

The Rainbow

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Content Warnings

Explicit:

Content that is explicitly shown in the text. Some topics are shown more often and more intensely than others, while others are only touched on lightly.

- Abusive relationships
- Sexual abuse / Sexual intimidation / Rape / Sexual torture
- Transphobia / Trans fetishisation / Misgendering
- Violence / Gore / Torture
- Vomit
- Eye trauma / Eye removal
- Child abuse / Injury to a child
- Manipulation
- Death / Murder
- PTSD / Panic Attacks

Mentioned/Implied:

Content that is talked about or implied to have happened either in the present or the past, but that is not explicitly shown on-page.

- Burning

- Execution
- Child death
- Non-consensual prostitution
- Harm to an animal
- Drugs

The Rainbow is a personal story written as a not-so-subtle metaphor for my time in the queer community and the personal experiences of both myself and those that I love. I have been told stories of the queer experience ever since I was little; from my mother recounting her beloved trans relative kicked from the family to never be in contact again, to my late father's old card buddy realising that perhaps he likes wearing dresses, to the online friends who were terrified of being found out by their parents and confided their deepest fears in me.

As *The Rainbow* draws from my own life and the stories I've been told by my elders and peers, it can be heavy. For information on content warnings, please see my website cjadewyton.com or contact me directly.

Please be aware that this book contains depictions of sexual assault being used as a method of abuse and control.

To those I know, and those I once knew.

*

To those who loved in the face of hate, those who were lost to hate, and even those who turned to hate.

*

I write this as a love letter to the queer community. Please never forget how important you are. The future needs us all, and growing old is worth it.

ACT 1

COMPASSION

Part 1: We Are Stardust

The nebula is a rainbow of colours, with unseen meaning spanning through the many generations of the universe. Light refractors through even the tiniest specs of stardust, and the building blocks of all of existence are lit up in a shining beauty of colour.

You can see its pieces, now, in the things around you. The people around you. One day, they will return to the sky. As will you. For dirt turns to dust, and dust turns to stars. And stars return to dirt in their shining bright rays that refract colour over the world in their cycle ever-repeating.

We are everything, and everything is us. From the core of the Earth to the furthest reaches of the universe and back, we are all the same. No amount of differences could ever change that.

It is something I beg you to remember as I share this story with you.

We are the same. We have always been the same. And that we stand so divided breaks my heart.

So, please, remember to have compassion. It is perhaps one of the single most important parts of our humanity. Without compassion, our world falls to ruin and we are nothing.

Now take a breath and picture a cloud of rainbow stardust shimmering in the vast beauty of space. It swirls with colour and light, as if it is alive.

And perhaps it is.

A gentle, melodic song plays through the stars, sung by a chorus of unseen voices deep within the nebula known as Desire. It is hopeful in tone, but sombre in lyric. You hear it, deep in your soul. They're calling out to you. They're calling to us all.

They are our past and our future, and I beg you to embrace them.

*

We are here.

(Here we are)
 We have always been here,
 And we always will be.
 (Always shall we be)
 We are forever,
 Just like them.
 (Just like them)
 And just like you.
 (Just like you)
 *
 Who are you?
 (Are you one of us?)
 It's okay.
 (We promise it's okay)
 You're not alone anymore.
 This fight is best fought together.
 (We will win it together)
 *
 We forget ourselves.
 (Oh, we forget)
 Buried under this hate,
 Of those who do not understand.
 (They may never understand)
 But we will never be forgotten.
 (No)
 Never forgotten,
 (Never forgotten)
 Us and you.
 (You and us)
 *
 We push away those who share our colours,
 (Beautiful colours)
 Trying to sate the fear of the Others,
 So that our own fears may fade away, too.
 But, oh,
 (But, oh)
 It's never enough.
 (We will never be enough for them)
 So we break apart all that we are,
 (We fracture ourselves)
 And forget we were built to love.
 (All we want is love)

*

*And this dance that we always do,
(We and you)
Spans through endless generations.
The cycles are repeating,
(Forever repeating)
Our colours are ever-entwining,
(Entwining)
And our love for you is growing,
(Growing)
Every single day.*

*

*Do not let them change you,
(Do let your colours fade away)
Come back into our arms.
(Please come back)
And we will bring you home again.
(Bring you home again)
Home again.
(Home again)
Bring you home again.
(Please come home)*

*

We love you.

Part 2: The Exalted Aqua and the Beautiful Ck-kah

The Exalted Aqua was a beautiful ship built of an alien material that shone a metallic blue in colour. It was an old, reliable thing that had been passed through generations. From hand to hand, heir to heir; receiving a new owner every time the crown was changed.

The one who held the crown would pass the great ship on to their chosen successor; a show of trust that allowed the ruler after them to travel from planet to planet as a representative for their people.

And, oh, weren't their people beautiful! The ck-kah were, in their own opinion, one of the most beautiful races that existed. However, this was not unexpected; as almost all races measured themselves by their own standards of beauty and subsequently thought themselves to be the most attractive.

The ck-kah were not an exception to this rule.

They thought themselves to be charmingly handsome, with their long necks and seahorse-like faces. For they were colourful, aquatic creatures with hard bony plates atop the backs of their otherwise-squishy heads and two beautiful fleshy sails on their backs. As they aged from child to adult their long, prehensile tails balanced their weight and allowed them to move from four legs to two. Those who were sturdier were considered the most attractive; wide, stable gaits with thick tails were expected of their models, and those without these features might be treated as unfairly as the people around you may treat someone who is fat or who has oily skin.

Their eyes grew atop four flexible eye-stalks, able to move independently of one another and see their surroundings from all sides at once. And, though they had no visible ears, their entire bodies were able to pick up vibrations in the air and water around them; a perfect way to hear their gorgeous clicking language, whether they may be above or below the waves.

And their babies— Their most beloved and beautiful babies. They were like round little octopus, with six thick tentacles and beaks so large they poked from their fleshy undersides to give them an almost parrot-like appearance. Little sails poked from their backs, allowing them to mimic the silly expressions their parents teased them with.

A beautiful race, of beautiful people; many of whom thought their standards of beauty was the only objective one.

And there were almost six thousand of them aboard the royal ship of the Exalted Aqua. And, though there were over five-thousand adults on-board, not a single one of them was the owner of the ship. No; as it was, currently, the Exalted Aqua was owned by a six year old ket.

A "ket" was, in its simplest translation, a type of female. In a more accurate translation, however, there would be no translation. It was its own identity that could simply not be compared to anything outside of its counterparts; the kat and the kit. Each of these three sexes filled a biological niche within the native race of the planet CK-CK, and all three were necessary for a healthy, happy relationship. Or, at least, that is what this six year old ket had heard from her mother (who was a kat, and considered by many other races to be another type of female, but known

by her own species to simply be what she was). There needed to be three. That's how it was. Not two, not seven, not four and a half— Three ck-kah per relationship, and each was to be a kit, a kat, and a ket. And, as the kat and the ket were often considered "females" of the species, the kit was often considered to be the male.

All of this, as you and I might know, was a rather regressive way of thinking. But it was all the little ket had heard and so, as she celebrated her sixth birthday aboard the ship that she had owned for almost a year and a half, she knew no better.

The reason for this ket's ownership of the Exalted Aqua was a sad one. A tragic accident occurred in the royal nursery, and the usually-tepid waters that moistened the hatchlings boiled strong enough to create steam that spread throughout the palace and cooked even the adults alive.

Only two survivors of the entire royal family remained; TK-ara, who now found herself as the crown princess for her entire planet, and her kat mother ER-ka, who had carried out seven of her children from the white-hot steam and into the cool salty water of their aquatic planet and cried with grief unmatched when only one survived past sunrise.

Alive, but skin splotched with scars of deep fleshy tones, the last two royals of the planet CK-CK are said to have looked a sight that made those of the upper class wish to turn their eyes away; though, of course, nobody would dare to be so rude. Not to royalty.

Despite the feeling that her body was ruined, ER-ka was wearing her best clothes. They were at TK-ara's sixth birthday party, after all, and ER-ka thought it was important to dress nicely. It had been an outfit that the king had ordered made for her before his death. And though it did nothing to hide the reddish-brown burn scars that she was so self-conscious of, she was glad to have listened to the advice of her personal servants, and finally allowed herself to wear the wonderful garment for the first time.

Her people looked at her as she wandered the room, some with awkward twitches of their skin that betrayed their discomfort with her now-healed wounds, and others with nothing but love and adoration and joy at her presence. Drawing strength from those who watched with affection, she took deep breaths to calm her nerves and carried her daughter (who had one tentacle wrapped around her mother's arm, and the others all wrapped around a large lolly that

resembled a blue salmon egg) across to a small crowd of celebrities who cooed and aww!ed over the child.

But, though she tried to keep her focus on those who looked at her with love, ER-ka still heard the quiet clicked-out whispers behind her back.

ER-ka was, by her own admission, still not used to the "high-life" of the royals. She had been nothing but a commoner when she had met the royal kit and ket. A simple cleaner in the kitchens who, as a kat, had caught their eye and eventually become one of CK-CK's two queens and taken on her biological duties as the incubator of their children's eggs.

It was the king kit who had been of royal blood. And it was lucky that TK-ara had survived; for otherwise there would be no way for that bloodline to be passed on and continue.

A lot of pressure would be put on the ket's shoulders, though ER-ka refused to let it reach her daughter's sails until she was old enough to understand it. So she gave a discontented flick of her tail in the direction of the chatter and, when the gossipers realised their voices weren't quiet enough to go unheard by their queen's sensitive skin, was relieved that the whispering stopped.

Instead, she was able to look around the beautiful room. Like her people, it was brightly coloured, with lots of blues, greens, and purples. Everything was rounded in shape (as was the popular aesthetic for ck-kah architecture) with circular furniture and no sharp corners. Patterns painted and carved resembled the dappling of light that would waver through water and reflect off its surface.

There were water features, of course, and ER-ka's people lounged casually within them like you or I might lounge in a comfortable armchair. Potted plants (though, the pots were more like fish-bowls) decorated every spare surface. ER-ka saw, but did not acknowledge, that one of the many wait staff had hidden herself behind a rather large mass of these plants to have what was the ck-kah equivalent of a smoke break. Instead, she simply ignored the inappropriate behaviour and looked down to her daughter to click out a reminder of her deep, unconditional love as she carried her to the large window.

She told the little ket, as they looked out together at the beautiful nebula surrounding them, that one day the

world would be hers to care for.

The child responded with joyous clicks and squeaks, and grew so excited that she wiggled in her mother's grip— And then, *tragedy!* As she dropped her large blue lolly.

Many hands grabbed for it, but none caught it as it hit the floor and rolled, accidentally kicked by a hurried foot, and caused a ruckus to break out.

But TK-ara did not cry or tantrum as she watched servant and celebrity alike scurry after her dropped treat. For, despite her age and how spoiled she had been as a royal princess, she was not a difficult child. She trusted her mother, and knew the lolly would either be retrieved or replaced, and knew there was no cause for fuss as it rolled across the floor to one of the humidity vents and teetered for a moment before finally falling through the grate and into the deep, dark hole below.

Part 3: The Stairwell

The lolly fell far and long. The vent's atmosphere was a stark contrast to the rest of the ship; rather than bright and cheerful, the vent was dark and solemn.

Think of the wettest, most dankest alleyway you've ever had to walk through, and put it inside of the most rusted tin can you have ever found discarded to the side of the road. Then, put that inside of a box, throw in some beach sand, and shove on the lid with force so only tiny specks of light shine through the crumpled cardboard.

That is how the inside of this vent felt.

Which, might have been okay if it was *only* the vent that felt this way. But, as it was, the vent opened up into a stairwell. And this stairwell was not much of an improvement.

Some might argue that the stairwell was *worse* than the vent— Because at least the vent was not full of strange rat-like creatures that skittered and nipped at each other. Though, as nobody had actually been inside the vents, there was no way to prove who was actually correct. In fact, it was not something anyone really thought to even argue, as very few people actually used these stairs.

Still, despite the rarity of their use, gentle, soulful singing echoed through the stairwell with no music to accompany it. It came from below, fading as it rose until it

fell silent at the top of the long stairs and was replaced by the muffled sounds of the princess TK-ara's birthday party.

The song was, as you may be familiar with, a version of *We Are Stardust*. Though unlike the song you would be familiar with, there was no hopeful tone to these lyrics. Instead, the voice that sung it cracked with misery; trembling on the long notes and threatening to break into sobs.

The lolly fell, bouncing on the stair railing and then dropping off the side down towards the engine room, and the sound of its metallic clang caused the singing voice to go quiet. And as the sorrowful voice stopped singing, so too stopped the quiet footsteps that echoed through the ship.

Without sound, the stairwell seemed even more desolate.

It was so dull and grey. The only lights were small dotted LEDs along each stair's edge. To you or I it might resemble a cinema staircase; only it was cold and metallic, instead of carpeted and crunchy with discarded popcorn.

The lights were so dim that, as one looked down the old stairwell, they would fade into nothingness as if being swallowed by a black shadowy mist.

Like the rest of the ship the stairwell was wet. Only, as it was not cleaned regularly, it had patches of algae growing over all of its surfaces, clinging to the dripping pipes that criss-crossed over the large open spaces.

A droplet of water fell, then, from a pipe above the stairs, and landed between the eyes of a very colourful alien, and Tindina Korric was brought back from their thoughts as they shook their head and wiped the droplet from their face with one of their many arms.

They were a different race to the ck-kah that partied above; a rette alien. Rettes resembled more a jungle spider than an aquatic seahorse, with six arms, large fangs, and crests made from rainbow cuticle that mimicked insect wings and ran down their heads, backs, and the joints of their limbs like decorative spines or feathers might on a fantasy creature in a children's picture book.

The rettes, like the ck-kah, often thought of themselves as the most beautiful creatures in the universe.

Though, Tindina was not considered to be a very attractive rette. They were too old. With too many scars and cracks from the fights they would get in at the pubs they

frequented. And their body, which was green with pink markings, was simply too dull to match the rette standard of beauty. And their crests, with their base of yellow, blue, and green, did not sparkle like the most attractive of their kind's might have sparkled.

This was of no concern to Tindina, however, as they had a wonderful personality and didn't need to be young and beautiful to make friends or find love.

And it might have been just as well, as their red-and-black work uniform would not have been considered very flattering. Nor would other rettes have been very impressed by the meal that Tindina carried on their tray; steaming soup made from animal broth and root vegetables, and five different cups of coffee. This coffee was (probably much to your surprise) regular human coffee like you or I may drink. It was something that Tindina's late husband had introduced them to, as their husband had been a human who liked coffee, and Tindina had enjoyed the way the hot caffeine made their endites tingle.

Overall, Tindina might have been perceived by their own culture in the same way our culture might perceive someone wearing unwashed sweatpants and drinking multiple 2-litre bottles of visibly out-of-date apple juice.

There was nothing wrong with it, truly. But most would not be interested in joining in this sort of activity and may walk a little faster to avoid being invited.

Like many rettes Tindina was, biologically, the equivalent of a human female. But they were not a woman. For the idea that an alien such as a rette would ascribe to human genders, after millions of years evolving without contact to humans, would be an absolutely insane idea to have.

No. For though rettes only had two common sexes, the alal and the tanar, they had twelve socially acceptable genders; all of which filled specific cultural niches.

The masculine identities of the rettes were as follows: alal, ala, fara, larnat.

Though, that doesn't matter, as Tindina was not a masculine gender.

As such, you might like to know the feminine genders of the rettes: tanar, tisar, tensa, and rahsit.

However, the knowledge of these genders is of no real concern to us as, though Tindina was the biological

equivalent of a female, they were not of a feminine gender.

In fact, if you called Tindina a woman, they would spit a large glob of guck (guck being a mix of phlegm, stomach acid, and venom) at your face.

No. Tindina was one of the androgynous genders, of which included: iih, atah, natis, and barsa.

Which of these identities Tindina resonated with is, frankly, none of your business.

But we place our tangents aside, as the singing started again from where it had paused, and Tindina clicked their mouth pieces together before continuing down the stairs; their footsteps echoing quietly as they descended towards the voice.

The song trembled with a crack of grief as Tindina reached the bottom of the staircase and the rette with the coffee cups clicked their mouth pieces again, this time in a way that might be compared to a sympathetic *tutting* sound, as they laid their hand on the door's handle to open it.

The moment the latch *clunked* the singing cut short and the prisoner scurried from his place on the floor to the very back of his cell, to hide within his damp blankets.

Part 4: Humanity

It is important, now, that humans are discussed a little more in-depth than merely as reasoning for Tindina's strange dietary habits. You may think you know humans, being one yourself, but it is not to be forgotten that these humans are a little different from the humans of your time and world; these humans I'm telling you about had spent many generations (thousands, perhaps) living in space and in contact with aliens. And so, though they were as human as you and I, and share our beautiful range of emotions (of which my personal favourite is love, and I recommend you consider which is your own), there are some important things about humans that must be discussed in the context of this world you are yet to experience.

One particular trait of humans was that, unlike most other races, they rarely thought themselves the most beautiful in the room; each human would gaze upon the strange and different bodies of those that travelled through the stars, and admire each of them as if they were a hand-crafted work of art.

Unusual, considering just how different humans appeared from most other races.

They were often described by the aliens around them as a gangly, always-upright lot whose bodies couldn't seem to decide if they wanted to be bald or furred. Different humans sported different amounts of bodily hair of all different lengths and textures. No two humans had fur exactly alike. Some would grow it so thick and curled their skin struggled to breathe and would come off in flaky chunks known as *dandruff*, while others would be bald and smooth from head-to-toe and oil themselves to a shine.

And to make it extra confusing for the non-humans around them, humans often dyed, shaved, or otherwise styled this hair in unnatural ways (I'm sure you, yourself, can think of a few styles already!). Especially the mops atop their heads and trails around their external genitals— A body part of which humans have always seemed *far* too willing to show off and share with the universe. Anyone who dared consent to see human genitals would often come out of the experience changed, especially when faced with the horror of knowledge that many humans didn't only violently pierce metal through their ears, noises, and lips... but through their extremely sensitive reproductive organs, as well.

Tindina had, at one point, enjoyed the bedded company of one such human. A daring man, Tindina's husband had not only had metal embedded within his glans, shaft, and scrotum, but he had periodically put bleach (an extremely potent toxin that could completely burn off and dissolve a *rette's* crests in only a few minutes) directly on his reproductive organs and face in order to whiten the hair so that coloured dye would take to it more efficiently. It had been a part of what Tindina had found so endearing about him, and if they'd had the biology to pierce or dye or tattoo themselves, they knew they would have joined him (but, instead, they had settled for decorating themselves in non-toxic temporary tattoos that stained their exoskeleton until their next moult).

When all was considered, humans were an unusual lot.

They would turn themselves into art. And it didn't stop with hair dyes and piercings— Not even with their *tattoos* or their *implants* or their *plastic surgery*.

No. Humans, seeing the beauty of the creatures of the world, had adapted their very DNA so they might embrace that of the other races and bear children outside of their own

genetics.

This was considered by many of the universe's races to be the beginning of humanity's decline; as so few pure-blooded humans now remained in the universe, it was reasonable to say they were teetering on the edge of extinction. And it was all because of that modified DNA.

However, unlike others in the world, humans embraced the traits of their mixed-blood heritage. A human was a human, regardless of how human they outwardly appeared or how many generations ago their human ancestry was to be found; even a single drop of that strange blood gave them the right to the title of *human*. Even if they were the mixed lineage of a hundred different planets, that one human ancestor in their blood was often an integral part of their identity. And, of course, this identity was not without its community. Human-populated planets were the most colourful and diverse; with bloodlines and cultures pulled from all corners of the universe, shared willingly with their neighbours.

It had been the beauty of humanity's unity that had brought Tindina to their knees when they had moved with their husband to Earth to care for his ageing parents. Despite every person looking so vastly different from one another, there had been a sense of *belonging* and *acceptance*; one that they, being an outcast on the fringe of their own *rette* society, had never experienced before that moment.

And it was for this love humanity had shown them —so willingly accepted, simply for their marriage to a human—that Tindina always felt a kinship with Earth and its inhabitants. And it was for this kinship that Tindina had felt a soft spot rubbed raw at the sound of such a beautiful and familiar song sung by such a sad and mournful voice.

And it was for this soft spot that, when Tindina saw the man they had been set to guard was a pure-blooded human with mostly-healed facial wounds and filthy, tattered clothing, they couldn't bring themselves to follow protocol, and tried to start a conversation.

Part 5: The Prisoner

The Exalted Aqua's brig wasn't a large one; the planet rarely found itself in battle, with the ck-kah being a peace-loving race who only found their way into the stars after all major wars had already subsided, and so there was

really no reason for a brig to be made or maintained, past the intergalactic travel laws deeming it a necessity in case of emergencies. Sometimes the brig of the Exalted Aqua might be used for storage, but more often than not it went completely ignored. Having a prisoner was a rarity. In fact, the only reason for the man aboard today was a request from a neighbouring planet on good terms with CK-CK, to help quietly move the prisoner from their own cells to what was to become his final resting place.

And of course the ck-kah had agreed. They were passing by both planets on their trip, anyway, and it would strengthen the bond between their governments and set a good example for TK-ara on how to handle future diplomatic missions.

Not that the princess actually understood what was going on. She was far too young to know what a brig was; let alone that the prisoner inside of it was being taken to his death.

No. As far as she knew, they were carrying some "special cargo" for the funny little moth-shaped representative who had tapped her forehead with affection and wished her an uneventful pupation.

She didn't know that the cargo was a person, let alone a criminal. And she had no idea that they were in the brig— Much like Tindina now was, now, as they kicked the stairwell door shut behind them and gave a clicking muttering as they looked around.

The brig was better lit than the stairwell, though it was still damp and its pale grey-white walls showed the water damage creeping over the cheap paint. The dented lockers to the right of the door were algae-coated from all of the wet in the air, and from within the wall behind these lockers came the scrabbling of the rat-like creatures that lived in the stairwell.

A notice board with the guards' schedule sheet had been deliberately placed over one of the worst stains in the room to hide it; though it did a terrible job and the ugly mark still peeked out from underneath its bottom.

And under the hint of a stain sat a small square table. And on the table sat a clipboard and pen. Both these items were brushed to the side by Tindina as they placed down their coffee and soup.

They sat in the lonely chair, flicking their rainbow crests in a silent greeting, before leaning back. They threw all four of their feet up on the table next to their food

and on top of the clipboard, resting one set of their hands behind their head as the other pair folded casually in their lap.

The ambience of the room as Tindina got comfortable was, in all honestly, a bleak one. So grey and cold and hopeless. There likely wasn't a more miserable sight on the ship.

Still, Tindina's food steamed near their feet, and they flicked their head crests again to communicate curiosity as they glanced to the human in the cell.

'You have a lovely singing voice,' they began. Though, rather than continuing, they settled for clicking their mouthpieces quietly as the form under the blankets pulled itself tighter in a way that they thought seemed rather familiar— It was an action their son had performed, once, as a teenager, after being publicly rejected by a rather pretty boy in their high school electronics class.

This human was obviously embarrassed to have been overheard.... So, with the rette version of a sigh (which to a human, might be perceived as more of a squeaky raspberry noise), Tindina changed the topic.

'I'm taking over Tartak's shift for the night,' they said. 'It's just like her to not wait to be relieved— You shouldn't have been left alone. I'm sorry that she did that to you. No respect.... At least you got a moment of privacy, hm?'

There was no response.

So Tindina, being rather smart and resourceful after living such a long life, used a foot to retrieve the clipboard from the table. They passed it into their hands, and then looked over the information on it casually.

'Alec Star-Strider, huh?' they said aloud as they examined the photo that had been taken of the man upon his arrest.

He was heavy-set, with brownish-tan skin like many humans had. Tindina could tell that his facial features —the ones that weren't obscured by the bruises and scratches— were soft and feminine. Though, as Tindina brought the photo closer so they could examine the severe-and-permanent-looking injury over Alec's right eye, they thought it might have been difficult for others less-acquainted with humanity to recognise the hints of human femininity that the man carried. Especially when everything else in the way he presented himself had so deliberately been chosen to scream

out as loud as possible:

Male! Male! I'm a male!

It was very clear to Tindina that Alec was, in fact, actually genetically female. But coming from the rettes, with their twelve acceptable genders, they barely flicked a crest at it and continued reading the man's documents.

When their eyes lay on what crime Alec had been charged with, Tindina dropped the clipboard with a *clang* that echoed loudly through the otherwise quiet room, and froze in shock.

They were quiet for a long moment. And it was during this long moment that Alec half-emerged from his blanket, a look of concern peeking out from behind his filthy, unchanged bandages as he (still wrapped in the blanket) crept forward to watch Tindina as they sat in their surprise.

His thick metal handcuffs brushed the cell's bars with a quiet *tink-clink* that caught Tindina's attention. When the rette saw the worried look on Alec's face they removed their feet from the table, sitting properly as they took on a serious-and-reserved energy and vibrated all of their crests with a communicative buzzing; surprise and disbelief.

'You killed Heklic Tilik?' they asked. 'You're the one who murdered the darabet senator?'

Alec eyed Tindina for a moment, fiddling with his cuffs, before looking away with a heavy, saddened sigh.

Tindina responded to his sigh with another loud buzz of disbelief.

It was not an easy thing to believe. Not at all! The darabets were a humongous people, with their shortest adults standing at least three times as tall as Alec (close to 6 meters; or two of your service stations stacked on top of each other, if you need a visual). And they had venomous fangs, knife-like tail-barbs, and six arms adorned with claws that could glide through steel like scissors through paper. They were known for being one of the largest and strongest intelligent races in the universe; the thought that this man, who struggled to hold up the weight of the cuffs around his wrists, had killed their *senator* —one of the biggest and strongest darabets ever known— was an absolutely ludicrous one!

In fact, as Tindina tried to imagine the pair together, they found the image to be so ridiculous that they laughed aloud at it, a noise that was eerily humanoid. 'Great bloody Skark! You don't look strong enough to kill a darabet! You

barely look like you'd be strong enough to stand up to me! How on Crusibis did you manage to kill Heklic?!

An inaudible mumble followed the question, and Tindina buzzed again.

'What? I didn't catch that.'

Another inaudible mumble, as Alec's gaze cut back to Tindina.

'I'm sorry, I'm old. I can't understand when you mumble—'

'I didn't do it!' he turned fully to Tindina, now, tears in his single exposed eye as his breath trembled and he shook with frustration. 'I didn't kill Heklic. I was trying to stop the bleeding!'

Unsure what to say, but finding that idea *much* more believable than the last, Tindina picked up their soup and held it to their mouth, dipping their fangs into the warm liquid as they slurped it up. They retrieved the dropped clipboard as they drank and, after passing it from foot to lower arm to upper arm, began to reread the information.

When they were sure they understood what was on the page, they put down their empty bowl and wiped their mouth and fangs on the back of their sleeve.

'It says you had two kilos of moondust on you,' they commented. 'I've heard a moondust overdose can put people in a frenzy. Especially vertebrates and warm-bloods.'

'Ugh, I wasn't on drugs.'

'You sure about that?'

'Rainbow's rays...' Alec rubbed the bridge of his nose (briefly, before seeming to realise how much it hurt and flinching from his own touch) and heaved a long and heavy breath. 'They found the drugs on me. Not in me. I was making a delivery.'

'To Heklic?' Tindina asked, retrieving one of their coffees and sipping loudly at it.

'Mm,' Alec grunted his response. 'And trust me when I say I'm not about to go and snort half a million chips worth of moondust that's not mine. That's how you end up dead!'

Tindina gave a smug look as their mouth-pieces clicked together in humour, and they lowered their now half-empty coffee cup. 'Dead like a darabet?'

'Shut up....'

Tindina picked up another cup of coffee in a different hand and, after using it to motion to Alec, poured part of it into their half-filled cup to mix the two drinks

together. 'You know,' they mumbled as they drank. 'I believe you, when you say you didn't do it.'

Despite his predicament, Alec's hard look softened, and he hummed out a note of acknowledgement to Tindina's statement.

'I'm curious, though, you must have seen something...' Tindina's mouthpieces clicked noisily, and their crests flicked and buzzed as Alec looked away from them. 'Oh, you did, didn't you? You know who it was who really killed the senator! Why didn't you say something?'

'It wouldn't change anything.'

Alec's voice was, perhaps, the most miserable voice Tindina had ever heard in all their many years of life. It pulled at all three of their hearts, making them feel a pang of sympathy.

'You don't know that,' they said. 'You're being put to death for a crime you didn't commit.'

'I do know that. And the government is well aware I didn't kill him. But they need someone to blame, and I'm already a lost cause with a record long enough to wallpaper a room with.'

'Delivering drugs isn't comparable to murder.'

'It is when you work for-' Alec cut off, then, his entire body tensing as he went quiet and retreated to his bed.

Tindina had seen the fear in the man's eye as he'd caught himself mid-sentence, and so they didn't say anything as he curled up and shuddered. No. They simply finished their coffees -all of them- and checked over the clipboard again.

It disgusted Tindina, that an innocent man would knowingly be put to death. And they vocalised this disgust with a very human-sounding scoff. The kind their husband might have made, back when he was alive.

It was a strange thing, Tindina thought, that this man knew who had killed Senator Heklic, but wasn't willing to say. Not even with the threat of death looming over him. Perhaps, if they could convince him to tell them who had really done it, they could help to save his life....

'Dead like a darabet,' they said quietly to themselves, before throwing the clipboard noisily back onto the table and stretching. They then spoke louder, directing their voice towards the man in the cell. 'Why are you so scared to say who did it? If you're being put to death anyway, there's not much worse that can be done to you.'

A laugh –one of sarcastic disbelief, not of true humour– answered them. ‘I’d rather a quick, ethical execution, than what he’ll do to me if he finds out I talked.’

Tindina gave a click, holding back their retort that there was no such thing as an ethical execution. It wouldn’t bring the poor man comfort to argue about the topic with him, so he could call it whatever he wished. Instead, they leant back in their chair and buzzed their crests loudly. ‘Come on, kiddo. Tell me. I might be able to help.’

‘If I tell you, you’d be in as much danger as I would,’ was the retort. ‘I won’t talk.’

‘We’ll see.’

The sound of Alec kicking the metal wall was, in reality, only a quiet dull *thump*! But in the otherwise silent room, it was a deafening act of defiance.

One that Tindina ignored, as they sat up straight and tapped a hand against their chitin-jointed knee. They tapped loudly, timing each tap to a half-second, and gave a victorious flick of their crests when they heard Alec begin to tap on the wall in time with them.

Now, after living on Earth for so many years, Tindina knew a trick about humans and how to get them speaking:

Music ran in their blood.

Quite literally, too.

Something, long ago, within humans, had been changed. All that fuffing about with their DNA and genetic code wasn’t completely without consequence, and at some point during the modifications, an uncontrolled urge to respond to song had been hard-coded into human brains. You might even recognise the part of the brain that was accidentally enhanced; that frustrating part, that constantly plays the most annoying songs in the back of your mind when you’re trying to focus on an important task. It became an uncontrollable instinct to respond to it.

So, to get a human speaking, you had to get them singing.

And Tindina, having raised a half-human son (who was, to be noted, around the same age as Alec; another reason for Tindina’s urge to break protocol), knew exactly how to get a young man to slip into song.

Especially a young man who they already knew liked to sing.

Tindina gave a buzz of their crests, humming musically up and down a scale of notes they had learnt back on Earth....

And Alec sat up in bed, a furious look on his face as he hummed back. He knew exactly what Tindina was doing, but it was clear he couldn't stop himself from harmonising with the rattle as they gave a howl-like note.

'You have a lovely singing voice,' they told him, a smug clicking echoing in their words.

'Fuck you!' Alec snapped.

'Now, now,' they sung, lowering their tone into a soft, soulful melody. 'None of that, young man! I know! What music! Is!'

'No!'

'I know! How humans! Are!'

'Shut up!'

'I have! A human! Son!'

'Kill yourself!'

'If, not you, then who?' they sung. 'If not you, then who?'

Alec covered his ears, giving a loud groan, and threw himself back down into the bed sheets.

'You saw something! What did you see? I believe you, let me help you! Who has framed you for this crime?'

'I can't tell you!'

'You can trust me.'

'I can't trust anyone!'

'Tell me who it was. I only want to help.'

'I caaaaaan't!'

It was a sung note, and the moment it escaped through Alec's lips, Tindina knew they'd won.

'Whooooooooo was it? I know I can help.'

'No! No! No!' the notes were hard and harsh; choked out against Alec's will. 'I can't tell you! You can't help me!'

'Who was it? Why did they do it! Give me an answer— Don't keep me on the edge of my seat?'

'Why not go and ask the whores that he beat!'

The rhyme was a victory, and as Alec slammed a hand over his mouth and gave a furious shout of frustration, Tindina rose from their chair and approached his cell, tapping on the bars with all four of their hands to create an enchanting and irresistible beat to tempt Alec's voice from his throat.

'Don't you want my help?'

'There are so many people, with so many motives—'

'I can save your life, can't you see?'

'-Just pick a random one to blame, and leave me be!'

'So that the same can happen to them as has happened to you?'

'Don't talk like you know me or what I've been through!'
the words spilled out of Alec, now, as an uncontrolled verse of lyrics that he couldn't stop. Even as tears welled in his eyes, and he rose to his feet, and he tried desperately to cover his mouth, the song still escaped him:

*You haven't met who I've met,
Or see what I've seen!
You haven't lived how I've lived,
Or been where I've been!
You can't imagine the violence,
The trauma or fear!
Never had people you love,
One by one disappear!
You have no idea,
Why I keep my mouth shut!
Frankly I'd rather my organs,
Remain in my gut!
He's a powerful monster with eyes everywhere,
And I'm already caught too deep in his snare!
The last man who betrayed him is still being found,
In space stations and basements and in holes in the ground.*

*What he does to deserters I dare not repeat,
In fear that my feet will end up in concrete!
So I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you in the dark,
Because you haven't seen what Tux the Face-Thief will do to a nark!*

Alec slammed into the cell bars, forcing Tindina to jump back and silence the musical tapping of metal so that he could finally stop his song.

But it was too late.

He'd said too much.

The name had come out.

And as Tindina stared down at him, their eyes wide and their crests pressed back in surprise, Alec realised what had escaped him and cursed out a sob.

'Tux?' Tindina asked, quietly. *'You work for the face-*

thief?'

'He.... I....'

The reality was much, much deeper than simply working for the face-thief; though Alec had no idea how to even begin to explain how he had found himself in a relationship with such a vicious, evil, abusive bastard of a man. How he had somehow, after years of prostitution and petty theft just to survive, become Tux's favourite consort and been pulled out of one hell directly into another. One that was somehow an even worse lifestyle than before, that had stripped what little autonomy he'd had left and made his impending death seem like a promised freedom.

So he didn't explain, and instead collapsed against the cell bars, sliding down them until he was on the floor. He lowered his hands from his mouth and twisted the cuff around his wrist into a more comfortable position, resting the heavy chains in his lap. 'I was helping Tux with a delivery. Heklic was demanding more moondust, but had refused to pay for his last kilo. I didn't think Tux would lose his mind like he did, but.... But he.... And then I.... I stayed behind, to try and stop the bleeding. Tux was yelling at me to leave but I couldn't. *I couldn't....*'

It was true.

Alec had indeed tried to save the senator's life. And his act of attempted heroism had been the reason he had been arrested. The government of the planet they were on needed someone to blame, someone easy to capture and point the finger at. Because if they couldn't capture the true perpetrator, as was unlikely with the ever-elusive, shape-changing Tux, it would have been seen as even more of a failure of government and risked a war with the darabet empire— Something that would have destroyed the tiny, already-heavily-indebted planet that had been hosting the senator.

And, so, despite overwhelming evidence that Alec had been desperately trying to stop the bleeding and save the senator's life, he had been beaten within an inch of his own and framed for the murder of Heklic Tilik.

'I....' Tindina stepped back to the cell, now, and lay a hand on Alec's shoulder. 'I'm not surprised that you'd rather be blamed for a murder, than admit to working for Tux.'

Alec trembled, burying his face into his knees. 'It was a

joke that I thought I had the right to live in the first place; let alone to be happy.'

'I'm sorry I pushed you,' it was a genuine apology, accompanied by a low, guttural gurgle that -to a rette- showed great remorse. 'I won't tell anyone what I know.'

And they meant it.

Part 6: An Unexpected Kindness

Alec had spent the better part of Tindina's shift quietly crying. And, politely, Tindina hadn't commented on it. It was clear to the rette, as the human had retreated back under his blankets and muffled himself into his pillow as much as possible, that he didn't want to be seen or heard in the moment. Something that Tindina could respect, as they'd experienced the same daunting emotions several times after their husband's death, and knew how embarrassing it could feel to have the want to be alone ignored.

And so Alec had cried. And cried, and cried, and cried, and cried. Quiet and muffled. Until his tears were all spent and he had exhausted himself into nothing but sniffing and sniffing.

And the sniffing and sniffing had eventually died down, as well, until he'd finally regained enough energy to sit up and wipe his eyes.

Though, Tindina still didn't say anything. It wasn't their place to break the silence. Not in their opinion, anyway.

Then-

BANG!

A loud-but-distant crash sounded overhead, followed by the sound of a joyful, childish squeal, and the clicking laughter of several older ck-kah.

Both Alec and Tindina looked up, as if expecting to be able to see the commotion going on overhead. But of course they couldn't. There were several thick layers of metal between them and the Exalted Aqua's main floors. It was rather surprising that they'd heard the crash at all, let alone the laughter or the squeal. It showed, truly, just how much fun the ck-kah overhead were having.

As the pair in the brig lowered their gazes again, their eyes met, and Tindina offered Alec a friendly nod that he returned with a weak smile.

'Sounds like they're having a party,' he commented, wiping away the last of the tears from his eye.

'You got the fly in the web, there. It's a pretty boring one, though. They don't even have any alcohol.'

Alec simply laughed. A small, breathless chuckle that would not have been audible, had the room not been so quiet. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah,' Tindina confirmed. 'Rich person things. You know how it is.'

'A senator?'

Tindina laughed, now. Much louder and more boisterous than Alec, it sounded almost unnatural to hear such a human sound coming from a rette. But it was simply how they laughed, now, after so long on Earth. 'That would be ironic!' they cheered. 'But, no. No. It's the ck-kah princess' sixth birthday. From what I overheard, it's a pupation preparation ceremony. So lots of food's involved.'

'Pupation?' Alec echoed. He had heard the term before, but never bothered to delve into the details. But then, before he could ask what, exactly, pupation for the princess entailed, he realised that that word *-princess-* had been used, and his eye went wide. 'Wait- Princess? Really? There are still princesses around? I thought that all the planets were run by senates and elected representatives, now. Not monarchs.'

'Most,' Tindina corrected. 'But there are still some with alternative governments- As rare as full blooded humans, really.'

Alec's smile vanished at the comment, and he looked unimpressed by Tindina's comparison. Though, Tindina ignored him and continued:

'Might even be less common, by the end of it all,' they said. 'I heard she's the last of the bloodline. Something about an accident? I don't know the details. Just that her and her mother were the only survivors.'

'Sounds traumatic.'

'Yeah,' Tindina agreed. 'I can only imagine what it must be like, to lose everyone you love all at once. I struggled enough when my husband died, and there was only one of him.'

Lowering his head, Alec slowly shifted so he was facing away from Tindina again. '*I don't need to imagine,*' he commented, quietly. Though he didn't elaborate. There was no way to put into words the horror of watching, from the crack

in the locked closet door, as his mother and sisters paid the price for his father's unpaid gambling debts. There was simply not enough strength in him to describe the way the spattering of blood on the walls would be forever seared into his memories like a branded mark on a meat-stock animal's hide. So, instead of saying anything else he simply flopped back over in bed and covered himself over again, curling his knees to his chest and shuddering.

'It sounds like the world's been far too cruel to you,' was all Tindina could think to say. 'I'm sorry. I hope your last days are peaceful ones.'

'Day,' Alec corrected.

The implication hung in the air like a heavy blanket on a line, alongside the even heavier silence. Both pushed down on the atmosphere in a suffocating way, until Tindina rose to their feet and made for the lockers.

'You know,' they began as they searched through each compartment. 'We're passing through the Desire Nebula. Isn't it considered a holy space by you humans?'

Tindina, of course, knew that they were correct; they had visited the Desire Nebula close to a dozen times with their late husband. But the question wasn't for their own confirmation, as much as it was to make Alec sit up and look to the roof again with a wistful longing in his uncovered eye.

Another moment of quiet sat over them before Alec finally breathed, 'Yeah. It's part of the Rainbow.'

'The Rainbow?' Tindina asked; though, they didn't actually need to ask. They were well aware of what the Rainbow was. They had learnt about it and its significance to human culture the day they had met their husband. But they hoped, as they pulled out one of their co-worker's uniforms from a locker, that talking would help Alec's mood.

'Yeah,' Alec whispered again. He smiled, then, his gaze falling back down to Tindina as he did. 'They're our oldest burial grounds. When we ran out of space on Earth for our dead, we burnt our ancestors and scattered them in space. They mixed with the stardust and.... And we've always joined it, ever since,' his smile fell, again, and his eye trailed to his hands in a melancholy way. 'I suppose I'll be scattered in Desire, if it's this close.'

'Most likely,' Tindina confirmed. 'Though, it'd be a shame for you to not see the nebula, before you become a

part of it. Wouldn't it?'

Alec huffed a heavy sigh, and then jumped, as he heard the lock on his cell door *CLUNK* loudly. He turned just in time to see Tindina swing it open.

'How about I take you upstairs for a look?' they suggested, holding out the uniform in their hands to show it off. 'There's a big window on the main floor. You'll be able to get a good look at it, if you're quick. We still have about one more hour before we leave Desire.'

Alec simply stared. It was hard for him to believe that this stranger was offering him such a kindness; almost as hard as it was for Tindina to believe that he had killed Senator Tilik.

Then, when Alec didn't take the uniform, Tindina threw it to him. 'Come on. Get changed. Before you miss it.'

'You're serious?' it came out with an almost scoff-like note to it. 'You're not just making fun of me?'

'I'd never make fun of a human joining the Rainbow,' they replied, their tone so firm that Alec knew they were being truthful.

'You're not scared that I'm a—'

'A drug-crazed murderer? No. I'm not,' the hard note left Tindina's voice as they clicked their mouthpieces together in humour and took on a friendly tone. 'I think that if someone was strong enough to kill a darabet, they'd be strong enough to rip ck-kah chromium off its hinges... I mean, I could probably do it if I tried hard enough,' one of their many feet kicked the bottom of the cell bars, and they flicked their crests playfully. 'It's made to be water and acid resistant, but doesn't really stand up to any actual force. And if you're struggling to lift your wrists when bound in it, I *highly* doubt you have the strength needed to pierce a darabet's skin, let alone all the way through to their lung.'

Alec gave another disbelieving scoff. Though, this time, it was accompanied by a laugh. And then, a whimper. 'You'll really take me to see the Rainbow? You'll really... you'll let me have that honour?'

'It's your right,' Tindina answered, simply, as they took Alec's wrists and undid his cuffs. They removed his bandage from his injured eye and gave a happy click as it was revealed that the wound was almost completely healed over—Scarred, terribly. And his vision looked like it might be

permanently impaired. But it was well enough that they could say he had just come back from medical leave, rather than answer questions about why he wasn't still in recovery.

And, as the eye was uncovered, it immediately filled with grateful tears. 'Nobody's ever been this kind to me, before....'

'Don't mention it,' Tindina commented, giving Alec a warm pat on his shoulder. Then, they gave another of their almost human-like laughs. 'Actually. *Definitely* don't mention it, or I'll lose my job! Hurry up, now! Get changed. We only have an hour, and there are a lot of stairs to get up.'

Part 7: A Connection and a Warning

It had been a good thing that Alec had gotten changed quickly, as Tindina had not been exaggerating the amount of stairs that there were to climb. Thirty minutes into their hour to see the nebula, they reached the top of the stairs, and Alec doubled over, wheezing as Tindina pet his back.

Reassurance meant nothing in this moment, as I'm sure anyone who has spent thirty minutes non-stop climbing stairs would understand, and Alec instinctively shoved Tindina's hand away from himself before being sick off the edge of the platform.

Short but loud, caused more by the squeezing of his struggling diaphragm than by an actual upset stomach, bile exited Alec's body and fell below, down and down, to join the previously-lost lolly in the engine room.

'Did they not even give you a meal?' Tindina asked, their disgust clear in their tone as they tapped two of their feet to express even more annoyance. 'You're supposed to be given food.'

There was no point in answering, really. Nothing would come from Tindina knowing that Alec hadn't eaten in two days; it would only serve to ruin their mood further. So Alec simply shrugged, mostly-ignoring their question, and straightened himself up.

'Are you sure about this?' he asked. 'What if we're caught?'

The response was an unexpectedly humoured one, though anyone who knew Tindina might have been more expecting of it than Alec, as they rarely struggled to find a reason to laugh even in the worst of situations. 'It's not like they

can sentence you to death twice, is it?'

It earned the laugh that Tindina was hoping for, even if it was a little breathless. 'But won't you get in trouble?'

'It's up to me to face any consequences I make for myself.'

A simple answer, that both eased Alec's nerves and made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle with anxiety. He wanted to say more, ask again if Tindina was sure, or make an excuse to go back down to his cell. But the look he was given warned him that arguing against this kindness would be disrespectful. That Tindina was well aware of what might happen to them. That it was their choice to make and questioning their ability to make it would insult them.

So Alec kept quiet, fixed his borrowed uniform, and took a deep breath to steel his nerves.

The door opened to the Exalted Aqua's main floor where the birthday celebration was being held. The brightly-coloured room jostled Alec's senses and he stumbled into Tindina, who quickly righted him and pet his back.

'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Nothing escaped from Alec's mouth as he gazed around at the shimmering water-like painted patterns and fish-bowl vases, but nothing needed to. His silent look screamed that he agreed in the beauty of the room. And of the people inside it.

Oh, he thought the ck-kah were gorgeous!

He couldn't help finding them beautiful, in their seashell and waterworm silk clothing, for he was human, and finding others beautiful was in his nature as much as singing was.

Few eyes glanced towards the door despite Alec's wide-eyes and shaky legs. He and Tindina were in uniform, after all, which meant they were the help. Below all these rich and important ck-kah, of course. And not worth looking at.

It made it easier, at least, as they ducked under the red-velvet rope and....

Alec's knees nearly buckled under him again when he saw it.

The Rainbow.

Visible through the window was that most amazing nebula, Desire. A swirling of every colour known, moving like glitter in coloured water as the Exalted Aqua slowly passed through the stardust field.

One step.

Two.

He tried not to fall on his unsteady knees or uncontrollably sprint in his desperation.

It was like the voices outside were calling to him.

A tear fell from Alec's good eye, rolling down his cheek as he reached the window and placed a hand against the glass.

They were singing to him through the glass. Singing in voices only he could hear.

They sung to him, and him alone, a message he could hear so clearly he might have thought it was being played from the ship's speakers, had he remembered he was on a ship at all.

It was like the nebula overtook him, lifting his soul from his body to embrace him within its own tangle of magic; it's own soft embrace.

*

*Do not let them change you,
(Do not lose the hope you once held)
You are stronger than you know,
(We promise it's okay)
And you're not alone anymore.
(You are one of us)
You must stay strong,
And teach what you have learned,
To the one who follows the foot-holes you leave behind.
(The cycles are always repeating)
Do not bow to the hatred of Others.
(They will never understand)
And protect Her,
(Protect Her)
From all that has hurt you,
(All that has already passed)
And from what He will become.
(He follows close behind)
Heed the warning,
(Heed our warning)
And make the connection.*

*

'Excuse my colleague, he's been downstairs most of the trip and missed our entry into the nebula. Just give him a

minute. You know how humans are about their Rainbow!'

The familiar, not-quite human sound of Tindina's laugh pulled Alec from his trance, and the world around him came to be again. As did the floor that he fell to as his legs gave out from underneath him.

Worried clicking followed his fall and, finally, the ck-kah of the room acknowledged him. Though he didn't acknowledge them as he panted and wailed. He couldn't stop the tears, even when Tindina pulled him up to sit and embraced him in their arms.

The ck-kah that Tindina had been speaking to was at his side, too, clicking in her native tongue with concern as she adjusted the baby in her arms.

Alec didn't realise he was in the presence of royalty. Though, even if he knew, it would not have changed the feeling that violently shook his body from the inside out as he desperately gasped for air through his sobs.

It was like he was choking! *Choking!*

And he was. As he coughed, a flurry of stardust escaped his lungs, and the surrounding guests of the party all squealed and stepped back in surprise.

TK-ara grabbed for the stardust, fascinated by the beautiful colours, but ER-ka pulled her back, her eyes and her sails retreating into her body as she flinched away from the inexplicable phenomenon.

Well. To *them* it was inexplicable. But to you and me the explanation is a very simple one: Alec was a human, just like you and I. And as we know, dirt turns to dust, dust turns to stars, and stars return to dirt. The cycle repeats, and everyone is connected.

The Rainbow was made from humans.

And humans were made from the Rainbow.

And in this moment, the humans of the past breathed through Alec, flooding his body with the magics of their souls. Filling him with such intense feeling it escaped him as a choking cough of colour.

'*Can't! Breeeath!*' it came out of Alec with a musical note. The voices gripped him; singing out of him forcefully and against his will until he was shouting: '*He comes! Oh, he cooomes for us all! To steal what should only be given freely! He is not ours! Though forged from our mistakes, he came to be! Ooooh! Ooooooh! We beg you run! We beg you to fleeee!*'

Panicked clicking filled the room from the surrounding ck-kah; was this some sort of act? Some sort of performance? Or was this man ill? Was this man having seizure or a psychotic episode of some sort? Was it his injuries coming back? How did humans heal? Surely this was not a part of the healing process of a human?!

The questions rippled through the room in a fearful way, growing louder as the man on the ground shook and screamed as if in great pain.

It was only when a small, soft tentacle found Alec's hand that the Rainbow released its hold on him, whispering one last verse in his ear:

*

You must bring her home again.

(Bring her home again)

Home again.

(Home again)

Bring her home again.

(Protect her)

*

Lungs suddenly clear, Alec's choking and wheezing grew quiet and he gasped in deeply, tears streaming from his eyes and blood trickling from his nose as he was finally able to catch his breath.

'Alec? Alec! Are you alright?' Tindina asked, rolling Alec over onto his side just as they used to do with their husband when he returned home drunk enough to be ill. They held him in place with trembling arms and forced themselves to speak in a comforting tone. 'Breathe. There we go. Breathe. You're breathing....'

TK-ara was pulled back, though she refused to let Alec go; instead she tightened her grip and clicked out in worry far too mature for a ck-kah who hadn't yet pupated. Perhaps it was the trauma of seeing her injured siblings pass, or perhaps she was simply an empathetic child by nature, but she refused to release her hold on Alec's arm no matter how much her mother urged her, and instead reached out one of her spare tentacles to wipe away the droplet of blood that had rolled down his face to hang from his cheek.

Panting and trembling, all Alec could do was shift his good eye onto the child. More tears welled from within him at the gesture of care and he gave a sob.

'Oh-kee,' TK-ara clicked. Her pronunciation of her second

language was rather impressive for such a young age, but it was still difficult to understand her thick, ck-kah accent as she softly stroked Alec's cheek and tried to comfort him. 'Oh-kee. Oh, ah, oh-kee.'

'What...?' Alec panted, meeting only one of her many eyes. His voice was barely a breath in his exhaustion, but it still made TK-ara's sails twitch.

'Oh-kee,' she repeated. 'Ah. Mm-ck. Oo. Oh-kee.'

'I... make... you... okay...' Alec echoed, each agonised breath burning his throat.

A series of clicks escaped TK-ara and it was clear she was happy to be understood.

Her mother clicked back firmly and continued to try and remove her daughter from Alec's arm. Alec watched the struggle, only vaguely aware of his senses slowly returning. He didn't want this young thing to be afraid—he'd been afraid so much at her age, inflicting it on another was a thought he couldn't bare—so he forced himself to roll onto his elbow and made a point to give the child a smile. As warm and reassuring as he could muster in his terrible state.

'I'm okay...' nothing in his voice made the statement seem true. Not his wheeze, his rasp, or the pained groan that followed it. But, still, he reached out to give TK-ara's tentacle a soft and caring squeeze. 'You did... a good job.... Thank you....'

TK-ara finally released his arm, and ER-ka hefted the little ket into her own to hold her close. She directed a grateful clicking sound at Alec (though he didn't understand it) before taking a step back and looking her daughter over.

And like ER-ka checked her daughter, Tindina checked Alec. Their crests pressed down and their hands worked fast to turn Alec's head this way and that so they could examine the stardust residue that had leaked from his mouth and nose.

It was a strange thing, indeed. And Tindina, with their personal-but-restricted knowledge of human beings, could still only guess what had happened.

And their guess was, perhaps, not fully inaccurate. Old human stories from the beginnings of time told of ancestors and prophecies. And just like those stories told of souls from the past predicting the terrors of the future, so does our story now. The warning Alec had cried out was not lost

on Tindina, and so with their suspicions prickling through their carapace they pulled Alec close so they could address him quietly aside from the still-confused room of ck-kah.

They had many questions (Who had spoken to him? What had been shared with him? Why had he been chosen to sing such a warning to people who barely spoke his language?) but in the end they only asked one:

'Who do we need to run from?'

The question brought back the last of Alec's sense and the hair on his arms rose to stand on end as everything fell together and he realised that he knew what this warning was. There was nothing else it could be.

Nothing else in this world could possibly warrant a warning from the universe itself.

'Tux.'

The name was barely past his rainbow-stained lips when the ship gave a vicious jolt and the alarm began to sound.

Part 8: The Boss' Favourite Whore

The takeover of the Exalted Aqua by the pirates was embarrassingly quick.

As you already know, the ck-kah were a peaceful people. With their ship made for pleasure and not war, they had little to no defences; no shields or guns or ship-dismounting repellents. Nor had they predicted an attack – not in this peaceful part of the system– and so they had very few guards aboard; the legal minimum for a party of this size.

Maybe, perhaps, if the other rulers of the ck-kah had still been alive, their experiences as nobles would have lead to better preparation in case of this exact situation.... But as ER-ka had grown up a servant and had no formal training in anything even slightly political, including diplomatic travel, she'd simply not had the foresight to be better protected when leaving her own planet's atmosphere. It was a costly mistake, though there was nobody to be blamed. ER-ka's advisers were also all new, replacing those that had passed in the disaster that killed her family, and only had as much experience with their jobs as she had with her own.

No. If any blame was to be cast, it should have been put solely on the shoulders of their attackers; those that chose

to act with violence, and not those unfortunate enough to receive it.

Near twenty-ships docked the Exalted Aqua, the one large fleet leader and seventeen smaller five-man vessels. Pirates poured into the room and restrained all the ck-kah, nobles and servants alike. Cuffs and rope were used to bind arms and acid-proof muzzles were strapped to faces to prevent any attempts at resistance.

One brave member of the wait staff, the same kat who had been shirking her duties behind the potted plants only a few hours earlier, tried to fend off the brutes. But she was met with force stronger than her own and found herself bruised and subdued; for as hard as a metal serving tray may be, there is simply no way for it to win against ten men with guns. Still, her effort was admirable and her courage important to note as, without her distraction, many of the other staff would not have found their way to safety within the emergency bay. Twelve escape pods were ejected and the distress signal activated, and the duty-shirking, tray-wielding hero gave defiant clicks of victory as she was muzzled and bound to a nearby chair.

Meanwhile, Tindina's weapon was stripped from them before they could take a shot, and the rette's limbs were all bound painfully tight. They were thrown heavily to the floor at the tray-swinging ck-kah's feet and before they could roll themselves upright another ck-kah was thrown on top of them.

Despite their rough treatment of the rest of the room, the pirates laid no hand on Alec as they hustled to capture their hostages—they had no need to, as the man stood paralysed with fear—and as they finished binding the last of their victims, whispers of confusion joined the fearful cries and whimpers. Questions as to why this one guard, over any other, had remained unharmed and unbound.

The reality was that they all recognised Alec as their boss' favourite lay, and refused to put a single bruise on him in fear of Tux's anger.

Likewise, Alec recognised almost all of the pirates. Cutthroats and mercenaries, every last one of them was a violent outcast who would sooner destroy society than rejoin it. He'd serviced at least half of them (maybe closer to two-thirds) before finding himself in Tux's grasp. And their sudden arrival when he thought he might finally find peace from them had caused his entire body to freeze.

Those finished with their work binding the party-goers began to circle Alec, keeping cautious distance as they examined his state.

His injured eye, his rainbow-covered chin and blood-stained cheeks, and the lines of his tears that streaked dark and clear through both were only some of what the crew acknowledged. That he was still alive seemed the most surprising thing to the pirates; they had thought him already dead. They hadn't expected to find him alive. Especially not here.

And then they noticed his clothes.

'What are you wearing?!' one humoured voice exclaimed, and Alec spun around to see a man he knew all too well; one of Tux's best men, who had many a time stood guard outside Tux's private quarters when Alec had been brought in from the streets to meet with him. A man who had just as many times turned his ear away from the door to ignore the sounds of abuse from within, and who would watch Alec leave with a careless glance that showed no compassion for shaking hands that fumbled to put pay into purse.

His name was Ippip, and he was of a race known as the kirit.

Now the kirits, much like the ck-kah, the rettes, and the darabets, considered themselves to be rather gorgeous people. Much more so than any other peoples in the entire galaxy.

And, again, from their own perspective, perhaps they were. For they were tall and gangly, with torsos as long as their legs and a prehensile tail that bore a spiked, poisonous stinger on the tip like a scorpion. Their arms, each with three elbow joints, were long enough that their hands hung at their knees, and they drooped with so much loose skin it gave the illusion they were wearing flared sleeves. Their lower jaws protruded from their flat, puggish faces, with visible teeth not unlike that of a common rat's.

They were a race that could almost be said to resemble humans with their bald bodies and upright postures. Though, if Ippip and Alec's personalities were anything to go off; humans and kirits were polar opposites.

The difference in their dispositions was easily and immediately demonstrated by their handling of little TK-ara; as Ippip now held the poor ket under one arm as she wiggled and squealed and cried with fear.

Alec didn't know much of the ck-kah language, but it was clear to him what the toddler was screaming simply from ER-ka's shriek as she heaved against the water feature her bindings had been tied to:

Mama, help!

It made Alec's skin crawl. But there was nothing he could do.

'Wonder what the boss'll say when he sees his favourite whore ain't so pretty anymore!' Ippip snorted, addressing the room more than Alec himself. 'Think he'll be happy his submissive little strumpet's been spared? Or do you think he's gonna be mad his best hump's now damaged goods?'

The betting started promptly, and the hostages were half-abandoned as the pirates formed a jeering crowd around Alec so they could see the severity of his scars.

All of Tindina's hearts sank as they watched the man's gaze drop hopelessly to the floor. The jeers for him to lift his head and show his wounds were sickening to the rette. Their own son was only Alec's age, after all, and they had already drawn many parallels between the two young men. It felt almost personal, now, as Tindina watched Ippip grab Alec by the jaw and force his neck to crane upwards towards the roof. It was almost as if their own son was the one on display. And for the young ck-kah princess to be squeaking and crying and struggling in that pirate's grip? It made every parental instinct in Tindina spark like static, and a furious noise vibrated through their body.

That was when ER-ka rested her tail over Tindina, quietly gaining the rette's attention without looking at them. She couldn't take any of her eyes off her daughter, not even one of them, and her sails quivered with the same fury that Tindina's crests buzzed.

Despite her inexperience in politics, ER-ka was not a stupid kat and had by now pieced together that Alec was the prisoner they had been transporting. It was more than clear to her that Tindina had brought him upstairs to see the nebula he would be joining on his death.... Still, despite Alec's unlawful presence at her daughter's celebration, ER-ka felt nothing but disgust at his mistreatment.

She had heard many whispers of similar taste when she'd first found her place in her beloved triad, and it was not lost on her that the objectifying language used by the pirates reflected many of the comments jealous nobles had

breathed about herself.... And even more-so, the humour at his injuries hit far too close to home; they spoke aloud many of the things she'd feared others thought of her when she'd looked in the mirror while her burns were still healing.

She gave a gurgle of hate towards the kirit who held her struggling baby and the poor human man, and she felt her acid glands bubbling as she swallowed down the urge to spit.

Clicking out an equally furious note of agreement, Tindina felt the front of their mouth filling with guck as they watched TK-ara swung around like a doll. They attempted to break their bindings, desperate to do *anything* to save the child, but it was no use.

And just as venom and acid filled Tindina and ER-ka's throats, so did tears fill Alec's eyes as he looked at the poor infant ck-kah struggling in the kirit's other hand.

His breathing was shallow and fearful as Ippip held him on display. Though it was not his own treatment that made his heart beat fast and hard.

Every squeak and squeal from poor TK-ara stabbed at him with vicious misery that sent tingles through his entire body.

And then... *anger*.

Hot like coal and different from anything he had ever felt before, Alec's stomach tensed and turned as he heaved in a sudden bout of emotion.

The pirates, seeing new tears start to roll down Alec's already-wet cheeks, all laughed aloud and nudged each other in humour.

Anger was not something Alec often felt. Not really. True, he sometimes became frustrated -as was displayed when he met Tindina- but actual *anger* was new to him. And it seemed none of those tormenting him recognised it as he clenched his fists and sniffed back a sob.

TK-ara was still just a toddler, so small and sweet. And when Alec had been suffering her first instinct was not to back away like the other ck-kah had done, but to approach and comfort him. It had been a beautiful thing. A kind of innocence that deserved nothing but love and care in return. And now she was being manhandled by a disgusting brute, and it filled Alec with such intense fury that it made him want to be sick.

'*You're hurting her,*' Alec muttered, almost too quiet for

Ippip to hear over his cohort's laughter. *'Hold her right, you idiot....'*

A sneer came in response as Ippip only half-heard the insult, and he squeezed Alec's jaw in warning for the man to backtrack on his words. The rainbow stardust on Alec's chin smeared Ippip's fingers, turning black at the touch of non-human skin. *'You're mumbling again, Alec. You know the boss hates it when you mumble. At least, when you do it without his cock in your mouth to excuse it...! But I like to think I'm a kinder man than him, so I'm gonna give you one chance to repeat yourself. Just to make sure you didn't say what I think you did!'*

It was clear even to those in the furthest corners of the room that Alec was trembling. And in the silence that followed Ippip's animal-like snarl Alec's short, ragged, snivelling breaths seemed to echo as loud as if he were shouting.

'Alec,' Ippip's voice was low and firm, accompanied by a cruel grin that twisted his flat face into a threatening and toothy look. His sick enjoyment of Alec's tears was all too clear as he leant in closer and snickered. *'What did you say to me?'*

'You're hurting her--' Alec's whimper cut off as his jaw was squeezed again.

'I didn't hear that.'

'You're--'

'Louder!'

'You're hurting her!' it was the most defiant tone Alec had ever dared to take with a member of Tux's crew. And though it was squealed out with sweaty palms and a quivering lip, it was clear it was said with anger and disgust. *'You asshole! She's just a fucking baby!'*

'Disrespectful whore!' Ippip released Alec's throat so he could raise his hand to the human.

The entire room held its breath, prisoner and pirate alike waiting for Ippip's knuckles to strike down onto Alec as the man closed his eyes and whimpered. But the kirit quickly thought better than to leave a mark on Tux's property and, instead of landing his blow, he lowered his fist. A low, raspy hiss breathed from him as he regained his self-control, and his lip curled and relaxed again as he fought back a snarl.

The room let out its collective breath, the pirates even

more relieved than their prisoners, and several shaking knees stumbled for balance as Ippip turned away from Alec and paced three steps in each direction.

Then, with a disgruntled grumble, Ippip turned to one of his crew-mates and growled, 'Go get the boss.'

Part 9: Tux, the Face-Thief

Now, before we continue, I think it is important to emphasise on Tux:

This man was foul.

A predator in every sense of the word, this beast of a man had beaten, eaten, and fucked his way through life with little regard for others' comfort or safety.

He was not human. Nor was he a rette. He was not a ck-kah. And he was not even a kirit.

At least, he was none of those things at that exact moment. Though he could have been, if he wanted to be. Because he was a shape-shifter. A creature that could steal and adapt the DNA of others into his own body so that he may turn himself into different species.

Nobody left alive knew what Tux the Face-Thief used to be. There were rumours, of course. But none were correct. Not even close. For it was such a strange and chance occurrence that it would take a million minds thinking a thousand theories a day to even skim close to the reality of Tux's origin. For he had not been of any intelligent race, earthling or alien.

Even by the end of this story only one within it shall have learnt the truth. And it is only upon their joining of the Rainbow that they shall be told.

But, unlike them, you do not need to die to learn of Tux's roots. For you, my beloved, I freely share the privilege of this knowledge:

An otter.

That was all he had been, once.

An Earth-born otter of the sea. A simple and wild animal with vicious instincts and a curiosity that would lead him to his fate.

It had all begun that day he had stumbled into the old human facility.

Abandoned, clearly. A natural disaster had once long ago split the ground beneath it and it had sunk and buried deep

underground where the sunlight could not find it.

A desolate place for such a monster to be made.

Tux had been escaping a pod of orca the day he was changed. He had been driven to the edge of a cliff —a wall, to him— by the pursuing hunters and chased back and forth until he found himself slipped into a crack in the rock. From there he had found himself within a system of dark caves that never seemed to lead upwards.

He was almost out of breath when he finally came to the facility and the pocket of stale air it provided. It stung his lungs as much as the lack of air had, and his head pounded like it had been beaten and rattled against stone. But, still, the pain did nothing to sate his curiosity. And the little creature began to wander and explore.

He found an ancient machine built by old humans. You have been told before of how the humans adapted their DNA so they could embrace the beauty of the aliens they found in the stars, and now you may learn that this machine was the science that allowed them to do so. Only here, deep in the depths where the sky had not been seen for thousands of years, it was not a thing to be celebrated anymore. Not by the otter that climbed on its top and sniffed curiously at the dusty metal buttons.

Click.

The otter's nose pressed too firm against a switch and the facility sprang to life. Lights flashed and sirens wailed, and the otter slipped and fell onto the machine's conveyor. The machine latched onto him, dragging him into its maw and strapping him down as it had the humans that had once volunteered themselves to change.

And as it had changed the humans' DNA to adapt and accept the genetic material of other races, it changed Tux's.

But the little otter had not been human. Not even slightly similar to one. So the machine, designed for humans and coded to run an exact sequence to create a specific genetic pattern, had run the code on an incorrect sequence and made the wrong pattern.

The machine withdrew from the creature as quickly as it had grabbed him, and nothing was ever the same for the otter ever again.

The critter now found himself with a most unique ability; that to absorb and store the genetic code of different species.

The first change was much like how common media might portray a werewolf's transformation; cracking bones, stretching flesh, and blinding white-hot agony that used to cause the creature to shriek out and writhe on the floor. But now he was used to the pain, and would simply take a deep breath and allow it to pass him over like a wave on the beach.

The first form Tux took was, as you might expect after being strapped into a machine made to modify human DNA, a human-like creature. Not quite a proper human, and not quite a proper otter. A halfway point between the two.

Something in-between. Something without any of the good of both things; something with only the bad.

Human greed was combined with animal instinct and the creature was forever changed for the worst.

Now that you know Tux the Face-Thief was born from an act of mechanical violence, may his intent and actions be clear as he continues the cycle and inflicts his own violence onto others. And though he has many an out to a better life, he shall never be changed from his ways. For though he is much like poor and pitiful Alec and violence is all he has ever known... he is also much unlike brave and kindhearted Alec, as it all he has ever wished to know.

Part 10: Vile Men With Hideous Motives

When Tux the Face-Thief emerged from his ship he was a huge, hulking beast of a darabet. Senator Tilik's DNA had proven itself quite useful; darabets were one of the largest intelligent creatures in the known universe and held quite a threatening authority. As you can probably guess, it was an energy that was useful in Tux's line of work. To be able to become such a massive creature with so much strength and such wonderful natural weapons was certainly an advantage for Tux. Though, of course, he was still a force to be reckoned with even in his smallest and most harmless forms.

That in mind, my mentioning Tux's enjoyment of Senator Tilik's DNA isn't to imply this was his first time turning into a darabet. He had absorbed plenty of darabet DNA over the years; he would have been a fool not to have at least one in his repertoire! But he'd never gotten ahold of such a fine, strong specimen before. Most of his samplings were of darabets in disarray. Weaklings and uglies and undersized

runts who came to him for money or drugs. But now he had access to the genetic makeup of a supreme individual and he towered over all around him. Even the doorways seemed to shrink of fear of his massive form as he ducked under them and strode, deliberately heavy-footed so his steps shook the ground, into the main event room of the Exalted Aqua.

His glare as his eyes scanned the room was furious. His orders had been simple ones, after all. Strip the place of valuables, grab the princess, and return to the ship. Ten minutes was all that it would have taken with the amount of men he'd sent. Twenty if there was any particularly rowdy guards to give his crew trouble. But now it had been nearly thirty minutes of waiting, and Tux was not known for his patience.

For it to have taken so long was annoying. And for his presence to be needed for such a simple task was *infuriating*... and it was never a good thing when Tux was angry. So he made his displeasure clear through his entrance as a signal to his crew that whatever held them up had better be important.

The pirates shuffled back, clearing a path from the door to Alec, and Tux's eyes widened as he saw the cause of his plan's disruption.

'Oh, this is wonderful!' the exclamation was joined by the sound of cracking, snapping bone and ripping skin as Tux's body began to change.

He made it look effortless as he marched forward without a care. But the sound of his joints reforming betrayed the agony it put him in, and the sight of his body contorting and changing was too much for the sheltered ck-kah nobles to bear. One was sick in their muzzle. Another passed out. ER-ka herself gave a shudder and swayed with illness as the darabet before her shrunk and changed from six limbs and a quadruped gait to four limbs and an upright stride.

Tux threw his arms up as his clothes fell from his body, and before they had hit the ground he had new robes around him, tied in place by the well-practised hands of his crew. The discarded cloth of his darabet clothes was dragged away to the side and folded.

As quickly as he made it across the room, Tux had turned human.

'And here I thought I'd lost my favourite cunt!' he shouted as he grabbed Alec in a way that made all sensible

people in the room cringe.

Despite the cheery tone, it was not a compliment. It was a show of power to all who saw it. An example of what Tux could do without repercussion. And more-so, it was deliberate humiliation that made every cell in Alec's body burn in embarrassment and shame.

There were snickers and whispers from the pirates, saying things I will not repeat here. Tindina gave an angry buzz as they heard a particularly foul statement from a nearby man and, with a chattering of their fangs, they aimed a kick at his ankle to knock him down.

He fell with a *thump* as his head hit the water feature ER-ka was bound to and the ck-kah flinched in surprise. When the pirate didn't get up ER-ka nudged his cheek with her tail, though she quickly withdrew it as she felt the sticky thick wet of blood. She flicked the blue-coloured blood from her tail-tip with a bitter click and cast Tindina a glance.

Both clearly hoped he was dead. Though they didn't have time to make sure of it as Tux took Alec's cheeks in his hands and gave a loud, exaggerate whine.

'Oh, my beautiful thing!' he cooed. 'What have they done to your face! Your eye, Alec! They've made you half-blind!'

Alec trembled at Tux's touch. It was all he could do. He was too scared to speak, almost too scared to *breathe*. Every fibre of his being screamed for him to flee, but he had nowhere to flee to except into the crowd of Tux's crew.

The reality of Tux's return to his life when Alec had thought with all his heart he was finally free of the creature was simply just too much to bear, and another tear found its way down his cheek, where it caught on Tux's fingers and smeared into the quickly-blackening stardust.

'Look at you, covered in all this hideous gunk,' Tux continued, snapping his fingers and holding out an expectant hand. He was immediately given the shirt off one of his men's back, and it was lifted to Alec's face to clean him of the blood, snot, tears, and now-ashy dust. 'There. That's better, don't you think? I can see that *beautiful* face of yours, now.'

The language Tux used was subtle, though it was not lost on Tindina in the same way it was lost on the ck-kah. As previously established, Tindina's experience with humans made it clear to them that Alec was female by birth but making every effort to be perceived as a male in life. And

as also established, the rettes had twelve socially-acceptable genders of which varied greatly in usage. And as also established, Tindina was not a conventional person like the noble ck-kahs of the Exalted Aqua, who always made sure to present themselves correctly as their biological ket, kat, and kit sexes; Tindina was an ugly, faded, coffee-drinking freak who married a slummy human with bleached pubic hair and golden genital piercings.

It was safe to say that Tindina, over any of the other hostages in the room, had the best understanding of why Tux's "compliments" made Alec cringe and close his eyes as if in physical pain.... It was clearly a crude punishment for being arrested. Tindina could see it in the way the corners of Tux's lips twitched and the edges of his eyes turned up in that very human kind of glee. Alec had ignored Tux's orders and tried to save Senator Tilik's life, and the humiliation of public misgendering was a way to put Alec back in line.

It made them furious to watch. So furious that the ck-kah beside them (the same one that had been thrown on top of them a half-hour ago) sensed the anger of their quivering crests through the vibrations in the air and rolled away in fear that the venom dripping from their fangs would poison him through his moisture-drinking skin.

When Alec didn't fight back, Tux pecked a kiss on his nose and turned to address the room. 'It's a good day, boys! We came for one princess, and found two instead!'

Alec's eyes closed again, a desperate and mournful look taking him over as Tux rounded on poor little TK-ara, who was still wiggling in Ippip's grasp and chirping out for her mother.

'Aren't you a cute little thing?' Tux snorted. He held out his hand to his crew once again and, as if they could read his mind, a knife found its way into his grasp.

A horrified ripple echoed through the ck-kah, drowned out by ER-ka's furious shriek as she lunged forward, desperate to break free from the water feature and get between this madman and her precious daughter. But her bindings held firm and her feet scraped the floor as she scrabbled in place, screaming profanities and violent threats in her native tongue.

Tux cut his eyes to her and grinned at her reaction. A humoured hum and mocking curtsy followed. 'Queen ER-ka, how

nice to meet you! I would apologise for my intrusion, but I'm not sorry.'

More threats and profanities followed the disrespect, but they only seemed to brighten the pirates' moods.

'Mhm, I see,' Tux rubbed at his chin. 'So she is as beloved as I've heard! Well, isn't that just perfect! What do you think, boys?' he turned back to TK-ara, then, and lifted his knife to rest on the soft skin beside her beak.

The child stopped struggling, then, and gave a nervous and confused squeak as her mother's clicks broke in anger and fear.

'How much do you think the ck-kah are willing to pay to keep their planet's last living heir safe from harm?' Tux asked. 'Let's run a little test, shall we?'

He flicked the knife and TK-ara gave a squeal as her soft and sensitive skin was broken. The cut was only small, but the droplet of blood that rolled down TK-ara's cheek brought a snarl from ER-ka and she instinctively spat, her muzzle filling with acid that splashed back against her own skin and burnt her snout.

But the scream that followed was not one of pain. No. It was one of rage. She hurled threat after threat at the monster-in-human-form and struggled against her bindings; the water feature she was tied to dragging forward half a step as it barely held against her maternal fury.

Tux just laughed and watched, knowing that the angrier the queen got, the more she would do to protect her daughter; the more she would pay to protect her!

Though what he hadn't noticed was that, in the same moment ER-ka had spat, Alec had moved between Tux and the young ket so that when the monster turned back from the ck-kah queen he was met with a different angry glare.

Genuine surprise raised Tux's brow, though it was accompanied by a grin.

'Oh, Alec,' he cooed. It was a voice so falsely sweet it was sickening. 'What are you doing, hm? It's like you think you're one of *them*.'

Alec swallowed, too scared to speak or answer, and as Tux stepped towards him he was forced to step back. Ippip moved from Alec's path, allowing Tux to begin an advance on Alec that had been performed many times before in more private quarters, and the rest of the pirates fell silent; all too aware of the severity of Alec's burst of defiance.

The monster licked TK-ara's blood from his knife, the child's DNA absorbing into his own as easily as water into a sponge, and he threw the weapon noisily to the floor as he took another step.

'You know better than to stand up to me!' he hissed. 'And I know you know better than to get between me and something I want! What could you possibly hope to gain by protecting them?! You know they'll never accept you! They'll never let you live! You're nothing but scum to them! Dirt on their shoes! They care about you as much as they care about the rat shit in the sewers! You are *nothing* to them!'

Tux forced Alec around in a circle, turning him like a dog might herd a sheep, and then advanced on him so quickly that Alec didn't have time to process what was happening until his wrists were in Tux's hands and his back collided with glass.

The last of the stardust vanished from the window as Alec was pressed into it, and he realised with a shudder they had left the nebula.

It was colder without his ancestors around him. Like he was suddenly alone again. Every sense in his body screamed of the danger he was in and yet he couldn't move to escape it. His heavy, panting breaths trembled out of him and he shook like a lap-dog out in the cold.

'But, my dearest beauty,' Tux breathed, leaning in so close Alec could feel the heat of his breath. 'You're something to *me*. I don't give many second chances. You know I don't. So don't take this one for granted.... Behave yourself, as you always have in the past, and I will celebrate that you survived this little mishap and spoil you rotten. You'll be mine forever and have any gift that your heart desires, no matter how big or small.... But you have to *behave* to earn it. Do you understand, Alec? You do as you're told. And you don't ever put yourself between me and my prey, again.'

Alec couldn't answer. He couldn't speak. He could barely keep his knees from buckling underneath him. And he certainly couldn't keep his tears from coming back once more to run down his cheeks thick and strong as he sobbed and sniffled.

All he was able to do was flick his gaze to the frightened little ck-kah princess. Held tight in Ippip's arms, TK-ara was reaching for her still-cursing mother with

the two tentacles that the kirit hadn't yet restrained. She was obviously terrified and confused, squealing and wiggling and desperate for ER-ka's comfort.

But Alec couldn't do anything to help her as Tux pulled him off the window just so he could slam him against it again.

'Don't you look at them!' Tux snarled. 'You look at *me*. You're *mine*. And you are to *always* look at me when I'm speaking to you!'

Alec didn't dare disobey. His good eye found Tux's glare and he stared for a long, silent moment at the man who held him against the window.

'That's better,' Tux's voice softened in reward, and he shifted forward to press his hips against Alec's own. 'Now, I want you to tell me what you are.'

Alec gave a squeak as he tried but failed to answer, and he swallowed before trailing his gaze down to Tux's chest, desperate to avoid the man's intense look without invoking his anger. But it only served to make Tux lean closer, pressing his forehead into Alec's in a sickening show of intimidation dressed up as affection that let him look nowhere else but into his eyes.

'What are you, Alec?' Tux repeated, his lips gently brushing Alec's own as he spoke.

Alec tried again to respond, but it barely came out of him. It was a whimper. Not even; just half a sound that was completely unintelligible.

'I hate it when you mumble, Alec,' Tux growled. 'You're always mumbling. *Tell me what you are.*'

A shudder was all Alec could muster. He didn't even try to speak again. Which only made Tux's lip curl up in annoyance.

'Don't make me make you sing,' he threatened.

Alec gave a despondent sob in response, and Tindina's crests rattled and their fangs dripped as Tux took in a deep breath.

'*Tell me!*' Tux sung, before stealing a kiss from Alec. '*Teeeeell meeeeeee what youuu are!*'

'I'm— *Yours!*' Alec choked out; the song escaping him in a loud, off-key note as his chest heaved in effort and grief.

Upon seeing the way that song was used to manipulate Alec, Tindina felt another gurgle escape them. A mix of the rette's most apologetic sound and a furious hiss of disgust,

it was directed at both Tux, for his foul abuse of such a sweet man, and at themselves, for using the same tactics to get Alec to speak with them earlier as that beast was using now. When they had sung to get a confession from Alec in the brig they had not known that it had been something used against him many times before. They found themselves surprised that Alec had been so forgiving about it; that he was so willing to overlook to the unwitting and accidental repeat of his abuse and accept Tindina's kindness. But Alec wasn't a spiteful person. And he knew that Tindina couldn't have known what he had been through. It hadn't even crossed his mind to hold it against them. They had meant no harm, after all. Not like Tux.

Not like this monster who stood before him.

'That's better,' Tux laughed. 'Now. I want to hear you to say it without a song to prompt you.... What are you, Alec?'

Feeling hopeless and defeated, Alec didn't know what else to do but open his mouth and try to answer the way Tux wanted him too. But he was exhausted and all he managed to squeak out was a quiet: 'I....'

'You're...?'

'I'm....'

'Go on.'

Another squeal sounded from Ippip's arms, and Alec couldn't stop himself from turning to look at the poor child as she cried out for her mother.

'Alec...' Tux growled in a warning tone.

Slowly, Alec turned back. He let out a long, miserable breath... but then TK-ara gave another cry of fear and he felt that unfamiliar feeling—that hot, burning anger—return to his chest and he met Tux's scowl with a glare.

'What's that look?' Tux muttered, his lip once again curling in annoyance. 'I'm keeping you either way, Alec. I'm just letting you choose if you spend your life in silks or in chains.'

A hostile mumble, barely audible, found its way from Alec's throat.

And Tux gave a snort. 'What did you say...?'

Alec repeated himself, only slightly louder than before. Three words, four syllables. But in a hiss that nobody in the room was able to make out.

It made Tux reel back to show his teeth; old instinct returning to him despite his current human form. He released

Alec's hands so he could slam his own furiously either side of him in a violent show of displeasure. 'STOP! FUCKING! MUMBLING!'

'I SAID I'D RATHER DIE!'

The shout was followed by a blow. Now free from Tux's grasp, Alec was able to make one desperate attempt for his freedom and with a burst of courage he struck at Tux. His forehead slammed into the monster's nose with a horrid CRACK that knocked him bleeding to the floor. Before Tux could even let out his cry of surprise, Alec had turned and lunged at Ippip with every ounce of strength he had in him.

The struggle was brief. Alec threw all of his heavy human weight into the gangly kirit and sent him crashing to the floor as he ripped the child from his arms and let his momentum continue forward.

The pirates all parted in surprise; not yet having understood what was happening, but still instinctively avoiding laying a hand on Alec in fear of invoking Tux's anger.

By the time Tux had rolled to his side and shouted for his crew to stop Alec, the man had already carried TK-ara out the event room's door and into hall to flee towards the docking station. And after him Tindina, ER-ka, and all of the ck-kah party-goers shouted for him to run. Run!

'Run, Alec! Run!'