

Undertow

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Undertow

by [traffipose](#)

Summary

"My spaceship got attacked." Doc pushes past Ren's little gasp of horror. "By a planet, I think. A guy who is a wavy planet. They turned my ship around, screwed up all the navigation systems, so I — what?"

Ren looks like he's caught between laughing and being horrified. "That's Dinnerbone, dude. He's basically a — I don't know, a god."

Doc snorts. "Not a very powerful one, then."

Notes

cw for descriptions of pain/injury, but no real violence, and i promise there's a very happy ending! also terminal amounts of worldbuilding, but that's a me problem. hope you enjoy :D

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The world spins, which would be normal if he were back on Dalet-Taw. Instead, he's on a quick

supply run to the nearest port planet and the view out his cockpit is meant to be nothing but straight lines. His spaceship careens wildly again. Down is up and up is left, and the stars are smeary lines in his vision.

Doc clenches his jaw as the bile rises. Most of the parts in this ship were welded in with his own two hands, modified from an old prisoner transport ship he could get for cheap. He should be able to identify the malfunction — maybe the artificial gravity? It feels like the meat of his brain is slamming against his skull as he whirls. At least his seatbelt is keeping him in the cockpit chair, even if it's cutting into his legs.

The spinning slows, somewhat, enough that he can focus. It's a small ship. The gravity systems are only housed a meter or so behind him, underneath the screwed-in metal plates. Doc pulls the brake as gently as he can, but the ship doesn't seem affected by the damping. He pulls it a little harder, feels the coils resist him. If anything, the ship speeds up.

Except, just as he lets go, the ship starts to slow. "What the —"

A... voice cuts him off. Not quite a voice. A reverberation in the form of words. "*Leave.*"

"What? No." Doc can't even marshal complete thoughts. He revs the engine, uncranks the brake until he's zipping forwards. Except something looks wrong. The star map in front of him is misaligned, not updating with where he is in space. His ship's heading is reversed like he's going backwards, but he can see the stars in front of him getting closer. Doc taps through half a dozen more checks before something pops up blinking amber.

He's upside-down, relative to the universal coordinates system, and nothing in his ship — not the nav systems, not the backup nav systems, not even the artificial gravity — seems to have recognized it. That's dangerous. If he hadn't already been keeping an eye out, he could have gotten turned around without a functioning nav, and in the vastness of space that's something close to a death sentence.

Yeah, Doc's not leaving. He whirls the ship around, ignores the spray of alarms. There's some sort of irresponsible, powerful being out here. Clearly, no one else has explained to him what is and isn't appropriate space-etiquette.

"I want to talk," Doc yells as he levers the thrusters on into a juddery rotation. It's not exactly surprising when, just a few hundred thousand clicks in, his ship starts rotating again. He flicks out the lateral fins, gives them some thrust until the stars stop spinning. "That won't work again, asshole."

The thrum of that voice bounces around his ship again, louder but almost confused. "*Leave.*" That's not even worth a response.

Doc's not quite sure where he's going, but straight ahead seems to be working fine. The gravity in his ship abandons all rhyme or reason, and Doc barely blinks. He's got a mission. It's been so long since he had a mission more important than raising goats and deciding whether plain bread for lunch was too depressing even for him. Souping up a jail ship to eat up his time. Living on a dwarf planet with a population of tw— one suits him fine, mostly.

Something emerges from the darkness, dimmer than the distant stars, not much broader. As Doc zips closer, though, it gets clearer that it's a planet with a rippling surface, the same dark brown as the soil back home. Doc throws some backward thrusters on to counter his momentum. "Is that where you live?"

“*Who are you?*” the voice thunders. The planet ripples with the words, mountains forming and sinking in time with the vowels. “*Why are you here?*”

“Can you even hear me?” Doc says.

No response. He pushes a little closer.

“*Why are you here?*” The voice sounds more urgent, now.

“You can’t just rig people’s ships to get them lost,” Doc snaps, probably to nobody. He can’t ripple the surface of this ship, but he can spew out a halo of photons. That gets — some response. Waves explode across the planet’s surface like a stone being thrown in a pond. Another blast of light and another pool of concentric circles, ones that don’t peter out this time. They balloon until they’ve enveloped the whole planet in a violent, pulsing rhythm centered straight on Doc. He barely has time to wonder if perhaps that’s a bad sign before it freezes. A whole planet, holding its breath.

Someone clears their throat.

“What the *fuck!*” Doc yells, spins his seat around so fast it squeals.

There’s a — being there, a man-shaped being, or a being that would be man-shaped if it weren’t standing unsupported on its head. Or a hat, maybe. It — they? he? moves towards Doc, and its legs take strides like on flat ground, despite the fact they’re pointing towards the ceiling of Doc’s ship. The fabric of its white coat falls up. Its voice is soft when it speaks. “*Why are you here?*”

“You — my nav systems. All of it. Nobody touches my ship!” Doc fumbles to unclick his seatbelt. He’s got his taser inside his coat, but this guy is... maybe a planet. Then again, they’re a planet in a humanoid shape, on a ship Doc built himself

“Well then don’t touch me,” they retort. There’s a gentle pull coming from them, like a new source of gravity. The metal near them starts to bow in.

“I didn’t.” Doc stands, backs closer to the console. “Just say you won’t do it again.”

It’s hard to tell facial expressions on an upside-down face, but Doc’s pretty sure that the twist to their lips doesn’t mean something good. The interior of his ship creaks as it pulls closer to them. “This is my world to control. What are you proud of.” He glances around, clearly spots the picture of Doc’s goats he plastered to the wall in a sentimental moment. “Those?”

Doc doesn’t mean to let a noise of angry surprise out. The sides of his ship are squealing now, the walls starting to go concave, and if this keeps up much longer he’ll lose air entirely. He inches closer to the control panel, lets his hand creep towards one specific switch. “Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t,” they say. “For now. But I have power and y—“ Doc throws the switch, watches the clear plastic partition between the cockpit and the hold slam up straight *through* them. Which wasn’t supposed to happen.

He winces, but there’s no blood, just a hideous grinding, crushing sound. They dissolve into smoke, or light dust, something pale that hangs in the air.

Doc flips the switch again. The partition comes down. In front of him, the planet’s started furiously rippling again, no discernible pattern. He turns the ship around.

There’s no parting message for him as he turns the ship around. Probably he should be grateful for that. He takes the long way to the port planet, because his supply run really can’t wait, but even as

he turns over cash and blueprints and scrap metal for different scrap metal and sacks of salt and gossip he can't stop thinking about — them. That planet. There's no one he knows to make small talk with to distract himself, not on a planet where no one stays longer than they need to hitch a ride.

He checks on his ship before he leaves. The half-dozen systems that that being threw off are surprisingly tricky to recalibrate. They're mostly undamaged, which is good, because Doc can't afford replacements. He can barely afford to rent the microscope and soldering machine to make the necessary fixes. It's a good thing he grows most of his own food, that he's never minded a few holes in his clothes.

He calls Ren on the way back.

"Hey, my dude!" Ren says. He looks tired, lonely. "How've you been?"

"Pretty good." Doc tilts his head towards the hold of the ship, where the crates should be visible. "Just got back from shopping."

"Neat!" Ren smiles. "So, why'd you call?"

"Do I need a reason to call?" Doc says. "Maybe I just wanted to talk you into visiting me again. A guy gets lonely, you know."

"Hey, you got me for a few years." Ren laughs. It echoes around that big junky freighter he's started piloting. "Gotta give everyone else a chance to get in line."

"Yeah." Doc tries not to glance around his own conspicuously empty ship. They're as bad as each other. "But I did have something else I wanted to ask you."

"Shoot," Ren says, ears perking up. It's easier hearing gossip as a drifter than as a yeoman farmer on some backwater dwarf planet, Doc guesses. Hopes.

"On my way there, I got... attacked." Doc pushes past Ren's little gasp of horror. "By a planet, I think. A wavy planet. They turned my ship around, screwed up all the navigation systems, so I — what?"

Ren looks like he's caught between laughing and being horrified. "That's Dinnerbone, dude. He's basically a — I don't know, a god."

Doc snorts. "Not a very powerful one, then."

"What?" It's nearly a squawk.

"He showed up in my ship, and he looked like some guy but upside-down, and I think I, uh, killed him, sort of. That form of him. I think he's okay."

"Oh good." Ren's voice is faint. "You killed the god but you think he's okay. He's killed people before, I'm pretty sure. I think. He really has two forms?"

"Yeah. He didn't seem that dangerous," Doc says. "Felt kind of overblown to me."

"He's a — he's an urban legend, dude!" There's a hollow beeping sound from Ren's side, and panic flashes over his face. "Sorry, dude, gotta go. She's a temperamental ship!"

"Yeah, go handle it. See you." Doc cuts the connection. There's plenty of void ahead for him to

stare into as he thinks. Apparently he got luckier than he thought. Or maybe urban legends are never really as scary as people think they are. The stars don't have any answers for him. Never have.

They're just as unhelpful when he's back planetside, when the boxes are all unloaded from the ship and the goats are all fed and watered, the compost turned and the herb garden weeded. It's easy to let the days blend, now that there's no one to making him keep track. There are always more chores to be done, and none of them depend on pesky things like days of the week. His goats head butt him the same whether it's mail day or not. The bots are so jailbroken they probably wouldn't know what a day of the week was unless Doc took the time to explain it. He doesn't ever have to receive signals if he doesn't want to, can just stop using the ship and crank the radio all the way off.

It takes him by surprise when, the next time he turns the ship on, there's a message waiting for him. People don't usually send him mail. For one thing, they'd have to know he was out here, with a ship that's still registered as belonging to the Crippectian prison system.

The message isn't from Ren like he was expecting. Its return address line says it's from Dinnerbone. That bastard shouldn't even have Doc's number — unless he somehow saw the ship's ID code, engraved at the base of the nav screen by interplanetary law. Damn. Doc pulls it open.

One word: *Payback*.

“What?” Doc says aloud.

A familiar clearing of a throat.

Slowly, Doc turns. He already knows what he's going to see. “You again.”

“Me,” Dinnerbone says. His voice is light, soft, a different accent than Doc's own. “You could have just asked me to leave, you know.”

“I did,” Doc says.

Dinnerbone sighs heavy enough to ruffle the dirt a few feet away from his head. “No, you didn't. And you shouldn't have been able to get that close to my heart anyway.”

“Your heart? That planet?” The air is eerily calm, no wind as a respite from the humidity.

“Yes.” Dinnerbone gestures with one arm, an annoyed thing. “That's not why I'm here, though. I'm here for —“

“Payback, yeah,” Doc says. “Even though I didn't do anything to you.” He tries not to think about the sickening rumble Dinnerbone's body had made as it was smashed by a pane of reinforced plastic. Clearly, it didn't take.

“Think of it as a warning, then.” Dinnerbone makes another gesture, sharper this time, both hands. There's a squint of concentration on his face, oddly charming. Then he — smiles. “Ta-ta.”

“What?” Doc says again, to the same cloud of white dust. It hovers in the air despite the damp. “Well. Okay.”

He turns to head back into the ship, but his foot slips on the dirt and he nearly overbalances. Pain sears down his right side. His body instinctively curls into it.

Doc glances down. His eye must be malfunctioning, refracting the sky and the earth. Otherwise, that means his arm — his arm is — he needs to call Ren. The ship's already on. He's ambidextrous enough to tap his way through the menus even with his head spinning. That's not the way his arm is supposed to bend.

The call comes through with a burst of noise, the video feed grainy.

"Twice in a month, dude, you must be missing me!" Ren says. He's glancing over his shoulder.

Doc scrapes for words. "Dinnerbone broke my arm."

Ren makes a questioning noise. "Arm of what?"

"The one on my *fucking* body." The pain's reaching his head, now, ripping through him with vicious teeth. It's solder on his bare skin. "I'm gonna have to take the damn thing off."

"Your arm? How are you even functioning, dude?" Ren doesn't look distracted anymore. "Aren't you supposed to go into shock?"

"Not helpful," Doc grinds out. He's on fire. He's been on fire and it hurt less. "Gonna leave the call on. If I sound like I'm dead, see if you can bury the body. Don't leave me to rot."

"Yeah," Ren says. Yeah, he'll make sure someone shows up if he needs. Doc's not listening. He's got a laser cutter in the shed, only a dozen paces away. Cut it. Cauterize it. His vision blurs and he shakes his head to clear it. Feet sinking in the loose dirt. Smell of fear, his own. Brushed metal of the shed under his fingers as he steadies himself. There are things in the world beyond the pain bleating from his arm, infecting his mind, his plodding steps. There is so much pain. His arm dangles from the joint, contorted.

He's used the cutter a dozen thousand times. His hands are sure on the switch. It lights up blinding, only a couple feet long.

It makes contact. The shed fills with the dry smell of burning grassy flesh. Doc screams, and screams, and his arm falls to the ground with a wet thud, and his throat is going and his lungs are burning and the pain is fading into a new kind of pain a hundred times more tolerable than before.

There is something like silence, punctuated by the defeated buzz of the laser cutter. He can think. That's good. Ren. "I'm alright," he yells. "No hospital needed."

Doc limps his way back out to the ship. Now that — whatever that was — is gone, he can think.

"You swear you're good?" Ren says, as soon as Doc pokes his head in.

"I can get a prosthetic together in like two days. My species is pretty good at losing limbs, honestly." Doc snorts. "Sorry to bother you."

Ren flat-out laughs at that, as though his eyes haven't been nervously flicking around even as they speak. "No bother. Anything for you. Anytime."

"You want to stay on the line while I figure out how to — to ream this asshole out?" The pain is sharp, still, but it's the kind that clears his mind rather than blots it out. He's got anger, too, cold and icy. Typing with one hand won't be a problem.

"...Sure." Ren glances around one more time. "Keep you from getting murdered, more like."

“Okay, okay. Dear asshole.” Line break.

“You can’t call him a — that in the first line!” Ren bursts out. “Use his name. People love that.”

“Too bad. Guy just acts without thinking of the consequences, he gets a strongly-worded letter.” Doc clicks his teeth in thought. “Stop trying to kill me. Sincerely, Doc.”

Ren sighs, the cheerful kind of long-suffering. An alarm blares on his end and he doesn’t even flinch. “If you gotta.”

“Oh, I gotta,” Doc says. He hits the send button with aplomb, enjoys the unnecessary chirping sound of a message on its way. “There. Done. Let me get some painkillers in me and you tell me how you’ve been.”

“Busy is how I’ve been,” Ren says, which Doc could have guessed. He makes a shooping motion, smiles like he’s relieved. “Call me back when you’ve got less to do and I’ve cleared a few things off my plate, too. See you, my dude.”

The video call dissolves. Fine. Doc has a prosthetic to design anyway. He goes to get his charcoal and is greeted with the sight of his severed arm on the floor, already browning at the fingers. Maybe engineering can wait for another day.

He tromps to the main house instead, whistles one of the bots over and asks it to clean up the workshop. There’s gotta be something listenable on one of his three radio channels. It’s just spartan enough inside to be cozy, dry goods on one wall, perishables on the other, linoleum floor he tracks dirt on.

He’s running low on painkillers — something for the grocery list. Still plenty of water in the indoor jug, though, so at least he doesn’t have to negotiate pumping the well with only one arm.

Doc settles in and flicks on the radio. A crackly news theme song greets him, heavy on the ominous bass and jingling. Sensationalist conservative garbage. Second option: sports. Not football, so it’s useless to him. He finds the canned pop music channels, zones out to that. Falls asleep at some point, wakes to the bluish glow of sunrise outside — he must have slept straight through the night — and a connection that’s more static than song. His shoulder aches, but it’s the understandable pain of a twisted ankle.

He should get moving for the day. Food, water, check on the bots. His whole body is sinking with exhaustion. Radio news it is.

The broadcaster’s voice cuts in mid-word. “—ew development in the story of the Red King. Previously declared dead, there have been recent eyewitness reports of a ghostly, dog-like figure haunting ships in the Gamma-Chi system. It remains to be seen whether these apparitions are a p —“ Doc turns the radio off. His hands are shaking; the painkillers must be kicking in. Gamma-Chi’s half a year’s travel away at a steady clip, the shadier part of the Chi cluster. No wonder the signal was so bad. No wonder Ren had been so distracted.

A thought creeps in, cold. Ren is hiding for a reason. People were out for him, way back then, the racer with a heart too big for a cruel sport and too much skill for his own good. No reason why a grudge couldn’t last four years: god knows Doc has a few.

Doc stumbles his way back to the ship. He’d forgotten to power it off. Two new messages for him, but Doc swipes them aside to hit the redial. It’s hard to break the muscle memory of reaching for things with his right arm. The sooner he can get that prosthetic done the better.

Four rings and no answer. He curses. Tries again. Lets it ring as he checks the messages.

One from Dinnerbone, which, whatever. Bigger problems. One from Ren.

It opens *Hey, Doctor M :D* and Doc can't help the worried smile that flutters over his face. *"Just so you know, I'm going a little deeper underground for right now. I might not be quite as easy to contact for a while. Think there are people chasing me, but I'm stuck in this gravity well for a little while, and I'm worried they can track my coords from my video calls. Love you, dude. Should be all fine. Thanks for everything. <3"*

The artificial sound of the phone ringing seems hollow, now. Doc wishes he couldn't picture Ren somewhere unreachable far, staring at his video screen, wishing he could pick up. Wanting something he can't have so badly that it aches. He cancels the call.

The second message can wait. Doc hasn't even had breakfast. He needs to design yet another prosthetic — maybe he can steal the design he used for Ren — and he needs to work on not losing his mind. The bluish sun shines warm. It's the staying sane that's going to really take some work.

The engineering is easier than he anticipates. Practice makes perfect, and he's got bots he can program to do the detail work with his nervous system as the arm wires in. The goats don't even mind being pet with a metal hand, press into it just the same. He makes his to-do list for the next week. It stretches to some fifty items, and Doc can barely bring himself to do any of them. His stomach is trying digest itself

It used to be so easy to let the days blur by. Doc barely makes it eighty hours before he turns the ship back on to see if he's got another message. His hands creep towards the call button, but he pulls them back.

Turns out he still hasn't rigged the touch screen to work with a metal hand. Something else to distract himself with. The pale grey metal and plastic of the ship used to feel, if not homey, at least comfortable. Doc can't stop his fingers from tapping a click-click rhythm out as he waits for the chirps of a successful boot-up.

Two new messages. He can check the other one later — Ren's sent an auto-ping, one of the pre-sets you can send with the push of a single button on a ship as big as his.

It reads *"Mayday."*

Panic floods Doc, sharpens him, curls his spine like he's under attack and trying to protect his squishy organs. Ren's some seven quadrillion kilometers away, stuck in a gravity well of some description. Sending a distress call he has to know Doc might not have gotten in time. Alone, with no one else to turn to. He checks the timestamp, breathes out hard when he sees it's from just three hours ago. Maybe there's time. There's nothing to do but try.

He opens the second message on autopilot, brain whirling through who he knows in the Chi cluster, distances, times, ship specs. The screen displays a single word of text.

"Sorry." It's from just a few minutes after Doc had responded the first time.

An insane shred of an idea starts coagulating in Doc's mind. He types out, *"How sorry? Because I could use a favor. We'd be even."* Takes a breath to steady himself and presses the button to send it.

Ren's out there waiting to die. Doc can throw himself on the mercy of one unpredictable, maybe-irrational, definitely-callous and impulsive humanoid planet. A planet that seems to have some sort

of control over gravity, though, the kind of finesse that lets him stand upside-down and contort Doc's arm without killing him. It's a stupid idea, but Doc's living on a backwater mud ball without backup. He banks on a lot of stupid ideas.

Dinnerbone responds just as oddly quick as he had before. *"We were already even. What's the favor?"*

They were not even, and Doc writes as much. The put-on anger, the overblown defense, it's all better than the miserable, hungry worry. Belatedly, he adds in a three-sentence explanation of what Ren's told him, carefully censored to hide who exactly is in trouble, and the universal coordinates he scrapes from Ren's last message. "Anything you can do?" he writes. It's an itchy vulnerable feeling, one Doc's not used to, but he pushes through it.

The response comes probably as fast as the ping took to get to — wherever that was, and back. *"Huh. Interesting."*

Doc can't think of anything to say. He tried. If there's anything else he can do, he can't come up with it. His hand shakes where it's hovering above the console, the real one, and Doc makes a fist to stop it.

It's quiet when he's away from the ship, still on and with the notifications as loud as he can jimmy them. The dirt feels like it shouldn't be so warm and comforting under his feet. The sky shouldn't be the same cheerful orange as always.

He lets the goats out of their pen. They can tell he's stressed, crowding around him, gnawing on his shirttails. The bots have to be maintained, recalibrated. His shed could use some shoring up at the foundations. Getting some dirt on his hands will clear his head. As he works, the sun inches across the sky, every degree a new fraction of a chance that Ren's — not. Anymore. He digs in harder.

It all goes out the window when the tinny ring of a video call blasts from the ship. Doc drops the socket wrench he's re-re-adjusting and sprints.

The call connects, even grainier than before. "Ren!" Doc shouts.

"Me," Ren says, and he looks dizzy, elated, confused. "Dude, I don't even know how I'm alive. I just... got thrown out of there. Like the black hole changed its mind."

"You're safe? You know what went wrong?" There are alarms blaring from Ren's ship, but Doc doesn't think either of them are paying attention.

Ren makes a guilty face. "Yeah, I know what happened. Took a bad deal. Got led there."

"You got lonely?" Doc doesn't need Ren to answer. His glance away is more than enough confirmation. He'd bet good money Ren's tail is wagging slow and anxious. "Just... let me know, instead of doing anything stupid, next time."

"How about before I do anything stupid?" Ren says, half-hearted mischief worse than if he hadn't tried at all. "I didn't mean for it to all —" he waves a hand, then makes a thumbs-down.

Something occurs to Doc. "You knew something was wrong when you called me, right? Was that — how they found you? Sniffed the call, swiped your coordinates?"

"...I wasn't going to let your call drop." Ren's head twitches. "And I'm glad I didn't. You can't tell, but I'm looking at your snazzy new arm."

Doc snorts. “You gotta prioritize yourself, though. No one else is gonna.”

“You will!” Ren blushes in contrition. “Thanks, though, dude. For everything. I promise I’m encrypting the hell out of this call, though.”

“You’re a good friend,” Doc says. “You’ll find good friends.”

Ren sighs, and for a second he looks almost as tired as he had when Doc scraped him up from where he’d been left to die. “You too. See you, my dude.”

Something bitter coils in Doc. “See you.” The line cuts.

Doc breathes in. Out. It’s been a long several days, the kind that Doc was trying to avoid by living out here. Minor, constant disasters are just fine. His blood is still trying to pump its way out of his chest, apparently never clued in that the danger’s passed.

Before he leaves, he messages out, “I don’t know what you did. But thanks.” Turns off the ship, resolute, even if he’s not quite sure of what.

He moves to do something. Clear his head. Figure out what routine looks like, again. There’s an odd smell in the air, electrical like something’s gone wrong with the ship.

“You’re welcome,” that bastard says from behind him. Probably Doc shouldn’t call him that, now that he’s done Ren a good turn, but the shoe fits so well. Like a fist in the eye.

“I don’t even know what you did,” Doc says. The upside-down thing is less jarring, the third time, or maybe it’s the way Doc’s pretty sure he’s not going to get shanked for once.

Dinnerbone shrugs, almost gets dirt on the shoulders of his coat. “It’s a gravity well. You just —“ he balls a fist, then flings his fingers outward. “Gave him a little push.”

“You just —“ Doc imitates the gesture. “Okay. I have questions.”

“Can’t say anyone’s ever asked before, but go ahead.” It’s easy to forget how dangerous he is when he doesn’t look it, when there’s a wry tilt to his mouth and a hint of self-deprecation to his voice.

“You really can manipulate gravity?” Doc can feel the fingers on his metal arm twitch. “On anything? Regardless of distance?”

Dinnerbone frowns. “What, you can’t?”

“Wh— no!” There’s maybe too much incredulity in Doc’s voice. “I don’t think I’ve met another being who can.”

“But you could counteract everything I threw at your ship,” Dinnerbone points out. There’s something almost cheerful about him now. Lively with debate.

“With thrusters, man!” He shouldn’t let himself get sucked in like this. “The artificial gravity in her is primitive by anyone’s standards.”

“Aha, see! So you do have control over it.” He folds his arms like he’s won something, which, no. “It’s just, you know, easier for me. Like how walking is, or —“ he glances around “— tinkering is, for you.”

“I can’t work on my bots from a trillion kilometers away.” Doc grimaces, fleeting. “Much less get them out of a gravity well.”

“It was an interesting challenge,” Dinnerbone says, and his poker face isn’t good enough to hide the sharp edge of satisfaction about him. Then he softens. “I don’t get many of those. At least, not on request.”

Doc can’t help snorting, sarcastic. “Because you’re so approachable.”

“I have my moments!” It really is hard to believe this is the same being capable of such casual cruelty. “Anyway, I just wanted to say — we’re even. Really even.”

“Thanks,” Doc says, surprised to believe he means it. “Not like I meant to go blundering into your airspace.”

“You — it was an accident?” Dinnerbone produces something like a laugh, although it’s breathy or maybe just off-kilter. “Your nav system must have really messed up.”

“What? I designed that thing myself!” Mostly he had, anyway. It’s souped-up beyond recognition, at least, the product of three weeks of sleepless nights when Ren’s night terrors kept him up.

“All I know is that you’re the first person to come through without a plasma cannon or seventeen in, oh, a few decades.” Dinnerbone shrugs like this is the way of the world, and not mildly horrific.

Doc blurts, “Well if you want a visitor who couldn’t even afford a plasma cannon...” and he can curse himself all he wants afterwards, but the words are out there. “To talk science, or something.” Not much better.

Dinnerbone looks as surprised as Doc feels. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that. Later?”

“... Yeah.” As soon as the word leaves Doc’s mouth, Dinnerbone puffs into that same cloud of dust, although it’s brownish rather than glittery white. At least he didn’t have to kill the guy this time. That’s such an absurd thought that Doc has to chuckle, and then he’s laughing so hard he’s nearly bent double. He invited the guy that he killed and that maimed him in return to — what, drink coffee and complain about transistors?

The world is spinning a little. His breath comes in rough spurts. It’s been a — it’s been a day.

Things settle down, though, first the world and then Doc’s semblance of a routine. He stops whipping his head around at every little sound the eighteen dozenth time it turns out to be one of the goats, or the wind in the corn, or the burner on the stove popping. Doc remembers what a week feels like, when it’s not filled with mortal peril. He gets goat spit on his arms and grease seemingly everywhere. Peace makes everything that happened feel like a dream, or at least like something that happened much longer ago than it really did. The sun rises bluish and sets indigo-y and Doc breathes in, out, in, out. He hardly wakes up in the night, hardly flinches at the sound of his metal arm on the stalks of corn.

It’s easy to forget there’s a prospective... get-together in his future until it actually happens.

“Could you at least call ahead?” Doc says at the sound of a familiar throat clearing. “And would it kill you to spawn in in front of me?”

“I did call ahead,” Dinnerbone says, unsubtly ignoring the second question. He sounds contrite when he adds, “I got bored.”

“And I’m the most interesting thing you have available,” Doc completes. It’s half-sarcastic, half-thoughtful, although with luck only that first part will read to someone who doesn’t know him well. “Come in. I think I still have coffee left.”

Turns out he doesn't, but he has only sort-of-expired tea and he can make hot water. The conversation starts awkward, like Doc was expecting, but it doesn't stay that way. Somewhere in Dinnerbone's combination of menace and vague social ineptitude — he sits in chairs right-side up, which was unexpected — there hides a deeply analytical mind focused on picking through the same problems as Doc in almost exactly the opposite way.

He cuts Doc off in the middle of his explanation of why the Byogdanev theories combined with even a basic topological understanding of fourth-dimensional universal curves demonstrates the possibility of strong force-based hyperwarp engines and makes Doc's point more elegantly and succinctly than he can. And then has the gall to contradict him, with Won's third conjecture, of all things! There's a smile splitting his face, he realizes belatedly, but he can brush the weird spasm of joy in his chest aside in favor of schooling Dinnerbone in vacuum-based electromagnetism.

The time slips past far more pleasantly than Doc is used to. When he finally makes his excuses, it's because his stomach is rumbling and supper isn't easy to prepare with a guest over.

“See you again?” Dinnerbone says, and Doc thinks he can read him well enough to know that the question is genuine. That he's hoping for a yes, but that he would sigh and bluster a little and respect a no.

“Next week?” Doc offers.

Dinnerbone grins, bright but tempered with something more serious. “See you then.”

He moves as if to puff away, but Doc manages to shoo him outside before he gets dust all over the floor and furniture.

There's a pang of regret in his throat as he looks at the cloud settle to the earth outside. More disconcertingly, there's a rumble of something warm in his chest, content like a good night's sleep or when he gets a new machine purring happily.

He wanders inside, still thinking. His hands get the potatoes from the mostly-cool, mostly-dry covered barrel they're stored in. He chops them, appreciates the smell of them cooking. Objectively, he and Dinnerbone should probably do that again. Less objectively, it's ridiculous for Doc to be hanging out with him, given — everything. He should be in shock at the thought. Bitter, at the very least.

But... Doc glances down at his metal hand, absentmindedly flips over a chunk of potato to check if it's browned. No harm no foul, right? He got over it. And if he pushes past the defensive growl in his chest that living alone is just how he likes it, it might be nice to have some occasional company. Not that calling Ren isn't nice, but Doc's not in love with stealing moments from opposite sides of the galaxy, with the half-hearted calculations to make sure Ren isn't asleep or out of reach of his signal. And anyway, Doc's never been the type to feel what other people expect him to feel. He's going to be grateful that he can push past the anger, that apparently Dinnerbone can do the same for him. Having someone to talk to will be a change, but a good one.

The week passes, and Doc still can't keep himself from wondering — when. The chores are the same as always, the monotony soothing. It's hard to be soothed when he still glances up at every stray noise, not enough to jar him from his work but enough to keep him engaged. Poised, for something to happen.

He's never going to get used to Dinnerbone appearing behind him, but at least he was expecting it. “Come on in,” he says.

When Doc turns, Dinnerbone's got a weird sort of a smile on his face. Chagrined, maybe. But it shifts into something more genuine, and he only says, "I'd be happy to."

Some part of Doc was expecting it to be stilted, again, but maybe he's getting more practiced at talking to Dinnerbone. It feels — not quite routine, but the good parts of it. The comfortable parts. Doc gets the feeling he's been looking too intently at Dinnerbone's face, although neither of them seem to mind.

The thing is, Doc doesn't click with people. Hadn't even clicked with Ren at first. Has the scar down his tricep to prove it.

This — them — they're clicking, and it's all Doc can do not to cut himself off in the middle of his sentences, point out how *weird* it is.

The conversation meanders, though. Doc asks, "What kind of tea is your favorite?" at one point, and Dinnerbone hedges in a way that isn't like him.

"You don't have a favorite?" Doc asks. He's had opinions on the best kind of flux to use, and whether ammonia-based fertilizer is ever worth the cost. Tea shouldn't be the thing to trip him up.

"I guess I don't know enough to say." Dinnerbone's mouth is curled down at the edges, his hands a little too tight around the chipped mug Doc had gotten out for him.

Doc laughs. "I don't think I've met many species that don't drink at least some kind of tea. No leaf stews, even?"

"...I eat stars," Dinnerbone says, careful. "There isn't much of a need to go shopping."

It's not quite a bucket of water over the conversation. Or, at least, Doc won't let it be. If he was going to be intimidated by Dinnerbone, it would've happened the first time they met. He's got stubbornness on his side, now, and an ember of curiosity he wants to fan.

"Do you want to come with me on my next supply run?"

It's odd seeing Dinnerbone totally at a loss for words. He sputters once, twice, then says, "Sure, yes. If you're — if you want."

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise," Doc says. "Fair warning, though, I don't think there are many stars for sale. The market I go to is mostly aimed at humanoids."

"Well, I can—" Dinnerbone makes a gesture at himself just on the edge of self-consciousness, although Doc personally thinks he has nothing to be ashamed of. "I'll fit in."

"You're going to love haggling," Doc says. "I've got enough set aside to barter with that you shouldn't need to bring anything."

"Good, because I don't think I'll be able to bring anything that far."

Doc frowns. "You can only move yourself?"

It's an interesting sound Dinnerbone makes at that, a half-laugh half-cough of surprise. "I'm not moving myself."

He says it like it's obvious, which only makes Doc's brow furrow more. "You're sitting in front of me."

“It’s — dust,” Dinnerbone says. “It’s stardust that I’m holding together. Here,” he pauses, glances away, and then with surprising delicacy extends his arm, palm up. “Here, touch my hand.”

Gently, Doc lays his fingers on Dinnerbone’s palm.

He’s right. It’s dusty, dryish, like a firmer version of the soil outside. The odd thing is how warm it is, warmer than Doc’s own skin, and an almost velvety smooth. Doc draws his hand down to Dinnerbone’s fingers almost without thinking about it, just feeling the way Dinnerbone’s skin shifts to something more textured, almost like fingerprints. It’s odd, sure, the warmth of it not quite the radiating kind of a warm-blooded being, but it’s pleasant. He’s still, under Doc’s fingers, and a patient kind of quiet. There’s a rustling sound as Doc moves, the sound of skin on skin loud in the silence.

“Can you feel touch?” Doc asks. His voice comes out rougher than he was expecting.

Dinnerbone doesn’t respond for a moment. When he does, his voice is quieter than Doc’s come to expect, more distant. “Probably not like you do. But, yes, overall. I can — tell where things are. Whether they’re touching me. How... hard or soft it is.”

Belatedly, Doc stops stroking Dinnerbone’s hand. There’s a fine layer of dust on his fingertips as he pulls away, clinging to their organic texture. He takes too large a gulp of tea.

“What were we saying?” Doc says. It’s a clumsy feint away from how he can still feel the echoes of warmth on his hand. There’s too much happening in his head, none of it quite understandable.

The conversation resumes, though, and in the parry and thrust of engineering debates, Doc can almost bring himself to forget about the whole thing.

It does turn into something of a routine, after that. Dinnerbone shows up roughly every week — sometimes a day late, a day early, as though he’s lost track of time, but it’s consistent enough that Doc can plan around it. Make the most of the little mood boost he gets, account for the energy he won’t be able to use during the rest of the day. Turns out Dinnerbone does have a favorite tea, an earthy, honey-sweet thing that Ren had come home with one day several years ago and that Doc can’t stand.

It’s weird learning things like that about a new person. Like bringing Dinnerbone into his life, however gradually and unintentionally. Doc wonders what conclusions Dinnerbone’s drawing about him.

Whether he still thinks about their hands, together, warm and comfortable and something like a definition of home Doc left behind long ago. The weeks pass. Doc rubs his fingertips together absentmindedly, a tic he can’t quite explain.

The thing about supply runs is that technically Doc can put them off for as long as he needs. Nearly forever. But the goats need salt, and the youngest one, Vivi, could use antibiotics for her diarrhea, and Doc himself is running low on the food and daily necessities he can’t make himself. Sure, he doesn’t technically need disinfectant cleaning spray, but at some point it’s an issue of quality of life.

He powers up the ship to send a message to Dinnerbone.

Realizes, when five separate pings come through for him, that it’s been maybe too long since he did that. They’re all from Ren.

“Pick up your phone, dude :D I’ve got news!”

“Seriously, it doesn’t matter if you wake me up. Call me <3”

“Check it out!” There’s a picture attached to that one, a grainy snapshot of the engine of his ship. It looks like he’s been busy: a ship as big as Dogwarts only ever comes with the least maneuverable of engines, and this looks more like a racer.

“Doc, are you mad? I’ve been being careful.”

“I may not be in the quadrant but I can and will visit you if you keep scaring me like this, dude <3”
The timestamp on that one is from a little over a week ago

Doc hits the call button with force. Ren picks up almost instantly.

“How’ve you been, dude,” Ren says, cheerful as always.

“I didn’t mean to disappear on you. Especially so soon after everything.” It’s hard making eye contact, but Doc feels like it probably needs to be said.

“All is forgiven,” Ren chirps. Smiles in a way Doc doesn’t trust at all. “When’s a good time for me to visit?”

“Live your life,” Doc says. “I’m going to be gone for the next few days, though. Supply run.”

“It’ll take me a couple weeks to get in the area.” Ren glances to his left, where his nav charts must be projected. “A few days is a while for a supply run.”

“Yeah,” Doc says. Lets it hang. Somehow he doesn’t think telling Ren about everything that’s been happening is a good idea. They’ve both got too damn big of protective streaks.

“Sure,” Ren says, drawing out the vowel a little. “See you in two weeks.”

“Wait.” Doc stops himself from physically reaching out to the screen, but only just. “You said you had news?”

“Oh, you should’ve seen from the picture.” Ren grins, toothy, alive. “Dogwarts has an *engine* in her now, baby! Probably doubled her top speed.”

“So you can slam into asteroids that much faster,” Doc grins. It might have hit too close to home a long time ago, when they only ships Ren had ever driven were built to be cheap and fast, but not anymore. “Glad you’re making the place your own.”

“Not like it’s anyone else’s,” Ren sighs.

Doc doesn’t have anything to say to that, really. They both know the platitudes backwards and forwards. “Two weeks.”

Ren jerks his head at that, more yes than no. “See you, my dude.” The feed cuts.

He’s still got that message to send to Dinnerbone. Probably he should be happy for Ren, his new engine, but there’s a cold resignation to him as he types. Ren’s coming over for the first time in, what, a year and a half, all because Doc got too caught up in whatever this is to check in with him. The message whooshes into the ether, the response whooshing back in only a few minutes.

“Sounds like fun!”

A couple days should be enough to clear his head, but it feels like the fog only grows thicker.

“Sorry if I’m not my normal self,” he says, when Dinnerbone appears, behind him as usual. There’s a smell to it that Doc thinks he’s getting used to, something ozone-y. Like lightning. “I’m a little under the weather.”

“Not a problem.” There’s a current of softness to Dinnerbone’s voice, like it actually isn’t. “We don’t have to go out.”

“It’s for the goats,” Doc says. Not really any more explanation needed. If little Vivi needs meds to get better, then Doc can shell out. The odd thing is that he really is starting to feel better now that someone else is here. That never used to happen — still wouldn’t, Doc thinks, if it were anyone else.

Dinnerbone laughs, lilted warming something in Doc. “Your pet abominations, I know.”

“You’re just saying that to piss me off,” Doc says. There’s enough of a cheerful grumble in his voice that they’ve both gotta know it’s working. “Get in the ship, man.”

He shouldn’t have worried: the conversation sparks up quickly, and even the pauses seem natural. Relaxing. Neither of them thinking of much to say, just watching the stars pass by outside as Doc nudges the engine into a steady rhythm.

“You’ve really never been shopping before?” Doc says, as he pulls into the line of ships waiting to dock at the port planet. The back-ups never used to be this bad, but some new regulation halved the amount of workers the governing body is allowed to employ. Austerity measures, despite the fact the economy hasn’t had a recession in double-digit decades. There’s gotta be an interesting point he can make in there, something about kinds of control.

“I figure it’s just an excuse to spend time together,” Dinnerbone says, nonchalant, like he isn’t throwing Doc’s whole worldview into an aborted tailspin. “You’re thinking about something.”

“Not about that!” Doc sputters. “It kind of was, wasn’t it. Well, it’s not like either of us get out much.”

The line inches forward, gives Doc something to do besides be deathly aware of how Dinnerbone is making eye contact, the intense, shivery kind, that Doc feels like he ought to mind but can’t bring himself to.

“...It’ll be fun shopping,” Dinnerbone says. The iridescence of the moment pops like a soap bubble. Something like regret whistles through Doc. Lost opportunities, maybe, to push. To find out something unexplored.

Shopping is fun. The dingy metal of the underground trading halls seems to suit them both just fine, and neither of them are the type to get lost in a crowd. Toting the scrap and spare food and tradables off the ship is easier with four pairs of hands, even if Dinnerbone carries his totes upside-down as well. seemingly holding the scrap inside.

It turns out Doc was right: Dinnerbone does love haggling, seems to delight in throwing people off-guard with his appearance. Probably Doc looming behind him like two meters of half-cybernetic muscle helps, but the sly desire to press for a better price, offer something just off-center of what this vendor or that one *really* wants is all Dinnerbone. It’s exhilarating. Breathtaking, even.

“You just got that for half what it’s worth.” Doc’s not sure he kept the glee from his voice.

Dinnerbone shakes the bottle of antibiotics, just as smug. “He’d give it to me just to leave him be.”

The thing is — there's intent to Doc's gaze, the kind he's not sure he can identify. Wants to identify. Dinnerbone says something else about the goats, the affectionate kind of mean, but Doc's barely paying attention.

"We're a good team," he says, watches Dinnerbone's eyebrow raise. "We should — " he claws around for words. "We should — do this. More than just today."

People bustle around them, the noise of it carrying the thoughts right out of Doc's head. Dinnerbone is quiet for a long, long second. Finally, he says, soft, "Do your people have courting rituals?"

Doc lets out a breath. There's a weight to the moment. A — hah — gravity. "No, but close enough."

"So we're..." he trails off.

"If you want." Doc forces himself to keep looking, even as his heart beats in his chest. It's been a while since he's chosen to do something truly scary. Mostly, he gets emergencies he knows how to deal with, to control and tamp down. This feels different than that. More unknowable. Doc just has to trust that he's read this right.

"Yeah," Dinnerbone says. "Yeah let's."

The joy on Doc's face has to be ridiculous, but he doesn't feel like hiding it. "The goats are kind of yours now, too," he says.

"Well in that case," Dinnerbone starts, dramatic, but he can't even keep it up for the length of a sentence. "It's a good thing I got Vivi her drugs, then."

And Doc has to tease him for that, and then Dinnerbone somehow makes a pun and a riposte in one sentence, and between one thing and the other the shopping's done and they're back on Dalet-Taw.

"We're gonna have to call this one as we go," Doc says, kneeling by Vivi. She butts him in the chest. "Given the — physical form issues."

"Then we'll figure it out." Dinnerbone loops a hand around Doc's forearm, gentle. His palm is just as dry as before, just as warm. "We've been figuring it out, sort of."

"Sort of." Doc covers Dinnerbone's hand with his own, the metal one. "Different for both of us, I guess." Which, he never really thinks about Dinnerbone being lonely, maybe because it never happens to him. But he's gotta be, right? Not used to people being friendly, even. That reminds Doc. "Hey, you've gotta meet Ren."

Dinnerbone makes a questioning sound, his grip changing minutely.

"Ren? The guy you saved." It's gonna be quite a conversation, explaining this one. A few months is pretty quick to forgive someone, especially given Doc's usual track record. "He's — important to me. I saved him once, too."

"I'll be happy to meet him for real, then," Dinnerbone says. He's standing on the dust he's made of, and he smiles when he says, "We'll make it work."

thank you for reading! and shout out as always to the discord server — there might be more in this AU coming soon from them!

drop me a kudos or a comment if you enjoyed? i thrive on positive reinforcement

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!