

**WHY
DID THE ALIEN
CROSS THE GALAXY?
To find a fake boyfriend
and befriend a
vacuum cleaner**



A.M. ROSE

Why Did The Alien Cross The
Galaxy? To Find a Fake
Boyfriend and Befriend a
Vacuum Cleaner

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Why Did The Alien Cross The Galaxy? To Find a Fake Boyfriend and Befriend a Vacuum Cleaner© by A. M. Rose

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Blurb

Observer log 1: what I learned on my first day on Earth

1. A coffee shop is a hub of human social interaction.
2. Cookies and hot chocolate can end interplanetary disputes.
3. High fives solidify relations between humans.
4. Vacuum cleaners make incredible companions.
5. You can help humans keep their former mates away by agreeing to pretend to be their fake new mate.
6. If there is only one bed at a hotel, it is customary to share it with your human fake mate.

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Chapter 1

Vix

Earth.

He was going. He was actually, for real, LEGIT, as humans would say, finally going.

Standing in front of his mirror with a farewell braid woven over his left shoulder felt more than surreal to Vix. He touched the intricate loops and twists of his hair with long fingers, staring into his own pale blue eyes in the mirror.

The braid was one he had practiced for a while, hoping one day he'd get to use it. Hoping one day he'd drape it over his left shoulder as he boarded the ship that would take him off his home planet and down to Earth.

And after years of dreaming and hoping, he had finally gotten the chance to twist his hair into beautiful knots from the top of his head all the way down to the backs of his knees. The soft white strands wove around each other, clipped in place by tiny metal adornments in all shades of pastel colors. The end of the braid only went partway through the elastic that held it

together, creating a small loop at the end of his hair. A perfect circle—endless.

It meant he was coming back.

He turned his head toward the holo-projector casting images into the middle of his room. One of his favorite human TV shows was playing softly in the background as he got ready. Vix knew people looked at him strangely when he talked about the shows, but they were a font of information about humanity, and Vix found them fascinating beyond belief.

The one currently playing was called *Saved by the Bell*, and it was an in-depth depiction of the educational system of humans from fifteen to eighteen years of age. Not exactly the target age group for Vix once he was down there, but as far as his knowledge went, humans liked to talk about their offspring. If he encountered someone whose child was of that age, he was well prepared.

The door to his room glimmered out of sight suddenly, drawing his attention. He glanced over to see his mothers walk through the archway, all five of them, one after the other, dressed in various shades of pink and purple.

Their white hair was twisted into their versions of the braid Vix had. They were almost identical, except theirs were draped over their right shoulders. They weren't leaving. They were seeing someone off.

“What is this you're wearing, my Vix?” his mother Lada asked first, her blue eyes scanning him from head to toe. She wasn't at the head of the procession, but she was the first to

approach him. Her robe moved with her, the gauzy pink fabric moving freely around her legs and arms. She was beautiful, even by Lumian standards. Willowy and flowy and very aware of it.

“They call it fashions. It’s fascinating,” Vix said, barely able to contain his excitement as he smoothed down the lapels of this thing called a blazer.

“And this is also a fashion?” Lada asked with a tilted head, indicating the thin strip of fabric running down his chest, the pointy tip of it touching the edge of a pair of very uncomfortable pants.

“It is,” he said, turning away from the mirror and facing his mother. “I don’t know that I like this fashion, though. The rest are fine.”

“Does it have to be worn?” she asked, thumbing the strip of fabric with a frown. Her eyes would occasionally stray to the mirror, the corners of her lips tipping up when she glanced at herself before refocusing. “It is very...unflattering, I would say.”

“Let him be, Lada,” his mother Bara said, now sitting cross-legged at the edge of his oval bed. She seemed to be checking the pockets of Vix’s bag and stuffing more things inside. A bottle of Lumian medicine, hair oil, ties, preserved Lumian nibbles. “I’m sure he knows what he’s doing.”

“From my notes and the research of other Observers over the years,” Vix said, eager to share his knowledge at any given opportunity, “it is worn for formal affairs when you want to

present yourself to others as polished and professional. As I am heading to Earth in a professional capacity, I thought it made sense.”

“It does. It will make you blend, for certain,” his mother Cvita said, a gentle smile on her face. Vix returned her smile, happy to have at least one of his parents in full support of his endeavors. Cvita understood. She always had.

“The color itself is very...stark. Much different,” Lada said, peeling her eyes from her reflection with a scrunch of her nose.

“I agree,” Vix said, looking down at the dark red fabric. It was the complete opposite of anything on Lumia. “But this was the only one we had in our sample storage. One of my goals while there is to acquire more suitable options for our future visits.”

“Are we really not going to address this?” his mother Tuga snapped finally, eyes brimming with tears as she turned to stare at them all.

“Address what, Tuga?” Bara asked, zipping the final compartment of Vix’s bag and standing up to walk to her partner. She put her hands on Tuga’s shoulders, encompassing them completely. Tuga was the smallest of his mothers, and Bara the largest. “We’ve known he would be going for a very long stretch of time.”

“And you’re all just okay with that?” Tuga asked, looking at all of them individually.

“I don’t think any of us are truly in support of it, heartshine,” his mother Danica said, voice gentle and soothing. “But we have to keep in mind that this is what our Vix wants. It’s what will make him happy.”

“Lumia will make him happy,” Tuga said, clutching at Bara’s wrists. “There is so much to do here. So much to explore. There are people he hasn’t met yet that would like him to stay.”

“Tuga, darling,” Cvita said cajolingly. “We all know how fixated he has always been on Earth. Let him satisfy the craving.”

“Besides,” Bara added, sending a sly glance Vix’s way. “Something tells me Vix wouldn’t really have interest in any of the Lumians.”

Vix smiled sheepishly at those words. Because she was right. Years of watching human shows and reading human romance novels had made something in him shift. Or maybe it had been there all along. While he adored and understood Lumian love affairs, he craved something very different.

He watched his mothers, the love they all shared together. He saw other family units and their bonds. Everything was shared. Everything was understood. And yet...

He wanted someone who would be...just his. Maybe.

Vix sighed internally.

He didn’t properly know. What he *did* know was that he was certain he couldn’t find it on Lumia.

“And I doubt they would be too interested in me, either. I’ve never been invited to any prospective bonding meetings,” Vix said, looking at Tuga with sad eyes. “I do appreciate everything you do, Mother. But this is something I feel in my heart I have to do. For myself.”

She looked back into his eyes, before detaching herself from Bara and closing the distance between them. She reached for his braid, running fingers over the loop at the very end. The promise it held.

“You’ll be back soon, my Vix, won’t you?”

Vix gathered her hands close. “Of course. We are scheduled to stay for only seven of their days.”

“I won’t lose you to Earth?” she wailed, throwing herself sideways into Bara’s arms again.

Bara rolled her eyes and dragged her bodily out of the room.

“Your mother loves you very much,” Danica said, looping her arm through Cvita’s.

“I know.” Vix nodded, looking at all of them left. “I love all of you too. I’ll bring you back something exciting.”

“We’ll hold you to that,” Cvita said, tilting her head a bit to reveal one small swirl of hair outside of her braid that had been previously hidden, pinned to the right side of her head just above her ear.

Vix gasped at the sight of it, surprised and elated at the same time.

“I am truly proud of you,” she said. “I know not everyone will understand your choice of job or your fascination with Earth, but you have made me proud every single day of your life.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, feeling his heart pulse in the center of his chest, a beautiful dark pink glow visible through his layers of clothes since he wasn’t wearing his heart guard.

“And I wish you all the best down there, my rainbow,” Danica said, elbowing Lada, who was busy fixing her tunic.

“Yes,” Lada said, blinking back into focus. “I do love you also, my Vix. Make sure to match your colors properly, and...”

She trailed off, her eyes caught on his chest. She walked over, a sudden shadow passing over her face. She laid a hand over his delicate heart, looking him deep in the eye.

“You protect this, do you hear me?” she said. “You are beautiful. I have no doubt you will have your choice of humans while you’re there.”

“Mother...” Vix protested, but she tsked, shaking her head.

“A beautiful person draws attention,” she said. “I know that better than anyone.”

“She does,” Danica said.

“That is true,” Cvita added.

“And you, my Vix, are truly beautiful, inside and out,” Lada said, tapping his chest. “Keep this safe. Seeing this is only for those deserving.”

She threw a gentle look toward her partners and swished out of the room without another word.

A gentle trilling coming from outside Vix's window interrupted whatever was left of the conversation. It sounded like millions of the softest wings fluttering in the evening breeze.

The Lumian farewell trill.

Beaming at his mothers, Vix rushed to the window, throwing the woven drapes aside and leaning out. He bounced on his feet when he realized just how many people had come to see him off. Vix's friends, their parents, schoolmates, and coworkers. And little children. Tiny, round-cheeked little Lumians doing their best to join in on the trill even though their little throats were too young to produce the vibrating sound.

Vix waved at them anyway, smiling at the toothy little grins he got in return.

Vix looked closer and realized that every Lumian there was dressed in their finest. Gauzy, bright yellow, open-chested garments fluttered in the breeze, exposing ornate heart guards that matched what each of them was wearing. He smiled at the gorgeous designs etched into each one, representing the individuality of each Lumian wearing it. There were Lumian proverbs on some, and ornate images on others. While Vix had opted to pack his own into his bag, and not wear it for the time being, he could almost feel the soft, sturdy material of it

against his skin, and the cool kiss of the magnetic clasps on his back.

He looked at their long white hair, braided into various different designs, each one wishing Vix success on his mission, luck in his travels, or courage in facing something new.

He draped the end of his braid over the window, letting the tiny loop at the end of it be a response to them.

The trill got louder. Reaching all the way down to Vix's bones and making him shake. Maybe he didn't fit in all the time, maybe he would never be completely understood. But Vix was Lumian. And he was accepted and cared for.

"It's time," Danica said, and he nodded, pushing off the window and following her out of their house.

She stepped out first, letting the cascade of soft vines fall into place in front of Vix. For good luck, he had to make his own way.

Taking a deep breath, he reached out and pushed the pale pink vines out of the way. He stepped onto the street paved with star-shaped rocks that, despite looking sturdy, had a softness to them, cushioning his steps.

The view that greeted him was the same one he had woken up to every single day since he was a child, and yet the prospect of leaving for the first time made him take a moment and just look.

Vix knew from the comparisons they had on their records that Lumia was a small planet. Probably the smallest inhabited planet in the known universe. But to Vix it was the most beautiful place he had seen in all of his studies of Lumian documents on other planets.

Soft, beautiful, colorful, peaceful.

It looked like someone had taken the gentlest of dreams and turned them into a home. Small hills and valleys wove together to create a stunning landscape of pastel pinks and violets and blues. The entire surface of them was covered in trees with dark purple bark and colorful leaves shaped into perfect balls.

Vix had seen images of something Earthlings called lollipops and thought Lumian trees resembled them very closely. Except you couldn't really carry Lumian trees around, and you most certainly couldn't eat them.

He turned to face the cluster of Lumian homes overlooking the flora and smiled at how inviting each appeared. Round edges and walls made of the same sturdy but soft material as the stars on the floors. They were painted to match nature. Not to disturb, but to blend in.

Lumian homes had no discernible front doors like humans had. They were welcome to enter and exit as they pleased, visiting, migrating, mingling in whatever capacity they felt like. They were truly a community in every sense of the word.

Vix turned his head once more, his gaze landing on his community, still trilling for him. He smiled at them, nodding

his head and lifting his hand to place it over his heart, and they placed their own hands over their hearts in response.

“It’s time, my Vix,” Bara said, holding his backpack over her shoulder as Tuga clutched at her from the other side.

“Lead the way.” Cvita smiled and Vix nodded, stepping forward and taking a few steps toward the edge of the woods, where he knew the transporter pod waited for him.

He felt, more than heard, steps following after him. His mothers, his friends, his people. He smiled and lifted his head higher, letting the trill fill him with courage and determination.

They reached the pod in mere minutes, Bara handing his bag to one of the travelers coming with him.

The trill died down in increments.

Vix turned around and smiled at his mothers one last time before stepping into the transporter pod. The last thing he saw was their braids before he closed his eyes.

Chapter 2

Vix

“Vix?” Someone spoke and Vix snapped his eyes open.

They met the wizened purple ones belonging to the captain of his transport ship. He was dressed in the usual lavender garb of the Lumian Space Travel Core, the flowing fabric of his vest meeting the floor and his pants and shirt wrapped in threads of gold.

He had his hair woven into a polite braid of greeting, and Vix smiled in acknowledgment. “Thank you for having me aboard.”

“It’s not often we travel to that part of space. It will be a change to star chart in that galaxy,” the captain said. He indicated with an arm. “Your luggage was stored away and the government-requested provisions for Earth travel have also arrived and are located by your seat, which is through here. The travel protocol has been updated recently, so I’ll go over it with you.”

“Lovely,” Vix said, listening carefully.

“As you know, the Lumian Travelers’ Protocol dictates the code of conduct of those leaving Lumia and visiting other species,” the captain said. “While we do not require complete secrecy, we do advise keeping information to a minimum. Humans, as far as we know, haven’t managed to reach the inhabited corners of the universe, which means their knowledge of other species is nonexistent. A panic is the last thing we need.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Vix said. “You can read the full protocol on your tablet. We made sure to sync the Earth database with all the information we have so far.”

“From old Observers?” Vix asked excitedly. He loved reading the notes the previous Observers had collected. It was his job at the moment, but those who had come before him had noted so many things that he couldn’t wait to dig deeper.

“Yes,” the captain said. “We know you have access to everything while doing your job, but we thought having it on hand might be beneficial to you in this situation.”

“Thank you so very much,” Vix said, and the captain nodded.

“We have a few stops until we reach Earth, so get comfortable,” the captain said. “If you have no further questions, we’ll set off.”

Vix shook his head staunchly. He wanted to get to Earth as quickly as this ship would allow.

“I’ll provide updates through the communications system,” the captain said, leading him out of the room before splitting off from him at the passenger seats.

The ship itself was small. There was no need for anything bigger with only a few passengers to transport. Even so, it was an impressive vessel. Its colors matched the LSTC’s lavender and gold, the seal of Lumia seen here and there—a bright pink fluffy tree under a sea of shiny stars.

Vix had let his curiosity lead him to hours of footage of Earth’s first steps into space and what their current space vessels looked like. They were very cute, in a clunky, ugly sort of way. Their trips to their moon had been a huge success, and it seemed like they had their sights set on a planet in their solar system next. It was quite endearing to watch their efforts.

Vix let himself mull that over as he strapped into his seat, humming Earth songs as he waited impatiently for the captain to be ready. After a short time that somehow lasted an eternity, takeoff was announced, and before he knew it Lumia was streaking past the window in a blur of pink and purple.

Then nothing but blackness engulfed them.

Vix turned on the flight data, the holographic screen lighting up in front of him. He sighed at the arrival time and switched it off with a huff. Maybe he could rest and try to regain some energy. He hadn’t been able to relax properly last night, tossing and turning.

He reclined his seat and closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind. He spent over an hour on the attempt before giving up.

He huffed, raising the seat back up and reaching into his bag to pull his tablet out.

He loved knowing it was filled to the brim with the notes of those who had come before him.

Observers.

Tasked with learning as much as possible about Earth in the event Lumia ever met the most devastating fate a planet could meet. Destruction.

Earth could sustain Lumian life, and so it was closely watched. Just in case it was needed.

Most Observers were outliers in Lumian society. A bit odd. A bit out there. Fascinated by something out of reach.

Vix was no exception. Except his fascination went deeper.

He clicked on a note by an Observer who was no longer with them, having met the stars long before Vix came to be. One of the notes that had set the fire under Vix's feet and woken up the obsession that gripped him and wouldn't let go.

THE COFFEEHOUSE (AND ALL ITS DERIVATIVE NAMES) IS THE EPICENTER OF HUMAN LIFE.

IT IS REVERED AMONG HUMANS. I HAVE SEEN COUNTLESS WORSHIPPING SIGNS BOTH ON THE SIDES OF BUILDINGS AND ON THE HUMANS THEMSELVES.

FROM A CULTURAL STANDPOINT, COFFEEHOUSES LARGELY SERVE AS CENTERS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION. A COFFEEHOUSE PROVIDES PATRONS WITH A PLACE TO CONGREGATE, TALK, READ, WRITE,

ENTERTAIN ONE ANOTHER, OR PASS THE TIME, WHETHER INDIVIDUALLY OR IN SMALL GROUPS. A COFFEEHOUSE CAN SERVE AS AN INFORMAL CLUB FOR ITS REGULAR MEMBERS.

EVEN IF THERE IS ONE ON A STREET, THERE IS GUARANTEED TO BE TWO MORE. ALL WILL BE FILLED. HUMANS GO IN LOOKING TERRIBLE AND COME OUT COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED! IT IS A PHENOMENON. THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN MENTIONS OF AN ADDICTIVE QUALITY, SOMETHING NAMED 'CAFFEINE.'

FURTHER STUDIES NEEDED.

“Arrived in the solar system.”

Vix blinked into awareness, startled and disoriented as he bolted upright through the holographic display, which fizzled out.

“Solid precipitation expected on transport. Temperature two degrees below freezing by Earth standards. Appropriate weather gear has been provided,” the captain continued over the communications.

It took a moment for Vix to come up with the human word since the weather on Lumia hardly fluctuated, but after some mental searching he straightened in triumph. Snow! It was snowing on Earth. How lovely!

“Please prepare to disembark,” the captain said before the communication fizzled out.

Vix knotted the ends of his braid together in a loop of excitement and scrambled to take out the Earth survival gear that had been assembled for him. The puffy pink coat he dug

out first was triple his size circumference-wise, and reminded him of the bushes back home you could curl up to sleep on. Why did humans have beds when such soft things existed? He hauled it into his lap and crushed it to his chest happily as he searched through the other items in the survival kit.

The green scarf was similar to the tie he was wearing, only miles softer, and seemed less likely to cause strangulation. The black gloves were recognizable—if too large—but they were soft on his sensitive fingertips, so Vix put them on top of his growing pile.

Next came the ‘hats.’

Lumia had no equivalent seeing as their hair was so important for communication, so Vix looked at the objects suspiciously and with some distaste. He’d seen them, of course, in his various studies, so he understood they served some kind of function, but he’d never expected to have to wear one himself. He sighed as he looked at the instruction leaflet on how to put it on, then back at the hats themselves.

He had two choices.

One with two attachments and one with one. He surveyed the fluffiness of the circles and the designs of *Rangifer tarandus*, commonly known as Reindeers, around the edges and decided the quality of the balls of fluff were much superior on the one with two. He pulled it over his head as instructed, frowning and feeling strange before ripping it off again.

“Oh, hell to the no,” he said to himself, practicing his use of human slang as he zipped the hats back into the darkness of the bag where they belonged.

“Please strap in, we’ll be reaching orbit momentarily.”

Vix hurried to follow the instruction, turning to look back out the window and get his first glimpse of the place he’d been staring at through a screen from light-years away for so many years now.

The entry was smooth, and Vix only had to wait a second before it was right there. He gasped quietly, his eyes reflecting the green and blue planet back at himself in the window.

It was beautiful.

“Holding in orbit. Ready for transport.”

Vix unclipped himself from his seat and put on his survival gear. His arms couldn’t quite reach his sides anymore and the scarf was getting in his mouth, but who said survival was easy? He was on a serious mission and needed to adapt to both the climate and social norms.

He made his way to the transporter and met the captain, who had his hair done up in professional braids for farewell now—less personal than his mothers. The captain’s eyes tracked over Vix’s own braids and his mouth twitched.

“Excited?”

Vix flushed. He’d forgotten to take the knot out. “Yes.”

The captain handed over the Earth luggage Vix had prepacked with the necessary human items. Money. A false identification. More clothing. His observation set for noting down his findings. It was the only Lumian tech he was risking bringing aside from the communications device the captain handed over next. It was a smooth oval shape in the same lavender as everything else aboard, the screen holographic.

“The frequency is coded already. If there are any emergencies, I’ll be in the area and ready to beam you onboard straight away. Other than that, I’ll see you in seven Earth standard days,” the captain explained.

Vix unknotted his hair and wove it simply over his shoulder to show his thanks. The captain nodded and stepped to the side, allowing Vix to step inside the transporter pod. Vix had never liked the single ones too much—they were narrow and cramped, just glass and tech in a cylinder. And now that he was wearing his survival gear, he had to fight to get himself to fit, feeling the captain give him a push from behind.

With the squish of fabric and a grunt he was in, arms pinned to his sides, face pressed to the glass at the back and luggage crammed in against the backs of his knees.

“Ready,” he mumbled against the glass.

The pod closed behind him and Vix felt the familiar tingle of the transporter as it disassembled him to place him elsewhere. He shut his eyes like he always did.

The immediate wash of cold against his exposed skin was what hit Vix first as he felt solid again.

He sucked in a startled breath, blinking his eyes open only to flutter them in pain and shock at the stark brightness of white, white, white.

He shielded his face, squinting this time to try and mitigate the effects. He would have to note the need for protective eyewear for future excursions during this planet's winter. His eyes eventually adjusted, and then he was able to lower his hand and look at his surroundings.

The captain had transported him to an unpopulated patch of land somewhere inside the city. Vix could see all manner of buildings in the distance and in the immediate vicinity, recognizing some as places of work and some as places of residence.

He felt his heart leap.

He was on Earth! Finally!

He jumped on the spot, looking down in shock at the feel and sound of crunching under his boots. He lifted one up, peering at the clumps of white clinging to the treads. How spectacular! He jumped again and again, running around in circles and watching flurries of snow pick up, examining the tracks he made and cataloging every tiny detail.

He scrambled for his observation equipment and began making notes about how *satisfying* snow was. Definitely something worth recording. He took pictures and took his glove off in order to feel the white substance for himself. He hissed at the chill as his fingers made contact, smiling so wide

his face began to hurt as the snow melted against the temperature of his hands.

He didn't really notice the time passing, it was only when he began to feel his exposed extremities, his ears in particular, starting to sting from the cold that he paused. He momentarily regretted his decision to leave the hats behind, but then shook his head and cupped his ears scornfully.

"I won't wear one. I won't," he muttered.

He straightened back up to his full height and grabbed his luggage, making sure to tuck his observation equipment away safely. He walked toward the buildings, finding a narrow alley that led to a street that was teeming with life.

He paused at the mouth of the alley, struck motionless with his mouth agape.

Humans. Real humans of all shapes and sizes were simply walking around! And surrounding them were all manner of strange and wonderful things. Lights of red, green, and gold. Decorations in familiar and unfamiliar patterns laced around every window, door, and building.

Merry Christmas! was written everywhere, a human celebration that many on this planet enjoyed if he remembered correctly.

He wanted to grab the nearest human and pepper them with question after question, eager to know and learn as much as possible. He had only been here a short period, but already he

felt like there wasn't enough time to understand all that he wanted.

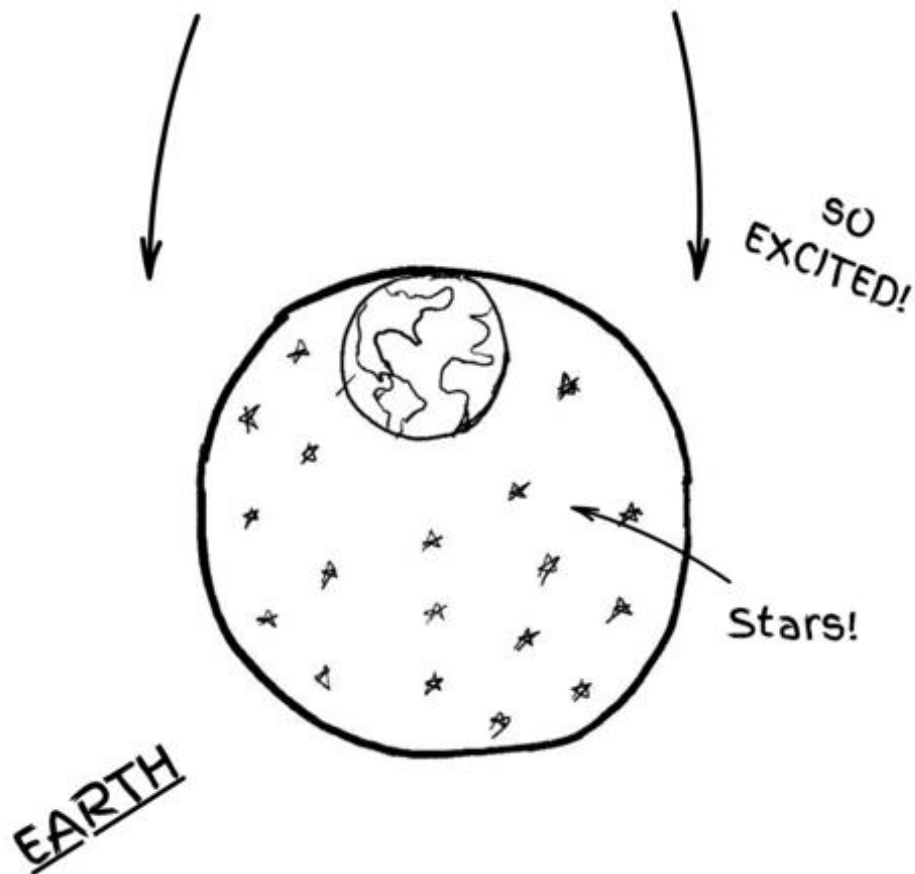
He took a deep breath. He needed to calm down, stay on task, and remember his training.

The first thing to do when visiting another planet was go to the epicenter of knowledge to get his bearings. He nodded to himself, glancing around and spotting the sign he was looking for almost immediately.

He grinned, heading toward the coffee cup sign with a spring in his step.

Observation log 1:

First time seeing Earth from the window of my transport ship! It is smaller than I expected, though it is still three times larger than Lumia. (-NOTE- they need to clean up their orbit.)



Chapter 3

Travis

Whatever good spirit Travis had left from the amazing day he'd just had evaporated the moment he stepped out of his car and saw his porch lights on.

He knew he'd turned them off this morning and there were only two people in the world that had keys to his place and liked to drop in unannounced—whether they were wanted there or not. Coincidentally, neither of those two were people he wanted there under any circumstances short of him dying and them being the only two beings in the world that could save his life. Even then, he wasn't willing to bet that the sweet nothingness of dying wouldn't be preferable to dealing with either of them.

He locked his car and climbed the three slippery steps to his door, reminding himself to salt them before bed, otherwise he'd be sliding to his car on his ass tomorrow morning.

A quick glance at a posh pair of snow-covered boots making puddles on his wooden deck told him he had been lucky

enough to avoid seeing his mother for the day. But he hadn't been lucky enough to avoid...him.

"I'm gonna need my house keys back," he bellowed as he stepped into his front hallway. "I told you before!"

He felt his stomach turn at the pungent scent of expensive cologne, so strong it probably managed to kill every single insect still alive in the harsh winter they were having.

"Aww, sweetheart, if I gave them back I wouldn't be able to surprise you anymore." The sickeningly sweet voice came from the general direction of his bedroom and he knew he was in for an uncomfortable couple of minutes.

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Lex. I'm surprised every time I think about how I managed to date you for so long," he bit back, hanging his coat on the rack and taking his hat off to shake his hair out of its matted mess.

He should probably care more that the man he had spent almost eight years of his life with would see him in a less-than-presentable state, but he had stopped caring about what Lexington thought right about the time he tripped and fell onto the tenth dick that didn't belong to Travis.

He walked to his bedroom and stopped in the doorway, leaning against the sturdy wooden doorframe and taking in the sight in front of him.

Two years ago his heart would have jumped out of his chest and his dick would have saluted the gorgeous form spread out on his bed wearing nothing but a black jockstrap and twirling a

satin blindfold around his finger. Now...the sight made his stomach turn. He rolled his eyes.

“Get dressed and get out,” he said, crossing the room and discarding his blazer on the back of the chair next to his full-length mirror.

“Aren’t we gonna celebrate?” Lex asked, fluttering his long lashes and sticking his plump bottom lip out in a pout that looked ridiculous now Travis knew the viper that lived beneath his smooth skin.

“Celebrate what? Did you get your ‘one month STD free’ chip?” Travis asked mockingly.

The jab landed, if the slight tick on Lex’s face was any indication, melting the faux sweetness into a syrupy mess. “Charming, as always.”

Travis unlaced his tie next, determined to ignore him. “I try.”

Lex whined at the dismissal, attempting some kind of seductive writhe on his satin sheets to lure him in. Travis vowed to burn them as soon as Lex vacated the area. They were a biohazard at best.

Lex flipped over onto his front and glared at his back, unaware that Travis was keeping an eye on him in the mirror, before his expression smoothed out into something imitating friendliness.

“A little birdie told me you made partner today,” Lex said.

And right there was the reason he was suddenly back after being blissfully out of Travis’s life for the past couple of

months. He'd popped up now and then since their breakup, between whatever suckers he was sleeping with. Lex was a spoiled, money-chasing brat and the only things he loved more than his own reflection were men who could support his lavish lifestyle. Travis was the backup plan.

"I did, yes, and it was already celebrated, so while I appreciate...all of this." He gestured vaguely at Lex still spread on his bed. "You're free to go."

"Baby, don't be like that..." Lex said, rising up on his knees. Lex reached out to touch him as he went to walk past him and Travis snatched his hand back to avoid him.

"Lex, I said get out. I'm not in the mood for you right now. Or ever, for that matter."

"Always so dramatic," Lex teased, still trying to grab hold of him.

"Stop playing stupid. I'm not interested, Lex. We're done. Have been for a while, actually. And I have zero intention of taking you back. I'm sure there are plenty of sad fuckers who'd trip over themselves to put up with you, but I'm not one of them. So kindly get dressed and fuck off." With that he left his room in search of some dinner. Lex could show himself out, he knew the fucking way by heart.

Travis opened the fridge and took out the leftover lasagna he had made yesterday, sticking it in the microwave and listening to the sound of clothes rustling as his ex finally complied.

Not a second later he was in the kitchen, glaring daggers at him and fixing his hair, which had been artfully messed up to look like he had been thoroughly fucked before coming to see him. Hell, for all Travis knew he could have been. Wouldn't be the first time Lex came to his bed freshly cum-stained by some other man.

"You used to be more fun," Lex said in that sickening voice of his. Travis absolutely cringed hearing it.

"I used to be unaware of your scenic tours of other people's bedrooms, so that might be why," Travis said, taking out his dinner at the beep, pulling out a fork and digging into his food, rejoicing in how little he felt for the man standing in front of him.

Lex was a stranger to him now, he probably always had been, and he actually liked it that way.

"It wasn't all my fault, Travis," Lex started in on one of his excuses and Travis rolled his eyes.

"Sure it wasn't," he said through a mouthful of food, knowing how much prim and proper Lexington Avery hated it.

"You were never home."

"I was working to get to where I am now. It's pretty baffling that you're okay coming back here now that I've made partner when you weren't willing to keep your legs closed for the few years it took me to make it this far," he said, tired of having the same conversation for the millionth time since they broke up.

“I made a mistake,” Lex said.

Travis scoffed and placed his food aside, lifting a condescending brow. “*A* mistake? Just the one?”

“C’mon, baby. No one knows you better than I do,” Lex said, reaching out to run his hand over Travis’s chest. “You know we were good together.”

Travis took Lex’s hand, circled his wrist, and pulled him close so their faces were inches apart. He could feel Lex’s breath hitch and his face flush. He’d always liked to be dominated in bed.

“You and I have very different definitions of good,” Travis said, realizing Lex wouldn’t give up easily. “Now, since you’re refusing to leave, I’m gonna head out. I don’t want you here when I come back. And I’m changing the locks. I should have done it the first time you pulled this shit.”

He released Lex’s hand and headed toward the door, grabbing his coat on the way.

“Where are you going?” Lex yelled after him.

“None of your business,” he threw over his shoulder, walking out without a clear direction in mind.

He could hear the annoying crunch of snow under Lex’s boots behind him as he instinctively headed to the nearest café. Travis felt a sick sense of glee at the idea of the muck on the street ruining them completely. Lex hated walking. And dirt. And anything that inconvenienced him even the slightest bit.

So, if he chose to meander through back alleys and muddy, formerly green patches on his way to the café, that was only for him to know. He was enjoying the fresh air. There were lights strung everywhere and the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg hung in the air almost constantly. Travis truly couldn't have cared less about any of it, but the sounds of Lex huffing and puffing behind him seemed to have awakened the long-lost Christmas spirit in him.

When he had no more reasonable ways to prolong his trek, he finally walked up to the small café that was most local to him and pushed the door open, purposefully letting it slide shut before Lex could reach it.

He didn't like opening doors for himself. Or doing anything for himself. Or anyone else. For fuck's sake, what had Travis been thinking for so long? So much time wasted on someone as vapid as Lex.

He joined the line at the counter, looking around to see if there were any available tables. Preferably somewhere Lex wouldn't want to sit—like next to a bad source of light, or by the door.

“Running away from me is childish, Travis,” Lex said from behind him, sounding a little winded and a lot aggravated. “We really should sit down and talk about this.”

“I told you I have nothing to talk to you about,” Travis said without turning around, stuffing his cold fingers into his coat pockets. “We're done and we're gonna stay done.”

“But...” Lex said, and Travis could picture the look on his face clearly. Bottom lip sticking out, gorgeous gray eyes wide and innocent looking. Lex knew how to use what he’d been given, that was for sure. “It’ll be in really poor taste for you to attend your yearly retreat alone like last year.”

Ah, the all-expenses-paid retreat.

Travis chuckled humorlessly. His eyes were still sweeping over the café, the line getting shorter and his window to find an escape from Lex getting narrower.

He caught sight of a young mother with a baby, sipping tea and breastfeeding her child. That could work. Lex despised children. But Travis didn’t think the woman deserved to be exposed to someone so unpleasant, so he moved on.

An older couple was by the door, cutely giggling over what seemed to be a crossword puzzle in front of them. Could work. Lex hated old people and any kind of mental stimulation. But again, they looked way too sweet and happy to ruin their day.

He glanced at the last table in the far corner and did a double take.

The man occupying the space looked to be in his twenties and he was sitting with his shoes off, long, thin legs pulled up onto the soft armchair. Travis could see his toes wiggling, mismatched socks sporting mistletoe and colorful baubles on them. His arms were wrapped around his knees, fingers cradling a mug the size of his head filled with what looked to be hot chocolate and a veritable mountain of marshmallows.

He was going cross-eyed as he sipped at the drink carefully, whipped cream sticking to his upper lip and one of the marshmallows hurtling down to the table.

A beaming smile stretched over his pale face at the taste, and Travis allowed himself a moment to really look at him. He had a long, thin face, all pointy angles and pale skin and eyes that were larger than any he'd seen. His hair was the most shocking white, the color of pristine snow, braided intricately and coiling over his shoulder. Travis couldn't see the end of it, and it made him wonder just how long it was.

He was dressed in tailored pants and a blazer, a bright red tie finishing off his outfit. The juxtaposition of the stuffy, formal outfit and the position he was sitting in was intriguing.

Travis felt a stirring of interest tickle the back of his brain.

"*Hey!*" Lex shook him from behind, interrupting his unashamed staring at the stranger. "Did you hear what I said?"

Travis turned around and leveled Lex with a stare. "Honestly, no."

"Next customer," was called out and Travis attempted to move but Lex wouldn't let go of his arm.

"You never listen to me!"

"If you said something interesting that wasn't centered around you and what you want, then maybe I would," Travis threw back.

Lex gasped, face flushing red. "That's not true!"

“Um...sir?” the barista said again.

“If you’re just following me around for an invite to the retreat, you can forget about it. I’m not taking you with me. This year or ever again.”

Travis ripped his arm away and moved to the front of the line to place his order, sending an apologetic look to the baristas listening to them argue. “Just a coffee, please. Black.”

“Want me to make it a double shot?” the guy asked, flicking his eyes over Travis’s shoulder. “Looks like you need it.”

Travis placed his card on the counter. “Make it a triple.”

The guy nodded sagely and rang him through.

“So you’re gonna go alone again?” Lex baited, moving after Travis to the pickup area. “Like a loser when all the other partners are bringing their significant others?”

Travis snorted. “Because that makes me a loser by your definition. Taking back my dick-hopping ex is a step above being single on the Lexington scale.”

“Before I came along all you would do is sit in the college library or your dorm room. You didn’t know how to talk to guys or what to do. We’ve been apart for two years and you haven’t even moved on. I’d be surprised if you didn’t stay alone for the rest of your boring life. You need me, Travis.”

Travis seethed, trying not to let Lex’s words get to him. He was being provoked shamelessly, Lex niggling at the spots he *knew* would irritate and chafe the worst. And all Travis wanted was to get him to shut up. To prove him wrong.

An idea took shape.

A flash of it.

It was terrible, Travis knew that.

But...

“I never said I’d be going alone, Lex,” Travis said, taking his mug of coffee and turning on his heel to meet Lex’s stunned gaze. “I just said I wouldn’t be going with you.”

He walked away, approaching the table with the weird stranger, heart hammering at the absolute insanity he was embarking upon. He cleared his throat to get his attention.

The stranger looked up, his eyes really were impossibly large and round, lashes longer than Travis was used to and the color a stunning blue. The air around him just screamed...different.

“Hi,” Travis said and was rewarded with a stunning, beaming smile.

“Hi!” the stranger replied in a similar tone, almost like he was trying to mimic, but without any audible derision. He had a slight accent that was impossible to place. The guy let go of his mug with one hand to wave at Travis enthusiastically. “My name is Vix. It’s very nice to meet you. Quite the weather we’re having today. How is your family doing?”

Travis stalled at the sudden onslaught of questions, quite sure he had just bitten off way more than he could chew. He’d committed now though, and the prospect of Lex breathing down his neck pushed him onward.

“I’m Travis,” he said. “And my family is doing just fine, thank you. Mind if I sit down?”

He pointed at the chair next to Vix, buried under piles of winter clothes.

“I don’t mind at all. It’s a chair. Those are for sitting so, go ahead,” Vix said, setting the mug down and piling the clothes onto his lap until all Travis could see of him was the top of his head and those ridiculously large blue eyes.

“How about we put those here?” Travis suggested, taking the clothes from Vix and setting them on a chair on the opposite end of the table.

“Oh yes, we can use those too,” Vix said. “Splendid!”

He lifted his hand, palm up toward Travis as he looked at him expectantly. Travis frowned slightly, but lifted his own hand to high-five the little weirdo.

“Travis?” Lex called, approaching their table and Travis leaned toward Vix quickly, whose eyes widened even more, pink lips falling open as he met Travis halfway.

“Are we sharing secrets?” he whispered into the space between them, getting even closer.

Travis was shocked into stillness momentarily. Who was this guy? But Lex’s looming presence made him shake his head.

“No, but I could use your help,” he said, slipping his hand around Vix’s as a long shadow fell over them both.

Showtime.

Chapter 4

Vix

A friend!

Vix certainly hadn't expected to make one so rapidly, but he was overjoyed, nonetheless. They were even engaging in physical displays of friendship already. The feel of the human's—Travis's—skin was slightly rough, much different to his own. The tingling sensations it produced were quite pleasant and he made a mental note to write it down for further study. Perhaps Travis wouldn't mind assisting him. After all, he was already asking for Vix's cooperation with something. An exchange could be beneficial and fruitful for both of them.

Before Vix could propose the cultural exchange, however, another figure had approached the table.

Truly, the coffeehouse had been the wisest and best choice!

“Who is this?” the other human asked, looking down at their joined hands.

Vix found his expression hard to parse, the short hair on his head not giving him any hints. But Vix decided to jump in

with both feet. Clearly his introduction had worked amazingly last time.

“My name is Vix. It is a pleasure to meet you. I hope the weather outside is not to your distaste. We can discuss it further if you would like to engage in small talks,” Vix said, rising to offer his hand, only to forget Travis was still holding his. He ended up with both arms outstretched in a strange manner, but it would have been rude to withdraw his greeting.

The human didn't move to return it, however, which made Vix blink, trying to remember how to respond. Had he done something offensive? Perhaps his accent was wrong, or he'd mistranslated his English.

Travis tugged on his hand and Vix returned to his seat, following the human's lead. He looked between the two humans carefully. They seemed to be engaged in a practice of staring without blinking.

“He answered your question. Is there anything else, Lex?” Travis said.

Lex flared his nostrils. “The question wasn't for him.”

“It wasn't?” Vix asked in surprise.

“No,” Lex said, and he seemed to be gritting his teeth. Perhaps he had a dental problem? Maybe Vix should offer him something to relieve it.

“Human conversations are very complex,” Vix said to himself before rallying and picking up a plate of cookies. “Would you like a baked good?”

“A...what?” Lex said, blinking rapidly.

“The sign said they were a limited menu item, so I got twenty because I did not know if I would be back. You are welcome to try one,” he said with a large smile.

Lex’s face had turned slightly red by this point, and he stomped his foot, much like a human child would. Curious. “Travis!”

Travis seemed unmoved by the display. “Lex.”

“What’s going on?”

“I think it’s quite obvious,” Travis said, leaning back in his seat and pulling Vix’s hand toward himself. Vix had to shuffle closer to accommodate, but it was no real trouble. He grabbed a cookie to take with him and bit into it. He rolled the texture and taste in his mouth. It was pleasantly sweet and melted in his mouth, though he could tell his physiology wouldn’t withstand too many. He was so distracted that Travis’s next words didn’t fully sink in at first. “He’s my date.”

“Date?” Lex voiced what Vix’s brain processed too late.

Vix turned with his mouthful, to find Travis already staring back at him like he was trying to convey something to him.

Vix frowned, eyes automatically traveling to Travis’s hair for answers, frustrated when he found nothing. This all seemed far too advanced for Vix’s knowledge. But...Travis had said he needed his help. Maybe this was how?

Was he supposed to...pretend?

He swallowed and searched his brain for what he knew about human courtship.

“Travis will be reimbursing me for the food and beverages I ordered. Then we will find a long beach to walk upon,” Vix declared.

“Are you going to let him mock me like this?” Lex demanded, pointing at Vix harshly, but his eyes were fixed on Travis.

Mock?

“I assure you, I wasn’t joking,” Vix said, trying to calm the situation. He must have made an error somewhere. Maybe his lying skills were in question? He dug deeper into his knowledge banks. “After the conclusion of our date Travis will walk me home and bestow upon me a kiss and I will think about the decision to invite him in for coffee...as in the euphemism for sexual intercourse.”

Travis made an alarming choking sound next to him and Vix looked over worriedly to check on his well-being, but was distracted again by Lex who made a high-pitched noise Vix had to cover his ears for.

“You’ll regret this, Travis! I’m calling all your partners. Everyone is going to know about your weird new fling!”

Vix frowned at the back of Lex’s head as he stormed out of the coffeehouse. It reminded him of some of the shows he had watched while conducting his research. Humans liked to use

physical displays to indicate emotion, and this was Vix's first encounter with one.

How fascinating.

He turned to Travis. "Was I sufficiently convincing?"

"Uhh..." Travis was staring at him with wide eyes. Vix hadn't noticed their color before and drew closer to inspect the shade. He put both hands on the armrest to steady himself as he leaned his torso over into Travis's space, following as Travis moved backward.

"Is there another name for this color?" Vix asked, feet swinging in the air.

"Just...brown," Travis said, looking between Vix's own eyes quickly, chin jutting and shoulders high. Vix studied them as well, tilting his head even closer and nearly overbalancing. Travis's hands rushed up to hold his upper arms.

"We don't have this where I'm from," Vix murmured, focusing on the dark hair growing from Travis's face. It had always fascinated him, and it was exciting to see it with his own eyes. "Is it not uncomfortable?"

He lifted a hand to stroke it and found himself deposited cleanly back into his seat. Vix blinked and pouted up at a now-standing Travis, mildly perturbed by the setback.

Travis was rubbing his hands over his own thighs, face a shade that closely resembled the sky back home.

"What am I doing?" Travis mumbled.

“You are currently standing,” Vix informed him.

Travis shot him a look and then covered his eyes with his hand. “I must be crazy.”

“Crazy?” Vix repeated. He tried to place the word.

“Because of what I’m about to do next,” Travis said, removing his hand and sitting back down to face him. “Firstly, thank you...I think. For playing along with me a minute ago.”

“For pretending to want to engage in sexual intercourse with you?”

Travis made the same choking noise as before. Vix assumed it must be some form of verbal cue and planned to research it later.

“Yes, uh...” He cleared his throat. “It’s a long story, but pretending I was dating someone else was the only way to get Lex off my back.”

“Does he climb on your back often?”

“Not literally,” Travis said, eyeing him strangely. “But figuratively. He was fine when we first broke up, but now I’ve been promoted, and it looks like he’s back.”

Vix widened his eyes. “You were previously coupled with him.”

“Yeah, we dated for a long time. There’s a Christmas retreat that starts tomorrow that we usually went to together, and he was expecting me to still take him like he didn’t sleep with half our college friends while we were together.”

Vix tried to follow along with the fast speech and colloquialisms. He knew humans liked being in pairs. Unlike Lumians, the majority of humans preferred their relationships to be between two people. Vix had heard of polyamorous humans, but it seemed like a rarer occurrence.

“If I understand all of this correctly,” Vix said, “you and Lex were in a romantic relationship that you thought was monogamous but he disagreed, which then made you feel negative emotions.”

“That about sums it up,” Travis said. “The promotion came with a raise. And he likes those.”

“A raise of what?” Vix asked, tilting his head.

Travis matched his position. “Money.”

“Ohhhh, right,” Vix said. “Compensation for your work increased. Which makes you a more desirable mate, by human standards.”

Travis didn’t confirm nor deny, but Vix felt he knew enough about human culture to be right about something like that. He was about to say something when Travis sighed and ran a hand down his face.

“Sorry. That’s more than you needed to know,” Travis said, before a soft ping cut off whatever he was going to say next. He pulled his communication device from his pocket and groaned. “Dammit, Lex. You seriously couldn’t have waited five minutes?”

“What happened?” Vix asked, leaning over and grabbing the phone to inspect it. He moved it this way and that, peering at the materials it was made from.

Travis watched him for a second before saying slowly, “Lex texted the rest of the partners at my firm. They’re now expecting my new ‘date’ at the retreat.”

Vix paused. “Me?”

Travis nodded.

“Okay,” he chirped.

“What?!”

“I shall come and meet your partners and celebrate your Earth holiday and pretend to be having lots of sexual intercourse with you so that Lex stops climbing upon your back after sleeping with your college.”

Travis opened his mouth once. Twice.

“Are you having difficulty with audible responses?” Vix asked.

“You really want to come and pretend to date me? Over Christmas. For five days. When you just met me.”

Vix nodded. “It shall prove to be very educational.”

Travis shook his head, eyes wide and fixed on him. “Who even are you?”

“Vix. Was my introduction not sufficient?” Vix asked with a frown.

Travis sighed. “This is the most insane thing I’ve ever considered doing. I’m not convinced this isn’t a hallucination.”

Vix reached over and pinched Travis. He yelped. “I believe that is the appropriate Earth custom to show you are in reality.”

“You keep saying... You know what, I’m not even going to ask,” Travis said, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve been at work all day and I’m so drained. Where should I pick you up tomorrow? I was thinking of leaving at seven so we can get there with plenty of time. It’s a four-hour drive away.”

“I only arrived today. I haven’t procured a residence as of yet,” Vix said.

“You didn’t book a hotel?”

“I didn’t have books on hotels, no.” Vix shook his head. “I was going to find one once I got here. Not a book. A hotel.”

He watched Travis watch him. Very intently. Without blinking. He tried matching that, figuring it was some sort of human ritual. His eyes started burning pretty quickly but he wasn’t about to blink if Travis wasn’t. It seemed important.

“What?” Travis finally asked and blinked.

Vix followed in relief. “What, what?”

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head. Vix watched him think. “Well I have a spare room at my place. I guess it would be easier to leave tomorrow if we’re in the same—”

“I accept!” Vix said.

“Just like that?” Travis asked, back to looking at him strangely again.

“Were you not really offering?”

“No, I mean... I guess I was—”

“Then I accept,” he said surely.

“Just... Sure. Do you want to get going now? We can box up your cookie mountain.”

“But I didn’t get to finish my drink,” Vix said sadly.

“It’s probably cold now. I’ll get you another one to go,” Travis said.

“Okay!”

Vix collected his things and put on his survival gear again. Travis dealt with everything else before leading him out of the café.

“It’s about a ten-minute walk from here,” Travis said, hesitating before leading Vix to the right down a fairly crowded street.

He was saying something to himself, but Vix was way too occupied staring at everything and everyone on their way to make it out. Some people looked back at him. Mostly at his hair, which made him very happy.

He had styled it into a lovely, flowing braid that clearly stated he was a friend coming in peace, and the three little separate braids on the crown of his head said he was really

happy to meet everyone. He was glad it was translating well with the humans, despite the fact that so many of them had hats on. Vix had no clue whether they were happy to meet him back. It was rather frustrating.

He plucked one of his braids from the crown of his head and wrapped it behind his ear to signal his slightly dampening mood.

A woman walked past them, a short gust of wind throwing the hood of her jacket off her head and revealing a very simple, rudimentary braid, formed in a full circle around her head.

It was awfully basic, merely saying hello, but Vix beamed at the woman, turning around as she rushed away.

“Hi to you too!” he exclaimed at the woman’s back, booted feet slipping on the snow and sending him flailing.

The amount of clothes he had on restricted his movement considerably, the heavy bag on his shoulder hindered his balance, and the plastic cup full of hot chocolate threatened to spill.

Vix couldn’t risk losing his beverage. It was too tasty to part with.

“I could use some assistance here,” he said, standing in a wide stance, hands and cup raised at his sides for maximum balancing purposes.

Travis turned around, having walked a few steps ahead. He noticed Vix’s predicament and hurried back, coming to stand

next to him. Vix had to crane his neck to look up at the man.

“You are exceptionally tall,” Vix said. “Is that standard for humans?”

He blinked a few times at Travis, waiting for a response to come so he could note it down in his research. But instead of responding, Travis gave him another very strange look before shaking his head quickly from side to side.

Vix was unfamiliar with the gesture.

Was it reflex? Was Travis sick? Oh...what if they were in danger and Travis was trying to warn him?

He risked his drink and ducked behind Travis, peering over his shoulder at their surroundings. None of the people around them looked particularly threatening, but one could never be completely sure.

“What are you doing?” Travis asked over his shoulder, and Vix looked back up at him again.

“Are we being watched?” he asked.

“By?”

“I am unsure. You seemed disturbed,” he explained, straightening back up when it became obvious Travis wasn't at all concerned for their safety. The headshake clearly had a meaning Vix wasn't aware of.

Something to find out. He made a mental note of it.

He got another peculiar look from Travis, and then his bag was being taken from him and Travis was wrapping a very

large hand around Vix's upper arm. He had a tough job of it because Vix's jacket was rather big and made from a slick material that made Travis's hand slide around a little bit.

It was so warm, though. Vix found he enjoyed it.

"Come on," Travis said. "My house is just up this driveway. Let's get warm and dry inside."

Vix slipped and slid after him.

"The texture of this snow is completely different from the other snow," he observed, wondering why that was.

"I haven't salted my driveway yet," Travis said.

Salt! Vix knew what that was.

"Is it customary to season the entryways to your homes?" Vix asked, fascinated by how much he was learning, and he hadn't even been on Earth for a full day!

"Salt helps prevent freezing, so it's not as slippery to walk or drive on," Travis said and Vix widened his eyes.

"Fascinating," he said as he took the few steps up to the front door.

"I assume you're from somewhere warm if snow shocks you this much," Travis said.

"You are correct," he said, nodding, watching Travis pull out a small metal object and insert it into a hole in his front door. He twisted it a few times, then pushed the door open. "It's very warm back home."

Travis released a quiet noise that didn't really resemble any words Vix was familiar with and invited him to enter his home.

It was quite dark inside, that was the first thing Vix noticed. Lumia was a bright planet, without a distinctive night to speak of.

The colors would dull slightly when it was time to rest, muting just enough to allow Lumian eyes to not strain. To allow them to relax and recharge.

Being surrounded by darkness was a very new experience for Vix.

Until Travis did something that produced a soft click, and then there was light in the room.

“How did you do that?” Vix asked, eyes wide and looking everywhere for the source of light Travis had used.

“Do what?” Travis asked, frowning.

Vix flapped his hand around them both. “You just made the light appear!”

Travis watched him with that same expression Vix couldn't discern before pointing a finger at a little button on the wall.

“I flipped a switch,” he said slowly, demonstrating by touching his finger to the button again and pressing down, engulfing them both in darkness again.

“Oh,” Vix said before another click sounded and there was light once more. “Does it happen just for you? Is that your job

on Earth, to make light? How interesting.”

“No, it’s...literally just a switch,” Travis said. “You can press it too if you want.”

“I can?” Vix asked, elated beyond belief. Travis nodded slowly.

Vix skipped over to the button, poking it with his finger and bringing the darkness back. He giggled in delight, pressing it once again to make it bright. And then again to make it dark. And then once more to make it bright. And then...

“Okay!” Travis said once the light was on again. “Surprisingly, it does the same thing every time you do it, so how about we check out your room. I know we should probably discuss this whole thing more and lay out the ground rules or whatever, but I’m exhausted and we’re leaving pretty early in the morning. We’ll have four hours to fill, so I can give you the finer details then, but let’s both get some rest first. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to head out.”

Vix nodded distractedly, trailing after him, eyes landing on every single light button they passed. His finger sometimes reached out and pressed, lights going on and off whenever he did it. It was delightfully entertaining.

“This is you,” Travis said as they reached another door.

“It’s a door,” Vix corrected him.

“It’s where you’ll be sleeping,” Travis said, opening the door wide.

“Okay, sleeping. I can do that,” Vix said, walking into the room.

“You’re welcome to use whatever you need around the house,” Travis said, placing Vix’s bag down next to the door. “Let me show you where everything is.”

Vix trailed after Travis as he showed him where the bathroom was, and his kitchen if Vix wanted to grab something to eat or drink. He was still pretty full of cookies, so he declined as politely as he could. He knew turning down food could be seen as offensive by some people, so he tried to tread lightly there.

“This is the living room.” Travis pointed to a larger room with soft seats and a screen mounted to a wall.

“Do you not live in other rooms?” Vix asked, and Travis frowned, mouthing something for a second before shaking his head, and leading Vix back toward his room.

They went past another door, and since Travis said nothing about it, Vix decided to peek inside anyway, in case it contained something he might need.

The door didn’t lead to a large room. Just something very dark and narrow. It was filled with shelves and there were so many things inside that Vix didn’t recognize half of them.

“Fascinating,” he whispered, startling when Travis leaned his head inside the room with him.

“It’s just storage,” Travis said.

“You store so many things,” Vix said, walking in and poking his nose around.

Something plastic and orange at the bottom of the shelf caught his attention and he leaned down to look closer.

It was a device that seemed to have large plastic wheels, some knobs, and a long, ribbed hose attached to it.

The front of it said PH-1L in bold, white letters. It looked like a machine of some sort, but the way it was slumping down in the darkness of the closet made Vix feel very somber.

“Why is PH-1L alone in here, when all your other devices are out and around the house?” Vix asked, feeling his bottom lip wobble slightly.

“Phil?” Travis asked, brow furrowed and Vix pointed to the device. “You mean my vacuum cleaner?”

“Vacuum cleaner,” Vix repeated before his eyes widened. “It can clean up vacuum. But that’s such an important job. He should be living in a place of honor.”

“What?” Travis asked, but Vix didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

He gripped the little handle at the top of PH-1L’s orange body and rolled him out of the storage place.

“He will be going to sleep with me in my room,” he declared, and rolled past Travis. He heard the man attempt several words before finally giving a long, loud sigh.

“Sure, he can sleep there,” he said as Vix situated PH-1L next to his bed, right in front of the window so he didn’t get bored during the night. “I’ll see you in the morning, Vix.”

“Yes, you will,” Vix said. “Because I will be here, so you will see me.”

Travis spent another few moments just looking at Vix, before shaking his head yet again and walking out, closing the door behind him.

Sleeping.

Vix could sleep.

He had studied humans and how they went prone, eyes closed and bodies shutting down to sleep.

It did not seem that hard.

He looked to the side and found another light button right next to his bed. It wouldn’t be there if humans didn’t engage in activities while in their beds, Vix reasoned, before clicking the light off, then on again. So much fun.

He pulled his tablet out and settled into the fluffy bedding, opening up a new document and writing in minute detail everything he had seen and experienced on his very first day on Earth.

Snow.

Hot chocolate.

Cookies.

Other humans.

A high five.

And a brand-new friend.

He looked his notes over, adding more details and some sketches here and there before he was happy with the clarity of them. He put the tablet away and settled down to rest.

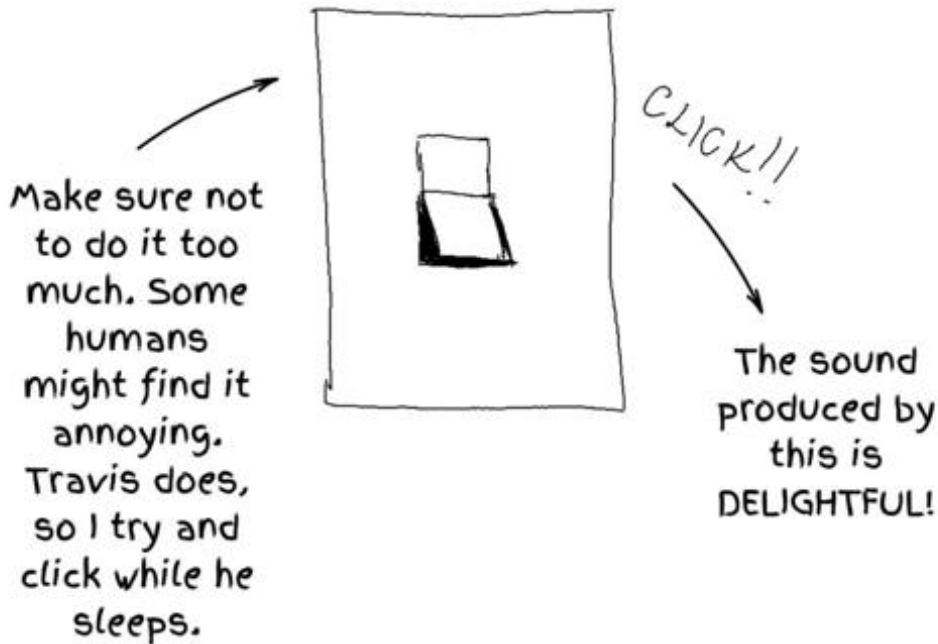
Vix couldn't wait to see what tomorrow had in store for him.

He clicked the light off, then on again, then off again.

Observation log 2:

Earth only has one sun so gets dark. This is called night. Humans use lights to make the dark go away. You click the little clicky thing and the light comes on. When you click it again, the light is gone.

Ingenious.



PRO TIP!!

Chapter 5

Travis

The sound of his alarm clock woke him, and Travis groaned as he dragged himself out of bed to the dim light of early dawn. It was way too early to be functional.

He shuffled to his bathroom and showered quickly, then threw on a pair of soft jeans and a thick sweater before picking up his suitcase and walking out of his room.

Only then did his mind come online completely and he remembered he had a guest. A weird, unpredictable guest Travis had asked to come to the retreat with him.

What the hell was he thinking?

He caught sight of himself in the full-length mirror in his hallway, shaking his head at his own reflection.

Out of your mind, dude. That's what you are. Completely lost it.

He figured the adrenaline of being promoted, fighting with his unhinged ex, and then seeing Vix in all of his shiny, weird-as-fuck glory just messed with his ability to function, so he'd

gone with whatever half-realized idea his mind came up with first.

But he had no excuses this morning. He was well rested, thinking clearly and he would fix the mess he'd gotten himself into.

He walked past the door to the guest room on his way to the kitchen.

Vix had stayed put the entire night as far as Travis could tell, which was nice. He assumed that meant he hadn't robbed him blind and disappeared into the night.

Turning his coffee machine on, he leaned against the counter, letting the soft whirring provide white noise for his wayward thoughts. He'd just wake Vix up, thank him for even entertaining the thought of going with a perfect stranger, and send him on his way. Vix didn't seem like the type to make a huge fuss about it. At least, Travis hoped. His people-assessing skills had been severely lacking lately.

Nodding to himself, he walked to the guest bedroom door and raised his hand to knock.

His knuckles hadn't even made contact with the door before it slammed open revealing a fresh-faced Vix bouncing on the balls of his feet. He was dressed in tight, bright yellow corduroy pants and an oversized blue sweater reaching almost down to his knees. Another set of mismatched socks adorned his feet, and his hair was just as shockingly white as the day before.

He was an eyesore. But a rather cute one.

Get it together, Travis.

“Hello, Travis,” Vix chirped, those crazy blue eyes staring up at him without blinking. “It’s morning and you are seeing me again as we agreed.”

“Good morning, Vix,” Travis said, trying to gear himself up to drop the news on him. “Did you sleep well?”

“I feel rested, thank you,” Vix said. “I am fully prepared for the day ahead.”

“Oh...good,” Travis said, knowing this was his perfect opening. He cleared his throat. “I’m making some coffee, if you’d like some?”

He wasn’t a coward. He was just *polite*. He’d tell him after he offered him a drink, at least.

He spun on his heel and began walking away without waiting for an answer.

“Does coffee taste the same as what I had yesterday?” Vix asked, trailing after him, basically glued to his back he was so close.

“Not exactly, no,” Travis said, making sure to not stop suddenly because Vix would headbutt him for sure. “It’s a bit more bitter.”

“I’ve never had bitter,” Vix said, nose scrunched in thought. “Do you think it’s wise for me to try it? Give it a go, as humans would say?”

As humans...what?

Travis ran a hand over his face. What the fuck was he doing? They should both probably be institutionalized at this point. Vix for being...well, Vix, and Travis for entertaining his bullshit and taking him to meet all of his business partners.

He'd literally JUST been promoted.

As much as Travis hated him, Lex would have fit in much better.

He watched Vix open his fridge and poke his entire head in, oohing and aahing about whatever he saw inside, and Travis needed to say something. Right now. Screw coffee and politeness. He needed to say the words.

"I'll make one for myself and then you can just taste and see if you like it," Travis said instead. "If you do, I can make you your own."

"Sounds sick!" Vix said out of nowhere, giving Travis a thumbs-up, and...Travis just didn't have the brainpower to keep questioning their collective sanity, or his own inability to extricate himself from a situation he'd voluntarily put himself in.

"Right..." He poured his coffee into a mug, splashing a tiny bit of cream into it, and trying not to add extra tears. "Here."

He offered the mug to Vix and watched him sniff it, look at it, and poke it with a finger before accepting and bringing it to his lips. He took the tiniest sip before contorting his face into an expression of pure horror.

“Ugh!” he exclaimed, sticking his tongue out and turning wide eyes to Travis, looking betrayed and disappointed. “Why would you do something like this to me? Aren’t we friends? We bestowed a high five upon each other yesterday!”

He shoved the mug back at Travis, pouting up a storm as he looked at him.

“I warned you it was bitter,” Travis said in his defense.

“Bitter tastes like death.” Vix huffed. “And it doesn’t even have the little clouds in it. Does the retreat serve this coffee?”

“Yes. No. It serves whatever you want to order.” Travis shook his head. “Listen, we’re getting off track. We need to talk about the retreat...”

“Whatever I want?” Vix gasped, eyes lighting up with little stars, Travis swore to god. “Then why are we still here?! Let us leave immediately!”

“Wait—”

Vix ignored him, hurrying away at top speed.

Travis dropped his head and pinched his nose as things continued to spiral away from him. Maybe it would be fine? It could be fine. Right?

He heard clattering coming from his guest room and snapped his head up. “The front door is the opposite way!”

“I am aware,” Vix called back. There was a brief pause, and then, “I am bringing PH-1L with me. He looks rather lonely,

and you never know when we might hit some vacuum on the way.”

Travis palmed his face, grabbing his coffee to go and making himself another one as insurance. It was the only way he was going to get through this car ride. He was becoming resigned at this point.

Maybe he could drop Vix on the side of the road somewhere. Maybe that was the answer.

Vix had gathered his single bag of things hastily, bouncing on his toes as he waited for Travis—actually by the front door this time. He had the vacuum next to him and was peering down the pipe with one eye.

“I don’t think we have the space in the car,” Travis tried, but he knew it was futile before he even finished the sentence.

Vix turned his pout to the highest level, looking up at Travis, pale eyes wide, large, and weirdly wet looking.

Travis refused to cave. He refused. It was insane and he was stronger than a pout and a set of puppy eyes.

“Maybe we can put it on the back seat.”

What was he even saying?

Vix cheered, grabbing the machine like a baby and cradling it to his chest. He held the pipe up like a sword. “Let us depart!”

Travis had totally lost control of the situation.

They moved outside, Travis muttering curse words to himself as he strapped the *vacuum cleaner* into the back of his car while Vix bumbled about behind him.

“I’ve lost it. I’ve truly fucking lost it,” he said as he slammed the door closed, moving around to the trunk.

He hoisted both their bags into it quickly before anything else could be seen and added. Like the mailbox. Or the street sign.

“Ready to go?” Travis asked once he’d closed it, barely avoiding catching Vix’s braid in it he was so close to him.

“Yes.” Vix gave a determined nod.

Travis noticed for the first time that his braid was completely different to how it had been yesterday.

“You changed your hair,” he said, and Vix beamed up at him, pale eyes widening.

“I did,” Vix said. “I’ve never been retreated before, so I’m very excited and looking forward to it.”

Travis didn’t bother to correct him, not sure he wanted to risk a back-and-forth conversation about language or retreats and their origins.

They got into the car, Vix pawing at anything and everything within reach before Travis could even put the key in the ignition. It was when Travis turned on the GPS that Vix’s attention was completely caught, however. He began to freely press all the buttons, changing their destination to New York

with a fifteen-hour arrival time, then changing the voice settings to an Australian accent, and then to French entirely.

Travis began to get the mother of all migraines within fifteen minutes, glad he'd been to this retreat often enough to know which way out of the city he was supposed to take.

Vix settled eventually—well, settled for Vix—and Travis was able to untense and focus on driving, the GPS lady telling him to *tourne à droite*.

The relative peace and quiet gave Travis time to really study his passenger. Yesterday he'd been so overwhelmed he couldn't even properly think. This morning had been the same. But now, on the road with nothing else to do, Travis couldn't avoid the elephant in the car.

Travis was certain that if Vix wasn't certifiable, he had definitely grown up secluded somewhere. It was the only explanation. The way he talked, the lilting accent he'd never heard before. The speech pattern like a mixture of regency England, scientific textbook, and a weird mashup of slang from every era made it seem like his only avenue of contact with the rest of the world had been whatever show or book he had come across. The way he knew some things in detail and wanted to share his knowledge, but had no clue about others. His fascination with the simplest things, from vacuums, to snow, to the GPS system.

It was all very...weird.

There was no other word for it.

He talked like he was from another planet. Earth this and Earth that. Like he wasn't part of Earth at all. Travis honestly didn't know why he wasn't driving to the nearest psych ward right now.

But as he looked over at Vix plastered against the window, exclaiming over every passing piece of scenery, his delight almost childlike, Travis found it wasn't all bad. Yes, Vix was insane. But he was also mildly entertaining if Travis really thought about it. And definitely harmless. Not to mention, not bad to look at. His...eccentricities seemed manageable. All Travis had to do was make sure Vix was so distracted with new things, he didn't have time to converse all that much with his partners.

For the whole retreat.

Travis grimaced.

Easy as pie.

"You can play some music if you'd like," Travis said when the silence became too much. His brain wouldn't shut up and he didn't like the direction his thoughts were going in.

"I can?" Vix asked, whipping his head around to look at Travis and picking up one of the tiny braids on top of his head to loop it around his ear. "Smashing."

Travis couldn't help the snort that escaped him.

"Smashing?"

Vix nodded. "It's a colloquialism that means something is wonderful or excellent, according to dictionaries."

“No, I know what it means, just haven’t heard anyone use it in a while,” Travis said. “And especially not in this part of the world.”

Vix watched him for a moment before shrugging and wiggling in his seat.

“You said music,” he said. Travis nodded, pointing his finger to his dashboard.

“There’s a bunch of radio stations saved, and there’s a USB with loads of music on it in the glove compartment,” Travis said, keeping his eyes on the road but still catching Vix frowning at his words.

“I have questions,” he said after a few moments.

Travis side-eyed him suspiciously. “Okay?”

“How do you save a radio station? What is a USB? And why do you have a compartment designated solely for your gloves? Do you own many gloves? Should I have put my gloves in there instead of in my bag? My expedition leader gave me gloves so I can store them in your compartment if needed.”

Travis was gonna crash.

There was no other possible ending to this trip.

And why did Travis see his point about the glove compartment? He didn’t think he ever stored gloves in there.

Great.

The lunatic was turning him crazy too. He was actually entertaining his ideas and questions for fuck’s sake.

He took a deep breath.

“It’s just a name for that little storage space there,” Travis said, voice shaking slightly but he was pretty happy about how calm he sounded. “And the radio stations have frequencies you can have your radio memorize so you don’t have to search for them every time.”

“Ah...clever,” Vix said, reaching for the buttons and turning the radio on.

A slow, popular ballad came on and Vix scrunched his nose. He swayed in his seat a little bit, head tilted as he listened to the lyrics.

He was surprisingly calm and invested in the song and Travis refocused on the road.

A soft sniffle brought him back to reality. He whipped his head around to find Vix rearranging his braid into something completely different, chin wobbling and eyes glassy.

“His legs don’t work like they used to before...” he said sadly. “Why?”

What the fuck?

“What?”

“He just said...” Vix said, pointing to the radio.

“Vix,” Travis said. “It’s just a song. It’s not for real.”

Vix paused his frantic braiding, glaring at the radio.

“He’s lying?” he said.

“No, he’s just a singer,” Travis said. “He writes songs for people to listen to.”

“And his legs are working?” Vix asked.

“As far as I know his legs work just fine.”

“I’m finding another frequency,” Vix said. “This one upset me.”

He fiddled with the radio for a bit before settling on what appeared to be a never-ending stream of the worst holiday music Travis had heard in his life. There were bells. In nearly every song.

Travis wanted to tuck and roll so badly.

Vix, on the other hand, seemed to be on cloud nine. There was a full-blown interpretative dance performance going on in the seat next to him. There were lanky arms flying everywhere, braids smacking him in the face, and a strange little trilling sound coming from Vix as he tried to mimic the melody.

When Travis thought he couldn’t take a single second more, a roadside shop appeared in the distance, and Travis made the split-second decision to pull over.

Vix paused his mini concert and fixed his eyes out the window. “Have we retreated?”

“Just taking a break.” Travis switched the engine off, and with it the god-awful Christmas tunes. He relaxed his head back against the rest and breathed a sigh of blessed relief.

Until he heard the door opening.

His eyes shot wide open and he saw the end of Vix's braid coiling out of the car.

"Shit." He tumbled out of his side and rounded the hood.
"Vix!"

He crashed through the remnants of the dirty snow that had been crushed by multiple cars and caught Vix by one puffy arm.

"This is the most beautiful place on planet Earth!" Vix exclaimed. "It must be so!"

Travis frowned, looking around at the hundreds of tacky decorations on makeshift shelves and racks. The shop wasn't even a proper building, just a shell with an open front that had been erected for the winter season. Ugly sweaters and shirts with terrible puns and slogans hung from the rafters. There were knock-off versions of toys and drinking games and inflatables in every shape and size staring at them creepily. Tinsel and garlands were strewn around like someone had just blown up the box containing them and then called it good wherever they landed.

To call it an eyesore was being generous.

Vix cupped his hands under his chin, worrying his braid between them as those too-big eyes stared in abject wonder.

Maybe this was a bigger mistake than the radio.

"They'll have better souvenirs at the retreat," Travis said.

It was a weak attempt, like baiting a kid with the ice cream at home when they were in front of the ice cream shop.

“Souvenirs are gifts. For when you have traveled and wish to express affection and that you missed and thought about your loved ones, correct?” Vix asked.

“Or for yourself,” Travis said, then clamped his mouth shut.

“How wonderful! I promised my mothers I would retrieve them many gifts!”

Vix was off like a rocket, greeting the owner of the pop up, who was wrapped in a whole lotta layers and cradling a thermos between gloved fingers.

Travis helplessly followed Vix around, used as a basket with no way out as his arms grew full of Christmas junk. He fucking jingled with every step. It was humiliating. Vix thought it was the best thing ever.

The time ticked on, and Travis noticed that Vix wasn't losing any steam as he talked to the owner, asking him about every single object he picked up. Travis's toes were starting to freeze inside his boots, and he stamped them to get some life back into them.

Vix himself had gotten so cold he looked...purple? The tip of his nose and his ears had a strange hue that must have been cast by the tinsel around his neck.

Travis looked around and spotted a red and green hat. Vix might as well grab something actually useful.

“Vix. Grab one of those,” Travis said, nodding with his chin.

Vix turned eagerly, only for his entire face to fall when he saw what Travis was gesturing to. He humphed and turned his nose up. “No, thank you.”

Travis raised a brow. “They have other designs.”

“No hats.”

“But your ears are going blue!”

Vix cupped them but remained steadfast. “No hats. They’re the worst creation on Earth.”

Travis couldn’t understand his aversion...until he looked at the pretty mess of knots and braids on Vix’s head. “Is this a hair thing?”

“A hair *thing*?” Vix gasped, before narrowing his eyes and stalking toward the counter, braiding his hair as he went.

Travis followed him, completely confused, though that seemed to be a state of being he should get used to around Vix. He placed Vix’s choices on the counter next to the others Vix had gathered up, stepping back as Vix proceeded to ignore him and converse with the owner.

Travis crossed his arms, wondering if he had really offended Vix, when his eyes snagged on a display tucked out of the way. A variety of earmuffs were lined up, some more elaborate than others, but a white pair that looked like bear ears caught Travis’s attention.

They would look nice against Vix’s hair.

The thought was unbidden, but once it took hold, Travis found his eyes straying back to the pair. The earmuffs wouldn't mess with Vix's braids too much like a hat would. It was only practical.

Only Vix wasn't a child. Or his real date. Or his boyfriend. So why did it matter if he wanted to freeze his ears off? He was an adult who could make his own choices. Like giving the owner a hundred-dollar bill for a bunch of cheap crap that cost twenty at most.

Jesus.

Vix gathered all his purchases up into a tote bag that had dancing polar bears and Travis bit his lip. It was like the universe's sign.

"The car's open. Give me a sec."

Vix pursed his lips and didn't say anything, but walked away—hopefully, to do what Travis said.

Travis waited until he was out of sight before grabbing the earmuffs. He felt his cheeks heat when the owner gave him a sly smile.

"Surprise gift for a loved one this holiday season?"

This was so stupid. Why didn't he just give them to Vix there? Or suggest Vix buy them himself?

He slammed a twenty down on the counter and booked it back to the car to find Vix by the back seat, leaning in toward the vacuum. He seemed to be wrapping tinsel around the handle.

Travis rolled his eyes, rounding the car while worrying the earmuffs between his fingers.

He stood behind Vix for a moment, indecisive, before thinking *Fuck it*, and leaning forward to settle the earmuffs over Vix's head and ears.

Vix startled, whirling around and knocking the earmuffs askew as he blinked up at Travis with those big blues.

“Uhhh...”

Vix brought his hands up to his head, feeling around the foreign object before Travis reached out and righted them.

“I figured these would work better for your hair,” he explained, feeling his face burn.

Vix frowned, feeling along the single band that circled the top of his head before the creases in his face evened out. He made a small sound of interest and Travis stepped back and shoved his tingling hands into his pockets.

“Shall we go?”

He didn't wait for a reply, turning and getting into the driver's seat and cursing his awkwardness. It wasn't even a big deal. Why was he even stressing over it?

Vix closed the back door and climbed in on the passenger side, pulling the visor down to look in the mirror at his earmuffs. Travis found himself staring, breathlessly waiting for the verdict.

He watched as Vix began to arrange his hair around them, pausing now and then in consideration before looping pieces around the band until it looked like the earmuffs had always been a part of Vix.

The smile that began to form on Vix's face, bright and as luminous as his hair, made Travis's heart race. He locked eyes with Vix in the visor mirror, and suddenly that smile widened, directed right at Travis, and he had to look away studiously to calm down.

"Thank you," Vix said, voice almost reverent as he fiddled with his earmuffs. "My ears are very warm now, and I don't think they'll fall off, which is nice. I like my ears."

"They're nice ears," Travis said stupidly before blinking twice and shaking his head. For. Fuck's. Sake.

"Right back at ya, buddy ol' pal," Vix said, and Travis, once again, chose to ignore the warning signs.

"Sure," he said instead. "Okay, we have a couple of hours in the car, and I think we should figure out what our story will be while we're there."

"Our story?" Vix asked, tilting his head, earmuffs and all, in question.

"Yeah," Travis said. "We're pretending to be in a relationship so we'll need some believable details to share with the people who will, undoubtedly, ask questions about us."

"People will interrogate us?"

Travis snorted. “Knowing my coworkers, it’ll absolutely feel like that. Look...we can stick to the truth as much as possible. To make it easier on us.”

“Right...”

“We met at the café a few months ago, and we kept it casual and friendly until we were sure we liked each other,” Travis offered, thinking it was easy enough for them both to remember. “Then I invited you on this retreat to spend more time together. Does that sound good?”

“That is what happened.” Vix frowned.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “We’re just gonna pretend it didn’t happen yesterday.”

“But months ago?”

“Yup.”

“And that will make your coworkers trust us?” Vix asked, and Travis tried to relax his shoulders and release the tension he felt sitting there.

“I truly hope so,” he said, focusing on the road as best as he could while answering an additional five million questions from his current partner in crime.

Chapter 6

Vix

Vix felt very uncomfortable with his nose pressed against the car window, and his eyes had started to sting from keeping them wide open for so long, but he had a task to perform and he would do his absolute best to do it properly.

“THERE IS ONE!” he yelled when he spotted a gap between two vehicles parked in the underground garage.

Travis had told him to keep an eye out for an opening, and while Vix was unwilling to throw his eyeball out of the car he was in, he still wanted to contribute. He was quite pleased with the fact that he had found the gap before Travis could.

“Thank you, Vix,” Travis said, guiding his car into the gap and turning it off.

He hopped out and Vix followed, making sure his earmuffs were still firmly in place. He put on his jacket and grabbed his souvenir bag, setting it on the floor to take PH-1L out of the backseat.

Travis got their bags out of the storage in the back, and came to join him.

“Are you taking that with us?” Travis asked with a grimace, pointing at the vacuum.

“Well I can’t just leave him here. It’s so cold,” Vix said. He liked PH-1L. And he’d decorated him nicely with the red-and-green bows he’d bought from the souvenir shop. It would truly be a pity to go through all that effort and have nobody see it.

“It’s a machine, Vix,” Travis said. “It won’t feel cold.”

Vix lifted his chin up and reached to pluck at one of the silicone ties at the end of his main braid. He tugged it off and let the end of the braid come undone in a sign of ultimate defiance.

“I like him,” Vix said. “He looks cute, and I don’t want to leave him.”

He held Travis’s stare for a few moments before Travis sighed deeply and nodded.

“Fine,” Travis said, picking up both of their bags and heading for the exit. “But he’s not leaving your room. *It!* It’s not leaving your room.”

“Is it warm in my room?” Vix asked, re-braiding his hair and scurrying after Travis, who was muttering under his breath.

“It’s a very fancy hotel, so I think it should be,” Travis said.

“Do they have the clicky lights like your house does?” Vix asked and Travis craned his neck to give him The Look again.

“Yes, Vix, they do,” he said, and Vix made a happy noise, wishing they could get to the room as quickly as possible.

They exited the parking structure and crossed the snowy path to a larger building made of wood and glass, the entire pointed roof of which was capped with beautiful snow. A set of wooden and glass doors covered in green foliage shaped into circles was at the front. This led to a large, echoing room that had many seating areas and decorations. Humans were walking around with smiles on their faces, conversing in small groups and with the people standing behind desks in one corner. What really grabbed Vix’s attention, however, was an impressively tall tree right in the center of the room, lit up and dazzling.

Vix walked toward it instinctively, dragging PH-1L behind him and craning his neck.

“Wait here and I’ll go check us in,” Travis said. “Right here, got it?”

Vix nodded absently, not really knowing what needed checking about them. Perhaps because he was Lumian? Maybe PH-1L required extra documentation. It was a care that was quickly pushed aside as Vix got lost in the twinkling lights and elaborate trinkets.

He circled the base of the tree a couple times over, touching each object and examining it. He came across a little ornament shaped like a colorful soldier and liked it instantly. He reached for it, already wrapping his fingers around it before he paused.

On Lumia, anything displayed was free for others to take, but he understood the limitations humans placed on items and possessions of value. It had sparked many conflicts in their past as he understood it.

He should ask Travis to avoid an intergalactic incident.

He scanned the room for the tall human, spotting him at the desk talking to a man who smiled with no teeth. Travis was gesticulating more than Vix had ever seen before and the man was shaking his head at the gestures.

Vix observed the interaction until Travis turned, carrying something in his hand and frowning heavily. He appeared displeased by something.

“You mad, bro?” Vix asked when Travis was close enough to him to be heard.

“Excuse me?” Travis asked, nostrils flaring slightly.

“Sure, I’ll wait here for your return,” he said, nodding, wondering why Travis had to leave again when he’d just joined him.

“What?” Travis asked.

“What?” Vix tilted his head, lifting his hand to twist two braids around one another, tying them at the end and letting them rest over his chest.

Confused. He was very, very confused by the conversation.

“Did you just say, ‘you mad, bro,’ to me?” Travis asked.

“Is that not an appropriate way to inquire about someone’s generally displeased-looking disposition?” Vix asked.

“By teenagers, and about a decade ago,” Travis said.

It explained nothing.

“Okay,” he said anyway. “Are you not pleased with retreating?”

“I am pleased with retreating, just not with the room situation,” he said.

“Do they not have clicky lights?” Vix asked, rushing to fix his hair into a deep mourning braid when Travis shook his head.

“They do have lights, they just don’t have enough rooms,” he said.

“So...we don’t get clicky lights, *or* a room?” Vix asked. “I can see why you’d be mad...bro.”

“I have the room I originally booked months ago, but because it’s the holidays they don’t have any spare bookings, or room changes.”

“Which...is displeasing to you?”

“I booked it when Lex and I were still together,” Travis said like that explained everything. Vix stared at him so he would elaborate further. “So it only has one bed.”

“And this is an issue for you?”

Travis made a funny expression, face turning slightly pink. “It isn’t for you? We only just met!”

Vix ran his fingers over his braid, mulling the words over in his head. Since Lumians didn't technically sleep, they chose to spend their nights in various combinations, depending on what their preferred nightly activities were. Those who liked to spend nights in silence grouped together, those who liked to stay active grouped to do whatever they wanted, rejoining their primary familial units in the mornings for a meal.

Humans, as far as Vix was aware, considered sleeping together to be very intimate, so he tried to be as understanding as he could be about Travis's predicament.

"I have seen many instances of humans sharing beds. I believe you call it sleepovers. I see no problem in engaging in such an activity to broaden my understanding of human behaviors and activities," he said. "Besides, if we are to convince others we are a couple, sharing a room would be wise."

"I—"

"Travis! You son of a gun!" a voice called loudly.

Vix startled. Son of a...? Was that even possible?

"Oh shit," Travis muttered, turning to look at the man approaching them across the shiny floor. The man had a round stomach and gray hair and was wearing a red sweater. Perhaps he was invoking the deity this holiday celebrated? Travis looked back at Vix with wide eyes. "Act normal."

Vix blinked and nodded faithfully. "If you would provide the parameters for normal, I shall do my best."

Travis groaned. “Just...hide the vacuum.”

“But I decorated PH-1L seasonally. It’s appropriate to spread cheer to those around us during this time,” Vix protested, pulling the vacuum closer.

“Vix—”

“Happy holidays!” the man boomed, slapping Travis on the arm as he reached him. “You’re the last one to get here. Did you get lost in a snow drift or something?”

“Henry, hey. Happy holidays. I had to stop off on the way,” Travis explained, rubbing the back of his neck. He blocked Vix’s view by stepping in front of him suddenly. “I’ve still got to check into my room and unpack, so I’ll meet up with you guys in a—”

“Now not so fast. Don’t think I’m letting you run away before you introduce me to your mysterious date.” Henry moved around Travis and looked at Vix, his eyes twinkling like the lights next to them. “He never mentioned you before, and then you spring up out of nowhere last night! The whole office is dying for the details.”

“Oh, no!” Vix said, horrified at the thought of so many people losing their lives because of him. He gripped Travis’s hand and waved a hand toward the man. “We have to help them. Give this man all of the details!”

Travis did not seem to be in a hurry to save them at all. He let out a long sigh and turned to look at the man.

“Don’t mind Vix, Henry,” Travis said, grabbing Vix’s arm. “He went a bit heavy on the motion sickness meds, so he’s a bit loopy.”

“I didn’t—” Vix started, but Travis cut him off.

“Get enough sleep. I know, sweetheart.” Travis nudged Vix toward a glass box that slid up and down on sturdy-looking wires. It was similar to a Lumian transporter in looks, but seemed rudimentary in all other aspects. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“But—”

“We’ll see you later, Henry,” Travis said, still dragging him. Vix craned his neck to look back at Henry.

“I give you my word we will save those people,” he said over his shoulder. “Tell them to stay strong.”

“Vix!” Travis warned, herding him into the glass transporter. Maybe he didn’t want Vix to see anyone die.

“Is that a vacuum cleaner covered in tinsel?” he heard, just before the doors closed.

Vix turned to Travis, who was gripping the railing with both hands, feeling like no number of mourning braids could express what he was feeling at that moment. “How long do they have?”

Travis sighed. “Who, Vix?”

Vix pointed through the glass side of the transporter. “Those poor humans. If we sent them the details via a communicator

of some sort, would that save them? Or does it have to be relayed by another human to work?”

“Vix, nobody is dying,” Travis said, leaning against one of the glass sides. His shoulders looked to be leaning down, and he seemed tired.

“They’re not?” Vix asked. “But Henry said—”

“It’s just an expression,” Travis said. “It means they’re very curious and want to know who you are and how I met you. They won’t die if we don’t tell them that.”

Vix tilted his head, examining Travis for any sign of insincerity. He couldn’t find any. Once again, the lack of any sort of meaning from Travis’s short hair was proving to be an issue for Vix.

“Do you promise nobody will die?”

Travis nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay then. I accept your explanation,” he said, feeling marginally more settled. If their lives weren’t really in imminent danger, Vix supposed they could deliver the needed information in a calm manner over the course of their retreating.

The glass transporter made a short dinging noise Vix really liked, and the door slid open. Vix followed Travis down a very drab-looking hallway.

He didn’t think anything on Lumia was colored in the shade they were seeing everywhere. Vix had no idea what the name

of it was, but it was very dull. It was making him feel tired and unmotivated.

Travis finally stopped at a door labeled 307 and held a card up to a black reader that turned from red to green. A click was heard and then Travis was opening the door.

Vix tried to peer around him as they walked in, eager to see what was inside. Surely there was a reason humans desired to retreat instead of staying at their own homes.

The room was large—bigger than any of the rooms Travis had in his home—and there were many doors in different corners. Vix left PH-1L and his bag by the door and eagerly ran to the first one.

Closet, bathroom, bedroom, balcony. One by one he stuck his head in, noting the various decorations—a mixture of animal and Christmas themed. There were lots of browns and greens. It was the outside, inside.

But it was at the balcony that Vix paused to take a closer look.

Beyond the glass doors there was untouched snow covering the wooden railing outlining the space. Underneath the overhang, two wooden chairs and a small table were placed around what looked to be a small campfire.

There was a mysterious large square in the corner that was covered, but had steps leading up to it.

“I recognize all the things but this,” Vix said, looking over his shoulder at Travis who was collapsed face-first on the

brown L-shaped sofa.

Travis mumbled something, then turned his face to glance at him. His hair was messy over his forehead, and Vix felt a curious impulse to correct it. “The room comes with a Jacuzzi and a firepit.”

“Ja-cu-zzi?” Vix repeated carefully.

Travis’s mouth twitched up in one corner, like the attempt at the word amused him. “Yeah. It’s like a pool. Or, it’s probably more accurate to describe it as a bath.”

“It contains water?”

Travis propped his head on his fist. “Heated water. And jets that massage you. And bubbles.”

Vix grew excited the more he listened. “Can we use it?”

The request had Travis sitting up straight. “Well I... Do you even have any swim clothes?”

“Do you not bathe naked?”

Travis’s eyes went wide and he began to cough. “It’s not actually for bathing! It’s for relaxing.”

“Oh. Well—”

“Shall we order room service?” Travis cut him off, reaching over and grabbing a piece of paper. “We can have the food sent up to the room instead of going down to the restaurant. It’s been a long day traveling.”

“You must be tired,” Vix acknowledged. “We can order food and you can relax inside the Jacuzzi while we eat!”

“Inside...”

Vix closed the balcony door and walked over, grabbing the menu from Travis’s loose grip. “I shall order for us to show my appreciation!”

He read through the instructions and located the phone it mentioned. One of everything sounded wonderful and he heard Travis’s gasps of excitement behind him as he read off each dish in order. He happily put the phone down and turned with a big smile to find Travis staring at him in shock.

“They said it’ll be a bit of a wait, but everything will be ready as soon as possible,” he said, and Travis gave him a small nod, clearly too happy to actually use his words. Vix was pleased. “So, Jacuzzi. I would like to try it, please.”

“We’re not doing it naked, Vix,” Travis said.

“I presume that is your personal boundary and I’m going to respect it,” he said. “You mentioned swim clothes? I’m not familiar, so could you explain?”

“Well, they look very similar to underwear, and you wear them into Jacuzzis, or if you go swimming in the pool or ocean,” Travis explained with a strange expression on his face, and Vix mulled his words over in his head.

“Did you bring any?”

Travis nodded. “I packed some because I knew the hotel has a pretty large pool I wanted to check out.”

Vix perked up at that, an idea forming. He piled all of his hair on top of his head in a rather adventurous clump, excited

to be trying something new once again.

“Okay, I suggest you use your swim clothes, and since I’m in possession of underwear and you said they were similar, would it be acceptable if I used those?” he asked, and watched Travis think it over.

“Fine. That should work.” Travis sighed. “You go change and I’ll get the Jacuzzi started.”

Vix bounced to his bag, sifting through his things until he found the underwear. He was reaching for his shirt to take it off when Travis called to him from the balcony.

“Change in the bathroom, Vix,” he said.

“Right,” Vix said. “I apologize.”

Humans seemed to be particular about nudity. That much Vix knew from studying his notes. Lumians only cared about covering their chests around those not closest to them.

Their bodies were all so similar, there was very little to hide. They wore clothes that were often transparent, and multitudes of Lumians chose to forgo everything other than their heart guards.

He rushed into the bathroom, taking in all the wonderful things of a very human-looking room. Vix was familiar with bathing quarters from Lumia, but this looked so bright and clean he couldn’t help but run his hands over the smooth surfaces. It was all white and pristine looking. There was an entry from an older Observer on typical human homes and Vix knew what amenities a bathroom had. A toilet, a sink, a tub

and a large mirror. Vix liked mirrors and this one came with the same clicky lights Travis's house and their hotel room had. It was so much fun he could barely contain himself.

But he had to. He held himself back from all the fun, pulling his clothes off and changing into the underwear he'd brought with him. They came with a matching shirt he felt would be enough to cover the most vulnerable part of him. It was made out of black, slinky material that went up to the hollow of Vix's neck, shielding him perfectly.

He stacked the used clothes on a shelf inside the bathroom and walked out, eager to experience the Jacuzzi. He was waylaid by a sudden knock at the door and diverted course, opening it up to see a man dressed in black and white behind a large silver contraption on wheels.

The human's eyes widened at the sight of him and Vix grinned, wondering if the human was reacting to his adventurous braids. "Hello! I'm happy to share excitement with you."

The human went red in the face. "I... Uh... Room service?"

"The food! Come in, come in," Vix said, turning around and stepping aside.

When he looked back the human snapped his head up from where he was looking down. Vix followed his gaze to the floor all around him and saw nothing of interest.

The human wheeled the cart in, growing redder and redder as the seconds passed. Perhaps he was overworked and needed

a break. “I can take it the rest of the way. Thank you for your service. Make sure to ask your employer for a reasonable break time. If not, you should enter a union or a protest, I have come to learn.”

The human nodded, his head bobbing around so much it was hard for Vix’s eyes to keep up with. “Is there anything else you need?”

Vix shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sur—”

“Vix? What’s taking you so long?” Travis called.

The human made an odd squeaking noise and exited the room quicker than Vix had seen anyone move. Curious.

Shrugging, Vix took the silver contraption on wheels and pushed it as the human had done all the way out to the balcony.

“I am ready!” he announced, bouncing on his toes, hissing when chilled air hit his skin. “Oh, it’s so cold! Why is the Jacuzzi outside? Could they not have put it next to the other water fixtures they have inside the bathroom?”

He was met with silence.

“Travis?” He turned and found the man staring at him, eyes wide and mouth opening and closing as he looked at Vix. It was a similar look to the one the other human had given him.

Vix followed his line of sight, all the way down to his underwear.

“Are these appropriate? I was told these are the latest styles in underwear,” Vix said, looking down his chest at the black material decorated with two adorable bows on the little straps on his shoulders.

The bottom of it reached the curve of his waist, touching the bright pink material covering his genitals. It was partially obscuring his pale skin, but letting it show through a soft mesh fabric in places. There was a tiny bow just above his private parts that matched the bows on his shoulders, and Vix thought it all looked very pleasing to the eye.

The only thing he didn't like was the fact that there was just a little string of fabric at the back, and it had disappeared completely between the globes of his backside, leaving it out in the cold air.

“Did you answer the door like that?” Travis asked, his voice sounding rough all of a sudden.

“Of course. Earth does not possess teleportation technology, after all.” Vix laughed. “The worker pushed it in here for us. He stared much the same way you did. Is this really not appropriate?”

He turned around so Travis could fully see his attire, hearing a choked sound when his back was turned. Vix swiveled back around to see Travis's reaction.

Travis was silent and still for a moment before he abruptly turned and bent headfirst over the Jacuzzi, slithering the rest of his body into the water after him. Water sloshed everywhere, drenching the floor, but when he didn't pop up again, Vix

rushed over. Human physiology did not allow them to remain underwater for long periods.

Vix could see the outline of Travis's body, obscured by bubbles and steam, and reached inside only to snatch his hand back when Travis broke the surface again with a gasp.

"I needed that," Travis said, eyes closed, water and hair all over his face.

"Why did you not use the appropriate steps?" Vix asked. "Is that not violating the safety regulations written on the side here?"

Travis shook his head, eyes still closed. "You use the steps. Hurry in, you'll catch a chill."

Vix wanted to argue further, but he was cold and the water was inviting, the steam curling up warmly. He hurried up the steps and dipped his foot in. He let out a noise of happiness at the heat and hopped inside, splashing water around him. His shirt immediately clung to his chest, molding itself to his skin.

Travis only opened his eyes once Vix was inside, peeking with one before he opened both fully. He seemed to relax, turning to the food and reaching over to drag the silver table closer. He began removing the silver domes, revealing the variety of Earth foods.

Vix trilled happily, moving closer, and they began to eat slowly. Vix didn't need as much sustenance as a human—Lumian bodies were far more efficient—but Vix enjoyed

watching Travis eat immensely. Quizzing him here and there about various things, making mental notes for later.

He was a very interesting human. Vix had always found humanity fascinating in itself, but there was something about Travis that had him wanting to ask a million questions and stare at him all day to work him out specifically. He was the opposite of everything Lumian. Dark, short hair and a bigger build, yes, but his personality also seemed closed off and contrary in many cases. He often said one thing while Vix suspected he meant another.

“What?” Travis asked, wiping his hands and mouth off with a napkin.

Vix hadn't realized he was staring. “I am observing you.”

Travis settled back against the headrest that seemed to be inbuilt and pushed the strands of his hair back off his face. “Observing me?”

Vix nodded, copying his actions and feeling the pressure of jets on his back that surprised him. He looked down, feeling around to find them, spinning in place as he felt along the edges and ridges under the water. “I am an Observer. It's my job,” he said absently as he explored.

Travis snorted. “Never heard someone say being nosy is an occupation.”

Vix stopped and brought wet fingers to the tip of his nose, looking down at it and then back over his shoulder at Travis. “Nosy?”

Travis's mouth did the thing where it rose at the corner again before he seemed to calm his expression purposefully, which only further sparked Vix's interest in him. He forgot about his nose and the jets and slid over to Travis's side of the Jacuzzi.

Travis seemed to be watching his every move as he drew closer and closer through the steam, but he didn't move away. Vix let his eyes run all over him. It was fascinating to see a human up close like this without the barrier of clothes.

He noted all the differences he knew of with his own eyes and not through a scientific manual or holoscreen.

"You have very broad shoulders. Is this so even compared to other humans?" Vix asked.

"I...guess," Travis said. "Compared with yours."

Vix smiled at what Travis must mean as a 'joke.' "It is an unfit comparison. I'm not from here. Your friend Henry was not as large as you here."

He reached out and patted Travis's shoulders with both hands, then reached down lower. "Only here..."

"Woah!"

Travis snatched his hand through the water for some reason and Vix got distracted comparing their hand sizes and the texture again. Now he had time to fully devote to it, he pulled their joined hands closer as he himself moved in so that their legs were brushing under the water.

"I find this sensation most pleasant. Where I come from, we do not engage in the practice of hand-holding," Vix said,

rubbing their fingers together. He glanced up at Travis's silence and raised a brow. "The steam is making you go red."

"The steam. Right."

Vix nodded, happy to be told so, only for the move to dislodge a braid. It coiled down over his shoulder and into the water, floating between them. The warm water made the untied end of it unravel, and Vix watched as it started spreading over the surface like the tendrils of steam rising above their heads.

He was so focused on watching it, he completely missed Travis reaching for it with his free hand before Vix could pull it out of the water and re-braid it.

Travis cupped his hand underneath, lifting it up and letting it drape over his palm like a web.

It was unbelievably intimate. No one but his mothers had ever touched his hair before. Especially untied like this. Vix barely held in his gasp, fighting the sudden weakness in his limbs that made him want to fall forward.

Travis tested the texture of Vix's hair between his fingers unknowingly, the little tugs on his scalp sending jolts through him that had him trembling. Vix watched the strands wrap around Travis's fingers, transfixed.

That only ever happened during sex.

A warmth that had nothing to do with the water began to coil through him. From the tips of his toes to the apples of his

cheeks. He felt like he was burning up from the inside, the heat centering in his chest and pulsing.

“Travis...” he said quietly, looking up at the human only to find him staring at Vix’s chest.

“What...?” Travis asked.

Vix snapped his head down, finding a barely visible pink glow cresting from the neckline of his shirt.

He gasped and clutched the material tighter to his skin, standing up and scurrying out of the Jacuzzi. He locked himself inside the bathroom, breaths coming in short little puffs as he took the shirt off and looked into the mirror.

Dark pink. Fuchsia colored, almost.

Not a familial heartshine.

Not a friendly one.

Vix pressed his hand to the center of his chest, covering the glow as best as he could. It wasn’t like that.

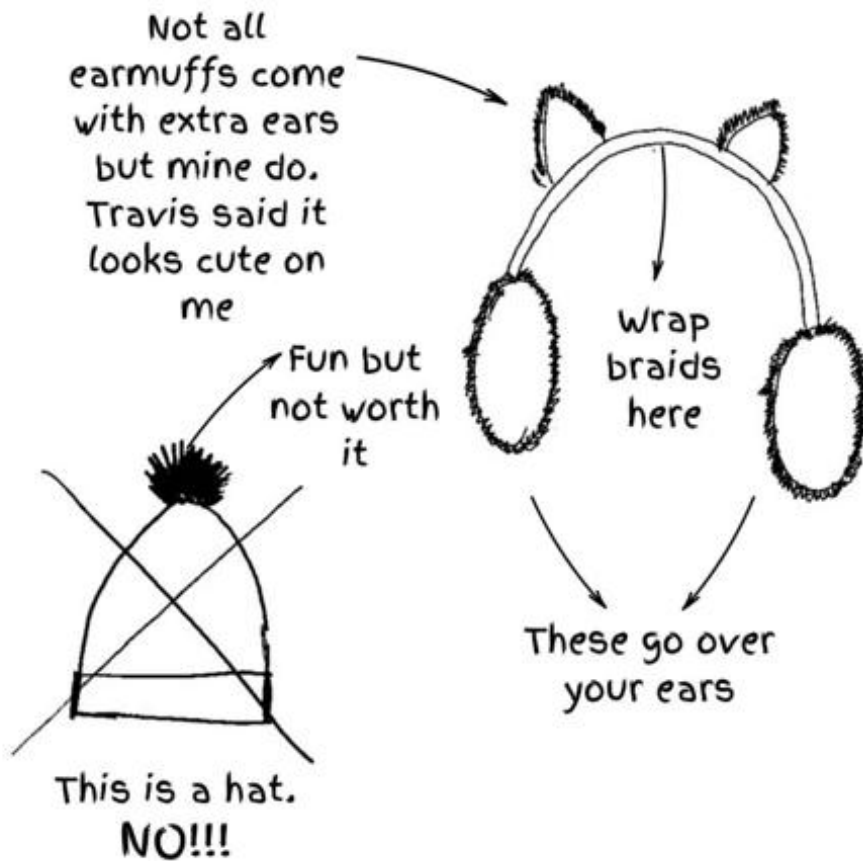
His heart wasn’t implying what the shine said it did.

It was just that Travis had touched his hair, and Vix didn’t know how to sort it out in his head.

Yes. That was it.

Observation log 3:

These are called earmuffs. They are fuzzy and warm and go over your ears so they don't fall off in the Earth season known as Winter. You can wrap your braids around them too. My human Travis bought these for me so I will be keeping them.



Chapter 7

Travis

The slam of the bathroom door Vix had disappeared behind pulled Travis out of a trance he seemed to be stuck in. Tingles were running up his spine and there was a seriously uncomfortable throbbing between his legs.

Vix induced.

Because of course it was.

Everything Travis had felt for the past couple of days had been Vix induced. A delirium. He had no idea what was happening to him. With him.

Vix's body on display like that after he had only seen it bundled up in a million layers of clothing. Vix's slim fingers on his skin, unashamed and curious as he explored. Vix's strange-colored eyes, wide and inquisitive as if he'd never seen another human before.

And Travis, wise beyond all reason, had let him get closer. Let him put his hands on him.

Touched his hair.

And sent him running instead.

How had trying to get one up on his ex and save face in front of his company turned into this?

Into Travis being confused about where the lines were. What the lines were? And how far behind he had left them when he'd decided to touch Vix like that.

Running a hand over his damp face, he heaved himself out of the hot tub, wrapping a large towel around himself and walking into the room.

He sat on the edge of the bed, looking toward the bathroom door. Vix was still inside. No sounds coming through.

Travis waited, and waited some more. Each ticking second made it harder to stay still. And then he couldn't anymore.

"Vix?" he called out, cringing at how shaky his voice sounded.

"I'm pooping," Vix called back, and the sheer ridiculousness of it erased the discomfort Travis was feeling instantly.

The response was so utterly Vix that it made Travis laugh.

"All right," he said. "Take your time."

"Well I'm not gonna take yours, so chillax."

Travis shook his head, standing up and getting dressed in dry clothes. He flopped down on the bed to wait for Vix to come out, feeling the day's exhaustion drawing him into the mattress.

He had no idea when he fell asleep, waking up to noise with no real concept that any time had passed at all. He blinked into the daylight streaming through the gap in the curtains, turning his head and finding the spot next to him empty and unruffled.

His musings were cut short by a knock at the door.

“Coming!” Vix’s voice rang out as footsteps hurried over.

Travis frowned, sitting up straight, all the blood rushing to his head suddenly. What if one of his coworkers had found his room and was knocking?

He rolled out of bed, getting a foot stuck in the decorative fur throw and hopping around to stop himself from falling.

“Good morning!” an unfamiliar voice said, making Travis pause where he was, arms and legs still akimbo. “We hope you enjoyed your first night with us. Here is the activities menu for your stay, and a reminder that breakfast is still ongoing. It’ll end at nine o’clock.”

“Activities?” Vix asked happily.

“Yes, sir. Please sign up for any—”

“Everything.”

“I’m sorry...?”

“Is there an everything option?”

“Some activities clash in times, sir. Several can run at once,” the man said, sounding slightly flustered by Vix’s enthusiasm.

Travis himself was slightly flustered, going back to frantically trying to untangle himself. Vix wanted to do every

activity? What was he saying? Of course Vix wanted to do every activity. Travis wouldn't have a single second of rest. And it would ruin his plan to stay holed up in their room for the majority of their stay.

Vix and the member of hotel staff continued to converse as Travis worked to free himself.

“Oh. Did the cleaners leave behind the vacuum? I'm so sorry. I'll take it away immediately,” the man said.

“He's my guest.”

“I'm sorry, sir?”

“His name is PH-1L. I brought him along to retreat with me. He is having a most spectacular time,” Vix said before gasping. “Are there any activities I can sign him up for?”

Travis ripped himself from the blanket, knee hitting the floor with a *thud*. Vix was going to get them kicked out. Or locked up. Or both. He stumbled out of the bedroom just as the door to the room closed ominously.

Vix turned around, a huge smile painted on his face, only getting bigger when he spotted Travis. He waved the activity card at him excitedly.

“I picked many activities for us! And PH-1L!”

“Great,” Travis said in defeat, collapsing onto the sofa.

Maybe the silver lining was that they'd be so busy doing activities that none of his coworkers could pin him down to

talk about Vix. Or he could strangle himself with the vacuum hose.

He let that hope buoy him as they prepared for the day, letting it carry him until they reached the dining hall on the first floor.

The room itself was huge and beautifully decorated. Dark wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling and twinkling white lights were strung everywhere. The whole left side was made entirely of floor-to-ceiling windows, offering a spectacular view of the surrounding forest and snow-covered trails. The smell of various foods from the stations set up at the head of the room drifted toward them. The sounds of talking and plates and silverware clinking were a continuous white noise.

Vix followed him, wide-eyed, hands grasping the back of Travis's sweater. It was preferable to Vix rushing ahead and causing havoc, so Travis didn't say anything about the contact. Vix seemed extremely touchy in general, and while Travis had never really been that way, often annoyed by people lolling all over him, surprisingly, he found in this instance he didn't hate it.

They joined the line for food, Travis grabbing two plates and placing them on a single tray.

“What do you want?” Travis asked.

He'd noticed last night that food seemed to be the only area in which Vix wasn't that exploratory, contrary to his first impressions at the café. He'd ordered the entire hotel menu—which Travis was still trying not to cry about when he thought

about the later cost—but he hadn't appeared to want to eat many of the dishes. It wasn't even that Travis could pin him down as being vegetarian, or pescatarian, or vegan even. Vix seemed to want to consume fruit predominantly. He was open to sampling tiny pieces of things, like an experiment, before either spitting it out, or accepting it with a bland but thoughtful expression.

He seemed more eager to have Travis try things and explain every difference, or smell, or texture, than to do it himself.

“What is that?” Vix asked, pointing at the puff pastry squares filled with raspberry jam and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

“It's a sweet pastry with fruit filling,” Travis said, taking one and putting it on a plate for Vix. “I think you'll probably like it.”

“I am looking forward to tasting it and I trust your judgment,” Vix said, poking a finger into the puff pastry. A strange little noise came from his throat, high-pitched and sounding like a child's laughter. “It's fluffy.”

Travis felt his lips pulling up into a smile at the excited bounce in Vix's step as he looked at the plate Travis prepared for him. He was fussing with his hair again, the installation for this morning centered around his earmuffs, which he refused to take off even though they were inside.

Vix looked happy.

And it made Travis feel good. Strangely good.

He cast his gaze over the breakfast spread, looking for more things Vix might like, because one tiny pastry wouldn't be enough to hold him over until lunch.

Something at the end of the breakfast bar caught his attention and he left Vix where he was and walked over there, genuinely pleased to find something he was sure would make Vix ecstatic. On a large silver platter, there was a small cluster of Christmas trees made entirely out of fruit. Watermelon was carved into little baubles, there was a mix of berries peppered through in place of lights, and a large pineapple star perched on top of the creation. It was colorful and silly, but Travis took one anyway, placing it onto his tray right next to the puff pastry.

"You actually brought the little weirdo with you," a voice came from his left and he closed his eyes, pinching his lips together to keep himself from cursing.

Why was he not surprised.

"Lex," he said curtly, not even bothering to turn to look at the man. He busied himself with piling whatever he could find onto his tray. He didn't care what he got as long as he got away from Lex.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Lex asked.

"Delirious," Travis drawled.

"Aren't you gonna ask who I'm here with?"

"Couldn't care less if I tried," Travis said, finally turning. Lex was dressed in his usual designer garb, each piece of

skiwear fitted and tailored to every inch of his body, hair parted and artfully placed over his forehead. His gray eyes were piercing, full of smug superiority. “Look, I’ve made it very clear we’re done. Enjoy your time here with whoever’s dick you rode in on.”

“I didn’t see dick riding on the activity menu,” Vix said as he came to an abrupt halt next to Travis, almost sliding into place by his side. “Can we sign up?”

Travis sent a silent prayer for patience toward the sky and wrapped an arm around Vix’s tiny waist. He was immediately made aware of just how fragile and small Vix was compared to him. It stirred something inside Travis. An urge he made sure to squash down.

“That activity is for us to do in private, sweetheart,” he said to Vix.

“Bitchin’,” was the reply he got. For fuck’s sake.

“Seriously, Travis,” Lex said, the whiny tone of his voice grating on Travis’s nerves. “How long do you plan to keep this charade up?”

“Not keeping anything up,” Travis said. “Vix is here with me. We’re going to have breakfast now. Excuse us.”

“Oh, is that for me?” Vix asked, dick riding momentarily forgotten as he stared at the fruit tree with a glint in his eye.

“I saw it and immediately thought of you,” Travis said, amping up the performance for Lex, who was glaring at them both.

“I love it so much!” Vix bounced on the balls of his feet, fussing with his braids again. Travis would have to ask about it, and soon. He was doing it too often, too intentionally for it to be a habit. “And it’s shaped like a Christmas tree. That is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

“Let’s go find a place to sit and you can tell me all about the activities you have planned for us,” Travis said, trying to urge him along.

Vix completely ignored the first part of the sentence, launching into the very detailed, *very* busy itinerary he had for them.

“But sledding is first, which is why I left PH-1L behind,” he said once he ran out of breath. “That’s right after breakfast. I asked the lovely human who came to our room what sledding is and he said it is when you sit on a...a...”

He drew a shape in the air with both hands, looking at Travis expectantly.

“A sled,” Travis supplied.

“YES! That. And then you slide down a hill on the snow,” Vix finished, looking beyond excited about the prospect. “It sounded delightful.”

“You’re going sledding,” Lex said, still not taking the hint and fucking off. And fine, Travis hated the very idea of sledding. But he knew Lex would rather be dead than cold and wet in the snow, despite his stupid outfit. So...sledding sounded like heaven.

“Problem?” Travis asked him.

Lex snorted. “Having a hard time imagining you having fun sledding.”

“Vix brings out the joy, I suppose,” he said.

Vix beamed. “And you bring me puffy pastries.”

Travis, surprisingly, found himself smiling genuinely at the words, forgetting for a second that this was all an act.

Vix was an oddball, that was for sure. But somehow, with Lex’s annoying presence there, it felt fun and endearing more than anything else.

“Let’s find a spot so you can try it and see if you like it,” Travis said, shouldering past Lex and leading Vix toward an empty table.

“I’ll see you on the slopes,” Lex threw after Travis, and Travis rolled his eyes.

As if.

Breakfast was over relatively quickly, with Vix too eager to start their ‘fun filled’ day and Travis just wanting to get the fuck out of there and away from Lex as fast as possible.

As much as he fronted, he couldn’t deny that it did hit a nerve that Lex was here with one of his coworkers. It had him questioning whether this was a new thing, or yet another affair to add to the tally.

The betrayal had settled in by now, but picking at the wound still hurt, and his pride had taken a major hit. Did everyone at

work know about this? Did they know about it before and had just never said anything to his face, only whispered behind his back?

These thoughts spun in his head as they gathered their outdoor wear from their room and made their way outside to the sledding hills. The chilled air took his breath away and he didn't look forward to the numbness his toes were sure to experience on the trek up the gritted pathway with these bulky sleds underarm.

“This planet is amazing,” Vix said, diverting Travis's attention.

He glanced over his shoulder to find Vix staring out into the distance and followed his eyeline past the snow-capped trees. In the distance, the giant shadow of the mountain could be seen. It wasn't always visible, often concealed behind cloud cover or weather conditions. Sometimes the whole weekend could pass without seeing it once.

The corner of Travis's mouth hitched as he silently took it in. “Yeah, I guess it's all right.”

Vix closed the distance between them, grasping his arm and peering up at him with wide, beseeching eyes. “All right? That seems like an inadequate descriptor.”

Travis snorted, looking back at the mountain and contemplating its magnitude. The peaks and angles. “Okay. It's beautiful.”

Vix made a satisfied noise in his throat. “Yes, yes. That’s much better.”

Travis shook his head, allowing Vix to tug him along, pointing out more things to him and asking him to provide appropriate adjectives. It was silly, but Travis felt like he was seeing the world again for the first time by his side. Things he often dismissed or looked straight past were suddenly pushed in his face to examine in ways he’d never considered doing.

“Travis? Is that you?” a familiar voice called as he was examining a rock Vix had retrieved from the ground.

Travis looked over his shoulder to see Janice waving up at him, her five-year-old twin girls, Jennifer and Jessica, waddling after her in their snow suits with their dad bringing up the rear carrying two kids’ sleds. They were all dressed in matching orange, like traffic cones.

“Jan, hey,” Travis called back, leaving Vix to look at his rock and walking down a little to greet her.

They were both the younger ones in the office and had gravitated together, first because of that simple common alignment, and then more so over bitching about everything and everyone they didn’t like.

“Where have you been hiding? Henry mentioned he’d seen you, but you didn’t respond to any of our messages,” she said as she drew level with him. She readjusted the fluffy black headband she was wearing over her dark hair.

“Yeah, sorry. We got in late and decided to turn in early,” Travis half-lied. Truthfully, he’d seen every message sent from his coworkers and ignored them all systematically.

Janice pursed her purple-painted lips. “And it doesn’t have anything to do with a certain someone who turned up unannounced yesterday?”

Travis tried and failed to hide his expression behind nonchalance.

“You don’t have to say it. The little harlot was preening all night on Ken’s arm and looking at the door for you to walk in.”

Travis raised a brow at the name calling, but his mind was stuck on repeat. Ken. Fucking Ken? He was twice Lex’s age, and last time he checked, very married.

“What’s a harlot, Mommy?” Jessica asked, tugging on Janice’s ski pants.

“Someone who needs Jesus.”

“Who’s Jesus?”

“Go ask your dad, honey.”

Jessica hopped off to her father, little body swishing and crunching on the snow. Travis would have laughed, but he couldn’t find the energy. He knew he should be acting unbothered. He had a supposed new date anyway. He ran a hand over his brow, just under the line of the bobble hat Vix had made a face at.

The reminder made him glance over his shoulder at him. He had drifted from where he had left him and was now examining the ropes marking the path up the slope. He had his nose nearly pressed to them as he bent over at a ninety-degree angle, the ends of his braids hanging and nearly touching the snow on the ground.

“He’s cute.” Travis spun back to face Janice, who had followed his line of sight. “Much cuter than Lex, anyway.”

Travis gave Vix one more glance, unable not to. He didn’t want to compare the two—the situations were completely different, even if Janice didn’t know that—but it was hard not to.

“He is,” Travis said, and it wasn’t really a lie. Lex had always tried for affected cuteness to get his way. Vix just... was Vix. “Did Ken say anything to explain why he was here with Lex?”

Janice scoffed. “He said he brought him as a ‘friend’ because his wife couldn’t make it and even though you and Lex had broken up, he felt like part of the family. Just a bunch of bullshit to cover up his closeted ass.”

Travis sighed through his nose, a cloud of fog passing between them. “Whatever.”

“I can spike his drink with laxatives if you want,” Janice offered casually.

It startled Travis into a laugh. “Is that something you do often?”

Janice shrugged.

“Mommy, Mommy! That man has pretty hair!” Jennifer said loudly, pointing at Vix.

It caught Vix’s attention and he turned from his scrutiny of the ropes to look at Jennifer, smiling broadly all of a sudden and hurrying over while looping his braids in a different way.

“Nice to meet you!” Vix said to her. “I see you are very advanced in communications already.”

“She gets that from me,” Janice said. “We’re very much on the ‘never shuts up’ end of the communication spectrum.”

Travis chuckled, but the joke didn’t seem to land with Vix who seemed to be looking between Janice’s hair and her daughter’s braids. He opened his mouth to say something a few times before closing it again.

“Can I touch your hair?” Jessica joined the conversation with her mom and sister, looking up at Vix.

Vix was silent, clearly trying to find a polite way to say no to the little girl. Travis wanted to intervene and help him, but eagle-eyed Janice caught on before he could.

“Your grubby little hands have just been in the snow. We don’t want to get Vix’s hair wet, now do we?” she asked in a tone of voice that really left no room for any answer that wasn’t no.

“No, Mommy,” Jessica said, and Janice nodded.

“Right,” she said. “Now, turn sharp to the right and march up that hill. We have sledding to survive. Aaaaaand go!”

Jessica and Jennifer turned to their right like little soldiers, executing their march as well as they could in the mushy snow, their dad hauling the sleds behind them.

Travis and Vix watched them for a second before heading after them. It took a bit of effort to climb up the hill but they managed without much slipping or tripping.

“I find those miniature humans to be extremely brave,” Vix said once they were finally at the top, watching the kids zip past them down the hill. His unoccupied hand was fussing with his braids again, tangling several of them together.

“Why?” Travis asked as Vix finally settled on tucking the end of his braid mess into the collar of his shirt, hiding it from sight.

“This incline is much steeper from here than it seemed when we were down there,” Vix said. “If my calculations are correct, sitting on this sled and rushing down, you’d accelerate by a significant amount, risking various injuries with no way to save yourself.”

Travis suppressed a laugh and nudged Vix with his shoulder.

“Are you saying you’re scared?” he asked teasingly.

Vix turned huge eyes to him, not even trying to hide it. “Yes.”

His willingness to admit something so silly hit Travis right in the chest unexpectedly. Most adults would have forced

themselves to posture and hide the fact that they were afraid of something kids did with no issues.

But with Vix, everything about him was just there in the open. For everyone to see. Travis didn't know what came over him, but he wanted to protect that.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he said, surprising himself but feeling like the words rang true.

Vix clearly thought so, if the beaming smile he trained on Travis was anything to go by.

"We can do it like that?" Vix asked, pointing to something behind Travis. He turned around to look and found a man holding his young son between his legs on a sled, arms wrapped firmly around the kid to keep him safe.

"Oh..." Travis said, mind jumping to the image of Vix basically in his lap. Why did that sound good? Why did he like that? "Would that make you feel safer?"

"Yes." Vix nodded, releasing the ends of his braids from his collar but keeping them twined. Something about those braids...

"Okay," Travis said, setting Vix's sled aside. "We'll put this here and come back for it later. We can use mine."

He placed his sled on the snow and hopped onto it, situating himself as far back as he could go without tipping over. He spread his legs and motioned to Vix.

"Come on," he said, and Vix clambered onto the sled, sitting down between Travis's legs and wiggling around like a very

adorable, colorful worm. “You comfy?”

“Not yet,” Vix said, scooting all the way back until his ass hit Travis’s hips and he plastered his back completely against Travis’s chest.

He reached behind himself and took both of Travis’s arms, tugging and huffing until Travis allowed him to wrap them around his waist. He crossed them over his stomach and then covered them with his own arms, squeezing as if making sure Travis would hold on to him all the way down.

The top of his head came just under Travis’s chin, the tips of the fuzzy ears on his earmuffs tickling Travis’s cheeks.

He smelled incredible too. Travis knew he’d used hotel bathroom stuff because the generic bodywash scent lingered on his skin, but underneath that was something so sweet, so fresh that Travis wanted to bury his face in his neck until he figured out what it was.

He didn’t want to linger on just how good it felt to have Vix that close. He didn’t want to allow his body to react the way it clearly wanted to. It wasn’t about Vix. Travis had just been going through a dry spell since his breakup with Lex, and it was beginning to show.

It had nothing to do with Vix rubbing all over him unintentionally. Nothing to do with his warm hands covering Travis’s, or the fact that Travis could feel his chest expanding under his touch.

And absolutely nothing to do with the pressure on his crotch. Nope. He was not going there.

“Well don’t you two look cozy?”

Travis sighed and squeezed his eyes shut, halfway to just kicking them off and leaving Lex in the dust so he could avoid talking to him.

“You are looking at us so intently, maybe you should capture a photograph to have it for an extended period of time for your observation,” Vix said, and Travis opened his eyes again, finding Lex glaring daggers into Vix.

“Travis, are you really gonna let him talk to me like this?” Lex asked.

Travis shrugged. “He’s his own person, Lex. Are you expecting me to sew his mouth shut?”

“I...”

“I have observed in various sources that having another person’s tongue inside your mouth severely impacts one’s ability to produce words,” Vix said, turning to Lex, eyes wide and blinking innocently. “Would that be agreeable with you?”

“No, that would not be agreeable with me!” Lex said, spitting the words, mocking what Vix was saying.

“In that case, I don’t know how to assist you,” Vix said. “But I see you don’t have a sled of your own. You can have that one.”

Travis and Lex both followed his finger to Vix's abandoned sled.

"I'm quite comfortable in Travis's lap so I won't be needing that one," Vix said. "You're most welcome."

"What...?"

"Travis, I am ready," Vix said, hopping up and down on Travis's lap a little bit to get him to move.

"Here we go then," Travis said.

"You can't just leave me here!" Lex said, but Travis ignored him completely.

He kicked them off down the slope and felt Vix's hands squeeze his forearms, a little yelp escaping his throat. Travis smiled, holding him tightly and feeling the rush of exhilaration as they picked up speed.

They carved through the snow, rushing past laughing children and happy people who had tumbled off halfway down, powder kicking up around them.

"My calculations were correct, this is very fast!" Vix yelled, and Travis let out a belly laugh.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had this much fun, Lex all but forgotten.

Chapter 8

Vix

Vix was hungry.

His legs and arms were sort of achy from climbing up that slope so he could fly down it again.

His feet were tired from all the walking he had done.

He could feel a tiny tingle on his nose from where it was slightly purple from the sun.

And there was a weird feeling in the pit of his stomach that he just couldn't pinpoint.

He'd tried with his braids. He truly had. He'd turned them, twisted them, and reshaped them about a dozen times before settling on tired, but happy to be spending time with people.

He just hoped nobody noticed and called him out on his deceptive hairstyle choices.

But most of all, he was hungry.

Travis poked his head into the bathroom where Vix was getting ready, and Vix felt some of that weirdness in his

stomach settle.

Travis had changed into some dark jeans and a dark blue sweater. His hair was pushed back and still slightly damp from the shower he had taken when they'd got back to the room.

He was the exact opposite of Vix, with his white jeans and a bright Christmas sweater he'd bought from the shop attached to the hotel. Vix had spotted it on the walk back from sledding. Travis had taken him in there after lunch, before they'd gone for a group walk to explore the rest of the trails around the retreat.

"Ready?" Travis asked, running his eyes over him and stopping on his hair like they often did.

Vix gave Travis a smile and hopped up from the small, fluffy chair that stood in front of the large mirror. He resisted the urge to check his braids again, hoping Travis would forgive his simpler communication tonight.

"Yes, I am prepared," he said. "Will there be more fruit trees? I really liked those this morning, and there weren't any at lunch. Do you think they'll have them at dinner, or is it just a breakfast delicacy?"

He shuffled out of the bathroom and clicked the light off, still delighted at how fun that was. He clicked it on again and off again just because he could.

"I'm honestly not sure, but it's a pretty good hotel, so I'm sure we'll find something you'll like," Travis said, waiting for him to finish before leading him out of their room.

“I liked the fruit tree,” Vix said.

“I know.” Travis chuckled. “But if they don’t have it now, I’m just saying we’ll make sure to find you something equally good.”

Something in Travis’s voice made Vix tilt his head in question and pause in his steps. Something was there that hadn’t been before. Something nice. It made Vix feel nice. He rearranged his braids a tiny bit, just a step away from tired and an inch toward happy. He felt less like he was trying to deceive people and more like he was being honest. That too felt very nice.

And when everything was that nice, Vix felt the need to skip. So he did.

He bounced after Travis, catching up with him just before they reached the elevator. This one wasn’t glass like the one they’d taken when they first arrived. Vix felt rather disappointed by it. Bummed, he believed humans would say, although the feeling was most certainly not in his...bum. Not even close.

The amused chuckle Travis let out at Vix’s skipping disappeared completely when the door opened and revealed just who they’d be sharing the elevator with.

Lex.

Vix was very confused by the interactions they’d had with Lex up until that point. From all that he knew about human love affairs, once they ended, the parties usually moved on and

found a happily ever after very quickly. The moving pictures humans watched made that very clear. Heartbreak, a few very quick, usually unrelated, events at which you were sad and ate ice cream, looking very unkempt from what Vix could tell, and then you bumped into someone at a grocery store or somewhere like that, and about an hour or two after, you got married.

So he wasn't sure what was happening with Travis and Lex.

As far as Vix could understand, their love affair had finished a long time ago. And yet it had been days, and Travis still wasn't bumping into anyone. In fact, he hadn't even visited a grocery store since Vix met him. The chances of him meeting someone were very low.

Vix had to have a conversation about it with Travis. He didn't know what straying from the usual path could lead to, but he was sure they had grocery stores where they were retreated.

“Going down?” Lex asked, arching a brow.

Travis shook his head, taking a step back. “We'll wait for the next one.”

“No need. Plenty of room in here with little old me. We're headed to the same place, after all,” Lex said, then leaned forward. “Or are you scared to be alone with me?”

Vix felt Travis wrap his arm around his waist suddenly. Vix looked up at him in question. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I am, thank you.” Travis nodded. “Just figured we’d like some alone time on the way down.”

Alone time. Together alone time.

Vix found the option to be far more appealing than trying to understand Lex, so he smiled and grabbed Travis’s arm to show his approval. Then he reached out and pressed the down button on the elevator, waving to Lex as the doors began to close. “Goodbye.”

Lex’s eyes went wide for some reason as he reached out. “Wait—”

They shut and Travis snorted, sending Vix a small smile. “Nice one.”

Vix blinked, not really knowing what he meant but feeling happy anyway that Travis was smiling at him. “Does Lex not understand that your romantic entanglement is over?”

Travis sighed. “He does. He just doesn’t care.”

“Has he not found a new partner? Your friend mentioned...”

“I really don’t want to talk about him,” Travis said, then winced like he was in pain. “I know that’s kind of a big ask since I asked you to come here as my pretend date and you deserve honesty.”

Vix blinked as he was reminded of his purpose here. “Oh yes! Have I been sufficiently acting? Shall we make a public display?”

Travis's face flushed a little pink and he avoided Vix's eyes. "No, uh, what you're doing now is grea—fine! Perfectly fine."

Travis let go of him and turned awkwardly to call a second elevator. Vix watched him carefully, sensing some type of distress. He would make sure that he did his part correctly for Travis's sake.

They reached the lobby soon enough and Vix began walking toward the dining hall like usual, only to get his waist scooped up and guided a different way entirely.

Vix pointed. "But dinner is that way."

"Not tonight," Travis grumbled. He pulled his communication device out and waved it. "My boss booked out half the bar for dinner and drinks last minute. He wants everyone in the same place."

"I see." Vix nodded in understanding. "Because you have been avoiding him."

Travis's mouth dropped open. "I haven't!"

"You haven't?"

"Haven't what?" came from behind them.

Vix peeked backward and saw that Henry was there, smiling jovially and still dressed much like one of the decorations. It was delightful.

"Hello again! We were just discussing the fact that Travis's boss hired out a bar to stop Travis avoiding him."

Travis groaned and Henry burst into chuckles that shook his whole body. He patted Travis on the shoulder so hard he stumbled. "I told you they were dying for the details."

Vix worried the end of his braid. "Travis assured me no one would be dying."

"They will be when I'm done with them," Travis muttered.

Vix gasped and pushed away from him. "How could you?"

"C'mon. I didn't mean it literally." Travis reached for him, but Vix avoided his hand.

"Then why did you say so?"

"It's a figure of speech!"

Vix made an angry flick with his hair. "I do not like it."

"I didn't even start it," Travis said, throwing a hand out. "Henry did!"

Hearing his name, Henry leaned in and said, "Aren't you missing someone?"

They both turned to face him.

Henry smiled so big it nearly took up his entire face. "Where's the vacuum?"

Vix brightened. "Oh yes! I shall go retrieve PH-1L immediately! He's been cooped up in our room all day."

"Oh no, no, no," Travis said, dragging him inside the bar. "Dinner. No vacuum. Those are the rules."

“But there’s no sign saying no. There’s usually a sign,” Vix protested.

“It’s a universal no.”

“Then there should be a sign,” Vix said stubbornly, ready to weave his hair into defiant knots. “They shouldn’t discriminate against PH-1L. His feelings will be hurt.”

“Oh look. Food!” Travis said, pointing and walking that way. “Let’s go.”

Vix pouted at the obvious diversion to the subject at hand, but he followed Travis. He *was* hungry. And maybe he could bring PH-1L down later.

The bar was similar to the dining hall, only darker and smaller. The wood was all carved and natural looking. Candles were lit on the tables, the twinkling lights above the bar casting illumination everywhere. Music was also playing quietly, the same sort of songs that had been on the radio. Vix began to hum along as they approached the buffet.

There were no fruit trees in sight still, but there were a variety of other things Travis assured him he would like. Vix trusted him to put all of them on the tray for him to try and then lead him to a round table where Janice sat with her husband and daughters.

Vix was happy to see the little humans again. They had their hair pinned into looping braids, one over each ear. A simple display of mischief. Vix copied them as he sat down and saw the girls giggle in approval.

“Didn’t feel like gagging over your dinner on the other table?” Janice asked Travis.

Travis pulled a face Vix didn’t understand, but his gaze drifted over to the table in question, where Lex was sitting with a bunch of men Vix didn’t recognize. He was draped over the arm of the oldest-looking human there, laughing loud enough to be heard over the ambiance and distance.

“He seems like he is having fun. Perhaps he has finally understood that your romance is at an end?” Vix said.

Janice snorted into her food. “Bless your heart.”

“Only my mothers can do that.”

Janice frowned and opened her mouth, only to be cut off.

“Can we not give him the attention he so obviously wants?” Travis asked, picking apart some bread rather harshly.

“Fine. He gives me indigestion anyway,” Janice said, waving it off as she passed some bread down to her husband, who was busy portioning out the girls’ food, before Travis could destroy it all. “But you’ll have to deal with him eventually. All they’ve been talking about this trip is your no-shows. It’s not a good look seeing as you only just made partner. They don’t care that it’s awkward for you, they just need their asses kissed regularly.”

“*You* get away with it.”

Janice smirked. “I have a pair of get-out-of-jail-free cards that’ll spit and spill food on them. They practically pay me to

sit at a five-meter distance at all times. It's incredibly convenient. At least until bedtime."

Vix was infinitely confused by the sentence, but Travis seemed to get it. He groaned, putting his head in his hands, and Vix bit his lip, glancing over at the table again. Vix didn't want Travis to be compromised in his working environment. He was here to help him.

Making up his mind, he got up from his seat and bridged the distance, ignoring Travis's startled call of his name behind him.

He approached the edge of the table and made sure his hair was in the appropriate formal greeting. "Hello. My name is Vix."

"We're having dinner here," Lex said, the words falling out slowly.

Vix looked at him with wide eyes, not really comprehending why he felt the need to point out the obvious.

"I am very pleased for you," he said, giving him a smile he hoped made him relax and realize Vix wasn't there to steal whatever it was he had on his plate. Travis had already picked things for Vix that he was satisfied with, so he had no interest in Lex's food.

The man was quite odd, in Vix's opinion. But he felt like that wasn't a very nice thing to say. He just tucked one of his braids under his chin and around his neck, tossing the end over the opposite shoulder.

Like a noose.

That would show him what Vix thought of him.

“You’re here with Travis, aren’t you?” an older man sitting right next to where Vix was standing asked. He had flecks of gray in his dark hair and was wearing a black blazer and festive tie. His eyes were...sharp. It was the only word that came to Vix’s mind.

Vix nodded. “I am.”

The man patted an empty chair next to him. “Well join us,” he said. “I’m Ben, and I’m Travis’s boss. We’ve been trying to pin you down since you got here.”

“I’m sorry. I think I would only allow Travis to pin me down.”

Ben snorted and Lex appeared as though he was about to vomit into his own lap.

“Do you require assistance?” Vix asked him. “Perhaps you should cease eating if it is causing you gastric discomfort. You have quite a few things on your plate.”

Lex gasped and slammed his palms down on the table, face reddening. “Did you just call me fat?!”

Vix frowned in confusion as Ben burst out laughing. “Oh this will be fun. Come, Vix. Sit.”

The tone suggested Ben was a person used to getting what he wanted. And while Vix didn’t feel particularly swayed to follow, his objective had been to smooth relations over for

Travis. So he turned, finding Travis glaring in his direction, halfway up from his chair.

“Can you please bring my food here?” he called out, making a lot of people in the bar look his way.

Travis scowled harder, saying something to Janice before approaching.

He fixed his face into a smile as he reached them, greeting the people around the table and ignoring Lex completely.

“Ben, your boss, said I should join them for dinner,” Vix said.

“Thank you, Ben, *we’d* love to,” Travis said, but it didn’t really sound like he’d love to, to Vix. His teeth were clenched, and his voice was sounding a bit rough. Maybe he was hungry. Vix had read that people got testy when they didn’t eat. What was the word for it...

“Are you hangry?”

A few people around the table laughed. Travis shook his head, but his lips were pulled up too.

“A little bit, maybe,” he relented, sitting down and placing Vix’s food in front of him. He laid an arm over the back of Vix’s chair and signaled someone behind them. “Can I get a whiskey on the rocks, please?”

“Rocks?” Vix asked.

Travis leaned into his ear, but his words were loud enough for everyone to hear. “Ice, sweetheart.”

Vix recognized that nickname. Travis had used it on him before. It meant he was acting up for others. Vix looked across the table at Ben and saw him watching them with his sharp eyes.

Ben smiled when they caught gazes and leaned in. “Let me introduce you to everyone.”

He went around the table, pointing at every single person and letting Vix know their names. Vix had an excellent memory, so he remembered them easily. He was happy to see Henry sit down at the end of the table during the introductions, the man sending him a jaunty wave.

There was one person, however—Kenneth, the one Lex was now in a relationship with—who didn’t have a single strand of hair on his head that caused Vix to look twice. Vix could barely believe it. He knew humans didn’t solely use hair to communicate just yet, but having no hair at all? How was he supposed to share anything with anyone? It was all very tragic, in Vix’s opinion. Maybe that was why Lex seemed so upset all the time.

“I’m very happy to be here with all of you,” he told them when Ben finished going around the table, hands fussing with his braids until they weren’t being rude because of Lex anymore. He wanted to make a good impression on Travis’s coworkers.

Lex huffed from the other side of the table, but nobody reacted to it in any way. They all just looked at Vix with

curious eyes and smiles. Some of them looked warmer than others, Vix noticed.

“And where did Travis find such a delightful creature as yourself?” Kenneth asked, interrupting Vix’s thoughts. Vix felt Travis stiffen noticeably where he was still leaning against him. Lex seemed to stiffen too.

“A coffee shop close to his house,” Vix said. “I like their hot chocolate. He was the first friend I made.”

“Aw! That’s like something straight out of a movie,” a woman with red lips and dangling snow earrings said.

“Yes, we are hashtag adorable.”

A few people laughed and Lex snapped a breadstick loudly.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” Ben asked. “I’ve traveled extensively, but I can’t place your accent.”

“He’s European,” Travis interjected, accepting the glass of ice rocks from the server.

Vix turned to look at Travis. He wasn’t from Europe. He knew what that was, and he had considered going there for his expedition, but in the end he’d chosen to come to America.

“I’m—”

“He came here to visit and decided to stay and that’s how we met,” Travis said, hand inching down his back and slipping around his waist to give it a tiny squeeze.

Vix jumped in his chair at the sudden touch. Apparently, Travis needed him to be from Europe.

“Donald Duck is an integral part of Christmas tradition in Sweden,” he said to the curious faces around him. “He is a duck. In a shirt. And a hat. No pants.”

Nobody said anything to that, and Vix felt pleased that they were clearly taking in this new piece of information Vix had provided them with.

“Well that’s wonderful,” Ben said finally. “Milla will be very disappointed she’s not here to hear the story.”

“Who is Milla?” Vix asked.

“My wife. She brought a book with her to read in her downtime and got to a tense bit right before dinner,” Ben said. “We probably won’t be seeing her until she finishes it.”

“Is it the one I recommended to her?” Lex asked, twirling the bubbly liquid in his glass around. “We have very similar taste.”

“You read?” Travis asked into his drink.

Vix lifted his fingers to cover his lips. Travis was being rude. But there was something funny about it.

Lex’s expression grew darker and he swiveled in his chair toward Kenneth, leaning into him and running a hand over the back of his neck.

Travis snorted next to him and pulled Vix’s chair closer to him in response, drawing him in tighter if that was possible.

“Are we in the middle of a ‘pissing contest?’” Vix asked quietly. “I read about those.”

“No. Yes. Maybe.” He watched Lex play with Kenneth’s tie and giggle in his ear. “Does no one care that the guy is married? I feel like I’m in the twilight zone.”

“You know about the twilight zone?” Vix asked in shock. “I didn’t realize Earth had come that far.”

Travis stared down at him for a minute before drinking all of his drink in one go. “I’m definitely in the twilight zone.”

Travis was clearly annoyed about losing the pissing contest. Vix pursed his lips and looked around as he racked his brain for an idea. He ran through a catalog of all the movies he had watched, looking for inspiration.

He spotted his tray of foods in front of him, all manner of desserts laid out, and inspiration struck. He scooped some of a tart filling onto his finger and brought it up to Travis’s lips.

“Want to try some?” he asked.

Travis was shocked still for a second.

Vix wiggled his finger enticingly and Travis’s pupils grew larger. It was strange. Like the atmosphere changed with them, charged up like there was some kind of static in the air. Travis wrapped his hand around Vix’s wrist softly, and Vix got distracted by it immediately. He really did think he was developing an unhealthy attachment to this human’s hands.

He was so wrapped up that he forgot what exactly he was supposed to be doing until Travis’s lips wrapped around the very tip of his finger. A wet tongue curled around the sticky

substance, and Vix felt a little weak all of a sudden. It was the most unusual phenomenon he had ever experienced.

When his wet fingertip was released, Vix tried to fight the urge to shove it back inside Travis's mouth.

"We should eat like this from now on," Vix declared.

Travis laughed haltingly, blotches of red crawling along his neck, pupils still hugely disproportionate to the size they usually were. "I don't know if I could survive that."

"Did I not feed you enough?" Vix asked, scooping another fingerful eagerly. "Here."

"Can you not?" Lex said from the other side of the table. "We're trying to eat."

Vix paused his action midway.

"Oh leave them be, Lexington," Ben said, waving a hand at him. "They look very cute together."

Travis surprised him by bending down and cleaning up his finger, faster this time.

"You didn't do it properly," Vix complained. "You're supposed to go slower and use your tongue again."

"Jesus Christ," Travis coughed, reaching for the drink of the person next to him and swallowing the red liquid much the same way he had done his own.

"Are we celebrating him now?" Vix asked. "I thought Santa was the more popular deity at this time of year?"

There was a small silence after that.

“Do you not celebrate Christmas?” the woman sitting on Travis’s other side asked.

Vix shook his head. “Not at all. But I find I enjoy it immensely.”

“Are you Jewish?” Ben asked.

“I’m—”

“European,” Henry interrupted from the end of the table, laughing to himself.

It seemed to have somehow derailed the conversation and the attention turned away from them as people resumed their own conversations.

“I really like your hair,” the woman on Travis’s right said again, reaching across and aiming for the end of one of Vix’s braids.

Vix froze on the spot at the impoliteness of it, unsure how to react to something like that. He just watched as if through a fog as her hand got closer and closer...only to be stopped by Travis before it could make contact.

“Sorry,” Travis said, blocking her. “He’s just very particular about his hair and doesn’t like people touching it.”

“Oh dear. I’m sorry,” she said, retracting her hand. “Is that type of hair commonplace where you’re from?”

“Yes. Everyone has it. I was very surprised when I came here, even though I had seen pictures,” Vix admitted. “It’s very hard to understand people.”

She nodded. "I hear culture shock is very hard for some."

They were interrupted by a loud laugh from Lex and all eyes turned to him.

He smiled apologetically, hand in front of his mouth. "Sorry. Kenneth whispered something funny."

Kenneth gave a sort of smile that didn't look too nice.

"Care to share with the class?" Ben asked.

"It's nothing." Kenneth waved it off, then took a sip of the same red drink everyone seemed to have. "Just an inside joke. Lex went to Cancun with me and Patricia this summer. We were just reminiscing."

Travis snorted, muttering under his breath, "Fucking Cancun."

Ben did something that made his eyes disappear and then reappear. It was intriguing and Vix attempted to recreate it, only to give himself a headache.

"Would anyone like a slice of Christmas cake?" someone farther down the table asked.

"Yes!" Vix said immediately, then leaned into Travis to whisper, "I want to try. Do you think I'll like it?"

Travis seemed surprised by his question but lost some of his cloudy expression, smiling and nodding. "It has a bunch of fruit in it, so you'll probably love it. The chocolates are full of fruit liquors too, I think."

He leaned over to ask his coworkers. His hand was still on Vix's waist, but it was comfortable. Vix didn't feel inclined to ask him to move it. He enjoyed the closeness and the extra heat. Travis ran hotter than the average human temperature.

Travis turned back with a plate full of new things, and Vix made a happy trill in his throat that was drowned out by the music. Vix tried a piece of the cake first and looked up at Travis in surprise, shoving more into his mouth.

With his cheeks full, he said, "I've never experienced this taste before."

Travis laughed, placing a red-and-gold napkin in his lap. "Might be the brandy. They soak it for months."

Vix swallowed. "Brandy?"

"It's alcohol," Travis explained, wiping some food particles from Vix's cheek with a soft finger. "The chocolates have some in them too, so maybe don't eat too many. I don't know if the world is prepared for a drunk Vix."

It was meant to be a joke. Vix was coming to recognize the tone without the aid of braids.

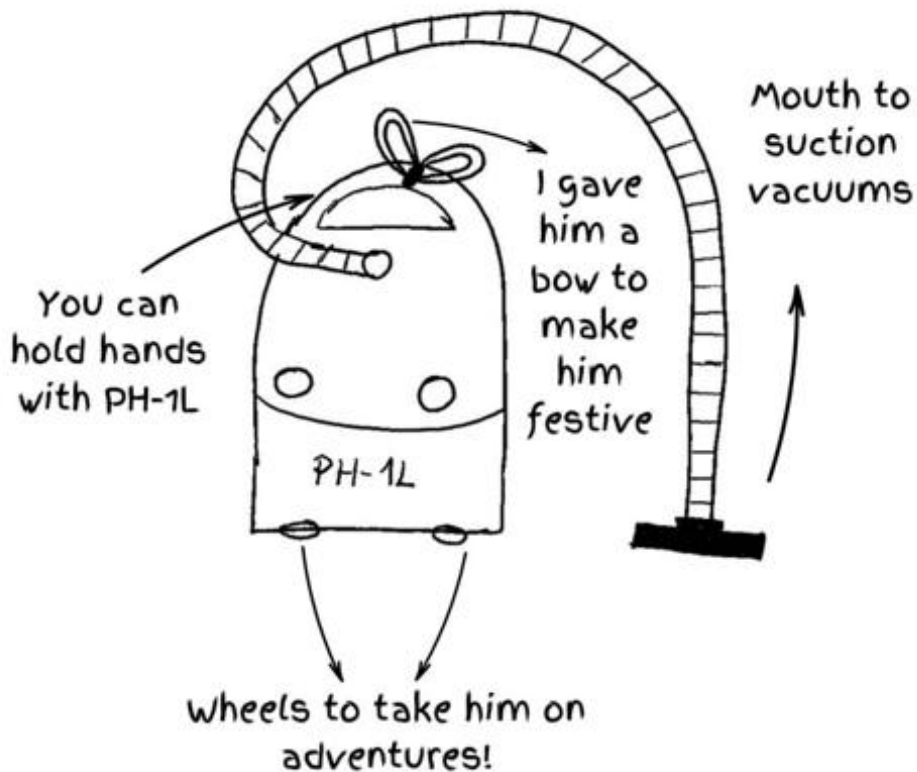
"Where I'm from, we do not get 'drunk,'" Vix assured him, popping a chocolate into his mouth next to try. He was loosely familiar with the concept of alcohol. He'd seen many instances of the substance that made humans lose their inhibitions. Previous Observers had put in requests for studies on the phenomenon, but none had been conducted as of yet.

Maybe he would conduct a study of his own while he was here. He nodded to himself and ate three more chocolates in quick succession. They really were quite addictive, warming him from the inside out.

He pulled at his collar, feeling slightly flushed, then ate a handful more chocolates.

Observation log 4:

This is a human invention called a vacuum cleaner. This one's designation is PH-1L and he lives with my human Travis. As you can tell he has a very important job. But he also makes for a wonderful companion when he's not cleaning the galaxy!



Chapter 9

Vix

After dinner, Vix was informed enthusiastically that the ‘party had just begun.’

Everyone got up from their seats and migrated toward the bar, ordering drinks with festive names and even more festive decorations as the plates from dinner were cleared away.

More desserts appeared in their place and the bar opened up fully to the rest of the retreaters, filling quickly. The noise grew louder, forcing proximity to hear conversations. Which was probably why Travis still had his arm around Vix’s waist. It was the optimal speaking distance, and the shared body heat was pleasing.

Vix was still feeling slightly strange after eating the cake and the chocolates, so after finishing the entire plate, he decided that maybe he shouldn’t have any more.

“I think that went fire,” Vix said.

Travis scrunched his brow at him, lips upturned slightly. “Went fire?”

“Is that not the correct use of that term?” Vix worried. “I do not want to upset the new generation.”

Travis smiled, eyes twinkling in the lights. “I think they’ll survive.”

“I was informed they get very upset.”

“You’re doing just fine,” Travis assured him, and those simple words meant a lot to Vix. He felt appreciated for his efforts. “And to answer you, yeah. I suppose I didn’t want the ground to swallow me up the *entire* time I was sitting there. So that’s positive.”

Vix was elated to have helped him. “Your coworkers are very nice.”

Travis gave him a look. “Even Tracie?”

“Tracie?”

“The one who tried to touch your hair,” Travis clarified, and Vix scowled immediately, putting a protective hand on his head. Travis chuckled, tweaking the very end of one of his braids. “It’s fine. I’ll keep guarding you.”

Vix felt his heart pulse in the center of his chest at the words and he had to fight a shiver at the casual touch, like he had while they were sitting in the hot tub. He placed a hand over his heart and looked down to make sure nothing was coming through the clothes he was wearing, because he was almost certain there was a glow coming out of there and he didn’t want anyone to see it.

“I shall guard you as well.” It felt only right to offer the same.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t think anyone wants to run their fingers through my hair. At least not to my knowledge. Who knows, maybe someone is harboring a secret fetish for me,” Travis said, smiling and looking around.

Vix was shocked to find he couldn’t be as nonchalant as the words landed. The idea of anyone running their hands through Travis’s hair, even deigning to *think* about doing it, hit him like a space shuttle. It was almost worse than imagining someone touching his own hair.

On instinct, he hopped up on the tips of his toes, looping his arms steadfastly around Travis’s neck for the best support to cover as much of Travis’s hair as he could with his hands.

Travis’s eyes widened, staring directly into his own now that their faces were level, noses almost brushing. “What are you doing?”

“What I said I would. I find the image of anyone touching your hair most displeasing. I shall, as your people say, cut a bitch.”

Travis’s mouth dropped wide open. Perhaps his jaw had become tired. Humans did have denser bone structures. Vix risked taking a hand off Travis’s head to help close it for him. It shut with a pleasing *pop*.

A sudden shove into the back of him distracted Vix from opening Travis’s mouth to recreate the sound. He looked over

his shoulder at the bright red lips and green eyes of the female who was responsible suspiciously. He recognized her snow earrings.

Was she here to grab Travis's hair?

She didn't look at Travis, however, her eyes were locked on his, the pupils growing slightly enlarged as she leaned in.

"I'm so sorry. I felt lightheaded for a moment," she apologized. "Are you wearing any perfume or cologne? It smells wonderful."

"He's not," Travis said for him, hooking Vix to the other side of him so he was now in between them. "It's the oils he puts in his hair."

Vix was surprised Travis had noticed.

The woman blinked, shaking her head like she was trying to rid herself of something. "Oh...okay. Sorry again..."

She stumbled off, clutching her head, and Travis stared after her.

"She seemed nice," Vix said.

"She seemed drunk," Travis corrected, then looked around. "Is it me or does it suddenly feel claustrophobic in here?"

Vix judged the dimensions of the space. "The room is quite large."

"But everyone seems to be standing around us for some reason."

Vix looked around. It *was* slightly odd that there were so many empty spaces in the room, yet people had chosen to converge so closely. “Maybe they wish to socialize better in closer quarters?”

“Well let’s get out of their way then,” Travis said, letting go of his waist to grab him by the hand and lead him through the crowd.

People turned their heads as he passed, and Vix was happy his greeting braid was finally working. It didn’t seem to have gotten too much of a response before.

“Hi. Hello. Nice to meet you. How are you? Yo! A pleasure, good sir.” He kept up the greetings as fast as they came to him, unable to talk further as Travis whisked him away to the other side of the bar.

“Someone put something in the drinks, I swear to...” Travis muttered, pulling them to a stop a good distance away.

“If there was nothing in the drinks, how would people drink?” Vix questioned. “Is that a thing?”

Travis huffed, smiling slightly. “Okay, sarcastic. No. It’s not a thing. It’s just...I don’t know...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t drag you around.”

Vix didn’t really understand what sarcastic was, so he let it go.

“I enjoy the custom of holding your hand. It does not bother me where we go,” Vix said truthfully, swinging their hands between them.

Travis stared at him for a long moment. “You’re really good at this.”

“At hand-holding?” Vix asked, pleased. “Thank you!”

“At pretend—”

“Trav!” Someone interrupted them. He was younger than Travis, with light hair and brown eyes. His shirt was unbuttoned lower than anyone in the room. “How are you? I was sitting at the end of the table so we couldn’t chat. Introduce me to the new flame properly, huh?”

Vix glanced around him for candles and possible fires. The action made him realize that his neck had started to hurt. He rubbed at the area, trying to soothe the irritation.

“Stephen. This is Vix,” Travis said, face pinching. “Vix, this is Stephen. He works in HR.”

“HR?” Vix inquired.

“Human Resources,” Travis whispered.

Vix’s eyes widened in shock. “There is such a job? Do you control all the resources yourself, or are there others? Surely you must have the most important job on the planet!”

Stephen adjusted his collar and stepped closer to him, a little closer than Vix was used to from anyone outside of Travis. “Well I mean...it *is* quite important. I just joined this summer. My uncle knew someone who knew someone...”

Travis let go of Vix’s hand and laid a hand on Stephen’s chest to halt his progress. “I think Ben is calling you.”

“Ben?” Stephen asked, like he’d never heard the name in his life.

“Our boss,” Travis said slowly.

“Our boss is named Ben,” Stephen repeated, still looking quite confused. “But Vix is here.”

“Yes, I am. And Ben is there,” Vix said helpfully, pointing to the man at the bar.

Stephen tried to grasp his hand all of a sudden and Travis intercepted it just in time. “Hey, what the hell are you doing? Do I need to put in a complaint to you about yourself?”

“I...don’t know,” Stephen admitted, taking a staggering step back. He put a hand to his head the same way the woman did earlier.

“Are you okay?” Travis asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Stephen said. “I just need...some fresh air. That’s all. I’m sorry. Sorry...”

He rushed away and Vix pursed his lips. “I expected Human Resources to be more impressive.”

Travis didn’t reply. “What is going on tonight?” he said instead.

“A party and then stargazing.”

Travis whipped his head around, brown eyes wide. “Stargazing? Since when?”

“Since I signed us up on the activity booklet. Did I not communicate this to you sufficiently?” Vix asked.

“Sufficiently? Try not at all!”

Vix wove an apologetic tendril over his head. “I apologize. We do not have to gaze at the stars if you do not wish.”

Travis ran a hand down his face and groaned. “Yes. We do.”

Vix tilted his head. “Why?”

“Because I’m incapable of saying no to you and your big blue eyes and gorgeous sad hair, okay?” Travis burst out, uncovering his face.

Vix’s mouth formed an O. Gorgeous wasn’t a word Vix was familiar with, and the tone didn’t suggest a compliment. Yet, at the same time Vix felt like there was something underlying the words. Travis said he couldn’t say no to him. Was that positive or negative?

Vix reached up and scattered his braids to show his frustration.

Travis watched the action and crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you annoyed with me?”

Vix turned his nose up defiantly, stray hairs getting into his eyes. “I have clearly stated my feelings.”

“Clearly my ass. You know what? I need another drink,” Travis said, throwing his hands up and walking two steps away before turning back. “Would you like one?”

Vix lifted a single shoulder and turned his face away. He peeked back at Travis. “I am beginning to feel a little dehydrated.”

“I’ll get you some water. Stay here.”

Vix watched him walk away, contemplating his own reactions. No one had ever pulled such emotions from him. His hands were getting tired from the effort of trying to express them.

Human interactions could be exhausting.

He sighed to himself, still feeling slightly off-center. Without Travis’s presence it was more noticeable to him that his neck felt slightly sore and swollen. He compressed the area distractedly as he glanced around the rest of the room.

There were a few people singing along to the music in the corner, arms around one another. A few others were dancing. Many were drinking strange-colored liquids.

He caught sight of a young woman who held his gaze and gave him a small wave.

Vix returned it, fixing his messy braids into a simple ‘nice to meet you’ shape when he saw her taking a few steps in his direction.

His emotions were like the aftermath of stars colliding, but he was here to make observations and gain insights. To gather experiences and learn about humans so he could relay the information back home. So if the need ever arose, they’d be ready to integrate with humans and save themselves from destruction.

He stood up straighter, watching as the woman was stopped by a man roughly her age. They pointed toward Vix, talking

with their hands more than they did their mouths. From the looks on their faces, it didn't seem like it was a pleasant conversation they were having.

Vix wondered if he had done something wrong.

He checked his braids in the reflective gold frame of a picture on the wall. They seemed to be in perfect order and not offensive in the slightest. He looked down at himself and his clothes were the same as when he'd put them on.

"Need some help checking yourself out?" someone asked, and Vix was startled. To his right was a man much older looking than Travis. Vix couldn't even begin to guess how much that was.

"Oh, no, thank you," he said. "Everything seems to be in order."

The man swept his eyes over Vix before nodding. "I agree."

Vix smiled widely. "Thank you! I was wondering if anything was wrong with me. I was ready to make friends, but they stopped and seemed to be upset about something."

He pointed at the couple from earlier and the man glanced once before frowning.

"Better that way," he said. "You don't want to have to deal with their shit. Nothing could be wrong with you. You're perfect."

Vix was surprised that those words had zero impact on him. They didn't make him happy or...anything. He couldn't help but compare it to the feeling he got when Travis told him

simply he was doing well. It was like night and day. The words conveyed less, but meant far more.

“Besides,” the man continued, unaware. “I can keep you company.”

“You want to be my friend?” Vix asked.

The man nodded, smiling with only one side of his mouth and dropping his tone so low it was hard to discern, “I’ll be whatever you need.”

“What is your name, kind sir?” Vix asked.

“I’m—”

“His name is Gone Without A Trace, if he knows what’s good for him,” Travis said, stomping up to them. If Travis had had braids, Vix imagined they would be arranged in a bunch of unhappy, angry knots. He appeared very displeased, which made Vix want to make him happy again.

“It’s a very strange name,” Vix said to the man. “My name is Vix. It’s very nice to meet you. Did you find your dinner delicious? I suggest you keep hydrated. Travis just brought some drinks for us, you can have one if you are in need.”

“He absolutely can’t have one,” Travis said, eyes darkening. He turned his back on the man and only faced Vix.

“Does Gone Without A Trace not like them?” Vix asked, reaching for his glass so it could free up Travis’s hands. Maybe one could wrap around his waist again.

“That’s not my name,” the man leaned around Travis’s large shoulders to say.

“It’s not?” Vix asked. “But Travis said—”

“Travis is wrong.”

“Travis is done with this conversation; I suggest you walk away now,” Travis said, turning on the man. Vix saw his shoulders square and his chin jut out. He also saw the man back away a step or two in response to it.

It was all very fascinating to watch, and Vix would usually do his best to memorize as much of it as he could for his observation logs.

But Vix had his drink and there was a straw inside that had a snowflake configuration on it that was very pleasing. He took some sips, the cold liquid making his neck feel better immediately.

“Do you wanna sit?” Travis asked, and Vix looked up to find they were alone again. The man with the weird name was nowhere to be seen.

Vix nodded and they sat down at a small round table with three tall stools. Vix noticed there were several people just staring at the two of them.

“People seem to be very interested in you,” Vix said as Travis put napkins under each of their glasses. “Maybe this is your chance to find a new partner so Lex will leave you alone?”

“I’m not really looking for another partner at the moment,” Travis said, scrubbing at the table even though it was perfectly clean.

“You’re not?” Vix asked.

“No, I’m not,” Travis said. He was avoiding eye contact. “I think taking some time for myself will be good for me.”

Vix nodded even though he didn’t understand the logic completely. On Lumia everything was done together. But Travis would know what worked best here on Earth.

Travis finally looked up. Vix noticed he had long eyelashes that curled slightly. He wanted to brush a fingertip against them. “Plus, I have you, don’t I?” he said.

Vix felt his heart pulse again in his chest.

It was dangerously close to what Vix yearned for. A partnership. But just between two.

It felt too big of a thing to dissect right then.

Instead, Vix offered up his palm for a high five that Travis smirked at before returning without hesitation. Their bond seemed to be getting stronger.

“So now you’re on to friendly high fives? What happened to the soft-core finger licking in public?” They both startled at the sound of Lex’s voice and Travis’s lightening mood seemed to disappear instantly. He scowled the way he only did when Lex was around and sat up in his chair, almost shielding Vix from his ex-partner. Vix wanted the smile back. Travis looked nice when he smiled.

Lex settled himself at the table with them, placing his drink down with a *thunk*. It had a froth of whipped cream on top.

“Would you like us to lick each other again?” Vix asked, palpating his neck distractedly. It was still swollen.

Lex’s lip curled up. “No. I don’t want him to lick *you*.”

“Lick *him*?” Travis asked. He seemed surprised by the wording, and Lex seemed surprised too.

He shook his head, rubbing at his temple. “No, I mean...I... I... What is that smell? Do you smell that?”

“Smell what?” Travis and Vix asked simultaneously.

“Nothing,” Lex muttered, swiping under his nose before fanning himself. “It’s stupidly hot in here too. Aren’t you hot?”

“Good chat, Lex. I’m sure Ken is waiting for you,” Travis said, dismissing the question and gesturing away from the table. “Better get back before his life alert goes off.”

“A little rude, Travis,” Lex chastised. “He’s your friend.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.” Travis laughed, short and sharp. “Just like Justin and Ricky were my friends.”

Vix pressed his neck harder as his head bobbed back and forth between them, certain he should not get involved.

“Here we go...” Lex groaned, swiping under his nose again. His eyes darted over to Vix all of a sudden, highly focused. He finished the end of his sentence in a slow trail. “...you always have to bring it up...”

“Then leave.”

“Are you going to force me?” Lex asked, lifting a provocative brow. “What if I don’t want to?”

“What *do* you want?” Travis asked.

Scuffing his chair a little closer to Vix, Lex dipped his finger into his drink and held it out to Vix, half leaning on the table. “How about this?”

Vix reared his head back. “Uhh... No, thank you.”

“Lex!” Travis yelled.

“What? Only you get to play with him? I want to play too,” Lex said, licking the cream off himself.

“You couldn’t stand him five minutes ago!”

“That’s not true,” Lex denied, looking back at Vix with half-lidded eyes that were slightly hazy. He put his chin on his hand. “He’s amazing.”

“Are you on something?” Travis hissed under his breath.

“No,” Lex said, swaying slightly.

“I don’t believe you. Jesus. I thought you quit that shit in college,” Travis said, getting up and grabbing Lex by the arms to keep him steady.

“Hey! Leave off! I wanna talk to Vix,” Lex yelled, trying and failing to free himself.

“I’m taking you to Ken. He can deal with your shit,” Travis said, looking back at Vix. “Give me a second, okay?”

“Of course,” Vix said, looking between them worriedly.

Travis helped Lex walk away and Vix sighed. He’d never thought it would be possible, but he was getting a little tired of all the interruptions. The urge to go back to the room like Travis so often wanted to suddenly sounded appealing. He could perhaps run a scan on his neck too.

He sipped his water as he waited, tapping his feet to the sounds of the music.

“I love this song!” someone spoke from Vix’s right and he turned to see a man with spiky red hair and a sparkling tinsel headband that bobbed around. He was smiling widely.

“It is a jam!” Vix confirmed, nodding his head to the beat. He didn’t think there was any real jam attached to the song, but all the human texts said it was an appropriate way to talk about a song you liked.

“I’m Hank. Care to dance?”

Vix tilted his head in consideration. While he wanted to experience all humanity had to offer, he was still feeling a little weary.

“Travis went to help his ex-romantic partner because he was propositioning me with licks of tongue that I did not want. Maybe once he’s back we can all dance together?” he said, pleased with the solution he came up with.

The man, however, seemed anything but. He was unhappy, lips pulled into a tight line and forehead creasing slightly.

“Travis can entertain himself for a while,” the man said.
“He’s a big boy.”

“You noticed that too? So it’s not just me, he really is a rather large specimen for a human,” he said, and the man opened and closed his mouth a few times before shaking his head and smiling again.

“You’re adorable,” he said, reaching out to take Vix by the hand. He brought it up to his face and took a deep inhale, practically flattening his nose. “And you smell so good.”

“That has been mentioned a lot by others.”

The man grunted, trying to dip his head into Vix’s neck next. “I don’t want to hear about you and others.”

He used the leverage on Vix’s arm to pull them even closer, almost knocking the breath out of him. Vix didn’t like it at all. These weren’t the gentle but insistent hands of Travis guiding him around. Yes, he could be assertive, but Vix never felt like he couldn’t say no.

This was something entirely different.

Vix shoved at the man’s chest to keep him at bay. “I would like to be unhandled now.”

“But we’re meant to be together. Can’t you see?” the man said, smiling happily.

“I don’t think so, buddy,” a familiar voice interjected.

Only it wasn’t Travis that interrupted this time. It was Stephen from Human Resources again.

“Butt out, asshole,” the tinsel man said. “We’re busy here.”

Stephen grabbed the man and pulled him away. Vix stumbled with the force. “No you’re not.”

“Yeah?” The two men got in each other’s faces. “Who the hell are you to tell me any different?”

“He’s the love of my life, so back off,” Stephen declared, pushing him in the shoulder.

Vix’s eyebrows shot up. “Um...”

“He’s not the love of your life. He’s mine! So *you* back off,” the tinsel man retorted, pushing Stephen back with two hands on his chest.

It was all that was needed to ignite Vix’s first ever human fight.

The two men yelled and screamed various obscenities, most of which Vix had no idea of the meaning to.

Punch. “Oh dear.” *Kick.* “Oh my.” *Grab.* “I do not think humans bend that way.”

He stepped and ducked out of the way of the flailing limbs, trying to defuse the situation as best he could.

He bent upside down, braids trailing on the floor as he tried to face the two that were hunched over in a lock of some kind. “Perhaps you should not choke him. He holds an important position. Your planet needs resources to survive.”

It did no good. The tinsel headband was crushed underfoot and people started to gather around, gasping and pointing. It

became chaos.

Vix did the only thing he could think of and poured the rest of his ice water directly over their heads. He had seen it work on the canine species of this planet...and drunken females.

Evidently, the males were immune.

“Woah, woah! What the hell is going on?” Travis asked, pushing through the crowd toward him. Vix had never been so elated and grasped his upper arm tightly. “What are they fighting about?”

“Me.”

Travis’s eyes bugged out. “You?”

Vix nodded solemnly. “They both made declarations to win me and are now engaged in the behavior exhibited by your ancestors. The Neanderthals.”

Travis’s jaw tightened. “Okay. You know what? I’ve had enough of this shit.”

He detached them and waded into the middle of the fight, pushing both men aside in a feat of strength that was quite impressive.

“Break it up, you morons, before I call hotel security and get you both thrown out in the snow on your asses.”

“He started it!” Stephen yelled, gasping for breath now he was released. His face was bright red.

“No, you did. He’s mine!”

“Vix is *mine*,” Travis growled, shoving them both again. “So get lost. And that goes for the rest of the room too! I don’t know what the hell has gotten into everyone tonight, but leave Vix alone.”

“But he’s so pretty.”

“He’s amazing!”

“He smells soooo good!”

“I can’t get him out of my head.”

“I miss the feel of you in my arms already,” the red-haired man said.

Travis looked over, expression dark. “He grabbed you?”

Vix nodded. “I didn’t like it.”

“Lex said you weren’t even together anyway,” Stephen added, still panting. “So what do you care?”

Travis seemed to be getting angrier with every comment, but those last reveals tipped something in him over. Vix knew because Travis spun around abruptly and Vix barely had time to draw in a startled breath before soft lips were touching his own in his first-ever kiss.

Vix’s eyes fluttered shut and his heart expanded. He could feel it glowing so brightly and pictured pure, perfect dark pink in his mind’s eye. Like a small sunburst had gone off inside his chest.

Travis pulled back slowly, lips still brushing as he whispered a gentle, “Sorry.”

Vix shook his head a minuscule amount, unable to express how his life had just changed forever. He didn't know enough of the human language. He couldn't even express it on his own. Not with a braid, or a trill.

Vix was truly, utterly, speechless.

Travis glanced over at the crowd. "He's off limits. Got it?"

He didn't wait for an answer, ushering Vix from the room into the lobby. Vix breathed a sigh of relief as soon as they exited the dark room.

"Travis!"

Travis groaned. "What now?"

It was Henry following them.

"Ben needs to talk to you about...everything."

"I'm not taking Vix back in there. They're insane," Travis said.

"I'll stay with him," Henry said, holding up a hand a second after. "And before you get all uppity, I have no intentions to steal your beau. He's not exactly my type."

Travis looked at Vix. "Are you okay with that? It doesn't really matter what I think."

Vix nodded. "I like Henry."

Travis sighed. "Okay. I'll square this away and be back as soon as I can."

Vix smiled happily. "Wonderous!"

Travis smiled, giving his hand a squeeze before walking back in. Henry came to stand beside him and crossed his arms over his large stomach.

“You know,” Henry said, “I thought a Lumian Observer would know better than to drink human alcohol.”

Vix gasped, staring at the man in wonder. “Lumian? How do... You know?”

Henry snorted. “Please. I have never met a single one of your kind that had any sort of ability to keep a secret. You’re like a walking billboard for an alien invasion.”

“I am following protocol. And we have never invaded anything,” Vix said, giving his braids an affronted flick over his shoulder. “We come in perfect peace every single time.”

“It was a joke,” Henry said, smirking. “But your protocols are absolute shit.”

“How dare you?” Vix asked, scrambling to make his braids appropriately outraged.

“It’s just fact,” Henry said. “It’s all so vague you can literally get away with broadcasting your alien status on national television.”

“They’re not vague,” Vix said. “They very clearly said to keep the information shared to a minimum. Which is what I did.”

“You call what happened in there a minimum?” Henry asked, and Vix scowled.

“That’s rude,” Vix said, pouting a little. “What happened in there wasn’t my fault. Lumia worked really hard on our protocols.”

“That’s just sad all around,” Henry said, shaking his head. “I advise you to add a point to your protocols not to consume human alcohol. Ever.”

“But I didn’t have any,” Vix said.

Henry shook his head and gestured to the dessert stand that could be seen through the doorway. “Remember the cake?”

“Oh.”

“And the chocolates.”

“Oh.”

“The whole plate of them.”

“Well—”

“No one else even had one.”

Vix threw a braid over his neck.

“Don’t get rude with me,” Henry said. “No one force-fed you.”

“But they tasted so yum,” Vix said, eyeing the desserts as if they had personally betrayed him.

“They also made you a beacon for every horny motherfucker here.”

“Do they really? With their own mothers?” Vix asked. He didn’t want to judge other races’ cultures but... “Ew.”

Henry ran his hand over his face and shook his head. “It’s another figure of speech.”

“So hard to keep up with so many of those,” he said. “I’m doing my best.”

“Forget about it.” Henry waved a hand at him. “The point is, Lumian metabolism doesn’t mesh well with alcohol. Clearly.”

“Like my neck?” Vix asked, removing his braid and showing the swelling.

Henry whistled, peering closer. “I could smell it as soon as you ate the first bite, but that’s pretty gnarly. Can I poke it?”

“No!” Vix exclaimed, cupping the sensitive area. “I need to run a scan on myself.”

“Well, I’m no scientist, but obviously something about your genetic makeup goes wild when it touches the stuff. It’s a toxin-like substance. Definitely airborne.”

Vix gasped in horror. “I’m poisoning people?”

“They’re enjoying it, trust me,” Henry said. “And it’s not dangerous or permanent. I think. They seem to be fine the moment you or they walk far enough away. Just wait for the alcohol to get out of your system. You digested a small amount, and I can smell that it’s already wearing off. Not as potent.”

“But how...how do you know all of that?” Vix asked.

Henry tapped his nose. “I’m Talurian. We can smell everything,” he said, making Vix squeal.

“You are also an alien on this planet?” he asked loudly.

“Shhhhhhhh,” Henry put a hand over his mouth, looking around himself. “For fuck’s sake why are you so loud?”

Vix didn’t think it was fair to be asked a question while his mouth was blocked but he raised his hand and twisted his braids to say, “Happy to see you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Henry said, laughing. “I’m happy to see you too. Listen, I know you people aren’t huge on keeping your identities hidden, but I don’t want to be found out. I’ve spent the last decade here flying under the radar, and I’d quite like to continue in the same vein, if you don’t mind.”

Vix shook his head and Henry released his hold on him.

“You’ve been here for a decade?” Vix asked.

Henry nodded. “Yup, spent my life hopping on other planets and wanted a change. Earth suits me, I think.”

“Thank you for helping.”

“No worries,” Henry said. “The party was getting a bit dull anyway.”

“There were humans engaging in physical altercations right in front of you,” Vix said. “How is that dull?”

“Oh you sweet, innocent soul,” Henry said. “I’ve been on this planet long enough to witness countless human fights. They don’t impress me anymore.”

“Really?” Vix asked, fascinated. “That many?”

“Humans love to fight,” Henry said. “Some even get paid to do it. It’s their job!”

“Stars!” Vix exclaimed. “You must tell me more. Travis is not back yet.”

“Okay well...what do you know about boxing?”

Chapter 10

Travis

Travis was DONE.

The entire bar had acted like they had no idea what had happened as soon as Travis walked back in. Like they had collective amnesia as they all held hands and sang carols.

Travis wanted to scream out loud. Tear his hair out.

Ben had had no idea what Henry said he'd wanted to talk to Travis about when he'd found him, and that was the last straw.

It was all the excuse he needed to bail.

He bid his goodbyes, barely managing to stay civil when his blood was boiling. Stargazing was suddenly the most desirable activity imaginable.

Travis was relieved to see Vix and Henry conversing normally in the lobby as he rejoined them.

“Ben couldn't remember what he wanted me for. Are you sure he asked for me?” Travis asked.

Henry raised his brows. “He sure did. Maybe the eggnog got to him.”

“Apparently it got to everyone. They’re all singing in there like nothing happened!”

“Curious,” Henry said. “I’ll go check it out. Have a good rest of your night.”

Vix waved enthusiastically. “Bye, Henry!”

And then it was just the two of them. Finally.

Travis checked Vix over, feeling a little shell-shocked. “Are you okay? That was...”

“A storm of shit?”

Travis chuckled and ran a hand over the back of his neck. “Yeah, kinda.”

“I am well, thank you for protecting me as you said you would.”

Travis couldn’t hold his sincere gaze, feeling like an ass that most of his actions had been jealousy-fueled rampages. He’d always thought he’d got away clean from Lex, but he knew now that he’d left his scars on him after all.

And that kiss...

It was like this rope of tension between them now. Travis wanted to cut it, but he was too afraid of what would happen if he did.

“Do you still want to go stargazing?” Travis asked instead, distracting himself by looking at his watch.

Vix lit up like the huge Christmas tree behind them. “Yes, please! It starts at eleven o’clock, up on the west hill.”

“We’ve got about half an hour to get there. Let’s get moving.”

They stopped by their room first and wrapped up in more layers than usual. The temperature dropped to about minus three at night, and despite Vix’s enthusiasm for exploration and nature, Travis had noticed the shivering and the weird but adorable purplish tinge he got on the tip of his nose and fingers. He’d even caught Vix wrapping the ends of his braids around his neck like an extra scarf layer earlier that day.

“Is this acceptable?” Vix asked, exiting the bathroom.

Travis looked up from where he was concentrating on doubling up his socks. He was perched on the end of the bed, so he had an unobstructed view of the puffy bowling ball that had just walked out.

Travis laughed out loud, tugging his sock up the last bit and approaching him. He was just a tiny white head and big, big eyes. He couldn’t even put his arms down to his sides. “What are you doing?”

“You said three layers!”

“Not three of every layer,” Travis teased, still unable to get control of his laughter. “How did you even fit three coats on?”

“It was a trial and a tribulation.”

Travis felt something in his chest expand and tried desperately to squash it down. He needed to stop thinking

those Vix-isms were so fucking adorable.

“Here. Let’s unimprison you...”

He helped Vix strip down to the necessary layers, ignoring studiously that he chose to let Vix keep one of his own extra sweaters on. It was practical. Vix got colder than he did. It was a bigger size. All reasonable excuses that had nothing to do with Travis wanting people to know that Vix was off limits. He wasn’t marking his territory. He wasn’t. Not even when he sprayed Vix with his cologne.

He was going to hell.

He zipped up Vix’s pink puffer coat, feeling hot and flushed, hoping Vix wouldn’t call him out on any of it. Vix *seemed* perfectly normal... Well, normal by Vix standards.

Grabbing the bear earmuffs from the dresser, he helped Vix secure them, making sure to avoid disturbing his braids, no matter how tempting it was to sink his hands into them and untangle them all.

He’d never seen Vix with loose hair. He was dying to.

When he glanced down, he saw that Vix was staring at him like he usually did. Only the last time their faces had been so close, Travis was claiming his pretty pink mouth.

He quickly stepped back, hands falling wide. He had no idea what he was doing. What had gotten into him. Maybe he’d gone crazy like everyone else.

“Ready to go?” he asked in a strangled voice. He turned for the door, startling when Vix attached himself to his arm with

both hands.

Travis looked down at him in surprise, noting Vix's easy smile. Like he wasn't troubled. Like the kiss was simply a part of the job. Like he enjoyed their closeness.

Travis didn't know whether he was happy with any of those assumptions or not. He didn't want to examine them too closely and find out.

He just led them out of the room, hoping the fresh air would clear his head.

He even let Vix drag that damn vacuum with them. He felt too guilty to tell him no.

They followed a dimly lit path up a small incline among a copse of trees, far enough away from the hotel that the lights would interfere less. There were long lounging chairs scattered around, covered in furs that allowed you to lie and look up. Next to them were small tables with drinks and food and some small metal heaters.

Travis waved in response to Tracie's enthusiastic shout of greeting, barely withholding a glare.

There wasn't much time to do anything though, as Vix excitedly claimed a seat toward the end, dragging Travis and PH-1L to sit. He placed the vacuum to the side of their chair, ignoring all the incredulous stares, before joining Travis on the seat instead of taking the one next to it like Travis thought he would. Their shoulders pressed tightly, but there was enough room other than that, and Vix quickly lay back.

Travis looked over his shoulder at him before slowly lowering himself to his back too.

Danger! Danger!

Travis ignored the warning signs, staring up into the inky black for a few moments like Vix, before turning his head to stare at Vix's profile instead.

People moved around them, speaking quietly and seating themselves, talking to the activity leader. Travis tuned it out. The world narrowed down to their singular space. It was a deep sigh. A cleansing breath. Travis felt his tense muscles unwind one by one as he allowed himself to relax.

"I think this is the longest you've ever been quiet," Travis whispered after some time passed, the hot wisps of his breath curling toward Vix's cheek.

Vix turned his head to meet his eyes, their noses nearly touching. Travis felt his heart pick up speed.

"It all looks different where I'm from," Vix murmured back.

"Where are you from?" Travis asked, eyes scanning him. "I don't think I've ever asked."

"Space." Travis burst out laughing, eyes squeezing shut. When he opened them again he saw Vix staring at him bemusedly, smiling just because, it seemed. "Lumia, to be specific. In the Tuxom galaxy."

"Ah. Lumia. Space. Should have been my first guess," Travis said between chuckles. Vix nodded along with the joke. "You should know a lot about the stars then."

Vix nodded enthusiastically. “I’ve studied countless star systems. It was mandatory learning.”

Travis smirked. “As all space farers should.”

“I think your planet refers to us as aliens most commonly.”

Travis laughed again and shook his head. “Okay, alien. Teach me.”

Vix got up onto his elbow and stared down at Travis in shock. “You’ve never studied the stars!”

“I’ve never thought about stargazing before,” Travis admitted. “I know some constellation names, but I have no idea which one is which, really.”

Vix looped a braid over his ear. It looked kind of droopy. “That’s very sad.”

Travis smiled. “You’re taking me through a lot of firsts, I have to say.”

He hadn’t meant to make that admission, or for it to feel so heavy coming out of his mouth. Vix’s eyes appeared to light up with it, like they held the stars themselves. His hand hesitated in his hair, like it often did, only he seemed unsure of where to place his braids.

Travis reached out and undid the depressed one from his ear as a start, rubbing the silky texture between his fingers. He heard Vix gasp, but he didn’t move away. He never had. Like Travis had earned the privilege somehow. It felt like a big deal. But Travis didn’t have the words or insight to figure out why.

The braid fell from his fingers and Vix stared at him for one second longer before sinking back down onto his back. He seemed contemplative.

Travis chewed on his cheek, looking up as well as silence wrapped around them. All that could be heard was quiet murmurings and the rustle of trees.

“Is that one Orion...or is that a plane?” Travis asked eventually.

Vix looked over at where Travis was pointing, before suddenly ducking under his outstretched arm. He settled into the curve of his body naturally, despite the squish of layers, head leaning back against his shoulder.

Travis stiffened in surprise, but Vix paid no mind as he grasped Travis’s bare wrist where his coat and gloves met. He moved their joined arms over until Travis was pointing at the correct constellation.

“That one is Orion.”

Travis didn’t even try to find it. His vision had whited out.

Vix obviously got bored of waiting, turning his head to see his reaction. His nose brushed against the skin of Travis’s neck, sending a burst of static straight through his nerve endings. He got half-hard at the simple touch. He couldn’t help it. The whole night he’d held on valiantly to sense, even through finger licking and unplanned kisses. He deserved a fucking award.

He’d officially reached the limit of his control.

And he didn't think he was too much to blame when Vix decided that his neck was his new play area.

The minx had turned almost fully, one step from being on top of him, pressing against Travis's neck harder as he nosed around. The tip of his frozen nose hit the sensitive dip behind his ear, and Travis dug his heels into the chair, fighting not to buck his hips.

Vix huffed hot breath against his skin, lungs expanding as he breathed in. "You smell really nice."

Travis's hand found Vix's waist under his coat, the sweater fabric bunching up under when he squeezed. He didn't know how else to respond, not when his brain was flooded with a soup of lust.

Was Vix doing this on purpose?

Vix hummed and threw an arm and a leg over his torso and hips.

It certainly fucking seemed like it.

But Travis could never take anything for granted with Vix. He was too unpredictable.

Travis turned his face down, dislodging Vix from his nook. He made a disgruntled sound but readjusted to settle with his head next to Travis's on the furs.

They locked eyes.

Their guide started a quiet story about the stars above them. Other people rustled their blankets, and Travis could hear

whispers around them.

None of it mattered as they stared at one another.

Vix's eyes were the first to flick down and Travis felt his stomach flip over.

His hand followed his gaze, abandoning its spot on Travis's chest to touch his mouth. The rough material of the gloves scraped against the slightly chapped skin and made Travis shudder.

Vix's white brows pinched slightly as he concentrated on mapping the skin, tugging at the flesh and dipping inside.

"You have a very pleasing mouth. Your top and bottom lips are very symmetrical."

It was probably the weirdest compliment he had ever gotten, but at this point, Travis just wanted to lean into the curve. "I like your mouth too."

Vix made a happy sound, exploring the area around his mouth now. "Is that why you engaged in the act of kissing me? Because you like my mouth?"

Travis felt put on the spot, but the embarrassing question did nothing to dampen the tent in his pants. Jesus fuck. "Among other reasons," he choked out.

"What are those reasons?"

Travis shook his head. He couldn't think, let alone explain.

"Would you like to kiss again to find out?" Vix asked. "I found the process very enjoyable."

Travis felt the universe spin around him, hand clenching on Vix's waist. "You want me to kiss you?"

Vix shook his head. "No." He moved in until there was no distance between them at all. "I want to kiss *you*."

Travis's eyes just about rolled back in his head. He didn't understand the reaction. He wasn't in high school with his first crush, but the butterflies and trembling transported him right back there.

He waited like a date on prom night for Vix to tilt forward and connect their mouths.

The touch was featherlight at first, then Vix applied more pressure, bit by bit, like he was categorizing every difference in each small kiss to his upper and lower lips.

Travis had always been the aggressor when it came to intimacy, it came naturally to him, but for these few moments he left his mouth slack and allowed himself to be kissed.

It was when Vix darted out the tip of his tongue that Travis lost his head.

He met Vix on the next kiss, slanting his mouth to find the best angle to open up. Vix gasped at the sudden change in pace, hand grasping Travis's jaw as he held on and tried to follow.

Travis licked into his mouth, tasting nothing but sweets. It was so concentrated Travis was sure he had to be imagining it. That didn't stop him from chasing the taste around every corner, however.

He cupped Vix's head to hold him steady, feeling the bumps of braids under his gloves. He quickly grew frustrated by the slip and slide, fingers itching to take hold.

Travis broke their lip lock and brought his hand to his mouth, ripping the glove off with his teeth and spitting it aside. The chill that greeted his fingertips was nothing to the shuddering satisfaction of shoving a hand into Vix's braids. He dug deep, the silky strands parting easily, like they knew exactly what Travis wanted.

He grasped a fistful and Vix arched, making a noise in his throat that didn't sound human. Travis swallowed it whole.

Vix grew wild in his arms after that, like the direct link to driving him insane was on his head.

Travis took full advantage, feeling a drugging sense of power and satisfaction as Vix fell apart with every caress to his scalp and tug of a braid. Travis was sure he was knotting the strands beyond saving, but he couldn't stop once he'd started, wanting to mess up the perfect pattern and make it into something wholly his.

His other hand worked its way under Vix's layers one by one, pushing them up and aside to reach the humid skin underneath. He could fit one of Vix's hips into one hand, like a delicate bird, and ended up crawling his fingers up the curve of his spine.

Vix's leg tightened across Travis's lap to the point where they were pressed front to front, the erection Travis couldn't help obvious even through all the barriers.

“And that concludes our night’s activity!”

The words made Travis freeze where he was, just about to roll Vix onto his back. Vix continued kissing at his mouth, tugging him by the face, but reality had washed cold and solid over him.

“We hope you enjoyed your time with us. You can collect your things and make your way back down the hill to the hotel. Please watch your step,” the guide said, sounding like he was getting closer.

Travis sprang upright, leaving Vix to fall messily against the furs, hair tumbling everywhere, mouth swollen and bruised. He looked like he’d just been taken apart and put back together again.

“Are you okay, sir?” the guide asked as he reached them.

“Absolutely not.”

Chapter 11

Vix

Vix sat at the bathroom mirror, brushing his hair over his shoulder absently after failing to find a braid that fitted his current mood.

He stared at his mouth, at the slightly purple tint around his puffy lips. He puckered them, like he could still feel the ghost of touch, then relaxed them again, mind replaying the night's events over.

“How lovely,” he murmured in his own language.

He caught the faint heartshine from under his pajamas, the fluffy blue material not enough to hide the fuchsia glow. He ran a hand over his sensitive heart.

A knock on the bathroom door made him jump in his seat.

“Vix?” Travis called, and the glow got brighter.

He flushed. “Y-yes?”

“You’ve been in there for quite a while,” Travis said.
“Everything okay?”

Well, he had no idea, did he?

How would he know if everything was ok?

He'd never felt the way he was feeling now.

Maybe he was dying.

Maybe Earth was dangerous for Lumians and they had no idea. Maybe they could only survive there for a few days before their bodies started giving out.

Oh stars. He was dying, wasn't he?

He threw his hairbrush down and rushed to the door, throwing it open.

"I think this planet is killing me," he said, looking up at Travis.

He got a surprised huff of laughter in return.

"You're not the only one, trust me," Travis said. That did not make Vix feel better at all. But before he could say anything further, Travis reached out with his fingers for Vix's loose hair before diverting to hold the doorframe. "Your hair is down."

"It was frustrating me," Vix said, letting out a huff through his nose. "None of the braids I tried were right."

Travis hummed, eyes traveling the length of it for a long time. "It looks nice down. I don't think I realized how long it actually is."

The compliment took Vix off guard. Nice down? He'd never heard anything like it before. As he was processing the unusual praise, he noticed Travis's fingers twitch next to his

shoulder. Vix's scalp tingled at the inch of separation, remembering the indescribable feeling of Travis's fingers holding it so tightly, weaving it into shapes Vix had never dared imagine.

"You can touch it," Vix murmured.

Their eyes met for a moment and held. It was like the stargazing all over again and Vix held his breath, anticipation coursing through him.

Travis ran his fingers down the lock of hair falling over Vix's chest, twisting the strand around his pointer finger. It was captivating to watch and had him feeling flushed.

"Silk," Travis whispered, eyes fixated on the strand before they moved slightly left. He frowned. "Have you got a Christmas light under your top?"

Vix's eyes widened. He'd completely forgotten to put on his heart guard!

He slapped his hands over the area. "Um..."

The movement dislodged the hair from Travis's hand and Travis shook his head, like he was trying to shake something off. He stepped back and gave Vix a close-lipped smile.

"I'll, uh...wash up and be right out," Travis said.

Vix couldn't really keep up with the abrupt shift in mood, but exited into the bedroom. Travis passed by him with his head lowered and Vix frowned. He looked down at his chest and saw his heart wasn't glowing any longer.

“Maybe keep it down for bed tonight?”

Vix spun on his heel to see Travis hovering in the doorway.

“My hair?” Vix asked.

Travis nodded.

“But...what does that say?” Vix asked with wide eyes, completely thrown off by the suggestion.

“To who?” Travis asked. “It’s only us here. There’s nobody around to see that it’s not braided. I mean, it’s up to you...I’ll just...”

He closed the door and Vix pressed his mouth shut. When put in those terms it made a small fraction of sense, but it didn’t mean it felt right. He looked at PH-1L.

“I’ll just put it into a resting braid and leave it at that,” he muttered, looping his hair into tiny little twists that fell down his back. Child’s play. The most basic style ever. “That’s fine, isn’t it?”

It was the only one that didn’t feel like a complete clash with the storm inside his head.

He made sure PH-1L was settled in for the night, adjusting his bows before he approached the bed and crawled under the covers. Once he was comfortable he noticed that Travis had turned on a projection of a fire on the far wall. It flickered pleasantly and cast the room in an amber-and-orange glow.

Vix couldn’t properly enjoy it, however.

He groaned and fell forward, still sitting, melding his face into the fur throw and muttering under his breath in Lumian. Everything was too complicated.

“What language is that?”

Vix bolted back upright to see Travis, dressed in his sleep clothes and now standing at the foot of the bed. The man slept in shorts. The entire landscape was encased in ice and snow and Travis was in shorts. Vix was befuddled.

“Lumian,” he answered in his native tongue and watched Travis try to sound it out.

Travis snorted at his own attempt as he rounded the mattress. He threw back the covers but paused before getting in. He looked once at Vix, swallowing heavily before he tentatively joined him, keeping space between them.

Vix found he didn't like it.

“I don't think I've ever heard of it,” Travis said.

“Likely not.” Vix scooted closer himself. “It is not known on Earth.”

Travis eyed his first moves suspiciously until Vix's words registered and he fell against the pillow with a tired laugh. “I forgot you're an alien. My mistake.”

“I do not judge you for your lapse in recall. Humans have access to significantly less of their brain than most species.”

Travis snorted in amusement, eyes closing and taking a long time to creep back open again. He yawned widely. “I don't

think I've ever done so much in one day.”

“Were the activities to your liking?” Vix asked.

Travis stiffened. “Activities?”

Perhaps Travis's recall was compromised. “Sledding and stargazing.”

“Stargazing was...informative.”

Vix pressed his lips together a few times, testing the puffiness. “I agree. It was most educational.”

Travis stared at his mouth before he abruptly turned his head and shut his eyes. “Sledding was fun. I didn't think I liked anything like that.”

It was so rushed coming out that Vix had a hard time following. He took a second to translate to himself before he shuffled a little closer still, turning sideways on the bed and resting his chin on his knees. “Had you ever tried before?”

Travis made a grunt that Vix took to be a negative when paired with his next statement. “I guess I stopped being so adventurous after college. I met Lex and got an internship right out of school that I wanted to succeed at and make something of myself with, so I just fell into routines. I didn't think there was much room for anything else.”

“Being dedicated to your work is indeed commendable. I share your thoughts,” Vix admitted. “I spent a large portion of my life dedicated to my research.”

Travis's thick brows twitched. “What do you research?”

“Earth.”

Travis snorted again, but it was weaker this time as his head lolled to the side. “Well thank you. Alien or not, you’re really helping me out when you don’t have to. This trip could have been miserable, but despite the craziness...I’ve laughed a lot. Probably more than I have in a long time.”

Vix forgot the process of breathing for a moment and gripped at his braid, only to freeze, unable to identify the emotion he was feeling. As he panicked, Travis fell asleep, mouth falling slightly slack.

Vix swallowed, head dizzy. He really was worried about his stability here on Earth. What was happening to him that he couldn’t even identify and communicate his own feelings?

He crawled out of bed and reached for his tablet. He desperately needed a release. Somewhere to vent his frustrations. Maybe if he cleared his mind he’d be able to center himself enough to find some inner understanding.

Tablet in hand, he huddled back under the thick blankets, cold toes pressing against Travis’s legs accidentally, but staying there through choice. He stared at the lump of them under the blanket with a frown. It was logical to share body heat in cold climates, but the satisfaction of being close was something entirely new.

It had started with the stargazing. Having Travis’s arm around him as they observed the constellations. The mixture of scent, touch, and heat had been enough to send his brain into the atmosphere.

And then there was the kissing to consider. It was a significant factor.

He had the sudden thought that Travis could have been compelled to kiss him under the influence of the toxin he had unknowingly released into the air.

But that wasn't completely right.

He touched his neck. The swelling was gone. He'd run a scan while he was getting changed before they went to stargaze, and the results had been normal. So it didn't explain the kissing outside. Travis had also stood with him all night since he'd consumed the alcohol and it hadn't seemed to affect him the same way.

Which was curious.

Did he want to kiss Vix the same way Vix now wanted to kiss him back? And what did that mean that Vix wanted to stay attached at the mouth with the human? He understood the basics of human courtship rituals, of course, but he had no idea how, or if, they applied in this matter. They were pretending to be in a relationship...

But Vix's heart had glowed.

Vix groaned in confusion, clutching his braid.

Maybe it was best to start at the beginning to understand his own thoughts.

Nodding, he let the steady rhythm of Travis's breath soothe him as he made notes about everything he had learned since he arrived at their retreat.

He also researched things he couldn't fully understand.

Relationships, mostly.

Lex and his behavior, in detail. He tried to learn why the man wouldn't leave Travis alone. He also tried to figure out how he could act more like he was Travis's romantic partner to make sure Lex understood completely.

He used the internet to read up on different things, cross-referencing with the databases Lumians had on humans.

There was so much data and so many conflicting views that it was hard to take in. There were also words that he had no Lumian translation for, like 'jealousy' and 'crush.' The more he looked into these two words specifically and what they meant, the closer he got to his screen.

Crush. A brief but intense infatuation with someone, especially someone unattainable.

Jealousy was more difficult. It had varying definitions, but the one that fit the most was in the romantic sense.

By the time the light was creeping under the curtains again, signaling dawn, Vix still wasn't done reading half the sources he'd pulled up. He'd changed his position from sitting to lying down with the tablet on hover-stasis over his head. He reached up now and again to change a source or scroll a page.

The more he read, the more he questioned. Did he have a crush? Was Lex jealous? Both their behaviors could fall into those categories, but surely there wasn't enough data.

Especially not to justify trying to work out how to weave new braids. He needed to think this over.

It was only when Travis rolled over that he broke out of his near trance-like state.

Travis's heavy arm dropped over his waist, causing him to let out a huff of air involuntarily. Travis hadn't really moved the night before, Vix had actually checked he was still breathing once or twice, so this was unexpected.

He wondered if the human was waking up, but he continued to draw in deep, even breaths.

Vix attempted to scoot a little to the left and got dragged in closer as a result. He let out a little squeak, eyes widening. Travis grumbled in his sleep, nuzzling his face closer and digging his nose into his shoulder.

Vix had never been so much as pushed before in his life, and now he was being *dragged* across a bed. He felt a strange upside-down feeling in his stomach and looked down at the arm causing it, then up at the man it was attached to.

By this point Vix had studied Travis's face in great detail. But somehow he kept discovering new things. Like the small mole on the helix of his ear, and the small hairs that were growing through where his hairline dragged down his temple in a point. A strange yet interesting difference that Vix wanted to explore.

Pursing his lips, he walked his fingers across the wide expanse of Travis's forearm. If he was going to be held in

place, he could at least satisfy his own curiosities. He walked those fingers through the hairs on Travis's arm, stopping to thumb over the smooth crescent shape of a scar that hadn't been removed for some reason.

Vix liked these imperfections most of all. Humans were all so diversely fascinating to look at, Travis especially so.

Lumians were all slight creatures. Much like Vix. Willowy and slender, long-limbed, and fragile looking compared to a lot of other species. There were few differences between them and while they could all tell each other apart, Vix was fairly certain not a single human would be able to do it at first.

Humans were diverse in ways Vix hadn't seen before. From their builds, to the color of their hair, eyes, and skin, the clothes they wore, and gestures they made.

They were each so special, and different.

And somehow, Travis was the most special out of all of the ones Vix had seen and talked to. Vix shouldn't have a bias in his observations, but he couldn't deny that he did.

It was all rather confusing, inconvenient, and hard to process.

He swiped a finger on the screen over his head and sent it into sleep mode, laying it down on the bedside table. The stretch was tough, but he managed.

Travis didn't seem happy with the movement though. His arm tightened further around Vix's waist, fingers accidentally slipping under Vix's top and brushing the skin of his stomach.

Vix gasped at the sensation, that swarm of tingles in the pit of his gut going wild. He was transported back to the chair outside, only this time he didn't have kissing to distract him.

All he could do was think about every single point where Travis's body was glued to his. He swept his gaze over their forms under the covers and blushed at the thought of how good they looked intertwined like that. Vix's long, simple braid draped over Travis's chest, the lump of Travis's hand under his top.

Travis's thumb twitched up and Vix suddenly remembered he'd never attached his heart guard.

His heart began to thump and pulse, the glow of it lighting up the room with that same pinkish glow.

If Travis moved just a few more inches up, he would be touching the most important part of him. The place he'd always been told to keep tightly guarded.

The fact that Vix wasn't sure whether he minded or not was alarming. His mother's voice in his head screamed at him to move.

In the end the choice was taken away. Travis shifted again and his hand fell back down to the bed across Vix. His hips pressed into Vix's thigh, the hard outline of something digging into him. He glanced down, moving his leg as he tried to work out what it was...

Travis grunted, rocking his hips into the action, eyelids flickering.

Oh.

Vix flushed, realizing the implications as Travis continued the slow circle of his hips against him. He moved his leg experimentally, but it seemed to wake Travis.

He blinked his eyes open blearily, squinting, trying to focus. It was fascinating to watch. He breathed in and out deeply, limbs twitching.

They locked eyes...

“I think your erect phallus is digging into my leg.”

Travis catapulted himself backward off the bed, hitting the floor with a heavy *slam*.

Chapter 12

Travis

He could stay here for the rest of eternity.

It wouldn't be so bad.

The carpet was soft and clean.

There was a dust bunny under the bed for company.

The downside was that he was pretty sure his dick would never work again. The embarrassment plus the force of hitting the ground may have caused permanent damage.

But maybe that was for the best.

His dick was what had started this whole mess in the first place. All the way back in college to now, his dick had been making Very Bad Decisions.

“Are you concussed? Shall I call a medical professional?”

Vix asked.

Maybe? Who knew at this point. Yesterday felt like a fever dream.

He grumbled something unintelligible in answer.

“I don’t under—”

The phone ringing cut him off, and he heard Vix shuffle away to pick it up.

“Hello this fine morn!”

Definitely a fever dream.

Travis shifted his face and glanced toward the window. The dull light told him it was way too early to be conscious.

“Oh yes! Thank you very much, we shall be there with bells on!” Vix chirped.

Hopefully he meant that figuratively.

The *click* of the receiver preceded Vix scurrying across the bed again. “The alarm-clock lady called and said we had to be ready in half an hour.”

“Alarm-clock lady?” Travis mumbled.

“When I signed us up for the craft activity, it said no need to set an alarm clock because their lady will call us instead to make sure we’re there on time,” Vix said, clearing one thing up and opening up at least fifteen more questions.

“Craft activity?” Travis asked, surfacing from his misery for a second to look up.

Vix’s large eyes were visible over the edge of the mattress, fingertips gripping the edge, his braid coiling down to the floor. He looked like a cat about to pounce.

“For decorating!” Vix said. “We go and pick a craft to do, and once we are finished, we can bring it back home!”

Travis stared for a moment before sighing and dragging himself up, ignoring the sad throb of his deflated erection. Vix followed his movement by sitting up himself. He looked too good. Disheveled and wide-eyed and...Travis slapped himself across the cheek.

The sound resonated in the room for a moment.

“Is that a common wake-up ritual?” Vix asked. “Should I try it myself?”

Travis sprang toward him, hands outstretched to stop him. “No! No...just...ignore that... Back up a little bit.”

Vix scooted backward on his ass.

“No... That’s not what I...” Travis said, gripping him by the ankles and pulling him closer again. The action was automatic. Like that kiss had unlocked something in his brain.

He let go of Vix like he was on fire, nearly tripping over his own feet to get away.

What was *wrong* with him?

“I meant with your explanation,” Travis choked out, putting his hands behind his back just in case. He couldn’t be trusted. “We’re doing crafts now?”

“Yes,” Vix said, seemingly nonplussed by the manhandling. “They specified it had to be early because the craft lady said there’s ‘snow time like the present.’”

Dear god.

The horror was too much to contemplate. The Christmas puns. The never-ending carols on as background music. The seasonal glitter.

He shuddered.

Travis had to draw the line somewhere. He had to.

He was going to draw the line this time.

Vix peered up at him with hopeful blue eyes...

“Welcome, fellow craft enthusiasts! I’m Fern. I hope you’ve all got your creative hats on today. I’m sure you have, or if you need to make one, that’s what I’m here for! I can feel your Christmas spirit from my head right down to my mistletoes!”

Travis sank down in his seat in misery, cursing how small it was. Like it was made for a freaking elf. His knees were pressing into the table underneath, almost lifting it off the ground.

Vix sat beside him, perfectly comfortable, vibrating with excitement. His hair a quivering pile on his head as he ate up every word of Fern’s. He had PH-1L next to him. Fern hadn’t batted an eye at the vacuum’s appearance. She’d complimented the aesthetic and suggested a few alternatives. Vix had been ecstatic, looking at her like she hung the moon and stars.

Travis tried not to let it get to him. After all, what did she have that he didn’t? A tiered dress that looked like a Christmas cake? Bits of tinsel woven through her flyaway brown hair? A jingle when she walked?

Clearly his nondescript gray sweater, barely brushed hair, and clunky gait were far superior in every respect.

So why was Vix staring at her so hard?

Travis gritted his teeth, feeling a vein pulse in his temple. He shouldn't be feeling like this. Vix wasn't his boyfriend. He was a stranger he'd met in a coffee shop! Who he shared a bed with...and made out with under the stars in probably the most romantic moment of his life...

He groaned and attempted to sink farther, disturbing the baskets of craft supplies on the table.

Travis just hoped the torture would end quickly.

“Sorry I'm late.”

Travis turned to see Lex poking his head through the door and just about gave up on life.

“Come in, come in! We were about to get jing, jing, jing-a-ling! That table has some free spots, right over there,” Fern said, ushering him in with one jangling arm.

There was only one table she could mean. The rest of the room was filled with kids and their stressed parents trying to keep them from eating glue, and the elderly who were chitchatting over steaming mugs.

Lex scanned the room, spotting Travis and smirking like he'd won something.

He strode over confidently, like he was on some kind of imaginary runway. He was overdressed enough for it, in

slacks, an expensive shirt, and a sweater vest.

Only, he didn't see PH-1L on the floor and tripped over the trailing hosepipe.

He went careening into a nearby table and managed to pull all the crafts on top of himself on the way down.

The room paused entirely.

“Oops! Someone took a tumble down the chimney. Up you get, dearie,” Fern said, not at all worried or fazed.

Lex groaned, rolling onto his ass looking like a glitter bomb had exploded on him. He had a Santa face stuck to his cheek.

Travis covered his mouth to stifle a laugh.

“PH-1L, did you do that?” Vix asked the vacuum seriously. “That’s not very nice.”

“Well done, PH-1L,” Travis said.

Vix tutted. “You shouldn’t encourage his bad behavior.”

Lex struggled to his feet, Christmas paraphernalia falling all around him. He looked down at himself once and then *screamed* at the top of his lungs.

Vix covered his ears, even though he was wearing his earmuffs.

“Now, now, it’s not that bad,” Fern said, brushing Lex off and leading him to the empty seat. She shoved him down. “You’re just covered in Christmas cheer.”

Lex looked positively murderous, face a stunning puce color and eyes locked on Vix.

“This is your fault!” he hissed as soon as Fern walked away.

“I apologize for PH-1L’s behavior,” Vix said, and Lex curled his upper lip in disgust.

“It’s a vacuum cleaner. It doesn’t have a behavior,” Lex spat, and Vix tilted his head.

“I find it very sad how little joy you have in your life,” Vix said. He actually had the gall to make his bottom lip quiver.

“Who are you calling sad?” Lex asked, and Vix stuck his finger out, pointing right at Lex’s chest. Travis had no idea where the sass was coming from. It was like looking at an entirely different Vix from the sweet little oddball he had gotten to know over the past few days.

“You, clearly,” Vix said, and then did an impressive attempt at an eye roll that had him throwing his entire head back and around. “DUH!”

“I’m gonna...” Lex started, and Travis tensed, ready to break up the potential fight that threatened to start up in front of all the innocent families.

Before he could, Vix raised his palm and held it up to Lex’s face.

“And while we are conversing, I would like to talk to you about setting up some personal boundaries.”

“You don’t have to keep convers—sorry, what?” Travis asked, caught off guard.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lex said, equally taken aback.

Vix wove two braids into tiny horns on the top of his head, like he was preparing for battle. “I do not wish you to attempt to lick either myself or Travis anymore. Or kiss him. Or try to engage in copulation. Your romantic liaison is at an end after you slept with every male human within your vicinity, so you should move on accordingly. This is an official warning.”

Travis was too stunned to speak.

Lex lunged as far as he could across the table. “Listen here, you little homewrecker. You have no idea who you’re dealing with—”

“Okay, my snowbells! Let’s begin!” Fern announced with a clap, cutting his tirade short with the force of her cheer.

Lex slithered back into his seat, glaring the whole time. Travis could only stare at Vix in shock, completely turned on.

Was this just to help Travis out? Was it for show? Or was Vix actually annoyed by Lex’s persistence? The hope was too much to push down.

Travis opened his mouth to ask, the questions too urgent to keep inside, but Fern launched into an enthusiastic tutorial on how to fold cardstock, complete with singing and dancing, and the moment was lost.

Travis honestly believed she had been transported from Santa’s workshop. He wanted to ship her straight back there in a sack.

Vix hung on her every word like she was teaching a seminar on neuroscience. It was sort of endearing how seriously he took it, versus Lex's disdain emanating from the other side of the table.

Lex's attitude called Travis's own into check. He didn't want to be a dark cloud hanging over Vix's enjoyment. So he folded the fucking card the way he was supposed to and grabbed the decorations.

As he was trying to figure out which balls were more 'festive,' whatever the fuck that meant, he kept peering over at Vix. Had he always been this cute concentrating? Had his nose always scrunched in that way? Did he find Travis as attractive as Travis found him?

He cleared his throat and whispered under his breath, "About Lex..."

Vix hummed distractedly. "Do you think this snowflake is prettier, or that one?"

Travis barely glanced at them. "The left is fine. What I was trying to say is—"

"Should I stick it here or here?" Vix cut him off, moving it around his red paper in indecision. "I am in a dilemma."

"I don't think it matters."

Vix gasped. "How could you say that?"

"It doesn't have to be so serious," Travis tried to explain, but that seemed to enrage Vix more.

“It is very serious. PH-1L understands the magnitude,” Vix told him, crossing his arms.

“PH-1L needs to mind his own business,” Travis muttered.

Vix grabbed the hosepipe and pointed it at him, eyes narrowed. “You take that back.”

Travis stared cross-eyed at it before holding his hands up. “I take it back.”

“Apologize to PH-1L.”

Travis clenched his jaw, staring at the inanimate object that seemed to be mocking him. “Sorry...PH-1L.”

Vix beamed, putting the hose down and patting PH-1L on the handle. “He forgives you.”

“Yippee.”

Vix went back to decorating and Travis sulked. That hadn’t gone how he’d wanted at all. He shot PH-1L a glare before scooting his chair a little closer to Vix’s inconspicuously.

Which meant it screeched loudly across the floor and everyone stared at him.

Travis flushed, trying to keep his composure. He looked down at his sad card and took a deep breath to relieve himself of his dignity. “Should I add sparkles?”

It got Vix’s attention, like he knew it would. It was a peace offering. Vix peered over and bounced excitedly. “Fern says sparkles brighten up everyone’s day.”

Vix grabbed the pots of glitter and unscrewed every single color, spilling some on the table immediately. He leaned into Travis's space to get at his card, slathering some glue on it before dropping half a ton of glitter all over.

Travis allowed him to do whatever he wanted, happy to have him close, his scent in his nose.

Vix looked up at him after he was done with hopeful eyes. "Do you like it?"

Travis didn't even look. "Yes." *I like you.* "So much."

Vix grinned and Travis wanted to kiss him silly. He had a severe case of cute aggression going on inside him.

In the end, he gathered up a fingerful of glitter and gently swiped it onto the tip of Vix's nose.

Vix startled, blinking down at it as best he could. Travis laughed at the owlish expression. "Because you brighten up my day, you have to be covered in sparkles too."

Vix's mouth popped open as the words sank in. Travis didn't have it in him to be embarrassed.

"Excuse me. You're stealing all the glitter." Lex broke into the moment.

"Just shake your head," Travis said, side-eyeing him. "You've got plenty in there."

Lex growled, baring his teeth.

"Ohh, someone has a resting Grinch face," Fern cooed in a baby voice, putting her hands on her hips and pouting.

“What’s wrong, tinsel?”

It was the most condescending and best thing that had ever happened.

Travis tried and failed to hold in his snickers as Lex’s scowl got even deeper. He crushed a polystyrene ball in his fist, the bits falling like snow.

“Why don’t you come with me, candy cane. I’ll sort you out,” Fern said, glancing over at Vix and Travis and smiling. “Everything looks in peppermint condition, you two! Well done, keep going.”

Lex didn’t even get to protest as he was hauled out of his seat by his collar. Fern was also apparently freakishly strong. It seemed like the spirit of Christmas came with superpowers.

Alone again, Travis cleared his throat. Now they didn’t have Lex as a buffer, he felt slightly awkward.

“I’m really sorry about this whole thing. I didn’t think Lex would be this...intense,” Travis felt the need to say.

Vix shook his head. He still had the glitter on his nose, catching the light. He was adorable. “His actions are not your own.”

“Yeah, but it’s my fault you have to deal with it. I’m the crazy person who asked you to fake-date me.”

“I find the process of fake-dating you to be nice.”

“*Nice?*” he spluttered.

Nice. It was such a non-word. Especially for someone like Vix, who came up with the wildest adjectives at the drop of a hat. And he picked...nice.

“Did I not use that term correctly?” Vix asked.

“I don’t know. Did you?” Travis mumbled petulantly, crossing his arms over his chest. The vacuum seemed to get better reviews than him. Stupid PH-1L.

“I liked it when you grabbed my hair and stuck your tongue in my mouth,” Vix said suddenly, way too loudly for what the content was. People around them looked over in shock and Travis flailed in his seat, nearly upending himself as he tried to hush Vix, who seemed unfazed. “Since that is included in fake-dating. I like it very much.”

Travis’s face was on fire. A mixture of pride and mortification warred in his body. “That’s uh...not actually supposed to be included in fake-dating. At least, I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” Vix said, pushing his lower lip out. “Does that mean you won’t do it again?”

I’ll do it right now if you don’t stick that lip back in. “I—”

“Because I believe you should,” Vix said. “We did it before and I think we can both agree it was dope.”

“Dope?” Travis asked, but he couldn’t really contain the smile blooming on his face.

Vix liked their kiss. And he wanted to kiss again.

“Yes,” Vix said. “Is that not appropriate to say? I was going to use sick, but then I figured, we exchanged bodily fluids and I do not want to leave you with an impression you gave me a disease.”

Oh, the looks people were giving them.

“That is very considerate of you,” Travis said. “And I agree, the kiss was dope.”

“Thank you!” Vix said, beaming at him and folding his braids into a different mess on his head.

“You’re very welcome. And you want to kiss again?”

“I would be most agreeable to that.” Vix nodded.

Travis smiled again. “Well then, I guess I will kiss you again.”

“But just me, right? You’re not going to do it with anyone else? Like Lex.” Vix sounded strangely assertive again. “I do not like him trying to do those things with you.”

“And why is that?” Travis asked, dry-mouthed. He needed him to say it.

“Because I only like you being that way with me,” Vix said, and the caveman in Travis wanted to roar at everyone around him that Vix had picked him.

“Okay. I’ll only do that with you,” Travis said. *Not a hardship at all.*

Vix smiled, big and bright. “Truly?”

Travis nodded, heart kicking into hyperspeed for some reason. He felt on cloud nine. “We can be exclusive...friends with benefits.”

“What sorts of benefits?” Vix asked. “I do know some positions offer dental and such. I believe my teeth are in perfect condition.”

He actually bared his teeth at Travis to prove his point. Which stood true. His teeth were, in fact, perfect.

“No, not dental,” Travis said. “I mean more like...friends usually just hang out together...”

“I do not wish to hang.” Vix shook his head. “That doesn’t sound very comfortable. Also, historically, it led to life terminations if hung by the neck.”

“No, I meant, friends usually just spend time together doing fun things,” Travis tried explaining.

“Like crafts?” Vix waved his card in the air, spraying glitter everywhere.

“Yes, like crafts.” Travis nodded. “But friends with benefits also kiss sometimes.”

Vix took the information in and seemed to be mulling over it as he glued his snowflakes.

“Friends. But with benefits,” Vix repeated, almost to himself. “I think kissing is very beneficial. I think we should kiss at frequent intervals in order to maximize the results.”

“I agree,” Travis said and Vix nodded.

“Do the benefits include anything else?” he asked. “There is a lot I want to try before we are done retreating.”

Travis’s joy was dimmed only slightly by the reminder that Vix was only there temporarily. They’d be back home in a few days and then Vix would be...who knew where. He pushed the thought aside, determined to enjoy the present and whatever the hell this thing was between them.

“We can try whatever you’d like.”

“Even sex?” Vix exclaimed and Travis slapped his hand on his forehead, feeling the stares of everyone in the room glued to the two of them.

“Jesus, keep your voice down!” he said, and Vix had the audacity to look under their table.

“I don’t think there’s anywhere down here to keep it...”

Travis would kill him. He was sure of it.

Observation log 5:

This is a card. You create these to gift to people for special occasions.

Supervision is necessary when creating as the process is very intricate. I made this one and the card expert said it was 'Incredibauble'. (-NOTE- This is Earth slang for very good.)



(Crafting is an excellent bonding exercise for mates. You can also use it as an interpersonal buffer to tell your mate's ex-mate to leave your mate alone)

Chapter 13

Travis

Travis tightened the gold tie around his neck and checked his watch for the millionth time in the few hours since he'd told Vix they'd be attending the Christmas party his company was throwing.

Vix's reaction had been interesting to say the least.

He had squealed, asked about five dozen questions ranging from appropriate attire to what to put on his vacuum for the party—that he absolutely would NOT be bringing with them—before rushing out of the room without a single word.

He'd come back about an hour later, flushed but excited, with a garment bag in his arms and a wide smile on his face. Before Travis could say anything, he'd walked into the bathroom, locked it, and that was the last Travis had seen of him. Four hours ago.

The party had started half an hour ago.

“Vix?” Travis called through the closed bathroom door. “Do you think you'll be done this century?”

“A century is a hundred Earth years, correct?”

Travis looked at the ceiling, silently asking for strength.
“Yes, Vix.”

“Then yes, I predict I will be ready in that time frame,” he said, and Travis snorted. He couldn’t help it.

Was Vix crazy? Yes.

Did he make it work for him? Absolutely.

“Glad to hear it.” He pulled out a chair situated next to the vanity and sat in it, trying his best not to crease his suit. “Just to let you know, I ran into some people and they said they couldn’t wait to meet PH-1L.”

There was silence.

Travis craned his neck to hear better.

Then a squeal that made Travis chuckle.

And then a crash that sent him flying from his seat and toward the bathroom door.

Just as he reached it, the door opened and Vix almost fell through, careening right into Travis’s chest and gripping the lapels of his suit to keep himself upright. Huge blue eyes stared right up at him, and Travis found himself thinking Vix was too gorgeous for his own good.

“Did they really?” Vix asked.

Travis blinked in confusion. “What?”

“What, what?” Vix asked in return before narrowing his eyes at Travis. “You deceived me, didn’t you?”

“Sorry,” Travis said sheepishly. “You were taking forever to get ready.”

Vix pulled out of his arms and attempted a glare, but something about his delicate features just didn’t allow for it to look anything other than adorable. The fuzzy white earmuffs he was wearing on his head weren’t helping either.

“That was mean,” he said.

“I know,” he said. “I’m really sorry.”

“You can relay that information to my hand,” Vix said, holding it right in Travis’s face. Huffy.

Travis tried to school his expression into one of remorse instead of bursting into laughter, when his brain finally registered Vix’s outfit.

“What are you wearing?” he asked.

Vix lowered his hand a bit, peeking from behind it. “Changing the subject won’t help.”

“No, I just...I haven’t seen you in that before.” And it was a good thing he hadn’t because he wasn’t sure he’d have survived it.

Vix was wearing a blood red, floor-length satin gown with a very high neck but a completely open back. The fabric was billowy and soft, molding to Vix’s slim frame like a second skin. Travis had had no idea he was into men dressing in feminine clothing, but apparently Vix had decided to just storm into his life and fuck up everything Travis thought was constant.

And looking at him, he wasn't even mad at it. He just wanted to slip his hands under that slinky fabric and feel his skin.

"I got it today," Vix said, unaware of Travis's inner turmoil. "I researched attire for occasions like this and realized I had none. So I went down to the shops in the lobby to find something. The nice lady gave me this to try and said it looked very hot. I find the material to be cooling, not hot, but I liked it, so I got it."

His voice was still a bit sharp from their earlier 'disagreement' but picked up traction and excitement the further the explanation went. By the end of it his hand was nowhere in sight and he was right up in Travis's personal space, eyes glowing with joy.

"It's a beautiful dress," Travis said, his gaze tracing down Vix's body.

"That's the best part," Vix said, spreading his legs as far as they would go. "They're pants. Just...pretending to be a dress. It's inspired. The lady said it's called a jumpsuit. I don't believe I'll be jumping in it, but I did try, and it wasn't any easier than it usually is. Oh and look...pockets."

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jumpsuit, wiggling his fingers so much it made the fabric dance around his legs.

Travis caved, slipping his hands into the pockets alongside Vix's and tugging him closer. Until they were chest to chest, lips almost touching.

“I like it a lot,” he whispered.

Vix shivered in his arms, looking up at him. “I think we should kiss now.”

Travis chuckled, leaning down to brush their noses together. “Yeah?”

“Totally,” Vix said. “We have come to an agreement and the agreement says we can kiss because it is beneficial.”

“Hmm. What if I changed my mind?” Travis asked with a playful smile.

Vix gasped, pulling back to look at him, eyes narrowed. “Is that a joke?”

“Yup.”

“You’re not a very humorous person, Travis,” Vix said. “I do not predict a thriving career as a standing-up jester for you.”

Travis opened and closed his mouth, fighting the urge to correct him, but opted to claim his lips instead. Felt like a much better use of his time.

He scooped him up flush against his chest, palms sliding up his back since Vix’s jumpsuit was fully backless. The amount of skin Travis was touching was sending him into overdrive.

He tipped his head down and brushed their noses together for a split second before touching his lips to Vix’s.

Vix let out a small sound and coiled closer, thin arms wrapping around Travis’s neck. Travis could feel him stepping up to his tiptoes. Vix returned the kiss. Just as eager and

enthusiastic as he was about everything else. It was a little bit clumsy, slightly inexperienced, and while a logical part of Travis understood Vix was a bit strange, the side that just wanted Vix couldn't understand how nobody else snatched him up already.

He brushed his tongue against the seam of Vix's lips and Vix allowed him in. No protests, no complaints. Just mindless agreement to anything and everything Travis wanted to do to him. And Travis wanted so much he was almost dizzy with it.

Almost ready to just call his boss and tell him they wouldn't be joining the party. Almost ready to just unwrap Vix from his pretty blood red jumpsuit and spread him out on their bed.

But Vix wanted to go to the party. He was excited about it. Eager for it.

So, reluctantly, Travis broke their kiss and helped Vix down to his feet.

"You don't have to stop," Vix said, not opening his eyes just yet, and Travis pecked his lips once again.

"We have a party to get to," he reminded him. "We're already late."

Vix gasped. "But I'm not ready yet!"

"You were just in the bathroom for four hours."

"Not nearly enough time," he said, pointing to his head. "Look at this mess!"

Travis did look. Vix's shockingly white hair looked just as beautiful as it always did. Braided to the nines in the most intricate of styles and shining with the oil he said he used.

"I think your hair looks perfect," Travis said.

Vix melted a tiny bit. "But it's not finished."

Travis used his sudden pliancy to steer him toward the door. "Looks finished to me."

"But..." Vix scrambled over him, hooking his fingers in PH-1L's handle and dragging it behind them, festive bowtie on the vacuum and all. "I'm taking him with me!"

"The party awaits, Vix, take whatever you want." He pushed him out the door and spent the entire elevator ride convincing him he looked just right.

Any argument Vix had was swiftly forgotten when they entered the large room where the party was taking place.

It truly looked stunning. Almost as if they'd trapped the magic of a wintery night inside four walls.

A white backdrop was filled with twinkling lights, lit candles, and delicate silver tinsel. The scent of pine lingered in the air and mixed with the delicious smells of food and eggnog. There were several trees decorated throughout and all the guests were dressed up and looking bright and happy.

Even the grump in Travis recognized the party for what it was. A beautiful event to relax and have some fun. But the sudden change in attitude might have been just having Vix on his arm, oooh-ing and aaah-ing over every single thing he saw.

Travis led him inside, trying his hardest not to puff his chest out at the looks Vix was getting from others. He felt like a smug caveman with the prettiest date at the party.

He stopped by a stray member of the waitstaff, handing PH-1L off with a sizable bribe and instructions to take care of the vacuum until he could pick it up again. The guy was mightily confused, but the money smoothed over any questions.

He guided Vix to a table with their nameplates on it and while he realized they were, once again, going to be sitting with Ben and his inner circle—meaning Kenneth and Lex—he didn't want to let that bring him down.

They took their seats, Travis feeling indulgent and pulling Vix onto his lap. Vix was happy to perch, the position giving him a better vantage point to take everything in. Travis didn't bother him, simply enjoying his closeness, running a hand up and down his exposed back until Janice joined them.

She was dressed in black lace, a deliberate dark spot against the room. He had a feeling if she could have worn a mourning veil she would have.

“Kids excuse didn't work?” Travis asked her.

She slammed her purse down. “Past their bedtime. I don't want to pay for it on the drive home tomorrow by using them as pawns. No matter how tempting that might be.”

“Hello, Janice. I enjoy your outfit today very much,” Vix said.

Janice quirked a smile. “Thanks, hon. Travis is lucky he snatched you up. Lex is going to throw a fit when he sees you.”

“I’ve come to observe Lex throws a fit whether he sees me or not,” Vix said.

Janice burst out laughing and Travis joined in.

“You’re quick,” she said, her eyes cutting left. “But speak of the devil.”

Travis turned to see Lex making his ‘grand entrance.’ He was poised on a bored Kenneth’s arm, dressed in a green tartan suit, his nose in the air.

Travis rolled his eyes, wondering if he’d really looked that douchey all those years parading around with him. Others began to filter over to the table—Ben, Henry, Tracie—and Travis patted Vix’s back.

“Hop down.”

Vix blinked. “Why? I am quite comfortable.”

“I’m okay with dinner and a show,” Janice said.

Travis sent her a chiding look before patting Vix again. “Just for dinner.”

Vix sighed. “Lame.”

He settled into his seat and the other places were taken, Travis avoiding Lex’s eyes at all costs across the table. Greetings were spread around and drinks poured,

conversations beginning to strike up with neighbors as they waited for dinner to be served.

Travis thanked god Janice was next to Vix. He didn't have to worry. He was safely shielded from major damage.

“What made you want to travel so far away?” Janice asked in genuine curiosity.

“I've always been fascinated with your world. America seemed as good a place to start as any. It was also the place I knew most of the language,” Vix said.

The addendum made Travis smile. Vix got things mixed around sometimes but Travis only knew enough rudimentary Spanish to order himself a beer without offending someone's mother, so Vix was more than impressive.

“So you came here all alone?” Tracie asked loudly, eavesdropping as always and barging into the conversation uninvited as she leaned across Travis. Maybe not as shielded as Travis had hoped. “You said Travis was the first friend you made, but you really didn't know anyone else in the city?”

“No one.” Vix shook his head. “I was fortunate to meet Travis as I did. And he introduced me to PH-1L. He was the second friend I made. He traveled here to retreat with us too.”

Travis groaned internally and grabbed his wine.

“Phil? Who is this mysterious person and why haven't we seen them?” Ben asked, joining the conversation too, like he'd smelled blood in the water.

“Lovely fellow,” Henry said, smirking. “I met him when they first arrived. Doesn’t say much but he’s a snappy dresser.”

“I’ve never heard of a Phil,” Lex muttered.

“Probably for the best,” Janice said, smearing some butter on her roll, then shoving it in her mouth. “I think your asshole got worn out on the rest of Travis’s friends.”

Travis spat his drink all over the table, stillness blanketing everyone in the aftermath.

“Is that a Christmas custom?” Vix asked as the silence stretched, picking up his water glass. “Are we supposed to do the same?”

Travis caught his hand to stop him, dabbing himself off with his napkin with the other. Janice continued to chew nonchalantly over the bomb she’d dropped, and Lex turned positively nuclear on the other side of the table.

“Kenneth!” he hissed, grabbing the arm of his suit. “Do something!”

“Sorry, what?” Kenneth asked, like he’d barely been listening. He seemed to be staring at the server’s ass.

“Well...” Ben cleared his throat, though he looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself. “I’m glad to hear Travis doesn’t have competition for your affections, Vix.”

“Oh no,” Vix said steadfastly. “We have already promised exclusivity to each other. And PH-1L was Travis’s friend long before I showed up, anyway.”

Travis coughed into his hand. “Totally. Our friendship has a warranty and everything. He’d never do anything, or I’d throw him out on the curb.”

Henry began belly laughing, holding his stomach, the only person in on the joke.

“Food!” Vix announced.

The dinner passed by relatively calmly from there. The only real way was up. People became more worried about filling their stomachs with awaited indulgence, like Thanksgiving hadn’t just passed. Vix wasn’t particularly impressed with any of it, mumbling about how he couldn’t understand why this was highlighted as one of the greatest meals of the year.

He was mollified by the dessert, but seemed to steer clear of anything that might have had a touch of alcohol, constantly checking with Travis.

By the time the plates were cleared away and coffees were served, Vix was already wiggling in his seat to escape, so Travis used the excuse to whisk him away to the dance floor.

The Christmas songs had been replaced by smooth jazz from a live band. Couples were already swaying along to the sultry saxophone and crooning bass.

Travis gathered Vix close, spinning him around once before capturing his delighted form against his chest.

Vix grinned, slightly breathless. “That was fun.”

Travis took his hand and twirled him twice more until he was dizzy, steadying him with hands on his lower back. Vix

wrapped his arms around Travis's neck as he found the center of the earth again, and Travis couldn't help but swoop down and press a kiss to his mouth.

"That makes me even more dizzy," Vix mumbled against his lips. Travis smiled and moved back, only to find nails digging into skin. "I didn't say I wanted it to cease."

Travis laughed and leaned back in.

"Ken! Ken! Come on!"

Travis sighed against Vix's mouth, doing his best to ignore Lex. He rested his forehead against Vix's and angled them away from the racket.

"Ken! This way, for god's sake. Why don't you listen?" Lex hissed. "Wrap your arms around me."

"You're sure you want to dance? You've been slamming drinks since before we got here," Ken said, not sounding particularly worried, more like he was trying to find an excuse to get out of it. "We can go back to the table."

"No. And stop stepping on my feet!"

"I'm not. You're tripping over mine because you can't stand up straight."

Travis desperately attempted to avoid the useless arguing, but Lex was determined to play this game of one-upmanship, and Travis quickly grew bored of it. He didn't want to use Vix the way Lex was using Kenneth, no matter how much of a prick the guy was, or how this whole thing had started with Vix.

“Wanna go anywhere else?” Travis whispered.

“The bathroom would be most convenient. The woman who sold me my outfit said I should make sure to go with lots of time to get out of it,” Vix said.

Travis smiled. “Okay then. Let’s go.”

He led them off the dance floor, spotting Lex and Ken still arguing and shaking his head. He located the bathroom and posted himself at the nearby bar to wait. He ordered himself a drink and leaned against the bar top, swishing the ice cubes around, knowing that Vix and bathrooms did not mesh well. He had the hardest time getting out of them once he entered.

Twenty minutes passed like that, Travis slowly sipping his drink and enjoying the relative calm.

Until he couldn’t anymore.

“Travis! Travis! I just saw your little freak in the bathroom,” Lex yelled.

Travis hung his head, before turning.

“Lex. I see you’ve found the bottoms of several glasses,” Travis said, watching him stumble toward him. His eyes looked glassy and barely focused, and his words were slightly slurred. “Kenneth found someone younger to play with?”

“How can you be so calm?” Lex demanded, pointing a finger in his face. “You can’t even see what’s right in front of your nose!”

“Oh I see what’s in front of my nose just fine,” Travis replied, batting his hand away. “A drunk, spoiled little asshole who needs to leave me alone.”

“*I* need to leave you alone?” Lex said, eyes wild. “But that weird, glowy little elf you brought along with you is fine to stay? Are you insane?”

Travis smiled at the words a little dreamily. “He really is glowy, isn’t he?”

“Did he drug you?” Lex asked, pawing at his suit to look for any signs. “Did he slip something into your drink? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He went to grab Travis’s glass from his hand, but missed it by a good foot, propelling himself forward and ending up buried face-first into Travis’s shirt.

“We said he wasn’t allowed near you.”

Vix appeared out of nowhere, looking at Lex with narrowed eyes and a frown on his forehead that just didn’t belong at all.

Lex jumped at the sound of his voice, turning around and pointing a shaky finger at Vix as he backed up.

“Stay away from me you...you...monster,” he slurred, and Travis gripped his upper arm, anger seeping in.

“Watch your mouth,” he warned.

“You brought that thing here with you,” Lex said, shaking his head. “Do you know what he is? He could be a danger to us all. He could end us...”

Travis looked back at Vix. Tiny, pale, delicate, and waifish. In his blood red jumpsuit that had pockets, his braided hair looped around his fuzzy earmuffs, those light blue eyes confused.

A danger? Vix?

“You’re actually out of your mind,” Travis said, using the grip on Lex’s arm to set him upright and push him away. “You need to leave, you’re clearly drunk.”

“I’m not drunk, I know what I saw!” Lex screeched, drawing the attention of several more people standing nearby.

“You could have seen dragons with how much you’ve had to drink, Lex,” Travis said, rolling his eyes. “Go to bed.”

“Not dragons, aliens!” Lex shouted.

Vix appeared shocked, face probably matching Travis’s perfectly.

“What?” Vix asked and Travis watched as he took a step closer to Lex.

“Aliens,” Travis repeated, holding Lex by the shoulder. He was certain now that he had to have been spying on them when they went stargazing. Where else would aliens have come from? “Wow, okay, way to take an inside joke and twist it. Let’s find your current sponsor and have him escort you to your room.”

“Don’t talk to me like that.” Lex shrugged his hand off and glared at Vix. “It’s not a joke! I know what I saw. I was in the bathroom when he was there!”

“You need to quit stalking people. I’m this close to calling the police, Lex, I mean it,” Travis said, standing between Lex and Vix to stop his ex from doing anything stupid. Well, stupider than what he was currently doing.

Which was accusing Travis’s date of being an alien. Quirky? Sure. But an alien?

Lex ignored his remark. “I was in the bathroom when he came in. I was about to walk out when I saw him fixing his dress.”

“It’s a jumpsuit,” Vix said, but there was something strange in his voice. Travis couldn’t put a finger on it.

“It’s camouflage!” Lex said, jabbing another accusing finger at him. “Designed to hide the fact that you have something glowy growing on your chest. Like a freak! An alien freak!”

And out of anything he could have said, that was the last thing Travis expected would make Vix lose his cool.

But he grabbed the glass out of Travis’s hand and flung the melted ice and the last drops of his bourbon right into Lex’s face.

“You need to learn how to shut your mouth,” Vix said.

Travis stared at him, stunned by the outburst that sounded nothing like the usual carefree nature Vix had about him. He figured it was understandable. He was being accused of being an alien, and as crazy as it was, and as sure as Travis was that nobody around them would believe it, Vix had every right to be insulted.

“SEE!!” Lex screeched. “He just attacked me. Everyone saw it. He’s dangerous!”

“It’s a drink to your face, Lex,” Travis said. “Not your first and I doubt it’ll be your last.”

“How ’bout them apples,” Vix said, nose high in the air as the droplets of Travis’s expensive bourbon trailed down Lex’s face.

Lex looked enraged.

His entire body tensed and then he balled his fingers into fists next to his hips.

He looked ready to...

Yup. There he went. Shit!

Travis jumped back, snagging Vix around the waist and spinning him out of the way as Lex charged him like an enraged bull. Vix squealed and kicked his feet, clearly enjoying himself despite almost being mauled by Travis’s insane ex.

“Someone get him under control!” Travis said to nobody in particular, swishing Vix left and right in his arms as he dodged Lex’s attempts to get to him. He was relentless.

“Just take his top off and you’ll see,” Lex demanded, swinging for Vix once again.

“He will be taking my clothes off in private, you uncultured heathen,” Vix threw back from where he was hanging upside down over Travis’s shoulder.

“That’s it!” Travis said. “We’re leaving.”

He gripped a server’s hand to stop him as he walked by.

“Bring the vacuum to our room later,” he said. “And you...”

He turned to look at Lex, but found Kenneth standing there, looking all too disinterested in his own date causing so much ruckus.

“Deal with him!” Travis told Kenneth before striding out of the party, ignoring the looks they were getting from every direction possible.

Instead of putting Vix down, he opted to carry him all the way to their room. Vix was shockingly quiet for a change. It was unnerving.

Travis walked into their room and deposited Vix on their bed, holding his upper arms to check him over.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

“I am,” he said, nodding. “He didn’t get to me because you were holding me up so high.”

“Good.” Travis brushed his hand over Vix’s braids before turning around with his hands on his head. “I can’t believe him!”

“He was behaving very strangely,” Vix said, and Travis snorted.

“That’s putting it nicely,” he said. “Aliens, for fuck’s sake. He drank enough to start believing in conspiracies.”

He turned to Vix, looking for affirmation and agreement, and found him twisting his fingers in his braids and biting his lower lip.

“Well, you know...is that so crazy?” Vix asked, big blue eyes looking up into Travis’s face.

Travis frowned, lowering his arms.

“He accused you of being an extraterrestrial,” Travis repeated, slowly, to make sure the words sank in.

But they didn’t seem to.

“I know,” Vix said. “Is that so bad?”

Travis stared some more.

“What?”

“You seem angry, and insulted,” Vix said, “because he called me an extraterrestrial. Why is that such a bad thing?”

“To be an alien?” Travis asked.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re quite lovely when you get to know us, and it’s not at all a rude thing to say to someone.”

Time froze for a second.

Travis stared at Vix once again, and it felt like he was seeing him for the very first time. Taking in all the little things about him that set him apart from everyone else he had ever met. The silver-white hair falling like liquid down to his knees, the large pale blue eyes he’d never seen the likes of. His small, slender stature that made him look fragile, and the way everything around him seemed to fascinate him.

The weird mannerisms and speech patterns flashed through his head, and the countless times Vix had referred to everyone around them as humans, and said he wasn't from Earth.

Travis had chalked it all up to general weirdness, he'd found it amusing for the most part.

But...

"So, you really are an alien."

Travis dropped down onto the edge of their bed, mind completely blank and the world shifting right before his eyes.

Vix got up to stand in front of him, the dark red of his outfit coloring Travis's vision.

"I think my understanding of humans has gotten better and I deduce this comes as a shock to you," Vix said finally.

Travis looked up into his face.

"Shock? Vix, you're an alien," he said, voice embarrassingly shaky.

"I'm aware. And I did mention this to you. Several times," Vix said, and okay, he had said it. Multiple times since the moment they met.

But...

"I just thought you were a psycho!" Travis said, voice going high-pitched as he threw his hands up in the air.

"Lumians can't predict the future," Vix said.

"Psycho, not psychic."

Vix tilted his head. “I am not familiar with the term ‘psycho.’”

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head. “Alien...”

“Yes,” Vix said. “Lumian. As I mentioned previously.”

“And where would that be?” he asked, because clearly he now believed in aliens, had brought one as his fake date to a company holiday retreat, and then gone ahead and kissed him.

What the fuck was his life?

“Tuxom, as I told you. It’s the galaxy adjacent to the Milky Way,” Vix said. “We’re a small, peaceful species.”

Travis’s head was spinning. Both from the realization that aliens were real and the notion that it actually made perfect sense because now he knew...Vix very clearly wasn’t of his world. Every quirk of his that stumped Travis finally made sense.

“And why are you here?” Travis asked.

“Research expedition,” Vix said. “I’m the Observer for my planet, as I explained to you. My job is to learn as much as possible about Earth as it’s a planet that can sustain Lumian life. If anything should ever happen to Lumia...”

“You’re gonna invade?” Travis asked, panicked.

Vix gasped. “Oh my word, what a preposterous idea, dude. We don’t invade. It’s unbecoming. And messy. We don’t like it.”

“Then what?” Travis asked, trying to wrap his head around it all.

“The idea is to know enough about humans to be able to pass as humans and blend in here. Live here and share your world with you,” Vix said. “Just to add...Lumia isn’t in any danger that we know of. So this is all just hypothetical. So we can be ready.”

“Right,” Travis said faintly. “So you have to learn everything?”

“Not just me,” Vix said. “I am only one in a long line of Observers. We have compiled an admirable amount of data that should be beneficial to us in the worst-case scenario.”

“And what Lex was saying? About the heart?” Travis asked.

Vix drew his shoulders in protectively.

“He was right,” Vix said, big eyes growing impossibly wider. “Lumians have a visible heart, right here.”

He placed his hand against the center of his chest.

“And it glows?” Travis asked, remembering seeing flashes of color.

Vix nodded shyly, playing with the end of his braid. “It does.”

“And the hair?” Travis asked, baffled that he was engaging with whatever was going on. Was he actually believing this nonsense?

But it made sense didn’t it?

“It’s a Lumian communication system,” Vix explained. “Each braid conveys a message. Other Lumians understand when they see them. We don’t have to use so many words to share our feelings.”

“What do your braids say now?” He hoped one of them meant they were joking about everything and he was just drunk and gullible at the moment.

Vix touched his braids one by one, gently, fingers soft and caring as he explained their meaning.

“This one means I’m looking forward to meeting everyone at the party,” he said, touching the braid at the crown of his head.

“This one here means I’m enjoying myself and am happy.” He touched the braid right next to it, toward his right ear.

“This one...means I like the person I’m with and am happy to have their company,” he murmured, touching the largest braid on the opposite side of his head.

Travis watched each move of his fingers, mind still reeling, but something was comforting about the fact that it was still Vix in front of him. Just as weird as he had been the entire time. Just as strange as the day they’d met.

And Travis liked him. He was happy to have his company too.

He was sure his brain would catch up to the alien thing and he’d spiral again, but...he found he still saw Vix as the same person he had been the whole trip. A crazy little thing who made his day brighter.

He stood up and bridged the gap between them, touching an unbraided strand of hair underneath the heavy braids.

“You missed a spot,” he whispered.

“I left that on purpose,” Vix said, glancing at him from under his lashes. “For...for you.”

“Me?”

“I... We said we'd engage in sexual activities,” Vix said. “You...you braid that for me, in that case.”

“Never braided anyone's hair,” he said.

“I can show you,” Vix said. “If you want me to.”

And that question, more than anything, made Travis pause.

Did he?

Chapter 14

Travis

Vix was standing in front of him, the unbraided strand of his hair falling over his shoulder and wrapping around Travis's fingers messily.

His eyes were wide as he looked up into Travis's, innocent and so full of wonder Travis had no idea how just one brush with Earth hadn't robbed him of all of that. How he managed to keep the purity and that childlike curiosity about everything he saw.

It was intoxicating to see it. To be a part of it. And now Vix was giving Travis an in to take bits of it for himself.

He shouldn't. He knew that. But he wanted. And Vix was giving it freely.

"Show me," he whispered.

Vix gasped, amazement coloring his features as he gripped Travis's fingers between his own.

"Let me guide you," Vix said. "It's a simple braid. The fact that a lover is braiding it gives it weight."

Travis swallowed against the lump in his throat, relaxing his fingers in Vix's hold and giving him control. "Okay."

"You'll separate the hair into three equal strands," Vix instructed, separating the first one to show Travis, then just hovering with his hands above Travis's as he clumsily repeated the simple step on his own.

It felt so foreign to him, but so right at the same time. Vix's hair was like silk under his rough touch.

"Good," Vix said once three strands of hair hung over Travis's palms. "Next, you will start braiding. Take the strand on the left..."

Travis did as instructed, careful not to tug too hard, not to hurt Vix in any way.

"You will bring that strand up and over the middle one so they trade places," Vix explained, guiding Travis's hands with his own again. "And then you will do the same with the strand on the right."

Travis did as told once again and something resembling a little knot formed at the top of the strands.

"And now you will continue doing so," Vix said, slightly breathless. "Bringing the left and right pieces over the middle one so they trade places until the hair is braided all the way down."

"I think I'll still need some help with it."

"I am here, Travis," he said, and it sounded charged. Like it had very little to do with hair and braiding and everything to

do with the fact the two of them were alone in their hotel room, about to do something that might change them both for good.

Travis nodded and looked back down at the hair in his hands. He took the left piece and brought it over the middle. Then the right one. Left again, right again. Vix kept his shaking hands above Travis's the entire time, shadowing his movements but never interrupting or taking over.

The braid was coming out looking somewhat like a braid. It wasn't even. Some places were tighter than others, some places were lopsided and strange looking. It didn't really live up to the braids Vix did for himself. The uniform, perfect, ornate ones he'd had on his head every single day since Travis first saw him.

But Vix didn't stop him. Not once. He watched him, breath catching occasionally and body swaying toward Travis when he'd accidentally tug a little harder.

He allowed the mess to happen.

He allowed the unevenness and disarray.

He allowed Travis to braid it to the best of his abilities and Travis had had no idea such a simple act could mean so much. Could feel so big.

He reached the end of Vix's braid sooner than he would have liked. The silk under his fingers tapered off into a pointy end Vix helped him tie together.

Vix let the braid hang over his shoulder and down the middle of his chest.

“It’s not as pretty as the ones you do,” Travis said, and Vix shook his head.

“I believe it to be perfect,” he said, running his fingers over his braid, and Travis felt it as though he was doing it to his naked skin.

The shiver started at the back of his neck and rushed down his chest, pooling between his legs and making everything feel charged. He let out an involuntary moan. “I can...”

“Feel it?” Vix asked, eyes half-lidded and knowing.

Travis nodded, frowning in confusion.

“A lover’s hands on our hair triggers a pheromone release. It creates a temporary bond,” Vix said, smiling. “I’ll feel you touching my hair, and you will feel it too. Pleasure.”

“I...” Travis started, but stopped when Vix reached up and around his neck, tugging at the silk ties of his jumpsuit until they hung around his pale arms. He held them at the base of his neck, looking up at Travis.

“The braid is done now, and it is to my liking,” Vix said. “You are allowed to see me now.”

“See you...”

Vix let go of the ties and the slinky fabric slithered down his chest to hang over his hips, revealing his naked chest.

Travis thought he might faint at the sight.

The center of Vix's chest was transparent like it was made of glass. It showed to the inside of him, the core of who he was, his heart like a gem beneath the see-through skin. Shining dark pink and bright. Casting a glow around Vix like a lantern, bathing them both in warmth.

The light reflected on Travis's face and danced on his skin with every breath Vix took. Tiny little hops of glow, of the most beautiful light Travis had ever seen.

Deep down he knew all of it should have freaked him out, like it had Lex, but nothing could have stopped him from reaching out.

"Can I?" he whispered shakily, and Vix nodded, meeting Travis's hand in the middle, wrapping his fingers around it and bringing it to his chest. He let the tips of Travis's fingers brush against the translucent skin and Travis shivered at the sensation.

He expected it to feel like glass, to be cool and hard just like a display case for a rare, precious gem it held inside.

Instead it was pliable and warm. It had give. And it made the moment even more special because it was so vulnerable. Vix was so vulnerable, allowing Travis to touch him there.

Travis knew he'd do anything in his power to keep Vix safe as long as he was with him.

He reached farther and splayed his entire palm over the center of Vix's chest. The glow burst between his fingers and

made his own skin shine. Like he himself was magical just because he was near Vix.

He could barely believe what was going on. And he didn't have the time to process it properly because Vix brought the braid Travis had done and wrapped it around Travis's wrist. He tied it together like a bracelet around his hand and Travis looked up at him in question.

"We are to join bodies now," Vix said, and Travis about lost his mind. "Lumians...they keep themselves connected using their hair in the process. If you will allow that..."

If...

"I'll allow anything you want," Travis said, too fucking eager. Vix smiled, letting go of the knot he'd made in his braid and trailing both of his hands up Travis's arms until he was holding him around the neck.

"Could you kiss me again?" Vix asked, and Travis didn't need to be asked twice.

Careful not to tug, he brought his tied hand down and around Vix's waist, pulling him in until that mesmerizing glow was trapped against Travis's chest.

He lowered his head and claimed Vix's lips gently, wanting to give him the best possible experience he could.

He parted Vix's lips with his own, coaxing his tongue out to suck on it, tasting the sweetness of the fruit and chocolate Vix had eaten for dinner. Vix responded eagerly, like he did

everything else. A little clumsy, a little too enthusiastic, but Travis couldn't bring himself to care when it felt so good.

A soft sound tickled his ears and he focused on it, realizing it was coming from Vix. Not a moan. Not quite a hum or a purr either. He didn't think he had ever heard anything like it before.

He broke the kiss to look down at Vix in question. "Was that you?"

Vix nodded, keeping his eyes glued to Travis's lips like a man possessed.

"Trill," Vix said. "It's a sound Lumians produce to express things that are hard to put into words or into braids."

"Is it a good sound?" Travis asked, and Vix smiled at him.

"It is a very good sound," he said, hopping up to kiss Travis again, almost knocking him off balance with the force of it.

Travis caught him easily. Vix was so scarily small in his arms. He nudged him to wrap his legs around Travis's waist and carried him to the armchair next to their bed. He sat down and placed Vix on his lap, their chests and lips still glued together. That soft little sound still danced in the air around them.

Vix was an alien, Travis's brain decided to remind him.

How would it even work between them? Their anatomy seemed to be similar enough, but the glowing heart in the middle of Vix's chest and the magical sex hair told him they obviously weren't completely the same.

How would they...

“You are thinking very loudly, Travis,” Vix said, cupping Travis’s cheeks and squishing them as he looked into his eyes.

“I’m just wondering...”

“Yes?”

“Are we compatible?” he asked and Vix frowned, tilting his head. Travis moved his hands a little lower, toward Vix’s pelvis. “Physically, I mean?”

Vix’s eyes widened.

“Oh,” he said, nodding. “From what I have observed I do not believe penetration will be possible.”

“Right,” Travis said, quite stupidly if he did say so himself.

“Lumians reproduce by inserting a very thin long organ into the body of the childbearing partner,” Vix explained. “The hole we have for that is very small. I do not think your penis would fit.”

He was so open about it. So matter-of-fact. Travis had no idea how to react to it. Even in the most casual relationships he’d had, there had been a level of awkwardness when talking about sex and intimate things. Not with Vix, though. No.

He just...said things.

“What do we do then?” Travis asked, and Vix scooted closer on his lap, their hips glued together, Travis harder than he had ever been in his life, even though he had no idea what to expect. Maybe *because* he had no idea.

“There are any number of things Lumians find pleasurable,” Vix said, stroking his hair again for emphasis. Travis bucked his hips. “And just as many things we know how to do that humans would find pleasurable as well.”

Travis gripped Vix’s hips in his hands and pulled him close to brush against the hard cock trapped beneath the suit pants he still had on. “Really?”

“Mhm,” Vix said, the trill getting slightly louder at the contact. “I do have to admit I have never tried any of them. But I am appropriately informed on the theory.”

“Theory is important.” Travis groaned, rubbing against Vix and gripping him harder.

“I agree,” Vix said, voice stacking on top of that trill still echoing around them.

Travis was on board even if the plan was beaming him up and probing his ass to within an inch of its life. In fact, that sounded fucking awesome.

“I want to see all of you,” Travis said, tugging at the waist of Vix’s jumpsuit frantically. Their position wouldn’t allow him to take it off completely and it was frustrating. Travis wanted it gone.

Vix, bless him, clearly wanted to give Travis everything he asked for, because he stood up, his braid still attached to Travis’s wrist, and undid the few small buttons that held the jumpsuit on his hips.

The satin slipped down to the floor, leaving Vix bare in front of Travis.

And he was a vision.

Everything about him felt both completely familiar and completely foreign. Similar enough to humans for Travis to recognize all parts of him, but different enough for him to want to explore.

A deep, hidden voice in the back of his mind told him that maybe he should be more weirded out, but all he felt was overwhelming arousal and want.

Vix was small, he knew that already. His body was shorter and slimmer than Travis's by a lot. His skin was so pale, almost silver, and looked like it was glowing in the dimly lit hotel room. His gorgeous, complicated, all-important hair trailed down his naked back, over his shoulders and his chest, brushing his naked hips and the backs of his thin thighs, ending just below his knees.

His chest, and that mesmerizing heart of his, glowed dark pink between them, making it all look warmer, more intimate. And then finally, Travis looked down.

Between his legs. He was smooth there. Just as pale. Travis found himself thinking it suited him. The long, thin organ Vix had wasn't hard. But it wasn't hanging either. It looked as if it had a life of its own. Movement independent of the rest of Vix's body. Like a tendril—soft and fragile. It was quite a few times longer than an average human cock and several times thinner. About the thickness of a pencil.

“Wow,” Travis said.

“Do you find me pleasing?” Vix asked shyly, and Travis scooted forward to sit at the edge of the armchair, his knees brushing Vix’s thighs.

“You look gorgeous, Vix,” Travis said. “Can I...can I touch?”

“I believe that would feel good to me,” Vix said, and Travis reached out, starting at his shoulders.

He ran his fingers over the soft skin there, down Vix’s chest, over that glow and his lower stomach, where a human would have a belly button but Vix had just a smooth expanse of skin.

He reached Vix’s hips and cupped them in his wide palms, imagining holding on to them as he rubbed Vix all over his body. His brain was running away from him with the images and the ideas of what he could do to Vix to bring them both pleasure.

The sexually adventurous creature that had just been awoken inside of him marveled at the fact that he got to learn with Vix. Learn about him and the ways to satisfy them both. But he was also excited to try something new himself. To experience something he was sure very few humans had the chance to do.

He released Vix’s hip and brought his hand to the core of him, running a finger over his cock, gasping at how silky it felt. It trembled when touched, swayed and coiled around Travis’s fingers, making him overheat.

“Vix...” he said when it wrapped around his index finger and mimicked the lewd actions Travis wanted to do with Vix.

“I desire you, Travis,” Vix said, breathing heavily, head lolling in pleasure. “Can you take your clothes off as well? I want to see you. All of you.”

Travis nodded, reluctant to let go, but desperate to get to the delicious parts Vix’s body promised. He stood and shed his clothes faster than he ever had, his shirt tangling in Vix’s braid.

“Let me...” Vix reached to untie it, but Travis stopped him before he could.

“No,” he said, refusing to be disconnected from him.

He had no idea why, but it felt important to stay tied in Vix’s hair. He grabbed his shirt and tugged at it until the sleeve ripped and fell off him, leaving him bare in front of Vix.

And Vix was looking.

His eyes scanning Travis from head to toe as his heart glowed more intensely.

“You are the most beautiful thing I have seen on this planet,” Vix whispered, and Travis wanted to bang his fists against his chest.

He knew he was a reasonably attractive man, but something about being seen as such by Vix felt intoxicating.

“Thank you,” he said.

Vix looked down. “It is very stiff,” he said, reaching out and running pale fingers over Travis’s cock.

The touch was innocent, curious and barely there, but Travis could swear nothing had ever felt better than that. He had to fight not to fuck into that tiny bit of friction.

“I do regret that I won’t be taking it inside me,” Vix said, unashamed as always. “I would have liked to know what that feels like with you.”

“Are you...” Travis tried to talk over the moans threatening to spill as Vix kept touching him, exploring, cupping his balls and tugging at the hair around them. “Are you sure we can’t do that?”

Vix looked up and in a swift motion turned his back to Travis. He reached a hand up and swept his hair out of the way, revealing his pale back and the barely visible swell of his ass. He let the hair fall over one shoulder and reached down, spreading his ass cheeks open.

Travis could barely hold himself together. Because there, in the very center of Vix, was the smallest opening Travis had ever seen. Just as silvery pale as the rest of Vix, smooth and fragile looking. Like a tiny dot on the otherwise unblemished expanse of skin.

“I do not think you would fit inside,” Vix said, and Travis found himself dropping to his knees.

“My cock, probably not,” he said, covering Vix’s hands with his own to keep him open. “But I do need to taste you.”

“Taste?” Vix asked in shock, but Travis couldn’t hold himself back any longer.

He dove in like a man starving.

Vix’s cheeks framed his face, and he knew his beard was making his skin red, but he didn’t care. His tongue slipped out to catch the edge of that tiny hole, and Vix’s trill got so loud Travis was sure everyone staying at the hotel would hear them.

He felt Vix’s hands slip from beneath his and he placed them at the back of Travis’s head, pulling him closer. His hips were moving underneath Travis’s tongue, hands keeping him in place, and while he usually loved being in control, Travis felt himself succumbing to whatever Vix wanted.

“Travis,” Vix said shakily, knees buckling as he did his best to fuck himself back onto Travis’s face. “Oh, that feels incredible.”

“Happy you like it.” Travis emerged from between his cheeks to answer, using his fingers to tease at Vix’s hole while he kissed his lower back, thighs, and hips.

“More,” Vix said, pushing his ass back. “Please, more.”

“I’ll give you more,” Travis said. “But I want to see where else I can touch to make you react that way.”

He used his hands to turn Vix back around and found himself a breath away from Vix’s cock. And that was an opportunity he couldn’t miss out on.

He kissed his hip first. Licked the crease between his hip and thigh. Gripped his ass to pull him closer.

“Are you going to be tasting that too?” Vix asked, looking down at him, eyes wide and lips parted.

“If you don’t mind?” Travis winked, and Vix shook his head instantly.

“No minding here,” he said and Travis smiled, trying to figure out how exactly one gave a blowjob to an alien.

He opted to not think too much. That seemed to be the best choice. He leaned in and kissed the root of Vix’s penis, right where it met his pelvis. It twitched, swished closer, ran over Travis’s lips, and he stuck his tongue out.

Vix’s organ wrapped around it, and for a second it looked like it was tied around his tongue. It was a surreal feeling. It tasted clean and fresh, sweet almost. It felt like kissing someone, except not with their mouths. It was the strangest, most erotic thing Travis had ever experienced.

Vix was doubled over him, fingers dug into his hair as he pulled at him, shivered above him. Trilled louder. He kept calling out for Travis. Pleading for more. Then asked for him to stop only to hold him closer and not let him move away.

Travis kept his hold on Vix, kept his tongue tangled with Vix’s cock as he pulled him forward, sitting back in the armchair, Vix between his knees. His cock unwrapped from Travis’s tongue and slithered inside his mouth, touching the backs of his teeth, the roof of his mouth, the root of his tongue. Travis wanted to choke on it. He didn’t think he’d ever felt more like a slut for someone or something than he did for Vix.

“Travis...” Vix called, and Travis pulled his head back, his cock falling from between his lips.

“Yes?” Travis asked, voice fucked rough.

Vix panted above him, flushed pink and purple. “I...I want to make you feel good as well. I’d like to bring you pleasure too.”

“You are,” Travis said, squeezing his ass and feeling his own cock pulse. “I am feeling very happy right now.”

“But I want to touch,” Vix said, a little pouty. “And I want to taste too. I want to do things to you. I have read a lot of Lumian diaries and scripts. I know things.”

“And you want to show me those things?” Travis asked, excitement building beyond anything he’d ever felt. He was going to get addicted to this. He already knew it.

Vix ran a hand down the braid that connected them, the sensation settling in Travis’s balls and making his eyes roll back. “Very much so.”

“Well, I’m all yours then.” Travis leaned back in the armchair and splayed his arms out, leaving himself open for Vix to do as he pleased. “Show me Lumian things.”

“Will you let me know if I do something that displeases you?” Vix asked, slinking closer.

“I promise I’ll let you know,” he said, eating him up with his eyes. Vix smiled, closing the distance until his knees were touching the insides of Travis’s open thighs.

“In that case,” Vix murmured. “I’d like to start.”

He was expecting Vix to straddle him, to kiss him, wrap his hands around him.

He got none of that.

Vix took one of his free braids and brought it forward, wrapping it around Travis’s neck and tying it. It was tight enough for Travis to feel it. Tight enough to have to work for each swallow. But not uncomfortable at all.

He took two more braids and with some help from Travis, looped them under his arms, over his shoulders and then tied them at his chest, creating a beautiful knot at the center of his sternum.

The ropes of Vix’s hair felt like fire on his naked skin. He felt tingles coming from them, like tiny electric zaps that entered his body and traveled through his nerves until they lit his insides on fire.

He could get off like this. Those braids rubbing against his nipples and sending jolts of pleasure directly to his dick. The pressure against his neck offering a darker enticement.

Another braid went around his waist, beautifully silver against his dark chest hair. Vix used two more to tie around his thighs, securing the ends of them under the one wrapped around his waist.

Travis knew there was a name for a human kink that used ropes to create beautiful patterns on other people, but seeing it

on himself, done with Vix's hair, just for their own eyes, felt surreal.

“Are you with me, Travis?” Vix asked, clearly finished with his handiwork on Travis's body.

“I am, yeah,” Travis said, swallowing hard when Vix knelt between his legs.

Most of his braids were now wrapped around Travis, connecting them in a way Travis had never been connected to anyone before.

Like he was owned by Vix. Branded by him.

“Lumians tie their lovers in their hair,” Vix said, running his fingers over the knots and ropes of his braids on Travis almost possessively. Each stroke sent more frissons of pleasure through him, making him grind his hips to chase it.

“Fuck, it feels...” Travis said, unable to articulate it.

“It feels incredible for me as well,” Vix murmured, stroking over him some more like he couldn't help it, his little body writhing. “I never thought I'd wrap my hair around someone.”

“Why not?” Travis asked, gasping as another wave of pleasure rolled over him.

“I am slightly odd, even among Lumians,” Vix said, pausing his movements to stare sheepishly at him. “Not a lot of others see me as a romantic prospect.”

“They're blind then,” Travis said, heated and honest.

Vix frowned. “Their eyesight is perfectly in order.”

“It’s an expression.” Travis chuckled. “It means I can’t believe they don’t see you as a romantic prospect because you’re gorgeous.”

“Ah,” Vix said blinking, the glow from his heart flaring stronger at the words. “Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Travis said, rocking his hips again. “But, uh, we might wanna hurry this up before it’s over too quickly. Just a warning.”

Vix looked down at his red, straining cock leaking all over and nodded.

“This is the part I have read about extensively,” Vix said. “It feels good for Lumians. I do hope it will feel just as good for you.”

“I’m sure it will,” Travis said hurriedly. He was already in a state of euphoria. He didn’t know what could feel better than this.

Vix nodded, biting his lip as he took the last two braids that weren’t already wrapped around Travis.

He lowered his head until his face was so close to Travis’s cock he thought he’d combust. One wrong breath could have him coming all over that pretty face.

Vix used one hand to grip the base of Travis’s cock, keeping it upright so the tip of it brushed over his lips.

He used his other hand to take one braid just below his ear, and wrap it around Travis’s cock, starting at the base and working his way up to the tip until it was completely obscured

from sight. He did the same thing with the last loose braid, using it to fill any remaining gaps.

Travis groaned, long and loud, throwing his arms up to grip the back of the headrest tightly. He didn't think anything had ever felt softer or smoother on his cock than Vix's hair did.

"I will be holding my hands around it, and you can thrust into it, like you would into a human lover," Vix said, and Travis snapped his eyes shut, hand flying down to squeeze the base of his cock.

"Fuck," he cursed, trying so hard not to come.

"Exactly," Vix said, doing what he said he would and wrapping both of his small hands around the braids on Travis's cock. "You can start whenever you feel like it."

"Start..." Travis repeated dumbly, unable to see straight.

"Fucking," Vix said, and god, there was nothing Travis could do to stop himself anymore. The last bits of his self-control flew out the window and he bucked his hips up, cock sliding in and out of the tube formed by Vix's hair.

He'd made a Fleshlight out of his fucking hair.

"Vix." He moaned when he felt lips at the tip of his cock, the only part of it still uncovered.

"You said I could taste too," Vix said, voice demanding, and Travis nodded, hips still working himself against the silky hair and those sinful lips.

“You can,” Travis said. “God, of course you can, but I want you to feel pleasure too.”

“I am,” Vix said and sure enough, the trill was still hanging in the air around them. Constant and vibrating against their skin, making the hair on Travis’s body stand up. “The feeling of you inside my hair is the greatest pleasure I could have ever imagined.”

“How...” Travis threw his head back and bowed his spine as he edged himself closer and closer to the climax.

“We’re connected, remember?” Vix whispered, tightening his hands around Travis’s cock, making the slide through his hair harder, giving him more friction.

“Can you come like this?” Travis asked, because he was so close it was painful.

“I can reach completion just like this,” Vix said, every word brushing his mouth over the tip of Travis’s cock.

He was gone. He was completely gone.

The words got stuck in his throat, his hands gripping the braids running from his body to Vix’s head. Vix gasped, the sound broken and delighted.

Travis’s hips were pushing in and out of the tightness of Vix’s braids and hands, the tip of him touching Vix’s lips over and over and over again. Vix’s heart glowed between them, and the trill got louder and louder until each of Travis’s senses was filled to the brim with Vix.

Gone.

Travis spilled over Vix's lips, drops of cum running down and getting soaked up by the braids.

The touch of his cum on Vix's hair had Vix stiffening, and Travis watched in fascination as his thin cock trembled, almost like it was vibrating. The glow of his heart flashed blood red for a split second, and the trill died on his lips, leaving them in complete silence as tiny drops of clear liquid dripped down Vix's cock.

Travis reached out to collect some, licking it off his fingers and moaning at the sweet taste. Vix was doing the same, licking Travis's cum off his swollen lips.

Travis wrapped his arms around Vix and pulled him up into his lap. The little alien went willingly, pliant and relaxed as Travis folded him into his arms among all the twisted braids. Travis kissed his forehead, his neck and his shoulders, careful not to tug at the points where they were still connected.

They untied the braids together, letting them pool over their bodies as they caught their breaths, still cuddled in the armchair.

"That was..." Travis started, but he had no idea what to say about what had just happened. He didn't remember the last time he'd come so hard.

"It was," Vix said tiredly, face buried in Travis's neck. "I am very tired now."

"Let's get you to bed." Travis stood up, scooping Vix into his arms and tucking them both into their large bed.

“Good thing PH-1L wasn’t here. He’d have had to see all of that,” Vix mumbled, and Travis chuckled, pulling him closer into his arms.

“He’d survive, I think. Sleep.”

“Lumians don’t sleep,” Vix said.

Travis frowned. “No?”

Vix shook his head. “But we do rest.”

“Rest then.” Travis stroked the braid he’d made for him. “We can talk more in the morning.”

“Did I please you?” Vix asked, blue eyes blinking at him, and Travis pecked his lips.

“More than you know, little Lumian,” Travis said. “More than you know.”

He fell asleep holding Vix close. Mind shifting through a litany of possibilities.

He woke to an empty bed.

Vix was gone.

Chapter 15

Travis

Overall, Travis felt like he was doing okay in the wake of Vix leaving his life just as abruptly as he'd entered it.

He'd allowed himself the confusion, the questioning, and the wondering while he packed his bags to head back home. He'd given himself a few hours, asked for a late checkout and just sat on the edge of his bed. Convincing himself he wasn't waiting for Vix to come back. Reading the note Vix left for him: an observation that was all about him but not why he'd gone. Trying and failing to make the words of admiration make him feel better and not like he wanted to scoop his insides out. Lying to himself that he wasn't jumping at every ding of the elevator coming down the quiet hallway.

After a couple of hours he gave that train of thought up and tried to argue with his mind that it was for the best Vix was gone. Travis wouldn't have to figure out how to end their arrangement once they were back. He wouldn't have to claim he was busy to make Vix realize he had to leave his home and

go wherever his own was. He wouldn't have to make it awkward or withstand any awkwardness.

Vix was gone. And Travis had to go home.

He made up a quick story he'd give any stragglers he encountered from his company on his way to the car, and picked up his luggage.

He rolled it toward the door, almost out in the hallway when his eyes caught on his vacuum cleaner, set neatly against the wall. Someone must have delivered it while he was showering. It was wrapped in tinsel and piled high with baubles and bows. The bow tie Vix had put on it for the party was still there too.

He had half a mind to just leave it. Get himself a new one. But something wouldn't let him close the door on it. Something wouldn't let him leave without it.

Propping the door open with his suitcase, he walked inside, swept the loose decorations off it as best as he could, and rolled the vacuum cleaner after him, a strand of tinsel rustling along the hallway carpet.

He checked out in record time, power walking to his car, grateful nobody else was around to see him.

“Travis!”

Except the person who always showed up like a bad penny.

Travis paused, glancing over his shoulder at a disheveled Lex. It was the worst he'd ever seen him look, a little gaunt and pale, dark circles under his eyes. His clothes were wrinkled and he had a designer suitcase by his feet. No

Kenneth in sight. Travis wondered if the guy had booked it out of there as fast as he could after everything that had gone down. It would be his style.

“What is it now, Lex?” Travis sighed.

Lex bit his lip, scanning around. “Where’s Vix?”

“What’s it to you?” Travis asked. “Got any more insane accusations to throw his way? Is he a leprechaun now as well?”

“I was drunk,” Lex said, cheeks coloring.

“Yeah, no shit,” he said, playing it up.

“Listen...about last night...what I was saying...what I thought I saw...” Lex said. Travis kept his lips shut, having no idea how to respond. “Can we just forget it?”

Travis raised a brow in surprise that Lex wasn’t pushing it.

“You want me to forget you went full psycho and accused someone of being an alien?” Travis asked, testing the waters by baiting Lex.

He watched Lex bristle like an angry cat. He couldn’t keep the calm facade for long. He never could.

“Like I said, I had too much to drink, and I don’t want it getting around that I’m an insane person,” Lex said.

“Yeah, god forbid people actually know the truth about you,” Travis bit back.

“I have a reputation, you know.”

“And it’s a stellar one. I wouldn’t dream of ruining it for you,” Travis said, rolling his eyes and turning away.

“And tell Vix too!” Lex threw after him, and Travis stiffened.

“Vix is gone, but I can assure you he gives as much of a shit about you as I do. Just leave us alone, Lex,” he said, and got into his car.

The trip back home was...uneventful. That was the best way he could describe it. The songs crooned on with zero commentary on them, the breaks Travis took went by with nothing weird bought, and before he knew it, he was parking his car in front of his house.

His driveway had been kept clean by his lovely neighbor, and Travis made a mental note to thank him the next day with some donuts from the café.

The café where he’d met Vix.

He paused at the thought before shaking his head and hopping over the few steps to his front door.

He unlocked it, toeing off his shoes and wheeling his suitcase and vacuum inside. He switched the light on.

Froze in place.

Then switched it off again.

Then on again.

It felt right.

The gentle *click* of the switch going on and off sounded comforting.

He walked down the hallway, stuffing the still partially decorated vacuum into the storage closet and his suitcase inside his bedroom.

He needed a shower and some food, but he didn't feel like doing any of it.

He just stripped down to his boxers and slid under his thick covers. No cold feet against his calves, no hair lying across his chest, no glow from Vix's chest.

No Vix.

It was for the best, Travis thought as sleep took him under.

He woke up exhausted. His dreams had been plagued by thin fingers, clumsy kisses, and silver hair painting patterns on Travis's skin.

He could feel the ropes of it around his wrists, knotted around his throat, tied to his waist. It was everywhere.

He showered in cold water, hoping it would wake him up enough to function. He declined several calls from his mother and Lex while trying to shovel down some breakfast.

Since he'd run his fridge and pantry down in time for his trip, all he had was some toast and jam left. He couldn't stop thinking that Vix would probably like the sweetness of it.

He made himself a coffee, black, to avoid thinking of him, but with each sip, Vix's disgusted little face flashed before his

eyes. Nose scrunched, eyes narrowed, betrayed look trained on Travis.

He poured the rest of his drink into the sink.

Tried to set the mug on his counter.

Missed.

And watched as if in slow motion as it shattered against the tiles.

Blue shards against white ceramic. Vix would probably like it.

He bit his lip and stepped over the shards to get the vacuum. He rolled it out, turned it on, and watched as it swallowed the silver and red tinsel that still hung from it. It glimmered and rustled as it disappeared and something in Travis cracked.

Vix was gone.

Travis had no way of reaching him.

No way of checking whether he was safe. If he was coming back. If Travis would ever see him again.

He was gone and it seemed like every stupid thing Travis tried to do reminded him of him.

He left the broken mug where it was, gripped PH-1L's handle, and walked out of his house, driving to the first open bar he could find.

He planted himself on one of the barstools, positioned the vacuum beneath his feet, and ordered a bourbon. Then another one. And another. And then he lost count.

He had no idea how much time had passed. And he wasn't sure he cared.

"Whatever answers you're looking for, I doubt you'll find them under the bar," a voice broke through his haze as Henry sat next to Travis on one of the bar stools, nudging him on the shoulder.

"M'not under the bar. PH-1L is," Travis mumbled, but even he had to admit he was clinging to his stool with the last of his strength. He was very close to being under it.

"Not yet," Henry said, flagging down the bartender. "I'll have a whiskey on the rocks. And some cold water for my sponge friend over here, please."

"No worries," the bartender said. "Been giving him soda for the last hour at least."

"Hey!" Travis tried peeling his head off the bar top but found it very difficult for some reason.

"Hey yourself, bud," the bartender said, turning back to Henry. "I'll have your order right out."

"Thank you." Henry rested his elbow on the bar, propping his head against his hand. He was sitting sideways, and it looked like he was kinda...spinning?

Or was that just Travis?

Or the world?

Something was spinning, anyway.

“So...” Henry gestured at Travis’s slumped form. “What’s with all of this?”

“Having drinks,” Travis said, and Henry snorted.

“No, yeah, I can see that,” he said. “But you’re plastered, you have a vacuum cleaner with you, and it’s not even six.”

“Six of what?” Travis asked and Henry rolled his eyes.

“Of hours in the afternoon, Travis. Pull yourself together,” Henry said, and Travis hung his head again, letting the cool marble of the bar soothe his overheated skin.

“He left. One moment he was there being all...weird...and pretty, and then I woke up and he was gone.”

“Didn’t say goodbye?”

“No...” Travis heard himself whine before he could control himself. He had no clue what was happening to him. Alien magic of some sort. There was no other explanation for it.

Ever since he’d seen Vix, all he’d done was wonder what he had turned into.

“Typical Lumian. Flighty as shit, those,” Henry said, thanking the bartender who placed his drink in front of him and pushing a glass of water toward Travis. “Drink that.”

Travis wrapped his fingers around the cool glass, the condensation making it very hard to hold on to. It slipped a little, sloshing water onto the bar. The little droplets scattered over the dark surface, catching the light and glimmering in front of them.

“Like little stars...” Travis said, poking one of the drops with his finger until it was gone. “Gone. Like Vix. Into the stars...poof...”

“Okay,” Henry said, draining the whiskey in front of him and slamming the glass back down, “explain this to me. You broke up with Lex, got a promotion that made him want you back, and then in the span of, what? A week? You found an alien in the middle of a café, whom you then decided to ask to pretend to be your boyfriend for a company retreat, and then you went and fell in love with him.”

Travis stared at him, head spinning.

“That was a lot of words,” he said, turning them over in his mind.

Lex. Yes, they broke up.

Found Vix in the café. Yup.

Alien Vix. Very strange. Cute too. Pretty. So pretty...

Wait...

“You said alien!” Travis snapped his head up, blinking against the dark spots forming in front of his eyes. He swatted a hand in front of his face, trying to wave them away. Wasn’t working. “You said alien!”

“You’re very quick.” Henry shook his head.

Travis frowned. “I don’t think that was a compliment.”

Henry raised his eyebrows. “And that’s the first sane thought you’ve had since I got here.”

“But you said alien.” Travis tried to get the conversation back on track. “I heard you, you said alien.”

“I did, Travis, yes,” Henry said. “That’s what Vix is. He’s Lumian.”

“I know that,” Travis said, the shock of it all making him see clearer somehow. “But how do you know? Did Vix tell you too?”

“Vix told everyone who wanted to listen.” Henry rolled his eyes. “It’s a good thing humans usually don’t believe stuff like that.”

“Humans...” Travis echoed him, something about the way Henry said it sounding awfully familiar. He tried focusing on the why. Tried figuring out where he’d heard it before.

“You’re gonna pull something, thinking that hard,” Henry drawled. “Let me help. I’m Talurian.”

“Is that in Europe?” Travis asked, and Henry snorted.

“Stars, you’re hammered,” he said. “It’s in space. Halfway between Vix’s home planet and yours.”

Travis almost did fall off his stool at that.

“You’re an alien?” he asked, his voice carrying in the still mostly empty bar.

The bartender turned her head, raising her eyebrow at them, and Henry shook his head.

“This will take a while to leave his system,” he said, and she nodded in understanding, looking at Travis with pity before

turning back to whatever she was doing.

“Keep your voice down, boy,” Henry hissed. “Lumians might be all open and happy about sharing their origins, but I sure am not.”

“Why?”

Henry glared at him. “I’ve seen *Independence Day*. I have zero intention of ending up in a trash bag, being dragged across a desert by a dehydrated soldier.”

“Aliens attacked first,” Travis said stupidly, and Henry ran a hand over his face.

“Not the point,” he said. “My point is that humans would probably jump at the chance to examine an actual alien, and I have no desire to be their test subject. So kindly keep this information to yourself.”

“As if anyone would believe me,” Travis mumbled.

“You never know,” Henry said. “Just takes one focused conspiracy theorist and the secret is out.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Good,” he said. “I come in peace and all that good stuff. And I can help you with your little...predicament.”

Travis frowned. “I’m not in any predicaments,” he said. “I came here to have some drinks and I’m enjoying myself.”

“Yeah, sure,” Henry said. “You look positively thrilled. The holiday cheer is just dripping off you. And your vacuum.”

“That sounded sarcastic.”

“Good, I’m getting a better and better grip on it the more I practice,” Henry said. “Now, Vix—”

“Gone,” Travis interrupted.

“You are so annoying when you’re drunk.” Henry sighed. “Can you please revert to the stoic, pragmatic Travis so we can have an actual conversation?”

“Probably not until tomorrow,” Travis said honestly.

“I figured as much. Okay, how about you listen to me then?”

“Sure.” Travis nodded. “That sounds like it could be fun.”

“I’ve never been more grateful to be on a planet with so many curse words to choose from.” Henry groaned. “Right, so, first things first. You’re in love with Vix.”

Travis nodded before the words even registered. “Wait, what? I’m not in love with him.”

“No, you’re just miserably drunk in the middle of the day because you give no shits about him whatsoever.”

“You’re being so rude to me,” Travis said. “Why would I be in love with him?”

“Honestly, no clue,” Henry said. “Can’t say I’m too crazy about Lumians in general. Flighty, weird, over the top...”

“Hey! Don’t talk about Vix like that. He’s not flighty...”

“I see you didn’t argue about him being weird and over the top.”

“I might be into him, but I’m not blind,” Travis said.

“Ah...so you *are* into him,” Henry said, pointing a finger at Travis.

“He’s interesting and very attractive. And I’m a man with functioning eyes.” Travis was happy to note he could successfully use words that had syllables. Multiple of them.

“So it’s just attraction?”

Travis shrugged. “Probably.”

“Well in that case, I guess I don’t need to help you get in touch with him,” Henry said casually. “You’ll be over him and on top of someone else in no time.”

Travis felt time freeze.

“You...” He gaped at Henry. “You can get in touch with him?”

Henry waved his hand dismissively. “I could. If it was necessary. But since you clearly aren’t really—”

“Nonono, wait,” Travis said. “I would definitely like to get in touch with him. That would be really good.”

“And why is that?” Henry asked.

Travis fiddled with his glass of water. “He left some stuff here. I’m sure he’ll need it back.”

“What stuff?”

“Just stuff...”

“Right, well we wouldn’t want Vix to be stuffless, so I guess I’ll give you a hand.” He stood up and waved at Travis. “Come on.”

“Now?” Travis asked.

“Or next year. Whatever works,” Henry said, and a whole year just seemed way too long to Travis.

He tried hopping up from the barstool and ended up slipping and almost faceplanting on the bar. PH-1L broke his fall and Travis gripped it closer.

“Easy there, Simone Biles,” Henry said. “No need for flair, just keep both feet firmly on the ground and follow me.”

He turned his back on Travis and led him out of the bar and toward a dark blue pickup truck parked just behind Travis’s car.

“We’ll leave yours here and I’ll drive you back,” Henry said as he unlocked his truck. “Get in.”

Travis stuffed PH-1L and himself into the cramped front seat and fastened his seat belt, stomach sloshing uncomfortably as Henry pulled out of the parking lot and onto the nearly empty street.

“Where are we going?” Travis asked.

“My place,” Henry said. “I have a way to get you in touch with Vix.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, the rumble of Henry’s truck, aided by the unhealthy amount of alcohol he had consumed lulling Travis to sleep.

The sun was completely down when he was shaken awake, confused and disoriented as he looked around himself.

Snow-covered trees, frozen ground, and not a single house around them.

“Where are we?” Travis asked as Henry stopped the car, getting out and walking over to Travis’s side. He opened his door for him and gestured for him to jump out.

“Told you we were going to my place,” Henry said, and Travis looked around himself, the crisp air making his brain a bit clearer. “You can leave your friend inside.”

“Hate to break it to you, but there is no place to be found around here,” Travis said. “Yours or anyone else’s.”

“Well I’m not gonna have my very alien-looking house out in the open, am I?” Henry said, walking toward a large rock beneath a tree close to them.

He reached into his pocket and took a smaller rock out, turning it in his hand a few times before pressing it down into the large rock.

It released a gentle hum that made the hairs on the back of Travis’s neck stand up. The snow beneath their feet shook, and a small platform cleared between the two of them. Henry pocketed the rock again and walked to stand in the middle of the platform.

He looked at Travis and waved him over. “Come on then.”

Travis shuffled to stand next to him, eyes wide as the platform shook once again before starting a slow descent.

Underground.

“What the hell?” Travis yelled.

Henry smiled. “Talurians like living beneath the ground. We like enclosed spaces and the safety they provide.”

“Like moles,” Travis mumbled, but Henry heard him anyway.

“Moles are smart creatures. A lot less chance of someone hurting you if you’re hidden underground.”

The platform reached the bottom of wherever they were going with a thud, and Travis followed Henry off it. It went back up, closing the hole in the ground and leaving them in complete darkness.

“Henry?” Travis called uncertainly.

“Shit, sorry. Humans can’t see in the dark. It slipped my mind,” Henry said.

A gentle click sounded right next to Travis, and a soft light illuminated Henry’s home.

It was...something. That was for sure.

Travis had expected mold, humidity, and dirt.

What he found instead was a comfortable-looking burrow. A series of small rooms were connected by narrow tunnels filled with fluffy carpets and pillows, blankets, and fuzz. Everywhere.

It looked warm and inviting. No actual furniture in sight.

“In here,” Henry called, walking into the first room on their left. Travis followed slowly, the light not really enough to

make him comfortable. He could barely see where he was stepping.

He walked into the room and looked up, eyes widening at the sight.

An entire wall was covered in machinery Travis had never seen. Blue and green screens, knobs and buttons and wires everywhere.

“What is that?” Travis asked as Henry settled in front of one of the screens.

“A communication device,” Henry said. “I travel a lot. Visit different planets. My people like to keep tabs on me to make sure I’m safe and have everything I need.”

“Can you call Vix with it?” Travis asked.

Henry shook his head. “No. Lumians use technology very different from ours. It’s not compatible at all.”

“Then...”

“I have several friends on other planets, and I just so happen to know that there are Lumians traveling to those planets. It’s a few degrees of separation, but I’m confident we can find our way to Vix.”

Travis wasn’t too convinced, but he had zero other options.

“Okay, do it,” he said, and Henry started pressing the buttons and turning some knobs. Several screens started changing colors, symbols appearing and disappearing, a hum in the

background reminding Travis of the rock just outside Henry's home.

As suddenly as it had started, the activity on Henry's screen stopped and they were left once again illuminated only by the small lamp Henry provided.

"The messages were sent," Henry said.

Travis frowned. "What did your friends say?"

"Nothing yet," he said. "Communicating like this can be slow and fickle sometimes."

"Will it work?" Travis checked, stomach turning with nervousness. And alcohol.

"It probably will. I sent several, just in case any of them fail to be delivered."

Travis nodded, scuffing the tip of his shoe against the tassels on one of Henry's many carpets. "So, now what?"

Henry shrugged. "Now we wait."

Chapter 16

Vix

Vix was a burrito.

That was a food humans had. Vix hadn't tried it because Travis had said it was spicy and he wouldn't like it. But it was also a shape humans took when they were feeling not great. It involved procuring a warm blanket, lying on one end of it and then rolling until you were completely wrapped in said blanket so only your head was visible.

Due to Lumia being relatively warm, blankets were more decorative than anything else, so Vix couldn't achieve the perfect burrito form, what with his feet sticking out as well as his head. But he felt like he had given it his best effort, and it did feel rather nice. Comforting.

He could understand why humans did it.

The reasons he needed to assume the burrito form though... he didn't understand. Not completely, anyway.

He just didn't think he'd been given enough time to figure it out before he was yanked from Earth...and from Travis.

Boarding the ship back home had felt like the biggest mistake ever made, every light-year they put between themselves and Earth felt like a punch to the gut. He didn't have the time to leave Travis a message. Didn't get to say goodbye to him.

The only thing he'd left him were his observations. The little things he'd noticed about his favorite human. He hoped Travis would like them. Hoped they'd remind him of Vix sometimes. He realized he didn't want Travis to forget him.

The thought of Travis forgetting...sent him into a spiral.

And in the spiral he stayed.

He'd spent the entire trip home trying and failing to arrange his braids into something that would make sense. But none of them had felt even remotely right.

He was sad. He knew that much. So he braided a strand at the back of his head. Loose, kinda messy, running down his back all the way to his knees. Untied at the end, because he didn't know when it'd stop.

He was disappointed too. He was supposed to have more days on Earth. More time to explore, to learn and to try things. So he added another braid on the right side of his head. Going down his scalp to just under his ear, then left unfinished. Just like his plans.

Those two emotions he could recognize and express. But the rest of it...he couldn't place. He'd never felt any of it before. Never done a braid for any of it. He left his hair down.

Disembarked the ship on Lumia like that.

Sad.

Disappointed.

Unfinished.

Greeted by the Lumian welcome trill and the soothing colors of his home planet that did nothing to actually soothe him.

Met with disbelief and wonder at the state of his hair as each and every Lumian rearranged their own braids into glaring question marks.

He was followed by countless pairs of pale blue eyes all the way home.

He greeted his mothers and gave them the little trinkets he had brought for them before going to his room.

He had assumed burrito shape that afternoon. And stayed that way since. He didn't really know how much time had passed.

One of his mothers would bring him food a few times a day, feeding him gently as he refused to exit burrito mode. The sweetness of Lumian fruits was familiar.

But Vix wanted to see them arranged into a tree.

He wanted another lemon tart.

He wanted to taste bitter again, even though bitter was the enemy.

He missed Earth...and other things from Earth.

“My Vix,” Cvita said as she walked into his room again, carrying a little bowl in her hands.

“Hi, Mom,” Vix said, poking his head out of his blanket and squinting at the light that assaulted his eyes.

“I brought you some compote,” she said, sitting at the edge of his bed and placing the bowl next to his head. “How about you wiggle out and try some.”

“No.” He shook his head, burrowing farther in and squeezing his eyes shut.

He wished he could sleep. Sleep seemed like it helped you forget. Like it made it easy to drift away and let your thoughts go.

“You have to eat something, Vix,” Cvita said pleadingly. “Tuga has been wailing for two days now.”

“I can hear her,” Vix said.

“Flavians can hear her,” Cvita said, “and their planet is on the other side of our suns at the moment.”

“I’m fine,” Vix said. “Tell her not to worry.”

“Sure, I’ll tell Tuga not to worry.” She snorted. “Never would have thought of that.”

“But I am okay,” he said, hooking his chin over the edge of his blanket and looking at his mother. “I will be.”

“Right,” she said, standing up. “Come on.”

“What?” he asked, but she just shook her head.

“Bara’s orders,” she said. “She gave me one more chance to coax you out gently and said to bring you out by whatever means necessary if you refused to eat. So up you go.”

“But I’m a burrito!” he said, and she stared at him for a moment.

“What?” she asked, and he wiggled a hand out of his blanket and pointed down at himself.

“A burrito,” he repeated. “I have a blanket and I have suitably rolled myself in it. It’s a valid attempt to accurately depict my emotional state.”

“I’m confused,” she said, fiddling with her braids.

“It’s a human custom.”

She nodded. “Okay. I don’t think Bara will mind if you bring your burrito with you.”

“I AM the burrito, Mother,” he said again. “My blanket and I are one.”

“Okay, in any case, you’re coming with me.”

“Mother...”

“No. I have been tasked with bringing you out and I am going to do it,” she said, stepping up next to his head, hooking her arms under his back and hefting him up, blanket and all, as if he were a plank.

She positioned him on his feet on the bed, then picked him up around the waist. She lifted him again and set him down on

the floor, rotating him toward the door. Vix was shocked by her display of strength.

“Were you training with Mother Bara?” he asked.

“March forward, please,” she said, ignoring his question completely, and he frowned.

“Burritos don’t march,” he insisted, and she shrugged.

“This one will have to,” she said, giving his back a little push. He hopped in place to avoid slamming face-first into the floor.

“But...”

“Hop on, my little burrito,” she said, giving him another push, and he had no choice but to actually hop and hobble out of his room and down the hallway of their family home.

Vix had no idea how humans did this when they went into burrito mode. It was exceedingly challenging.

“Mom, what is this about?” Vix asked, voice breathy from all the hopping he’d done. He wasn’t used to so much physical activity.

“You haven’t been yourself since you got home, my Vix,” Cvita said when they came to their daytime activity room. “All of your mothers and I are worried about you. You haven’t been to work in days, you haven’t left your room, and Lada said you actually smell really bad, which isn’t like you. What’s wrong?”

Vix paused for a second.

Thinking hard on how to answer that question.

He didn't know.

Everything had been off since he came back, and there were no words to describe what was happening to him.

"I don't know, Mom," he finally whispered. "I have never felt like this before, and I don't know what is going on."

"Your hair told us as much," Cvita said. "Come on in."

She led him into the daytime room, and he gasped at the sight in front of him.

His mothers, all gathered around the pile of fluffy pillows and blankets on the floor.

Danica patted the pillow closest to her.

"Your notes said humans like to surround themselves with soft, fluffy things when they're feeling emotionally unbalanced," she said. "So we thought we could try it too."

Vix thought back to the notes he had made after watching several movies with blanket forts and nests and cuddling in bed. He was so pleased his mothers had found them and brought it there for him.

He hopped over and plopped himself sideways on the pile, head in Lada's lap, legs in Bara's.

"Your hair is a mess, my heart," Lada said, nose scrunched in distaste, but she still ran her fingers through it gently, lovingly.

“His everything is a mess,” Bara said, tickling the bottoms of his feet.

“Be gentle, Bara,” Tuga said, sniffing softly. “He’s fragile right now.”

“I will be okay, Mother Tuga,” Vix said gently. “I’m just a little...off at the moment.”

“We can see,” Danica said. “And we’re ready to listen to you and try to figure it all out. We promise we can help, my heartshine. Just let us in.”

He sighed and rolled over to lie on his back. His mothers sat in a circle around him, like stars in his sky, like a shiny constellation lighting the way for him.

“Okay, so, I was on Earth,” he started, and they all glared at him.

“Yes,” Lada said.

“We are aware,” Bara added.

“Sadly,” Tuga finished.

“And when I got there, I met someone,” he said.

“Wasn’t that the point?” Danica asked. “To meet humans and study them.”

Vix shrugged.

Cvita tilted her head.

“Or was this a special someone?” she asked, making all of his mothers gasp.

“Special?” Lada asked. “Was the human beautiful?”

“Did the human treat you nicely?” Danica asked.

“Oh, if you have gone and found happiness with someone who lives so far away from us, I will perish,” Tuga said loudly, and Vix shook his head.

“Let him speak, Tuga,” Bara said, clasping her hand over Tuga’s mouth and tugging her into her lap.

“I met Travis the first day I came to Earth,” Vix said. “All of my notes said to find the hub of human interactions, and cafés are such hubs. Humans gather there to consume warm beverages and eat sweet baked goods.”

“Travis is your special someone?” Lada asked, and Vix nodded.

“He was there to find a companion to retreat with,” Vix said. “His former lover was not a nice person and he wanted someone to go with him and pretend to be his current lover. Out of all the humans in the café, he picked me.”

“He picked you?” Bara asked.

Vix nodded.

“To pretend to be his lover?”

“Yes,” Vix said. “And I knew a lot about it because of all the videos I had watched and memorized. I was very good.”

His mothers were looking at him, indecipherable expressions on their faces.

“What?” he asked, and they all shook their heads.

“No, nothing,” Lada said. “What happened next?”

And so Vix told them everything. From the moment Travis met him to the moment the ship had whisked him away. He rushed and blushed through the kisses, the touches, and their night together. He wanted to keep those to himself as much as possible. Selfishly, he didn't want anyone else to know how it felt to be kissed by Travis. Or how it felt to kiss back. That belonged to Vix.

He told them everything else, though. He almost talked himself hoarse.

“And now I'm home and I should be happy. And I am happy. I missed you and Lumia,” he said, “but there is this... something in my head and I can't find the braids and I can't turn my mind off, and I don't know what to write in my notes, and then also...”

He sat up and unwrapped his blanket, letting it pool around his waist as he shrugged off the shirt he had taken from Travis before he left.

He bared his heart to his mothers, the gentle blue light reflecting on their faces as they stared at it.

“Vix,” Lada said, covering her lips with her fingers.

“Oh, my babyyyyyy.” Tuga shrugged Bara's hand away from her face and wailed, reaching for him and scooping him up in her arms.

Her fingers touched the skin on his chest, caressing the glowing heart beneath it.

“Oh, my heartshine,” she said. “This is what I was afraid of.”

“Afraid?” Vix said, looking down and touching his own chest. “Am I dying? Is that what the blue means? Did Earth give me something lethal?”

“You’re not dying,” Bara said. “Tuga, get a hold of yourself, please.”

“Then what is it?” Vix asked, and Danica reached out to run a hand through his hair.

“Turn around, darling,” she told him, and he tried protesting, wanting answers, but she shook her head. “Just listen to your mother.”

He did as he was told, turning his back to her and tilting his head back when she started a braid on the crown of his head.

She wove it in a small circle like a crown, letting the end of it drop down his shoulder before she tied it with a small elastic.

She took the small mirror Lada always carried around and handed it to Vix.

“Take a look, my Vix,” Cvita told him.

He raised the mirror and looked at himself, the sadness and disappointment braids still on his head.

But just next to those two now stood a third braid. One Vix had never seen on himself, but one he knew well.

“How does it feel?” Lada asked, and he looked up, meeting the eyes of all of his mothers one by one, words frozen on his

lips.

He nodded, because there was nothing else he could do. The storm inside him settled. The questions had answers, and he felt like he could finally see clearly.

“Mothers...”

“You’re in love, my Vix,” Danica said softly.

Love?

He was in love?

But that...

“But your hearts glow dark pink,” he told them. “Love is dark pink.”

“Requited love is dark pink, my Vix,” Cvita said. “You...you don’t have your love with you anymore. Travis is on Earth.”

“So it’s blue...”

“Because you’re not together,” Lada finished for him, fixing her hair and sitting straighter.

“Oh...” Vix blinked against the sudden dryness of his eyes and the prickle he felt beneath his lids. “So it’ll always be blue?”

“Your Travis is human, darling,” Bara said. “And your life is on Lumia.”

“I miss him,” Vix said, and Tuga sniffled.

“My baby’s heart is blue,” she said, rubbing her tears away as she tried to smother him in more blankets and pillows.

“Time helps things like this, Vix,” Bara said. “I promise it won’t always be blue.”

“But he was my special person,” Vix said.

Cvita smiled sadly. “Someone can have more than one special person,” she said, looking at her partners, love obvious on her face.

But Vix didn’t hear any of it.

“I just want one,” he said. “I just want Travis.”

“Oh, my boy!” Tuga descended on him, and for the first time since Vix could remember, instead of trying to calm her down, his other mothers joined in.

They piled up on him, until the gentle blue glow was trapped between them, hidden from sight.

Toppings on his burrito.

A giggle escaped Vix at the thought.

And then another one.

And another until he was laughing loudly.

Laughing until his stomach hurt.

Laughing until his cheeks felt stretched out, like they were permanently stuck in a grin.

He lifted his fingers to touch and found them wet.

Wet from tears.

Because sometime while he was laughing so hard it hurt, the hurt had won. And the tears had spilled.

He missed Travis.

He wanted Travis.

But Travis was far away.

So far away that Vix's heart was blue.

Chapter 17

Vix

He was happy he had shared his thoughts with his mothers. He really was. It felt easier to carry the emotions inside when he had a name for them, braids for them.

After their conversation, Vix finally found the will to get himself in order. He had allowed his mothers to oil his hair and wash it, their fingers comforting as they braided his heart into it.

They put his sadness back because he had asked for it. It didn't feel right without the thin braid expressing it. But the confusion was gone. The mess on the side of his head didn't exist anymore. Lada had woven a love braid into his hair after it was washed and it shone beautifully under the warm Lumian stars.

Vix liked it.

He liked the feel of it against the crown of his head, liked it running down his back and touching the backs of his knees. It was a gentle caress against his bare back.

He had decided to keep his heart on show inside his home. To get used to it. To learn how to live with the soft blue glow it kept giving.

He wasn't getting Travis back. All he could do was find a way to get used to it.

"My Vix." Cvita walked into his room. "We'll be heading out to visit Arany and her family."

"Oh... Okay."

"Would you like to come with us?" she asked, and as much as he didn't want to be alone, he also didn't want to be among others.

His braid would attract attention he didn't want. He wasn't ready to answer questions about it. He didn't want to share Travis with anyone else. But the thought of being without that braid even for an afternoon felt so wrong... He refused.

"No, thank you," he said finally, managing a soft smile. "You go and have fun. Give my best to Arany."

"Do you want one of us to stay with you?" Cvita asked. "Tuga would jump at the chance, if I'm being honest."

Vix actually managed a quiet laugh at that.

"Please take her with you," he said jokingly. "I don't think I can handle the emotions today."

"As you wish, my stardust," she said. "I'll wrangle them all out of the house. Try to do something fun, okay? Something to take your mind off things."

“I’ll do my best, Mom,” he said. “I promise.”

“Good.” She smiled and leaned in to kiss his cheek before swishing out of his room.

He was alone once again, with an undefined amount of time in front of him to fill. Lumian parties tended to run long, with guests often opting to spend the night or several nights at the host’s home.

Vix wouldn’t be surprised if his mothers didn’t return for days.

He walked over to the bag he had used to pack for Earth and opened it up for the first time since he got back.

Things smelled like Earth in it still.

Heavy, sweet, bringing up memory after memory for Vix until the glow of his heart threatened to blind him.

He dug out the clothes he’d probably never use again. The puffy pink jacket, the sweaters and the corduroy pants, the little underwear set Travis had seemed to like a lot.

He put them all in a small pile next to the chair the bag was sitting on and then sat cross-legged on the floor, facing it.

The last item he held in his hands, running his fingers over the soft surface, bringing it close to his face and inhaling. It smelled like the oils Vix used for his hair. There was none of Travis left there.

Vix sighed and dropped the fuzzy white earmuffs onto the floor.

He placed both of his palms on his chest, the blue seeping through his fingers. Just like the hope he'd get everything he'd always wanted.

Someone to love.

Someone who was his.

A soft sound coming from the entrance to his home startled him, and he blinked back the tears he didn't want to spill when he was alone. He needed someone to wipe them away for him. Needed someone to hold him while they fell. It didn't feel nice to cry by yourself.

Maybe he should have asked his mother Tuga to stay, he thought as he walked out of his room. You could always count on her to out-cry anyone.

Another sound came.

"Coming," Vix said, and hurried to the entrance.

He'd bet anything Cvita had sent one of his friends from the party to come by and keep Vix company.

He crossed the barrier of his front door and stepped outside, frowning when he realized there was nobody there.

He took a step forward and tripped over something, nearly falling onto his face and cracking his skull open.

"What..." he started, but the words got caught in his throat.

An orange plastic body.

A long gray hose.

Countless ribbons tied around every bit of it.

Vix's vacuum friend.

“PH-1L!!” he said loudly, dropping to his knees and scooping the vacuum into his lap.

He ran his hands over the cool plastic surface, beside himself with how happy he was to see it.

But how was he seeing it?

He was on Lumia.

Vacuums lived on Earth.

“How...”

“Hi, Vix...” A voice came from above him and Vix jumped up, head spinning as he met Travis's warm brown eyes.

“Travis?” he asked, but before he got a response he was jumping up into Travis's arms, all the emotions bursting out of him.

The tears he'd been keeping at bay spilled, and he sobbed as he clung to Travis with all of his strength.

The feeling of Travis's sturdy body holding him up, the smell of him, earthy and grounding invading Vix's nostrils... The mix of Travis and his home planet made Vix finally feel whole. Finally home.

“How are you here?” he asked, lifting his head from Travis's shoulder and gripping his cheeks between his palms to look into his face. “This is Lumia. How are you here?”

Travis held him around the waist, his smile just a bit bewildered and his eyes shifting between Vix and seemingly

everything around him.

“I missed you,” Travis said. “You left and you didn’t say goodbye and I missed you. I woke up and you were just gone. Why?”

“My captain called me to leave urgently because our ship had suffered damage on the way to Earth and if we had waited to get it fixed we would have been stranded. I had to go.”

“Oh...” Travis said, still breathing heavily, eyes shifting in every direction.

“But I missed you too,” Vix said. “I told my mothers about you. I told them how you wanted me to be your fake boyfriend and that we kissed and how we had sex and how I didn’t want to leave you but I had to.”

“You told your mothers we had sex?” Travis asked, voice high pitched.

“Did you want to tell them yourself?” Vix asked, frowning. “Is it a human ritual? I can call them to come back home.”

“No!” Travis squawked. “No need to call them. They know already, we’re good. Speaking of good, my lungs aren’t going to just...give out, are they?”

Vix frowned at the abrupt question. “Our atmospheres are very similar. It is why Lumia chose Earth as a potential fallback, if you recall me mentioning?”

“Right. Yes. That makes sense,” Travis said, blinking a few times before squeezing him again around the middle. “I really did miss you.”

“As did I,” Vix said, making a happy trill in his throat. “How did you come to travel here?”

“Henry made some calls. From his underground alien mole lair,” Travis said, eyes going wide. “Did you know he’s an alien too?”

“He revealed himself to me that night at the bar.” Vix nodded, watching as Travis got distracted looking at some passersby. “So I have Henry to thank for our reunion?”

“Everyone is so small here,” Travis murmured. “And the grass is purple. And the trees are pink. And the sky is purple and pink.”

“Travis?”

“Hm?” Travis whipped his head back around and then smiled upon seeing him again. “I missed you.”

Vix laughed. “As you have stated many times.”

“Have I?” Travis asked, like he truly didn’t realize. “You know, gravity is weird here. I feel like I’m going to float away.”

“That is impossible. There is only a negligible difference and you have a higher bone density,” Vix assured him, only to get cut off by a surprise kiss.

Vix made a happy noise, returning it with fervor. He grabbed one of his mourning braids, moving it from its sad configuration and wrapping it tightly around Travis’s neck. Joining them so they could not be parted again anytime soon.

His heart was overjoyed. He could feel it pulsing excitedly and he knew the glow would no longer be blue, but a beautiful, luminous dark pink.

“I can see purple behind my eyelids. I don’t know if that’s normal,” Travis muttered against his mouth. “Maybe I’m having a reaction.”

Vix pulled back slightly. “Lumia is very purple. It is likely your imagination.”

Travis nodded. Very quickly and for longer than was typical. “Sure.”

He moved back in to kiss Vix, and Vix’s toes curled happily, the irregularity pushed aside in favor of drinking Travis in again. They should kiss for three days. And only pause for breaks. That seemed appropriate to make up for lost time.

“I’m feeling lightheaded. Are you sure my lungs work here?” Travis mumbled again a second later.

Vix separated them and frowned. Travis was acting very strangely. His pupils were blown out wide and his limbs were trembling slightly. “Are you perhaps having what you would call an attack of panic? Or more commonly, losing your shit?”

“No,” Travis squeaked, eyes wide and quivering.

The noise made Vix smile, and he cupped Travis’s head, stroking over his lovely short hair soothingly. “You are very safe with me. I promised to guard you on Earth. I did not mean just your hair or for that singular moment. You are in no danger.”

A loud trill sounded before Travis could answer, his neighbor leaning out of their window above them.

“Vix!” they called. “What is that?”

It was in Lumian, so Travis couldn’t understand, but he jumped in fright. Vix didn’t believe him to be truly scared, but he was clearly overwhelmed.

“This is Travis. He is my human,” Vix called back.

“Human?” they repeated in wonder. “He looks very strange. Why is he dressed that way? And where are his braids? He seems very weird.”

Vix flicked a rude braid at them. “He is not weird. He is mine.”

Their pale eyes went wide and Vix tugged Travis along into his house, not untying them. There was enough slack for them to walk one after another just fine.

“PH-1L. You must guard the door. I put my trust in you,” he said sternly. “And then I shall show you to your guest room so you can relax.”

That done, he turned his back and headed deeper into his house. Vix didn’t stop until they were in his bedroom, calling for the screen to close after them.

He settled Travis on his bed and climbed into his lap to cradle him to his chest. Travis didn’t protest, breathing in and out heavily into his skin, right over his heart, hands gripping Vix’s clothes at his hips.

Vix let him settle, petting his head, only stopping to reach for his tablet. It had a scanner equipped and he did a quick scan of Travis and compared it to the one he'd taken of the human when he had been sleeping the first night at the retreat.

Some of his life signs were elevated, but there seemed to be nothing dangerous. And as time passed he watched Travis's heartbeat trickle down slowly.

He set the tablet aside and pressed a kiss to Travis's head. "You traveled across galaxies to see me."

Travis groaned. "Please don't mention that."

"Was it not a pleasant journey?" Vix asked.

"The journey was fine. It felt like we weren't even moving. But thinking about it makes me want to throw up," he mumbled. "I went to space."

"You did. Not the first of your kind to do so, but you definitely have traveled the farthest as far as any record shows."

Travis groaned again and Vix made a soothing trill in the back of his throat.

"I am very glad you did so. My heart had gone blue without you."

Travis nodded. "Me too..." And then he paused and lifted his head slightly as the meaning sank in. "You mean..."

Vix bit his lips, grasping Travis's hand and pressing it to his heart, which was now glowing a healthy, happy pink again.

Travis's bottom lip wobbled. "That's...so sad."

Vix's eyebrows rose at the unexpected reaction. It was wildly out of Travis's character as he had come to know it. "You are still in a state of heightened stress. Let us lie down."

Travis allowed himself to be pushed flat, but kept clutching Vix with teary eyes and wobbling lips. Vix grasped his blankets and wrapped them up, then sent them rolling across the large bed until they were tangled together in a burrito.

Travis blinked at him inside the darkened cocoon. "Um..."

"We are now a burrito," Vix informed him. "It should make you feel better."

"It...actually does," Travis admitted, relaxing slightly more against him now everything else was blocked from sight. "We should just stay here."

Vix giggled. "Not forever. There are many places I wish to take you now you are here!"

Travis swallowed, his face going a little white again as he snuggled down into the blankets. "Maybe not right away."

"When you are feeling better." Vix nodded, rubbing his back. "How long are you here for?"

"I don't even know how long has passed," Travis said. "My phone died at some point. I may be fired."

Vix shook his head. "Henry will not let that happen. And the trip from Earth does not take too long."

“Well I didn’t really plan the whole...return trip,” Travis admitted. “I’ll be honest, I was kind of drunk when Henry let me in on the alien thing and the contacting you thing. And then I was sleeping off the hangover when he rang me to let me know things were a go. It was a blur from there. The details were kind of lost. I only thought about seeing you again.”

The words made Vix indescribably happy, his heartshine lighting up the dark space between them. Travis smiled to see it. Apparently Vix himself wasn’t something that was too ‘alien’ for Travis.

“Does that mean...” Vix licked his lips. “Does that mean you wish to pursue a relationship with me? Because you traveled all this way, and I do not mean to read into the signals, but you do not have any braids to help me interpret—”

“Yes.”

Vix lost all the breath inside him. “Yes?”

“Yes. I want you, Vix,” Travis said, wiggling an arm free so he could reach up and stroke Vix’s hair. “We only spent that short amount of time together. We’re not the same species, or even from the same galaxy, but...the thought of not having you around makes my heart blue.”

It was the strongest declaration Travis could have given him.

Vix rolled them so he could lie on top of Travis, sinking his face into his neck. “I do not wish to part from you ever again.”

Travis sank his fingers into his braids, loosening some. Vix didn't care. "Me either," Travis said, "but we should probably talk about how that's going to work exactly. Not that I'm one to talk. I came here without even knowing how to get back."

"I shall arrange for a transport for you," Vix assured him. "Lumia will be very happy to have you for as long as you'd like to stay, however. We are very welcoming of all species."

"Do you ever plan on returning to Earth?" Travis asked suddenly.

Vix poked his head up to meet Travis' serious gaze. "I would like to, yes. But I would need permission for travel."

"Isn't it your job? To observe?" Travis asked. Vix nodded. "So they should be fine with it? I mean...I could show you around. Answer all of your questions. I'd be an invaluable resource to the uh...cause."

"And we can kiss and have sex as much as we like."

Travis laughed. "That too."

"I can put in a request," Vix said. "I would not want to be permanently stationed on Earth however. I love Lumia. I would miss it and my mothers."

"I can visit," Travis said quickly.

"You seem not to like it."

"I can get used to it."

Vix smiled, his heart glowing even more. He leaned down and claimed Travis's bottom lip with his own, kissing him for

a few blissful moments. This was all he had ever wanted. Someone just for him. He broke away suddenly to say, “I do not wish to share you with anyone else. No humans, or Lumians, or any other species.”

“That’s fine. Me too. I just want you,” Travis said, slightly dazed.

Vix made a pleased trill, wiggling around in joy as much as he could within the confines of the blanket.

Travis hissed. “Keep that up and we may have some other pressing issues to talk about.”

Vix raised a questioning brow before he noticed the hardness against his leg. “Oh. It seems the cocoon really is working.”

Travis laughed and rolled them until he was on top. He stared down at Vix once he had him pinned. “I’m feeling much better.”

“Then we should finish our discussion later,” Vix said. “I wish to be, as humans say, fucked into the mattress.”

“This is definitely going on the list as the wildest place I’ve ever had sex.”

They joined mouths again, Travis rolling them out of the blankets a little so they could get some moving room. They ended up tangled in Vix’s braids instead, which was just as pleasant, if not more so if the way Travis moaned was any indication.

Vix tugged at Travis’s shirt, pulling it up and over his shoulders. Travis ducked his head out and threw it to the side,

falling back on top of him just as his doorway unmaterialized.

“*Vix!*” Tuga screeched. “The neighbor called and said we had to return immediately. What is going on—”

She skidded to a halt inside his room, his other four mothers crashing into her one by one and jolting her a step closer until she was inches from the bed.

Travis froze on top of him, looking horrified.

Vix licked his lips and waved, unable to get up with the way Travis had him pinned. “Hi, Mothers. Everything is fine.”

“Apparently so,” Cvita said, a hand over her smiling mouth, her eyes dancing in amusement.

“Is this...Travis?” Danica asked, tilting her head.

Vix nodded. “This is Travis.”

“So this is a human in the flesh,” Lada said, bypassing the line and approaching, reaching out for him.

Travis squeaked, rolling off Vix and grasping a blanket to his chest daintily to ward her off.

“Mother. Please,” Vix said as he sat up, warning her.

“Were you about to have sex with this human?” Bara asked matter-of-factly, eyeing all his braids wrapped around him.

Vix shifted guiltily.

“But what if he leaves and your heart is blue again? What if he stays? How can this be?” Tuga cried out, throwing herself about, wailing, with Bara trying to contain her limbs.

Vix sighed and flopped back onto his bed, giving an apologetic look to Travis, knowing this could last for hours. Which meant no kissing. And no sex.

He glared at the doorway to his room. “PH-1L! YOU HAD ONE JOB!”

Epilogue

“Vix, babe we’re gonna be late,” Travis called, taking his suitcase out of the bedroom and wheeling it by the front door next to where Vix had parked PH-1L. The vacuum had a series of stickers stuck to him right now, like the back of a passport. For every place Vix had taken him with them to (wanted or not).

Travis took out his phone to check his list and make sure he’d packed everything they’d need to spend the next three months on Lumia. Since they’d decided to stay together and make this crazy cross-galactic relationship work, they’d alternated living on Earth and Lumia as they figured out the long-term particulars. It was coming up on a year now and time had flown by in the same whirlwind Vix had first entered his life, but he’d loved every second of it.

He walked back into the kitchen and made sure all of the appliances were turned off. He opened the fridge door to make sure nothing perishable remained inside, spotting the container of strange glowing pink fruits that were native to Lumia and

grabbing them for the journey. He was pretty sure they were addictive to humans. He hadn't been able to stop eating them since his first visit.

He closed the fridge door with his prize in hand, chuckling at a newspaper article Vix had stuck on it with a spaceship-shaped magnet.

He'd drawn hearts and smiley faces all over it, explaining to Travis he had seen countless families on TV shows displaying treasured mementos on their fridge.

Why an article about Lex's family going bankrupt, his latest rich boyfriend dumping him and him fleeing the country counted as a treasured memento to Vix, Travis couldn't say. But it brought Vix immense joy so he'd just gone with it.

He absolutely refused to admit he smiled a little every time he saw the article too.

"Vix?" he called again and frowned at the sound of something heavy tumbling to the floor. "You okay, love?"

"The cord is missing!" Vix called out from somewhere inside the closet in the hallway.

Travis's frown deepened as he stowed his snack away. "What cord?"

There was no cord on his list. There wasn't anything on his list that required a cord.

Vix emerged from the closet, hair wrapped in a messy nest on top of his head. It was a hairstyle he'd found on TikTok under the tag #messybunhacks. It involved a claw clip and

Travis hadn't seen Vix as delighted by a concept since he'd bought him his first earmuffs when they first met.

The sheer idea of something having claws going into his hair sent him into a hyperactive spiral until Travis agreed to drive him to the nearest store to find and buy one. Vix, in true Vix fashion, got seventeen different ones and spent the next five days trying out every claw clip hack ever recorded with varying degrees of success.

Today's installation was by far one of the worst ones, but Travis had learned not to say a word. Vix would be braiding his hair before they got to Lumia anyway, so it really didn't matter. And Travis secretly liked the way strands of hair would fall out so he could wrap his fingers in them.

"Did you put it away?" Vix asked.

Travis snapped out of his hair-related thoughts to re-focus on Vix. "Put what away?"

Vix pointed to the closet.

"The cord," he said again and no...that didn't help explain anything.

"What cord are we talking about, babe?" he asked patiently.

"Roni's," Vix said as if that helped.

"Who's Roni?" Travis asked, feeling like he was losing the last grip he had on the conversation they were having.

"My drill," Vix said.

Travis stared at him.

Brain working as hard as it could.

And then it clicked.

“You’re bringing the drill with you?” he asked and Vix nodded like it was the most obvious thing.

“PH-1L needs a friend while we’re there and Roni will get lonely here when we’re gone,” he said, walking back to the closet and pulling out a light blue case with the word Ronix branded onto it.

The little weirdo really was taking the drill on a cross-galactic adventure because his vacuum cleaner best friend would be lonely.

“Right,” Travis said, lifting his hand to rub the bridge of his nose even though he felt affection bubbling up to cancel out his annoyance immediately. “Roni is cordless, babe.”

“He is?” Vix asked, big eyes blinking in surprise adorably.

“Yup,” Travis said. “So if we’re bringing him along, just take that case and he’ll be all set.”

“That is dope!” Vix bounced on the balls of his feet. “I am most delighted.”

“Okay, delight,” Travis said with a helpless smile. “Now go grab your bag and let’s head out. I won’t be blamed for being late like I was last time.”

“Nobody blamed you,” Vix protested, struggling to drag his duffle bag over the floor to the front door. He’d overpacked

again. He always seemed to be trying to bring Earth itself back to Lumia.

“Your entire planet blamed me,” Travis said, picking up the strap of Vix’s bag and hefting it over his shoulder. Jesus. “There were disappointed braids hanging everywhere.”

“You know what those look like?” Vix asked, eyes wide and impressed as he looked up at Travis.

For all of Vix’s enthusiasm about Earth, sometimes he had a hard time realizing that Travis had put the same amount of effort into learning as much as he could about Lumian culture even though it was all still pretty new.

He didn’t have a background as an Observer to bolster his knowledge, but he was pretty tuned in to Vix which helped smooth the way a little as he spent more and more time on Lumia.

After getting over his initial terror of space and aliens and oh my god that is.

Mostly.

Lumia was interesting beyond belief despite it being, you know, across the galaxy. So Travis had done his best to read and ask questions to those who could speak to him. How many humans had gotten to experience what he had?

And the most important reason he’d put the effort into learning what he could as quickly as possible was that he loved a Lumian more than he’d ever loved anything or anyone in his life. Of course he wanted to know everything about the

person who had quickly and messily become the center of his entire universe. A universe that had expanded beyond what he thought was possible.

He let the bag drop from his shoulder and reached for Vix, wrapping his arms around his waist and pulling him close. He tilted his head down and brushed his nose against Vix's.

"I'm pretty sure I know all of your braids by now," he said, lifting one hand and twirling a stray lock of silver hair around his fingers.

Vix beamed. "That is very impressive."

Travis chuckled at the amazement in his voice. "You're very impressive."

Vix pouted. "I'm not even doing anything."

Travis swooped in to kiss that pout away from his lips. A gentle press that was now so familiar and needed. Vix responded eagerly like he always did. He often said kissing was his favorite thing about Earth. Travis could fully agree. Kissing Vix was now the best part about Earth.

"You're existing," Travis said into his dewy lips. "And you're here, with me. That's all I need."

He smiled at the soft, purplish blush rising on Vix's cheeks and pecked the soft skin there for good measure.

"You are very sappy today," Vix said, pretending like he didn't like it. He was still an awful liar. And even if he wasn't, Vix had wrapped Travis up in his arms tightly—a compromise

since he didn't have a braid ready—and that completely gave him away.

“I'm always sappy with you,” Travis said, forcing himself to detangle from Vix despite his trill of dissent and pick up their stuff again. “You sure you have everything you need?”

“I am,” Vix said, still looking grumpy before he brightened again suddenly. “Oh! I put the invite to Henry's brother's wedding in your suitcase, so it doesn't wrinkle in my bag.”

“Good thinking,” Travis said still not quite sure why they were invited to the wedding of someone neither of them had ever met.

Henry had become somewhat of an unwilling confidant to them both ever since that day in the bar. The only person Travis could talk to without the risk of being committed, or taken off by men in black shades in a black sedan. So their relationship had definitely blossomed. From co-worker to... long-suffering friend. But Travis hadn't thought it had progressed this far. He was oddly touched... and a lot suspicious.

“My mother is preparing both of us an appropriate outfit to wear to Taluria,” Vix said, patting PH-1L on the head absently.

“Aren't we just gonna camouflage as a bush or something?” Travis joked. “Blend in like they like to do.”

“There are no bushes on Taluria,” Vix said, looking at Travis like it was the most common of all common facts.

“Of course not,” he said.

“But we’re getting something really nice,” Vix said. “Mother Lada promised.”

“Well she knows her stuff so we’re good,” Travis said. He hadn’t ever worn anything Lumian yet...apart from Vix’s braids that is. It wouldn’t do any good for timekeeping if he went down that particular route though. “How are we getting to the wedding by the way?”

“Henry’s family booked a ship to pick up the guests from all the nearby planets,” Vix said. “A few other Lumians are invited as well. It is odd, I don’t think those people know Henry’s brother either.”

“Strange.” Travis nodded, leading their way out of the house and toward his car.

He put their bags into the trunk and PH-1L into his harness in the backseat. He didn’t want to talk about that. He opened the door for Vix, settling him in before hopping into the driver’s seat.

He started the car and pulled out of his driveway, merging into the traffic to take them to a remote spot in the woods where a Lumian transport pod was waiting for them.

“What does a Talurian wedding look like?” Travis asked after they’d spent a few moments in silence and Vix perked up, always happy to just chatter on about the things he found interesting.

“Oh, it’s very sweet!” he said. “You’ve seen Henry’s home here, right?”

“I have,” Travis said. “We’ve been there together as well.”

“Yes, well when two Talurians decide to join their families, they each start tunneling from their family home toward the other person until they reach each other. The place where they meet is the location of their new home. It is then blessed by an elder member of their society and their names are put down as joint owners of the newly created home. And that means they’re married by their customs.”

“That sounds...messy,” Travis said, imagining someone who looked like Henry tunneling for hours, trying to meet their future spouse.

“It can be, from what I have heard.” Vix nodded, fiddling with the seat heaters. Travis had recently gotten a new car and the buttons still excited Vix to no end. “But it’s also very romantic. Imagine starting your new life together by overcoming something so difficult.”

“You mean like we did?” Travis quirked a smile in Vix’s direction.

Vix beamed at him, eyes sparkling and so, so beautiful. “Exactly like that,” Vix said. “And how happy are we?”

“Very happy.” Travis nodded, feeling the sentiment resonate in his chest like his own heartshine.

Vix gave him a lame thumbs-up in response.

It made Travis laugh because after everything. Commuting back and forth, trying to make this human/alien thing work, Vix was still...Vix. He was still barely passing as a human, he

was still struggling to pick the correct responses sometimes and it made him so unbearably adorable to Travis.

Fuck, but he loved him so damn much.

He reached for Vix's hand, kissing the tips of his fingers and keeping his hand in his own as he drove them to the edge of the woods on the outskirts of the city where a transportation pod was waiting to take them to Lumia and Vix's mothers.

Vix's family had taken him in with open arms...though Tuga still shot him a few forlorn looks and ranted in Lumian now and then. They were working hard at learning English to communicate, the process much faster than Travis could ever hope to learn Lumian. They seemed endlessly fascinated with him and the way he talked, looked, and did things. Lumia as a whole often stared or followed him around while he was there.

"They're here!!" Vix bounced in his seat, pointing to the barely visible silhouette of their pod between a thick spread of trees in front of them. "I'm so excited!"

Travis smiled, parking his car at the edge of the woods and turning it off, unable to contain Vix from catapulting himself out of the car, grabbing PH-1L, and zooming toward the crew that had come to pick them up.

He was chattering with them before Travis managed to step out, leaving him to handle their luggage on his own. As usual.

"Need a hand?" a voice came from behind him and he turned around to hand his suitcase to Henry.

“I’d appreciate it,” Travis said, locking the car and handing the keys to Henry as well. “Treat it with respect.”

“Meh, you’ll be lucky if you find it in one piece,” Henry said grumpily, pissed at having been asked to be awake so early in the morning.

The logistics of organizing his life were still a nightmare at times, but Henry had helped Travis get things in order. He had experience with making himself at home in a completely different end of the universe, so his advice was invaluable.

He’d also taken over more of Travis’s workload while Travis was on Lumia, contacting him only if anything urgent came up. It was a system that had worked for them so far, and Travis did his best to make it up to him while on Earth. Which meant stopping Vix from calling him every five seconds to socialize.

“You always say that but so far, all of my things have survived being in your care,” Travis said as they headed toward the pod.

“All it takes is once, my boy,” Henry said wisely. “I need compensation somehow.”

Travis nudged him with his shoulder, looking toward the pod to see Vix disappearing inside. “Come on, old man. See me off to that death trap.”

Travis greeted the crew as warmly as he could without the traditional braids of Lumia. He had been talking to Vix recently about maybe growing out a lock of hair to be able to do at least the more basic ones.

“Travis!” A young crew member, Arai, greeted him warmly, reaching for his bag with greedy fingers. He had been on almost every transport Travis had taken and spoke the clearest English amongst them. “Did you bring us anything this time?”

“Of course I did,” Travis said, unzipping his suitcase and pulling out a small bag of trinkets Vix had collected for them.

“I am most pleased,” Arai exclaimed, pulling out a little tub of glittery slime, a slinky, a tea infuser shaped like a penguin, a color-changing mug, and a box of popping candy. He didn’t have the same vigor as Vix for human things specifically, but he had that spark of curiosity, an explorer’s mind.

“Glad you like it,” Travis said, allowing another crew member to take both of their bags and store them inside the pod while he said goodbye to Henry.

“I’ll see you in just a few months, for the wedding,” Henry said, eyes fixed on him. “You’re still coming, right?”

Travis nodded, wondering at Henry’s insistence. “Vix said his mothers have it all organized so we’ll be there and hopefully I won’t cause an intergalactic war with whatever I manage to do.”

He said it jokingly, but honestly, he wouldn’t put it past himself. Lumians seemed notoriously difficult to offend, but he had no knowledge of Talurians other than Henry’s taciturn ways.

“Might not be a bad thing,” Henry mumbled, but before Travis could respond he was turning away and hopping into

Travis's car, driving away into the sunrise.

What the hell?

"We should head off," Arai said. "The sun is almost up and we want to leave orbit before daytime."

Travis took a deep breath and Arai giggled, looping a braid to show his amusement. "Still not used to this? You have been on our ship many times now."

Travis shrugged. "Doubt I'll ever be. But let's get going."

He followed Arai inside, listening to the heavy door slide shut behind them.

"We put you in your usual room," Arai said. "Vix should be there already. Try and get some sleep. I understand time moves faster for humans if they're asleep?"

"Something like that, yeah," Travis said, not really keen on explaining the passage of time to an overly excited alien when he was on the brink of being hurled into open space.

"We will inform you of our arrival," Arai said before leaving with his bag of goodies and Travis walked the familiar path to his assigned room.

He pressed the button to open the door and walked in, gasping at the image in front of him.

"Fuck," he whispered at the sight of Vix, sprawled on the soft, round bed in the center of the room, not a single stitch of clothing on him.

His long, silvery hair was all around him like a halo, pale skin on display just for Travis. The soft glow of his heart never failed to make Travis weak in the knees. He didn't know many people who could literally see how much someone loved them.

"Vix," he said, unable to say anything else. It sounded like a prayer and Vix blinked sweetly up at him.

"Hello, my favorite human," Vix said, lifting himself to kneel on the bed. His thin cock was wisping restlessly around his thighs, and Travis wanted to touch and taste so badly.

"Hi." He approached, reaching out with his hand and allowing his fingers to be wrapped in Vix's cock. "Not that I'm complaining, but what is going on?"

"Oh," Vix said tugging at the buttons of Travis's shirt. "I did some reading on the internet."

"Always a risky move," Travis said, following Vix's fingers as they worked their way down his chest. "What did you find this time?"

"Well," Vix said, gasping softly when Travis ran the tip of his thumb over the smooth skin on his cock. "We tried a lot of things to get you to relax while traveling."

"Mhm," Travis said when Vix pushed his shirt off his shoulders and pinched his nipple, before trailing his hands down.

"And they didn't really work," Vix said, reaching inside his jeans and finding him hard and wanting.

“Not really, no,” Travis agreed, breath getting harder to take with each gentle touch of Vix’s fingers.

“Well I have found another method,” Vix said, pushing Travis’s jeans down his legs and scooting closer until they were pressed together.

Travis’s chest was painted in Vix’s heartshine, and his hand with Vix’s cock in it was trapped between their bodies.

“And what is that?” he asked, a little breathless for the answer.

“It is called a mile-high club,” Vix said throwing his head back and pulling Travis’s face toward his neck. “Have you heard of it?”

“I’m not sure,” Travis lied, nipping at the skin behind Vix’s ear. “Explain it to me?”

“It means having sex while flying in an airplane,” Vix said around a moan. “We’re not really on a plane but I thought it still counts?”

Travis wrapped his arms around Vix’s waist, lifting him up and throwing him onto the bed, shucking the rest of his clothes before covering Vix’s body with his own.

“Oh, it absolutely counts,” gripping Vix’s thigh with the palm of his hand and slotting himself between his legs until their entire bodies are glued together.

Vix’s heart shone between them, his hair framing them on top of the bed, his gorgeous eyes stared up at him with so much love Travis thought he could burst and turn into stardust.

And as the transportation pod vibrated and left Earth, with Vix wrapped tight in his arms, he felt like maybe, he already was.

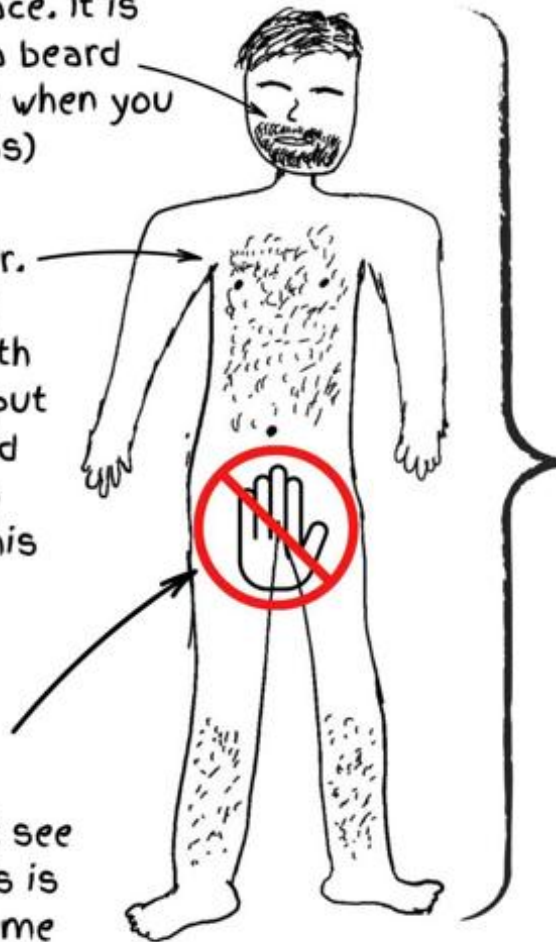
Final observation:

This is my favourite human. The best human. This is my Travis.

This is hair growing on his face. It is called a beard (Feels nice when you kiss)

Chest hair. Soft to cuddle with when you put your head there to listen to his heart

NO!
You can't see this. This is just for me



VERY TALL!!

About The Authors

A. M. Rose is a pseudonym that hides two people trying to write books one nervous breakdown at a time. How do you cowrite books when you live countries



apart you ask? By sending weird texts at 3 in the morning and giving no context. The stuff dreams are made of. Opposites in every way, the chaotic energy is harnessed for the good of everyone by creating worlds no one asked for. You're welcome.

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