

you weren't there that day for the Naming of Things

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Summary

"Rocky did not understand human names and titles when we met. Eridian names longer, give information on Eridian's home, associations, skills." For the first time in ages, he positioned two of his arms together, forming the design that Grace thought of like a family crest, a single design bisected.

"You should teach me to read those before we get to Erid, so I can be polite." As Grace considered the linework, already picking up on some vague ideas from the shapes in Rocky's carapace, something else occurred to him. "So... I picked 'Rocky' because your outer shell looks like stone."

"And for inspirational story of athlete who defeats human system of poverty to become great champion. Eye of the tiger."

"Retroactively, yeah." Grace bent at the hips, getting to Rocky's 'eye' level. "So what'd you name me?"

Notes

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

Chapter 1

It took a mortifyingly long time to figure out the name thing, which had been bugging him since about an hour into his new life. After Mary had so kindly informed him of his name, Grace couldn't help but wonder what it might've been before, before he woke up in the interstellar outskirts of Tau Ceti, beyond the horizon line where his memory started.

Eventually, he tossed it into the same mental pile as the rest of the questions, like the official Detritus Drawer of his desk back in his classroom. Sometimes he had trouble with letting go of things like that; worthwhile but currently unhelpful. A lot of his past had become so much detritus.

Then, Grace lost his glasses again.

"Could you just do me a solid here, help me find them?" Grace asked from half-underneath one of the tables in the lab.

"Why would I help you find?" Rocky answered with his usual melodic mockery. "Grace is eager to lose face decoration for seventh time, question?"

Oh, temptation was a cruel thing. On one hand, Grace could correct Rocky, because it'd be the *eighth* time, and Grace so rarely got to correct the nearly flawless operation of eridian memory.

On the other hand, he would have to admit he'd lost his glasses even more times than Rocky knew, which seemed slightly worse.

"Not decoration," Grace corrected, climbing back to his feet and looking over the top of the table yet again, just in case his brain just wasn't recognizing the shape and his glasses were just sitting there, taunting him. "Important tool, I need them or my vision's going to be worse than yours." Rocky let out the lovely fluted sound that roughly translated to scoffing at the poor, partially blind human. Such cruelty. "When Mary tells us we need to correct course or we'll hit a random piece of space junk, and I can't pilot us to safety because my shipmate refuses to help me out—"

"Random object in space?" Rocky asked, three hands still weaving xenonite for something he'd been working on for days now. Since they'd reunited and prepared for the journey to Erid, Rocky had been single-mindedly plugging away at something. Even when they spent time in the mental health node, he delegate some hands to some ultra-fine mesh. "No objects on map or scope or sonar sweep. No known inhabited planets in vicinity, no species with space-flight capability. Where is hypothetical space junk coming from, question? Grace's scenario dumb dumb dumb."

"I wonder which is more likely," Grace said, walking over to Rocky's enclosure and slumping forward until his chest and forehead were pressed to the glass, arms hanging limp and dejected at his sides. "Unanticipated space garbage showing up in our path to crash into or

my good good good friend doing me a favor and telling me where my life-saving adaptive equipment has gone. I could start some calculations."

"Ooh, calculations," Rocky said in too-eager vibrato; over a week ago, Grace had turned the volume down on Rocky's text-to-speech. As he picked up on more eridian language, the amount of nuance he was losing relying on the translator bugged him. Like now, with the dual-hum of alien insincerity. "Very large numbers involved. Would like to see results if Grace is capable."

"You wouldn't be the first person who said I couldn't do math and was wrong." Drumming his fingers against the glass, Grace's mouth pinched. "Of course... I would need my *glasses* to see the board to write any equations." When Rocky remained stoic to his plight, he knocked his forehead against the glass a few times. "Roooooock, c'mon. You already know where they are, don't you, with your rock-spidey sense?" He thumped his head against the glass again.

Rocky continued to work on whatever metal weaving thing he was doing.

With a huge sigh, Grace knocked his head against the glass again, staring at Rocky with as much petulance as he could muster. He kept on for a bit, then remembered that eridian speech so sort of naturally musical.

Palming the glass, Grace began drumming his fingers against it, purposefully making the taps as off-rhythm as he could, pushing against every instinct driving him to measure out the beats.

Rocky broke seconds later, holstering his xenonite tools and bracing himself with four limbs to get close to Grace's face. "Annoying human with no patience, no rhythm! Human sight is temperamental, unreliable. If you need glasses tool all the time, why do you take them off so often, set them aside and forget them, question?"

Well, at least he had Rocky's attention. "Tell me where and I'll answer."

With a frustrated vent of hot air, Rocky pointed. "Glasses in pocket of superfluous outerware Grace put on chair then let fall onto floor."

Oh, right. Patting the wall with their one-two-three pattern, Grace found his knit cardigan on the floor beside the lab chair, fishing out his glasses from the pocket. "Thank you thank you thank you," he tossed back at Rocky, sliding them on with a wash of relief.

"Glasses are stupid. Delicate and easily misplaced but so important." Suddenly, Grace had more of Rocky's attention; he was xenonite weaving with just two hands, ergo Grace had earned an extra twenty percent of Rocky's focus. Such was the Grace Scale For Measuring Eridian Focal Delineation. "Why Grace so careless, question? Could be space junk on journey, need glasses to pilot ship to safety."

"You—" Grace hissed out a breath through his teeth, his rough approximation of Rocky's annoyed venting sound. "Genuine inquiry or being a jerk?"

Rocky swayed, weight shifting from one hip joint to another to another. "Yes."

"Boolean jokes are peak of humor," Grace said, then tacked on a, "Sarcasm," just to be sure Rocky didn't start doing that all the time. Clapping his hands briskly, he went on: "Lesson time with Mr. Grace, okay, so human eyes—"

"Mister not Doctor?" Rocky asked, limb tap-tapping away. "Why? Doctor is more... need word."

"Pretentious?" Grace asked, but rolled on. "Yeah, I have the fancy title but when I was teaching school, I went by Mr. Grace."

"You hid your qualifications? For what purpose, question?"

Waving a hand through air dismissively, he said, "Being the only teacher in the school who goes by 'Doctor' would be awkward and would cause kids to ask questions. Giving same answer over and over, repetitive."

"Understand. Mr. Grace, continue lesson now."

"Oh, so long as I have your permission." Rolling his eyes, Grace nudged one of the lab chairs closer to Rocky's enclosure, dropping into it and propping his feet up. Resting on an angled wall of glass, warmth suffused up from Grace's heels into his ankles and halfway up his thighs. Nice and toasty.

Without even thinking about it, he hooked a finger through the corner of his frames, tugging them down to rest against his jaw.

Rocky pointed accusingly with a ticked-off zip of noise.

"I, okay, look!" He waved the glasses demonstrably, as if he'd always meant them as a visual aid. Right. "Do you want to know or not?" Grace recognized his own name and a lot of frustrated sub-tones in Rocky's reply and not a lot else. "As I was saying... human eyes are very important but can come with a lot of problems. Some can be fixed through surgery or by shooting lasers into the eyes, but plenty don't require medical intervention."

"Need word clarification, did you say lasers?"

This was the problem, being two equally nosy and inquisitive creatures that were over-curious about each other. They didn't have conversations so much as long braided digressions, always getting wrapped up in the parentheticals without solving the actual equation.

As with leading class discussions, sometimes Grace had to be firm, so he did not entertain the lasers query.

"Some humans need glasses to see anything and everything. I used to have pretty good vision but then I got farsighted, so I can see things farther away from me but up close is blurry." Holding one of the arms of his frames, Grace spun the glasses around in a little twirl. "I knew people who woke up and put on their glasses and never took them off until they went to

sleep. Their glasses were like a part of them. Me, I didn't grow up with them, so I'm, you know."

"Careless and willing to impair your vision for entertainment," Rocky provided. "So Grace not always farsighted? What changed, question?"

What was a very good question. There was enough of a gap in Grace's memory that he was about to just tell Rocky it was one of those things he didn't know anymore.

But—

He can't avoid the plain fact of it anymore, not when he's getting headaches from grading papers. There seems to be a narrow window of about three inches where he can position a paper and the words won't blur or start doubling on him.

Once his insurance kicks in, he makes an appointment at the closest retail optometrist shop. Last time he got an exam, he managed to skate by without needing glasses.

Now, he's resigned. Maybe he'll look nice. From his observations, almost everyone looks better in glasses than without.

"Morning, sir," the desk clerk asks with a perfectly polite smile. "How can I help you?"

"Hi, uh, Ryland Grace, got an appointment. Can I do the dialation thing if I'm biking?"

"Probably," she tells him, tapping at her computer. "We have those little sunshades you can wear out." Her smile widens. "Got you, Mister.... Grace. Could I see some ID real quick?"

He feels a nervous twinge, but grabs his wallet, wrestling briefly with the cards in that stupid little plastic sleeve before dropping the entire stack. "Sorry, these things." Oh, but he doesn't have a license yet. He hasn't acquired a vehicle yet. "Wait, uh, would a passport work?"

"A... yes, sure."

"I just haven't been here long yet. Uh, here." He manages to hand the little book over without catastrophe.

"That's fine, thanks." She opens the passport, eyebrows lifting as she skims the stamps—Sweden, Paris, Brussels, Denmark, the sort of important cities he used to visit. "Okay, thank you." She handed it back. "Our records had a small mistake, but I've got it fixed for you now. We'll call you back in a few minutes."

He gives her a little salute with the passport. "I'll just browse the frames," he says, and turns away, getting his things shoved into his bag before he realizes— oh right. He ducks his head, grinning, inordinately pleased with himself since—

"Oh *that's* why I couldn't remember my old name!" Grace burst out as that day, the day he'd picked out his wire frames because they were on sale and he thought the little glint of gold worked for him, it all settled over his brain like a bedsheet drifting down over his mind. "I never changed it! I just stuck with Ryland!"

It was such a relief to get a piece of himself back that didn't pitch him directly into a fugue state. At least a dozen times, he'd had to come to terms with some washed up fragment of Earth by sitting in the mental health node or against one of the huge windows, reconciling information in a way that always felt destructive, tearing up pieces of a puzzle to lay different pieces down, undoing his previous work.

No misty eyes or curling up in a ball with Yao's quilt needed. When Grace finished remembering, he found himself right where he'd been before, feet still warm against the xenonite glass. Rocky had put his project down to get closer though, four arms bracing him like a spider against the angles of the enclosure. From his new position, he was almost above Grace, his new vantage point as close as possible as he tapped his fingers together idly, likely using the sound to examine Grace.

"You remembered something from before mission?" he asked cautiously; Rocky had unfortunately learned how getting memories back could be... rough.

"I did. Nothing shattering the, you know, delicate paradigm of the self but, hey." Grace shrugged. "I didn't need glasses until I was an adult. Normal vision deterioration, just kicked in a bit early for me." Said glasses were still in his hand; sliding them on, Grace leaned in to examine his vague reflection in the glass.

They did look nice. If he knew he was going to be in *space*, though, he might've gone with a more resilient form factor. "I think I was due for an update right around the time I was confined to the Astrophage research ship. I picked rimless for my first pair and I was nervous about how I'd look. Vain human aesthetics. But now I think... full rims would have been more sturdy. Maybe I could've done a color. Maybe red?" Thumb against his thigh, he examined the carmine red fabric of his NASA jumpsuit. He had a feeling he wouldn't have worn such a bold color before—in his other life.

Tap-tap-tap on the glass drew his attention back up to Rocky. He had his visual frequency crystal scanner thing pointed at Grace. "Hm. Glasses narrow, thin, translucent material. Rocky need closer examination. Can I take? Pass through?" He swung a hand down, towards the drawer installed in this section of the enclosure.

They had multiple set up across the ship for exchanging items; this one was within reach. However... "Uh," Grace said eloquently, glasses off again to press the pads of his fingers against the edge of the lenses.

An offended two-note trill whistled out of Rocky. "Grace's hesitation, great professional insult. Your glasses are very important, only one you have, I will be careful." He pointed to the drawer more emphatically.

"Hang on!" Rocky could be so *sensitive*. "Ohmigod, Rock, chill, I need to check something. What's your current ambient temperature in there?" Flapping out an arm, Grace snagged a

laptop enough to drag it close. He managed to (in quick succession) drop it, catch it, drag it up onto his lap, then finally start pulling up info on plastic polymers.

"370 degrees in your Celsius."

"Yeah, that is *well* over the polycarbonate transition temp. If I give you my glasses, they'll melt." Heaving a sigh, Grace tried to pre-empt Rocky: "I know, I know, Earth materials are stupid."

"Human evolution stupid." Rocky jabbed a finger accusingly, a gesture he'd definitely hijacked from Grace. "Your primary sense relies on one-of-a-kind tool that melts when environment is not very very very cold!"

"Hey," Grace said softly, earnestly. "I am so sorry this upsets you so much. I know it's such a hardship."

"Oh yes, funniest human. When we reach Erid, Grace can travel, do comedy show like Izzard. Hailed across planet for innovations in humor."

"Are you done?" Grace asked, folding his arms and knocking Rocky's enclosure with the toe of one shoe.

"For moment. I will think of more." Lowering himself back to the floor of his space, Rocky stood right-side up, shuffling back to his project. "Have additional question, not joke about you." Grace tried out an affirmative hum. "You said you did not change name, surprised. Grace expected different name?"

Oh boy, that was a big question. He had already breezed through the gender thing, enough for Rocky to know Grace was a little beyond the standard deviation of humanity on the matter, but he wasn't that kind of educator. He was trans, but he wasn't a sociologist and gender theory was best left to braver souls than him. Heck, he didn't have to do his own testosterone injections anymore, thanks to Armando.

(Which, even as the terrifying event horizon of food rationing loomed, the T juice was still in great supply. Was the ship's medical bay synthesizing it? Or was this a Sally Ride situation, NASA and their thoughtful-if-misguided cache of 100 tampons?)

This, though, could've been amusing. "Sometimes when I remember things, it's... eh, not a good time."

"Yes. Sometimes it seems like you are hurt by remembering," Rocky said simply, even as it hummed between them, what a huge understatement that was.

"I wouldn't argue with that assessment," Grace agreed softly. "But this time was pretty good. Do you remember talking about, uh, male-female-et cetera, human gender?"

"Remember everything," Rocky said quickly, instinctual pride as his crystal cathedral of a brain. Then, he hunched lower, posture going apologetic. "Yes, I remember."

"Rocky, it's okay to make fun of my bad memory." If they couldn't get some levity out of it, that made the amnesia even worse. "But yeah, so when a human is thought to be one gender and then picks a different gender, they often change their names. A lot— I mean, in English, like a *majority* of human names signify male or female, so if someone has one of those names, they usually pick a new, more appropriate name to use."

"Understand, yes. So Grace..."

"I assumed I did the same, but I couldn't *remember* what my original name was. Some trans people really dislike their previous name but I couldn't even remember if I disliked it, which was weird." He tap-tap-tapped at the enclosure. "Now I know, I just stuck with Ryland! So that's why I couldn't figure it out."

"This name is not male or female? You didn't dislike it?"

"It's fine," Grace said. "But I sort of remember one of the upsides to not changing it." He grinned over at Rocky. "A lot of people in my field when I was getting started assumed I was a man, it's a weird bad bias against women scientists and I had an ambiguous name. So I'd try to subtly correct them. But then I figured out I was *actually* a man, so all the people who knew me as Lady-Doctor Ryland Grace, I got to mess with them a bit. And you'd think with a self-selecting group of smart people, they'd figure that out, but *nobody* went, *oh you changed your gender*; they all just went oops, like they'd made the mistake. Even some I'd *met before* and worked with, they all assumed they'd messed up and didn't want to bring attention to it. Scientists and academics, man."

That might've been a little too xenoanthropologically complex for Rocky to share the amusement. Still, Grace could almost feel a significant percentage of his attention. "Rocky doesn't have word for Grace's other name."

"Don't worry about it, I'm just Grace now," he said, before he could think about it.

"Other name, more personal? For friends?"

Rocky had been subjected to a few human movies and probably was making a reasonable inference. And yes, if Grace was doing a primer of human culture, that's how he'd explain the difference between a surname and given name. It was simple.

He *never* called himself 'Ryland' in his head. Did he before, on Earth?

Rocky reiterated his question with a double-tap of one arm.

"If you want to make a word for 'Ryland,' go for it," Grace said. "But I prefer Grace. Just Grace."

"Rocky did not understand human names and titles when we met. Eridian names longer, give information on Eridian's home, associations, skills." For the first time in ages, he positioned two of his arms together, forming the design that Grace thought of like a family crest, a single design bisected.

"You should teach me to read those before we get to Erid, so I can be polite." As he considered the linework, already picking up on some vague ideas from the shapes in Rocky's carapace, something else occurred to him. "So... I picked 'Rocky' because your outer shell looks like stone."

"And for inspirational story of athlete who defeats human system of poverty to become great champion. Eye of the tiger."

"Retroactively, yeah." Grace bent at the hips, getting to Rocky's 'eye' level. "So what'd you name me?"

Nothing, just the low frequency clicking of Rocky echolocating him. And maybe a teeny little shift so his ray gun focused on Grace's face.

Grace lifted his eyebrows, going for an overdramatic expression of anticipation to be easily read.

"It was something vaguely insulting, wasn't it," Grace asked. "Like, '*ew squishy blob creature*' or '*triple yuck*' or something?"

"Yes yes yes," he confirmed way too quickly. "Rocky called Grace mean name. Very mean, eridian language filled with mean names."

Oh, *that* was suspicious. Interesting. Grace straightened, standing around to watch as Rocky very studiously got back to work on his project.

"That's really what you're going with, bud?"

"No understand, busy busy busy. Grace go, busy, check on taumoeba, check on flight corrections."

"Uh huh." But this was not over.

End Notes

i feel like this needs a second chapter but i'm not sure yet how to handle the idea I wanna explore so we'll see

ETA: okay I figured it out, three chapters

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