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AFTER-SCHOOL SPECIAL

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Volume 8, Issue 38:
After-School Special

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"Part of Something Ours" by by Nanaki and illustrated by beili

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See You After School

by Tsukizubon Saruko (月図凡然る子)

"See you after school."

It wasn't loud enough for anyone else to hear, just a hiss across the aisle between the rows of desks. For a second Kiran stopped, in the middle of getting up, frozen with his backpack halfway hefted up; then he swallowed, and made himself finish and pick up his test sheet to deposit at the front on the teacher's desk. He made a business of keeping his body between it and Jeff, though, blocking any possible view of the paper from across the aisle, and ignoring the sullen glare up from the circle of Jeff's arm on his desk. If he was in for a penny, he was in for a pound, he guessed.

There was always something to set him off, anyway. A wrong look in the locker room after gym, a wrong word in the hallway between classes. Sometimes even less than that. It was just how guys like Jeff worked; they'd find any excuse in the end. This time it had been the history test, but it might have been anything. When Jeff had turned his head toward Kiran, under the screening cover of Tammy Fitzpatrick's frizzy hair in the seat ahead of him, and whispered, "Hey loser, let me copy off you," Kiran had just set his jaw, and shaken his head *No*. The consequences, whatever they might be, were beyond his control.

See you after school.

His pulse was beating hard high up in his neck, his throat dry again, his palms damp. He scrubbed one against his pant leg, dropped his test first on Ms. Feijoo's empty desk, and got the hell out.

Jeff was only in about half of Kiran's classes, but that was enough to have attracted his attention. He was a huge kid for their age, really only about Kiran's height but probably twice as big around, all massive stocky bulk and heavy bones. He had long, thick, gorillaish arms, legs like young trees, and a bulldog sort of a face under his bristly blond crewcut, with a jutting brow and jaw that lent him a perpetual glower. When he walked around school you could practically feel the earth shake under his feet. He took remedial classes and woodshop, was always in danger of getting kicked off the football team for his grades, hung around and laughed and made crude jokes and swilled beer with the other jocks but was never really one of them, maybe a little too much of something different from them. He was the kind of kid that kids like Kiran, all knobby knees and jutting Adam's apple and straight As, knew by instinct to swing wide around. The kind of kid the chess club whispers about, a petty god celebrated in myths of putting this mortal down a toilet, that one in the hospital.

See you after school.

It rang in Kiran's mind for the rest of the day, clanging along like a song stuck in his head. He picked at his lunch, too distracted to eat, and ended up throwing the rest of it away and spending the rest of the period shut up in the upstairs bathroom. He spent all of AP Bio afterwards staring out the window, gnawing on his lip, taking down nonsense instead of notes. English -- normally his favorite class -- was likewise a mess; Jeff was in that one with him, and kept staring holes in the side of his face, the entire time, until he could feel himself sweating and his fingertips twitching. He couldn't seem to stop his eyes from sneaking over, seeing the sliver

of Jeff's face and steadily gazing eyes turning his way from a few desks ahead of him. Every glimpse he got of those huge meaty hands of Jeff's, lying lax and loose on his desk, made his mouth go cottony. Mr. Taylor kept calling on him in that pointed way teachers did when they thought you weren't paying attention, and every single time he couldn't seem to remember a goddamn thing about the chapters of *The Color Purple* they'd been supposed to read. It was a relief to finally escape to French, even if he kept confusing all his prepositions.

See you after school.

What would it be this time? Getting yanked into a boys' bathroom as he walked by? Tripped into the bushes around behind the side of the gym? Or maybe followed halfway back to his house, and jumped in some shadowy corner, right in the middle of everything and broad daylight?

Well, it didn't matter. The date was set now.

Finally, at long last, the last bell rang; and with heart hammering and legs rubbery, Kiran went down the halls to his locker, and set out for the front door.

He got as far as the athletic fields, which he took a shortcut through to get to the back road that led to his house. He was actually just starting to think that maybe it wasn't going to happen after all, maybe Jeff had changed his mind, when he passed by the side of the bleachers on the far side...

And then by the time he saw the shadow shifting out of the corner of his eye, in the darkness underneath them, there was already a big meaty hand snaking out to grab his shoulder.

He was pulled in and under, clapped hard up against what felt like a wall of solid muscle; he yelped, his backpack falling askew on his shoulder and then all the way to the ground with a thump. The grip on his shoulder tightened, then hauled him around to push his back up against one of the bleachers' supports. Jeff loomed out of the dim at him, smirking, right up in his face so they were nearly nose-to-nose.

"Hey, there, loser," he said, voice so low it was almost a purr. Kiran's eyelids fluttered a little, his throat convulsing. "You weren't trying to run off on me, were you?"

"Thought maybe *you'd* run off on *me*," he said anyway, gamely, over the dusty hardpan of his throat. Jeff snorted, and somehow leaned in even closer still, his hand planted on the support above Kiran's head so that gorilla-arm just caged him in.

"Shut up." His breath close, and warm, on the side of Kiran's face. "You wanna talk all day, or you wanna go?"

"Up to you," Kiran said. Barely above a whisper, and almost through his teeth. It widened Jeff's smirk to a grin, anyway, showing all his teeth. He grabbed a fistful of Kiran's t-shirt, hauling him forward and up almost on his toes --

And kissed him, hard, hard enough to clash their teeth.

Kiran let out a low groan in the back of his throat, and grabbed his hands up Jeff right back, seizing the best handfuls he could of Jeff's little prickles of hair. Their lips smacked apart, tongues rolling together in a sloppy, clumsy mess. Jeff shoved a knee forward between his legs, up against the support, making him shudder; after thinking about this all day he was already hard, but he only ground up against the big slab of Jeff's thigh for a few seconds before pushing him away, and then pushing him around and backward, deeper into the shadows under the bleachers.

Jeff stumbled and Kiran pushed the advantage, driving him all the way back to the next support over, pinning Jeff face-first into its steel. Jeff grunted and then squirmed, and tried to turn around, but Kiran pushed him back in place again and swarmed him, pressing him close with his own weight -- little though that was. He molded himself around Jeff's back, ground up against his ass, lapping wet trails up the nape and side of his neck and biting his ear hard. Jeff made another groaning grunt that was more of a shout, ground his hips first forward into the support and then backward into the hard-on trapped in Kiran's jeans.

"Fuck," Jeff said through his teeth, "fuck, *fuck*," and then it was trailing off in a groan as he fumbled at the front of his own pants. Kiran helped him, diving in under Jeff's scrabbling hands first to take a big squeezing handful of the bulge at the front -- making Jeff make a deeply satisfying strangling noise in his throat -- and then yanking down the zipper while Jeff tore the button open. Then he grabbed either side and yanked them down to Jeff's thighs, and Jeff's slightly spread stance let them slide the rest of the way to his ankles. For a second Jeff was leaned against the support with dark blue boxer-briefs showing under the tails of his shirt, molded to tree-trunk thighs, and then Jeff had shucked those down too. They wound up in a haphazard tangle at his knees, letting Kiran finally reach for a big thick handful of Jeff's weird, cut cock and stroke it. Jeff dug down his face into his own upper arm, making a heavy spit-full gasping sound.

Jeff had a *nice* ass for a white guy, all else aside: a big round bubble of it, all spring-steel firm and well-turned and a little dimpled at either side. Kiran groped his other hand over it while he was jerking Jeff's dick, smirking at the way Jeff squirmed. He just kept panting into his arm for a minute, burying whining desperate sounds in his shirt, and then finally turned his head enough to gasp his mouth free.

"Put it in," Jeff said first, tight and strained, and then ground back again; Kiran let him, but also let him keep talking. "C'mon, *fuck*, do it, put it *in*, stick it *in*, I'm gonna fucking -- " Whatever he was going to fucking got buried against his arm again, though, and inside another strangling moan. Kiran wet his lips, his own breath coming hot and harsh, eyelids fluttering again... but he was pleased with himself, as always, when he managed to keep his own voice a little cool in Jeff's ear.

"You're gonna what?" Licking between words, making Jeff twitch and hiss. "Gonna come? You gonna come before I even get in you, just thinking about my dick?"

"*Please* -- " It came out in a whine, a little thin whimper nobody on the chess club or anywhere else would even believe. Heat thrilled up Kiran's arms, settling in his chest a minute and then squeezing down around his dick.

"Yeah, beg. Beg me. Or I'll just jerk you off and go home."

"Please! Fuck!" Jeff squirmed around, squeezing the support over his head like it was a tow-rope out of the ocean. "Please, please, *fuck* me, Christ, you little bitch, *fuck* me, *fuck* me, *please* -- "

Good enough, Kiran figured -- or, well, it better be, because now *he* was making the whining sounds in his throat on every breath and he was leaking all over the inside of his jeans. He let go of Jeff's cock, which this time got a strangely cry of equal parts frustration and shaky relief, and went for his own pants. He dug out the condom he'd put in a back pocket with trembling fingers, before yanking the fly open and pushing his jeans down with his underwear to his thighs. He tore open the condom and rolled it on, the lubed surface nearly making him drop it once, then spat in one palm (something he'd gotten pretty good at with practice, he could probably beat out any of the veteran hawkers on Jeff's football team if he cared to try) and

slicked his covered cock. Then he slid a wet finger between Jeff's cheeks for a second, to rim around him and just tease. Jeff jumped a little, then growled back in his throat, although it was much too broken with arousal to sound very threatening anymore.

"Fuck you, just *get your cock in me*," Jeff breathed into the back of the hand he'd braced his forehead on, against the support, and Kiran ended up having to stop and take a hard swallow to get his balance back. And then he was grabbing his cock, grabbing Jeff's hip, Jeff splaying his legs as far as he could so Kiran could press the tip to his asshole and then in.

He took it slow on the way in: just driving with one long gradual thrust of his hips, hot tight flesh giving around him with the occasional flutter of muscle, until he was all the way seated inside, balls up against Jeff's ass. Jeff helping him all the way in, pushing back, pushing it faster as much as he could but Kiran still keeping control with the hand on his hip. Jeff's voice breaking again, in the middle of his throaty, unsteady keens. He shuddered when Kiran slid all the way in, and it made Kiran have to stop and gather his breath, just for a second. When he really went deep, that was what made Jeff shake.

"Fuck me," Jeff almost whispered again, not demanding anymore but just pleading, and the corner of Kiran's mouth twisted up in a distracted half-grin.

And he did.

The spit and condom-lube didn't help all that much, there was still some stick and burn if he went too fast or got too much range of motion going, but he didn't need to. Just a little out, and then as hard in as he possibly could. All he had to do was grab both Jeff's hips and pound in that last inch or so, over and over again, enough to get it where Jeff wanted it. Jeff went crazy for it like always, fucking *screamed* before he could crane his head and bite his forearm, huffed hard high-pitched breath noises around his closed teeth, shook on his feet and couldn't keep his hand off himself for more than a couple seconds. Kiran thought about telling him to stop, he'd done it before, but in the end through the hot haze in his head he decided not to: Jeff'd just come with no help at all if he did, and Kiran wanted him like this right now, shuddering and jerking off because he just couldn't help it with Kiran's dick in him, jerking it like he probably did at home every afternoon they *couldn't* do this, thinking about this and *wanting*.

It didn't last long past there. It never did. Maybe half a minute more of Jeff's sweaty hand frantic and squeezing on his cock, Kiran's balls bumping off his ass as he just nailed deep again and again, and then Jeff stiffened and then seemed to completely explode. The muscles of his neck and back and arms seemed to contract and then flex and extend, his whole body to shake with some kind of top-speed velocity, his mouth on his arm clamped down but even then couldn't keep back the roaring screaming shout that tore out of it. Come spurted over his hand, over the support, onto the tails of his shirt at the front. And the muscles inside him were out of control, too, tensing and squeezing and fluttering with every shake, and Kiran didn't see or notice anything else: just shouted with his eyes screwed shut into Jeff's shoulder, and then came inside the latex inside him, his fingers digging furrows in Jeff's bare hips.

They just stood like that for a few seconds, heaving breath, Kiran leaning on Jeff and Jeff leaning on the support. Distantly, now that they were quiet, he could hear the hollow metallic clanging and rumpling of canvas from the flagpoles up above the bleachers, as the school flags flapped in the wind outside.

Finally, with a small groan, Kiran pushed off from Jeff's shoulders, and pulled his soft dick back out again; Jeff let out a grunt against the support, but otherwise didn't move as Kiran stripped off the condom and pitched it into the dust a few feet away, and pulled his pants up and closed again. With that done, Kiran went to his fallen backpack, first to dig out his inhaler and

take a blast until his chest opened up again, and then to take out a pack of tissues and bring them back to Jeff. Only then did Jeff finally rouse, to accept them with a grunt Kiran thought was of thanks this time, and then scrub wincing with a couple at the crack of his ass.

"You still suck for not letting me cheat on that history test, asshole," Jeff said finally, as he was yanking his pants back on; his voice was a little cracked and a little thick still, but mostly normal again. Kiran glanced over his shoulder, where he'd bent to pick up his backpack, and rolled his eyes.

"If you'd actually come over and *study* sometime, you wouldn't need to cheat."

Jeff just waved that off with a little snort, although Kiran thought a less scoffing one than usual. Maybe he was finally getting somewhere with that.

He pulled his backpack on, while Jeff hovered, hands shoved in his pockets, still kind of red in the face but back to looking as bulldoggy and sullen as ever. Just when Kiran was about to go, Jeff said, a little hesitating: "Hey, uh... you're still not gonna tell anybody about this, right?"

Kiran paused, looking at him for a long moment... and then smirked.

"Depends," he said, and leaned in to plant a quick kiss on Jeff's mouth, pulling back to grin at him while he was still surprised. "Start giving me your lunch money, and we'll talk."

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Part of Something Ours

by Nanaki (ナナキ)

illustrated by beili

Zack pulled up his hood and slumped over the table, using his arms as pillows. Showing up at school when the sun wasn't even up, on a Saturday no less, wasn't what he signed up for when he joined the engineering club. It was a cruel and unusual punishment, as far as he was concerned.

A hand clapped him on the back, jolting him back into consciousness. Zack cracked open an eye and glared up at the culprit. Bryce looked down at him with amusement clear on his stupid face.



"You gonna sleep or are you actually gonna help do something?" Zack didn't bother to respond and put his face back down. "I told you to stop freaking out over the championship and go to bed early last night."

"I don't know you anymore." Most of Zack's reply was muffled by his arms. He just wanted some sleep, or maybe just a mainline of caffeine; Zack wasn't awake enough to really care which.

As if reading his mind (which Zack couldn't discount, seeing as they were as good as attached to the hip), Bryce sighed and put a huge travel mug down in front of his face. Zack's eyes zeroed in on mug and he greedily pulled it closer, only sitting up when he had the lid open.

The first scalding sip was enough to jump-start his brain. By the second, Zack had enough faculties back to notice whose mug he was drinking from. "Bryce, were you hiding my own coffee from me?"

Whatever Bryce was going to say was interrupted when Mr. Morris, their faculty advisor, came through the door with an excited "Hello, engineers!" Zack grabbed the mug and chugged, because there was no way he could handle Morris otherwise.

"We have a long day ahead of us, so let's start getting ready and loading everything up." A collective groan went up in the room. Apparently Zack wasn't the only one who had trouble staying awake. "Remember, we do get a few hours on competition day to make last minute adjustments to our robot. Oh, and Bryce, I'm going to need to go over the itinerary with you."

Bryce reached over and swiped the mug out of Zack's loose grip before Zack could react. He took a long sip of coffee before handing it back to Zack. "I guess that's my cue. Don't drink all that at once or we're gonna end up stopping at every gas station so you can take a piss."

Zack rolled his eyes and waved his boyfriend off. "Yes, mom."

Bryce snorted, but Zack saw that he was trying not to smile as he walked to the front of the classroom.

Zack figured he needed to get off his ass when he was the only person left in the classroom with Bryce and Mr. Morris. His bag was already stowed away in Bryce's truck so he decided to head for the workshop and see if anyone there needed his help.

The workshop looked empty from the outside, but Zack saw a couple of people packing up when he stepped inside. Parked in the far corner of the room was TERA, all 120 pounds of steel, circuit-boards, and tires of it. TERA wasn't the prettiest robot -- the rectangular metal skeleton could attest to that -- but they weren't going to a beauty competition, so no one really cared. Zack actually liked the industrial look.

The junior who was in charge of putting the robot together popped her head out from the closet and waved. "Hey, do you think we should connect the battery and stuff right now?"

Zack shook his head and she disappeared back into the closet. "We have to take the battery and bumpers off for the clean weigh-in once we get there, anyway. Probably just put them in a box."

A thumbs up appeared from inside the closet, followed quickly by a tall plastic bin and lid.

"Hey, Zack, think fast!"

Zack instinctively threw up his hands and dropped to the ground, letting whatever Bryce tossed towards him clatter to the concrete floor. They turned out to be Bryce's keys.

"I hate you so much right now," Zack grumbled as he picked up the discarded keys and stood up.

"I didn't even toss 'em that hard. I totally thought you were gonna catch it." Zack would've believed Bryce's sincerity more if his shoulders weren't shaking with bottled-up laughter.

"Do you need something or are you just here to tease me some more?"

Bryce pulled him into a one-armed hug. "Sorry, sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

A mock gagging sound from behind the closet door interrupted them. They stared at each other for a second, silently debating if they should act extra-sappy before deciding better of it.

"Can you go and plug those into the GPS?" Bryce asked, handing Zack a piece of paper.

"Why can't you do it?"

Bryce pointed towards TERA. "Cause I have to move that outside."

Bryce's truck was out in the loading dock next to the workshop. Most of the club members were lingering next to the nondescript white van next to Bryce's truck, and they waved as Zack walked by. Zack waved back and unlocked the door before climbing inside. The list wasn't that long; they were mostly making stops for food, making it easy enough to plug in.

Bryce and three other guys brought TERA out to the loading dock when Zack was finished inputting their route. TERA was hard enough to load as it was because of its weight and bulk, but the protective cardboard sleeve made it even harder. It looked like it took all of Bryce's strength to load the robot into the back.

TERA was too tall for them to leave it upright, so they had to lay it down on its side -- which proved to be the hardest part of all, as they tried to do it without getting the wires tangled or breaking any of the fragile innards.

When Bryce threw a tarp over the robot and tied everything down to the truck bed, Zack reached into the ice box on the backseat and pulled out a bottle of water. He jumped down from his seat and went to hand Bryce the bottle. Bryce gladly accepted it and drained half the bottle.

"Everyone settle down, I'd like to say something before we leave." The loading dock grew silent and everyone turned to look at Morris as he locked the doors and came outside. "This competition isn't all about just winning. It's a time to gather together and have a good time. Win or lose, I want everyone to have fun at the competition. Now let's get going."

The coffee Zack had guzzled couldn't stave off his exhaustion from being sleep-deprived the night before, and he fell asleep even before they got on the freeway. By the time he woke up, the sun was shining and the clock said that a good four hours had passed.

Zack was a heavy sleeper, he once slept through his brother Nick sneaking home after curfew and accidentally tripping the alarm system, but Bryce still had the music down low so it didn't disturb him. Bryce's eyes were hidden behind his aviators, but his head was facing straight ahead and it looked like he'd yet to notice Zack was awake, giving Zack a chance to just watch him.



Zack must've made a sound or something else to bring attention to himself, because Bryce looked over at him. Bryce shot him a smile and greeted him with a good morning, before turning his head back to the road in front of them.

"How far along are we?" Zack asked as he opened the center console and rooted around for his sunglasses. He made a triumphant noise when he found them and slipped them on.

"We're almost at the first stop, a Denny's I think. Maybe in another hour." Bryce yawned into his fist before reaching for the coffee and taking a sip.

"That's good 'cause I'm starving. Mm, I can already taste the bacon and pancakes." Zack's stomach growled in agreement.

"When are you not hungry?"

"Just for that, I'm making you buy me waffles, too."

They pulled up in front of the stadium at half past nine. The GPS had told them that they'd arrived at their destination when they'd turned into the parking lot, but they didn't know where they were supposed to go to park and unload. It didn't help that the place was deserted apart from a couple of maintenance trucks parked in the far corner, either.

Zack's phone beeped from inside his hoodie and he pulled it out to find a text waiting for him. *just exited freeway, rep waiting @ back loading dock*. Bryce nodded when Zack relayed the message and he maneuvered them around to the back of the stadium.

Just as the text had said, someone was standing in the loading area, next to an open service entrance. The man climbed down from the raised dock and came up to tell them to back into the loading area. Bryce did he was told and carefully backed his truck into position.

The van with the rest of the club pulled up in front of them as Bryce was lowering the tailgate. Mr. Morris got out of the van and went to meet with the representative while a few of

the guys climbed out and came to help Bryce with TERA. They got the all-clear to unload after Mr. Morris signed the papers the representative shoved in front of his face.

If loading TERA in had been struggle, getting the robot unloaded from the back of the truck was a herculean effort. Righting the 120 pounds of robot that was TERA -- while making sure not to break anything, that was important -- and then keeping it from falling as they rolled it off the truck wasn't easy. It took Bryce, Zack, and the four other guys who came to help to do it.

It was comparatively easier to load up their cart with their extra parts and push both it and the robot through the wide service door and into the brightly lit back room. There were other entries lined up and ready inside, but they were directed to roll TERA onto an industrial-sized scale at the back of the room.

TERA came in just under the weight limit and it was only after the representative officially recorded the number that they were allowed to park TERA into its overnight parking spot. The representative went through TERA's parts one final time and had them tape it shut when he was satisfied with what he found.

It was almost surreal for Zack to be standing there after months of work. Bryce must have felt the same because he reached up and squeezed Zack's shoulder.

The hotel ended up being a quick fifteen-minute drive from the convention center; which was good, because everyone was exhausted after nearly a full day on the road. Mr. Morris told them to wait in the lobby while he went ahead to sign them in at the front desk. The sofas in the lobby were hard and uncomfortable, but Zack still found himself slumping against Bryce and dozing.

Zack blinked awake with a sharp intake of air when his human pillow shifted. Bryce had moved to grab a keycard from Mr. Morris.

"I hope you boys don't mind being on the other side of the hotel. It was the only room they had available."

Bryce shook his head and told Mr. Morris that they'd make do just fine with the arrangement. Bryce reached for Zack's backpack as Mr. Morris went on to hand out the rest of the keys, but Zack batted away Bryce's hands and grabbed his backpack from the ground. "I got it."

Yawning, Zack got up and stretched his sore back, before following Bryce to the elevators. The ride up to their floor was quick and they found their room at the end of the hallway. Bryce unlocked the door and led Zack in.

"You can go ahead and use the bathroom first," Bryce told him, dropping his bag on the floor at the foot of one of the beds.

"Sure, thanks." Zack tossed his backpack on the other bed and toed off his sneakers before stepping into the bathroom.

Zack clicked on the light in the bathroom and stripped out of his hoodie, letting the door close behind him. He turned on the sink and washed his face with cold water. It woke him up and Bryce was waiting for him when Zack stepped outside the bathroom. Zack paused when his eyes landed on Bryce's toned, bare chest. Whatever Zack was going to say was cut off when Bryce leaned in and pulled Zack into a kiss.

Zack gasped when he felt Bryce's tongue swipe over his teeth, looking for entry. Bryce took that as a good sign and deepened the kiss, before walking Zack back towards the wall. Zack let him take the lead and wrapped his arms around Bryce's neck, pulling Bryce closer.

Zack shuddered when hot, callused hands slipped under his shirt and gripped his hips. Zack groaned into Bryce's mouth when Bryce ran his hands up Zack's sides, hitching up Zack's t-shirt as he went. Bryce's pupils were blown and dark with arousal when they separated.



Bryce didn't waste time and pulled Zack's t-shirt off. He tossed it over his shoulder, before latching onto Zack's exposed neck.

Zack gasped involuntarily when Bryce reached down and unbuttoned his jeans, pulling them open with practiced ease. Bryce slipped his hands down the back of Zack's jeans and dragged them down his thighs.

Zack was so hard it almost hurt.

Bryce pulled away from Zack's neck and dropped to his knees. Zack's legs almost gave out when Bryce leaned forward and put his mouth over his clothed erection. Bryce mouthed the length, making Zack moan, before he pushed Zack up against the wall and grasped his boxers.

Zack let out a distressed sound when Bryce pulled back, but his whole body jerked when Bryce pulled down his constricting boxers and a hot mouth took him whole.

Zack felt his entire face heat up and he laced his fingers with Bryce's hand braced up against the wall near Zack's hip. He bit down on his lip to keep from crying out, but couldn't help but moan into his free arm.

Zack was lost in the sensation of Bryce's mouth bobbing up and down, and he only dully noticing a probing finger. He looked down to see Bryce holding a bottle of lube. Zack's hips jerked reflexively when he heard Bryce pop open the lid.

One of Bryce's slick fingers circled his hole and Zack gasped when Bryce slowly pushed the finger inside Zack. There was a dull burn, but it wasn't a bad burn; Zack rather liked the friction.

Zack barely muffled his yelp when Bryce skimmed over the spot inside of him that shot a bolt of white-hot pleasure through his body. Bryce ran his finger over the spot again and Zack's legs just about gave out.

Bryce pulled off of Zack's cock and tongued along the underside, slowly adding another finger to the one already working inside. Zack let out a stuttered breath at the burn, but it faded faster and Zack was quickly back to riding an endorphin high.

"B... Bryce. You gotta..." Zack choked out when Bryce sucked him down whole again, pushing him right to the edge. He was embarrassingly close, his body was already shaking with pent up need. "Hey Bry... agh!"

Bryce's throat worked to swallow as Zack came with a sharp exhale of breath. Bryce didn't waste a drop and kept on licking and sucking until Zack was a shaking, spent mess. Bryce finally pulled his slick mouth away when Zack pushed him away, and licked his lips, thoughtfully, letting Zack slump to the ground.

Zack somehow found the hand-eye coordination to reach for Bryce's boxers; Bryce had pushed his jeans down while Zack was occupied. Bryce caught his hands and pinned them to the wall above his head, leaning forward to close his mouth around Zack's bitten-red lips. Zack could taste his own come on Bryce's tongue when it swept through his mouth

"I already came," Bryce whispered, breathlessly, as he pulled away from Zack's mouth and grazed Zack's earlobe with his teeth. "You don't know what you do to me, Zack. Making those noises and looking at me like I'm the only thing in the world."

"Fuck," Zack panted, face heating up. "You can't just say stuff like that."

Zack reached over to the nightstand and plugged his phone into the charger when Bryce came out of the bathroom. Bryce shut the door with his foot and pulled on a worn white t-shirt.

"Big day tomorrow, huh?" Bryce said as he slipped into bed behind Zack.

Zack pulled Bryce's arm over his stomach and shimmied closer until his back was flush against Bryce's solid chest. "Yup."

Zack turned his head back when Bryce didn't say anything. Bryce was looking at him with a mildly concerned expression. "You know, you've been really zen about all this. I figured you were gonna be stressed out."

The bed shook a little when Zack shrugged. "I think I'm too tired to worry. Besides, it's not like there's anything we can do." Bryce's forehead smoothed out, but he didn't look completely convicted. "I'm fine." Zack said, reassuringly. "Don't worry about it."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure." Zack put his head back down on the pillow. "Now c'mon, turn off the light. We have to get up early."

Even Zack was a bit surprised when his nerves didn't act up the next day. He was fine at breakfast and he was calm when he put the finishing touches on TERA when one of the freshman started hyperventilating.

It was a good thing Zack wasn't stressing out, because the matches were far more intense than the regional games. They managed to survive their first two matches, but in the end, they lost the third qualifying round. TERA hit and then got stuck in the safety barriers set up around the playing field, a quick and complete disqualification.

Sure it was a defeat, but the day wasn't a complete bust. Being out of the running made it easier to just *be*. Everyone laughed more freely and weren't on pins and needles all day. They even got a plaque for participating, which was more than they expected to get.

Mr. Morris corralled everyone up in front of Bryce's truck for a group photo before they headed back home. There wasn't enough room for everyone once they brought TERA in, so Bryce and Zack hopped up onto the hood. Bryce threw an arm around Zack's shoulders and pulled him closer. Once everyone was crowded together, the cameraman snapped the photo.

They worked quickly, disassembling TERA into pieces and packing it away. By the time they finished, the parking lot was mostly empty and the sun was setting. Mr. Morris called over to them from the school van and told them to drive safe as they climbed into the truck.

They waved as the van went by and Bryce turned towards Zack as the engine thrummed. "You ready to head back?"

"Yeah, let's go home."



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Consequences of the New York City Smoke-Free Air Act of 2002

by Domashita Romero (地下口×口)

He had a thing about rooftops. For a couple of years in there, he had gotten anxiety just looking at a ladder, but now as a grown adult man with a couple of years of therapy under his belt, he found himself hauling up to hang with the HVAC systems surprisingly often. Admittedly, the main impetus for getting over his hangup was the perpetual rooftop parties thrown by a dude he'd desperately wanted to hook up with a few years ago, but you had to take the motivation where you could get it. Making out with that dude as the sun set over Manhattan had worked like magic, really.

That dude was just history now, and as Dante staggered up through his mid-twenties and into his late-twenties and terrifyingly closer to thirty, his opportunities to go to rooftop parties with sexy hipsters were ever dwindling. He'd climb up to his apartment building's rooftop from time to time to write, but most of his upper-storey time was spent on top of the school he taught at, lurking behind the ventilation so he could smoke without anyone getting on his case and without being a bad influence to the children.

He could hear the children, out at recess in the small amount of field the school managed to claim in Brooklyn. For the amount of tuition their parents paid, damn right they were going to at least get a swingset. His own class was down there knocking each other into the dirt, but it was happily not his day to supervise the insanity, so rooftop it was. He wouldn't say he hated his job, but he also wouldn't say that getting a nicotine infusion into his brain didn't help get him through the afternoon.

Dante could tell he wasn't the only one to come up here to smoke; there were butts scattered around the edge of the roof wall. If anyone ever caused a fuss about it, he was sure it'd be blamed on maintenance men or custodial staff. He always put his butt out and then disposed of it properly in a trash can. He was weird about evidence.

Still, though, even though he knew this wasn't his sacred special secret private zone, he still jumped when he heard the access door open. He hid his cigarette behind his back, like the rising smoke wouldn't give him away, like he was not a grown man who legally purchased them.

Mr. Adibe lingered in the doorway, looking just as surprised to see him. "Oh, ah..." He dipped his head a little and smiled, and Dante held his breath, even though it was full of smoke. "Didn't think anyone else would be up here."

Dante opened his mouth to speak, but it came out as a cough from holding in smoke too long. "I, uh..." He coughed a little more and then managed an awkward little smile. "Uh, yeah, you caught me."

"Oh, heavens, no," Mr. Adibe said, stepping out more onto the rooftop. "I'll have to send you to the head office right away, you delinquent." He smiled, and Dante smiled back, the both of them a little circle of nervousness.

Mr. Adibe -- Charles was his first name, but Dante was just accustomed to everyone being addressed teacher-style -- floated around the various classes teaching science. The rest of the faculty and most parents tended to assume the two of them were friendly, which was pretty gently racist when you got down to it, but Dante had never spent much time with the guy, actually. He seemed nice, though.

Dante shrugged a little and brought his cigarette from behind his back to admit his guilt. "You know how parents would be if they saw me doing this..."

Charles rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Oh, do I know," he said, and let the access door close behind him. Thankfully for the both of them it didn't lock automatically, which was a problem Dante had run into before in his roof adventures. "I am ever on guard to keep myself from failing in their watchful eyes."

Dante dropped his eyes down to the mottled concrete of the roof. "What do you ever do that would get you in trouble with parents?"

Charles laughed and pushed his glasses up on his face. "Well, I smoke as well," he said, and then shook his head. "I used to. Or, well, I'm trying to quit." He sighed and put a hand over his brow. "Not very well, actually. Would you mind if I borrowed one of those?"

Dante shook his head and went for the bag he'd set down by the wall to retrieve his pack. "Doesn't really work for borrowing," he said, handing a cigarette to Charles. "I'm always getting my kids on that one."

Charles took the cigarette and sighed. "It just seems a bit politer, though, doesn't it?"

"Kinda, yeah." Dante took out his lighter and lit Charles' cigarette. When he leaned in he could see how long his eyelashes were. "So, what, no 'bumming a fag?'" Dante tried, a joke he regretted the minute it came out of his mouth.

Charles rolled his eyes and sucked on the cigarette. "Oh, god," he said. "No, trust me, I've had that turn of phrase completely laughed out of me."

Dante shook his head. "Sorry, sorry, I couldn't resist," he said, and at least Charles was smiling. He hadn't talked to him much, but he had beyond noticed how cute he was. An adolescence of being a nerd meant he would always have a weakness to English accents. The curls, the glasses, the voice? He absolutely had to be straight, no doubt.

Charles took a very deep drag off of the cigarette and then let it out with a low groan. "Oh, that's good." He came up to stand beside the roof wall with Dante, looking down at the street below. "I got started in university and have been trying to kick it since."

Dante looked down at the cars below. "Yeah, you and me, both," he said. "Kinda felt like the thing I was supposed to do, you know? I'm all moving to New York, getting my MFA, it just seems natural like you've gotta smoke."

Charles glanced over at him. "You don't really seem the tortured artist type."

"Yeah," Dante said, and finished his cigarette, smudging out the end of it against the roof wall. "Most people do say that about me." There were a few moments of silence, and then his eyes bugged out. "Oh god, I just realized how dramatic and stupid that sounded." He turned to Charles to look at him and spread his hands out. "No. No, I am not a tortured artist."

Charles brought his smoke to his lips and smiled around it. "Well... like I said, you don't seem it." He blew smoke out into the late September air. Autumn in New York was one of the best things about living there, and Dante couldn't wait for it to arrive. "Me, I just... well, everyone else was doing it, so I did, too."

Dante nodded. "And when everyone else is doing it... like, especially since you can't smoke inside anywhere here." He glanced over at Charles. "It like that where you're from, too?"

Charles rolled his eyes. "Yes, for ages," he said. "And all of the interesting people go outside to have a smoke, and then you're just left there awkwardly having a drink with the chap with asthma, and while he is very nice..."

Dante laughed a little and thought about having another cigarette, but he needed time to air out before going back to teach. "Yeah, I know all about the chaps with asthma." Now that he

wasn't smoking he wasn't quite sure of what to do with his hands, so he brushed his fingers over the uneven surface of the waist-high roof wall. "And then before you know it: addiction."

Charles' lips looked soft. He pursed them prettily as he blew out smoke. "I keep thinking I've kicked it, but then the minute I came up here and caught a whiff, oh, that was the end for me."

"Sorry about that," Dante said, shaking his head again. "So... what were you coming up here for, anyway?"

"Oh, just, ah..." Charles smiled and looked down again. Neither of them were really looking at each other -- not openly, at least. They both pointed themselves out at the streets below and kept to glances. "Just like to get a little quiet time up here now and then. Maybe get a bit of reading done."

Dante's eyebrows went up. "Oh, yeah?" he said. "What're you reading?"

Charles looked a little sheepish, but then went for the bag he'd brought with him and pulled out a paperback. Oh, man, for all that Dante was no luddite, him and his English degree got big ol' boners for anyone who still went for paper and glue-bindings instead of ebook. Charles held up the cover to him. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. "Only just a bit into it, but I'm enjoying it so far..."

Dante smiled, really smiled. "Oh, that's a good one," he said. "I've thought sometimes that if I were teaching older kids, I'd give them that one."

Charles smiled and thumbed a little through the pages before putting the book away again. "That something you'd like to do?"

Dante took in a breath, and then let it out in an awkward, choked little laugh. "No, actually, not at all." He slipped his hands under the rims of his glasses to rub under his eyes. "Really, how many of us actually want to be teaching kids at all?"

"Oh, well," Charles said, and chewed his lip a little as he flicked ash off over the side of the building. "I do."

Dante took in a deep breath, and then sighed as he just slid his fingers up even further under his glasses to cover his eyes completely. "Aaand I'm a jerk."

"No, no," Charles said, and Dante peeked through his fingers to see there was enough of a smile on his lips for Dante to know that he'd done no real harm. "I'm used to that, too."

Dante laughed and pulled his hand away from his face. "Yeah, you know, I just gotta let you know up front that I'm a big ol' dumb cliché," he said, and he laughed when Charles did.

"I don't mean to sound rude, but yes, I've seen it before," Charles said. He'd already been at the school when Dante got the job, and Dante had to assume some other discontented mid-twenties butthole with a lot of student loan debt had had his job before him. Charles took a long pull from his cigarette, which was near the end. He was savoring the hell out of the thing. "You had me fooled, though. Your kids seem to like you."

Dante brushed a hand over the back of his neck. Charles came in to drop science on his kids, and Dante tended to check out while he did that, so it surprised him that Charles had noticed anything of what he did at all. "Oh, well... thanks. I like them too, of course," he said, and he did. The kids were fun, and weird, and surprising. This had just not been what he had in mind for where he'd be at this point in his life. But all of that was way too heavy shit to get into in a random awkward conversation with a coworker on a rooftop during recess. "It's not so bad."

Charles smiled and puffed the last on his cigarette. He stubbed it out on the wall, and then kept the butt in his hand. Dante noted that with a little nod. "I wouldn't tell on you if you hated it," he said.

"You'd have to tell on a couple of people around here if you were doing that," he said, and they both laughed a little, sharing a little blip of eye contact that communicated that they were both thinking of the same person. Ms. Winchester taught second grade and hated it with every fiber of her being, which was part of why the kids that Dante got ended up liking him so much. He ended up looking into Charles' eyes a bit longer than was needed to share unspoken mutual knowledge. They were just so damn pretty, all rich and dark with those soft stupid eyelashes. Dante absolutely needed to check himself. He pushed away from the wall.

"All right, I'm gonna leave you to it," he said. "Levar Burton's going to come up and shank me if I keep a man away from a good book for too long."

Charles looked confused for a while, then said, "The man... from Star Trek?"

Dante took a deep, slow breath. "Okay, you grew up in a different country so I understand that things are different, but before we talk again I'm going to need you to google 'Reading Rainbow,' okay?"

Charles gave him the softest, sweetest smile. "Sounds delightful," he said. "I absolutely will."

Dante gave him a little two-finger salute, and then felt incredibly goofy for doing that. "Do it. Enjoy your book. I'll see ya," he said, and walked away from Charles' little wave to head down the stairs back into the school building. Somewhere later, after school had ended and all of the yuppie parents had collected the kids and Dante was on the subway home, he realized he his mind kept coming back to the curve of that smile, his fingers holding the cigarette, the weave of his eyelashes.

Dante called himself an idiot and ate dinner on his apartment's roof that night.

They never officially made it a thing, never planned a time or a date, but it just started to happen more and more that Dante and Charles ended up on the roof at the same time. Dante would smoke, sometimes Charles would, too, and they'd talk a little. Charles was sweet, demurring at first from any topics that could be considered gossip about their fellow faculty, but no one really lasted for long when it came to that.

They didn't stand not-facing each other anymore, but rather tended to seat themselves on the edge of the wall, both of them with one foot on the ground, pointed toward each other. Dante flicked the large amount of ash that had gathered at the end of his cigarette; he'd sort of been forgetting to smoke it.

"Oh, she was drunk," Dante said, and Charles covered his mouth as he laughed. It was a shame; he had such a damn good smile. "Big meet-the-parents thing, and she was drunk as a skunk. I saw the flask!"

"Did anyone notice?" Charles said.

Dante shook his head. "No, I don't think so," he said. "I mean, come on, the parents we've got to deal with? Most of them were probably drunk themselves."

Charles snorted. "But not out of a *flask*."

Dante waved a hand in the air. "Please, of course not! Unless it was an organically sourced free-trade locally forged flask."

"Filled with..." Charles looked off to the sky thoughtfully. "Small-batch artisanal hand-made moonshine?"

Dante leaned his head back and laughed, probably too loudly for how they were supposed to secretly be up here. "Oh, damn, yeah, you have definitely settled in. You speak the language."

Charles waved a hand a little. "I don't mean to be mean, really. They're actually mostly very nice."

"Yeah, they are," Dante said. "And, like, I can't really blame them. They're just trying to get the best for their kids." He laughed. "Sometimes they make me think of my mom, with the way they fuss and want to get involved in every damn little thing."

"The overprotective sort?" Charles said.

"Hah, yeah, pretty much," Dante said, and remembered to take a draw on his cigarette. "I'm her delicate little nerdy baby boy; she always worries."

Charles' eyebrow arched. "'Delicate?'"

Dante screwed up his face and flexed body-builder style. "She doesn't know what a big tough dude I've become since moving away," he said. He was really pretty slim and spoonchested under his sweater, but it wasn't like Charles was ever going to see that. He relaxed from his pose. "But, yeah, she's a mom. Moms are moms. It's been like ten years since I moved away and she still gets all emotional on the phone sometimes."

"Ah, that's sweet, though," Charles said. Dante smiled.

"Yeah, it is," he said. "So, yeah, it may annoy the fuck out of me when little Juniper's mom spends like twenty minutes talking to me about she has ADHD but they're going medication-free and trying to manage it with a low-gluten diet but she needs to be seated not too close to the window but also not too far away either because the lack of sunlight causes a vitamin D deficiency that just exacerbates the condition, and it's not a *problem*, it's a *condition*..." He stopped and took a deep breath, and grinned at the way Charles was smiling. "I know she's just looking out for her baby. I'd probably do the same thing."

Charles drew his knee up close to his chest, one foot resting on the roof wall, the other on the roof itself. He seemed steady, at least. "You want kids yourself someday?"

Dante laughed and brushed a hand over his hair. "Damn, this job is seriously the test of that question, isn't it?" Charles let out a soft laugh and nodded. "I dunno. That's... kind of complicated." He waved a hand a little before snubbing out his cigarette. "My sister's got kids, though, so that at least gets me off the hook on the grandkid front."

"Ah, my brother, as well," Charles said, and trailed his fingertips over the edge of the wall as he looked over the buildings. "But, yes, it is rather complicated."

"You like kids, though?" Dante asked. It was definitely not a given in this job.

"I do," Charles said, with a smile that said the sentiment was genuine. Then he laughed and shook his head, bringing his hand to his forehead. "And hell if I don't know how carefully one must toe the line with that sentiment when one is male."

Dante let out a bark of a laugh. "Yeah, no shit." Not only were he and Charles the only two black teachers in the lower school, but they were among the very small handful of male teachers in the *whole* school. Most of the other men were focused in the upper school; people just tended to give you the side-eye if you were a dude and spent your life surrounded by eight-year-olds. It was one of the reasons why Dante was not so much out at work. He wasn't *in*, necessarily, but he definitely wasn't out. He shook his head. "This is really what you want to do, though? Like... a career?"

Charles nodded. "Really is. I just really enjoy," he made strange claw shapes with his hands in the general form of a child's head. "molding young minds!" Dante had to be making a strange face, because Charles' eyes got wide. "No, that sounded demented. I just had a lot of wonderful teachers when I was a boy who made a difference in my life, and I wanted to do the same."

"Seriously, man, I admire that," Dante said. "Makes me feel like a chump for how this is just a job to me."

"Well, everyone needs a job," Charles said. "So what is it you'd really rather be doing?"

Dante rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. "Well, you remember how I said I was a big cliché? I'm a writer."

Charles leaned back a little against a bit of ventilation piping. "I suppose that is cliché, but that doesn't make it bad. What do you write?"

Dante pinched his brow between his fingers. "Nothing right now," he said. "But I write plays. Have written. I had a couple of one-act things get produced in school, but that was school..."

He peered beyond his fingers to see that Charles had a soft expression on his face. "Oh, that's wonderful," he said, and Dante blinked a few times at the smile on his face. "I mean, I've met my share of failed novelists and essayists in this city, but not a--"

"--failed playwright?" Dante said, and laughed when Charles' eyes went full moon-wide. Gave him a better look at how pretty they were.

"No! Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that," he said, and put a hand up into his thick head of curls, tugging on them a little in nervous frustration. Well, that was just adorable. Damn it. "You're not *failed*, I was just saying, you know, the other people I've met, you know what I mean, you know the type, they're..."

Dante waved a hand to cut him off. "No, no, I get you. I went to school with them," he said. "Yeah, I'm not failed, but I'm also not successful either. And I know it's not something I'm ever going to get rich off of, so, you know... this job. Gotta pay the bills."

"But you can still work on it off the clock, yes?" Charles said.

"Yeah, theoretically," Dante said. "But, you know, herding munchkins all day, and then trying to have any sort of social life at all... sort of leaves the creative juices parched."

Charles tapped his fingers thoughtfully on his chin. He seemed to perpetually have a little bit of scruff; Dante had a little imagination adventure about him being the absent-minded scientist type, too caught up in thinking about some molecular compound or about rocket propulsion to remember to shave enough. "Hmm, a social life," he said. "I vaguely recall what one of those was."

Dante smiled. Definitely up late considering Jupiter's moons, this guy. Too damn cute. "Don't get out a lot?"

"Not much," he said. "My friends are a little," he made wiggly fingers in the air to represent typing, "ephemeral. Spread to the winds."

"Yeah, I know how that is," Dante said. He had plenty of friends in town -- or at least, he had people to hang out with, sometimes people to hook up with, but the closest he'd ever had to a best friend had moved to Portland a long time ago. That situation was the definition of complicated, anyway.

They were going to need to go back inside soon. Gentle young minds needed to be molded. Dante was having his kids do Hamlet, and it was extremely hilarious. "Well, hey," he said, and he knew the next words out of his mouth were a stupid idea. "Maybe we should hang out sometime. On a ground floor."

Charles' eyebrows slowly rose, and he gave Dante a dawning smile. "Oh... really?"

He absolutely had to be straight and Dante had to get that in his head right now. He'd wasted too much time in his life pining over straight boys. People got struck by lightning every day and a hundred coin flips could all turn up heads, but those things still had to be more likely

than two gay black dudes teaching at the same elementary school. But still, it was good to have a friend. "Yeah. It'd be nice to hang with you for more than half an hour," he said. "And anyway, it's going to get too cold to be up here soon."

Charles was grinning now. "Well! Ground floor it is!" he said, nearly bouncing. Dante hoped he'd keep his balance. "Or perhaps even *below* ground floor."

Dante had to smirk at that. "Hey, if you know a place."

"I might," Charles said, roguishly cocking an eyebrow. Dante reminded himself again to keep a steady head.

"Cool," he said, and stood up, brushing dust off his butt. "We'll make it happen."

Winter term came and passed, and they spent at least one glary bright December afternoon shivering on the roof with snow catching in Charles' curls, but they never managed the hangout anywhere below third floor. It probably just wasn't meant to be, Dante figured. You couldn't smoke in bars, anyway.

It was early spring, just warm enough to ditch the scarf and hat and heavy boots when Dante went up to the roof and was surprised to see that Charles was there first. He was deep in a book -- a well-loved copy of *The Pluto Files*, that adorable bastard -- and didn't look up until the access door squeaked closed behind Dante. His smile was bright and broad and he waved. Dante came over to sit on his usual perch near him.

"Welcome back!" Charles said, thumbing a dogear into his book, which only made Dante flinch a little. "Did you have a good vacation?"

Dante had come in on the red-eye from Portland at ass-o'clock this morning, and was feeling bleary and hungover without having drunk a drop. Although the weekend had involved drinking considerably more than drops, so part of it was probably carryover. "Oh, yeah, it was nice."

"Portland, was it?" Charles asked. Right, he must have mentioned it at some point.

"Yeah," Dante said. "Kinda chilly, but nice."

Charles brushed his thumb over the edge of the book, fanning out the pages a little. "Visiting friends? Just sightseeing?"

"A wedding, actually," Dante said.

Charles smiled and shook his head a little. "Ah, yes, we are of the age, aren't we?" Charles was just a little bit older than Dante, he'd been able to ascertain, but not by much. "I've gotten my share of invites, but they were mostly courtesy, since no one really expects me to fly off anywhere."

"Yeah, I get those too," Dante said. "This one, though, I definitely had to. I was *in* the wedding."

"Oh, I've never done that, no," Charles said. "How was it?"

"A lot of work," Dante said, and even though it was fun, it had been. He really wanted to take the rest of the week off just to sleep, both to regain energy and to have the experience of not taking the covers off from over his head for a while. "A lot of running around and stuff. It was small and not super-traditional or anything, but a wedding is a wedding."

Charles nodded a little, and then a little frown came over his face, knotting up between his brows. "If you don't mind me saying, you don't seem too happy about it."

Dante let out a deep sigh, took off his glasses, and rubbed his face. To hell with a pokerface. "To be honest, it was kind of a weird... thing." He rubbed the airplane headache

lingering in his sinuses. "I mean, they're a good couple, they're good together, I like them both, but... well, one of them's my ex."

Charles sucked in breath through his teeth. "That *is* awkward."

Dante put his glasses back on and waved a hand. "I mean, we broke up like ten years ago and it was totally a mutual amicable thing and we're really good friends still, but... it was weird. I mean--" Dante stopped and choked on his next word for a second before he spoke. Oh, the gender-neutral pronoun thing was so weak and so obvious, but he just did not have it in him to deal with that whole issue right then. "They were, uh, my first relationship. First... everything."

Charles' eyes were soft through his lashes. "First love?" he asked, gently.

"No, not..." Dante stopped and wrinkled his nose up. "Kind of? Not really. I don't know. It was high school and we were friends before and it was just weird. It was good, but it was weird. I mean, I love-- I mean, we loved each other but not, like, *in* love, if that makes sense."

"It does," Charles said. "I've been there myself a few times." He dropped his hand to brush along the outer edge of the building. "It's funny, I actually got an email from my ex this weekend. The one I moved here for."

"Damn," Dante said. "Must've been serious to jump an ocean."

"Oh, it was," Charles said, but he rolled his eyes while he did. "Love of each others' lives, or so we said. Funny how the romance fizzles out once it's no longer some whirlwind international student tryst and instead the two of you sharing an apartment and arguing over what movie to watch."

Dante'd never managed something so domestic. He'd never co-habitated at all. "What was the email?"

"Drunk," Charles said, disgust in his voice. "Does it every six months or so. 'Oh, baby, come back, I've got a place just for you, I miss you so much, breaking up with you was the worst mistake of my life.'" He delivered it in a shockingly good Boston accent, pitched in that deep way you did when you were mocking someone. "I didn't answer it. I know he'll just have completely forgotten it in the morning."

Dante opened his mouth to say something commiserating, but his brain played him that record scratch, which was funny, since as a typical member of his age group he'd probably never even seen a record player. "Wait, did you say 'he?'"

Charles blinked a few times. Maybe he hadn't realized he'd said it, or maybe he'd thought Dante knew all along. "Oh, ah, yes, I did." His cheeks darkened just a little, and Dante suddenly felt warm, very warm. "I *am* gay, I suppose I haven't mentioned it?"

Dante took a couple of deep breaths. He'd never had asthma before, but maybe he could suddenly develop it. Maybe he'd just pitch off the side of the building. "No, you, uh..." Was there a suave way to handle this? His reaction was making Charles frown, because cool, great, he looked like some homophobic dick. "Uh, so am I?"

Charles stared at him for a long moment. "You're what?"

"Gay?" Dante said, his voice pitching up high at the end, like he was uncertain of the fact, when he had been completely 100% certain of that fact since he was like thirteen. He coughed a little. "Gay. I am also gay."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes." Dante had a vision that this might go on for a while, but instead Charles went still, the two of them staring at each other.

"Well, I will be damned," Charles said.

Dante smiled a little. "Crazy, ri--" He didn't make it through the word as Charles scrambled across the space between them to kiss him, awkward and ill-fitting, their teeth bumping together and noses colliding. He managed real lip-to-lip contact as Dante flailed a little, tipping them both off balance in a way that tilted him dangerously towards falling off the side of the building. God *damn* his rooftop thing. He grabbed Charles by the hip and shoved him in the other direction, toppling with him until they were a heap on the rooftop.

"Sorry," Charles said, panting a little with his face against the roof. "Sorry, sorry, I really shouldn't have done that, that was awful of me, I'm sorry." He sighed and rested his head against the concrete. "I've had such a thing for you for ages, and I thought you were completely unobtainable."

"You..." For a moment Dante considered that he was still on the plane from Portland, having a dream that was going to leave him with the stewardess telling him to put a blanket over his lap. "I've had a thing for *you!*"

Charles lifted up his head. "You have?"

Dante waved his arms up in the air like an idiot. "Like crazy! Been kicking myself in the ass for getting a crush on a straight boy again!"

"You could have asked," Charles said.

"So could you!" Dante said, pitching up into histrionics again. Charles lifted his head to meet his eyes, and after a few moments they both started laughing, the mingled sounds somewhere between relieved and desperate. "Oh, come the hell here," Dante said, and tugged Charles over to kiss him, this time properly.

Dante'd been thinking about those lips since the first time he'd seen them wrapped around the filter of a cigarette, and they were just as good as he'd hoped, soft and plump. The kiss still wasn't perfect, though; they bumped noses, their glasses clattered, but they both just laughed and kept kissing. Dante put his hand into Charles' hair, finally satisfying the need he'd had for months to get a good feel of those curls.

They made out like stupid teenagers for a while, Dante on his back on the rooftop with Charles half sprawled against him. Dante pet the back of his neck and Charles broke away from the kiss to let out a little whimper. Well, *that* he was going to have to remember for later.

Later. "We... probably should not be doing this here," he said. There was blue sky above and the sound of children playing below. That access door was so not locked in any way.

"No, we probably shouldn't," Charles said, breathing against his mouth, his eyes closed to show those damn long eyelashes.

Dante took in a slow breath. If he went back down into the school now, he'd have a giant boner, and then he'd get fired and put in jail for certain. He put his hand on the small of Charles' back. "I kinda want to do it anyway."

Charles grinned against his lips. "Me too," he said, and scrambled his way over to straddle Dante's thighs. "We'll just have to make it quick."

"Quick is good," Dante said between kisses as he pawed under Charles' shirt, going past layers of clothing to feel his skin. "Slower later."

"Oh, later," Charles said breathlessly as he shifted and Dante could feel his erection pressing into his. "Later sounds wonderful."

Dante's response was just some aimless sound muffled into Charles' cheek as he slid his lips over it, feeling the stubble's light sting making them all the more sensitive. This was the kind of slutty hookup he usually reserved for bar bathrooms and also had not actually managed in

years, but damn did he want it to be more than just that. Later, indeed.

Dante rubbed at Charles' cock through his pants and listened to him whimper as he pondered his options. He felt him out through fabric and it felt good, nice and thick, and he knew European guys were almost guaranteed to be uncut. Blowing him would be fantastic. But kissing was also so, so good right then. Handjobs would be good, but jizz on the clothes would be bad. This would take some careful work.

He rolled Charles off him so they were lying side by side on the cold, dirty concrete, their legs tangled up together. "Okay, okay, like this," he whispered, and Charles just nodded as Dante undid Charles' belt, then his own. Charles needed no further encouragement to get him to pull Dante's dick out, those long fingers curling around it tight enough to make Dante squeak. His fingertips were smooth. Dante had to get his hand on Charles' cock immediately.

Thick, yes, uncut, yes, and Charles made the sexiest little stuttering gasp right into Dante's mouth as he stroked him. This wouldn't take long if he kept things like that up, which Dante had to sadly admit was for the best. "Better hurry," he whispered, laughing just a little.

"Not going to be a problem," Charles said, voice shaking. They kissed without stopping, even as Dante got a crick in his neck from lying on the hard roof, even as his other arm went numb. He could have stayed here kissing him until the rooftop was covered in snow again. He was going to come soon, he could feel the orgasm starting up in his gut. It'd be quick and dirty and wouldn't linger, but that promise of *later* would make it so good.

"I, I--" Charles gasped, and then bit Dante's lip as he came. Dante wanted to pull away and see it, the ridiculously obscene sight of someone literally coming on an institute of learning, but he was too busy grabbing Charles' hand to keep it tight and keep it moving until he was hissing breath through his teeth and adding his own splattered commentary on his job satisfaction on the rooftop.

A few more moments of kissing and they parted, both of them settling onto their backs. Dante gently put his softening, oversensitized cock back into his pants and put his clothes in order. Unscathed of DNA evidence, it seemed, and a quick glance to Charles showed he was the same. He closed his eyes and just listened to his heart racing in his ears, to the south of Charles' breathing slowing, to the noise of Brooklyn below.

"Well, I could certainly use a cigarette *now*," Charles said, and Dante laughed.

"Bum a fag?" Dante said through a grin that hurt his mouth in the best way.

"Mm, well," Charles said. "Maybe later."

Dante laughed again, a weighted breath leaving his chest, and just smiled up at the spring sun. The rooftop beneath him was hard and cold, and it had never felt so steady underneath him, or so good.

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Reed Fixation

by Kimyōna Akage (奇妙な赤毛)

"Justin Preston!" a voice calls over the din of the symphonic band warming up. I start from my fingering and look around. The voice calls my name again. I can't see who's calling my name until Carson Finn of the varsity orchestra mounts the podium and blows our conductor's whistle. There's immediate silence.

"Once again," he says, sounding annoyed, "I need Justin Preston to meet me in the instrument lockers. Now."

Everyone stares at me as he steps off the podium and heads out the door. I nearly bite my reed as I maneuver my bassoon's butt strap into my left hand so I can carry my bassoon with one hand and pick my way through the seats. My second chair looks like she's about to cry as my first chair slaps my ass and makes a comment about making messy cork wax with the Prince of Double Reeds.

That's really what we call him. He plays just about every double reed instrument in modern orchestral history. Even the sarrusophone, which is an actual instrument. We borrowed Mr. Sparks' iPhone to Google it when he brought it in for Period Ensemble rehearsals last year. Oboes and its siblings are his specialty though. He's in the instrument lockers putting his oboe together, not looking at me. I'm watching him roll his reed in his mouth a little too long and I have to suck on the spit that's threatening to fall out of my reed.

I end up choking on my own reed.

He glares at me before recognizing me. "Justin, right? You're fourth seat bassoon."

I nod, my bassoon's bell knocking against my head when I straighten.

"You were second seat last month when I sat in on your seat test. Why fourth?"

"I caught strep throat and couldn't play for two weeks."

He stops waxing the cork joint on his bell to look at me. "From your boyfriend?"

I roll my eyes. "From my little brother. He's eleven." And a little shit for spitting in my orange juice; I'm going to put catnip in his drum kit. With three cats in the house, I'm sure one of them will trash it.

Carson shrugs and puts his reed into the oboe. He plays a few notes, fingers rolling over the keys in a manner so skilled even the most het of the straight guys gets hot under the collar. Satisfied with its sound he pulls his reed, double-checks a sticky key, and takes it apart. When it's back in the case he offers it to me. I just stare at it. I can read his name and address on the metal "Take it." He sounds annoyed again.

"Why?" I blurt. That's one of his oboes. He's offering it to me. That's about equivalent to someone handing over their highly protected virginity. I'm getting flashbacks to last year's formal when Daniel Ellison tried to force himself on me in the restrooms; I yelled for an adult and I still don't regret it.

"Because starting next week you're taking private lessons from me."

"But I don't play oboe!" I don't. When I was six I was told that my fingers were too long to not play bassoon. I fell in love with it and never considered the oboe. Besides, the only person I know who could play it effortlessly was trying to shove one of his off on me. The fact that it's his oboe has me torn between just running and listening to the voice in my head telling me to "You will by the end of the semester. Mrs. Richards wants you to join varsity orchestra as my

third oboe."

Third oboe. There are currently seven seats in varsity and the first three get solos. I take the case just to have him stop staring at me and make my way back to my seat in symphonic, the case under my seat like a bomb.

The sympathetic looks I'm getting from the double reed section are almost as disconcerting as having to spend hours with the strictest musician in the school.

Last bell rings for the day and I find myself sitting on a bench in the instrument lockers. I've had the oboe for a few days now; thanks to the internet and a lot of hand massages from my mom I've figured out a lot of the fingering for the oboe. I'm nowhere good enough to pick a note without peeking at the positioning of my fingers -- which some may be wrong since I don't have a reed to check pitch -- but at least I shouldn't embarrass myself for my first lesson with Carson.

My fingers ache at the thought. My fingers are freakishly long and not used to folding themselves in half to press well-cared-for but still old keys. I'm pretty sure that I'm not rolling my fingers back properly when fingering the notes that need a half-covered hole. Right now "embouchure" is a dirty word because I'm sure my mouth doesn't know what to do with a reed that small.

Carson's head peeks out of one of the practice rooms that dot the locker room. He actually smiles and opens the door wider. "You're here, great. Come on in and get set up."

He flips through a book as I put the oboe together. It's similar to the bassoon in that regard, though I'm using the stick of cork wax that I found in the case instead of my own so it smells musty. Little-known secret: I'm learning to make my own waxes and shines for instruments. Which is why my bassoon never smells as bad as everyone else's.

I practice basic fingering for a little bit. His C key always sticks and doesn't loosen unless you use it a lot. He's staring at my hands when I look up.

"Are they cramping?" I shrug. I'm not going to admit that my mom soaks my hands in Epsom salts for half an hour after practice. "You should stretch them more. Your hands don't do me any good if they can't move."

My fingers stop moving as my brain stutters over his words. I can't even blush because all the blood is heading south. Shit. I duck my head and mumble something along the lines of, "Thanks."

Luckily he doesn't notice any of my spazzing and just nods. He only has eyes for his oboe, the one I have in my hands. It's fairly possessive and I wonder how old this oboe is. His dad is an oboist and his mother plays the clarinet. It's public knowledge -- band gossip is only truth when it comes to instruments -- that he plays his father's oboe, a gift for getting first seat in varsity orchestra. That was early sophomore year. He's a senior now.

"It's my first," he says quietly as if I couldn't keep my thoughts to myself. My hands still and then tighten around the joints protectively.

"Why?"

He meets my eyes and there's passion behind his straightforward gaze. "Because the fastest way to become better is to play a difficult instrument."

His words ease the aching in my fingers. The way he puts it makes so much sense. I remember my first bassoon, a rental with sticky keys that nothing could alleviate. But when I got my first bassoon -- my only bassoon and the only girl I'll spend the rest of my life with -- playing was effortless. My mom actually put me on a time limit each day; I couldn't put her down.

We're staring at each other for at least a minute too long before my finger twitches the wrong way and I misfinger a note. His lips twist disapprovingly and whatever was passing between us is lost in him correcting my placement. It's how we spend the rest of the week's lessons, him in close proximity, hands all over me breaking bad habits before I start them.

Next week Carson had something special for me. It's in the form of a tin about the size of his hand, thin and rectangular. He selects something from it, reverent, and offers it to me. It's the most beautiful reed I've ever seen. I know what an oboe reed looks like but this was different.

An oboe reed is longer, thinner and finer than a bassoon reed. But both types of reed are handmade. This one was as well except the craftsmanship was a work of art. The curvature is nonexistent, a gradual elegant slope from the cord to the near-translucent tip. Bassoon reeds lack that delicate elegance and that's why I don't reach for it. Carson smiles, sympathetic.

"Don't worry, it's not yours yet. You'll get this when I decide you're good enough. For now, you learn to play this."

I nearly lose a sigh of relief when he puts that reed away and pulls out a synthetic reed. Handmade reeds are good and worth the money we pay for them. Professionals have a lot, each reed for a specific sound the musician wants or a certain orchestra or ensemble they're a part of. I have three, two for regular use, one just in case my reeds decide they want to split halfway through the Christmas concert. Considering Carson's career he probably has at least ten between all his instruments.

The synthetic reed has no taste as I stick it in my mouth to wet it. My tongue rolls it idly and I already miss the texture of a real reed. Watching Carson slip his reed in his mouth made me very jealous of his tongue. By the end of this I'm going to want to crawl into his mouth and rub my face against it.

In a nonsexual way, of course. Sexually, I'd rub myself all over his fingers. Those are sexual objects.

"Justin?" I look up to see Carson watching me. He smiles and I nearly faint, the blood going south so fast. "If you're back with me I'd like to teach you how to hold a reed. Again."

I'm bad at holding a reed in my mouth. At least an oboe reed.

Bassoon reeds need strong lips to hold it in place as well as keep a good seal. That kind of strength shuts an oboe reed down and forces the air out my nose and dislodges a booger. Carson snickers and I want to put the booger on his nose.

"Your embouchure is nearly perfect," Carson says admiringly as he turns my head with firm fingers on my chin. "It's the pressure that's stopping the flow."

He really needs to stop talking. It's all coming out innuendo and if I pop one I will kill myself with this reed. He's chewing on his lip now, considering his fingers. I refuse to consider his fingers for reasons mentioned above. He points his pinky finger at my lips.

"Fit your mouth around my finger as I showed you with the reed," he commands. "The reed is too small for you to learn the proper pressure on."

I swallow and stare at the pinky finger in front of me. He wants me to put his finger in my mouth. My heart drops into the pit of my stomach as I flush and lean forward. It takes all my self-control to resist running my tongue against his finger as I close my mouth around it.

"First, I want a bassoon's embouchure."

I comply, rolling my lips inward and finding the sweet spot right behind his nailbed. If I couldn't smell him, I'd think I was handling my own reed. I blow out of habit, letting the air flow out my nose instead of through my nonexistent reed. He nods approvingly and my tongue twitches.

"For an oboe you have to pull your lips in more so your teeth make the seal at the edge of your lips and not in the middle. Good. Now blow. Stop, stop. If you keep your cheeks that firm you're going to close off the reed. Let them and the area around your mouth puff a bit." He watches me try and fail. There's that annoyed slant to his mouth again. He pulls out and kindly suggests I practice at home.

Carson is in a bad mood today. I can tell because when I meet him he just grunts at me. Instead of making a beeline to the practice rooms he picks up his things and gestures for me to follow. We head for the basement where the library stacks are. Further back, past the rare book room the previous principal's widow donated to the school, I see practice rooms. They're gross, soundproofing at least two decades old and peeling. I wince when I see the unpainted cinderblocks through holes in the panels. The sound of us setting up chairs and stands sounds off-key.

"Once again we're going to get you to hold a reed," he says, tossing me mine.

I'm not going to go into detail about this. Needless to say, I still haven't figured out how to relax my face muscles enough to allow for some puffing. After years of keeping a firm face it's hard. After a half hour of this, Carson was at the end of his patience. He tells me to put away my oboe. We're not going to be playing anytime soon.

"I hope you kiss better than you hold a reed because god, do you suck," Carson mutters under his breath. The click of latches closing punctuates his annoyed tone perfectly. My teeth grit in a way I was grateful that I didn't have a reed in my mouth.

"Try me and find out," I retort unthinkingly.

He shrugs and says, "Sure," then turns on me.

Truthfully, when he came at me, hand raised, I thought he was going to punch me. I'd punch me. His hand went to the oboe in my hand and took it, leaving it to rest on the stand, possibly crushing my reed. As I open my mouth to warn him that he's crushing his precious reeds, he slots his mouth against mine, climbing into my lap. I do what I've always wanted, licking into his mouth, running the tip along the ridge of his hard palate, catching my tongue against his teeth as he curls inward, shuddering. I pull out before he accidentally bites me.

He chases after me, smooth-worn fingertips from years of fingering keys slipping down the back of my shirt. They're cold, as if his oboe transferred its chill to him rather than Carson warming it. I lean back in the chair, trapping his fingers. They dig in.

Now, he's too far away. If he leans the entire distance, he'll be licking my collarbone the entire way -- which he's doing now. I groan and he hums contentment against my neck. I reach for his knees, surprisingly knobby for an avid swimmer and pull him closer. He lets out a noise as he rocks back and glares at me first, then down to my pants. I've been hard since he climbed into my lap. He rocks against me, once, obviously testing me.

I grab his ass and rut against him. He does that inward curl-and-shudder again, and I have to nose at him to get him to look at me again. His pupils are blown wide and he's flushed from his hairline down into his shirt. I kiss him gently, like I'm learning the feel of a new reed, and he falls into me. He tastes like his reeds, I realize as my hands are crawling up his back, bracing it

so I don't gain distance from him. The next time he curls inward and shudders -- nipping at the edge of his lips this time -- the movement is shifted lower into his hips and he rolls against me. We moan into each other's mouth as our dicks brush.

"Tip your head forward," he gasps at me. My brain is barely working, overloaded from the feel of Carson against me. I hadn't even registered one of his hands' getting loose and playing along my hairline until now. I nod, taking the time to acquaint myself with the artery pulsing strong in his throat. It's following a tempo much higher than the metronome ticking away the minutes somewhere in the practice room.

No, it's the school's bell ringing the hour. Five p.m. I'm suddenly grateful for the fact that no one is down here after two. We'd definitely be caught and I want to do more to Justin before lesson ends at six.

He's more sensitive where his throat meets his collarbone than under his jaw. He shifts and I jolt as he places a sucking kiss at my hairline on the back of my neck. It hurts a little and I wonder if I'll have a mark there by the end of this. He's grinding against me, our dicks sliding easily restrained by our uniform pants.

His other hand is suddenly free and reaching for my belt. It pauses. In pants and shared breaths that multiply in the room I give consent and my belt and snap comes undone in what seems like one movement. Smooth fingertips followed by what feels like sandpaper fingers slipped inside my pants, wrapping around my dick. I thrust up into his downward stroke. It's my turn to arch back away from him. I'm already seeing stars as he leans in and scrapes his teeth against my Adam's apple.

I want to feel him. My hands move upwards and he chuckles, extracting himself from me to let my hands coax first his sweater and then his shirt off button by button. My mind jump-starts as I watch his hair fall back in place and I follow the line along his throat, across the arch of his collarbone and down his inner arm to his nipple. He shucks off the rest of the shirt. I tongue it experimentally.

As expected, he curls inward over my shoulders, scrabbling at my back with a choked moan. I swirl my tongue around it quickly and went lower, nipping at his ribs.

"I'm not that flexible."

Before I can finish the sentence, he's squirming out of my lap. I catch him and bear him down to the ground where he takes my shoulders and pushes me lower. There's a faint throbbing in my knee until his buckle distracts me. His belt comes apart easily. He's eager to get rid of his pants and wriggles enough that I can get them down to his knees. I hear his foot kick off his shoe before he sticks a thumb into his pants' waistband and tug one leg the rest of the way off. I kneel between his knees and breathe on his erection as it half pokes out of his boxers. Before he can take a gasp I swallow him. My name gains an extra twelve syllables and I hum around him.

His hands are grabbing at my shirt, bunching it at my armpits. I slide back -- teeth gently scraping against him, he keens and I've found my new favorite sound -- and let him take the shirt. There's a plop from it landing wherever he threw it; I could care less, I'm nosing his legs further apart.

"No."

My head is up and hands are clearly away from him. He reaches for me and repeats himself. "You have to talk to me, babe; you said no."

He blinks away the lust for a moment and that annoyed slant to his mouth comes back. I want to kiss it but no is no.

"I want to do you too." He rolls onto his side and I get the hint. I so get the hint. The sound of music stands scraping along the worn carpet sets my teeth on edge but it doesn't stop me from rotating around so we're facing each other. He's shoving my pants down as fast as he can while I go back to swallowing him.

He teases me, a lick to the underside as if I'm a sax mouthpiece drying out that drags across my frenulum before worrying at my urethra. I buck and he hums around me, too hot and too wet. I can hear the smugness in it. I worm my tongue in between his foreskin and crown as my fingers massage his balls. I'm going to cheat and I don't care. Two fingers slip back further until I find his puckered hole then it's a game of just enough pressure to tease but not enough to coax him open. He sucks me deeper and harder.

After that, it's an infinite loop of sensation. We've set a rhythm of alternating thrusts, trying not to choke each other in our haste, though I'm pretty sure Carson has no gag reflex with how deep he's taking me.

Without warning, I come, crying out something around Carson's dick, and it's enough to send him over the edge. I swallow what I can. What dribbles out of my mouth is forgotten as he gives one last suck before things go hazy.

Reality rebuilds itself around us slowly. My knee felt like I tore a hole in it when I slipped and I could still feel the ghost of Carson's dick pulsing in my throat. I hear Carson breathing, too close. When did he move, I can't remember. I swallow and Carson speaks.

"The carpet, no, the entire room is shit. I'm having the boosters to fix these up."

He's so sure of it it makes me laugh. "Why? No one comes down here."

Carson smiles and I'm suddenly grateful I never provoked this side of him before. We'd have been fucking from day one and I'd be even more behind. "Exactly."

Even though I'm spent, my dick pulses at the possibility of more. Of whatever this was.

Carson has his head on straighter than I do because he reaches for me, tucking me away gently and doing up my pants. I reach forward to help him but his are already done. I reach again and this time I find the bundle that was his shirts. I untangle them and get him to stop threading my belt to slide his arms into his shirt. I button while he buckles, both of us smiling though light kisses left in the afterglow's wake. He shakes out his sweater and pulls it on. Somehow my shirt ended up in it and it pops out with his head. We're laughing too hard to do anything but sit back down.

His phone vibrates. It takes a couple of tries, but Carson makes it to his backpack. He groans. "I have to get going if I'm going to make my next lesson."

I nod, the mood gone even though the giddy holy-shit feeling is still there. I get my shirt on; Carson packs up our instruments. He packs my reed back into his case; looks like I still haven't earned take-home rights yet. We head out, Carson making sure that the door locked behind us.

Just as I'm about to say bye, he catches me and pulls me close. "Private lessons at my place on the weekends. You're good, but not that good."

I've been around him long enough I know he's still talking about my embouchure and not my oral skills. I laugh and kiss him. "I want breakfast."

"When you earn your reed."

I knew it was going to be this way. "Deal."

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This Story Is Full of Scorpions: Seriously, Dude, Don't Read It

by shukyou (主教)

illustrated by sairobi



According to Multiverse Theory, you, in an infinite number of universes, right now, are fucking Rick Santorum. All it takes for there to be a divergence is a decision, no matter how small: the second you make a choice, you go one way, and a universe where you make the other choice goes the other way. Another choice, another split. Every decision you make, from where to go to college to when to scratch your balls, is happening at that very same moment in an infinite number of other universes, and some of you are making one choice, and some of you are making another.

Or maybe the choice got made before you even got there. Maybe your great-great-great grandmother had a pickle for lunch one August Thursday, and that set off the chain of events that led to you, where you are, right now, reading this. Maybe if she'd had an apple instead, you

wouldn't be sitting here at all. Instead, you -- or someone enough like you that it might as well be you -- would be knees-up in some sturdy Pennsylvania Dutch four-poster bed, taking it like whatever you take it like from a former senator and presidential candidate in a sweater-vest. There's even an infinite number of universes where he's removed the sweater-vest.

There is, of course, an infinite number of universes out there where this is *not* happening. But mathematically speaking, infinity and infinity are the same -- that is, you can't have *more* of the infinity where a thing is happening than you can of the infinity where that thing isn't happening. So if you could step through the thin membrane separating these universes into that next universe over's version of you, odds are fifty-fifty that you'd find yourself on the receiving end of Rick Santorum's glorious Republican penis.

Think about that next time you're having trouble sleeping.

Ty was balls-deep in me when Mike called. You better believe I let that bastard go to voicemail.

Balls-deep isn't even an exaggeration. I was actually feeling his firm, hairy nutsack slap against my asscheeks every time he plowed into me. It's one of those things that feels awesome at the time but feels so stupid when you talk about it later, like when you're jerking off to porn and five seconds after you come, you can't believe what the hell crap it was that just made you shoot your load. But he was there and my knees were touching my shoulders and it was all great.

Speaking of shooting one's load, that's what I did about three minutes after the terrible midi version of Coldplay's 'Clocks' that Mike, that asshole, had set as his personal for-me ringtone stopped. I grabbed Ty's hair -- 'Electric Lizard' green this week, though he'd done a shit job at the roots and I could still see 'Bad Boy Blue' peeking out just above his scalp -- and pulled him into a deep, toothy kiss. "Fucking come in me," I demanded straight into his mouth, like he could hear me better that way. "I want to feel you jizz in me, you fucking beautiful fuck." I am not at my most creative right after I've had my balls drained.

Fortunately, Ty found my stupid dirty talk as hot as I found his stupid tongue stud and his stupid black fingernails and his stupid everything else hot, so he doubled down and fucked me so hard I figured we'd leave a permanent me-sized mark in the mattress. I didn't care. It was Mike's bed.

With all the lube and friction and sweat, you can't actually feel when a guy comes in you -- at least, I can't, and I'm a pretty sensitive asshole by several definitions of the phrase -- but Ty's face gave me the good news as he gasped and furrowed his brows tight for a long moment, then collapsed on top of me in a great pile of sweat and limbs. I love him, but I put up with this for about two seconds before I shoved him off me and out of me, then curled up with him face-to-face. We kissed for several minutes like that, just touching and petting and snuggling and leaking all sorts of bodily fluids onto Mike's sheets. He'd used my car's backseat similarly last month; fair was fair.

At last, Ty slapped my ass twice, hard enough to sting, and rolled off the bed. "Fuck, I needed that," he said, stretching his arms above his head. His soft, still-glistening penis dangled about eye level with me as I lay there; if a penis could have looked proud of itself, his would have been doing just that.

"I assume showing up at ten on a Tuesday morning means finals are done for you?" I rolled onto my stomach, both letting my ass air-dry and giving Ty a good look at what he'd done.

"One more." Ty stretched out his arms behind him and popped his spine. "At noon. And then nothing to do this summer but apply for grad schools and have sex with my boyfriend."

"Not in that order."

Ty picked up his discarded clothes from the trail that led from the bed to the apartment's front door. Okay, fucking on Mike's bed *was* revenge, but it was also a matter of convenience. My room was ten whole feet farther away. "Sometimes in that order." Items collected, he tossed them on the corner of the bed that was still relatively semen-free. "And I need a shower. I don't want to sit a language exam smelling like cock."

"You could sit on my face smelling like cock," I offered, which was the most Mike-like thing I'd said all day.

"Later," he promised, blowing me a kiss as he stepped into the bathroom. I was already ready for round two, and I love fucking in bathrooms as a general rule, but our apartment's particular shower was about the size of a second-grader's pencil case, meaning if we did try something, Ty's dick was liable to wind up stuck somewhere less comfortable than in my ass.

The door hadn't been shut two seconds behind him before I heard a distinct and melodious scream. I slapped my forehead. "It's just Chester!" I shouted back.

He stumbled back out, looking even whiter than he usually did and pointing an accusatory finger back over his shoulder. "I can't shower in there."

We were coming up on our three-month anniversary, which meant Ty was about to finish his third full month of being a psychic. I'd given him spectral herpes -- consensually! wholly consensually! -- on our first date, which had not-coincidentally been in a creepy haunted house where we'd needed a combination of my highly contagious paranormal abilities and his in-progress Asian Languages and Cultures undergraduate degree to keep us from being siliconed to death by animated anthropomorphic sex toys. He was adjusting well, all things considered, but I can still remember my first year of my infection and how many times I'd thought I had a handle on what was now inside my head and been totally wrong. "Maybe keep the light off?"

"*His intestines glow in the dark,*" Ty reminded me, which was a good point.

"Okay, okay," I said, rolling out of bed. I felt bad for having forgotten to warn him, but the truth was that our bathroom had looked like that for a week now, which meant I'd been used to it for nearly as long. No matter how much of a trooper he was, Ty had only had twelve weeks to adjust to being able to view the unseen world that hung around us every day. I'd been this way seven years and counting. "Get dressed, we'll go back to your dorm, you can take a shower there, you can go prove your Mandarin-translating skills to some tweedy professor, and then we can celebrate by breaking your dorm bed."

"Fine," sighed Ty. He picked up one of Mike's discarded t-shirts from the floor and wiped down his front; bless him, he had from the start taken the right attitude toward my terrible best friend, roommate, and occasional sexual outlet. Speaking of, I remembered the phone call from earlier a split-second before Ty asked, "Was that Mike calling?"

I nodded and flipped open the phone, and was surprised to see that he'd left me a voicemail message. Ever since the whole haunted house incident, he'd decided that live conversation was his preferred method of long-distance communication. I tapped in my voice code and held the phone to my ear, wondering what it was he wanted this time.

Ten minutes later, badly dressed and badly parked, we were in the lobby of Hellman Hall. "And he said *the* sociology building?" Ty asked, looking at the directory near the elevator.

"Do you have more than one?" Mike's message had been weird and garbled, especially near the end, but that part at least had been clear.

"No, but ... there's the sociology *offices* and there's the sociology *classes*. Most of the classes get held in here. The department offices are in ... Pitlow, I think, but that's the other side of campus, and it doesn't have a fourteenth floor."

"Well, if this isn't it, we know what our next stop is." I pressed the elevator call button.

Unkempt and obviously not-very-long-post-coital as we both looked, we would have been out of place literally anywhere but a homeless shelter on singles night or a college campus during the last day of finals week. I might have looked slightly older than the average student, but was no more recently washed. The cracks in the linoleum formed arcane alchemical symbols. The espresso machine at the coffee cart growled at me in what I think was French. The first letters of every student organization flyer on the bulletin board, read in order, told the time and date of a combination faculty tennis tournament and Roman orgy. One girl's copy of *Cry, the Beloved Country* called me a crypto-Marxist as she walked by. I hate higher education.

At last the elevator car came. We stepped into it, and Ty held my hand while I tried to look cool. Mike was a stupid obnoxious asshole idiot, but he was *my* stupid obnoxious asshole idiot, and I still wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd worried me. At last, the elevator arrived, and when we stepped out, Ty tugged me left. "This way," he said, guiding me down a corridor lined with classrooms.

I didn't even have to check the plates by the doors; I could see our destination from the other end of the hall, and from the way Ty slowed down as we got close, he could too. Anybody else would have walked right on by without so much as a second glance, but seeing the world the way everybody else did was a luxury I'd long since given up. It made me think of watching movies where the audio and video got just a hair out of synch, enough that my brain could tell something's wrong even if it couldn't say what specifically. The patch of floor by the door was a little *too* beige, the blue around the door frame was not quite blue enough, and the handle was just different enough from all the other door handles that the wrongness began to itch at my brain. I tightened my grip on Ty's hand and pressed the call button on my phone. Sure enough, from the other side of the door, I heard a distorted, underwater rendition of 'Sexyback'.

"Mike?" I called out after it rang itself to voicemail. I tried the doorknob and found it locked, so I knocked a few times. "Mike, are you in there?"

"Jase?" The voice from the other side was muffled and feeble, but unmistakable. "Jason?"

I tried the door again, hoping for the very real possibility that I'd just been an idiot the first time and turned it the wrong way. No such luck: the handle swung but the mechanism didn't disengage. "Mike, the door's locked. You're going to have to let us in."

There was a small pause before Mike spoke again. "...Jason, you've got to get me down from here, I'm so scared."

No. Mike was lots of things -- a dickhead, a jackass, an asshole, a cocky bastard, a shitstain, a fuckwit -- but he wasn't ever scared. Being scared required certain sensible parts of his brain I'd lay good money on his having been born without. I looked at Ty, who shrugged and knocked a few times himself. "Mike, it's Ty. I'm here too."

"Ty?" He sounded on the verge of tears. This was equal parts troubling and embarrassing.

"Yeah, dude, it's me. I came too."

"Just the two of you?"

"Just the two of us," I promised, jiggling the handle to see if I couldn't shake its inner workings loose by sheer force of will. Now *I* was starting to panic. If he was pulling my leg,

I'd throw him out the window. "Come on, Mike, if you want us in there, you've got to open the door."

After another pause, this one longer, I heard a sound from the other side of the door I associate only with deep-sea documentaries and certain seminal (pun unintended) pieces of Mike's porn collection: a very peculiar sort of squishing, damp and sort of sticky, enough to make my skin crawl. It slapped up against the door and then slid down, and as it did, the handle pulled free, leaving the door to swing open a crack. A trickle of green, swampy water appeared to flow out from behind the door, though I couldn't feel it even when it washed over the tops of my crappy Keds. Holding Ty's hand so that he wouldn't get scared and absolutely not because my own stomach was about to crawl up my throat and out my mouth in a show of frankly well-timed self-preservation, I placed my other hand flat against the door and pushed it open wide.

More ghostly water flooded out, and now I could hear it as it my feet slogged through it, even though I still felt bone-dry from top to bottom. A soggy smell wafted through the air, the green-and-brown scent of decaying organic things. The room was empty except for desk-chairs in neat rows and a lecturer's podium at the front; on top of the podium sat Mike.

Well, 'sat' may have been a strong word for it; I'm not really sure what you call it when you've got a human head from the neck up and nothing but a whole mass of long purple tentacles beneath it, and you're staying very still.

"Jason," said Mike's head, fixing me with a worried gaze I now knew to be sincere, "I think I screwed up."

Because it seemed like the polite thing to do, I stepped closer and shut the door behind us. Ty's expression wavered between horrified and fascinated; bless the driving intellectual curiosity of college boys. One long purple tentacle snaked up my leg, and I very manfully did not wet my pants, though it was close. I looked down in time to see another snakelike appendage brush across the top of Ty's sandaled foot. "Jesus!" Ty yelped, clutching my hand so hard I feared for my very bones.

"So," said Mike, and I hated my brain then for, faced with all the logical impossibilities in front of it, getting hung up on the way he shouldn't have been able to speak on account of not having any room for human-sized lungs in his flat, tentacled body, "remember the sociology professor I told you I was seeing? Turns out she's an elder god."

I wanted to claim it wasn't the weirdest thing that had happened to me all week, but no, this made even Chester seem like small potatoes. "...Like Cthulhu?"

"Cthaeghya, actually," said Mike, his tentacles swishing in a way that might have been a shrug. "But she prefers 'Katie'."

Ty shook his head. "Cthaeghya's not an elder god; she's a Great Old One--"

"Not the point, sweetie," I said, patting his shoulder in a way I hoped wasn't too patronizing; we'd talked about how best to respect and treat one another as equals despite the five-year age gap between us. "So, what, did you piss her off?"

"No! I showed her a great time!" Mike sighed. "So she wanted to see me again and.... Oh fuck, hold on."

"Hold on to what?" I asked, but by the time I'd said that, it was already too late.

'Too late', of course, is a relative term even at the best of times, because whatever happened not only had happened before I even started speaking, but had always been happening. Mike sat on the podium now -- and *sat*, on his human ass, with his human legs dangling off the sides, balanced precariously on a piece of equipment not meant to support a full-grown male human -- and had always been sitting there, just like that. I had only a half-memory of seeing

him as the half-octopoid abomination holding court above the murky, ghostly sea, like being able to remember a dream yet all the while knowing it'd never happened. I felt a flash of vertigo that passed as quick as it had come, leaving me wondering if I'd even really felt it at all.

Mike hopped down from the podium and landed on his feet with a little grunt on impact. "Well, that was fucked up. Anyway. Where was I?"

"You mean 'Katie' like Dr. Starr?" asked Ty, who seemed to be rolling with this now even better than I was. Couldn't handle toilet ghosts; could handle sudden whole-body changes. Good to know.

"Yeah! Why, you know her?"

"Took her Intro to Semiotics last semester."

I waved my hand across the air between them. "Again, not the point."

Mike walked over and poked me a few times, which I allowed in part because when I'd heard his fear through that door, the back of my mind had started considering worst-case scenarios about why he might have been scared, and if he'd been dying, I would have felt really bad about how much spunk I'd recently left on his belongings. "Okay, I think it's every five minutes or so. It's hard to tell time as half an octopus, though. And that clock is--" Mike pointed and frowned, and I turned, following the line of his finger see to a blackboard-covered wall with not a timepiece in sight. "You see the problem."

With a sigh, I leaned more heavily on my crutch, taking some of the weight off my prosthetic leg, which had started to pain me. "All I saw was you doing your best neck-down impression of a cephalopod, and that seems to have cleared up on its own. Did you say to her something involving a kitchen and sandwich-making? Because we talked about that."

"If you *must* know, *she* invited *me* here for a little mid-morning hanky-panky," Mike said, looking about as smug and self-satisfied as he ever did, "and then, after I had pleased her to her satisfaction and then some -- which I, respecting your sensibilities as homosexuals, shall not detail here, lest you clutch your own pearl necklaces -- she needed to get some grading done, so she left and told me to wait five minutes before following her. But I waited slightly more than five minutes, and then I was made entirely of cheese."

"Entirely?" asked Ty.

"Mostly. I think I had pimento eyes. But the *really* weird thing was how it wasn't weird at all. It was like, oh, okay, I'm a sentient man-sized cheese conglomerate, that's what I've always been and what I'll always be, that's fine. I could remember *not* being one, sure, but it didn't feel wrong that I was. Kind of sad that cheese can't eat itself. I bet I was delicious."

For all the shit that Mike had landed himself in before, this definitely won some kind of special jury prize for creativity. "Well, all's well that ends well." I shifted my grip on my crutch before turning for the door. "Let's get out of here so Ty can get ready for his exam--"

"Jase, hold up," said Mike, and I stopped with a sigh, wondering what *now*. "We're not out of it."

"What?" I looked him up and down. "You are neither cheese nor a sea creature. Congratulations."

He pointed to my lower half. "You don't have a prosthetic leg."

Of all the stupid things he'd said that day, that was the stupidest. Of *course* I had a prosthetic; I'd had it -- or something like it -- since I'd lost my right leg from the hip down in a car crash when I was nine. I'd had to go through months of PT to learn to walk with it, and I'd never been able to balance well enough to get by without some sort of secondary support. I'd met Mike in middle school and he'd been the first non-family, non-doctor person to see my stump,

which he'd proclaimed 'pretty cool' before asking if I wanted to watch *Silk Stalkings* reruns. Everything in my entire life since the age of nine had been colored by my leg, or the lack thereof.

Except that he was right, too. Like he'd said about his full-body cheese experience, while I could remember everything about growing up with a prosthesis, I also knew at the same time that this wasn't right. It was right for here, but it wasn't right for *me*. "Shit," I said, tapping the crutch against the cosmetic plastic case beneath my leg and hearing it click.

"So what do we do?" asked Ty, and now when I looked at him, I could see the 'Electric Banana' yellow that made him look not unlike Tweety Bird from the scalp up, but I could also remember seeing that morning a blur of neon green as the real Ty -- *my* Ty -- had sucked my cock like it was going out of style. Everything was okay right up until you could look at it and remember it wasn't. Now *that* was fucked up.

"Are you *sure* you didn't piss her off?" I tried again. Even Mike himself sometimes did not know the breadth and depth of his true annoyingness.

"We made a dinner date for six tonight. She kissed me. She *giggled*. And not in a Pennywise the Clown way, either." Mike flicked me in the ear, then stepped back just far enough that I couldn't return it without chancing falling over. "She did *nothing* to indicate I'd earned any amount of psycho bitchness, whether on a purely human or elder god scale."

"Great Old One," Ty corrected him.

"And *that's* another thing: at what point did the whole ancient-evil-from-beyond-the-stars bit come up?" I frowned at Mike. "Is there a space for that in your OKCupid profile, or do you usually wait for the third date to share the *really* personal stuff?"

Mike pointed to his eyes, then rolled them like it should have been obvious. "You'll see it too when you meet her. You know, if five minutes from now we're not all ice sculptures or motorized teddy bears or sea monkeys."

"Well, in the meantime, does anyone have any *productive* suggestions?" I asked, feeling the room sway a little as I did.

"Do you think she can stop it?" asked Ty, running his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair as he pulled it away from his face and back into a ponytail. Our daughters teased him about how old-fashioned it made him look, but I thought it was handsomely leonine, and after almost twenty-five years of marriage, middle-aged husband opinion overruled even four teenage girls' shared opinion.

"I think she went back to her office," said Mike, bracing one hand against his back as he bent down and retrieved two cell phones from the floor, only one of which I recognized as his. "I tried calling her, but it must've fallen out of her pocket when I was nailing her over the projector cart."

"Charming." I took both phones for safekeeping and deposited them in the left-hand pocket of my Dockers. "...It happened again, didn't it?"

Mike looked down at his Bermuda shorts and ill-fitting lilac polo shirt, then gave a slow, sad nod. "It must be speeding up." He gave his rather impressive beer belly a mournful pat.

"Look on the bright side," Ty said to him. "You could have gone back to being a half-octopus."

"Fuck, being a half-octopus was *awesome*," said Mike, punctuating his sentence by wiggling his fingers beneath his chin. "I had *tentacles*. I could breathe underwater! My dick could get up to five feet long!" He spread his hands apart on either side of him almost as far as they could go. "It was flexible, too. I tied it into, like, eight knots while waiting for you guys."

"On *that* note," I said, grabbing Ty's sleeve and dragging him toward the door, equal parts hoping Mike would follow us and hoping he wouldn't. "Come on, Dorothy. Let's find the Wizard and get him to send us home. You said the sociology offices were in, what, Pillow Hall?"

"Pitlow." Ty took my hand from where it had been tugging his sweater out of shape and twined his fingers with mine; I could feel the smooth titanium of his wedding band press against my skin. "I think."

"Good enough for me." I looked out the hall on the odd chance that this disturbance might be tied to the room, but the farther out I leaned, the more it spread; it had been tied to Mike before, but it was tied to all three of us now. Fuck spectrally transmitted diseases. Right then and there, I made a new rule to live by: when in doubt, don't touch Mike.

Mike poked me in the back of my sport coat. "Wasn't the whole point that Dorothy had what she needed from the start and didn't even need to follow the Yellow Brick Road in the first place?"

I glanced back over my shoulder. "You got ruby slippers on you?"

"Nope."

"Then, Toto," I said, stepping forward, "we're off."

A combination of late middle age and antiquated elevator technology meant that the trip from Mike's ground zero at the end of the hall to the building's lobby took several minutes and was punctuated by a bathroom break long enough to shake a few drops free from Mike's insistent bladder. Ty and I waited out in the hallway, where we passed the time by necking like teenagers. Disgusting, I know. We paused only long enough for me to answer a question from Meena, our second oldest, about getting a tattoo; Ty was for it, I was against it, and so the response she got was the classic dad line about how 'we'll discuss it later'. Even if I wasn't going to be here for much longer, the me whose life I was borrowing was going to have to live with it, and I didn't feel right making his decisions for him.

I took advantage of the slow-descending elevator cab to try and piece together a bit more about our situation. "So you were cheese, and you were a half-octopus," I said to Mike, "but what in-between?"

"Well, I was cheese, and then I was a tortoise, and then I was a toddler, and *then* I was sort of a zombie, but at least I was a zombie who could dial a phone." Mike pointed to my pocket. Well, rotting flesh would have accounted for a lot of the distort in the message. "And then ... well, I don't know what was going on right after I called you, but the next time I became aware of what was going on, I was hanging from the ceiling tiles by one of my feet. And then I was pregnant, and that wasn't fun."

"You were a woman?" asked Ty.

"No, just pregnant. Like I said, not fun. And then the floor was lava, which wasn't really a reflection on me so much, I guess, but the top of the podium seemed like a safe bet, and that was where you found me."

I frowned, trying to find any sort of connection in what seemed an otherwise random cast of characters. "Everything looked wet when we found you."

Mike nodded. "That's what happens. *Everything* changes. And it's hard to tell unless you *try* because everything just seems ... normal. Even as a zombie: I was miserable, but I wasn't freaked out. It was like, oh, okay, same shit, different day."

"But you sounded like you were about to piss yourself when we showed up."

With an annoyed frown, Mike looked away. "Octopuses, and this was news to me too, are scared of heights."

Before I could say anything, the elevator gave a little lurch, and when it stopped, I stepped out. The lobby looked both just the same size I remembered and bigger than I remembered, and I tried to hold my spine as tall as I could, pretending like I belonged on a university campus. Maybe I could psych everyone out, let them think I was some sort of Asian kid prodigy already taking college classes instead of a guy who had just barely passed eighth-grade math with a 72 average.

Ty towered over me, having hit his growth spurt way ahead of most boys our age; he was the school's basketball star mostly by virtue of his height, and his popularity for his sports accomplishments meant that it was still okay that people knew we were friends, but I couldn't hold his hand when anyone else could see and *nobody* could know that sometimes I sucked him off when our parents thought we were in the basement playing *Halo*. By my closeted and nervous fourteen-year-old standards, it was a fantastic arrangement.

"Well, now what?" asked Mike, taking off his backwards baseball cap just long enough to scratch his scalp. I sucked *him* off sometimes too, when we were in *his* basement pretending to play *Call of Duty*, but you couldn't have paid me enough to hold his hand anywhere.

Ty shrugged. "Man, I don't know. I've been here, like, once."

I could see Mike was starting to get pissy, so I stepped on his foot. "There's got to be a map or some shit around here. Okay? Colleges love that sort of thing."

"That's the mall, dickweed." Mike rolled his eyes.

"Assface."

"Faggot."

"Not an insult!" I pointed out for, like, the eighteen billionth time that week.

"Your *mom's* an insult."

"Yeah, well, so's your face!"

"Fuck you both," said Ty, flipping us off with both of his unpainted middle fingers before strolling toward the closest set of doors. Seeing that our audience (and therefore only reason to continue embarrassing ourselves with our little show) was leaving us, Mike and I both shrugged and followed him out.

On an immediate, practical, to-do-list level, I had no problem at all holding on to our multi-part objective: find a map, find Pitlow, find this elder-god-I-mean-Great-Old-One-whatever person, go back to being myself. Knowing that, however, didn't make it any easier for me to focus on the task at hand. Being in college made me think about how my parents were already talking about college, which meant they were on me about my grades, even though I was like, seriously, I'm starting high school next year, nobody cares about a C in middle school math, but then they were like, no, colleges care about that, and besides, colleges care about extracurriculars and community service and shit like that, so why don't you go walk some old ladies across a street or hand out soup at a soup kitchen?

And then I was like, I don't have any *time* for that, can't you see I'm busy? Except I didn't say, how am I supposed to concentrate on school when the guy I'm *so* in love with spends all his time at school saying things to girls that make them giggle and saying things to guys like how he wants to fuck the girls, except he said that he wants to fuck *me*, but I'm not really sure if I'm ready for butt stuff yet, but he says that's "real" sex, but he doesn't make the air quotes when he says it, and maybe if I don't have sex with him he's going to go find some other girl to do it with, and I can't tell my parents because they'd *freak* and cry and ground me until I was fifty, and I *like*

sucking dick but some days I just wish we could kiss, except he says kissing's gay so he won't do it for more than thirty seconds at a time--

Anyway, I didn't see the sign until I walked face-first into it.

"Donkey fucker!" I yelled, which was an expression I was embarrassed to say I'd picked up from Mike. I staggered back and clapped my hands to my nose, which had made the initial impact; it felt tender but not bloody, which at least meant I hadn't added injury to insult.

"Hey, you found it!" said Mike, clapping me on the back as he passed by. He stood in front of the cartoony drawing of the campus, complete with tiny happy students waving from various buildings, and made a stupid chin-stroking gesture as he tried to puzzle it out.

I was about to say something else insult-worthy to Mike when I felt Ty's hands on my shoulders, turning me so we were face-to-face -- or as much as two people could be with nearly eighteen inches of height difference between them. "You okay?" asked Ty in a soft, concerned voice. He reached up to take my hands away from my face, and I fought him a little, but not much.

"Fine," I said, hoping that the injury would explain my sudden blush. The truth was that Ty never got this close to me when other people were around, and I felt a little weak in my knees just knowing it was true. All attempts at not popping a boner were at present failing. "I mean, just a bump, right? You knock heads with guys all the time during games and walk it off."

Ty frowned for a second, then started to smile. "I thought you hated watching basketball."

Shit. Caught by my own big stupid mouth, I stammered a few times before deciding that my feet were the safest place to stare. "I ... come sometimes." Every damn game, from start to finish, no matter how much I fronted otherwise. "You know, when there's nothing better to do." Which included everything in the world that *wasn't* watching Ty get all sweaty in his uniform. The part of my consciousness that *wasn't* a teenager knew that I didn't have anything approaching a sports fetish elsewhere, which I suppose was a great piece of evidence in the nurture-over-nature column.

"You know," said Ty, brushing his thumb across my (sore but not busted) lower lip, "I'd really like to see you there."

I laughed a little, trying to brush it off like hearing him say that hadn't just sent my heart BASE jumping from the top of my rib cage down into my stomach. "What, I wouldn't cramp your style or something?"

Ty shrugged, still fixing me with those intense hazel eyes of his. "Maybe being able to kind of remember being married to you," he said, leaning in close enough that I could smell the musk from his deodorant, "kind of gave me a new perspective on things."

"If you two faggots are done, I think I know where we need to go."

"Not an insult!" I shouted back at Mike the Momentkiller, angry at both his language and his for-shit timing.

"Not being insulting! Being descriptive! Excuse me, if you two homosexuals of the homosexual homosex persuasion are done homosexing it up in the middle of the sidewalk," Mike said, jabbing his finger against a corner of the map, "the only useful member of this whole party has actually found where we need to go."

Pissed and self-conscious all at once, I stepped back from what I swore in a few more seconds would have been Ty's manly embrace and turned to see just what Mike had found. The **YOU ARE HERE** sticker sat near the bottom of the map, not far from what looked like the an approximate rendering of the tall building we'd just left, while Mike's finger pointed to a pink

square in the far right-hand corner that sported both a **52** and a squat caricature of a little blonde pigtailed person wearing an Arizona Ford hat and holding a skull. The legend at the bottom told me that **52** was Pitlow; I guessed from the drawing that archaeology had gotten to represent the building because sociology was harder to draw.

Ty nodded. "Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, like, I kind of remember. But it's totally way the fuck over there."

"Shorter if we cut through the library," I said, pointing to the big blue rectangle that blocked the straightest path as the proverbial crow might fly. "There's a front entrance and a back entrance."

"That's what she said," said Mike. I didn't even comment; it was like yelling at a bird for shitting on your car.

Ty pointed to a flat stretch of green on which two cheery cartoon students were tossing a cheery cartoon frisbee to one another. "So we come out of the library, take a left at the quad, cross Kellerman Street, and it's the second building on the right. Can we all remember that, or do we need to write it down?"

"No guarantee that anything we write down gets taken with us," I said, rummaging around in my purse for anything that *wasn't* my wallet, my keyring, three tampons, a condom long past its expiration date, a half-unwrapped peppermint, my phone, Mike's phone, the professor's phone, or a tube of dark maroon lipstick. No dice. "We'd better start walking."

"Don't have to tell me twice," said Ty, leading the charge in her sparkly purple combat boots. The lipstick was hers, but I had to haul it along because she hated carrying a purse and it would melt in any of the million pockets in her cargo pants. Curse my superior age and intellect, making me always have to be the responsible one.

As she marched ahead with her special kind of neurotic efficiency, I took advantage of the brief bit of privacy afforded us by distance. "Hey," I said, tapping Mike on the shoulder, "so why didn't you tell me about this professor?" I'd already ruled out her being embarrassed about the whole Great Old One thing; as Mike's choice of partners went, 'evil immortal space monster' was almost tame.

"I don't know." Mike sighed and shook her head, fidgeting with her bracelets as she walked. "I mean, I wasn't *not* telling you. It just ... didn't come up."

"Didn't come up? How long have you two been seeing one another?"

Mike mumbled something, and when I poked her, she sighed again. "Three weeks, okay?"

I swatted her on the shoulder. "Three weeks and we haven't even been introduced? Some best friend *you* are." Seeing Mike's face fall, I linked our arms together and walked shoulder-to-shoulder with her down the sidewalk past piles of naked college students on the grass, celebrating having survived the semester by stripping and napping. It almost made me wish I'd come to college. "So, how'd you two meet?"

"She called us, actually. That Friday you and Ty went out to that Take Back the Night Rave, she called and wanted to know if we took care of Dire Sharks, because she had one in her basement. So I went over and we got to talking, and one thing led to another, and then the next thing I know, we're ... getting kind of serious."

One of the girls on the grass waved Ty over, so we hung back a bit as she went over to chat. "What do you mean, 'serious'?" I'd heard Mike use many words to describe her various relationships before, but that had never been one of them.

"I don't know, serious like serious. Like how people get when they start to get serious about things." Mike snorted and grabbed her bra strap where it'd started to sag across her shoulder, then tugged it back up beneath the strap of her tank top. Well, whatever being in a serious relationship meant to Mike, it certainly didn't compel more ladylike behavior. "I don't know, what's it like with you and Ty?"

"Well, when within twenty-four hours of meeting a person you've already been presented with a vision of the two of you forty years down the road, living Happily Ever After, it kind of colors the whole trajectory." The old-lady versions of ourselves Ty and I had seen as we'd fled the haunted house of our first date probably should have been unnerving at best, but in fact, we both found it sort of relaxing -- it was like a friendly guarantee that no matter how bad we might fuck things up things up together, we'd find a way to work it out in the end. Plus, now I knew that Ty would be smoking hot even in her sixties. Call me shallow, but I wasn't complaining.

Mike stuck out her tongue at me. "Well, you fucking suck. ...Anyway, I was *going* to tell you. I just didn't know what to say. That's all."

Not wanting to make this more awkward than it was already, I tried to divert the subject a little. "What about the shark?" The two of us -- three now, when Ty was available to help -- had a reputation for making short work of all sorts of supernatural entities and spectral happenings, but as far as I knew, Mike had as much prior experience with cryptozoology as I did, which was none.

"Turns out she meant 'take care' like sharksitting. Fluffy's pretty great, actually. He does all sorts of tricks, like 'sit' and 'stay'. Doesn't shake hands, but that's probably for the best."

When Ty came back to us, her shirt was unbuttoned to show her neon pink bra, over the lacy edge of which I could see peeking, like twin sunrises, the edges of her rose-brown nipples. Sometimes she made it so hard to lift my eyes all the way up to her face. "Julio says I need to get naked, since the Mandarin final's been cancelled. Apparently Professor Lin didn't get the exams to the printers in time or something, so she emailed us and said she'd just average out all the other work we've done for the semester. How cool is that?"

I am not a woman of great willpower, and thus I was amazed at my own ability to respond to the twinned ideas of my girlfriend and public nudity by saying, "We need to fix this first. You can get naked later. I promise."

"Aw, poop," said Ty, but I was right, so she didn't argue more than a cursory pout before taking my other arm. We walked three abreast toward the library, an arrangement which worked well for me, because the two half-exposed tits bouncing next to me distracted me enough that I would have introduced my face to another campus map had Mike not been watching out for me. What are best friends for, right?

The air-conditioned library was so cold, especially after we'd been out in the midday heat, that Ty's nipples stood out like little bullets beneath her bra cups. If she kept this up, I could no longer be held responsible for my actions. That anchoring part of my mind, the "real" me, still knew what it was like to possess a gay man's brain and corresponding penis, but the lesbian I was at present couldn't help conflating these two worldviews until all I wanted to do was pour warm lube all over her chest and titfuck Ty until I jizzed all over her throat and chin, and believe me, *that* was a thought neither version of me had ever entertained before.

We walked single-file through the security gate, and by the time I'd been announced by its silence to be not a book-smuggler, Mike was already several steps ahead, looking at the library floor guide. "Okay, we've got to go two floors down and through the computer lab to get to the back exit," she said, tapping the plastic map. "Piece of cake."

As the library's central stairwell went down, it got smaller and less well-lit, until we found ourselves inching down the last few steps by the light of a single flickering fluorescent tube, stepping down on faith as much as anything. "I don't even know what's down here," Ty said, holding the door open at the bottom as Mike and I walked through. "I mean, as far as library stuff goes. Newspapers, maybe? Some big books too, I guess. But I've, uh, never been down here for books."

A quick sniff of the air was all I needed to determine what people *did* come down here for. I'd gotten in the habit of wearing a scarf even on the hottest days of the year, and now I brought it up across the lower half of my face, making a filter which dulled the flood of olfactory information, but by no means stopped it. "Seems kind of empty," said Mike, looking down the deserted, dim rows between the stacks. "Guess a library clears out pretty quick once finals are over."

I glanced back to Ty to make sure we were headed in the right direction, but what I saw froze me in my tracks. Given the way he'd talked about the place as we'd stepped through the doors, Ty probably hadn't been down here in the three months since he'd met me, and now I the look on his face told of just how my infecting him had changed his experience of the location: he looked hungry now, like he'd smelled a plate of fajitas brought out sizzling to whatever table was waving down the waiter with a tiny Mexican flag. Except there was no food allowed in the library, and anyway, he was looking at me.

Hey, Mike, maybe coming down here wasn't such a good idea, and maybe we should turn back and go around the library the long way, I wanted to say. I even had it all composed in my mind, ready to go, an excellent suggestion if I did say so myself. But I didn't get more than the first two phonemes out, if that, before Ty was up against me, sandwiching me between him and the wall, and grinding his hard, huge cock against my leg. He pulled the thin scarf away from my mouth, and as I gasped in surprise, I breathed in the full experience of old spunk and used condoms and wave after wave of the pheromones that rolled off Ty as he -- and there was no delicate way to put this -- humped my leg.

On the one hand, I couldn't really blame him; I too had spent my first several months as a werewolf wanting to stick my dick in everything that moved, which had led to a large number of bad sex decisions and a small number of fairly awesome ones. On the other hand, though, this was really impeding our progress. But on some third hand, possibly one that I'd borrowed from Mike, I needed Ty to fuck me right then like a Volkswagen needed tires.

"Uh, guys," said Mike, but I could smell his arousal too. Well, whatever; it wasn't the first time Ty and I had fucked in front of him, and knowing my luck, it probably was not going to be the last. I let Ty grab hold of the front of my shirt and drag me back into a dark corner behind the stairs where the smell of stale sex was the strongest, and I managed to unfasten and push down my jeans before he could rip them off me. This was the smell of hundreds, maybe even thousands, of students' having worked off academic anxieties in the most primal ways they could. Did I say I hate higher education? I fucking love it.

Being a werewolf isn't like most people think it is; for starters, it's a lot more *wer* than *wulf*, to get back to the Old English roots of the term, and the most it has to do with the moon, I've been told, is that if you have a working uterus, your periods get really regular. It's mostly about being closer to your senses and instincts than about any fur-and-fangs transformation. Instincts take a certain amount of control to manage, though, and control wasn't what Ty had right now. He tossed me onto my back on an old dusty table and spread my legs wide, then spat on his cock and gave it a few quick slicks before he shoved it hard into me. Well, thank goodness

I hadn't dried out completely from our hour-long fuck session earlier, though it's debatable how much I would have complained even if I had. Getting used to rough sex kind of came with the territory.

I stretched back and gripped the far edge of the short table, letting my head and shoulders fall off the edge as Ty slammed his cock again and again into me. I'd spent no small part of my adolescence fretting about my masculinity as an Asian-American gay man in general and how much of my general manliness I lost by really, really liking the idea of taking it up the butt in particular; actually getting to the ass-pounding stage of things hadn't alleviated either worry, and had in fact made the latter one even worse. But being and being fucked by werewolves had made me realize that taking it, loving it, and coming back for more involved a level of toughness that had to be fairly impressive. Anyone with a penis could stick it *in* to something. Taking it all was how I showed everyone who was the real boss.

I opened my eyes to see Mike's crotch in front of me, upside-down to me as I hung over the edge. "Just fucking do it," I said, rolling my eyes at his hesitation, and when he unzipped his jeans and pulled out his meat, I opened wide and took it in to the root, so far down that it pressed against the inside of my throat. I didn't even gag once. Let the little shits who'd made fun of me in Sunday School try *that*.

Ty grunted and gasped as he thrust into me, the sounds of a man so far gone into basic sexual need that he no longer cared about how stupid he sounded. I'd been half-hard already before he'd even shoved his dick in me in the first place, and now it was like I had a steel bar bouncing against my lower belly, tapping and bobbing in time with every deep thrust. I loved every second of it, and I loved *him*, and I loved that he knew both of those things. Choking down Mike's dick was just the cherry on top of that particular sundae.

Being spit-roasted takes a lot of concentration, to say the least, and so not only did I lose track of time, I lost track of how I was supposed to be keeping track of time at all in the first place. Thus, when I felt that now-familiar sense of vertigo wash over me, I knew what was coming, but had too much cock in my mouth to say anything about it before I realized I couldn't say anything at all.

It was a good thing that I could remember having always had an immobile body constructed of silicone, because otherwise I'm certain I would have been having the most epic panic attack in the history of bad reactions to bad situations. Instead, I just lay there, my mouth and ass both stretched open, and both filled with stiff, realistic, penis-shaped hunks of synthetic material. I didn't have identifiable senses in the way humans thought of them, but I could sense some things anyway, like how the underside of my nose was still smashed up against the underside of Mike's hairless rubber balls, and how Ty's external support had failed, leaving his slumped body pressing my knees back beyond normal human tolerance and all the way to the table.

Somewhere from over my shoulder, a bright light burst to life. "Okay, everyone quiet on set," said the student director, "and Harvey, will you move that tall one's arm? Put it around the guy on the table's cock." Some small shuffling ensued, and then my ever-stiff cock lay in the loose grip of poseable silicone fingers. "Places, everyone, good." A weight pressed down on my chest, a wiggly human weight, the kind that accompanied the very particular sensation of having one's chest sat on. "Okay, this is *Manolo and the RealDoll Orgy*, scene three, take one, and ... action!"

Fuck the universe. Fuck karma. Fuck everything.

When I could move again, I was wearing all my clothes and had no parts of anyone else's body stuck inside of any orifice of mine, which was something of a relief. I was still on my back on the dusty table, though, and I had the oddest blue-balled sensation of not having achieved orgasm while having a totally flaccid penis uninterested at the moment in getting me even near release, let alone achieving it. I sat up and stretched my arms above my head, looking around. Ty was standing between my knees, leaning up against the table, and Mike was both standing right behind me and a centaur.

"Can I fuck you now?" he asked, performing some sort of weird horse-contortion that involved lifting his back leg and trying to bend his human top half down so he could get a good look at his junk.

"No," Ty and I said at the same time.

Getting Mike down the stairs had been enough of a challenge, but weaving him through the short doorways and low-hanging pipes that crisscrossed the ceiling was almost impossible. The worst part was that it was *still* probably a better idea than trying to get him across the antiquated grate systems that dotted the campus surface, remnants of the last human-centaur war that hadn't been paved over or dug up yet. "Your campus isn't exactly accommodating," Mike noted after he misjudged a sharp turn and kicked over a cart stacked with books.

"Like I said, if we just wait here--" I started, but Mike cut me off with a whinny and petulant hoof-stomp.

"Look, let's just get it over with." Mike brushed past, knocking me to the side with his big ass as he did. I fell against Ty, who caught me and shared a quiet exasperated eye-roll. Maybe it wasn't PC to say out loud, but everybody knew centaurs could be such fucking *mares* at times.

The alchemy lab on the far side of the library complex was all but deserted, with only a few desk sets occupied by little first-years trying against all odds to format their tinctures before the deadline. It was a testament to how focused they all were that only a one of them bothered even to look up as Mike walked in, and even he couldn't leave his solutions alone long enough to get a good gape in. The desk monitor waved her bloodstone past each of us as we stood before her until she was certain that we hadn't absconded with any of the library's precious volumes. "Are you three enrolled here?" she asked, looking us up and down with her bright orange eyes.

"I am," said Ty, reaching into his cloak to pull out his silver identification badge. "Tyrannius Oakenthorpe, College of Enochian Languages. And these are my friends who are *thinking* about enrolling in the fall. I was just giving them the tour. To help them see whether or not they'd like it."

The monitor blinked twice before shaking her head and opening the doors with a wave of her hand. "Well, good luck with that," she said, derision dripping from her voice. "Even a novice could see they don't have a lick of magic in 'em."

"You have a nice day too," I said, and I grabbed Mike's peytral and yanked him away before he could open his mouth and say something stupid. It was almost true -- neither Mike nor I had any *inborn* magic, that was for sure, and even now what we had wasn't recognized by most academy-trained practitioners -- but Mike could be prideful even in the face of truth, and we'd had too many things slowing us down already anyway. I'd already reached the point where, more than anything, I wanted *not* to be doing this anymore.

We stepped out into the daylight beneath high colored plumes that wafted over from the pyromancy field; Ty sneezed. "Okay," he said, rubbing his nose on the sleeve of his robes, "out and ... turn left."

The problem was, there was no left. Or, rather, there was, but there was nothing to the left but open expanses and burned-out shells of buildings, remnants of the last war that now, even a hundred years later, lay in ruins used only for the safe practice of dangerous magics. Even if our human legs had been able to see us through, Mike's hooves would never have found sure enough footing to make the crossing possible. Two rows of red-cloaked sophomores hurried away from what must have been their final exam, though some looked a little more the worse for wear than others; one in the back row even looked to be a little on fire.

"Well," I said, folding my arms across my chest, "now would be a great time for Plan B." Plan B? B was for ball. Those two humans sitting on the grass had a ball. I was going to get it.

Mike darted past me like *he* was going to get the ball, which was stupid, because *I* was going to get the ball. I tried to bite his tail to make him stop, but the tail I tried to bite was too quick, and it tried to run around behind me! I chased after it until I got sort of sick and had to stop, and it disappeared. But that was okay, because the ball was right where I'd left it. Mike had stopped to sniff something. The ball was mine! This was the best day ever!

The humans with the ball wanted to pat me on the head, and I allowed this because maybe they would give me the ball when they were done patting, or at least throw it, because that was all I really wanted to happen, just throw the ball and go get it. It was all the fun of getting the ball with the added good of knowing that, in a minute, I was going to be able to go get it *again*! I loved that game. It was the best game ever.

The ball was a lot bigger closer up than it was far away. It must have been a magic ball, because by the time I got there, it was black and white and bigger than me. One of the humans said something to me, so I barked back, because whenever humans say something to you, it means they want you to bark back. I wagged my tail so hard I fell over a little. Ty came up behind me and he tried to chew on my tail for a while, so I tried to chew on his tail too. I knew it was Ty because I sniffed his butt and his butt smelled like Ty's butt.

Mike came up after and I sniffed his butt too. He smelled like Mike, but he also smelled like something else. I sniffed the air and could smell the same smell as Mike's butt, only this time from the far edge of the green soft part. Something over there smelled like Mike's butt. No, Mike's butt smelled like something else, and something over there also smelled like something else. Mike's butt smelled like a lady.

That's when I remembered that we were looking for a lady. I didn't know *why*, but we were, so we needed to keep looking. Ty still wanted the ball, but I grabbed him and chewed on his ear to remind him that we were still smelling for a lady. She must have been a nice lady, to have had such a nice smell, and it was right over there. We could keep following it.

Ty didn't want to go, not with a ball right there. I reminded him that we were supposed to be smelling for a lady, and anyway, that black-and-white magic ball was way too big right now, and maybe the lady would have a ball that didn't change size. Ty thought that was a good idea, and we started running. Mike came along a little bit later, after going to smell something in a patch of dry grass that was almost the same yellow color he was. It was a good smell, but it didn't smell like the lady, and we had to find her and the ball she maybe had. It was up to us.

There were all sorts of big houses with doors that people went into, but only one of the houses had the right smell. The lady was in there! She had to be. The house smelled like Mike's

butt. Maybe we could get inside. Someone could open the door and let us in. The door opened and a person came out! We were good boys! We could come in! This was the best day ANTS

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ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS ANTS being inside Lyman House was enough to prove that we were in the presence of something very large and very old. All the items on the shelves were turned just enough toward the house's center to give the impression that there was something inside working like a magnet, drawing everything towards its great metal heart. There was what looked to be a secretary's desk just past the front, but the chair behind the desk was empty and a little **out to lunch** sign stood like a little cardboard sentry over all the piles of folders and paperwork stacked high. Everything was quaint, from the wall-hung pictures of what I assumed were supposed to be prior students and administrators, to the little red gingham curtains that fell over every window, letting in light while blocking any real view of the outside. I'd want to go to school at a cute little place like this, I thought. The design guys really knew what they were doing.

On the closest wall was a directory board made of little white letters stuck to a black slotted background. It read like a credit roll of crew in-jokes, all except for one entry six lines down: Dr. K. Starr, Sociology, room 301. Mike indicated that line with his finger; he was getting good at pointing fetchingly. "Third floor," he said, giving it a tap for good measure.

"So what are we going to do if she's not there?" asked Ty.

I shook my head. "Better question: what are we going to do if she *is*?"

Mike pulled off his sunglasses and tucked them in the inside pocket of his leather jacket. "We start with 'please'. And if 'please' doesn't work, we get her face in--" With a sigh, he shook his head and reached for the sunglasses he'd just put away. "Sorry, hold on." He put them back on, left them there for a second, then proceeded to take them off and store them with the same gestures he'd used before. "We start with 'please'. And if 'please' doesn't work, we get up in her face about it."

"How do you get up in an elder god's face?" asked Ty. I could see a knot of frustration at the corner of his mouth; he'd been a big enough nerd in high school that he'd argued for the change, but in the end had lost out on account of the executive decision that 'elder god' was less

likely to get someone into copyright trouble than 'Great Old One'.

"I'll think of something," Mike said, grinning out of the left side of his mouth. "Her bark's worse than her bite."

"Her bite's pretty bad," I pointed out.

"Says the man whose last girlfriend could have had her frickin' picture in the dictionary next to *vagina dentata*. And anyway, I tell you, she didn't do this on purpose! It's got to be some kind of accident. So I'll just turn on the charm." Taking a quick, conspicuous look around to make sure no one who cared was in the vicinity, Mike reached for a bouquet of carnations in a vase on the front desk and plucked them out, shaking the stems a few times to get off the excess water. "See? Charm. Now follow me."

I tailed first Mike and then Ty around the corner of what we all pretended was a wall and not a small rig of cameras with three people hanging on behind it. I don't know what made Julianna think that filming in a cramped setup like this was fun for anyone, but mine was not to reason why. I guessed it was better than that awful dusty haunted house we'd used a couple months back, where I'd been sure I'd bust through the floorboards at any minute and had come down with a mild case of bronchitis just from all the mold we'd stirred up. She was a great director, and I know the studio gave her only minimal control over things like screenplay and location, but somehow we and she always seemed to wind up in the worst places together.

I could hear the squeak of the wheel-mounted rig as it pushed along behind us, following us down the narrow, pastel-wallpapered hallway toward the flight of stairs that would take us up to the house's upstairs. Just far enough up that he couldn't be seen any longer, Mike stopped his ascent, which didn't give Ty much room to go, and I damn near had to shove them both out of the way so I could complete the shot. As soon as my backside was eclipsed by the architecture, I heard Julianna call, "Cut! Got it in one, boys!"

Smiling with relief, all three of us trundled back downstairs and into the little house's main room, clearing the stairs for the rest of the crew to set up the next shot. A low murmur rose, full of the conversations and activity that had been suspended for the length of the cameras' rolling. A little cooler of water bottles sat over in the corner, so I went and got one out, then drained it all in what felt like a single swallow. It was bad enough when you had to shoot summer scenes in winter, but shooting winter scenes in summer was a special kind of miserable.

As Julianna and the rest of the crew negotiated the cameras up the stairs, I flipped out my phone and listened to my messages: one was from my agent, asking me to give her a call whenever I got a chance; the other was from my wife, reminding me to pick up the dog's antibiotics on the way home. Well, with any luck we'd be finished up here soon, and I could do both of those things well within the scope of normal business hours. The twinkier of the two hair-and-makeup boys came over and gave my hair a little spritz to make sure the fauxhawk he'd carefully sculpted that morning wasn't about to give up the ghost, and I shut my eyes, allowing him permission to poke and prod at will.

At last the cameras were set, and we lined up single-file at the bottom of the stairs: Mike stood first, pilfered flowers at the ready; Ty hung just behind, holding out the props department's best estimation of an amateur EMF reader (which looked to me more like a handheld pinball machine with headphones, but what did I know?); and I brought up the rear, both sensible and fashionable, tapping a kid-sized baseball bat against my leg. We made one hell of a ghost-fighting team.

"Whenever you're ready!" we heard Julianna call from the top of the stairs, and Mike spent a moment getting into character, then lifted his foot and took the first step up.

I held still in the shadows at the bottom until both of them were all the way to the top of the staircase, and when I heard Ty's quiet whistle, I sprinted up as fast as my shackled legs could carry me -- which was faster than I would have imagined, but whatever alien metal this was, it wasn't at all as heavy as it looked. They weren't even *shackles*, really, but they were made of metal and they were screwed in permanently at my knees and the backs of my calves and I didn't know what else to call them. "Clear?" I asked in a voice only loud enough to carry over the prison machinery's deep, pervasive grind.

"Clear," Ty nodded, gesturing to the empty hallway. The corridor was lined with doors, but all of their keypads were locked and lit up red. Someone had scratched the word *chariots* several times all over the door facing the stairwell, which was unnerving, to say the least.

Mike pointed down to the far end of the hall, where a faint glow shone from just beyond a bright green **NO EXIT** sign. "Her office should be at the top of that staircase. There's only one room on the whole third floor."

"And we're sure she's there?" I asked, glancing at the laser components of the security system I'd disabled earlier. I wasn't sure how long it would be before the testing officials figured out how to reverse what I'd done, and I wasn't keen on the idea of going to a floor with only one way up or down, only to find ourselves there both trapped and out of luck.

"We're sure." Ty tapped a panel on the wall next to him, and a glowing 3D schematic of the building popped up, complete with three glowing blue dots that indicated our position and a bright orange dot in a room one level above us. The blueprint didn't show past the eighth sub-basement or so, but the pink security dots were making their way in droves up the stairwell we'd climbed just minutes earlier. I could knock out the automated systems, but human components were another thing entirely.

Mike took a pumpernickel roll from his pocket, squished it once for good luck, and sent it bouncing on its bready way down the corridor. The throw covered barely half the distance, but not a single laser turret so much as budged as it had bounced by. "Okay, *slowly*," I said, pointing first to Mike, then to the far end of the hall. "I've told the system everything's okay. Don't give it *any* reason to doubt that. Just go nice and easy, like you're supposed to be there."

"Have you *met* me?" asked Mike, who turned and started walking away before I could point out that, yes, I had, and that was why I was worried.

Watching the pink dots climb the digital staircase made me nervous, so Mike wasn't more than a few yards down before I sent Ty on after him, and I didn't wait much longer after that to go myself. The closer I got to each door, the more I could hear sounds from the other side: sometimes voices, sometimes just pounding, sometimes the crackle of radio static, sometimes a combination of all three. The lowest sub-basements where we'd been kept before had been just holding cells, a hundred bodies to a room, and the floors above that were all testing rooms of various sizes and arrangements, but I couldn't tell what was going on here. From the outside, these rooms didn't look too small to be prison cells -- I'd learned the hard way that there was no such thing as a room too small to be a prison cell -- but they didn't seem to have windows or slots on the doors, which seemed to me poor prison design, if a jailer couldn't see in.

The loudspeaker crackled and turned on with a whine of feedback right on schedule, straight-up on the hour, but we were all so tense that we jumped and froze even that this familiar sound. "Here's a question for you," said the warden's voice, without preamble or explanation. "Who is not afraid of no ghosts?"

Mike looked back at me with a frown, but I shooed him on ahead: Mike himself was on record as being not afraid of *any* ghosts. Huge difference.

There was a sharp beep, and the voice continued: "As of just now, every character in every book by Virginia Woolf. Man, those things were dull. Chariots chariots." And then it was silent.

After a pause long enough to be sure that the announcement was over, Ty shook his head. "I think he makes less sense every time."

"You're telling me." I gave him a gentle nudge onward.

As soon as we'd cleared the far doorway, I hit the panel on the wall with my gloved fist and watched as the corridor we'd just walked through fill up with crisscrossed purple laser beams. It might not do much to slow down the guys who had the master keys to every system on the station, but it was something. We raced up the stairs, Mike-first again, to find that at the top landing, there was indeed only one door. A gold nameplate at eye level indicated that this was the office of one Dr. K.T. Starr, Department of Human Experimentation.

Mike paused, then licked his hands and slicked back his hair as best he could. "How do I look?" he asked, turning his good side toward me.

"Like an escaped convict; how do you *think* you look?" I rolled my eyes. One day Mike's vanity was going to be the end of us all, and that day was very possibly going to be today.

"Fine, fine." Mike knocked twice. "Katie?" he called out, and then, without waiting for an answer, he turned the handle and walked on in.

Her office was everything I'd imagined a place inhabited by a combination social sciences professional and ancient evil from beyond the stars would be like. It was homey, with lots of natural woods and fibers, and the high triangular window brought in a lot of outside light. Bookcases lined every wall, and a comfy beige couch sat just opposite the desk. I wanted to take a nap on it. I wanted a lot of things.

Cthaeghya, the Great Old One herself, sat behind the desk with two ballpoint pens pinning up her curly black hair and a pair of neon orange reading glasses sliding off her nose. She was dark-skinned and darker-eyed, and her short, round frame looked like she'd dressed it that morning by robbing every aging hippie in a five-mile radius. When she saw us enter, her face broke into a lovely (if a bit surprised) smile, and she pushed her glasses on top of her head. "Mike!" She closed the gradebook in front of her as she stood.

Okay, 'stood' may have been a strong word for what she did. Sure, she pulled the human part of her body to its feet from a sitting position, but that wasn't all of her body, not by a long shot. No wonder Mike had known what she was just to meet her: the entire lower half of her body seemed to be made of deep indigo-black tentacles that moved and swished around her regardless of what her human aspect was up to. I couldn't see them when I looked straight at her, but if my eyes darted away for a fraction of a second, there they were, clear as daylight in my peripheral vision. I felt nauseated and aroused all at once, which wasn't a new feeling for me, but which was one I didn't normally associate with women.

"Katie, baby," said Mike, walking across the room to take her hands in his. "Got a little bit of a problem."

She looked him over and clucked her tongue. "Well, you sure do, don't you?" She had a lovely unplaceable accent, all her vowels caught somewhere between Middle East and Deep South, but at the same time her speech had a folksy tone that made me think of someone doing a bad impression of every character from *Fargo*. "Oh, that was me, I'm so sorry, sometimes I just get a little carried away, you know how it goes."

"Carried away?" I asked. I decided that my accumulated exhaustion at that moment was a more powerful force than being afraid of what might happen if I sat on a Great Old One's couch, and I sat on the couch.

"Oh, and this must be Jason and Ty! Come in, boys. So pleased to finally meet you. Make yourselves at home." Well, that answered any questions I might have had about the couch in terms of my being on it. "I've heard so much about you two. Can I get you some tea?"

It was not how I'd imagined my first real encounter with an immortal creature of unimaginable power to go. "Uh, no, ma'am," I said, and then remembered to add, "but thank you." I felt strange here, and it took me a minute to realize that what was strange was that nothing was strange at all: I was myself again, at least so far as I could tell, with no lingering cognitive dissonance or troubling sensation that I was living someone else's life. No, I was myself again, familiar old warts and all. I'd never been so happy to be boring in all my life.

"What kind of tea?" asked Ty, and I had to be impressed that even after all he'd been through today, he still had the wherewithal to be choosy.

"Oh, just black, I'm afraid. I bought a little assortment the other day, but wouldn't you know it, I left it at home again this morning."

Still holding her hands in his, Mike bent down a little to look her in the eye. She only came up to the middle of his chest and she appeared physically to be at least twenty years his senior, if not more so, but she was unbelievably sexy. I couldn't quite put my finger on specifics, but I felt sure it had something to do with the tentacles. "You wouldn't believe the shit that's been happening. We've been bouncing through--"

"Through the dimensions, yes, yes, I know." She used his hands to tug him down to her level and gave him a quick but affectionate kiss on the lips before working her way out of his grip and going over to the electric kettle by the window. "I've never had that linger for someone else after I was gone before, but then again, I've never met people with powers like yours before, so I suppose there's a first time for everything, now, isn't there? I hope you like lemon, dear," she said to Ty, "because I'm fresh out of cream."

"Lemon's fine, ma'am," Ty said. "Can I offer you a hand?"

Katie -- it felt odd to call her that, but if that was how Mike was going to play it, I was going to come along -- shook her head with a smile. "Oh no, dear, you just sit yourself down next to that handsome boyfriend of yours and I'll bring it right over when it's ready."

Being called 'handsome' by an ancient evil was pretty flattering, especially when I felt far more haggard than handsome, a train of thought which brought me back to the substance of my initial inquiry. "Excuse me, ma'am," I said, because my mother, the champion of the mixed metaphor, had always taught me you catch more flies with honey than by putting your foot in your mouth, "but can we go back to the earlier 'carried away' part?"

She smiled as she unwrapped a pair of tea bags. "What you're wondering is: when you walk out that door again, are you going to be yourself or not. Am I right?" All three of us nodded in semi-unison. "Well, there's nothing to worry about. Dimensional travellers such as myself can forget from time to time that not everyone's re-entry is as smooth as our own. Obviously if I'd realized you'd been like that, I never would have left you, dear," she said, blowing a kiss over her shoulder to Mike, who looked about as accepting about all this as his golden retriever puppy self had been a couple universes over. "But right after I called you to set up our date, the provost asked if I could come and look over some paperwork about fifteen minutes after, and I thought, well, there's not enough time for both! So I made time."

"Made...?" Mike frowned. "Out of what?"

"All right, maybe not *made* so much as *borrowed*. Time is a universal constant, it's true, but only in the sense that it's only reliably constant within a single universe at a time. Time that passes when crossing the lines between universes doesn't necessarily accumulate the same way in the universe one started in. So I took us a few steps over so we could get in a little quality time." She shot Mike a lascivious wink before going back to the business of tea-making. "It's also how I finished my doctorate in two years."

I hadn't put on my watch as we'd rushed out the apartment to answer Mike's message, but we couldn't have left the house any later than 11:15. I felt certain we'd been running around for well over an hour since then, but the clock behind Katie's desk showed it was only twenty minutes to noon. "Ty, your Mandarin final!"

Ty shook his head. "It got canceled, remember?"

"Oh, did it get cancelled here or did it get cancelled somewhere else?" asked Katie, tapping her teaspoon against the side of the kettle as it started to steam. "Because that's always something you should check."

"It ... got cancelled when we were all sexy, emotionally available girls and everyone celebrated finishing finals with casual nudity," said Ty, looking more crestfallen with each word that came out of his mouth.

"Ah, I'd wager your luck's not that good, dearie," said Katie, shaking her head. She brought over the cup of tea to where he sat dejected on the sofa, and despite how my eyes could see her feet take each step, her true motion had all the grace and beauty to it of a giant squid countless fathoms beneath the ocean. Her hips were positively hypnotic. I was having flashbacks to the time I'd gotten strep throat in sixth grade and spent my whole convalescence watching *The Little Mermaid* eighty billion times. It still bothers me to this day that Triton has no nipples. "So you drink up and then you go, and if Dr. Lin has a problem, you can tell me and I'll send him an email."

Sometimes, after you'd made your way through a dozen or so different and to-various-degrees-disturbing versions of yourself, when an elder-god-like-thing handed you a cup of tea and told you she'd write you a note excusing your tardiness, the only thing to do was what Ty did right then, which was take the cup and saucer and say, "Thank you, ma'am."

I pulled the rubber waders up as high as they would go and cinched them tight around my waist. "And she said she'd be back Thursday?"

"Thursday or Friday," said Mike. "Or maybe next week. Punctuality's not her strong suit."

"So what happens if she's not back by the time the semester starts?"

Mike shrugged. "She says she wants me to come home with her over fall break, see her hometown, meet her parents. What do you wear to a family gathering of unimaginable evil?"

"Tie's always good," I suggested, and Mike nodded at my sage advice.

From the garage door just past the kitchen, Ty staggered in, lugging a cooler and visibly sweating. "I don't think it's fair making me haul all the heavy things."

"Fine," I said, "I will trade jobs with you right now. *You* go down there."

"I have a condition!"

"Galeophobia is not a condition! You can't just make up an actual medical condition by putting together two Greek words and saying, well, there's a phobia."

"It is a real and documented phobia."

Ty shook his head. "No, fear of cats is ailurophobia."

Mike took the cooler from him and took off the lid; the smell of cold, raw meat filled my nostrils. "Galeophobia is a fear of dogfish, sharks with cat-like markings, or cats. Fluffy is none of these things."

"He's got you there," I said to Ty, not necessarily believing Mike, but wanting to do everything I could to give my dearly beloved boyfriend as much grief as I could for leaving the hard jobs to the little guys. "So what happens if *both* you guys go home to her parents' this fall?"

"Depends on how long we're gone, I guess. Think they sell shark carriers at the mall pet store?"

I shook my head and got a good grip on the cleaver. "Not in this universe," I said, bringing it down and leaving a large gash in the bone. "Try the one next door."

When we'd successfully hacked up the beef carcass into more manageable pieces, I wrapped them all up in a tarp and put a zip tie around the loose ends to close it like a dumpling. I was about to cinch it shut when Mike called out, "Shit, the leeks!" He went over to the refrigerator and grabbed a produce bag from the crisper drawer, then dropped all dozen or so leeks into the meat pile. "Okay, there you go."

"I don't think he can taste those," I said, securing the ends.

"Katie says it makes his coat shiny," said Mike, and I wasn't about to be the one to tell the Great Old One that we'd been neglectful in the quest to give her Dire Shark the shiniest coat possible. Giving his yellow kitchen gloves one last tug for security's sake, Mike grabbed the top of the bag and lugged it toward the basement door and the dark, howling void just beyond it. From deep within, there was a hungry splash. "You know," Mike said between grunts of effort, "she's been talking about kids."

"Kids?" I grabbed the bag just below his hands and tried to time my lunges with his. "I guess you just make women long for the pitter-patter of little tentacles."

"Yeah," Mike sighed, though the grin that curled up the side of his mouth didn't look grudging at all. In fact, in the months since he and Katie had been together, I'd seen a real change come over him: he was still a vulgar, irritating, slightly psychotic shit, but not he was an infinitely more responsible vulgar, irritating, slightly psychotic shit. It wasn't just any woman who could make you feed her pet while she was on vacation. He paused at the top of the staircase just long enough to get his footing and looked down to the swirling black waters below. "Shall we?"

"Let's," I said, and together my best friend and I went to see a shark about some dinner.

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Movie Watchers

by Jestana

"Hey, Nate!" Thomas Clark waved as he approached his friend, who waited patiently by the car, backpack slung over one broad shoulder.

Nathan Haines waved back with a broad grin, stepping forward so they could exchange shoulder punches. "Hiya, Tom. Classes go all right?"

"Well enough." He pressed the button on the key fob that unlocked the car doors. "How about you?"

Opening the door, his best friend slid into the car. "Well enough."

"I just said that so you can't say it." He grinned as he slid behind the wheel and started the car, carefully backing out of the parking spot.

Black head tilted back against the seat, Nathan asked, "Why does that mean I can't say it? I'm sure it's as true for me as it is for you."

"It's in the best friend rulebook," Thomas lectured as he finished backing out and headed for the exit. He loved getting out of school early because he was a senior. He didn't have to fight the traffic of parents picking up their kids or students walking home. It was just them and the few other seniors who got to leave early because they'd voluntarily attended summer school in the past. "You can't use the same description as me."

Nathan gave a low chuckle that sent shivers down Thomas' spine. "Is this the same as not being allowed to order the same meal as you in restaurants?"

"Yes! Exactly!" He grinned, turning onto the street to head home. "Glad you see it my way."

His friend chuckled again and rubbed a hand across his eyes. "You amuse me, Tom. Don't ever change, all right?"

"Just for you, I won't." Thomas smiled and parked in front of his house.

The two of them climbed out and, once the doors closed, Thomas set the alarm. "Mind if I come in for a bit?"

"Not at all." He ignored his sudden case of nerves as he thought of the DVD waiting in his room. "In fact, I have a new movie for us to watch."

Nathan arched a black eyebrow as he followed Thomas to the front door and stood waiting for him to unlock it. "Is this a new movie or a new 'movie'?"

"Which do you think?" Turning the lock, he stepped inside and waited for his friend to move past him before closing the door behind them.

They detoured into the kitchen to grab some cookies from the cookie jar, which was always stocked with goodies since Mrs. Clark loved to bake. Only once they were on the stairs did Nathan respond to the question. "A new 'movie,' to judge by your answer."

His mouth full of cookies, Thomas only nodded. He finished chewing and swallowed. "You know me well."

"I should hope I do after all these years." Nathan preceded Thomas into the bedroom and dropped his backpack on the floor by the door before crossing to sprawl across the bed.

Hanging his own backpack on the back of the door, Thomas moved to where he kept his stash of porn movies and pulled out the latest one he wanted to share with Nathan. This habit had begun last summer, when Thomas had returned early from a trip and surprised Nathan

while he was watching a porn movie in his room. Instead of being shocked and scandalized to find his best friend masturbating while watching porn, Thomas had been incredibly turned on and hesitated only a moment before joining him on the bed and pulling out his own dick. They hadn't said much after that until the movie had finished and they'd been cleaning up. Even then, all Thomas had said was that he had some 'movies' of his own to share with Nathan. Ever since, they would get together once or twice a week to watch some porn, both of them tugging at themselves and usually getting off at least once, sometimes twice, while they did.

Today's movie would be different from what they usually watched, though, and Thomas hoped his friend wouldn't mind. His cock already stiffening at the thought of what they were about to do, Thomas moved to the DVD player and slipped the disc in, leaving the case on top of it while he moved back to the bed to join Nathan. He'd already removed his shoes and socks and Thomas did the same while the player read the DVD and analyzed it before beginning to play. As the two boys propped pillows behind them and settled in to watch, the first scene began to play. As it progressed through the set-up, Thomas watched Nathan out of the corner of his eye, seeing him frown at first, and then stiffen in surprise when he realized they were watching gay porn. Rather than comment on it, he relaxed back against his pillow and reached down to rub himself through his denim shorts.

Relaxing as well, Thomas focused his attention on the movie, unbuttoning and unzipping his shorts so he could free his cock, which was already quite hard between the movie and Nathan. He pulled out the lube he kept hidden and squeezed some onto his hand before offering it to his friend. Nathan accepted it and took a moment to unfasten his own shorts before using it. Thomas couldn't quite stifle a gasp of pleasure as he wrapped his hand around his cock. As much as he enjoyed masturbating on his own, he always enjoyed it more when Nathan was masturbating right alongside him.

Thomas wished he had the courage to reach over and bat Nathan's hand out of the way so he could wrap his own around that hard black cock and slide it from the base to the crown with a slight twist at the end. He'd move his hand steadily up and down Nathan's dick with just the right amount of pressure, listening to him gasp and moan with pleasure induced by Thomas' touch. His eyes flew open when his hand was tugged away from his cock to be replaced by Nathan's. He stared at his friend in surprise. "Nate?"

"Go with it, Tom." His smile nervous around the edges, Nathan leaned in to lightly brush his lips against Thomas'.

After a moment of surprise, he returned the kiss with a warm one of his own. After a moment of fumbling, he found his friend's prick and began tugging at it, just like he'd dreamt of doing ever since that day last summer. The porn continued unheeded as the two teenagers kissed and tugged at each other, gasping almost in unison when they came.

Once the usual post-orgasm fog had cleared a little, Thomas reached for the tissues and offered the box to Nathan, who grabbed a couple to clean himself up. Doing the same, Thomas tucked his spent cock back into his shorts and got up to turn off the movie. After putting it back with the others, he turned back to the bed to see Nathan lounging on it, dark eyes intent. "Nate?"

"How long have you been wanting to do that?" Thomas wasn't surprised by the question and perched at the end of the bed before he answered.

"Since I walked in on you last summer." He didn't quite meet his friend's eyes, plucking at the bedspread as a way to avoid looking at him directly.

"Why did it take you so long to do something about it?" Nathan nudged his hip with one bare foot. "Why not do something sooner?"

"Wasn't sure how you'd react," he replied with a shrug, nudging the black foot with his hand. "Not every guy is amenable to his best friend jerking him off."

"Point." Nathan sounded satisfied with the answer. "Would you like to do that again?"

"God, yes." Thomas snapped his head up to answer, only to blush at how eager he sounded. "I mean, if you want to, yeah."

"I think that first answer is the proper gauge of your opinion." Nathan sounded amused. He gestured with one hand. "C'mere."

"Why?" He eyed his friend suspiciously. As much as he liked Nathan, he was still a little wary.

"Just come here." Nathan rolled his eyes, exasperated.

Cautiously, Thomas shifted up the bed and, with some coaxing from Nathan, laid down beside him. Then, cupping Thomas' cheek in one warm hand, Nathan kissed him, sweet and soft. The sort of kiss he'd always heard described. Sighing, he gave himself up to the kiss, stretching one arm across Nathan's chest. A knock on the bedroom door startled them apart. "Tom! Is Nate in there with you?"

"Yeah, Mom." Thomas reluctantly pulled away from Nathan and sat up.

He stifled a groan of embarrassment when his mother added. "Don't forget to do your homework or you don't get to play your video games after dinner."

"I won't forget, Mom." He rolled his eyes and muttered to Nathan. "Geez, you'd think after all these years of good grades she'd realize she doesn't need to constantly prod me about homework the way she does my sister."

Nathan laughed and sat up to kiss Thomas' cheek. "I'd better head home. Ma's going to want me to watch my brothers and sisters soon."

Thomas watched as Nathan gathered his things together. Part of him wished reality had never intruded, that they could have gone on kissing each other for ages. "Tell her I said hi."

"I will." Nathan hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and glanced at Thomas with mischievous brown eyes. "Maybe next time, we can forget the 'movie,' too."

He was gone before Thomas could think of a reply. Once it registered what Nathan meant, a huge smile spread across his face. "Yes!"

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Spirit Week

by Kikuna Matata (菊菜 瞬)

On Monday morning, Drew gets to school earlier than usual. It makes sense, probably, but it does pose one small but annoying inconvenience: he has to pull his car up outside the entrance to the parking lot and climb out to unhook the chain, then drag it off to the side.

Rebecca is just pulling up as he gets the chain wound up, and she rolls down her window to say, "Oh, thank you, Mr. Wachowski! You're certainly early this morning."

"Spirit Week, Principal Hopkins," he says, smiling at her, "Everybody on deck, I hear." She laughs, and he ducks to peer at Neil through the window into her back seat. Drew says, "Go Manatees!"

In reply, Neil swings his fist and shouts, "Go Manatees!" and practically hits himself in the face. Drew grins and gives them a wave, stepping to the side. The afternoon last April when Neil Hopkins finished with Drew's Survey section was one of the best moments of Drew's life.

Drew heads into the music room and starts setting up for his homeroom, which is tacked onto Beginning String Ensemble, all sixth and seventh grade. He cleans the chalkboard, scrubbing doubly hard on the nick over the second row of staff lines on the right, and sorts his scores into stacks by period. He reviews his notes from Friday: Jazz Band is starting to work on improvisation, and if Jill Morales can just *focus*, she'll be ready for a solo by the winter recital; Advanced String Ensemble should be ready to start in on the Vivaldi, but they're still rushing the Adagio of the Brandenburg, which he'll bring up with the first chairs in sectionals. Jackson is still having a hard time commanding the other students' attention; he's light years ahead of Margaret in terms of performance ability, but Drew's starting to worry he'll have to swap their seats if he wants the cellists to ever learn to all play the same notes at the same time. Beginning Strings is a nightmare, of course; so is Beginning Band, just after lunch. At least he gets to tackle his two most painful classes after a break. His two Survey classes are back-to-back after Beginning Strings; it's six weeks into the term and time for the second rotation, which means he has almost no idea what he's going to get. He rubs at his face and finishes off the last of his coffee, then takes his travel mug and heads down to the office to pick up his mail and a refill.

He thumbs through his mail. Spirit Week. Faculty meeting next Wednesday at four; Jesse's on deck for snacks. Spirit Week, more Spirit Week, students caught graffititing the portables up by the upper field over the weekend--oh, *Larissa*--fresh grass by the back parking lot so please try to keep off the lawn--why do they even bother, *honestly*. Drew stuffs everything under his arm and heads back to his room. He pats at his pocket, checking for his multi-tool; a number of the music stands have screws that badly need to be tightened.

Drew gives them a full eight-count after the bell to settle into their seats and come to silence. In the beginning classes, the students are required to leave their instruments in their cases in their laps--or, in the case of the cellists and Melvin Indio, Drew's lone bass player this year, in the stands along the wall--until he has finished with the announcements, but today he's written, *Assembly Day -- No Instruments* across the middle of the chalkboard in ten-inch-high letters. It doesn't seem to make much of a difference; he catches as many of them as he can and says, "No instruments today--put it back," or, "Read the chalkboard, please," but a few still

manage to escape. Josh Nelson is fiddling with the clasps on his viola case and squirming in his chair, so Drew smacks his baton against the podium and says, "Nelson!"

Josh looks up, eyes wide and alarmed.

"Front and center, Nelson!" Drew barks. He's trying to channel the conductor of the youth symphony from when he was in high school, which is difficult, because his conductor had been a tall, massive, grizzled-haired and red-eyed alcoholic of about sixty-five who'd been able to set the timpani to humming with his baritone roar, and Drew is a slight, nerdy-looking thirty-four-year-old who still gets carded when he buys his fianc   cigarettes and has difficulty ordering assertively at Starbucks. "Fine military name, Nelson!" Drew shouts. He suspects it's probably more ridiculous than intimidating, but it's too late to back out now. "Do you know what this week is?"

"S-spirit Week!" Josh tells him, wide-eyed. When he says it, the gum falls out of his mouth.

"Pick that up and throw it away, then report back!" Drew points at the wastebasket. Josh scrambles to comply. Miriam Smith is staring up at Drew, clutching her backpack to her chest.

"Nelson!" Drew's throat is starting to hurt.

"Yes, Mr. Wachowski?" Josh is scrambling back over to his seat.

"Spirit Week!"

Josh sits, alert and attentive. "Yes, Mr. Wachowski!"

Drew meets his eyes. "What do we do during Spirit Week?"

Too late, he realizes his mistake: Josh is in sixth grade. Josh's face falls almost comically, and he says, "I don't know, Mr. Wachowski!"

"Too right you don't!" Drew roars, desperately playing for time. He finally lights on Anne Bradbury, who is hunched in the third row, ducking down behind her stand and trying, without much success, to be much less than six feet tall. "Bradbury!" She looks up, paper white behind her freckles. "You're in seventh grade, aren't you, Bradbury?"

She nods, staring at him.

"All right!" Drew clears his throat, and the cellists start to giggle. He glares at them, and they hush. "Bradbury, for the benefit of the sixth graders: what do we do during Spirit Week?"

"We, um, wear school colors?" she suggests hesitantly.

"Which are?" He grabs for his coffee cup. He can't breathe.

"Blue and purple," she says, smiling shyly at him. His mouth twitches, but he doesn't let himself smile back.

"Too right they are!" he says. "Which is why I am wearing this very fine *purple* shirt -- be quiet, Broch -- under a blue sweater! And what else do we do, Bradbury?"

"Well, um, there're competitions," she says, clearly warming to her role as Educator of Tiny Ignorant Sixth-Graders, "like, there's an obstacle course that we have to run in PE and we get points for our homeroom for how fast we go, and, um, contests at lunch, and there's a canned food drive, for the food bank, for Thanksgiving, and we get points for how many cans we bring in. Things like that."

"Absolutely correct!" Drew takes a breath. "But you've forgotten the most important thing, Bradbury! I know I had you in homeroom last year, too, so I know you remember: *what do we do during Spirit Week?*"

Anne sits up straighter. The entire room has gone quiet, staring raptly at him. He's enjoying it. Maybe he should channel old Mr. Van Doren more often.

"Beat," she says, and then stops. "Destroy Mr. Vargas?"

He drops his baton, leaning in. "That's right," he says, voice low and tense. "We *destroy* Mr. Vargas."

The room is silent. Drew straightens and taps his baton against the edge of the podium.

"The Spirit Week assembly is at nine," he says. He can hear a truck backing up down the street; he could get used to this. "But first, we need to take roll--and a few of you also need to put your instruments away. I'd like to call your attention to the chalkboard..."

He eyes them over the rim of his glasses, and the handful of students clutching their cases shift in their seats, scuffing their feet against the floor.

Drew doesn't really mind assemblies, but the Spirit Week assembly is always a little tedious--mostly because he actually *enjoys* Spirit Week, and it seems a shame to delay it, for any reason. Jesse has his Photography and Yearbook class first, as always, and he's herding his small, unwashed aspiring hipsters into something that could, perhaps, somewhere, be considered a line; Drew doesn't even try. If he can prevent the Beginning String Ensemble from dueling with their school-issued bows, he's happy, and for assemblies, they (mercifully) have to leave their instruments entirely behind. The string players mill, more or less in Drew's assigned location, and when Jesse looks over at him, Drew raises an eyebrow and sticks out an arm to discourage a cellist from wandering over into Becky's first period class (too big to be seventh graders, so: American history), but doesn't say a word. Jesse smirks and then turns back to his cluster of camera-bearing mouth-breathers, undoubtedly to incite them into open rebellion.

Mike, who chairs physical education, coaches soccer at the high school, and also has somehow managed to become their IT guy after the last one had a breakdown and fled to Alaska, is helping Rebecca get their ancient PA to turn on, so that her voice can squeal over all of the speakers surrounding the quad in echoing underwater stereo.

"Good morning!" she shouts, unnecessarily. Drew winces. "Welcome to Spirit Week!"

"Go Manatees!" shouts one of the kids from the back of Tom's tidy cluster of Algebra students, and a low, throbbing "Boooo" seeps up through the rest of the eighth graders. Drew remembers what it was like to be convinced he wasn't allowed to like anything, but he can't remember if it was as tiring at the time as it seems to him as an adult.

Rebecca, for her part, takes it and rolls with it, going into a long and repetitive speech about the importance of showing Manatee spirit and Spirit Week events and the party the winning homeroom will get as a prize (pizza at lunch on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, which Drew does admire as a particularly Machiavellian bit of thinking on Rebecca's part). Drew mostly tunes it out; he's heard it for eight years already, the same every time. On the plus side, it's a beautiful day. At the tail end of October, the misery of California's late summer has mostly burnt away--this year, thankfully, less literally than most. Drew might not get much out of the assembly itself, but he can enjoy the sunshine and the blue clouds and being very slightly too hot in his borrowed purple shirt and his favorite blue sweater, and most of all, he can relish the stupid, pointless thrill he gets when Rebecca says, "--Last year's winners, Mr. Wachowski's Beginning String Ensemble!"

Drew raises his hand, giving a gracious Miss America wave, and a smattering of cheers fills the courtyard, from those in last year's class who have dropped out or moved on to Advanced Strings, as well as the handful still diligently struggling along in this year's beginning class.

"And of course, the runners-up," Rebecca says, "Ms. Pleva's Honors Physical Science" -- her current class roars; bizarre, really, since all the actual students in question have since moved on to the high school-- "and Mr. Vargas's Yearbook class, who tied for second."

A girl in a flowered dress and Doc Martens--Drew is having an uncomfortable flashback to ninth grade, in 1992--pulls her camera up and points it at the hedge, then depresses the shutter button.

At the podium, Rebecca clears her throat and says, "Well! Excellent! You all are playing for the honor and glory of your homerooms. So play fair, and play hard, and... good luck!"

Luisa is smiling at Drew, so Drew steps over to shake her hand, in the spirit of sportsmanship, et cetera.

"Good luck," she murmurs. "He's out for blood this year. He was in the lounge before the bell, drawing up battle plans."

"I can take Jesse," Drew says mildly. "Don't think I didn't notice you quietly sneaking up behind me last year."

"Wachowski," Jesse says, behind him, so Drew turns to shake his hand, too. "I could get into all our lockers this morning. I hope you're not planning to go easy on me."

"That doesn't sound much like me," Drew says. "In fact, my current plan is to utterly destroy you."

"I look forward to seeing you try," Jesse tells him, smirking, and curls his fingers against the inside of Drew's wrist, just in time with a blinding surge among the banked fires of Drew's long-suppressed rage.

"Watch your back, Vargas," Drew says, which is clumsy and unworthy of this particular annual ritual, but the best he can manage under the circumstances. Jesse's collar is askew, and his eyes are hollowed and dark, and Drew shuts that line of thought down as quickly as he can. He can't afford sympathy; it's Spirit Week.

"Better get back to your class," Jesse says, "before the violists wander into traffic," and then steps back over to his class, looking, as usual, devastatingly confident and casual.

"Did we really win last year?" Leah Eliot, second chair cello, asks as they head back to the music room.

Jesse's not sleeping. Not surprising, really, up half the night with a new baby, but--Drew takes a breath.

"We did," he manages to confirm. "But not easily. We did it through hard work and dedication, and--most importantly--by participating in every last event. Every event we could compete in, we did. Brian, get the door; everyone else, start pulling the chairs into groups. We're going to break up into sections and come up with a battle plan, all right?"

"What about me?" Melvin asks, mournful. "I don't have a section."

Drew grinds his teeth together in a parody of a smile. "Today, why don't you join up with the cellos, Melvin?" he says. He doesn't say, *Just like always*, but he's tempted.

Melvin nods, and heads over reluctantly to join the cellos.

The really hard part of Spirit Week, as Drew has learned from long practice, is keeping the enthusiasm of thirty preteen children all focused on a single goal for an entire week--while also still attempting to conduct the bulk of his regular classes. Monday is fine; no first-period class gets much done on Monday of Spirit Week, and by the time Rebecca is marking up their points on the big bulletin board out at the front of the school after the last bell, Drew is pleased

to see that his class is already just behind Tom's Algebra class, with Sabine's sixth-grade French class and Jesse's Yearbook class not far behind them. The Algebra students are almost all eighth-graders, and Tom's classes always tend to take an early lead and then fall behind. Sabine doesn't really have that necessary killer instinct, but Drew supposes he ought to keep an eye on her, anyway. Jesse is, as usual, his only obvious competition.

When it comes to the Spirit Week competition, Drew and Jesse are incredibly well-matched. They both know the importance of bribery, for one thing, as well as that all-critical Wednesday push to keep the kids engaged through the end of the week, and their long-standing rivalry has become enough of a running joke in the teacher's lounge that they both get away with behavior during Spirit Week that would be completely inexcusable from two grown men any other time of the year. Last year, Jesse arranged for Drew's glasses to meet an untimely end at the hands of a fishing rod, a trio of innocent-looking sixth graders, and a skateboard (Jesse swore the skateboard was accidental), and Drew spent the rest of the week wearing the two-year-old pair that he kept in his car in case of emergencies; the year before, Drew spent two hours of the preceding Friday afternoon jamming all the padlocks on the equipment lockers in the photography room with hot glue.

This year, Drew knows consciously that Jesse has enough on his plate, with his parents and Naomi and the baby, but Drew's angry, and Jesse resents that Drew is angry, and is certain that he's in the right because he's Jesse, and that just makes Drew *furious*, which is why he has been scrupulously careful not to do a single thing to Jesse in the guise of Spirit Week high spirits that he wouldn't do any other week. He simply doesn't trust himself. Last year he swapped Jesse's tea for decaf and everyone in the teacher's lounge had a good laugh over it when Jesse finally noticed, bleary-eyed, on his sixth cup, on *Thursday*, but this year Drew wants to take all of the cigarettes Jesse left behind and chain-smoke them in the stairwell outside Naomi's apartment, waiting until Naomi would open the door with the baby to complain about the smell, whereupon Drew would shout, "Spirit Week!" and run. But of course, if he actually did it, not even he would believe it had anything to do with Spirit Week at all.

He makes it through Tuesday mostly by avoiding Jesse except in areas frequented by masses of students, but on Wednesday morning, Drew can't get the coffee maker in the office to work when he goes up for his mail and his refill, and it's early enough that Mike isn't in yet, so there's no one to hassle to fix it for him. Which leaves the coffee maker in the teacher's lounge.

It's a painful decision, but not a particularly difficult one.

It's too much to expect that Jesse wouldn't be in. Of course Jesse is in. It's 7:14 in the morning; most of the teachers won't even be on campus until near eight, but Drew doesn't want to see Jesse so of course Jesse is in, sitting with his knees tucked up on the end of Becky Diaz's hideous donated sofa, drinking an absolutely enormous cup of (not decaf) tea and checking his email.

Jesse looks up.

"Coffee maker in the office is broken," Drew explains. Jesse blinks, and nods, and looks back down at his laptop screen.

Drew gets down a filter, measures out coffee, fills up the water tank and starts it brewing. He's dripped water on the counter, but the paper towel roll is empty, so he just leans back against a drier part of the edge and watches Jesse.

"You know," Jesse says, without looking up. "I am starting to get nervous about what you're planning."

"Anticipation really is cruel, isn't it?" Drew says.

"Naomi wants you to come over for dinner on Friday," Jesse says.

Drew smiles and says, "Oh, lovely, dinner."

Jesse snaps his laptop shut and stands, setting it on the rickety round table, which smells, inexplicably, like fish. "Are you planning on acting like a grown-up at any point in the near future?" he asks. "Or are you just going to keep--"

"Oh, come on, Vargas," Drew says, folding his arms over his chest. "We never act like grown-ups during Spirit Week."

Jesse smiles. "Right, Spirit Week."

Drew smiles back. "I'm leading, in case you haven't noticed."

"I was leading at lunchtime yesterday," Jesse counters, and Drew laughs, and heads over to the supply cupboard on the other side of the room to get another roll of paper towels.

"Well, you always did have enough guts to take the occasional battle," he says. Chalk, a half-carton of Cheetos, two pristine bottles of Windex, but no paper towels. He closes the cupboard, and adds, "But you don't ever really seem to have the commitment to win the war, do you?"

When he turns, Jesse is right behind him, face set. "Is this war, then?" he asks.

"What did you think it was?" Drew asks. "A game?"

"Yeah," Jesse says. "It's always a game."

Drew laughs, and Jesse grabs his shoulders and pushes Drew back, hard enough to snap his head back into the cupboard door. "If you want war," Jesse tells him, voice low. "That can still be arranged."

Drew curls his lip, and Jesse pushes him back again, hard. The cupboard door rattles.

"You want to have this out right here?" Jesse asks. "Right now? Because I've barely seen you in three weeks, and it's only just starting to really become clear to me that an awful lot of that is because of *you*."

"Oh, yeah," Drew says, quietly. "Naomi and the baby, that's definitely all about me."

Jesse narrows his eyes. "That's a low blow, Wachowski."

Drew's fundamental problem, really, is that there are parts of him that are rational and parts of him that are instinctive and sometimes, the parts of him that are instinctive steamroll the parts of him that are rational so thoroughly that he barely feels like he's making decisions at all. Jesse's hands are tightening on Drew's shoulders, and Drew's pulse is picking up. Jesse smells like Old Spice deodorant and his unwashed hair, and his long fingers are clenching Drew's shoulders and the baby probably kept Jesse up all night and they're in the teacher's lounge, but Drew hasn't gotten laid in three weeks.

Drew shifts his hips, and Jesse takes a breath.

"You were saying something," Drew says, "about low blows."

Jesse blinks at him, and Drew slides down, just a little, and pulls his hands up from his sides and puts them on Jesse's belt. Jesse sucks in a breath.

"I could, you know," Drew says, unfastening the buckle. "I could just drop down to my knees, right here, right now, and just swallow you down and have you yanking at my hair and coming down my throat before the first bus has finished its pick-ups."

"Drew," Jesse warns, just as Drew slips Jesse's belt loose with a snick and pops the button on his slacks and yanks the zipper down, quick. Drew's heart is pounding. He shoves Jesse's pants and boxers down together. "Jesus Christ," Jesse gasps, "you're--you're not serious--oh, f-fu-_-"

Drew's mouth is watering. Jesse's cock is very hard and very hot and silky-soft and wet at the tip, and Drew's heart is going about two hundred beats per minute and he is thinking about Jesse bending him over Becky Diaz's hideous donated sofa and fucking him until he screams. "I'm thinking about you bending me over Becky Diaz's hideous donated sofa," he whispers, watching Jesse's mouth, "and fucking me until I scream."

Jesse's breath comes out hard, all in a rush.

Drew is allowed a very small, satisfying space in which to be tremendously pleased with himself before Jesse is pushing into Drew's hand and whispering, "Get your pants down."

Drew blinks at him, and Jesse presses Drew's shoulders back. "Do it," Jesse says. "Get your pants down and I'll do you right here, right up against--not the cupboard; the door rattles. Get up against the wall."

Drew's wrist stills without him wanting it to, and Jesse fucks up into his hand, his mouth curving out wide and open, teeth dangerously bright. Jesse presses Drew's spine flat against the cupboard door and presses his mouth to Drew's ear and whispers, "You start these games, Wachowski, and you think I'll forfeit, don't you?"

Drew manages to swallow, throat dry, and says, "We'll get caught." It comes out breathless, and Drew almost hates himself for that, a little.

"You think so?" Jesse drops his face down, nuzzles at Drew's throat. "Because I don't think so. I think it'll be over lightning fast, Wachowski. I think the idea's already got you leaking a wet spot through your shorts."

Drew shifts. He says, "You seriously think I'll," and then stops, because Jesse is rolling his hips slow and easy, fucking Drew's fist in smooth, steady thrusts, and Drew--Drew can't come up with a retort.

"I do think so," Jesse says, and then, softer, "Tighter, please," and Drew's fist tightens without any input from his brain. "I think I'll make you spit into my hand," Jesse is murmuring, hot against Drew's neck, "and I'll smear it all over your hole and I think you'll already be biting down on your hand to keep yourself quiet while I'm still just rubbing my cock against you, before I even get it inside, won't you?"

"Oh my God," Drew hears, and then closes his eyes, face burning hot.

"I think you're going to take your pants down" --Jesse licks the skin under Drew's left ear-- "and turn around, and let me fuck you up into the wall where anyone--anyone, Becky, Sabine--*Principal Hopkins*, could walk in at any second, and then you're going to go over to the music room and try to teach... what was it? That 'horde of tone-deaf banshees' you call your Beginning String Ensemble to follow your baton for forty-five minutes, with your ass full of my come."

Drew swallows, and Jesse pushes his cock into Drew's hand, over and over and over again. Jesse's cock is burning hot and thick, longer than Jesse's glorious fingers. Drew doesn't want to stop touching him, so he undoes Jesse's belt right-handed.

Jesse laughs, soft and close, barely audible, and kisses his cheek. "Miss me, Wachowski?"

Drew can't talk. He can't. He can't talk and he can't trust himself so he undoes the button on his khakis and Jesse drops one hand to hold Drew's waistband so that Drew can tug down the zipper. Jesse rubs his thumb over Drew's jaw and whispers, "Yeah," when Drew pushes his boxers, dark and wet at the front, down to bunch up with his khakis at the tops of his thighs, and Drew has to let go of Jesse's cock. He knows that. He has to, if he's going to turn around.

"C'mon," Jesse murmurs, and then kisses him, geologically deep, drowning. Jesse pulls back and whispers, "C'mon, turn around."

Drew lets go of Jesse's cock and turns around, stumbling over to the wall, just at the other side of the cupboard.

He presses his forehead against the wall, his glasses slipping askew. The wall is cool, so he twists to press it against his cheek. Jesse's long fingers are sneaking down into the crack of Drew's ass, and Drew hears him spit and--and oh, but does he remember?--and yes, Jesse is pressing up close against Drew's back and putting his hand over Drew's mouth. Jesse whispers, hot against his nape, "Spit," so Drew spits, shivering. Jesse presses a kiss against his neck, just above his collar, and Drew's whole body jerks, hard.

"Not yet," Jesse tells him, rubbing his spit-slick fingers against Drew's crack, all over him, burning-hot where they're touching and shivering-cold where they're not, and Drew makes a noise without thinking and Jesse is just rubbing the head of his cock against him; oh, God, Jesse's a fucking lunatic, they're having a quickie in the--the goddamned *teacher's lounge* and he's going to fucking *tease*--

Jesse *pushes*, and Drew gasps, "Oh--mh--" and Jesse's hand slams flat over his mouth. Drew arches his back, shoving himself down.

"Too long?" Jesse whispers, and Drew nods, desperate, and Jesse slams into him, pressing Drew's whole body tight against the wall. "I bet you've been going home every night and trying to finger yourself and then crying because you just can't deep enough, haven't you?" Jesse's voice is snide, amused, but then he pulls back and slams back in again and Drew is just so fucking relieved that he can't even remember that he's supposed to be angry. Jesse fucks him in hard, steady thrusts, just dry enough to sting, and Drew's jaw keeps bumping into the wall and his glasses are a disaster but Jesse is thick inside him, relentless, his breath hot against Drew's spine. One time in college Drew spent two and a half hours in a cock ring while his boyfriend sucked on his balls and he doesn't even think at the end of that he was half this hard. Every roll of Jesse's hips makes his toes curl in his shoes--fuck, damn it, he's dripping precome all over the place and he fucking loves these shoes--and his hand speeds up on his sweat-slick cock until his wrist aches with it and he--and he--

"Oh, God," Jesse is gasping, hot and damp on his skin. Drew is blinking back solar flare afterimages and trying not to let his come drip through his fingers and onto his pants or his shoes and Jesse is gasping, "Oh, God--I can feel--oh, God--" and pushing *in--fuck*--and Drew groans out loud as Jesse pants out, "Jesus Christ, shut *up*," while Drew's whole body is shaking and seizing up as Jesse squeezes him around the waist, trembling against his back.

"Fuck." Jesse laughs, tense and dangerous, just as there's a bolt of high, feminine laughter in the hall. Jesse hisses, "Fuck, you have to--" and pulls out--*ow*--dropping down onto his heels and tugging Drew around; yanking up Drew's pants, doing up his zipper and button and belt, tugging his shirt straight, while Drew tries to figure out what to do with a gob of come in his hand in the teacher's lounge. Jesse stumbles back up to his feet and puts his own clothes to rights while Drew lets the wall hold him up, and then Tom's voice mingles with Luisa's as the key rattles in the lock. Jesse drops down casually on the end of Becky Diaz's hideous green donated sofa, then looks at Drew, who is still staring at the come in his hand. Jesse twists and tosses him one of the cushions from the back of the sofa. Drew is... grateful. Damn it. He wipes his hand on the cushion and then tosses it back, and Jesse sets it back into place with the wet smear to the back, hidden, just as Tom gets the door open. Jesse crosses his legs at the knee.

"...But I keep telling her, with the budget cuts--oh, Drew, hello. We don't normally see you this early," he says, smiling.

"Coffee maker in the office is broken," Drew says automatically. He looks over at the coffee maker, which has finished brewing, and his cup beside it.

"Oh, that piece of--well," Luisa amends, a little clumsily, as Drew heads over to the counter. "It was a donation, after all."

"Everything we have here was a donation," Jesse says, voice light, and the three of them laugh.

Drew picks up the carafe. He fills his cup and recaps it. He takes a sip, and sighs.

"Good coffee," he says, and slides his hand into his pocket. "Thanks."

He heads out, feeling shaky and hollowed-out, half convinced that all of them can see what he can feel: the damp line of Jesse's come already trickling down from his ass, just curving down onto the top of his thigh.

Jesus Christ. Spirit Week! He thinks he's actually going insane.

Wednesday is pretty much a wash. He manages to make it through the day without falling over or dissolving into a shaking mess, but it's a near thing. After the last bell, he stumbles out to his car and into the driver's seat and puts his forehead on the steering wheel. His asshole aches; under other circumstances, that'd be amazing. He hasn't checked the point tallies on the bulletin board out front all day; he doesn't remember what he said to Beginning String Ensemble at all. He does remember Anne Bradbury hunching over in front of his desk, trying uselessly to be small, and mumbling something half-intelligible and urgent. They're probably losing. Drew wonders a little bit why he usually cares.

He pulls himself together and drives home. The house isn't, objectively, a large house; it's a 1920s one-story with three small bedrooms and a walk-in closet that Drew uses as a practice room. The bedroom they use as an office is the biggest. They probably could've gotten a king-sized bed into that one, but instead they'd stuck with their old queen in the bedroom down the hall, the one with the crap illumination and a window-frame that had leaked until the stormy night where they drank nine shots of tequila between them and Drew beat on the edge of the window with a rubber mallet while Jesse sat naked and cross-legged in the middle of the bed and laughed until he cried. In the office, they'd set up the massive, heavy, two-sided desk that Drew had inherited from his dad--just about the only thing they own that didn't come from Ikea, and way too nice for two teachers with a mortgage--and angled it so that both of them could just turn their heads to the side to look out the window into the backyard. The house really isn't big, especially not by L.A. standards, but it's way too big for one person, and with Jesse gone it feels too quiet, too. Drew marks the music theory assignments for his Survey classes and goes through his scores, but he can't focus. Eventually, he gets up, heads into the kitchen, and makes two shots of espresso and a cup of tea. He puts the tea on Jesse's side of the desk and lets the smell fill the room while he sips his espresso, and gives himself a half an hour in which to be grotesquely, comically lonely.

It's five in the afternoon. Drew doesn't know anything about babies. He doesn't know what you do with a baby at five in the afternoon. He doesn't know if it's bath time or dinner time or bedtime, if the baby's even on a schedule yet or if Naomi's still whipping out her tits at all hours, which had been the subject of a lengthy, rambling voicemail at two in the morning eighteen days ago. It had been painfully funny the first five times Drew listened to it, but now

it just makes his chest hurt. Jesse sounds tired on the voicemail, and now he sounds even more tired in person, and Drew wants to drive over to Naomi's apartment and kidnap him. He wants to take Jesse back to their neighborhood and their house and their bed and scratch at the place on Jesse's back that Jesse can't ever get for himself and let Jesse get a full night's sleep, but twenty-four days ago Naomi went into labor and Jesse, as expected, abandoned Drew in favor of ties of blood and history and family. Drew can't compete, and he knows it, and he hates himself for wanting to, anyway.

He finishes off the espresso, and then he drinks the tea. It's awful. He makes himself Kraft macaroni and cheese for dinner, and washes it down with the bottle of red that Tom and Lisa had brought to their housewarming party.

"Mr. Wachowski," Owen says, on Thursday morning, after the bell has rung for the start of first period.

Drew is hungover and queasy, and the coffee maker in the office is still broken, so he's down by a cup. "Yes, Mr. Broch," he says, as steadily as he can manage.

"We're losing," says Owen, flat. "Why didn't you say that we're losing?"

Drew sets his baton down and represses the urge to scream. The violinists are whispering to each other, but that's incurable. "Not by much," Drew says. "We can still--"

"We can still beat Yearbook, but we're getting crushed by Ms. Rosenbaum's French class," Owen says. Owen is a little guy, lean and wiry, with skinny arms and legs sticking out of his oversized t-shirt and cargo shorts, and he's got the potential to be a good cellist. He has natural talent enough, and a degree of dedication that Drew doesn't often get from students who started with him and don't take private lessons.

Owen tells him, "I don't care about beating Mr. Vargas. I want pizza. Don't you want to really win?"

Drew leans on his podium. "You play sports?" he asks.

"Yep." Owen nods. "Hockey."

"You any good?" Drew asks.

"Nope." Owen shakes his head. "I fall down a lot."

"Okay," Drew says. He takes a breath. "Well, all right. How far behind are we?"

"Thirty-six points behind Yearbook," Brian offers. "And seventy-seven behind French."

Drew scrawls this up on the chalkboard. "All right. Owen's perfectly right; we can't allow ourselves to be beaten by the *French*."

This gets him a very small ripple of laughter, which is worth something, he supposes. He rubs at his face. "All right," he says. "Let's work it out. Three points for a can of food, five for a volunteer hour, ten for a win at lunchtime--who likes math?"

They don't actually get any rehearsing in, but they do come up with a plan, and honestly, Drew's hangover doesn't much relish the thought of thirty beginners sawing at their instruments for forty-five minutes, anyway.

The bulk of the plan falls to the students, but Drew can at least undermine the enemy's morale, and honestly, he's tired of eating his lunch in his classroom, anyway. He heads up to the fields at lunchtime to watch Melvin and Beatriz both pull down wins for his homeroom, then walks back over to the parking lot, as casually as he can. Jesse's bike is near the middle of the rack, easy to spot; it's an orange women's bike that Jesse's had since college and become desperately and unreasonably attached to; it's hideous. Drew leans against the rack and scans for

spies, then reaches into his pocket, fishes out his multitool, and flicks open the knife.

Drew has to deal with Margaret and Jackson in seventh period. It's the worst thing he's had to do in ages. When Drew finally works himself up to telling them he's switching their seats, Jackson just looks relieved to finally not be expected to command. It makes it worse, somehow.

By the time Drew makes it out to the parking lot, unhappy and exhausted, Jesse's sitting on the hood of Drew's car, knees pulled to his face, the dust from Drew's hood leaving pale splotches all over the seat of his charcoal grey pants. His shoulders are hunched, and when Drew unlocks the doors, Jesse barely raises his head.

"You look like--" Drew starts, and then realizes he doesn't know if there's a kid within hearing range, and corrects to, "bad."

Jesse nods wearily. "I'd bawl you out for slashing my tires," he says, "but honestly, right now, I'm just glad for the excuse to ask for a ride."

"How do you know it was me?" Drew asks, sliding his satchel onto the back seat.

Jesse doesn't dignify that with a response. Instead, he climbs off the hood of the car, a little unsteadily, and Drew helps him sling his panniers--which feel like they're full of rocks and are probably actually full of sixth-grade essays on ancient Egypt instead--into the trunk. Jesse falls into the passenger seat and drops his head back, closing his eyes. Drew does up his seatbelt and turns on the car.

Jesse dozes off before they've even turned out of the parking lot, so Drew leaves the radio off and drives over to Naomi's apartment in silence. There's not much traffic. It takes eleven minutes, so Drew drives around the block a few times, because eleven minutes isn't any kind of nap at all.

On the fourth time, Naomi's come out onto the stoop with the baby, her long hair badly braided and frizzing around her face, and Drew can't really justify waiting any more, so he pulls over to the side and turns off the ignition. Naomi watches, but doesn't come down. Jesse is already stirring, but Drew reaches over and touches his shoulder.

"Hey," he says, quiet. "We're here."

"Is there a baby?" Jesse mumbles.

"Yeah." Drew sighs. "Your sister's got him out on the stoop."

"Oh, God, fuck Naomi and her godforsaken womb," Jesse groans, and rubs at his face, hard enough to make his cheeks flush.

"She's not my type," Drew says, and Jesse laughs, painful and sharp, and undoes his seatbelt. Drew swallows and grabs his left wrist.

Jesse looks at him.

"Is it always going to be like this?" Drew asks, quiet.

Jesse stares at him.

"I mean." Drew licks his lips. "I mean, I do get it: she's family, you do shit for family. I get it, Jesse. But I hate sleeping by myself, I wake up all the time and I keep hallucinating the phone ringing, I want it to so bad, and I--"

"I'm not ditching Naomi by herself with a newborn just so you can get laid more conveniently." Jesse's voice is sharp.

Drew shakes his head. "I didn't say anything about sex."

"You jumped me in the teacher's lounge," Jesse reminds him, and Drew says, "It was a moment of weakness," and Jesse laughs harshly and says, "Don't lie, you'd want to do it here if you thought I could get it up."

Drew exhales, and rubs his thumb over Jesse's palm, up to his ring. Jesse stills.

"I would," Drew says, very quietly. "I'll take you in the car or the stairwell or that nice park over behind the Vons, if you want, and I'd... I'd fucking love it, you know I'd love it. I love. Anything you'll give me."

Jesse sighs and leans away, resting his head against his window. He doesn't take his hand back, though.

"I know she got screwed over, and I know you don't want to ditch her by herself, and I love that about you, Jesse," Drew says, quiet. "But when I asked you if you wanted her to stay with us, I meant it, and it's really fucking hard to tell myself you're not just--just taking off, when you s-stop calling, and you--"

"I don't get any fucking *sleep*," Jesse says, low, and Drew takes a breath and says, "I know."

There's a long silence. Drew watches Naomi, up on the stoop, rocking her baby against her chest, her face turned away from whatever she can see of the two of them in the car.

"You have a sister and a nephew," Drew says, finally.

Jesse exhales. "Yeah," he says quietly.

Drew nods, Jesse's ring solid and body-warm under his thumb.

Drew asks, "Do I?"

Jesse doesn't say anything. After a minute, Drew lets go of his hand and gets out. He goes around to the back, puts one of Jesse's panniers over each shoulder and heads up towards the stoop.

"Hey," Drew says. Up close, Naomi looks utterly worn down: grey-faced and the hollow kind of too-thin that the Vargases all tend to in times of stress and overwork.

"Hey," she says, smiling weakly.

"Can I bring you anything?" Drew asks. He's always liked Naomi, is the thing. "Like... milk? Takeout? Vodka?"

She laughs. Behind Drew's back, Jesse says, "Drew," very softly.

"Seriously," Drew says. "Um... just, call, I guess--can I take these upstairs?"

Her eyes flick to Jesse, then back again. "Yeah," she says. "It's open."

Drew nods and heads up the stairs. He can hear her talking to Jesse, but he tries not to listen. Her apartment's on the second floor. There's baby stuff absolutely everywhere, and Jesse's blue pajamas are in a ball next to the blanket on the sofa. Drew rubs at his face, just as Naomi is coming in behind him, still holding the baby tight against her chest.

"You want to hold him?" she asks. Jesse is right behind her.

"Better not," Drew says, sticking his hands in his pockets. "I didn't lock the car."

Drew is on campus by six-thirty in the morning. He told Jesse he had to go in extra early and that Jesse should borrow Naomi's car or get a ride with Tom. It's a dick move, and he knows it, but for the first time in two and a half years he's having to question whether or not he's still supposed to be wearing his ring, and it's not a feeling he can handle with equanimity. He unfastens the chain across the entrance to the faculty lot and parks under a tree. In his classroom, he goes through his scores and his notes and finishes his coffee too fast, but he doesn't have

the alarm code for the office, so if he wants more, he'll be stuck with the teacher's lounge, and as unlikely as Jesse being there this early may be, Drew doesn't want to risk it. He polishes the violas, instead.

It's soothing.

"So here's the thing," Jesse says from the doorway, and Drew jerks his head up from viola number six, startled. Jesse closes the door behind him, tugs at the handle to make sure it's latched, and then pockets his keys.

"If you've come by to be a dick about the Spirit Week competition," Drew says, "I think you should know that my kids are rallying for a last-minute push to the finish."

Jesse crosses his arms over his chest. "Do you actually even care about Spirit Week?" he asks.

Drew looks back down at the viola and draws the polishing cloth down the front, easy and smooth. "I care about beating you," he says.

Jesse nods, sharp, and is silent.

Drew finishes the front of the viola and turns it over to work on the back. He usually saves this stuff for Friday afternoon, but at least if he finishes it this morning, he'll be able to get out of this hellhole that much sooner.

"When you said Naomi could come and stay with us," Jesse says, "I thought you were being polite."

Drew exhales. He sets the viola back in its case, and straightens up in his seat. "I don't actually do a whole lot just to be polite," he reminds Jesse, like they haven't known each other for eight years.

"Which I know." Jesse nods. "Like, consciously." He sighs, and pulls the first violinist's chair out and sits down, his legs sprawling all over the place. "But the thing is," he says, "you hate kids."

"I don't *hate* them," Drew corrects. "I dislike them. Which, I mean, honestly, I teach middle school; I don't think anyone who teaches middle school likes them very much after a while."

"I do," Jesse says, very quietly, and Drew goes very still.

The room is quiet. It's still early enough that there's no amorphous cloud of youthful high spirits floating in through the crack under the door. He can't even hear much traffic, not yet.

"You want kids?" Drew asks. It comes out perfectly even. He's proud of that, he thinks.

"I don't know." Jesse sighs, and rubs at his face. "Look. I'm not... I don't have any illusions about kids: they start out sort of... loud and squashy, which is awful, and then they turn into our students, who are awful, and then they turn into teenagers, who are really awful, but... I like Naomi's kid, and I--I've always liked kids, I've always liked playing with my cousins and crap like that, and I--"

"You haven't ever brought this up," Drew says, low, and Jesse takes a breath and says, "I was pretty sure you'd take off if I did."

"I wouldn't take off," Drew says, suddenly searingly, ferociously angry, "I wouldn't--I wouldn't *do* that to you, I wouldn't--I asked you to marry me, Jesus Christ."

"Yeah," Jesse says quietly. "So. Maybe I was stupid."

Drew puts his hands over his face.

After a second, he can hear Jesse standing up, coming over. All the chairs creak, is the thing, and the room's got thin carpeting that speaks almost as loudly as a hardwood floor when Jesse crouches in front of him. Jesse is touching his wrists and murmuring, "I made a mistake,"

and then, more softly, "I'm sorry."

Drew takes a breath, and admits, "I was kind of a dick about it, so," and Jesse drops forward onto his knees and leans up between Drew's legs to kiss him. Jesse smells like coffee, which is cheating, since he hardly ever drinks it. He must've washed his hair last night; it's dried a little funny, and it smells like Febreze. Drew kisses Jesse's cheek, and Jesse presses his face into Drew's shoulder, and then leans back and pushes up to his feet. His left knee creaks, a little, and Drew skims his palm over Jesse's thigh. Jesse runs his fingers through Drew's hair.

"You want to talk about kids?" Drew asks, quiet.

"Um." Jesse licks his lips and says, "Not right now, really, actually."

Drew starts to laugh. "I'm not having sex with you on campus," he manages. "Not again, Jesus. You ruined me for the whole day last time."

Jesse tugs Drew up to his feet, kisses his jaw. "It's early," Jesse says, voice low, and damn it, damn him, and damn Drew most of all for being so goddamned easy; his toes are already curling up in his shoes. "We have time for--"

"Not on campus," Drew says, as firmly as he can manage. That's not a kink. That's not allowed to be a kink. They can't *afford* for it to be a kink. "You wouldn't be saying this if we were in your classroom."

"Mm, no." Jesse presses his mouth to Drew's mouth, light. "But I have the darkroom, so..." It sounds like a joke; good. Jokes are safe. No one gets arrested for public indecency as long as it's just a joke.

"Right." Drew wraps his arms around Jesse's shoulders. "So you'd take me into the darkroom, show me your *photo collection*?"

"No, my photo collection is at home." Jesse mouths at Drew's throat before pulling back, and Drew snorts. "But I could push you up against the counter," Jesse muses, "you know... get your pants down..." and all of a sudden, it's not really a joke at all.

Drew swallows. His hips are rocking up, almost without him meaning for them to, and he and Jesse both breathe out. Jesse presses his forehead to Drew's forehead, squeezing him around the waist.

"I'd get your pants down," Jesse repeats, softer, and rocks against Drew's hip. Drew swallows, and presses his face against the side of Jesse's face.

"What time is it?" Drew whispers, because Jesse is facing the clock.

"Five to eight," Jesse kisses his temple and whispers, "I'd get your pants down, just--just so I could really get a good hold on your ass--"

Drew bites down on Jesse's lip, and Jesse catches his breath. "Good start," Drew whispers, and splays his fingers wide on Jesse's back.

"Yeah." Jesse pulls back, rubs his mouth over Drew's ear. He didn't shave well, and the edges of his mouth are stubbly and rough. "I think I'd suck you, get you nice and hard with my mouth, just to remember what you taste like." Jesse slides his hand up Drew's back. "I miss the way you taste."

Drew swallows, heavy, and tucks his fingertips just into Jesse's waistband.

"I miss the way you taste all over," Jesse whispers, and Drew shakes his head and says, "I'm not--we can't," and Jesse pulls him up tighter and whispers, "No, I know; just listen," like Drew would actually be capable of doing something else. Drew nods, and bends to kiss Jesse's shoulder through his shirt.

"I want to turn you around and spread you open," Jesse is saying. His voice is rough, a little too loud for a whisper, and Drew drops his hand and rubs at himself through his trousers. "I

want to--God, fuck the darkroom, fuck--I want to take you *home*," Jesse gasps, as Drew turns his hand up, heart pounding, and Jesse presses himself against Drew's fingers. "I want--I want to take you home and get your pants down and make you put your hands on the window while I fuck you open with my tongue--Jesus fucking Christ, I told Naomi I'd be back by four," and Drew starts to laugh.

"You're such a shit," Drew tells him, but he's already getting Jesse's belt undone, and Jesse is pushing up against him, panting, eyes wild, cheeks flushed.

"How fast do you think we could do it?" Jesse is asking. His pupils are huge. He looks high. He hasn't been getting enough sleep. Drew sticks his hand down Jesse's pants and Jesse's eyes flutter shut.

"Now?" Drew asks.

"No, now's going to take about thirty seconds," Jesse tells him, too fast, and probably not inaccurately. "I want to take you home after school, I want--"

"Bell's at 3:25," Drew reminds him. "Fifteen minutes home, ten minutes to fuck, ten minutes to your sister's--we could do it, just barely, if you don't mind spending the evening looking after her baby smelling like spunk." He pushes Jesse's pants down for more room, and Jesse groans.

"Because." Jesse swallows, hard, as Drew pushes him back against the podium and braces his feet beside Jesse's feet. "I forgot what I was saying," Jesse admits, and Drew tightens his hand and says, "You were going to fuck me open with your tongue, while Mrs. Rodriguez from across the way watches us through her binoculars."

"You're a good fucking show," Jesse gasps, hips snapping up, and Drew swallows and drops down to his knees. "Oh Jesus." Jesse drops his hand into Drew's hair and pets and pets, while Drew nuzzles breathlessly at Jesse's dripping cock and his heavy, tight balls.

"You were going to fuck me open with your tongue," Drew reminds him, "which, I mean, don't stop there," and then he puts his mouth over Jesse's cock and sinks all the way down.

"Oh God." Jesse is obviously trying to hold still, but he's failing, his hips just barely jerking, fucking the head of his cock into Drew's throat. Drew has to pull back for air, and Jesse groans, and grabs him by the ears, which puts Drew back in easily one of his top five favorite places on the planet. Drew can feel his eyes fluttering shut, his toes cramped tight in his shoes. "God," Jesse is gasping, "I'm going to--I'm going to do it, Drew, you--I don't think you believe me but I'm going to do it, I'm gonna take you home and shove my tongue and my fingers up you until you come once, just from that, just--jizz all over the window, just really--really give Mrs. Rodriguez what she's looking for, you know?"

Drew is squirming, but one of the advantages of having Jesse's cock crammed in his mouth is that it helps keep him mostly quiet. Good thing, too; he can hear the first few signs of student life stirring on campus: a car door slamming, Sabine's shrill two-fingered whistle to call a renegade early drop-off student back to the library. Drew shivers and pulls back just enough to take a huge, rasping breath, and then swallows Jesse back down, fumbling the too-tight button and zipper on his own pants open, just to get some *room*.

"Then." Jesse licks his lips, drops his voice. "I--I could fuck your mouth some more, if your throat doesn't hurt too much--'m not hurting you, am I?" Drew manages to get his right hand up to give Jesse a tiny dissenting wave; his left hand is busy. "No, Jesus, fuck, I--God, look at you. God. I could watch you jerk yourself off all day, Jesus. Maybe I will, maybe tomorrow I'll--I'll--shit, no, tomorrow we'll probably be hauling all of Naomi's baby crap over to the house, and I have like nine years of papers to grade--why, why are you stopping, why are you laughing?"

"Nothing," Drew says, gasping for air. His chest feels too tight, too full, almost bursting. He rubs his face on Jesse's hip and says, "Nothing, keep going," and then draws him back into his mouth.

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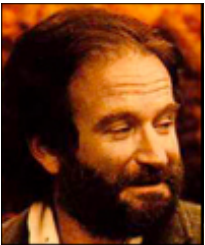
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