

"Now I can know when I'm being insulted in an alien language," Julius Nix joked as he gestured to the small interstellar translator he was wearing on his left ear. It cuffed the upper edge of his ear in thin metal the color of antique brass. The model was the same that the Sisters of Celestial Harmony used in their missionary work, and probably had a more extensive database than anything he could afford. It had arrived at his office just the other day, along with a note "I hope human ribs heal quickly" and a payment to his bank account.

Father Dominic chuckled as he poured tea. "Do your clients often insult you?"

"Not the clients, usually, unless I'm turning them down. But if I always expect the worst, then I get to be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't happen."

The priest shook his head as he sat down at his desk across from his guest. "I can't decide if that's rather pessimistic of you, or oddly optimistic."

Julius shrugged and sipped the tea. This was the first time he'd been by to visit Father Dominic since the Celestialite business several days ago. He'd thought it would be good to give the guy a chance to get some rest. He also didn't want to seem desperate. This whole being social thing was kind of new, honestly. Well, the "just talking" kind of social.

"Have any more nuns contracted your services?" Father Dominic teased.

Julius nearly choked on his tea. "Nope. I might have turned them away if they had. I do have a case though, even if I don't expect it to amount to much."

The copper feathers on the priest's head puffed a little as he stirred his tea, "I'm glad to hear you have work. May I ask what the nature of the case is?"

Julius chuckled, "Yeah, like I said, I don't expect this to amount to much. A maintenance worker by the name of Jerry Renea claims to have seen 'weird glowing stuff' along the pipes under Sector Green-Five."

The Slanae's feathers puffed a lot. "Here?"

"I mean, not here specifically, it's a big sector, but yeah. Supposedly there's something glowy and unnatural under our feet... and since Jerry doesn't have any proof of it being there, the Guard won't listen to him."

Father Dominic frowned and poured himself another cup of tea, adding a tiny spoonful of greyish powder from a small bowl. "He has no proof?"

"Apparently not. After seeing it a couple times in a row, he went to the Guard to let them know they needed to send down an alien life specialist of some sort. A Guard rep went down with him, and saw nothing. Two days later, the glowy stuff was back again, but the Guard didn't want anything to do with him." Julius shrugged, "So, he comes to me."

"Then you will be spending several nights in the maintenance tunnels of the sector?"

"Not several, Jerry's got a job he hasn't been able to finish thanks to glowy stuff. I've got to find this thing tonight and figure out what it is."

Father Dominic chuckled. "If there's any way I can assist, don't hesitate to ask."

"I doubt I'm going to need any theological research, but if I need someone to be respectable and intimidating, I'll let you know," Julius joked.

"Happy to help," Father Dominic leaned back in his chair, relaxed, his fingers languidly stirring his tea.

Julius pursed his lips as he looked over his new friend. The rogue Celestialite Sister's venom had done a number on the priest, and he still didn't look a hundred percent back to himself. His skin was a little off-color, not as... plummy violet-black as it should be. His feathers

(or whatever they were) seemed thinned out, and his normally prominent cheekbones were *too* prominent.

"May I ask a question?" Father Dominic suddenly asked.

"Sure."

"Why does the Guard have such a low opinion of you?"

Julius sighed heavily. "One of my first cases, this guy wants proof his husband's been cheating on him. So I follow the guy, find out that yeah, he has been, but not with a regular lover. He just enjoys one-night stands and judging by the places he goes and the drinks they order, he treats his dates real well. Hell of a lot better than his husband. But I need proof, right? Picture of two men at a bar or at dinner doesn't mean anything, only reason I know sex is involved is word of mouth. So, I get the brilliant idea to go undercover. I fit the physical profile for his type, figure it's worth a shot, it works, and while he's cleaning up I transfer a copy of his transactions for the past couple months to his husband.

"After his husband gets the info and I get paid, I was arrested for unlicensed prostitution. Turned out the cheating husband was a member of the Guard and it wasn't hard for him to track me down. They also didn't have anything to hold me, so I just did a night in a cell as a warning. Later when a member of the Guard wants to hire me and I say 'no,' she spins a tale about it being she couldn't pay my rates, instead of my refusal being that I don't help domestic abusers track down their spouses.

"So, yeah. No love for the Guard."

Father Dominic was both impressed and appalled. "You were willing to go to such lengths for your client?"

Julius shrugged, "Not hard, done it before."

Father Dominic was confused. "Done... what?"

"I used to live on Luna, born and raised. Shit happened, needed to make a living. Didn't have much by way of skills, but I did have a great ass."

Father Dominic's feathers puffed a little. "Ah."

Julius mentally kicked himself. He was pretty sure sex work wasn't something priests were generally ok with. At least, that was the stereotype, right?

"When you say 'shit happened,' you mean a series of events of misfortune you had no control over, and yet affected your life and the opportunities within negatively?"

Julius smirked, surprised. "Yeah, that's what that means."

Father Dominic made a thoughtful sound. "Most humans do not use such idioms around me, I am glad to have the practice."

"I am more than happy to give you lessons in all the shit people don't say in front of priests," Julius laughed.

The priest smiled. "I would like that."

Julius was overwhelmingly relieved to hear it.

"You're looking better," Julius commented, "but still not great." Ok, maybe he wasn't much good at this small talk thing.

Father Dominic made an amused sound. "Healing takes time."

"Uh huh. Tell that to someone you didn't instantly heal his head wound."

"It wasn't instant, I simply stopped the bleeding and covered the wound with great efficiency."

Julius did not hide his skepticism.

Father Dominic made a slight shrugging motion and gestured to the small bowl of powder, "The supplement I use is not a perfect replacement, but it suffices."

"Replacement for what?"

"For my natural diet of certain organic materials. I must make do with what I can. I am on my way to full recovery, I will be fine."

It was obvious this was not a topic the priest wanted to discuss, which Julius found mildly alarming and suspicious. He told himself to calm down. If the guy didn't want to talk about his eating habits, then it wasn't anyone else's business.

"Have you been working?" Julius quickly added, "I guess you always are, technically, but I mean actual... work. Services?" He rolled his eyes at Father Dominic's amusement, "I'm asking if you've been resting after nearly dying."

"I have, though I cannot abandon my regular duties. Mass needs to be served, and I have an appointment in an hour actually to visit a sick parishioner. I did cancel today's confessional hours, not that anyone comes to them."

Julius sighed. "At least there's that." He stood, "Alright, I'm going to tell you to get more rest, leave you to your appointment, and grab a bite to eat before I go exploring maintenance tunnels."

"Good luck, Mr. Nix."

"Thanks. Hopefully it won't be too boring of a night."

The maintenance tunnels of Port Station were in need of maintenance. The guide lights were dim, if present at all, and bits of debris and whatever else managed to fit through a vent scattered the floor at regular intervals. Julius made his way through one of the tunnels under the Religious Sector slowly, flashlight in hand, looking for anything that might explain his client's insistence that something glowing was living down here.

He was headed toward the Athee garden, or at least he hoped he was. The job Jerry had been sent down here to do in the first place was to find out what was screwing with the greenhouse's water recycling. In the two days he'd been able to work glow-free, Jerry had spotted some green stuff on the ceiling along the pipes and figured he'd found the culprit, but hadn't been able to clear it out. Something about special equipment? He'd gotten a little sidetracked and Julius had lost track of the conversation, but the important thing was that the glowing stuff came back before Jerry had a chance to finish his work.

So here Julius was, holding a flashlight in a tunnel and looking around like an idiot because he wasn't sure if he was supposed to have gone left or right at that last junction...

He turned his flashlight off. If something glowing was down here, he'd be able to find it better in the dark, right?

"No, Julius, you fucking idiot," he answered his own question with a grumble. "Now you just can't see anything."

A guide light flickered on and off again in its death throes, casting the tunnel in pale amber for a moment before plunging back into darkness. Julius flicked his flashlight back on with a sigh and moved forward.

"I'm amazed any work actually gets done down here," Julius muttered. "Maintenance crew deserves a raise. And better funding."

Fortunately, it didn't take much longer before the flickering pale amber on the ground was joined by a glowing yellow-green overhead. Julius turned off his flashlight. The yellow-green shape reminded him of the purple vines on the wall of Father Dominic's office, but larger and, well, glowing, with a couple long leafless tendrils extended down. Jerry had been right.

The tendrils glistened in the dark, like they were covered with water condensation. "You're probably what's messing with the Athee water recycling, huh?" Julius wondered as he reached up.

The vine's tendril wrapped around his wrist as soon as he touched it.

"Whoa, ok," Julius tried to pull his hand back and found he was stuck, "serves me right I guess..."

The vine tightened, sliding up the sleeve of his jacket.

"Nope, we are not that friendly— fuck!"

Julius's skin started to prickle under the vine, growing into a burning sensation. Julius pulled, but the vine wasn't going anywhere. He pulled out a pocket tool and started hacking at the tendril as the burning worsened, pulling as hard as he could the whole time until finally the vine snapped.

Julius leaped back and peeled the tendril from his arm with a hiss of pain. He pulled out his flashlight to survey the damage.

"Oh. Oh shit."

A winding line of red, raw skin wrapped around his lower arm, a painful prickling persisting as the vine's residue kept slowly eating away. It seemed like it should be hurting a lot more than it was, but he didn't have time to think of that. He needed medical attention, fast.

Fortunately, he was friends with someone in Sector Green-Five who could help.

"Hope he's back from his appointment," Julius muttered as he made his way out of the maintenance tunnels and back to the Catholic church.

Father Dominic was immediately concerned when he saw Julius at his door, and just as quickly upset.

"What in heaven happened now?" he demanded with a gesture to Julius's arm.

Julius followed him inside, "I found the glowy thing."

"And, what, stuck your arm down its throat?"

Julius was defensive, taken aback by the priest's harshness, "It grabbed me! I wasn't expecting a fucking vine to grab me!"

Father Dominic turned to stare at him, "A vine?" He waved away Julius's explanation as he entered his office and pointed to the chair, "No, sit, remove your coat if you can, I'll be right back."

Julius managed to get his coat off, stifling a cry as he failed to keep the sleeve from brushing his arm. The pain had been worsening as he walked, whether because the wound was getting worse or some numbing agent was wearing off he wasn't sure. He was bleeding now, though, so maybe both.

Father Dominic returned, wooden box in hand. "Look away, please," he said as he kneeled by the chair.

Julius shook his head, "I want to see what you're doing this time."

Father Dominic frowned, "Last time, you said you were 'freaked out.'"

"Yeah, because it was weird, but now I wanna know what you do."

"It would be best if you didn't look," the priest bit, annoyed.

Julius was annoyed right back, "A glowing vine just tried to eat me on a space station! What the hell are you so worried about me seeing?"

Father Dominic's feathers sharpened, then wilted as he sighed. His voice was quiet. "Don't move."

Julius couldn't help but feel a little guilty at how suddenly dejected his friend looked, but he was baffled by where it came from. What could be so bad?

Father Dominic set the box beside him on the floor, opening it to reveal some sort of pale salve. He gently took Julius's arm and brushed his fingers over the pooled blood on his skin. Julius softly cursed, pained.

"I'm sorry," the Slanae said, his voice thicker, a little distant. "I should have used water, but... old habits. This will hurt for a moment."

He spread the salve over his hands before wrapping them around Julius's arm.

The pressure hurt a lot, but Julius barely registered it was there. He was too distracted watching his friend.

Father Dominic's eyes were closed, an expression of sheer relief on his face. His skin, which had never quite been the right color during his recovery, was returning to its healthy plum-black hue. His feathers slowly puffed out, the copper shining.

Julius's eyes widened. "Oh."

Father Dominic opened his eyes, but wouldn't meet Julius's. "I'm going to have to take more in order to counter the effects of the enzymes still eating at your skin. I imagine it will be uncomfortable."

"Go for it," Julius said, morbidly fascinated. It wasn't just the fact that the priest was absorbing his blood that held his attention— it looked like Father Dominic was trying very hard not to enjoy it. He wasn't succeeding.

When he let go, the wound was covered in a "bandage" of dark charcoal.

Julius stared. "Wow."

Father Dominic was silent.

"You look like you're feeling better," Julius said.

Father Dominic blinked in surprise. "Yes. Much."

"So, the 'certain organic compounds' you usually eat is... blood."

The priest glanced away, tense. "Not just blood, but that one is a favorite."

"Did you," Julius shifted awkwardly, "when you patched me up after those nuns knocked me around and you put your whole hand on my head, were you... tasting me?"

"I was treating your wound, but absorbing your blood was involved. It's the only way to shed the thin layers necessary to bandage the wound securely."

Julius blinked. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finally, he gestured to his arm, "You cleaned the wound by absorbing the blood around it, and then bandaged it with pieces of your own *skin*? That's the black stuff?"

"I used an antiseptic as well, I'm not barbaric," Father Dominic huffed as he closed the lid on the box of salve.

Julius leaned back as he processed this. "No wonder you didn't want me to look... what?"

Father Dominic was staring at him, momentarily speechless. "I suppose I'm waiting for the part where you leave in disgust."

Julius was surprised. "Does that happen a lot?"

"I try not to let anyone know." Father Dominic looked supremely uncomfortable. "Once, a parishioner realized the reason I never drank during the social hour after the service was I was 'drinking through my fingers,' as you describe it, which caused some fascination and amusement among the parish. That was odd, but acceptable. When someone curious started researching my species, they discovered we keep livestock much like humans do... except we don't need them to be dead to use them for food."

Julius scoffed, "Bet that caused a panic."

"It caused unrest. Most people thought the person spreading the information was being xenophobic and should have simply asked me anything they wanted to know, given me a chance to provide context. However, there were more than a few that found the idea disturbing and stopped coming. Of course, my parish is always in constant flux, with workers being transferred to other stations, retiring planetside, travelers who are only here for a short time and stop by for a service—"

"But rumors have a funny way of persisting," Julius finished the thought.

"Yes." He seemed to realize Julius was not, in fact, going to run away, and relaxed a little. "A fact you know far too well, I was saddened to learn."

Julius smiled. "Tell you what, you intimidate the people who insult me into an apology, I punch the ones who insult you in the face."

Father Dominic laughed a little, surprised. "Please do not. I appreciate the intention, but I wouldn't want you committing a violent act for my sake."

Julius shrugged with a grin. "If you say so, but no promises."

Father Dominic nodded once. "Did I take too much? Was it unpleasant?"

Julius shook his head, kinda touched he was so worried. "Nah. A little woozy, but some juice and a cookie and I'll be fine."

"Some... what?"

"That's a thing when humans give blood, juice to rehydrate and a cookie to restore your blood sugar levels."

The priest's brow furrowed. "Give blood to whom?"

"Seriously? Hospitals, blood banks? Not every human donates, but some do. If someone needs a transfusion, it's gotta come from somewhere."

Father Dominic looked stunned. "Yes of course. I never had a reason to think about it."

"You should ask your parishioners for donations instead of relying on that supplement powder," Julius joked.

"Absolutely not," the priest's feathers puffed as he quickly stood up.

"Holy shit, that's what you were thinking isn't it!" Julius laughed.

"I am not doing such a thing." He picked up the box of salve and paused. He looked torn. "I'm afraid I don't have anything you could eat, but I can make some tea."

Julius dialed it back a few notches for an encouraging smile and a polite, "Tea would be great. Thanks."

Father Dominic left the room. He'd never seen him so flustered, Julius mused as he examined his arm. Granted, he'd only really known him, what, a week? They'd had tea a few times but that was it. This was just so different from the collected calm he'd seen before.

Julius kind of hated that Father Dominic had to rely on what was obviously an inferior substitute for food, just because of alien (to the Slanae) social norms. No, he *really* hated it. Hell, he could snack on Julius anytime as far as he was concerned— and he was never *ever* saying that sentence out loud, even if it was true.

"Tell me about this vine that attacked you so ferociously," Father Dominic said as he entered with the tea tray.

Julius followed the conversation shift. "Glowed. It was on the ceiling, with some tendrils hanging down, and when I touched it it grabbed me. Looked like it was wet, probably messing up the Athee garden water circulation."

"Or the plant exudes a sap that enables it to keep a stronger hold on its prey," Father Dominic suggested as he poured.

Julius blinked. "That's a thing?"

"It is for a few species on my planet, and several on Earth."

"Well I've only been to Earth once, back when I was a kid, and never made a habit of studying the flora."

His friend smiled a little and stirred a hefty spoonful of sugar into a cup before handing it to Julius. "One of the human priests back home was an avid gardener, and brought a few Earth species with him—contained in pots and kept indoors, so as not to affect the environment, of course. I was rather fascinated. My point is that carnivorous plants exist on many worlds. Some of them are also illegal to transport through this station."

"Aha." Julius grinned. "Then I guess the first thing to do is figure out if this is one of them."

"I'll pull up a list of illegal plants from the Athee homeworld, as it was under their garden here." He activated his desk, holographic interface displaying with a flicker. "Then we can go back to where you saw it and confirm if it's a match, if necessary."

"We?"

"You clearly can't be trusted not to touch glowing alien life forms," Father Dominic teased.

"I didn't know plants could eat people!"

"It could have been poisonous, rather than carnivorous."

Julius hid his face in his hand. "I didn't think of that." He looked up and tried to defend himself, "You try growing up under a dome and see how much plant life you get exposed to. I mean, there were gardens, but it's not like I ever had a reason to go there."

"I can't imagine," Father Dominic kindly interrupted his rambling with a smile. "Is the tea helping?"

"I'm not as woozy as I was, so I guess so," Julius said between sips. "Thanks."

"Of course." Father Dominic manipulated his desk's interface, quickly scrolling through documents and pictures. "What do you know of the Athee religion?"

Julius shrugged. "Ancestor worship, fond of plants."

"The plants *are* the ancestors, or at least hold their spirits," Father Dominic corrected, then shook his head. "I confess, every time I have tried to discuss theology with my neighbors, I

haven't had much success." He paused to magnify a picture, "Ah. Is this what you saw in the tunnels?"

"No, that's too orange."

"Could it be the same species in a different color?"

"I don't think so, it's too... webby? There were just a few tendrils hanging down on this one."

Father Dominic brought up a different picture. "This?"

"Maybe? Thicker and, you know, glowing."

"Hm." He sorted through a few pictures, "This species can grow to be quite large. This is what it looks like while luring prey."

Julius pointed, "Yep, that's it."

"You're positive?"

"Absolutely. Don't even need to double check, unless this thing's got a look-alike cousin."

"Not that I've found. Are you recovered enough to walk?"

Julius appreciated the concern, but also had the unpleasant impression that it was rooted in some serious misinformation. "I'm fine, honest. You didn't take that much."

Father Dominic seemed reassured. "Good. Shall we, then?"

Julius shrugged, "Sure. Let's go to the garden."

"Good evening, Spirit Gardener Shokon," Father Dominic greeted the attendant with a small bow.

The attendant gave a small bow of his own, his three-fingered red hands folded over the front of his blue robe. The small tusks meant the attendant was male, or at least used male pronouns. Julius didn't know much about Athee biology or culture, but he did know they took their pronouns seriously and tusks were masculine, so there it was.

"Fatherdominic," the attendant turned the title and name into one word and added series of low sounds and hums that ended in a click, "welcome. You have brought someone?"

"Yes, this is a friend of mine, Mr. Julius Nix."

Julius got a smaller bow from the attendant. "Misterjuliusnix."

Julius glanced at Father Dominic, who inclined his head and shoulders slightly. Julius repeated the gesture to the attendant. "Um. Hello."

"Do you have a moment to talk?" Father Dominic asked before Julius could commit some sort of social faux pax. "We have a story to tell that is of importance to your garden."

The attendant, or Spirit Gardener as was apparently his title, nodded and led them through the greenhouse. They followed him to a pair of benches under the branches of a feathery leaved pink tree. As they sat down, the priest and detective on one bench and the gardener on the other, Father Dominic said, "Mr. Nix is a private detective."

"I am not familiar with this title," their host said.

"People can go to him for help when the Guard is unable or unwilling to assist," Father Dominic said. Julius thought that sounded too noble, half the time he was just digging through the dirty laundry of spurned spouses, but he'd go with whatever got them the info they needed. "I should let him explain why we're here."

Julius explained, keeping his language in check. "See, sir, I was hired by a maintenance worker who found something... strange. Turns out, there's an illegal carnivorous plant that's spread from your garden to the maintenance tunnels. We wanted to tell you first instead of taking the evidence to the Guard right away, since they'd just come down here and throw the rulebook at you. Metaphorically, I mean."

Spirit Gardener Shokon was very still for a long moment. "I appreciate your consideration. The tradition is less common now, but the plant you mention, the kodam, was once often used to absorb the spirit of a loved one."

"Absorb... how?" Julius asked, though he had a feeling he already knew.

"The body is ritually given for food so that the spirit can join in the plant's existence, and can be cared for."

Julius didn't know where to go with this.

Good thing he'd brought a priest.

"I understand the importance of such a ritual," Father Dominic said, "and why you would go through the risk of bringing the necessary plant on board the station. We Slanae honor our deceased by seeing their remains given to nourish the future generations. Unfortunately, your plant has spread into the maintenance tunnels below us and is responsible for the problems you've had with your water supply."

Spirit Gardener Shokon groaned. "I told my apprentice to keep careful watch, it spreads very quickly. It appears this was not enough. The kodam is very strong and sturdy. This is why it was often chosen to house a spirit in the old days."

"Can you move it?" Julius asked.

"Perhaps, but it is a delicate procedure and I do not want to cause more damage to the garden's structure in an effort to preserve the kodam."

Father Dominic spoke, "It would also be essential that wherever you put it doesn't become a new problem."

Spirit Gardener Shokon nodded. "I do not know how to prevent that."

Julius grinned. "I think I may know a guy."

Jerry Renea had worked for Port Station Maintenance for twenty years. It wasn't glamorous, but it was necessary and honest work that paid the bills. He'd seen some weird shit in his career, and made a habit of steering clear of anything remotely resembling trouble. He never expected he'd hired it.

"Like I've been saying," Julius repeated as he trailed after Jerry, "the only reason why the plant spread so far in the first place is because they don't know how the station's built. But you do! And you know what to look out for if it gets out again."

Jerry wasn't sure how Nix had even figured out where he lived, but this was not a conversation he wanted to have on the walk home. "And like I've been saying, it's not my problem!" He lowered his voice with a glance around. "It's illegal! If the Guard find it, I'm fucked."

Julius rolled his eyes. "Oh bullshit, how would you know what an illegal alien plant looks like? 'Gee, officer, I tried to tell you *something* was down there, but no one would listen! Guess it was a plant, huh?'" Jerry was unimpressed. Julius sighed and managed to block the other man's

way, hands up in apology. "Jerry, it's got the spirit of a guy's wife or something. He's grieving. Let the damn plant stay, huh?"

Jerry crossed his arms. "It's what?"

"I don't understand it either, but I don't have to. It's not about me, or you. It's about them. It *matters* to them."

"Didn't it attack you?"

"It didn't attack, it's a plant, it's incapable of conscious thought. I'm just an idiot with an overactive 'ooh shiny' impulse." Julius paused for breath. "Look, Jerry, you'll get paid."

Jerry was skeptical. "Paid?"

Julius shrugged, "Probably not a lot, it's not like they have a steady income, but Spirit Gardener Shokon was very firm that they would do what they could."

"... Guy's wife?"

"Thinks her spirit is connected to the plant. If he takes care of the plant, he's supporting her in the afterlife."

Jerry was quiet for a long moment. Then he sighed. "Hell, hard enough supporting the wife and kids in *this* life, they gotta worry about the next one too?" He grumbled and pointed a finger at the damn detective, "Fine, I won't report the plant, but *only* if they do exactly what I say to keep it out of the fucking pipes."

Julius smiled. "Absolutely."

The Athee Spirit Gardeners were of mixed opinion concerning Jerry's help, initially, but once he took Shokon down into the maintenance tunnel to see what the plant had done and how Jerry wanted to get it out, they started figuring out a plan. Julius left them to it, and found Father Dominic waiting outside the tunnel entrance. He'd stuck around as a respected neighbor, just in case any misunderstandings needed smoothing over.

"I presume it went well?"

"They're still talking, but yeah, I think they've worked something out. Are you disappointed Jerry wouldn't let you down there?"

"I understand his concern," Father Dominic said graciously. "I am quite tall."

Julius chuckled as they started walking.

"Hey, when we met Shokon," Julius asked after a moment, "what was up with all the hums he put after your name?"

"That was my name."

Julius blinked. "The rumble and hum and click. That's your name."

Father Dominic smirked. "There's a reason I use 'Dominic.'"

"Hang on, say your name."

A low rumbling sound came from the priest, changing tones a couple times before ending with a sound like an old clock's tock.

Julius braced himself for embarrassment. "Ok... wait, is the rumbling part of it?"

"Yes."

Julius took a breath and tried, pitching his voice as low as he could and trying to mimic the tones.

Father Dominic laughed.

"Oh come on!" Julius punched his arm, "Was I that bad?"

"Yes!" He was still laughing, "That was atrocious!"

Julius tried again, and watched his friend stumble from laughing so hard. "Jesus. Ok, what am I doing wrong?"

Father Dominic straightened up and tried to be more dignified about the whole thing, "The sound should be more in your chest, try to ground yourself in the vibration."

"Ok..." Julius tried again, "—shit that feels fucking weird stop laughing!" He grinned, laughing himself. He'd never seen his friend laugh before, not like this. It was cute. "Ok, ok, I'll stick with Dominic."

"Please," Father Dominic cleared his throat and collected himself, "though I appreciate the attempt."

Julius realized they'd reached the church.

"So, um. See you around?"

"You're welcome at the church anytime."

Julius was suddenly... awkward. "Right. Yes." *I can't make you laugh in the church...* "Is there any place nearby that serves stuff you can eat?"

Father Dominic tilted his head, puzzled.

"I mean stuff you enjoy eating," Julius clarified.

"Ah. There used to be a stall in the Market that kept stock of a soup I enjoyed. It was run by a human couple, both Catholic, but they left when the woman fell ill and needed more specialized care than could be provided here."

"I guess blood isn't used in a lot of cooking?"

"There are many dishes that incorporate it in some way, but finding the right consistency and chemical composition is tricky."

Julius nodded, "Not just a flavor thing, but texture, too, I get it."

The priest tilted his head. "What?"

Julius shrugged, "Lots of humans have foods they don't like just because of the way it feels in their mouth. That's not exactly the same as what you said, but that's what I'm imagining."

Father Dominic was thoughtful. "Interesting."

"I'll keep an eye out for a place, then, if you wanted to go out with me— for food! Get out of the sector, sometime." Oh god he was gonna die on the spot. "See you later!" He waved and made a hasty retreat.

"I... look forward to it, Mr. Nix," a very confused Father Dominic called after him.

Julius rushed back to his office as fast as he could, the blush slowly fading from his cheeks. He felt like an idiot. What the fuck had happened, how could that have come out so weird? All he wanted to do was ask a friend to get a meal sometime.

Well. That wasn't all he *wanted* to do, but that was all he *could* do.

He really wanted to know him better. Not just because the Slanae was astoundingly attractive to him, but the way he saw the universe was fascinating. He felt like they could have a lot in common, despite being two different species.

He sighed as he entered his room. Start with finding a place to eat.