

Shousetsu Bang*Bang

JUNE 2012 | ISSUE 37

PROFESSOR WORTHINGTON
AND THE SEARCH FOR THE
ONE-EYED TROUSER SNAKE

TASTES LIKE TRUE GRIT

BODIES IN SPACE

FRATERNIZATION



ON EARTH MY NINA

SWAMPED!

I SURVIVED A DEADLY CAMPING TRIP WITH
AN AUSTRALIAN PARK RANGER

THROUGH THE HOSTILE
JUNGLES OF GAIA

DEADLY SCORPIONS ATE
MY SHIRT!

WEASELS
RIPPED
MY FLESH

6/1/12 TYPED

SHOUSETSU BANG* BANG

Volume 8, Issue 37: Weasels Ripped My Flesh

1. Professor Worthington and the Search
for the One-Eyed Trouser Snake
secrets of a mysterious island,
exposed by Hinata Yamimoto
2. Deadly Scorpions Ate My Shirt!
an illustrated desert adventure by Igrisujin
3. On Earth My Nina
an illustrated exploration of cryptozoology
by Domashita Romero (地下口メ口)
4. Tastes Like True Grit
scenes from a hunter's deadly trade, by Daisuke Yaki (大輔焼)
5. Fraternization
a shocking true crime exposé by Jestana
6. I survived a deadly camping trip with an Australian park ranger
a breathtaking account of survival
by Shikkoku no Suzu (漆黒のスズ)
7. Through the hostile jungles of Gaia
a real war adventure by Kaerutobi Ike (蛙跳び池)
8. Bodies in Space
an illustrated journey by shukyou (主教)
9. Swamped!
exclusive photo-feature by melanofly (メラノ飛)

Shousetsu Bang*Bang
Volume 8, Issue 37

For the online version of this publication, please visit:
<http://bb-shousetsu.livejournal.com/76860.html>

Cover design by Chira and Doyle

Edited and assembled by beebilebabe and ladysisyphus
PDF version layout by relvetica

© 2012. Some rights reserved. This volume is released under a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial No-Derivatives 3.0 license. This license permits non-profit sharing, downloading, and reproduction of this publication as an unbroken unit, provided that attribution is properly assigned. To learn more, please visit <http://creativecommons.org>.



Copyrights for individual stories are reserved by each contributor.

"Professor Worthington and the Search for the One-Eyed Trouser Snake"
by Hinata Yamimoto

"Deadly Scorpions Ate My Shirt!" by Igrisujin and illustrated by quaedam

"On Earth My Nina" by Domashita Romero and illustrated by serenity_winner

"Tastes Like True Grit" by Daisuke Yaki

"Fraternization" by Jestana

"I survived a deadly camping trip with an Australian park ranger"
by Shikkoku no Suzu

"Through the hostile jungles of Gaia" by Kaerutobi Ike

"Bodies in Space" by shukyou and illustrated by Neru Momochimuchi

Copyrights for individual images are reserved by each contributor.

Swamped, by melanofly

If you are interested in becoming a contributor, please review the submission guidelines for stories and artwork.

Published by <http://shousetsubangbang.com>

Professor Worthington and the Search for the One-Eyed Trouser Snake

By Hinata Yamimoto

I was balls-deep in secondhand embarrassment from the start of the safari.

Let's be clear, this was not my usual sort of client. As the only Good Ol' Boy offering tours on Nakkavara Island (it's this little uninhabited place a fuckton of miles away from any coast, don't bother), I tend to attract a certain personality type. Like the rich asshole who wants to shoot something with horns. Or the trust fund asshole who wants to shoot something with claws. Or (my personal favorite) the rich asshole who brings his kids along so they can watch daddy be a man while he, yes, shoots something. I don't know, something about having the only Texan accent for 200 miles tends to draw them to me.

But anyway, this character wasn't one of those assholes. He was an entirely *different* type of asshole. No, not an asshole. Douchebag? Dumbass? Something like a cross between a 'tool' and a 'twit,' with a major emphasis on 'dork.' Fuckwit? Fuckwit.

Where to begin with this fella? Guess the best place would be a name. "James Worthington," the paper said, or, as I learned when I had my hand gripped in a bone-crushing handshake, "Professor James T. Worthington the third, so utterly spiffing to meet you, I say, wot!"

Professah. James. T. Worthington. The third.

I shit you not.

Guy was just about my height, thought it was hard to tell with the fucking ridiculous safari hat on his head--you know, the tan one with the point on top that bowls out to the sides? It matched the lumpy tan safari gear pack and clothes and ... were those the pants with snaps on them so you could turn them into shorts without exposing your junk to the elements? Jesus fucking wept.

"And you would be Jeb Walker, I presume?" he asked, shaking my hand between both of his, like it was the ham in a ham sandwich that had been particularly sassy and needed to be taught a lesson.

"Ayep," I said, because I was. And now you know my name. See how I slipped it in all casual and seamless-like? I am one fucking considerate narrator, never say otherwise.

"Splendid!" Worthington said, and his face was all thick glasses and unfortunate moustache and big, British, buck-toothed grin.

Did I mention that according to the info sheet he'd filled out, this parody of Disney's Gentlemen Adventurer Club was all of twenty-five?

When he'd had enough of shaking my hand and the sound of Rohit's motorboat had faded away, he let me go. I looked at the boxes on the shore and the gathering clouds--just in time for the upcoming 3:00 shower.

"We'd best be getting to the base camp afore we get soaked," I said, hefting one of the boxes onto my hip, and good Lord, was he packing enough bricks to build a traditional British hunting lodge?

"Capital idea!" he said, piling the other two boxes on top of each other and lifting them like they weighed nothing.

We trudged down the path to the main camp, Worthington quietly mumbling a jaunty little hedgehog-themed marching song in beat with his steps. It wasn't long until we reached the

lodge. The lodge was a Frankenstein's masterpiece. I'd worked on it for the past eight years, from when I'd first inherited the single-room cabin from the island's previous owners. Since then, I'd added two guest rooms, a fireplace, an electrical generator, a decent kitchenette, a bathroom with the most fantastic water pressure ever, and a satellite dish so I can Skype with my sister.

We dumped his possessions in the swankier of the guest rooms. His pack hit the floor with a loud thud. Boy was packing some guns, is what I'm saying, and I don't mean the type that shoots bullets.

"You get yourself settled and come on out when you want to start planning the week," I said, and left him with his things.

I took the maps of the island and spread them over the table, trying to figure out what would interest the Professor. On his form, written on the line that asked what he wanted to do, was only *'that is confidential. wink.'* Still, I could make a guess or two. He hadn't declared any weapons beyond a few things with blades and a small sidearm, so he probably wasn't there to hunt. Or he was more extreme than I thought.

Maybe he'd like to meet Abby. Everyone loves to meet Abby.

All along, over the sound of rain hitting the roof, there were clangs and bangs and a few sproings. What the hell had he packed?

Worthington came bustling out of his room. He had left the hat behind, and his hair, though black, otherwise looked like it could give Einstein a run for his money. He carried several silver- and cream-colored devices and deposited them in the kitchen.

"What's all that?" I asked.

"I suspected you might not have a proper tea set," he said, tapping his finger against his nose. It only drew more attention to his terrible moustache. "You Americans only ever care about your coffee."

I bristled a little. "I'll have you know my coffee has been compared unfavorably to piss."

He laughed at that, a full-throated chortle, head tossed back and everything. He gave me a hearty slap on the back. "Well said, Walker, well said. I like your tweed!"

"Always been proud of my tweed. Have a seat," I said, kicking the chair opposite me so it slid into an inviting position. He sat.

I leaned forward, folding my hands over the map. "Now. Professor. What are you here for?"

He laughed again, said, "That is confidential!" and winked.

In hindsight, I'm not sure what else I expected.

"Alrighty. Ground rules. And just so you know, technically, you've already agreed to all this, so if you don't like it, take it up with my lawyer. Who is my sister, and therefore Texan, too. So good luck there." I thumped the contract for emphasis. "Number one: I say, you do. There's all sorts of nasty critters and accidents waiting to happen out there, and I'd be none-too-pleased if'n you got maimed on account of foolishness such as going where I say don't go, talking when I tell you hush, or shooting when I say hold your goddamned fire. You hear me?"

"No tomfoolery. Understood."

"Rule number two: no going off by your lonesome. We're not in the lodge, we use the buddy system. Holding hands and looking both ways before we cross the street just like you learned in kindergarten or whatever the equivalent is for you folks back in England, comprende?"

"Comprehended."

"Rule number three: no shooting things you don't plan on taking with you. Mother Nature

keeps this island in a delicate ecological balance like a bunch of plates spinning on those pole things, and you do not want to be that yahoo who jumps up on stage and knocks them all over by removing the apex predators and then waits for applause. You need trophies, fine, but you only take what you can carry." Worthington began to speak, but I held up a finger. "Rule 3b: I'm your guide and bodyguard. I do not carry your shit."

I scratched my head, getting to the end of my spiel. "Rule number I've-already-forgotten-what-number-we're-on: my job ends once you get off the island. Any customs rules you want to take care of, you figure them out on your own. I am not legally responsible for any injuries or emotional damage or anything else that happens off the island, blah blah blah, any complaints, see my lawyer."

I folded my hands again, giving Worthington my best 'business settled' look. "Any questions?"

He actually raised a hand, like he was some proper British schoolboy looking to see if there would be a test on this. I nodded at him, hoping he'd rise to ask with his hands neatly clasped in front of his crotch, but no dice.

"Have you any qualms with the capture of live animals?" he asked, leaning forward, an almost manic gleam in his eyes.

I whistled through my teeth. "Just what are we talking about?"

He tapped his nose and winked.

"Confidential. Right. Mind giving me a clue? Is it bigger than a breadbox and full of claws?"

Worthington chortled. "I assure you, it is of moderate size and is not an apex predator, and I have brought all the necessary equipment to trap and contain it." He sighed. "I do hope you don't take offense at this. After the debacle with Doctor Biggerstaf and the Two-Bulged Snipe, I've found it paramount to maintain a certain level of discretion when it comes to these things."

It says something about my life when I can hear things like that and not even blink. "I hear you. It's the height of bad manners to go interfering with another man's snipe."

Worthington beamed and clapped his hands. "Excellent! Then we are of accord!" He scooted his chair over to my side of the table. "Now, let us see about these maps."

I pointed out the various features of the island, important landmarks and paths as well as the shacks we could use to hide from the three o'clock deluges. As the rain outside tapered down, we picked a preliminary scouting path.

I'll say this for Worthington: he has the gams for hiking. When the rain stopped pouring and the heated ground stopped steaming, we set off on the most difficult path on the island. It's the one I generally only take the douchebag gym-bunny pricks on to try and tire them out, but Worthington took it with a bounce in his step and a grin under his terrible, terrible moustache. He kept a hand on his bushwhacking knife, unneeded as it was. He would have probably been singing a jolly hiking song if I hadn't made it perfectly clear to cut that shit out. Then again, he was probably too busy paying attention to everything we passed. Every time I looked back when the sound of his footsteps had stopped, he was bent down, eyes wide, lips whispering names in Latin.

Something in the bushes caught my eye. "Hold," I said, raising my arm in the traditional 'stop yo shit' motion. It was unnecessary in this case, since Worthington was already stopped, hand curled firmly around the handle of his knife. It was still sheathed, which was a

good sign that things weren't about to escalate.

I locked eyes with the beastie in front of us. "You don't want to do this, darlin," I said softly. I drew my sword and held it over my head, blade pointed down like some lopsided sabretooth tiger. I glared at him, the very picture of 'don't start none, won't be none.'

"Walker!" Worthington shouted just as the sneak attack came. It was from the left, just as I predicted. I switched my grip, swinging my sword like a baseball bat. I caught the attacker in the side with the flat of my blade.

"Not today, Marley!" I yelled, following it up with a sharp kick to the ribs. He whimpered and rushed back into the woods, partner following him. "You're getting the short end of the stick, Marley! Make Bob do the dirty work sometimes!" I shouted after their retreating tails.

I looked back to Worthington, who had drawn his blade and turned to protect my right flank--good instincts, if unnecessary in this case. "It's okay, Perfessor. Those two only ever hunt together."

"Ah, I see," Worthington said, putting his sword away with shaking hands.

"Everything all right there?" I asked. I was worried that I may have traumatized the poor kid, which for once wasn't my intention, but when he looked back at me, he was grinning wide enough to show every one of his oversized teeth. Adrenaline, then. I could relate.

"That was a fantastic scrum, Walker!" Worthington enthused. "The way you intercepted that sneak attack without even looking? Phwoar! I just hope next time you'll let me have a bit of a scrap too, wot?"

I huffed a laugh and continued down the trail, Worthington following at my heels like a puppy. "Don't be too impressed. Marley and Bob know a grand total of one strategy, which they use every fucking time. At this point, the only way they can hurt me is with secondhand embarrassment."

I could feel the question mark forming over Worthington's head. "But if they attack you every time, why don't you--"

"Kill them?" I finished, cutting him off. I shrugged. "Don't see the point. My job's hard enough maintaining the ecological balance without getting rid of any more predators, and besides, if two homosexual life partners want to make it their life's mission to eat me, who am I to judge?"

Worthington laughed loudly and clapped me on the shoulder. "Who are we to judge indeed, Walker? Well said!"

We continued down the path, Worthington following behind.

"Walker...those two creatures. Were they perhaps *Amphicyonidae Orthipicus*?" Worthington asked.

He couldn't see my eyebrows rise, which was a real pity, since they so rarely do that. "Ayep. Gold star, Perfessor." Worthington hummed happily. "They happen to be the mystery critter you're after?"

"Ah, no. But a rare animal, and compatible with what I'm searching for? Oh yes," Worthington said.

"Glad to hear it," I said.

We soon came to the place we were looking for: the top of the cliff face which gave a good view of the east side of the island. We had a good hour of rest time before the sun began to set and we had to turn around and head back to the lodge. Worthington took out the spare copy of the map I'd given him, a compass, a pair of binoculars, and a few textbooks. How he managed

to carry all of that up the super-steep hill, I have no idea.

I took the opportunity to lounge out against a tree and enjoy the view. The island had really recovered over the years since I'd bought it. The foliage's coverage had gone from badly-used-fishnets to sleek-and-sexy-thigh-highs, and the noise from the birds trying to get laid or encourage other birds to get the fuck out of their territory was twice as loud. Yeah, I'll admit it. I done good.

Worthington seemed to appreciate it too, from the way he was looking like he wanted to tear into the jungles below and strip them of their secrets. But, classy-like, like he wanted to make sure they had a good time, too, because he was a gentleman explorer at heart.

He finished marking things on his maps and stood up. "Pardon, Walker, just need to get a bird's-eye view of the other side of the island, won't be a moment," he said and, with a move worthy of the finest bowtied stripper in Vegas, reached down and tore off the bottom parts of his pants.

Let me pause a moment here so I can wax poetic about his thighs.

Okay, first, a minor digression. I'm a good-looking man. The combination of living on the island and narcissism have given me a pretty perfectly toned body. I've been naked in front of the webcam enough times to have hundreds of loyal subscribers more-or-less tell me I'm the equivalent of a bronzed Adonis who can't tan. A perma-sunburned Adonis. What I'm saying is, I'm cut.

Worthington was not cut. Worthington was like if you lifted weights real hard and the UPS guy came with your shipment of muscles and was like, "whoops, looks like they sent you a double shipment of muscles, do you want me to send the extra back?" and Worthington said, "No trouble my good man, just slap those extra muscles on wherever they can fit!" His calves swelled like party balloons ready to pop. This muscles of his thighs flexed and bulged like an undulating orgy of snakes. When he bent to hoist himself into the tree, the seat of his pants clung so tight I could see the dimples in each cheek.

I believe that he did not climb the tree so much as he wrapped his thighs around it, and the tree submitted to their will.

Which, to be honest, was starting to sound like a right fine idea.

This was going to be a heck of an awkward week.

The next morning, when the sun was just starting to peek over the hills, Worthington thrust his maps between me and my morning Franken Berry cereal. "Judging by the thickness of foliage and elevation levels, I've narrowed it down to these three areas," he said, indicating the points circled on the maps.

I glanced at them, tapped one, and went back to my breakfast before the milk turned too dark a shade of pink. Not exactly a morning person here.

"Right-o," Worthington said. "Any particular reason you're choosing this place?"

"Think you'd like to meet someone," I grunted. For the morning, this was goddamned erudite for me.

The trek wasn't so bad this time--we curved around the cliff's face so there wasn't as much of an uphill trek, and Worthington's legs kept up just fine. More than fine. He paused now and then to investigate a plant or insect, and every time he bent, I could just hear the fabric straining around his gloriously built ass. I spent the whole journey just thinking about those legs, the way the muscles must band and flex as he moved. I bet if you put a walnut between his

cheeks, he could crack it with just one squat.

Oh God. I bet he does squats.

Fuck.

We reached the place I was looking for in just a few hours and a minimal number of awkward boners. I held up a hand for quiet again, and damned if he didn't take orders well. I stuck my fingers in my mouth and gave three whistles: low, high, low. When there wasn't a response, I did it again.

"What are--" Worthington began to ask, but I held up a hand again. A few moments later, the grass rustled, and out came a large, tusked, furry friend. She came up to me and reared up on her back legs, resting her front paws on my shoulder.

"*Smilodon Gratiuis*," Worthington whispered.

"Good catch," I said, then had to close my mouth as she nuzzled the heck out of my face. I rubbed back, then turned my head to the side. "But I just call her Abby." Her paw gently cuffed my head, bringing it back to her shoulder. "Yes, yes, I love you too, darlin," I said, laughing. Worthington was laughing, too.

"You seem to have quite the bond," Worthington said.

"Well, I am sort of her papa," I said, settling Abby back to the ground. She nosed at my hand, so I bent over and scruffed behind her ears while I talked. "Her mama passed away when she was little, so I ended up raising her until she was big enough to look after herself."

The brush rustled again. "Oh look, here comes the grandkids," I said. Three more creatures came out, smaller than Abby, perhaps the size of a full grown human.

"Be careful," I warned, when Worthington stuck out his hand for a cub to sniff. "Abby might be tamed, but these'uns ain't."

"Poppycock, they seem fine," Worthington said, and playfully tousled the cub's fur. The cub reached a paw out and casually knocked off Worthington's stupid hat. Worthington lightly tapped its nose. The cub leaned in close and huffed. "One moment," Worthington said to the cub, and removed his glasses.

"Walker, if you would be so kind?" he said, extending them in my direction. I took them and tucked them into a pocket.

"You sure you know what you're..." My train of thought got derailed on account of sudden shirtlessness. My train of thought was so derailed the little conductor was fired and the little commuters were issued bus passes to make up for the inconvenience, because, damn, Worthington had some beautifully built arms hidden under that shirt, and the thin undershirt left very little to the imagination. I had to sit down.

A moment later, the legs of his trousers were also removed, and Worthington was getting into a wide-legged stance. The cub came up to him, stretching until they were nose-to-nose, each staring the other down.

At some signal, Worthington's arms landed on the cub's shoulders, at the same time its front paws started to rise from the ground. Worthington's legs worked overtime, bracing himself on the ground as the two tried to push each other off balance. I suppose I should've worried, but the cub was keeping its claws sheathed, and Abby laid down next to me and put her head in my lap. If they weren't worried, I guess I shouldn't be, either. They were just two cubs playing.

One of Worthington's legs buckled, the cub toppling over him, but Worthington managed to use his momentum to keep them rolling. Each struggled to stay on top, Worthington laughing madly the whole time.

"The guy comes all the way out here, and his first instincts on meeting a new critter is to

see how well it can wrestle," I said to Abby, scratching her head.

Worthington managed to pin the cub to the ground. He turned to me, all bright blue eyes and buck-toothed grin, sweat sliding down his arms, and said, "Walker! Do you want next match?"

Holy fuck yes please.

"No thanks, I'm good," I said, waving him on.

He shrugged and let the cub up, ready for round two.

I looked at Abby. "Sad thing is?" I said to her. "I'd still totally let him put his dick in me."

Abby looked at Worthington, looked at me, huffed, and put her head back on my lap.

I worked on my sketchbook that evening while Worthington sang in the bathtub. I wanted to record how big Abby's cubs had gotten, and the image of the Professor wrestling wild animals wouldn't leave my head. I did a few rough sketches before I realized that the sounds of singing had died off and the air was suspiciously steamier.

"I didn't know you could draw!"

I didn't jump. Why would I jump when there was an attractively ridiculous dripping wet man wearing only a towel standing three feet away from me?

God damn it. I hadn't gotten this many awkward boners since that time way back in AP history when we had a sub who kept dropping his goddamned piece of chalk.

"Can I help you?" I drawled.

"Ah, yes, you're out of talcum powder. Can't finish drying up without it, it's just not cricket!" he said cheerfully, leaning over my shoulder. The water from his hair dripped onto my neck. He smelled amazing.

"There's Abby and the cubs! You have a real knack for this!" he enthused. He grasped the page's edge. "May I?"

"Suit yourself." Why yes, nearly naked man, I *would* like to show you my etchings.

He flipped through the book, looking at all the sketches of plants and wildlife I'd seen on the island. He cooed over the page that showed Abby's cubs at just three weeks old. "Do you take most visitors to see them?"

"Hell no!" I blurted out. Worthington looked a little shocked. "I mean, I'm not likely to bring her out to meet someone who'd like to shoot her, is all. I save her for the folks with kids."

Worthington nodded in understanding. "Ah yes, they're the ones who are here to look at the wilderness rather than hunt."

I gave him a strange look. "No, they're the ones who're here to shoot things, same as anyone else. But show them a mama with a bunch of cuddly, furry cubs, and your daddy wants to shoot them? That's a recipe for tears like none other." I laughed to myself. "Must've put a dozen kids off of shooting things in the past year alone."

"Isn't that a bit risky?" Worthington asked.

"Ain't one papa who's shot yet. And the kids are fine, all told. Heck, one at the end was talking about setting up a wildlife fund at her school." I smiled proudly at the memory of the little girl with pigtails and a big dream.

Worthington laughed. "You're a queer one, Walker."

I pointed my finger like a pistol at him and winked. "You said it."

He continued flipping back, until he noticed something other than my sketches that surprised him. "Are these the dates?" he said, pointing at the corner of the page. I nodded; he

frowned. "How long have you been here?"

I leaned back and stretched, like I had to actually think about it. "It's gotta be close on eight years now," I said. "When I bought this place up, it was a miserable, overhunted piece of land. Sunk nearly all my money into it, too. Still not sure why, to tell the truth. I was a stupid, idealistic twenty-one-year-old, just out of college with nothing better to do. But the island's gotten better, so that's something."

Worthington frowned again. "But if hunting was the problem, why do you let hunters come here?"

I shrugged. "Need the money. And I figure, if you give them a controlled way to hunt, I won't have to worry about poachers. And also, tourists don't hardly pay anything, and *I need the money.*"

Worthington hummed to himself in thought. I could see something forming at the front of his brain. "Wait one bleeding moment. You're four years older than me?" he asked in absolute shock, and I couldn't help it, I started laughing. After a few seconds, he started laughing, too.

He straightened up suddenly. "Oh! I've just had the most marvelous idea!" He rushed back to his room, holding his towel in place to my disappointment. A moment later he was back--no more fully clothed, thankfully, but he was holding a book and grinning at me, like I held all the secrets he was looking for.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to hold him down and shave his moustache, or at least lick it until it lost all power over me.

"What's that there?" I asked. He sat down on the couch, thighs pressed hotly against my own.

"One of my grandfather's books," he said, opening to a certain page. "He was an explorer, like my father and myself. I've been attempting to find all the creatures he described in these pages." He pointed to a page with an illustration of a plant with rather suggestively shaped purplish berries, each hung in a pair from a joined stem. "Have you seen a plant that looks like this?"

I flipped back a couple dozen pages, to the stuff I'd drawn my sixth year here. "This look like a match?" I asked. "Don't know what they are. I've been calling them dongleberries on account of how they look like--"

"Yes, splendid, that's it!" Worthington cheered. "And do you happen to know if any of them grow in an area with a lot of these?" He pointed to another page with a small animal, kind of like a vole.

I flipped to another page, which showed a little rat-like creature hiding under the dongleberry's leaves. "That serve?"

Worthington leaned in even closer, hand gripping high on my thigh. "And do you happen to know if you can find both of these in any of the areas I've circled?"

I huffed a laugh and leaned back, praying to the ceiling for deliverance. "Perfessor, I think you've just planned out tomorrow's journey."

We'd laid several traps that morning. Worthington certainly believed we were in the right area, and by the quivering of his godawful moustache, I'd lay even bets he was right. The traps were an unusual design: slim, weight-sensitive, rectangular boxes with a right strange fabric covering, but Worthington seemed pretty sure that they'd work, and it was no skin off me either way.

The rains came. We moved to the nearest shelter--a lean-to, really, just three wooden walls and a roof on a padded, elevated floor, but it was enough to keep the rain off. Worthington pulled a pipe from God-knows-where and puffed at it as he thumbed through some hardcover volume. I noticed his name on the spine, though if it were this James T. Worthington or the two that preceded him, I had no clue. I didn't mind the smoke, since it kept the mosquitoes away, and if he didn't care about the scent alerting the other animals in the region, neither did I.

I sat by the open wall, eyes closed, breathing in the scent of the rain falling on my island, and felt myself drifting off to sleep.

"You truly love this island, don't you?" Worthington asked.

"A-yep," I said, keeping my eyes closed.

"Why don't you try to get some more official protections for it?" he asked.

I sighed. "The home country don't exactly like the idea of declaring all of this a not-for-profit sanctuary, and there ain't a federation I've contacted that wants to spend the money sticking their necks out for this thumbprint of an island." I made a face. "Don't worry your pretty little head there, Perfessor. S'long as I'm here, we'll be okay."

I heard him slide on closer in, smelled the cloud of his tobacco get stronger. "I have...a bit of pull when it comes to these things," he said awkwardly. Should've known it'd take the embarrassment of offering a favor to get the wind out of his sails. "If you'd like, when the week is out, I could perhaps advocate on your behalf?"

I opened one eye to look at him. "You know what, Perfessor? I'd sure appreciate that."

Worthington beamed. "Oh, not at all, it's nothing, truly. In fact, it should be a charm once I find--" He cut himself off, looking instantly guilty. "Oh dash it all, why not?" He turned to me, looking me dead in the eye. "Walker. Can you keep a secret?"

I looked left and right, at all the nothing that could overhear us. "Think I could be persuaded to."

"Very well! I am on the hunt--" he leaned in closer, whispering the words "--for the One-Eyed Trouser Snake."

I'll give you a moment there. I needed one, too.

I dug my pinky into my ear, swirling it around a bit. "Beg pardon?"

"The One-Eyed Trouser Snake!" Worthington repeated.

Welp, if he insisted.

I reached over and took his pipe out of his hand, conscientiously smothering the glowing tobacco. Because, if I learned one thing from Saturday morning cartoons, it was that only me and a big anthropomorphic teddy bear could prevent forest fires. I took Worthington's book and placed it, and the pipe, carefully to the side.

Then, and only then, did I jump on Worthington, pushing his back against the floor. He fell with only a slight exhalation to mark the point when he hit the ground, pith hat rolling across the floor. I took advantage of his momentary stupor to pin his arms above his head. I wrapped my legs around his thighs, bracing my feet under his knees. I leaned in, lips pressed next to his ear, and growled, "Shit, man, you only had to ask."

Worthington laughed at that, a deep, rounded "Ho ho ho!" and I swear it made me taste British toffee on the back of my teeth. "I see! Fisticuffs!"

He bucked his hips, crotch rubbing against my already half-hard dick, throwing me off balance. He spun us around so he was on top, landing sideways across my stomach. He slid an arm under my leg, pulling it up into a textbook leg lock. "Nice moves, Perfessor," I purred.

"Sorry, old chum. I'm an Eton boy. We scrum all the time."

"Oh, do you now?" Did I say it was a textbook leg lock? It was a textbook leg lock on anyone except a guy who'd done yoga with his sister all throughout high school. I bent my leg back with the hold, all the way until my boots were at my nose, and wrapped my knee around the back of his neck, pushing him down again. I scissored my other leg under his chest and *squeezed*.

That was the plan, anyway, until he grabbed one of my thighs in each hand and *pushed* until I was spread eagled on the floor, exposed and panting. I reached for him, but he executed a beautiful flip, turning me onto my belly and pressing his full weight onto my back.

He reached an arm around my neck. I twisted my arm back around his. He leaned onto my body. I bent my legs back until they wrapped around his knees, ankles locking in place.

"We...seem to be at an impasse," Worthington said, breathing heavily onto my neck. I could feel the bristles of his stupid moustache scratching my skin.

"Seems that way," I agreed.

"Best of three?" he offered, but made no move to let go of his grip.

"I think we might find another way to settle this," I said, shamelessly rubbing my ass against his crotch.

"Oh...oh!" Worthington said. I squeezed my legs tight around his thighs to get better leverage and gave another shameless rub, long and hard, against his crotch. And speaking of things that were growing long and hard...

"Ready to continue your exploration, Perfessor?" I asked, releasing my legs and giving him the sultriest look over my shoulder.

He sat back, blushing, and said, "Well, I *am* an Eton boy," and I had no idea what the fuck that meant, but boy did it sound dirty.

He started to slowly unlace his boots, but I wasn't having none of that. I grabbed each boot and yanked it off, giving him the option of either doing ballet points or losing a toe. I allowed him to unbuckle his own belt, then unzipped and yanked them off, too, throwing them in a corner because, seriously, fuck pants.

All he wore below the equator was a pair of plain white undies, a pair of socks, and--were those sock garters? Holy fuck he was wearing sock garters. I slipped a thumb under each elastic, just to feel the press against his rock solid calves. I leaned in and up until my cheek was pressed against his crotch, his dick hot and straining against the fabric.

I rubbed my face against the cloth, enjoying the heavy, salty scent. It had been a while since I'd had a dick on my face. I wanted to enjoy it while I could. I wanted to rub up against it, get its good, dickish scent all over me. I wanted to walk through my island after this and have all the critters go, "Hey, is that a giant walking dick? It smells like a giant walking dick! Wait, it's just Walker. Way to get a dick, Walker!" and give me whatever version of a thumbs-up a critter could do without an opposable thumb.

Okay, largely I just wanted Worthington to keep making those little, hitched noises in his throat. I mouthed at the bulge under the fabric, working my way up its length, and giving a little extra suck at the top. I slid my hands up his calves to his thighs, feeling all those impossible muscles twitch under my hands. I grabbed the waistband of his underwear and pulled, sliding it off his hips, and tossing it to another corner of the room.

I reached up and snatched his eyeglasses, pulling them down for just a moment. I wanted to see his eyes, his amazing, bright blue eyes so dilated they were practically black. I pushed them back on--I wanted him to have a good view of what was coming next.

Making sure he was watching every moment, I wrapped my lips around the tip of his cock, giving the leaking tip a good, quick lick. Slowly, slowly, inch by inch, I lowered myself

down his cock. God, his dick was amazing, all hot and firm and wide enough to give a real nice stretch. It didn't hurt that all the while he was saying things like, "Oh bother that's a right good jimmying there boy-o," and other such Britishisms. They got more and more nonsensical the deeper I sank.

Fun biology fact: the neurochemical emotion known as "shame" originates in the gag reflex. Since I lack the latter, it explains why I have such a pathological lack of the former. Go ahead, ask Bill Nye, he'll tell you. It's science.

I grabbed Worthington's hands and brought them to my head. After a moment he caught on, fingers gently closing in my hair. I rose up and sank down again, giving a little suck at the top. He groaned, fingers tightening, pulling at my hair. I moaned at that little bit of pain, working my mouth up and down his cock again, faster this time.

Worthington made a little humming noise, and when I glanced up, I saw him giving me a calculating look. His hands tightened in my hair, deliberately this time, and damn, it felt so good. I reached down and unbuttoned my pants, sticking my hand inside and grasping my cock, giving it a good tug.

Worthington's hands went flat and still on my scalp. I looked up, questions in my eyes, dick in my mouth.

"Apologies, Walker, I'm not playing fair, am I?" he said. "One should give as good as one takes, eh?"

My mouth came free with a little pop. Worthington's cock bobbed back and forth, glistening with saliva like it had been blessed by three royally kinky fairies.

"I ain't complaining," I said, though my jaw was a touch sore.

"Even so," he said, and reached for the top button on my shirt. Before he could waste any time, I pulled my shirt over my head, then shucked off my pants, boxers, socks, and shoes in one quick move.

"Better?" I asked, stretching to show off my admittedly awesome physique.

"I would say so, yes!" He nodded in agreement and removed his own shirt, tossing it aside. I'll admit I was a little disappointed--I was hoping he'd do that thing where you flex and the shirt tears into tiny shreds, because that would be awesome.

He bent to remove his socks, but I put a hand out to stop him, murmuring, "Leave them on." He left them alone with a goofy smile. "Now where were we? That's right..." I mused, and hooked a foot around his ankle. I gave a little yank, and he fell with me, landing on top. I wiggled around so my ass was in the air, pressed up against him, just like we'd been before.

"Looks like you win this round, Perfessor," I said in a monotone voice. "What you gonna do now?"

"One moment, old chap," he said, and I heard some rustling and the snap of a bottle. A dollop of something cold and slippery landed on my ass.

"This another one of your Eton things?" I said.

"Preparedness is one of Eton's mottos," he said proudly, and poked a finger into my ass. Dang it felt good, Worthington slicking me up all careful and deliberate-like. It'd been awhile since I'd had anything up there that wasn't bright purple or run on batteries.

I smelled something sweet. "Is that...is that fruit punch flavored?"

He honest-to-God harrumphed at that. "Strawberry kiwi flavored, I'll have you know," he said with great dignity.

It was official. I was about to get fucked by the world's most perfect man.

"You about ready to stick it in?" I asked. He got a nice, firm grip on my hips, lined

himself up, and *pushed*.

I groaned as he slid in, feeling myself stretch around his cock. He was just the right size, not big enough to hurt, but wide enough that it took a little pushing to get in. His hands were hard on my hips, keeping me in place, and I hoped to God I'd have two matching hand-shaped bruises tomorrow to remember this by.

"You all right, chap?" Worthington asked, hand smoothing over my hip bone.

"God yes," I said, and pushed my ass back on him a few times. He got the hint right quick, pounding into me with military rhythm and precision. I pillowed my head in my arms and lifted my hips, canting them at just the right angle so he'd hit that one perfect spot every time. Man was a machine, driving hard into me without slowing, and I learned one more reason to love those thick legs of his.

Wish I could say it lasted a long time, but it only took a few minutes of that relentless rhythm to bring me to the edge. Worthington leaned over me, fisted my cock in his hand, and sank his teeth into my shoulder, and I was gone with a shout so loud I disturbed a whole flock of birds.

Fly away, little birds. Tell the rest of the island how Jeb Walker just got fucked to within an inch of his life.

Worthington came a minute later. Silently, I'm sad to say, because if he'd yelled something like, "God save the Queen!" or "Tally-ho!" I would've been obligated to gay marry him right then and there.

He collapsed onto my back, all sweaty and heavy and perfect.

"A-yep," I drawled, sighing happily.

"Rather," Worthington agreed.

I winced a little as he lifted his hips and his dick slid out. He rolled off of me onto his back, spread out for all the world to see his collapsing penis in a pretty purple condom. He poked at it once, then rolled it off and tied it up, tucking it into one of the garbage bags. Good. I don't truck with non-biodegradable garbage on my island.

I debated getting up to get my bag. I've got a deck of cards in there which should tide us over until round two (and oh yes, there would damned better be a round two), and I wanted to make sure I had access to my stash of condoms, which have silver stars printed on them and are therefore superior.

Instead, I rolled onto my side, gave him the biggest shit-eating grin, and said, "Sooooo...you find what you're looking for?"

He kissed me.

I don't know why that surprised me, but it did. He kissed me like he did everything: full of enthusiasm and a purposefulness that meant he was categorizing everything in that strange little head of his. His glasses clacked against my forehead, and his big buck teeth pulled at my lower lip, and his moustache...was still godawful, but it was beginning to grow on me, really. He kissed me until my head was in a fog and started thinking, you know what, sex is good and all, but I think I'd prefer just kissing this man and never ever stopping for the rest of my life.

He pulled back. "Hold one moment," he said, whispering against my lips. His gaze was focused over my shoulder.

He crawled over to where I had tossed my pants in the corner of the room. In one quick move he pounced on my pants, hands wrapping around it like he wanted to strangle my invisible ankle.

A pink snake, body as thick as a prize-winning zucchini, slithered out of the other leg. It

reared up, hissing at Worthington, who wasted no time grabbing it under the jaw so it couldn't bite him. He wrapped his legs around its body so it couldn't wriggle away. Worthington was bare-ass naked, fisting a giant pink snake clenched between his thighs.

It was, in fact, the hottest damned thing I have ever seen.

"Walker! The cage!" he yelled, but I was already on it, legs moving faster than I could think. I grabbed one of the spare cages, opened it up, and shoved it down on the snake's head, slamming the door shut before it had time to turn around and slither out again.

"Got 'im!" I shouted, rattling the cage a little to make sure everything was secure. The snake hissed at me, and I could distinctly see the single golden eye smack in the middle of its forehead. "Huh. So, Perfessor. That One-Eyed Trouser Snake you were looking for?"

"Yes?" Worthington dug a book from his pack, looking way too dignified for someone who was starkers and had just wrestled a snake.

"Turns out, that ain't a colorful metaphor?" I asked.

Worthington blinked at me. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"This is another excellent discovery to add to my collection! Come, Walker, look!" He waved me over, and I saw that the book he had was a scrapbook. He pointed to the photographs on the various pages. "This was my first big discovery--*Oncorhynchus Barba*, the Bearded Trout! After that I went to the tropics and found *Tridacna Capilli* and *Acanthaster Connivi*, the Hairy Clam and Winking Starfish, respectively." He pointed to pages of him and various sea life.

"After that I went to the jungles of South America and found *Mustela Pupure*, the Purple Helmet Warrior Weasel." He winked at me. "That was my greatest find until today."

He turned to the next page, which was blank. "And here's where our newest find will go. Of course, I'll have to spend a good deal of time here, researching its habitat and life cycle and all that. Must be thorough, after all."

"Of course," I repeated.

"With this kind of discovery, I suppose there would be all sorts of grants out there to protect the habitat of such a rare creature, and I would need an assistant who knows how to navigate the wilds..." He continued giving me a meaningful look.

Huh. So that's what hope feels like.

I coughed and turned away. "And once all that's done?" I asked, never one to not ruin a good thing.

"There are always more places to explore!" He got a sly look on his face. "Would you be interested in joining my search? I think I have a good lead on a specimen."

"And that would be?"

He leaned in close and whispered, "The Beast with Two Backs."

When I was through laughing hysterically, I nodded, said, "Professor, I think I can manage that," and tackled him to the ground again.

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://bb-shousetsu.livejournal.com/76860.html>

Deadly Scorpions Ate My Shirt!

by Igrisujin

illustrated by quaedam

Jimmy Olsen slapped his tattered passport on the table and pointed to the first page. *It's a long shot*, he thought, *but it might just work*.

"Do you know what this says?" he asked.

Seid Suhail shook his head. Smoke eddied around his furrowed brow and collected in a thick layer beneath the trading post's low ceiling. He bent over to examine the dog-eared page with a sceptical expression.

"It says that Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary." He smiled and pushed the passport towards Seid Suhail. It was lucky for him that the Arab trader had no way of knowing that Olsen was in the Sahara without the embassy's knowledge or consent. "Assistance, Seid Suhail, and protection. Keid is still a British province. That means you have to help."

The Arab trader looked at Olsen like he was crazy. "You can pass," he said. "That's not the problem. But nobody will go with you. There are no maps of that region. No man has ever entered Eram and come out alive. It is very bad luck."

"How do you know the ruins are there," asked Olsen with a grin, "if nobody's ever returned?"

Seid Suhail sighed. "There are some things only the English need to be told," he said grimly. "There is nothing in Eram worth seeing. You will only die, and then there will be an enquiry, and men with guns will come from the city and accuse us of murdering you for your money. I would not go there for a kingdom." He took a long drag on his hookah and spat out the fumes. "And neither should you."

Olsen took the passport back. "There won't be an enquiry," he said quietly.

"Even so," replied Seid Suhail. "Why do you want to go there, anyhow?"

Olsen only shook his head. He had spent his life exploring, and it was the only trade that he had not yet tired of. He had travelled half of Africa, and traded for diamonds in the shadows of the mountains of the Moon. He had dived on wrecks for gold, hunted man-eating leopards through the dusty streets of Indian towns and captured rare animals in the South American jungles. But the world was smaller, these days, and he'd found himself hunting for the few corners left unmapped. An Oxford archaeologist had paid him good money to find the lost city's location. It had given Jimmy an excuse to head into the desert once again. He relished the challenge.

They sat in silence for a while. Olsen shifted his weight uneasily as the old scar on his knee, the one where the Gold Coast shark had gouged him, began to throb.

"I could talk directly to the guides," he said.

"As you wish," said Seid Suhail. "But they won't go no matter how much money you offer. Two men tried last year and they were never heard of again. Nobody has returned from that desert alive."

Olsen tucked his passport back into his pocket. "There must be somebody in Keid crazy

enough to guide me," he said. "And if you can't help me, I'll just go alone."

"Then you will die."

"Then I'll die."

Seid Suhail frowned. Jimmy Olsen held his breath.

"The authorities in Cairo won't be happy to hear of a dead Englishman," he said.

In truth, he doubted that the Cairo embassy would ever hear of his death, and even if they did they wouldn't care two bits. But the prospect appeared to worry Seid Suhail far more than it worried Olsen, and Olsen was well used to wielding any weapon at his disposal.

Seid Suhail shook his head. "I am sorry," he said. "I can't help you."

Olsen shrugged. "I guess I'll leave," he said. "After all, I'll have to get up pretty early tomorrow." He massaged his injured knee with the palm of his left hand, wincing as muscles tensed beneath his fingers. "Suppose you just forget about it."

"There is one man," Seid Suhail said reluctantly.

Olsen smiled.

"He's not a guide. He's a foreigner like you. American, I think. But he may have maps."

"An American?" Olsen asked suspiciously. "Here? Is he a spy?"

"An aviator," Seid Suhail said. "His plane has broken down. He's waiting here for parts."

Jimmy Olsen shrugged. If a desert guide could not be found, good maps were the next best thing. He swatted away a coil of smoke from Seid Suhail's hookah and asked "Where can I find this aviator?"

Seid Suhail scrawled an address in pencil upon a scrap of parchment and pushed it towards Olsen. "Here," he said. "But don't say that I didn't warn you."

"I won't." Jimmy said. He took the paper and headed straight for the aviator's house, but the landlord shook his head.

"Try the airfield," he suggested.

Jimmy limped off to try the airfield.

The airport, like most things in Keid, was a strip of dusty sand. A battered aeroplane painted in peeling desert camouflage stood at one side of the runway. A cargo net had been draped over one wing to fashion a makeshift tent. Olsen walked over to the tent and cleared his throat. "Hello?"

The plane smelt of grease and hot metal. Even Olsen, who was by no means a pilot, could see that she was in pretty poor shape. He ran his hands over one battered panel, noting the unmistakable scars of bullet holes, and jerked his hand away as a man ducked under the plane's wing.

"Nice to see a friendly face, all the way out here," the aviator said as he straightened. "My name's Memphis. Johnny Memphis, at your service." He thumped the perforated panels of the plane with affection and held out a grease-stained hand. "And this is *Kittyhawk*."

Jimmy shook it. "Jimmy Olsen," he introduced himself as Memphis wiped his hands upon an oil-streaked rag. "At yours."

Johnny Memphis was shorter than Olsen. Most people were. He wore tattered engineers' overalls that, like his plane, had seen better days. But there was no fault with his hospitality. He pulled up a discarded crate to serve as a chair and offered Olsen a drink from a canteen that tasted faintly of oil before listening politely to Jimmy's explanation.

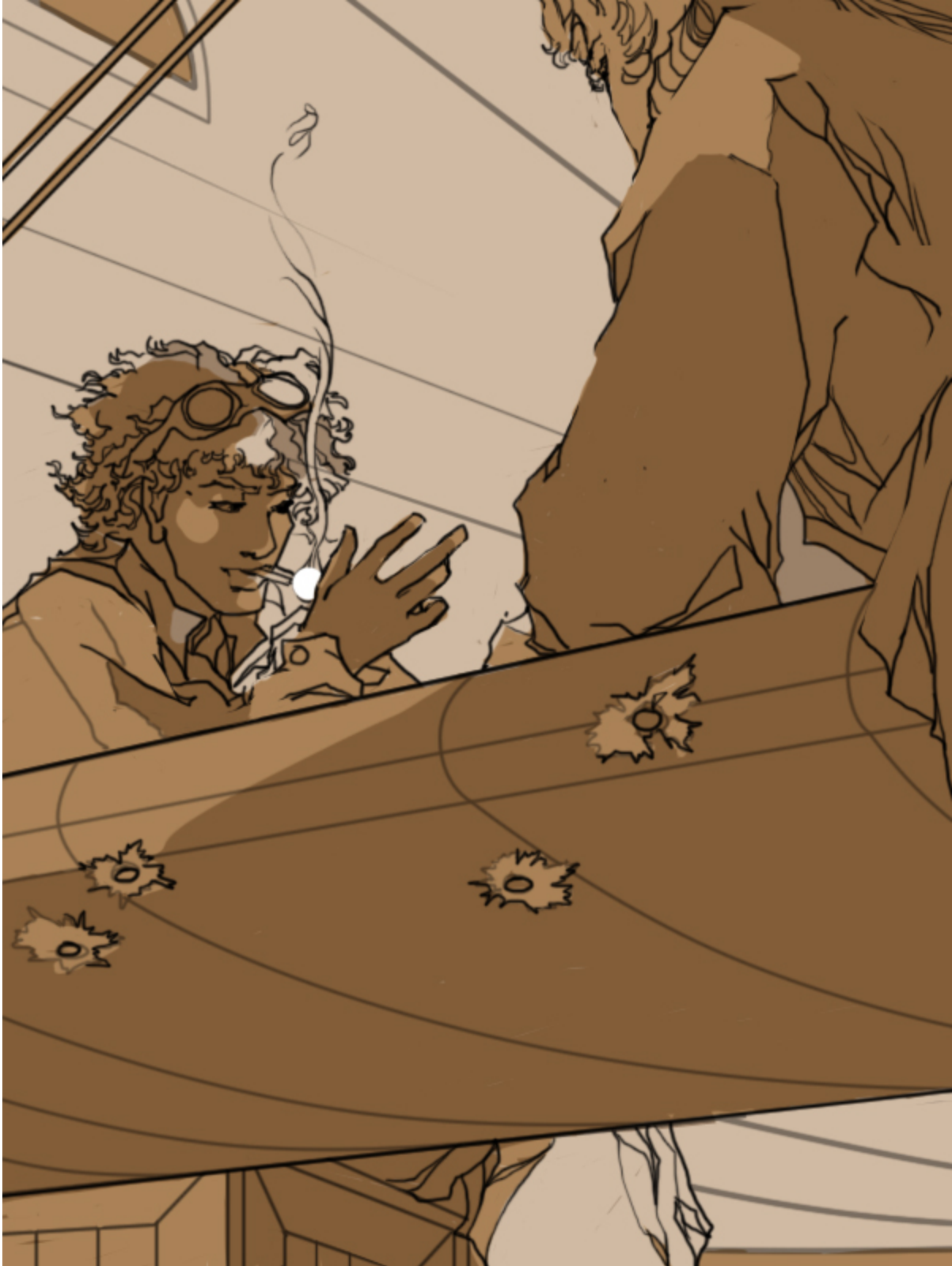
When Jimmy was done, he shook his head.

"Can't be done," he said. "Those maps are my ticket out of here."

Olsen frowned. "I can pay."

Memphis shook his head again and stubbed his cigarette out in the sand. He chain-smoked incessantly, smoking each one cigarette down to the filter before lighting a fresh one from its stub. He handled the cigarette and lighter with surprising grace, flexing long-fingered hands that would have looked more at home on an artist than a mechanic. His skin was bronzed like Jimmy's from years of desert travel, although from his features Jimmy had a feeling that the darkness of Memphis' skin owed more to genetics than exposure to the sun.

(con't)



"I can't leave without my charts," he said. "They're worth more than your English pounds to me."

"I'll bring them back." Olsen said.

Johnny Memphis shook his head. "From the sound of things, you might not come back," he said. "And then I'm stuck."

"Come with me," Olsen said impulsively.

Memphis frowned. He took a deep drag on his cigarette and tipped his head back, clearly savouring the nicotine. "Are you serious?" he said as he exhaled through his teeth.

Olsen nodded. "I need to get to that city, Mister Memphis," he said, helping himself to one of the aviator's cigarettes. "Seems like you're the only one who can help me."

"Just Johnny," Johnny Memphis said. He took an enamelled lighter from the pocket of his overalls and flicked the cap open, leaning in close to light Olsen's cigarette. "How much are you paying?"

Jimmy inhaled. "Thanks for the smoke," he said, and named a sum.

"Don't mention it." Memphis said, watching Olsen speculatively through eyes half-hooded against the sun. "Buy me a few parts, you've got yourself a deal. When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," Olsen told him.

Johnny Memphis leaned back against the plane's perished rubber tyres. "Suits me. This girl's not going anywhere." He reached back and ran an affectionate hand along the struts of the *Kittyhawk*. "A little desert adventure should help to break up the day. There's just one thing-

Olsen sighed. "Don't tell me that you've already changed your mind."

Memphis shook his head. "No chance. But I just need to check. There's not much wildlife around here, is there?"

Olsen frowned. "This is the desert," he said. "It's famous for having nothing." He ran through a mental list of all the animals he had seen since entering the Sahara. It was not a long list. "There may be some camels."

"I'm okay with camels," said Johnny Memphis.

"Why?" asked Olsen.

"Me and mother nature don't get on," Memphis said. There was a grim, haunted look on his face that puzzled Jimmy Olsen, but he had long since learned that most men in wild places were running from something, and didn't think it fit to inquire.

"Eram is a ruin," he said. "There's nothing there but a bunch of tumbled stones. Maybe some inscriptions. But that's all."

Johnny Memphis grinned. "Sounds like an interesting place," he said. "All right, Olsen. Let's do it. Let's find some real adventure."

They set out at dawn in Jimmy's tattered Jeep. The car ground its way across the gravel plains with a slow and inexorable certainty. They left the city behind within the hour. Its low-rise mud brick buildings melted seamlessly into the plains beneath the vast and empty desert sky.

Jimmy Olsen drove, hands sweating on the narrow rim of the steering wheel. Johnny Memphis lounged back in the seat beside him with both feet on the dashboard and recited bearings from his charts.

To Olsen's surprise, the aviator was a good companion. He had an almost-inexhaustible store of dirty jokes to match his supply of cigarettes. Olsen had warmed to him down at the airfield, but now he was starting to downright like the man.

He watched as Memphis bent his head and tried to light his cigarette--no easy task in the front seat of a breezy, jolting car. Memphis' eyes narrowed as ash fell into his lap, and he

scowled at the flame like it had personally offended him. There were crows' feet in the corners of his eyes that made Olsen review his estimate of the aviator's age by a few years.

He crunched the gears down to second and thought about sliding his hand onto Johnny Memphis's knee and pretending that he had missed the gear lever. He wasn't sure if the aviator would welcome the contact, but he had learned from experience that a few months in the wilderness could have the straightest man considering an alternative lifestyle.

Better not, he thought as Memphis finally lit his cigarette. The aviator gave Olsen a sidelong glance and Jimmy Olsen wondered if he'd caught Olsen studying his face.

"Want one?"

Olsen shook his head. "Are you sure we're on the right track here?"

Johnny Memphis nodded. "Positive," he said. "My maps never lie." He swapped his cigarette from one hand to another and flicked ash out of the Jeep's open side. "Some place, this."

"It's beautiful," Olsen said. He knew that the desert was not everyone's taste, with its sandy scrub and cloudless blue sky. "Look at those mountains."

He nodded to a low crest of hills some distance away. The sandstone rocks had been sculpted into fantastic shapes. It was a sight, Olsen thought, that would rival Arizona's Grand Canyon, and it meant all the more to him because so few people had seen it.

Johnny Memphis looked at the hills and whistled. "Yeah, beautiful. But I'd rather see it from the seat of my plane. You fly?"

"Once or twice," Olsen said, and told Memphis a story about hunting rogue lions in the Serengeti wastes.

Johnny Memphis laughed in all the right places, and when the tale was done he said "You really have been everywhere, haven't you?"

"I've done my time," Jimmy Olsen said. He squinted in the setting sun. "Speaking of time, we should really make camp for the night. We're doing well, but it's easy to lose your way out here in the dark. It'd be a shame to miss our target now."

Johnny Memphis cast a doubtful look at the sandy wastes. "It's your call, Olsen," he said. "I guess you know what you're doing."

"Trust me," Olsen said. "I've camped in places much worse than this. We've got petrol, spare tyres, and plenty of water." He spun the wheel and brought the Jeep to a halt beside a patch of thorny scrub. "Those bushes will make good firewood."

"Whatever you say," Johnny Memphis looked doubtful. "I'm sleeping in the truck."

"You'll find the sand more comfortable than you think," Olsen said. He pulled the handbrake on and went around the back of the Jeep to loosen the straps that secured its canvas cover. He lifted down an axe, three jerry-cans of petrol, and a couple of rough woollen blankets. "Help me light a fire."

Memphis shook his head. But he dug a fire-pit in the stony ground and helped Olsen collect enough wood for a real blaze. By the time the sun had dipped below the horizon the wood had crumbled down to coals and the flames were tinged with blue light. Jimmy Olsen held his hand above the blaze and jerked it back after a second. He brushed at his arm where the fine blond hairs had crisped in the heat.

"I think it's hot enough."

Johnny Memphis crouched in the passenger seat with his legs dangling over the side of the truck and his blanket wrapped around him like a poncho. "I'd say so." He looked up at the cloudless desert sky as Jimmy Olsen pulled a package of dried meat from the trunk. "It's colder here than I expected."

Olsen shrugged. "It'd be warmer," he said, "if you'd come nearer the fire."

Memphis glanced at their surroundings and pulled a fold of the poncho over his head. "I prefer it here."

Olsen shrugged and handed him the food. Johnny Memphis did not come down off the car seat. Olsen wondered if he had somehow managed to offend the aviator. It was certainly possible that Johnny Memphis had worked out the meaning behind Olsen's close observations in the Jeep that day. But as he passed Memphis the food the pilot's hand lingered upon Jimmy's a little longer than it should have in a way that made him doubt that was the case.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Things," Memphis said darkly.

Olsen waved a hand around them. The sky was clear as glass. The Milky Way streaked above their heads like a path of sprinkled sugar. "There's nothing here but stars." He stretched luxuriously flopped onto his back. "It makes me wonder why I ever spend my time anywhere else. You do not get this in cities."

"It makes me wonder why I ever go outside," Memphis said darkly as he bit into the meat.

"Well, you can't get more outside than this," Olsen said, wondering as he did so what exactly was the matter.

"Thanks for reminding me," Memphis said. He finished the meat, wiped his hands upon his grease-stained trousers, and lit another cigarette.

"You should slow down on those cigarettes," said Olsen. "I've heard they're not good for you."

Johnny Memphis snorted. "What are you talking about? They're perfectly good for you." He took a deep drag, tilted his head back and exhaled pursed his lips in a way that had Jimmy Olsen thinking unthinkable thoughts. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"I've known a few doctors that would disagree," Olsen said. He sat up and shifted awkwardly on his blanket to hide his arousal. There was no sound apart from the hiss and crackle of the coals. On his trips into the jungle he had often heard small animals moving through the brush, but here there was nothing except for Jimmy and Memphis and the powdered desert sky.

After a while Johnny Memphis tucked his cigarettes into his shirt and wrapped his blanket around his shoulders. "I need to piss," he said matter-of-factly. "Are you sure it's safe?"

Olsen nodded. "There's nothing except us for miles," he said as Memphis dropped down from the Jeep, scowling at the shadowy surroundings as if an enemy would jump out any minute. "It's safe."

"Don't go anywhere."

"I'll be here," Jimmy Olsen said, wondering even as he said it where the hell Memphis thought he was likely to go. "Don't lose sight of the campfire."

"No doubt of that," Memphis said grimly. He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and marched off into the darkness. Olsen heard his footsteps scraping along the stony desert, a stream of liquid hitting the ground, and then silence.

He drifted off into a doze, eyes half-slitted, staring at the flames and wondering just what it would take to get Johnny Memphis to join him on a blanket near the campfire.

A scream jolted Olsen from his reverie. "Olsen! For Christ's sake, Olsen, help!"

Jimmy Olsen leapt from his crouch into startled movement. He took a brand from the fire and easily picked out the silhouette of Johnny Memphis standing very still against the dunes. His trusty Browning semi-automatic was immediately in his hand.

"Memphis!" he called. "What's up?"

"I need you to come here *right now*," Johnny Memphis said through gritted teeth, "and I hope to God you've got a gun."

"Can do." Olsen made his way across the sandy plain towards Memphis. The aviator was poised in a crouch, shirtless and sweating despite the cold. A huge desert scorpion, its sting raised and pincers spread wide, snaked its way across the gravel towards him.

Olsen took careful aim. "What happened to your shirt?" he asked as he blasted the scorpion into fragments of chitin.

Johnny Memphis inclined his head. "Over there," he said.

Olsen followed the movement and saw a crumpled ball of cotton lying rolled up in the dirt next to Memphis' discarded blanket. One sleeve bunched and rolled with movement.

Memphis made a strangled sound as a second scorpion scuttled from the empty sleeve.

"It's like this all the time," he said as the enormous scorpion scurried towards him.

"You could have warned me," Olsen said as he sent the insect to oblivion with a single squeeze upon the Browning's trigger. The cartridge flipped out and landed hissing in the sand.

"I told you I don't get on with animals," Memphis said through clenched teeth. He made no move to collect his shirt, so Jimmy Olsen took a second look. It was a good look. The aviator had none of Jimmy's height or width, but he had a lean and wiry body with graceful limbs and those slim, elegant hands...

"Pass me the torch," Johnny Memphis said. Jimmy nearly jerked back in surprise as he realised the aviator was nearly touching him. He'd moved closer without Olsen even noticing. "I think I can see movement."

Jimmy Olsen squinted. As he saw the black tide creeping towards them across the sand, he realised it was nearly already too late.

"Back to the fire!" he shouted, firing into the air and hoping the shot would deter the horde of scuttling scorpions from attacking. As far as he could see, it had no effect whatsoever.

They dashed back towards the campfire. Olsen could see that it was already too late to start the Jeep. He tucked the gun into the waistband of his trousers and ran to the back of the car. Fumbling with the canvas straps, he pulled out a jerry-can of petrol and thrust it into Johnny Memphis' hands.

"Draw a circle around the camp!" he shouted. "Big enough for us and the Jeep. I'll hold them off."

He drew the Browning and hoped to God he had enough bullets left. Taking aim at the multiple glittering eyes that gleamed between the lead scorpion's spread claws, he fired a fusillade of shots.

"Jesus, Olsen!" Johnny Memphis cried as he began to dribble petrol around the fire. "They're everywhere!"

Olsen fired at the deadly insects until his magazine was empty. Memphis used the time Jimmy gave him to complete the circle. He took a flaming thorn-branch from the fire and ignited the petrol. Flames blazed up, catching many of the scorpions by surprise and incinerating them immediately. The clicking tide withdrew.

Olsen wondered if their retreat was permanent. He sank down by the fire and dug for another clip in his trouser pockets. Memphis came over to his side, still half-naked. The amber skin of his torso was streaked with ash from the flames.

Olsen nodded. "You keep an eye on that side of the camp," he said, pointing with the muzzle of the Browning to the one half of the circle that didn't include the Jeep. "I'll cover this

side. Yell if you see anything."

Johnny Memphis nodded and settled down in the sand with his back against Olsen's.

"Why does this happen to you?" Olsen asked him as he fed the magazine into his gun.

Johnny Memphis shrugged. "I have no idea," he said. "Why do you think I'm out here?"

"I don't know," said Jimmy Olsen. "But as I'm out here with you, why don't you tell me?"

Memphis gave him a long look. "Okay," he said, "I'll tell you. When I was a kid we lived in Florida. Mom only figured out something was up when I got attacked by alligators four times before my third birthday. That isn't normal for a kid."

Olsen shrugged. "I've been to Florida," he said. "Alligators aren't that uncommon."

Johnny Memphis cast a wary eye into the dark. "Right. Four attacks by alligators. Twice by snapping turtles. Twice by feral pigs. And once by a giant otter escaped from some zoo. Coincidence?"

Olsen shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Neither did my folks. Luckily enough, my Dad was in the Forces, so we moved around a lot. Only trouble was, he got posted to Alaska."

"Alaska?"

"Alaska," Johnny Memphis said. "Two words. Polar bears. Now, I can tell what you're thinking-"

"I doubt it," said Jimmy Olsen. "But go on."

"Alaska was a bad choice. So we moved to Hawaii, and that was the best of the bunch. It doesn't seem to work on birds." He stretched, shivered, and moved a little closer to the fire. "Or fish. Although I was once nearly drowned by a giant clam."

"A clam?" Olsen asked.

"It closed on my foot." Memphis rolled up his trouser leg to show a pale ring around one ankle. "Nearly took my leg off." He was shaking now, and Olsen guessed it was a mix of adrenaline and the cold. He reached into the sand and dug out his own blanket. Shaking the grit off, he handed it to Memphis.

Johnny Memphis took it. "Thanks," he said. "You're very relaxed about this."

"You could say I've done this before," Olsen said. He sighted down the barrel of the pistol at the scuttling darkness and tried not to think about the warmth of Memphis's body pressing against his back.

Memphis half-laughed. "What, saving some dumbass?"

Olsen shook his head and realised that, back-to-back as they were, Memphis couldn't see him. "No. I've been in my share of hard situations. I used to do this for a job."

"I thought you were an explorer," Johnny Memphis said. "That or a spy."

"Bits," Olsen told him. "I've done some hunting. Worked for zoos, as well. I'm a half-decent surveyor, and I can fake a working knowledge of any kind of archaeology you care to name. Spent a lot of time in deserts. But I've never seen any scorpions behave like that."

Johnny Memphis shifted and suddenly froze. Jimmy Olsen could feel his spine stiffen through the woollen blanket.

"Olsen," he gasped. "There's one on me."

Olsen spun. He caught a glimpse of a small dark shadow darting down Johnny Memphis' leg towards the sand. He knew he was far too close to shoot. Using the barrel of the pistol like a scoop, he flicked the scorpion off into the flames. It hissed as it burned to embers.

"Jesus," Memphis moaned. "I think it got me." He shrugged the blanket from his shoulders and brushed his hands down his torso, twisting as he examined every inch of his skin.

His hands came to rest on a raised blister on his side, just above his belt. "Here."

"Let me look." Olsen came over to his side and knelt down. Memphis's skin was flushed red around the bite, and he could see a small welt marking the centre of the wound like a dartboard. He brushed his index finger carefully over the wound. Memphis's skin was taut and soft over hand-raised muscle. He realised that the aviator probably thought himself about to die and withdrew his hand, the pads of his fingers burning with the memory of sensation. "You'll be fine."

"Aren't they deadly?" Memphis stared disbelievingly at Olsen.

Olsen shook his head. "Not just one. The large scorpions are relatively harmless. The smaller critters are the ones you should watch out for. You'll be feverish for a day or too. Maybe a little bit light-headed. But you'll be fine."

Johnny Memphis slid the waistband of his trousers an inch further towards his hips as Olsen leant over him. "So we never were in any danger?" he asked as he examined the bite more carefully.

"I wouldn't put it like that," Olsen said. "I've never seen so many scorpions attack together." He cast a grateful glance towards their fiery barrier. "But it seems that they don't like the flames. I think we've had it for now." He looked down at Memphis and paused as he realised the aviator was leaning towards him. There was a definite bulge in the crotch of his trousers.

Olsen caught his breath. The desert around them was very still. Johnny Memphis watched him with a mixture of arousal, guilt and fear.

Jimmy Olsen swallowed. "Is that a gun in your pants," he asked softly, "or are you just very pleased to see me?"

A disbelieving smile spread across Johnny Memphis's face. "That is such a cliché," he said as he reached up and ran his hand across Olsen's ass.

"Clichés are there for a reason," Olsen growled. He leant forwards, taking most of his weight upon his elbows, and kissed Johnny Memphis' mouth. He tasted sweat upon chapped lips, and went deeper.

After he pulled back Memphis looked up at him with dark eyes and asked, "So you think I'll live, doc? Because that was a pretty poor attempt at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, if you ask me."

"There's only one way to be sure," Olsen told him. He raised himself on hands and knees and slid down Johnny Memphis's body. He ran light fingers along the ridges of Memphis's collarbones, down the hollow in his throat, and around the curve of one pectoral to the hollowed planes of his abdomen. When his hands found the welt left by the scorpion's sting, he lowered his mouth to the wound and sucked.

Memphis gasped and arched under him, his body tensing. His erection pressed against Olsen's shoulder as Memphis used one hand to push his own pants down around his hips. It was a short stretch for Olsen to move his mouth half an inch, from the wound to the tip of Johnny Memphis' cock.

Maybe, Olsen thought as he sucked, he'd found the reason why half the world's wildlife was out to get the aviator. Johnny Memphis tasted *good*. Like smoke and dirty cream.

He sucked until his jaw ached and until Memphis's breath was coming in deep, hard gasps that shook his body and drove his hips up into Jimmy Olsen's mouth. The aviator's hand clenched in the desert sand beside Olsen's head.

"You don't--" he gasped.

Olsen shook his head and went right on going. The ache in his jaw was passing from

pleasurable to the edge of pain when Memphis shuddered, gasped, "Fuck," just once and came in Olsen's mouth.

Olsen swallowed and rolled off. He spat into the ashes of the fire and looked around, expecting the camp to be overrun by insects following their moments of inattention. But there were no scorpions to be seen. Dawn already tinted the sandstone massifs around them. He looked back at Johnny Memphis just as the aviator wriggled back into his pants.

"What about you?"

Olsen shook his head. "Later," he said. Eram was waiting for them, and Jimmy Olsen had always been one for the slow burn. Besides, the thought of sitting next to Johnny Memphis all day, thinking all the time about exactly what he could do to that slim, lithe body was going to be nearly as good as the sex itself.

Johnny Memphis got up. "Suit yourself," he said and looked at Jimmy Olsen through his lashes. "Thanks for saving my life. I've never seen any sort of bite treated like that before."

"I'm not surprised," Olsen said, grinning. "It's an ancient technique I learned on my travels. From the mystical Monarchate of Dhamsawy."

Johnny Memphis stretched. "I shall have to visit the Monarchate of Dhamsawy," he said. "But when we do, we're taking *my* plane."

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/218314.html>

On Earth My Nina

by Domashita Romero (地下××)
illustrated by serenity_winner

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinybeard

Yesterday was not the first time I told someone I was an ornithologist and they thought I meant orthodontist, but I can pray it is the last.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinybeard It's 'cause you got such beautiful chompers!

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

I'm thinking: braces for birds -- "Your smile will be im-pecker-ble!"

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinybeard

@pen_ham I'm confiscating your phone.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinybeard Come and get it, chickadee.

Jonathan looked across the table, past the remnants of his plate of eggs and ketchup-smudged hashbrowns. Pen's gaze remained fixed on his phone, tapping and swiping away. Jonathan wiggled his fingers a little in readiness underneath the table, and then made a move, reaching across. Pen twisted his body, pulling the phone out of reach while not even looking up from the screen.

"You'll have to let your guard down eventually," Jonathan said, making one last futile grab.

"I sleep with one eye open and one finger on the 'tweet' button," Pen said, and grinned as he turned his phone to face Jonathan, showing him that he had just tweeted, 'I'm thinking: HASHDOWNS, the first griddled breakfast food laden with barbiturates!' Jonathan made a face and tugged his plate closer towards him. "What, it's not like you're driving today."

The waitress came by and refilled Jonathan's coffee when he nodded, and he swirled some cream into it to return it to the right color of sparrow-wing brown. "Well, okay, sure, if you just want me passed out in the passenger seat, fine...."

"You're right, that sounds boring," Pen said, and then his wide smile got wider. "Sunny side uppers, instead?"

Jonathan was quick this time and reached out to put a hand over Pen's before he could pull his phone up and tweet anything. "No thanks, I'm full."

Pen turned his hand around to tickle Jonathan's palm a little, but he didn't remove his hand, no matter how much the feeling of his fingers made the hairs on his neck stand on end. Pen pointed with his other hand to the piece of bacon Jonathan had left on his plate. "So, you're not going to finish that?"

"Nope," Jonathan said, and Pen let out a little maniacal laugh of triumph before snatching

it off of his plate and smudging it through the syrup on his own. "I thought we might save it as bait."

"I don't know if they really tend to go for cured meats," Pen said, bacon piece flopping from the edge of his mouth. "They tend to go for live stuff, you know? Pigs, dogs, children..."

"Bacon is pig," Jonathan said.

Pen ate the last of the bacon and gave him a porky grin. "We'll get a to-go box."

They did get a to-go box, but it was full of sandwiches for later, and Jonathan found a place to safely nestle it in the car's tiny back seats. Pen was already settling in to the driver's seat, doing the shifting and adjusting necessary to get a man of his substance properly seated in a car designed for 1960s body types. The T-Bird was, in Jonathan's opinion, not really the best vehicle for this trip, but Pen had insisted. It only made sense, he had said.

He put his knees up on the dashboard and tilted his head to the rear-view mirror to see if he had any crumbs in his beard. "What's on the map today?"

"Taton, New Mexico!" Pen said, turning the key in the ignition and smiling as the car growled into life. "My research tells me there was a sighting there."

Jonathan glanced over at him, eyebrow raised. "Your research, huh?"

Pen laughed as he backed out of the diner's parking lot. "Hey, man, I did research. I did a google. I websited. I talked to a librarian. I got books. On *eBay* I got books, so you know they're legit."

"Oh, deeply legit," Jonathan said.

"It's the creepy old used bookstore of the 21st century, man, you've gotta get with it," Pen said as they got back on the road. Jonathan sunk down into his seat a little more, letting the wind go through his hair. The combination of the convertible and the Southwestern landscape made him feel a little bit sometimes like he should be smoking a cigarette and being the coolest dude in the universe, but more often it made him feel like Thelma. Well, at least then he might get to have sex with Brad Pitt.

Pen fiddled with the radio for a while, until he found a station playing classic rock. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel for a while, the only sounds between them the wail of guitars, the rumble of the engine, and the roar of the wind. But Penrose Hamilton had never allowed a comfortable silence grow to any ripe old age. "That orthodontist guy was into you, though."

Jonathan raised his eyebrows, then reached into the glovebox to get his very hip prescription sunglasses. It was sunny, sure, but mostly he wanted to have his reactions somewhat concealed. "Was he?"

"Oh, yeah," Pen said. "So much eyefucking going on he needed to put rubbers on all of his eyelashes."

Jonathan laughed. "Well, did you see his teeth? Probably just angling for some free braces."

"Not your type?"

"Not my type," Jonathan said, and Pen just chuckled. Jonathan had a very, very definite type, one he'd been fixated on for a good twenty years. If Pen had forgotten what that was, well, maybe it was for the best.

The Birds in My Beard

So, things to know: there is no town in New Mexico called 'Taton.' And the people who live around the area where Taton does not exist, well, they do not particularly know much about things that happened in 1892. And when you bring up specifically that you want to know more about a child stolen by a giant eagle in 1892, they ask you to leave the 7-11.

However, I did see a quail.

When they'd been roommates in college way back in the mists of the early '90s, Jonathan had known, as corny and cliché as it seemed, that Pen was destined for greater things. When Pen had dropped out of college in junior year to seek his fortune in ways that didn't involve writing essays, Jonathan felt even more certain. They'd kept in touch as best they could back in those days, while Pen hustled and Jonathan went to increasingly more and more school. By the time he'd gotten his doctorate and moved back to the west coast, Pen had put a lasso around the internet and made dot-com millions. To Jonathan's surprise, he wanted to meet up again and spend at least a few of those dollars buying Jonathan dinner, getting him drunk, and remembering old times.

So it had stayed that way for the past ten years or so: Jonathan up in the woods north of San Francisco, Pen down in the Bay, emailing and IMing and occasionally coming into contact with each other in the flesh every month or so. Pen was the kind of guy who was friends with everyone; it was no surprise he'd want to keep the little feathered asteroid that Jonathan was in his orbit. Whatever Jonathan thought or felt about him really wasn't that important. He was nothing like Pen's best friend, which was why it surprised him so much when Pen had called him a few months ago.

He hadn't heard from Pen in a while before it. Pen had a habit of going dark for a while every once in a while; the guy had sold PalPlace.com for boatloads before the bubble burst and better social networks came along, so these days he was busy shitting money onto startups that amused him or throwing cash at charities. Jonathan had been a long time since hearing from him when he'd called this time, though. And he'd *called*, he'd actually called on the telephone. Not a text, not an email, an actual phone call. Jonathan had stood next to his truck in the woods, stock-still to keep from losing signal out in the wild like one was apt to, and listened as Pen told him about the dream.

Pen called it a vision, of course. Jonathan didn't think middle-aged white dudes had visions without chemical interference, but Pen promised he'd been entirely sober when it had come to him.

"A Thunderbird," he'd said, sounding almost out of breath over the crackling cell phone connection. "I didn't even know what a Thunderbird was two days ago, other than a car and an e-mail client, but I saw this and I knew. I just knew." Jonathan had heard Pen excited more times than he'd heard him anything else, but this was different.

"The Thunderbird came to me," Pen had said, "and now I have to come to it."

And that was how Jonathan came to be driving throughout the U.S. with Pen, guided on a meandering map of half-baked sightings and old myths. Pen had asked him to come for a month, just a month. Jonathan had tons of vacation time and sabbatical rights and no real reason to say no, other than how the whole thing put all of his professional credibility at stake. His blog did

that, too, of course, but blogs didn't involve leaves of absence.

It was Pen, though. He just couldn't ever say no to Pen.

They were on the road when his phone buzzed with an email notification. Someone had read his blog and had written to let him know that the kid who'd been snatched up by a giant eagle a hundred and twenty years ago had been in *Raton*, New Mexico, which was entirely a real place, on Google Maps and everything. So much for Pen's research. They were already halfway on their backtrack to Arizona -- Pen mapped his route through no logical order known to man -- though, so Jonathan made the executive decision not to interrupt his plan.

Jonathan turned his phone towards Pen. "Look," he said. Pen glanced over; the roads were straight and empty enough that he could take his eyes off the road for a good long while and be okay. "A bird is giving a man a fistbump! It's amusing because this is not usual behavior for a bird."

Pen looked at the picture, of the parrot with its little foot balled up against a man's fist, and laughed. "Is it? Is that really not usual behavior?" Making Pen smile was as easy as getting ice to melt in summer, but it still always made Jonathan's heart flip a little.

"Well, you know, parrots, you can get them to do just about anything."

Pen arched his eyebrow high above the edge of his glasses. "Anything?"

"Do not be foul," Jonathan said, and held up his hand to ward off Pen before he made some crack about chickens. "They're crazy intelligent, though. It sort of makes me nervous. Some of them know how to play the piano or do math."

"You can't take that kind of stuff too seriously, man," Pen said. "They're just doing whatever it takes to get seeds or fruit or whatever it is they eat." He lifted a hand in the air in a fist, a fine imitation of the bird on Jonathan's phone. "Just like us, when we're working for the *man*."

"Ah, yes, the man," Jonathan said, and put his phone away, settling back in his seat with his eyes closed. Jonathan was a government employee, if you wanted to get technical about it, but that didn't actually bother Pen. "Damn the man."

"Save the Empire," Pen said, and Jonathan laughed. "Oh, oh, get my phone out of my pocket. I need you to tweet something for me."

Jonathan cracked open an eye. "I'm not tweeting for you. That's not in my contract."

"You can either get my phone for me or risk me tweeting while driving," Pen said. "You don't want that, man. There are PSAs."

Jonathan sighed and reached across between them to dig in Pen's pocket, trying his best not to let his fingers brush over the curve of his stomach or linger too long on his hip. He huffed a breath as he opened up the Twitter app. "Okay, what genius thought does the internet need to hear right this instant?"

Pen spread one hand out in front of him, framing his beautiful thought. "'I'm thinking: FEMPIRE RECORDS, the all riot grrl music emporium!'"

Jonathan shook his head a little, but tapped it in. "Someone's probably thought of that one already, you know."

"Bah," Pen said. "We'll just have to become business partners, then." Jonathan turned Pen's phone about awkwardly in his fingers, unsure of what to do with it now, until Pen tilted his hip upwards. "Okay, I'm done for now, you can put it back."

Jonathan bit the inside of his lip lightly and put the phone back into the pocket of Pen's jeans as delicately as he could, but Pen still squirmed a bit. "Ticklish, damn you!" he laughed. "Oh, angle it in a little more and then send me a lot of texts. That'll make the next

hundred miles a lot more interesting."

Jonathan pulled out his phone and wrote a text to Pen that said 'YOU ARE ABSURD.' A few seconds later he could hear the 'bzzrt' of Pen's phone vibrating his his pocket, followed by Pen's delighted giggle. "That's all you get," he said. "I don't want you offroading."

Pen made a disappointed little moue, and Jonathan just looked at the screen of his phone until it went dark, thinking about what other things he might have said.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

Fun fact: 'bird strike' is the term for when a bird smacks into a plane. It hurts the bird much more than the plane.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

Fun fact: 'bird strike' is the term for when birds refuse to work until they get better labor conditions or work benefits.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham Hoo, tell me about it. The big Bird Strike of 2008 was really rough for my profession.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard I remember it! That little Sally Field bird holding that sign that said UNION, just flapping her heart out.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard NO JUSTICE, NO BEAKS!

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham Whoops, and now I'm on strike, too.

"You have to admit, though, the guy had some pretty compelling evidence," Pen said, partially through a taco.

"He had a lot of bent-up metal parts," Jonathan said. Pen had been a little sulky after the meeting with man who claimed a Thunderbird had hit his plane had not turned out to be the rock-solid evidence he was hoping for. Fortunately, Pen was easily mollified with carnitas and was back to being chipper and dedicated.

"*Bloodstained* bent-up metal parts!" He wiped the grease from his fingers onto a paper napkin. "And you saw the pictures he had. Those were some seriously big feathers and bird goop."

"The technical term is 'snarge,'" Jonathan said.

Pen looked up from his taco. "Snarge?" he said, nose wrinkling. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Jonathan said, and shook his head. "Yeah, I'll give you that it was definitely a big bird. Probably a condor or something. They get huge. But not... *huge*."

Pen looked up at the sky. They were seated at the little picnic tables outside of the restaurant, and the wind was starting to pick up, getting colder. The stars were just beginning to

peek out in the darkening sky. Pen was smiling. "But you have to think... what if, you know? It could be."

Jonathan had been playing the voice of reason, the scientist, the actual man who knew anything at all about wingspans and the amount of weight a large bird could lift, where Pen was the dreamer, the impossible thinker. Jonathan had thought for the trip up to this point that Pen couldn't really be entirely serious about this whole endeavour. This was just your standard mid-life crisis, an excuse to tool around the country for a while in a classic car while being ridiculous. Something like a grown-up spring break. He watched Pen's eyes scan the sky, watched the brightening stars reflect in his dark eyes, and had to wonder.

"Do you..." Pen didn't look at him. "Do you *really* think so? Really?"

Pen looked right at Jonathan and hit him with the full force of his smile, that beautiful madman's grin that felt like a laser-guided bullet right into Jonathan's core. "I just feel it," he said, soft and awed. "Even before I dug up all this evidence and read all the stories, I just felt it. I just know. People everywhere, all over the country have been talking about them since the *beginning*. They're out there; I just have to find one. This is what I'm supposed to do."

Pen went back to scanning the skies, and Jonathan let out a soft breath. "It... *was* a particularly large amount of snarge in those photos."

"Wasn't it?" Pen said, downright giddy. "I wish they'd been in color."

"No. No, you probably don't." The last of Jonathan's own tacos had gotten cold. He picked a few of the slivers of red onion off of it and ate them; it wasn't like he'd be kissing anyone anytime soon. "So... what are we going to do if we find one?"

"Man," Pen said, and leaned back from the picnic table bench, clinging to the table as he stretched backwards, the bottom of his t-shirt riding up to show the faintly furry rise of his stomach. Jonathan tried not to stare. "I don't really know. I figure I'll figure it out when it happens. Destiny and shit."

"It's just that, you know, in all these stories you've been telling me of people seeing them, it tends to involve a small child or young man being snatched up in horrible sharp talons and carried away."

Pen laughed. "Ah, I'm not worried. I'm a big fat guy!" He put a hand over his belly and gave it a rub to illustrate. "I'll just weight it down back to earth."

"Okay, but what about *me*?" Jonathan asked. He wasn't a slim man, himself, but he wasn't big like Pen; a theoretical aerodynamically absurd giant bird might be able to get lift-off with him in tow.

"Ah, I'll just grab on to your leg and bring the whole mess down," Pen said, waving his hand. "And if I don't, well, maybe you'll get to check out the nest."

"Of course," Jonathan said. "I'll scope out the ingredients for a Thunderbird omelette."

Pen ate radish slices off of Jonathan's abandoned taco. "You know, according to Sioux legend, Thunderbird eggs are the size of South Dakota."

"Huh," Jonathan said. "You'd think that'd be easy to find."

"You'd think!" Pen said. He met Jonathan's eyes, smiling, and licked a little lime juice off his fingers. "But we haven't been everywhere yet."

Jonathan knew right then that this trip was going to last longer than a month. It was fine. He could use the time off. "Not even to South Dakota."

Pen tapped his temple. "It's on the agenda. We'll get there." Pen tossed his crumpled up napkin on the table and started wadding up the tinfoil remains of the tacos. "Ready to head out? Magic phone tells me we can get pretty far before it gets too late."

Jonathan stood up from the table. "Point the way and I'll drive."

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

If anyone ever suggests to you that you drive across the country in a 50-year-old car, maybe don't listen to them?

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

I am getting to experience the only Mobil station in Perry, Oklahoma, though.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard IT IS PART OF THE EXPERIENCE

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard SAVOR IT

"It smells of cow," Jonathan said, not looking up from his phone.

"You like cow!" Pen said, tapping his phone against his lips as he looked out over the very, very flat horizon.

"Like the *end* of a cow," Jonathan clarified.

"It's local flavor!" Pen said. They'd been on the road for several months, and it was far from the first time the car had run into some sort of mechanical problem. Pen had said he'd souped the thing up before taking it out, but there was only so much you could do with old hardware. There was a reason the serious car guys tended to let their babies just sit and be pretty. Jonathan was getting more used to waiting outside a mechanic's than he liked. He just hoped this round didn't involve ordering a part; that had meant Pen cooped up in a motel room for over a week, which was problematic for a variety of reasons, like his ideas for reality shows and the way he spent a lot of time in a robe that he was not good at closing the whole way. Jonathan had been taking a lot of very long showers on this trip.

"Not the kind of flavor I'm interested in," Jonathan said, stretching his legs out. It looked like a storm might be blowing in, dark clouds coming in at the edge of the sky. Brought by giant wings, perhaps.

"Hey, we're seeing the sights," Pen said. "You can ask the mechanic about the local wildlife or something. Maybe we'll see a roadrunner."

Jonathan smiled. For all his passion about mythical birds, Pen did not know shit about the actual proven ones; they'd left major roadrunner territory while back. Still, Jonathan didn't feel like bursting Pen's bubble. "Leave your dynamite at home."

Pen stretched an arm along the back of the bench they were sitting on, not quite touching the back of Jonathan's shoulders. "You know, I almost named my first company 'Acme.'"

"You did not."

"It was among the contenders!" As far as Jonathan knew, Pen's first company had been called HamTech and had not been successful.

Jonathan held out his hands, framing his words in marquee with the same wide-eyed delight as Pen always had when he did the same thing. "I'm thinking: Ack! Me!"

Pen laughed and snapped the fingers on the hand that wasn't creeping around Jonathan's

shoulder, transforming the sound into a proud finger gun. "Oh, see, you even know the slogan! You now owe me the licensing fee."

Jonathan smiled and relaxed back a little, letting his shoulders press against Pen's arm for a little bit. It wouldn't do too good to stay too long in a position like that, not here in the heartland, but for just a few seconds, it was nice. "You can have thirty percent of the nothing I got for using it."

Pen pumped his fist a little. "Nice."

"Is that too generous? What's your usual rate?"

Pen lifted his arm up, tucking both of his hands behind his head and closing his eyes. "I don't negotiate without my lawyer present."

"Does your lawyer even know where you *are*?" Pen had brought no technology with him on this journey other than his phone; if he'd been doing any business, he'd been doing it while Jonathan was in one of those long showers.

"She knows I'm alive," Pen said, and Jonathan supposed that was good enough. Pen kept his eyes closed and hummed a little, some snippet of a pop song they'd heard on the radio earlier, and they sat there in peaceful companionship, Jonathan watching the clouds come in. They'd have to go inside if it started to rain.

"Storm's a-brewin'," Jonathan said, in his best impression of a grizzled New England lighthouse keeper.

"Ayuh," Pen said, without opening his eyes. He rarely slept more than six hours a time at nights, but was prone to catnapping in twenty-minute bursts in the car. One minute he'd be running his mouth, and the next he'd be snoozing.

A little bird, white-breasted and grey-winged, hopped across the dirt in front of them, peeping and cheeping like a little toy horn as it pecked around for crumbs. Jonathan elbowed Pen in the ribs, and pointed to the bird when he opened his eyes. "Look who brought the clouds," he said. "Think he's what you're looking for?"

Pen smiled. "Only if I got *really* huge while I had my eyes closed." The bird hopped a little closer to them, then away again. "What is it, really?"

Jonathan let out a deep, weary sigh. "It's a nuthatch." Pen made a deep snorting sound, an entirely internal laugh. "Yes, yes, I know, I know."

"You sure? It's not a tit?"

"It's not a tit," Jonathan said. "I'm glad to see you haven't let being in your forties mature you."

Pen's laugh hitched a little, but he shook his head. "Never. Keeps me young."

The door to the garage opened and clattered shut again, and the little nuthatch flew off. The mechanic that Pen had had a very rousing and excited conversation about different models of Thunderbirds with earlier came out to stand in front of them. He was a young man, broad and square and cornfed as hell. Not really Jonathan's usual type, but it had been an exceedingly dry trip; he didn't mind spending a while looking at the way the sweat made his shirt cling to his chest.

"I'm afraid I'm going to need a little more time with her, fellas," he said. "If you wait around until I close up here, though, I can take you into town and you can get a room."

"The lady demands, and so we must obey her," Pen said, and the mechanic smiled. Jonathan had had some concerns that the non-coastal types might not find Pen's manner appealing, but the rat-bastard just had a way with everyone. Jonathan let him do the talking, always. "We'd really appreciate that, thank you. And as a token of our gratitude, after we get the

room thing sorted, if you know the location of somewhere that serves adult beverages, it would be my pleasure to buy you several."

The mechanic laughed and wiped some sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "No shit?" he said. "Yeah, I could use a beer or two."

"Or three, or four..." Pen said.

"Hey, you get me too drunk and it's going to take even longer to get your car fixed up."

"Hey, I can tell," Pen said, the wattage in his smile Times-Square-bright, "in your capable hands, she'll be purring in no time."

He had a *way* with people, a universal flirtation, a confidence deep in his fat gut that he could make anyone like him, an assurance that he could make the whole room want to go home with him and then walk out alone whistling. Jonathan looked at Pen's grin, at the sweat on the mechanic's neck, and decided he was really ready for those beers.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

I am one hungover ornithologist.

The Birds in My Beard

If you're lucky, you can see a yellow-headed blackbird in Ohio. If you're *very* lucky, apparently you can also see a yeti.

One collective noun for blackbirds is 'merl.' A merl of blackbirds. I don't know what the collective noun for yeti is, but I'm going to suggest a 'lumber.' Of course, if you see a lumber of yetis, you should probably pick up your camera and get out of there.

"Fucking *SASQUATCH!*" Pen shouted as he slammed his hand on the steering wheel.

"Well, if we find it, we have his number," Jonathan said.

"Like twelve different emails!" Pen said, waving one hand around wildly in the air. "Twelve different emails with this guy about how he's a fucking cryptozoological expert and knows Native American legends out the ass, and we go see him and all he's fucking got is fucking *SASQUATCH!* Oh, yeah, that's right, buddy, I said *sasquatch*, fuck you and your *yeti*, probably just a fucking *bear*."

"At least he made good coffee."

Pen stopped gesticulating and took a breath, calming a bit. He pointed at Jonathan and nodded. "Damn fine cup of coffee, I will give you that." He put both hands back on the wheel and let out a deep huff. "But fuck him and fuck his sasquatch, seriously."

Jonathan crumpled himself into the seat a bit more, looking deep into the trees that they drove past. "Don't fuck the sasquatch."

Pen narrowed his eyes at the road in front of them. "I bet he wants to fuck the sasquatch."

Jonathan laughed. "Yeah, probably," he said. "He was eyeing my beard pretty funny."

The yeti guy had been in a house not too different from Jonathan's own, tucked in the woods and full of the paraphernalia of his obsession. He was more fur than feathers, though, in many ways; he was broad-shouldered and possessing quite a substantial beard himself, a thick man clad in

plenty of flannel. Jonathan had had a funny eye on him, himself.

Pen was starting to smile again. His moments of anger always came like summer storms, hard and quick; who knew what kind of birds brought those. "You're the only sasquatch I'm interested in," he said. "My mini-sasquatch. Miniquatch. Manquatch."

"Sasquette," Jonathan provided, and Pen laughed brightly. He snaked the car through the wooded road, heading back to civilization. Pen flipped the radio on, fiddling with it until it landed on a country station. Jonathan listened to twangy guitar and thought about how far he was from home, how far he was from his usual routines, his usual life. "You know, I might've."

"You might've?" Pen said, and glanced over to see Jonathan give him a meaningful glance over the top of his glasses. "...Oh, you *might've*. With him?"

Jonathan had never gone full-on for the bear thing, but the longer he stayed on the road with Pen, the weaker his inner criteria got. "Sure, if he could've shut up for a few minutes."

"Well," Pen said, his grin ratcheting up on one side only, matching with the arch of his eyebrow. "There's always *one* good way to get someone like that to shut up."

Pen talked a lot. "At least one."

Pen shook his head. "Hey, man, if you ever feel so inspired, don't let me get in your way. Just, give me the word, or the hand signal, or..." He made some gesture with his hand, something that looked halfway between the Shocker and a Vulcan greeting. Not the most subtle.

"No, no, it's okay," Jonathan said. It was, in theory, totally okay. He was a middle-aged man who could handle a dry spell, but in reality, he hadn't had this long of a dry spell since before he'd come out. He hadn't had a steady boyfriend for a few years, but that was never a reason to stop getting laid. It wasn't every night or even every week, but he knew the bars to go to and the websites to hit up when he was but a human man with some human goddamn needs. But what was he supposed to do on this trip? Tell Pen, 'you chill out for a few hours; I'm going to go suck a stranger's cock?' The terrible thing about that thought was knowing that Pen would just smile and tell him to have a good time.

No, the terrible thing about that thought was that he couldn't just say, 'you chill out for a bit; I'm going to suck *your* cock.' They weren't in college anymore. Things were different.

"It's okay," he said again. "I was just saying."

Pen shrugged. "I mean, he wasn't a bad-looking guy..."

"Nice beard," Jonathan said, with a soft sigh.

Pen glanced over at him. "Ah, I've seen better," he said, and then winked.

Jonathan swallowed a little and ran his hand over his beard. He'd let it grow a little longer on the trip; he needed a haircut, too, meaning he really did look admirably sasquatch-esque. "Well, thanks..."

Pen reached over and put his fingers under Jonathan's chin, scratching them through his beard. The contact was brief and ridiculous, but still made the hairs on his arms stand upright and his heart do double-time. "Yours is the only beard for me," Pen said, happy and oblivious.

Jonathan took a slow breath. "Hey, you think you could pull over for a bit? I need to piss."

"Yeah?" Pen said, and started to slow the car down, taking it into the pebbly, grassy shoulder. "Me too, actually. I didn't want to see what that guy's bathroom was like."

"Yeti-foot toilet paper holder, I'd bet," Jonathan said, and got out of the car when Pen parked. They both walked a little into the woods a few feet apart, each finding their own tree to mark. They'd actually made a little point of it, sort of a side quest to their main one, to take at least one nature piss in every state.

He peed on a dry leaf and focused on listening to the different bird calls filtering through the trees instead of letting himself spare even a moment's thought to Pen holding his dick four feet away.

"Hey, you know what this reminds me of?" Pen asked. Jonathan could tell he was smiling at him, but he didn't look over.

"The last time we peed in the woods?"

"Sort of," he said. "Remember in college, when we went to Tahoe? Everyone else was skiing and we got locked out forever? Made all kinds of yellow snow."

Jonathan took a breath and put a his dick back in his pants before putting a hand on the tree in front of him. "Not all we made," he said, soft and low, barely more than a thought. Now that he'd said it, it seemed a marvel he'd made it all these months without saying anything like it before, but Pen could not only manage to ignore an elephant in the room, he'd ride the damn thing.

Pen was quiet for a few moments, long enough for a bird to squeal a loud *chr-chr-chr* overhead; he echoed the sound a little in his own laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Jonathan had been nowhere near the closet door and skittish about even thinking the word 'gay' to himself when they'd roomed together that year in college. But things were different with Pen; things were easy with Pen. That combination and alcohol together lead to him and Pen cramped up on one of their tiny dorm beds, to Pen's being the first man he ever kissed, the first man whose dick he sucked, the first who ever sucked his. It was drunk and awkward and ridiculous, but Jonathan had just never stood a chance since that day. He'd thought it would be a one time thing, but it kept happening again and again, in their beds, in the middle of the night in the dorm showers, in the woods with their knees getting wet with snow outside of a ski lodge. Jonathan had had boyfriends since then, had slept with enough men that he had no chance of remembering all their names, but he always had to come back in the end to how he had one name written right over his heart and it was spelled P-E-N.

He heard the rustling of the leaves as Pen came a little closer. "You ever think about that? You know... back then?"

Jonathan laughed a little dryly, looking out into the trees. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I do." He could hear Pen smiling. "We had fun."

Jonathan looked over at him. Twenty years of basically pretending none of it ever happened, and now Pen was smiling at him about it in the woods in Ohio. He had to smile a little at the perfect absurdity of it. "We did," he said. "You were pretty drunk the whole time, though."

Pen shrugged a little. "Eh, so were you. And I wasn't as much so as you think." He'd snuck his way closer into Jonathan's orbit. "It was a real good time."

"It was," Jonathan said. His fingers curled on the treebark, the little scrape of it keeping him somewhere in the real world.

Pen kept smiling, the curve of his mouth sweet, and looked at him through his eyelashes. "I'm just saying... it's just the two of us on all this. I mean, sure, I'm older and fatter now, but I know I'm definitely prettier than any yeti guy."

Jonathan could feel his heart beating in his eyes. Now? *Now?* "Shit, Pen..."

Pen laughed and reached out to curl his fingers around the back of Jonathan's neck; he couldn't stop his eyes from fluttering shut for a moment. "Couldn't hurt to have a little fun again, you know? Like old times."

"Yeah..." Jonathan breathed out, and that was all the cue Pen needed to lean in and kiss him. His lips were a little chapped and his mouth tasted like coffee, and Jonathan could feel his

entire world stopping, heart, breath, head. He closed his eyes and kissed him back.

And then he stopped. He put his hands on Pen's chest and pushed him back a little. Pen made a softly disappointed sound of question, and Jonathan let out an unsteady breath. "Wait, no," he said, and kept his eyes focused on his fingers on Pen's chest. "It'd be fun." He laughed a little, weak and wavering. "Very fun. But there are just... emotions. Involved. Emotions involved."

"Emotions?" Pen said.

Jonathan crinkled his face in a grimace. If he licked his lips he could still taste Pen there, and it would just make his body angrier that his son-of-a-bitch brain had everyone's best interests in mind. "Feelings," he said, and winced more at the word and the words that came out of him after. "I have feelings. For you."

"Oh," Pen said softly. "...This whole time?"

"Yeah," Jonathan said, and forced out a breath he was holding. "So, so yeah. We aren't in college anymore, and we could have fun, yeah, but I think someone would end up getting hurt." *Someone* was an interesting new pronunciation of *I* that Jonathan was trying out. "So... no."

Pen took a step back and Jonathan lifted his eyes to look at him. He rubbed the back of his neck and hunched in a little, brow knitted as he chewed on the inside of his lip. Jonathan wasn't sure he'd ever seen a sight like this before: Pen Hamilton completely thrown off of his game and unsure of where to set his next step.

"Well, uh..." Pen let out a nervous little laugh and turned up the smile again, though it was a little unsure. "Hey, no worries. Just a thought. Just a, uh, yeah. Just an idea." He shook his head and laughed a little more. "C'mon, let's get back on the road."

They hiked up the small hill back to the car, and Pen nervously drummed his hands on the steering wheel as they started driving again, the first uncomfortable silence in the whole damn trip clogging up the air between them. But then he slapped his hand on the wheel hard enough to make Jonathan start, and said, "So what I'm saying is, *fuck* sasquatches!"

Jonathan let out a very slow breath. "Fuck them right in their imaginary asses," he said, keeping his eyes on the road's yellow divider line.

"Oh, I'm not saying they're imaginary," Pen said. "But I'm saying they can go screw."

"Ah, a critical distinction, pardon me," Jonathan said. He had a dull ache in his chest, but it was fading -- or at least getting back to the level he was accustomed to.

"Anyway, we're getting milkshakes," Pen said, firmly, and Jonathan fired up the GPS to point them to the nearest Sonic. Brain freeze sounded deeply appealing.

The Birds in My Beard

You don't need to have a powerful telescope to see the constellation Cygnus, but it certainly does make it more exciting. Isn't much good for seeing any non-space-birds, but damn, is it cool.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard Hey, nerd, quit stargazing and come back in. Joel wants to hear about your blog.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham There is not much to hear about my blog. It is a blog. It has birds. It is a bird blog.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard Okay, fine, just come back in because I miiiiiss yooooou

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham Shh, I'm having a vision. You doing anything for the next nine months? I need to go looking for Spacebirds.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard Sign me up!

After nearly a week of camping in the Adirondacks, which mostly involved staring at the treetops and sharing a tent with Pen, Pen declared himself sick to shit of it of roughing it and spent fifteen minutes furiously texting before announcing a new compass heading for the T-bird, one that lead straight to the ridiculous huge rich jerk house of his friend Joel, who had also made more money than was at all sensible from having a website. Jonathan couldn't complain; he had a couple of those showers with three or four different heads coming out of the walls, a seemingly endless assortment of beers, a grill that could have steaks put on it, and, most importantly, was someone other than each other for the two of them to talk to. Someone who didn't have theories about the Chupacabra.

Jonathan wasn't tired of Pen, not at all; he'd hit the 'tired of Pen' mark for a few days around month three, but had bravely soldiered on and now had essentially forgotten what it was like to spend longer than the span of a hot shower or a decent shit apart. It was strange, after so long like this, to think that he used to spend so much time alone. It would take a bit of acclimation when he went home. Whenever he went home.

Joel and Pen were cut from the same cloth, so after enough beers, they both started talking in a way that Jonathan, a man who had never ventured any capital, could think to break into, fast and constant, and he went to watch the stars. He drank his beer and listened to the crickets, the soft hooting of owls in the trees. He looked up at the sky and smiled; now, of course, would be the perfect poetic time for him to see a pair of huge dark wings spread across the sky.

When he came back inside, Pen had Joel scooted near him around the table, peering at an item Jonathan was very, very familiar with. Much of Pen's "research," Jonathan had discovered, came from a men's adventure magazine from the 60's he'd found, the kind that had stories about hidden Nazi gold and dangerous women next to the story about monster birds carrying off men. They'd hit most of the locations mentioned in it, but Pen always had more leads to keep them moving. He was showing it to Joel now, pointing at the black and white picture of debris of a downed airplane supposedly hit by a Thunderbird. No snarge, though, sadly.

Jonathan was more than a little drunk and tired. He came up and put a hand to the back of Pen's head, scratching his fingers a little through the dark, cool strands. Pen looked up at him with the smile of a dog eager to see its master again after a long day, and Jonathan just laughed.

"Jonathan!" Pen said, and he had a charming flush to his face from drinking. "I showed

Joel your blog."

"I like your blog," Joel said.

"He likes your blog!" Pen said.

"Have you thought about monetizing it at all?" Joel said. He had thick eyebrows and thick glasses, and when he talked his thick eyebrows bunched up below his thick glasses. "Ad partnerships, maybe an Amazon affiliate program or something?"

Jonathan laughed and shook his head. His hand was still resting on Pen's neck where it met his shoulder, and he was just going to leave it there if no one said anything about it. "No, no," he said. "It's just a silly little blog where I write silly little things about birds. I don't think anyone even reads it."

"I read it!" Pen said.

"Yeah, and you monetize me plenty." He tilted his beer bottle back to get the last dregs of it down his gullet, and then gave Pen a little squeeze on the shoulder. "I am old and decrepit and tired. You guys going to get into too much trouble if I go crash?"

Pen tilted his head back and made a 'pssh!' noise. "We've never been in a minute of trouble in our lives."

Joel shook his head. "Second door on the right upstairs is you. Clean towels are in the bathroom, and the Wi-Fi password is 'excelsior.'"

"*Excelsior!*" Jonathan exclaimed, and then bid them both goodnight to shuffle upstairs. He let himself melt away in the shower for a while, then came to bed, stretching out on the ridiculously huge mattress in his underwear. It had been a long time since he'd had a room alone. Pen had the money, of course, to get them separate rooms at the hotels and motels along their trip, but for the most part he insisted on them sharing, for a proper, authentic road trip experience. He almost didn't know what to do with this sudden privacy.

No, that was absolute bullshit, he knew exactly what to do. He retrieved his laptop, *excelsior*-ed his way into the wireless, and set browser tabs to as many free porn youtube clones as he could think of. God, it had been forever. It was perhaps strange for him to be picky now, but he spent a while skimming over the thumbnails looking for something really good. The proliferation of amateur stuff had been good for him, as it greatly increased the number of dirty videos featuring his exact type. Perfectly muscled waxed dudes weren't it, twinkles weren't it, yeti-like bears weren't it. He liked them chubby and cubby, with soft round bellies for him to come on, big fleshy asses for him to grab, tits to suck. It'd been his type before Pen, at least; Pen just happened to be the ideal damn specimen.

He found a promising video and clicked on it, something ill-lit where the man's head was cropped out of frame, but his chest and stomach and dick were front and center. The man in the video's dick wasn't too long, jutting out and pressing up beneath the curve of his belly. He started to stroke himself, the fingers of his other hand tugging at one of his nipples, and Jonathan slipped his hand under the waist of his boxers, squeezing his own cock as it stiffened in his hand.

An IM window popped up on his screen, directly in front of the video.

Pen: jonathan

Jonathan made a low, frustrated noise. He must've borrowed a computer from Joel. The temptation to write 'brb masturbating' into the window in response was very high, but he resisted. He didn't like ignoring Pen, but sometimes...

He minimized the IM window and skipped back a bit in the video, back to the part where

the guy was getting some good twist in his wrist. The IM window kept flashing at him though, and the little chirp he'd set as a notification went off again and again. Pen was apparently frantic about something and really wanted his attention. If it was a real problem, he knew, he wouldn't IM him; he'd just come to the room. He flipped back to the window.

Pen: hey
Pen: hey
Pen: hey
Pen: j
Pen: o
Pen: n
Pen: a
Pen: t
Pen: h
Pen: a
Pen: n
Pen: hey

Jonathan sighed and took his hand out of his underwear to type.

Jonathan: Well, I wasn't at the computer before, but now I'm ignoring you on principle.
Pen: jonathaaaaaan
Jonathan: Yes?
Pen: check out this bird

A dialogue popped up for Jonathan to accept a file, and he shook his head and allowed it. Probably another unusually large eagle or vulture or crane that Jonathan needed to take the wind out of Pen's sails about. He opened the file and was greeted by a webcam picture of Pen, smiling like he just ate a whole flock of canaries, giving him the finger.

Jonathan just stared at it for three long seconds before putting his head in his hands and laughing until he nearly choked.

Pen: pretty majestic, huh?

The picture had that soft, grainy quality that everything taken with a webcam did. Pen was obviously sitting on the bed in another room in Joel's house. He'd showered, clearly; his hair was damp, some strands of it curling wetly on his forehead, and he'd taken his glasses off, making him look unfocused and a little young. He was in a robe, not wrapped tightly closed as usual; Jonathan could see the skin of his neck, his shoulders, and just the top edge of his slightly furry chest. He took a breath. He'd stopped watching the video entirely, but his dick was still getting harder.

Jonathan: Ah, the Greater American Nerdhawk.

There was a pause for a while, enough for Jonathan to think maybe Pen was done bothering him, but then the window pinged again.

Pen: oh shit it's attacking me!

The image Pen sent then was of himself, face contorted in terror, with his middle finger poking into his eye. He filled the screen with messages while Jonathan laughed again.

Pen: I need your professional assistance!

Pen: jonathan!

Pen: jonathan help!

Pen: jonathan it flew out the door!

Pen: I think it's coming for you!

Jonathan was a little breathless, both from laughing and from how incredibly, stupidly hard he was. He pondered the screen for a while, then fired up his webcam, framed things properly, and took a picture of himself looking upwards in horror as his own middle finger came in from the corner of the frame. A masterpiece, without a doubt. He sent it to Pen.

Pen: noooooooooooooo!!!!

Pen: jonathaaaaaaaaan

Pen: jonathan what I have done??

Pen: damn these birds!

Pen: I'll remember you as you lived, buddy!

Pen: jonathaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!!!!!

Jonathan: Good night, Pen.

Pen: sleep tight, sweet stuff :)

Jonathan closed the IM window and reclined back on the bed, bringing the shot of Pen flipping him the bird back up. It was hard to tell from the middling quality of the image, but Pen looked flushed. Jonathan entertained the thought -- really entertained it, letting it roll over in his mind -- that maybe Pen had been getting up to the same thing he had. Maybe he'd jerked off in the shower. Maybe he was jerking off right now. Jonathan had heard a little flutter of his laugh through the walls when he'd sent the picture; he strained his ears to imagine the squeak of a mattress, the slap of skin. He looked at that picture and could almost smell him, clean soap and water. He'd be so good to touch, to *grab*, so warm and wet. His dick had to taste fantastic.

Jonathan was coming before he'd even fully realized he'd started stroking his cock. He panted and gasped as he shuddered. He couldn't have been quiet if he tried. He didn't care, anyway; let him hear it. He closed his eyes and thought about falling asleep just like that, lights on, hand around his dick, spunk drying on his shorts. He was entirely too old for that sort of nonsense.

When he'd cleaned up and settled back down, he looked at that picture of Pen again, him and his big, proud fuck-you finger. For a few seconds, he made it his computer's wallpaper. "You're dumb," he said. To himself or Pen, it didn't matter. He changed the wallpaper back to its previous picture of a kestrel, put his laptop aside, turned off the lights, and went to sleep.

The Birds in My Beard

The Andean Condor is a bird who means business. It's bald and doesn't care what you think about that; it changes color when it's angry, much like the Hulk; and it's got a wingspan of ten and a half feet, the largest of any known bird. The most it can pick up, however, is around nine pounds of weight.

The average weight for a domestic pig starts at around a hundred pounds, and they just get fatter the more delicious they are.

However, even if the big and beautiful Andean Condor could pick up a porker, it wouldn't; it, along with most of the other really big guys, is a scavenger.

But, hey, sometimes everyone needs a change of habits.

Pen had turned his charm up so high the knob broke off, but for neither love nor money would convince this farmer to give them one of his pigs. Jonathan was okay with this, really; mammalian wildlife biology had never been his bag, and also the car was getting enough of a funk from having the two of them in it for so long without getting any extra help. So, they had to improvise.

The porcine substitute they put together was made from a sack that had once held a very large amount of potatoes, basically all of the non-poultry meat the local Pick n' Save had to offer, some hacked-off water bottles for legs, and, because Pen was feeling artistic, a strip of beef jerky he'd devoted some time to curling into a spiral shape as the tail. They had a surprisingly serious discussion about putting bacon bits on the whole endeavour, but in the end decided it was overkill.

They sat on their stomachs in a field not from from where they'd placed their frankenpig, covered with a camouflage tarp Pen had picked up at an Army surplus store. They had it over their heads, like two kids at a sleepover telling scary stories. It was a beautiful day, sweet soft early spring breezes and a sky of clouds that dappled the grass (and their piggy) with shadows. Jonathan looked at their creation, standing proud and starting to stink in the sun, and listened to Pen sigh.

"I don't think this is going to work," he said, and really had to wonder why he hadn't said that until this very point.

"This is, like, *the* field," Pen said, keeping his voice low. "There were tons of sightings right here. Snatched a pig right off the damn ground."

Jonathan looked at their pig. They should have given it a nose, or at least ears. They could have gotten them in the pet needs aisle. "But it was in the 70s, you said."

"See, that's the thing!" Pen said, vigorous although he was trying to keep his voice down. "There are patterns to this sort of thing. There's a big uptick in sightings every thirty or forty years. And I think we both know how long it's been since the 70s." Jonathan had turned forty-one on this trip. Pen would be forty-three soon. "And there are migration patterns, man! They come right through here." Pen had shown him, on a map drawn by the first female cryptid enthusiast they'd met on the whole trip. She'd been incredibly interested in Pen, flirting with him to an extent that it made Jonathan a little uncomfortable, but Pen had paid her no mind. He was

either oblivious or uncaring; either way, all he wanted to talk about with her was Thunderbirds. At least Jonathan wasn't the only one not getting laid.

He kept his eyes on the pig bait for a long while, an amount of minutes he didn't want to keep track of by checking his watch. He listened to Pen's breathing, the wind in the grass, the distant birds. Flies were starting to notice the pig. "Pen?" he said, after perhaps an hour.

"Hm?"

"What are we doing?"

He glanced over at Jonathan, cutting his eyes towards him without turning his head. "We're... baiting a Thunderbird," he said, in a tone like Jonathan had just asked what Google was.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But what are we *doing*?"

"We're..." He could hear Pen swallow. He got the meaning of his question. "We're looking."

"What are we looking for?" He kept his eyes fixed on the pig, but in his peripheral vision he could see Pen's face tense up, see him start to squirm. It didn't feel good to do this, but it was time. It was past time, if he was going to be honest with himself. It was getting close to a year that they'd been at this.

"Thunderbirds," Pen said, quietly.

"I know that," Jonathan said, and he truly did. For whatever the hell else this was about, for whatever was going on, Pen absolutely really did want to find a Thunderbird. "But what else are we looking for?"

Pen didn't say anything for a long while, but then he heaved out a huge breath, took his glasses off to toss them into the grass, and rolled onto his back. The tarp crumpled in on him, covering much of his face, concealing him from Jonathan. "Jesus, I don't know." Jonathan just waited for more. Pen was not a man who needed prodding to speak. "It's just... fuck. I'm getting old, you know? I'm in my *forties*, man. *We're* in our forties. That's one of those things that I was like, yeah, you hear about it happening to other people, but you never thought it would happen to you."

Turning forty hadn't phased Jonathan too badly, but he remembered the tremendous party that Pen had thrown for his own milestone, and how he didn't hear from him at all for three months afterwards. Pen put a hand over his eyes. "Just... like, fuck. What have I done? What have I ever even accomplished?"

"You've had so many businesses," Jonathan said. "Really successful ones."

Pen let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Yeah, if you mean that they made me money, sure." He pushed his fingers up past his hairline, rubbing into his scalp. "Seriously, though, ask any mom on Facebook or kid on Tumblr if they have a goddamn idea what PalPlace is. It's a footnote. It's a footnote to a footnote, one of those little weird cross-shaped things, I don't know what they're called. It was just me getting really lucky."

Jonathan wasn't sure if he should, but it seemed right; he let his hand slide over the grass to rest his fingers lightly against Pen's shoulder. He sighed a little at the touch. "I invest in startups that make apps to tell you where to find cocktail ingredients and give to charities that raise awareness," Pen continued. He lifted his hands from his hair to curl his fingers in front of him, lifting up the tarp as they strangled the air. "Everything I've done is just air molecules. It's just dust. It's just ones and zeroes." He turned his head to look at Jonathan. He was so strained about his age, but he looked so young and gentle without his glasses, his coffee-colored eyes a little soft, a little wide, a little unfocused. "I'm just looking for something real."

It couldn't have been more perfectly Pen. His quest for something real was all about hunting something imaginary. Jonathan squeezed his arm and gestured out to their pig in the field with a jut of his chin. "Well, hey, our bait did attract something."

Pen rolled back over onto his stomach and picked up his glasses to look at the small murder of crows that had settled on the pig, pecking and poking at the cotton of the sack to get at the delicious spoiling pork loin within. Pen sighed deeply, long enough for his back to shake, and dipped his head to rest it in the cradle of his forearms for a moment. He shook a little more, and it only took a few seconds for Jonathan to realize he was laughing.

"Buzz off, you fuckers!" he shouted at the crows, who, like most crows, did not give a fuck. "You gotta be a shitload bigger if you want a piece of my pig!"

Jonathan put a hand on the small of his back and felt him laugh again as he watched the crows just go to town on that beef jerky tail. "Well, hey. Even more bait, right?"

"Garnish, man," he said, and his smile was back. "Even better than bacon bits."

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

You know, this is -- excuse me -- a DAMN fine cup of coffee.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard Cherry pie to go?

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham You better believe it. Get the whole damn thing.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

I'm thinking: TWIN BEAKS, a surprisingly moody animated series about two cockatiel detectives.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard

@pen_ham They basically did that on Sesame Street.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinmybeard SON OF A BITCH

Jonathan felt more at ease in these woods than he had in a while. It was good to be back on the Pacific end of the country, surrounded by tall evergreens and thick mosses. Their quest tromping through the forest was as pointless and fruitless as ever, but at least Jonathan could breathe in the green air. It had him more than a little homesick, but it was better than nothing.

The Quinault people, Pen had told him, had a legend about how Thunderbirds would pick whales up right out of the sea. They would drop them in the trees, and if you looked, you could find whale bones high among the branches, covered in moss. It was just part of the routine by now that Jonathan pointed out how scientifically unlikely this scenario was, Pen smiled at him and told him it'd still be fun to look, and Jonathan parked the car and tightened up the laces on his boots. He had to admit, it would be a cool thing to see.

Pen only had the patience for a few days of full-on forest roughing it before he started to

get ornery, wanting a shower and a cup of coffee that he had to pay at least four dollars for. They were almost back to the end of the loop they'd made through the Quinault forest. Jonathan kept his eyes up towards the tops of the massive trees, but he hadn't seen any whale bones yet.

"So, where are we going to go next?" he asked. Pen was quiet. He glanced behind him to see that, yes, he was still there, walking with an unsubtle step through the underbrush, uneaten by any bears. He was frowning slightly, looking down in a way that was more than to just watch his step. "Pen?"

"I... don't know," he said. "I'm kind of, um, out of places." He stopped walking and looked up at Jonathan. "I think we've been everywhere."

Jonathan stopped and turned to look at him. "Everywhere?" They'd climbed over mountains in North Carolina in search of nests; they'd been to a dormant volcano in New Mexico said to have been calmed by a sacrifice to the Thunderbird; they'd gone in search of a cave in Tennessee said to be full of bones both animal and man from the Thunderbird's meals. They'd talked to West Virginian hillbillies about the dreaded giant owl "Bighoot" and a professor in New Haven about Poua-kai, the monster bird of New Zealand. They'd been everywhere, but surely not *everywhere*.

Pen laughed a little, the sound choked, as he pushed both hands back through his hair. "I'm just... out. I'm out of leads. Even the Internet messageboard weirdos are stumped on what else we could possibly see."

Jonathan watched him, watched how he would look anywhere but at Jonathan's eyes. "So... what now?"

Pen took off his glasses and rubbed a hand over his face. "Honestly, I was going to make something up," he said. "Some new myth, some fresh sighting. Something on the opposite side of the country."

"I... would not have been happy if you did that," Jonathan said, although really, he had no solid evidence that Pen hadn't been making up half of the wild giant geese they'd gone chasing after, other than that Pen wouldn't lie like that. He'd barrel over you with the truth and leave you flattened with no choice to follow before he'd lie to someone who trusted him.

"I know," Pen said, eyes still covered. A wood-warbler sang proudly above them, and Jonathan closed his eyes, too.

"Maybe..." Jonathan let out a breath. He'd thought about saying this so many times over the past year; he didn't know why it would catch in his throat now. "Maybe it's time to go home."

"No," Pen said, and put his glasses back on. "There's got to be something else. Maybe we can go back to somewhere we've been, look harder..."

"Pen," Jonathan said. "This has been good. This has all been good. But... I have a life to go back to. I have a *job*."

Pen laughed a little desperately. "This could be your job! You want a salary? I'll give you a salary."

Jonathan shook his head. "I *like* my job." He let out a soft sigh. "I like my job. I like my house. I like working with real birds. I've got a life to go back to. You've got one, too."

"I don't want to go back to it," Pen said, soft and stubborn like a three-year-old.

"Pen..."

"No, look, listen," Pen said, and Jonathan did those things. "If we go home, this is just going to... stop. You'll go back to your life, and I'll go back to mine, and it's going to be like it was before. Back to the kind of life where I don't see you every day."

Jonathan frowned and swallowed over the rise of his heart. "It's not like we live so far

apart..."

A nervous laugh bubbled out of Pen again. "I didn't actually ask you out to do this because you know bird stuff," he said. That had always been the story, that Jonathan was the expert, Pen was the direction. "I asked you because you're the only person who'd want to be around me this long, and you're the only person I want to be around this long, and really, after this long, I want to be around you much, much longer."

Jonathan breathed very slowly and very carefully. "You could have said that."

Pen managed a little smile, the sun beneath some clouds. "You don't think that would have been a little weird?"

He probably would have said yes, anyway. "A little."

"And the Thunderbirds... the Thunderbirds are important too. Were. I don't know." He shook his head. "I really do believe. I think they're out there. I could look forever. I could just never go back to the real world and it would be fine, as long as I got to do it with you."

"We..." Jonathan's voice dried up, and he cleared his throat. "We do have to go back."

Pen filled with breath and let it out again. "It's the 'with you' part that's the important bit."

"Pen..." Jonathan said. "What, ah, what are you saying?"

"You remember what you said to me about feelings?" That had been almost six months ago, and they hadn't spoken one word about it afterwards. Jonathan had nearly convinced himself Pen had forgotten the whole awkward encounter. "Feelings."

"Feelings?" Jonathan said, the word squeaking past his lips.

"I have them," Pen said, and there was that smile, that soft glance through his eyelashes. "For you."

Jonathan let out a very shaky breath and listened to his heart pound in his ears. "Okay," he said, stupidly. "We still have to go back, though."

Pen took a step and a half nearer, crackling in the leaves and closing in the space between them. "Yeah, I know we do," he admitted. "I think I'd be okay with it if I could go back with you."

Jonathan smiled as his hands twitched; he wanted to do something, wanted to touch Pen somehow, but everything he thought of seemed awkward and stupid. "You want to come hang out in the woods with me?"

"Sure," Pen said, and solved the problem for Jonathan, reaching out to scratch underneath his beard with his fingertips. "I mean, you've got broadband, right?"

"Tons of it," Jonathan said. "Very broad."

"Hey, sounds like it could be a plan," Pen said.

"Could be," Jonathan said, even though he knew it could be a terrible one. Pen could get bored in another year and wander off. Pen could actually be terrible in a relationship. Pen could never stop talking and scare all the birds away from the feeders around his house. He still couldn't stop from smiling.

"So," Pen said, brushing his fingers out across Jonathan's cheek, smoothing over his whiskers. "I'm going to try to kiss you again. Is that cool with you?"

"Very cool," Jonathan said, and Pen's grin had never seemed so bright and beautiful as it was right before he leaned in to kiss him. His fingers slid into Jonathan's hair, winding through the waves of it to pull him closer as his lips parted to let him in. There was no coffee taste this time, just Pen, just the exact thing Jonathan had been remembering and dreaming about for half his life. It was one of those sweet, perfect kisses corny romances were built on, alone in the woods with a chorus of birds serving as stand-ins for the swelling strings on the soundtrack. It

would have been an absolutely ideal moment for a bear to eat them.

Jonathan put his hands in Pen's hair and pushed it back, grabbing as much of it as he could as he kissed him more fiercely. Romance was all well and good, but he'd been thinking about this too long. He could feel Pen laughing as he met his enthusiasm, perfectly happy to have Jonathan chewing on his lower lip. Jonathan only realized that he'd been advancing forward, trying to violate the laws of space to get as close to Pen as he could, when he met resistance in the form of Pen colliding with a spruce tree. Pen just grinned as Jonathan backed him into the bark, and Jonathan had no choice but to kiss him even harder.

When he moved from Pen's mouth to kiss his throat, Pen laughed breathlessly. "Jesus, you did not have the beard last time we did this." He curled his arm around Jonathan's waist, pulling him closer, pressing him against all the soft parts of his body. Jonathan heard himself growl a little against Pen's neck and sucked a little red mark into his skin. "I like the beard. I *like* the beard."

Of course Pen was a talker. Jonathan wouldn't expect or want it any other way. He could say whatever he wanted when his mouth was free, which was, in Jonathan's estimation, not going to be very often. He kissed Pen until he groaned, the throaty sound mixed up with a laugh. He always laughed when he was happy, even at times like these, and it made him hard enough to hurt. "Fuck," he breathed as he ground his hips up against Pen's, feeling Pen's own erection before he devoted all his attention to rubbing against the bottom of his belly.

Pen gasped and laughed and clutched at him, but then tugged at the back of his collar and said, "Jonathan, Jonathan, wait."

Fuck shit fuck ass fuck cock fuck. "Yeah?" Jonathan said, instead of any of that.

"We are... *way* too old to have sex in the woods."

Jonathan took a slow breath, resting his forehead against Pen's, their glasses clinking together. God damn it. "Yeah," he said. "You're right."

"So let's get the hell out of the woods," Pen said, and Jonathan had to kiss that smile a little longer before setting to break speed records at hiking.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

I'm thinking: Cran-KY, the cranberry-flavored sexual lubricant for when you might not quite be in the mood.

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinybeard

@pen_ham JUST BUY SOMETHING AND GET BACK IN THE CAR.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

@birdsinybeard There's a line!

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinybeard

@pen_ham ARRRRGHHHHH

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

I'm thinking: ROUGH RAVENS, the enticingly studded condom just for corvids!

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard
@pen_ham ARGHGHHHHGHGHHHHHHH

Jonathan Crowe @birdsinmybeard
@pen_ham Also, ravens don't have penises. You're thinking of ducks.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham
@birdsinmybeard I'm thinking: something that RHYMES with ducks. Out in a minute.

Pen laughed and the mattress wheezed as Jonathan knocked him back on the motel bed. In a stunning display of the change in status quo that had happened over the past few hours, he'd gotten them a room with only one bed, asked for while grinning lasciviously at the desk clerk while Jonathan stood behind him and shook his head. It got them a bigger bed, though, larger than any of the extra-long twin mattresses they'd tangled on in college.

Jonathan climbed on top of him without much seductive grace, but he seriously did not give a shit about what anything he did looked like right now. He kissed Pen's smiling face and pushed a hand underneath his shirt, trailing his fingers through the hair on his stomach and over to squeeze at the side of his waist. "God," he breathed against Pen's mouth. "You've been driving me completely insane."

"Sorry?" Pen said.

"You are not," Jonathan said. "Asshole." Pen laughed at that, and he was smiling, too.

"I'll make it up to you!" Pen said, and Jonathan put his other hand under Pen's t-shirt to push it up off over his head. Pen laughed once he was free from it, setting his glasses back properly on his face from where they'd been jostled. "I'll make it up to you like crazy."

"Damn right, you will," Jonathan said as he dealt with his own shirt, nearly tearing open the buttons and throwing the t-shirt he wore under it across the room. Pen's hands went right for him, greedily pawing at his torso. He pulled a little at the fur on Jonathan's stomach.

"C'mere, Sasquatch," he said, and Jonathan bent back down again, sighing as they came skin-to-skin.

"Rawr," he said, and kissed Pen just as he laughed, swallowing the sound of it deep inside of him. He kept his balance on one forearm while he touched Pen as much as he could with the other hand, grasping at his flesh, pressing fingers into his skin, tweaking at one of his nipples. That last made Pen jolt and giggle breathlessly, so Jonathan settled his weight on his knees, put one hand back through Pen's hair to hold him in place, and bent down to tease at it with his mouth, sucking it between his lips.

"Jeeeesus," Pen said as he squirmed and smiled. "You learned a few tricks, huh?"

"Mmhm," Jonathan said, and lifted up to see if the attention would be equally appreciated on the other side; it was. All the things he wanted to do to and with Pen were building up in his mind, crashing together in one giant filthy pileup, too huge and muddled to focus on one thing. At least they all had an important first step.

"Naked," he said.

"Naked!" Pen said, and kicked off his sneakers before helping Jonathan get rid of the remainder of his stupid clothing. Jonathan stepped back from the bed to finish undressing himself. He paused as he unfastened his jeans to just look at Pen, naked and spread out and grinning at him, short cock popping up happy to see him from under his belly. It took him a few

seconds to remember to breathe.

"I absolutely need you to fuck me," he said. Well, that solved the pileup problem.

"I will!" Pen said, as Jonathan finished undressing. "I absolutely will."

"Cool," Jonathan said, and got back on the bed. "Just let me do one thing first." Jonathan settled between Pen's knees, got a good hold on either of his thighs, and sucked his cock deep into his mouth.

"Oh, yeah," Pen said, breathless as Jonathan could hear him smile. That was one of the things that had made him fall for him twenty years ago, the way he never stopped smiling for a minute of sex, the way it was always so much fun to him. "Take all the time you need. It's cool."

Jonathan squeezed the flesh of Pen's thighs and took him all the way to the root. Pen didn't have a big cock by anyone's definition, but, Jesus, had Jonathan ever not cared. He'd been with guys smaller, and been with guys with third legs, but Pen hit the baby bear spot perfectly. He'd remembered all this time the way it curved a little to the right at the end, the way the texture of his skin changed when he slid his tongue past his circumcision scar.

Jonathan pulled his head back to lick at the end of Pen's cock, getting a serious taste of him. Pen put his hands into Jonathan's hair, tangling in its length, and Jonathan groaned, letting go of Pen's thigh to stroke his own cock. He bobbed on Pen's cock, his forehead coming to rest against Pen's belly each time he took him deeper. It'd be so easy to lose himself like this, to get him off like this and swallow every drop. He squeezed around the root of his own dick just at the thought of it.

Pen laughed again and pulled on his hair, drawing him off. "Okay, okay, whoa," he said, breathless and gorgeous. "If you have any more plans tonight, that's gotta stop."

Jonathan rested his head against the soft rise of Pen's stomach and breathed in deep, smelling his skin, smelling the sweat of the day. "Yeah, good call," he said, and pulled himself up. He staggered off the bed again and over to the bag full of Pen's drug store plunder. He dropped the box of condoms and the bottle of lube onto the bed, and Pen sat up, grinning at him like it was his birthday.

"I thought about getting some really fancy shit," he said, opening the box and pulling out one foil-wrapped condom. "Like, all kinds of colors. Construct some kind of sex-bower."

"You know, I sincerely appreciate the thought," Jonathan said, as his mouth went dry to watch Pen carefully, expertly roll the condom on. "But bower unnecessary."

"Next time," Pen said, and swayed forward to kiss Jonathan, sighing quietly as he tasted himself on Jonathan's lips. "How do you want to do this?"

He and Pen had never fucked, back in college. They'd never even talked about fucking; it had all been too much, too big, too complicated. Now, Jonathan wasn't about to ask anything as stupid as if Pen knew what he was doing. Of course he did; Pen knew how to do everything. He moved away from Pen and laid on his back on the bed. "Like this?"

Pen grinned and uncapped the bottle of Walgreens-friendly lube, slathering his fingers with it. Jesus, he actually did know what he was doing. Jonathan's cock jumped against his stomach just at the sight of it. "Cool," he said, and trailed a slick finger past Jonathan's balls to slot right inside him, like it was just what he'd been intending to do this whole trip. "I want to see your face."

"Jesus, fuck," Jonathan cleverly replied, and angled his hips to get Pen to work deeper. He wanted to tell him to say hell to all the buildup, to just fucking fuck him already, but it had been a long time, longer than just the year they'd been traveling, since he'd been fucked; a little preamble was a good idea. As Pen worked one finger into him and then another, he really, really

stopped having any complaints.

"I thought about you like this," Pen said as he fucked Jonathan with his fingers. He settled his other hand on Jonathan's body, squeezing at his own pectoral muscle and toying with his nipple. It didn't have as strong an effect on him as it did on Pen, but Jonathan still jerked towards the touch. "I always regretted that we never fucked."

Jonathan laughed, and apparently the sound of it made Pen hook his fingers upward, which made him make a sound that was not at all like a laugh. "Now is the time," he said, and then reached out to grab Pen's dick and squeeze it. "Now is really the time."

Pen, surprisingly, said nothing. He slid his fingers out, making Jonathan grunt a little from the absence, and then grunt again at the sight of him slicking up his cock. Pen pushed up close between his legs, pushing his knees up in a way that was not really that comfortable for a man his age, but good lord, did Jonathan not care, because it was all a prelude to Pen slowly, perfectly sliding his cock into his ass.

"Jesus, fuck," Jonathan worked out, and he grabbed upwards until he found the back of Pen's neck, grasping on and bringing him down to kiss him. Pen's stomach pressed into Jonathan's cock, and for a moment he thought he might come right then. He bit his lip, and then he bit Pen's.

Pen fucked him slow and steady, making a burn in him that just grew more ferocious with every stroke. "...crazy about you," Pen said, breathless and distracted as he worked one arm under one of Jonathan's thighs, lifting his hips half up from the bed. "Just fucking insane over you, you don't know."

"Tell me later," Jonathan could work out, and grabbed at Pen's chest, groping and squeezing, wanting nothing more than to just get handfuls of all that body, all that flesh. Pen didn't moan or sigh or groan, he laughed, leaning his head back happy and beautiful, and steadied himself to stroke Jonathan's cock as he fucked him. For a big guy, he was goddamn athletic, and Jonathan growled to think of the other ways he'd be able to see that performed.

Pen said other things while he fucked him; Pen actually never shut up for a second while he fucked him, but Jonathan couldn't really hear a word. He just closed his eyes and leaned his head back, feeling nothing but Pen filling him up again and again, Pen's hand teasingly leaving off his cock for a few seconds to rake fingers through the thick hair on his belly, Pen leaning forward so his stomach nudged up against Jonathan's balls.

He grabbed handfuls of the scratchy motel sheets when he came, and heard Pen laughing in nothing but pure delight as he spilled over his hand. Pen just fucked him harder in the aftermath of it, enough to make him feel each jolt up into his eyeballs, and the beautiful bastard said Jonathan's *name* when he came, pushed up to the hilt in him, dripping sweat onto his body.

Pen pulled out of him after what seemed like a long while, and flopped gracelessly onto the bed next to him. Neither of them touched each other as they caught their breaths, as Jonathan felt his come cool and dry into the hair on his stomach. After a while, though, Pen worked his arm up awkwardly between them to slide his hand under Jonathan's neck, rubbing his fingers into it while he tangled up his hair.

"Ravens really don't have penises?" he said, after a few minutes like that.

"Nope," Jonathan said. Smiling made him feel tired, but he did it anyway. "Most birds don't."

"How do they fuck?" Pen said.

"It's called a 'cloacal kiss,'" Jonathan said.

"Wow," Pen said, and laughed, high and bright. "Sounds romantic. Think we could try

that some time?"

"If you figure out a way," Jonathan said, opening his eyes to turn and look at Pen, "I will be down for it."

Pen looked over at him and tapped on the side of his nose. "I'll do some research. I know a guy."

Jonathan laughed and rolled over, flopping an arm over Pen's soft middle. He dozed off for a while, nose pressed into Pen's shoulder, smelling his skin.

Pen Hamilton @pen_ham

I'm thinking: it's time to go home.

When he woke up, Pen was no longer beside him. He was standing near the window, dressed again. Jonathan had a second of fear arch through his gut, but then Pen turned to him with an electric smile. "Hey, clean up and get dressed, I want to go outside."

"Yeah?" Jonathan said, sitting up. His come had formed a lovely crust in his body hair, which was a surprisingly teenage thing for him to experience again at this age.

"It's a beautiful night," Pen said. Jonathan nodded, and cleaned up and put his clothes back on. Pen led him out into the parking lot of the motel holding his hand, and brought him to lie down on the hood of the car next to him. The whole time they'd been traveling, neither of them had never done anything like this.

"Dig the stars," Pen said. Jonathan looked upwards. It was a remarkably clear night, all kinds of light radiating from the sky. It was the kind of sky he was used to seeing from his home near the park. It was nothing like Pen would see where he'd lived. He'd like the change.

Jonathan turned on the hood of the car, hearing the metal whine a little, and crowded in to Pen to nuzzle his mouth. "Nah, I've seen 'em," he said.

"Gotta keep watching the skies, you know?" Pen said.

"Some other time," Jonathan said, and kissed him, warm and sweet and good. He closed his eyes, Pen closed his eyes, and neither of them paid any mind to the shadow that passed over them, dark wings spread so, so wide.



*If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/217843.html>*

Tastes Like True Grit

by Daisuke Yaki (大輔焼)

"Illian Nikado?"

"*Illian Nikado.*"

The name swept over town. It was spoken with varying degrees of contempt, praise and curiosity; tossed lightly from one person to another, appearing at the start of a scornful growl only to disappear again at the tail-end of a besotted sigh.

Despite all of these different entangled opinions, however, one might very well be able to find a common thread underlying it all given a close enough look.

Closer.

Closer.

There.

"Warren Black would hate the little greenhorn."

"My god, Warren Black would hate you," Sir Nikado boomed.

His father had never quite known that there existed a decibel for speech below that of 'deafening'. It sounded even louder than usual in the cloistered confines of their house parlour.

"Look at this. Not a piece of grit or dirt on you. No malodorous splatters or grisly body parts sticking out anywhere. Not a hair out of place! And sporting a suit as well?" His father gestured extravagantly to the paper he had slapped down, which was emblazoned with a picture of him rendered in charcoal.

Illian pointed out that Warren Black wore suits too.

"You look like a bookkeeper," his father scoffed. "Warren did not. Tell me son, are you going to strike fear into the hearts of men and monstrous beasts alike by looking like a bookkeeper?"

"Ah, but I do believe, he was making a statement with it."

Where there had been two around the mahogany table in the parlour, there were now three.

A lesser man might have been shocked, spewed out whatever was in his mouth even, if they were eating as Illian was. He was too used to it to even blink an eye. The long curling hair and serene, innocent expression on her face often caused people to scoff when they found out about her *nom de plume*. Still, her quiet entrances were a telling hint as to why his mother had earned the name "The Silent Slayer" in her youth.

Straightening the paper out with a snap, Madame Nikado read from it in a clear timbre,

"The exquisitely handcrafted three-piece suit Illian of Nikado wears is moving art, a visual commentary that represents the profligate consumption habits of our generation against the everyday grit of hunting---"

"Wait, let me see that."

His father forcefully wrenched the paper away, his lips moving silently while his eyes scanned the rest of the article.

"Ach. Well. I see," his father consented grudgingly in the end. "But next time, how 'bout you try to make a more... *bloodier* visual commentary, alright? Now, I'm off to shoot some flesh-

eating coyotes."

Madame Nikado's eyes trailed lovingly after her husband's before settling onto Illian.

"It pleases me to know that my suit was not simply catering to my vanities so much as trying to make an important visual commentary on society," he said dryly. "You do know I was wearing it only because I thought it looked dashing on me, right?"

"You're not the only one to notice that," his mother replied, waving yet another broadsheet in his face. "Zappa Daily has proclaimed you Most Eligible Up-and-Coming Bachelor-Hunter! Such an illustrious title for one so young and new, no?"

"Indeed. Even more promising than last week's 'Most Pleasing Derriere'."

"But of course," Madame Nikado continued. "You inherited that from me. Now, speaking of pleasing derrieres..."

With a wink, she slipped something into his hands.

"...Mother. What is this."

"Oh, don't play coy now. It's the monthly publication from the Society of Proper Young Ladies. I'll have you know, it was very hard to get my hands on ---"

"I... don't collect these anymore."

"-- *very* hard to get my hands on this copy. They're doing a special on Warren Black for this particular issue. Enjoy yourself now, ta! Your father will be needing me."

His mother fluttered away with a gun in one hand and a harlequin novel in the other. This was not as strange as it seemed due to the fact that there were ample stocks of both be found inside the parlour. Madame and Sir Nikado, while able to bridge the gap in their dispositions through affection and familiarity, had never been able to perform the same when it came to matters of decoration.

As such, guns of all shapes and sizes engaged in a fearless battle for space with the lurid covers of bodice-rippers.

It was liable to give anyone a headache when looked at for too long, and Illian shifted his eyes back down to the stylized cover of Warren Black staring broodingly up at him.

If he were entirely honest with himself, Illian had to admit that he *might* have had a little bit of a crush on Warren Black in his younger years.

He had hoarded everything there was of the man. Trading cards, covers, penny dreadfuls... Warren Black had been the bee's knees and Illian Nikado his admiring acolyte. The man seemed to be able to do just about anything. Clearing the Scourge of Mankind With One Punch, Defeating the Blight of the Lands Before Lunchtime, *Eating* the Blight of the Lands for Lunchtime... He had already started to achieve legendary status when Illian was still trying to learn the heft and make of a rifle with his hands.

Needless to say, Illian had kept all his collections of Warren Black in mint condition. Well. Almost all. Some of them had, unfortunately, been marred by suspicious stains when he had reached a certain age.

He was over it, though. He was over this past obsession and now possessed the strength and clarity of mind to put aside the publication from the Proper Young Ladies.

He moved towards the door with determination. And halted with one hand on the doorknob. Cast a glance back to where Warren Black seemed to be beckoning to him in a broodingly accusatory fashion from the bin.

In the next moment, he was curled up in bed with the publication, tilting his head

wonderingly at it.

"Dear god, are those *tentacles*?"

My, my, who is this newcomer that we have all been hearing so much talk of?

Illian Nikado's tall, dark and handsome self certainly has been in all manner of broadsheets and papers these days. It would be no difficult feat to pick one up if a lady should like to find out more about, say, his favourite choice of dish or colour. But what is she to do should she crave instead for something a shade more... impolite?

You would be delighted to find, my dears, that you would no longer have to dig into the dark recesses of your naughty, naughty minds to slake such cravings. Our lovely writers and artists have decided, once again, to take over this burdensome task just for you...

- Miss Marple, Editor's Note from *The Society of Proper Young Ladies*, Issue 27

Tentacles had proven to be a popular subject with the Proper Young Ladies. Illian knew this because their next publication had featured *him*. In a moment of perverse curiosity, masochism and, yes, that vanity of his raising its head again, Illian had obtained one discreetly. He had laughed and winced in turn as he flipped the pages.

He supposed it could be considered flattering in a certain debauched way. But Illian doubted that his body could accommodate that many slithering appendages. His gaze travelled over the different artworks and stories: lingering over the more outlandish ones, skittering past those that had too much bodily fluids for him to stomach, sliding right across a couple of pages and--

Stopped.

There, in the very last section of the periodical, was a spread of him lovingly etched in swathes of charcoal. There was nothing assaulting him nor was he assaulting anyone. Instead, he was simply lying down, one hand flung palm outwards across his face while the other rested on his stomach. His relaxed form and immaculate suit, set against the flame-engulfed surroundings, provided for a strangely pleasing contrast.

Illian squinted at the drawing. *E.B.* was the signature of the artist.

How had this *E.B.* known that this was the very same pose that he had assumed after killing that Fire-breathing Cobra a week ago? There was something vaguely familiar about the art style that Illian couldn't quite put a finger on.

He placed his finger on it a few days later.

"When will you challenge Warren Black to a duel, boy?" his father exclaimed, sweeping in with various grisly bits and malodorous splatters attached to him. "It's all the papers been talking about."

Zappa Daily was thrown across the table to where he sat sipping tea.

"Ah! It's *E.B.* again," he jabbed at the ornate initials resting at the corner of his picture.

"Indeed. You've only noticed now?" Madame Nikado had appeared silently by his side,

eyes glinting with humour, the rich fabric of her black dress flawless except for the bloodstains on it. "He drew all your previous pieces as well. It seems you've gained an admirer."

"Eebee? What in god's good name is that?"

Madame Nikado ignored her husband in favour of spreading out last week's Zappa, tapping one sharply pointed nail at the corner. *E.B.* yet again.

"Hmm. Well, if there's any admirer to be gained, one can do worse than catching the attentions of someone who occupies a certain amount of artistic integrity."

"What?" His father looked scandalised. "But this artist is dull as ditch water! *Bah* to artistic integrity I say. Why wouldn't anyone want gleaming horns from the top of your head? Or Zombie Weasels manfully ripping into your flesh!?"

"I do find it refreshing to be drawn as a normal human being from time to time. Preferably, with nothing gnawing or hanging off my body."

"Kids these days," Sir Nikado grumbled. "You're all too bloody soft. Y'know what would toughen you up? A duel with Warren Black!"

Illian's face fell.

"Wouldn't it be *exciting* to finally be able to meet him?" Madame Nikado twinkled at him.

That was the problem. It would be a test of wills to keep control if he actually faced Warren Black in all his towering muscled glory. Blurting out "take me now" was never a good start to a duel and was liable to cause more bodily harm than he could withstand.

Still, much like the Zombie Weasel, his father never let go once he had bitten on an idea.

"I'll be sure to engage him in a duel if I ever happen to bump into him," Illian said brightly.

Illian set about careful plans to make sure that this would never happen.

Their paths had never intersected before this since they preferred different hunting grounds. Warren Black leaned towards huge, gnashing teeth while Illian Nikado courted prey that was smaller in size but speedier.

Still, it did him no harm to place a more mindful eye on the Zappa Hunter Forecast. It had a helpful chart of sightings for Fearsome Creatures along with predictions as to which Hunter was likely to slay what. Illian simply avoided the areas which had a Bloody with a High Chance of Warren Black.

There was no question as to who would be completely eviscerated into a messy pulp should they ever meet. His style of gunslinging may have earned him second in the rankings but it would fare considerably worse as any sort of effective shield against Warren.

The traditional style that had been laid down by Warren Black was pure, brute force and most Hunters followed religiously in his footsteps. Illian, however, avoided this if he could. For one, he did not have the sort of physique that would allow him to hasten death with one blow. Two, it was more amusing to see the reactions he caused by diverting away from the well-trodden path. Sir Nikado had nearly blown a vein when Zappa ran an article on how he had dealt with the Beguiling Siren off Cape Coil.

"YOU SET HER UP WITH THE MAN-EATING SUCCUBUS?!"

"She was getting lonely," Illian had shrugged. "And tired of dashing men against the rocks with her voice all the time."

Truth was, he had never even wanted to be a Hunter in the first place, and had actively

channeled all of his resentment towards being forced into that very vocation into finding all the different ways to make his father and the traditionalists grit their teeth.

His initial plans were as un-Hunterly as one could get.

All Illian wanted to do was to move into a quiet corner and open up a bookstore. Not the huge ones like what you would see in neighbouring Mirhein, mind you, but rather a building that one could easily miss in the blink of an eye: a room that the few lucky unsuspecting travellers would stumble upon, allowing themselves to be charmed by the artfully tumbled mess of books inside, the quaint armchairs and leaning shelves, the smell of decaying paper and ink in the air. He, of course, would play the part of the slightly eccentric if handsome gentleman-owner who would step out into a slant of light from a strategically placed window and welcome them in with an enigmatic smile.

The fantasies he had harbored ground to a halt the day his brother eloped with his Archnemesis. Alice the Cook was her name. This was a horribly plain name for a Hunter but it had stuck because there was simply no other title that was more apt. Alice couldn't be bothered with guns or explosives or fancy fisticuffs. She baited her prey with lovingly prepared food, then stood back and smiled beatifically as they choked to death from the amount of poison it had been laced with.

His brother was the only who had managed to live through one of her meals.

Faster than one could say, "Ha! I knew it was just sexual tension!" Illian was whisked into the role that his brother had been meant to undertake. The elder Nikado had always been better than him in wielding a gun, but Illian could hold fairly well in a match against him and this was enough to place him leagues ahead of anyone else.

Except for Warren Black. Whom everyone said would hate him. In addition to getting eviscerated, Illian had no wish to see the hero of his childhood staring at him with black daggers of hatred before he died.

A selected extract by Sir Basil Waverly III, esteemed author of *Love at First Death: Mating Habits of the Venomous Regal Naga*, has this to say on the fine creature in question:

Despite its prodigious name, the colouring of the Regal Naga merely ranges from muted evergreens to murky shades of brown; a luminescent greyish green the most exciting peak that it could reach in the spectrum that has been set out for it through its biological make-up.

It has been accorded a more forgiving palette, however, where the first part of its name is concerned. The venomous spit that the Regal Naga carries is able to comfortably traverse through every colour in the rainbow and back again. This particular detail has been regarded, justly, as the most important aspect of its mating ritual. I would also like to direct attention to another equally important and yet often overlooked behaviour: The Chase.

The smaller size of the females belonging to the Regal family does not, in any way, hinder its ability to lead the male on a chase that might encompass miles and miles of land, unceasingly and tirelessly, through desert scrub and shadowed forests, whether rain or shine. In order to reward the male's dogged pursuit and to offer encouragement should its spirit flag, the female Regal Naga will leave behind various brilliantly coloured victims in its wake. To their sensitive eyes, nothing can elucidate the concept of "I Love You" more conspicuously than different brightly coloured shades of death.

Illian had extensively stocked his library back home with everything from Ackerley's *Musing on Man* to Zeinhardt's *Nefarious Kiss of the Temptor*. Out of all the readings at his

disposal, the above extract was one that he had not ever come across.

If he had, he might not currently have been running away so desperately from the enormous Venomous Regal Naga chasing him.

Nor her amorous male counterpart, which was, in turn, being chased by none other than Warren Black.

There were certain things which gained clarity under the pressing weight of fatigue: the thudding of his heart, the harsh rasp of his breath with every step he took, the slow, dull ache that was starting to bloom in his thighs.

Normally, Illian would find a certain measure of comfort in the desert outback. The endless stretch of sand and sky ignited a fierce joy in him, coaxed out the bright-eyed child in him that had once flipped through picture books depicting the very same scene and breathed out in wonder at it. Now the elongated shadows cast by strewn rubble and rocks seemed to taunt him. *Not enough cover*, they said. *Not enough cover to duck out of sight from the unforgiving sun nor from those after you.*

He had been running for so far and so long that the regular detritus soon reared instead into sharp, twisting metal; angry, dark cracks outlined against the sky that broke its tranquility. They were wreckage left from the Great Rail Wars, hastily laid out by several different companies in a bid to be the first to build a transcontinental railroad and reap the gold and glory that would follow. Saboteurs and gunmen hired by the companies to do damage to their rivals gradually dissolved the entire affair into the wreckage that it was today.

Just as the rusting tracks here terminated themselves abruptly, Illian realised that he needed to stop as well. There was no sense in running. The Regal Naga had her attentions wholly focused on him and what little energy he had left it was best to conserve for the battle that was to follow.

Out of the corner of his eyes, through the heat and sweat, Illian caught sight of a wavering image of a man gesturing to him behind the remains of a train carriage. There was no time to wonder whether his mind had cracked. He leapt aside just as a furious rattling sound filled his ears, curling into a roll and springing up again to rush towards the carriage. Behind him, poisonous pink smoke curled up from the sand where his feet had been a moment before.

It was true. His mind had started conjuring up illusions. The man he was now crouched down beside was Warren Black. That was, if Warren Black were shorter, less muscular, and had a smudge of charcoal down one cheek.

"I wanted to save this for the exhibit," the realistic-looking illusion muttered. "But being on the brink of danger is a good reason as any to use it."

Illusion Warren's hand rummaged around in his pack and withdrew what looked like an explosive from it. The pin was removed in between his teeth before it was thrown into the air, the Regal Naga swinging her head away from the carriage ruins to follow its graceful arc. When it finally landed, it did not end in blood and entrails. Instead, it burst into a multi-coloured profusion of paint splatters.

The Regal Naga stopped fanning her hood out threateningly, hissing furiously, or doing anything else that warned of imminent death. She cocked her head to the side in a curious fashion and swayed towards the splatters to stare at it. Illian could only describe the sound that she emitted then as a happy burble before she all but collapsed to wriggle against it. The male in close pursuit joined after a brief hesitation into a passionate writhing pile that the Proper Young Ladies would have applauded.

"He would never have thought of that," Illian marvelled. He took in the dirty-blond

hair and grey eyes of his unexpected saviour that were so strikingly similar to the famous Hunter's. "And yet, do you know how much of an uncanny resemblance you bear to---"

"Warren Black?" Warren's almost-twin answered. "Yes. That's not surprising considering he's my brother."

It was the last thing he saw before a sharp blow to his head knocked him out.

"Y'know," Illian casually remarked aloud, tossing the flesh that he had carved out from the Bile-spitting Scorpion into the pot, "it's not very becoming to knock out a person without his permission. Or to leave him on his house door step after without even a kiss good-night."

An embarrassed silence radiated from the jagged rock outcropping on his left.

"I never did manage to thank you properly for getting me away from that Naga the other day. How about some scorpion stew?" Illian took a sip and made sure he *mmm*-ed as loud as possible. "I got this recipe from a very talented cook."

Silence continued to reign.

"The B is for Black," Illian said carefully, "but what does the E stand for?"

The man was stalking him. *Had* been stalking him all along, ever since the Fire-breathing Cobra, Illian was sure of it. All of the sketches that had appeared of him in the papers after were detailed in a way that could only have come from close proximity.

Out of all the Hunters that the artist could have chosen as his muse, Illian supposed he was the easiest to track. Where there was sand and speedy prey to be found, so too was he, which narrowed his hunting grounds to only two regions: The South Plains or White Slumps; and even within that, one could narrow it even further to a few choice areas.

E.B. had appeared without fail for all his subsequent hunts but this would be the first time he had stepped out of hiding.

"Elliot," Warren's brother replied with a sigh. "How did you find out?"

"Truly," Illian snorted. "You need to credit me with a little more intelligence. I saw the picture Zappa ran the next day. It was the very first time I had ever seen you use artistic license. No Nagas had been 'Massacred With One Bullet!' In fact, I can rightly say that more were being made."

The smile that Elliot flashed was one that could never be imagined on his brother. It was too open and disarming, the sort of smile that invited you to quirk your lips in response as well.

"I couldn't possibly send them a picture of you knocked out and slung over my shoulder."

"Hm. Yes. That would be the sort of thing for the Proper Young Ladies."

Elliot choked on the stew that he had only begun to take a sip of.

"You read that?"

"With a good dash of horror and amusement. I apparently use my rifle in a manner very much not intended for it when it gets too lonesome for me out in the barren desert."

"Thought you only reserved that for your tentacled prey."

"Only when my rifle is not able to satisfy." This was punctuated by a particularly loud slurp of the stew. "Still, I find that the last section of the Young Ladies manages to depict the sinful depravity that I indulge in the best."

Elliot grinned at his stew.

"Tastes good?" Illian asked.

"Tastes just like true grit."

They played a game, the two of them. The rules were simple; find a way to bait Elliot Black away from sketching him under cover and to do it in the quickest amount of time possible while Elliot tried not to notice.

Food was a dependable lure that Illian often used, sitting back and allowing its smell along with his contented sounds to hook Elliot into the open. The more disgusting the target that had been slaughtered for the current dish, the faster the other man lost.

At other times, Illian threw out bits and pieces of conversation: everyday occurrences, things off the top of his head, small questions and stupid questions. The replies he received in return, after much verbal poking and prodding, mostly ranged from grunts to monosyllabic comments, but even these were hard-won and Illian couldn't help but hoard them all.

Illian never asked the one question that mattered though, the one that burned inside of him each time his eyes tracked the fluid sweep of charcoal across paper: Why me?

The drawings were not impersonal commissions completed for want of money. There was something more to it. Illian did not know what he might have done to deserve the attentive gaze, the tiny crease between the brows, the long, elegant fingers lingering carefully over every line.

Elliot Black looked so much like his brother. But steely-eyed Warren could never have shown the same sort of warmth that his brother poured into his work.

That was another topic that they had never mentioned between them. What was it like, growing up with him? Were they reared by desert wolves? Sprung out fully-formed from the loins of a goddess?

They were once questions that had rustled restlessly beneath his skin, but now, Illian found that the same itch existed instead for Elliot to stop sketching. *Swing those grey eyes away from paper to flesh and blood once in a while, why don't you?* he wanted to say.

"Warren Black," Illian began, wiping down his rifle as Elliot sketched unseen. "I used to jerk off to your brother when I was younger. I'd be up in my room--"

His rifle flew out of his hands as a heavy weight crashed into his side, sending him sprawling into the pale sand that White Slumps had been named after.

It was the fastest Elliot had ever lost.

"Shut up," Elliot hissed, his entire face flushed a rather appealing red, all the attention he lavished on sketching now focused entirely on him. "Oh god, shut up. That was not something I needed to know, what is wrong with you?"

"May I continue?"

"No." Elliot looked down at Illian's arched eyebrow. "But that wouldn't stop you, would it?"

"It would not. I'd be up in my room and in my head he would be right where you are now. But with much fewer clothes on."

That quickly sent Elliot scrambling off. Illian shifted and tilted his head to the side, blue eyes steady on the hard, taut line of his back a few paces away.

"I'd be up in bed in the dark all guilty and scared. It is Warren Black, after all. I expected him to come bursting it at any moment to punch out this kid that dared wank off to him."

Elliot's shoulders tensed even more, as of a hunting bow under strain.

"It's always been your brother whenever I take care of my personal needs. Imagine my surprise last night when you popped up instead."

Elliot had whirled around, eyes wide and startled. "Did you just. Did you just admit to--"
"Yes. But you do not have to worry; your virtue was not sullied. I kept trying to bring the fantasy around to a more indecent direction but my mind refused to cooperate. All it had you do was paint me."

Elliot passed a hand wearily over his face. "I don't know if you've noticed but I fulfil that for you every day with pencil."

"Oh no. You were painting *on* me."

"How scandalous." Elliot's tone could have rivaled the desert itself.

"Utterly. What do you think my tortured psyche was trying to tell me?"

"That you're not paying enough attention to your surroundings. Winged Python."

Illian had heard the faint sound of uneven beating wings and was already reaching for his rifle, the fine sand around them lifting up into skirling eddies as the creature came closer. Rising to his feet in one fluid motion, he aimed it so the bullet thudded into flesh when the creature swooped low enough to the ground. Once. Twice.

The complicated loops that the Winged Python curved into as it flew meant that his bullet only found its intended target between the eyes on the third shot.

Has the **TRUE SHOT** that Illian always held **LOST** its aim? Mr A. of A Certain Fine Establishment spills all in this **EXCLUSIVE** interview!

How are you doing on this fine day Sir?

Overcome by crushing disappointment! Oh, the despair that overflows in my heart!

Could you tell us a bit more about your predicament?

Always shoots true, they said, a clean, lethal shot in between the eyes, they said. Well, the Winged Python that Illian Nikado brought in was completely *ruined*. Tell me, how am I going to stay in business if my wares have been riddled by bullets?

- Issue #419 of *Hands Up, Baby!*

Illian shot the Flesh-eating Coyote in the middle of its forehead and pretended that it was Mr A.

"Here," Elliot's voice came to him, stepping out from behind the jagged pile of leaning rocks that the coyote's body had slumped beside. Illian had given up on trying to discover the secret to Elliot's uncanny knowledge of his exact whereabouts. Whatever sandy plain or far-flung outback that Illian found himself in, Elliot was invariably two steps hidden behind him. "I can sense you," he would say solemnly each time, and Illian never could tell whether he was joking or serious.

"What's that?"

"Body paint," Elliot said, tossing the object in his hands over, which turned out to be a plain white tube succinctly pronouncing itself as **Black**. "Thought I could oblige your darkest fantasy for you."

Which was how Illian found himself stripped half naked in the shade of an overhanging ledge in the middle of the South Plains.

He was currently trying very hard not to giggle.

"This-- is not-- very seductive at all," he gasped in between bursts of helpless laughter, jerking when the tip of the brush flicked over a particularly sensitive spot between his shoulder blades.

"It's not my fault you're so ticklish. Now," Elliot's voice dropped to a low warning growl that sent a twinge through him. "Stay still."

It was easier to do so as time passed and his body familiarised itself to the feel of soft bristles tracing patterns over his back. Soon, the urge to laugh passed entirely and Illian gradually felt himself being lulled into supinity. Despite their shadowy location, the stifling heat of the plains still pressed in, and Illian started to wonder about Elliot's hands: the weight of them against the nape of his neck; how his long, graceful fingers could work so steadily and tirelessly. Wondered what it would feel like on him without a paintbrush.

Illian shifted a little, limbs languid while the brush slid again across the same spot that had made him laugh before, only this time it wrung a pleased sigh out of him instead.

"Almost done," the voice behind him gruffly said.

"What did you paint on me?"

"A lucky sigil to aim true."

"I have no need for that," Illian grumbled. "It was only that once and anyway, I do not believe in--" His head shot up. "Something's coming."

Only Elliot's hand pressed down firmly against him prevented him from startling, every muscle in his body now rigidly alert.

"Stop moving. Just a bit more."

Even though he was facing the base of the rough, ochre ledge and was robbed of sight for what lay behind, the sound of those wings, looping and curving in the air, was deadly familiar to him.

"Now," there was the tiniest waver to his voice. "Elliot, *now*."

Elliot Black stepped aside and the rifle Illian whirled around to point in the space he had left revealed the sinuous form of the Winged Python eeling towards them. This time, only one shot rang out.

They both bent over to check its fallen body, the vibrant scales turning dull as its life seeped out, and a perfect red circle stood out in between unseeing eyes.

"See," Elliot's lips curved into that grin which made Illian stare for a beat longer. "It works."

Dear Aunt Agonia,

I have this female sibling named Elli. Not many know about her, but I do, and this means that I am one of the few people that Elli talks to. Which isn't often. Brooding silences are a family trait. I prefer to let my fists do the talking while Elli does the same, except by drawing. I can never fathom this because the fist is clearly mightier than the pencil. I am getting sidetracked wait [unidentifiable smudge]

The problem is that these days he she cannot stop drawing this other gal named Il Lillian. I have commanded her to get off her arse and do something about it but she is

too stubborn to listen to my sage advice. She has this complex y'see. She thinks everyone would rather have me instead.

What do I do to knock some sense into her?

Yours honourably,
Blarren Wack

Dearest Blarren Wack,

Darling, there's never a problem of *l'amour* that a little Heartsease cannot solve. One small pinch is all it takes to bring true feelings to light.

Yours primly,
Aunt Agonia

- *The Society of Proper Young Ladies*, Issue 28

Compared to other plants of a similar nature, the *Viola arvensis*, or Heartsease as it is more commonly known by, has the fine distinction of being a natural aphrodisiac that displays its effects only when the bearer of one's desire is near.

Caution is to be advised with regards to timing should it be inhaled or consumed. If this is not enough to convince, one should only look towards the duel of *Constantine Thorne vs. Adamantine Brer vs. Erei Perseus* and the salacious turn it had undertaken when...

- *Fauna and Flora of Merle Woods*, Edgard Varese

Illian expressed his disapproval in the most eloquent way possible,
"Yeeeurgh."

"Shush. You might attract something unsavoury. And you'll remember, I never asked you to come along."

Illian batted away a vine that had unfurled from above to leave a slimy trail on his cheek behind.

"I never leave a debt unpaid. It's doubled ever since the Winged Python and I intend to settle it in full today."

If only the Merle Woods weren't trying so hard to make him feel unwelcome. The gnarled branches of imposingly huge trees blocked out the sight of the sky, casting everything beneath them in a cool darkness only broken occasionally by a cat's cradle of shifting light over their faces.

He had heard of a condition once called "desert fever", of an aching heat that seeped into your bones and made you yearn, made you long for firm sand crunching beneath and open, blue skies that stretched out as far as the eye could see. Living all his life where the plains were abundant, Illian had only smiled politely at such a concept's existing. Now, something close to it

rolled over him.

"Is this plant truly worth all this?" Illian asked, disconsolately rolling up his sleeves in order to assuage the humidity that pressed in around them.

"I've told you, Kauffman used it for his last masterpiece before he died, and Warren said there was word of it here. Sightings of it are as rare as-- as an ordinary weasel would be."

"Sightings of your brother here are not though. What if he appears?"

"He has other plans today," Elliot assured, brimming with a confidence that almost made Illian feel embarrassed for bringing up such doubts in the first place. *Almost*, because in the next second Elliot's head whipped to the right, eyes narrowing into the distance.

"Oh no." A faint crashing sound, as of someone or something easily levelling anything that stood in its way drifted over to the both of them. "You said he had plans."

"He did, he was supposed to be off making matches, I--"

The copse of trees surrounding them disintegrated into a punched-through doorway to welcome one Warren Black, the wooden bark that splintered into the air ringing his head like a crown for an instant. Eyes brimming divine vengeance, Warren Black bellowed the strangest battle cry Illian had ever heard--

"Ye dunderheads, yer going the wrong way!"

-- before charging straight at them.

The bullet that he shot winked out of existence from its straight path, swallowed in a huge fist before the fingers that unfurled revealed it as dust. Warren's own course remained undeterred.

Warren's punches had no need to make contact with flesh to inflict damage. The sheer force that uncoiled from them when his fist landed on the ground was enough to fell several trees ahead. There was nothing Illian could do then but leap, tumble and dodge away, with Elliot keeping pace beside him while the relentless blows Warren threw their way drove them deeper into the woods. Whereas the desert had embraced them, Merle did so in a manner reminiscent of a Regal Naga squeezing the life out of a Flesh-eating Coyote. The Woods formed a narrow tunnel of outstretched branches snatching and snagging against their clothes in an attempt to halt progress, their feet narrowly dodging the protruding vines that lay in wait for one small misstep.

He found that his fatigue was rising, the trees beginning to blend into one long blur. The iron grip of his focus faltered, just *slightly*, and that was when Illian found himself falling.

The ground rushed up to meet him. He was already twisting his body to make sure he landed safely on his back, rifle instinctively whipping up and out, the cool metal beneath his hands a comfort even if the bullets it contained were useless against Warren Black.

His heart trying to crash out of his ribs, Illian's fingers tightened on the trigger as Warren finally loomed into view -- only for his grip to ease, his rifle wobbling slightly in confusion, when the man continued running right past him.

There was the thudding sound of body's impacting upon another body, a short yelp followed by the crunching and crackling sound of detritus underfoot supporting the descent of one of them.

By the time Illian had scrambled up to his feet, there was no sign of Warren Black. Or his brother.

"Elliot?" he called out as he ran towards where the sounds had originated from, only to skid to a stop when the edges of his boots met a small grassy incline.

Elliot was at the bottom, whole and unharmed except for a large quantity of yellow thistles that had settled all over his hair and body from the patch of flowers that had cushioned

his fall. He was coughing irritably, hands trying to flick the thistles off.

"You look like the soft toy my cousin Janie won from the spring fair," Illian announced, carefully sliding down to where Elliot stood. His hands itched to pet away the fluff and he gave in to the urge, fingers tentatively reaching out. This close, Illian could see just how widely blown Elliot's pupils were, only a thin ring of grey eclipsing them, and how his chest was heaving, the sound of his breathing harsh in the quiet that had blanketed the forest after Warren's departure.

Elliot physically recoiled at Illian's touch, leaping up and almost stumbling in his haste to get away.

"You need to--to stay back," the edges of his voice fraying with near panic. Illian's brows down into a frown. "Leave me here and-- Get to town. You're bleeding."

"What?" Illian ran a cursory hand over his face, grazing over a slight bump and held up fingers dark with blood in the dim light. "It's nothing. Only a scratch. *You* need to get to town. I'm not the one who has been poisoned, come here."

Illian tried to inject as much urgency as he could into the tone of his voice, thrusting his hand out when Elliot did nothing but stand there, his gaze fixed and unblinking on the red-tipped fingers held towards him. He could not identify the flowers that had poisoned his rogue illustrator, but they were bound to be lethal if paralysis was setting in at such an early stage. If he was sure of one thing, it was this: He would get Elliot back to town if it was the last thing he did, even if he had to drag the man every step of the way.

Illian could feel the shudder that ran through the entire length of Elliot's body when he stepped forward to grip him firmly by the arm.

The next thing he knew, the world was whirling past him and there was the familiar feel of loamy ground against his back once again.

There was heat all around him: warmth coming off Elliot's crouched body in waves, his hot breath washing over his face; stifling heat that pressed in all around even as he felt Elliot holding himself away with a will that sent fine tremors through his body, the hands framing Illian's face clenched into the dirt.

"Illian," Elliot gritted out, his voice thick with need. This was not the work of any poison that he knew of.

Because it never had been.

"It's Heartsease," he breathed out in reply. "Oh dear."

Elliot's forehead thudded to the ground beside him, repeating his name again, drawing it out into a near-sob.

"Elliot, listen, listen to me."

If he could, he would have brushed a reassuring hand down Elliot's back. Instead, he attempted to get his voice to convey the motion for him.

"That patch of flowers you fell into? It helps to bring out suppressed desires. The only way you can flush it out of your system is by," Illian cycled through every word that he knew before deciding to let bluntness win. "Fucking."

The word tugged a laugh out from Elliot.

"Oh god. This is turning out like something right out of a Zeinhardt epic."

"Not really. It needs a little bit more... 'Jab your multicolored bayonet of passion into me!'"

"And an evil twin brother?"

It was meant to be in jest, maybe, but there was a look in his eyes that mirrored what Illian had once seen out in White Slumps, when he had first mentioned Warren Black out loud.

Illian had refrained himself from touching Elliot, wanted to let him make the first move. To make it clear that choice was not robbed away even with Heartsease lapping desire over him. Now, he entangled his hands into blond hair and hissed,

"Look you clueless fool. Haven't I told you before? It's not your brother's name on my lips when I only have my hand and rifle for company. Now, would you kindly please shut up and take me?"

It should have led to clothes being ripped off, tongues sliding sinuously around each other, hands and mouths adeptly roaming over silky skin before peaking into white, blinding pleasure.

What happened instead was a button flying into his face when Elliot tore his shirt apart. The look Illian had given caused Elliot to give a soft huff of laughter. In their haste to kiss after, Elliot as an apology and Illian to brush off his embarrassment, their teeth clacked together with enough force to draw blood.

With a wince and exasperation twinned on each other's faces, they tried again. Elliot licked off the blood from the lower swell of his lips, a tongue flicking over to soothe the cut there before sliding in. Elliot was too careful, his tongue only making a hesitant swipe before trying to retreat, and Illian had to press back, giving a small, unsatisfied moan to encourage Elliot into thrusting it roughly back in.

Kissing like teenagers on the backseat of a wagon on Spring's Eve, they were all sloppy and eager, but from the groan welling up from Illian's throat and the possessive hand cupping his cheek, an objective observer could tell that neither would have traded it for anything more deliberate.

Clothes were slowly discarded as they wound together, no buttons making painful detours this time, and Illian finally found out what Elliot's hand against his bare skin felt like. Calluses scraped pleasingly against skin, fingers attentively mapped over every dip and contour when they would only have sketched those same lines out before.

Those fingers were avoiding the one area that mattered, though; Elliot teasingly ran them over the sharp jut of his hipbone, tracing down to the crease of his knees and back out to his thighs again but never going anywhere near his cock. Frustrated, Illian rolled his hips up, smirking when Elliot gave a low growl.

"I would very much like to fuck you," Elliot murmured into his ear. Illian showed his willing acquiescence by letting his legs spread wider.

There was nothing suitable at hand except for gun oil and even after having coated a liberal amount onto his fingers, the first one came too sudden and too much. Illian jerked, flinching, receiving soft apologies mouthed into his skin when Elliot saw his discomfort. "Slower, go slower," and the digit pressed back in again, following his command with painstaking care; each finger that followed the first taking their own sweet time to stretch and stroke till Illian was cursing Elliot out for being a tease.

"But you told me to go slow," Elliot said blandly, an arm across Illian's stomach to prevent him from rising up. "I'm learning that patience is golden."

"You can stuff all that patience up your ass," Illian snarled.

"I believe," Elliot continued, a saint's patience pouring from out every line of his body, "it should be the other way around."

Even with all the preparation, Elliot was of a more than considerable size. The Proper Young Ladies would have heartily approved. This meant that there was not much time to adjust

before he drove in. Still, there was pleasure to be found in the act from the desperate sounds Elliot was making, the play of skin over muscle each time he surged forward, the look of complete and utter abandon that was exposed on his face. And Illian wanted nothing more than to lose himself in it; he *did*, but found himself rather distracted by the rock digging into his back and the unidentifiable bug crawling up his shoulder.

At this point, with the wrecked state Elliot was in and all the helpless moans he was making, Illian had no wish to interrupt with a *you're gorgeous like this and I don't want you to stop but maybe, just maybe, could we move a little bit to the right?*.

He was fully prepared to dig his fingers in and bear the twinge lancing up the base of his spine with every thrust when Elliot shifted and struck something inside him that had him keening long and low in return, back arching and fingers raking down to leave red stripes behind.

"Found it," Elliot panted, the corner of his lips twitching up. "Did you think you were going to make a martyr of yourself for me?"

Elliot proceeded to find that spot again and again, sparking fire through his bones and he was all but sobbing by then, all thoughts as to uncomfortable pointy rocks or creepy crawlies disappearing. Heck, there could be a weasel gnawing off his arm right now and he wouldn't have noticed. All that mattered for Illian was to lock his ankles and dig it into the small of Elliot's back, urging him on harder, deeper, in, out, in, *in* and the other was spilling into him with a cry.

When Illian's vision cleared, he found that Elliot had already hardened again inside him, a sheepish look on his face.

"Again?"

The flush that travelled all the way down to his chest answered for Illian.

Reader's Poll: Results for Favourite Artwork
Winner: Heartsease, Which I By Hunting, *E.B.*

- *The Society of Proper Young Ladies*, Issue 30

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/217557.html>

Fraternization

by Jestana

Just as Carl started the computer analyzing evidence, James entered the lab. Carl took note of the wrinkled suit, rumpled black hair, and new lines of stress and exhaustion around James' eyes and mouth. He remained quiet as James slumped into a chair. "We found her. She's alive."

"I'm glad to hear it," Carl answered, for more than one reason. He was always glad when the victims survived, but he was also glad because it meant James wouldn't be pushing himself and his team like he had been these past forty-eight hours. "What about suspects?"

The computer made a sound to let Carl know it was finished with the analysis and he began skimming through the information even as he listened to James. "We got one, but the other one escaped, and he's apparently the brains behind the operation. We're hoping the one we have will make a deal."

Before Carl could respond, the captain entered, frowning as he took in James. "Go home, Richards. You need sleep."

"We still have a suspect to catch," James objected, sitting up to gaze back at the captain.

Carl noticed that the captain's suit was just as wrinkled as James', but he'd obviously been able to take a catnap or something because he looked awake and his hair had been combed recently. "You won't have anything to go until Torrence--" he gestured at Carl, who smiled faintly "--and the other techs finish going over the evidence for you."

James opened his mouth to protest and Carl jumped into the conversation. He knew James wouldn't be able to sleep until they'd caught the other suspect, but he was practically dead on his feet and would be more of a hindrance than a help at this point. "He's right, James. Go home and rest. We'll let you know if we find anything."

"Fine." Sighing deeply, James heaved himself to his feet and stumbled towards the door.

"Maybe you should take him home, Torrence," the captain suggested when James nearly walked right into the doorjamb. "Make sure he gets there safely and stays there."

"Yes, Sir." Nodding, Carl saved what he'd been working on and took James' arm to guide him from the lab to the parking garage. Alone in the car, he addressed James in a playfully accusing voice. "You're not *that* tired, James."

Grinning as he sat back in his seat, his lover replied, "No, but I don't hear you complaining."

"Because he told me to make sure you stay at home," Carl smirked as he drove the familiar route to the condo they shared. "He didn't say *how* I was supposed to do that."

Brown eyes closed, James remarked, "I can tell by your voice that you have some *ideas*."

"Mm-hmm." Carl turned onto their street. Pulling into the driveway, he nudged James. "We're home. Get your gorgeous ass into the shower."

He was pretty sure James' expression was a pout, though he knew James would deny it if asked. "I thought you were going to make sure I stay home?"

"Shower first. You stink." Carl wrinkled his nose as he climbed out of the car.

Climbing out as well, James gave him a wounded look. "I thought you liked the way I smell?"

"Not when you smell like you've been dumpster-diving," Carl retorted, unlocking the

door, and then standing back so James could enter first. "I thought you had your minions do that now."

Shedding his clothes as he headed to the master bedroom and attached bath, James replied, "Not when they don't know what to look for."

Scooping up the discarded clothes, Carl carried them to the laundry room to wash later. Hearing the shower start, Carl began shedding his clothes as he headed to the master bedroom. Dumping them in the laundry hamper, he slipped into the bathroom as well. He took a moment to enjoy the way the steam from the shower enveloped him as he closed the door behind him.

James was only a vague shape through the frosted glass of the shower stall. Sliding it open, he carefully stepped inside and slid the door closed. James was a gorgeous sight: tall and broad-shouldered, stood facing the showerhead. His head was bent under the spray, water plastering black hair to his skull. Muscular arms were held up, big hands braced on the tile wall. The broad shoulders tapered into a trim waist and hips, which then translated into a gorgeous tight ass and long muscular legs. At the moment, those very legs were spread.

Pleased that his lover had understood his intentions without needing them spelled out, Carl grabbed the waterproof lube from its shelf and squeezed a generous amount onto his long, slender fingers. James stiffened briefly when he carefully slid one finger in, but relaxed with a sigh the next moment. He took his time preparing his lover, slowly adding fingers until he was using all four digits. Usually, James fucked Carl, but there were times when his lover needed this, needed to give up control and this was obviously one of those times.

By the time he decided James was prepared enough, his lover was shaking with a combination of arousal and restraining the impulse to turn and take over. Withdrawing his fingers, Carl took a moment to slick his hard and aching cock before positioning himself at James' entrance. Resting his hands on the trim hips, he pressed into the tight channel, letting out a hiss of pleasure at the heat that surrounded him. He didn't exactly *miss* this, but it sure felt amazing whenever he did fuck James.

He held still for several moments to keep from exploding then and there. Once he was sure he was going to last, Carl slowly pulled out, and then pressed back in, angling his hips so the head of his cock passed over James' prostate. It took a couple slow thrusts to find the right angle. When he did, James practically convulsed with a wordless cry, his channel tightening spasmodically around Carl's cock. He gritted his teeth as he focused on holding back his climax. This was for James more than him, so he should come first.

After that, Carl slowly sped up the tempo of his thrusts until he was pounding into James' ass, holding his hips so tightly that there'd be bruises there later. James pressed back into the thrusts, babbling nonsensical words as the pleasure short-circuited his brain. About the only coherent words he managed were variations of 'yes', 'more', 'please', and 'Carl'. For his own part, Carl's brain had mostly shut down as well. All he could focus on was how amazing this felt, how tight James was, and how much longer they could last.

Finally, James pressed his ass back into Carl's thrusts and went still for a brief moment before coming with another cry: "*Carl!*"

The rhythmic tightening of James' ass around his cock was too much. Carl slammed into him one last time as his own climax overwhelmed him: "*James!*"

They remained still for some time, still joined, as they savored the afterglow. It lasted for a while, because a residual tremor of pleasure would shake one, setting off a sympathetic tremor in the other. Finally, reluctantly, Carl pulled out of James, to a sound of loss from the latter. He stroked James' back soothingly, reaching for the washcloth to clean both of them up. From

previous experience, Carl knew James would be all but useless until he'd had some sleep, which was the idea behind this. It was up to him to turn off the water, get them out of the shower, dried off, and into bed.

He did just that, reaching around James to turn off the water, then maneuvering him out of the stall and onto the bath mat. Grabbing the towels, he dried them both off, with some assistance from James. Hanging the towels back up, he led James into the bedroom and over to the bed, where he'd already pulled the covers back on his way to the bathroom. With a nudge from Carl, James practically fell onto the bed. Shaking his head, Carl managed to shift James around until his head was on the pillows.

Once he was situated, Carl turned off the lights and reluctantly started to get dressed. Then his cell phone beeped to tell him he had a text message. Opening it up, he smiled at the message from Melissa, one of the other techs: **Talked Cap into letting you stay with Jim. Sleep well.** Glad for that, he removed the boxers he'd pulled on and crawled under the covers with James. The moment he sensed Carl's presence beside him, James wrapped himself around the slender man, nuzzling his nose into the thick brown hair at Carl's temple. Smiling wryly, Carl made sure the alarm clock was set and finally let himself relax, snuggling into the warmth of James' larger body as he drifted off to sleep.

It seemed as if he'd just closed his eyes when he woke to the feel of James' lips on his in a sweet kiss. Carl responded with a sigh of pleasure. When James pulled back, Carl made a soft sound of disappointment, wishing his lover had deepened the kiss instead of ending it, and opened his eyes. James was gazing at him with tenderness in his brown eyes. Smiling, Carl stroked his stubbled cheek. "Morning."

"H'lo," James replied, turning his head to kiss Carl's palm.

"Feeling better now?" he asked, his skin tingling.

"Mostly," James admitted, one hand slowly smoothing up and down Carl's spine.

"Let me guess: you'll feel better once we've caught the other suspect." Carl smiled gently, the hand on James' cheek sliding down to rest over his heart.

"Yeah." His lover nodded, black hair falling into his eyes with the gesture, hiding the hardness that had come into them at the thought of the man who'd be willing to kidnap a little girl. "I want to make him pay for what he put her and her family through."

"I know." Carl kissed him lightly and softly, reassuring him. "And he will."

"Why aren't you at the precinct?" James frowned as it suddenly occurred to him that Carl shouldn't be there.

"It pays to have a friend who can talk the cap into almost anything." Carl grinned, pressing kisses along James' collarbone.

James moaned and tilted his head back. "Mel?"

Carl nodded, nipping playfully. "Melissa."

Both of them groaned when James' phone rang. Carl reluctantly let James go so he could reach over and pick it up. Looking at the screen, he flipped it open. "Richards." He listened for a few moments. "Good. I'll be there in ten." He paused and frowned. "No need, Janice. I can get myself there." He rolled his eyes. "I'll see you at the precinct."

He closed the phone and they started to get up. "She doesn't take a hint, does she?"

"Hope springs eternal, I guess," James answered with a sigh as they quickly dressed in clean clothes and combed their hair.

Going into the kitchen once he was dressed, Carl poured coffee into two travel mugs. Adding sugar to one and creamer to the other, he carried them to the entryway, where James

waited. Handing the one with sugar to his lover, they exited the condo together and headed to work.

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/217274.html>

I Survived a Deadly Camping Trip with an Australian Park Ranger

by Shikkoku no Suzu (漆黒のスズ)

In Simon Carroway's view, there were three things that were particularly wrong with his current situation.

First, he was stuck up a gumtree and there was a protuberant piece of branch sticking into his arse; second, there were five dingoes sitting under the tree, muzzles upturned as if they expected him to just drop into their waiting jaws; and third, he had no mobile phone reception.

"Hungry, are you?" he called down at them. "Well, I've got news for you. Fuck the lot of you; I can sit up here all day."

One of the dingoes stuck its tongue out of the side of its mouth and panted.

"Tits," muttered Simon, sidling along the branch until he could lean against the smooth white trunk. He shook his mobile phone and held it out in front of him, but the notification bar maintained obstinately that there was no coverage to be found.

He wasn't a complete idiot, he had a VHF radio in his bag, but it was in his tent, which was pitched about five metres away, and might as well have been in Madagascar for all the use it was.

Eventually the dingoes would go looking for food somewhere else, Simon assumed. How they could even be hungry when they had already ransacked the campsite and eaten everything that wasn't sealed into a tin, he couldn't fathom. Perhaps they suspected he was in possession of a concealed baby and thought it might make a nice dessert.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he turned the collar of his shirt up to protect the back of his neck from the sun he could feel glaring down at him. "At least it's not cold," he muttered to himself.

When Simon had convinced his editor to let him take a fortnight to tour Australia and write a piece about one of the only countries in the world to dodge the GFC he had thought it would be a great opportunity to escape the grey, dreary English winter and enjoy some sunshine.

Well, he was enjoying the bloody sunshine all right. He hunched his shoulders, trying to shelter the tips of his ears, which were beginning to feel distinctly pink. Sunscreen and insect repellent: two more things he had conscientiously packed and then neglected to take with him in his headlong flight up the nearest tree. He certainly deserved the fucking medal for preparedness.

How long had he been up here? He considered his phone. At least two hours. There was no-one else in the campsite, and he hadn't seen anyone go past. How was it that in London you couldn't throw a rock without hearing, "Oi, mate, watch out!", but in their own country Aussies were apparently nocturnal, invisible, and rare?

When he had told his friend Melinda that he was going to Australia and asked for recommendations of things to see, she had come back to him with a list of cafes and galleries he should visit in Melbourne. "Oh, don't buy into the cliché, Sy," she said. "Red dirt and kangaroos: Australia isn't like that. Most Aussies, including yours truly, grew up in cities, and there is a really interesting urban culture. Why don't you write about that?"

He'd told her that there was no way he could write an article about Australia without at least some of the clichés, and she'd thrown up her hands and said, "Poms. Fuck the lot of you." Then they'd drunk their way through a six pack of very nice beer from a boutique brewery outside Melbourne, which Melinda had presented as the closing statement in her case.

The search for the Australian cliché had brought him here, to a deserted campsite in a national park a few hours outside Sydney, which, according to the internet, contained some stunning granite formations of immense cultural significance.

His stomach rumbled. "You there," he called to the friendliest looking dingo, which was flopped down on its side grinning up at him, "what say you bring me that tin of baked beans, I'll open it, and we can share?"

"Blimey, what're you doing up there?" drawled a male voice with vowels as wide as the Nullarbor Desert.

Simon sat up straight and looked around. Emerging from the direction of the road was a weathered man in khaki, heavy workmen's boots, a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. He was as tanned as a nut.

"Oh, thank goodness," said Simon. "Be careful, they're vicious."

The stranger, revealing blinding white teeth framed by lips almost the same colour as his skin. "Those fellows? Nah."

"They're dingoes," said Simon severely, channelling his Cambridge professor father. "They eat babies, and, one assumes, other-sized humans."

"They'd like you to think they are. Watch this." A piercing whistle emerged from the stranger, and the creatures pricked up their ears. The man reached down and picked up a long stick, then took two strides forward and bowled it into the undergrowth on the far side of Simon's tree. In a flash, the dogs were gone, and Simon was staring, agog at his rescuer.

"You have got to be joking."

"There's some dingo in there somewhere, but I reckon they're mutts putting on airs. Lots of bitzas in these parts -- you know, dogs with bitza this and bitza that in their genes. They probably thought you were an oversized cockatoo with all that yellow hair. Now, let's see about getting you down."

Simon shimmied down the tree trunk and leaned his back against the it. He said in his best Queen's English, "Might I know your -- ouch!" There had been a sudden, sharp pain in his left index finger, which had been pressed against a loose piece of bark.

The man stepped up and pulled Simon's hand over to examine it. "Looks like a red back to me." He went over to look at the branch Simon had had his hand on. "Yup. Whatcha doin' all the way up here, missy?"

"What?"

"You just got chomped by a red back spider. Don't worry, it won't kill ya, just hurt like buggery for a day or so. You're bloody lucky: this is funnel web territory. Now there's a spider you don't want to meet in a dark alley. You might be feeling a bit crook soon though, so you better come back to the station with me quick smart for an ice pack, then I'll drive you to the hospital. Most people brush through all right, but occasionally those bites can go nasty, and I reckon out here it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Who... are you?" said Simon, retrieving his hand.

"Park Ranger. Bluey Carmichael. Nice to meet ya."

"Is Bluey really your name?" Simon examined his finger. As that sudden, sharp pain faded, he could hardly even identify the bite mark. Perhaps it was just a splinter.

"Nah, they just call me that cos I got red hair," said Bluey, taking off his hat to reveal a tangled russet mane escaping from a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"Oh, I see," said Simon. He paused. "My name is Simon Carroway. I'm a journalist."

"And here I thought you were with animal control," said Bluey. "Pommy?"

"I'm from London," Simon replied stiffly.

"Don't get on your high horse, mate," said Bluey. "Hop along, my ute's just down the road. No point whistling an ambo all the way up here, so I'll just drive you to the hospital."

"How far is that?"

"Not far; coupla hours."

Simon hesitated. "What about my possessions?"

"She'll be right, just grab anything you need, lock the rest in your car, and I'll get it this arvo and keep it safe and sound for ya."

Grumbling but overborne by this powerful personality, Simon was swept into the passenger seat of a battered, mud-covered pickup truck with the Forests New South Wales logo on the side.

By the time they had completed the ten minute drive to the ranger station, Simon was studying his hand in fascination. There was a raised white lump surrounded by a circle of blanched skin and outside that a red rash was spreading down his finger. His hand was starting to swell, and a thin line of pain was being drawn up his arm.

Bluey sat Simon down on a wooden chair, took his hand and examined it. Simon studied his face. Dark coppery hair fell in front of his eyes, bleached lighter at the ends, just below his shoulders. His face was a uniform tan, except for a light patch around his eyes made by sunglasses that made him look like some strange Australian species of panda. Through the tan of his forearms, a haze of freckles were visible, and the vee of his shirt revealed wiry chest hair. Simon wondered whether Bluey's tan extended under all that practical khaki.

Making a clicking noise, Bluey went and got an ice pack from the freezer. He paused and studied Simon, then got a bucket out of the cupboard.

"What's that for?" said Simon, his voice sounding thready even to him.

"You'll see, mate," said Bluey. He picked up a couple of towels, then helped Simon up. "You just keep that arm still as you can, all right? And keep the ice on it; it'll help."

Simon leaned against Bluey's warm side, closed his eyes, and nodded. They made their way out to the truck and Bluey helped Simon buckle in.

"Now, don't be shy about using that bucket," said Bluey as he climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. Simon nodded pathetically, all his previous irritation with his ridiculous rescuer replaced by heartfelt gratitude.

Every bump hurt as they rattled down the dirt road to the highway. Bluey cast Simon several worried looks, and once reached over to pat him on the shoulder. "Buck up, kiddo," he said, "smoother sailing from here on."

"I sincerely hope so," said Simon in a strained voice, pressing his un-bitten fist to his abdomen, which was cramping around itself.

After half an hour of increasingly strained silence, Simon said, "Stop the car, please."

Giving him a startled glance, Bluey pulled onto the shoulder and Simon stumbled out into the undergrowth. When he returned, Bluey said, "That's what the bucket was for, yanno."

"No, it wasn't," said Simon calmly. Bluey made that clicking noise, somehow imbuing it with sympathy, and started the truck again.

By the time they reached the little regional hospital, Simon was propped up against the door, unable to decide which part of him hurt more. He tumbled out of the cabin into Bluey's arms, and had to be carried, head lolling, into the little emergency room. The triage nurse said, "Hello Bluey, What's this?"

"Pommy tourist. Reddy bite, I'd say; I eyeballed the culprit. Up in the park."

This was apparently enough for the nurse, who whistled and gestured Bluey towards an empty bed. Simon took her hand and said, "I'm a journalist, madam, not a tourist."

"Course you are, dearie," she said.

Simon half-listened as the doctor and nurse conferred, then the doctor came over and said, "Mr Carroway, you've been bitten by a red back spider. It isn't life threatening, but as you are having quite a bad reaction, we are going to give you the antivenin and keep you in overnight. Mr Carmichael has gone, but he said he would pick you up in the morning and take you back to your car."

"Thank you, doctor," mumbled Simon.

The antivenin brought about a blessed remission from his suffering, and apart from some rather lurid dreams, he awoke feeling sore and sunburnt, but not much else.

Bluey arrived, resplendent in khaki, covered in dirt, with his sunglasses pushed into his hair and his hat, which Simon now understood was called an akubra, in one hand.

"G'day, how ya feeling?" he asked, swinging Simon's bag onto his shoulder as they walked back to the ute.

"Much better, thank you," said Simon. "And thank you for looking after me yesterday."

"No worries," said Bluey. "Let's get you back to your car, then." They drove in silence for a while, then Bluey said, "So, journo, hey? Whatcha doing in the arse end of the world?"

"Researching an article; I'm writing about how Australia survived the GFC. The Global Financial Crisis."

"Fair dinkum?" Bluey sounded only mildly interested. "So what the bloody hell you doing out here?"

Simon winced. "I, uh. Research. How long have you been a ranger?"

"Oh, since the bunyip left the billabong, at least," said Bluey, tipping his hat back with one hand and scratching his forehead.

"And might I ask how long that it?" inquired Simon politely.

Bluey tilted his head. "Ten years or so, I reckon." He took his sunglasses off and flicked Simon a quick glance. "So, dingoes and red backs. Have you met any of our other native fauna?"

"As in... a crocodile? No, not yet. I saw some kangaroos. They didn't try to kill me; at the time I don't think I appreciated how unusual that is among Australian wildlife."

"Seen a drop bear?" Before Simon could reply, Bluey shook his head and answered himself: "No, 'course not. No-one living's seen a drop bear. Deadliest animals in the southern hemisphere."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"First documented drop bear sighting was near here, actually. Bloke came with one of those old cameras in the 1850s. They never found him, but they found the camera sure enough, and when they developed it all they could see was a creature like a giant koala, but with claws as long as your finger, and fangs dripping with blood."

"Now I'm sure you're pulling my leg," said Simon, leaning back against the seat.

"Nah, mate, dead set, you should use that in your article."

"Mhmm," said Simon.

"So what're your plans after this?"

What were his plans? Simon cast his eyes up, mentally rifling through his itinerary. "Well, I have to be back in Sydney on Sunday, then I'm flying to Melbourne for a few

days, then up to Cairns, then I fly back to London Monday next week."

"Crikey, you know how to take it slow and enjoy the sights." Bluey flexed his fingers on the steering wheel. "So what're you going to do until Sunday?"

"Well, I was going to get a hotel room in town and start working on my article." Simon hesitated. "I thought, with your consent, I might take a photo of you to include in it. Would that be all right?"

Bluey clicked his tongue against his cheek. "What, so you can stick it up alongside some porkies about how wild and dangerous Oz is? Have you been up to the rocks yet?"

"No..." Simon tilted his head and considered Bluey's profile. Simon guessed he was in his mid-thirties, although he had a Puckish quality, and it would not have been entirely surprising if he turned out to be three hundred. Simon felt his heart thump a little harder.

"Well you can't go back to the big smoke without seeing the rocks."

Simon winced. "I think I've probably seen enough Australian nature for my article."

"I'll make ya a deal. Stick around for two more days, I'll show you around the gap, and then I'll let you take a pic of me for your story." Bluey pushed his sunglasses down his nose, and pinned Simon with his light blue eyes.

Simon looked down at his lap, stifling a ridiculous smile. Melinda was going to murder him when she saw the story. Half-unbelieving at himself, he said, "It's a deal, thank you."

Very much against his will, Simon had reluctantly agreed to continue the camping experience. He sat around the ranger station, and in the midafternoon Bluey announced that he was off the clock and they could get going.

"What about the park?"

"There's a ranger station in town," said Bluey, "and my mate Jack is on duty up here tomorrow. We've only got some hikers registered in the park this week. Not all that many come out this far cos there's a coupla bigger parks closer to Sydney. You were in the least popular campground too," he added. "Dunno how the bloody hell you found it."

"I Googled it," mumbled Simon.

They left Simon's car behind the station and struck off up the hill in the ute, driving until the sun was brushing the horizon and they reached a cleared site. "We'll pitch here," said Bluey. "Perks of being with a ranger; ordinary fellas have to stick to the campgrounds."

Simon thought without fondness of the deserted campground he had stayed in two nights earlier. "Are there any dingoes around here?"

"Course there are," said Bluey, more Puckish than ever, "but they'll leave us alone."

They pitched the tents and Bluey got a campfire going. "Tea?" he said.

"Oh, yes please." They sat opposite each other while the water boiled, and then Bluey served hot water into two plastic camping mugs and plopped in teabags. He reached behind him and produced a hip flask, liberally fortifying his mug while Simon watched him in astonishment.

"Bundy?" said Bluey, holding it out.

"Er," said Simon.

"Don't like rum? More of a whiskey man?"

"No, rum is fine," said Simon, and accepted the mug. He blew over the lip, disturbing the steam rising from the drink.

"So, what's your story?" said Bluey.

"Not much to tell: grew up in England, father a professor, mother a doctor. Studied at

City University London. You?"

"Oh, I grew up around here." Bluey sipped his tea and smacked his lips. In the firelight, the pale skin around his eyes seemed to glow. Simon sighed. "I went to Sydney for uni, but it didn't stick, so I came back here, took over my grandpa's property, and been here ever since."

"Why didn't you finish your degree?"

"Coupla reasons." Bluey looked into the fire, cradling his mug loosely in both hands. "I really only went cos my boyfriend and I wanted to try living together and not sneaking around under our parents' noses. Then we broke up and my grandpa died, and I wasn't all that keen on uni anyway, so I dropped out and came back here." He shrugged. "Finished my degree by correspondence a coupla years ago though."

Simon had only processed the beginning of this speech. "So you're..."

Bluey looked at him across the fire. "Gay, yeah. What, you thought a rugged, manly bloke like me should be chasin' the sheilas?"

"No, it's just. Well. I, er." Simon struggled to force the words out around his heart, which seemed to be trying to force its way into his windpipe. "I'm gay too."

A smile broke across Bluey's face. "Well stone the crows," he said.

Feeling heat climb up his neck, Simon rolled his shoulders and asked, "Does it ever cool down?" The air around them was still, warm and damp.

"Nah, not in the summer." Bluey shrugged, still eyeing Simon with a mixture of appraisal and amusement. "You look like you got a bit burnt the other day."

"Yes, I think so," said Simon. "This English skin of mine burns if the sun so much as peeps at it."

"Shows a blush too, doesn't it?"

Simon tucked his chin into his chest and stared, mortified, at the firelight reflected in his tea.

"Cheer up, only teasing." Bluey stood up from the fire and went to the truck, rummaging in his pack until he pulled out a packet of pasta and some tinned spaghetti sauce. "Dinner?"

It was some time before Simon got to sleep. He lay in his sleeping bag with his head towards the tent flap, trying to catch whatever cool air might make its way through the fly screen. He was slightly befuzzed from the spiked tea, and the knowledge that Bluey was gay awoke in him the feelings he had been determinedly ignoring since he had been carried into the hospital. Although all he could really recall was the awful pain of the spider bite, he imagined Bluey's muscled chest and strong arms encircling him, resting his head against Bluey's khaki-clad shoulder.

Bloody hell. When had he developed a damsel-in-distress complex? He generally went for men in their late twenties, like him, who had artistically mussed hair and wore skinny jeans, not sweaty bushmen with ridiculous tan lines and vowels you could drive a lorry through.

He rolled over in his sleeping bag and put his arm over his head. He could hear Bluey rustling around in his own tent. Why did they bring two tents anyway? What a daft idea. Simon's tent was easily big enough for two.

Just because he's gay doesn't mean he likes you, Simon told himself.

He had drifted off to sleep, lying on his stomach, when he was woken by a hissing noise. He tried to turn over and felt something on the sleeping bag, near his leg, which hissed again. He lay very still.

There was a snake in his tent. *Breathe slowly*, he told himself. *Stay calm. Oh Jesus fucking Christ*. The snake was a coiled lump near his feet, which meant it had already slithered past his head to get into the tent.

His breathing sped up until he knew he was hyperventilating. He was going to die.

The next time the snake stopped hissing at him, he reached forward and undid the zip on the fly screen. The hissing started again, and he froze. Could he get bitten through a sleeping bag? When it stopped, and he unzipped enough of the screen that he could slide out of the sleeping bag, out of the tent, and onto the dirt. Almost sobbing with relief, he turned and zipped the flyscreen, although it left the telltale gap at the bottom which was where the snake must have got in. Which meant it had passed within a handspan of his eyes.

His breathing peaked and merged with the strangled sobbing noise. He pulled himself up onto shaking legs and staggered over to Bluey's tent.

"Bluey," he said. "I'm dreadfully sorry to wake you, but there is a snake in my tent."

He heard a rustle and then a torch flicked on and shone into his face. "That right?" said Bluey. "Give us a squiz."

He climbed out of the tent and stood, hair askew, in his boxer shorts. Simon was in no state to appreciate the view. "It was sitting on my feet," he said. "There was a fucking snake sitting on my feet hissing at me. Jesus bloody arse buggery Christ. I almost died."

"Steady on, mate, you'll make the cockatiels blush," said Bluey. "Not all snakes'll kill ya." He shone the torch into Simon's tent and said, "Ah, now that's your common death adder."

Simon's voice climbed to new heights. "*Common death adder?* There is a *common death adder* in my tent? Which was this--" he held up his index fingers about ten inches apart "--close to my face?"

"Yeah, I was worried it was a tiger snake."

Taking a couple of deep breaths, Simon said, "So the *common death adder* is not, in fact, *deathly?*"

"Oh yeah." Bluey scratched his stomach. "It'll give you a nasty bite, all right. But the tiger snake is worse, and we're pretty close to a creek, which is their habitat."

"Fucking hell."

Bluey smiled at him and said fondly, "Calm down, you galah. You can kip in my tent tonight. Hold this." He gave Simon the torch and went over to the snake-infested tent. "Shine it this way." Opening the screen, he reached in and snagged the edge of the sleeping bag, tugging it out, ignoring the snake's outraged hissing.

Once the sleeping bag was free, Bluey still leaning into the tent, said, "There you go, tent's all yours, but I'll leave the door open so you can pop out when you're finished with it."

He handed the sleeping bag to Simon, who held it gingerly away from himself. "What if it just follows us into your tent?" he said.

"What, you think it's got a crush on you?" said Bluey with a cackle. "No worries, we'll zip it up good, and I'll sleep nearest the flap it to protect your virtue."

They climbed into Bluey's tent. It wasn't as big as Simon's, and as Simon wiggled into his sleeping bag he realised that they would be sleeping practically pressed up against each other. Bluey zipped both the fly screen and waterproof outer flap, then settled into his sleeping bag. "All right and tight?"

Lying on his side, his back to Bluey's, which seemed to be radiating heat, Simon nodded.

When Simon awoke, he was alone in the tent. Rubbing his scalp, he climbed out and discovered Bluey standing next to the ute, still in his boxers, but wearing his boots, unlaced, without socks. Simon's first thought was that, yes, there were more ridiculous tan lines to be discovered; Bluey's torso was several shades lighter than his arms.

Shortly after this came a growing appreciation of Bluey's well-muscled back and slender hips. His hair had evidently been finger-combed and was tied back at the nape of his neck. He turned around, and Simon's gaze slid along collarbone and well-defined pectoral muscle before he dragged it up to Bluey's face. "Good morning."

"Morning," said Bluey. "The good news is, your roommate has moved out, so you should be right to grab your stuff."

"Oh, good," said Simon.

"Just make sure you check your shoes before you put them on." At Simon's inquiring look, Bluey added, "Funnelwebs."

Simon shuddered and held up his hand. "I don't want to know."

After breakfast, they packed up and climbed into the ute. Bluey turned the key in the ignition and it sputtered and seemed to catch, then went silent. "Hm," said Bluey, and tried again. This time an even more half-hearted sputter was the response. "That might present a problem."

"What's wrong?"

"It looks like the battery's gone flat. Shoulda replaced it a month ago."

"Can you fix it?" said Simon, leaning forward in his seat.

"Nah, not without a spare or another car and jumper cables." Bluey climbed out of the cabin, and after a moment Simon followed suit and met him at the back of the ute, fiddling with a hand-held radio.

"So what do we do?"

"Well, I can't raise the station from here; the mountain's in the way. So I say we hitch our packs and hike up to the gap from here."

"How long will that take?"

"Oh, coupla days."

"And what's the alternative?"

Bluey looked at him over his sunglasses. "Find a spot where the radio works and someone will be here within a few hours."

Attempting to keep his tone politely inquiring, Simon said, "And why can't we do that?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I have a plane to catch in a *coupla days* as you put it."

"I forgot," said Bluey, tipping his akubra back and scratching his forehead, "you gotta go review cafes in Melbourne, right?"

"Well, yes," said Simon.

"No worries." Wordlessly, Bluey began pulling things out of his pack, leaving them in the tray of the ute.

Simon shifted from leg to leg, went around to his pack, and pulled out his mobile phone. Still no coverage. "Is anywhere around here going to get a phone signal?"

Bluey didn't look up. "Depends on the provider. Maybe up on high ground," he said. "The mountain is bugging around with that too. I can get coverage up on the rocks, usually."

Simon squeezed his eyes shut. "All right," he said. "Let's hike up to there. If I can get phone coverage, I can change my flight anyway."

Bluey favoured him with a grin that made his heart skitter. "You beauty," he said, and emptied his pack with added gusto.

He seemed to be removing rather a lot of their food supplies, which prompted Simon to say, "Are you sure it's a good idea to leave all this behind?"

"She'll be right," said Bluey, patting a container of flour as he put it in the pack. "We'll have damper."

They set off. There wasn't much conversation; Simon was distracted by a long mental tirade at himself. Bluey walked behind him for a while, then circled around to adjust Simon's pack straps. His boots were new, and they pinched, and he could feel sweat gathering on the band of his cap. Why the fuck had he agreed to this?

He focused for a moment on the bunch and stretch of Bluey's arse in his tight khaki shorts, and then recommenced his mental lecture where it had left off.

Around midday, they reached a small watering hole created by a shelf of rock in a swift-flowing creek. Bluey gave Simon a speculative look and said, "Care for a swim?"

"Is it safe?"

"Yeah, 'course. Been here heaps of times."

A swim did sound rather good. He was sweating more than he had actually thought possible, and for the last hour he had been becoming increasingly concerned by how long it had been since he showered.

Bluey was already toeing off his boots and leaning down to take off his socks, his pack discarded next to him. He threw down his hat and pulled his shirt over his shoulders, muscles rippling under lightly freckled flesh. A complication of swimming occurred to Simon, and he turned his back to get undressed, willing his blood to keep circulating to his brain instead of heading quite so swiftly south.

He heard a splash and turned around to discover Bluey was already in up to his waist. Simon could just see the hem of his boxer shorts vanishing into the water, and he had put his akubra back on. "It's bloody lovely," he said to Simon and leaned back against a rock. He watched with an enigmatic half-smile as Simon tiptoed over to the pool and stuck a foot in. The water was cool and pleasant, and Simon stepped in, placing his feet carefully until he reached the deepest point, where the water came up to his mid-chest.

Bluey pulled his hair out of its elastic and ducked under the water, emerging dripping wet and grinning ear to ear.

"Watch out," he said, pointing behind Simon, "there's a box jellyfish over there."

"What? Jesus Christ." Simon fled the alleged stinger, and plastered himself flat against Bluey's chest.

Bluey's arms came up around him, and his entire frame shook with laughter. "That time I was definitely pulling your leg," he said.

Simon forced his heart rate to slow and smacked the flat of his palm against Bluey's chest. "You bastard," he said.

"You gullible pom," Bluey retorted.

Simon tried to pull away, but discovered he was being held fast. He looked up at Bluey, and found that handsome face tilted down to his. The water sluicing between their bodies turned warm.

"Hello," said Bluey softly.

Simon's mouth opened on a little sigh. He could feel Bluey's prick against his hip. He closed his eyes and reached his hands around Bluey's waist, and then he felt a puff of warm air

on his lips. He froze, and then the soft brush of Bluey's mouth on his released him. He tilted his head and leaned in, wrapping his arms around Bluey's waist, locking his fingers together to keep his hands from sliding on the wet skin.

Bluey's teeth tugged on his bottom lip, and then their mouths met and opened, tongues brushing against each other, breathing the same air.

Then Bluey shuffled them both backwards and Simon found his back pressed up against one of the granite boulders forming the wall of the pool. Bluey's knee was between his legs, pulling him almost off his feet. Bluey's tongue dove deep into his mouth; his big hands were on Simon's hips, tilting them forward.

Bluey groaned and released Simon, stepping back. Simon made an interrogative noise.

"We've got two days, right? No hurry." Bluey gave him a dazed smile and brushed his hand across his mouth. He turned around and located his hat floating brim-down nearby and threw it onto the bank near the packs. "C'mere."

Simon paddled over to him, and Bluey scooped up water in his hand and sluiced it down Simon's chest, following the path of the water between Simon's pectorals with the pads of his fingers. Simon ducked under the water and ran his hands across his torso, under his arms, around the back of his neck. He surfaced and pushed his hair back with both hands.

"This place is gorgeous," he said, looking up at the dappled light through the Eucalypts, shining off the glossy granite boulders, the splash of water into the pool and then the gurgle as it overflowed the rock shelf and continued on its way down the mountain.

Bluey waded across and sat on a rock just out of the water, his feet dangling into the pool. "You're definitely sunburnt."

"Not just blushing, then?"

"Whatcha got to blush about?"

"Nothing at all." Simon climbed onto the rock beside him and lay back, the midday warmth sinking into his wet skin.

Eventually, with an air of Herculean effort, Bluey climbed up from the rock and went over to his pack, extracting two muesli bars and holding one up. Rousing from his doze, Simon discovered he was ravenous and padded over to take the snack.

After lunch, they refilled spare canteens with water to carry until it could be boiled that evening because Bluey didn't think they'd encounter another creek. Then they kept walking, up through the Eucalyptus forest.

Bluey maintained a steady stream of information, including pointing out the differences among bluegums, ironbark, and scribblybark trees, and educating Simon on the various bird calls of the kookaburra, the rosella, and the cockatoo. At one point he stopped and held up his hand. "I reckon that's a lyrebird," he whispered. Then he slowly pointed his finger to the right of where they were standing. Simon followed his gaze and saw a brownish bird around the size of a pheasant standing in a cleared patch of woodland. It produced a series high-pitched, swooping birdcalls, and then paused and they heard the distinctive laughing call of the kookaburra.

"I could swear..." whispered Simon.

"Yup. Sneaky little fellow. Lyrebirds are excellent mimics. It's how they attract a mate. Don't hear so much of it in summer, though."

They moved on and up. Every now and then, Bluey would stop and examine a tree or shrub. Sometimes he'd pull some leaves or fruit off it and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt.

About midafternoon they were walking along, Simon thought, minding their own business, when it felt as if someone threw a ball at the back of his head. He ducked and put his hand to his skull. "Ouch, what the fuck just happened?"

Bluey turned around and ducked. This time, something skidded across the top of his scalp. His hand came away bloody.

"Magpie," said Bluey, "we must be near a nest. Once we get out of range it'll--duck!"

Simon bent at the knees just in time to avoid a talon to the eye. "Walk faster," he said, waving his hands above his head in the hope that would deter the homicidal bird. Instead, he got a scratched hand. He broke into a jog, pack jiggling behind him

They heard a curious warbling call. "That's the magpie," said Bluey.

"Interesting," said Simon. "Is it apologising?"

"More likely telling us to get out and stay out," said Bluey. "Magpies are very protective of their nests." He paused then added, Simon assumed, to the bird, "Sorry mate, we'll get outta your way now."

"Admirable." Simon checked his head for damage. There were a few points of pain, but they all seemed to have stopped bleeding.

Eventually, Bluey paused in a clearing and said, "We'll camp here."

"But there's still hours of daylight."

"Yep, but I need to get a fire going before it starts raining." He pointed at a bank of heavy grey clouds on the horizon.

"Oh, fucking perfect," muttered Simon.

Bluey winked at him and said, "Why don't you set up the tent, hey?" They'd only brought Simon's tent, which was the larger of the two.

Once the fire was going, Bluey boiled all the water they'd carried, then produced the flour and a mixing bowl. By the time Simon had pitched the tent, the fire had burned through its tinder and a lump of aluminium foil sat in the coals. Bluey patted the ground beside him and held out a mug of tea, which Simon accepted; it was generously spiked with rum again. They sat in companionable silence until Simon's stomach rumbled.

Bluey laughed and produced a handful of yellow berries the size of olives and offered them to Simon. "Appleberries. Try one."

Simon took the fruit and popped it in his mouth. It tasted like stewed apples. "That's delicious. What's in the foil?"

"Dampener," said Bluey happily, "flavoured with native thyme and saltbush." He tipped a couple more appleberries into Simon's hand and leaned back on his hands, looking up at the sky in the fading light.

The dampener turned out to be heavy bread made of only water and flour, which was extremely filling and surprisingly tasty. The first drops of rain began to fall, so they took everything including the dampener into the tent and lounged in their sleeping bags listening to the splatter of rain on the side. Bluey held the torch pointed at the ground between them, and at some point he leaned over and pressed his lips to Simon's and then they were lying side by side, Bluey's arm over Simon's shoulder, lazily kissing and nuzzling in the darkness.

Simon kicked out of his sleeping bag and pressed himself against Bluey, who hooked his thumbs in Simon's boxer shorts and pushed them down, freeing his hardening prick. He wrapped his broad fist around the shaft and began to pump it. Simon wrapped his arm around Bluey's shoulder and pressed his nose against Bluey's neck, eyes squeezed shut, trying to stifle the groaning noises.

"Ah, Jesus, Simon," muttered Bluey. He kicked his way out of his sleeping bag and rolled atop Simon, supporting his weight with his elbows on either side of Simon's head, resting his hips on Simon's so that their cocks were only separated by Bluey's boxer shorts. Simon pushed against him and Bluey responded by moving his hips, making them both gasp.

Simon raised his knee and rolled Bluey, then crawled down his body, finishing curled with his knees near Bluey's shoulders. He rested his head on his hands on Bluey's hip, considering his prick silhouetted by the light of the torch, still trapped in his boxer shorts.

Well, that was easily solved. Sliding his fingers between fabric and flesh, he pulled the shorts off and left them around Bluey's knees before returning his attention to the swelling appendage before him. Bluey's hand was resting possessively on his hip, and when Simon looked up, he saw Bluey had lifted his shoulders off the ground so he could watch what Simon was doing. Simon smiled to himself and put his hand around Bluey's prick, raising it and giving it a few preliminary strokes.

He paused. "Do you have a condom?"

Wordlessly, Bluey nodded. Moving with visible discomfort, he half-twisted and rummaged in his pack until he found the first aid kit. There, tucked behind band-aids and sachets of saline were a couple of little square packets. Simon took one with a snort. "What kind of emergencies are these for?" he said as he took the serrated edge in his teeth and pulled the packed open.

"Always good to be prepared," said Bluey as Simon rolled the condom onto his cock.

That done, Simon leaned over and wrap his mouth around the head. When he was sure he had Bluey's attention, he hummed. The reaction was instantaneous. "Bloody oath," Bluey swore, and his hips bucked off the tent floor. "That's some birdsong you got there, mate."

Simon slid his mouth onto Bluey's cock as far as it would go, and brought his hand up to meet it. He had set up a rhythm that was wringing a series of bucks, moans and colourful exclamations from Bluey, when he felt a bolt of pressure through his crotch and froze. Bluey's hand had found its way back to his prick and closed around it. Bluey gave him a glittering smile and tilted his head, a clear invitation.

As Simon slid his mouth down Bluey's shaft, he felt an answering tug on his prick. Bluey was mirroring his timing, the bastard.

He sped up, unable to stop the twisting of his own hips, even as he tried to concentrate. "Watching you squirm is like having a goanna by the tail," Bluey gasped out, and Simon stopped, pulled his mouth away with a slick pop. He raised his eyebrows. "I'm sorry, Jesus, keep going, Jesus, please," said Bluey, and Simon obliged him.

Simon had his free hand pressed against Bluey's abdomen, and he felt the moment when Bluey's muscles began to coil and spasm towards orgasm. He pulled away, leaving the Australian staring dazedly up at him.

"Don't suppose you have any lube in that incredibly comprehensive first aid kit?"

It took a visible effort for Bluey to process that question. "Yeah," he said, "it's in there somewhere."

Simon blinked. "You do come prepared."

Bluey put his hands on his belly and looked over at Simon. "I really like you," he said. "So I was hoping..."

"How'd you know I was gay?"

He got a blithe smile in return. "We Aussies are an optimistic bunch."

Simon, having found the lube, was willing to let that one go. He opened the tube and

squeezed some onto his hand, then gave Bluey's prick a couple of pumps.

"Here," said Bluey, taking the tube. As Simon settled astride his crotch, Bluey reached behind him and pushed first one finger, then another, into Simon's arse. Simon threw back his head and sighed, tilting his hips for easier access.

That being done, Simon reached under himself to take Bluey's prick, and sank onto it. As always, there was the feeling of his body's being stretched, testing the juncture of pleasure and pain. Then his buttocks met Bluey's hips and he rested for a moment, testing, squeezing his muscles around the intrusion. Bluey groaned, and Simon looked down at him. He had his hands splayed over Bluey's chest, a nipple between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He pinched it.

"Crikey," Bluey said, grinding out the syllables.

"You really are Australian to your core, aren't you?" said Simon.

"True blue," replied Bluey, putting his hands on Simon's hips and coaxing him to rise up.

Simon's body seemed as reluctant to release Bluey's cock as it had been to accept it; they both groaned at the friction. The second fall was easier, and after a while it was comfortable, then pleasurable, to bounce up and down on Bluey's cock. Bluey's hands stayed on Simon's hips, dragging him up and pulling him down. Simon's head fell back, and he struggled to breathe through the sensations drowning him.

He kicked the torch with his knee and sent the dim light lancing around the tent, lighting up raindrops in silhouette. He heard the rain, but distantly, like a soundtrack to their fucking.

Bluey's hands on his hips held him still and he looked down. "Lemme flip you," said Bluey, "so I can jack you off."

Simon nodded, and found himself on his back, legs up in the air. Bluey smiled down at him, his white teeth the only thing visible. He braced himself low, elbow next to Simon's head, and reached between them with his other hand to wrap around Simon's cock.

Simon arched back and hit his head against the ground. His legs spasmed, tendons pulling tight, toes curling. Bluey thrust into him and tugged on his cock, once, twice, three times.

There was sweat slicking the skin between them, rolling off Bluey's forehead. His hair was plastered tight to his temples. Simon put his hands up and tangled his fingers in those tangled copper strands and pulled Bluey's head down to him.

Their lips met, and it was barely a kiss; it was another manifestation of the violence of Bluey's thrusts into Simon's body, the insistent pressure around his cock. He pushed his tongue between Bluey's teeth and arched his hips to meet Bluey's thrusts. He felt his belly tighten and he gasped, then groaned, then there was spunk all over his stomach.

Bluey let out a long sigh like a deflating air mattress, and collapsed forward, his head hanging on his shoulders, elbows either side of Simon's head.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he muttered.

"Seconded," said Simon, hearing the threadiness in his own voice.

In the morning, the rain had passed, leaving damp wood, soggy leaf litter, and mud. They were delayed moving on when Bluey pushed Simon down and sucked him off, and then again when Simon gave Bluey a hand job against a tree.

When they eventually began walking, Bluey said, "Watch out for leeches."

"Leeches," said Simon direfully.

"Had a mate once who ended up with six leeches on his shin. His leg was bleeding so

much it was like the self-serve coke machine at Hungry Jacks." He made a clicking noise. "Well, it's only a few k's to the ridge, where we'll have phone signal and radio coverage then a few hours more until we're reunited with the outside world."

Simon pressed his lips together. "All right," he echoed with even less conviction than Bluey.

They reached the ridge an hour later, identifiable by a rocky outcrop. "C'mon," said Bluey, dropping his pack. "Follow me." Without waiting for a reply, he vanished between two massive granite boulders, each the size of a one-storey house. A short scramble over a series of rocks later, they were standing on a long, sloping piece of granite, above the treeline, looking down. "These're the famous rocks, and that's the gap," said Bluey. "Ain't she something?"

"Breathtaking," said Simon, looking down at the rolling green-blue forest, punctuated by granite outcrops like the one they stood on. In the far distance, he could see where the forest ended, and cleared farmland began. The sun had come out and the heat of the morning was swiftly drying the rock. Simon sat down and stuck his feet out in front of him. He pulled out his phone and discovered it was reluctantly conceding him one bar of coverage. He dialled the airline and made his way through the auto-responder until a man picked up. Since he hadn't yet technically missed his flight, he changed it without trouble to the next day. He really did need to get to Melbourne at some point.

When he hung up, Bluey was standing behind him gazing out at the view. "My mate Jack's on his way up. He'll be here in a few hours."

"That's great," said Simon. "Shall we explore?"

"Sure thing, just let me sit here for a while."

Simon nodded, and they sat down side by side, looking out over the forest. Simon leaned his shoulder against Bluey's.

"This is my place," said Bluey in a rather mystical tone. Simon thought he had never seemed so much like a hundred-year-old bush creature as he did sitting there in his khaki, knees drawn up to his chest, copper hair peeping out from underneath his akubra, looking out over the landscape.

"Your place is stunning," said Simon.

"Thank you." There was simple pride in Bluey's voice. He turned and pushed Simon flat onto the rock, climbing atop him and sliding his hand into Simon's pants. "It's your place now, too," he said.

Simon put his hands around Bluey's neck and dropped one knee out to the side so Bluey could get to his prick. "Does that mean it's going to stop trying to kill me?" he asked.

The heat of the day was fading away, and the sky was sliding from blue to indigo. They were sitting beside a creek cut deep into the rock, and dangling their feet in the water. Simon couldn't help yawning; he was tired in every bone and every muscle of his body. There was a sated feeling coiled in his belly, and a niggling pain in the vicinity of his heart.

Watching the water of the creek, he saw a splash and then a sleek brown head, barely visible. "Look," he said, "is that a platypus?"

Bluey blinked and narrowed his eyes, leaning forward. "Yep," he said. He drew his feet out of the water.

Simon sat very still, hoping the creature would come closer. "Isn't it adorable?"

"You should probably get your feet away," said Bluey, more serious than Simon had seen

him.

"Whyever for? Is it going to try and eat me?" The platypus swam closer, oblivious to his audience.

"Seriously." Bluey tugged on Simon's arm. "You do not want to get stung by one of those."

"Stung? Are you telling me that adorable creature has a stinger?"

"Spurs on its hind legs. Nasty venom, trust me. Rips through your nervous system and doesn't clear out for days."

Simon threw up his hands and got up. "Well, that's just fucking typical. Everything in this entire fucking country is deadly." He stomped back to his shoes. "You can't take a step without getting bitten by a spider or chased by dingoes."

"Well, you came into their habitat," said Bluey.

"I don't care. In every civilised country, the wildlife has given up and capitulated to its human conquerors, but not here. Oh no--you Aussies are locked in a battle for this country with every animal that lives here. The snakes want to fuck you up; the spiders want you dead. The birds will peck out your eyes, and even the adorable small furry creatures stand ready at any moment to take up their positions as the foot soldiers of Satan. Fuck Australia; I'm going home before the animals rise up and kill you all."

"Oi, steady on," said Bluey.

"That's all you have to say? *Oi, steady on?* How can you be so blasé? Does your life mean nothing to you?"

Bluey shrugged. "Worst thing I've ever been bitten by was a mosquito, and I'm pretty sure you got them in London."

Simon ran his hand across his eyes. "You're right, I'm sorry. You've been jolly decent to me, Bluey, and it's hardly your fault that this entire continent apparently has it in for me."

"Well, you are a pom, and it is cricket season." Bluey hid a smile behind his hand. "Let's go wait on the road. Jack should be here soon."

A little while later, a four-wheel drive rattled up the patch and stopped by them. "Well, well, well," said the driver, another tanned, white-toothed Aussie.

"Thanks Jacko, I owe ya one."

"You sure do. Hop in."

Jack had presumably gone to his own home, so it was just Bluey and Simon in the ranger station. There was an air of endings that night, as if they had already started the process of saying goodbye to this strange weekend and to each other. The little camp bed was narrow and uncomfortable, but it held them both, Bluey's stomach to Simon's back, Bluey's arm clamped to Simon's stomach keeping their bodies close as he pressed his cock into Simon's body.

In the morning, they stood like two boys introduced by their mothers and told to play together. Simon said, "Would you mind if I got that photo now?"

"Oh, yeah, no worries," said Bluey. "Outside?"

"Definitely." Bluey stood next to a scribblybark tree and smiled, showing twenty or so of his white teeth to the camera.

"I haven't got any release forms with me, so I'll post you one along with a copy of the picture. And the article, when it's done."

"Email's fine too," said Bluey.

"Er, right." Simon ducked his head and accepted a piece of paper with an email address written on it. "So, I had better get going."

Bluey leaned against the wall of the station. "Those cafés won't review themselves."

"No, they certainly won't. Listen, if you're ever in the UK, look me up, all right?"

Smiling, Bluey said, "I will. And hey, Simon."

Simon turned around from loading his pack into the car. "Yes?"

"Watch out for yowies. They're nasty critters with long white hair and feet on backwards. There's a lot of them around Melbourne."

Giving Bluey a narrow look, Simon said, "Yowies."

"Yup."

"Do they have razor sharp claws?"

"Yup."

"And fangs dripping blood?"

"Definitely."

Simon nodded as he got into the car. "I'll be careful," he said.

*If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/216907.html>*

Through the Hostile Jungles of Gaia

by Kaerutobi Ike (蛙跳び池)

Xander glared at his backpack as the shirt he had been trying to stuff in one-handed caught on the zipper and unfolded itself. Again. With an annoyed humpf, Xander gave up on any semblance of neatness and just shoved the damn thing in the bag. He stared at the rest of the items laid out on his bed and, after a moment of consideration, did the same with the rest of them.

The red lighting in the room was so dim that he almost missed his techbook. In fact, he had only remembered it as he felt the sharp corners dig into his spine, when he sprawled across the bed after mistakenly thinking he was finally done packing.

The techbook was on his right side, where his arm was strapped to his torso by a shoulder brace, so Xander had to roll on his belly to retrieve it. He went to stuff it in the bag with the rest of his things, but paused at the last moment, fingers grazing over the scratches and the dents that marred its surface. Xander didn't remember its being in such bad shape. Dropping it back at his side, he reached in his dresser for the techbook he normally used, the one that was made to work in the red-tinted darkness that allowed Tarim to take off his armour without burning his skin. Speaking of Tarim, the other man should be back soon.

Placed side by side, the two techbooks didn't differ all that much. Xander's techbook was slimmer and lighter; possibly making it a more recent model. The idea that he might own something more advanced than military-issued equipment made Xander snort.

He pushed himself onto his knees to reach his bag and felt his right shoulder protest. His left wrist was acting up too. With the whole *shoulder incident* a mere week after the cast was removed from it, Xander hadn't been able to do any of his physio to build back the strength in his wrist yet.

Xander had another moment of hesitation as he held his own techbook above the opening of his bag. Was it worth the weight? It wasn't very heavy but....

Xander smiled bitterly. What did he think he was doing? All he was going to do was carry his bag from his room to the shuttle that would bring them to Gaia, and then from the shuttle to the room he would occupy with Tarim. Both trips would take about five minutes respectively. Then there would be nothing else to do but wait.

This was his first mission in four months, and Xander might as well be part of the luggage. He was surprised by how much he missed being a *real* soldier. Going days without a decent meal or a shower, being ordered around every second of the day: all the things he had complained about in the past all came rushing back to him through a haze of nostalgia. True, some times had been tough. but he had had few worries beyond the next pit stop or what he would be eating that day. He had been a part of a whole team of people that had endured the same things he did. What they did had counted for something. They achieved things that had direct results and could be pointed at to say, "I did that." Sometimes there was even reasons to feel proud.

Now? Now he wasn't even welcome in his own squad.

The door opened and the fabric of the curtains rustled. Xander dropped the techbook in his bag and turned to face the door and welcome Tarim.

The black combat suit never stopped being creepy. Even after having four months to

get used to it, Xander still had trouble thinking of the looming figure as Tarim. It was like they were two entirely different people. The black armour was just the Berserker: a dangerous, unpredictable being who could become violent any second. Then there was Tarim, the guy with the albino-white skin and the soul of a bunny rabbit.

The armour walked to the section of wall that hid the automated machinery used to remove the suit. It was nearly pitch-black in there, just a few red glints from where the light caught on a shiny surface from time to time. Once it started moving, it looked like a swarm of beetles. Xander could feel the ghosts of tiny legs skittering over on his skin just thinking about it.

The Berserker walked in there, the swarm did its job, and out walked Tarim. This soon after coming out, his system was still full of the mood-dampener that the suit injected in his bloodstream. Usually, it would take him about twenty minutes to become human again. But lately....

There. Whereas Tarim would have usually gone straight for the shower not so long ago, now he stopped next to Xander. The first time, Xander had expected this to be the prelude for a Berserker incident. He had braced for a strike, prepared to go limp because, even out of the armour, Tarim was stronger than Xander could ever hope to be. The best strategy was to let him do anything he wanted and hope it ended quickly.

But Tarim hadn't hit him then and he wasn't hitting him now.

Instead, there was touching. Nothing big, just a hand on Xander's cheek, or giving a brief squeeze to his good shoulder. Little gestures of affection that were just weird considering the relationship they had, and weirder for being offered at a time when Tarim's body should still be filled with heavyweight mood-suppressors.

Once Tarim was satisfied with his greeting, he disappeared into the shower for the rest of his evening ritual. Xander watched the door close, the lingering warmth where Tarim's hand had caressed the back of his neck heating his skin. He could get used to this, he thought not for the first time.

Xander had five minutes before Tarim finished. He turned back to the bed, to his bag, and to the bitter flavour this trip was acquiring -- not because he would be waiting for Tarim to return for most of his stay, he decided, but because of the company he would be waiting with. His squad.

Xander noticed he was gripping his bag so hard that his knuckles had turned white. He took a deep breath and relaxed his grip as he exhaled. There was nothing he could do about it now.

He zipped the bag shut and did up the clasps. He knew now that they were all homophobic assholes first and foremost, and that would always come before being his supposed companions. He just had to remember it and not expect too much from them.

He rested the bag next to the door. Straightening up, he inspected the room for anything he might have forgotten. He just wished—even though there was nothing he could do about it—that he wasn't wearing the cast for this trip, wished he didn't look as much like the victim of an abusive relationship—as Nicholas had once put it—wished he wasn't going as the *Special Unit's Grounder*. After that, there would be no chance of things ever going back to normal. This would forever mark him as *the Grounder*.

Xander was so caught up with his pity party, that he didn't notice the bathroom door had opened and that Tarim was back in the main room with him. He only took notice of the Special Unit when two strong arms hugged him from behind and Tarim's lean form pressed into his back.

Xander rested his head on Tarim's shoulder and twisted his neck to look at Tarim's face.

Tarim's red eyes stared back.

"Hi," Xander said. The arms around him tightened, Tarim's mouth got that phantom tilt at the corners that didn't quite look like a smile, though it really was one. Xander smiled back. "How was your day?"

Tarim's reply was burying his face in the crook of Xander's neck to rub his nose in the hollow of Xander's clavicle. White hair tickled Xander's nose, and he scratched absently at it with the back of his hand. "Long day then."

Sometimes, Tarim was open to talking straight out of the shower. When he was more tired--if Xander's observations could be trusted--words were slower to come back to him.

Tarim pushed Xander toward the bed and Xander complied. Tarim helped him to lie down, not once letting him go, and spooned up against him, hugging him closer, as if it was possible.

It was no surprise when Tarim undid Xander's brace and dropped it over the side of the bed. The doctor had started to complain that Xander took too long to heal, so Xander had tried to convince Tarim that the brace needed to stay on. Tarim had nodded gravely through all the speech, which Xander took to mean that he understood and would comply with the doctor's wishes, and yet, the very next day he was reaching for it just the same. Xander might have believed Tarim wasn't fully aware of what he was doing—that it was just muscle-memory, another part of his habitual routine—but Tarim was too careful to not jar Xander's shoulder for him to not be conscious of his actions.

Xander's t-shirt followed the brace, and then Tarim's towel got discarded too. Tarim repositioned Xander so that he could hold him to his chest while he got rid of Xander's trousers and underwear, making sure that their skin never stopped making contact in some way. Once they were fully naked, his lips pressed against Xander's neck. Once in a while, he would breathe out small puffs of hair that made Xander squirm as it tickled against his skin.

They used to rush into this. Usually, by the time Xander was naked, they were already kissing each other, teasing each other into mindless pleasure. Lately—always lately, always stuff they didn't used to do that now they suddenly *did*—Tarim had started to take his time. Xander has always thought he knew that he was dealing with a cuddler, but Tarim had taken to cuddling like it was an ends in and of itself. Xander wouldn't have minded so much, if it hadn't given him time to *think*.

People like Xander shouldn't have been allowed to think. If they were allowed to drive instead of just going along for the ride.... well, they swerved straight for the ravine.

They were facing each other now. One of Tarim's legs sandwiched between Xander's while the other's foot hooked behind Xander's calves. Xander's head was pillowed on Tarim's arm, the hand attached to it playing in his hair. The other hand was resting on Xander's bad shoulder, supporting it gently. The warmth was nice. Tarim was always warm. His skin, his not-quite-smiles, his whole personality, all of it left Xander feeling warm. Mainly because Xander was always cold, which was fitting, because he had a cold mind and a heart like a shard of ice. Or so someone had once told him.

And this was the kind of thought that too much thinking led to.

"Hi."

Xander looked up. Tarim was smiling now. The corners of his lips were tilted up for real, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

Xander smiled. "Hi, I'm glad to have you back." He stretched to kiss Tarim's lips, a languorous kiss that promised pleasure and sex. Sex was nice. It didn't allow for much thinking.

Tarim answered in kind: small, open-mouthed kissing for a while, bringing teeth and tongue in play teasingly before they got to full-on tongue action. Tarim grimaced when a little drool ran along his chin and Xander laughed. He swiped it away with his thumb and then kept his hand on Tarim's jaw to better control the angle. Tarim was ticklish under his ribs and Xander always forgot about it, so they had to break the kiss for that too.

When he was done catching his breath, Tarim pinned Xander to the bed and settled over him. Xander took a second to enjoy the feel of Tarim's skin, his weight. More warmth, and that was his cue to pull Tarim back down to him and kiss some more. But then, an idea struck him and he pushed back. "Hey, you want me to suck you?"

Tarim tried to catch Xander's mouth again, groaned in disappointment when Xander's arms didn't allow him close enough. Xander laughed and repeated his question.

"I like your mouth where it is," Tarim answered while he attempted once more to initiate a kiss.

Xander gave him a short one. Well, not so short. He forgot to push Tarim away again and didn't remember his proposition until he was forced to break their lips anyway, because it was either breathe or faint from lack of oxygen. God, they behaved like teenagers.

Once his brain was properly oxygenated again, he pushed against Tarim to roll him on his back. Tarim moved an inch and then registered that he wasn't going in the direction he wanted.

"Come on," Xander said, "you'll like this. I give great head."

Tarim frowned. "Don't want to get head," he protested.

Xander chuckled. "Stop whinging; you're acting like a kid."

Tarim stuck his tongue out. Xander laughed and gave him a lick on his nose for his trouble, which sent them both into peals of laughter. Tarim eventually rolled on his back. "Fine, if you want to so much."

"Don't sound so resigned. I feel like I suggested to have you tortured."

Tarim didn't answer and Xander couldn't see if anything was playing out over his face, because his gaze was focused decidedly lower. Tarim had very little hair aside from the white strands on his head and his almost-translucent eyebrows and eyelashes. He had some under his arms, and Xander took notice for the first time that he actually had a trail of snow-white hair under his navel, going down to a patch above his cock. Xander grazed along it with his knuckles. He gave a playful tug and Tarim jerked a little.

"I thought you were going to give me head?" he grumpily asked.

Tarim looked up and was surprised to see a faint blush spreading from Tarim's cheek to his neck and down to his torso. The black of his pupil had almost swallowed the red of his iris and his breath was shallow.

"In a hurry now?" Xander asked with a smirk.

"You're a tease." The seriousness with which Tarim said this shocked another laugh out of Xander. He moved back to get closer to the foot of the bed, forgetting his bad shoulder until he had tried to put weight on his arms and failed. Tarim oofed when Xander's upper body suddenly collapsed on top of him. Tarim's "ouch!" was muffled by Tarim's skin.

Tarim rose up to his elbows, gently shifting Xander so he wasn't resting on his injured arm any longer. Xander felt stupid. His shoulder was throbbing in warning and his nose was tender. He said as much when Tarim asked if he was okay. "And my ego is in pieces," he added just to see the smile come back to Tarim's lips.

"Bad idea. I told you."

"That's not what you told me."

Tarim huffed. Before Xander could protest that he still wanted to try that blowjob, Tarim hugged him from behind again, pulled Xander's back flush against his chest, and snaked a hand over his hip to wrap around Xander's cock.

"Blowjobs another time. Tomorrow's going to be busy and we need to sleep." His hands moved to pleasure Xander.

Xander's protest died in his throat and was reborn as moan. His attempt at getting away made his shoulder throb some more and it was that that finally convinced him to stop struggling and enjoy Tarim's taking care of him.

The angle was too awkward to reciprocate. Too awkward to kiss too, and that was maybe more annoying.

As if reading his mind, Tarim pressed his lips to Xander's cheek, insisting until Xander got the hint and turned his head. Their mouths met, Tarim's tongue lapping at his lips until he opened them to allow it in.

Tarim snuggled closer, hips rolling against the back of Xander's thighs. He also moved his hand faster and that propelled Xander to do something about Tarim's pleasure before he was too far gone. He licked his hand, getting it slick, and reached between his legs, taking Tarim's dick into his hand, guiding Tarim's cock between his thighs. Tarim grunted in thanks and it was then that Xander finally allowed his mind to go blank.

Xander distantly registered Tarim's muscles clenching and releasing; the arms around him became limp and Tarim stopped moving.

Xander burrowed further into Tarim's embrace, trying to convince himself he didn't need to get them clean. With regret, Xander untangled himself and shivered as he crossed the room to the bathroom. There was a washcloth on the counter that he wet down and used to clean himself. He rinsed it and brought it to Tarim, who didn't react when Xander called his name, but let out a tired grunt when the wet fabric touched his skin. He did grab Xander's leg when he was done to keep him from leaving.

Tarim's order to "stay" was so garbled Xander hardly recognized it. Chances were Tarim was already more than half-asleep when he said it. Xander shook his head in disbelief, but he also dropped the cloth to the ground and did as he was told, joining Tarim on the bed. Tarim immediately plastered himself to Xander's back, an arm sneaking around Xander's waist before he drifted off for good.

The only noise in the shuttle--besides the humming of the engine--was the hushed conversation between Stephen and Kartha. Everyone else was either watching Xander and Tarim--fully decked out in his armour--or pretending very hard that they weren't there.

And then there was Nicholas.

The last time Xander had seen him was when he had been forced to tell Nicholas to back the fuck off after he had tried to provoke Tarim while he was in armour. Which coincided with the time Xander broke his wrist and bruised his ribs.

Nicholas had been behaving strangely since Xander had been named as Grounder, which was surprising, because it was Nicholas' accusation that had decided the whole thing. If Nicholas hadn't pointed his finger and said "gay", then they would have had to draw straws to decide which of them would become the Grounder. Who knew what might have happened then?

Annie was situated on Nicholas's other side, smiling at Nicholas, ignoring Xander's existence completely, and keeping a wary eye on Tarim. It wasn't really her fault that she was

under the delusion that Nicholas was a *good guy*. Worst, she thought he batted for her team, which he just might. Nicholas was engaged to a girl back on his home planet, even if he liked to act like he wasn't. That, and he had been more than okay with Xander's gayness, until it had become something he could use to prove that Xander was more qualified to be the Berserker's Boy Toy.

Xander burrowed himself closer against Tarim's armour, hiding himself in his side. It wasn't much of a comfort to be allowed this close by the Berserker. Since he had put it on that morning, Tarim had reverted to his Berserker personality. He didn't talk, didn't move unless he had to. Xander might as well have been seeking comfort from a rock. His only consolation was that his cuddling the big black armour made the others uncomfortable. Every time he touched the armour they fidgeted in their seat. He pointed towards the planet they were headed to through the window and told Tarim that it looked nothing like his did and everyone had glared at him as if he had committed some grand crime. Xander had smiled even though Tarim hadn't acknowledged his comment.

It was hard to tell how much of Tarim was still present when he wore the armour. He kept his memories of his time in it; Xander had had proof of that much. Regardless, he behaved like an entirely different person when he was suited up.

When the sergeant came back from the cockpit, Xander was stretched over a bench, back propped against the armour in the most relaxed pose he could muster with a hard corner digging between his shoulder blades. The horror that overtook everyone's face when he had first assumed the position was worth the minor discomfort.

"Xander! Put your fucking feet on the fucking floor!" shouted the sergeant. He was glaring at Xander, but he still flinched when he saw Tarim move out of the corner of his eye. Xander looked back just in time to see the helmet turn to face the wall again. Apparently Tarim was still somewhat curious about his surroundings.

Xander did as he was told. There was no reason to alienate the sergeant, so sat proper with his spine held straight. Because he was a good little soldier like that.

Gaia, their destination, was four hours away by shuttle. They were headed to a small research centre, deep in a very hostile jungle that covered sixty percent of the planet's surface. All the information was on Xander's techbook. Three hundred pages about man-eating predators, man-heating plants, and man-eating mud. Xander had stared at the pictures with awe and a good dose of bewilderment. Why did they insist on keeping people there? It was like asking for someone to get killed.

After two of those four hours, Nicholas rose to his feet and walked toward Xander. Annie trailed after him like a shadow. Xander watched her move closer with a raised eyebrow. She had made no secret of her fear of the Berserker, the very thing that was just behind Xander. It seemed that Annie, not an open-minded woman, was a courageous one.

Xander couldn't feel Tarim tense through the armour, obviously, but it still felt like he did when the armour's helmet moved once again and followed Nicholas' progression. The berserker didn't like Nicholas and Nicholas was too pig-headed to take that into consideration before he did something stupid like walking to Xander and sitting next to him. So it was up to Xander to be the reasonable one. "Nicholas, don't do that."

"Do what?"

Annie was already furrowing her eyebrows in anticipation of what he would say next. Xander sighed. "Whatever you think you're doing right now. Just stay away from me, will you? I don't want to be beat up again."

Nicholas stopped at once, eyes jerking to the looming figure of the Berserker. He must have noticed then, that it was him the armour was watching, when he looked down at Xander, Nicholas looked hesitant.

"He doesn't like you very much," Xander said, though it didn't properly get across just how Tarim *felt* about Nicholas. But what was he supposed to say? That Tarim was jealous of the relationship Nicholas and Xander had shared? Yeah, that would go over really well in the present company.

The rest of the squad had been following the exchange, but when Xander looked at them, they all looked away. Only the sergeant held his gaze.

Xander wondered on which side the man stood. Did he regret the way things had turned out? Surely the guy would have preferred a solution that didn't destroy the unity of the squad under his charge? A bitter smile was stretching Xander's lips when he looked away from his sergeant. The man might have wanted things to go differently but he hadn't stepped forward to stop Xander's mockery of a nomination.

Nicholas stared at him silently for a few more moments before shaking his head and returning to his seat, Annie hot on his heels.

This time, when Xander gathered his knees to his chest and burrowed in the armour's side, the sergeant didn't say anything about his feet being on the bench.

Xander imagined he was back in his bed, with Tarim's arms around him.

Another hour passed and they were entering Gaia's atmosphere when the shuttle shook. It wasn't unheard of. Everyone who wasn't already seated went back to his or her seat. Xander straightened and fastened a safety belt around his waist.

Five minutes passed without any other turbulence, more than enough time for everyone to be willing to forget there had been any in the first place. All of a sudden, another, more powerful jolt ran through the shuttle, a red signal lit on the ceiling and a siren blared through the small ship.

What little gravity the shuttle could maintain inside was suddenly increased tenfold, crushing everyone down into their seats. As suddenly as it had happened, the effect was reversed and everyone not strapped down was sent crashing against the ceiling. Xander stared as two of his teammates were projected into the air, slamming into the ceiling. From the sickening crack that echoed in the small space, one of them broke something.

There was a moment during which everything floated. In those few seconds, Xander saw that Stephen had gone green, that Nicholas and Annie were trying to help the man who was plastered on the ceiling by the force of their fall, and that the sergeant was twisted in his seat, trying to get the attention of the pilots and asking repeatedly to know what was going on.

Movement on his other side caught his eye. The Berserker was moving. For some reason, he wasn't affected by the wacky gravity—magnetic soles, his brain supplied. There was a big red lever on a wall, one that was tied with a chain to make sure it couldn't be moved. The berserker tugged on the chain, breaking it like a piece of string, and he pulled the lever down.

It was a good thing for Annie and Nicholas that they had managed to get the guy they were reaching for on the bench, because whatever the Berserker did caused another jolt to go through the shuttle. Gravity crushed them against their seats once again with a force and a suddenness that left Xander breathless. Another bang went through the shuttle, signalling that someone else had hit a wall.

A very, very pale pilot joined them, looking as white as Tarim. He stumbled, caught himself against a wall, and opened his mouth as if to tell them something but all that got out

was a disgusting retching sound as he emptied his stomach. Kartha, the squad medic, gave a tired "Shit!" and got up to help him.

Xander couldn't agree more.

No one seemed in a hurry to find out what had happened. Either the pilot had come with good news or it was going to be every man for himself in a few moments. There was enough chaos left that everyone could find something to tidy or someone to help. The only exception was Drake's body, strewn across the floor. It must have been his skull breaking against the ceiling when the shuttle had been freefalling. Xander saw Nicholas take his vitals. From the frown and the minute shake of his head, nothing could be done to help him anymore. Xander thanked his lucky stars that his belt had been buckled and left it at that. There was a pile of boxes near the back of the shuttle that would keep him away from the others. He busied himself with that.

The Berserker kept watch over him, which kept the others away. Someone tried to get closer to him at some point—Xander had a feeling it had been Nicholas—but the giant armour had stepped more obviously between Xander and the intruder and they had left without saying a word.

Once the shuttle had regained some semblance of order, the sergeant called them in the corner most removed from where they had moved Drake's body.

The sergeant started his explanation with a curt, "The engines are dead."

Every head turned to the pilot, who gave a weak shrug of his shoulders and added, "We got hit by a meteorite," as if that explained everything.

"How come we aren't falling then?" asked a suspicious Annie. "Because right now it sure doesn't feel like we're falling."

Xander looked back at the Berserker, who was still standing a few feet behind them. The armour didn't give any sign that he was conscious of the attention.

"Your friend there," the pilot pointed the Berserker and everyone joined Xander in staring at him, "engaged an emergency protocol. Right now, we're hung under a gigantic parachute." It looked as if it pained the man to admit that part.

"What now, sir?" Nicholas asked the sergeant.

The expression on the sergeant's face had been sour since he talked to the pilot, but that was nothing compared to the bitterness in his voice when he said, "I'd like to tell you we warn the Galatea and wait for help, but we can't." Once again everyone turned to the pilot.

"Communications are off too. We only get static."

"So it's broken after all," Nicholas said.

Xander would have liked to object. They still had light, they still had air and heating, they should be able to communicate. It didn't make sense at all. Happily for him, he wasn't the only one gaping like a fish. Stephen was too and he was the first to break and asked the question he was willing to bet they all had been dying to ask: "What broke?"

Nicholas waved in the air as if pointing to something far away. "You know, the communication relay." Seeing as Stephen was still looking lost so he continued, "The one that allows communication through the magnetic field around Gaia?"

Stephen made a noise of understanding—so as to not look stupid, though Xander was ready to bet he still didn't understand. As for Xander, he couldn't believe he had forgotten about the magnetic field. But if the relay had finally broken—it had been on its last leg when the research centre had sent a distress message to ask for Tarim to repair it—then everything made sense. There was only one thing he needed to know now. "What do we do once we reach the

ground then? Walk?"

The sergeant nodded. "You said it."

"How are we going to know in which direction to go?" someone, Billy or Samuel maybe, asked.

The sergeant shrugged. "Good old-fashioned way, I guess."

"I can do that," the pilot interrupted. "I can calculate an itinerary."

The sergeant nodded to him in thanks and turned toward Billy—he had been the one talking, then. "There you go."

For all he had been wishing for a walk in the mud the night before, Xander had a bad feeling about this one.

Xander had decided he shouldn't wait for them to be traipsing through the woods to take some pain meds. He preferred to be as close to high for the oncoming trip as the pills would let him. If he was going to be eaten, he didn't want to feel it happen.

The pills were with his toiletry. With his luck, it would be at the bottom of the bag. The first thing he took out on was his techbook—which reminded him, so much for not caring for weight—he dropped the thing without any care, getting everyone's attention when it clattered loudly on the floor. Xander ignored them and lifted a shirt. If he remembered correctly, his toiletry bag was somewhere near the socks. Or was it the spare trousers?

Someone walked to him and asked, "What are you doing?" It was Kartha.

"My meds are in there." The medic gave a wary look to where the Berserker was sitting a few feet away, but the armour gave no sign of moving. Kartha crouched next to Xander and held the bag for him.

"Thanks." Xander pulled another ball of fabric out of the bag. What was that? Oh, underwear.

"You're welcome."

The toiletry bag finally appeared, somehow having settled way down at the bottom of the bag. Xander stuck one end of it under his foot and opened the zipper with his good hand. Kartha watched him do it with a frown. "Do you need help?"

Xander shook his head. "I've got it." He found the bottle where his pills were and took a few out.

"Should you be taking that many?" Kartha asked when Xander popped three pills in his mouth. The medic's meddling instincts must have finally kicked in. He gave a contemplative look at Xander's brace and started reaching for it. "How long have you had that anyway?"

Xander jerked back instinctively. Then he felt foolish when that sent some pills rolling on the ground and just made Kartha raise his hands in alarm.

"Sorry." Xander looked at the armour, noticed it was still sitting, and decided maybe he should relax too. "Really, sorry. I'm okay though. I can do it." He collected the pills and put them back in the little bottle, giving a pointed look at Kartha when he managed to close it one-handed. He wanted to say 'see, I can do it' but that would have been overkill.

Kartha shrugged and went back to his seat. Xander followed his progression and noticed that Nicholas was watching him attentively. Xander jerked his head back to the mess he had made. He put the toiletry bag back in the bag and decided the shirt and techbook could stay where they were. Now it was looking like he would have to actually carry the damn thing so he might as well pack it light *this time*.

As expected, they landed without any grace. The shuttle rested on top of some trees until its weight became too much and they broke. By then, the parachute was already falling to the side and they got another dose of free-falling. This time, everyone was wearing their safety belts and the worst they had to suffer was the sickening lurch when the shuttle finally made impact with the solid ground.

Once they were sure they had landed for real, everyone got to their feet and gathered his or her bag. The pilot and the sergeant conferred with each other over a satellite view of Gaia. There were two marks on it and a line that Xander was sorry to see made a V shape. Anything other than a straight line meant that the journey would be longer. Anything other than a line also hinted that there was something on the way that they couldn't walk through.

"Okay people," the sergeant said after the pilot finished mumbling something to him. "We are going to do this camping trip all together and I don't want to have to send anyone back to their mummy." Which was sergeant's way of telling them 'please, people, don't make me send you back home in a box'. "Everyone has a bag, make sure you pack rations in case we are separated." He turned to address Billy and Stephen specifically: "You two are pack mules until I say otherwise. Go with Nicholas to the emergency store and take whatever he tells you to. Annie, you stay with our pilot friend here. By tomorrow, I want you to be able to lead us to the research centre with your eyes closed. Kartha--"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll check my first aid kit. See if anything appeared in there while I had my back to it. ...What?" he asked, feigning innocence in front of the sergeant's glare. Xander lost interest. He already knew how that show ended.

Annie and the pilot were hunched over the map, talking to each other in low tones -- not low enough that Xander couldn't make their words out despite the sergeant's loudly lecturing Kartha on proper respect due to superiors.

"And here, there's a marsh," said the pilot, his finger right in the middle of the two points marked on the plan.

"We've walked in mud before...."

"Not on Gaia. You don't want to go anywhere near mud on Gaia. Trust me, the additional day is a far better option."

Annie took in the serious expression of the pilot and said, "I believe you."

Xander believed him too. Man-eating mud. They were stranded on a planet that had *man-eating mud*.

"Xander!"

Xander jerked around to face the sergeant. "Sir, yes sir."

The man gestured him closer, until they were barely a breath away from each other.

Xander barely refrained of rolling his eyes. "Yes, sir?" he asked again, lowering his voice, too low to be understood by—fuck it, no one could talk low enough to not attract everyone else's attention in this tin can. Xander hoped the sergeant didn't want to be discreet because they were most definitely anything but.

"I need to know how we are going to deal with him." The sergeant gave a nod of his head toward the back of the room.

"Him?" Was he talking about Nicholas?

"The Berserker, Xander!" Everyone turned to stare at them and now the sergeant was glaring at Xander like it was his fault everyone had heard his outburst. He leaned closer to the

sergeant to better try to mask their conversation, even though there was no doubt in his mind that everyone already knew what had been and would be said.

"What, you don't just order him around like one of us?"

The sergeant looked genuinely surprised by that idea. He looked above Xander's shoulder to where the Berserker was still passively sitting on a chair. "Hey, you..."

"Tarim," Xander supplied. The sergeant paused, as if the concept of an armour possessing a name demanded consideration or something. Which, said like that, did sound weird. Xander huffed in annoyance and turned to face the armour too.

"Tarim!" The helmet pivoted to look at him. Xander made a 'come here' gesture. "Could you come here a minute?" he tacked on, just in case Tarim didn't get the motion while in his suited-up state. He had almost tried 'move your ass back here', but what if the Berserker took offense to that? Plus his mum had always said that politeness could get you anything. It was proven true, kind of, when the giant armour stood up and joined them in the corner. At once, the sergeant looked less intimidating and a lot more intimidated. Still, he squared his shoulders and his voice came out without any hint of his earlier hesitation.

"Soldier, you are going to come with us. I want you to help my men to the best of your ability. Understood?"

There was a long silence. And then, coming from the helmet, a heavily distorted version of Tarim's voice answered, "Sir, yes sir." Everyone in the room gaped like a fish, even Xander. Tarim, at his most grumpy, when he was still giving Xander the cold shoulder, had never sounded as bad as he had just now. A shiver travelled down his spine at the simple memory of that dead and toneless voice.

No one else noticed anything—but no one else had any experience with Tarim, the real Tarim. The sergeant gave an approving nod and said, "Good." The others went back to what they were doing. Xander established that the sergeant was done with him and walked away. Just in case the horrible voice should come out of the helmet again. Stephen, who was straightening just as he walked near him, gave him an understanding look and commented, "Guess you get just as freaked out as the rest of us after all."

Xander wanted to hit him. He didn't.

Eventually, everyone was ready to go. Even Xander, who found a way to tie his backpack across his torso, so that he could carry it without it resting on his bad shoulder. It had the benefit of leaving him with a free hand to wield his gun. But, if it came to that, he might as well aim for his own head, because he couldn't aim for shit with his left hand and the right was currently strapped to his chest.

The jungle was... green. Full of roots to trip on, of green things that left green ichor on their clothes, of strange-looking—were those insects? Could they be called insects? They had wings and no feathers; surely they were some kind of insects?

But the most important part was that, so far, there were still no signs of any man-eating anything.

Xander found out very quickly that his best wouldn't do for the trip. Between the drugs, the injuries of the last few months, and the lack of proper exercise due to said injuries, he was winded and tired hours before any of the others showed any sign of fatigue. In addition to that, the constant onslaught of pain made him grumpy. When Kartha approached him to ask if he was all right, he was shot down in flames.

When he didn't think his mood could sour any further, he looked to the side and saw Tarim. What truly pulled Xander down was the way he never seemed to look in Xander's direction.

They made a pit stop around mid-afternoon. Xander was half-relieved, because he didn't think he could have made another step, and half-annoyed, because now that they had stopped, he knew he couldn't get back up and make another step.

That was when Kartha struck again. He crouched at Xander's side with a plastic thingy in his hand that he shoved at him. "Put this in your mouth and take a deep breath, then blow slowly," he ordered. Someone snickered in the background.

Xander hesitated but the sergeant was looking at him--hell, everybody was looking at him--and he had already hit his drama queen quota for the day.

He did as told. Inhaling was like breathing in smoke and exhaling provoked a raspy sound in his lungs that wouldn't have sounded any different coming from a eighty-year-old chain-smoker. It made Xander cough. Once his coughing had abated, though, he felt much better.

Kartha noticed. "There," he said, "that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

Xander rubbed his face to hide the blush he felt coming. "Thanks. Sorry." God, he was so pathetic. When he looked up the only eyes still on him were Nicholas'. All the others were already back to their sandwiches and, in Stephen and Kartha's case, a silent game of rock-paper-scissors.

"What's the matter with you?" Xander snapped.

Nicholas looked toward a row of trees and Xander suddenly noticed that the armour was nowhere in sight. Nicholas tentatively got to his feet. Xander tried to glare him away, but that didn't work. Nicholas next to Xander's boots and crouched there.

"Don't you dare," hissed Xander. "Go away before *he* comes back."

"Xander, I just.... Can we just talk? I've been thinking and...." Before Xander could say something nasty about Nicholas and thinking, there were branches breaking in the nearest thicket. The Berserker was back.

Xander half-expected to see him lunge for Nicholas and felt a twinge of disappointment when it didn't. But then Nicholas was already backing away and Tarim must not have thought he posed a threat. Or maybe the Berserker didn't care at all.

The armour's return marked the end of their rest.

Thanks to the thing Kartha had made him inhale, Xander was able to follow the group, though he didn't break any record and stuck with the end of the column where the green and the mud was already trampled and thus easier to walk on. For some reason, the Berserker stopped doing his back-and-forth inspection and stuck to the head of the line.

At the end of the day, the score was ten for the humans (squad of eight minus Drake, plus pilot, plus sergeant, plus Tarim) to zero for the man-eating creatures.

There was even good news, according to Annie and the pilot. Apparently, they had covered more ground than anticipated. She added, "If we keep up this pace then we'll be there in three days instead of four."

That garnered a round of half-hearted cheers around the fire. Xander refrained entirely because he was well-behaved and not at all because he felt like crumbling on the ground and die. Also, he was saving his energy to do his part of the work. Because everyone on the squad had a job. It wasn't always official, but that was the way they did things. Nicholas was their quartermaster, Annie was their map specialist, Kartha was the medic, Stephen was plain old muscle, Billy was...well everyone was glad if Billy didn't get them in trouble (also, he was

very good at finding good spots to establish camp), Drake had been their communication officer, Samuel had a pair of eyes like a hawk and could shoot anything with a rifle, and Xander cooked—and good cooking was at the root of a troop's spirit, as any person with two brain cells would tell you.

Xander was ready to make his most famous dish: *we-don't-have-much-so-be-thankful it's-at-least-warm*. Which wasn't as bad as the title would lead one to think. It wasn't as good as fresh ingredients would have made it either, but the advantage of traveling rations was that they didn't need any cutting or peeling. They did need opening, though, and that was just awkward with only one hand, especially when he was so tired he couldn't walk straight, much less open rations packs.

Everyone must have seen him look at the rations with tears of frustration in his eyes. No one moved. He didn't know if it was due to Tarim's presence, or just payback for his treating them like they were jerks who thought his homosexual ass deserved to get offered to a Berserker. He didn't need them anyway.

The first pack went mostly in the pot, save a few pieces of dried vegetable that ended on his lap. The second pack was more half in, half out. Hands ripped the third pack from him and opened it with an efficiency that... was just nice. Annie opened the rest of the pack without saying a word and that was nice too, until Billy ruined it by commenting about women in the kitchen. Nicholas told him to shut up. Tarim—well, Tarim didn't talk and that was nice because no one wanted to hear the voice of the dead coming out of the armour. No one.

The score changed at around one in the morning. The humans were still at ten (everyone who had survived the original landing was still standing), but the man-eating team got four new players in, mangy cat-like things about the size of a tiger, if tigers came in green with spikes on their back.

There was much flailing about and running—Xander mostly. And the creatures seemed set on getting at least one of them for their dinner—Xander, by the looks of it—as they kept throwing people to the ground to try and bite off their throats—Xander's especially. In fact, he spent most of the fifteen minutes following the beginning of the attack thinking he had drawn his last breath.

And, no, it wasn't funny. It was just that the fourth time one of the creatures managed to trip him and put a sharply clawed paw on his chest to keep him there while it ate his windpipe -- well, that fourth time? He just lost it and started laughing like a crazy person. Which was a good thing really, because it startled the creature and gave Samuel that extra second that he needed to kill it.

Tarim missed most of that, seeing as he was playing bulldozer with another creature in the bushes.

Someone--the sergeant?--slapped Xander. The sting brought him out of his hysteria instantly. "I'm done. Don't hit, I'm done!"

The sergeant considered him for a second longer and Xander thought he might get hit again anyway. Instead, he lowered his hand and shouted, "The fuck did you think you were doing, flailing around like that, soldier!? When the enemy attack, you pull out your weapon and you shoot!"

Xander knew the moment he pointed his holster and opened his mouth to say, "It's stuck," that it wasn't the right thing to say. Not the right thing at all.

The Sergeant grabbed him by the brace and jerked it open. "Then don't put it back on until we get to the centre and use your damn hand for something good for once. Wanking days are over, soldier."

And maybe the next bit was the sergeant's fault. But Xander was of the opinion that the man had been very worried he would have to explain one more death and was just taking his fear out on the easiest target. So really it was Xander's fault for yelping like he did.

Anyway, one moment Tarim was standing at the edge of the camp, waiting for his orders like a good robot; the next he was at the sergeant's throat, threatening to do with his hand what the creatures had been trying with a mouthful of teeth. Now, if he had done that to the creatures, Xander would have gladly stood aside and cheered. But since it was happening to his immediate superior, he had to do something. Since he couldn't think of anything better he did the exact same thing he had done the last time this situation had occurred. He threw himself at the armour and wedged himself between the Berserker and his sergeant.

By some miracle, this second incident ended with only minor bruising all around. Added with the scratches from the feline creatures, it was very annoying, but it didn't make walking harder, so he counted it as a win. Xander also followed the sergeant's advice and stored the brace away. His shoulder hurt more, but he could reach for his gun. His balance was better too. It was worth feeling a bit achier if it gave him a better chance of not getting eaten.

The second day got off to a good start, if an early one, because no one really felt like sleeping after the feline ninja attack. But of course, it could only last so long.

It started very unspectacularly with a question from Annie that went along the lines of: "Does anyone else hear that?"

Everyone stopped to listen but no one heard anything.

Which was why everyone ignored her the second time she stopped to look wonderingly at the surrounding greenery.

Everyone heard the next weird sound though: a loud rustling in the bushes. Lots of loud rustling, actually. Coming from all around them.

"That doesn't sound good," Stephen said, because he had a talent for stating the obvious.

Then the rustling got louder and closer, until it was coming straight from the other side of a bush that had seemed enormous when they had had to cross through—but wasn't that wide when Xander really thought about it—and, suddenly, there was a gigantic... thing, coming straight at them. Xander saw a lot of grey skin—scales?—and at least four tusks.

The animal disappeared before anyone could make sense of it, leaving only crushed vegetation behind. And the rustling hadn't stopped yet.

"We don't want to see whatever it was fleeing from do we?" Samuel's voice was half-drowned in the ambient noise but everyone heard him.

They also all heard Annie when she said, "I told you there was a weird noise." For once, Xander wasn't the only one who looked like he wanted to strangle her.

Their chances of outrunning whatever was behind them were pretty slim, so they upped their pace and hoped the danger wasn't advancing in their direction. It worked for the rest of the day. Mainly.

A little before sunset, Nicholas had the unfortunate idea to look behind his shoulder. Xander was bringing up the rear and had no trouble to follow the play of emotion on his face. It was quite simple: curiosity, surprise, understanding, and finally worry and just a tinge of horror.

"Guys." His voice broke at the end and it sounded like a question but really it wasn't. Everyone turned around to see what warranted the call for attention and a similar suite of expressions crossed their faces. Xander didn't want to look back, but he couldn't kid himself that Nicholas was hallucinating. When he turned around, he could have sworn there were trees following them. Then he realised they weren't following so much as falling forward, broken by some invisible creature advancing in the forest. Xander right knew then that they were screwed.

Their packs were nearly abandoned, only kept because the sergeant screamed at them that if he saw anyone leave something behind he would make sure they got court-martialled to death. And since they could just abandon them later if they needed to, everyone kept their stuff and started running.

The first person had started running straight ahead, but then Annie shouted, "Not this way, we're headed for the marsh!" and she steered them further on the left. Xander was glad to have her. If things ever went back to normal it wouldn't last, but right now he was so glad to have her.

Despite Annie's warning, they still ended wading ankle-deep in swamp water. It made running more tiring. They kept moving for another kilometre, after which Xander stumbled and got a faceful of stale water. That marked the end of the running.

"Xander," asked Samuel after half an hour, "is it still following us?"

"Look for yourself!" Xander answered.

"No way. Nicholas?"

"I'm afraid to end up like Xander."

"A wet uniform isn't the worst that can happen to you," interrupted Annie. "If you're so worried, Samuel, just turn your head and look."

"You're heartless Annie."

"And you're a poltroon. 'sides something that massive would certainly make enough noise to warn us."

"Shut up, Annie; no one says 'poltroon'."

Billy jerked a thumb toward Xander. "Yes, know-it-all women. He said it too once."

"Shut up, Billy, or the know-it-all women are going to kick your homophobic ass," Annie spat.

She would have said more but Xander intervened. "Talk for yourself, Annie. I'm not going near Billy's ass."

"Aww, Xander, I thought your delicate homo sensibilities would have more respect for my ass," Billy teased.

"I don't know about the other homos, but I know how often you shower that ass and that's just repulsive. No offense, dirt-bag."

"Shut up everyone!" interrupted the sergeant. "I think it's getting closer."

They looked around, the trees were definitively closer, but not close enough to warrant running yet.

"What the fuck is that?"

"I don't know. Drop your packs and run!"

It was finally happening. They were being chased by a man-eating pile of *mud*. A hill,

really—a shrubbery was growing on top of it for God's sake!—with a wide hole at the front that looked like a mouth, if stared at cross-eyed. There were also two black holes that looked like eyes but that might have been burrows. For all Xander knew, the hill thing had bunny parasites and that was their home. But it did look like eyes. And shit, but that shrubbery thing looked like a mohawk, making this the most ridiculous monster Xander had ever seen in his entire life. He was going to have nightmares about it, he just knew it!

Everything went as well as a desperate chase between humans and a man-eating hill could go, right until the ground started to shake under their feet.

As it happened, giant, moving hills also had their predators. It was just a matter of finding a big enough stampede of elephants. Yes, elephants. They were grey, and had big ears, a long nose, and tusks, so no one cared if they had six legs and prehensile thumbs, or if Annie disagreed, they were elephants and that was that.

The hill didn't have enough sense to recognize when it was outmatched and started fighting. The elephants were going to win anyway, so they fought back.

The Berserker reached the end of its tether while everyone else was fighting for their lives and they didn't notice straight away that he was acting weird. Until it became obvious that the Berserker wasn't discriminating his opponent as much as he could and just attacked whatever was closest to him. The ran out of creatures and there was no more stepping away and hoping he turned on the nearest elephant.

"Oh God, he's going to kill us! Do something, Xander, he's going to kill us!"

And wouldn't that be a good thing, if it stopped everyone screaming insanities left and right? Regardless, there was nothing Xander could do. Two or three pairs of hands had him in a death-grip and held him between the knot of his companion and the raging Berserker.

The armour was covered in gore and bits of elephants that were elephants even with prehensile thumbs and now was really not the moment to get distracted, Xander!

So, gory armour looking his way, terrified companions keeping him at the front. But that was his job, wasn't it? The other side of his job, the one that managed to be even less pleasant than being paid to be the Berserker's friend-slash-fuck-buddy. And Xander was brilliant at this fuck-buddy job, wasn't he? So he was going to be brilliant at the stop-the-berserker-from-going-friendly-fire part too. Because lives were at stake and his was first on the list.

While he had his little breakdown, the armour had not remained still. It was now coming at them in long, purposeful strides. It was holding a tusk like it was a club, repeating something in a low voice that had Xander struggling to make out the words. And really, he should have known better than to think he might want to understand any of them.

The armour's chant of war was just an endless litany of *get me out, get me out, get me out* in that dead voice Xander hated more every time he heard it. To tell the truth, this fucked-up chant filled him with a revulsion that almost overwhelmed his terror.

"Tarim," Xander called. He didn't know if it would work but he was pretty sure running wouldn't, and by now he would have said anything just to drown the words coming from the armour. "Tarim, it's alright, the monsters are gone now you can stop." The armour didn't react. "Tarim, come on, Tarim, we're on your side. We're your friends."

"Get me out, get me out, get me...."

"Please, Tarim! Please, we're your friends, I'm your friend. Remember me? Please don't do.... No! What are you...."

They had shoved him forward. As he smacked against the armour, the only thing that

registered in Xander's mind was that *they had shoved him forward*. Not all of them, Nicholas was insulting someone and asking to be let go of. But at least one pair of hands had shoved him at the Berserker.

The Berserker who was now looking down at him, silent for a second—but what did it matter what happened for only a second? In the next second, the chant of "let me go" had been replaced by a cry full of hurt and fear. It went straight through Xander's chest, right to where the shard of ice was, and melted it right off.

Xander realised what had happened, but he couldn't think about it. He didn't have time. Things in his body were hurting that called for his immediate attention. Some of those things he didn't even know he had until they started to hurt. Like whatever was on the right side of his abdomen. That hurt a lot. Or the part between his neck and his feet, that hurt so much he had difficulties telling where the pain started and where it ended. Whatever didn't hurt, he just wasn't feeling right now. Any moment now he was going to black out anyway.

Any moment.

Any....

Kartha didn't make any remark about pills this time. As soon as Xander woke up, he just crushed five into powder, mixed that powder in a plastic bag full of water, and then worked to drown Xander with his mixture. Amongst all these things, the only one that struck Xander as out of place was the water. It looked clean.

It was dark and Xander thought he was having a nightmare, because someone was screaming in fear and pain. But it wasn't Tarim. The voice sounded like Billy. Then there were torches moving around, cries, roars, gunshots. Silence. More bitter water to swallow or drown.

He was followed by a hill. No, a man with a gaping mouth, two black pits for eyes and a mohawk. The man was wearing a big black armour. The armour turned white. Why was Xander running from Tarim?

"Thirsty...."

"Shush, we're nearly there."

"Where is...."

"Making sure we all die of a heart attack."

"...rim...."

"Over there. Don't worry Xander, your precious Tarim is over there."

"Where...."

"He's not going to make it, is he?"

At the end of the tunnel the light was a wrong colour. Xander knew if he went there, then he had to leave someone behind, because the light was the wrong fucking colour. So he didn't go. He just wished he could remember who and why.

Xander glared at his backpack when the shirt he had been trying to put inside it one-handed caught on the zipper and unfolded. Again.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?"

Xander glared at Nicholas. "Yes, I can do it."

"Obviously you can't," commented Annie from the other side of Xander's bed. But she didn't touch the shirt.

"The doctors said you should stay. They said two weeks, Xander."

No one understood, Nicholas least of all. Annie didn't get it either, but at least she recognized it.

She had been there with Nicholas, spending every spare minute of their time at his bedside, telling him about the journey to get him, and all the rest of them, away from the dangerous, the deathly and the downright monstrous. They had glossed over the details of the terrible *accident* that had befallen Billy on the second night.

"Such a shame that Samuel wasn't able to shoot sooner," Nicholas said at the end, sounding anything *but* sorry.

When Xander said he'd had enough of the hospital bed and wanted to return to his room, though, Nicholas had listed all the reasons why Xander couldn't, shouldn't and mustn't. Xander knew Annie wasn't against him when she didn't add any.

They didn't get it, but it didn't matter in the end. They were back on the Galatea, and the Captain and his attendant treated Tarim like a favoured pet. On the captain's next visit, he conversed with the doctor until the man agreed that a bed was a bed and Xander could be taken receive his treatment just as efficiently in his own room.

The condition was that Xander should pack his own bag and get to his room on his own. He wasn't all that sure that his body was up for the walk back to his room, but still, he was packing his own bag, and nearly done too. He would figure out how to get himself to his room when the time came. One thing at a time.

Grant, the captain's attendant, wheeled Xander to his room himself.

They passed the curtains, and there was the red-hued darkness. A soft song was playing, its words in a language Xander didn't understand despite the fact that he could recite them by heart by now. On the bed, a white figure was laying in a foetal position.

Even the armour hadn't been able to ward off the creature's attack entirely, and the beautiful white skin of Tarim was still marred with bruises. Xander had learnt later that Tarim had made the last part of the journey on a broken leg. No one had suspected anything until they took him out of the armour. With the cocktail of drugs, pain, and stress, it had been a miracle he hadn't been Berserking out at anything that moved. Yet, Xander's squad had affirmed that he had behaved like a mouse after Xander's blackout had made him regain his senses.

His meds must have been messing with his head, because Xander felt tears come to his eyes

"Thanks Grant," he said softly.

"Anytime. Tell him to eat properly."

The figure on the bed unfurled slowly.

"Hi," Xander said when the two red eyes landed on him.

"Hi," answered Tarim hoarsely; his eyes were very wet and he started to sob, but a smile spread across his face despite it. "I'm glad to have you back."

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/216753.html>

Bodies in Space

by shukyoku (主教)

illustrated by Neru Momochimuchi (百千鞭練)

Isaac didn't make mistakes. He was a very thorough and hard worker, and had been praised for that by his supervisor on so many occasions that he'd lost count, and something had to happen very many times before Isaac lost count of it.

He'd made a mistake today, though, and the part of the computer that checked his work for mistakes told him of his error with a box with a message in it saying that he needed to check again. After that he took his break (the one he was supposed to take twice every day, even though he usually didn't and just said that he had) and went to stand in the bathroom with the light off and the rattling old duct fan on for exactly ten minutes. When he had counted six hundred seconds, he turned on the light again and took two pieces of paper out of his wallet.

One was a picture of Saturn, its rings, and two of its moons; that picture had arrived on earth on November 3, 1980, exactly six years, four months, and three days before Isaac was born, though it had been taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft before that, because light took time to travel no matter where in the universe you were (at least on the scale at which humans and spacecraft operated).

The other was a list of things from Dr. Mazzy that were okay, and the third thing on the list was 'making mistakes'. He read the whole list over four times, focusing on those two words in particular. He didn't forget things; sometimes he just didn't remember to remember them.

He decided it was okay to make a mistake when he was excited, and he was excited. On Friday, Rick would be back. That made thinking about anything else difficult.

In the end, the computer was the only one who noticed Isaac's mistake, and it wouldn't be disappointed with him or tell anyone else about it so long as he fixed it, and he did. When the clock said 5:00:00 PM, he logged out, neatened his workspace, put his empty lunch bag in his backpack, and got on his bicycle. He obeyed all traffic laws, including the one about wearing a helmet. At first he hadn't liked the way it made his head feel, but Rick had brought back stickers from all over the world and helped Isaac arrange them over the shiny blue surface, and now Isaac liked wearing it. For the past four months and two days, Rick had been in Mozambique; Isaac didn't have a sticker from Mozambique yet.

At dinner his mother kissed his forehead as she brought him his plate and asked him about how his day had been. He didn't tell her about the mistake, because Rick had taught him that when people asked questions like that, unless there was something terribly wrong, Isaac should say that it had been fine. "Fine," he said, and she smiled, which made him happy. He liked making her happy.

His father's workday had been less fine, and he told Isaac's mother about it while Isaac separated the peas from where they'd run into the mashed potatoes. That was something else that Rick had taught him: that he didn't have to be mad when food touched, that he could make it stop touching. Rick was smart and went all over the world with his camera and had filmed people who made entire television shows about how to survive in places like the desert and the tundra. Isaac watched those shows over and over, even though they weren't about space, because he liked thinking about how this was what the world must look like from behind Rick's eyes.

"Does he need someone to pick him up?" asked Isaac's father, and then he was quiet until

Isaac realized that the words were for him and looked up. "Does he have a ride?"

"A car," said Isaac. The airport was too far away for Isaac to bike to, and he'd tried.

Isaac's mother smiled. "Did he say who's driving the car?"

"Mrs. Headley." Rick's mother was nice and made Isaac lemon cookies for his birthday every year and once took Isaac and Rick to the planetarium where Rick had held Isaac's hand the whole show and punched the boy who'd laughed at them when he'd seen it.

"She should stay for dinner," said Isaac's mother. "I'll make lasagna. Can you invite her, please, Isaac?"

Isaac pulled out his phone and opened its email client. *You are invited to dinner with us on Friday March 23 after you bring your son Rick to our house after he is at the airport*, he tapped into the subject line of the email. He looked this over and added in the body, *It will be lasagna*. That done, he closed the phone and put it away. Isaac's mother didn't approve of his having it out at family meals.

After supper, he put away the leftovers and did the dishes, then said good-night to his parents and went to his apartment over the garage. His parents and Rick had helped him remodel it when he'd finished high school and decided that it wasn't right for an adult to live with his parents any longer. He'd spent his entire summer on that project, and when he'd finished, he'd made two small rooms and a bathroom out of the large space and curtained-off toilet that had been there when his parents had bought the house. One of the rooms was his bedroom, and the other had just been a room at first, but had become Rick's Room as soon as Rick had gotten his film internship and needed somewhere to keep his camera equipment. There was small bed in there, and sometimes Rick slept in it, and sometimes he didn't.

Isaac did his yoga exercises for thirty minutes, bending his body however the woman on the DVD told him to. He loved yoga because it was slow and didn't make him frustrated because everything went by too fast. When Rick was here, they'd do it together. Rick was graceful and athletic and never fell over during poses the way Isaac did and never laughed at Isaac when he fell over during poses, just smiled and helped him back up.

Exercises completed, Isaac turned off the lights and took off his clothes. His laptop was on the table by his bed, and he took it and opened it to a webpage of free pornography. There were so many men together on this site, and they all looked different, but Isaac liked the men that looked like Rick best: the darkest skin, shaved heads, lots of muscles. He clicked on a link that opened a video where two men, both of whom looked like Rick, were kissing and only wearing dark grey underwear. Isaac had seen this one several times before, but he liked watching things he'd seen before. Familiarity was safe.

The taller one of the men put his hands on the other's hips and started tugging his underwear down, and Isaac thought about what Rick would look like doing the same thing. Down went the underwear, revealing a large, dark penis that looked big enough already, but which Isaac knew would get bigger as soon as the other man put it in his mouth. That had been the thing Isaac had worried about the most when he'd started his research, how much of one another men seemed comfortable with putting in their mouths. He'd gotten over that by trying to imagine what Rick would have said to him about that, and then imagining that Rick told *him* to imagine that they'd all taken showers right before they started.

The laptop on his belly blocked Isaac's view of his own penis, but he could feel it getting bigger as he watched the men and thought about Rick, until it tapped the back of the laptop shell with its tip. He'd spent several of his teenage years very mad at his penis and how it had a mind of its own. He could make his hands and feet and all the other parts of his body do what

he wanted, but no matter how much he yelled at it, it would never listen. As with so many other things in the world, he'd needed Rick to show him how to appreciate it.

On the screen, the men got naked and touched one another with their hands and their mouths, and Isaac had seen it happen so many times by now that it was like watching the ballet dancers on PBS shows, only dancers didn't have the same effect on him the men on the video did. Rick had told Isaac once that he didn't want to kiss girls, and Isaac had said that he didn't want to kiss girls either, and Rick had laughed and said it wasn't the same because Isaac didn't want to kiss girls *or* boys. That had been true right up until Isaac had figured that he could kiss Rick sometimes when they were alone, at which point he'd amended his earlier statement to reflect how he wanted to kiss boys a lot, but only if those boys were Rick, and Rick had laughed and kissed him some more.

He knew that Rick did more than kiss other boys while he was away, though, more than kiss and more than the touching that he and Rick shared while they lay together face-to-face in Isaac's narrow bed. The first time he'd had that thought, which had come into his head from out of nowhere, he'd cried for two hours and been unable to explain to his mother what had made him so sad. On the screen, the two men were turned so they were facing one another on the bed, except that one was the wrong way on the bed so they could put their penises in one another's mouths. Rick probably liked doing that, Isaac thought, and his penis twitched and tapped against the back of the laptop.

That was enough watching for now. Isaac closed the tab with the video in it and placed his laptop on the floor. He lay there in the dark, his eyes shut, hands flat against the mattress on either side of his hips. He thought about seeing Rick's penis for the first time; he'd felt it but never seen it, and he assumed it would look like the ones the men in the video had, even though Isaac's own was shorter and redder than theirs. He thought about putting his mouth on it and making Rick make the noises the men in the video made, which had sounded bad at first, but which he'd figured out were actually good, which wasn't too much of a surprise, because as far as Isaac could tell the world was full of people who said things they didn't actually mean all the time. He thought about the way the men in the video moved their mouths and practiced moving his own mouth the same way. At last, he put his hand on his own penis and bit his lip as he had an orgasm (as he *came*, that was what Rick said when that happened) that left semen all over his chest.

He kept a towel by the side of his bed that he cleaned himself up with, and when that was done he tucked himself beneath all the blankets on his bed, still naked. He didn't like to do that to himself very often, because when he did, he had to be alone afterwards, and what he wanted instead was to be able to put his head on Rick's chest and listen to Rick's heartbeat. Rick wasn't there, though, so Isaac shut his eyes and began to list all the four-digit prime numbers. By the time he got to 2347, he was too sleepy to keep whispering them aloud, and before he even reached the six thousands, he was asleep.

Isaac let Rick walk in the front door and set down his heavy duffel before throwing his arms around Rick's neck and pressing his forehead against Rick's shoulder. Rick's arms were around his waist a half-second later, squeezing him tight. "Hey, stranger," Rick said in a soft voice, and that was a joke because they weren't strangers at all, they were *best friends*. Rick had explained the concept one summer afternoon while they'd been walking together back from the 7-11, and Isaac had agreed, yes, that definition fit. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Rick," Isaac said. "You should come back to America and not stay in Mozambique."

"I think so too! That's why I'm back!" Rick gave Isaac two pats on his back to let Isaac know that the hug should be over, and Isaac nodded and stepped back, giving his parents enough room to hug Rick too.

Behind Rick came Rick's mother, Mrs. Headley. She wasn't a Mrs. anymore, Isaac's mother had explained, because Rick's father and mother weren't married anymore, and Rick's father lived in a different part of Baltimore and only saw Rick sometimes and never gave Rick presents except on his birthday and once for high school graduation. She was small and skinny, and now a lot of her black hair was silver. Isaac gave her a hug, just a little one, and he counted to three while he did it, and on three he let go.

"How was your flight?" asked Isaac's mother, holding Rick's arm as she led them to the dining room table. The lasagna had been ready for an hour, but Rick's arrival had been delayed, so she'd kept it warming in the oven while they'd waited. Isaac had set the table for everyone with the good plates, which were white and had little blue flowers around the rim.

Rick sighed as he sat down. "Long. But that wasn't the holdup. They sent us through customs twice. Something with the producer's paperwork sent off some red flag, so some poor government employee had to look through all my camera equipment and dirty underwear again."

Isaac's father laughed, but not a mean laugh. "After dinner, I'll start the washing machine, and you can just open your bag upside-down right over the top of it." He mimed doing so, which made Rick laugh with him.

Rick's mother folded her napkin in her lap. "I feel bad, just dropping him off here with all his washing-up still to do...."

Isaac's mother shook her head and touched Rick's mother on her shoulder. "Oh, we're just glad to have him back too, Paulette. Besides, he does it himself! We just provide the machinery." Every time Rick came home from being away, his mother would say things like 'I feel bad' and 'are you sure you don't mind?' to Isaac's mother. Isaac didn't understand why, since Rick had his house and his bed and his editing equipment here and had told Isaac he liked staying there better than he liked the idea of sleeping on the couch in his mother's sister's or newest boyfriend's apartment, but Isaac didn't ask. Instead, he took a piece of twisted garlic bread from the basket on the table, untwisted the two strands, and ate each one separately.

Isaac let most of the dinner conversation go by him when Rick wasn't talking. It was easy to do: he stopped thinking of the things that were coming out of people's mouths as words and started thinking of them as sound without meaning, signal without substance, like the background noise of the universe picked up by radio telescopes. He didn't like large groups, and anything larger than two was a large group.

Instead of talking, he ate his meal and looked at Rick. Rick's hands were big and dark, and he had a new scar on the back of one thumb, a puckered pink line that hadn't been there when he'd left. He had a braided twine bracelet around his left wrist; Isaac hated the way jewelry of any kind felt, but Rick looked good in it. Little black curls had started to form atop his head and on his chin, the way they did when he'd gone too long without shaving either. Isaac fought back the urge to lean over and see if Rick's skin tasted any different after being in Mozambique; he knew that wasn't a thing to test in front of parents, and anyway, Rick would let him try later.

"A fishing boat," said Rick, and the way he held up his scarred thumb to let the rest of the people at the table see let Isaac know that he was talking about it, so Isaac started listening again. "The day after we landed, we were just off the coast getting some shots in this little thing,

all three of us -- me, one of my producers, and the fisherman -- in a boat that I didn't want to get into in the first place, because it looked like even a little wave might send it over. So I made Dana -- he's my producer -- go with me to get the shots, so if you can imagine all three of us -- me with my only remotely waterproof camera, Dana, who's this grumpy white guy in his forties with a big Santa Claus beard, and this skinny little African fisherman who's got to be twice as old as both of us put together -- cramped together inside a bunch of boards that made a space ... couldn't have been wider than this table, and not a lot longer."

Isaac could imagine. He didn't always know what to imagine when people told their stories, but Rick told good stories, and sometimes he told the stories a second and third and fourth time while he showed Isaac his footage on the little editing TVs in Rick's Room. It was what Dr. Mazzy talked about all the time, empathy, and once he'd asked Isaac why he thought having empathy for Rick was easier for Isaac than having empathy for other people, and Isaac had told him that most people didn't have film footage to go with their feelings.

"So we get two miles out from shore, easy, and the waves start to pick up, going from just batting the boat back and forth to really pitching and rocking. The fisherman looks fine -- he's been doing this literally every day of his life since he was five or six -- but Dana's starting to look real green. Seasick," Rick added, looking at Isaac, and Isaac nodded; 'green' was an idiom that when used to describe people meant 'ill' or 'jealous' or 'ecologically friendly', and sometimes Isaac didn't know which one applied. "And he leaned a little too close to the edge just as the wave pushed the other side of the boat too high, and bam!" Rick clapped his hands together. "Over the side, into Maputo Bay."

Rick's mother and Isaac's mother both put their hands to their mouths, and Rick just grinned. "I mean, I didn't know what to do -- I'm barely hanging on myself, and I've got fifty pounds of really expensive equipment on or near me. And of course, that's when I see the sharks."

"Oh no!" Isaac smacked his hands flat on either side of his head. He wasn't really distressed -- obviously the story had a happy ending, or Rick wouldn't be here telling it -- but the story was getting interesting, and that's how people showed they were interested.

Still wearing his big grin that showed most of his front teeth, Rick one hand on Isaac's shoulder and pointed off in the distance, back to some now-unseen place where sleek bodies circled just beneath the surface of the water. "So I'm in a panic, because he's here sputtering and splashing, and he doesn't see them, and I don't think the fisherman sees them either, so I do the only thing I know how to do, which is just grab over the side of the boat and haul him back in. I grab his shirt and use the camera bag on the other side for a counterweight and just yank--" Rick mimed the gesture, clenching his hands around some imaginary drowning man's imaginary shirt. "And then we're both back in the boat, soaking wet, while the fisherman's looking at him like he's stupid for falling over and at me like I'm crazy for not waiting for the life preserver and rope he's holding like he's half a second ready from throwing.

"And yeah, okay, that might have been a little easier, but I'm pointing in the water and telling him, no, not there's sharks in there! But his English isn't that good, and I don't know five words of Portuguese, so I take the chance that the Spanish word will be close enough, and I'm here pointing and shouting, '*Tiburón! ¡Tiburones in el agua!*' And he just stares at me for a minute before I can see what I'm saying starts to make sense, and he then he just *laughs* at me and starts paddling the boat back to shore."

"He wasn't worried about sharks?" asked Isaac's father.

Rick laughed and shook his head. "Oh, no, he would have been *very* worried about

sharks, especially if they'd ventured that close to the shore. As it was, the moral of the story is that I still had a lot to learn about Mozambique, and that included how to tell the difference between a cluster of tiger sharks and a school of herring."

That made Isaac and Rick's parents laugh, though Isaac didn't think anything was funny, so he didn't join them. He'd seen sharks before, at the aquarium, but he didn't think he'd ever seen a herring. He'd like to go to the aquarium with Rick now that Rick was back. They could go to the dark room with all the jellyfish and hold hands and watch the little glowing bodies spin and twirl inside their tiny tanks. Isaac liked that room best because the jellyfish looked like they were in space.

"Meanwhile *I* call him a week later," said Rick's mother, "and he tells me, everything's great here, Mama, the weather's so nice and pretty, and I'm getting my stitches out tomorrow."

"I didn't even notice it at the time, not until we got back to shore and I noticed first that my whole sleeve and shirt were covered in blood, and *then* that it was coming from me." Rick held out his hand in a sideways thumbs-up (or, Isaac supposed, a sideways thumbs-down) where Isaac could see the jagged scar. "That boat was held together with a lot of prayer and a lot of nails, and one of them poked just a *little* too far out the side...."

Isaac's mother shivered even though the room wasn't cold. "Stitches *and* a tetanus shot, I hope."

"Funny enough, after that thing with the bear trap in the Yukon the September before last, I'm all caught up." Rick reached down to pat his left leg, just above the place where his jeans hid three long scratches that ran the length of his calf from knee to ankle. Isaac liked to touch them while Rick told him the story about the time he and the Tlingit wildlife activist he was filming came across a well-protected poachers' camp. "So I can keep stepping on rusty nails for at least another year and a half, no problem."

With a sigh, Isaac's mother put her hand on Rick's mother's shoulder. "It amazes me, Paulette, how you let him go do all these dangerous things."

"Jenny, I have been his mother for twenty-five years," said Rick's mother, "and I have yet to figure out how, when he wants a thing bad enough, to stop him."

After dinner Isaac helped clean the dishes and bring in the last of Rick's bags from the car inside. Rick kissed his own mother good-night, then gave Isaac's parents hugs and thanked them for letting him stay here before hefting the heaviest of his duffels and following Isaac up the stairway to the rooms over the garage. Rick was very strong; Isaac wanted to help him carry the bigger bags too, but Isaac couldn't even lift them off the ground. Instead, he was helpful by holding all the doors open for Rick, and when at last they were alone together, Rick opened his arms wide and Isaac hugged him long and hard, and Rick didn't give him a single signal that the hug should end, and Isaac didn't count to three and then let go.

Isaac's legs started to get tired, though, so he stopped hugging Rick and took off his shoes. "I had yoga every night," he said, pointing to the TV.

"Did you?" Rick grinned. "Maybe we can do some together in the morning. I'm beat, though."

That was an idiom too, one that Rick used when he was tired, not when he'd been injured or had lost a game. "Are you going to sleep in this bed in here and not that bed in there?" Isaac asked.

Rick looked at him as he unlaced his own hiking boots and put them by the door. "I'd like to, if that's okay with you."

"Okay. I'd like to. That's okay with me."

"Good," said Rick, and he took off his shirt. His body was very handsome and Isaac could see the lines many of his major muscle groups made as they pushed up from under his skin. Isaac stared openly, and Rick smiled back at him. The things Isaac did that bothered most people didn't bother Rick. "So, did you do anything fun while I was gone?"

Isaac shook his head, paused to reconsider, and nodded. "Dr. Mazzy introduced me to a new doctor. Her name is Dr. Karimi. We're going to work on Practical Life Skills. We practiced making macaroni and cheese."

Rick grinned as he took his pants off, leaving only his light blue boxer shorts on. "So, will you make some for me sometime?"

"I will. It wasn't very good." Isaac had tried so hard to remember all the steps and follow all the directions, and he'd done everything right, but the boiling water in the pot had started spilling all over the sides, and he'd been so distraught that he'd turned off the stove completely, so the noodles had been a little crunchy at the end. Isaac wasn't usually allowed to use the stove without someone's help. "I like Taco Bell better."

Rick laughed. "You *always* want to go to Taco Bell." He pulled a white t-shirt out of his bag and put it on, then touched Isaac's shoulder as he walked into the bathroom but didn't shut the door behind him. The green toothbrush by the sink was his, and he ran water over it and put toothpaste on it. Isaac didn't like brushing his teeth because he didn't like the way toothpaste tasted, but he was brave and did it anyway. "You know, I bet if you asked this Dr. Karimi about it, she'd teach you how to make a cheese quesadilla."

Isaac shook his head. "You can't make cheese quesadillas. You buy them from the menu at Taco Bell."

"But the people at Taco Bell have to make them, right? So there's got to be a way. You just have to learn it." Rick stuck the toothbrush in his mouth and started brushing.

As he brushed, Isaac looked at him, forgetting for a moment the impossibility of quesadillas and concentrating instead on Rick. He walked over behind Rick, into the small space between Rick and the wall, and put his arms around Rick's waist and his cheek against Rick's back, just between Rick's shoulderblades. Rick kept brushing with his left hand, but he put his right one over the top of Isaac's and placed one of his fingers between each one of Isaac's, until they went Rick, Isaac, Rick, Isaac, all the way to their thumbs. Isaac held on tight until he had to let go to let Rick rinse out his mouth and spit into the sink. "I need a haircut," said Rick, looking at himself in the mirror.

Isaac peeked over Rick's shoulder until he could see them both in the mirror, even though all he could see of himself was the top of his head and his light brown arms around Rick's dark brown waist. "My hair is longer than yours."

"It is. Do you want to get a haircut too? We could go together to the barber tomorrow."

"Okay." Isaac nodded. "And then Taco Bell?"

Rick laughed and turned in Isaac's arms until they were chest-to-chest in the small bathroom. His body was warm and smooth, and now he smelled like mint. "And then Taco Bell. It's a date. But first, my body thinks it's the middle of the night right now and I've *got* to get some sleep."

By the time Isaac had gotten through his whole list of nighttime bathroom steps, Rick had turned off the light and crawled into bed, so Isaac stripped down to his underwear and crawled into the space Rick had made next to him, placing his head on Rick's bicep and putting his hand on Rick's stomach just below his ribs. Rick's breathing was slow and even, and Isaac liked the way that made his hand rise and fall in time, like touching a very slow clock. He lay there

for a minute, then stretched up to where Rick's face was and kissed Rick on the mouth. Rick kissed back, petting Isaac's arm as he did. It was so dark in the bedroom that Isaac shut his eyes, because they weren't helping him anyway, and let the way Rick tasted and smelled and felt be more important.

After a short time, Rick pulled back from the kiss and touched their foreheads together. "I'm *so* tired," he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "But I missed you. I really did. I missed everything about you. I thought about you all the time."

"I thought about you all the time too," said Isaac, not because it was polite to repeat something like that but because it was true.

"Then it's good we're back together." Rick kissed him once more, a slow and gentle touch of mouths, before nudging Isaac back down to where their bodies had been before. He started to say something, but the words were cut off by a yawn, so Isaac was quiet and waited until he could continue. "Tell me something about Saturn. About one of its moons. The big one."

Isaac had told Rick about Saturn and its moons and many other astronomy things before, but Rick wasn't like Isaac, and he could almost always remember the things that people told him. He wasn't asking because he'd forgotten, though. Instead, Rick had explained once, just like Isaac liked to hear Rick's same stories again and again, Rick liked to hear Isaac talk about the things he loved, even if he'd heard Isaac talk about those same things before. "Of Saturn's 31 moons, Titan is especially targeted for its richness in organic compounds." As he spoke, he thought about the way Neil deGrasse Tyson's words looked on the PBS website; Isaac had read it a few hundred times. "That moon has its own probe, the Huygens probe, which is a deployable subprobe attached to the main Cassini spacecraft. The Huygens probe will plunge through the atmosphere—because Titan has an atmosphere, for goodness' sake! And it might have oceans, not of water but of liquid methane. You can only begin to imagine what kind of interesting chemistry we might find and what forms any possible life might take under such circumstances—perhaps life not as we know it, but as we don't know it."

He could have kept going, but he could tell from Rick's soft snoring that Rick was asleep, so instead Isaac stopped talking and listened to Rick instead. He was a little tired, but not as tired as Rick, so he stayed awake a little longer, letting Rick's breathing and heartbeat be what he imagined the background noise of the universe might sound like to the right ears.

Dr. Karimi had a large silver yoga ball in her office that Isaac was allowed to sit on instead of on a chair. He liked that better, and he wondered if his boss, Mr. Dieterich, would let him replace his office chair with a yoga ball. He sat with his hands in his lap and rocked back and forth, bouncing a little as he did, but keeping his feet flat on the floor. Today they'd worked on using the washing machine and the dryer, which was easy for Isaac because he'd helped his mother and Rick do it plenty of times before. Then Rick had come to pick him up, and Dr. Karimi had told Isaac to wait in her office while she spoke to Rick out in the hall.

He could hear their voices through the closed door, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. A little clock on Dr. Karimi's desk looked like a flower that rocked back and forth every time it clicked over a new second. Isaac stared at it for a while, then started to rock back and forth with it. The rhythm made him think of his father's math practice drills: *One times one is one. Two times two is four. Three times three is nine. Four times four is sixteen.*

Isaac liked the other students in the class. There were two boys, Andy and Henry, and one girl, Sarah. Andy had a binder full of pictures of Disney princesses and said that he wanted

to be Cinderella, and today Henry had laughed and called Andy a fucking retard gaybo, which was what he'd called Isaac last week. Isaac hadn't let it bother him -- like Rick always said, *sticks and stones can break your bones, but people are just stupid* -- but Andy had cried and then had a seizure, which had ended the lesson. Dr. Karimi had put Sarah and Isaac at a table and given them a deck of cards, and they'd played Slaps until Sarah's grandmother had come to pick her up. Sarah was good at slapping but not so good at counting, which made the game difficult.

He wasn't mad at Henry. He knew Henry didn't really mean it, or if he did, he didn't really know what he meant. Henry just couldn't help it. Two weeks ago he'd noted aloud what a bad idea it was to touch the hot burner, then two seconds later had deliberately put his hand right on top of it, which Isaac judged to be a pretty dumb move on Henry's part. But Isaac had overheard Henry's mother say they were messing with Henry's medications, and Isaac knew that always made people a little funny.

There was a picture on Dr. Karimi's wall of a big stone temple she and her husband had visited on their honeymoon to Guatemala. Dr. Karimi and her husband were in most of the picture too, but Isaac liked looking at the temple. Rick had been to Guatemala before, filming people for a documentary on the Maya that had aired last May. Rick had gone scuba-diving while he'd been down there, and told a story about the time he'd been exploring a coral reef next to another tourist, who'd decided to feed the moray eels. One huge green moray had mistaken that tourist's hand for food, and had shot out and grabbed hold of the tourist's finger (and at this point in the telling, Rick always grabbed Isaac's index finger with his own hand, though he obviously never tried to hurt Isaac the way the moray had hurt the diver man), spilling blood into the water. Rick had pulled out his dive knife and sliced the moray's head away from the rest of its body (which Rick demonstrated with a bold sweep of his left arm), but even with the animal dead, the moray's jaw wouldn't let go. He'd had to get the man out of the water before the blood attracted other animals and jam his knife between the eel's jaws, then pry the teeth out. Isaac liked this story because it had a lot of gestures in it and because he knew what a moray eel looked like; he'd seen ones when he and Rick had gone to the aquarium.

The door opened, but only Dr. Karimi came inside, and she shut it behind her. "Hello, Isaac," she said. She sat in the chair across from him.

"Hello, Dr. Karimi," Isaac said, even though they'd already said hello earlier that day. When someone said hello to you, you were supposed to say it back, unless that person was a stranger, in which case you were supposed to use your best judgment. Isaac usually said hello back anyway.

"I was just talking to Rick," she said, pointing to the closed door. The door wasn't Rick, but Rick was probably on the other side of it. "He tells me he stays with you when he's in town, and that he takes you to appointments sometimes."

Isaac nodded. "I'm going to make macaroni and cheese for him."

"That's good, you can practice." Dr. Karimi leaned forward and took Isaac's hands in hers, and it was only when she'd quieted them that he realized he'd been flapping them. Sometimes when he had nothing important to think about, he forgot about keeping quiet hands, and they started fluttering on their own. "Isaac, I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to be absolutely honest with me. All right?"

"All right," said Isaac, who liked being honest. Lying was another thing he wasn't very good at.

"I know you and Rick have been friends for a long time. But does he ever make you do anything you don't want to do?"

Isaac nodded. "Yes."

Dr. Karimi's grip on Isaac's hands tightened, and Isaac didn't like being held on to like that, but she was a doctor, and he was supposed to let doctors touch him even if he didn't like it, because doctors were only ever trying to help. "You can tell me about it."

"We went to the barber yesterday and he made me get my hair cut *very* short." Isaac reached up to touch the short curls. He didn't mind the way his hair looked when it was like this, and it *was* easier to wash, but it meant that barber had to get close to his scalp with his scissors, and Isaac didn't like the way they felt or sounded. "And then he said we should do my parents' laundry for them and clean up the house, and he even made me mop."

There was a small pause, and then Dr. Karimi sat back in her chair, loosening her grip a little. "What I meant to say is, does he ever touch you in ways you don't want to be touched?"

"No," said Isaac. He always liked it when Rick touched him, and usually when Rick wasn't touching him, that's what Isaac wanted him to be doing, even when they were in public and he knew they shouldn't.

"Well ... all right." Dr. Karimi patted Isaac's hands and stood. "But if he ever does, you know you can talk to me."

"Okay." Isaac stood up with her and let her lead him over to the door.

Rick was waiting just outside, tapping on his phone, though when he saw Isaac come out, he put the phone away. After a quick round of good-byes from everyone and a reminder from Dr. Karimi's secretary that Isaac's next group appointment was in a week, Rick and Isaac escaped together out of the hospital complex and into the sunshine. Rick didn't say anything as they walked across the courtyard full of trees and little flower beds, so Isaac didn't say anything either. The sky had no clouds in it at all. It looked blue, but it wasn't *really* blue -- that was, there wasn't a real, physical something up there that was blue that could be picked up and moved somewhere else and still stay blue. The atmosphere reflected light. If the Earth had no atmosphere, the people on it would be able to see the stars even in the daytime.

Without announcing that he was going to, Rick stopped and sat down on a wooden bench beneath the shade of a large tree, so Isaac sat with him close enough that their knees touched. After a minute or two, Rick sighed and put his hand on Isaac's back. "I don't think she likes me very much."

"Okay." Isaac had never been a very good judge at telling when people did and didn't like other people. Usually it involved dramatic gestures or thrown objects before he noticed.

Rick closed his eyes and leaned back against the back of the bench. He was handsome and strong, and he was smart too in ways Isaac knew he'd never be. Rick never let Isaac call himself 'stupid', so Isaac didn't, even if on the inside he knew it was actually true. "It doesn't get easier, does it?"

Isaac looked at him, puzzled, before deciding that whatever Rick had been asking, if it was important enough, he'd ask again. Despite the sun, a chilly breeze blew past, freezing the revealed nape of Isaac's neck; he turned up the collar on his light jacket. Maybe they could make macaroni and cheese tonight. Rick had stories about eating all kinds of weird foods, but Isaac liked macaroni and cheese and fish sticks and cheese quesadillas and especially pizza, and Rick said it was good to know what you liked. A couple of pigeons pecked their way across the sidewalk toward a discarded kid's meal pack of McDonalds french fries on the ground near the trash can by the bench, and Isaac very bravely did not shoo them away. He didn't like birds. They were unpredictable. A man walked by with three small dogs that scared the birds away. Isaac wasn't allowed to have dogs because his dad was allergic to them, but he liked them all the

same. When he was younger they'd taken him to an allergy doctor who'd given him a hundred million shots all over his back, then told him he was allergic to medicines he didn't know how pronounce. It was okay that he couldn't, though, because he had a metal disc he wore on a chain around his neck all the time, and the names of those medicines were printed there.

"I want to kiss you right now," said Isaac, watching warily as the birds went in for another attack on the french fries. "I won't, but I want to."

Rick was quiet for a moment, then laughed and rubbed his hand in circles on Isaac's back. "Wish it were that easy," he said, though Isaac had to strain a little to hear him because he'd dropped his voice. "Can I take a rain check on that?"

That meant that whatever Isaac had asked to do, Rick wanted it to happen, but it would have to happen later. "You can take a rain check on that." Isaac nodded.

They sat there for a few more minutes, just watching the people go by, until Rick stood and said, "June 18, 1974."

Isaac stood with him. "Monday," he said, though he couldn't keep down the start of a giggle, no matter how hard he tried. As bad as Isaac was at trying to fool people with jokes, he was even worse at it with Rick. Barely ten seconds later, he blurted out the correct day of the week: "Tuesday!"

Rick growled a little and grabbed Isaac from behind, getting the back of Isaac's neck in the crook of his elbow, and Isaac let him do it, because this was one of the few ways Rick would touch Isaac in public anymore. The more Rick would put his hands on Isaac behind closed doors, the less he'd do it when they were out with other people. Rick hadn't held Isaac's hand in public in years, not since before high school, when Rick had started shaving his head and wearing his pants low and going by 'Rick' instead of 'Ricky'.

But it was okay. Rick was touching him and laughing, and Isaac was laughing too, and they'd go home soon and make macaroni and cheese together, and then Rick had a rain check to take care of.

He never remembered his dreams, but that didn't mean he stopped feeling the way he felt in them when he woke up. It must have been a bad dream, too, because Rick was awake before Isaac even was, nudging him and calling his name. Isaac's eyes snapped open, but his room was too dark to see anything of use; the stars he'd stuck to the ceiling in accurate constellations (or at least as accurate as one could get with sheets of glow-in-the-dark stickers from a museum gift shop) had already given back all the light they'd absorbed during the day, and were now as cold and dark as the rest of the ceiling. Someday all the real stars would burn out too, but that would be so long after Isaac's lifetime that he wouldn't have to worry about what would happen to him when they did. He still thought about it sometimes, though. Maybe that was what the dream had been about.

Rick drew his arms around Isaac's chest, and Isaac squirmed until Rick was on top of him, resting his weight on Isaac's chest until it was almost hard for Isaac to breathe. That made him breathe deep, though, and every breath of his was deliberate until he could feel his heart rate slow. All the while, Rick stroked his hair and whispered things in Isaac's ear; Isaac wasn't listening to the words, but he knew the tone meant *you're safe, I have you, I'm here*. Isaac waited until he felt all right again, then craned his head upward and pressed his mouth to Rick's in a deep kiss.

The hand that had been petting Isaac's hair carded through it and made a fist in Isaac's

thick curls as Rick kissed back. He wasn't speaking now, but Isaac could feel the same promises of safety in the way their mouths moved together. He loved kissing Rick. Something about that made sense in a way other things lacked. It was a puzzle, but it was no mystery: certain actions produced equal (if not necessarily opposite) reactions. Isaac slipped his knee between Rick's legs until he could feel Rick's penis against his thigh, and he pressed against it just enough to feel that it was hard and getting harder. Darkness was nice because no one expected him to understand any facial expressions or body language, not even Rick, who said he didn't expect that of Isaac, except sometimes he really did, though Isaac figured he couldn't help it. But here, Isaac could shut his eyes and let Rick's body tell him by touch what both it and he wanted. Rick's body wanted Isaac to keep kissing and feeling it, so that's what Isaac did.

Rick was on a deadline, which meant that for all three of the nights since he'd come home (except, of course, the first), he'd been up late editing some more of his endless footage. Isaac always tried to stay up late with him when this happened and always wound up falling asleep in the chair next to Rick's; Rick would wake him up and shuffle him off to bed, staying to tuck him in until Isaac fell asleep again, which never took long. He had an important job and he was working on a deadline, and Isaac understood that. But deadlines were bad and kissing was good. Kissing was, as far as Isaac was concerned, about the best thing.

Thinking back on what he'd seen in his well-studied porn clips, Isaac began to push Rick's boxers down off his sleek, muscled hips. Rick hadn't seen the same ones, so it wasn't fair to expect him to know his half of that dance, but the sequence of actions gave Isaac something to hang on to. The room was warm, and Rick smelled of sweat and sleep, smells that Isaac loved. He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, licking until he found a drop of sweat on a slow trickle down from Rick's temple. Rick's mouth tasted good, his sweat tasted good -- the rest of him, it stood to reason, had to taste good too.

Eyes still shut, he gave Rick a little nudge, and then a stronger nudge, until Rick rolled off him and they were side by side on the bed. Rick started to say something, to make some sort of noise, so Isaac put his fingertips over Rick's mouth until he could feel the air in Rick's lungs whoosh out silently against his hand. Isaac loved listening to Rick talk, but right now he didn't want to use his energy making sense of Rick's words when he had something else he wanted to focus on. He kissed his way down the middle of Rick's chest, feeling the tiny curls of hair brush over his lips during his descent, until his chin bumped the tip of Rick's penis. Now it was time to be brave.

The first taste was weird and salty, and a little gross and warm and mucose too, and Isaac might have given up right then if Rick hadn't shivered and grabbed for Isaac's hair, making sure a little more forcefully than usual that Isaac couldn't go anywhere. Most of the time, Isaac hated being held in place, but with Rick it was all right. And now it was *especially* all right, because that meant Rick liked it. Bolstered by that certainty, Isaac opened his mouth and put the whole head of Rick's penis inside, then flicked his tongue back and forth across the tip.

He was as scared of this as he was of any other thing he'd never done before, but Rick always told him that being scared was just what happened before you went ahead and did something brave anyway. Isaac took a deep breath through his nose, took it all in and let it all out, and as he did he realized that Rick *did* taste good like this -- still a little gross, but not in a bad way, and that meant it was all right. He moved his lips and tongue around, tasting different places, feeling the textures at different spots.

Doctors and other people had told Isaac that he needed to practice empathy -- something they defined as feeling the same as someone else was feeling, even though you didn't share

their reasons for feeling that way. In general, Isaac found that a stupid idea, especially since he sometimes had problems feeling things for his *own* reasons. But empathy with Rick while having sex with him was even easier than empathy with Rick under normal conditions: Isaac wanted Rick to feel good, so Isaac paid attention to the things Rick did when he felt good, and then Isaac just did those things even more. Having sex with everyone in the world wasn't a practical or even very appealing idea, but it sure might have made a lot of Isaac's interpersonal interactions easier.

Rick said something, then tapped Isaac on the shoulder and said it again, so Isaac took Rick's penis out of his mouth and looked straight at him, paying attention this time. "If you keep doing that, things are going to get messy," said Rick in a heavy, breathy whisper.

"I know," said Isaac, and he went back to his explorations. Messy was the *point*. Honestly, it was as though Rick thought Isaac hadn't done any research at all.

He lost track of how long he was there, moving and tasting and waiting for response, but he didn't mind the time it took, because that time was with Rick, and Isaac liked it. Rick left one hand in Isaac's hair, just resting and petting, but he had his other one over his mouth, muffling the little sounds that came out. They were pretty little sounds, easier to understand than words. He wanted Rick to make more of those sounds. Rick's penis was big and couldn't fit all in Isaac's mouth at first, so Isaac did some of his breathing and relaxation exercises to loosen his throat so he didn't feel like he was going to choke. When he felt he could, he leaned forward and let Rick's penis slip down toward his throat, big and choking, except Isaac wasn't choking, because he was relaxed. Rick made a sound that couldn't be hidden behind his hand as Isaac pushed all the way down, until his nose was up against Rick's belly and he couldn't go any farther.

Rick's body shivered and went a little rigid, but Isaac was so consumed with breathing and taste that he didn't really connect those physical cues to anything else, and so he was surprised when Rick came; he felt the first pulse of Rick's semen against the back of his throat, too far back even to really taste, but he pulled away quickly and got a long stripe of it down his tongue. It had the same kind of good-gross taste as Rick's penis had, so he closed his mouth and thought about it for a minute. That had been messy. That had been all right.

A few seconds later, Isaac was startled by Rick's arms as Rick sat up and grabbed him in a fierce bear hug, then pulled him back to the bed, kissing him deeply. One of Rick's knees landed between Isaac's legs, and Isaac pushed up against it, gasping. He might have been self-conscious about showing anyone else how much he wanted this, but this was Rick, and it was okay to let Rick know. He wondered what it would be like to have Rick's mouth around his own penis. From all evidence before him, he concluded that it would probably feel good -- but that still wasn't what he wanted right now. "Just here," Isaac said, holding Rick's shoulders for leverage. "It's okay here."

Rick said something as he put his hand inside of Isaac's shorts and put his hand around Isaac's penis, but Isaac didn't understand the words. It was okay, though, because Isaac just wanted to hear Rick's voice, low and deep and full of air. Rick's voice was the most beautiful thing about him, except maybe for all the other beautiful parts, and Isaac didn't call Rick beautiful because Rick didn't like being called beautiful, but that didn't make it any less true. He felt Rick's fingertips over his mouth, just a gentle pressure reminding him not to be loud, but Isaac couldn't help it. His tongue still tasted like Rick, and Rick's voice was in his ear, and Rick's hand was stroking up and down his penis, and Rick was in his bed, and Rick was here, and Rick would never let anything bad happen to him--

He had an orgasm all over the inside of his boxer shorts and the outside of Rick's hand, and he must have been making a sound because when he stopped to take a breath, there was an

extra silence in his ears. He collapsed back against the bed, breathless, and let Rick do the things he did to clean up Isaac afterwards, like grab the towel by the side of the bed and take off Isaac's boxer shorts until Isaac was there in just his t-shirt, still trying to get his lungs working right, feeling invincible.

After a minute, Rick lay back down next to him and put his fingertips over Isaac's lips again, making Isaac realize that he'd been speaking. He frowned and shut his mouth, trying to remember what he'd been saying, but it was gone now. "Everything okay?" Rick asked, taking his fingers away.

Isaac nodded and wrapped his arms around Rick's chest. "I like putting your penis in my mouth." He thought about this for a second, remembering the reading he'd done about it on Wikipedia. "And having fellatio."

With a laugh that resonated through Isaac's whole body, Rick pulled him close until their penises were touching again; they were both soft now, though, so that didn't matter as much as it would have ten minutes ago. "Well, for a first time, that was pretty damn good. But you can call it a blowjob next time."

"I saw that," said Isaac, remembering the list of synonyms he'd seen on the page, "but it didn't seem right."

Rick's hand pet through his hair, untangling all the tangles Rick had put into it by grabbing at it before. His scalp felt a little sore, but he and Rick had talked about 'good sore' - like the kind you got after you did yoga -- and 'bad sore' -- like the kind you got after you did yoga badly -- and this was definitely good sore. "Doesn't make much sense, does it? I mean, no one's actually blowing anything."

"I wasn't. I watched, too, and no one else did."

"But you know better than anyone, names are weird, and the things people call other things don't always make sense." Rick punctuated his sentence by kissing Isaac's forehead, which Isaac's mom had done a lot when he was a baby and still did sometimes, only it was very different when Rick did it.

"They should." People tended to say things they didn't mean a lot of the time, which bothered Isaac. Once in third grade he'd been doing his multiplication times table worksheets as fast as he could, and his teacher, Ms. LaRiviere, had told him that he was on fire, which had led to some immediate distress on Isaac's part and a later parent-teacher-student conference on the topic of how stupid idioms were. (That wasn't what anyone else had said, but that had been Isaac's clear takeaway from the conversation.) "People would have an easier time."

Rick kissed his forehead again. "Yeah. Yeah, that's true, isn't it? I know for you especially. But some things are just stuck."

Isaac had encountered stuck things before -- like how sometimes his shoelaces got stuck in his bicycle chain -- but the idea the relationship between a word and the thing it shouldn't describe but did anyway as being *stuck* was a new one on him. "Are we stuck?" he asked, looking down at Rick's chest.

Rick shook his head. "Stuck? No, we're not stuck. We're free to do whatever we want."

No, that wasn't what Isaac was asking. "No, are we *stuck*?" Rick didn't answer right away, so Isaac tried again, this time putting the emphasis on a different word: "Are *we* stuck?"

"I promise, no. We're really not."

A spike of fear crawled up Isaac's throat, from his stomach all the way to his mouth, and he started to breathe in a way that he knew made a high-pitched whine that his mother didn't like, except he couldn't help it. Rick left all the time, but it was okay, because he kept coming back.

But if he wasn't stuck, he wouldn't keep coming back. Planets kept coming back to the same places in their solar cycles because they were stuck. Otherwise everything would just drift away.

"Hey, hey," said Rick, hugging Isaac tight enough to startle him out of making noise. "Tell me what you're picturing for stuck."

"Blowjob' is stuck to fellatio even though it doesn't make any sense," Isaac explained, making sure he said every word clearly. He loved Rick, but sometimes Rick was slow.

"Oh!" Rick reached under Isaac's chin and turned his face up so they were face-to-face with one another in the near-dark room, barely visible to one another. "Yeah, we're stuck. You and me. I'm definitely stuck on you."

That answer made Isaac feel a thousand times better, and better made him feel sleepy, so he yawned and put his head back against Rick's bicep. Rick had beautiful biceps. "I don't want to be not stuck to you," Isaac said, putting his arm around Rick's waist. He didn't mean stuck like with superglue, which he supposed was another meaning there, but there was no glue in the bed, so he figured Rick would know what he meant.

"No, we're definitely stuck to one another. You to me and me to you."

"Even though I don't make sense?"

Rick patted his back. "Hey, you make sense. You make a lot of sense. Sometimes it's a sense I don't get, but that doesn't mean it's not sense."

Calmed to a pleasant quiet, Isaac hugged Rick tight around his waist. Rick was sturdy; he could take a lot of hugging. "When Galileo first saw Saturn in his telescope, he thought it had ears, and assumed they were actually two moons. Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens was the first to accurately identify that the planet is surrounded by a wide, thin ring system." Isaac paused and took a small breath. "I like you better than Saturn."

"Wow," said Rick, "that's ... a pretty big deal."

"It's true," Isaac said. "You have ears too."

"Is that why you like me? Because I have ears?"

Rick was joking, Isaac knew, because *everyone* had ears (except for the people who didn't, like Vincent Van Gogh, and even then they'd usually started out having ears), and even though Rick's ears were very nice ears, they weren't special. "No," said Isaac, poking Rick's belly. "Silly."

"Well, I hope you like silly, because you're stuck with me." Rick pulled up the covers over them, and Isaac felt so happy and safe that as soon as he closed his eyes, he was asleep again, with no bad dreams following him back there.

Rick never got to stay. It was like how on some mornings, Isaac wanted to stay home instead of going to work, except he couldn't because you had to go to work, because that was, as his father said, the cornerstone on which our fair society was built. Isaac had a book on architecture that he'd read several times; he knew what a cornerstone was. Rick's work was different from Isaac's work, though, because Rick didn't go to the same building and do the same things three days a week, eight hours a day (with a half-hour of lunch at precisely noon). Rick's job was very different.

"Alaska?" Isaac asked as Rick took his phone from his ear and pressed the button to end the call. His mother had taught him that eavesdropping was bad, and it wasn't usually a problem for Isaac, except that he always wanted to hear what Rick was saying.

"Looks like," said Rick, staring at his phone a moment before slipping it into his back

pocket. He walked back over to the bed where Isaac still was -- the phone call had woken them both up, and Isaac had stayed awake too even though the phone call wasn't for him -- but instead of getting back in like he was going back to sleep, Rick sat at the foot of the bed. "For a while, maybe."

Isaac knew he was bad with measuring time. He kept three calendars in his bedroom alone. "A while is how long?"

Rick crossed his legs up beneath him like the lady on the DVD did at the beginning and the end of the yoga workout. "A while means I don't know how long. Could be three or four months, maybe even six or seven. It changes depending on what has to get filmed. I just go, and then they tell me when I can come home."

"Seven months." Isaac knew he was bad with measuring time, but he also knew seven months was a lot of time that Rick wouldn't be there.

Rick reached out to take Isaac's hand. "It's a great job opportunity, though. Everybody wants this spot. Well, everyone who doesn't get seasick, anyway." Isaac already knew that Rick didn't get seasick, so he didn't have to ask. "And it's good money, and if you do well one season, they'll probably ask you back for the next."

"Okay," said Isaac. He'd never been to Alaska, but he knew it was still in the United States, because the United States had acquired it by purchasing it from Russia. History wasn't as interesting as space, but he knew a lot about that too. He had been given a certificate in elementary school because he'd been able to name all the Presidents of the United States, their Vice Presidents, and to what political parties they'd belonged. Isaac didn't know what a Whig was, but he could remember that Abraham Lincoln had been one. He could remember lots of stuff. He wanted a job someday where people just gave him money for memorizing things.

When he heard Rick chuckle, Isaac focused back on him. "You don't mind if it's dangerous, though, do you?" Rick rubbed the backs of Isaac's knuckles with his thumb. "You like the stories."

"I like the stories," Isaac echoed; then he slowed down and thought about what it meant to say that. "I like *your* stories. I like you."

"I like you too," said Rick, and he leaned in for a quick kiss before lying down next to Isaac again. He put his chest up against Isaac's back and put an arm around his waist, which was something that Rick called 'spoon', and that was something Isaac hadn't understood until Rick had actually pulled two spoons out of the kitchen drawer and showed him how they fit together. Now when Isaac put the dishes away after they came out of the dishwasher, he thought about Rick every time he got to the silverware. "And hey, maybe if it pays enough, I could save up to afford rent on an apartment."

"Okay," said Isaac. He knew Rick meant his *own* apartment, one where there wasn't 'Rick's room' and then everything else. Rick had stayed in his own apartment while he'd been at college, in a dormitory building called Winter that he said was named after a person, not the season. Isaac had gone once and hadn't liked it. It had been too full of loud people he didn't know, all of whom talked too fast and said strange things, and even though Isaac had gotten scared Rick hadn't touched him until nobody else was looking. There had been a girl there, too, with bright tangerine lipstick who'd called Rick her boyfriend, and Rick hadn't said she was or wasn't.

Rick rubbed little circles against Isaac's bare hip. "Or I could tell them no and ask for something shorter, closer to home."

"Okay," said Isaac. An apartment was also what Isaac had, but Rick couldn't live with

his parents the way Isaac lived with his. Rick's mother lived with Rick's aunt and uncle and cousins, because she didn't have a boyfriend right now, and Rick's father hadn't been someone who'd wanted to live with Rick since before Rick and Isaac had met. There were apartments everywhere, but not many apartments close enough that Isaac could ride his bike and get to them. He'd have to get a ride in a car to Rick's apartment, or maybe take a bus, and he hated buses because they made him sick to his stomach. Rick was going to go away forever to a place where Isaac couldn't get to him.

"Hey." Rick kissed the back of Isaac's neck. "Talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

Sometimes Rick asked Isaac to do that, and Isaac really wanted to. It was what he wanted more than anything else that he wanted, to tell Rick what he was thinking. The problem was that there were sometimes no words for what he was thinking, or at least not any words that came fast enough to keep up with what was happening in Isaac's brain. He wished he had a camera of his own there, hooked up to one of Rick's TV screens so that he could just record and play anything he wanted, and no one would have to ask him to put into words what he was thinking. Maybe he should become a famous inventor and invent that, and then he could make millions of dollars and tell Rick it was okay to stay right here forever, just here, in the apartment, in their bed, no more adventures, no more stories except the ones he had already, again and again.

But there was no camera in his brain, so Isaac shut his eyes and tried to find all the words for what he was thinking. "I like you," he said first, but he'd said that earlier and it probably wasn't enough. "I like spoon."

Rick laughed at that, but in the good way, and he hugged his arm tighter around Isaac's waist. "Me too. What else do you like?"

"Saturn," said Isaac, which made Rick laugh and hug him again, and though that was a nice response, it suggested to Isaac that hadn't been what Rick was asking. "I like ... you to come home. And not go to apartments."

"I, uh." Rick took a soft, wordless breath and rested his forehead against the back of Isaac's neck. "I meant an apartment for *us*."

"We *have* an apartment for us," Isaac pointed out. It was Rick's apartment as much as it was Isaac's, after all; he had his own room and everything.

"I know. And you could come back here while I'm away, if you wanted. Or maybe--" Rick didn't finish that sentence, though. Instead, he was quiet for a long time, and since he had to wake up in six minutes to start getting ready for work anyway, Isaac stayed awake and waited for Rick to speak again. Maybe an apartment that they got together would have a bigger ceiling with more places to put glow-in-the-dark stars. Maybe Rick would even let Isaac put them on the walls and doors, instead of just on the ceiling like Isaac's mother had insisted. They could paint the walls and ceilings black and then fill them with stars, and it'd be like going to sleep in space every night. He thought about constellations and where he'd put them, even though he knew they all looked very different once you weren't standing on Earth any longer. That was all right, though; he could figure it out.

When Isaac's alarm went off, he reached over to silence the radio voices, then sat up, letting his legs hang over the side of the bed. He'd had this bed since he was ten, and when he'd sat on the edge of it then, his feet hadn't touched the ground. Behind him, Rick sat up too, even though Isaac knew Rick didn't have to wake up early unless he wanted to. "Hey, Newton," said Rick, who sometimes called Isaac by his middle name when he was being funny.

Isaac turned to see Rick smiling back at him. "Hey, Cuffey," Isaac said back in kind, even though Richard Cuffey wasn't a famous scientist, so it wasn't quite as funny.

Rick leaned in to kiss the back of Isaac's shoulder. "I just think you're a lot more capable of taking care of yourself than most people give you credit for," he said, his lips brushing Isaac's bare skin as he spoke. "You're really smart. And ... I love your parents, and I'm glad they're able to look out for you as much as they do, but ... sometimes I think you'd do a better job looking out for yourself. You'd *definitely* do a better job than they think you would."

"Okay," said Isaac. He'd been to doctors who'd told him and his parents that he'd never be able to live independently, though he'd had to ask later what that meant. But most of those doctors had never met Rick.

With one last kiss, Rick fell back into bed. "Okay, okay it is. Don't let me make you late for work."

"I'm never late for work," said Isaac, who took great pride in how true that statement was.

"My point exactly," said Rick with a smile.

Rick agreed to go to Alaska, and Isaac agreed that he should go to Alaska, so he didn't call his bosses back and tell them he wasn't going. Instead, he called them back and asked them when he was going, and they said he had to be on a plane with all his suitcases packed in eleven days. Isaac didn't cry at all when Rick told him.

Rick didn't say anything else about an apartment for them, either, and Isaac didn't ask.

One day, five days before his plane was going to leave, Rick had to go to New York City, and he asked Isaac if he wanted to come along. Isaac had been to New York City before, on school field trips and twice with his parents, but he'd never been alone with Rick before. He had to ask his parents, who'd said yes, but only after making sure Rick gave them all the details about where they'd be going and where they'd be staying. Rick had promised that he'd take good care of Isaac, and Isaac's mother had said that nobody doubted that, but everything she said seemed like doubt anyway.

Isaac didn't like keeping secrets from people, and Rick wasn't a secret, but the way he and Rick kissed one another was a secret. It had been a secret ever since the first time they'd done it, sitting together on Isaac's bed in his old room, on June 21st, 2002, which Isaac remembered because it was the first day he'd kissed Rick but also because it was the summer solstice, the longest daylight of the year. It had been a Friday and he'd been wearing red sneakers and Rick had shown him that kissing was the best thing in the world, but then afterward had said that they couldn't tell anyone. When Isaac had asked why, Rick had told him that it was okay to kiss boys sometimes but it wasn't okay to tell other people about it, because other people would think you were a fag, and it was bad to be a fag, which was a word that seemed to be defined as a boy who kissed other boys, only in a bad way. Even though he'd never told anybody that he kissed Rick, not even his parents, people had called him that all through high school anyway. Isaac guessed that he just looked like a fag and tried not to let that bother him.

So Isaac couldn't tell his mom not to worry, Rick would take care of him because Rick *always* took good care of him and never made Isaac do anything he didn't want to do except when it would be good for him later, like haircuts, and Isaac knew this because Rick promised him that every time Isaac kissed him, and Rick had never lied to him or gone back on his word.

That Wednesday morning, Isaac packed his backpack with everything he would need for an overnight trip. He put in one pair of boxer shorts, one pair of socks, one t-shirt to sleep in, one t-shirt to wear home, a clean pair of jeans, his toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, a comb, his laptop, the charger for his laptop, his phone, the charger for his phone, and a biography of

Copernicus. Rick assured Isaac that the studio was pretty casual, even for a business place, but because it was a business and it was Rick's work, Isaac put on slacks, nice loafers, a pressed shirt with a collar, and a tie with star maps on it. His mother brushed his hair back and put some gel in the front of it so it didn't get too messed up on the way to New York. Isaac felt good about how he looked.

They took a train there. Isaac liked trains better than airplanes because you could see all sorts of interesting things out the window of a train, but out the window of the plane, where it *should* have been interesting, it was usually just mostly clouds. Rick pulled out his laptop and plugged a pair of earbuds into the jack, then handed one of them to Isaac and put the other in his own ear. Isaac settled up next to him and Rick turned on some of his footage, the kind he was going today to talk about with his bosses. Isaac watched all of Rick's shows when they were done -- several times each, in fact -- but there was a difference between seeing the final television product and seeing what Rick called his 'raw' footage, the kind that no one else had cooked into something else.

This particular set of images started in a place where Isaac could both see the water and hear it in his one plugged-in ear. He could hear birds, too, and all sorts of people talking. There were boats lined up back on the water, ones like the boat in Rick's story of how he'd scarred his thumb (which he'd already told Isaac several times, and Isaac never got tired of gasping every time the sharks-but-not-really-sharks showed up), and Isaac could hear them too, how they smacked up against one another with every wave. People -- sometimes the same ones as the people who were talking -- walked back and forth carrying nets and fish; some of them looked at Rick's camera as they passed, while some didn't even notice.

"Smells like fish," said Rick, and it took Isaac a moment to realize the Rick that was speaking wasn't the Rick here with him in real life, but the Rick on the tape from Mozambique. A muffled voice answered him, a man's voice even deeper than Rick's, and Rick laughed. "Yeah, well, I guess all the people here would be worried if it *didn't* smell like fish." The voice said something else, and Isaac concentrated as hard as he could to make sense of the words, but they were too far from the camera's microphone for him to understand. This time, Rick didn't say anything back, and a moment later, the camera turned down a road toward the water.

This was how the world looked to Rick, always straight ahead and focused. Rick's camera never went anywhere strange or wandered off. It went where it was told to go, but Isaac went where he was told to go all the time, and he still saw things on his own that no one else had to show him. But people told Isaac to focus all the time, and no one ever told Rick that. Rick could concentrate on his own without having to be reminded.

As Rick's camera walked toward the water, that other voice started talking again. At first Isaac thought it might be speaking another language, but he could make out single words here and there, and once there was a clear command to "get a shot of this." That was when Rick's camera pointed down to where some boys were playing with a net.

"Two of them showed us around later," said Rick, and this time it was the real Rick, speaking in the ear Isaac didn't have the earbud in. He spoke quietly, because it was polite to speak quietly in public and on a train, and they were in public on a train. "Sammy and Eduardo. They're brothers, so they took me to their father's boat and showed me how they helped him with his catch."

"And then?" asked Isaac, waiting the rest of the story.

Rick laughed and squeezed the back of Isaac's hand briefly. "And then I got it all on film, and I said good-night and went back to where we were staying. Not all my stories end in wild

animal attacks or major injuries, sorry."

Isaac nodded and went back to watching the footage. He was glad that Rick hadn't gotten attacked or injured, but he still liked those stories best anyway. And he wished Rick hadn't stopped touching his hand.

They had to ride a subway to get to the network offices, which Isaac didn't like because he didn't like going underground, but all the discomfort of that journey was erased the moment he stepped in the front doors to the network offices. They were amazing, full of huge glass windows and television screens that showed all sorts of shows, some of which Isaac had seen before, some of which he hadn't. He wanted to stay and watch the screen where Neil deGrasse Tyson was talking about black holes, but Rick nudged him on past to a bank of elevators. Rick let Isaac press the button to call the elevators, and they waited until one of the elevators arrived, and when the elevator got there they stepped inside and went up.

The floor where they came out wasn't nearly as interesting as the floor they'd left; in fact, it looked like a plain old office, not unlike the one where Isaac worked. There were desks and phones and staplers and computers, and even though no one else was wearing a tie, Isaac felt comfortable. He couldn't hold Rick's hand, so he held on to the loop at the end of Rick's messenger bag strap and let Rick lead him through the desks. Some people even had two and three computers on their desks, and Isaac was frankly jealous.

Three people were waiting for them at the end of the hallway, two men and a woman, and the woman was wearing a tie but the men weren't, which Isaac thought was funny and strange and nice. Rick introduced them all: "This is my best friend from back home, Isaac Walcott. Isaac, these are some of my bosses: Aston Lee, Miriam Carpenter, and Dana Levinworth."

"Hello." Isaac stood on the other side of Rick so he wouldn't have to shake anyone's hand; he was bad sometimes at shaking hands. The last name he'd heard, however, pulled up a memory of one of Rick's stories, and Isaac turned toward the bearded man it belonged to. "You fell in the water."

"I did!" said the man named Dana, but he laughed as he said it, so Isaac liked him. "And I see Rick's already been getting some mileage off the tale of that rescue. It's nice to meet you, Isaac. Rick's told us a lot about you."

"Okay," said Isaac. The top of his foot itched, so he scratched it with the toe of his other foot. "May I please use the restroom?"

They all chuckled as though Isaac had said something funny, and Rick put a hand on his shoulder to turn Isaac back toward the way they'd come. "Just on the other side of the elevators. And then when you're done, why don't you come back here and hang out on this couch, and I'll come out when I'm done, and we'll go get something for dinner, okay? If you need anything, just ask Davey." Rick pointed to the desk next to the sofa, at which sat a young man with blue hair that he'd probably dyed to make it look that way. "All good?"

"All good." Isaac nodded. Rick had explained to him before that Isaac wasn't allowed in the meeting, and Isaac had agreed to wait because Isaac didn't mind waiting sometimes. "I have to tie my shoe."

"Good thinking," Rick agreed. The other two bosses had gone back inside the room where Rick was going to go, but the man named Aston was waiting, leaning against the doorframe as Isaac bent down to fix his loose laces. "Hey," Rick said to him, and though Isaac knew he shouldn't listen in to other people's conversations, he did anyway.

"When you didn't call, I thought it might be because of a girl," said Aston, and Isaac recognized it immediately as the deep voice from the Mozambique video. Isaac's fingers fumbled

with his laces, and the knot he'd made came undone.

"I've been busy," said Rick, speaking in the low, fast way he sometimes did when he was saying things he maybe didn't want Isaac to understand. "And I thought from the start we understood, it wasn't going to be anything to call about."

Aston put his hand on Rick's shoulder and Rick brushed it away as Isaac stood up again. "I'm done tying my shoe," he said, because maybe that would give them something to talk about other than what it was Rick didn't want Isaac to know. "I'll go to the bathroom on the other side of the elevators and wait on the sofa and you'll come out when your're done and we'll go get something for dinner, okay." Isaac repeated the instructions because that was the best way to let someone know he'd understood what he was supposed to do.

"Great," said Rick, and before Isaac could leave to go to the bathroom, Rick pulled him in for a quick, surprising hug, one that Isaac wished had lasted a little longer. "Be good."

"I'm very good." Isaac hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and set out according to Rick's instructions.

The bathroom was the kind Isaac liked best, where he almost didn't have to touch anything to make everything work. He took care of his business without making a mess and he washed up afterwards, both of which were things stressed by his life skills classes that he'd never had any problem remembering. Dirty things got to be dirty all they wanted, but clean things needed to stay clean. He scrubbed his hands with soap as long as it took him to count to ninety, then rinsed them clean under the automatic faucet and dried them with the automatic drier.

Halfway back to the couch where Rick had told him to stay, Isaac's brain did something Dr. Karimi called 'making inferences'. That was when you looked at all the things you'd heard and said, and then used them to make a guess about something that was probably true, even if nobody had said anything about that. He nearly stopped in his tracks, but he remembered that he was in public and in an office, so he went back to the sofa and sat down.

After counting backwards to zero from two hundred fifty-two by multiples of three, Isaac stopped and stood. Davey, the desk man with the blue hair, looked at him. "Need me to get you something?"

"I want to take a walk," said Isaac, hugging his backpack around his shoulders. "Can I take a walk?"

Davey pulled one of the business cards from the holder on his desk and wrote something on the back, then handed the card to Isaac. "No problem. When you come back, just show this to the front desk and tell them to call me if they've got any questions."

"Thank you," said Isaac, putting the card in his pocket next to his phone. He counted to five. "*Where* can I take a walk?"

"First time in New York?" asked Davey, and Isaac nodded. "No problem. Just remember it's a grid. If you go out and turn left, then take the first right when you get to...."

What followed was a lot of directions -- a *lot* of directions -- about places in and tips on and routes through Manhattan. Some of the places Isaac recognized -- like Broadway and Times Square and Brooklyn -- but everything else might as well have been in a space alien language. Isaac tried, he really did, he tried *so* hard, but there were too many *rights* and *lefts* and *straights* to keep up with, and they didn't mean anything by themselves. Isaac kept his hands fisted in his pockets and didn't say anything, and he nodded because it was polite to look interested when someone was talking, but even Davey's pointing didn't have any meaning to Isaac. At last, Davey stopped, and Isaac nodded again. "Thank you," he said, because that was polite too, and then he added, "and please tell Rick I had a walk."

"Sure thing ... Isaac, right?" Davey asked. He didn't wait for confirmation before saying, "My cell number's on the card too, so if you're going to be in town for a while, maybe you could give me a call?"

That had been like what Aston had said to Rick. "Okay," said Isaac, and he turned and went back to the elevators, then took them down to the lobby and walked out of the building, past all the talking televisions, to the street.

Just remember it's a grid. He could do that.

It turned out to be easy to know where he was, even if he didn't know where he was going. The streets that said AVE behind their numbers were all parallel to the other streets that said AVE behind their numbers, and the streets that didn't say AVE anywhere were parallel to all the other streets that didn't say AVE anywhere. There were crosswalks at nearly all the corners, and at each one he could make the choice if he wanted to turn left, right, or straight, and even though there were all sorts of other people on the street with him, no one cared if he went left, right, or straight. No one said anything to him at all, in fact. Sometimes they bumped into him on crowded sidewalks, but Dr. Mazzy said that was okay, because sometimes that just happened when lots of people were together, and pretty soon it'd be over again.

He thought about the solar system, and how Manhattan was built on rectangles but the solar system was built on circles. Maybe if people had all the room in the solar system, they'd build circular cities too, and then they could just go around as often as they liked. Before he'd understood about Saturn's rings and how they weren't solid planes, he'd wanted to build his house there. It was a silly idea that science said could never be true, but he still liked thinking about it. Maybe some people could live on the top side of the rings and some people could live on the bottom side, and then they wouldn't have to go so far to visit one another. You wouldn't have to go all the way through an oblate spheroid, like Earth was, or even all the way around it, like you had to take a plane to get from America to Mozambique, or from Baltimore to Alaska. Maybe if they lived on Saturn's rings and Alaska was on the other side, Rick could go to work in Alaska every day and come home with his camera to Isaac every night. That was how Isaac wanted things to be.

Maybe people would make more sense if they went in circles more often. Rectangles were full of decisions: left, right, straight, or even turn around and back the way you came. Planets moved in circles around the sun and they never had any problems with it. Planets never wanted stupid things. Moons went in circles around planets and they never wanted stupid things either. They never got scared or lonely or lost or jealous. People were made of the same elements as all the other things in the rest of the universe -- 'star stuff', Carl Sagan had said, and Carl Sagan had died, but before he'd done that he'd known a lot of things -- but somehow people had screwed up the star stuff and made emotions out of it, which was why Isaac had to pause his walk until he stopped crying. A nice man with a turban and a hot dog cart handed him a handful of napkins, and after he blew his nose, Isaac remembered to say thank you.

It wasn't until Isaac noticed two things at approximately the same time that he began to worry a little. The first was that the sun had dipped behind even the shortest of the buildings, which made the breeze that blew all the trash along the streets seem harder and colder. The second was that the street that he was on was called York, which wasn't a number at all. The rectangles had failed him.

Behind him was a building that looked like a university, and it had benches out by the street under the trees, so Isaac sat down on one of them and put his backpack on his lap. Lots of people about his age walked by, laughing and talking to one another, but nobody talked to him or

sat by him. He supposed this was where he might have been, if he'd been normal like Rick, if he hadn't had to be in all his life skills classes and reading resource classes, if his whole brain didn't have a wall around it that made it hard for things to get in and harder still for things to get out.

Isaac sat on the bench and watched all the people walk by as the sky grew dimmer and all the city lights started to pop on. Rick got lost, too, in his stories sometimes. Sometimes he had to sleep in a tree and sometimes he had to dig a cave in the snow to sleep inside and sometimes he had to light a signal fire to let the planes know where to find him. He never got lost alone, though; he always had somebody with him. Somebody like Aston. And he always got back home.

After a while, Isaac stood again and started walking. He thought the building where Rick was might be behind him, but he couldn't remember the numbers now, which was stupid, because remembering numbers was what he was great at. But he could remember them when they had some sort of meaning, and these numbers had no meaning in and of themselves, just meaning when you put them next to one another. He didn't want to go back there anyway. Instead, he walked until he saw a street with a number on it -- E 67th, which wasn't an AVE, so it went east and west, and not north and south -- and he turned left on it. He wasn't going to get back to a numbered grid by staying on a street called York.

He walked straight, crossing a few AVE streets, and after not very long he started to see the words 'Central Park' and 'Central Park Zoo' appearing on signs. He knew Central Park; he'd been there with his parents *and* his school. It was called Central Park because it was right in the middle, which was a good place to be. The Sun was in the middle of the solar system and it got along just fine.

Isaac crossed the last AVE at the crosswalk, and then he was on the same side of the street as Central Park. He didn't think it was the biggest park in the world, but it was pretty big. He had a little money on him, but he didn't want to go into the zoo right now. Instead, he took one of the walkways in amongst the trees. It was amazing how fast, in the coming dark of evening, the city disappeared. He could see little glimpses of artificial light through gaps in the leaves, but if he closed his eyes halfway he could pretend they were stars and he was somewhere else, one of the strange places Rick talked about, maybe even Alaska. Alaska probably had more snow in it, but maybe not everywhere. Some parts of Alaska might be exactly like this. Isaac should get a camera and film this too, so that he could show his story to other people, to prove once and for all why circles were better than rectangles and why planets were better than people. Maybe they'd understand.

From out of somewhere, the *Farscape* theme song started playing, and it was nearly done before Isaac realized the place it was coming from was his pocket. He pressed the green button to answer it. "Hi," he said, because his phone had told him already who was calling.

"Isaac! Where *are* you?" Rick's voice was full of emotion, Isaac could tell, but he couldn't tell *what* that emotion was. Maybe he was happy that Isaac had found such a nice place to be. It probably wasn't true, but it was nice to think.

"You had sex with Aston," said Isaac into the phone. A squirrel ran across the ground and then back up a tree. Squirrels slept in trees all the time, and so did birds, but Isaac didn't think the ways they kept from falling out would work for people.

"Isaac, please, where are you? Are you okay?" No, that was worry. "Tell me where you are and I'll come get you."

Isaac looked up at the trees. "I'm in the wilderness," he said. "Miles from civilization. Living off the land. I may have to sleep in a tree."

"Jesus fuck, Isaac, tell me where you are! Are you in Central Park?"

"I'm in Central Park," Isaac confirmed. Someone had left a can by the bench, and he picked it up and put it in the garbage can that was for things you could recycle.

"Stay right there. I'm coming for you right--" There was a small hissing noise from Rick's side of the phone, and then the background was full of city sounds. "Fuck, Central Park is.... Where the fuck is Central Park?"

Isaac looked around. "It's at E-six-seven street and an AVE. I don't know which one. Why did you have sex with Aston? I don't like him."

Rick was silent for a moment, though Isaac could hear from his breathing that he was still holding on to his phone. "Can we talk about this later?"

"I don't want you to have sex with Aston." It was strange, how easy this was to say into a telephone. He'd been so afraid of telephones, but he realized the bad part was listening through them. Talking into them wasn't bad at all. "I don't like him."

"Promise me you'll stay put until I find you."

"Do you like him better than me?"

From Rick's side of the phone, there was an audible horn blast followed by some words people could say in movies but not on TV. "Isaac, can we *please* talk about this once I find you?"

"I don't like him. I don't want you to like him." Isaac felt his knees tremble a little, so he sat down on a bench. "I don't want you to kiss him. I know you kiss him, but I don't want you to."

"Isaac, I--" Rick sounded out of breath. Maybe he'd been exercising. "Okay. We slept together sometimes. While we were in Africa." There was another pause, and Isaac waited. "It was just sex. And I *really* wish we hadn't."

"I don't want you to like him."

"God, no, Isaac, I -- fuck, I barely even like to be in the same *room* with him. He was just ... there."

Isaac didn't understand; there were lots of people in his life that were there around him, and he didn't have sex with any of them. He had sex with Rick because he liked Rick best of anyone else in the whole world, and now he didn't want to go get dinner with Rick because he wanted to throw up instead. "I know." He pulled his legs up underneath him on the bench so they wouldn't be touched by the five big dogs that walked by on leashes all managed by the same girl. "I know you do all the time. When you're gone. And you don't tell me."

"Fuck, fuck, motherfucking *fuck*," Rick swore, his words coming out in heavy puffs of breath. "Isaac, I -- fuck, I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to." Isaac pushed the hot-dog vendor's napkins up just under his eyes; they were wet and gross by now, but they were all he had. "Stop."

"Just -- fuck, Isaac, please just ... stay there, okay? I'm coming for you."

"Stop," Isaac repeated, folding his hands into fists. "Stop, stop, stop. Stop it. Stop doing it. Stop. Stop. Stop."

"Isaac!" shouted Rick into the phone, and Isaac closed his mouth so the words wouldn't get out any more. "Just stay there. I'm almost there. I see the park."

For a moment, the idea of Rick's showing up made Isaac want to run away and make good on his threat to try sleeping in a tree. He could probably do it, too; some of the branches looked big, and Isaac had always been small for his age and had never caught up with being the right size for anything. Maybe he could learn to live in the park. They probably didn't let people live in the park, but maybe he could get very good at it and learn to do it in secret. He could

pretend the other people didn't exist and they could pretend he didn't exist, and even though he knew about light pollution, he could find the darkest place in the park and live there and look up at the stars every night, not the glow-in-the-dark sticker-stars in his bedroom, but the *real* stars.

He was still looking up at the sky where the stars should have started to peek out, in fact, when he heard his name and turned. Out of breath and with his bag slung awkwardly around his chest, Rick was standing there at the edge of the walkway. Isaac definitely didn't have enough time to climb a tree now, not in the five seconds it took for Rick's long, strong legs to carry him across the distance between them, until they slammed into one another so hard that Isaac might have been knocked over had Rick not caught him in his arms and hugged him tight enough that it was hard to breathe.

"God," Rick gasped next to Isaac's ear, crushing him in a hug, "I was so fucking worried."

"I went for a walk," said Isaac, feeling his cheeks wet with tears again. "Just remember it's a grid."

They took a taxi to the hotel where they were staying, but they still had to walk to the street so they could get the taxi, and Rick held Isaac's hand the whole way to the side of the road, and then the whole ride in the taxi. He had to let go of Isaac long enough to pull out all the cards and sign all the papers that let the hotel know they were who they said they were, but as soon as he was done, Rick interlaced his fingers with Isaac's and they headed together up the stairs.

The whole hotel room was about the size of Rick's room in Isaac's apartment, but was definitely better than sleeping in a tree would have been. Rick dropped his bag on the floor and did a bellyflop sideways on the bed, so Isaac did the same thing, only he bounced almost off the end of the bed, but Rick caught him and drew him close, and they lay there together like that for several minutes. Rick smelled like sweat, but Isaac liked that.

"It was a shitty thing for me to do," said Rick, and for once Isaac didn't have to wonder what he was talking about. "I thought you wouldn't know. Or you wouldn't mind. ...No, that's not true. I knew you'd mind. That's why I didn't want you to know."

"Stop." Isaac put his hand on Rick's chest and Rick became quiet, so to make sure Rick hadn't understood the wrong thing, Isaac repeated, "Stop."

Rick patted Isaac's side. "Here, sit up a minute," he said, pulling himself into a cross-legged position on the bed, and Isaac did the same, until they were knees-to-knees and Rick had both of Isaac's hands in his. "I'll stop."

"Okay," said Isaac, who was happy to leave the matter at that. "Can we have pizza for dinner?"

"We can in a minute, but hold on. This is important." Rick squeezed Isaac's hands in the way he did when Isaac really needed to listen, so Isaac really listened. "I'm ... not really brave. I'm glad you think I am -- fuck, I really need *you* to think I am most of all -- but most of the time, I'm not. I'm still scared of a lot of things."

"Sharks." Isaac nodded. He understood.

"Well ... yes, sharks," Rick said. "But there are things that scare me more than that. Like ... having someone call me a fag. Or having my dad find out that I am." Isaac didn't think Rick kissed him in a bad way at *all*, but he was patient and waited for Rick to finish speaking. "But it scared me to death thinking something might have happened to you on account of something that was my stupid fault."

"I'm fine," said Isaac. He'd gotten lost, but only a little, and he'd found his way to Central Park, and if he'd had to, he could have found his way somewhere else he'd decided he needed to be. He wasn't always good at following directions, but he was good at solving puzzles, and he liked circles better than rectangles, but that didn't mean he couldn't figure out rectangles if he needed to. He only ever got lost if he was going somewhere and stopped paying attention for too long. In fact, that was his only problem with most tasks that involved more than one step. But he did more than that at work because he'd learned how. He'd learned lots of things. He probably had room to learn more.

Rick squeezed Isaac's hands. "I know you are. You're really amazing. I tell everybody that all the time. And I hate myself most when I don't give you enough credit for how amazing you are."

"Okay," said Isaac, "but it's fixed. You stop and we'll be boyfriends."

"Boyfriends?" repeated Rick, which was good, because that let Isaac know he'd understood.

Isaac nodded, and then, just in case Rick was being slow again, he explained: "It's when you kiss somebody only and don't kiss anyone else ever."

"That..." Rick took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "That's one definition, yeah." He rubbed his thumb over the back of Isaac's hand, up and down his knuckles like hills, ascending and descending each knob of bone. "I don't think your parents would like the idea, though."

Parents, as far as Isaac understood, had nothing to do with boyfriends, but he was willing to trust Rick on this one. "Yes they would."

"I'm not so sure. Your new doctor already thinks I'm molesting you."

Isaac remembered all the lessons he'd sat through on STRANGER DANGER and good touches versus bad touches and when you needed to get an adult, and what those lessons described was miles away from what he and Rick did together. What they did was more like what the people in the porn movies did, and those were all over the internet, and they weren't like stranger danger at *all*. "That's stupid," said Isaac. He decided he didn't want to have this conversation facing Rick, because Rick's face was making a lot of expressions, so he scooted over and sat side-by-side next to Rick and put his head on Rick's shoulder. That was easier all around.

After the space of another long, deep breath, Rick turned and kissed the top of Isaac's head, right in the middle of all his hair. "I don't deserve you."

"Okay," said Isaac. He was struck with a sudden horrible thought: "*Is there pizza in New York?*"

Rick laughed, but the laugh was kind of like crying too, and he had to reach for a handful of tissues from the box beside the bed and blow his nose before he could answer. "There's pizza *everywhere*. But definitely pizza in New York." He didn't make a move to get off the bed, though, so Isaac waited a minute more. "...God, Isaac, I'm so sorry. I've been such a shitty person and I'm so sorry."

Rick, it seemed to Isaac, was trapped -- at least, that was what Dr. Mazzy called it, when Isaac got into a place where he wanted to think about other things and move on and be okay, except that he couldn't because some thought kept holding him down. He'd never seen Rick get trapped like that before, but he supposed it could happen to anyone. At least now Isaac knew what he needed to do. He scooted forward on the bed until he could reach his back pockets, then took his wallet out. He pulled the two important pieces of paper from it and handed them both to

Rick.

Rick first looked at the picture of Saturn, smiling as he recognized it. "This is the one that was taken on my birthday, right?"

"Your birthday minus six years," Isaac specified. The second thing Isaac had ever learned about Rick -- the first had been his name -- was his birthday, and he'd been so excited that he hadn't even known what to say to this amazing boy with the amazing birthday. At recess, he'd pulled out his fat *National Geographic* Saturn facts magazine and showed that picture to Rick, and when Rick had proclaimed it 'cool' and said he wanted to see more, Isaac had been so happy he'd cried a little.

"Looking good, Saturn," Rick said, and he placed the picture down face-up on the bed so that he could see the second piece of paper. "What's this, your list?"

"Read it," Isaac instructed.

He hadn't meant for Rick to interpret his command to mean 'aloud', but that was okay too. "'Here are things that Dr. Mazzy says are okay for me,'" Rick read from the top line. "'One, when other people do things that don't make sense. Two, when I want to do things that don't make sense to me. Three, ma--'" Rick was quiet for a moment as he pressed his first to his lips and swallowed. "'Three, making mistakes.'"

Isaac looked at Rick, who was crying now, and that sometimes made it hard for people to talk, so he volunteered himself to read the rest of the list. He and Dr. Mazzy had written it together, and he knew it by heart, but the words were sometimes still nice just to see. "'Four, when food touches other food on a plate. Five, asking to be alone sometimes. Six, asking people to explain what they mean when I don't understand. Seven, trying new things.'"

As Isaac finished, Rick reached for his hand and twined their fingers together, then turned so they were touching forehead-to-forehead. "I think being boyfriends is a new thing I'd like to try."

"Okay," said Isaac, but this time he meant it. "Do boyfriends go get pizza with sausage and mushrooms and black olives and hold hands there and on the way back?"

"Yes," Rick said, nodding. "Yes, that is what boyfriends do."

New York City didn't turn off any of its lights at night, or at least that was how it seemed from Isaac's position by the hotel window. They'd gone out earlier and found a place that served pizza in giant individual slices, and the pizza place hadn't had one pizza with sausage *and* mushrooms *and* black olives, but they'd had one pizza with just sausage, and one pizza with just mushrooms and black olives, so Isaac had gotten one slice of each and put them face-together like a pizza sandwich and been satisfied with the outcome. Rick had eaten three slices, all from the pizza with *way* too many toppings on it for Isaac to count, but it had made Rick happy, and that was what mattered. And they'd held hands all the way there and all the way back, and no one had called them fags or any other bad names at all.

Rick was asleep now, all wrapped up in the covers of the hotel bed, but Isaac didn't feel like sleeping just yet, so he'd stayed there with Rick in the darkened room until Rick had started snoring, and then he'd wriggled his way out of the bed and over to the chair by the window. He'd decided he liked New York. It was a grid and it had a pretty park in the middle and there was pizza. It had all the things he needed.

Maybe Rick could save up for an apartment in New York. It was a long way away from Isaac's parents, but not too far away, and there was a train. He'd seen people riding their bikes

around a lot, and even though he didn't like the subway, he could be brave and learn how to use it. There were lots of things to do and see here, too. He looked up at the sky and couldn't see any of the stars, and that made him sad, but there were always other places to see stars, and there were things he liked about space he couldn't see from Earth, even on the darkest night with the best telescope.

He could remember the day he'd realized he'd never be an astronaut. It had been right after his twelfth birthday, and he'd had a seizure so bad he'd slept through the whole week following. Rick had brought him a book on astronauts to the hospital as a get-well present, but Isaac had been too tired to sit up and hold the book, so Rick had read it to him, and when he'd gotten to the section on requirements to be an astronaut, Isaac had started crying. Astronauts needed to be able to do things with their brains that Isaac's brain would never be able to do. They needed to have reasoning and concentration and memory, and no matter how much Isaac wanted to have these things, his brain wouldn't ever be able to cooperate.

He also remembered that Rick hadn't tried to argue or tell him he could do anything he wanted, the way Isaac's parents did. He'd just sat there and held Isaac's hand, and when Isaac had stopped crying, Rick had turned to the next section, the one all about how astronauts did experiments in space, and started reading again.

Isaac's backpack was by his feet, and he pulled out his laptop and opened it, then connected to the hotel's wireless network. He opened his email client and started an email to his parents. He left the subject line blank and went straight for the body of the email. *Rick is my boyfriend and I'm happy and please don't be mad*, he wrote. He didn't think they would be mad, but if Rick thought they would, it would be better to tell them in an email than in person. Isaac didn't like trying to talk to angry people. *New York is pretty and we ate pizza. Tomorrow we are coming home on the train and a subway or a taxi in New York. I rode in a taxi today and went to Central Park and it was fun.*

Even that didn't seem like quite enough if they were really going to be mad, though, so Isaac added: *Rick can take good care of me*. He frowned at that sentence, then deleted it and replaced it with, *I can take good care of myself*, then added, *and Rick is good at helping*. Isaac deemed that an excellent conclusion, so he made sure that both of his parents' email addresses were correct, then pressed 'send'. The screen reloaded to let him know the email had gone through, so he closed his laptop and put it back in his backpack, then crawled back into bed.

Rick was normally a sound sleeper, but Isaac's curling up next to him woke him a little, and he extended his arm so that Isaac could use it as a pillow. "Everything okay?" he asked, his voice a sleepy rumble.

"Everything okay," Isaac confirmed. He put his hand on Rick's bare, warm chest and shut his eyes.

"Just couldn't sleep?"

"Just couldn't sleep."

Rick kissed him on the forehead. "So tell me something Carl Sagan said."

Isaac loved Carl Sagan best, almost as much as he loved Saturn, almost as much as he loved Rick. "Those worlds in space are as countless as all the grains of sand on all the beaches of the earth," he said, calling back to mind one of the episodes of *Cosmos* he'd seen countless times, one he'd known by heart even before he'd known what all the words meant. "Each of those worlds is as real as ours and every one of them is a succession of incidents, events, occurrences which influence its future. Countless worlds, numberless moments, an immensity of space and time. And our small planet at this moment, here we face a critical branch point in history. What

we do with our world, right now, will propagate down through the centuries and powerfully affect the destiny of our descendants. It is well within our power to destroy our civilization and perhaps our species as well. If we capitulate to superstition or greed or stupidity we could plunge our world into a time of darkness deeper than the time between the collapse of classical civilization and the Italian Renaissance. But we are also capable of using our compassion and our intelligence, our technology and our wealth to make an abundant and meaningful life for every inhabitant of this planet, to enhance enormously our understanding of the Universe, and to carry us to the stars."

At least, that was what he meant to say. He remembered getting through the first part of it aloud, at least, but somewhere in the middle of the speech, talking became an effort, and the next thing he knew, the brightness from the window was not the lights of Times Square, but the morning sunlight, and Rick was nuzzling him awake, and it was time to go home.

"November 19, 1965."

"Friday.

"February 29, 1972."

"Tuesday. Birthday: Saul Williams."

"No kidding," said Rick, and Isaac was pleased that Rick had liked that bit of trivia about his favourite musician. "Okay, how about ... July 4th, 2035."

"Wednesday," said Isaac with no hesitation. Rick seemed to think that dates in the future were somehow harder to figure out, when really, calendars just repeated themselves every twenty-eight years no matter which way you went -- unless, of course, you went farther than 1900 or 2100, neither of which were or would be leap years, but if you knew that you could adjust your calculations for it. Everything was just a matter of having sufficient preparation.

They walked hand-in-hand down the airport terminal on the public side of the security gates. Isaac's parents had said good-bye to Rick that morning at the light rail station and let Isaac take him by rail to the airport with the understanding that Isaac would come back alone on his own. They hadn't been angry about Rick and Isaac's being boyfriends, or at least they'd said they hadn't been angry, and no one had yelled, so as far as Isaac was concerned, everything was okay. Rick had come to bed late one night and said he'd been talking to them about it a little, and the next morning everything had seemed the same as it always had before the New York trip, which was Isaac's standard for everything's being all right.

(con't)



"August 21st, 1904."

"Sunday. Can you call me on the telephone from Alaska?"

Rick stopped in his tracks and just looked at Isaac for a minute, but then he smiled. "Yeah, I can call you from Alaska. Well, maybe not when I'm actually out on the boat. But when I'm back on land, if I can get a signal and you want me to, I'll call you every day, if you want."

Isaac nodded. "And sometimes you can just talk." He still didn't like the idea of the telephone with most people, but after New York, talking to Rick like that seemed a lot less scary. "And you can tell me when you're coming home, and when you do I can come get you again and we can ride the train home together."

"It's a deal," said Rick, squeezing his hand. He looked up at the big electronic board by the security gates and sighed. "Okay, I've got to go. But I'll be back before you know it, and when I do, we'll talk about all sorts of things, like apartments. Okay?"

"Okay," Isaac agreed, and he squeezed Rick's hand back. "Come back soon."

"Soon as I can," Rick promised. He glanced around for a moment, then used his grip on Isaac's hand to pull him closer, until they were chest-to-chest in a hug. "Do you want to kiss me right now?"

Isaac nodded. "Yeah." He usually did.

"Then go ahead," said Rick, tilting his chin downward until his mouth was in range.

The idea of kissing Rick in public both terrified and delighted Isaac, and he found for a second that he was so excited he couldn't make himself move. He didn't want to miss the chance, though, and Rick's plane was about to leave, so Isaac rocked himself forward on his tiptoes until he was tall enough to fit the gap between them, and then they were kissing, open-mouthed and warm and not at all like he saw people who were family or even close friends kiss. It was a boyfriend kiss between boyfriends, and one of them was going to go away, but he'd come back, and then everything would be okay again.

It was still new to both of them, though, and Rick pulled back after not too long, though he let his arms around Isaac linger for a moment more. "Okay," he said at last, stepping away and slinging his bag up over his shoulder, "time for another adventure."

"Bye." Isaac gave one last wave as Rick stepped into the security line, then turned to go. He'd brought people to the airport before, mostly his mother with his father, who'd always insisted they stay and wave until she disappeared on the other side of the metal detectors. Isaac didn't really see the point, though, so he put his hands back in his pockets and set off for the light rail station. The train wouldn't be there for another twelve minutes, but he didn't mind waiting, even if it was a little chilly out.

Sometimes he thought maybe he could be an astronaut anyway. Maybe science would discover something that needed to be done in space that only his brain could do, and they'd ask him and he'd say yes, of course, he'd be glad to do the job. And then Rick could come with him and make a video of the whole thing, like *Cosmos*, only actually in space, and they'd go to space and eat space food and share facts about space. Isaac knew more about space than he did about almost anything. They could call the show *Isaac and Rick's Space Show in Space*. It'd be the best show ever.

It probably wouldn't happen, of course, but he could still dream it, and that was an important first step.

His phone buzzed in his pocket as he got to the rail platform, and when he pulled it out, he saw he had a text message from Rick: *I miss you already.*

I miss you already too, Isaac texted back. He waited a minute, and then another, but there was no reply. Rick must already be on the plane, with his seat back and tray tables in their full and upright locked positions, and all his portable electronic devices switched off for takeoff. Next he'd land in Detroit, and then in Seattle, and then in Anchorage, and by the time he got to Unalaska, Isaac would be asleep. They could talk on the telephone the next day, though, because Isaac just had to go to the doctor, not to work, and going to the doctor didn't take as long as going to work.

He would get back from the airport before his parents got home from their jobs. Maybe he'd make dinner for them. He'd have to stay very focused, doing it on his own for the first time, but he felt confident. He'd learn how to do things even better, and when Rick got back, Isaac could show him how good he'd gotten. And if he didn't do it all right the first time, it was still okay to make mistakes.

Just before the train pulled up, Isaac glanced over his shoulder and saw a plane lift off into the air. Maybe it wasn't Rick's plane, but maybe it was, and either way, it didn't take off like a space shuttle. Airplanes and space shuttles landed the same way, but they had to take off in different ways because they were going different places. Alaska was five thousand miles away. The Moon, which was about the closest place anyone would need a space shuttle to get to, was (on average) 238,900 miles away. Lots of people lived in Alaska. Only twelve people had been on the Moon, and none of them were still there now. That didn't make the Moon better; it just made it farther away.

He took his seat on the rail car and closed his eyes and thought of Rick, who might have been thinking of him too. Isaac was already planning on meeting him at the airport in the spring and kissing him right there, in front of everyone. And someday in billions of years when the Sun burned up and the Earth was destroyed, the atoms that made them both right now would be sent out to join the rest of space. It might take until the end of the universe, but someday Isaac would get back to where he'd started: the deep black beyond the Earth's atmosphere, the place where all the stars lived. Rick would be with him too, and Isaac's mom and dad, and Mrs. Headley and Dr. Karimi and Dr. Mazzy and Aston Lee and Mr. Dietterich and Neil deGrasse Tyson and Carl Sagan and the man with the hot dog cart and everyone else who'd ever lived or would ever live, all out there in space together, because some things could be neither created nor destroyed. Some things just *were*, no matter what, and when Rick came home, more of them would be in their right places.

Outside the train, the world went by, and somewhere above him in the sky, a plane flew away, and objects in motion would stay in motion, and objects at rest would stay at rest. Isaac Newton -- the real one, the one Isaac had been named after -- had figured out that law, and a law wasn't a theory, it was a *law*. The air Rick had breathed out was still in Isaac's apartment, and the sheets still smelled like him, and there were little parts of him everywhere, and someday he'd come home, and against the great scale of universal time, a few months wasn't long at all. Before Isaac even knew it, they'd be together. The train would rock its way down the tracks and Rick's airplane would fly west and the planet would rotate and the solar system would turn and the galaxy would spin and the universe would keep on expanding, and with enough time, everything in it would again be made right.

If you liked this story, let the author know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/216098.html>

Swamped!

by melanofly (メラノ飛)



*If you liked this illustration, let the artist know!
Leave a comment at <http://s2b2.livejournal.com/216010.html>*

EDITORIAL MASTHEAD

Editor in Chief: ladysisyphus



The Pearl-Diver Who Battled Bears for her Oxford Commas!

Editor, Social Media Coordinator: beeblebabe



The Strange World of People Who Update Facebook and Also Fight Bears!

Editor Emeritus: petronia



Nymphos Who No Longer Edit This Magazine But Sure as Hell Still Fight Bears!

Still Sucking: relvetica



SS
BB*

© 2005-2012, [Shousetsu Bang*Bang](#)