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SHOUBETSU BANG*BANG

yuri special



Leather
&
Lace

Shousetsu Bang*Bang
Volume 8, Special Issue 7

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"in monocromia" by Kohakuiro Kameyo
"A Budding Cherry Blossom" by Kim Chee and illustrated by beili
"War Bonds" by shukyou and illustrated by serenity_winner
"In Attendance" by Hinotori
"Big Name Fan" by Domashita Romero and illustrated by hybridcritter
"Love Lights Up the Darkness" by Yamanashi Moe
"And I got ready for the future to arrive" by Nijihiro Sumi
"Ravencloak" by Tsuki Akari
"Ultimate Illusion" by Haitoku no Honou and illustrated by neomeruru
"Anne Skye" by Lady Memphremagog
"She Wants To Move" by Matsuri Yuri
"Lady's Maid" by Jestana
"This Song Is About Your Sister" by Tsukizubon Saruko

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When Lulu woke on the third day of the seventh month of her fifth year of being kept by the House, she stared at the white ceiling of her room, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Some half hour later, she was dragged from her dreams by the soft but insistent knocking of the hall's attendant, who she snarled at before swinging her feet over the edge of her bed and donning the gauzy robe she favored whenever she wasn't on official business. She had a showing later, but she'd be damned if she was going to strap herself into latex one instant sooner than she had to. The display screen on the wall opposite came softly to life in response to her movements; words scrolled up it, listing her tasks for the day, the weather (not that it made a great deal of difference), the names of her opponents. She gave it only a cursory glance before settling in with her breakfast and her book.

Two hours into it, the attendant returned and fetched her out of her reverie and into the cold, white present.

"You must be prepared," the woman said softly from behind her veil.

"The hell I do," Lulu snapped, stalking down the hallway beside her. "It's not for an *hour*."

"You know the procedure."

"Fuck off."

She swept into the bathing room, threw her robe aside, and dropped herself into the bath with the intent of soaking anyone who came near her. It worked.

Once the water on the floor had been cleaned up, two attendants came with a tray, which she knocked from their hands. Crystal liquid intended to loosen her limbs spilled across the freshly-mopped floor. She rose from the bath as regally as a queen and dripped soap across the tiles between the attendants without giving them a second glance.

The garb for showings was ineffectual as real armor, but she was long accustomed to that and strapped herself into it anyways. In the next chamber over, she could see Stephanie doing the same. She gave a little wave through the glass and Lulu lifted her middle finger. Stephanie laughed soundlessly and returned to fastening on her boots.

The wings of the showing room were dark. Just beyond the doors, Lulu could hear the murmurs of the crowd and the occasional boom of an announcement blaring through the speakers. She gathered her thoughts, exhaling them out and leaving only stillness behind in her head.

Inhale.

Exhale.

The doors swung open, admitting a blinding burst of light punctuated by the flare of cameras from the small army of fashion photographers crowded together on one side of the showing room. She stepped into the light's embrace, ignoring the spots swimming before her eyes. The murmurs rose to a din, commentary and speculation that was impossible to dissect but irrelevant even if she could. Her sandals sounded quietly on the spotless white floor as she walked in a carefully choreographed arc in front of the photographers and style reporters. Her compatriots

followed, equally adorned in vinyl and horn and metal.

On the other side of the room, more richly appointed, sat the guests of the House. Some lounged in chairs, others perched on tables; most had drinks in their hands and practiced expressions of polite interest. They were largely unremarkable compared to every other such group Lulu had ever laid eyes on, though her eyes caught on one - perhaps the only one worth noting - a woman, tall, dressed all in black save for a plain gold mask hiding her face. Her hair was wheat-blonde, giving the impression of her head's being crafted entirely of gold.

Lulu's gaze swept over her, then away to the platform where her circuit would end.

Stephanie followed close behind her as the small cadre of women and men selected by the House for this day's session lined up facing the wall, waiting for the signal to begin - it came, moments after the last sandaled foot stepped up onto the platform, a pulse that heralded the start of a thumping beat that echoed through the floor and their bodies like a living thing. Lulu took a breath underneath the wave of sound, then dropped the fur from her shoulders and took a blade down from the hooks on the wall.

Though it might seem otherwise from the ferocity of some of the competitors, the fights that opened each showing were highly ritualized; the House traded in blood and beauty, and its denizens were valuable commodities. Serious injuries were rare - it had happened but twice in the time Lulu had been in residence. She still bore the scar, faint but present, on her left thigh.

Neatly dodging the swing Stephanie aimed at her, Lulu threw herself into the dance of combat.

Her favored weapon was a sword, mid-length and light, with a blade that curved slightly and shone bright from countless polishings. She was fast, if short - the sword made up for what reach her arm lacked, even if the point was not to draw blood. Dominic caught her eye and she nodded slightly, stepping past a pair already dueling to cross blades with him.

Though it lasted perhaps sixty seconds, the fray scattered all of them across the room in complex patterns that seethed and shifted with the music pounding through the air. As she whirled past the guests of the House, Lulu's gaze snagged again on the woman with the gold mask, who seemed to be watching her in particular. Through the cloud of black hair that whipped across her peripheral vision and the crystals that dangled from her headpiece, Lulu caught a glimpse of the woman leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees, watching. She dragged her gaze away in time to catch a strike from Dominic against the flat of her blade. Sloppy. She tipped her headpiece down further over her forehead and concentrated as she moved into the next set.

The rest of the showing was a blur, punctuated only by spare sharp moments when she managed to catch a glimpse of the mask woman looking at her with interest in her dark, half-hidden eyes. Chest heaving and clothing sticking to her as the final note echoed through the room, Lulu cast one last glance around, then turned on her heel and vanished into the depths of the back rooms. Applause and the flash of cameras followed her out.

It was perhaps three days before she encountered the gold mask woman again. This time she was in one of the House's parlors, sipping a drink from a tall white glass. Lulu only spotted her because the door to the hall was open.

Lulu paused outside the door. The mask woman was alone.

She hovered in the doorway, not quite crossing the threshold, and watched the woman as much as the other was watching her. The drink in her hand fizzed softly.

"I saw you at the showing," Lulu said, breaking the silence as neatly as if the other woman had dropped her glass.

The mask woman regarded her from behind her veil of gold. "So you did," she agreed.

Lulu was silent for a moment. She'd opened her mouth to speak when the woman interrupted her. "Would you care to join me?" Her voice was softly accented, catching the hard vowels.

Lulu studied her in silence for a long moment, recalling the interest that had been in her eyes at the showing and was making another appearance now. "No," she said finally, and left.

The third time they spoke was outside the changing rooms for the pools near the guest wing.

"My name is Helen," the blonde woman said. "Helen Kunitskaia ."

"Nice name."

"It was my grandmother's." Helen chuckled softly, as if this were some private joke.

"Mine's Lulu."

"I quite like it," Helen said. She had long fingers, Lulu noted, with nails cut close to the quick. She realized she was staring at the woman's hands and dragged her gaze upward from where they were absently toying with the strap of a bag that held, judging by the way they were spilling out, towels and a swimming suit. Helen's close-cropped hair was damp from the pool. She still wore her mask. "Might I ask its origin?"

Lulu shrugged. "I picked it."

Helen's eyebrows rose, just visible through the eyeholes of the by-now familiar veil of her mask. "No familial association?"

"My family's dead," Lulu said curtly. She turned and stalked off.

Lulu's bedroom was little more than a box; she shared showers with all of the other denizens of the floor, which irritated her faintly but not enough for her to do much more than scowl at them from time to time. She stormed into it, tearing off stiffened lace and kicking the sandals from her feet. If she'd had a bed large enough, she'd have flopped across it; as it was, she threw herself into her reading chair and fumed.

The next unsubtle attendant to suggest she should court the favor of the masked guest in a more *intimate* setting was going to get her foot so far up their ass they'd be able to taste her boring white nail polish.

Before she'd had a chance to let her rage build up to a really good blaze of fury, a knock sounded at her door. She glared at it, prepared to deliver a blistering tirade when she opened it - but when she did, she found only Stephanie with an armful of alcohol, food, and books. Her anger expired, like a match blown out.

"Hey, Steph."

"Lulu." Stephanie nodded greeting and invited herself in. She arranged her burdens on the counter and opened up the cupboard for glasses. Lulu flopped back into her chair. Stephanie handed her a drink and opened a case that revealed soft cheese, crackers, and almonds. The second case she popped open held some sort of cake.

"You must be psychic," Lulu said, burying herself in the greenish drink. Every time she said it, Stephanie denied it, but she was certain it was true.

"No, I just use my brain." Stephanie took the second-nicest chair, as was her custom, and

arranged the offerings of food and booze around herself. She'd left the books on the counter, a gift to quell Lulu's near-certain later anger. Lulu's films were still in Stephanie's care, evidence of a similar, though reversed, exchange a couple of weeks ago. "They've been hassling you." It wasn't a question.

"Fuckers." A hint of the fire flared up in her chest again. "I've been here five years, I can pick which goddamn guests to entertain."

"It was your anniversary, wasn't it?" Stephanie turned her glass in her hands and offered the almonds. Lulu took them automatically. "Long time."

"Yeah." Lulu sighed and took another sip. The alcohol was a pleasant burn down her throat. "Two more to go."

Stephanie studied her and nodded, apparently satisfied. "What're you going to do?"

Lulu blinked. "After? I hadn't really thought about it. Maybe I should become a famous singer." She laughed.

Stephanie smiled. The last time she'd caught Lulu singing in the showers, she suggested she take up a career in music. Lulu laughed then as well, saying that she was no great fan of paparazzi, but the fashion at least would be familiar.

Both of them fell silent, taking turns at the cheese and sipping their respective drinks. Finally, Lulu sighed. "What do *you* think I should do?"

Stephanie told her.

That night as she lay naked in bed in the near dark, Lulu let her hands wander over her breasts. She toyed absently with her nipple, staring up at the unremarkable ceiling.

"Fucking *hell*," she breathed. Her hands slid downward.

"Why do you stay?" Helen asked, tipping her head slightly in accent to her query. Lulu didn't answer.

"It must be an interesting life," she went on when it became clear that Lulu wasn't going to say anything. "Here."

"That's one word for it."

"I have lived in the north most of mine." Helen turned her glass in her hand. "Though I have traveled far abroad. There are a great many sights I have yet to behold. I thirst for them."

Lulu shrugged. "Guess I've never had much interest in travel."

Helen set the glass down on the table beside her. Her fingertips brushed over Lulu's knuckles, perhaps an idle gesture. It caught Lulu by surprise, and she barely kept herself from jumping out of her chair. "I must recommend it," she said. "It broadens the mind."

"Books do the same thing."

"No page can describe what it is like to step outside into a Russian winter." Helen chuckled, low and rich. "Or a Saharan summer."

"Well, fuck," Lulu said, "Why would I want to burn to a crisp just for walking around?"

"For the experience."

"Sounds like a pretty shitty experience to me."

"But without the, ah." Helen's mouth rolled around the words, as if they didn't quite fit. Perhaps, in truth, they didn't. "Shitty experiences, the sweet ones would not hold their savor."

"I live in the east wing," Lulu said abruptly. "Number forty-three C."

"I see." Helen nodded, folding her hands in her lap. Lulu lifted her eyes from them - again - and looked away.

A knock sounded at her door, three taps in swift succession.

Lulu flicked her eyes up to the door in time to see it open, then returned her gaze to her book and shifted slightly in her chair in irritation. Helen stepped through and closed the door behind her. Lulu did not look up.

"So the room number was real," Helen said without preamble. "I'm a little surprised."

"I'm not a liar," Lulu said to her book. "Only a bitch."

"Mm." Helen tucked her hands into her pockets and looked around the spartan chamber with some interest. Bed, counter, cabinets, softly lit screen, clothing tossed on the floor, closed washroom door, drawers, shelves holding the few possessions that were truly Lulu's and a handful of hardcopy volumes, poetry and prose alike. It was hardly the most fascinating domicile to be had, even within the House's walls. The guest suites were miniature masterworks of interior design. "You have your own books?"

"There's a library." Lulu read the sentence her eyes were on for a third time without registering its meaning.

"Ah." Uninvited, Helen took a seat in the only other chair in the room, the second-best one that Stephanie favored when she came visiting. Unlike Stephanie, Helen's presence was like a beacon to Lulu's attention, inescapable. "I'd like to see it sometime."

"The guides will show you anything you want to see."

"I don't care for tours."

Silence fell as Lulu tried very hard to read the rest of the page and Helen studied the white on white of the furnishings against the walls. There was a sparse splash of color in the form of one piece of artwork, carefully framed (in white, of course) and hung across from the bed. Some minutes passed before Lulu set the tablet down.

"Your room has to be more comfortable than this," she said, attempting to bore a hole into Helen's forehead with her stare.

"To be sure," the other woman agreed. "But it lacks company."

Lulu, if possible, stared harder. "I don't even like you."

"I'm aware," Helen said amiably. "Will you show me the library?"

"...Fine."

The showers were deserted at this time of night - the lights were dimmed, except for the ones that blossomed to brilliance as she passed by and faded as she moved beyond their range of motion detection. She left her nightclothes on a bench and strolled bare through the banks of lockers to the showers proper. A mirrored wall reflected her walking beside herself, prominent nose, olive skin and all. Her hand moved automatically to press the buttons for soft light before she stepped onto the gently sloping tile and slid the glass door shut behind her.

The water hissed from the showerhead hot and welcome, and she bent her head into the stream. Thoughts bled from her mind and washed away like so much soap scum. The drops pattering across her shoulders and the smooth tile almost masked the sound of metal rasping

against metal behind her.

A footstep alerted her to the presence of another body half a second before hands slid up her stiffening back. She didn't turn.

"It's late," Helen murmured, barely audible over the rush of water and the blood beating in her ears. "I'm surprised you're not asleep."

"Insomnia," Lulu said with what she hoped was cool indifference despite the fingers wandering around her naked hips. "It's genetic."

"I see."

The butterflies in Lulu's stomach started dancing complicated waltzes as Helen's hands crept toward the thatch of hair that she refused to shave off despite the urging of the House's salon mistresses. Her breath caught, quivering, in her throat for a second more as Helen's fingertips twisted in the curls. "Why are you up?" she murmured weakly.

"Insomnia," Helen said into the back of her neck. "It's genetic." Her fingers slipped down.

Lulu's breath hitched again as Helen's fingers explored, parting flesh and hair to seek out her clit, and further back - god, she was soaked already, and not just from the water. A little moan escaped her lips and she tipped her head back, closing her eyes as Helen's fingertips stroked right beside her clit. Lulu parted her knees a little more, standing with her feet splayed and certain she looked ridiculous but far from caring about it.

"I love how you sound," Helen murmured in her softly accented voice. She slid her fingers back and slicked them again, lifting her other hand to tweak Lulu's bared nipple. Lulu arched against her hand, inviting her to keep it there. Helen's fingers worked against her, high and low, and she panted as heat pooled low in her belly, winding her tight as a spool of thread. Lulu squirmed, shoving back against Helen's bare skin and trying to get as much contact from her fingers as possible, a maddening combination of motions that helped as much as it hindered.

Her legs shook as orgasm washed over her; she was dimly aware of Helen supporting her lest her knees go out from under her. She threw out an arm and braced herself against the wall of the shower, riding out the last of it clenched around Helen's hand.

Long moments passed like that. When she turned her head, she had a glimpse of Helen's smile before the other woman rinsed off her hands in the spray and sauntered away, out the sliding glass door into the dimly-lit locker room, taking the opportunity for a full look at her face with her. Lulu stared after her, but did not follow.

The library held a vast collection of digital books, all available for borrowing either on one's own tablet or one of the ones provided for temporary use by the House. It also held a small - more restricted but also more prized - selection of hard copy books. Lulu had access to both, and made ruthless use of it.

"Reference volumes are here," she said in hushed tones to Helen. "And fiction, here."

"I cannot remember the last time I saw such a collection," Helen answered. "I'm quite impressed."

A little swell of pride rose in Lulu's heart. She smiled. "Good." She paced down the aisle between the tall shelves, pointing out volumes and sections here and there to Helen, who followed close at her heels. She found a ladder and rolled it down the length of the shelves in the next row, then climbed and fetched down a handful of books, some from this shelf, some from that. "You should look at these," she said, pushing them into Helen's hands. Helen's mask glinted

in the glow of the soft, artfully arranged lights.

"I will read them," she promised. "Thank you."

"They speak for themselves." Lulu shrugged. "This next row starts the nonfiction."

They wandered together between the shelves as Lulu spoke quietly and Helen answered. As luck would have it, the library was largely deserted, so no one interrupted them. The lounge area, appointed with couches, chairs, and low tables all in pristine white, was equally empty. There were lamps, also, which could be manually adjusted to enhance the illumination provided by the ambient light. Lulu switched two on, deposited her selections on one of the tables, and dragged the table closer to her favorite couch. Helen joined her with an armload of books, some chosen by her, some by Lulu. They fell into silence, each with their respective reading.

"Why do you wear so much white?" Helen asked, some minutes - or perhaps hours - later.

"It's dictated by the standards of the House," Lulu replied. "I don't choose it."

Helen fell quiet, seemingly lost in her book. After a few minutes more, she broke the silence to ask, "What is your favorite color?"

"Red," Lulu answered, and returned to her reading.

"Take this off," Lulu said, ghosting her fingers over Helen's mask. "It's stupid to wear it all the time."

"Perhaps," Helen murmured, catching Lulu's hand and holding it. She pressed her lips to Lulu's fingertips, barely a kiss. When she spoke, her mouth moved against Lulu's skin. "But I favor it."

Lulu took a shaky breath. "I favor being able to see your damn *face*."

"Then come with me," Helen said. She let Lulu's hand drop, though it brushed against Helen's breast before she quite let it go. Almost without input from her conscious thoughts, Lulu lifted it again and tipped the mask up, over Helen's forehead.

Helen stared at her for long moments, curiously exposed without the barrier of gold separating her from the world. She was not classically beautiful, but Lulu found her totally arresting; after what could have been an eternity or the blink of an eye, Helen tugged the mask back down, hiding her sharp nose and angular cheekbones.

Wordlessly she held out her hand, and Lulu took it.

The room Helen was staying in was opulently large; it was sparsely furnished, though, which drew the eye unavoidably toward the great dark bulk of the bed centered along one wall.

Helen's borrowed bed was stripped of covers (they were piled, Lulu noted distantly, on the furry rug beside the nightstand; the cleaners would have a fit) aside from pristine white sheets. Helen herself lounged in the midst of them, shirt open nearly to the middle of her breastbone and trousers creaking softly as she shifted and sat up with her legs spread wide. Her mask was carefully nestled atop a cushion on the nightstand. She settled her feet on the floor and leaned back on her hands.

"I wasn't sure you were going to come out," she said blandly as Lulu emerged from the washroom. (It was several times larger than her own, with a deep bathtub that she could have fit five of herself into.) Lulu rolled her eyes and tossed her coat onto the floor. She crossed the room in several strides, climbed up onto Helen's lap, and kissed her without bothering to reply.

Helen kissed her back, leaning forward and letting her hands rise to Lulu's hips. She gripped them, slipped her fingers beneath the band of her scant skirt, grasped her rear and squeezed. Lulu pushed her ass against Helen's hands in approval. She sucked Helen's tongue into her mouth, toyed with it, bit at her lips.

Helen's pupils were blown wide when Lulu, panting, drew back enough to look at them. "Fuck," she swore. "I want your fingers in me *right the fuck now.*"

The fingers in question shook as they unfastened Lulu's bra, freeing her breasts. Helen tossed the garment aside and dipped her mouth to lap at said breasts while Lulu fisted a hand in Helen's hair to encourage her. "*Fuuuck,*" she sighed as Helen took a nipple in her mouth and sucked it to hardness. Helen's teeth grazed the sensitive flesh, making her gasp.

"Take this off," she hissed. Her fingers plucked at Helen's shirt. Helen obliged, shrugging it off her shoulders and pulling her hands and mouth from Lulu's flesh long enough to undo the last few buttons and toss the shirt away. Her skin was pale, though a light dusting of freckles graced her shoulders. Lulu unfastened the other woman's bra with practiced ease and cupped her small, high breasts.

"You're really fucking gorgeous, you know that?" Lulu said, catching Helen's eye.

"I would say that of you," Helen breathed. Her gaze strayed down to Lulu's bared nipples, then further. Lulu hadn't bothered wearing underwear on her lower half.

"I want to touch you," Lulu said, voice rough with wanting. "Let me touch you."

"Only if I may do the same."

"I figured that was a given."

Lulu unfastened Helen's pants with a kind of sure determination reserved for people searching for lost lovers. Her hand stilled when her fingers met a strangely smooth, velvety surface, and she pulled her mouth from Helen's long enough to investigate with her eyes what her fingers had already found.

Helen wore a deep violet dildo strapped to her hips beneath her leather trousers - its color was a shocking splash against the whiteness of the House's furnishings and the stark black of the clothes Helen herself favored. Lulu's brows rose beneath the curled fringe of her hair.

"Do you object?" Helen murmured. Instead of answering, Lulu kissed her again, harder.

"There's lube in the drawer," she said, finally, when she could bring herself to drag her mouth from Helen's. "Little white bottle."

Helen leaned back and stretched her arm out to rummage through the nightstand drawer in question, discarding a few things before coming back with the right one. She popped the cap and squirted out a liberal amount - perhaps too much, some dripped off - on her fingers, and from there onto the violet dildo. The bottle went the way of her clothing, off the side of the bed. Lulu stroked herself, watching Helen do this, and she spread herself wide with her other hand so that Helen could watch her in turn.

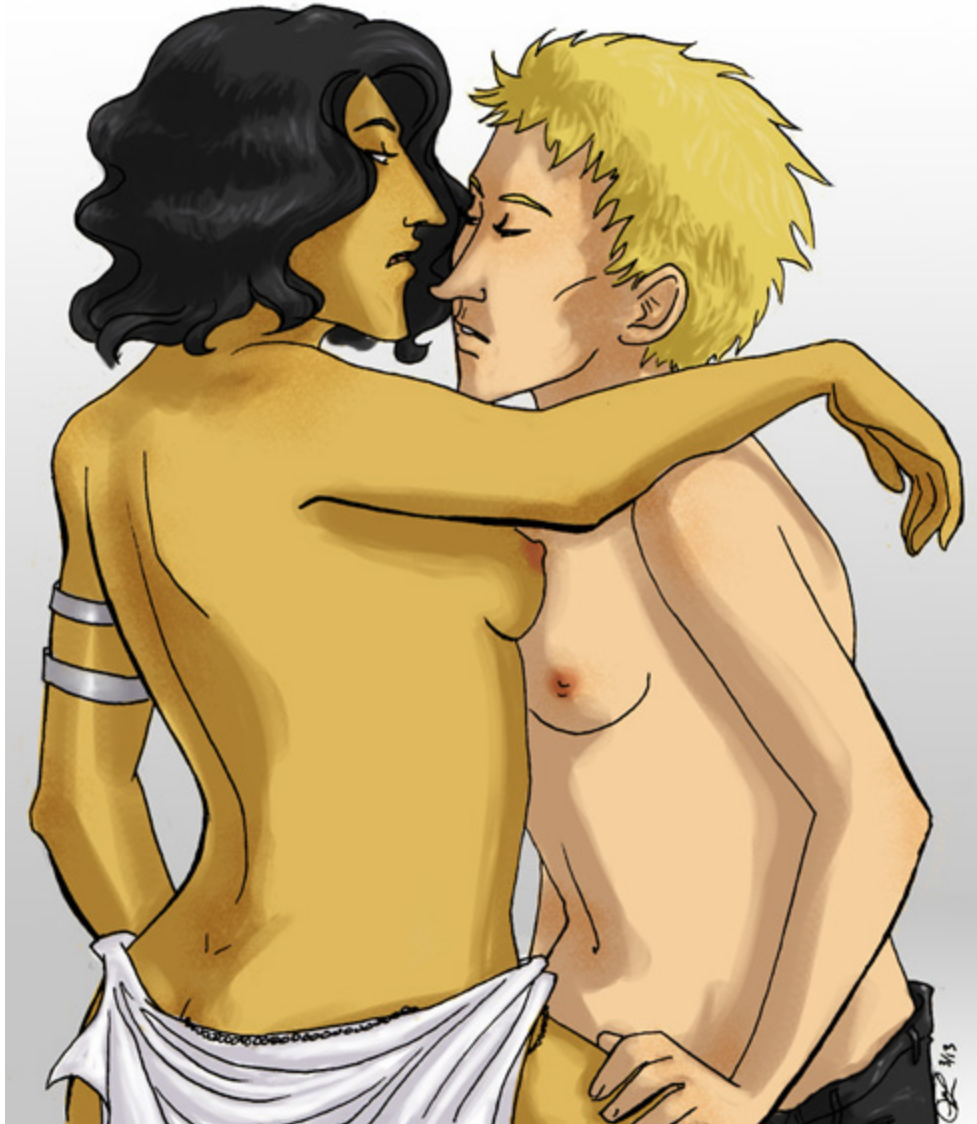
"That's very distracting," Helen murmured.

"No shit," Lulu said agreeably. "Now fuck me."

"Ride it," Helen said, holding the toy in place for her. Lulu scooted forward on Helen's lap, bracing herself on Helen's shoulder. She rose up on her knees, settled the head of the dildo - there, yes, perfect - and sank down, letting the toy push inside her.

"How's this?" she panted, rolling her hips to settle it inside.

"Perfect."



Helen's hands rose to Lulu's hips again, gripping them as Lulu rocked. "Feels *nice*," she said. Helen slid her fingers down and stroked Lulu's clit, making Lulu gasp and her hips buck harder. "*Shit*."

Helen took hold of Lulu, who held onto Helen's shoulders with her hands and Helen's waist with her legs, and rolled them both over until she was kneeling bent over Lulu and Lulu was on her back amidst the rumpled sheets.

"Yeah," Lulu panted. "Like that, don't you? You like - *ah* - fucking me like that--"

Helen set both hands on Lulu's hips and dragged her in, hiking her ass up onto her thighs and pushing the dildo deeper into her.

"Ah, *fuck*," Lulu swore. She tipped her head back, laying her throat bare.

"Touch yourself," Helen murmured. Her voice lay low in her throat. "Rub it for me."

Lulu grinned and slid her hands shamelessly across her breasts and down. "Fuck yes I will."

You can - mm - watch me." She dipped her fingertips down between wet folds of flesh, found her clit, and rubbed right along the side where she liked it best. Helen's eyes darkened, and she rolled her hips harder. Lulu ground herself against Helen, shoving them as close together as she could.

Lulu's constant stream of dirty monologue fell into a largely repetitious reiteration of "*Fuck me, god*," as she rubbed her clit and Helen obligingly fucked her into the mattress.

"Fuck," Lulu said. "*Helen*." She said her name like a curse, or perhaps a prayer.

"Yes," Helen breathed.

Lulu squeezed Helen's hips between her thighs, rocking her hips and rubbing herself faster. Her head tipped back and she gasped, her whole body shuddering as she came. Helen's hips rocked gently as Lulu sagged, shuddering, body loosening and legs releasing their grip.

Lulu blew out a long breath, feeling a ridiculous smile come to her face but unable to stop it. When she lifted her head, she noted Helen gazing down on her with a curious expression, which at once kindled her pride and ire.

"Get up here," Lulu snarled, "And get on my face."

Helen disentangled herself from the knots of Lulu's limbs and obliged her, crawling up and settling herself at the head of the bed with one knee planted on either side of Lulu's head. Lulu curled her hands around Helen's strong thighs and buried her face immediately in the hot, wet center of her.

Helen's breath hitched, and Lulu's fingertips dug into her flesh. She sought out Helen's clit amidst her sparse, curly hair and the splayed straps of the harness and set to it with her lips and tongue, lapping at its tip. Her breath gusted hot, reflected back against her face. Helen's hips started to rock, following the motion of Lulu's tongue, and the dildo she still wore rubbed against the top of Lulu's head. Some of her hair caught on it, but she ignored the tug in favor of devoting her attention to Helen's clit. The other woman tasted fucking *fantastic*.

The little moans she drew from Helen's throat were music to her ears; as she wormed her hand underneath Helen's rear and pressed two fingers inside her, that music rose to a symphony. She could really get used to that, she thought. Helen's hips rocked as Lulu pressed her tongue against her, lapping and sucking as if she couldn't quite get enough.

When Helen came, it was not with an ostentatious scream, just a tensing of her whole body and a tiny, breathless sound, forced out from airless lungs. She shook, catching herself against the headboard, and panted as she lifted her hips from Lulu's face to allow her more air.

"Come here," Lulu demanded, slapping at Helen's legs. The other woman obliged her, climbing off and flopping down at her side, where Lulu offered her a slow kiss. Helen accepted, licking the taste of herself from Lulu's lips. They lay like that, kissing wordlessly, for a long time.

"Come with me," Helen said, stretching out long and lacing her fingers with Lulu's over Lulu's belly. Her bare skin was flushed still, and sticky where they touched. "When I go."

"I still have two years of service to the House to pay," Lulu said.

"Whatever debt you owe them, I'll pay it."

"It's a lot."

"I have the money."

Lulu was silent for long moments, staring at the ceiling. It was blank, featureless white.

"You can wear red," Helen murmured, "If you want."

With color in her eyes, Lulu nodded assent.

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嬰櫻 (Little Cherry Blossom)

by Kim Chee (沈菜)

illustrated by beili

After a month's absence, Lieutenant-General Liu was back again that evening to celebrate another major victory, but one thing had changed: he was no longer a Lieutenant-General, but a full-fledged General. Word of Liu Yang's courage and intelligence on the battlefield quickly spread. When Ying-Ying wasn't afraid for his life, she worried that he might begin to choose the fancier diner over their modest wineshop due to his newfound fame. Most of the high-ranking officers chose not to mingle with the juniors and soldiers at mealtime.

But luckily for Ying-Ying, General Liu was friends with a small group of his men from his own province. As he rose up the ranks, he remained close to them, and these soldiers continued to follow his lead. Ying-Ying considered them a less pretentious bunch than most of the men she encountered. They were young and old, sickly and strong, warriors and commanders—but they stuck together.

After dinner, General Liu's men ordered for him a large jug of hot liquor, ordinarily enough to turn four hefty warriors into one motionless pile of armor and flesh. They chanted for him to drink all of it in one swig, to which he answered in his steady tenor voice: "I don't think I can even drink that much water."

He wasn't large for a warrior—perhaps the size of an average man from Ying-Ying's village. A man of few words who chose to practice calligraphy and compose poetry in his spare time, he was rather sweet and unthreatening. He drank quite a lot, but never to the point of drunkenness. It was hard to imagine him as a ruthless leader of men without seeing him firsthand in battle.

As General Liu sat pondering how he might empty the jug, Ying-Ying handed out smaller cups of the same liquor to each of the men. The younger men made passes at her under the table when they thought the General wasn't watching, and occasionally, someone would manage to grab her leg and cause her to stumble. She would then glance at the General to see if he had noticed, hoping that he'd have his head turned the other way so he wouldn't think her clumsy, but he always seemed to be looking back at her.

Just as Ying-Ying was about to leave the room with the empty tray, a large hand encircled her arm.

"Don't go yet," said the man who grabbed her. He held her in his rough grip—though he tried hard to be gentle—and led her to their table, before General Liu. She complied, afraid that he might break her arm if she struggled.

The General shook his head. "Let her go, Brother Yu," he ordered mildly. "She has work to do."

"But she wants to see you finish the jug. Don't you, auntie?"

Ying-Ying didn't know how to respond. Truthfully, she wasn't too eager to see General Liu drunk, assuming that he wouldn't vomit all over the table before he finished.

"She's just too shy to admit it," one of the other warriors suggested.

"Come on, the old auntie is waiting."

Ying-Ying knew they were fond of her and meant no harm by the joke, but she couldn't bring

herself to look at the General. This month, she would turn twenty. Her mother had given up hope of finding her a husband, and it was common knowledge among the villagers and warriors that she was no longer a virgin.

General Liu also lowered his gaze. Ying-Ying could sense his discomfort in her presence. Perhaps he was unaccustomed to being near an unclean woman; she noticed he was much less reserved in front of her mother and younger sister. He was so young—only twenty-six, although he appeared even younger—and it was easy for her to forget that he had already accomplished so much for his age. She wondered where his family was, if he had parents or siblings at home who prayed every day for his safe return.

Suddenly, he took a deep breath, picked up the heavy jug by the neck with one hand, and tipped it in her direction in a sign of respect. The men took this as a mocking gesture and laughed, but the General's expression remained solemn. Then he swung his head back and lifted the jug to his lips.

The room fell silent. General Liu's eyes were squeezed shut, his fine brows knitted, as if he were concentrating hard to remember something. The first few mouthfuls came easily enough, but after about ten large gulps, his arm began to shake. Still, he held on. Ying-Ying felt the room spin, just watching him.

"It's *qigong*," Brother Yu her whispered into her ear. "Watch—he can control his body so that the alcohol doesn't go into his blood."

More than halfway through, the General's chest heaved and each swallow became more labored. His face and ears flushed from the heat of the drink. He made a strangled noise and small drop of liquor trickled from the corner of his mouth down his long neck—taut and sinewy from the effort of his posture—before disappearing under his armor.

Ying-Ying almost cried out, raising her hands to her face. She didn't want to embarrass the General by seizing the jug from him (not that she had that kind of strength), but she could barely restrain herself. "Is he okay?" she finally asked, convinced that General Liu's life was more important than his reputation for alcohol consumption. "Maybe he should stop. Has he done this before?"

"Oh, he'll be fine," said the elderly warrior who sat closest to the General, delighted by her anxiety. "No need to worry."

"Look, he's almost done," another man pointed out.

Sure enough, General Liu finished the last drop and threw down the jug, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

The men cheered and slapped his back, proposing toasts and tossing their own drinks down. To Ying-Ying's relief and wonder, the General appeared merely dazed, laughing along with his men. If anything, the alcohol had given his face a healthier glow.

Ying-Ying quietly slipped out of the room, but before she left, she took one last glimpse of the General, and it seemed to her again that he had been looking at her a moment ago. She closed the door behind her, smiling at her own foolish fantasies.

Outside, she found her sister carrying a basket of steamed buns to the adjacent room. There was smoke coming from the kitchen, which meant their mother was still working. The recent victory would keep them busy for the next few nights.

"Mei, let me help you with that."

Mei hugged the basket in her arms. "But I'm having fun," she whined. "There are two young captains in the main dining room who like me. They say I carry myself like an elegant woman."

One of them asked if I was old enough to get married."

"What did you tell him?"

"Of course, I told him I'm old enough—I *am* old enough—but I didn't tell him I was engaged. He'll talk to Ma if he's serious, and she can turn him away."

Mei's future husband was a wealthy but good-natured widower, who'd fallen in love with her at first sight and offered their mother an unthinkable sum of money for her daughter's hand. Ying-Ying personally wished to see her sweet dimpled sister with a younger man—perhaps a dashing warrior who was also from a working family—but Mei had been so indifferent about the arrangement that Ying-Ying stopped caring herself.

Almost. Mei was only happy to be admired by so many men; she was still too young to realize the impact of marriage on the rest of her life.

"Listen to yourself," said Ying-Ying, patting her cheek. "You're still a little girl."

"What about you? You're still in love with Lieutenant-General Liu. Or should I say *General* Liu?"

Ying-Ying frowned. Were her feelings so obvious? She noted to herself that she would have to do better at hiding them. "Don't talk about what you don't understand," she chided. "I think he's a very kind and worthy man, but I want nothing more to do with him."

"Then why do you always insist on serving their table?"

"Would you like to serve them instead? I thought you said you didn't like the way one of his men looked at you."

"That was a year ago," Mei retorted. "It doesn't matter which room I'm in—they all look at me like that now." She readjusted the basket in her arms. "Anyway, I need to bring these over before they get cold."

"Just be careful," called Ying-Ying after her. "Don't do anything stupid."

She helped her mother wash dishes in the kitchen for a while, then picked up the empty wooden bucket against the wall and headed for the well. When she got there, she set down her lamp on the stone edge and rolled up her long sleeves, securing each side in a knot. Then she attached the bucket to the end of the rope.

"I remember doing that a long time ago," said someone behind her.

Ying-Ying jumped. The crank slipped from her hands and the bucket plopped into the water below. "You scared me," she stammered. "I didn't know you left the room."

"I had to relieve myself."

Ying-Ying blushed at the General's frankness, glad that it was dark.

He sat down on the edge of the well, next to the sleepy glow of her lamp, and leaned back slightly.

"Are you all right?" asked Ying-Ying, holding out her hands in case he might lean back too far. "Do you need to lie down?"

"Don't worry about me. I just want to watch you lift the bucket out."

He didn't sound drunk at all, but his request was so unusual that he had to be.

Ying-Ying slowly turned the crank, prepared for him to pass out any moment. What would it be like to wrap her arms around his chest and catch him before he fell? The thought terrified and excited her at once, but he only continued to watch her quietly with his large slanted eyes, like the eyes of a phoenix.

"This isn't very interesting," she said, after she unhooked the bucket and set it on the ground. They were alone, and if anyone saw them together like this, the General's reputation would be

tainted. "Why don't I take you back to the wineshop first?"

"Are you scared of me?"

"No, why should I be?" Ying-Ying held back a smile. It barely crossed her mind that he was taller and stronger than her. She took him by the arm to help him stand, but when he flexed his muscles in response to her touch, she remembered her place and snatched back her hand.

After a while of walking, it became apparent that he had no trouble finding his way back to the wineshop on his own. What was she doing then? He probably wondered why an ugly unchaste girl like her was following him in the middle of the night, but was too polite to say so. Maybe he thought she was trying to seduce him and was thinking of ways to get rid of her.

She fell a step behind, hoping he would continue without her, but he slowed his pace until she caught up.

When they were almost at the door, General Liu suddenly stopped under one of the lamps and turned to face her. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" he blurted out hoarsely.

Ying-Ying's heart skipped a beat. She had seen the look before—the passion in his dilated eyes was unmistakable—but it *was* a mistake: he was not just any man, and she was no longer the pretty innocent girl she used to be. He must have seen someone else when he looked at her. Her chest ached, thinking of that lucky girl.

"Could you be drunk?" she asked, hoping to lighten the mood with a playful tone. "You know, they say you have the tolerance of fifty men."

She thought she saw General Liu's face inch closer to her own. "I may be a bit drunk, but you're even more exquisite when I can see clearly. Only I'm not as courageous when I'm sober."

Ying-Ying was just about reply that he was brave enough without the alcohol, but instead she giggled aloud before she could stop herself, hiccupping as she tried to suppress her laughter. Her entire body became very stiff and weak, and even though she was laughing, she wanted to cry. Why couldn't she stop? She cupped her mouth with a hand to stifle the unpleasant sound, glancing at the General to see if he was disgusted by her behavior.

To her surprise, he smiled. "So, Ying-Ying, what else have you heard about me?" he asked softly, prying her hand away from her face.



She dropped the lamp in her hand and it went out with a crash.

He was still holding her wrist, which she had left exposed when she forgot to undo the knots in her sleeves. She couldn't stop gazing at the way his long slender fingers curled against her skin—warm and firm, but hesitant. His handsome youthful face was now so close to her own that she could smell the liquor in his breath, tinged with sweetness. He had long lashes for a man, a rather elegant nose that ended with full lips, framed by a smooth but strong jaw.

"G-General Liu, I hardly think this is appropriate," she whispered, trembling under his grip, half wishing she could hide her face and half hoping he would hold on for a bit longer. To her horror, a tear leaked from the corner of her eye, burning against her cheek.

He instantly released her and took a few steps back. "Please forgive me," he said, bowing his head. "I only wish you happiness." He picked up the lamp that had fallen, placed it in her quaking hands, and hurried away to join his soldiers.

The next few days were the most delightfully tormenting days of Ying-Ying's life. For three days, General Liu did not return, although some of his men came regularly for dinner. Ying-Ying had the good sense not to ask why he wasn't there, serving them food and wine as she would any other day.

During the day, she found herself looking in the mirror more often than usual. Her eyes were smaller than her sister's, but they weren't ugly or different sizes. She'd stopped plucking her eyebrows years ago, although they were never bushy to begin with; nor were they very shapely. Her nose and mouth and chin were rather ordinary—a bit on the daintier side, or so she liked to believe—but her large front teeth ruined the lower half of her face, and she didn't have her sister's dimples. The only part of her face she truly loved were her ears, which were like perfect oyster shells, especially when she used to wear pearl earrings, but no one else ever noticed them.

With some make-up, she thought, she might make herself beautiful again. Finally on one afternoon, her sister left to go play with her friends and Ying-Ying could be alone for a while. Instead of setting the tables after washing the floors and cleaning the stables as she usually did, she returned to the small room they shared and sat down in front of the mirror. She found the box with Mei's make-up, picked out a thin brush, and dabbed it with ink from the small porcelain container she had given Mei—the same one her mother had given to her.

Very carefully, she drew a thin line across her right eyelid, picking up the brush at the corner to give her eye a livelier look. She tried to do the same with the opposite eye, but it had been too long since she last held a brush, and the ink went on too thick.

Someone was coming. She flung the brush into the box without cleaning it and tucked the box back under the table. Then she hurried to wipe the ink off her eyes with her sleeve, but it had already begun to dry.

"Big sister?"

Ying-Ying froze.

It was Mei. At first, she wore an expression of shock and concern, but then she started to laugh. "You look like a panda!" she cried.

At this, Ying-Ying laughed too. She laughed until inky tears streamed down her cheek, hugging her squealing sister until they were both out of breath.

"You weren't supposed to come back so early, you little devil," she said, when they were lying in a tangle of hair and limbs.

"And you aren't supposed to be playing with make-up."

"So what if I am? It's not like I was going to show anyone."

Mei sat up, propping her chin on her knees. "I can do it for you," she said thoughtfully. "I'm better at it than you now. Then you can see how you look."

She cleaned around Ying-Ying's eyes with a soft cotton pad and some perfumed water, then dusted Ying-Ying's face with powder. With some red ink, she tinted Ying-Ying's cheeks, rubbed them with her pinky, and applied the same ink to Ying-Ying's lips.

"Close your eyes."

Ying-Ying complied, enjoying the coolness of the brush against her eyelid. She kept her eyes closed as Mei filled in her eyebrows.

"Look."

Ying-Ying opened her eyes again and looked in the mirror. She beamed, revealing her teeth, then quickly closed her mouth and smiled in a more lady-like manner. The make-up enlarged her eyes and covered the lines around her mouth. She could have passed for a sixteen-year-old.

"Wow," Mei whispered, combing the knots out of Ying-Ying's hair with her fingers and pinning it into a neat bun. "There. You should keep it on. Maybe General Liu will be back tonight."

"Don't be silly," said Ying-Ying, although her chest swelled with excitement at the thought of General Liu seeing her like this.

"Really, you look like a princess. Let's show Ma."

"No, Mei—"

But Mei was already dragging her to the door. They giggled as they darted past the cows and chickens outside as if the animals were strange men, finally coming to the kitchen.

"Ma! Ma! Look!"

Mei pushed Ying-Ying inside. Their mother glanced at her older daughter and went back to grinding the rice grains in the mortar as if nothing had changed.

"You didn't set the tables," she said in a flat voice.

"Ma, just look at her," Mei insisted, throwing her arms around Ying-Ying's shoulders. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Ying-Ying took Mei's hands into her own, knowing what would come next.

"I already saw," said her mother. She didn't look up again. "It's not appropriate for someone like her. She looks ridiculous."

Mei didn't answer again, but Ying-Ying felt her sister's wet face against her neck.

Ying-Ying squeezed her hands and led her outside. "Ma is right, you know. I can't let our customers see me like this."

Mei sniffled, lifting an arm to wipe her nose on her sleeve, but Ying-Ying pushed her hand back down.

"Stop crying. Ma and I aren't dead yet, and you're not a child anymore."

This only caused Mei to sob harder. She threw her arms around Ying-Ying and cried into her shoulder, wiping her nose instead on Ying-Ying's dress. She cried so miserably and in such earnest that Ying-Ying was touched.

"Don't be sad for me," she murmured. She laughed when Mei looked at her with pink teary eyes. "You've made me so happy already. See? There's no reason to cry. Now go help Ma with the rice cakes."

She dried Mei's eyes for her and gave her a little push back into the kitchen.

The courtyard was empty and silent. Ying-Ying hurried back to their living quarters to wash the make-up from her face before heading to the stockroom to retrieve the table mats.

As Mei had predicted, General Liu returned that same night, but instead of taking his dinner with his usual cup of rice wine, he politely requested she exchange the wine for some hot tea. Ying-Ying did not ask him why, although she wanted to suspect it had something to do with the events of his previous visit.

Even after dinner, he refused any kind of alcohol and sat quietly through the evening, answering only when someone addressed him directly.

Ying-Ying remained in the room for a while, listening in on the conversations, raising her sleeve to her mouth whenever someone attempted to tell a joke or gasping when they recounted near-death experiences. As always, they found her delightful and she enjoyed their enthusiasm, but it began to trouble her that General Liu had not looked in her direction even once since he

arrived.

After a while, he stood and excused himself from the room.

Ying-Ying waited for one of the men to finish his tale. When General Liu did not return, she moved the empty liquor jugs from the table onto a tray and took them out to be refilled.

He wasn't in the courtyard. As Ying-Ying wondered if he had gone to relieve himself behind the house again, she heard the sound of a horse snorting and realized he was probably in the stable.

Ying-Ying straightened her hairpin and smoothed down her dress with her free hand, then went into the wine room and filled all four jugs almost to the brim. One of them—the one with two small chips at the mouth—was the same one General Liu drank from. Ying-Ying dipped her finger into the warm liquid and brought it to her lips, wincing as it burned her tongue.

With both hands she picked up the tray, now with the added weight of the liquor, and pushed the heavy wooden door open with her hip. As she leaned into it, someone held it open for her. She gasped and stumbled, catching herself and the tray.

"Be careful!"

Ying-Ying saw it too: one of the jars had slid to the corner of the tray, balancing on edge. But it was too late.

She swooped down and caught the fallen jug around its neck, balancing the rest of the jugs atop the tray in her other hand. A small splash rose in a perfect straight line and landed back into the jug. Now everything was too heavy for both Ying-Ying's hands, and she sank down on her legs until she was squatting, placing the jug and tray safely on the ground.

From above, General Liu stared at her with his mouth open.

"I'm so sorry." Ying-Ying's heart was pounding so hard that she could feel it in her throat. She set the fourth jar back on the tray, hoping he wouldn't detect the note of pride in her voice, and found that she was too weak to stand.

"No, no, it's my fault. Let me hold that for you." General Liu stooped and took the tray and its contents effortlessly in one hand, helping her up with the other. He added softly: "I also want to apologize for my behavior three nights ago. It was very irresponsible of me to have so much to drink, and I'm afraid I hurt you."

"How could you have hurt me?" Ying-Ying replied, tucking in a strand of her hair that had come loose. "Every woman likes to hear that she is beautiful. I simply overreacted." She had already rehearsed her response—yearning for him to confront her—and was quite satisfied with its appropriateness and honesty.

He released her arm and handed her the tray, motioning with a nod for her to walk a step ahead of him.

Her face turned very hot as it occurred to her then that he may have misinterpreted her words. What if he thought she actually believed him the other night, when he had called her beautiful? Perhaps he only pretended to respect her now, while thinking of how vain and ignorant she was.

"Have you ever held a sword?" asked General Liu.

Ying-Ying struggled to compose her thoughts, unsure if she had heard him correctly. "No, it's always been my mother, sister, and me. We didn't have anyone to teach us martial arts."

"You would have mastered it quickly. You have good reflexes and nimble hands."

Ying-Ying took a deep breath, moved by his kindness. They stopped in front of his dining room and she turned to smile at him, giving a courteous nod.

He spoke again as she inched toward the door. "You know, someone like you should learn to

defend yourself and your family, should the need arise. I can teach you."

"Really?" Ying-Ying bit her lip—she could feel the laughter bubbling inside her again. She shook her head before he could answer. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm a grown woman."

"So? Women can fight just as well as men. I know a woman who can wield a fifty-jin spear with the precision of an arrow." General Liu sucked in his breath after he said this and looked away, flustered.

He was clearly in love with this woman, Ying-Ying decided. And here she was, thinking that he had been impressed by her silly display of jug-catching talent. "She sounds extraordinary," she whispered with a hint of a smile, and turned to go inside.

But General Liu caught her by the arm. "Ying-Ying, do you trust me?"

Their eyes met for the first time that night. "Yes," said Ying-Ying, when she found her voice again, and she meant it.

"If you have time, meet me by the stable tomorrow, an hour before sundown. I will show you how to use a dagger."

"You're really going to sneak off to a military camp? That's so exciting."

Mei knelt on the edge of their sleeping mat, parting Ying-Ying's thick long hair into three sections.

"Don't be silly," said Ying-Ying, glancing absently in the mirror as Mei braided her hair. "General Liu is just going to show me some martial arts nearby. He thinks I have potential."

Mei laughed.

Ying-Ying handed her a string. "I know, isn't it funny? But I'll go just to humor him."

"I think," Mei breathed into Ying-Ying's ear as she tied the ends of her hair, pausing dramatically, "he wants to take you away."

"Mei!"

Mei burst into a fit of giggles and fell back on the bed.

"Don't joke about these things!" But it was too late: Ying-Ying's mind was already full of bad and impossible thoughts of General Liu falling in love with her. Perhaps such a noble man could see past her plain exterior and her lost virginity to the kind and hardworking girl she tried so hard to be. Or he might see her for who she really was: vain and foolish for having such shameful feelings for him.

"Would you go with him?" Mei asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

"Of course not!"

"Why not? He's so handsome and strong, and he looks at you differently. I wish a man would look at me that way."

Ying-Ying sighed. "No, you don't understand. It's because he pities me."

Mei was still afraid of the dark, so Ying-Ying kept the lamp burning and waited for her to fall asleep. But even after Mei had long dozed off, Ying-Ying remained in front of the mirror. She pursed her lips and pushed up the corners of her eyes, remembering what General Liu had said to her the first night of his return.

There was absolutely nothing exquisite about her. And the way she had laughed like a donkey—how could he not be repulsed by her?

But perhaps she was more beautiful in the dark. She made sure again that Mei was asleep before blowing out the flame of her lamp. Then she caressed her own face and neck, watching the dark figure in the reflection. It was easier to love herself this way. She cupped her cheek, running her thumb down her nose and pausing at her lips, and kissed herself softly.

Something stirred within her. With trembling fingers, she opened her robe and pushed out her soft plump breasts, which she hated and took extra care to conceal. Her mother always scolded her for their size, saying that having large breasts was a sign of promiscuity. She must have been right, because when Ying-Ying's rapist had held her down, her breasts were the first part of her body he reached for, squeezing and twisting them until they bruised.

Ying-Ying wasn't sure where she got the idea to do it, but she now cradled her breasts in her arms, the same way she would hold a crying child.

Then, feeling dirty about what she had just done, she covered herself, curled up next to Mei on the sleeping mat, and closed her eyes.

As he promised she would, Ying-Ying found General Liu by the stable the following afternoon. He was feeding his horse—a majestic red mare—from a sack of grain that hung from the saddle. In daylight, he looked different: slightly older, but stronger and more spirited. For the first time, Ying-Ying noticed how long and graceful his legs were, even though they were for the most part hidden under his tunic and boots.

"I was just worrying that you wouldn't come," he greeted in his quiet voice.

"I didn't have the proper attire," said Ying-Ying, adjusting her skirt.

General Liu raised an eyebrow, causing Ying-Ying to feel even sillier about her situation. "How else would you dress? And what use would it be if you couldn't defend yourself in ordinary clothes? Go get your horse—we're going to a clearing in the forest."

"Oh, our horse?" Ying-Ying glanced worriedly in the direction of the stable. "She's getting old. We never ride her anymore. And my mother might notice if she's gone."

"Then ride on my horse, if you don't mind sitting with me."

He motioned for her to come closer. The last time Ying-Ying rode a horse was more than three years ago, when the enemy was nearly at their front door and she had to act as one of the messengers between her village and the warriors who were protecting them. Now she gazed up at General Liu's mare, which was much larger than any horse she had ever ridden.

"What a splendid horse."

"Don't be afraid," said the General. At first, Ying-Ying thought he was talking to the horse, but then she realized he was talking to her. "She listens to anyone who is a friend of mine."

The horse turned her head and bumped one side of Ying-Ying's face curiously with her muzzle. Ying-Ying stroked her silky mane before grasping the lower part of it and hoisting herself onto the saddle. A moment later, General Liu had also mounted behind her and taken the reins, and they were speeding off in a quiet gallop toward the woods.

Ying-Ying leaned forward as far as she could without losing her balance, clinging to the horse's mane for dear life. She didn't want to sit in the middle of the saddle either, in case she pressed too close to General Liu and made him uncomfortable.

She heard him chuckle. "Relax. You're making my horse nervous."

The horse reared as they came to the edge of the woods, and Ying-Ying slid backwards. Luckily, she could only feel the cool leather of General Liu's armor—otherwise, she thought, she

would never have been able to face him again.

They soon came to a ring of poplar trees by a stream. General Liu hopped off his horse and helped Ying-Ying down. "This is where I like to practice when I'm alone," he said. "It's only a short walk from our camp, but I don't think anyone will bother us."



Ying-Ying blushed at the suggestiveness of these words, but General Liu took no notice, closing his eyes and inhaling the fresh woody air.

He showed her how to meditate. At first, he searched for a clean rock for her to sit on so she wouldn't soil her skirt, but she began to feel ridiculous and convinced him that she didn't mind sitting on the ground.

It was almost mid-autumn, but the air was warm, and birds could still be heard in the trees. The earthy smell of poplar wood lingered in the fine mist left by the morning rain. Ying-Ying

closed her eyes and tried to imagine—as General Liu had told her—that she was no longer Ying-Ying, but a tiny speck in the vast forest; and that forest was only a speck on a map of China.

She felt only a little more relaxed afterwards, if anything at all, but General Liu appeared refreshed, stretching his limber body and loosening his joints. "Come on, warm up a little!" he called to her. "Don't be embarrassed!"

He made her do all sorts of funny stretches, then asked her to simply hold out her arm.

"Don't lock your elbow," he said, bending her arm. "Now make a fist."

She did as she was told.

He pressed her arm down. "Firmer! Don't let me move your arm." He pushed her over and over until she held her arm still against him. "Good! I knew you were strong."

They did the same activity with the other arm, except this time, he only had to give her three pushes.

He demonstrated how she should stand to anticipate an attack and how to deflect a strike to her head or upper body. When he was satisfied with Ying-Ying's stance, he taught her how to throw a punch at someone.

She gave a few loose and awkward punches into the air, unaccustomed to making such sudden movements.

"Strong fists, remember? With that punch, at best, you might be able to scare away a sick old man, but an old man wouldn't attack you anyway."

"What about an old grandmother?" Ying-Ying joked.

"Old grandmothers are fiercer than you," said General Liu, with the intention of provoking her, but Ying-Ying only wanted to laugh. "Now pretend my hand is the face of the person you hate most in the world."

Ying-Ying tried to remember the face of the man who raped her, but at the moment, she could think of nothing but General Liu's kindness. It made her heart ache to see him bracing himself for her punch, as if she might actually hurt him.

"I can't... I can't hit you."

"Then pretend I'm your annoying little brother. My three older sisters used to hit me all the time."

Ying-Ying smiled, imagining a younger General Liu getting abused by his sisters. She swung at him playfully, but he dodged her hand. When she tried again, he easily deflected her blow and she lost balance, falling sideways into a small puddle of mud.

She sat up, expecting him to rush to her aid, but he didn't move.

"Get up!"

She scrambled onto her feet, ashamed it even crossed her mind that he might get his hands dirty to help someone like her. One side of her skirt was covered in mud.

"Hit me again."

Ying-Ying caught her breath and lunged, determined to prove to him that she wasn't as weak as he made her believe. She missed. Then she spun around and leaned her weight into her fist.

"Remember to swing your body and don't lock your joints! Again!"

She did, but failed. He was too quick for her. She wondered why he didn't just stand still, if he wanted her to hit him so badly. Was he teasing her because he found her clumsiness amusing?

"Scream!" he told her. "Scream loudly and hit me!"

Now she was certain he was making fun of her, but she didn't care anymore. She had already made a fool of herself and felt like screaming anyway.

She gave a piercing cry, hardly believing that she could produce such a savage sound, and threw herself at him. This time, her fist sank into his hand, and his feet slid a fraction of an inch across the dirt.

When Ying-Ying looked up, General Liu was watching her with an almost wistful gleam in his eye. He gave her a praising nod. "You could have been a warrior," he said. "Now let's see what you can do with a weapon."

He untied the small dagger from his belt and handed it to her, still in its sheath.

It was heavier than it looked, and there were four pieces of jade set in the elaborate bronze handle, although they once had been six—one had fallen out from each side. She gingerly drew it out, terrified that she might drop it on her foot. The blade was curved at the tip and sharp enough to kill.



"How many—" Ying-Ying began.

"I use it to cut fruits," said General Liu, laughing. "But I can let you hold my sword later."

He helped her tie the scabbard to her sash and showed her how to handle the knife, how to slice and thrust in the most effective manner. He would hold her hands in his own, molding them until he was satisfied. Ying-Ying soon forgot he was a General, once pointing the blade between his eyes, twice coming close to slicing off his hair, giggling and pulling him to his feet whenever he pretended to be wounded. At times, it felt like they were dancing.

Then the sun's rays through the poplar trees turned fiery red, and Ying-Ying remembered that she wasn't supposed to be there. Her clothes were covered in mud and loose strands of her hair stuck to her face. She paused to fix her skirt, which had slipped, glancing at General Liu—who stood his ground, awaiting her next move—and slipped the dagger back in its sheath.

He ran up to her and gripped her by the shoulders, which only confirmed her belief that coming out here with him was a mistake. "Ying-Ying, what's wrong? Are you tired?"

"We shouldn't be doing this. A man and a woman shouldn't be alone like this."

"But no one can see us. And even if they do, I'm a respectable warrior and you're a respectable woman and we're practicing martial arts. If they want to think it's anything more than that, then it's their problem and not ours."

"General Liu, I don't know how much you know about me," said Ying-Ying, looking away, "but I'm not a respectable woman."

"Why not?" he urged, shaking her. "What happened to you wasn't your fault. Those who can't see that are just blinded by their own arrogance and stupidity."

Ying-Ying raised a hand to hide her face, but he wouldn't let her. "It isn't just that. There's something else."

"What?"

"I—" She swallowed. What use was lying when she had nothing left to hide? She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I have feelings for you."

For a long time, General Liu didn't move, and Ying-Ying began to think he hadn't heard her. But then he answered, in a whisper even softer than hers: "And why can't you have feelings for me? Am I not worthy of your affection?"

He patted Ying-Ying's tears away with his sleeve and embraced her. She sighed, leaning against the cool leather scales of his armor, wondering if she'll ever feel so content again.

"Our camp is moving forward tomorrow," he told her. "We've secured the southern borders. But I'll come see you again when the war is over."

"Don't come back. With your reputation, you could marry any woman of your choosing. Find the woman you love and marry her."

"If I could do that, I would marry you."

Ying-Ying frowned, pulling away. "You shouldn't say that. What about the woman you told me about? The one who can wield a spear? Don't you love her?"

General Liu reached between them and touched Ying-Ying's cheek. His usually steady fingers trembled, which frightened her. "I have a secret to tell you," he murmured. "I know you won't tell anyone because you're a kind-hearted girl, but I also want you to know so you won't miss me when I'm gone."

Ying-Ying held her breath, waiting for him to tell her the terrible secret—perhaps that he had slaughtered women and babies; or worse, that he was a demon in disguise, sent from the Underworld to lure her, while the real General Liu was already dead.

"I'm sterile. It would be unfair for the girl I marry and her family."

Ying-Ying cupped her mouth, shocked. But at the same time, this news comforted her and made her love the General more. She took General Liu's hand from her face and clasped in her own. "You're wrong," she said, surprised by the conviction in her own voice. "The girl you marry would be the happiest girl in the world, knowing that her children would have been brave and kind and intelligent, like their father. They would make her proud, even in another world."

His adoring gaze made her dizzy with happiness, and for a moment, she worried she would faint. Just when she thought she couldn't be any happier, he bent down and touched her forehead with his lips. "Ying-Ying... just like a budding cherry blossom. How I wish I could remain here with you."

As he untied his horse and prepared the saddle, she began to remove the dagger from her

waist, but he held out a hand to stop her.

"Keep it," he said. "It was my father's. His father gave it to him when he was a boy and he gave it to me. Since I can't give it to my son, I want you to have it."

They rode out of the forest just in time to see the beautiful red sun graze the edge of the earth. Ying-Ying sighed, clutching the strong arms that held the reins and encircled her waist. But as they got closer to the wineshop, she sensed that something was wrong.

The horse slowed to a trot and Ying-Ying stiffened. General Liu abruptly withdrew his arms.

Ying-Ying's mother was waiting by the stable. Even from the distance in the dim red light, Ying-Ying could see her eyes brimming with tears of shame and disapproval—her arms hung loosely at her sides and her back seemed more hunched than before.

Ying-Ying jumped off the horse and ran toward her, but her mother turned away and headed for the kitchen.

"Don't follow me!" she spat. "I don't want to see you!"

She slammed the door. Ying-Ying heard the door lock and sank to the ground.

Another figure was coming in her direction from their living quarters. It was Mei, her pretty face red with tears and slap marks. "Big sister!" she screamed. "Don't be angry! Please don't be angry!" She clung to Ying-Ying, sobbing. "She didn't believe me. I told her you went to pick mushrooms, but she knew I was lying, and I had to tell her the truth. I'm bad, bad, bad...."

Suddenly, she let go and began to hit herself. Ying-Ying grabbed her hands and pinned them behind her, pulling her wailing sister into her arms.

When Ying-Ying looked up, she found General Liu gazing at them with a blank expression. Dressed in armor with his red horse and the sunset behind him, he was like a magnificent bronze statue.

He walked past them and stopped at the kitchen door. Then he removed his helmet, dusted it off, and knocked three times on the door. "Madam Zhang, Liu Yang is here to apologize to you," he addressed. "Please allow him to explain." The door opened a crack and he went inside, closing it behind him.

Mei lifted her face from Ying-Ying's shoulder and stared at the empty porch.

They were inside for a long time. Mei and Ying-Ying waited, holding each other. The birds flew home to their nests and the sun disappeared behind the trees, but General Liu still did not come out.

Finally, he appeared and came toward them. They watched him expectantly, but he said nothing, brushing Ying-Ying's neck with the back of his warm hand before making his way to the horse. He put on his helmet, jumped onto his horse, and rode away without looking back.

A moment later, their mother also walked out. They could tell she had been crying.

"Ma!" Ying-Ying called. "Are you all right?"

Their mother looked from one daughter to the other, moving her lips, but no sound came out. She appeared stunned.

"Ma, what happened?" said Ying-Ying again. Her voice cracked. Mei was squeezing her so hard that Ying-Ying could barely breathe.

"He asked me if he could marry you."

They all fell silent. To Ying-Ying, it was as if time had stopped.

Then, without warning, their mother knelt on the ground and embraced both her daughters at once. She wept; and they all wept together—for their dead father, for Ying-Ying's lost innocence, for Mei's future in a strange new home.

After a while, Mei tore herself from her mother's grasp. "Well, what did you tell him?" she asked impatiently, unable to contain herself.

"What do you think I said, you stupid child?" her mother snapped. "Of course, I said yes."

They already knew that General Liu would be too busy meeting with the other commanders to return for dinner, but Ying-Ying's mother insisted on decorating the wineshop with red posters and paper lanterns. When asked if there was any special occasion that night, Ying-Ying only replied that the decorations were a gesture of gratitude to the warriors, who would be leaving soon to defend other parts of their kingdom.

After all the customers left, Ying-Ying cleaned up the dishes and went to bathe. Then she returned to her room. She didn't see her sister there and assumed Mei had gone to see their mother, so she took the dagger General Liu gave her off the muddy sash she had been wearing earlier and examined it under the bright light.

"What's that?"

Ying-Ying quickly sheathed the knife and hid it under her sleeve, but Mei had already seen what it was.

"Stop sneaking in all the time!" Ying-Ying laughed.

Mei's eyes grew very wide. "Did he give that to you? Let me see it!"

"You can look, but don't play with it," said Ying-Ying, handing the dagger to her reluctantly. "It's dangerous."

"Wow," Mei whispered, appearing rather comical with the hilt so close to her face. "It's so beautiful. He must love you so much."

Ying-Ying snatched it back from her. "Okay, you've seen enough. Go to sleep."

"But I want you to show me some martial arts!"

"I don't know any martial arts."

"Well, what did General Liu teach you today? Unless... you two weren't..."

"Mei!" Ying-Ying's ears grew hot as she realized what was on her little sister's mind.

"Then show me!"

"All right," said Ying-Ying, putting the dagger down and sitting cross-legged on the bed. "First, you have to meditate and find your inner balance." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, making exaggerated gestures with her arms.

General Liu had said nothing of 'inner balance', whatever that meant, but it sounded pretty awesome. After all, even with her eyes closed, Ying-Ying could see the expression of fascination of Mei's face, and that was impressive in and of itself.

"Hah!" Her eyes flew open and she raised one arm straight in the air, as if about to slice an opponent in half. She began to make dart-like motions in Mei's direction.

Mei doubled over with laughter and Ying-Ying pretended to attack her, grabbing her stomach.

"Tickle attack!"

"Hey, that's not fair!" Mei squealed, kicking and trying to grab Ying-Ying's flying hands. "You're making this up!"

"How would you know?"

A while later, Mei lay very still on the bed, tired and defeated. "Will you miss him?" she murmured sleepily.

"Yes." Ying-Ying stroked her lovely head and watched her eyes flutter closed.

"Will you climb atop the big hill every day and look for him?"

Ying-Ying grinned and tweaked Mei's nose. "Maybe."

"You have to let down your hair when you do it. That way, he can see you from miles away."

"Where do you get these crazy ideas?"

Mei didn't answer and Ying-Ying thought she was asleep. But a moment later, she spoke again: "Big sister, I'm so happy for you..."

Ying-Ying sighed and picked up the dagger, moving it to the space behind her pillow. She blew out the lamp and slipped under her blanket, pulling it up to her neck, picturing herself standing before General Liu on their wedding day. She wondered what his parents were like. What if they didn't approve of her and tried to make her life miserable? But they had given birth to such a gentle and brilliant son, so they must have been wonderful people too.

Then she realized something terrible. What if he never came back? What if he found another girl who would be just as happy to marry him, but was still a virgin? Or worse, what if he died in battle?

Just as she was about to torment herself with all the most awful scenarios, she heard a soft tapping noise outside. She rolled over and pulled the blankets tighter around herself, hoping it was just her imagination, but she heard it again—a very deliberate rapping—coming from the door.

Was it him? But he was probably getting ready to move out soon. Ying-Ying grabbed her knife and tip-toed to the door, pressing her ear to the wood.

"A stranger knocks on your door in the middle of the night," someone whispered through the crack. "You don't know who it could be. Do you have your dagger with you?"

Ying-Ying slid to the floor, laughing silently with glee and relief. Then she unlocked the door and peeked out. "General Liu, what are you doing here?"

The General was sitting on her porch, his head propped against the wall of the house. "I can't sleep. I had to see you again."

Ying-Ying made sure Mei was still asleep before taking General Liu's outstretched hand and slipping through the door. He looked at her with his unwavering gaze, and for some reason Ying-Ying couldn't stop smiling—she had to keep pursing her lips to hide her front teeth. When she tried to turn away, he trapped her against the wall between his arms.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, looking at his mouth so she wouldn't have to meet his eye.

"I know," he murmured. "But once I'm gone, who knows when I can come back?" He cupped her face in one hand, caressing her jaw with his thumb.

She leaned into his touch. "How long has it been since you've seen your family?"

"In two weeks, it will be eight years."

"Wow," Ying-Ying breathed. She couldn't imagine being separated from her family for so long. "You must miss them so much. Being a man must be hard in a time like this." She was babbling, thinking all the while that she had to keep talking somehow, although she wasn't sure why.

At this, General Liu smiled a little. "Being a woman is never easy."

"Well, it's not so bad," said Ying-Ying. He was standing so close that she couldn't think. "Women can sometimes cry and people will understand. Like my mother, who rarely cries—what did you tell her to make her cry like that?"

"I asked her for your hand."

"But how—"

It took her a moment to realize that his mouth was touching hers and that she had stopped breathing. But he soon broke the kiss, pressing their foreheads together. "Forgive me," he gasped. "I've wanted to do that for so long... I don't think I could have waited..."

"You haven't done anything wrong." Ying-Ying reached around him, putting her hands on the back of his neck. Ten thousand emotions battled within her, but love was winning. She could finally admit it—she was madly in love with General Liu, ever since he'd first set foot in their little wineshop over two years ago; ever since he'd devoured each modest meal like it was the best meal he ever had; ever since Ying-Ying had first noticed his shy gaze, meant only for her, despite his knowledge of her past. "It's my own fault for trying to lure you."

"Are you really trying to lure me?"

"No—I don't know. I'm a bad woman."

"No, you're too good," said General Liu, to her surprise and confusion. He grabbed her by the waist. "Follow me."

"But my little sister—"

"There's no one else nearby, and we won't be away for long."

He led Ying-Ying to the stable, where her old horse was fast asleep in her usual alcove and his red mare was resting in one corner against a sack of wheat. She looked up as her master removed her saddle cover, then lowered her head again.

General Liu spread the tapestry on the soft ground. "Sit down," he said. He also sat down, beside Ying-Ying. "I don't want you to think badly of yourself, but I also want you to be happy..."

It was dark, except for the moonlight shining through the cracks in the roof and walls. Ying-Ying could see the faint outline of his cheekbone, the glow of his hair and eyelashes, the glint in his eye. "I don't understand—"

General Liu cut her off with another kiss, once more stealing her breath away. There were tears on her face, but he brushed them away with the back of his calloused fingers. He loosened her long braid and ran his hand through her hair, pushing it back, kissing the lovely curve of her ear and down her neck.

A familiar feeling stirred in her breast, like it did a few nights ago before the mirror. She wrapped her arms around him, ignoring the discomfort of his hard leather armor against her body, thinking only of his deft fingers and soft lips.

He pressed his mouth to the sensitive area under her neck, close to the edge of her robes, and she froze. The last man who had touched her there had grasped the opening of her dress and stripped the fabric from her body, tearing away her bindings underneath. She felt only fear and repulsion then, but now she desired General Liu to do what the man had done, and she hated herself for it.

Her breasts were unbound under her thin robes. All she had to do was loosen her sash and reveal them.

"Can I see my future wife?" he asked softly, as if he had read her mind.

When she didn't object, he reached for her robe, moving the fabric aside to reveal one breast, round and pale in the silvery light. She shivered from the exposure, but soon his warm hand was against her, and she began to shiver for a whole different reason.

He kneaded her doughy breast, supporting her back with his other arm, and whatever fears and doubts she had earlier quickly resided. She felt his short hot breaths against her neck and her hand found his wrist, running up and down the length of his arm and feeling the hard muscles

twitch through his sleeve. Her breast started to feel sore and a strange sound escaped her.

General Liu licked Ying-Ying's lower lip, eliciting another noise from her, before slipping his tongue inside her mouth.

He tasted surprisingly sweet. Their mouths melded together, warm and wet and wanting. Just as his tongue found hers, Ying-Ying had the sudden urge to urinate. She shrank away, gasping and clenching her legs, thinking that she had wet herself.

"Don't be ashamed," he cooed breathlessly, cradling her. "You're so beautiful."

It was the second time he had ever called her beautiful, and this time, she believed him. Her body slackened and she gave into his touch again, resting her head under his chin, feeling like the most adored and spoiled girl in the world.

Then, to her horror, he reached under her robes, where she could still feel the moisture between her legs. She gave an involuntary cry, and he abruptly withdrew his hand, murmuring his apologies and pressing little kisses to her ear.

"Shhh, shhh... don't be frightened. I only wanted to touch your little flower petal, if you would let me. I would never hurt you."

He made it sound so innocent and sacred. Ever since Ying-Ying was a little girl, her mother had warned her to never let a man touch her there, or no one would ever love her and she would remain alone for the rest of her life. But now she was engaged to a man who would soon be going far away—a dangerous and unyielding man in battle, but sterile and harmless to her. Wouldn't it be all right for him—and him alone—to touch her?

"I don't want you to look," she whispered.

"All right. I won't look."

"Let me wipe myself first."

She thought she could see him smiling kindly at her in the dark. "No, don't," he said, laying a firm hand over the lower part of her stomach, against the fabric of her robe. "Just imagine that you are a queen in the sky, where no human can see or reach you, and my hand is like Heaven's throne."

Ying-Ying giggled as he lifted her by the hips and straddled her over his legs. The breeze tickled her groin and breasts, but his hand flew under her and she felt hot again. Then he pushed against her, steady, encouraging, almost lifting her. She gasped, enveloping his hand in her silky folds. When she relaxed, he rubbed his palm against her in a slow sensual rhythm, and she was reminded of the wings of a large bird in flight. She moaned and sank down, feeling very weak, wondering what was happening to her.

While he continued to rub her in circles, he raised her hand to his lips, sucking on each finger until she curled them against his face, trembling. He pressed wet kisses to her palm, over and over, and she really began to think she was in Heaven. With feather-light fingers, she touched his nose, his ears, lingering over his beautiful phoenix eyes.

He opened them, cupped one of her breasts with his free hand, and took her delicate nipple into his mouth. Ying-Ying arched her back and stroked his smooth face with both hands, and he sighed against her breast, watching her through his long lashes as he suckled her sweetly.

His armor had become a nuisance. She had an urge to rip away all the layers that separated them, but feared what she might find. Maybe she could just remove his shirt and leave his pants on, she thought, tugging at the string that held his cloak.

The heavy cloak easily fell away, but she couldn't take off his armor. Her nipple slid from his mouth, drawing from him a silk-like string of saliva. General Liu gave her a peck on the lips and

removed his hand from between her legs. She whimpered, missing him already, squirming against his muscular thighs as he licked a strange pearly fluid from his fingers. Then he gave her cheek a reassuring pat before lifting away his armor and pulling her into his arms, placing his hand back under her.

Ying-Ying pressed against him, delighted by the soft fabric against her tender breasts, even thinking for a moment that she could smell flowers in his clothes. She untied the sash at his waist and pushed his thick robes back, and they fell to the ground, on top of his cloak.

But when she grabbed a handful of his shirt, hoping to bring it over his head, he guided her hand away in his own. "I have scars."

"That's okay; I've dressed lots of wounds before."

He kissed the corner of her lips. "I've never been with a woman. It makes me self-conscious to take off my clothes in front of you."

Ying-Ying's hand fell back into her lap and she lowered her head. General Liu did not say more after that, but continued to kiss and fondle her.

She felt guilty for reminding him that he wasn't her first, so she told him: "You're the first man I've ever loved."

"I'm honored," the General whispered, to her relief, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. He rubbed her faster.

She whimpered, clinging to him. Her groin throbbed, leaking onto his hand—as much as she tried to hold it in—but he didn't seem to mind at all, nibbling at her earlobe.

Suddenly, he stopped moving. Ying-Ying almost cried out in agony, grinding against him. "I'll remove my shirt if you let me kiss you down there," he said.

She tingled all over at his bold request. "You said you wouldn't look."

"Can I look now?"

"It's dirty."

"No, it's not. And if it is, I don't care."

Ying-Ying gave his tunic another tug. "Take this off first."

"What if you don't let me kiss you because I'm too hideous? Let me kiss you first."

He seemed so desperate to kiss her that she started to feel curious about what might be hidden there. "Okay, one kiss," she agreed.

General Liu undid her sash and opened her robe, exposing her entire body. He opened her legs slightly, kissed her between the breasts and down past her belly button, and buried his face in the thick curly hair between her legs. She felt his mouth there, on her most intimate part, lingering, tickling her. He inhaled deeply and a heavenly ache spread from her groin to the rest of her body, but he kept his promise: he pulled away after one kiss, and the sensation faded.

She tugged at his shirt. General Liu sat up and licked his lips, and removed his tunic reluctantly. He had a solid figure and a slim and attractive waist. There were old scars—and newer, half-healed cuts and bruises—in the areas Ying-Ying could see; but his chest was tightly bandaged.

"You're not hideous at all," said Ying-Ying, hardly able to conceal the pleasure in her voice. Her fingers roamed the rich terrain of his back and shoulders. Then she blushed and took back her hand, remembering that she never deserved him in the first place. Was this splendid man really to be her husband? To her surprise, he really did smell like flowers. "You smell so good. Can I see your wounds?"

"You have to promise you won't scream or run away, regardless of what you see."

"I promise," she said. There was no scar in the world that could make her run away from him. He kissed her with his mouth open. She tasted the familiar sweetness in his breath, intoxicating her. His fingers found her privates again while his other hand unraveled the bandages around his chest.



The last of the bandages fell away, but the General continued to kiss her. When she tried to break the kiss, he clasped her to his chest, but instead of hard relentless muscle, she felt another pair of breasts—albeit smaller and firmer—against her own.

She shuddered as the ache between her legs erupted, clamping down on General Liu's hand, muffling her beastly moans against his neck—except he wasn't a man. General Liu was a woman, just like Ying-Ying.

A very strong woman.

Her free arm found its way around Ying-Ying's hips and held them down as they bucked and quivered. When Ying-Ying lifted her face to catch her breath and settled back onto the inviting hand—moist and slippery with her own fluids—she unintentionally took General Liu's finger

inside her, and the convulsions started all over again. Powerless against her own body, but safer than she had ever felt before, she gave in, collapsing into the General's arms.

"You..." she whispered, when her body was still, too exhausted to finish her sentence. Her vision blurred and she felt like she was lying in a field of flowers in Heaven.

They held each other for a long time, but when Ying-Ying finally found the energy to look down, General Liu hurried to hide her chest with her arm. That was when Ying-Ying noticed the crushed cherry petals, scattered over her lithe body.

Had they fallen through the roof from the trees above? But it was autumn. She must have had them under her bindings all along.

"If you hate me now, I don't blame you. I was ready to make you wait for years, for a man who doesn't exist." Her deep quiet voice shook. Ying-Ying could see the outline of her long neck and her face, proud and elegant. Under the pale glow of the moon, she was like a goddess. "And yet, I still have the arrogance now to believe that you might forgive me out of kindness."

What was there to forgive? Women could not fight in battle, but that crime was not for Ying-Ying to forgive, and no one ever said a woman could not love another woman. Yet General Liu was quick to assume Ying-Ying's love would turn to hate. Was there some sort of unspoken rule? The more Ying-Ying thought about it, the more she began to think they had done something forbidden, but her heart was too full and tired to feel any regret.

General Liu eventually lowered her arm and Ying-Ying's face grew warmer at the sight of her nakedness. She was clearly a woman, but her body was strangely beautiful and different from the other women Ying-Ying knew, reshaped by so many years of living as a man. Ying-Ying traced the curve of those delicate breasts—still tender from being so tightly bound—then the hard well-defined muscles below them. She felt General Liu's hand cover her own, and she closed her eyes, nestling her cheek on the General's left breast, right over her heart.

"I need to go back soon," said General Liu. She drew Ying-Ying's robe around her neck, cradling her smaller, softer body. "We're moving out before dawn. And your sister needs you to protect her."

Ying-Ying mumbled incoherently, already half asleep.

General Liu combed her long hair with her fingers, tied her robes for her, and pressed her lips to Ying-Ying's temple. "I shouldn't ask, but do you still love me?"

"Mm."

"Then will you still wait for me when I'm gone?" she asked, close to Ying-Ying's ear, and held her breath.

"Don't go," Ying-Ying murmured. She only wanted to sleep, to wake up later in her beloved's embrace and watch the sun rise and set. And still, she would remain with her.

"You're mine—my little cherry blossom. I promise I'll be back for you. Don't run off with a man, okay? He won't love you the way I do. And don't tell anyone my secret, or I'll kill myself."

Ying-Ying had a dream that night: she was sleeping on the branch of a poplar tree, its large leaves tickling her body. The sun occasionally shone through, warm against her bare skin. She could hear the whisper of a sword nearby.

She woke up the next morning in her own bed, with no memory of how she got there. The dagger General Liu had given her was still next to her pillow. The sun was already out, Mei had gone to feed the animals, and her mother would soon yell at her for oversleeping.

But Ying-Ying remained in bed, stretching contentedly, feeling happier than ever, until she noticed a yellowing strip of cloth tied to her wrist in an elegant knot.

It was a piece of the ribbon that General Liu used to bind her chest. On one end of the cloth, General Liu had written her name—劉楊—in her flowing script with dark red ink and a blade of grass. *Yang*, the character for poplar—not the character for the sun, as the rest of the world knew her.

Ying-Ying held it to her face and inhaled the familiar sweet scent of cherry blossoms, mingled with sweat and blood, and tears came to her eyes. How many tales of Liu Yang's victories would reach her from distant lands? How many more years would pass before Ying-Ying could see her again?

She sat at the edge of the sleeping mat and hugged herself, imagining that it was General Liu's arms around her. She wondered what the General would look like in a long red dress, with jewels and flowers in her hair; General Liu must have been a very beautiful and proud woman.

Remembering that she was also a woman, Ying-Ying sat up a little straighter and drew her hair into a bun. Then she put on her dress and slippers, tied up her sleeves, and began her morning chores.



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War Bonds

by shukyou (主教)

illustrated by serenity_winner

It was the war's fault that she was there, in dungarees and with all her wavy red hair tied back in a kerchief, her hands grubby in the crevices of her knuckles and palms, holding pneumatic tools she hadn't known had existed two weeks before, wearing a gold locket with Tom's picture in it the way his letters promised he kept what few pictures he had of her wedged in the crevices of the metal that held his bunk to the wall. The war was responsible for how the nails she'd always kept so nice were ragged at the tips and cuticles, and rimmed around and beneath with heavy black-brown grease; the war was why she came home to an empty house and cooked supper for one and jumped in the middle of the night at every unexplained noise and sometimes stayed awake until dawn, hugging Tom's pillow to her chest and telling herself it was going to be all right.

She wouldn't complain; she was a good girl who never complained. She just wanted God and the rest of the universe to be clear on the point of the matter of her suffering. She had done nothing wrong; it was the war.

She wouldn't even blame the Germans, even though all the posters and politicians told her to. She'd never much had a head for things like this, anyway, and even though she didn't doubt what the newspapers and newsreels told her, she suspected it was all more complicated than that. When she'd been home in California, it had been the Japanese's fault, and now here in New Jersey, it was the Germans', and after a while she'd come to the conclusion that fault was a complicated thing. So she did her part for the war effort, and in doing so she imagined that every rivet she tightened wasn't going toward stopping Germans or stopping Japanese, but stopping war. Thus she remained cheerful and steadfast.

But she was only human, which was how she missed the last bus on the day she couldn't leave the washroom because she was concentrating too hard on crying without making a sound. The long chain that held the locket with Tom's picture also kept her wedding ring safe while she was on the job, and she gripped them both so hard that they left marks in her palm as she pushed a wadded-up ball of toilet tissue to her mouth and nose, muffling her sobs until long after she'd heard all the other women leave. She couldn't let them see her like that, even though she didn't know them that well; she couldn't go out without wearing the same brave face the rest of them did.

At last, she pulled herself together and blew her nose, then transferred the ring from the chain to her finger again. She washed her face, hoping the cold water would take away the red blotches that had swallowed the freckles on her pale face. It didn't, but she supposed it was all right. She'd never been what the boys had called a pretty girl anyway, and now the only person she had to look pretty for was in some great grey ship a million miles from her, so she told her reflection that it didn't matter and walked away before her vanity could get the best of her.

By the time she made her way outside, the sun had already disappeared behind the factory buildings, and the shuttle bus that took the navy wives from the base to the factory and back had long since departed. That alone nearly brought her to tears again, except that that *had* been her

fault, and she'd had enough self-pity for the day. Her feet throbbed in her too-large borrowed work boots, and her joints ached from the memory of the machinery's rattle, but she could still walk, so she would. Four miles to the base, and another two to the house the Navy had assigned Tom when he'd gotten married, where they'd lived together as husband and wife five weeks and four days before he'd shipped out six months ago. She'd use the time to compose a letter to Tom, and she'd eat last night's dinner cold at the table while she wrote it out on the stiff stationery Tom's sister had given her as a wedding present. And then tomorrow she'd get up and do it all again, because she had to, because of the war.

She'd barely made it in sight of the factory's gate when she heard the roar of an engine, and she turned in time to see a motorcycle round the corner. Startled, she staggered back and nearly tripped into the ditch by the side of the road, and as she looked back after finding her footing again, the motorcycle stopped beside her. Its rider dropped the kickstand on the bike and pulled her goggles up around the brim of her helmet. "You're Patty, right? You need a ride?"



Truth be told, all she'd wanted to do when the motorcycle had pulled up in front of her house was to go inside and fall over, but it had seemed beyond rude *not* to invite her savior in for supper, and if there was one thing Patty had been raised not to be, it was rude.

Actually having Lou at the kitchen table, though, made Patty's hands tremble as she put the roast in the oven to heat. "I'm sorry if it's not any good," she said, adjusting the dial. It *was* good, Patty knew, as she'd made it Sunday and made a plate of it for herself every night since, but she was plain and liked plain things. Lou, however, had dark hair pinned back in a very modern style and rode a motorcycle and spoke with an east coast accent and wore lipstick the shade of a ripe tomato, and thus was probably used to things far more cosmopolitan than Patty's mother's pot

roast recipe.

But Lou just smiled and shook her head. "It smells delicious already. Mrs. Kingsley -- it's her boarding house, and she runs it like the Kaiser -- cooks for us girls, but she's lost all her tastebuds, if she ever had any in the first place."

"Oh," said Patty, smoothing her apron; she'd excused herself after they'd arrived home to change out of her work clothes. She supposed she'd had no reason to assume all the girls at the factory were military wives, but then again, she'd had no real reason to assume they weren't. "So you're not married?"

Lou shook her head again, sending her soft curls brushing back and forth over her shoulders. "Not even a steady. Yours is overseas, I take it."

"Literally," said Patty, and when Lou frowned, she clarified, "stationed on an aircraft carrier."

"Oh, *over*-- I get it." Lou laughed, and Patty had to keep reminding herself not to stare. It was like she'd opened her front door and invited some exotic animal to dinner, a giraffe or a zebra, something slender and delicate that Patty had only ever seen in grainy newsreels from darkest Africa. She was astonishing, as narrow as Patty was round, and looking nothing like she'd just finished a full day assembling war machinery. Even her mouth was captivating, and Patty wanted to sit across from her at the table and just watch those painted red lips form words.

This was, Patty supposed, what happened to girls who grew up without many friends: they became strange women and terrible hosts. "Can I ... would you like something to drink?" She tried to think of what her mother, herself a military wife, would have done, confronted with the prospect of entertaining guests. "I ... well, there's no tea made, but I could make some, or coffee, or maybe some lemonade; there's no milk delivery today, if that changes your opinion on the coffee or the tea, or..." She trailed off, trying to think what else she might have to offer.

"Tea's fine, coffee's fine. Anything's fine, really." Lou folded her hands atop the table; even though they were short and chipped at the tips, they were as red as her lipstick. "Or something stronger, if you have it."

Patty couldn't stop how wide her eyes went at that, and she blushed as Lou laughed again. "No, I mean, I just don't know if--"

"Honey, it's fine, I'm sorry. You're already so sweet to have me over. I guess I'm not very good at being a dinner guest."

"No, no, you're--" Patty took a deep breath and sat down in the chair opposite Lou, keeping the small, square, butter-yellow formica table between them. "You're just the first guest I've had. Here. Ever. So it's probably just that I'm not a very good host."

When she looked up, she expected to see something in Lou's worldly, motorcycle-riding eyes -- pity, most likely, or maybe even disapproval at what an ill-mannered woman she'd had the poor fortune to come across. Instead, though, she found Lou reaching for her, moving to take Patty's hand in her own slender fingers, which were shockingly cold. "Make a deal with me, you won't tell anyone how bad I am at this and I won't tell anyone how bad you are at this, and we'll go to our graves letting everyone else think we're normal?"

For the first time since she'd watched the horizon until long after Tom's ship disappeared over its edge, Patty felt an unfamiliar noise choke forth from her chest and realized it was the sound of her own laughter. "Our secret," she promised, and she squeezed Lou's hand back.

She'd seen Lou at the factory before, of course -- Lou was hard to miss, as she was loud and

funny and always surrounded during breaks by a crowd of the younger, more daring women. Frankly, what had shocked Patty most about Lou's first offer of a ride hadn't been the offer itself, but that it had been accompanied by Lou's knowing Patty's name.

Patty had operated the majority of her life under the assumption that she was, for all intents and purposes, invisible. It hadn't been her family's fault, of course; her father and four older brothers, all military men themselves, weren't shy in their adoration of her, and her mother loved her only daughter and all the things she could do with a girl that had been denied her with her boys. But they'd all been loud and she'd been quiet by nature, and as she'd grown older and the family figure that was 'husky' on her brothers and 'chubby' on her had earned her the nickname of 'Fatty Patty', she'd decided that her best course of action was not to draw attention to herself.

But Tom had thought she was beautiful from the start. He'd passed by her thinner, prettier friends at the USO dance and gone straight to her, and when she'd said she wasn't really comfortable dancing, he'd sat with her and talked for hours until she'd at last agreed to let him try to take her out on the floor. He was tall and lanky, and the top of her head barely came to the middle of his chest, but he'd spun her around as gracefully as though they'd been made to fit one another, and by the time he'd walked her home and kissed her good-night on her porch, she'd known she was in love.

Six weeks later they'd been married, and less than six weeks after that he'd been gone, meaning that now she'd been apart from him twice as long as she'd been with him. She didn't regret an inch of it, but that didn't stop her from getting so lonely she felt Tom's absence as though he'd taken with him some part of her chest. She'd thought she could keep this all to herself, and indeed she had done just that for months, not even mentioning it in her letters to her mother beyond variations on 'I miss him, but I'm doing fine.'

Lou, though, was the pin that, removed from the machine, made it all fall apart. Ten minutes after the roast had come out of the oven, Patty had found herself talking out her loneliness over five-day-old leftovers, and Lou had listened to every word. The next day, when the girls all took lunch, Patty looked up from her sack of cold cuts on white bread to find that Lou had taken the seat across from her. The next week, Lou sat with her every day and gave her a ride home from work twice more, and much to her shy surprise, Patty found she'd made a friend.

"He's handsome," said Lou, looking at the framed photographs Patty had placed atop the bookshelf. One was of Tom alone, looking stern into the camera as the photographer captured his uniformed likeness for the US Navy's official records; in the other he wore the same dull dress uniform as he did in the first, but in this one he beamed as he wrapped his arms around Patty, who had just seconds before promised to love, honour, and obey him in her new role as Mrs. Thomas White. "I promise, I won't try to steal him, but if he weren't yours ... well, I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating crackers."

"Is that ... something people do?" Patty set her grandmother's silver tea service on the coffee table in the den, then smoothed out her skirt beneath her as she sat on the couch. She didn't think much of hot tea in the afternoon herself, but it had been what her mother had insisted upon whenever they'd had visitors over after Sunday morning church, and Patty was bound and determined to continue that fine tradition. She'd been to church herself that morning and played the piano for the Sunday school choir, which she preferred to sitting through even the most well-meaning of the dull chaplain's sermons about defending the faith and keeping the home fires burning.

"Just an expression, honey." With a laugh, Lou sat opposite her in one of the den's plush

armchairs. Patty had made none of the decor choices herself, and in fact found whatever stylist had designed the standard base housing to have far too severe of an eye for her taste, but she couldn't fault how soft those chairs were, even if she'd *never* have chosen to upholster them in white. Twice a month the base inspectors came around to make sure that everything was shipshape, which also meant critiquing her cleaning. "You must miss him terribly."

Patty nodded as she poured the tea into the cups and added two cubes of sugar to hers, a slice of lemon for Lou's. "All the time." She ran her left thumb over the plain gold band on her ring finger; Tom had promised he'd get her something better someday, and she allowed that promise because she knew it would make him happy, but deep down her plain heart she hoped he never did.

Lou smirked, her red lips a wicked fingernail-moon over the horizon of her cup. "Especially at night, hm?"

"It *is* a little troubling sometimes, with a new house and--" Patty stopped mid-sentence and caught the way Lou was looking at her, and her cheeks went pink to beat the sunrise. "Oh! Oh, you mean--" She brought her hands up to the sides of her fire-warm face, though she couldn't beat down the giggles Lou had drawn out of her. "Oh, you *are* terrible! And on Sunday!"

With a laugh, Lou recrossed her legs, and Patty couldn't help staring. They'd only seen one another before during and after work, and as such, Patty's entire understanding of Lou's body had been tempered by how she looked in factory attire and the way she felt as Patty wrapped her arms around Lou's waist and pressed her cheek into the soft leather of her jacket as they drove. She'd shown up for this social call, however, in a bright red dress with a sharp boat-neckline and a pencil skirt that rode above her knees when she sat, revealing her miles of slender legs beneath. "Babies get made on Sundays same as any other day," Lou laughed, wiggling her dark eyebrows.

The quip had been meant as a joke, she knew, with not a hint of malice or venom in it -- but something about it broadsided Patty, and instead of laughing along, she burst into an unheralded flood of tears. "Oh, shit, sweetheart!" Lou flailed her free hand for a moment, then set down her teacup, grabbed the cloth napkins from the tray, and came around the coffee table to sit beside Patty; she draped one arm around Patty's shoulders and dabbed at her cheeks with the lacy cloth. "Oh, Christ, honey, don't cry. Don't cry."

"It's--" Patty gripped the napkins in her hands and pressed them to her eyes, trying to steady her breathing as Lou rubbed circles against her back. She wanted to say *something*, to promise Lou that it was all right, to apologize for having come with her own minefield, but none of her wants managed to make it into action. Instead, she let Lou tug her close and placed her head on Lou's shoulder as she cried, sobbing out all the fears she'd managed thus far to swallow down both around others and alone. Of course she'd cried when she'd gone to see Tom's ship off, she same way she'd cried the night before as he'd made love to her and promised her he'd be thinking of her all the time: controlled grief, just enough to let him know that he'd be missed, not enough to make him worry that she'd fall apart without him. Now, though, in Lou's arms she was a wreck, and that was rude and horrible of her, to take this lady she didn't even know that well and mortify them both by turning into this blubbery, sniffing mess.

Lou kissed her hair. "I am *so* sorry." She smelled exotic, like some French perfume or powder Patty had never considered herself fancy enough to try. "It's all right. Shh, it's going to be all right."

Patty clenched her hand into a fist until the ache of the gesture drew her back into some semblance of control, and she forced herself to breathe on command until her hitching sobs

quieted into ragged but even respiration. "I'm *so* sorry," Patty moaned, the noise muffled against the napkin, "I just -- and you -- you didn't--"

"Shh. It's okay. It's okay, everything's going to be okay." Bless her, despite the mess Patty was making of herself, Lou never once let her go. "You cry your eyes out if you need to. Our secret."

That, at least, made Patty laugh, though what came out of her mouth was more of a wet snort that even the napkins couldn't muffle. "I just--" She took the napkin away from her mouth and was horrified to see a trail of snot go with it, so much so that she clamped it back to her face and bonked her nose with her fingers, sending a white jolt of pain across her face.

With a tug, Lou helped her to her feet. "Why don't we go get you cleaned up?" she said, and when Patty nodded, Lou walked with her all the way back into the master bathroom.

Several splashes of cold water against her face later, all the makeup she'd put on earlier was gone and her cheeks were a horrible blotchy pink, but Patty was feeling much herself again -- apart from feeling foolish, that was, though she did have to admit, she felt like that much of the time too. "I'm ... just *so* sorry." She combed back a long strand of her bright red hair and pinned it behind her ear where it belonged.

"Quit apologizing. Sounded like that was a long time coming." Leaning in the doorway of the bathroom, Lou folded her arms across her chest. "Was it the baby part?"

Patty shook her head, then sighed and nodded. "We, um ... we tried. Before Tom left. We tried a *lot*. It was what we both wanted -- we both come from big families, and we ... well, we thought...."

"Thought it'd be a little less lonely with a little someone to distract you?"

Satisfied that she looked almost presentable again, Patty nodded at her reflection in the mirror. "I've ... I've only done that, that crying, I've only done it once, and that was ... two weeks after he shipped out, my ... well, my period came, and I...."

"Come on and sit down," said Lou, and when she gave Patty a tug on her sleeve, Patty followed. She expected Lou would lead them out into the front of the house again, and was thus surprised when Lou didn't take her any farther than her bed, where they both sat. "I only ever cry like that when my Aunt Flo *doesn't* show up, but I get where you're coming from anyway. That might be different if I had a man like yours, but ... well, you could say that about any number of things."

Patty spun her wedding band around her finger as Lou talked, and as they sat there together, he embarrassment shifted from being over her crying jag to being over her messy house; she'd overslept that morning and hadn't even made up her bed properly before dashing off to church. "I just, I mean, I can't believe, I invite you over and you're not here five minutes before I'm sobbing all over your pretty dress and showing you what a terrible housekeeper I am."

"Terrible housek--" Lou looked around the room, frowning. "This is bad? Honey, I'd *love* for my place to look this good. Mrs. Kingsley is always getting on me to pick up better and not leave my needles and thread all over the floor. I tell her if she doesn't like it, she can just stay out, but, well, it's like anything else she doesn't want to hear, in one ear and out the other." With the hand that wasn't resting at the small of Patty's back, Lou made an airplane noise and mimed the entrance and exit from her own head of some imaginary thing with an earnestness that made Patty giggle.

"You sew?" Patty asked, looking at Lou's dress. It seemed too perfect to be handmade, but Patty had to admit, she'd seen nothing like it in the stores around here.

Lou nodded and tugged at her hem. "I just finished this this morning, so I feel like every time I

sit down, I find another pin I forgot." As proof of her point, she reached her fingers up along the seam of the skirt that ran up her thigh and pulled out a straight pin, which she deposited on Patty's nightstand. "You'd think I hadn't checked at all, but no, they're just sneaky."

"You really made this?" No wonder it fit her so well, hugging her slender body at all the right angles. The red was the same as her lipstick and fingernails, that perfect bright shade that someone meant when they said 'red' and meant nothing but. Patty brushed the backs of her knuckles up against the fabric, feeling how smooth it was beneath her skin, how warm it was from being so close to Lou's body.

"I like sewing. It relaxes me. And it's cheaper than going to a boutique every time I want a new dress. Before the war, I worked in a dressmaker's shop, but the owner closed it down, so ... I decided to do my part for America." Lou fired off a salute that made Patty giggle again. She'd met people this carefree and funny before, but they'd all been boys -- her brothers, mostly, and her brothers' friends. Lou might easily have been a boy too, if not for how one look at her told the story of how she was every inch a lady.

Patty pointed to one of the three buttons that fastened the front of her dress shut, the one fixed on with thread a darker blue than on the others, because she hadn't been able to find a match in the store. "I *can* sew, but ... mending, mostly. Fixing, not making. ...And I'm not even so good at that."

"Do you have things that need to be fixed now?" asked Lou, and Patty nodded. "Well, just set anything aside in a pile, and I'll come over sometime and do it."

The enormity of the offer took a minute for Patty to realize, and when she did, her jaw fell open a little. "Oh, no, I *can't*, that's just too much--"

"Don't be silly. Isn't that what normal ladies are supposed to do, anyway? Don't we get together and sew things and complain about men we know?"

"We quilt, too. I think we quilt. And cook."

Lou laughed and squeezed Patty's knee -- a friendly touch, but there was something electric about it all the same, the way Lou's slender, cold fingers felt through the thin cotton of Patty's dress. "There you go! I'm a terrible cook. I'll come over, you make dinner, I'll fix your clothes, and we'll complain about *something* together. How does that sound?"

"That..." Patty swallowed hard so another bubble of emotion didn't burst in her throat and bring her back to tears. "That sounds amazing."

Though Patty had every intention of moving them back out into the main part of the house, away from the part she thought of as belonging to her and Tom alone, they wound up sitting there for another two hours, laughing and talking, with Lou's hand atop Patty's knee all the while. They chattered on about nothing of substance or any real emotional weight -- work at the factory, movies they'd seen and enjoyed, fashion and hairstyles -- until Patty's stomach rumbled and Lou broke into a fit of giggles. Patty hadn't planned on having Lou stay all the way to dinner, but as she explained while Lou tried to make her apologies, cooking for two was so much better than cooking for one. The meal wound up being canned tomato soup and cheese toast at the kitchen table, and even though Patty promised she hadn't added a thing to it, Lou still swore up and down it was better than when she heated it for herself.

Lou left when twilight had just started to coax the streetlights on, and Patty walked her to the door and hugged her good-night, then stood on the front stoop and watched until long after her motorcycle had sped off into the coming night. Summer well was on its way out, but the weather was warm enough that a few brave crickets still sang. This winter that was coming would be her

first in the northeast, her first away from California, and she shivered to think of what her front lawn would look like covered in snow. She'd have to pay one of the neighbourhood boys a dollar to come clean her walks for her, and maybe to shovel it off her roof if too much fell. Or was that something that even had to be done? What would she have to do to survive a east coast winter on her own?

Or maybe she wouldn't be on her own. Maybe the war would be over by then and Tom would be home, and she'd be standing in the same spot she was now, only bundled up in her coat, watching the plumes of white rise from his mouth as he swung every athletic shovelful of snow away. Since this was her fantasy and she got to say what was what, she folded her hands across her belly where a child would be growing then, hers and Tom's, the start of their family.

Maybe Lou could be there too, helping out as Patty got bigger and bigger and less able to take care of the housework. She seemed so sad, Lou did, and Patty couldn't quite put her finger on why that was true, but it was. She was bright and cheerful and capable of making Patty laugh until she got the hiccups, but beneath those lurked something else just out of Patty's field of vision. When Patty had cried, Lou hadn't tried to shush her or change the subject; Lou had let her cry, had seemed to know why it was important to let her cry. Having someone to take care of might help them both scare that sadness away.

So it was settled, at least in Patty's mind, that Lou would be there then. Tom would like her, no question; they were both so alike, after all, so smart and funny and strong. Hands resting on her stomach, Patty closed her eyes and imagined her house full of people and noise and life.

Some things in Patty's life just happened so fast that it wasn't until they were well underway that she realized they were happening at all. She was going to have to amend that list to include this: standing in her house's second bedroom with the shade drawn, holding up her hair, wearing nothing from the waist up but her brassiere, as Lou wrapped a measuring tape around various dimensions of her anatomy. "You have *such* beautiful soft skin," said Lou as her hands stretched the tape measure along the distance between the far ends of Patty's shoulders.

"I don't do anything to it," said Patty, trying not to shiver as Lou's cold hands brushed over her flesh. "Well, I *do* take baths a lot, I suppose."

"That's probably it. I'd *love* a good long soak, but you can never get two minutes in the bathroom at the boarding house before someone's beating down the door trying to do their own business." Lou planted one end of the tape at the nape of Patty's neck and stretched the other down to where the hem of her skirt began, then jotted the number on the little notepad she'd been using. It was full of numbers now, but every time Patty tried to see them, Lou turned the pad over so her measurements were out of sight. "Of course, I had three sisters growing up, so I guess it's a lot like home."

Lou was making Patty a dress, even though Patty had sternly insisted that the *last* thing she needed in the world was a new dress, what was she going to do with it, she didn't have anywhere to wear it anyway, it'd probably just hang in the closet and collect dust. But for every inch of Patty's stubbornness, Lou had three, and thus all her resistance had been called forth in the service of a losing battle.

Despite how appealing the offer of getting together again had sounded, real life just hadn't cooperated: one weekend, Lou had needed to go home to see her mother in Delaware; the next, Patty's period had come again, causing her to declare herself unfit for human company; the one

after that, one of the girls on the base had thrown a bridal shower that Patty knew it would be only neighbourly to attend; the one after *that*, Lou's bike had broken down midway, and she'd had to borrow the phone from the garage to tell Patty, sorry, this wasn't a quick repair. Thus well over a month had passed since their earlier time together, and every day since had only amplified Patty's worry that the closeness she'd felt had been a one-time thing. They'd been together at the factory every workday since, of course, and seeing Lou at lunch brightened each day for Patty -- but everyone was friendly there, and there were other girls around too. Maybe Patty had been so desperate for companionship that she'd dubbed Lou her best friend without much consent on Lou's part.

She needn't have worried. The second Patty had opened the door, Lou had wrapped her in a strong hug and kissed her cheek. Lou had a grey-green duffel swung over her shoulder, and she'd spread its contents out over every empty flat surface in the guest bedroom. Her sewing machine had stayed home on account of its being 'a real bear to lug around', in Lou's words, but she'd still come equipped with more pins and needles and thread and bobbins and scraps of fabric and patches and scissors and what-not than Patty had ever seen in her whole life. And somehow, Lou's working her way through Patty's pile of mending had turned into Lou's declaration that her next project would be something in Patty's size.

"I'm thinking green," Lou said as she placed one end of the tape measure between Patty's fingertips and ran the rest of it up the length of her arm. "And not just some pale spring green. Big bold green. Dark green. Something that sets off that amazing hair of yours."

For as long as she could remember, nothing in Patty's closet had *ever* met the description of 'bold', not even her wedding dress, which she'd picked based solely on the criteria that it: a) had been white, b) had been a dress, and c) had been in her size. In fact, it had been the only one she'd put on in the shop, and when it had zipped up the back without corseting her until she passed out, she'd put on her most enthusiastic face for her mother just so the expedition could be over with as quickly as possible. The idea of dressing to attract attention was completely anathema to her because the idea of attracting attention, period, was much the same. "I was ... thinking something plain. A small print, maybe." At Lou's urging, Patty raised both arms and set them atop her head, holding her hair away from the back of her neck. "Nothing special."

"Oh, no. Special it is." Lou reached her arms around Patty's stomach with the measure, and Patty resisted every urge to squeeze in her tummy fat, knowing that the more she did, the more uncomfortable the final dress would be. "You're beautiful. You've just got to show it off."

Patty felt the pink in her cheeks travel all the way down to the tips of her toes. "No, I'm really, *really* not."

Lou frowned as she came around to Patty's front and drew the tape measure just under the cups of her brassiere. "Who told you that? Because they were *so* wrong."

Under Lou's combined scrutiny and flattery, Patty longed for the floor to open up and swallow her whole -- or at least to swallow her nipples, which had decided that the best response to being half-naked and complimented by someone as gorgeous as Lou was to turn into little bullets that stuck out in sharp relief against the white lace intended to rein them in. "Oh, *stop*," she mumbled, turning her face toward the wall.

"Come on, who said it? Was it one of the girls at the job? Because I could give her a bloody nose." Lou mimed popping someone in the nose, complete with funny-pages sound effect, then crouched in front of Patty and dropped the measuring tape from Patty's hip to the floor. "I'm not fooling, though. Look at you. God, if I looked like you, I wouldn't even have to put on makeup."

Or stuff my bra."

"Oh, I...." Patty's face was hot, and she was sure that if she could have seen herself in the mirror right then, she would have been the strawberry in strawberry blonde. "I'm really not--"

"You know what I should do?" Lou popped back up to her feet, a move that had her reaching for Patty's arm for balance; Patty tried not to gasp on account of either the fact of the touch or its temperature. "One of the girls on the floor has a camera. Well, she's got a journalist sweetheart, and *he's* got a camera, and a darkroom to boot. We should get you all dolled up like this again, in your nicest underthings, and take a few shots to send to that sailor of yours."

Patty opened her mouth to reply, but all that came out was a little mouse's squeak, and as Lou rolled up the tape measure and walked away laughing, Patty found the end of the guest bed a very good place to sit down. The idea of getting undressed like this in front of a camera, in front of *Lou*, of getting those shots developed by some stranger and sent off to Tom, of what Tom would probably do when he saw them.... "Would, um." Patty smoothed her hands across her lap and hoped that there wasn't something about her appearance she was missing that might give away how damp her panties were. "Could ... we really?"

Now it was *Lou's* turn to look surprised -- her bluff called, her lips in a big red *O* -- but that melted away into delight. "I'll sure as hell ask!" She clapped her hands together with glee. "Give that man a taste of what he'll be getting when he gets back home. Let him know you're thinking about him."

"I, ah, I am." Patty folded her hands in her lap, pressing them into the well made by her skirt as she crossed her legs beneath her. "A *lot*."

Lou's beautiful mouth quirked up ruby-painted side into a devious smirk. "Oh, *are* you?" She picked up a ball of thread that had come undone and began winding it back around its spool. "Has he got a lot to miss, then?"

With a giggle, Patty looked down at her hands. "Oh, yes." She caught her lower lip between her teeth, but couldn't keep down her smile. "More than most men -- or so I hear."

Lou let out a delighted laugh and plopped herself down on the end of the bed next to Patty, close enough that the sleeve of her blouse brushed against Patty's bare shoulder. "You know, when I first saw you, I thought, she looks like a good little girl, but I bet there's more to that than meets the eye -- and I was right! Look at you," Lou said, brushing a curl of Patty's hair away from her face, "just as bad as me."

"You're not *bad*," Patty protested, because she truly believed that. In the conversations they'd had, Lou had made more than a few references to soldiers, dances, and having to sneak boys both in and out of her boarding house, and Patty didn't have a speck of illusion about what might have taken place between both parts of that sneaking -- but she'd never once considered that a slight against Lou's character. It wasn't anything Patty could have seen herself doing, especially not now that she was a married woman, but that didn't make it *bad*. "Truth be told, I'm a little jealous sometimes."

"Jealous?" Lou raised an eyebrow.

"That you get ... touched. And ... more than touched." Biting her lip again, Patty shrugged.

Lou took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips, then shook her head. "Got another secret for you. I don't think I'd mind if it ... just stopped happening. Getting with men, I mean. You know what my dream date is? We go out, go dancing, go back to my place, he feels me up a bit, and then he just goes the hell home and I finish myself off. That's how the nights usually go, even, except there's always an extra step in there where he's just got to stick it in, move it around

a bit, and make some big manly show about it. I used to be good about playing along, too, getting all, *oh, big boy, you feel so good, you big strong man, give it to me.*"

The way Lou dropped her voice when she did her impression of herself, the way it got all husky and soft, made Patty have to cross her legs to keep her wet panties from soaking through all the way to the back of her skirt. "Used to be?" she asked once she'd managed to find her capacity for speech.

"One time I was so tired, I didn't even bother, and you know what? It didn't make a damn bit of difference." Lou snorted derisively, then laughed. "So now I don't usually make the effort, and to tell you the truth, I don't think any of them notice. If I could just somehow ... leave my ladyness there and go take a shower or listen to the radio, I bet any one of them'd just go on with out me."

Lou's take on sex was beyond alien to Patty, who'd declared to Tom (to his great amusement) on the third day of their stay-at-home honeymoon in their new house that if she could get paid just to do that all day, she'd do so in a heartbeat, and never retire. "They're not *all* like that, are they?"

Shaking her head, Lou sighed. "No, not *all*, but ... a lot. Most. They're just...." With another great exhale of air, Lou lay back on the bed, and Patty followed her there, until they were both stretched over the lower half of the bed, hanging their legs from the knees down off the end. "They're kids. They're five, six years younger than I am, and they're scared and lonely, and they don't know if they're going to die before they get the chance to do this again. So I think about that, and ... I guess it's not such a big deal, lying there, letting them ... work it off. Forget tightening bolts on airplane wings; that's my *real* contribution to the war effort."

Patty laughed at that and gave Lou a little half-hug around her waist, and when Lou didn't chase her off after that, Patty didn't let go. Lou's stomach was flat where Patty's made two soft rolls, and her hand rose and fell in time with Lou's easy breathing. "You're a true patriot."

That made Lou laugh as well, and the sound vibrated through Patty's fingertips, all the way up her arm and down the rest of her body, until it seemed to settle right between her legs. "My point here is," said Lou, turning to face Patty, "that if you've got a man that's good both in and out of bed? As soon as he gets back, handcuff him to the headboard and never let him out of the house again."

"Just have to get him back first," said Patty, her smiling clouding over.

"Then we've *got* to get him some sexy pictures of you!" Lou reached over and placed her hand on Patty's hip, just below the waistband of her skirt. "He sees those and I guarantee it, he will shoot down *every* Nazi submarine that gets in the way of getting him back home to you."

Patty laughed again -- and that was the amazing thing about Lou, that she could come into Patty's life during a time she when she feared she might never be happy again and make her laugh, not just once but every time they were together. She was so strange and marvelous: a new song in a language that Patty didn't speak, played from a building across the street, drawing Patty in with every verse. Only once before in her entire life had Patty ever met someone who'd understood her so quickly, who'd made her feel loved and safe so instantly, and that someone had been Tom.

With a quick sigh, Patty sat up and smoothed her skirt. "I'm, um, having feminine troubles today," she lied as she scooted off the end of the bed. "Is it all right if I go take a quick hot bath? I promise I'll be right back and I'll make dinner after."

Lou waved away all of Patty's concerns with one delicate, slender hand. "Take as long as you

want, honey. I'm not hungry just yet and I've got plenty to keep me busy. Go have a good soak."

"Thank you." With a little wave, Patty scurried off toward her bedroom and locked the door tight behind her.

Alone at last, the first thing Patty did was slip a hand down into her panties, and she nearly wept with relief as her cool fingers found the hot, wet center there; she pressed against it and little orgasmic tremors spread out all over her body, making her shake so hard she had to lean against the wall and bite the heel of her other hand to keep from making noise. It was good, but it wasn't enough, and by the time she withdrew her hand, she was ready to go again. This was going to take some serious work.

She stripped off the rest of her clothes, flinging her sodden undergarments straight into the laundry basket, and started up the tub. As the water heated up, she went and got a hairbrush that she'd left on her nightstand, a plain one that she'd picked up in some dime store or another, whose short bristles had no hope of making their way through even her lightest tangles, but whose long, smooth wooden handle more than made up for any failings on the other half's part. When the water was to her desired temperature, she dropped in the rubber plug, poured in half a cap of rose oil, and slid right on in.

Patty's upbringing had been decent and conservative, of course, but somewhere around her twelfth birthday, she'd been washing herself in the tub when she'd brought a soapy wet washcloth down between her legs and nearly drowned herself with surprise from the electric shocks set off by the friction of that contact. She'd done it again, and had only just managed to keep from crying out as she came and came without even having a name for what was happening to her. Explorations had commenced over subsequent baths, first with the washcloth, then with fingers, and finally with a hairbrush much like the one she owned now. She'd been surprised at first just how much of it fit in there, and surprised as well at how doing so had never caused her pain, despite the horror stories the girls told at school about brides on their wedding night staining everything in a six-foot radius with gallons of blood. If there'd ever been blood, Patty hadn't noticed -- she'd been too busy on her back in the warm water with her knees and feet in the air, pumping that brush handle in and out of herself just as fast and hard as she could.

While her technical loss of virginity *had* been a worry when Tom had started calling on her seriously, she'd decided not to beat around the bush, and had just, one one of their long walks together, come out and told him what she'd been up to behind locked bathroom doors -- and had watched with delight as his eyes had grown the size of dinner plates and he'd walked straight into a tree. Once he'd recovered from the jolt and she'd cleaned up the small gash on his forehead, he'd told her that that'd been about the best thing he'd ever heard a woman say, and oh, if she hadn't been in love with him already, that would have done it a thousand times over.

She thought about his penis and where she wished it were right now as she slipped the hairbrush inside as a poor facsimile. Her mother had warned her gently that it might hurt and that she should be brave because it *would* get better with time, but the second she'd had him inside her on their wedding night, she'd never wanted him to leave again. She pinched her nipple between her fingers and thought about how Tom's hands had shaken when he'd finally been allowed to touch his wife like that, how she'd teased him and told him that a girl built the way she was wasn't going to be fragile. She wanted him here *so* badly, to lay his long, lean body atop hers, to hold her hands in his and move against her body until she couldn't remember her name, to come inside her and remind her how much they belonged together.

This time, though, her fantasy was different: when she shut her eyes, she still imagined Tom

on top of her, but she saw Lou just to her side, naked as she was and kissing her breasts. Patty couldn't imagine that Lou would *ever* be amenable to such a thing, especially with the way she'd expressed her feelings about sex with men, but this was Patty's fantasy and no one else ever needed to know. She braced her feet against the side of the tub and leaned back, making that hairbrush work hard for her. She could come just like this, she knew, from only penetration, but it would be so lovely to have Lou there as well, smelling good and feeling better. Patty wanted to kiss those lips of hers until the red paint was gone, leaving the flushed skin beneath exposed. With Tom between her legs, sweating and moving and making all his beautiful sounds, Patty could still wrap her arms around Lou and feel her breasts. They were so small, especially compared to Patty's, but Patty bet they were sensitive. She wanted to make Lou writhe and moan and gasp just by sucking on her nipples; she wanted to see how many times she could make Lou come -- maybe even once for every man in uniform who'd left Lou keyed up and unsatisfied. She wanted to make Lou say all those dirty pretty things she said to boys, only she wanted to make Lou say them to her and *mean* them.

Thinking of Lou brought her off faster and harder than she'd come in a long while, certainly since before Tom had left. She could feel her inner muscles pulse around the hard wood of the brush handle as she climaxed, tugging at her nipple even as she bit her lips together and tried not to make a sound. Tom inside her, Lou beside her -- she'd never before wanted something so badly or with such crystal clarity. Of all the things she'd been given cause to dislike about herself, her very active sex drive had not been one of them, particularly not in light of how much delight Tom took in it. She was a dirty bad naughty girl who needed to be given the what-for, and she knew just who to give it to her.

At last she settled down into the water, much of which had been splashed over the side of the tub and absorbed in the bathmat, and pulled the hairbrush out of herself before its presence could get unpleasant. Already, though, she could feel how much her sensitive parts still wanted to be touched, fondled, stroked to climax again. If Lou hadn't still been there, Patty might indeed have dumped more warm water in the tub and gone for another round, perhaps one with an even more detailed, narrative fantasy. Ah, well, that would have to wait for another time.

By the time Patty got back out into the main part of the house, Lou was deep in a sewing project, stretched out on the floor with a yard or so of gingham draped across her lap and a half-dozen pins pinched firm in the corner of her mouth. Lou looked up at Patty, standing in the doorway in a plain pink dress and with damp tendrils of her hair clinging to her bare neck, and her face broke out into that wicked grin Patty had seen earlier. "Good bath?" she asked, her words muffled by the pins but her tone still clear.

"Oh, yes," said Patty, and though she couldn't stop blushing, she found she wasn't embarrassed at all.

From time to time, she could almost forget about what was going on elsewhere in the world. The radio said that bombs were falling all over Europe, but the bombs weren't falling on *her*, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that the news stories were terrible radio dramas, sad fictions meant to evoke an emotional response without having to represent reality. Tom might be away on business *anywhere* in the world, not just on an aircraft carrier in the north Atlantic. Everything might still somewhere be okay. Even though she felt terrible guilt for distancing herself from the fact of war, she had to, or else she might have fallen apart.

Even her best wishes couldn't keep it out forever, though. She was alone at home that Wednesday evening, washing down the picture window that opened up from the living room onto their front lawn, when she saw the black Ford pull up in front of her house and her heart stopped beating. Out of the car stepped two men, both in uniform, both wearing grim expressions, and Patty used what little strength she had to open the front door ahead of their ringing the doorbell. Surely they had the wrong house, she told herself, all the while knowing that was a lie: men like that never got the wrong house; that was why everyone was afraid of them, because they were never wrong. Every woman who had a man she loved overseas knew what those men meant; every nightmare featured them, two regular human men, with their uniform hats tucked under their arms and identical looks of sorrow on their faces.

Patty didn't remember walking the steps to her kitchen phone or dialing the number to the boarding house. The person that picked up the phone had an unfamiliar voice, a woman who sounded as young as Lou and had Lou's accent but wasn't Lou. Patty couldn't quite remember what she'd said to that woman, only that her legs had given out beneath her as she'd said it, and she'd wound up in a puddle of legs and skirt on the linoleum floor, trying to her hardest to speak sense when the world didn't make sense anymore. Whoever that nameless woman was, bless her, she'd managed to grab the gist of Patty's otherwise incoherent call and had promised Lou was on her way over right then.

The drive from the boarding house to Patty's generally took about fifteen minutes by car, twenty by bus; Lou was there in five. Helmet hanging from one hand, she pushed her way through the open front door, calling Patty's name. Patty could only sob in reply, but it was enough to bring Lou to her, and Lou fell to her knees beside Patty and wrapped her up in a broad hug and stroked her hair. "Oh, baby, sweetheart," she murmured against Patty's hair. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

Patty wanted to say something, say *anything*, but for the second time in their acquaintance, she found herself reduced to great wailing sobs in Lou's arms. This time, though, Lou didn't try to hush her or encourage her to get cleaned up; Lou just held her and let Patty cry out her grief. Patty grabbed for Lou and wound up with great fistfuls of her leather jacket, which she liked because she could squeeze as hard as she wanted and not hurt it or herself. There was one thing in the entire world that was resistant to damage, and it was Lou's jacket, and so Patty clung onto it for dear life. As long as she had it, she would be safe.

Minutes or hours later, Patty couldn't tell which, she'd cried herself so dry that she wasn't even making tears anymore, nor did she have the strength left to sob. As she took a shuddering but quiet breath and came to a rest, Lou helped her up and guided her back toward the bedroom, where she lay Patty down on the bed and curled up right next to her, face to face. Exhausted, Patty still managed to place her hand across the side of Lou's face, and Lou folded her own over it, squeezing it tight. "They-- they came this afternoon," Patty stammered, trying to force the situation into words. If she could say it, she could deal with it. "They came a-and they said ... Kevin--"

"Your *brother*?" Lou's eyes went wide, and Patty could see they were rimmed with red; she'd been crying too. "Oh, God, honey, I'm so sorry for you, I'm *so* sorry, but ... I thought it had been *Tom*."

Despite her weak state, hearing Lou verbalize that possibility combined with the actual news of her brother's death drew another crying jag out of Patty. It was so awful, to be sad about someone's death but to be at the same time so relieved it hadn't been someone else. "No, no, not

... not Tom. No."

Lou let out a great whoosh of breath and drew Patty close, pillowing her arm beneath Patty's cheek. She smelled of perfume and motor oil now, a combination that might have been noxious under other circumstances but on Lou was the most wonderful thing in the world. Patty lay her hand on Lou's side, between her jacket and her shirt, and focused on matching her own ragged breathing to Lou's steady, clean respiration. "I'm so sorry," Lou said, and it wasn't clear if she meant sympathy or apology, but either way, it felt good for Patty to hear.

Twinned grief and relief pushed her forward until her mouth was against Lou's, and they were kissing, long and slow. She thought it might be a dream, and then she was embarrassed for having cried so much beforehand, but Lou never faltered or backed off. Lou's mouth was smart and her lips were quick, and she moved from kissing Patty's mouth to kissing all over her face, overlaying trails of tears with hundreds of tiny kisses. Patty wanted to protest, to explain, to make her own apologies, but she was so tired, and Lou was so strong and safe. As long as she was here, Patty would be all right.

She didn't remember falling asleep like that either, but she shut her eyes and the next thing she knew it was morning, and the light was coming in through the open window, and Lou was gone but her leather jacket was still there beneath Patty's cheek. Patty rubbed her eyes and sat up, feeling the residue of every tear she'd cried the night before; her head pounded and her mouth was bone-dry. She picked up the jacket and held it to her mouth, breathing it in before she set out to face the day.

Lou had breakfast going when Patty got out to the kitchen, and she explained as she put the toast and eggs on Patty's plate that she'd called the supervisor at work and explained what was going on, and that he understood the situation. She'd also called Greyhound and asked about fares and schedules to San Francisco and back again. "And if you want," she added, pouring Patty a tall glass of milk, "I'll stay here and take care of your house until you come back."

"You don't have to do that," said Patty, talking about the offer of house-sitting but really meaning any of it.

Lou folded her arms, spatula still in hand, and shook her head. "I want to."

Lou even wound up being the one to speak to Patty's parents, as Patty got only as far as hearing her mother's voice before she broke down and couldn't continue the call. She sat there at the table, holding Lou's hand as Lou first told Patty's mother that Patty was being looked after, then gave Patty's father a sense of what the Greyhound schedules would be like. Patty pulled herself together at the end just long enough to promise her father that she'd be home as soon as she could be, but even that was a feat of monumental strength. She'd have to have it together by the time she got home, because her parents needed her to be supportive, not a giant mess. Perhaps the long bus ride ahead had its advantages.

They didn't talk about how they'd kissed the night before, nor did they kiss again, though Lou barely let Patty out of arm's reach as they packed and prepared for her journey -- or really, as Lou packed and prepared, and Patty wandered through in a daze. Kevin had been her closest brother in age, only barely two years older than she. He'd been the first one to warm to Tom, the gentlest of the boys, the one whose heart broke over baby birds that had fallen out of their nests. He hadn't been cut out to be a soldier; he'd chosen the life because his fathers and brothers had, and because his country had needed him. Now his country couldn't give him back.

While Lou ironed her dresses, Patty sat down at the kitchen table and wrote a short letter to Tom, a process that took three times as long as it should have for how often she had to stop and

dry her eyes. *I love you*, she wrote. *Kevin was killed somewhere in the Pacific; they say they can't tell us because of national security. I'm going back to California tonight. I miss you so much I can't stand it. I pray every night that you'll come home safe to me.* She didn't want to burden him with so much of her own sadness when she knew he had important things to worry about, so she told him again how much she loved him and signed it, *Always and forever yours, Patty.*

She didn't set out to say anything in the letter about Lou, because she didn't know where to begin, and she knew that right now was *not* the time to start that explanation. It seemed ungracious to leave her out entirely, though, so she added at the bottom: *P.S. I have made a friend named Lou and she is going to watch the house while I'm away. She's amazing. I don't know what I'd do without her. I'm so grateful.* She paused, then added, *I think you'd like her.* With one last kiss, she sealed the letter in the envelope and addressed it to Tom, then placed it in the mailbox and popped up the flag.

The next three weeks of Patty's life might as well have happened under anaesthetic, for all she really felt or registered any of it. All of her crying that first night and morning after seemed to have gotten it out of her system, and though she certainly grieved with her family, she didn't dissolve. She was strong for them the way Lou had been strong for her. After the funeral was done, she stayed after to make sure everyone was all right -- yet even as she did, she was beset with a type of homesickness that seemed odd, considering how she was back in the place she'd called home for the first eighteen years of her life. But this wasn't her home anymore; home was back east, the place where Lou was waiting, the place where Tom would return to her someday when all the fighting and dying was done.

She fell asleep as soon as the bus pulled out of the San Francisco station, and when she woke four days later, after what seemed like a million legs and layovers, she was at the main depot on the base and it was well past dark. Her house was only a mile away, so she hiked up her suitcase and started walking, and as she did, the fog seemed to clear. This was real; this was where she belonged. Somewhere between being Fatty Patty alone on the edge of the dance floor and going back to bury her twenty-two-year-old brother, she'd started living.

She turned the key in the door quietly, just in case Lou had already gone to bed, but she needn't have worried -- Lou, by nature almost as much of a night owl as Patty herself, was to the front door and turning back the deadbolt before Patty could even finish unlocking it herself. Without saying even a word of greeting, she tossed her arms around Patty's shoulders and buried her face in the soft curve of Patty's shoulder. Patty wrapped her arms around Lou's waist and they just stood there together for a long minute, holding on for dear life.

Lou didn't ask the obvious questions about how the trip had been, just lifted Patty's suitcase and shuffled her back inside where, despite Lou's horror stories about her own housekeeping skills, the place was spotless. Patty kicked off her shoes and didn't care that they fell in the middle of the living room. It was good to be home.

Without comment, Patty took Lou's hand and led her back to the master bedroom, and Lou followed. Patty stripped off her coat and travelling dress, then gave up and took off all her undergarments as well, until she was completely naked before Lou; she pulled back the covers of the bed and climbed beneath, then patted the pillow on Tom's side. Someday she'd have to explain to him why it smelled like perfume and motor oil, but someday she'd have to explain all of this to him anyway, so that was all right. With a quiet smile, Lou took off all her clothes, folding each piece neatly over the chair in the corner, and turned off the light before getting into

bed as well.

Patty was horny and hungry and lonely and relieved and *so* many things all at once, but mostly she was exhausted. She took Lou's arm and turned away from her, until they were both facing the same direction and Lou's bare breasts pushed up against Patty's back. Lou hugged Patty's waist where Patty had placed her arm, and Patty closed her eyes. "I'm so glad you're back," Lou said, her lips brushing the back of Patty's ear.

"I thought about you every day," Patty said, her voice barely louder than a whisper but resonant in the quiet dark.

Lou kissed the back of her neck. "So did I."

Patty took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Stay here. With me."

There was a pause, and then Lou hugged her tight. "I'd love to," she said, and every word was a puff of warm air against Patty's skin.

She slept the whole next day through, waking up only twice while the sun was still up, once to use the bathroom, and once to find something to nibble in the kitchen. The bus had made her motion-sick to the point where she'd barely eaten anything the whole trip home, but now that she was steady again, she was starving. She found three chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise on a plate in the icebox, with a dishtowel over them and a note on top of that which read *Off to work, but we'll have the weekend! See you when I get home. --L.* Patty ate all three without really tasting them, drank two tall glasses of cold milk, and went back to the bedroom to fall right asleep again.

The noise of Lou's motorcycle in the driveway woke her some hours later, and Patty sat up in bed, still naked. She ran her fingers back through her hair, wincing as they hit snags only a few inches in. She was a mess, but she was home again, and could be a mess if she wanted. What was remarkable, though, was that for the first time she could remember since the men had come to her door that awful evening, she didn't feel like rolling over and going right back to sleep at the first opportunity. She was awake and, what was more, she *wanted* to be. She'd spent the past several weeks waking up, getting dressed, and performing tasks not because she had ever once wanted to, but because all those things were things she'd needed to do. She'd imagined herself as being like Tom, a good soldier, following orders even when they broke her heart. But now she was back where she belonged, and though she still carried her grief, she no longer felt swaddled in it, wrapped and smothered until the best she could hope for was hibernation. The world kept going.

Despite her best efforts to rouse herself, though, she was still finding her feet when Lou walked back into the bedroom, still in her work clothes and jacket, her goggles pushing back her windblown hair. "Good morning, sunshine," Lou said, hanging her helmet on the hook by the closet door where Tom had sometimes kept his uniform cap. Her jacket and goggles went just beneath it, and then she was there, *really* there, and Patty rushed toward her and threw her arms around Lou's waist, resting her cheek against Lou's shoulder.

The euphoria of the embrace was short-lived, though, as Lou's overalls had metal buttons on them that had just come in from a windy ride on a cool autumn day, and Patty still wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing; thus, after barely a second's hug, Patty yelped and stepped back, rubbing the tops of her breasts where she'd most felt the frost. "Cold!"

Lou laughed and unhooked the straps, letting them fall back over her shoulders and exposing

the grubby white shirt she wore underneath. Lou wasn't wearing a bra now, Patty could tell, as she'd long been envious of Lou's ability to go out into the world without heavy-duty architectural support around her chest. Seeing the suggestions of where Lou's nipples were in soft relief beneath the fabric sent Patty's brain ablaze. She'd gone over a month now without an orgasm, which was ten times longer than she'd preciously gone without one since she'd figured out how to make them happen, and seeing Lou like this made her realize just how long a month really was. "I'd better get cleaned up, huh?" Lou scratched her dark hair loose from its tight wave. "At least get into something less filthy."

"Sure," said Patty, and she took another step back, clearing the way for Lou to get to the bathroom. Her dressing-gown lay draped over the end of the bed from where she'd tossed it off after her earlier kitchen venture, and she put it on again, tying the cord snug around her waist. "Want me to start dinner?"

"If you're hungry, yeah. That'd be great." With a grin, Lou reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it up over her head, revealing without question how little she was wearing beneath. Patty hadn't gotten a good look that night before she'd left, owing to a whole host of distractions, and she couldn't help staring. Lou's breasts were small and of the same nut-brown shade as the rest of her skin, and her nipples were pert and darker. Black tufts poked out from beneath her armpits, darker than the rest of her hair. Her frame was boyish in a lot of ways, but only so far as it highlighted how much womanly the rest of it was, and Patty wanted more than anything to touch her.

Instead, she smiled and folded her hands in front of her, and Lou gave her a pat on her shoulder before walking off into the master bathroom and shutting the door. Patty realized that she hadn't told Lou where to sleep or which facilities to use, and as such she surprised herself at how pleased she was to find that the guest bed was still made (and covered with Lou's sewing implements) and the hall bathroom looked as neat as it had the day Patty had made it that way. No one could *take* Tom's place, of course, and she never wanted anyone to, but ... having someone there with her to fill the space, to keep it warm, that was a comfort beyond measure.

On inspection, her pantry and refrigerator appeared to be much in the same order as that in which they'd been left. She wondered if Lou had gone shopping on the base or if she'd had to go into town; probably the latter, as Patty hadn't actually spoken to anyone before she'd set out for California, and therefore no one had been warned that the part of Mrs. Patricia White would be played by one Miss Louisa Ward for the foreseeable future. Patty wondered if Lou had met anyone in the area during Patty's absence -- surely she'd had to explain her presence in the Whites' house a time or two, but that wasn't the same as meeting people. Not for the first time, she wished she hadn't been in such a mad fog before leaving, or else she might have realized exactly what an offer Lou had made for her. Could Patty truly claim that if (God forbid) their places had been reversed, she would have done the same?

The clock on the wall told her it was well past seven in the evening, but she'd just woken up, and thus she declared it time for breakfast. She didn't have quite the resources to make a full breakfast -- Lou *had* been shopping for only one, after all -- but she could still make the best of it. Into the pan went butter and bacon, and she cracked eggs to whisk with milk in a bowl. Before she could pour them into the skillet, though, her eye caught on something fixed to the front of the icebox: a letter to her, bearing the customary postage and stamp declaring that its contents had been checked for coded material by military censors and found safe.

She put down her cooking implements, turned off the gas on the burner, and sat down at the

table. The end of a butter knife slit open the top, and out fell two pages filled front and back with Tom's cramped print. *Dear sweet beautiful lovely Patty*, it began, and Patty felt her eyes prick with tears as she imagined Tom's voice saying those words -- though not tears of grief now, but of happiness and longing. He'd dedicated the whole first letter to recounting his memories of Kevin, writing about how pleased he'd been to be able to call Kevin family, even if only for a short while. Tom was closer in age to her third brother, John, but he and Kevin had enjoyed giving one another a delightful hard time over Tom's marrying Patty. *He was a fine man and a good brother*, Patty read, and then she needed to stop to grab a napkin and wipe her eyes before she could continue.

The rest of the letter was much as his letters ever were: reminding her just how much he loved her and missed her, and telling her how often she was in his thoughts. They'd both learned to keep their letters simple, lest comments about what had happened that day incurred the black strikethroughs of men trained to suss out even the slightest hint of espionage, and as such long declarations of love were both common and welcome from Tom's end. In particular, he seemed pleased by the news of Lou: *I'm glad you have a friend to be with you. I worry that you might be too lonely without me, and don't want you to be lonely ever. If you like her I am certain I would too.* The letter concluded, *I know you have to go back to California now for a time, and so I wait patiently until your next letter and go to sleep every night wishing you were in my arms. All my love, Tom.*

Patty read the letter three times through, committing every word to memory, and became so distracted that she lost all track of time until Lou came padding into the kitchen, wearing a pair of loose men's pajama pants and a t-shirt, tucking a towel snug around her hair. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Patty, scooting out from the table and turning back to the stove; she fired up the burner and took up the whisk again. "I got distracted."

"Don't worry," Lou said, smiling at the open letter on the table. "You need a hand?"

"Absolutely not. You sit right down." Patty pointed to a seat with authoritative fervor, then broke into giggles as Lou saluted and obeyed.

The bacon cooked quickly, and Patty lifted the pieces from the pan with a fork, then poured the eggs over the greasy remains. "So, did I miss anything important?"

Lou shook her head. "Pretty quiet on the home front. June's engaged and Willa's expecting, and Hilma's husband Bernie took a bullet but lived to tell the tale, so they're sending him home. The lady across the street, Mrs. Barker, every time she looked at me I swear she was thinking about calling the cops, until one day I got her cat out of a tree, and now she thinks I'm Mrs. Jesus. My mother seems convinced that my middle sister's twins both have some nasty swamp disease, which probably isn't true, but she still resents my sister's husband for moving them to Florida. You've got two stray cats, one tabby and one grey, that like it when I leave scraps of chicken on the back stoop. ...It's kind of a nice change for me, stepping into this normal married life that's got everything *but* the husband."

Patty scooped eggs and bacon onto plates as Lou talked, then toasted and buttered three pieces of white bread each and topped the whole meal off with good dashes of salt and pepper. She felt a bit awkward realizing that the portions she'd dispensed were so uneven, but she was starving and Lou ate like a bird even under the best of conditions. "And here I was afraid it might have been strange and lonely for you."

"Not in a bad way," said Lou, who picked up a piece of bacon with her fingers and bit the end. "When I was younger, I thought about being like this -- married, a house, kids, or at least kids on

the way -- and it was like if someone had asked me if I wanted to live the rest of my life in concrete shoes. So I ran for the biggest city in the vicinity and swore I'd do whatever I wanted. And I don't regret it, but ... I like your life too."

With a smile, Patty reached across the table and took Lou's hand with her own. "I can't tell you how much better it is with you in it."

Lou took a deep breath and let it out in a rush of air that included the words, "Good, because I already moved out of the boarding house and brought all my stuff here and I can leave again if you want and I swear I was planning to but--"

Patty squeezed Lou's fingers, cutting her off mid-sentence. "Stay," she said, an offer and a plea at once, and there were no words for how happy she felt when Lou turned those dark eyes on her and nodded.

They finished their breakfast-for-dinner and put the dishes in the sink, and then there in the kitchen, wearing only a robe and with her fingers still damp from the faucet, Patty touched Lou's face with her hands and kissed her. She'd thought about this in her few conscious moments on the trip to California, had imagined a million ways she might have orchestrated events to come to this point, but in the end it was only as simple as doing it. Fresh from the shower and without makeup, Lou's face was as beautiful in its natural state as it ever was all done up, and when Patty kissed her rose-brown lips, she was delighted to feel Lou kiss back.

The kitchen windows faced only the garage and a high fence, but having them at all still made Patty nervous, and when she pulled back from the kiss, she took Lou's hand and tugged her toward the bedroom. "Come on," she said, leading the way as Lou followed close behind.

When they got to the bedroom, Patty shut the door behind them but didn't switch on the lamp, leaving the only light in the room the yellow-white glow from the streetlamps beyond the curtained windows. She sat down on the bed, back up against the pile of pillows that cushioned the headboard, and Lou knelt astride her hips and brushed her hands over the knot that tied Patty's robe shut. In the dimness, Lou's dark eyes looked infinitely deep; when she pulled the towel from her head, long strands of damp black hair pulled down over her shoulders. She took her t-shirt off over that, revealing her beautiful breasts, and this time Patty reached up to touch one, smiling when her fingers brushed across one of Lou's hard nipples and Lou gasped. She did it again, this time eliciting a whimpering sound that made Lou bite her lower lip. "That was exactly the noise I'd hoped you'd make," said Patty, not wholly aware she'd spoken aloud until she saw Lou's mouth twist into a smirk.

"Thought about this a lot, huh?" Lou tugged open Patty's robe and put her hands on Patty's chest, just at the top of her breasts.

This was no time for playing coy. "Kind of a lot, yeah," Patty laughed. "You're just ... so pretty, and I wanted you to touch me *so* badly."

"Like that time you excused yourself to 'take a bath'?" asked Lou, and she laughed as Patty's cheeks flushed upon hearing the accusation. "You're just ready to go all the time, aren't you?" Without waiting for an answer, she bent down and took one of Patty's nipples in her mouth, catching it with her teeth as she licked it to hardness.

Surprised by the sensation and wanting more of it, Patty arched her back from the bed and grabbed great handfuls of the comforter. "Oh, *oh*," she gasped, "oh, yes, *please*, yes."

Patty parted her legs and Lou changed her position until she was straddling only one of Patty's thighs, leaving herself room to lay across Patty's body and suck at her breasts as she let one hand trail up the length of Patty's leg, starting at her knee and traveling to the soft inner skin of her

thigh. The touch set all of Patty's nerves on edge, and she felt herself soaking through her robe to the bedspread -- she'd have to wash both later, of course, but tomorrow's laundry was *entirely* not her concern at the moment. Lou's icy fingers brushed across the folds of skin between Patty's legs, and Patty could feel how they'd come in dry but come away wet, until they could slide across her flushed, sensitive skin without resistance.

Doctors had names for all the bits and parts down there, and Patty knew this because once she'd seen an anatomy text in the public library and had secreted it away to a corner, glancing at shots of the parts that men and women alike kept under their clothes for the few seconds she could stand to see each page, before the terror of discovery had grown too great and she'd had to put it back lest anyone find her reading up on it. No one she'd ever heard hold court on the subject, including her doctor, had ever acted like there was anything down there but a deep dark hole, though, and Patty knew that simply wasn't true; she'd been down there herself, after all, some intrepid deep-sea explorer like Captain Nemo, charting unmapped territories. That hole was fantastic to have, of course, and she loved the way she felt when Tom was inside her there, but that wasn't where Lou's hand was now. Lou's fingertips brushed the little knob just before Patty's puff of darker-red curls began, and Patty squeaked, clutching the bedspread so hard she pulled the sheets awry. "Right there, right there, just keep touching me right there--"

Bless Lou, she was crackerjack at taking directions. She pressed right where she'd been when Patty had told her to stay in place, not right on the money of where she needed to be but close enough, and Patty contributed her own share of the work, rocking against the touch and pressure until the buildup could push her right over the edge. "Yes, *yes!*" Patty shouted, tossing her head back against the pillows so hard that the headboard pounded against the wall behind it. Thank heavens for a house with no immediate neighbours. At the sound of Patty's cries, Lou began to draw her hand away, and Patty grabbed for her wrist, forcing her to remain in place as the further waves of Patty's orgasm crashed over her, lessening and then subsiding altogether.

At last, Patty exhaled and slumped back against the bed; after a moment's thought, she let go of Lou's wrist. Lou sat back, looking pleased with herself but a still a little alarmed. "That ... was good?" she asked, rubbing together her slick fingers.

"That was *great*," sighed Patty, who wasn't satisfied, but was placated for now. She ran her fingers over her nipple where Lou's mouth had been moments before and sighed. "...Have you ever done that to another woman?"

"I've barely ever done that to *myself*," said Lou. "But ... no. Sometimes, some girls I've known and I, we've kissed one another for the boys who asked, but never anything more than just a kiss. You?"

Patty shook her head. "Tom's been my first and only everything. We waited right up until our wedding night for, you know, the big thing, but..." Her fingers teased her nipple to hardness again as she sighed with pleasure at the memory. "Let's just say that if my parents had known how many dark patches behind toolsheds and gaps between very tall hedges there were in our neighbourhood, they would *never* have let Tom take me on as many long evening walks as they did."

"Oh, you *bad* girl!" Lou laughed and lay down against the bed, until she and Patty were side by side, Patty still half-wearing her untied robe and Lou naked only to the waist. Patty placed a hand on Lou's flat stomach, smiling as she hit a ticklish spot that made Lou squeak and clutch her belly. "Bad! Bad!"

"Very bad," said Patty, and she took the opportunity to slip her hand beneath the loose

waistband of Lou's pajama pants, down to the juncture of Lou's thighs. It was like flipping the switch on a machine: Lou's protest stopped mid-sound, and the rest of the air rushed out of her lungs in a great wordless rush. Emboldened, Patty reached for the pants themselves, then scooted down the bed to yank them all the way off Lou, down and off her ankles. She'd done the same to Tom before, but her prize then had been very different from what she saw now: the dark, wide thatch of hair just above where Lou's legs split, and something hidden by the darkness and shadows just beneath.

That anatomy text and a few awkward experiments with a hand mirror aside, Patty really had no idea what things *looked* like down there; she knew the topography the way a blind woman might know her surroundings by touch alone. For this and other reasons, she regarded this as an unmissable opportunity. Settling herself on her stomach, Patty parted Lou's thighs and got her face down right there between. "What are--?" asked Lou, scooting her hips up closer to the headboard and bending her knees, but otherwise complying with Patty's positioning.

Patty smiled and kissed the inside of Lou's thigh. "Looking at you." Lou's thighs were taut and close-shaven, as opposed to Patty's, which were soft and pale and covered with little hairs almost too pale to see. Lou smelled wonderful, which Patty found odd, since she didn't smell that different down there from the way Patty did, and Patty didn't care for her own scent. But on Lou it was a sweet smell, dark and salty at once, making Patty wonder what she tasted like. Well, she supposed, there was only one way to find out. "Just trust me," she said. She brushed back the thatch of hair and found a little pink bud peeking out of the folds of flesh there, one that Patty assumed corresponded to her own. Taking her cue from what she herself liked, Patty flicked her tongue across its surface.

Lou tasted as sweet as she smelled, which was lovely to discover, but what was even better was finding out how much licking Lou was like poking her with a live electric wire. Moaning, Lou thrust a hand into Patty's hair and balled it into a fist -- at first, Patty feared, to pull her away, but then Lou pushed her back in and Patty went to work.

She feared she might have some difficulty determining what Lou did and didn't like at first, as Lou made plenty of sounds, but none of them turned their way into words. However, she needn't have worried; every time Patty's clever tongue did something right, Lou's hand tightened in her hair and her whole body trembled. Her hips thrust around so much that keeping contact was a bit difficult, but Patty had a solution: she took two of her fingers and pushed them inside Lou's warm, wet slit, anchoring her to the bed. Lou clapped her hands across her mouth, but Patty reached up with her free hand and tugged them down. "Nobody can hear you," she promised, her lips brushing the inside of Lou's thigh as she talked. "Nobody but me. And I want to."

That was all the encouragement Lou needed, it seemed. When Patty put her mouth on Lou again, sucking at that little bud of hardened flesh, Lou let out a great gasping moan that surely would have penetrated the walls of any multi-room dwelling. She was so wet that she soaked Patty's chin and lips, and Patty was delighted. Testing the waters, Patty slipped another finger inside Lou, drawing out another cry of pleasure from her. She was gorgeous like this, consumed with passion and sensation, and Patty wondered if anyone had ever gotten to see her like this before. She curled up the tips of her fingers and sucked hard, and that was the end of Lou -- she cried out louder than she had before and her inner muscles clenched hard around Patty's fingers, pulsing with shivers that jolted the rest of her body. Her thighs clamped together, pressing against either side of Patty's head, and that show of enthusiasm made Patty giggle against Lou's skin, causing Lou's hips to thrash so hard that Patty's fingers slipped right out of her.

Even though she'd only gotten off ten minutes or so before, Patty was as aroused right then as she'd ever been in her life, and she knew exactly what she needed to satisfy her. Giving her face and hand a quick wipe on Lou's discarded towel, she climbed up astride Lou's waist and grabbed Lou's fingers. For all that Lou's hands were well-manicured and gorgeous, they weren't small, and that was just how Patty wanted them to be. "Now," she said, folding Lou's four fingers into a point and bring them down between her legs. "I need this, *please*, I need you."

Hazy though she was from her orgasm, Lou didn't hesitate. She let Patty guide her to where she needed to be, then pushed all four in at once. Patty gasped with delight and rocked forward until she was on all fours, giving Lou as much access as she could. "Please," she said, moving her hips up and down on Lou's hand so that Lou would get the idea. "And please, I want your mouth, *please*." Perhaps she wasn't the best at dirty talk in bed, but her need for release pushed past any potential embarrassment and loosed her tongue.

At least Lou was a girl who could take a hint. She craned her neck up and caught one of Patty's breasts in her mouth as they hung pendulous above her, then began to suck the way she had earlier, only this time with more force and teeth than she'd employed before. Patty rocked herself back and forth against Lou's fingers, gasping every time they pushed deeper inside her. "Yes, just like that, yes, don't stop, don't you dare stop," she murmured, a litany where she wasn't paying attention to every word she said, but she meant every one nonetheless. She was so wet that Lou slid in and out of her with ease, stretching her better than any hairbrush ever could.

On the surface and to all other eyes, Patty was a good but plain girl, proper and tightly buttoned, a model of purity and chastity if for no other reason than the general presumption that any man who wanted to be with her must have a list of reasons that did not prioritize sexual desire. But her frank, strong sexuality had been part of what had won Tom over to her in body as well as in mind and heart, and it was what had just helped bring Lou to an overwhelming orgasm, and as such, it was the secret about herself that she loved best. She felt frumpy and awkward everywhere but like this; here, she felt beautiful, wild, desirable. She came just like that, rocking back and forth on Lou's hand, kneeling over Lou's body, crying out in pleasure.

And then it was done and she collapsed next to Lou, shivering for a moment before taking decisive action and moving them both beneath the covers. It was an awkward sort of shuffle, especially considering how sticky and damp they both were, but at last she was curled up in Lou's arms, her head pillowed against Lou's shoulder, petting her slender hips. "I think everyone in the town might've heard you there," said Lou, kissing her hair.

"Let them," said Patty, only because she knew there was *no* way the sound had traveled any farther than the strong walls of the military-built house. "I'll bet you a thousand dollars most of them have never come like that."

Lou laughed and hugged her close. "That ... was really good."

"Good!" Patty puffed up, feeling a sense of pride at a job well done. "So we'll maybe do it again?"

"I'd love to," Lou promised, bending down to brush another kiss at the edge of Patty's hairline. "...Not right now, though, right?"

"I ... could go again," Patty confessed, nuzzling Lou's shoulder.

Lou pulled back and looked at her, reading her face as though testing for lies, and when Patty gave no indication that she was joking, Lou sighed and pulled her close again. "You'd need an *army* of lovers to keep you satisfied."

Patty giggled, partly because it was a funny thing to imagine -- she, mild-mannered navy wife,

installing a revolving door in her bedroom -- and partly because Lou hadn't been the first to make that accusation. Tom was a sailor in peak condition, after all, a man of twenty-three who often had been forced with the rest of his group to run the whole perimeter of the base two and three times at a go, and more than once he'd had to cry uncle at moments when Patty herself could still have gone another round or two. "Maybe just *half* an army," she joked back, tossing her arm over Lou's waist and smiling as Lou laughed.

"I still feel silly," she admitted, but she still let Lou pose her into place, putting one of Patty's arms up over her head to hold her hair away from her neck.

"You won't feel silly when you see these. I promise." Lou leaned over her and planted a kiss in the middle of her forehead. "You look beautiful."

As one who'd spent her whole life avoiding photography whenever possible, Patty still wasn't sure how whatever Lou saw right now would translate to still images. She was wearing the green dress Lou had made for her, though 'wearing' was a generous estimation of her relationship to it right now, as Lou had left all the buttons down the front undone such that the tops of Patty's breasts spilled out the front. Not a nipple was showing, but only by the thinnest margin of fabric. "Are you sure?" With her free hand, she smoothed the fabric of her skirt over her knees.

"Oh, trust me, I'm going to want to keep some of these for myself." With a villainous cackle, Lou hopped off the bed and went over to the chair where she'd propped up the borrowed camera. Though Patty had been nervous about whether or not this would actually go off as planned, Lou had come back from her meeting with her friend's boyfriend with the whole kit bag in tow, telling her that not only had said boyfriend not been surprised by the request, it hadn't even been the first time the camera had been used for that purpose that week. Patty was grateful for that news, not just for how it made the man seem far less like a weirdo, but for how that had made this whole practice feel more normal. Taking pictures for your man off at war wasn't just for oversexed young wives with exhibitionist tendencies -- it was the red-blooded, all-American thing to do.

As she settled into it, she thought of what it would be like when Tom opened the letter with the photographs inside. "Do you think he'll show these pictures to anyone else on the boat?"

"He'd be stupid not to brag on be married to someone like you," Lou said, but then she stopped and looked up from the camera. "Unless, of course, you don't want him to. You could write him saying you wish he wouldn't, and I'm sure that'd be fine."

"No, I..." Though she knew this was about the naughtiest thought she'd ever had, the idea of a group of sailors all leaning over Tom's shoulder and seeing her like this, making catcalls and talking about what they'd like to do to her ... well, what she felt was the opposite of repulsion. "I mean, I wouldn't mind."

"You mean, you'd like it." Lou winked at her. "You should write him and tell him *that*, then. I bet that'd make him enjoy the pictures even more, don't you?"

Still holding her pose, Patty wiggled a little with pleasure at the the idea. "I know he doesn't get much time alone. He complains about it sometimes in his letters."

"Say cheese," Lou ordered, and though Patty didn't actually say anything, she smiled for the camera and held still as the shutter clicked. The journalist had given them some basic instructions about what made for a good picture -- most of it came down to having enough light and holding the camera steady -- so they'd turned on every light in the bedroom and thrown open

the shutters for good measure, and now Patty just hoped no one peeked in, for their sake as much as her own. "That one's going to be great. Now sit back a little and let your hair down."

"How do you know it's going to be great?" asked Patty as she readjusted herself accordingly.

"Because it's you and you look beautiful, that's how. Spread your knees apart a little."

Patty did, and then, deciding that if they were going to do this they might as well do it all the way, hiked up the skirt so that the places where her stockings connected to her garters were visible against her pale skin. Like most women, she'd learned to go without nylons for the duration, but she'd saved this last pair for a special occasion, and what occasion was more special than this? "This work?"

"It's working for *me*, definitely." The shutter double-clicked as Lou saved that moment for posterity twice over. "Good girl with a naughty streak. Lean forward, now, and let the camera see what you've got."

Tilting toward Lou caused Patty's breasts to fall even more precipitously out of the unbuttoned top, far past the point where her brassiere would have been visible, had she been wearing one. She tried to put on her sexiest face, but just wound up giggling as Lou fired off another few shots. "How much film do we have left?"

"Two shots, why?"

"Okay, one more from me," said Patty, who, before she could change her own mind, pulled the dress off over her head and tossed it aside, until she was left wearing nothing below her waist but her undergarments, and nothing above her waist at all. "Quick!" She folded her arms across her chest demurely, but still just underneath her breasts, which spilled over the top of her linked arms in a way so obscene that she couldn't help grinning.



With a laugh, Lou took the shot. "Okay, one more. You want to take off the rest for that?"
"No, I want you to trade me places." Still shirtless, Patty hopped off the bed and grabbed Lou's

arm, pushing her toward the spot she'd just vacated.

"What? Me? I look terrible!" Lou protested, even though it was an absolute lie; she'd done her hair and makeup that morning the same gorgeous way she always did, and the dark brown dress (another of her own creations) that she'd worn to go retrieve the camera hugged her lovely pear-shaped body, making the most of her flat chest and fuller hips. She sat on the bed with her legs tucked up beneath her, fixing an exaggerated scowl on Patty. "Nobody wants pictures of *me*."

"I want pictures of you. Now what button do I press?" From the lens side of the camera, what Lou had been doing had looked easy enough, but now that she was in place, there were more options than she'd counted on.

"Maybe I just won't tell you." Lou mimed zipping her lips.

Patty stuck her tongue out at her the same way she'd done so many times before to her brothers. "I bet it's the big one right here. I'm going to press it, ready or not...."

"Fine! Fine, hold on." Lou brushed her dark hair over her shoulders and folded her hands in her lap, then curled her mouth into a her wide, beautiful smile. It seemed like every time Patty looked at her, the more amazing she could see that Lou really was. There was a time Patty would have been envious, and might even have hated Lou because she looked like that and Patty never would, but now Lou's beauty made her happy, because it was as much Patty's to treasure as it was her own. "Okay, you can have your photograph."

"Three, two, one--" Patty pressed the button and heard the shutter snap as the film inside captured the moment for good. "There we go. That one's for me."

The last burst of fireworks had died down almost twenty minutes previous (which was a blessing, as they made all the dogs in earshot just go insane), but some of the younger people still had sparklers to burn, and they ran back and forth down the sidewalks and in the middle of the street with their bright cargo in hand, laughing and carrying on. On the empty lot near the end of the street, whatever card tables and folding chairs the residents had been able to procure on short notice were still arranged hours after the mid-afternoon celebration they'd been pressed into service for; Patty could see from her porch that every seat was still filled, and casserole dishes and serving trays hung around them in abundance. A piece of her own was down there, a large tin platter Tom's aunt had given them as a wedding gift, and last she'd seen of it, nearly every ham sandwich she'd arranged on it had been taken. Some of the other women had made fancy dishes and elaborate jelly casseroles, but Patty had decided that simple was the best -- and besides, she'd been crying too hard to read a recipe.

She was still crying now, as she sat in the porch swing and watched the festivities from a distance, though now the streams from her eyes had dried up to thin trickles that she mopped up with the occasional dab of her handkerchief. She'd cried enough for the past two years for a lifetime, and now that the war was over, she wanted that to be over too.

Beneath the streetlamps, a figure was coming down the street toward her, and though Patty knew she should get herself together and go back to the celebration, she couldn't find the will to move from where she'd curled up against the slatted wood. There was no mistaking that walk for anyone else's, either; even dressed like a man in the trousers and jacket she'd worn for giving kids rides celebratory joyrides around on the back of her motorcycle earlier, Lou still walked like a lady. "Hey there, good-looking," she said as she turned up the walk to the house. "Lila said you'd headed back to powder your nose but she hadn't seen you in a while, so I thought I'd come

back and check."

"Oh, I'm--" Patty cleared her throat, chasing both emotion and phlegm from her voice. "I was going to go back. I just got comfortable here."

In the year and a half or so since she'd move onto the base with Patty, Lou had become a darling of the neighbourhood, defeating all suspicion about her sketchy past and unmarried present by having charisma to spare. In fact, she'd been one of the only ones who, when the news of Germany's surrender had reached the base, hadn't been so overwhelmed with emotion that she couldn't plan a block party. It was her event as much as anyone else's, and Patty more than half-suspected that Lou had come to drag her back to the festivities; instead, though, Lou sat down on the other half of the swing and took Patty's hand in her own. "How is it that you can cry those blue eyes out and still look so pretty?" she asked, brushing Patty's hair from her face.

Patty laughed despite herself. "Oh, no, I look like an angry pig," she said, pressing her fingers to her puffy cheeks.

Lou shook her head. "Still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." She brushed her thumb across the back of Patty's knuckles, tracing small circles almost in the way one friend might comfort another, except that Patty knew those hands and knew what they were capable of. That, after all, was part of why she was crying.

There wasn't anyone in earshot, but Patty dropped her voice anyway, and though she tried to meet Lou's gaze with her own, she couldn't make her chin lift that far. "Lou, I love you," she began, before her voice caught and she tripped over the air as it came out of her lungs.

"I love you too, honey," Lou said. She reached over and put her other hand on Patty's knee, atop the skirt of blue organdy that had been Lou's present to her that past Christmas.

"I mean," Patty swallowed, "I *love* you." She screwed up her lips, trying to think of a way to say what she meant without repeating herself, and after a moment continued, "Like I love Tom. But ... not *instead* of loving Tom."

Lou's face remained a still, lovely mask, but she took a deep breath and let it out in a long, slow sigh -- and all at once, Patty's heart sank. This had been so cruel to Lou, living with her like this, falling in love with her like this, when they knew nothing could ever come of it. The bitterest little part of herself, the voice she hated but couldn't silence, accused her of having ensnared Lou as an understudy for Tom, someone waiting in the wings just in case Tom didn't make it back from war. But despite a single terrifying -- and incorrect, Patty was informed after two hours of incoherent fear -- rumor that his ship had been sunk that past November, Tom had made it through unscathed, and now was on his way home. Patty was the happiest she'd ever been in her life, but that wasn't the only reason she couldn't stop crying.

"I know," Lou said at last, staring at some point off in the distance where Patty wasn't. "And he's a great guy, I can tell, and you two are going to be happy like crazy when he gets back. This has been your life from the start. I was just visiting."

It was a ridiculous claim, considering that Patty had lived with Tom only a month and a half, and Lou had now been staying with her for a year and a half, but what stung most about it was that it was true. This was Tom's house, maintained by Tom's pay and position, and everything in it was rightly his to return home to. Even if they could have run off, where would they have gone? Lou made fair money at the factory -- a fraction of what a man doing the same job would've earned, but money nonetheless -- and that had given Patty the freedom to stop the manual labor she'd hated and instead offer piano lessons to the children on the base for the past year, which brought in its own well-meaning pittance. But they'd always known the women's

jobs wouldn't last the men's coming back home, and Patty couldn't just strap her piano to the back of Lou's motorcycle as they rode off to parts unknown.

Her heaviest anchor, too, was her love for Tom. She loved him even more now than she had when she'd kissed him good-bye that summer day nearly two years previous. His letters were full of affection and funny stories and real interest in her life, and she could imagine how much he'd smiled as he'd received every one of hers in return. Nothing that kept her here was obligation or duty; she wanted more than anything to be here, to be his wife, to have his children, to grow old together as she'd promised when he'd married her.

From the first time she'd kissed Lou, she'd had to rationalize it to herself, what they were doing: this wasn't cheating, she had to believe, because any other thought was an unbearable betrayal of Tom's trust. But her heart wasn't a finite thing, where loving one stole love from the other; if anything, loving Lou had made her love for Tom stronger. She'd spent long nights telling Lou all about him, and Lou had come to the point where she was as excited to see Tom's letters in the mail as Patty was. They'd developed and sent off the first set of photographs, and when Tom had responded with a letter full of very proper prose that still left *no* doubt as to what he'd been doing while he was looking at them, they'd borrowed the camera for a second set, and then a third. Taking the measurements from clothes he'd left behind, Lou had helped Patty make Tom a shirt, and when it had come out all wrong and a frustrated Patty had wanted to throw it away, Lou had kissed her and made her save it as proof of how much effort she was willing to put forth for him. With Lou's help, she'd become a better, stronger, more independent person, and now when Tom came home, she'd be ready not to depend on him, but to share his life with him.

Grabbing Lou's hand tighter, she scooted closer on the porch seat until their knees were touching. "I love you," she said again, and she knew it wasn't enough, but she at least had to try.

"I know," Lou repeated, and this time she leaned over to kiss Patty's hair in an almost-sisterly fashion, then lay Patty's head on her shoulder and stroked her hair back from her neck. "I do know. I've never doubted that. You ... just have the biggest heart in the whole wide world. We could all fit in there if we tried. That's why you're going to make such a great mom someday, I know it. You just don't have a selfish bone in your whole beautiful body."

Patty sniffled and shook her head. "I'm *all* selfish. I want both you and Tom."

That made Lou chuckle, the sound low and dark. "You're confusing selfish with insatiable." She gave Patty a poke in the middle of her belly, and Patty giggled despite herself and wrapped her arms around her own waist. "I mean it, though, when I say I love you. I do, no strings attached, no matter what. You're the one who taught me the most important lesson I've ever learned about love, which is that it doesn't have to happen when you're both in the same room." A little drop of water fell across into Patty's hair, though Lou's voice remained steady. "If I'm living in your house or three thousand miles away, it doesn't matter, because either way I'm going to love you for the rest of my life."

For a long moment, Patty couldn't speak; all her words had climbed into her throat and expanded in unison, blocking their own exit until she could hardly even breathe. Instead, she hugged Lou around her waist and just sat there on the porch swing, listening to Lou's heartbeat with one ear and the sounds of the warm evening with the other. A trio of ladies walked by with their children, and when they smiled in greeting, Lou gave a little wave back on their shared behalf. Emotions ran high tonight everywhere, and no one would question such a public display of affection given the circumstances. "I don't know what to tell Tom," Patty said at last, her voice

muffled against Lou's top.

"I'm afraid you'd know better than I would." Lou's fingers stroked little circles against Patty's arm. She was such a comfort; everything she did eased Patty's worried soul. "If you want to tell him nothing and have me just go, I'll go."

Patty shook her head again, shutting her eyes tight. "No, please, don't."

With a gentle laugh, Lou hugged her tight. "I'm not going anywhere, shh. Not if you don't want me to." A bang sounded from the end of the street, followed by the dog chorus; perhaps the fireworks weren't all gone after all. "I don't know him in person, but from all his letters and everything you've told me, he's crazy about you. But even more than that, he wants you to be happy. And so do I. So if you want me to stay here and we'll just go back to being friends like we were before, that's fine."

"That's not fair to you."

"Not fair?" Lou pulled back enough to see Patty's face, her pretty dark brows pointed down in a *V* of confusion.

She'd had the thought before several times, that it would be beyond cruel to put Lou into the position of playing the chaste friend while Patty resumed her married life, but now that Patty found herself having to wrestle it into words, she kept coming up short of where she wanted to be. "You ... should be able to get out and have a family too."

The scoff Lou made at that was so full of scorn that had Lou not hugged her at the same time, Patty would have assumed she'd managed to offend her. "There's not a man alive who'd want *me* for a wife. And even if I could find one, I wouldn't want to be his wife anyway. That's okay here with you, though, because you don't want a wife -- you're a very good wife yourself, and you like being a wife, and that's great, that you've found something that makes you so happy. But you don't want me to be your husband, because you *have* a husband already, and that's okay, I wouldn't make a very good husband either. That's why I struck out on my own in the first place: to live my own life, do what I wanted to do, get drunk and sleep around if I wanted to, ride a motorcycle, wear trousers, not answer to anyone or be anyone else's anything. Except the flaw in *that* plan was, I wasn't happy alone either."

"Oh," said Patty, who'd suspected all these things before, but still had to process hearing them straight from Lou's mouth. Neither she nor Lou was stupid (and Lou had threatened to paint Patty blue in her sleep if she ever heard Patty suggest that about herself again), and Patty suspected that Lou, like herself, had been aware of all these truths and issues long before this moment. But as with almost everything else normal in their lives, the war had drowned them out, made so much light and noise that even the most obvious of concerns could go ignored. Now that the fighting was over, though, everything would have to change. Everything could be normal again, so everything would have to be.

Five more great bursts sounded off in the distance, cracking like gunfire and filling the sky with red, white, and blue light as Lou held her hand. "I'll tell him," Patty said at last, her words pushed beneath the loud booms that echoed through the streets. "Not right when he's home. But after. He deserves to know. And you'll stay here until then, and after then if it's okay with him. But--" Her voice trembled and she bit the inside of her cheek until she found her nerve again. "But it has to be over. *We* have to be over."

After the space of a deep breath, in and out, Lou nodded. "I promise," she said, and Patty could hear the *but I'll still love you* behind it.

They stayed out there for an hour more in silence, rocking on the porch swing and listening as

the evening quieted down and all the revelers went to their homes. The night air still carried the faint smell of exploded gunpowder, the memory that lingered long after the moment that had caused it had passed. At last, foregoing what personal effects she'd left at the end of the road, Patty took Lou's hand and drew her inside. Lou followed her back to the bedroom, where they both undressed quietly and made love without speaking, foreheads pressed to one another as hands went to work drawing pleasure out from one another's bodies.

Though she only came once, Patty was so exhausted emotionally that as her orgasm subsided, she collapsed back against the bed; she barely had strength enough left over to bring Lou to climax by teasing her clitoris (a word Lou had taught her, and one she loved to say, not least because Lou giggled every time she heard Patty pronounce it) between two of her fingers until Lou dissolved into shudders. Lou drew her close after that, in their shared bed that wouldn't be theirs to share for much longer. Patty wanted to stay awake for this, to remember every inch of how it felt to be loved like that, in Lou's particular way, but her body had no appreciation for sentimentality, and the moment she closed her eyes, she was fast asleep.

She smiled as she felt him thrust one last time between her legs, then collapse beside her on the bed, pressing kisses all over the back of her neck and shoulders. "God, you're beautiful." To punctuate this compliment, he reached over and rubbed her enormous belly, which now at eight months was larger than her other three pregnancies had been at nine. She loved being pregnant, loved every inch of how it made her feel, but still was glad they'd made the decision to stop after this one -- he was going to be a big, big boy.

"And you're wonderful," Patty said, turning in his arms with a burst of huffing, ungraceful effort. Tom waited patiently for her to get settled, though, and when he did he kissed her lips. His cheeks were prickly with the end-of-day stubble, and the fingers he caressed her body had turned thick over the years with a contractor's calluses, but she loved the way they felt against her skin. "Even he thinks so." She nudged his midsection with her own.

Tom laughed and reached down to stroke her round stomach. "What makes you so convinced we've got another son cooking in there?"

She took his hand in hers and pressed it down below her navel. "I carried Anne and Betty down here, and Tommy and this one are up here," she explained, moving his hand as she did up toward the top of her belly. It was an inexact science at best, but something about this pregnancy just *felt* the same way her first had, though she couldn't put her finger on it. "So, boys' names it is."

A sudden jolt knocked the wind out of her, and she saw Tom's face light up in the way that let her know he'd felt it too. "I think he heard you. Or he's declaring he's going to grow up and be the kicker for the '49ers."

"I think he's just happy that his daddy makes his mommy so happy," said Patty, tossing one of her ankles over Tom's legs. "And if he's anything like his daddy, someday he's going to make a nice girl *very* happy too."

Tom laughed in kind and kissed her, long and deep and slow. He was tall and strong, and even five years out of the service he still did push-ups every morning and went on runs for miles at a stretch, but he was still the gentlest man she'd ever met, and every bit the wonderful father she'd dreamed he would be. "I love you," he promised against her lips, "more than anything, but--"

"But you have to get up early tomorrow, I know." Patty stuck out her tongue at him, which

made him grin, then kissed him on the tip of his nose. "I just guess I'll have to go somewhere else to satisfy my horny pregnant needs...."

"Your threats don't work with me, you hussy. I know I'm the only one who'll ever be man enough to satisfy you."

"I'll tell her you said that." With one more kiss on his mouth, then one to his forehead for good measure, Patty tucked him in and turned out the bedside table lamp. Her thighs were still slick where they touched, but she didn't mind. She pulled on a thin nightgown over her shoulders, amused at how its customary calf-length was arrested by her belly until now its hem came barely to her knees. Well, that wouldn't be for much longer anyway. She turned back to tell Tom good-night one last time, but as she leaned closer, she heard the snores that had already swallowed his breathing. Smiling, she stole out of the room as quietly as she could. He worked hard and loved the work he did, but it wore him right out, and he deserved his rest.

As she stole out into the hallway, she couldn't help bypassing the door at the top of the stairs, the one closest to the master bedroom, and peeking into the other two bedrooms down at the end of the hall. All three children were sound asleep, as was only appropriate for the late hour: the girls side by side in their matching tiny white beds in one room, and Tom Jr. alone in the other. If her predictions were correct, he'd be sharing soon as well -- though given the level of six-year-old enthusiasm that he'd shown for his upcoming sibling, she didn't suspect he'd find much cause to object to the arrangement. And if her guess were wrong, well, it didn't matter; that baby would be loved more than it knew what to do with, no matter what.

Satisfied that three of her children were sound asleep -- and the one that was awake, well, there was nothing to be done about him, but at least she knew he was safe -- Patty crept back to the door she'd skipped earlier and knocked once before slipping inside. "Two seconds," said Lou, who was sitting up at the head of her bed and had the lamp beside her focusing its beam on the fabric she had in her hands. She made a few more quick stitches, then cut the thread with her teeth. "And Mrs. Miller can complain all she wants about how it's not how the girls in Brussels did the edging in the first place, but you know what? It's done and I don't care." With a triumphant gesture, Lou placed the mess of sewing on the bedside table, then mimed washing her hands clean of it.

Patty giggled as she pulled off her nightgown before climbing into the bed; Mrs. Miller was one of Lou's best clients, an elderly widow who insisted that everything Lou did was horrible hackneyed work and still brought every bit of tailoring and mending to her anyway. Lou lay an arm across the pillows, and Patty snuggled up close to her, lying flat on her back. "How's the little one?" Lou asked, pulling out a jar from the drawer in the nightstand.

"Doing cartwheels." Patty closed her eyes and tried not to squeak as Lou rubbed the cold cocoa butter across her belly.

"So he's going to be a night owl like his mama, is he? Stay up carousing until dawn, sleep past noon, put on clothes just in time for giving afterschool piano lessons?"

"There are worse fates." Beneath even Lou's cold touch, the lotion warmed up as it settled across Patty's skin. Four pregnancies -- well, three and eight-ninths -- later, and Patty didn't have so much as a stretch mark that she hadn't had beforehand, thanks to how Lou insisted on putting so much effort into preserving what she called Patty's perfect skin. Patty had heard many of the mothers she'd known complaining how miserable their pregnancies had been for them, and Patty had just smiled sympathetically and never once mentioned that the *real* secret to feeling beautiful while carrying a baby was to have a loving husband and a devoted lover on hand, and then to

make sure those were two different people.

She'd lasted only five weeks after Tom's homecoming, five weeks of living as his wife while her chaste friend Lou kept residence in their guest bedroom, before he'd kissed her one night after making love to her and she'd just dissolved into tears. He'd held her there in the dark as the whole story had come out, peppered with tears and apologies and declarations of her love, and to his incredible credit, he'd stayed quiet and let her tell it all. When she'd finally finished, he'd put his arms around her and told her that it *was* a little strange to hear, and that he wasn't quite sure how he felt about all of it, but that he loved her and, what was more, he really liked Lou. "And if she makes you happy, that makes me happy too," he'd promised her, and she'd drawn him close to her again, needing to feel him on top of and inside her. Two months later, her doctor had confirmed that Tom Jr. was on his way.

As they always did, Lou's hands found their way up to Patty's breasts, which were sensitive but not painfully tender at this stage, and when Lou's lotioned fingertips teased one of Patty's nipples into a point, Patty smirked. "You know, he said tonight that he was the only one who'd ever be man enough to satisfy me," she said, cracking one eye open to see Lou's reaction.

Lou screwed up her face in comic indignation. "Oh, he knows now I'm committed to proving him wrong," she said, squaring her shoulders. Patty had dreams of getting both Tom and Lou in bed with her someday, but for now she was more than content with being the cause of their loving yet antagonistic relationship toward one another. Lou never butched up quite so much as when Tom teased out her competitive streak.

"No, he's right," said Patty, and when she felt Lou's hands still against her skin, she laughed a wicked little laugh. "So it's up to you to be *woman* enough to satisfy me."

"Challenge accepted." With a quick kiss across Patty's mouth, Lou tossed back the covers and knelt between Patty's legs. As Lou's fingers teased her open, Patty closed her eyes and rested her hands across her belly, feeling in that moment at the center of everything good in the world.

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In Attendance

by Hinotori (火鳥)

"If I didn't know better," said Ari, holding her arms out straight as Kesha poked at her with pins, "I'd think you were enjoying this."

Kesha pulled some pins out from between her lips before replying. "I don't get the opportunity to dress up like this enough," she said, eyes shining.

Ari groaned. "I always thought that was a *good* thing."

The only positive thing Ari could say about the voluminous robes the ladies in attendance were expected to wear for wedding ceremonies was that it was easy to conceal weapons inside them. Kesha had managed to conceal three knives and a shortsword between the layers of her outfit, and had practiced pulling them out and fighting with them for half an hour straight before she'd declared the job done.

Kesha had then removed all but the base layer - which had almost taken half an hour on its own - in order to fit Ari for her own robes. They were on layer three, with two more to go.

"I won't be able to move at all in this," muttered Ari, swinging her arms from side to side experimentally. "What good is a mage who can't move?"

Kesha pursed her lips. "I may be able to cut some slits to improve the movement at the shoulder. Let me see..."

Three iterations later, Ari had something she felt confident enough with to attempt one of the basic kata.

"It'll do," she admitted, then she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. "I look ridiculous." The robes were fine pieces of work, but with her in them it just looked... incongruous. Her hair was still in its messy high ponytail, and her face was plain and unadorned.

"Because we haven't done your hair yet," said Kesha. "Or painted your eyes."

Ari closed her eyes in despair. "Do noble ladies have to go through this *every day*?" she asked.

"Noble ladies probably have an entire retinue to look after them," said Kesha. "Even Laila is probably getting her sisters to help her dress. Sit down and I'll do your hair."

Kesha's hands were more gentle than you would expect from a swordswoman. They pulled tightly on Ari's hair, but not hard enough to hurt. Ari felt her heartbeat quicken and closed her eyes while she attempted to centre herself again.

An eternity later, they were both dressed and made up. Kesha looked a lot more natural in her robes to Ari's eye, although she made faces looking at herself in the mirror.

The length of the sleeves and sheer number of layers made it easy to disguise the unusual amount of muscle Kesha sported for a lady purportedly childhood friends with a sheltered merchant's daughter.

Kesha had pinned her own hair - with Ari's nervous assistance - in simple loops. "It's too short to be fashionable," she admitted. "But I'm hoping nobody will call me on it." She twirled a little, her robes flowing out with the movement.

"I still think I look like I don't belong," said Ari, gently feeling the braid Kesha had made of Ari's hair. A few tendrils had been left loose to brush her cheeks, and her eyes were made up in the traditional style. Her eyes had been lined in gold, curling in loops and swirls down her cheek

and up to her brow. She felt alien.

"You look perfect," said Kesha, looking into Ari's eyes with a gaze so intense that Ari wondered what was going through her mind.

"I wonder if I'll ever get to do this for real," mused Ari.

"How do you mean?"

"Attend someone at her wedding - somebody I'm actually close to rather than pretending." Ari hesitated. "Have you ever thought of getting married?"

Kesha froze for the tiniest moment, then averted her gaze to the floor. "No. I don't think I'll ever get married."

Ari couldn't quite help the little flutter of excitement at that. "Do you--"

Somebody knocked at the door. A little annoyed, Ari flicked her hand in its direction and read the life signature on the other side. "Laila," she said. "It must be time to start."

Laila smiled at them both. "You look lovely," she said in approval.

"Not so lovely as yourself," said Kesha.

Laila blushed prettily. "I do hope so. Mother tells me the guests are all seated," she said. "Our cue is when we hear the guitar start to play."

Laila's sisters joined them in front of the doors, just in time for the music begin. The flute led the melody, the bass coming in to join after a moment, followed by the reed wind.

As the guitar twined itself into the piece, Laila's eldest sister flung open the doors. The five of them made their way serenely towards the podium, where Laila's husband-to-be waited with his own retinue.

Ari resolutely didn't look out into the crowd of guests, concentrating on not stepping on her own skirts - or on Kesha's.

Laila came to a halt at the podium, and they arranged themselves in a half-circle behind her. Ari let her hands drop to her sides so that her fingers were hidden in her sleeves.

The officiant gave some words of greeting, then launched into the ceremony. Ari schooled her face to appear patient, maybe a little bored, whilst paying attention to every single word. She'd spent the last two days memorising this ceremony and any deviation was suspect.

The officiant held her hands over the fire on the podium, making intricate gestures as she spoke the words of the ceremony. As written, the ceremony was powerless, and the gestures nothing more than decoration.

It would only take a few changes to work powerful magic, however - especially at a ceremony so revered as a wedding.

The first change was to the clause about the raising of children. The word order changed; a single substitution; a circular motion when it should have been straight. Ari moved her hands behind her back so she could work the neutralising spell without drawing attention to herself.

Barbaric, she thought to herself. Trying to ensure fertility and the birth of a son. It had been forbidden for centuries.

The officiant didn't appear to notice Ari's intervention, which might be to her favour - perhaps she didn't even realise what she was doing.

The second attempted change was similarly small and petty: an attempt to ensure fidelity. It was easily circumvented.

At last, the priest started the final stage of the ceremony. She threw her arms open and the flames grew higher, spilling out of the bowl and turning blue.

Then the roof caved in.

Ari felt, rather than saw, Kesha spring into action, drawing her sword and pushing herself in front of Laila. Ari was closest to the officiant, whose expression was just as astonished as the rest of the party, so she pulled her back behind her. Ari weaved spells for strength into Kesha's sword arm quickly, then she readied an immobilization spell, taking care, even with her limited time, to ensure her hand movements were accurate.

The assassins - for in their black masks they could be nothing else - had not been prepared for a trained sword-mage pair. She hitched her robes up with the cord Kesha had sewn into them before launching into the final kicks and punches that completed the immobilisation spell. Two of the assassins dropped to the floor and Ari tore strips off her robe in order to bind their hands and feet, lest the spell wear off early. Then she risked a glance to check on how Kesha was handling the remaining assassin.

Kesha was a blur of motion, fighting to keep the assassin's undoubtedly-poisoned knives away from herself and Laila. The assassin slashed very close to Kesha's face, Kesha's blade blocking the blow in the nick of time. Kesha was the better fighter, that much was obvious, but she was hampered by trying to prevent the assassin from getting past her without harming it. To spill blood would be a terrible omen at a wedding.

Ari bit her lip and waited until she'd mastered the rhythm of the fight, then lashed out with a spellkick that knocked the assassin's feet out from under it. Without blinking, Kesha knocked out the assassin with the butt of her sword.

They waited a moment, the screams from the remaining guests gradually quieting down.

In defiance of all protocol, Laila's chosen husband dashed to her side. "Laila! Are you injured?"

"I'm fine, Raol," she said, ducking her head. "Thanks to my friends."

"I cannot thank you enough," he said, turning to face Kesha and Ari. "If you hadn't been here..."

Kesha sheathed her weapon and affected a sheepish look that was completely out of character. "I know we're not supposed to bring weapons," she said. "But I was so worried after Laila received all those threats..." She dropped her hands to her sides.

"I'm sure the officiant will forgive it," he gushed. "Won't you?"

The officiant, sitting half-slumped up against the wall, managed to pull herself to her feet. "Under the circumstances," she said, brushing down her robes, "I will have to. I doubt the lady Laila was the only target of those assassins."

Killing the officiant *and* the bride would be a way to doubly ensure the wedding never took place. It would take months to arrange a new officiant for the couple even if the bride survived.

The guard arrived, obviously summoned by the fleeing guests. They took statements from everybody in the room and took the assassins into custody, reassuring Raol and Laila that they would be kept well secured.

"Do we think we can continue with the ceremony?" asked Raol nervously. "I worry about other interruptions."

Ari looked out at the half-empty hall. "Most of the guests have run away," she said.

"Then it is their loss for abandoning us in our time of need," said Laila softly. "Please, let's just do it."

"Very well," said the officiant. "Now, where was I..."

Ari knelt down and helped her reassemble the ritual fire. The bowl was hidden under the wood and tile that had formerly made up the roof and ceiling and it took some searching to reassemble

the ritual table. She followed the officiant's lead in calling the fires to return.

"Thank you," said the officiant. "You do this very well. Where were you trained?"

Ari shrugged. "I picked it up here and there."

The rest of the ceremony went entirely as scripted. Ari didn't even need to neutralise any more spells - which was fortunate, as she was feeling the effects of using so much magic. Her limbs felt heavy as lead, but she could feel excess power teasing at her gown. It would take a while for it to dissipate.

At last, the ceremony was over and Laila and Raol were officially married. Laila's happiness was infectious, and Ari found herself smiling as she and Kesha returned to their dressing room to change for the wedding feast.

"I cannot believe you tore up your gown," said Kesha, holding up the ruined fabric woefully.

"Can't you?" asked Ari innocently.

Kesha giggled. "Point taken." She put the fabric aside and helped Ari out of the rest of her layers. Once Ari was reduced only to her simple shift, she returned the favour.

Off came the outer robe of brilliant blue and silver, decorated embroidered dragons and lilies. Off came the inner robe of muted grey and light blue, sewn with gemstones into the hems. Off came the ruffled petticoat of fine silk.

Ari hesitated as she undid the lacing that ran down Kesha's chest and revealed bare skin, suddenly realising the intimacy of their position. She felt heat rush into her cheeks.

Kesha met her embarrassed gaze evenly. "Ari?"

"Sorry," she said. "I just..."

Kesha kissed her, and it was nothing like she'd ever imagined. Soft and warm, Kesha's lips were dry until she opened her mouth some more and oh...

The remainder of Ari's stored power crackled around them, unwinding Ari's hair from its braid and making it tickle her shoulders.

Ari pulled back. "Just one thing," she said. "This isn't... because of the clothes, is it? Because that's not me, I don't look like that. You know what I look like. That isn't going to change."

Kesha blinked at her slowly, then laughed. "Yes, I know what you look like. I know you when you've just woken up, when you've won a battle, when you've *lost* a battle, when you're going to sleep... All that's new is that now I know you when you're completely uncomfortable dressed up in traditional gowns." She bopped Ari on the nose. "Yes, you were beautiful, but that's not why I kissed you."

"I'd like you to kiss me again," said Ari quickly.

Kesha cocked her head with another of those sweet, shy smiles that turned Ari's insides around. "I think that can be arranged. But you should finish undoing my gown first."

Ari returned to the laces, slower this time - thinking that she was allowed to touch now; she was allowed to look. Kesha watched her through hooded eyes.

She pushed the straps of the gown over Kesha's shoulders and it slithered to the floor with barely a whisper of sound.

They stood in front of each other, dressed only in their shifts. Ari felt goosebumps rise on her skin, and turned away to coax the fireplace into life with a few quick gestures.

There was a plush rug laid out in front of the fire and they sunk down onto it gracefully, although Ari couldn't have said how they managed when they were so caught up in each other. Kesha slid her hands under Ari's shift and gently cupped her breasts, brushing a thumb over her nipple and breaking into a smile when Ari gasped. The windows in the room rattled and Ari felt

heat on the side of her face as the fire flared up wildly.

"You're beautiful like this, too," Kesha said, her eyes shining in the firelight.

Ari pushed Kesha down until she was lying on the rug, her hair in disarray as Ari's power teased it out of its pins, one by one. Ari kissed her, feeling those soft lips give way to the warmth of her mouth.

Ari slid a finger under Kesha's shift and into her panties, working her way through the wiry curls there until she could feel the soft folds of flesh, already a little damp with want.

"Oh, post-battle tension," breathed Kesha. "Usually I just take a long, hot bath."

"And is this better?" Ari murmured.

Kesha nuzzled her face into Ari's neck. "Definitely. Don't stop."

Ari kissed her again. It was too risky for Ari in this state, but that didn't mean she couldn't take care of her partner.

She dove a little deeper into Kesha's folds, slicking her fingers with what she found there, then stroked gently while her thumb searched for that certain spot... She knew she'd found it when Kesha gasped.

Kesha's pupils were blown out of proportion, her cheeks flushed and her breathing heavy. Ari nuzzled at her neck and kept her hand moving, drawing circles with her thumb and drawing gasps with every stroke.

Ari felt like she could keep doing this forever, feeling Kesha's heat around her and seeing her drenched in pleasure, but soon enough Kesha squeezed her eyes tightly and she drew in a deep breath, quivering around Ari's hands as she reached her completion.

She gently stroked Kesha's hair as she settled, breathing slowly returning to normal. Kesha opened her eyes. "You...?"

"Not now," she said, kissing Kesha's nose. "Later."

Kesha broke into a wide smile. "It's a promise."

The bucket they'd been provided for washing had gone cold, but Ari still had enough rogue power floating around the room to be able to channel it into heating the water.

They dressed each other again, slower as they kept being distracted with kisses.

At least they were allowed to wear more sensible clothing to the wedding feast. It wasn't quite the fighting leathers Ari was most comfortable in, but the gown was sleeveless and the skirt had slits on each side tall enough that she would have a decent range of motion in it.

"I think one of the guards may have recognised me," said Kesha, concentrating on the mirror as she pinned her hair back up, brushing off Ari's apologies easily. "I don't think she'll say anything, but she knows we're probably not actually Laila's childhood friends."

Ari made a face. "We'll have to include it in our report. It shouldn't cause any trouble. I hope." She hated having to make non-routine reports.

"From the questions she was asking, I think she wants to join up," said Kesha, grinning. "I'm not sure, but I think she might have met me during the Janos case. "

That was before Ari had met her. "Well, that should appease the Guild, anyway. They're always happy to poach from the Guard." Ari should know - that's how she'd been recruited.

Kesha brushed the wrinkles out of her dress in front of the mirror critically, flexing her arms a few times. "Oh well. They already know I'm a swordswoman."

"You look fine," said Ari.

Kesha gave her an indulgent look. "You're hardly an authority, but I'll take your word for it." She held out her hand. "Shall we?"

"Always," said Ari.

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/210981.html>

Big Name Fan

by Domashita Romero (地下×)

illustrated by hybridcritter

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com

To: celladoor@gmail.com

Subject: interested in an interview?

Hello, there. My name is Bailey Callendar, and I'm a writer currently working for Magpie -- we sort of fall under the "ladyblog" category, but we're a bit more diverse than that. I'm working on a story right now about slash fiction, and I'm interested in interviewing a few of the more prominent and prolific authors. I promise this isn't going to be a "oh, aren't those girls so weird and cute with their little fan stories" sort of hit piece I've seen around; I want to get a good survey of the culture and open it up to our readers. Your name's come up a lot with some of the people I've already been talking to, and I'd love to get your input. I'd just like to ask you a few things about your history with slash, your involvement in fandom, that sort of thing. Please let me know if you're interested, and if not: happy writing!

-b

From: celladoor@gmail.com

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com

Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Oh, I'd love to help out! I have read those point-and-laugh articles before, and I have to say, I was not impressed. I've been deeply involved in fandom for quite some time, so ask away!

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com

To: celladoor@gmail.com

Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Great! Although, here's the point where I reveal my angle and you maybe change your mind. I'm specifically writing about lesbians who write male/male slash fiction. I've read your blog, and it seems you identify as lesbian -- please correct me if I'm wrong. Again, I'm not looking to write a "what's wrong with these women" article or paint you out as bad lesbians or make you defend yourself. I'm gay myself, and find the whole phenomenon fascinating -- female sexuality is a complicated beast, isn't it? I want to write something that shows people more of that complexity.

Still interested?

-b

From: celladoor@gmail.com
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Oh, aren't you sneaky. No, I'm still interested. Actually, I'm *more* interested. That's one of the things that's so delightful about fandom, I've found. It really gives a lot of women a way to express and explore their sexualities and identities that they might not be able to do in their everyday lives. And, yes, I'm certainly a part of that. The article sounds good -- I know everyone's experience is different, so I'd love to hear what some other girls have to say.

So! I'm game! Fire at will!

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Excellent! Well, let me start with some basic questions, and then we can just build from there:

- How did you get involved with fandom?
- How did you get involved with slash specifically?
- What appeals to you about male/male pairings?

-b

From: celladoor@gmail.com
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Oh, I've been involved in fandom almost as long as I can remember. I was in fandom before I think I even knew what fandom was, writing little stories in my head about what *I* would do if I got sucked into *Labyrinth*. I discovered fanfic on the internet in the late 90s at a very tender age, and I was hooked for life. I didn't read the smutty stuff at first, because I thought, I don't know, the internet police would come to my house, or something, but eventually curiosity got the better of me and I just had to read how Mulder and Scully finally hooked up.

Slash was just a natural progression from there. The bulk of the fanwork you're going to get for most series is slash, so once you follow the trail, you just end up up to your neck in copulating imaginary men. Which isn't too bad of a place to be, depending on your preferences.

And ah, here's where you say, but Marcella! Your stated preferences have nothing to do with copulating men! Here's where it gets more complicated. So, I was reading about Mulder and Scully boffing, even though the only one of them I'd really care to have a roll in the sheets with is Scully (oh, gingers!), but I cared enough about their *characters* that I was interested regardless of genitalia. And when I got into slash, it was like that, too -- I was interested in the characters. The show I'm into now, *Mars*, on its outset it's just a silly little semi-supernatural procedural, but it's got such good characters in it. The chemistry between the two leads is just so rich I can't help but want to write more expanding that relationship. But there's more to it, there.

It should come as no surprise to you, a gay woman yourself, that all of the love stories and couplings you see in almost all of today's popular media are dreadfully, boringly heteronormative. I'd rather poke myself in the eye than sit through a romantic comedy, and I occasionally have to restrain my gagging at the obligatory love plots that come up even in non-romantic movies. It's just so... bog-standard and boring and repressive and I could really go on all day just about that. So that's part of what's fun about slash. You get to play around with sex and romance and characters without falling into the common tropes. Of course, there are plenty of tropes in fanfic *itself* -- I haven't been above writing a 'Five Things That Never Happened to [x] and One Thing That Did' story -- but you get to escape the stereotypes for a little bit. Sexily.

And now I send the birdie back into your court. Thwop!

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Excellent! I can really tell you're a good writer just from these responses. Are there any of your stories you'd recommend I should read?

Now further questions:

You said 'sexily,' so now I have to ask the personal questions: does writing/reading the male/male stuff turn you on? Do you get something out of it other than intellectual stimulation, as it were?

-b

From: celladoor@gmail.com
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Oh, you're saucy, aren't you? Ah, well, you can't spend your free time writing pornography and get all prude when someone asks you about your personal life. I don't personally get turned on by writing *my* stories -- I'm spending too much time thinking if the words are right or if I've spent too much attention talking about how the guys are breathing in the scene -- but thinking it out beforehand, or reading someone else's work? Yes, it's sexy. That is the delightful thing about imagination, you know? I may be gay, but I'm also a proper pervert, so thinking about any two people getting sexy will do me right. It's more about the energy of the thing, as woo-woo as that sounds, than the actual genitals being put together.

And thinking that something that I've written has turned someone *else* on? Well, that's about as sexy as you can get.

As for a story of mine, hmm... most of them do require some information about the source material, but "Sound and Vision" is probably a good one for you. It's a bit long, but it's an AU so you can make it through without a lot of background information. I'm really quite proud of it. And it's got plenty of dirty bits! ;)

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

I read your story! It was fantastic! I mean, there were probably some parts that went over my head because I've never seen the show, but it really could stand on its own as original fiction. I thought I might skim over the dirty bits when I got to them -- no offense, but one cock is too much for me, let alone two -- but I didn't, because they were really essential to the story. I'm impressed! I'll have to read some of the others on your site when I have time. Perhaps you'll make a convert of me...

But I still have questions for you first!

If the appeal is in breaking out of heteronormative tropes, why write men? Aren't there lesbian pairings you could write for?

-b

From: celladoor@gmail.com
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com

Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Ah, you've caught me. Although in this case, it's as much popular media's fault as it is mine. There are lesbian pairings I like, but there just aren't as many. It's hard to get *one* well-written female character on television or in a movie, let alone two. I *have* written stories about the girls, but, well.... to be honest, no one reads them. It is the unfortunate sad state of our world where no one cares about the ladies. And I won't lie, part of the reason I'm in this business is for the positive feedback, so when there's none... well. I hang my head in shame. Sully me with the BAD LESBIAN stamp.

I am glad you liked the story, though. :)

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Oh, I won't mark you as a bad lesbian. I'm sure you're a very good lesbian. Speaking of, do you have a girlfriend? Does she know about what you write? What does she think?

-b

From: marcella.fletcher@vanderbilt.edu
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: interview

Oh, I don't have a girlfriend at the moment. If I did, though, I think I'd be honest about my dirty hobbies. I know there are other girls in the fandom who met through it. Happy wives fangirling away.

--marcella

From: celladoor@gmail.com
To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Whoops, accidentally sent that from my school address! Pardon, I've got too many email accounts tangled up in my phone and I sometimes get confused. Now you know my last name! Kindly do not put it in your piece, please. :)

--marcella

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

You go to Vanderbilt? Do you live in Nashville? I live in Nashville! Oh, I'd love it if we could meet up and continue this interview in person. And maybe you could show me some of that show you write about. I've read some more of your stories and I have to say I'm.... intrigued. ;)

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: interested in an interview?

Sorry, was that coming on too strong? We can set my clumsy email flirting aside and I'd still like to get coffee and talk more about the article. Let me know?

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
To: marcella.fletcher@vanderbilt.edu
Subject: covering my bases

Just going to send to this email address, too, in case you somehow didn't get it... I'd love to meet up with you and conduct this interview face to face. And I'd just like to meet you. Sound good?

Bailey tried to keep focus on the blog she was reading, but after reading a paragraph about who some Kardashian or another was screwing for the third time without absorbing it, she flipped back to the tab with her email open and hit refresh again. Nothing. Of course, her phone would chirp at her the second she got an email, but it didn't hurt to keep checking.

It had been three days since she'd last gotten an email from Marcella. There were probably perfectly sensible reasons why she hadn't responded -- some life emergency, extremely localized power outage, homophobic spam blockers -- but Bailey couldn't help but assume it was her fault. Everything had been going so well, too. She'd had good conversations with the other women she'd interviewed for the piece, but Marcella was something special. She had a sparkle to her writing that had her rereading every email, not to mention the best parts of that fanfiction she'd read.

So, maybe she'd been too forward. Bailey had only been back living in Nashville for less than a year. New York had been glamorous and exciting and dramatic, but it had also been expensive and hard and, well, *dramatic*. A nasty breakup, a lack of good jobs, and her dad's getting sick had been the perfect storm to blow her back south. She still had a few friends left around from high school, but the gay scene left something to be desired. She couldn't help but jump at the chance to at least make a friend with some common interests.

Bailey found herself reading over the archives of Marcella's blog. She talked mostly about

fandom things that were partially inscrutable to her -- she had no inherent judgments about the scene, but sometimes it seemed like they were speaking another language -- but here and there she found little snippets about her life. She was originally from England -- that explained some elements of her writing style -- twenty-six years old, and getting her Masters from Vanderbilt. She had some photos here and there on her blog, but they were all of things like merchandise, DVD box sets, and Etsy-purchased fannish crafts. None of herself. Bailey had spent a very significant portion of her life scouring blogs, and eventually almost everyone posted a picture of themselves, especially the more popular bloggers. And Marcella was popular.

Maybe she was shy. She obviously wasn't shy *online*; she was vivacious and flirty and fun, but Bailey had learned from her other interviews that someone's online life wasn't always reflected in how they were in the flesh-and-blood world. Maybe she didn't think she was pretty enough.

"I am being such a creep," she said to her computer after a failed Facebook search. Internet stalking was a perfectly normal hobby, she told herself as she went to Vanderbilt's website. Maybe there was a student directory with photos. She'd been out of college almost ten years herself, but that was something schools did, wasn't it? She went to the site's people finder, entered in Marcella's name, and clicked 'find.' If she didn't get any hits here, she would stop being a stalker, move on with her life, and write her damn piece.

She got a hit. One definite hit, for Marcella A. Fletcher. With a phone number, a title of Administrative Assistant III, and a department of A&S Dean's Office. She was a student worker, perhaps? There was an address right there for the Dean's office, in one of the more prominent buildings on the Vandy campus. She knew right where it was.

Bailey bit her lip as she stared at her screen. This was creep behavior. This was complete stalker behavior. But really, she just wanted to get closure on her interview, and that was okay, wasn't it? All she was doing was putting on her spunky girl reporter hat and following the story. If Marcella wanted her to buzz off, she would; she'd disappear entirely.

The next day she drove onto Vanderbilt's campus, through the lovely tree-lined roads, to Kirkland Hall, with its stately red brick and high clock tower. She went up to the third floor and walked through the doors to the Dean's office with her head high, like she had a perfectly legitimate reason to be there.

She heard a British accent as soon as she came into the reception area, a woman answering the phone with a crisp, "College of Arts and Sciences, Dean's Office, how may I help you?" Bailey smiled and walked in further; that *had* to be Marcella. She scanned the desks at the front of the office, looking for someone Marcella's age. The women working there were all older, and none of them looked like students. Then she heard the voice again.

"Mhm. Right. Now, what's your major?" There, at the desk just to the left, was the source of that charming accent. She was a middle-aged woman, dressed in the standard of office lady style, boxy beige sweater and short-trimmed nails. Her sandy hair was tied back in a short ponytail at the base of her neck, and she brushed bangs from her tired eyes as she nodded to whatever was being said on the phone. She was plain but not unpretty, with a smudge of color on her lips her only makeup. And there, on the desk in front of her, was her nameplate: Marcella Fletcher.

"Hi, do you need something?" said the smiling woman at the main desk. Bailey swallowed and mustered up a smile of her own and laughed.

"You know, I am in the *complete* wrong office, sorry!" she said, and turned right on her heel to walk out.

Bailey lingered on the steps of Kirkland Hall, craving a cigarette, though she hadn't smoked

since moving home. It was possible, she supposed, for that Marcella Fletcher to also have a daughter named Marcella Fletcher, but there weren't many female juniors in the world, and she hadn't looked old enough to have a twenty-six-year old daughter. So, that was Marcella. People's online lives didn't always reflect how they were in the flesh-and-blood world, indeed.

Well, now she *really* wanted to talk to her.

It'd be terrible to ambush her while she was at work, of course. But the day was almost over; Bailey could just wait outside and talk to her in a nice open public space when she got off work. She sat down on the steps and pulled out her phone, pointing her browser to Marcella's website to pic another fic at random to go through. It was another one marked 'AU', and while Bailey didn't know exactly what that meant, she'd like the last one she'd read, so she went to it. And proceeded to get so wrapped up in it that she completely missed that Marcella had left the building and was now fifty feet away and moving fast.

Bailey pulled herself to her feet and brushed dust off the rear of her skirt. She opened her mouth to shout out Marcella's name, but stopped herself, because, good lord, who wanted a stranger yelling at them from across a yard? She'd just catch up to her -- although she really needed to move fast; for a short girl, Marcella had some serious hustle and was booking it down the road. Hopefully Bailey could catch up to her before she got in her car.

She didn't head for the parking lots, though. Bailey kept following, and had almost gotten to her when Marcella darted out across West End, making it to the other side of the street before traffic overtook the road again. What was she doing? Didn't she know being a pedestrian in Nashville was a dangerous game? She'd gotten a good lead on Bailey by the time the traffic was clear enough for her to cross. It occurred to Bailey as she followed her another block that Marcella might live near campus; if it turned out she was following her home she would just go home and turn herself in to the creep police.

Marcella did turn to enter a building eventually; it wasn't a residence, though, but the greenery-covered entrance of Cafe Coco. Well, at least she'd be easy to find, and maybe Bailey could buy her a coffee. Marcella wasn't inside the cafe when she went in, though, so Bailey headed out to the patio, and there she was, set up at a table with her laptop open to a tumblr page full of animated gifs of famous actors. Yes, this had to be the right woman.

Bailey took a breath and marched right up to her table. "Ah... hi."

Marcella looked up and looked her over for a while, looking a little wide-eyed and startled, but then she blinked and looked down at her laptop. "Oh, I'm sorry, do you want this table? I suppose it is rather rude of me, taking the whole thing to myself. I can move..."

"No, no, it's okay," Bailey said. "You're Marcella, aren't you?"

Marcella went still and suspicious, eyeing Bailey. "Yes, I am. I'm sorry, have we met?"

Bailey smiled at her and extended a hand. "I'm Bailey. We were emailing?"

Marcella's eyes trailed up from Bailey's hand to her face, and went owl-wide as the name connected and all the color drained from her face. "Oh, god," she said, and covered her face in her hands. "No, you weren't supposed to... please, don't tell anyone."



It was not the reaction Bailey was expecting, but after a few seconds of thought, she realized

she was a *fucking moron* for not expecting it, in addition to being a completely inappropriate asshole for doing something like this. She was so hungry for more information that she completely disregarded the human part of the story. Of *course* a woman who'd created a very different persona for her online life wouldn't want to be caught out. When someone stopped responded to your emails you were supposed to take a hint. God, she was the worst.

"No, it's okay!" Bailey said, because it was too late to simply turn around and walk right out of the cafe. "I'm not going to tell anyone. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to talk to you more."

Marcella brought her hands away from her face; she looked completely miserable. Bailey was an *asshole*. "I'm really sorry," she said, voice rasping.

Bailey sat down in the seat across from Marcella; this was only more awkward with her standing there towering over her. "No, really, it's okay. I'm not going to put this in the article. I won't mention a thing about it. I won't even write about you at all if you don't want me to."

Marcella cast a mournful look at her computer, where it looped two seconds of motion from one of the actors from that *Mars* show perpetually. She closed the lid. "No one knows."

"No one?"

Marcella shook her head. "No one in my real life knows about what I do online, and no one online knows I'm..." She made a gesture down her body. "This."

'This' was not bad at all, in Bailey's view. She could use a bit of advice on how to dress better for her body type, but Bailey thought Marcella was really quite cute. She was short and nicely thick, with just that bit of soft-edged butchiness to her that Bailey really liked. She couldn't quite see what the problem was. "Why haven't you told anyone online?"

Marcella let out a sigh. "I don't want to be... the creepy old lady in fandom. The one that people look at and whisper behind her back, oh, isn't it time she got a real life? Shouldn't she have grown up by now?" She knitted her fingers together, flexing them to push her knuckles in. "The *thirty*-year-olds call themselves decrepit, and I'm, well." She let out a little humorless laugh. "Older than that."

"I don't think..." Bailey stopped and took a breath, closing her eyes for a moment. "Maybe you don't care what I think. I'm a privacy-invading asshole and I'm the one who needs to apologize to *you*. I'm sorry. If you'd like me to go away and never speak to you again, I will." She looked Marcella in the eye and offered what she hoped was a repentant smile. "But if I can make it up to you, I'd like to buy you a drink and you can talk to me about it. Or whatever you want."

Marcella looked at her for a long while, a little color raising in her cheeks, and then she let out a breath. "Yes, a drink sounds good."

"This place serves alcohol, doesn't it?" Bailey asked. "Would you like alcohol?"

"Oh, *god*, yes," Marcella said, and Bailey left the table to acquire beers.

Bailey returned with two glasses of Newcastle. When she handed one to Marcella, she gulped down a good half of it in one go. Bailey sat down across from her and raised her eyebrows.

"Impressive."

"Well, I am English," Marcella said, as she licked foam off her top lip. Bailey couldn't help but smile.

"I did notice that," she said.

Marcella let out a huff of a laugh. "Yes, that part is at least true."

Bailey leaned in across the table and made her voice soft. "What else is?"

Marcella sighed and looked to the heavens. "Well, I have been in fandom forever. Just... a bit

longer than I told you. I'm not getting a Masters; I'm just a secretary. It's just... online you can be what you've always wanted to be." She covered her eyes with one hand and drank most of the rest of her beer with the other. "You'll hate me, but I'm not even actually a lesbian."

Bailey was glad Marcella's eyes were closed; she couldn't have hid the disappointment on her face. "You're not?"

"Never even kissed a girl," she said, and dropped her hand.

"Why say you are?" The usual reason for that kind of behavior was impressing dumb boys at parties in college. Marcella's fandom world seemed to be a no-boys-allowed zone, so that seemed highly unlikely.

"I wanted to be someone interesting. Someone more exciting. Someone I'd have a hard time getting away with being in real life."

Bailey had a feeling, so she took the risk. "Someone you've always wanted to be?"

Marcella's eyes dropped and she smiled just a little, some faint color coming back into her cheeks. "A bit, yeah."

Bailey sipped at her beer. "You did say you'd written the girl stuff, after all..."

"I did! I have." Marcella drank the last of her beer. "I mean, not as much as other things, and it's all short..."

Bailey raised an eyebrow. "But dirty?"

Marcella smiled a little more at that and got a little pinker. "Quite. Pretty much all of my stuff is. I'm just completely incapable of writing gen."

Bailey swirled her beer around in her glass, tilting it a little towards Marcella. "I'd really like to read it."

Marcella's eyes got wider and she opened up her laptop. "I can send you the link right now!" She clicked and typed furiously for a few moments, and then Bailey's phone blipped with the email notification. "Of course... you don't, ah. You don't have to read it now. I mean, you *could*; it's short. But..." She shook her head. "I'm going to get another drink. You do what you like."

Marcella left the table, and Bailey watched her go. If she were in Marcella's shoes, she probably would have chased her away instead of letting her sit and ask more personally probing questions, but Bailey got the feeling Marcella had been wanting someone to talk to for a long while. Some secrets became a lot of pressure to keep. The line at the counter inside seemed long, so Bailey picked up her phone and clicked the link to at least skim Marcella's story.

By the time Marcella returned with her new beer, Bailey had read it through one and a half times (once from start to finish, and then just the dirty bits a second time), her cheeks were flushed, and her panties were damp. Bailey's been able to tell that Marcella's more manly smut was good, but it did nothing for her; this stuff was *hot*, no wilting timid descriptions of female sex, just serious, three-fingered *porn*.

Marcella sat down and looked at how Bailey was staring at her phone. "Did you, ah, read it?"

Bailey gave her a big grin and put her phone down. "Are you *sure* you're not a lesbian?"

Marcella dipped her head and smiled. "Never more than a sisterly kiss between school chums."

"Well, *that* sounds sexy," Bailey said.

Marcella laughed. "Not nearly as much as you'd hope." She drank her second beer with less desperate need than the first. "So, you liked it?"

"It was great," Bailey said. She might have to come back and read that one *later*. "You've really never...?"

Marcella shook her head. "I mean, I've done plenty of reading on my own. And, you know, I *have* the equipment." She smiled a little again, cute and shy. "And I've always had a very active imagination."

"I'll say," Bailey said. There was something delightfully dirty and fun about this, consuming porn in public while no one was the wiser. "You really are a good writer. Much better than the other women I interviewed."

"Thank you," Marcella said, smiling into the rim of her glass. "I read some of your articles, too." She made a little typing gesture with her hands. "I googled you."

"Well, that is fair," Bailey said. "I did stalk you a bit."

"Yes, there is that," Marcella said, laughing a little. "You are apparently some kind of evil detective."

"Not evil!" Bailey said, holding up a hand in front of her in defense. "Just curious. I didn't even mean to follow you here, it just... happened." It wasn't a terribly good explanation of her creepy behavior, but somehow, amazingly, Marcella did not seem to be holding it against her.

Marcella took another healthy swallow of her beer and said, "Mm, if you weren't so pretty you wouldn't get away with it." She looked up at Bailey as she realized what she'd said, then drank more of her beer as she blushed. Bailey just smiled.

"Oh, look at me. I went and let you pay for one of your own drinks," she said. "How about this: I buy us dinner, and you tell me how a lovely girl like you ended up here."

Marcella looked a little embarrassed as she smiled. "I think you're a bit confused on those 'lovely' and 'girl' points, but yes, that sounds nice."

They acquired food and more alcohol, and Marcella had just settled into an appealing permanently flushed state. "The place I'm from, it's tiny. You've absolutely never heard of it," she began without any prodding from Bailey. "But about seven years ago, I met a man, an American, and I ended up coming here with him."

"Still with him?" Bailey had known plenty of lesbians who'd spent a good deal of their lives dating men, so this was no damning evidence.

Marcella snorted. "Ha. He dumped me."

Bailey raised her glass. "Fuck him."

Marcella clinked hers against Bailey's. "To hell with him," she said, and drank. "He's married with twins now."

"Oh, to hell with him extra," Bailey said.

"I think of all the diapers and the university bills and it gives me pleasure," Marcella said, a tiny devilish smile on her lips.

"Not much maternal instinct, then?"

"Ha!" Marcella barked. "Not a drop." She looked a little off to the side as she drank. "And, well, even if I did, it's a bit late for me..."

Bailey bit her lip. "If I can just be entirely rude, how old *are* you?"

Marcella closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm turning forty in two months," she said. "Fifty-two days, to be precise. God help me."

"Forty's not that old," Bailey said. "And anyway, you don't look forty."

"Ah, yes," Marcella said. "More like forty-five."

"No, I was thinking you were closer to my age," Bailey said, and smiled. "I'm thirty-one."

Marcella gave her a long look, then shook her head. "You're a very darling girl, but if someone told you you're more beautiful without your glasses, you really shouldn't have listened to them..."

"Perfect eyesight," Bailey said. "I think you're very pretty."

Marcella's brows furrowed, a soft, confused gesture coming over her face. "I'm... really not, but thank you anyway."

"You are!" Bailey said, firmly enough to make Marcella blink rapidly. "I mean, I did think that might be one of the reasons you didn't want to meet with me, that you didn't think you were pretty enough. But you are!" Bailey shook her head. "No, that sounded wrong. I wanted to meet you regardless of what you looked like."

Marcella looked down at her hands, her short fingers wound around the bottom of her glass. "I'm really nothing that special."

"Oh, come on," Bailey said, reaching out to give her a tap on her knuckle with just her fingertip. "You've got a secret life writing porn. That's pretty special!"

Marcella laughed. "I'm just a middle-aged woman with crap taste in telly who spends a lot of time in boring meetings having dirty thoughts."

Bailey closed her eyes and giggled. "Oh, *telly*. I love that. It's so cute."

Marcella covered her face with her hand. "Oh, it's only because I've been drinking. Usually I keep my American in line, so people don't tease."

"I'm not teasing," Bailey said. "I just really do think it's cute. *You're* cute." She'd had less than half the number of drinks Marcella'd had, but she couldn't help but get a little giddy, especially when it made Marcella smile like that, so sweet and bashful.

"You know... one of the first ways I participated in fandom, when I got tired of lurking, was to read people's Harry Potter fanfic and check it for proper Britishness."

Bailey put a hand over her mouth. "That is the cutest thing I've ever heard."

"Isn't it?"

"Just as cute as you are," Bailey said, and then shook her head. "I'm sorry, I should stop flirting."

"No, I..," Marcella brushed her bangs out of her face and looked Bailey in the eye. "I really don't mind."

Bailey could feel her smile taking up her whole face. "You know, I've never seen any of the Harry Potter movies. Or read the books."

Marcella's eyes got wide, as though Bailey had just said she'd never in her life seen a dog before. "They're *cultural touchstones!*"

Bailey shrugged a little. "I just never got around to it. Emma Watson isn't as butch in the movies as she is these days, is she?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Marcella said. "I could loan them to you, of course. Books, movies, I have them all."

"Or we could watch them together?"

Marcella took in a little breath, looked for a moment like she might lift up and leap over the patio railing, but then smiled. "That could be very nice."

"And maybe when we're done with those, you could show me some of that show you write so much for."

Marcella's smile got bigger. "That could be really, really nice."

"Popcorn and cheap wine?"

"Sounds like a date," Marcella said.

"Does it?" Bailey said, and when Marcella's eyes got a little wide and startled, she continued. "I mean, I'm perfectly happy to do it even if it's not. I... honestly don't have a lot of friends in

town anymore. It's one of the reasons I wanted to meet you."

"I don't really, either," Marcella said, and then chewed the side of her lip for a second. "But, ah... it does sound nice."

"A date?"

"A date," Marcella said, and let out a breath.

"The kind that might have a not-sisterly-at-all kiss at the end?" Bailey asked.

Marcella let out a nervous little laugh and looked up at Bailey. "That kind, yes."

"Well," Bailey said, and clinked her glass against Marcella's, quietly marveling at how this had ended up working out. "Just let me know when you're free."

Marcella's apartment was a nondescript little thing near Belmont, and Bailey arrived there around seven on Saturday night with a bottle of cheap rosé in hand. "Oh, lovely," she said as she took the bottle from Bailey's hands. "Think it'll pair well with popcorn?"

"I think anything pairs well with popcorn." Marcella looked more comfortable with herself now, dressed casually in t-shirt and jeans, her little socked feet poking out from beneath the cuffs. In pants, Bailey could really appreciate the shape of her legs, short and strong-thighed.

"Did you get home okay the other night?" Bailey asked.

"No, died on the way home," Marcella said, smiling at her. "Terrible tragedy."

Bailey gave her a little swat on the arm. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, everything was fine," Marcella said. "I find riding my bike home while half-pissed to be quite an enjoyable experience." She looked thoughtful. "And I'm *fairly* certain it's legal." Her bike-riding explained those lovely thighs and that firm-looking ass that Bailey got to look at as she turned towards the kitchen.

"Just stay off the highway," Bailey said as she followed, and Marcella laughed.

"So, you've really never read Harry Potter?" she said, as she popped Bailey's bottle of wine into the fridge and removed a chilly bottle of white.

"I mean, I know of it. Wizards! Voldemort! Someone made me eat a terrible jellybean once."

Marcella laughed as she popped open the bottle with a corkscrew. "Oh, god, those things are horrible." She retrieved two glasses from one of her cabinets. "What sort of things do you usually read?"

"Non-fiction, mostly," Bailey said. "I'm one of those terrible people who stopped reading novels after getting burned out in college literature classes."

"Mm, I do understand that," Marcella said as she poured. "I've just had longer to get over it. I mean, as you can see." She nodded her head out to the living room, where every wall was covered in bookshelves, filled to the brims with books and DVDs. "I mean, if you're going to write, the best thing to do is read."

"Oh, you're smart *and* cute," Bailey said, and Marcella pinkened as she handed her a glass of wine.

"Cheers, then?" Marcella said, and they clinked glasses. Marcella took a very hearty drink of her wine as Bailey sipped, and then laughed as she shook her head. "God, I must be really coming off as a lush. I honestly don't drink too often, I'm just... well, a bit nervous."

"Please, you've got nothing on me in my prime," Bailey said. "And you don't need to be nervous. I'll be a good dyke; I won't bite."

Marcella laughed softly. "No, no, it's not that... I just always get nervous on dates."

Bailey leaned up against Marcella's kitchen counter. "Do you go on many?"

"Some," Marcella said, then sighed and took another hefty drink. "Honestly, I've got rubbish luck with men. One asks me out and I just go, oh! this might be my only chance, I'd better say yes, and then there I am, regardless of how good he is."

Bailey smirked a little. "Oh, is that why you said yes to me?"

Marcella's eyes got wide. "No! Oh, no." She linked her fingers around the stem of her wine glass, holding it like a sacred chalice of pinot grigio. "This is... very different. I mean... none of them ever knew about the real me, and..." She looked into her glass for a moment, then up at Bailey through her lashes. "No one as beautiful as you ever showed interest in me before."

It would be just a lovely moment to kiss her, Bailey thought, but one had to tread carefully with straight girls. She just smiled and tapped her glass against Marcella's again. "Well, they're all idiots, and I'm very lucky."

Marcella smiled, a giddy little light taking up in her eyes, and then laughed. "That sounds like something I'd write," she said, softly, and then shook her head and straightened up. "Right. I'm going to make popcorn. Go make yourself comfortable on the sofa." She handed Bailey the bottle of wine to take with her with a look of deep gravity, and turned to fuss in the cabinets again.

Bailey kicked off her shoes and settled on the couch, curling up her feet next to her. She'd worn a short skirt and stockings patterned in spidery swirls: not logistically the best for a night on the couch, but it *was* a date, and she knew how good they made her legs look. She listened to the sounds of popping in the kitchen and sipped her wine. Marcella's apartment was fairly nondescript in terms of interior decorating, but she'd clearly invested a lot of time and attention into an impressive home theater system. Bailey wasn't sure she'd ever seen a single woman with so large a television.

Bailey was counting the rows of DVD boxed sets when Marcella returned with popcorn, setting it down with her wine on the coffee table. "Am I really the only one who knows about your fandom life?" she asked. "Not even your boyfriends?"

Marcella let out a short laugh. "Oh, especially not my boyfriends. The sort I've dated wouldn't have taken well to an announcement of, 'oh, honey, by the way, I write a lot of gay pornography. About characters who are better-looking than you.'"

"Might be a little threatened?"

"Definitely," Marcella said. She gestured at the apartment. "I mean, I don't even usually have people over. Let's just say my extensive media collection has been deemed 'weird' by some of the men I've dated."

"They sound like pricks," Bailey said, and Marcella just sighed and had to give a little nod. "No friends from work, either?"

Marcella shook her head. "They're all very nice people, and we get along fine, but... outside of work, we don't really have much in common. They're all married and have kids, or grandkids, or go to *church*.... The people in the office I've had the most connection with are the student workers, and that just makes me feel... old and sad."

"I don't think you're old *or* sad," Bailey said. "I mean, you've got something you're passionate about. A lot of people don't have that."

"Ah, yes. My secret passions," she said, smiling. "I still don't think my coworkers would exactly be impressed."

"Who needs them!" Bailey said, waving a dismissive hand in the air. "They probably spend

their nights watching *Real Housewives*, while you're having imagination adventures." Marcella laughed at that, and she continued, "I mean, now you've got me, at least. If I can be so forward."

Marcella tucked her legs up under her on the couch, turning her body more towards Bailey. "You can be, certainly."

Bailey snatched up the bottle of wine and refilled Marcella's glass. "And I can introduce you to my friend Nina and her girlfriend. She's the one who got me headed down the path that lead me to you. She's a voracious lesbian slash-reader." Bailey paused and laughed. "Wait, I don't know if that sounds like she's a voracious lesbian or a voracious reader. Maybe both."

"Oh, taking me to meet voracious lesbians on the second date," Marcella said, arching an eyebrow. "This is getting dangerous."

"Who's to say you haven't got one on the first date?" Bailey said, and felt good about how her grin was met by one of Marcella's own. "But really, you all could bond, and I'd be the one non-nerdy one left out of the loop."

"That does sound like fun," Marcella said, then bit her lip a little. "Does she know me online, though? I'd feel awkward having to, ah, break the news."

"I don't think she does," Bailey said. "She flits about in different fandoms than you do." She took a nibble of some popcorn. "What *is* that show you like about? I sort of wasn't able to gather from what you had me read; I'm just assuming it isn't actually steampunk."

Marcella laughed and shook her head. "No, that was just a bit of AU fun. I can't help myself from wanting to imagine people in waistcoats and top hats from time to time."

"As do we all," Bailey said, and grinned. "Or corsets."

"Yes, *indeed*," Marcella said, then pondered her words for a moment and sighed. "The show itself... well, it sounds rather silly on paper." She took in a steadying breath and continued. "It's a crime show about a man named Roland Mars -- hence the name of the show -- who presents himself to the police as a Sherlock Holmes-like deductive genius, but *actually* he can solve crimes because of, um, his magic powers. Can see through the fabric of space and time because of a link to essential elemental forces." She looked at Bailey, who blinked. "I know, it's a *very* silly concept, but believe me when I say the characters make up for all the cheesy magic-vision effects. He and his cop partner have fabulous chemistry."

"No, no, I didn't say anything!" Bailey said. "Although I did think that whole magic bit in the fic of yours I read was, you know, your little embellishment."

Marcella laughed. "No, that's completely canon, somehow." She wiggled her fingers in the air. "Murder mysteries with magic, ooh."

"And gay sex?"

"Well, if you read between the lines." She took a drink of her wine and smiled, looking the most relaxed and comfortable that Bailey had yet seen her. "Everyone involved with the show knows what the internet gets up to, and they do a bit of teasing and, well, pandering. Putting the boys in a lot of tight enclosed spaces together, finding reasons for them to take their shirts off..."

"But never any real payoff?"

"Well... no," Marcella said. "But in a way, that would spoil the fun. If they *actually* hooked up, it would kill the whole happy industry of girls thinking up ways for them to hook up." She laughed again. "That's just my opinion, though. I know some girls who make deadly serious petitions on the topic, get into all kinds of nasty internet fights. Not my area." She giggled a little. "I'm just here for the porn."

Bailey leaned over and clinked her glass against Marcella's at that. "You're really doing more

than that, though. You write really good *stories*, not just dirty bits." She drank her wine and enjoyed the way Marcella seemed to glow from the praise. "Do you ever think of writing, you know, a book? Something original? Your waistcoats story seemed halfway there."

Marcella refilled her half-empty glass and let out a little breath. "I have thought about it. I've probably got it in me, but..." She shrugged. "I'd have to go through the whole terror of trying to sell it, and getting rejected by publishers, and then in the end no one would probably read it."

Bailey reached over to brush her fingers over Marcella's knee. "I would."

"Oh, well, I'll be sure to put some good lesbianism in it for you," Marcella said, and then laughed. "Into my imaginary novel that doesn't exist." She looked into her wine glass, but she dropped her hand down to brush over Bailey's fingers. "But, you know, that's sort of the other end of the coin that's telling me to be a normal adult with the kind of interests people at work would approve of. It's this idea that fanfiction isn't enough. Like you're supposed to grow up from *that*, too. But, you know, maybe I could write a book someday, but I'd probably still write fanfiction. Because it's *fun*. It makes me happy."

Bailey raised up her glass. "Cheers to that. Not enough people have things that make them feel that way." She tilted her head and smiled a bit ruefully. "Myself included, honestly."

Marcella tinged her glass against Bailey's, and curled her fingers so they threaded through Bailey's, still on her knee. "Well, I'll convert you yet."

Bailey drank and then grinned, taking a moment to bite the rim of her glass. "Well, I suppose that's a fair trade. Do *you* get a toaster?"

"Amazon gift certificate, I believe," she said, and her smile was so soft and pretty, Bailey had to struggle not to lean over and kiss it right then and there.

Somewhere halfway into the second bottle of wine they realized they'd completely forgotten to watch the movie at all, but by that point, neither of them cared. Marcella impressed her with passionate talk about the role women play in popular media (leaving Bailey wondering how she, an actual lesbian, didn't know about the Bechdel Test), babbled charmingly about why she loved *The Princess Bride* (which Marcella was horrified Bailey'd never seen), and told a story about a terrible ex of hers that made Bailey laugh so hard she fell off the couch.

"I'm sorry, I'm a terrible guest," she said, as Marcella pulled her up off the floor. She ended up in her arms for a bit, leaning close, enough to feel her breath against her hair. "Getting drunk and falling off your furniture."

"Oh, it wasn't a long fall, at least," Marcella said, rubbing her back a little. "But I think I won't be letting you drive home. You can stay here tonight."

In your bed? Bailey stopped herself from saying, even as drunk as she was. She was really quite smitten with Marcella, and it'd do no good to scare the straight girl off on the first date. She rested her head on Marcella's shoulder, sighing softly. "Oh, it's been a long time since I've had to crash on someone's couch."

Marcella brushed her hand over Bailey's hair, fingers winding a little through its waves. "Mine's comfortable, I assure you. I've fallen asleep on it enough times."

"You'll tuck me in?"

"Under my nan's quilt, no less," Marcella said, and laughed. "Isn't *that* just the sexiest thing you've ever heard?"

Bailey lifted up her head and smiled at her. "You know, a little bit." Marcella smiled back, and then it was happening, that moment, that sparking giddy moment right before you knew you were going to kiss someone for the first time. Marcella took in a little breath of bravery and she

leaned in first. Her fingers curled in Bailey's hair as she rose to meet her, kissing her soft and sweet, the feeling of her lips thrilling through her whole body. There was plenty of her that wanted to push her back on the couch and kiss her more and more, but she held back, because this was perfect just how it was. Slow and gentle, one step at a time. She'd hate herself if she messed this up.

She pulled away and smiled at Marcella's pink cheeks. "You're so pretty when you blush," she said, and staggered her way up to her feet. "You get that sexy quilt, and I'm going to go drink directly out of your tap like an elegant woman."

Marcella laughed, putting fingers first to her cheek and then to her lips. "You *could* use a glass."

"Complicated, too complicated," she said as she weaved her way to the kitchen. She had bumbled through a few cabinets actually finding a glass when she turned and saw Marcella had followed her. She reached up both of her hands and held Bailey's face to bring her down across the few inches of difference between their heights and kissed her again, this time more assuredly. It made Bailey's toes curl.

When she let Bailey go, she brushed her sweet short fingers against her throat, making Bailey's hair stand on end. "This was the best date I've had in..." She stopped and laughed. "This is the best date I've had."

"Me too," Bailey said, and loved the way it made Marcella smile.

To: celladoor@gmail.com
From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: fun time last night

I must say, you're really excellent at taking care of a girl with a hangover. But I do have one question: did I leave my panties at your place?

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
From: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: fun time last night

Oh, you naughty girl, you know you haven't. Unless you've hid them somewhere for me to find later. You *did* leave your stockings here. It was like some very sexy spider had spun a web over the edge of my sofa.

To: celladoor@gmail.com
From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Red: fun time last night

Oh, you can keep those as a trophy. I think I'd put about four runs in them by the end of the night, anyway. I fell asleep with the damn things on and got into a very serious battle with them around two in the morning.

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
From: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: fun time last night

I know; I had a peek when I went to the bathroom around three. You'd kicked my poor nan's quilt off. Legs just everywhere.

I may have looked longer than just a peek. ;)

To: celladoor@gmail.com
From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Red: fun time last night

Ooh, who's the naughty girl now? I woke up with my skirt around my belly button so I hope you got a very good look!

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
From: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: fun time last night

How else do you think I knew you didn't leave your panties here?

To: celladoor@gmail.com
From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: fun time last night

Okay, I think it's very important that we see each other again very soon. I've gushed about you to my voracious lesbian friends and they'd love to meet you. Perhaps an evening with a bit less wine and actually successfully watching something that my nerdy education lacks?

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
From: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: fun time last night

Some phrase about dipping in honey comes to mind. Name the time and place and I'll be there.

Bailey ended up having to pick Marcella up to go to Nina's, due to its being a little far away and unfamiliar for her to go biking to. That was just fine, though, because after they kissed hello

they got to laugh in the car on the way, Marcella fussing through the playlists on the iPod Bailey had hooked into the car stereo. Bailey felt a little bad for thinking it, but she was a little startled at the amount of knowledge Marcella had about good music.

"How do you know so much about music?" she asked.

"Oh, fanmixes," Marcella said, and an explanation of that filled up the rest of the ride to Nina's.

The night with the girls went off smashingly well. Nina's girlfriend Julia cooked enough food to keep the amount of wine they drank from being debilitating, and they both simply loved Marcella. Bailey could tell she was nervous at first, clutching her wine glass with both hands as she bit her lip through small talk. But the minute Nina asked her something about her "ships," she blossomed like a spring flower, and three of them were off in their own fannish world before Bailey could blink. She didn't mind standing on the edge for a while, not when it made Marcella be so alive.

"Wait, is your username 'celladoor'?" Julia asked at one point, and Bailey bit the inside of her lip as Marcella paled.

"Er, yes, actually. That's me."

"Oh, I've read something of yours!" Julia said with obvious delight. "I'm not huge into *Mars*, but someone recced me that one you wrote, the *X-Files* crossover."

Marcella laughed and put a hand against her chest. "Oh, that one is a bit silly."

"Oh, whatever!" Julia said, gesturing broadly to nearly slosh her wine on the carpet. "I eat stuff like that up! The way you had Roland talking about all the dirty shit he could see that had gone down in Mulder's apartment? Mystical echoes of tranny porn? Loved it!"

Marcella smiled. "I'm really glad you liked it." She laughed and brushed her hair behind her ear. "I guess my secret's really out then, that I'm not exactly who I say I am online."

"Oh, you aren't?" Julia said, then waved her hand. "Ah, don't worry about that sort of thing. Nina and I met online, and I was pretending to be a man at the time."

Nina smiled. "Such angst I had over it, how I was falling for a *man*." She leaned over to kiss her girlfriend. "Lucky for me you're a dirty liar."

"I just lie about my age," Marcella said. Julia waved her hand in the air again.

"Oh, to hell with that," she said. "There need to be more girls over thirty in fandom. Someone needs to raise these children properly. Sit them down and say, when I was your age, we didn't *have* kinkmemes. We had to walk uphill in the snow both ways to get a *Due South* fic with two paragraphs of smut, and we liked it!"

Marcella laughed brightly. "Oh, you just might be right. They might be mad at me for lying, though."

"It's just the internet," Nina said. "You've got us now, after all."

"And me," Bailey chimed in, reaching out to take Marcella's small hand in hers. "Even if I don't know what a kinkmeme is."

Marcella reached out and patted her cheek. "I'll teach you, dear."

When they settled on the couch to watch *The Princess Bride* (Nina and Julia had been equally scandalized by Bailey's lack of experience with it and insisted), the girls curled themselves up together at one end, and Marcella sat next to her on the other, their hands twined up together. By the time the movie was half over, Bailey had her arm around her. She had the kind of curves that Bailey liked a lot, soft under her fingers when she curled them around her waist. So many of the girls she'd dated in New York had been like her, smoking too much and eating too little;

gorgeous and glamorous, but built like clothes hangers. Now she was back home, had quit smoking, and could get her arms around the type of girl she *really* liked.

The movie ended and there were hugs and promises all around to do this again, and a general exchange of emails and tumblrs and livejournals between Marcella and the girls. While Bailey drove her home, Marcella reached over to twine fingers with hers, squeezing her hand as she smiled dreamily out the window into the night. Bailey held it tight until she actually needed to use it to drive.

Bailey pulled up in front of Marcella's apartment. "I really had fun tonight," she said, turning to her.

"So did I," Marcella said, and then tucked a bit of her hair behind her ear. "Would you... like to come inside?"

There was promise in those words, and it made Bailey a little wet. She took the key out of the ignition and smiled. "I'd love to."

They were inside long enough to put down purses and for Marcella to kick off her shoes before she turned and took Bailey's face between her hands again to kiss her, long and wet and deep. You'd never have thought it too look at her, but by god, the woman knew how to kiss. Bailey was panting when Marcella pulled back.

"I really like you," she said, breathless herself. "And not just because you're beautiful and decided to pay attention to me for some reason. I've had more fun with you the few times we've been together than I have since... I don't remember."

Bailey pet her cheek with her fingertips, and Marcella sighed. "You, too. You're so much more wonderful than I think you know."

Marcella laughed a little, soft and nervous. "You're really making me feel it." She opened her mouth to speak, frowned, and then shook her head. "I was going to say something utterly terrible like 'let me make you feel it, too,' but that is a line I wouldn't put in my worst fic, so I'll just say: will you come to bed with me?"

Bailey curled her fingers behind Marcella's neck, stroking up her neck and making her shiver from it. "I very definitely will," she said, and then a pang of conscience hit her. "But you don't have to rush this. I know you've never done this before."

Marcella smirked a little, a crooked thing that was pretty on her lips, and looked up at her through her eyelashes. "Just because I haven't done it doesn't mean I haven't thought about it." She rocked up on her toes to kiss Bailey again, just a brief wet touch of lips that made her want more. "I've thought of it plenty."

Bailey let out a breath. "Lead the way, then."

Marcella's bedroom had even more bookshelves in it, but most importantly it had her bed, a big, beautiful queen-sized thing that they both tumbled onto, stretching out side by side as they kissed. Marcella thread her fingers into Bailey's hair, tangling them deep as she tilted her head back to kiss her more. She never expected her to be so forceful, but she had an insistence to her every move and kiss that made her ache.

Marcella kept kissing her as she pulled her hand from the curls of Bailey's hair to stroke down her neck and settled against one of her breasts. She paused in her kiss to let out a shaky breath as she shaped out her flesh with her fingers. She found Bailey's nipple with her thumb and drew it over it until it stiffened, tingling and tight even through two layers of fabric.

"God!" Bailey gasped, and she was smiling. "You *have* thought about this, haven't you?"

"I really have," Marcella said into her chin before kissing her neck. She slipped a hand under

the edge of Marcella's shirt. "Can I?"

The exact intent of Marcella's question was unclear, so Bailey just went for the strongest option, and sat up a little to pull the shirt off over her head. Marcella brought her hand back as soon as she settled down again, tracing her fingers over the lace of Bailey's bra. She lined out the edges of it for a while, teasing those round little fingers along where fabric met skin, and then tugged one of the cups down before bringing her mouth down to Bailey's nipple.

Bailey made a choked gasping sound and grabbed the back of Marcella's head as she felt herself get soaked with each tease of Marcella's tongue. This was *not* how previously straight girls acted; she had expected her first time in bed with Marcella to be a world of teaching her how things went. Marcella's tongue fluttered over the peak of her nipple and she whimpered and squirmed.

"You've really..." she gasped, "really never done this before?"

"Really," Marcella said into her skin as she reached behind to undo the clasp of her bra. "Lots of thinking, lots of reading," she said as she helped Bailey out of it, leaving her bare from the waist up. "Tell me if I do any of it wrong."

"No," Bailey breathed as she rolled more onto her back, giving Marcella access to both of her breasts. "No, you're doing *amazing*." Marcella mouthed at one nipple as she felt her other breast with a gentle hand. Bailey'd been so fixated on those fingers of hers: short and neat and thick. No one would call them elegant, but all Bailey could think about was having them inside her. Her hips squirmed on the bed as she thought of it.

Marcella played with her breasts until she was whimpering and writhing, biting her knuckle to keep from bothering the neighbors with the sounds she might make. When Marcella went for the zip on the side of her skirt, she let out a desperate breathy laugh in relief. Marcella hesitated at it, but she shook her head. "Don't stop, don't stop, you're just... I didn't expect this."

"I've never met anyone as beautiful as you," Marcella said, breathing into the curve of her belly. "No one's ever let me do this before."

"Anything," Bailey said, tossing her head against the pillow. "Anything at all." Marcella drew in breath and slipped her hand beneath the loosened fabric of Bailey's skirt before pulling it off.

"I loved those stockings of yours, but I'm glad you've not got them on tonight," Marcella said as she moved her hand up Bailey's thigh, trailing inward. All she had left on were her panties, little satiny things that were completely soaked by now. She looked beyond the haze of her eyelashes to see the intense look of concentration that colored Marcella's face just before she slid her hand between Bailey's thighs, pulling her thumb up over the dampened fabric.

Bailey gasped and pushed her hips into that touch, and Marcella followed perfectly, teasing her clit through the satin. "I shouldn't have worn a damn thing," she gasped, and Marcella laughed.

"Naughty girl," she said, her voice breathy but warm. She kissed the edge of Bailey's knee. "Then I wouldn't get to do this for the first time." She hooked her fingers at the waist of Bailey's panties and tugged them down, guiding her knees together as she pulled them off.

Bailey was naked, spread out on Marcella's bed, and there she was, still entirely clothed. She wanted to proclaim how this wasn't fair, but then Marcella was sliding her fingers down through her pubic hair, parting her lips and going deeper long enough to get her fingers wet. Bailey bit her lip and jerked her hips, hungry to feel more of them inside her, but then Marcella was teasing her clit with the tip of one dampened fingertip.

She shouldn't have been surprised. Of course any woman with a healthy mind constantly full

of pornographic thoughts like Marcella would know her way around. Any girl had enough experience with herself to know. Her truest surprise, though, came when Marcella pulled her hand away, slide both hands beneath Bailey's thighs, and bent down to put her face between Marcella's legs.

"Good *god!*" Bailey gasped at the first touch of Marcella's tongue against her clit, circling it delicately as she kept a good hold on her thighs. Marcella was some kind of mythical creature; straight girls *never* went straight to eating pussy. But there she was, going without any hesitation. She brought a hand in to spread Bailey's lips as she buried her nose in Bailey's curls.

She made noises as she worked, little gasps and sighs as she licked at Bailey, teasing around her clit for a tortureously long time before going in deep, sucking wetly until Bailey's legs jerked against the mattress. Bailey had lost track of all sounds that she was making; for all she knew she'd been yelling Marcella's name. She tangled her hand into Marcella's hair, fingers slipping through the sweat at the nape of her neck, and pulled her closer.

She was hovering near orgasm, flirting towards the edge but then just coming off again, hazy and dizzy as Marcella kept toying with her. She gripped into her hair and gasped, "Your fingers..." Marcella hesitated as she listened to the command. "In me, please."

Marcella took in a heavy, determined breath and kept lapping at her as she slid one of those perfect little fingers inside of Bailey. She could have gone for a whole hand's worth, but just that one, sliding in and out of her where she was so unbelievably wet, was enough to make her whole body go tight. She clawed at the bed as she came, gracelessly shoving herself down onto Marcella's finger, pushing herself into her mouth.

When she could think coherently again, she cracked an eye open to see Marcella lying next to her, mouth still a little pink and damp as she watched her. "Jesus *fucking* Christ, woman," she said, and Marcella just broke into a smile and laughed. "Really never?"

"Really never," Marcella said, and her voice was lower and softer now. That accent of hers really did things to Bailey, and even though her cunt was still twitching from coming, she thought of going again. "Had it done badly to me plenty, though, so I've put a lot of thought into how to do it properly."

"You've had it done badly?" Bailey said, sitting up a little.

"Oh, plenty," Marcella said, and Bailey grinned as she nudged her back onto the bed.

"We're going to fix that right now," she said, and brought her head down to mouth at one of Marcella's nipples through her shirt. She jerked and gasped as Bailey got the fabric wet, and she could feel her stiffen through the cotton. She grinned as she teased the point of it with her teeth, making Marcella whimper.

She slid both hands under Marcella's shirt and pushed it up over her head. When she'd sorted out their tangle of arms, she leaned back a little to get a good look at her. She was soft and lovely, from the perfect handfuls of her breasts to the gentle rise of her belly, but when Bailey looked up to her face she could see the nervousness and uncertainty there. She surged up to kiss her hard.

"You're beautiful," she said against her mouth, and the whispery little laugh Marcella let out told her she didn't quite believe that yet. She'd have to show her. She straddled Marcella's hips and guided her up to unfasten and remove her bra, then bent down to press her face between her breasts. She felt them with both hands, squeezing them lightly as she kissed around the curve of one, slowly coming up to take one of her dark nipples in her mouth.

Marcella squirmed but stayed quiet, bringing the back of her hand to her mouth to muffle any

sounds. Bailey wanted to make her *shout*. She kept toying with one of her nipples as she slid her hand down Marcella's body, twisting open the button of her jeans easily so she could slip her hand inside them. She was *so wet*; Bailey squeezed her own thighs together as her fingers circled Marcella's clit. She stroked it directly and Marcella let out a little yelp. Bailey grinned against her skin.

"Come on," she said as she moved on the bed to be between Marcella's thighs. They both laughed as they went through the never-graceful struggle of getting Marcella's jeans off. Bailey smiled at her when she was finally naked, spreading her fingers out over the expanse of her hips. "I love your thighs," she said as she stroked them, feeling the strong muscle beneath her skin.

"You do?" Marcella said, softly.

Bailey scooted down to smile up at Marcella from between her legs. "I do. Strong and sexy. Try not to crush my head with them, though." Marcella laughed a little at that, her stomach jumping, and Bailey slid her hands up Marcella's thighs to part her lips and taste her. She tasted good, sweet and heavy in a way Bailey suspected she was going to find addictive.

She went slow, teasing her tongue around Marcella's clit, gauging her reaction. Marcella's breath picked up the longer she did it, and she began to writhe, nudging her hips downward in a wordless request for more. How terrible it was that Marcella's other lovers hadn't given her proper attention. Bailey sucked wetly at her clit until Marcella moaned. By god, she was going to make a convert out of this woman.

She knew she was on the right path when Marcella reached down to tangle her fingers in her hair. Her thighs were squeezing her in on both sides as Marcella pressed her forward, leaving her happily, wonderfully suffocated. Marcella was gasping now, breathing hard and desperate, and Bailey just didn't stop, just licked her and sucked her and fucked her with her tongue until those gorgeous thighs of her tightened and she cried out, slamming the headboard with a flailing hand as she came jerkily.

Bailey stayed lapping at her until Marcella hissed a little and gave her hair a gentle tug, and then she came up to wrap herself up with Marcella, twining their bodies together to feel skin against skin. Marcella rested her head against Bailey's collarbone, still breathing hard. After a long while, she let out a little laugh and said, "*Goodness.*"

Bailey laughed and tugged her face up to give her a kiss, smiling at how she could still taste herself on her lips. "God, you're cute."

"I'm completely precious," Marcella said, voice low and lazy. She wrapped her arms around Bailey's waist and hugged her close. "Stay the night, please?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Bailey said, and held her close as she fell asleep.

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com

From: celladoor@gmail.com

Subject: you've inspired me

I've started work on a new story today. It's going to be sprawling and epic and utterly full of smut. And most importantly: it's going to be genderswap.

To: celladoor@gmail.com

From: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
Subject: Re: you've inspired me

Ooh, girls only? Oh, but think of the comments!

To: bailey.callendar@gmail.com
From: celladoor@gmail.com
Subject: Re: you've inspired me

I only need one. <3

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/210657.html>

Love Lights Up the Darkness

by Yamanashi Moe (山梨もえ)

That night, for the first time in a year or so, Chisato starts to cry while brushing her teeth.

She barely even realizes it until she hears her mom's footsteps down the hall. She spits out her toothpaste and tries to wipe her face dry, but her eyes have already gone red and puffy, and she's breathing in little sobs. It's too obvious to hide it now.

There's a knock on the bathroom door. "Chisato? Are you all right? Did something happen?"

Chisato opens the door. "It's nothing, mom," she says, with her best embarrassed smile. "I... um... I'm under a lot of stress at school right now, and... well, it's that time of the month for me, so..."

Her mom doesn't respond, but her face says she doesn't quite buy it.

"I'm sorry." She can't meet her eyes. "I'll be fine, I promise."

"Chisato," says her mother, gently, "you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Every time her mother says this to her - and there have been many times over the last two years - she wishes so badly that it were true. That she could let her know why she's so tired all the time, why she has trouble keeping up in school, why she sometimes cries at night before bed. Why she sometimes looks around the streets of Futsuyama as though she's seeing something different.

She just can't bear to do it. There are things nobody should know about, and since she's the only one who can do anything, it's for the best if she keeps them to herself.

"I know," she says, and without saying anything more, she hugs her mom tightly, pressing her wet face into her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Her mom puts her arms around her with a wistful sigh. "You have nothing to be sorry for," she says. "I trust you, honey."

"Thanks, mom."

Too soon, she has to let go and continue her preparations for bed.

Chisato has worked out an evening routine that soothes her enough to sleep, regardless of what might happen in the night. She makes a pot of chamomile tea, then listens to her favourite CDs while she reads something that doesn't require too much thought on her part: a light novel or classic children's book. Sometimes she even does a bit of homework, if it's easy.

She sleeps in a four-poster bed with a fluffy duvet and brightly-coloured patchwork quilt. The bed and the quilt were both birthday presents from when she turned seven, a time when she was going through a phase of fascination with fairy tales. Gradually, she's given up most of her childhood stuffed animals, but a few of the most treasured still sit by her pillow.

Just before bed, she lets down her hair from the buns she wears at the nape of her neck. There's a hairbrush on her dresser, and she brushes her hair with it, gently and carefully. It reminds her of when her mom used to do her hair for her. The memory is comforting in the face of uncertainty.

"Good night!" she calls, pulling off her slippers and climbing into bed.

"Good night!" her mom calls back from down the hall.

That night, like every night, she says a silent prayer to whoever might be listening, asking

them to give her courage.

She lets her head fall back onto the bed.

Ironically, when she opens her eyes an hour later and sees only darkness, she is perfectly calm.

Even from her bed, she's learned to immediately recognize that she's gone to the Shadow World. Her alarm clock and the little red light of her smoke alarm are both dark. The neon sign across the street advertising the neighbors' store has disappeared from her window, replaced by the branches of a gnarled black tree. Mostly, though, it's just a feeling, an unease she's only ever felt in this one situation.

She slips out of bed and pulls her power talisman out of her pyjama top. It's about the size of a cellphone charm, shaped like the sun and made of a strangely warm metal she's never been able to identify. She keeps it on a chain around her neck at all times.

"Power of the sun," she mumbles, and she is enveloped in a blinding golden light. When it fades, her transformation is complete.

Chisato's magical girl costume is beautiful, with a frilly skirt and long, lace-up boots. It fits to the contours of her body, but not too tightly, and it never tears or wrinkles. Her hair is tied up with shiny red and yellow ribbons. Sometimes, when she's alone in the house, she transforms during the day just to admire herself in the mirror. Cute clothes like the kind her classmates wear are usually too small for her, and it feels good to see herself all dressed up.

She used to feel conflicted about this - how could she enjoy anything connected with the Shadow World? But life goes on. She has to find happiness where she can.

Tucking her power talisman into the top of her costume, she opens her bedroom window and jumps out. The fall would be dangerous in her everyday life, but as a magical girl she seems to glide down to street level.

The Shadow World is clearly a parallel of her hometown, but with everything somehow askew. The pavement of her little street is cracked and blistered, so that it rises and falls like waves as far as she can see. The buildings are crooked, with narrow doors and windows scattered haphazardly around their shadowy facades. The cherry trees that line the road become black, twisted skeletons that tower above her. "Scary" isn't the right word for it, not quite, but it's unsettling, and Chisato shivers a little as she scans her surroundings for Shadows.

She sees one further down the street, but it's not yet facing her way - she can still take it by surprise. It's humanoid and roughly her size. Like all Shadows its outline is fuzzy, expanding and contracting slightly with every move it makes. When it opens its mouth, a greasy black smoke pours out, rising up into the equally black sky.

"Fire Lily Strike," she calls, and a vaguely flower-shaped fireball grows in her palms, then launches itself towards the Shadow. Before the creature has time to turn around, it is engulfed in flame. There's a hissing sound as the fire burns itself out, taking the Shadow with it.

Chisato takes a cautious step closer to the place where it was standing. The only thing left is a perfectly round black gem.

She crushes it under her heel in one firm stomp. It's impossible to be sure, but she thinks that some Shadows regenerate after they've been melted down. They might even become stronger. To avoid the risk, she destroys the black stones whenever she has the chance.

Sensing something behind her, she whirls around.

Behind her is a Greater Shadow. It's at least three times her size, and looks like a goat standing

on its hind legs, but with huge, splayed claws instead of hooves. Its horns twist absurdly from the top of its head, so big and asymmetrical that no living creature would be able to support their weight. It has no eyes, of course, only a gaping red mouth in what is otherwise a sea of blackness.

Chisato is hit by a near-paralyzing wave of fear. Fortunately, over time, she's learned to ignore her reaction to the grotesque appearance of most Shadows. She springs backwards as the creature swipes at her with its claws.

It was careless of her not to keep to the walls. Attacking a Shadow in plain sight, forgetting to observe her surroundings, she's let a Greater Shadow sneak up on her unnoticed. It's a mistake she made often enough as a beginner, and it was only luck that kept her alive back then. Now, there's nothing she can do but hope she has the strength to take it down.

She readies another Fire Lily Strike.

"Freezing Ambush."

The Shadow's mouth contorts horrifically as the blade of a sparkling crystal sword emerges from its mouth. Stabbed through, it crumbles into nothingness, its crooked horns the last thing to disappear.

Behind the remains, gripping the hilt of the sword with both hands as she lands on the ground, is another girl. She too is wearing a costume: a blue and silver corset with a pleated skirt and long, white gloves. Her hair is in a high ponytail and there's a tiara on her head.

It's Ryuuzaki Kana.

"You're... Tanemura-san," she says, as she shatters the Shadow's remains with the point of her sword. "You should be more careful."

"I, um- yeah..." stammers Chisato, too surprised to thank her.

Ryuuzaki Kana is in her class at school, but she's only lived in Futsuyama for a few months. Chisato doesn't know much about her. She's thin and beautiful, with a kind of angular, mature face, and she's one of the taller girls in class. She's an average student, the same as Chisato, with Gym as her only stand-out subject. Some of the sports teams have tried to recruit her, but she's turned them all down. She's popular in such a way that everyone admires her and no one gets too close.

This is the most they've ever said to one another.

"Thank you," she says finally, remembering her manners.

"It was nothing." Kana's not even looking at her. Instead, she scans their surroundings intently, sword in position to attack. "We need to move. I saw another big one headed this way."

Chisato has a million questions, but they'll have to wait. The Shadow World isn't the place. "We should get to higher ground."

"Right."

Together, they run for the four-way stop at the end of the street, which in the Shadow World is a hill tall enough to see most of the neighborhood from. Instinctively, Chisato puts her back up against Kana's. There are several Shadows approaching from the left: all about as small of the first one she killed tonight, but threats nonetheless.

"River of Flame," she cries, and a pathway of fire springs up from the concrete at her feet, then blazes its way to the nearest Shadow and envelops it.

"Nice aim," comments Kana, glancing her way for a moment before taking out another Shadow with her ice sword.

"Thanks."

They hardly speak for the rest of the night. The Shadows come faster than usual, as though the presence of two magical girls attracts them twice as strongly. Chisato fires off Fire Flowers and Rivers of Flame and watches admiringly when, once, Kana summons a line of ice javelins which fire themselves into the crowd of Shadows and disperse them momentarily.

Chisato loses track of time, which is already malleable in the Shadow World. Finally, though, she sees the faintest light on the horizon, an almost unnoticeable change in the shade of the black sky.

Instantly, the world returns to normal.

The streetlights come back all at once, the neighbor's neon sign once again advertises their convenience store. Chisato and Kana are standing in the intersection of the perfectly flat street which leads back to Chisato's square two-story house, and the cherry trees are bare but alive.

They take a step back out of the intersection, and Kana de-transforms in a column of silver light. Chisato can just barely see the outline of her body as her costume fades away. She's always wondered what that must look like.

In her normal form, Kana is wearing a black t-shirt and sweatpants. She pulls her cellphone out of her pocket - dark blue, with no charms or decorations - and checks the screen. "Four-thirty."

"That's smart," says Chisato admiringly. "What you're wearing." Her street is usually deserted this early in the morning, and as far as she knows she's never been spotted in either her magical girl costume or her pyjamas, but she has worried about it.

Kana shrugs her shoulders. "I like to be prepared."

Chisato's not sure if that was meant to be an insult or just a statement of fact. Either way, she hardly cares - dawn and the discovery of Kana have made her too happy to be offended. She's about to burst into a rush of questions, but when she opens her mouth all that comes out is a yawn.

"Excuse me!" She puts her hand over her mouth, belatedly, and laughs. "I think I might go home and sleep for a bit. But, um..."

"We'll talk at the school," says Kana, answering her unvoiced question. "If you want."

"Of course!" Chisato smiles, wholeheartedly. "I can't believe... well. See you in class."

Without another word, Kana jogs away.

From the moment she wakes up and starts the day, Chisato is overflowing with nervous joy. Usually her mornings after going to the Shadow World are a struggle, but today she feels as energetic as if she'd had a full night of sleep.

"You look happy," comments her mother mildly, as they eat a quick breakfast of cereal together.

Chisato nods. She hasn't been able to stop smiling. "Yeah! I feel a lot better now."

"I'm so glad, honey."

As usual, she has barely enough time to get to class before the bell rings. Kana is already sitting in her desk when she bursts into the room. Her eyes flicker to Chisato, staying focused on her until she takes her seat near the back.

It's not much, but it's enough to keep her on the edge of her seat for all of their morning classes.

At lunchtime, when Kana goes to the school cafeteria, Chisato goes with her. They take seats

together in a quiet corner and talk in whispers over plates of curry rice.

"When did it start for you?"

Kana's expression is unreadable. "Two years ago, I think. Maybe three."

"Me too," says Chisato, trying to sound calm, although her heart is racing. "I mean, it's been two and a half years, for me. Since I got the talisman." She reaches into her shirt and pulls it out, cupping it carefully in her hands so that no one else will see it and wonder. "I found it in my hand one morning, after I dreamt about the Shadow World."

"Why do you call it that?"

Chisato pauses. "I don't know. It just came into my head. Why, what do you call it?"

"The Shadow World." Kana frowns. "Those words came into my head, too, the first time I woke up there. With my transformation phrase."

"It's not 'Power of the sun,' is it?"

She shakes her head. "Power of the moon."

"So we match!" Chisato can't help smiling at the thought. "And after you transformed, you just... knew how to use your powers?"

Kana nods. "There was nothing strange about it to me at the time. Even when I saw the Shadows." She looks bitter. "I thought it was another dream."

"Yeah, me too," responds Chisato with an awkward little laugh. "Until a Shadow grabbed me and the bruises were still there in the morning. I had to wear a scarf for a week." The memory still makes her wince, and she hurries to another topic. "So, um, you never met, like--"

"A talking animal guide?" finishes Kana, a bit sarcastically. "No. There was only the dream, and then I was there for real. I don't know what the Shadow World is, or why I have magic powers." She stares down at her plate. "I just fight. That's all."

They're both quiet for a while.

"I never knew if the Shadow World was everywhere," says Chisato, slowly, "or only in Futsuyama. I don't know if I ever thought about it before."

"I hoped it might just be my city," responds Kana. She laughs, unpleasantly. "I guess that was too much to hope for."

"Is that why you moved here?"

"Partly."

"And your parents...?"

"I live alone."

Chisato frowns. "So they let you move here by yourself?"

"None of your business," snaps Kana.

Shocked, Chisato flinches. "Sorry," she says, nervously. "I shouldn't... I don't want to pry."

"No." Still looking frustrated, Kana closes her eyes and takes a deep, faintly shaky breath. "No, I'm sorry, that was rude. You were only asking." She looks uncomfortable, even nervous. "I've never... talked about this before. With anyone."

"We don't have to talk about it at all, if you don't want to." Chisato smiles shyly across the table. "I'm just glad that there's someone else."

"Me too," replies Kana. Almost hesitantly, she adds, "Chisato-san."

The sound of her first name on Kana's lips makes her heart beat a little faster, but she tries to ignore it.

They decide to signal one another the next time they wake up in the Shadow World. A few nights later, Chisato does. After transforming, she hops out of the window and aims a Fire Lily Strike into the black sky, sending it up like a flare. A few seconds later, there's a reply: tiny beads of ice shooting up into the darkness, like a hailstorm in reverse.

Chisato thinks it's close, but can't be sure. Following the twisted pathways of the Shadow World, she continues to send out signals every minute. It seems to take forever, but finally she turns a corner and sees Kana running towards her.

"Hi," she says, shyly, unsure of what to say to express her gladness.

"Hi," responds Kana. "Anything follow you?"

"I don't think so...."

"There was a Greater Shadow trailing me, but I think I lost it." Kana glances over her shoulder, as if to make sure. "Still, we should be careful."

"We can shake it off," says Chisato, and she gestures to the house beside them, a crooked and shadowy monster of a building. "I don't think they sense us as well when we're indoors."

Kana raises an eyebrow coolly. "I'm sure the people inside will be thrilled to see us."

Flushing, Chisato shakes her head. "No, that's not a problem." She pulls the door handle. It's open, of course - people don't lock their doors at night in this town. "I'll show you."

The door they come through is tall and crooked, sitting in the wall almost diagonally, so that they have to duck going through it. On the other side of the wall, though, it looks perfectly normal. There's even a little peephole through which Chisato can see the Shadows passing by outside. Other than the darkness, which could easily be the result of a power outage, there's only one difference between this house in the Shadow World and the real world.

There's a middle-aged man sitting on the couch in the main room, across from a blank-screened TV. His index finger touches his glasses as if to push them up his nose, but he is completely still.

"What's wrong with him?" whispers Kana, taking a step closer.

Chisato replies by waving her hand in front of the man's face. There is no reaction. "He's frozen. It happens to everyone - I don't know why." This is why she always leaves her house by the bedroom window - the sight of her mom as still as a wax figure makes her nauseous. "And people who are outside when the Shadow World appears just..."

"...Vanish, and then reappear in the morning," finishes Kana. "I know. I've seen it too."

"I think that's why the Shadows come after us," says Chisato. "We're the only living things in this world."

"Have you ever seen the edge of town?"

Chisato shakes her head. "I try to stay close to my house." That's not the whole truth. Really, the Shadow World scares her so much already that she's been too terrified of what she'll see to wander too far from the relative safety of her neighborhood. She braces herself for a frown or a cutting remark from Kana.

Kana responds with neither. Her face is calm, almost gentle. "I went to the edge of my city once," she says, adding, "Only because my old apartment was close." She goes to the door and looks out through the peephole. "Do you want to see it?"

"Sure," says Chisato, after a moment's hesitation. "Okay." She's pretty sure that Kana wouldn't take her anywhere too dangerous, and travelling through town might be easier with two people. She goes to the door and checks the peephole. "I think we're clear. For now."

"Let's go."

They run through the streets, firing off occasional attacks into the crowd of Shadows amassing behind them. Chisato's lungs are burning. She's not used to running this fast, and eventually Kana has to grab her hand and half-pull her along.

"Sorry," she wheezes.

"Don't be," replies Kana, sounding slightly winded herself. "I used to do track and field."

That does make her feel a little better, and she tightens her grip on Kana's hand.

She loses track of where they are. The Shadow World has a uniformity which makes it difficult to tell, but she's pretty sure she's never been through this part of town before. Once she thinks she sees, a few blocks away, a Shadow the size of a skyscraper, but they turn the corner before she can be sure. It's probably for the best.

As they continue into the outskirts of town, the Shadows thin out and finally disappear altogether. Chisato can't quite be happy about that, though: there's a kind of foreboding atmosphere around them that makes her worry something worse might be up ahead.

"We're here," says Kana abruptly.

Chisato gasps.

At the edge of town, everything fades to black. The street before them gives way to a deep, seemingly endless darkness, dwarfing them and the whole town.

"What's out there?" asks Chisato. She has to force herself not to whisper.

"I don't know."

Chisato summons a flame into her hand, but it doesn't help - the darkness seems to swallow it up. Beside her, Kana fires a spear of ice into the darkness in a shallow arc. Some distance away from them, it hits ground and shatters.

"Well," says Chisato, letting out a sigh of relief, "at least it's not just... empty, or filled with Shadows..." Still, the void is overwhelming. "Have you ever tried walking into it?"

Kana shakes her head. "I was--" She hesitates, then frowns and continues, "I was scared."

"Yeah." Chisato laughs nervously. "I'm scared just to be here. What do you think is out there?"

Kana shrugs her shoulders. "Maybe it goes on forever."

Chisato shudders. "I hope not."

"I don't really think so," says Kana almost at once, as though trying to assuage her fears. "The Shadow World existed in my city, too, so it must be in other places. Maybe it's all connected." She gestures out into the darkness. "Other towns. Other Shadows."

"Other magical girls?"

"I don't know."

Chisato shakes her head. "We can't be the only ones," she says, sounding more certain than she really feels. "It was one thing when I was alone, but I'm sure there can't be only two of us. Maybe every city in Japan has one!"

Kana looks like she doesn't buy it, but she doesn't argue.

The overwhelming presence of the empty darkness brings their conversation to an end. Chisato stares out into it, as transfixed as she is terrified. After a while, her eyes start playing tricks on her and flashes of light appear in the darkness, like distant stars.

Without really thinking, she puts out her hand and touches Kana's. At first she's afraid this will bother her, but she barely seems to notice, so Chisato keeps it there until they finally turn around and head back towards the centre of town.

Chisato hasn't had any close friends since she became a magical girl. She was part of the choir in middle school, but eventually she decided that she needed to drop out. Nights in the Shadow World were leaving her exhausted during the day. Going home after school let her take an afternoon nap, and that was more important than club activities.

In high school, she never even joined a club. She's friendly with her classmates, and sometimes she joins them to go shopping or see a movie, but she doesn't have a strong connection with anyone, and that's okay with her. Pretending to be a normal teenage girl takes a surprising amount of energy, and she couldn't keep it up long enough to maintain a serious friendship.

With Kana, of course, she doesn't have to pretend. With Kana, everything is in the open.

Soon they spend most of their free time together. Chisato has never realized how badly she's needed someone to talk to, someone who understands what she was going through. Just knowing she isn't alone makes her feel light, like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

She tells Kana everything she's been holding in: how scared she is, how much she worries that nothing will ever change, how badly she just wants to go to bed without knowing that she might wake up in a few hours in the Shadow World.

"Sometimes I wonder what we're doing this for," she says, in a quiet moment late one night. "Fighting Shadows. I mean, nobody ever asked me to, and... well, it's dangerous, right?" She pauses for a moment, thinking. "But I also have this feeling that something terrible would happen if we didn't. I don't know. What do you think?"

Kana says nothing. Her face is inscrutable.

It's not always easy, being friends with her. There's a part of Kana that seems to be constantly on edge. Even in the daytime, her eyes dart from left to right as though Shadows might be everywhere, hidden, waiting for the right time to strike unexpectedly. She clearly doesn't get much sleep at night. Sometimes it seems like nervous energy is all that gets her through the day.

The downside to this alertness is her irritability. There are days when it seems like Chisato can't say anything without making her grit her teeth or snap at her.

Kana herself tells her, early on, it might be better if they didn't hang out.

"Look, Chisato-san," she says, a few days after they went to the edge of town together. "You need to know that I'm not..." She stops, then tries again. "I'm not good at talking to people. Sometimes I say things I don't mean, or in a way that I don't mean to say them. I might hurt you."

"It doesn't really bother me," says Chisato, grateful for her honesty, and trying to be as frank as possible in return. "I know that you don't mean to, and you always apologize." She smiles, but it probably looks a little forced. "I do worry about you, though."

"I'll be fine."

"Have you ever... thought about talking to someone? Like a counselor?" Afraid Kana will take this suggestion badly, she braces herself.

She shouldn't have worried. Kana doesn't look upset, only very tired.

"Of course I've thought about it," she says. "But who would believe me?"

Chisato has nothing to say to that, but after school that day, she pressures Kana into coming to the mall with her. They go window shopping and drink smoothies and go to a Print Club and get photos with heart-shaped borders. It's almost like being a normal teenage girl, except that they're both a little awkward, overcome by the novelty of it.

When Kana tucks the printed photo carefully into one of her textbooks to keep it uncreased, Chisato feels a little rush of pleasure, then a pang of guilt immediately after.

She's so happy, but at the same time, she's suspicious of herself. She's scared of the way she feels sometimes when she's with Kana: like the Shadow World is a secret place where the two of them can be alone together, and not a dangerous mystery. Sometimes the thought of waking up there gives her a sweet, sick thrill that she hates.

If what she's feeling is love, she wants no part of it. She doesn't have the energy to figure it out, let alone worry about Kana's reaction. Her life is complicated enough.

For the first few weeks they fight back-to-back, surrounded on all sides by Shadows. Eventually, though, Kana suggests that since Chisato's powers are more suited long range attacks, she should stay out of the fray as much as possible while Kana uses her sword up close. The first time they try her plan, they find that Chisato can take out enough Shadows from a distance that Kana only has to fight one or two at a time, making defeating the Shadows far easier.

Once they've practiced their strategy on smaller Shadows, they start taking on some Greater Shadows instead of avoiding them. Then, gaining confidence, they start exploring new areas of town, rooting out the Shadows there before they have a chance to attack unexpectedly.

"Ready?" asks Kana, as they come upon a group of Shadows in front of the shopping arcade downtown. They're mostly small, with amorphous bodies and writhing tentacles that expand and contract sporadically. It shouldn't be a problem to destroy them.

"Ready," replies Chisato, a fireball already in hand.

The Shadows are fiercer than ever that night, and Chisato can hardly keep up. She loses track of Kana in the black smoke of the fray, and then a Greater Shadow with seemingly endless blades covering its insectoid body rears up in front of her. She's about to attack, but one of the smaller Shadows wraps a black tentacle around her leg, and she sends a River of Fire in its direction instead.

There's too much going on at once, it's impossible for her to keep track. She tries to jump back out of the fight, to a more secure position--

"Chisato!"

Something tackles her, and she slams to the ground. But it's not a Shadow - it's Kana, and she's screaming. She's been hurt. Chisato is dazed, but she springs to her feet to see the Greater Shadow from earlier close at hand, a splash of blood on its long, razor-sharp arm, and Chisato realizes too late what's just happened.

Her whole body is overcome with horror, then with rage. She lays Kana on the concrete as gently as possible and rises to her feet with her fists clenched hard.

"Towering Inferno," she says, and a thousand tongues of flame seem to shoot from her eyes, exploding in size and number as they sweep over the Shadows. She doesn't stop until they're incinerated, and even then she focuses the flame on their black gemstones until they melt and sizzle away.

When she comes back to herself, her legs are shaking with the effort of keeping her standing, and there's a cold sweat covering her whole body. It takes her a second to remember what's happened.

"Kana!"

Kana is wearing her ordinary clothes. The attack must have snapped her out of her transformation somehow. There's a deep, bloody gash down her left side and a pool of blood

forming on the concrete around her.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she says, in a small, strained voice.

Chisato bites her lips. "You haven't even seen it." Kana starts to get up, but Chisato shakes her head vehemently. "No, don't move yet. We need to stop the bleeding...." She thinks for a second, then reverts to her normal form.

"What are you doing!?"

"It's just for a second." As quickly as possible, she pulls off her pyjama top and bunches it up in her hands. "Power of the sun!" Transformed again, she kneels at Kana's side and presses it to the wound.

Kana hisses in pain, but manages a small smile. "Good... idea."

"Thanks."

They stay there until Chisato is convinced that the bleeding has slowed. Then, helping Kana to her feet and putting her arm over her shoulder so she can bear some of her weight, she brings her to the doors of the town hospital. It's deserted, of course, but it's all she can think to do.

"I wish we had water," she says, laying Kana gently down on her good side, and sitting down on the curb next to her. "I'd feel so much better if we could clean your wound."

"Maybe you should cauterize it," says Kana, quietly.

Chisato forces herself to laugh. "Don't be ridiculous," she says quickly. "It's not that bad. It'll be morning soon enough, and you'll be in emergency."

"'Soon', huh." Kana says the word with a kind of cynical chuckle. The laugh seems to hurt her, and she winces. "You know how time stretches."

"Soon," repeats Chisato, because it's what she has to believe. "And Kana?" She's about to add an honorific, but at this point it no longer feels necessary. "If you like, you can lend me your housekey, and I can go to your apartment and pick up your toothbrush and things. And I'll bring you a lunch, if you don't want the hospital food."

Kana is silent for a long time.

"Chisato, I need to tell you something," she says, at last. "If I don't..."

"No. Don't say that, it's ridiculous." She tries to force the tears from her eyes. "You're not going to die, Kana."

Kana ignores her. "I think it's important that you know what happens if... that you know why we're fighting." A bitter, humourless smile crosses her face. "Because I found out the hard way, before I moved here. I... gave up."

"You what?"

"I stopped fighting Shadows. I was so tired... When I woke up in the Shadow World, I would barricade myself in my room and go back to sleep. I felt like something bad would happen, but I ignored that feeling. I just wanted the whole thing to go away. I didn't know..."

A sick feeling rises up in Chisato's stomach. "What happened?"

"They came to the real world." Kana look past her, into the distance. "Shadows. They came into my house. They attacked my parents. They..." Her voice is hoarse with pain. "My, my mom, she..."

Chisato shakes her head. "I'm... I'm so sorry."

"I couldn't stay there anymore. I couldn't live in that house, knowing that it was my fault."

"It's nobody's fault!" Looking at Kana, at the still-bleeding gash on her side makes her feel sad and angry and protective all at once. "It's natural to be scared. You couldn't know what would happen." Tentatively, she offers Kana her hand to hold, a gesture of solidarity. "Don't blame

yourself for wanting not to fight. You shouldn't *have* to fight."

Kana takes it. "Neither... should you."

"But we will." It's hard, but Chisato manages a smile. "You'll be okay, and we'll keep fighting. So that nothing like that will happen ever again."

Kana's eyes flutter.

"You have to stay conscious," she says, anxiously.

"Don't worry," replies Kana, with another cynical laugh. "Hurts too much to sleep." Then, a kind of helpless expression crosses her face. "Chisato... don't... let go of my hand."

She doesn't.

When the sky starts to lighten, an ambulance and a team of paramedics materialize on the street, along with a nurse smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. As they strap Kana onto a stretcher, Chisato wonders numbly what these people think they've been doing all night.

She paces back and forth across the waiting room, still in her pyjamas, stopping only to ask the orderlies at the front desk about Kana's condition. Listening in on them, she discovers that Kana has an uncle in Futsuyama who's supposed to be her legal guardian, but he's not answering the phone. Finally someone takes pity on Chisato and lets her know that Kana was given a blood transfusion and she's in stable condition.

Visiting hours don't start until the afternoon. She goes home and tries to rest, but for the first time in a long while, she can't manage to fall asleep. It seems like forever until she is able to go back to the hospital and see Kana.

"Hi," she says, entering the room.

"Hi." Kana is lying in bed. She's on an IV, but some colour has returned to her face.

Chisato puts down the flowers she brought as a gift on the bedside table. She's forgotten to bring a vase for them. "How's...?" she starts awkwardly.

"It's healing," she says. "Much faster than it should, I think. The doctors seemed shocked."

"I'm... I'm so glad you're okay." It comes out a little bit strained, but she's trying her best not to cry.

"They're keeping me overnight for observation," says Kana, with a sigh. "I feel like some kind of specimen." She pauses, then points to the keychain lying by her leg. "Um, if you wouldn't mind... can you take my housekey and--"

"Of course!" says Chisato, picking it up. Threaded onto the keychain is a small crescent moon - Kana's sigil. "I promised I would."

Kana's apartment is on the first floor of a boarding-house-style building on the other side of the school. The room is bare and lifeless, except that taped to the wall above her desk, there's a photo they took at the Print Club. Chisato cries again when she sees it.

The next day, Kana is back at school again, as though nothing ever happened. Chisato is desperate to talk with her, but can't manage to get near her. Every time class breaks, the whole class gathers around Kana, bombarding her with questions and well wishes. In a way Chisato is glad to see that they care, but it means she has to wait until after school to ask the question on her mind.

"Will you be okay by yourself?"

Kana stiffens, and her face becomes a mask of stubborn independence. "Of course."

Instantly, Chisato regrets her choice of words. "I mean," she says, "you're welcome to stay

over at my house, tonight, if you'd like. I'd feel better that way."

"...Yeah. Yeah, okay." Her face softens, just a little. "Thank you."

Her mom makes nikujaga and they all have dinner on the couch together. Kana's met her mom before, but only briefly. They seem to like one another. Chisato is so glad to hear them talking to one another that she hardly says anything the whole time.

Thrilled that she's having a sleepover for the first time in years, Chisato's mom offers Kana a pair of Chisato's old pyjamas when she finds out she doesn't have her own. They're a bright sunshine yellow, with little white ducks marching in a row along the hem. When Chisato sees them, she bursts out laughing.

"What's so funny?" asks Kana with a glare. "They're yours."

Chisato nods. "I know," she says, still giggling. "I'm sorry."

They stay up for a while, listening to a new CD of Chisato's and talking about nothing in particular. Finally, though, they get ready for bed in a kind of nervous silence, both knowing that at any moment the house could plunge into darkness and their night of peace come to an abrupt end.

Chisato wonders if she should sleep on the floor, but the bed is more than big enough for two, so in the end she decides it's fine. They lie side by side. She tries her best, but she can't fall asleep. If she concentrates, she can almost make out the sound of Kana's steady heartbeat, comforting and terrifying all at once.

"You're awake," whispers Kana.

"So are you."

Kana seems to ignore that. "If it hasn't happened yet, it won't happen tonight."

"I know," she whispers back. "It's just..." But the rest of her sentence - that she can't sleep knowing that Kana is lying beside her - she completes only in her mind.

There's a sudden warmth pressed against her as Kana rolls closer to her in the bed. Chisato can't help but gasp, and she's sure her face is bright red.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," She swallows, nervously. "Sorry." In the semidarkness, Kana's face is so beautiful it makes her ache. She's terrified that Kana must hear how hard her heart is beating, must know everything.

Kana has an expression on her face that she's never seen on her before: tenderness. "Chisato," she whispers, and leans over, and kisses her on the mouth.

Chisato feels like the bed is giving way underneath her, like the earth has disappeared, and she's falling through space. Her arms wrap themselves around Kana as though holding on to her is the only thing keeping her alive. It's not her first kiss, but it's the only one that's ever made her feel like this.

Kana pulls away, shaking her head with a smile when she sees the anxious expression on Chisato's face. "Just a second." She throws one leg over Chisato, lying down on top of her, and then returns to kissing her. Her tongue presses into Chisato's mouth, gently but firmly. Chisato puts out her own tongue in response.

There are little wet noises as they explore each others' mouths. Being close to Kana like this for the first time makes Chisato restless, and she presses her legs together, feeling a little jolt of pleasure shoot up through her body.

When Kana brings her hands up to Chisato's face, her oversized sleeve drapes awkwardly between them. With a grunt of frustration, Kana sits up and pulls the pyjama shirt off. Her

breasts are small, almost flat, with hard pink nipples outlined in shadow in the half-darkness. There's still a white gauze bandage taped to her side.

Abruptly, Chisato realizes that this might not be the best time for what they're doing. "Are you okay? Your wound... I..."

Kana shakes her head. "I'm fine." Her hands trace Chisato's face, fingers grazing her lips, parting them gently like she did earlier with her tongue. "...Can I touch you?"

"O-of course."

Kana explores her body with a touch so gentle it makes her want to cry. "Chisato," she whispers, over and over, her lips pressed to her throat, her collarbone, the plane of skin between her breasts. "Chisato."

She's never thought of herself as being particularly sensitive before, but now everywhere Kana touches her sends little shocks of pleasure through her body, making her more restless than before. When Kana's fingers ghost over her nipples, she can't help reaching down to touch herself.

Kana's hand catches her wrist, lightly. "Let me...?"

"Yeah..."

Chisato undoes the drawstring of her pyjama pants and pulls them down, leaving herself exposed in a way that is both embarrassing and exciting. Somehow, the embarrassment fades as Kana's hands trace the fleshy curve of her hips, the roundness of her stomach.

Kana meets her eyes. With an uncharacteristic hesitance, she reaches between Chisato's legs, tracing a path up her inner thigh before reaching her pubic mound and resting there, softly. After a moment, she presses into the cleft between Chisato's legs, to where she is wet with anticipation. Her fingers are long and slightly cold, and the touch of them fills Chisato with a heady, terrifying pleasure.

"I..." She feels like she should say something, respond in some way, except that Kana looks like she's concentrating so intensely and the feeling gathering itself up inside her it makes it hard to think. "Kana..."

Kana withdraws her hand, looking at her wet fingers with a kind of disbelieving satisfaction. "Chisato?" She's breathing heavily. "Is that... should I keep going?"

Chisato's whole body shivers. Unable to speak, she nods.

Kana kisses her again, at the same time bringing her hand back down between Chisato's thighs. Her touch is more sure this time. Her fingers find her clitoris, and Chisato's whole body convulses, like she's had an electric shock.

"Sorry!" she cries out, feeling clumsy and ashamed. "I didn't... Didn't mean to..."

"It's fine," says Kana, hoarsely. Her fingers move away slightly, rubbing up and down just above her clitoris, so that the stimulation is less intense, less a shock and more a slow blossoming of pleasure.

It's so good Chisato can hardly stand it. Her hands fist and unfist, clutching at the sheets. She feels like she'll die if Kana keeps touching her like this, but she'll die if she stops, too. Tears are forming in the corners of her eyes.

Kana stops for a moment, but it's only to whisper "Shhh." Chisato realizes that she's been whimpering. Embarrassed, she clamps her hand down over her mouth, hard, and nods.

"Next time," whispers Kana, in an almost offhand way, "you can be as loud as you like. When we're alone."

The thought that there will be a next time makes Chisato inexpressibly happy, but before she

can reply, Kana starts touching her again and everything else is gone. Her fingers go faster than before, brushing lightly against her clitoris, then reaching inside her, then both at the same time. Chisato's tongue curls at the pleasure of it. Her body tenses, almost ready for release.

Hazily she realizes that Kana's other hand is inside her pyjama pants, moving in a jerky, almost frantic way. The thought that Kana is touching herself - that being with Chisato like this makes her want to touch herself - is what finally makes her orgasm.

"Kana," and she bites down on her hand as she comes, otherwise she knows she'll scream.

"Chisato," replies Kana raggedly, and though a haze of pleasure Chisato thinks that she might be close to coming too. She puts out her hands, running them gently through Kana's hair, and when Kana responds with a moan she feels so happy she can't quite believe it.

All of a sudden none of it matters anymore: the Shadows, the fighting, the unknown. With Kana, she feels like she can do anything.

Two nights later, they stand at the edge of town. The void rises up before them, overwhelming.

"Ready?"

Chisato slips her hand into Kana's.

"Ready."

Together, they step into the darkness.

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And I got ready for the future to arrive

by Nijiuro Sumi (虹色墨)

She woke up.

The sun was out and the sky was bright, so she woke up. She lay there for a while, blinking at the ceiling, and thought about trying to go back to sleep. Then she got up. She put on her Army t-shirt and a pair of shorts and laced on her running shoes.

On her way to the door, she heard her mother yell behind her, "Helena! Aren't you going to have any breakfast?"

"Later!" she yelled back and shut the door behind her, a little too hard.

The air was fresh and cool; her breath puffed out in front of her face in little white clouds. Early-morning traffic was just starting to crawl down the streets. She didn't think about anything except the way her feet hit the ground, the shock traveling up through her bones and into her joints. She ran a little too fast, at first, and by the time she reached the first light her lungs were burning, and she leaned against the pole and caught her breath.

As soon as the light changed, she took off running again, pacing herself this time. This time, she ran for longer, watching the way the light fell through the trees. At some point in the last four years, the Andersons finally cut down that tree in their front yard; the Carrolls repainted their house dark green; the Chens sold their house, and the new owners tore down the modest one-story Craftsman and built a boxy two-story in its place.

She turned right, in order to make a circle, concentrating on her breathing, and the way she pumped her arms, the elastic motion of the muscles in her legs. Everyone's front lawn looked so uniformly square and green and lush with grass. It seemed strange, all of a sudden.

By the time she returned home, thirty minutes later, she could feel the way her shirt stuck to her back with sweat. She could hear her mother in the kitchen, and she slipped up the stairs without a word to strip her clothes off, chuck them in the closet, and step into the shower. She went downstairs for breakfast with her hair still wet, dressed in one of her old high-school t-shirts. It was too big for her now.

"I made pancakes," her mother sing-songed as she sat down at the table.

"Great," Helena replied, with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Her mother slid a plate in front of her, two pancakes and a pile of yellow scrambled egg curds. She pushed them around on her plate for a bit before taking a bite.

"Do you want some salt?" Her mother sat down at the table next to her; she had only one small pancake on her plate, and some scrambled egg whites.

"No, it's fine." They ate in silence. Helena drank all of her orange juice and ate all her eggs, but made it only through one of her pancakes. She took her dishes to the kitchen, slid the remaining pancake back onto the stack, and scraped the rest into the trash. She put her plate in the dishwasher and said to her mother, "I'm going to go work on the truck."

"All right," her mother murmured, and Helena stuffed her feet into her Doc Martens and left.

"How was your ride today?" asked Dr. Greene.

Helena shrugged. "It was all right."

"You took Xanax."

Helena nodded.

"There's no shame in that, you know. It's something you're taking to help you cope."

"I'm not ashamed," said Helena.

Dr. Greene waited.

"I'm not," she said. "It's just--like you said, it's something I'm taking to help me cope. It's, it's not like I'm taking it every day, even. And eventually, I'll be able to cope on my own, and then I won't need it anymore."

"That's right." Dr. Greene smiled. Her teeth were very white and even. "So, how're you feeling right now?"

Like I don't want to be here, thought Helena. Like I'm on fucking Xanax. But instead she just said, "Okay."

She was under the car, so she didn't hear the crunch of footsteps; didn't, in fact, hear her name being called until someone kicked her gently on the shoe. She rolled out, frowning, ready to chew out her mother for bothering her in the garage, but it was Megan. She blinked.

Megan looked...she looked good, but then, she had always looked good. Her hair was buzzed short on the sides and in the back, leaving a fashionable cap of dark hair on top; multiple piercings adorned her ears; a phoenix flowed up her arm, tail feathers fanning over and across her forearm. She was wearing skinny jeans and Vans and a low-cut top.

"Hi," said Megan. She tucked her thumbs into her pockets.

Helena pushed herself up on her elbows. "Hi."

"You look good," Megan offered.

Helena wondered what she looked like, dressed as she was in yet another baggy old high-school t-shirt and her old Doc Martens. She doubted it was "good." At least the jeans were new, even if they weren't skinny. "You too."

Megan crossed her arms, then uncrossed them again. "You didn't, uh, you didn't answer any of my messages. On Facebook."

"Oh. Yeah. I, uh, I don't really Facebook. Sorry."

"It's okay." Megan slid the bottom of her shoe across the concrete. The scraping sound made the hair on the back of Helena's neck stand on end. "Um, do you not want me to be here? Because, because I can go--"

"No." Helena pushed herself up into a proper sitting position, the creeper skidding forward half an inch as she did so. "It's. You can stay. Did Mom, she let you in, right? Here, let's go inside."

"Do you girls want anything to drink?" Mrs. Patterson inquired brightly. She held up a pitcher of lemonade, the wooden spoon still in it that she'd been using to crush the cylinder of concentrate. She got down two glasses before even hearing their answers, and poured them both.

"Thanks, Mrs. P," said Megan.

"Thanks, Mom."

They took their glasses and went upstairs to Helena's room.

"Your mom's kind of freaking me out," said Megan. "It's like we're still in high school or something."

"Or actually, more like she's June Cleaver and we just came back from playing outside," said Helen.

They stood at the top of the stairs and sniggered, and for a second it felt like high school again. Helena smiled and it felt easy, and Megan smiled back and it felt right. Her chest hurt, a little, and that was like high school, too, and then Helena looked away and pushed open the door to her room. There was a corkboard on the door that used to hold song lyrics and pictures of Tegan and Sara, but those were gone now, and the corkboard lay empty and brown.

"Wow," said Megan. "It looks...really the same, in here."

"Yeah." Helena flopped down backwards on the bed. It had the same plaid comforter and dark blue sheets as in high school. They probably hadn't been touched since the day she moved out. "She wasn't like this with Margaret's room. But I guess because I'm her baby girl or something, I don't know."

Megan took the desk chair, turning it around so that she could sit with her arms on the back of the chair and rest her chin on them. "My parents didn't really touch my room either. But they're talking about selling the house."

Helena sat up. "Really?"

Megan shrugged. "Yeah. I guess...I dunno, I guess while I've been at college they've really been feeling how big and empty the house is. And I'm gonna be graduating in December, and I told them I'm not gonna move back in, so..."

"Oh." Helena swallowed. "Are you gonna stay in Chicago?"

"I dunno. I really like it there, but I mean, it's Chicago. Also, the winters there totally suck."

Helena pressed her lips together and managed to turn her giggle into a snort. "Yeah, I bet."

"I'm serious! Hell is, like, having to wait half an hour for your car to defrost and then you still have to scrape all the ice off, and, it's just, ugh." Megan shook her head back and forth like a dog. "Yeah. It sucks. So, what's wrong with Otto?"

"Huh?" It took Helena a second to remember. Otto had been Megan's name for the truck. She thought it was cute, naming things, and insisted that all vehicles in particular had to have a name. Helena always just thought of it as the truck. "Oh, he, uh. Just a few things. Needs a new water pump. Nothing big. Gives me something to do."

"Mmm." Megan rested her head on top of her folded arms. "So what're your plans?"

"I dunno. Find a job, I guess."

"What do you want to do?"

Helena let her eyes roam across the walls, across the the black and white *KISS* poster. "No clue."

"What did you do in the Army?"

"Nothing much." Helena sat up. "What do you want to do?"

Megan chewed on her bottom lip for a second. "I just want to, like, do something meaningful. Maybe I'll go work for a non-profit or something. There are lots of those in Chicago."

"Here, too."

"Yeah, here, too. But I don't know if I want to, like, live in the same city my entire life, you know?"

Helena didn't know. She'd been halfway around the world, but she didn't know anything about living in new places. "Yeah, I guess."

"It sucks," said Helena. "Like, I mean, in high school the truck meant I had independence. Now I'm just...stuck."

Dr. Greene made a humming sound. "Any progress on fixing it?"

"Yeah, a little. It's just really slow going. I don't feel like working on it a lot."

Dr. Greene didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Helena thought about how she used to drive Megan to school. Megan got her license, eventually, but she kept riding with Helena because now it was tradition, and it was fun, and they bonded during their rides. She bought a used car their senior year and drove it to Chicago with all her stuff in the trunk and the backseat. It probably had a gajillion miles on it now. Helena wondered if she planned on buying a new car.

"I guess I feel like I'm kind of stuck," said Helena. "In general."

Megan brought a plastic bag weighed down with frozen zongzi the next time she visited. "From my mom," she said, sounding a little embarrassed. "I told her you'd lost weight, and now she's worried that you're not getting enough to eat, or something."

Helena peered down into the bag. Half a dozen pyramidal shapes wrapped in bamboo leaves sat in the bottom of the bag, still crusted with ice around the twine. The bag smelled green and slightly of freezer.

"Microwave for three to five minutes on high, wrapped in a wet paper towel," said Megan.

"I know. I remember." Helena stepped aside so that Megan could come in. Megan toed off her shoes in the entryway. "Oh yeah, right, um, we take our shoes off now."

Megan flashed a smile up at her as she bent over to pick them up and put them on the shoe rack, next to Megan's Doc Martens. "Your mom told me last time I came over. It always really weirded me out to keep my shoes on, actually."

"Yeah, I remember." Megan used to leave her shoes all over the house, wherever she was when she'd finally gotten fed up with the strangeness of enclosed feet: at the bottom of the stairs, at the top of the stairs, in Helena's bedroom, by the front door. Once, they couldn't find one of her shoes, and it was because the dog, Obie, had taken one of them and put it under his bed.

Come to think of it, Megan hadn't asked about Obie; he'd died a year after Helena shipped out. Had she already known? Or maybe she'd somehow forgotten about Obie. It seemed strange that Megan could find things out about Helena's family, without Helena telling her.

They padded across the new hardwood floors in their socked feet. Helena put the zongzi in the freezer and then remembered her manners. Her mother would kill her if she were home right now. "Want anything to drink?"

"Nah, I'm good, thanks."

Helena poured herself a glass of water, for lack of anything else to do. Megan leaned against the counter next to the sink. Helena took small sips. "So, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know, what do you want to do?"

They smiled at each other, but it wasn't as right and easy as it'd been last time. Helena felt her cheeks stretch, this time.

"I have the car," said Megan. "We could go somewhere, if you wanted. The beach."

Helena pushed herself away from the counter and took another big gulp of water. "Nah. Don't have a swimsuit."

"We can go to the mall and buy one. If you want."

Swimsuit shopping had been a torment for Helena in high school; she'd had to shop in the plus size section and all the swimsuits were for old women, with skirts and shelf bras and buckles on the front. That wasn't a problem anymore, and that wasn't the problem now. "I'd rather stay home, that's all."

"Okay," and Helena hated the way Megan's voice went all quiet and soft, like Helena was a bit of dandelion fluff that might break off and float away. She ground her teeth. Megan said, "Wanna just watch TV, then? Or we can go for a walk?"

"You don't have to stay." Helena jutted out her jaw. She sat down on the couch and looked into her glass of water so she didn't have to look at Megan. "I know I'm boring. It's your summer vacation. You should go to the beach."

"What, by myself? That's no fun." Megan sat down on the edge of the cushion and put her elbows on her knees.

"You have other friends."

Megan shrugged. "I'd rather hang out with you."

They sat on the couch in silence for maybe thirty seconds. It felt uncomfortably like a session with Dr. Greene. Finally, Megan picked up one of the three remote controls on the coffee table. Helena's mom had gotten DirecTV, and now there were like eight hundred channels or something. Eight hundred channels and still nothing to watch; that was always the way.

Megan put on Dog Whisperer, not because they were big fans of Cesar Millan but because Dog Whisperer meant there'd be cute dogs. Helena looked up. A pit bull bounded across the screen and barked ferociously at someone passing by on the other side of the fence. Helena sipped at her water, and then she put it down.

"How's the truck coming along?"

Helena ran her tongue around her teeth before answering. "I'm missing a part. I ordered it online; it'll be here in a few days."

Dr. Greene crossed her legs. "That's good."

"Yeah." Dr. Greene hadn't suggested that Helena could have asked her mom to go to Kragen or AutoZone, or gone herself. But Helena didn't trust her mom to buy the right part herself, and she didn't want to pop a Xanax just to go to the auto store to buy a part. Not when she could just buy one online. It was cheaper, anyway, even if she did have to pay shipping, so really it evened out.

"Is that the last thing you need to fix the truck?"

"I think so. But really, I won't know until I get behind the wheel."

Dr. Greene raised her eyebrows; the gesture made her eyes look large and surprised. "So you do plan on driving the truck?"

"Well...well, yeah. I mean, what's the point in fixing it otherwise?" Helena shifted in her seat. She hadn't really meant to say that; it was just what had come out of her mouth. But really, what was the point, if she didn't mean to drive the truck? "I'll have to drive it, at least, to make sure everything's running okay."

"And how do you plan to do this?"

"I dunno," said Helena. "Take a lot of Xanax, I guess."

"I brought some movies," said Megan.

Helena looked. "*G.I. Jane*? Really?"

Megan grinned. "Oh c'mon, you think Demi Moore is totally hot."

"Anyone's hot in uniform, with a shaved head."

"Even Uma Thurman?"

Helena grimaced. "Maybe not Uma Thurman. She'd just look like...like a bald giraffe."

They laughed, but they didn't watch *G.I. Jane*. They watched *Buffy* instead and wondered if they were posers. Did it matter that they weren't old enough to have watched *Buffy* when it was still airing? Then again, did anyone really care? Eliza Dushku was totally hot. They watched two episodes of *Buffy*, and then Helena made more popcorn, and they watched two more. They argued over whether Willow or Tara was more dateable.

Helena's mother came home at one point. She stood in the entryway to the living room and smiled at them. Helena hit pause on the remote.

"Oh, look at you two," she said. "It's just like old times, isn't it?"

It wasn't, at all, because Megan was going to graduate and then she was going to stay in Chicago or move away somewhere else, forever, and Helena was going to stay in this house until she died. But all Helena said was, "Yeah, almost."

Megan stayed for dinner. She called her mother first, standing in the front hall where the reception was best, one hand tucked into her armpit and the other holding her phone up against her ear. "Yeah, I won't be home too late. Yeah. I'll drive carefully. She says thanks for the zongzi."

"Mom's making spaghetti," said Helena.

Megan grinned. "I love your mom's spaghetti."

Helena's mother made spaghetti a lot. Also meatloaf, and macaroni and cheese, and chicken noodle soup. Simple food, she called it. Comfort food. Megan loved it; at home she ate chicken and rice, she said, every other night. Chicken and rice with a side of steamed broccoli, or steamed green beans. Sometimes tofu. Sometimes pork bone soup. Sometimes fried rice. But usually, chicken and rice. Helena used to love going over to Megan's house for dinner, where nothing was ever smothered in canned condensed cream of mushroom soup.

"What did you eat in the Army?" Megan asked.

"Ugh, the same thing every day. It was horrible. I knew a few people who stopped being vegetarian in the Army." Helena bit into a meatball with relish. "I know I used to complain about your cooking a lot, Mom, but never again. All I wanted to do was come home and eat stuff in cream of mushroom soup."

Helena saw her mother giggle, and realized that she hadn't seen her mother really laugh, like this, since she got home. There'd been a little Welcome Home party, and she'd laughed there, but it wasn't like this, a mouth-open, teeth-showing guffaw. Those little laughs at the Welcome Home party were for show, to disguise the fact that she had new gray hairs and new lines at the corners of her eyes. Helena resolved to be nicer to her mother.

"God, if I'd known that the Army would cure you of your picky eating, I would've signed you up ages ago," her mother joked.

It was a bad joke to make, maybe, but nobody minded. They smiled at each other around the

table, a little family, the three of them.

"Did the Army teach you to eat vegetables, too?" she asked.

Helena shuddered, remembering the brown, mushy broccoli and slimy spinach. "God, no."

"Megan was mad at me, when I first said I was going to sign up for the Army," said Helena.

"Really." Dr. Greene raised her eyebrows. They gave her that large-eyed surprised look, again. Helena wondered if therapists practiced those faces in front of the mirror. "And how did that make you feel?"

"Angry, at the time. Like, you don't know me. Stuff like that." Helena shifted. She tried crossing her legs. She hadn't been able to do that, before the Army; her thighs had been too large. It felt strange, so she uncrossed them again.

"And now?"

Helena shrugged. "Now it was a really long time ago, it seems like. We're different people now. We don't get mad over stuff like that anymore."

"Hey, good timing."

Megan came crunching over the grass and stood with her hands in her pockets as Helena scrubbed her hands with orange pumice, filling the air with artificial citrus scent. "Oh really?"

"Yeah, he's all ready. I think. Just gotta take him for a test drive. You coming?"

Megan grinned in a way that Helena had seen on Facebook: Megan with Kelly Whittier, Jo-Ann Swenson, and Susan Patel, people that Helena knew only through Facebook tags. They were at some restaurant, the lights of Chicago blurry outside the window behind them, Megan laughing with her mouth open, not looking at the camera. The only photos of Helena on Facebook were the ones that someone else had tagged her in: Helena Patterson at boot camp. Helena Patterson in the background of a mess hall shot.

Helena rinsed the pumice off her hands with the hose and climbed into the truck. Megan got in on the other side. Helena inserted the key into the ignition and turned it. They held their breaths. The engine sputtered to life, made an ominous clanking sound, and then caught. Helena didn't dare look at Megan. She tested the gas pedal, and the car rolled forward, just a little bit. Then she slammed on the brakes, jerking them both forward in their seats, though the truck hadn't moved very much and hadn't been going very fast. Helena leaned forward and rested her forehead against the steering wheel. She could feel her heartbeat in her skull, and she was aware that she was breathing too fast. Her palms were clammy against the steering wheel. Her chest hurt, and she thought there was a very real possibility that she was going to be sick all over the inside of the truck, and that would never come out.

"Helena?" Megan's voice seemed to come from very far away.

"Hang on," Helena gasped.

"Is there--is there something I should do? Should I get your mom?"

"No." Helena squeezed her eyes shut. "Just--just talk to me. Tell me everything's going to be okay."

"Everything's going to be okay." And then, to Helena's horror, she felt Megan's hand against her back, rubbing soothing circles. Helena recoiled so sharply that she banged her elbow against the door of the truck. She thought about opening that door and tumbling out onto the concrete

and scrambling away from Megan and this goddamn fucking truck and out of this town entirely.

"Don't touch me," she snapped.

"Sorry, sorry." Megan held up her hands. She looked calm, but in that way that Helena knew she looked when she really didn't know what to do. That was one thing about her that hadn't changed, it seemed. One thing that Helena remembered.

"No, sorry." Helena closed her eyes again. She was sweating all over. She felt like everything was rushing in towards her. Possibly she was dying. "You should probably go get my mom."

She heard the passenger side door open and then close again. She couldn't hear Megan crossing the grass, running into the house, calling for her mother. Helena felt as if she were alone on the planet and plummeting into a well that went on forever. A black hole, then. Yes, being sucked into a black hole, where it would be cold and fearful until she died. She put one hand on her abdomen and felt it rise and fall as she breathed. Remembered to breathe.

Her mother came. She said sensible and sweet nothings until Helena could get out of her head and out of the truck. She went back into the house and back into her room, where it was safe, where the Xanax was. She took one and curled up under the covers. She did not see Megan.

"You did everything you were supposed to," said Dr. Greene.

"Yeah, except for the part where *I had a panic attack*."

"But you responded exactly the way you were supposed to," said Dr. Greene. "You remembered to breathe, and you remembered to ask for help."

"Yeah, well, I've had enough of them by now that I should know," Helena muttered. She cupped her chin in her hand and stared out the window, at the parking lot and the trees.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Dr. Greene.

Helena bit her lip and decided to be truthful. "Megan."

"What about her?"

Megan hadn't come by the house since that day. Well, it'd only been two days, so that was hardly unusual; it wasn't like Megan came over every day. Helena wasn't sure if she wanted Megan to come over, ever again. Things would be awkward and stiff between them now. Every time Megan looked at Helena, she'd see the sweating, shivering wreck of a woman who had a panic attack when she tried to drive a truck she'd driven nearly every day since she'd been sixteen years old. And every time Helena saw Megan, she'd see pity.

"I dunno," said Helena. "Just wondering what I'm going to say, the next time I see her."

Maybe coincidentally, Megan came by the next day with a jar of something. Its contents were a pale tan, with red and white and dark bits swirling in it.

"Soup," she said. "From my mom."

"Oh." Helena held open the door. "Come in."

Megan toed off her shoes at the door and bent over to put them on the shoe rack. Helena took the soup to the kitchen and put it in the refrigerator. She turned around to find Megan behind her, hands behind her back, looking trepidatious. Helena stopped where she was and leaned against the refrigerator.

"So, what do you want to do?" Helena asked.

"I dunno. Whatever you want to do."

Helena looked off to the side, at the counters. Her mom had gotten the counters redone, too, replacing the crappy yellow tile with sophisticated granite. Every time she'd come home on leave, something about the house had been different. It'd felt less like home.

She thought longingly of the bottle of Xanax in her room.

"Look," said Helena. "Maybe you should leave."

She didn't look at Megan, but she could feel Megan drawing herself up to her full height of five foot three.

"I will, if you really want me to," said Megan. "But I don't--"

Helena took a deep breath. "I think I want you to."

"I just want to help you!" Megan exploded. "You, you had a panic attack trying to *drive a car*, Helena, you can't just pretend everything's okay--"

"I know it's not okay!" Helena snapped. "I know I'm not okay! I have PTSD, okay, *I'm not okay*, but you can't fix it! I don't need you to fix it!"

She looked at Megan now, and watched as Megan's face turned into something sad and hurt and crumpled. Helena's chest opened up and caved in on itself. She bit her lip and almost said something, like *sorry* or *I didn't mean it*. But Megan turned and left. Helena heard the door shut after her, and then the car started up and rolled away.

NEW MESSAGE

To: Megan Wu

Sorry about the other day.

NEW MESSAGE

From: Megan Wu

It's okay. I guess I understand why you were mad. I'm sorry if I triggered anything. I wasn't trying to be pushy. You're my friend and I care about you.

NEW MESSAGE

To: Megan Wu

Okay I took a Xanax so that I could write this. I hope it works.

I was driving one of the trucks in a supply convoy. I remember it was a day just like any other. I didn't have any bad feelings or anything, but maybe I had a bad feeling about every drive. The truck in front of me was hit by an RPG. The blast made my truck swerve and I went into the ditch. I don't really remember what happened after that. There was a lot of gunfire. I guess someone got me out of the truck and to safety. I wasn't hurt much, had some glass in my skin and that was about it. But I couldn't drive after that, so they had to send me home.

I joined the Army because I wanted to be stronger. You were always protecting me in high school and I wanted to be able to protect myself. But that didn't really work because I feel like I'm the same person I was before. And I guess I was mad about that and I took it out on you instead. Sorry.

I still want us to be friends.

NEW MESSAGE

From: Megan Wu

Wow. I don't really know how to respond to that. Other than...thanks, I guess. I'm really flattered.

But this isn't about me! It's about you. You don't have to change anything about yourself. You're great the way you are.

NEW MESSAGE

To: Megan Wu

That's really nice of you to say, but you're wrong. I'm fucked up and I have PTSD and I'm not fine at all.

NEW MESSAGE

From: Megan Wu

Besides that! I mean, you're really buff now, and you're not afraid to stand up to people. The old you wouldn't have said the stuff you said the other day, about how I can't fix you, and the old you wouldn't have known how to deal with a panic attack. You were cute before, but now you're strong.

And you're right, by the way. I can't fix you. I shouldn't even try.

NEW MESSAGE

To: Megan Wu

Thanks, I guess.

You thought I was cute?

NEW MESSAGE

From: Megan Wu

You're welcome. And I still think you're cute.

That night, Helena lay in bed and thought, *she thinks I'm cute*.

Sometimes she looked in the mirror and still expected to see that chunky girl with the bad hair and the nerdy round glasses. She wondered what Megan thought was so cute about that girl. It couldn't have been the baggy t-shirts.

She stuck her hand down the waistband of her boxers. She hadn't masturbated since coming home, and she hadn't masturbated much in the Army; shared quarters made it awkward. Which wasn't to say that people didn't do it. People did it, all the time. But Helena had usually found it too anxious.

But she wasn't in the Army anymore, and she wasn't thirteen, either, feeling around the folds of her vulva and trying to figure out how to get off, afraid that her sister next door would hear her. She massaged her pubic mound first, feeling the crinkly hair with her fingers, before delving one finger between her lips. She tried to picture Megan naked. She was only able to catch a brief glimpse of small, pert breasts and a phoenix tattoo before her mind shut it down. She'd never been able to do that, not even in high school.

She massaged her clitoral hood; it was too dry, so she dipped her finger into her vaginal opening to collect some moisture and tried again. It went a little better, that time. She tried to

picture kissing Megan. No, no good; fantasizing with real people never worked for her. She cast her mind back to a hurried, furtive encounter in the back of a truck, panting into the hot air, sand in her hair and in the crevices of her boots. She switched to light, rhythmic strokes with her finger and imagined that that was a woman's tongue, lapping. She stopped to pick up more slick from her vaginal opening and rubbed it all over her clit. Her breath came faster; she could feel herself flushing, her lips becoming engorged.

She tried picturing Megan again, naked, in the bed with her, propped up on her elbows and smiling. This time she made it three seconds before her mind rebelled against the notion. She closed her eyes and pictured Megan penetrating her with something, avoiding her face and focusing instead on her small, lithe body. Megan was a college girl in a big city; she probably had a bunch of toys in her room. Probably it was something she and her friends did together, go to the sex store, discussing the virtues of this or that dildo or vibrator. Helena had never used a vibrator. She'd never even watched any porn where women used vibrators on each other. She knew a lot of the men watched porn, but she didn't want to watch the kind of porn that men watched.

What did a vibrator feel like, anyway? Helena had never even tried penetrating herself with anything other than her fingers. She thought that vibration might feel good against her clit, but not inside. Penetrating herself with her fingers had never done much for her, and she didn't know that a vibrator would be much better. But maybe Megan would show her.

Wasn't she getting a little ahead of herself, here? Just because Megan said she was cute didn't mean she was going to want to fuck her.

Oh, but Helena wanted her to. She really, really wanted her to.

She came a few minutes later, thinking sometimes about Megan, thinking sometimes about women in the Army, but most of the time just thinking about how much she wanted to come. She did with a little hitched breath--being in the Army had taught her how to be quiet--and sank back into the sheets. She felt a little silly afterwards, but she often did, after masturbating, at what had seemed so urgent and exciting at the time. She wiped her fingers off on the sheets, then turned over and went to sleep.

The next morning, she went for a run. Afterwards, she ate omelettes with her mother. They talked about their plans for that day. Helena said she was going to read a book and maybe go for a walk, maybe watch some TV. Her mother asked if Megan was coming over. Helena said she didn't know.

She waited for her mother to leave for work. Then she took a Xanax, found her keys, and walked down to the truck. She sat in the driver's seat and sent Megan a text message: *hey u home?*

Yeah, why?

on my way over

Helena took a deep breath, put the key in the ignition, and turned it.

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Ravencloak

by Tsuki Akari

"Lord of Winter," said Lady Dagmar. She swept forward before Aesa could say a word, shifting her cloak into her brown hawk's wings as she knelt in the feast hall. She spread them to their full length, so that all present could see them. This was custom for a Valkyrie captain in a strange feast hall. "We ask you to release a wind for us. Just to hold the winter a little longer. My Lord Bryngeror has endured the attention of her rivals for too long. We need a late winter to thwart them. The snow needn't stop their attack, only delay it."

The announcement caused a murmur among the attendants in the hall, all bundled up in furs to combat the cold of the hall. Aesa could imagine how it must have looked: a small flight of Valkyrie coming in the name of a small holding on the other side of the valley, speaking for the wife of a Jarl who had died two winters ago, and asking a god himself for aid.

"Remember, a god in exile is still a god," Lady Dagmar had warned them, when they'd entered the hall. It had mostly been a warning to Aesa, who had been all too eager to shake the ice from her wings and rush ahead. Hodur had not been to Asgard in some time, not even to the selection tournaments in which he would be allowed to choose new Valkyrie, but even still he kept the winter winds in his stores, and in many ways the one god all people of the mountains believed in above all else.

Aesa supposed this was all very impressive, but she was just struck by how young he actually looked. She had been told Hodur was blind and weak, but although he bound his eyes with cloth, he seemed able-bodied enough. She had expected him to look like his Odin, all wild and grand. Hodur's hair was close-kept, and his beard little more than a scratchy peppering across his strong chin. His hair was dark, too. Not a common thing among the Nine Peaks.

It was a black that almost matched the hair of his Raven--the Valkyrie who customarily served as captain of the local flight. She stood closest to his chair as he frowned at Lady Dagmar's request. The hair that peeked from under her helm was black. It matched her wings--currently resting in their cloak form around her shoulders. The cloak hung almost to her hips and was as dark as the far corners of the feast hall. She was what really caught Aesa's eye. Mardoll and Dotta's too. Aesa could hear them whisper behind her.

"Her cloak really is black."

"She looks so young."

"Is it true what they say about her?"

"Yes," said Aesa, perhaps a touch too loudly. "It probably is. Now shut up."

Hodur raised a hand to silence the hall.

"You understand," he said to Lady Dagmar, who had knelt silent the whole time, "that what you ask is no small thing?"

"Surely," ventured Lady Dagmar, with great care, "it is nothing to the god whom is Lord of all winter storms?"

At this, Hodur smiled thinly. "Perhaps, but I cannot give anything too freely. Many of great renown have sent their wings to me with hopes for my favor, and you are the Valkyrie of no true Jarl."

Lady Dagmar only winced slightly at the reminder. Bryngeror's husband had died two winters ago. The oldest son was just seven years old. Bryngeror had done well to keep the Hall and the holdings functional in the time since the Jarl's passing, but it didn't mean his old allies considered her equal to the lands she managed so well.

"Lady Bryngeror has done commendably in the absence of her husband," said Lady Dagmar, carefully. "I stand by her request."

"Hm," Hodur nodded. With his eyes bound and his jaw set, it was hard to tell what he thought of the request. He reached out past the arm of the chair to touch his Raven's wrist. She murmured something to him in response. "Very well. Since you have such faith in your master, I shall grant you the customary consideration. Select your representative, Lady Dagmar, and choose wisely, for they will be the ones to make your case. "

An attendant stepped forward with a spear.

Mardoll and Dotta exchanged doubtful looks. "How exactly...?" Dotta began to ask, but Lady Dagmar silenced her with a slash of her hand. It was customary for a visiting Valkyrie to present their fighting prowess when requesting a favor on behalf of their lord. Purportedly it was a matter of good sportsmanship, but Aesa always suspected it had more to do with showing a potential rival what a bad idea it would be to say no. Blind or not, Hodur had chosen to observe this custom. They were to respect it. Lady Dagmar stood and shifted her wings back into her cloak as Hodur's Raven stepped forward, shouldering her own spear with an expert ease in spite of her young age.

"Can Lady Dagmar really--?" Mardoll whispered worriedly. They said that Hodur's Valkyrie had once faced a dragon and lived.

Lady Dagmar stood ready. The attendant began to explain the terms. Aesa knew as a Valkyrie in her first wing she ought to observe the proceedings with great care, but she could hardly listen. This was the moment she'd been waiting for since Bryngeror had asked them to visit the god's hall. Hodur's Raven stood across from them with her spear held parallel to her body, waiting.

Aesa found she could wait no longer.

"I'll fight," said Aesa, seizing the spear as Lady Dagmar reached for it. Lady Dagmar tried to grab her, but it was too late. Aesa surged forward, her red cloak whirling into a flurry of equally red wings as she pointed her spear directly at the youngest Raven in the Nine Peaks.

Hodur's chief Valkyrie raised her eyebrows.

"Aesa," she said, after a moment.

"Signy Sigyndottir," said Aesa. "It's been some time."

And then, not waiting for the signal or her shield, she lunged.

They fought to a draw, but only because they had ruined the banquet spread.

"You are our welcome guests, apparently," said Hodur, as his servants had carried the split table out of the feast hall. The noise of the plates clattering had been considerable. He held one hand against his ear. "Eat and rest as you see fit. This will be your home until morning, but be mindful not to break any more of my tables."

Aesa took that as an invitation to wander as she would. She stepped out into the snowfield that marked the beginning of the Winter Lord's hunting range.

She looked out across the dark expanse, to storehouses in the distance. The storm had cleared, whether by natural course or by Hodur's will, she couldn't be sure. It didn't really matter. The

snow was clear and ice-blue in the light of the moon. Aesa stretched her arms over her head and looked over her shoulder. There, on the roof of the feast hall. Aesa flipped backwards and unfurled her wings.

She landed on the roof beside the dark-haired Raven, who scowled and raised her hand against the brush of Aesa's wings.

"You sure haven't changed have you?" asked Aesa, folding her wings back into her red cloak. "Knew I'd find you. You *perch*, Signy."

"I enjoy my privacy," said the Raven--Signy-- with twist of her lips. "And you enjoy violating it. What are you doing here?"

"Greeting party of Lady Bryngeror," said Aesa, simply.

"Besides that," said Signy.

"Hm." Aesa stomped on the roof until the snow slid away and sat down beside Signy. "Let me think. Requesting aid, paying court to a God, saving my Jarl's holdings, and looking for an old acquaintance. Have you seen her? About this tall, long nose, black hair, glares like a hawk--a bit like that, yes."

"And I thought you were here to request another duel," said Signy.

"If you'd like," said Aesa. "But a word would do."

Signy's lips twisted. She closed her eyes. "I haven't seen anyone by your description," she said. "Ask someone else."

"I don't see anyone else."

"Then go someplace else. "

"Why don't you?" said Aesa. "If I'm bothering you that much. Or is this you not wanting to give me the satisfaction of making you run?"

Signy said nothing.

"Because believe you me, my friend," said Aesa. "I don't think I could get you to run farther than the last time."

Signy moved.

The spear swiped the air where Aesa had been previously seated. Snow exploded in a white mist. Aesa landed a foot away, her skirts settling around her and her cloak spread into the vague shape of her wings.

"There!" breathed Aesa. "Yes, there! That's the Signy I remember."

Signy stared at her blankly over the length of her spear. "So. This is why you've come? To taunt me like a first-year?"

"No," said Aesa, crack her knuckles. "But if I'm wrong, correct me!"

"Certainly," said Signy. She flowed to her feet, brushing the pieces of snow off of her skirts. She tightened the straps on one of her bracers then, with a sigh, she lunged.

The snow muffled the sounds of metal clanging on metal, and the sound of ragged breath in the cold air. Aesa danced just out of the spear's reach, bending and weaving to avoid the expert lunges and the lethal sweeps.

"You *have* improved," noted Signy, with some surprise. She hadn't wanted to admit it, but as minutes dragged it became embarrassing not to. "You haven't tried to tackle me once."

"Yes, well," said Aesa, drawing her axe once to deflect another lunge with a loud screech of metal. "I've learned to bide my time."

She side-stepped the next lunge. It brought Signy close. Aesa's arm shot out, grabbing the other Valkyrie by her shoulder. She pulled her as close as she could, till there was just a hand

between them and she could see the faint twist of Signy's mouth.

"You haven't learned not to announce your actions," said Signy, softly. She let herself fall forward. Her forehead collided with Aesa's, sending her head ringing.

"Oh ho!" cried Aesa, stumbling back. "That was dirty! Has our pristine Valkyrie Princess finally learned a little pit fighting?"

"I've learned the best way to deal with scum," said Signy, shouldering her spear, "is to know their ways."

Aesa eyed her through the ringing in her head. "I can respect that."

"Yes," said Signy, "I'm sure you do."

Aesa curled her free hand into a fist and charged, axe swinging.

If Signy had expected another charge like the one in the hall, she was mistaken, for this time Aesa launched herself skywards before their weapons could touch. She swooped in from behind, feet first, and Signy just barely had time to negotiate her spear and her feet and hop to the side to avoid Aesa's heavy boots. Aesa didn't give her much time to recover. She landed, sprung backwards and planted an elbow in Signy's stomach. Signy felt the breath go out of her but forced her mind to work, planting her spear in the ground and using it as anchoring as she aimed her own side kick which struck the other Valkyrie in the soft spot just above her knee. Aesa broke away with an outraged squawk, but didn't waste time in delivering another three punches, which Signy ducked, deflected, and parried in swift succession. The fourth swing had a fist full of ice in it. Signy shut her eyes against the sting, and in that split second Aesa's boot found her breastplate. Her spear fell. So did the axe. Aesa's weight bore Signy down into the snow.

"What a filthy way to win," murmured Signy. "It's a wonder you were selected by a Jarl, fighting like that."

"You're bleeding," said Aesa.

Signy *was* bleeding. It wasn't the ice which had scratched her, although the lines were pink on her cheek. It wasn't even a stray nick from the axe, which had left deep scratches in her thicker armor. No--it was her lip. She'd bitten down hard enough to draw blood. The wound stung in the cold. Aesa reached with a wet gloved hand to touch it, but Signy turned her head away and her cheek into the snow.

Aesa sighed, and settled her hand in beside her head instead.

"I would've thought you'd have at least grown your hair out by now," she said, gasping as the adrenaline siphoned out.

Signy glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. Aesa was flushed, her fell hair fell raggedly around them, braids clumped and tangled. "So long as I let someone so beneath me cut it," she whispered. "I will cut it as a reminder of my carelessness."

"So I *was* the reason you left," breathed Aesa.

Signy swallowed, hard. "You self-centered *idiot*." She spread her wings against the snow, beating them hard. The ice stirred up was enough to catch Aesa off guard, and Signy planted a hand over her face and shoved her back.

It wasn't a fight that would've passed regulation in any of the selection tournaments. Neither of them retrieved their weapon. Aesa grabbed at Signy's wings. Signy kned her in the chin. The ground turned to slush and broken ice as they rolled down the slope.

"Do you believe the mountains move for you?" hissed Signy as she threw a punch. She was better at it than she used to be. Aesa winced as she caught it an inch from her face. "Do you believe the sky bows for you? That the birds sing for you? That the sun *shines* for you?"

"No, just--" Aesa grabbed Signy's shoulders, pulling them sideways. "Gods, Signy. Calm down! I just want to know why you left!"

But Signy could not be calmed. Aesa had the weight advantage, but Signy was smaller, lighter, and eminently bonier. She stuck out her elbows and twisted out from beneath her, just enough to aim another kick at Aesa's gut. She rushed to her feet.

"And now you believe I owe you answers!" she shouted, she punctuated each word with a jab from her foot. Aesa managed to scabble to her knees, blocking with an arm. "As though you were entitled to it. As though we were ever *friends*. You rush ahead of your captain in the audience hall, because you believe you are entitled to that fight with me? Do you think *everything* everyone does is just for you? That what I did was just because of you? Like *Sifa*?"

"Sifa!" Aesa let a blow in through sheer surprise. Her head snapped to the side, she narrowed her eyes as she surged upwards. "Now that's too much. You know why Sifa did what she did! You were *there*!"

Aesa charged. Signy swept out of the way, but she didn't factor in the sudden re-emergence of Aesa's wing, one of which swept forward and smacked her firmly in the chest. She fell, winded, and Aesa was on her in an instant, her hands bunched in the folds of the reformed cloak. Signy stared up at her, her dark eyes blank and startlingly calm. "Yes, and I know what she was to you."

"What she *was*? She was our friend. She was our wingmate. She was--"

Aesa froze.

"...Oh," she said. "Oh. That's not what you mean."

Signy went heavy in her grip. The Raven tipped her head back and breathed out. "No, it's not."

Aesa's cheeks, already bright from the fight, turned a brighter pink. It clashed miserably with her hair. "You knew about that? How, I mean. It was just once or twice. It was late, and you were out practicing on the peak...oh, *Hel*, you came back before midnight for once in your life."

Signy said nothing.

"What, did you sit and watch?"

"No," said Signy, bitterly. "I saw quite enough."

Aesa let her go. Signy settled in the snow. She'd left her helmet on the roof of the feast hall. Her black hair stuck to her cheeks. Aesa brushed her own hair out of the way, and kept her hand pressed to her forehead, as she caught her breath.

"Is... *that* why you left?" Aesa's hand dropped. "Is Signy Sigyndottir really that petty? You left because you thought I wouldn't *fuck* you?"

Signy began to roll away. "Believe what you'd like."

"No," said Aesa, throwing her leg out to keep her in place. "I'll see for myself."

It was a kiss that was all teeth and determination, and not a lot of finesse. That didn't really seem to matter for the way Signy suddenly surged up under her, grabbing a handful of pleats and pulling with a hunger to match any mountain wolf. For a moment it was a hot, uncomfortable press, and Aesa had to turn her head to the side to get away.

"So tell me again," said Aesa, with a rough laugh, "how that wasn't it?"

"It wasn't," said Signy, "but if you can do that without nearly cracking a tooth, I might at least tell you the truth."

Aesa did. She did so sliding a leg between Signy's skirts, leather gloves creaking as she seized her shoulders. It was a little less toothy, but a lot messier and when Signy broke away, this time, Aesa's lips stung with the sudden remembrance of the cold around them.

"Let me go," murmured Signy, glancing back up to the hall.

"Uh--what?" Aesa shook her head and glared down at her. "No. So you can run again? No."

"So I can *take you to my quarters*," said Signy. "Unless you have developed an immunity to frostbite."

"Oh--oh," said Aesa. She rolled away. Signy lay in the snow for a moment, as though contemplating the sanity of her actions. Then, with great dignity, she swept to her feet, opened her wings, and flapped back upwards towards the hall. For once in her life, Aesa followed without a word.

The tiny room Signy had been afforded as the appointed Raven of Hodur consisted of a fur bedroll, a few chests, and three spears and a shield mounted on the wall. Aesa imagined some of those chests must have held books or changes of clothes, but aside from that there was nothing to identify the room as anything other than the quarters of a generic, faceless warrior. Aesa, who had always made a point of decorating her living space with anything bright or new, made a face into the polished shield as she folded her cloak with great care over her arm. The rest of the armor and leathers had been thrown to various corners of the room, but the cloak Aesa handled with care.

In the shield's reflection she watched Signy divest herself of her own armor. She took great care with it, laying it out with an agonizing particularity in the space by the bedroll. By the time she was down to her tunic and breaches, Aesa stood naked across from her, her cloak under her arm and one hand on her hip. Signy glanced at her, then reached for the hearth.

"You keep a fire in your room now," said Aesa, following the movement. She remembered Signy's corner of the training hall when they were younger, which were always ice cold. She had refused to keep a fire, even a small one.

"Practicality," said Signy, reaching for the clasp on her tunic. "The nights are longer here. I've learned to set aside fear for the sake of survival."

"Was *that* it?" Aesa watched Signy's hands. The only faltered slightly. "Was it shame? Anyone would have frozen for a moment, you know. Whether or not it was a bad memory. Even the captains hesitated. It was dragon fire. With a full dragon attached to it, I might add."

Signy's hands fell away. Her shirt fell open, exposing narrow a thin line of pale skin and the beginning curve of one breast.

"Are you still trying to guess?" she murmured. She settled for sitting back on her bedroll, and staring blankly at the spears on the wall, looking just past Aesa and not quite at her. "You didn't falter."

"I don't burn," said Aesa.

"Sifa didn't falter," said Signy.

"Did you really envy her that much?"

"No," admitted Signy. "I had never thought much about her one way or the other, beyond that she struck me as one who took on the cloak and wings to find a good husband, not glory on the battlefield."

"You were wrong," said Aesa, settling down across from her.

Signy nodded. "I was wrong. She was one of the true Valkyrie. And she was brave where I myself faltered. I should have given her due respect. Do you think she would have foregone a husband for you?"

"I don't know, probably," admitted Aesa, fiddling with her cloak. She settled finally for resting it on one of the chests, next to Signy's, the red looked striking beside the black. "Although she would have hated fighting the rest of her life. I can't say I didn't think about it, after she died. But it wasn't like I can ask her, anymore. Though could you imagine how awkward that would've been? She would've wanted to pitch herself into a ravine."

"Would you have foregone marriage for her?"

"Marriage? Feh, I'm staying a Valkyrie. Did I love her like a Valkyrie captain loves her second, you mean?" asked Aesa. "No. And you have no idea how that kept me up for a while. But it isn't as though she hadn't meant something to me. She was one of the few friends I had in the training hall. You were the other one, you should know."

"I hated you," said Signy.

Aesa didn't flinch. "Oh, and I hated you plenty right back. But you were still a friend. Look here." Signy didn't look. Aesa sighed and settled for grabbing her shoulder and turning her. "Sifa didn't do it all just for me. She was a person. No one does anything so bold for just for one reason. Not unless they're mad as balls, like me, and Sifa sure wasn't. She really loved our flight, all of us. She really loved her holding. Her father. Her brothers and sisters. She couldn't let the dragon take any of it. You should know that."

"I know that," said Signy.

"Do you hate her?"

"Never while she was alive," said Signy. "There was no point. She was never my match in any way. And yet she had things I realized I lack, and yes."

"Well," said Aesa, digging her fingers into the cloth of her tunic pulling it aside. "Let me take away your excuse to."

It was nothing like a fight. At least, not the one that had come before. Signy let Aesa slide her tunic off her shoulders, hissing only faintly as the fabric brushed past her sensitive wing-marks. Signy let Aesa push her back onto the bed roll, watching through half-lidded eyes as Aesa swore and yanked at her breeches, pulling them up over her knees and tossing them over her shoulder. Signy only hissed slightly in disapproval at the cavalier treatment of her belongings, but Signy also let Aesa grip her ankle and lean over her to run a hand from her collarbone down to her stomach, with her fingers curled so that she left red lines across her pale skin. Her hand stopped over her hip bone, fingers playing along the rise, as though committing the contour to memory.

"Thinner than ever," said Aesa, tracking the lines of tightened muscle along her stomach. She located one soft point along Signy's inner thigh and slid her hand over it, pinching it. "You never did explain where all that food really went. Do you still eat the roast or is just snow, now?"

Signy rolled her eyes and said nothing.

"Damn," muttered Aesa. "I'm not doing this if you're only going to just lie here. This isn't what I--"

But when she started to let go of Signy's ankle, her hand shot up. They dug hard enough into Aesa that she gasped. She was sure there'd be marks in the morning.

Signy, levered forward so that her mouth was close to Aesa's, whispered: "*Coward.*"

"Oh, Hel," said Aesa, "If that's how you'd like it."

So she did it the way Signy wanted it. She pushed Signy back down. She pulled her leg over her shoulder, and leaned in for the kill.

She had her with her mouth, much more mindful of her teeth than before. The hot-cold draw of her tongue was so confident and sudden that, for a moment, Signy gasped in very real

surprise, but Aesa held her hips down. She did it slow, determined to make her squirm, but this proved too tentative for Signy, whose muscles twitch with each stroke, to be sure, but eventually shook her head and dug her nails into Aesa's shoulder.

So Aesa had her with her hand. She had expected Signy to be drawn tighter than a bow, but Signy gave faster than she expected, lying almost boneless as she worked her finger in. She flexed it carefully, spreading one palm over Signy's stomach. Signy tilted her head to watch her. She nearly looked bored.

"I had thought you had come to be known for your first charge," she murmured, dryly.

Aesa's head jolted up in surprise. "So you *did* hear of me up here. I'm doing something right!"

"Not presently," said Signy.

So Aesa added another finger and pressed home. That shut Signy up. That was how Aesa had her, gripping her hip for leverage as she pressed in fast and hard. When that wasn't enough, she pulled them both so that Signy instead sat on her lap, so that Signy could let herself be had at the pace she wanted: which was fast, so fast that Aesa was grateful for how her years of training had strengthened her wrist.

When Signy came it was with her whole body, everything simply tightened, and she grabbed for both skin and hair as she grit her teeth and swallowed any sound. If Aesa expected to be left on her own after that, she was mistaken. No sooner had Signy caught her breath and untangled herself then she fell on Aesa with a cold ferocity that nevertheless burned as she bit her bottom lip. She rolled her backwards so that her head bumped the floor at the foot of the bedroll. She slid her leg between Aesa's and, with merciless precision, pressed once, and then again, and then again after that.

"Ah," Aesa gasped, laughing as Signy glared down at her. "Yes. That's how I thought you'd be."

It didn't take very long after that.

"I was afraid," said Signy.

"Eh?" Aesa raised her head out of her arms. She lay in a pile of fur. When she cracked her eyes, she saw Signy crouched by the hearth, one hand held straight out over the open flame.

"When I left," admitted Signy, "I was afraid, but not of what you think."

"Oh?" Aesa rolled over. She reached out a careful hand, touching Signy's back, just beneath her wing marks. Signy tensed, but said nothing. "And what do I think?"

"I was afraid of the things you showed me," said Signy, "You. Sifa. You made me realize I still loved life. I would not be so willing to die for my cause like she did. I wasn't able to honor her actions the way you did. I didn't want death. No one can serve as Odin's Raven without wanting death. I wanted to live. Not survive, just live. It was something I hadn't wanted in a very long time."

"A-ha," said Aesa, squirming out from beneath the furs.

Signy raised an eyebrow as she settled beside her. "A...ha?"

"It's funny," said Aesa, smiling--not unkindly. She put her hand over Signy's and pulled it away from the flame. "I'd sometimes hoped that it was something a little like that."

Hodur gave them the winds in a bottle meant for carrying mead. It swished and howled like a

wolf in its container, but the seal held.

An attendant handed it to Lady Dagmar as Aesa emerged from the hall.

"You are to release it from your peak and not before then," she heard her tell the Valkyrie captain. "It will be at its most vicious from the North-East. I know it is small, but it is from a bad year. Our master will keep his promise to you."

"He has Bryngeror's greatest thanks," said Lady Dagmar. She slipped the bottle into her pack and turned as Aesa drew near. "And her apologies for his damaged banquet table."

"Ah, yes," said Aesa. "That. I will be happy to take that out of my wages in the next tournament."

"If I allow you fight," said Lady Dagmar, as the attendant scurried out of the way. "You may have done us a turn by impressing a god, Aesa, but you countermanded my direct order. Do it again, and I will take your cloak for a month."

This was no small threat. Wings were, after all, a Valkyrie's pride and joy. "I understand, Lady Dagmar. It won't happen again."

Lady Dagmar sighed, and she strode for the ridge. "And you could stand to look more sorry for it."

Still, she left it at that.

This exit, too, was a part of the ritual. In a larger hall, the full flight of resident Valkyrie would have taken wing to see the visiting flight off. Among Hodur's Valkyrie there was only his one dark Raven. She waited along the bend, her black cloak standing out like a slash against the mountains. She spared them no pleasantries or farewells, but simply dove off of the ridge. Her cloak unfurled, and her wings carried her up into a clear mountain sky. Lady Dagmar dove after her, followed by a laden Dotta and Mardoll. Aesa held back, flying behind them, if only to marvel for a moment or two at what a stark contrast Signy was compared to any other Valkyrie right. So stubbornly grim and severe.

When they reached the valley, and Signy peeled away, Aesa broke formation. She wheeled back, angling her wings so that the sun caught her red feathers at just the right glint. She could hear Lady Dagmar's reproach, but she ignored it, staring at that dark spot, and cupping her hands so she could be sure the Raven would hear her.

"Signy Sigyndottir!" she shouted. "I will see you at the next tournament, won't I! You'd best be there. You'd best be ready to face me again! Or I will know the Raven of Hodur has something new to fear!"

The dark spot hesitated for a moment against the sky, and for a moment Aesa thought she saw the glint of a spear raised in agreement--but Signy was already very far away, and growing farther, as she winged back to the lonely hall of the Winter Lord.

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Ultimate Illusion

by Haitoku no Honou (背徳)

illustrated by neomeruru

DISC ONE

"Look, Briggs," Shihaya says from inside the bridge, "I'm not asking for much."

Kayla slows her steps, stopping just before the open door. With Romeo and the others away on their latest mission to acquire goddess-knows-what, they've been anchored two hundred feet up with nothing to do for three days. The prospect of anything's happening, even if it's Shihaya complaining, is too attractive to pass up.

"I mean, he says he *loves* me," Shihaya says. "He says we're destined to be together. And then he leaves me behind at every opportunity!" Her voice rises into a nasal whine. "'Oh, Shnookums, you can come next time.' But it never happens!"

Kayla inches closer to the door. She hasn't spoken to Shihaya that many times, but she's always been so perfect, so composed. Hearing her with real emotion in her voice is a novelty.

"He's always telling me he'll buy me that new bow, but what does he come back from every town with?" She doesn't really pause for an answer. "A new *sword*! And not only is it not really better than whatever sword he had before, but they all clash horribly with what he *thinks* is fashionable that week! And how am I supposed to be effective in a fight if my bow is bad and I'm shooting tiny *splinters*?"

Briggs makes a non-committal noise, and Shihaya sucks in an aggrieved breath. "And he says he's going to save the kingdom but he just flies us around in circles doing *nothing* and coming back with *useless things* and if he calls me 'shnookums' *one more time--*"

Kayla takes a step around the corner and into the doorway. She doesn't know Shihaya that well, but every word out of her mouth is something that Kayla's thought herself over the last few weeks. Maybe they're not so different after all.

In the bridge, Shihaya's out of her chair, half-turned towards the doorway. She's portrait-perfect as always, dress laced tight around her chest and falling in a wave to the floor, hair pulled back from her face in two braids and the rest spilling past her shoulders.

To the side, Briggs is half-hidden in the pilot's chair, slouched down with his feet on the console and his hat pulled low over his face.

All of a sudden, Kayla's unsure of her welcome. Shihaya's been on the ship for much longer than she has; maybe she's intruding.

She pushes a wobbly smile onto her face. "He keeps calling me 'babycakes'," she volunteers, and Shihaya's suddenly in motion, stabbing a finger towards her, lace around her wrist shaking.

"*See?*" she says. "I'm *not* the only one!"

"He's been telling *me* he'll buy me an upgraded mage focus since I came onboard," Kayla says. "But every time--"

"Sword," Shihaya says, snapping her fingers. "Did you see the green and *pink* one?"

"*Yes--*" Kayla says, and then her smile feels real, and Shihaya is smiling back. She feels brave, suddenly, bold. "I thought the one with the orange hilt went really well with his purple doublet,"

she says, and Shihaya lets out a peal of laughter.

"Tell you a secret," she says, leaning in conspiratorially, and Kayla leans in without thinking. "I threw that purple doublet overboard," she whispers, and Kayla giggles in spite of herself.

"I was *wondering* what happened to that," she says. "I thought he must have just finally realised it wasn't his colour."

Shihaya snorts. "I think he's colourblind," she says.

"He's more than *that*," Kayla says. "I think he's stupid, to leave us here. I mean, not that I have anything against the others--"

Shihaya's nodding along. "But I'm the best archer he'll ever see, and I assume you're equally skilled in the magic arts, and he's just overlooking us--"

"Because we're *girls*," Kayla finishes, and makes an exaggerated face. "Even that last quest, you know, the one with the dragon--"

"Right, yes," Shihaya says, "the one where ranged support would have made everything *so much easier*--"

"Exactly!" Kayla says. "'But babycakes, you might get hurt.' Would it kill him to let us make a decision now and again?"

"I think it might," Shihaya mock-whispers, and Kayla snorts.

"To hell with *him*," she says. "We could do so much better on our own." She flops down into Shihaya's vacated chair, tilting her head back to look at the ceiling. "Go pick up your new bow, grab my mage focus - and actually go and get something *done*."

She's expecting Shihaya to chime in, more of the easy back-and-forth they'd fallen into, and instead there's nothing but silence.

She tilts her head back down, uneasy suddenly - has she offended her? - to see Shihaya staring at her. Her expression is different, too - all amusement gone, and in its place something far more measuring.

Shihaya nods once, slowly. "Yes," she says. "We could."

Kayla sits bolt upright. "I was just--" she says. "You want--" Words are tangling on her tongue, and she shakes her head sharply, trying to form the shape of what she wants to say. Instead, what comes out is, "But you're *engaged*!"

It's Shihaya's turn to snort, and she waves a hand in the air. "Claiming we're destined to be together just because I happen to fit the vague shape of his nursery rhymes is charming for a while," she says. "And I am fond of him. But-" She sighs. "He wants to roll me in blankets and put me in a glass tower, protect me from the world. He wants a delicate princess to protect, a flower in a glasshouse, or a dove in a gilded cage."

She turns her head, staring straight at Kayla. She feels pinned, Shihaya's gaze like the point of a sword. "I'm not a flower," Shihaya says. "I don't need protecting. And hell if I'm going to stay caged up on his say-so." She pauses for a moment, and then breaks into a smile suddenly, and it's as though the sun has come out - just like that, the tension is gone. "Especially not when I don't have to be alone in doing it."

Kayla lets out a breath. She doesn't know what to think - she'd just been complaining, not really serious, but for all that this has been spur-of-the-moment, Shihaya seems to have put a lot of thought into things. "I don't know what to think," she says. "I mean - we'd be stranding him."

Shihaya just smirks. "If she were *his* ship," she says, "I might feel a bit sorry for him."

Kayla blinks. "It's not?" she says. "But he--" She breaks off, looking down; now she feels embarrassed, to have been taken in. Would Shihaya think less of her, for wanting to believe the

best in people?

"It's okay," Shihaya says, and Kayla dares to lift her head to see that her smirk has softened into a gentle smile. "He can be dashing when he wants to be, speaking half-truths and charming his way into things."

"Whose ship is it, then?" Kayla asks, feeling a little less embarrassed - after all, Shihaya must have been taken in too, for her to have been here even despite the engagement.

Shihaya's smile widens, and she turns to the pilot's chair. "Briggs," she says, and Kayla nearly starts as she remembers that all this time, someone else has been in the room.

"Yes milady," Briggs says, far more formal than Kayla has ever heard him speak before. At some point during the previous conversation, he'd taken his feet off the console and straightened his hat, the very image of a reputable airship pilot.

"Weigh anchor," Shihaya says. "Set a course for Waystone City."

"Yes milady," Briggs says, and there's a shudder under their feet as the airship hums awake.

Shihaya turns to Kayla, a proud smile on her face. "The *Light of Dawn* is mine," she says. "And I may fly her wherever I wish."

She holds out a hand. "Kayla," she says, "will you fly with me?"

She'd taken a chance with Romeo - she'd gambled and she'd lost. Shihaya is offering her another chance, only this time, she knows what she's in for. She hopes. At the very least, whatever it is, she knows it won't be boring.

She reaches out and clasps Shihaya's hand. "I will," she says, and Shihaya beams and with a grip like iron, levers her out of the chair.

"You won't regret it," she says, and with her smile lighting up the room, Kayla can believe it.



They come into Waystone City just as the sun is setting. Kayla's at the bow for the final approach - she's heard about Waystone City, certainly: that it's the main trading hub of the Empire, that in Waystone City you can find anything and everything you want - for a price - but it's further north than she's ever been before, and she wants to see as much as she can.

The lowering sun casts everything in an orange glow, the tall spires of the docking station shining in the light, stretching long dappled shadows across the city streets. In comparison to the greens of the forest they've been flying over, Waystone City is a shock, forest breaking abruptly against the bounds of the city and then fading into the distance. The buildings sparkle in the light, reflections off windows and metal accents that make the whole city shine.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Kayla turns her head in time to see Shihaya take the last step to the rail beside her. The sunset light casts halos in her hair and a gentle shine on her dress. Against the backdrop of the glowing city, she looks every inch like she belongs.

"I've never seen anything like it," Kayla says, and turns her head back to the city before her, breathing it in.

"We'll dock just before nightfall," Shihaya says, "head down in the morning. We should be able to find everything we need and be off again before the day is out."

"Why not head down tonight?" Kayla asks.

"That's ... not a good idea," Shihaya says, and when Kayla glances over, she's looking down, staring out over the city. When she continues, her voice is quiet. "Waystone City is beautiful, yes, but it has a darker side too. We're best served by staying on the ship tonight."

Kayla frowns, looking back down. The sky has darkened, and the light from the lowering sun has changed in turn, a colour more red than orange painted across the city streets. She's not normally one to believe in omens, but she feels cold, a strange chill shivering down her spine.

"You would know best," she says, voice quiet in return.

They stand in silence for long moments, the *Light of Dawn* turning in a slow arc to line up with the docking station. When she glances back at Shihaya, she's still staring at the city below, dress washed in red light. She seems - Kayla's not sure, exactly, because sometimes Shihaya's face is so expressive and sometimes it's just not, and this is one of these times - but if she had to guess, she'd guess *sad*.

She swallows. She and Shihaya are in this together, now - surely there's no harm in asking. "Are you ... okay?" she asks, her voice coming out so quiet she can barely hear it over the thrum of her own heartbeat.

Shihaya blinks, turning toward her, and for just a moment Kayla's not sure what to make of her expression. And then she smiles, and it's not at all like her smiles earlier; it's small, and sad. "The last time I was in Waystone City," she says, "I buried my brother."

"Oh," Kayla says, the exclamation almost shocked out of her. She has a sister back home; she can't imagine what it would be like to lose her.

"It's okay," Shihaya says, her voice still quiet and steady. Kayla can only imagine how many layers of iron control lie hidden underneath. "It was a long time ago. I just haven't been back since then."

"I'm sorry," Kayla says, and it sounds inane, but she's not very good at expressing herself sometimes, and she doesn't know what else to say. "If there's anything I can do--"

"I'll be okay," Shihaya says, and turns back to the city below them. While they've been talking, the sun has lowered further still; as Kayla watches, the last sliver of light shimmers below the horizon. Without the sun, the city streets are much darker; from this high, the street lamps and lights from windows seem dim, tiny points of light nearly swallowed by the darkness that surrounds them. "But I would prefer not to be alone."

"Okay," Kayla says, and takes a half step down the rail; in response, Shihaya shifts in a rustle of fabric until they're shoulder to shoulder, arm to arm.

"Thank you," she says, and they stand and watch the city drift by together.

Waystone City in daylight is *busy*. Aside from the thrum of machinery, the lift down from the spire they've docked at is quiet; by contrast, when they finally step out onto the street Kayla feels

almost *assaulted* by noise.

The streets are full, people and hawkstriders and carts mingling all together in no discernable order - although they all seem to be in a terrible hurry. And everyone seems to be shouting; about how fast other people are going, about various sellers and markets they should visit - Kayla doesn't know what to listen to or where to turn.

Shihaya gets two steps ahead before she turns around. Amongst the chaos around them, it's as though a sphere of calm exists around her - as usual, she looks to the inch the perfect lady, not a hair out of place and unlike last night, completely unruffled.

"Ah," she says immediately, coming over to her. "It's very loud, isn't it?"

"Sorry," Kayla says, face heating, but Shihaya is already waving a hand.

"No, no need to apologise, I should have thought," she says, and reaches out, taking Kayla's hand. "Can you manage for just a little bit?"

Kayla takes a deep breath. Shihaya's hand is warm under hers, and she won't be alone in the crowd; Shihaya will be with her.

"Yes," she says, and Shihaya smiles one of her bright smiles and tows her into the street.

She's no stranger to a city; she studied, after all, at the University. But that was a city founded around learning, and this is ... overwhelming. She focuses on Shihaya in front of her and holds on.

After a few turns (and one near-miss with a hawkstrider pulling a cart of cabbages; Shihaya might *look* delicate, but she's made of iron when she wants to move in a hurry), Shihaya guides her off the street and up a step onto a raised wooden platform.

"Here we are," she says, and gives Kayla's fingers a squeeze.

After a minute, a yellow hawkstrider pulling a hansom cab dashes up to the platform. "You ladies in need of a ride?" the driver asks, tipping his hat. "Edge of the Yellow Cab Company at your service."

"Yes, thank you," Shihaya says, and steps into the cab without letting go of Kayla's hand.

Kayla steadies herself on the edge of the cab and steps in after her, and they settle on the seat with their clasped hand between them.

"The Academy first," Shihaya says. "We'll retain your services for much of the day, if you are agreeable?"

"Anything for ladies such as yourself!" Edge says, and clucks the hawkstrider into motion.

It's a relief not to be directly in the streets. Kayla lets out a deep breath, relaxing into the seat.

"Thank you," she says, and Shihaya squeezes her hand, smiling.

"I forgot how overpowering it can be, on your first time," she says. "It's like the chaos in the heat of battle; to the untrained it seems disordered and random. But as you learn, you can discern patterns of movement and intention; and then instead of chaos everything falls into its place."

"I must confess," Kayla says, "I have no wish to learn more about the streets of Waystone City--" and breaks off as Shihaya giggles.

"You find it terrible, don't you," Shihaya says, and Kayla can't help but smile back, drawn in.

"It's not completely terrible," she says, and tightens her fingers.

Shihaya takes a breath - and then the hansom cab slows, and Edge taps on the roof. "Ladies, the Academy."

Shihaya glances around, and Kayla feels all of a sudden like a pressure has lifted from her shoulders. She looks around herself; the hawkstrider is pulling them into a small courtyard, and the sign above the wood and wrought iron door is painted with two crossed arrows.

"Is this where you studied?" Kayla asks.

Shihaya smiles. "Not in Waystone City," she says. "The Academy has many faces. But I did study with them for a time."

The cab pulls up against a low platform, and they alight. Shihaya gives her fingers one last squeeze before she pulls away, rummaging in her purse and passing a coin or two to Edge. Kayla flexes her hand and tries not to think about how Shihaya's skin felt.

"Thank you," Shihaya says. "We will return shortly."

Edge tips his hat, tucking the coins away, and they turn toward the Academy. There's a short flight of stairs from the platform to the door, and there's no hesitation as Shihaya reaches out, curls her fingers around the handle, and pulls the door open.

The entrance hall is small - a counter across the back, doors on either side and behind the counter, and a few bows and sets of arrows displayed on the walls to each side. There's only one man behind the counter, short fuzz of hair on his head and a close-cropped beard to match. There are several arrows in various stages of completion strewn across the countertop in front of him, and a pile of feathers at his elbow. There's a faint hum of magic about him: nothing to indicate he's skilled himself, but if she had to guess, she'd say one or two tattoos, and those likely to be protection.

"Welcome to the Academy!" he booms, and then glances up and fumbles the arrow he's holding. "*Shihaya*?"

"Good morning to you too," Shihaya says, and sketches a shallow bow. "Are you well?"

"Yes, yes, of course I am," the man says, and carefully sets the arrow to one side. "I just wasn't expecting to see *you*. Last I heard you were gallivanting across the Empire with that... *man*." He makes a face, like saying Romeo's *name* is too distasteful. "If I didn't know better I'd have said you were ensorcelled."

Shihaya waves a hand. "It's over," she says, "and I'm here to collect my bow."

The man snorts. "Of course you are," he says. "Well, come on then."

Shihaya glances back at Kayla, gestures for her to follow, and heads for the counter.

The man lifts a section of the counter for them to pass, bellows "*Gi!* Watch the front!" in one direction, and then leads them in the other.

"Weren't sure we'd be seeing you again," he says conversationally as they walk down the corridor.

Shihaya snorts in a very unladylike fashion. "You know better," she says, and the man nods.

"*I* do," he says. "Couple of the other lads wanted your bow for themselves."

Shihaya laughs. "And how did they find her?"

The man stops at a door, pausing as he turns back. The smile on his face is wolfish. "She wasn't to their liking."

He pushes the door open and steps away from the doorframe. "I've kept her oiled and in good condition for you. Use her well."

Shihaya steps through the doorway, and Kayla follows her. There's a hum of magic from in here too, much stronger than from the man, and she lets her eyes follow the pull to the centre.

There's a stand: simple, wooden, unadorned. On it rests a bow, unstrung. Kayla doesn't know much about bows, beyond the basics; it's a recurve, carved out of something pale she can't identify, with a simple worn leather grip.

Shihaya makes a deep bow, hair falling about her face, stays there for one beat, two, before rising. "Starseeker," she breathes, "I have returned. Will you consent for me to bear you one

more time?"

There's a swirl of magic, a rising chorus of voices, pealing in harmony, and Kayla freezes in shock, pressure suddenly rising about her - and then with a shimmer of light over the bow, it's gone, back to that hum.

"You have my gratitude," Shihaya says, and using both hands, gently lifts the bow from the stand.

After that first abrupt wave of magic, Kayla is braced for more, something, anything - so it's almost a disappointment when nothing else happens. Shihaya turns to her with the bow held casually in one hand and a breathtaking smile on her face.

"I have all I need," she says. "Shall we go?"

Kayla blinks, glancing over Shihaya's clothing. She's seen archers before - most of them with arm guards and gloves, and all of them with *arrows*. "Don't you need--" she starts, and somehow, Shihaya's smile widens.

"No," she says, and then leans in a little, dropping her voice. "You'll see."



SHIHAYA

Level 11 Hume Archer

Age: 20

Birthplace: Empire City

Bloodtype: B

Passive Ability: Eagle Eye

Shihaya increases your party's %hit for melee and ranged attacks.

Limit Break: Hail of Arrows

Shihaya uses her incredible speed to rain arrows down on her foes.

Edge is waiting for them at the platform when they come down the stairs, and he hastens to his station as they step into the cab, taking their seats, Shihaya with Starseeker tucked securely into one arm.

"Where to next, ladies?" he asks.

Shihaya glances at Kayla, and she takes a deep breath, curling her fingers around the edge of her knee. "The University compound," she says.

There's a jolt as they start moving, and then the hawkstrider turns around the courtyard and out the gate and they're back into the noise of the streets. Kayla sinks back into the seat, closing her eyes, and when cool fingers touch the back of her hand, slide to interlock with hers, she tips her head back and breathes.

She feels the University compound before they get there.

The city has an underlying resonance, of course; that many lives, interwoven and sunk deep into the land for years - that leaves a mark all by itself. Then there's the magic they carry, all the tattoos and charms of protection, of luck, of fortune. It runs under everything, a resonance she can *feel*, like a buzz deep under her skin, running over her bones.

The University compound changes that.

It's subtle, at first, but stronger as they get closer; a single clear note emerging from the underlying hum. As they turn into the final street, other notes join in; first the third, then the fifth, then more, echoes upon echoes that ring and ring, all the way through her.

"Kayla," Shihaya says, and there's worry in her voice, fingers tight against her knee. "Kayla, we're here."

"I know," she says, takes a deep breath, and hauls her senses into order. It's nothing like the University proper, back home; this is far stronger, and she doesn't know why a single compound, an outpost of the whole, would have such complex harmony. She could stay there forever, until her whole body sung in tune with the harmony and she became a part of it - but she doesn't have that luxury. *She's* in control of her magic, not the other way around, and she has promises to keep.

She opens her eyes.

Shihaya's hovering in her vision, worry creasing her brow. "Kayla," she says, relief in her tone.

"I'm okay," Kayla says, although that's not quite true; she still feels shaky, a bit out of control. Her fingers tighten against Shihaya's as she stands and steps out of the cab onto the platform. The University compound is unassuming from the outside; simple stairs to the door and a roughly lettered plaque hanging above.

Shihaya hands Edge another coin and hastens after her, Starseeker tucked in close.

"What kind of mage focus will you get?" she asks. "There are a fair number, are there not?"

Kayla nods. "There are," she says, and bites her lip, looking sideways at Shihaya. "I can't tell you any more. I'm sorry."

Shihaya nods soberly. "I understand," she says, and smiles. "I will wait wherever is appropriate, until you return."

Kayla pulls the door open and steps through. Inside, the hum drops in volume, fading from the bright chorus outside into a barely-there whisper that dances around her, soft and caressing.

Against the quiet background, the notes of individuals stood out. "Sister," a man says from the side, and she turns her head, unsurprised; she had felt him approach.

"Brother," she says, and they bow to each other.

"Please, wait here," the man says, bowing slightly shallower to Shihaya. She returns it precisely to the same degree, smiles at Kayla, and strolls casually over to a chair near the wall.

The man leads her through a door and into the compound. "Will you be wanting the Artist?" he asks, and she nods.

After two more simple corridors, he gestures to a door, bows, and leaves her.

She reaches out, places a hand on the latch, and pushes the door open.

The rush of voices is nearly overwhelming: the singing chorus she'd felt outside, but much purer.

"Kayla," a woman's voice whispers, "come inside."

She takes a step forward, drawn in, and the door whispers closed behind her.

"What do you have?" the woman whispers, and she feels a pull, words nearly dragged out of her.

"Fire," she says, the chorus reacting and changing as she speaks. "Lightning. Ice. Wind."

There's a hum from the chorus, and the chord changes. "What do you need?" the woman whispers, words echoing across the music.

"Water. Earth," she says, and her words are echoing now too. "Gravity. Dark."

The chorus softens. "Why?" the woman whispers.

Hanging suspended in the midst of harmony, she struggles to find words. But she's doing this for a reason, after all. Because she promised. Because she can. Because of Shihaya's smile.

"Because there is a need."

The woman hums, for a moment in tune with the harmony. "You wish for a storm," she whispers finally. "But can you control it?"

The chorus rises, sharp, and then magic swirls tight around her, jagged lances like needles against her back. She breathes with it, lets the pain move through her, and twists her energy up a semitone into harmony with the chorus.

"You have learned well," the woman whispers, and the harmonies start to ebb. "Now *focus*."

She might have screamed; she's not sure, because pain *rips* through her as the harmonies shatter and the chorus shrieks into discord. It feels like her mind has shattered along with the harmony, like she has scattered to the four winds and will never be whole. *Focus*.

Focus is hard, but she can breathe: in sobbing gasps, at first, but soon she's breathing in a rhythm. Gradually her senses come back under her control, tinged with the elements she knows, and the elements she's learned. Water is cool, refreshing; earth is warm, and tastes of life. Gravity is strong, a constant pull against her; and dark is a smear of darkness against the others, a void defined by its lack.

"Carry it well," the woman whispers. "Storm Warning."

The magic starts to fade; the chorus subsides, harmonies blending together until the last, a single long note that softens into a gentle hum.

She opens her eyes; she's standing in a bare room, alone.

"Thank you," she says, and makes a deep bow. Her back pulls a little uncomfortably, but it's nothing she can't handle.

She turns, opens the door, and steps out into the corridor. The man from earlier is waiting for her; he hands her a new necklace and starts walking back the way they'd come. She gives it a cursory glance - beaded chain, centre gem, doesn't clash hideously with anything she's already wearing - and slings it over her head to join the rest.

She has the power, now; all she needs is the control and focus to *use* it.

Shihaya's looking in her direction already as she rounds the last corner.

"Get what you needed?" she asks, giving her a quick once-over, her eyes lingering on the new necklace.

"Yes," Kayla says, "I did."

Shihaya stands gracefully, giving Starseeker a little twirl before tucking it away under her arm. "Shall we return to the *Light of Dawn*?" she asks. "Or do you need anything else?"

Kayla thinks about the crush of streets outside, the throbbing in her back, and the quiet peace of the airship. "I don't need anything else that badly!" she says, and Shihaya laughs.

"Very well," she says, and they go out the door.

DISC TWO

"Get *down*!" Shihaya shrieks, and Kayla drops flat just in time; a gout of flame streaks through the space she'd just been occupying, rush of heat over her back.

She rolls over, takes a breath, and throws ice as a distraction, pushing back up to her feet. She takes a deep breath in to focus, blows it out to centre, then flings up her hand and *calls*; a moment later lightning crackles down out of the sky and *slams* into the thing. It lifts its head and bellows, scraping its front legs against the ground as though about to charge. It looks more annoyed than hurt.

She pushes her hands forward, stretches her mind out underneath the creature, and thinks: *focus*. She closes her eyes; in the distance, the creature starts to charge, shaking the ground with every step; she hears Shihaya, screaming her name; and she thinks: *gravity*.

The creature's front legs collapse first, knees buckling as the force of her magic takes effect. Then its body slams into the ground as it starts to slide, force of its charge too strong to stop it completely. She calls wind, a familiar element, and leaps into the air, letting the currents sail her clean over the creature to land gently on the ground.

The creature has four legs and two arms, and seems to be some kind of horrible mix of machinery and creature, with a long tail and a mane of tentacles. Before they'd gotten to it, it'd razed two towns to the ground, and nearly wiped a third off the map. There had been some survivors, from the last - and they'd told them where it was headed. They just hadn't expected to come across it so *suddenly*.

Shihaya screams something inarticulate, and she whips around. The area's resonance is twisted and distorted by the creature, a horrific abomination that shouldn't ever have existed, no matter how supreme a weapon it's supposed to be, but she can feel a surge of magic from her vicinity, and then Starseeker shimmers. Wings extend from each side of the bow, arm guards appear on Shihaya's forearms, and as she takes hold of empty air in front of her a bowstring and arrow appear. She draws back, elbow straight and fletching to her cheek, holds for a moment, and looses the arrow.

There's another twist of magic, subtle, as the arrow soars through the air, and then it *slams* into one of the creature's eyes.

It bellows another roar at it staggers to its feet, turns its head, and breathes fire.

"*Shihaya!*" she screams, reaching with her hand and her magic at the same time. Shihaya's moving, dropping into a roll, but it's not going to be fast enough; Kayla's not sure what element she's called, but *something* is streaking to answer.

The flame smashes through the water and ice that appear in front of it, slowing a fraction - it's enough time for Shihaya to be a little further out of the way when the flame reaches her, although it still has enough force to singe a line up her dress.

Kayla's already in motion; she's probably stupid to get closer, but her elemental magic is mostly just making it angry. Shihaya's taken out one of its *eyes*. If she can just get close enough--

The creature rears up and *slams* its front legs back down, and Kayla can feel that twisted note,

a rumble through the ground that erupts into a localised earthquake. She reaches for earth, but not fast enough; the ground bucks under her and she's tossed into the dirt. It knocks the breath out of her for a moment, and she has to struggle to get back to her feet.

"Fine," she mutters, and takes a deep breath. This time, she calls *dark*.

The light around her dims. Off to the side, Shihaya's back on her feet too, sending arrow after arrow at the creature; Kayla reaches a hand, and the next arrow Shihaya nocks has tendrils of darkness floating off it.

She pauses for just a moment longer at the draw, holding steady, and Kayla can feel the hum from Starseeker, pulsing for just a moment - and then Shihaya looses the arrow and it streaks away. It hits the creature in the eye, the same one Shihaya wounded moments before, and there's another pulse of magic. Kayla stretches out her focus, darkness singing her own note, a counterpoint harmony, and the creature staggers.

Shihaya puts three more arrows into the creature's eye, and Kayla reaches again, this time for earth and gravity combined.

When the creature crashes to the ground again, it doesn't get up.

Kayla pulls in a shaky breath, but the second catches in her throat as she sees Shihaya sink slowly to one knee.

"Shihaya!" she calls, staggering over, and Shihaya limply waves her free hand.

"Kayla," she says, and lifts her head. She's smiling, even with scratches and dirt across her face and burns down her dress, and Kayla feels lighter all of a sudden. "We defeated the creature."

"We did," Kayla says, and clasps Shihaya's wrist to pull her to her feet. She feels jittery, anxious and with a thrum under her skin that has nothing to do with magic. "Are you injured?"

"I may have some burns," Shihaya says. "I do not have any charms of protection."

Kayla frowns. Shihaya is more than capable of taking care of herself in a physical confrontation, but against magic she was vulnerable. If her roll had been a second slower, if Kayla hadn't intercepted it with water and ice - she can't think about what might have happened, but she's definitely not going to give it a chance to happen again. "Then I will have to make you one," she says.

"There's no need--" Shihaya starts, and Kayla shakes her head, feeling brave, that thrum under her skin urging her on, and puts a hand over Shihaya's heart, the end of the charred line. Shihaya's warm under her hand, heart beating out of time, and just as fast as her own.

"There is a need," Kayla says. "I will not see you hurt, not when I can prevent it."

Shihaya takes an unsteady breath. "Kayla--" she whispers, and takes a step forward. They're very nearly chest to chest, Kayla's hand pressed between them. "Do you - are you--"

"Yes," Kayla whispers, and then Shihaya is closing the last gap between them, curling a hand around her neck and drawing her in.

Shihaya's lips are soft, gentle kisses with a little flick against her lips on each one. She sucks in an unsteady breath, tight feeling low in her stomach and that damned thrum driving her. Shihaya pulls her back in, hand like iron on the back of her neck, her lips still parted when they kiss. Her tongue grazes Shihaya's, and it's like a bolt of lightning - she makes a muffled noise, clutching against Shihaya, and Shihaya's mouth curves against her own as she does it again.

"Shi-Shihaya," Kayla says while she still has some presence of mind left, using the hand still pressed between them to lever some distance. "*Shihaya*."

"Mm?" Shihaya lifts her head lazily to look her in the eyes. Her lips are red, and Kayla jerks

her gaze back up.

"I am not," she says, taking an unsteady breath, "doing this, right next to the corpse of a creature we just stopped from slaughtering another town."

"Spoilsport," Shihaya says, pouting, and Kayla can't help the way her eyes flick down.

Shihaya's free hand slides around Kayla's neck and down her throat, stopping in the hollow of her collarbones. Kayla's next breath is unsteady, and she can feel Shihaya's fingers against her neck as she speaks. "I don't really want to just leave it here, but it's far too big to carry with us."

Shihaya shrugs a shoulder carelessly. "Burn it," she says, "I don't really care," and slides her hand down, teasing at the top of Kayla's blouse.

Kayla squeezes her eyes closed, desperately grasping for *focus*. Shihaya's heartbeat, strong against her fingers; Shihaya's hand, sliding under the line of her shirt; not relevant to what she's about to do. She reaches out blindly with a hand, in the general direction of the creature, and thinks of *fire*.

"Lovely," Shihaya murmurs a moment later, and slides her hand under the curve of Kayla's breast.

Kayla's eyes fly back open, and Shihaya deliberately stares at her, corner of her mouth turned up, as she runs her fingers across her nipple. It's more than a bolt of lightning; it's heat, gathering low in her stomach and between her legs.

"Shi-Shihaya," Kayla says, and swallows. "Airship. Please."

Shihaya sighs, carefully pulling her hand back out of Kayla's blouse. "Very well," she says. "But Kayla--"

She steps forward again, leaning in and pressing her lips to the edge of Kayla's ear. "I *will* have you," she says, and Kayla shivers all the way to her toes.

"I have no objections," she says shakily, and Shihaya's laughter rings out around them.

It's a very long walk back to the cutter.

It's not that far in terms of distance, but it *feels* long, Kayla constantly glancing at Shihaya out of the corner of her eye, catching Shihaya doing the same thing. The way they start off walking with a careful foot of distance between them, and end up brushing shoulders, and the way every time Shihaya has to sidestep an obstacle her hips sway into Kayla's - even the slide of the ruffled fabric of Shihaya's dress against her leg a torment.

It's almost a relief when they reach the cutter, still anchored where they'd left it, bobbing against their tow line. Shihaya goes up the ladder first while Kayla picks at the knot in the tow line, tugging it free. She coils it with one hand as she goes up the ladder herself, dropping the coiled rope over its pin and pulling the ladder up after her.

Shihaya is already below deck; Kayla steps through the hatch and climbs down the internal ladder into the tiny cockpit. Shihaya is over to one side, checking something on the wall; Kayla settles into the co-pilot's chair with a sigh, leather creaking underneath her. She tips her head back, closes her eyes, and lets out a breath. They did it; they defeated the monster, this 'supreme weapon', and they did it with just the two of them.

Shihaya moves away from the wall, soft clip of her footsteps and swish of her dress loud in the small room, and then there's suddenly a weight across her lap as Shihaya settles herself down, straddling her lap with her knees each side of her hips. Her eyes snap open in surprise; Shihaya looks terribly pleased with herself, smile playing at the corners of her mouth as she leans in

close.

"I know you wanted the *Light of Dawn*," Shihaya says, breath puffing over Kayla's skin as she ghosts her mouth up the line of her jaw, "but I just couldn't wait."

Kayla lifts a hand, threading her fingers into Shihaya's hair and pulling her down. "We're not outside anymore, at least," she says, "I suppose that will have to--" and then Shihaya's mouth is on hers, demanding, and she can't finish her sentence.

Shihaya doesn't wait, this time, doesn't start slow; she presses her advantage, tongue curling around Kayla's. It's hot, and wet, and she feels almost overwhelmed, the feel and taste and smell of Shihaya surrounding her.

She doesn't pay much attention to Shihaya's hands creeping up her sides, which turns out to be a mistake - while she's gasping into Shihaya's mouth, Shihaya's hands sweep up and over the edge of her blouse, dragging it down underneath her breasts.

Kayla's next breath comes in sharp, sensitive skin suddenly in much colder air. Shihaya pulls away from the kiss, glancing down at her handiwork, and strokes her hands along the curve under Kayla's breasts.

The sudden change of pace is jarring; she's thrumming under her skin, and she doesn't want *slow*. Shihaya can't wait, won't wait - well, neither will she.

"I thought you were going to *have* me," Kayla says, pulls her hand away from the back of Shihaya's neck, and puts both hands on Shihaya's knees. She holds Shihaya's gaze and deliberately slides her fingers higher, running up Shihaya's thighs and pushing up her dress.

Shihaya's next breath sings out of her. "I am," she says, and doesn't break eye contact, inhaling sharply when Kayla's hands reach the creases at the top of her thighs. "*Kayla*."

She slides her finger sideways, under a scrap of fabric and into soft curls. Shihaya's damp here already, legs quivering against her with the effort of staying still as she runs her fingers down.

Shihaya gasps, whole body shaking at the first touch, and she almost topples forward, back gracefully arching as her forehead gently smacks into Kayla's shoulder. "*Kayla*--" she says again, then her back arches more as she slides her tongue in a line down Kayla's chest, fastening her teeth on her breast.

It *is* a bolt of lightning, straight from her breast to between her legs, and her next breath comes in a strangled gasp, hand pressing a little harder than she intends into Shihaya. But that seems to be okay, if Shihaya's moan is any indication, and she does it again just to hear her make that sound - to hear her make that sound because of *her*.

Shihaya closes her teeth around her again, pulsing them in a rhythm, and slides her other hand up to do the same to her other breast, only with her fingernails. Each press sparks the growing fire between her legs, and she squirms in the chair, Shihaya's knees keeping her legs pressed firmly together.

She slides her free hand up, over the folds in Shihaya's dress, and tucks it inside her bodice; it's a tight fit, but she can just wriggle her fingers in enough to get some payback of her own. The first time she *squeezes* with one hand and *presses* with the other, Shihaya *keens*, tearing her mouth away from Kayla's breast and gasping for air, breath tingling over her sensitive skin.

Now *she* has the advantage; she does it again, and again, falling into a rhythm. Shihaya's back gradually straightens, then arches in the other direction, her hips rocking forward with each press of Kayla's hands.

Kayla leans forward as much as she can, lifting her head. "Shihaya," she says, and Shihaya's eyes crack open.

"*Kayla*--" she moans, undone, and Kayla smiles.

"Yes, you will have me," she says. "But *I* will have *you* as well," and presses in harder, twisting her other wrist. She presses in, and *in-* and then Shihaya's back arches even more, somehow, and she shudders all over, suddenly slicker against Kayla's fingers.

Kayla gentles her hands, slowing her movements, and Shihaya's breathing gradually evens out. She straightens her back, opening her eyes, a pink flush to her cheeks. "*Kayla*," she says, and her voice is low and rough, scraping down Kayla's spine.

She's suddenly breathless, and Shihaya leans forward with a creak of leather, pushing her arm away and capturing her mouth. Somewhere in the middle of a series of kisses, she wriggles back, lifting one knee out of the way and nudging Kayla's legs apart. Her hand slides down, over Kayla's bare stomach and under the waistband of her pants. When she finally brushes fingers between Kayla's legs it's like the lightning has centred itself; she throws her head back against the chair, gasping for air, as Shihaya's fingers move in tiny circles.

"*Kayla*--" Shihaya hums, and her other hand settles again on Kayla's breast, flicking her nipple back into hardness. "*Kayla*."

The thrum under her skin increases, Shihaya's fingers turning her higher and higher. It's not unlike the feeling she gets, focusing as she builds power for some or other strike: the slow gathering of something under her skin, in her centre, tingling over her skin and every now and then, jolts that leave her shaken and breathless.

"*Shi*--" she gasps, "*Shi*--" because her problem is that when she builds power, she *can't* let go - any strike, any elemental call is directed, focused - under her *control*. To do otherwise - an unfocused elemental release, in any possible direction - would be nothing but chaos, and unthinkable. But this isn't that, it *isn't*, and yet she's still holding on so tightly, riding the edge but never letting herself fall.

"*Kayla*," Shihaya hums, the sharp point of her teeth grazing her ear, scratching across her jawline, scraping against her throat. Her breath hovers, warm, over her collarbone. "*Kayla, let go*."

She tosses her head, frustration leaking in to her voice as she groans with Shihaya's next motion. She's so close, nearly there, but all of her damn control is getting in the way.

"*Kayla, look at me*--" Shihaya says, and Kayla levers her eyes open - when had they fallen closed? - and tilts her chin down, Shihaya's face coming into view. She's pink and flushed and her hair is a bit everywhere, and she's smiling like Kayla's the only thing in the world. "*Kayla*," she breathes, and it's like sunrise and the swell of magic all at once, radiant. "I have you," she says, "*I have you. Let go*--" and staring into her eyes, without any sort of conscious thought, Kayla feels herself fall.

It's absolutely overwhelming, like a much happier chaos on the streets on Waystone City only ten times stronger, a hundred times stronger. Like the feeling at the University compound, when the Artist's magic gripped her, only more sensual, more physical. Lighting shivers its way through her system, and she can hear her voice in her ears, gasping for air. She reaches out, grasping at something to hold onto, and suddenly the underlying resonance of the area is humming in her ears, point and counterpoint notes shimmering through it in reaction to her magic.

Gradually, her shivers ease, leaving her feeling wrung out but strangely enough, renewed at the same time. She becomes aware of Shihaya, holding her close and humming nonsense in her ear, rocking gently back and forth.

"Shihaya," she says, and her voice comes out a rasp, barely more than a whisper.

"Kayla," Shihaya says, voice also quiet, and draws back enough to see her face. "Are you well?"

She looks ... *open*, is her first thought, as though in this moment, she's unguarded.

Kayla swallows, trying to clear her throat. "That was--" She doesn't have the words to describe it, that feeling of falling. She doesn't even know how she'd managed it, how Shihaya had managed it. "I am well," she says instead, and lifts a hand to place it over Shihaya's heart. "I am well."

"I am glad to hear it," Shihaya says, and some kind of tension in her eases, although Kayla can't for the life of her identify what or why. She leans in closer, until Kayla's eyes cross trying to focus, until their noses touch. "I am also well, and satisfied - for now. But when we get back to the *Light of Dawn*, I wish to undress you, piece by piece, and lay you across my sheets, and--"

"*Shihaya--*" Kayla says, because Shihaya's still rocking her, knee pressed up between her legs, and she can feel the lightning stirring under her skin, eager to run her hands over Shihaya's skin unbounded by clothes, and be touched in turn. "Shihaya, I beg of you. Fly us back to the ship, and *stop talking--*" and Shihaya's laughter lights up the cockpit.

It takes her three days to make the protection talisman for Shihaya. For another brother or sister, she would get out her needles and inks and work it directly into their skin. But Shihaya is not her sister, is not privy to their secrets, so instead she must work indirectly, through a channel.

She has four strands from Shihaya's head - far more than enough for a simple talisman, but she's not going for simple. She wants something that will protect Shihaya, absolutely and completely, because anything less is too much of a risk. She picks the most elegant of her collection of jewellery, a brooch that Shihaya might conceivably wear of her own choosing.

She takes hours to design the tattoo, slight adjustments to the angle of each line until she's satisfied that the energy will flow, always flow, through and around and back out without putting too much pressure anywhere else, until there are no weak points, no places where the design could shatter and fail. She uses her finest set of needles to inscribe the design into the back of the gem, calling for earth to help smooth out the lines, remove any imperfections.

It's sometime on the second day when she's happy with the gem, and sets it aside to lay out Shihaya's strands of hair. They need equal concentrations of opposing elements, and the focus required will be like nothing she's ever done. She pulls in a breath and lets herself focus on everything and nothing, every fraction of power she allows under her precise control.

The first hair she imbues with fire and ice, and that's the easiest, both elements she learned early and used for years, second nature by now. The second she imbues with lightning and water, and that's more difficult; lightning she knows, the second element she ever mastered, but her affinity with water is very recent, and it's much slower. The third is wind and earth, and that's the same; she's confident with wind, but she's unused to the solidity of earth, and keeping an even flow takes her time.

Finally she's at the last hair, and this is the most difficult, for this is gravity and darkness, both recent elements, and also the most opposed - gravity a pull, a *weight*, and darkness the complete absence of that, of anything - a void. Getting the concentrations even requires her absolute focus, or one will overwhelm the other and she'll have to begin again.

It's well past dawn on the third day when she's satisfied. The hairs are glowing lines in front of

her, and she carefully lifts the jewel in deliberately steady hands and touches it to each in turn, the tattoo glowing stronger and brighter with each strand of power it absorbs.

She places the jewel back in the brooch, using a touch of earth to close the setting around it, careful not to disrupt the delicate balance of power swirling in it. Once it is attuned, it will be safe; for now, any disruption and she will have to begin again, all her work for nothing.

She wanders the airship in a daze, both hands in front of her cradling the brooch; Shihaya is not on the bridge, or in her rooms, or in the galley. She finally finds her at the prow, wind lifting the hair from her neck and ruffling the feathers over her shoulders.

"Shihaya," she says, and there's a resonance to her words that she doesn't intend. Shihaya stiffens, and turns slowly, expressionless.

"Kayla," she says, and then she sees the brooch cupped in her hands and her mouth forms a perfect O.

"Shihaya," she says again, and lifts her hands. "For your protection, I give this freely."

Shihaya takes a step forward, and uses both hands to lift the brooch, the smallest shake in her fingers as she does so. "I thank you," she says formally, but her voice is quiet, unsteady. She presses the brooch to her hip, where her dress gathers, and slides the pin home.

She marshals her focus, reaching out; the brooch sounds a clear note, like the peal of a bell, echoing back on itself in harmony, and Shihaya also has a resonance, the background hum lighter as it passes her. She takes the two, and weaves them together - there's a surge of magic and a flare of light from the brooch, and Shihaya inhales sharply, choking off a noise in her throat.

When it fades, Shihaya is doing more than just influencing the resonance around her; she has her own note, clear and bright like her smile, and the gem in the brooch is dark.

"It is done," she says, and then the world blurs around her as she falls into Shihaya's arms.

The protection talisman performs perfectly during its first real test. They're fighting a band of mercenaries, supposedly just lawless brigands, but their information says different. They're well-trained, and organised, and they have two users of magic in there somewhere, both tattooed for several elements each. Shihaya is in *her* element, Starseeker blazing as she takes down mercenary after mercenary while Kayla holds off the mages.

In the end, Shihaya takes a bolt of lightning head on without blinking while Kayla's tied up dealing with a blizzard *and* a firestorm, and follows it up by putting an arrow through the mage's throat. It's perfect, except for the moment of terror she'd felt at seeing the lightning arc down and knowing there was nothing she could do to prevent it hitting; knowing that if she hadn't been perfect, if there is even one tiny error, that bolt of lightning will strike down, and Shihaya will be--

And afterward, when they're tangled together in Shihaya's bed, triumphant and mused and sweaty, Kayla can't help but think that they're tangled in more than just the physical. She's given pieces of herself to Shihaya that she's never given anyone else. It should be terrifying, and it is, at those moments when they're in danger, when Shihaya's life is on the line; but for the rest of the time, she doesn't feel anxious.

She feels at peace, but it's more than that, too.

For the first time since venturing out to see the world, she feels like she's home.

DISC THREE

"To your left!" Shihaya calls, and Kayla swings around, still running, and calls fire without looking, lash of flame whipping out and searing across the two dark-clad figures attempting to flank them. They're in the thick of things now; this was supposed to be an easy quest, in and out with no-one the wiser, but here they are assaulted at every turn.

They're getting closer; every quest gets them more answers, and they're slowly putting together the pieces of what's going on. There's something happening in the Empire, some underlying scheme to topple the current structure and do ... *something*, Kayla's not yet certain. The crucial piece of information they're missing is *who*, because when they have *that* they know where to strike.

A note of magic swells ahead, and Kayla twists without thinking, wind rising around her and throwing the person backwards. A moment later Starseeker sings out beside her and the figure falls.

They crash through the final doors side by side, Shihaya with Starseeker half-drawn and ready, and Kayla with her hands up and focussed.

The priest is kneeling, head bent in prayer, as a man dressed in black lifts a sword above him in both hands--

Kayla pushes forward, wind again, and blows the man backwards into the wall.

"Are you all right?" she asks, hurrying forward, and kneels beside the priest. "Are we in time?"

He lifts his head and smiles, calm. "All things happen in their own time," he says, and lifts a hand.

His palm is empty, and then it isn't; on it lies a simple scrap of paper. But that's not the remarkable thing; the paper is inscribed with the whirling loops of a tattoo that she's not seen before, but that *feels* familiar, right down to the soft note that's singing from it.

"Do you know who's behind this?" she asks. "And what *is* that?"

The priest extends his hand towards her. "The Emperor," he says. "And his family."

"The *Emperor*?" Kayla says, and from somewhere behind her Shihaya sucks in a sharp breath. "But he's *already* Emperor. What does he gain, attacking his own kingdom?" She'd expected a power-hungry subordinate, or a non-Empire citizen, or perhaps a neighbouring kingdom; anything but the ruler himself.

"He has misused the elements," the priest says. "You cannot sow discord and expect harmony in turn."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Kayla says as Shihaya steps up to her side.

"Well," the priest says, "perhaps you can, at that. The harmony will correct itself, in time."

Shihaya reaches out and takes the paper from his hand. "And this?" she asks.

The priest's smile is gentle. "You know what it is, princess."

Kayla blinks. "Princess?" she asks, turning to look at Shihaya--

There's a burst of pain as something strikes her on the temple--

"Don't you *dare*," Shihaya says, and she sounds *furios*.

"What do you mean, 'don't you dare'?" a male voice says. "You're the one who's been working

against us all this time."

"Yes, that's exactly what I've been doing," Shihaya snaps, "you complete imbecile. You would have killed that priest for *nothing*, and then the symbol would have been lost."

"You don't have to be *cruel*, Shihaya," the voice whines. "I didn't know he had it."

"And that would have stood you in good stead when we faced Father again, wouldn't it?" Shihaya snarls. Someone heaves a deep sigh. "She's waking up," Shihaya says, suddenly not sounding angry at all, and another sunburst of pain--

When she wakes, she's alone, and her head *aches*.

Kayla opens her eyes, and the roof of the room swims into view, thick wooden beams deep in shadow. She blinks once, twice, and focuses as best she can, but the resonance of the room is low, muted; for now at least, she's alone.

She rolls over carefully, pushes herself up to hands and knees, and rests back on her heels, looking around. The priest is lying still a few feet away. His hands are crossed over his chest and he has no visible wounds, but a trail of blood is seeping from underneath. His face looks peaceful, and Kayla has to wonder whether he knew the hour of his death. *All things happen in their own time.*

The symbol is gone, as is the man she'd struck with wind.

And, of course, there's no sign of Shihaya.

She can feel her focus slipping and rigidly hauls it back into line. So Shihaya is a princess: the Emperor's daughter, even. And the man her brother, perhaps? She'd said she'd buried her brother at Waystone City, but she'd also heard the Emperor had several sons, so perhaps he was one of several.

Of course, perhaps she had not buried a brother at all. Perhaps everything she's ever said has been lies.

Focus.

So Shihaya has been working for the Emperor all along. But what is the Emperor trying to obtain?

She closes her eyes, trying to pull up the image of the tattoo in her mind's eye, but each time it dissolves into scribbles. It *felt* familiar, yes, sang a note that she has definitely heard before. If she'd had more time, or had the tattoo in front of her once again--

Regardless of the specifics, the tattoo was certainly complex and powerful. She can't imagine what he wants it for, not without knowing what it actually does, but if he's been working against the Empire all this time, if he's been - what had the priest said, *sowing discord?* - then it can't be for anything good.

And now Shihaya and her probably-brother have the tattoo, and are probably already on their way to deliver it to the Emperor. She wonders if they're on the *Light of Dawn*, if Shihaya is, even now, laughing about her with her probably-brother, or throwing her things overboard like she did Romeo's stupid doublet.

Had she ever cared? Or was that, too, a lie?

Focus.

She spends a moment clearing her mind. Most strong emotions are disruptive, discordant; they blocked harmony and dulled resonance, and now more than ever, she has to rely on herself and her abilities. She has no-one left to turn to.

She breathes in, holds for a moment, and breathes out, sending her emotions with it. She has control, and focus, and power; and she has all those because there was a need. That hasn't changed just because she's alone; the Artist wove her a new tattoo for her additional power, and she has a responsibility to--

She blinks, and then sags down, concentrating. She can't see her own back, of course, but she's intimately familiar with the shape her own power takes, and the lines and whorls that generate it.

She calls fire to the end of her finger, sinks into her own mind, and starts tracing lines.

When she's finished tracing the last loop, the smell of burnt wood in her nose, she opens her eyes.

The tattoo burned into the floorboards isn't a perfect reproduction of the one on the paper (the one Shihaya took), but it's definitely pretty close.

She'd wished for a storm, and the Artist had given her Storm Warning. Had Shihaya known? Had Shihaya known that the symbol she was searching for, the symbol that her father wanted, was nearly the same one that Kayla had been wearing all this time?

She doesn't know what kind of storm the Emperor wishes to obtain, but if he is after discord then she can't let him continue to twist the elements out of harmony, and she definitely can't let him apply and attune the tattoo.

She smears the tattoo into illegibility and pushes to her feet, rubbing at her temple. She will see if the cutter is still where they'd left it, however long ago that was, or obtain other transport if not. And then--

The capital. And the Emperor. And Shihaya.

DISC FOUR

"Hello, Kayla."

She's been counting on the Emperor, and instead, of *course*, she's gotten Shihaya. Well, she's been practicing on the way, and it's the work of moments to focus and sweep her emotions away.

"Hello," she says, and turns.

Shihaya looks just like when she'd last seen her, right down to Starseeker in a casual grip down in one hand. She's not expressionless, even if it's fairly close - if Kayla had to guess, she'd say solemn.

"Why are you here?" Shihaya asks, and Kayla has to shake her head in amazement.

"Don't pretend you don't know, princess," she says calmly, and Shihaya winces. "I'm here for the Emperor."

"I'm sorry," Shihaya says. "I can't let you through."

Kayla nods. "Very well," she says. She lifts her hands up into a guard, feeling the resonance of the room. Shihaya's note is clear from the other side of the room; there are no other hidden notes, no traps. Just her, and Shihaya standing in her way. It's more difficult to keep her control when Shihaya is right there in front of her.

Focus.

She starts with wind, a quick burst that tears across the room and dissipates across the far wall without lifting a hair on Shihaya's head.

Kayla blinks, and then her eye is drawn to Shihaya's hip and the gleam of the protection talisman, and her heart sinks. Of course she's wearing it. She must have known that she was

coming, and Shihaya is anything but stupid. She wouldn't come to fight a mage without some form of protection from magic.

She feels the swell in magic a split second before Shihaya moves, Starseeker coming up fast, and she dives to the side, an arrow slamming into the floor a moment later.

"Why are you fighting?" Shihaya asks, another arrow half-drawn as Kayla rolls up to her feet. "The priest's scroll was most enlightening. Father is having the symbol inscribed now."

She goes for fire next; she can't affect Shihaya directly, but surely she can do so indirectly. When she calls, fire answers, leaping from her hands and towards Shihaya. The wave parts around her as the protection absorbs it, but it does sear into the floorboards, and Shihaya takes a quick half step to the side to clear the affected area, bringing Starseeker up.

Kayla's a little slow in dodging this time; Shihaya is *fast*. The arrow tears across the top of her arm, just under the sleeve of her blouse. Pain blooms in her upper arm as slick blood runs down her skin; she counters by bring her other hand up and calling earth, lifting the floorboards underneath her and throwing Shihaya backwards.

Shihaya makes a pained noise as she hits the floor, somewhat awkwardly, but she's back on her feet with Starseeker out moments later.

"What happened to you?" Shihaya says, carefully circling around. "You're not normally this silent."

"Emotions are discordant," Kayla says, and starts gathering magic. "I should have realised it would turn out like this."

Shihaya winces again. "I'm sorry that it came to this," she says.

"So am I," Kayla says, and lashes out, this time with earth and gravity. The combination is much stronger than her first blow, and Shihaya is thrown clear across the room to slam into the wall.

"Stand aside," she says. "I do not want to hurt you, but I must stop the Emperor."

Shihaya peels herself up off the wall, raising Starseeker. "I do not wish to hurt you," she says. "But I will if you continue."

Kayla lets her magic build, unmoving, then pushes forward, again with earth and gravity, but Shihaya's faster - she still goes sailing across the room, but Kayla's too close to get out of the way, and another arrow tears past, her other arm this time. The force of the arrow spins her half around, and it *hurts*, trickle of blood slowly running down past her elbow.

Shihaya's aim is perfect. So why is she only grazing her? Why isn't she shooting to kill, or at least injure?

Shihaya's note chimes, moving fast, and Kayla turns but she's not fast enough - Shihaya is *right there* in her face, and then a leg snakes in between hers and she *shoves*, and Kayla hits the ground, wind knocked out of her for a moment. Shihaya follows her down, pressed together like a mockery of what they used to mean to each other.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, and whips Starseeker around in a pale blur to slam into her temple.

It's not enough to knock her out this time, but it is enough to stun, and for long moments, as Shihaya presses a kiss to her forehead and stands, it's all she can do to lie there and breathe.

Shihaya's back down a moment later, and when she slides something cold and sharp up her neck Kayla's certain this is the moment where everything ends. But she doesn't cut in; she hooks the blade underneath the chains of her necklaces instead, snapping it out. Beads scatter across the floor in a waterfall of tiny clicks, and Shihaya stands again, footsteps moving away.

"I have disarmed her," she says. "Bring her."

Kayla lets herself remain limp as hands snake under her shoulders and knees and she's awkwardly lifted. It's ungainly, and she has to fight to remain limp and not shift her weight to assist.

She's eventually deposited none-too-gently on another cold floor and breathes in, assessing the room. The resonance is - wrong, somehow; Shihaya's note is clean, and there are several other clean hums or notes near her, but there's one other note in front of her, a discordant wail that casts the resonance into disharmony.

Has she finally reached the Emperor?

"I see you, little mage," a low voice says, and even his voice sounds wrong, harsh and flat. "You are not fooling anyone."

She uncurls from where she'd been dropped, pushing herself to her feet. Her arms are throbbing, and the lines of blood feel tacky on her skin.

She lifts her chin, and there before her is the Emperor. For someone so discordant, he's very unassuming, short hair, no shirt, and there in dark lines on his stomach the tattoo from the priest's paper.

It looks ... wrong, somehow, *different*, and she tries to trace as many lines as possible as quickly as she can, trying to work out what's changed.

"Little mage," the Emperor says, interrupting her concentration. "Why are you here?"

"You sow discord and attack your own people," Kayla says. "And for what, a new tattoo?"

"This?" the Emperor asks, touching his fingertips to the edge of the design. The skin framing the lines is still red, as though he'd just stepped out as they were applying it. "This is but a means to an end, little mage. I'd thought my daughter would have taught you that."

Kayla flinches, the Emperor's words hitting a little closer to home than she's comfortable with. *Does Shihaya consider her only a means to an end?* She steadies her breathing; now is not the time to think on it. The Emperor is here, and she needs to stop him.

"Do you think you can still defeat me?" the Emperor asks. "You have just fought my daughter, and she was victorious; how do you expect to defeat me?"

Kayla clenches her fists, and slowly pools her magic. "The same way I would any opponent," she says, and throws fire.

The Emperor drowns it in water without moving and counters with ice, hail flying down towards her. She blocks with fire and sends forward a great gout of flame in the same motion, and this time the Emperor does move, taking two steps to the side and guiding the flame past himself.

She frowns, focusing, and strikes again - this time fire and earth from below, and lightning from above.

The crash of the lighting echoes across the room as the ground shakes, swirl of fire blocking her view of the Emperor. A discordant wail cuts across the resonance of the room, and then the Emperor strides through the flames, tattoo on his stomach with just the hint of a glow.

"You cannot touch me, little mage," the Emperor says. "Every time you attack, I grow stronger."

The glow of his tattoo deepens, and Kayla takes a step back almost involuntarily as another discord cuts through the background harmony.

"You have yet to touch *me*," Kayla says, regaining her ground. "What makes you think you can?"

The Emperor smiles. "I do not have to touch you," he says. "The Storm will do everything for

me."

The discord strengthens again, a second hum that clashes with the first, a creeping disharmony that builds and swells. It shivers over Kayla's skin like a series of unpleasant needles, and she shudders.

So the Emperor has wished for a Storm of discord? Well, Kayla has been marked with Storm Warning.

She takes a breath, centres herself, and *focuses*.

It's a slow build, and the strength of the Emperor's disharmony is jarring, painful. His storm grows, spilling over into the physical world, a dark swirl around him starting to fade into being.

She throws her caution to the wind; she *cannot* let him summon his storm. She pours everything she has through her tattoo, lines on her back flashing to life, and a harmonious wind starts to rise around her, catching at the corners of her clothing.

"Wind will not help you, little mage," the Emperor says. "This is but the first; the next storm will be a hundredfold larger--"

"No," Kayla says, cutting him off. She's calm, and focused, standing in the eye of her storm. There's wind around her, true, but the other elements are there too, straining against her control. If he can't feel them, all the better. "Harmony will always correct itself," she says, lifts her hands, and lets everything go.

Everything happens at once; the Emperor's tattoo flares with an ugly light, a scream of discord. The dark energy swirling around him reaches out tendrils towards her; and a gleaming arrow whistles over her shoulder and buries itself right in the centre of the Emperor's tattoo.

There's a beat as the dark energy freezes; then everything collapses in and her storm *thunders* down.

It's a rising chorus all around her, a hundred voices singing in harmony over and around her, a mix of all of the elements. It's the crash of lightning and the roar of flame; the clatter of hail and the hiss of rain, and underpinning everything, the deep hum of gravity.

The storm spirals away from her, and she breathes it in, lets the harmonies wash away the discord.

"Kayla!" Shihaya screams in her ear, and she startles, opening her eyes; with the chorus of the storm singing in her ears she hadn't heard or felt her approach. "Kayla, enough! It's over!"

It would be so easy to give over everything. In the centre of the storm, nothing matters, not even herself; she's nothing but a note in a chorus of harmony.

"*Kayla!*" Shihaya says, urgent, and her hands close over her arms, shaking. "Kayla, snap out of it, *please!*"

"You left," Kayla says, prying her eyes open again; for once Shihaya is an open book, emotions chasing themselves around her face for all to see. "Why should I care?"

"I was a reason once," Shihaya says. "Is that still enough?"

It's enough for her control to slip, the storm slowing just a fraction. "You were a reason once," Kayla whispers. "And then you betrayed me."

Shihaya looks down. It's the first time Kayla's seen her uncertain. "I knew Father would not rest until he had attained the Storm," she says. "I also knew that he would want to use it, immediately, and the best chance for both of us to be there without exhausting ourselves fighting through his army would be for him to think me on his side, and you unable to harm him. When I saw my brother already there - I was taken by surprise."

"So you knocked me out and *left* me?" Kayla asks, sharp, and the wind howls along with her.

"You could not have *told* me your plan?" She turns her head away. "I would be a fool to believe you again. How am I to know what is true?"

"*Please, Kayla, rein in the storm--*" Shihaya says urgently. "We can talk all you wish afterward, but right now you need to *focus--*"

The chorus of the storm is strong around her, and she reaches out - *You wish for a storm*, the Artist whispers in her mind, *but can you control it?* - and grasps the edges, channelling the swell of magic back through her tattoo. The storm weakens, funnelling itself back into her, and she's shaking by the end, Shihaya's grip on her arms the only thing keeping her grounded.

"Are you satisfied?" Kayla asks, opening her eyes.

The room around her is absolutely wrecked. The windows are blown out, floor boards ripped up and stones in the walls cracked and scorched. Whatever furnishings used to be in here are long gone, reduced to splinters and kindling. On the other side of the room, the Emperor lies still, Shihaya's arrow still buried in the centre of his discordant tattoo.

Shihaya is looking at the destruction around them with a tiny smile on her face. "Yes," says, "I am."

Kayla flexes her arms under Shihaya's fingers, and her attention snaps right back to her instantly.

"Shihaya," she says. "Who *are* you?"

Shihaya nods. "I am the only daughter of the late Emperor," she says, "and I couldn't stand his discord. He was harming the Empire, and I made a vow that I would stop him."

"You couldn't stand his discord?" Kayla asks. "You can feel harmony?"

Shihaya's eyes cut to the side, and the corner of her mouth turns up. "Yes," she says, and then looks her straight in the eye. "And from the first, your harmony has been so clear, so bright - I wrapped my notes around yours and sang counterpoint to your melody from the very beginning." No wonder they'd fallen in together so fast, with Shihaya deliberately singing in tune with her; no wonder she'd felt so bereft when she'd left.

"And what will you do now?" Kayla asks. The energy she'd gathered for the storm is draining away; she sways on her feet, Shihaya bracing her. She's so tired; she just wants to be able to trust again, wants to be able to close her eyes and know that Shihaya will still be there when she wakes.

"Decide whether I want the throne," Shihaya says. "None of my brothers will oppose me if I want it, after tonight."

"Do you?" Kayla asks.

Shihaya sighs. "I can't deny it has its attractions," she says. "But I've never enjoyed being in a cage."

She holds out a hand in the small space between them, palm up and open. "Kayla," she says, "will you fly with me?"

"If you ever," Kayla says, "do *anything* like that again--" and the corner of Shihaya's mouth turns up, probably reading the answer out of the resonance of the room already, before she can even voice it. Because she'd been happy like she's never been before, flying with Shihaya in the *Light of Dawn*, and she wants nothing more than to return to that time, just the two of them.

"Goddess help me," she says, "I will fly with you," and Shihaya breaks out into a radiant smile, harmony rising around them in a chorus.

"Welcome home," she says.

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Anne Skye

by Lady Memphremagog

Looking back, my biggest mistake--if mistake it could be called--had been taking the veil with me. Had I not brought along that scrap of fabric, I would have had nothing to link me to the scandalous affair at Rosewood Hall.

Other than my own regrets, of course.

I had meant to leave the veil in my room, folded up nicely on top of the white, silk gown I had been wearing the previous day. I had *meant* to make a clean break, with nothing but my pride.

It had come down to my pride or my name and I could more easily relinquish the latter. After all, I had been ready to give that up as well and take the name of the man--

But there was no use dwelling in the past. I doffed my name with my expensive gown and ran away with nothing but half a year's wages and the plain stuff clothes on my back (and a torn and tattered veil I could never use again). I could not stay.

The issue, I discovered, with running away from something, rather than running to somewhere, is that one quickly loses one's sense of direction. I ascended the first coach to pull into the yard, which happened to be traveling to points North. I spent much of the trip crying into my cloak, I am ashamed to admit, and so missed any indication of where I was actually going. I dismounted at a small town in --shire, for no better reason than that I could not stand spending another hour in the coach, alone with my thought and my regrets. I had tried telling myself to stop being silly, to take hold of my grief and be grateful that I had found out in time, yet my self seemed unwilling to listen. I was still pining.

Those were hard days; I had little enough to live on, unless sorrow was considered food, then I had a feast for a Queen. I lived mostly on the kindness of strangers and the grace of God.

It was through the combination of those two that my life finally began to improve. The embodiment of my salvation was named St. George Waterson and he was the clergyman of the local parish.

I still had money, though not much, when I first came to his door. I hammered on it for a full minute before it swung open and I was invited in. I had expected the parson to be an older man, perhaps greying and slightly stooped (for that was how I remembered most parsons looking). St. George was none of those things. Tall, broad-shouldered, with golden hair and a face that looked as though it had been carved by Michaelangelo from marble, I felt even smaller and mousier than ever. Drab little sparrow that I was, I faded into the background in the face of such obvious splendor.

My discomfort was humiliatingly evident in my address.

"Give me work," I begged him, "so that I might live and provide for myself." I was not afraid of hard work, but of wasting away.

He stared at me, before I realized that I was, perhaps, getting ahead of myself. "My name is Anna Smith," I said, a necessary lie, for I had left my true name behind when I left Rosewood Hall, "and I wish for work."

His face remained stern. "What sort of work?" he asked.

"Whatever you would have me do," I answered. "I am not afraid of long hours or labor. I was

trained as an instructress in a girl's boarding school."

He nodded and smiled. His smile was indescribable: bright like the light of the sun, but still strangely unfriendly. He was smiling because of me, yet not at me. "God works in mysterious ways," he observed, stepping aside to make room for me to enter his house. "I had been thinking that the children of this town were in dire need of education; nothing like the drawing or music you would have taught to your pupils, but simple reading and writing. I am equipped to teach the boys, but the girls...what was I to do about the girls?" He was striding through his home and, despite being inside of a small vicarage, I found myself nearly running to keep up. "And just as I had decided the problem was intractable, God hands me the gift of a schoolmistress on my front door, telling me she is in dire need of work."

He turned to face me. "I would like the job," I said bravely.

"Yes, that is the strange part," he murmured. "Why would a woman such as yourself, who could easily have become a governess for a wealthy family--do not protest, Miss Smith, your demeanor speaks for you--choose to come here and ask me for an occupation without even knowing I wanted a teacher?"

"As you said, God works in mysterious ways."

He fixed me with eyes so blue, they glittered like the cold waters of a lake on a summer day. "Is there any reason I should not hire you? Anything in your past that would preclude me from placing you in front of a classroom of young and coarse girls?"

"Nothing!" I answered, with perhaps more vehemence than I intended. He turned his head to the side and waited for me to continue. I offered as much as I dared up for judgment. "There was a...scandal involving my previous employer. It never touched me; I did nothing wrong and no shame would ever be attached to my actions--anyone involved would tell you as much. Yet I could not stay. I left because it was my duty to myself to leave such a place."

Wasn't it?

My convictions were enough for St. George and that, as they say, would be enough for me. After some basic tests of my qualifications, which were a mere formality, and one last reminder that I would be doing work far less demanding or gratifying than before, he brought me to the empty stone cottage that was both schoolhouse and teacher's apartments. In between classes, I found the time to brighten my blank domain with curtains, some wildflowers and even a painting or two. The cottage began to feel like a home.

St. George was wrong, as it happened, about the work. I found my tenure in the small parish of --shire to be one of the most gratifying experiences of my young life. The girls were young and coarse, it was true, but they were also kind and willing to be taught. And I, I felt as though I was finally able to do *something* that would manifestly make God's world better. It was not happiness, but it was close.

St. George did not see himself as my supervisor, though he would stop by often to ensure that I was doing well or to bring regards from his sisters, who kept house for him. We had supper together once a week and it was in those moments when I was sitting among a family that I felt truly at peace. I had not been made to live alone, though it seemed I was not made for companionship either.

It was on one of his occasional visits to my schoolroom that St. George noticed the veil. It had been an unwanted guest in my home for the past three months, yet I could not bring myself to sever that last link between my previous life and me.

By the time I noticed the direction his gaze had turned, it was too late. He picked it up

carefully, and despite the torn fabric and tears staining it, its richness was more than evident.

"A curious article for an unmarried schoolmistress," he observed, putting it back. I said nothing, for what could I say? "It reminds me of a story I heard a fortnight or so ago. The story was old news, for it had been over two months even then since the events had occurred, yet the actual tale was so strange, the teller could not help but share it. Shall I tell it to you?"

"As you choose," I answered with as much carelessness as I could muster.

He seemed not to notice my absence of enthusiasm. "The story begins with a young governess, much like yourself. Your names are even similar; she was called Anne Skye, I believe. She was employed by a wealthy man to teach his young ward, who was rumored to be his natural daughter, yet no one knew for sure."

I could not help myself (and I, after all, knew better) and exclaimed, "Is this the sort of speculation you should be engaging in?"

"I am merely repeating the story as it was told to me," he said coolly. "In any event, the man supposedly fell in love with the young governess, for reasons no one could fathom as she was neither beautiful nor particularly interesting--"

I bristled, but he ignored me.

"--and they were engaged to be married."

It was strange, hearing him narrate the events of my life with such little emotion. He was telling the story of my wedding day with such passionless aplomb, such...boredom even, that I wondered how I could stand to hear him. It was not as though I could not remember the events with far more clarity than St. George would ever know them.

The day had dawned cold and bright, a chill April morning with clear skies and the promise of a wide, open future. I had neither the desire to sleep, nor any reason to; I sat up by my husband-to-be's side as I had promised to do long ago, long before I had known whom he had had in mind for his bride. He had known then, of course, but he had yet to tell me of his plans. One of many things he had not told me.

The walk to the church was, I knew, ten minutes long, yet it seemed either to take a lifetime or no time at all. I arrived out of breath, with his hands clutching my own as he towed me along towards the future.

We stood before the altar, the half-familiar words of the ceremony intoned from the clergyman's lips and falling like lead on the stone floor of the church. They never quite seemed to reach my ears.

Until, that is, the traditional liturgy was rent apart by the unimaginable answer to the oft-repeated question.

"I require and charge you both (as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed), that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not lawfully be joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it; for be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow, are not joined together by God, neither is their matrimony lawful."

The pause was no longer than a breath; the clergyman had turned to continue the ceremony when a voice rang out that shattered through the fog around my brain. "This marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment."

There was silence in the church and even the poor clergyman needed a moment to recollect himself before he was capable of facing the interloper.

"What is the nature of this impediment?" he asked. I could not see the face of the man who

had halted my wedding; I was looking sideways, at the face of the man who I still believed would be my husband. He looked straight ahead and seemed more stone-like than the granite floor of the church. "Perhaps it could be gotten over, or--"

"Hardly," said the intruder with a short, barked laugh. "It is a simple impediment, yet an insuperable one. The groom, Mr. Edmund Fairview Richardson, is a woman in disguise."

I have no excuse for what happened next. I had no control over my body and I was so taut with anticipation and anxiety, I laughed.

It was my laughter, I think, that broke Edmund in the end.

"Call it off," he said to the clergyman, his quiet voice echoing down the almost empty aisle. "There will be no wedding today."

I looked at him, really looked for the first time in months: at his smooth chin that never seemed in need of a blade; at the fine bones in his hands, which were now clenched by his side; at the long-lashed, black eyes that seemed to shine with inner fire, except now were dark. He-*She* nodded once, just once, before grabbing me by the hand and dragging me down the aisle and out the church doors. We passed by the man who had ruined her secret and I looked curiously at his face. He was unfamiliar to me, which seemed entirely unfair. If I was to have my life splintered, it should be by someone I know, someone with a reason. It should not be at the hands of some stranger.

I learned his identity several hours later, after I emerged from my room, resolved to leave Rosewood forever. I had spent a few minutes trying to cry, once we returned to the hall, yet the tears would not flow. I was horribly, frustratingly calm. I changed back into my everyday clothing, careful to avoid the sight of the packed and neatly labeled trunk at the foot of my bed. Mrs. Anne Richardson would not be needing it.

There was little for me to do except walk; first out my door and finally out of the hall except, as before, there was one simple impediment.

Edmund was sitting on the floor in front of my room, one leg crossed over the other in a way that my opened eyes insisted as seeing as feminine. She sprung to her feet when I opened the door and nearly knocked me over in the process.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, which was a foolish question and one I wished I could take back the moment it slipped from my lips.

"I've been waiting to speak with you," she answered. She was in her shirtsleeves and her hair had fallen from its queue and hung loose around her face. For the first time, it dawned on me that as striking a man as Edmund had been, as a woman she was beautiful.

We stood there, face to face in the doorway leading to my room, waiting for something to happen. I stepped back first, moving aside so she could enter, before going to sit on the small ottoman in front of my dressing table. She sat on my packed trunk, facing me and looking anxiously into my eyes. I looked away. We were close enough that if we were both to stretch out our hands, our fingers would touch, yet I kept my hands close and in my lap.

"Anne," she said finally, and it terrified me how my heart still fluttered at the sound of my name from those lips. "Why won't you yell at me?"

I just stared.

"No, you wouldn't yell at me, would you? You wouldn't scream or rage or cry, that's not in your nature? You will sit here, in your tiny bedroom, and tell me in a small, calm voice that you are going to leave."

She paused. "And I will tell you yes. Yes, we are going to leave this wretched hall as soon as

we can, strike out for the Continent and I will show you Paris, just as I promised."

I opened my mouth to object when I had the startling realization that I did not know her name.

"Anne, please, say something."

"I don't know what to call you," I blurted out, which elicited a laugh from my interlocutor. I had always loved Edmund's laugh; it was rich and full and surprisingly light and hearing it again made me wish I could cry, but the tears were still firmly stoppered up.

"Edmund," she said finally. "It has been so long since anyone used my birth name, I don't think I would respond to it even if I heard it."

"What was your name?"

She smiled ruefully. "Catherine. I was born Catherine Maria Richardson. Edmund was my elder brother. When I was sixteen years old, my father shipped us both off to Madeira--Edmund to oversee his plantation and me to marry the son of his business partner. I had no interest in such a marriage and when my brother died aboard ship, I seized my chance. I disembarked as Edmund Fairview Richardson and conveyed the sad news of my younger sister's death. I was tall for my age and broad-shouldered and Ed had always been a bit undersized. His clothing fit well enough and as for the title," here she smiled, "it had always fit me better than him."

"For a time," she continued, "everything went well. But, as you see, no deception can last forever. My father's partner, Robert Carpenter, had a daughter about my age and, since his original plans for an alliance were frustrated by my untimely death, he decided that a daughter married to my father's heir was an even better choice. My objections remained unconsidered, as did my relentless protests that my father would disown me were I to marry a Carpenter. What was good enough for Catherine was nowhere near good enough for Edmund," she added, her lip curled with disdain.

"Carpenter sent the idiot girl into my bed," Edmund said after a moment's pause. "Had her sneak in after I was asleep so she could lie with me. We were both rather surprised and Berenice ran off to tell her father. Fortunately for me, we both had too much to lose if the story became public knowledge, so we agreed that no one involved would speak of the matter again. I could not bear to remain in Madeira a second longer and set off for the Continent where I led a pure and upright lifestyle with only a slight veneer of dissolution to keep anyone from looking too closely."

She smiled and, fool that I was, I smiled back at her, amused at the thought of my Edmund pretending to the role of rake. I sobered quickly, though. She was not, could never be my Edmund.

"Remember when I told you that I knew for a fact that Marie was not my daughter?" Edmund asked. "This would be why. Yet her mother had no place for a baby in the drawing rooms and dressing rooms of Paris."

"It was a good deed," I told her.

"One of my few," she said ruefully. "I treated you ill, Anne. I should have told you, should have trusted you from the first. I know that now." She stood up, only to fall to her knees before me and take my cold hands in her own. She chafed them and looked up into my face. Had I wished to, I could not have looked away.

"I thought I had heard the last of the Carpenters," Edmund said, "After we had parted ways in Madeira. It seems Jonah Carpenter, whom Catherine was meant to have married, never quite forgave me for giving up skirts and marriage to him in favor of freedom, power and my brother's inheritance. It was he you saw in the church. This is his revenge."

I was paralyzed; unsure what to do next.

"Come with me," said Edmund, raising my hands. "Anne, come away with me." She bent her head and pressed a kiss to the first knuckle on my left hand. "Stay by my side." Another kiss, this time on my right. "I will be yours and you mine." She kissed my fingertips and tugged me forward.

I could easily have resisted, yet I fell forward, into her soft arms. God, how I longed to stay nestled to her breast for all eternity, with her lips pressed to my hair and her fingers tracing strange lines along the bared skin of my neck.

"My Anne," she murmured and I pulled back to tell that I could not be her Anne, not in truth, except she pressed her lips to my own and all protestations, as well as coherent thought, slid out from my mind. Her lips were soft, like rose petals, like silk, like the puff of breath from the words "I love you." My body, poor and plain as it was, felt radiant beneath her kiss. I felt as though I could boil over from some unfamiliar feeling that was deeper than joy, deeper and lower and all I could think of was how easily I could lose myself in the wave of sweetness that was Edmund's kiss.

"My Anne," she said again, breaking the kiss and combing my hair back with her fingers. "My lovely Anne."

"I am not," I said shakily. "I am not lovely and I cannot be yours."

"Anne--"

"Edmund, please listen. I cannot stay here, not after today, not after what happened. People will--"

"I don't give a damn about people," Edmund swore and the oath sounded strange from her lips. "I care for you, Anne. I love you."

"You can't," I said, scrambling to my feet and putting the bed between us. "Edmund, I'm sorry."

"So this is what I am to content myself with?" she asked bitterly. "One stolen kiss? Anne, I would give you my heart, my soul, everything that I am."

"I'm sorry," I said again, shaking my head. It would not work. I knew it would not work. My heart was screaming in my chest that I had to try, that I could forswear my reputation and my meager place in society; none of that would matter if I could spend the rest of my life at Edmund's side. And it was true; I would give up all that for her. I would give up anything...except myself. I looked into her eyes and saw them dark like coals and shimmering with tears. I could not submit to her this last time. I could not give her my self. I would have nothing left.

"Please leave," I said, my voice shaking. The tears that would not come earlier were teetering at the edge of my eyes. "Please...Catherine..."

She closed her eyes and I watched one tear trickle down her cheek. "I will leave you for today," she said. "Take the night to reconsider. Anne, I beg you, don't leave me. You are the only sun that lights my day, my fierce little bird who can fly so far, my hope, my love, my life."

I bowed my head and said nothing. "I will see you in the morning," she said and shut the door slowly behind her.

By the time the sun rose, I was already gone.

"Well, Miss Smith," said St. George's voice quite near my ear, startling me from my reverie, "What did you think of my story?"

"Sensational," I answered, mustering some portion of my mind to respond to his questions

while the rest tried to shakily recover from the onslaught of memories I had hoped to forget. "I am sure it would make a lovely novel."

"You are not moved by the poor girl's plight? To have been deceived so cruelly by her employer--"

"You know nothing about it," I said fervently, then added, "nor do I so I would not presume to judge."

His continued silence would once have been enough to break me, but I had survived worse than being stared at by a clergyman and I owed him no answers.

"I shall be honest with you, Miss Skye," he said. "You have done well. You chose as God would have had you choose."

"I would ask you never to speak of this again," I said. "I do not know your motives, Mr. Waterson, in bringing to light details of my past that have no bearing on my present."

"I only wished you to know," he said as mildly as he was able, "that the woman who called herself Edmund Richardson is searching England for you. She has offered a substantial monetary reward for any information regarding your whereabouts. I also wish you to know that your secret is safe with me."

I thanked him for his understanding and his discretion; I could do little else. His approbation meant less than I believe he realized. 'Til this point, I had allowed myself to put the events of the spring out of my mind, yet his recounting had brought them back in full force. Time had not assuaged the guilt I felt at abandoning Edmund, nor had it extinguished my love for her. St. George's expressed faith in me and my choice had rather the opposite effect than was intended.

I found myself thinking more and more of Edmund. Was she well? Was she healing? Did she wake up in the morning and marvel at the small hole in her heart that would never close, like I did? I wished I had a source of news, a hint that Edmund was, or would be, all right. Then again, I supposed she felt the same way about me. I did not deserve any reassurance that I could not grant her as well.

I had heard that love unsated and unfed would soon die and a part of me longed for the day when my love for Edmund would finally disappear. I did not know what to do with the way my heart would still leap into my throat at the thought of her, or the way my mind would forever return to the memories of our one kiss, like a child who insists on reading her favorite book and will not brook the introduction of another.

Though I remained still, the world itself continued on its inexorable journey forward. The schools in the little village of --ton were declared an unqualified success, a fact that pleased everyone except St. George, who nonetheless received most of the approbation.

His sisters had cautioned me against approaching him in his current black mood. "He dreams of leaving England and serving God as a missionary in the colonies," they explained. "He sees this achievement as but the first step. Having started the school, he knows he can spread God's word to man, but now that the school is completed, he feels as though he must do something new." St. George was, by his own admission, a man in need of constant action. His greatest fear was stagnation.

Through no wish of my own, I found myself caught up in his quest. "Anne," he said one night, when I joined their small family circle for supper, "How would you like to learn Hindustani?"

"I had never thought about it before," I answered. "I don't believe I have an inclination towards it, no."

"Would you put aside your disinclination, though, if it would help me in my cause? I find that I have learned almost all that I can without a conversation partner."

"But why me?" I asked with obvious bewilderment. "Surely Jane or--"

"You are a trained governess and no doubt have some facility with languages yourself. I believe your last pupil was French, was she not?"

"But Hindustani?" I said, rather more querulously than I intended.

"I have no doubt you can do it," St. George said with as much authority as he could muster, which was a good deal.

And so I found myself embarking on a course of study that slowly grew to encompass the language, religion and curious habits of men who lived halfway round the world from me. St. George became an overwhelming presence in my life; he was an exacting master and, though he was quick to praise me when his standards were met, I did not meet them often. Still, he seemed satisfied with matters and I...well, every hour I spent struggling with Hindustani was another hour not spent thinking about Edmund. She lived in my thoughts more than ever these days.

Summer turned to autumn, which made its way into winter, and St. George began to make plans for spring. He was ready; more than ready, he was driven. He would go. I had been expecting that. What surprised me was when I discovered that he did not plan to go alone.

I had finished my teaching for the day and was making my way the short distance to the parsonage when I saw St. George coming down the path. We met about halfway between his home and mine.

"Come walk with me, Anne," he commanded. I, in the role of obedient companion I inevitably adopted around him, obeyed.

We walked in silence. He seemed intent on observing the day, with its light grey skies and purpling heather. I was intent on observing him, noting a tightness in the set of his jaw and a tenseness in the way he carried himself. St. George had been more preoccupied than usual over the past few weeks. Perhaps I would now learn why.

"You have been a diligent student, these past months," he observed.

I shrugged. "I have tried. And I do find myself fascinated by India. It seems such a strange and magical place."

St. George snorted. "Strange, perhaps, but no more magical than here. Such fancies reflect the unenlightened state of the population there at large." He paused. "Would you be interested in seeing India?"

I stared at him. "I had never thought about it. When would I ever see India?"

"Come now, you have an active imagination and a penchant for the fantastic. You mean to tell me you have never imagined what life might be like in the East?"

I had been too busy trying *not* to imagine what life would be like with Edmund. "I rather think it is beyond imagining. Still, were I to exercise that faculty, I imagine it would be a wonderful place."

"I can offer you a chance to see for yourself," he said and it took me a moment to realize what he was--what he had to have been saying. "You must have realized why it was so important that you be the one to help me learn Hindustani. You would make an ideal missionary's wife; you have shown yourself to be resilient, capable, unafraid of hard work and determined to do your part in educating those in need." He stopped and looked at me; as if he had said something requiring a reply.

"I...forgive me, did you just ask me to marry you?"

He smiled. "Ah, Anne, you are not sort of woman to be won through sugared words or compliments. You were not made for flattery but for honesty. I have been honest with you, Anne. You were made to be a missionary's wife, you were made for a life of hardship, and of toil, but of great reward. Rise to the challenge, Anne, and embrace the life that God has chosen for you."

What was I to say? For that matter, what could I possibly say? It was clear to me now what St. George had been doing for the past months. He had been training me, testing my mettle. And he wished to marry me and take me to India.

Marry St. George? I could barely even conceive of it. He was further from my reach than...well, the farthest shores of China. He was untouchable, an impregnable fortress. It would be like falling in love with the granite hills.

And I did not love him. It was a strange moment of clarity, looking up at a man who, in another time, would have worn nothing at all and competed in Olympic games for the glory of the gods. Instead, he went off to strange and barbaric places to fight for the glory of Christ in heaven. I could not, could never marry such a man. I could not marry where I did not love and, it must be confessed, I still loved elsewhere.

Yet was I right to dismiss St. George's proposal? There was, after all, nothing left for me in England. Perhaps I should go, forget all that had passed between Edmund and me. If I was to run away, India was certainly a good choice. I could truly leave my previous hopes and dreams behind. I could forge a new life for myself, one that was hard and filled with toil, yes, but one that would have little time for grief and lost hopes. I could *do* something worth doing in India. I could be a missionary.

The question was, could I be this missionary's wife?

As soon as I thought the question, I knew its impossibility. I could not wed St. George, not with my heart so firmly beholden to another. I could not enter into a sham of a marriage; pretend to give my heart where I felt no passion or ardor. I could esteem his greatness, appreciate his manifold worthy qualities, even adore him as the worshipper adores her saint, but I could not love him as a wife was meant to love her husband. And even if I could, I realized, I *would* not.

The vehemence of my own mind shocked me, yet the truth of my hastily-arrived-at conclusion was clear. I could go to India and it would be a good place for me, but I could never go as St. George Waterson's wife.

"You are right," I said, breaking the silence that had settled round us like the fog on the moor. "I could do much in India. Perhaps you are even right about it being my calling."

"I know I am," he interjected.

"But I cannot go as your wife. As your partner and friend and helpmate, I would go with a joyous heart, but I cannot be your wife."

He appeared incredulous. I felt a sudden, strange rush of power, one I did not care to examine too closely. "You must see, St. George, that we are all wrong for one another. We would make a terrible match."

"I see no such thing," he said stiffly.

"Do you love me?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"I admire you," he answered, "I esteem you and I am sure that, with time, we will come to love one another as much as any couple."

Could anything be drearier? "I'm sorry, St. George," I said. "I will go with you and you can admire me and esteem my work as much as you choose, for I will work hard and I will do the job

you and God have given me, but I cannot marry you."

"Anne, it is impossible that you travel with me--by my side--yet not as my wife."

"And it is more impossible that I marry you," I answered. I was aware, as was he, that there was no such thing as more impossible, yet St. George's obstinacy was frustrating. I was offering him everything he asked for; he did not want my heart.

He looked at me with a gaze meant to transfix. "Anne, you are not thinking of the woman whose company you left, I hope. For you are well aware that you must cut her from your life, forget that she has ever been."

I could just as easily carve a piece of my chest out as cut Edmund from my past. She would be a part of me until the day I died. But St. George knew nothing of love and I could not explain it to him. He simply could not comprehend a love that filled one's soul the way his duty to God filled his. And even if he could, he would consider it blasphemous.

"We will speak again later," he said and walked away. I let him go, too afraid of my own feelings to pay him much heed.

I spent a restless night in my small cabin, unable to sleep as my mind worked feverishly over my fate. I knew St. George well enough by now to recognize when he was determined. He would not rest until he had his way. Strong, implacable, it would be like trying to resist a mountain. I would give in in the end, this I knew. And he would be a faithful husband to me and do his duty in the marriage bed and I would stand by his side and try to please him and do his will and forget that it was God's will as well that I was meant to do. I would die in the uncivilized wilds of India from a broken heart and a battered soul.

Was this what God wanted of me? Was this my role in life? Was I meant to sacrifice myself on the altar of St. George's mission?

I fell asleep with my head pillowed on my arms and the few tears that succeeded in leaking from my eyes dried on my cheeks.

I wish I could recall my dreams from that night. I know they were powerful and filled with purpose, but what their content was, I still cannot say. All I know is that I awoke the next morning before dawn having made up my mind. If it was God's will that I go to India with St. George, then I would do it and with a glad heart. But I could not leave England, not without seeing Edmund one last time. I could not damn her to a lifetime of not knowing what had become of me, not knowing if I was alive or dead. I owed her that much. I would find her and take leave of her properly this time and we both would move on with our lives. If I could not leave my heart behind me in England, I would have to reclaim it before my departure.

Having made up my mind, the actual preparations seemed all too simple. I left a note pinned to my schoolroom door informing my students that I would be absent until further notice and another addressed to St. George was left under the door of the church. For the third time in my life, I left my home on the dawn coach. The first time, I had been nearly faint with excitement as I set off from the small school where I taught for my first post as governess. The second had been my nightmarish departure from Rosewood two days after my aborted wedding. This third time was somewhere in between the two. I was neither excited nor grieving, I was simply...waiting. My fate was coming to meet me and I would be ready when it did.

I exited the coach at the small inn near Rosewood, a full day after my journey's commencement, and began the familiar walk up to the house. The road was the same muddy brown as last year and the trees were still the green of new spring. Nothing had changed.

Out of habit, I hopped over the stile and made my way towards the house from the back. It

was only when I heard an incredulous voice speak my name that I realized what I had done.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Fairview, would never have run, but the pace at which she bustled to meet me was certainly speedier than a walk. She clasped my hands in her own and would not meet my eyes.

"Mrs. Fairview," I said warmly, for I remembered how well she had treated me when I had first come to Rosewood and she had been my only friend, "is something wrong? Has anything...happened?"

She laughed a silly, flustered sort of laugh and shook her hands free of mine. "Oh, Miss Skye, where to begin?" At the beginning, please, I thought but did not say. "After you left, poor Miss Richardson was quite out of her mind with grief." I winced, but tried to hide the gesture. "She was quite unwell, you have to understand."

I interrupted her. "Yes, but where is she?"

Mrs. Fairview wrung her hands. "They had discussed putting her away; they have homes where they care for people like her." Madwomen, she meant. "They said that she needed someone to look after her, someone to keep her under control. It wasn't right, what she did."

"Where is she?" I repeated, my heart beating faster with every extraneous word.

"Miss Richardson had inherited a small property from her mother when the poor woman died. Heatherdown, it's called, in the county of --."

"And she lives there now?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Fairview. "Her cousin said that she was mentally unfit to inherit her father's land and she refused to contest it. When he came with the lawyers, he offered her a choice: either she could retire quietly to Heatherdown or, if she refused to leave, he would have her put away in an asylum. For her own good."

I could not listen anymore. I thanked Mrs. Fairview for her information and turned around, back the way I had come. I did not try to see inside the house, nor was I invited to. Rosewood was my home no longer and I had no wish to trespass on the time or property of a man like Edmund's cousin, whose despicable behavior made me believe that the grounds themselves were tainted.

I had not planned to pay for more than two journeys, but the information I received from Mrs. Fairview meant that I had no choice but to press on. It had not occurred to me that Edmund's situation had been, in many ways, more precarious than my own. Her offer to run away to the Continent had been as much for her safety as for my comfort. She had remained in England to search for me.

I wished, fervently, that I had had the good sense to write her a note when I left. Or I could have sent her a letter at some point in the past year. And yet she would have come for me, as I could not help going back for her.

I had done the right thing, hadn't I?

The ride to Heatherdown was shorter than my trip to Rosewood. Nevertheless, it was early evening by the time I arrived at the nearest stop. The house was a good four miles away and, fool that I was, I could not bear the thought of spending another minute wracking my mind with worry for Edmund. Mrs. Fairview's news was like a heavy weight upon my already stooped shoulders. The road was overhung with trees and even before the sun had fully set, I found myself enveloped in darkness. As is the way of such things, a thin drizzle began to fall from the sky and, though I was mostly shielded from its effect by the trees, I arrived at Heatherdown cold, wet and over an hour later than I had planned. It had been dark out for quite some time and the

shutters on the house were drawn, giving me no idea of whether anyone was awake behind its slate grey and gloomy façade.

As the rain began in earnest, I rapped on the door. After several moments went by with no answer, I knocked again, harder this time. My efforts still produced no results and it was not until I commenced hammering on the door with my fists that I received a response.

The door swung open and Edmund was standing before me once again. She was still dressed in men's clothes and wore a shabby dressing-gown belted loosely around her waist. Her hair was tied back in a queue, yet some dark tendrils escaped and framed her face. She looked...younger than I remembered. More vulnerable. For some reason, I had always thought of Edmund as towering over me, yet she was barely three inches taller than I. I could have stared for hours, simply standing before her and taking in her presence. For all her new vulnerability, she had lost neither her composure nor her strength.

"Well?" she asked brusquely. "What do you want?"

It dawned on me that my hood had been drawn so far over my face that she could not see me. I tugged it off impatiently and stood in the doorway of Heatherdown cottage with the rain falling fast on my bared head.

Edmund took a moment, but only a moment, to recognize me. "Anne," she breathed, her eyes searching my face. I wondered what they were looking for.

"Come inside," she said, her voice strangely flat. She stepped back and I was out of the rain at last. "Give me your cloak. The servants have gone to bed, but I found that sleep eluded me. It often does, these days. I have found the midnight hour to be a surprisingly constant companion."

She led me to small, cramped library where the fire was burning low in the grate. Edmund turned to build it up, though she kept sneaking glances back at me, as if afraid I would evaporate from the chair in which I sat.

"Well," she said again, after the fire had been tended and she had drawn up a chair close to mine. She was close enough to touch, yet I felt as though I could not move. "Will you not speak?"

"I don't know what to say," I confessed. The fire flickered around the dimly lit room, casting strange shadows on unfamiliar furniture and giving Edmund, who was lit from behind, a reddish halo.

"Why are you here?"

I missed her voice, the low mellifluous sound of it as she laughed at me and teased me and told me I was beautiful. This expressionless tone was like that of a stranger. Had we become strangers to one another?

I took a deep breath and began. "I came to take my leave of you--properly, this time. We're going to--that is, I have been asked to join a...friend of mine. He will be going to India as a missionary and he asked me to come along. As his wife." It occurred to me that Edmund had set the chairs with the express purpose of seeing my face while hers remained hidden.

"So you came to say goodbye," she said coolly.

"No," I said before I even realized what I was saying. "I mean, yes, I had come for that reason. I had thought..."

"Anne," she said and the quiet calm in her voice frightened me, "why are you here?"

"For you," I said simply, before all my worries and fears and doubts could get back in the way. "I came here for you." I reached my hand out to her and she caught it lightly before leaping to her feet and pulling me with her. She wrapped her arms around me and I felt a sob building in

my throat as I buried my face in her neck and clung to her.

"Anne," she said and it was her own, dear familiar voice again. "My Anne." All I could do was nod my head in agreement.

"You're freezing," she informed me after several minutes had passed. I honestly had not noticed. "Come with me, I have a spare nightdress and dressing gown for you." She led me up to her bedroom, her slim fingers twined tightly in mine. She did not let go even to open the door; she handed me the candle and turned the knob with her now free hand instead.

The room was smaller even than my apartments had been at Rosewood, but it was serviceable and, more to the point, warm from the fire in the hearth. Edmund handed me the aforementioned articles of clothing and, after a long look, turned to leave and shut the door behind her. I undressed and donned her clothes, which were too big for me and even shabbier than those she wore, but were blessedly warm and smelled of Edmund in some indescribable fashion that made want to bury my face in their fabric. Once decent, I opened the door to let her back in.

She strode back in and held me close once again. I certainly had no objections. "Much better," she observed in my ear. "I'm no longer worried that your fingers will fall off from shivering." I smiled. "Now," she said, leading me to the bed and seating me besides her, "What's all this about running off to India with a handsome missionary?"

"I never said he was handsome," I objected.

"Yes, but I would be very disappointed in you, Anne Skye, if you had settled for a plain one." Edmund's playfulness drew me out and I found myself telling her the whole story, from my precipitous flight from Rosewood to my occupation as teacher in a small village school.

"And you truly enjoyed that?" Edmund asked and it was clear she was trying not to wrinkle her nose.

"Yes," I said, laughing. "I truly did. It was nice to have some purpose in life."

"And this is why you agreed to go with that blockhead St. George to India? So you would have a purpose?"

"He is not a blockhead." Edmund looked at me and waited. "All right, perhaps he is a bit of a blockhead," I said. "And there had to be some reason I was put on this earth, something I was meant to do. It just took me until I came here, and saw you again, and saw me through your eyes, that I realized my purpose in life was to be Anne Skye."

Edmund smiled and kissed me gently, chastely on the lips. "Well done, dearest."

I hesitated, then leant over and kissed her back. I had meant to simply return her gesture, but as I pressed my lips against hers, I felt her mouth part beneath mine and my lips opened in obedient mimicry. Her hands cradled the back of my head and loosened my hair so that it cascaded down my back. I felt her fingers comb through my tresses and moaned softly-- helplessly--at the sensation. She smiled against my lips and deepened the kiss. We sat there, arms locked around one another and mouths slowly exploring until I realized I was badly in need of air and drew back.

Edmund was grinning at me and I, feeling strangely aware of every inch of my body, smiled hesitantly back. She stood up and held out a hand. "Will you kiss me again, Anne Skye?"

I did and gladly. This time I pressed my body against Edmund's, letting her hand in the small of my back guide me until the keenest knife's blade could not have slid between us. My body felt as though it was on fire and I cried out as Edmund nipped gently at my lower lip. She kissed her way to the corner of my mouth, then along my jawbone and to the juncture between my ear and neck. When her lips pressed against that spot, I whimpered, for it was shockingly sensitive.

Edmund pulled back and smiled crookedly at me. "I think," she said, "Before we continue, there are a few things I need to know."

I was still breathless from her touch, but managed to ask "What?"

"I have been very good so far tonight," she said. "I have been patient and understanding and I have demanded nothing of you. I have been quiet and calm and kept my heart in check, though it strains to burst out from my ribs. But, Anne, I do not have the strength for you to break my heart another time. If you plan to leave tomorrow morning, tell me now so that I know better than to hope. Please, Anne, I cannot bear it!"

"Edmund," I said and she gasped as I realized this was the first time since appearing at her door that I had said her name. "I will stay for as long as you will have me."

"Then I should warn you," she murmured, "that you will be here for a very long time indeed."

I meant to answer that I was entirely amenable to that proposition, but I found myself interrupted by a yawn so large I thought my jaw must have come unhinged.

Edmund laughed at me. "I think, dearest, that it is time for you to go to bed."

I nodded and, with a rueful smile, asked if she would show me to my bedroom.

"I could awaken one of the servants and ask them to prepare the guest room for you--for we do have one spare room--but it is already past midnight and I would hate to disturb them. This bed, on the other hand, is large enough for two." I eyed her warily. "Come, Anne, what do you think I am going to do?"

"If I knew," I replied, "I would be far less worried."

"I promise," said Edmund, "I will merely sleep by your side like a faithful lapdog who has the privilege of reposing in her mistress's bed."

Edmund was as good as her word. She slid into bed by my side and we lay in the darkness facing one another with our hands intertwined and resting on the pillow beside our heads.

When I woke up, however, Edmund's back was to me and her head was resting atop my right arm, while my left arm snaked over her torso and held her close. I could see the top of her head from where I lay on the pillow and I felt warm and safe and, for a moment, hoped I would never have to move again.

Of course, that was when I began to panic. I remembered all my reasons--good reasons--for having left Edmund in the first place and that I had come here solely for the purpose of saying goodbye rather than promising to stay. I remembered the way I had kissed her and a blush of shame and want spread over my face. What was I thinking, coming back?

In my sudden fear, I had jerked my arm back and Edmund was roused by my movement. She took one look at me and sighed. "Anne," she said, sitting up in bed, "will you tell me what is the matter?"

Her voice grounded me and gave me a space in which to think clearly. I looked at her, seated patiently by my side, and contrasted that image with the Edmund who had haunted my memories. She had been driven by grief then, and, like me, by fear. She had wanted to hold on to me whatever the cost. I had run from her for fear of losing myself beneath her will. And I had run, I now knew, from St. George when he threatened to exercise his power over me as well. I could not bear to see myself lost to the vagaries of another person, no matter how much I loved them or how valid their cause.

Yet I was so tired of running. I didn't want to run anymore and, as Edmund very cautiously laid her hand on my shoulder, I realized that I didn't have to. I had come back of my own free will and I would stay, for stay I certainly would, because I wanted to. I, Anne Skye, had made

my choice.

"Thank you," I said, not in answer to her question, because it was a question that no longer needed answering. I looked up into her dark eyes and pulled her down for a kiss.

This time, when she reached the sensitive spot behind my ear, she did not pull away, but rather held me as I gasped and arched my back for contact I had not even realized I wanted.

"Patience, dearest," Edmund said and shifted so that I was lying on my back and she was stretched out on top of me, one of her legs nestled between mine. She went back to kissing my neck and slowly trailed her way down, not stopping even when she reached the neckline of the nightdress. I could feel her soft kisses through the thin fabric and my legs slid further apart beneath her.

"That's it," she murmured as she cupped my breast in her hand and lightly ran her thumb over the tip. I whimpered softly and Edmund merely smiled and lowered her head to kiss my nipple through the nightdress. I rocked my hips forward, my hands reaching up to clutch at her shoulders as the feel of her mouth on my breast made my body sing.

"I want to touch you," I said, once I could.

"You could begin by removing this shift," Edmund suggested, guiding my hands to the lacings on her nightdress. My fingers were clumsy and shaky, but with some effort on both our parts, we removed the garment in question and I found myself momentarily stunned at how lovely my Edmund was. "Now your turn," said Edmund, and I shyly allowed her to undress me as well. I wanted to curl up and hide myself from Edmund's gaze; I had never been more aware of how thin and plain and unimpressive I was, but Edmund insisted that I lie on the bed, fully exposed to her eyes.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that you are beautiful?" she asked.

"What happens if I say no?"

"Then I will have to convince you." The glint in her eye left no doubt what her idea of convincing might entail.

"Then no."

Edmund bestowed a mock glare on me and then, before I could understand what was happening, she parted my thighs and pressed her mouth to the space at their juncture. I nearly screamed and it was only her firm grip on my legs that kept me from thrashing about. The desire for contact had grown to a desperate ache and, as Edmund lavished attention on my body with her tongue, I was helpless beneath her. She was licking and teasing at one spot over and over again and I felt like a spring being wound tighter and tighter, threatening to release at any moment. She was relentless and I began to buck my hips against her mouth, begging for something I didn't understand until it was as though every inch of my body was shining like the stars and they all exploded at once in a grand display that put every firework show in the world to shame.

"Do you believe me now, Anne Skye?" she asked and it took me a long moment to understand what she meant.

"Yes," I said, for fear that I could not withstand another assault by her conviction. "Edmund, I love you."

Her face turned radiant at the sound of my words and she laid her head down in between my breasts. "I love you too, Anne. Ever since the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you would be mine."

"And did you also know that you would belong to me?"

"No," she admitted, "that part took me rather by surprise."

I reached down and, as I had seen her do, brushed my thumb along the stiff peak of her nipple. "Oh, Anne," she breathed and I did it again, watching her face as I did so. Her lips parted; she looked perfect.

"Teach me how to touch you," I said, my thumb rubbing small circles on her breasts. "Teach me what to do to make you see stars."

"Stars, eh?" Edmund said, catching my hand in her own and guiding it to the join of her thighs. I took two fingers and, with Edmund still guiding my hand, began to stroke her slick folds. She showed me the small nub of flesh that had brought me so much pleasure and then let me find a rhythm that not only had her writhing on the bed, but also made me slide my free hand between my legs to fondle myself as well.

I lay down atop my Edmund, my fingers slick with her juices as I rubbed faster and she cried my name over and over again. It seemed to take forever and no time at all before her body tightened and she let out a desperate shout that was also my name. I watched her sink, boneless, back down on the bed even as I continued to tease and pet the little nub between my legs.

Edmund, hearing the soft sounds I couldn't help but make, opened her eyes and smiled. "You *do* learn fast, dearest." She propped herself up on one elbow and motioned me to continue. "Go on," she said; "I wish to watch."

Her words burned in my ears and I stretched out, my legs flung wide apart with one hand working between them and the other rubbing my breasts in a quick and jerky motion that matched the way my hips insisted on moving.

"That's it," Edmund purred, her dark and smoky voice falling over me like a caress. "My lovely Anne, my beautiful Anne, open your eyes and look at me."

I obeyed and the sight of her watching me with flushed cheeks and mussed hair and a smile that felt like sunlight was enough to send me into the same firework-filled sky as before.

I crawled to her side and Edmund gathered me in her arms. "Now what happens?" I asked.

"Now? Well, first we wash and dress ourselves, then I think we should venture downstairs in search of a morning repast."

"And then what?"

"I don't know, Anne Skye. What do you want?"

I smiled and kissed her again. "You."

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She Wants To Move

by Matsuri Yuri (祭百合)

Sheila was staring at the ceiling, counting tiles and waiting for him—and the boredom—to just finish. One would think a sex worker would have a thrilling sex life, but apparently they left that out of the pamphlet. Dylan always made a big fucking deal of going down on her, like it qualified him for sainthood or something. Then he'd moan like the guy version of a faking an orgasm, sloppily licking her, just missing *the spot*, messing up the rhythm like a bad song.

And then she'd have stubble burn on her thighs, which were pretty obvious when wearing a damn g-string.

Sheila tapped him on the head. Faked a smile. She was good at faking a lot of things. Orgasms, smiles, affection, flirting. It made up most of her job.

"I want you in me," Sheila said. It sounded flat to her—flatter than she intended it to sound—but he apparently bought it.

"But baby, I'm doing you," he said.

"Yeah, and it got me so hot, I want you," Sheila said.

That was all he needed. He climbed on top of her, his weight an annoying reminder of where Sheila was. Her mind wandered, back to work, away from him, and the faint scent of his Old Spice aftershave.

In her mind, she put on the mask again, and only then did she make the sharp intake of breath, which he thought was for him.

It wasn't exactly the American dream. It should've been. He was nice, fairly dependable, and attractive in a scruffy, artistic hipster sort of way. He'd given her mixtapes and ironically bad poetry and kept a stubble because he thought she liked it. He brought silk flowers spritzed with cheap perfume so they'd last, her friends and family loved him. And why shouldn't they? He was nice... a bit too nice.

Sheila closed her eyes and imagined dancing. The grinding swerve of bodies, the lights, the pole. The rough edge of leather against her skin.

It was only then that the flush of pleasure came over her, the first moan, bit back for a name which wasn't his.

Five minutes.

Sheila pushed her dark hair out of her face. She'd cut it when she took this job, dyed it black for her Leather Heather persona, but kept the bangs. Nobody but the bosses knew her name as anything else but Leather Heather or Mistress Heather, and she preferred it that way. She'd been at the Cat Scratch Club for six months now, because waitressing only got you so far, and she made twice as much for just dancing than she'd make a week's shifts.

But, no, that was a lie. It was a shithole, yeah, but it was the highlight of her day. Something within her thrummed at the thought of letting loose and feeling the leather against her skin.

Sheila pulled up her leather gloves, not for the first time, marveling at the feel of against her. With this gloves and mask, this corset, she became powerful, somebody the people feared as

much as they desired. It was like those childhood dreams of becoming a super hero. Put on the black leather mask, and she became someone else. No one gave Leather Heather any shit, and if they did, she'd make them regret it, leave them with bruises for ever crossing her. She could make them go to their knees, force them to lick her boots, worship her like the queen she was.

Sheila glanced to her side, where her partner was reapplying her cotton candy pink lipstick. Lacey tapped her toes in tune to a tune only she could hear. Always peppy, always bright, Lacey was unrefined sunshine with a shot of strawberry daiquiri. Or at least, that's what the mask she wore in here. Lacey looked too good to be in this corner of town, like the golden girl cheerleader who made you want to buy her a picket fence dream to live in. There were no track marks on Lacey's arms; she didn't need any artificial sunshine, she had plenty of her own.

Sheila adjusted her fishnets. Her heels were already killing her, and she hadn't even gone out yet. It was a good sort of pain, though. It bit into her, made her feel real. She tapped her ever-present riding crop against her thigh lightly, waiting for the seconds to pass until Leather Heather could fully emerge.

Finally, the music shifted, and she knew it was time.

"You ready?" Lacey asked. She already had on her white lace two piece, her blond shoulder-length hair pulled into pigtails.

Sheila nodded.

They stepped out from the back as the driving music started to wind up. She couldn't make out much of the song, except the refrain of a woman's singing husky lyric about giving lapdances for free.

Lacey warmed them up by going to the pole like it was her lost-lost friend. She wrapped her legs about it, spinning in a graceful arc of white lace and pink lipstick. She came to a stop, and rubbed herself against it, the cold metal pressed between her pert breasts, her face a perfect mask of ecstasy. No one could fake like Lacey.

Another turn, and Lacey's hand was held out, and Sheila knew it was her cue. She stepped up, took her hand and yank it, yanked Lacey to her and kissed her. The leather left marks on her skin, and she hadn't even brought out her riding crop yet. Lacey ground herself against her thigh, her blue eyes clouded with lust.

Lacey was the only girl at the club who didn't look back and flirt at the crowd when they danced. Lacey kept her eyes just on her, all the flirting just for her. Sheila stood back, clad in her dominatrix special, fishnets and black mask to match her black corset. With Lacey it always played out as a strange tango; their eyes were only on each other.

Lacey's back was pressed to her, an offering. Sheila squeezed Lacey's pert breasts *hard* and pulled her top off. Lacey let out a very convincing moan and undulated her body against her, rubbing her ass against her groin. Were the men cheering? Getting rowdy? She didn't notice, didn't care. Her world was the stage, Lacey grinding her against her.

Then they were breaking apart, dancing to the beat together, Lacey offering her hands to be bound. Eyes on each other, Lacey's sultry gaze was all spice, intoxicating her, fascinating her. Lacey was on her knees before her, ready and wanting. She dared on each smack of the riding crop. Each slap of leather elicited another moan faked so well it sounded perfectly real.

Everything else faded away until there was nothing but leather and lace.

Sheila took a breather outside and let her pulse run down to normal again. They used to call

her a cold hard bitch in school, but really she just kept it all in. Everything, the anger, the happiness, it was all clutched tight against her chest, and nobody ever earned the right to see it. Except you denied your emotions and soon you couldn't tell them apart. She only meant to keep a secret, wait until somebody worthy came along.

But *Leather Heather*, she didn't take shit from anyone. Every night, she became a little more of the leather dominatrix queen, until the mask and her face blurred. One day, she wouldn't be there any more, just the cold queen who had taken her place.

Sheila almost wished she'd taken up smoking when the coolness outweighed the issues, because it gave ample time for pushing people away and being alone. But she hadn't, so moments outside alone, just watching the street was cast aside as just another part of bitchiness.

She heard the door open, and kept her gaze fixed out the window, and watched the lights of the cars on the street pass by. Neila, Aisha, and Jenna never really made conversation with her, anyways. But it wasn't any of them, as she realized when she heard a voice calling her stage name. Sheila didn't turn around.

"Hey, I was looking for you," Lacey said.

Sheila glanced over, wishing she had a cigarette in her mouth to hold off conversation a few moments more. She didn't have any ashes to flick, nor any cigarette to grind under the heel of her shoe.

Lacey wasn't in her white lace two-piece anymore, but had donned one of those cutesy distressed skinny jeans and a teal camisole with a bunny on it—and not even a playboy bunny—of all things.

"Yes?"

"You were really good tonight," Lacey said.

There was a long silence, and Sheila realized that Lacey was waiting for her to fill it.

"Same," Sheila finally said.

Lacey laughed. "You're so funny, Heather."

"That's *Mistress* Heather to you," Sheila said.

"*Mistress* Heather, then," Lacey said.

"Why are you even here?" Sheila said.

"Dancing? It's a living," Lacey said. Yet she said it with such flippancy, without a hint of regret.

Sheila hadn't meant it, but she had a feeling that Lacey had known this all along.

"Why would you do it, then?" Sheila said. "A girl like you..."

Lacey cut her off with a laugh. "A girl like me deserves a better place than this, right? A girl like me should be married off and working on my first child, right? Or maybe I should be trying for *homecoming queen*?"

Sheila didn't answer.

"Maybe I just needed the money. Or maybe...I did it so I could work closer with you," Lacey said. There was a seductive tinge to her voice. Lacey got in closer until Sheila could feel her against her body again.

"We're not on stage," Sheila said, but she didn't move away. She felt her heartbeat begin to pick up, like the way it did when she was dancing.

"So I need an audience to flirt with you, now?" Lacey said. "Or was I mistaken? That was some pretty hot dancing..."

There'd been rumors there one of them was really a dyke, and not just putting on a show. She'd

never guessed it was Lacey of all people. The girl looked like the poster child for heterosexuality.

"You?" Sheila said, giving Lacey another once over. There was no secret rainbows, or anything which screamed *I'm a lesbian* about her.

"Figured it out? Looks can be deceiving, you know. So, what do you think? Wanna give me a whirl?" Lacey said.

"I've got a guy," Sheila said.

"Funny how you never mention him. We don't even know his name," Lacey said.

"It's not like I tell my sob stories around this place," Sheila said. She blew out a sigh, and looked around. Away from Lacey, away from the shithole that was her life outside of the club. She could see him now, the way he lit up whenever he saw her, the way he was always sending her little love notes, how he'd even accepted her choice of job without once criticizing her for it. A guy like that was one in a million, people kept telling her.

She'd spent a year trying to fall in love with him, and all it did was make her crave the leather all the more.

The truth was, she was bored out of her fucking mind, and dancing was the only time that her flatline of a life made a blip. Lacey was there, teasing her on with bubble gum pink lips and eyes that dared her to touch just a little more.

Sheila didn't know if Lacey was worthy of getting past the shell she'd made, but she was tired of waiting.

Lacey leaned in, her warm breath just near her ear. *"I could take care of you."* There was a wild gleam to Lacey, a hint at depths beyond the cotton candy floss exterior.

Sheila looked down at her. Something curled within her. Desire, a pinprick of interest. And all for a girl who barely came to her shoulders. The cheerleader special, somebody she would've hated in school on principle.

Sheila didn't even have to think on this choice.

"Just a moment, I've got something I've got to do," Sheila said.

Her mind was already made up. It'd been made up the moment she went into this club and realized she'd been living without being alive all these years, but she'd been lingering on the edge. Leather Heather had taken over this part of her, and who was she to resist?

All she could think was *you can't text message a break up! Not after two years!*

She rung his cell, no answer. She heard the twee message start up, complete with in-jokes she barely knew, and his best guy friend chiming in.

Hi, I'm—

Not here right now, so please leave a message,

—preferably not in interpretive dance, ironic or otherwise

And I will try and get back to you!

At least it was more personal than a text.

"Listen, this isn't working," Sheila said. She trailed off. She couldn't figure out where to go from there. "It's been fun, but I'm moving on. I know it's a cliché, but really...it's not you, it's me."

She drifted off, letting the radio static set in. There should be more, Dylan always wanted to *talk about their relationship* and even now he'd want to negotiate, to beg for her back, try and win her over. He'd never given up on her, even when he should have. This seemed unnecessarily cruel, but she could only think that a clean cut would be easier than giving him any more false

hope.

"See you," Sheila said, and cut the call off.

The 'see you' was so extraneous, but Sheila was used to saying that to his "I love you, baby" notes, never quite confirming or denying what he hoped for. Everything he wanted that she just couldn't be.

He wasn't too bad. But she couldn't deal with good enough any longer.

"You ready?" Lacey said in her teasing voice.

"Whenever you are," she said.

They didn't even make it to a hotel. They twisted up in each other, her hands in Lacey's hair, Lacey's hands squeezing her ass hard enough to leave a few bruises on her for once. The pain was beautiful, clarifying. Sheila couldn't wait for her skin to be marked with purpling bruises. They cramped themselves into the back seat like a pair of horny teenagers, adding more bruises as they bumped into the window, the seat, the door. Lacey eagerly climbed up on her. She didn't look fierce, but oh did she kiss fierce. Lacey bit through the kisses, and she tasted blood.

Abruptly, Lacey broke away from the kiss, which only left her wanting more.

"I brought you something," Lacey said.

She pulled out something from the little purse at the back seat. In the light of the street lamp, she could just make out leather gloves.

"You left them in the dressing room," Lacey said. "So I....got them for you."

She put on the gloves, feeling herself encased, safe again.

"Tell me what you want," Lacey said.

"Fuck me, already," Sheila hissed. She pushed Lacey's head down. Lacey was all too happy to comply. Soon, her white T-shirt with a local radio station she listened to was up over her head.

"I'd finger you, but my nails are long. But...if you want me, I'd even give up my French manicure. And I'm *really* attached to my French manicure," Lacey said.

"Later," Sheila said tersely. "Now, *fuck me*."

"Yes, mistress," Lacey said.

Lacey gave her all the sharp hints of pain that Dylan was too nice to ever do. Lacey scraped her down her stomach, leaving trail of candyfloss pink lipstick past the raw little welts Lacey's teeth and French manicure were doing to her skin. Sheila let out a hiss between clenched teeth as Lacey began to peel off her jeans, raking her nails down her abdomen.

Lacey left a little pink stain there as she began to kiss down her white bikini underwear. She was pulling the underwear down slowly, kissing exposed skin as it was revealed.

I hope the lipstick never washes out, Sheila thought.

When her panties were finally down, and Lacey's tongue was finally on her, Sheila almost let out a something near a scream of pleasure. For the first time she could remember, she was clinging to the back seat, her body feeling electric, *alive*. Lacey's hair tickled her thighs, her lips a soft contrast to the earlier scrapes she'd left on her.

Her fingers were tangled in Lacey's hair, pulling so hard as to leave a burning sensation under Lacey's skin. To remind her who was control. This was for her benefit, her pleasure. Sheila lost herself in the rhythm of Lacey's tongue, bucking her hips, her breath growing ragged. She couldn't remember a time she'd really lost herself, not in any of the fucks or lovers she'd drifted through. She wasn't bored or pulling back, wondering why she was bothering to fuck anyways.

Every nerve in her seemed to wake up to the flick of Lacey's tongue on her.

Lacey's nails were sinking into her hips, adding a tang of pain to the mix of heady pleasure rising. It didn't take much for Lacey to finish her off, the orgasm as sharp and fulfilling as the bruises, the welts and scrapes forming on her skin. She loosened her grip on Lacey's hair. Something within her she'd held tight for too long relaxed at last.

Lacey pushed herself up off her.

"I didn't think you'd come so quickly," Lacey said. She pulled out a kleenex, a compact, and her trademark pink lipstick and began to reapply her make up.

Neither had Sheila, for that matter.

"Maybe you're just skilled," Sheila said.

Lacey smiled at this. "Well, I certainly hope I am!"

"Consider that a thank-you for making me come on stage," Lacey said.

It came to her that the reason Lacey could fake it better than any other person she'd known was because it wasn't fake at all. All that manufactured chemistry, the kisses to excite guys for their next paycheck? It wasn't a game to Lacey.

Sheila began to pull up her pants, not bothering to wipe away the kiss marks of lipstick all over her body.

"You want ice cream?" Lacey said. She was pulling her blond hair back into a ponytail to try and tame the sex hair aftereffects.

"What?" She said.

"Ice cream. I like to eat ice cream and watch romcoms after I fuck," Lacey said. "We could go back to my place..."

There wasn't anything better coming up in her weekend. Still, it was all coming too soon; she wasn't going to go from a misanthrope to a social butterfly overnight.

"Maybe next time," Sheila said.

"There's going to be a next time?" Lacey said.

And she knew that yes, this wouldn't be a one-time thing.

"You're so quiet and mysterious. I love it," Lacey said. "Isn't it just like me, though? Instead of tall, dark and handsome, I go for leggy, dark and willing to flog me."

"All admirable qualities," Sheila said with a wry smile.

"And see! Now you've got a sense of humor over that leather bitch queen persona. I love it," Lacey said.

This elicited a small smile from Sheila. "If you say so."

"And I do! What's your name, by the way? Your real one," Lacey said.

"Yours first," she said.

Lacey smiled. "Would you believe me if I said it was Lacey? I mean, when you're named Lacey, there's no need for a stripper name," Lacey said.

She looked down at her leather gloves. She couldn't see a hint of her own skin anymore, just leather.

"You can call me Heather," she said.

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Lady's Maid

by Jestana

"Oh and, Mildred, Miss Langdon didn't bring a maid with her, so if you could do the job for her while you're here?" the housekeeper, Miss Dowden, requested of the maid.

The younger woman nodded, bobbing a curtsy respectfully. "Yes, ma'am."

"She's in the Green room," Miss Dowden informed her, and then turned her attention to the visiting valets and maids, telling them where they'd be staying and which rooms their masters and mistresses had been assigned.

Stifling a sigh, Mildred Scott left the corridor and headed upstairs to the room in question. *She must be young. No older woman with money would travel anywhere without a maid...* She reached the appropriate door and tapped respectfully on the wood panel. The female voice that responded sounded distracted. "Come in!"

"Begging your pardon, Miss, but I've been asked to act as your maid while you're here," Mildred began as she entered the room.

She stopped short when she saw the young lady in question. Tall and slender, Miss Langdon had thick black hair carefully styled in the latest fashion, clear green eyes curious as she gazed at the maid. Her traveling clothes were wrinkled as if she'd been in them for some time. "Oh, thank you." The lady gestured to the cases spread around the room. "My gown for dinner tonight is in one of these, but I've no idea which one."

"Perhaps it's this one, Miss." Mildred moved to the case she'd have used if she'd packed the woman's things and found an elegant white gown inside, a velvet case nestled among its folds. Opening the case, she found a perfectly matched set of jewellery. Showing it to the lady, she asked, "And these jewels to go with it, Miss?"

The taller woman smiled, removing the last of the pins holding her hair in place so it tumbled down around her shoulders. "Yes, that's it. Thank you...Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Mildred Scott, Miss," she answered quietly, setting the jewels and gown aside, pushing away a sudden rush of memories. "Would you like to change now?"

Adelaide Langdon nodded as she shrugged out of her coat. "Yes, I'll take a bath after dinner."

"Yes, Miss." Mildred managed to keep her face and voice neutral as she helped the young lady remove her travelling clothes, and then slip into the gown itself. Her skin was smooth and pale and she moved with a grace and poise that the maid remembered all too well.

Once the dress was buttoned up, Adelaide sat down at the dressing table so Mildred could do her hair. The brush slid easily through the black locks. "Could you please put my things away once I've gone down to dinner, Mildred?"

"Yes, Miss." She nodded, stealing glances at them in the mirror. With her brown hair and brown eyes and wearing her maid's uniform, Mildred felt even more dowdy than usual next to Miss Langdon's beautiful figure and elegant gown.

When Adelaide picked up the cigarette case on the table, Mildred retrieved the lighter in time for her to light the cigarette she'd retrieved from it. "Thank you, Mildred."

"Simply doing my job, Miss." Mildred finished with the black hair and stepped back. "Do you need help with your make up, Miss?"

Adelaide shook her head. "No, thank you. I prefer to do it myself."

"Yes, Miss." Turning away as the young woman began touching up her make-up, Mildred began picking up the discarded clothes and folding them neatly.

When she finished, Adelaide stood up and turned in a circle. "What do you think?"

"You look lovely, Miss," Mildred told her sincerely, her arms full of clothes.

The smile she received was warm and genuine. "Thank you, Mildred. I'll see you later."

"Yes, Miss." Waiting until the door closed behind the young woman, she slumped against the bedpost. *How could I have not recognised the name? Of all the maids she could have picked to wait on her, Miss Dowden picked me!*

"One more hand, Addie," Sheila requested when the younger woman rose to leave. "You're the only one here who can match me at cards."

Smiling apologetically, she shook her head. "I'm very sorry, Aunt, but I had a long drive today and I want a bath before I turn in for the night."

"Very well, but you simply *must* play again tomorrow night." Sheila wagged a finger at her, smiling fondly at her niece.

She nodded, catching her aunt's hand and squeezing it gently. "I will, I promise."

"Good girl, now off with you." Sheila made shooining motions with her hands.

Stooping, Adelaide kissed the wrinkled cheek. "Good night, Aunt Sheila."

"Yes, yes, good night, Addie." Sheila addressed the others in the room. "Well, would anyone care to take Addie's place? The night's still young."

Hiding a smile as the others made their excuses, Adelaide left the room and headed upstairs to the bedroom she'd been given. She opened the door as quietly as she could and saw the maid, Mildred, standing by the window. Dressed in the typical black dress and white cap and apron of a servant, her brown hair was pulled back into a sensible bun at the nape of her neck. Something about her was familiar to Adelaide, but she couldn't imagine why. Closing the door, she opened it again, more noisily this time. Now Mildred stood beside the bed, her face a carefully schooled mask of indifference. "I found your bath things and took the liberty of filling the tub in the bathroom just across the corridor, Miss."

"Thank you, Mildred." Adelaide turned so the maid could unbutton her dress. As it fell to pool around her feet, the maid guided her arms into her bathrobe.

Wrapping the soft terrycloth around herself, she tied the belt as she stepped out of the dress and her shoes in a single move. "Can you manage your stockings yourself, Miss?"

"I can, yes," she assured the maid, moving towards the door, noticing that nightclothes had already been laid out on the bed. Adelaide paused at the door and looked back. Mildred was already hanging the evening gown in the wardrobe, stretching on tiptoe in her sensible shoes in order to reach it.

Shaking her head at herself, Adelaide slipped across the corridor to the bathroom. Just as Mildred had said, her bath things were in place and the tub was full of water that steamed slightly in the cool evening air. Testing the water, she was surprised to find it at just the temperature she liked. Looking more closely at her things as she disrobed, she realised that they were placed exactly where she preferred them. *How could she know? If she were my maid, that'd be one thing, but we only met today...*

Slipping into the warm water, Adelaide pondered the question as she washed away the day of

driving and evening of socialising. By the time she finished and pulled the plug, she was no closer to an answer. Wrapping her bathrobe around herself once more, she crossed the corridor again to the bedroom. "Was everything to your satisfaction, Miss?"

"It was, indeed, Mildred," she replied, smiling warmly. "Thank you."

"Simply my job, Miss," Mildred told her, moving past her to the door.

As she left to retrieve Adelaide's things in case someone else wished to wash up, Adelaide moved to the bed to put on the underclothes and nightgown the maid had set out. Layering her favourite dusky rose dressing gown over them, she sat down at the dressing table to begin brushing her damp hair. She watched in the mirror as Mildred returned with the bath things.

"Mildred, could you please help me with this?"

"Yes, Miss." Setting the basket of toiletries aside, Mildred approached and took the brush from Adelaide, sliding it through the damp black strands with care.

She watched in the mirror through lowered eyelashes, noticing that a serene look had settled over Mildred's features as she brushed that looked nothing like what Adelaide was coming to realise was her typical blank-faced expression. When Mildred set the brush down, Adelaide picked up her cigarette case and, by the time she'd selected one and brought it to her lips, Mildred already had a lighter ready for her. Breathing in the smoke, she continued to watch in the mirror as Mildred gathered the black strands together and began to braid them, securing the end with a ribbon that Adelaide handed to her without a word. Finished, Mildred stepped back, hands folded properly before her. Turning in the chair to face the other woman, Adelaide asked, "Have we met before?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss?" Surprise and shock chased each other across the other woman's face, but it was the hint of fear in the brown eyes that caught Adelaide's attention.

Standing up, Adelaide stepped towards Mildred, only for her to back up a step. When she took another step forward, Mildred matched it with another step back. "You knew *exactly* how I like my baths, you braided my hair for me without asking if I prefer to keep it in a ponytail at night, and you knew I prefer using a cigarette lighter to a match. How?"

"It's a servant's job to deduce what their employers want beforehand and prepare accordingly," Mildred explained, her brown eyes not quite meeting Adelaide's green ones.

Adelaide shook her head. "This goes beyond that. You couldn't possibly have deduced all that simply from meeting me today. We've met before, haven't we?"

"It's not my place to remember," Mildred replied, her face settling into the blank mask once again. "If you don't need me for anything else, Miss, may I go?"

Stifling a sigh, she nodded and watched as the maid slipped from the room. *We have met. But where? She's a servant, I'm not...*

She slipped into her room with a sigh of relief. *Stupid, stupid girl! Remembering little details like that will get you the sack if you're not careful!*

"Everything all right?" The visiting maid looked concerned when Mildred turned to her. "You look awfully pale."

Managing a reassuring smile, she crossed to where she kept her clothes and pulled out her nightgown. "I'm fine. Just tired and ready for bed."

"Maybe you're just not used to waiting on one person," Diana mused, watching from under her covers as Mildred changed into the nightgown. "I like it loads better than just being a general

maid."

Turning out the light and slipping under the covers on her bed, she was pleased to realise that no one had stolen her hot water bottle this time. There *were* advantages to having to share a room. "Well, it depends on the woman you're waiting on, too."

"That's a good point, though I've heard that Miss Langdon is nice," Diana sounded thoughtful. "Is she?"

Mildred nodded even though it was dark. "She is. Constantly said 'please' and 'thank you'. She didn't order me about like some ladies do."

"Do you know why she didn't have a maid with her?" Diana sounded eagerly curious.

This time Mildred shook her head. "No, she didn't tell me and it wasn't my place to ask, just to do the job of a lady's maid."

"Pity. Maybe she'll ask *you* to be her maid." Diana sounded cheerful, as if she rather liked the idea.

Mildred didn't respond, hoping the other woman would think she'd fallen asleep. *Oh, god, that would be torture if she did...*

"No, Ma'am, please don't send me away! It won't happen again, I promise!" "You're right, it won't, because I won't have you corrupting any of my young ladies. You will pack your things this instant and leave my school!" "Please, Ma'am!" "Now!" A young girl, about Adelaide's age, in a maid's uniform, stumbled out of the headmistress' office, and hurried down the corridor, sobbing. "It wasn't my fault!"

Adelaide woke with a start, frowning a little. That'd been years ago. Why was she remembering it now? "Good morning, Miss. I have your breakfast for you."

"Thank you, Mildred." Adelaide sat up so Mildred could place the breakfast tray across her lap. As Mildred straightened up, Adelaide caught her wrist with one hand. "You didn't, by chance, work at a girls' school once?"

After a moment of surprise, Mildred gently tugged her wrist free and turned her attention to pouring the tea for the other woman. "Why would that matter, Miss?"

"Just something I remembered," Adelaide remarked with a wave of her hand, noticing that everything on the tray was fixed exactly the way she liked. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Mildred moved to the wardrobe to choose an outfit for the day's hunting party. "It was a boarding school for young ladies. I was walking past the headmistress' office when I heard her yelling at someone, apparently a maid. She was sacking the poor girl and I don't think the maid even noticed me when she left the office and went to the servants' quarters."

Mildred was standing very still by the wardrobe, still holding a blouse in her hands. Adelaide sipped her tea as she waited for the other woman's reaction. Finally, Mildred reached into the wardrobe for a skirt and jacket to go with the blouse. "Why are you telling me, Miss?"

"It may have been five years ago, but I remember the maid's voice very clearly," she explained, taking a bite of her eggs. "Her accent was rougher, but her voice is the same as yours."

Smoothing the blouse, skirt, and jacket carefully, Mildred laid them over a chair. "You must have me mixed up with someone else, Miss. I never worked at a seminary for young ladies."

"When did I ever say it was a seminary for young ladies?" Adelaide asked, hiding her smile of triumph behind her teacup.

Mildred's shoulders slumped under her uniform and she muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like 'bugger'. Keeping her back to Adelaide, she asked, "Did you ever figure out *why* I was sacked, Miss?"

"Something about 'corrupting' her young ladies, though I don't know quite what she meant by that," Adelaide admitted, continuing to eat.

Mildred found the hat that went with the skirt and jacket and set it aside. "It's just as well, Miss. I was lucky to find another position without references and I'd rather not jeopardise it."

"Did the reason you lost that job have anything to do with the fact that you seem to remember so many details about me?" Adelaide asked, polishing off the last of her breakfast.

Mildred's voice was stiff as she laid a scarf with the rest of the outfit. "I'd rather not say, Miss. It'd be better for both of us if you simply forgot."

"Why?" Adelaide was surprised not only by the suggestion, but also by Mildred's tone of voice. It wasn't what she'd expected at all.

Mildred turned to face her, brown eyes determinedly shuttered. "Will that be all, Miss?"

"No, it won't." Adelaide set the breakfast tray aside and, standing up, stalked towards Mildred. As expected, she backed away from Adelaide. This time, she didn't stop until she had the Mildred backed against the wall. "Why do you want me to forget, Mildred?"

Licking her lips, Mildred whispered, "Please, Miss. That was a painful time of my life and I'd rather not remember it."

"Miss Langdon?" At the sound of the familiar voice accompanied by an equally-familiar tap on the door, Adelaide stepped back and let Mildred go over to open the door. The older woman in a maid's uniform smiled briefly at the younger maid before turning to Adelaide. "So sorry to bother you this early, Miss, but Lady Langdon wanted to have a word with you before we leave to join the men."

Adelaide managed a smile for the woman who was almost another aunt to her. "Thank you, Dora. Tell my aunt that I'll meet her in the parlour once I'm dressed."

"Very good, Miss." Curtseying, Dora withdrew and presumably headed back to her mistress' room.

Sighing, Adelaide turned to Mildred. "Well, we'd best not keep my aunt waiting."

"Yes, Miss."

Grateful that she wasn't required to wait on the guests, Mildred stayed in her room and flipped through fashion magazines that she didn't really see. She was too caught up in memories she couldn't keep back anymore: *"One little kiss, Mildred. What could it hurt?"*

"No, Miss." She backed away from the older girl. "What if we're caught?"

Mildred didn't like the predatory look on Natasha Clarkson's face. "She never comes here. We won't be caught."

"It'll be the sack for me if we are, Miss." Feeling a wall at her back, she held up her hands to try to stop the young lady.

Closing the distance between them, Natasha pressed her lips to Mildred's. In the same move, she pressed her bosom into Mildred's upraised hands. She froze, not sure what she should do or how she should react. That matter was decided for her by a scandalised gasp. "Mildred! Miss Clarkson! What is going on here?"

"I-I'm sorry, Ma'am." She immediately ducked away from the older girl.

The headmistress' expression was thunderous. "I didn't ask if you were sorry, girl!"

"She kissed me, Miss Trask," Natasha explained while Mildred frantically tried to think of how to explain the situation.

Horrified by the blatant lie, Mildred tried to correct her. "No, I didn't, Ma'am."

"Are you calling one of my young ladies a liar?" The tall, imposing woman loomed over the girls, her expression beyond thunderous now.

Miserable, she shook her head and whispered, "No, Ma'am."

"To my office, Mildred," Miss Trask snapped, pointing. Feeling as if her feet had turned to lead, she went that direction. Faintly, she heard Miss Trask telling the young lady, "I'm very sorry Mildred imposed herself on you, Miss Clarkson."

Unwilling to hear another lie, Mildred hurried the rest of the way to the headmistress' office. I'm going to be sacked, I know it. Why did she do it?

"Mildred, are you all right?" Diana's voice dragged her back to the present.

She tried to offer a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, Diana. It's nothing."

"Must be a pretty big 'nothing' for you to be crying." Diana reached up to dab at Mildred's cheek for her.

Her memories still fresh in her mind, Mildred couldn't stop herself from flinching. Reaching into her pocket for a handkerchief, she dabbed at her cheek. "Just some bad memories, is all. I'll be fine."

"I think you're trying to convince yourself more than me," Diana commented with forced lightness in her voice.

Closing her magazines, Mildred drew her knees up to her chest. "You're probably right."

"Are you sure you don't want to take a bath now?" Diana asked, turning to put her things away. "You might not get another chance this weekend."

Mildred nodded. "I'm sure."

"All right. Say, is that the latest mag?" At a nod from Mildred, Diana asked, "May I read it?" Smiling faintly, she held it out. "Enjoy."

"Ta!"

"Are you all right, Addie, dear?" Sheila asked as they took a stroll after lunch. "You've been quite distracted all day."

Adelaide offered an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Aunt. I've just had something on my mind."

"Clearly, since you didn't even ask how your cousin fared in the day's shooting," her aunt sounded bemused by the idea.

She immediately felt contrition. "I didn't? Oh, dear. Maybe I should--"

"Don't worry, dear." Sheila patted her arm comfortingly. "He's awfully understanding for a man."

Adelaide eyed her aunt with an amused smile. "That's the highest compliment I've ever heard you make about him."

"Don't tell him I said it," Sheila instructed her, green eyes twinkling playfully. "He won't believe you."

Adelaide laughed. There was a reason she liked her aunt. "I won't, I promise. Maybe you can help me, actually."

"Oh? Is something wrong?" Sheila looked intrigued as Adelaide glanced around to ensure no

one was nearby.

Lowering her voice, she explained what had happened earlier. "I want to help her, Aunt, but I don't know how I would."

"Perhaps she doesn't need your help," Sheila suggested. "It sounds like she's done well enough for herself and who are we to interfere?"

Adelaide sighed and tugged fretfully at her scarf. "I just feel like there *is* something I can do, but I've no idea what it could be."

"Well, it's fairly certain that you scared her with your little display," Sheila remarked with a shake of her grey-haired head.

Adelaide stared at her, green eyes distressed. "Scared her?"

"Backing her up to the wall like that?" Eyebrows arched disapprovingly over her own green eyes, Sheila tsked. "Really, my dear, you've been taught better than that."

Adelaide arched her own eyebrows in response. "What do you suggest?"

"If you really want to know, don't try to scare it out of her," Sheila explained patiently. "But don't press too hard for an answer. She has her reasons for not wishing to tell you and she doesn't really know you as it is, so why would she confide in you?"

Adelaide sighed deeply. "You're right, Aunt. I shouldn't have tried to intimidate her. She probably gets enough of that from others."

"Good girl. Now, what are you going to do instead?"

"Find a way she can get to know me so she'll feel free to confide in me."

"You don't have much time for that."

"I'll think of something."

Mildred was dismayed when she found Adelaide in her bedroom already after dinner. "Oh, I'm sorry, Miss. I thought--"

"I wanted you to think it," Adelaide told her. She beckoned with one hand as she stubbed out her cigarette with the other. "Come in."

Trying to ignore the trepidation that settled in her stomach, Mildred did so. "Shall I get out your nightclothes, Miss?"

"Not just yet, Mildred." She patted the bed beside her invitingly. "Have a seat."

Mildred shook her head. "I prefer to stand."

"Please, sit. I'd like to speak to you as an equal and I can't do that while you're standing." Adelaide looked exasperated as she explained.

Mildred shook her head again. "Begging your pardon, Miss, but we've never been equals and we never will be."

"As close as we can get, then." Adelaide stood and crossed to the dressing table, though she didn't sit down. "I have a proposition for you."

Mildred quickly hid her surprise and stepped forward to begin helping Adelaide out of her evening finery. "What would that be, Miss?"

"I've been looking for a lady's maid and I'm offering you the position," Adelaide explained as Mildred finished unbuttoning her dress and it fell in a pool of silk around her feet. "I can pay you quite well."

As Adelaide stepped out of the dress and shoes, Mildred stood frozen for a moment. *Work for Miss Langdon? No. It's been torture enough waiting on her this weekend. I couldn't stand it*

every day... Shaking her head yet again, she helped Adelaide out of her underclothes. "I'm sorry, Miss, but I'll have to refuse, despite the money."

"Refuse?" Adelaide sounded surprised as Mildred helped her into her nightgown. "Isn't that what most maids want: to be a lady's maid?"

The maid in question tugged at the nightgown to ensure the material hadn't caught on anything. "I'm not most maids, Miss."

"No, you're not, and that's why I'd like *you* to be my maid," Adelaide explained, sitting down at the dressing table. "If I wanted a typical maid, I'd already have one."

Mildred began removing pins from the thick black hair in front of her. "I'm flattered, Miss, but I still respectfully refuse."

"It's an open-ended offer, Mildred." Adelaide watched Mildred in the mirror.

She kept her gaze on the hair she was now brushing. "You'll find someone else to be your maid soon enough, Miss."

"No, I won't." The other woman sounded awfully certain of herself.

Neither woman said anything else on the matter and Mildred escaped up to her room as soon as Adelaide was settled in bed. *I can't say yes. She'll find out quick enough if I do and she should never know...*

"I beg your pardon, Sir, Miss, but a young lady's arrived asking to speak with Miss Adelaide," the butler, Jackson, informed Adelaide and her adopted uncle as they played chess several months after she'd visited Kipton Park.

She glanced at her guardian and friend, then back at the butler. "Did she provide a name?"

"Mildred Scott, Miss," he informed her, his demeanour as stiff and proper as ever.

At that, Adelaide turned to her companion. "Excuse me, Uncle James."

"Of course, Addie. The longer I can put off my defeat at your hands, the better." He smiled fondly and sat back in his chair.

Amused, she took a moment to kiss his cheek before following Jackson from the room. He led her to a smaller parlour. "In there, Miss."

"Thank you, Jackson. Could you please bring some tea for us?" she requested softly, peeking into the room. It'd been several months since Adelaide had seen Mildred, but she recognised her easily. She was perched on the edge of an armchair, hands folded in her lap, dressed in a plain grey skirt and jacket over a pale cream blouse with a plain straw hat on her head. Her brown hair was still pulled back into a bun and she still wore her sensible black shoes.

Next to Adelaide, Jackson bowed slightly. "Yes, Miss."

"Thank you." After he left, she entered the parlour. Upon her entrance, Mildred rose hastily to her feet. "Have a seat, Mildred. You're here as a guest."

Mildred nodded, but didn't sit down until after Adelaide had. "Thank you for seeing me, Miss."

"Adelaide, please, and you're quite welcome." Jackson entered then with a tray of tea things. "Thank you, Jackson."

He set the tray on the table beside her chair. "Very good, Miss."

"What brings you here, Mildred?" Adelaide asked once Jackson had left.

As she poured the tea, she saw Mildred fidget out of the corner of her eye. It had to go against her training as a servant to let Adelaide pour the tea. Since Mildred was there as a guest, it wasn't

her place to do so. Once she had her tea and added honey and lemon to it, Mildred finally answered the question: "Did you hear about Lord Ansel's death?"

"Yes, we did." Adelaide nodded, taking a sip of her own tea. "We were all very sad when we got the news."

Nodding, Mildred chose a biscuit and ate it. "Lady Ansel decided staying at Kipton Park would be too much trouble, so she's closing it up and moving to the smaller house in town."

"And since she's moving to a smaller house, she won't need as many servants," Adelaide supplied, nibbling on a biscuit of her own.

Another nod, accompanied by fidgeting with the tea cup. "Yes, and I was one of the servants she let go."

"I'm very sorry to hear that." She lightly rested her hand on Mildred's arm, already suspecting the reason for her visit.

The cup clattered against the saucer as Mildred set them on the table. "Which brings me to why I'm here." She lifted her head so her brown eyes met Adelaide's green ones. "You said once that your offer of the position as your maid was open-ended. Did you mean it?"

"I did." Adelaide briefly considered pretending not to know what Mildred was referring to, but the trepidation and determination in the brown eyes convinced her that it'd be a bad idea. "Does this mean you wish to retract your refusal?"

Relief flashed across the delicate face. "Yes, it does, Miss. I would be honoured to serve as your lady's maid."

"I'll be glad to have you." She smiled warmly, glad that her impulse to leave the offer open had worked out. "I'll show you around and introduce you to everyone after we finish our tea. Did you bring any clothes or such with you?"

Another nod, a smile lingering around Mildred's lips as she picked up her teacup. "I have one suitcase. I don't need much."

"Very well." Rising, she found the bell and rang it.

Jackson arrived moments later. "You rang, Miss?"

"Yes, Jackson. Mildred here will be joining the staff as my maid," Adelaide informed him. "Please see to it that the appropriate room is prepared for her."

He nodded, glancing quickly at Mildred, who ducked her head for a moment before meeting his gaze. "Yes, Miss."

"That will be all." Dismissing him, she resumed her seat.

Bowing, he left the room. "Thank you for hiring me, Miss."

"You're quite welcome, Mildred."

As she'd expected, being Adelaide Langdon's lady's maid was torturous. Apparently, five years' separation had done nothing to end her attraction to Adelaide and waiting on her could be excruciating at times. Still, it was nice to spend time with her and really get to know her. "I'm sure you've guessed it by now, but Uncle James isn't really my uncle."

"What is he to you, then?" Mildred asked, brushing Adelaide's hair with slow strokes.

Adelaide smiled fondly, green eyes half-closed. "He became my guardian after Father died and now he's one of my dearest friends. He and Father were very close friends, you see, and my father's will made it very clear that Uncle James was to be my guardian. Only if he wasn't able would Aunt Sheila be my guardian."

"Lady Langdon, Miss?" Mildred asked, setting the brush down and beginning to braid the thick black locks.

Adelaide started to nod, but stopped when she realised it would hamper Mildred's efforts. "Mmm. She's actually Father's aunt, but saying great-aunt is a bit much."

"I see." Mildred finished the braid and secured it with the ribbon Adelaide provided. "Will there be anything else, Miss?"

Adelaide looked around the room. The bed was turned down, a hot water bottle ready, and she was already in her nightclothes. "No, that'll be all, Mildred. Go and get some sleep yourself."

"Yes, Miss." Curtseying a little, Mildred picked up the discarded clothes as the other woman climbed into bed. "Good night, Miss."

"Good night, Mildred." Turning out the lights, Mildred quietly left the room and headed to her own.

It was rather nice to know that Adelaide trusted her enough to share such things with her and Mildred wanted to return the favour, but she couldn't think of anything *she* could confide. Her own life was largely boring, except for her being sacked and *that* wasn't something she was ready to share yet. She said as much once while they were driving somewhere. "There's not much to tell about me, Miss. My parents were both in the service and I was brought up to serve as well."

"Did you ever regret it?" Adelaide risked taking her eyes off the road long enough to glance curiously at Mildred.

Mildred nodded, keeping her own eyes on the road. "Just once, about six years ago."

"Not anymore?" Adelaide returned her attention to the road.

Mildred was glad she had done so. "No, I'm glad for it now and wouldn't change anything."

"I'm glad for it, too."

"How are you and that new maid of yours working out?" Sheila asked her niece when the latter visited the former.

Adelaide smiled fondly. "Quite well, Aunt. I wasn't sure she'd actually take me up on my extended offer, but I'm quite glad she did."

"I can see that." Sheila sounded amused. "You remind me of your father when he talked about your mother."

The niece stared at her aunt in shock. "You're suggesting that I'm in love with Mildred?"

"My dear child, I'm not *suggesting* it. I'm *saying* it," Sheila corrected, still amused.

Adelaide shook her head in disbelief. "No, no. That's not possible."

"Isn't it?" Sheila challenged. "You've never been interested in marrying and were very selective about whom you hired to be your maid."

Adelaide shrugged slightly. "I just didn't want a typical maid. I wanted someone to sh-- oh."

"Exactly my point, dear," Sheila patted her hand and left Adelaide to her thoughts.

Adelaide was distracted for the rest of the day, thinking things over. She'd always known she was different from her peers, but she'd never considered *how* she was different. It was a little strange to look back on her life and see the events in a different light. "Are you all right, Miss?"

"Yes, Mildred, I'm fine." She offered a reassuring smile as Mildred reached over her shoulder for a ribbon to tie at the end of the braid.

Mildred kept her eyes on what was doing even as she asked, somewhat diffidently, "Is it

something I can help with, Miss?"

"Only if you can help me figure out what my heart's trying to tell me," Adelaide answered ruefully.

Since she was watching Mildred in the mirror, she noticed the way the other woman froze, her hands resting on the back of the vanity chair. Her voice was calm and neutral when she answered: "The only one who can understand your heart is you, Miss."

"Do you know what *your* heart tells you?" Adelaide asked, turning in her seat to meet the brown eyes directly.

To her credit, Mildred didn't look away as she once would have. She simply nodded as she folded her hands together in front of her. "Yes, I do, Miss. It tells me I am where I belong."

"Does it say that you love someone?" Adelaide suspected the answer after all the thinking she'd done that day, but she wanted it confirmed.

Mildred's face went blank, but not before Adelaide glimpsed surprise and fear. "Why should it matter, Miss?"

"Because I think mine is telling me I'm in love," she explained in a quiet voice, reaching up to cover the folded hands with one of hers.

Only a brief widening of the brown eyes hinted that Mildred was affected in any way. "Who is the lucky gentleman, Miss?"

"It's not a gentleman," Adelaide responded gently, not surprised that the other would deliberately misunderstand. Smiling faintly, she added, "It's not a man in service, either."

The folded hands trembled under her touch. "Who is it, then, Miss?"

"You, Mildred," she answered simply.

Surprisingly, Mildred closed her eyes, as if to shut out everything in front of her. When she spoke, her voice was low and strained: "Do you mean it, Miss?"

"Absolutely," Adelaide replied, squeezing gently. "I don't know when it began, but I can't imagine living without you and *not* because you're my maid."

Slowly, Mildred opened her eyes, hope, pleasure, and love shining in their depths. "I love you, too, Miss."

"Given the circumstances, I think 'Addie' or 'Adelaide' would be more appropriate," she suggested with a smile, managing to unfold the hands so she could bring one to her lips to press a kiss to the palm.

Mildred's breath hitched. "I'll try, but it's so ingrained."

"Well, you dropped the 'Miss' at least, which is a good start." Reaching up with her free hand, Adelaide cupped the back of Mildred's neck and drew her down into a soft, sweet kiss.

After only a moment of hesitation, Mildred responded with a soft sigh, one hand cupping Adelaide's cheek. For a first kiss, it was quite lovely and she looked forward to many more. It was Mildred who drew back first, her eyes uncertain as she gazed down at Adelaide. "I haven't overstepped any boundaries, have I?"

"Of course not." She resisted the impulse to roll her eyes. "*I* kissed *you*, so that's not possible."

Mildred nodded, looking relieved. Adelaide remained silent, fidgeting with the hand she still held. "Is something wrong?"

Green eyes sheepish as they met brown, she admitted, "I'm not sure where to go from here."

"I understand the bed is usually the next step," Mildred suggested, her cheeks flushing.

Adelaide stared at her for a moment, unable to deny the way her heart skipped a beat at the thought of sharing her bed with the other woman. "I'm not sure what we'd do once we get there."

"I've some ideas," Mildred admitted with a sly smile.

Raising her eyebrows, Adelaide got to her feet. "Would you care to join me in my bed, Mildred?"

"I'd be glad to...Adelaide." The name came with some effort and Adelaide rewarded Mildred with a delighted smile and a warm kiss.

As the kiss grew in passion and hunger, the two women stumbled over to the bed. Somehow, Adelaide's nightgown disappeared, but Mildred's uniform remained largely intact. Breathless, she began tugging at the dress. "You're a little overdressed aren't you?"

"Perhaps just a little," Mildred admitted, turning her back so Adelaide could unbutton her dress.

It was a trifle difficult to concentrate on undoing the buttons when such lovely, smooth skin was revealed each time she undid one, but Adelaide managed it. Once the last one was unfastened, she leaned forward to press a kiss to the back of Mildred's neck, just below her bun. Mildred let out a breathy moan as Adelaide carefully pushed the dress down until it was a heap of black fabric around her feet. Intrigued, Adelaide lightly nipped the same spot, her arms sliding around Mildred's waist. This elicited a gasp from her lover and she murmured in her ear, "I'll have to remember that spot."

"Perhaps I should wear my hair down from now on," Mildred replied as she turned in her arms.

Continuing to exchange heated kisses, they removed their undergarments and the pins and ribbons keeping their hair back. Finally, Adelaide lay back on the bed and Mildred hovered above her, both just gazing at each other. Though shorter, the other woman had a more generous figure and a really fantastic bosom. Adelaide was rather glad it was usually hidden by the modest uniform Mildred was required to wear. Her skin was naturally darker than Adelaide's and it bore marks of the struggle she'd had to endure to survive. Adelaide, on the other hand, had a more svelte build, with high, firm breasts and slender hips and thighs. Her skin was pale and smooth without a blemish or mark. Finally, Mildred had looked her fill and leaned down to kiss her lover as she gently cupped a breast in one hand. When the thumb teased the nipple to a hard point, she couldn't stop a gasp of surprised pleasure or the way her back arched to press her breast further into the teasing hand. "Millie!"

"Just enjoy, Addie," Mildred murmured against her lips, repeating the process with the other breast. "Let me love you."

Adelaide couldn't do much else, her head spinning from the sensations and the heat that seemed to be pooling low in her stomach. She ached, but she wasn't sure what it meant. "Just as long as you let me return the favour."

"I will." Smiling, Mildred trailed kisses down Adelaide's neck and chest until she took one breast into her mouth, suckling on the nipple like a child would. The sensation went straight to the place that she hardly dared touch, even in the dark of the night, and Adelaide gasped in surprised pleasure.

She gasped again when Mildred switched breasts and slid her hand down to that very spot where she ached, cupping her mound gently. Adelaide grabbed her lover's wrist and Mildred lifted her head to give her a curious look. "I've never really touched myself there. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely and you'll like it, trust me." Mildred's smile was positively filthy and Adelaide was so surprised by it that she let go of her lover's wrist.

The next moment, knowing fingers slipped between her folds and she had to cover her mouth

to stifle a surprised cry of pleasure. Something inside her wound tighter and tighter as waves of pleasure washed over her until that something snapped and she shook as her first orgasm crashed over her. Trembling a little with aftershocks, she watched as her lover brought her fingers to her mouth and licked them clean. "Isn't that unhealthy?"

"Not really." Mildred smiled and offered her hand to Adelaide. "Would you like a taste?"

After a moment, she took hold of Mildred's wrist and held it steady as she licked the last of her fluids from her fingers. It was a salty-sweet taste that was actually rather nice. Looking at her lover, she realised that her skin was flushed and her breathing quick. Shifting her fingers slightly so they rested on the pulse point, she felt the blood thrumming under her fingers. Smiling, she tugged on Mildred's wrist until she fell onto the bed beside her. At the questioning look in the brown eyes, she replied, "Your turn."

"Yes, please, Addie." Mildred's voice was husky with desire and Adelaide wasted no time putting what she'd just learned to good use. This was a wonderful start to their relationship and she intended for it to last many years. *I don't know who chose Mildred to be my maid at Kipton Park, but I owe them a huge thank-you...*

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This Song Is About Your Sister (What Happens At The Villa, Stays At The Villa)

by Tsukizubon Saruko (月図凡然る子)

illustrated by lihsa

The suspicion grew sort of gradually, a nagging doubt at the back of her mind, like thinking you'd left the oven on. First just a vague sense of something out of place, and then bit by bit the specifics began to fill in; and then it was a growing, solid certainty.

"Are we -- " Zoe started, and then she stopped playing entirely, resting her bass against her chest and pulling off one cup of her headset. "...Are we playing in the wrong key?"

Andy looked at her for a second, frowning, his fingers starting to falter as his concentration broke. "No. What? No."

"I think we are, though."

"No." But then he looked down at the fretboard, and his frown deepened. "Yes. ...Fuck."

"Wait, what happened?" And that was George too, at last, pulling off her own headset with her violin squeezed to her shoulder under her cheek. "...Is it *not* in F-sharp major, then? Because it has been the last three times we've gone through."

"No, it's not in bloody fucking..." Andy said, and the rest trailed off into a stormy inaudible mutter that seemed to go directly down to his guitar strings, as he grabbed up his capo and started tuning furiously. Zoe put a hand over her mouth to muffle her laugh; outside the soundproof glass, she could see Jack doing the same thing at the mixing console, and Bill standing over him just howling openly, in big inaudible whoops. Jack composed himself admirably, though, before pushing the intercom button.

"No worries, you guys, take your time," he said, his pleasant, flat Canadian accent ringing tinnily in Zoe's still-covered ear. "From the top, whenever you're ready."

"I just want to make it clear at this point that we are a brilliant, signed, and most of all *extremely* professional band," Bill's voice came right afterward, on a slight overlap, a little further away; Zoe looked up through the glass to see him addressing the Flip, holding it up to his face. "Extremely, very professional. We essentially could not be more professional, were we to try. I *have* tried, in fact. Daily. To no avail."

"Put my camera down, wanker," Zoe said, and laughed again when Bill looked at her with hurt, betrayed eyes and pressed the camera to his cheek, like they were dancing the tango. Andy rolled his eyes, but at least now he looked like he was fighting not to smile, too, instead of like a volcano about to go off. Jack took a breath to say something -- and then something made both him and Bill turn and look toward the door, and then he leaned in to the mic and turned on the intercom again.

"Actually, never mind, let's take five for now, okay? It sounds like Bran's back with Shelley."

They all stood up in a scuffle (except George, who'd been standing all along), setting aside and racking instruments, pulling off headsets. Once Andy opened the live room door, they could hear the distant babble of noise that must have tipped Jack off: mingled laughter from down the hall, a sweet high female voice rising over top of all the male ones. Andy led them in a line down around the corner to the kitchen, the rest falling in behind and Jack lingering to shut down some equipment, and then they were coming in on Shelley leaning on the countertop and laughing, all

thick ginger hair and freckled shoulders in a strapless summer dress, Bran hovering behind her with her suitcase in hand and smirking, Kenny and Lucas on about some stupid thing as usual. Andy interrupted the scene with a loud crow of "Shel!" and then they were a line of hugs instead, coming to her one after another, filing into the room. When Zoe was next, Shelley never hesitated, just folded her in too like they were old friends. The back of her dress was warm and thin under Zoe's hands, hair ticklish against the side of her neck.

Zoe had met Shelley a handful of times before she'd joined the band: mostly here and there at one of their gigs or over at Bran's, hovering quiet around the edges with a beer and a hopeful sort of smile. All she'd really thought of Shel for a long time was that their genes had been a lot kinder to her than they had to Bran. Shelley wasn't gorgeous exactly, but she was pretty, made a bit better job of the ginger and the pasty freckled face and the big pale eyes. ...Of course, Zoe supposed it might actually be "not having got hit in the nose with a football so much" that was what had been kinder to Shelley, but never mind. She seemed nice, and she was quiet mainly, and she was easy to miss, especially next to her brother.

Most of the times she'd actually spent any real time with Shelley had been since Shel had started playing with them, anyway -- including the incident this past winter. Zoe'd been on her way home from about four hours' worth of coffee and vegan biscotti at Tic with Edgar (laying out the next issue of Bloody Well and tossing ideas around for the webcomic they'd been meaning to do together for months now), when finally the increasingly incoherent tweets Bran had been putting out all afternoon had started to genuinely worry her, and she'd switched bus lines to stop by his place. Cardiff in February was mild but a soggy, windy mess; her hair had plastered wet to her cheeks by the time she'd got under the overhang of Bran's walk-up, in spite of her umbrella. And then when she'd buzzed, it hadn't even been Bran who'd opened the building door -- but Shelley, her hair back in sparkly little-girl barrettes that showed how she shaved it up the sides, wearing a pastel jumper and an uncertain, apologetic smile. "Hello."

"Er," Zoe said, when she opened the door, and then "Hi," because that didn't seem sufficient. Shel pulled the door wide to let her in, though, and she went gratefully enough. "...Is Bran not in? I thought he was."

Shel glanced over her shoulder, and then back at Zoe, looking more anxious than ever. Zoe had always sort of assumed confidence in Shelley because of her prettiness, and their having met mostly at bars when Shel was already slightly drunk and excited; but one-on-one in ordinary circumstances she actually seemed outright gawky, like a little deer. "Um, he is, he's just..." She seemed to debate with herself how to finish that, and then sighed, pushing hair out of her eyes. "He's *really* drunk. And John and Stephen from Xerox Lali came round to watch the football, only now he's not letting them leave til X Factor's done, and they've got a gig at the Buffalo Bar tonight and all, so..."

She trailed off, which more or less just left Zoe staring at her for a few moments. "Good lord," she said at last, and sidled past Shelley in the narrow hall, heading for the stairs in the lead with Shel's footsteps trailing behind. "Is there some sort of reason for this, apart from his having suddenly suffered a total mental collapse?"

"He keeps moaning about how lonely he is," Shelley's voice drifted to her over her shoulder, sounding timid. "That's all I know. He... well, you know he and Daphne broke up last week, yeah?"

That at least gave Zoe pause, and she turned back under the landing, struggling her bag back up on her arm. Actually, she *hadn't* known that, which was cause for slightly more concern. "Did they?"

"Yeah. ...Well, they'd been sort of on the rocks for a while. That was just -- you know, the end of it." All news to her, worse yet. Although she supposed she had thought it strange that Bran hadn't been hijacking the band's Twitter to hawk Turtle Society's new record like a snake oil salesman on amphetamines, like he had with the EP last year. "That's actually why I'm here, I said I was gonna stay at his place for a while, so I could keep an eye on him, like."

"That seems wise in theory," Zoe said, although it was already falling off to an absent murmur as she climbed the last few steps to Bran's door. It was slightly ajar from Shelley's exit, and she pushed it in on tented fingertips, calling through the gap. "Bran?"

"Izzat Zo?" a rather blurry and very cheerful voice called from the round the corner of the kitchen. "Zo! Come in here, you have got to see this. Kitty's on and I swear to Jesus, she's wearing a fucking sequined turd."

"Hello, Zoe," John said, at a more modest volume, after she'd arrived at what passed for Bran's sitting room in the midst of all this. Stephen lifted an amiable hand, as well. They were sitting at either end of the tan leather sofa with Bran in the middle, like two uncomfortable slices of bread on either side of a lolling and pink-faced stack of ham. There was a small forest of empty bottles sprawling out across the floorboards away from their feet. Zoe glanced over them all, and then the television, and then back, pulling wet hair out of the collar of her coat to dry.

"I understand there's a hostage situation in progress here," she said, eventually -- her eyes settling on Bran, who kept his stubbornly fixed. Behind her in the kitchen, she could hear Shel coming in too, closing the door. "Have you got any demands?"

Bran glanced at her at that, finally, then sprouted a lopsided bleary half-grin. "Get your top off?"

"Oh, extremely incorrect answer, I'm afraid." She patted John on the shoulder, then nodded toward the door when he looked up. "You two can go, if you need to. I'll handle this."

"*What?*" Bran demanded, outraged, even as both John and Stephen were getting hurriedly up, giving him bracing shoulder-slaps and mumbling apologies. Stephen paused on their way by her to lean in close, eyes solemn behind his thick-rimmed glasses.

"Thanks very much," he said, low and confidential under his soft Scottish burr. "Wasn't sure what we should do."

"Between the two of you, I think you could actually haul him out the window," Zoe pointed out. Stephen looked slightly abashed.

"Well, he kept threatening to kill himself..." He paused, considering. "Although that might have been 'cos Leeds won."

Zoe rolled her eyes, and grabbed at both their shoulders, turning and pushing them. "Out. Out with you. Have a good gig. I'll text if we find your spines lying about."

"Traitors!" Bran wailed from the sofa, on which he was now horizontal, but to her relief nobody paid him any mind. "Bloody *girls*, taking even me mates away from me..."

"Mates don't make mates watch X Factor," Zoe informed him, and dumped her bag off on the sofa next to his head, as the door closed behind half of the illustrious Xerox Lali. "God, look at you. You're a disaster, aren't you?"

"I'm always a disaster," Bran said, hiccuping, then sniffed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "Did you just come up to chase my mates away and tell me I'm awful? 'Cos I can do

that without you no problem."

She sat on the arm of the sofa next to him, leaning her elbow up on its back. "I came up because you've been really alarming on Twitter all day and I was worried about you, dickhead. Freeing the band you'd kidnapped was just an extra." She watched him for a moment, then added, carefully: "Your sister told me you and Daphne split up."

Bran made a thick, noncommittal noise with the side of his mouth that was buried in leather. Zoe decided, ultimately, that she shouldn't rush to interpret that.

"So is this all you've been doing?" she said, instead, after a moment. "Getting drunk and looking at terrible people on television, and making fun of them on the internet?"

"Crap telly comforts my sorrow," Bran said, mused into the sofa. Zoe sighed.

"Crap telly feeds on your sorrow. Your sadness gives crap telly strength. Crap telly is, basically, a dementor." No response. She yanked gently at the curls at the top of his head, which by now were a truly astonishing fright, making him grunt and swat at her hand. "Well, this isn't going to make you feel any better, you know."

"*Nothing's* going to make me feel better." He rolled his head down entirely into the cushion, wrapping his arms around it. "Maybe if I just lie here long enough I'll die."

Zoe looked at him for a long moment longer, and then her jaw set. She got to her feet again, and grabbed both Bran's wrists up from the sofa, hauling on them for all she was worth; he wasn't much taller than her but had to be some three stone up the scale, and all of it muscle, but she had determination on her side. "All right, that'll do. Up. You are going to get up and get dressed in something that's not got stains all over and drink some water and then get out of this disgusting fucking flat. We're gonna go to the Xerox gig, all right?"

Bran moaned, still with his head buried, much more insistently this time. "Don't want to. Want to die."

"No you don't. Half your fucking songs are about how much you don't want to die. Up, donkey." She pulled harder, at least managing to get his head and upper chest hanging off the sofa. Bran consented to roll onto his back, squinting truculently up at her with his arms splayed in her hands and his hair hanging down from his forehead. Zoe considered that progress enough for the time being, and let his wrists go, raising her voice to call back to the back bedroom. "Shelley? We're going to the Xerox gig at Buffalo in a bit, d'you want to come?"

"I am not," Bran said under her, and she glared down at him; but he *had* started pulling himself up to a sitting position now, which she felt was a minor victory.

"If you just made them listen to who you would and wouldn't shag on that awful show for a half-hour, the very least you can do is -- "

"Oh!" Shelley's voice drifted back then, though, cutting her off -- sounding so pleased and surprised she was a bit guiltily glad she'd asked. "Yeah, all right -- " Distant clankings and the sound of a door. "Just let me get something on that looks decent."

"You look fine," Zoe called back, although she assumed it was a lost cause. Bran had stopped moving, though, and she turned her attention back to him, grabbing a fistful of his t-shirt and hauling on him again. "All right, get a move on. Water first."

Once at the bar, Shelley had bought her a drink without comment, Bran had sobered up a bit at a time, and the three of them had ended up having a pretty good discussion about the upcoming Oscars at one point, popping back out into the fresh air between sets. And it'd been maybe a month later that Bran and Andy had really started talking in earnest, not just idly, about the new album.

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

At @xeroxlali 's gig at BB in Cardiff. Fuckin amazing show. Lads are AFIRE as always.

Zoe @zoespooky

@brannjonn See, didn't I tell you it'd be better than sitting home?

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

@zoespooky Pff, if you like GOING OUT and having a SOCIAL LIFE and shite ;) ach ye harpy

See Shel @seeshelrun

@brannjonn @zoespooky who tweets when they're standing right next to each other?! <3

Zoe @zoespooky

@seeshelrun You, apparently?

They managed to put in a couple more hours' recording that day, in the end, before finally Jack had to go catch the ferry back to Santorini, where the friends he was staying with lived -- in spite, as usual, of their offers of dinner and the fold-out couch. Bill and George took over the kitchen, and together managed to make a very passable traditional moussaka (which Bill insisted on calling by name loudly, repeatedly, and as exaggeratedly Manchester-ly as possible), as well as an untopped vegan edition that was ultimately labeled, via Post-it, 'BRAN'S SHITTY MOOSAKA :)'. They'd been mostly eating just sprawled out over the kitchen table and the stools at the counter and the couches in the sitting room, but in honour of Shelley's arrival Kenny and Lucas went out on the patio and moved the tables back together, picnic-fashion, so they could all fit. Bran stood by with a beer, and supervised and harangued them until finally Lucas let out a primal scream and chased him, laughing wildly, into the pool area and out of view.

"*Shelley's -- first -- record!*" Andy intoned with his water glass lifted, once they were all seated and Shelley was pink-faced and giggling at the head of the table, wearing a lopsided tiara George had made her out of tinfoil. They all followed his example, raising an odd assortment of beverages, which turned into a chaos of people reaching across each other and clinking. "We'll get the keyboards set up tomorrow, if you're ready to get started."

"Boo, record talk at the supper table, hiss," Zoe said, and threw a potato wedge at him. It landed neatly in the middle of his plate, and he turned wide eyes up to her and patted soft somber applause with his fingers on his palm.

"I can start whenever you want!" Shelley said, after she'd recovered a bit, and when Zoe turned back to her she looked all in nervous earnest, in spite of her smile. "...It's *so* pretty here, though, I wouldn't say no to just mucking about for a day or so."

"Take your time," George said, soothing; she was further up the table, at Shel's elbow. "Kenny and Bill have still got to do their bits on this batch, and Jack was saying he'd like Bran to lay down the lead vocals before we do any backing. You can settle in a bit." Shelley gave her a small grateful smile, and Zoe was pleased to see that although Andy looked slightly put out, he kept quiet, too. In between, Lucas brightened, too, looking round.

"We ought to go to the beach tomorrow, Shel," he said, grinning at her around Bran. "It's great, it's still not really in season so if you go at the right time, it's dead quiet."

"Ah, that sounds good," Kenny said, and Zoe elbowed him.

"Yeah, except *you've* still got recording to do." He gave her an injured look and then elbowed back, and they kept that up for a moment even as she kept talking. "I might go along, though, if you wouldn't mind. I've not got out much since we've been here."

"That'd be great," Shelley said, and when Zoe looked back at her she did look genuinely pleased.

They went out early the next morning, before Jack had even arrived, first to the beach and then for a walk along footpaths that led far up the cliff walls above the water, much further up than they actually went. George ended up coming along with them, and she and Zoe sat on the sand and talked while Lucas and Shelley messed about in the water, then followed behind while they led the way on the hike. Zoe kept the Flip out almost the whole time, panning over the water, the trails, the cliffs, the distant buildings. And sometimes, as they made their way up the path, just on Shelley's back ahead of her: the freckles and beginnings of sunburn on her shoulders above her terry cover-up, the flip-flops dangling from her hand above her bare feet, the star tattoo on the back of her ankle and the rose one peeking around the edge of her bicep. The tendrils of wet hair dangling down from the clip she'd knotted it all up into, sticking to her neck and glistening in the clear Mediterranean sun.

When Kater had left the band, year before last, all the reasons why that she'd told them had been pretty mundane: she wanted to go back to uni; she wanted to finish her degree in physics and maybe go on to graduate school; she'd never planned on just being in a band her whole life, not even from the start. Zoe had supposed all of that made sense, but a part of her had also wondered if that was all there was to it. Kater had always been a gentle, sort of soft-spoken girl once off the stage, once she was out from behind the keyboards and not plastered sweat-sticky in shitty bar lighting, wailing into a microphone cheek-to-cheek with Bran. She was thick-thighed and curvy, quite a bit heavier than even Zoe, let alone George, and maybe there were only so many YouTube comments and foul message-board postings calling you "the fat one" or "biggun" that a person could reasonably be expected to take.

It wasn't just Kater, of course; there was more than enough to go around. "when did zoe start getting so hot" on their videos, "What'd you do to your hair? I liked it better red," at the merch table, "Rather fuck the blonde than the skinny one" on an old one of their Last.fm photos. "If nobody actually gives a shit what I do in the *band*, I'd like to know about it now," she had said, backstage at a dive bar in Edinburgh, smiling through all her teeth. "Like, if I could just leave my bass at home, I wish somebody'd just tell me. It's a really heavy thing to be lugging around for no fucking reason."

"Ah, they're just idiots, Zo," Andy had told her, looking uncomfortable in the extreme, "don't pay 'em any mind, it's not worth it," but the problem was that to her it seemed like, demographically speaking, the idiots were too much of a majority to be so summarily dismissed. But that was all any of the boys wanted to do, of course, was dismiss them. Wave them off, like it was stupid of her not to be able to just ignore all that shit that *they* could so easily ignore, just because it didn't actually affect them at all and did her. They all knew it was shit, but somehow they seemed to think that should be the end of it, just knowing. They all poked fun at the creepy

and the stupid, making tweets and posting pictures of parodic laddishness, but in the back of her mind she couldn't help thinking that imitation was a pretty piss-poor form of censure. They all meant well, and they *weren't* idiots, and she loved them every last one, but even all of that couldn't always erase the gulf between meaning and doing.

It *was* a lads' band, after all; you couldn't really escape that. Bran wrote the words, on and on about football and death and falling in and out of love with girls, and Andy was the master of where they went and what they sounded like musically, and they made disparaging cracks behind each others' backs about the contributions of "that handsome fuck" and "that ugly fuck" respectively. "A bit like Lennon and McCartney, if they'd both said 'fuck' a lot more," Zoe had confided to Bill, as they'd sat sharing a joint out back of a club in Munich not long after he'd started touring with them, around when Kater had left. Bill had frowned, thoughtfully, cocking his head.

"...Vladimir?" he'd said, after a pregnant pause, on account of being an arse. She'd trod on his foot.

And now George was leaving, too; none of them had been talking about it much, but this record would be her last with them. Going back to university, up top, and maybe getting away from all this shit underneath. It would be just her and Shelley now, for girls in the band, and maybe only that until Shelley got fed up, too. Or maybe until Zoe did, although she couldn't say for certain which one would come first. Kater had moved back to London after finishing her last year of school, but on a visit to Cardiff she had met up with Zoe for lunch one day; she'd looked vibrant and happy, and *grown-up*, out of their twenty-something Never-Never-Land of bars and zines and parties and gigs and on to the real world that adults with jobs inhabited. It had left Zoe wondering what exactly was wrong with *her*, that *she* didn't want to go back to school, had in fact hated it while she was there and was just as happy to be out; that *she* couldn't even picture herself falling neatly into that kind of a life, the kind that seemed to have made Kater find an inward glow instead of just reflected stage-light. She wrote paid magazine articles and alternative press pieces, put out indie pubs and could sometimes sell a short story, picked up the occasional part-time hours as a barista or a bookshop clerk, and that plus the band and indulgent parents back home had always been more or less enough to keep her afloat. She supposed one day she would need more, but more and more these days she found herself troubled that so far, this had always been all she'd wanted. Particularly when it meant that *this* could get away with treating her some of the ways it did.

At a gig in Detroit, on their last U.S. tour, a balding man who had to be ten years older than her had pushed to the front of the crowd between songs just to yell up at her, "*Too many tattoos!*" For a second she hadn't believed she could have heard him right; and then her mouth had gone sour, hot pissed-off bile churning around in her stomach. "Too little hair," she'd snapped back at him, beyond the stage footlights, but it'd been no good, honestly. The gig had been spoiled, the fun drained out of the rest of the set. She'd slumped off the stage at the end in a mood, written a pissed-off tweet about it backstage, then written a pissed-off blog entry about it later in the van, lit up in the glow of her laptop screen from where it balanced on her knees. She didn't care what he or anybody thought about the spread of ink downward from her shoulder, growing into something closer to a full sleeve, but it was the *tone* of it that rankled and dug under the skin. The casual ownership that it implied; the assumption that she existed to please, a visual feast that had been bought and paid for. ...And, of course, possibly the fact that everyone else in the band -- even Shelley and George, it seemed, or even if not they at least were keeping quiet -- seemed to

think she was overreacting, trying to make their nervous joking way around it instead of getting angry about it themselves. Like they couldn't even understand what she was upset about.

"Doesn't it get to you?" she'd asked Jenny when she'd come over to Birmingham for the afternoon one time, playing *Left 4 Dead* on Jenny's XBox and drinking gallons of the unbelievable rooibos tea lattes Jenny'd made in a saucepan over her ancient stove. Jenny played bass in *Yellow Peril*, who they'd all made friends with at a festival a few years back, and who'd opened for them loads of times since; she and Zoe hung round a lot, and had snogged a few times, although not much had ever really come of it. "I mean, you lot are always saying how rough the crowds were around here, starting out. Didn't they give you a hard time?"

Jenny'd shrugged, lining up a pipe bomb shot on a tank from a safe distance. "Sometimes, a bit. But I find what helps a lot is to go round everywhere with a rabid little punk and a really tall Black fella." She'd paused a moment, concentrating. "I mean, all right, Trip'd actually rather write you a sonnet about how you've done harm to your neighbour and should feel ashamed of yourself than ever get in a punch-up, but just on a glance he spooks yer racists good and proper."

Zoe's startled look had managed to get her character killed, although she wasn't too concerned. "...They stick up for you, you mean?"

"Oh, yeah. One time I had on a skirt and some dickhead in the front wouldn't shut up about how I ought to get my knees apart, and finally he got in too close and Nik kicked him right in the face. I heard he wound up in hospital getting his jaw wired." She'd shot a kind, slightly abashed little smile sidelong at Zoe then -- perhaps sensing a bit of her growing twinge of envy. "But you know... that's not just about my lads. We're not big like you lot, we can still get away with that stuff."

"We're not big," Zoe had said, blinking, half a skeptical grin trying to pull at her mouth. Jenny'd shrugged again.

"You can afford to do a U.S. tour every year," she'd said. "You're signed. You've got a song on an advert. ...I dunno, maybe it just looks big from down where we are."

Zoe'd had to sit and chew on that for a bit. It had been hard to put her finger, back then, on exactly what it was about that that had bothered her. "...Is that good, then? I've sort of lost track."

"Depends on whether you think it's good." There was a short choral burst and the growing sound of sobbing from the television, and Jenny cursed blisteringly under her breath, distracted for several minutes before returning to her thread. "It's meant to be what we're in it for, I s'pose, but I wouldn't think you were mental if you wanted out of it, either. It *is* rough, it's rough all over, not just in the shitty little pubs. And if you've got a label and a big name in the mix to worry about, it seems like that'd just mean there's less you can do about it, yeah?"

"I don't know," Zoe said, and sighed, setting down her controller; there was no need for it until she respawned anyway. "I don't even know if I do want out of it. Sometimes I'm sick of all the shit, but... ergh. I couldn't just walk out on them, anyway."

"You could, if you had to." She glanced at Jenny, found her eyes still on the screen. "They're your band. They're not your family. If you've got other things you need to do -- then you do what you've got to."

Which was all true, Zoe supposed. But somehow, now matter how she turned it all over in her mind later, none of it quite felt like it touched on the point, exactly. At least, not for her.

"Could we possibly, at some point," George said, sounding weary, from behind Zoe's

shoulder, "have the guitars back in the studio, so that people might actually *use the shower* if they'd like to?"

Kenny responded by furrowing his brow, and arching his back to thrust his guitar forward in her direction, playing several more especially pointed licks. Or rather, *clicks*, since there wasn't an outlet anywhere near the bathtub he was standing in, and the best his guitar would produce was the faint tinny twangs of an unplugged electric. There was a burst of masculine snickering also from behind Zoe, and she had to bite her own lip even as she was zooming out. Unlike the remodeled loo downstairs, the tub in here was a charming free-standing claw-foot, which she thought really heightened the effect.

"Hang on just a moment, this could be important," she said. "I can't be sure, but... I *think* he may be trying to communicate with us, in his strange, primitive language."

Kenny twanged another chord, with a triumphant enthusiasm the sound really failed to match. "Don't be absurd," Bill said from out in the hallway this time, loudly scoffing. "Everyone knows guitar players don't have souls!" There was even louder laughter after a pause, and Zoe swiveled the Flip around to find Andy regarding Bill deadpan with folded arms, Bill gesturing at him as the camera found them. "Oh, no, and he's standing right here..."

"So what I'm hearing you say is that you won't be needing those *three guitars* you brought in your luggage," Andy said, albeit the last part ended up a bit muffled as Bill moved in with arms wide and then crushed Andy's head in to his chest. You forgot sometimes how ludicrously tall Bill was, until he did things like that. He was making shushing noises now, stroking Andy's hair, looking far-off and saintly.

"Don't fight my love, Andrew." He bent in to press a solemn kiss into the top of Andy's head, eyes misty. "Give in to my love."

Zoe was about to say something to that, having just barely won the battle for her composure again, but then Shelley and Bran emerged from the other end of the hall, passing by the cluster of them all to the stairs. Zoe followed them with the camera now, coming back out of the loo's doorway and into the hall. "Are you two headed to the studio, then?"

"Yeah, Jack's a proper slavedriver," Bran said over his shoulder, rolling his eyes. Shelley nodded, at least pausing to half-turn.

"Yeah, he said he wanted to try a session with both of us together..." She peered round Zoe's shoulder, trailing off, then back at all of them with an incredulous smile. "...Is there a reason Kenny's got his guitar in the tub?"

"I like the optimism of that," Bill said, as Andy gave in and hugged him round the middle, then let go slapping his back. "That there might actually be a reason why that was happening. I envy that very much."

"Is it all right if I come listen in?" Zoe said, ignoring him, following them down the top of the stairs. Shelley glanced back, starting to speak and then interrupting herself with an uncertain little laugh.

"Yeah, it's all r-- oh God, can we not have the camera, please? I've not even got makeup on."

"You look fine," Zoe said, but she thumbed the recording button anyway, dropping the Flip back to her side. "Are you nervous? Your first big day of recording and all..."

"I -- dunno, should I be?" She looked more uncomfortable than ever, when Zoe caught a glimpse of her face in profile as they rounded the bottom of the stairs, although she was laughing. "It's fine. It's no big deal, it's fine."

Zoe had been opening her mouth to press the question -- but the fine edge on Shelley's voice

caught her up short, blinking. She ended up just following them to the studio, without another word.

Jack went over notes with them for a few minutes in the control room, and then Bran went in the isolation booth, Shel setting up instead at her keyboards in the live room. It was only during the notes process that Zoe actually realised what track they were working on today. She'd played on it already, of course, but sitting around and listening to the *words* was really another thing... But even though her jaw set a bit, she guessed she'd signed on for it herself, and just stayed in her chair when the two of them went into the trenches. It wasn't like she'd ever *said* anything about the stupid song, and if she got up and left again when she'd said she was going to sit in, Shelley might take it the wrong way. And it wasn't such a big deal, anyway, really. Nothing to get fussed about, at least.

So she sat in the chair behind Jack's at the console, and listened as he brought up the instrumentals he'd put together from what they'd done so far, counted off the beats in her head and noted the places where something sounded a bit funny, to maybe bring up later. You could never really enjoy listening to your own band. She watched the side of Bran's face in the booth, and then the back of Shelley's head in the room, through the glass, as Bran picked up the vocals and then Shel backed him up. Both of them all breath and effort and mouths moving apparently soundlessly, their voices only brought to her by a whole third room's worth of electrical equipment.

...And in her rental car --

Or did she borrow yours? --

Along with the door chime

She screamed in 3/4 time,

She could have danced all night, we waltzed until she said she was sore

I drove her home at quarter to four

Whereupon she let me in her back door

But when she saw my face in the cold blue dawn light, I could see in her eyes she wished I'd stayed behind

This song is about your sister

And all the places that I've kissed her

When you see her don't tell her I've missed her

You know I wouldn't want to be out of line...

It wasn't Bran's best work, she supposed -- nor his worst, definitely, but... well, never mind. It didn't matter. She focused on Shelley's voice, instead of the lyrics; it was interesting to have it isolated at all, for really the first time ever, not drowned out by the rest of the band like in rehearsals and at gigs. Strange as it seemed, Shel's speaking voice was higher than her singing voice, which was around the same pitch as Kater's had been -- which had worked out well for them, all things considered, at least in terms of doing their old stuff live with a new singer. Shel's was sweeter, though, not as brassy, and blended with Bran's far better than Kater's ever had, which was why they had always split the vocals rather than trying for the harmonies that Bran and Shel could pull off. The sound was pleasant, if very different from where they'd been on their last record: more sophisticated, Zoe thought. Andy had taken best advantage of all the

band's changes and upheavals over the past few years, moving them forward to a kind of maturity.

"That's really nice, isn't it?" Jack murmured to her, swiveling in his chair, keeping his voice just loud enough for her to hear but low enough not to cover the playback. "That's why I wanted to hear them together, I wanted to get the feel of it. It's great, though, they just resonate so beautifully."

Zoe nodded, turning her dormant camera over in her hands. "Blood harmony, don't they call that?" He nodded back, smiling. "Shelley's doing really well, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah. Like an old pro. You'd never know she hadn't done it before." They arrived at the second bridge, and Jack leaned forward and pressed the intercom, making both of them falter and look up. "That sounds incredible, you guys. Really incredible. Could you give me the first verse one more time, and -- Bran, really *punch* it out. Make sure you're really getting all your consonants, really get your teeth into them. Having the hi-hat in there just tangles things up a little, is all. Okay?"

"Was that all right on my end?" Shelley asked -- twisting her head back so she could look through the glass and talk into the microphone at the same time. Her eyes somehow looked even bigger than ever. Jack gave a thumbs-up, holding his arm up above the mixing board, and she offered a tentative smile.

"Fantastic, Shelley. Good strong breath support, keep it up." He leaned forward again, tapping away at adjustments. "All right, back to the top, ready? Here we go."

After a while, Zoe picked back up her camera, and quietly turned it back on. It couldn't be so bad, she reasoned with herself; Shelley's face was what she'd been concerned about, and it was turned away.

They all went in the pool in the evening, taking turns while the boys messed about with trying to barbecue, and mostly made a big silly botch of it like only a bunch of city lads strutting and puffing and trying to prove their manliness could. Zoe treaded water halfway between the deep and shallow ends, and laughed so hard she almost sank when, after a rousing game of pirate fencing with pool noodles, Shelley managed to knock Kenny off the diving board and into the water hard enough to make him yowl about his stinging belly. Lucas took her up and carried her in triumph on his tattooed shoulders around the shallow side, while Kenny hauled himself out to collapse on the deck and moan, and Zoe watched them, grinning. Lucas and Shelley had always got on well; not only had they both joined up around the same time, as the thing with Archie had happened not long after Kater had left -- although Zoe and most everyone else liked to think about it much less -- but they were also the two youngest. Which set them apart from Bill, even though he'd also joined them that same year, since he was older than the band's average: almost thirty. And Kenny hung round with them a lot, too, of course -- but Kenny'd always *felt* young to Zoe, in spite of being her age.

She'd got back up on the deck herself, and was drying on a towel against the wall of the villa a bit apart from the barbecuing mayhem, when the sound of wet feet slapping on the concrete made her squint up into the low-hanging sun. Shelley was standing over her, damp and with her own towel tied like a sarong over the bottoms of her vintage-style two-piece. Bare, her belly curved out in a slight, plump pot that her choice of tops usually disguised, and another tattoo could be seen with it bare: an ornate map compass just inside the curve of one hip, disappearing

under the fabric.

"Can I join you?" she said, and Zoe smiled and shifted over on the towel, making room for her to sit down. Shelley's bare upper arm grazed hers as she settled in, cool to the touch and light enough to tickle. She pulled up her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, and seemed to think for long moments before looking over at Zoe again. "I, um..." Shel bit her lip, smiled, leaned her cheek on her towel-covered knee. "I sort of wanted to apologise."

Zoe blinked, then frowned. "For what?"

"I, er..." Shelley hesitated a moment, and then turned her head on her knees, resting her chin between them instead and staring out at the pool. "I sort of snapped at you, a bit, this morning? Or... maybe I didn't exactly, I dunno." Another anxious laugh. "I was just -- I *was* really nervous. And it put me a bit on edge, and I just... yeah." She tweezed with two fingers at her hair, where it clung wet to the side of her cheek. "I just felt bad about it."

"It's all right," Zoe said, watching the side of her face. Shelley glanced over at her again, then dropped her gaze, still smiling. "It's strange, though -- I was thinking, once you got in the studio, you really didn't seem nervous at all. You seemed really comfortable. Jack was even saying to me how you're a natural."

Shelley pinkened a little at that; the colour turned up easily on her pale skin, as much as it did on Bran's when he was drunk or angry. "Oh, I dunno -- I mean -- I mean, when it's in the *studio*, yeah, then it's fine. When I'm actually doing it, it's like I can stop thinking about it, yeah? I don't get so worried." She laced her fingers together on her shins, restlessly, first one way and then another. "That bit's fine, the -- actually playing bit, it's fine."

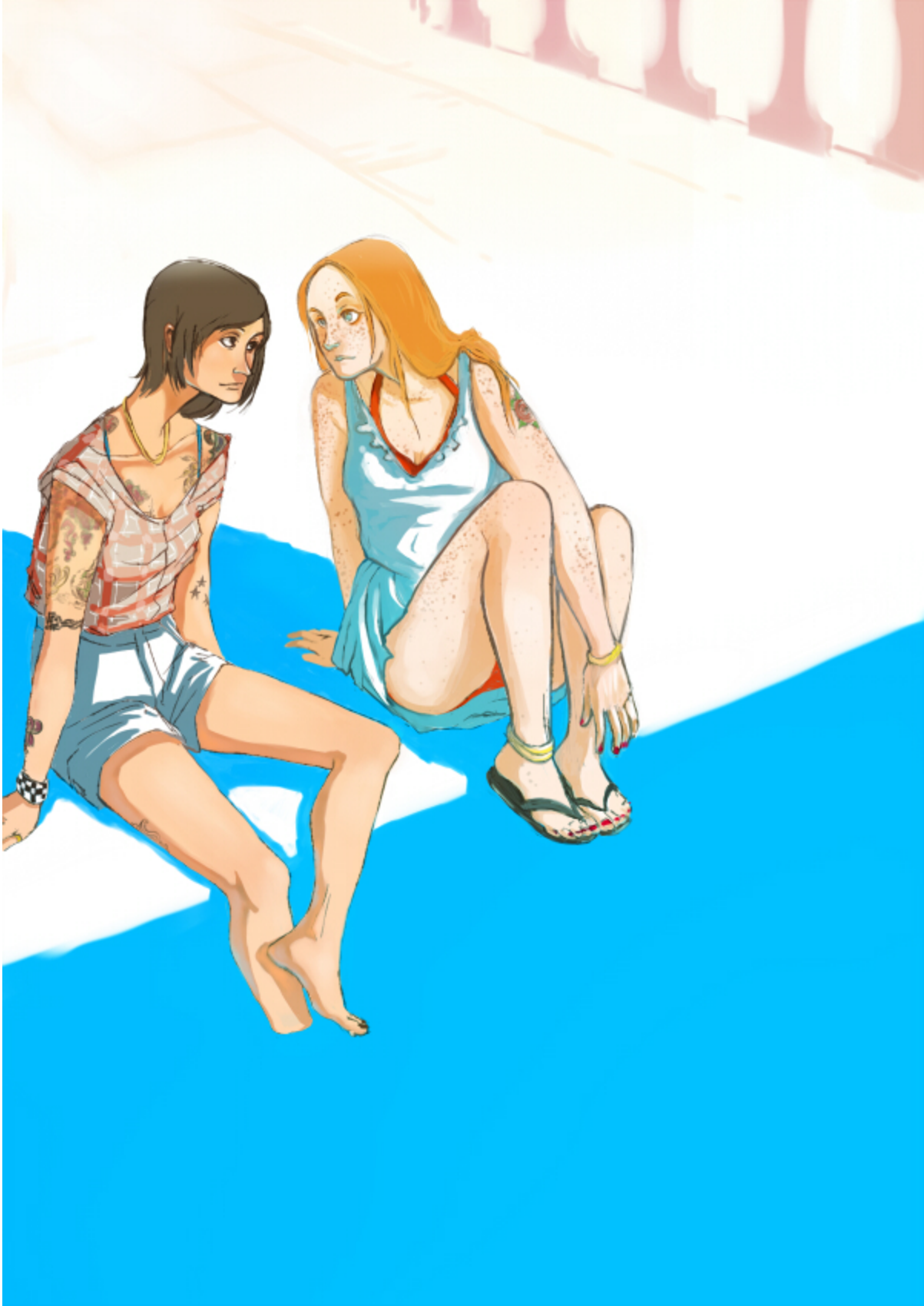
"So what are you nervous about, then?" Zoe caught her eye again, and smiled, wringing a little more water out of the ends of her hair. "Isn't that the hardest part, actually playing?"

"No, no -- " She laughed, leaning back against her hands. "No, it's the *easiest*. I mean, I've *been* doing that, on tour and all. It's... all the other bits, leading up to it, that's what I get nervous about." Zoe frowned at that again, and Shelley looked down and bit her lip a moment before squinting back up, shy and smiling. "It's stupid, but... when me and Bran were kids, he'd hang round with me when it was just the two of us. But if he ever had his friends over, it was -- you know, in his room with the door shut, no little sisters allowed. So now -- this is *so* stupid." She laughed again, ducking her head momentarily down into the circle of her arms. "But being in the band, it's still like... you know. Like he finally let me come in, yeah?"

It took Zoe a long time to be able to think of an answer for that.

"It's not stupid," she said, finally. Looking out at Bran and Andy arguing in front of the barbecue pit, Bill standing just beyond them, alternately drinking a glass of red wine and tooting serenely on a kazoo he had out for God only knew what reason; George sitting with her feet in the pool, laughing and holding up a hand to protect from splashes as Lucas and Kenny apparently tried to drown each other. "...It has to come as a fairly disappointing reward for that much patience, though, I must say."

"It's the best thing that's ever happened to me," Shelley said. Her voice was quiet, but so full of feeling Zoe looked round at her again, surprised; and found herself caught wrong-footed, and even a little guilty.



The band had formed at university, starting in Zoe's first year: in its very earliest stage, with just her on bass, Kenny on guitar, and Archie on drums. It hadn't even had a name at that point, much less anything resembling "gigs" or a rehearsal "schedule" or, in fact, much in the way of "music," if she were to be honest. They'd mainly just been three friends who'd vaguely learnt instruments at school, occupying a practice room in the music building on weekend nights to drink too much vodka and make a lot of noise. Anyone could have told you there'd been a number of problems with their sound, but probably first among them was the fact that among the three of them, they'd had neither anyone who could write lyrics nor, indeed, anyone who could sing them. Then Kenny had met Andy in a bar near campus (to hear Andy tell it, he'd overheard Kenny viciously slagging off The Postal Service to some mates and formed an instant admiration), and he'd wound up joining them and eventually sort of taking over them, which had really come as something of a relief. Andy had come with a lot of ideas; his first had been that they were going to do sort of prog-rock ambient soundscapes, and he'd written a lot of pretentious and baffling lyrics that consisted of maybe three unrelated sentences per song that he sang very slowly and over and over. And they'd all more or less gone along with that, if only for lack of anything better to do.

After finally hitting a practice session where Zoe and Kenny hadn't been able to do anything but laugh hysterically every time Andy opened his mouth, though, he'd first had a minor tantrum, and then, gradually, begun to see reason; and the band had gained more members, until they were making jokes about being really more of an orchestra. First George, as a friend of Archie's, then Kater, introduced by Andy, and then only a few days later Bran, whom Zoe had known from her poetry writing class. He'd asked her out in the second week of classes, actually, and she'd turned him down, citing her then-boyfriend -- but somehow that hadn't turned out to be as awkward as she might have expected in the long term, at least not for her. She'd made indifferent marks in the course and been mostly indifferent to it in general, and Bran had also been fairly unmemorable at the time, quiet and plain and a bit truculent -- but he *had* impressed her with his writing, when they'd workshopped together. He'd been not amazing but *good*, good enough at least to have you remembering bits of his phrasing days later, and his lyrics turned out to be even better: sharp and clever and droll, self-involved and self-deprecating at once, despairing over the pointlessly miniscule and amused by the devastatingly tragic. He'd given them a voice that Andy had helped them develop the perfect sound to match, urging them to a sort of manic, joyful clamor with a fine edge of desperation on it. A Pitchfork writer, amid other uncharacteristically lavish praise, had described their first album as sounding "like laughing your head off while jumping off a cliff," and Zoe had loved that, had bookmarked that review to read it over and over again.

Bran's singing, on the other hand, might not have been much impressive, comparatively speaking -- but even so, and even the lyrics apart, nobody who'd seen them play had ever really questioned why Bran had ended up the frontman. Put on stage with a band behind him, he'd discovered in himself a potent and rather startling charisma, a natural showmanship that had been striking even in its rawest form, even before years of practice and conscious effort had refined it. It was hard to even put your finger on why, but when Bran was on stage, you couldn't really look at anyone else. For all Kater's voice had been about ten times more pleasant to listen to, she'd always sort of faded into the background behind him, when they'd been singing

together. ...On the other hand, despite Shelley's meekness in person, Zoe thought in recent years that some of the effect might be genetic; that *Shel*, by contrast, might have the potential to be able to hold her own. Just like Bran, when you put her up front and under the lights, Shelley seemed like she could change into someone new.

They'd started getting gigs bare months after they'd all started practicing together, first just at parties around the university and then spreading out into the pubs around the city, and further beyond. Friends with more enthusiasm than talent had produced a few makeshift singles for them, which had spread quickly online; then they'd landed a record deal with an independent label, and that'd really been the end of the beginning of the whole thing.

"You reckon we've sold out?" Archie had asked her, grinning, as they'd waited on the curb to split a cab home from their first day of real, in-a-studio-and-everything recording ever. She'd snorted, breath steaming in the cold and wet, hands shoved in her coat pockets and bouncing on her toes.

"I don't think you can have sold out if you've not actually made any money."

"Maybe we're the first ever to have pulled it off," he'd said, and she'd laughed, grabbing his arm for extra warmth. It was a day she'd once looked back on fondly, could now only regard with sad suspicion. Once you knew, you had to start remembering all of your past conversations that way: wondering if he'd been using even then, wondering if he'd even been high that day, that afternoon, that moment. Everything passed through the fine-toothed comb; nothing was spared, no matter how you hated yourself for it. It was like the coke itself got spread across the lens of your memory, ground in there until it dulled the picture in every scene, turned it a different colour than before.

The bottom line of it was, Archie had never wanted to be famous. Nor had she. Nor had any of them, really; except maybe Bran and Andy, and even they sort of wincingly and self-loathingly, walking a fine tightrope of too-cool irony between their arrogance and the insecurities it covered over. And honestly, they *weren't* famous, not really -- not even now.

But she could admit to herself that, at the very least, maybe Jenny had been right. Maybe even if they weren't famous, they might, at least relatively speaking, be starting to be *big*. And really, wasn't *big* more than enough to be going on with?

"Oh, I dunno," Shelley said, looking alarmed at the very idea. "*Is* it, d'you think?"

Zoe shrugged a bit, sipping her coffee. It always sort of bothered her when people talked about it like that -- like it was something that was just set in stone one way or another, like it had an on-off switch, and had to be arbitred by someone. ...Although somehow when it came from Shelley, it didn't as much. "That's what I'm asking you. ...It doesn't bother you?"

"It -- hasn't so far, I s'pose." She leaned back on the counter, and then pushed herself up to sit on it, her bare feet dangling in mid-air. She had tiny and very white feet, their toenails currently painted a spangly purple. "Well, if it *is*, I really don't think it's on purpose. Bran's really good about that sort of thing, I think he knows more than I do."

"Well -- I don't know, really. I guess 'sexist' wasn't quite what I meant to say, but..." Zoe sighed, and turned to prop her bottom against the kitchen counter as well. They were the only two down in the kitchen and sitting room area today; Lucas was laying down drums for the next set of tracks, Andy and Bill listening in, Bran shut up in his and Kenny's room finishing up some tweaks to the lyrics, George and Kenny gone into the town for some sight-seeing. "It's the tone of

it, you know? I mean, I expect that's what he was aiming for, but even so, that doesn't make it *good*. It's just so..." She grasped, but couldn't quite reach it: the shit the song conjured up, the balding dickhead at the Detroit show, that one vile 'lads' shop' putting out flippant t-shirts about rape, the whole complex of foul expectations and entitlements that went with that sort of sense of *possession*, even when it was all joshing and winking-and-nudging. It wouldn't seem to come into words. Shelley, though, she found had come to peer down at her while she was thinking it over, biting her lip and hesitating.

"If you really don't like it -- have you said anything to Bran?" she asked, at last. Zoe blew out another breath that ruffled up her bangs, scrunching one hand back around her hair.

"No... You're right, I suppose I should, but -- I don't know. If nobody else has a problem with it... and I don't even know if I have a *real* problem with it, honestly, or if I'm just making one out of nothing sometimes. ...I just don't want to get him into a temper for nothing, you know?"

She half-expected Shelley to give her the rebuke she really deserved for that -- to find her scowling or hands-on-hips when she looked back -- but instead Shel was nodding, vigorously enough to make her hair flap on her shoulders. "No, yeah, I do." She glanced around, at the stairs, and then leaned in a little and lowered her voice. "He's been a bit off even since we've been here, don't you think? Sort of moody? ...I'd thought he might cheer up, working on the record."

Zoe nodded, tilting her coffee cup slightly to watch the surface of the liquid shift. "He was even before you got here. Hasn't changed much." She shrugged, her mouth quirking. "And I'm afraid it hasn't escaped my notice all the songs on the whole record are about miserable breakups and/or girls being awful."

"Well, he's never been a one for bottling it up," Shelley said, in a tone so matter-of-fact it made Zoe huff laughter out into her cup, blowing back coffee-scented air. "...I don't think it's just that, though, either."

That dried the laughter from Zoe's throat. Gradually she lowered the cup again, staring down into it. "No," she said, at length. "I know. ...Has he ever -- seen a psychiatrist, or anything? Got help about it?"

"...I really can't even picture Bran going to a psychiatrist," Shelley said, after a long, thoughtful pause. Another helpless little laugh burst its way out of Zoe, and she nodded, head hung forward.

"No, now that you've said it, nor can I." She wiped at her face with the back of her hand. "He'd have one jumping out the window in a couple months, anyway."

Shelley laughed, but quieted and went thoughtful again before long, taking another moment to speak again. "Actually, I dunno if it's even really that bad. Most of the time, anyway? He's... good and then he's not, that's all I know. He's always been that way." She shrugged, tugging at the hem of her skirt where it fell across her knees. "Sometimes I think it's just, like -- he's really clever, and he's *too* clever, yeah? ...He thinks too much, maybe. He's so clever he makes himself miserable."

...Well, and it wasn't exactly like Zoe couldn't relate to that.

They stood and sat in silence for a moment, Zoe contemplating her coffee, Shel twisting her fingers round her knees. Finally, Zoe turned so that she could lean her elbow on the counter instead; she wasn't as tall as Shelley, she couldn't even have got up there if she'd tried, she didn't think. "Do you know," she said, after another second's pause, "that in all the time we've known each other, I don't think you and I have had a *single* conversation longer than, 'Can you play me

an E, please' that hasn't wound up being about Bran?"

Shelley blinked at her, wide-eyed, and then tried a timid smile. "I... really? ...That can't be right, can it?"

"I think it is." She sipped her coffee again, looking off to one side while she thought, then back at Shel. "...I don't know if you've heard of this, but for years there was this American comic called Dykes To Watch Out For," and she wasn't looking closely but she thought Shelley's eyes might have widened a bit at that, "that put out the idea of a test for films, to work out how they did on gender bias. There had to be, er -- " Ticking off on her fingers, sticking them out as she went along. "Two female characters -- who have a conversation -- about something other than a man. People call it the Bechdel Test, after the author." She paused, and then met Shelley's eyes again, smiling with a slight edge. "In the over a year that we've known each other, I actually don't believe you and I have quite passed the Bechdel Test, in real life. So that's -- really depressing, isn't it?"

"I... guess so." Shelley kicked her feet a moment, crossing them over each other. "What'd you rather talk about, then?"

Zoe considered that a moment -- then set down her coffee cup, and turned to fully face Shel. "You," she said, smiling. "I want to know all about Shelley Platt -- not Shelley Platt Bran Platt's little sister, not Shelley Platt who does keyboards and vocals in Los Gauchos, just... the standard-issue one."

"I, er -- " Shel looked deeply alarmed for a moment, and then laughed, ducking down her head to push at her hair. "Oh God, you're not going to get out that camera, are you?"

"No. No, no. This is just for me. Me personally." Grinning now, both of them laughing a little. "It's not hard, what are you being shy about? What are you interested in? What do you like?"

"Oh, I dunno... I mean, I *know*, I'm just on the spot all of a sudden, so I can't think of anything -- " Shel put a hand over her mouth, covering her giggles. "All right. Erm. What do I like. Well... my dog!" She brightened suddenly, straightening up a bit on the counter and looking at Zoe in a more animated sort of way. "Oh, my dog, I *love* her. Her name's Angela, she's a miniature dachshund, she's *so* sweet. Hold on, I've got pictures -- " She propped up on one hand and lifted her bottom off the counter, digging in the back pocket of her jean shorts for her mobile phone, and then lifted it up to thumb through. "There -- " Holding the phone out to Zoe. "That's her last time we got home from tour, she was *so* excited. She pissed on the rug, she was so excited, actually, but I couldn't even get cross with her. I think the next few are from then as well -- "

"Oh, my *God*," Zoe broke in, free hand pressed over her mouth as she took the phone and flipped through -- laughing a little at herself, in spite of herself. "Oh my God, look at her, that little face!"

"I *know*!" They caught each other's eyes and just laughed for a moment, and then Zoe handed Shelley's phone back, shaking her head. "So... yeah, my dog. And... well, music's no good, I basically just like the same stuff as Bran, we've got the same taste and he's always playing me new things -- But, well. I like... Being Human. ...I mean, the show, not like, just in general." Which startled Zoe into laughing, hard, and Shel grinned sheepishly. "...And the Vampire Diaries. And I really liked The Hunger Games. And... The Notebook, I *loved* it, and *don't make fun of me*, all right."

"I'm not, I won't -- " Although she might have undermined that somewhat by snorting laughter in the middle of it. Shelley made a wide-eyed, indignant face at her that didn't help much.

"You are, now you're laughing at me!"

"No, that's not it, I just -- " Collecting herself, calming, wiping at her eyes a little. "You're just... really sweet."

"I am not," Shelley said, folding her arms, but her smile was still lingering. Zoe just laughed again, shaking her head.

"You are so. You are so very much. ...But no, it's fine, I've got no room to judge you."

Shelley smiled a little broader, tilting her head on one side so her hair made a long straight fall. "Why? What do *you* like?"

"Oh, loads of completely stupid things." Shelley raised her eyebrows, and Zoe snickered a bit more into her hand, before letting it fall away. "Well, I love horror films. Especially really cheesy old slasher ones, from the seventies and eighties? A friend of mine and I have got a horror fiction zine that we do, actually, I could show you an issue sometime if you like. And... I love comics -- I've been trying to write one with the same friend for a while, he draws as well, but it hasn't worked out yet -- and... I know, oh, trying to do indie comics, I should be into all really intelligent artistic independent ones, and I do like a lot of those, but... what I *really* love is superhero comics."

"Really?" Shelley asked, sounding as much amused as incredulous, and Zoe sighed through her smile, nodding. "Who's your favourite superhero, then?"

"Oh, God, I don't know, erm..." She laughed a bit, then thought about it for a moment. "I think... probably Jean Grey? ...She's one of the X-Men, she's Phoenix, or Dark Phoenix, depending, these days. They, you know -- "

"I know a little bit about it," Shelley broke in, grinning a bit. "I've seen the films..." But she just started laughing again when that made Zoe groan, slapping her palm down in a soft pound on the counter.

"Noooo, you can't just see the films! Look, when we get back to Cardiff you should come over and I'll sit you down with my collection, you should at least read over some of the stuff since the reboot..." She caught herself there, and laughed for a moment before waving it off. "*Anyway*, though, yeah, stupid stuff. I'm also *really* obsessed with the X-Files, and that wasn't always good enough to deserve it either, so there you go."

"So now we're getting to know each other," Shelley said, after a moment's pause; and her smile, when Zoe looked back at her, was softer now. More honest -- and far bolder now, far less shy, as well. Zoe met her eyes for a long moment, and then met it: slow and spreading, across her lips.

"Yeah," she said. "Now we're starting to."

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

A MOMENT OF SILENCE PLZ FOR MY BEST FRIEND DEMETRIOS THE CRAB,
TRAGICALLY EATEN BEFORE HIS TIME BY MY OTHER FRIEND @hemlockvolt
PLEASE RT

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

THIS IS THE LAST PICTURE EVER TAKEN OF DEMETRIOS yfrog.com/alksdnr
TURNING DOWN THE VOLUME ON THE TELLY AS U CAN SEE HE WAS V.
CONSIDERATE

Bill Halliwell @hemlockvolt

@brannjonn He will be as fondly remembered as he was delicious. #ripdemetrios

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

@hemlockvolt YOU MONSTER

Bran Jonathan @brannjonn

Wait nm, Bill has now plied me with a large quantity of weird liquoricey Greek booze. All forgiven. Sorry Demetrios #ripdemetrios

Bill Stewart @hemlockvolt

WARM.....OUZO

See Shel @seeshelrun

just want it known @hemlockvolt and @brannjonn are off their FACES and shouldnt be listened to fyi.....

"*Warm ouzo*," Bill intoned, into the webcam, in his sternest and most serious tones, "is the beverage of the gods. The Greek gods, specifically. 'Twas poured from the highest peaks of Mount Olympus, down into the waiting open mouths of mortal man."

"And woman," George called over her shoulder from the kitchen, where to be entirely fair she was actually making a cup of tea. Bill never missed a beat, though.

"And woman. Man possibly first, though, as he does tend to be slightly taller."

"Might I ask, Mr. Volt, sir, what it is that warm ouzo is made of, compo-- compositionally speaking?" Bran asked, from Bill's elbow. They were both sitting at the end of the table, side-by-side, the better to get the correct angle on the camera on Bill's laptop; the latest nearly-empty bottle of ouzo sat on the table between them, in the foreground to the camera's eye. Bill nodded gravely.

"Indeed, Mr. Platt. Warm ouzo consists, primarily, of the -- still-steaming urine of Zeus himself, rarified in the fires of Hephaestus's forge, and mingled also with the waters of the Phoenician well in which the Phoenix once bathed." He stopped and considered a moment. "Also some liquoricey bits."

Bran nodded solemnly throughout, both of them still staring into the camera like newscasters. "Now, I've also noticed that drinking warm ouzo causes me to become... I would say seventy-five to eighty percent more sexually attractive to members of the opposite sex. Would you say that effect is typical, of the impact of warm ouzo?"

"I would. I would, in fact." Bill hesitated, frowning. "Actually I would say that an increase of over one hundred percent is more common, generally closer to around one hundred and fifteen. But in your case, I would imagine that your natural state of being extremely, potentially attractive to the opposite sex -- "

"Oh, yeah, my natural sexiness, that's true -- "

"-- to people of *all* sexes, actually, yes, I think that might skew the results slightly in your case."

"That's a good point. That's a very good point." Bran was quiet a moment, then added in the

same thoughtful murmur, "Plus my huge willy."

"Yes, there's the matter of your tremendous willy," Bill said -- or started to say, and then dissolved into a near-spit-take of laughter in the middle. Bran remained composed, still gazing into the camera with his hands folded, although as Bill collapsed on the table a smile did start to yank at the corners of Bran's mouth. Bran was the only person Zoe had ever seen be able to get Bill to crack first.

"Can we please just have a rule," Shelley said, leaning her arm up on the back of the sofa to crane around, "that as long as I'm around, *nobody is allowed to talk about Bran's willy?*" She'd had a reasonable amount to drink herself -- although of beer, not ouzo -- and was quite a bit louder than normal, although in her case that more or less only brought her up to a standard volume. She was also, however, sitting sideways on the couch with her legs stretched across Zoe's lap. Zoe herself, to be honest, might *also* have had more than a bit to drink, and had at some point looped her arm round Shelley's waist when she'd not been paying attention.

"You'd have to take it up with him first, I think," Kenny said, cheerfully enough, from his reclining chair on the other side of the coffee table. "He's the one always bringing it up." Bran blew Shel a kiss, and she flipped him off.

"Your go," Lucas said, nudging Kenny's knee from the floor beside his feet, and Kenny blinked round and then leaned forward to examine the board. They'd found Monopoly stuffed in the back of a closet, and initiated a truly interminable game of it -- although one to which a bit of excitement was added by the fact that the game board was in Greek, given the fact that none of them could read it. The television muttered to itself in the background, unheeded by any of them; Bran had managed in spite of his inebriation to locate BBC World News on the satellite earlier, and said that he wanted to wait for Sport Today to come on. For right now, though, it was just depressing headlines: arrests by Syrian security forces, weird serial murders in Japan, flooding in the States.

Kenny rolled and moved his piece, then shuffled at his play money. "Yeah, all right, I'll buy... whatever this one is. This one I'm on, the green one."

"Bag End," Andy suggested; he'd claimed the other chair and had a glass of whiskey dangling from his hand. Kenny snorted laughter.

"Yeah, Bag End. I'm buying Bag End. Gonna toss them hobbits out, raise the property values, eh?"

"So now Kenny's a Middle Earth slumlord," Zoe said, Shelley convulsing in giggles on her shoulder. "Well, that's very reassuring. We have certainly learnt and grown from our experiences abroad."

"Do you have enough still?" Lucas asked him, peering around Kenny's elbow at the money. Kenny turned it outward to show it to him, for all the good it did either of them.

"I have... literally no idea." All of them laughed this time, Shelley's head falling on Zoe's shoulder in the process. Whatever she washed her hair with smelled faintly like apples. At last Kenny plucked a wad of bills from the stack and tossed it at the box, fumbling for the matching property card. "There we are, it's that much now. Your go, Andy."

"All right, then -- " He set his glass aside and shifted forward out of his chair, onto his knees where he could reach, and moved. "Ah! Chance. ...Or is that one Community Chest?"

"No, it's Chance, Chance is orange," Lucas put in. Andy drew a card, made a show of frowning at it, then knee-walked forward so he could show it to Zoe. She craned her neck back and squinted.

"Oh, do you know what that one is? It's the 'Be A Love And Get Zoe Another Drink' card! They've just added that one, I'm quite in favour of it."

Andy narrowed his eyes at her in deep betrayal, and she beamed at him while Shelley and the other boys laughed. George saved the day in the end, though -- stepping in and plucking the card from Andy's fingers, then setting her tea on the end-table at the other side of the sofa. "Oh, I'll do that one," she said; "I'm a believer in community service."

"I love yooooou, Geoooooorge," Zoe said, more or less, lolling her head to the side on the couch. George waved a dismissing hand behind her, on her way back to the kitchen, and Zoe laughed.

The game kept up until well into the night, when players started dropping out: first George, who had been playing only nominally for some time (Lucas had been moving for her) excused herself, and then Andy fell asleep slumped over the arm of his chair and was urged up to bed. Bill followed not long after, and not long after that Bran and Kenny and Lucas went out for a midnight swim. Zoe objected at first on the basis that they were all blind drunk and would probably die, but finally relented when they all swore multiple times that they'd hang onto pool floats and stay in the shallow end.

And then the sliding doors had clapped shut again, and it was just her and Shelley left, still curled up together on the couch; neither of them had got up all night except to go for a pee, and even then they'd come back to the same position each time. She'd thought Shelley was dozing a bit, but after the boys left Shel lifted her head to meet Zoe's eyes with a sleepy smile.

"Just us, I s'pose," she said. Zoe smiled, and lowered her gaze, not quite meeting Shel's anymore. Somehow, there was something awkward about sitting here like this when it was only the two of them, when everyone else had gone -- something that stretched out taut.

"Yeah." She pushed at Shelley's hair, brushing it out of her eyes with her fingertips. "Are you all right? Hanging in?"

Shelley laughed a little, ducking her head a bit, although not exactly away from Zoe's hand. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm pretty much sober by now, I get through it fast. Just a bit sleepy."

"Yeah, me too." Zoe shifted their shared weight a little to the side away from Shelley, so she could stretch out her free arm; she bumped the touchpad of her sleeping laptop on the end of the sofa, bringing it back to life and squinting at its clock. "...Good lord, no wonder. It's almost three in the morning."

"D'you want to go to bed?" Shelley asked. Zoe considered, leaning her head on the back of the couch, her fingers toying with the pocket of Shel's shorts.

"No, I'm probably going to stay awake a while, wait until I clear up a bit." She hesitated, and turned her head back in Shelley's direction -- and then started to retrieve her arm, shifting her weight out from under Shel's. "If you want to go on to sleep, though, I can -- "

Shel didn't let her get that far, though. Just leaned forward, into the circle of her arm instead of away, and kissed her.

It was slow and wet, slick and messy. Shelley's mouth tasted like chapstick, like beer, like nothing much. Her hand closed lightly over Zoe's shoulder, her hair tickling Zoe's bare upper arm. Her body suddenly felt much warmer, heavier, more *real* across Zoe's lap and leaned against her shoulder.

When they parted Shel only went away by a distance of centimeters; her eyes were downcast and half-lidded, and she licked her lips once and smiled. "That's maybe not quite what I meant," she said.

There were a total of five bedrooms in the villa; Bran and Kenny had doubled up, as had

George and Shelley, and Lucas had for some reason been setting up a tent in the rear yard and sleeping there, but the rest of them each had their own. They crept upstairs to Zoe's giggling and shushing each other, holding hands, Shel pulling Zoe back in once to kiss her again on the stairs, so thoroughly and at such length they nearly fell and ended up laughing in stifled whispers some more. Then finally they were in and the door shut behind them, not even bothering to turn on a light but only moving by the rippling glow of the ones around the pool, from outside. They kissed for a while longer, careening into the room on a long curve with arms locked round each other and bumping into things and giggling, and then Zoe started to tug at the hem of Shelley's top, pulling it up. Shel lifted her arms over her head, letting it be stripped off her and away. The dim light picked out the planes and curves of her in a kind of glow, made pools of shadow in the indentations of collarbones and inner arms and hips and navel. Her bra had lace over the white cups, her shoulders and breasts and back dappled in freckles. There was a dark smudge of bruise on her upper belly, where she'd slipped trying to get out of the pool the other day, and racked it against the side.

Zoe undid her bra, and she shrugged out of it, letting it fall forward and away; then Shel shucked down her shorts and stepped out of them, forward, to where she could push the flannel shirt off Zoe's shoulders. Zoe pulled the dress under it off herself, it was tight and there was no really graceful way to get out of it; she had to squirm around like an eel, working it up one side and then the other and making a puffed disaster of her hair, and she ended up snickering into the last of the fabric as she pulled it free. Shelley caught it from her after a moment, and they leaned back together in their pants and mussed hair, pressing mouths into skin and muffling laughter. They were drunk, certainly, but not too drunk for this. Her head felt fogged and warm, but steady as long as she didn't close her eyes.

They made it to the bed somehow, sat and then lay down on it sideways. Zoe propped up on her elbow, Shelley lying out on her back, looking up at her with her face barely-lit in pale blue. She was wide-eyed, smiling, maybe flushed; it was hard to see. She reached up as Zoe was looking, stroked hair back out of her eyes.

"I had a crush on you for ages," Shel said, solemn -- and then suddenly burst out in a tiny giggle, and put her hand over her mouth, as though to trap it back in. "Oh God, sorry. I'm acting so stupid. ...This is a bit weird, isn't it? This is weird."

"I don't care," Zoe said, and found herself grinning -- then dropping her head forward and laughing when Shelley looked back at her, dimly relieved when it made Shel laugh too. "I like weird. Weird is the best." She paused, and then leaned in and kissed Shelley again, slower this time and a little neater. Shelley made a muffled, eager little noise and lifted her head a bit up off the mattress, into it, wrapping a hand around behind Zoe's head that lingered even after Zoe let go, her lips and nose brushing Shelley's while she spoke. "...I like you."

"Kiss me," Shel said: grinning, shy. And she did. And did. And did.

Her fingers slid eventually down the planes of Shelley's upper chest, from the line of one collarbone down the scatter of freckles over creamy skin. They tapered off gradually around the V between her breasts, off to either side and into where her shirts and swimsuit tops would have protected from the sun; it was hard to see, but when she pulled back to look Zoe thought there were even a couple freckles around the edges of Shel's nipples, which she found charming for no good reason. She bent in and kissed one, her hair trailing on skin off to the side, and Shelley shivered under her and inhaled a wet breath. Zoe settled in, tonguing at it in earnest, playing with the other between her fingers. When she shifted the angle of her head to look up at Shelley's face,

she found Shel's head turned to one side, eyes closed, biting her lip. She was squeezing a pinch of the bedclothes in a strangling-tight fist, up beside her cheek.

Zoe shifted her weight, freeing her smarter hand; still flicking her tonguetip against Shelley's nipple, she ran the flat of her palm down over Shel's stomach, onto the lace edging of her boyshorts' waistband. Shel twitched at first, with a giggly whimper that sounded suspiciously ticklish, but by the time Zoe's hand was on her knickers she was sighing out a shaky breath that sounded like she'd been holding it, trembling in her hand on the back of Zoe's neck, spreading out her thighs and canting up her hips. It was an invitation that had Zoe even wetter in a sudden hot flush at once, one she didn't even try to resist. She slid her fingers down to trace a line down the center of the shorts' crotch -- finding the fabric soaked slick-wet to the touch -- and Shelley made a whispered, all-breath sound that cracked in the middle. After a moment she opened her eyes, just to a narrow sliver, to look up at Zoe -- and then smiled around her parted lips and heavy breath, and slid her hand down from Zoe's neck to her shoulder and then to cup one of her breasts, rolling a gentle thumb over and around on its nipple. Zoe let her eyes half-close, smiling back a bit, and then moved in to kiss Shelley again: tasting her through her lips, teasing her through her pants, little jolts running from the ball of Shel's thumb into her chest and down through her to gather right between her thighs.

Finally she disengaged, one bit at a time -- lips first, then hands, then drawing herself up on the bed -- and slid her fingers of both hands under the waistband of Shelley's knickers, tugging them down. Shelley pressed her legs back together and lifted her hips up, helping, and kicked them off the rest of the way when Zoe couldn't reach anymore; and then shifted around obligingly when nudged, to lie out on the bed the right way. And then Zoe leaned off the bed to the side table, felt around for a hairband and pulled her hair back into a messy tail with it, and then shifted herself over and settled between Shelley's spread legs.

"You're so pretty," she said in a murmur, just gliding her fingers for now down through soft short ginger hair and then up the lines of Shelley's lips, back down again through slick open wet; she couldn't even really see, in all the shadows, only feel. Shelley shuddered, though, pushing her legs even wider, the tremor pronounced in the lines of her thighs. "Gorgeous. ...I ought to write songs about you."

It took Shelley a moment, an audible swallow, to answer. "Now?" her voice finally came, though -- dry and quavery, but with a bit of a giggle in it, too. Zoe drew herself up a bit to grin at her.

"Dirty ones. ...Maybe I'll write one on your clit -- " stroking Shel, Shel twitching, gasping too hard and too loud, pressing a hand over her mouth -- "see if you can guess the words --"

The sound Shelley made at the first touch of her tongue burst even around the edges of her hand, high and thin and muffled. She sealed her palm tighter, and Zoe set to work: done teasing, meaning every bit of it now. Pushing her arms up under Shelley's thighs, curling them round her hips, holding her in; nudging with the tip of her tongue on Shel's clit, rubbing with its flat. Still rubbing her lips, lower down, with fingertips, dipping lightly between them, spreading and just caressing. Feeling every shudder, working to tease out every sound buried in Shelley's hand. There was something curiously intimate about the sound of them: made tiny and strangled, buried there. Their range reduced, so they only belonged in this room, to the two of them.

It took so little time for Shel to come that at first Zoe almost thought something was wrong, instead, almost pulled back; but then the fast, chokey puffs of her breathing were joined by shaking tension all through her muscles, and then her hips were surging, a hard plosive breath

muffling against her hand, and there was a sudden tautness and then slick fluttering against Zoe's tongue and around her fingertips, making it hard work to keep in place for a moment. She did it anyway, though -- working out the last in a frantic crescendo of her tongue, rubbing firm with her fingers -- until finally the shaking in Shelley's hips and thighs built to its peak and then collapsed, her body going limp in Zoe's arms and on the bed. She teased for a second or two longer still, drawing out an extra shiver here and twitch there and gasp there, and then left one kiss behind on her way to sitting back up. Rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth and chin, and then stretched out over Shelley, where she lay naked and spent and panting, and even so shaky-weak arms wrapped around her at once, pulling her down and in, for more kissing.

After a second or two, though, Shelley's chest began to shake against hers, her breath to stutter into Zoe's mouth; Zoe pulled back for a quizzical look to find her giggling, looking sheepish. "I think I caught a 'Y' and an 'O' and then I lost track," she said, when she could get herself back under control again. It took Zoe a second to understand -- and then she started laughing too, pressing her head in beside Shelley's.

"I think I lost track before you did," she admitted, "I wouldn't read too much into it;" and then they were both laughing, hugging, burying the sound in each other.

Shelley seemed disinclined to move much of anywhere, even as their giggles tapered off into occasional unpredictable bursts, but her enthusiasm came back in good time, all the same. Her hands made their way back to Zoe's breasts, fondling and playing, and then sliding down her sides to push down her own pants. Zoe pushed her knees back under her to one side, the better to lift up her hips, and helped finish the job, and meanwhile Shelley struggled to sit up with her back propped on the pillows, so that when she tugged Zoe back it was to straddle Shel's lap. Her hand slipped between Zoe's thighs without hesitation, far less shy than Zoe had ever known any part of Shelley to be, and a startled little breath huffed out of her, ruffling Shelley's hair with their heads leaned against each other.

She pushed herself up on her knees a little, leaning on Shelley and the wall behind, to give better access. Shel's fingers slicked themselves between her lips, then pressed onto her clit with deliberate precision and rubbed tight fast circles, perfect and yet still not quite enough. She put her lips up to Shelley's ear, whispering, "Put 'em in," and Shel inhaled a small shivery breath -- but she slid her hand down, also, and pressed her first and middle fingers forward from the others, between Zoe's lips and then deeper and then all the way deep. Zoe dropped her forehead onto Shelley's shoulder and made a thick, low sound, adjusting her hips, seating them better. Pushed a bit, and then Shelley took the hint, and started to work them, squirming the knuckle of her thumb against Zoe's clit without having to be asked.

It built up: the fingers working inside, the pressure against her clitoris, plus the other hand that eventually began teasing at her nipple again. Shelley craned her head down at the same time, leaving lazy kisses up the side of Zoe's throat, and it was Zoe's turn to shudder against her, her breathing coming hard and ragged. Closing in, hot pressure building inside the bowl of her hips, dripping around Shelley's fingers down onto Shel's thighs, her legs shaking and knees throbbing with the exertion but none of it anything she really noticed, anything to care about, news from someplace else and nothing that mattered but fingers and thumb and mouth --

-- and she came, wobbling on her knees and clinging to Shel's shoulders maybe bruise-tight, burying her moaning cry against soft freckled skin and every muscle shaking --

And then they had collapsed together, her arms around Shelley, Shelley's hands trapped but her mouth a moving swarm of kisses. It reached Zoe's mouth and stayed there, lingered there,

making a meal of it even as Zoe was still panting and gasping and hard-pressed to answer. And then Shel pulled back and leaned her forehead against Zoe's; and they just stayed that way a moment, Zoe sprawled on Shel, breath and heartbeats relaxing again.

At some point they parted; at some point Shelley eased her fingers out, and retrieved her hands, and held on, and they kissed again. At some point they shifted themselves around enough to get the covers out from under them, and then to get them over top of them instead. The faint sounds of the boys splashing about in the pool were still reaching them from outside, so they probably hadn't all drowned themselves, and Zoe supposed that was good too.

Shelley curled up in her arms, pressed against her chest, the skin of her cheek and shoulders and arms and Zoe's all sticking slightly with their cooling sweat. Her hair made a pretty drift across Zoe's pillow. Zoe looked at it until somehow her eyes had got closed when she hadn't been paying attention, and when she tried to open them again and look some more, in the end she wound up falling asleep instead.

"Could I ask you a rhetorical question?" Zoe asked Kenny some two days later -- when Shelley had been creeping into her room at night, and out again the next morning, ever since. George at least was surely the wiser by now, Zoe thought with some sheepishness, although if so she was keeping a perfect and typically well-bred silence about it. Kenny glanced up at her from his guitar, which he was tuning in his favourite chair in the sitting room.

"Yeah, all right," he said, looking a bit nonplussed and a bit pleased. "What is it?"

She came round to sit on a hassock across from him, leaning her elbows on her knees.

"...Would you ever fuck somebody in the band?"

Kenny's eyes widened -- and then he sat straight up in the chair, guitar forgotten under his pinning arms. "Oh God. *Who did you fuck in the band?*"

"I haven't -- " She spluttered. "I said it was a *rhetorical* question!"

"Yeah, but whenever girls say that, what they mean is 'what do you think of this thing I did so I know if I should actually tell you?!' " ...Which, actually, was pretty well exactly spot-on for this situation, although that just made her resentful. "Is it Bill? You like Bill."

"No, it's not anyone. I didn't -- "

"Oh, please tell me you didn't finally give Bran a pity fuck."

"*No.*" She glowered a bit, but it did little to quell Kenny's look of skeptical horror, and finally she sighed. "...I wouldn't pity fuck Bran anyway. He does all right."

Kenny snorted. "In general, maybe. Not with *you.*" He considered that a moment, then added, "Actually maybe not even in general."

"Well, the whole idea of pity fucking is pretty shitty anyway. I'm fairly pitiless." Zoe sighed again, brushing at her bangs. "Look, I'm just saying -- would you? If it came up."

"I... dunno." He appeared to finally give that some real thought, settling back in the chair again after a moment. "I guess I might, if it did. But it'd be a bit weird, eh? I mean, I'd be sort of nervous about it, that's true. Like... 'oh no, we've still got to work and stuff, is this gonna make things weird, am I gonna fuck everybody up?'"

Zoe nodded, looking down -- trying not to show too much in her eyes. "Yeah. Doing an office romance is a bit worse when sometimes your office involves living together for months, I suppose."

"Yeah." Kenny twanged a bit at his low E, chewing his lip, and then looked up again. "But you

know, the other side of that is... with doing shit like this, and touring and all -- sometimes it doesn't really leave too much time *to* shag anybody else. I mean, like you said that one time, it's dead hard to get laid on tour." Zoe smiled at that, nodding. "So I guess I can see that side of it too. Like, it might be a bit easier in some ways, too. ...I really dunno. I just wouldn't want to mess anything up for the band. That's what counts the most, I think."

She tilted her head on one side, meeting his eyes, still smiling -- a bit touched in spite of herself. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

They sat quiet for a moment, after that. Finally Zoe said, into the silence, "I guess maybe that answers this question, but... do you ever wish we could go back to the beginning again? I mean... we've been in this the longest, out of everybody now. Do you ever miss when it was just you and -- Archie and me, just messing around at uni? Before all this stuff started happening to us, and things got this -- complicated?"

"No." He said it immediately -- laughing a little, even, scoffing, like it was a ridiculous question. "I mean, we couldn't play worth shit, for one thing." Zoe couldn't help laughing at that, and when she looked up again she found Kenny with a bit of a sheepish, shy grin. "But, I mean, also... I love doing it. It's different, but that doesn't matter, all the bits that I like are still the same. It's like..." He paused, thinking. "It's not even like it's more complicated, to me, it's more like -- it's not like we're *bigger*. For me it's just like... I liked playing with my friends, yeah? And I'm still playing with my friends. I've just... got more friends." He shrugged, jostling the guitar slightly. "I liked what we were doing back at university. But I like what we're doing now, too. I don't just want to trade out one for the other."

He seemed to run out of things to say there, and they both just fell quiet again. Zoe just turning that over and over in her mind; storing it away, for future reference.

"All right," she said, finally, straightening up again. "Just curious, I guess. ...Thanks."

"Sure," Kenny said. And then, just before she could get up: "...It's not Andy, is it? 'Cos you know Bran would actually, *literally* go mental."

Zoe stopped in mid-motion to stare at him, with deep incredulity. "No, I did not fuck Andy. Good lord." She considered that a moment, then snorted. "...God, how does *anyone* ever fuck Andy? You have to imagine he'd just be... going on the whole time about leitmotifs, and thematic elements, you'd never get anything done."

Kenny was already hiccuping laughter, and then lifted his guitar a bit off his lap to start pumping his hips up off the chair in fast obscene jerks, mimicking heavy groaning breathing. "Yeah, pay attention to this bit," he said, pitching his voice a bit higher and putting on a passable imitation of Andy's posher accent; "I think this bit's going to pull the whole thing together -- give it a bit more depth -- ""

At which point, though, he couldn't even continue, because they'd both collapsed into howls of laughter: Zoe so hard she flopped down on her back on the hassock, clutching her stomach, tears squeezing out of her eyes.

Greece, and the villa, had been Jack's idea, since he knew people on the islands. What nobody in the band had really expected, though, was how easily Jack had talked the label into funding the trip. Jack had produced their previous two records, and it'd been agreed when they'd signed that he was one of their most valuable components in himself; but getting the okay to go fuck off

on an island vacation in a sort of little mansion with a recording studio attached just on the basis of his suggesting it was still... an eerie experience, a bit, spooky and maybe even sort of alarming. It felt like a glimpse at the writing on the wall, and the paint of the giant letters BIG there was still dripping. Hanging round in a posh villa on the continent for a month recording the new album certainly felt like something *rock stars* would do, at least, not a bunch of silly pretentious foul-mouthed university kids.

"Do you ever feel a bit like we've kidnapped you?" Zoe asked Bill, teasing, one evening as they checked and packed things up in the live room, after Jack had already left for the ferry. "You know... you thought you were just going to give us some extra backup and vocals for a couple shows, and then oh no, we've absorbed you into our hive mind, and all of a sudden you're in Greece." He'd considered that, leaning on the wall as he checked the tuning on Andy's guitar.

"I think winding up in a Greek island villa is about the most positive effect one could hope for, from being absorbed into a hive mind," he said, and she laughed. "But overall..." He paused to consider, his hand stilling on the guitar's neck. "It's been something of a surprise, I'll give you that. But not a bad one."

"So you don't miss, you know, doing your solo stuff?" Zoe asked, watching his face -- for as little as it changed. Not certain what had turned her mind to being concerned about this, or indeed whether she'd even known that she was concerned about it at all. Bill made a thoughtful sound, but strummed again, if idly.

"Well, I don't know that I'd say that. ...Well, no, I *wouldn't* say that. I do miss it, it's something I'd like to return to." He thought for another moment. "But I wouldn't say I'm in a rush, either. I do enjoy being Hemlock Volt, but... he's always gonna be there, if I want, because that's my thing that I do. This is -- a thing that I do with others, and apart from being something more social, I find that's also something that tends to be a bit more fragile." He glanced over at her, met her eyes, smiled briefly. He had sort of drowsy, half-lidded eyes by nature, and that always made them hard to read even on the rare occasions when he was being serious. "I suppose... yes, I'd like to get back to it, eventually. But for right now, I'm doing something else, something I feel is really valuable, and -- gonna change a lot of the things that I do when I'm on my own again, whenever that happens. And that's fine. Make sense?"

"Yeah," she said. By now just standing in the middle of the room, crowded between instruments, whatever she'd been doing forgotten. "Of course."

Bill held up a finger, teacherly and grave. "Sartre said, 'Hell is other people,'" he said, and Zoe nodded, rolling her eyes a bit, and he leaned in slightly intent, recapturing her attention. "*But*, on the other hand, *Halliwell* said: 'Well, heaven sounds boring as shit.'"

"I don't think I'm familiar with the famous philosopher Halliwell," Zoe said -- through her grin, laughing a bit in spite of herself. Bill raised his eyebrows, glancing down to fiddle a bit more with Andy's guitar.

"Oh, you should be. He's brilliant. A key thinker of our age." He paused, looking up again thoughtfully. "A bit obsessed with warm ouzo, though, I'm not sure what that's about."

"None of us are," Zoe said, and patted his shoulder on her way past him to her bass.

Zoe had always liked George, sort of especially; not just as another girl, but as the particular other girl she happened to be -- who was, Zoe sometimes thought privately and pointedly did not say, sort of like your maiden great-aunt in miniature. She loved tea and cats and the crossword,

knitted and volunteered at a library, didn't drink and seemed always to tolerate all the rest of their behaviour with a sort of fond, patient exasperation. That was, possibly, why it had stung more than it should have, when she'd said she was leaving: in a way, it had felt less like losing a band-mate, and more like being given up for adoption.

"Are you looking forward to going back to uni?" Zoe asked -- breaking both the silence and, for possibly the first time this entire trip, the unwritten taboo on mentioning how George was leaving. George glanced over at her, pushing windblown strands of hair away from her eyes, frowning and still a little out of breath; they'd stopped to sit down and rest on a grassy bit of hillside, in front of the rocky outcropping full of beautiful old churches they'd come hiking up to see. Zoe had left the Flip behind this time and been taking still pictures at a breakneck speed instead, deluging Instagram up until her phone had lost its signal.

"I guess so," George said. Her toes, bare, dug and twined into the short grass; her sensible trainers, with which she'd replaced her sensible brown flats for the day, sat primly to one side with her short socks stuffed in their tops. "...It's a bit peculiar to think about, honestly. Sort of Rip-van-Winkle-ish." She glanced over at Zoe, smiled when she caught her eye and looked out again at the view back down to the village and the distant, sparkling water. "It's like my whole life's just -- been on hold, for the last five years. And now I've got to try to find my place again."

"So this isn't your whole life, I suppose?" Zoe asked -- after a moment's pause to try not to be hurt, and not even for any good reason. George looked at her longer this time, curious, until she dropped her gaze.

"Well... not the *whole* thing, no." She laughed a little, self-conscious. "It's been wonderful. Of course, it always has. But... there's a lot more I want to do, and I think I'd rather get back to it, at this point. ...That's how it works, isn't it? You do stuff like this while you're young, and then when you're done, you can get on with it. No harm done."

Zoe looked down at her own feet, her hands laced around the front of her shins. Chewing her lip for long moments. "...And what if I don't want to get on with it, even if I'm not that young anymore? What if -- this is all I still want to do?"

"Then I'd have to say there's a good chance we're two different people with our own choices to make," George said, after another lengthy pause. Zoe didn't look, but she sounded careful, and gentle. "What's the matter, Zo? You've seemed worried for a while now."

She sighed, trying to fuss her own hair out of where the wind had blown it in her eyes, still not looking at George. "Nothing. It's just..." She thought about that, and then rolled her head back on her shoulders, looking up at the sky. "I don't know. Do you think it's stupid of me, not to want to go back to school?"

"Of course not. I hope you didn't think I meant that." She shook her head, starting to answer, but George went on before she could. "It's the right thing to do for me. And the right time. If it's not for the rest of you, I couldn't be happier for you about that. Really, it's brilliant that so much is changing for the band, and so much is happening. It's really exciting. And I'm glad if you want to be a part of it, I just... don't, myself, right now."

"I don't even know if I do," Zoe said, and then sighed again when George frowned at her. "I just... sort of want to do anything else even less, I guess? But it's hard to know, sometimes. I..." She picked up her phone again, rolled it over meditatively in one hand. "...Did you ever feel like it was really hard, being a girl in this band?"

George was quiet for another moment. "This band particularly, or any band?"

"Both? ...Does it make a difference?"

"It might, I think." She considered, while Zoe watched her, rocking back on her hips. "In this band... not all that much, I suppose. A little, but not much. We are a bit outnumbered, but I really think that's all. In general, though -- hmm. I'm not sure."

"Not even being in a band so much, maybe, just... ugh." Zoe scrubbed at her forehead, trying to think. "We're outnumbered everywhere, but that's not the issue. It's like... it's the default expectation, everywhere, that this is a boys' thing, this entire scene. You're expected to be a boy if you show up, and if you do and you're not, then it's all about you being sexy -- so *that's* for the boys, too. You never get to be a *part* of it, you're just -- either you're in, or you're a set piece."

George gestured down at herself, her cardigan jumper and corduroy trousers, a bit of an ironic twist on her lips. "I've never been most people's idea of 'sexy,' I'm afraid," she said, and Zoe smiled, though turning her eyes down again. "...I'm not arguing, I think there's a lot of truth in that. But that's... never really been the biggest thing for me, I suppose. I try not to mind too much about everyone else; and I don't think that's so much of a problem with our lot, anyway."

"But it *is* though -- " It burst out of her before she could seem to bite it back, making George look round at her in surprise. Zoe dug her hands up into her hair, as though she were trying to hold all the thoughts in her head. "Or, it's not, I dunno, but -- that doesn't mean they don't go in for it at all, sometimes, just they don't always *realise*, and -- I don't know if that's better or worse, exactly. It's just everywhere, it's everyone. And, it's like... the whole thing about wanting to stay on, and *not* go back to school, is... am I doing something wrong, am I messing up by just -- putting up with it? Should I be putting my foot down about it much more, or I'm doing it the wrong way? And if I do, is it that I ought to be staying here and changing everyone, or I ought to just walk out and forget about it? Even beyond whether I want to stay or not -- am I even doing the right thing, if I do or don't?"

There was a long, windy pause then, where neither of them said anything at all.

"I don't think there's any such thing," George said, quietly. "And I don't think it matters what anyone would say you should or shouldn't be doing, either. It's still all just a matter of whether you want to stay in the band or not. At the end of the day, that's the only thing that ought to be making that decision." She paused, and then pushed on, turning a little more to face Zoe. "And come to that, even if you *did* decide to leave -- that wouldn't necessarily mean just walking out on the band and forgetting about it, either. I mean, that's not what I -- "

"No, I know," Zoe broke across her, desperate, "I didn't mean to say you were -- "

But George laid a cool, bony hand across her wrist there, quelling her. "No, listen. I'm telling you something." She ducked down her head, seeking out Zoe's eyes. "I don't know how it is for everyone else, but -- it's not all professional, the way things are with us. It's not all a matter of figures. If you do want things to change, that's not just about telling your band the working conditions you want; that's telling your *friends* how you want them to treat you. And if you do decide to leave, I'd certainly hope that's not about just -- cutting ties." Her voice began to waver very slightly over the next few sentences, at first so little that Zoe could almost hope she was just imagining it, and then gradually more. "Because *I* definitely don't mean to just -- walk out and have it done with. I'll be around -- if you all ever want me to be on a record again, or if any of you ever just want to go out and talk, anytime. I'm not going anywhere, not really. I still want to feel like a part of this -- I still want to belong." Swallowing, a faint bright shine in her eyes. "Because you *are* all my friends, no matter what else. And that I don't want to change."

"I don't either," Zoe said -- again almost over top of the end of that. Her own voice hitching, a small wet trail coursing its way from under her eye. "I'd never mean it that way even for a

second, I hope you know that, I'd never even think it. Of course you're still a part of it. You're still a part of *us*, you're always gonna be." She scrubbed at her eye with the backs of her knuckles, then hiccuped a sudden laugh. "...Oh, God, why are we crying?!"

"Oh, no, we must be girls," George said, laughing, crying herself now at the same time, tears rolling down her face and lips trembling. "That does it, they're never going to let us into their club now."

"Sod their club, it's full of idiots," Zoe almost choked saying, and then they were both fumbling forward and hugging each other, leaning together laughing and crying and shaking with both, the wind off the sea tangling together their hair.

She should have known. As soon as Bran came into the studio particularly stormy and morose that afternoon, as soon as he started making cracks and jabs at things over Jack's shoulder until Andy looked about to spit fire; as soon as Shelley began shooting dismayed, significant looks, helpless and miserable, at Zoe as soon as Bran turned his back on the other side of the glass. At least by the time he snapped at Lucas for drumming on the kitchen counter while they were all getting things ready for dinner, and then turned and went right out the sliding doors as soon as Lucas looked back at him, startled and affronted. And yet, somehow, even by the time she came out after him some fifteen minutes later, jaw set, it still hadn't occurred to her -- even by the time she had come up beside where he was sitting alone by the edge of the pool, in waning dusk, and stood over him and waited with her arms folded.

"You're shagging my sister," Bran said then, though. Calmly, and with no real inflection at all.

It was every possible evidence of how Bran had continued to be her friend, how he had continued to be her band-mate, how he had continued to be in her life at all, that what followed that wasn't: *And you won't shag me*. That it didn't even hang, particularly, in the air, without ever having been spoken. It was present, certainly -- buried somewhere between them like a hatchet, a subtext with a quiet brooding life of its own -- but he never would have said it, or even meant it. It was why she still loved him, all the same; why she could even bring herself, in spite of everything, to feel a little sorry.

He didn't say anything else, either, though. Eventually, she sat down next to him, the concrete cool through the thin of her skirt. The setting sun was obscured behind the villa, on its far side, and the sky ahead of them was a growing expanse of dark and blue.

"Yes," Zoe said, finally. There didn't seem to be much else to say. "...She told you?"

"Caught her coming out this morning, and I could sort out the rest. She never could lie even when we were kids." He sat quiet a moment, then at last looked over at her: his eyes a bit squinted and cool, his mouth twisting a bit at the corner and fooling no one. "...I care about her a fucking lot, you know."

"Good," Zoe said. Measuring her voice. "So do I." She paused, and let that sit; but Bran didn't rise, and after a few more moments, she looked front again, taking a deep breath. "You do realise it's none of your business, don't you? I mean, that she's a consenting adult, and we both are, and it's really nothing to do with you?"

"Nothing to do with the band, either?" he muttered, picking at a thread at the cuff of his jeans. She blew out another breath, ruffling her bangs up off her forehead.

"That's also nothing I haven't considered, actually, thank you. But we *are* adults. All of us." A long inhale -- hesitating on the precipice -- and then: "And if you're that worried about fucking

up the band... you might want to start at home."

He narrowed his eyes at her harder than ever. "What's *that* mean?"

She made herself take a long pause, shutting her eyes and calming down, before she said anything else. "...Maybe not exactly what I said. But -- it *has* been really difficult being around you, the entire time we've been here." She looked over at him, found him staring thundery-faced down at his knees with his mouth set against itself, looked away again. "I know you've had a bad year. And I'm sorry, I really, really am. It's been shitty, and I understand that. But... it keeps going on and on, and now we're just all having a hard time knowing what to do. Having to go round on eggshells. It makes things strained. Not just as a band, as *us*." She hesitated, looking back at him again, and then pushed forward. "And I know we've all got problems, and our own things going on that are fucking us up, sometimes. But, the thing is... yours are the only ones we all end up singing about."

Nothing. Just the quiet of the rear yard, the occasional faint sounds of thumping and movement and the television from inside.

"I love you, dickhead," Zoe said, and sighed, leaning back on her hands. "I don't want you to be miserable all the time because I don't want you to be miserable all the time. I want you to get your shit together because I think having your shit together would be a really nice thing for *you*. ...But I also want it because it changes everything for the rest of us, when you don't. And it makes a lot of things that aren't great most of the time a lot worse." She paused for a moment, chewing on her lip. Looking up at the sky; everything feeling caught in her throat. When it finally burst out of her, it came hard, like a cough:

"I *hate that fucking Sister song*."

She was aware of that actually startling him into looking over at her; of some fragments of the expression on his face, although she didn't want to look close enough to know the rest. "Not really because of how you wrote it -- although I think it's a lot of the ugliest parts of you showing up, and I'm not exactly thrilled with that either. But because of how it's gonna get *listened* to. 'Cause of what all the dickheads and idiots are going to hear when they hear it, and *say* when they hear it, and *do* when they hear it. I know, and we know, what's really going on, we get the joke -- you're bluffing, fine, you're putting on like you're brilliant and amazing because you actually think you're shit and you're unhappy, *and* you're taking the piss out of all this chest-out lads-ladding bullshit that you're putting on. But *not everyone who listens to it is gonna get it*. They're gonna hear it like it's what you *mean* -- 'hur-hur, all right, he fucked the man's sister in the arse, dead clever' -- because that's what happens when a lot more people are paying attention to you suddenly, there's more idiots in the mix, it's just the law of proportions. And that means that many more idiots acting like shitheads at our gigs, and on the internet, and wherever the hell else they can find us, because they think that's what we're about, they think that's who we are." She took a hard, unsteady breath, trying to collect back her voice from shaking, and get going again before Bran's plain growing outrage could form into the argument he wanted to make. "And all right, they're not your responsibility, I know that. And the song by itself isn't going to make everything a mess. But it's damn well not going to *help*, either. And it's shitty, it's a shitty, horrible feeling, having to put up with you parroting back that same shit like it's funny, when I'm getting it from people who *mean* it every other time we play."

She drew another breath, let it out in a loud sigh. "...And when I think it's what's driven off Kater, and now I think it's some of what's driven off George, and now it's what *your sister* has to put up with as well -- at least until whenever she gets driven off too. And you know, I'm really

worried about that in particular, because I do care about her too, and she hasn't been doing this that long and she's so desperate for you and your mates to all think she's cool and all right that I think she might just try to do that thing where you go along with it, yeah, no matter who's doing it and how miserable it makes you, because you don't want to be the angry feminist bitch shutting down everyone's fun, you want everyone to like you and think you're a laugh and you'll swallow fucking anything to get it.

"And I know you lot think it's stupid, the way these dicks act to us, and it's not how you'd ever want to behave. But I'm sick and fucking tired of you all *acting* like the people who don't see a problem with it -- and I don't even care anymore if it's a joke or not."

Silence again. She breathed, steady, in and out, pulling herself back into rein again now that all of that had spilled out of her guts. Bran didn't look like he wanted to make some argument back at her now, at least; now he was just sitting folded around himself, staring down at his knees. There was nothing on his face that she could read.

Finally, Zoe got up, on the force of the adrenaline she was still vibrating with; dusting off the back of her skirt, and looking down at him with slow growing weariness. "And for God's sake, tell Shelley she's amazing in the band," she said -- and was at least relieved to hear that the heat had gone out of her voice, even if she wasn't sure that what had replaced it was any better. "Because she is, and for some fucking reason your opinion matters more to her than anyone else's in the entire world. And you at least owe her that much."

She waited, watching the top of Bran's head; but there was never any answer from him, no matter how long she did. And finally, she just sighed, and took a breath, about to say something else... and then found she couldn't actually think of anything, and let it out again.

And then left him there, to go back inside the villa. A squat, folded shadow-shape in the growing dusk, at the edge of the still glinting surface of the water; and just outside the reach of all the light and noise and life from inside, where it was still waiting.

The knock on the door of her room, the next morning, took her by surprise. It was still early, and soon enough after Shelley had left that at first Zoe thought Shel had realised she'd left something behind, and come back. But when she opened the door, it was Andy, instead: looking wide awake, nervous, and determined.

"Morning, Zo," he said, and she blinked, staring at him nonplussed.

"...Good morning."

He nodded -- seemed to hesitate a moment -- and then pushed on. "Erm... so, we just wanted to let you know... Bran came and got me first thing this morning, and he told me some of what you talked to him about, last night. ...About Sister." Zoe blinked at him harder than ever, and he jerked his thumb back over his shoulder, gesturing vaguely toward the other end of the hall and downstairs. "We've been down in the studio since seven or so, doing some work on it. Because, I mean -- " Scratching at his head, looking more flustered and on edge than ever. His sentences coming in fits and starts. "I mean, obviously we can't just -- scrap the song, or write a new one, we're in the middle of *recording* and we've got half the song laid down -- but -- or, well, we *could* still leave it off the actual album, if it comes to that, but we thought we'd try, first... you know, try to -- tart it up a bit. Do some work with the music, and the vocals, to give it more of a funny, sarcastic sort of tone. So it doesn't read as being sincere, or anything. Because, I agree, maybe we hadn't done as much of that as we could, and it was maybe a bit awkward, and..."

Andy paused, folded his arms across his chest, seemed to take a deep breath. "We just, you know... we talked it over, and we both agreed that -- the important thing isn't the song, but that something happens with the song that satisfies everyone. Because, he and I, we both feel that... we're a *band*, we're not just -- Bran And Andy And Some Other Fellows. If one member of the band doesn't feel comfortable with what we're doing, then none of us should. And if something that's happening is -- *making* someone uncomfortable, then, you know, then, that's, that's not just their problem, or anything like that, that's *everyone's* problem. And we really want to commit ourselves to fixing it." He took another pause to breathe, and then just sighed, dropping his head forward before looking up to finally really meet her eyes. "And, for me personally, can I just say that -- I do think it's completely shitty of Bran not to come tell you all of this in person, but... I also want you to know that it's not that he's -- sulking, or -- making me play Telephone for you two, or anything like that. He's just... really, really afraid that you're still angry at him, I think, and that's really terrifying for him, because I think you're basically the person he looks up to the most in the entire world. And... so, you know, I can sort of understand."

He looked a bit lost by then, though, and took a moment or two casting about to find his thread again. "So, er... yeah, we're down in the studio working on that. And -- if, you know, you'd like to join us, we were thinking we're maybe gonna do sort of a bare-bones run-through of the new version for Jack when he gets in, and if you want to come in and give it a listen and maybe give us some bass on that... we'd just really, really appreciate that, and we'd be really glad to have you there."

And at that point, finally, Andy seemed to run out of things to say; and just stood looking at Zoe, folded in and almost fearful. And for a minute or two, she just stood there and stared back at him: still holding on to the edge of the door, and still sort of absorbing all that into her mind.

"Yeah," she said, at last; and when it came, so, with it, did a small, growing smile she hadn't entirely been expecting. "Yeah, I'd like that very much. Thanks. ...Just give me fifteen or so, and I'll be right down?"

"Yeah, sure." Nodding so hard she thought he'd roll his head off, and palpably relieved. "Sure, yeah, of course, take your time. I'll just be, er, you know." He started to turn away, out of the doorway and back down the hall... and then stopped, and turned back, something seeming to occur to him. "Oh, and -- I'm really happy for you and Shelley, as well. And, you know, I think we're all fine with it, and everything, so -- I wouldn't worry about that."

And then he really had gone -- before she could voice any sort of protest or question about that, or even do anything besides look completely taken aback.

...Well, that cat was probably more or less out at this point, anyway. On a certain amount of consideration, she supposed it might be just as well.

She closed the door behind him, going back into her room, to dig through her suitcase and the stuff she'd scattered by the bedside table; and even by the time she'd got on a non-pajama top and started to brush her hair, her smile still lingered. And when, some ten minutes later, she came into the studio downstairs to find Andy sitting and noodling at his guitar, Bran leaned up against the wall of the live room playing with a stray metronome, Bran glanced up at her and then smiled with veiled eyes, looking quickly back down at the floor again. And when she went over to him, stood in front of him until he looked up, and then, wordlessly, hugged him, he hugged back -- with a depth of feeling she didn't know if she'd ever felt from him before, or might again.

So *that* was all right.

They'd all been giggling on and off throughout their handclaps-and-final-percussion recording session, because they always did; it was the silliest and sort of the best part of the entire recording process, and carried the added bonus that few of them besides Lucas and Zoe were very good at it. When Zoe lost it for the third time that day, though, Bill turned on her with all mock affrontedness, hands fisted on his hips and nostrils flaring. "I beg your pardon! Need I remind you that clapping your hands is a *very serious business*, young lady!"

"Sorry," Zoe said, wheezing and giggling a bit more as she pushed her headset down around her neck, wiping her eyes, "sorry, it's not that, it's just..." She glanced around at them, as she settled -- finishing on Shelley, who met her eyes for only a few seconds and then turned a bit pink, and looked away. Which was always sort of a nice feeling, if a bit perversely. "I was just thinking... maybe we all really are a bit more like a family than a band, sometimes."

The slightly bemused looks all the rest cast at each other came as no real surprise; she hadn't exactly expected them to understand, after all. Bran, though, *did* take her by surprise -- and never missed a beat.

"Yeah?" he said, and glanced round at the rest before looking back at her, with a broad, cheeky grin. "Does that mean you're shagging *your* sister, then?"

Zoe threw an egg shaker at his head; but as he ducked and came back up laughing, she thought that all of that really just served to prove her point.

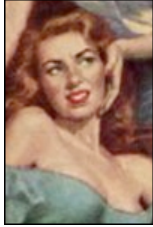
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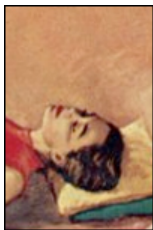
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