

[Cover description: a photo collage, with the environment depicted in photos with the figures black-and-white paper dolls cut out and put on top. Most of the cover shows a Treehouse waterfall and forest, which is where M.D. is standing, while Raige and Thomas are in a large heart-shaped portal showing graffitied rocks and a Southwest setting. Raige stands in the middle grinning while Thomas and M.D. kiss his cheeks.]

Infinity Smashed: Hearts Sparks Beat
by LB Lee

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THE CAST

M.D.: a brown-skinned androgyne with sharp, angular features. She's dressed in a jumpsuit with latex gloves and a surgical mask, and holding a large, angry maggot that's vomiting black goop into her face. First person narrator.

Lives: USA (past), UDC (past), Treehouse (present).

Jobs: property (crossed out), hoodrat (crossed out), junior healer.

Thomas Rodriguez: a handsome boy with dark hair and golden complexion, making a total lecher smile and finger-guns. He wears a UT football jersey. Temp worker extraordinaire.

Lives: Mexico, Texas, Treehouse.

Loves: His family, his life, the ladies, you.

Raige Unnigrutt: a gangling, geeky white boy with shaggy red hair and freckles. He wears headphones and twirls drumsticks while reading a book entitled *Happy Zappy*.

Lives: Arizona.

Jobs: ○.

Likes: music, fanfic, romantic sf/f

Biff MacGilligan: a short, stocky brown man in a baseball cap, vest, and sleeveless shirt. He's pulling his vest tight and looks as though he's been caught unawares. He has sideburns, a curly ponytail, and a cigarette. Man of many closets.

Lives: Arizona

Jobs: illegal.

Likes: ???

THE ACE OF HEARTS

It took three weeks to say and five minutes to explode.

As per tradition, Raige took M.D. to Tarzan's Pizza for a medium Jane with pepperoni. No more stalling, he told himself. It was time to tell her, for real this time: he liked her as more than friends, she didn't need to do anything about it, and it'd be great if they could stay friends with that understanding.

Short. Simple. Terrifying.

For any musical performance, Raige had been taught to rehearse all the way up until the day of the event, and then stop. Otherwise he'd just psych himself out and freeze up. Raige had always heeded this advice when it came to music, and he intended to heed it with M.D., but the moment he saw her, before he could stop himself, he rehearsed the words. And then, during the drive to Tarzan's, he went over them again, picking them apart. They made the order, and he did it again, and again as they paid and got cups for the drinks. Suddenly all the words seemed trite, stupid, or manipulative, and so did everything else he could think to say.

M.D. carried the steaming pan of pizza to their table, plopped it down, then sat and pulled off her gloves so the grease wouldn't get on them. "What's the face for?" she asked. "College admissions stuff?"

He just stared at her in dread.

Watching his face curiously, M.D. excavated the first slice, trailing thick ribbons of melted cheese and bits of onion and

green pepper. "Or UIL or something?" she ventured.

Raige just sat there.

After giving him a moment, M.D. raised an eyebrow at him and grunted inquiringly around her mouthful of cheese.

Raige cudged his brain for something, anything to say, and got: "I've been seeing the previews for the next Harry Potter movie and I hate how they're making Hermione Granger's hair different." He wanted to smack himself. "What do you think?"

M.D. gave him an incredulous look, but she played along. "Uh, okay. What's the deal with her hair again?" And they had a perfectly nice conversation about the fashion sense of Hermione Granger, which was great but *not* what Raige wanted to talk about.

He tried again halfway through the pizza, but then M.D. went, "hold that thought, surprise plumbing inspection," and darted off to the bathroom, and by the time she got back, it seemed way too awkward to push, and...

And now M.D. was scooping out the last slice, it was almost time to go, and he'd completely frozen up. Again.

He knew he couldn't keep this up forever. Hiding his feelings from a friend was hard enough, but hiding it from a psychic, even one as untrained as M.D., was just begging for disaster. What was he going to do, just try to never, ever touch her in any way for the rest of his life, for fear what his thoughts would give away? If he didn't tell her, it was statistically inevitable that she would find out in the worst possible way at the worst possible time. He'd already had that happen once; no need to repeat it.

"Hey, M.D.?"

She seemed completely wrapped up in trying to get as

much cheese into her mouth as possible. “Mflrgh?”

[illustration description: Raige and M.D. eating pizza at a booth in Tarzan’s, with a solid oaken table. M.D. is happily chowing down on her pizza, while Raige is looking anxious. They are watched over by a pulpy pin-up of Tarzan in a loincloth.]

“I... I’ve still got feelings for you.” Oh thank god, now it’d be over. “I’m happy as your friend, and I want you to know that, but...” he shrugged apologetically. “You don’t have to do anything about it, but I felt like I’d rather... I don’t know. Let you know. Even if nothing happens. Because I don’t want this to go like the last time.”

They’d already had this conversation once before, years ago when their friendship was new. So Raige had figured she’d respond now the way she had then: with a burst of indignant, freaked-out verbiage, and then a hasty exit. Like a squid, but with words instead of ink.

But this time, she just swallowed her cheese, put her slice down, and looked sad. Resigned.

Raige’s heart about stopped. His panic brain started gibbering that he’d screwed this up, he’d ruined everything, she was never going to want to be around him again, backpedal, *backpedal*—

“Look, when I said I was happy with this, I was serious,” he said quickly. “I won’t—”

“I know you won’t,” she said. “That’s not the problem. The problem is, I apparently *am* capable of romantic feelings, and now I have to actually *do* something about them.” She rubbed her face tiredly. “Thanks a lot, jerk.”

Raige didn't know his emotions could 180 so fast twice.

"Wait, really? That's... that's really great, actually."

"No, it's not!" she said, slamming her fist to the table. "This is terrible! I'm asexual!"

"Yeah, I'm aware of that. So?"

"So, you're not."

Raige looked at her and spread his hands. "So...?"

"So, it'd never work."

"With all the things we've been through, *that* is what you're worried about? I mean, no offense, but I kind of followed you through three dimensions' worth of immigration problems, a couple really bad years, *and* the bears thing."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Never, but I mean, we remained friends through all that. I don't get why *this* should stop us."

"Look, I've been researching, all right? In case it... ever came up." She fidgeted a napkin between her fingers.

So she *had* thought about it. "They have books on this? Sheesh, I had to turn to the Internet..."

"They have books on everything, Raige. You just have to look hard enough for them and be willing to make librarians extremely uncomfortable. And—look, I can't do the, like, icky sex thing..."

"Yeah, I kind of figured on that." But he was exhilarated and he was grinning when he reached for his Mountain Dew. Who cared whether she said yes or no, she *liked* him and wasn't freaking out! Everything from this point was gravy. "But that's okay. I mean... we can do other stuff if you want..."

"No," and she held up a stern finger, "I can't do a

relationship either. Like I said, I've been doing research, and everything I've read says it'd be cruelly narcissistic of me to start a relationship with you when I could never fill your sexual needs."

Raige froze. "What?"

"Do you need it laid out with a sources cited page? I could work one up for you..."

"No, I mean—what the hell are these books you're reading?"

"Books on frigidity, impotence, and sexual disinterest. Really uplifting topic, let me tell you; my self-esteem has never been better. We're just not compatible, Raige. You're seventeen; you don't need a sexually defective partner—"

"Wait, wait, hold on—"

She just raised her volume. "—I'd rather stay friends with you than start something that's doomed to bitter failure and resentment—"

"—You're not—"

"—I drive a lot of people off, okay, I'm not losing one of the few people who've put up with me through the Crazy Years just because I can't boink them—"

"Will you please just fucking listen to me?"

A few people at the table across from them turned around in their chairs to stare, and Raige quailed behind his soda. But M.D. was listening now, because he never raised his voice, and so he kept talking, just at a much quieter volume.

"Okay, first of all, all that is just bullshit. Yes, I'm seventeen. So are you. I don't see what that's got to do with anything. And you're not... you're not defective. You're *not*. Damn it, you're my friend, I love you, and there's nothing wrong with

you.”

M.D. jolted as though he'd thrown the cold soda in her face. Then she avoided his eyes, tried to smirk it off. “Wow, you've got it bad.”

“Come on. You knew I loved you years ago. It's only the type that's changed. And I'm not going to curl up and die from... from sexual starvation, okay? It's not a big deal.”

“That's an admirable sentiment.” M.D. was back to looking tired and eating her final pizza slice. “Really. I appreciate it. But I don't believe you.”

Raige took a deep breath, counted to ten, and took a moment to think about all the things he liked about Tarzan's. The waitress knew his order by heart, the pizza was great, and the Centipede arcade machine still worked. There were faded Frank Frazetta prints on the walls, heavy oak furniture, superhero trading cards sealed into the tabletops, and tire treads burned into the floor by a drunk driver back in 2001. It was his favorite restaurant in the whole multiverse, and it would be a terrible shame if he were the one who got them thrown out by shouting.

Then he said as calmly as he could, “I don't need it.”

“Oh no, I'm not denying that. But I have a much harder time believing you don't *want* it.”

She gave him a hard stare, and Raige said nothing. There was nothing to say; of all of them, he'd always been the worst liar.

M.D. shrugged and gnawed on her pizza crust, and he saw it in her face, the resignation and grief. Like this was something she'd thought about ages ago and long since figured out and written off. “Right now, sure, you're in the throes of adolescent passion and it doesn't seem like a big deal. But what about after a

year? Two? Five? If we even make it that long. Don't get me wrong, I believe you'd try. You've always been nice like that. But eventually, I think it'd start wearing on you. Eventually, I think you'd want what most people want: a chance to divest yourself of your darn virginity."

Raige winced and coughed behind his hand. "Um. That's... actually kind of already been taken care of."

M.D. stopped chewing. "Really?"

"Uh. Yeah. Actually. Sort of."

"Sort of?" She squinted at him, and he could see her poring through her memory. "But... *when*? You never—" Her eyes went wide with horror. "Oh no. Tell me you didn't!"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific than that," Raige said dryly.

"The... the Wendy girl! You know!" She waved her pizza crust around like that would somehow explain it. "The girl with the anorexic black saxophone thingy!"

Raige rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Bass clarinet, kid, and that's really not a good use of the word—"

"Whatever! Tell me it wasn't her, the one with the saxophone, I will lose all respect for you—"

"No! Of course not! I'm not a dick!" Raige said, taking refuge behind his Mountain Dew. "Jesus, kid, we lasted like five seconds... she's my *friend*..."

"What was I supposed to think, I haven't heard about any other girl..."

"There wasn't one, okay? It was Thomas."

Silence. When he looked up, M.D. had a distant, deeply involved expression on her face, as though she was pondering the

mechanics of the universe. Raige waited for her verdict.

“Huh.” She apparently saw his hangdog expression, and gave him a comforting wave with the remains of the crust. “Don’t worry about it. At first I was going to be shocked, but in hindsight, not really. So when exactly did this happen? I mean, I realize I’m not the most observant person in the world, but the amount of time I’ve spent in your head...”

Raige hid his face in his hands. “You were distracted. That was when they were first trying you out as junior healer, you remember, you barely had time to eat and sleep—”

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “Jesus, Raige!”

“Look, I’m sorry, I should’ve been there for you—”

“What? No, not that, don’t be stupid! I just... expected you to put up a little more *resistance*; I thought it would’ve taken at least a year, during my mental ward period, but that was—sweet blue dirt marble, you’d barely known *me* a month then...”

“It was an accident!”

She stared at him. Propped her chin on her hand. Lifted her crust to her mouth. Chewed.

Raige let his shoulders fall. “Okay, fine, it wasn’t an accident.”

“I was going to say, that’s one heck of an accident...”

“He’s *persuasive*!”

“All right, that I’ll grant you. And he’s *parsecs* better than Wendy, at least you never—”

Raige held up his hands defensively. “Okay, okay, so I was a dick with Wendy. You really don’t need to remind me.”

“And you didn’t cough up for so long, I’m not sure whether I should be insulted—”

“Look,” Raige said from behind his hands. “It happened, and I decided not to do it again, all right? I wanted to just... forget about it, okay?”

M.D.’s eyes immediately sharpened. “Do I need to kill him? I can kill him for you.”

“No, no, he was fine,” Raige hastened to say. “He... he was a perfect gentleman about it. Honestly, I felt guilty, because I still liked you at the time, and even though I knew you didn’t like me, I didn’t feel right doing it, so...”

Out of his head, he realized that it sounded pretty ridiculous and M.D. was giving him an incredulous squint.

“...So I decided it was probably better I not get together with anyone till I got myself sorted out.” He shrugged. “And I didn’t tell you, because I wasn’t even sure how *I* felt about it, never mind how you might feel about it. And that’s probably why you never got it from my head, because I worked very hard to never think about it ever again.”

M.D. looked at him sidelong, but at least she seemed reassured. “Huh. Well, I have to admit, that makes a lot of the background noise in Thomas’s head make *way* more sense.”

“What do you mean?”

But M.D. shook her head. “That’s a conversation you’d be better off having with him. He probably didn’t *mean* for me to hear that stuff, never mind tell you about it.”

Raige nodded. M.D. went involuntarily telepathic with just about anyone who touched her, unless electrical conductors muddled the business. It made privacy complicated, and over the years, she had gotten more diligent about keeping her mouth shut on the stuff she overheard. On the one hand, he appreciated it,

but now he found himself wondering. And squirming, a little. Not because the idea of Thomas thinking about him felt bad, but because it felt good, and he was trying to move past all that.

M.D. was still sitting there, looking at him as though she was making some radical adjustments to her mental image of him, but she didn't seem upset. On the whole, Raige had to admit she was taking it pretty well. He'd expected at least one explosion, but—

Her eyes lit up. "Have you considered dating him instead?"
Goddamn it.

"M.D., I asked you. Not him."

"You like him, don't you? You're still attracted to him, right?"

Raige felt his cheeks burn. "Hey, well, I mean..."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Come on, he'd be so much better. He's sane, normal, plenty sexual—"

"And, need I remind you, not the one I'm asking."

"Yeah. You sure you thought this through? I mean, come on, from where I'm standing, he seems a much better candidate than I am. I'm a mess, Raige. Thomas is so much more stable, and so much more experienced with this kind of thing, plus his immigration status is *pristine*."

"And I didn't ask him to date me," Raige said through his teeth. "I asked *you*."

"Why?"

Raige went blank. "What?"

"Why are you asking me instead of him? You haven't actually said, and honestly, I'm getting a little worried because in my experience, if you're avoiding something so hard that it's

censored out of your own head... are you *sure* nothing bad happened?"

Raige suddenly felt like a dick. Oh god. Of course she was worried. More than anyone, she knew the dangers of blocking things out. And he wanted to reassure her... but he also didn't want to look too hard at the box he'd shoved his feelings about Thomas into.

So he squirmed, drummed his fingers on the table, and said, "Thomas was fine."

No, the problem wasn't Thomas. He'd been perfectly nice from start to finish—maybe a lot more overtly flirtatious than he would've dared be to a guy in the States, but not in a bad way. He'd invited Raige back to his place, Raige had taken him up on it, things had gotten, well... and then Raige had freaked out and ended up crying all over him.

And he still wasn't even sure *why*. At least with M.D., they would never have sex, so that wouldn't be a problem.

But she was pushing her plate away from her. "Look, I don't know what happened or what's going on with you, but no way am I dating you just so you can avoid dealing with *him*. Seriously, what are you so twisted up about? People have been giving you grief about being gay for ages, you seemed calm about that—"

"No! It's not—goddamn it, M.D.! It's not like that!"

"Well, then what is it?"

"*I'm only supposed to like one person at a time!*" Raige shouted.

"Oh please, and you think *my* reasons are bunk—"

"Is everything okay here?" The waitress had appeared.

Raige didn't realize how loud they'd gotten, but now he

noticed that all of Tarzan's was studiously ignoring them. His face burned and he shrunk in his seat.

M.D. didn't appear to notice—or maybe she did and just didn't care. She just glared at the waitress and snapped, "No, go away."

Admittedly, Raige kind of wanted to say that too, but he swallowed, regained himself, and forced his volume down. "Yes. Sorry, we'll quiet down." He gave the waitress an apologetic smile, and she looked uneasy but left. Then, to M.D., he said, "we should take this outside."

She deflated. "Yeah."

The time it took for M.D. to get her gloves back on, Raige to leave a big (apologetic) tip, and the both of them to hurry outside helped calm them down. That March had been unusually cool for Vaygo, enough to be outside, so they went next door to sit on the bench under the awning of Videos of Barsoom.

"I'm sorry," Raige said. "Usually I don't get mad like that. If I'm honest, I kind of freaked out when me and Thomas did stuff, I don't know why, and I don't like thinking about it. I guess I thought maybe if I was with someone else, I wouldn't have to."

He didn't like admitting it, but M.D. didn't seem hurt. "Did that work with Wendy?"

"No."

"Then I doubt it'd work with me," she replied. "And I'm sorry too. I guess I thought if I never stayed with anybody, at least I wouldn't have to worry about screwing it up. You could just get with someone else and all my problems would be solved."

"Did that work with Wendy?" Raige asked, smiling. She made a sour face. "No."

They sat on the bench for a while. M.D. pulled her knees up and rested her chin on them.

"I'm doing this all wrong," she said. "I've seen the movies. When the boy you like asks you out, you're supposed to just say *yes* and not ruin the moment."

"Like I keep saying, I'm not asking them, I'm asking you," Raige replied. "Though I admit, a little enthusiasm wouldn't have upset me."

They sat there for a while, watching the traffic zip back and forth. Then M.D.'s head jerked up.

"Wait, no, we're both being stupid." She looked at him. "Is there any reason you couldn't date both of us?"

Raige's understanding of reality imploded. "What?"

"Don't play deaf."

"But... I can't do that! It's not—"

"Say 'normal' and I swear to god I will hit you."

"I was going to say it's not *ethical*," Raige said. "Give me some credit."

"Why?"

"I mean... it's not fair if I'm dating two people and you're not!"

M.D. shrugged. "Wouldn't bother me."

"Seriously?"

"Thomas is my friend. I approve of him. Not only that, he is way more together than I am. Between the two of you, you just might balance my chaos out, and frankly, I think we'd be more stable with him than without him. If anything, I don't know how I'd be able to live up to him, if he's as good as he says he is. Is he?"

Raige flushed and looked away. "Uh..."

“Oh good. I was going to say, that level of self-delusion would’ve been a concern. Come on, Raige, for all you know, he won’t *want* to date you, so it’s a moot point anyway!”

Raige looked at her. “You really are okay with this?”

She glanced up and her look softened. She pulled the Velcro on one of her gloves, tugged it off, and held out her bare hand, covered in old scars. “Want me to prove it?” she asked.

Raige hesitated. Then he took her hand, and their fingers and minds interwove.

Not long after he and M.D. had first met, he had found himself plummeting through free-fall with her. This felt like that, only instead of the deafening white noise of air rushing by, it was the symphonic roar of their own souls. And her grip was even stronger now than it had been then, and as they spun, wrapped in their own emotional orchestra, it was exhilarating, rather than terrifying. Raige had had this with her before, and sometimes there were issues with interpretation, but emotion always came through just fine. She was terrified, but she loved him with fierce, ragged determination, and that was beautiful.

For an eternal moment, their minds were closer than bodies could ever allow. Then M.D. jerked back, and they were separate again, back on a bench downtown in front of the pizzeria and the movie store. He couldn’t read her expression before she hid it in her hands.

“God,” she whispered. “That felt better than I thought it would be.”

Still stunned, Raige sat on the bench and watched traffic until he was sure he was back in himself. The sun was starting to go down; M.D. would have to leave soon if she wanted to get

enough sleep before work.

"We don't have to," he said.

"Yeah," she said, raising her head. Her face was full of longing. "Even though we want to. We could just stay friends. Never have to worry about this stuff."

"But we'd always know."

"Yeah."

"And we'd still want to try."

"Yeah."

Silence. Then M.D. said, "We're going to have to tell Thomas about this, aren't we?"

"Yup."

She slumped over the back of the bench with a whining moan. "Ugh, and he's going to be so *smug* about it too."

He knew he shouldn't, but Raige cracked up laughing. M.D. made a vague kicking motion at him, but couldn't really put much oomph behind it while flopped over half the bench.

"You are such a jerk," she said.

"I love you."

She paused, then sighed like it hurt. "Oh god. We're going to do this, aren't we? We're dating now, aren't we?"

Raige took one of her hands, the one that still had the glove on it, and kissed the knuckles, and he saw her face and that was the end of it. They were moving on to the next adventure.

And it felt just as terrifying as all the other adventures, but that was okay. So far, M.D. had yet to take him on an adventure he regretted.

FOLIE À TROIS

Raige and M.D. invited Thomas out for pizza on Friday, and they couldn't have been more obvious if they'd tried. Raige's cheeks were red and he kept tugging at his hair and looking at M.D. as though hoping she would say something, and M.D. kept fidgeting and giving Raige the stink-eye as though expecting *him* to say something. They thought they were being subtle but they really weren't, and after they'd made it through half a Carnivore Special without saying anything real, just flagrant bullshit about Raige's favorite Austin yodeler and M.D.'s new book on the composting of human manure, Thomas finally decided to put them out of their socially inept misery.

"Okay, you know what, I know. Y'all hooked up. Y'all're trying to tell me, and y'all're doing a really crappy job, because y'all think I'm going to make fun of y'all. And you know what, I will, I really will, but not on y'all's first day." He smiled sagely and put his arms around their shoulders. "Y'all's first day, I congratulate y'all, buy y'all ice cream, and go *Jesus Christ, took y'all long enough!*"

Raige winced and slunk down in the booth until he was barely taller than Thomas. M.D. made a face and crossed her arms.

"And it took you half a large to let us off the hook?" she said. "Some friend you are."

"I was having fun watching you squirm," Thomas said, but he was lying. He just hadn't wanted to admit that he, Sex Incarnate, was now the third wheel. "Because y'all're both

hilarious. So, Raige,” he snapped his fingers, “hand it over.”

M.D. blinked at Raige, who went flaming scarlet, cleared his throat, and said, “Uh, actually, I kissed her. So um...”

“Seriously? Jesus!” But Thomas wasn’t a sore loser, so he pulled his wallet out and handed over a five. “God, I thought you’d die of old age before you had the guts to try...”

“You knew? You *bet* on it?” M.D. shrieked. Her skin tone didn’t let her go red, but her voice was hitting that distinctive squawking range of true M.D. mortification. And he wasn’t even *trying*.

“I didn’t think it’d ever actually happen!” Raige protested, trying to wave away the five. “He insisted! I figured he’d forget about it.”

“Raige, my man, I forget a lot of things. The tenth president, the quadratic equation, my aunt’s birthday. I don’t forget the important stuff. And take the five, I got a new job over at Tio’s for the moving season.”

“If he doesn’t want it, I’ll take it,” M.D. said. “All my wages are currently in Treehouse form, good luck converting that...”

“Hey, I never made *any* bets with you,” Thomas retorted. “I know better. You cheat.”

“Lies and heresy! Cheating implies I get *caught*.”

“If you’re really that determined to give me five dollars, use it to buy the ice cream,” Raige interrupted, and that satisfied everyone.

They finished their Carnivore Special, paid the bill, and then headed over to Take Your Licks to get their cones, which they ate on the subway overpass, watching the trains and people rush by. The heat had come on with a vengeance, and M.D. was the

only one to finish her cone before it turned into a melted mess, though she gave herself two ice cream headaches in the process.

"You mock my eating habits," she said, clutching her temples, "but they are mere evidence of my evolutionary superiority."

"Yeah right," Thomas said, catching a drip off his cone. "You just eat like that 'cause you were raised by wolves."

The ribbing was halfhearted. Sure, he and Raige had horsed around a bit in the past, but he'd always known in his gut that if M.D. ever got over her own social awkwardness enough to ask him out, Raige would be gone in a heartbeat. And Thomas knew how these things worked, especially for people who hadn't dated much before: once they started, they forgot everyone else existed for a while, and nothing was really ever the same afterward. Either they stayed together, in which case they now had their special couple land where their friends couldn't follow, or they broke up, in which case there was tears and fighting. Whichever happened, the friend triangle was over.

And he was odd man out.

He'd known this would happen, had always figured easy come easy go, he'd take it in stride like he did everything else, but still. He'd miss them.

He was so busy trying not to be sad that he didn't notice that M.D. and Raige weren't hanging all over each other, but instead, were on either side of him, Raige leaning on the overpass railing, M.D. sitting on it with her legs hooked under.

"It's funny," she said, flicking a cone crumb to a pigeon. "You're Mr. Charm and Schmaltz, bragging all the time about how everybody wants you, but you've been single the whole time I've

known you.”

“Single, but not lonely. I’m a playa, baby.”

“Sure, whatever, Casanova.”

Thomas shrugged and sighed. “Aw, you know, after Treehouse, it’s hard finding someone who gets it. It’s not as bad as it was when I was still in school, but still, we’re not on the same page anymore, you know? They’re all thinking about college and stuff, and no way am I going to go, not now. I don’t know what I’d *do*, and I’ve worked so long now, I’m having a hard time doing the whole school thing again. The GED was hard enough.”

Raige cleared his throat. He was turning red again. “Hey, uh, Thomas?”

“Yeah?”

“M.D. and me? That’s... only *half* the news.”

“Yeah?” Thomas felt a sinking sensation in his gut. They weren’t getting married or doing something crazy, were they? “What’s going on?”

Raige and M.D. gave each other uncomfortable looks over Thomas’s shoulder, than gave him pathetic, hopeful smiles as though asking for him to read their minds again.

“Sorry, guys, I’m not psychic. Y’all’re going to have to tell me this time.”

“You know I’m asexual, right?” M.D. said.

“Well, yeah.”

“You realize Raige isn’t, right?”

“Yeah...” Honestly, he’d kind of figured that once they got together, M.D. would change her mind, or Raige would, or something. But apparently not.

“I’m telepathic at physical contact, so presumably I can feel

sexual pleasure by proxy, but that doesn't mean I particularly want to—and I tend to lose contact with my body during that sort of thing anyway if I'm not careful, so—"

"I know how your stuff works, babe." She was sliding into Science Talk again, which was another M.D. sign of mortification; something was up.

Raige took over, though he talked like he was hoping he wouldn't stutter if he blurted it out fast enough. "I like you a lot, and she likes you a lot, and if you're okay with it we wanted to know if you wanted to be with us." Then he buried his hand in his hair, curled over the railing, and started to hyperventilate.

"Yeah, that basically," M.D. said, reaching over Thomas to pat Raige on the back. "Thank you for doing that; I really didn't want to open my brains to him too..."

Thomas didn't say anything; he was busy thinking everything over, enough that he didn't notice his ice cream going to ruin. "So... like a threesome thing?"

M.D. rolled her eyes. "Fine, flatten it all to sex—"

"No, no! I just... I don't know any other word for it."

"Ménage à trois?" Raige suggested.

"More like folie à trois," M.D. muttered.

"No parle Français, okay? And no, I didn't just mean sex, though now that you mention it..." He gave them questioning looks.

M.D. made a face like a fourth-grader discovering porn for the first time. "Ew..."

"Ouch," Thomas told her, though part of him was relieved.

"Seriously, did you miss the whole 'asexual' part of the conversation, I thought I explained this to you ages ago—"

"Maybe," Raige squeaked.

They looked at him with surprise. Raige just avoided looking at either of them and took deep interest in licking vanilla off his fingers, which was all the more distracting because he had no idea how distracting it was. Then he shrugged and continued, in the high pitch he'd only started being able to maintain a couple weeks ago, "I, uh, I could be okay with that."

Thomas grinned and patted him on the back. "Flattered."

"This," M.D. said, crossing her arms, "is obviously going to require more discussion than I thought."

Thomas glanced at Raige, who was obviously trying not to hyperventilate, and M.D., looking huffy and in over her head.

"This is *killing* y'all, isn't it? I'm sorry I didn't drag it out longer."

"Look, my planning skills are limited to surviving mayhem and eluding various agencies of *la migra intergalactica*," M.D. said, settling deeper into her self-defensive sulk. "Pardon me for not having everything laid out yet. I'm still figuring out this sexual behavior concept, and whether I want anything to do with it."

"I can help with that," Thomas volunteered, and she rolled her eyes, while Raige laughed behind his hand. Well, if he could make them laugh, that meant that they were still friends, at least.

M.D. wrinkled her nose at both of them. "When I pondered my future, I didn't exactly ponder this. All I know is, me and Raige are happy when it's the two of us. But we're happier when it's the three of us. We're still figuring out what it all means."

Thomas glanced back and forth at them and ate his ice cream for an excuse to buy some thinking time. He had no doubt they were serious; M.D. was acting like she didn't care in the way

that meant she totally did, and Raige was obviously trying not to have a heart attack of embarrassment. As uncomfortable as they both were, he was surprised they'd managed to even tell him. Surprised, and a little flattered.

Just to see what'd happen, he ran his tongue over the last of his ice cream. M.D. didn't appear to notice, which was usual, but Raige turned a deeper shade of scarlet and hastily looked away. Which was gratifying.

[illustration description: Inked illustration of M.D., Thomas, and Raige by the subway railing. M.D. and Raige are trying to invite Thomas into the relationship while having enough social awkwardness to sink five. Thomas is looking suspiciously at them as he eats his ice cream. Raige is blushing and looking away, while M.D. has a face like someone faced with a final they haven't studied for.]

"Y'all have been doing some serious talking, huh?" Thomas asked.

"Duh. We already have one dimension and three government agencies between us, not to mention the obnoxious time zone difference and Raige's dad hating me like Hansen's Disease," M.D. said.

"He doesn't hate you," Raige emphasized. "He's just... afraid you'll abduct me again."

"What the heck, I didn't abduct you! You came of your own free will!"

"I would *hope* so," Thomas said.

Raige looked like he was dying; M.D. staunchly ignored them both.

"There are numerous logistical issues to take into account,"

she continued, tenting her gloved fingers, “and that was *before* the topic of you and your dubious sense of humor, which is still not funny by the way, even came up. You can’t just jump into a relationship like that.”

Thomas wasn’t impressed by the Mr. Spock act. “How long did it take before you stopped freaking out?”

She scowled. “Who cares?” And then she started poking him in the side. “So? Well? What’s the verdict?”

“Don’t rush him,” Raige scolded. “We had a whole week to talk this over; give him a second.”

M.D. shrugged. “Yeah, but he’s more well-adjusted than we are. He lords his sexual liberation over us all the frogging time; I’m ready to watch him walk his talk. Anyway, his quiet’s giving me the creeps. He’s only made one sex joke since we told him.”

Thomas laughed and wrapped an arm around each of them. “Hey, give me some time to bask, huh? I’m a popular guy, but this is the first time I’ve been propositioned for a space threesome.”

“Folie à trois,” M.D. corrected.

“No habla Français, babe. Give me a minute here.”

“Well, uh, if you want,” Raige said, “it is the weekend, and I’ve got movies at my house, so if you want to bask with company...”

Thomas grinned. “I could go for that.”

It seemed their friend triangle of coolness wasn’t broken after all.

COMING OUT STORIES

I. THOMAS'S FAMILY

It'd barely been one pizza date before Thomas sat Raige and M.D. down to talk about his plan. (One nice thing about Tarzan's was, nobody went there that Raige, Thomas, or M.D. knew, outside of each other. The only safer place to discuss sensitive topics would've been a confessional.)

"You're going to tell your family?" Raige's eyes were wide. "Wow..."

"Yup."

"Jeez, Thomas, I mean, good luck, I can't *imagine* telling mine..."

M.D. didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. Her crossed arms and curled upper lip said everything.

"You know, there *is* such a thing as a decent family," Thomas said to her, nettled. "Just because y'all's are freaking insane—"

"My dad isn't—" Raige started.

M.D. and Thomas gave him a look, and he subsided with a wince and hunched shoulders.

"So what's brought this on?" M.D. asked.

"What do you mean, what's brought it on?" Thomas asked. "This isn't new. Something happens with me, I tell my folks. We've been together just long enough for me to be sure it's going to stick for a bit, and it'll drive me nuts not flirting or talking

about it. That's not weird, is it?"

Raige only hunched his shoulders even more and gave an apologetic (and panicked) grin. "I... was kind of hoping to let it slide until maybe I'm out of the house..."

Thomas waved a hand. "Not you, man, I get that. But babe, you? You've got no reason to hide it."

M.D. looked wry. "I haven't seen One in years, thank god, and she doesn't approve of either of you."

Thomas didn't even want to *think* about the kind of people M.D.'s sister would approve of. Ted Bundy, maybe. "Screw Number One, I mean your *real* family. Scorch and Flame and... uh..." He tried to think of someone else.

"Biff?" Raige supplied helpfully.

"No, screw Biff, don't tell Biff."

M.D. rolled her eyes. "I'll tell them eventually, I just hadn't figured out how to bring it up. It doesn't exactly come up in casual conversation: 'so how's it going? Have I mentioned I'm urinating on all the family values of America today?' Anyway, why are you telling us? Surely you're not asking our permission."

"Nah, nah. It's just, my folks're great, but..." Thomas shrugged. "Having a back-up never killed anyone, you know?"

Raige bit his lip and tugged at his bangs. "Hey, you know, if there's any problem..."

"There won't be, there won't be," Thomas said quickly.

"They know y'all, they like y'all. It shouldn't be a problem."

They sat in silence for a moment.

Then Thomas grimaced and said, "But just in case there is a problem, kid, you think Treehouse still got a place for me?"

"Sure, you can stay with me, or any of your old buddies,"

M.D. assured him. "You should come visit anyway; the rumor mill misses you."

Raige was still fretting with his hair. "You sure it'll be okay? Because, you know, you can stay with me too..."

"Dude, you're freaked out enough about your dad. No offense, but I'd rather not cause you any extra stress, even if y'all *do* have indoor plumbing. But don't worry. Like I said, won't be no problem."

Surely it was true. Raige was just antsy because he was worried about coming out to his dad and it was splashing on everything else, and M.D. was cynical because she grew up so rough that going feral was a step up. (Having One for a sister was bad enough, but foster care had apparently done its best to outdo her.)

But Thomas's family wasn't like that. His family was cool, unshakable. They were tight, even after he'd been missing for a year and a half off-world. That'd shake anybody, but they'd taken him back in as smoothly as anyone could expect under the circumstances. When he'd been struggling in school afterward, a year behind (two, if Raige hadn't tutored him), they'd backed him up while at the same time making sure he got his GED. After all that, surely they'd be okay with him having a boyfriend and a girlfriend at the same time. That was nothing.

But still. You heard horror stories...

He shoved the niggling worry back. See, this was why he needed to get it over with. The longer he waited, the more he'd make it into a big deal.

He was in luck; his older brother Marcus was finishing his tour of duty in a couple weeks, so Thomas put his head down and

clocked in some overtime to keep himself busy till then, especially since he knew it'd take a while for Marcus to unwind. Finally, everything came together: Marcus was rested up, Christopher tore himself away from his Xbox, Ma wasn't on the beat, and Papi came home from work early so everyone could have dinner together. This was a rare event, so Thomas took advantage of it. Right after dinner, before any of them could find something else they needed to do, he said they had to talk.

Christopher whined about it, of course, because he wanted to go play more Halo, but Ma gave him a look and he shut up. They all went into the living room and made themselves comfortable, Papi in his recliner, Ma, Marcus, and Christopher on the couch. Everyone was fidgeting, looking nervous. Thomas had always been the clown of the family; the last time he'd called everyone in, it was to talk about quitting school, and Marcus hadn't been there for that one.

Thomas figured he might as well come clean right off, before their imaginations got them too worried. "I'm dating M.D. and Raige now. Thought y'all'd want to know. Any questions?"

For a few seconds, there was flabbergasted silence. Then Papi slumped against the armchair, clutched his chest, and said, "Ai, mijó, don't do that. That look on your face, I thought you were sick with cancer or..."

"I was guessing pregnancy, myself," Marcus admitted.

"He wouldn't have waited till you came in for that," Ma scoffed, but then she squinted at him suspiciously. "You haven't, have you?"

"Ma!"

"Because I know you, mijó, and I taught you better than

that. I don't want you caught with your pants down and someone in trouble just because—"

"Ma! Nobody's pregnant—none of us can even *get* pregnant—"

"That's no reason to get cocky. That M.D. girl works with sick people all day," Ma warned. "Y'all make sure you play safe and clean."

"Just because she's a super-soldier from another dimension doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful, mijo," his father said gravely. "Her body chemistry might interact very badly with yours."

The whole time, Marcus looked like he'd been choking down laughter, but that made him crack up good and proper. "I love this family," he declared. "I tell y'all, when I'm done with the service, I'm moving right back down here..."

Christopher had been sitting there, stiff as a post, but now he jumped to his feet, nostrils flared and fists clenched. "Will y'all stop acting like this is normal? The hell is wrong with you, bro? Bad enough you vanished for a couple years, people *still* haven't let me forget that, no, now you're... I don't even *know* what you're doing."

Thomas leered. "Do you really want to know?"

"No! Stop acting like it's some big joke!" And he got up and stomped out. Nobody stopped him.

Marcus straightened up, and his face was serious again. "Hey, don't listen to Christopher, he's fifteen. Let him cool off and calm down, you know how he gets."

"Yeah, I know," Thomas said, trying to play at being casual. Christopher had freaked out after he'd come home again too. "No

big deal.”

Apparently Marcus could still tell he was a bit rattled, because he leaned over and shook Thomas's hand, then pulled him in for a manly hug and thump on the back. “Congratulations, bro.”

Thomas felt his shoulders relax. “Thanks, man.” He thumped Marcus back.

Ma and Papi stayed quiet. Ma had her arms crossed and brow furrowed, lips thin; she looked worried. Papi was more composed, but he rarely ever looked upset. Thomas waited and tried to look as calm as his father. No big deal, he told himself. If they took it bad (and they *wouldn't*), he could crash in Treehouse for a while, go back to the labor pool. Nothing he hadn't done before, nothing to lose, nothing to worry over. Everything would turn out okay in the end; it always did. Life loved Thomas too much to give him something he couldn't handle.

He sat down on the spot Christopher had vacated on the couch, bracing his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands so nobody would notice they were shaking.

Then Papi got up and hugged him with a warm smile, and his mother sighed and says, “You always were the maverick in the family. So how exactly did this happen?”

And he knew everything would be fine.

...

A couple hours later, Thomas came to Christopher's bedroom door. It was shut tight, and he could hear the music and gunshot sounds of Halo through it.

Thomas knocked. “Hey, little man. You in?”

Silence for a while, until he thought that maybe Christopher was going to ignore him. Then, “yeah, whatever.”

Thomas came in. Christopher was sitting on his bed, Xbox controller in his hands. The reflected glow of the TV screen made the lenses of his glasses appear almost opaque.

Thomas leaned against the doorway. "Oh what, Halo's bigger than me now?"

With every air of reluctance, Christopher paused the game. "You gonna come give me crap now?"

"Nah," Thomas said. "You already know you acted like a turd."

Christopher glared at him, but it looked like he was blinking back tears behind his glasses. "You never *said*, man. You're freaking gay this whole time, and you never tell me? What the hell?"

"I'm not gay," Thomas said. "I'm bi. And it never came up before this."

"So... what? You need one of both to keep happy now?"

Thomas sighed and came over to sit next to Christopher on the bed. "No. Quit trying to wind me up. I didn't even ask them out, they asked me."

"What? At the same time?"

Thomas nodded.

"How does that even *work*?"

Thomas shrugged and shifted uncomfortably. He was the charmer, the smooth talker, but he was lousy for explanations. All he could think to say was, "I don't know, man. Sometimes you just get lucky."

"You've gotten weird, bro. Ever since you left and came back, you're different."

Thomas couldn't deny that. A year and a half off-world

would change anybody. The boundaries of life, what it could be, it all became so much *bigger*. That said... "Bro, I was bi before this. I just didn't figure myself out till I was gone a while. But that part of me didn't change. You just didn't know about it. I wasn't sure how big it was, until now."

That seemed to mollify Christopher a little. "Doesn't it freak you out? That maybe they do stuff without you?"

Thomas thought about the face M.D. made whenever anyone brought up sex, and how flustered and panicky Raige was. He snorted. "Nah. If they do, good for them. It's cool. It's all cool."

Christopher was silent for a while. "You should've told me," he said. "Jesus, man, I even *knew* something was up, you were looking like something was bugging you for ages, and here I thought it was just work and stuff, but no, you were hiding *this* from us."

"I wanted to wait till Marcus was back. Tell everybody together."

"Yeah, well, don't do that; you know Marcus is never here, we'll all be waiting forever. Jesus. Makes me feel like I don't count or something."

"I won't. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lock you out."

Christopher sniffed, then nodded a couple times.

"Okay. For that, I guess I'm okay with you being a pervert then."

"Oh, like that's anything new," Thomas retorted, and stole an Xbox controller.

[illustration description: Inked illustration of Thomas being group-hugged by his family after coming out. His mother

has a bun, a police uniform, and a worried but loving expression. His father is dressed like a homebody, and he's grinning, while Marcus, a big bear of a brother, seems to be laughing. Even Christopher is smiling, however uncertainly.]

II. SCORCH AND FLAME

Outside of Tarzan's Pizza, the safest place for Raige, Thomas, and M.D. to talk was Treehouse. Reptiles, bugs, and nightmare beasts cared about American social norms only as amusing topics of conversation, in the vein of, "can you *believe* what they do in *that* place?" So even though M.D.'s round underground room was dark, damp, and smaller than his bathroom, Raige found himself camping out there more and more, just so he could agonize in peace.

"Do you think I should?" he asked, again.

"No," M.D. said, again.

His hair was verging on Einsteinian from his agitated tugging. "It's just... he's telling his family, and you're going to tell Bobcat and everyone eventually, and here I am just sitting on it like I'm ashamed of you guys or something."

M.D. rolled her eyes and rested her gloved hand on Raige's shoulder. Latex, this time—she'd just gotten off work. "Raige, I *know* you're not ashamed of me. Thomas knows you're not ashamed of him. We're not upset, all right? You're not a coward; you just have this amazing instinct called self-preservation that warns you before you do something stupid."

But Raige didn't look reassured. "You're going to tell Biff. My dad, at least, probably isn't going to punch me."

M.D. shrugged. "I don't know why you seem so sure that punching is the worst thing someone can do to you, Raige. At least I'm not financially dependent on or sharing quarters with Biff. Also, I can electrocute him. Completely different."

Raige said nothing.

M.D. opened her mouth to try again when Thomas burst in, big grin on his face.

"They took it fine!" he crowed, and pumped his fist. "I'm out and in the clear, and y'all're invited for dinner so they can make sure y'all're good enough for me!"

M.D. looked at Raige, but he'd apparently shoved his anxiety aside and was smiling. "That's great, Thomas! I'm so glad to hear it!"

"Good job. Here." M.D. stood up and reached for one of the bags hanging from the root cage ceiling to dig out a pastry. She tossed it to Thomas, who effortlessly snatched it out of the air. "I got you a present to celebrate your successful expedition outside of the wardrobe. The honey sweets you always ask me to get for you."

Raige looked stricken. "Oh no, Thomas, I'm sorry, I didn't get you anything..."

Thomas just grinned and tackled them both. He, of course, could think of plenty of ways to celebrate.

M.D. squawked and hastily squirmed free. "Watch the skin, watch the skin!"

"Sorry, sorry."

"It's okay, just... not my thing." She reached for her shoes and started pulling them on.

Raige sat up. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. I just don't want to be involved in the physical stuff, no offense. But we're doing the big fall clean-out at dawn, so as long as you guys are done and cleaned up before too late, so I can get a full night's sleep..."

"I can be quick!" Thomas promised.

"Cool. Have fun!" And she waved and headed out.

It wasn't hard to keep busy for a couple hours. Had Treehouse been a nation, gossip would've been its national sport. Morbid curiosity aside, it was socially mandatory to keep a thumb on the pulse of the rumor mill, just to enforce social bonding and keep tabs. It was the only way such a ragtag group of dimensional derelicts could keep the whole place from falling apart. M.D. wandered around chatting with her neighbors for a bit, but kept Thomas's good news to herself; surely he'd want to share that himself.

As she walked around, she tried to decide if she was upset, weirded out, or something else. The compass needle wandered back and forth, but she was pretty sure she wasn't upset. Maybe a little grossed out? Not heartbroken, though.

When it was long dark and she started to get sleepy, she headed back to find Raige and Thomas fully dressed, curled up asleep together among the blankets.

"Wow," she snickered. "Already down for the count?" By Thomas and Raige's time zone, it must've been barely dinnertime.

Turned out Raige wasn't asleep; he made as though to sit up, only for Thomas to make a protest noise, so he waved instead and said, "I don't think he got much sleep, the last few days."

Thomas's eyes stayed closed, but he made a vague wave in M.D.'s direction. Then, blearily, "We didn't do nothing."

"Yes, yes, you're very considerate."

Raige looked embarrassed and gave her a shrug.

M.D. shrugged back. She still wasn't sure how she felt about it, but at least whatever she was feeling didn't seem to be

intense or bad. Just... different. "You guys can stay the night if you want, I'll put up my hammock..."

Thomas flailed blindly in her direction with one arm. "C'mere."

M.D. looked dubious.

"Not that. Hugs. If you want 'em."

After a moment, M.D. hesitantly stripped off her outer layers and got into bed wearing just her thermals and thick socks.

At first, it was weird. Being so close to anyone, even them, was hard. It'd taken her ages to get used to sleeping on a mattress at all, even a thin Treehouse sleeping pad, and now she was on one with *people*. Even though she knew and trusted them, part of her brain resisted turning off. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. She was supposed to sleep alone, back to the wall, arm through her backpack straps or knife under her pillow...

But as Thomas hugged her, making sleepy contented noises, his soul was all sunshine joy and relief, citrus and wine. It made everything in her go quiet, still, and sleepy—especially since Thomas conked out again almost instantly, leaving his mind quiet, soothing white noise. She found herself starting to relax.

Raige kept to his side of the mattress, carefully avoiding touching M.D.'s skin even though it meant he was barely on the sleeping pad. Once Thomas's breathing went deep and even, he gave M.D. a questioning look. She nodded, and he snuggled in, wrapping her up completely in boy.

Being awake, Raige's mind was clearer and more alert. M.D. could hear the ghost of the conversation he and Thomas had had—"you want to?" "I don't know." "That's cool." He was happy too, of course, glad that Thomas wasn't worried anymore, relieved that

everything had gone smoothly, but underneath all that was a nagging worry he was trying to ignore. He'd pulled off a pretty convincing performance, good enough to fool Thomas, anyway. But not M.D.

Raige sighed; she felt it against her hair. *"Sometimes I (don't really) wish you weren't psychic (but god it makes things easier),"* his mind said.

"(Jerk) dad, huh?" she thought back.

He was silent but she got her answer anyway.

M.D. rubbed her ungloved hand up and down his back, which caused her to receive a soft thrum of emotional pain. She hated being unable to do anything else. She'd saved his life a couple times, gotten him through so many adventures, but she couldn't fix this. It just wasn't right.

"Is this okay (the sleeping like this I mean)?/anxiety/what if it's not okay?" he asked.

"It's... hard," she admitted. *"But sort of nice. (Nice? nice.)"*

Normally, M.D. slept lightly, restlessly, waking up at the slightest disturbance and full of nightmares. But that night, she fell asleep wrapped up in the smells and textures of people who loved her, and though she woke up a few times, she always relaxed back to sleep and dreamed nothing at all.

Hours later, she woke up calm and deliciously lethargic to the sound of chirruping insects and the morning market above. One of her arms was sore from Raige lying on it, both boys were still asleep, and the warm morning sunbeams were slanting down from the skylight in the roof. For a moment, all was right with the world, and M.D. spared a moment to wonder whether doing this more regularly would cut her nightmares down to nothing.

[image description: Inked illustration of M.D., Thomas, and Raige all cuddled together in bed. Raige and Thomas wear boxer shorts and undershirts; M.D. wears a full sweatsuit, with the cuffs tucked into gloves and thick socks. They are cozy, sleeping, and happy.]

Wait. Sunlight? Morning market?

Rise-high shift. Scrubbing. *Late.*

She cried out in horror, yanked her arm out from under Raige's face, and crashed out of bed.

"No! No, no, no!" She scrambled into her work clothes and boots, tried to tie the laces, failed completely in her haste, and just left them undone.

Raige groaned and rolled over to pull the pillow over his head. Thomas just laughed at her, all loose and relaxed and smug as a canary-fed cat, and crooned, "Good morning, babe."

"You're a horrible person," she snarled, then raced out the door, cramming a dumpling in her mouth and tying her hair back with both hands.

She dashed up the tunnel, whipped around once she reached ground-level, and burst into the infirmary, stumbling over her shoelaces and trying to sign apologies with her mouth stuffed with dumpling.

"I'm so sorry, I got held up, it'll never happen again—" Exertion and eating at the same time were never a good idea; dumpling went down the wrong tube and she went into a fit of coughing.

Her bosses, Scorch and Flame, were staring at her. Scorch looked like a cross between a stegosaurus and a Komodo dragon, while Flame looked like a little red dragon the size of a buzzard.

Neither of their faces emoted in a human way, but M.D. had worked for them for two years, enough to recognize their body language. They looked... well, Scorch looked amused, but Flame looked satanically *gleeful*.

They knew.

"...You can smell them on me, can't you?" she signed.

Scorch chuckled, a raspy wheezing sound. "Are you happy, junior?" he signed innocently. "This is good news?"

"Well, yeah, I—*no*!" But it was too late.

Flame flapped to her highest perch and snapped out her wings, which M.D. had learned was a posture of melodramatic dominance and triumph, similar to the maniacal laugh of a James Bond villain. And that did it; M.D. was doomed. After years of careful dodging, they'd finally caught her.

Treehouse had very, very different ideas about gifts than the States. If one was wealthy, one gave gifts, constantly. To newcomers to town, to employees, to anyone not receiving the same fortune. Giving gifts was a social necessity, a way of emphasizing community among a bunch of dimensional castaways who needed every ounce of social glue available.

M.D. hated receiving gifts. They came with strings and hooks and obligations, and from the moment she'd been permanently hired, she'd practically had to beat off her bosses with a stick to keep them from drowning her in stuff. (After all, they were the healers! How could they be trusted with community health if they didn't demonstrate their own sense of community-mindedness with their own junior?) Scorch had taken it with fairly good humor, but Flame had taken it personally, and after lots of fights, M.D. had finally gotten through to her that where

she came from, gifts were for celebratory good times *only*.

She'd mostly said that to get them off her back, and she doubted they'd truly believed her. But Treehouse also had the social norm of tolerating other people's social norms, unless someone was getting hurt, so Flame hadn't been able to do much but grumble and wait for something to celebrate.

M.D. had done an excellent job of always finding reasons that good times weren't worthy of celebration. But now, for the first time since her permanent hire, something had happened to her that was so unambiguously wonderful that she had no way to wiggle out of her community obligations.

"Flame, boss, no—"

But Flame ignored her completely. Instead, she looked at Scorch, who stood placidly by, covered in cleaning gear. "This is a momentous occasion, is it not?" she asked.

"Most momentous," Scorch agreed.

"Our dearest, most beloved junior—"

"I'm your *only* junior, boss."

"—Most precious, practically our own hatchling, has found herself a mate—or two—worthy of her! Isn't that lovely?"

"Truly grand," Scorch agreed.

M.D. flailed her arms around and screeched, but Scorch and Flame didn't even look at her.

"This is a magnificent occasion! A glorious occasion! A fantastic, stupendous, marvelous occasion!" Flame declared. "And do you know what that means?"

"What does it mean, my sunbeam?"

M.D. howled, but they ignored that too.

"Gifts!" Scorch and Flame signed together. "Gifts, gifts,

gifts!"

They looked at her expectantly, Flame with an expression like Ahab if he'd finally bagged the white whale. Scorch was quivering all over with glee like a monstrous blob of dragon jelly.

M.D. sighed and crossed her arms. "Fine. Whatever. Do your worst, you wretched garden pests."

Scorch's laughter sounded like a cross between a foghorn and a vuvuzela. They left her to scrub down the practice while they made out their list.

III . BOBCAT

Treehouse time was five or six hours ahead of what Raige and Thomas were used to, which meant that they were just starting to talk about breakfast when M.D. came home from work, covered in filth and doddering under a gigantic basket of... stuff. Some of it looked like food, but the rest...

“What,” Raige asked, “is *that*?”

M.D. fixed them both with a baleful glare. “This,” she held up the basket and shook it, “is the equivalent of a wedding gift from Scorch and Flame. They think I’m mated to you guys now.”

Thomas snorted and buried his face in his forearms but remained silent. Raige kept his face straight and desperately searched for something neutral to say.

He finally settled on, “That’s, um. Very generous of them.”

Wrong choice. M.D. threw the basket down, glared daggers at him, and stomped off to change out of her stained work jumpsuit... which was just three paces in her tiny place, but still, she made those three steps count.

Raige looked helplessly at Thomas, who explained in carefully modulated tones, “Treehouse rules, man. Gifts are heavy duty. And you know how M.D. is. They’ve probably been waiting *years* to do this.”

“Dang right they have!” M.D. snarled, tearing off her latex gloves and tossing them in the scrap bucket. “This is just what they managed to surprise me with; they’re still making out their wish list. With my luck, they’re going to throw a frogging party for the whole town and try to bake me a cake made entirely of

meat products.”

“Come on, let’s not get hyperbolic...” Raige soothed.

“Remember that time they tried to do Christmas stockings? I had to *burn* those socks.”

“Okay yeah, the stockings were pretty bad. But still, they’re just trying to express their congratulations. This is good, they’re happy for you!”

“I thought you were holding off on telling them?” Thomas interrupted.

M.D. pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. “I didn’t tell them anything. They *smelled* you on me. By their sensory standard, I might as well have walked in covered in hickeys and with ‘Thomas and Raige were here’ spray-painted on me. I probably still smell like Axe body spray, thanks a lot, Thomas; at least Raige wears something subtle...”

Thomas snorted and went to check out the basket. “Wow, that sounds so hard. I can’t imagine how tough that must’ve been, them being all happy for you and giving you all this crap.”

“Yeah, if my dad tries to bake me a meat cake after I tell him, I’ll consider it a huge success,” Raige agreed, investigating the basket’s contents with curiosity. He barely recognized half of it.

“Apparently they approve of you,” M.D. said, pulling her final sweatshirt on over her head and snatching Raige’s green flannel (by that point, really it was hers) off a hook. “I think they’re relieved that something *good* is happening to me for once.”

“Aw, you hear that? She thinks we’re good,” Thomas said, digging through the basket and coming up with what looked like an old vacuum tube. “And what’s with all the gears and stuff?”

"I have no idea; they seem to be under the impression that those are the kind of things you give hominids when they start dating."

"Huh," Raige said, picking up a pair of spur gears and idly spinning them. "And you... didn't correct them?"

"No, I was too busy suffering apoplexy of shame."

"Aw, babe, don't be ashamed," Thomas crooned, patting her on the back of her shirt. "Shame is for other people."

M.D. rolled her eyes.

"Speaking of other people," Raige said, holding up his cell phone, "Bobcat called from the League."

"How the hell do you get League service out here?" Thomas complained. "I can't even walk across the kitchen without losing service, and that's *local*..."

"Apparently my dad picked the one cell phone provider that has some dealings with the League, and I guess the tracker satellites they put up also do some phone stuff. I'm kind of amazed it works, not that I can get calls from anyone *but* Bobcat out here..."

Buckling her belt back on, M.D. shoved past Thomas with a look of curiosity. "How is my old social worker, anyway?"

"Good. He hasn't heard from you since the hearing, just wanted to check in on how you're handling the transition, invited us over for tea. Said he had the afternoon free—er, by this time zone anyway." Raige shrugged and scratched the back of his head. "So... should we tell him?"

"We might as well get the humiliation over with," M.D. grumbled, grabbing her jaunt-watch from one of the belt's myriad pouches. "Now that my *employers* know my relationship status,

he's going to be offended if we don't tell him."

"Isn't it kind of a formality?" Raige asked as she fiddled with the watch. "I mean, he's telepathic; if he didn't know just from talking to me, he will the moment we walk in..."

"Good," M.D. growled, twisting a dial and grabbing their hands. "That'll make it easy."

Reality tore like tissue paper, and they went through the rip. There was the smell of burning plastic and a weird lurch as their atoms rearranged, and then they were in the bland off-white curving architecture of the Jaunter's League. The rip sealed itself up behind them.

Bobcat's office was obviously originally designed and built for someone of human size, but he'd customized it for a Cat++ over the years—at least, that was what Raige *assumed* all the ramps and scratch pads were for. And it turned out that indeed, telling Bobcat was completely unnecessary. When they came in, the furry social worker bolted down from his desk, tail high as his mood.

Oh, child, I'm so proud of you! he said, sitting at M.D.'s knees. *You're engaging in developmentally appropriate social relationships! This is such a milestone!*

M.D. scowled. Thomas grinned. Raige suppressed laughter and goes, "He's right, you know. This is the most normal thing you've ever done."

"We're the most normal things you've ever done," Thomas corrected. Even though technically, the doing hadn't started yet, but Thomas was never one to miss an opportunity.

M.D.'s lip curled but she otherwise ignored them and scratched Bobcat's ears, muttering, "Well, uh. I like them. I might

keep them around a while.”

Raige put one hand to his heart. Thomas faked a swoon. “I’ll break out the champagne.”

Bobcat pulled away from M.D.’s hands and planted himself in front of Thomas and Raige, mental voice abruptly serious. *Now, he said, I know exactly what your educational system is like on this matter, and I doubt it was at all helpful for this eventuality. So, before you do anything rash, obviously we need to have a serious conversation.*

Raige felt his grin vanish. M.D. looked as though she’d just been cornered in a church. Thomas was the only one who didn’t look too concerned.

“You’ve been planning this, haven’t you?” M.D. accused.

Bobcat’s whiskers twitched and his tail curled into a question mark. *Yes. Yes I have. Now sit down, I spent all day memorizing this speech and I’ll be deeply insulted if you don’t listen to it all...*

M.D. made a miserable squeaking sound.

...

An interminable time later, the three of them left Bobcat’s office laden with gloves, condoms, and items that could be loosely described as “books” but were clearly clumsily translated print-outs of digital works that Bobcat had bound together with clips and binders.

M.D. was uncharacteristically subdued. Raige’s shoulders were up around his ears and his face felt like it was on fire. Thomas was hysterical with laughter.

“Well,” Raige said finally. “That was... educational.”

M.D. shuddered. “Yes. Yes it was. Good to see that I didn’t miss out on the quintessential American experience of having the

Talk in humiliating detail.”

“Could’ve been worse,” Thomas wheezed from the floor.

“Could’ve been Biff.”

“Don’t even joke.”

“I had no idea Bobcat was so... knowledgeable,” Raige said.

“I guess he figured that he had to be, in my case,” M.D. replied. She eyed one of the books under her arm (*Practical Non-Monogamy: a Commonsense Guide*) and sighed with resignation. “Books. My great weakness. I’m going to be buried in these for weeks.”

“Uh. Can I borrow some of them?” Raige asked.

“Sure, you don’t think all of these were for me, do you?” She held up another, labeled *So You’re A Bisexual*, then started rearranging the stack to try and find others. “And I’m pretty sure this one about prostate stimulation is for you, since as far as I know, I don’t possess one...”

Raige felt his facial temperature go up another few degrees. “Er, that’s okay, let’s try for the... less terrifying stuff first.” He accepted the bisexual one, though, and hung on to *Telepathic Eroticism*.

“What if your dad finds them?”

Raige resisted a snort. “I’ll keep them on the shelf with the Mercedes Lackey and the paranormal romance and he’ll never notice. Here, what’s that purple one...”

There was some rapid swapping of books from the piles. Judging by the weird texture and dimensions of the pages they were printed on, Bobcat’s people had long since left the fine art of paper records behind. Some of the titles were impressively awful, maybe due to poor translation. Raige got a copy of *Asexual/Sexual*

Relations for the Optimistic and Perplexed while M.D. ended up with *Under Construction: Construct Sexual Theory* and some garish yellow thing entitled *Happy Zappy Electric Play*. Most of the covers were vaguely abstract, but *Happy Zappy* had an enormous cartoony lightning bolt with a smiley face on it.

[illustration description: A drawing of a black book, held together with binder clips, with the title of *Happy Zappy Electrical Play*. A bright yellow lightning bolt with a smiley face on it tops it off.]

Once they'd gotten themselves situated with a good stack of books each, there was still a remainder that neither of them were comfortable touching—either because it felt like advanced study (*Your Prenuptial Agreement and You*) or just embarrassed them too much (*101 Sex Toys You Can Make In Your Parents' Basement*).

“What about Thomas?” Raige asked.

They looked at Thomas, who beamed. M.D. looked back at Raige and said coolly, “What about him?”

They dumped all the unwanted volumes off on him. He took them with a thumbs-up.

IV. BIFF

We had to stop by my room to drop off all the Bobcat books, but I didn't plan to stay. The Treehouse gossip machine had done its work, and the moment we returned (at the jaunt-watch's auto-point, which was just outside the town wall), one of the guards waved their tentacles at me and signed, "Blessings upon your mating, all of you! Handsome Boy," that was Thomas, "I shall take you on the town, so we may celebrate in style!"

"You're the best, Jelly Legs!" Thomas signed back.

"Indeed! We shall have gifts, and I shall lovingly mock you, junior healer! I have been informed that your social norms have failed you, and now you have no protection against our joy."

Thomas grinned at me. I just scowled and told Jelly Legs to let me in.

From the gate to my place near town center, I got congratulated multiple times, and there wasn't really anything I could do about it. Flame had apparently made sure to tell everyone that my number was up; a pile of invitations, gifts, and IOUs were already heaped at my door. At least they weren't all for me; Thomas was still a citizen, after all, even if he didn't live in Treehouse anymore, and he was a popular guy.

I already had a sizable collection of biology, medicine, and botany texts in my room. The Bobcat books soon took residence next to them. The gifts I just scraped in with my feet; I'd have to sort them out later.

"Well, today has raised my humiliation tolerance a good few notches," I said, shoving the last of the mess in. "I might as

well finish ripping off the Band-Aid and do Biff now. He's the only one left, and I want to use his fridge anyway."

"I know you don't want to celebrate," Thomas said, "but that doesn't mean you have to get yourself punched in the face instead."

"At least he won't mock me." I went to dig the meat out of the basket from Scorch and Flame. If I was going to have an unpleasant conversation with Biff, I was going to bribe him with food first. "He was the top of my list, honestly. We spend too much time in each other's gray matter for him *not* to find out, and he's likely to take it less badly if I tell him."

"I notice you say 'less badly,' not 'well,'" Raige said.

I ignored him. "He'll rant and rave, hopefully *not* booze it out of his system, and that'll be that."

Raige fussed with his hair. "Look, do you want one of us to come with you, I don't want him to take it out on you..."

"No. I don't need help. I can always electrocute his sorry carcass, not that I think I'll need to."

"If he gives you *any* crap," Thomas said, uncharacteristically serious, "any at all, I swear to God..."

"Will you two quit worrying over my honor? It's really not necessary." I shouldered my backpack and pulled my jaunt-watch out of my pocket. "Stay home, sort the gift pile, and desecrate my bedroom; I'll be back later."

And I was off again.

Biff lived back in Vaygo, Arizona—though on the opposite end from Raige, both geographically and socially. While Raige lived up north in ritzy Oasis Valley, Biff lived on the south side in a dilapidated building that had been partially burned to the ground,

only to then be reclaimed by squatters. All of Biff's electricity came from extension cords that poked through holes in the walls and ceiling, the water that came from the faucet wasn't always potable, and his entire apartment was smaller than Raige's bedroom. I liked it.

Biff himself was in his mid-twenties, a short hairy fireplug of a man who was just as grumpy and disreputable as he looked. He was also hands-down the most powerful visual illusionist (the *only* illusionist) that I had ever met, though god only knew where those abilities had come from. Biff had never expressed any interest in finding out, and as far as I could tell, he mostly used them to make himself look more passable. Raige and Thomas had never gotten along with him, which was fair; neither did I, half the time. But there were more important things than getting along. And hey, at least he'd started relaxing his passing vanish around me, over the years.

Biff and I had never really talked about it, but after years of association, we'd just sort of adjusted to each other's schedules. Since Biff was almost nocturnal, I never tried to arrive before Treehouse sunset, and in exchange, he usually made sure to be home when I came for dinner. It wasn't like we could call each other in advance, after all.

This time, I heard him come through the door a bare second or two before I clambered through his window, and once I vaulted inside, I saw him in gym shorts with a basketball under his arm.

"No food?" I asked plaintively.

"I do shit 'sides cook, you know," he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. He eyed the paper-wrapped package under my arm

and jerked his chin at it inquiringly.

"Meat for you," I said, lobbing it to him. He caught it with his free hand.

He tossed the ball away. "What kind?"

"The answer won't mean anything to you. You know the drill: cook it thoroughly and try a little bit first, just in case your gut responds way differently to it than mine. Same as always."

Biff shrugged with his mouth, opened the paper enough to verify that the meat was unrecognizable, and turned to put it in the fridge. "Pretty marbled. They always give you good shit?"

"Nah, it was a... celebratory present." I couldn't hide my sourness. "Speaking of which, Thomas, Raige, and I are dating now."

Biff halted with one hand on the open fridge door. His back was to me, but I saw his shoulders tense. "Dating who?"

"Each other."

Biff stood silent and frozen, meat in one hand, fridge door under the other. I stayed on the windowsill, just in case. After a few seconds, I said, "You're letting the cold air out."

He stayed where he was. He heaved a deep enough breath that I could see it in his shoulders, then let it out. He put the meat in the fridge.

"Okay," he said.

I waited.

"That's it?" I asked.

"I said okay!" Biff snapped, slamming the fridge door hard enough that the whole thing shook. "You want me to be a dick about it? Cuz I can."

"No, no, I am totally copacetic with this moment of

character-building,” I said quickly, getting off the sill and venturing in. “Just... surprised.”

[illustration description: A black and white drawing of M.D. looking expectantly on Biff, who is resting his face against the door of his rusty old fridge and clearly wondering how he ended up in this position, he wasn't going to have kids, goddammit...]

Biff just grunted. He still hadn't turned to face me. He looked to be resting his forehead against the freezer door. After a moment, he raised one finger and said, “One asshole question.”

“I'd expect nothing less.”

“Thought you didn't fuck?”

“Wow, you're right, that is an asshole question, and none of your business. Thus, I'm not going to answer it.”

He shrugged and nodded, as though this was the answer he'd expected. “Kay. This mean next time I see 'em, they'll be acting like—”

“—Like people who're dating each other? Yes. I know for a fact that Thomas plans to blast the Village People and make out with Raige just to see what color you turn. If you have any sense at all, you won't give him the satisfaction.”

“Like I'd give him the shits and giggles,” Biff muttered darkly.

“That too, but mostly because I'd like to continue associating with you. Your bigotry is your business, as long as you keep it to yourself. Start splashing it on my friends—”

“Boyfriends,” Biff corrected, turning around to lean back against the fridge and cross his arms.

I blinked. “Wow, they are, aren't they?” I shook my head.

"I'm still getting over that."

"Yeah," Biff said, looking me over as though he'd never seen me before. "Yeah, me too."

We were silent for a moment.

Then Biff said, "Pretty Boy give you herpes, I'll fucking kill him."

"All right, first of all, Biff, it's been years, you darn well know people's names and can use them like a grown-up. Second, I don't need your help to kill anyone. Third, if you guys are so desperate to prove your masculinity to each other, just find a grassy field and a football, and leave me out of it. And finally, have some respect."

Biff shifted uncomfortably against the fridge. "Look, I know you got all that stuff taken out of you and shit, you ain't having kids, but..."

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. "Oh god, I can't believe you're doing this. Dang it, now I owe Thomas a steak..."

"M just saying!"

"Biff, I'm junior healer; I know more about cleanliness and disease transmission than you do, so... let's not have this talk."

Judging by his crawling-through-glass expression, Biff found this as excruciating as I did. But I guess he was really determined to look out for my welfare, because he said, "But you got... you know, you got a plan for this shit, right?"

"Dude, what are you, my mom?" But he gave me a fierce look, so I said, "Yes, yes, I have all this covered, give me some credit, eesh. I just came back from a sexual health intervention with my social worker cat, and no offense, but I trust him way more on this front than you."

Biff slumped against the fridge with a look of relief. "Aw, thank fuck," he said, putting a hand to his forehead. "I didn't *wanna* talk this shit, just..."

"It's okay, Biff, I wasn't raised *entirely* by Dumpster raccoons; we never have to discuss this ever again. In fact, let's do that. All right? Keep your bigotry to yourself, pretend this conversation never happened, and we're good to go. Are we clear?"

"We clear, we clear, Jesus. You want me to grill your good-job-fucking-my-head meat tonight or what?"

"Yes. Cook it. And then give some to me so I can pay Thomas off."

When I came back home and delivered the Treehouse steak to Thomas, he and Raige looked at me as though readying themselves for the worst.

"Relax," I said. "He took it fine. I think he's really improving, he's almost a recovering jerk at this point..."

V. RAIGE'S MOM

Raige was working at his trap set, pencil in one hand, drumsticks in the other, when the phone rang. Without looking up from the sheet music he was annotating, he reached up and pulled down his headphones so he could sandwich his cell phone between his shoulder and ear. "Hello?"

A warm, rapid voice, rough from cigarettes and too many nights in smoky bars, chuckled down the line. "How's it going, kiddo? Up late with the headphones again?"

Raige dropped his sticks. "Mom?" For a moment, he was floored; he hadn't heard from her in so long... then he regained himself and shoved his music away, leaning back against the wall and pushing his fingers through his hair. "Mom! It's—it's so good to hear from you! How are you? Where're you playing at?"

"Denton, baby, and no complaints here. We did the Rusted Spoke last night, the church of line-dance, and we were the preachers. Hallelujah!"

"Hey, that's great," Raige said, unable to stop smiling. He'd missed her so much. "What did you play?"

"Oh, all the goodies, had to show these people there was more to life than Billy Ray Cyrus. There was this great guest accordionist up with me; you met him once, do you remember, that guy with the beard? I did Mojo Nixon covers with him? I guess you wouldn't, that was so long ago..." She paused, and he heard the faint click of a lighter.

"Mom," Raige said disapprovingly, spinning his seat, "you're not smoking again, are you?"

He heard her inhale, cough slightly. "I'm sorry, baby, I swear I'll quit one of these days, it's just impossible on the road, everyone's doing it and reminding me what I'm missing."

So she was doing the parties again. "You've already been sick once," Raige said. "Promise me you'll stop when you get back, okay?"

"I will, baby, I will. Don't worry, I'm in the peak of health, no more getting sick. But enough about your old lady." He could hear the change in her voice, as though she was gripping the cigarette in her lips and the phone with her shoulder. He could imagine her pushing her brown hair out of her freckled face, pulling it back with both hands to secure it in a silver clip. "How're things with you?"

Raige fished his drumsticks off the floor and twirled one through his fingers. "Oh, um, things are good. I applied for VU! If I get in—and I should, they take anybody in the top ten percent of their class—I think I'll try majoring in music performance with a focus on jazz."

"Wow, college already? Seems like only yesterday you couldn't even reach the piano pedals, and now look at you, going for broke!" He heard her exhale smoke. "You're not overdoing it on the studying, are you? Make sure you have a life, I know how you are. Don't be like your father, all work and no play. But don't be like your mother either, ha!"

Raige chuckled, drummed idly against his thigh. "Well, speaking of that, I'm uh... I'm actually dating now."

"Really? Lord, I should've called you so much sooner, how did I miss this? Who is she, do I know her? Does she play?"

"Oh, no, you don't know them, they—" he winced and lost

his rhythm.

“They?”

“Uh. Shit.” But the idea of backing out and pretending Thomas or M.D. didn’t exist just left a bad taste in his mouth, so he admitted, “I’m kind of dating two people, actually.” He bit his lip and worried the drumsticks through his hands.

“Oh! Well, I’ll be damned.” For a moment, she was silent; he imagined she was drumming her fingers on the frame of whatever crappy payphone she was using, automatically fingering chords. Finally, she said, “Well, obviously you got that from *my* side of the family! So do I get to know their names or is it some big secret?”

Raige exhaled and relaxed his hands; he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding his breath, or that he’d been squeezing his drumsticks so tightly. “Thomas and M.D. Their names are Thomas and M.D.”

If the lack of an obviously female name bothered her, she didn’t show it. “Well now, let’s talk the important stuff: they play?”

“Not like you do, but Thomas... god, Mom, you should hear him sing, it’s amazing, he’s got crazy range, and if he ever ended up doing something with it, he could probably go pro, but I don’t think that’s his thing. M.D... well, she likes Weird Al and rap and that’s about it.”

“Well, ain’t nobody perfect.”

“It’s okay. I can talk about other things with her. They’re good people, Mom. I’m... I’m really lucky.”

He heard her sigh. “Jesus, honey, I need to come home, here I am missing all this for some country line-dance club north of Dallas, and you’re going to be grown up before I get to see you.

So does your father know?"

He'd been hoping she wouldn't ask. "Uh... well..."

Her voice was wry. "You haven't told him, have you?"

"...It's kind of in process."

"Has he met them?"

Raige briefly remembered M.D. and his father's first meeting. The shouting, the running. The headlong dash out the window in his bathrobe. "...Sort of?"

She sounded like she was suppressing laughter. "Doesn't like them, huh?"

"He hasn't gotten to know them yet," Raige finally evaded. "So really, I can't say he likes or dislikes them..."

She groaned; he could imagine her slumping against the pay phone. "Oh, George, George. Do I need to have a talk with him?"

Raige's lips twisted wryly. "I think she handled herself pretty well. And I'll get around to telling him, just..." He pushed his bangs out of his eyes. "Not yet, okay?"

"God, and I'm out east, missing all this. Well, don't you worry about George. I know he might take a while, but he'll come around. He always does. He doesn't know how to show it, always, but he really does just want you to be happy."

Raige looked away, fidgeted with his sticks, then moved the phone to his other ear. "I've really missed you. When are you coming home?"

She sighed. "Soon, baby. Soon."

"Please, I just... I feel like it's been forever, and I really miss you. Ever since you got sick..."

"You worry too much; I'm fine. I promise, I'm taking care

of myself this time. Here, how about this, I'll talk to the guys, and I'll be home next Thursday. We'll have a big ol' Joplinathon, watch *the Sting* and that Billy Dee Williams flick, order pizza, okay? Invite your sweeties; I'll meet them."

Something was flickering in the corner of his vision, but Raige just assumed it was from his eyes filling with happy tears. "Oh, thank god. It's been crazy without you, Mom, you have no..."

He didn't finish; he'd blinked his eyes clear, but that'd only made the flickering worse. When he looked up, he saw that it was his bedroom window. Outside, the sunlight kept flickering, changing from morning to evening. But that was odd... he could've sworn it was late, dark already...

The paint on his windowsill began to disappear. Not peel or flake, just... vanish into the ether, like reality's filmstrip was starting to run off the reel. And his sheet music, now that he was looking at it, was just a garble.

Oh. Oh no.

The tinny, static-filled voice in his ear still sounded exactly the same. "Baby? What's the matter?"

The world continued quietly unraveling itself.

Raige swallowed. "Hey, Mom? I, uh. I have some bad news."

"What do you mean?"

"I..." His window was gone now. "I think I'm dreaming. And I'm going to wake up, and this will have never happened, because you... you never went back on the road and you never got better, and..." he swallowed. "And we're not going to get to have the Joplinathon, are we?"

[image description: Raige's mom, standing with her back

to the viewer, talking on a pay phone. Around her is darkness and swirls of smoke from her cigarette. She's a thin, freckled woman wearing her hair pulled back in a silver and turquoise clip, a plaid shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots.]

"No, baby, we're not." Her voice was sad, and he heard her smoky sigh. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice. I'm really sorry."

His room was gone now.

"Yeah," Raige said. "Me too."

The dream world collapsed entirely.

...

Raige woke up in M.D.'s tiny bedroom and lurched upright. His mind was muzzy with fog, and he nearly elbowed Thomas in the face lurching over him for his cell phone.

"No. No, no, *no*..."

M.D., of course, was alert so fast that he wouldn't have known she was ever asleep. "Raige, what's wrong?"

Raige ignored her, fumbling for his phone. Only Thomas's weight kept him from totally inverting the hammock they were in, and the swaying meant he only knocked the phone further across the floor. After scrabbling for it and missing, he cursed and finally crawled over Thomas and fell out of the hammock to find it, nearly clobbering M.D. from where she was sleeping on her mat on the floor.

Thomas rolled over, rubbing his eyes. "Jesus, man, what the hell?"

Raige finally managed to fish his cell phone off the floor, and the display lit up, showing no missed calls. He mashed buttons until he somehow managed to get his voice mail. It wouldn't connect.

"Raige," M.D. explained, "we're in Treehouse; your voice mail doesn't get service here."

Raige ignored her. When the call dropped, he tried again, making a sound of aggravation.

"Ugh, what time is it?" Thomas continued. "Christ..."

"My mom called me," Raige mumbled groggily. "Okay? She called me, and I missed it."

That woke Thomas up. He sat up straight, exchanged glances with M.D., then flopped back against the hammock, muttering something under his breath.

"Raige," M.D. said, in an unusually gentle voice, "she didn't call you."

"She *did*," Raige insisted, shaking his phone. It still wouldn't go through. "She's coming home on Thursday. We were going to watch *the Sting* and have pizza. She *promised*, okay?" His throat was closing up.

M.D. and Thomas exchanged looks again, and M.D. got on her hands and knees and came around to where Raige sat, still trying to get his phone to work. She gently took it out of his hands; her face was sympathetic.

"Here," she told him, "this will be faster than caffeine."

And she touched him.

Unlike him, M.D. always woke up instantly alert and fully awake; if she forgot what reality was, it was only for a few seconds until a nightmare passed. In Raige's state, her mind was like cold water in the face, jolting him back into his right mind, and he remembered again that his mom was gone, there was no "after you were sick," just doctors and hospital rooms and wearing black. So there was no way in hell she could be calling him,

definitely no way she'd be coming to visit him on Thursday—

But she'd promised.

He burst into tears, and M.D. hugged him. "It's okay," she told him, wrapping her mind around him like a blanket. Raige was still too tired to feel ashamed; he just clutched her shirt and sobbed. "It's okay, it'll pass in a bit, just wait it out..."

And Raige knew she was right, because M.D. had nightmares all the time, she knew more about them than anyone else he knew, but at the moment, he just hurt everywhere. "She was going to meet you guys and damn it, she would've *liked* you..."

Thomas got out of the hammock, sat down, and joined the hug. "Hey. At least you got to tell her about us, then, right?"

Raige swallowed and sniffed. "Yeah. Yeah, I told her."

"Was she cool?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she was cool. She thinks M.D.'s music taste sucks."

"M.D.'s music taste *does* suck. So it's okay. She knows. You did good. C'mon, man, go back to sleep, it's okay..."

Raige hiccuped, but he let himself be laid down on the mat, where he was wrapped in blankets and hugged, and eventually exhaustion stopped the crying and he slipped back to sleep.

As he was drifting into the twilight haze, he heard Thomas murmur to M.D., "Jesus, I hope he never has one of those again."

"Yeah," she agreed, rubbing his back. "The good ones must be the worst..."

...

After that, Raige couldn't take the pressure. He told his father the next day.

It went badly.

THE BRICK OF TRAUMA

Don't get me wrong, I loved Raige, I really did. But like everybody else on the planet, he was imperfect, and some of his habits drove me up the wall. I had been trying to talk to him about his dad for weeks, and he kept redirecting the conversation back to me. If he thought I wouldn't notice, he was wrong, and finally, I asked Thomas's help, because Thomas had actual social skills and I figured he'd have some ideas on how to pull off a conversation like this without destroying the relationship in the process.

Turned out Raige had been doing the same avoidance redirection thing with him too, and Thomas found it just as maddening. ("I thought maybe he was talking to *you*!") So, as co-dates and friends, we joined forces in pinning Raige down before he drove all of us crazy, including himself.

It wasn't that difficult, really. Raige was already working himself into a lather regarding his college admissions process, probably so as to have an excuse to hide in his room away from his father all day, while Raige's dad was apparently doing the same thing with work stuff so he could hide in his office all day. When we rang the doorbell, it was Raige who answered the door.

Thomas said, "let's take a walk," and even though he was smiling, his tone wasn't one Raige could argue with. Besides, with both father and son avoiding each other as hard as they could, their enormous empty mansion of a house felt downright *oppressive*. Neither of us wanted to have this conversation there.

Not that the “walk” turned out to be much better. See, unlike Thomas and Biff, who lived in mixed residential-industrial areas, and me, who lived in... well, Treehouse, Raige lived in exile out in suburban wasteland. There was nothing within convenient walking distance of his monstrous house except more monstrous houses. There was no real place to sit down for a serious talk, no shade, and Vaygo in May has a heat most people find brutal. I didn’t mind, but Thomas and Raige weren’t impervious. And driving somewhere like Tarzan’s would’ve just given Raige a million distractions to keep not talking.

When we asked what was around, Raige said, “There’s a tennis court not too far from here...”

“Fantastic,” I said. “I love tennis.”

“Yeah, totally,” Thomas agreed. He might not have been lying, even.

Turned out the tennis court wasn’t available either. It looked to be under construction... though the workers themselves were not in evidence. As near as I could guess, they were repaving the courts or something, with a cluster of masonry that neither me nor Thomas could fathom the use of.

“I think it’s like, for a guardhouse or something,” Raige said.

“For a tennis court?” I asked.

“What?” Thomas asked. “Is someone going to steal it?”

Raige shrugged. “People have been complaining non-residents have been using them.”

I almost asked, then let it slide. We were here to talk to Raige about himself, not his stupid neighbors’ bizarre territorial feelings about concrete.

Thomas, being a merciful sort, started the conversation off. He ducked under the construction tape, leaned against a tractor which offered the only shade in the area, and said, "Look, dude, we know you're avoiding talking about what went down with your dad."

Raige wilted. "But I don't... I..."

He glanced guiltily at me, and then I got it. And I can't lie: I got mad.

"Oh no," I said. "You're not blaming this on *me*."

"I'm not *blaming* you, it's not like that..."

"It's *exactly* like that," I said. "It's like..."

I looked around the construction site for props. Nothing popped out at first, but then I saw the pile of bricks for the guardhouse and an idea came to me. Darting over, I snatched one up and then returned to Raige and Thomas over by the tractor. They were looking at me with some bemusement.

There was no way either of them had a writing utensil, so I dug into my herb belt and pulled out a Sharpie. It took a couple go-overs, but I managed to scrawl a sad frowny face on the brick, which I then held up for their inspection.

"It's like this, all right? This is the Brick of Trauma."

Thomas looked sardonic.

"Keep the wisecrack to yourself, okay, this is important. Brick of Trauma. When you hold the Brick of Trauma, you are the designated sad sack of the room, all right? Did you guys ever have some stupid thing in school where you couldn't talk till you were holding the special talking pass or something? It's like that, only instead of getting to speak, you get other people's caring and attention. So, for instance, if Raige is holding the Brick of

Trauma,” I lobbed it to him; he fumbled, then caught it, “that means he’s feeling bad and needs comforting, or chicken soup, or whatever. You with me so far?”

Nods, though it was clear Raige was feeling deeply uncomfortable with holding my sad brick. He was already holding it out awkwardly as though hoping I’d take it back.

“Yeah, see that thing you’re doing? That’s exactly what’s going on here.” I yanked the unhappy brick back from Raige. “I feel like I’m stuck with this thing. *Forever*. I can’t let go of it. Thomas, you’re not so bad—”

“Cool.”

“—But Raige, you’re *terrible* about this. I can’t give it to you, because you always act like, ‘oh no, you deserve it, you’ve had all these horrible things happen to you, surely my paltry problems can’t compare.’ Like it’s some kind of favor to me or something, only it’s really not, because jeez, milquetoast, I’m really sick of being the designated sad sack 24/7! Especially not when it’s just an excuse for you to avoid dealing with your own bushwah! I’ve already got enough baggage of my own; I don’t want to help you hang onto *yours*. Come on.”

“That’s fair,” Raige said, “but I really feel uncomfortable taking the... do I really have to call it that?”

I shoved it at him. “Yes. Yes you do.”

He took it with a sigh. “Fine, I don’t like taking the... Brick of Trauma because I, like, had an argument with my dad, when you... I mean, how does that even compare? Like, ‘oh, poor me, boo hoo, my dad thinks I’m gay and got mad and he’s ignoring me’ when you...” He stuttered off. “I mean, you didn’t even have a place to *live* when I met you! You just... carried a tarp and food

and stuff in that Army backpack, and you ate things that I can't believe didn't make you really sick, and your arms were covered in bandages!"

"All right, to be fair, you met me at a pretty bad time..."

"*You broke out of a hospital!* The only time you even saw a real doctor the whole time I've known you was when the League and the UDC were fighting over who *owned* you! Uh, no offense to your bosses or anything. But healers and doctors aren't the same. You had *nothing*, and I have *everything*, and it just feels like... like stupid rich boy problems." He looked at the brick sadly.

[image description: Raige's thin, freckled hands holding a brick with a cartoonish sad face scribbled on it.]

Thomas raised his hand. "Just so you know, like, my family has money problems sometimes, but I still wake up sometimes and just thank freaking Jesus that I'm not you, man. At least I never *really* worried my parents would kick me out, you know? I planned for it, because you know, better safe than sorry, but I didn't really think it'd happen, you know?"

"Dad didn't kick me out of the house either," Raige said.

"Yeah, he's just making you wish you could be anywhere else," I said, coming over to sit on the tractor tire next to him.

"And yeah, I've had my low points, but I *have* a place to live now, and food, and Scorch and Flame have done more for me than any doctor on Earth, even if they don't really have antibiotics, you know? It's okay, Raige. *I'm* okay. I know I wasn't always, especially that first year, but I am now, and you don't have to hold back out of concern for me, all right?"

We sat for a bit.

"I'm glad you're okay," Raige said finally.

“Yeah, same,” Thomas said. “Not gonna lie, things were kinda scary there for a while with you.”

“Yeah, they were.” Even I had worried for me, back then. 2002 had been an abyss of a year; it’d taken me all of 2003 (not to mention the help of everyone I knew) to climb out of it.

Things were still hard sometimes. But as I sat in the shadow of the tractor, I realized how hard they *weren’t* now. Yeah, I still had nightmares and still got angry and frustrated... but I didn’t go into psychotic blackout rages anymore. I hadn’t had to take long stretches off work in months, or cover myself in ash to get everyone in Treehouse to leave me alone. Sure, I never would’ve been able to manage being a doctor on Earth—but like Raige had said, healers weren’t the same as doctors, and Treehouse wasn’t the States.

Everyone in Treehouse, practically, was displaced—and not like me; I was at least there by choice. Most other folks had fallen through dimensional rifts, the way Thomas had, only they’d never been able to find their way home again. So the whole place was inhabited by a bunch of scared, traumatized aliens, and my level of damage was practically normal. Heck, I was doing pretty well, by Treehouse standards! Ribbonblack, for instance, had apparently been such a mental wreck upon her arrival that she’d gone full-blown feral and lived in the woods eating people for years until she finally got herself together enough to be a part of town. And now she was the senior healer of the night people, the most experienced in the whole place!

In Treehouse, at least, there was a precedent for someone like me doing okay. And now that I was thinking about it... for the first time I realized I might be able to actually do okay too, instead

of just scraping from crisis to crisis.

It was a weird feeling. I wasn't entirely sure what to do with it. On Earth, I'd been a lost cause. But in Treehouse, I could just be a junior healer.

I realized that like Thomas, I was grateful not to be Raige. All the money in the world couldn't solve the problem he had—and anyway, the money belonged to his dad, not to him. Which was part of what made me nervous. At least Thomas and I had our own sources of income, our own job histories. Raige had never worked a job in his life. He hadn't even *babysat*.

"You guys really think it's that bad?" Raige said finally, pulling me back to the present.

"Uh, yeah," Thomas said. "If my parents were acting like your dad was, I'd be freaking out, man."

"Let me put it this way," I said. "Raige, you know all those foster care families I was with over the years? I bolted from people's houses for way smaller things than this. If I had to live in a place that full of tension, trying to avoid someone with nobody else in the house but them, I would've packed my bags and bolted street-side within days."

Raige seemed to chew on that for a while. "You don't think I'm overreacting?"

"Dude," Thomas said. "Your dad's all you got, after your mom... you know."

"I have my Great-Aunt Kara."

"Yeah, across the border—the *northern* one. How could you *not* be freaked out? I'd be freaked out. Just having silence is the worst!"

"At least if someone flips out and starts screaming and

trying to break your face, they're actually *engaging* with you," I said.

Thomas and Raige looked at me.

"What?" I said. "It's true. At least if someone gets violent, you know where you stand with them. Silence, you can't do anything with! It's just *there*."

Raige blinked. "Is that why you wanted to talk about this? Because you couldn't tell where you stood with me?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Thought. "Huh. You know, now that you mention it, yeah, probably."

Thomas had a look on his face like he'd just figured out the answer to some deep cosmic question that'd bugged him for years.

"What's with the face?" I asked.

He snapped out of it. "Nothing. I think I just finally get why you hang around Biff all day even if he's a total asshole."

Raige was still chewing on earlier. "I didn't mean to make you feel pushed away," he said. "Either of you."

"It's okay. I didn't feel like you were doing it to be a jerk. Just... you know. Don't do it, okay? I'm not in crisis now; I can handle you talking."

Thomas just folded his arms behind his head and said, "We're cool, man."

Raige bit his lip and fidgeted with his bangs. He looked at the sad brick in his lap. Then he said, "Okay, so things haven't been great..."

GREAT-AUNT KARA STEINLECHTER

Kara Steinlechter was playing bridge with the girls when the kitchen phone rang.

"Ignore it," she said. "Everyone knows not to call me on bridge night."

They continued playing, and Kara was so busy winning that she completely forgot about the phone. Late that night, after everyone had left, she showered, braided her white hair to keep it from getting tangled while she slept, and poured herself a cup of chamomile tea. She was heading towards her room to turn in with a book when she saw the answering machine's blinking light from the study.

She went in, pressed the button, and heard her nephew-in-law's voice.

"Kara, it's George. I need to talk to you. Call me as soon as you get this."

Hmm. George never said that, certainly not on bridge night. Kara put her mug down on the desk, hooked her cane over the back of the chair, and sat down to pick up the phone.

It was late, but George picked up immediately. He skipped right to the point: "I need you to take your grand-nephew for a few days."

That was hardly a crisis, but Kara suppressed her annoyance and put on her reading glasses so she could flip through the arty calendar on the wall. "Well, let's see. They're

having a jamboree on the pier in mid-July, he might like that..."

"I meant now. This weekend."

She stopped flipping. "This weekend? George, it's Thursday. You can't be serious."

The only response was a heavy sigh.

"George Arnold Unnigrutt, don't you sigh at me. If you want me to take him on such short notice, you had better give me a good explanation."

Another sigh. "He's dating."

Kara could only think of one reason that George would consider that so important that he'd interrupt her bridge night and request an emergency trip. "That wild girl you've complained about?"

Pause. "Yes."

Kara waited. When nothing was forthcoming, she ventured, "She isn't pregnant, is she?"

"No! God, no!" Apparently the thought had never occurred to him; for a moment, he sounded both appalled at the very idea, and deeply relieved that it hadn't come to pass.

"Well?"

"He's dating that Mexican boy too. Both of them. Together."

"Well, good for him. What does that have to do with me?"

That did the job. George started ranting, and Kara got more information than if she'd spent half an hour holding his hand and cajoling. Before retirement, she'd been a therapist; a petty part of her relished that she no longer had to be polite and gentle to everyone around her. So she sipped her tea, and she listened.

Eventually, George wound down, and Kara put away her mug.

“George, for the past I-don’t-know-how-many years, you’ve called me up to worry and complain about your son not dating. Now he starts, and you want to call me up and worry and complain about that? He’s a teenager. It’s his job to date people you don’t like.”

George made a sound of exasperation. She could practically see him pacing, raking his fingers through his hair and beard until they stood every which way. “I thought he was gay.”

“Well, there you go. Aren’t you relieved to be wrong?”

“He’s seventeen! He can’t even vote, and here he is graduating early and doing *this*! What am I supposed to say to him? *Do*? If I tell him no, that’ll just make it all the more tempting and—and—” Silence.

Kara waited to be sure he was truly stuck, then asked, “Are you worried he’ll disappear again?”

Silence, long enough that she thought she’d have to speak again. Then, quietly, in a very tired voice: “Ever since he came back, it’s like I don’t know him anymore.”

Kara softened. However difficult his temperament, George and Raige were all the family she had left, and she loved them. “I think your issues go back further than that.”

Long pause. “Yes.”

...

Freckled and bony, Lily Steinlechter had never been the prettiest child, but she’d been hands down the most fun. Her smile lit up rooms; her laugh was incandescent. Give her a fiddle or a piano, and she could get Baptists to dance at a funeral. She

was joyful and vivacious, a spark of a woman who embodied the moment.

So when she she'd gotten together with dull old George, Kara hadn't understood it.

Oh, she could understand the appeal to *George*. He was stiff and square, but Lily could tease him into smiles and laughs, even get him to dance. She was a bright light, a breath of fresh air in his otherwise stuffy life.

[image description: An inked illustration of Raige's mom, a bony freckled woman with thick brown hair, playing fiddle like a madman while smirking and looking flirty at George, who has a terrible early 80s mullet and looks on with adoration.]

But the Steinlechts had always been a bohemian family, artists and musicians and libertines; Kara herself had been reborn in the sixties and done a stint as an itinerant performance artist before settling down into counseling. Meanwhile, the only passion George seemed to have was for the moribund beer company he'd inherited from his grandfather. He'd seemed as sensitive and artistic as a doorstep, prickly as a cactus. What on earth could Lily have seen in him?

But then Lily had gotten sick again.

Lily had always been a sickly child. It was almost as though she shone so brightly because there was a fire blazing within her, and periodically it consumed her until there was nothing left. When that happened, she'd collapse into cold ash.

When Lily was sick, she didn't light up rooms. She didn't dance, didn't play, didn't laugh. Mostly, she slept. Often, she cried.

Some people didn't like being around Lily when she was

sick. They preferred her when she was the bright light, the life of the party. But George had stayed with her and tended her lovingly.

“I don’t have to be fun around him, Auntie,” she’d said.

Three years later, when Lily and George had asked Kara’s blessing to get married, she’d given it. There were far worse things, she’d supposed, than having a spouse you could be sick and sad around.

And Lily, sadly, became sick more and more often. The musician’s schedule didn’t help. Tour after tour, late night after late night, party after drink after cigarette. But to ask Lily to give up music was unthinkable; it was her life.

Had been her life.

When she’d died, so had George’s light.

Kara was pulled back into the present as he said, “He’s so much like her...”

She sighed. “He is. But he’s like you too, in some ways. In good ways.”

It was true. Raige had inherited much of his mother’s musical talent, her freckles and lankiness and smile, but his internal light hardly held a candle to Lily’s; it was more a gentle glow than an all-consuming inferno. He would probably never become the brilliant performer she was, but his flames would never consume him, and that stability, Kara was certain, came entirely from George.

Raige had always been so quiet, so gentle, so... retiring. Running away with a strange wild girl for months on end wasn’t the kind of thing he would do; it was the kind of thing *Lily* would do, and it’d scared George to death. Maybe he’d thought his son

was going the way of his wife, catching fire, burning out of control. The reality had turned out much stranger (Kara had squeezed the details out of them eventually), but there was a rift now. Raige had gone somewhere his father couldn't follow.

"I don't think you need to worry about him running off," Kara continued. "He's growing up, that's all. Coming into his own. I admit, the circumstances are unusual, but at the root, he's putting himself out there in the world, instead of hiding in a book. And he trusted you enough to tell you what was going on."

"That's true," George admitted. "I don't think I deserved it."

"Nevertheless, he did it, and now you have to deal with it. If it's any comfort, I can't imagine that a son you and Lily raised would mistreat those he loves. At least he's just graduating early and dating unconventionally; think what he *could* be doing!"

She could feel George doing just that. Up until his disappearance, Raige had never given George even the slightest trouble that parents expected from their teenagers. He'd never stayed out late, never partied, barely dated at all. Drugs, fighting, pregnancy... unthinkable.

George said, finally, "he's so young."

"They always are."

A long pause, like George was thinking. "If I ship him off to you, I might make the whole thing worse. I don't want that. I just don't know what else to do."

Kara stayed silent, waiting for him to finish the thought.

"I don't even *dislike* the Mexican kid, really. *He* seems fine."

"Well, then, you're batting fifty," Kara mused. "That's better than most parents get."

She hoped to make him laugh, but it didn't. He was clearly

busy thinking. Finally, he said, “help me make an action plan.”

Kara smiled. This was the part of George she liked, the man who acted, took that miserable little straw bale of a beer company and spun it into gold. He could be hard and brusque, but he was no fool.

They spent the next hour coming up with ideas, scripts, and roleplaying them out, with Kara playing Raige as necessary. George had seemed uncertain at first, but they’d done this before, and by the end, he was ready... or as ready as he was ever going to be.

“I need to get to bed,” Kara said. “Good luck, George.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” *Click.*

THE PROM STORY

Thomas opened the front door, bleary-eyed and still in his boxer shorts and undershirt.

“M.D.?”

“Morning,” I greeted. “Sorry for the hour, but I wanted to make sure you hadn’t headed out to work yet.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Thomas said, yawning. “I was up already. You hungry? I got bacon and waffles.”

“I won’t be long,” I said, following him in. I had to give him credit; he was obviously groggy, but holding a conversation. Raige needed at least an hour, plus caffeine, and Biff... well, I’d never seen Biff up and verbal before noon.

Nobody else was in the house. Presumably Thomas’s mom had already headed on duty, his little brother to school, and who knew what his dad was off doing. The kitchen was clean and sunny and smelled like bacon, a platter of which Thomas shoved at me. I took a slice. It was room temperature; presumably his mom or dad had made it before leaving.

“So what’s up?” he asked.

“Raige’s prom is coming up.”

“Thought he wasn’t going?”

“Paralyzed in anxiety, more like. But I asked him, and after hemming and hawing for a few minutes, he admitted he wanted to go. I mean, what has he got to lose, right?”

Thomas nodded and shoved a couple frozen waffles into the toaster. “Cool. So you ask him?”

I went to go search for toppings. “Yup. He said yes, but only if you came too—you know how he is about ‘being fair.’ So if you want to do the whole big romantic gesture thing and ask him out yourself, go for it.”

Thomas gave me a thumbs-up. “I’ll do it next time I see him.”

The waffles popped, and Thomas pulled them out and tossed them on plates. I kept the peanut butter for myself and passed him the butter and syrup. He made happy sounds, got to slathering, and asked, “So that’s all cool, but what’s the rush? Not like I’m not happy to see you, but you could’ve just left a note or something.”

I winced and twiddled my fingers. “Well, you see... it’s like this...”

Thomas looked up from his waffles, mouth full.

“I don’t have anything to wear.”

Thomas set his fork down. His eyes were starting to gleam. “You mean...?”

“Yes. I am formally requesting your assistance.” I made obeisance over the kitchen table. “Please take me shopping, O God of Coolness and Fashion Sense.”

You have never heard such an evil laugh from a guy.

...

It wasn’t as though I was looking forward to going clothes shopping with Thomas, or at all. It was just that he was the only human I trusted to make good choices in that department, and I wanted to at least be presentable at this absurd adolescent rite of passage. It was important to Raige, even if it wasn’t all that important to me. And Thomas, at least, knew what a dollar was

worth.

It took us a while to sort out our schedules, but finally we got our shopping expedition. Thomas seemed absolutely delighted to be going to some secondhand fancy dress shop to find something to wear, which was more than I could say for me.

"These are hideous," I complained as we wandered the aisles of taffeta and chiffon, "and impractical."

"What, you planning to fight a bear at prom?"

"Raige's dad is only a short evolutionary hop away, but regardless, it's going to be crowded with hormonal teenagers that I don't want to get mental flashes of. I need something that covers me from the neck down."

"Yeeeeeah, I don't think we could pull that with dresses. How do you feel about tuxes?"

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling, dragged my feet, and whined.

"C'mon, you gotta like *something*. You can punch Raige's dad in a tux."

"But they're all so... *black*. We'll look like a troop of penguins."

The more exasperated Thomas got, the more he sounded like his mother. One of these days, I was going to tell him. "Look, kid, those are your options, and you should own at least *one* formal Earth thing. Remember what you had for the emancipation hearing?"

I shuddered.

"Yeah, exactly. Come on, work with me here."

I tried, really I did. But men's suits, I discovered, were *the* most boring clothes on the planet. Apparently guys didn't believe

in colors asides from black, white, navy, and gray. (Or “charcoal,” as Thomas insisted on referring to it.) Also, all the men’s clothes were way too big, while the children’s selection seemed to top out at just too small.

Then we found the discount rack.

“Oh my god,” I said. “I want it.”

Thomas looked like I’d brought a rabid raccoon home for a pet. “Of course you do.”

It looked like something that Fred Astaire would’ve worn, had he consulted Liberace. It was gold and glittery and had enough ruffles to tie Raige’s dad up with *and* gag him afterward. Plus it came with a matching ruffly shirt and sequined vest.

And this modern marvel of fashion was discounted so steeply, you’d think someone had been murdered in it. Even I could afford it—well, almost, after bartering with Thomas.

“Aren’t you getting anything?” I asked as I tried it on. (It hung off me, but who cared?)

“Nah, I got Marcus’s old tux; it’ll be fine. I’m here for emotional support.”

“Well, support no more. I’ve found my formal outfit for the rest of my life.” I threw the curtain back and came out.

Thomas circled around, looking me over and rubbing his chin. “Needs roller skates.”

“Yes.”

“And hemming. And a belt and a tie. *Those*, I can hook you up with. Now let’s get out of here.”

Money changed hands, and I was saved from shopping any further. Providence divine!

As we climbed into the Steed (the ancient rusty orange

pick-up that Thomas had joyfully inherited) and he rolled down the windows, I said, "Hey Thomas?"

"What's up?"

"Thanks for this."

"No problem. That outfit's you. Like Vegas threw up, but you."

"Not that. Well, not just that. But I sort of figured you'd want to shove me into a dress and give me a makeover or something."

Thomas thought about it. "Maybe in the early days, I would've," he admitted, "but now it feels like a dick move. And kinda gross. You know, like those photos where weird old people dress their pets up like George Washington and Betsy Ross, and you can just *feel* how much that wiener dog hates it."

"I would *definitely* be that wiener dog in the Betsy Ross costume."

"Yeah, and this's the only prom any of us're getting, so we should have fun and wear what we want. Not like we're ever setting foot in Raige's school again."

The next few chunks of my Earth time were spent with Thomas and some friend of his (who was apparently studying Textiles and Apparel at UT) trying to bootstrap Liberace's love-child into something that wouldn't get me burned as a fashion witch. She measured and pinned and hemmed, and by the end, I looked pretty all right. She seemed pretty pleased with herself and even remarked how my outfit was "vintage," which as far as I could tell meant it was so old and outdated that it came out the other side and became cool again.

Thomas, of course, didn't need his friend's services. He

could've worn a trash bag and made it look good, so the hand-me-down tux from his older brother looked like it'd been custom-made for him.

"Wait," I said, "I recognize that! That's what you wore to my hearing, right?"

He beamed and gave me a double thumbs-up. "Like I said: always have at least one formal outfit. Besides, Jasmina already altered it for me."

His friend grinned and tossed her tailor's tape over her neck like a feather boa.

After some brief discussion on who was doing what, we split. Thomas planned to *drive* to Arizona because he said he didn't want to have to rely on Raige's dad for a car. That was fair enough, but he also apparently thought driving a thousand miles in a truck with no AC across the hottest part of the country in June would be fun.

"I'm making a road trip out of it," he said. "I'll hit Carlsbad, Roswell, the Petrified Forest, and the Grand Canyon on the way."

"You're insane."

"You say. You're staying with Biff. His AC's not much better."

True, but Biff on his worst day was still head and shoulders over Raige's dad as far as I was concerned. They couldn't have paid me enough to stay *there*. Besides, I'd slept in Raige's house before, and it'd been awful. The beds were too big and the pillows too fat. Biff had a nice saggy couch with flat pillows, like god intended, and I always slept better there.

Biff didn't seem to know what to do with the idea of me going to prom, so mostly ignored it, which suited me fine. We

hung my outfit on the bathroom hinge where the door normally would've been attached, since that was the only place to hang it, and then we went about our afternoon as usual.

"Do you have an iron?" I asked.

"Do I *look* like I got an iron?" He glanced up from the blender he was making smoothies with—it was way too hot to cook. "You coming back here tonight?"

"Most likely."

He reached into his pocket, tossed a couple keys at me. "Here. Got 'em made so you don't gotta climb through my fucking window in that get-up. Someone'll shoot you."

"You're the best." I added it to the ring, along with the spares to Thomas's and Raige's places, plus Bobcat's Jaunter's League office. "My dream of being as cool as the school janitor is closer to fruition every day."

Biff ate (his breakfast, what would've been my dinner), while I slept so I could survive staying up until what was (for me) the witching hours of the morning. When I got up, we played some cards and futzed around, and then I started getting ready. I cleaned up, got dressed, attempted the half-Windsor that Thomas had so desperately tried to teach me, and examined the result in the mirror. It was serviceable, but something was missing.

I pulled the ponytail holder out of my hair, brushed it out, made a face. I looked like the most infamous of glam rock, resurrected. I tried pulling my hair back again, double-tying it. Even worse. I took it down again with a sound of exasperation.

Biff had put down the cards to watch me from the table. He jerked his chin at me inquiringly, but I didn't answer, still staring at my reflection and trying to figure out what was wrong.

His chair screeched back on the linoleum and I looked up. He was standing and pointing to the empty chair.

“Sit.”

I sat, and he took the brush and ponytail holder from me. Gripping the band in his teeth, he brushed my hair out, separated it into three sections, and began braiding with quick, methodical movements. He didn’t yank anything. As he brushed against me, I got bits and pieces of his mind: quiet, calm, focused only on the task. Then a sensory bubble: braiding soft cotton fluff hair through his fingers, rough and curly—

He finished and pulled back before the memory could finish, then conjured up my reflection so I could see the results. I turned my head back and forth to check the details. Much better.

“I didn’t know you could do hair,” I remarked.

“I had sisters.”

That got my attention. “You do?”

“Yeah. Once.”

I tried to picture Biff wrangling smaller, female versions of himself, but all I could imagine was lots of shouting. Biff’s life before he came to Vaygo was mostly off-limits to discussion; I’d gleaned little bits and pieces over the years, but this was the first I’d heard of any siblings.

“How many?” I asked.

“Two.”

“Are they...?”

“Dunno.” He looked away. “You gonna be late.” Talk over.

I met Thomas out front of Biff’s apartment building so he wouldn’t have to park; the Steed was so old and battered that it might’ve been safe to leave it alone for a while, but neither of us

wanted to take any chances.

Thomas looked far fresher and well rested than anyone had a right to after a thousand miles in a truck. His hair was freshly gelled, his face shaved, and his hand-me-down suit (which was hanging from a hook on the car door) looked like it'd been freshly pressed just for the occasion. He even had a rose pinned to the buttonhole, a perfect match with the bouquet on the dash—both of which I hadn't thought of.

He saw my dismayed face. "I got one for you." He popped the glove compartment, narrowly avoided a tidal wave of maps, and pulled out a few dandelions bound with florist's tape, which worked far better for my outfit than a rose.

"Best co-date," I said, pinning the fuzzy yellow mass to my lapel. "Did you... you made this, didn't you?"

"I'm a man of many talents and *nobody* sells dandelion boutonnieres, babe. You ready for this?"

"Born ready," I declared. "Let's go wreck Raige's prom!" And off we went.

While we trucked up from south Vaygo to Oasis Valley, Thomas told me about his road trip, which admittedly seemed to have been pretty great, asides from the near-constant threat of heat exhaustion. But as the scenery changed from cement and sand to green lawns and McMansions, Thomas's mood sobered. When he parked in front of Raige's dad's enormous house, he turned off the engine, looked me dead in the eye, and said, "I want to handle Raige's dad."

"What? No! I can handle him!"

Thomas rolled his eyes at me. "Babe, who's the charming one?"

“You.”

“Who’s got the social skills?”

“You.”

“Who *doesn’t* have issues with authority?”

I made a face, but didn’t really have a leg to stand on.

“Look, this is important to Raige. If you get in some big fight with his dad before we even get there, he’ll be sad, we’ll be stressed out, and everything will suck. I don’t want this to suck.”

However I felt about Raige’s dad, I had to concede that I too wanted us to have a good time. If Thomas thought he could manage the miserable bear-walrus, well, let him. Me, I was still hoping that Raige would answer the door and bolt out before his dad even knew what was happening so we could avoid the whole thing.

Thomas got dressed in the truck (he even managed to make the process look somewhat graceful), put on extra deodorant, and straightened his lapels and boutonniere. “How do I look?”

I gave him the OK sign.

He nodded, took a deep breath as though to prepare himself, and we got out to do battle.

Luck was not with us. Raige’s dad answered the doorbell and loomed at us like we were Mormons out to sell him house insurance.

Thomas didn’t flinch. He gave Raige’s dad a dazzling smile, held up his bouquet of roses, and said, “Hi Mr. Unnigrutt, we’re here to take Raige to prom.”

Raige’s dad just stood there like a statue. I couldn’t read his face. Behind him, Raige clattered down the stairs, still

buttoning his shirt and looking like he'd just realized he had a test he hadn't studied for.

"Hi guys!" he squeaked. "I was just—"

"I want to talk to you," Raige's dad said. "All of you. Now."

Silence. Raige looked petrified. I fidgeted and looked to Thomas, who seemed completely unruffled.

"Sure, Mr. Unnigrutt," he said, and when there was space, he entered to give Raige the roses and kiss his cheek. "These're for you. M.D. didn't get you any."

I didn't respond; I was still watching Raige's dad watch me. His face still didn't tell me anything.

"Are you coming in or staying out?" he finally asked.

I came in.

After the heat of Thomas's truck and Biff's apartment, the air-conditioned house felt uncomfortably chilly. Raige's dad ushered us into the living room and sat in a chair he'd pulled from the dining room; I guess the recliners didn't give him the correct aura of authority. Raige and Thomas took the white leather couch. Me, I stayed standing. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I didn't like it one bit.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Raige's dad cleared his throat and steepled his fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said.

If Thomas hadn't hammered into me that he was in charge, I would've surely said something regrettable. As it was, I looked to Thomas, and he said, "huh?"

"I don't necessarily agree with what you're doing or who you're doing it with," this was said to Raige, "but I want to be a part of your life and I'm not going to get that, the way I've been

acting.”

Raige said nothing. Neither did I—I was too busy wondering who this imposter was and what he’d done with Raige’s real dad. Thomas kept smiling, but he’d smile through anything.

“I don’t even dislike you, really,” Raige’s dad said to Thomas, but then he pointed a sausage finger at me and admitted, “You, I don’t like.”

Oh thank god, still the same guy. “I don’t like you either,” I said.

He just nodded, as though this was what he expected, and we both took a moment to relax in the comforting familiarity of our mutual dislike.

After a moment, he said, “So, have a good time. Use the car if you like. Be back by one.”

“You’re the boss, Mr. Unnigrutt,” Thomas said. He was *still* smiling, somehow.

I didn’t say anything. It just seemed the safest thing to do.

Raige seemed as stymied as I was, and finally settled on, “Thanks, Dad.”

For a moment, Raige’s dad softened, looked almost deeply sad. “Have a good time, son,” he said.

And then we made our escape before he could change his mind.

“I hate to say this, but we should take Raige’s car,” I said as we headed across the front yard. “Yours is crammed with road trip gear.”

“I admit I could use the AC...” Thomas admitted.

But then Raige burst into tears, rendering the discussion

moot; we would take the Steed. It meant I was squished between Raige, the door, and a box of protein bars while I pulled comforting duty, but that was okay; I'd learned *something* over the years. I just patted Raige on the back and let him cry all over my ruffles and blow his nose on my glorified hanky (Thomas called it a pocket-square) while Thomas kept a concerned eye on him as best he could while still watching the road.

"Yo," he said when he had a spare moment. "I'm just... gonna hit Tarzan's 'cause it's like the only thing in Vaygo I can get to without a map and I'm starving. That cool? We cool?"

I nodded and even Raige managed a tearful, "okay."

So we ended up at our usual booth at Tarzan's Pizza. At least Raige seemed to feel better once surrounded by the familiar heavy wood furniture and loincloth pulp art. Thomas took over comforting duty while I went and made our order—not that I really needed to. We'd been in so many times that the lady behind the counter knew our order by heart. And thank god for Vaygo social mores, which meant that under *no* circumstances were you to pay unusual attention to a crying stranger. She just gave me the Styrofoam cups with less disinterest than required, and I went to fill them up. Mountain Dew for Raige, iced tea for Thomas, and plain water for me. Maybe I couldn't magically fix things for Raige, but at least I could rehydrate him.

By the time I came back, his face was puffy and red, but he was no longer crying. "Thanks," he sniffled, and took the soda. "I'm sorry, I should've gotten you guys flowers."

Of all the things for him to care about. "Raige, I have a hard enough time thinking of a use for *one* bouquet, never mind two." I gave Thomas his iced tea and then sat across from them with my

water, fidgeting the cup between my hands. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I just... didn't expect that from Dad. Seriously, I thought he was going to throw me out or something, but..." his hands fluttered. "You'd think I'd be all happy. I don't know what's wrong with me."

I didn't know what to say, so looked to Thomas again for help. He said, "Maybe it's like a tension thing."

"Yeah?" Raige said.

"Like, you've been holding it together and doing college apps like a beast, and now you can maybe breathe some."

"Do you really think your dad's pulled his head out of his butt?" I asked dubiously before Thomas could kick me in the shin. "I dunno..."

Thomas shot me a look telling me not to ruin this, but Raige nodded. "Dad's not like that. He only says stuff he means. I mean, I think it'll be weird, still, but I'm not scared he'll kick me out now." He took a deep shuddery breath, looked at us, really looked at us, and smiled. "I like your outfits."

"It's the best, right?" I said. "I can't believe it was so cheap... the tie's super boring, though."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Not my fault you didn't like anything I had..."

"Oh! About that..." And Raige dug into his pockets.

While Thomas and I watched with curiosity, he pulled a narrow little box out of his pocket, the kind that might hold fancy jewelry. For a horrified moment, I thought he'd gotten me something expensive, but when he opened it, it turned out to hold the most magical bolo tie I'd ever seen, all silver and turquoise with dark leather laces. It was also very clearly not new.

THE PROM STORY

“Oh wow, it’s perfect!” But not Raige’s taste at all. “It’s not yours, is it?”

He shook his head. “Mom’s. I can’t wear it, but I thought you might.”

I didn’t know what I could say to that, so I settled on, “how do I put it on?”

Raige helped, and at the end, my outfit was truly complete.

After that, things were okay. We ate our pizza. We talked. Raige smiled and laughed and the more time passed, the happier he looked, like a curse had been lifted or something.

Since we’d had to bolt from Raige’s house before he finished getting dressed, Raige had to knot his tie and finish up in the Tarzan’s bathroom. When he came out, I was pleased to note that we *wouldn’t* look like a troop of penguins; Raige wasn’t wearing a stitch of black.

“I hate it,” he said. “Wearing it, I mean. It reminds me of funerals.”

Instead, he was wearing a sort of grayish tweedy thing with a blue tie and brown shoes. He’d attempted to do something with his hair, but the cowlicks surrendered to no one, so he just looked like a colossal dork, exactly how I liked him. Thomas whipped out a dandelion/rose combo boutonniere he’d made for Raige, which made us both laugh. I put it in Raige’s buttonhole, Thomas adjusted it so it wouldn’t droop, and off we went to have our quintessential high school experience.

It took us a while to find the place, and even longer to find some free parking, but we finally found a spot a few blocks away. While I tried to cram the Vaygo map back into the over-stuffed glove box, Raige started to tense up.

"What if people freak out?" he asked.

"Then I'll give you tongue," Thomas said.

I put my arm around Raige's shoulders—sitting down, I could actually reach. "Think of it this way, milquetoast," I said. "You *never* have to see any of these stupid bozos again."

"Actually, I still have grad—"

"Shh. Never again."

"Man, your grades are so good, they can't do anything to you," Thomas said. "You already got into VU, right?"

"It's in process," Raige said primly.

"Well, there you go! Let's dance."

The junior prom (which, due to Raige's early graduation, was his senior prom by proxy) was held in some community hall... but this being Oasis Valley, it was a way fancier community hall than I'd ever been in. Getting in required searches to insure we weren't carrying any alcohol, drugs, or condoms, plus us signing in, and here there was a slight problem. Turned out that if you weren't a student at Oasis Valley High, you officially needed an Oasis Valley date... and only one was allowed, of the expected gender. So they'd let me in, but not Thomas—which nuked my idea of giving Thomas my ticket and just finding my own way in, probably through the window. For a moment, it looked like Raige might go back to crying.

But then Thomas stepped in. I don't know how he did it, but for such a horn-dog, he could come off as incredibly wholesome when he wanted to be, and the prom guards must have been moms. It also might've helped that all three tickets had been paid in advance. Regardless, after a whole lot of "ma'am" and "sir" and "gosh, I don't know how that happened, but we all

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got ready,” and “I had no idea,” he got us in before Raige could melt down or I could blow up.

The dance space in the community hall had been decorated with twinkling white Christmas lights, lots of dark blue, purple, and black crepe paper, and... glow in the dark stars? Then I realized the disco ball had been made up with rings.

“Is this... supposed to be outer space?” I asked.

Raige made the face that said he thought something was unforgivably corny but didn’t want to admit to it. “The theme is ‘Out of This World, Class of ‘05.’”

Part of me was hoping we’d end up with appropriate silly sci-fi music and songs like “Planet Claire,” but no such luck; it was just Top Ten Radio, played by a DJ who kept making atrocious space puns. (Leading Raige to immediately ask if we too found the music “mercurial.” Well, if he was punning, at least that meant he was feeling better.)

While Raige went over to say hello to his marching band crew, I sidled over to Thomas, trying to keep a pleasant expression on my face. “You aren’t going to be able to treat him like your boyfriend without getting thrown out, are you?”

Thomas kept smiling. “Nope.”

I sucked my teeth. Then I said, “Let me handle it.”

He raised an eyebrow at me.

“Look, you have the social skills, you have the charm, you took care of Raige’s dad. Let me take care of this.”

“You’re the boss,” he said, and by the time Raige was back, I had my plan.

It took Raige a while to relax, but we made bad puns and silly dance moves until he was smiling and laughing again. All

three of us danced together to pop music, being careful not to touch or give any hints we were anything but friends. No problem for me, but I could tell Thomas had to work at it. He was trying his best to have a good time, but I could tell it was bugging him.

In-between sets, some of Raige's band buddies came up to talk and ask for introductions. I worried Raige would stumble, but I guess after his dad, he was finally running out of things to freak out about. He just said, "this is my boyfriend, Thomas, and my girlfriend, M.D."

At least some of them must've known already, because they made sounds of recognition and shook our hands, saying things like, "Hi, I'm Ashley, first trumpet concert," or, "I'm Chris, snare section leader," and we pretended to know what they were talking about. Others looked super puzzled or suspicious but didn't say anything. One girl snorted, which made me say, "Excuse you." A few guys thumped Raige on the back and acted like he'd won the lottery.

A surprising number asked what school we were from. Thomas and I just said, "out-of-state," and that seemed to satisfy them.

The most awkward part was Raige's ex-girlfriend, Wendy Ogata. She came up, looking a little uncertain, but then she smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you," and maybe it wasn't the most comfortable interaction I'd ever had, but at least she seemed okay.

After that, Raige seemed to perk up completely, apparently oblivious to the whispering that folks were doing around him. We danced hard to some fast songs, along with a few of Raige's band friends in a circle. Then, as the DJ switched to sappy slow music,

folks started to pair off. Raige seemed to lock up, torn between wanting to dance with both of us and also worrying who to ask first and how to be egalitarian about it.

I held out a hand to Thomas. "Rock paper scissors?"

But he waved a hand. "You go first."

I knew how much Thomas loved big romantic gestures and dancing. He was offering first dibs to me because he knew I wouldn't get us into trouble dancing with Raige. I didn't like it, but I had to admit, I wasn't quite ready to get thrown out just yet.

"Okay," I said. "But I think one round of slow-dancing is all I can handle. No offense, Raige. I'll hand you over to Thomas for the rest, how's that sound?"

Thomas's face lit up, Raige smiled, and that worked for everybody.

I'd had to invest in some white cotton gloves, since none of my collection even slightly matched the outfit. But Raige didn't seem to mind; he took my hands and led me out to the dance floor.

I won't pretend we were any good at slow-dancing, but at least it seemed pretty simple, more ambulatory hugging than actual dancing. And even though I'd always thought slow-dancing would be about as much fun as watching Infomercials, it was actually pretty okay. It probably helped that Raige wasn't trying to make ambulatory hugging into ambulatory sex, like a lot of the couples around us. He just seemed happy to be hugging me. Also, he was grinning like his face would break.

"You look happy," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't know, I just... you know how you told me, way back during the adventure period, that this would be

great?”

“I think I said it would be *interesting*.”

“Yeah, well, this is even better. I never thought I’d get to do this, with you guys, and I just can’t get over how amazingly cool this is.”

Oh man, he was not going to be happy when he realized that people were whispering about him. But I didn’t have the heart to break it to him, not right then.

“It’s kind of like... I don’t know, like something was off-key, and I thought I could never tune it, but now it is, and it feels a lot better. Does that make any sense?”

“I think so. That’s good.” And I kissed him, which made him grin harder.

“Okay,” he said after the song ended and a new one started up, a fancy one, “so this is embarrassing to admit, but my parents actually taught me to waltz.”

“You’re kidding. Your dad can *waltz*?” It was like finding a waltzing walrus.

“Yup. It’s pretty easy. Want to do it?”

“Sure, why not.”

I was terrible at it. But it was still pretty fun.

We finished that, and then Thomas spun off with Raige. Me, I kept an eye on the whispers and loaded up on snacks and punch. Pizza or no pizza, I was going to need all the extra energy I could get, especially if I wanted to stay awake through all this.

Thomas, I could tell, was in his element. Big sappy romance was totally his game, and Raige was delighted to play. I watched them hug while moving, and it felt good to watch. Once, Thomas gave me a huge grin and thumbs-up behind Raige’s back,

like he'd won the Superbowl. I gave him a thumbs-up back.

[image description: Inked illustration of the crew at a really dorky prom thing. Raige and Thomas are grinning and slow-dancing in front of a terrible tinfoil rocket ship with Christmas lights, paper UFOs and planets, while M.D. gives a thumbs-up and stuffs her face.]

The boys made it through that set okay, and then it switched to fast music again and we were insulated by a horde of marching band kids, but I could tell we wouldn't stay lucky much longer. A little social ripple was making its way out from Raige and more and more people were starting to give us weird looks. Even Thomas's charm wasn't going to save us from this one.

When we got a break between songs, I told Raige. For a moment, his shoulders slumped, and I thought he'd break down again, but then he straightened up and said, "I don't care."

I wasn't sure I believed him, but there were bigger fish to fry. "Well, that's good," I said, "because I have a plan."

I'd anticipated on having to do some convincing, but to my surprise, Raige went for it right off the bat. Maybe he'd finally had enough. Maybe he was reassured by the knowledge that his marching band crew was still sticking by him, his dad wasn't going to throw him out, and VU was highly unlikely to reject him. Or maybe I'd just been a bad influence on him. Whatever the reason, he started dancing like it was his last night on earth, and Thomas and I danced with him. Stomping and dancing was so much fun that the music became almost tolerable.

When the music switched to slow again, him and Thomas paired off again, and this time, they didn't act like they were being chaperoned. They kissed, they danced, and Thomas did what he

did best.

And so did I. When I saw the chaperon coming for them, I dashed in to put myself between them.

"Hi!" I said. "Great party, right?"

She tried to get around me, then made a double take as she recognized me; she must've been one of the people Thomas had sweet-talked. "Aren't you his date?" she said.

"One of them, yes, and I want you to leave us alone." Then, remembering Thomas's effect on adults, "please. Ma'am."

Apparently I wasn't as good at it as he was. "This is against school policy. Do you even go here?"

What was with these people and their deep abiding interest in where I went to school? "My boyfriend goes here."

"One date per student. That's the rule." She didn't seem to know what to do with me, that I wasn't upset about my boyfriend dancing with someone else. "And no... no naughty displays."

I squinted at her. I glanced at Thomas and Raige, who were dancing, but not doing anything particularly scandalous. Plus there were plenty of couples around them who seemed to be trying to exchange as many bodily fluids as possible without removing any of their clothes, but I guess they didn't count.

"What exactly are your standards?" I asked.

You'd think adults wouldn't pause to have an argument with me, but I kept that woman going for way longer than I expected. Maybe shoving me out of the way just because I was annoying seemed too drastic, or maybe all of this was making her uncomfortable enough that she felt like she had to justify herself to me. That was fine; it meant all I had to do was feed her enough lines to keep her going. She obviously wanted to avoid a scene

and stay polite, and my refusing to just go along with it seemed to set her back.

Eventually, she figured out what I was doing, though, and stopped engaging with me. She pushed past me, and I figured getting into a fistfight with a prom-mom would upset Raige, so I decided to keep it clean and start setting off sparklers instead.

They weren't dangerous, of course; nor were they real. They were just colored fountains of rainbow light, bio-generated at a distance by yours truly. It wasn't exactly what my abilities were meant to be used for—I got the sense it was the Dellan equivalent of learning to vomit in different colors, or fart the national anthem—and they were nowhere near the kind of show Biff could pull off, but that was fine. My goal wasn't to impress or scare, just distract.

It certainly got the chaperon's attention for another little bit, and Raige and Thomas took their cue to escape. I myself took off once they were good and gone; Biff could pull a pink elephant parade while driving and talking at the same time, but I was nowhere near his league and didn't want to risk the light show dying until I was sure the boys were clear.

By the time I made my own exit, Thomas and Raige had a good head start on me and were full-on sprinting across the parking lot. Sure, why not, I didn't want to hang around here either. No way could I catch up with them, but I made it to the Steed right as Thomas got it started. I vaulted into the truck bed, got my foot caught, narrowly avoided plowing face-first into the liner, and we took off.

Well, for a few blocks. Just enough to get some distance before Thomas pulled over to get me into the cab.

Raige was still doubled over laughing in the passenger seat, and he hugged me and kissed my cheek as I came in.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Alas, my formal clothes." My knees and elbows were blackened from the crash with the liner. "I'm fine, though."

"Cool," Thomas said. "You think anyone got my license number?"

"I didn't see anybody chasing us. Do you really think they'd take you down for that?"

"Man, I don't know how these people work! They pitched a fit over what school we go to!" He turned to Raige. "You okay, man?"

Raige slumped back, giggling. "Oh man, Dad's going to *kill* me." But he seemed remarkably okay about it, even delighted.

Regardless, when Thomas asked if I wanted to be dropped off first, I said no. No way was I leaving the boys to battle the bear-walrus alone.

When we arrived back at the house, the lights were still on, and when we came in, we found Raige's dad in a florid crimson bathrobe, talking on the cordless phone in his high-powered executive voice.

"I see. Yes, I understand. A disturbance, you say?" He saw us come in and pointed to the floor in a stay-put gesture. Thomas and I each took one of Raige's hands. "What do you mean by that? No, you're being vague. Say it again, clearly this time."

Well, at least Raige's dad talked like that to everybody, including other adults.

"I see. I see." He raised an eyebrow at us, but otherwise showed no emotion. "Is that so? Well, that's your business. Yes, I

will. No, I don't. Good night."

He hung up. We just stood there, Raige and Thomas sweaty from the run and the drive, me with my clothes scuffed and dirty.

Raige's dad looked us over and tightened the sash on his bathrobe as though it was his most professional tie. "That was your school. They said there was a disruption."

"Well..." Thomas started.

"I—" I began.

He froze us both with a look. "I wasn't talking to either of you." To Raige, "well?"

For a moment, I thought Raige might buckle. But then he got a look of fierce determination, straightened to his full height, and I realized that without his slouch, he was actually taller than his dad, just barely. He squeezed both our hands tight.

"They wouldn't let them in to the dance, even though I paid for the tickets. Thomas got in by pretending not to be my date, and I just got sick of it and started dancing with both of them. The school didn't like it, and we left before they could kick us out."

"I see," his dad said. "They said it was..." I could *see* the word "naughty" go through his head, hoped he would say it, but instead, he finished with, "licentious."

Raige turned red, but he also looked angry, which wasn't a first, but pretty close.

"We were slow-dancing," he said. "God, Dad, I only just started dating them, and it freaked me out even going to prom with them. Do you seriously think I'd..."

Raige's dad snorted, and I realized he was smiling. "No, I didn't. I may not be winning any fatherhood awards, but I didn't

think I knew you *that* poorly.”

“Well, good, because that’s not what happened.”

I raised my hand, like I was in school, and it seemed to work; Raige’s dad looked at me. “Yes, what is it?”

“Frankly, guy, I like your son a lot—”

“Daww,” Thomas said.

I tried to reach around Raige to smack Thomas, but couldn’t quite manage. “—But I would throw up before I did any horizontal hoedown with him in public.”

Raige’s dad looked at Thomas, who just spread his hands and said, “I don’t want to get arrested.”

“That’s what I thought,” Raige’s dad said. “Well, the school asked me to talk to you, and I have. Personally, I don’t care. You’ve been so well-behaved for so long, it’s about time you did something to irritate them. I’m glad.”

Raige said, “thank you,” probably because he didn’t know what else to say. Me, I was still waiting for the punch line.

It didn’t come. Instead, Raige’s dad looked at Thomas and me and asked, “Do you have someplace to stay tonight?”

“Yes,” I said quickly. Regardless of his sudden personality transplant, no way was I spending the night under the same roof as Raige’s dad.

Thomas said, “No, sir, and I’d love it if I could stay here.” Suck-up.

“Good. I want you sleeping in a different room, and I want your doors open, but otherwise, I’ll see you in the morning.” And he swept off in his ridiculous bathrobe.

We looked to Raige, who seemed floored.

“Holy shit,” he said. “I think he’s actually *proud* of me.”

THE PROM STORY

...

It was just as well that Biff had made me the spare keys. After all the excitement of prom and Raige's dad being stolen by body-snatchers, it was dawn by Treehouse time, and I was exhausted, plus my elbows and knees were feeling their collisions with Thomas's truck. Shinnying up the drainpipe for the fire escape just didn't appeal. As it was, all I had to do was open the lock, pull the heavy chain free that held the door shut, and drag my carcass up the four flights of stairs to unlock *that* door.

I expected Biff to be long gone by the time I staggered in, but he was still there, sweating in front of the fan and making enough pasta salad to feed Italy.

"Please tell me you didn't wait up for me," I groaned. "I've already got Raige's dad liking me and I can't take any more unpleasant surprises."

He responded by turning, pulling a camera from the counter beside him, and snapping a picture of me. When the Polaroid popped out of its slot, he gave it a few shakes to help it develop, looked it over, and smirked.

"I hate you," I said.

"Hate you too," he said, and snapped another.

I ignored him and slumped off to the shower to wash off the party. By the time I was out, Biff was off to work, but he'd left the second photo on the arm of the sofa with a pillow and a blanket, along with a bowl of noodles and pesto. As I scarfed them down (the energy for that light show had to get replaced), I looked the Polaroid over.

My clothes were mussed, my braid coming undone, and I was groggily rolling my eyes at the camera. In the margin, Biff

had written the date. Apparently this one was for me to keep. I could hang it on the wall at home, or maybe at my workplace; Scorch and Flame would probably love it...

I fell asleep before I could decide.

[image description: A black and white Polaroid, taken by Biff, of M.D. in a bedraggled canary yellow super-seventies suit covered in ruffles, flicking him off in his nasty crumbling apartment with its rusty fixtures and cracks in the walls.]

PROM NIGHT

Raige assumed the conversations with his dad were over, but it turned out he was just going to fetch fresh pillows and sheets for one of the guest rooms. Raige helped him make the bed while Thomas gave M.D. her ride home, and at first, they were quiet. But as he fluffed the pillows, Raige's dad looked at him and said, "you're a lot like your mother, you know that?"

Raige froze for a moment, then put the pillows in place. "Yeah."

"That's not a bad thing. Not mostly." Raige's dad pulled the chair away from the guest desk and sat down. He looked tired, his expression bittersweet. "I know that made it hard for you, when she... when she was gone. And sometimes I made it harder. But I'm glad you're like her. She was a good person, and so are you."

Raige wasn't sure what to say, so he decided to just sit on the bed and listen.

"Your mother, though, she burned like a bonfire," his father said. "Do you remember how she would get?"

Raige remembered his mother when she was running hot. Her frenzied speech, the chain-smoking, the relentless pacing as she wrote music and practiced. Sometimes she would stay up for days at a time. Sometimes she got a little scary. "Yeah, Dad. She could get pretty intense."

"Have you ever felt like that?"

Raige shook his head.

"You can tell me."

"No, Dad. I don't think I have it in me." He took a deep breath. "And sometimes I hate that. Because it's like the fire in her was what made her so good at music, and I don't think I'll ever be as good as her."

But Raige's dad was staring at him and shaking his head. He reached out and cupped Raige's face in his hands, and when he spoke his voice was shaking. "No. No, that didn't make her good at music, son. That fire, people think it's genius, but it burned your mother alive, and I couldn't bear it if it took you too." His voice cracked. "I might not have acted like it, but I don't care if you never become a great musician, a great businessman, a great anything. I just don't want to lose you to what took your mother." And then, desperately, "you're sure you've never felt it?"

"No, Dad. Never."

"Oh, thank God. Thank God..." Raige had never seen his father cry, not even after the funeral. "We should've talked about this sooner. I'm sorry..." and then he couldn't say anything else.

Raige hugged his dad. He started to cry too.

When Thomas came back, he saw Raige's red eyes and looked concerned.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's great," Raige said, and it was.

...

Even though it'd been a long, full day, even though it was late and Raige was tired, he couldn't stop smiling up at his bedroom ceiling. For the first time in what felt like forever, everything was okay. There was nothing to worry over or be afraid of. School, his dad, his dates, his friends... all fine.

So why couldn't he sleep?

Finally, we gave up trying and went downstairs for a glass of warm milk, hoping that it'd help wind him down with an old book. Instead, as he headed to the kitchen, he heard a door open behind him—the guestroom.

“Hey,” Thomas said.

“Sorry, did I wake you up?” But though Thomas was dressed for sleeping, he didn't look sleepy.

“Nah, can't sleep.”

“Me either. Too much excitement, I guess. I was going to get some milk, you want some?”

But Thomas grinned. “I've got a better idea.”

In the cooler night air, Thomas's truck was way more bearable, and way less cramped with only two people in it. As Raige got in, Thomas leaned across his lap to pull the map from the dash. They'd both pulled shoes and shorts on, and Thomas was no longer gussied up in formal wear, but Raige's skin still tingled where they touched anyway.

Thomas didn't seem to notice, busy diving into the map. “Okay, so I didn't get the chance on my road trip, the timing didn't work out, but y'all in Oasis Valley are right on the edge of the desert, which is supposed to have the coolest night sky views. I've got blankets in the back. You in?”

Raige looked at Thomas's eager face, even though he'd surely seen a million stars from his time in Treehouse, and couldn't help but grin back. “Sure!”

They drove off.

The cool night air blew through the open windows, and Raige put his hand out, feeling the breeze wind around his fingers like a river of silk. Him and Thomas sat in companionable silence,

listening to the wind and the road. Raige had no idea what time it was; if the Steed had ever had a functioning clock, it didn't glow in the dark, and the inside lights didn't work at all. Thomas could apparently navigate everything by touch and muscle-memory, and it meant that Raige had nothing much to look at but outside. The headlights kept his night-vision from properly kicking in, but he could still see that it was all sable and navy out, the city retreating behind them. Within fifteen minutes, the streets had been replaced with empty desert.

"Wow," Raige said, looking out the window. Outside was nothing but sky and low mountains.

"I know, right? Here, keep an eye out for a turn-off, somewhere dark so we can see better."

"There!"

It wasn't clear what the little road was; it trundled on a ways and then seemed to peter out, possibly turning into someone's ranch, but there were no streetlights or traffic. Thomas pulled over onto the shoulder, and they got out.

"Wow," Raige said.

In Oasis Valley—in all of greater Vaygo—there was way too much city to see many stars. Treehouse didn't have skyscrapers, but it did have dense forest.

Here, though, there was nothing but sky. An enormous twinkling bowl of silver and black velvet, with the Milky Way a cosmic dragon stretching all the way across. Surrounded by mountains and sky, without even road noise to break the silence, Raige felt something in him open wide and breathe. He felt tiny, cosmically insignificant, and wonderful.

Eyes on the sky, Thomas used a hand on the side of the

Steed to guide himself to the truck bed and open it. “You know, I know the Treehouse sky pretty good. It has to be one of those parallel earths, right, like Bobcat said? But it’s crazy, I don’t recognize a single constellation.” He hopped up into the bed with a couple Indian blankets under one arm, which he tossed out to cushion the hard metal. Raige joined him, and when Thomas lay down on his back, that sounded good too.

Flat on his back, it felt like he was floating in an ocean of stars. Outside the city, the heat was dissipating, almost cool. He turned and looked at Thomas, who was mussed from bed, dressed in baggy shorts and undershirt, no longer spruced up for prom. Raige remembered the last time they’d looked at stars, the last time Raige couldn’t sleep. He remembered Thomas’s smile, his mouth, his hands, his hips.

It’d been a couple years, but Raige still remembered it. Still thought about it.

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” he asked Thomas.

Thomas pulled his eyes away from the sky to give Raige a rueful smile. “I was horny.”

Raige thought about it, then rolled onto his side, threw a leg over Thomas’s hips, and pulled him in to kiss him.

Thomas didn’t resist—indeed, he melted into it and made a pleased noise. But then he pulled back. “Hey. You sure about this? I mean, no offense, but the last time we tried this, you ended up crying. It’s been a crazy day, you know? You don’t have to feel obligated or anything; I’m like, the three-time state champ of jacking off—”

“A master—” but the pun was so bad, even Raige couldn’t quite bring himself to finish it.

“For real, man. Are you okay?”

Raige thought about it and smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, I really am.”

Thomas smiled back. “Cool. Come here.”

It was weird—since the day Raige had met Thomas and realized the attraction, it’d felt like something in his chest was tied in a knot. Thomas flirting with him hadn’t loosened it; neither had kissing, or trying to have sex. Dating Thomas and M.D. had loosened it some, but not entirely.

Now, though, it felt gone. Like everything was right. And Thomas was gorgeous, the night was perfect, and no way was anyone likely to come driving on whatever this road was at whatever hour this was. And besides, Thomas’s old truck had a pretty deep bed; unless some person climbed up with a flashlight...

Raige grabbed Thomas, got on top of him, and started kissing like his heart depended on it. And god, it felt good, to feel Thomas open up into it, to touch him without being distracted by a million worries and anxieties. To not feel confused or guilty or ashamed. Thomas was his boyfriend, had been his boyfriend for months, everyone knew, and everything was fine.

The blankets under them were soft and warm, and so was Thomas’s undershirt, his skin, his mouth. He still smelled a little of his deodorant, and goosebumps were rising on the skin under Raige’s hands, and oh, this was even better than Raige remembered.

Thomas touched Raige’s shirt. “So, do I get to this time?”

Raige’s face felt hot, but he nodded and sat up, and Thomas’s grin was like the moon as he pulled Raige’s shirt off. Even without streetlights, the moon was mostly full, and between

that, the stars, and their night vision, they could still see fine. Raige resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest and curl in on himself.

But Thomas was looking at him like he was beautiful. “Nice,” he said, trailing his fingers over the freckles on Raige’s arms. “Man, this is what you’ve been hiding? You’re crazy.”

Raige laughed and pulled Thomas’s shirt off, then went for his shorts.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Do I get to...?”

Raige swallowed hard. “If you want.”

They went back to kissing, and Raige could feel Thomas’s hands shaking. It made him feel a little more confident, even though the closest Raige had to ideas about the proceedings came from fanfiction, where everyone was gratuitously endowed. Which had always seemed kind of intimidating, to Raige at least.

Fortunately, under the baggy shorts, Thomas seemed to be built more along the lines of what Raige had seen in school locker rooms. He was lithe and golden and Raige still couldn’t believe this guy wanted to be his boyfriend, *was* his boyfriend, had put on a tux and brought him roses in front of his dad, danced slow and close with him at prom where anyone could see them. He was fearless and shameless, and...

...And totally failing at getting Raige’s fly open. Apparently his cool didn’t extend to his fine motor control, not when he was turned on anyway. Which was kind of flattering, that Thomas not only wanted this with him, but also wanted it badly enough that he couldn’t undo buttons. How was that anything but the coolest

thing ever?

Raige's hands weren't shaking. He had drummer hands, pianist hands, and no matter how anxious he got, they never showed it. (And thank god for that; he would've been *doomed*.) He risked a touch, and Thomas gasped into his mouth, pushed into his hand, and flailed at the buttons with no success. Raige hardly noticed the last bit; he was still enchanted by the feel of soft skin over solid core, the warmth, the way Thomas squirmed and breathed and sounded. For a moment, he just drank it all in, mapped him by hand.

Thomas pulled away, panting. "Hey... Raige..."

"This okay?"

Lazy grin. "Oh yeah. Just... I picked up condoms while dropping M.D. off. If you want to do something else, they're in the glove compartment, but this is fine, like a hundred percent fine, too."

Raige thought of all the things they could be doing (well, as best he could imagine) and sure, it was exciting, but it was also... much. Raige had read just enough to suspect that it probably wasn't what doing it was actually like. This, though, this he'd done before, with himself at least. And there were lots of things Raige froze up on, but his hands had never let him down.

"This is fine," Raige breathed, and started stroking.

Thomas went to pieces. He kissed rough and hungry, murmuring, finally gave up on the buttons and just clung to Raige's shoulders. The angle was a little difficult and trying to make it better just ended with Thomas in his lap, rubbing all over him and thrusting between their stomachs.

Raige had seen Thomas without the Mr. Cool act before.

Seen him tired, or hurt, or sad. But seeing him like this was something else. It was like seeing deep into him, somewhere primal and beautiful. His face was open, his hands still, but his body undulating like he was trying to rub as much of himself against as much of Raige as he could reach—hips and chests and stomachs and thighs, dick slipping through Raige’s fingers to brush against the sensitive skin above his belt line. He was... wetter than Raige was, which was different, and a little messy, but also kind of nice.

[image description: A black and white ink wash illustration of Raige and Thomas making out in the back of Thomas’s ancient truck, surrounded by stars, desert, and mountains.]

Thomas was getting loud now, babbling almost-words despite himself, hips stuttering, clutching at Raige’s shoulders, squeezing him close and tight and god, Raige was aching—

With a cry, Thomas came over his fingers, wet and sticky, and Raige felt a sympathetic throb in the pit of his stomach, but not enough to spill over. God. That’d been even better than he remembered.

Thomas came down slowly, shivering and thrusting shallowly until relaxing completely into Raige’s arms, chuckling.

“You okay, man?” His voice was rough and deep and god, Raige was going to die if Thomas didn’t touch him right now.

“Uh. Yes.” Raige’s voice was more stable that it’d been the last time they’d tried this, but still nowhere as nice-sounding as Thomas’s. Raige couldn’t stop looking from his slick hand to Thomas’s rosy expression. “Can you—I mean—”

Thomas chuckled deep in his throat and this time got Raige’s shorts open on the first try. Raige had about a millisecond

to belatedly worry about how he looked before he saw Thomas's grin.

"Oh hell yeah," he said. "And you think you're not hot."

And then Thomas's tongue was in his mouth, on his neck and collarbone and chest, and his hand was wrapping around Raige with short, sharp strokes and god, yes, finally, *finally*. And Thomas was looking at him like he was the hottest thing ever, and Raige was even starting to kind of believe him a little. The closest they'd ever gotten to this before was Thomas groping him once through his jeans, and this was better, so much better—

It was building now, this beautiful aching anticipation, and yes, this was good, this was *perfect*, something amazing was about to happen, he could feel it coming—

But it stalled out there. He squirmed, sped up, but that only made it worse. He made a sound of frustration.

"Loosen up," Thomas said, laughter in his voice, and Raige relaxed guiltily. "No hurry."

They kissed, and there—*now*—

"Fuck! Yes!"

Raige had had orgasms before, of course. He wasn't *that* inexperienced, not since he was fourteen and discovered his favorite fanfic site. But what with all the stress of college admissions and his dad, he hadn't been in the right frame of mind for a while. But now months of tension rushed out of him.

When he came back to himself, Thomas had pulled the blanket over them and was looking at him nervously. Waiting for him to freak out, or break down in tears, like had happened the last time.

Raige remembered. He remembered how Thomas had

PROM NIGHT

comforted him, then played it like no big deal. “Just for fun,” he’d said, but Raige had seen the hurt in his face.

So Raige pushed some of the hair back from Thomas’s face, beamed, and said, “Thank you.”

And the second before Thomas grinned back, Raige saw the wide-eyed vulnerability, the open wonder, before it was covered by joy.

Raige hugged Thomas tight, and they laughed, and fell asleep under the rough blankets.

RITUAL PURIFICATION THROUGH ARSON

A couple weeks after prom, I came to Biff's apartment and found him gone.

This alone wasn't unusual. Biff and I both kept odd hours, exacerbated by the time zone difference, and neither of us had reliable phone service. Missing each other sometimes was inevitable. Normally, I would've shrugged and either waited up for him or darted back out his window, but this time, I paused. Something was missing, and after a moment, I realized what: his spice rack.

Really, it wasn't even a rack, just a duct-taped shoe box, but the way Biff acted, it was solid gold and invented the fork, and if you put something back wrong, he'd bite your head off. The spice box was always on the counter, the place of honor, so he could reach it without moving from the stove. And now it was gone.

It wasn't the only thing missing, either. The perishables were gone too, and when I came inside to look around more thoroughly, so was his cooler.

For anyone else, this would've meant a forgotten grocery run, but Biff's food was his entertainment center; he *never* ran out. With a growing sense of foreboding, I went to the cantankerous old fridge. It took a good couple yanks, but I finally succeeded in getting the door open.

It was completely barren except for a chunk of cheese and a large Tupperware container with a bit of paper taped to the lid,

reading “MD.”

The Tupperware, it turned out, contained chili. The note was scribbled in Biff’s atrocious handwriting and idiosyncratic shorthand. Translated, it read:

MD—

gone to GA

back next week

H2O garden 1/DAY & get mail

eat the chili

—B

No explanation. No return date. Not even a “please.” I balled up the note and threw it in the trash with a growl. Then, like the patsy I was, I went to ransack his cabinets for something with which to water the basil, rosemary, and unknown Treehouse monstrosity growing in coffee cans on the fire escape—his “garden.” No reason for the horticulture to suffer just because their owner was a jerk.

As I poured the water over the coffee cans, my annoyance gave way to growing unease. Biff never left Vaygo if he could help it, and Georgia had to be a good few days’ trip by bus, at least. A trip like that cost serious money, at least for people like Biff and me. What could possibly be so important that he’d just up and drop everything and go cross-country? The only things he had back in Georgia were his family and...

I froze. The old olive oil bottle I was using as a watering

can went empty, but I didn't think to right it.

Oh no.

She was in Georgia.

I didn't know her name; he'd never coughed it up. He called her nothing but *she* or *her*, like she was less a person and more an entity, a symbol, an idea. If he'd intended to deface her into nothingness, it backfired royally. Instead of just one person, she seemed like everyone you ever ran from.

And now he'd gone to Georgia.

Part of me hoped he knew what he was doing. The other part worried what that might entail.

...

For the next week or so, I darted back and forth to Biff's apartment, watering his plants, gathering his "mail" (i.e., the sticky notes on the door), and scuttling out again. Eight days passed. Nine. Ten. He still didn't come back.

I grew steadily more twitchy and irritable until one morning, over the Rodriguez family breakfast table, I caved and desperately asked Raige and Thomas, "you guys haven't happened to hear anything about Biff lately, have you?"

Raige raised his eyes from his pink paperback to give me a dubious look. "We don't exactly run in the same circles."

"I know," I said hastily. "I just meant... er. On the news. Or something."

It went over as badly as it sounded.

"Oh god, what's he done now?" Thomas groaned from behind the classifieds, where he was circling jobs. "Wait, never mind, keep it to yourself. I don't want to be an accessory."

"He hasn't done anything," I retorted, praying I was right.

“He’s just... vanished for a week and a half now.”

Thomas and Raige were both giving me “this is surprising you *why?*” looks.

“I’m not *concerned*,” I hastened to add. “Just... ten days...”

Thomas and Raige let their reading materials fall slack and gave each other sardonic looks, then turned back to me with identical expressions of wide-eyed sincerity.

“What’s that?” Raige asked innocently. “You mean he just up and left without telling you where he was going or when he’d be back?”

“You mean you have no idea what trouble he might be in, just that he probably is?” Thomas added.

“You mean you’re desperately worried about him but have absolutely no way to contact him because he didn’t seem to think you might want to know?” Raige continued sweetly.

Thomas rubbed his chin. “Remind you of anyone?”

Raige snapped his fingers. “It’s on the tip of my tongue, give me a second...”

“All right, all right, I get it,” I snapped, “this is karmic retribution for all the times I did the exact same thing to you.”

They burst into frenzied applause.

“Oh god,” Raige said, wiping away an invisible tear, “after all this time, you finally understand, I’m so proud to be your boyfriend right now...”

“She’s come so far,” Thomas agreed.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re both hilarious, stop clapping. So you haven’t heard anything?”

“Nope,” Raige said, going back to his paranormal romance, “and I’m going to say that’s a good thing.”

"I'll ask Ma to keep an eye on the Most Wanted list," Thomas retorted, pulling up the classifieds again. "I'll let you know if he pops up. But seriously, I mean it, don't tell me what he's doing."

...

It was Thursday of the week Biff said he'd be coming back, but there was a small pile of notes and papers at his door, and when I let myself in, the spice box. I sighed, added the papers to the pile on the counter, and went to pick up my old friend the olive oil bottle. It, at least, had proven its constancy.

Which was more than I could say for Biff's sink; turning the tap yielded nothing. This was hardly the first time, so I sighed and moved to the more reliable shower—or rather, the section of severed garden hose duct taped to the pipe sticking out of the bathroom wall. It too was dry.

I rolled my eyes up to the cracked ceiling and whined. Bad enough Biff had me pulling house-sitting duty for a week and a half; he couldn't seriously expect me to do repair work too.

For a moment, I was tempted to just leave, but it was broiling hot, and the abandoned houseplants needed all the help they could get. Finally, sympathy for the garden made up my mind, and I dragged my way to the old lady across the hall.

Biff insisted the woman wasn't his landlady, merely someone with whom he shared a mutually beneficial business arrangement. But from what I understood, she was the one who ran the place, she was the one who'd gotten the place semi-reliable power and running water, and she was *definitely* the one who put most of the notes on his door, warning about brownouts, water rationing, and missed connections. In my books, that made her

his landlady. We'd never really talked; I always got the sense she was trying to figure out my angle.

I knocked on the cracked, splintery door. It opened a few inches, exposing a long, pointed nose and beady little eyes.

"What do you want?"

I held up the olive oil bottle and smiled cheerfully. "Hi, I'm Biff's chump lackey for the week, watering his poor forsaken houseplants. His pipes have died, so—"

"I ain't fixing no pipes till he's back."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I just want some water for the plants."

She eyed me suspiciously, and for a moment, I thought she'd tell me to go away and bother someone else. Then a bony hand reached through the crack in the door. I handed the bottle to her, and she took it and shut the door in my face. After a minute, it opened again and she passed the bottle back to me, filled. This time, she undid the chain and opened the door enough for me to see all of her; she had a baggy housedress, a wild mane of salt-and-pepper hair, and an appraising squint.

"You that kid who stayed with him while he was drying out," she said. I couldn't tell if it was a statement or a question. "I never see you around, though. Where you live?"

I blinked. "Out of town."

I could tell she didn't like that answer. "What's he to you?" I must've looked blank. "You ain't kin, are you?"

She sounded highly doubtful, with good reason. Biff and I showed no physical resemblance, asides from brown skin, blond hair, and shortness.

I snorted. "No."

She crossed her arms and waited for a better answer.

"I'm his..." god, what *were* we to each other? "...associate?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Business?"

"No."

Oddly, that seemed to amuse her. It was strange to see her bitter face almost smiling. "And you water his plants." Again, statement or question? Couldn't say.

I shrugged. "Not their fault their owner's an unreliable jerk who doesn't give a proper times-table for when he'll be back."

She sniffed derisively. "He'll be back Saturday night. Now stop skittering round all the time. You think I can't hear you? I ain't deaf. You're worse than the rats."

The door creaked shut again. I stood there staring at the flaking paint, olive oil bottle hanging from my hand.

Finally I shrieked, "he couldn't have told me that *before*?"

Then I stormed off to water his godforsaken plants, muttering furiously under my breath. When I got home, I was going to give both Raige and Thomas big hugs and profuse apologies. They deserved to be canonized for all the times I'd done this to them in the past.

...

The downtown Interstate Bus Service terminal was an interesting study on the futility of humanity's battle against entropy. At the best of times, it was irregular; at worst, it resembled a cross between a Chinese fire drill and the New York Stock Exchange during a bank crisis. But when it came to covering long distances on the cheap, it couldn't be beat. Even *I* had been on an Inter-Bus.

Today, though, I wasn't a passenger. I sat outside on a

hard metal bench with obscenities scratched into the paint, watched bewildered people rush back and forth, and I waited. Raige had offered me a ride, but for all his sweetness and politeness, I knew that him and Biff got on like oil and water, and I didn't want to torture him. Nor did I want him around if Biff turned out to have done something highly illegal.

If he came back at all. Which I was still uncertain about.

It'd been a long day. A long week (or two). The jittery terminal board showed that the last bus from Atlanta was delayed yet again, and despite myself, I started nodding off on the bench. Back in Treehouse, it was my bedtime—and I'd been up since dawn working. My eyelids felt leaden. My chin dropped to my chest. I dozed off.

"Hey."

I jerked upright. There was a crick in my neck, it was dark out, and the terminal was almost deserted except for a couple bleary backpackers and Biff. He stood in front of me with a sweatshirt tied around his waist and a ratty duffel bag slung over his shoulder. His perpetual stubble had grown into a scruffy beard, his clothes were rumpled, and he reeked of gasoline. Apparently the Inter-Bus had been an even bigger hazard than usual.

He looked as tired as I felt. And something about him seemed... off. Not his usual white-boy disguise illusion either. Something else.

Before I could put my finger on it, he said, "How long you been waiting there?"

I twisted my neck, which cracked. "Your stupid bus was late."

“How you know which one was mine?”

“I didn’t, because *somebody* didn’t see fit to say. I waited.” I stretched the kinks out of my back, then stood up, and we headed off towards the subway. “Thought you weren’t coming back, maybe.”

His mouth quirked skeptically. “Thought I’d stay in Georgia?”

“Its prison system, yes. What happened, did someone die?”

He winced and lengthened his stride, but I kept pace. “You been watering my plants? Getting the mail?”

“Yeah, yeah, I treated them like they were my own leafy children, truly devoted. Also, your landlady needs some cash for your pipes, someone named Benny has a job for you, and rolling brownouts are in effect. You owe me way more than one Tupperware of chili for that, by the way—”

At that moment, Biff’s stomach chose to send up a gurgling wail of agony. Apparently he hadn’t managed to get any dinner on the road back.

I reached into my belt and pulled out a dumpling. Biff looked at it skeptically; I pushed it into his face. “Don’t be a snob. I’ve fed you Treehouse food before.”

Giving in, he chomped down, and apparently it passed muster.

“You need to eat?” he asked with his mouth full.

“I’m covered. You want to talk?”

He rubbed his face with his free hand. “I wanna sleep. For a fucking week.” He paused. “I got booze at the house?”

“No.”

He made a noise I couldn't interpret. "You want my couch? I shouldn't drink tonight."

"You shouldn't drink any night, Biff. Besides, you aren't getting rid of me that easy."

"Cool." He seemed relieved.

...

We were both too exhausted to talk on the subway; I had a hard enough time just staying awake. I'd never seen the train so empty—nothing but homeless sleepers, late-shift workers, and the hardest of the Saturday night bar crowd. It made for a quiet journey back. Biff shrugged on his usual body language armor of "look at me funny and I'll break your face," but it seemed to take some effort and he wasn't really trying.

That's when I realized what'd seemed different about him. I'd known Biff long enough to know that he didn't drop the tough guy act for hell or high water, and here he was, struggling to manage the bare minimum. He wasn't even dressed right. Normally, Biff wore muscle-for-hire shirts, nothing loose or with sleeves, and he kept his hair pulled back. But now it was hanging loose in stringy waves to his shoulders, and his baggy T-shirt looked like it'd been snatched from a gas station—it even had some awful penis joke about motorcycles on it.

But what made me most uneasy was his anger. Usually, Biff constantly radiated a steaming, simmering rage that was always on the verge of boiling over, and I was pretty certain it was the only thing keeping him alive half the time. Now it was gone, and that had never been a good sign in the past.

Maybe he was just tired. But I'd seen Biff tired before.

Biff caught me looking at him and gave me a disgusted

look that was almost his old face. He made a shooing gesture, as though telling me to get some tact.

I grimaced (being caught was bad, getting chided for lack of subtlety by *Biff* of all people was worse) and stared at an ad requesting sperm donors for the rest of the trip.

We shuffled off the subway and staggered straight up the stairs to Biff's apartment. He dropped his duffel in the doorway and made for the shower, rubbing his lower back.

"Your pipes are out again," I told him.

He halted. Made a face. Then he waved his hand derisively and moved for the couch instead. "Fuck it. I'll take care of it tomorrow. Another night won't kill me."

He collapsed onto the couch with a sigh of relief. After what surely must've been a couple nights of being stuck upright, I didn't blame him, but I shoved his legs, trying to move his bulk.

"Hey, that's *mine*. Get your own bed, freeloader."

Groaning like I'd asked him to build the pyramids, he got up, staggered the steps to the mattress on the floor, and flopped face-down on it, barely pausing to kick off his boots and dump his keys, smokes, and wallet out of his pockets. I took my rightful place on the sagging, lumpy sofa, and pulled down the blanket Biff left draped over the top for me.

I had just enough time to catch the faint smell of gasoline he'd left on the cushions. Then I was out like a light.

I ended up waking up before Biff, which was no surprise; I was a morning bird and he probably had way more sleep to catch up on than I did. I took advantage of it to go across the hall and let Biff's quasi-landlady know that he'd returned and apparently gotten into a fight with a filling station, so could she please fix his

pipes? She handed me a few bottles of water to cover breakfast and grabbed a toolbox to go take care of it, and by the time Biff was up, mumbling and scratching himself, the shower was fixed—well, its normal level of malfunction anyway.

After an ice-cold shower and a shave to get his sideburns back to their requisite precision thinness, Biff was awake and alert and no longer smelled like anything but testosterone. He was also ravenous, as was I, and his cupboards were barren.

We stopped across the street at the mini-mart to grab emergency supplies. The enormous selection of liquor made me nervous, as did the way Biff looked at them, but he turned away without buying any of them.

Groceries attained, we made our way back up to his place.

“I ain’t cooking,” Biff announced, grabbing a banana. “Too fucking hungry.”

“I could give it a shot,” I volunteered.

He looked at me skeptically. “You can cook now?”

I fidgeted. “Scrambled eggs? Sort of?”

I grabbed the eggs and a frying pan, and Biff held out for all of two minutes before my attempts at homemaking made him decide he could cook after all. He shoved me out of the way and took over, grumbling halfheartedly about how I wouldn’t know how to grease a pan if it shoved itself up my rectum and died there, and would I make myself useful and get him some butter? He put me to work chopping ingredients and grabbing dishes, and that kept us both busy for a while, until we finally retreated from the stove-heated kitchen to the fire escape to take advantage of the cooler air and the shade.

Outside, the Sunday morning traffic was a grumbling,

glutted crawl; in Vaygo, some traffic was always jammed, no matter the day or hour. I hung my legs through the railing, watched the church folks scurry by, and scarfed chicken ovaries with cheese, tomatoes, bell peppers, and mushrooms, plus spices from the beloved box (now returned to its proper place).

“So?” I asked. “What brought you back?”

He glanced at me, then went back to studying the traffic. “Nothing. It just been ten years since I left. Doing your hair for that dance reminded me. That’s all.”

“Yeah? How’d it go?”

He shrugged and propped his feet against the rusty railing. “She got some money now.”

No emphasis. Just she. “How?”

“Dunno.” With a shrug, he forked some eggs in his mouth and chewed. “Nicer house, better part of town—still got the car, though.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Go figure, huh? She doing great, and I ain’t stopped fucking up since.”

I watched him, chewing without attention. He seemed oddly calm—more relaxed than I’d ever seen him, including the times he’d been loaded up on alcohol, nicotine, or post-injury painkillers. It made me nervous.

“What’d you do?” I asked.

He didn’t seem to hear me. “Must’ve remarried, I guess,” he continued, tapping his fork against his plate. “Couldn’t find her in the phone book... I’d been up shit creek if it wasn’t for that damn car...”

“Biff. What did you do?”

He glanced up at me, as though startled at my seriousness, then went back to staring out into the shimmering skyline. “I set

her car on fire.”

[image description: a silhouette of Biff under a night sky with a lighter just barely illuminating his face.]

Well, that explained the smell. All I could think to say was, “You sure it was hers?”

He snorted. “Custom paint job. I’d know that fucking thing anywhere.” He saw my face and hastily added, “Jacked it at dawn and pulled out in an empty parking lot. Nobody to see, nothing else to burn. I stayed, watched to make sure.”

I wasn’t sure what baffled me more: that Biff seemed to worry I’d think less of him, or that he worried I’d think less of him not for carjacking or arson, but for being *irresponsible* about it.

Finally, I swallowed my eggs and admitted, “I worried you were going off to kill her.”

His face went through a rapid tumult of expressions, including a wince. “Thought about it,” he admitted, “but I didn’t wanna touch her.” He leaned back against the concrete and folded his arms behind his head, letting the plate rest in his lap. “So that’s what happened.”

I sat there for a while, still taking it in, trying to put it together. Of all things, what I ended up saying was, “Arson isn’t really your style.”

Biff just shrugged.

But it still bothered me. Carjacking was something Biff had done with me before, but if anyone had ever asked me how he would destroy a car, I would’ve guessed with a bat and a knife, not matches and lighter fluid. When it came to violence and destruction, Biff was a hands-on, spur-of-the-moment type. I tried to think what might change that, and could only come up

with one answer: whoever “she” was, he was still petrified of her, so much so that not only could he not assault her in person, he couldn’t even do it to her *car*.

I wondered what stealing it and driving it off had been like for him. He must’ve wanted out of it as quick as possible.

I could’ve asked a lot of questions then, but what I ended up asking was, “What’d you have against that car?”

Biff glanced at me, then reclined back with a sigh and spoke calmly, seemingly to the skyline. It was just as well that he wasn’t looking at me.

“She loved that car. My old man gave it to her.” Wait, Biff’s father knew this woman? Had that kind of money? “Custom paint and everything. She took me round in it a few times, for—you know. Before I left. Said the car was hers, so she could do whatever she wanted in it.” He shook his head and pulled a pack of Marlboros out of his back pocket, fished for his lighter. “I fucking hated that car.”

The lighter burst into flame, and he lit up. I watched in silence as he inhaled, then tucked the pack and lighter back in his pocket and sighed the smoke out over the rail.

“How’d she react?” I asked finally.

He shrugged. “Didn’t stick around to see.”

“I would’ve stayed for the reaction.”

“I didn’t want to look at her.” And he went back to smoking, apparently done talking.

Finally I asked, “Did it help?”

He looked at me.

“Please tell me it helped,” I said, moving my plate so I could pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. “You

went through a lot of trouble to do that, and it's going to kill me if you feel just as horrible as before."

He opened his mouth, but seemed to rethink whatever he was going to say and ended up just shutting it again.

"You look a lot less angry now, but the only times I've ever seen you *not* angry, you were on the verge of putting a gun in your mouth," I continued, "so you know..."

He seemed to give the question some thought. Then he said, "Y'know, it sounds fucking crazy, right, but you'd think I'd be happy, right? Burning that car. But I freaked. Just fucking ran, grabbed the first bus I could even though I was thinking of buying a few more days. It was like... I dunno. That car was fucking *sacred* or something, like it was God, and I didn't think it'd actually *burn*. But at the end of the day, it was just a car. All that custom paint, all that work and money and shit that went into it... gone.

"She'll get the money back, sure," he added. "You gotta be crazy not to insure something like that. But she ain't never gonna get that car back."

"Good," I said.

He didn't seem to hear. "It felt like I broke the world or something. The whole time I'm on that fucking bus, I'm freaking out about it."

"But you didn't drink," I said.

He grimaced. "Barely. If I hadn't been there right as the bus was going, I would've gotten trashed. Jesus, kid, being back there... I never been so thirsty. I'm *still* fucking thirsty.

"But I was tired of it. Ten years since I fucking left. *Ten*. I was so sick of thinking 'bout her, *caring*. I wanted her out of my head. Wanted it over.

"Dunno if that did it. Guess we'll see."

I looked him over. "Well, I don't know about that, but I'll tell you one thing; something about you is different. It's like you're quieter inside or something."

"Yeah?" He gave me a light shove. "Yeah, that's how it feels, maybe. Quieter. You got quieter inside after being with your crazy dinosaur bosses a bit. And you got better after, so maybe I'll get better too."

I smiled and punched him in the shoulder. He punched me back, and we went back to watching the tides of humanity ebb and flow below, going from church to home, bar to bar, all with the aimless haste of the city.

"So, while you were over in Georgia, you get to see any of your family?" I asked. "Torch your old man's car, since he apparently has so many to go around?"

He looked stricken for a moment. Then he got it together and said, "No. Just her, and I didn't want to see her."

Biff had never told me much about his life before Vaygo, but what little he had suddenly all made sense. Why he'd left, why he acted the way he did, why he never, ever discussed his family. Why he'd never called her a name.

The only things I could think to say were greeting card banalities, and finally I just leaned into him, resting my head against the shoulder of his hideous crotch rocket T-shirt. He didn't throw me off. He leaned into my weight for a moment, looked tired.

"I'm amazed you stayed dry through that," I said.

He laughed a little. Later I'd find out why, but he didn't tell me then. Instead, said, "Better I stay dead to 'em, at least till I can

got something good to show for myself. Oh, and hey,” he tapped his coffee can garden, “thanks for watering the plants.”

“You’re lucky I can read your chicken scratch. And don’t ever make me find out your itinerary from your landlady again.”

“She ain’t my landlady.” But it was muted, and we sat and watched the traffic crawl by through the streets.

I had to return to Treehouse for work not long after, and the moment I left, Biff went to the mini-mart, bought a ton of liquor, and drank himself sick. It was like he needed to punish himself.

That was the last we talked about it for two years.

WHEN THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WHERE

Raige called up Thomas first, since he was the one with the phone line.

"Bueno?"

"Hey, it's Raige."

"My man! What can I do you for?"

"Cute." Raige braced the phone between his ear and his shoulder so he could tape up a box as he talked. "Well, the big day has finally arrived. I'm moving to VU this weekend."

"Isn't orientation next week?"

"So I procrastinated a little. I couldn't decide what to bring to my dorm room, so I'm taking it all." *Shrrrip*. "Anyway, Dad's got a board meeting until late, so he can't help me out till then. I was wondering if you were free."

Thomas made a dubious noise; Raige heard sounds as though he was scrabbling for a calendar. "Only Monday, and only as long as you don't need the Steed. Every college student in town is moving right now, and my boss will kill me if I try and take off."

"No, no, I've got the car, so you can just grab a blip from the League. It should only be a few hours work, no big deal; I've got most of it packed up and just need help moving it."

"Sure, no problem. M.D. coming?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm still kind of working on that part, actually."

You know how it is with her schedule and the logistics.”

“Enh, I owe her a visit; she was going to come over for barbecue. I’ll tell her, make sure she can make it.”

“Thanks, Thomas. I owe you guys dinner and music. See you Monday.”

“See you then.” *Click.*

Raige put the tape away and hastily scribbled SHEET MUSIC, BOOKS, COMICS on the side of the box in marker. He stood up, surveyed the mass of cardboard, and took a deep breath.

“Adulthood,” he said.

After all the adventures, he somehow thought it’d be less scary.

...

Monday came, and with it, stifling humidity. Even Thomas, who was used to hauling heavy boxes in the Texas summer, wilted the moment he went outdoors.

“Oh man, this is *nasty*.” The second he dropped his load of boxes by the Lexus, he shucked his shirt. “Tell me it’ll rain.”

Raige sighed, set down his own box, and pulled his shirt away from his skin, trying to force a breeze. “God, I wish. But no, it’s just mocking you.”

Mopping at his face with the shirt, Thomas headed for the side of the house. “Screw the boxes, man, I’m soaking down with the hose; I don’t want to *die*.”

[illustration description: Shirtless Thomas dousing him down with a garden hose in a suggestive fashion and ridiculously baggy 2004-era shorts.]

While Raige arranged the boxes, mostly as an excuse to keep from looking at his shirtless, sweaty boyfriend, M.D. came

out with her own box full of books, whistling and dressed in summer clothes, completely unbothered. Raige and Thomas both glared at her with envy.

She smirked and struck a pose with the box. "Yeah, that's right. Solar-powered desert alien. Feel envy, Earthlings."

Thomas made as if to blast her with the hose, but she held the paper products hostage.

"Don't worry, this shouldn't take long," Raige assured as Thomas poured water over his head and shoulders with a sigh of relief. "A few hours, then we can stay in the AC."

Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. Box after box after box came out, adding to the pile by the car, and the sun just got hotter and hotter. Raige was far too insecure (and burnable) to think of going shirtless in public in broad daylight, but he was starting to wonder if dying of embarrassment was really worse than dying of heat stroke.

"God, how much crap do you own?" Thomas complained as he moved another stack.

"It looked like less outside the boxes..." Raige protested weakly, crab-walking through the door because the stack in his arms blocked his direct vision.

"I think this is the fourth box I've carried out of music alone," M.D. complained, kicking the door shut behind her.

"Didn't I tell you to clean out your belongings before this?"

"I *did*," Raige protested, which just made Thomas and M.D. groan.

"God, I don't even want to know what it was like before..." Thomas said, kicking the recycling bin out of the way. "And don't put them in the car yet, I told you, it's way easier to do that once

you have everything out.”

“Raige, I never planned on going to college, and even *I* know dorm rooms are tiny. Where are you going to put all this?” M.D. asked.

“I’ll find a way. When there’s a will, there’s a where.”

M.D. was only strong enough to carry one box at a time, which meant he could see her roll her eyes. But then again, she’d been living out of a backpack when Raige met her, and he was pretty sure she still packed it periodically, just to make sure her stuff hadn’t outgrown it.

“Man, if I’d known you were going to have this much stuff, I would’ve said screw the Lexus, told the boss my grandma was dying, and chugged the Steed down here,” Thomas said, putting his boxes down to rub the small of his back. “In my professional estimation as a temporary employee of Tio’s Moving Company, there’s no way you’re going to fit all that in there.”

“When’s there’s a will, there’s a where,” Raige insisted stubbornly—mostly because god, this first load was bad enough, he didn’t want to have to drive it all over to VU, then come all the way back for *more*.

M.D. nudged between them to drop her box. “I hate to say this, but maybe your dad could bring his car, put the extra boxes in that?”

Raige grimaced. “The Miata is *tiny*. And I don’t know, I wanted to be able to do this myself, prove I’m not totally incompetent, you know?”

They all looked at the car and the boxes dubiously. Finally, Thomas made as though to roll up his sleeves and came forward.

“Make way for the master. Let’s see if I can work some

miracles...”

Within half an hour, Thomas had found an order for the Lexus. They made an assembly line, and after that, things went pretty quickly and smoothly.

Well, except for the three boxes of varying sizes left out.

“What about these?” Raige asked, nudging one of them with his foot.

Thomas shrugged. “Either you tie them to the top, come back for a second trip, or you dump ‘em. I’m good, but I’m not a god.” He stretched, rolling his shoulders. “Except in bed.”

“Yes, yes, we’re all aware,” M.D. said, surveying the packing job. The Lexus was packed denser than a rush hour subway, with just enough space at the top for Raige to still be able to somewhat use the rear-view mirror. “Huh. Actually, that’s pretty good.”

Thomas bowed. But she wasn’t done.

“Except you filled the back seat, so one of us is stuck behind.”

Thomas’s bow halted midway through. “Aw, man.”

M.D.’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, ooh, I could ride on the roof, I haven’t done that in years, it’ll be great—”

“No,” Thomas and Raige said in unison.

“I’m going on the highway,” Raige added. “I’m not getting pulled over for—”

“For having an alien stuck to the roof of your Lexus? But it’d make such a great story for your future hypothetical grandchildren!”

It was just as well that Raige’s dad then pulled into the driveway and came out, undoing his tie and rolling up his sleeves in the heat.

"How's the move going?" he asked.

Raige sighed and gestured helplessly at the last few boxes, but his father didn't seem upset. He seemed almost eager to be a part of it, even if it was only the end.

"This is it? Well done. I'll take the rest." And he bent to reach for one.

For a moment, Raige worried that Thomas and M.D. might draw straws to see who'd have to ride with his dad, but M.D. gave Thomas a pleading look, and he said, "Here sir, let me help with that. I work with a moving company, you know..."

M.D. mouthed "thank you" while Raige's dad's back was turned.

...

Raige's roommate, who according to the sticky note on the door was named Joshua Hsu, looked to have already moved in, though he wasn't there when the moving party arrived. Judging by the spartan furnishings, he'd come from out of state, and thus with only the possessions that could be lugged onto a plane. Good thing, too; Raige's stuff needed all the space it could get.

With Raige's dad's help, they managed to truck everything in without too much trouble—and they even made a decent start on *unpacking* it all. There weren't even any fights; apparently Thomas had taken up making his own soda, which Raige's dad was honestly interested in. They happily swapped brewing stories while M.D. mostly hauled books out of boxes and tried to stay out of the way.

They had gotten through maybe half a dozen boxes when Raige discovered with dismay that the "few hours work" had turned into a full day of stress and labor, even with all the extra

help. As an apology for his total underestimation of the magnitude of the undertaking, Raige said, "Okay, I'm treating everyone to dinner."

When he mentioned it, his dad looked stiff for a moment, then asked, "May I join you?"

Awkward shared glance between Thomas and M.D. "Uh..."

Before anyone could stop him, Raige said, "yes!"

It probably came out a lot more emphatic than he meant, but all he knew was, however uncomfortable, his father was making an effort, and he didn't want things to go back the way they had been, all stiff distance and awkwardness. However awful it might feel, he wanted to get used to having his dad and his dates in the same room without killing each other.

For a moment, he thought he wouldn't get his wish. M.D. was getting all tense and fidgety from where she was crouched on the floor. She opened her mouth... and a chubby boy with spiky black hair arrived, a laptop bag slung over his shoulder.

"Oh wow, hi," he said, looking at the moving party and their mass of boxes. "I guess one of you is my roommate, huh?"

He was looking at Thomas as though expecting it to be him, which was a fair mistake to make, seeing as how Thomas was already flopped on the bed like he owned it. But Raige rushed over to shake Joshua's hand, scrubbing the sweat away on the side of his shorts. Before he could think better of it, he said, "I'm Raige. I'm your roommate. This is my dad, my girlfriend, and my boyfriend. We're having a moving party, and I'm ordering take-out for everybody. Would you like some?"

Joshua blinked, but didn't resist the handshake. "What? Cool! Nice to meet you. Sure, what are you getting?"

"Nothing hot," Thomas said from where he was draped over the bed.

"Salad?" M.D. asked.

"Don't mock me."

"Sushi?" Raige's dad suggested.

That worked for everybody, and a quick delivery call to Oishii Sushi and half an hour later, everyone was happy. They all sat in a rough circle around the dorm room, Thomas and Raige's dad on Raige's bed, Joshua on his own bed, Raige in his computer chair, and M.D. on the floor because she preferred it.

Josh turned out to be a chatty Computer Science major who also played a ridiculous amount of video games, among of which was Halo, which meant that Thomas could hold a conversation with him, and old Nintendo games, which meant that Raige had a new friend.

Raige's dad didn't say much, but he didn't seem unhappy to be there, so Raige decided to see it as a success. He even managed a stiff but okay conversation with M.D. about their favorite sushi rolls.

As Raige sat there, watching them all chatting, he suddenly felt a rise of tears in his throat. But not the bad kind. He'd made it. He was in college, studying music, dating his two best friends, his dad was here with them, and his new roommate seemed cool. They were having a good dinner, and nobody was trying to impale anyone with a chopstick. What could be better?

Then he reached for another roll and saw rosy pink.

"Oh no!"

Everyone looked up. M.D. made an inquiring sound through the food in her mouth, but Raige was too busy surveying

the damage. Everywhere his shirt didn't cover was burned.

"No way, seriously? What are you, Casper?" Thomas was already leaning over to examine.

Raige's father swallowed his spicy dragon roll and said, "He inherited that from me."

"You're not burned," M.D. said suspiciously.

"SPF 45. All day, every day."

"Jeez."

"Thanks a lot, Dad." Raige said, and for a moment he was worried that'd make his dad mad, but he just laughed. It was a good sound, one Raige hadn't heard in a long time, but he couldn't truly enjoy it. "Ugh, now I'm going to have to cover myself with aloe or it'll itch like crazy tomorrow..."

"I packed some in the Miata, just in case." He tossed Raige the keys, but Raige missed. "But you have to get it yourself."

Raige picked the keys up from the floor. "Thanks. Aw, man, and I wore *shorts* today... I'm going to look like a candy cane..."

M.D., who was approximately the color of undyed leather, swallowed her spring roll and smirked at Thomas, who'd had a complexion like gold even *before* he'd started working outdoors. They grinned at each other.

"Power to the brown," he said, putting out a fist.

"Melanin is *swellanin*," M.D. agreed, bumping it.

"You guys can keep bragging, I'm going to get some aloe," Raige said, getting up. While Joshua called assurances that it was okay, he burned too, he headed out. Unaccountably, Thomas followed him.

"Everything okay?" Raige asked as they left the building.

"Yeah, yeah, we're cool," he said, leaning against the hood of the sports car while Raige searched for the aloe vera. "Hey, you know, your dad is all right."

"Yeah, I'm glad he's trying. Aha!" He found the big squeeze bottle in the side door, still mostly filled with clear gel.

"Need help reaching the tricky spots?" Thomas asked innocently.

"I've got it, thanks."

"Are you sure? I mean, the way you are, man, you might have sunburns in places you've never even *thought of*."

He probably did. It didn't make him feel any better. "I told you, I've got it."

Thomas's expression was nigh angelic. "Just saying, where's there's a will, there's a where..."

Raige should've known better than to keep feeding him straight lines.

ILLEGAL ALIENS

M.D. woke on Thomas's bedroom floor to pre-emptive adrenaline and the faintest rays of pre-dawn sunlight coming in the window.

What had woken her? Not a nightmare. Not Raige or Thomas, sleeping up on the bed next to her; she'd gotten used to them. She held still, focused on sounds, trying to find what was different. The familiar rattling of the window AC, the hiss of a sprinkler outside...

Wait. Thomas's family hadn't put out a sprinkler last night, and she heard voices—

Across the hall, a door slammed open, and Thomas jerked up. Whatever it was, he apparently knew what was going on; he was already on his feet and dashing out the door—only to jump back as his mother pounded past, hair in a net and baseball bat in her hand. The moment she was past, he was after her, M.D. right on their heels. The three of them banged through the screen door while Raige made a groggy sound.

There were three teenagers on the stoop, armed with spray cans, but they were already scattering into the pre-dawn grayness. Thomas and his mother gave chase, but M.D. didn't bother. She glanced at the half-finished graffiti ("GO BACK" and a swastika), planted her feet, and raised a hand to aim.

"Move!" she shouted, and Thomas, glancing over his shoulder at her, hauled his mother down and away from conductors.

Shooting electricity from a distance wasn't like shooting a gun. Really, it was more analogous to pouring water down a hillside, clearing the flow path so as to insure that the path of least resistance also encompassed the target. (Preferably without setting off every car alarm and destroying every air conditioner on the way.)

It wasn't very impressive, visually. Had any of the other taggers quit running to watch, all they would've noticed was an unpleasant cracking noise, possibly a split-second flash, and one of their buddies collapsing in mid-stride like he'd been pole-axed. But they were too busy running to notice or care; they left the unlucky one behind.

The moment the guy hit the ground, Thomas was back on his feet. He got to the vandal first, and raised a hand, but then Ms. Rodriguez got there and shoved him off. She whispered something to him, too quiet for M.D. to hear but clearly an order.

For a second, it looked like Thomas might argue with her, but his mother stared him down, and after a second, he backed down, and walked away, stone-faced. As M.D. caught up to them, the vandal twitched and made as though to try getting up, but Ms. Rodriguez took a firm grip on him and kept him down.

"The hell is wrong with you?" she asked. Her fatigue seemed to keep her from getting properly angry, but she was certainly annoyed. "I'm a *cop*, you idiots. You just tagged a cop's house and woke me up at—I don't even *know* what time it is—you're lucky I just had the bat. Mijo, get my phone."

Thomas didn't look particularly eager, so M.D. nudged him with her elbow to get him moving, and he turned and stalked back to the house, quickly enough that M.D. had to trot to keep up.

She'd never seen his face looking like that.

"She wants me out of the way," he said in Pidgin Sign.

"She doesn't want a conflict of interest," M.D. replied.

"Oh, like anyone would charge her for clobbering some racist asshole..."

"Let's not give your mom a bigger headache than she's already got. If you'd like, I can zap him again..."

But Thomas signed, "forget it."

They were back at the house, where the rest of the Rodriguez family was up. Christopher was eyeing the graffiti and shaking his head. Mr. Rodriguez, dressed in a bathrobe and rubbing his lower back, had a gun in one hand, the cordless phone in the other, apparently talking to the on-duty police. Though both looked disgusted, the overriding attitude was one of weary resignation.

"Has this happened before?" M.D. asked Thomas.

"Yeah, a couple times. Dad does a lot of volunteering; ESL classes, legal help, that kind of stuff. Really brings the racists out..."

Raige shuffled into the doorway, rubbing his eyes and clearly still half-asleep. "Huh? What happened?"

"Assholes happened, man," Thomas replied, and sat down on the cement porch, arms crossed.

Christopher sidled up. His expression was one of acute discomfort. "Uh, guys?"

Thomas and Mr. Rodriguez looked up.

Christopher looked away. Without his glasses, his eyes looked all the larger and more upset. "I think this is my fault."

"No it's not," Thomas retorted.

Mr. Rodriguez hushed him with a glance. "Why do you say that, mijo?"

"I got in a fight with some guys at school yesterday. We had to do some BS immigration debate for class, and that guy down there is one of the guys I argued with. They said they'd come and pull something like this; I didn't think they really *would*."

Mr. Rodriguez sighed. "We can talk about that more later, if you like, but not this early in the morning. But it's not your fault."

The flashing police lights showed up then, which was just as well. There was a quick, quiet exchange of words and reports; it was obvious everyone had done this before. Everybody looked tired and annoyed, except Raige, who looked tired and confused, and the vandal, who looked petrified and not a little relieved to get away from a family of irate gun-owners.

"Sorry to hear this happened," the officer said to Ms. Rodriguez. "We'll keep him a bit, see what we can do. Get some sleep, Marcia."

"Thanks, Sal," she said, rubbing her face. "See you at six."

"See you at six."

The cruiser drove off, and Ms. Rodriguez started ushering the family back inside. "Come on, back to bed, all of you."

"But what about—" Thomas started, gesturing towards the graffiti, but she held up her hand.

"It'll wait," she said. "We have work in the morning, Christopher has school."

"They sprayed a fucking swastika on the garage!"

Ms. Rodriguez rubbed her forehead. "Well, thank God it was closed then. Let Sal take care of it, and go to bed. And don't

let me catch you using that word again.”

“They won’t do nothing! They never do—”

But Ms. Rodriguez was apparently too tired to hang around for the rant. The screen door shut behind her with a clatter, leaving Thomas, M.D., and Raige outside, Thomas still glaring at the half-finished graffiti.

“Really?” M.D. asked. “Your mom is a cop, isn’t honking one of them off a really bad idea?”

Thomas snorted. “Half-finished graffiti done by some high-schooler? Come on. They’re going to claim they were just joking around, that it’s no big deal, just stupid kids writing stupid words, and they’ll get a slap on the wrist ‘cause y’know, boys are boys and...” he held up his hands, shook them, then let them fall slack to his sides with a sigh. “Forget it. I’m going back to bed.”

He pushed by Raige and trudged back into the house. M.D. didn’t follow; she just stared at the spray paint.

“You going back in?” Raige asked. His voice was still bleary, but he looked to have finally woken up.

“No—wait. Yes, but...” She shoved past him and darted into the house, but she didn’t return to the guest room. She hit the kitchen, digging around under the sink.

“What’re you looking for?” Raige asked, stooping to peer over her shoulder.

“A bucket. God, what do you use to get paint off brick? Will soap even work?”

“Power washer, if it’s not too late,” Raige said. When M.D. craned her neck to stare up at him, he shrugged. “We got tagged by the Temperance League a few times.”

“Those still exist? Whatever, I don’t think they’ve got a

washer, and I'm not keeping them up even longer to ask." She dug a five-gallon bucket out of the cabinet and filled it with soap and hot water from the bathroom. When she turned back to the door, Raige had come up with a couple sponges.

"I don't have class till three-thirty today," he said.

"Good." Refusing his offered hand, she dragged the heavy bucket outside, dumped it on the driveway with water sloshing over the rim, snatched the sponge, and started scrubbing fiercely at the paint. Raige watched her for a moment, then joined her.

"Are you... okay?" he asked, scrubbing up high.

M.D. was scouring so viciously that it gave her words a rhythm. "*I'm the illegal alien.*"

"Whoa, hey, no..."

But that just seemed to make M.D. angrier. "*I'm the one who got deported. I'm the one who used up local resources and took forever to learn English and bit people and stole stuff.*" The paint wasn't coming off, but she only redoubled her efforts. "I was the biggest—the biggest *waste*—"

Her voice was starting to get frenzied, her body tense and shaking. She caught herself, forcibly relaxed, and rested her forehead against the garage door, breathing hard.

"I'm okay," she said when Raige stopped. "I'm okay."

Raige stood there for a moment, fidgeting with the sponge, then said, "I don't think you're a waste."

She didn't say anything, only shook her head and went back to scrubbing. It was no more effective than it'd been before.

"Hey."

Raige turned; M.D. didn't. Thomas had come back out, and he didn't look angry anymore, just resigned, which was

somehow even worse.

"Y'all don't got to do that, guys. Come on."

M.D. kept scrubbing. "Yes I do."

Thomas came over and gently took the sponge from her hand. "It ain't coming off, and they might need photos and stuff later. Don't mess with the evidence."

M.D. was fluttering her hands, looking upset. "But—"

"M.D. Stop. This isn't about you."

"*I know!*" she hissed. "But *you're* my co-date, and your family is... is well-adjusted, and kind, and everything a family and a group of citizens should be! And anyone who can't see that is—is—" she seemed to be struggling for words, "*—stupid!*"

She kicked the bucket of water so hard it fell over, spilling suds down the driveway and stood there with her chest heaving, eyes wild. The next words came out of her ragged and guttural:

"You deserve better."

Thomas looked at the mess a moment, then snorted. His mouth quirked. "Well, yeah. 'Cause these guys, you know, they're Einsteins..." He gave her a hug. "C'mon, you're getting all crazy-eyes again. Chill. But thanks."

She leaned into him, ducking her head behind her hair, and hugged him hard. "You deserve better," she said again, but this time in her normal voice.

Thomas patted her on the back of her thermals. "It's just paint. The neighbors got a power washer; you can help get it in the morning."

"Yeah. I want to make it better."

"It's okay," he said, but it didn't sound okay. "Pops would say, 'at least nobody got hurt.'"

Raige came around Thomas's back so he could join the hug. "I'd really rather you guys not have to worry about *anybody* getting hurt. I mean, at least when me and Dad's house got tagged, it wasn't anything scary—just kind of weird."

[image description: Inked illustration of an angry Thomas being held and comforted by Raige and M.D., all with bedheads.]

Thomas hugged him back, then got a face as though he'd just remembered something. He snapped his fingers and looked back to M.D. "Oh, hey, babe, you want to make me feel better?"

M.D.'s head snapped up. "Yes."

"Then you gotta tell me something. I know you've been zapped before—"

"So many times."

"Does it hurt?"

She perked up. "Smarts like crazy. Also has a not-insignificant chance of causing loss of bowel control." And then, because Raige was looking worried, "but unless I've gotten way worse at this recently, I doubt I've done him any real damage."

And now Thomas's face relaxed, returning to its usual good cheer. "Cool. Okay, *now* I'm not mad."

"Think nothing of it, co-date." And she hugged him too.

Thomas took a deep breath and relaxed. Then he pulled back, keeping an arm around each of them, and said, "Come on. Let's go back to bed and forget these assholes."

They did, and this time, M.D. did not sleep on the floor.

ZAP!

It happened over Thanksgiving break, after Josh had gone home to his folks and Raige and M.D. had the dorm room to themselves. As Raige was digging up his DVD of *Teenagers from Outer Space*, he turned to find her sitting bolt upright on his bed with an expression like general off to war.

“All right, so here’s the deal,” she said. “I want to try this sex thing with you.”

Raige blinked. “Really? But uh, I thought—” he gestured vaguely with the movie box.

“Oh no, you totally thought right, and I appreciate that. But I’ve had some months to think about it, and I guess I’m a little curious. There needs to be some ground rules, but if you’re willing to follow them, I’m willing to try this thing out.”

The rules were:

1. No touching M.D. below the belt.
2. No trying to turn M.D. on. (“It won’t work, and I won’t like it. Trust me on this.”)
3. M.D. was in charge. No ifs, ands, or buts.

All of this sounded reasonable enough to Raige, who’d just figured him and M.D. would be cuddles-only. His only concern was M.D.’s motivations—that she was doing it because she felt obligated to, not because she truly wanted to. She’d made it exorbitantly clear that she wasn’t into sex, the way some people weren’t into football or rap music. If she didn’t find him

attractive that way, and had no interest in getting touched, what could she possibly get out of it?

It seemed rude to ask, but she didn't seem offended when he brought it up. Instead, she whipped out her herb belt, put on the smile Frankenstein probably had in the lab, and declared, "I want to do science to you."

From anyone else, that would've been intimidating. But it was probably one of the few things M.D. could've said that would've assured Raige that yes, she was doing it because she wanted to. Even if it was for very, very different reasons than he or Thomas would've had.

So he said, "okay, but we take it slow," and that suited her.

It took a while for them to overcome their mutual nerves and get around to it, but the moment they did, a new number one rule had to be added: no direct skin contact of any kind while Raige was turned on. Turned out sexual arousal and pleasure didn't just "not work" for M.D.; they felt actively unpleasant, and orgasm the worst of all. And since she still couldn't stay out of his head while in physical contact with him, that meant barriers.

This turned out... surprisingly okay. Raige was already used to M.D. wearing gloves for everything; it was just a part of her. And she had plenty of different materials—the bashed-up leather bike-gloves he'd met her in, latex and nitrile for work, heavy duty padded cloth ones for bitey patients who lived in thorn bushes... a million different textures and ways of touching, all of them hers alone. And the little rituals of pulling them on, tugging them into place, flexing her hands to get the fit right... he doubted she noticed, having worn them for so long, but he did, and he'd already developed a bit of a Pavlovian response to them. For what

gloves and clothing couldn't cover, Raige had a big roll of Cling Wrap, and that worked pretty great for both of them. (Though god only knew what Raige's roommate thought he was doing with it, that he went through it so fast.)

And for someone who had no libido herself, it turned out that M.D. was creative, in a "junior healer studying the sexual response of the teenage Raige" way. She treated sex like an enjoyable medical experiment, and Raige could never shake the suspicion that at any moment, she might take a look at his erection and maniacally cackle, "*it's aliiiiive!*"

She seemed to be having an intellectual blast. But Raige worried that it was all kind of... one-sided.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do for you?" he asked once.

"Nope." She stripped off her gloves, humming cheerfully. "You just keep being yourself and we'll call it even."

Raige wiped sweat from his forehead and pushed himself up to a sitting position. "It's just... it doesn't seem fair, you know?"

"Life is fair? That's a new development; I must've missed the newsletter..."

Raige gave her a look and she leaned over to tousle his hair.

"Relax. I like you, you big dork, and no offense, but some body parts are only open to me and my healers."

Raige let the subject drop, since he didn't want her to feel pressured and he didn't know what he could offer in exchange. Still. It just didn't seem right for her to always be on the giving end.

He brought it up with Thomas at their weekly dinner date, but he was completely unsympathetic.

“Man, it sounds like she’s being great,” he said. “You’re just torturing yourself second-guessing her; let it go.”

Raige tugged at his bangs. “Look, it’s not even that, it’s just... I want to be able to do *something* special for her. It doesn’t have to be sexual, just *something*. And she won’t let me buy her anything, so I can’t do that.”

Thomas hummed and stirred his soda with his straw. “Have you asked her?”

“Y—”

“In a way that made it clear you didn’t mean sex? ‘Cause no offense, y’all’re getting better, but y’all still got enough awkwardness to fill a book. No, like, three books, a whole *series*...”

Raige cringed. “Gee, thanks.”

Thomas beamed and saluted him with the soda. “Do it when you’re stone cold, out doing something else. It’s easy. ‘Hey, what’s something unsexy and fun you’d like to do?’ There, I even gave you the line.” His face lit up. “I got it! Her birthday’s coming up, right? In February? Tell her it’s a birthday present. Ain’t no way even she can say no to a birthday present! Here, if you want, I’ll even help you do it.”

Since they had a three-way dramatic reading of *The Eye of Argon* scheduled together already, it wasn’t hard to rig. During a chapter break, Raige managed to broach the subject. He even got the line out properly.

But M.D. just shrugged. “Sorry, milquetoast. I don’t want anything, not even for my birthday.”

“Oh, bull,” Thomas retorted, grabbing her as though he planned to noogie her. “There must be *something* that gives you a rush.”

She tried to shrug him off. “Nope. Seriously, guys, I really can’t think of anything, I’m perfectly—”

But then she froze, staring off into the distance as though trying to recall an old dream. Then she winced with her whole face, as though whatever she’d come up with wasn’t something she was proud of.

“Well. Okay, maybe there’s one thing, but—”

“Oh no you don’t,” Thomas crowed, tightening his grip.

“M.D., I still can’t believe I managed to ask you half the things I have, never mind that you agreed to them,” Raige said. “I love you, I understand you have a thing about presents, but I really would feel more comfortable knowing there was something fun I could do for you.”

M.D. looked like she was weakening.

Raige put one hand on his heart. “And I solemnly swear I will not tease you or laugh about it.” Then, catching her look at Thomas, “Him either.”

Thomas looked wounded but made the Scout’s Honor sign.

M.D. rolled her eyes. “That’s very touching, but it doesn’t matter. It’s something you can’t physically fulfill.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows.

M.D. glared at him. “Whatever it is, not that, you deviant. Electricity, all right? I like getting electrified. Last I checked, Raige can’t channel current, so...”

Huh. The way she was acting, Raige had expected something more... unusual. But this wasn’t even really a surprise. In hindsight, he was annoyed at himself for not thinking of it earlier; he’d seen the dreamy look she got when Thomas’s family hooked her up to a car battery.

He thought about it. “Let me get back to you.”

First was asking advice from the Internet. Once he learned enough to know that it was possible on regular people, never mind rough-and-tumble bioelectros like M.D., he went to Bobcat. Specifically for that embarrassing *Happy Zappy Electrical Play* book that Raige had never gotten the guts to actually read.

It was horribly awkward to bring up, but Bobcat took the news in stride (who knew, maybe this stuff was totally normal on his world) and after a lecture on M.D.’s physiology, he handed over a few books’ worth of information on a CD-ROM, along with *Happy Zappy*. The book was awkwardly translated and relentlessly perky, but it answered all the questions Raige ever could’ve had about the process, all accompanied with shamelessly adorable diagrams.

Since Raige didn’t share M.D.’s innate ability to zap people, the next step was getting his hands on a mechanical substitute. Even that proved to have a few options. There were a few do-it-yourself ways, but Raige was a Fine Arts major. Nor did he feel up to trying one of the many specialty shops lying around certain areas of Vaygo, even though he was eighteen now and could.

Once again, the Internet came to his rescue, and within a couple weeks, Raige unlocked his dorm room mailbox to find a slip of paper announcing he had a package. He tried not to look guilty as he went to the RA’s desk to retrieve it, but fortunately for him, the box was totally anonymous and unremarkable. Raige hustled it upstairs, and then started the excruciating wait for his roommate to leave. (Joshua was cool, but no way was Raige opening this box in his presence.)

Finally, he was alone, and after putting a Scrunchie on the door as a Do Not Disturb notice (technically, it meant “I am having sex in here,” which wasn’t *totally* off-base), Raige tore the box open. And inside was...

...A surprisingly boring gadget. It looked like something M.D. might use at work, with a thick plastic handle maybe ten inches long, and then some metal or glass electrodes that could be attached at the top. The glass electrodes were the only part of the thing that looked at all interesting; the rest just looked vaguely industrial.

Turned on, though, it looked less boring. The glass electrodes lit up in pink, purple, orange, or red when electrified, like little neon lights. They shot out tiny lightning bolts of the same color. It wasn’t that noticeable when the light was on, but in the dark, it was pretty cool to see.

Raige spent the next couple of days testing the gadget on his hands and forearms any time he had the dorm room to himself. Everything he had read insisted that it was best to self-test, just to keep one’s expectations reasonable, and besides, he badly needed to reassure himself that he wasn’t doing the equivalent of hitting M.D. with a cattle prod. (Which was apparently a thing some people were into, but some people were way more adventurous than Raige was.)

It felt... weird. He had been zapped by M.D. enough times that he at least had some experience with the sensation, but it was still strange, like a pinprick sunburn that felt more diffuse the more surface area it covered, leaving burning tingles and pink marks for a while afterward. Weird, and not something he’d want to experience for long, but hey, M.D. apparently felt the same way

about orgasm, so who was he to judge? And even if it wasn't exactly *pleasurable*, it was certainly *interesting*, in a scientific curiosity kind of way. Was that how M.D. felt about all sex? If so, well, that wasn't so bad. In a way, it was reassuring to get a perspective for how she felt. Even if it didn't turn him on, he was still excited to try it.

Next up, there was the conversation with his roommate.

"Josh," Raige said, "I need the room to myself for a few hours on Friday. My girlfriend's coming over."

Joshua Hsu gave Raige a harried look from his computer keyboard. "You're kidding, right? I have a group project due Monday, and my part of the code won't even *run*. Go to her place."

"I... I can't." No way was Raige going to admit that the violet wand needed a wall outlet, which Treehouse most assuredly didn't have. He certainly wasn't going to ask M.D. to power it; that just seemed mean, like making someone bake their own birthday cake. "Trust me, if I *could* go to her place, I would, but I promise, I really, really can't. And it's her birthday." Raige didn't have siblings, but he'd learned a little from Thomas; he got on his knees and struck a praying position. "*Pleeeeeease?*"

Joshua looked Raige over, and then let out a long sigh. "You have to clean this place for the rest of the semester and buy me the next season of *Red vs. Blue*. And you let my girlfriend stay over next week without ratting me out to the RA."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! You're the best!"

By the time M.D. came to visit, Joshua Hsu had holed up in the computer lab with his laptop and an immense amount of coffee, and Raige felt like he'd built Rome in a day. M.D. had clearly just gotten back from the bath-house, smelled like soap

and a spice cabinet, and it was apparent that she figured he'd given up on the whole electricity thing.

"Am I glad to see you," she said, squeezing his arm. "Work was murder this week, and I could kill for some B-movies and sushi."

If it were Thomas, he probably could've used that to say something smooth. But Raige coughed and said, "Actually, I was thinking of maybe doing something different."

And he pulled out the old briefcase of his dad's. M.D. just stared at it blankly, and opening it to show the violet wand and its electrodes didn't make her look any less confused, so he tossed her the instruction booklet. She caught it, gave him a funny look, and started reading. Then she froze.

"Oh my god."

"Is that a 'fantasmo' oh my god, or a 'you idiot' oh my god?"

She was flipping through the booklet faster now. "Where did you get this? *How much* was it?"

"The Internet, and you don't get to know."

She groaned. "Oh god, that means it was expensive—"

Raige rolled his eyes. "I invested in a quality product, which coincidentally has a thirty-day returns policy. I can afford it. And I thought..." he shrugged, and for a moment he worried she was upset because he'd misread her.

But when she spoke, her voice was small and she was staring at the wand like she wanted to eat it. "I didn't think you'd take me seriously."

Raige smiled. "I've been reading up. But you know, if you really want to watch *Robot Monster*..."

[image description: A black and white picture of Raige

with a violet wand behind his back, looking awkward and smiling at M.D., who apparently has just found out what he's got and is clearly trying to decide if she's horrified at the amount of money he has surely spent, or delighted.]

He had never heard her laugh like that before. "No, no, I—yes. This sounds much more interesting than B-movies and sushi."

M.D. had a very happy birthday, and he didn't end up needing the returns policy after all.

CROSSED WIRES

The date was going very, very nicely, as far as Raige could tell. Courtesy of the Thanksgiving holidays, he and his dates had *finally* managed to have the same block of time free and get together, for the first time in too long. Raige hadn't had some mid-term to study for, Thomas hadn't had to cover a last-minute shift, and M.D. hadn't had to bolt out the door for a medical emergency. For once, they'd all managed to get to M.D.'s place on time with no incidents—no long line at the League, no forgetting of paperwork, nothing like that. The large Jane with pepperoni that Raige had gotten from Tarzan's was still steaming hot, and the latest of Thomas's homemade soda experiments (rosewater cardamom, he said) was still ice cold.

(M.D.'s salad was still... well, it was a salad. Raige didn't have the heart to tell her he wasn't hugely into it, and after he finished, she surprised him with his favorite Treehouse honey cakes, which were purple and made for a delicious dessert.)

Everything was nice. They ate their pizza, salad, and cakes, drank their soda. Raige got out his laptop, put it on the table/shelf/counter thing, and cuddled up on the bed with his dates to watch *Star Trek II: the Wrath of Khan*. (Raige had gotten to choose the movie, even though it wasn't his turn, because they'd missed his birthday a month prior. Thomas mostly picked action films, while M.D.'s knowledge of cinema seemed limited to atrociously bad Bela Lugosi flicks.) They made silly commentary together and laughed.

If Raige had to pick, these were the his favorite moments—ordinary and still, M.D. curled up on his left, Thomas draped over his right. No adrenaline, no adventure, just peace. Being loved, Raige was now certain, was being comfortably, happily squished.

By the time the end credits rolled, Thomas was making out with him, which was also pretty great.

“You got him covered or do I need to assist?” M.D. asked.

Thomas must’ve given her a thumbs-up or something behind Raige’s back, because she said, “Ten-four,” and went about popping out the DVD and shutting down the laptop before its battery died. Raige kind of lost track of her, if he was honest; Thomas was distracting.

Not so distracting that Raige didn’t snap out of it once the clothes started coming off, though.

“Wait, hold on...” And then he looked around with surprise. Everything had been moved out of the way that needed it, and while M.D. was still fully dressed as usual, she was rolling up her sleeves and shoving her normal gloves in her pocket.

“We’ve discussed doing this already,” she said, and Thomas nodded. “You want me in?”

Something nagged at the back of Raige’s mind, but he was already foggy and excited, and this was also kind of amazing, and before he could think about it too hard, he blurted, “yes!” and had even been with them long enough to not die of embarrassment immediately afterward.

“Aw, you even managed to say it right off; good job, milquetoast,” she said, patting him on the knee of his pants.

“What can I say?” Thomas said, tossing her a pair of latex gloves from the enormous box in the corner. “I’m the best

influence.”

“Or the worst.”

“Who’s counting?”

Raige didn’t say anything. Even though he’d been with them both for a year and a half now, he still couldn’t get over that he got to have this. Have *them*. That they were okay with this, and with him, and had been for long enough that even he was starting to think it wasn’t a fluke.

“You guys know the rules,” M.D. said, pulling the gloves on. “I touch Raige, you don’t touch me, don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“Sure.”

“You got it.”

M.D. finished tugging the latex gloves into place and announced her readiness with a rubbery *snap* that made all of Raige’s hormones jump.

“The doctor is *in*,” she announced in a fake Lugosi accent.

“Oh come on,” Thomas said, “you can’t say that until at *least* half an hour from now...”

After that, things left nice on a rocket ship, headed straight for perfect by way of fantasma, and all of time and space collapsed into eternal moments of skin and latex and heat and—

—And suddenly M.D. and Thomas were bolting for opposite ends of the room (not that there was far to go), making sounds of pure horror.

“Huh?” Raige came back to himself. “Oh my god! Are you okay?”

Thomas was hugging himself and making noises and facial gestures like he’d just taken a big bite of wool. “Oh man, that was nasty, *nasty*...”

For her part, M.D. was trying to claw at her eyes but couldn't on account of her gloves being covered in lube and other assorted substances. "Scarred! Scarred forever! My brain! Aaaaah!" She split the difference and scrubbed her face on her bare arm.

For a moment, Raige was positive he'd done something wrong, that this was his fault and he'd ruined everything. Then he told that part of himself to hush and got his sense back.

"You touched, didn't you?"

"It was an accident!" M.D. wailed.

"I slipped!" Thomas moaned. "I'm sorry!"

"Not as sorry as I am!"

Thank goodness M.D.'s room was even smaller than Raige's dorm room; even as far apart as possible, he could still comfort them both at the same time. Super-careful to only touch M.D.'s shirt, he patted them both on the back. "It's okay, it's okay..."

"No! Not okay!" Thomas said. "I feel like I just shoved my dick in a blizzard!"

M.D. had gotten herself together enough to start peeling off her gloves. "Ugh, it was like being in a porno with the bad music and *everything* and someone shoving me full of drugs and *I don't approve of your endocrine system, Thomas!*"

"*You say!* I was hoping to get off tonight!"

Apparently the idea of what *that* would've felt like through the telepathic link occurred to them both at the same time; their aghast expressions matched.

Thomas shuddered. "No way. Not happening. My buzz is killed. I vote abort."

M.D. made a frustrated sound, but she also nodded.

Raige nodded and hugged them both tight—well, he hugged Thomas. When he tried to hug M.D., she just squirmed out from under his arm and stormed off to hurl her gloves in the scraps basket, kick the wall, and stomp out of the room.

For a moment, he considered going after her, but he wasn't dressed so he decided to stay focused on Thomas, who was clearly unhappy to be naked with his boyfriend and not at all turned on by it.

"It must've been my fault," he muttered, rubbing his face. "She's always so freaking *careful*..."

"Hey, hey, it's okay—"

"No, dude, it's *not*, we had this planned and I screwed it up..."

"I'm not mad, accidents happen, it—wait. You planned this?"

"Yeah, for *months*! Do you have any idea how freaking hard it is for me and M.D. to get the same time off as you with a six-hour time difference and her working an eight-day week so her stupid schedule *never* matches ours? It freaking *blows*, man. I had to butter up my manager *forever*..."

"Not *that*, I mean... you know. *This*."

Thomas looked forlorn. "It was your birthday, man. We wanted it to be special."

And suddenly, it all made sense. Why Thomas had made fancy soda, and why M.D. had gotten those purple honey cakes that Raige liked so much even though they cost a bomb, and why they'd let Raige pick the movie even though it wasn't his turn.

One slip, and that'd all gone out the window.

"But... my birthday was in October," Raige said.

"Yeah, stuff kept going wrong."

"M.D. went for it?"

Thomas looked a little uncomfortable. "Look, man, between you and me? She sometimes feels like a third wheel—"

"She's *not*—"

He held up his hands. "Yeah, I know and you know, but she still has this stupid idea in her head. I don't know where she got it, but she's the one who came up with this whole idea. She chased me down months ago, got me on-board, said..." he sighed. "She said it let her feel like she wasn't competing with me and losing. You know?"

Raige thought about it. He thought about what M.D. had said to him, that time in Tarzan's Pizza when they'd first gotten together: "I don't know how I'd be able to live up to him." He felt sad.

"Plus, seriously," Thomas added, "I would've asked my *grandma* for a three-way before bringing it up to M.D."

"You joked about it!"

"Yeah. I *joked*."

"Then why...?"

Thomas looked uncomfortable. "I mean... you know... like I'd turn that down?" He chuckled, but unconvincingly. "I mean, come on, M.D. never asks for *anything* like that, and she's seen me naked before, so it's not like a big deal, and you told me you might be into it..."

Raige squinted at him. "Yeah, but you know that doesn't mean you have to say yes, right? You... kind of don't sound okay with this."

"I guess?" But Thomas didn't sound sure of it. "I don't know, I'm not like, *grossed out* or anything, I... I guess I thought I wanted to try it, and now that the blood's back in my brain... I don't know, man, let me get back to you on that one, this is weird, I'm not used to feeling like this."

Raige sat there and thought, then sighed. "We should get dressed and talk to her."

"Yeah."

"And we are *not* doing something like this again."

After some cleaning up with baby wipes as best they could and getting decent again, they went looking for M.D... though that implied she'd gone far. Really, she'd just climbed the tree that grew right above her living space, the one she worked in, gotten up on a branch, and curled up into a ball with her head down on her knees. She had her sleeves rolled down, her normal gloves back on.

Raige and Thomas clambered up next to her... though Raige nearly fell once or twice.

"Hey," Raige said, coming to sit next to her.

She made a grumbling noise.

Thomas flopped on her other side, keeping more distance. "Are you crying?"

"No!" Indignant. But she didn't look up.

Outside, Treehouse was shifting to the dusk market, which meant lots of assorted beings were walking, flying, slithering, or undulating by, carrying wares. Treehouse being what it was, people were glancing up at them curiously, and any minute now, someone was sure to try to ask what was wrong.

Raige hastily made the "local societal more" sign, since it

was about the only Pidgin Sign with any complicated meaning he'd ever managed to properly learn, and he'd discovered it translated to, "we're doing weird Earthling stuff, don't mind us." For his part, Thomas went off into a more complex visual monologue. Raige didn't catch barely any of it, but it must've been a more thorough, "everything's fine, do not disturb," because the crowd returned to bustling and left them alone.

"Can I hug you?" Raige asked.

For a moment, he thought M.D. wouldn't answer. Then she said, "Yeah."

He did. She didn't uncurl, but she did relax a little.

"I ruined it," she said.

"No, you didn't."

"It was probably me who screwed up," Thomas said. "You had clothes and gloves, and you're always really careful about touching us."

"Stop trying to comfort me, you stupid horn-dog."

They stopped and let her sit there for a bit.

Then Thomas punched her in the shoulder. She jabbed him with her elbow, and her head came up. There were no tears on her face, just a fierce glare.

"We had it all planned out and it was going to be great, and you did this stupidly nice thing for my birthday so I wanted to pay you back and *ugh*."

"I know, I know," Thomas said. "The best laid plans of aliens and men, babe."

Raige tried to think of something he could say that was comforting but in a way that wouldn't just make M.D. madder. Finally, he said, "Y'all are the best."

They looked at him.

"You got my favorite extra-dimensional dessert. You made me soda. You let me watch my favorite movie even though I know neither of you actually like it that much and it was kind of M.D.'s turn..."

"Yeah, you're both on the hook for *Bela Lugosi Meets the Brooklyn Gorilla* next time, by the way."

"...And you planned this whole surprise for *ages*. And I really appreciate that you tried and all, I do! Just... let's maybe not try and do this again, okay? Or at least, not without everybody talking, all together, *before* anyone starts getting turned on. I'm already the luckiest guy in the multiverse right about now because I've got two such cool people dating me, and I don't think I could handle that much amazingness at one time without my brain exploding. So it's really just as well it didn't work out."

Thomas was smiling again. "Yeah, we *are* pretty great."

"Yup. So, you know, you guys don't really get to feel bad today—I mean, you can, if you really want, but I'm just saying, I already had a really spectacular belated birthday, and nothing can really ruin that for me, so if you're feeling bad for me, you really don't have to." Pause. "Though now that we're talking, there's one thing I kind of do really want right now."

They both looked at him eagerly.

"A bath. I'm, uh. Kind of sticky and gross."

He lucked out; that made them both smile. M.D. got up, stretched, and said, "Okay, I'll go rent a private room with Bath Master III. As long as nothing sexual happens, I'm okay with being in your heads for that duration."

"My thoughts will be pure and Catholic," Thomas swore.

“Ew.” But she was smiling when she said it.

Apparently M.D. told the master of the bath house that it was Raige’s birthday; Raige came into the room to find a fresh supply of fancy creams, oils, and even bubblers. Not as foamy or lavish as the stuff at home, but hey, the reason Bath Master III was a third was an encyclopedic memory on bath stuff that wouldn’t hurt the community or its water supply. And the water temperature was *perfect*.

Getting scrubbed by two people who loved him? Best way to end a date.

[image description: Raige, Thomas, and M.D. soak in a hot spring while M.D. blows bubbles. They all look happy and comfortable.]

SMELL LIKE HOME

Raige was in one of the many VU computer labs, putting the finishing touches on a paper about the history of ragtime, when the girl next to him leaned over and asked, “What’s that you’re wearing?”

Raige looked down at his faded T-shirt, a little perplexed. “Oh, it’s just an old Latin competition—”

“No, I meant,” and she was leaning closer now, close enough to be a little weird, “...is that... after-shave?”

Raige blinked. “Uh, I don’t wear any.” He wondered if she was trying to subtly tell him that his deodorant had failed and if so, whether he could check without being too obvious about it.

But the girl must’ve caught the look on his face, because she hastily reassured, “No, no, I didn’t mean... it’s *good* is all, and I was wondering where you’d gotten it. I’ve never smelled anything like it.” She leaned in, inhaled, then caught herself and giggled nervously. “I’m sorry, I know I’m being weird, I’ve just got to know, what is it, shampoo or something? It smells kind of herbal...”

“Oh!” And Raige tugged his bangs and laughed out of embarrassment and discomfort. “It’s my girlfriend—I mean, the smell of my girlfriend—her workplace, I mean.” Smooth. “She’s a—she works with herbs and stuff a lot, and so...” He held up his hands, feeling his cheeks burn.

The girl’s face fell. “Oh. I guess that means, uh, I can’t really buy it.”

Raige drummed on the computer desk. “Well, if you like, I could ask her for some, she probably has spare...”

“No, no, that’s okay.”

“You sure? Because you know, it’s no big deal, she’s got tons...”

But the girl, looking as flustered as he felt, squeaked, “No, really, it’s fine, thanks anyway.” And she swiped up her books and scuttled off.

Well, okay. That was... different. And when Raige got a chance, he went into the restroom, pulled his shirt up to his nose and inhaled. Wearing it so long, he’d gotten used to it, but with it right up in his face, it hit hard, the scent of medicinal plants, some minty, some tangy, mingling to smell like green and sunshine, adventures and laughter...

Raige hastily dropped his shirt and rushed back to his History of American Music paper, desperately trying to distract himself with moldy old composers.

Unfortunately, he didn’t get much chance to change or shower. There was class, marching rehearsal, more class, Jazzmer rehearsal, and then meeting Thomas at the food court for dinner. And the moment he sat down, Thomas grinned knowingly at him and said, “spent the night at M.D.’s place, huh?”

Raige grimaced. “Okay, that’s it, I really need to shower and change after this.”

Thomas raised his hands. “Relax, man, I didn’t say it was bad. Could be way worse, you could smell like *me* after work, all mulch and Ever-Gro. At least M.D. smells like something that’s good for you.”

“Yes. She does.”

"What, did someone complain or something?"

"No, no," and Raige recounted the events in the computer lab. "Weird, huh?"

Thomas raised an eyebrow at him over the table. "Dude, she was hitting on you."

"What? Really? No..."

"I never said she was *good* at it. Man, maybe I ought to hang out with M.D. after work more often, see if that gets me more girls..."

"Please don't. It's distracting enough on her; if you both start smelling like that, I'll turn into a basket case."

Thomas laughed, but then he fiddled the cup between his hands and looked serious. "Hey, man, can I tell you something?"

"Of course. What's wrong?"

Thomas got a look like someone about to admit they were terrified of apple trees. "This is going to sound really dumb, but... I don't think I like M.D."

"*What?*"

"No, no, I mean, I like her! I just don't... you know, *like* her. *Like-like* her." And Thomas, the one who always seemed absolutely at ease, looked uncomfortable.

Raige blinked. "Did you feel... obligated to?"

Thomas just stared at him like he was from the moon. "She's a girl," he said, like that was all the explanation needed.

"Sort of, I guess, but so?"

"So, what else do you need, right? You remember that whole screw-up at your birthday, how you were asking me if I was okay with it? Yeah, I wasn't like, *thinking* it out like this, not then, but I guess I thought maybe that'd do it, make me into her, but

nope! Like, she's a girl—I mean, I *think* she's a girl—and we're always around each other, and I like her, but I... I just don't think I want to have sex with her. Like ever!" Thomas seemed a little distraught over this, as though he'd encountered an adventure he didn't want to have, or a barbecue he didn't want to eat. "We've seen each other *naked*, man, and I *didn't care*! I didn't think that was *possible*!"

"Does she know this?"

"That's the thing, man, I don't know! I mean, she's in and out of my head, right, so she must know, and okay, once we tried kissing—"

"Wow, really?" Raige had *not* heard about that.

Thomas just cringed. "Yeah, and it went all 'this is like kissing my grandma' weird." he threw up his hands. "What do I do, man?"

[image description: M.D. and Thomas attempt to kiss, only for M.D. to recoil with a face like a toddler given lima beans the first time. Thomas is just looking away and laughing embarrassedly.]

Raige hastily tried to push away the image of his boyfriend and girlfriend kissing. "I mean... do you have to do anything? M.D.'s asexual. I really don't think she was secretly hoping this whole time to have sex with you."

Even *saying* it felt wrong. They both shuddered.

"See? See? That's what I'm talking about! It's *weird*, man." And Thomas fidgeted some more and then said, "Look, I know you've got all these hang-ups about not being 'fair' and stuff, and I know you kinda said to me at the start that it'd be all three of us, but I had to tell you: we ain't *never* going to get together, M.D. and

me. Not like you and me are, not even like you and her are. I guess I just sort of assumed we would, but I don't think it's ever happening, man." And he looked at Raige as if expecting him to freak out.

Which was tempting. "I admit," Raige said, drumming his fingers on the table, "Even though I guess I wasn't thinking it out either, and it sounds kind of crazy when I actually say it aloud, I guess I was kind of hoping it could just... all stay balanced. All three of us together."

"I know. But no offense, man, people ain't algebra. Our equations don't always balance." And then, "and I'd kinda like to date other girls, if that's cool. Girls who I'm actually into."

Oh thank god. "Actually, yes, that sounds way less scary... I mean in theory, at least, I guess we'll find out if I freak out but I don't *want* to and—" he caught himself, changed the subject before he could go into an anxiety spiral. "It's hard enough handling that M.D. doesn't want to be with anyone but me; if you want to be with other people, that sounds only fair." Then, because he was still anxious, "...anybody I know?"

"Oh!" Thomas laughed, a little awkwardly. "Nah, there's nobody in particular, not yet, I just... wanted to keep my options open, you know? I realized that I was way more interested in the girls at work than M.D. and finally figured out that I needed to fess up. And I mean, I'm going to have this talk with her too, just to be sure, but honestly, she's probably going to care way less about this than me."

Raige thought about how M.D. acted, and how she and Thomas related to each other. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure you're right. She's never treated you the way she treats me. I'm her boyfriend,

but you're her..."

"Co-date."

"Exactly. And yeah, I'm a little freaked out, but I honestly think she'll be relieved to have that cleared up with you."

Thomas looked relieved too. "Okay, cool. And once there's actually a real girl in the picture, instead of just a 'maybe,' should I... should I tell you, or do you not want to know? I'm pretty sure it's going to be a girl," he added, "I'm way more into them."

Raige thought about it. "I think I'd rather know. Otherwise I'll probably just torture myself about what could be happening. Though I reserve the right to be wrong."

"Deal! And I guess we'll figure it out when it happens."

Knowing Thomas, it would definitely be a *when*, not an *if*. Raige tried to figure out how he felt about it, but there was so much anxiety floating around in him already, he had to admit he couldn't be sure. One thing, however, he *was* certain about: "I'm glad you told me."

Thomas relaxed. "Yeah. Me too. It's actually been bugging me for months, and it felt so dumb, you know? Me, not liking a girl!"

Raige shrugged. "I don't like every single girl I see. Why should you?"

That was apparently something Thomas had never seriously considered. He finished off his drink with a pensive expression, checked his watch, and made a sound of dismay as he got up. "Okay, I've got to head back soon, but yeah, let me get back to you on all this, okay? I'm just glad to have it out of my head."

"No problem." Raige got up from the dining hall table to hug him.

Thomas hugged him back, giving him a good few thumps. "And be careful around those New Agey shops, the incense might give you ideas... you gonna try to date her?"

Raige winced. "Um, no. That was... really weird, and kind of creepy, honestly. And I'm happy just with you and M.D. I think that's all I can handle."

Thomas left, and it wasn't until Raige finished his own dinner that he realized Thomas's jacket was still draped over the chair where he'd left it. Raige picked it up, tied it around his waist, and headed off for the Comic Book Club meeting afterward. He intended to call Thomas right after, but then some of his comics friends wanted to stay and talk, and what with one thing and another, he didn't return to his dorm room until late. Since his roommate had eight o'clock courses and was surely already in bed, Raige stayed out in the hall when he pulled out his cell phone to call Thomas.

It turned out to be too late to call, even with Texas a time zone away, but there was a voice mail from Thomas, who sounded deeply relieved. "Yeah, okay, M.D. just told me, 'you thought we were going to *what*?' and I've never been so glad to be shot down. Thanks man! Love you. Hey, I think you got my jacket; grab it back from you Thursday? Let me know." *Beep*.

Raige grinned and hung up. Then he edged the door open and snuck in with his shoes in his hand to avoid waking his roommate, navigating to the bed in the dark. As he stripped off his shirt, he paused to smell the herbs still clinging to it. Now, lingering underneath, was a hint of Thomas's deodorant, left from the jacket.

Raige shoved the jacket under his pillow and fell asleep

SMELLS LIKE HOME

smiling.

HEARTS IN SPADES

Raige and Thomas knew better than to play cards with M.D., had known long before they even considered dating. Asides from being ultra-competitive, M.D. cheated, and she was obviously an old hand at it long before she'd discovered the extent of her powers. On top of which, she was a sore loser.

So Thomas had long since quit playing with her.

Then one day, Biff showed up on M.D.'s doorstep in Treehouse with a couple of boxes and a face like he'd just lost a very bad bet. He completely ignored Thomas and Raige both, and started setting up shop.

M.D. had told Thomas that Biff was working for Ribbonblack, the spidersquid on the night side of town, but when Thomas had pushed for details, she'd clammed up. So he asked, "Dude, why're you here?"

"Working."

"Why?"

Biff just looked at M.D. and acted like he wasn't totally stymied by Treehouse's hexagonal shelves. "Why they here?"

"Gosh, gee, it's almost like I have a social life and all three of you are just going to have to deal with that." And she glared at them all as though daring any of them to protest.

Raige was the white boy's Mother Teresa, so naturally he didn't put up any fuss. But Thomas was less forgiving. He liked to think of himself as a get-along kind of guy... but Biff was a special kind of obnoxious, the kind that just got to him. But whatever,

M.D. got to pick her own dick friends, and he didn't want the fight, so he just crossed his arms and said, "I'm cool."

Biff snorted, only to get M.D.'s glare fixed on him.

"Problem?" she asked.

Thomas expected a fight, but Biff just busied himself with lighting a cigarette.

"That's what I thought." She said, and yinked the cigarette from his hand. "And no smoking inside."

Biff grumbled, but didn't try again. Man, what pooch had he screwed to end up crashing with her off-world? Thomas was dying to know. Sure, there were tons of good things in Treehouse, but nothing he could imagine Biff wanting or needing.

It was just as well Biff hadn't brought much with him; M.D.'s place was the size of Thomas's bathroom and just having all four of them standing in it was way above capacity. And Raige had to stoop to keep his head from hitting the ceiling.

"So where's the rest of your stuff?" Raige asked.

"Ain't no 'rest;' this is it," Biff growled.

Thomas banked that Biff's redneck ass didn't speak anything but American and switched languages. "How long will he be here?"

M.D. replied, in much worse Spanish, "six month. And he speak Spanish."

Biff glowered at them both over his shoulder. Great.

At least it turned out to be less horrific than Thomas feared. They all had their own schedules, and Biff seemed to spend as much time out of the house as possible. Except for the two boxes shoved in the back, (and one seemed to be filled entirely with kitchen equipment) it was easy to forget the guy was around.

The few times Thomas ran into him, they mostly just coldly ignored each other.

One afternoon, Thomas and Raige came to visit and found M.D.'s tiny room empty. They headed for the commons, and sure enough, they found Biff and M.D. sitting around one of the squat, fat old fungi that Treehouse used as general purpose outdoor furniture. They were playing cards.

[illustration description: A tired, blank-faced Biff playing cards with M.D., who is getting her ass served to her and not liking it one bit. A couple Treehousians are watching with interest; one looks to be a large flying jellyfish, and the other is a flippered flying critter. Raige and Thomas are in the background, wondering what on earth everyone's so interested in.]

Well, no, that wasn't the right word, M.D. didn't *play* when it came to cards; she more *fought*, and Biff was apparently the same way. They were putting down cards, comparing hands, staring at each other across the table, all in dead silence—which from M.D. was downright rare.

A small crowd of curious Treehouse folks were peering over their shoulders, but apparently had been told not to interrupt; they were all still and unobtrusive.

Thomas looked at Raige, who looked back. They shrugged. They wandered over to join the onlookers.

Whatever variant of poker Biff and M.D. looked to be playing, Thomas figured they both had to be cheating, because if M.D. was bad, Biff could only be worse. Two things were odd, though: neither were betting, and M.D. was undeniably getting her ass served to her.

M.D. had whipped Thomas enough in cards that he could

enjoy seeing the look of aggravation on her face. Biff didn't show much reaction; either he was used to beating everyone at cards, or he had other things on his mind. And to be fair, he did look exhausted.

Periodically, they'd pause and talk it over quietly, but not like they were lording or mourning over their cards. Biff looked more like he was explaining something with uncharacteristic lack of bitchiness, while M.D. listened intently with a look of mixed incredulity, irritation, and determination.

Then Biff would take the deck, shuffle, and they'd start the whole thing over again.

After a few rounds of this, one of the Treehouse people floated over to Thomas—well, technically they were a colony organism, but he'd never quite figured out whether that made them one person or many. They looked like an airborne tentacled blob, somewhat reminiscent of a Portuguese Man O' War, and more importantly, they were a casual friend of Thomas's from the old days back in Treehouse's labor pool.

"Ah, Handsome Boy!" they said, using his Treehouse name. "Good health to you."

"Good health, Jelly Legs," Thomas signed back. "How's guard duty suiting you?" They'd been promoted a few years back.

"Oh, nothing of interest since we envenomated the junior healer's sister and threw her out of here. Remember that? Oh, that was exciting! Though of course, it is best that things stay dull and tranquil," they added dutifully. "But please, explain, what are your landsmen doing? Is it terribly important? Religious?"

"No," Thomas replied, "it's just a game."

"Do not trick us! We worked with you, we know how your

people act when playing! They are taking it far too seriously!”

Thomas was doing his best to explain that no, poker was not a sanctified act, except maybe to hardcore card sharks like Biff and M.D., when Raige laughed under his breath.

“What is it?” Thomas asked, pausing in his conversation with Jelly Legs.

“He’s teaching her to play better,” Raige replied. Which, translated out of the habitual politeness, meant he was teaching her to *cheat* better.

“Seriously?” Thomas wasn’t sure which he found more incredible: that M.D. would need lessons, or that Biff would give them without being a royal ass about it.

“Sure. I don’t know who she used to play, but I’ll bet they handled losing better than the people Biff played with.”

Thomas didn’t have much trouble believing that. No wonder M.D. looked so annoyed.

Jelly Legs undulated to get his attention. “What is the spotted one saying?” They were telepathic, but reading someone without a language in common required a lot of finagling.

While Thomas explained the concept of card sharking to the land jellyfish, Raige edged his way through to join M.D. and Biff at the table. “Hey, can I play?”

Thomas would’ve had to be blind not to see the identical expressions on M.D.’s and Biff’s faces: fresh meat.

“Ah!” Jelly Legs signed, rising higher into the air so everyone could see their signing. “Citizens, Handsome Boy has explained everything to me: this is a game of great psychological and behavioral skill on his home world! You see, the spotted one is now challenging the masters. This is a behavior signifying

social dominance, and there shall henceforth follow a great competition with wagers!"

A ripple of excitement went through the crowd. Jelly Legs oriented on Thomas, asking, "We have understood properly?"

"Pretty much, but we're not betting anything." He knew better.

"Oh no, we did not mean you, we meant us! As your friend, it is the citizenly thing to do to vouch for your victory!"

"Oh man, I don't know..."

But now another Treehouse laborer from the old days was wiggling to get his attention. "You! I wish to bet on you too!"

"Yes! You represent the labor pool! You must prove our greatness and social dominance!"

One of the night healer apprentices added, "for my professional reputation, I wish to bid on the junior healer! It will not do otherwise!"

"Yes, yes, and me as well! She set my broken leg, so I bid on her crushing triumph!"

"And I shall bid on the spotted one; it is unfair to leave him out, no? He is the one who expressed dominance, so I believe it is he who is truly the great one! Also, he knitted me a cozy once!"

Everyone looked at Thomas hopefully. He laughed. Sure, why not. It wasn't *his* money. He came around to squat around the fungus, and in both English and Pidgin Sign, he said, "I'm in too."

"Huzzah! Huzzah! The labor pool is represented! We shall emerge triumphant!"

Apparently gambling transcended species. There was a quick swapping of bets among the Treehouse crowd—nothing

major, clearly all in good fun, mostly reflecting who they were closest to. (Which meant that nobody wanted to bet on Biff, who had no social ties except through M.D. and therefore was a complete dark horse.) M.D. was explaining this to Biff, who seemed a little perplexed but then tried to stubbornly ignore it.

Thomas, who'd seen and made his own bets in the past, tuned out the Treehouse bettors and got down to brass tacks. "Okay, no way am I playing poker or making bets with either of y'all. I know better."

"What he said," Raige said.

M.D. shrugged. "All right, how's about bridge?"

"Bridge?" Thomas asked. "Nobody plays that."

"I think my great-aunt plays it," Raige said, "but I haven't."

"I now officially like your aunt," M.D. said.

"Nobody here know how to play but you," Biff retorted as he shuffled. "Fuck that shit."

"Well then, feel free to make other suggestions, instead of just badmouthing mine."

"Go fish?" Raige suggested, but was immediately shouted down.

Biff shrugged. "Spades."

"That I know," Thomas said.

M.D. scoffed a little, but she knew spades too, and three out of the four was the best they were likely to get. Since the Treehouse bettors didn't know the game either, M.D. ran a trial hand laying out the rules in English for Raige, while Thomas translated into Pidgin Sign for the crowd of onlookers. Once everyone understood enough to at least keep a game going, they got started.

The bettors had been slightly dismayed to learn that spades was a team game, but they had quickly come up with a solution: each team would be further subdivided into whoever they decided played best, so therefore there would still be an ultimate winner. Thomas doubted that their standards would be the same as his, but whatever, as long as they were happy, and they seemed absolutely delighted.

"Prove our dominance!" cried one of the bettors. "Prove we of the labor pool are nothing to scoff at!"

"No, no, it is the healer who shall be victorious!"

"And don't forget the spotty one! I still have his cozy!"

The guy with the cozy was doomed to be disappointed. Raige was book-smart, but even Thomas could tell he was *rotten* at cards. Even if he was clear on the rules (and Thomas really wasn't sure he was), he couldn't have bluffed a toddler. It wasn't entirely a surprise when Biff said flatly, "I ain't playing with him."

Thomas grimaced. If he'd known not sucking at spades would've stuck him with Biff as a playing partner, he would've tried to act dumber.

"That's fine," M.D. said. "We'll clean your clock."

Biff just switched chairs with M.D. "Who's dealing?"

"Not you," M.D. said, swiping the deck from him.

"Oh, like you're so much better," Thomas said.

"Hey, I'm not going to cheat on Raige's first hand. Give me some credit."

"How about no cheating at all? From anybody?" Raige asked.

M.D. wasn't looking at him, though. She and Biff were busy giving each other shark-eyes, and Thomas could tell that in

their minds, the competition was between the two of them. See, this was why he never wanted to play cards with her.

M.D. dealt. Glanced at her hand, frowned, then kicked Biff across the table. “Knock if off,” she snapped.

He sneered at her. “You got a shitty hand, that’s your own fault.” But a couple of the cards in Thomas’s hand changed quietly when he wasn’t looking directly at him. Judging by her face, M.D. had something similar going on in her own hand.

Meanwhile, Jelly Legs (who’d apparently decided to play the role of commentator) was explaining to the crowd that Biff had attempted a surreptitious dominance display, only to be caught, and that this caused him to lose face. Truly, it was good nobody had bet on him!

Since Thomas was to M.D.’s right, he got to bid on tricks first. His hand was decent, a couple kings and a queen, but no aces, so he bid an average three, to the dismay of the labor pool. Jelly Legs insisted it was fine; the labor pool would show that skill trumped luck every time.

When Raige came up, he asked, “uh, what if you can’t take anything?”

Biff smirked. By the looks of things, M.D. was in pain and trying not to show it.

“You can bid nil,” she said, putting down her cards so she could say it in both languages for the benefit of the bettors. “You pull it off, you get a hundred points, but if you win any hands, you lose a hundred.”

The bettors made a nonverbal, “oooooh!”

Raige said, “Cool!”

“Keep in mind that it also completely changes the game

mechanics,” M.D. added in a restrained voice and gestures. “Your partner has to get their tricks, *and* cover you so you don’t take any by mistake. If you bid nil, you can’t take *anything*. I really don’t recommend it for a first game.”

“Neat!” Raige said, beaming. “I’ll do that then; it’ll be great. Put me down for zero.”

Biff immediately bid low with the intention of cracking the newbie, and M.D. bid low so she could focus on covering Raige—though Thomas could tell that what she really wanted to do was strangle him.

Meanwhile, the Treehouse crowd seemed to have gotten the idea that Raige was pulling ahead with a surprise act of dominance that nobody had seen coming, and that this put him ahead of everyone else in the game. Thomas didn’t have the heart to try and explain things to them; they were clearly entertaining themselves just fine.

“Okay, who’s got the two of clubs?”

And off they went.

Thomas was no genius at cards, but he’d played spades enough times to know his way around. If his hand wasn’t great, and Raige’s was nil-worthy, that meant either M.D. or Biff (or both) had the holy roller of hands. And at first, Biff seemed to be the one; he took the first hand with the ace of clubs, the second with the ace of diamonds—and that’s when Raige shed the ace of hearts.

The game screeched to a halt. Everyone else froze, then leaned over the table to scrutinize the hand with looks ranging from mild curiosity (from Biff) to oh-god-what-did-you-just-do (from M.D.).

“Uh, suit was diamonds, man,” Thomas reminded.

Raige blinked. “Yeah, I know. If you can’t follow suit, you can play anything, right? Did I do something wrong?”

M.D. made an indecipherable noise.

Biff squinted at Raige suspiciously. “You sure you never played this before?”

Raige looked innocent. The guy with the cozy went nuts.

The game became a fiasco soon after, and not just because the bettors were treating it like the Superbowl. Biff apparently had half the spades, all of them high, and Raige seemed to own practically every heart in the deck. Thomas, with his average hand, ended up winning tricks with eights and nines, while M.D. struggled to keep up. Her hand turned out to be abysmal; the highest card she showed was the queen of clubs, which Thomas took with the king straight after.

It quickly became obvious that Raige might’ve been a rotten card player, but he flew blind like a champ. He cheerfully played on, clueless to the fact that his nil hand was actually pretty good, definitely way better than M.D.’s, all while she sweated and lost trick after trick covering his ass.

For his part, Biff looked steadily more and more annoyed at Raige’s continued success, but he couldn’t do much about it. His hand was just too spade-heavy and heart-light to go under, and finally, he focused on setting M.D. instead, since she was the one with the crappier hand. (Thomas also suspected that he’d given up on trying to understand what the hell Raige was doing.)

As for Thomas, he grabbed his tricks, played conservatively, and mostly just watched the whole thing unfold with growing entertainment. Biff and M.D. were both used to

pounding everyone; this was driving them *bananas*.

The Treehouse crowd, meanwhile, thought that Raige was some sort of alpha male spades beast, crushing everything in his path. They were ecstatic.

Soon there were only a few hands left, and M.D. still hadn't managed to pull a single trick. Biff's spades simply hadn't let him lose, even on purpose, and what few he hadn't pulled, Thomas had.

Thomas led the hand. He tossed the four of spades down. Raige probably would just play hearts, but—

Raige put down the queen of spades.

By this point, nothing Raige did in this game surprised Thomas anymore, because it was obvious that Raige was just making crap up as he went along. Biff's eyes lit up, and he happily tossed down the eight of spades then folded his arms behind his head, looking at M.D. with a *beat that* expression. He'd already shed the ace earlier in the game.

M.D. stared at Raige. "You bid nil with the queen of spades," she said. Her voice was expressionless.

Raige blinked and shrugged. "The ace or the king would've beat it."

"You bid nil. With the queen of spades."

Thomas smothered his laughter behind his hand. He'd been trying to control himself the whole time, but this was just too good.

Biff wasn't smiling—Thomas was pretty sure his face wouldn't move that way—but he definitely looked *smug*. "Toldja I wasn't playing with him," he said.

Raige shrugged. "I mean, I could've gotten trumped..."

“Dude,” Thomas said. “Spades *are* trump.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You. Bid nil. With the queen. Of *spades*.”

Raige just beamed at her angelically. “But you have the king, right?”

M.D. threw it down. “Yes, you houseplant, but what is *wrong* with you?”

Biff howled with indignation. “The fuck you draw that out for, thought I had you—”

But M.D. wasn’t paying attention. She was shaking her head and looking like it was taking all her focus not to throttle Raige on the spot, who looked innocently apologetic. Thomas just collapsed on the table laughing, and the Treehouse crowd went wild.

Needless to say, Raige and M.D. won the match with flying colors. M.D. didn’t even gloat; she’d been uncharacteristically subdued the rest of the match, shaking her head and staring at Raige like she had something incredibly unpleasant planned in his near future. As for the Treehouse bettors, well, that one random guy with the cozy made out like a bandit, and everyone agreed that Raige was a force of nature, far greater than any of them had ever given him credit for. (And they still thought Biff sucked at cards.)

After they packed up and headed out, Thomas pulled Raige aside. “Okay man, cough up, where’d you learn?”

Raige looked completely innocent. “I’ve never played spades before in my life.” Then, at Thomas’s continued look, he smiled and added, “but I’ve played hearts at every family function for as long as I can remember, and the rules are pretty similar.”

Thomas laughed. "I knew it. Did you see that look on M.D.'s face? She is going to *kill* you."

"I was still pretty clueless half the time," Raige protested. "I forgot the queen of spades was a *good* thing to have..."

"How'd you know you were going to win?"

"Are you kidding? I didn't! I figured I'd lose no matter what, so I might as well go nuts." Raige shrugged. "Just beginner's luck, I guess."

Thomas clapped an arm on his shoulder and said, "you're a genius." And the one random person who'd bet on Raige came up to give him a chunk of the winnings as a thank you.

Biff stayed for months after that, but neither him nor M.D. ever tried to drag Raige and Thomas into a game of poker again.

TURF WAR

Raige came out to the Treehouse commons looking for M.D. and found Jelly Legs trying to secure a hoop to a tree branch, along with an entourage of what looked to be backseat engineers who were “helping.” Other onlookers were making themselves comfortable around a clearing in the center of the commons, which was where Thomas and Biff stood, both in gym shorts. Thomas had a basketball under his arm, and ostensibly, they were smiling at each other. You know. If wolves smiled.

As for M.D., she was plopped on a fungus, a bowl of stir-fried fern heads in her lap, and appeared to be overseeing the whole business.

“Whose idea was this?” Raige asked, moving towards her.

He fully expected her to say, “mine,” but instead, she replied, “the Treehouse gamblers. There was apparently a dispute on who played better in that whole spades game, so this is the tie-breaker to decide the ultimate loser. Biff got to pick the game last time, so Thomas chose basketball; I guess football isn’t really a one-on-one sort of deal. Here, sit down, have some ferns, Biff actually made them pretty great...”

Raige didn’t sit. Thomas and Biff were still eyeing at each other in the wolves-with-a-steak way.

“This is a terrible idea,” Raige said. “Someone’s going to get seriously hurt.”

“Yup,” she agreed, and popped a fern head into her mouth.

“Shouldn’t we stop them?”

"Nope."

"Reason...?"

"Primarily, I'm sick of watching Thomas's chest-beating and this might finally get it out of his system. Also: if we try to stop them from seriously hurting each other, they may seriously hurt *us*." She held up and waved a little pocket notebook. "Besides, I've already taken down all the bets and explained the basic principles of basketball to everyone, and I'm not doing that all over again for arm-wrestling, or beer pong, or whatever fool thing those two would do instead."

"Since when do you know anything about basketball?"

She just held a finger to her lips and went, "ssh."

Raige sighed and watched Thomas and Biff survey the makeshift half-court. He didn't really think he had a chance of talking them out of it on his own, and despite all his higher aspirations, he couldn't help but wonder who would win. All other things being equal, his money would've been on Thomas, who looked faster and wasn't tall but still had five inches on Biff. But Biff didn't seem unduly concerned.

"Who're you betting on?" Raige asked M.D.

She didn't even pretend to be offended. "I don't bet on cockfights, milquetoast. I just referee. Besides, as bookie I get a small percentage."

Jelly Legs waved a tentacle and drifted down from the hoop, which was now secured to the tree branch with what looked like spider silk. The backseat engineers seemed more or less satisfied, and so did M.D.

"Looks great, guys! You ready to play?"

Thumbs up from Thomas. Biff didn't say anything.

“Cool!” M.D. made some gestures at the Treehouse bettors, who all eagerly took up their preferred viewing places. Once everyone was all sorted, she shouted, “all right, ready, set, *hut!*”

Wham!

Raige winced. M.D. grinned and bellowed, “fore!”

[image description: M.D. sitting in a chair, cheerfully waving a little flag while sounds of commotion happen off-panel. Raige has his face in his hand and clearly doesn't approve of any of this.]

BODILY RECONSTRUCTION

MONTH ZERO

“Biff,” I whined. “You’re out of toilet paper.”

Biff didn’t look up from where he was scrubbing dishes.

“Check under the sink. If I’m out, I got newspaper.”

I made a face—Biff could squirrel away a lot of junk, and half of it seemed to end up in the crate under the bathroom sink. I pulled overalls up and gloves on and went to excavate, coming up with Ace bandages, normal bandages, tape, four bottles of rubbing alcohol, five different bottles with labels I couldn’t read, and after that I just pulled the whole crate out because it was obvious I’d be at it a while. By that depth, things were starting to get pretty disgusting, and I was just starting to wonder whether I’d *want* anything I found down there when I saw toilet paper.

It wasn’t much, and it was being used as wrapping for something else, but hey, it was comparatively clean. Pleased, I pulled the paper off... and found myself holding a half-empty case of hypodermic needles, just like the kind I had at work.

I don’t know how long I sat there with the sharps in my hand, but apparently it was long enough to make Biff impatient. “Hey,” he barked over the sloshing, “I need more toilet paper or what?”

Jumping to my feet, I stormed over to where Biff was up to

his elbows in soapy water, trying to scour the frying pan into submission.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

He held up the frying pan. I held up the needles.

He froze. Then: “Oh. Shit.”

Which meant it was exactly what I thought it was. And I shouldn’t have been surprised, I knew Biff, I knew his self-destructive habits, I *knew*—

“You... you...”

Biff dropped the pan with a splash, turned around, and walked away.

It didn’t occur to me to move, since Biff *never* turned down a fight, but when he got to the window and looked as though he might actually leave through it, I chased after him. Fine, if he wasn’t going to explode, I’d do it for him.

“*You!*” I didn’t have a word bad enough for him. “You pull this on me? The past year and a half, you’ve been saying you’re sober, and the whole time you—what? Moved on to something *worse?*”

He began to vanish. I grabbed him by the back of the vest before he could finish the job and shook him like a rat, waving the needles in front of his nose. “No. You’re going nowhere. You tell me what you’re on.”

Biff didn’t try to shove me away. He didn’t even look at me. Shoulders slumped, he said in a tired voice, “it ain’t like that.”

“What are you injecting?” I hissed.

Biff grabbed an old shirt off the windowsill and began drying his hands on it. His voice was flat. “Testosterone.”

Even then, I was too angry to get it. “Testosterone? What

would *you* need—”

Hands dry, Biff turned back to face me, grabbed my free hand, and clapped it to his chest. Then he waited for me to figure out what it was I was feeling through my gloves and his shirt.

When my eyes went big, he let go of me and waited.

I took a step back. Goggled at him. And it was stupid, I knew better, an illusionist skilled as he was, but I still stared at his chest, trying to see through it anyway. Then I recovered enough sense to realize what I was doing and wrestled my eyes back up to his face. At least I didn't stare anywhere else. Also, I wiped my hand on my jeans, not because of what I'd felt but because it was *him*.

Something. I was supposed to say something. Preferably something intelligent. But nothing was coming to mind. Not even idiotic, impolite things to say. Just... nothing.

Biff didn't give me anything to work with. He just crossed his arms over his chest and waited, face unreadable.

Finally, I said, “So... can I use this for toilet paper or not?”

Pause. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” I gave the case of needles to him, kept the paper for myself, and let my legs carry me back to the bathroom. Then I shoved my head back out the doorway. “Also, yes, you're out, and you need more.” Pulled my head in, then shoved it back out again. “And this conversation isn't over.”

He didn't say anything. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do to insure him staying; I really did need to go.

The few minutes that bought me weren't enough for me to completely reconfigure my understanding of reality, but they were enough for me to come to a short-term solution: ignore it.

All of it. What it might mean, what it might explain about Biff's personality, how I might feel about it. By the time I came out, scrubbing my bare hands dry against my thighs, I was in full Junior Healer Mode.

"Please tell me you're not reusing your needles. That's a terrible idea. If you need it, I can get you some new ones at work and get your old ones disposed of properly."

All right, it sounded weak, but at least it didn't sound *stupid*.

Biff hadn't moved from his spot by the window. He still wasn't giving me much in the way of conversational traction; he just grunted in a way that didn't really mean anything and kept not looking at me.

Pretending like I knew what I was doing, I came over, put my hands on my hips, and tried to act like he was a patient I was deeply annoyed with, but who at least wasn't being as stupid as I'd feared he was being.

"Where have you been getting it from?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm not asking to get in your business. I'm asking because you don't have health insurance, and if you haven't told me before this then you sure as heck haven't told Rosenthal, so I'm guessing you're doing it all yourself, and I don't want you coming down with septicemia."

He obviously wasn't happy, but at least he coughed up. "Yeah, it's DIY. I got 'em from Rosenthal; she thinks I use it for... other shit. There's a couple bottles under the sink, you want one."

So *that's* what they'd been. "I would like that, yes. I'll give it back once I'm done. I don't know enough about testosterone to

know what's a safe mix, but I can try to find out."

"All the labels're in Spanish. Think they're from Mexico or something."

I grimaced. My Spanish reading skills were abysmal. "I might need Thomas's help, then—I won't tell him," I added when I saw Biff's face. "I just want to make sure you're... that you're getting what you're supposed to. And if nothing's wrong, nothing lost. If something is, I can at least try to get you something safer. I don't know how, but..."

I ran out of words and finally just sat down. Biff had neither left nor punched me in the face. Which meant that this was serious. I knew what happened when Biff couldn't fight or flee. At best, he drank himself sick. At worst...

For a while, the only sound was the leaky sink dripping into the dishwashing suds. Then I put my head in my hands.

"This is so stupid. I was worried you were doing heroin or something. This is way better. If it was Raige, I wouldn't even be surprised." I raised my head, looked at him, and added miserably, "It's just that it's *you*."

Moving like he expected me to jump up and bite him, Biff edged to the other chair, pulled it as far away from me as he could get away with and still have access to the table, and sat down. At least I wasn't alone in complete conversational inadequacy; he wouldn't even look at me, just picked up the pack of cards from the corner and started shuffling. I watched the cards go in and out and said nothing.

Finally, without looking up from his shuffling, he said, "I ain't a girl."

Oh hallelujah, something I could respond to. "Well, *yeah*,

you think? It's just..." I shook my head. "Jeez, Biff, I knew you were wedded to your closet, but I figured you only had *one* of them..."

He bent the cards so far that for a moment, I thought they'd explode out of his hands, but he didn't say anything.

I set my elbows on the table and shook my head. Finally, I held up a finger and said, "one asshole question."

He glanced up.

"How did you keep it from me?"

He went back to the cards. "I didn't."

I blinked and cocked my head, but he didn't elaborate. So I dug back through my memory, all the times Biff and I had been up to our metaphorical knees in each other's psychological bull.

When I'd found out about his sexuality, he hadn't said he wasn't a faggot—that'd come later. He'd specifically said, "I ain't a girl."

It'd never occurred to me to take the words at face value. After all, gender had never quite made sense to me, and neither did sexuality, and Earthlings seemed to conflate them all the time as though that made it less confusing. So if there'd been any cues in his memories, I'd probably just ignored them. Why wouldn't I? His mind had been so busy bellowing, "I'm alpha male of the manly brigade," at top volume that I'd honestly just found it a relief to have someone so easy to figure out.

"Jeez," I said, "exchange your subconscious with a guy and you still don't know everything about him."

Biff glared at me. "No, you didn't know the *wrong* shit about me." He passed me the deck.

I cut it and passed it back. For a moment, I almost asked

how he'd kept me from noticing, with all the tussles we'd gotten into. But then I realized I didn't need to. I'd always worn gloves, and now that I thought about it, even when Biff had put my hand to his chest, it'd felt like he was using *something* to hold everything in place. Which implied... wait a minute...

I squinted at Biff. "Please tell me you're not using those Ace bandages I found under the sink."

Biff started dealing cards, probably just to have something to do with his hands, but he didn't say anything.

I covered my face again and groaned. And here I'd been thinking his short wind was just from smoking. "Biff. Biff. There are so many safer ways you could be going about this."

The last card hit the table. "I ain't ditching 'em."

Quiet. Calm. Utterly immovable.

An idea came to me. "What if I got you something better?"

He looked up.

"Treehouse has to custom-make pretty much every article of clothing. It's normal. It won't wreck your lung capacity, it won't fall down over the course of the day, and I'll get off your back."

He seemed to be seriously thinking it over. Then, "hey."

"Enh?"

"You think your bosses could fix," he gestured vaguely at his chest, "this?"

It took me a second to realize what he meant, then I shook my head. "Nuh uh, no way, not for a dead whale. Treehouse isn't like the US of A; we can't just *do* surgery. There are non-trivial odds of you dying on the table. Even if my bosses agreed to it—and they wouldn't—the results wouldn't be nearly as good as what

you could get here.”

Biff's tone started getting testy. “Yeah, well, I can't get it here.”

“Look, I have no idea what something like that would cost here in Vaygo, but you don't even have the resources to barter for it up my stretch of the multiverse...”

“It ain't about the money, okay? Like, you said why your people won't do it, 'cause it might kill me, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That's their only reason, right?”

“You need *more*?”

He snorted. “Kid, even if I had ten K to blow out my ass, they wouldn't let me in the door here.”

I frowned. “Correct me if I'm wrong, but I was under the distinct impression that money could get you anything in Vaygo.”

“Sure, I wanna get carved by some vet student in their basement. I wanna get it done right, I gotta go through the red tape.”

“You don't have health insurance.”

He smacked the table. “I ain't talking fucking health insurance, okay, I'm talking red tape. Gotta see the shrink and get 'em to say what I known forever, only my life of knowing ain't shit next to some headshrinker getting paid by the hour. And that's if I got all the paperwork and social security number and shit, which I don't. So no,” he said, “I don't give a shit if your bosses leave me looking like Frankenstein; I can vanish that. All I care about is they don't give me shit about it.”

“Frankenstein was the creator, not the monster.” I sighed and stood up. “Well, I can give it a try. But I can tell you what

they'll say right now..."

...

"Never," Flame signed, ruffling her wings with annoyance. "I don't know where your friend comes from that surgery can be purely for aesthetics, but here, it's a serious matter. You told him that, I hope."

"Of course I told him; what do you take me for? To him, it is a serious matter. He wants it."

Flame huffed with exasperation and looked to Scorch for support, but he was snuffling thoughtfully.

"We're not qualified," he signed, "but Ribbonblack might be."

"You think so?" I asked.

Ribbonblack had once been a feral predator in the wild forest. Now she was healer for the night people. Unlike Scorch and Flame, who took most cases themselves and preferred having only one junior healer at a time, Ribbonblack was so ancient and sickly that she spared her energy for major emergencies, leaving day-to-day business mostly to her crew of senior apprentices. Although she'd been nothing but gracious to me, I'd always found her a little unsettling.

"Ribbonblack used to be a surgeon on a much more technologically progressed society than ours. It's why we go to her for the delicate work," Flame signed. She looked to Scorch questioningly. "She has so little energy to spare these days, do you really think it worth it?"

Scorch scratched behind his jaw with his tongue—his version of a shrug. "We've been meaning to have a sit-down with her anyway. I have no idea whether this is something she'd want

to do, but why not? She'll at least be curious."

Flame was obviously not content with this, judging by the way her ruff stood up, but she shook her body like she was shedding all responsibility and signed, "well, let's see what Ribbonblack says. If your friend is truly set and determined on coming all the way here, we might as well see what we can do with him."

MONTH ONE

Between Ribbonblack's frailty and our own chaotic schedules, it took three weeks before we managed to meet, and it ended up being a last-minute deal, as are most things in Treehouse. I scrambled with my jaunt-watch to Biff's place, and it looked like I arrived in the nick of time; he was buttoning his jacket, had a duffel bag over his shoulder, and looked about to leave.

"Hey," I said, "you're in luck. We're seeing Ribbonblack."

"When?"

"Now." I glanced at the bag. "You busy?"

He tossed it aside. "Not anymore."

"Come on. And ditch the jacket; it's summer at home."

He shucked it and followed me out the window.

Biff had been to Treehouse a couple of times, but not enough for it to really sink in. He still seemed to assume that once he left, everyone put the skyscrapers back up and started speaking English again. At least he'd already met Scorch and Flame, though he still hadn't gotten over the idea that they could (and might

want to) eat him.

Scorch liked Biff—mostly due to not understanding a word he said and thinking he smelled great. Flame, however, found Biff's body language unpleasant and disagreed on the appeal of the odor of Marlboro Reds, so she was closing down the practice while the rest of us headed out into the dusk to Ribbonblack's practice.

The place was huge, due to the number of apprentices Ribbonblack housed and the number of patients she saw, and the whole place looked like a giant mutant lovechild of a banyan and bamboo. (Since, like most ground-level Treehouse permanent businesses, it was housed within a tree. Why go through all the bother of cutting down, making boards, and building when you could just use an already-existing living structure that'd survive and repair itself for centuries?)

One of Ribbonblack's junior apprentices greeted us at the door. "Welcome," it signed with rustling fronds, lighting a lamp. The gourd contraption gave off a dim twilight illumination, enough for us to see without blinding the night people. "Please, come in."

Biff stared at the apprentice. His jaw clenched. I elbowed him hard in the side and hissed, "*huge* favor," and that seemed to knock him out of it. Thank god for the language and societal mores barrier.

Scorch tucked in his tail, sucked in his sides, and managed to scrape through the door. His species being a kind that didn't need much in the way of cushions, he simply lay down directly across from a large hanging basket, while I sat next to him on a cushion that'd been left out for me. Biff took the free cushion on

my other side, though it was obvious he had no earthly idea what anything was.

The apprentice hung the lamp from the ceiling, fetched us water, then faded into the background. I felt a little guilty; such social grace had never been my strong point. Then again, seeing who I was sitting next to, maybe I didn't have much to feel bad about.

"So... where's this Ribbonblack thing?" Biff asked.

I tried not to look like I was in pain; Scorch had been around me enough that he might guess why. "That's her in the basket, genius."

"That's *alive*?"

Ribbonblack was a flexible, emaciated being resembling a rough cross between a daddy-long-legs and a squid. Her numerous limbs were all long, spindly hydrostats—some as thick as my wrist, others thinner than my pinky, mostly covered with suckers. Her dull black skin was broken up with veins of blue that pulsed with her vital rhythms. She looked like something out of a nightmare, and though she moved smoothly enough, I got the sense that once upon a time, she'd been able to move a lot faster.

At least communication wouldn't be an issue. Ribbonblack was a telepath, and not of the haphazard, mortifying variety like me, the more popular "speak coherently through thought" type. Her mental "voice" was always flat and slightly jerky—an effect of her editing out emotions and irrelevant data from her broadcasts.

"Good set to you," she said. Then she paused. "I can't greet the newcomer. He's not configuring."

Oh great. "Biff, she's trying to connect telepathically with you, but it's not working."

He shifted uncomfortably. “We gotta do that? Feels like spiders in my head.”

“Biff, now is *really* not the time to get recalcitrant.”

“Look, you didn’t tell me she was no fucking mind-reader. You sure she don’t speak English?”

“Yes, Biff, I’m positive she doesn’t speak English. She doesn’t have vocal cords.” I adjusted my thoughts to specifically broadcast to Ribbonblack. “I’m sorry, he has... issues. I’ll translate for him.”

That settled, her and Scorch started chatting. Since to Biff, they appeared to be just sitting in silence, he leaned to me and asked, “what they doing?”

“Talking shop. Nothing you’d be interested in, but it’s important for me, so shut it; I’ll let you know when there’s something you need to know.”

Biff was the most unusual part of the night’s meeting, but he was far from the most important. There was no telling how far Ribbonblack’s energy might stretch, and since she, Scorch, and Flame were the only full-fledged healers in town, it was in their best interests to keep abreast of news with each other’s practices. A little friendly competition was all well and good, but Treehouse’s balance was a delicate one, and if Ribbonblack got sick, or if Flame got hurt, we needed to be ready.

I kept my mouth shut unless I had anything useful to add; mostly, I listened. Ribbonblack’s primary apprentice looked to be shaping up into proper healer material. It’d be good to have another around, eh? Help carry some of the burden of the night people... and a new illness among the Dead Carrier Beetle family, had we heard? Only the younger, a breeding issue perhaps...

Biff bounced his knee and fidgeted with his water, but at least he didn't interrupt. Probably because he knew that half the people in the room could kill him and eat him if he annoyed them too much.

Ribbonblack appeared to be holding up well, and eventually, Scorch said, "you remember that possible case we found beyond our abilities."

"Of course. That is what the shy one is here for, then?"

Ha. Biff, shy.

"It is. Some friend of our junior healer's. We wanted to hear your take on it."

Ribbonblack turned to me—well, mentally speaking. Her body didn't express emotion in a way I could recognize, but she allowed a thread of curiosity to enter her broadcast. "Speak."

I nudged Biff. "All right, this is you."

Speaking aloud in English as I broadcast, I went into my spiel. As I explained, both Scorch and Ribbonblack eyed Biff appraisingly. Seeing how Scorch had big pointy teeth as long as my finger and Ribbonblack pulsed and undulated like a living shadow, I couldn't blame Biff for looking a bit uncomfortable. I *could* blame him for asking me, "you sure they don't eat people?"

I halted my broadcast for a moment. "Of course they eat people; what they don't eat is customers. Now *shut it*."

Apparently Scorch could read enough of my body language to get at least a vague idea of what I was expressing, if not the reason why. He chuckled. Since for him, that involved quivering and cavernous wheezing, this didn't do much to make Biff look any more relaxed.

"Shall I lick him?" Scorch asked mischievously. "It works

for overwrought hatchlings...”

“Let’s not send him screaming out the door, huh?” I replied.

If Ribbonblack was amused, I couldn’t tell. She was all business, asking questions on Biff’s anatomy and general health. I did my best to explain in a way that was clear, concise, and wouldn’t get me decked. There were no sudden glares or fist clenching, so I guess I didn’t phrase it too abysmally.

Then came the physical.

I turned to Biff. “Okay, this is the part where you’re going to have to strip down for them.”

He wasn’t paying attention. “Your boss is drooling at me.”

“He can’t help it; we smell like barbecue to him. Just ignore it. I promise, he won’t try to eat you; he drooled the whole first season of my apprenticeship and I’m still here.”

He didn’t seem convinced, but he got up and reached for his shirt. “The vanish too?”

“The vanish too.”

No need to ask what he wanted; I turned around and directed my attention to the wall behind me, giving the sign for “local societal more” over my head. Scorch and Ribbonblack didn’t protest. After all, I wasn’t going to have anything to do with the surgery, so there was no reason for me to see anything.

I heard the rustle of cloth, and Scorch’s thoughtful *whuff*. Thanks to Ribbonblack’s broadcast, they could communicate with me out of my line of sight, which allowed me to keep translating.

“Ribbonblack asks if she can touch you.”

“They ask?”

“Healers always ask here.”

Pause. “Yeah, okay.”

I heard the soft creak of Ribbonblack’s basket, but after that, nothing. I had no idea she’d started until I heard Biff yelp, “Jesus *shit*, that’s cold!”

The next half hour was more questions and answers: Biff’s health, his goals and intentions for the hypothetical surgery. I kept him honest, and at one point, I even got up and modeled, since for all my biology, I remained flat as a board. I kept my face to the wall, and though Biff sounded like he was talking through his teeth the entire time, he didn’t flip out or hit anyone.

When I turned back around, Biff was fully dressed, both in clothes and illusion. He came to sit down again, eyes down and back tense, so I punched him in the shoulder. He punched me back and relaxed a little.

Ribbonblack was back in her basket, though I hadn’t heard her return. She interlaced her tendrils and her broadcast went blank; she was thinking privately. Finally, her thoughtstream became perceivable again. I tried to translate alongside her broadcast as best I could.

“I’m intrigued,” she said. “It would be an interesting change of pace for me to do art and not just craft. I was an aesthetic surgeon, back on my home.” The word “home” was painfully disjointed, as though she was stripping a lot of emotion out of it. “It would be a challenge. I’d need to do a great deal of research, and of course, my work wouldn’t compare to someone trained in the procedure.”

“No shit,” Biff said when I finished. “Can she do it?”

Using slightly more diplomatic phrasing, I relayed the inquiry, and Ribbonblack said, “obviously, I have more research to

do, but at this time, I believe it's possible."

I looked to Biff. "You're in luck. She's going for it."

"All *right*," he said, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

"What'll it cost me?"

"Work and service. So... you squeamish?"

The next couple hours were spent hashing out an employment contract—of immense interest to Ribbonblack and Biff, mind-numbing for everyone else. Scorch took the time to go out and fetch us dinner, but Biff still needed a translator (diplomatic censor), so I was stuck for the whole thing. Just as well, really; Biff could haggle pretty well... in Arizona. Here, he was a sitting duck.

Unfortunately, Biff's skill-set held little value in Treehouse. For a while, it sounded like Ribbonblack would refuse to take the case because he had nothing to offer, but I took a hand in the proceedings and mentioned American availability of cheap, mass-produced medical equipment. Finally, they settled on a certain amount of Vaygan pharmaceuticals (not street and not stolen), plus a half-week of set-rise labor for two seasons.

"Meaning?" he asked me.

"A Treehouse week is eight days, a season eleven weeks, and set-rise shift from dusk until dawn. So... four days a week, you'll be working the graveyard death march for roughly six months, plus whatever else it is you do at home."

No hesitation whatsoever. "Deal."

Thought the employment contract was bad? Next came the *paperwork*.

Some people assume that "primitive" societies are above (or maybe below) bureaucracy. They've obviously never tried to

run a town with dozens of different languages and social mores. I had to go down to bully the record-keepers, since they didn't like going to Ribbonblack's place or anywhere else for that matter. Then they had to write up the contract, where everyone haggled over the exact wording of it in multiple languages. Once *that* was settled, the record-keepers made copies (by hand) and everyone signed everything multiple times.

By the time we left and staggered homeward, the moon had set and I was falling asleep on my feet.

"Ugh," I groaned, rubbing my eyes. "Biff, you need to either learn some Pidgin Sign or get over your telepathy thing, because I'm never doing that again."

Biff didn't seem to care that he'd spent half the night getting prodded by an eldritch abomination and arguing Treehouse contract law. He was as cheerful as I'd ever seen him, rubbing his hands together and chortling. "Fuck that shit, who cares, I'm getting surgery!"

"I'm glad you're happy," I mumbled, fumbling at the door. "Great, and I have work at dawn... do you think you can manage not to assault anyone until tomorrow afternoon? Because there is no way I'm going through even *more* effort to get you home at this hour."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. You got a couch?"

"My hammock's broken. You can either share the mattress pad with me, or take the floor, choice is yours." The door wasn't coming open. In my condition, this seemed the height of unfairness.

Biff reached over, braced his shoulder, and forced the door. His look was militantly casual. "So hey, I got a couple days

to get shit set up, but... y'know. Ain't no bus going to Dipshit, Nowhere, and I'm gonna be here a lot..."

I paused. I stared at him. Then I shut my eyes, rested my head against the door-frame, and whined. Because oh, I knew where this was going. Where *he* was going.

...

"You're letting him move in?" Thomas moaned. "Why?"

I rubbed my temple and grabbed a slice of pizza from the pan on the table at Tarzan's. "Look, him moving in is the *least* inconvenient thing for me right now. He's working for Ribbonblack half the week, I can't run back and forth playing taxi all the time—"

"Ribbonblack?" Raige said, grabbing his own slice. "Why's he working for Ribbonblack?"

Thomas's eyes lit up. "Does he have cancer? Oh, please tell me he's got cancer..."

"He doesn't have cancer! He just is, all right?"

"And can we not make terminal illness jokes, please?" Raige asked. "Personal sensitivity."

"Right. Sorry, Raige."

"It's okay. So how long will he be staying?"

"Two seasons."

Thomas let his head fall back against the booth and intoned, "ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of my sex life—"

"Don't be so dramatic," I said. "You act like I'm the only one with a residence."

"Yeah, but the walls are like paper at my folks' place, and I swear Raige's new roommate never leaves."

Raige spread his hands and shrugged. "It was a random draw. Nothing I can do."

"Yeah, because you left it to the last minute—"

"Look," I interrupted, "Biff's working the graveyard death march. He won't have the energy to care about *anything*, certainly not you." Then I hastily added, "that said, refrain from having sex in front of him. He just might notice."

"He's working set-rise? Harsh." Thomas plucked a stray thread of cheese and raised an eyebrow. "Why the hell would be willing to go through that?"

Raige didn't say anything. Judging by his face, he was torn between saying that it was none of their business and asking the same question himself.

"If you want to know, you can ask him," I said. "As it is, my room, my rent, my rules. Cope."

"Is... everything okay with him?" Raige asked.

"Who cares?" Thomas retorted.

"As okay as Biff ever is," I said, "but he's got enough on his plate between Ribbonblack and holding things down in Vaygo. He won't have anything left over to bother with you."

Thomas didn't look convinced. "Us, sure. What about you?"

"What about me?"

He held up one hand. "You're fire." He held up the other. "He's dynamite. Put you together, and..." he slapped his hands together and pantomimed an eloquent little mushroom cloud. "I give it a week before y'all blow the whole place up."

"Thomas!" Raige scolded. "Be fair. It'll take at least three."

"Oh, ha, ha," I said, and stole a crust.

MONTH TWO

It went fine.

Hard to believe? Not really. Biff and I had shared quarters numerous times before without killing each other. This time, at least, we were doing it of our own free will. Besides, Biff was a jerk, but I was doing him a huge favor, and he knew it. He didn't miraculously transform into Prince Charming, but he at least put forth some effort.

The mornings settled into a routine fast. I'd wake up and, weather permitting, watch the sun rise while I ate my breakfast of leftovers. (For all of Biff's abrasive traits, I had to give him one thing: the six months he lived with me were the most nutritionally lucrative of my life.) I'd set a plate out for him, and roughly halfway through my meal, he would stagger past. I'd say good morning; if he was feeling energetic, he'd grunt at me. Then he'd collapse over his food and sleep until he had to get up and do it all over again.

I admit, it was a little satisfying seeing gym-rat Biff struggle with the physical demands of my job. Having been Scorch and Flame's flunky for years, I could testify as to the amount of grunt work required to keep a healing practice going, and Ribbonblack's was way bigger than ours. Lugging hot water and soap, sterilizing everything over and over in a society without Lysol or rubbing alcohol, disposing of medical waste—oh, it was bad. And that wasn't even including the usual abuses one went through restraining juveniles or accessing remote patients at the

tops of trees or deep underground. Being a healer was like being a combination doctor, shrink, nutritionist, and veterinarian, and I was positive that Ribbonblack saved the worst of it all for him.

Biff was lousy at Pidgin Sign, and worse with telepathy, but he knew when he was being hazed. One rainy morning, after shedding his wet jacket and toppling onto my mattress pad, he mustered the power to mumble into my pillow, “she trying to get rid of me?”

“Hmm?”

“Ribbonblack.”

I chewed and swallowed my dumpling. “Testing you. By local standard, you’re asking for the Hummer stretch limo of surgeries; she’s making you earn it.”

The pause was so long, I thought he’d fallen asleep, but no, he was just gearing up for a tirade, though when he finally let loose, it was more an exhausted grumble: “I’ll show her. Fuck her. Fuck this whole fucking town.”

His face was buried in the pillow, so he couldn’t see me smile, or toast him with my water bottle. “Fight the good fight, Biffy.”

“Fuck you too,” he growled, and fell asleep.

...

Throughout our association, I’d never known Biff to be passionate about anything—unless you counted anger, in which case he was passionate about everything. Considering what Ribbonblack was putting him through, I expected him to explode after a month or two—that or just give up. But nope, that one complaint was it. After that, he settled into a fierce, silent perseverance I’d never seen from him before. He hurled himself

into the endless swarms of biting insects, the herds of furious juveniles, the mud and the blood and the filth. He got trampled, blistered, and bitten. But he kept going.

He never became much of a polyglot, but he started badgering me to teach him more Pidgin Sign. "How do I say, 'Where?'" Or, "How do I say, 'What's this?'" And, of course, "How do I say, 'Fuck off?'" (He had to settle for "go rot.") He even started being able to put together his own short sentences, though his grammar was still appalling. ("Give shovel go rot busy.")

When he finally put together that I had to go through the same menial work as a junior healer, that Ribbonblack wasn't just inventing horrible jobs for him to do, he started badgering me for tricks of the trade. "How do you keep them two-legged triceratops things from kicking you?" Or, "You got something for these bites?" As time wore on, I even started giving him straight answers. (Though I never did get him to stop using dinosaur names.)

And he started to bounce back. First he managed to eat before hitting the sack. Then he started having the energy to clean the dishes and put them away. Finally, he started rising in the evenings to cook, as though determined to pay me some form of rent, even if it was by the calorie. Eventually I started letting him have his way with the groceries, because even though he didn't have a clue what he was getting from the gardens half the time, his choices invariably turned out better than mine. I finally started putting on a little weight, much to Raige and Thomas's delight.

Still, Biff was usually asleep when I got home. So when I came home from work to find him awake and cooking, I knew something was up. When I smelled the food, and saw his face, I

knew it was going to be a humdinger.

“You need a favor, don’t you?” I said.

He scowled. “Ribbonblack needs shit on the surgery. Articles and crap.”

“Ah, she’s sending you out for that, huh? Congratulations; that means she thinks you’re going to make it. So you need me to go library diving for you?”

“They got shit like that?”

“Libraries have everything, Biff. Especially when they’re for schools of medicine, and Raige is my VU library connection.”

“Well, you wanna do that, sure, but I was going somewhere else.” His expression made it apparent it wasn’t Disneyland.

I tossed my work apron over a hook, leaned back against the wall, and gestured at him to get on with it.

“There’s a tranny support group every Wednesday at the faggot health center. I’m gonna have to go.”

“You know, I think everyone there would be grateful if I went instead.”

“The fuck’d *you* need books on chopping off your tits for? You don’t got any. You’re already going book diving for me, so let me do some shit myself, Jesus.”

“Okay, okay. But let it be on record that I think this is a lousy idea, and you have to promise me you won’t insult anyone.”

MONTH THREE

The Harry Benjamin Health Center looked no different than any of the other blocks of concrete around it, but the closer

we got, the further Biff withdrew into his jacket until the brim of his cap almost touched his collar. His vanish kept fluctuating, like he was desperately trying to find a face he would be fine with never being able to use again.

“Will you relax?” I said. “These people are just like you.”

“No they ain’t,” he snarled.

I rolled my eyes and warbled, “there was a man who had a hippo and Crissy was her name-oh...”

“I been here before.”

That got my attention. “I thought the entire GLBT population of North America had a restraining order on you.”

“I was a stupid kid then, okay? Thought I could do it legal.” His eyes went glassy with horror. “Hippie college queers. All of ‘em, hippie college queers.”

“You say that like you’re so much better.”

“When they weren’t fighting each other over shit I don’t care about, they kept telling me to find a good shrink.” He snorted. “Cuz, y’know, I was rich and shit.”

“I can’t imagine why they would tell you that.”

“Fuck you. I just kept my mouth shut, hands in my pockets, and ran like hell soon as it was over.”

“Self-control? From you?”

“Shut up, I was seventeen.”

“That was a long time ago, Biff,” I cooed. “I’m sure things have changed since then and the college kids have all grown up now.”

He grunted and slunk into the building, steadfastly staring straight ahead and ignoring the HIV test posters. I followed and swiped a few condoms from the freebie bowl before Biff grabbed

my arm and yanked me past.

Up the stairs, past a bunch of rainbow flags, (Biff was starting to look like a turtle in his jacket shell) and we came to a door with a sign in front saying, “Trans Support Vaygo Meeting.” The door was open, showing a few people in chairs chatting to each other, and standing out front was someone with purple hair and a big bright smile.

“Welcome to Trans Support Vaygo! My name is Lisa, my preferred pronouns are she, her, and hers, and I’m the group moderator.” She grabbed my hand and began vigorously pumping it. “How might I refer to you?”

Hey, this didn’t sound bad. I didn’t have to guess! “M.D. I don’t care about pronouns; use whichever you want.”

“No problem.” She turned to Biff. “And you are?”

She reached for Biff’s hand, but he had his hands crammed deep in his pockets and was standing as far away as he could get away with and still be affiliated with me. He made a sound that communicated nothing but extreme discomfort. I jerked my chin, trying to get him to come over, but he didn’t appear to notice.

“He’s... shy,” I said, and glared at him.

She laughed. “Oh, that’s okay, we get plenty of nervous family the first time.”

Biff and I hastily jerked back.

“Wait, naw—”

“No, no, no—”

“We ain’t—”

We stopped. Looked at each other. He gave me a pained, questioning look. I spread my hands, shrugged, and grunted. If

he wanted to play bumbling uncle to my transgendered whatever, I could live with that. The face he had on at the moment could at least *sort of* pass, with a stretch.

But Biff sighed and said, “we ain’t related.”

“And I’m an adult, thanks,” I added.

“Oh.”

Awkward silence. She looked back and forth from me to him, like she was waiting for an explanation, but I didn’t feel like one was required, and Biff didn’t say anything, which was fine by me. As far as I was concerned, my job was to keep him from offending as many people as possible, and having him silent sounded like a good start.

Finally, she chuckled uncomfortably and said, “well, I’m very glad you came, and sorry that you took all this trouble, but you look very uncomfortable, and this is a trans safe space. For the emotional comfort of my members, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

I blinked. “Oh. Uh, okay. I’ll just...”

“Oh no, sweetie, you’re fine, we’re totally welcoming of gender queer, gender fluid, and questioning youth here.” There were *words* for what I was? “But this space is for trans people to feel safe in a cis world, and...”

I realized she was looking at Biff when she said it, and before I could stomp on his instep, he snarled, “I’m a fucking tranny, okay, now can I come in or not?”

...

“Wow. Two sentences. Color me impressed; I thought it’d take at *least* a paragraph before they kicked you out.” I sat down on the curb next to him, heavily laden with pamphlets, articles from

the Southwest Transsexual Summit, and a book.

“Fuck ‘em,” he said, tossing ash off his cigarette and crossing his arms. “Didn’t want to be part of their damn group anyway.”

“You know, you might’ve made it through the door if you hadn’t gone off and said ‘tranny.’”

“That’s what I am. They the ones who asked. What, I need to show ‘em my degree in PC ‘fore they let me in? Fuck ‘em. Fuck ‘em all.”

I sighed. “Well, I can definitely see why you’re going to Ribbonblack. Just as well, really; the hippie college kids are still there.”

“Told you.”

“They weren’t so bad. Just... academic. Speaking of which, do you know what ‘phallogocentrism’ means?”

He took a long drag, then flatly: “no.”

“Unclench, would you? I don’t know, I thought maybe there was some manual or something they gave you when you first came—”

“Nah, they just act like it.”

“Bitter, bitter. Anyway, I just smiled and nodded and pretended I knew what the heck they were talking about.” I smacked him on the back. “Come on. Let’s get out of this weirdly clean area of town and hit some south-side pharmacy to pay your medical bills.”

He stubbed out his cigarette, put the remainder behind his ear, and got up to head down the street.

“So how was it?” he asked.

“The meeting? All right, I guess. Like I said, I didn’t

understand what they were going on about half the time, so I didn't say much. It was nice to be called all sorts of pronouns, but they seemed *way* too interested in my ethnicity."

He snorted. "They guess right?"

"Please. They were far too well brought-up to ask. It was fun watching them try, though. They kept talking about how nice it was to have some 'diversity,' and then they started fighting for the title of Coolest White Person."

"Who won?"

"You of all people should know that winners don't compete."

He shook his head. "Hippie college queers."

"Can't say you didn't warn me. At least I got some reading material for Ribbonblack." I flipped through a brochure with a smirk. "With your Pidgin Sign skills, she'll need to contract me to read them for her, which means Raige and Thomas are getting new-spring presents from me this year, yipee-ki-yay."

Biff didn't share my enthusiasm. He kept up a brisk pace until we crossed under the graffiti-stained I-10 bridge, which marked the invisible Vaygo cultural line to the south side. Only when we were surrounded by the crumbling brick dollar shops and Russian liquor stores did he relax, and we got our mass amounts of aspirin, ibuprofen, and decongestants without incident.

...

It turned out that Raige's VU library card would not allow him to grab books from the medical school library, but the building *was* open to the public. (Or at least, to students, but all I had to do was dress in all American clothes and borrow Thomas's

backpack and I passed well enough that they let me in with Raige.)

I had never thought to take full advantage of Raige's library access, but the moment I walked through the big double doors, I realized the error of my ways. My fingers twitched. My pupils dilated. I began to salivate.

Raige hitched his backpack up his shoulder. "I guess you'll need me to work the computer catalog, huh?"

I cackled maniacally.

I was so distracted by the cornucopia of medical journals that I didn't realize the obvious until Raige sat at the computer. Of course I needed his help. A seven-story library wouldn't be amenable to my usual strategy of browsing, and while I had improved in many ways over the years, I still tended to cause weird rainbows to appear on any computer monitor I got too close to, along with other errors.

"So, what're we looking for today?" Raige asked, flexing his hands.

It occurred to me that I should've worked this out beforehand.

"Kid?"

I could've ditched Raige and asked one of the librarians, except (A) awkward, and (B) I'd sound like a prankster, especially considering (C) nobody ever believed what an electronic menace I was until I demonstrated with mass amounts of property damage. Not my idea of a good time.

"Couldn't we just find the right area?"

"Kid, this is the medical library. They probably have a couple floors for whatever you want. Come on, I'm not Thomas, I won't wisecrack if Scorch and Flame need stuff on... I don't know,

priapism or something.”

I almost asked how Raige knew what priapism was.

Caught myself just in time. “It’s sexual reassignment surgery.”

Raige hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he said, “sure, okay,” and got to work like nothing was amiss.

This was why I loved the guy.

There was exactly one medical journal in the entire library that looked at all useful. I arrowed in on that, while Raige parted ways with me so as to replenish his stock of fantasy romance novels in another building.

I was almost done with the photocopy machine when Raige caught up with me, purple paperbacks under his arm. “Find what you were looking for?”

“Close enough.” I pulled the journal out from under the lid and removed the fresh warm copies of “Improvements in the Nipple Pedicle Method” from the tray. “Ready?”

As we exited down the stairs into the sun, he halted, expression serious.

“Hey. If... if something’s going on with you, you know I’m here whenever you need me, right?”

I sighed, then went and hugged him. “I know. It’s not for me.”

Raige was silent a moment, then I felt him stiffen. “Oh. That uh, that explains a lot, actually. Should I say anything, or...?”

“No. So far, I think, Biff’s managed to avoid committing homicide. Let’s not make me his record-breaker. Say nothing, do nothing, remember nothing. And don’t tell Thomas.”

“I’m his boyfriend, I love him, and I wouldn’t dream of it. Will Biff be recovering long?”

"Five weeks Treehouse, if he's lucky. Likely more like seven."

Raige gave a low whistle. "Thomas will flip."

"Thomas isn't the one stuck being Biff's caregiver, so he can just deal."

"Yeah, well, if you need some extra help while he gets better..."

I grinned. "And you wonder how you got yourself two people who adore you." He blushed. "Now that you mention it, though, could I borrow a recliner from your dad's place? Biff's not going to be able to sleep lying down for a while."

"Will it fit?"

"Let's find out!"

...

I'll spare you the ordeal of getting a La-Z-Boy through interdimensional customs. Suffice to say, if you ever get the genius idea of trying to move an enormous heavy chair over dimensional borders, for the love of mercy, don't do it yourself. Having never owned a recliner myself, I'd forgotten just how big and heavy American engineering could make a chair, and even Raige's patience wore thin after a while.

Which was why Biff was the one I strong-armed into helping me move it the rest of the way.

Hauling it into town wasn't too bad; I just put it on a dolly and hitched it to Scorch's back, who thought the whole thing was delightful exercise. All me and Biff had to do was help ease the thing out of ruts and pot-holes—which, to be fair, there were lots, since Treehouse was so hilly that wheels weren't practical.

Getting the chair from town down to my room, however,

was a nightmare. See, my room was underground. It had two entrances: a tunnel outside, and the dumbwaiter, which connected to Scorch and Flame's practice directly above. A normal chair would've fit down the dumbwaiter no problem, but the La-Z-Boy was such a monster that Biff and I had to wrestle it down the tunnel, which was too small for Scorch. Said tunnel was also round.

Have you ever tried to circle a square?

[image description: M.D. and Biff wrangling the recliner down the tunnel. M.D.'s room is shaped like an underground dome, with spiraling shelves around the sides and sacks of stuff hanging from the root cage ceiling, and the whole space is clearly not designed for the furniture coming its way.]

"How the fuck you get shit in here?" Biff complained as we tilted and twisted around a curve.

I banged my hip into a root and hissed. "Look, not my fault the USA and Treehouse have different base principles of design. I'm only doing this for the sake of *your* post-surgical carcass, so shut up and push."

In my little round room, the recliner took up about half the available space. I wasn't thrilled about having it around, but at least Biff would be able to sleep comfortably after the operation.

I rubbed my back, wincing. "Ugh. When the time comes, I'm just going to wrap it in plastic, put it back on wheels, tie it to Scorch, and have him drag it out. No way am I hauling that thing out of here on my own."

Biff had already parked his rump, wiggling to find the comfiest spot. "How you get this thing, anyway?"

I tried to stretch. Bad idea. "Ow! Raige. Or rather, his old

man. The guy's starting to actually not hate me, can you believe it? Loaned it of his own free will and everything."

Biff snorted, then said, "Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

I paused in rubbing my back and looked up. He was studiously looking at the rope of garlic hanging from my ceiling.

I grinned. "Biff, you learned a social skill! I'm so proud of you!"

He threw garlic at my head.

MONTH FOUR

As the surgery date neared, preparations got more and more underway. The next one Biff needed me for was buying a compression vest—the very garment that had set the whole surgery in motion. Apparently Ribbonblack had found out what he was using instead and was so professionally offended that she insisted he get a proper chest-binder on the spot, especially since he needed a post-surgical recovery vest anyway.

Were he in Vaygo, Biff likely would've spent his immediate post-operative period in nothing but ordinary bandages, but Ribbonblack was a novice to this procedure and wasn't taking any chances. The vest wouldn't just keep everything in place for proper healing; it'd also allow her to get in and check her work. (Plus it could be easily taken off and cleaned. Remember, no easy disinfectant in Treehouse, and Biff wouldn't be able to bathe for a solid week.) She was willing to shell out for a custom garment,

especially since it would also help Biff's lung capacity while working for her.

Which was how Biff ended up half-naked with a giant bug, getting plastered with goo coming out of her hind end.

"Never said your clothes came out of spider ass," he remarked.

I rolled my eyes at the wall I was facing. "Spinnerets. Totally different. Also, The Best Weaver is *way* too fancy for me."

"That's really her name?"

"You have to admit, it's a genius marketing move. She mostly makes super-special ritual clothes—you know, Treehouse version of prom dresses. Nothing I'd have much use for."

"Huh." He sounded uncomfortable, but I couldn't blame him. He'd probably been touched more in the past four months than he had in the prior four years, and besides, while The Best Weaver wasn't actually a giant predatory spider, she resembled one enough to make the difference moot. Especially since she was webbing him up.

"Kid." His voice was getting decidedly edgy. "I can't move my arms."

"That's normal. She's making a custom mold of your torso; the webbing has to be hard. Just relax; she hasn't lost a customer yet."

He made a wordless sound of discomfort, and I decided a distraction was in order, before he tried to kick The Best Weaver in the pedipalps.

"You know how I promised I wouldn't ask you stupid questions?"

"Yup." Well, at least the aggravation was directed towards

me now.

“Does it qualify as a stupid question if I ask how you kept it from the law?” He didn’t swear at me immediately, so I continued, “I don’t know about you, but they strip-searched me pretty thoroughly.”

His voice sounded like it was shrugging, but at least the itchy tones in his voice went down. “Yeah, well, I didn’t fucking bite them.”

“Eesh. Bite one immigration official, and nobody ever lets you forget it...”

“No shit. I didn’t, so they didn’t tranq me for it.”

And his vanish had taken care of the rest. Once again, I found myself envying his skills—while at the same time being glad I didn’t need them. The folks Biff and I had crossed had been *puzzled* by my anatomy, but at least they didn’t expect me to look fully human; Biff, they would’ve keelhauled.

“Surely you were off your hormones while in a prison cell with me.”

“Y’tthink?”

“I mean, I don’t know much about testosterone, but I do know you have to keep taking it or your body starts to revert.” I remembered what Biff had been like during that initial stint.

“Wow, no wonder you were so cranky; your organs must’ve...”

“Y’tthink?”

I caught the edge in his voice. “Right. Sorry.”

The Best Weaver skittered towards me on the wall so I could see her and signed, “tell my honored customer that the webbing needs to harden for a little while. It should be snug, but not uncomfortable. Let me know if he has trouble breathing.”

I relayed the information, and Biff muttered, "great."

Not knowing the verbal or the body language, The Best Weaver began cleaning up, nibbling off stray web bits and chittering cheerfully to herself. I'd been around her enough to know it was the equivalent of someone humming, but it probably sounded a little more ominous to Biff, especially since he was the one who couldn't move from the waist up.

"She eat people too?"

I resisted a sigh and rubbed my forehead. "Biff, Treehouse has a very broad definition of 'people.' By local standard, I eat people, you eat people, the trees outside the fence eat people. Ethics here are complicated."

"So... what? Eating people's okay here?"

"*Complicated.* Just scream if she starts biting you and I'll zap her. The Best Weaver, I'm sure you'll be relieved to know, is highly susceptible to electricity."

"Thanks a lot."

"Hey, don't blame me, you asked, I answered."

Pause. "How you know that shit about hormones, anyway? They got trannies like me out here in Dipshit, Nowhere?"

I hesitated a moment. Then I admitted, "for a while, there was talk of putting me on estrogen."

I could *hear* his eyebrows go up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. So I know a bit, just all in the opposite direction."

Silence. I decided to let him off the hook.

"Come on, Biff, I don't associate with you in expectation of tact. Spit it out."

It still took him a moment. "How come they...?"

I shrugged. "You know my creators fixed me."

“No tits, no fucking, no babies. I know.”

“I really don’t know that me being asexual is because of that, but whatever. On Earth, I was able to pass myself off as a late bloomer, but the Jaunter’s League was less laissez faire about things. I wasn’t quite age of majority, by their arbitrary standard, and since I was technically their ward for a little bit, they had the authority to medically normalize me. They saw it as undoing my ‘mutilation,’ not adding to it.

“I won’t go into the ridiculous fight that ensued over whether I was mentally competent to refuse or withstand treatment, but for a while, I seriously considered it.”

Anyone else would’ve taken that as a given. But Biff was silent, waiting for the punch line.

“Obviously I was not at my sanest at the time,” I said wryly, and he made a knowing sound. “But everyone seemed to think I was missing out on something amazing, and I guess I started to worry I was missing out on some sage adult wisdom or something. Like by refusing to have a normal puberty and growth cycle, I was refusing to grow up.”

Biff snorted. “I been through two,” he told me. “You ain’t missing shit.”

“Yeah, eventually, I came to the same conclusion. I mean, it’s not like I look like a little kid or anything. My body will just be a little different, that’s all. To me, it really isn’t that big a deal, but... I don’t know, your culture really loves its puberty stories, you know? From everything I’ve read, it’s an unpleasant, awkward, embarrassing stage of development, but it’s almost this weird biological hazing ritual that most of your people can’t imagine foregoing.”

“Nah, it’s shit. You fine missing it.” Pause, then, “it bad for you, not doing it?”

I shrugged. “Enh, I need to keep an eye on some aspects of my health, bone density and electroplaque leakage kind of stuff, but I’ve been fine so far, and anyway, those can be managed *without* life-altering metabolic upheaval.” I shrugged. “You know the anticlimax. I squirmed my way out, the statute of limitations expired, and now I’m age of majority and legally in charge of my own medical destiny and that’s the end of it.”

“You never said.”

“Yeah, well, neither did you.”

It came out sharper than I intended, and Biff had no response.

“Look, it’s fine with you and Raige, you don’t give me hassle, and it’s fine in Treehouse, where I’m the only full-time ape in town. But as I get older, I make more people uncomfortable. They don’t know *what* I am. You saw the folks at that support group; they thought *I* was the one there for info. And even the people who do know, like at the League, they look at me like I’m some mad science experiment, like, ‘oh, poor thing, she doesn’t know what they’ve done to her.’ Like I’m some stupid five-year-old or something!”

Silence.

I rubbed my face. “I mean, I’m not complaining, all right? I chose this. It’s not like I see Earthlings much. Just you and Raige, who’re fine with it, and Thomas. And sure, back before we knew how deep it ran, he kidded me about it a little, but not once the blood work came back. Now, I think he just feels bad about it. Even though he respects my decision, I don’t think he’ll ever get

why I did it.”

The silence hung. With my back to Biff, I couldn't see his face and he couldn't see mine, and it was best that way. I just stood there until The Best Weaver, oblivious to the content of the conversation, came down the wall to ask me to let Biff know that she was going to cut the web off him now.

Turned out the process acted like an incompetent waxing, which for someone like Biff became quite a production. After much cursing and yelping and, “tell my honored customer that I will cut him if he doesn't hold still!” the cast came off successfully, and it served to shove the whole conversation (monologue, really) under the rug.

I was glad. The whole business had been years ago, and it was humiliating to find it still upset me. I didn't feel much like eating or talking through dinner, despite Biff's cooking, and he was still sulking over his partially depilated back, so at least the silence was mutual. I figured that the whole thing would just join the rest of the things we'd never speak of again.

But as Biff headed out to leave for his set-rise shift, he halted and hung in the doorway. He looked like he was attempting social grace, but the effort didn't leave him with anything left over with which to speak.

“What?” I prompted after a bit.

He shuffled, rubbed his neck, and mumbled, “M glad you didn't cave.”

Then he left so I wouldn't have to say anything. Which was just as well; I didn't want him to see me cry.

BODILY RECONSTRUCTION

MONTH FIVE

It was getting down to the line now, but that didn't mean things slowed down. It just meant that on top of giving him the healing practice's dirty work, Ribbonblack was constantly prodding and poking Biff to make sure he didn't have any surprise reactions or health problems that might cause him to drop dead during the operation. The assortment of drugs that he kept under his sink turned out to be useful; he still had the Vicodin from those gunshot wounds years prior, and it spared Ribbonblack the strain of having to find out a good local mix.

Biff got progressively antsier and antsier, sublimating the anxiety into huge spreeds of cooking. One day, I came home from work to find him already up, a steaming pot of something delicious on my camp stove burner. I sidled up to it, sniffing, but Biff fended me off with his elbow, then smacked me with the spoon when I reached for it.

"Your punishments are cruel and unusual," I complained, rubbing my wrist, "and you're up early. You don't need another favor, do you?"

He shrugged. "Nah, couldn't sleep. Surgery coming up, so Ribbonblack said no smoking."

"You *complied*? I've been nagging you to quit smoking for years!"

"Yeah, well, you ain't taking a knife to me. Once that's over, I'm starting again. Had to go off my shots too." He lifted the lid, prodded the contents with the spoon, and grabbed some cubed meat on the cutting board. As he used the knife to slide it into the pot, I cocked my head.

"How you holding up?"

He shrugged. "Enh, fine for now. Give it a week and it'll suck, though. Gimme some of that... that purple potato thing."

I passed it over and as he did mysterious culinary things, I caught a look at his chest.

"Hey. Your vest is gone."

"Yup."

"Your *vanish* is gone."

He gave me a look that asked whether I thought pointing out the obvious made me smart.

"Ribbonblack again?"

He took sudden inordinate interest in the soup. "Me."

I let him stir for a bit, then said, "So, do I get an explanation or what?"

He shrugged. "Just... coming up soon, and I could die, so I thought... y'know. Maybe if I tried enough, I could just deal." He gave me a defensive look and added, "ain't like nobody here can tell the difference."

"True. So? How does it feel?"

"Shitty. Gonna try the full day."

"Good luck with that."

He had the vest and vanish back on before the soup was done.

MONTH SIX

Taking Biff's addictions away never went smoothly. It'd taken him years to taper off the binge-drinking, and he still

sometimes toppled off the wagon under stress. This was worse; he was going cold-turkey on *everything*, all at the same time. His personality took a heavy downgrade, and he pretty much stopped sleeping, which only made it worse.

Now we *did* start fighting. It was impossible not to; with his endocrine system in full revolt and no cigs, booze, or bloodshed to distract him, Biff hated *everything*. A missing sock was cause for an emotional explosion, and nothing on earth seemed to calm him down. Even cooking turned into an emotional minefield. My only consolation was that he would soon be under the knife and this would all be over.

Then we got a message from Ribbonblack's practice. She was sick; the surgery would have to be delayed "until further notice."

Biff hit the roof. Though it took all of my self-control, I refrained from joining him. Everything would be fine, I told myself. Fine. Ribbonblack would be fine, the surgery would be fine, everything would be fine, fine, fine.

Two weeks, I did this. It was the third-longest two weeks of my life, but I managed to at least imitate a responsible adult.

Then I came home to find my entire place wrecked and Biff in full tirade because he was positive I'd embarked upon a nefarious plot to make his life miserable by hiding his spice rack. (It was, in fact, back at his apartment in Vaygo. But by that point he was so sleep-deprived that he'd forgotten.) He'd overturned my furniture. He'd tossed my bedding everywhere. He'd *disorganized* my *books*.

Within five seconds, we were roaring and waving our arms at each other like furious baboons. After all that restraint, it was a

relief to finally let loose, and it looked like Biff would finally get the violence he craved, but right as I was hefting the frying pan, I had a flash of common sense. Biff was going under the knife soon. (Hopefully, oh god, oh please.) He couldn't afford to take damage. As junior healer, it was my responsibility, my *duty*, not to hurt him.

Never have I been so tempted to violate my professional scruples. I might have anyway if not for the second realization that hurting him might delay the surgery *even longer*.

That did it. Unclenching my hand one finger at a time, I gently set the frying pan down and forcibly dampened my volume. The effort made my voice sound strangled.

"Pack," I said. "You're leaving."

Self-control completely exhausted, I stormed out before he could tempt me further. Looking around, I saw Scorch and Flame's tree and hurled myself up it as high as I could. Once I'd climbed as far as was structurally sound, I sat, stared at the canopy below me, and did my own stint of hating everything.

After a minute or two, Biff slunk out, body language reminiscent of a dog caught defecating on the carpet. Guilt was not something he usually expressed; I would've found it funny if I hadn't been so mad at him.

"Hey. Do—"

"Go rot!"

"But—"

"Go *away*!"

He did.

For a while, I stayed in that tree, scowling into space. Eventually, I'd have to climb down so I could ship him off to

Vaygo, but that would mean dealing with him, and I'd had enough of that for the time being. As it was, I had a nice view of a sunny sky, and that seemed a much better use of my attention. *This* exploding ball of nuclear hot air was billions of miles away, mercifully silent, and much prettier.

The sun had gone behind the clouds and it was threatening to rain when Biff came out a second time. This time, he didn't say anything to me, just climbed up. It took a couple near-falls, but eventually he made it up to my branch. I refused to acknowledge his existence.

"Still mad, huh?"

Understatement of the year.

"I made lunch."

His lunch could rot, for all I cared.

"I cleaned up," he said.

He'd probably sorted my books *alphabetically*.

"C'mon. Don't send me back."

"Why not?" Fine, so I was lousy at the silent treatment.

"If I go back, I'll drink." His voice was weary. "I don't want to do that."

"Just because you have lousy impulse-control doesn't mean I'm obligated to tolerate your toddler tantrums."

Silence. I let him stew; it was that or kick him off my branch. At this point, I almost looked forward to him giving me a good excuse. Forget professional scruples; the way he'd been lately, not a single healer would convict me.

I was already planning the best direction to shove him when he said, "nah. You ain't."

I squinted at him suspiciously. This was far too good to be

true. Any minute now, he was going to revert to the over-defensive fiery ball of wrath that I knew so well.

"I'd've decked me a week ago, and you done a lot for me, the past few months." He looked to be developing an ulcer. "I..."

"Yes?"

Through his teeth: "*I appreciate it.*"

I cupped my hand around one ear. "What was that? I can't hear you over the emergency snowstorm announcement in Hell."

"I said I 'preciate it, okay? Jesus fuck, you want a medal or something?"

That was more like it. "After what you've put me through, I deserve three."

"No shit, you think I don't know how crazy I am right now? I ain't been off my shit in years, 'cause when I do, I get like this. Look, I'll change my schedule, stick myself in solitary, whatever, I just *can't go home*. If I drink like this, I'll ruin everything. I just got to get through this, so I never got to do it again. Please." The ulcer was back. "Just... please."

He rubbed his eyes, and I sighed.

"You have one day. Spend tomorrow behaving like a person, or your departure will be merely a day delayed."

I started to climb down, and Biff said, "hey."

I looked up, ready for him to say something worthy of a face-punch.

"Can we do something?"

I frowned. "Meaning...?"

"Look. I can't fight, I can't drink, I can't smoke, and my work's done. I need something to do, 'fore I kill this whole fucking town."

"I'll get back to you."

Then I climbed down to see what he'd cooked me in penance, and he helped me reorganize my books.

...

The next day, I took a groggy Biff hiking to Lookout Point. This was a common act of recreation all over Silver Fern, even in winter, so we weren't the only hiking party. Banded together, the group was big enough to protect from attack, and Biff had been around enough that he could finally recognize predatory plants, which saved me a lot of bother.

Vaygo was flat as a pool table, while Silver Fern was full of hills and small mountains. Biff was used to an aerobic lifestyle, but not on this level, and his wind was short; I could wear him out without exhausting myself in the process, and enjoy great views in the bargain. It worked, too. After the first hour, he could pass for human again, and warmed up enough that he took off his jacket.

We arrived at Lookout Point not long past noon and broke for a meal. It was cool, clear weather. We could see the bay, busy with boats, and the colors and movement of the Freeport market. The rocky cliffs and grassy hills and forest spread out around us in tones of blue, brown, and green—the ocean breezes kept Silver Fern from having intense winters. If we turned around, we could see Treehouse's tree-line wall and the lookout towers.

Biff didn't seem impressed, but he never did.

"Dusk and dawn are the traditional times to come here," I said, plunking down and taking off my Army pack for a sandwich, "but your night-vision is lousy and I can't take a day off work to spend the night in Freeport. Too bad, really. The sunsets are *amazing*, and the Freeport market's the best in Silver Fern. I'm

sure Scorch would be glad to let me handle the trip for once. Another time, if you want.”

Biff settled back, breathing hard but less winded than I’d expected. I wasn’t sure which had helped his lung capacity more: getting rid of the cigarettes, or getting rid of the Ace bandages. “Sure. After the surgery. When I’m better.” He clapped a hand to his back pocket, then frowned when he found it empty. “When I can smoke again.”

I tossed him a water bottle from my army pack. “Your incisions will thank you for your brief abstinence.”

He drank, and when he came up for air, he started digging in my pack for his own lunch. “How they gonna put me under?”

“Who said you were getting put under?” At his frown, I said, “We can’t use global anaesthesia here for long procedures; it’s a respiratory thing. Also, even if it wouldn’t kill you... don’t you barf like crazy when anesthetized?”

Biff made a sour face. Which meant I’d remembered correctly. “So, what, you doing it under local?”

“Ribbonblack’ll put you in a hypnotic trance state; it’s part of the telepathy thing and how her people hunt.”

He paused in his hunt for a sandwich. “Shit.”

“I know you have a thing about people who aren’t me being in your head, but this is noninvasive. Earthling shrinks and showmen have been inducing trances for decades without any psychic ability at all. Ribbonblack’s a professional. You’ll be out in seconds, and she won’t go digging.”

“Still.” Biff bit his lip, tapped his fingers against the pocket where his cigarettes used to be. “Can you be there for it?”

“Biff,” I said gently, “you know how much I suck.”

"Didn't say you got to *do* it. Just... be there. Make sure she don't fuck around. Make sure I don't wake up in the middle." He was staring fixedly at the horizon.

"Sure," I said. "I can do that. I highly doubt I'll *need* to, but I will."

That seemed to help a little. He nodded a couple times. "Okay. Sure. Think it'll go okay?"

"Of course."

He shoved me.

"You'll most likely live through it," I amended. "If you don't, you'll just never wake up. Which reminds me, how would you want your corpse disposed of? It's *really* important here."

Judging by Biff's expression, he had never once considered the deposition of his earthly remains. "What you having done?"

I grinned. "Oh, I'm totally having my carcass fed to the trees. I think One and her handlers are still hoping to outlast me and bag my remains for research, so I'm determined to get mulched and digested."

"Sure, trees're fine. And if I kick it, you got to promise me something."

"What?"

"You got to deck Ribbonblack for me."

I rubbed my chin. "Hmm. I don't know, we healers aren't supposed to punch each other, professionalism you know..."

He shoved me again.

"Okay, okay, I promise, if you die on the table, I'll feed you to the trees and punch Ribbonblack in your surly memory. But really, far more likely is that you'll live through the surgery and look like Scorch chewed on you."

He nodded, as though he'd come to the same conclusion. "I can deal with that."

I nodded, and we sat and watched the boats and rafts come in to Freeport, little blips of white and yellow on the great expanse of blue.

"It better be good when we come back here," he said.

"It will," I swore. "It totally will."

[image description: long after all this is over, Biff and M.D. return to Lookout Point one sunset. M.D. sits with her arms outspread as though showing off the scenery. Biff is pointedly not looking at her, choosing instead to light up a cigarette. The ocean, coast, and mountains spread out below them in a hallucinogenic rainbow of colors.]

MONTH SEVEN

For that whole month, Biff stayed with me in Treehouse. It wasn't pretty, but somehow he stayed sober and smokeless without killing anyone or getting himself Treehouse-arrested.

Considering the stress and anxiety leading up to it, the surgery day itself was anticlimactic. I think by that point, we all just wanted it to be over. Biff didn't sleep the entire day before, and by the time he got to the operating table, he was so drained that he was out like a light the moment Ribbonblack touched him.

I stayed in his mind, made sure he was good and under, then slipped out, and all that was left was waiting.

...

"Fine" is a relative term, especially with first time surgeries

involving filleting a guy across the chest. I'll spare you the grisly details; suffice to say, Biff lived, he was never dangerously close to dying, and things were incised, excised, and sutured relatively cleanly. By all accounts, a rousing success.

I didn't get to see the result right away, and neither did Biff. My gore tolerance had improved over the years, but I drew the line with people I knew too personally, and by the time Biff came to, he was wrapped in so many layers of bandages, plus the compression garment, that there was no way of telling how it'd gone.

His first semi-conscious words were, "Y'punch Rib'nblack?"

"Nope. Congratulations, Biff, you lived."

"The fuck you say." And then he slept for fourteen hours.

He spent the first three days in Ribbonblack's infirmary so she could keep an eye on him. It was going to be a week, but Biff was almost as rotten a patient as I was, and he was in a lot of pain most of the time, so we got him moved back down to the La-Z-Boy at my place. I emptied his drains (if you don't know what that means, don't look it up), kept him entertained and medicated, and we waited for the bandages to come off.

Then Ribbonblack got sick.

"*Again?*" Biff whined.

I couldn't blame him; I'd said the exact same thing when I'd heard.

"Wait, it gets better," I said.

Biff couldn't shout (it hurt too much), but a growl crept up from the back of his throat. "When do these fucking bandages come off?"

“Eventually.” When it looked like he was going to start yelling, regardless of stitches, I said, “Look, it *will* be soon. Those tubes under your arms have to come out. If she isn’t better in time, either her juniors or us day healers will do it. We’ll get it done. You wanted the Treehouse healer experience; now you’re getting it.”

He let his head fall against the recliner and groaned.

“Look, I’m not thrilled about this either, but Ribbonblack is old, rickety, and catches everything that comes through here. That’s just how it goes.” I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes and rubbed.

He raised his head. “You said it got better.”

I chuckled and rubbed harder. “Yes. Yes I did.”

“Well?”

I let my hands fall with a sigh. “Guess who has to take up the slack with Ribbonblack down?”

Biff looked at me, sighed.

“My thoughts exactly. I’m going to need to get outside help; I can’t work double shifts and take care of you at the same time, even if I *do* live right below my workplace.”

“No way. Ain’t no giant bug emptying my drains.”

“I... wasn’t planning on using a Treehouse resident, actually.”

He stared at me. I gave him my most charming, ingratiating grin.

...

“Raige! Buddy! Pal! *Friend...*”

“You need something, don’t you?”

“Oh god, do I...”

...

Bless his geeky white soul, Raige was there come dawn—one in the morning, Vaygo time. Armed with flashlight, books, instant ramen, and a twelve-pack of Mountain Dew, he acted like Biff bandaged up with drains pinned to the front of his vest was the most normal thing in the world. Smart as he was, he could pull off impressive performances of good-natured obliviousness when he chose to.

“Hey,” he said, bending over so as not to hit his head on the doorsill. “How’s it going?”

Just as well it was a general question. Biff was too busy marinating in self-righteous sulking to do more than glare.

“Surviving,” I said, trying to bolt down breakfast and talk at the same time. “I’m headed out in a moment. Drain log is on the wall—”

He held up my instructions. “Yup, you wrote it all down, I’ve got it.”

“Be sure to measure the amount of Biff juice every few hours; don’t forget, no more than one Vicodin every—”

Raige started ushering me out the door. “I’ve got it.”

“If he starts leaking through his bandages, get me immediately; I’ll be right upstairs, Scorch and Flame know what’s going on—”

He kissed my glove. “Have a nice shift, sweetie.”

“And don’t let him needle you, he’s just grouchy, and—”

“Get outta here, will ya?” Biff barked, and I hugged Raige and left him to his babysitting. Hopefully everyone would be alive when I got back.

With Ribbonblack down, the shift was a madhouse. Flame

was resting up for the night work, which meant it was just Scorch and me, and he was slow and sluggish from winter dropping his metabolism. Naturally, we had an out-of-town crisis case halfway through, someone falling out of a tree and breaking half of everything, so we had to further divide the practice, Scorch heading to deal with that while I stayed in and single-handedly held the day practice myself. (Thankfully, nothing exotic came up in the interim, just the usual sprains, bruises, and maintenance cases, so I didn't have to wake Flame.) Somehow we soldiered through it, though I was never so relieved to clock out, long after the sun had set.

But there was no time to rest. I had to scrub off and check on Biff and Raige, make sure they hadn't driven each other to tears or madness, make sure everything had gotten done, double-check it all...

When I came down, I found the fire blazing and the guys calmly eating dinner. A big bowl of it had been left out for me, and Biff must've had a hand in it, because the ramen was filled with meat and vegetables. Raige was reading one of his sci-fi romance novels, Biff was resting, and everything looked tranquil as could be.

Raige looked up and smiled when he heard me come in. "Hey, how was work?"

I moaned and collapsed onto the floor next to my bowl.

"That busy, huh?"

I nodded and promptly fell asleep over my ramen. Nobody tried to wake me, even though I'm sure Raige had pulled an all-nighter and needed the rest even more.

Despite working from dawn till past dusk, I was still a light

sleeper, and Biff had a naturally blaring voice, even when he was trying to keep it down. I surfaced periodically, just enough to register Raige draping a blanket over me or quiet talking, and then I'd be out again, reassured that no one was dead.

Once, I woke up enough to make out the words.

"She tell you why I'm here?"

"Is it any of my business?"

"No."

"There you go, then."

It wasn't their voices that ended up waking me for good so much as the crick in my neck from sleeping slumped over a table. I twitched and made a bleary whining noise. It seemed the height of injustice to be denied slumber for such a trivial reason.

"Evening," Raige said, ruffling my hair. He had circles under his eyes. "You should eat something."

"Ugh." I rubbed my eyes, blinked blearily at them. "What time's it?"

Raige checked his watch, stifled a yawn behind his hand as he made the time zone calculation in his head. "Almost midnight, your time. I'm surprised you were able to sleep in that position as long as you did."

Biff snorted. "I slept days like that."

I rotated my neck until it popped. "I lack your padding." My stomach growled plaintively, so I grabbed the ramen and began devouring it cold. "I presume everything went smoothly?"

"I think so," Raige said, "if you mean enough... stuff... coming out of him to fill a water balloon. I uh... put it in that jar over there. Should I... do something with it, or...?"

"I'll take care of it," I said, and turning to Biff, "how're you

feeling?”

Biff shrugged with his mouth and eyebrows. “Like I got hit by a truck.”

“All normal.”

“You think they’ll call you out during the night?” Raige asked. “Because no offense, but I *really* need to sleep.”

“You and me both,” I snarled, slurping the food down. “They have me pull a triple and I quit.”

They didn’t. Raige and I toppled onto the mattress pad, Biff stayed in the recliner, and we all slept the night through without interruption. It was heavenly.

...

Three days later, Raige returned home to more properly enjoy his summer vacation, and Ribbonblack summoned Biff and I. At long last, the bandages were coming off.

“Do I get to see the work?” I asked as I helped wrestle Biff into my coat. It was way too big, which was the only way any clothing of mine would fit over his shoulders. “Because if you’d rather I didn’t....”

He didn’t seem to hear me at first, too involved with getting the coat on with minimal pain. Then, “Nah, it’s okay.”

A surprise storm had left a couple inches of snow. Scorch had already stamped a path to the main road, but most of the snow remained powdery and pristine, reflecting the blues of immediate post-sunset. Various Treehouse beings skittered through the snow with sounds of delight or annoyance, depending on temperament and physiology. The air smelled sharp and clean, a pleasant contrast to my room, which had grown increasingly stuffy with Biff stuck there for over a week

without a shower. (Sure, I'd very carefully helped him wash what parts of him could be reached, but there was still only so much we could do.)

He hadn't been out that day, and anyway, he'd never been north of the Mason-Dixon line. When he saw the snow, he looked dazed for a moment. Then he raised his face to the air and sighed a long column of steam.

"Didn't know it snowed here."

"Mostly it doesn't." I stamped my feet and tucked my hands in my armpits. "Come on, you're wearing my only coat. Let's get to Ribbonblack's before I freeze."

Thankfully, Ribbonblack's practice was nice and warm. Off came the bandages, off came the vest, and out came the tubes. That was a queasy process, and for the first time ever, I almost saw Biff faint. We laid him down to recover, and after making sure he was all right, Ribbonblack left to deal with other business.

After everything he'd gone through, I expected Biff to be impatient to see the result. But no, he kept his eyes screwed tightly shut, looking a little gray under his complexion, clenching his fists tight at his sides.

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"Should've punched her."

"You heard the doctor; T-Rex arms for seven weeks. You aren't punching anybody."

"You do it."

"And take on her workload again? No dice."

Silence.

"You can look down, you know. Whatever you're imagining, I promise it's not as bad as all that."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Need help getting up?”

“I got it.”

It took a bit, since he was light-headed and couldn’t use his arms. Mirrors weren’t really a thing in Treehouse, but that was fine; Biff just conjured one up for himself.

The stitches were black and precise, a stark contrast against the raw red wounds that stretched across his chest under his pectoral muscles. There was a good amount of swelling, and under it, I could tell that his chest would be uneven, as though he’d suffered a major accident. The scarring would be massive and ragged. But there was no mistaking it for what he had before.

Biff smiled. “Perfect.”

Then he fainted. At least I managed to catch him before he burst anything.

HOORAY-WE'RE-NOT- DEAD DAY

"What?" Biff asked.

"It's a holiday," M.D. explained with beleaguered patience, stripping off her dirty gloves. "At the end of winter, the town gives thanks for the replenishing of the seasons."

"Like Thanksgiving?"

"More like Hooray-We're-Not-Dead Day, but sure."

Biff did not feel like celebrating Hooray-We're-Not-Dead Day, because he wasn't convinced. He was still fresh from the operating room, with tubes under his arms and bandages around his chest, and it all fucking hurt. He suspected that the entire town of Treehouse was mocking him, and needed to go fuck itself.

"You going?" he asked.

"Of course I'm going," M.D. said, changing out of her work clothes. "It's a holiday. If you don't come out to celebrate holidays in Treehouse, people get worried about you and then they never leave you alone. I'm a good citizen now."

"Aw," Biff said.

"Up yours, Bandage Boy."

"What they do on Hooray-We're-Not-Dead Day?"

She paused from tying her shoes. "That's right. You've never seen a Treehouse holiday, have you?" She grinned. "Oh, we are so solving this."

"I ain't a citizen. Fuck you."

“You’ve been working for Ribbonblack and living with me for six and a half months. By Treehouse standards, you’re an in-law.” She jumped to her feet, putting her hands on her hips. “Come on, you don’t want to spend the day rotting in my room and taking root to the recliner, do you? It’ll be fun.”

Biff did not believe in the concept of fun. Not with gore grenades pinned to his chest. To show her so, he cranked the recliner back. Carefully. His arms still didn’t have much mobility.

“Oh, by the way,” she pulled out a bottle. “Ribbonblack approved you going back on testosterone today.”

[image description: inked illustration of M.D. holding up a pump-bottle of testosterone, labeled Mangoo, with a grin like Satan’s insurance salesman. Biff is wrapped in bandages, gore-grenades, and is slumped in a recliner with a grumpy face.]

Oh, thank god. “Gimme.”

She held the bottle back. “Promise you’ll come celebrate Hooray-We’re-Not-Dead Day with me. Nothing strenuous, just come out for a little bit.”

“Sure, whatever, *give it to me.*”

It turned out to be goo, not a shot, which Biff found suspicious until M.D. told him it’d hit faster, at which point he couldn’t care less. And she wasn’t lying; within half an hour of her rubbing it into his back and shoulders, the constant gnawing rage at the back of his brain started to ease.

He didn’t know how he ever made it without the stuff.

...

The holiday came right after Biff’s tubes came out and his vest could easily fit under his clothes. Thomas and Raige showed up and Biff snuck out before M.D. noticed. He didn’t want to fuck

things up.

Outside, the festival was in full swing. The platform at town center was fixed up, but nothing was happening yet; everyone seemed to be out shopping at the food and goods stalls. Branches were crisscrossed with shimmering webs, and waxed paper had been put up to block the drizzling rain. It was cold and damp, and the snow had melted to muddy sludge, but the monster people seemed happy.

They also seemed to want to talk to him. Which was uncomfortable. Biff had almost started getting used to how up in your business everyone was in Treehouse, but he'd only learned enough wiggle-dance to not get killed, and he didn't like looking stupid, so mostly he just tried to be invisible.

When he saw M.D. coming down the street without boyfriends, he hastily made his way to her. She was bundled up against the chill, wearing the coat he'd left behind.

"Don't sneak off like that again, I'm supposed to be watching you and shivering is bad for your incisions." Before he could stop her, she wrapped him in a blanket; he tried to fight her off, but shit, that *hurt*, and he had to admit the blanket helped.

"What's that face for?" she asked.

"They keep trying to *talk* to me," he complained. "And the vanish just pissed them off."

She snickered. "They read by smell, and it's in bad taste to try and hide like that, just so you know. Good thing you've got me." She was wearing her old finger-less gloves and grabbed his hand. It was weird and her hands were like ice, but Biff didn't complain; it gave him an instant, if idiosyncratic, translation.

A bug came up to them. "Hooray we're not dead!" it

declared.

“Hooray we’re not dead!” M.D. signed back.

“Your honored associates are also not dead, I hope?” the bug asked.

“They are indeed not dead,” M.D. replied, ignoring Biff’s snort. “Yours?”

Which set the bug off on a long list of friends, family, and neighbors, all of whom were not dead, but the kid nodded and paid rapt attention.

“We will be having the ceremony later this set. You’ll be there, of course?”

“Sure,” she said, and they moved on.

There was food everywhere, berries and winter fruit and leafy greens. (The carnivores, M.D. explained, had to eat elsewhere to keep the peace today.) There was water and juice and other drinks sweetened or fermented. M.D. got food for them both, refused to let Biff carry anything (“T-Rex arms,”) and they sat down next to M.D.’s bosses and boyfriends in the crowd at town center. Biff was uncomfortable around Raige and Thomas, but didn’t leave; he didn’t want to get stuck without a translator again.

At the talking platform, a blue bug got up top. M.D.’s mind told him it was one of the Dead-Carrier Beetles, who apparently did shit besides give birth to enormous jumping flesh-eating maggots. All around, people’s conversations stopped.

The beetle started talking about all the people who had died in the past year, sick or old or eaten by trees. They talked about how great those people were, and relatives and friends got up to share their stories. When they were done, there was silence.

No one moved.

After long enough that Biff was starting to wonder, the beetle started signing again.

“Elder Sister is not dead,” it signed.

Soft, like sign language whispering: “Hooray, she lives.”

“Younger Sister is not dead.”

“Hooray, she lives.”

“Brood Mother is not dead. Brood Brother is not dead.”

“Hooray, they live.”

And it went on like that, every name of everyone in town who wasn't dead. As it went on, it got faster and faster, with “louder” signs, like they were moving from grief to celebration, and people started to stomp to the rhythm of it.

“Ribbonblack is not dead! Her house is not dead!”

“Hooray, they live!”

“Great Writer is not dead! The house of the Record-Keepers is not dead!”

“Hooray, they live!”

“Scorch and Flame are not dead! Their junior is not dead!”

“Hooray, they live!”

Somewhere along the way, it stopped sounding funny. Maybe because he was hooked into the kid's brain, and through her he could feel all the years, all the fuck-ups and fights and fatigue. Maybe it was because he could tell everyone really meant it. Into the dark, over and over again, they signed:

“Life is hard, but we are not dead! We are all alive!”

“Hooray, we live! We live, we live, we live!”

When it'd gotten so dark that the lanterns had been lit, they finished. And then the festival *really* kicked off.

Dancing. Acrobatics. Weaving and spinning and wrestling. M.D. wouldn't take part—she wouldn't let him out of her sight—but he watched her bellow encouragement for her stegosaurus boss during a wrestling match. She and Raige screamed themselves hoarse rooting for Thomas as he competed in what seemed like a Treehouse equivalent of a nighttime obstacle course race in the mud. Biff let her be healer until the dances started up, when he kicked her into the ring and told her he was a fucking adult for Chrissakes, leave him alone.

He had no idea how so many different kind of bodies could all do the dance, but they did. There was no music, and the beat was kept with a huge drum on the dance floor. Biff could feel the vibrations pounding in his bones like a second heartbeat.

There were three layers to the dance—canopy, branch, and ground—and M.D. was on the bottom level, spinning and swapping partners in a series of interlocking circles. She danced with her stegosaurus boss, with her boyfriends, with bugs and birds and nightmares, and she was beaming. Above her, enormous fireflies danced and wove through the air.

It must've gone on for ages, because Biff was exhausted and aching just from sitting and watching, but he didn't want to interrupt, so he tried to ignore it. No good; M.D. glanced over her shoulder, and he saw her frown, and then she was backing out, slipping out of the dance. The circles meshed behind her.

Her breath was quick fog in the night air. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you home."

They went back, where she got him into the La-Z-Boy, wrapped him in more blankets, and got the fire sorted to help keep the place warmer for him, just in case. She even tucked the

blankets around the sides.

“Hooray we ain’t dead,” he said groggily to her.

“Hooray, we live,” she said softly, and touched his arm.

He knew he’d fall asleep pretty fast... but he pretended to conk out even faster, just so he could make sure she snuck out for more fun.

TIME TO GO

Days went by, and even though Biff was back on hormones, steady again, he was itching inside like he hadn't in ages. There was somewhere he needed to go, something he needed to do, but he didn't know what, only that it had him climbing walls.

"Cabin fever," M.D. said, but that wasn't it.

He wasn't the only one itching, either. M.D. was twitchy, snappy, packing and repacking that enormous Army backpack in the corner and trying to scrub all the stains out of her work clothes. At first, Biff just figured she was sick of having to deal with him, but then he found out about her healer ceremony.

"I've been working for Scorch and Flame for four years now," she explained as she fought with her hair and tried not to look anxious. "I'm overdue." She stared in the mirror fragment hanging on the wall and made a sound of aggravation.

Biff came up behind her to braid her hair; he still couldn't move his arms much above the elbow, but at least he could do her hair like he had at prom. She handed him the ponytail-holder and settled down. As her hair twined through his fingers, he remembered other times, other braids...

He pushed the thought away before it could upset him; her brain was giving off enough spiky-jag anxiety as it was. "So... what?" he asked around the holder in his mouth. "You a full doctor now?"

"Psh, no. I was a 'rise' healer, now I'll be a 'high' healer.

‘Set’ healers are full-blown. That comes after another four years.”

Biff grunted. So it was like being halfway through medical school. Okay.

[image description: inked illustration of Biff in a compression vest, braiding M.D.’s hair while she fidgets and blathers on. He has a ponytail holder in his mouth, while she’s all dressed in her jumpsuit, gloves, and turtleneck for her healer ceremony.]

“I can’t believe they’re approving me, after everything but they are.” She didn’t look excited, though; she looked sick. “And the whole town is coming.” She didn’t say it, but he wasn’t stupid; he could count months. He’d met her in June, all those years ago, and it was August now, but earlier had been all taken up with Ribbonblack keeling over and then his surgery, no time for a ceremony. So, even though she didn’t invite him exactly, he came. His itch wasn’t going anywhere.

He didn’t understand the ceremony much; it was way beyond his grip on wiggle-dance. But the old farts who’d made up his job contract were there, and Ribbonblack and the dinosaurs were there, and they were in town center surrounded by everybody. The kid hadn’t been joking about the whole town coming. (Then again, she was nineteen now; maybe he couldn’t call her “kid” anymore.) Her boys were there too, and Biff decided to stay in the back, where they wouldn’t notice him.

There were a lot of speeches that he couldn’t understand, which everyone seemed to approve of. M.D. got a new apron and rubbed down with oil, and that was apparently the diploma part, because the whole town chittered and stomped, Raige and Thomas cheered, someone sent up a bunch of what looked like

balloons on fire, and the whole time, M.D. just stood there and looked *terrified*.

Biff stayed on the fringe of everything, just enough for her to know he was there, and when the eating started (it looked like the whole town brought food with them) he wandered off to the community gardens to grab some (small, light) groceries and a quick smoke. She shouldn't need to be associated with him right now. Now was the time for the town and her boys and all the respectable bug-eyed monsters to congratulate her.

He gave it a bit, just long enough to really start hurting, and ambled back just as Raige and Thomas were leaving; Biff ignored them and blew past like they weren't there. When he came in, M.D. practically slammed the door behind him and tore the band out of her hair.

"Thank god that's over," she snarled, clawing out the braid with her fingers. "I swear, one more 'blessings on your practice, healer!' and I will *scream*."

She looked at him, daring him, but he just held up the little bag of groceries (which had been a pain to carry, but hell if he was telling *her* that).

Her shoulders slumped with relief. "This is why I tolerate you."

"Tolerate you too," Biff said, and started whipping up a stir-fry. Queasy as she'd looked, he figured she didn't eat anything during the ceremony, and that going out to the group kitchens would just put her on the spot some more.

While he worked, she brushed out her hair, redid it in her usual ponytail, and then just... sat there, staring at the wall. When the stir-fry was finished, he scooped it onto plates, and she still

didn't move.

"Hey," he said, "you hungry or what?"

She didn't look away from the wall. "I have never wanted to leave so badly before."

Biff just stood there.

"I mean, four *years*, Biff. I've never stayed anywhere at anything with anyone that long before, and now I've been sleeping in a bed with a real mattress that nobody can take away from me, eating food I actually buy that I actually want, and nobody's looking at me like I'm crazy, and it's *creepy*. And god, Raige and Thomas... I've been dating Raige for over two years now. And he's still here."

She stopped there, but Biff couldn't think of anything to say and standing with the plates was starting to hurt, so he came to sit next to her and put the food down on the floor.

She put her face in her hands. "I'm going to mess it up, Biff. Any second now, I'm going to ruin it, because I ruin *everything*, only this time it's going to hurt because I actually *care*, and... and times like this, I just want to pack up and leave so I don't have to watch it happen."

Biff glanced at the space next to the door. Her old Army backpack was up against the wall, fully packed. Just in case.

She'd had the same backpack when she'd crashed with him, back when things had been really bad. From what Raige had told him, she'd been living out of that same backpack when Raige had met her. She didn't like anyone touching it or using it.

"I can handle hard times. Those are easy. It's the times like this that I want to go somewhere, anywhere, just *go*. You know?"

Biff paused. He remembered the old muscle memory of braiding his sisters' hair, and suddenly the nameless itch he'd been feeling for weeks turned clear and bright in his head. Yeah, he knew. It was just that this time, he didn't want to run *away*. He wanted to run *to*.

He turned, took the plates of stir-fry, put one in his lap and shoved the other into her face so she had to either take it or wear it. "Hey. You remember my folks in Georgia?"

M.D. poked at the stir-fry, but at least she started eating. "Uh huh. You set a car on fire and got drunk for a week."

"Yeah." He handed her soy sauce. "I ain't doing that this time."

She picked at her food and at first he thought she was going to ignore him, but then she said, "so when were you thinking of going?"

"Now. Soon. I dunno."

"For how long?"

"A week, maybe." He slurped down some bamboo shoots. "Depends."

"Are you asking me to come with you?"

Deep breath. "Yeah."

"For you or for me?"

"For me." He was sick of drinking. "But if you need to get outta here, might as well do something useful, right? I'll keep your head on straight."

She was quiet for a while. Then she sat up and smiled. "I've never been to Georgia..."

"Can you get the time off, now that you high-healer?"

She grimaced. "Ugh, yeah, for that amount of time, that

would require some finagling and advance notice...”

There was a knock at the door, though it sounded weirdly weak and squishy, like someone trying to knock with a dead fish. For a moment, Biff worried that Raige or Thomas had come back, but no, it was the giant floating jellyfish he’d seen around, the one who really liked betting on random shit. It wiggle-danced at M.D., and she looked furious, leaped to her feet and dashed for the door, pulling on thicker gloves.

Biff grabbed her sleeve before she could bolt and gave her a questioning look.

“Sister Dearest is here and out cold. Now let go, I need to get rid of her.”

Biff was hurting, but he got up. M.D. was a shit-house rat, but Number One Eldest Daughter was the kind of sane that went so far it wrapped around the other end. And when it came to power, she made M.D. look like a potato battery.

“You’re not coming,” M.D. said, and when he started to protest, “*you* are getting Ribbonblack, because she and Jelly Legs are the only people in this town I trust to keep One down, and Jelly Legs is slow.”

Grabbing the jellyfish by the tentacles like a bunch of balloons, she made as if to bolt, but Biff grabbed her shoulder.

“Fuck that,” he said. “I remember last time. We making a fucking *plan*.”

He saw her face, but he also could see that he had her.

“Yeah. You’re right,” she said. “Let’s get Ribbonblack and make one.”

A CHANGE IN REGIME

Sirens wailed above Number One Eldest Daughter's head. Behind her, back at the interrogation cell, she heard cries of surprise and dismay. She had to rely on her ears; her arms were bound in wire behind her back at wrists and elbows, and with the metal conductors interfering with her own bio-electrical field, she could neither broadcast nor properly receive. Everything was blurry and muddled, hard to locate or respond to.

She kept moving, as quickly and quietly as she could, but even with her sense of pain unwoven, she could feel things shifting in her body in unnatural ways, a floating in her head that no amount of training could ameliorate. Blood was on her clothes, she was bound in body and mind, and she was exhausted. If someone tried to fight her, she'd have to kick-shock them to death, and she wasn't at all sure she could do it in her current condition.

But she was alive, so it wasn't a worst case scenario yet.

As she curved around a corner, the hall opened up into the subterranean storage room, all walled with clay and tile. She staggered in gratefully, kicked the door shut and rammed the bio-lock with her shoulder. It wouldn't engage, and after another failed attempt, she gave up. At best, the liberators had lobotomized it; worse, they may have become its new masters. They might've been transcendence fundamentalists, but One knew better than to think that they'd let their ethics interfere with their mission.

The storage drawers in their cabinets each had their own individual mini-bio-locks—not in the same class as the door, but also not centralized, and apparently nobody had gotten around to poisoning them yet. Leaning against one of the cabinets, grateful for its support, One pressed her foot against her drawer, forced a charge through her toes, and it clicked open with a cheerful chirp—far too loud for her liking. She fumbled it open with her foot, and there it was, a round little bit of metal roughly the size of her palm, suspended by a chain. She got her toes around it just as the next team of liberators came in.

She tossed the jaunt-watch up to her mouth and bit down on the button, letting the dimensional door swallow her up.

It was a simple public door. If the fundamentalist savages wanted to find her, it was merely a matter of finding the right transit records. One had not survived two and a half regimes by being careless, and enough had gone wrong today. She knew she'd need to put more distance between her and them.

The door spat her out just outside the tree-line wall of Treehouse. The landing was rough, and she hit the ground hard, jaunt-watch clutched in her bloody teeth. She spat it out as the guards oriented on her—a feathered flier and a tentacled living zeppelin. She'd never bothered to force-feed herself the barbaric local dialect and her broadcast was muted, but no matter; she recognized the telepathic zeppelin from the last time, and it surely recognized her. Its broadcast presumably still worked fine.

“Asylum!” she shouted. “I request asylum!”

Then she collapsed. Unintentional, but it couldn't hurt her performance, so that was fine.

At this point, there were only two ways it could end, both

completely out of her control and thus not worth worrying over. In the first scenario, she'd never wake up. Treehouse derelicts were beasts and monsters, but they respected her position at the top of the predatory pyramid. Getting eaten and composted would be degrading, but it was still miles better than what the transcendents had in mind for her.

So when she found herself regaining consciousness, she already knew things were taking a turn for the better.

One took her first moments to assess her injuries.

Unconsciousness had robbed her of her mental anaesthesia; her whole body ached, breathing caused a stabbing pain in her side, and her face was swelling. Still, there were no new wounds, so she could pull the conditioning back up without worrying she'd permanently damage herself. After a moment to weave her mind into the proper configuration, she drifted up to the top of her skull, leaving the sea of pain to roil away impotently below.

No longer distracted by her own discomfort, she glanced around through slitted, swollen eyes to gauge her surroundings. She was propped up against a tree, with her bound arms at an awkward angle and a root digging into her rump, but at least she no longer had to care about the sensations. Her ankles had been slicked with grease and then cuffed with metal, blindfolding her mind completely. Around her was unfamiliar forest: trees, rocks, soil, ferns. No sign of Treehouse, or its walls.

No sign of the locals either. There was only One's little sister, sitting on a rock with an empty food plate by her crossed legs and peeling some fruit with a knife. She looked as though she'd been there for a while, long enough to get hungry or bored.

The last time One had seen M.D., she'd been haggard and

frayed. Now she looked well-rested, well-fed, made of well-braided whipcord. She was also dressed in heavy boots, jumpsuit, and a thick leather belt, all clean and smelling of medicinal greenery and spiced oil. Apparently she'd continued with her unlikely work, even after all these years. Still, there was something else about her. What was it?

One opened her eyes as much as she was able. "You look well, sister."

M.D. didn't seem surprised that she was awake. "You look like tenderized death. What happened? You stab the wrong back?"

"A change in regime with bad taste. Are these the cuffs from the first time?"

M.D. tossed the last bit of peel off her knife blade and sank her teeth into the fruit. "Yup."

One smiled, felt the strain on her torn lips, but M.D. didn't flinch away. "How sentimental. I'm touched."

M.D. just grunted and kept eating. She seemed in no hurry, so One shifted to a less uncomfortable position and more thoroughly surveyed where she was. Not that it helped—the forest remained opaque and unfamiliar, devoid of sentient life. But One was positive *someone* was out there, watching her. One's sister had gained weight, but One still outmassed her enough to be a cumbersome burden. Someone had surely helped move her here, but she saw no drag marks, no footprints, no signs of vehicles, no marks of passage of any kind. How had she gotten here? They hadn't *flown* her here, had they?

On the plus side, if she couldn't tell her own location, likely the liberators couldn't either.

“What is this?” she asked.

Chomp. “It’s a forest, One.”

One ignored the jibe. “No, you’ve done something. What did you do?”

“I handcuffed you.”

With her limbs and mind bound, One had to accept that as the only answer forthcoming. Still, it bothered her. Something odd was going on, and someone was watching her, she could *feel* it, but no matter how she looked, she saw no one. Eventually, she gave up looking and focused on the matter at hand.

“Where am I?”

M.D. wiped her mouth on a cloth. “Outside town. You didn’t really expect them to let you in, did you?”

“No. I expected them to get you. Congratulations on your... promotion? You seem to be prospering.”

M.D. spat out seeds and tossed the fruit core aside. “Why are you here?”

“Where’s my door?”

M.D. held it up, then pocketed it again. “Why are you here?” she repeated.

“I need a place to stay until the political climate improves, and I have it on unimpeachable authority that this barbarous place won’t deport me. One might even succeed here...” she looked over M.D.’s stained work clothes, “...in a matter of speaking.”

M.D. made a sound of disgust. “You’re joking, right? You’re lucky Jelly Legs didn’t call dibs and eat you on the spot.”

“So I can’t stay with you?”

“No.”

“Or in your town?”

“No! What is your *problem*?”

Ah good, she was annoyed and off-balance. Maybe now One would get a straight answer. “My problem, little sister, is that now I’m a symbol of the old regime, a valuable pile of parts, and therefore I must go. I chose somewhere slightly less distasteful than death, now tell me, where am I and what did you do? Don’t feign ignorance.” It came out more ragged than she intended.

M.D. stared her down, took a deep breath, and visibly calmed herself. “If you can’t tell, then I’m not going to tell you.”

[image description: inked illustration of M.D. and One. One is beaten half to hell, disheveled, and tied at arms and ankles, and has a cagey expression. M.D. is sitting on a tree stump, knife in hand, posture rigid and face blank.]

So she *had* done something. At least One wasn’t losing her mind. “If I can’t stay with you, or in your miserable shantytown,” not that she’d expected or desired either, “tell me somewhere else to go. Otherwise you may not like the company you receive.”

M.D. slapped her knife down. “See, *this* is why I was happy when we kicked you out. Jelly Legs pumped you full of venom, Scorch almost tore your arm off, and for a moment there, I thought that you might actually leave me alone.”

Number One shrugged as best she could with her arms bound. “We don’t always get what we want, sister.” She was tired, so tired, and the food smelled so good.

M.D. paused, looked her sister over, her broken face, her missing fingernails. “Was all that the new regime?”

She rested her head back against the tree, fought another surge of dizziness. “Nothing permanent. Pomp and politics,

symbolic hate for a symbol of the old system. They won't last long unless they improve their technique. Regardless, until things stabilize, I'm calling in that favor I did you."

"You haven't done me *jack*—"

One had been tortured incompetently, bound physically and mentally, and she was tired. Enough so that she no longer cared what she told her sister. It wasn't as though M.D. could tell anyone of importance, out here in exile among the beasts. "Do you truly think the Coalition let you alone because of your actions? I persuaded them to write you off, and while I don't expect you to be grateful, I *do* expect you to not want to be indebted to me. We could've taken this place by force. Fire-bombed your little anthropophagic trees, seeded your hilltop with so much lightning you'd only see the sun once a year, left this miserable backwater so attrited they couldn't wait to be rid of you. Look at you. You're nobody special, not anymore. Why wouldn't they give you up like all the rest?"

M.D. said nothing.

"You didn't really think you won through your own efforts alone?" Apparently so, and One leaned against the tree trunk. She wanted to laugh, but didn't want to hurt her ribs or her lips.

"Thank you, sister. I didn't expect to be amused today."

M.D. looked queasy. "What made you suddenly decide to... to write me off?"

"Your value had depreciated considerably. Assets are lost sometimes. I thought I might be lost too, one day, and you seemed more valuable in this capacity." One smiled. "Was I wrong?"

M.D. just stared at her.

"Here, some advice, gratis. I plan to disappear, and you should too; this is the first place they're likely to look for me."

"And if one symbol of the old regime is gone, they might be willing to settle for another."

"Clever child. You don't need to be an asset to be valuable to them."

"How would you advise avoiding these people?"

"The same way you would avoid me." One of the few parts of her interrogation they'd gotten right was unraveling her and pulling as many records from her mind as they could. Unless they were stupid, they'd use her own tactics to guess her movements and track her.

M.D. stared hard at One, but that was fine. One wasn't lying about anything, had nothing to hide, and she'd done the best she could; things were out of her hands now. If she ended up eaten by animals, well, such was life at times.

But sure enough, One's little sister got up and came over to dig through her belt, keeping her distance and sucking her teeth in annoyance.

"You give advice, you get advice: don't try to join a town. Go feral."

"I don't know what that means."

"Live like an animal." Out came a bottle of liquid. "Eat whatever you can grow, gather, or gut; try not to get eaten yourself. Figure out who you are when you're alone and free."

"Freedom doesn't exist."

"Fine, then find out what you are when you're owned by reality, instead of the Gween or the UDC or whoever it is they've got in charge now." Now out came a wad of cloth. "You can try the

forests, the swamps to the northwest, or keep going until you hit the beach and try to hitch a ride off somewhere else. But don't join a town. That grease on your ankles? Pheromone goop; you and me can't smell it, but you reek of bad news to ninety percent of the Silver Fern population, and townsfolk will eat you on sight."

"And it doesn't wash off." Though she'd try anyway.

"Nope. Go feral; it'll be good for you. Someone as calculating and dangerous as you will have no problem." She poured the liquid from the bottle onto the cloth. The fumes were noxious. "Now, I'd say I'm sorry except unlike the new regime, I know better than to turn my back on you while you're conscious and untied..."

Despite the smell, One didn't resist when the rag was held to her nose and mouth; fighting might mean a miscalculation, and she doubted that whatever passed for knock-out drugs in this savage society were forgiving. So she breathed deep and even, and let oblivion take her.

When she woke again, she was alone. The wire around her arms was gone, as were the cuffs from her ankles. When she sloughed her pain again, she discovered that her wounds had been cleaned, stitched, and bandaged, and a large, familiar backpack of provisions was on the ground next to her. A quick search showed it held everything she might need for interminable survival: food, medicine, a full canteen, fire sticks, some hideous blue plastic sheet that could have only come from America, cord, and a multi-tool, all carefully packed with One's door.

There was also a note, reading: *By the time you get this, I'll be gone. You won't find me. Don't try.*

One smiled. Not the best outcome, but certainly better

than the start of the day had led her to hope for. Truly, it was good to have a sister, bound to a career that forbade all but the most necessary of violence. As an asset, she was a failure, but as an investment...!

The scenery around her had changed again, but this time, One was positive she hadn't been moved. That was most certainly the same root that had been digging into her buttock earlier, and though the tree next to it looked unfamiliar, when she touched it, she recognized the texture. Yes, it was most certainly the same tree she'd been leaning against before, but with a whole new visual guise.

For a moment, she puzzled. How...? But then she knew.

She laughed, honestly delighted. "You brought the hallucination man with you! That was clever! I didn't plan for that!"

No answer, and while One's broadcast was picking up all sorts of living creatures around her, she didn't feel her sister or the hallucination man—or whatever Treehouse barbarians they had likely brought with them as added insurance. Then again, it was quite possible that M.D. had learned to cloak her own signal in the ensuing years, or perhaps some Treehouse native had come along to do it for her; it wasn't that difficult to learn. Regardless, even with the terrain disguised, uphill was surely the way to Treehouse. She could return, if she wanted.

But she didn't. There was nothing for her there, and One had had enough fights for one day. Silver Fern was wilderness; One would need all her strength to get as far away as possible, find a safe place to sleep, recover from her injuries, and prepare for her new (hopefully temporary) life as wild animal.

She got up, stretched her limbs as safely as she could, and shouldered the pack. Her body was stiff, but it would last. It had to. She headed downhill.

“I’ll bring the pack back,” she called over her shoulder, even though she knew M.D. probably wasn’t there, and certainly wouldn’t answer if she was. “I know you’re attached to it. Good luck with your vocation and your grumpy hallucination man... and whoever or whatever else has made you so happy. I hope it’s deserving of you.”

There was no answer, and she walked off into the trees.

THE SHITTY-SHITTY BANG-BANG HEIST

Thanks to One, I ended up having no trouble getting my time off and crashing at Biff's place again (where thankfully, I had enough emergency stuff stockpiled to mostly make up for losing my bag). But that didn't ease me or Biff's nerves. If Treehouse was the number one spot to look for me, Vaygo was number two, and we'd both had enough experiences with One to want as much distance between her, her pursuers, and us as possible.

"I don't know what the fuck her deal is," he snarled as we headed up the stairs, "but her people ain't gonna find us in Georgia."

"How, exactly, are we going to get there?" I asked.

Biff made a face as he made his way up the stairs, which verified my suspicion: the past seven months had cleaned out whatever savings he might've had. "I'll find a job."

I held up his boxes of stuff meaningfully. "Last I heard, your line of work requires arms."

"I got this."

"I really don't think you do."

We reached his apartment door, which was covered in sticky notes from his prolonged absence. Since Biff couldn't really reach up to grab them, I swiped them myself, and as he told me to shut my face, we discovered that his door was unlocked. Not only that, but when we quieted, we could hear the inimitable grumble

of the window AC he had recently acquired—and left off while he was away.

We forgot our argument. Biff made as though to burst in, but I hastily gestured him away—he was still recovering from major surgery, while I had electric eel arms. I put his boxes down, covered them in a flurry of sticky notes, and then I burst in the door.

And there was Amanda “Med School” Rosenthal, sitting on Biff’s crummy folding chair at his lousy card table, square in front of the window AC, reading a true crime novel. She hardly even looked up, and when she did, she sighed as though I’d deeply disappointed her.

“Tell me you brought MacGilligan with you,” she said.

I wasn’t sure how to react to that, so just looked over my shoulder. Biff came in—with a subtly shifted image, I noticed, which hid the fact that he was in light bandages and favoring his everything.

Rosenthal shut the book, but otherwise her expression didn’t change.

“You are *impossible* to get a hold of,” she said. “Frankie had to let me in.”

Until his surgery, Rosenthal had been Biff’s most regular healthcare provider, responsible for providing his hormones and stitching any superfluous holes he acquired. But she wasn’t playing street medic today. Judging by the crisp business suit, she was here in her *other* professional capacity, fine purveyor of luxury pharmaceuticals. The number of cigarette butts in the ashtray suggested that she’d been waiting a while.

Biff and I both glanced at the sticky notes on the boxes I’d

carried. Among the notices about rent and water rationing, at least two read, “Mandy—CALL HER!!!!” I shoved the boxes into the apartment and tossed the notes onto the kitchen counter.

“What do you want?” Biff asked.

Rosenthal put the book away and folded her hands in her lap. “I have a job for you.”

Biff gave me a smug look as though he’d somehow planned it this way and went to sit in the other chair. I stayed standing, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Rosenthal gave me a dubious look.

“Kid’s with me,” Biff said.

I left her personal universe. “Fine. I’m being blackmailed by an ex.” She tossed a folder of paperwork onto the card table. “Take care of it.”

That sounded incredibly vague to me, but Biff didn’t seem concerned. He started leafing through the papers, squinting at the text. “Anything specific?”

“He’s not worth my attention. Insure he never gets it again.”

“Deadline?”

“The sooner the better. He tires me.”

“Pay?”

She named a number, and it took all my self-control not to react. Before I could get my wind back, Biff said, “Done.”

...

The moment I shut the door behind her, I said, “Biff, you can’t do it.”

He didn’t look up from the papers. “I need the money, we need to skip town; we doing the job.”

"I didn't say 'shouldn't,' Biff, I said 'can't.' You can barely wash your own hair right now, never mind break someone's arms."

"It been a month!"

I threw out my arms. "Welcome to Treehouse major surgery. You can't say I didn't warn you."

For a moment, I felt bad for him. But then he straightened up and gave me an appraising look, and my sympathy evaporated.

"No," I said.

He ignored me. "You done B&E before."

"I squatted, years ago. Big difference, and anyway, I'm not going to help you disregard my own medical advice, not even to skip town. You could seriously hurt yourself, and if you do, I don't have the gear to fix you up, except in Treehouse where we can't go."

Biff walked his fingers across the table. "All you got to do is carry and climb fences. Easy. Won't even break his arms; all we got to do is steal the blackmail, plus everything worth it. Can you carry a flat-screen?"

"I wouldn't know, and I have no intention of ever finding out, so the point's moot."

Then he said the words of doom: "*You owe me.*"

I froze. "No."

He had a sadistic gleam in his eye. "The bet. Help on the job. You lost, I'm collecting. *We had a deal.*"

"Biff, that was, like, four years ago—"

"You remember the maggots?" He chortled like a drain. "I remember the maggots."

I was silent a moment. "You hold a grudge."

"Fuck you, it was *Christmas*."

"You hold a grudge, *and* you're petty." I sighed. "What's my cut?"

"You don't get no—" He saw my face. "Twenty percent."

I laughed. "Fifty."

"Thirty."

"Forty."

He sighed. "Third and half the fenced shit."

I was the worst healer ever. "Deal. Scoot over, I read faster." He made room. "So what exactly are we stealing, anyway? Photos?"

Biff flipped through the folder to the first page, handed it to me. "Sex tape."

"And she *cares*?"

What followed was Biff's valiant effort to explain Vaygo underworld politics to me. Boiled down: Med School Rosenthal wasn't just a drug-dealer and street medic; she was also the daughter of some local gangster who I'd never heard of but was big fish in Biff's world. Said gangster was apparently totally fine with his daughter pushing prescription pills on soccer moms, but would blow his stack if he knew that she had banged a goy. No other gang would deal with Rosenthal without leaking it to her father (it was a respect thing, apparently) and she certainly couldn't go to him, so she needed an independent operator like Biff to do the job.

"Wow," I said, "not only is this job way too classy for you, it's also the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Biff rolled his eyes. "I do a lot of stupid shit for money."

"I've seen you do it for free. So this big-deal daughter of

the boss... moonlights patching you up?"

Biff shrugged as best he could. "She know me."

Clearly there was a story here, but it'd have to wait for another time. I looked at the paper Biff had handed me. There was a photo of a pretty ordinary looking white guy named Max Love. The name rang a vague bell, but I couldn't place where; I certainly didn't know the face. The address, however... "Wait, hey, I know that street! I think Raige drives past it every time he takes me back to Jaunt Central."

Biff scowled. "Yeah, fucking Oasis Valley. Rail takes forever to get out there..." He gave me a look. "Close to your boyfriend, you said?"

"Same general vicinity. Why?"

He smiled at me and I realized that I'd been cheated. Third and half was far too low.

...

I needed to go to Oasis Valley to see Raige anyway. He needed to know about One, and Biff *still* didn't have phone service. He normally relied on his landlady, but she was out, and someone had vandalized the payphone again. It was probably just as well; some news was best delivered in person.

Biff insisted on taking the rail out too. I was dubious how well his body would handle it, but he pointed out that with One around, he didn't want to be anywhere near his normal stomping grounds, and Oasis Valley was the last place in Vaygo that anyone would go looking for him. Besides, he needed to start casing the mark's house anyway.

He got his way on that, but he did not get his way about my asking for the use of Raige's car. I knew that would never fly. We

parted ways at Raige's subdivision with an agreement to meet back at the squat, and then it was off to break the news.

Fortunately for me, Raige was exactly where he'd told me he'd be after my healer ceremony: at his dad's house, practicing at his trap set and enjoying his summer vacation—well, until I showed up. With that kind of timing, he knew full well that it couldn't be good news, so I fessed up right away.

"Someone *beat up* One?" Raige asked. "I thought she was like, Bruce Lee Hannibal Lecter."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess the cloak-and-dagger finally got her. And I don't know, she seemed weirdly sincere, but who knows with her. So I need to borrow your phone, call Thomas, tell him what happened, and then we need to get out of here."

The group of us had made our "Looking Out For Number One" plan ages ago, long before we'd started dating. Namely: the moment she or anyone else from the Old Country came sniffing around, even if we didn't understand why, even if they seemed benign, all of us needed to scatter immediately—go somewhere none of the rest of us would predict or know about, and not tell anybody else where we were going or when we were coming back.

The non-communication aspect was imperative. One was a psychological strip-miner, and so might anyone else who was after her; it was not safe for any of us to know the plan of anyone else.

Raige pulled out his cell phone and made for the hall. "I'll call Thomas. You put your data in the NiuCat."

I nodded, and once he left, pulled the smallest of his bookshelves away from the wall. There, a little light-sketch of a cat stretched and blinked its laser-pointer eyes up at me. An empty

speech bubble appeared next to its head.

I didn't know what the NiuCat really was, or who it belonged to, only that it involved one of Bobcat's friends who was a hardcore psycurity nut. Bobcat had sworn up and down upon any and all things that whatever we wrote into the NiuCat would be secure, and that his coworker could store the information in a way that One couldn't find without going through a level of paranoia and psychological defenses that even she wasn't up to. (I didn't entirely trust that, but didn't have much choice. It was either trust Bobcat's anonymous friend, or stay radio silent.)

Our rules were to write our general return timeframe and whatever information we felt safe giving out, just in case one of us really did need to know. (Though getting that information would require going through Bobcat and meeting his friend, whoever it was, in person.) I myself figured the vaguer, the better, and with my fingertip scribbled in, "USA, three weeks," and the date. When I was done, I patted the NiuCat on its little light head. The NiuCat closed its eyes and disappeared, along with its bubble.

There. At least if something did happen to me, Raige and Thomas would know how long to wait before they started freaking out.

As I came out, I found Raige putting the phone away. He looked a little pale, but otherwise calm. "Thomas wasn't home; I left a message and I'll try back again later. You done?"

I nodded, and he went in to put his own information into the NiuCat. I took the opportunity to use the bathroom; I doubted I'd be seeing one nearly so nice for a good while.

When I finished, I found Raige in his room, packing an overnight bag. He looked up when he saw me. "Do you have your

plan set? Is there anything I can help you with?"

And I thought of something. Something that would infuriate Biff utterly, but would also insure he didn't destroy himself trying to do the robbery. After all, Rosenthal had never said he needed to do the job right away.

"Honestly, I could use some money."

Raige went for his wallet. "How much?"

I realized that I had no idea what the bus tickets to Georgia would cost. Biff would know, but he was unavailable, while for the sake of all our safety, I *couldn't* ask Raige to look it up. So I bit my tongue and just named the figure Rosenthal had stated.

Raige startled. "Wow, uh. That's a lot. I mean, I have it! But not in cash, not in the kind of time we have. Would a check...?"

I grimaced. No, it wouldn't; Biff and I had neither bank accounts nor the identification with which to make them.

"I could ask my Dad...?"

I grimaced harder, but my healer's scruples and desperation to skip town won out over my distaste. "If it helps, I am *mostly* sure we can pay it back within a reasonable amount of time?"

Wrong thing to say. "Wait, what? Where are you going to get that kind of—" his expression sharpened. He put his wallet away. "What are you and Biff doing?"

"...Working?" I could've punched myself.

Raige crossed his arms. "What *kind* of work?"

By Treehouse time, it was past my bedtime. I'd had a long, stressful day, it was nowhere near over, and I was out of guile and cleverness. So I told him.

When I was done, Raige's face was in his hands.

"Okay," he said, "wow. What the hell, M.D.? It's one thing to loan *you* that kind of money, but loaning it to *Biff*? Even *I* know better than to get involved with that kind of money and Vaygan gangsters! How do *you* not?"

"Raige, come on, Biff doesn't merit the title of 'gangster;' he's a petty thug at best..."

"Don't joke about this." He was rubbing his eyes now. "You are *lucky* that this is what he chose to collect on. This is a terrible idea; he can take care of himself. Borrow some money from me and go hide out in Tucson or something!"

"Look, you don't have to be happy about it, and I'll happily explain all this when it's over, but I'm sticking with Biff, and this is what we're doing," I said. "If you can't give us the money, then Max Love will."

"Max Love?" Raige looked up. "He sounds familiar..."

"You too? What's up with that?"

As though magically summoned, Raige's father rammed his head into the doorway and declared, "he's a two-bit crook from Ohio, that's what he is!" He saw me jump, saw Raige packing his overnight bag, and blinked. "What's all this?"

Apparently Raige and I had been talking too intently to hear him return from work. More hasty explanations ensued, on both sides.

It turned out that Max Love wasn't just some rich jerk who'd made a sex tape, oh no. He was also the founder, owner, and primary designer of Max Lovables, those bug-eyed plushie monstrosities that gave me nightmares but which Raige apparently thought were cute. That was why the name sounded

familiar; we'd heard the catchy "Max Lovables! Lovable to the max!" jingles for years. As for Raige's dad, it seemed he knew Max Love somewhat personally, on account of their being titans of their respective industries, and even in that milieu, Love was infamous.

It was one thing to be hated by Raige's dad. That was easy. But Max Love wasn't just loathed; he was "*professionally disrespected.*" Those were the exact words Raige's dad used, and until he said them, I hadn't thought it was possible.

Under normal circumstances, I never would've dared, but Raige's dad's contempt gave me guts. So I explained the very basics of the job to him and asked if we could borrow the cash.

Raige's dad nearly gave himself a hernia laughing. He said, "good for you. No."

Then he went—presumably to go pack his own overnight bag—only to then lean back into the doorway. "I have a plan that'll get us both out of the house, and get *you* all you'd ever need to know about Max." He looked cheerfully at Raige. "How about a networking event, son?"

Raige looked aghast.

Turned out there was some gala across town that very night, to which Raige's dad had been invited and given a tepid "maybe" to. It was outside of the house, outside of all our usual stomping grounds (except arguably Raige's dad's), and while Max Love himself wouldn't be there, many people who knew him would. We wouldn't have to stay long, just grab dinner, let Raige's dad settle some quick business obligations, get me some information, and take off, dumping me back with Biff along the way.

The opportunity was too good to pass up, and I had no time to argue. Heck, there was barely enough time to help them pack, grab my prom outfit out of Raige's closet (it was the only formal outfit I owned, and it wouldn't have lasted ten seconds back at home), and hurry out the door. As we piled into the car, Raige shoved a Mountain Dew into my hand.

"You look like you're about to fall over," he said.

"I am," I admitted, and fell asleep on his tweed-clad shoulder in the car. I figured I'd save the caffeinated sugar for when I arrived.

Not that it did me much good. Half of the rich people at the party seemed to want to pinch Raige's cheeks and coo at him, but none of them wanted to talk to me. They could tell that I wasn't one of them; my clothes were wrong, my face was wrong, my *color* was wrong—I'd already had a drunk woman ask me if I was Chinese, which was apparently more socially acceptable than chewing her out for it.

Luckily for me, Raige was more successful.

"Dad asked around and the Chicago International Toy Fair is next weekend. Max should be gone all three days," he informed me, handing me a petit four. "Are you hiding in here, or just sleeping?"

"Hiding," I mumbled from where my face was buried in my arms. I was too exhausted for shame.

"Good. Move over."

I scooted, and he joined me in the supply closet, shutting the door behind us. The brooms and mops, I had discovered, were more my class of people.

"Your dad is a sadist," I said, tearing into the confection.

“He knows I owe him too much now to ruin his reputation at these stupid parties. How do I make him hate me again?”

“It’s too late. You’ve treated me too well. He’ll never stop liking you now.” He found an upturned ten-gallon bucket to sit on and sat, loosening his tie from around his throat. “Look, we need to talk. This is a bad idea.”

I winced.

“See, you know it too. So why are you doing this? You just helped Biff with seven months of surgery; you can’t honestly believe you still owe him. This whole thing is illegal, and it’s no good avoiding One if it brings the PIN down on you again.”

I sighed, rubbed my forehead as I tried to figure out what I could say that was vague enough not to risk anything, but still specific enough to satisfy him. “Look, Biff has people he needs to see. And the last time he tried this, it... didn’t go well. I’m there to keep him from... from Biffing it up.”

“He has to see them?”

“Yes.”

“And it has to be now?”

“Raige...”

“It has to be *you*?”

It was *way* too late at night for me to be having this conversation. So I threw down my hands and snapped, “Look, just today I’ve become high healer, had to deal with One, and now this, and all I want is to run away from everyone and everything and have things go back to when it was simple and easy, *and do you really have to be badgering me about this now?*”

Raige stared at me, and that’s when the maid opened the door on us, trying to find out what kind of lover’s spat the brooms

could've gotten into.

...

Biff didn't look much better than I did when I crawled in.

"Fuck is that face for?"

I made a whining noise and slithered onto the couch, sweeping at the plaster dust. "Don't you start with me too, bucko." I extended a platter of cold hors-d'oeuvres, remembered Biff's arms, and put it on the floor myself. "Raige is stupid."

"So that's a no on the car?"

"I didn't bring up the stupid car. The answer's no. It's gone. They took it. Sleep; talk in the morning."

I was out before I could hear his response, and I guess Biff realized I'd hit my limits—and him too. He took mercy on me and let me sleep the whole night through.

We weren't sleeping in his apartment, of course. But with Biff's health and his gear, we couldn't afford to be too far from it, not until we had some way to move it all, and what with everything else, I hadn't had it in me to ask for hotel money from Raige. So we were camping out in the boiler room in the basement, which looked like a serial killer's torture lab, but also had a solid steel door with a heavy chain lock. The building had survived the riots, after all, and it kept us safe for one night.

Once I was up, I felt better in all ways but one: Raige.

Biff was sitting on his sleeping bag on the floor, pulling the hors-d'oeuvres from the cooler he'd trucked down. In the heat, he'd stripped to the waist; he looked a little battered, but everything was still holding together.

"You still got that face," he said.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, and told him what I'd

learned from Raige's dad and the party. "Please tell me your evening went better."

It had. He shoved my legs out of the way, plunked down on the couch, and conjured up a three-dimensional miniature image of the house to give me a burglar's external tour while we shared stolen party refreshments. He hadn't managed to commit the lawn or gardens to memory, and the house was just a skeleton frame with windows and doors marked in blue, security in red, but even then, one thing was apparent.

"That is one butt-ugly house," I said around a mouthful of cocktail weenies.

Biff shrugged, as though the aesthetic tastes of the mega-rich were beyond him.

I eyed the diagram. It showed a three story McMansion with mismatched windows, superfluous turrets, and a fake balcony, as expensive as it was hideous. I couldn't help but wonder why the guy had spent so much money on that; at least Raige's father had chosen something that looked like it wouldn't fall over. That fake balcony in the back had possibilities, though. There was no actual place to stand, only an opening (either a large window or a small door) and railing. Totally useless for the inhabitant, but for me...

"You said you had the security cameras covered?"

"Yeah. The alarm's a problem, though. Can you cover that?"

"Can I zap it?"

Biff gave me a look of disgust. Turned out that old heist movies to the contrary, cutting the wires was no longer a thing in the real world, and hadn't been for ages. These days, I'd need to

not just hit the alarm itself, but also the battery intended to take over in times of power outage, all fast enough to kill any signal. Biff didn't think I could do it, and honestly, neither did I.

"Man, thought you fucking squatted, how come you don't know this shit?"

"Biff, squatting uses places nobody *wants*. That's the *point*. And anyway, I never tried camping out in alarmed buildings; until I got my stupid electrical stuff under control, I set them off, just by existing."

"What, for real?"

"Yes, for real, that's why I started climbing in through windows; it simplified things." Thank god *that* had gotten under control by the time I'd first met Raige's dad. "So what's this alarm consist of, anyway? How do you turn it off, a password, a button?"

Worse: a key-ring fob. And our mark had had enough common sense to take back Rosenthal's. No good there. But Biff didn't seem concerned about that. In fact, he was rubbing his chin and giving me a thoughtful look.

"Hey," he said. "Could you set 'em off again? Just by being there? From a distance?"

"I mean, sure, I guess. But why?"

Biff smiled.

Turned out that no matter how fancy and state-of-the-art a security system was, nothing worked perfectly. Much like car alarms, they got set off by all sorts of things besides burglary—squirrels, internal glitches, me—and half the time there wasn't really a way to "fix" them, since turning down the alarm's sensitivity meant legit break-in attempts would get lost in the shuffle.

Apparently cops got called out on false alarms pretty regularly, and not surprisingly, they were not fond of their time being wasted. Biff's idea (and apparently, his preferred tactic when working solo) was to annoy cops into submission by setting off the burglar alarm on purpose on a specific schedule until the cops got sick of responding to what appeared to be a hypersensitive alarm. The trick was to pull off just the right balance of annoying, but not so annoying as to warrant immediate repair. If we pulled it off right, we could just ignore the security system entirely on heist day—I'd just pick the lock or climb through a window and let Biff in through the front door. It'd go off again when we had to leave, but by then we'd be gone.

I was uncertain about our ability to pull it off in the time crunch allotted to us, but Biff said it was our best bet. He was the B&E man, so I deferred to his professional expertise. And just like that, we had our basic plan.

...

It seemed perverse that twenty-four hours prior, my biggest concerns about getting money for Georgia were how long it'd take and whether I could get my schedule to cooperate. Now we had the opposite problem: trying to keep up with the brutal pace that One and the toy fair imposed on us.

I probably would've managed, but Biff was still held together with sutures and machismo, and even he admitted that the rail trip to Oasis Valley had taken a lot out of him. He couldn't keep pulling that, and we sure couldn't keep sleeping in the boiler room, so he decided to solve both problems and borrow a car.

"Oh my god," I said. "What is that?"

"Fuck you, *you* coulda asked your boyfriend for *his* car." Biff

couldn't slam the door shut, with his arms' limited range of motion, so he kicked it shut, and for a moment, I thought the bumper might come off.

The Vaygan south side was haven to many an ugly car, but this one had cage-fought them all for the title. Once upon a time, it might've been a Volkswagen; now it was a grade-A lemon. Some optimistic soul had painted it pink at some point, except for its name in careful blue script: "Shitty-Shitty Bang-Bang." The whole thing was covered in gun decals, the interior looked like it'd been attacked by every knife, cat, and sandblaster in Vaygo, and it *smelled*.

I hugged the front fender. "I love it. This car is my mom now."

"Yeah, well, Mommy's going back to rehab after this, so give it up."

But I didn't care about that, or that Biff would have to put a vanish job on it to keep it from being reported to the Oasis Valley Homeowners Association. It was a work of modern art, semi-reliable transportation to and from Oasis Valley, a safe, air-conditioned place to sleep, and it would probably hold a flat-screen. We were set to go.

And we had a lot of going that needed to be gone. I won't recount the time we spent in Oasis Valley, zapping the burglar alarm, irritating the cops, and doing the tedious grunt work required to make our heist happen. A lot of it was just watching: who visited our mark regularly? If so, at what times? Did he have a house-cleaner, a cook, or other staff who dropped in, and if so, what times-table did they follow? Did he or any of the nearby neighbors have a yappy, territorial dog? All this was familiar to

me from my squatting days, and what we couldn't see for ourselves, Biff asked Rosenthal about.

Obviously, all this casing required we spend a lot of quality time in the area, and neither me nor Biff could pass for residents. At first, he stuck with straightforward invisibility, which would've worked fine for him alone, but I basically had to hold his hand the entire time to insure I stayed within the vanish radius. To make matters worse, I was wretched at navigating the world invisible, and it insured a complete meltdown from any dog that passed by—they couldn't see us, but oh, they could *smell* us. Finally Biff caved and gave us neighborhood-appropriate images that'd map to our movements.

He didn't warn me the first time he did this, leading to me yelping, "gah! You're white!" in front of a soccer mom, who by her face thought this was the most offensive thing she'd ever heard before Biff hauled me off down a side-street to avoid any further interaction.

Sure, Biff whitened himself up depending on company, neighborhood, and feeling, had done so in front of me for ages. But he'd never done it so blatantly before while still using his own appearance as a base. It was *creepy*, like some kind of Twilight Zone ringer in khaki.

The next chance I got, I checked my own face in a side mirror on a parked car, only to find he'd defaulted me to white as well. Not only that, but he'd softened my contours, given me curves. Even with the constant hand-holding to insure telepathic contact, the mapping was off too; there was a noticeable lag, and a lot of my smaller movements didn't register at all.

I shuddered and avoided looking at my reflection after

that. Biff looked apologetic, but he didn't change the image, and I didn't ask him to. We needed to look unremarkable, and in this neighborhood, that meant looking white.

"You ever feel like you're losing yourself, doing that?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Not enough."

Ouch. "Even after all the renovating?"

He frowned as though the thought hadn't occurred to him. He absently touched his chest. "Guess I'm still getting used to that," he said finally.

"What're you going to show your sisters?" I asked. "When you see them again?"

His expression closed. "Working on it."

Wearing local images meant we had to keep moving and looking like we had some legitimate reason to be there, and it also meant Biff had to tailor his body language so he didn't look like he was out hunting the man who'd groin-kicked him, but at least the dogs left us alone. We ended up spending a lot of time either in the car or at the neighborhood tennis courts and park, since that was the only public place people were allowed to sit around in for free and Biff still wasn't all that mobile. With the car, though, he managed pretty well—though the sleep he got clearly wasn't the best, even with the driver's seat cranked all the way back. (And we got woken by the cops a few times as we slept off the side of the road in the desert.)

I slept curled up in the backseat with our gear. A couple times, I noticed Biff staring at me in the rear view mirror.

"What?" I asked every time, but he'd just shake his head.

On Thursday, Biff declared us ready and I agreed. We had

our plan, we had our gear, we had our transit, and we had an advance from Rosenthal. We celebrated with a night in some budget motel off in some part of Vaygo that I'd never heard of. Biff said he wanted a good night's sleep in a real room with a real kitchen before hauling the heist, and I agreed with him. We checked over his chest (it seemed to be healing well), checked over the car (it was as fine as it was ever going to be), had a big dinner of cabbage and kielbasa, shoved the leftovers in the fridge, and went to bed assured of our preparedness.

Everything seemed to be going so well, we forgot to check the weather report.

...

To be fair, it was a reasonable mistake. It was August in Vaygo, Arizona, in the midst of a horrific drought. What would *you* have predicted the weather to be?

But on Friday morning, the first day of the toy fair, the heavens opened, the tempest descended, and it *didn't stop*.

At first, Biff and I reacted with incredulity and mild annoyance. But as the rain continued to pelt down, our emotions shifted to growing alarm.

In Treehouse, rain like this was a common enough occurrence, but Vaygo was a desert city. It was prepared for drought, fire, strikes, and riots, not water pouring out of the sky. Biff and I sat at the motel window, listening to the weather report on the radio and watching the sky. Well, I was watching; Biff was glowering at it as though he could somehow bully Mother Nature into capitulation.

When the radio announced that parts of I-10 were closed due to flash flooding, Biff went rigid, leaped to his feet and made

for the door, only to have to come back for his keys.

“Where are you going?” I asked. “You can’t run!”

“The shitheap!”

“Relax, we parked it uphill. With bricks. It won’t wash away.”

“It *leaks*!”

Of course it leaked. Why would a waterproof car be necessary in Vaygo? By the time we got there, the inside wasn’t much drier than we were. Worse, it wouldn’t start.

That Biff couldn’t pound on the steering wheel only seemed to make him madder. He glared at me.

“Get out,” he snarled.

“But—”

“Now.”

I sighed, opened the door, and returned to the torrent.

Biff flicked on the headlights and shouted out the window, “They bright?” When I shook my head no, he looked slightly less angry. “Battery. Fuck it, I ain’t buying a new one for this. Jump it.”

I glowered at him. “Fifty percent.”

“Fuck you!”

“Fifty or you can jump this thing yourself!”

He caved and popped the hood.

Unfortunately, after half an hour of struggling and swearing, it became clear that I couldn’t jump the thing. It was just too wet. All I was managing to do was hurt myself and possibly the car. Shaking my numb hands, I shouted to Biff, “is there some other way to get this stupid thing started?”

There was: pushing.

Had Biff been able-bodied, it would've been easy. As it was, the only reason I was able to do it was that Biff had parked on a slope, so I had gravity's assistance (though even then, it took all my strength and weight). Unfortunately for him, Biff had parked on an *upward* slope, meaning we had to push-start it in reverse. He nearly smashed into a street light and ended our heist before it began, but finally got our intrepid metal chariot started. I piled in, soaked to the skin, and we went searching for higher, drier ground.

Too bad half the Vaygan car-owning population had a similar idea.

We ended up having to park the car in a multistory parking garage up in the business district, and give up our firstborn for the privilege. With the state of the roads (and the drivers on them) what would've taken us twenty minutes to walk under normal circumstances took almost an hour driving.

This was more than just an irritation. Water sloshed in through the sides and bottom of the car as we went through low points, and while Shitty-Shitty Bang-Bang kept running (barely), it got bogged down in the sludge at one point and had to be pushed out. Worse, I couldn't move it myself this time; Biff had to help.

It was bad to watch. Biff still had a lot of core strength, but try using it without involving any chest muscles. Somehow we got the car moving again, but he looked awful, and I was deeply relieved when we finally found safety in our miserable little parking spot at the top of a concrete box. But then he just sat there with a glassy look in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Silence.

"We can wait. Take your time."

He just rested for a while, while I took the opportunity to wring out my shirt. He needed help getting his off. When we did, I was relieved to see that he was still in one piece, but bruises were already starting to blossom across his chest.

I gave Biff some Vicodin, which he swallowed dry.

"We can't do it today," he said.

"No," I said.

He touched his chest. "Tomorrow ain't looking so hot either."

I shook my head.

"Sunday?"

"Pray," I replied.

...

Biff did not look much better Sunday, and neither did the roads, but we didn't have much of a choice in the matter. It was the last day of the Chicago International Toy Fair, we were running out of cash, and who knew when we'd get another opportunity? At least I-10 was due to be mostly passable by evening, and some of the surface moisture had evaporated, leaving sinkholes, subway flooding, and swampy humidity in its wake, bad enough that even I wanted to strip down to short sleeves—though I didn't. Biff insisted that the less skin contact we made with the mark's stuff, the better, and seeing as he was wearing long sleeves, pants, and gloves, I did too. Biff made sure to bring water bottles and leave super-early.

We made our way up to the parking garage with apprehension. The car had thankfully mostly dried out, though it

smelled even more like cheese.

Biff got in, turned the key. It didn't start.

We sighed. He popped the hood. This time, I was able to jump it. It started, Biff slapped a vanish job on it (we were now driving a marginally less hideous, far more boring Volvo, with appropriate neighborhood residency stickers), and off we went.

Traffic was still a mess, but we made it to Oasis Valley in plenty of time for our date with the "malfunctioning burglar alarm." (Since Biff insisted that the burglar alarm had to go off at the same time, every time, so as to be easily correlated with a regular outside stimulus that couldn't be fixed—a loud delivery truck going by or something.) We parked across the street from Max Love's house, got out, and got to work.

While Biff raised the vanish so we could see each other but not be seen by neighbors (or the outdoor security cameras he'd cased earlier), I pulled on heavy gloves and started climbing. It was that or pick the lock, but I was desperately out of practice with lock-picking, while my time in Treehouse was full of navigating vertical terrain. Besides, I'd done my own casing and noted that Max Love had focused his security on the bottom floors.

I had already picked most of my route. Our mark's ostentatious lawn (fluorescent green even before the downpour and mowed within an inch of its life) turned out handy—he had a tall, tough, climbable tree right in front of one of his turrets. Not a cactus, not a yucca, an honest-to-god *tree*, probably transplanted and maintained at ridiculous expense. The rain had rendered the lawn a sodden mess, but I was able to avoid squishing through it (and thus leaving obvious footprints) via the artfully arranged

concrete stones that bordered between the garden and the lawn. Across the border and up the tree I went, but I took my time; we were running early, and Biff had me covered visually, so it was more important to be quiet and unobtrusive.

The tree didn't go close to any windows, but that was fine; it did go up to the roof, which was *not* covered in fake stucco and thus far easier to move around on without leaving obvious marks of passage. While Biff watched, sweated, and slugged back water, I got up without accident, then went looking for that fake balcony. In the process, I found myself looking into the back yard, which I'd never paid much attention to, previously. My focus had been on the house and possible entryways, and anyway, most of what I'd seen had been covered by a big tarp. I'd dismissed it as some gardening project, but the rain had weighted it so much that it'd sunk in, showing—

I came back into Biff's view, but there was no way I could verbally express my feelings without noise. So I shook my fists, flailed at the backyard, and gave him the look of a hapless god faced with the perfidy of humanity.

Biff spread his hands and looked incredulous.

I defaulted to Pidgin Sign, gesturing big and broad to insure he saw it: "*he has a diving pool!*"

Of course, what I signed was "big lake." But surely Biff knew those signs; I'd taught him them.

Biff rolled his eyes dramatically enough that I could see it from the roof. He waved me on as though to say, "get on with it."

"I will *urinate* in this man's lake!" I signed angrily.

I don't know if Biff knew the sign for "urinate" or not, but he knew *me*. With a look of irritation, he drew one finger across

his throat and made a pointed open-window gesture. I huffed but acquiesced. At least the pool had massively overflowed due to the rainstorm and ruined the back lawn.

It turned out the fake balcony was within dropping distance from the back roof, but that didn't do me any good; the balcony wasn't just fake but poorly attached too, and the moment my foot touched the rail, it started to give. I considered somehow getting the window open and swinging inside without touching the railing at all, only to then realize that the shutters opened *outward*—that is, into the space the railing blocked. No way was I getting in there unless I tore the whole railing off first, which admittedly probably wouldn't be hard but not exactly conducive to stealth.

Grumbling, I pulled myself back up on the roof and started looking for a more sensibly designed window. Eventually I found one—locked, but it proved just as amenable to my trusty L-bar as Biff's. After getting it open, I tucked the L-bar back into my belt and swung in to find myself in an enormous room that seemed to be decorated entirely in shades of beige.

It was also a crisp seventy degrees inside, despite the sweltering outdoors. At least we would be able to steal in comfort.

I leaned out and gave Biff a thumbs-up, then made as though to check an invisible watch. He checked the time, made doorknob motions, and I nodded, then shut the window and went to find the front door. Even though it was the middle of the day, the house was surprisingly dim, but I didn't turn on any lights; I wasn't sure if Biff had the vanish completely down yet.

Once I let him in, he shut the door again, re-locked it, and to my surprise, moved out of view and sat under the grand

staircase (which, seeing this place, was probably made of plastic). When I didn't follow, he frowned and gestured for me to join him. "Already fucked up on the weather," he murmured. "I ain't fucking up this."

I opened my mouth to protest, but then I realized it: all the standing, driving, and sweating had worn him out. I shut my mouth and sat next to him and took the water bottle when he offered.

Just as well I did, really; Biff's instincts were good. The cops drove by, but by that point were sick enough of our shtick to not put much effort into it. The house looked fine, the door was fully intact and still locked, and after checking both, they left, presuming it another false alarm. Maybe they called Max Love again, but even if they did, nothing to be done until he got back from the toy conference.

Once they were definitely gone, Biff stood up and headed for the main hall.

"Okay, got a vanish 'round the whole house, so lights're fine, just be quiet. Put all the shit down here in—" Then he flicked on the hall lights and went silent.

The enormous frames on the walls, which I'd presumed to hold family photos or something, turned out to all contain extreme close-ups of Max Lovables, all in photo-realistic oils. The painter had apparently been most interested in their glassy eyes, but there were also disembodied heads, limbs, and bodies.

For a moment, we just stood there. I looked at Biff. He looked uncomfortable a moment, then shook it off and muttered, "you take top, I take first, meet on second. Shit go in the foyer."

I pulled a heavy-duty garbage bag from the roll in my belt

(Biff was pulling his own from his pockets), and headed off without protest. He wasn't looking so good, while I was still fresh after climbing a house, and anyway, I hoped that the top floor would be less creepy.

For once, Love's house followed some rules of common sense: he had apparently kept to the lower floors, and the top floor was just a couple bland guestrooms, an attic. Lots of beige.

I didn't really expect to find Love's personal revenge wankery up there, and sure enough, I didn't. But that was fine, because there was plenty of various other loot. The flat-screen TVs, alas, did not make the cut; they weighed almost as much as I did, and were so big and unwieldy that I wasn't sure they'd fit through the car door, even if I got them there. The other electronics, fortunately, were more compact; I hauled some very nice stereo equipment down to the foyer without trouble, along with some women's jewelry that I assumed belonged to Rosenthal.

I finished riffling through the attic (which seemed to be filled mostly with boxes of old paperwork), made off with some cuff links, headed down the stairs, and met Biff at the second floor. Or rather, found him standing in a lit doorway, staring.

"What's your deal?" I asked.

He moved out of the way.

"Oh my god," I said.

The second floor, it turned out, had the studio and work rooms. Display cases, sheets of paper covered with designs, racks upon racks of fabrics. And on every available surface: plushies. Piles upon piles of them, staring at me with their shiny plastic eyes.

I shuddered and made to turn the lights off, only for Biff to

smack my hand.

"We taking these," he said, and something in my expression must've got him defensive. "Fuck you, some of these are worth 2K!"

"Wait, really?"

Turned out there was a thriving underground black market in Max Lovables, of all things, and Biff had read up as best he could before the heist—though he admitted he wasn't entirely clear on the nitty-gritty distinctions of which were worth the most, since he was neither a nine-year-old girl nor the mother of one. So we grabbed them all and filled two enormous garbage bags with them. I was glad not to have to look at their beady little eyes.

Biff was smirking at me while I bagged.

"What?" I asked.

"You don't like 'em." The jerk was *laughing* at me. "You fucking scared of plushies."

"I'm not *scared* of them, Biff. I just think they're possessed by demons."

He wiggled a rainbow panda into my face. "It coming... it gonna get'cha..."

"I will electrocute you, I swear I will."

Once the Lovables were bagged, we started hunting the tapes again, divvying up the rooms between us. I had to give Biff credit; he was methodical about the whole business, working from corner to corner and insuring that we wouldn't hit any territory twice. We went through the work rooms together, and while he tore through the office, I hit the rec room, where the entertainment center was.

That held another bounty of robbables, but the shelves upon shelves of movies made me pause. It seemed like a stupid idea to keep his blackmail with all the rest of his movies where anyone could find them, but hey, where better to hide one movie than among hundreds of others? What if he'd concealed it in a box for something nobody would ever watch of their own volition, *America's Funniest Fly-Fishing Videos* or something?

It was a chilling idea, but it would've burned a ton of time to test, so for the moment, I shelved it and focused instead on grabbing all the expensive electronics that I could lift. That kept me busy for a while, and I was just finishing that when Biff came in. He looked tired and collapsed on the sofa to rest.

"You find it?" I asked, but he shook his head. There went that hope. And Biff had gone through the first floor, with all the personal stuff; surely he hadn't missed it.

I was starting to have a sense of foreboding. "What if he's put it in a safe or a safety deposit box or something? That's what I'd do."

Biff rolled his eyes. "He ain't you. Rosenthal gets calls from this place. Says she can hear the movies in the background as he..." He made a very recognizable motion.

"Ugh!"

"Yeah. So he gotta keep 'em close by." He surveyed the room, rubbing his chin. "This set-up's better than what he got in his room."

"Yeah, so?"

"You got some revenge porn. You gonna jack off to it in your room, or in this place?"

I thought about it. Personally, if I were inclined to such

behavior, I would've wanted the privacy of my own room, even if it *did* have a giant plushie painting watching me do it. But... this was a guy who kept a pristine lawn even in the depths of water rationing, who ran the AC even when he wasn't home. A guy with tons of money who nevertheless blackmailed his less-wealthy ex, purely for humiliation's sake.

"It'd be like bragging, wouldn't it?" I said. "To keep it in a room everyone comes to, never knowing."

"Yeah. That's what I'm thinking."

We looked at Love's movie collection. We couldn't not; it was right across from us, in an enormous cabinet crammed full of tapes. Weirdly, for all his money I didn't see a single DVD; even Thomas's family had bought some by then.

"Before you came up," I said, "I was thinking what if he hid it in another movie box..."

I could tell by Biff's face that he thought the prospect plausible, but was no more enthusiastic about it than I was. The only way to be sure would be to manually check each box. It'd take forever. And sure, we could empty the whole thing... but what on earth would we do with them?

Biff sighed. "You go through everything?"

I shook my head and continued, letting him rest.

Biff had a system for tossing rooms. Unlike my natural inclination, which was just to hit everything I saw and *then* search more thoroughly, he preferred to start from one corner and sweep through it one bit at a time, like a minesweeper. He was the one with a clue, so I finished clearing the entertainment center, cleared the other walls, then hit the center, leaving the sofa Biff was resting on for last.

Which is where I barked my knuckles trying to reach under it.

I jerked back with a hiss. Biff looked down with curiosity, kicked back with his foot. His boot, rather than going under the sofa, hit wood with a *thunk*. We glanced at each other, and I pulled up the sofa fringe.

There were drawers built into them. *Locked* drawers.

I dug my picks out of my belt.

Thankfully, these drawers had much worse locks than what was surely on the front door. It took me a while to pop them, but at least I managed.

I pulled open the first drawer. Then another. Biff swore.

The entire thing was filled with homemade tapes, labeled with date ranges and then esoteric abbreviations: “2001/4/21-30 Bd-SS,” “2002/2-2004/10 Ba-CF,” stuff like that. They were meticulously filed in chronological order, stacked with labels facing out, and two of the three drawers were completely packed. (The third was half full.)

“What even are these?” I asked. “No way this guy’s gotten laid that many times...”

Biff’s jaw was set in a grim line. He reached in and grabbed a tape from roughly eight months back with the label addendum “D-AR.” Then he turned on the TV (which, like the others, wasn’t portable enough to take), woke up the VCR (which wasn’t worth enough), and shoved the tape in.

“Do you think—”

I didn’t finish. The tape had started, and it showed...

The dining room. It was empty.

We waited a couple seconds, and when nothing changed,

Biff jabbed the fast-forward button. Mandy Rosenthal instantly sped into the room with Max Love.

They started having dinner. Biff kept the fast-forward on, but that's all that happened: they had dinner. Then the tape cut and started up with a new, different meal, also starring Rosenthal. As far as I could tell, they were perfectly normal meals, no passionate sex on the table or anything. Which only made it creepier, especially once I realized that these couldn't have been the original tapes. No, Max Love had apparently taken *those* recordings and spliced them together into *this* one, so as to have the maximum possible footage of Rosenthal per tape. No wonder he hadn't changed over to DVDs! How much work had this taken him?

"Biff," I said, "this guy..."

Biff said nothing. He was digging into the tapes, frowning at the labels.

"'D' is probably 'dining room,'" I ventured. "Ugh, that means that all those are rooms—'bedroom,' 'bathroom.' And I guess 'AR' is 'Amanda Rosenthal..."

We looked at the tapes. Most of them did not have "AR" at the end. Biff ejected the dining room tape, put in "GBd-SS," hit play, then fast-forward. It showed one of the guest bedrooms I'd been through, and a different woman. Apparently that jewelry I'd snatched *wasn't* Rosenthal's.

As we watched in silence, the woman sat down, took off her shoes, rubbed her feet, and started changing into a robe. Biff hit stop before she could do so, and we just sat there for a while.

Finally, Biff said, "So that's what all that fancy shit in his room was for."

I hadn't thought I could get any more horrified, but I did. "Oh god, what about the originals?"

"He must've taped over 'em. Why splice if you ain't gonna reuse 'em?"

"Even if he did, and you don't know that, does he still have these things running in his house?" I saw Biff freeze, and I knew we were in trouble. The vanish was only in operation for *outside* the house. I hadn't seen anything resembling a camera inside, and presumably neither had he, but it was clear Max Love was operating at a way higher pay-grade than we were. "There's so much electronics in this place, I never thought to look for bugs; I'm going to have to fry everything now..."

"Shit. Yeah, you do that." Biff grabbed for a drawer. "And fuck it, we taking all of these—"

That's when we heard the sound of a garage door opening. Felt it, rather, since it was directly below us. Looks like Max Love had come home early.

Biff gave me a look of indignant betrayal as though this was somehow my fault. I gave him a similarly indignant look of wounded innocence.

The rumbling vibration of a car driving into the garage reminded us of our priorities. Biff reached for the VCR to get the tape, forgot his stitches, and over-stretched. When he buckled over, I went for it, but in my rush—

Zap! The TV went dead.

Biff and I went through a brief, hasty pantomime—him strangling the air as much as he could while doubled-over in pain, me flailing with worry that I'd damaged the tape or him. Finally we stopped doing stupid things and Biff vanished us while I

groped for him to start a proper communication channel.

Gloves meant the usual way didn't work, and in the current situation, I didn't dare take them off. I nearly busted his nose doing it, but at last got our foreheads touching, and the telepathy switched on.

"*You said he'd be gone! (ow, fuck)*" Biff mentally snarled, but then he moved onto the important part: "*Let's beat his ass.*"

"*With what?*"

Turns out that Biff, even crippled and exhausted, still carried a makeshift sap in his boot as a matter of course; he sent me the mental image. "*Look, we vanished, you got arms...*" and then he reverted to nonverbal thought to give me a visualization of us beating Mark Love into concussion and bolting with all our stuff.

Well, I had to admit that would be by far the simplest solution, but, "*no, Biff.*"

Raw incredulity. "*No? What you mean, no? (image of the vanished stuff piled in the foyer) (Max Love tripping over them) (the empty car, followed by our empty wallets)*"

"*You can't do it (T-Rex arms), and I won't (bound hands). I'm a healer; I can't hurt people anymore—*"

Biff's response was nonverbal and disdainful.

"*I PROMISED! I'm a high healer, and they put that stupid oil on my head (hooray we live) (blessings upon your practice, healer!), and I promised! And if you can't handle that, then you shouldn't have hired me!*"

Silence for a moment... or rather, a quiet cognitive cog-turning that was too low and nonverbal for me to really make out. I figured Biff was thinking up a way to shut me up, shut me down, and get me on-board, but instead he just went, "*okay.*"

That was it. No fighting, no complaining. He didn't even seem all that upset.

Before I could question it, he went, "so. *What we gonna do?*" and we tossed aside verbal thought as too slow and got down to nuts and bolts.

Our problems were dual. The first was getting ourselves and our loot out of the house and into the car, which was disguised and parked across the street. The other was more complicated: we had to insure Max Love didn't have any remaining functional tapes or records of our presence in the house.

However I felt about Biff's ability to pull off the first task, I was the only person who could handle the second. As demonstrated with the TV and the burglar alarm, my natural state until recently was a walking electronic disaster. Even if Max Love didn't have the apartment bugged, he might've had back-up copies of the Rosenthal footage hidden somewhere in the house, and we didn't have the time to find it. So I had to go through and destroy everything, including Max's computer and any back-up media around, and hope that did the job. Thank god tapes, being magnetic, trumped even computers for how badly they hated me.

Biff wouldn't be able to vanish me. He might've been able to sneak around invisible, but I needed to be able to see myself—and besides, I knew he was full up covering the house, the car, and the stuff. So I would be on my own, while he tried to haul everything to the car that he could. (He claimed he could lug the tapes, as long as he did it one drawer at a time; I wasn't sure I believed him, but didn't have much choice.) Then I'd get out of the house, into the car, and we'd make our escape. Vroom, zoom,

avoided doom.

Well. In theory. If the car started.

Biff tossed me his mental map of the first floor, making sure to point out the gun safe, and I helped move the boxes of tapes out of the danger zone; they were our proof of job done and I couldn't afford to destroy them by accident. Biff grabbed one and vanished.

I heard a door open downstairs and a voice, deeply aggravated: "—I-10! I know, in August! No, no, I can't, just keep me in the loop while you're there—"

Biff phased into view for a split second to give me a thumbs-up. Then he disappeared again and I shook my hands out and focused. I needed something big and loud to keep Max out of the foyer and away from Biff. Thank goodness for that entertainment center in front of me.

These days, electrically controlling myself was second nature. Now I let go, pulled the power to the surface, started to charge. The VCR clock flickered, warped, and then went dead, but that wasn't near distracting enough. I wanted fireworks.

TV and VCR started to smoke. The front panel of the tape player burst off with a satisfying electronic *bang!* I smelled burning plastic.

"What now? Shannon, let me call you back, nothing is going right this week..."

I was already making for the first floor, only to find Max's shadow heading up the stairs. I backpedaled before he came into view and threw myself behind the first door I saw—a work closet, it turned out.

It was a lousy hiding place, but fortunately, it didn't look

like Max had figured out there were people in the house yet. Judging by his body language, he just thought entropy was gunning for him. Muttering furiously about the burglar alarm, the weather, the traffic, and the airport, he stormed past my door without even looking, dressed in rumpled business clothes with cell phone in hand. I waited until he was out of sight, and then I bolted down the stairs as quickly and quietly as I could. The longer he stayed off the first floor and away from Biff, the better.

Biff's mental map was good, but it was purely a spatial floor plan—no way to tell which room was what. I couldn't afford to miss anything, so finally I just decided to clear them the way we'd searched them: in strict linear order, from one end to another. Living room, office, dining room, kitchen—I burned through them, doing a quick turn around the periphery, running my gloved hands over any gizmos, then moving on, all as quick as I could. The gloves made it a little more challenging, but fortunately not impossible. I didn't see hide or hair of Biff, but he was definitely aware of me; he let the boxes come into view every time I crossed the foyer, insuring I didn't trip on them.

Max wasn't up on the second floor long; he caught up with me in the worst possible place, the master bedroom, which was right in the center of the floor, next to both stairs *and* foyer. Even as I saw his shadow descending, I cursed Biff for not labeling his stupid map. Of *course* Max would come to his own room first!

I couldn't make it out without being seen, and in the seconds I had, there were only three hiding places, all bad: behind the bed, in the master bath, or in the closet. I jittered in indecision for a moment, threw myself over the bed, and found myself face-to-face with the gun safe.

With horror, I realized that Biff *had* marked this room for me on the map—where else would Max keep his gun safe but his own room? If I'd paid proper attention...

Too late now. He was coming in. Under the bed, I saw his legs moving my way. I got ready for a fight.

Crash!

The legs halted, turned, and dashed out of the room, and I popped up to my feet. That crash had sounded expensive; Biff was was trying to buy me time.

No time to worry about him. I still had two and a half floors to clear.

As I cleared the master bathroom, I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. No vanish; I was stuck with my own face. I pulled my bandanna up like a bandit and hoped I wouldn't get seen.

I rushed the rest of the first floor, dodging Max as best I could. Judging by the sounds, he clearly understood *something* was amiss, but still not what. Biff could be surprisingly stealthy when he had to be, but I knew he couldn't run interference for long; he was already in bad shape, and none of his illusions would do a lick of good if Max tripped over a box or called the cops. Worse, he was blocking Biff's (and my) exit.

As I cleared the ground floor and bolted up the stairs, I passed by the rec room again and laid eyes on the stupid flat-screen Biff had so hoped for. I couldn't lift it, but I *could* push it, and it hit the floor with a crash that thrilled the cockles of my delinquent soul.

"Sam Hill!"

There. Hopefully that would get Max off the first floor and

clear Biff's path. No time to worry about my own. I continued my blitz through the second floor, trying to be quiet, and when I heard our mark tromp up the stairs, I hurled myself into the sewing room and hid in what looked like a repurposed walk-in closet turned storage space, burrowing between hanging rolls of fabric behind the door. While I prayed he'd be sloppy in his search, I gathered up electricity, just in case he wasn't.

But he didn't come in. In fact, I didn't hear him at all.

I waited. Still nothing.

Carefully, silently, I slipped out of the closet and into the sewing room. Evening was coming on and the already dim house was getting downright dark. Good; my night vision was surely better than his.

I peeked through the gap of the door hinge into the hall. Empty.

I got down on all fours, ears pricked, and edged into the doorway. The hallway light was off, but when I glanced over, I saw Max Love at the mouth of the downward staircase, armed with a handgun and whispering into his cell phone.

I took the energy I'd been holding, focused, and zapped.

Lights burst. I heard a shot. Max Love yelped and dropped the phone as though it'd bitten him, and I sprinted past him for the third floor staircase; if I couldn't go down, I had to go up. But now he was chasing me, shouting—not shooting yet, for love of his stupid McMansion, but I doubted that'd last much longer.

Now wasn't the time to conserve energy; I sucked down everything available—the house's power, the waning sunlight, ambient heat—and burned it all as I dashed by outlets. The house's electrical wires eagerly channeled the current, getting

fried in the process. Light bulbs seared into life, only to pop and die. The smell was awful. The burglar alarm surely went off again, though I didn't hear anything.

It was so dark that it was hard to see now, but I kept running, relying on my haphazard mental map. Where was the window, the one I'd left unlocked? At this point, it was my only way down.

I saw a flash of beige, turned left... and found myself in the *other* guest room, same layout but no window.

For one foolish second, I looked around as though the window was hiding from me, until I got it together and turned around—only as Max appeared, blocking the doorway. He aimed his gun.

"We have castle laws here," he panted. "Want to push me?"

I shook my head, and raised my hands, and I saw him register my size. It seemed to calm him down a little, that I was smaller than him.

"Good. Get down. Flat."

I dropped to my knees, then my belly, keeping my head down and arms up the whole way. Let him think I was scared; in the dark room and with shadows crawling towards me, he probably hadn't gotten a good look at my face yet, and as long as he thought I was white, the situation might still be salvageable.

Max Love stayed where he was, catching his breath. "The cops are on their way. Nobody needs to get hurt."

I snuck a look up, and providence smiled. Through the door, over Max's shoulder, across the hall, and through the room behind, I saw it. That useless, ridiculous, beautiful fake balcony. Overlooking the pool.

My breath was fogging the air, and I was shivering with cold, even though I'd surely killed the AC by now. But still, I tried one last trick.

I dragged up everything my body and surroundings could offer, shut my eyes, and then blasted all the energy out again—but not as electricity. Red seared against my eyelids, and Max Love shrieked, but I was already moving. My lungs burned. Come on, come on—

I bear-crawled past Love—another shot hit the wall, but he misjudged, aimed too high. I was starting to see static. Please, please let this house be as badly made as it appeared, *please*—

I made it to my feet right as I came to the balcony—it didn't even have a *door* behind those shutters, just a window. No matter; I smashed my work boot into it anyway. Glass shattered. The shutters burst open, caught on that stupid useless railing, and I kicked again, taking the whole mess off. I heard Max shouting, bulled through the rubble, and leaped.

For a moment, the air was whipping through my hair and clothes. And then—

Sploosh! Cool, chlorinated water.

I broke the surface, clawed my way past the tarp, and scrambled out of the pool, then sprinted for the car, squishing through the lawn, water gushing from my boots. Biff was already in the driver's side, door shut and windows open, but he was gesturing frantically at the rear—

Of course the car needed a jump. Of course.

I didn't so much stop by the car as collide with it—it turned out the vanish job concealing it as a Volvo didn't exactly cover its dimensions, and there was a disorienting moment as I

broke through the veil to the real image underneath. Hauling my gloves off with my teeth, I dug into the engine, grateful that after all the practice, I knew what to grab and where. Despite my wetness, the engine itself was fine, and at some small electrical penalty to myself, I jumped it fast.

Still, a quick jump took a very long time with a furious homeowner screaming at us (or his neighbors) from the top story. I couldn't hear it over the engine revving and finally turning over, but I could see him aiming that gun. Not that his accuracy would be much good with that gun at this distance, but Shitty-Shitty Bang-Bang was a pretty hard-to-miss target.

I slammed the hood shut, shouted, "drive!" and Biff, bless his criminal soul, presumed I knew what I was doing and goosed it. I latched onto the back like a tick and then it was just a race to get out before the cops arrived.

Thank god the community wasn't gated and the neighbors were apathetic; we made it out fast without anyone following. A Vaygan driver par excellence, Biff turned on back road after back road, detoured every time he saw a jam, sink hole, or warning sign, changed the car vanish twice, and finally vanished us entirely once we were on an empty street, out somewhere near the fringe of the desert.

Once we were out in the desert proper and he was finally convinced we'd escaped, he pulled over on the shoulder and ditched the car vanish. Shitty-Shitty Bang-Bang returned to all its dilapidated glory and I released my death grip on the back and staggered onto the road, soaking wet and covered in splinters and road sludge.

Biff did not move from where he was in the driver's seat.

He didn't even look at me, busy white-knuckling the steering wheel and scowling off at the horizon.

[image description: a banged-up pink Volkswagen covered in gun decals drives off, spraying sand, with M.D. clinging to the back and seemingly shouting at Biff in the driver's seat, where he seems to be shouting back.]

I grinned at him. "Hey Biff. How's the stitches?"

"You crazy fucking bitch," he said, and unlocked the passenger door.

I squished into the passenger seat and collapsed. The back was crammed with junk. "Oh good, you got the stuff," I slurred. "That's nice."

"Fuck you, bitch, that was a *shit show*. You coulda been shot, broken your crazy bitch neck on the bottom of that fucking pool and then we'd've both been fucked up the ass—"

I started giggling.

"The fuck so funny?" he snarled. "You think this funny?"

My cheeks ached. "No. No, I don't think *this* is funny at all."

He rolled his shoulders and gave me a look of impatient attention.

"I told you what I'd do to his pool," I said.

Biff's eyes narrowed. He leaned over, sniffed me, and recoiled like a cat given lima beans.

"You nasty," he said, but he wasn't shouting now, and he hunched over to strip to the waist. He was soaked with sweat, but his bandages showed no other stains, at least. "And you smell like dead dog."

"Oh please, like you can even tell, the way this car smells

and sweaty as you are... you can take those bandages off by the way, let your incisions air out for a bit.”

He did, and fortunately, the bruising looked manageable. He mopped his face and armpits with his shirts, tossed them aside, and put the car back in drive. “You showering when we get home.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” And I promptly conked out in the passenger seat. Biff let me rest; he knew from experience the metabolic cost of that kind of electrical storm.

The only time I surfaced was when I noticed that the car had stopped. It was in a parking lot for some shut-down auto place with a payphone out front, and Biff was just hanging up. I made a bleary questioning noise at him as he came, and he paused to ruffle my hair.

“Ain’t nobody come looking,” he said. “We going home.”

I was too exhausted to argue with him. I just said, “kay,” and went back to sleep.

Once we got back to the squat on Everclear, he roused me with a shirt to the face (“I ain’t carrying your nasty ass”) and insisted I head straight for the shower. I didn’t protest; I was weak and shaky and didn’t really feel like lugging a million bags of plushies up four flights of stairs. While I grabbed a stereo speaker and dragged myself up like a zombie, Biff hit up his fellow tenants to get the rest of the contraband upstairs.

Judging by their lack of reaction, this was a normal thing for them to do. I still didn’t know their names—except the landlady, who I was *pretty* sure was Frankie—but I’d seen her, the tall librarian, and the short curvy girl enough for them to recognize me. The curvy girl waved. I waved back, and quickly

regretted it. Now that the adrenaline had worn off and I was conscious, I was feeling the window I'd plowed through.

Somehow I made it up the stairs and into Biff's apartment, dumped the speaker off to the side, and made it into the bathroom, which still didn't have a door on it. At the moment, I was glad; opening it seemed more effort than it was worth. I slumped on the toilet, got my clothes off with some effort, and then I got a good look at myself.

Oh wow. No *wonder* everything hurt.

"Hey Biff?"

"What?" Biff was occupied with lugging a sack of Lovables that had sprung a hole.

"Come here. I need you."

Now he looked at me. His eyebrows went up. "*Damn.*"

"Yeah. Help me out with some of this?"

More like most of it. After all the exertion, I couldn't have tied my shoes. Fortunately, though his upper body strength was tanked, Biff's fine dexterity was unaffected, and while the downstairs neighbors trucked up our ill-gotten gains and politely didn't look at us, he got to work with tweezers and rubbing alcohol, ignoring when I hissed.

"Your own damn fault. Should've let me break his arms," he said, but there was no heat in it.

All I wanted to do was sleep, but he got me under the shower hose with a bar of soap and the admonition, "don't do that again."

"Bah," I slurred from where my face was plopped against my knees. "You should've seen my exit. It was great."

Biff's response was to turn the hose on me, full blast. I

expected an ice storm, but I guess the heat had gotten to the water supply; it was pleasantly warm. "Come out when you clean," he ordered.

I made a happy burbling noise.

The warm water didn't last long, but it did help revive me a little. Somehow I scrubbed myself clean, and when I finally had it in me to look around, I found a roll of bandages, a box of Band-Aids, and a set of clean clothes sitting on the toilet seat. When I slugged within sight of the doorway, I saw that my dirty ones were in a heap next to the kitchen sink, which Biff was filling with soap and swishing around.

"Need help?" he asked.

I was too exhausted to feel shame. "Yes."

Biff got my wounds dressed, though I at least managed to dress myself. Since all my clothes were gross from our prolonged stay away from laundromats, the clothes were his. The T-shirt read, "the bigger the crotch rocket, the better the ride," and its sleeves went to my elbows, while the jeans had to be belted halfway to Missouri, but I didn't complain; I was just grateful they were clean. The boxes of stolen goods had all been hauled up.

[Image description: M.D. in Biff's way-too-big clothes, shirt sleeves hanging off her shoulders, striking a macho pose in his baseball cap and declaring, "Hurf durf, I'm Biff and I'm *butch*." Biff, standing to the side with a pot of spaghetti, snarls, "no you ain't. Give me back my hat."]

"Food's in the fridge," he said.

"You're the best." I set myself to devouring an immense quantity of sausage and spaghetti drenched in tomato sauce. Biff left my clothes in the sink to soak and went to take his own

shower, then joined me in my feast. We toasted our success with water in plastic cups, and then set to chowing down at his battered little card table.

Midway through, someone knocked at the door.

I looked at Biff nervously; he didn't look at me. "Yeah?" he called with his mouth full. "What?"

Raige's voice: "Is M.D. here?"

I gave Biff a horrified look. Avoiding my eyes, he labored to his feet, took his Tupperware, and said, "Yup, and I was just going."

"No you weren't," I hissed, "get back here!"

But Biff had already opened the door for Raige and squeezed past him. "Yeah, bye."

"Coward!" I shouted, but he was already gone, leaving me alone with Raige. And if I'd had any concern that One was involved, that was gone the moment I saw how angry he was. I'd never seen him so white.

"You did it, didn't you?" he said. "You went and robbed Max Love."

I couldn't exactly deny it, seeing as I was covered in bandages and surrounded by boxes and bags of pilfered plushies. "You're supposed to be scattered."

"No, no, don't start," he said, and his voice was shaking. "I did everything I was supposed to! I camped out in the arts district with Dad, and I didn't draw attention to myself and—there were gunshots! What were you *doing*?"

"It's okay," I said. "It worked out."

"You're *not* listening!" Raige was actually shouting now. "Do you *know* what the castle law is? It means that people here can

shoot you if they catch you in their house stealing their stuff!”

“Milquetoast, it’s okay,” I soothed. “I’ve been shot before.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, and I realized he was crying. “*I don’t want you to get shot,*” he said, and hugged me.

For a moment, I just sat there, trying to figure out what to do that at least wouldn’t make anything worse. Finally I patted him on the back and he sniffed hard.

“At the party last week,” he said, “you said you wanted everything to be the way it was, back when it was simpler.”

I cringed. “Raige, I didn’t actually mean that.”

He let go of me, collapsed into Biff’s abandoned chair, obviously still angry but no longer shouting. “Did you? What did you mean, then?”

I sighed, offered him spaghetti, but he didn’t take any.

“This will sound crazy and stupid.”

“I still want to hear it.” His tone was not to be argued with. “Because you know better. You’ve been healer for years! You haven’t pulled shit like this since... since Jesus, I don’t know, since things went bad with Vandorsky. Since before you got your shit together. Why now? What the *hell*, M.D.?”

I fidgeted with my bandages and my cuticles. “I’ve never been a normal person before. You know? I was always this... this walking disaster. It was all I knew how to be, all I thought I *could* be. And being like this, someone with a job, and a home, and people who care about me? Like a real family? It’s *terrifying*. It feels like I’m going to lose it any second, because that’s what always happens: I screw it up, and I lose it, and this time, I’ll actually *care*.”

Raige said nothing, just stared at me.

"I know how crazy that sounds. But when everything's in chaos and crisis, I know how to deal with that. I know it. It's not fun, but it... it feels easy." Sleeping in the back of the car had been easy. Having barely any of my stuff had been easy. "It feels like home."

Raige took a deep breath and the anger seemed to drain out of him. He pulled out a handkerchief, blew his nose, and then twisted the bit of fabric between his hands. "Mom got crazy sometimes. Not in your way, her own way. When I was a kid, the way we talked about it was, she had a fire in her, and sometimes it told her great things, but sometimes it told her terrible things. And one day, she started believing the terrible things it told her, and eventually, it killed her. She died in this stupid, awful, preventable way, and me and Dad are still a mess from it ten years later." He said all this in a quiet, awful voice. "And I will lose my shit if you die the same way."

There was nothing I could say to that. Raige didn't bring up his mother often; she was his last-ditch trump card for a reason.

"You can't pull this shit anymore, kid. Because you're right, you've got people who care about you now, people who depend on you. You're Treehouse's high healer for the day people, and think what would've happened to them if you *had* gotten shot. I can't tell you what to do, but please, don't take jobs like this. It's not going to end well, not for you, not for Biff, not for anyone, and I... I can't be with you if you're going to pull stunts like this."

I felt very, very small.

"Please. Say something."

I was still trying to figure out what to say. Finally, I settled on taking his hands and saying, “I’m sorry. I... I just needed to prove to myself that I can still do something else. Even if everything else goes away.”

Raige’s face softened. He cupped my gloved hands. “Look, even if something catastrophic happens, you belong in Treehouse. You’ll find something else *there*. I know it, Thomas knows it. Even Biff knows it. He doesn’t want you doing this kind of work.”

My skepticism must’ve showed.

“He called me. Told me what happened. And he knows the One plan, same as you. He figured after you dived out a window and nearly got yourself shot, it was better for him to risk coming back here and calling me.”

“Rat fink.” But I couldn’t put much anger into it. No wonder he’d rolled over so easy when I refused to beat up Max Love. “He won’t need me after this; he’ll be all better in a few more weeks. No more jobs like this.”

“You promise?”

I bumped my forehead against his so he’d know I wasn’t lying. “I promise. I’m sorry I scared you.”

He put an arm around me. “I’m sorry I flipped out.”

“No, it’s okay. You were right.” I got up, breaking the contact.

“Where’re you going?”

“To let Biff know it’s safe to come up now, that we’re doing feeling emotions.”

I found him downstairs in the zine library, slouched in a mangy armchair and watching a guy paint a house on the flickering old TV set in the corner. He didn’t look surprised to see

THE SHITTY-SHITTY BANG-BANG HEIST

me. “You win?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, come help me hide the body.”

We went back up to finish our dinner with Raige, and then we scattered again.

THE BUS TO GEORGIA

Getting the money for Georgia was one thing; now there was the matter of getting there. After a lot of scowling and tabulating over bus maps, Biff announced that we would be taking the most colorful, cost-effective method of travel in the country: Inter-Bus. Three of them, specifically, transferring in Amarillo, Dallas, and Atlanta, at which point we'd have to make the rest of the trip in some local rattletrap.

Total cost? Eight hundred dollars. Total travel time? Forty-six hours, each way, ideally, theoretically, hopefully. And unless he had the benefit of post-operative painkillers, Biff couldn't sleep sitting upright...

We left Vaygo before six AM on a bus crammed with hungover college students, small children on leashes, and crackpots, all vying for highest volume. Due to my body clock stubbornly clinging to Treehouse time, I was fresh as a daisy, but Biff was a groggy, cantankerous wreck. We barricaded ourselves next to a crate of lemons and tried to enjoy the view.

In Albuquerque, the lemons got off and a clean-cut young man got on. To this day, I have never seen so many crosses on one human. The front of his cap, his T-shirt, even the toes of his sneakers had them, plus the words JESUS LOVES. He looked at us with fervor (and a little alarm) and asked, "Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and savior?"

"Get out," Biff said.

He tried to give us a brochure before he did. Fortunately, I

was closer to the aisle; Biff had finally regained some of his reach, but he couldn't make it over my knees.

We got left alone after that.

In Amarillo, our bus was two hours late. Biff flopped on the cement to catch a few Zs while I watched over our stuff. It was getting to be my usual bedtime, but I felt a sleep-deprived me would be less awful than a sleep-deprived Biff.

In Lubbock, we found ourselves constantly stared at from across the aisle by a little old white lady who obviously didn't know what to make of us. Even with his vanish, Biff looked like Thug #2 for a 1980s action flick, and I was clearly too old to be his kid, too young to be his girlfriend, and dressed in my usual mix of thrift shop and industry surplus rejects, all a bit worse for the wear. Vaygan to the core, Biff pretended she didn't exist; me, I stared back at her with a demented smile until eventually she switched seats.

Unlike Biff, I could sleep sitting up, so I dozed off somewhere around Abilene, waking up in Dallas to find Biff enthralled in conversation with the skinny guy in front of us about homelessness and divination, of all things. When we got off, I asked Biff who the guy was.

"Rat shaman," Biff said. He was starting to weave on his feet. "Nice guy."

"Right," I said, and then we had to sprint for the Dallas bus—not the one we'd signed up for, but the one after it.

[image description: M.D. chasing after a bus that's leaving her behind. Biff is behind her, but clearly in no shape to go chasing; he's bent over, bracing himself with his knees, clearly exhausted and sore.]

That one was full enough that we got split up. I ended up sharing a row with a man whose testicles were apparently of such magnitude and importance that they required at least a seat and a half's worth of airing. I finally got him to respect my personal space after making sure he got a static cling zap every time he touched me.

Biff was crammed in with what seemed to be the world's chattiest cell phone user, but didn't seem to notice; I think he was starting to hallucinate by that point. We finally got reunited around Vicksburg, where he passed out from sheer exhaustion. I fell asleep on his shoulder not long after.

I woke up sticky with drool when the driver bellowed, "Atlanta! Last stop, Atlanta! Everyone off my bus!"

I whimpered and hid my eyes against Biff's shoulder. "If I murder the driver, will they show mercy?"

"Kill her in Stonefall," Biff said, shoving me off. "I want a bed."

Might as well. We'd missed the last bus, due to the vagaries of the Inter-Bus, and it was either sleep in the station or find a hotel and return in the morning. We chose the latter.

Fortunately, there was a budget inn nearby—the kind of place where the receptionist kept metal mesh and bulletproof glass between herself and the customers. Biff paid for a room with a queen-size bed and headed straight for it, while I took a shower first. After two humid days on a bus without a change of clothes, I felt absolutely disgusting.

It seemed a safe bet that Biff would be dead to the world when I got out, but when I flopped on my side of the bed, he turned over and said, "hey."

THE BUS TO GEORGIA

"Why are you still conscious?" I whined.

He rubbed his face. "Just... nerves. They ain't seen me since..." vague gesture at himself.

"Huh? Oh." His sisters.

I turned my head. In the morning light, I could see the jagged raw scars on his chest, the older one from the bullet in his shoulder a couple years ago. I couldn't imagine him looking any different, but then again, I'd never really seen him before his renovations. (And I had a moment to realize that he wasn't automatically vanishing the scars away from me.)

"I could vanish it," he said. "My voice ain't that deep, I could..."

I grimaced. "Could you?"

He sighed, smacked his head against the pillow. "I could *try*."

"They're going to find out eventually, you know. What's the point of finding them if you're just going to lie to them?"

"I don't know! I don't know, okay? I don't know shit. I always lie. I never don't."

Silence for a bit.

Finally, I said, "You didn't lie to me."

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, closed his eyes.

"You're different."

"And you're not, Mr. I-Bought-Surgery-From-A-Tentacle-Beast?"

He snorted. "Think it'll be okay?"

I knew that this was the part where I was supposed to beam and chirp, "Of course!" but instead I said, "I don't know."

"Yeah," he said. "I don't know either."

INFINITY SMASHED: HEART SPARKS BEAT

We were both silent after that. There was nothing else I could think of to say. Maybe there was nothing *to* say.

At least we got some sleep.

HOME COMING

When Josie MacGilligan answered the knock at her door, the reflexive terror surged in her throat. Then her sense kicked in; the man was twenty years too young and a shade too dark. Not her father, just someone with an uncanny resemblance to him, someone she'd surely met before...

She wrestled her face straight. "May I help you?"

The stranger shoved his hands in his pockets, hunched his shoulders in a familiar-but-strange way, and she'd just realized where she'd seen it before when he said, "hey, JoJo."

Nobody called her JoJo, except Mama and...

Josie put a hand to her mouth. "Beth?"

A wince flashed across her big sister's face, almost too quick to catch. "I... don't go by that no more."

Of course she didn't; she'd been going by Biff even before she'd left. Beth had always been the tomboy of the family, but everyone had assumed she'd grow out of it, settle down, not...

"God," Josie said before she could stop herself. "You look just like Daddy."

Now the wince was clear. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah. You... you come on in." Josie let go of the door-frame and cleared the way. "You ain't gonna run again, are you?"

Beth wouldn't look her in the eye. "Dunno."

Well, at least it was honest. That'd have to be a start. Beth came in, and the bowlegged swagger, the stocky frame, all were familiar, but the angles of her face, the hair on the backs of her

hands, the voice... Josie never would've known she was a girl, had they been strangers.

Before she could stop herself, she said, "you ain't done nothing permanent, have you?"

Beth just looked at her.

Josie took a deep breath and pushed her fingers back through her hair. "God," she said. "No wonder you left."

Beth shrugged and looked away.

"You always been like this?"

"JoJo," gently, "I don't want to talk about this now."

Her accent had changed too, more Southwest.

"Yeah," Josie said, nodding. "Okay. We don't got to talk about it."

What she really wanted to do was take Beth, shake her, ask how she could've done this to herself, turn from Josie's big sister into this stranger who looked like her father but not. All those years of not knowing where she went, *why* she went, if she was okay...

Much to her mortification, she started to cry.

Beth went antsy and big-eyed, like she was about to bolt again, vanish out of Josie's life for another forever, so Josie shut the door and blocked it to keep her from going anywhere. Beth hovered, then stepped forward to awkwardly pat her shoulder. "Hey, don't cry, huh? 'M sorry..."

Josie was taller than Beth now. Impossible; in her child's memory, her big sister had always seemed so *big*.

Then again, so had her father, and he'd turned out to be only five foot five.

Sniffing, Josie approached the kitchen table, not sure what

to do. Part of her wanted to wipe it down and clean away the toast crumbs like Beth was a customer, and another part wanted to pour her coffee like she was family, but Josie didn't know how Beth took it. If she took it at all; she hadn't used to drink coffee, before she left...

Beth saw her indecision. "I'll make something."

Too overwrought to speak, Josie nodded, and Beth fished through cabinets, pulled out cream and orange juice and the last of the raspberries like she'd never left. Like Josie was eight again and she and Millie were begging their big sister to make them something. The blender noise meant Josie didn't have to talk.

[image description: Inked illustration of Biff in a cheap but neat trailer house with his sister, who has fluffy dark curly hair and appears to be freaking out and trying to hide it as she tries to lite a cigarette. Biff works with a blender and looks away, out the window, where a tiny M.D. in a tree is trying to get his attention and nonverbally ask if everything's okay.]

Finally, Josie swallowed her tears. She tried to light a Pall Mall, but her hands were trembling too much to work the lighter. After a moment, Beth put the raspberry puree into the fridge, pulled a Zippo out of her pocket and lit it for her.

"When you start?" she asked Josie with a hint of disapproval.

"After you left." She took a drag, and Beth lit up too. Marlboro 72s. "Don't know why you're surprised. You smoked, Mama smoked."

"Figured you were too smart for it."

She laughed bitterly. "They needed a new bad kid after you left. Millie was too quiet, so I got the job." She inhaled, let the heat

and smoke curl comfortingly around her lungs. “Helped me remember you.”

Beth gave a curl of her hair a tug. “Quit perming too.”

Josie fluffed her curls proudly. “Bad kid, remember? Week I start smoking, I shaved that shit off my head with Daddy’s razor.”

Even after everything, Beth’s chuckle was still the same. It felt good, and so Josie kept going.

“Mama found me in the bathroom, surrounded by sad little straight hairs, big chunks hanging off the back of my head, and she about *died*. Got that little plastic smile on her face—you know the one I mean—and she walked away. Daddy about killed me, but after you and the ambulance, he couldn’t afford to put another kid in the hospital, and *why’d you have to go?*”

Beth was silent.

Damn it, she was crying again. “Years, you gone. *Years*. Last time I saw you, I was eleven. You bleeding all over the kitchen, and then you gone. No phone call, no mail, no *shit*, and now...” She waved with her cigarette at Beth’s new body. “Now *this*. You didn’t tell me shit. You *still* ain’t telling me shit. Why you leave, Biff? Why’d you leave me?”

She couldn’t talk anymore. All she could do was cry.

After a moment, Beth came up and hugged her. Stiffly, like she hadn’t hugged anyone in a long time, and rocked her. And even though she was shorter than Josie and smelled like smoke and boy now, Josie hugged her back and cried until she had nothing left, and she felt better.

“M sorry,” Beth said. “I had to leave. I was going bad.”

“No. Not you.” As the years passed, her big sister had been

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shadowed with rage, coming home with bruises from somewhere else, but she'd never, ever— "You kept us *safe*."

Beth just gave her a sad look.

"Never."

Beth let go of her and went to whip the cream by hand.

"But you came back. To *me*."

"Only one I could find in the phone book."

Josie drew on her cigarette. "Yeah. Yeah, Mama remarried. She go by O'Donahue now."

"Old man?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"Millie?"

Josie looked down. "She didn't make it."

Beth's arm stopped whisking a moment. They were silent, remembering their sister, who'd always been so quiet and good at math.

"She was always the good one," Beth said.

"Yeah," Josie said, "for all the good it did her. We can go to see her, if you want. The stone's plain, but I always bring her flowers, keep it pretty."

"She'd like that."

"Yeah." Millie had always loved flowers, tulips most of all.

"How's Mama?"

"Ain't spoken to her since Christmas. Same old story. Would you believe I tried to save her sad ass? When she finally divorced him, I thought maybe... but nope, moved right on to O'Donahue. I swear, our mother's got a thing for mean white men." She shuddered. "Bet I inherited it too. 'S why I don't date." A thought occurred to her. "You got somebody?"

Beth looked deeply uncomfortable and redoubled her whisking. "I..."

"No, I mean... anybody. I mean, folks here, they know me, and it's hard, but I'm... not like you. You got anybody? Tell me you didn't do all," she gestured vaguely at the stubble, the deep voice, the *everything*, "all that on your own."

Beth shrugged. "Yeah, I got somebody. A... a friend. She came with me."

"She like you?"

Shrug. "She don't care."

"Good. That... that's good." She couldn't imagine not caring. "She here?"

"Outside, yeah." The cream was whipped. Beth pulled the puree out of the fridge and started folding it in. "You don't gotta meet her."

"You don't got to introduce her. But if you want to. Or talk. I wish..." Well, there were a lot of things she wished. "I want to help. Make things better. You know?"

Beth spooned some of the raspberry fool into a coffee mug and came over to put it on the table. "I don't talk much."

"Our family never talked. I'm over that tradition."

Beth hesitated, then said, "I'll get her."

She walked towards the door, and then paused. Turning to give Josie a reassuring smile over her shoulder, she said, "I won't vanish."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The screen door slammed, and Josie ate a bite of the raspberry fool. It was cool and light, and her big sister had come

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back. Maybe things were going to be okay.

Beth did come back. And things were.

END NOTES

This book was an accident.

Infinity Smashed was my first serious writing project, an adolescent magnum opus filled with everything that Tiny Me thought was cool. It was goofy and slapdash, but it made me happy, even if I was its sole audience.

Years passed, adulthood arrived, and *Infinity Smashed* had grown so inextricable and byzantine in continuity that it was impossible to write any further. If I wanted to keep writing (and I did), I'd have to raze the entire structure and rebuild from scratch.

Having just emerged from years of writer's block, I decided that it was more important for me to keep writing than to do so "correctly." Rigid perfectionism had kept me blocked, so I started throwing out stories that were purposely not-canon, purely for my own enjoyment. A large portion of these stories were known as the "Polyverse."

I specifically chose this conceit because it was so antithetical to my original plan; the first core document even had the filename "5PairingsThatDidn'tHappen.doc." But the years passed, and I realized that not only did I like it way better than my original plan, it was just plain *better*. A few years later, I became non-monogamous myself, and the project took on an even more personal angle.

Infinity Smashed has always been a strange, contrarian creative endeavor, so it seems appropriate that I finished the final book of the series first. It contains eight years' worth of stories,

END NOTES

though many have changed quite a bit since I originally posted them online. I'm including the story notes and dates from when they were originally posted.

The Ace of Hearts was originally posted in March 2014 under the title of *The Next Adventure*, a reference to a webcomic made by Francesca Buchko, who was the first *Infinity Smashed* fan back in 2004. Tarzan's Pizza is based off Conan's, which I assure you is even more colorful than its fictional counterpart. Also, the Hermione reference is because this story takes place in 2002, when the third Harry Potter movie was coming out.

Folie á Trois was originally posted in August 2011.

The coming out stories were originally posted separately, *Coming Out to the Family Rodriguez* in February 2012 for a writeathon on the topic of love, according to a prompt from ysabetwordsmith on explaining polyamory to a clueless friend (or in this case, brother).

Coming Out to Scorch and Flame is kludged from two different stories, one with the same title which was never posted and another called *It's Better to Give*, posted in August 2013 according to a prompt from ysabetwordsmith for a writeathon on the theme of wealth.

Coming Out to Bobcat was posted in July 2014.

Coming Out to Biff was posted in December 2014. First one started, last one posted. Go figure.

The story about Raige's mom was originally entitled *Calling Home* and posted in August 2011; it was based heavily off a

nightmare I had involving coming out to my little brother. Sadly, the real-life version did not end so well.

The Brick of Trauma was originally posted in December 2011.

Great Aunt Kara Steinlechster was originally posted as *Coming Out to Raige's Dad* in July 2018, sponsored by my Patreon supporters.

The Prom Story was originally posted in August 2018, though I'd had plans for it since 2013. It was sponsored by the Patreon crew.

Prom Night was originally posted in January 2019. It got written specifically because my husband remarked that it seemed unfair that the only time I'd written Raige and Thomas having sex, it'd ended in tears. I agreed.

Ritual Purification Through Arson was originally posted in September 2011; Lee Wilder came up with the title. This is the only revenge story I've ever written, and I listened to the Beach Boys album *Pet Sounds* while writing it. It was oddly suiting.

When There's a Will, There's a Where was originally posted in August 2011.

Illegal Aliens was originally posted in April 2014. Special thanks to Lee Wilder who worked with cops and fact-checked the details.

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Smell Like Home was originally posted in April 2012. The title comes from a quote from one of my college professors: “Maybe it doesn’t matter if I look like home; maybe I should at least smell like home. [...] All of you be careful with smells.”

Zap! was originally written in March 2013 for a writeathon based on the idea of the Other. It was prompted and sponsored by Meeresbande who wanted consensual asexual love with polyamory. Special thanks go to Dr. Grimm and Leif, who allowed me to experiment with their violet wand and take notes on what it looked and felt like.

Crossed Wires was originally posted in July 2018 and was sponsored by the Patreon crew. M.D.’s angst over being asexual was pretty much the same angst I had, back when I was asexual.

Hearts in Spades was originally posted in August 2011. My family used to play a lot of round-robin spades.

Turf War was posted in January 2012 as brain bleach.

Bodily Reconstruction was originally posted in June 2013 (well, sort of) and had a super short run as a stand-alone floppy zine. It is entirely Lee Wilder’s fault for saying in December 2011 that Biff was trans... and I realized that was correct.

Some surgeons require trans men quit hormones before surgery, including mine; it was only while writing this story that I discovered that other surgeons don’t do that and there doesn’t seem to be any medical reason to demand this. Oops!

All of Biff's post-surgical experiences are based on my own. Man, am I glad I took reference sketches of my bandages and blood-bombs while I had them!

Don't do what Biff does; if you're going to bind, get a proper binder from Underworks or T-Kingdom or something.

Hooray-We're-Not-Dead Day was originally posted in November 2014 and prompted by Megan Rupe, who requested Treehouse Thanksgiving. The translation Biff is getting is pretty wonky, on account of it being his interpretation of M.D.'s subconscious interpretation of Pidgin Sign. The ceremony sounds a little less weird natively.

Testosterone is most commonly injected, but it's also available in goo forms; Androgel is the most famous (and what I myself used). It's a daily dose rather than weekly or monthly; Treehouse is more equipped to make it in that form.

Despite its reputation for causing anger and rage, testosterone actually stabilizes mood in some people. Biff is one of them.

Time To Go was originally posted in June 2014, for a writeathon based on the theme of journeys. It was prompted and sponsored by titianblue of We Hunted the Mammoth; she requested the urge to just jump on a bus or a train and *go*.

A Change in Regime was originally posted in October 2018 and sponsored by the Patreon crew. Treehouse DOES have drugs that would render humans unconscious... but they can only be used for very short periods safely, unless an auxiliary method (like

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Ribbonblack's hypnotrance, which she uses for Biff's surgery) is available.

The Shitty-Shitty Bang-Bang Heist was originally posted in November 2017, but I'd been working on it off and on since 2012. It was sponsored by the Patreon crew. Max Love is loosely based off of Ty Warner of Beanie Babies fame, but while Warner *did* stalk his exes and bug one's apartment, he did not blackmail her for it, as far as I know.

Due to the intricacies of the Vaygan underworld, Biff is relegated to bottom feeding, lest he run afoul of the local gangsters. It is very uncommon for someone to survive long as an independent operator in his part of town, and how Biff pulls it off and knows Rosenthal is a story all on its own.

The Bus to Georgia was originally posted in August 2014, also for the journeys writeathon. Megan Rupe requested a story about difficult travel companions becoming friends, and it was sponsored by titianblue of We Hunted the Mammoth. The crucifix kid is a real guy; I met him on a bus to Ohio. The rat shaman is also a real person; a friend told me about him. Inter-Bus is very loosely based on a combo of the Greyhound and the infamous Fung Wah, the latter of which was eventually shut down because its buses kept catching fire, losing wheels, and generally being horribly driven.

Homecoming was originally posted in August 2014 for a writeathon based on foolishness, based off of Livejournal user rix_scaedu's prompt requesting raspberry fools, and was

sponsored by zen_of_cayenne. This story was also the final prompt in the Stuff100, an enormous table of 100 Infinity Smashed prompts that I'd been working on since 2005.

[image description: inked illustration of Raige and Thomas shirtless and smooching.]

ABOUT LB LEE

[Image description: a pencil drawing of LB's vessel at a large drafting table, futzing with papers.]

Multivarious entity raised by imaginary wolves in a subconscious barn. They make mental health comics, draw pretty pictures and write queer psy-fi. They live in Boston.

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[Back cover description: a very blue photo of a fjord, with cliffs and a waterfall. M.D. is showing it off to Biff, who looks incredibly unimpressed.]

Back cover text:

Header: A Long, LONG-Distance Relationship

Body Text: Geeky Raige studies music in Arizona. Smooth-talking Thomas works jobs in Texas. And M.D. lives on a different world entirely, training as junior healer. As friends, their adventures took them off the map; as dates, they get to make their own. Human or not, their communities are behind them all the way, though M.D.'s associate Biff still has some secrets in his back pocket...

From coming out to inter-dimensional health insurance problems, Heart Sparks Beat is a queer slice-of-life psy-fi for everyone who's ever found and loved their own path.