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MADE USEFUL

In 1975, Grey's bubble and zayde grow too sick and frail to keep her, and she ends up back with her parents. It's not like it used to be; she's big now, big enough that they're afraid of her, rather than the other way around. (Grey's saddened by this, but it doesn't show. She doesn't talk or emote at home.)

She goes out for wrestling, since they can't stop her now. In motion, everything makes sense. It doesn't matter that she's a golem whose words get tangled, that she's bad at being a boy and worse at being a girl, that her grades are falling... until they get so bad she's at risk of academic probation.

When one of her teammates hears about her troubles, he says, "My kid sister's real smart. She got my grades up; maybe she can do it for you too."

So when she's a senior, Grey meets Vicky Engelmann, a tiny sophomore all hair, freckles, and glasses. When Grey's parents warn her that Grey will never amount to anything, Vicky looks taken aback, then covers it with a polite smile and says, "I'll be fine, thanks."

Then she gets Grey out of the house. "Do they always talk about you like that?"

Grey shrugs.

It takes Vicky five seconds to realize that Grey learns better when she's moving. ("Oh, Harold's like that too! I must've taught him half of algebra in a hammerlock...") They orbit the block a million times as Vicky explains things with a sketchpad. They don't even get to the lesson they're supposed to be doing, because Vicky wants to make sure Grey understands the prerequisites first. Grey doesn't, but Vicky doesn't roll her eyes or huff, she just goes back as far as she needs and builds from there.

When they're done, she does a little victory dance. "We did good work today, Grey!"

Grey jolts. Nobody calls her by her grandparents' last name except the wrestling team, at her insistence; Vicky must've picked it up from Harold.

She sees Grey's expression. "Wait, sorry, should I call you....?"

"No," she says.

She likes the way Vicky says it. It sounds right. Besides, Vicky's voice is magic; it makes Grey want to curl up and purr like a cat in a sunbeam. She tells herself it's attraction, even though it's not the same as the burn she feels

around some of her teammates. The burn, Grey wants to believe, is just adrenaline. She likes Vicky. She wants to be the kind of boy who likes Vicky.

Her grades scrape upward and the tutoring becomes less necessary, but Grey and Vicky keep meeting anyway, walking endless circles around the block together. Vicky introduces Grey to poetry, which is dead on the page but alive in her voice—Robert Frost, Yehuda Amichai, even Shakespeare, who always intimidated Grey too much to take in. After they've known each other a while, Vicky starts sharing her own poetry, all about stars, chemistry, and imaginary numbers. Grey doesn't understand it but it's beautiful anyway.



"You don't have to listen to this if you don't want to," Vicky says, blushing. "I want to," Grey says.

After a poem about covalence, Vicky kisses her. It's fine, easy to take the flood of relief (somebody likes her, somebody *wants* her) for desire. When Vicky asks to go steady, Grey says yes, and her parents haven't been so happy for years. Finally, a sign that Grey's good for something, *somebody*.

They go out the rest of the year. Vicky is easy to love. She isn't like Grey; she's going places, good at putting things together in new and different ways, like science and math with poetry. She's kind, and not in a syrupy, charitable way. Through her eyes, the world is an interesting, marvelous place.

Which is why, after they've been together a while, Grey tries to describe the pleasant buzz she gets from Vicky's voice. She can't find the words, as usual, so tries to express it by undulating her hand and saying, "Feels good."

Vicky turns pink and Grey realizes how it sounds; she tries to explain that no, it's not like that, but her words get more and more tangled until they're both sitting on the park bench, silent and mortified. Then Vicky sees Grey's face and goes into peals of laughter, with her and not at her, and she hugs Grey and says in a goofy voice, "What are you wearing, Grey?" And then they're laughing together and it feels good.

When Grey turns eighteen, Vicky gives her *Leaves of Grass*, not realizing that Grey only likes poetry when it's Vicky reciting it. Still, Grey trudges through, reading it in bed to put herself to sleep. It works until she reaches the end of "When I Heard At The Close of the Day":

"I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,

*For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy."*

Grey shuts the book and hugs it to her chest, burning inside. She feels caught.

It can't mean what it sounds like. They read Whitman in school, all that stuff about Lincoln and democracy. Grey's *girlfriend* gave her this. All that talk of "him that tenderly loves me" has to mean something else, friends or brothers or something, or they'd never let her read it.

She reads it again, paying attention the whole way through this time. It still sounds exactly how she thinks it sounds, like it's about someone who likes boys in the same forbidden way that Grey does. No matter how she tries, the poem still sounds like it's about someone like her, loving a man and sleeping with him. It sounds... good.

Grey's masturbated before, but never to poetry. Then she hides the book in her stack of textbooks and feels sick. She's Vicky's boyfriend now. She's not supposed to feel this way anymore.

When prom comes, Grey asks Vicky to go, because that's what boys do and it'll make Vicky happy. Vicky wears a green dress and a supernova smile, and Grey takes reassurance in that, her parents' pride. Finally, she's doing things right, being what she's supposed to be.

Afterward, she and Vicky have sex in the back of a borrowed station wagon. It's awkward, messy, and afterwards, Vicky asks, "Did you... like doing that?"

Grey shrugs. She likes making Vicky happy. What else is there?

Grey tries not think about how often she rereads certain Whitman poems, or how earlier in spring, she wrestled a boy who looked like a superhero. He came up hard in her crotch hold, which happens sometimes and doesn't mean anything, but when she saw his face, she lost her concentration completely and found getting pinned weirdly thrilling. Adrenaline. Just adrenaline.

Vicky and Grey have a lot of sex over the summer, but it only works if Grey takes her own desires out of the equation and focuses on making Vicky happy. Then it's satisfying, though not erotic. Maybe she can be a boy if she does it this way, treats sex like something she does, not something she wants or enjoys. Vicky always seems guilty afterward, though.

"Are you sure?" she keeps asking. "I want to do something for you."

This time, they're squished together in the backseat of Grey's father's station wagon, under a picnic blanket with the unnecessary box of condoms. Grey snuggles close; this part, she likes. She tells Vicky what she always does: "Poem?"

Vicky doesn't seem to believe that Grey likes this, but she can't resist either, because she loves spinning poetry as much as Grey loves listening to her. So Vicky weaves one about the constellations in her silk water voice, and she cuddles Grey and pets her hair, and it's perfect. She dozes off.

Grey dreams of the superhero boy who pinned her. She dreams of an arm around her waist, ragged breath against her skin, autumn moonlight, and when she wakes up, Vicky goes, "Oh, so you *do*... want to try again?"

It's the one time Grey manages to consummate the thing halfway properly, and it feels awful. Vicky, who looked so relieved and hopeful, sees Grey's face and wilts.

"What's wrong?"

She looks guilty again, like this is her fault, and Grey doesn't know how to explain that it isn't, it's Grey, it's always Grey that's the problem, because Grey's good for nothing, not even making Vicky happy. Vicky's the only reason Grey got her diploma, she's smart and kind and interesting, and Grey loves her and her voice and it's not enough. If Grey can't be a proper boy for Vicky, she'll never manage it for any girl, ever.

Vicky's talking now, trying to find out what's wrong, how to fix it, like it's her problem, and Grey can't take it, so she tells Vicky everything.

Afterward, Vicky just sits there and goes, "Oh."

There's nothing more to say.

That night, Grey goes to her job pushing a mop, which she got because it doesn't require her to talk to anybody and she finds cleaning empty buildings soothing and satisfying. As she cleans a hardware store, going through the familiar paces of wiping, mopping, and scrubbing, she makes her plan. When her parents find out Vicky's gone, that there will be no other girls, they'll be furious. But Grey doesn't have to stay for it. She's an adult now; she can leave. She'll use the rest of the summer to get things together and save a little money, then join the Army. At least it'll get her out of here. Maybe they'll be able to make a man of her, finally.

She hears a clunk, something scurrying, and looks up from the toilet she's scrubbing. Her neck prickles. Feeling silly, she grabs a claw hammer off the wall and goes to investigate, hoping it's rats and not vandals.

It's neither. It's worse.

It's like a small cougar, only it's the wrong color and shrieks like a person and it makes Grey's mind scream and scream. Then it tries to kill her.

Grey has only ever been good at one thing, and she's had years of practice doing it regardless of her mental state. She goes into motion.

When Andersen arrives, with his PIN Neurophysics box and his gun and his unflappability, Grey is terrified, bloody, and surrounded by wall fasteners, but alive. Andersen kills the cougar and the screaming in Grey's head stops, leaving her shaking and sweaty with adrenaline.

"My mistake," Andersen says. "I didn't hear you. You all right?"

Grey just stands there, wheezing. Her throat has locked tight, but Andersen doesn't seem to notice, just hands her his handkerchief and starts tagging and bagging the animal.

"Your broadcast's funny; must've mistook you for the Zar!" Andersen shakes his head. "Maybe that'll do you favors someday." In a decade or so, Ops and Neurophysics will separate and he'll lead the former, but even now, as a young man with nobody to manage, he looks leathery and fed up. Still, he intervened and showed concern for her well-being, so in that moment, he's the most heroic and handsome of men.

Grey hiccups and rocks and calms down as Andersen works. Her forearms go from stinging to throbbing, and they'll scar, but she can still move her fingers well enough; she wraps them with Andersen's handkerchief and her



own. Because it's her job, regardless of injuries or cougars, she picks up all the wall fasteners and puts them back in their places, washes the hammer and returns it, gets her mop to clean the blood and dirt off the floor. She's already cleaned this aisle once, but it's the principle of the thing. Andersen watches her with an unreadable look... listening, she realizes later.

Later generations of the Neurophysics box get more coherent and reliable, but Andersen will never upgrade. His box is a Johnson original, esoteric and synesthetic, strapped to his back like old radio equipment, and it's very good at what it does with enough interpretation. Even now, in 1976, Andersen's had a decade of practice with it.

"You're the janitor," he says.

Grey keeps mopping. She figures her actions are self-explanatory.

"You're not attached to this job, are you?"

Grey looks up.

"I work for a national agency concerned with the protection of people like you from things like that," he says, nodding at the cougar in its bag. "It's good, hard, physical work."

Grey isn't scared of hard work.

"Didn't think so. Look, you're big, obedient, and you know how to handle yourself. There might be a place with us for you... but none of that queer stuff."

Grey freezes, but Andersen is unperturbed, just sits on his box and lights a cigarette. He's small, wiry, and unafraid, clearly aware that he'll win a fight.

"Relax, boy. Nobody else in Ops has a box; your secret's safe with me."

Later on, thinking back on it, that's when Grey realizes that the boxes have limits. Because Andersen might be smart and skilled, but he only knows one of her secrets. In the moment, though, her mind is still trying to catch up with everything, so she doesn't react, which is probably what saves her.

"Follow protocol and I could care less what you do with yourself," Andersen continues. His eyes flick up. "Can you keep your dick to yourself?"

Yes. It's not like it's in demand.

Andersen smiles around his cigarette. "Then I'd say you're golden. What do you say?"

Grey says yes, and finally, she becomes good for something.

25 YEARS OF SERVICE

Staying celibate isn't a hard promise for Grey to keep, at first. She's too busy trying not to wash out. Thanks to Vicky, she now knows that she can learn... but it still takes a while, and she can't afford to lose this. Andersen is sponsoring her training; she can't disappoint him.

The first year is all training. The physical parts aren't so bad—it reminds her of wrestling—but the book parts are awful. Rules, regulations, hierarchy and names and history. (She also has to study a language; thank goodness “StanG Sign Language” is an option.) She takes to running at dawn, using the motion to pound the knowledge into her head. She barely makes it.

The second year, she starts the job, and it's even worse, because now her actions have consequences far larger than her own failure. She has to protect people, help them, *talk to them*. She flails, fumbles, forgets. Her throat locks, and her SGSL is barely rudimentary. Everyone seems exasperated with her, and finally Andersen takes her aside and says, “Get your tongue untied, boy.”

As a child, when Grey stopped talking, her parents dragged her through a series of doctors, psychiatrists, and speech exercises. The only one with any efficacy was scripting her responses, which makes her feel like a parrot, but better a parrot than a failure. At least all the rules and regulations give some boilerplate to start with.

It's unpleasant and makes her coworkers think she's angry all the time, but it works. Around year three, things start coming together.

Come year four, Grey knows she's going to make it. Thanks to scripting, she can speak, however stiffly and blankly. Her exhilaration knows no bounds. She's learning! She's doing this! Her bubbe and zayde rejoice.

In year five, they're gone. Flu. She sits shiva, legally adopts their last name in memory. She works harder.

By year six, she's getting some bemused attention from her superiors—except Andersen, who acts like he expected nothing less. Her crush is long gone, but she'll always work for him and he knows it. When he transfers to Arizona and asks her to follow, she does; she has no reason not to, now. In Vago, nobody knows her old name or rocky start. They treat her competence as a given. It feels wonderful.

Desire starts coming back, now that she has room for it, but Grey ignores

it. More and more people have gotten fizzy boxes, and she's had years of practice redirecting her feelings and desire. She's given up so much for the PIN already. Why not this?

It's not like she'll get it anyway.

...

In her late twenties, Grey ranks Specialist. It's a step up in responsibility and puts her back in the morass of learning, adjusting, and playing catch-up, but she feels up to the challenge this time. As an extra bonus, Specialist is a gender-neutral title and almost everyone in Ops goes by their last name, so nobody wonders at calling her Grey. People don't even know her first name anymore.

She loves her uniform, the navy blue suit, the gold rings at the shoulders. It's a sign of how far she's come, and men and women alike wear it, which feels good. When she shaves, does up her buttons, and knots her tie, she isn't herself anymore, but an anonymous personification of order. It feels good to leave all the mess of her behind.

When she makes Specialist, she gets a permanent comboy: Ms. Margaux. She's one of Johnson's original hires, a chain-smoking old mummy of a woman with a creaky witch laugh. Nothing phases her, and Grey takes comfort in her patience, her oft-repeated phrases and stories.

They're not close, exactly. Grey doesn't get close to people. But their relationship grows over the years like a vine making its way up a wall. They both appreciate routine. Neither mind companionable silence, or taking things slowly. Working with Ms. Margaux feels good, comfortable.

One morning, as Grey's driving to work, she sees Ms. Margaux waiting at a bus stop with her big beaded purse and the enormous jug of sweet tea that the docs keep trying to get her to give up. Grey pulls over and offers a ride.

"Well, ain't that a kicker! I didn't know you lived down here, Grey." Ms. Margaux gets in, tucking her jug down between her feet. When Grey moves to turn down the opera, Ms. Margaux stops her.

"I like this one. But you know, if you're asking me, you have to try Mario Lanza's performance..."



For the rest of their decade-plus work partnership, they share music and the commute, filling Grey's car with tapes. Mostly, they listen to the music or sing along together. They don't need to talk, but sometimes they do, and Grey learns bits and pieces about Ms. Margaux's life, like her son's wedding.

"He's about your age; I wasn't sure he would ever find someone! But I'm glad he did. It's not good for people, being alone." She looks at Grey. "Do you have someone, Grey?"

Grey shakes her head. "No."

"No one you fancy? You've never said."

"Not a people person."

Ms. Margaux can't argue that; nobody can. But she looks at Grey a long time, then says, "Well, that's too bad," like she's halfway to figuring out why Grey never mentions women or exes, has no photos of loved ones on her desk.

For a moment, Grey wants to tell her. She likes Ms. Margaux. She likes their commutes, their tapes, their routines. But that's exactly why she mustn't. She can't afford to lose this, lose *her*, to something petty like the life she'll never lead. It doesn't matter. It hasn't mattered in years. It'll never matter.

So when Ms. Margaux says, "Do you—" Grey interrupts, "It's personal."

The words sit between them like a toad.

"All right, all right," Ms. Margaux says. She sounds sad. "That's fine. I'm sorry for pushing."

She never brings it up again.

...

A few times, Grey thinks about apologizing, telling her. But her throat locks and she never does.

And now Ms. Margaux is gone. Everyone thought it'd be the diabetes (and the sweet tea), but the cancer got her first.

Her funeral is well-attended. It turns out that while Ms. Margaux's husband is long passed, she has family, children and grandchildren, a church and knitting circle; there's barely enough room for everyone. That feels right. It hurts less to think she's so beloved.

Grey stands out. She's big, she's white, she doesn't know any of the hymns or have any knitting gear. While going down the line and shaking the hands of Ms. Margaux's children, giving condolences, a stately man who proves to be her son (the one who married late) asks, "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Grey. Work partner."

The man's expression clicks; apparently Ms. Margaux talked about her. He tells Grey to stay, there's something he needs to do, but it gets lost in all the

people and grieving, so it doesn't end up happening.

Grey's mostly forgotten about it when a few months later, she gets a call from Agatha at reception.

"There's a package for you." Agatha's tone is disapproving. "It's clean. Get it at home next time."

It turns out that Ms. Margaux left Grey something, but she didn't have proper contact information written down (or if she did, it got lost) and it's taken this long for everything to get sorted out. In the package are two records—a 45 and an LP. Attached to the album sleeves are sticky notes, in Ms. Margaux's crabbed handwriting: "Grey—hope you like. If not, burn so I can listen downstairs." She can imagine the witch's cackle at the end: ee-hee-hee.

That evening, Grey stretches out on the living room floor next to her stereo (inherited from her grandparents) and listens. The LP is an old performance of *Treemonisha*, an opera she doesn't know. It's nice.

The 45's performer (as depicted on the album sleeve) wears a cowboy outfit and a pencil-thin mustache. It doesn't look like something Ms. Margaux (or Grey, for that matter) would enjoy, but nevertheless, Grey puts it on.

The A-side is some yodeling warbling horror that she will never listen to again. The B-side, though holds a song about secret love, yearning to be free, and Grey goes still, staring at the ceiling.

No one was older guard than Drusilla Margaux. No one knew the PIN policies better than her; she'd been with them through the civil rights movement, through the attempted purges after Johnson's death. If she had suspicions about Grey, she would never write it down or say it in any way that could get her caught.

Grey looks at the sticky notes again, still attached to the album sleeve: "hope you like." The cowboy yodeler sings about the open doors of hearts and letting go of secrets.

Grey will never know.

...

It takes a while to adjust to the Ms. Margaux-shaped holes in her life. Before that last hospital stay, Grey was driving halfway across town to pick her up and drop her off, and now all that time hangs empty and silent—no more detours, no more tapes, no more Ms. Margaux. Like a big statehouse that's gone but the roads act like it's still there.

Grey tries to rebuild, find new ways of being around people. She starts working out at Health and Medical. Lots of first-shifters unwind at the same time, and the sound of her coworkers chatting, lifting, or kvetching is nice

background noise. Even coworkers who should know better sometimes treat Grey like she's deaf or inanimate, so she can keep up on gossip as long as she keeps her mouth shut.

At home, she takes to eating dinner on the couch while watching TV. *Barbarian Barbara* is her favorite, a warrior woman who saves the day and kisses handsome men. She also watches an old painting show, hosted by a man with a soothing Vicky-like voice that helps her sleep on bad nights. She might not have someone to come home to, but she could do worse than a friendly voice and a kind face who isn't unhappy to see her.

She takes to sleeping on the couch. Her bedroom feels too empty.

...

There are rumors about Specialist Larkin, that she's a lesbian.

She's a transfer from Mississippi with a voice made for radio; no matter how upset people are, she's calming and professional, a good leader. Grey wants to get to know her better, but how? Asking her to drinks or coffee sounds like a romantic interest, disastrous. Their gym routines are different. Larkin's not even on first shift, half the time, and when she is, Grey's throat locks tight—something which only gets worse the harder she tries to speak. Grey has spent years getting good at her job, but she'll never be sociable, and finally, she gives up trying.

Then she walks in on Larkin and Doc Pritchard kissing in the stairwell.

They all freeze. Larkin's face becomes the professional mask she wears in hostage situations. Grey tries to speak, but her throat locks, and she knows that the longer she waits, the worse it'll be, so in panic, she about-faces and flees.

Larkin follows after her as quickly as she can without drawing attention, straightening her clothes. Under the mask, Grey can tell that Larkin is afraid. They both know the work policy.

"Let's talk," Larkin says in that smooth Mississippi River voice.

Grey nods, and they move out of the building to Grey's car.

Larkin keeps using her work voice, the one for aggravated armed people. "Is this going to be a problem?" she asks.

Grey tries to think of the right words. She thinks of Ms. Margaux, of the cowboy yodeler, and when her mind threatens to freeze, she blurts, "I'm a feygeleh." It's the closest way she knows how to say it.

Larkin jolts. Looks Grey over. The mask pops off and she sags in the car with a whoosh like a marathon runner who's just crossed the finish line.

"Oh, thank Jesus," she says in her normal voice. "Don't scare us like that. Come on, let's go tell Taneesha she ain't getting washed today."

And then they're friends.

...

Larkin and Pritchard—well, Ebony and Taneesha—change everything.

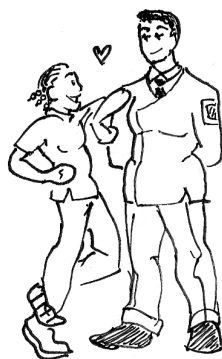
They've both been out of the closet for years, everywhere but work. They live together in the gayborhood of Autumnville, go to a gay church, have gay friends, and are involved in various gay groups around town. It's a whole world that's always been there, and Grey never knew.

Pritchard's family is supportive. Larkin's isn't ("preacher's daughter") but she's built such a massive circle of loved ones that she thrives regardless.

"Oh sure, it hurt then and still does sometimes," she says, "but it's their problem, not mine."

She says it casually, offhandedly, but Grey has to sit and think about it for a while. Their problem, not hers.

She becomes more Larkin's friend than Pritchard's—Ebony doesn't mind long stretches of silence, but Pritchard seems to think the air needs filling, and anyway, she's not Ops like they are. They try to have Grey over for parties but that's a failure—too many people, too much conversation. It's overwhelming, and Grey can tell most of the other guests find her off-putting, a looming, scarred-up stranger who doesn't talk. Nobody needs that.



She and Larkin work out on Fridays, though, and have periodic TV nights, watching sports, *Barbarian Barbara*, or *Disasters in Dykeland*, a low-budget soap opera that Grey doesn't understand but watches anyway. It's soothing to see a TV show with a racial breakdown like their workplace but where everyone, from the detectives to the heiresses to the auto mechanics, are gay women. (And also because Ebony has stars in her eyes for the actress who plays the heroic OB-GYN and her evil con artist twin sister.)

At one point, the heroic OB-GYN gets a new next-door neighbor. She's big like Grey, terse like Grey, a bodybuilder with short hair. Her name is Bea. She's transsexual.

The first time Bea appears on the screen, Grey freezes dead with a nacho in her hand, flooded with recognition. She's seen transsexuals before, of course, but they're all soft and pretty. This is the first time she's seen one like her.

Unaware, Larkin gets up for more drinks and snacks, asks if Grey wants some, but Grey just shakes her head and keeps watching.

Bea becomes her favorite character on *Disasters in Dykeland*. She's never the

butt of a joke, never called a man even when she fixes a car engine, builds muscle mass, or gets angry. She gets a girlfriend, dumps her for treating her badly, and goes on a three-minute monologue on the joys and sanctity of self. Larkin wanders off to use the bathroom, but Grey sits riveted and munches tortilla chips while “women come in all shapes and sizes!” rings out from the screen. For Larkin, it’s old hat; for Grey, it’s a paradigm shift.

It takes her a few weeks to tell Larkin, but she doesn’t want another Ms. Margaux situation. Grey’s getting older, her joints are starting to go, and she’s having a harder time living with the idea of dying alone. Still, she’s afraid when she tells Ebony, “I’m like Bea.”

Ebony thinks it over, then nods like this doesn’t really surprise her. “Okay,” she says. “You want to change anything? What I call you?”

Grey shakes her head. The girl in her is nameless, but now naming her is an option. On the surface, nothing’s changed, but her heart opens anyway.

...

In early 2001, Grey almost gets disemboweled. When she comes to in Health and Medical, she’s swathed in bandages and a coworker’s doing the crossword in a chair across from her. It’s been a while since she’s needed a vigil; there must’ve been concern that she wouldn’t make it.

When Grey stirs, the agent looks up, relieved—then uncomfortable. “Oh hey, you’re awake. I uh, better get Doc Richardson.”

Richardson has sharp features and hair that’s stayed platinum blond into adulthood. He’s never liked Grey, which is a boon; he’s blunt and to the point.

“I put your guts and dick back together as best I could, but...” The silence hangs. “You’ll have to keep me apprised.”

“Okay.” Grey will die before she discusses her genitals with Richardson.

She goes home. Richardson doesn’t like it, but he can’t stop her. Larkin and Doc Pritchard drive her home in their van and get her ensconced on the sofa with the TV and gallons of soup and Recharge.

While Larkin’s out grabbing groceries and toiletries, Grey asks Pritchard how bad it really is. At first, Pritchard doesn’t understand the question; she thinks Grey’s worried about the usual things. It’s excruciating, but there’s nobody else to ask, nobody Grey feels safe asking, and she finally manages to communicate: will this affect her ability to...?

Pritchard doesn’t look repelled or contemptuous, but all she can say is, “There’ll be scar tissue. Who knows how that’ll pan out. Richardson’s a pig, but he’s right. You’ll just have to keep an eye on it.”

Then she offers to handle the catheterizing, which is a relief to say yes to.

Pritchard doesn't understand Grey, but she doesn't treat Grey like a man either.

Grey spends a week on the couch, sleeping and watching Larkin's box sets of *Disasters in Dykeland*. Pritchard checks up on her regularly, signs off to do it officially. Larkin's schedule is unpredictable as usual, but she manages to make it over at the same time as Pritchard one day to watch women's basketball. (Grey isn't a big fan, but what matters is the company. At least the scoreboard insures she can keep the basics straight, even with the drugs.)

She moves as little as possible. She doesn't know what she looks like under the bandages, but whenever she shifts, she can feel the pull on the stitches all down her front. She tries to take as little of the Vicodin as possible; she's learned the hard way that it makes her horny and stupid.

Most of the bandages come off and her catheter comes out after the first week. Pritchard treats her with awkward professionalism, not pity or horror, but Grey wants to take her first shower by herself, so she shoos Pritchard out. Only once the door is shut does she take a good look at herself.

A dark-stitched railroad runs down her front. More scars. Her genitals, well, they're in one piece. At least her innards seem okay; she didn't relish the idea of a permanent catheter, since it'd likely cost her position.

She looks at herself in the mirror, grimaces at her haggard face, unshaved for a week. She reaches down to touch herself and finds only numbness.

She sighs. Maybe this is for the best. For as long as she's with the PIN, she can't be anything but what she is right now, and she's never going to leave the PIN. The option might as well be taken off the table permanently.

It's fine. She has her job. That's all that matters.

...

After Grey recovers enough to return to work, she discovers that her libido is unscathed, even if her body is not. She needs to learn new workarounds, and the interim is maddening.

To make matters worse, her work life is in flux. After Ms. Margaux's death, Grey worked with Darlene, but now Darlene's been promoted—well-deserved and long overdue, but Grey's been shuffled through temp comboys ever since.

Diaz at HR has no sympathy. "If you want the nice ones to stick around, stop scaring them off." As though Grey does it on purpose.

The latest is a young "cool Mormon," oppressively friendly, and Diaz gets her wish, because Grey *can't get rid of him*. No matter how she stonewalls, Penn keeps getting into her personal space, trying to make them bro-buddies, and it's maddening. She's restless, sexually frustrated, missing Ms. Margaux, and it takes all her focus to make it through the shift. When she clocks out, it's with a

sigh of relief; at least now she can get some time to herself.

But then Penn pops up, seemingly out of nowhere, gym bag over his shoulder. "You hitting H&M too, bro? Awesome!" He punches Grey in the shoulder, making her flinch. "Let's do some reps!"

Grey looks in mute appeal at Larkin, who spreads her hands.

"Sorry, I have a church dinner with my name on it."

Penn's ears prick. "Where do you worship?"

Rainbow MCC, but Larkin can't say that. "Around. See you Friday, Grey."

Grey waves goodbye and tries not to sigh. It's not Penn's fault; he's just in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's no polite way to escape, besides from avoiding the gym entirely, and exercise is the only release she has right now, so she lets Penn herd her.

He looks so pleased; she feels bad for not liking him. He wants so badly to be her friend.

"That Larkin is a heck of a woman. Is she... you know...?"

Grey just stares at Penn until he looks away.

"Just wondering. You two involved?"

"No."

Penn lights up again. "More for me! Eh?"

Grey wishes she could say that Larkin is taken, but she can't. All she can do is ignore Penn's hand, held out for a high-five.

Penn's smile doesn't dim. "That's okay, bro; I know you're happy for me."

The whole workout is an exercise in frustration. Penn stands too close, makes a production out of his reps, puts his weights back improperly, and combined with the gnawing aching *want* Grey's stuck with, it's unbearable. Normally, Grey struggles with getting near people, not getting away from them. She doesn't know what to do. This has never happened to her before.

"Steam room, bro?" Penn asks.

"No." Torture, Grey is sure, is sitting in a broiling room with nothing but a towel and Penn.

She assumes they'll part ways and that'll be the end, but Penn follows her to the showers nonetheless and insists on washing with the curtain open: "all bodies are God's bodies, bro!"

Grey yanks her own curtain shut and pulls at her hair. Why is Penn acting the meshugana? Because he's Mormon? Because he's Penn? There are a million people who would happily be his friend, people who aren't her. *What does he want from her?*

She blinks. Wait...

No. Impossible. Penn's young, handsome, sociable. He's *Mormon*. Surely he's not flirting with *her*.

It would explain all this, though...

If Penn is indeed flirting, Grey isn't flattered. She's aghast. (And resigned; of course, of all the times and all the men in all the world...) Bad enough when she thought Penn was just out to befriend or convert her, but this...

She has to get rid of him. But how?

Grey starts to undress, and then she knows. The stitches are out, and the scabs have healed, but the scars are still raw and red, and she makes no move to hide them when she pulls back the curtain to put her clothes away.

Penn lights up—but then his eyes go down and his expression freezes.

Grey stares hard at him, not hiding her irritation. She feels some bitter satisfaction when he averts his eyes, clears his throat, and shuts his curtain.

He requests a transfer to third shift the next week. Problem solved.

...

Diaz's HR office is right by the break room, so it's impossible to get coffee without passing her. The morning after Penn becomes third shift's problem, Grey tries to sneak past, but no such luck; Diaz pounds on the window.

"Hey Grey! Come meet your new comboy!"

Unable to refuse, Grey enters her office.

Penn was in his twenties, slim and white and smiling. The new guy is Grey's age, short and round and Indian (the Mumbai kind, not the Darlene kind), with bifocals, gray hair at his temples and mustache, and a quizzical air. He's turned around in his chair to get a look at Grey, and if he weren't looking at her so dismissively, he'd be a very attractive man.

Behind his back, Diaz mouths the word, "wash hire," points at him, and nods with gleeful satisfaction.

Aloud, she chirps, "This is Babubhai Doshi."

"Bob," he corrects.

"Bob, this is Grey. Say hi."

Grey just stands there.

Doshi eyes her coffee jealously.

The silence hangs.

"You'll love each other," Diaz assures them.

Doshi turns back forward to give her a contemptuous look,



and Grey takes the opportunity to sidle out. As she does, she hears Diaz say, “Grey’s senior specialist with honors.”

“Great.” Doshi’s voice is acid. “I love boy scouts.”

Grey doesn’t mind if her new comboy dislikes her. That’s good—it’ll make him more inclined to transfer out, and the sooner he leaves, the better. Grey’s had twenty-five years to learn how to redirect inconvenient thoughts and feelings, but that’s hard when her body is clamoring for attention.

She can handle him. All she has to do is be herself as hard as she can.

He can’t be worse than Penn.

INDYGRRL03

I never would've touched the PIN if it hadn't been for SpecialestAlpha.

That was the name I knew him by, back on alt.games.alienmenace. His gimmick: brooding secret agent alien hunter, desperate to find teenage girls to join the fight against extraterrestrials (and blow him). The group treated him like a pet troll, and for a long time, I saw nothing wrong with that.

Back then, my programming job devoured everything. It was the dot-com bubble, and between the money and the futurism, I managed to overlook the workload, the projects that kept switchbacking from gold to shit. Y2K came and went, but the crunches continued. I hit my breaking point when they had me hastily relocate to Vago, Arizona. I never should've agreed to it; they still had sodomy laws on the books (though they'd get repealed in a few months). The five-day drive was 80% corn, cows, and desert, and when I finally dragged into the city, I found a riot in progress. When someone threw a brick at my moving truck and told me to return to California, I started to wonder what the hell I was doing.

So I quit, five seconds before the company went bankrupt. Locked myself in my new apartment with my boxes and a fresh supply of booze, waited for the riots to pass, and plugged in... where I found SpecialestAlpha making progress with some new kid. She was younger than my niece. It bothered me.

So I trawled some archives and found out that this creep had been pulling this for *six years*. The girls all disappeared from the Web, but not him. When I tried to bring it up to the mods, though, the response was, "Proof, please, Bob."

I'd made a lot of money for a lot of years on a lot of code now doomed to never see the light of day. I was stranded in the desert, staring into an abyss of empty hours and existential dread. I needed to find a new job and reevaluate my life.

I decided to crush SpecialestAlpha instead.

I thought it'd take me a weekend; it took months. Not because the guy was stealthy—just the opposite. Every time I thought I'd found everything, more turned up, messianic alien screeds and teenage girls strung together with links and screen-names. The guy wasn't completely fatheaded; I would've bet my stock dossier (back when it was worth something) that he had done more than creepily flirt with all those teenagers, but I couldn't prove it.

I could prove one thing, though: he really was a government employee, or had been. Einstein had tried to show off his legitimacy, back on alt.tv.area51, by using his work email once: eugene.smedley@pin.gov.

With his legal name, the bottom fell out of the sleaze barrel, especially once cross-referenced with the events and locations he'd discuss in his web diary. A complaint of "pigs in jack boots" in Seattle led me to the newspapers, which bagged me arrest notices, which led to a couple phone calls to the relevant court clerks, which got me his domestic violence charges from the '90s (dropped; never found out why). From an oblique reference to a "mainstream media smear campaign," I found a larger newspaper story about an accidental bomb threat one of his art projects had started. The guy had founded an honest-to-god no-shitting millennial teenybopper church (One Universe) around Y2K triggering the UFO apocalypse. I couldn't make this shit up!

And this two-bit Roswell Messiah was a government employee! Doing what? And what the everloving hell was pin.gov?

An "under construction" page, turned out, with nothing but a header bar, log in, and phone number. At least I learned what it stood for: Peripheral Immigration and Naturalization (no Service, which should've warned me). I imagined a bureaucrat behind a desk, shrugged, and went back to chasing rats.

It took me another three weeks to start wondering what "peripheral" meant. The word didn't mean anything to me in an immigration context. I called my family back in Connecticut and they were equally stumped, even with their old paperwork on hand.

"It was the '50s, Babu," my sister Su said. "Maybe they changed things."

But it bothered me. The INS website was hideous and cluttered, but it was just as familiar as I expected it to be and never used the word "peripheral." Finally I called the number on the "under construction" site and after falling through half a dozen badly programmed phone trees and being on hold for an hour and a half, I got a human being. Arguably.

"PIN Vago division, this is Agatha speaking, how may I help you?"

"Hi, I'm trying to get a hold of Eugene Smedley—"

"There's nobody here by that name. You must want another department. Goodbye—"

"Wait, wait!" I didn't want a repeat of the past couple hours. "At least transfer me to Seattle!"

Stentorian sigh. "Sir, we don't do unauthorized transfers. Have a nice—"

"At least tell me what peripheral means!"

Click.

Fine. Screw them. I went back to cracking Eugene, the easier nut.

I had plenty of sources, but it was a morass and the slab of text I was writing to explain it all was more likely to inspire confusion than outrage. Eugene's DV charges had been dropped, the bomb threat was a harmless accident, and his public interactions with teenage girls stuck with flirtation—if I wasn't careful, he could spin the whole thing as a smear campaign to feed his next persecuted prophet story. I needed something bulletproof.

So I made a new set of accounts and screen-names, pretending to be a depressed schoolgirl in Indiana with a thing for sci-fi and secret agents. I posted a few times in Eugene's active threads, left a bogus intro post, and within a week got a private message with the subject line "you seem special."

It took me weeks to soften him up; I'd presumed his whole "the mundies are out to get me" thing was just a way to play the poor baby, but some of it seemed genuine. Maybe I wasn't the first person to infiltrate him. Many a late night was spent on instant messenger, patting his ass while he moaned about the burdens of the world, his Purpose, and his mother.

Then Su found out.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

I paced my office in my bathrobe. "Look, he's set to crack, I know it—"

"Bob, you've spent weeks talking for hours a day with some guy you don't even *like*, following him around like some kind of obsessive—"

"He's a slimeball!"

"That doesn't mean you have to act like one! So you found a con artist. Good job. But you're getting pulled into his story. He's already got you three-quarters in the bag, and you crawled in there yourself!"

That stopped me dead. Su didn't like talking about it, but back in college, before she'd settled down with Ravi, she'd gotten taken



in by a Romeo-style con man. She'd gotten out okay financially, but it'd messed with her for a couple years. I'd been in high school still, hadn't really understood how she'd fallen for an oily guy like that, but if anyone knew cons, it was her.

"You've got enough info," she continued, "so just drop the guy. Please? This guy sounds dangerous, and you sound like you're about to wear tinfoil. When's the last time you slept?"

I looked at my office. All over the place were unwashed coffee mugs, piles of print-outs and handwritten notes, a timetable of account handles (stuck to the wall with sticky notes because I kept having to add and reshuffle them), a timeline, and a bingo sheet. (Free space: "I'm the Specialest!") I hadn't shaved or changed out of my bath robe in days, and as for sleep...

Jesus Christ, I realized, I had more files about Eugene than composed my entire porn collection! What was I doing with my life?

"Okay," I said. "Maybe you're right. But I feel like I'm missing something, something big, staring me right in the face..."

"Come on, Babu." Her voice was sad. "They always have some stupid little secret you're on the verge of knowing. That's how they hook you. Drop it. This is not how you recuperate from that Smithson West job."

My computer chimed. A new chat window had popped up:

SpecialestAlpha: you up?

I turned my back on it, shifted my phone to the other ear. "Yeah, okay, you're right. I have the post about set to go; I'll feed him to the wolves, delete the accounts, and go back to normal midlife crisis activities."

Su sounded relieved. "Yeah, go buy some giant ugly car, have sex with people I disapprove of or something."

I smiled. "You say that like I don't already—"

Another chime. I forced myself not to look at it.

"Thanks, Su. Maybe this is getting to me."

"Look, this guy does sound overdue for consequences. Just don't stare into the abyss so hard, you know? And be safe, huh?"

Another chime. I gritted my teeth and turned to log out.

SpecialestAlpha: i have a secret for you

SpecialestAlpha: do you know what a peripherel is?

I froze. Grimaced. Told Su, "Final night. I promise."

The relief in her voice vanished. "Bob..."

"I promise. I swear. I'll talk to you tomorrow, give you the all clear."

She sighed. "If you don't answer, I'm staging an intervention!"

We hung up, and I went back to my keyboard.

That night, I got into Eugene's hard drive. While he prattled on about peripherals being timespace-displaced universes existing simultaneously alongside our own, I slapped together a zipped file of *Alien Menace Kaminari* (a Japan-only release), an emulator to play it on, a fan translation, and an installer (plus rootkit). When he took a moment to let me ooh and ah over his genius, I offered to email it to him and walk him through the process.

He was a big fan of *Alien Menace*, of course; it was why I'd picked it. And he'd spent weeks convincing himself that I was a devoted girl on the verge of putting out. He said yes, installed, and hey presto! I had him. And it turned out he was the kind of guy who kept all his account info in plain text on a document named Passwords, so I got into the PIN "under construction" site.

Where I found he hadn't been lying.

Oh, the Y2K UFO apocalypse, him being the speciest Messiah, that was all bunk. But he truly was a government agent kicking interdimensional aliens off the planet (or the country, at least). There was no way he faked all that dull-as-dirt paperwork on his hard drive—Eugene was a lot of things but never *boring*. He worked in PIN Operations, where "Specialist," with an I, was a real job title—though not one lowly Eugene held. He hadn't even been shitting about the definition of peripheral! It really was some sci-fi parallel dimensions bullshit!

Meanwhile, in the chat window, Eugene was trying to get into my digital drawers, and I didn't even care. When he wouldn't take no for an answer, I said my mother was calling me and went to mix myself a stiff drink or three while my computer downloaded everything in sight.

That night, I didn't sleep, shower, shave, or change clothes. I was going down a much deeper rabbit hole, armed with coffee and Kahlua.

When I surfaced from Eugene's files, the sun was coming up and my caffeine/alcohol balance was getting out of whack. I figured I had maybe fifteen minutes before I passed out, so I went to Eugene's preferred newsgroups and message boards and slapped up my text brick and sources as IndyGrrl03. I added the attempted cybersex chat log but didn't bother editing; I'd lost those abilities somewhere around 5 AM.

Then I did something that the sober, well-rested me wouldn't have. Using Passwords.txt, I accessed Eugene's email and sent my text brick and sources to

every @pin.gov address that I could find in his contacts.

Then I deleted all my IndyGrrlo3 accounts and collapsed into bed.

I woke up thirteen hours later to a pounding hangover and a ringing phone. Su, of course.

"Well?" she asked when I fumbled the receiver onto my face. "Are you done with this creep?"

Reality crashed down. I lurched upright, clutched my head, looked at the external hard drives I'd filled up in my drunken info orgy. I made a suppressed screaming sound.

"That better mean, 'why yes, Su Didi, he's out of my system and you'll never have to hear about him again.'"

I tried to think what to say. Finally, I settled on, "Yes."

Someone knocked on the door. I ignored it.

"Good," Su said. "Now lay low and forget you ever saw him—"

The knocking was getting louder. "Come on, Doshi!" I heard through the door. "Don't make this unpleasant!"

Even Su heard that. "Is that the creep? Did you bring him *home*?"

"What? No! Look, I—I have to take this, I'll call you back."

When I answered the door, a hungover shut-in in my bathrobe, I found a skinny black guy in a navy blue PIN jumpsuit with a box under his arm, what looked like a cochlear implant, and a big smile.

"Evening, guy," he said, wedging his foot in the door. "Got a minute?"

Of course they'd found me. I'd hacked some Orwellian corner of the federal government, by accident, and announced it in neon over email, all while using only enough security to protect myself from some dumbass like Eugene.

"Be chill man, be chill, it's all copacetic," the guy said in a soothing stoner voice. "I'm not the one you have to worry about. She is."

He jerked his thumb back at the hall. A woman in a navy suit and shades leaned against the wall, relaxed as a panther in a tree. She waved at me.

"So how's about we sit down and have us a nice, mellow conversation, eh?"

I let him in. The woman made no attempt to follow.

"Can I get you some coffee?" I asked, even though it was evening. I didn't know what else to do, and I was too groggy and hungover to be clever.

"Sure." Putting his box down on a stack of mine, he sat, grabbed a stack of Eugene papers, and started leafing through. "You're older than I expected."

I poured myself a mug of leftover coffee from the coffeemaker, chugged it down cold, put on fresh for him. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Busy night?" he asked without looking up.

I grunted and refilled my mug with water, which I also chugged.

"Unemployed." It didn't sound like a question.

I didn't answer him. He didn't seem to mind, just read, looked around, and waited for the coffeemaker to start burbling. I refilled my mug again, poured him one, brought it over but stayed standing.

"Come on, guy, don't be like that." He gestured to the couch. I sat. He seemed to know that I was capable of conversation now, and extended his hand. "I'm Harmonius. And you're Bob."

I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine." He took a sip of coffee, made a sound of relish. "I'm from Neurophysics. You know what we do?"

No. What I'd found was too bogged down in "Dellan bioelectromagnetism" and "synesthetic bleed" for me to make sense of it.

"We're good at reading people... and solving problems like Eugene."

He handed me a portion of the *Seattle Daily*. I found circled: "Eugene Smedley, 28, was found wandering in an agitated state by local police. Unable to state his name or age, he was identified by his driver's license..."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Harmonius kept smiling.

"Hippocampal cleansing—washing, we call it. Awful thing; we hate doing it. Guy like him never should've gotten hired in the first place. Us fuzzies, we're supposed to vet all the new guys. Only way to do it. We're going to have to clean house, make sure this doesn't happen again."

He sipped his coffee. I just sat there. He didn't seem to notice the silence.

"It'd be worse for you. Bilingual, right? What's that you're thinking in, Hindi?"

"Gujarati," I said.

Harmonius whistled. "Yup, no speakers on staff. We'd have to blanket-wash, just to be safe, and you don't want that. We don't want that."

My coffee mug started to tremble in my hand.

"Lucky for you, my friend, I don't think we'll have to," Harmonius said.

"See, you're a smart guy, smart enough to be scared. You like your brain just the way it is, and I agree: a mind is a terrible thing to wash. You did us a favor, and," he gestured at the conspiracy hut that my apartment had become, "if you'll pardon my saying so, you seem to be needing some direction here. Why don't you come work for us? Keep us honest. Plenty of room for a guy with your talents; what do you say?"

What else could I say? I chugged my coffee and said yes.

THE UN-AMERICAN FESTIVITIES COMMITTEE

For a shady government agency dealing with interdimensional migration, the PIN buildings didn't look special or important. They were just another cluster of boxy beige buildings in their own strip mall on the outskirts of town. Health and Medical on one side of the parking lot, Communications and Operations on the other. Comm-Ops wasn't any more exciting on the inside, except for the gigantic painting on the wall.

There were others, but they were mostly what you'd expect: old white guys in suits and executives' chairs. Except one, which according to the plaque depicted "Cora Johnson: Founder, Neurophysics and Communications." She was a middle-aged black woman with impeccable hair and a distant expression; the window behind her showed a starry sky. Her right hand rested on a model spaceship, and instead of a fancy chair, she sat on a big boxy contraption that looked like the grandmother of Harmonius's box. Worn padding and straps suggested that the thing could be carried—and had been, for a long time.

"That's Johnson. She invented the boxes... and made this place somewhere I'm willing to work."

I turned to see a small wiry woman with salt-and-pepper hair. Like me, she wore a blue Comm sweater, though hers had gold rings. Strong handshake.

"I'm Darlene, first shift Comm captain. We'll see a lot of each other. So, Diaz tells me you're a piranha."

In my bouncing around the PIN, I'd learned not to mention that forced labor conditions made me snappy; nobody understood my attitude. "I didn't like Diaz, and I hadn't had my coffee. You get me when I'm civilized." Mostly. All the coffee in the world couldn't fix first shift, which started at 6 AM.

"Give Diaz a break; she's the one stuck finding places for everyone who pissed off Ops that the fuzzies don't want to wash. She must've been desperate if she put you on first shift; we're usually old horses."

Lucky me. "Yeah, I'm working with Grey."

"So I heard. Comboyed for him a few years. Quiet guy, kind of intense. Come on, I'll show you around."

Nobody who came in would've thought this place was devoted to dealing with interdimensional entities. All the computers were outdated, the printers dot matrix, and according to Darlene, most records had yet to be digitized. ("You'll have to dig in the basement.") My systems must've taken ten minutes to boot—there were four, because apparently local, federal, and "peripheral" systems didn't place nice with each other. The peripheral databases barely ran at all, so just about every damn thing I did also needed to be replicated on paper and put into massive color-coded binders.

Compared to Smithson West, it was culture shock. Any minute, I expected Darlene to open a cabinet and show me the magical semaphore flags that could contact UFOs, but only after prayers, incense, and offerings. (She didn't, but she did show me the ancient, all-hating fax machine that peripheral documents came through. Behold, the 21st century.)

Thankfully, I wouldn't have to deal with the fax machine. It was Darlene's problem. My job was to do what she told me and clear the paperwork path for Ops guys like Grey who handled the face-to-face asskicking.

"It's not as exciting as they act," Darlene assured me. "Mostly, we deal with customs violators, folks trying to sell nonsense to the locals—perpetual motion, cold fusion, religion, crap like that."

The floor plan was a product of the open office craze, with everyone's desks clustered together in a big room, overseen by Darlene up on the bridge. If you wanted to talk to a coworker, you stood up and shouted. Seeing as everyone in Comm was constantly on the phone or radio, the noise pollution was awful, and out of desperation, chest-high cubicle walls had been erected, with people's heads popping up like prairie dogs. As though determined to prevent privacy, nobody got a cube to themselves; I shared mine with Jenny St. Rivers, who comboxed for Specialist MacIntire and was, according to Darlene, "the best hot-spotter on first." She was young, pretty, black, and had a button on her messenger bag that read EATEN BY GRUES.

"Hark, adventurer," I greeted, and that broke the ice.

Jenny proved to be smart and capable; good, since she did the bulk of my day-to-day training. Thanks to my previous failed positions in the PIN revolving door, I wasn't completely at sea, but she spared me a lot of headaches.

"No, no, that means it's crashed."

"No, don't try to fix it, they'll blame it on you. Call Herman and Dylan; they're IT, they might get to it today, and until then, go hit the basement."

"It's not downstairs? Maybe someone pulled it—*hey Randall!* Do you got the Claudia file?"

Thanks to her, I made it through my first day, and when she saw me



digging through my bus schedules, she offered me a ride home.

"You have money," she said. "Why ride the bus?"

I tried to explain that I grew up north of the Mason-Dixon line, in a city with extant public transit and roads like spaghetti, but I could tell she still thought I was crazy.

On the ride home, she

declared herself my carpool buddy and explained what hot-spotting was.

"It's reading a map to guess where someone'll come through peripheral space. It's like... if you were driving to Phoenix, you'd take I10, right?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"You'd have to, unless you wanted to get really scenic... or lost. It's the same through peripherals. You only have so much fuel, so much time, so many roads—well, unless you have a ripper car, but they're pricey. My specialty is predicting the roads and exits and making sure we're there to meet them."

Most of this wasn't computerized. Jenny made do with a database that barely ran, a heavily annotated old tome held together with masking tape and rubber bands, paper maps, and a drawing compass. I got to see her do it the next day, and it was fascinating to watch. We intercepted the stuffed animal trader the moment he touched ground.

Orwellian or not, bureaucratic or not, at least the work was interesting, in a strangely mundane kind of way. There were the black marketers trying to buy plushies in bulk and resell at heavy markup. There were the missionaries obsessed with the idea that the multiverse was a six-dimensional torus, which should be reflected in family structure and corporate leadership. There were copper hoarders and con artists and snake oil salesmen, and a surprising number of ordinary people (not necessarily human) wanting to start a new life.

"Another country, sure," I said, "but why would anyone want to move to

another universe? And why here?" The impression I'd gotten was that most other peripherals saw us as barbarians needing the six-dimensional torus.

"Well..." Jenny said. "You know about Johnson?"

"The one who invented the fizzy boxes?"

"Oh, she didn't just invent them. She was there at first contact. But this wasn't a diplomatic first contact, or a military one either; it was an accident, a Dellan bio-construct ripping through to escape her owners."

"Bio-construct?"

"I think it's like clone meat? All sorts of constructs around, and as far as I can tell, the only thing they have in common is they're slaves. Anyway, the Dellans wanted theirs back, and Johnson told them to take a hike. She got the bio-construct asylum, reverse-engineered the fizzy box from their technology, and when the PIN got formed, she made sure we'd have a place here."

A noble sentiment, but even if the long-dead Johnson was the saint people claimed, I wasn't about to be proud of an integrated panopticon. (For given values of integrated; I was the only South Asian there.) The fuzzies weren't there just for xenopsychology (and in-house counseling, which floored me). They were there for us. I could only enjoy my work as long as I forgot that.



Despite the cognitive dissonance, I got along fine on a day-to-day basis with most of my coworkers... except Grey, who I think hated me, what with the unblinking eagle stare, the unchanging expression of a serial killer mug shot, and the tendency to loom rather than speak. I maybe got a paragraph a day, less once he discovered I knew Morse and obsolete ten-code, and he seemed impervious to sarcasm, irony, or humor.

Untrollable. Either he was stupid or thought I was, and he'd apparently pissed off HR even more than I had; I was stuck with him.

Jenny was happy to hate him with me. "Don't take it personal, Bob; one day that guy is going to snap and kill us all. I heard he's a robot from the Cold War."

Randall rolled his chair out. "Old Ironass? I heard he was some super-

soldier project gone horribly wrong.”

“And I heard you don’t have enough work to do,” Darlene said, dumping paper on our desks. “Get moving, gossips.”

Just then, Agatha burst onto the Comm floor, shouting to turn on the TV. No one had ever seen her run or emote before, so we obeyed, and that’s how we found out about the towers. It was September 11th.

I spent the rest of the day in a panicked fog, calling my family, making sure everyone was safe. None of my immediate relatives were in New York, but Ravi Jijaji was, on business. When everyone turned up in one piece, I thought the worst was over, but that was just the beginning.

Once the shock wore off, people started looking for someone to blame, and they weren’t picky about who. A Hindu temple got fire-bombed in Jersey; some poor Sikh bastard got gunned down in Mesa, way too close to Vago for comfort. It was surreal—I was American for Chrissakes, my people were from a different country, *I was not buddies with bin Laden*—but I was a wash hire, new in town, and people started looking at me funny. Darlene and Jenny never wavered (and Grey kept acting like a poorly programmed chatbot), but I wasn’t so sure about the rest of my coworkers. I couldn’t tell if they were pulling away from me or if I was pulling away from them, but paranoia seemed only sensible.

Then the new guys started showing up.

Thanks to Johnson, the PIN had a lot of black women on staff. Whether that was a side effect or a cause of the lack of oversight (and budget), it made the weisswurst brigade all the more noticeable as they descended, especially on Ops and Management. Nobody would say what they were doing or why. One day, Darlene was late, stormed in fuming but wouldn’t say why. I suspected someone had tried to push her out.

I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I recognized the sinking ship feeling. I’d felt it at my last job, but this one, I couldn’t quit—not in sound mind anyway. (And once the Patriot Act passed and my memories became free wiretapping, I really didn’t dare run.)

And Diwali was coming up.

I’d requested the time off earlier, in exchange for working Thanksgiving, but September 11th had up-ended everything. When they did get to it, I found myself in the office of some new spook manager with crocodile eyes; he was clearly unimpressed with the new wash hire and this un-American holiday he’d never heard of and gave me the thumbs down: I’d be working *both* holidays. New or not, condescending or not, he gave me the creeps, and I left shaken and angry at both him and myself.

To top it all off, when I left his office, I found Grey outside, waiting.

"What're you doing here?" I asked. "Don't tell me you want Diwali off too."

Grey just stared at me.

"Maybe you'll get luckier than me." Even to me, my voice sounded nasty, but Grey was someone I could lay into without worrying I'd get washed or shot. "He seems like your type."

Then I stomped off to call my sister and tell her the bad news.

Su tried to make the best of it. "It's okay, Babu, it won't be the same but we can do the meals and gifts during the kids' Thanksgiving break..."

"No, we can't." Despite myself, I felt on the verge of tears. "Got the rejection in person and everything. It's a 'seniority' thing, apparently."

"That sounds like bullshit."

"Damn right it's bullshit, but this place has lost its goddamned mind since September 11th, and I—" Too late, I remembered the things about this job I couldn't tell her, how insecure this line might be, that the government could apparently wiretap anyone they wanted these days without a warrant, and that I was on the verge of a meltdown. I caught myself, took some breaths, tried to calm down, "—and I can't get away. I'm sorry, Su. I'm so sorry."

Su did her best to salvage the situation. She banged out a plan for phone calls and instant messenger so I could be there by proxy; she even swore she'd videotape the whole thing. It wasn't the same, and we both knew it, but she kept me talking and focused on the practicalities enough that I didn't break down until I got home.

Diwali was about family. It was about my parents, my sister, her kids and in-laws, up a thousand miles away in Connecticut and calling everyone across the pond. It was about starting a new year, eating food and giving gifts and putting up lights to push back the darkness of the night.

But I had a feeling that there was no pushing back what was coming.

I didn't dare complain to my coworkers. All I could do was shut my mouth and feel the noose tighten around my neck. It was a twitchy few weeks.

On the first day of Diwali, I found a box of sweets on my desk, pink peppercorn elderberry balls that spice-crackled pleasantly in my mouth. A sticky note was stuck to the box: *Happy Diwali*, in big block print.

Jenny stole a piece. "Wow, this is good! Who's it from?"

"No idea," I lied, crumpling the note in my pocket before she saw it. I'd only mentioned Diwali to two coworkers, and I'd spent enough time passing paper back and forth with Grey to recognize the handwriting.

But Grey was the same old Specialist Ironass, said nothing of it and didn't

seem to notice my scrutiny. After scratching my head all shift, I clocked out, shouldered my bag, told Jenny to wait up for me, and beelined for Grey's office.

Most of the Ops guys didn't have their own offices any more than we did, but Grey had apparently amassed enough holy seniority to earn a hellish little alcove created by the erection of "temporary" walls that would never come down as long as filing cabinets could hold them up. Grey never left on time and today was no exception; I could see hunched shoulders through the door glass.

I banged on the door: dah dit dah.

Without looking up, Grey waved me in. I did and shut the door behind me, since there was no way to ask this comfortably.

"Did you get me candy?" I asked, holding up the box.

Grey glanced up, went back to working. "Yes."

I blinked. I'd expected denial. "Why?"

Grey put the pen down and started cranking one shoulder like it was stiff. "Candy holiday. Isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but..." *but how do you know that*, I didn't ask. "...Thank you?"

"You're welcome." Back to the paperwork. "Is that all?"

For a moment there, I'd almost started liking Grey, but now I came closer and rapped on the desk to pull those laser eyes up again. "No. I've been an ass to you this whole time. You don't like me. Why would you...?"

Grey just stared at me.

I sighed. "What kind of candy do you like?"

Shrug.

"Are you seriously this boring?"

Shrug.

I gave up. "Fine."

Jenny tried to lure me into conversation on the ride home, but I was distracted and didn't say much. I'd met some weird people over the years, but Grey was the first so boring as to come out the other side.

When Jenny dropped me off and I checked my mailbox, I found a box of candy from Su—orange drops, my favorite when we were kids. It cheered me to see it, and I called her as I unlocked my door.

"Hey nerd! Happy Diwali!" she said upon answering. "Your sweets haven't arrived yet; you're the worst brother. How's the job going?"

I groaned. "Lousy. I don't want to talk about it. Tell me what's going on with you guys."

All the States side of the family was with her. While I kicked my shoes off and unwound, Su passed the phone around and I got to hear from everyone,

even my niece, who only had eyes for her new boyfriend (who my mother disapprovingly informed me was a liberal arts major). My nephew was having trouble with some high school coding project; together, we found the missed semicolon. Su's youngest lectured me on the evils of "the gender binary," whatever that was, and its cosmic importance. My parents told me about all the intrigues going on with the family across the pond—adultery, embezzlement, kissing up to Bapuji who seemed determined to outlive them all, the usual. They were all making rangoli together; Su promised me pics.

I missed them, all of them, so badly.

"You okay, Babu?" Su asked when she came back. "Because you sound awful. Maybe this job wasn't such a good idea."

It'd never been a good idea. But all Su knew was that I was in a crummy government job involving national security that I couldn't discuss and which paid a third of my old Smithsonian West salary. She probably thought I'd gone altruist in my midlife crisis.

"It's just been a long day. I'll be okay, I'm home now." I tossed the box of pink peppercorn candy on the table with Su's orange drops. "It wasn't a total loss; one of my coworkers gave me sweets."

"Oh? They Hindu?"

"Nah, Christian. It was the damndest thing."

"Oho," she said. "Are they... *available*?"

I snorted as I poured myself a drink. "Available, I'm sure. Eligible, no."

"You sure? I heard they just repealed the sodomy laws over there..."

"Hurrah, progress." I toasted Don't Ask, Don't Tell. "It's fine, I'm roping me a cowgirl named Patty Mae; we'll have lots of good Christian babies together."

"Good. Ride 'em, cowboy. We'll tell all the worst stories about you over dinner; it'll be like you're here."

I laughed and saluted her with my wine. "Gain ten pounds for me."

"Way ahead of you, nerd."

And that's how I got through the first day of Diwali. I cleaned my apartment, put up lights, pulled my own feast out of the slow-cooker and microwave, and ate with my family from afar. It wasn't as awful as it could've been, and once I got off the horn with them, I pulled out some cashews to grind for kaju katli. I'd already made one big batch for my family, had ingredients left over, and since Grey hadn't expressed an opinion, that was what I'd make. I could've just bought something, but I wanted to keep myself busy. It let things feel more normal.

Even if I was spending the holiday alone.

THE VIP

Grey really does try to make Bob hate her.

Before 9/11, she does well. A man as expressive and catty as him proves easy to irritate; all she has to do is make herself social dead weight, be the golem he expects her to be, and watch him climb the walls. After he confuses South Fifth Street and Fifth Street South, she double-checks all his directions until he tells her to go to hell and hangs up on her. It's very satisfying.

After 9/11, it stops being enjoyable. All the sniping in the world can't hide the misery on Bob's face after being denied his Diwali leave, and Grey relents. It's not his fault that she's attracted to him, and her personal issues take a back seat to his basic comfort at work.

So she tries to split the difference, stay unresponsive socially but trading candy back and forth through Diwali. She eats a lot of those cashew fudge things (delicious) and even overcomes her fear of cooking enough to make a (burnt) batch of coconut macaroons. It's an embarrassment compared to Bob's offerings but she has to try. Management is being needlessly harsh forcing him to work through this. It's not as though Diwali runs on a skeleton crew.

Thanksgiving does, though. Grey's there by choice (she works all holidays) and normally Darlene is too (she hates Thanksgiving), but she's out sick. With all the people out on holiday, Management had to call in Williamson, who's ostensibly the captain of Comm third shift, but only since last week. He's one of the 9/11 restructure hires, not happy about being dragged out for a double on a holiday with no notice, and he seems to especially dislike Bob, who spends the shift taking refuge in Grey's office under the pretense of doing work for her.

"He's running on caffeine and stress, praying nothing important happens," Bob says over lunch, "so, of course, we've got an emergency."

Of course. "What is it?" Grey asks as she sucks down instant noodles.

Bob has relaxed enough around Grey to sit on her desk. "Remember that very important meeting of very important people Management had yesterday? Well, one of them lost their very important pet. They insist their precious baby must only be reclaimed by our best—national security—and you're the highest ranked on shift. Congratulations."

VIP personal problems are glorified babysitting. "Who's the VIP?"

"Anything involving that meeting is apparently above my pay grade," Bob says bitterly. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"No," Grey says. "Meeting was Management and Neurophysics only."

"Really? Huh. Anyway, it's basically a pigeon. Chipped too; the VIP says that the League satellite that we apparently tolerate in our air space located it by the Supermart off Autumnville."

The Supermart has a concrete parking garage and a rail stop. There will be a thousand pigeons. "Description?"

"Uh..." Bob checks the papers in his hands. "It's a 'very fancy pigeon.'"

Grey doesn't have to say anything.

"Look, I'm sorry, the VIP is too pissy to answer questions, Williamson's too pissy to ask, and our missing property database must be running slow again, because it's not there. That's it: fancy pigeon, clipped wings, return ASAP."

Grey sighs, wolfs her noodles, and goes to get a net (and some traps, at Williamson's insistence). Then she heads for the Supermart. The whole way there, Williamson pesters her with calls through Bob. At first, Bob makes light of it, but it becomes less funny as it goes on:

"Are you there yet? Asking for Williamson."

"How about now?"

"Me again. Where are you?"

Grey suppresses her annoyance. She can barely talk and drive at the same time, has to pull over for every call, so all Williamson's badgering does is slow her down. Judging by his tone, Bob knows it too, but Williamson must be leaning on him hard enough that he has to badger her anyway, and Grey doesn't have the heart to screen the calls and leave him to take the heat. It's a relief when she finally arrives and reports in, hopefully earning herself some peace and quiet in which to search.

This part isn't so bad. Grey doesn't mind doing tedious work on her own; nobody can bother her about how she does it, as long as she does it well. And on Thanksgiving Day, the Supermart is mostly deserted.

By people, anyway. The pigeons are out in force. Grey can already tell that she was right about the traps being useless; she'll catch a dozen locals first. The only way to find her target is to chase the flocks and see which birds don't take flight. It's silly but better than dealing with Williamson, so she gets to work.

The first flock takes off unanimously. Same with the second. The third has a straggler, but old, ragged, and sick, obviously not a fancy pet. Grey lets it be.

The fourth flock is around back in employee parking, pecking around a Dumpster. She doesn't even need to give chase to know she's found her bird.

It is indeed a very fancy pigeon, with a long tail, unnaturally vivid colors of pink and blue, and feathers dished in such a way that its head looks like an enormous marshmallow. There's no way it could be local, even ignoring the silver collar yoke around its throat. If Williamson (or the VIP) had been clearer... but oh well. At least finding it wasn't too difficult.

Then she tries catching it.

The moment she gets the net, the pigeon's head pops up. When she approaches, it bolts, flapping and whistling and sending the flock flying. For a flightless bird, it proves surprisingly speedy; it zigzags, spins, twirls, and Grey must spend twenty minutes chasing it around the asphalt before it scuttles under a low-rider.

It's a good hiding spot, too low for Grey to crawl under and squeezed too close against a concrete loading dock for her to go around the other side. She tries putting a trap close by; the pigeon ignores it.

She's forcing herself to her knees to see if she can nudge the pigeon out with the net handle when her phone rings.

"Me again," Bob says in a threadbare voice. "Found it?"

"Yes."

"Caught it?"

"No." She eyes the bird. It fluffs itself anxiously. "Working on it."

Diplomatic pause. "Williamson really wants it back."

"I know." She sits with a hiss of pain. "Let him catch it."

"So you *do* have a personality!"

Grey grimaces. She goes silent, tries to be dead weight, but it's too late.

"Ha! I knew it." After a moment, Bob seems to decide that if Grey has a personality, maybe she's someone he can tell: "hey, something's off."

Grey eyes the pigeon, who has settled into a quivering loaf. "What?"

"I don't know. But Williamson won't let me anywhere near the VIP—I still have no idea who this person is, only that they make Williamson very nervous. Why even bring a damned pet to a hush-hush peripheral meeting, anyway?"

"Service animal?" That might explain the cleverness.

"Then why did it take a day to notice it was missing?" That, Grey has no answer for. "And if it's that valuable, why such a lousy description? Why don't they have a local copy of what they put into the missing property database? We might not have decent access, but they must."

That does seem strange. "Still not there?"

"Nope. And for once, the problem isn't on our end; we've had new entries come in. Vehicles, livestock, proprietary tech... but no pigeon. Williamson tells

me to butt out, but..."

Grey thinks. To her, this is just another babysitting job, full of human error and high-strung emotions that she doesn't want to deal with, but Bob got hired because he smelled a rat. More than that, he was right. "Look into it. My order." That's an ordinary task for someone in Ops to request of their comboy. Maybe it'll get Williamson off Bob's back.

"Will do. And since I've got you on the line with our very important pigeon, anything special about it?" He's covering his bases, but his tone makes it clear how silly he finds the idea of a special pigeon.



Grey stares hard at the bird, which shudders and pulls its marshmallow head deeper into its body. Feeling absurd, she moves the phone to her other hand and signs, "Know SGSL?"

The pigeon's head snaps up. It leaps to its feet. It has no hands (someone must've taken its pack) but it extends one wing forward, not to the side as though flapping, and snaps it down vertically—a very clear "yes" in SGSL.

Still, just in case it's a fluke, Grey signs, "Please sign yes and no." That can be expressed without hands.

Sure enough, the pigeon repeats the vertical wing snap, then a sharp horizontal one, and Grey marinates in horror. She's been chasing a sapient—a *person*—around the Supermart with a net.

Where are its hands? Why is it wearing a collar? Why isn't it broadcasting? All constructs without hands or vocal cords have transceivers; it's how they communicate, but Grey doesn't hear that unsettling radio voice in her head.

Something is wrong, and Grey's mind is too slow and clunky to figure it out. But she has someone much faster on the line. Pinning her phone to her ear with her shoulder so she can sign frantic two-handed apologies to the pigeon, she says to Bob, "Sapient."

"What?"

"Missing persons. Any birds?"

“Uh—” she hears a clattering keyboard. “I don’t know about birds, but there is a glitch listing, no photo, the name is a random number string—”

A number in missing persons could mean an emancipated construct. Bob hasn’t dealt with that before, so he couldn’t have known, but a Comm captain should’ve. “Who is it?”

“Let’s see, 9109 from Fluji Alpha, went missing a few weeks ago. Works for, uh, Konpom Anikonpomka, whatever that is...”

“Construct Deconglom,” Grey translates. “Construct rights?”

“I’ll look it up, but jump back: this pigeon is an activist pet?”

“Not a pet,” Grey says. “Nobody owns it. Someone took its pack, put a collar on it. Emancipated constructs don’t wear collars.”

“Does it have a name on it? Maybe this isn’t 9109.”

Grey squints, but the letters are too small to make out. She signs to the pigeon, “Are you 9109?”

Vertical wing swipe: yes.

“Is that collar yours?”

Emphatic horizontal: no!

“May I see it?”

The pigeon comes out from under the low-rider.

The collar is small and silver, with no obvious catch to open it. When Grey feels for one (after asking 9109’s permission), she feels an engraving, but before she can read it, a holographic message pops up in StanG: GENE-LOCKED.

“It’s 9109,” Grey says, her blood freezing. If it’s an emancipated construct working in construct rights, “it” is likely how it would refer to itself in English. Grey doesn’t understand those politics, but she doesn’t have to. She squints to make out the engraving. “Gene-locked collar, reads ‘Apur 5447’ in StanG.”

She hears Bob fumble for pen and paper. “Spell Apur for me?”

She does, romanized since Bob can’t read StanG. “Look into it. And get me a fizzy and Larkin to translate.” Larkin always gets the worst shifts, so she’s on, and 9109 is stressed and upset; it needs Larkin’s diplomacy, her people skills.

Bob makes a dubious sound. “Williamson says nobody but you. He’s pissed enough that having you means having *me*.”

“I don’t know no-hands SGSL,” Grey says. This is a lot of talking for her, and she’s upset; her chest is getting tight, and her throat is threatening to lock. “I’ve scared it. I’ve—I’ve done it wrong. I’m wrong. It needs—it needs not-me. Please, Bob.”

Silence for a moment. Bob has never heard her upset before. Then he says, “Okay, I’ll see what I can do,” and hangs up.

Grey looks at the pigeon, who's eyeing her hopefully with its cocked marshmallow head. It's clearly been through an ordeal, dirty and disheveled. She doesn't know what's happened to it or how it's ended up here in a collar, but she's going to do her job. 9109 is a fugitive construct, and it is on free land. It is not a VIP's pet.

Grey's throat has locked, but she can still speak SGSL. She tries to keep her face flat. "I'm sorry," she signs. "My error. Translator coming soon."

9109 relaxes. It settles by Grey's knee, which is starting to stiffen up, and returns to loafing. Grey gets up to stretch and pace. It eases her knees and helps her think. 9109 does nothing to get her attention; it too seems to be thinking.

Larkin and Harmonius arrive within thirty minutes from the Supermart. She has a bag of pigeon feed; he has his box and a bad cold.

Grey doesn't like fizzies—they make her uncomfortable—but Harmonius clearly should be in bed. "Sick?"

Harmonius's voice is congested. "Ah, it's getting better. I swapped shifts yesterday." He sees 9109 and his eyebrows go up. "Oh hey, a bird++."

Larkin bows to 9109, who bobs back. "I apologize for your treatment, 9109," she says in StanG with her smooth, calm river voice. "We are working to correct it as quickly as possible. I've brought food for you; are you hungry?"

9109 signs yes and sets on the pellets with a will. The tightness is Grey's chest loosens. With Larkin here, the situation doesn't seem as irreparable.

There's a lot that can't be communicated. Harmonius has a transceiver so can hear 9109, but his StanG is limited; Larkin's is fluent but she can't hear 9109, while 9109 has no English module and can only speak StanG and SGSL. Grey is unnecessary and stands awkwardly off to the side while they talk, taking the opportunity to calm down.

Finally, they regroup at Grey's car and pull Bob in on speakerphone.

"Okay," Harmonius says, blowing his nose, "as far as I can tell, 9109 never felt it was lying. That doesn't make it or my reading accurate, though, especially not today. It says that it got kidnapped to put pressure on the construct rights group it heads on Fluji Alpha. I don't know nothing about that."

"But I do, and it tracks," Bob says. "While you guys were talking, I did some digging through the League public news and patent databases, and I found a few things. You were on the right track, Grey—Construct Deconglom is an anti-government construct rights organization, which 9109 is high up in. It's been declared a terrorist group by the Fluji Alpha conglomerate."

"It didn't mention that," Harmonius said.

"I'll bet, but listen to this: the big cheese responsible for the declaration is

Apur Aimeh, who runs the Apur gene-property company when she isn't doing politics and recently patented a 5447 transceiver-inhibitor collar that matches what Grey described to me. What do you want to bet that Apur, or one of her people, is our mysterious VIP? And that's why 9109 can't broadcast."

"Huh," Larkin remarks. "Grey, your combo is *good*."

"Ha! I'm a lot of things," Bob says, in a tone that Grey can't help but react to. She only hopes that Harmonius is too stopped up to notice. "Unfortunately, I don't know Fluji conglomerate politics, and the translations I get are garbage, so I can't say how valid the terrorist claims are."

"Doesn't matter," Grey says. "USA has no agreements with Fluji Alpha."

"Still, if 9109's violent, that complicates things," Larkin says. "Bob, exactly what kind of terrorists are these people called?"

"Uh." Rustling paper. "Fiduciary."

Larkin and Grey relax a little. "Small mercies," Larkin breathes. "It means they're a threat to Apur's bottom line, Bob—and hopefully with lawyers or copyright battles, not pipe bombs, because 9109's emergency beacon didn't just notify Apur's people. 9109's crew is coming through the big chain in about an hour, and they are going to be *damn* unhappy that we're holding their leader, who's been stripped of flight, adapt-tech, language modules, and slapped in a broadcast-blocking collar that likely only Apur herself can open. I need to talk them down, and thank Jesus, 9109 is willing to work with us."

"It just wants to go home, get real food, and go back to work," Harmonius says with a snuffle. "Unfortunately, whatever y'all end up doing, I can't be there to translate. I had Darlene's bug yesterday, missed the big meeting, so I'm locked in today. I can't miss it, especially since I'm here on the down-low."

Larkin pats his arm. "You done good, Harm. But before you head on back: do we all agree that kidnapping your political-economic opponent, pretending it's your property, *losing* it, and then lying about it to send us slave-catching—which we famously don't do—is bullshit?"

"Yup," Harmonius says. "Policy couldn't be clearer. Whatever 9109's job is, it's a fugitive construct fleeing ownership, it's on free land, and it doesn't want to immigrate. It wants to go home. You ask me, let it; violent or not, it'll be off our hands, and Fluji Alpha's not our problem; it's not like we're allies."

"I can't imagine why," Bob says. "I'm in. To hell with these people."

Grey nods in agreement. She owes this to 9109, after treating it so shabbily.

"Good," Larkin says, "we're all on the same page, and I'm taking charge of this disaster. Let's get 9109 off our planet. Harm, take some pills. Grey, tell me that mess you call a glove compartment has entry/exit forms."

She does and starts digging for them.

"What about me?" Bob asks. "More important: what about Williamson?"

"We'll handle him and his incompetence once 9109 is gone," Larkin says. "We've got a rendezvous to make, and none of this would've happened if he'd done his damn job in the first place. Keep him out of our hair as long as you can."

Bob's voice gets tense. "I don't know if I can; he's raising the rafters."

He doesn't say it, but Grey hears it: since Bob is the lowest-ranked and the only one answerable to Williamson, he's bearing the brunt of his captain's frustration, even though none of this is Bob's fault or doing.

"I'll handle him," Grey says, wielding the forms. "Send him to me."

Bob sounds relieved. "Thanks, boss. I'll do my best." He hangs up.

"That's me out too," Harmonius says, wheeling off. "Good luck, y'all."

Grey looks at 9109, who seems to be eating its weight in pigeon pellets. It can't wear a seat belt, and this is her first time transporting a non-humanoid construct that didn't bring its own car seat. She looks questioningly at Larkin, who looks indecisive; then they turn to 9109 and ask it.

It ends up riding on Larkin's shoulder in the navigator's seat, preening its feathers. No one protests; Grey knows just enough about bird++ body language to know that they put immense stock in altitude. It wants to be on the same level, equal to the humans it's riding with, which seems only fair. Fortunately for them, Harmonius has sworn up and down that it doesn't understand a word of English, so Larkin can talk through her plan without worrying how it'll respond. Grey mostly nods; she needs to stay focused on driving and making their desert rendezvous.

They're on the final leg on a bumpy cattle road when Williamson calls. Since Grey's driving, Larkin picks up and puts him on speakerphone.

"Did you tell Doshi to waste my time?"

From the navigator's seat, Larkin raises her eyebrows.

"Yes," Grey says. She hates talking, and she's sick of Williamson.

Williamson sputters. "Where's the bird?"

"Taking care of it." She's Ops, not him. He doesn't get to tell Grey her job.

Williamson changes gears. In an unctuous voice, he says, "Specialist Grey, this is a delicate diplomatic matter involving the future of our trade relations, and our VIP is a very important ally who has been nothing but honest. I worry your comboy's intentionally misleading you."

Grey's wheel goes off the road and she has to brake. 9109 flutters but doesn't fall. Larkin steadies it and puts a fist to her mouth as though to bite it.

"He's been ducking my orders and wasting our time all day," Williamson continues, "and I think that was his intention from the start. He wants us to fail, and whatever he's told you, you're still a good soldier—"

They don't have time for this. "Bob's fine. I will handle Apur Aimeh."

"That name, which I can neither confirm nor deny—"

Larkin is tapping her watch with a pressing look, so even though Grey hates pulling this card, she repeats, "I will handle Apur Aimeh. Call Andersen if that's a problem."

"No, no, no, that won't be necessary!" Williamson's tone turns ingratiating. "Let's not bother him with trivialities, okay? If you want the headache, it's yours. Just don't trust a wash hire. You might not like where it gets you."

Grey gets Williamson off the line, but it takes long enough to put them behind schedule. When she finally gets them back on the road at speed, Larkin bursts out, loudly enough that 9109 jolts, "Son of a *bitch*. Trying to snow us... we don't even trade with any damn peripherals! It's why all we have are fizzy boxes! If we weren't in such a damn hurry, I'd—"

The sky opens up with a tearing roar.

Larkin nearly has a stroke. "Shit! *Shit!* I am going to *roast* Williamson—I'm point; you're backup! Avenge my ass if they decide to shoot me!"

Grey nods and nearly hits a cattle fence pulling over. As the ripper car lands, she dives for the gun rack.

"If I kick it, you can have my *Barbarian Barbara* tapes," Larkin says, and reaches for the door. She takes a deep breath, puts a calm mask over her face, then looks to 9109 to make sure it's ready. It fluffs itself one last time, then assumes an upright, dignified posture and signs yes. She nods, then gets out of the car with a measured stride, looking serene, professional, and approachable.

Grey finds her rifle, scrambles to load it, and braces it against the window.

The ripper car sits in a cow pasture, an unblemished white ellipsoid despite the dust and dirt it's kicked up. It's large enough to hold half a dozen people—and if they have any sense, there are at least four inside: a negotiator, a medic, a (getaway) driver, and backup. No weapons are visible, but they're surely there. A speaker crackles.

"Release 9109," it says in genderless, ageless StanG.

9109 hops off of Larkin's shoulder and struts to the ripper car, then starts dancing hands-free SGSL. Larkin lets it talk and stops at the cattle fence, holding up her empty hands—not a fighting position, not a defensive position. When 9109 finishes talking and turns to look at her, she says in her clear, soothing river voice, "My name is Ebony Larkin and I'm with Peripheral

Immigration and Naturalization. I'm here to help you."

9109 dances some more, but the ship shows no sign of movement. Grey flips her safety off.

"Remove the collar. 9109 is a free being."

"I'm sorry. It's gene-locked. We don't have that technology."

Silence.

From her position, Grey can see a trickle of sweat on the back of Larkin's neck, but it doesn't show in her voice or body language. "We have a long tradition of giving refuge to constructs seeking freedom. 9109 is free and wants to go home, so we return it to you."

"Why is our leader collared and deprived of its adapt-tech?"

"That is a good question that we are still investigating."

"You don't know."

"No."

Silence. 9109 dances. Grey can count Larkin's breaths.

The ship comes open with a hiss, showing a white-haired human woman, unarmed. She rushes to 9109, who leaps up into her hands, and they confer.

Whatever 9109 says, it's apparently good enough for the woman. She turns to them both and bows, cautious.

"My thanks for your assistance in liberating our leader," she says in crisp StanG. "We—"

Grey's phone rings. She bites her tongue and ignores it.

The phone rings, rings, and finally goes to voice mail, only to start ringing again. When she glances at the screen, it says BOB.

She looks at the Construct Deconglom negotiator, then at Larkin. They're talking, sitting together on the dirt across from each other—a peaceful position, and Larkin's relaxed. Grey puts the safety back on and answers her phone. "What?"

"It's the VIP," Bob says in a subdued voice. "She wants to talk to you."

If he's calling now, it's because he has no choice.

Fine, then. This whole case is only messy because some conglomerate official insisted on bringing a trafficked construct here for some unfathomable reason. If that official wants to talk, then Grey has some choice words for her, and unlike Bob, she can get away with being rude and impolitic. "Put her on."

There's a beep. Bob says, "Hello, ma'am?"

Apur (or whoever she is) must have gotten her hands on an English translation module, a good (expensive) one; she speaks fluently. "Yes, hello, you tedious incompetent. Is this the one in charge?"

"Yes," Grey says. "Specialist Grey. Operations."

"So I hear. I have it on authority that you are my obstruction. It would be a terrible shame if our relationship were to be irreparably damaged. We do not trade with enemies."

Fluji Alpha has never traded with them. "Okay," Grey says.

"I insist upon recouping my property. The collar is a fresh prototype, highly valuable; where is it?"

Grey eyes the ripper car. It's opened up, and a white-haired girl is scanning 9109's collar. Grey keeps her rifle where it is but relaxes her grip. "Gene-locked. Can store it for you a week; then it's ours." Presuming the girl can get it off.

"Have you no way to bring it into communal airspace for me?"

Bob makes a stifled noise—a snort, maybe. Grey says, "No."

"And my pet?"

Grey prefers SGSL to StanG, but she can say, "9109 is not your pet," with construct-object and person-free suffixes to make the meaning clear.

Cold silence. Then Apur says, in English, "Your accent shames you. I wish to speak with your superior, Williamson." When thwarted, go up the chain.

"Williamson isn't my superior," Grey says in English. Williamson coughed up jurisdiction to her, in her mind, and she's not giving it back, nor does she want to interrupt Andersen's Thanksgiving for this nonsense. When she checks her watch, second shift is just starting. "Bob, second shift Comm captain?"

"Bernadette Vega."

Good. Vega is fresh, rested, and an old horse fluent in StanG. "Transfer."

"She's on another call," Bob chirps. "Hold please!"

Apur says something indignant, cut off midway through.

"There, that should hold her," Bob says. "Considering everything, I thought you might want to warn Bernadette first."

"Thank you," Grey says. "I'll hold."

"No need; I lied. Transferring."

And before Grey can think of a response, she hears, "Vega here," and has to stitch more words together.

Apur fights kicking and screaming every step of the way, but Williamson handed the "headache" to Grey, which means that once Vega's in charge, there's nothing he or Apur can do. 9109 is free, safe, and soon gone, taking the newly patented collar with it. Vega, unsurprisingly, sides with Larkin, Grey, and Bob; PIN policy regarding fugitive constructs is ironclad. Grey spends the rest of the shift doing the paperwork with Bob.

All of that is satisfying, however tedious. Far more frustrating and time-

consuming is dealing with Williamson, who reacts as though they've created a massive diplomatic incident and seems dead set on painting Bob as some villainous mastermind who spearheaded the whole thing (not Larkin) and was rude to Apur (not Grey) for some nebulous reason. Grey, Larkin, and Vega back Bob up, but they shouldn't have to, and Williamson doesn't get reprimanded, which is disturbing. The whole thing has a surreal, unpleasant taste to it, like something's missing. Grey never does find out why 9109 was brought to Vago in the first place, or even if the VIP truly was Apur, and it bothers her.

All the absurdity does keep her from remembering the holiday... until the shift ends. Then it all crashes down on her at once.

She thinks about her empty apartment, the can of soup, bag of salad, and TV awaiting her. She thinks about being alone.

She decides to work out instead.

The PIN gym is empty after 4PM on Thanksgiving, but she can at least see and hear her second-shift coworkers going about their business outside. When she changes into her gym clothes, she even allows herself the treat of her *Barbarian Barbara* T-shirt, which Larkin gave her. Normally she wouldn't dare, since it's a women's show and she doesn't want anyone to wonder, but just for this evening, with nobody around to see her, she needs this little bit of herself.

Exercise usually makes her feel good, but nothing can stop the burgeoning awareness of what the rest of the day will hold. Eventually, she has to leave. Eventually, she has to go home.

Then her stomach gurgles, and she realizes that she's starving. Glad for the excuse to stay longer, she decides to visit the break room fridge. For a moment, she considers changing, but the building is half-deserted and it's too early for the second shift dinner rush, so finally she goes as is.

She's rooting around in the overstuffed freezer, someone's ice cream in her hand, when she hears, "That's not yours, lady."

Grey nearly jumps out of her skin. She spins and there's Bob, looking drained and exhausted... and now deeply chagrined.

"Shit, sorry, I—" but he just putters out.

Grey stays frozen. What's given her away? Her shirt? Her body language? She wasn't paying attention; did she slip? (And at the same time, she doesn't want Bob to be sorry, doesn't want him to correct himself, doesn't want to hear anything about what he thinks she really is.)

But Bob doesn't do any of that. He just shakes his head like he's throwing off a bad dream and continues, "I don't care if you *are* senior specialist with honors; Darlene will have your ass for stealing her ice cream."

Grey isn't stealing it, but her throat is locked, so she just stands there with it. (Now that she's looking, she sees the label: DARLENE'S! CURSED! DO NOT EAT!) What is Bob doing here at this hour? Doesn't he have people to be with?

As though to answer her, he goes over to the Lost and Found board on the wall and pulls his keys off the tack. He pockets them, looking at her now like he's never seen her before.

"That's a good act you have," he says. "I'm impressed."

Grey's heart starts pounding.

"You're not stupid; you just want everyone to think you are. Why?"

Grey relaxes. Oh. That. That's fine, though it's still closer than is safe.

(Because she doesn't want him getting close, doesn't want—)

But it's been a bad day, so she replies, "I like getting to you."

Bob's eyes spark. "Well, I'll be damned," he says, leaning against the door and crossing his arms. "A sense of humor, *and* you're a better troll than I am."

Grey doesn't know what that means, but she likes the way Bob says it, and she likes the way he's smiling at her. He has a wicked smile.

Oh no. This was why she was trying to drive him off. He thinks she's a man, this is a Don't Ask, Don't Tell workplace, fuzzies work in the next building over, and she's too drained to redirect well. She tries to shutter her expression, pull back, but Bob just chuckles, approaches until he's only a couple feet away, pinning her between him and the open fridge. He's a foot shorter than her, not powerfully built, but Grey's neck prickles anyway.

"I like that. Makes you interesting." He reaches forward, plucks the ice cream out of her hand with a flourish, leans close, and purrs in a velvet voice, "I like getting to you too, boss."

Grey's mouth goes dry.

Bob pulls out of Grey's personal space and turns his attention to the ice cream label. "So," he says in his normal voice, "is it working?"

It's late. Grey's hungry, tired, and not looking forward to spending Thanksgiving on the couch with the television. So she says, "Yes."

Apparently Bob doesn't expect that; he looks up, startled for a moment, then laughs. He has a good laugh. "Good!" he says.

He leans past Grey to put the ice cream back into the freezer but doesn't touch her. "Don't eat this crap," he says. "It's low-fat. Take me home, and I'll feed you Thanksgiving dinner. You like pie? I'll make pie."

She should say no. This is a bad idea.

She says yes.

GOODNIGHT, GRACIE

It was the stiffest Thanksgiving dinner I ever had.

Grey showered, replaced both uniform and steel rod, and silently waved me into 1990's most boring, practical sedan, but I was determined not to fall for the hardass act this time. Anyone who'd trolled me that successfully had earned my full attention, and I'd felt *something* in that break room.

My apartment was still half full of boxes, but at least I'd cleaned up the Eugene Smedley conspiracy bunker and stopped piling dishes everywhere. Grey looked like the kind of person who ironed for fun, but I tried not to be embarrassed, just swept a half-built computer out of the way and said, "Pardon the mess; I wasn't expecting company. Shoes off."

After a tense glance around, Grey knelt to silently unlace. I went to turn on the oven, pull out pie-making supplies, and grab a bottle of wine. I'd need it.

"You drink?"

"A little."

Oh, thank god. I got wineglasses, and when I turned, I found Grey in tie and shirt sleeves, washing up and making a beeline for the pie stuff.

"You're my guest; you don't have to—" Grey gave me a look like a dog desperate to go out, and the words withered on my tongue. "Okay."

Grey's sleeves had little button straps to hold them up. The scars were still a jolt, but I was getting used to them, enough to notice something else: Grey's arms were shaved.

Hm. Maybe I wasn't the only one flagging rainbows amidst the navy blue...

I handed over the Brie and Braeburns. "Chop these. I'm doing the chicken."

I racked my brains while Grey chopped apples and cheese, but by the time I had the chicken spiced and sauteing, I'd come to the conclusion that I couldn't ask... or tell. If I was wrong, I was sunk. Worse, I was washed. And girder or not, Grey was the only one I felt safe working for since September 11th.

Biting my tongue, I glanced over at Grey, grimly rolling out pie crust, tie thrown over one shoulder. The sight was incongruous enough to lighten my mood... until I noticed the muscles working in Grey's scarred, shaved forearms.

Ah. So *that* was what I'd felt in the break room. Well, if my libido had to choose badly, at least it'd chosen someone guaranteed not to notice.

Grey looked up, cheek streaked with flour. I resisted the urge to wipe it away and say a line. Instead, I passed my towel over. "You've got flour there."

Grey brushed it off. "This one's done."

"Good. Give it here." Grey did, looking expectant. After a moment, I realized why. "Oh, we're only making the one. Apple cheese chicken."

I got out the pie tin, crammed everything in, shoved it into the oven to bake, and popped the naan, bhatia kadhi, and shaak into the microwave. The rice cooker was all set. Now for the hard part: getting Grey talking. But what did you talk about with someone this reticent? What did we have in common?

Work. "You know StanG?" I asked, pouring the wine.

Grey accepted the glass with a shrug. "Better with SGSL."

SGSL was StanG Sign Language. Same writing system. "Would you be willing to teach me some? That whole case, I felt at sea with that auto-translated garbage, and I hated feeling snowed."

"Shouldn't have happened," Grey said, and for a moment, I thought I caught a hint of professional irritation. "Williamson's job." Then, as though realizing my question was still unanswered, "Yes."

"Thanks." The next Apur would have a tougher job. More important, it'd give me a respectable, heterosexual excuse to meet Grey outside of work.

The microwave dinged, and I passed out plates and silverware. Grey seemed uncertain—probably none of the dishes were familiar—but dug in, only to go still and sit there without chewing.

My staring must've been too obvious. "Delicious," Grey said, and set in.

"Damn right," I said, trying not to be too pleased with myself.

"Nut fudge was too. Thank you."

"The kaju katli? No problem. I liked the macaroons." I had to know. "How did you know about Diwali?"

Grey hesitated. "Looked it up at the library. They have encyclopedias."

Not even the Internet. Then I realized something even weirder: Grey couldn't have done it right away. It would've had to wait for at least an hour or two, because... "The day I mentioned it, you clearly had an appointment with Management after me. What was that about, anyway?"

Grey drank. "Want me out of the field."

I nearly spilled my wine. "What? Why?"

Grey cranked one shoulder til it popped. "Getting old." Then, with a spark that was *exactly* the personality I'd sensed in the break room (and would've pleased me under normal circumstances), "thought you wanted a transfer."

"Yeah, until all the trigger-happy young fellows started flooding Ops. At least you don't think I'm a terrorist." I steadied myself with more wine. "So?"

"Told them no. I hate desk work."

I relaxed. "The boys upstairs let you say no to them?"

Grey looked away. "Not always. Still made you work on Diwali."

"What do you mean?"

Grey hesitated, then admitted, "Asked them to let you off."

I remembered how I'd behaved. "After I snapped at you?"

"Wasn't about me."

Well, no, but... "But you realize I was wrong to do it, right?"

Grey just stared at me blankly. I felt like a heel.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's fine."

It wasn't, but Grey was stiffening up again, so I said, "Then thank you for trying," and topped off the offered wineglass. "Why didn't you say so before?"

Grey had apparently drunk enough to joke. "Didn't want you to like me."

"Ha! Too late," I teased, "you're never getting rid of me now."

Grey didn't laugh or smile, but it looked touch and go for a moment. Maybe I was getting somewhere. Maybe I could—

No. No, I couldn't.

Maybe I didn't have to. "After all," I said, "you're a *Barbarian Barbara* fan."

Grey perked up. "You watch?"

"I modded a forum for it in the nineties. I might still have a couple fanzines for it somewhere." *Barbarian Barbara* had an infamously queer fanbase. Maybe...

No. "I watch the reruns after work."

Straight? Or terminally square? I tried again. "What got you into it?"

"The actress is good. You?"

"I like the mythology." Ah hell, why not, subterfuge wasn't getting me anywhere. "And I like women who can break me in half."

And Specialist Ironass, battleaxe of the PIN, went wide-eyed and turned pink. Now there was a surprise. I liked that—

"You too?" I asked innocently.

The oven timer went off, and Grey about jumped to get the pie out. Out of view, I kicked myself. Down, boy. Stop it. Maybe Grey wasn't queer at all, just a sub in denial... and wasn't *that* a mental image...

Distraction came when Grey plopped the pie down. It'd come out a beauty, bursting out of its crust from all the food groups crammed into it. I pulled out the pie-slicer and affected magisterial dignity.

"You are now part of a grand, noble tradition," I announced, heaving slices onto our plates, "one I've had since undergrad. After a godawful day like today, you make this pie," get high out of your mind, "and eat it. Take it from a fat boy: food is a mood stabilizer."

I had gotten through innumerable finals, break-ups, and travails with this pie. I never thought I'd be sharing one with Grey, of all people, but there was a lot about the past year I hadn't expected. And Grey *did* eat two big slices.

"Wonderful," Grey said, settling back. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." By all means, eye candy, keep thanking me. "I'll send you back with some, keep you out of the office fridge."

So on the whole, a not-terrible dinner. What's more, the following Monday evening, Grey arrived at my cube with a copy of the StanG alphabet tables, a tattered old pocket dictionary, and a cheat-sheet of peripherals. Success!

After that, we built a routine. Three days a week, we'd clear a table in the break room, Grey would drive off anyone who might interrupt, and we'd spend a respectable hour learning the lingua franca.

It was a royal pain in the ass. I'd learned all my languages as a child, not an adult in my late forties. StanG was hard, SGSL hellish. Adding insult to injury, Grey (who usually had the world's stiffest wrists) signed like poetry in motion. It wasn't fair.

"Do you prefer sign to talking?" I asked once. "You look like you do."

Grey's hands went stiff and still again. "Yes."

I raised an eyebrow. "That wasn't an insult."

"Talk is a lot. Too much. Can't keep up." Grey signed an open-mouthed pull, as though trying to drag out words—nothing in SGSL, I'd learn later, but "over word-budget" in Grey.

"Well then," I said, "all the more reason for me to learn SGSL."

Every once in a while, I got a similar flicker of personality, but most of the time, I just got lessons. Every time we finished, Grey gave me a ride home, I offered dinner or *Barbarian Barbara* watches and got a, "no, thank you." There was no way to push without looking like I was making a pass, so I didn't.

Things went along like this for a month or so, until one day we set up only for a new guy to harry us out. Apparently being forced to work here wasn't bad enough; we had to perform our devotion in our off-hours too by ducking in to the office Christmas—ahem, "winter holiday" party.

I groaned, "I don't even celebrate this damn holiday!" Or get it off.

"Me either," Grey said bitterly.

I blinked. "You don't?"

Grey said nothing, just kept packing up with obvious reluctance.

"I... just assumed you were Christian."

Still nothing.

"If I might ask, what...?"

Grey's shoulders tensed. "Jewish. Atheist."

"Hindu atheist; nice to meet you." Grey relaxed a little. "You're the old horse; how long until we can bolt?"

"Fifteen minutes. I'll drive you home. No one will argue with me."

"You're the best, boss." Even I could handle fifteen minutes, especially if Grey was suffering with me.

There was nothing like government-mandated holiday cheer at a place you hated. They hosted it in the conference room with the chairs pushed to the walls and glittery plastic snowflakes taped over the management fad slogans on the blackboard. The conference table had been draped in a plastic red-and-green tablecloth and covered in cheap chips, a limp salad platter, and brightly colored punch. Cloying carols played through the speakers.

Grey went to go lurk in a corner. I took a low-fat sugar-free cookie shaped like a snowman.

At the best of times, the PIN probably threw depressing parties, but add in the September 11th churn and it was *tense*. Everyone was laughing too loud and smiling too big, pretending they weren't watching each other like vultures circling a carcass. People were dividing down the line of the old horses and the new restructure guys, putting my August-hired ass in an awkward position, and I couldn't blame Jenny for going off to neck with Specialist MacIntire in the supply closet.

Grey didn't even make it the full fifteen minutes, disappeared while I was in the restroom, and when I came back, Randall and Hernandez (who'd clearly done some drinking) were making noble declarations about terrorists, the sanctity of America, and the war on Christmas.

I tried to edge out, but that got Randall's attention.

"What's your problem, Doshi? Are we *bothering* you?"

I tried to keep smiling. "Come on, Randall..."

Now he was starting to come over. Weedy or not, he was still taller than I was, and everyone else was looking away with uncomfortable smiles, so I was relieved when Specialist Larkin came to my rescue and whisked me off.

"Hey! Hey!" Randall whined. "Come on, Larkin!"

"Cool off, Randall," she said over her shoulder. "Drink some water."

"Thank you," I said, once we were safely out of the room. "I'm going to go

find Grey; I want my ride home.”

“Good idea. I’ll keep things from blowing up here, at least til you get back, but then I’m leaving too; someone’s spiked the punch and I think it’s going to get ugly. Let me know if you need me for a substitute ride.”

A couple of the second shifters were in the break room, looking resentful, but no Grey. No luck in the bathrooms either.

In hindsight, it was obvious. Where else would a workaholic like Grey hide but the office? Not at the desk, though—on the floor, sitting against the wall. If I hadn’t heard humming, I never would’ve realized.

I tried the door, found it unlocked, and came in. “I don’t know that song.”

“Romberg,” Grey replied from the corner in an over-enunciated voice.

“Supposed to be a tenor part. Mario Lanza.”

“I see you got into the punch,” I said, noting the plastic cup on the chair.

Grey made a face.

I sipped from the cup, almost lost my nose hair, and hastily put it back.

“Wow, this is vile. How much have you had?”

Solemnly: “Too much.”

“No kidding.” I shut the door and sat against it, making myself as comfortable as I could on the cheap carpet. Forms were stacked on the floor between us; when I picked one up, I discovered it was a case report from the day prior. “Are you doing paperwork? What a boy scout!”

Grey plucked the paper out of my hand and replaced it on the stack, carefully aligning the corners. “Not a boy scout. What’re you doing here?”

“Looking for you and avoiding Randall and Hernandez.”

Grey frowned. “Hassling you?”

“They’re feeling patriotic, let’s put it that way. Larkin bailed me out, but I think I’ve had enough. You want to get out of here?”

Clearly yes, but Grey grimaced. “Can’t drive like this.”

I held out my hand. “I’m sober. Or we can call a cab.”

After a brief search, Grey dropped the car keys into my hand.

“Wow,” I said. “You *do* hate these parties.”

Grey made the “over word-budget” sign. “Too loud. Too much.” With a sigh, slumping against the wall: “Not good with people. Treat me wrong.”

“Do I treat you wrong?”

Silence. Then, “You’re not afraid of me.”

“People aren’t scared of you, Grey.”

That got me a skeptical look.

“Okay, some of them are,” I amended, “but most of them, I think they just

don't know what to say to you. You're not exactly Mr. Approachable."

Grey winced. "No Mr. Not a Mr."

"Specialist Approachable," I revised, and that passed muster.

I should've caught on then, but as it was, we got up to go. Grey was a little clumsy and over-coordinated but could still walk well enough unassisted. My disappointment gave me an idea.

"Do me a favor?"

Grey looked up—well, down.

"Pretend you're drunker. You're my ticket past Randall and Hernandez."

I held out my arm, and after a moment, Grey took it, trying to touch me as little as possible. Ah well, I could still enjoy it.

We had to go past the conference room to leave—and anyway, I wanted Larkin to know we were leaving. I waved... and caught Randall's eye. With the doggedness of the drunk, he picked up right where he'd left off.

"We're not done!"

"Yes, we are. Do you mind? I have to go pour Grey into bed."

That just made him and Hernandez think they needed to ask permission.

"Grey," Hernandez made as though to grab my other arm, "we need to talk to Doshi. Let us borrow him for a second."

"No," Grey said.

"But—"

"No."

"Come on—"

Grey went into laser-beam stare mode. "No."

There was a tense moment, but apparently Randall and Hernandez weren't so drunk as to pick a fight with Specialist Ironass. They exchanged glances, shrugged, and disavowed me like cats.

With a grateful look, I said in my best George Burns, "say goodnight, Grey."

The reference must've come through. "Goodnight, Gracie."

That's when I caught on.

It was just as well that Grey was too sloshed to notice or talk beyond giving me directions. By the time I got to Grey's apartment complex (big, ugly, beige), I had thought of a dozen things to say and a million reasons not to say them.

Unaware, Grey saved me with a, "Thank you," and even a hint of a smile.

That knocked me out of it. "Careful. They won't be scared of you anymore."

A stranger could see that smile now. "Goodnight, Bob."

I handed over the keys and took the plunge. "You know, I'm bi."

Grey froze. Looked up.

"My niecephew, they're a they, been giving me transgender liberation speeches all year." If I was wrong about this, Randall and Hernandez would be the least of my worries. "I just wanted to tell you, since I'm trying to be friends with you and I'm lousy at hiding it."

Grey stared at me hard. Silence. Shit. I'd fucked myself.

But then... "Grace. My name's Grace."

"Grace," I said, trying it out. "It suits you. She?"

"Yes. But not at work." Hesitantly: "you?"

"Just he. I've never been good at it, though... anyway, I'm going to call myself a cab, get myself home." Die of relief. "Goodnight, Grace. Happy Nondescript Winter Holiday."

I pulled my phone out of my pocket but Grey waved to get my attention.

"Company?" she asked. "While you wait."

I blinked. "Sure, if you're offering."

Together, we perched on the trunk of Grey's car to wait for the cab.

"Niecephew?" she asked.

I had photos in my wallet, along with their siblings. Grey let me blather and gush, didn't seem to notice that I was babbling, looking at me like she was wondering where the hell I'd come from. Her eyes were hazel; I'd never noticed before. When the cab pulled up and I got up to go, she waved again. "Barbarian Barbara has a movie."



"I heard." It'd been the talk of my old forum friends. "I've heard it's big dumb cheese, just my style."

"Still showing at Autumnville Theater."

"The one with the murals and the velvet Elvis museum?" She hadn't struck me as the kind of person who'd go there.

But she nodded. "Want to go?"

"What, now? We don't know the show times, Ms. Sociable!"

She shrugged. "Velvet Elvises are nice."

I cracked up. "Sure, Grace. I'm all yours."

We both got in the cab.

TOUCHED

Grey knows the moment Bob starts liking her, because that's when he starts touching her.

It's Thanksgiving, and after stuffing her full of delicious food, Bob still has enough leftovers to feed an army. He hands over an enormous package of them before she goes, and as he does, their hands brush. He doesn't seem to notice.

Grey notices.

Most people give Grey a wide berth, like they're afraid of her. But after she and Bob spend Christmas eating Chinese food and watching Barbara wage love and war through the Roman Empire, the touches become intentional: brushing against her in the hall, a light tap to her arm or shoulder to punctuate a remark. They don't feel intrusive, like Penn's shoulder-punches. They feel friendly, joking... good.

One lunch, when Bob's pulled away in mid-word, his hand trails across her shoulder, and it starts feeling *too* good.

Larkin notices. While Bob's back is turned, she gives Grey a glance over her shades and asks in SGSL, "He's handsy with you. Do you mind?"

Grey shakes her head. Larkin relaxes.

"Good. We don't need another Penn." She sinks her teeth into a burger—from Thanksgiving to New Year's, she gives up her diet. "Is he...?"

Grey's cheeks flame and she signs, "It doesn't matter."

Larkin clearly doesn't believe her. Before Grey can stop her, she calls in English, "Hey, Doshi! You seeing anybody?"

"Ha! Relationships are a waste of the good stuff," Bob replies, grabbing his bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

When he leaves, Grey tells Larkin, "Stop it." Even if Bob likes women like her (doubtful), they're partners, counterparts. It's not like Larkin and Pritchard, who work different shifts. Bob and Grey's fraternization would be the worst kind. Impossible.

Besides. Grey won't be here for much longer.

Larkin holds up her hands. "Just looking out for you."

"It'll pass," Grey insists. "Always does."

She likes Bob. As long as they don't discuss his wandering hands, as long as it's in the gray zone of propriety, it can continue. Bob keeps to deniable things: leaning on Grey when reaching for something, the occasional hand on her

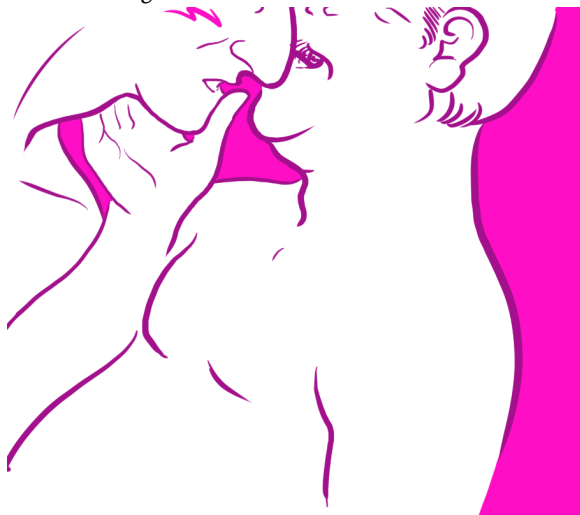
shoulder, nudges to get her attention.

Around New Year's, going over StanG, Bob's hand is warm on her arm when a manager goes by. Bob pulls away, busies himself with papers, and Grey realizes that friendly men don't worry about touching someone in front of management. Flirting men do. And if Bob isn't interested in a relationship...

She can't oblige, and there'd be no point anyway, but she still burns, and now nothing gets her attention like Bob's hands, soft and graceful, with tapered fingers that belong to concert pianists or Renaissance paintings. She's spent years training herself not to talk with her hands, but Bob dances with his.

And now they're dancing with her, increasingly confidently as Bob learns to read her. He keeps touching her, light and fiery—arm, shoulder, low back—and she keeps letting him, keeps pretending not to notice. He keeps calling her Grace. Naming something makes it real, and hearing her name on his tongue... it can't go anywhere, but it's been a long time. It's hard not to want.

One night, she dreams of Bob's clever hands running up her neck, under her shirt, down her pants. She dreams of Bob's wicked smile and velvet voice ("I like getting to you too, Grace,") his fingers curling into her *right there*, and then she wakes up, hot, aching, *not done*.



Grey squirms. Desperate and rebellious, she touches herself the way Bob in the dream touched her, the way she used to before her parents caught her. When she slides her fingers up into herself, her long-denied body combusts—finally, *finally*—leaving her limp and panting, her shorts wet and clinging to her thighs.

That hasn't happened since the accident. For a moment, all she can feel is relief, gratitude at the healing.

Then reality sets in, and she throws clothes and sheets into the laundry basket. Enough is enough, she tells herself. She'll ask Bob to stop. Things won't be the same, but what matters is keeping her mind on the job, even if he stops

touching her.

She tosses and turns all night, sleeps through her morning alarm, misses her run, comes on shift muzzy and irritable from the lack of exercise.

When she arrives at her office, Bob is there with coffee. He must be on his second cup; he's unusually cheerful and lively for the hour, and when he passes Grey's mug to her, their hands brush. It feels like lightning.

He doesn't seem to notice. "Rough night, boss?"

Grey opens her mouth to tell him. Sighs.

"Yes," she says.

And that's the closest she gets.

RED ROSES, OLD HORSES

Jenny pulled up at 5:30 AM, all bouncy brown curls and schadenfreude.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Bob," she crooned.

I glared at her over my coffee and climbed in with a grumble. Witty comebacks had to wait until after caffeine.

She got on the highway. "So, what's your plan, Button Mash and beer?"

"Tempting, but no." I sipped. "Grey and I are having singles' night out."

Jenny shook her head sadly and pulled onto the highway. "I can't believe you *like* him now." I couldn't contradict the "him" no matter how I wanted to.

I rolled my eyes. "You make it sound like a character defect."

"It is a character defect, Bob! Grey's a mass murder waiting to happen—"

"Never. Mass murder is against policy."

"—and you're a sadist who likes pushing him around."

"Yup." She was joking. I was only pretending to. But even if Grey liked men (which I wasn't sure she did), she'd married her job straight out of high school and never broke protocol, unlike me or Jenny. "How about you and MacIntire?"

Specialist MacIntire was Jenny's counterpart, a burly redhead. Their personal relationship had been barely a secret since before my hire.

"We're having a nice romantic dinner—and I won't end up buried under his floorboards," Jenny said. "I won't have to do all the talking either."

I shrugged. "I can talk enough for two."

When we reached the Comm building, some poor optimist had hung red paper hearts in the windows and tuned the radio to love songs, and our cubicle was covered in pink crepe. I tore it down from my half while waiting for my systems to boot; Jenny left hers up.

The clock hit 6 AM. Up on the bridge, Darlene shouted, "Third shift, clock out! First shift, let's get moving!" and we got to work.

The shift started quiet—cranks and bootleggers mostly. Most of my systems stayed functional, which was nice. Jenny and I did our shares of printing, signing, and dating stuff for the Big Blue Binder. During lunch break, Darlene passed out candy hearts, which was nice of her.

Around three, someone came up to Darlene's cube, interrupting a phone call. With a look of annoyance, she stood up, covered her headset mic, and shouted down at us, "All right, which of you jokers ordered delivery?"

Jenny's friend Lila made a show of dismay and went to go fetch.

Getting a delivery guy in was no minor task. They had to be buzzed in (by Agatha, the PIN's least helpful bureaucrat), go through the security checkpoint, showing identification, uniform, goods, and receipt, and be kept under guard while somebody from our department went to collect the pizza or Chinese or whatever it was. Then the whole process was done in reverse to get the guy out. It took a while, but Lila came back grinning with a dozen red roses.

She gave them to Jenny. "Happy Valentine's Day, from you-know-who."

Jenny sat there with her hands to her mouth, eyes huge and shining.

"Aw," I said, patting her back. "Congratulations, kiddo."

Jenny's hands went down. She touched a petal, beaming big as the sky, and I made a mental note to buy MacIntire a drink next time I saw him. Before she could find words, though, Darlene called us up to her desk.

Darlene's desk was set above the rest of ours in a modernist glass cube that probably won a design award and was nigh-unusable. Usually, Darlene left her door open and shouted down to all of us, but now she shut us into the goldfish bowl with her and sat down, looking frazzled.

"That was the League," she said, pointing to the phone.

The Jaunter's League was an off-world cross between the UN and the EU. They thought we were forest monkeys in jackboots, so hadn't invited us to join, and seeing as they still allowed slavery, we wouldn't have accepted if they had. We sometimes worked together, but never comfortably.

"They want us to go fetch some ship and bring it back. It's set to land in our sector within the hour, and I smell a rat. Doshi, prove me right. St. Rivers, you're hot-spotting. Go, and keep it quiet til you have something for me."

She gave us a stack of grainy faxes, and we went back to our cube to divvy them up and ponder—me the what, Jenny the where.

Right away, I saw why Darlene had gotten suspicious. The mess of records, forms, and bureaucratese was gummed up with clearance back-and-forth that even Grey might've been baffled by, but it was all padding. The only hard data we had was the ship's class and registration... which was so new that we didn't have it on paper yet, and that database had crashed again. Whatever it was, and whatever or whoever was on it, the League wanted the whole thing back yesterday... and they didn't want us asking questions about it.

When I told Jenny, she made a derisive noise from her maps and dog-eared hot spotter book. "It better not be that slave catcher BS again, I swear to Jesus..."

"Let's find out." I was already adjusting my headset and dialing off-world.

As much as I hated working for the PIN, I did like this part of it. The

League had technology beyond our most utopian dreams, but it was still made, maintained, and guarded by people, who are dumb on every peripheral. Why beat your head against the wall when you can schmooze the door man? Grey had taught me that there was power in people thinking you were stupid, and though it took a while, I managed to Agatha my way into finding the right League Missing Vehicles bureaucrat. Maybe they could tell me more.

When I got put on hold again, I turned to Jenny, who was hard at work with compass and ruler. "It's some shiny sales demo cruiser, the kind they send to conference shows to show off merchandise."

"People or things?" she asked.

"It's small and automated, so no crew. If it's carrying anyone, it'd be a really tight fit. I'm guessing things."

"Things don't hijack a ship," she said, holding up her map, covered in shaded overlapping circles. "Unless Transit's really off, it's headed for the big chain. That's a person driving that thing."

I looked over her shoulder and swore. "The big chain" (nobody used its official name) had opened up low over the Vago desert and held unusually steady for decades; Grey had cut her teeth there back in the '80s. Its fame still attracted the desperate... who usually crashed once they came through, saw the ground rushing up, and panicked. A lot of them died at impact.

Jenny got to work on cleaning the map up for the rest of us, but I couldn't watch; my bureaucrat was back on the phone.

"Mixed bag," I said when I hung up. "For once, our system isn't at fault; the whole thing is down, so they can't tell me who owns the ship. Good news is, I can tell you the *kind* of people who own it: tech and bio start-ups."

Jenny sucked her teeth. We both knew that in the League, "tech" and "bio" could be euphemism for "constructs," itself a euphemism for "slaves." "That's a Priority One for you, always at the end of shift. Let's go talk to Darlene."

After that, everything became logistics. Darlene delegated the task load, and we got to work herding cats. At least second shift was coming in, giving us extra hands, and we were able to blanket the probable crash radius before the fireworks started. Then it was hurry up and wait.

Grey was staked out at some far-flung corner of Jenny's map with Larkin, MacIntire, and Dean, a new guy I didn't know well. Through statistical inevitability...

"Comm, this is Larkin, we have visual, target is through the hot spot at—"
Crash!

"Correction: target has landed."

Jenny bit her lip. So far, the vehicle was behaving like something being driven by a person, right down to bungling the landing, and she didn't look happy at being right. Across the floor, other comboys were quieting down and turning to listen to their radios. Other Ops groups discussing logistics, mostly. Then of all things, the boys upstairs came on:

"Ops, this is Management." The voice was unfamiliar. "The occupant, 107, is to be contained and returned. All clear?"

If Larkin felt hesitant, it didn't show in her voice. "10-4."

"Wait, Management knows there's a driver?" Jenny asked. "Since when does the League talk to them and not us?"

We looked up to Darlene (and Bernadette, the second-shift captain) on the bridge. They seemed to be having a hushed, heated discussion; Darlene threw up her hands, and Bernadette shook her head in disgust. Whoever this licensed idiot was, he'd gone over their heads.

A buzz went up. Jenny and I both checked our pockets, but it was her personal cell. Over her shoulder, I saw the text message from MacIntire: "see you tonight. Love you."

Jenny texted back "XOXO" and put it back in her pocket.

Then *my* personal cell buzzed. It was a text from Grey: "how many?"

If they were privately contacting us instead of asking by radio or work phone, they shared our uneasiness. "Our size, 1, tight fit," I replied.

Silence for a while; presumably Grey, Larkin, MacIntire, and Dean were debating what to do next. Then the radio crackled into life again. "This is MacIntire. I'm approaching the vehicle—"

The speaker erupted in chaos, making us jump, and it didn't turn off, bogarting the whole channel: crashing, static, shouting maybe. MacIntire had lost his radio.

A mutter rose up and comboys started flipping to the crisis channel; from the sound of it, Ops had the same idea. I reached for our radio, but one look from Jenny stopped me. I could hear the clean channel from the next cube over—lots of voices, nobody from our group.

Jenny twisted her bangles around her wrists. MacIntire's radio kept broadcasting indecipherable mayhem for a while, then cut out.

Jenny sat frozen. I put a hand on her shoulder. Then our channel kicked up again. "This is Larkin from Ops. Target has fled. We have no visual."

A sigh went up on the Comm floor, but Larkin kept talking. Somebody was making a hell of a racket in the background, but I couldn't make any words out.

"Request paramedics; agents are down." The noise behind her spiked, then

cut out, like she'd silenced her radio to say something to whoever it was before coming back. When she did, the background noise was gone. "Things got bad."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath against the ice in my stomach. In Ops understatement, that meant someone was dead.

I picked up my radio. "What's Grey's status?"

"Grey's all right, Bob."

I released my breath and let myself slump against the support of my chair, but then I saw Jenny, sitting at her desk, staring at nothing, rubbing a rose petal between her fingers.

"Is Jenny with you?" Larkin continued.

Jenny just sat there. I answered for her, "Yes, she's on."

Larkin sighed over the line. I already knew what she'd say, word for word. Every time, it was the same phrase and the same tone: "I'm sorry. It was fast; he didn't even feel it."

Of course he didn't. They never did.

Jenny nodded as though Larkin could see her, then reached over and pulled the roses into her lap. Then she began to cry, but only with her eyes; her face looked confused, like it hadn't sunk in yet.

The floor went silent except for the computers and fluorescent lights. I looked at Lila in the cube next door, who nodded and made a flagging-down gesture with one hand, a phone with the other; she'd handle the docs.

Telling Larkin, "Medics on the way," I killed our radio, removed my headset, and went to Jenny.

"He always went for the big gesture," she said, shaking the roses at me as though in admonishment. Her voice trembled only slightly. "Corny white boy. And now he's..." Her face became animated and terrible for a moment; then the power went out again. "Oh, the reservation. I need to cancel the reservation. Valentine's Day, you know, everyone wants to be there on Valentine's Day..."

"Don't worry about it, kiddo." I reached over to shut down her computer, and she made no move to stop me. "Let's clock you out and get you home. There anything you need?"

"No. Nothing." Then she changed her mind and thrust the roses at me. "Yes. Get rid of these."

I held my hands out to push them away. "No, I—"

"*Get rid of them.*" Her voice splintered.

Feeling helpless, I took the bundle from her hand. Once the flowers left her line of sight, she returned to her stupor, idly tearing apart a spare petal.

Lila came over, fidgeting with her necklace. "Jenny? Baby?"

Jenny said nothing. Lila and I exchanged nervous looks and she knelt next to Jenny, rubbing her back. Jenny started to shake and sob, and Lila pulled her in for a hug.

"Sh. It's okay, it's okay. I'm going to drive you home and run you a nice hot bath, okay? I'll stay the night, does that sound good?"

Jenny nodded, too overcome to speak. Maybe I couldn't give her what she needed, but at least she'd have Lila, not have to deal with it alone.

"Thanks, Lila," I murmured to her. "You're a good friend. Take her home, I'll handle the paperwork."

The rest of the shift I spent in a blur of activity, filling out as much of Jenny's paperwork as I could and sending it to the boys upstairs with a request for her to get some mental health leave. I didn't hear Darlene shout, "First shift, clock out!" and realize how late it'd gotten until she came down, jabbed me in the neck with a pencil, and ordered me to go home. Then I shut my computer down, yanked my headset off, and headed out the door with the roses. When Grey wasn't out there waiting for me, I sat on the curb.

People had died at the PIN during my hire, but nobody I knew. Still, Ops was a youngster's game, and Grey was forty-three...

Health and Medical was across the street. As I looked up, the glass doors slid open and Dean stormed out, foot in a boot. When he came upon his car, he yanked the door open and slammed it shut going in. He'd never struck me as one of those guys who raged through a crisis, but then again, I'd never been there for one like this.

If Dean had gone to Medical, maybe Grey had too. I grabbed the flowers and headed over.

When I entered, the reek of ammonia almost knocked me over. Despite everything, I stopped in my tracks and gasped.

"It's bad, isn't it?" That was Doc Pritchard, the second shift EMT who'd probably fixed Dean's foot. She was a tiny woman with a legendary gore tolerance, and I'd never seen her looking so strung out.

"Hi Taneesha," I said. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, putting her hands in her pockets and taking a deep breath. "Yeah, it was rough." She seemed to force her mind off it, gave me a weak smile. "But at least it's over, right? Well, everything but this." She waved a hand at the stench.

"Yeah, what is that, Dean?"

"Nope, Grey." She pulled blue earbuds from her pocket and pushed one into her ear. "Refused an ambulance again, and for once, I'm not sorry; I don't

want my rig smelling like that.”

“Speaking of, where...?”

Taneesha cocked her thumb back into the building. “Last I saw, out of Biohazard and making for the showers. Hope it helps.”

She went back to her ambulance to await the next call, and I headed for the men’s locker room. At that hour, it should’ve had a few unwinding, off-duty first shifters, but the stench must’ve flushed them all out; it was empty except for one shower stall.

I rapped on the door frame: dah dit dah. “Hey. It’s me.”

She rapped back acknowledgment, in Morse.

“Can I get you anything?”

That, she had to use voice for. “Towel. Clothes. Locker key’s on the ring.”

Under the circumstances, I couldn’t blame her for bee-lining to the shower. I had to get rubber gloves out of the supply closet before I touched her uniform, which could’ve stood up by itself, encrusted as it was with blood (hers?) and what looked like rancid pumpkin pie filling. I pulled Grey’s spattered keys off her belt loop and took them to the sink for decontamination.

“What is this crap?” I asked as I scrubbed.

I didn’t expect her to answer, but she called, “Vomit,” over the running water. “Nontoxic.” As though that helped.

The street clothes in the locker (argyle sweater, khakis) were square, but at least Grey wouldn’t look like my bodyguard in them. I grabbed them along with the towel and hung them on the hook outside the shower curtain.

“I’ll see if I can salvage your phone,” I called.

She rapped “roger” on the door frame, and I went to get some garbage bags from the supply closet. Hopefully double-bagging would block out the stench. Dumping the contents of Grey’s pockets into my hand made me grimace. How much vomit could a body contain?

Fortunately, Grey used an indestructible brick phone. Even covered in filth, it was still on, though nonfunctional. I couldn’t get it to turn off and finally popped the battery pack before cleaning it as best I could.

The pager was made of weaker stuff. It was dead. I did my best; maybe a night packed in rice would revive it.

Then there was a... flash drive? It was so disgusting I couldn’t be sure, and just as I finished washing it, the shower curtain rasped back. When I turned, there was Grey doing the top button of her shirt, scrubbed within an inch of her life and smelling like my college O-chem project.

When I’d met Grace, her straight male robot act had been too good; I’d

dismissed her. Now that I knew her properly, she was a big butch beauty with a bird-of-prey look to her. She was younger than me by a few years, not that anyone could tell by looking; her ash-brown hair had started going gray sometime in her twenties, and a couple of decades with the PIN was racking up mileage I never wanted to see. Under the deadpan work mask, I could see lines of strain on her face, but she was moving smoothly. Not her blood on the uniform, I thought with relief. Must've been the 107's.

"Hey there, boss," I said, pulling off my gloves to clap my free hand to her arm. "You look like hell. MacIntire, huh?"

She nodded. "Good man." She held out her hands for her stuff and when I handed it over, shoved it into her pockets without looking.

"You should pack the electronics in rice soon. And maybe a night in baking soda will get the smell off your keys."

"Thank you." She looked hangdog, gestured at herself questioningly.

"Way better than it was," I assured, patting her. "Tolerable."

"Enough for dinner?"

"You still want to?" Grey's people tolerance was low on a good day.

"Don't want to be alone."

Grey rarely said she wanted anything. "I'm flattered," I said.

She glanced at the flowers on the hand drier, tilted her head.

I inferred the question. "They're Jenny's."

"From MacIntire?" So she had known.

"Yeah. She doesn't want them now." I took off my glasses, rubbed them against my sleeve. "Mind if I keep them in your car? I haven't decided what to do with them yet."

If Grey smelled like my chem project, her long-suffering sedan smelled like the whole damned lab. We gave it up as a job for professional cleaners, and Grey shoveled her crap out of the passenger seat for me.

The stench was even worse with the doors shut. Grey saw my face, sighed, and rolled the window down. I sent her a grateful look and cranked mine down too, despite the winter chill.

"I promise I'll put it back up when we arrive; I know what Vago is like—" My cell began to ring. I silenced it and shoved it in the glove compartment, narrowly avoiding a cascade of maps, forms, and tranq tubes.

She saw it. "Okay?"

I sighed, rubbed my face. "I just... don't want to deal with anyone else right now." I couldn't tell my friends outside of work about the job, and Grey was the only coworker I was out to. "Where to, Grace?"

She woke up the car and pulled out of the parking lot. "Punjabi?"

"You hate Punjabi."

"Want it?"

"No, you've had a worse day than me; I won't let you humor me. Italian? Hell, for you, I'll even take a night at the Opera House. It's your favorite, right?"

Her face quirked. "Valentine's Day."

"What? Oh." Even with Jenny's roses in my lap, I'd forgotten. The Opera House would be all hearts and flowers. "The offer still stands."

On a better day, I might've made it an invitation, but after that shift, I wasn't up to it.

Grey's shoulders relaxed a little. "Okay." She got onto the highway.

"Who the hell was that guy who went over our heads?" I asked.

She shrugged. "New."

I grumbled. Since the rise of the Department of Homeland Security, all kinds of acronymed spooks we'd never heard of were turning up in all sorts of management positions... and disappearing just as quickly with zero discussion. "The hell is going on upstairs? And why did the League talk to him?"

Grey just shook her head. She didn't know either. "Ship had a coma-pod. Nothing else."

"Ah hell, so Jenny was right. Another runaway." That must've been how the 107 had fit with so little space and flimsy life support. Might've explained all the vomiting too; coma-pods were rough on a body. "And the boys upstairs wanted to return it. Since when do we do that?"

"Doesn't matter now," Grey said. "It panicked."

True. Any chance of a peaceful resolution had gone out the window the moment it killed MacIntire. "How'd it lose you guys?"

"Smoke. Ship was on fire."

Well, at least it wouldn't get far sick. Maybe second shift would find it hiding in a culvert. "Any word or explanation from Management?"

She shook her head.

"Well, they can pay MacIntire's funeral bills. The hell with them; if they're going to force me to work here, why won't they use me?"

Grey had no answer for me. Usually, she shed the robot act the moment we left work, but today, her face stayed frozen, her body tense. When we arrived and started rolling up our windows, I asked, "Leave your gun for me, Grace?"

She paused.

"I know you're licensed, I know you've had a shit day, and I don't want to fight. But I want to spend my evening with you, not Specialist Ironass."

Grey watched me for a moment, then reached down, undid her holster, and unloaded, disassembled, and locked her gun in the car safe at my feet.

"Thank you," I said, surprised. I'd expected resistance.

She shrugged. "Owners don't like armed customers."

"That's a nice way of putting it." The Opera House never got robbed; the mob hated competition. "I'm grateful anyway. Let's eat."

I gave her shoulder a squeeze and we went in.

In defiance of the urban decay, the Opera House was clean red stone and wrought iron, with waiters who ground pepper from mills as long as their arms into olive oil made by God. The wine menu was good, the pesto divine. But then you had the atmosphere.

The Opera House was singular even in Vago: an opera karaoke bar. No shitting. There was a stage and mic at one end with an old piano player who'd accompany any drunken fool who belted an aria. (Anyone who stumped the piano player got free drinks, but nobody ever did.) Everyone was encouraged to sing along, including the staff, and while they scheduled proper performers on weekends, they hardly needed them.

Grey hated socializing, but she adored opera. I didn't, but if it got the mask off her face and helped us forget MacIntire a little, it was worth it.

The front of house staff was well trained; they must've noticed the smell, but they didn't show it. They gave us a table in a back corner, away from everyone else, which let Grey have her back to the wall and eyes on the exits. The place was decked out for the holiday—white tablecloths, red candles, pink carnations—but no roses, thankfully.

Out came the bread and the pepper mills.

"You drinking anything tonight?" I asked, looking over the wine menu.

"Water."

"Wild woman." I ordered a glass for myself; I needed it.

On a normal day, the Opera House was raucous; on Valentine's Day, people were practically hanging from the chandeliers to proclaim their love in song.

"I have to know," I asked. "Why this place? Don't people wear you out?"

"Music is different," she replied. "Don't have to talk. It all..." she made an undulating gesture with one hand. "Flows. It's nice."

Fair enough; music didn't demand attention or response. It wasn't even in English until a waiter came with my pesto parmigiana. Then someone started singing a drinking song, full of eyes bright as stars and lips red and sweet.

"Wait," I said. "Didn't you sing this drunk at that shitty Christmas party?"

Grey hid her face, but I smiled—and not just because it was a sign she was

relaxing. That party might've been shit, but it'd started our friendship. After months wondering if Grey could stand me, I'd discovered that what I'd taken for dislike was really the grim tension of playing straight man all the time.

"What is it?" I asked. "Wagner?"

She gave me a pained look. "Romberg. *Student Prince*."

I gestured. "Well? What're you waiting for?"

But she shook her head. "I don't sing around people."

"That's a shame. I'd love to hear you sing for me."

I was pulling her pigtails, but after a moment's hesitation, she joined in on the next verse, and it stopped being a joke. Her singing voice didn't lurch or stutter. It was smooth, deep, and rich and purred in my rib cage like a V8 engine. And hearing her sing a love song with all the feeling she didn't allow herself in robot mode... well. It made me wish I *had* made an invitation.

"Wow," I said when she finished. "Who taught you that?"

She looked away. "Grandparents. They liked opera."

Grey never mentioned family. I settled on, "Your voice is beautiful."

She turned pink, which I liked. "Thank you." I liked that even more.

It'd been a long day. We were tired. That meant I shouldn't proposition her, but I was tempted. Maybe, once we were in the car; that way, if the answer was no, the awkwardness would only last until we reached my apartment. And if it was yes, well...

I finished my (delicious) dinner right as the waiter dropped us the bill. Since Grey refused to wear reading glasses even though she was starting to need them, I told her what she owed, tossed some cash down for my half, then went to hit the can while she finished eating.

The Opera House had one-stall unisex bathrooms with hatch windows left cracked for ventilation. I'd never paid them much attention before, but I'd just finished my business and zipped my pants when I smelled ammonia.

Then an off-white spider-squid slithered in.

I jumped and yelped, crashing back into the wall. The 107 hissed and brandished broken glass at me to make me shut up, then gave me a hard stare-down. My head began to buzz, and after a tense few seconds, it began signing.

I didn't understand. I shook my head.

It signed again, slower: "Speak SGSL?"

I swallowed and signed back, "A little?"

It didn't take long for it to figure out just how little I knew—and judging by the hesitant, jerky way it moved, it wasn't much better. After a lot of back-and-forth, it managed to get through to me: "[Noun]. Have [noun]. Give [noun]."

"I don't understand," I signed.

It swelled up dangerously. "*Give [noun]!*" My head started buzzing again.

"What is...?" I made my best effort to replicate the noun sign.

It stared at me, but at least it calmed down. After a moment of thought, it raised one of the shards of glass... not towards me, but the wall. It scratched a simple spider-squid figure into the paint and pointed at it. "I. Understand?"

"Yes."

It drew smaller spider-squids, made a V around them, pointed. "My [noun]. Understand?"

It couldn't have been the sign for "children;" even I knew that one. Some other family term, then? Since I didn't know "maybe," I signed, "Yes?"

"My. My [family]," it signed. "Have [family]! Give [family]!"

Whatever the 107 and its family were, I was damned sure I'd never seen or heard of anything like them before. "No have."

"*Yes have!*" It was starting to swell up again. "*Give!*"

I had no choice but to say, "I don't understand! I don't speak SGSL!"

For a moment, it just stood there. I felt my head fill with static—I'd never felt anything like it, and I didn't care for the experience one bit. Then it gave me up as a lost cause, my head cleared, and it settled by the door, glass at the ready. When I made as if to move, it puffed up warningly. I stilled, and so did it.

We waited.

For something that'd killed my coworker, it was smaller than I expected, child or large dog size, a scrawny squishy harvestman with too many ribbon tentacle limbs. Its dark-veined putty-colored body was covered in orange vomit stains and specks of blue-green blood, plus road dust and grit like it'd gotten here by undercarriage. Every once in a while it made a wet gagging sound, but its body language never slackened, so I stayed put. Sick and small or not, it'd cut a swathe through Ops.

I don't know how long I sat there on the toilet, feeling cold sweat plaster my shirt to my back, but finally Grey began to wonder what the hell I was doing. I heard a dah-dit-dah rap against the door, a hesitant, "Twenty?"

The 107 didn't know English, but it must've recognized Grey's voice. It jumped up and signed at me. My head started buzzing again. The hell was that?

I threw up my hands, signed again: "I don't speak SGSL!"

Fed up, it sprang above me and horse-kicked me at the doorway. As if to hammer the point home, it tried to shove my face into the door.

"Grey," I said, as calmly as I could, "the 107 wants to talk to you."

Pause. "Now?"

The 107 thrust my face doorward, waved a shard of glass in my face.

"Now. Right now," I babbled. Then, even though I knew the 107 couldn't understand me, "Let me unlock the door, damn you!"

It hissed at me.

Grey tried the door; when it wouldn't open, the 107 seemed to understand the problem. I held up one hand and went for the lock as obviously as I could. The 107's tentacles rippled, but it let me pull back the deadbolt. Grey came through the door as carefully as I'd opened it, holding her hands up empty, and though the 107 slithered out of reach and wielded the glass warningly, it let her come through. It stared hard at her.

Grey jerked, then cocked her head. She signed, "Stop. SGSL only."

I frowned, but before I could ask, she waved at me to be silent. When the 107 signed at her, she closed and relocked the door.

"Wants me there," she translated, indicating the john. "You over there."

Though it was closer to the 107 than I liked, I took the corner by the sink, Grey sat, and the 107 parked itself in front of the door again. It started signing at her—I caught the "have [noun], give [noun]" bit again, and it pointed to the drawing it'd made on the wall. When it finished, Grey signed back, broad and clear enough for me to get the gist: no have. It signed more, longer this time, and she signed again: no.

It didn't like that answer. It signed harder.

Grey kept her eyes on the 107. "Bob," she said in her robot voice, "no other refugees like this one, right?"

So it *was* asking about its people. "Not unless they came after we got off shift. I was trying to tell it that."

Grey signed to the 107. It didn't look any happier and signed something short and sharp. Grey signed back: no. The 107 gestured at me and she tensed.

"Grey, why is it looking at me like that?"

"Run soon," she replied.

"Grace..." it was starting to puff up.

"Thanks for dinner." And then she hurled himself at the 107.

The 107 was fast and flexible, but Grey was big and there wasn't much space to maneuver; it partially dodged, coiled around her, and started slashing at her with the glass. Me, I ran for the door. The 107 shrieked and tried to stop me, but I got the bolt open and sprinted for the restaurant exit, leaving a wake of alarmed customers and staff. I shouted at them to call the cops but this wasn't the police part of town and whichever local gangster was in charge was unlikely to fare better. We needed my coworkers, but my phone was in Grey's

car, and she had the keys. I swiped a rolling pin off the counter as I ran and hoped it was solid enough.

When I made it to the parking lot and the car, I swung at the passenger side window as hard as I could, but the rolling pin bounced off like I'd attacked a safe, sending reverb up my wrist and leaving the glass unmarked. I heard a *thunk* as the locks froze, right before the car alarm started wailing. I redoubled my efforts, but the glass wouldn't break.

A couple teenagers in baggy pants paused to spectate.

"You're doing it wrong, Pops," one called.

"Yeah," the other said. "You got to aim for the edge of the frame."

I obeyed, and the window shattered all in one go. They clapped politely until screams started erupting from the Opera House, sending them scattering. The fight must've made it out of the bathroom.

The glove compartment was an easy reach, but opening it caused another shower of junk that almost knocked my phone onto the floor. At the last second I managed to catch it and call work.

I got Agatha. "Our office has closed for the night—"

"Agatha! It's Bob! Get me second shift Comm!"

"Sir, the second shift is unavailable to—"

"Fuck you, Agatha, the 107's going to kill Grey, send second shift over here!"

That woke her up. "Where are you?"

I rattled off the address while clutching the stitch in my side. "I am going to kill the League, them and Management! What the hell is this, Agatha?"

I had never heard Agatha be so helpful. "Hold tight, Doshi, we're coming."

The cries coming from the Opera House hit a new pitch and people started flooding out. "Hurry up!"

"Don't be stupid, Bob," Agatha said. "Just let Grey do his job."

I stared at the roses in the passenger seat, half-covered in papers, maps, and a tranq tube. I hung up on her.

Grey's gun was locked up, and even if it hadn't been, I'd never shot a gun before. But I had used auto-injectors—my sister had allergies. I didn't know how I'd get close enough to tag the 107 or whether the sedatives would work on it, but I grabbed one anyway. (The rest had fallen out of reach.)

The sounds of chaos from the Opera House were intensifying.

The back service door was open, though nobody was streaming out of it now. Once I reached it, I got down and started crawling. The kitchen had emptied and I couldn't see past the counter, but bottles and silverware were flying, people were screaming, and it sounded like a brawl was in progress.

My head started buzzing again, at a higher pitch. It made my fillings rattle. I'd been just as scared a second prior, which made me realize that it was the 107 doing it... whatever it was. All I could do was try to tune it out.

When I made my way to the counter, I rose to a kneel, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening and where Grey was in the maelstrom. A plate whizzed past my forehead but didn't seem to have been aimed at me.

Most people had fled, except for a few unlucky bastards barricaded behind tables. They couldn't leave without getting hit by the 107, who was a spinning blur hurling everything in reach—food, dishes, cutlery—and trying to get back over to my side of the counter. It seemed to be using Grey for ballast, who was pinned down on her back and losing the fight but refusing to let go.

Shit. It was in reach, but moving too fast to tag. It'd see me coming.

The latter, at least, I could do something about. Up on the counter near me was an abandoned sack of flour. I snatched it, lobbed it at them, and the 107 reflexively slashed it, sending up a cloud.

"Hold it still!" I shouted to Grey.

I could barely see her under the flour and tentacles, but she heard me. She reared up, grappled, tried to lock its main body. The 107 had far more free limbs, clutching upgraded weaponry—a wine bottle, a bread knife, a frying pan—and it turned all of them on her, but she held on.

The shot would never get better. I dove over the counter, jammed the injector against the 107, and mashed the button. The 107 screeched and hit me with the frying pan.

When I hit the floor, back on my original side of the counter, both my glasses and the tranq tube were gone. The 107 had gotten free and taken the latter but couldn't seem to figure out what it was or how to make it work. Giving it up as a concern for later, it raised the frying pan again.

Grey tackled it across the counter.

The 107 whirled and hit her but couldn't rip free. Finally, it yanked her over the hot stove until her clothes ignited and she had to let go. Left empty-handed, Grey finished scrambling over the counter to join me. She hit the floor with a graceless thud, bloodied, smoldering, covered in flour, one arm hanging stiff. I rushed to help her get her sweater off. The smoke went with it.

"Who's coming?" she demanded.

"Second shift," I replied, delighted and terrified that we were both still alive. "I smashed your window. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you."

A wine bottle whizzed over our heads and smashed against the wall,

spewing foam.

“Shit! If we survive this, Grace, you are teaching me more SGSL! *We don’t even have its damn family!*”

I heard a clatter, the lights spun, and when I looked up, a blur of movement was scuttling across the ceiling, sparkling with what I presumed was more kitchenware—wineglasses, I discovered, when it started hurling them at us. It seemed to be getting dopey, and its aim wasn’t good, but it had us pinned down and the buzzing in my head was getting nauseating and disorienting.

I looked around, saw the big kitchen sink half-full of water. “Can it drown?”

Grey’s response was to shove me out of the way as the 107 lost its grip. It swept a cutting board at me as it fell but focused on dropping Grey. Me, I dashed for the sink and turned the tap full blast.

Grey caught the 107, bear-hugged it, and hauled it to the sink. She ignored its tentacles, ignored the weapons, focused entirely on immobilizing its main body. Then she shoved it into the water and held it there.

Drowning is a bad way to die. It takes an eternity—at least five minutes. The buzzing in my head pulsed in red and black. When it vomited, I felt it. And it tried to beat Grey to death the whole time. She took it, blank-faced and silent, until its arms went limp and slid off her. The screaming in my head stopped.

“Knife,” she told me.

I handed her one and didn’t watch what she did with it. When she was done, she put her back to the sink and slid down onto the floor next to me, covered in water and flour, stained with blood both red and blue-green.

“Okay?” Her voice and face were hollow.

I shook my head. “You?”

She shook her head, and that’s when second shift arrived.

One of the Ops guys saw us first, double-taking at the candles and flowers.

Grey had completely shut down, so I said, “You’re late. It’s over,” and jerked my head at the mass of tentacles hanging out of the sink.

Another Ops guy went to investigate. The first one saw my Comm sweater. “What’re you doing here, comboy?”

I didn’t like the look he was giving us, so I said, “Your job, apparently.”

Someone asked, “Are we good?”

The Ops guy at the sink said, “All clear,” and then I had an EMT shining a light in my eyes and asking if I felt nauseous. (Not anymore.)

Despite the horror, my only injuries were a bump and a headache; even my glasses only had a bent earpiece and a cracked lens. Our waiter brought them to me... along with a complimentary gift card.

"Our thanks," he said.

"It wasn't me, but you're welcome," I replied. "Anyone hurt?"

"A few, but your guy took most of it. He's crazy." The waiter's tone said this was a compliment. "Where is he?"

I stood up to find out.

Turned out she was in the other restroom, the only place not trashed. When I came in, she was propped up against the wall, still gripping the knife, while Doc Pritchard bandaged and argued with her in equal measure.

"Bob! This is your dumbass, right?"

"Hi Taneesha," I said, locking the door to keep out rubberneckers... and in case I slipped on pronouns. "Yup, that's my dumbass. How you doing, boss?"

"Like shit," Pritchard said. "And she won't listen to me, so explain to your dumbass why she has to go to Medical and see Richardson."

I came over and pried the knife out of Grey's hand. "Grace, why are you arguing with the woman who saves your life? Do what she says."

Grey made a face and said to Pritchard, "Okay. No painkillers til after."

"After what?" I asked, but Pritchard held up a hand to silence me and said, "Your choice."

I stared at her, but all she said was, "Now persuade your dumbass she needs an ambulance."

I looked at Grey. "You need an ambulance?"

"No."

I looked at Pritchard and shrugged. "I tried."

Pritchard lost that battle, but won the one over getting Grey to her car by gurney. When Grey saw the shattered glass of the window, she sighed.

Pritchard hustled off to help restaurant patrons, rubbing her back, and I held my hand out to Grey. "Keys. I'm driving."

She didn't fight me, just reached for her belt loop, but it was on the side of her bad arm and the hand on her good side was gashed. Before she could figure it out or hurt herself, I said, "May I?" and when she nodded, finagled it off for her. To hell with what second shift thought; they weren't hurt.

"No painkillers?" I snarled as I shut off the car alarm. "Really?"

"Later," she said. "When we get to Medical, stick with Pritchard."

"I tell you, I'm fine—"

"*Promise me.*" Her voice was sharp, glitchy, and she was giving me the stare that had half the department petrified of her.

It didn't scare me, but I backed down. "Okay, okay, if it makes you feel better, I promise I'll stick close to Pritchard, show you my clean bill of health."

Will you take your damn painkillers?"

She stared at me hard, saw I was serious, and calmed down. "Later."

I didn't like that answer, but a distraction came when I opened the car door, unleashing a wave of the reeking astringent vomit smell.

"Son of a bitch," I said, sweeping the glass off the seat with my jacket and laying it down for her to sit on. "Worst case of coma pod's revenge I've ever seen. And it still scented you across town to get its... what? Family?"

Grey shook her head; she didn't know.

Grey's SGSL was pretty good. Maybe the 107 had used local slang for its third cousin, but why? Even I knew the signs for "family" and "friend."

I gave Grey my shoulder to lean on, helped her into the car, and did her seat belt for her before she could try.

"Maybe it was delirious," I said as I got in, but I didn't like that answer.

Neither did Grey. "No," she said in a horrible empty voice. "Telepath. Not a good one, but lucid. Knew it was drowning."

I remembered the screaming in my head, the nausea, and shuddered. The 107 had been dangerous. It'd killed MacIntire, and it would've killed us too. But the more I heard and saw, the more it sounded like it hadn't understood what the hell was going on anymore than we had. The whole bloodbath might've been avoided with a fizzy like Harmonius around.

"That shouldn't have happened," I said, pulling out. Then, seeing what she thought I meant, "No, none of that should've happened. The League should've told us what the 107 was, that it was a telepathic scent-tracker, and the boys upstairs shouldn't have frozen us out." I was icy calm now and furious. "Their cloak-and-dagger games killed MacIntire and almost killed us, and now Jenny's a mess and her roses are in the backseat and *the hell are we even doing in this job?*"

Grey didn't seem to understand why I was upset. "Not your fault."

"Damn right it wasn't my fault! *It wasn't yours either.* I know you're married to your job, Grace, but it's cheating on you, and it's going to kill you one day." I got onto 110. "You're not twenty-five anymore. You can't keep doing this to your body. *They don't care about you.*"

Grey's voice was tired. "They don't have to."

We spent the rest of the ride to Medical in silence.

Doc Richardson turned out to be a pointy-faced, imperious iceberg blond. "I see you've recovered," he told Grey as I wheeled her in. "My congratulations."

I could be catty too. "This is who Doc Pritchard thinks we need?"

Richardson looked contemptuous and corrected me, "*Paramedic* Pritchard."

While Grey was busy getting put back together, I taped cardboard over the

shattered window, swept out the glass, and set myself on the multicolored forms in triplicate. I had almost finished the stack when I heard, “Babubhai Doshi?”

“I’m off-shift,” I snapped.

“Mr. Doshi, if you could come with us for a moment...”

The tone made me look up. There were two guys I didn’t know, one from Ops and one from Management with a DARPA IAO tag, whatever that meant. With them was Harmonius. I’d never seen him without his imperturbable Buddha smile, but now he was tense and kept fidgeting with the cable that twined from his box up into his skull.

Like I’d promised Grey, I’d stuck close to Doc Pritchard. She’d been leaning against the wall, listening to music, but the moment these guys approached, she stiffened and disappeared around a corner.

Something was up, but I didn’t see how I could refuse, so I got up and followed them into a spare office, where they sat me down on a hard chair. The Ops guy took up a station in front of the door, and the Management spook said, “Why don’t you tell us what happened tonight, Doshi?”

I just stared at them. They weren’t giving me this because Grey and I had gone to dinner, were they? Half of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was *don’t ask*.

I looked to Harmonius, but he just gave me a pleading look. So I held up my stack of forms and said, “You give me a minute, you’ll have it all on paper.”

The spook was unimpressed. “What’s your immigration status, Doshi?”

“Excuse me?” I started to stand up, but the Ops guy put a hand on my shoulder before I got anywhere. “Check my hiring record.”

“Just answer the question.”

“Like my record says,” I said, chill setting in, “I’m an American citizen.”

The spook looked to Harmonius, who nodded. “And?”

Now I was getting scared. “And an overseas citizen of India.”

“Is that like dual citizenship?”

“India doesn’t allow—it’s—” I choked down my emotions, stilled my hands, and said, as calmly as I could, “like I said, it’s in my hiring record. Now what is this about?”

The door burst open and Grey stormed in like a blizzard. The strangers bristled... but lost some of the macho composure when the smell hit them.

Harmonius, on the other hand, returned to his usual smiling self. “Hey, Grey,” he drawled. “Don’t forget the Vicodin.”

Grey ignored him. I’d never seen her so angry. “Who are you?”

“Do you mind?” The new manager said. “This is a private meeting.”

She looked at me. "Is it?"

"News to me." I jumped up. The Ops goon made as if to stop me, but Grey glared at him full force and even injured and covered in flour, there was no contest; he recoiled and backed down. The manager didn't.

"You're one of Andersen's hires." He didn't sound pleased—Andersen was one of the oldest horses in the PIN, a notorious hardass. "He said you were a good soldier, but I'm starting to doubt, Grey."

That just made Grey madder. "Specialist Grey," she corrected.

He ignored her. "Why don't you tell us what happened, Grey?"

Instead, she started arguing protocol with the spook, who started red tape-gunning back. He still wasn't giving us a name. Me, I watched Harmonius. He kept looking hard at me, Grey, then the manager, trying to explain a thesis paper with his eyes.

I got it. My inclination was to touch Grey to get her attention, but I chose to clear my throat instead. Grey glanced at me, followed my eyes to Harmonius.

Harmonius kept his cheerful stoner face on, but it was clearly a strain. "Come on, Grey, we're all honest folk here," he said. "Nobody needs formalities, huh? Just answer the man's questions and we can all get out of here."

Grey didn't like it, but she glanced at me and said in an icy robot voice, "Incident, shift-end. Dinner for informal post-op. Nothing else."

"Fraternizing?" the spook asked.

Grey's voice hit subzero. "No."

"Telling tales out of school?"

"No."

The manager looked to Harmonius, who beamed and gave a thumbs-up. "As an arrow, boss."

The manager frowned, but Grey said, "I'm going home," and stormed out, taking me with her.

Doc Pritchard was outside, looking tense; she must've grabbed Grey the moment the goons came. Now she ran for her again as Grey started to sway.

"Catch him, catch him!"

Between us, we kept Grey from pitching over. I expected Pritchard to get her to a chair, but instead she got under Grey's arm and directed me to the other so we could half-carry her down the hall. It clearly hurt like hell, but Grey gritted her teeth and kept moving as best she could.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Stupid, *stupid* motherfucker," Pritchard swore. I'd never heard that tone in her voice before. "What were you thinking?"

Grey said nothing.

"You okay?" Pritchard was asking *me*, not Grey.

"Just rattled. What the hell was that?"

Pritchard and Grey exchanged looks. "Where?" Pritchard asked.

"Car," Grey replied.

They said nothing until we got there. Pritchard didn't even remark on the stench or broken window. The moment we were all in and the doors were shut, she said, "That was an informal sedition meeting they sprung on you, Bob."

"A *what*?"

"It's something they do for suspected subversives in-house. Looks like you've gotten on the list."

"Easier target." Grey was still angry. "Picked you instead of me."

"They pulled one on Larkin not too long ago," Pritchard continued, passing a bottle of pills to Grey. "Fortunately, she got hired the normal way, and I'm friends with a lot of fuzzies; Harmonius covered for her, Grey vouched and helped me peg them on trying to skip the paperwork."

"They're using fuzzies for this?" I said. "Those damn boxes catch a thought in ten; I escaped washing because none of them spoke Gujarati!"

"Look, things have gotten weird since September 11th. Everyone's gone paranoid," Pritchard said. "Scuttlebutt is the boys upstairs are having some kind of power struggle like when Johnson died, trying to purge the ranks, get the old horses out and their people in 'to fight terrorism.'"

I thought about how they'd gone above Comm's head, hidden info from us.

"Okay," I said finally. "What do we do?"

Pritchard reached out and took my multicolored stack of forms, which were crumpled but still with me. "I am going to file this paperwork and request health leave for you on account of stress from nearly getting murdered. You want my advice? Lay low. Horrible as it sounds, this probably isn't personal; they'll move on to weaker links." She looked to Grey. "I have to stay with Ebony tonight. You going to be okay after that stunt?"

Grey had spent everything on that performance in the sedition meeting. She wouldn't be going anywhere or doing anything on her own for a while.

She looked to me. "Stay with me?"

"Absolutely." I squeezed her shoulder. "Thanks, Taneesha. I owe you."

"Hey, us lower-downs got to stick together," she said, saluting me with the paperwork. She got out of the car and called to Grey, "And take your pills!"

Grey waved to her, and then Pritchard was gone, leaving us in the car. For a moment, I was still. Then everything caught up with me, and I started to shake.

Grey saw it. "Okay?"

I tried to talk, couldn't. Shook my head instead. I leaned my elbows on my knees and held my head in my hands, chilled even in my thick work clothes. I felt lightheaded, tight-chested; breathing felt like drowning. Then I started to sob, too strung out to be ashamed. The 107 business had been bad enough, but for my own workplace, my own *country* to treat me like this...

Grey tried to pass me her handkerchief, but I didn't take it. After helplessly watching me, she touched a hand to my shoulder, hesitant, like I might bite her head off. When I didn't, she got more confident and started rubbing my back. She'd never really touched me unprompted before; it helped. She was here. She'd saved my ass, again. I was safe... for now.

And the moment I could, I was getting the hell out of here.

Eventually, I could breathe again and straighten up. "God, what a shit day. I'm okay now. Thanks." She pulled back, and I took her handkerchief to mop my eyes. "Nice mama wolf act, earlier. I've never seen that side of you before."

She grimaced and slumped against the seat. "Don't like doing it. Hurts."

"I'll get you home and horizontal." That only reminded me of my hopes before the 107 crashed in. What a joke. I shoved the handkerchief into my breast pocket and passed her a water bottle. "Now take your damn painkillers; you look like you're about to pass out."

She tipped two pills into her bandaged hand, grimacing. "Make me stupid."

Something clicked. "And you wanted to be smart for the sedition meeting. You knew this was going to happen."

She said nothing.

"Well, congratulations, Grace, you made it. Be as stoned stupid as you want. I won't tell."

She shifted, looked uncomfortable. "Make me..."

She faltered. I raised my eyebrows.

"...Frisky."

If I hadn't been so drained, I would've laughed. "Well, this I have to see..."

That seemed to reassure her. She took her pills, and I started up the car. I didn't trust her ability to give directions for much longer, so I grabbed the map book from between the seats and wrote them down myself.

It was a sizable drive, made longer by a hunt for a gas station, and for most of it, Grey stayed silent, slumped in her seat, staring out the window. I figured she'd conked out until I paid for the gas.

"Bob."

"Mm?" I was digging through the map book, checking our route.

"Have to tell you." Her voice was fuzzy. "MacIntire."

"Yeah? What about him?"

"He was dying."

"Uh huh."

"It was bad."

"Okay."

Grey was quiet a while, then repeated, "It was bad."

I put the maps down. "Okay..."

"There was... a water pipe it got. Sharp, broken. From the boat."

"Ship?"

"Ship, yeah." I couldn't remember hearing her say "yeah" before. "Rules. Important. Have to follow them, or it gets worse." She made a frustrated sound. "Not saying this right."

This didn't sound like news I wanted to be driving for, so I moved the car from the pump to a parking spot. Grey didn't notice, too focused on putting the words together in her head. I put the car in park and waited for her.

Finally, she got it. She looked at me and said, "I put him down."

I just sat there.

"He asked me to," Grey said, desperately, like I needed to understand. "It was bad. Said it was going to start hurting soon."

I remembered the red blood on Grey's uniform—blood that hadn't been hers or the 107's,

which was blue-green. I remembered the sounds of chaos through the radio. I remembered how furious Dean had been, thundering out of Health and Medical, how strung out Pritchard had been. I remembered how easily Grey gave up her gun at the Opera House, wanting it away from her.

"There are rules," Grey said again.



I was silent.

"Say something. Please?"

"Okay, Grace," I said. "Okay."

She had a horrible look on her face. "Be angry."

I sighed, patted her arm. "I'm not angry. Or surprised."

She just looked at me.

I remembered her face as she'd drowned the 107. No triumph, no pleasure, only sad, robotic weariness. "How you treated the 107, it just made me think that this was something you've had to do before. And the whole line about quick and painless... well, it felt like a line." I remembered how Dean stomped off. "Dean's new, isn't he? He disagree with the old horse policy?"

She nodded.

"What're you going to do?"

"Avoid him."

Stupid question, in retrospect. What else could she do?

She was still looking at me with that awful look. She started to rock. "You're not angry."

I patted her back. "Sorry, beautiful; you're stuck with me."

She made a horrible sound. She didn't seem able to cry, only rock. The car wasn't big enough to let me hold her, but I kept my hand on her back until it passed. It was the last either of us said until we got to her apartment building.

It was one of the hideous concrete towers scattered all over Vago for working class families. Kids chased a ball around the parking lot, but they stopped when they saw Grey's smashed-up car. When I opened the door, the smell hit them; they dropped the ball, gasped, and fled squealing into the night. Grey's shoulders slumped. She liked kids, even when they didn't like her.

I looked at the building dubiously. "Which floor are you on?"

"Seventh."

I grimaced and reached out my hands to help her up. "Can you make it with me, or should I call on the neighbors?"

A wince crossed her face. "You."

I got under her good shoulder and took as much of her weight as I could. "Point us to the elevator."

We crossed able-bodied adults in the halls, but none offered to help; they just averted their eyes and pretended their kids weren't holding their noses and gripping their throats. We got the elevator to ourselves.

"Nice neighbors you've got," I grumbled as the doors shut with a *ping*.

Grey snorted—a sound I'd never heard her make. "Think I'm a gangster."

I sighed. "Of course they do." In this town, what else could she be? I wondered what they made of the smell... or me.

Even with the smell, I couldn't help notice how much she was letting me touch her. Obviously, this wasn't the "going up to your place" I'd had in mind at the Opera House, but my libido had yet to catch on, and after a day like that, I wanted to feel good about damn near anything. So I didn't resist it.

We made it to her apartment without incident, though getting the door unlocked and open without dropping her was a trick and I knocked something off the TV stand fishing for the light switch.

"Couch or bed?" I asked.

"Shower." Should've known.

I barked my hip on the sofa but got her there. Thank god it had a shower stool, implying she'd washed up injured before and wouldn't need assistance. I couldn't offer help without it being suggestive, and Grey didn't ask, so I went to hunt down clothes that she could get on and off one-handed.

Grey had been to my place, but this was my first time in hers. Judging by the look of her bedroom, she'd spent about as much time in it as I had. No wall hangings, military-made bed, a couple filing cabinets, and a desk with an honest-to-god electric typewriter. No computer.

When I opened her dresser, I found everything sorted by item and color. Trying not to feel like a lech, I grabbed some sweatpants, a *Barbarian Barbara* T-shirt (I'd probably have to help her into it, but it was that or work shirts), and underwear (which she *folded*). I found a spare hanger, hung the clothes on the bathroom doorknob, and called over the running water, "Give me your stuff and I'll see what I can do."

"Trying." Her voice sounded strained. She was having trouble.

"Okay. Go easy in there. Call if—" you need me, want me, want—"if you need help." Not much better.

While I waited, I set up on the big, ugly couch—a blue floral monster covered in fringe. Blankets and a pillow on one end cued me to check for a fold-out bed, which turned out to be surprisingly comfortable. I wondered who it was for, then realized Grey'd placed the couch in clear line of sight to the doors. Maybe she never slept in her own bed.

The living room looked a lot more homey than the bedroom. Besides the TV, the dresser it was perched on, and the couch, there was a big black stereo (with an eight-track player!) and a substantial music collection, mostly vinyl: classical and the darkest pits of pre-Kennedy-assassination pop, even though Grey was a '70s kid like me. I also discovered what I'd knocked over while

groping for the lights: a *yahrzeit* candle (burned-out, thankfully). When I put it back, I found an old photo, the only one I'd seen so far, of two smiling, wrinkled little ancients bundled in wheelchairs in front of a mural. No Grey.

The TV remote turned up in the top drawer of the dresser, along with a lot of homemade videotapes of *Barbarian Barbara*... and *the Joy of Painting*, oddly.

I was scratching my head over that one when I heard the *thump* of clothes hitting the bathroom door. Despite her injuries, Grey had managed. Without looking, I opened the door a crack, grabbed the old clothes, and got to work.

Like the uniform before them, they were unsalvageable—ripped, burned, and bloodied. I didn't like looking at them so I pulled a garbage bag from under the kitchen sink and bagged them just like I had previously. Once they were out of my sight, I felt better.

The kitchen was worse than the bedroom—not a seasoning in sight, and Grey apparently lived off sandwiches, salad without dressing, and tinned soup. For a horrible moment, I thought I wouldn't find any rice, but a long-neglected bag finally turned up in the back. At least she wouldn't miss it, I thought as I emptied it into Tupperware.

In went phone and pager. Grey's wallet and keys went on the kitchen table, which left the USB drive... though now that I was looking closer at it, I was less sure. The hell was it?

Crash!

I shoved it in my pocket and rushed over to the bathroom, only to hover at the door. Finally I knocked—*dah dit dah*.

"Twenty?" I asked.

She rapped back SOS. I went in and found her sitting clean and shirtless on the can, surrounded by the contents of her first aid kit. She'd gotten the old bandages off by herself and put some new ones on her leg, only to drop the rest. She looked up at me helplessly, arms over her chest.

"It's okay," I told her. "I'll do it."

She didn't seem to like me looking at her, so I pretended to be absorbed in gathering things up. When the silence got heavy, I asked, "Are those your musical grandparents in that photo? The one with the mural?"

She nodded. "One of Bubbe's. Muralist. Zayde was a sculptor. Had custody of me a few years. Died before I made specialist."

In the months I'd known her, Grey had never discussed her parents, or any other family. Between her gender, the lack of photos, and now this mention of spending a few years away, I could make a guess why.

Once I got the first aid kit back together on the bathroom sink, I asked, "Do

you need help with the new bandages?"

She nodded, then saw my eyes on her chest and curled in on herself.

I shook myself and grabbed bandages. "No, sorry, I shouldn't... it's okay."

"Sorry," she said. "Messy."

"No," I said, sharply enough that she looked up. "You look," good, "fine. I was just... impressed." Shit. "I mean, you've survived everything." My babbling sounded like compensating for disgust, so I blurted out the truth: "I have a thing for scars, that's all. You don't have to do anything. It doesn't bother me."

She froze and blinked at me. "Why?"

"I need a reason?"

She thought that over, then straightened and uncrossed her arms.

I'd never seen Grey with her shirt off; why would I have? Now I saw jagged arcs from a broken bottle, bruises, stitches across her chest (and, I suspected, the leg she'd managed to bandage). It was worse on the side of her bad arm, the shoulder of which had a couple of old crater scars. Her forearms were covered with old slashes, and there were other marks, smaller and anonymous.

And then there was the big one, arcing down her collarbone, across her ribs, down her stomach, and disappearing under her waistband. I yanked my eyes away before she caught me wanting to lick it. "Okay, I'm not Pritchard. How do I do this right?"

Grey coached me through bandaging and taping so they wouldn't pull the wounds open or tug on the stitches coming off, and I tried not to notice how good she felt. She'd never let me this close before, and she was warm and beautiful and alive; I wanted to map her with my hands, my tongue, follow that weld job down and—

Then I noticed something else.

"Oh hey, that shower did it," I said. "You smell good again." I bit my tongue.

She'd been avoiding my eyes the whole time, but now she tensed under my hands. She let me finish wrapping gauze around her hand and then pulled away, curling in on herself again. My heart sank.

"Hurting?" I asked.

Her eyes flicked towards me, then away. "No."

Shit. This wasn't when and how I'd wanted to have this conversation, but I put the gauze down and bit the bullet. "Look, Grace..."

At the same time she said, "It's not the pills."

"I... come again?"

She waved her bandaged hand at me, looked like she was struggling to put the words together. "The Vicodin isn't doing this."

I blinked at her. "Okay."

"It's not." She gave me a pleading look. "It's you."

At my incomprehension, she looked frustrated, wrestled with herself, and finally grabbed my hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"This." She met my eyes, and now I saw the want in them. "I like this."

She let me go.

"Oh," I said.

I sat down on the side of the bathtub, even though it was wet, and took off my glasses to clean them. They didn't need it but I needed something to do with my hands, something that didn't involve her.

Finally, I said, "I like it too. Always have, really."

"I know."

"You knew I was..."

Grey gave me an incredulous look. "Since New Year's."

Well, that wasn't so bad. By my accounts, I'd started flirting with her on Thanksgiving. "Well hell, why didn't you say so? If I'd known, I would've asked sooner. And since the boys upstairs are gunning for me anyway..." I put a hand on her knee, slid it up her thigh. "Want to fuck?"

Grey's breath caught. "Can't do casual sex."

That wasn't a no. "First base, then?"

Silence. Maybe it was a no.

"Help me out here, Grace. Tell me what you want."

"Everything." Her face hurt to see. "I want everything."

I took my hand back. "For how long?"

"Forever," she blurted, then winced and hastily amended, "as long as I can. And you don't do relationships."

Well, shit. Any other day, that would've sent me sprinting for the door, and judging by her face, she expected me to do just that.

I could. I could walk away from her over-committed ass, and Grey could go back to working her heart out in the rut that was her own personal chasm. We could go back to being good, sexless little worker bees like the PIN wanted.

Or... "Well, I don't know about *forever*... but I can give you everything for one night, at least. How about that?"

She stared at me.

I shrugged. "Why the hell not? Today's been full of bad ideas; at least this one will feel good." I touched her cheek; she closed her eyes and nuzzled into it. "Besides, if I'm going to get fired and washed, I want it to be for more than a nice chaste dinner with you. Now, are we going to do this, or are we just going

to talk about it?"

She must've been as tired of Don't Ask, Don't Tell as I was, because her eyes dropped to my mouth, and when I leaned in, she met me halfway. She kissed like a girder, tense and nervous, clearly out of practice, but when I touched her cheek and kissed her back, the breath went out of her. When she pulled back, her eyes were full of stars, and she touched her mouth disbelievingly, like it'd been years. "Yes," she said, and reached for me, then pulled back.

"You can touch me," I said. "That's part of the idea."

I expected her to kiss me again, but instead, she ran her hands over my hair, my cheeks, my shoulders, like she was making sure I was real. Her expression was wondering.

My back was starting to protest so I pulled away to stretch. "We should do this somewhere else. Do you want a shirt for this?"

She thought about it. "Yes."

I concealed my disappointment. "Need help putting it on?"

She did, but at least I didn't have to be conservative with my hands now. We got it on her without too much trouble, and the skin of her stomach rippled when I brushed it.

"Bed or sofa?"

"Sofa."

This time, she didn't hesitate to put her arm around me, and once I got her comfortably horizontal, I asked, "So, how far do you want to go?"

Her answer was to tug me down on the sofa-bed with her; there was just enough room for the both of us. She nudged off my sweater, ran her fingertips up my arms, cupped my face in her bandaged hands. This time, she kissed how she signed, slow and thorough, and the sound she made when I brushed my tongue against her mouth was everything, as was how she opened to it and clutched my shoulders.

"No, but really," I said when we came up for air. "You're hurt, you're high, and I don't trust your voice. If we need to stop?"

She tapped out twice against my shoulder.

"And if it's good?"

Squeeze.

I grinned. "We're in business. Show me where to touch you."

She put my hands up her shirt, one to the weld job. She looked up, hesitant. I laughed nervously. "You're okay with that? You don't have to indulge me..."

She squeezed yes, and I ran my hands under her shirt, tracing up her ribs and stomach and back down again, enjoying how she squirmed, until I hit her

waistband and toyed with it. "Nice. Are you up to getting stroked off tonight?"

Her hips hitched under my hand, but she tapped out against my shoulder.

I stopped. "What's wrong? Do you want it like this?"

She had a hangdog, test-I-haven't-studied-for face. "Yes, but..."

Grey was precise with her words. With casual sex, she'd said "can't," not "won't." I imagined all the explanations (apologies, really) that she might feel obligated to give about her body, how that'd mesh with her word budget, and how it would *not* get us laid. So far, she'd talked just fine with her hands.

"Okay, two questions," I said. "Do you want me to, and does it feel good?"

She held up one, two fingers and nodded: yes to both.

I kissed her cheek. "All I care about. Show me how you like it."

I saw a moment of struggle in her face, but then she decided to hell with it, buried her hand in my hair, and shoved my hand down her pants, deeper than I expected, further back. She spread her legs for me, pushed into it, and—

"Ah," I said, "I got you. No scar tissue here."

I curled my fingers and the sound it tore out of her was everything I could've hoped for. She kissed me frantically, trying to get up my shirt with her good hand, and god, if this was what she was like injured and getting touched from the outside, getting inside her would bring the house down. I wanted to see her like that, without the uniform, without the self-control, wanted to fuck her till she sang for me, til she gave and opened and fell apart.

I never did get her pants down, but who gave a damn as long as I had her grinding against my wrist, making pretty sounds, and clutching me like it was the end of the world. When I started sucking on her neck, she squeezed for yes and started shaking. When my teeth grazed her, she gasped and pushed me harder into her shoulder.

I laughed. "Want me to bite you?"

"Yes!"

There was no arguing with that tone. I sank my teeth in, harder than intended, and she came with a gasp.

"Soft girl likes it rough," I remarked, watching, and she shivered and squeezed me with her thighs before going limp, panting. I kissed the marks I'd left. "That sounded overdue."

She brushed her fingers over them, then my mouth. "Yes. Thank you."

"Well now, aren't you polite." I pulled her handkerchief from my pocket to wipe the fog from my glasses, then clean us up. "Any time, Grace."

She smiled then, *really* smiled. It lit up her whole face, crinkled her eyes, and made something in me turn over. I'd found her attractive enough already,

but when she smiled like that, she was a damn heartbreaker.

As Grey shifted against me, trying to find a good position to touch me that didn't hurt, something gouged into my hip.

"Ow! Hold on a second." I dug into my pocket, found the USB that'd been digging into me, and shoved it at her. "Here. This is yours."

Grey frowned. "It's not."

"What do you mean, it—" Then I remembered the electric typewriter. Grey didn't own a computer. "Well, how'd it get in your pockets then?"

We looked at each other, and we knew.

Grey shifted to get her good arm out from under me and took the plug, an anonymous peg of metal and ceramic, strong enough to survive a 107's guts. She gave it a twist and a squeeze, and what I'd taken for a port became an unsheathed lens. It sent up a V of light.

Then it started projecting 3D photos in shades of red. No backgrounds, only people: the 107, with others like it. Tiny ones, battered older ones missing limbs, one its size with a big scar across its face. The pictures cycled through automatically. A tinny little tune played.

We watched the slideshow in frozen silence. This was what had propelled the 107 across town, full of the coma pod bends, to take on a restaurant full of people: a cheap 3D photo album. Its family.

The projector stopped and turned itself off.

Chastened and chilled, I tapped out on Grey's shoulder. She nodded, tried to twist and look over her shoulder.

I realized why. "It's okay, Grace; I'll watch the door."

She hesitated. "Touching okay?"

"What? Sure."

She shifted over onto her side—carefully—and snuggled to my chest.

"Okay," I said, brushing a hand over her buzzed scalp. The fuzz at her nape was soft. "Maybe more than one night."

She nuzzled my throat. "Okay."

She fell asleep facing me, not the door. I stayed awake with her in my arms, petting her hair and feeling her breathe. Thinking.

...

MacIntire turned out to have no will, and if he had any family, none of us knew how to find them, so us coworkers managed his last affairs. I ran the phone tree. Grey was too beat up to do anything physical, but she handled the paperwork, informing MacIntire's landlord and shutting off the utilities. I could tell that she'd done it before, many times.

We didn't ask Jenny to help, but she showed up anyway with her battered pick-up, red eyes, and a determined expression. She cried while going through MacIntire's stuff, but silently, and she threw off any attempts to comfort her, as though to prove to herself that she could do it without falling apart.

Larkin turned out to have a van, so she and Jenny handled driving the unclaimed possessions to secondhand stores or the landfill. Since Larkin's arm was still in a sling from her own injuries on Valentine's Day, Doc Pritchard and a few grunts I didn't know handled the hauling.

The PIN paid for the funeral—a grim perk—and MacIntire had been well-liked. A lot of people showed up—not Dean, though.

Jenny refused to wear mourning clothes. Instead, she wore an orange and yellow dress and dancing shoes, too thin to do much good in February, but she showed no sign of being cold. Her skirts fluttered in the wind, her gold jewelry shone, and she clasped a large pack of tissue.

There was one more tradition with PIN funerals, one we comboys were in charge of. Normally, Darlene would've done it, being shift captain, but when Jenny asked for the job, nobody said no.

When the time came, Jenny put on her headset; the rest of us pulled out our radios and tuned them. She took a deep breath and turned on her mic.

"Specialist MacIntire, this is Comm, come in."

Silence, of course. She called him three times, then turned off her radio and looked to all of us. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but her eyes were alive and her voice clear as a bell.

"Specialist MacIntire has completed his final assignment," she announced. "He is now off-duty. First shift, clock out."

We turned off our radios, and that was that.

I came over when I got a chance. She was crying again, but in a way that didn't frighten me as much, especially when she saw me and hugged me.

"How you holding up, kiddo?" I asked, patting her back.

She laughed, shaky but real. "Awful. I didn't think I'd manage last call."

"You did great."

She pulled away, blotting her eyes with a tissue and nodding. "Yeah. And I know y'all would've done it for me, but I wanted to do it. It's always in my head; now maybe it can start to end."

A core of worry in my chest loosened. She was going to be okay.



She smacked my shoulder playfully. "You didn't have to show up. You barely knew the corny bastard."

"What, and leave Grey alone?" I cocked my thumb over to where she stood at the back of the crowd, looking stiff and uncomfortable. "What kind of cube-mate would I be if I left you with your least favorite serial killer?"

"How is he?"

"Back on her feet, at least." Shit. Jenny blinked at me, and I tried to roll on. "The stitches will be coming out soon. Here, I don't know if you still want them, but..." I pulled out a paper bundle.

Her eyes grew wide, and for a moment, she couldn't speak; when she did, it was in a broken whisper. "Are those...?"

"Your roses, yeah. I babysat them for a while. If you don't want them, I figured I'd leave them with MacIntire."

She took the bundle to examine the slightly-wilted blossoms. She touched a petal. "You took care of them for me." Then she looked up and blurted, "I'm so sorry I wasn't there when... you could've..." She hugged me again, harder.

I patted her hair. "Hey, none of that. I'm okay. I'm not joining Ops."

She nodded and pulled away, looking me over as though to make sure. "You okay, though? You look a little..."

"Yeah, I'll be okay. Just had to rethink some things."

"That's good to hear. Should've known, old dog like you has more tricks than I'll get in a lifetime. Here, let's go give these flowers to MacIntire."

We went and laid the roses over the fresh-turned sod together. Nobody else was that close to the grave, so it gave us a little privacy.

"I get why you like her now," she whispered to me. For a moment, her smile became something like it'd used to be, and she turned away, her dress rippling in the breeze. "Take care of yourselves. See you on shift."

I smiled. "See you on shift."

I went to rejoin Grey. Together we hiked up the cemetery hillside to where she'd parked her newly repaired car. We didn't get in, just sat on the back and watched everyone gradually disperse, leaving Jenny. She stood alone in her orange and yellow dress, holding one last rose. Finally she left too, clutching her Kleenex. Her pickup drove off. It was beginning to get dark.

"She's a good woman." Grey said finally.

I nodded. "Smart one, too. But she won't out us."

"Good woman," she repeated. Then, to me, "No forevers."

"No," I agreed. "But I'll give you tomorrow, if you like."

We got into her car and left the cemetery behind in a spray of gravel.

TUCKED

Fooling around with Grey while she was injured was a bad idea, so they agree to stop until she recovers. Bob stays at her place, playing helper, cooking her real food, filling her spice rack. Since the pressure's off, they play a lot of sexual twenty questions and spend an evening on the sofa just touching, learning each other's bodies and playing Hot and Cold, tapping out when it gets too hot. It's been a while since Bob's had a slow burn going. It's nice. It makes returning to work (and all its paranoia) bearable.

When Grey's well enough to come back, they get VD tests—taking care to do it outside work. When the results come back, Bob asks for a ride home.

He means hers, and Grey, smart girl, realizes it. They tumble into bed, necking furiously as they try to undress each other. Grey manages to pull Bob's shirt off before he pushes her jacket down off her shoulders, and shoves her backwards so he can pin her wrists to the mattress and straddle her.

Something's different, but Bob's way too horny to figure out what until Grey taps pause against his hand.

"Wait," she says.

Bob makes a sound of protest but stops. "What? What's wrong?"

Nothing looks wrong. Grey's panting, pink in the cheeks, seems to like being held down even though there's no question who's stronger. Bob can feel her hips moving under his, like she doesn't realize she's doing it.

"Need to take care of something."

"Now?" Bob complains. "Right now?"

Grey hesitates.

"I can be fast," Bob swears, sensing weakness. He's trying to hold still, but it's hard with Grey rubbing up on him like this. "Whatever it is, I can be fast."

Grey's expression is a mix of want and uncertainty and something else, but she squeezes for yes. Bob makes a sound of relief and divine gratitude, kisses her, and gets her belt and slacks open.

Everything's tucked in.

Bob looks up. Grey's tense, nervous, but holds his eyes.

Long drawn-out processing is where sex goes to die, so Bob asks the only thing that matters and is any of his business: "it feel better if you stay like that?"

She nods. Bob smiles and shoves a thigh between her legs; she gasps and goes boneless under him, and that's how they fuck, with Grey pinned to the bed and still mostly dressed. It turns out that she loves riding Bob's thigh like this—maybe it's a deep pressure sensation thing—and it's not something Bob himself would want, but he sees no reason to complain, especially not for the thrill he gets from messing Grey up in uniform, covering her in hickeys, and making her come wet and messy in her neatly-pressed slacks, all the while staring up at him in awed adoration.



That last part should be a concern. Bob's made it clear to her that this is just a day-by-day thing, friends blowing off steam, nothing more. But it hits his buttons when she smiles at him, says, "Thank you," and then throws him off like he's nothing. She shoves him down and sucks him off like their lives depend on it, and Bob doesn't think about how quickly he gets off, or how hard. It's hot; who cares why? He's never been one to let his brain get in the way of good sex.

And if he maybe babbles something about opening her up and shoving her full of cock, well, it doesn't seem to bother her.

FOREVER, RIGHT NOW

By the time they're done celebrating, it's late and they're tired. When Grey reaches for her keys, Bob mumbles, "Forget it," and she falls asleep in his arms, forgetting her morning alarm until it goes off before dawn.

Bob bumbles indignantly but doesn't move. Grey reaches to turn off the clock radio.

"Hell time's it?" Bob mumbles into the pillow.

"Four. I run." She disentangles herself to reach for her clothes.

Bob keeps his face in the pillow. "You're crazy."

Grey pats him and heads out, leaving coffee as an apology.

She's had the same routine for years: wake, stretch, run, shower, shave, breakfast. There's comfort in the rhythm of her steps and pulse, the way her body wakes up and cooperates with itself, despite the wear and tear. It wipes the cobwebs from her mind



and muscles. Depending on the time of year, she gets to see the sun rise.

She's been too injured to run before, so expects the sluggish resistance. New is the pull in her hips and thighs, the lingering languor. It feels good.

She should feel guilty, but she doesn't. For once, she doesn't care about her job; she doesn't have to. She knew what she was getting into, she made her choice, and now her body sings. Between breaths, she hums snatches of old songs. This won't last, but it doesn't have to. Right now, there's the crisp pre-dawn air, the gravel under her shoes, and the memory of Bob's arm over her.

When she returns home, pleasantly winded and sweaty, she finds Bob finishing off the coffee, dressed, shaved, and reading the paper. Not awake yet, but getting there.

"Morning," he says without looking up. "Bathroom's all yours."

"Thank you." Grey kisses his cheek, which she's done before, but Bob jolts and watches her go. Grey's barely in the bathroom for a second before he follows her in with a gleam in his eye and slides his hands around her hips.

"You look good," he says.

Grey looks down at her knee brace, the gym shorts, the old *Barbarian Barbara* T-shirt. There's nothing special about any of it. She gives Bob an inquiring look, but he's kissing the hickeys he left on her shoulder and purring, "You smell *fantastic*." Some parts of him must wake up faster than others.

"Shower," Grey reminds, tapping out on his shoulder. Bob sighs but lets her slide out of his arms and shoo him out. "Read the paper for me?" She likes his voice like this, soft and rough from waking up.

She leaves the bathroom door cracked so she can hear Bob read off articles while she showers, shaves, and dresses. When she comes out knotting her tie, Bob twines it through his fingers.

"You look good like this too." He tugs her down by the tie and buries his face in her neck. "Smelled better before you showered, though."

"Work." But Grey doesn't tap out.

"I don't need as much warm-up as you do." Bob's wrapped her tie around his hand to hold her in place, and his voice is velvet. "We can still make it."

He hasn't tightened his grip yet, and there's a question in his eyes. Grey swallows and squeezes yes.

"Good." Bob fumbles behind Grey for a towel, rolls it, and tosses it on the floor for cushioning. "Drop."

Grey kneels and reaches for Bob's belt, but Bob stops her, holds her chin and tilts it up for a second to smile down at her.

"What?" Grey asks, and he lets go.

"Nothing. You're pretty on your knees." He nods. "Go ahead."

Grey sucks him off on the bathroom floor, and Bob pets her hair and talks through it in a voice that roughens and breaks the further along he gets. He gives plenty of warning before coming, but Grey just squeezes yes and takes it.

She's about to stand when Bob puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't swallow yet." His hand moves to her mouth. "Open."

Grey does and Bob slides his thumb in to open her mouth further and pet her tongue. He smiles at what he sees, makes a pleased, possessive sound, and heat surges through her.

Bob must see it; he chuckles and pulls out so she can swallow, grabbing a washcloth to clean them up with. "Come on. If we hurry, we can still make it in time." He wipes her face, glances down at her groin, and grins. "If you're good, I'll have you for lunch."

She knows Bob is teasing (even he isn't that reckless), but she can't help imagining it—him shoving her into a shower stall in the locker room, cranking up the water to cover the noise, dropping to his knees. Bob smirks at her expression, pats her cheek, and strides out the door.

They make it in time, Bob acts professional and restrained all shift, and the sound of his voice makes her crazy. For once, she doesn't agonize about the new coworkers, the new policies; she's distracted. She's on the Comm floor the moment Darlene shouts, "First shift, clock out! I don't care where you go, long as it ain't here," even though the other combos eye her uneasily.

Bob smiles innocently as he adjusts his laptop bag. "No overtime, boss?"

Grey can't grab Bob and drag him to the car. She has to keep her hands to herself until they arrive at her apartment and drag him to the bedroom instead. He cackles when she does it.

Bob stays the night again, sitting up in bed to play some indecipherable game on his laptop. Grey falls asleep with an arm over his belly, watching the letters and punctuation symbols do battle, and his clattering keyboard follows her into dreams. When she wakes up a split second before four, he's sprawled against her side, arm tucked around her like he's always been there. In the soft dawn light, he's all lush abundance and curves: full mouth, soft chest, rolls of belly, plush thighs, and his hands—

Bob's hands.

When the alarm goes off, he groans and buries his face in her neck; his stubble scrapes her skin. "You're crazy, but I'll give you today."

Grey squeezes Bob's hand, gets up, and goes to put the coffee on.

This time, she comes back to bed before showering. Bob approves.

SHAVED

With one thing and another, Bob starts staying the night at Grey's place more often. It's easier, especially since Jenny knows and doesn't require excuses. (Though she does seem horrified at the idea that Grey is a sexual being and not a killer government robot.)

Bob hasn't had to share a bathroom in a while, but they build a morning routine. Grey gets up, puts on the coffee, and leaves the paper for him. Once the Liquid of Life rouses him, he drags into the bathroom and showers and shaves because once Grey returns, she's in it til they leave. Sometimes he reads the paper to her but always through the bathroom door, and he has to brush his teeth over the kitchen sink. It works until he gets a bad breakfast burrito one morning and bursts in while Grey's showering, apologizing profusely.

There's no hiding the amount of shaving cream everywhere. Grey mostly shows concern for Bob's health (he's fine, once the burrito's out of him), but she also seems shamefaced, like he caught her at something.

They rush on to work and can't talk about it. Even if they weren't courting disaster, Bob doesn't know what to say to her, because he's not sure what she's ashamed of. If she's not happy with her body, why remind her? If she doesn't like him seeing her, how to reassure her?

Then he gets an idea. He packs a bag, stays the night, and come Saturday, forces himself up early to chug his coffee. When Grey comes back from her run, flushed and smelling delicious, Bob is alert and holding a straight razor.

"I could do that for you, if you want."

Her eyes are wide, but she says, "Okay."

The shaving kit was a well-meaning gift from an old coworker—tasteful, butch, and hilariously kinky. It'd taken all his self-control to say with a straight face, "Thanks Marv, I'll treasure it always," before forgetting it in a closet. Bob can use a straight razor (Bapu insisted he learn, that disposable razors were a racket), but he's never wanted to wave a lethal weapon around before coffee. Well, not for fun, not until now.

With kink, his mind slows down and everything drops away. A daily chore like shaving becomes ceremonial, meditative... and hot. Usually, they fuck with Grey still dressed. He's seen her naked before, during her recovery, but never for long. This time, though, she holds still, lets him build up a rich, creamy

lather with the badger brush, soap her up, and razor her clean. Arms, chest, legs, it's a lot of skin.

He knows the story of her body better now. As he guides the razor over her arms, he knows that the scars on her forearms are from her hire, the craters in her shoulder from an old firefight, as are the bullet scars in her bicep. As he works down her torso, he knows the weld job is from an event she only calls "the accident." When he sits on the edge of the bathtub and braces her foot on his knee so as to get the best angle for her legs, he sees her battered knees, gotten the quotidian way: hit by a car while jogging.

She doesn't talk about the burn scars on her shins at all.

When he feels Grey's eyes on him, he looks up to find that worshipful look on her face again. Bob's got enough of an ego to like the stroking. He smiles at her, and she turns pink and averts her eyes, which just ices the cake. Half the department is scared of her, but he makes her blush like a schoolgirl.

So when he finishes her legs, he tosses the towel over his shoulder and asks, "Want me to go higher?"

That, he can tell, Grey doesn't shave, at least not regularly, but Bob can't resist the look on her face. She swallows, opens her thighs to the razor, and this, *this* is what he's kinky for, that perfect moment when she bends for him because she wants to, wants *him* to. Because he's just that good.

Bob kisses her hip by the weld job scar, and she sucks in her breath.

"Twenty?" he asks.

"Sensitive."

"Oh? In a good way?"

She nods.

He grins. "Good." He goes back to work.

He likes the idea of her going to work with all this under her uniform. Part of him wants someone to notice. To want, though nobody in the PIN will ever admit that old Specialist Ironass is hot as hell.

Too late boys, he thinks. She's mine now.

Then he catches himself, shoves that thought (and its possessiveness) away. Stop it; down, boy. Don't ruin a good thing. Leave it in the scene.

But when he finishes and she runs her hands over herself, feeling the difference with a wondering expression, Bob has to busy himself with putting things away. He's never been good at hiding his feelings, and seeing this beautiful girl covered in signs of him—hickies fading on her neck, skin razored smooth... seeing her *like* it...

"Thank you," she says.

Bob isn't sure why she's thanking him, but he also never wants her to stop, so he says, "You're welcome," and kisses her hip again.



She squirms, and for a moment, he thinks she's going to pull away, but then her hands come down on his shoulders. Her eyes are questioning.

"Please?" she asks.

Bob has never been able to resist a sub with good manners.

MARKED

A low whistle. "Who's the lucky lady, Grey?"

Grey pulls her shirt down, but it's too late; the other gym rats have noticed. The restructure hires eye her disdainfully, but the old horses start ribbing her.

"Well, well, surprise, surprise!"

"I *thought* you'd been less uptight lately. C'mon, who is she?"

"Nobody," Grey says, shutting the locker.

"Bet you it's
Larkin. Is it Larkin?"


"Whoever she
is, she's feisty!
Damn, man, have
you seen your
back?"

No, she hasn't,
but she remembers
how it felt, Bob
digging his nails in,
his voice rough and
full of laughter.

Normally, she's
more careful how
she dresses and
changes at work.
But she's so tired of
being careful. As her
coworkers rib her,
congratulate her
even, she wishes she
could joke back.

"Meow! Kitty's
got claws!"

"Watch out,

9/29/19 



Grey, she'll break out the whip!"

"Man, and here I thought you spent your off-hours doing crosswords..."

They're laughing now, imagining maybe a pretty girl in rubber. Grey just shrugs and lets them think it, which makes them rib her harder. When she leaves the locker room, Reyes follows and finds Bob waiting for his ride home.

"Doshi, you didn't tell us Grey had a *life*," Reyes complains.

Bob smirks. "Is that so? News to me."

Grey gives Bob a look, which Reyes doesn't notice. "I tell you, Doshi, it's not fair," he kvetches. "I'm young, handsome, I can carry a conversation, but no, old Ironass here is the one who looks like a rose bush jumped on his back!"

Bob's expression freezes.

"Where did he even *find* this girl?" Reyes continues, oblivious.

Somehow they get away, but the drive home is tense. Bob is silent, lost in thought, and Grey's shame chokes her throat. Stupid, stupid. He has far more to fear than her, she knows better, and without being told she turns to take him back to his place, not hers.

They're almost there when Bob says, "I need to quit doing that."

"No." It comes out forcefully enough that he looks up. "My fault. Sloppy. Don't stop. Please? I like it. Makes it—me—real." Her throat locks.

Grey can't tell her coworkers about Bob, how he tastes like fine coffee in the morning and sounds like velvet in bed, how he makes her feel small and precious and beautiful. She can't tell them who she is, only *show* them.

Bob's expression is torn. He loves doing this, she knows; he kisses the marks he leaves and plays with them for days afterward. But when he gets out of the car, he says, "The new management's already sniffing around us; they find out I'm fucking you and we'll both be burnt and washed."

Grey can't argue that. The storm at work may have passed them for now, but it still rages around them. Nobody knows what will happen. More and more old horses are gone, and more women are leaving than coming in. It makes Grey uneasy (Jews have been purged before, though not recently), and Bob's position is far shakier than her own. She's lucky he's not leaving immediately.

So she says nothing. They try to be more careful, and Bob stops marking her for a while, even though they miss it.

G I L D E D

Bob has a lot of things, and he doesn't like getting rid of any of them. He's only been in Vago a short while, but he has twice Grey's possessions and seems incapable of paring them down. At first, he tries to hide what he's doing, but finally, he asks her for help. "You're always so organized... and I don't want to have to rent a truck the size of the last one."

His expression is ginger. He's trying to let her down easy, remind her that he's planning to leave, move back to the east coast. But he's never hidden that from her, so it doesn't bother her to say yes.

They take on the bathroom first, where Grey finds the lipstick. Presuming it an ex-girlfriend's, she moves to toss it, but Bob stops her.

"No, no, I'm keeping this."

Grey looks questioning.

"Yeah, it's mine. I did Rocky Horror, back in the day." Bob uncaps the lipstick and gives it a twist. It comes up metallic gold.

"Show me?" Grey asks.

So after they toss the expired cleaning products and extra toothbrushes, Bob plops down on the couch and boots up his laptop to pull up the photos. Grey sits next to him, riveted.

Bob is young in these pictures, smooth and clean-shaven, with no glasses or gray in his (long) hair. But that's not what stands out. No, what stands out is the gold: glitter over his eyes, bangles on his wrists, paint on lips and fingers. And his clothes! Grey didn't know corsets came in gold lamé.

"Black is the traditional," Bob says as he clicks through, "but it's boring. Su gets all the credit, by the way; she took me shopping, made me presentable..."

Grey says nothing, just watches the younger Bob pose, wink, blow kisses at the photographer, hip cocked and hands dancing. This Bob she's only seen glimpses of, shameless and uninhibited, fey and flamboyant. Show-stopping.

Grey can't imagine ever being that confident herself.

"When?" she asks.

"Oh jeez, let's see... late seventies? Yeah, grad school, I hadn't quite had the queeniness steamrolled out of me yet..."

"What happened?"

Bob huffs a pseudo-laugh. "I started making money. And I got sick of other people's bullshit." With affected lightheartedness: "and shaving took forever." Grey watches Bob's younger self cavort across the screen, laughing and happy. She touches a finger to the screen, smiles.

"Beautiful."

Bob looks raw and open for a moment; then he looks away. "You know, I even felt the same way, back then. Guess that's why I bought the new tube when I was unemployed. I don't know, here I was, stuck in this litter box city, and I wanted to feel good about something." He shrugs. "Didn't work; just made me realize how old and square I'd gotten."

Grey brushes her



fingers over Bob's shoulder, clad in his usual polo shirt. She tries to speak, but the words get stuck.

Bob waits for her. Finally, Grey untangles: "see you in it. Please?"

Bob's eyes spark. His body language shifts to pleased, confident.

"Oh really?"

Grey nods and Bob puts the laptop away.

It's nothing elaborate—just the lipstick. But watching him paint his mouth gold is still a revelation. Watching him navigate his mustache feels intimate, and when Bob finishes and turns with a flourish and a, "Ta-da!" there's a note of hesitancy, like he's not sure how Grey will react.

She just stares. The only point of comparison she has is Vicky, who only ever wore makeup at prom, and the effect was wasted on Grey. But Bob in lipstick is gilded, like the precious metal under his skin is visible now, matching the frames of his glasses, transforming him into something otherworldly.

"So?" Bob asks. "What do you think?"

Grey replies by kissing him, and under the gold, it's still Bob's mouth against hers, still Bob's softness against her, Bob's hands on her back. Grey pushes back into them, trying to get him to dig his nails in.

He doesn't, but when he pulls back, he laughs. "Wow, this stuff smears right off." He brushes his thumb over Grey's mouth, then pauses. Heat comes into his eyes. "You look good like this."

Hot and cold flash through her.

Bob reaches for the tube. "Let me put some on you..."

Grey swallows. She's never worn makeup. She was never that kind of girl. Up until this moment, she never thought she'd want to... or could.

Bob's waiting, looking at her questioningly. She squeezes for yes.

Grey knows she's not like Bob. This can't look good on her, not like it does on him. Her color, her build, it's all wrong. But Bob takes her chin in his hand, paints her gold, and when he finishes, his smile makes a zing go through her.

"I didn't think you'd let me," he teases, but in a nice way. "Pretty girl."

She can tell he means it, and it gives her the shivers. "I love you," she says.

Normally, that would make him draw back, brush it off. But here, now, it makes him purr, "Damn right you do," and kiss her hard.

Bob doesn't bite or scratch her, but he leaves shining smears on Grey's mouth, her neck, shoves her down on the bed and moves lower. Grey wants to keep kissing him, but not as much as she wants to be covered in gold, to wear it under her clothes to work, even if she can't say who left it on her. She wants everyone to see it on her and know someone beautiful touched her, even if they

can't know it's Bob. She wants him like this, golden and unstoppable, before he defaulted to wearing nothing but brown, white, and blue, before he took to fidgeting with his glasses to still his dancing hands. Grey wants everything.



Afterward, Bob touches the gold he's left on her hips with such longing that she says, "Keeping these."

"You're killing me, Grace." But he doesn't say no, and all the following shift, she feels his eyes on her. Even though nobody sees it, he knows it's there, and she finds excuses to touch her hips in front of him, flirting with him in ways only he recognizes, and that evening, he yanks her to bed, rips her clothes off, and dives into her lap to claw her back and bite her everywhere.

"You," he growls, hips undulating, "are a tease."

She beams at him. "Yes."

He comes in her hand, telling her all the lovely things he does to girls like her, and gives up trying not to mark her after that.

WALTZING

I was in trouble.

It was one thing to strike up a friendly fucking arrangement with Grey to spite our workplace. But this was getting out of hand; I couldn't keep my damn teeth in my mouth for a week. Grey was a PIN lifer and never did anything casually; I doubted she'd made an exception for me, *especially* if she was saying she loved me with that look on her face. Worse, my reaction was, "damn right you're mine," not, "if I keep doing this, I'm going to get washed."

I couldn't stay here, in this Patriot Act job in this wasteland town. She had to know that; she was helping me prep for the move! But if she was bothered or worried, it didn't show, and I sure as hell wasn't going to bring it up, so we kept going through my crap, where we found the old photos.

"So this is where they went!" I cried. "I missed these..."

The one I'd found was a black and white shot, taken in high school, me and a kid in a letterman jacket. It was the only shot I had of him, and Su had only gotten it because she'd snuck up on us during lunch; I hadn't known she was there so was caught in mid-conversation, while he was looking up with a surprised look, sandwich still in hand.

Grey pointed to the boy and looked at me questioningly.

"Arthur Eastwood," I said. "You could call him my first sweetheart."

"In high school?"

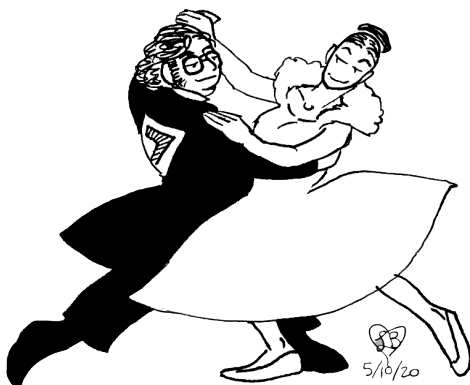
"Secret star-crossed thing. What about you, did you...?"

But she shook her head. "Just Vicky."

She held out the photo she held, where my zitty college self waltzed with a tall girl. The fashion was terrible but the shot was good, catching us in the full sweep of motion.

"Oh, that old thing," I said.

"Su's work too. She's good, right? You'd never guess I was agonizing about my O-Chem project that day."



"Didn't know you danced."

"Oh yeah, up through college. I think we won the one in the picture."

Grey pointed to the girl and gave me an inquiring look.

I sighed and took the frame from her. "Linda Alagaratnam. Man, I haven't thought about her or Arthur in years..."

The sexual revolution missed my snotty private high school, and Su and I were brown specks in a Mayflower white sea. She dealt by keeping her head down, but I had limp wrists and a big mouth so got catty instead. It didn't serve me well. One day, I was getting my ass kicked by a Kennedy when I heard, "Leave him alone," and the next thing I knew, someone was putting my glasses in my hand and asking if I was all right.

Arthur was the kind of golden athlete they put on propaganda posters, but his letterman jacket wasn't from our school. He was a rare mid-year transfer, had no idea what he'd just done.

I put my glasses back on and said, "You know I'm the class fag, right?"

He smiled. "So?"

Be still my beating heart.

Poor Su must've listened to a hundred variations of, "Oh, my agony, how can I share my secret love?" Surely, I thought, there was no way someone so beautiful, so athletic, so clearly heterosexual—

Within three weeks I had him on his knees in the boy's room.

I don't remember the details of how we got there, just that I was teasing him, saying he should get down and worship me. Except then he did. I saw his face, realized this big strapping Adonis had a thing for me pushing him around, and discovered my kink on the spot. Blew my teenage fat-boy mind.

We had a lot of fun stealing kisses and more all over campus, but always in secret. His parents had yanked him out of his last school for doing the same thing, and one day, they caught him again, this time with my love (well, lust) letters in his backpack. I never found out what became of him.

Arthur refused to rat me out so I avoided all consequences, but I graduated bitter as hell, determined to smash down the closet door. And I did, the moment I made it to college. Came out, discovered disco, took every drug offered to me, and pretended I hadn't been a smug atheist since the fifth grade so I could have orgies with guru-chasers who insisted on calling me (and mispronouncing) Babubhai.

I met Linda in 1973 at ballroom dance tryouts, and I'm pretty sure we got paired as a joke. Linda was four inches taller than me in socks, wore all black

and a disaffected expression. Side by side, we looked like a geometry lesson, circle and line. We had only three things in common: subcontinent of origin, collegiate disdain for most of the human race, and dancing skills. When we figured out we were a dynamite team, we made it our mission in life to crush everyone who opposed us.

Grey's voice jerked me back to the present. "You liked it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did for a while." I put Arthur's photo on the wall, but recycled Linda's. "You dance?"

She shrugged. "Parents got me lessons for prom. Didn't go well."

"You didn't like it?"

She glanced at me, then away.

"Didn't like leading."

Oh. "And I'm guessing it wasn't girls you wanted to dance with."

"No." Hesitant: "dance with me?"

I thought it over. "Sure, but at your place; you've got the stereo for it and I won't trip you over a box."

Her face lit up.

The next time we were at her apartment, we pushed couch and coffee table against the wall and dug through her LPs until I saw Strauss. "How's a waltz? That's easy enough."

"Won't be good at it."

"Don't worry; I was a good lead once. And my first job was giving lessons."

After a quick refresher course, the arm of the record player came down with a crackle hiss. I stepped up to Grey, touched one hand to her back and took her other hand in mine. Her free hand dropped to my shoulder.

It'd been years, but my body remembered its frame. Grey stiffened up, though. When I looked up, she swallowed.

"Okay?" I asked as the music started.

"Never had this," she said. "Been the girl."

I'd danced with Su, Linda, innumerable other women; I'd also danced with men, including a stolen slow-dance with Arthur in my room while "studying." Grey had never had the chance.



Well, she did now. I got up on my toes to kiss her. "Dance with me, Grace." She relaxed after that. When we finished, I said, "See? You did great."

She was beaming—the big, open kind I'd first seen on Valentine's Day, the kind that hit me in the chest. "Thank you," she said. And when the next song kicked in: "more?"

"Sure." And it became a regular thing after that. She'd never be competitor material, but that didn't matter to her. She just enjoyed dancing with me.

She might've relaxed, but I held back, focusing on the technicals and keeping her at arm's length like I was giving her lessons. Grey noticed first, one evening when she tried to move in closer and I snapped, "Dance space."

She looked startled. I grimaced. We stopped dancing.

She cocked her head and tapped my temple.

"Just memories," I said. "It's dumb."

She turned off the stereo, brought me a chair, claimed another for herself, and looked up at me expectantly.

There was no outwaiting Grace. I sat, taking off my glasses to clean.

"You remind me of Arthur. You're sweet, protective in the same way."

Arthur had been a big loving puppy. Even as dumb kids who didn't know any better, we hadn't hurt each other. Linda, though...

"You remind me of Linda too," I said. "She was trapped in a box, like you, and she found it suffocating, like you. And here I was, a flaming bougie guju in paisley, pissing on her values and running wild."

Linda and I never slept together; she was holding out for a good Tamil boy. Instead, we started psychologically kinking out together without realizing we were doing it. Not that she knew, but Linda was the dommiest domme I ever met; her looks could cut glass. And she didn't want an Arthur; she wanted a fight. She brought out the overcompetitive, insecure dom in me and we were forever locking horns, fighting to top each other and never succeeding.

Cosmic balance, I called it once while high. She just laughed at me.

"After I got off the hippie trip, I fucked enough all-American closet cases to form their own football team. I got off on making them roll over for me, being their dirty little secret. Call it a carry-over from high school.

"I was a shit, rubbed it in Linda's face." Taking smug pleasure in getting something heterosexual her wasn't—couldn't, as long as she was waiting for her good Tamil boy. "The best revenge she could get was refusing to hate-fuck me—and thank god she didn't, we would've killed each other.

"Eventually, though, the inevitable happened and one of my tricks caught gay panic. That's why I don't like men tossing me around."

It could've been worse; I was able to walk away from it. It could've been better; Linda was my closest friend on campus, so I had to go to her, rather than Su (who studied elsewhere). Linda knew my tastes, pegged me the moment she saw me, and finally got her chance to knock me off my high horse. I would never forget her tone when she said, "That's why you don't fight nature."

"You ask me, she was telling herself more than me," I said. "I knew it even then. But it was still a shitty thing to say, and it worked. We'd been playing power games for years, but that's when she won." I chuckled. "You should've seen her face when she realized. The fun was all in the fight, and now she'd ruined it. We threw everything into dance, the rest of junior year, trying to get the spark back, but it was too late."

Even when times were good, we were gold-level asshats. But times were no longer good, and neither of us could admit it, because that would mean it was over. So we just kept trying, harder and harder. The extracurricular arms race took over so much of my life that I almost flunked my junior year, something I'd avoided during my acid-and-orgies period. Hell, I *lost weight*.

Su had stood by me through my cannonball coming out, my short-lived attempt at free love, all my smarter-than-thou condescension, but now she took me aside and asked, "Do you even like this girl? Because she seems to *hate* you."

I scoffed and blustered, but she was right. Without the thrill of combat, Linda and I were just smug, spiteful assholes sneering at each other. That was when I realized it was time to tap out. At least my grades gave me the perfect excuse; Linda never found out the real reason I pulled away. In a frantic surge of coffee-swilling cramming, I squeaked through junior year; Linda graduated and moved to Florida to terrorize the retirees. The moment she was gone and the endorphins wore off, I crashed, quit the dance team and spent senior year with my nose in the books, gaining the weight back.

I got my queer smeared a few more times after that, until I discovered erotic BBS right around the time I first heard about AIDS. No chance of infection, arrest, or assault? Easy escape from the rude, racist, and repulsive? The choice was a no-brainer.

Offline, back up north, I had a semi-regular play partner, a fellow switch named Mindy who was just as fat and relationship-averse as me. We shared scenes, laughs, and take-out; anyone who knocks friendly convenience hasn't tried it. But then the Smithson West job devoured my life until by the time I moved to Vago, we hadn't seen each other in over a year.

And now there was Grace. Grace, who bent like she was made for it and smiled like the summer sun and still said "thank you" every time she came.

Who'd gone from a one-night impulse fling to *this*.

"Linda and I were bad for each other, and I never want to repeat that," I said. "But now there's you. And... god, but I like domming you."

"I know," Grey said.

"Yeah?"

She gave me a wry look, undid her tie, and tugged open her collar.

I coughed. "Apparently I also like hickeying you like a sloppy prom date."

She brushed her fingers over the marks. "Wasn't complaining."

I reached over to touch. "Careful. You keep encouraging me like that..."

"So?"

I pulled my hand out of her shirt. "You know I'm leaving when I can, right?"

"Yes."

"You said you loved me."

"Yes."

I waited, but that was it. I spread my hands. "I can't stay, Grace!"

"You don't have to," she said.

She went silent again but clearly had more to say. I waited for her.

"Not... not trying to make you stay," she said. "Or love me. World's small. You make it bigger." She made a sound of exasperation, plucked at her hair. "Didn't used to matter. Nothing to want. Now there is." She looked up, hazel eyes fierce, and swapped to SGSL. "I want all of it. All of you. Because you're here now and one day you won't be."

I'd never gotten so many words out of her at a time.

"That's how you want to do this?" I asked. "Go all in, knowing it'll end soon and hurt like hell? All of me really isn't worth all of that."

With her hands, she replied, "Yes, you are."

There was nothing I could say.

"It's how I work," she continued. "I give you today. No forever."

It took me a while to think of a response. "Thank you. And..." I glanced at her neck and coughed. "If you want all of me, I admit, I've been holding back on the kink. Trying, anyway. Would you want—"

"Yes."

She'd never interrupted me before. It made me laugh... in part out of relief. I'd been worried that I was getting into another doomed-to-fail Linda situation, even though Grey's temperament was on the opposite pole. But she'd said what she wanted, she'd interrupted me to say it, and she'd clearly put more thought into it than I had. I didn't understand what she saw in me, but...

"Tell me three things you won't do," I said. She cocked her head. "Humor

me. No matter how much I want to do them. Three things.”

She thought about it. With her voice: “won’t be a man. Won’t use my work gear. Won’t...” she hesitated. “Won’t top you.”

“Do you mean running the kinky activity or fucking me in the ass?”

She turned pink, held up two fingers.

Intriguing. I liked women tossing me around; if Grace was interested—

“Why?” she asked with her hands.

“I just needed to know you’d say no to me.” I put my glasses back on and clapped my hands. “You’ve convinced me, Grace. I’m all yours, for now.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

Such a polite girl. “You’re welcome. What would you like?”

Grey pulled out her car keys. “Bring your music over. Dance.”

So we lugged my CDs over. She wouldn’t let me sort through them either, just stuck a big strip of packing tape across the racks to hold the cases in place, grabbed them wholesale, and shoved them in the backseat. Once they were in her apartment and parked next to her records, we started layering on discs since Grey’s stereo could be programmed in advance. She let me go first, and I chose a geekwave song that not only had plenty of buffer time but a couple measures of tempo setting. It’d make for a short, sappy waltz, but that was okay, perfect even. I pressed play and went to join her at the center of the room. She was even taller than Linda, but at least it wasn’t all legs, and her face when I pulled her to me was gold.

“No more suspension bridge,” I said as the audience started chanting “love.” “Dance close with me, kinky girl.”

Back in college, I’d tangoed with Linda, but we’d been competing, focused on perfection—work, not play. It was a different ballgame dancing with Grey’s right hip inside and above mine, leading her through movement and pressure, feeling her bend and give to it while the band sang about human weakness and small cherished things. Grey’s stereo clicked over to the next one—country, of all things, something in 4/4 time about secret love, but we winged it fine, and then it was back to waltz, whirling to beautiful ephemerality and airplanes over the sea, and oh, I had missed this.

We danced to techno and opera and disco and rock’n’roll, fast and slow, apart and together, open and closed. I danced harder than I had since college, and Grey danced harder than she ever had in her life. We broke sweats, and our breaths got short, and I dipped her and kissed her, and we didn’t stop.

Nobody could stop us.

WRESTLING

Bob's apartment is full of tchotchkes—math Olympics trophies, fanzines, ham radio parts. Grey, though, took nothing personal when she left but her copy of *Leaves of Grass* and a few things inside. When Bob asks for childhood photos of her, she pulls them from between the pages.

The first is her prom photo: Vicky in her fluffy green dress, Grey in an ill-fitting rental suit. She's stiff and unsmiling, but Vicky's head is thrown back laughing. It's how Grey likes to remember her.

"So this is her?" Bob says. "She's cute. Any idea what she's doing now?"

Grey shakes her head. A couple days later, Bob will tell her that according to the Internet, Vicky's an aerospace engineer with the Sojourner probe people and it'll brighten Grey's day, but for now, Bob moves on.

The other is a newspaper clipping, yellow and brittle, local coverage of her high school wrestling team. The grainy photo of Grey during a match is the only one of herself that she likes.

"Oh wow, this is you?"

"Regionals," she voices, then in SGSL: "won. Never happened again."

"You look better in this one."

Grey shrugs. She always feels more like herself in motion, and since she wasn't aware of the camera, she didn't tense up. Then she sees how Bob is eyeing the wrestling singlet and nudges him.

"Nothing. Just imagining." Bob's tone is distracted. He likes jocks, she knows, and women manhandling him.

She gets an idea. "Wrestled before?" she asks with voice.

"Ha! No."

"Want to?"

Bob looks up, expression intent. "Hell yes."

They clear a space on the living room floor. Grey's joints aren't what they used to be, but that's fine; it's not like this is intended to be real sport. Which is why they start with her arm around Bob's waist; it's not how they're supposed to start a first match, but she knows how he'll react. And sure enough...

"Wow," Bob says. "And people think ballroom is gay."

Grey chuckles. Ballroom dancing is almost compulsively heterosexual, with its strict roles of male lead and female follow; what it isn't is macho. Wrestling,

on the other hand, is (mostly) men rolling around together on the floor in leotards, and as an adult, Grey's free to enjoy it. "Ready? Go."



Within seconds, Grey is covered in rug burn, breathing hard, and has Bob pinned. Bob doesn't mind, judging by his face and the way he's panting.

"Goddamn," he declares. "I am jealous."

Grey lets him up, only to get tackled.

"Not legal," she protests, but Bob pins her wrists to the carpet, slides his thigh between hers, and grins when Grey instinctively opens to it.

"I didn't tap out." His voice is dark and rough. "First one to come loses."

Grey smiles, nods, and throws him off.

It takes a while. They both know Grey's stronger and heavier, but this isn't sport; it's play, and if Bob wants to win through sheer force of personality, well, she likes letting him try. At one point, things get rowdy enough that they crash her into the coffee table and have to make sure that she's unhurt. (She's fine. Fantastic. She could do this all day.) They have to keep their clothes on, since the carpet isn't the kind that's good against sensitive parts.

It feels wonderful. Wrestling was the closest Grey could get to boys and have it be okay, and only as a boy who didn't enjoy it too much. Now, though, enjoying is the whole point. She can revel in her body, be as forceful as she wants, knowing Bob loves it because she's a girl doing it, and he trusts her. And having him all over her, rough and panting and sweaty and perfect—

They're getting close. A delicious aching tension is building in her core; she keeps moving her hips even with nothing to rub against, and somewhere along the way both their shirts have gotten rucked up. Bob's hard and has been for a while, and finally, Grey decides it's time to end it. She twists, uses her legs to pin him down on his back, and pulls his dick out of his shorts.

And Bob blurts, "*I love you!*"

Grey freezes. She looks up, but Bob thrashes.

"Don't you stop, you beautiful fucking—" Grey goes down on him. "*Fuck!*"

Bob always talks a lot during sex, but usually he manages to stay filthily coherent. This time though, he writhes against her grip and babbles end-of-the-world ecstasies: "love you, *god*, I fucking love you, my beautiful fucking girl, love you love you *love you*—" before coming. Grey licks him clean and pauses to catch her breath, because she is *throbbing*.

"Holy shit," Bob breathes. "That was the most fun I've ever had losing." He turns his head, sees the wetness on Grey's shorts, and works an arm free to touch. "Looks like it was close, though..."

Grey gets up and walks away.

"Grace?"

"Don't have to say it," she voices.

Bob pauses. "You've said it to me."

"Different."

Bob sits up, adjusts his clothes. "Are you okay?"

Grey's throat locks. She sits against the wall, hides her face, and taps out.

She hears Bob get up, fetch his glasses from the other room, come back.

"Can I touch you?"

Grey nods without looking up.

Bob starts petting her back. He waits.

It's one thing for her to love him, to say it to him. That's fine, as it should be. But Bob isn't supposed to love her back. It's enough, his patience, his touch and his eyes, his cooking dinner and learning SGSL and giving her tomorrow after tomorrow, even though she knows how much he hates it here. He's not supposed to say anything, not supposed to call her...

"Not a beautiful girl," she says with her hands.

Bob's voice is sad. "I won't call you that if you don't want me to."

Grey shakes her head. "I want it," she signs. "That's what hurts."

Then she loses even SGSL, but Bob doesn't push, get angry, or pull away when Grey starts to rock. He just sits with her, quietly loving her.

STRAPPING

They're down to Bob's MISC boxes, never unpacked, when Grey finds a neon pink and purple dildo shaped like something from a tropical aquarium.

"That's where it ended up? I've been looking all over!" Bob plucks it from her hands and puts it in his headboard, next to the latex gloves where anyone could see it. "It's good, right? You should see it under a black light." He sees her face, snorts, and pats her shoulder. "There, there, Grace, it's mine, not yours."

But that's not it. Sure, she's shocked at first, but when she goes home to bed, she can't stop thinking about the sinuous swirl of silicone, its bright, cheerful colors. Like it's nothing to be ashamed of. Like it's fun.

Bob must like it, if he keeps it right there in his headboard. Maybe it's his favorite. Maybe he likes the way the ridges and swirls feel inside him. Maybe—

Grey turns onto her stomach and hugs her pillow, squirmy and overheated. She's never wanted to put her genitals inside someone and still doesn't. But the dildo in Bob's headboard looked nothing like any piece of human anatomy, in shape or color. Texture either, she presumes, being made of rubber.

She slides a hand down the front of her shorts, pushes her hips into it. The pressure feels good. If she was wearing that dildo, it'd push against her like this. And if she was wearing it while tucked...

She curls her fingers into herself and shivers, burying her face in the pillow. Yes, yes, it'd feel like that. It'd feel *good*...

She falls asleep imagining Bob's face and voice, the curve of his back.

Bob's never pushed back against her three forbidden things, so if she wants it to happen, she'll have to bring it up. But how? The next time they're in his room, she decides. It's right there in his headboard; she can ask about it.

But when the time comes, his headboard's empty.

"Where's...?" she signs, but while she knows SGSL for "dildo," (sex toy bootleggers) Bob doesn't, and she *can't* voice it. She has to settle for gesturing.

Bob frowns, then realizes what she means. "Oh! In the dishwasher." Her confusion must show. "Cleaning. Why?"

So he does like it.

With her hands, she says, "I want to use it."

Bob freezes.

"On you."

"Oh." She can't read his face. Maybe this is like borrowing his toothbrush.

Her throat tightens. "Okay?" she signs.

"More than. I just... thought that was a never."

Grey shrugs. She did too, until she saw it in his hands and realized she had options besides her own anatomy. "It looks fun," she signs.

He laughs, pets her hair. "I've clearly been a bad influence on you, beautiful girl. So, were you planning on using your hands, or do you want a harness?"

He makes it sound ordinary. She holds up two fingers: harness.

"Okay. Thigh, face, or...?"

She's going to catch fire from embarrassment, but she gestures at her hips.

Bob's expression goes distant. She taps him inquiringly.

"Nothing. Just imagining." He stands up and grabs his laptop bag. "Duct tape and cheap jeans is fine when you're young and horny, but we're a class act here; we're buying from the Internet. You want leather or neoprene?"

She shrugs. "Not black?" she signs.

Bob is not a miracle worker. In her size and price range, the only non-black options are blue imitation denim, chain mail, or pink lace. She wrinkles her nose. Black neoprene it is.

By the time they get that sorted, the dishwasher has finished. When Bob unloads the aquarium dildo, he asks, "Did you have your heart set on this one in particular? I have others."

Of course he does. "Show me?" she signs.

There's a whole rainbow of them in a tub under his bed, mostly rubber but also glass and metal. Some of them look human, others like fantastical modern art. Most are beautiful.

"What kind do you like?" Bob asks.

Her mind goes blank.

Bob must see it; he reframes. "What do you want to fuck me with?"

It helps. "Not a normal one. More like this." She indicates the aquarium dildo. Then she has a revelation. "Your favorite. Loan me your favorite."

After all, that's what got to her, the idea of using his favorite on him.

Bob grins and cups her cheek. "How did I ever mistake you for vanilla?"

She kisses his palm and leaves him to it.

Bob can't pick just one either but narrows it down to three, the aquarium dildo among them. Grey's happy to take it. It's pleasantly squeezable in her hands and she's trying not to squish it too obviously when Bob clears his throat.

"I should warn you, Grace, I'm a lousy bottom." He acts blithe, but his tone is apologetic. "Hard work. Sorry."

Grey smiles, tugs him down on the bed, and signs, "Help me practice?"

Bob isn't hard work. Grey's used to years of labor with little to no reward

besides her own satisfaction; Bob doesn't even take hours, most of the time, and the pay-off is fantastic. Some kissing, heavy petting, hands and tongue and focus, and he melts like butter. She learns how he breathes, moves, *talks* as his body moves through its paces. She doesn't notice the clock; it takes as long as it takes, and Bob mostly doesn't complain. (Mostly. Once, she falls asleep in the middle of proceedings, much to his dismay, and another time, he has to stop her because it's been long enough that he needs to eat something.)

Bob seems surprised at how intent she is but not displeased. He knows what he wants, how he wants it, and gives good directions, which Grey takes well. What starts as "practice" becomes sex in its own right, Bob clutching her shoulders or hugging her neck as she slides her fingers or the toy into him.

"You're going to drain me dry, beautiful girl; leave something for when the harness gets here!" he chides, but he's laughing and never tries to stop her.

The day it arrives, Grey shuts herself in Bob's bathroom. It fits fine, thank goodness, though getting the whole rig on comfortably takes a couple tries—the dildo has to be worked through the O-ring of the harness first and the whole contraption pulled halfway up her thighs so she can get herself situated. It's worth it when she gets everything in place and sees herself in the mirror.



She doesn't look like a man at all. She looks like herself. And when she comes out, Bob's naked on the bed, all black and brown and gold in the stripes of sunlight through the blinds.

He swallows when he sees her. "I should've put you in lace."

Grey smiles and comes over to kiss him and press him back on the bed, enjoying the unfamiliar weight in her shorts—which is Bob's, not hers. When it brushes against his thigh, he jumps, but the sound he makes is excited.

It's their weekend. They have all the time in the world, Bob's bed is high enough off the floor that she can do this standing up, sparing her knees, and she's had months to learn Bob's body. She's almost

disappointed when he warms and opens to her so quickly, and his expression is

almost comedic.

"You are the service top of my dreams," he swears. "Holy shit, Grace—" She laughs and kisses his cheek.

"Wait, hold on a little—*there*." His nails dig into her back and she arches into it, thrusts instinctively, and Bob makes a rapturous noise. "Yes, just like that, beautiful girl, don't speed up, keep it right there—yes!" His thighs squeeze her waist. "Perfect, *fucking* perfect, good girl, god, when I get to fuck you—"

This feels *nothing* like Grey's awful attempts to act the boy in high school. This feels *right*. With everything tucked up inside her, the base of the dildo rides perfect. She doubts she could come from it, this time anyway, but that's fine. What she really wants is to make *Bob* come.

She's going to get her wish. His voice is getting rough and broken.

"Good, pretty, *perfect* girl, you make me want to keep you—"

"You can keep me," she says.

He snaps his hips like he's almost there, but he gasps, "No, no—"

It's cheating, but she's seen the look in Bob's eyes when he shaves her, when he gets her on her knees, when he marks her up. And she wants to, so badly, so she ducks her head and whispers in his ear, "I'm yours."

Bob's eyes go wide, and he comes almost sobbing, but when he comes down, his expression is raw. Nervous.

"You shouldn't say that to me, Grace," he says. "I like it too much."

She kisses his fingertips. "I like it too," she signs. "I like being yours."

He pets her hair as she snuggles to him. "Even when I'm gone?"

"Yes." That's how she works. She loves people, and it's better that they don't love her back. It hurts less. She's known from the start that one day Bob will go, and that's fine.

Apparently he isn't the same way; he has to think about it for a while. Then he says, "What happens to you after I'm gone?"

She freezes.

"They passed the Homeland Security Act a few months ago; the restructure is official and mandated now. Surely you've noticed."

She has.

Bob takes a deep breath. "I think I know why 9109 was on our planet."

She sits up, pulls back so she can frown at him.

"You know, it stuck with me, the way One-Week Williamson went on about our trade agreements. You, Larkin, Harmonius, you're all old horses, and none of you knew what he was talking about."

"Snow job."

"See, I thought that too, back in November. But by Valentine's Day, Larkin,

you, and I had all been roped into informal sedition meetings—everyone but Harmonius, who was never officially involved. Remember that DARPA goon, the one you didn't know? Turns out he was from the Information Awareness Office. Heard of them?"

"No."

"I didn't think so; they're more my set than yours. They're out to data-mine any and everything they can, and today they started funding R&D for a thing called Total Information Awareness."

"Wiretapping?"

"Among other things. The Patriot Act they passed last year? The one that makes our lives free wiretapping? It applies to fizzy boxes too."

A horrible chill is coming over her. "Boxes are unreliable."

"Yes, they are, because Johnson made them back in the '60s, but 9109's transceiver is from a lot later down the line... and with a lot more people and money involved. I think our government wanted it for surveillance purposes, and Apur was here to sell, until 9109 escaped. You said the 107 was a telepath; I'll bet that's why Management wanted it and kept us in the dark, because we didn't play along then and they knew we wouldn't now. So now they're purging the ranks, replacing us with people who will." He looks at Grey. "You don't look surprised."

Grey shakes her head. "I'm not." Even in ignorance, she's felt the changes.

Bob takes her hands. He looks so sad, so worried, and she knows it's over. The part about DARPA is new, but this part, she's dreaded for months. "Grace," he says, "there's no way Neurophysics doesn't know about us. Harmonius can't tell Gujarati from Hindi, but he can still get a partial read on me. Even if your wetware makes you completely unreadable—"

Grey remembers Andersen clocking her on sight.

"—They can still read our friends." He looks at her hopelessly. "I've racked my brains for months wondering why nobody's outed us yet. And then I realized: it's because of you."

Grey's heart caves in. She was a fool to hope that Bob would never figure this out. He got *hired* for his ability to piece information together, his mind is a cat's cradle, and all she can do is watch as he tells her things she already knows.

"You've protected me since September before last, and you're Andersen's favorite workhorse, but he's long past retirement. Eventually they're going to oust him, and when they do, they'll send you to the glue factory."

"Yes," Grey voices. "I know."

Bob's voice goes sharp. "You *know*? How long have you known?"

"Since your sedition meeting." And the one thing Andersen demanded was

that she keep her hands to herself. His protection is long gone. She knew it the moment she said yes to Bob on Valentine's Day.

"Well, what's your plan, then?"

She sits there, silent. Bob jumps to the wrong conclusion.

"Grace, I told you last year, *they don't care about you*. They'll out you the moment you mention retirement, and even if they don't, even if I leave without a hitch and Andersen lives forever, you can't keep doing this to your body. What are you going to do, just die in the field and never get old?"

He says it like he intends it as a joke, but then he sees her face.

Grey gets off the bed and reaches for her clothes.

Bob sits up. "I'm right, aren't I? That's your retirement plan." She sees it click then. "That's always been your plan."

Grey starts getting dressed.

"That's why you treat yourself like cannon fodder. You never planned on living long enough to deal with the consequences, did you?" His voice is getting louder. "You know, it bugged me that you, Ms. Forever, were so calm about me leaving, but I didn't question it because," he pauses, "because it was convenient for me. But you've known this entire time. Haven't you?"

Grey sighs. "They told me things were changing, the day they denied your Diwali leave," she voices. "Never told me details. I told them no first."

She sees the realization dawn. "You said they wanted you out of the field."

Grey buttons her shirt.

"I thought you meant management or something!"

"Same thing," Grey voices. Management is about leadership, social skills, multi-tasking, all the things Grey is worst at. Even if she morally agrees with the incoming changes (which she doesn't), even if she tries, she will fail. A retirement-wash will leave her with no skills to sell but janitorial, and her knees and back won't even let her do *that* anymore. Better to die in the field before she becomes a professional slave-catcher.

"Did you hope to get killed by the 107?"

Grey says nothing, only grabs her overnight bag.

Bob's putting it all together now. "You never let on you were attracted to me until afterward. What am I, your last hurrah? A loose end?" He realizes she's leaving and rushes to take her arm. She throws it off. "You could've retired if not for me! Why the hell did you say yes to me at all?"

The words rip out of her. "*Because I wanted you!*"

She has never raised her voice to Bob before. He freezes like he's scared of her. Grey hates it. She hates all of it, feeling angry, raising her voice, being the kind of person other people are afraid of. Her throat locks and she turns to

SGSL, too upset to sign clear and careful. "Twenty-five years. Never touching anybody, loving anybody. I was tired. You treat me like a person. Like a girl. Your beautiful girl. It was supposed to be one night. You'd go. You wouldn't have to see this. I..." Her hands hover, fall. "I just wanted to enjoy it."

Bob looks stricken. "Grace—"

She holds up a hand to silence him. "You're smart. You're funny. You're going places. When you leave the PIN," because he will, she's always known that he will, "you will have other jobs, other people who love you. You'll be fine. You'll be—" her mind is starting to lock. "You'll be—"

Golden. Because that's how Bob has always been, golden and unstoppable, no matter who tries to grind him down. No one, not society, not the PIN, not the world, has ever been able to stop Bob from being himself. It's why Grey loves him. He deserves someone as golden as him, and Grey's only ever been good for one thing: her amoral, uncaring, miserable job.

She's starting to gulp air, rock in place. She doesn't want Bob to see her like this, but she's locked, unable to move.

Bob reaches up to cup her face. It's what makes her realize she's crying.

"Come with me," he says.

She starts to shake her head, but he tightens his hold.

"*Listen to me.*" His voice is a heated whisper. "I haven't left this hellhole yet because when I do, they'll blame you. Getting out of this panopticon requires someone who knows its workings, an old horse like you. Everyone knows we're close, you're already on their radar, and I'm a selfish, flighty son of a bitch, but I'm not letting you take that fall for me, Grace, even if that's what you think you have to do. You are so much more than this place. I don't want you to die for this job, and I sure as hell don't want you to die for me. *I want to keep you.*"

She stops fighting.

"Grace, when I have a fling, I don't stick around for a year learning a language I can never put on my C.V. and confessing my feelings in the throes of orgasm. You're my beautiful girl, I love you, I want to keep you." He wipes her tears with his handkerchief. "Okay?"

Grey stares at him. "I'm not good at anything else," she signs.

"Bullshit. I am a picky, pushy bottom, Grace, but you topped me like an angel tonight. You sure as hell didn't learn that from the PIN. And anyway, you're the best when it comes to protection, and I'm going to need it." He takes a deep breath. "Now, do you want to go on the run with me or not?"

He stands there, holding her face in his hands, waiting for her to move everything around in her head. His face is open, vulnerable. Beautiful.

"Yes," Grey says, and everything changes again.

INSIDE GIRL

It seems like after something that dramatic, they'd throw their bags into Grey's car and drive off that very night, but it doesn't work that way. They need to plan their escape, prepare their financials, prevent splash damage. Some of their cases can be dropped without care, but others would lead to vulnerable people getting hurt, more than they'll accept, so their workload has to be dealt with in a way that won't draw suspicion. (That proves to be the easy part—after all, the PIN wants Grey out of the field and are happy to wean her off.) They can't tell anybody, not even Jenny or Larkin. When Bob and Grey leave, the fuzzies will surely round everyone up, and ignorance is their best protection.

Bob is impatient, but he defers to Grey's expertise... especially once he finds out what her filing cabinets are for.

"You've kept *everything* they've given you? Since 1976?"

As they dig into the papers and Grey starts explaining what she remembers of the context (and the jargon), Bob gets more and more interested.

"I don't believe this," he says from the floor, surrounded by piles of paper. "Grace, you have the exact notice where our memories become government property, long before the Patriot Act made it free wiretapping. All this time, you've had their downfall in your damn filing cabinets!" He looks up at her. "Do you want to go public with this?"

Grey has to think about it. When she says yes, they start spending every night at her apartment, shuffling paper, taking notes. She gets used to Bob's sticky note tables and timelines on the walls, falling asleep to him clacking away on his laptop or to the screech of the scanner in the other room. Grey can't write her way out of a paper bag, but she proves a good editor, catching mistakes he's made. Other times, arguing how best to do something, they find a new, better way. It's just as well that the escape plan takes months; this write-up dwarfs the one about Eugene Smedley. (Though Bob draws on those skills: "I can't *believe* that piss-ant taught me something. Thanks, Eugene.")

They finish clearing out Bob's belongings and when his lease ends, he moves in with Grace and helps her clean out *her* things. Ideally, they'll whittle it down to one van load. They start being careful at work again, but it doesn't grate like before. If all goes well, soon they'll never have to do it again.

Besides. On an ordinary day, Bob is golden. When he's pursuing a beloved important goal, he's *incandescent*.

One morning, Grey wakes up to her alarm alone in bed. She finds Bob at the kitchen table with his laptop and scanner, owl-eyed, unshaven, and surrounded by paper. When he sees her, he looks chagrined, checks his watch.

Grey leans on the door frame and crosses her arms mock-disapprovingly.

"I didn't want to wake you." Bob's voice is fuzzy with fatigue. "Come see."

She shakes her head but takes her reading glasses from his hand. Bob grins, slumps against his chair, and gestures at the screen with a flourish.

"It's done. Well, this draft." He stretches with a crackle and pop.

She undoes his collar and starts feeling down his neck and back for knots. Saturday or not, Bob knows better. He's not twenty-five anymore either.

"320 pages, not including bibliography. I haven't counted the sources we scanned, transcribed, and backed up," Bob says as she starts kneading. "Even if we cut and run tomorrow, we have everything... mm, have I been good?"

She nods, kisses his neck, and he purrs and goes loose under her hands.

"My best girl," he declares groggily and closes his eyes.

She rubs him down, works the kinks out of his neck and shoulders, then pats him so he'll open his eyes and see her sign, "Go to bed, Bob."

"Sure." He gets up and wraps his arms around her waist. "Come with me."

Grey laughs and lets him get up on his toes to kiss her, but when his mustache tickles her neck, her breath catches. "You're half-asleep."

"I'm not *all* asleep," he croons, sucking on her collarbone. "And I want to celebrate before I pass out, preferably by fucking you," hip roll, "*nice...*"

From day one, Grey's known that Bob wants inside more than her mouth; he's filthily honest in bed, goes on a pornographic tear of everything he wants to do to her. What he doesn't know is that she wants it just as badly. Her body just hasn't cooperated, no matter how badly she aches for it.

But she doesn't have to take him in her ass.

Before, she was too ashamed and too busy to ask, but now the write-up is done (or at least presentable), and forbidden things are everyday joys. The only words she has for what she wants are stuffy and disdainful, from her parents' copy of *Human Sexual Pathology* ("perverse invagination of the inguinal canals"), but she doesn't have to use words if they don't suit her, not with Bob.

And she wants it. She wants Bob's pretty hands inside her.

So she signs, "Something I want."

Bob makes a pleased, sleepy sound. "Show me."

He follows her to the bedroom and plunks down on a chair so he doesn't fall asleep. Grey undresses, sits on the edge of the bed so she can spread her legs for better viewing, swallows, and reaches down to touch herself.

Since the accident, her clit is mostly numb, except for deep pressure and

pain, but when she moves it out of the way, the unscarred side of her labia is okay. She plays with herself, warming under Bob's eyes, feeling the heat rise in her face. She can see Bob working to still his hands, look but not touch.

Grey curves her fingers into position and slides them up into herself, sending an electric surge up her spine.

Bob leans forward, grabs his glasses off the dresser. "Do that again."

Grey does, biting her lip to stay silent, but those passageways of her body aren't visibly obvious, and Bob still looks puzzled.

"Can I...?" He reaches forward.

She's starting to breathe hard now. She nods, takes Bob's hand and puts it over hers so he can feel what she's doing. It's all she can do not to curl his fingers into place and start fucking herself with them. As it is, she keeps moving her fingers in and out of herself, pushing her hips into it a little.

Now Bob understands. "I didn't know you could do that," he breathes. "Mine are way too sensitive; I'd die..."

He doesn't look repulsed or disgusted, just delighted at this new, wondrous discovery. Like of course Grey would enjoy this, why wouldn't she?

"That doesn't hurt?"

Grey shakes her head, even though the full sensation could be described as achingly good, like a deep stretch, a hard workout, Bob's teeth in her shoulder and his nails in her back.

"Can you come like that?"

Grey chuckles breathlessly, nods. Oh yes, she can come like this. It was her favorite way as a child and again after the accident. Delicious shivers are going up her back now, making the yearning ache worse; it's not *her* hands she wants.

Grey stops, pulls her fingers out of herself, and tugs Bob's hand.

"Do this to me?" she asks with her hands. "Please?"

Bob's expression is molten. He makes a sound like he's trying to keep control and not just pin her to the bed. "Such a polite girl I have," he says in that dark velvet voice, and gets up.

There's no need for Bob's glasses; he won't see anything. He puts them back on the dresser and joins Grey on the bed, pressing against her back and sliding a hand down her front, chasing the edge of sensation with his fingertips. Grey pushes into it. She's ached for this for years, she just never thought she'd find someone willing, never mind someone like Bob who's breathing shivery and fast against her neck, whose belly fits perfectly into the curve of her back and whose clever, soft, *beautiful* hands—

Both are sliding into position now, toying with her. "Can you take both?" Bob purrs in her ear.

Grey squirms; she can, and oh, she wants that, to be stuffed full of him, but the scarred side is finicky, not something Bob should attempt on a first go, so she pulls that hand away and signs, “Later.”

Bob doesn’t protest. He rubs her thigh and toys with the edges of her scars where the numbness gives over to sensitivity. “Lead on.”

It takes a few tries, since Bob’s never done it before and Grey’s never had someone to do it with. For a moment, she thinks she’ll have to get things in position herself, but then Bob traces the route of Grey’s G-spot into her body, follows it up, and—

Yes. Oh, yes. *Finally.*

The noise Grey makes and the way she jerks must resemble pain, because Bob stops and asks, “Twenty?” in a ragged voice. Like it’s taking everything he has to keep still and not fuck her senseless like he’s been promising for a year.

Grey squeezes for yes, and Bob starts moving, ginger at first, then with building confidence as he maps the territory. The world disappears except for Bob’s softness: his belly against her back, his thighs bracketing hers, his mouth on her nape, his fingers coaxing Grey’s body into fucking itself—

Not enough. “More?” she signs. “Please?”

Two are a challenge, but in the best way, the achingly perfect way, just on the edge of too much and settling into just right. Perfect, Bob’s hands are perfect, Grey’s been dreaming about them forever, stroking inside her all nerves and sensation. She’s full of him, electric, a gossamer weave of sparks and fire inside her like ecstatic architecture.

When Bob starts using the rest of his hand to grope and fondle, he claps his free hand over her mouth and growls, “*Sing for me.*”

Grey obeys. Words are gone but sound isn’t, not with Bob unlocking her from the inside out like this; she doesn’t even recognize the sounds she’s making, but his hand on her mouth is permission to be as loud as she wants, to not worry about the neighbors, so she lets loose. She lets go.

And Bob doesn’t say a word. He’s focused entirely on what he’s doing, gasping against Grey’s skin when she pushes against him and gets his cock where she wants it. Bob thrusts, and Grey mindlessly grinds back against him, trying to get as much as she can. The tension is throbbing, looming in the dark behind her eyelids, about to burst, she almost doesn’t want it to, it’s perfect, it’s everything—Bob’s hand over her mouth, Bob’s cock against her ass, Bob inside her so deep, so close, oh *please*—

Bob pulls his hand from Grey’s mouth, shoves it hard between her legs.

“*Thank you!*” Grey sobs, and the orgasm hits like a spiderweb of lightning radiating from Bob’s hands. The intensity brings tears to her eyes and lasts for

a seeming eternity before she comes down, slumping back against Bob's body. When she does, Bob slides his fingers out of her, making her shudder and whimper. She already misses them.

"Wow," Bob pants. "Okay. That was hot."

Grey laughs and sighs, getting her breath back. "Okay?" she asks with her hands. "Can't take you this way."

"I don't know," Bob says, fingertips dancing on her hip, "you took me just fine." Pause. "Grace, you know you don't have to thank me, right?"

Grey shrugs. "I like to," she signs.

"Good. Never stop." Bob nuzzles the back of Grey's neck. "I like pretty girls with nice manners." He makes it sound beautifully filthy, and he's still hard.

Grey turns and reaches for him, but Bob pulls her close.

"Here, let me..." his cock slides between her thighs.

Normally, Grey moves too much to be any good this way, but now she's relaxed, happy to hold Bob and squeeze her thighs together just right. He barely manages to bite her and purr, "*Mine*," before coming down her thighs, and she pets him, holds him up, and rubs her cheek against his hair.



"Okay," Bob mumbles into her collarbone. "Now I really do need to sleep."

Grey laughs and flops back on the bed with him. For as long as she can remember, she's felt a gnawing want, an unsatisfiable craving for something that she thought couldn't exist... until now. Now the ache is gone.

Running can wait for other mornings.

MISC. ART

This book has been brewing a long time. Here's art from along the way! If not stated otherwise, presume it from 2020 or 2021.



The 107 originally looked far more humanoid and went through a series of embarrassing names, including Serious Putty and Mr. Monster. From August 2006.



Old Bob body language doodles. 2007ish, maybe?

First ever drawing of Grey, from January 2004. (Yeah, this book's that old.) Grey got made purely for plot reasons because I needed someone to cover a chunk of story the POV character wasn't present for. Grey started as a deadpan snarker type, but I already had a surplus of those, and she became less and less talky as the story progressed. So then I needed Bob to exposit for her, and then they took the thing over and made their own book.



First ever sketch of Bob. 2/16/06.

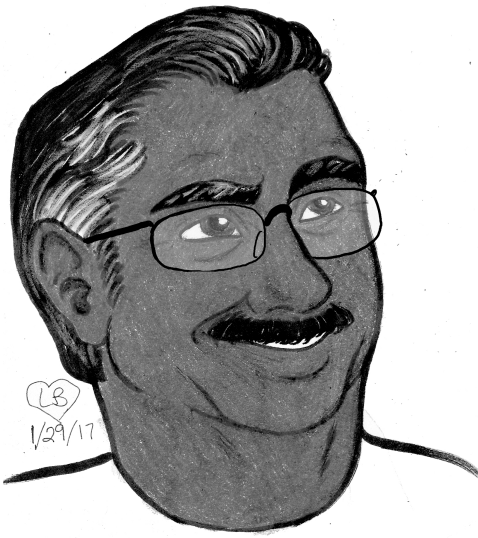


9109's crew: Big Three, Little Five.



2010.
Still
gives me
a kick.

Grey doesn't know what ASMR is, but she gets it hardcore from certain tones of voice and having her hair played with. Bob is bemused, but hey, he's done weirder, he's happy to babble about his favorite video games for thirty minutes and turn Grey into happy, sleepy goo.



Believe it or not, this was the first time I dared draw them kissing. I got my ass kicked back in 2005 for writing this stuff, so I got cagey for a long time. I even tried (failed) for a couple years to make the book straight, but that wasn't the answer. No, the answer was to make it sweeter, sexier, kinkier, *queerer*.

Grey wears her uniform all the time because it's the least unfashionable clothing she owns.

Told you so. It's not dysphoria either, she really does just have the most boring butch dyke fashion sense on the face of the earth.

Over time, Grey gets more at ease with showing skin, but she stays boring all her life.

I needed a reference sheet to keep track of all of Grey's old injuries (and I still missed the burns on her shins). She is overwhelmingly presumed to be a gangster unless she bundles up. (Which, since Vago is a hot desert, also makes her stand out. She can't win.) You don't get to know who Yuki is.

Bob, in protective business casual. “How did I get so square?”



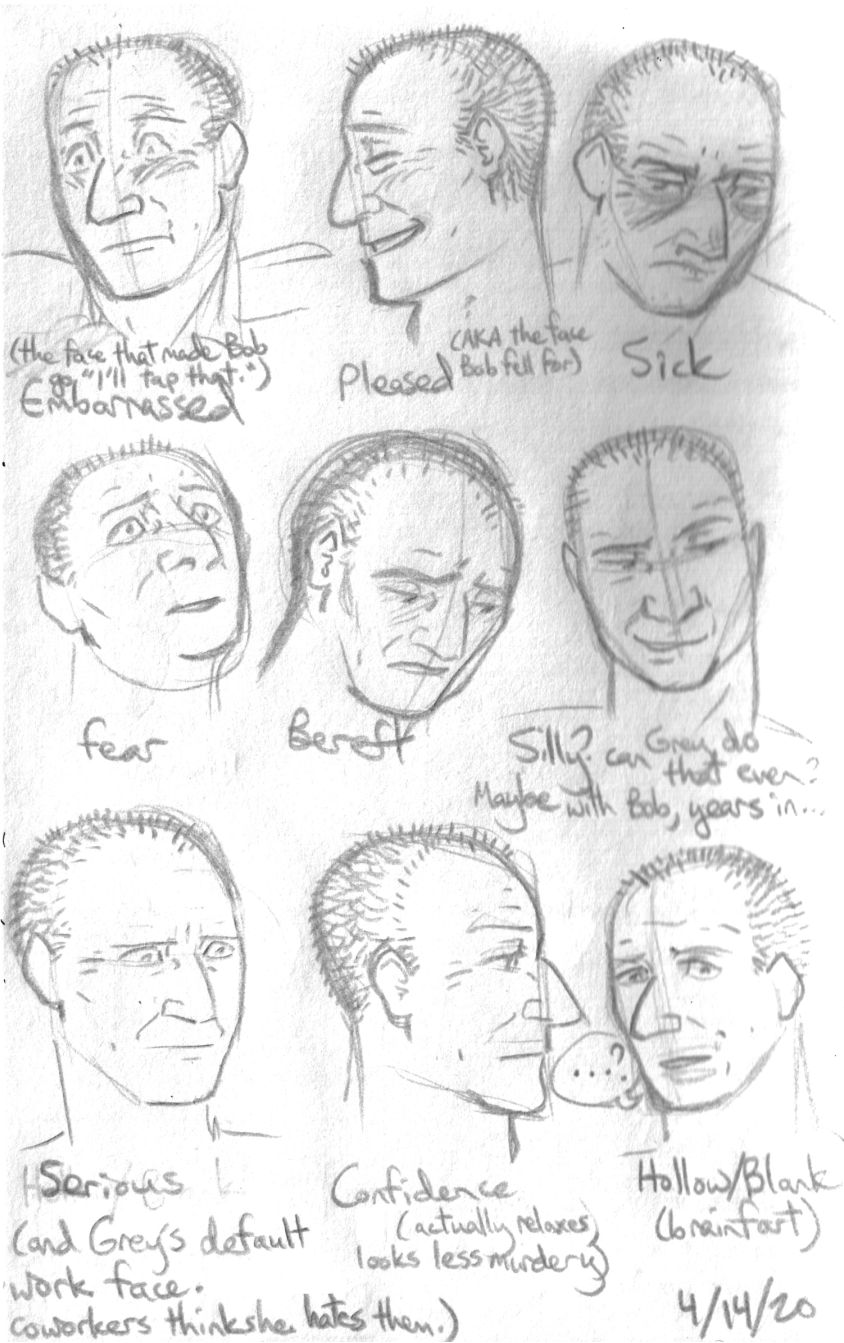
See, at least Bob has pizzazz. If he could get away with wearing this stuff at the PIN, he would.



I can't see Bob making it in the leather scene, but I guarantee you he has the outfit anyway. While forcibly recloseted in Vago, he splurges on a lot of gear just to express himself somehow. Still flags and wears his keys on the right out of nostalgia—East coast style, not West.

Grey in work mode basically behaves like a robot, and it makes her face godawful to draw.

Yeah, this was before I figured out that Grey does emoté and smile and all of that. She just doesn't do it wherever she's closeted, and she's closeted pretty much everywhere.



After Grey, I let myself draw Bob as a reward. He's a lot more expressive, so a lot easier. With Grey, one millimeter off ruins everything. Drawing Bob is way more forgiving.

4/21/20



Triumph



Tired



Irritated



Incredulous
(AKA, the face Bob made when
he realized Greyd antagonized him
the whole time)



Embarrassed
Oops



Sarcastic (back in the '90s
in college)



Drunk (cheerful & horny)



Bereft



Fierce

The beat-up bunny girl is Momo Usagi, Bob's favorite player character in the Button Mash Beatdown video game franchise. Neither she nor the franchise made it into the book, since Barbarian Barbara basically did the same job. She's a gymnast bunny with the (poorly translated) catchphrase of "do your utmost!"

Larkin gets a story of her own, but not in this book. She ends up bringing about the key plot events of the Infinity Smashed book taking place immediately after this one.

Pritchard originally had Jenny's design, back in 2004. Then Jenny became a different character so I had to redesign her.

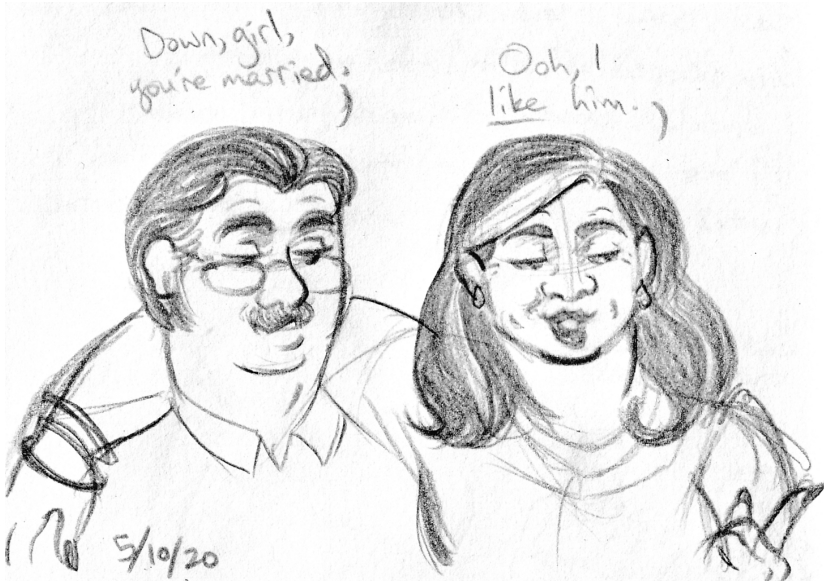


Jenny got hired because she ran across a bootleg plushie salesman by accident.

Old drawing of Jenny from February 2007 or so. She originally had a bunch of stories of her own, but all got cut. Sorry, Jenny.

Originally, this book was only going to be the story “Red Roses, Old Horses.” This illustration is from the old original draft of that, with most of the cast and a few folks who don’t appear in this book at all. Clockwise from top left: Dean, the ill-fated Specialist MacIntire, Jenny, Larkin, Bob, Grey, and three characters from old drafts (Maureen, Mack, and Smith) who’re unlikely to ever see the light of day except as unnamed cameos that I make purely to please myself. They work in Holding, out in the desert, which is where the slackers and wash-outs of Ops end up. Art from January 2007.

Grey's fashion sense has changed zero since 1972.



Bob's sister. Su's a travel agent who lives a completely normal middle-class life up in Connecticut, and she loves her drama queen brother dearly.



That coffee-inhaling face is the best drawing of Bob I've ever done. I will never top it. (And just pretend everyone in Infinity Smashed drives on the right.)



Don't troll Bob, Jenny. He plays for keeps.



The best thing of Grey I've ever done. July 2013.

Grey's bad at knowing her own sexual desires, but she knows she's in love from basically February 15th onward. Bob's very well-acquainted with what he wants in bed, but he's in denial about the feelings until she pins him to the rug, and even then, he mostly tries not to think about it.



