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# HOUSETSU BANG\*BANG



HOORAY FOR

# HOLLYWOOD

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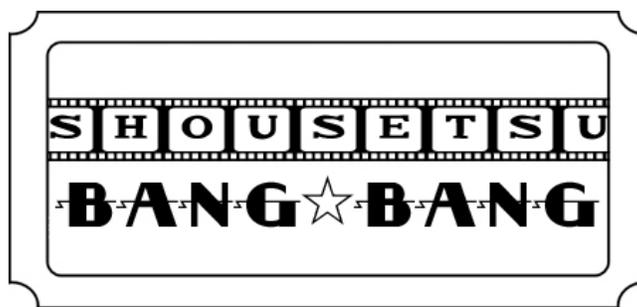
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## The Envelope, Please

by Tsukizubon Saruko (月図凡然る子)

"Rental," was the first thing Col managed to gasp when he finally separated their mouths, wheezing into Gary's, "rental, rental, god damn you, *rental*."

The message sunk in eventually, and Gary paused, actually easing up a blessed little bit on where he'd been grinding Col's back into the elaborate backstage scaffolding. "...Wait, it is? *Seriously?*" He drew back a few more inches, to where he could run a critical eye down the front of Col's tux. ...Lingering in certain places more than others, and Col tried and failed not to blush. He probably looked like he'd stuffed one of the stupid statuettes down his pants. "Pardon me, but you know, I'm an old man, I forget things sometimes, maybe you can remind me how much it was that *Thanksgiving at the Reynolds'* grossed on its first weekend. Something like 40 million, wasn't it?"

"My dad keeps telling me to just invest everything," Col muttered, looking at his fingers tangled in Gary's lapels. Gary probably owned his tux. Gary had probably owned his tux for longer than Col had been *alive*. "I live in an apartment."

"Oh, no. I had no idea. When has anyone ever suffered as you have suffered." He softened the sting of that, though, by pressing a kiss into the top of Col's hair, where it crinkled slightly in the gel. "For the love of God, though, can you *please* stop reminding me of how old you are?"

The first time they had ever been introduced, on a downtown lunch date, Col had beamed from ear to ear and burst out before he could think about it, *It is such an honor, sir, Ward is one of my favorite shows of all time. When I was ten I used to bug my mom for hours so she'd let me stay up past my bedtime to watch it.* He had never, ever been allowed to forget it. "Sorry. I don't know. Just -- *careful*."

Gary looked over his face again, then smirked. "What if I just pay your deposit?"

He would've thought up some answer to that, Col was sure, but he never had time.

Gary smelled like some heady, spiced aftershave or cologne; his mouth tasted like whiskey, which gave Col the distinct sullen feeling that there were some green room antics the teen heartthrob still got left out of, even when he'd been over twenty-one for a good fourteen months now. Stubble scraped against Col's cheeks and chin when Gary pushed harder, plunging his tongue deeper, although it mostly just made him shiver. There were big, heavy, square-knuckled hands running down the small of his back again, down further to first grip his ass and then knead it, a bigger thicker thigh shoving in between his; and the thought of returning the suit wrinkled was rapidly becoming secondary to the thought of returning it with a precome stain on the front of the pants. Let alone being shepherded through a throng of screaming teenaged girls outside like that. Let *alone* the thought of walking out across the *stage* like that. ...Not to mention --

He pulled back again to try to protest, but this time Gary took having his mouth freed up as an opportunity to nip the base of Col's throat right above his bowtie. Which lost Col his chance immediately, since he had to clap a hand over his mouth just to keep quiet. One of the little closed-circuit TVs showing the stage was right over their heads, faint echoes of Billy Crystal's voice drifting to them from the sound equipment even in this relatively secluded little corner.

Scaffolding and a swag of curtain were all that stood between them and the main corridor, though, where crew and other presenters passed by every couple of minutes, and even that barrier was just a matter of glancing around a corner to overcome.

Col bit his lip, and pulled his hand away slightly to try to say something else -- which of course was when one of Gary's hands slid around his hip, and took a firm squeezing palmful of the front of Col's pants. The squeaking gasp that came out of Col turned out to be *very* loud, considering, and he was pretty sure he was roughly tomato-colored as he wrenched his head wildly over his shoulder to check the gap. He hadn't heard anything but he was half-expecting Meryl Streep or somebody to be standing there, even though she was actually a nominee this year, you couldn't help it, wasn't it everybody's worst nightmare to have Meryl Streep disappointed in you? "You're doing this on *purpose* now," he hissed, and then had to try to look at anything else except Gary's stupid handsome face grinning up at him from around his collarbones.

"You just need to relax, kid. You're way too easy." Which Col *definitely* wanted to argue with, but with Gary straightening back up and pressing his mouth into his ear, his palm working in a warm, rubbing circle over the clothed shape of Col's dick, it was pretty much impossible. "It wouldn't take much to just get you off like this, huh?" he muttered, hot air stirring inside Col's ear and lips barely moving on its cup, making him squirm hard and bite his hand again. "That might be interesting. Send you out on stage, it'd be the high point of the show for sure. All the tabloids'd tear each other to bits, fighting over who it was out in the wings who made you come. ...But you'd know. And I'd know." He paused, grinning, the shape of his teeth clear on Col's ear, while Col shuddered and his breath made a wet sipping sound past his palm. "Or if you're really worried, we could *stop*. And then they'd be wondering who got you looking as pretty as this." A soft, wet kiss on his ear, an extra squeeze of his cock. "All red and wet and hard as fuck."

"You're an *asshole*," Col managed, after swallowing at least six times, his voice a faint plosive muffle against the palm of his hand. His knees had entirely buckled by now; he was practically limp against Gary -- all except for his cock, anyway, ha ha. Gary's laugh, tickling much harder into his ear, came panicky-close to making his grip slip. His balls actually tightened for a second, and it took biting his tongue hard in his mouth and focusing his whole mind on the thought of Meryl Streep staring at him with folded arms and deep sorrow in her eyes to ease back off the brink.

"Well, all right, if that's how you feel about it -- " And he *did* start to pull back, sending Col into a second's raw panic -- but instead of pulling away any further, tugged Col forward with him, glancing over his shoulder until he found a stepladder that had been behind them both. Gary sat down on one of its lower steps, and his hands cupped around Col's hips, pulling him stumbling in until Gary was smirking up at him from the vicinity of his cummerbund. ...Which, it was just now occurring to Col, was a terrible name for anything, whoever had thought up that name should have been *shot*.

"Take it easy," Gary said, smoothing his hands around to the front of Col's pants again, but this time to undo their fly. "I won't get any on you."

And before Col could offer any other protest, Gary had worked his dick out through the slit in his boxers into his hand, and taken it about as deep as he could into his mouth.

Col yelped, strangled through his closed teeth, before he could stop himself, and fell forward until his hands found a fumbling grip on the rails of the ladder, clinging for balance. Gary was holding the wings of fabric apart with one spread hand from underneath, but there was still only

so deep he could take Col without pressing up to it; so he made up for it by lavishing all his attention on Col's head, sweeping his tongue around in smooth circles and sucking close and tight enough to make stars flicker behind Col's squeezed-shut eyes. Col pressed his face into his arm, where it hung clinging to the ladder, biting a little crease of his tailcoat's fabric without thinking -- counterproductively enough. He was already *so* close, this was going to be so embarrassing, maybe a max of forty-five seconds --

Footsteps, out in the corridor: a click of heels, heavier men's shoes following behind. The pair who'd been on stage the last time Col had gotten a glimpse of the TV: some young starlet he barely knew and a slightly older actor he didn't at all. His eyes sprang open, seeing nothing but the out-of-focus folds of his sleeve that he was panting into. They were coming closer, on their way back to the dressing rooms, chatting in half-whispers, the woman laughing -- they were going to walk right by this little alcove, in this position they could probably see the edge of his *back* around the corner, they might *look*, they might --

Gary's mouth slowed for a moment, and then soft breath huffed from it at the edges, feathering around Col's dick -- a *laugh*, God, was he *laughing*? And then the hand that had been holding Col's pants and shorts open slid *into* the gap of his pants instead, over his underwear, cupping his balls through the thin material, *squeezing* them; his mouth sped up again and then into double-time, his head bobbing back and forward, his tongue drawing an obscene alphabet in cursive right on the wet oversensitive slit tip of Col's throbbing, aching cock --

He came, right there, right then, at the exact second that the presenters walked past their hiding place, maybe two feet away from where they stood. *Biting* as hard as he could on a fold of his sleeve, filling his mouth with it, strangling the shout to death in his throat behind a cushion of expensive wool. His whole body shaking, but trying to hold himself as still as possible, not even daring to twitch or breathe as Gary licked and worked him through every last shudder, teasing out every single one he could, trying to get him to crack.

The footsteps and voices passed by without ever hesitating, moving away up the corridor and fading out of earshot. Which at least was a little like a win. After a good two minutes or so, Col could even kind of breathe again.

"You are the worst." Heaving, on every breath, reeling his hands back in in spite of how he wobbled on his feet, so he could scrub his face with them. "You are the worst, you are the very, very worst, you are a horrible man, you're -- "

But then he'd interrupted himself before he could finish, by dropping to his knees in front of where Gary sat and kissing him again, as hard as he could. And, well, in spite of the somewhat heavy-breathed sound of it now, he thought Gary was laughing too hard to be listening anyway.

He could see the wisdom in Gary's approach, now that he was thinking something a little more like clearly, and just pulled Gary's cock out through his fly too, fumbling with it since he wouldn't stop kissing long enough to look. Gary made a thick, heavy little sound in his throat, against Col's mouth, as he went to work in long squeezing strokes -- using both hands, mostly so that he could curl one of them around the head as a preemptive shield. God damn it, he was going to keep both of them presentable, or die trying.

Tinny echoes from the stage went by as he worked his hand, his face pressed into the salt-and-pepper skim of Gary's hair, Gary's breathing hot and thick and fast and stubble-ringed against the side of his throat: bits of patter, bits of the audience laughing, a cut to commercial break. All of it distant, and unimportant-seeming, now -- even the stagehands passing by grunting and carrying something, out in the corridor, they seemed preoccupied and noisy enough not to worry about.

He wound up pushed up on his knees almost over Gary, pressing him back into the ladder, Gary lying back mostly lax and languid but craning up to nip hungrily at his throat, one hand curled gripping around the ladder's railing and the other cupped around the back of Col's neck, digging into his hair. Gary thickened in Col's hand, shifted restlessly where he sat, and then he took one last half-lidded, greedy stare at Col's face, where it hovered watching his own... and then let his eyes flutter shut, let out a thick, half-voiced sigh through parted lips, and came pulsing and wet into Col's stroking hand.

And then they just collapsed together, and sat there, panting hard into each other, rising and falling slightly on the crests of each other's breath. Overheated and sweaty and disarranged and spent, and something like peaceful.

Which was when the disembodied voice from onstage that had been washing over Col like comforting radio babble finally said something that caught and held, like a fishhook, in his ear: "...to present the nominees for Best Original Song..."

"Oh *shit*," Col said, overlapping Gary's murmured and totally unnecessary, "Whoops, that's you." He lunged off Gary and up to his feet, staggering, doing a lot of hasty tucking and zipping and patting down in the process. "Oh God, oh God, fuck. Do I look okay? *Do I look okay?*"

"Sure, fine," Gary said, even as he was getting up too, with a wince and grunt of effort. "Perfect. Just like you just got laid." Before Col could even splutter, though, he'd already grinned again and kissed him, and then turned him by his shoulders toward the corridor. "Go get 'em, kid."

He sprinted up the corridor, full-tilt, smacking into a flat as he took a corner and practically bowling over a couple of sound guys in his way. He was completely out of breath and probably dripping sweat by the time he came scrambling up the last steps and stumbled his pace down to fall into step with Kody, who was already marching her way through the wings without him, wearing a long shimmery silver backless gown and an expression of pure murder. "Where the *fuck* were you?" she hissed under her breath, just before a broad dazzling Disney-princess smile sprang into life on her face, the second they crossed onto the edge of the stage.

"...Colwyn Holmes and Kody Marner!" Billy was finishing, sounding slightly relieved, over applause and some distinctly feminine cheering from the crowd out beyond the glare of the lights. Col flashed the easiest-going star grin he could out at them, considering he was still gasping for breath and had a sidestitch, and bent down a little to pant back at her.

"Sorry. I'm really sorry. Something came up."

"Eat a dick," Kody said, under her huge sweet smile and wave. Things had always been sort of up and down between them since *Varsity Angel*, but she also smelled like she'd taken a bath in vodka, so he guessed he shouldn't take this too personally.

They reached the podium, and read their patter off the teleprompter, pretty much on autopilot. Col had even managed to catch most of his breath by then, and it was fine, everything was fine.

Right up until the point when Kody handed him the envelope -- and he handed it right back to her, grinning weakly. Prompting an unscripted *seriously?!* look from her, and surprising one of the evening's probably few genuine laughs out of the audience. But she opened it for him anyway, while he watched and waited, with his frozen smile plastered up on his face as hard as it would go.

And his right hand, still stickily coated with Gary's come, hidden as best he could behind his back.

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## Sliced

by Domashita Romero (地下口メ口)  
illustrated by mc Ruthless

"Chef Kassa, you have been sliced."



Edward wouldn't lie; there was some part of him that thrilled whenever he got to say those words. He had no influence on the decision-making process, but he got the glory of delivering the sentence, making and breaking dreams in one reality show producer-honed phrase. Sometimes, like when the chef getting the axe was a complete asshole (which happened with

some regularity; the producers really knew how to pick them), he took a special pleasure in it, but most of the time those little shreds of evil twelve-year-old boy glee dissolved as soon as he saw the realization hit the newly-dubbed loser, as soon as he saw the light in their eyes go dull.

And sometimes they cried. Oh, it was just terrible when they cried.

Chef Kassa didn't seem like a crier, but Edward did see a tell-tale rapid flutter of eyelashes when he saw his dessert, his poor downfall of a dessert, revealed when he lifted the cloche. Edward knew the cameras were sucking up every little ounce of emotion on his face. The poor kid got himself together quickly enough with a thick breath that made his nostrils flare, and he shook the hand of Chef Patrice, the winner.

"Thank you, this was an honor," he said, only a little flutter in his voice, and shook the hands of each of the judges. He took Edward's last; his hand was warm and a little damp with nerves, and Edward gave his long fingers a solid squeeze. He managed to smile at him before walking off set, the poor kid, the poor cute kid. Sometimes it felt good to deliver the news, but damn if this time he didn't feel personally guilty. He'd been rooting for him.

Still, they had to finish filming, all of Patrice's triumph and excited fist-pumping. The producers would likely be happy; he had a pretty good story, what with how he was going to use the prize money to fulfill his mother's dream of finally seeing Paris. They loved the stories that involved parents -- *those* often got those delicious tears that reality television fed on. Patrice was no crier, though. Edward wondered how Kassa was doing backstage; he hoped his post-mortem interview wouldn't be a damp one.

When all was said and done with filming he went back to see if he could find the kid before he escaped off into the cold cruel world again, empty-handed. He found him just ready to leave the dressing room, out of his Sliced-provided chef jacket and back in street clothes, but still with his black bandana covering his dreads. "Oh, Kassa, hey," Edward said, catching him before he headed out of the studio.

"Oh, hello," he said, and smiled. It didn't quite reach his eyes. "Did you need something?"

"No, I just..." Edward felt a little odd, now. He'd never done anything like this, talking to one of the contestants after filming. He usually kept himself hands-off. "I just wanted to say you did a really good job today. You should be proud of what you did out there."

"Don't worry, I am." His smile went a little crooked, a little more real. "Do they let you have a taste after all?"

"Oh, not a bite," Edward said. "I just have to smell it and look at it and listen to everyone talk about it while I writhe in torment." Kassa laughed at that, so Edward kept going. "I can't tell you how many times I've been deeply tempted to go nibbling cold tidbits off of the plate they photograph."

"Not this time, though?" he said.

"It was close. It was very close. Everyone was going on so much about how you used those vienna sausages as bacon in your greens. It was the first time I've ever had my stomach growl for canned meat."

Kassa rolled his eyes up to the heavens and held up a palm. "I opened that box up and saw those and I just didn't know whether to faint or go blind." Edward smiled. He really was a sweet kid; usually that phrase involved more profanity.

"Still, you did a great job."

Kassa shrugged a little. "Just a couple of mistakes here and there." He'd been doing really well until the dessert round, where his admirably risky move of trying to bake little cakes had

backfired on him entirely when they turned out drastically underdone and almost liquid in the middle, and not in a fun, intentional way. "But don't you worry, I'm not letting it get me down. Oh, but they just got about twenty minutes of this kind of talk from me on tape back there, you'll hear it plenty." He gestured back to where he'd just been wrung out with final interviews, long fingers dangling in the air. Edward wouldn't have called him flaming, not by any stripe, but he, as a former Professional Homosexual, could sense queer in the most slightly loosened of wrists, like a shark scenting blood. Kassa *was* cute. If Edward weren't dating someone -- and if he weren't twice Kassa's age -- he might suggest dinner to help lessen the sting of his loss. As it was, though, he just put a hand on his bicep and gave it a little squeeze.

"No, I know it," he said, smiling. "I haven't seen the last of you, I know it."

Kassa grinned at him then, a real smile, bright and beautiful. "I'll come back next time and win."

"Or I'll come eat at your restaurant?"

"You can be at the chef's table on opening night," Kassa said, resting his hand on top of Edward's for a moment. Oh, to be twenty years younger and single! "Right with my nanas."

"Oh, such an honor!" Kassa'd spent the filming bringing up his grandmothers a lot, both from producer nudges to keep the thread of his story strong for them to edit to pieces later, and from a genuine love. It always warmed Edward's heart to see someone with a love of food that came from family; it sure as hell wasn't where *his* had started. "You can put me in the seat that gets hit by the bathroom door, as long as I get your cooking."

"You will," he said. "One way or another."

"I have no doubt," he said, and Edward went home that day thinking of how Kassa walked out of the studio with his head high. Edward hadn't had an ounce of that kind of confidence when he was that age, and especially not the good attitude to go with it. Hell, he was forty-one now, and he *still* didn't have those things on his brightest days. *Kids these days*, he thought, in the fondest way possible.

Luis was late coming home, but that just gave Edward more time to fuss over dinner. And to *spoil* his dinner, as it had been many hours since lunch, and most of those hours had been filled with standing around smelling food cooking; he couldn't help but nibble on a spear or three of roasted asparagus, testing them for appropriate levels of seasoning before they found their final homes on plates next to roasted potatoes and steak au poivre. It wasn't the most fantastically creative or mind-blowing of dinners, but Edward wasn't a chef like the ones on his show. He leaned more to classic things, done simply and done well.

Edward poured himself another glass of wine to settle his nerves and stepped away from the oven to keep from nibbling. He *could* have gone wild with tonight's dinner -- watching the chefs at work was always inspiring -- but he'd picked this menu specifically. It was the same as the first dinner he'd cooked for Luis five years ago, on their third date. Luis had swooned over his steak and ended up with beautifully red wine-stained lips. Edward had found a bottle of the same vintage. It was all part of the plan.

Edward had worked halfway through his bottle of 'chef's helper' wine when he heard Luis' key at the door. It was ridiculous that he was nervous about this. They'd been through their ups and downs, but after five years, you had to see some things as inevitable, didn't you? No, no, it wasn't romantic to think of it like that. He loved Luis. They fit well together. It would be fine.

Luis came into the kitchen, shrugging his coat off and coming in to give Edward a kiss. "Sorry I'm late; work was idiotic," he said, and took in a breath. "Smells fantastic. I hope I haven't caused it to be cold or burnt."

"You forget that I'm an expert," Edward said, as he started arranging plates. Luis gave his shoulders a little rub as he spooned sauce over the steaks and he smiled. His shoulders had to be rocks, but the press of Luis' thumbs made him relax a little. Everything would be fine. "Sit down, let a man work."

Luis laughed and took a seat at the table. "Yes, chef," he said, and took out his phone. He didn't look up from fiddling with it as he reached for the special bottle of wine that Edward had opened to let breathe, pouring himself a glass without looking at the label. He set the phone down on the edge of the table when Edward put food in front of him. Hell, he'd meant to light candles. He was a disappointment to Professional Homosexuals everywhere.

"Mm, it's good," Luis said as he tucked in. Edward ate in small bites himself, earlier appetite quenched by nerves and a belly sloshing with syrah. Timing was everything.

"Do you remember the first time I made this?" Edward asked, and cringed a little inwardly. It was such a cheesy romance movie way to start. He should have gone scripted with this one.

Luis looked up, halfway through a bite of asparagus. "Hmm... did you make it for my birthday last year?"

"No, no." He'd made salmon for Luis' last birthday. "It was the first time you came here. First time I cooked for you."

Luis pondered the steak on the end of his fork and smiled. "Oh, wow, it was, wasn't it? That was a long time ago. Sorry I forgot."

Edward shook his head. "Five years," he said. He took a breath. Time to jump. "And I think after five years... well, it's time to start thinking about the next five years. And the next after that, and the next after that." Luis set his fork down and stared at him. "I want to be cooking like this for you for a long time to come."

Edward couldn't quite focus on the line of worry forming between Luis's eyebrows. He had to keep moving. Getting down on one knee seemed ridiculously heteronormative, so he reached across the table to take his hand, held just over his sleeping iPhone.

"Will you marry me?"

The echo of the words turned to sand in his mouth as Luis frowned and looked down at his partially eaten dinner, and then pulled his hand away from Edward's. "Edward... look, I..."

Edward couldn't quite hear the rest of the sentence. Really, he heard it, but the problem was that all of the words sounded like 'no.'

Edward was wondering why life was so endlessly cruel to him as to have made him put the bottle of wine where he couldn't reach it from where he was lying in a snot-encrusted pile on the couch when he heard the key in the front door. He had just a few seconds of hope that it was Luis, coming back after a few days thought with a changed mind and an open heart, but then he heard Carter's sing-songy call of, "Hello? Edward? If you're a corpse in the bathtub, say nothing at all!"

Oh, the bathtub. He hadn't considered that as an appropriate place to die. He might have to change his plans. Still, he moaned something incoherent and Carter came into the living room. He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the scene in front of him. "Oh my god, this is just

America's greatest tragedy." He'd texted Carter when Luis had first left, but the bastard who alleged to be his best friend had been in L.A. shooting something. It was his fault things had gotten to this state. "Are you in *sweatpants*?" He pointed over to the iPod dock. "Is that *Adele*?"

"Leave me to die," Edward said into his couch cushion.

"I think you already *did*," Carter said. "The only way this scene could get sadder would be if you were covered in Cheeto dust."

"I ate a pint of Chubby Hubby," Edward said, muffled. "And then I cried into the remnants because I'll never have a hubby of any girth."

Carter sighed and came over to sit on the edge of the couch. "You know, if I'd wanted to have conversations with sixteen-year-old girls, I'd've pretended to be straight in high school." He rubbed Edward's back soothingly. After years of working on *Gay Plan for the Straight Man* together, they'd become the closest of friends. If Edward was a Professional Homosexual, Carter had a Grand Master's certification in the art. His cattiness was just his way of showing he cared.

"You aren't helping," Edward said, even though he really sort of was. "Or leaving me to die."

Carter pet the back of his head (and Edward could *hear* the face he made, since he hadn't exactly showered in a while) and got up from the couch. "And I'm not going to. First step, enough with the weepy soundtrack, it's time to get a little empowerment going in here." Carter went over to mess with the iPod, and after a few seconds of silence, a breathy voice came out of the speakers, singing *At first I was afraid, I was petrified...*

Edward groaned and put a pillow from the couch over his face. Damn the predictability of his playlist. "I will *not* survive," he said, and Carter came over to grab his hands and make them limply wiggle in the air in tune to the music.

"Yes, you will! Hey, hey!"

"I'm already dead," Edward said into the pillow as he allowed himself to be manipulated.

"You are *not*," Carter said, and let his hands drop as Ms. Gaynor continued to sing. He pulled the pillow off of Edward's face. "You are simply on the road to drunken fattydom, and friends don't let friends become drunken fatties without a very good reason."

"I *have* a good reason," Edward said, looking up at Carter through smudged glasses. "I will be drunk and fat and you can just cut my cock off, as it's never getting used again."

Carter pet his hair again. "You know, I'm sure there are some people in the world with that kink, but I'm not one of them."

"I'll find a German."

Carter put his hands under Edward's shoulders and pushed him upwards. "No, you won't. Or if you do he'll be twenty-four and named Günther and will have the ability to suck a soccer ball through a garden hose." He forced Edward into a sitting position. "Up, up. We're going to get you cleaned up and get you out."

"*Out*?"

Carter put an arm around his shoulders and slid onto the couch next to him. For half a second, Edward, his brain dehydrated by tears and wine, wondered if perhaps Carter would love him, if no one else would. Half a bottle of wine more and he might try it. "Outside!" Carter declared. "If you're going to be a drunken fatty, you're going to at least have the decency to do it in public instead of just drowning here in Boone's Farm and fudgecicles."

He hadn't gotten *that* bad. Yet. "I can't go *out*. I'm a public figure! I'll be on those snarky food blogs! I'll get snarked!"

"You got your heart broken and the first thing you did was tell *me*. You are clearly asking to

be snarked one way or the other." Edward gave him a look that had to have been pathetic, with the little cooing sound Carter made and the way he poked out his lower lip. "Oh, you poor thing. If you're that worried, we'll put a hat and sunglasses on you."

"If you put a baseball cap on me, I'm throwing up pinot noir onto your cashmere," Edward said, and meant every word. Carter patted him on the cheek.

"That's the fighting spirit!" He stood up and held on to Edward's hand, trying to pull him up. "Come on, you big sally, don't think you can out-stubborn me. If I can make rednecks wax their backs, I can get you out for a grown-up drink."

It was an excellent point. Edward didn't even have the strength to keep fighting. What did it matter if he went somewhere and cried in public? He was never going to love again, after all. He stood up. "I'm not going to a club, though. I'm too old for anything resembling a club."

"No clubs," Carter said, as he pushed him towards the bathroom. "Now lets get you in the shower and into something that doesn't possibly have urine stains near the crotch, I'm not looking too closely."

"No, no, it's chardonnay."

"*Chardonnay?*" Carter said, voice pitching high. "Sweet Mary, you *do* need help." He gave him a hug around his shoulders, warm and close despite Edward's general level of disgustingness. "Papa Carter will take care of you."

A shower, some fresh clothes, and a cab to Manhattan later saw them seated at a little nook of a table at some very quiet beer bar covered in monk-related murals.

"This place is not like you," Edward said.

"Sometimes you have to strike where they least expect you," Carter said, and put a beer that tasted like raspberries into Edward's hand. That was true; the bar was sparsely populated to start with, and the patrons there didn't seem to recognize or remotely care that two stars of basic cable were there. Safety from snark, at least. Edward drank his beer.

Two of those later and he'd advanced from generic cries for death to the more specific. "I asked him to marry me, and he *breaks up with me*. What am I supposed to even do after that?"

Carter put his hand on top of his. "Sweetheart, I want you to answer me really honestly here." He put his *other* hand on top of that. This was real. "Did you really, actually want to marry him?"

"Of course!" Edward said. "Yes, I did. I mean, we'd been together for five years..."

"My parents were together for twenty and they didn't want to be married for at least ten of those," Carter said. "Were you two really, actually *happy* together?"

"Yes," Edward said, and then bit his lip and looked down into the pink foam of his beer. "I mean, you know, happy in that way you are in a long-term relationship. It's not like everything is going to be romantic comedy giddy fireworks forever; we're two middle-aged homos, for pete's sake!" Carter just kept looking at him, a piercing stare that kept him talking. "I wanted to ask him the minute it became legal. But I didn't want it to be just a, 'oh, now gays can get married, so we have to.' But I still wanted to. I wanted to... you know, seal it up. Lock it down. Have a nice sense of security as I trudge ever onward into old age." He put a hand over his face and sighed. Carter pet his hand a little. "You know what he said when I asked him?"

"What?"

"That he wanted to see other people." Carter sucked in a little breath through his teeth, and Edward laughed bitterly. "And isn't that just perfect! I'm all dying to become Miss Model Homosexual, all family-friendly and legally wed so my favorite political candidates can point at me and smile, and he wants an open relationship!"

"Was that something he'd wanted for a while?" Carter asked. "Did you have any idea?"

"Well..." Edward cringed as he thought of it. "You remember *the Argentina incident*." Luis traveled a lot for business. His trip to South America two years ago had involved him finding *companionship*.

"Yes," Carter said. "And now that you're broken up I can tell you that he is a worthless shithead for doing that do you and you should have never given him another chance. If he wants to go back to that tramp, let him. You can do better than that."

Edward took his glasses off and set them on the table, rubbing his eyes and letting the world go soft. "I could do it, though? I could try an open relationship? Isn't that what all the enlightened faggots do?"

Carter squeezed his hand. "Oh, honey, no. You are the Harriet Homemaker of homosexuals. You'd just cry quietly into your pillow every night." Edward sighed and nodded. It was entirely true. "And if you *were* going to be in an open relationship, you deserve to be in it with someone you know you can trust, not someone who's already run around behind your back with some slutty south-of-the-border ass."

Edward put his glasses back on and managed a little smile. "Well, not that it matters, as I will now be alone forever."

Carter reached out and gave his cheek a little fingertip-slap. "That is not true."

"Entirely true," Edward said as he turned his face away from it. "I'm going to become a gay Miss Havisham."

"You look terrible in white, so absolutely not."

Edward leaned his head back against the wall behind him and closed his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe part of me knew he wasn't satisfied. Maybe I was trying to fix it by getting married."

"Darling, heterosexuals have been trying that one for years and it hasn't worked for *them*." Carter gave his hand a little squeeze. "But you don't have to give up hope now."

"I know," Edward admitted, letting some actual sense break through his need for melodramatics. "But, god, being single in my forties? Just take me out back and shoot me."

Carter reached across the little table and poked Edward on the nose, getting him to open his eyes. "Now, none of that. You're handsome and talented and famous. Boys will be knocking down your door as soon as you throw all of Luis' things out on the lawn and put out the welcome mat."

"Whatever you say," Edward said, and smiled. "And if no one shows up, we could always date!"

One of Carter's eyebrows went up almost the entire way to his hairline while the other dove down to obscure his eye. "That's a very sweet thought, but I also know you're a bottom. I don't think it's going to work out."

Edward sighed, this time with deliberately put-on drama, instead of his soul-deep pain. "And despite the fact that you are, too, you're still an incredible pain in my ass." Carter laughed, and he managed a smile, too. "But just watch out, when we hit fifty and are still alone, I'm showing up at your door with roses."

"I'm sorry, someone has misinformed you that I'm ever turning fifty," Carter said. "But I'll take the roses." Edward laughed as Carter finished the last drops of his beer. "I know you're all sore and hurting now, but you won't be alone forever. There's someone out there for you. Some good man who wants to be a little his-and-his cake topper with you."

"I know. There is," Edward admitted. "But I don't think I'm ready to go looking just yet."

"I'll keep an eye out for you," Carter said. "And until then, I'll keep you drunk."

"You are a saint," he said, and pushed his empty glass towards Carter for him to go back to the bar and get refilled. He looked around the bar, at the tables of couples and friends, at Carter teasing the bartender as he got more drinks. He closed his eyes, and hummed a little Gloria Gaynor.

Dealing with the apartment after Luis moved out was the strangest part. He'd had the place before they were together, so it was something of just restoring it to its previous form, but now there were odd holes and gaps, weird blank spaces even if he'd moved all the bookshelves to interior designer-approved locations. This was just what life was like now, he figured. Finding ways to fill all the spaces.

Life, of course, went on. He filmed the show, wrote some magazine articles, and remembered how to cook dinner for just one person. That was really the worst part of all of it, actually, the single portions and the leftovers and the unshared bottles of wine. It drove him to indulge much, much more in eating out, always a terrible hardship in a city like New York.

No dates, though. If he wanted a dinner companion, he always had Carter to make him laugh and make inappropriate comments about the cuter waiters. A while after the breakup he brought Carter with him to Aubergine, one of those nouveau French-American places that was so popular in the city these days. It'd been open for a while, but had changed chefs recently and gotten good buzz over it, and nothing soothed a broken heart like possibly getting to eat bone marrow. Something about the name of the place seemed familiar, too, although that was possibly from the fact that he had, at points in his life, eaten eggplants before.

When he and Carter had been seated, Edward went straight for the menu, planning his method of attack, while Carter just traced his fingers around the edges and surveyed the room. "What do *you* think of the whole open kitchen thing?" he said. "It always seems a little chain restaurant-y to me, like they want you to make sure you can see no one's spitting in your food."

Aubergine's kitchen was exposed, the hustle of the line in plain sight for anyone to view. Their table had a particularly good sight line on it. "Please, like those places would want to let you see them defrosting bags of frozen ground beef?" Carter laughed as Edward watched the chefs move; it was a Tuesday night and the place wasn't crowded, but they still had a balletic stir of activity. "I like it, really. Keeps things from being too stuffy and old-world. Lets you see a bit of the fire."

"And maybe hear someone call someone else a *puta*?"

Edward laughed. "I think we'd need a bit of a closer table for that..." His eyes focused on someone in the kitchen and he pushed his glasses up his nose, leaning in the direction of the kitchen. "Wait, someone in there looks familiar."

"Oh, an old flame tending the flames?"

*That* was where he'd heard of Aubergine before. He got up from the table. "I'll be right back. Under no circumstances select a wine until I return." He headed for the kitchen. He knew it was such a frowned-upon, shit thing to do to go raiding into the back of the house without permission, but what was the point of being a food celebrity if you couldn't occasionally take advantage of it?

"Chef Kassa!" he called out once he got to the edge of the kitchen, past the glare of the expeditor. Kassa looked up from where he was in mid-chop of some shallots, and then blinked rapidly as he recognized Edward's face and connected it to reality. "Got a second?"

Kassa looked at his station, clearly mentally pondering how long he could be gone before people started wanting to kick his ass, and then set his knife down and came over to where Edward stood. "Hey!" he said, sounding a little out of breath from surprise. "Didn't expect to see you again so soon!"

"I just couldn't wait until you had a place of your own," he said, and, well, that might have been more forward than he intended. "No, it's actually completely a coincidence, I didn't know you were still here. How are you doing?"

"Holding up," he said. "I'm staging, so..."

Edward's eyebrows went up. A stage in a restaurant like this was good training, but it meant a lot of hours with no pay. Edward was surprised he hadn't yet been offered a paying position on the line. "Still?"

Kassa shrugged and smiled. "You gotta work hard to work hard." He gestured over his shoulder to where he no doubt had things to peel and chop. "Speaking of, I'd better get back to it. I'll let the chef know you're here, though. He likes making a fuss over special guests."

"I'd love it if you could make me something," Edward said. Was he flirting? He surely wasn't flirting; Kassa was half his age.

Kassa laughed, giving him a wide and beautiful smile. "You're overestimating what they let me do back here. I can maybe put a special garnish on it."

"I'll know it was from you." He gave Kassa's arm a squeeze. "Good to see you, Kassa. Best of luck."

"Thank you," he said, and went back to his station as Edward returned to his seat and to Carter's eyes shooting searing laser beams at him.

"And what was *that*?"

"Oh, he's just someone who was on the show once," Edward said as he picked the menu up again. "Very nice young man. Glad he's still working."

"So, were you asking him out?"

Edward glared over the menu at Carter. "No! Of course not."

"And why not?" Carter turned his head to openly ogle in the direction of the kitchen. "I mean, *look* at him!"

Edward *had* looked at him, all six feet of him, with his pretty dark eyes and ridiculous cheekbones. "You're still being ridiculous. I've got to be twenty years older than him."

"So?" Carter tapped his finger on Edward's menu to make him drop it down. "You're at the perfect stage in your life for it! Just got broken up with, been off the market for a while... you deserve the chance to be a sugar daddy!"

Edward covered his eyes with his hand. "Please don't make me lose my appetite. I really want to eat here."

"I'm serious, though." Carter pulled his hand away from his face. "I'm not talking about asking him to settle down and buy a house upstate or anything. Just a nice little bit of rebound fun to help you get your feet back under you." He gestured over to the kitchen. "I could read the body language from here, by the way. He's into you."

"You're absurd. He was being polite." Edward sighed. "He was being polite and I was being inappropriate and creepy."

"Please," Carter said. "You're not creepy. *I'm* creepy. I'm a pencil-thin moustache away from the full John Waters. You're elegant and charming and a young man like that would love to be taken out on a date by you."

Edward opened his mouth to retort, but the waiter arrived just in time to interrupt him. At least ordering could put Carter off his mission for a while. He specifically stretched out the conversation about wine to get him bored enough to be distracted onto something else. At least Edward would be getting his bone marrow, now.

*He* couldn't distract himself, though, not with a clear view of Kassa, hard at work in the kitchen, endlessly toiling with his knives. "I haven't even been on a date in years," he said. "Especially not with someone his age. They've probably completely changed it by now."

"*I've* been on a date with someone his age, and no, they have not," Carter said. "You take him out to dinner, someplace where you know the chef and can impress his little shorts off, talk about the food, talk about the wine... oh, dear, *is* he old enough to drink?"

Edward cringed. "Maybe?"

Carter waved a hand in the air. "Well, it's not like you're going to take him to T.G.I.Friday's; they're not going to card." He spent a while with his head tilted, looking at Kassa. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could say no," Edward said. "Pardon me if I'm a little delicate about the subject of rejection at the moment."

Carter lifted his napkin off his lap. "Simple solution: I'll ask him for you!" Edward grabbed him before he could stand up.

"Do I look like a fourteen-year-old girl? Are we in study hall?"

"I'll invite him to dinner with the *both* of us," Carter said. "A perfectly safe grown-up activity with no obligations, just two figures from 'I Love the 2000s' having a meal with a promising young chef."

"And that's not somehow creepy?" Edward asked.

"It's only as creepy as you make it, darling," Carter said, and Edward wrestled him back into his chair in time for their appetizers to arrive. "And what is *that*?" Carter asked, pointing at Edward's plate.

There, next to the long split bone with beautifully roasted marrow, next to the delicate parsley salad, was a little cherry tomato, carved into a rose that would do any 1980s wedding caterer proud. Edward picked it up and smiled. "A present from the chef."

"That chef?" Carter said, pointing at Kassa. Edward nodded, and Carter stood up. "I'm going. If he doesn't want to go out with you, *I'm* taking him."

There was no stopping him now. "At least eat your food first!" Edward called after him, but he was already marching proudly into the kitchen -- directly *in* to the kitchen, good lord, right on the line, Edward just couldn't watch anymore. He just had to sit back and let whatever was going to happen happen. Edward squeezed the little tomato a bit, making its petals fan out, and then popped it into his mouth.

Edward was a few minutes early himself, but Kassa was already waiting there in front of Lardo. It was something else to see him outside of anything like a kitchen. He was dressed in black, making him look all the more slender and tall, and for the first time Edward was seeing him without a cooking-sweat-soaked bandana on, his thin dreads tied half-back at the nape of his neck. He gave him the brightest smile when he noticed him coming. God, he was crazy for doing this.

"Hey, hope you weren't waiting long," he said as he got close, putting a hand out to touch

Kassa's elbow. Kassa shook his head. "Carter will probably be a while. He's always dramatically late."

Kassa frowned a little. "Didn't you get his message?"

Oh, of *course*. "No?"

"He said he couldn't make it. Said he got hit by food poisoning, the poor thing."

Edward sighed. "Yes, that poor man." Really, it was stupid of him to not have expected something like this. "Well, I hope you don't mind if it's just the two of us."

"No, I don't mind at all," Kassa said, looking right into his eyes as he said it. Madness, utter madness.

Edward opened the door for him and they quickly found themselves seated. "I've heard a lot about this place," Kassa said as he looked around and picked up the menu. "I've always wanted to try it."

"Oh, it's great," Edward said. "I've known Jamie, the executive chef, for years. We go way back." Ah, good, he was already bragging. That was very attractive in a bloated old man like himself.

Kassa's eyes got wide, though. "Oh, really? Do you think you could introduce me?" He quickly closed his eyes and snapped his jaw shut, shaking his head. "No, no, I don't mean to be some little twerp who begs you to get connections."

"No! Oh, no, I'd love for you to meet her," Edward said. "I don't think that about you at all, don't worry. I mean *I* asked *you* here... well, okay, technically Carter asked you, but my point stands."

Kassa dipped his head a little and smiled. He had really lovely eyelashes. "You know, just to be honest with you, I was a little terrified when he asked me."

Edward laughed. "I can't blame you. He's a ridiculous goblin. One I love, but nonetheless. I promise I wouldn't have abandoned you to him."

"I think he might have eaten me alive," Kassa said.

"Raw," Edward said, and felt a thrill at Kassa's smile.

"Kassa tartar," he said. "If those are his habits, no wonder he's sick."

Edward waved a hand in the air. "Oh, he's not sick." Edward had no stake in defending Carter's honor.

"He's not?"

"He's a liar and a bastard and a wannabe yenta."

Kassa laughed. "Okay, I have to confess, I've heard that word a couple of times since I moved up here and I have no idea what it means."

"He's trying to set us up," Edward said. He waited for Kassa's laugh, and then they could have a grand old chuckle about what a ridiculous thought that even was, and have a nice dinner as colleagues that would leave Kassa with a full belly and some networking contacts.

"Oh," Kassa said, soft and gentle. "So, is this a date?"

He had a look in his eyes, those dark lovely eyes, that said that somehow, amazingly, hearing an answer of 'yes' would not be horrific. Edward still had to play it safe. "What answer would make you the least uncomfortable?"

He felt Kassa's foot brush his under the table. "I wouldn't object to it being a date."

It became quickly difficult to think of anything clever. Or, for that matter, to swallow or remember to breathe. Edward managed to laugh out a breath before he turned red, and said, "Well, if you don't mind an aging pasty white homosexual on the other side of the table, then yes,

it's a date."

"You forgot handsome," Kassa said. Perhaps Carter had bribed him.

"Deliberately omitted, actually." If this was now officially a date, though, he had to do his best no to completely blow it. "Especially when compared to present company."

Kassa laughed, soft and breathy. "Well, I'd say I'm nothing special, but I'm feeling pretty special right now."

"Stop, you'll make this old queen blush," Edward said, and then the waitress arrived, stalling any further attempts at flirting as the two of them dissected the menu, and Edward encouraged Kassa to order whatever he wanted, to his heart's content. Perhaps there was something to the sugar daddy thing, after all.

The waitress went on her merry way, the two of them were left with no menus to fidget over, smiling just a little awkwardly at each other across the table. It'd been so long since Edward had been on a first date; he'd forgotten what this even felt like. It actually wasn't bad at all.

Kassa broke the silence. "I don't really get a lot of chances to date, actually," he said. "I'm always really busy, and no one really... *knows* about me." He made an extravagant little finger gesture that perfectly conveyed the abstract concept of homosexuality. "I guess you got a good read on me, though."

"Oh!" Edward lived his life so dramatically out of the closet that sometimes he forgot about the poor people still behind its door. "I have gotten a bit of practice in my life, it's true. But there was also a good amount of wishful thinking involved." He held up an enthused little fist in front of him and shook it. "Lucky me, I was right!" Oh, lord, he was a helpless dork. At least Kassa laughed.

"I thought you were going to ask me out that first time after the show," Kassa said. "So you're not the only one with wishes."

"I thought about it," Edward said. "But I was dating someone at the time."

Kassa raised his eyebrows. It really hadn't been that long since the taping. The episode hadn't even aired yet. "But not anymore?"

"Not anymore."

Kassa smiled. "Lucky *me*," he said, and the wine arrived. Edward made an extra show of sniffing and swirling and approving of it, because he had both a reputation and an audience, and then they both had full glasses and were alone again.

Edward lifted his glass to clink against Kassa's, but paused. "Do tell me first... *are* you old enough to drink?"

Kassa tipped his glass the extra inch and made it go *ting* against Edward's. "Turned twenty-one last month."

Edward let out a slight groan as he drank his first sip of wine. "I am twenty years older than you. I just want you to be fully aware and warned of that."

Kassa smiled over the rim of his glass. "I don't have a problem with it."

"Are you sure?"

Kassa laughed and put his glass down. "Listen to you! I'm supposed to be the nervous one here, not you."

"Sorry," Edward said, letting out a breath and drinking more of his wine. "I'm out of practice. Why should *you* be nervous?"

Kassa held the stem of his glass between two of his long fingers and circled it on the table cloth, making the wine swirl. "Well, here I am on my first real, grown-up New York City date

with a handsome TV star. Of course I'm nervous."

"Don't be," Edward said. "I'm a ridiculous man, and harmless as a declawed kitten." Kassa laughed at that, and Edward knew it was time to steer things another way before he just tumbled down a path of babbling about all his failings. "How long have you been in the city?"

"About nine months," Kassa said. "I was working in kitchens down in Charleston before, but I wanted to come up to where the real action was at. And my sister lives here, so..." He let out a little laugh. "I've been sleeping on her couch the whole time. That's one of the reasons I was hoping to win on Sliced, so I could get my own place before she tosses me out back down south."

"Is that a risk?"

"Well, she's not going to put up with me forever," Kassa said. "I've got another few months to get a paying gig before my time is up."

"You should come stay with me," Edward said, and the words came out of his mouth and landed on the table like a lump of uncooked dough, awkward and slowly expanding. "I mean, I have a big apartment, and an extra room, and just... lots of empty space."

"Well, I..." Kassa's eyes were wide like dollar coins. "I couldn't pay rent. I'm not getting paid."

"That's fine!" Edward said. "I own!"

Kassa laughed and looked away, and god, what was wrong with Edward? There was being a bit of a charming sugar daddy, and then there was being a total creep. He apparently couldn't even make it to an entree course without essentially proposing marriage. "My deadline's not for a while. I'll think about it."

Edward put a hand over his face. "I'm sorry, that came out totally weird, didn't it? I swear it'd be no strings attached, no creepy sex thing..."

Kassa let out a relieved sounding laugh. "It *did* kind of sound that way, I'm sorry," he said. "And I was going to say, now, I know this is kind of an expensive dinner, but that doesn't make it a guarantee!"

"Forget I ever said anything," Edward said. "I am old and weird and creepy and have forgotten how to date."

Kassa reached across the table and took his hand, his fingers warm as they pressed into his skin. "We'll set it aside. Maybe not *forget* it, because honestly I might need to take you up on it. But for now we'll just..." He lifted up his glass. "Talk about the wine?"

Edward had to marvel. Here was someone beautiful, and talented, and determined, and young, and somehow remarkably much more mature than he had managed to be lately. Was this what a mid-life crisis felt like? "Right," he said, and straightened himself up, turning his hand to briefly squeeze Kassa's. "I can talk about wine until I've bored you to death. Do you know anything about *terroir*?"

Kassa leaned back in his chair and brought his glass up to his lips, smiling at him. "Please, Edward, tell me *all* about *terroir*."

Edward gave him an exciting lecture about wine geography, and they'd explored all the hills and valleys of the bottle by the time they'd finished their entrees. With a little liquid relaxation, they could talk about the food, about how Kassa's experiences in the south differed from cooking in the big city, and Edward could make him laugh telling him dirt about behind the scenes at Sliced. Before dessert he snuck him back into the kitchen to meet Jamie, and she made them something special for dessert before getting Kassa's contact information.

They stood on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, standing close as people drifted by them.

"Okay," Edward said, "I had a really nice time tonight, and if you did too, I'd like to see you again." He held up a hand to preempt Kassa's reply. "And not with a moving van or anything. Just another date."

"I'd like that a lot," Kassa said. "I still have to cook for you, remember?"

"My kitchen is yours," Edward said, then laughed. "Temporarily! For an evening!"

Kassa laughed and put his fingers over Edward's mouth. "You need to do like we do where I'm from and just slow it down."

"I'm trying," Edward said, past his fingers. Kassa took them away and bent in to kiss him, soft, sweet, and innocent. Kassa may have told him to slow down, but his kiss made Edward want to drop to one knee right there. He restrained himself, somehow.

"I'll call you," he said, as Kassa pulled away. He squeezed his fingers in his, and watched him as he walked away.

In the cab home he checked his phone and saw that he had eight text messages from Carter. He would just deal with those later. Right then he was busy brushing his fingers across his lips and thinking about what would come next.

Busy schedules for the both of them meant they couldn't have the promised date where Kassa could cook for Edward immediately, but Edward found time to take him to lunch, a nice, safe, broad daylight sort of thing where he managed not to be too alienatingly weird. It perhaps was a little strange when he started showing pictures on his phone of his kitchen, but Kassa gratifyingly gasped and sighed in jealousy. He still felt a little like he was baiting some sort of trap, but the kiss Kassa gave him at the end of lunch calmed his worries some.

They found a free evening eventually, though, and Edward demanded a shopping list for whatever menu Kassa wanted to prepare. He felt like he was contributing something if he could blow money buying the most grass-fed of beef and the most organic of vegetables. He loaded the fridge with groceries and waited for Kassa, fussing over his iPod's playlist and refilling one of his larger wine glasses.

Kassa arrived and kissed him hello for a good long while before pulling back and grinning at him. "Lead me to your kitchen."

"Tonight it's your kitchen," Edward said. "I'm just your bumbling sous chef." He took Kassa's hand and led him back to the kitchen. "Or, more realistically, I'll just be like I am on the show: standing out of the way and trying to make witty commentary. Just with more wine."

"And this time, you'll actually get to taste things." Kassa stopped dead when they stepped inside the kitchen. "Oh my lord, it's even bigger than in the pictures."

Edward shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you have to understand I'm contractually obligated to respond to that with a 'That's what he said.'"

Kassa laughed and swatted him on the arm. "Naughty man," he said, and put the bundle he had in his arms down on the kitchen island, taking a moment to brush his fingers out over the marble and go 'mm.' He unfolded the cloth to reveal a set of knives and a black chef's apron.

"Oh, you came prepared," Edward said.

"Now, I'm sure you have very excellent knives yourself, but... a man's got to have his knives."

"Oh, I understand completely," he said. Kassa set the knives on the counter and shook out the apron, hooking it over his neck. Edward came in close to tie the strings around his waist, and Kassa smiled at him over his shoulder.

"Whenever I take them on the subway I'm worried they're going to do a random search and throw me in jail," he said. He held up one of his hands. "And I'll say, wait! I'm a chef! Just look at all the cuts and burns!"

Edward took his hand and inspected it. Chef's hands, no doubt, marked with little lines of old nicks and calluses. They were beautiful. "Hmm, we'll let you go this time."

"Thank you, officer," Kassa said, then grinned and tapped Edward on the nose. "Okay, unless you have any objections, I'm taking over your kitchen."

"Wait, one thing!" Edward said, and retrieved the bottle of wine he'd opened. "I always think cooking with wine is an important skill. Even if it's not in the recipe, it should go into the chef." Kassa laughed at his fairly dumb joke, and clinked glasses with him before drinking. His pink tongue darted across his lips after he finished his sip, and from the look on his face Edward knew he needed to make note of this wine for the future, even if it was patently ridiculous that he was planning for what to do on unseen anniversaries on the third date. He had problems.

He helped Kassa find what he needed in his kitchen, bowls and pans and utensils of all sorts. Kassa gave him a *look* when Edward was able to supply a well-seasoned cast iron pan, the kind of heavy-eyed glance and a grin that usually came right before a man went for his belt buckle. Edward wanted to bring out every last gadget and tool in his kitchen to see if he could inspire more of that.

"So, what's on the menu for tonight?" he asked as Kassa started to pull his requested ingredients out of the fridge and pantry. He moved quickly and smoothly, not with the frantic energy that he'd been forced to on the show or at work; Edward hoped the undemanding pace of a home kitchen was an enjoyable change for him.

"Something that I'm going to serve at my restaurant," Kassa said as he prepared a dish of beaten eggs. He looked up at Edward and smiled. "You know, someday."

"Definitely someday," Edward said, as Kassa filled another dish with flour. "Oh, and you're going to win my heart with something fried, aren't you?"

"A special little combination I came up with." He pulled a jar out of his pocket full of reddish powder. "See, when I was growing up, my parents were always working, so my nanas did most of the raising me. And they know how to *cook*, let me tell you, and they taught me everything I know." He laughed and smiled at Edward as he shook the powder into the flour. "Of course, I only said that about a dozen times on the show."

"I like hearing it again," Edward said, leaning on the counter to watch. "Now you're saying it to me."

"Well, Nana Lanelle is from Ethiopia, so she taught me all about her kind of food," he said. "And Nana Jean is from South Carolina, so she taught me about *hers*. So I want to make a restaurant that's a little bit of both." He gave Edward a big smile. "I figure no one's ever tried to make an Ethiopian soul food restaurant before. I'm gonna call it LanelleJean, after them." He gestured down at the food he was preparing. "So you're going to be a taste tester tonight of some berebere chicken-fried steak."

"I'm sold. I'm booked for the first reservation. For the whole week."

Kassa laughed. "You've got it right now! I haven't tried any of this on anyone but my family."

"It's a great idea. I..." He caught the words before they came out this time, before he offered to give Kassa seed money to start a restaurant. It was the *third date*, he reminded himself, and more importantly, from all he knew about Kassa so far, this was a dream he wanted to fulfill with his own hard work, not with some old man shaking his wallet out over the top of his head. *Slow*, he

reminded himself. "I really think it's going to be fantastic. I know you'll get there."

He let Kassa work, just sitting back to watch and providing items or an extra pair of hands when needed. When he revealed that he just happened to keep a jar of bacon grease in his fridge, Kassa gave him a kiss that pushed him back against the fridge, leaving his heart pounding as Kassa took it from his hands and went to apply it to one of the many pans he had going on Edward's stove.

Before long Kassa could remove his apron and wipe the sweat from his brow, and Edward could carry wine glasses behind him as Kassa transported two beautifully-constructed plates of food to his table. The steaks were crisp-edged and fragrant, settled next to the bacony greens and spiced fried lentils Kassa had also prepared. Edward sat across from Kassa and lifted his wine glass towards him. "To Lanelle and Jean," he said.

Kassa smiled and clinked his glass. "To my nanas."

Kassa was watching him as he took his first bite, but Edward didn't have to play up his reaction at all. The meat was perfectly done, the coating crisp and light, and the seasoning exciting without being overpowering. Edward closed his eyes and let out a little moan while he chewed. "Kassa, this is fantastic," he said as he went for another bite.

"The judge approves?"

"Absolutely. You win the prize."

"What exactly was that again?" Kassa asked, smiling at him as he managed to make holding a forkful of fried steak look coy and inviting. Young men were dangerous.

"We'll discuss it later," Edward said, and from the way Kassa smiled after it, it sounded like a promise.

Edward made some vague threat of dessert partway through the meal, but with dinner and the rest of the bottle of wine finished, Kassa apparently was uninterested in it. Or at least, had a very different interpretation of it, as Edward found himself on his couch, with Kassa, making out like a pair of teenagers. It was so different from anything he had in such a long time that he laughed a little against Kassa's mouth.

"Mm?" Kassa said, still breathing against his lips. "Something funny?"

Edward brushed his fingers along Kassa's side, tracing the slim line of his waist. "It's been such a long time since I necked on a couch like this. I just had this little moment of worrying that my dad might come in and catch us."

Kassa laughed and moved in closer, pushing Edward a little more back against the couch's arm, a little more horizontal. "See, I'm happy because I know no one in my family's going to interrupt." He brushed the curve of his lips over Edward's cheek. "In the past I've always had to be a lot more sneaky."

Edward's mind erupted in thoughts of Kassa's not-so-far-distant past of clandestine teenage couplings in sultry southern summers, and he was *such* a dirty old man for the way the thought hit him right and low in the gut. He went with it, though, putting a hand behind Kassa's neck and kissing him thoroughly. "No sneaking necessary," he said quietly, and Kassa grinned and pushed him further down on the couch, until he was completely lain out flat, Kassa stretched on top of him.

He brushed his hands over Kassa's back and found himself giddy at the novelty of it, spending such a long while kissing someone while everyone remained fully clothed. Sex with Luis had never gotten *bad*, per se, but it had become a bit rote. They never spent time doing anything like this, not for a long while before the end.

Kassa's long legs tangled up with Edward's and his hair brushed his face. He tasted like wine and all the spices of dinner, and when he sucked on Edward's lower lip it made him make a little shaky noise he'd forgotten he was the sort of person to make. He slid his hands down Kassa's body to grab his ass, bringing them together so he could feel Kassa's cock press into his hip.

Kassa let out a small moan into his mouth, and then pulled away with a little breathy laugh, drawing back enough to look Edward in the eyes. He was smiling, but Edward could see a little nervousness in it. "Just so you know, I'm not going to sleep with you tonight."

Edward blinked and wondered if he should remove his hands from Kassa's rump, but not quite enough to actually do it. "Oh, yes. Of course, that's fine. Whatever you want." He took a little breath. "Only what you want to do."

Kassa let out a little relieved breath and gave Edward a light kiss. "But we *can* fool around."

"Oh. Okay?" Edward said. God help him, he was apparently so old that he didn't know that those two courses of action were no longer the same thing anymore. He would just lie back and let Kassa steer the ship.

Kassa returned to kissing him and started moving against him, a slow writhe of his hips to grind them together. Edward truly couldn't remember the last time he'd come in his pants, but if that was how this evening was to end, he couldn't actually complain. He got a better hold on Kassa's ass and pulled him closer.

"You feel good," Kassa whispered into his mouth before he came away to kiss at Edward's neck. Edward thought to respond with his mutual appreciation, but Kassa slipped a hand between them to rest at his belt, and all that came out of him was a little gasp. "Can I?"

"Good god," Edward managed. "Of course."

Kassa sat up, biting his lip a little as he smiled. Edward could feel a little tremor in his fingers as he brushed his hand down Edward's stomach. He wanted to tell him there was nothing to be nervous about, but he bit his own lip instead. It was a long time ago, but he could remember the nerves of being with someone the first time, when your list of people you'd been with at all wasn't very long. It felt a little bit like the sort of nervous he himself was at that very moment. "I love your hands," he said, instead.

Kassa looked a little surprised, but it still made him grin. "Well, good." He unfastened Edward's belt and undid his trousers. "Because, well..." Actions spoke louder as he pulled Edward's cock free from his boxers and curled those long fingers around it. If this was included in the definition of 'fooling around,' Edward was just fine with it.

Edward closed his eyes and leaned his head back, just feeling Kassa's fingers as they squeezed and stroked, reveling in the difference from everything he'd known in the past five years. He could feel those little cuts and rough spots as they tugged at his cock, good chef's fingers making him forget about every stupid thing he'd worried about up until that point. He could come just like this, if Kassa kept up at it. It was fine, he was an expert at getting protein stains out of clothes.

Kassa shifted, though, and Edward opened his eyes to see him bending down with lips parted, his goal unmistakable. He saw that pretty pink tongue dart over his lips again before he bent down completely. He wrapped his lips around the tip of Edward's cock and Edward reached down, brushing his hair from his face and touching his cheek with his fingertips. Kassa looked up, and Edward could see the nervous, giddy smile in his eyes. Edward could do nothing but smile back.

Edward's eyes fought to close as Kassa sucked him, but he would be damned if he missed out

on a sight like the one before him. Kassa was slow and deliberate as his mouth slid over Edward's cock; there was nothing rote or routine about this for him, not at all. He probably still had specific memories of every blowjob he'd ever given in his life, still was learning new things to try. Edward could only try his best to encourage him.

His tongue was thick and clever as it circled around Edward's cock, and the noises his mouth made were shameless and wet. Edward had always loved having sex with chefs, because they had no care or embarrassment for the ridiculous sensual realities of sex. Edward grabbed at the back of the couch and gasped as Kassa's mouth got wetter around his cock and he nudged him deeper with each bob of his head.

"Kassa!" he said roughly, and god, new partner, new younger partner, he was really supposed to give a proper warning before he came, but that was really all he could manage. What was he supposed to do, given a mouth like that, given those beautiful fingers looped around the base of his cock. He came into Kassa's mouth gasping and hissing, and afterwards, as he went soft between Kassa's lips and the last twitches of orgasm worked through his body, he felt simultaneously ten years younger and ready to sleep for three days straight.

Kassa straightened up, putting his knuckles to the back of his lips for a moment before he smiled. Well, at least that went over okay. He put a hand under the tails of Edward's shirt and rubbed his stomach, making him twitch with the ticklish sensation. "That good?"

Edward took in a deep breath so he could speak. "You... really have no idea how much I needed that." All worries about age and the future seemed completely greyed out after properly getting off for the first time in god-knew-how long. He awkwardly pulled himself halfway sitting. "Now if you'd please sit back, I'd really enjoy returning the favor."

Kassa laughed, breathless and eager, and settled back on the opposite corner of the couch. "Please," he said, and Edward ever so gracefully tumbled off the couch onto the floor, settling on his knees between Kassa's legs. He was never at his most elegant immediately after he'd come his brains out.

He undid Kassa's pants and pulled his cock out, and oh, that was just beautiful. Long and thin and uncut -- Edward could only think of how much he would enjoy getting fucked by it. But, again, he was thinking too much of the future before it was there. It was time to take things slow. He took Kassa's hand for a moment, just long enough to kiss his fingertips, and then let it go to take him into his mouth.

Oh, he'd missed this. Kassa's hands went into his hair and his fingers met at the back of his neck as Edward sucked him, learning the map of his cock with his tongue. Edward had been comfortably in the habit of being able to take all of Luis' cock into his mouth without any problem, but Kassa was longer; he wrapped fingers around the base of him as the tip of his cock nudged the back of his throat.

Kassa gasped and whimpered, making shivering little noises as Edward teased under his foreskin with his tongue. He could get to like this, being the older one, being the man with experience. It could keep him sharp, keep him from being old and dull if he had this wonderful young man to keep happy. He made his own happy sound as he sucked the tip of his cock, licking the taste of him from the tip.

"Don't stop," Kassa gasped, and pushed Edward's head down a little. Oh, he liked it even more if Kassa was the assertive type. He sucked him hard and fast, grabbing on to his thighs as he tried to give him all he could. Slowly learning all of his favorite spots could come later; now he just wanted to make Kassa come.

When he did it was with a lovely sound, a soft, sweet cry as his fingers clenched at the back of Edward's neck as he came into his mouth. He swallowed him readily, marveling at how different he tasted from what he'd gotten so used to over the past five years. He liked the taste.

When Kassa was spent and softening, Edward staggered his way back up to the couch and tugged him close. Kassa laughed a little into his neck before turning his head up to kiss him; neither of them tasted anything like wine now.

"About dessert..." Edward said, and Kassa laughed.

"Oh, no," he said. "I'd say I'm full." He rest his head against Edward's shoulder for a while, his breathing settling towards calm as he idly traced a finger up and down Edward's chest. "I like you, you know."

"Yeah," Edward said as he brushed his hand along Kassa's back. "I like you, too."

They stayed like that for a while, and kissed for a while more, but then the realities of the progression of time became what they were, and they both had to put their clothes in order, stand up like reasonable gentlemen, and say goodnight. They kissed at Edward's door for a long while, and made vague plans to see each other again that Edward knew would become reality. And then Kassa was gone.

Edward checked his phone for the first time that night to see a series of texts from Carter, the last of which read, 'but in a worst case scenario you can always butch up! :)' He shook his head and wrote back a simple 'I had a very lovely night' and set his phone aside.

None of his offer to let Kassa cook in his kitchen involved cleaning up anything, so he put himself to the task, rinsing plates and pans and glasses and putting them in the dishwasher. As he was heating the oil to season his cast iron pan, he took a breath and looked up, looked around his apartment. Kassa had been gone for a while, but it didn't feel like he'd fully left. At the same time, Edward could still see the gaps and blank spots that Luis' absence had left. The presence of one didn't quite overlap or fill the other. Tonight was just a third date, not the beginning of a new stage in his life.

As he rubbed oil into iron with a folded paper towel, he surprised himself to realize that this was completely okay.

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## Highjacked by the Truth

by Dr. Noh

As the engine noise dies away, the sounds of the jungle close in around them. It's been five hours since they left the last town, longer since they saw another vehicle. The red mud track stretches out in front of them like a streak of blood through the trees.

"Are you writing blog entries in your head again, man?" Nick asks.

Rowan drops his forehead down to the center of the steering wheel. The horn makes a sad little squeak and follows the engine into the afterlife. "Next time," he says, into the dented plastic, "Kitty's getting the rental car."

Nick swings the camera toward the back seat to shoot their security consultant. Rowan found her in a bar in Cambodia, back when *Highjacked by the Truth* was just a blog with a cult following. She stops buffing her nails to aim her 9mm at the camera and tell Nick sweetly to go fuck himself.

"Hey," Rowan says. "We're not gonna get on cable like that, kids."

Kitty rolls her eyes. "We're not gonna get on cable at all," she says.

"Sure we are," Zoe says, hat still pulled down over her face. "This is like every fucking show on TNT. Hot bitches, firearms, and way too much sex. You boys are the hot bitches, obviously."

"Who's having too much sex?" Nick demands.

"Not me," Rowan says. He looks at Kitty and Zoe.

Kitty also looks at Zoe, and raises her eyebrows.

"Oh," Zoe says brightly. "Just me then? Sorry, guys."

Rowan rolls his eyes. "Can you look at the car, Z?"

"Uh, computers and car engines? Not actually as similar as you might think. Especially car engines made before I was born."

"Kitty?"

"Not a clue."

"Hey," Nick says. "You ask both the girls before you ask me? Thanks for the heaping helping of emasculation, man."

"Dude, literally the only thing I've ever seen you do is film shit, like, seriously, ever. I've known you six years and I barely know what your face looks like. I'm BFFs with your fucking camera."

Nick shrugs. "My old man fixed up wrecks in the back yard. I can look at it." He shoves his camera at Rowan. "Take your BFF and--"

"Keep rolling," the rest of the car choruses.

It's *Highjacked's* battle cry. Diarrhea? Keep rolling. Cast member on fire? Keep rolling. About to be shot on suspicion of espionage? Keep rolling until your camera gets confiscated or Kitty shows up with one of her terrifying mercenary buddies to save your ass. Almost get eaten by a yeti that turns out to be a really pissed-off bear? For god's sake, keep rolling.

They've been to more than forty countries, checked out hundreds of paranormal sightings, everything from aliens to Elvis, and Nick has every second on tape. The internet loves them.

Well, parts of the internet hate them, but that's just as good. They've done a couple of TV guest spots on *Ghost Hunters*. Now Rowan's starting to get calls about a real live show of their own.

"You won't be able to swear like this on cable," Rowan tells Nick, 20 minutes later.

"Bleep you and bleep your mom," Nick says. "This thing is a bleeping piece of fucking shit."

"I might be able to help," someone says, just behind Rowan.

Rowan whips around. "Jesus, dude! That'd be murder if I had a bad heart. Where the fuck did you come from?"

He smiles at the guy, tries to look calm, and looks him over. White, which is weird for the fucking epicenter of nowhere in South America, British in that super freaky upper class way where everything he says ends up sounding like 'I used to own your country, bitch', and paler than Tom Cruise in a bad vampire movie.

The weirdest part though, is that Kitty isn't standing behind him with a gun to his head. If Kitty had an online dating profile, first on the list of dislikes would be: people sneaking up on them. Likes: steel toed boots, OPI nail polish, and pushing her 9mm against the backs of people's skulls, so she's missing out on a stellar opportunity here.

He glances at her. She's a few feet off, looking angry, which is her version of surprised. (Dislikes also include: being surprised.)

"Just out for a walk," the stranger says. He offers Rowan his hand. "Tennyson Hazard."

"Really?" Rowan says, before he can stop himself. "Uh, sorry. Good to meet you." He shakes the offered hand. The guy has a nice grip, sure and warm, the kind that makes Rowan think about what it would feel like on his dick.

"I'm afraid so. Most people call me Tenner. Shall I have a look at your engine?"

Half an hour later, they're back on the road. Rowan's ready to hire Tenner just on the basis of his mechanic's chops and his name (because how fucking cool would Tennyson Hazard look in the credits?), Zoe's making fuck-him-fuck-him-NOW gestures every time she catches Rowan's eye, Nick has basically forgotten how to film anyone else, and Kitty... Well, Kitty hates him, but Kitty hates everyone she meets for at least a month, so that doesn't mean much. She hasn't shot him yet.

They set up camp at the site of an old Spanish mission. Rowan gives his introductory spiel to the camera about hauntings, old murders, ghost monks, etc.

"But the big draw here, boys and girls, is the head honcho, Father Castillo. He was the new guy. Nothing in the records about why he was sent over. Six months later, one of the junior monks makes it to the nearest town. Everyone up here is dead. He says Castillo murdered them."

He wasn't expecting much from the place, but it's actually kind of freaky. More than that, it's got the real-deal feel.

He raises an eyebrow at Zoe. She pauses in setting up her monitoring equipment long enough to nod back. She can feel it too. He gets a zingy thing going on in his stomach, half excitement and half worry. The thing about the real-deal sites is that they never give good footage. Usually what they give is equipment failure and pants-shitting terror.

Rowan sidles over to Tenner. "Hey, man. How do you feel about being on camera?"

"I thought I already was. Fixing your engine. Exciting stuff."

"Tonight, I mean. You wanna come out with us?"

He gives Rowan this funny little smile. "And hunt ghosts?"

"Not a believer?"

"I believe in what I can see. What I can touch."

Tenner brushes his fingers lightly up Rowan's arm on 'touch'. Looks like Zoe's gaydar is operating at full power. Rowan gets a whole different kind of zingy thing in his stomach. This guy is hot, mysterious, and *hitting on him*, which is Rowan's favorite kind of guy. Add the voice to that, so low it's like a really British thunderstorm, and Rowan feels like he's won the Triple Crown of sex, or at least he will have by tomorrow morning if he's got anything to say about it.

"So come out with us. Can't promise the ghosts will let you cop a feel, but you might see something. I've got a good feeling about this place."

Tenner tilts his head a little and narrows his eyes. "A good feeling."

"Yeah, you know. When you've done as many of these as I have, you get to know what the real thing feels like."

"Yes," Tenner says, after a pause. "I believe I will accompany you tonight."

"Bitchin'! We're gonna be live on the interwebs pretty soon if Z can hook us up to a satellite, so I gotta get you a release to sign, hold on. Oh, hey, can you cook?"

Tenner blinks slowly at him. "I can. To an extent."

"Awesome. Not saying you gotta, but you might wanna, cause we're all shit at it. BRB!"

He jogs over to the car and makes grabby hands at the waterproof box. Kitty pops it open and hands him the release form.

"You have to stop saying internet acronyms out loud if you ever want to get laid again," she says.

"Whatevs, he totally likes me and I have a great ass."

They have a better than average dinner, conjured up by Tenner out of ramen noodles, a bag of grated cheddar, and a can of tomato sauce. By the time it's full dark, they're ready to go.

"Okay, peeps. Tenner's coming with me and Nick to the church to start. Kitty, perimeter patrol?"

"I'm staying with Zoe at base."

That stops Rowan for a second. Kitty stays at base when she thinks Z shouldn't be left alone. Last time she stayed at base, they were in a ghost town in Nevada. A bunch of drunk assholes rolled up in a Suburban, would've trashed the camp and god knows what else if Kitty hadn't seen them off.

"Something up?" he asks.

She shrugs. "Staying here."

Maybe she can sense it too, that tingly feeling in the air. It's crawling up his spine now, urging him to get going. He gives into it, and they head for the church.

The first part of the night is pretty dull. Some exploration, a few isolation sessions with the EVP recorder. The highlight is Rowan nearly falling through a rotted out floorboard into the basement. Tenner catches him by the arm and hauls him back.

Rowan points the FLIR thermal imager down into the echoing hole. It's all navy blue, with the floorboards a warmer light blue and his feet yellow. And then something moves across the screen.

"Did you see that?" Rowan whispers. "Shit, tell me someone saw that."

"I saw it," Tenner says quietly. "A black shape, possibly humanoid. What temperature registers as black on your thermal imager?"

"Nothing? Pretty much nothing. We went to Siberia and everything was pretty damn dark blue, but it's relative. The coldest stuff should be dark blue no matter how cold it is."

"A heat sink," Tenner says.

"We gotta get down there."

"I'm not sure that's wise."

"Fuck wise," Rowan says, summarizing his life to date. "Did anyone see stairs?"

"Might be round the back," Nick offers.

They find the stairs to the basement outside, underneath double doors set into the ground. It takes Tenner and Rowan together to wrench them open, and a flood of cold air pushes out and past them. It leaves Rowan with goosebumps and a weird prickle at the back of his neck.

Tenner grabs Rowan's arm. "Stay here. Let me go down first."

"What? Like hell! Come on, Nick."

He charges down the stairs before he can think about the serious note in Tenner's voice, or about the chill that seems to be settling down in his chest. It's not that cold, he tells himself. It's just the contrast. The jungle's a million degrees and down here, it's... He can see his breath.

It comes out in clouds of steam. It's that cold. He gets out his thermometer and starts talking to the camera, the usual patter about temperature fluctuations and spirit activity, overlaid with excitement because this is going to be big, so big, he's never seen a site like this, it's amazing...and all the while something in the pit of his stomach is telling him *get out jesus h. christ get out now.*

"In conclusion," he tells their audience, "we're freezing down here, got a clear human shaped figure on the FLIR, looks like shit's about to get real. Hey, Tenner, come tell our loyal viewers what-- Tenner?"

He looks around. Even with the night vision scope he can't see more than a few feet in any direction. When he gives in and switches on a flashlight, it's the same deal.

"Tenner? Come on, answer me! Stay close, Nick." He starts along the wall, hand not quite touching it in case of enormous spiders. His heart's beating too fast. Night vision should be showing him the whole room. The flashlights should be giving them more penetration than this. It's like the darkness down here is a solid thing, not just a lack of light.

"Who thought you'd need a parka for the jungle?" he says for the camera. "It's looking like a big space down here. I know it's hard to see on camera... That's 'cause it's fucking hard to see in real life. Tenner? Answer me, come on! I can't lose our first guest on a live webcast, where are you?"

He sees something, movement ahead of him, and strides forward, cautious of the debris scattered across the dirt floor. It's human shaped, dark, moving. But it's wrong somehow.

"Nick, you see that?"

"I see it, man. Fuck."

"Father Castillo, is that you? If you're there, can you give us a sign? Make a sound?"

There's a creak of wood, like a door opening. He strains his eyes against the dark and steps closer. The thing ahead of them moves with him. There's a dark slash across it, like a crack. Castillo used a sword on some of them, but if this is a ghost, it's the most solid one Rowan's ever seen.

He should be narrating for the camera, but he can't. His throat is tight with fear. His palms are sweating, and his shivering in the cold. It's all he can do to take another step. When he moves, it moves again.

Closer.

Closer.

A hand comes out of the darkness and yanks him away from the wall. He draws a breath that

he knows will come out as a totally mortifying girly scream, but another hand clamps down over his mouth.

"Shut up," Tenner hisses in his ear. "Shut up and stop moving. Both of you. Right now. Freeze."

There's something in his voice. Nick's stopped mid-stride, and Rowan doesn't think he could make a noise even without the hand over his mouth.

"Turn around," Tenner says. His voice has this weird edge to it, like every word has an echo you can't quite hear. "Walk back toward the stairs. Do it quietly. Do it now."

They go. Rowan doesn't think they have a choice. He's angry and confused, but he's also a little relieved. He thinks about that thing, behind them in the dark.

They walk, and they walk. They were maybe twenty feet from the stairs when Tenner told them to stop and turn around. They've been walking for at least five minutes.

"We've gone too far," Rowan whispers.

"Yes, you have," Tenner says, with feeling.

"I mean we've passed the stairs. We must have."

"Did you see the stairs? No? Then what do you think the odds are that we've passed them?"

Rowan grabs his shoulder and jerks Tenner around to face him. "What is going on?"

Tenner looks at him for a long moment and then shakes him off. "All right. Look."

He raises a hand, and the ambient light level in the room goes from zero to shitty compact fluorescent to halogen to *surface of the sun*. Rowan claps his hands over his eyes and keeps them there for a few seconds until he stops seeing red through them.

He takes them away slowly, a finger at a time. The room is daylight bright now. He can see the stone wall, the dirt floor, the...bones. The human bones. A lot of places they go have human remains. He's almost-kinda-sorta used to it. If the worst the room had to offer was bones, he'd be okay. But there's also the dark.

With this kind of light, they should be able to see the whole room. It can't be bigger than the church above it. But Rowan still can't see more than a few feet in any direction. The light doesn't just drop off; it's *cut* off. The darkness ripples around them like oil. Little tendrils of it creep out into the light and retract as if burned.

"Okay," Rowan says, aware his voice is climbing the upper slopes of Mt. Unmanly but unable to do anything about it. "Okay, so, the only thing keeping me from totally losing my shit here is the traffic we're gonna get from this. What now? Who are you? What the hell is going on? What was that...thing I saw before?"

"Sorry to say, but you almost certainly lost your satellite signal when we lost the stairs. And it's long odds you'll get anything usable off the tape."

"Right. Or you wouldn't be... Being all...magical. Or whatever. For the camera. Shit! Are Kitty and Zoe okay out there?"

"Worried, I suspect, at not being able to contact you. But as we can't get out, so they can't get in. There's nothing to harm them out there."

"So it's all in here with us?" Nick mutters from the behind the camera. "That's super."

"Yeah," Tenner agrees. He pulls out a knife, sticks it into the dirt, and starts taking off his boot.

"Dude, what are you doing?" Rowan says.

"My power, unsupplemented, isn't enough to get us out of this trap. There are three ways to raise power. Blood, sex, and sacrifice. The amount of blood needed would leave me too weak to

do anything useful. I'd rather not lose another finger, so the little toe it is."

"Another-- You have all ten fingers! I would've noticed if you were rocking the Frodo look!"

Tenner holds up his left hand. He is lacking a pinky. Rowan swallows again, harder.

"Glamor," Tenner says. "People tend to remember someone...rocking the Frodo look, as you put it."

Rowan sits down on the floor with a thump. "Would now be a bad time to have hysterics? I always wanted to try it."

Tenner ignores him and holds the blade of his knife against his own toe.

"Whoa!" Rowan grabs his wrist. "You can't-- I cannot sit here and watch you carve yourself up, dude, no, no way!"

Tenner's face is grim, pale, and a little sweaty. "We don't have a lot of choice."

"Can you just tell me what's going on first! Please!"

Tenner studies him for a second and then relaxes his grip on the knife. "All right. We have time." He lets out a little breath of laughter. "Time is all we have, at the moment."

He sticks his foot back in his boot, knife back in the boot sheath, and rolls to his feet. He strides forward, and the dark recedes like a slimy, living curtain. Rowan stays firmly behind him, but manages to follow without pissing himself or anything seriously embarrassing. He reaches back without looking, and Nick grabs his hand. Better safe than...losing your cameraman to creepy-ass sentient darkness.

They're headed back toward that thing now. Rowan sort of wishes he hadn't asked, but he didn't want to watch Tenner cut off his own toe, either. The situation is significantly more fucked up than *Highjacked's* previous worst, which only involved humans and guns and a possible shallow grave.

Pretty soon, Rowan can see the thing again, wavering out of the thick darkness, human shaped, but still somehow wrong. Curiosity trumps terror at the last second, and Rowan passes Tenner at a jog. Whatever it is can't be as bad as he's imagining. He just needs to know.

"Don't touch it," Tenner snaps, in that voice that's impossible to disobey.

Rowan stops just short. It's not a monster at all. It's a mirror.

All the time he thought it was moving toward them in the dark, and he was moving toward it. He stares into it. It's him, but...not. Wrong. Bent at odd angles and hemmed in with shadows. He moves his hand. It waves back at him. He leans closer, tries to see his own eyes. There's something in them, some weird color or afterimage, like a retinal burn. He leans closer...

Tenner jerks him back sharply by the collar. "Gaze not too long into the abyss," he says, brightly.

"What is it?" Rowan asks.

"It's what it looks like. It's a mirror. It just reflects different things than ordinary mirrors do."

"Things like?"

Tenner hesitates. "Souls," he says, at last. "For lack of a better word."

"That's my *soul*? Jesus."

"Yours isn't so bad. You should see mine." He catches Rowan's expression, which must be pretty horrified, because his face softens. "Look, what you see...is only what you *can* see. Normal people aren't equipped to use these mirrors as they were intended. There's too much that's invisible to you."

"So you don't see the same thing I do?"

"You see the weight you've acquired in your life. Loss, grief, pain, cruelty. That which you've

caused and what you've experienced. The mortal things. The things that don't live on. I see the whole. I won't say you're a shining beacon in the wilderness, Rowan, but you're not a bad person. Do not take what you see here to heart."

"Did Father Castillo take it to heart?"

"Yes," Tenner said, softly. "I believe he did. My research indicates that the mirror belonged to his predecessor. There were a lot of us in the Church back then. He knew he was dying, tried to destroy it - the crack, you see - and failed. Died in the attempt. Castillo found it..." He shrugged.

"It sent him totally looney tunes."

"Concise and poetic. Yes."

"And he killed all those people because of it?"

"That was my initial thought. That's why I let you come along. But it's worse than that."

"That's not bad enough? And hey, wait, we gave you a lift!"

"Had I known what happened here, I would never have fixed your vehicle. I would've come on my own." Tenner paused and put a hand on Rowan's shoulder to turn him gently away from the mirror. "He brought them down here to judge them. He made them look into it, one by one. After that... He might've killed them. They might have killed each other or killed themselves."

Rowan wraps his arms around himself. He's still freezing, and his chest hurts deep inside like someone's punched him there. He tries to laugh. "No one liked what they saw, huh?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Tenner says gently. "No one could. They were only seeing the worst of themselves."

"Why would someone make a thing like that?"

"This is not its intended purpose. True Reflectors can be used for many things. Divination, communication. Even travel. They're useful, in the right hands."

"Oh, and you're the right hands?"

"No. I came here to destroy it."

Rowan chews his lip. "Oh. Is that what you need the power of your toe for?"

Tenner snorts and manages to make it sound genteel. "No. My own power will suffice for that. I need a sacrifice to get us out of this...maelstrom of souls. I have never in my life seen such a conglomeration of pain and madness and terror. It's warping the skin of the world." He waves a hand. "The darkness. The disappearing stairs. They are closing in. They want deliverance, and who can blame them."

Rowan looks around at the boiling darkness. He thinks about all those monks going crazy looking at themselves, seeing what he saw and thinking it was all there was inside them.

"Can you do that? Deliver them?"

"Not with a toe. I'll have to come back."

"What would it take? You said it could be blood?"

"It would take every last drop in your body, and even if you were willing, I don't do that sort of thing."

"Sex?"

Tenner blinks at him. "What?" he says.

"You said blood, sex, or sacrifice."

"You want to have sex on a dirt floor in the freezing cold surrounded by bones and the unquiet dead?"

"It sounds bad when you put it like that." Rowan holds up a hand. "Look, no, obviously not, but I think I'd prefer it to you cutting off your toe. And we were gonna anyway."

Tenner raises his eyebrows. "Oh, were we?"

Rowan does his best cocky grin. "Yeah, totally. I've got lube."

"You..." Tenner closes his eyes briefly. "Of course you do."

"It's not you," Nick puts in. "He's always got lube."

"And condoms," Rowan adds, helpfully.

"It would have to be bareback, I'm afraid," Tenner says. He crosses his arms over his chest and cocks his head to one side. "Still interested?"

"You doing me or me doing you?"

"Your choice."

"Uh," Rowan says. He glances at Nick.

"Imagine the traffic," Nick says, a smirk in his voice.

"No way, dude. Turn around."

"What happened to 'keep rolling'?"

"Nick! Tenner, back me up here."

Tenner shrugs. "The last time I had sex for ritualistic purposes, there were twenty people watching."

"Nick!"

Nicks snorts. "Okay, chill. Like I wanna see that anyway. I'll turn around and stick my fingers in my ears. You two have fun."

He does. Rowan and Tenner face each other, Tenner impassive, Rowan shifting his weight awkwardly and too aware of his sweaty palms.

"Can you make it warmer in here like you made it lighter? There's some shrinkage happening."

Tenner gives him an amused smile, but bends to draw a wide circle in the dirt around them. He clears it of bones and mutters a few words when he closes it. Abruptly, the atmosphere shifts and Rowan feels lighter all over. It's also about twenty degrees warmer, which is still chilly for being naked, but not hypothermia territory.

"Wow. Better."

"Can we keep him?" Nick asks.

"Fingers! In ears!"

Nick does as he's told for once, but it's still fucking hard to ignore him.

Tenner puts large, warm hands at Rowan's waist and draws him close. It's suddenly a lot easier.

"Twenty people, huh?"

"It's an easy taboo to overcome. Not a few of us now have day jobs in the porn industry. Power raising is far more effective than viagra." He lays a hand on his cheek, tipping Rowan's head up until their eyes meet. "You do not have to do this. Truly."

"I want to." Especially when Tenner looks at him like that, soft and serious at once. There's more in his eyes than Rowan remembers seeing in anyone's, sadness and caring, and Rowan wonders if it's possible to fall for someone in ten seconds of eye contact.

He shakes himself mentally and pulls Tenner down to him for a kiss. It's good, warm and slippery, a little hesitant on Tenner's part. Maybe you don't kiss for ritualistic sex. Fuck that. If Rowan's having sex, it's going to involve kissing.

Tenner's arms come around him, one hand in his hair, tugging his head back. Tenner kisses down his neck and licks the hollow of his throat. Rowan's always been weirdly sensitive there,

and it makes him shiver and swallow convulsively. Tenner makes a little noise of satisfaction and does it again.

"I can feel it," he murmurs. "A literal hotspot in your energy field."

"Is this, like, magical dirty talk?"

Tenner smiles and drags his teeth over another spot under Rowan's jaw. "Maybe. How's it working for you?"

"Pretty--" Deep breath, lock knees so he doesn't fall over. "Pretty well. Jesus."

Tenner palms Rowan's cock through his jeans, and in seconds it goes from that one little touch to both of them with their pants and underwear down around their knees, junk out, cocks rubbing together and getting all sticky and slippery, and god, it's better than Rowan thought it could be. Tenner makes it easy to ignore where they are, keeps distracting Rowan with these little touches, licks, nips, every time he starts to remember--

"I'm going to fuck you," Tenner says, hot in his ear. "Hands and knees, please. I think that will be easiest."

Rowan drops to his knees faster than he ever has in his life. "I usually top," he says, stupidly.

"But you don't want to this time."

He can't deny it, so he keeps quiet. Tenner moves in behind him. Warm hands stroke over his back, his sides, the backs of his thighs. Fingers trail between his cheeks. He struggles to get his legs wider, but he's caught by his jeans. His cock is aching.

Lips press to the center of his back, and Tenner works two slicked fingers inside him. Rowan arches his back hard and bites his lip. He's panting.

"Too much?" Tenner asks.

"No! God. No, keep going. Deeper."

"Looking for another hotspot, am I?"

"Smug bastard. Come on."

"Hmm...more difficult to find than the others..."

Rowan makes a frustrated noise and shoves himself back onto Tenner's fingers. He can almost feel it, angles his hips, wanting it. The reason he usually tops isn't because he doesn't enjoy this. He likes it almost too much.

"Dammit, just a little-- Come on--"

And then Tenner does something, twists a little deeper, and the pads of his fingers are rubbing solidly against Rowan's very favorite hotspot, and Rowan's hips are jerking, fucking himself helplessly to get more of that, and this isn't like any sex he's ever had in his life.

He can hear himself swearing, hear his pulse in his ears. He's so hard his cock is bumping against his stomach, leaving sticky trails of fluid across his skin. He moans when it brushes the hem of his t-shirt.

Tenner pulls his fingers out, and a second later his cock is shoving in. It's big. It should hurt, at least a little, with as long as it's been for Rowan. It doesn't. It feels like the best fucking thing in the world, and Rowan can't get it in him fast enough.

"Jesus, yeah, fuck, come on, please, I want it, want it so bad, need it--" He keeps up a steady litany of pleading, no real idea of the specific words coming out of his mouth. Finally, he's got it all. Tenner's stretched over his back, mouthing the back of his neck, hands moving shakily along his sides, under his shirt.

"Move," Rowan says. "Please, fuck, you gotta move."

"Yeah," Tenner says. His voice is shaky too. "Okay. Home stretch. Here we go."

He draws back, shoves in hard, hits it exactly right. Rowan's fingers dig into the dirt, and his cock throbs. He wants to touch himself, but he knows it'll be over in a second if he does, and he wants more of this, wants this *forever*.

"Again, come on, it's good, god, it's so good, don't stop--" He tries to shut himself up, but the only thing that does that is Tenner's next stroke, deep and hard inside him, and the one after that, and the one after that.

The rhythm picks up, and Rowan's forgotten about even the possibility of touching himself and just clings to the ground like he might fall off if he doesn't. He sees sparks, *feels* them crackling up and down his spine, and when he starts to come, his entire body shakes with it.

It doesn't stop. His cock is still spurting, jerking, all his muscles clenching in time to Tenner's rough thrusts. He can hear himself making noises he didn't know he was capable of, high and almost pained, pulled out of him. His vision goes starry and spotty. It's too much. He doesn't want it to stop.

Tenner's cock rams home one more time, and Rowan can feel it when he comes, wet and hot inside him. Rowan's own orgasm finally starts to trail off normally, passing into little shudders and aftershocks. Rowan's arms give out and dump him on the floor.

There's a little slice of time where he's just breathing, coming down, trying not to get dirt up his nose. Words gradually replace the pounding of his own blood in his ears. He looks up.

Just as he does, there's a flash of white that blanks the whole room. When it clears, Tenner is standing, naked, arms outstretched and eyes closed. His lips are moving, but the shapes they're making don't match what Rowan hears. It's almost song.

The light is still so bright he has to squint. The darkness around them boils and starts to scream. Rowan puts his hands over his ears, but it doesn't help. It's not a noise he can shut out, and it gets louder, louder, until his nails are digging into the skin of his temples and he's biting his tongue and he can't take it for one more second...and it's gone.

The darkness drains away like a tide and leaves a perfectly ordinary basement behind it. Rowan can see the stairs, not more than ten feet away. Even most of the bones are gone.

He realizes he's still curled up on the ground with his ass hanging out and puts himself to rights. "Is that all?" he asks Tenner.

Tenner is still naked, swaying on his feet. He doesn't answer. Rowan stands and touches his shoulder. "You okay, man?"

Tenner pitches forward, and Rowan barely catches him in time. He lowers them both to the floor.

"I'm all right," Tenner mumbles. "Just tired. It's done."

"Right, great. We'll get you out of here, get you some clothes and a Powerbar or something. Hold on." He looks around. "Nick? Nick, where-- oh shitting hell."

Tenner jerks his head and looks in the direction Rowan is staring. Nick is standing in front of the mirror, camera still in his hand. Filming the fucking thing. Rowan launches himself up on shaky legs.

"Nick? What are you doing?"

"I can see into it," Nick says. His voice is soft and dreamy. "I can see all kinds of stuff."

"Can you just step back a little?"

"No," Nick says. "There's more." He steps forward. His palm lands against the surface of the mirror. His lens touches it...and slides right into it.

"Pull him back," Tenner croaks.

Rowan gets him by the shoulder and yanks him back. "You okay? Hey, you're okay, you are, look at me." But it's clear that Nick is not okay. He doesn't even look like he's Nick anymore. Nobody's home in there.

"Goddammit!" Rowan yells. He picks up a skull and hurls it at the mirror. It cracks and crumbles and doesn't even leave a dent in the mirror's surface.

"Bring him here," Tenner says, voice weak.

Rowan hauls him over and helps Tenner to his feet again. Tenner's swaying. His hands are shaking.

"What do you need?" Rowan says. "Blood?" He holds out his hand.

Tenner grips his wrist. "Don't. You shouldn't offer yourself so freely. You've given me more than enough tonight." He turns to Nick, though he keeps hold of Rowan's wrist and he's leaning against Rowan's side to stay upright. "This will not go smoothly. You may need to carry both of us out of here."

Rowan nods. He takes the camera from Nick and sets it on the floor just in case. Nick wouldn't want his baby broken.

"Nick. Nicholas Caspian Garza." Tenner's voice has that weird note of command in it. Nick's eyes focus on his face. "You wander where you are not welcome." He lifts his hand and traces something on Nick's cheek. *"You must come back."*

The four words ring and echo like thunder, though his voice isn't loud. Nick's eyes go wide. He makes a surprised noise and crumples to the ground. A second later, Tenner goes down too. Rowan tries to catch them both and just manages to fall down with them.

Rowan scrambles to his feet and stops, torn between going for help and not leaving them unconscious in a creepy basement with an evil soul-eating mirror. Fortunately, his earpiece crackles into life just then, and Z's forced calm fills his ears, along with the sound an axe hitting wood as Kitty goes for the storm doors covering the stairs like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

He hugs Kitty when she makes it through, and she doesn't hit him or anything.

Tenner and Nick are unconscious for nearly twelve hours. It's enough time to get them back to civilization and checked into a hotel, and enough time for Zoe to run Nick's tape. It's blank after the satellite feed cut out, as Tenner predicted. Except for the very end.

There's no mirror, or Nick, or Nick's reflection. It's all weird colors and vague shapes. Zoe shrugs.

"It's like a bad acid trip. We can't put this up on the site. No one will buy it."

Rowan thinks about the camera lens sunk into the surface of the mirror. "Yeah. Keep a copy of the footage just in case though, huh?"

"Sure. Put the beginning up?"

"Yeah, I'll do a blog entry for it tomorrow."

He goes to look in on Nick and Tenner. And Nick's camera. It's still got a little charge left. Just for fun, he shoots both of them sleeping and then goes out on the balcony to shoot the people down in the town square. After a minute or two, he plays it back on the viewfinder.

Nick looks normal. Tenner glows with a pure blue-white light that pulses when he breathes. Not all of the people in the crowd down in the square are solid. Rowan swallows and sets the camera down carefully.

"I'd very much like to buy that," Tenner says, from just behind him.

"You gotta stop that! Fuck. I thought you were asleep."

"Ten thousand dollars."

"It's Nick's. You have to ask him."

Tenner frowns. "I can't let you keep it."

"It's still Nick's. Is he gonna be all right?"

"He'll be fine. I looked him over. There's no lasting damage. Twenty thousand."

"It's his camera!"

Tenner smiles. "All right. I'll talk to him."

"So. I guess you know...what it does now."

"It's integrated some of the properties of the mirror. It should prove fascinating to study."

"Are you going back there?"

"Soon, yes." His eyes widen. "You did leave the mirror there? You didn't try to move it?"

"Hell to the no. I'm not touching that thing. Are you sure you should?"

Tenner shrugs. "I still mean to destroy it, or at least conceal it from mortal eyes. But it will be a week or more before I have the necessary power reserves built up again, and I might as well use that time for research."

"I guess you're not coming with us then." Rowan's heart sinks a little, though he knew, really, that it wouldn't happen. "We could pay you a pretty decent salary. Some rich weirdo just offered us twenty grand for a beat-up camera."

Tenner smiles at him briefly. "I'm afraid not. But I believe we'll see each other again."

"Yeah?"

"If nothing else, I am in your debt." He takes Rowan's hand and presses something into it. "If you need me, this will call me to you."

Rowan looks at it. It's a little wooden sphere, carved on every surface and strung on a leather band. Rowan ties it around his neck, and it rests just at the hollow of his throat.

"How?" he asks. "Will you just know?"

"Blood is the traditional call, but any bodily fluid will suffice."

Rowan smirks. "So I could jack off on this thing and you'd, what, appear in my bedroom in a puff of smoke? Hot."

Tenner rolls his eyes, but he's smiling too, though he rubs a hand over his face to hide it. "It only works once, so be very sure you need me before you use it."

"Oh, I need you," Rowan says, wiggling his eyebrows.

"If you conjure me up for a date, you will be sorry."

"Doubt that. Anyway. You've got all your toes. And we got some pretty good footage before Nick's camera started seeing dead people. All's well that end's well?"

"Astonishingly, yes. I didn't think any of us would get out of there alive," he adds casually.

Rowan feels a residual chill go through him. "That bad, huh?"

"Oh, yes. That bad."

"Thanks for not telling me. I mean that."

"Any time."

Rowan touches the wooden bead at his throat. "You don't really owe me, you know. It was just sex. I mean, pretty much the most fantastic sex ever, but still."

"Sex *and* sacrifice. It was a gift you gave willingly because you didn't want to see me in pain. Two for the price of one, as it were. That's why it was...like it was. That's why we're not dead. And that's why I couldn't take your blood. All three to the same person, that's a promise you don't

want to make to anyone, Rowan. Be more careful with yourself."

"Sure. If I meet any more of you guys, I'll watch out for that." He tries to say it casually, but he can feel his face heating up. He wonders exactly what kind of promise that would be. "We're out of here tomorrow," he adds quickly. "So, you know. If you wanted to do anything tonight...."

"You can buy me dinner. And then we'll see."

They watch the sunset until Kitty comes out on the balcony for a smoke. A second later, Z drags Nick out. He's pale and tired, but smiling. They go to dinner, all of them together. It's hours before Rowan can get Tenner alone again, but he doesn't really mind. They're his family, after all.

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# You're Doing It Wrong

by Nijiro Sumi (虹色墨)

## INT. - RILEY'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Close-up on RILEY's face as he leans in close to the mirror, applying mascara. Catchy pop music plays in the background. Slow pull back, so that we can see him pausing in his ministrations every now and then to bob along to the music, moving his shoulders and arms, mouthing along to the lyrics. He looks as though he's in his 20s, with fine, almost feminine features, and short brown hair and multiple piercings in each ear: a variety of hoops and studs in his lobes, a cartilage piercing in one ear, and a bar in the other. Full-sleeve renderings of Aztec gods and other mythological imagery cover both his arms. Pull back farther, and we can see a tramp stamp of an infinity symbol in the small of his back. He's dressed in a pair of dark red briefs.

## BEDROOM

The music is still playing. RILEY is now standing in front of a full-length mirror on the closet door and holding up two outfits in front of him: a white sailor "crackerjack" uniform, complete with blue scarf, and schoolgirl uniform with a pleated plaid skirt in the other. He's still mouthing along to the lyrics. We can see Riley's bedroom in the background of the mirror, which is extremely neat when compared to the average 20-something male's.

## CUT TO

A computer screen, ostensibly that of someone viewing RILEY's camboy website. At the top of the screen it says HELP RILEY PAY FOR COLLEGE, and at the bottom is a embedded chatroom, and various buttons: Tip, Private Show, Photos, Videos, About, Contact. But most of the screen is taken up by a video, which shows Riley lying on his bed, propped up on his elbows, dressed in a policeman's uniform, complete with hat. When he speaks, his voice is obviously coming from computer speakers.

RILEY

Good evening, ladies! Riley here to show you a good time. Hope you're all having a fabulous Friday night! I know I am.

RILEY twirls his handcuffs and smiles saucily at the camera. The PRIVATE SHOW button at the bottom of the screen lights up, as if someone's just clicked it. RILEY raises his eyebrows.

RILEY

And that's the sound of a Private Show request! Sorry boys, bee arr bee!

The video screen flickers, goes black, and then comes back on. RILEY is still seated there, sans hat. He grins at the screen.

RILEY  
Hello, Steve0229. What'll it be today?

STEVE (O.S.)  
Well, you know I like to stay on theme. How about something involving misuse of police equipment?

RILEY tilts his head and looks coy.

RILEY  
Well, I can't really handcuff myself, now can I?

STEVE (O.S.)  
You can get more creative than that.

RILEY  
You're right, I can.

RILEY momentarily disappears off-camera as he rolls to retrieve something from the floor. He returns with a police baton--not the expandable kind, but the old-fashioned ones with a short handle coming out at a 90-degree angle. He raises his eyebrow at the camera.

STEVE (O.S.)  
Oh, yeah.

RILEY  
The fun's just getting started!

RILEY sets the baton aside and unbuttons his uniform shirt. He runs his fingers down the revealed skin but doesn't linger--customers don't appreciate paying for too long of a tease. He shrugs off the shirt and drops it off the side of the bed. A tattoo of a Valentine candy heart that says BE MINE rests just above his heart. His chest is pale and smooth and a little thin, without a well-defined six-pack or anything. He slides off his trousers to reveal his briefs and palms the pronounced bulge in the front. He plumps out his bottom lip, tilts his head back and groans.

STEVE (O.S.)  
Suck, suck the baton. Suck it like it was my cock.

RILEY  
Oh baby, I like the way you think.

RILEY picks up the baton and licks the edge of it, getting it good and wet before slowly pushing it into his mouth. He sucks with every evidence of enjoyment, eyes half-lidded, moaning like he can't stand it. He presses the heel of his other hand into his crotch and pushes his hips up into it in small circles. STEVE's breath can be heard coming kind of heavily.

STEVE (O.S.)

Take your underwear off. Take it off.

RILEY tilts his head back and continues sliding the baton in and out of his mouth, while with his other hand he manages to push down the elastic of his underwear. His cock springs free, large and flushed and bare of hair, even on the testicles. He wriggles rather impressively to get his underwear off the rest of the way and flings that, too, off-camera.

STEVE (O.S.)

Touch yourself. Are you going to touch yourself?

RILEY pauses briefly to spit into his hand. He spits again, then palms his cock. He pumps his shaft fast and hard, making little slapping sounds, and continues to suck the baton with his eyes closed, moaning up a storm.

STEVE (O.S.)

Oh God, oh God. You're so hot. You're so beautiful.

RILEY pulls the baton out of his mouth. He's grinning, though his eyes are still closed.

RILEY

You're so sweet. Such a sweetie. Do you want to see me fuck myself?

STEVE (O.S.)

Oh God, yes. Please fuck yourself. Fuck yourself. Bring yourself off.

RILEY

This is why I like you, Steve. All right, give me a sec.

RILEY reaches off-camera briefly and comes back with a condom. He tears off the foil and rolls the condom down over the end of the police baton with brisk efficiency and. He repositions himself so that he's on his back, legs raised, with his ass facing the camera. It's not quite the porno close-up of the ass--for one thing, it's a webcam and the resolution isn't as good--but it provides quite a nice view as he starts to push the baton into his hole. RILEY starts moaning before the baton's even an inch in; it's difficult to tell whether he's putting a show on for his customer or if he's genuinely enjoying himself.

RILEY

Oh God, it's so big. It's so hard.

STEVE (O.S.)

Yeah, yeah. God, fuck yourself.

RILEY

Oh, I am. It feels so good.

RILEY starts thrusting the baton in and out, bucking his hips up to make it. He thrashes his head from side to side and moans; at one point he reaches up to clutch his own hair with one hand, while the other continues to thrust. His cock is hard up against his stomach.

STEVE (O.S.)

Touch yourself. If you want to. You can touch yourself.

RILEY

No, I'm gonna come just like this. Just from this. God, it's so good.

STEVE (O.S.)

Oh God, oh God.

Several more minutes of RILEY fucking himself. Sometimes he slows it down, giving himself slow, deep strokes. Other times they're fast, shallow thrusts. At one point his hand drifts down to toy with one of his nipples, and then down farther. He stops short of actually touching his cock and lets his hand just rest on his stomach as he continues to fuck himself.

RILEY

I'm gonna come.

STEVE just groans.

RILEY

I'll take that as an okay, then.

RILEY comes, splattering semen onto his belly and up his chest. He goes limp with a sigh, rubbing the back of his head onto his sheets, and pulls out the baton with a slick, filthy sound. He pulls off the condom and drops it off the side of the bed, then rolls onto his side to smile at the camera.

RILEY

How was that? Was that good?

STEVE (O.S.)

Oh, hell yeah.

RILEY grins.

RILEY

All right. You know how the billing works, I don't need to give you the spiel, do I?

STEVE (O.S.)

Naw. Thanks, Riley.

RILEY

Thank you, Steve.

CUT TO BLACK

EXT. STANFORD CAMPUS - DAY

Establishing shot of Stanford University. Students running around, cyclists ignoring stop signs, etc. etc. It's a nice, sunny day.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Class--or section, rather--is obviously just ending, as the students are collecting their things and departing. RILEY slings his messenger bag over his shoulder and walks up to STEVE, who's sitting near the back. STEVE is taller and a little more heavily built than RILEY, and more conventional in his appearance: blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned, wearing a red and blue striped polo shirt and jeans and sneakers. RILEY is dressed in skinny jeans, an ironic t-shirt, and flip-flops.

RILEY

Hey, so, uh, I was wondering...

STEVE

Huh?

RILEY pauses, obviously nervous about something. STEVE seems a little nervous as well, though he's hiding it well.

RILEY

Are you doing anything this weekend?

STEVE

Oh, uh, well, it's my birthday on Wednesday, so my friends and I were gonna go out...

RILEY

Oh, when's your birthday?

STEVE

February 29. Yeah, I'm a leap year baby.

RILEY

Oh.

STEVE

What was it you wanted to ask me about?

RILEY

Oh, I was just gonna, um, I wanted to see if you wanted to get, um, to get a coffee or something. Sometime.

STEVE looks mortified and doesn't reply.

RILEY

Sorry, I just, um, you outed yourself in class today as, uh, you know what, never mind, it was dumb, there's no reason you'd be interested in me--

STEVE

Shit, this is so fucking awkward.

STEVE puts one hand to his head and bites his lip. He looks agonized, tormented. RILEY just looks confused.

RILEY

What? Look, it's not a big deal if you're not--

STEVE

I know who you are! I, I found you on tumblr, I'm, uh--

A look of horrified comprehension dawns on RILEY's face.

RILEY

Shit! You! You're Steve0229!

STEVE's face burns red. He grabs his backpack.

STEVE

I'm sorry, I should've switched to a different section, I will switch to a different section, this is really, I wouldn't blame you if--

RILEY

That's a really fucking lame handle! Your name and your birthday? Really?

STEVE

I'm not very creative, okay?! I was just, I don't know, I just wanted to see if it was really you, and--

RILEY

Okay. Okay. This is really awkward. You were right. Really, really awkward.

STEVE

Yeah, I--I'm just gonna go.

RILEY

Wait.

RILEY seizes STEVE by the arm before he can make good his escape. STEVE looks down at RILEY's hand and for a moment it looks like he's going to shake him off. But he doesn't, though he doesn't look at RILEY, either.

RILEY

This can, um. This can still work. Even though it's kind of weird and backwards. But at least you know I'm a sex worker. I mean, that gets a lot of it out of the way. The, um, the awkward stuff.

STEVE

Dude, it's like, massively creepy, the part where I've been paying you to masturbate for me on camera.

RILEY

Yeah, you could've been more up front about that.

STEVE

What was I supposed to say?! Hey Riley, I saw your show last night, it was super hot. Want to go out?

RILEY

Okay, actually, I can see how that'd be really, um.

STEVE

Plus I thought you were way too cool for me. Look at you, with all your piercings and your tattoos and you're so fucking hot, and I'm just like, some bro who wears Old Navy.

RILEY seems extremely flattered.

RILEY

You think I'm so fucking hot?

STEVE

I would not have spent that much money if I did not think you were so fucking hot.

RILEY

Okay, well, I think you're hot, too.

RILEY steps a little closer to STEVE and lowers his voice.

RILEY

Wanna fuck me for real?

STEVE

Doesn't it, doesn't it violate some kind of code, you know, dating clients?

RILEY smooths one hand down the front of STEVE's chest. STEVE stares at that hand as if he doesn't quite know how it got there.

RILEY

Yeah, well. You wouldn't be able to be a client anymore.

STEVE

That's. That's okay. It was getting pretty expensive.

RILEY

Yeah, I think you paid for...one whole textbook.

They grin at each other, a little helplessly.

RILEY

So, coffee?

STEVE

Okay. But you're paying. I'm fucking broke.

###

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## Behind the Scenes

by Kuroobaa (クローバー)

illustrated by cloverbloom

Really. The hyperbolic reaction may have been something like throwing the first thing he can grab across the room, preferably straight to his boyfriend. But Tyler's not into theatrics so he only manages to blurt out, "You're going to do what?" He stares at Kevin incredulously and hates the way Kevin's acting so nonchalant about this—this preposterous idea.

"It's just for publicity, Ty. You know how it is," Kevin says with a shrug then lifts the mug filled with hot coffee to his lips like they're in the middle of a simple discussion about the weather.

"Exactly. I know how it is and this could either backfire or blow up in our faces." Tyler has seen it happen to other couples. It's unsettling to think that if Kevin pushes through with this plan, then Tyler has to start accepting the possibility that he might lose his boyfriend in the process. "God, Kev! I don't want us to be another Brad and Jennifer."

"Babe." Kevin sets his mug on the kitchen counter then hugs Tyler from behind. He presses his lips against the sensitive spot behind Tyler's ear and Tyler feels a shiver run down his spine. "That's not going to happen. Don't you have faith in me? I'm not going to let this affect us in any way. I promise," Kevin says in a soothing manner while trailing kisses down the side of Tyler's neck.

"It's not that I don't have any faith in you but... but it's with Megan Flux!" Tyler belatedly realizes he sounds like a whining child but he doesn't care. He has every right to whine and be worried and throw tantrums or whatever. How else should he react after finding out that Kevin's stupid manager thinks it's a good idea for Kevin to pretend-date Megan just because she and Kevin are doing a movie together?

"So what?"

The bread slices pop out of the toaster and Tyler grabs it, drops it on the plate and twists around to face Kevin. "So what? Are you kidding? She's like one of the most ethereally beautiful women in Hollywood right now. And she's sweet and nice and sensual. Who wouldn't want to date her for real?"

Kevin lifts an eyebrow and stares at Tyler as if Tyler has grown another head. "It's not like I'm going to fall for her, Ty. I'm gay."

"You're bisexual," Tyler reminds him then Tyler drops his shoulders in defeat. "Fine. It seems you've already made the decision. I guess there's nothing I can do to change your mind."

"Hey, I didn't make the decision. Karen did," is Kevin's abrupt defense.

Tyler knows that's plausible because Karen can be such a manipulative bitch but he still says, "It's not like she can force you on a fake date with someone," just to show Kevin he's still upset. He crosses his arms tightly over his chest, putting a barrier between him and Kevin. "She must have consulted you first before giving Megan or her manager a final word."

Kevin tilts his head, eyes glistening with a hint of mischief. "Is this going to end up in a rough make-up sex?" His lips twitch in a lopsided smile that always, *always* manages to ease off Tyler's

ire. "Because we can drop this discussion right now, forget about breakfast and go back to bed so I can fuck you senseless."

Tyler decides to push his worries aside and enjoy the way Kevin's sucking on his neck and the way Kevin's hands are kneading his ass.

The whole dating thing with Kevin and Megan explodes in the media just a couple of weeks after they started filming 'Romancin' in Chattanooga'. The public eats it up like it's a real deal. Despite vowing not to look at rag mags, Tyler ends up grabbing copies of 'Chatmates' and 'Hush Mush' and some decent entertainment magazines out of curiosity.

The pictures are convincing. There's even a couple where Kevin and Megan are on a lip-lock and Tyler spends about half an hour staring at the picture, wondering if it's fake, if it has something to do with the angle or if Kevin and Megan are indeed kissing.

"You're going to get a migraine for that."

Tyler drops the magazine then realizes that hiding it is pointless since Carsen had seen him reading it. He's been too engrossed poring through the articles written about Kevin and Megan that he didn't even notice Carsen has crept inside the trailer.

Carsen picks up one of the tabloids, tutts and says, "Does this mean the boyfriend's cheating on you? Or is this one of those staged relationships just to get more audience for the film?"

"It's a sham." Tyler pushes himself up from his seat then stretches with his arms above his head. He feels the slight pop in his back, the strain on his muscles easing up a little. "Is it my turn yet?"

"Nah." Carsen shakes his head. "They're redoing the scene with Chelsea and Rick. It was too windy when they filmed the scene earlier that it didn't look good on the screen."

"Bummer." Tyler blows a fringe of his reddish brown hair off his forehead. Much as he loves outdoor shoots, the unpredictable L.A. weather often makes filming complicated.

"So..." Carsen leans against the wall. The uneasy way he shifts from one leg to another makes him seem anxious about something. "Since you're boyfriend's away, you wanna grab some dinner with me later?"

Tyler worries his lower lip, contemplating whether he should go to dinner with this undeniably handsome heartthrob or sulk in his apartment alone. "Can we have Chinese?"

Carsen's face nearly splits in two when he smiles. "Of course. "

Tyler's relationship with Kevin isn't really public even though they've been together for two years. Kevin isn't completely out of the closet but he's not exactly hiding his sexuality either: his family knows about it, at least. Tyler, on the other hand, is more open to the people around him.

When his manager, Lila, hears the news about Kevin and Megan, she doesn't waste time expressing her concern. Tyler thought it best to tell Lila the truth before she misconstrues the whole issue so he agrees to meet her for lunch.

"I think it's a brilliant scheme," Lila says as soon as Tyler's done relaying the entire story in the most concise way possible. "Not saying it's a good idea but it can help sell the movie. I gotta hand it to Karen. She certainly knows her game, knows what fans would want."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Tyler says with feigned bitterness.

"You should do it too, you know." There isn't any trace of hilarity or mockery in Lila's

expression and her seriousness unnerves Tyler.

"Do what?"

"Pretend dating." Lila starts talking about the T.V. series Tyler's doing, reminds Tyler that ZX Network is already working on getting his character, River, hook up with Carsen Grade's character, Brian. "Fans have actually given a ship name for your characters, you know. Briver. Cute, isn't it?"

Tyler *so* doesn't like where this conversation is going.

It seems Tyler is unable to escape the constant uproar in his life. Given that Lila is also Carsen's manager, she takes advantage of her position and plants this pretend dating shenanigan into the guy's head. So Carsen's been badgering Tyler about it since.

"I have to ask Kevin," Tyler tells Carsen when Carsen brings it up again.

Carsen looks stunned – probably not expecting that Tyler will actually take it into consideration. He arches an eyebrow and asks, "Why should you?"

The query takes Tyler aback and he's quick to react, saying, "Because he's my boyfriend?" with the last word taking on a questioning pitch

"Well isn't he dating Megan Flaux?"

"Pretending. Pretending to date Megan," Tyler emphasizes, maybe to convince himself more than Carsen. Kevin's been calling less often for the past three weeks and Tyler's actually beginning to worry. The headlining relationship between Kevin and Megan seems to be a larger-than-life issue that sometimes Tyler wonders if it's turning out to be real. "And Kevin told me about it before they started with the whole scheme, so I think it's just proper that I talk to him about this."

Kevin doesn't sound all too pleased with idea when Tyler calls him later that day but Kevin agrees without having Tyler to put up a fight.

Rumors spread like wildfire, Tyler discovers. It's not really the first time Tyler goes out to dinner with Carsen. They've hung out countless times as friends – had lunch and dinner and sometimes played tennis at the sports club – but it's different when their respective publicists actually send a handful of paparazzi on their tail. The next day, pictures of their rendezvous are printed on every tabloid imaginable.

Kevin calls two days later, asks, "Should I be worried?" and Tyler just laughs and laughs until he hears Kevin laughing along with him.

"Don't be silly," Tyler says in defense but his heart isn't really into placating Kevin's qualms. "So when's your next break?"

"Monday actually." There's some rustling noise from Kevin's end and Tyler thinks he hears a faint moan that sounds womanish just as Garth starts barking. "What is Garth's problem?"

"He just wants to go out." Tyler leads the Beagle through the kitchen and the dog dashes to the backyard the moment Tyler pulls the door open. "So are you coming home on Monday?"

There's a pregnant pause that lasts about a minute – maybe more – before Kevin sighs audibly. "Afraid not, babe. We're on break from filming but we have to do some photo shoots for the movie."

"Oh," is all Tyler could say initially, then, "okay," and he tries not to sound disappointed but

the slight twinge in his chest is not that easy to ignore. "Maybe I'll see you in the next two weeks then?"

"Sure, babe." Kevin seems distracted, or maybe Tyler's just imagining it. "I'll call you if I can."

"There must be dozens of sites and blogs created for us," Carsen remarks one afternoon, a touch of amusement evident in his voice. His fingers are making *tap tap* noises while he types vigorously on his laptop. "Not just for Briver, some fans are actually shipping us both. There's a group that calls us Tysen and another that calls us Carser."

Tyler hates to admit it, but he's actually enjoying this, enjoying the attention they're getting, enjoying Carsen's company, and that's exactly what he tells Carsen.

"I like spending time with you too, Ty," Carsen says in almost a whisper. The softness in Carsen's deep blue eyes makes Tyler's heart stutter at first, then his heartbeat picks up pace, beating rapidly like Tyler is some teenage girl with a crush.

Being with Carsen makes Tyler miss Kevin less. In fact, he doesn't even notice that he hasn't seen Kevin in little over a month.

When they're having dinner at the Ivy on Valentine's day, Tyler finds himself studying Carsen from across the table, awed by how regally handsome his costar is.

Carsen leans closer to the table. "Is there something on my face?"

"Hmm?" is Tyler's initial reaction and then, "oh," when he realizes he's been caught staring and he feels his cheeks burn, his eyes dropping on the table, keen on memorizing the patterns on the table cloth.

"I don't mind, you know," Carsen says in that familiar baritone he only uses when he's flirting, and lately, that seems to be all the time. "I like it when you look at me."

Tyler feels his cock twitch beneath his pants, glad he's wearing something loose. *Fuck!* He's so screwed.

After dinner, they head over to the beach, strolling along the quiet shore with their hands entwined. There are paparazzi following them – flashes from their highly advanced cameras slicing through the darkness – but Tyler forgets about them for a moment, long enough for him to imagine how it feels if this isn't a pretense at all.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Carsen stops, tugs Tyler close and kisses him.



Lila stares at the tabloid page, one eyebrow higher than the other. "Well, this looks convincing."

Tyler's amazed by how crisp and clear the photo is, despite the backdrop of darkness. He needs to get whatever type of camera that paparazzo used. *Damn. What am I thinking?* He shakes his head, presses the heel of his palm against his temple to ease a non-existing headache and says, "I don't even know how that happened."

It's true though. One minute they were talking about the script for the next episode that they'd be filming and the next minute, Carsen's hot mouth was on his. The kiss wasn't long but it wasn't chaste either. It wasn't rough or possessive but more like their lips were just getting acquainted, but it certainly did things to Tyler that made him—is still making him feel that he has cheated on Kevin.

Kevin doesn't seem affected though when Tyler calls him. "Ty, I know it's all for show," Kevin says without a tinge of jealousy but that's not enough to appease the guilt that's clawing at the back of Tyler's brain.

"Maybe I should pay him a surprise visit," Tyler tells Lila later that day.

"Right. You need to get laid," is the only response she offers then she's helping him find the next available flight to Tennessee.

Tyler gets to Chattanooga at seven something in the morning. He calls Karen to make sure Kevin's not on the set then. "He won't start filming until one," she says then promises not to spoil Tyler's surprise.

The spare key to Kevin's temporary apartment is right where Karen says it should be so Tyler slips inside as discreetly as he can. His ears catch the distinct sound of someone moaning. Tyler's thinking of hightailing out of there, probably in the wrong place, but his legs seem to move on their own and he makes his way to what he presumes is the bedroom. The door's ajar so Tyler just cocks his head and peeks inside.

It feels like someone has just shoved an anvil straight into his belly. There on the bed is a very naked Kevin on top of a very naked Megan.

"Shit! Tyler? What are you...?" Kevin's voice yanks Tyler out of his stupor and before Kevin can hop out of bed, Tyler manages to dash out of the apartment, ignoring Kevin's "wait, Tyler, let me explain!"

Tyler spends the next three days in a friend's place. Kendra is fierce enough to keep Kevin away, which isn't really a problem since Kevin has only tried to contact him twice since the incident.

Thankfully, Kendra doesn't dote on him because when she asks, "How are you holding up?" Tyler admits that he's actually not hurting. He's more shocked than hurt.

Lila helps in finding him a new place and pretty soon he's moving into this gorgeous unit in a villa near the beach. By some twist of fate though, Carsen lives a block away.

"At least Carsen can drop by any time to keep you company," Lila deadpans but Tyler catches a glimpse of the smile she's trying to repress. "Somebody needs to keep an eye on you while you're not filming."

"I'm not a child," Tyler bites out.

Carsen drops by every so often to bring him chicken soup ("I'm not sick, Cars," Tyler says, appalled) and a bouquet of flowers ("I'm not dying either!") and Carsen's Xbox ("Awesome! Let's play.")

Carsen's presence is a welcome distraction and Tyler doesn't even try to deny that it's exactly what he needs. Before Tyler knows it, he's tearing off a two-month sheet from his wall calendar and thoughts of Kevin are left buried in the pages of Tyler's history.

They fall into a routine – Tyler and Carsen, sometimes doing something spontaneous and out of the blue like this trip to Mexico. After sampling some enchiladas and quesadillas, they both try out the famous Mexican brew.

A few bottles of beer and several shots of Tequila later, they both stumble back to the room they're sharing at this little motel they found earlier. Tyler's pretty sure he's not smashed though, not to the point where he won't remember a thing the next morning. He's still very much conscious to know that Carsen is half carrying him, that... that he's giggling – about what, he's not sure.

"You're equally amusing when drunk," Carsen says when he eases Tyler onto the bed. "Cute, too."

"I'm not cute and I'm not drunk." Tyler doesn't hear himself slur so *yeah*, he's still sober – sober enough that he's aware he's tugging at Carsen's shirt, aware that he's kissing Carsen, aware that they're both stripping their clothes off and aware that Carsen's talented tongue is licking a trail down Tyler's torso.

Tyler bucks when Carsen takes him into his mouth. *God*, Carsen's mouth feels heaven against his cock.

"Fuck," Tyler hisses when Carsen takes him deeper, fighting the urge to start thrusting. He curls his fingers against the soft curls of Carsen's dark brown hair, coaxing Carsen to move.

When Carsen starts bobbing his head between Tyler's thighs, sucking and tonguing and *oh, oh...* Tyler feels every trace of intoxication leave his body. Sounds Tyler barely recognizes as his own rumble through his throat. It doesn't take long before Tyler's crying out his release.

Once Tyler can feel his legs again and his muscles are no longer twitching, he slides down Carsen's body to reciprocate, taking Carsen's erection in his hand and giving a few strokes first then he wraps his lips around the head of Carsen's cock.

Tyler listens to the sound Carsen's making and soon he finds the right technique, the right rhythm and soon, Carsen's blowing his load down Tyler's throat, Tyler's name falling from Carsen's lips.

The next morning, Tyler wakes up with a massive headache. It takes about a couple of minutes for him to slip out of the momentary disorientation and the second he remembers what has transpired the night before, he *so* wants to hit his head hard against the wall.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

He quickly collects his clothes and makes a beeline to the bathroom as soon as Carsen starts to stir awake.

Carsen is sitting on the edge of the bed with his boxers on, *thank goodness*, face pinched as if he's trying to recall where he is, when Tyler ambles back into the room. Carsen lifts his head up, flashes a weak smile and says, "Mornin'."

"Last night shouldn't have happened," falls out of Tyler's mouth and he wishes he can swallow the words back when a frown frames Carsen's face.

"Look Tyler, I—"

"You better get dressed. We have to get back early."

No matter how hard Tyler tries, he feels awkward around Carsen so he tries to avoid the man over the next few days. His efforts are futile though when they're on the set but Tyler manages to survive a couple of weeks more playing an immature game of hide-and-seek with Carsen. It's not that he regrets what happened. He's just scared to acknowledge the emotions that have taken control of his heart where Carsen is concerned.

Tyler's reprieve from the pretend dating scheme doesn't go unnoticed. Lila soon invades his private sanctuary, armed with a weapon of intervention.

"What happened between you and Tyler?" she asks with a clear hint of resoluteness that Tyler recognizes so he knows it's pointless to brush her off. He tells her about Mexico.

The next day, someone comes pounding on his door and Tyler's not surprised to see Carsen standing at his doorway but he's not expecting Carsen to hold up a tabloid. The header reads: 'Carsen Grade and Tyler Kenwick call it quits.'

"I don't know about you," Carsen says, "but I'm ready to deny this rumor."

Tyler heaves a shallow breath, his silent *shit-what-have-I-gotten-myself-into* sigh and steps aside to let Carsen in.

"I don't know, Carsen. I mean... do you really want to go on playing this stupid game, pretend that you're interested in me?"

The look that crosses Carsen's face makes Tyler's heart seize. There's sadness in Carsen's eyes and honesty and something else Tyler's doesn't have a name for.

Carsen takes three strides to bridge the wide gap between them, gaze locked into Tyler's. "Who says I'm pretending?"

"I..." The words melt on Tyler's tongue and he stands there gaping at Carsen, trying to find a sign of insincerity in Carsen's eyes.

"I stopped pretending the moment I kissed you at the beach, Tyler." Carsen takes another step towards Tyler. And another. And another. Carsen's close enough that Tyler can feel the warmth of Carsen's breath against his face. "And I'm hoping that what happened in Mexico doesn't just stay in Mexico."

"I don't want you to be a rebound boyfriend or something," Tyler says softly. Carsen's proximity is making him feel lightheaded.

The cocksure attitude Carsen exudes when he asks, "Am I a rebound?" weakens Tyler's resolve then Tyler's shaking his head, taking short, shallow breaths.

Carsen pulls him close, whispers, "Hey," his thick arms closing in around Tyler's shoulders. "It's okay, Ty. Everything's going to be okay."

The pre-awards party is already in full swing by the time Tyler and Carsen arrive.

They would have gotten there earlier but Carsen's hands were all over Tyler that Tyler was cajoled into having sex and ruining the clothes they were wearing in the process.

Lila bounds over to them, exclaiming, "There you are! I was half expecting that you guys wouldn't be able to make it. What took you so long?"

"Traffic was heavy," Carsen says but judging from the way Lila rolls her eyes, it's obvious that she doesn't buy his excuse.

"Well, you boys have fun." She gives them a little wave with her fingers then pivots on her heels and glides gracefully over to the nearest group of people.

Carter leans closer, lips close to Tyler's ear. "Why don't we just say hi to the people we know so we can leave and go back to your place or mine?"

"Tempting," Tyler teases and he rubs his ass against Carsen's crotch for good measure.

Tyler whips his head around when he hears an all-too-familiar voice call out, "Tyler?" and doesn't sense any pang in his chest like he has always feared he might feel when he sees Kevin.

"You look great," Kevin says. Not even Kevin's alluring smile has any effect on Tyler anymore. He hasn't seen his ex for ten months but it feels like a decade for Tyler.

"Thanks," is Tyler's perfunctory response. He presses further into Carsen's side when Carsen rests his arm around Tyler's shoulder.

Kevin waves a finger between Tyler and Carsen, saying, "So... you two are still at it," which makes Tyler go "huh?" with his brows furrowed. Kevin's smile grows wider, his teeth showing. "I see you two are still pretending you're in a relationship."

*Oh*, Tyler thinks. *Oh*. And he *so* wants to laugh, to guffaw because clueless Kevin is just hilarious.

Tyler slides his hand in Carsen's, feels Carsen give a light squeeze. "We're not really pretending," Tyler says. "Not anymore."

"Oh." Several emotions settle on Kevin's expression: confusion, hurt, disappointment and there may be a bit of resentment. A feeling of triumph bubbles in Tyler's chest. "I'll uh... I need

to go find Megan," Kevin says, slowly creeping away from them. "I guess I'll see you around."

Tyler doesn't watch Kevin leave. He lifts his eyes to Carsen, glad that there isn't any trace of uncertainty on Carsen's face. "Let's stay for a while, just an hour, then we can get out of here."

"Anything you want," Carsen says then presses his lips against Tyler's, kissing him softly, gently, like a silent promise.

Tyler thinks he hears several cameras going off. He doesn't mind, doesn't care. He doesn't have to worry if their kiss looks convincing enough, not anymore, because this? This is real.

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## Unmasked

by Jestana

illustrated by The Winter Cynic

Benjamin Goddard let himself into his home and smiled tiredly when he saw his brother reading on the couch. "Hi, Frank."

"Evening, Ben." Franklin tapped on the screen of his gadget a few times before putting it away. He looked at his twin in concern. "Are you all right?"

He nodded as he set his helmet on the table in the entryway and shrugged out of his motorcycle jacket. "I'm fine. I just needed to ride for a bit. Did you have any trouble putting Robbie to bed?"

"None at all," the other twin assured his brother, digging his car keys out of his pocket. "Though he *did* tell me he hoped you'd check in on him once you got back."

Benjamin nodded, putting his jacket and helmet away. "I'll do that."

"Good." Smiling, Franklin briefly embraced his brother. "Take care."

He nodded again, watching as his brother stepped outside. "You, too, Frank."

Waving, his twin headed to his parked car to head home. Sighing, Benjamin closed the door as he ran a hand through his wavy dark brown hair. *I'm still no closer to an answer...* Pushing that thought away, he turned and headed upstairs to his son's room. Robert was sprawled across the bed, clutching a stuffed rabbit to his chest as he slept. Smiling fondly, he gently smoothed his son's auburn hair back from his face. *He reminds me of Lili so much. I wish she could be here to help me raise him...*

Quietly withdrawing, he headed downstairs, pulling out his phone to read--again--the e-mail he'd received earlier that day:

*Benjamin,*

*I know you probably don't want to speak to me again, but I thought you'd like to know that I'm doing an interview with Kevin Barstone that airs tonight. I'll talk about what happened and maybe you'll understand better why I did what I did.*

*Joseph*

"I must be out of my mind to be doing this," he muttered to himself, going into his study to turn on the television in there. He found the station and sat down to watch.

"Our next guest is someone who turned Hollywood on its ear recently," Kevin, seated at his desk, was saying. "Apparently not satisfied with playing male roles, he dressed up as a woman and auditioned for a female role in the upcoming movie, *Love and Lies*, that he surprisingly actually got. Here to tell us about it, Joseph Reynolds."

The studio audience's reaction was mixed as a slender man of average height with curly pale blond hair wearing black slacks and a white polo shirt entered with a wave and a smile. Some

people cheered for him, but there were a few boos as well. Joseph didn't seem unsettled at all, walking over to shake Kevin's hand and sit down in the chair next to his desk. Once the audience quieted, he spoke: "Thanks for letting me do this interview, Kevin."

"Not at all, Joe. I'm sure everyone would like to know what possessed you to dress up as a woman and audition for a movie," Kevin replied with a grin, blue eyes twinkling with mirth.

Joseph propped one foot on the opposite knee as he leaned back in his chair, unmistakably masculine. "I didn't *intend* for it to go as far as it did. Henrietta was just a bit part originally, but everyone liked the way I played her so much that the writers expanded the role so she became part of a love triangle with Benjamin and Rosa's characters."

"Since it was a love triangle, did you have to kiss Benjamin or Rosamund?" The talk show host gave an exaggerated leer as he asked the question.

Laughing a little, Joseph said, "Yes, I did."

The studio audience cheered, whistled, and catcalled at that. After a moment, Kevin asked, "You're not going to say which one you kissed?"

"And spoil the movie for you? Of course not." The blond grinned, dropping his foot to the floor.

Chuckling, Kevin shifted in his chair, folding his arms on the desk and leaning forward. "So, the question that everyone wants to know the answer to: Why did you do it in the first place? You shouldn't have had trouble finding work as a man."

"Well, I've done my share of Shakespeare and played a number of the female parts while I was studying," Joseph explained, the grin disappearing. "My favorite was actually Ophelia. I rather enjoyed going crazy. When I came out here, I decided, for a lark, to see if I could land a role as a woman. If I didn't, oh well, it's time to try for a part as a man. If I did, then good, I haven't lost my touch."

Frowning a little, Kevin asked, "So it was just a challenge for you, to see if you could do it? You're not going to *become* a woman?"

"No, not at all. I'm happy being a man," Joseph replied, one foot bouncing rapidly. "As fun as it was to be Josephine, it's been very nice to be Joseph again."

Kevin nodded, a smile quirking at his mouth. "What about your co-stars? How did Benjamin and Rosamund take the news that you're actually a man?"

"Well, Rosa decked me when she first learned the truth." Laughing ruefully, Joseph rubbed his cheek where the punch had landed. Benjamin couldn't help a wry smile of his own. Rosamund Kellogg had made no secret of her attraction to 'Josephine' and had been quite upset to learn that the 'woman' she'd been flirting with all those months was, in reality, a man. "I've since talked to her and she forgave me for being a man. We're good friends now."

Leaning further forward, the host asked, "What about Benjamin?"

"I...don't know." For the first time since he'd emerged from backstage, Joseph looked uncertain. "We haven't really talked since I was outed. I *hope* he'll forgive me because I feel like we'd become good friends towards the end there."

They went to commercial break then and Benjamin sat back in his chair. He clearly remembered the day that Joseph had been outed: *He and Rosa had been talking in the green room as they waited for Josephine to rejoin them while they waited to begin taping their interview for the movie. She'd spilled water on her skirt and left to change into a dry one. Both were startled when the production assistant hurried in, her face pale with shock. Getting to his feet, Benjamin asked, "Are you all right, Miss?"*

*"I'm fine, Mr. Goddard." Allison managed a small smile, even as she glanced over her shoulder at the door she'd just come through. "Excuse me, I need to find--"*

*Josephine hurried through the door the assistant had come through, her usual calm composure gone for once. "Miss Hanners, wait!"*

*"Stay away from me!" She backed away from the tall, slender woman, clutching her clipboard to her chest like a shield.*

*The taller woman stopped, holding her hands up. "It's not what you think."*

*"Oh, really? Then I didn't just see that you're really a man dressed as a woman?" A profound silence fell on the room at that point.*

*Benjamin stared at the actress, wondering how she was going to react. That was a serious accusation to make. Josephine was frozen in place, her hands still in the air as she stared at the assistant. Finally, she slowly lowered her hands and closed her brown eyes, all expression fading from her face. Next to Benjamin, Rosamund stood up, tossing her thick dark brown hair back over her shoulder. "Well, Josie? Are you going to answer her?"*

*"Yes, Josephine." The new voice came from the door, where the producer of the talk show stood waiting. "We'd all like to know."*

*Opening her eyes, Josephine looked at each of them in turn. When she finally answered, her voice was deeper, a man's voice. "Miss Hanners is correct. I am a man." Much to Benjamin's surprise, she raised her hands to her blouse and unbuttoned it. When she pulled it open, they could all see that her bra had been stuffed somehow.*

*"You bastard!" Gray eyes flashing with anger, Rosamund closed the distance between them and punched Joseph. As he staggered back, attempting to catch himself, she turned on her heel and addressed the producer. "I refuse to do the interview today."*

*As she stormed out, Benjamin could only sit in shock, stunned by the revelation. The woman he'd been working with, developed an attraction to, was a man? What did that say about him? Did that make him gay? Or did it count when he thought the man was a woman? He rubbed his temples, a headache already starting. "Ben?" He looked at the producer in wordless inquiry. "I think it'd be best if we cancelled today's interview completely."*

*"Yes, of course. I understand." He stood up and started for the door, heading to the dressing room he'd been given to clean off the make-up they'd put on him in preparation for the interview.*

*Another voice stopped him at the door. "Ben? For what it's worth, I'm sorry it came out like this. It wasn't supposed to."*

*"It did, Joseph, and that's what matters." Barely glancing back at the younger man, he continued on to the dressing room.*

*"Welcome back, folks!" Kevin's voice intruded on Benjamin's memories. "Now, Joseph, you said you didn't mean for things to go this far. Did you ever intend to reveal that you were a man?"*

*The young man, one foot propped on the other knee once more, shrugged a little. "I don't know. When Henrietta was just a bit part, I'd just intended Josephine to exist for the one role, and then she'd never audition again. After a suitable amount of time had passed, Joseph would start auditioning for parts."*

*"What about when they expanded your role?" The talk show host looked very curious. "That obviously had to have changed your plan."*

*Joseph nodded, rubbing his knee thoughtfully. "It did, yes. I had a vague idea of keeping to my original idea, only keep up the charade for a little longer."*

"Instead, things sort of blew up, didn't they?" There was sympathy in Kevin's voice.

Another nod as Joseph picked at the seam of his slacks. "Yes, they did. It was a relief in a way because I'd missed being a man. I just wish it hadn't blown up the way it had."

"Do you think the producer and director made the right decision not to try to change the movie?" That was the one question that was on everyone's mind. Was it right to have left things as they were after Joseph was outed?

This time, the blond sighed heavily. "I honestly don't know. From a logistical and economical standpoint, yes, it was. As intrinsic as Henrietta is to the plot, it would have cost too much time and money to re-write the script and shoot everything all over again." Joseph looked from the host to the camera, brown eyes sincere. "I can only hope that people will like my performance and I'd like to say here and now that this will be Josephine's *only* role. She's retired and won't act ever again."

"Thanks again for coming on the show." Kevin offered his hand to Joseph, who took it.

Smiling as he shook the host's hand, he told him, "Thanks for having me."

The show went to another break and Benjamin turned off the television. He sat quietly on the couch, thinking not only about what Joseph had said, but also about his gestures and body language. Everything about him was disturbingly familiar. Granted, Josephine had never sat with her foot on her knee like Joseph had, but every hand gesture, every tilt of his head, even the way his voice changed inflections, reminded him of Josephine. *I guess he was still very much himself even when he was a woman...*

Joseph stifled a sigh as he switched off the television. *That was pretty decent for an interview...*

"You all right, Joe?" the question came from Leopold Quincy, one of his roommates.

He stroked the Chocolate Labrador sprawled on the couch beside him. Nelson stretched in his sleep, but didn't react otherwise. "Fine enough, Leo. Just wish I hadn't had to go through all this."

"You're the one who decided to audition as a woman," his friend reminded him with a smirk.

Joseph groaned and rubbed his face. "I know, I know. You and Brian have had enough laughs at my expense over this."

"You can't really blame us." The smirk faded, replaced by a concerned look. "I've just never seen you this discombobulated by anything. Has it really gotten to you?"

Dropping his hand to rub behind Nelson's ears, he shrugged. "It's not the situation itself that's the problem, Leo."

"Is it Benjamin?" Leopold's bright blue eyes were shrewd when Joseph looked up at him, startled. "I'm right, aren't I? He was attracted to Josephine and now you're worried you can't even be friends with him again now that you're Joseph."

He smiled wryly, not surprised that his friend had read him so accurately. "Do you think he might come around, Leo? I mean, imagine that you've been straight all your life, and then you meet Brianna Maddox, fall for her, and find out that she's actually a man. How would you feel?"

"It's different for every person, Joe," Leopold reminded him gently. "How I would react isn't necessarily how Benjamin would react."

Joseph slumped back against the cushions. "I don't even know if he watched the interview."

"You told him about it?" Leopold looked surprised. "When? How?"

It was his turn to smirk, pleased to have surprised his friend. "This afternoon. I sent him an e-

mail about it."

"If it made a difference, he'll probably contact you." The other blond reached out and covered Joseph's hand on Nelson's flank with his own. "You just have to be patient."

He smiled as he turned his hand over under his friend's and squeezed lightly. "Thanks, Leo."

"No problem, Joe." Leopold returned the squeeze then gently withdrew his hand and left, heading down the hall to the room he shared with his lover.

Giving Nelson one last stroke, Joseph stood up and headed off to bed as well.

"Oh, Ben, this is a surprise." Rosamund smiled and opened the door wider. "Come on in."

He stepped inside, removing his motorcycle jacket as he did. "I hope you don't mind my coming by unannounced."

"Not at all." She took his jacket and helmet to put in her hall closet. "Would you like something to drink?"

He nodded, following her into the bright, airy kitchen. "Whatever you're having will be fine."

"Tea it is." The actress moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a pitcher of tea, pouring two glasses for them. Without being asked, she pulled out a container of lemons and offered it to Benjamin. He took one and squeezed it into his glass. She set the sugar bowl on the table the next moment. As he stirred in a spoonful, Rosamund sat down across from him. "I bet I can guess why you're here."

Benjamin smile ruefully at her. "Am I that obvious?"

"Please, Ben, there was a betting pool going over which of us would get Josie." She rolled her expressive gray eyes with a smile.

He took a sip of his tea, unable to smile just yet. "Have you questioned your sexuality at all, Rosa? Did you ever doubt you were lesbian?"

"Not really," she admitted, sipping her own tea. "I always knew, even as a teenager, that I liked other girls. I kissed a few boys, but none of them made me feel the way girls did. The incident with Joseph hasn't changed that."

Benjamin stirred his tea meditatively. "Did you see his interview last night?"

"I'm the one who encouraged him to do it," she informed him, sitting back in her chair. "I told him the only way to set the record straight was to tell the truth and give people a chance to make their own judgments."

He fixed intent hazel eyes on her, forgetting his drink for the moment. "So you *have* forgiven him for being a man?"

"Yes, I have." She smiled fondly. "I freely admit that he's gorgeous as a man or woman."

Benjamin sat back, tracing patterns in the condensation on his glass. *He is at that...*

"Ben, being attracted to a man doesn't automatically make you gay," she told him gently, drawing his attention back to her. "Neither does it make me straight."

He took a sip of his drink, eyeing her thoughtfully. "What *does* it make me, then?"

"At least bi-curious," she replied with a laugh. "You won't know for sure unless you spend time with Joseph. I know he'd like to be friends at least."

The actor shrugged a little, tapping one finger restlessly against his glass. "I'll think about it."

"Your phone made noise, Joe!" Brian called down the hall once the blond emerged from the

shower, one towel wrapped around his waist as he dried his hair with a second.

Calling a 'thank you' back down the hall, Joseph went to his room to pick up his phone where he'd left it on his dresser. Seeing that he had a missed call, he tapped through the menus to check who it'd been from. Grinning when he read Rosamund's number, he dialed it and set the phone to speaker so he could get dressed as he talked with her. After a few rings, she answered: "Hello?"

"Hi, Rosa. You called?" He tossed his damp towels in the direction of the hamper and pulled on his underwear.

She sounded distracted when she replied, which made him frown. "I did. Wow, you got back to me fast. Where were you?"

"Taking a shower," he reported with an audible leer in his voice even as he stepped into his jeans and pulled them up. "Too bad you weren't here to join me."

Laughing a little, he could practically see her waving a finger at him. "Stop it, you. Just because I found you attractive as a woman doesn't mean I want to sleep with you as a man."

"Can't blame a bloke for trying," he retorted, grinning once again as he picked out a bright yellow T-shirt and tugged it on over his head. "So why'd you call me?"

Rosamund let out an audible breath and he froze in the midst of slipping into a white, gold, and brown plaid button-up shirt at the sound. "It's Ben, Joe. He was riding his bike and a car driver didn't see him."

"Is he all right?" he asked, grabbing his comb and trying to bring some semblance of order to his curly hair, cursing under his breath when it snagged on a tangle. "Which hospital is he at?"

Her voice was shaky as she replied, "He was wearing a helmet and his leathers, so he wasn't too badly hurt. He's at the Good Samaritan hospital."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." He gave up on his hair and started hunting for his shoes, forgoing socks completely.

She sounded skeptical. "You don't have a California license."

"My roommates do," he assured her, stuffing his feet into his shoes and grabbing his wallet from his dresser. "One of them'll take me."

A hint of her usual good humor crept into her voice. "Make sure it's the tall dark-haired one. He looks so adorable when I fluster him."

"I don't think Leo's home, so it just might be Brian." Joseph laughed, remembering the first time his reserved, bashful roommate had met Rosamund. Once he'd, in the guise of Josephine, made the introductions, the actress had stepped forward and kissed Brian on both cheeks and thanked him for being so gallant as to give Josie a ride. Brian had blushed, stammered that it was nothing, and quickly made his escape.

A delighted laugh came from the phone. "Excellent. Maybe I'll give him a proper kiss this time instead of kissing his cheek."

"He just might die if you do that, and then Leo'll never forgive you," he warned her, snatching up his keys.

She made a humming sound at that. "True. I'll just have to think of something else to fluster him, then. Can't have Leopold Quincy mad at me."

"I'll leave you to it." He sobered as he picked up the phone and switched it to regular mode. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Rosamund sounded just as serious when she replied, "We'll be waiting."

"Wait, 'we'?" he asked, but it was too late. She'd hung up. Shaking his head, he headed down the hall to find Brian and ask him for a ride.

Franklin stayed by Benjamin's side as he hobbled out of the room. "All right, Ben?"

"I'm *fine*, Frank," he retorted, just a little annoyed by his brother's constant hovering. He knew *why* his twin was hovering, but it didn't mean it didn't annoy him. "I just broke my leg, that's all."

Rosamund's voice interjected then, bringing a smile to his face, "We're all glad that you always wear leathers, Ben."

"Are you all right, Daddy?" Robert demanded, rushing forward from where he'd been standing with the actress, stopping short of where he still balanced on his crutches.

Steadying himself on one crutch, he reached down and ruffled his son's auburn hair. "I'm fine, Robbie. A little banged up and broken, but fine."

"That's very good news." Joseph's voice nearly made Benjamin lose his balance completely. He hadn't expected the younger man to be there at all.

He looked past Rosamund to see the blond standing near the door, a black-haired young man who was vaguely familiar next to him. Offering a weak smile, he nodded. "Thank you, Joseph."

"Not at all, Benjamin." The younger man moved closer, pulling his friend with him. "I don't know if you remember Brian Maddox, one of my roommates."

Suddenly able to place the young man, Benjamin nodded. "Yes, Brian. I remember you. Math teacher, right?"

"Yes, I'm an adjunct math professor at a community college," Brian replied, shaking the older man's hand. "I'm sorry about your leg."

He glanced down at his plaster-encased limb and smiled wryly. "It'll heal in time. I'm just glad I hadn't agreed to any projects any time soon."

"Does this mean you'll be home more, Daddy?" Robert asked then, green eyes wide and hopeful.

Benjamin nodded again, smiling fondly. "It certainly does. You'll get sick of me being home all the time, in fact."

"That's silly," his son scoffed. "I could never get sick of you being home."

The adults chuckled at that and Benjamin felt as if a hand had squeezed his heart a little. *Have I really been away from home that much lately?*

"Speaking of home, Joe and I should be going," Brian declared then, glancing at his watch. "I have assignments to grade before tomorrow."

Dismay crossed Joseph's face briefly at that before it was masked by a good-natured smile. "Yes, I'm sorry, Brian. I forgot that some of us are workaholics."

"Oh, I can give you a ride if you didn't want to go yet, Joe," Rosamund offered with a smile, glancing between the two young men.

Surprise flashed quickly across Joseph's face. "Are you sure, Rosa? I don't want to impose on you or anything."

"It's not an imposition when I offer," she told him with fond smile. Then she turned to Brian and the gangly man's cheeks turned red. "Go on, Brian. Drive safely and don't spend all your time grading assignments." She took hold of his cheeks and pulled his head down so she could kiss his forehead, and then the tip of his long nose. "Say 'hello' to Leo for me."

"Y-yes, of course. Take care, Miss Kellogg." Still blushing, he clasped his friend's hand quickly before making his escape.

Joseph eyed her with an amused smile. "You enjoy flustering him too much."

"He blushes and stammers so prettily, how can I resist?" Rosamund responded with an arch smile. If she'd been in character for the film, she'd have fluttered her fan in front of her face.

Robert tugged on the hem of the woman's shirt. "Aunt Rosa, why'd you do that?"

"Because I could, Robbie," she replied, bending down to tweak his nose playfully. "And I've a terrible habit of teasing."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Okay." Then he looked up at his father. "Daddy, I'm hungry."

"You can have something to eat when we get home," Benjamin told him as they started heading to the exit as a group.

The six-year-old began to pout. "I'm hungry *now*, though."

"Why don't we stop at a restaurant and have lunch together?" Rosamund suggested, her expression one of studious innocence.

Robert perked up immediately. "Yeah!"

"No, Robbie," he interjected, glancing at the actress. "I'm trying to teach him good nutrition and eating habits, Rosa."

She swatted his shoulder as they stepped onto an elevator. "A treat once in awhile isn't going to hurt the boy, Ben."

"She has a point," Franklin finally added his voice.

A little reluctantly, Benjamin looked at Joseph, who'd mostly stayed by Rosamund's side.

"Well, Joseph, are you going to gang up on me as well?"

"Robert is *your* son, Benjamin," Joseph replied in the maddeningly calm voice that had always driven him crazy when Joseph was Josephine. It *still* drove him crazy, come to think of it.

"Though, I admit to being rather hungry myself. I haven't eaten much yet today."

Rosamund hugged the young man. "Poor thing. That settles it. We're all going to sit down and have lunch together before head home."

"Fine, have it *your* way." He mentally threw up his hands at her insistence. *I've a feeling I know why she's doing this...*

"I know what you're trying to do here, Rosa," Joseph told her as she drove them to the restaurant they'd all agreed upon before leaving the hospital.

Even as she deftly wove in and out of LA traffic, Rosamund feigned an innocent expression. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Joe."

"You do and you know it." He grinned, amused by her efforts.

The innocent expression disappeared, to be replaced by a playful one. "All right, I admit I'm up to something, but only because you men are slow when it comes to relationships."

"Hey!" he protested with a laugh. "We're not that bad."

The look she gave him as they waited at a red light was fondly exasperated. "Yes, you are, and Ben more than most."

"Well, I don't want to rush things with Ben anyway," he reminded her. "Besides, it's possible we'll never be more than friends."

She turned into the parking lot for the restaurant. "You'll never find out for sure if you don't spend time together. The ice caps'll melt completely if we wait for *Ben* to do anything."

"I concede your point." He chuckled, climbing out of the car once she'd parked and turned the engine off. "Thank you, Rosa."

Smiling, she kissed his cheek and took his arm. "You're welcome, Joe."

Arm-in-arm, they headed inside. *I hope things work out with Ben. I miss him...*

When Benjamin entered the restaurant with Franklin and Robert, they saw Rosamund and Joseph already seated at a table for five, talking. Drinks in front of them indicated that they'd already ordered their meals. Robert tugged at his uncle's hand. "I wanna go play!"

"Tell me what you want to eat first, and then you can go play," Benjamin told his son, exchanging an amused glance with his brother.

Predictably, Robert whined, "I wanna play *now*!"

"If you don't tell me what you want, you won't get anything at all and will have to wait until we get home to have your lunch," he informed his son firmly.

Sighing heavily, Robert looked up at the menu. "I want chicken nuggets."

"All right." Benjamin looked at the menu to determine which kid's meal that was. Then he looked at his twin. "The usual?"

Franklin nodded, amused, then took his nephew over to the play area where several children were already running around. After placing his order, he filled their cups, and then wondered how he was going to get them to the table while still using the crutches. That matter was taken out of his hands when two slender hands plucked up the cups. He turned to find Joseph standing beside him, a tiny smile on his face. "Looks like you could use a couple extra hands, Benjamin."

"Thank you, Joseph." He clumped after the younger man to the table he and Rosamund had been sitting at. He frowned when he saw that a tray with food was on the table, but she wasn't. "Where's Rosa?"

Joseph set the drinks down and resumed his seat. "She had to powder her nose."

"Ah, I see." He carefully lowered himself into the chair opposite the blond.

They sat in silence for several awkward moments. So many questions had occurred to him the previous evening as he'd watched Joseph's interview, but now he couldn't think of a single one. He could only desperately wish that Rosamund would return from the restroom soon. He was hopeless in social situations without a script! One of the workers brought a tray over and set it in front of Joseph. He accepted it with a smile and a 'thank you'. She lingered, as if she didn't want to leave yet, and the two men looked at her curiously. Finally, turning to Benjamin, she asked, "Excuse me for asking, but are you Benjamin Goddard, the actor?"

"Yes, I am," he confirmed with a nod, though he groaned inwardly. This was another reason he preferred not to go out for meals. As much as he enjoyed acting, he'd rather do without the notoriety that came with it.

The young woman actually squealed and Benjamin hid a wince at the sound. "Ooh, I *love* your work! You're *such* a wonderful actor!"

"Thank you." He managed to muster up a smile for her. *One of those fans. Lovely...*

Someone called from behind the counter and she reluctantly left to resume her work. He didn't realize he'd audibly sighed in relief until he heard Joseph chuckle. "She was tame compared to some of the others who've gushed over you."

"Only because she's working right now," he reminded the younger man. There'd been a couple incidents with 'fans' when he, Rosamund, and 'Josephine' had gone out for drinks after a long day of shooting.

The blond dipped his head slightly in concession as he finished doctoring his hamburger. "That's an excellent point."

Thinking of those nights out, something occurred to Benjamin that he *had* to ask about. "I'm curious about something, Joseph." The other man looked up from taking a bite of his burger. "When I spent time with 'Josie', I received the distinct impression that 'she' was attracted to me. Was *that* an act, or was it real?"

"The only acting I did as Josephine was in front of the camera and to project femininity," Joseph answered quietly once he'd swallowed his bite, fidgeting with his burger.

The older man nodded, but didn't have a chance to say anything in reply because Rosamund chose that moment to return just as a different worker arrived with Benjamin, Franklin, and Robert's order. He was glad for the distraction of getting his twin and son and distributing the food. It made the need to formulate a response to Joseph's statement unnecessary. He'd been flattered when he'd realized that 'Josephine' was attracted to him and that didn't change with the knowledge that 'she' was actually 'Joseph'. He'd been drawn to the young 'woman's cool, calm, composure and dry, understated sense of humor. As they'd done their share of promotional interviews for the movie, he'd begun to ponder the possibility of asking her out. Then Allison Hanners had outed Joseph and now Benjamin wasn't sure *what* his feelings were anymore in regards to the younger man. He *did* know, however, that the best way to figure *that* out was to spend time with Joseph, which he intended to do. Robert's voice interrupted his thoughts just then: "Daddy, I have to pee."

"I'll take you, Robbie," Franklin immediately offered, since his twin's mobility was limited by his broken leg.

"Okay." Robert let his uncle lead him to the bathrooms.

Realizing he was now alone with Rosamund because Joseph was refilling his drink, Benjamin told her quietly, "Thank you for this, Rosa." He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to reply. "Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. You won't fool me."

"In that case, you're quite welcome, Ben," she told him with a fond smile. "Has it helped?"

He nodded. "It has. I'd like to be Joseph's friend."

"Then please call me Joe," the younger man interjected as he returned with his refilled cup.

Benjamin smiled, getting carefully to his good foot and crutches when he saw that Franklin and Robert were returning from the bathroom. "Only if you call me Ben."

"Of course." Joseph offered his hand. "Thank you, Ben."

He shook the proffered hand. "Thank *you*, Joe."

"Bye, Ben." Rosamund leaned in and kissed his cheek.

He returned the gesture. "Bye, Rosa. Drive safely."

"Always." She winked and they said their good-byes to Franklin and Robert before leaving.

The other three followed soon after, Benjamin's thoughts on the blond young man. *How do I feel about him?*

It was both relief and torture to spend time with Benjamin as his friend. On the one hand, Joseph was spending time with the man, just like he'd wanted. On the other hand, being so close to the man he was attracted to yet unable to *act* on that attraction was almost more than he could bear sometimes. Matters weren't helped much by the tabloids. Just as they'd settled down after the hoopla over Joseph's outing, *Love and Lies* hit theaters. Though the critics focused on the more technical aspects of the film (storytelling, performances, etc.) the tabloids focused more on the fact that yes, Benjamin and 'Josephine's characters *did*, in fact, have an on-screen kiss. This

launched a great deal of speculation over both men's sexuality and whether all the times they'd been seen in each other's company had been dates rather than two male friends hanging out. Joseph knew which *he* would like them to fall under, but he kept that to himself. He'd made it clear to Benjamin that he didn't want the older man to feel pressured to reciprocate out of a sense of obligation. "I've seen a relationship like that and neither party was very happy."

"What will you do if I decide all I feel for you is friendship?" Benjamin asked as they walked side-by-side along the beach, Robert playing in the waves as they came in.

He took a moment to give the question serious consideration, staring blankly out over the water. "I'll simply have to find a way to get over my attraction. Maybe go away for a week or two, but I won't blame you if it comes to that. We can't force feelings we don't feel and I'd never want a relationship with someone like that."

"It sounds like you're speaking from experience," the older man remarked quietly, his unspoken question clear. A quick glance at his face assured the younger man that he wouldn't press for answer if he didn't want to give it.

Grateful for the brunette's understanding, he explained in a low voice, "My father only proposed to my mother because his parents pressured him into it. My mother only accepted because my father was rich. Neither of them was truly happy, though they certainly tried. I, my brother, Kyle, and my sister, Lorene, are proof enough of their attempts. When I was thirteen, my parents divorced for reasons I didn't find out until I was 21."

"What were they?" Benjamin prompted gently when Joseph fell silent, remembering the initial separation and the subsequent divorce.

Coming to a stop, he looked up to meet his friend's hazel eyes, his mouth quirked up in an ironic smile. "Mother caught Father cheating on her. With a man."

"Ah." His friend nodded, a wry smile curving his own lips. He lightly rested his hand on Joseph's shoulder. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

He shrugged slightly and resumed walking. "I just want you to understand why I want you to be certain of your feelings."

"Believe me, I do." The older man assured him as he fell into step with him.

The younger man smiled faintly. "Good."

Several months after the premiere of *Love and Lies* found Benjamin standing outside a hospital room, feeling quite nervous. Shaking his head at himself, he knocked on the door. Faintly, he heard Joseph's voice through the synthetic wood: "Come in!"

"Morning, Joe, how are you feeling?" Benjamin asked, poking his head in the room. The blond was sitting up in bed, a bandage wrapped around his head, right arm in a sling, and poking awkwardly at a tray of food of front of him with the fork in his left hand.

A warm smile curved the younger man's mouth, distorting the colorful bruises that decorated his face, and he dropped the fork. "Good morning, Ben. I'm feeling fine, thanks to the drugs they have me on."

"Leo called me last night," he explained as he entered the room and sat down in the chair next to the bed. "Visiting hours were almost over, though, otherwise I'd have come then."

Joseph rested his good hand on Benjamin's arm, his smile reassuring. "I wasn't in any shape for visitors last night, anyway, because of the anesthetic they used to put me under for the surgery."

"What happened to you that you needed surgery?" he asked, taking the blond's hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze, feeling that the index and middle finger were both in splints. Seeing the evidence of his injuries, he was beginning to suspect.

Sighing, Joseph sat back against the pillows. "Apparently, there are men out there who object to the fact that I not only had the audacity to dress up as a woman and audition for a role, but that I actually managed to play my part rather convincingly."

"It was a hate crime?" The brunette stared at his friend in horrified shock, his heart freezing at the thought that his friend had been the victim of such an attack. He'd always thought of such things as something abstract that happened to other people, not to himself or any of his friends.

The Englishman nodded, whiskey-brown eyes glittering for a moment. "Yes. He managed to hurt me badly enough that one of my lungs collapsed. The doctors had to operate to re-inflate it."

"Oh, god, Joe!" Unable to articulate everything going through his mind, Benjamin leaned forward and hugged the younger man carefully.

His friend returned the hug as well as he could with one arm, lightly rubbing the older man's back. "I'm all right, Ben. I survived and none of my injuries are permanent."

Feeling a little sheepish over his outburst, he straightened up, quickly wiping one hand across his eyes. "What about your attacker? What's going to be done about him?"

"I got a good look at him and gave the police a description," the blond told him.

The American nodded, glad that something would be done about the attack. After fidgeting for a few moments, he cleared his throat. "Since Leo called me, I've been doing a lot of thinking. I didn't get much sleep because my brain wouldn't shut off."

"You certainly look like you could use some sleep," the younger man commented after studying the brunette for several moments. "What were you thinking about so much?"

Not quite looking at his friend, he replied, "About the fact that you'd been hurt badly enough to require surgery." Thankfully, Joseph remained quiet, just gazing steadily at Benjamin. "It occurred to me that there'd been a chance that you wouldn't survive the surgery and the mere thought of the possibility sent chills through me." The Englishman looked surprised at that, as if he hadn't expected such a statement. "As I thought about what it would've been like to lose you, to worrying about an upcoming funeral for you, I realized that I'd be just as devastated as I was when I lost Lili."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying, Ben?" The blond was staring at him fixedly, hardly seeming to breathe.

Slowly, the brunette nodded, aware of how important this moment was for them and determined not to mess it up. "I am, Joe. The attraction I felt for 'Josephine' hasn't changed for 'Joseph'. If anything, our time spent together has only strengthened it."

"You're sure?" the other man barely whispered the words, as if he was afraid to believe him.

For his reply, the older man leaned forward and kissed him. The sensation of Joseph's lips against his own was at once familiar, yet strange. They'd kissed for the film, but those had been performances, with neither of them putting honest emotion into the press of lips against lips. This time, though, no cameras were rolling and that made a world of difference. By the time he drew back, both of them were gasping for breath. "Do you believe I'm sincere now?"

"I may need more reassurance," Joseph replied with a mischievous smile curving his kiss-swollen lips.

Smiling back, Benjamin leaned in to kiss the younger man again, cupping the bruised face tenderly this time. Neither of them heard the door open and close and so didn't pull apart until

Leopold commented, "As lovely as this show is, you two might want to tone it down a bit before the nurses get worried."

"Hello, Leo," Joseph greeted his roommate after sitting back reluctantly.

Grinning cheekily, the aspiring artist moved to the other side of the bed and leaned down to kiss the actor's cheek. "No need ask how you're feeling now."

"I'm feeling marvelous, and it's not the drugs talking," the Englishman replied, flashing warm smile over at Benjamin.

He blushed at Leopold's knowing look. He tended to be intensely private about some things and having someone walk in on them kissing made him just a little uncomfortable. *At least it was Leo and not one of the nurses...*

"Is everything all right in here, Mr. Reynolds?" A nurse poked her head in just then, as if conjured by the older man's thoughts. Her eyes landed on him and widened just a little.

Joseph answered her question calmly, just a hint of mischief in his voice. "Yes, everything's fine, nurse. Thank you for your concern."

"Well, it's time to take your vitals," she told him, shaking off her surprise and looking at the other two men. "If you gentlemen could give us some privacy?"

Benjamin and Leopold nodded and exited the room. Out in the hallway, the russet-gold blond turned to the dark brunette, completely serious now. "I want you to know that if you hurt Joe, Brian and I *will* make you regret it."

"I've no intention of hurting him, I assure you," he replied, a little taken aback by the abrupt change in Leopold's manner.

Just as quickly, it changed back, an impish smile lighting the younger man's round face. "Good."

With a broken right arm, broken fingers on his left hand, cracked ribs, a minor concussion, and numerous abrasions and bruises, Joseph's recovery was slower than he'd like. It was a blessing in disguise, however, because it kept him from pushing Benjamin too far too fast in their new relationship. Much as he wanted to give himself fully to the older man, the younger man was glad they were taking things slow, learning more about each other on a personal level before plunging into a more physical relationship. He'd been with men who'd rushed him into bed and he'd been left feeling dissatisfied with the relationship as a whole. Sex was all well and good, but he wanted more than that so he'd broken up with those particular boyfriends fairly quickly. Apart from that, there was one other thing that he worried about and he finally brought it up after he'd had plenty of time to recover: "Did you ever wish I'd been born Josephine, Ben?"

The older man was silent for several minutes, clearly considering the question carefully. Finally, hazel eyes met brown, an apologetic smile curving Benjamin's mouth. "To be honest, yes, I did. Your outing left me worried and confused and I didn't like the feeling."

"But you don't wish it anymore?" he asked, needing the reassurance that Benjamin liked him the way he was.

The American nodded, his smile fond now. "Not anymore. Your interview with Kevin helped me realize that what had attracted me to Josephine in the first place was still there as Joseph."

"You're absolutely sure?" the Englishman asked, not entirely certain *why* he was pressing the issue, but doing so anyway.

Another nod of the dark brown head, this time the fondness of the smile was tinged with

exasperation. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm attracted to *you*, Joe, and you wouldn't *be* you if you'd been born Josephine instead."

"Thank you." Deciding mere words were inadequate, Joseph leaned in and kissed Benjamin.

The older man responded eagerly, wrapping his arms around the younger man to pull him closer. Moaning as he deepened the kiss, Joseph smoothed his hands across Benjamin's broad shoulders before sliding them down to toy with the buttons his shirt. Gently brushing the slender hands away, the American unbuttoned his own shirt. The Englishman pulled back from the kiss, gazing at him in silent inquiry. Benjamin nodded in response. "Yes, I'm ready to take the next step."

"Just let me know if there's anything you don't want me to do," Joseph told him, pulling him into another kiss.

After several more heated kisses, during which they both lost their shirts, the blond stood and tugged on the brunette's hands. He stood up a tad reluctantly. "Where are we going?"

"To my room," the younger man told him, leading his soon-to-be-lover down the hall. "Unless you *want* Leo and Brian to see us?"

The older man shook his head. "Oh, god, no."

"Then welcome to my boudoir." Joseph opened the door of his room with a flourish.

Benjamin preceded him inside and stood in the middle of it, arms folded awkwardly across his stomach as the other man closed the door. "I don't know what you see in me. I'm old and fat."

"You're neither," he assured him, kissing the tip of his nose as he gently unfolded his arms. "You're not even ten years older than me and you just have softness around your middle. Besides, I hear sex is an excellent way to get in shape."

A smile peeked out as the older man rested his hands on the younger man's hips. "Well, when you put it *that* way..."

"Remember, Ben, only what *you* want," he reminded the American, resisting the slight tug that would bring their groins into contact.

"Right now, I want *you*." The Englishman gasped when Benjamin gave a particularly strong tug, causing him to stumble forward so they were pressed against each other, chest-to-chest and hips-to-hips.

Joseph licked his lips when he realized that he wasn't the only one who'd been aroused by those kisses they'd shared. "Hmm, so I can feel."

"Joe!" It was the brunette's turn to gasp when the blond ground their hips together.

Grinning, he maneuvered them over to the bed and stepped back to shuck his jeans and jockstrap in a single move, leaving himself completely nude. The taller man could only stare as the shorter man stood there, unashamedly naked and aroused. After a few moments, he reached for the other man's jeans. "Your turn."

"Right." Obviously a little nervous, Benjamin let Joseph unbutton and unzip his jeans, pushing them down along with his boxers.



Once they were gone, he took a moment to look the older man over. Though he *was* soft around the middle, his cock certainly wasn't. It jutted out proudly from his groin, thick and flushed with arousal. Finally, he reached out and carefully wrapped one hand around it. Benjamin gasped again, grabbing Joseph's shoulders. "All right?"

"Better than 'all right'," the brunette managed to gasp, his fingers digging into the fine bones of the blond's shoulders. "Feels fantastic."

The shorter man released the taller man's cock. "You're hurting me, Ben."

"What? Oh!" He quickly let go of the younger man's shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

He rotated his shoulders carefully. "It's all right. You just squeezed a little too hard."

"Didn't mean to. It's just been a long time since anyone else has touched me," the older man admitted, his cheeks turning red. Leaning forward, he kissed each shoulder in turn.

Joseph's eyes fluttered closed as he reached up to hold onto Benjamin's shoulders to steady himself. "Maybe we should sit down."

"That's probably a good idea." The American sat on the bed and Englishman soon joined him.

As they kissed once more, the younger man gasped when he felt the older man wrap one hand around his prick. As the tentative strokes grew bolder, he took his lover's member in hand again and returned the favor. Soon, they were just leaning against each, gasping and moaning with pleasure as they stroked each other to an almost-mutual climax. Joseph released just before he felt Benjamin's seed spill over his hand. As they caught their breath, the shorter man smiled fondly. "You catch on fast."

"It's not too different from masturbating, but far more satisfying," the taller man admitted.

Turning, Joseph retrieved the box of tissues from the nightstand and offered it to Benjamin. The older man took one and cleaned his hand. As he cleaned his own hand, the younger man replied, "I quite agree. It's much more satisfying to bring someone else off instead of yourself."

"Indeed." Tossing the used tissue into the trash can, the American looked at the Englishman almost shyly. "It was good for you, then?"

Smiling as he threw away his own tissue, the shorter man cupped the taller man's face between his hands. "It was better than good because it's *you*, Ben."

"Thank you, Joe." Smiling back, his lover leaned in to kiss him once more.

Joseph returned the kiss eagerly, glad that he'd decided to try out for the part of Henrietta. *Despite the trouble and stress of it all, I got to meet to Ben and that's made it worth every bit...*

Finis

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## Evander Stream and the Attack of His Greatest Fan

by Yamaba Aikaloko (ヤマバ アイカロコ)

With one hand holding onto the brim of his iconic Homburg hat and the other clutching the precious stone orb, genealogist Mo Bentham races down the dark tunnel. The dark waves almost catching up on him consist of pitch black, venomous spiders. When he rounds the corner, an impossibly large spider web is found to cover the entrance to the cave.

"Seriously? If only the American army worked that swiftly..."

Mo reaches for his giant cutter and manages to sever several strands of sticky string before the spiders crawl up onto his leather boots. He kicks and swears, stumbles back into the web and gets himself tangled up. As the spiders climb his khakis, Mo reaches outwards for all that he's worth so that the Russian orb catches the bright sunshine just outside of the cave. Its ancient magic releases a beam of focused light, scaring off the spiders closest to him. With a cry Mo breaks free of the web, only to fall from the cave's mouth into the deep tropical ravine below. Clutching desperately at anything within reach, he snatches hold of a piece of rope. Looking up, he sees that the rope dangles from a hovering helicopter. His trusty sidekick Gareth Quinn grins down from an open window.

"Awright there, bud?"

Mo waggles his eyebrows roguishly and makes sure his Homburg is in place.

"When am I not? Get us out of here, before those spiders decide that they like their flies with rotor blades!"

I stuff my face with popcorn. As the helicopter flies away into the sunset, I know the exact shape of every amber lined cloud by heart. Once the credits stop rolling, I reach for my trusty Android to author a brief entry for "the Stream Team" forum.

**GUNNA DO IT, MADE UP MY MIND!!**

I press the button. The text announcing the start of this glorious, glorious day appears on the screen.

"Welcome back, all of you!"

The Nazi guards playing cards with two guys from the US Marine look up at the bearded man shouting in the megaphone. A woman comes to a stop, balancing a stack of rubber limbs in her arms. The techs stop making noise tugging at parts of a large spotlight.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks... Listen up! Today we have a living icon of adventure movies on the set, as you all know! We say welcome to Mister Evander Stream!"

A well-toned man in his early forties stands up from his make-up chair and waves his hand to answer the spontaneous applauds erupting in the room, and my knees almost give out. His six and a half feet of manliness are dressed up in worn jeans and a dirty tan tank top for today's

appearance. As he sits down again, the room quiets down. I have to force my hands to stop clapping.

"Welcome, Mister Stream! Welcome! It's a great honor having you on set! As you all know, we'll begin with the descent into the hidden chamber beneath the library. We'll shoot as much as possible in one single take, and we're aiming for four minutes of uncut action! It will look absolutely great, but I got to warn you that the moving axes are rather heavy..."

One of the Nazi officers peeks at the top card of the deck while the others listen. I don't rat him out. Feeling giddy, I sneak out from behind the fake brick wall that I've hidden behind and take a few steps over the odd looking floor, towards the Greatest Hero of All Time.

Suddenly, a hand grasps my shoulder.

"Whoa, easy there! The stepping stones move, did you miss that?"

A middle-aged woman with purple glasses pulls me back from the fake granite squares laid down in a chess game pattern on the floor. She seems to be one of those extremely competent middle-aged women that I fear.

"Uh... Sorry. I'll walk around them."

I look down quickly so the hood will mask my face again, but as I turn to flee there is another crew member standing in my way.

"Shyla, darling! Did you bring a nephew?"

I catch a glimpse of well-manicured hands before they remove my hood.

"Oh... My... God! He's dreeeamy! Shyla, hon, it's a *crime* to keep relatives that look like Jensen Ackles a secret."

I stare at the androgynous man beaming towards me. Who is Jensen Ackles? I take a careful step to the side but purple Shyla speaks again before I can escape.

"He's not mine. I don't know who he is! What's your name?"

I've never been a good liar.

"Jens... uh... Jens Acorn."

Schooling my features into the most handy-manly expression he can think of, I point towards the other side of the room.

"Yeah. I'm with the prop building section. Listen, I'm needed over there, so..."

Shyla is every bit as sharp as she looks – she narrows her eyes into slits and cocks her face to the side. Damn it!

"You're with Anderson's team? I haven't seen you around before."

I panic. No words come out of my mouth. I beam towards her hoping to win points for charm, but obviously Shyla doesn't like younger men. She picks up a walkie-talkie from her belt.

"Shyla Dennis to security, we have an unauthorized person on set, by the floor puzzle."

The man shrugs his shoulders so that the make-up brushes in his shirt pockets clink, and looks compassionately at me.

"Sorry Jensen, you gotta wait until the movie hits the theatres."

Oh no. No no no. I search every corner of my brain for something to save the situation, to save this day, to save *me*... Emptiness answers. I was brought up too well. Two security guys with cool looking vests approach from the left, and soon enough I'm being hauled towards the exit. People turn their heads as we pass, and I know that I must make the perfect picture of absolute misery to them. I twist my neck in despair, but there is only the usual chaos of a film set.

Because I have my head turned, there really is no warning at all. The shot is deafening.

I jump like a sissy rabbit. The guy at my right side sinks to the floor. The other security guard

reaches for his weapon but is overpowered by the masked men barging in through the door. I stumble to the side.

"All phones on the floor! You hear me!? All phones on the floor, now!"

The masked guys wave their guns in the air, pointing at the people closest to the entrance. There is one or two surprised screams but otherwise only terrified silence. I try to back up slowly, but stealth is clearly not my forte. One of the masked men catches sight of me and shoves me roughly back into the crowd. I almost trip over a rubber leg.

"Get back! Get in the center of the room!"

Crew, cast, and I slowly obey, gathering in the middle of the large room built like an old castle hall. Two of the masked men leave briefly to search the changing rooms, the side rooms and the make-up boxes, collecting people to drop off with us others. Before long we form a little sitting crowd just in front of the checkered floor, surrounded by our dropped cell phones.

"You shut up! You sit down! You don't give us any trouble! Got it? You there – yeah, you! Get over here!"

A handsome black haired man about my age rises slowly from the floor and shows his palms in surrender. He slowly makes his way through the large group of sitting people, all holding their breaths. As the man leaves the circle of hostages and enters that of discarded phones, one of the masked men pulls him close by the upper arm.

"You! Are you Landon Farnham?"

The man seems scared and doesn't answer. He's shaken crudely by the arm.

"What's your name, idiot? Answer me!"

As the man with dark hair seems transfixed by terror, the man holding him forces him down to the ground and juts the gun against his forehead. Another one of the masked men pushes the first one away.

"No damaging the goods, you fuckhead! This is Farnham, I'm sure of it. Now we want Lisa Low."

Before they get the chance to scan their hostage for the next celebrity, a young woman stands up. She seems furious.

"There she is! Come over here, pretty!"

As Lisa reaches the group of men holding Landon, she too is seized.

"What do you want? What right do you think you have to do this?" she spits at them, drawing her upper lip up like a growling dog. The men laugh and tug at her hair.

"A shame, you're prettier on film! It's all quite simple, sweetheart – we're gonna switch you stars for money and get the lives we deserve."

I catch a glimpse of movement in the corner of my eye. A man bows his head and hunches over a bit, just like I did on the set. Just like a person that doesn't want to attract attention... I look over at him and feel my insides melt to goo.

We've been here for forty minutes now, and everyone agrees with me that we must look to Evander Stream for help. Even Shyla has folded to the general consensus. Evander looks around with a pained expression. I wonder why? Each time he looks in my direction I feel like swooning.

Two of our guards have taken Lisa and Landon away, into one of the dressing rooms we think, so there are only two remaining. They send us occasional foul looks, but only start yelling once,

when a stunt man tries to sneak his phone back into his pocket. Otherwise they seem more interested in discussing when someone will pay up or how many cops there are outside than in our whispering.

"Really, he can save us all!" I mouth quietly to my neighbor. "I'll be the decoy so that you lot can get out, and then Mister Stream will help me! It'll work, I promise!"

She nods slightly and carries the message forward. Even the wounded security guy nods, and I know that my plan is on.

"Hey! Listen!" I yell, raising a hand as if we were in school. "The guy that you shot needs to be let go! He's bleeding all over the place!"

The masked guys look at me, their guns at the ready.

"You stay where you are," the taller one says. The other one guarding us is the aggressive one who threatened to blow Landon Farnham's brains out.

"Yeah, okay. But seriously, if you don't let him out, he might die."

Our guards look at each other. If they're not total dicks they should care at least somewhat about people dying.

"Listen, I'll take him out and come right back inside. Okay? I promise. I'll just take him out."

They still hesitate. I try my utmost to look like a male mother Teresa in her thirties, but it's not enough. The angry one raises his weapon. The wounded security guy chooses that moment to let out a weak moan.

Tall guy lays a hand on Angry guy's barrel to lower it.

"Take him out."

My legs have fallen asleep, so I move clumsily through the sitting crowd. As I bend down to get a good grip around the bleeding security guy's chest, I wink at Evander. I don't think he sees me though, because he doesn't answer it.

People shuffle to make way for us. I pull the wounded guy towards the front exit, making sure that his leg leaves a nice bloody trail for effects. He plays his part well, letting his head bob weakly against his chest. At least I hope he's exaggerating. Otherwise he'll probably be dead as soon as he gets out into the California sunshine.

When we reach the little hallway, I let go of my passenger for a moment to push the door handle down. As soon as the thick door swings open I can hear a helicopter approaching. That's too cool! We reach the concrete outside and are greeted with shouts from the policemen surrounding the building.

"We have two hostages coming out the front door – I repeat – two hostages coming out of the front door..."

"... Two men: one Caucasian, dark hair, about thirty-five; one Asian, about forty-five, seemingly shot in the leg..."

"There's blood. Get a doctor over there!"

Two ladies in white coats sprint towards us. I let them take the security guy but back away as they try to pull me towards an ambulance as well.

"I promised to come back. I can't stay."

A third woman, this one in a police uniform, approaches in time to hear my words. She steps right in front of me taking up nearly all of my visual field.

"How many are there inside?"

"Uhm... About fifty people?"

"How many are your captors?"

"Four... Listen, I really have to go back."

"Will they let a meddler in?"

"No! Definitely not! I've got to go!"

I don't know that last part for certain of course, but I can't let the police ruin this ideal situation. I congratulate myself as I back into the building and shut the door again.

Halfway over the floor, I stop, and the enemy reacts according to plan.

"Get back here! Get back now!"

I take a step backwards. Tall guy raises his gun and starts walking towards me.

"Or not! Catch me if you can!" I shout at them. Tall guy's speeding up, but Angry guy remains on his chair. "Shortie!" I add, and as I turn and run, and they're both hot on my trail.

There's a net hanging on the far wall leading up to a dark opening, and I soar upwards on it like a balloon. Right behind me are the Angry pants of Angry guy.

"Get down, idiot! Give me some space and I'll just shoot him!"

I reach the opening. It's a dead end. Even fancy sets have their limits, I take it. Understanding that running forwards won't do me much good, I make it into a really cool feint before I do a backflip back down. What can I say? I'm in my film mode!

Clearly I haven't worked on my backflips. I hit Tall guy in the face.

After a few seconds I get my vision back. Tall guy seems pretty out of it, and Angry guy is still trying to turn around in the net to draw his gun. Thinking on my feet I grab hold of the net and give it a good shake, making Angry guy lose his balance and get tangled. I snatch Tall guy's gun from his limp hand and run.

The circle of phones gapes empty. I see the last couple of crew members round a corner and I take off after them. Angry guy breaks free with a roar behind me. I run as fast as I ever had through the big room. Suddenly, the floor sinks four inches.

I realize that I've forgotten the stepping stones.

I scramble back up, making too little progress over the tricky floor.

"You gunna die, you fucker! You gunna die!"

He's right behind me. The solid ground is getting closer... closer....

There's an electric humming sound and the room instantaneously gets much brighter. I reach the edge of the floor puzzle and run into the arms of my Hero. He's turned on the large spotlight right in the face of my attacker.

"Let's go, kid!"

He's just called me kid. I tingle all over.

"Why is this such a bright idea, again? How are *we* going to get out?"

I throw the empty super glue container over my shoulder. This door won't open any time soon.

"We have to give the others a chance to get away, right? Now the helicopter can get them off the roof safely. You and I have to save the stars!"

Angry guy is already shooting at first door that we passed. It'll take him a few minutes to get through the barricade of props that we built behind it, though. When he does break through, he won't stand a chance against the door to the roof that we've glued shut, so he'll have to pick one of the others.

I take Evander by the hand and choose one of them for us. He doesn't pull his hand back.

"You seem rather nuts, kid!" he exclaims as we race down a concrete staircase. "Do you know

that the stunt you pulled in the great hall was identical to that of Martha in *Templar Riddles*? Except that she back flipped down instead of falling into the gunman's face."

I squeeze his hand.

"Oh, you noticed? It's one of my all-time favorites! And afterwards you torch the castle, run off together and have sex in the boat."

He jerks his hand from mine and sends me a funny look. Must be toughening himself up for some villain-bashing.

"Police help hostages. Escaped hostages escape. We don't stand a chance in this weird storage building."

He's right, it really is weird: all old storage house mixed up with fake castle walls, odd contraptions and action movie props. It's apparently unusual to shoot scenes on a set that has been more or less completely transformed for its purpose – normally it's just backdrops and computer effects. It's even more unusual to build several sets into one building like this, but since *Zodiac Zenith* was such a blockbuster the film studio is really paying up for its sequel. I feel the corners of my mouth lift in bliss. I'm on an adventure with Evander Stream in a medieval castle!

"Kid, movies are not for real."

He can read minds too!

"Movies are fake to the core," he continues. "If it were real life, heroes would die like flies. But you're not the only one who's having a hard time separating fact from fiction, I suppose... I can't understand why all those people suddenly looked to me for help in the great hall!"

He suddenly falls silent and holds up a hand to stop me. There's sound coming from above.

"What do you mean, 'gone'!? Where are they?"

"All I found was this clumsy fool knocked out! There's no one else in the hall!"

"Fuck! How could I have chosen such idiots to work with!?"

"I think the real question is how you could have chosen such a crappy career," a third voice interrupts.

"Lisa Low," Evander whispers.

"Shut up, bitch! One more word and I'll shoot you through your fucking tongue! We keep it cool and stay here. If the police have gotten in somehow we can still hold this room."

There's light coming from a small ventilation window close to the ceiling, partly covered by a thin metallic frame with bars. Standing on my toes, I can see four pairs of feet and all of Tall guy.

"We've gotta help them!" I whisper.

Evander's shoulders sink and he looks around with a hopeless gaze. It's probably his thinking pose.

A good thing about movie sets is that there's a lot of stuff lying around: like chains, padlocks, and scissors. We use the scissors to cut the net from the wall in the great hall and the chain to encircle a heavy backdrop beside the door to the hostage room. With a quick hand movement one can twirl it around the door handle and lock it in place with the padlock.

We share a look of manliness and adventure lust before we barge in. Has Evander always been so pale? God, he's handsome!

I count down, mouthing quietly. Then we kick the door open and run in, net lifted high over

our heads.

"What the fu...?"

And they're caught. Lisa Low and Landon Farnham are also caught of course, since there's net all over the place, but Evander quickly cuts them free with his scissors and starts working on their bonds.

"Get their guns, kid!"

I search the two mad, fallen villains as thoroughly as possible through the net, while the others rush out of the room. I manage to fish both weapons out and turn around. Is that Evander standing panting in the doorway, congratulating me to my heroic deeds? No, he's too short... Way, *way* too short...

Angry guy.

"Please let me kill him. Please."

"Shut up."

"He won't bring us much money anyway! He's not famous!"

"I said shut up! Let me think!"

Angry guy points his gun at my stomach. Older guy paces the room and snaps at him. Italian guy has taken over the make-up chairs that Landon Farnham was recently tied to and just hangs his head.

I pretend to edge away from the gun, but actually move towards the little window close to the floor. Perhaps, if Evander stretches his fingers through the bars, I can feel them before I die. I reach the wall. I stretch my fingers out.

There is nothing.

Not even bars. But there are scissors, slowly working on the rope tying my wrists behind my back. My heart flutters. This is so intense!

The masked men are arguing among themselves about how to proceed. Angry guy wants to see blood, but Older guy wants whatever money he can get. Italian guy seems to want a milder sentence, but he's clearly not the talkative kind. No one takes notice of me.

The ropes are cut through. I wiggle my fingers experimentally. Little by little I lift the back of my hoodie to grip Tall guy's gun – they forgot to search me for that. I hold it towards the ventilation window, and soon I feel someone taking it. I recognize his hard fingertips...

I edge ever so slowly towards the door, careful not to pull the net spread out on the floor. Three feet... Five feet...

"Hey you!"

Older guy sees me! Then a gun goes off. The bad guys fall down to take cover. I run out the door.

Lisa Low slams the door shut behind me and locks the chain in place. She grins at me and holds her palm up for a high-five. I grin back and slap it, adrenaline and pride flooding my veins.

Landon Farnham and Evander emerge from the shadows of a side door.

"Oh God..." Landon Farnham mumbles. "It actually worked. Oh, God..."

The villains yank away at the door, but in vain. I hold up my palm for Evander to slap, and after rolling his eyes he actually does.

"Damn it, kid! You were lucky that the metal piece was only held in place by hatches and not by screws!"

"It wasn't luck with you around! Thank you so much for saving me, Mister Stream!"

"Saving you? I fired a warning shot through the ventilation, that's all. It was Lisa who chained the crazy bastards in."

Landon Farnham looks up.

"Chained? What chain did you... Oh my god! That's the chain we use for the escape scene; it's meant to break under pressure!"

It is as though the chain heard him. It breaks and the door flings open.

"Split!" I shout, grabbing hold of Evander's arm and sprinting down the stone corridor to our right. Lisa Low and Landon Farnham take off towards the great hall.

There's at least two behind us – Angry guy is howling with rage and the other one already pants from exhaustion.

"Shoot!" I scream. "Shoot them!"

"Are you out of your mind, kid!? This is real life! They could die!"

"We're being chased by murderous kidnappers! It's okay to shoot!"

"Damnit..."

Evander lifts the gun and pokes it blindly over his head. A shot goes off. Nothing happens. Two more bangs, and then one of our followers shrieks in pain. It's Italian guy! I risk a backwards glance and see him clutching his right knee. Angry guy looks even Angrier. By the looks of it, he's searching for his own weapon.

"Great, Mister Stream! Now the other one!"

Evander waves the gun around and fires randomly, but when the gun clicks Angry guy is still running.

"Dammit all!"

Shots go off behind us.

"*Dammit!*"

Evander sounds so forceful! If we weren't being chased I'd probably melt into a puddle of admiration. The corridor gets narrower by the second and we have to crouch as well as we can while running. A bullet flies past my ear, touching my hair.

"Mister Stream! Do something!"

And he does! Suddenly he whips around and yanks at a lever that I didn't see with all his might. Something large swooshes by right behind us and I spin around on the spot. There are several large somethings. Moving axes!

Angry guy is caught in between two of them. They're swinging from wall to wall at high speed, but Angry guy risks it and throws himself forward. He doesn't make it. One of the axes hits him straight in the back and crushes him to the fake stone wall. He drops his gun to the floor with a clatter.

"Yeah! Woo!"

I wave a fist around in the air. This really is the greatest day of my life!

"You're messed up, kid. Those axes are blunt and made out of plastic."

Well, that's cool, too. Not *as* cool of course, so I stop waving my fist and settle for just grinning. Evander shakes his head but I can see a smile tugging at his lips.

"Doesn't mean they won't hold him there, though. Come on, kiddo. Let's find another way out of here."

We leave Angry guy to his not so messy fate and move on.

This set is apparently about the size of Spain. After climbing three old ladders, crawling through a tunnel that looks slippery but really isn't, and balancing on weird, tipping platforms through a ball room, we take a break in the treasure chamber. We sink down on top of two closed treasure chests to catch our breaths.

"If I could only remember more of the tour they gave me this morning," Evander complains, his head in his hands. "I wasn't really paying attention to anything else other than those brutal-looking moving axes."

"Yeah, they were cool... What was your role in this movie, by the way? Nothing's been released yet besides the fact that you're in it."

"I'm just guest-starring as the helpful son of an eccentric millionaire. I disguise myself as a worker on an oil platform to open a secret door for Landon Farnham's character. The platform explodes in the end, not showing whether I survive or not. If this one becomes a success too, I'll make another appearance in the third movie."

"So you're making a comeback?"

Evander sends me a tired look.

"If I got a dollar for every time someone asked me that question... No kid, I won't start acting for real again. I don't need the money and I'm done with the business."

My heart sink. Still, it feels very special that Evander wants to talk to me about this.

"But you're the greatest action hero of all time! What went wrong?"

"If you must know... It was all the kissing scenes. A male head character must kiss at least one woman per action movie. That's the rules of the industry. Only, the more women I kissed, the more I realized that it wasn't for me. I gave always gave it a good go, of course, since it's my job... but I knew that my merchandize portrayed me as a straight macho man. That felt so fake."

"So you weren't only living a lie – it was your job to portray it to the world!"

I feel tears of sympathy forming in my eyes. Evander looks up as though he's forgotten that I'm here.

"Uhm... Something like that. But listen kid, now you know more about me than anyone, not counting my mum. You have to return the favor. Hell, I don't even know your name!"

"I'm Max! Max Magnusson. And... I'm your greatest fan..."

Evander laughs. I like that sound.

"I think we've covered that. Give me a real secret."

Do I dare? Yes. I do.

"I would like you to kiss me. You know, you've saved me three times today. It's only fair that you kiss me."

Silence fills the treasure chamber, even though there should be violins starting about now. I lean over to him, slowly, and place my lips against his. I give them a kiss. Then I pull back.

Evander apparently shut his eyes during the kiss, because now he opens them.

"Kid... Max... You know I'm not who you think I am, right?"

I nod.

"Right."

"You know that I'm not halfway as crazy as you."

"I know. It's okay."

And it really is.

He leans in for a crusher. His stubble is the pointiest, manliest thing I've ever felt. I moan and

grab a hold of his muscular shoulders.

"Max..." He whispers against my mouth, his voice low and husky. "Come here, kid..."

I climb onto his lap, straddling his tree-trunk thighs and deepening the kiss even more. He crushes me to him, one hand on my shoulder blade and the other in the small of my back. I throw my arms around his neck like a needy orangutan.

"Oh... my neck... Please, my neck..." I sigh and tilt my head backwards.

He's such a thoughtful lover! He worships my Adam's apple with a swirling tongue and nipping teeth until I'm sporting a boner the size of one of the Austrian gold bars on the floor. Mewling, I press even closer to him to rub my ass against his own happiness.

Evander groans and starts dry-humping my ass through our jeans. I cling to him, claw at his back and ride his lap with my very best impression of a gallop through the moonlit desert.

"Uhn... You wanna get under, kid?"

"Yeah... Hell, yeah..."

And he stands up, taking me with him. Oh, wonder of masculinity! I keep my legs locked around his waist and my arms around his neck as he browses the chamber for a good fucking spot. And there it is.

"Over there! That's Julius Caesar isn't it? Oh, please fuck me on Julius Caesar!"

He carries me over to the fallen statue made out of plastic and false gold. As soon as I feel it under my back, I start to wriggle out of my jeans and Stream Team underwear. Evander tugs at my clothing and manages to take off both my sneakers and my hoodie in under two minutes. Then, he reaches for his own zipper.

Whoa.

His cock is awesome.

Before I know it I'm sliding down from the statue to hit my knees in front of him. It smells like man. I grasp his hips and give it a long lick. It tastes like man. This is without a doubt the manliest thing I've done in my entire life.

Evander groans like a bear when I go down on him. I suck him like a thick, juicy lollipop, making smacking wet sounds on purpose. His fingernails scrape my scalp as if he wants to hold me in place. When I reach around him to grasp his ass, he begins fucking my mouth – slowly at first, but then accelerating until he thrusts like a madman. I hold on, letting him ride out the storm. When he comes, I swallow.

"Oh, God! It's so good! So good... Mm... Thanks, kid. What a ride."

I happily accept his outstretched hand and let him help me up. He draws me in with an arm around my neck and cups a hand over my dick.

"Would you like the same service?"

"No, I'd actually much prefer you to fuck me on Julius Caesar. There probably won't be another chance of that in my life."

Evander looks slightly startled, but then he laughs.

"You're so demanding, Max! But yeah, you're right, this is a once in a lifetime. Bend over and I'll see what I can do."

I turn and bend, regretting that I didn't shave or anything to make my ass crack look nice. Evander doesn't seem to mind natural coin slots, though. I hear him spit on his fingers. When they slide up between my buttocks I feel the wet trace they leave behind. Evander lets his fingers draw lazy circles around my asshole before pushing them in.

"Oh, go faster!" I whine, face-down against Caesar's toga. "I can take more of those!"

Evander pulls out, spits on his fingers again and return with four of them. Oh, they're big. And hard. And flexible. I push back towards him, finding a nice rhythm to finger-fuck in.

"Oh... Ah... Ah! I'm getting warmed up! Get your cock in!"

Evander thrusts his fingers into me a few more times before drawing them out. He spits, twice, and I lift my hips a bit to achieve what I guess is the best angle. For a second or two, the head of his cock just rests against my asshole. Then he takes hold of my hips and thrusts slowly.

This is big for real. And really, really nice. I whimper when he's gone in all the way, but it's exclusively from pleasure. He lets me adjust for a moment before moving again. I meet his thrusts a little early, one after another, making him pick up the pace. Soon we're rutting like rabbits on the statue, both of us moaning and sweating.

"Harder... Uhn... Harder!"

"You naughty little... All right, here it comes!"

Adjusting his grip, he lifts my legs off of the floor so that my entire body weight lowers me onto his cock. Then he fucks me in earnest again.

"Ah! Oh!"

I'm bouncing up and down like a rubber ball, and it's absolute bliss.

"Oh! Oh! Mister... Mister Stream! Mister Streeaaaam!!!"

I come. Not like a firework, but like an atomic bomb. I tense up and release what feels like a truckload of sperm in the greatest, most intense climax of my life.

When it's over, I notice Evander coming too. It's a strange feeling – probably the best in the world. Then he collapses over me, panting in my ear.

"Really, kiddo. In situations like this, you may call me Evander."

This is the coolest room yet – at least if you don't look at the spotlights, cables and opposite concrete wall.

"What is this place supposed to be?" I ask Evander.

"An underground harbor for the Russian scientists. They're meant to run down from all the doors up there by these odd staircases to the boats that are supposed to dock in the water over there."

"This would be an epic set for the final battle! Just look at all these wires! Are they for stunts?"

"Yeah, you rig an actor or stuntman up in them and then you can operate the wires from over here. If you yank them, the person flies. If you give them slack, like this..."

The wires drop to the ground forming little pools like the one I left in Caesar's hand. It turned out to be a rather small truckload, by the way.

"... they get knocked out by wannabe action heroes."

A man steps out of the shadows from under a staircase. My blood becomes ice in my veins. Older guy.

"Never... let... companions... slack."

He punctuates each word with a threatening step forward. His gun points at us with deadly accuracy. I gulp.

"And never let anyone cross you unpunished."

Older guy aims his weapon in my face.

"First you, pretty boy. I'll blow your brains out first, because you annoy me so badly."

He points the gun at Evander.

"Then I'll shoot you dead, because you... What the... My, my... Look who we have here!"

Older guy laughs, and I don't like the sound of it.

"Evander Stream! Fancy seeing such a legend here! Perhaps my day isn't all spoiled – you can bring me a handsome sum, more than those two B-movie stars. You're Depp to their Knightly and Bloom."

"They got away, then?" Evander asks.

"They were out the front door before I could catch up with them. But never mind. I'll keep you with me and blow your pal to bits."

Once again I'm looking into the barrel of his gun. Something vibrates in my jeans. None of this in the nice and manly way it was with Evander, though. It's my phone! I never surrendered it in the great hall!

Evander steps in front of me.

"You won't get anything out of killing this guy. No one's died yet in this drama, so you can still give up and get a fairly mild sentence."

I fish my Android from my pocket. It's a text.

'Knock knock? / police'

This is what I pay taxes for! Getting text messages signed "police" – so cool! I tap "y" for "yes" and send it off. Then I slip my phone back into my pocket.

"Get out of my way, Stream! You should be glad I won't shoot you too!"

"Calm down. Listen, you've got the gun, no one's questioning that."

"I said get out of my way!"

I stick my head out from behind Evander's broad back.

"Oh, it's okay. You can shoot me all you want, but I'm curious about a few things first."

Older guy looks dumbfounded for a moment – then he just looks mad.

"What!?"

I take that as an invitation to ask away.

"Did you get in here the same way as I did? I told the security guys on the street that I was driving to the arena just beside this building to watch my kid's ice skating contest. One of the guards had been ice skating in his youth and apparently his dad never came to watch him, so they let me through. Then I just snuck in here instead of the arena."

Older guy blinks. He opens his mouth, closes it again and blinks some more.

"We... we actually said we'd be referees for an ice skating contest."

"Wow! What are the odds of that? And they let you in too? But if you don't mind me saying, that's not a very good plan. What if they hadn't liked ice skating so much?"

"If they hadn't let us through, we'd have killed them!"

Was that a sound I heard from one of the doors?

"Oh, that's crappy. You would have been arrested before entering the building."

"Just how fast do you think the police are, idiot?"

Right on cue, the door opens with a bang. I fling myself at Older guy.

"Run, Evander!" I yell, as fifteen cops form a zone of safety in one end of the room.

"Police!" they shout. "Drop your weapon!"

But Older guy is faster than he looks. He wrestles me in front of him and juts his gun into my temple. Evander is somewhere behind us – I can see the cops signaling to him to come over to their side of the room.

"One move and he's fucking dead!"

The police hesitate. There are red spots dancing all over the place, but no one dares to pull the trigger. Older guy forces me to back with him up a staircase. He's going to escape through another door into this labyrinth!

"Drop your weapon and lay down on the floor! Drop your weapon!"

Older guy isn't dropping his weapon. He's approaching a door...

Then Older guy lets go of me with a scream. I look around to see Evander Stream pull at a wire with both hands. Older guy hangs suspended upside-down from said wire as it appears to have caught his foot. The police rush forward to take control of the situation, and soon enough Older guy gets a nice pair of handcuffs and the Miranda warning.

On our way out a kind looking officer takes off his helmet and claps my shoulder.

"We were very lucky you still had your phone! Searching for your number on the Internet was the last thing we could think of to get in contact with the two of you. We had no idea of how the situation was on the inside, so we didn't dare come in without any kind of reassurance."

I'm just about to tell him to thank Mister Stream and not me when we reach the front door. Outside is a brightly sunlit chaos made up of policemen running around, freed hostages cheering, ambulances blinking, curious spectators trying to break through the circle of cops, and at least a hundred reporters turning their cameras towards us.

An ending worthy of any action movie. I might not make it into the frame, but that's all right. Evander just takes my hand.

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## The Sad Blanket

by shukyou (主教)

illustrated by r\_a\_parker

Alone in the command center Richard sat, his elbows braced against the shiny black roundtable, leaning forward into his clasped hands, resting his lips against his steepled index fingers. The machines around him buzzed and hummed, but he paid them no mind; he stared straight ahead at nothing, though even his expressionless face told its own story. He'd changed back into his civilian clothes, a shirt and slacks so expensive they looked cheap. His graphite-grey helmet lay on the table next to him, cracked up the left side, and a half-patched wound up his left cheek toward his ear told of where the helmet had been when it had suffered that damage. Alone, he waited, and he'd wait as long as he had to, impeccable and patient.

The heavy metal doors swooshed open (or at least they would, after foley got through with them), but Richard didn't flinch, not even as Brandon stormed in, his own blond hair matted with blood. "What the *hell* was that?" shouted Brandon, bringing down his gloved fist on the metal railing. He was still in costume, though the star-spangled pattern up the sleeves was burned and torn in artful places, exposing his golden-tanned, muscled body beneath.

"Oh, good, you survived long enough to complain." Richard moved nothing more than the muscles necessary for speech. This wasn't amateur hour, not by any means, but even amongst professionals, Richard was a professional.

Brandon's entire body was tense with fury and betrayal, his jaw set firm enough that it might have put his teeth in danger of shattering. "You *knew* the thrusters would fail. You *set us up*."

"No," said Richard, and now a cloud of real anger bubbled up through his ice-cool voice, "*you* were so intent on being a *hero* that you couldn't wait for--"

"*You set us up!*" Taking powerful, echoing strides, Brandon walked around the empty comm station to the short set of steps that would take him from the center's upper level of control stations to the sunken center where Richard sat. "You couldn't stand knowing that your idea wouldn't work, so you *sabotaged* the only way we *AAAUGH!*"

If any crew members there hadn't already been watching the proceedings like a hawk, Brandon's shout surely got their attention, and thus nearly two dozen people -- to say nothing of the cameras, microphones, and various other recording devices -- witnessed as the poorly bolted 'metal' railing by the staircase gave way, sending Brandon pitching forward ass-over-endtable in an ungainly sprawl down the few remaining steps to the sheet-metal floor below. The crash was spectacular, augmented by how kicking over the chairs arranged at the table overloaded the microphones and send all the headphone-wearers into frantic fits of trying to free their ears.

Richard, ever the real-life hero, was out of his seat and over the table in a heartbeat, landing at Brandon's side barely a second after Brandon met the ground. The set medics arrived fractions of a second later, both of them swarming in with Olympic speed. "I'm okay!" shouted Brandon, unseen beneath the level of the table and the crush of people. "I'm ... okay."

Surrounded by wires and expensive equipment, and not in the best shape even as forty-six

went, Josh took significantly longer to make his way over to the crash site, and by the time he'd gotten there, the number of people surrounding the downed actor had tripled. "No, that's just makeup," Richard said to a medic who was expressing concern over what appeared to be a significant head injury.

Across his lap lay Brandon, who looked sheepish and a little startled, but otherwise fine. As Josh approached, Brandon pressed his lips together and turned a shade of red to match the stripes across his chest. "Please tell me that's not going in the final print."

Well, if he was able to joke about it, Josh figured, he was probably going to be all right. "Of the blooper reel, maybe," Josh said, making Brandon wince as Richard laughed. "We've all heard of method acting, but can you please not use your Major Amazing superhero strength to *destroy my set*?" He gave Brandon the sternest, fiercest scowl he could to let him know exactly how much he was joking, and was gratified when Brandon smiled back.

To Josh's fair surprise, it turned out that Brandon hadn't been exaggerating to seem brave -- he *was* all right, according to the medics, save a few bumps and bruises that he'd probably feel more tomorrow than he did right then. But the commotion had disrupted the flow of things and there were still carpenters to be called, so despite Brandon's solid assurances that he could do it again, really, Josh declared what little was left of the day a wash, at least as far as filming went. Major Amazing and Carbon Man could pick up their argument tomorrow as though nothing had happened, and maybe this time the place that was supposed to be a multi-million-dollar top-secret government agency's war room wouldn't fall apart under an actor's too-heavy grip.

Well, nobody'd ever said making movies was easy. In fact, when he'd made his transition from the small screen to the big one, everyone he'd talked to had promised just the opposite. As the medics saw a protesting Brandon off the set and Richard went the other direction to get his scar makeup removed, Josh returned to his DIRECTOR chair to see what the day, before its untimely end, had left him.

Under normal circumstances, Josh would never have been so rude as just to walk right into Brandon's trailer, revised shooting script in hand, without so much as bothering to knock. However, working on the film had robbed all circumstances of normal for the foreseeable future, and distraction was the new order of the day. Movie-making always involved a fair amount of angry input from high-strung people in uncomfortable-looking suits, but the scope and magnitude of this project had apparently turned all their concern dials to eleven. He didn't *hate* Detroit, but he was coming to the conclusion that he didn't *like* it either, when what should have been a balmy June day felt like a Los Angeles Christmas -- even if the unseasonal coolness was better for the actors, especially the ones who, in true superhero and -villain style, weren't exactly dressed for the heat. And to top it all off, his phone had lit up during a production meeting with a typical afterthought text from Marni, telling him that the tubes in Lainie's ears had gone in just fine, when Josh hadn't even known such a thing was happening at all.

Thus, his usual lack of social graces had been replaced for the time being by a new and improved lack of social graces, and Josh didn't even listen for a response to his knock before barging inside. Brandon was sitting with his back to the door, facing the table where he kept his laptop. "Hey," said Josh, waving the pages so they rustled, "brought you the--"

Brandon laughed -- not a polite chuckle of greeting, either, but a full-throated funny-joke laugh, lovely and resonant. "You're the worst."

Josh stopped a few feet in and frowned, looking first at the pages in his hand, then at his ratty UCLA sweatshirt and jeans, checking for obvious flaws. "...Okay, little harsh, maybe, but nothing I haven't heard before from--"

"Yeah, but she's just like that. When they develop the technology to just graft phones to the side of your face, she'll be the first in line."

It wasn't unlike the time he'd gone to Austria for a month's exchange in high school and met two boys who practiced their English by reading Beckett plays aloud. For once in his life, he chose not to respond to something he obviously didn't understand, and instead stepped closer in silence, crossing the narrow distance between the door and Brandon's chair. As he neared it, the screen on Brandon's laptop emerged from behind the eclipse of Brandon's broad shoulders, until Josh could see that the image on the screen wasn't static -- it moved, though at a jerky, low-quality pace, showing a very attractive black man with a shaved head and his arms around a great brown dog. No sound came out of the computer, though, and Josh's curiosity begged him forward with such focused interest that when Brandon jerked his head around, the resulting yelps of surprise from both parties were comic in the extreme.

Brandon recovered first, reaching up to yank one of the earbuds from his ear. "Hi! Sorry!" he panted, while the man on the screen laughed and the silent dog barked. "Sorry, I had these in, I--"

"No, it's fine, I just--" Josh stopped, unable to think of what he had *just*, anyway. Walked in unannounced to someone else's personal space and scared the living daylight out of his star? Something like that. "I can come back later."

"No! No, it's totally cool, we were--" Brandon turned his head toward the side with the earbud still in, listening as the man said something. "Yeah, director calls! Talk to you tomorrow? ...Love you too. And *love you*," he added, in the tone of voice humans generally reserved for communication with newborn humans and pets of all ages. "Be good boys, both of you. ...Okay, bye-bye."

"I *seriously* didn't mean to interrupt," said Josh, who found himself walking the Tightrope of Mind Your Own Business over a wilderness of new and interesting information. Despite having the standard agency profile available for all interested parties, Brandon was still something of a mystery to Josh, evasive in the few interviews of his Josh had seen and never appearing in any of the usual sources for gossip. And Josh loved gossip.

Brandon shook his head as he closed the laptop and turned in his chair to face Josh. "No, seriously, it's cool. I was just, you know ... Skyping home, like a giant loser."

And that, Josh knew, should have been the end of the matter. Oh, he should reassure Brandon, calling home was nothing to be ashamed about; being away from loved ones was always hard, even for the shortest of times and under the best of circumstances; here's the new script, have a nice day. It was what any regular, decent, privacy-respecting person would have done.

But Josh had never been regular, he wasn't entirely sure he'd ever been decent, and as the cast of *Kitty the Werewolf Stabber* had said in the last-day-of-shooting card they'd all signed for him, he'd never butted out when he could butt in. And they'd meant it as a compliment, he was sure. Probably. That was what they'd said, anyway. "Little homesick, huh?" he asked, placing the script atop the mini-fridge next to a half-depleted six-pack of Mountain Dew; it could wait.

A weird look crossed Brandon's face, half concern and half suspicion, but it faded with a sigh into embarrassed resignation. "Yeah. A *lot* homesick. And I keep trying to tell myself *not* to, that I'm not a ten-year-old at his first Boy Scout Camp weekend or something. It's ridiculous. I'm twenty-nine, I can sleep without my Transformers night-light, but...." He stopped and cleared his

throat. "Anyway! Um, wow, that got pathetic real fast. Sorry."

Josh's brain heard the apology and processed the words, but it had gotten hung up a few sentences back. "Do you seriously have a Transformers night-light?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said Brandon, laughing -- but the laugh faded as fast as it had risen, replaced by the sheepishness from before. "...No, because it broke about three years ago, and I couldn't justify at the time paying two hundred bucks to get it fixed, but it's sitting in a box in the top of my closet, and now I've got the money but I just haven't gotten around to it, and *wow*, this is not something I usually tell people. But it's true. In a box. In its *original* box. Had it since I was five."

"Come with me," was all Josh said in reply, and as he turned to leave the trailer, he could hear the sound of baffled-but-compliant Brandon's rising and following.

Less than thirty minutes later, Brandon was sitting Josh's trailer with a blanket around his shoulders, a knit dinosaur hat on his head, and a huge mug of cocoa between his hands. The casual observer might have been forgiven for not recognizing the contents of the mug, however, as the top was covered with a layer of assorted miniature pastel marshmallows. To be fair to Josh's sense of appropriate sugar content, he'd asked how many to put in, and Brandon had said 'all of them'.

"And then they made me their chief," Josh concluded his admittedly aimless tale about his last trip to a comic store, catching Brandon with a giggle in the middle of his taking a sip. "Well, temporarily. But I think I'd get a discount if I ever went back *without* a disguise. ...You look better."

With the long green stegosaurus tail draped over his shoulder and an unmistakable moustache of spun sugar and chocolate powder, Brandon may have looked ridiculous by general standards, but nobody could have missed that million-watt smile. He didn't have a movie star smile, and that was the first things that Josh, skeptical about the studio's casting choice, had noticed when he'd seen the first dailies from *Major Amazing: The First Vengeancer*: that good-looking kid in the patriotic suit grinned like he meant it, all big and just this side of dopey. "Yeah. Yeah, I am. A lot." Brandon tugged at the tattered beige blanket. "Guess your Sad Blanket really works."



"One hundred percent effective or your money back. Efficacy doubles when you combine it with the Happy Hat." A jingle bell was hidden somewhere in the hat's narrowest point, and Josh gave it a flick, drawing its little fairy sound out into the room. "Whenever we had a really emotional episode of *Kitty* to film, I'd always have them on set -- sometimes for the actors, sometimes just for me. A lot of times for me to physically *put* on the actors, because seriously, even though you know it's your job and you know it's their job, it's tough making a little girl cry."

"I don't know if I told you, but I loved *Kitty*." Brandon smiled, looking down into the sugary Sargasso Sea in his cup. "Seriously loved it. And I'm not just saying that like, oh, you're my director, I have to be your biggest fan now. I'm saying it like, I had a TV and VCR in my room, and that VCR was programmed to record every Tuesday night like clockwork, and I had a whole

bookshelf in my room that was just *Kitty* tapes with handwritten labels."

Well, that was a kind of flattery Josh hadn't expected to meet in Hollywood proper. Being the king of the geeks may have earned him the occasional declaration of fealty from comic-store patrons and convention-going enthusiasts -- and he was grateful for every inch of that, no lie -- but Josh had learned that devoted fans usually meant niche appeal. The *Vengeancers* cast was an amazing group made up of wonderful people, all of whom had thus far been just delightful to work with, but Brandon was the first one, Richard notwithstanding, who'd said anything about having more than a passing familiarity with Josh's previous work. *Kitty* tapes, laughing at comic store stories, Transformer night-light, acceptance of both the Sad Blanket and the Happy Hat with reverent solemnity.... "You're one of us, aren't you?"

Brandon nodded, making the dinosaur hat's bell jingle. "Nerdy as charged. *Also* not something I tend to tell a lot of people." He shrugged, and as he did, the blanket draped itself even more securely around his shoulders.

"I seriously had no idea." Josh sat down across from Brandon on one of the trailer's long cushioned benches, then pulled his legs up beneath him and braced his elbows against his knees. "I mean, there are places where everyone's never more than twenty minutes away from showing up at Dragon-Con in full garb, and there are places where all sensors show Nerd Levels at zero, but even putting 'comic book' in front of 'blockbuster' doesn't somehow magically change one to the other. Except Richard, I mean, but I know the second he got the role, he went out and bought the half of all the Carbon Man comics in the world that he didn't have already."

"That was the *other* bookshelf in my room growing up: Carbon Man comics."

"I figured an all-American boy such as yourself would gravitate toward Major Amazing."

Laughing, Brandon shook his head. "Nope. He was too much of a goody-goody. All squeaky clean and boring." He took a sip of his cocoa, then added, as he chewed through a mouthful of marshmallow icebergs, "And I think you're overestimating how Major Amazing I was back in high school. Way more Major All-State One-Act Play Competition. You need a different kind of superhero team to pull off a forty-minute adaptation of *Our Town*."

Josh made a low, non-ironic whistle of impressedness. "This AV Club nerd salutes you." Brandon smiled back and made another valiant attempt at vanquishing the sea of cocoa in front of him.

Realizing the extent of Brandon's inner nerd life made a lot of things make sense, to the point where Josh felt a little embarrassed he hadn't noticed the telltale closet nerd signs before: Brandon's puppy-like enthusiasm for all things, his deep interest in what motivated a character that was in essence what would happen if you crossed an action figure and a whole troop of Boy Scouts, his utter lack of ego when it came to surrendering the spotlight to his costumed co-stars, the way his whole face had lit up the first time Richard had walked onto the set in full Carbon Man gear. Hell, had Josh been paying better attention, the homesickness would have been the final piece of evidence in his case, not the first. Nerds needed their space, and anyone who doubted this, Josh felt, did not have a sufficient understanding of how key Batman's Bat-Cave was to the entire process of being Batman. (He was grateful, though, that he'd passed out of his earlier life stage where he hadn't always understood when was and wasn't a good time to expound on theories like that.)

While Brandon was drinking and batting absently at the Happy Hat's jingly tip, Josh reached under the bed and pulled out a red suitcase. It was about the same size as a briefcase, though it was far deeper and had a combination lock across the top that hadn't worked in years; since as

long he could remember, it had been his, as evidenced by the wide purple **JOHSUA** crayoned along one short side. "Okay," he said in preamble, resting it shut across his knees, "this is Suitcase."

"...Hello, Suitcase," said Brandon, giving it a little wave.

Any anxieties he'd had about revealing its contents melted in the face of that response. "It's half-empty now," Josh explained as he flipped open the latches, "because the Sad Blanket and the Happy Hat usually go in here too." Josh expected some sort of inquiry there, but Brandon just nodded with a gravitas equivalent to that with which Josh was handling the situation. Josh watched him carefully, ready to abort the viewing the second Brandon expressed anything that wasn't genuine interest; when Brandon leaned forward on his knees to get a better look, though, Josh took a deep breath and opened the case.

The contents were a bit jumbled, given that Josh had taken out their customary padding while writing the night before -- or, rather, while trying to write and failing miserably, which is why they'd come out in the first place. "Here," he said with all the didactic gusto of a museum tour guide, "is the entire crew of the Enterprise-D in action figure form. These are the seven comic books I would take with me to a desert island, assuming I could only take seven. This is my first Game Boy, even though the only game I still have for it is Tetris. These are my emergency chocolate bars, which have to get eaten and re-stocked every so often, because the chocolate dries out, and ... well, that's its own emergency. And this is a picture that my mother painted on a little canvas. ...She wasn't a very good painter."

"It's nice, though," said Brandon, and when Josh finally dared to look up at him to gauge his reaction, he was beyond gratified to see Brandon's expression wide and impressed by Josh's soul-in-a-box collection

"It's supposed to be a sunset."

Brandon paused, then tilted his head to the left. "Oh, I was looking at it from the wrong angle."

"See, the green part goes on the side."

"I *was* getting a bit of an O'Keefe vibe there."

"And then you turn it ninety degrees, right?" Josh smiled and picked up the playing-card-sized canvas from the pile, then handed it over to Brandon so the tiny **M.W.** was in the bottom right corner. "That was one of the things I loved best about Mom, that ... well, she was a crap painter, and more than that, she *knew* she was a crap painter. But she loved to paint! So she wasn't going to let the fact that she wasn't any good at it stop her." He should stop there, he knew -- he'd tripped all his own hard-earned people-don't-care-about-this sensors -- but he'd been wearing the Sad Blanket himself not too long ago, and some things, once started, couldn't stop being said. "So there have been times when I've been scared too, you know, that I'm a crap director and that I don't have any thing to give or make or say, but then I think ... man, what would Mom do? And the answer is, she'd keep on trucking and she'd make the best crap that she could."

With his eyes fixed on the painting, Brandon rotated it back and forth from one orientation to another. "Okay, honesty time: do you think we're making crap now?"

"Nope." Josh shook his head, and when Brandon smiled, he couldn't keep from doing the same. "I mean, it's not high art or anything, but we're telling a story, and we're doing it in the best way we can, and we're having fun while we do it. ...At least, *I'm* having fun. Guess I shouldn't speak for anybody else."

"No, I'm having fun too," said Brandon, and he sounded so sincere that Josh decided to ignore

that those words came from a professional thespian still wrapped in the Sad Blanket. "...Say, what's that?" He pointed into the suitcase to a child's drawing, visible now beneath the place where the tiny oil painting had been before.

Josh pushed aside the comic books and pulled out the plastic-protected sheet of construction paper; he hesitated a moment before handing it over to Brandon. "*That* is a picture that my eldest did of me as a superhero. With a megaphone." It took a little imagination to apply that interpretation, but the focal point of the picture was definitely a fat pink circle with legs, holding a green triangle and flying through the air. "I am saving the Eiffel Tower from burning down, and she's never been able to explain adequately why."

Despite the fact that he *was* quite a talented actor, Brandon couldn't quite keep all the surprise off his face, and Josh pretended not to notice *that*, either. "So ... you have kids?"

"Well, yes and no. On the yes side, yes! Three of them. On the no side, no, they live with their moms, and I'm kind of more of their strange uncle than their dad, but ... still their dad." Josh reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone, leafing through the various options for the photo album as he talked. "Their mom is my sister's oldest friend, so she's kind of like my little sister too, so when she and her wife wanted kids, I volunteered the stuff." Josh pulled up the snap he'd taken on his last visit, nearly three months ago, and turned the phone so Brandon could see. "The big one's Kendra, the artist, and that's Harper, who likes frogs, and that one's Lainie, who ... well, she's a champion at getting ear infections and putting her feet in her mouth."

"God, they're *adorable*," said Brandon, who -- *completely* unprompted by Josh -- slid the picture to the side with his fingertips to reveal the other photos from that visit. It had been the first time Josh had met Lainie in person, so most of the shots were of her tiny bald baby head against various backgrounds, but there'd been no way he was getting out of there without indulging the elder pair's love for the camera. "I mean, they look just like you. Especially Harper."

"Well, for his sake, I hope his mom's Italian-Chineseness manages to balance out my Irish-Irishness as he grows older, saving him from my redheaded indignities of never being able to tan and having a forehead that grows larger every year."

Brandon tapped Josh in the center of his forehead with Josh's phone before handing it back. "Means you're brainy."

"Means by the time I'm fifty, my forehead will have pushed my entire face down into my chin." Josh squished his features together with his hands, making Brandon laugh. "And then I won't have to blow the budget on makeup for the next *Vengeancers* movie. I'll just play the villain myself."

"Foreheadio, Master of Evil," Brandon said in a fine dramatic movie-trailer voice. "He'll conquer the world for love ... and a hat that fits."

Josh wrung his hands together and did his best villain cackle. "What's the matter, little heroes? Did you think you could get ... *ahead*?"

With a mighty groan, Brandon fell back against the couch, clutching his hands to his chest and letting his tongue loll out the side of his mouth. "My ... one ... weakness!"

"Cheaper than Kryptonite." Josh laughed, setting Brandon off as well, and when Brandon sat up again a moment later, the Happy Hat was still fixed to his head, but the Sad Blanket had fallen unnoticed off his shoulders. "Hey, though, thanks for letting me brag a little. It's not a *secret* or anything, my kids, but I don't like to horn in on their moms' territory, even when they're not around."

Brandon shook his head, making the bell jingle. "No, hey, I get it, I totally do. I mean, you heard me talking to *my* baby, and I bet I sounded like a total idiot."

It had already been an evening of easy confessions and quiet surprises, and Josh supposed that he'd already shown more than he'd planned of his own soul -- but this one still knocked him for a bit of a loop, especially since he always tried to keep an eye out for other queer cast and crew members, and he'd heard *nothing* that had suggested that of Brandon. "No, hey, not an idiot," he promised to fill the space as he tried to decide where to go next from this unexpected personal revelation. All things considered, he opted for light and information-based, respectively: "He was pretty cute! How long have you two been together?"

"Well, I got him when he was about two months old, and we had his fifth birthday party right before I left to come here! So, you know, a good long while."

Despite the obviousness of the misunderstanding, Josh had been chewing so firmly over Brandon's casual admission about his sexuality that the answer took several silent, embarrassing seconds to process. "...Your baby the *dog*. Got it."

Brandon managed to choke on his cocoa -- an impressive feat given that the mug had been empty for several minutes. "Oh, you--! No, no, no! No, no, that's-- God, no, Ace! Ace the dog! Who stays home when I'm away, with my brother, who house-sits for me and punches in the numbers, because dogs aren't good at Skype."

"Brother?" asked still-confused Josh, looking at Brandon's pale skin and golden hair, and thinking back to the dark-complected man on the monitor.

"Technically, stepbrother."

"And the fog lifts. They're *both* pretty cute, though."

"That's how he and Ace get all the ladies when they're out walking together, or so I'm told. He's my dog at heart, though. I'm a complete dork about him; I've even got a picture of him in my wallet." Brandon reached into his back pocket and pulled out a battered brown leather billfold, then flipped it open to the middle section; there, in the first plastic sleeve, was a picture of Brandon kneeling next to Ace, hugging him in some grassy park. "*And* I have pictures of him as a puppy on my phone. He's who I've got waiting for me at home."

Even Josh, who'd never had a dog as a child due to his mother's allergies, and then who'd never bothered interrupting his solitary lifestyle by adding a second dependent lifeform to the house, had to admit that Ace's handsome face had broken into his chest deposit box and stolen his heart. "You two make a pretty handsome couple."

"Best relationship I've *ever* been in, period." The words were a joke, of course, but beneath them ran a colder current that reminded Josh of the way Brandon had sounded earlier, back in his trailer, lost somewhere between playing his role and playing himself. His smiles were never fake, Josh felt sure by now, but neither were they always the whole story, and little quips like that were the cracks that showed through the veneer of easygoing happiness. There was more to Brandon Moore than anyone was giving him credit for being -- and, Josh was embarrassed to admit, up until that evening, he'd been as much a part of that anyone as anyone else.

Two days later, Josh became aware of Brandon's crush on Richard.

Brandon's mood seemed a thousand times improved after his spending an evening with Josh, and though Josh wasn't ready to take full credit for that change, he was glad he could have helped out. Their time together *did* make Josh more attentive to Brandon at all times, though, in

the same sort of mothering way he had with his most beloved actors -- and part of which this increased attention alerted him to was the fact that Richard's presence made Brandon swoon.

To be fair, Richard's presence made *everyone* swoon -- he was just that kind of man. Were he a D&D character, he'd have come into the world with his charisma maxed out and just gotten better from there; Josh had met his fair share of dedicatedly straight men and gay women who had admitted that, if given the opportunity to get into Richard's pants, they'd make an exception. And yet he was also about the nicest person Josh had ever met, which meant that Richard had somehow managed to spring into a triple backflip of fame and make a perfect landing in the narrow Venn diagram strip caused by the overlap of Crazy Sexy Perfect and Gosh-Darn-It Likeable. Josh could only assume that Richard's firm footing in the latter camp had more than once kept him from getting his crazy sexy perfect nose bashed in.

But Brandon had special sparkles in his eyes whenever Richard came around, and the fact of their playing the focal points of an ensemble cast meant that Richard came around him often. From a director's perspective, it was sort of a dream come true -- after all, only the most pig-headedly hetero-minded fans could read the relationship between Major Amazing and Carbon Man as anything *but* romantic, but Josh had known that pitching the script with that element in the foreground would have gotten it (and him) pitched out of the studio. Thus, the extent to which the script reflected those two characters' closeness was limited mostly to tense encounters and intense apologies afterward.

Subtext, however, was another matter entirely.

Interviewers often asked Josh about his writing process, looking for some little nugget to pass on to fans and future writers alike, that secret key that, if it could be mastered, could grant an ordinary mortal the powers of a real Hollywood scriptwriter -- which was *like* having the powers of a radioactive spider, Josh supposed, only a million times lamer. Josh stuck to the mundane variations on 'write what you know' and 'just keep writing', not because he was afraid that telling other people about his habits might somehow increase his competition, but because he didn't really feel like getting into all the intricacies of 'I drink lots of Mountain Dew and play with toys'. Best, he thought, to preserve at least some of the magic.

At present, he was sitting at a table in one of the lounges, surrounded by two dozen or so Major Amazing and Carbon Man action figures, most of which he'd bent into various heroic poses. He'd meant to work something out with the two heroes' big fistfight -- the one in the penultimate act, the one that had originally led to Major Amazing's tragic and noble death before the studio'd told Josh he couldn't just kill off one of their major properties in a film that was already looking good for some sequels -- but trying to stage fight scenes with easily toppled plastic men lent itself less to choreographing action sequences and more to creating a tiny, costumed middle school dance. Resigned to the fact that there just wasn't enough articulation in the Major's molded arms to make it look like he was trying to choke Carbon Man, Josh settled for resting them on Carbon Man's shoulders. "'Would you like to dance?'" he asked, dropping his voice for his best impression of Richard. "'Oh, yes,'" he replied in a falsetto far above Brandon's real tone, "'you're so strong, Carbon Man!' 'Let's not fight.' 'No! Let's be allies forever!' 'I brought you this corsage.' 'Thank you, but I'm afraid you can't get a pin through the titanium mesh of my shirt. You'll have to stick it in my flowing golden hair.' Let me push back your strange cap-mask-hat thing, Major.' 'Oh, yes! Behold my rugged good looks!' 'Only if you behold mine as well, my darling.'"

"Uncanny!" said a voice from behind him, and Josh turned to find Richard, who was giving a

slow clap as he walked through the door. "Are you my new understudy? How *did* you know my lines?"

"I was going to replace you with this guy," Josh said as he pulled the Carbon Man figure away from its stiff, romantic embrace, "but damn it, you actors have a union or something."

Richard wrinkled up his nose in an exaggerated show of pique. "I know. I blame Obama."

"Hey, are you--" Brandon stopped mid-sentence as he poked his head in the other door, looking back and forth between the two of them. "Oh, hey! Hi! I was actually.... Am I interrupting?"

With a smile, Richard folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorway. "Our fearless director was just giving me a preview of the scene from *Vengeancers II* where Carbon Man asks Major Amazing to the senior prom."

Once upon a time, Josh had possessed what society generally considered the appropriate amount of shame regarding nerdy pursuits, which included the impulse to disguise *any* action taken with doll-like figures, up to and including fantasy-casting them in John Hughes movies. Once upon a time, too, he'd had a rat-tail and Converse hi-tops, but some things were just meant to be outgrown. "I'm thinking he flies in with a iPod, also powered by a jet pack, hovering above his head, playing a little hey-hey, you-you, I don't like your boyfriend. It'll be a hit with all the kids."

Richard just stared at him for a long, uncomfortable minute -- just stared, not moving a single muscle in his face, not even blinking -- before turning on his heel and striding out of the room with a walk of extreme dignity. Josh, who'd never been very good at staring contests, shut his eyes and howled with laughter. Richard wasn't the best for nothing.

By the time he'd composed himself and sat up straight again, Brandon had picked up a pair of the action figures and was studying the miniature Carbon Man's feet. "So, no, you're *not* interrupting anything," said Josh. "But if you were looking for Richard, well, you can go catch him and tell him that as long as he pays for the rights, he can have Carbon Man do his *Say Anything* impression to whatever song he likes."

"Oh, no, I--" With a bashful smile, Brandon glanced over to the direction of Richard's exit, then looked back down at the toys in his hand. "It's okay, I was mostly just sort of wandering, anyway."

Josh gestured to the other end of the other end of the couch. "Well, you can hang out in here with me while I'm being a disgrace to my profession."

"Well, at least we get to go home Friday, right?" Brandon made the little Carbon Man doll bounce up and down on his knee. "*Are* you heading back Friday?"

Josh shook his head, then went to tidying up some of the papers around him; he hadn't been getting any work done anyway. "Nah, I'm here through Saturday, and then I've got to fly to New York, so I won't be back home until Monday night. Keeping the world safe for democracy and making sure all the shit winds up back where it's supposed to be, that's Director Man's superpower -- and with it comes great responsibility. This big-scale stuff is ... well, I'm still getting the hang of it. The biggest field trip we ever took while filming *Kitty* was a little jaunt to the beach, and some of my camera crew and I made an Arizona road trip to get background footage for *Dragonfly*, but having to hop planes to appease folk in completely different states is...." He caught a glimpse of Brandon's hands out of the corner of his eye. "Did you just make them kiss?"

While Josh had been able to shed most of his old nerd shame the way a snake sheds its old skin,

Brandon was still clearly deep in the throes of his own, even around Josh. "No, I...." He looked down at the action figures in his hand, which were tilted so that their mouths could meet despite their idealized chest proportions. Caught, he sighed. "Isn't that the first thing *anyone* does with action figures?"

"Depends on the action figures, but usually yes." Josh gestured to the awkward pairs of plastic men who'd been subject to his own whims. "Or you make them slow-dance."

With a nervous little laugh, Brandon separated the dolls from their embrace, then went about making them hold hands as best as their plastic joints would allow. Romance was rough when you were eight inches tall and made by Mattel. "So, uh, can I ask you a question about how you write Carbon Man and the Major?"

"Did I make them kind of gay on purpose, or are superhero bromances just doomed by the very nature of their existences to a kind of romanticism we usually associate with 'chick flicks'?"

"Well ... I might not have worded it that way...."

"As it turns out, the answer to both halves of my complicated guess at your simple question is: yes." Josh chanced a cautious look in Brandon's direction. "That cool?"

The look on Brandon's face was hard to read, trapped somewhere between skepticism and honest confusion. "No, it's fine, it's just, you and Richard were joking, and I thought...."

"Richard's good. Good enough to read between the lines I write." Josh nudged his bottle of Mountain Dew toward Brandon, who refused with a polite shake of his head. "You can do whatever the hell you want with it, cross my heart and hope for pie. But yeah, it's there in my head, even if they don't let me put it on the screen. These two guys are oil and water, and when you mix those two, good things can happen, like mayonnaise, and bad things can happen, like explosions. But it's the twenty-first century now, and everybody's looking at this with modern eyes, so you can't just take a relationship where, if one of them was a girl, they'd *have* to be kissing by the end of the movie, and then say, oh, but they're dudes, so it's all dude-bro dudeness, dude, bro, dude. ...Make sense?"

Brandon's mouth curled up to one side in a sweet little smile, the kind that people sometimes put on to bite down a laugh beneath. "I have no idea what it's like inside your head most of the time, but I want to build a summer house in there." He reached up and tapped Josh's temple.

Josh laughed as he swatted Brandon's hand away, and when Brandon kept poking, Josh picked up one of the Carbon Man figures from the table and zoomed it through Brandon's line of approach. Brandon retaliated by grabbing the closest Major Amazing doll and swooping it down with great swishing sounds. "A challenger appears!" said Josh, back in his Richard voice. "But Major! You can't even fly!"

Brandon looked at the doll in front of him and his eyes grew wide. "Oh no!" he gasped, turning the tiny Major Amazing doll belly up and staging a slow descent. "My terrible hubris has led me to ruin! Save me, Carbon Man!"

"Damn, it feels good to be a hero." The Carbon Man figure swooped down beneath Brandon's fake-falling Major Amazing doll, until Josh was holding both of them in his hand and having them fly around his head. Brandon applauded and Josh took a bow, then grabbed a figure in each hand and forced them to bend at the waist, a movement which was easier to pull off one-handed than having them straighten back up. "I'm pleased you enjoyed my little one-act play. I call it, *Why Josh Did Not Date In High School*. I'm taking it off-off-off-Broadway next season."

"Now make the sequel as a musical with a public-school budget and you can call it *Why Brandon Did Not Date In High School*, only with more being skinny and snaggle-toothed and

singing showtunes in front of bathroom mirrors with Mom's hairbrushes."

Josh shook his head. "Nope. I firmly refuse to believe anything but that you came straight from the stork all tall and muscley, fully tanned and catnip to anyone with a pair of eyes and a pulse."

That made Brandon laugh, at least, but the sound was quiet and mostly breath, and his eyes dropped down to where one of the Carbon Man action figures stood all alone on the table, hands on some approximation of his hips, looking as regal as Richard ever did, if at 1/12 scale. "Not anyone," he said with a sigh.

Thus it hit Josh like the proverbial fist of an angry god: Brandon had a thing for Richard, and okay, true, *everyone* had a thing for Richard, but Brandon had a Thing for Richard, the kind of Thing that wasn't just a little thing, but was a but Thing, the Thingiest kind of Thing. Not even the kind of Thing that was a one-off thing, the way that no matter how singular a person's sexual orientation was, there was always that one person who'd convince them to bat for the other team -- more of a thing that was in line with all other expected things, as least as far as Brandon must have been concerned. A straight man would have made jokes about wanting to do him; a gay or bi man would have made those jokes without having to have them necessarily be jokes. But a closeted gay man wouldn't -- couldn't -- say a thing.

This wasn't Josh's first lap around the Hollywood pool, after all, and he knew -- both from his own observations and from talking to Noel, one of the newer additions to Josh's little stable of well-loved and oft-used actors -- that for an actor, coming out of the closet was like playing a game of Russian Roulette with three bullets in the cylinder instead of one: it *might* go well, but it had an even chance of blowing your head off. Being a young, good-looking action-picture actor poised and sold as a heartthrob raised the number of bullets to five. No *wonder* Brandon was so homesick. No wonder a lot of things.

So Josh did the only thing that he knew how to do: he took the Carbon Man doll he was holding, returned the Major Amazing doll to Brandon, and said, in his sultriest voice, "Dance with me, bro!" And together they waltzed, the two plastic men, clinging to one another as though they were the only things in the world, oblivious to the two grown puppetmasters on the couch that pinched their plastic hips between thumbs and forefingers while laughing themselves silly.

To Josh's great consternation, playing matchmaker for Brandon and Richard was harder than it looked. For starters, though they were in a lot of scenes together, they were also *not* in a lot of scenes together, which meant getting them both on set at the same time wasn't always a thing that happened naturally. For another, returning to LA meant that most everyone was back on home turf, and thus less obligated to hang out together in the evenings for sheer lack of knowing anyone else in the vicinity.

The real challenge, though, Josh had come to realize, was that this was a plan that by necessity had to be worked through Brandon. Josh *could* have just gone up to Richard and said 'he's into it, go for him', but not only did that make Josh feel a little like an exotic game warden, he was sure from experience that the road to propositioning a closeted gay man was *not* the Aggressively Forward Highway. No, he had to talk Brandon into this, get him ready, soften up his mind-putty in Josh's warm, pudgy hands until Brandon was ready for love, or at least for arts and crafts night.

Step the first: let Brandon know that Josh knew that Brandon was gay.

Step two, of course, would be to let Brandon know, *immediately* after enacting step one, that Josh thought being gay was a perfectly fine and dandy lifestyle choice, so as not to allow the situation to descend into some comedy of terrors. A few quick rounds with some gossip site search engines showed Josh several photos of and short news items about Brandon-and-some-girl, though the -and-some-girl changed every few months, starting from around the time Brandon had really attracted nerd attention for his role in the high-budget but ill-fated *Bionic Six* movie. In all of the pictures did Brandon look polite, and in none of them did he look particularly interested. Were he a betting man, Josh would've laid down money that these pretty young things had been arranged publicity marriages of a sort, quick and low-commitment couples contrived by interested agents that convinced the public eye that everyone involved was hetero-unremarkable. (He'd been unaware that such things happened at all until half the cast of *Dragonfly* had informed him otherwise in the process of explaining why Seth had suddenly acquired such a boring girlfriend.) That meant that Brandon was pretty invested in the appearance, and that Josh would do well to take it slow. Make him feel comfortable. Start with something personal.

"Richard's *really* attractive, isn't he?" said Josh one day as he and Brandon stood off to the side of the motion-capture set, watching as the various special-effects technicians got Richard in place. Both stars were outfitted in form-fitting black leotards with ping-pong balls stuck to them at what Josh could only assume were not random intervals. "I mean ... that's a *nice* view." In a harness that left little of his exceptional backside to the imagination, Richard dangled suspended a few feet off the floor, laughing at some unheard joke the tech supervisor made.

Brandon didn't even look as he yanked at the cuffs of his own outfit. "Um ... yeah. I mean, you know, he comes by his Sexiest Man nomination honestly." He kept his voice low, though the dimensions of the room meant that the two of them were far away from any eavesdroppers.

Josh watched as Richard struck a heroic aerial pose, one that would become the basis for the computer model of Carbon Man in flight. "Not really my type, though," he said, watching Brandon out of the corner of his eye for a reaction; he was gratified when he saw Brandon freeze mid-tug. "Well, I wouldn't disqualify him on the basis of his terminal case of the handsomes. But he's the kind of guy that loves the nightlife, and I'm already asleep before the evening news. He'd need someone younger, someone who could keep up with him."

"Uh-huh." The fabric around Brandon's waist now seemed to be in dire need of his immediate attentions.

"Of course, I'm not really *his* type," Josh continued. "I've known him for a few years, and I've seen the kind of people he's with, and they're all the kind of attractive that makes airbrushing redundant. Definitely not mere mortals like me. More like ... well, like you."

Those ping-pong balls by his hips might have been the center of the universe, as focused as Brandon was on them. "Oh, I... Isn't he dating? Someone? Now?"

"Broke it off a few weeks ago, apparently. Wasn't anything serious. Some model from Italy or thereabouts; I never met him." Josh kept his eyes straight ahead on Richard now, letting Brandon hear the full weight of that pronoun without having his reactions observed. "Good-looking guys like that, though? They never stay single for long. Say, I know!" He snapped his fingers, as though the thought had just popped into his head, unbidden and *certainly* unplanned in its arrival. "Why don't you invite him to my barbecue?"

"Barbecue?" echoed Brandon, frowning as though Josh had suggested that they all meet for frog tea on Josh's purple moon base patio.

"Saturday afternoon after next, I'm having a couple people over. Actors and crew I've worked

with before, and some of their families. Totally informal, come as you are, wear something you don't mind getting barbecue sauce on or pushed in the pool in. Bring Ace!" Josh gave Brandon his most supportive, confident grin. "Get Richard to give you a ride, or you give him a ride, or something, and it'll give you guys a chance to talk somewhere you *don't* have a hundred cameras pointed at you every second."

One of the wirework experts whistled to Brandon from the other side of the room and waved him over, and Brandon gave her a wave of acknowledgment back before pushing away from the wall. "That ... would be really awesome, actually." Maybe it was Josh's imagination, but after even the short conversation they'd just had, something about Brandon seemed ... calmer. Josh couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he had a good feeling nonetheless. "Are you *sure* it's okay for Ace to come?"

"Are you kidding? Inviting you is just a way to ensure Ace gets there. If *you* can't come, just send the dog with a twenty tucked into his collar for cab fare."

"Deal, boss." Brandon fired off a quick salute before jogging off to get harnessed up. Josh watched with a smile as ropes hoisted Brandon thirty feet into the air to where Richard was waiting; Richard held out his hands as Brandon got close, and Brandon took them, using the momentum from his ascent to get chest-to-chest with Richard. Even three stories above the ground, they made an handsome couple, and Josh smiled as he saw the way they grinned at one another. It wasn't a *great* match, he had to admit, and maybe it wasn't the groundwork for a happily-ever-after, but at least Josh trusted Richard to follow the campsite rule and leave Brandon better than he'd found him. In a world of closets and agents, that sweet kid deserved at least that much.

"God, she's adorable," said Josh, leaning over the table to see the bright-eyed, curly-haired girl in the picture on Brandon's phone. He was a little bleary from the incredible number of beers he'd consumed that evening, but he'd been awake so long that he was starting to see the cracks of sober on the other side.

Brandon nodded and flipped to a second picture, where the same girl now sported a sparkly pink tutu. "She's got a big brother, Marc, but Jamia's my sweetie. She's four now, and she just hard-core hit the princess stage where Disney basically grabs your wallet and takes everything out of it forcibly."

The server walked by with a pot and refilled both their cups of coffee, and Josh gave her a quiet round of applause for her noble gesture. They'd been two of the only people at the wrap party without dates, and as such they'd wound up talking mostly to one another as the evening went on, and then exclusively to one another as the majority of attendees petered out in pairs and groups; after last call, they'd made it out of the club together, walked half a block south, and taken up a booth in a 24-hour Denny's. If anyone recognized them here, waning drunks not too far off from seeing dawn, no one was rude enough to mention it.

"She doesn't know it," Brandon continued, shaking out four packets of sugar and dumping them into his coffee, "but Uncle Brandon is going to take her to Disneyland for her next birthday. There's a thing where you can get a whole princess makeover, and get to meet all the other princesses there and have tea with a talking candlestick, and do something else too, I'm fuzzy on all the details...."

Josh's jaw dropped progressively with each word Brandon said, until he was left gaping in

wonder at what had just been described. "...I want to come."

Brandon laughed. "Do you want a princess makeover too, Josh?"

"I *do*. I secretly really do." Josh looked around at the few fellow late-night diners around them, all of whom appeared to care a negative amount about what was transpiring in their booth.

"Maybe not so secretly now."

"Maybe for your birthday, then."

Josh lifted the fork he'd been using to eat his coconut cake and pointed it at Brandon. "Don't tease."

"I'm not! Cross my heart!" Brandon punctuated that last sentence by tracing an *X* over the left side of his chest.

With a sigh, Josh sank back into the hard plastic of the booth seat. "It doesn't matter. I'll never be as beautiful as Belle."

"See," Brandon gestured with a french fry, "I think of you more as an Ariel: fishy friends, big dreams, giant nerd, the mermaid equivalent of a manga collection, the type to stage impromptu pirate battles with found objects..."

"Belle's a nerd too," Josh pointed out, delighted at the realization; he'd never thought of it that way before. "Why, who's your favourite?"

"Totally Ariel. And okay, maybe she didn't actually have pirate battles in the movie, but you *know* she would have. Turn on the deleted scenes, and there she is, wearing a jackboot for a hat, threatening sea life with a bottle opener." Brandon paused for a moment, then laughed self-consciously over his coffee. "So I've seen that movie, like, a thousand times between my sister growing up and my niece, so I've had a lot of time to think about things. Like why there aren't any mermen except for Triton, and he had no nipples. That's kind of creepy."

"And there's Ursula! That's why I never watched any of the straight-to-video sequels: no Ursula. She was the best, all fat and sexy and tentacles. And you *know* something was up with her and Triton."

Brandon sat back in his seat, gobsmacked. "You just blew my mind. You just blew my mind out the back of my face."

"Squeezed your mind-grapes," said Josh, making frankly pornographic grabbing gestures just above the level of the table -- *just* as their server walked by. She, like most late-night diner waitstaff, had the face of a woman who'd seen it all, but even she couldn't keep from arching an eyebrow at the display in front of her. Josh just grinned right back, pleased that he'd reached the point in his life where he'd ceased to feel guilty about being caught doing anything stupid in public, and after a beat, she walked off, smiling and shaking her head.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Brandon added, "She's *also* the only one of the sea-women in that movie that doesn't have the Mermaid Problem."

"Sure, if you like your lady-holes surrounded by tentacles."

"Maybe Triton does!" Brandon shot back, and Josh laughed, inwardly pleased at how downright proud of himself Brandon looked every time he managed to crack Josh up. "...Are we thinking too hard about this?"

Josh shook his head. "We as nerds live in a world where no one thinks hard *enough* about this; thus, we have to compensate."

"Well," said Brandon, placing his hands palms-down on the table in a definitive sort of gesture, "this is officially legitimately the best conversation I've ever been a part of."

"Then you're going to *love* the barbecue this weekend. Nerds as far as the eye can see! People

who make a living overthinking things! Plus, grilled meat." Josh wrung his hands together mad-scientist style. "And my 'special sauce', if you know what I mean."

"I sincerely hope I do not," said Brandon, and that was when their second round of pancakes arrived.

As they made their way through the short stacks, Brandon brought up his niece and their baby-sitting Disney-watching adventures again -- and then just kept talking, wandering away from family stories to tales from other aspects of his life. Josh, contrary to all his instincts, shut up and let him go; he tossed in an odd quip or a cute answer when Brandon's storytelling suggested a response was necessary, but otherwise he just smiled and nodded and let Brandon share. And if Brandon seemed a little desperate or prone to oversharing, well, Josh didn't imagine he'd had much opportunity before just to *talk*.

Brandon was a sweet man, Josh thought as he listened, always ready to believe the best in people. Even the stories he told of the times he'd been wronged were sympathetic to the injurious party. He was always willing to laugh at himself, too, and he had such a beautiful laugh. When it was real, it sparkled up out of his chest, and the smile that went with it lit up his whole face. Of course Josh knew how attractive he was -- he stared at the man's face for hours sometimes, trying to find just the right shot -- but it was different seeing it like this, unselfconscious, *real*.

And then Brandon slipped. He didn't notice, Josh figured, because he just kept on going with the story about the time he'd accidentally called Ace's name in his sleep and been rewarded with eighty pounds of excited dog on the bed, but the bedmate in the story, who'd been none too happy about the sudden dog, had definitely been a 'he'.

"So you broke it off with him?" asked Josh during an appropriate pause in the telling.

Brandon nodded. "It seems stupid to be all 'love me, love my dog', but Ace has been my best buddy for a long time, and that's just what dogs are *like*, so I said to him, if you can't--" Mid-word, Brandon's voice made a choking noise that Josh knew well, that one that happened when one's brain filter caught up to what was coming out of one's mouth two seconds too late. His mouth opened, then shut with a nutcracker's click, and he stared wide-eyed down at the syrup-soaked pancake remnants in front of him.

Remembering the importance of step two, Josh smiled and plowed on forward. "Hey, from what I've seen, Ace is definitely worth breaking up with a guy for."

"I..." Brandon swallowed and took a deep breath, then combed his sandy hair back from his forehead with his fingers, his eyes still downcast. It was another three deep breaths before he spoke again: "Nobody knew."

"And they won't hear it from me." Josh mimed pulling a zipper across his lips. "...You know why I like superheroes? I'm going to guess it's the same reason you do."

The corner of Brandon's mouth tugged up in a shy smile. "Why's that?"

"Because they're big damn heroes with big damn secrets. They've got something about them they can't tell anyone, something that makes them different -- but the same thing that makes them different is what makes them heroes. Even when they're using their 'real' names and identities, they're usually just pretending to be themselves, so they put on their outfits and they get superhero names just so they *can* be themselves. Even the Vengeancers that have civilian identities that are a matter of public record still use codenames. They've still all got something that they could ignore and go on being regular, or they could acknowledge and become extraordinary. And when they find other people with the same secrets, they don't have to hide it anymore."

At last, as Josh fell silent, Brandon looked up again, and when he did, Josh could see cracks of red peeking out from the corners of his eyes, little scarlet lightning bolts that threaded across the whites of his eyes toward the blue center. He balled up the napkin and put it under his nose, then shook his head. "Sorry, I -- shit, sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." Josh shook his head, then speared his leftover strawberry with his fork and transferred it to Brandon's plate, leaving it there as a little peace offering. "You're still my Major. Hell, you're even more *my* Major for it. You can trust me not to tell anyone the entrance to your secret lair."

Dabbing the corners of his eyes, Brandon laughed. "Thanks," he said, and then his smile faded. "I just ... wish all the attention that comes from being the Major made it *less* difficult, and not *more*."

Josh had no real response to that, so he nudged the strawberry with his fork again until Brandon chuckled and ate it. Outside, the sky had already begun to shade away from night; he could see the black outlines of the palm fronds in relief against the charcoal-blue pre-dawn light. He hoped that Brandon would actually bring Richard to the barbecue, so that they could be together in an environment where Brandon felt safe. Josh would do everything up to and including pressing all the other guests into service for a rousing rendition of 'Kiss the Girl', if that was what it took. Even the bravest and most resourceful of the princesses didn't have to do it alone, and Josh had always been far more the talking animal sidekick anyway. Sometimes true love just needed a push.

Josh was literally up to his elbows in charcoal when he heard the first bark. He jerked his head back in the direction of the house just in time to see a furry missile come streaking out of the back door, tearing around the pool in wide circles and weaving in and out of the various guests with slalom precision. After the third circuit or so, the blur came to a halt in front of the grill, where it appeared in its still state as a shaggy, flop-eared, black-and-tan monster with the world's stupidest grin. "Ace!" Josh guessed, and the dog barked once before wagging his tail with so much enthusiasm that it hit the deck with percussive force. "Where's your daddy, good dog?"

"Hey!" called Brandon, who had come in a pair of nicely snug jeans and a t-shirt with a *Dragonfly* logo across the front -- and who also, it seemed, had come alone. Well, alone if one didn't count both the dog and the case of Sam Adams that Brandon toted with a single hand as though it were a case of feathers instead. When Josh glanced down at the beer, impressed, Brandon grinned. "Oh, should I have brought enough to share?"

"Ice chests over there." Josh pointed to a pile of poolside coolers. "Grab a cold something already if you want, and food should be happening any minute now. Did you let yourself in?"

From behind him, Joy laughed, and as Josh turned to greet her, she kissed him on his cheek. "He was standing on the doorstep when I got here, all lost and helpless. He followed me in; can I keep him?" She had been the one who'd given Josh the apron he was wearing now, the black one with white Klingon lettering issuing the demand that anyone who could read it kiss the cook.

"I don't know," said Josh, looking Brandon up and down. "He's a pretty big responsibility for a girl your age."

Joy, who was well into her thirties and thus older than Brandon by a fair margin, laughed and fluttered her eyelashes at Josh. Her husband had already made a beeline for the pool and was hanging out on one of the wide neon noodles; Josh had been uncertain about him when Joy had

first started dating him, but by the time they'd announced their engagement, he'd been enthusiastic. Josh *liked* most of the actors he worked with, but a very select few became his good friends by virtue of his developing sheer mama-bear protective instincts toward them. Joy, with her sweet face and burgundy-dyed hair, had gotten that reaction within five minutes of their first meeting. Most of Josh's former cast members at the party had taken longer to earn that kind of affection, but not by much.

Except, that was, for Brandon. Josh now felt that fierceness when he thought about anyone or anything that might cause Brandon to be sad, but Brandon had taken longer to get there than the rest of them combined. For the most part, by the end of his first full day working with someone, Josh could tell whether or not he was going to go all Mother Wharton on an actor and nudge him or her into the coop with all the other chicks. He'd been making the picture with Brandon for nearly two months before their night with the Sad Blanket. Brandon, it seemed, was something special.

By the time Brandon got back from icing the beers and chatting with some of the guests (who also appeared impressed by his one-handed beer hauling), Josh was about to slide the first round of hamburgers off the grill. One of the rarer patties split on the spatula, sending half of itself toppling to the ground below. "Is Ace allowed to spoil his dinner?" Josh asked, pointing to the dirty meat.

"No, but it's a special occasion." Brandon whistled and Ace came bounding over from the deck, excited to hear his master's call and thrilled beyond reason to realize that the dead burger was, in fact, for him. He scarfed it down in one enthusiastic bite, then took up position near Josh's feet, sitting at attention and looking up, watching every movement of Josh's hands just in case some other little morsel chanced to fall. Given the way Josh had seen Brandon eat entire mammoths at the catering tables, he wasn't surprised that man and dog were best friends. "So, um, did you hear from Richard?"

Josh shook his head. "Not since the wrap party. What's up?"

"Oh." Brandon shrugged and shoved the hand that wasn't holding a beer into his pocket. "He said he might call you. Anyway, he said sorry, he wanted to come, but he had a thing already, something with producers. Next time, though, he said, he'd love to come."

Josh's response to that was pre-empted by a baby's sob, which was how Josh knew Noel and Daniel had arrived. He waved them over and they came, each one with an identical baby girl in his arms; Josh kissed all four of them on their cheeks, even little Gracie, who was fussing up a storm. "Okay, looks like *someone's* big entrance part two is coming after a diaper change," said Daniel, taking a cloth bag from Noel's shoulder and draping it over his own. "Is it okay if I temporarily repurpose one of your bedrooms as a changing area?"

"Hey, a lady's got to look her best. Up the stairs, and you can use any one you want." Josh smiled as Daniel and Gracie headed back in the direction of the house, then turned back to Scout, who unlike her sister was *delighted* to here. "Well, now we all know which one of you is going to be the drama queen, don't we?" He poked her on her nose.

Noel sat Scout up so she could see over his shoulder, and her little baby eyes went wide as she was confronted with so much motion and sound. "Oh, we've known it since they were born, when Scout just popped right out and Gracie made us all wait another forty-eight minutes." He patted her on the back, and she slapped her four-month-old hands against his shoulder; Josh envied being that small and easily entertained. "And this must be Brandon."

Josh glanced behind his shoulder at Brandon, whose expression of bewildered delight was not

unlike Scout's. "Um, yes, that's me, I'm Brandon. And you're Noel."

"I am," Noel confirmed with a smile. "Pleased to meet you. Josh has been telling me all about you."

"Only the good stuff," Josh promised, though that wasn't *strictly* true. The same day that Josh had been struck by his revelation about the nature of Brandon's sexuality and situation, he had called Noel for advice. Of all the gay people Josh knew in the business -- and he knew a fair number, relatively speaking -- Noel was the only actor he knew personally who'd had a career, come out of the closet, and managed not only to keep that career going, but to improve upon it. If anyone in the entire world could be a guiding light to Brandon, that anyone would be Noel, a man who knew how to keep a secret.

Noel shifted Scout so his left arm supported all her weight, then stretched his hand out to Brandon for a quick shake. "And this is Scout, our little Buddha," he said, turning her so she faced Brandon.

Brandon had certainly noticed the baby before -- she and her sister were both hard to miss, being the only miniature humans at the party, and half-noisy ones to boot -- but actually coming face-to-face with her transformed him. His whole expression took on the angelic glow it had possessed when Josh had seen him talking to Ace through the computer screen, that bright, fascinated, wide-mouthed smile that seemed almost too wide for his head. "Hi!" he said, extending his finger; Scout took it in one chubby hand and stuck the tip straight into her mouth, which, judging from the way his eyes formed perfect circles of amazement, appeared to be the best thing that had ever happened in Brandon's whole life.

Noel smirked in Josh's direction, then turned back to the man who seemed to have fallen in love with his daughter. "Do you want to hold her for a minute while I get a bite to eat?"

"C-can I?" asked Brandon even as he reached for her, making his move before Noel could change his mind. Noel, however, forked her over with no hesitation beyond that needed to make sure that Brandon had a good grip on her. He needn't have worried, though; Brandon held Scout with the careful attention others might have reserved for the Hope Diamond or a particularly unstable bomb. He looked at her for a moment, then drew her close to his chest and sniffed her head as she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and marked her territory with drool.

Divested of his baby, Noel stretched his arms above his head, then scratched his scalp, sending his short ash-blond curls every which way. "I think this is the first time in four months I've had my hands free. Almost forgot what it felt like. I'm going to go get a beer; you want one?" He looked at Josh as he gestured over to the impromptu icehouse.

"Ah, you know the way to a man's heart." Josh grinned and pulled out the sauce again; it wouldn't do to have the chicken go dry.

Daniel came out a few minutes later with much-happier Gracie in tow, and not thirty seconds after that did Brandon wind up with babies in *both* arms, both of whom looked as swept off their feet by the experience as Josh imagined *any* two young ladies would when placed in a similar situation. Ace was also quite interested by this development, and proved himself indeed the best dog in the world as he handled them as gently as Brandon did, never once barking or showing his teeth. For their own part, Noel and Daniel looked thrilled to have an unexpected babysitter descend upon them, and celebrated by necking like a pair of teenagers by the side of the pool.

Though he didn't actively stare, on account of not *actually* being a creepy old man, Josh couldn't quite take his eyes off them in his spare moments between having to be the Klingon Grill Lord. They were happy and stable and so much in love, and they were both great guys who

deserved all those good things. It wasn't *their* fault that seeing them like that made Josh's heart ache.

There was a run on burgers that kept Josh busy for some time after that, especially with the differences between beef, turkey, and veggie patty cooking times, which he juggled with expert skill; there were a few things in his life Josh took great pride in being able to manage like a boss, and the precise and excellent cooking of flat, circular meat and meat substitutes to specification was way up on that list. Doing so, however, took a fair bit of concentration -- to say nothing of how Elliot had challenged him to a spatula duel, which had led Josh to proclaim that despite Elliot's success in his role as the indefatigable leader of the unsinkable *Tranquility*, Captain Skinnybritches was going *down* -- and thus Josh lost track of what Brandon was up to, how he was faring at a party where he'd known no one before walking in the door, or how he was making out riding herd over a set of infant twins.

He needn't have worried. As the Great Utensil Wars drew to a close (the warring parties were in the middle of declaring a truce when Joy stabbed them both with a pool noodle, this earning through her backhanded treachery both the victory and the undisputed title of The Noodlenator), Josh looked over to the far side of the yard to an isolated set of lawn chairs. In one sat Noel, leaning forward with a bottle of beer dangling from his fingertips as he said something Josh had no hope of hearing; in the other, Brandon half-reclined with a baby in each arm and a dog by his feet, all three of whom napped as the grownup humans talked. Brandon didn't look *happy*, necessarily, but he didn't look upset either as he listened, nodding at points with a gesture just slight enough so as not to disturb the little ones cradled to his chest.

One of the things Josh had learned early on in his career was that a director's job was *not* to tell the actors what to do. The actors knew what to do; it was their job to know. His job as a director was just to set everything up, pass out all the relevant information, and give everything that push to get it going. Sometimes it even worked in real life too.

The main reason that Josh scheduled his barbecues at noon on Saturdays was that most everyone there had something else to do Saturday night, and thus mid-day was the best time to catch them before letting them go to fluff and puff before whatever more photogenic occasions demanded their being there. True to form, by four-thirty, everyone had wandered off -- everyone, that was, except for Brandon.

He hadn't *asked* to stay, but Josh hadn't wanted him to leave either, and thus when things had started winding down and Brandon had offered help cleaning up, Josh had said, sure, you can take in all the heavy things! And he'd meant it as a joke, the way he meant most things, but Brandon hoisted the grill and took it back to the garage without so much as breaking a sweat, while Josh stood, impressed, and watched him go. There wasn't a part of that man that *wasn't* nice-looking, but the seat of his pants in motion was definitely a sight to behold.

Afterward, he'd excused himself to go take a quick shower, and when he came back down he found Brandon in front of his DVD bookshelf, beholding the scope and magnitude of Josh's collection. "That ... is a lot of movies," he said.

"I just hate it when I want to see something and I *can't*. Thus, my monument to instant gratification." Josh sat on the couch, which Ace took as a cue that he should come over and put his front legs across Josh's knees; Brandon opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Josh carded his fingers into the fur on either side of Ace's head and brought his face down so that

Ace could lick at will. "Hey there, good boy! Did you and your big human friend have fun at the party?"

"With all the people food he begged off various plates, he'd *better* have had fun," said Brandon, and right on cue, Ace belched. "Oh, Ace, that's not attractive."

"I've done worse myself," said Josh, giving Ace a kiss on the nose -- while holding his breath. "How about you? Did you get any scraps?"

"Only a few." Brandon smiled and sat at the other end of the couch. "But I had a good time anyway."

"Good! Shame Richard couldn't come, but, well, there's always next time. Maybe we should do this again soon, give you guys a chance to talk. And then maybe, air quotes, 'talk'."

Brandon watched Josh's gestures with a skeptical eye. "You know, you don't have to *say* 'air quotes' when you make them."

"...Well, maybe I wanted to make sure my meaning got across. Like wearing a belt and suspenders."

"To hold up your verbal pants."

Josh patted his thighs, which were not covered in pants, verbal or otherwise, but were instead clad in over-the-knee shorts with an impressive multi-hued pastel pattern. They were his special Saturday shorts, worn only on days when he wasn't required to give two hoots about looking presentable. "I'm always wearing my verbal pants! Well, okay, maybe not *always*. I take them off when I go to bed so I don't talk in my sleep and let all the ideas escape."

"I talk in *my* sleep," said Brandon, and when Josh laughed, he nodded. "It's true! Apparently I said something once about mice. Like, the three blind kind."

"And who told you this?"

Brandon took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. "The other person who was in the bed. That I was sleeping with."

Josh found a spot to scratch behind Ace's ear that made his front paw wiggle, then gave up and patted the couch cushion next to him. The doggy belly flop that followed immediately after spoke of a hound who'd spent more than a little time on human furniture. "And is that person still around?"

"It wasn't, um, a long-term thing. So no."

"See," said Josh, looking at Ace's dog-grinning face so he didn't make Brandon feel any more uncomfortable than the conversation already had, "if I wound up in bed with a man who had chatty dreams about rodents, I would give serious thought to proposing marriage, so ... I don't know what that guy's problem was. I mean, I'm assuming there was some other probl--" Josh interrupted himself mid-word. "Sorry, I won't be Buttinsky Brown, all interrogating you about your personal business."

"No, it's okay, it's just...." Brandon sighed and reached for Ace's tail, which had flopped somewhere in the vicinity of his knee; he stroked the fluff there as Ace looked quite delighted to be loved on at both ends. "I haven't had a very good romantic history. And I know part of it's the problem of having to keep it secret, which always sucks, but relationship trouble just loves me."

Josh shook his head, not disagreeing but commiserating. "Well, I've kind of got the same background there, so. More of a tragedy in your case, though."

Brandon frowned. "When I met you, I thought you'd have, like, lots of girlfriends. Boyfriends. Whatever. At *least* one of *something*."

"Not even a pet -- though I'm thinking about kidnapping this guy here." Josh bent down to kiss Ace on the nose, and Ace responded by licking at Josh's cheeks and mouth. "I mean, I've had lots of have-sex-with benefriends in my life, and I still do, and that's fine and nice. But I'm kind of not the guy someone puts up with for very long. I don't give exit polls on my relationships, but if reasons to break up with me were a Family Feud category, I'm pretty sure the number-one answer would be 'his personality'." At most times, Josh could keep his chin up about his lack of sustainable couplings, but sometimes the little threads of bitterness snuck in despite his best efforts to keep them out. Maybe he was still a little sore from seeing Noel and Daniel so in love earlier; maybe he was even a little touchy about the idea of Brandon's crush on Richard. Everyone else got to be happy.

"But ... you're so funny and cute and sweet and wonderful!"

"And *you're* handsome and charming and adorable and ... I may double up on 'handsome' here, but I think I'm well within my rights to. But even good things can't save bad decisions." Josh frowned. "Not that dating you would be a bad decision. Like, at *all*."

A little sparkle lit up behind Brandon's eyes, and he turned on the sofa until he and Josh could see one another more clearly. "So ... you'd date me?"

"Oh, sure!" Josh said, and Brandon's mouth lifted into a smile. "I mean, I'd be *stupid* not to."

"And ... you'd take me out on a nice first date?"

"Totally. You deserve only the best, after all."

"So where would we go?"

Josh loved games like this: hypothetical fun time, 'would you rather' battles, epic rounds of fuck/kill/marry -- anything that required judicious application of imagination. "Let's see ... you're a guy who does black tie events all the time, so I'm not going to try and impress you with something swank and dressy, because you've probably already put on a tuxedo a minimum of ten times this month already. So I'd probably go the other route and say something excruciatingly normal. Something you can wear sneakers to, or at least not look too weird in loafers and khakis and a shirt that's been ironed sometime in the current century. I guess that means dinner and a movie -- no, wait, movie and *then* dinner, so we can talk about the movie."

With each successive element Josh described, Brandon's smile edged more into a full grin, until by the time Josh paused, Brandon was the picture of pure delight. "Can the movie be stupid and full of things blowing up and dinner be bad for us?" he asked with a hopeful little wiggle that nearly knocked Ace's back half out of his lap.

"The worst and the worst. Only fools take a first date to something they actually want to *see*; you either like the date and miss the movie, or like the movie and ignore the date. So: lots of explosions and a plot with moon-sized holes in it, and then somewhere with milkshakes they'll put two straws in."

"That--" Brandon's voice caught mid-word, and he buried the hitch in a breathy laugh as he looked down at his hands. "Can ... we really? Do that?"

"Oh, sure! Heck, we can go this evening if you're free. Let me get out my phone and see what's playing when." Josh dislodged Ace just enough to get at his back pocket.

"No, I mean...." Brandon took a deep breath. "Can we really go on a date?"

For one of the few times in his life he could remember, Josh Wharton was at a loss for words.

He recovered quickly, though -- and just in time, too, because the proper response to a question like that was *not* to gape quietly like a caught fish, lest the other person do what Josh's *own* brain was prone to and stick in all sorts of horrible untrue things into the silence. However,

what he tossed into the gap was arguably not much better: "But don't you ... like Richard?"

Brandon made a noise caught halfway between a laugh and a sigh, and he closed his eyes as he raked his hair away from his face. "That's what Noel said you'd told him and ... I seriously have no idea how you got there. I mean, Richard's *great*, he's ... well, he's really sexy, and that sort of goes without saying, but I don't want to go on a date with *him*. I want to go on a date with *you*."

A list of possible causes for these sentences' coming out of Brandon's mouth flashed through Josh's mind, though all of them sounded like his best recollections of *Kitty* plots. Brandon might have been abducted and replaced with a body double while Josh was in the shower. He might have been under the sway of a mind-controlling puppetmaster parasite. He might have been reciting a script while somewhere far away, a kidnapper watched the proceedings via camera and held Brandon's niece hostage. Josh himself might have fallen into some fugue state where his brain played out strange scenarios, and any minute now, Elliot would come bouncing through the door on a pogo stick, singing the *Dragonfly* theme. Literally all of these seemed more likely to him than the idea that Brandon Moore might actually, literally, presently be asking him out.

"You have ... seen me, right?" Josh gestured to his body, taking special time to point out how his belly pooched out under the lower half of his polo shirt. "You haven't been miraculously concealing your crippling blindness from us all these years?"

Brandon laughed and grabbed Josh's hand with his own, which was as large and warm and handsome as the rest of him. "Growing up, I was the skinny theatre arts kid with braces, glasses, bad skin, and the worst haircut known to man. All my crushes were from the guys I hung around, who were all nerds like me. I didn't want the captain of the football team to take me to prom, I wanted the captain of the *debate* team. Richard's hot, but so are you."

"Oh, no. He and I aren't even in the same class." Josh squeezed his hand back, but Brandon wasn't inclined to take that as a sign to let go. "*You* and he are in the same class. You're both in the *advanced* class. Me, I'm down the hall in Remedial Attractiveness. We're taught Basic Hair-Brushing and How To Make Sure You're Not Wearing That Shirt Inside-Out 101."

"See?" Brandon laughed again and scooted closer, and Ace shifted to accommodate. "That right there? That's what makes you attractive."

"My recently brushed hair?"

"The funny. It's the new sexy. Hell, it's the *classic* sexy." Brandon brushed his thumb across the back of Josh's hand, making all the little hairs on Josh's skin stand on end. "Skinny drama nerd, remember?"

Josh knew he should just shut up and go with this, but there was some evil little monster in his head, some terrible spinning gear that just wouldn't let him shut up and accept when he had a good thing coming. "Even," he said, and he swallowed, looking down at Ace, "even skinny drama nerds have dreams of handsome princes."

Brandon shook his head. "Got to follow your heart."

A little lump crept up into Josh's throat, and he cleared it away; he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders and told that little monster to shut the hell up. "Let me double-check this here: what I hear you saying is that you want to go on a date with me, and not just a friend date, but an actual date-date, with more-than-friends implications and even the promise of later sexy times, with me, and you are not doing this under the influence of drugs or money or vague promises of future benefits, and you aren't feeling a crushing sense of impending horror all the while?"

"I like blowing chubby guys because their bellies make a nice little pillow for my forehead," said Brandon with as conversational a tone as he'd said anything else that evening, and Josh felt compelled to get up, fill a glass of water, take in a mouthful, and spit it out again just to capture the extent of his reaction to hearing those words come out of Brandon Moore's mouth. Absent any nearby liquids, Josh settled on making a choked noise somewhere in the back of his throat, one that made Brandon smile to hear.

"I." Josh swallowed. "I want that stitched into a sampler for my living room."

"I'll learn needlepoint," Brandon said with a smirk, and he leaned in to kiss Josh.

Disney couldn't have animated it better -- it was perfect, the two of them on the couch together, contented dog across their laps, about to take the plunge into that magical first kiss moment where anything could happen. And, as so many things tended to be, it was ruined all by Josh's ever-churning thought processes. "Wait!" he said when their lips were barely six inches apart, causing Brandon's eyes to snap open into wide worried circles. "You were talking about that date -- have you ever, you know, *been* with a guy you were actually dating?"

Brandon looked baffled for a moment, then slightly embarrassed. "Um ... no. Not since, like, high school. I haven't even *had* a real, adult, not-sneaking-out-of-the-house date."

"Well, then, we can't just--" Josh gestured back and forth between the two of them, and then between their still-close lips. "I mean, there are protocols! There are date things! Romance!" He leaned back from the kiss and flapped his hands not unlike a busy cartoon bird might flutter its wings. "Going out! Picking up at a house! Bringing flowers! Or not bringing flowers! Bringing something that isn't flowers and then apologizing that it's not flowers! Good-night kisses! Or not, as you feel appropriate. I should get a whiteboard. *I need to do this right for you.*"

It was a testament to how serious Brandon's offer was that not only did he not look put off by Josh's sudden spastic display of anxieties, but his smile seemed to indicate he was genuinely touched. "Okay," he nodded, sitting up straight again without letting go of Josh's hand. "You probably don't need the whiteboard, though. I trust your instincts."

"Great. I'll pick you up at seven. Wear a tie. I don't care how you wear it. Points for creativity."

"So..." Brandon looked from Josh to Ace and back to Josh again. "Ace and I will just go home now, and you pick me up later?"

"Yes! This is how a date works!" Josh slapped his hand against his thigh. "And I need time to prepare. I am an *artist*! And I have to think of a movie. I'm picking it right now. In my mind. You don't even know."

Brandon nodded as though this were a sound course of action. "I will be surprised."

"It ... may be the new *Objective: Unattainable* movie, that cool?"

"My arched eyebrow and knowing smile indicate that it is," said Brandon, pointing to the appropriate parts of his face in turn.

"And this from the main who said I don't have to say 'air quotes'. Fantastic. Go home now. I will be by to pick you up with flowers or not-flowers, depending."

"Do ... I get a kiss now, or do I have to wait?"

Stopping to consider the question sent a thousand more anxieties barraged the fortress of Josh's confidence -- what if he was a bad kisser, what if he had bad breath, what if an asteroid hit the planet right as their lips touched -- but he held fast despite them; Brandon was worth it. "How about we decide that we should wait for later, but I kiss you now anyway just to make sure you won't hate it later?"

"Deal," said Brandon, and he leaned in to press their mouths together.

It was a stupidly perfect kiss, though Josh supposed he expected nothing less from someone as stupidly perfect as Brandon. The pressure was just right, the anticipation had made it even better, and Brandon's lips were shaped in a way that felt even better than they looked, and that was saying something. Their only points of contact were their clasped hands and their mouths, but that was plenty. Josh parted his lips and Brandon's tongue found its way inside Josh's mouth, and *that* was just obscene how good that was, as startling as hearing comments about fellatio from Brandon's clean-cut mouth and equally as sexy. He hadn't been kissed like this in a long time, possibly ever, and he just wanted more.

At last, after a moment's good, deep contact, Brandon pulled back and pressed their foreheads together; he shut his eyes, and Josh followed suit. "No, I'm *really* not going to hate that later," he said, his voice so deep and breathy and sexy that it short-circuited something in Josh's brain. Whatever it was, Josh decided he could live without it.

"Can I check one more time?" he asked, reaching with his other hand for Brandon's shoulder. "Just to be sure?"

"Yes, very yes, we should do that." Brandon barely got to the end of the sentence before they were kissing again, lips and tongues tangled together. Brandon smelled like some dark, woody aftershave and beer and barbecue sauce and sunlight and truth and justice and the American way and all those other things superheroes were supposed to smell like, except he was better than a superhero because he was *real*. He was real and here and kissing Josh, and something in the universe for once seemed to have gone very, very right.

With a chuckle, Brandon pulled away again, pecking Josh once on the tip of his nose before relenting and nudging Ace back to the floor so they could both stand. "Okay, if you're going to send me home, you better do it now, or that date part is just getting skipped in favour of the after-date part."

"Nope." Josh folded his arms and shook his head. "Date will happen! Shoo! Your coach and footmen will arrive in two hours. Just don't be surprised if they look like a silver Civic hybrid."

"Just as long as the prince looks the same," said Brandon, giving Josh one more quick kiss before turning and heading for the door with Ace at his heels, laughing all the way.

Flowers, it turned out to be, and not not-flowers. Short on time and ideas, Josh stopped by the local supermarket and plucked from the center of a display the most ridiculous bouquet he'd ever seen, one full of red roses, white carnations, and dyed-to-be-cobalt-blue daisies. The Major would have loved it unironically, and the look of delight on Brandon's face as Josh presented it to him at the door led Josh to believe that Brandon did as well, and to an equal degree.

The movie might actually have been good, or it might have been terrible; either way, Josh wasn't paying attention. He was focused on only two things, the first of which was a mantra of *don't screw this up don't screw this up* running loud enough through his head to drown out the movie's soundtrack, and the second of which was the way Brandon's hand felt twined with his atop the armrest. It was quite a testament to how amazing that second part was that it more than once managed to overpower the first. Well, and the unpleasant third, which was his attempts to control, by sheer force of will, how much his palms were sweating.

He'd been on dates before. He'd been on dates with *guys* before. They tended to be fewer and farther-between than his times out with ladies, but they happened. Sometimes they were even

successful, even if the subsequent attempts at relationships never lasted long. He was supposed to be the expert here. This was just embarrassing.

But he *liked* Brandon. He was in like with Brandon. And every time Josh thought about the way Brandon's mouth had felt against his own, he had to then devote some part of his brain's processing power to make sure he didn't throw up and die out of sheer excited nervousness.

He recovered a little over dinner, because he could *talk* then, and Brandon could talk back, and they could make one another laugh, so that was pretty much situation normal. They didn't hold hands over the TGI Fridays' wobbly, slightly sticky table, but Josh moved his feet so his left one and Brandon's right one were pressed together for the whole meal. The movie had been as plotless and full of explosions as promised, which meant every time one conversation thread pulled to a close, another popped right up and kept the evening going. They both ordered burgers with heart-attack-inducing levels of fried things on and beside them, and when Josh couldn't finish more than two-thirds of his, Brandon gladly made short work of the remnants. Dessert was, as promised, an Oreo cookie milkshake with two straws -- which they never successfully managed to coordinate enough to use at the same time, but it was the thought that counted.

Even so, Josh was prepared to accept the date as a failure, or at least as only a partial success, until he pulled into the driveway of Brandon's house and Brandon put a hand on his knee. "Come on in and stay a while," he said with a grin, and that was an offer Josh couldn't refuse.

He supposed Brandon's house was nice -- smallish by Hollywood star standards, maybe, but cozy and tasteful all the same -- but he didn't have long to look at its interior before Brandon was kissing him, which was far more interesting. One of Brandon's hands cupped the side of Josh's face and the other grabbed his hip as Brandon pressed Josh up against the closed front door, so Josh put his hands wherever he could find space on Brandon, which turned out to be around his waist. Ace came trotting up to greet them, but upon seeing the two humans engaged in something else, he sat down on the stairs. Truly, this was an animal that deserved recognition in the Best Dog category.

"I've always liked redheads," Brandon said against Josh's mouth as he reached up to run his fingers through Josh's hair. "Especially when they're real red. All the way down."

Josh laughed, though the sound turned into a choked gasp as Brandon kissed his way from Josh's mouth along his jaw, all the way to his ear. "I really, *really* hope I haven't oversold you on what's under my clothes."

"A dick, I hope?" Brandon chuckled.

"Yes, well, but ... on the way there."

Brandon took the hand he'd been using to hold Josh's waist and tugged at his shirt, untucking it. "Arms, chest, belly, maybe with some more red hair on them?"

Josh shrugged as he nodded. "And, um, freckles."

"I *love* freckles," Brandon said, and the initial *L* in *love* was a long lick of his tongue up the side of Josh's ear, making Josh feel unsure about how much more of this his knees could be expected to take before they just gave out and sent him pitching forward. "And hair and bellies and chests and cock. Yours, specifically, even sight unseen on that last point. And if you don't believe me, I'm just going to have to work to convince you I do."

The way Brandon pressed against Josh's body made refusing this next door to impossible, but damn it, Josh's stupid brain seemed bound and determined to try. "Just don't feel any pressure, um, to put out on a first date...."

"Oh, but I want to. I *really* want to." Taking advantage of Josh's loosened state, Brandon

pushed his hand up beneath Josh's shirt, petting his bare chest. "It's been a while."

Josh nodded in sympathy; he hadn't even had friends-with-benefits sex in months, and the length of time since his most recent end-of-date sex could be measured in years. "So, uh ... the couch? Or somewhere else...?"

Brandon tugged Josh to the stairs, letting go of him enough to swat Josh on the ass and indicate that up was the current direction of choice. "Bed." He smacked again, a pleasant sort of punctuation to his command.

"And ... we're still talking about sex, right?"

"I am going to suck your dick until your eyes cross, and keep sucking until they go back to normal, so ... yes."

Of all the spectacular things Brandon had to offer that evening, somehow it was his dirty talk that most threatened to stop Josh's heart. Josh was by no means a prude, and though he wasn't much inclined toward non-family-friendly language of his own, even during sexy times, he'd certainly heard it all before. But Brandon had always seemed so sweet, so wholesome, so all-American that Josh was now having to do some serious reassessments of how much of that was Brandon himself, and how much Josh had projected onto him because of the role. Hearing his notions disabused was about the sexiest thing in the universe. On shaky, excited legs, Josh made his way up the stairs and through the open door to the bedroom.

The bed was unmade and there were clothes strewn about the place, but again, Josh didn't have long to get a sense of the scope and quality of the interior design. Brandon turned him around and kissed him again, and then held him as they both fell onto the bed, side by side, mouths and arms and legs tangled together. Brandon's shirt pulled up from his waist in the fall, and Josh reached out to touch the curve of his hip above his jeans, causing Brandon to gasp and kiss harder. If he had a goal of making Josh feel sexy, well, he was well on his way to achieving it.

A moment later, Josh became aware of something very furry on top of his head, which didn't make much sense, because all parts of Brandon were currently accounted for. Curiosity got the better of him, and he looked up to find himself face-to-face with a fluffy tan ear. "...Oh, Ace."

Brandon stopped for a moment and sighed, then wrapped his arms around his admittedly good-sized dog and swooped him into his arms like he was a baby; Ace, for his own part, seemed delighted by this development, and didn't struggle at all. "Hey, buddy!" said Brandon, and Ace licked his face. "We're going to do some people stuff in here, and then I'll let you back in, okay? I promise." He put Ace down on the landing at the top of the stairs and shut the door, and Ace, bless him, didn't so much as yap or scratch at the door in response.

Dog properly sexiled, Brandon turned back to Josh and grinned. "Where were we?" he asked, and before Josh could answer, Brandon took off his shirt and tossed it in the same direction where all the other discarded shirts in the room lay. That done, he reached for his jeans, unbuttoned the first two buttons of the fly, and stopped, looking thoughtful. "...You know, there's a whole tumblr devoted to me taking my pants off."

"Sorry, what?" Josh sat up a little, propping himself up on his elbows behind him.

"A tumblr. Devoted to me. Taking my pants off. Like so." Brandon undid another button. "Little weird, not going to lie."

Josh shook his head. "I'm sorry, you're telling me there's an *entire website* out there devoted to pictures of you taking your clothes off--"

"Pictures *and* animated .gif sets," Brandon added.

"Devoted to preserving still *and* moving evidence of the phenomenon that is you divesting yourself of your pants, and I'm not looking at it *right now*?"

Brandon just stared at him for a moment before cracking up and starting to push his jeans off over his hips. "Because I'm taking off my pants right now. Here. In person."

It was as though some fat baby angels had rolled back the clouds and let a ray of heavenly light shine down directly onto Josh's brain; he might've sworn he even heard some accompanying celestial choir to mark the occasion. "...Dear God, I've one-upped the internet."

"Livin' the dream," said Brandon, who kicked his pants off his feet, leaving himself wearing nothing but a pair of boxers with the Hogwarts logo on them, giving Josh yet another thing to be envious of. Instead of continuing with the striptease, though, he got back into bed, took one of Josh's hands, and slipped Josh's fingers beneath the waistband. Josh tugged as directed, and was surprised to find a little triangle of fabric poke out from beneath. He kept tugging, and the triangle revealed itself to be a long strip of striped fabric, until Josh had Brandon's boxers well down around his thighs and could see that his earlier instructions to wear a tie had not gone unheeded. Points for creativity *indeed*. "That audience didn't see that coming," he said, impressed.

"So ... I'm naked now!" Brandon announced, and though he *did* technically still have a bit of fabric about his person, Josh decided he wasn't in the mood to split hairs about it.

"You are," Josh agreed, brushing his fingertips over Brandon's muscled stomach. This part, at least, wasn't anything Josh hadn't seen before, but that had been all waxed and oiled and smoothed into a uniform consistency by makeup artists; here, in the dim, real light of the bedroom, he could see that Brandon's skin was actually far paler than his time on the screen had made him out to be, and he had a trail of dark blond hair that started across his chest and crept down to -- well, Josh wasn't entirely sure he could let his brain go there just yet, lest it *completely* dismantle his ability to talk. "And I'm ... not, and unless presented with a compelling argument otherwise should probably stay that way so as not to spoil the effect."

"I'll blow you."

"A stunning rebuttal!" said Josh, though as soon as the words got back to his ears, he laughed and buried his face in the duvet. "And now I have the giggles because I said 'butt'. Okay! In bed with a gorgeous man, working my way up to the sexing, time to *stop* acting like I'm five."

Brandon laughed and kissed him on the tip of his ear. "I *like* it," he said, nuzzling Josh's cheek with his lips. "I like all of it. And I was promised that I would be having sex this evening with a man with freckles, and by God, I expect you to make good on that."

"Okay, but..." Josh started to wriggle out of his shirt. "You may want to get a pair of sunglasses to defend your vision from this pasty whiteness of this sexy hunk of man-jello."

Brandon rolled back on his side -- which made Josh feel at least a *little* better from knowing that his awkward attempts at undressing himself wouldn't accidentally put out Brandon's eye -- and surveyed the scene before him with a lecherous grin. "I know you're doing the self-deprecating thing, but you seriously, *seriously* are my type."

"Flan of your dreams, huh?"

"Look at my penis!" Brandon pointed downward, and Josh couldn't help following with his gaze until he beheld said penis in all its glory. And it *was* glorious: upright and stalwart and justice-loving and all those good things, sticking out at a stiff angle from Brandon's body, bright pink for the top part above his circumcision scar, and then a duskier brown the rest of the way to the root, where it disappeared beneath a forest of curls. "Look at what it's doing! It's realizing I'm

going to get my mouth on you *very soon* and it's really pretty psyched about that."

"I..." Josh took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. He could feel that his cheeks were already tomato-red, and suspected the rest of his body was following suit. "If I take my pants off and it's some kind of dealbreaker here, I'm going to shower in my clothes for the rest of my life."

"Please take off your pants. *Please* take off your pants. I am going to get of my knees to encourage you to take off your pants." True to his word, Brandon got on all fours and positioned himself around Josh's knees, which perhaps should have been goofy, but instead was about the sexiest thing Josh had ever seen. "The Major awaits." Brandon wiggled his eyebrows.

Well, with an invitation like that, how could Josh refuse? Taking that final deep, confidence-inspiring breath, he unfastened his pants and slipped out of them, his (Batman) boxers, and his socks all in one none-too-graceful move. Grace didn't matter, though, because all at once meant he couldn't stop in the middle and have second thoughts. Stripped bare, he lay back against the bed, panting; his own cock didn't tend to be quite so perpendicular as Brandon's was, but it lay against his belly all the same, insistently hard.

With a bright smile, Brandon bent down to kiss at Josh's thighs -- which were, as promised, freckled and furry. Josh wanted to make some quip about it, but it seemed all the breath had gone from his lungs. This, though, was more important than breathing. Brandon kicked his way upward, pausing and kissing, taking his teasing time; he paused long enough to suck a red hickey into Josh's hip that Josh knew wouldn't fade for a month at best. That, though, didn't matter, not when Brandon was still going. He stopped a few inches from Josh's erection and blew on it, then laughed with delight as it twitched and rose from Josh's stomach, trailing precome behind it. "I'm going to blow you now. Is that okay?"

Josh nodded. "It's okay. It's spectacular. And I do not use that word lightly. I learned how to spell it when preparing for my second-grade spelling bee, and it has remained dear to me ever since."

"Well, if you can still spell it when I'm done, I haven't done my job," said Brandon, and he opened his mouth and sucked Josh's cock all the way in.

Within the first few seconds, Josh realized that he needed to develop an entirely new mental Blowjob Scale, because nothing in his entire life had prepared him for this. Brandon sucked cock like a champ, keeping the maddening balance between driving Josh fast toward the edge and pulling back just before the point of no return. He teased and licked from time to time, but mostly he kept his lips tight and his mouth around Josh's shaft as he bobbed his head up and down. It was obscene -- it was *beyond* obscene, in fact, so far over the edge that Josh might have been inclined to create a new word for it if he'd been capable of using his higher brain functions. As he was, he just gasped and groaned as he watched Brandon's beautiful face move up and down over his cock.

But it didn't seem fair, having them arranged like this, and after a few solid minutes of this assault, Josh began to make grabby hands. Brandon stopped mid-stroke and made a questioning noise, and Josh pointed toward the rest of Brandon's body. "Here," he said, hoping that Brandon would get the message, and relieved when Brandon, like the good actor he was, turned his body so that he lay alongside Josh's, putting his own cock not close enough to Josh's mouth to do any good, but well within reach of Josh's hands. Josh tugged off the loose tie and debated scooting over before realizing that he had enough anxieties as it was without having to add worries about his own blowjob skill to that pile.

So instead he stroked Brandon's cock, and was delighted to feel it respond to his touch -- and was doubly delighted to hear Brandon gasp as Josh's fingers made contact. Well, if Brandon really did want to make Josh feel sexy, he certainly knew the correct way to go about it, bless that sweet, sexy man. Josh didn't bother with the tease; he went straight for the touch, invested as anything in being able to bring Brandon off. He felt Brandon's whole body shudder and twitch in response, and whatever got the biggest reaction, Josh just did it again and again.

This was so gratifying that after not too much longer, Josh leaned forward and dragged his tongue across the salty, slick head of Brandon's cock. That, it seemed, was all it too -- despite his headstart on Josh, Brandon came first, gasping and crying out as he shot come all over Josh's chin and chest. A line of it even splashed Josh's lower lip, and he flicked his tongue out to get a taste. Oh, he sincerely hoped Brandon would let him do *that* again.

Brandon trembled as he lay there for a moment, just long enough to catch his breath, before diving back onto Josh's cock. He pushed his lips straight down to the root and left them there, letting his tongue and throat do all the work. The assault was merciless, and try as he might to keep some level of composure, Josh couldn't; he grabbed at the sheets and gasped, and was fairly certain he said things, though he wasn't entirely aware of what was coming out of his mouth. Anything outside the immediate vicinity of his dick was extraneous; that was where his world was centered at the moment, and its center was deep in Brandon's mouth. At last, he couldn't hang on any longer, and he arched his back off the bed, coming hard and fast into Brandon's mouth.

The aftermath of this was so fuzzy, he was only aware at the very edges of his perception when Brandon wiped him off, pulled back the covers, and tucked them both beneath. "S," he muttered as he stroked Brandon's side, "s ... p ... spee ... r ... jeff ... n.... What was the word again?"

Brandon laughed and kissed the top of his head. "Yep, mission accomplished."

"Because I'm sure the letter blue was in there too."

"As far as I'm concerned, you take home *all* the prizes today." Brandon pulled him close until they rested chest-to-chest, with Josh's head pillowed on Brandon's formidable bicep. "This year's All-American Spelling Bee and Blowjob Champ, right here."

"That's got to be an impressive trophy," said Josh, and Brandon laughed. "I ... um, I hate to say it, but ... I'm *really* tired."

"Oh, God, me too." Brandon let out a lungful of air in an exhausted *whoooo*. "Round two in the morning. ...If, um, you're going to stay."

"Is that okay?"

Brandon hugged him and pressed their foreheads together. "That's more than okay. That's perfect. That's the most perfect ending to the most perfect date *ever*. ...There's just one thing."

Josh, who was already halfway into a sex coma, cracked open one eye. "What? What?"

"Just stay here a second." Brandon kissed Josh on the bridge of his nose and slipped out of bed.

Josh heard the sound of the door's opening and a slapped thigh, and then there was another body in the bed, a third one that wanted to be exactly where Josh was. A big sloppy dog kiss smeared the side of his cheek, and a paw stood on his belly in a way that wasn't quite pleasant. "Hey, Ace," said Josh, reaching up both to scritch the dog and to move him half a foot to the side. "You sleep in here, huh?"

"Yeah." Brandon started to crawl back under the covers, but stopped midway. "If, um ... if

that's okay?"

"Just perfect," said Josh, which was how he wound up sound asleep shortly after, having become the middle of a Josh sandwich between a piece of very handsome bread and a piece of also very handsome but somewhat furrier bread. In all his life, he'd never felt quite so loved.



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Brandon went to the premiere with Rose on his arm; everyone was delighted to see Major Amazing and the Preying Mantis walking the red carpet together, and no one suspected that they were bearding for one another. Josh followed along shortly behind, holding out his elbow for Kendra to take. Her mothers had been a lot more supportive of his offer to take her than he'd

thought they'd be, and Kendra herself couldn't have been more thrilled -- it was nice enough that she might get to meet some movie stars, but when Josh had told her she'd get the chance to meet some *famous comic artists*, she'd nearly had a preteen heart attack. She wore a lovely blue pantsuit she'd picked out herself, and she grinned and waved every time a flashbulb went off. She called him 'Uncle Josh' and he introduced her as a friend of the family, even though by now she knew the score. As with everything else, it was all about who was watching.

In the press area, Josh found himself talking to a reporter from one of the more comic-focused media outlets there tonight, an adorable young thing with kinky black hair and a Carbon Man tank top on over what looked otherwise to be a fancy red dress. "Can we get you to spill any secrets about what *The Vengeancers* is like?" she asked, hanging back just out of the camera's frame.

Josh looked at the camera and held up a pair of fingers. "Two words: Explosions."

The reporter muffled a giggle into her fist. "And what about our heroes? Do you think the fans are going to be pleased?"

"I think they're going to be thrilled." Josh glanced over his shoulder to where other cameras had caught the other actors; Richard had his arm over Brandon's shoulders and was at that moment telling a camera something that made Brandon cover his face and laugh. "I know this isn't necessarily the direction everyone wanted the story to go, and I know there are lots of fans out there that are going to be wondering, 'Why did he do that? Why did he change that?' And the answer is, because I wanted to make sure I was telling the best story I could and having a good time. Obviously this isn't the *only* story out there about these characters, and it's definitely not going to be the last story, and it may not even be the best story, but it's my story, and I'm lucky I got this opportunity to tell it with such a talented bunch of people."

"And here's the Major himself right now," said the reporter, and Josh had just started to turn when he got hugged from behind by Brandon, who looked equal parts handsome and goofy all done up in a tuxedo, and somehow managed to make the combination devastatingly sexy. "Got any dirt to spill about your first time with Josh Wharton?"

Brandon made a funny expression that he just barely hid under a laugh, and Josh only managed to keep a straight face by biting the inside of his cheek. Someday, Brandon had said, and he'd meant it -- someday he'd come out and be out, and he'd be ready for whatever followed. He wasn't sure he was brave enough yet to face the whole array of consequences that might arise from such a disclosure, and he had a lot of family and friends to tell before he started broadcasting it all over the world, but it would happen, he promised, and when it did, he wanted Josh to be by his side.

"Total slavedriver," said Brandon, draping his arm around Josh's shoulders in a protective way that was just this side of romantic -- and it would stay on that side for now, until he was ready. He tucked Kendra under his other arm, and she threw her arms around the waist of the man who had that night become her new instant best friend, just add water. Josh suspected she may have known the score on *that* one too, and if so, well, that was all right too. "We all hated him. He made us cry. And work. And work while crying."

"Yes, that's why you should come see this movie: because it's directed by the man that made Major Amazing cry," said Josh, sending the reporter into another bout of giggles.

They made their way through a few further interviews and on into the theater, where Josh managed to use his powers as the director to finesse a seat between Brandon and Kendra -- or he had, until Kendra realized the movie wasn't going to start right away and demanded that Josh

trade seats with her so she could show Brandon how to play Plants Vs. Zombies. When the lights went down, she just settled in right where she was, and Josh exchanged a smile with Brandon over her head. "Something stupid with things blowing up?" Josh asked, nodding toward the screen.

"You know what I like," said Brandon as the projector roared to life and the movie began.

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"Show me an editor who isn't a personality and you'll show me a woman who accepts bad grammar, terrible spelling, unsexy story-telling, and smartquotes without complaint."



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"In America, sex is an obsession. On Livejournal, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and the internet in general, it's a fact. And an obsession. It's pretty much both, actually."



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"Whatever happens, the most important thing is growing old gracefully. And you can't do that editing a hardcore gay porn zine."



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