A New Lease on Life: Gallery of Memories

by Ghost_of_a_Chance_13

Summary

Amber O'Brien lost her heart in Willsdale, MO - to Donatello. Now, in her new life, he's her bridge over rough water - the glue keeping her broken self together. The closer they grow, the harder she falls, and the more she struggles with keeping her love secret. It's only a matter of time before he finds out and she gives in. One-shots in the world of "A New Lease on Life," written to thank my totally awesome readers!

Chapters with sexual content are flagged with *___* in the title.
Hey, Folks! Ghost, here. Recently, all you awesome readers have pushed my story "A New Lease on Life" past 1,000 views—for me, a new record! Instead of goin' all Sally Fields over how much y'all've made my year, I wanted to give something back. Every time you awesome readers push this story past another milestone - IE, +1000 views, +10 reviews/comments, etc - I'll post a standalone one-shot set in the New Lease world in thanks! These stories will jump around in the timeline so SPOILERS!

Here, have an ANLoL one-shot about Donnie and Amber! The song this story is based around is always the first I play when I need to get working on ANLoL, and as I feel like it really fits Amber during Part I, it's also the namesake of Part I. Lyrics in italics, set in mid-March, and can be read as a standalone but makes most sense if you first read the published chapters of "A New Lease on Life," or at least through chapter 11.

THANK YOU so, so much, and I hope y'all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested listening: The Rasmus, "Time to Burn"

Time to Burn

Come on!
Another long, miserable night, Amber ruminates as she stares through her tar-thick coffee. How long has she gone without a decent night's sleep? How long has it been since she could rest easy through the night, unmolested by nightmares of the days when the sirens sang? She shudders at a memory of tattered green skies running rampant through her mind, relishing the acidic burn of her coffee. Pain, she's found, is the most effective way she can shut down the mental assaults she falls victim to more and more.

Pain…She scoffs into her mug, recalling the days after a minivan ran her down in the crosswalk halfway to the dorms. The impact flattened her to the hood, revealed that the driver was passed-out-drunk, and the vehicle careened into a retaining wall with her still attached. Pinned between the out-of-control van and crumbling concrete, she barely survived and was lucky to avoid paralysis. Between a shattered knee, broken ankle, several cracked ribs, abundant internal bruising, and permanent spinal injuries, she was in constant pain. She yearned to be no longer reliant on pain pills and physical therapy; now, pain is the only way to get any peace.

'That life is over,' she reminds herself sternly as she gazes around her new home…the home of a family who welcomed her with open arms even despite the mess she clearly is. Down the hallway her new family sleeps soundly, their dreams unhaunted by the terrors of her own. Somewhere in the distance, a subway roars past, the familiar grinding growl triggering a panic that has become as familiar as her own name.

_Fear of the dark tears me apart,_
_won't leave me alone,_
_and time keeps running out._

_Just one more life, I'm so sick and tired_  
of singing the blues.  
_I should turn my life around._

Shouts and grunts echo from the dojo as her new family train. Just inside the doorway, Amber watches intently. The brothers' skills in hand-to-hand combat never cease to amaze her. Even the simplest, most basic of katas remind her of just how unremarkable she is in comparison.

Unshed tears burn her eyes at a memory from her previous life—of her best friend Aaron wrestling with Mercy in a vacant pasture littered with pokeweed and fallen Hedge-apples. Always too weak to join in, Amber perched carefully on a fallen tree, certain the split-rail fence would topple under her weight. Her two grey-streaked braids hung in a comforting weight against her back as a spasm of pain ripped through her lower back. Despite the pinched nerve, she fought to keep a grin on her face; she always hated having them worry about her. A pair of glass-shielded hazel eyes meet hers across the dojo floor and from force of habit, she forces on a smile that she doesn't really feel.

That life is over, she chastises herself; she can't return to Willsdale, to her friend Aaron, her job, her little shotgun shack and her yard full of roses and black locust trees. It's best to move on, to give up any hope of seeing them again, and make the best of the second chance she has been given. Her boys' father and sensei calls a halt to their repetitions and the four ninjas separate, the eldest and youngest pairing off for a one-on-one fight. Her smile becomes more genuine as Donatello approaches, standing confidently at her side to observe his brothers' match and verbally critique the match for her benefit. His brilliance never ceases to amaze her, and this tactical explanation is no different. Though he explains everything with his usual efficiency, she can focus on nothing more than the soft tenor of his voice and the racing of her heart.
Tell me why do I feel this way?
All my life I've been standing on the borderline.
Too many bridges burned,
Too many lies I've heard.
I had a life but I can't go back—
I can't do that, it will never be the same again,
and I know I don't
have any time to burn.

Come on!

Donatello stares through the doorway of the lab in trepidation, eyes glued to the fitfully slumbering brunette tucked into the spare cot. Amber is always tired, rarely able to sleep more than a few hours at a time, and ever since Spring arrived, she sleeps even less. Every night her dreams are plagued by shattered homes, splintered skies, broken lives, legions of battered, marching corpses… Even during their grimmest discussions and darkest desensitizing sessions she tells him barely a fraction of the nightmare she's lived, but what she does share seems straight out of a horror movie. Though he's never seen the small town she still calls home, he can sense her crippling homesickness every time he catches her staring off into space.

Amber is lost—a woman without a home, without a life, trapped in a world that has never been hers and living the life of a woman she's never met. No matter how much effort he piles into comforting her, protecting her, calming her, helping her conquer her demons, he knows it is but a drop in the barrel. Every time she wakes in the night, screaming and crying in the grips of a terror he can only imagine, Donnie wonders what he can possibly do to help. She isn't a broken machine; he can't fix her.

As she tosses and turns in her sleep, her blonde friend creeps up beside him. Though Mercy's skin no longer hangs on her bones like an oversized leotard, her blue eyes are dull, hung with shadows; between Amber's nightly awakenings and continued complications from reviving in the body of an alcoholic, Mercy isn't sleeping much either. "You're doing your best," she reminds him as always, "and you're accomplishing more than you think." Still, he feels that his best isn't good enough…as long as he is unable to fend off Amber's demons, it will never be good enough for him. On the cot, she whimpers in her sleep, an endless stream of whispered pleas cracking her lips.

Donatello sits before his desk, meticulously poring over a multitude of subterranean maps of the area. He's spoken of expanding the lair and wants to do so with the least amount of impact on the sewers' structural integrity. From her place by the door, Amber drinks in the sight that hauntened her dreams long before they met. Bright hazel eyes shift from green to gold as they dart between the backlit monitor and the pile of maps scattered before him. A small, confident smile heralds progress—subconscious wetting of wide lips relays concentration—he stoops forward eagerly 'til he's almost hunched over the keyboard, sure signs he is tearing through challenge after challenge like Occam's Razor through Mikey's explanation of why the sky is blue. With an adorably excited grin, he jots down another formula on the pad of paper beside him. A pang clenches her heart—she ducks around the corner, clutching her stomach to calm the frolicking butterflies.
When did she fall for him? Sure, she's dreamt of him for years, has crushed on him for even longer, but when exactly did she fall in love with Donatello? Silently digging through another life's memories she searches for answers but finds none. He had hold of her heart long before she died and is still its sole possessor, but he has only known her a few months. To him, it would be too early, too much, too soon, and she can't stand the idea of ruining the close friendship they have formed. She is lucky—so lucky to have even met him, and even more so for him to find her worthy of his time. To ruin their ever-strengthening comradery with her obviously-as-of-yet unrequited feelings…

"Never," she spits with a determined scowl as she stalks into the kitchen. Without another word she tackles the mountain of dishes, hoping the work will silence her mind for a time.

Tell me why do I feel this way?
All my life I've been standing on the borderline.
Too many bridges burned,
too many lies I've heard.
Had a life but I can't go back—
I can't do that, it will never be the same again,
and I know I don't have any time to burn.

Stifled whimpers echo through the lab though she tries to smother them in her knees. Another panic attack, another memory, another reminder of the life she left behind…Amber slumps wearily in the foot-well of the desk, wondering why she can't get her fears under control. Her whole life she's feared the turning weather, feared the murky skies, feared the shower that became a storm, and now, she fears even the smallest, fluffiest cloud and the lightest misty rain.

"What's happening to me?" she wonders hopelessly, tears streaking her cheeks. 'I've never been so weak…so fearful…I've gotta get this under control!' A soft scrape at her side draws her attention; the sight of Donatello crouching down before the footwell sets her cheeks aflame. Even as she blushes, he dries her eyes with a soft kerchief and settles on the floor beside her with a welcoming smile, waiting for the inevitable. As so often before, she creeps over to sit across his lap, hiding her eyes in his shoulder. Though it's offered out of platonic love, no more romantic than it is unwelcome, his embrace always offers safety, security, and comfort. Until she's ready, until he's sure, until they actually have a chance, she'll take every bit of affection she can get, no matter how painful the wait may be.

"It's okay to be upset, Braids," he reminds with confidence, gently petting the twin plaits he'd nicknamed her for. "There's no shame in fear, no shame in pain—only in letting them rule you, and you aren't." She turns to him, her eyes watery and dubious. "Take your time—We're here for you, as always."

"That's jus' it, Dee," she admits tiredly. "long as this is takin', I'll run out'a time."

Leave it all behind—
Cross the borderline—
Face the truth, don't have any time to...
Have any time to burn.

The sun hasn't yet risen when Amber crawls from her cot to the couch, her mind bogged down with another night's lingering dreams. Painful memories and endless tears, soothing caresses and
murmured pleas, it's all become a blur. Never before have her dreams been torn in such different directions, never before have they left such a deep mark on her waking mind. This night's dreams were even worse than usual, not full of fear but heat. Passionate cries, sweaty limbs, strong arms and yearning eyes…if not for a sudden slam of a nearby door, who knows how far the dream might have gone? Torn apart inside, she slumps to the worn sofa, never even noticing Mercy stumble a drunkard's path to the bathroom, grumbling under her breath about too much coffee and too little balance.

"Why's this happening, Lord?" Amber mumbles, finally breaking her long spiritual silence; has she really not asked His guidance since the day she died? "Why've you put me here—why'd you decide I deserved a second chance when so many others were more deserving? So many died, so why do I live?" Searching for answers never whispered in her ear, she recalls the fateful day she slipped away from City Hall and died in the school library. Suddenly, she flinches in horror; finally, everything makes sense. "You heard me!" she groans into her hands, fighting a fit of tears. "I died in regret—that I never found love worth living for! This is your answer?!” Her voice is shrill as she glares in disbelief at the concrete ceiling. "Dropping me in another world where I have that love but can't do jack shit about it?! God, that damn book was right! We ARE in the hands of infinite power AND infinite sadism!"

"Ya know," Mercy grumbles as she stalks past. "Yer the only churchy-type I've ever known to full-out bitch when you pray. Yer mother'd be horrified, seein' as—" Abruptly remembering something, she cuts herself off. "An attitude like that'll get ya nowhere…just be thankful you may someday have a chance." Amber doesn't even have to ask; she knows Mercy's referring to Donatello.

"'Someday?'' Amber murmurs, sinking into the worn upholstery. "Better than 'never,' I guess. Thanks, Mercy…What'd I ever do without you knocking sense in'ta my head when I need it?" As her lifelong friend sulks off to bed again, Amber casts her eyes to the ceiling again. 'Sorry,' she thinks awkwardly at the likely irritated deity she just bawled out. 'Who'd have believed Mercy would be such a good influence?'

Tell me why do I feel this way?
All my life I've been standing on the borderline.
    Too many bridges burned,
    too many lies I've heard.
    Had a life but I can't go back—
I can't do that, it will never be the same again,
    I can't do it 'cause I know I don't
    have any time to burn.

A mere two layers of steel away from the living room, Donatello stands frozen behind the bathroom door. The friends' conversation wasn't for his ears, he's sure, but he can no sooner drag himself away than relieve himself of a limb. Surely it's a coincidence, he reasons silently, sliding slowly to the floor and sprawling out on the cold unfriendly tile.

Mere moments before, he ducked into the lab to locate a misplaced charger only to find the room heavy with pheromones and Amber mumbling in her sleep. It took every ounce of strength he had just to tear himself out of the room without responding, even more so after his name fell from sleep-slurred lips. The moment he was free, he tore through the lair to the bathroom, intent on a cold shower.

'It isn't that strange,' he reasons to himself as the cold tiles freeze away his reaction to the potent
scent. Amber lives with his family, spends much of her time with him, and they're only growing closer as friends—and it's not like she can control who she dreams about, any more than he can. Like any young, healthy, red-blooded male, Donatello is no stranger to dreams of the sort and has even seen Amber in some of them; he does find her physically attractive, after all. For any of that to mean love, though? After a few scant months? 'Ridiculous!' he reminds himself, staring through the tile floor.

'I died in regret,' her words echo hauntingly in his thoughts. '—regret that I never found love worth living for! This is your answer?! Dropping me in another world where I have that love but can't do jack shit about it?!!' Could there be more to his dear friend than he's seen, he wonders nervously. Though they've not been acquainted long she has an uncanny, inexplicable way of knowing just what he's thinking, feeling, and other things she shouldn't know. Not for the first time, he wonders if his master was wrong—wonders if perhaps his family did exist in the world that Amber came from. Did Amber know his counterpart in that world? Did he know her? As always, he's left with more questions than answers.

_Tell me why do I feel this way?_
_all my life I've been standing on the borderline._
_too many bridges burned,_
_too many lies I've heard._

It's surely too soon to tell, but perhaps someday the truth would be clear to him. For now, he wonders if he's misreading the situation. Could Amber truly, deeply, honestly love him, and not only in the way one loves a dear friend? Or, perhaps, when she sees him, is she more seeing the other version of him she left behind? She doesn't seem the sort to fall prey to petty infatuations or snap judgments. She always rebuffs Michelangelo's blatant flirtation with nothing more serious than a hairy eyeball or teasing jab, and insists on being considerate to Raphael no matter how rude his behavior toward her becomes. She frequently goes to Leonardo and their sensei for guidance and is making a concerted effort to befriend April. Even Casey, who holds nothing but contempt for her, is for some reason treated with a varying mixture of respect, regret, and when he pushes her too far, annoyance.

No matter how he turns it, her behavior around Donatello consistently differs. Only around him does that bright spreading blush flare with reliable regularity. She never fails to seek him out for comfort and contact, either. Even the day they met, she seemed more intrigued and beguiled by him than worried and repulsed—a surprising but very much welcome change, in his mind. Surely she hasn't attached herself to him so thoroughly simply because she trusts him? There must be something he hasn't seen, for how could she know him so well without meeting him before? One thing remains certain among all the uncertainties clouding his mind and quickening his heart: there's more to Amber than appears, and he is only now scratching the tip of the iceberg.

_I had a life but I can't go back—_
_I can't do that, it will never be the same again,_
_And I know I don't have any time to..._
_...have any time to burn._

Outside the door, Amber curls up on the lumpy sofa with a sigh. A foul, musky funk born of old cheese crumbs, grease and soda stains, years of dust, and numberless sweaty feet burns her nose, but just beneath them is a fainter pleasant smell: Coffee, grease, and clean sweat. Curious at the source,
she digs through the cushions, emerging triumphantly with a scrap of vibrant purple fabric: a spare mask, she wonders? Maybe a bandage? No...the memory settles like a summer night. It's the very arm-wrap she was blindfolded with the day she arrived in the Lair. Comforted by the surprisingly soothing combination of scents she's always known were Donatello's, she curls into a lump with the cloth tucked securely under her cheek. As evening draws to a close and she drifts into dreams, gentle hands tuck a worn green afghan over and around her; though their owner knows not, nightmarish memories are held at bay by familiar hazel eyes, a voice humming soothingly in her ear, and the hope that even when her secret is outed, Donatello will not push her away.

Amber's last life ended with the beginning of another and the demons of her past still have her tightly in their clutches. Though he cannot yet love her back, Donatello would never leave her to fight them alone. For the first time since she awoke in this new life, she feels certain...

She has time to burn.

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Chapter End Notes

Well, hopefully that didn't suck too much! What'd ya think, Folks? Again, thank you, all you totally swell readers whom I owe ANLoL's infamy to—you're the best! Have a great August, everyone, and hope to hear from y'all soon!

NOTES:
* POKEWEED AND HEDGE APPLES: Pokeweed is a very toxic plant that can kill just about anything that eats it; despite this danger, there are people who DO eat it, as it's not quite as toxic if you, a, pick it at the right time, place, and size, b, boil it in fresh water a dozen times, (used water reportedly makes a great insecticide/vermicide) and c, prepare to have the worst case of the OMGMYSTOMACHs you've ever endured. Oh, and d, have a ride to the ER because it's probably going to poison you anyway. Hedge-apple is a term local to the Midwest; technically, a Hedge-apple is a large, putrid, five-ton green fruit from the Osage Orange tree, which is traditionally used in building fences.
* BLACK LOCUST TREES: These trees grow pretty quickly, spread by roots, cuttings, and seeds, and one healthy tree can quickly cover miles in every direction with its seedlings and off-shoots. Black Locusts have thorny trunks and limbs, generally grow to medium height, have odd round leaves in palmate branches. When in bloom, the flowers are grouped in large, grape-like clusters of ivory-white blossoms that somewhat resemble a cross between the catalpa, lilac, and redbud blossoms. Seeds are spread by bean-like pods.
* OCCAM'S RAZOR: Simply put, 'Among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected and is most likely the correct one.'
* INFINITE POWER AND INFINITE SADISM: A direct quote from "Inferno," Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's modern take on 'The Inferno' from Dante's Divine Comedy. If you recall, when Amber found herself in Limbo in chapter 2 of ANLoL, her nerdy tendencies convinced her she was actually in 'a little bronze jar in the vestibule to Hell' and would be released if she recited the words that were the main character's saving grace: 'For the love of God, get me out of here!' Needless to say it didn't work until she added a 'please.'
Hey, Y'all! Ya did it again—2,000 hits on "A New Lease on Life!" I'm seriously fightin' goin' all Sally Fields on ya this time—I'm beyond happy that my story still holds your interests! As before, I wanted to give something back, so I bring you another ANLoL one-shot, set in the somewhat distant future of Part I, after the previous one-shot "Time to Burn." Tried something new with this one, too; I love writing one-shots because you can focus more on style and atmosphere than the average chapter story allows for. Hope you enjoy, and thanks again for being such wonderful, awesome readers! This's dedicated to you!

Chapter Notes

Rated T.
Cautionary statements: a little coarse language, some extra angst…um, I think that's about it. \Enjoy!
Suggested Listening: Linkin Park, "Castle of Glass"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Castle of Glass

The Kitchen

In another time, another place, another world, Amber's sure she and Donatello could be everything to each other. In this world? Not a chance…not now. She can't blame him for mistrusting her, now—she hid the truth of how she knew him and her years' long love for him behind layer upon layer of lies and half-truths, believing he'd never feel the same. 'Well,' she muses almost bitterly. 'Now he knows…and I was right from the very beginning. It makes no sense focusing on what could'a been when it clearly wasn't.'

She stares through her umpteenth cup of coffee, mentally listing every reason she can think of, everything that made her love for him absurd. Even as she trudges resolutely from one barrier to the next, she feels others crumbling down in their wake. Tooth and nail, she fights her attachment to him, never even considering that he might someday feel the same—someday when he's had time to lick his wounds and realize why she lied in the first place. 'How ridiculous,' she reminds herself vehemently. 'He deserves better than me—he deserves someone who can get caught in the rain without winding up in the gutter.'

Spring has descended on New York with the fury of a sleepy kitten—a sight she's never before
witnessed. In her old life, the world she came from, Spring was a turbulent transition from ice storms to humid scorchers interspersed with pouring rain and squalling sirens. New York, instead, has almost constant rain—soft spring rain like an English rain...so light, yet endless from a leaden sky—she shakes herself from memories of hot summer nights with the record player on low.* Compared to Tornado Alley's most active season, New York's version of Spring would be refreshingly mild...if she weren't terrified of rain.

As a low peal of thunder reverberates through the underground, Amber shakily lifts her cup to her lips, forcing herself to think of pleasant things. Wind rippling across fields of golden-tasseled grass...summertime symphonies of cicadas and crickets...morning glories blooming along her front porch in the morning, then moonflowers at night...wading in the crick** in Summertime, dodging legions of tiny crawdads, frogs, and river snails....

Donatello's appearance in the kitchen doorway is heralded by a particularly loud crack of thunder. He doesn't ask her what's wrong—this dance isn't a new one. Gently extricating the empty mug from her tense grip, he settles into the nearest chair and wraps her in supportive if tense arms. Ever since he confronted her about her secret, ever since she admitted just how she and Mercy knew his family so well, he's found it hard to trust her. How can he trust her when she's lied about something so simple, so, to him, pointless? Even so, he cares for her, probably more than he reasonably should. Before he learned the truth, she was his friend, and that hasn't changed; despite her lies, he can't stand to see her suffering and do nothing.

Before the truth reared its ugly head, he'd have held her until the cows came home if it didn't get awkward. She shivers into his shoulder. Despite it all, he struggles to clamp down the urge to bury his snout in her hair, sure it would bear traces of coconut from her shampoo and conditioner as every time before. Their friendship isn't what it was, but he'll still hold her...at least until he's sure she won't fall apart the moment he lets go.

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*Take me down to the river bend
Take me down to the fighting end
Wash the poison from off my skin
Show me how to be whole again

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Another rainy day has been followed by an equally rainy night. At least the thunder has stopped, Amber reminds herself weakly. Across the kitchen table, Donatello changes the slide on his tablet. Right before her eyes, Amber's greatest fear spawns in full-color hi-def detail. Just as it split the sky the day she died, a massive, jagged wall cloud splinters the LCD screen before her—a tear in the very fabric of the sky, like a warped zipper bunched back together by impatient hands.

Lightning splinters a leaden sky...thunder chases after, rattling her very bones...a twisted grin mocks from the sickened sky...

Everything happens at once. In the back of her mind, she hears Donatello's worried voice urging her to breathe, reminding her that she's safe. Next thing she knows, she's staring up at him from a cold, dark hole...another panic attack ended with her crammed into the footwell of the massive metal desk in the lab. As every time before, Donnie crouches beside her with a purple paisley handkerchief, issuing reassurances she feels sure to be lies. Unlike before their falling out, though, he doesn't dry her eyes—he just holds out the kerchief expectantly.

"Again?" she croaks, visibly surprised at the scratchy tone in her voice. Panic attacks are always
jarring at the least, but picking up the pieces afterward is no picnic either. She's come up with hundreds of unspoken comparisons—suddenly finding oneself instantly transported thirty minutes into the future with a migraine, PMS, the flu, and a hangover, wandering upstairs in the night and finding you've mistaken the number of steps, expecting to sweep through a doorway into a perfectly safe elevator and instead finding yourself surrounded by angry, heavily armed Foot ninja—but try as she might, she's not found a single comparison that can accurately portray the aftermath of a panic attack.

"Yeah," Donnie answers gently, dropping to sit beside her on the cold, dusty floor. "You're making progress, though…we found the top experience on your anxiety scale without making you go through another to—uh, storm." He's so sure he can avert problems by using a euphemism, she realizes with a weary sigh; far be it from her to admit that it doesn't actually help.

Like so many before it, the night ends with Amber dropping into the creaky metal cot in the lab, too worn out to even dream. Like just as many mornings, the next one is marked by a muffled shriek splitting the air as she wakes from horrifying nightmares that never fade with the light of day.

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"Amber," Mercy scolds quietly over prep-work, her blue eyes sharp. "Don't let it get to ya—you can kick this! I know ya can!" Her older friend smiles weakly, saluting the blonde with her small tumbler of single malt Scotch—three fingers worth, neat with barely a drip of mineral water, and though it wasn't awful, her Gran'da would scorn the quality—"Too young," he'd gripe in his husky voice. "Too young, too many grains in the mix." It's not Mercy's fault, she reminds herself silently; she's trying to understand. How can Mercy understand, though, when Amber herself is entirely too bewildered?

"It's okay, Merse," she reassures softly. "It's not your fault I'm broken—it's not your job to fix me, either." Mercy's denim blue eyes flash with anger, her thin lips twisting in a snarl not unlike the sky in Amber's dreams. Grey and green demons flash before her mind's eye again and she mentally shakes them off.

"Oh," Mercy retorts sharply. "An' I s'ppose it's DONNIE'S job?! You'd trust someone you've known less'n a year over someone ya've known yer whole fuckin' life?!" Silence shrouds the room like a cloud of poison gas until, realizing what Amber's not saying, Mercy blanches, her rage fizzling into pain. "No...No, Amber, no! You're trying to spare me?! After everything we've been through together, ya don't think I can handle this?! I'm not crazy in this life—my brain chemistry's right—I can handle it!" Amber reaches out across the kitchen table, squeezing her friend's hand reassuringly.

"You were never crazy, Mercy," she reassures with a smile she doesn't really feel. "Your brain was wired differently, nothing more, nothing less. I'm just not so sure about my own, anymore...."

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"Cause I'm only a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything there for you to see
"Why do you fear the rain, Amber?" Across the kitchen table, Leonardo is the very picture of serenity; the thunder echoing down from the streets above has no effect on him. He wears the shadows of the dark room like a fine cloak. Between them, a row of candles provides the only light in the room, a dish of smoking incense before them casting dancing shadows all around. Amber slouches back in her chair, fear skittering up and down her spine like an invisible creature with too many legs. "It's perfectly normal for children to fear thunderstorms because of the noise, but most grow out of that fear. Mercy tells me you were the opposite—that you loved the rain, prayed for rain, and were always happiest during rainstorms, the harsher the better."

Cornflower blue eyes scan for changes—stiffening posture, clenching fingers, constricting pupils, quickening breath—without a single word from her, he can pinpoint exactly when her fears take hold of her. Not for the first time, she feels horrible for burdening his family with helping her, no matter that they'd insisted on doing so. Leonardo's methods differ from Donatello's and Splinter's but their effectiveness has been proven several times over; if only these sessions weren't quite so intense, she wishes silently. "What changed?" he finishes, his eyes finally meeting hers again. She stalls for time, wrangling her words into their appropriate order while watching plumes of smoke curling up from the incense.

"I..." She falters then takes several calming breaths perfumed by herbal tea, then tries again. "I guess I stopped enjoying storms during junior high. Maybe sixth grade?" She hesitated, gnawing at her lip as she glances over memories shoved in a mental box labeled FOOK-NO!**** "Spring break was on its way. A big storm hit in the middle of the day, droppin' f-funnels everywhere—the s-s-sirens w-went off mid-lesson." She feels a telltale hitch in her breath between stammers and glances up at Leo. He nods patiently.

"You're doing fine, Amber," he reassures. "What happened when the sirens went off?" Though she feels panic needling at her resolve, though she dreads going back over the memories she'd locked away years before, she trudges onward, pausing for a sip of the tranquilizing tea.

"Our teacher was from Cali—she didn't know what the sirens meant an' ignored'em. I—I knew what they—" Amber feels Leo take her hand and focuses on the sensation of his calloused skin against her fingertips. "She wouldn't listen. I ran, ran to the basement to wait out the storm, but I had to go through the lobby to get there." Lips trembling, fingers white from clenching his, she turns haunted eyes to him. "The lobby was lined with floor-to-ceiling windows...and the sky looked...s-sick—Murky and green like poisonous sludge—I...I woke up at home, hours later, only to hear that I passed out in front of those windows—got a nice goose-egg an' a sore arse out of it." With a weak sniffle, she forces down a gulp of tea, hoping against hope it will calm her.

"You didn't sustain any lasting injury, right?" Leonardo prods gently; she shakes her head. "I'm sure it was frightening for a child. Still, you weren't hurt...and you're an adult now. Now if you're ready...?" Though she dreads what's coming, she nods and tosses back the rest of her tea. She systematically works the tension from her muscles, loosens her posture, and focuses on calming her racing heart rate, then fixes her eyes on the dancing smoke. Leonardo reaches for her other hand, working pressure points in her wrists and hands. In a matter of moments, the tea's sedative properties and the pressure points have her relaxed and groggy and she slips into an almost hypnotic state.

"Alright, Amber," Leo murmurs encouragingly. "It's time to return to the past. I need you to go back to the school and your classes—go back to the stormy afternoon when the sirens sounded—go back to the lobby with the tall windows and look out those windows—What do you see?"
Sometime between the last dregs of her scotch and Mikey's sudden gasp, Amber ran out of bell pepper. From the worried cringes of Mike and Mercy, she knows she was chopping air for far too long. "Just testin' ya," she teases, not at all feeling the warm smile she shoots them. Across the kitchen by the coffee maker, Donatello fixes her with a knowing stare; she knows she's fooling no one. 'Maybe it's better that way,' she considers as she starts in on another pepper. 'Everyone can see that I'm cracking up. What's the point in hiding it?'

'It's a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything else I need to see
For you to see'

The brothers shamble through the door, bruised, bleeding, and weary; patrol clearly didn't go as planned. In moments the lab is bustling with activity as the resident genius prepares to patch up his brothers to his best ability. Still, he struggles to keep his head in the game, mentally running triage as Amber and Mercy fuss over the returning team. A lucky miss resulted in a Foot shuriken embedded in Raph's carapace instead of Mikey's forehead—priority 2. Mike took an elbow to the eye—no fractures, no serious damage—priority 3 with an ice pack. Leo ended up at the wrong end of a katana and has a deep laceration dangerously close to his femoral artery, needs stitches to close—priority 1.

It isn't until an hour later that Don has time to conquer priority 4. In the otherwise empty kitchen, Amber stares wide-eyed at the tray in his hands, laden with a curved needle and dissolving thread. The horror in her eyes humbles him knowing it's directed at the one injury he couldn't adequately treat: a deep but clean cut on the outside of his left calf courtesy of a stray kunai, friendly fire though he won't admit it. Once she's finally through reaming him out for hiding the injury from his family and for using a dirty handkerchief as a tourniquet, she yanks him into her arms, stifling tears in his shoulder. Not for the first time he wishes she'd just told him the truth from the beginning…no matter how little sense it made to him, discovering her lies hasn't changed his feelings at all...

He still cares for her, and probably too much.

'It's a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything else I need to be'

"Saw ya stitched up Donnie," Raphael grumbles from the doorway of the kitchen. Elbows deep in soapsuds, Amber pays him no mind. Raphael rarely has anything nice to say to her, after all. She guesses she can't blame him, what with being stuck inside the body of a woman he once had a relationship with, though the thought still makes her queasy. To her complete surprise, he lumbers up
beside her, snags a ratty dishtowel from the counter and sets to drying the pans lining the drainer.

"Yeah?" she acknowledges incredulously, repeatedly glancing from Raph to the skillet in his hands and back again, as though taking her eyes off of the sight would cause it to vanish in a puff of smoke. "He couldn't reach it."

"He don't usually ask fa help if we've been hit," Raph rumbled still not looking at her. "He always t'inks Splinta'll put'im in da Haashi an' we ain't got Donnie's mot'a control. B afore ya showed up, he'd neva'Ve admitted he got hit 'til someone split the scab in sparring." Fierce golden amber eyes met hers in warning. "We got our differences, Kid, but if ya got'is back, I got yers." Without another word, he stalks out the door again, leaving Amber stunned beyond belief. Maybe he isn't as broken about Kimber's death as she thought, she considers as she returns to the washing in bemused silence.

"True strength comes not from never failing," Master Splinter reminds her later that night. "If so, mighty trees would never be downed by great winds. One must endeavor to be not only strong but resilient—strong like a tree, resilient like a reed." Amber nods into her tea, recalling the lesson from another time, another life, where she spent rainy afternoons poring over folktales and fables.

"I understand, Sir," she answers softly. Even so, she cannot fathom how she can do so…she's not strong, not resilient. 'How can I be?' she ruminates as she scrys in her teacup. 'I'm as fragile as glass—if not, why am I cracking up? There's nothing else to see.'
off-and-on numbness, this can happen. An unexpected severe panic attack can fade and leave you completely lost as to where you are, how you got there, even why you're jammed in under the table in the first place. In a way, recovering from a sudden panic is somewhat being spontaneously ripped from one place and time and dropped into another in the future, only you're shaking like a leaf, feeling sick, and know you've been crying, screaming, etc. even though you don't remember it. The second description is a blatant allusion to a quote from Lemony Snickets' "A Series of Unfortunate Events;" the second is a reference to the 2014 TMNT movie…NOT the ELEVATOR.

**** If you're up to date on ANLoL, you'll recall that Amber's mother immigrated to America in the late 50s with her family, and that her father Glen, Amber's "Gran'da," moved in with the O'Briens after his wife Arabel or "Granny Devon" died. Amber has always been very close to her grandfather and some of his quirks and habits have worn off on her as a result—for instance, her appreciation for fine single malt scotch, her habit of saying "shite" and "arse" instead of "shit" and "ass," her tendency to sound like him when she's beyond furious, etc. Glen has retained his thick brogue despite his years of living in Missouri; instead of 'fuck no,' he says "fook no." This mental box is a nod to the grandfather Amber has been parted from, and to her more prominent ancestry.
A steady pitter-pat echoes off the walls of the bathroom almost like the sound of a steady rain. Alone in the only locking shower stall, Amber stares through the dingy tile wall, through and into a past she left behind.

Spring has hit in New York City and brought along its usual companions: Rain, storms, unstable temperatures, and errant songbirds. Down below the city, the slightest shower echoes like cannon-fire; down here, the lightest breeze howls like a risen demon. The Lair once seemed a comforting place, passing subway trams aside, but now Amber can hardly sleep from all the noise from above. Most days she’s glued to the television and radio, anxiously dreading reports of severe thunderstorms or—God forbid!—tornados, never mind that tornados weren’t common in the far north.

Donatello has barely spoken to her lately. Of course, she admits begrudgingly, she’s no innocent in their feud. If she’d just told him from the beginning—told him point-blank that she was from a world where he and his brothers were merely a fantasy she’d held dear—she wouldn’t have had to keep that secret so close. The secret drove them apart and slowly rotted away his trust in her and their easy rapport. If only she’d just spoken up from the start…their shouting match wouldn’t have driven her...
from the lair, Hun would never have found her, Donatello would never have shut her out completely...so many horrid events could have been avoided if she'd simply fessed up!

It's not too late, she reminds herself grudgingly; she CAN tell him everything she's held back...but how could she tell him? How can you seriously tell someone right to their faces that you'd never believed they existed—that somewhere millions of voyeurs are watching every move they make, judging them for every mistake, creating explicit art depicting them with rather terrifyingly oversized 'equipment,' and writing even more explicit stories about them engaging in carnal relations with their siblings?! She shudders, watching soapy water vanish down the side-set drain. 'No matter how angry he is,' she realizes solemnly. 'I wouldn't change what I did...Given the chance, I'd still hide it from him all over again. I love Donatello, an' I'd rather bear his fury than be his undoing. Sometimes the truth's just too painful.'

Amber forces herself to focus on the here and now. In the steam-filled stall, a glint of metal catches her eye from the soap tray. Spring has arrived, after all, she reminds herself with an annoyed snort; even this far North, it's just a matter of time before her trusty jeans will be sweltering and unpractical. 'Guess that's that...time for some deforestation.' As she slathers shaving cream down one high-propped leg, she lets her mind drift back to another world, another life, and another friend she's found herself separated from.

Willsdale, Missouri, December 24th, 2009

Christmastime in Willsdale was often understated compared to larger cities. There were no shopping malls, no Black Friday flash mobs, no ritzy black tie charity events, and no serial break-ins. Once the Square was decorated for the parade, everything went back to its usual sleepy pace. Only one house in the city was ever filled with shouts and screams during the holidays, but no one bothered to set the meager police force on them.

After all, it was only a rowdy party between three obnoxious best friends.

"Shut up, Ferret-Face!" Aaron barked at the actor on the old television. "We all know you weren't playin' cards!" At the other end of the sagging plaid sofa, Amber smothered laughter in cleavage buried in grey knit. Across the small, cluttered parlor, Mercy sprawled out across an equally sunken vinyl loveseat, a plate of turkey, potatoes, greens, and rolls propped on her lap.

"That'd be a royal flush," she quipped when Major Houlihan turned bright red and shrieked indignantly.

"Royal pain'in the ass, too!" Amber wheezed. "Poor Radar...what's been seen can never be unseen!" Beside her, Aaron poked at his potatoes suspiciously.

"No kiddin'," he retorted, making sure he caught Amber's attention. "Kinda like this food—what's been tasted can never be UN-tasted!" Amber turned to him with a blank warning expression, her plate set aside for the time being. She crossed her thick arms under her understated breasts and arched one grey-shot eyebrow at him.

"Care to try that again?" she asked pointedly. From the loveseat, Mercy watched, sniggering. The food was fine—great, even—but Aaron was a smartass through and through. He'd never acknowledge aloud that it wasn't horribly inedible. Though their greying friend seemed completely oblivious of it, Mercy knew it was Aaron's way of flirting with her. Sure enough, Aaron grinned up at Amber.

"It tastes like deep-fried ass," he proclaimed proudly. As focused as he was on Amber's 'we are not
amused' expression, he never expected the battered Kleenex box that sailed right past his ear a moment later. "HEY! Mercy?!” Mercy smirked back, sprawling out carelessly.

"Yer turn, Amber," Mercy teased, tossing her empty soda bottle over. Between Aaron’s sputtered protests and Mercy’s laughter, Amber chucked the empty bottle right at him, getting him right square in the forehead. "Could'a had a V-8."

"Could’a had pie, too," Amber teased. "Smartarses don’t get pie."

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The Lair

Late nights were never easy on Donatello. Since starting work on expanding the Lair, however, they’ve become even more miserable. At one time, he dreaded the day Amber no longer needed his family and chose to move on; now, he can't wait to get her out of his lab and into a room of her own—possibly even out of the Lair. Long nights planning and researching for the work inevitably lead to him falling asleep at his desk face-first in blueprints and printouts and that means neck aches and backaches he can never soak away no matter how hot he cranks up the water. It has yet to stop him trying, though.

For that reason alone, Donnie didn't turn tail and run when he realized the bathroom was already occupied—occupied by a stubborn, green-eyed menace with greying hair and more secrets than she would admit. Amber…even if she were showering silently for once, he'd know it was her by the scent of coconut shampoo, mango body wash, and musky womanly pheromones. Donnie fixes a wary hazel stare on the shower stall furthest from the door—the only one with a working lock—fighting tooth and nail to remind himself why they've fallen apart.

In the whole time Amber has lived in the Lair, she's never showered without singing or humming. She's told Donatello it's to block out the sound of the water pouring from the spigot—a sound just similar enough to rain to send her skin crawling and her pulse racing. At one time, he hadn't minded it, even though she was horribly tone deaf; since their falling out, however, even her most mild of habits have become grating to him. Little things he'd found endearing before—the way she blushes when she meets his eyes, the way she hums and sways her hips while sweeping, mopping, and washing dishes, even how she still leaves breakfast and over-sweetened coffee on his bedstand when he manages to sleep in—everything that made him fall for her now makes him despise her. Even the ever-present twin braids he'd nicknamed her for are suddenly an annoyance.

Why can't she just tell him the truth? Why can't she just tell him how she knows him, knows his family, and all the other myriad things she refuses to reveal? Her excuses are many—you don't wanna know, you'll be sorry if I tell you, it's too horrifying, yadda yadda yadda—and none of them hold water. Perhaps he's overreacting…perhaps he's taking it all too hard…either way, he couldn't care less. Being a pacifist doesn't mean being a doormat, and he'll be damned if he lets her hurt him again. Because, after all, insist though he may that he's only angry, he is very, very hurt by her deception, and even more so by her willingness to lose his friendship rather than come clean with him. If nothing else could convince him she's trouble, that does the trick nicely…and boy, does it hurt.

"I try to find a way to make," Amber sings distractedly from the furthest stall, oblivious to Donatello's presence. "all our little joys relate without that ever-present hate but now I know that it's too late." Early on she'd admitted to her tone-deafness, stating crassly "So I sing like cats fuckin', who gives a shite?" For once, though, she isn't that off-key; Donnie never notices, though, instead, recoiling at the lyrics hitting too close to home. Perhaps he can still back out unheard—he could soak away the soreness later when the bathroom isn't a ticking time bomb.
'What am I thinking?' he wonders in aggravation. She's a visitor in his home, and, in his mind at least, an unwelcome one. If his presence bothers her, she can bloody well leave. Without further ado, he lets himself into the stall next to hers intent on cranking the water as high as it can go. Never let it be said he couldn't hold a grudge. An angry Donnie is a passive-aggressive Donnie, as Amber is quickly learning.

"Suicide is painless," Amber continues softly, unheeding of her sullen company. "It brings on many changes, and I can take or leave it if I please." Perhaps he was being too hard on her, Donnie wonders for a scant moment; only for a moment, though. Mutant turtle or not, a man has to stand his ground. "The game of life is hard to play—I'm gonna lose it anyway. The losing card I'll someday lay, so this is all I have to say...Suicide is—AH-HAH-HOW!" Amber bursts out suddenly; a loud metallic clatter followed on the heels of her pained hiss. "Fark that hurts!"

Donatello tries not to care—tries not to worry—but even now, after so long of holding tightly to his anger and hurt and using their ongoing fight as a bitter shield against further betrayal, he can't help but care. He worries he'll always care, but he doesn't have to show it. 'It's never changed,' he ruminates. 'She screams, I come running...well, not this time. She's a big girl, she can deal with it herself.'

One glance at the steady stream of bright red trailing down the drain between their stalls, however, and all bets are off.

Somehow—even after all his mental bellyaching about Amber—he finds himself on his knees in the outer part of her shower stall, the still-locked door wrenched right off its hinges and the faded curtain cast aside like a crumpled napkin, while a naked flustered brunette screeches bloody murder at him. All of this currently evades him, though—his horror-fueled attention is focused on the still bloody Buck knife abandoned on the wet floor and the blood fairly pouring down her lathered inexplicably hairy shin. Are human women supposed to have so much leg hair, he wonders with disturbing detachment. Obviously, being mammals, they would have at least a little peach fuzz, but if what he saw was peach fuzz, then the Amazon rainforest was a bush. Between awkward realizations, an endless torrent of concerned rambling spills from his lips as he grabs her bare leg to assess the injury, nearly knocking her right off her feet.

"DONNIE-FUCKIN'-TELLO!" The sudden scream—accompanied by a wet hand shoving itself over his glasses—finally catches his attention. "I'M NAKED HERE!" Ah. So that's what he missed, he realizes with a noisy gulp. Somewhere above him, Amber tosses her unused towel over his head to block his eyes then - still sopping wet - yanks her clothes on at record speed. At the jeans, though, she hesitates, still eyeing the long bleeding scrape from shaving with an unfamiliar blade. It would stain the pale denim horribly, she admits, but the only other option would be to flee to the lab sans-pants—not exactly a good idea in a home full of men. Perhaps she could wear the towel as a makeshift kilt until she could cover her arse? The moment the idea materializes, she cringes; Granny Devon would'a made her pick a switch for that one.

"What...HAPPENED," Donnie grinds out from the beneath the towel. Finally freed from the terrycloth prison, he can't control the dark blush exploding across his cheeks. Her sweater has been pulled down as far as possible to make up for a lack of pants—baring the water-beaded tattoo spilling across her now-visible cleavage—and it just barely conceals her underwear. Amber rolls her eyes, crouching to collect the knife from the floor; he forces his eyes away from the imminent flash of undergarments.

'Great,' she sulks silently. 'Now I've gotta sterilize it again...Fark me!' Before she can get a grip on the handle, Donnie slaps her hand away as though she was a misbehaving toddler; after barging in
on her like he did, he doesn't even have the courtesy to cringe at the hairy-eyeball glare she fixes on him in retaliation. Despite their glaring contest, he snatches the knife and tucks it blade-first into his belt.

"Dee, I'm fine," she insists rather sharply, dabbing the white frothy substance off of her still bare leg with the towel. It clearly escapes her notice that the movement raises her sweater hem higher, the notched side baring a sliver of lavender cotton above her hip. He forces himself to think of the blood all over the floor rather than Amber wearing purple underwear; he fails miserably. "Gimme a minute, an' I'll explain."

By the time they made it to the Needle Room, the bleeding had finally stopped. Now clad in a pair of cutoffs and perched tensely on the metal exam bench, she submits to his inspection without complaint...much. "I swear," she mumbles into her knees, "I'm perfectly fine. I just cut myself shaving, it's no big deal." Now that she's not bleeding buckets down the bathroom drain, he can see that the actual wound, while large, is very shallow—more of a skin than a cut. Just in case, he douses it with alcohol and slaps a bandage over it while she's still hissing at the sting.

"Shaving?" he echoes dubiously then descends headlong into scolding. "With a knife? Was it really such an emergency you had to hack your leg hair off with this?" In a move Raphael would be impressed with, he fishes the knife from his belt, flips it mid-air, and catches it by the very tip, shaking the handle at her sternly before dropping it onto the table far from her reach. The very gesture screams 'little girls shouldn't play with sharp objects, Missy!' Not for the first time lately, Amber is torn between the temptation to launch herself into his lap and snog him to death and the urge to chuck some random object at his face. As every time before, she instead snorts and pretends she isn't contemplating jumping him. "You've got an appointment with Dr. Morris tomorrow," he reminds in a deadpan. "You could've picked up razors on the way home."

She sighs, defeated. "Yeah," she admits softly, avoiding his eyes. "I could'a...but I wouldn't'a." She cringes, staring heatedly through the tray of bloody cotton and bandage wrapping. "Dee," she admits in a fluster, "I ain't used a cartridge razor on my legs since I was a teenager. I'm used to shaving with a straight razor—that knife was the closest I could find in Kimber's storage. I really expected her to have some sort'a weapon fetish or somethin', but that's the only knife I found capable of holding a razor edge. Most'a her blades were crap." Clearly aware that she's rambling, and that her explanation sounds as ridiculous as 'ninja-mutant-turtle-teenagers,' she blushes hotly and fidgets with the hem of her sweater. "I was a crippled janitor, Don...janitorial don't pay well in small towns, an' when ya gotta have help to do yer job, ya get paid even less. I made cuts—did without things, learned to substitute others, an' that was that. I was dirt poor, but I was happy."

No longer concerned she'd harmed herself over losing his support, Donatello feels regret for taking that support away. He's hurt and angry, but she's hurt and angry too. They'd been nearly inseparable before their big fight and now they can barely speak to one another. Pass the salt. We're out'a coffee. I ran the washer. Sensei needs you. Short, often one-sided conversations have taken the place of long drawn-out heart-to-hearts, and tension between them is only growing thicker. It's only a matter of time before one of them gives...and neither is willing to play that part.

Worst of all, he still cares for her...as much, if not more than before he realized he couldn't trust her. How can he care for her if he can't trust her? The answer still eludes him.

Amber knows without a doubt where her friend's mind has wandered; she's drowning in the instinct to reach out and brush away the faint wrinkles around his too-serious hazel eyes. Before, he wouldn't have fought it; he might even have given her one of his toothy heart-stopping smiles and set her pulse skittering like a cracked-out squirrel. Now, he'd only cringe away and avoid her even more. 'Why's love hurt so much?' she wonders, choking on her own breath. She forces her eyes away from his,
sure they'll only betray her.

"Braids." Hushed and tired, the neglected nickname draws her watering eyes right back again. "Please…I've gotta know…tell me how you know us! Tell me who we are in the world you came from!" Always the same question, Amber realizes as she retreats into her knees again. Always the same question she can never answer.

"You know I can't, Dee," she murmurs, her voice cracking. "Keeping it from you kills me, but it would kill you all the more if I shared it." She fights to hold it together, throws everything she has into convincing him she isn't completely gutted by his inability to forgive her for her choices. Of course, forgiveness is dependent on repentance, and she cannot yet regret the choice she still makes every time he asks again. If she's anything, she's stubborn.

Later that night, when only she remains awake, she'll give in to the tears fighting for freedom. She'll cry into her pillow and curse whatever deranged force thought putting her in his world was a swell idea. Someday Donatello may forgive her for hiding the truth from him—someday he may understand. For now, she just wants her friend back, even if that friend can never love her in return. If only a broken heart was as painless as a nicked shin.

Old life, new life, no matter what changes, it seems love just isn't in her cards.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for 3,000+ views! Y'all made my year!
Chapter Summary

Hey, Folks! Y'all're gettin' another bonus one-shot already—and an 'M' rated one, too!—because shortly after I posted the last bonus one-shot, ANLoL hit another milestone: +15 reviews! World's most awesome readers, really! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

In case I've never mentioned it, "Gallery of Memories" isn't posted in chronological order—or any order, really!—so don't be surprised when the installments jump around the timeline. This one's a BIG jump—all the way to Part III, "Between the Raindrops." Donnie and Amber have long since quit playing the "I love ya but I can't tell ya" game and are an established couple. No trigger warnings here, but there IS a warning for a few mildly explicit scenes of adult content, some spoilers for "Out of the Shadows," and some MAJOR spoilers for future chapters of "A New Lease on Life."

This one-shot is dedicated to all my awesome reviewers: ImpartingAbyss, kmm92886, DaLadyofSouls, nightowl2010, ischryos, ladyDOTwarriorDOT10, whose name FFnet sensors as a web address, Drake Rhapsody, and AmelessUnderworld! Y'all're the BEST!

Chapter Notes

Suggested Listening: Making April, "These Are the Nights," Lifehouse, "Between the Raindrops"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-Six

October 25th, 2016, 10:45 pm, the Lair

Donatello is plotting something. That much, Amber is certain of; what exactly his plans are, however, she has no idea. Staring up at the unfinished concrete ceiling, she thinks back to the first time she realized something was off.

Her favorite season is well underway, and as she is quickly learning, Fall in New York is nothing like Fall in Missouri. It's much colder, especially at night and in the early hours, and below ground is even worse. The Lair has a great heating system courtesy of their resident genius, but no furnace works miracles. Amber's grateful to have her own personal bed-warmer now—a large, sleep-cuddling boyfriend who radiates heat like nobody's business and loves spending nights curled as tightly around her back and over-sized rump as possible. As for tonight…

…well, an empty bed's a cold bed. Donatello left to visit April around six that evening, but come ten, he's still not home; had he been any other man, Amber would question his fidelity. As it is, she knows he'd never even consider such a betrayal and she has the utmost faith in him. Now she waits up, the bedside lamp burning away beside her and a previously engaging book abandoned on the
stand. She never thought she'd see the day when even The Phantom of the Opera couldn't hold her interest. PTSD, she has found, has far more effects than the ones she'd expected—her ever-shrinking attention span is only one casualty out of dozens.*

Finally, the bedroom door creaks open, bright light from the hallway stabbing Amber's open eyes. "Hey," her purple-clad lover grins as he shrugs off his heavy trench coat by the door. Despite the long night waiting—and freezing—Amber's eyes crinkle in an affectionate smile. She's missed him too much for anything less.

"Hey, yerself," she fires back as usual. Several articles of warm outer clothing later, he yanks on some sweats, a huge thermal shirt, and a pair of socks thick enough to double as oven mitts. Without even having to look, he knows she's watching him and, as always, likes what she sees; the pheromones thick in the air are proof enough. At one time, he was too self-conscious to change in front of another. Of course, she's seen it all, now—several times daily, in fact—and ever since they stopped dancing around one another like idiots, she's never hidden her attraction to him.

Several months have passed since that ever-present 'and' between their names became permanent. Donnie and Amber—Dee and Braids—the names have become as close as the couple themselves, and trauma recovery aside, life couldn't be happier. Despite it, some days Donnie worries he'll wake up and find it's all been a dream—that he and Amber are still fighting like idiots, or that she chose one of his brothers over him, or—worst of all—that there never was an Amber O'Brien, and he'd simply hallucinated her into existence!

Donnie stops himself right there. Amber's waited up for him and has kept his side of the bed warm; self-doubt and trouble-borrowing have no place in the bed they share. He ambles over and crawls in beside her, pausing only to nuzzle her cheek. A split second later she jolts away with a startled shriek, winding the blanket around her as tightly as possible. "Fark you're cold—stay over there!" A playful grin splits his face as he yanks the blanket away and wraps his cold arms tightly around the squawking brunette.

For a time, they wrestle in the sheets, one fighting to stay warm and the other pursuing to steal that warmth. Finally, she submits, trembling, but not only from his clammy skin. As he tucks his head under her chin and trails open-mouthed kisses in the wake of her drifting neckline, his sharp hearing catches a faint hitch in her breath. Amber knows without even seeing that he's wearing a smug grin; she'd never admit it, but the fire he's lit under her skin would never let her feel cold.

"Sorry I'm late," he admits into the crook of her neck. "Things took longer than expected and I had to take a detour home—there was a big pileup on 15th." Amber sucks in a breath at the faint brush of still-cold lips along her twice-pierced ear. "At least," he adds pausing to nip the metal-studded lobe, "I don't have to go back anytime soon. Everything's ready." One brush of his lips across hers turns into another, quickly followed by more kisses and a nuzzle to her chin.

For a while, Amber is incapable of speech—anything beyond a sigh, murmur, or whimper—and her question remains unasked. A brief pause in his attentions heralds clarity's return; when he meets her eyes again, his glasses set beside hers on the stand and his mask draped over the bedpost, she takes advantage. "When're you gonna fill me in?" she asks him. "You and April have been meeting every day for the last two weeks...Mercy knows somethin', but she says she's 'sworn to secrecy.' What's going on?" For a moment, Amber sees nervousness in his hazel eyes, but it's quickly crowded out by confidence and affection. The dim light reflecting off his unshielded eyes causes the hazel to veer more toward brown; as always, the change takes Amber's breath away and provokes a long, breathless staring contest on her end.

"If I told you," he finally answers, tapping the end of her nose and grinning when it makes her moss
green eyes cross. "it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" Predictably, her cheeks darken with a surge of blood; she shakes her head weakly, her insides a-flutter. This turtle was going to kill her one day….

"You'll find out soon enough…I promise."

Waiting was never so difficult when she and Donnie were just awkwardly close friends.

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**Friday October 28th, 2016, Noon, Outside Northampton**

After several hours on the road, Amber turns the Party Wagon onto a dirt road leading off into the trees. Donnie still hasn't told her why they left the Lair for the weekend, nor has he told her why the others haven't come with them. In fact, other than playing navigator and disc jockey, he's done little more than stare out the tinted windows in visible anticipation. He's kept her completely in the dark other than sending her in to pick up a packet from a small business they passed by, and in the office she endured sly winks at her twin braided pigtails and bewildering congratulations from the receptionist and her boss. Perhaps, she wonders as the trees grow ever thicker on either side of the road, they mistook her for someone else?

Finally, they've reached their destination…and Amber is no less bewildered than when they left home. Donnie digs through the packet of papers, compares the remote cabin before them to a photo and address in a brochure, and breaks into a wide grin. "We're here!" he announces and clammers out of the passenger seat. By the time she's through searching for prying eyes and catches up to him, he's let himself through the front door. "C'mon!" he calls from beyond the gaping doorway.

The moment she crosses the threshold into the cabin's front room, she freezes. Happy Birthday, Braids! reads a paper sign hung from an exposed rafter; below that, someone had hand-written and crossed out "36," followed by "26." Donatello, Amber realizes with no small amount of warm-an’-fuzzies, ordered the edit so both her real age and Kimber's age would be on the same sign. What amounts to a small detail is much more…it's a reminder that he accepts her, not just the shell Amber now lives in, but the person she once was, lumps, bumps, crows' feet and all. In between the excitement crowding her mind, one thing rings clearly: Mercy squealed. The sneaky blonde will be getting the Aaron treatment when they get home, complete with zip-ties, sock-gag, and photographic blackmail.

"You—" Her voice cracks on the word, and she pauses to rally her determination, wide green eyes fixed on Donnie grinning underneath the sign. "You rented…for…?" She can't finish the thought around the joyful squeal trying to force its way out. Instead, she darts toward him and takes a flying leap into his waiting arms. Between breathless kisses and murmured words, they mutually decide that unloading the van can wait a while. After all, in the loft, there's a king sized bed with their names on it.

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**The Cabin, 6:15 pm**

Twilight has draped the world in shades of silver and grey; soon it will bring a darkness only seen far beyond the lights of the city. Dinner—a pan of chicken alfredo casserole Mikey snuck past Amber and Donnie—is in the oven, and Amber has discovered the cabin's rather impressive Bluetooth-compatible sound system. Since Donnie hooked up his tablet for her—dishing out some gentle teasing about her technological ineptitude—she's taken advantage of the free wifi and put her disturbingly large and varied Musify library on shuffle. The sound system bounces from Quiet Riley to Hank Sumatra to The Rats' Mass,** every note drifting up to the loft where Donnie is going over a last-minute checklist. His plans, after all, have only just begun. Now if he can just find his nerve!

When he finally makes his way down the stairs and into the kitchen, Amber isn't at all focused on the
oven. Instead, she's bopping her head and dancing like a fool to the beat of an Alice Creeper song blasting on the stereo. Donnie doesn't recognize it and Amber is belting out completely different—and incredibly off-key—lyrics.

"She licked'er lips, they were bloody red," she wails into an alfredo-smeared ladle, oblivious to her company. "She had the heart'a the livin' dead! She pushed me down on a burnin' bed—Thought I's in heaven!—but instead, she turned'er head an' she softly said," Without warning, she shrieks, "I'll bite'cha face off!" In the doorway, Donnie struggles to stifle the laughter bubbling up his throat. "I'll bite'cha face off! I'll bite'cha face off, lil' man—I'll bite'cha—AH!" she shrieks suddenly, tomato red and staring at him in horror. He's too busy laughing convulsively to wonder that she noticed his presence, and he slides down the doorframe to land in a twitching pile on the hardwood floor.

By the time her blush has faded and he's able to inhale without snorting, the song is long over and another's come on. He's familiar with this one—quite familiar—and breaks into a grin. It's just what the doctor ordered. Without further hesitation, he pulls Amber into his arms and gently positions her feet with his own. She always gets embarrassed when he catches her dancing and argues that she "couldn't dance if her life depended on it;" well, it took a while, but by the time this weekend is over, she won't have that excuse anymore.

"Dee, what're ya doin'?" Amber asks curiously as he plants her hands on his shoulders and his own at her waist.

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Look around…

There's no one but you and me

Right here and now,

The way it was meant to be.

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It takes a minute to convince her to step onto his feet, and when she finally agrees, she's struck once more by how drastic their height difference really is. Of course, since reviving in Kimber's recently vacated corpse, she's 5'6"—a whopping three inches taller than she'd ever been!—but Donatello and his brothers have given tall a whole new meaning. Compared to a 6'10" turtle with a perpetual slouch, she feels like a Chihuahua surrounded by Great Danes.

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There's a smile on my face

Knowing that together everything that's in our way—

We're better than alright.

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All at once, Amber realizes Donnie's feet—even with hers on top of them—are moving in a steady rhythm. Forward left, right, back right, left, turn one-quarter…As the pattern becomes apparent, so too does his carefully timed breathing—two quick inhales and one slow exhale to count out the steps. Her heart melts; so THAT'S why he was spending hours at April's lately!

"You're dancing Salsa to Lifehouse?" she remarks instead. Sure enough, he blushes, gives her one of those wide, goofy smiles that always send her heart fluttering, and shrugs. Anyone who can resist those grins, she's decided, has no joy in their hearts; she pities them for their loss.
Walking between the raindrops,
Riding the aftershock beside you.
Off into the sunset
Living like there's nothing left to lose.

After some practice and encouragements, she steps off of his feet and tries her hand at it, allowing him to properly position her arms this time. She's always had two left feet, no sense of grace, and a remarkable ability to trip over things that don't even exist, but the way he grins at her, she feels incredible. Perhaps, she considers as he throws in a spontaneous spin and dip, perhaps she's not quite so hopeless as she's believed. Of course, the moment this occurs to her, she steps on his foot, hard. To his credit, he doesn't even flinch.

Chasing after gold mines,
Crossing the fine lines we knew.
Hold on and take a breath,
I'll be here every step
Walking between the raindrops with you.

Friday, October 28th, 2016, 8:35 pm

Sunset came early that evening, the fading sunlight chased off by ominous dark clouds. As the front rolled in, Amber watched nervously from the small front porch, dreading the storm to come…there would have to be a storm when Donnie's convinced her to relax. So much has happened since she arrived in this world, Hun's failed vendetta against her only a small part of it. In moments like this, when the sky simmers with bilious tension, she wonders how she's managed to survive without losing her mind. She's broken, but at least she's mending.

By the time the first drops of rain painted the roof, she had her building panic under control. Now, Donnie's reminding her that rain is a good thing—just as on those stormy afternoons in Northampton, he distracts her from the cracked, vomit green sky in her past, and helps her associate rainstorms with cherished memories. Gasps and hoarse cries ring out through the candlelit loft accompanied by soft whispers and rustles; in the city, they have to keep their voices low lest his family overhear, but out here, only the other wild things will bear witness. The sky has broken open outside the cabin, but the two lovers are too lost in one another to care.

"D-Donnie!" Amber whimpers into a bare shoulder already decorated with bruises and sweat. Feebly she clings to his neck as though she can even hold herself up anymore—she hasn't had a fully functioning spine since he first pulled her from the window into his lap. From the moment his hooded hazel eyes meet hers full of heat, want, and need, she's always struck with an all-consuming weakness; when her brilliant lover turns his attentions to making her cry out his name, all she can do is hang on and weather the downpour.

Thunder cracks overhead. Donatello dives for her neck, mouthing and nipping at her damp skin as she grinds down against him, half in his lap and half in the blitzing clouds. In moments like this, when nature howls jealously at the door, he defies the forces that she fears—defies the winds that
took her life before, the flash and concussion that speed her pulse, and the rain that would mix with frightened tears.

With a bunching of muscles her world turns sideways; without warning, she's pressed back into the tangled sheets and he's pulling out, pulling away. Before the frantic brunette can get out more than a plaintive whine he buries his face between her soft, full thighs, triggering a shriek that turns into a high-pitched keen. Pinned hips fight for freedom—shaky thighs clench his broad shoulders—all the while, a deep, guttural churr reverberates in his throat sending jolts down her spine. Her world boils down to lips, teeth, tongue, and fingers; his senses swim from her pheromones hanging heavy in the air.

By the next crack of thunder, Amber's been reduced to a whimpering, panting puddle, her lover's name a prayer on her lips, her hips rhythmically bucking against him with every aftershock. Lightning splinters the sky as Donatello returns to take her skyward, crawling inside to claim her again. Her name falling from his lips like a treasured mantra, he covers her body like storm clouds cover the horizon.

Later that night, their storm has passed—and so, too, nature's pale imitation of it—and they lie in a messy, blissful heap. Panting and gasping have smoothed into murmurs and sighs and their ever-increasing desire for one another has been, for the time, sated. They never speak of the rain in these stolen moments, never speak of the traumatic memories that still reappear like demons from the dark. Instead, they speak of family, friendship, love, and other permanent things storms can never take away.

Outside, armies of stars stare down between wisps of Autumn fog, a million shining reminders of how love can conquer fear.

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**Saturday, October 29th, 2016, 8:15 am**

"Hey, Donnie-boy!" After a moment's pause, Vern raps on the door again but still receives no answer. Vern shrugs visually scanning the surrounding woods, then checks for bars on his phone. Perhaps Donatello hadn't gotten his call last night? The Party Wagon waits in the gravel driveway but the cabin is silent and still. For a moment the ex-cameraman hesitates on the wooden paneled porch, torn between concern for the turtle who never called him yesterday or returned his calls the night before, and worry about barging in on something he can never in-see.

"What am I thinkin'?" he scoffs to himself with a cocky grin. "Donnie's a great guy but he's a ninja—gettin' laid's probably against their 'bushy-doo-doo*** honor code' or somethin'." Though he's completely alone, he can't resist throwing up 'air quotes' as he reassures himself. Finally, sure he won't wind up blinded by a naked ninja turtle, Vern digs the cabin's spare key out of his jacket pocket and strides confidently to the door, head nodding to some nameless Jazz tune stuck in his head. Even this far from Manhattan, he can get anything he could ever want—all by flashing the fancy key he got for playing the turtles' wingman.

A blood-curdling screech wakes Donnie from his well-deserved rest—Amber! Before he can do more than process the facts that he's a, alone, b, buck naked, and c, totally unarmed, he's tucked and bolted from the loft to the source of the commotion.

In the small tidy kitchen echoing with some drum-heavy folk tune, Amber stands rigidly over a crumpled pile of clothing, wide-eyed and brandishing an egg-smeared frying pan. She's barely more dressed than Donatello is, clad in a flannel robe over the silky purple nightgown she wore for a whole five minutes last night. After ascertaining she's shaken but uninjured—and chastising himself
for his body's reaction to the garment that enhances more than conceals—he crouches next to the body crumpled on the floor and rolls it over.

"Vern," he groans at the unhearing intruder. "Really? It couldn't wait until Sunday!?" Shaking his head he retreats to the loft long enough to throw on his trousers and tug on his mask and goggles then joins Amber again. She stands awkwardly next to their visitor's limp form skillet at the ready, clearly aware that trying to get Vern's dead weight off the floor would only earn her a hernia. 'That's my clever girl,' Donnie muses with a smirk running a quick scan for injuries. Surprisingly, there's no sign of any injury…and no lack of brain wave activity. Someone's playing possum, he realizes with a snort, and drops into a chair, propping his feet up on Vern's chest. A wince and crinkled nose confirm his suspicions, and it's all he can do to suppress his inner Mikey.

"So that's the infamous 'Vern,' huh?" she mumbles, still eyeing the dark-haired visitor warily; not surprisingly, the eggs she'd been scrambling plaster his spiky dark hair to his scalp with stringy white gunk. "How'de get in? He scared the livin' shite out'a me!" Donatello heaves a frustrated sigh into the cup of coffee she passes him. A moment later, he gives her a touched smile at the steaming plate of pop-tarts waiting for him. Even out in the sticks, she brings him pop-tarts and too-sweet coffee on Saturday mornings.

"You'd be surprised what a key to the city'll get you," he responds dryly. "The property manager probably loaned him the spare key on sight. He's irritating," he adds emphatically for Vern's benefit, "but he's harmless—can't say the same about you, though." Blood rushes to her cheeks at the cheeky grin he shoots her over the half-empty sugar jar; after a sip of his coffee, he wonders if the jar was full before she prepared his cup. "You really bashed him in the head with a skillet?" Amber gives him a deadpan stare.

"Would ya've had me break the coffee carafe over'is head?" she asks dryly.

"A dreadful fate for something that brings such joy," Donnie teases. "In that case, I must approve of the skillet." For a time, neither speaks, then Amber stares him down.

"He's fakin', ain't he?" she deadpans.

"Yep," he replies, the last syllable popping audibly. Realizing the gig is up and he's not in danger, Vern shoves Donnie's bare feet off his chest and clambers up to a sitting position with a loud groan.

"Ain't that gratitude," the older man grumbles scathingly at Donatello. "I came to make sure you aren't hurt, and your girlfriend tried to gimme a skillet lobotomy!" A snort slips past Donnie's lips, and Amber responds with a gently chastising arch of the eyebrow. Without so much as a by-your-leave, she slips down from her chair and helps Vern to his feet, steering him toward the bathroom. If he doesn't wash the egg out of his hair, it'll turn to concrete.

"So you called Dee for a favor," Amber sums up Vern's long-winded explanation. After about thirty minutes of wrestling with the gunk in his hair, he'd emerged reeking of coconut shampoo and as fussy as a wet cat. By then, Amber and Donnie had both dressed and eaten breakfast. "He told ya we ain't had a lotta time alone lately, an' to pay'im back, ya rented us a cabin for the weekend on the condition he not tell me you did it." Vern deflate, but nods begrudgingly; he hadn't wanted her to find this out, but what's done is done. His rep is so gonna suffer.

Without warning, her arms wrap around his neck in an over-familiar hug, and he thanks his lucky stars she's fully dressed. He likes his women a little less on the chunky side, but he IS male; no straight man can concentrate with breasts in his face. "I'm sorry I bashed your skull in," she mumbles as she backs away never realizing she shoved his face into her abundant chest with the hug. "You
really startled me. Please don't take it as a lack of gratitude, because—" She cuts herself off, realizing she's starting to ramble, and sure she'll be blushing soon, too. "Thank you…for being so thoughtful and generous." Vern smirks at her, saluting her with his coffee cup.

"Anytime, Kid. Anytime."

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**Sunday, October 30th, 2016, just before dawn**

Amber may never tire of being able to sleep through the night. In her old life, she was capable of sleeping through nuclear fallout after late nights; in this life, she's struggled with night terrors triggered by passing subway trams. Only sleeping at Donatello's side has been able to keep her from waking up screaming, but even that isn't foolproof - there are still mornings when she wakes up bawling with no memory of how or why. Out in the woods, though, there's nothing to waken her demons, and thus, her—no passing trains, no screaming sirens, nothing more annoying than the occasional howling dog. Out here, there's literally nothing that could wake her now…

…nothing, that is, except the large calloused hand lazily trailing up and down her bare thigh and the snout nuzzling the nape of her neck. She sighs, leaning back into Donatello's open arms.

In drowsy moments like this, his true colors shine unhindered. There's none of the rush and desperation that storms bring, only gentle touches and murmured endearments she can't always understand. Sometimes she'll hear something she recognizes among the litany of foreign compliments and petnames, but he's got more languages in his larder than she could ever hope to master. Her Donnie is a bona fide genius and in the time between sleep and waking he often forgets that she isn't. This morning his word choices seem to be focusing on Japanese, French, and what she could swear is Latin. Even though she cannot understand what he's saying, she gets the gist; love has a language all its own, and needs no translation. As another indecipherable endearment whispers along her skin, she trembles in his arms and turns to meet his brushing lips.

"Happy Birthday, Braids," he mutters near her ear, still toying with the lace-trimmed hem of the silky garment. The moment he saw it online, he knew it was perfect for her—it was the kind of flimsy nightwear she wore in his dreams even when they were still 'just friends.'## Clearly, he'd underestimated his reaction to seeing her wear it, though…every time, he wanted nothing more than to rip it off of her and re-assert his claim on her person. He never imagined himself as capable of being possessive, but to his utter surprise, she seems to like it. "I changed my mind—you're not allowed to wear this."

"Really?" Amber teases as he brushes her grey-streaked braid aside to nip her neck. "But you just gave it to me—does it make me look fa—AH!" Donnie's lips clamped around her bare shoulder cut off the tease, followed by a hand smoothing appreciatively over her plump rear, full hip, soft belly, and more-than-ample love-handles. A pleased tremble runs through her body as the caress drifts lower and lower down her body, every inch of ground covered leaving her breathless. Teasing aside, he wouldn't be in the slightest disappointed if the nightgown emphasizes her more voluptuous assets; he's made it perfectly clear that he loves her curves and has always admired them.

"No," he answers her unfinished tease hoarsely, brushing his lips over the tender love bite on her shoulder. "It makes my brain short-circuit—lift your leg." Her breathy chuckles shudder into a gasp as he slides home after a moment of teasing and fumbling. Finally…finally, the noise in her head has been chased away by his gentle touch. In her lover's arms, she feels safe—safer than she's ever felt before—and the horrors of her past cannot reach her. Everything's the way it's meant to be.

Right here and now, there's only Amber and Donnie, loving between the raindrops.
* Attention problems - This is quite true, but not well known—many times after developing PTSD a person who's never had attention problems will suddenly find themselves incapable of focusing and easily distracted. Even after getting the vast majority of PTSD symptoms under control, your attention span may be permanently shrunk to the size of a peanut.

** Name Changes - Once Amber found herself in her new world—the world of the TMNT—she began quickly realizing that many things are different from the life she left behind, especially actors, movies, and music. Sometimes these changes are drastic, but sometimes they're as mild as a different name and a few changed lyrics. Quiet Riley, Hank Sumatra, The Rats' Mass, and Alice Creeper, in our world, would be Quiet Riot, Frank Sinatra, The Rasmus, and Alice Cooper, and the song Amber butchered is Alice Cooper's "I'll Bite Your Face Off," which I think fits Kimber pretty well. ;) Following that, the lyrics shown are from the song "Between the Raindrops" by Lifehouse.

*** Bushy-Doo-Doo - Blame this distortion of "Bushido" on Casey—can't recall if it's from the '03 incarnation or the 90s live-action one, but it just had "Vern" written all over it.

# Languages in the larder - This may be a local term or just a bizarre choice in words; I've only heard it a few times. Basically, having something 'in the larder' means having it at ready access or out in the open. For instance, Amber has a lot of determination in the larder, and Mikey has a lot of energy and positivity in the larder. In Donnie's case, he's mastered many languages both in connection to his work and out of sheer boredom, and has a variety to choose from at any given moment. Headcanon, maybe, but he strikes me as the type to be polylingual.

## Long, slinky purple nightgown - Remember Donnie's dream from "A New Lease on Life," chapter 8? ;) That nightgown was a birthday present for Amber, along with the weekend on Vern's bill.

A quick bit of trivia: Although Amber and Kimber are counterparts, they have much more in difference than they do in common. Amber was born on October 30th, 1976, and died at 35 in 2011 winding up transferred to Kimber's empty body. Kimber was born on October 28th, 1991, and died at 25 in 2016. Thus, this October Amber and Kimber would have turned respectively 36 and 26.
**Dribble-Drabble 1: "Change" / "Cycles and Seasons"**

Chapter Summary

Hey, Folks! I know I usually post a full one-shot when y'all push ANLoL past another milestone, but these two seemed determined to remain drabbles—my errant muse wasn't any help, either. …Ahem. Anyway, you awesome readers pushed ANLoL past +4,000 views! Thus, I give you not one, but TWO cavity-inducing drabbles!

Chapter Notes

"Change" is set in the early days of Donnie and Amber's relationship, is rated a high-T for adult themes, awkward humor, and frank but not explicit discussions.

"Seasons and Cycles" is set sometime after "Twenty-Six;" Donnie and Amber are as good as permanent and considering the future, but there's one thing he never counted on coming between them…HORMONES. Seriously, this one's so sappy it'll rot your teeth! Aside from the cavity-sweetness, it's rated mid-M for blatant adult themes, potty-mouth, and non-explicit intimacy, lots of awkward moments, and a mild rant in the notes. Also rated WTF because it took a whole freakin' day of research to get my Gaelic, slang, and colloquialisms straight—Scots Gaelic is one tough language!

Thank you, all y'all mind-blowingly awesome readers, for being so mind-blowingly awesome! Hope y'all enjoy and hope everyone's been having as nice weather as the Midwest has!

*Suggested Listening: John Legend, "No Other Love"

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**Dribble: Change**

Perhaps if Donatello had known relationships could be so difficult, he would never have bothered with one. Perhaps…but not likely.

Almost a year ago, he and his brothers discovered Amber O'Brien freezing to death in an abandoned subway station, and their lives turned topsy-turvy overnight. He and Amber danced around one another for months, one pulling away, the other pushing away, both too stubborn to realize they had a chance. Now, that's all changed—they have never been closer. Every day, the dividing line between them grows more feeble; every day it's harder to recall life before the ever-present 'and' that now accompanies their names. Donnie and Amber, Dee and Braids…even now with his angry lover avoiding him, he doesn't regret a thing. 'Now,' he considers silently as he watches her from the lab doorway. 'If only I can figure out what I did wrong!'

He has no idea what might have happened, but obviously, something HAS happened. For over a month now, she's spent every night tucked into his protective arms; the sleeping embrace keeps away her night terrors and ensures he gets an adequate night's rest.
The last three days, however, she's worn perfume and avoided everyone; the last three nights, she's forsaken their bed for her old cot in the barracks and spent much of those nights crying out in her sleep. Earlier that morning, she snapped at him over the kitchen table when he remarked that she looked tired. Even worse, Michelangelo teased over lunch that his brothers should just "throw chocolate and run;" never had Donnie been so terrified by a woman before, much less a greying woman even shorter than Mikey.

Now, Amber is curled up on the lumpy sofa with a bag of dried fruit and a cup of cocoa watching "Sense and Sensibility" and looking incredibly ill-humored. Every now and then she'll grumble aloud about something being 'against the book,' a bit of vital plot being completely missing, or a random detail being "pulled out'a the producer's ass." Donnie isn't sure he wants to know what she's referring to and lurks safely beyond throwing distance. She still insists that she's not fit for training, but from the multitude of objects she's chucked at his brothers in the past Donnie knows she won't miss.

"Ya know," Mercy grumbles from behind him startling him half out of his scales. "Ya could just go talk to'er...she won't bite." Donnie begs to differ—the fading bruise on his collarbone is evidence to the contrary, though the bite wasn't given in anger or unwelcome. He chokes, sure he's blushing. Sure enough, Mercy rolls her eyes, shoots off one of her usual snarky remarks about 'nerds in love,' and stalks away to the garden. By the time the blush fades—and the triggering memory of a sweaty disheveled Amber bucking against his still-clothed lap, his hands full of her plump rear, and her teeth sunk into his shoulder to stifle a moan—a commercial about some mysterious feminine product has come onto the screen. Perhaps, he considers silently, it's time to beg forgiveness for whatever horrible thing he can't recall doing.

"Lurking, much?" Amber's sudden sullen remark startles a high pitched squeak from her nervous boyfriend. "Ya know there's room here fer both'a us."

"Y-Yeah," Donnie stammers against his own will. Woodenly, he approaches and sinks into the couch beside Amber, sitting stiffly and staring blankly at the mother and three daughters filling the screen. The mother and her two youngest are ranting about the many positive qualities of a character identified only as "Mr. Willoughby." Amidst the din, the eldest daughter remarks dryly,

"Is he human?"

"No, he's a unicorn," Amber snarks without missing a beat. Only a moment later, pain pinches her face and she hisses through her teeth, clearly fighting to contain a pained groan. "Shite, this sucks." As she struggles to regain her composure, Donnie scrutinizes her appearance, searching for clues; finally, he gives up and goes straight to the source.

"Are you alright?" As if she weren't scary enough already, she slowly turns to fasten a dark scowl on him. "R…Right," he stammers in response. "Nunya—got it."

"Later," she grumbles digging through the bag of fruit for a slice of apple. "I'll answer that later. Savvy?" Before he can answer, she pops the apple slice into his mouth, leans back into the arm of the sofa, and lays her legs across his lap with a faint attempt at a smile. Despite her crabyness and frequent twinges of pain, the movie passes without further incident.

A knock at his bedroom door startles Donatello; what startles him more is the brunette shifting awkwardly in the doorway. "Come on in," he encourages pulling back the blanket and sheet for her. "Kept it warm for you." She gives a faint smile at his thoughtfulness but says nothing. Once she's shucked off her unnecessary clothing, donned her nightclothes, and set her glasses on the nightstand beside his, she crawls in beside Donnie…and promptly stiffens against his side, whimpering.
"Braids?"

"Just—Just give it a min," she mumbles into his shoulder. A moment later she relaxes again. "Later just occurred, in case you were wonderin'," she points out dryly.

"What's wrong?" She avoids his eyes awkwardly, focusing instead on the pronounced dimple in the chin right at her eye level. At one time, she'd considered that particular facial feature a little unflattering, but then again, at one time she'd also thought Santa was real and boys were icky; people change, and so do their tastes. She loves Donatello for his heart, for his insides, but his outsides are pretty dang attractive, too. Calloused fingertips tip her chin up guiding her eyes back to his again, and a momentary gleam of brown in the reflective hazel makes her blush. "Honey," he reminds gently, "I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong."

Honey…this turtle's gonna kill'er one'a these days. Amber feels ready to squeal from warm-an'-fuzzies, but instead, blurts out, "I'm a non-pregnant adult female who's suddenly become moody an' achy." Damn her broken filter…she cringes. "Darlin', some things ya jus' can't fix…ragtime's one of 'em."

"Ragtime?" Donatello echoes dubiously. "You've been touchy lately because of music?" If ever Amber doubted her boys were raised in a sewer, this would be more than enough proof. She buries her face in his bare chest, sure her cheeks are scarlet from the heat radiating off of them.

"Dec," she grumbles, "My uterus ain't happy – it's torturing me for not getting pregnant. Do the math." While he puzzles over her words and her embarrassment, he recalls a rather awkward moment recently between Raphael and Mercy.

"Ya can't trust nothin' dat bleeds fa seven days without dyin'," Raph had grumbled after getting his head taken off by the blonde. A moment later she'd shouted a single word – Boris! – and Raph turned whiter than a sheet. Boris, after all, is the humongous hairy wolf spider Mercy saved from her arachnophobic companion and released into her garden to earn his keep; Mercy has since made a habit of threatening to shove Boris down Raph's shorts to keep him in line.*

Bleeds for seven days…finally, Donatello connects the dots. He swallows noisily and stares down at Amber, halfway between horrified and worried. The brunette heaves a resigned sigh, turning to glare at the lamp on the nightstand. Being a genius doesn't make a man any less likely to get squeamish over sleeping with a menstruating woman; it's the one time of the month when a woman spontaneously develops the equivalent of 'cooties' and the men around her regress into adolescent boys frantically tracing circles and dots into their skin. "I'll be right back," Donnie announces with a nervous smile, crawls over her to get out of bed, and beats a swift retreat to the lab, pushing his glasses up his snout on the way.

Minutes pass with Amber staring up at the ceiling cursing her uterus with everything she has. Could it really have happened any other way? Just as she's about to go sleep in the barracks again, a Donatello-shaped blur sweeps through the door armed with two mug-shaped blurs. "For the pain," he announces sheepishly handing her a mug full of a familiar herbal tar and another of extra rich cocoa. "Splinter's special anti-inflammatory brew?" she winces, and he nods grimly. Another instance of 'if the disease won't kill ya, the cure will;' the blend includes many medicinal herbs and spices such as chamomile, ginger, and turmeric, and even with enough sugar to choke an ox, the taste could turn a body's face inside out. It always works, but it tastes like licking a dumpster. Having learned long ago that drinking the tea was like ripping off a band-aid, she downs the noxious brew as quickly as possible, holds her breath while the resulting nausea weakens, then takes a deep, steady drag of the cocoa.

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Donatello watches nervously as she savors the cocoa, thinking over what he's learned. If the search results were anything to go by, she must be in horrible pain – he can't imagine how anyone could handle undergoing it every month! Add in that most women are left to suffer silently and endure teasing and sarcastic jabs from the men they live with, it seems more than a person could bear. By the time Amber's drained the second cup, he feels more confident in his plans.

"Where's it hurt most?" he asks simply; for a moment she stares owlishly at him, questioning his sanity, then reaches to grip her right lower back.

"The cramps I can handle," she admits, "but when they go to my back, it's Hell...that's what's had me so sore." Donnie shakes his head, practically tut-tutting at her, and guides her to lie on her stomach.

"Just relax," he urges, but the drag of her nightshirt being pushed upward makes her stiffen. The 'and' between their names is still new, and they still have secrets between them...namely their own bodies. The most he's seen of hers could be blamed on various injuries and the one time he barged in on her while showering;‡‡ Amber tenses, recalling all the lumps and bumps now bared to his eyes and that bloating would make those lumps and bumps seem even more pronounced than usual.

His knuckles sink into her lower back, silencing her worries and dragging a hoarse gasp from her lungs. "That it?" he asks gently kneading a knot loose. It takes a moment of stammering, but she finally gets out her answer—'a little lower.' This time he doesn't miss, descending on the tense muscles with skill. As the pain fades away, Donnie's touch changes – knead smooths into caress and knuckles into fingertips, and the careful distance he'd maintained shrinks further by the moment.

Once he's content that his liquefied lover is no longer hurting, he tugs her shirt back down and crawls in beside her, pulling her into his arms the moment his glasses are back off. Underneath the normal smells of his bedroom, the fading oil plugin by the hamper, and the remaining odors from the tea and cocoa, he can detect both new and familiar pheromones radiating from the woman in his arms. Unfortunately, the non-scents aren't the only thing he can detect; fortunately, she doesn't see his nose wrinkle and doesn't notice him start breathing through his mouth. It sounds awfully insensitive but sometimes a strong sense of smell isn't such a blessing; maybe it's time to change the oil plug?

"I don't deserve you," she mumbles into his collarbone unaware of the direction his thoughts have taken him. "Ya know that, right, Dee?"

"Well, I don't deserve you, either," he teases back. "It seems we must learn to be content with being happier than we deserve."# Her only response is a low, husky laugh that tickles his Adam's apple, but he's sure she caught the reference. Drowsy green eyes grin up at him and soft cocoa-sweet lips take his; between the first languid, nipping, brushing kiss and the one following, his left hand tangles in her loosened hair, and his right cups her chin and cheek tenderly. Before she can get carried away, Amber pulls back with a final nip at his lower lip. Donnie chuckles and rubs noses with her, and when she buries her blush in his chest, he lets his snout drift into her hair, soaking in the sweet coconut scent still lingering from her shampoo.

"I kinda feel sorry for Raph." The sudden remark from the woman in his arms startles him, and he stares down at her in confusion. A sly smile splits her face, just as it had when she shared Mercy's affinity for spiders, but her explanation makes his blood run cold. "Cohabitating women tend to synchronize."##

"...you're kidding, right?"

MORE after these NOTES:
* "Boris the Spider" is a reference to an obscure rock song by the same name, performed by The Who. Remember, Mercy's an odd little metal-head who likes spiders.

** This occurred in a previous one-shot here, "Painless."

# "I must learn to be content with being happier than I deserve" is a quote from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

## No. She's totally not kidding…men with several daughters and a wife learn to fear the Ides of Ragtime and keep the man-cave well stocked.

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Suggested Listening: John Legend "Stay with You," Luke Ryan "Rain is a Good Thing"

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**Drabble: Cycles and Seasons**

Last Spring, Amber O'Brien was too broken to enjoy the end of winter. After all, in the world she came from, it was just a transition from ice storms to thunderstorms—not a lot to celebrate when you're fighting a debilitating storm phobia. Now, she lives in New York—in a city known more for mild drizzling rain than funnel-decked gully-washers—and thanks to the hazel-eyed genius buried up to the shoulders under the hood of Casey's battered pickup, she's learning to enjoy rain again.

Of course, she admits with a warm fluttering in her gut, Spring isn't just marked by changes in weather…millions of fangirls in her world believe Spring also means mating season. Ever since she and Donatello finally quit dancing around one another like idiots—okay, ever since the first time they got to know one another's bodies on a more intimate level—Amber's been waiting for Spring with a mixture of anxiety and eagerness. Anxiety can be explained easily; she does have PTSD, after all, and Spring is one of her triggers thanks to the damn monster storm that killed her. As for eagerness…well, let's just say her Donnie's a fast learner, eager to please, and what he lacks in bullshit-macho-posturing he makes up for with enthusiasm and skill.

"Brake," Donatello calls out from under the hood. Almost sulking, Amber steps on the brake as ordered; for a turtle being driven mad by hormones, he's certainly not in any hurry to jump'er. She's callin' bullshit. "I said brake, Hon."

"I did," Amber snaps back, releasing then pressing the groaning pedal again; "That creak ain't my knee, ya know." For good measure, she pumps the pedal one more time thenlobs out the open window, 'I'm tellin' ya, it ain't the brakes or the engine—yer lookin' in the wrong damn spot!"

"I've looked everywhere, Amber! You know how many moving parts are in this thing?! I've checked every one I can think of!" In a fit of uncharacteristic temper, he slams the hood down scowling at the hated truck and stands seething over the dented hood. In her previous life, the arm Amber drapes along the open window was much meatier, perpetually sunburned, and covered in more freckles than the rest of her body combined. She watches Donatello silently seething, unimpressed by what amounts to an overworked and undersexed man losing his cool.

"Ya know," she points out blandly, "Yellin' at it won't do any good. I tried – Ol' Jumper died on me."

"You seriously named your car after the mule from Old Yeller?" he grumbles at her, and she shrugs.

"Callin' it 'Devil's child' gave Mum the fits," she explains with a shrug, her normally pronounced
twang exaggerated ironically. "'s either call't *Big Red Piece'a Shit or name't after a jackass." Sure enough, a strangled snort slipped past Don's clenched lips. With a lazy lopsided smile, Amber leans back in the seat and waits, counting down the moments 'til her Donnie returns in a flurry of snorts, wheezes, and guffaws. Instead, he stiffens, blanches, pulls the hood back up, and forces his eyes back to the engine, his shoulders and jaw tense.

"What could I have missed?" he mutters seemingly oblivious to his mate's dismay. "There's gotta be a reason for that rattle—trucks don't rattle for no reason!"

"Fark this." Without another word, Amber lurches out of the truck's cab and stalks off toward the farmhouse. As the distant screen door slams, Donatello slumps against the grill, breathing heavily, his eyes wild and his fingers clenched tightly to the hot metal. Even with the bay doors wide open and her gone, the barn is flooded with her pheromones – the teasing, tantalizing non-scents drive him crazy even when he's NOT fighting his baser instincts!

"Let's go to the farm, Leo said," Donatello mumbles mockingly. "It'll be great, Leo said! Never mind that it's raining daily and my mate's in friggin' estrus!" For the first time since last month's cycle, he's fighting a strong urge to collapse at his desk and repeatedly bang his head on the surface.

He and his brothers aren't *humans* and they aren't *animals*—they're a mix of the two previously unseen in their world. Everything's new, everything has to be handled with the greatest of care, and nothing can be taken for granted. He doesn't have high hopes that he and Amber could conceive, but it's not something he could rule out without testing. If they did conceive, God only knows if the child wouldn't miscarry, or if his mutagen-laced DNA would render the fetus stillborn, all arms, legs, and randomly misplaced organs like a monster out of some hokey b-movie horror flick—he shuts down the cold dread racing up his spine. Losing a child is something most couples never get past. He'd rather anything than subject Amber to the possibility of losing an unplanned baby…but he still hasn't found a tactful way to broach the subject. And to be bluntly honest, no one likes pulling out.

Sooner or later she's going to connect the dots. It's only a matter of time before she realizes that her estrus cycle *always* coincides with some urgent trouble—a 'training accident,' a super-important time-sensitive project, a spur of the moment abduction to save some random dumbass from themselves—usually one or more of Casey's possibly fictional distant future relatives. Amber's not an idiot…if she hasn't figured it out already, it's only a matter of time, and Hell hath no fury like a horny woman stuck with DIY.

"Could really use some advice, ya know," Don announces to the empty barn, his ears straining for a familiar sign—a ticking clock, an annoying, shrill laugh, the smell of dust and leather—anything would work. As every time before, though, he's completely alone…he's screwed. "Yeah, thanks for nothing…see if I fix ever fix your screw-ups again."

Amber storms into the shabby kitchen like a woman on a mission, only to stop dead at the counter and dig through the cooler on the floor. As every time before, she is faced with the painful truth that she forgot the Scotch…as every time before, she feels torn between tears and sarcasm. "Why's the rum always gone?" she mumbles pathetically.

"Ye drank it awl, Jack,"# Mercy snarks through the open window startling her. "Ye an' yer damn peanuts!" As her heart rate calms, Amber grins,

"Finally, someone who gets me! Where've ya been all my life?"

"Straight an' surrounded by cows," Mercy teases ducking through the kitchen door. "Fortunately for you, Pretty-Boy stocks actual rum—says'e makes a mean mojito." The blonde shrugs
noncommittally. "Wouldn't touch it with a twenty-foot pole wit'a stick on th'end, but I don't drink." Amber smirks at the mental image of Mercy jousting with a living mojito and turns to dig a glass out of the cupboard.

"Don't really wanna drink," she admits as she draws tea from the jug on the windowsill. "Jus' miss home again…miss when things actually made some farkin' sense."

"More farkin' sense than Donnie bangin' that heap'a bolts instead'a you?" Mercy suggests slyly, her denim blue eyes grinning as widely as her lips. Amber slumps down at the counter, almost missing the barstool.

"I think yer filter broke, Merse," she suggests dryly. "Yer startin' to talk like me."

"Blame Raph" Mercy shrugs drawing a glass of tea for herself and downing it in a single breath. "He's not one fer holdin'is tongue, an' don't see why I do…filters're overrated anyway. So what's the deal, anyway?" Refilling her glass, she watches Amber warily out of the corner of one blue eye. "This time'a the month, Raph can't keep'is hands off me, but yer gettin' twat-blocked left-an'-right."

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"Twat-blocked ain't the half of it," she grumbles into her tea. "He's even started avoidin' me…only let me hang out today 'cause I offered to help with that damn truck." She shakes her head, unintentionally whacking Mercy with the single grey-streaked braid running down her back. "All those brains, an'e ain't figured out the catalytic converter's the problem—that beast is so old the platinum's fallin' loose inside, jus' like with Ol'—" She trails off, green eyes wide and one twitching.

"That SKUNK!" she shrieks suddenly, startling Mercy half out of her skin. "That brilliant, frustrating, manipulative SKUNK! He's not tryin'a fix it, he's tryin'a push me away!" Suddenly everything makes sense…his evasive behavior, his single-minded insistence on working, and especially the way his nostrils kept flaring every time she found herself contemplating jumping him. Estrus…the bane of womankind, the lesser-known sister of the ever-hated menstruation, and the time when a woman was most fertile.

"He doesn't know, does he?" Mercy asks lowly, one blonde brow arching up beyond her bangs; Amber shakes her head in denial.

"I need'a favor, Hon," the brunette admits tersely. "…we're gonna need Raph."

One moment, Donatello was pacing the confines of the barn, struggling to piece together a way to broach the subject of monthly fertility with Amber. Now he's lying in the dark, bound hand and foot, and growing increasingly panicked. Was the farm attacked?! He was overpowered, clearly, but was anyone hurt? Oh, God—AMBER! What if Amber was hurt?!

Before his frenzied thought process can spiral any further out of control, a bright light buzzes to life right in his eyes, blinding him. "Where were you at oh-ten-hundred hours last night?!" someone demands in a poor imitation of some random movie interrogation scene. Donatello clamps his mouth shut, certain that if he so much as says a word, his loved ones could be in serious danger at the hands of the unseen nutjob; with his mouth closed, however, there's nothing to block out the familiar scents —and non-scents—in his direct vicinity: coconut, mango, black tea, and fertile, frustrated woman.

He sighs, shakes his head, and glares just to the left of the work light. "Really, Amber?" he deadpans. "Really?" Sure enough, the work light's turned to the wall, the light reflection illuminating an irate brunette at his side…and the loft of the barn. She only takes her eyes off him long enough to turn the overhead light on, then stands glaring at him, arms crossed under her ample breasts
defensively. "I get that you're upset, really, it's understandable, but did you have to tie me the futon?"

"Last chance to come clean without a fight," she warns schooling her face into what she hopes is a 'we are not amused' frown. When she had Raphael zip tie Donatello's unconscious body spread-eagled to the old metal framed futon, she'd endured no shortage of jabs about 'keeping it fresh' and having a secret bondage fetish. Now that she's faced with a helpless Donnie spread out on that very futon—the place where they first started learning one another's bodies—she's starting to wonder if Raph wasn't just being a smartass. Was she frustrated enough to take advantage of—before the thought can finish she forces it away, repulsed by an idea that could be misconstrued as rape, were the roles reversed. No, no matter how desperate she became, she'd never take away Donatello's right to refusal. "I have ways of making you talk," she warns instead of acknowledging the tension crackling in the loft.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Donnie grumbles under his breath. She arches an eyebrow at him, sinks into the creaking desk chair, and crosses one jeans-clad leg over the other, clearly waiting for him to get it over with. Like ripping off a Band-Aid, he realizes with a cringe, this is gonna hurt. "You're… fertile…"

He trails off, cheeks blushing and avoiding her eyes. He isn't known for getting tongue-tied over awkward explanations—Mercy often refers to him as 'Dr. TMI'—but as always, that all flies out the window when he's with Amber. He's seen every inch of her, experienced every inch of her, and sometimes even several times daily—there isn't much they aren't willing to try at least once. Still, after over a year of awkward wakeups, close-calls, and really horrible timing, he can't tell her what's going on and still face her.

"You're worried I'll get pregnant," she acknowledges aloud; his wince is all the answer she needs, but he nervously rolls one hazel eye to meet hers. "That's why I'm getting shot, ya knucklehead." The slip of the tongue finally breaks her own cool, and she gives him a weak smile. "—shots… I meant shots." Compared to previous slips, he considers that one pretty mild…especially compared to the time they fell, landed in a tangled, horny, missionary style heap, and she blurted out "can I get off now?" Despite many, MANY more filter fails since then, it was the only one that qualified as 'epic.'

Suddenly her words sink in. "Shots?" he repeats in disbelief. "You're…you've been taking contraceptives? –and you didn't tell me?"

"I'm sure I did at least once," she drawls teasingly, "But it probably came out as 'blah-blah-Scotch-blah-shots-blah-blah. Tol'ja I's boring." Without giving him a chance to refute her claims, she saunters toward him, digging her buck knife out of her boot sheath mid-stride. Right as she cuts the last zip tie binding him to the metal frame, she finds herself suddenly staring up at him instead of down. "Damn," she breathes letting the knife clatter to the floor. "Ya'd think ya were a ninja or—" Lips at her neck cut off the sarcastic remark and she trails off in a hushed moan. She's missed her Donnie; finally, the noise in her head is fading away.

"There's still a possibility," he points out even as he nuzzles her neck, not making a very good case for abstinence. Spring triggers a mating frenzy in many animals but more than not, it just makes him and his brothers restless. This time, he's beyond restless—he's lying cradled in the nook of his frustrated, fertile mate's thighs, his lungs flooded with her pheromones, and instead of doing something helpful—like shaking him silly!—she's yanking him closer by his neck and tangling their legs. He's lost…there never is any hope he could tell her no, after all, not when she gets this close to him. "Contraceptives aren't—foolproof," he warns even as she cuts him off repeatedly. "I need to—to run tests—and—"
"You'd better." She yanks him away from her neck for another kiss that ends in a bitten lip—his—followed by him latching his lips around the juncture of her throat just tight enough to pinch. 'I'm gettin' sick'a gettin' jerked around...it ain't even the fun kind'a jerked around!' Her suspicions about the season grow stronger at the beginnings of a churr rattling his chest; not even a stitch of clothing missing, and the rumble's already sounding—score one for perverted fangirls! "If...If it's even possible..." Though her needy uterus is calling her all sorts of unflattering names for interrupting him, she stills him with a hand on his heart; he sits back on his heels, allowing her to sit up as well. "Would you ever want...kids?"

All the air seemingly sucked out of the loft, he stares nervously at her; finally, he answers with a hesitant smile, "It's certainly something to think about, right? Not like there's a rush or anything." Amber chuckles, staring at his chest.

"How ironic," she muses aloud. "Mum was always naggin' at me to get married an' start poppin' out gran'babies for'er, an' the only ones she'll ever get'd be half-human half-awesome."

"Where did she go wrong with you?" he teases, chucking her chin.

"She taught me to think fer myself—not my fault most guys're just testicles with brains." Donatello cringed.

"Not a pleasant image, Dear."

Rain drums a slow, steady percussion on the tin roof overhead. Up in the loft of the barn, two lovers lie still tangled in one another, their lungs slowing and their hearts full to bursting. Calloused fingertips trace an oft-traveled path across Amber's bare skin—every hill and valley in the road greeted with a fond caress, every scar and stretch mark made sacred with a kiss, and every spattering of freckles mapped out anew, and as every time before, the trail ends right over her pounding heart, only to start all over.

Even as Donatello's touch reminds her yet again that he loves her, all of her, even the parts of her some consider flaws, she reminds him of the same. Gentle touches trace reminders of previous battles—from barely noticeable childhood scars to still recent injuries in the line of duty. Why, Amber wonders as every time before, pausing to press a kiss to a still-tender scar on his shoulder, why would a clan so adamant about having honor consistently aim for the medic? If she'd ever doubted the Foot was led by hypocrites, that doubt was squashed by their refusal to observe the most basic of humanitarian law.

Lips meet and mingle in soft, fleeting brushes and nips punctuated with nuzzles and nose-rubs. At one time, Donatello was a little disappointed that he couldn't kiss Amber the way movies always portrayed kissing—even Raph and Mercy got pretty tongue-y and intense and admittedly, it was sometimes pretty horrifying to witness. Donnie doesn't feel left out, though...his over-large mouth and Amber's small jaw and harsh overbite aside, their lip locks are in a class all their own. Who needs slobber and teeth when your very heart is at your lips?

In these moments, there's no point in speaking—anything that hasn't been said can be seen in their eyes, heard in their heartbeats, and felt in their touch. Though words are superfluous, neither have ever been prone to holding their tongues. His words, as so often in such tender moments, stray into the litany of languages he's picked up, none of which he deems sufficient to say what he means; her words are slow, tinged with a lazy, drawling variation of her usual twang, and what she lacks in languages, she makes up for in sweetness and flattery. Darlin'—mornin' dew—the subject of her song, the door at the end of her road, her own personal Xanadu...he knows a lot of the endearments come from music and literature, but if anything, he's humbled to inspire such feelings in her, even if
they're worded by others.

Somewhere between two of his personal favorites for her—*itsumo aishiteru* and *Mi sol y cielo, mi corazón y mi alma*—she surprises him entirely, so much so that he's momentarily struck speechless. "Qu—uh, what?" he catches himself quickly, tracing an emerging blush with the pad of his thumb. For a moment, she hesitates; then seeming to muster up her courage again, murmurs something he can only interpret as 'iyannan.' He searches his larder and every language in it but comes up empty.

"Somethin' tells me Gran'da wasn't kiddin' about that bein' an insult," Amber mumbles in embarrassment. "Granny Devon used to call'im that...Leannan,*** said it meant sweetheart or something like it." Before she can convince herself that she's—as she so charmingly puts it—"screwed the pooch," he gathers her in his arms and rolls onto his back, staring up with what he's sure is a sappy, dorky smile.

"It's perfect." Their bodies are cooling in the dusk and their physical connection is beyond salvage, but it matters none to them - their hearts have never been more connected. "Scots Gaelic, I'm assuming, as your grandparents were Scottish...it's one I've not heard before." Amber sits up astride his lap, greying brown hair falling loose from her braid and sticking to her shoulders and neck, and green eyes full of mischief. There's a lot she can't recall from her Gran'da and Granny's expansive Gaelic vocabulary, but she's finally able to contribute something besides poetic drivel—something she's quite happy about.

"Perfect?" she murmurs, calling on years of gruff brogue from the grandfather she'd idolized and followed around like a lost puppy—a grandfather she could mimic with the best. "Dinnae fash sae, ye braw numpty," she teases trailing appreciative fingertips along the curves and angles of his partially fused plastron. "Dinnae ye ken? Yer a belter to ma twally arse, ye sook." ****

"I have no idea what you just said," Donnie admits staring owlishly at her, but she can see the telltale signs of a blush spreading from his snout outward. "Not sure I mind, either."

"I'll tell ya when yer older," Amber laughs dropping the act and returning to his lips; when they break apart again, the steady pitter-pat on the barn roof has intensified threefold. For a moment her eyes dart to the work bench in the corner and the battered weather radio on the surface, but her world turns topsy-turvy again. "You really love throwing me fer a loop, don't ya?" she teases Don. "Gonna give me vertigo if ya keep flippin' me like a pan—" Insistent lips cut her off and wrench from her a squeak that smooths into a sigh when her mate backs away, pinning her hips down with his talented hands.

"You trust me, right?" he teases, his ever-changing eyes gleaming golden brown in the dim light. As she nods weakly, telltale goosebumps parade up and down her skin—not only from the storm outside but his closeness and smug grin. He licks his lips, soaking in her pheromones and scent and ready to dive in nose first. "Remember," he teases lightly as he does every time storms drive them into one another's arms, "Rain is a good thing."

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**OTHER NOTES!**

# A shameless PoTC reference, lol.

## See chapter 8 of "A New Lease on Life."

### Drama-mama alert! A lotta folks on this site would'a wanted that scene to turn out differently, but I stand my ground—**rape** is **rape**, and regardless of their gender, taking
away someone's ability to decline or refuse that attention, whatever pretty words you put it in, is rape. Sorry to burst y'all's perverse bubbles, but anything akin to rape isn't my cuppa tea and I refuse to read OR write stories glorifying and justifying rape—it has nothing to do with prudishness, and everything to do with principals. That's my piece, and that's that.

* itsu no aishiteru – Japanese, "I will always love you."

** Mi sol y cielo, mi corazón y mi alma – Spanish, roughly "My sun and sky, my heart and soul"

*** Leannan – Scots Gaelic, "Lover, Sweetheart, etc." Amber's pronunciation is INCREDIBLY ROUGH and I'm sure full'a errors—I'm NOT a native speaker, nor have I ever met a native speaker, and to be quite honest, my native language is Hick and my second language is Fratish. (Meaning I took French from a Puerto Rican then Spanish from a Brit and constantly mix the two with Brit-English and Hick-English beyond hope of use.)

**** "Dinnae fash sae, ye braw numpty. Dinnae ye ken? Yer a belter to ma twally arse, ye sook." Not Gaelic, just Scottish slang. VERY roughly, "Don't fuss so much, ya handsome idiot. Don't ya know? You're fantastic compared to my stupid ass, ya big softie!" As a side note, 'numpty' means idiot but indicates affection rather than just calling someone an idiot—they're not just any idiot, they're YOUR idiot! My husband, Cold, and I are pretty weird so this fits us—our most affectionate pet names are insults—I'm his asshat and he's my dumbarse, and we love it that way! If we ever use certain actual terms of endearment—for instance, him calling me "Dear" or "Darlin'" or me calling him "Sweetcheeks" or "Honeybunch," it's a sign that person really f*cked up and should be running, lol! Thanks for readin', and I hope y'all're having a good Spring so far!
Chapter Summary

Thanks for 20 reviews and +5000 views on FFnet!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**Hey, Y'all!** You awesome, awesome readers just pushed ANLoL past two new milestones—we just passed +5000 hits on FFnet and AmelessUnderworld posted the 20th review there! Okay, so I've never done this before but I'm gonna combine those milestones. A, last time I posted two drabbles instead of a single oneshot, and B, life is just too bloody hectic right now to get a chapter per milestone. It's a bleedin' miracle I got this finished and I halfway suspect I'll wake up in the morning and realize I totally screwed the pooch on it. So, without further ado...(ahem) Thank you, awesome readers, for pushing ANLoL past +5,000 views! Thank you, equally awesome reviewers for posting 20 reviews! Y'all really, really made my day! Readers, this chapter is dedicated to my readers and my reviewers—have some super-awkward Mercy and Raph!

No real warnings other than language and a little suggestiveness

*Suggested Listening: Kansas "One Man, One Heart," Sixx:A.M. "Are You With Me?"

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Mush

Silence has fallen over a home normally full of happy racket. The Lair currently houses five ninjas and two humans, and there's rarely a quiet moment between the seven occupants. The only sound—a news broadcast on low volume—barely reaches the pair slumped on the lumpy old couch. Raphael stares through the myriad of salvaged televisions and computer monitors making up the TV wall but his attention isn't on the news. Instead, his every sense is tuned into the blonde woman sprawled out on the other side of the sofa picking at the potting soil under her nails.

Mercy… Her very name is a virtue but the woman herself seems built for vice. Grey blue eyes the color of stone-washed denim shout insults and expletives at him—soft nude lips sneer, smirk, and spout words that would make a sailor blush—full breasts hide an equally full heart, and short, wild blonde hair complements her even wilder personality. Over the time, Raph and Mercy have grown closer than either would have expected and so far, neither has any complaints about it, though both are still hesitant to push their boundaries much.

The blonde stares through the over-groomed newscaster on the linked TV screens, unimpressed by his sleek black hair or lady-killer eyes. A namby-pamby rich boy like him probably couldn't chop wood without a chainsaw, much less bale hay or haul feedbags; she has no interest in any man too soft and weak to do the job she misses like Hell. It seems a vital part of her was left behind in the world she'll never see again…even with the army of plants she's scattered throughout the Lair, she longs for open fields, the hayloft of the barn, the soft lowing of cows and the disapproving clucking of chickens, and lazy days in her favorite climbing tree.
Finally, Newscaster-Nancy relinquishes the screen to some lame-ass game show hosted by a skinny redhead in a skimpy red dress. Raph's eye twitches at the over-abundant cleavage spilling over the woman's neckline and the equally over-abundant makeup painting her face. He glances furtively over at Mercy. She dresses for comfort rather than looks but she always looks great to him—especially when she's staring him down heatedly over the sparring mat, her lips split in a competitive sneer, her eyes shouting antagonistic come-ons at him, sweat making her tank top cling frantically to her slowly-improving curves—

He stops himself cold, sure he's blushing. With weapons like those at her disposal, it's a miracle he's been able to teach her a thing; every time they spar, he's torn between knowing she won't improve if he goes easy on her and the temptation to yield—just once!—so she can pin him to the mats. She's never managed it, but he's fantasized about it often—about being trapped between her soft body and the hard mats, possibly even with her full breasts right up in his face! Surely he's not the only sensei who's ever felt tempted by his student—surely other male teachers have been tortured by tantalizing female students! Thoughts of the blonde haunt his dreams, wistful wishes for incidents that never see the light of day. He glances over again; unimpressed denim blue eyes stare back at him, freezing him in place. **Caught.**

"Take a picture," Mercy drawls with a lopsided smirk, lazily crossing her arms behind her to cushion her head. "It'll las' longer." Raph's cheeks flame at the posture, certain she realizes just how much it emphasizes the smooth column of her throat, her long, lean arms, and her impressive bust. In the time since she first invited herself into his home, she's made leaps and bounds of progress. No longer the scrawny strung-out addict he first met, Mercy has begun to blossom…granted, she still has plenty of thorns, but what's a rose without thorns? As though to prove him wrong, the rose at the other end of the couch grabs her soda off the table, takes a deep swig, and lets out a loud unladylike belch. Rose, Raph thinks shaking his head. Right…maybe she's more of a **cactus**.*

The tense silence over, he distractedly flips through the channels searching for something worth watching. At this late hour, though, there's little on—sports replays, crappy soap operas, even crappier made-for-TV movies… Finally, he hits pay-dirt: the title, "The Hills Were Painted Red" suggests some sort of action flick—maybe about zombies or war—so he sets the remote aside. No less than ten minutes into the show, however, the error is clear…it isn't an action film, it's a horribly written mushy drama set in a mythical town in Arizona. Inwardly he's shaking his fists at the producers for the misleading title and wincing every time the couple on screen start slobbering on each other again.

"If you're watchin' this shit," Mercy suddenly proclaims, "Yer watchin' it **alone.**" The declaration surprises him.

"I thought girls loved dis kinda shit?" he points out, amber eyes confused. "Don't chicks dig mushy stuff?" Mercy doesn't meet his eyes, instead, grimacing at the on-screen couple all-but dry-humping against a boulder.

"Not this chick." An overly enthusiastic moan makes her physically choke; whoever produced that movie should be shot. "Mushy stuff makes me wanna **hork.** The books an' movies're the worst about it! I swear, every damn time, it's 'Oh, Mister Beefcake!'" she gushes in an exaggerated squeaky voice, her face twisted in disgust. "*You're such a stud-muffin! Take me, I'm yours!* GAG!" she pantomimed sticking her fingers down her throat complete with gagging noises. "Cut the sappy bullshit an' jus' **fuck a'ready**—it's the only reason people **bought** the book!"

Raph watches the grumbling blonde in disbelief; he's never met anyone who can make situations horribly awkward quite like Amber and Mercy can. Sometime between the sudden uncomfortable silence and more muttered curses and complaints from Mercy, his thoughts accidentally slip past the
"Ya got somethin' against love, don't ya?" If the silence wasn't awkward enough already, he realizes blanching, he just pushed the awkwardness up to radioactive levels. Mercy studies the nervous ninja curiously, debating her answer. Finally, she speaks.

"I ain't necessarily anti-love," she admits lowly, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "I ain't exactly pro-love, either, though. Love hurts—lovin' someone can hurt'em more'n hatin'em..." Her eyes saddened, staring beyond the battered coffee table and into her memories. "Ya can love someone an' still hurt'em...an' if they love ya too, it hurts more'n if they hate ya." Not for the first time, he wonders what her old life was like, wonders who in that old life left her afraid of attachment.

"Ya know," he pauses, clears the squeak from his voice, and tries again. "I used'ta think if ya really love someone ya wouldn't hurt'em fer the life'a ya...turns out no matter how much ya love a person, yer still gonna hurt'em once in a while." He gives her a reassuring smile, draping one long arm along the back of the sofa half-hoping she'd invite herself to cuddle up against him. That hope, he realizes quickly, is unfounded. "I love my brothuhs—love my sensei—but I've still hurt'em before an' I know no mattuh how hard I try, I'll hurt'em again. It's jus' part'a bein'-" He almost finishes 'part of being human' but catches himself. "—nobody's perfect...we all got our flaws, an' we're all gonna make mistakes dat hurt dose we care about. So long as we don't mean it an' make up fer it, it'll be alright, yeah?" Mercy sits silently, considering her words before speaking them; in the background, the over-paid and under-skilled actress screams at the stereotypical 'bad boy' character mere moments after all-out molesting him in public.

"What if..." She hesitates, running her fingers through her always messy blonde hair. "What if they...meant to hurt you? ...if they didn't—didn't care if they hurt you?" She flinches, a litany of remembered barbs ringing through her ears. "Whore! Slut! Disgrace! Undeserved though the words were, they left deep wounds that still ache a lifetime later.

"Ya sayin' dat happened?" He asks his voice just a decibel above a growl. If this person is in his world, not in the world she left behind...well, he's been wanting to bust some skulls anyway.

"My mother." Mercy's murmured admission stops him cold. Her MOTHER?! He never had a mother, but weren't they supposed to be supportive and nurturing and love their kids more'n they deserved?!! "Clarity Ross. She had a sister—a twin sister named Charity...I never met'er, but I paid fer ev'ry mistake she ever made." Raph nodded encouragingly, muting the TV in hopes she'd continue. "I look a lot like'er, apparently...an' we both had—" she cut herself off before the words 'Bipolar disorder' could slip past. It wasn't a dirty secret, not really, but she wasn't quite ready to tell him that part of her previous life; after all, she's stable now and finding out she was once unstable might change his opinion of her. "'pparently I had a lot in common with Charity when she was younger. Then she got knocked up, got inta drugs, an' drove'er life from fine to FUBAR. Ma couldn't forgive'er fer it, an' when Charity overdosed, Ma started drinkin'...I could handle gettin' hit, gettin' slapped around—" Raph snarled at the comment, his eyes burning gold with outrage. "—it's the rest that really stuck. Small towns gossip—people're always goin' on 'bout someone comin' home after curfew, some gal gettin' thicker 'round the waist, someone gettin' caught with their pants down..." She shrugged her skinny shoulders, feigning indifference. "They never spect that talkin' to get anyone hurt, but ev'ry time Ma heard it, she was sure they were talkin'bout me...an' she made sure I knew it."

"Dey weren't," he acknowledged when she seemed unwilling to continue. "Were dey."

"Di'n't matter ta Ma. I ne'er e'en been kissed, but she ne'er let up to the day I died." While that bombshell sank in, she cringed, faking interest in the silent TV with a hot blush. "Ya know, I asked..."
her once—asked 'er if I was really Charity's kid…she decked me." Someone, Raph decides viciously, should've shown Clarity what it feels like to be treated the way she treated Mercy.

"Where was yer dad, Kid?" he asks instead of speaking his thoughts aloud; the fact that she doesn't even pout at the nickname tells him she's more upset than she'd have him know.

"Never knew my dad…if'e even was my dad. Ma's first husband, Ernie Flint, was KIA when I was jus' a baby." She shrugs. Her mother never understood how she could feel so little when Flint was concerned, but she was still in diapers when he left for his final tour; how can one grow close to someone when they're gone before you're even aware they exist? "Had a great stepdad—Ellis stepped in when he could, but'ee couldn't do what needed done—she wanted ta save face, so he wouldn't get'er the help she needed. Only one who ever really stood up to Ma was Amber." Finally, her lips tilt back upward again; though the smile is small, Raph is glad to see it and gladly returns it. "Ya should'a heard those two scream at each other—first time I e'er heard someone use 'cow' as an insult!"

A companionable silence fills the room, both thinking over what was said and what was left unsaid. At length, Raphael says off-handedly, "So ya don't hate love."

"Nah," she answers with a lopsided grin. "I hate mush. I don't hate love, but I don't really trust it, either—if love don't have to hurt, maybe I'd give it a shot."

_Tell her_, his conscience urges him harshly. _Tell her, tell her, TELL HER! _Instead of doing so, he reaches out for the remote—and turns off the television. "Love ain't gotta hurt, Mercy," he promises with an 'aw, shucks' grin. "If it's da last thing I do, I ain't gonna let nobody hurt ya like dat again."

Sure enough, Mercy—the Merse with a mouth—blushes and tries to brush it off.***

"Jeez," she proclaims, sitting up with a long, languid stretch and exaggerated yawn. "I'm bushed—whatever ya wanna watch is fine—I'm'onna nap." Without further ado, she flops across the sofa to use his strong thigh as a pillow. As she flings her legs over the arm of the sofa and makes a big show of 'getting comfy' he stares down in horror. If his body reacts at all, she'll know the moment it happens! But…is that such a bad thing?

By the time he's made up his mind and gotten past the fear, a soft snore drifts up to his ears; there he was freaking out all over the place, and she fell asleep almost instantly. Her sudden decision to use him as a pillow made everything awkward and tense, but without a single word, she's shown him just how much she trusts him. All her life, she was given every reason to fear love, every reason to believe that love only hurt, and with one simple action, she proved that she was ready to try and move past that fear and hurt. Marveling at the realization, he gently threads his thick fingers through her short blonde hair, smoothing the fine spiky locks into a semblance of order. When he first met Mercy, she was entirely unimpressed with him; when she first approached him, his mouth pushed her to the point of trying to strangle him. Now she's softer, smoother, and stronger…and he's grown very, very fond of her.

A faint brush of chapped lips on the inside of her wrist brings a barely-suppressed smile to the lips of a woman faking sleep. She died without ever knowing the love of a man, but at least, in this life, she's been kissed.

Maybe a little mush isn't so bad after all.
* In the language of flowers, cacti symbolize endurance—see ANLoL chapter 16 notes—and because of their thorny exterior and often understated blooms, many people are repelled by cacti. Mercy, like a cactus, has unpleasant traits and a tendency to repel people, but she's soft between the spines. ;)

** According to my research, calling a Scottish woman a 'cow' is one of the worst possible insults you can fling at her—a completely unforgivable slight. I do NOT live in the UK so don't take my word for it—the person I'm quoting might actually have been using sarcasm where sarcasm wasn't expected. I kinda like the idea either way, since Mercy A, grew up on a cattle ranch, B, loves cows and loved helping her stepdad with the cows, and C, Clarity, a born-n-bred American with no international influences, was unlikely to realize just how badly she was being insulted by Amber calling her a cow.

*** Yes. I seriously went there. Deadpool's probably either rolling in his non-existent grave or punching the air in excitement.
Chapter Summary

Donnie and Raph are a pair of mutants dating a pair of non-mutant human women who had an entire life before meeting them - there are bound to be moments of weakness when they wonder if they're good enough. They'll never be left weak, though - their women have it covered.

OR

Donnie pesters Mercy, Mercy bullies him. Raph blusters, Amber sees right through it. Donnie spills the beans and gets laid for his troubles. Women talk.

Chapter Notes

This is way overdue and I'm incredibly sorry about that, folks. From the start of "Gallery of Memories" I've been posting one-shots in honor of my wonderful readers every time they push "A New Lease on Life" past milestones. (In case anyone's forgotten, those milestones are +10 reviews and +1,000 hits/views on FFnet.) I've had the story on AO3 for a while now but I haven't yet set up milestones for that site despite great reception. SO! Fixing that right now. AO3's milestones will be +20 comments, +20 kudos, and +500 hits/views. I will not be combining hits/views from both sites because frankly, my math skills are even worse than Amber's. Both sites will have equal access to all one-shots in "Gallery of Memories, and in case I haven't mentioned it before, these one-shots aren't guaranteed to fit into the story-line perfectly. That out of the way…THANK YOU, awesome folks on AO3, for posting +10 comments on "A New Lease on Life!" This one-shot is dedicated to y'all. Sorry it's late and hope it's worth the wait! Have a great day, y'all!

Precautions: Rated M for language and mild lime.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Meatloaf "Two out of Three Ain't Bad," Survivor "Keep it Right Here"

Two out of Three

The Garden

Mercy isn't sure what led to the situation she's found herself in, but she's sure Amber's responsible. After all, if the brunette wasn't so closed off, so evasive, would Donatello have cornered her best friend in the garden for information? Mercy stalls, torn between the row of pepper seedlings she's been planting and the blushing fidgeting genius blocking her way to the wheelbarrow. The 'yardwork' still needs to be done but the blonde doesn't do well with people much less people asking her about her best friend's preferences in—UGH!—boyfriends.
"Lemme ask one…more…time," she states in a low, warning tone as she digs another hole with her bare hands. Trowels, after all, are totally overrated in her opinion and she's quite used to planting barehanded. "Yer askin' me what kinda guys Amber used'ta date…why? —and I should answer you, why?" Donatello fidgets awkwardly, his bright hazel eyes darting every which way as he scrambles for an answer that won't make him sound like a lovesick puppy. With a noisy swallow, he finally takes a leap of faith.

"I care about her," he admits in a half-mumble with a dark blush streaking across his cheeks. "...I love her, Mercy…and I..." Seeming to suddenly grow a backbone, he pauses for a deep, steadying breath and shoves his drooping glasses back up his snout. "She's hard to read—emotional closeness and openness are two of her greatest weaknesses. Everything she says and does tells me she feels the same, but I still need to know."

"Why?" Mercy repeats halfway between squinting and glaring, and he turns to stare down at the neat row of seedlings at his feet. Beforehand, his eyes were squinting in the bright artificial lighting but as they cast toward the ground, a shadow fell across them. The absence of light and introduction of shade sends a perplexing ripple through his refractive irises; right before Mercy's eyes, the light hazel darkens to brown, leaving her blinking in surprise.

The unexpected occurrence reminds her that she hasn't really spent a lot of time with Raphael's tall gangly twin—for obvious reasons, he's too smart and sweet for her sassy smartass self. Maybe, she considers as she tenderly knuckles dirt in place around another sprout, she should rectify that oversight. After all, he's her best friend's boyfriend—sure, she religiously avoided all the others before him but this boyfriend isn't likely to blow his chances anytime soon. While he presumably searches his vast vocabulary for answers she'll understand, Mercy smacks the loose dirt from her hands and gently but firmly nudges him away from her setup.

"Oh," he interjects with a sheepish grin. "I'm in your way, aren't I? Sorry." The blonde rolls her denim blue eyes and collects another pepper plant from the seedling tray.

"Just keep clear." Everything going on is entirely against her prickly nature but she knows Don wouldn't have sought her out if he thought he had any better options. "So what're ya worried about? Why're you askin' me instead'a Amber?" Seemingly startled back to his purposes, Don's smile fades into a cringe.

"She—She had a whole life before we met," he admits fidgeting with a carton of fertilizer stakes. "She's had friends, family, coworkers...even lovers..." Mercy feels about ready to gag; God, she hates mushy stuff, and this turtle seems full'a mush! "If she's only with me because—because she has no better options—" Before he can fall any further into self-deprecating babbling, Mercy snatches up the cultivating rake and gives him a strong whack across the shins.

"'At's enough'a that!" she snaps as the turtle clutches his stinging leg and swears in Japanese—at least she thinks it's Japanese, could be Korean for all she knows. "Amber ain't with ya 'cause she's desperate—she ain't with ya 'cause she ain't got better options! She's with ya 'cause she loves ya, ya douche-nozzle!" Donnie's hopping and swearing suddenly halt and he stares down at her with a disgusted cringe.

"How's that even an insult?" he asks with a hint of a grumble in his voice. "A douche nozzle is just part of an apparatus used to cleanse bodily cavities for—"

"Nerd," Mercy cuts him off sharply. "Ya want my help, or are ya gonna correct my grammar next?" Donnie rolls his eyes and drops to sit a safe foot or so away. "Look, if yer still worried about it, here's yer answer. Amber'n I've been close since we were kids—grade school age kids—and I met every single asshole she ever dated. Sometimes bein' roommates is more hassle'n it's worth," she
adds under her breath recalling the day she came home early and found Amber's naked ass in the air over their sofa. Of course, the naked boyfriend underneath was even more traumatizing. "She's at least predictable if nothin' else—every single jerkoff she ever dated was one'a three things." She turned shrewd eyes back up to Donatello's, ticking her words off on long slender dirt-smudged fingers. "They were all smart, sensitive, or at least able to drink'er under the table."

"'Drink her under the table?'" Donatello echoes with a wince. He knows all too well how well Amber can handle alcohol—even after downing an entire bottle of Scotch in one sitting, she was still too sober to get her tattoo inked over without anesthesia! If Casey hadn't suggested a shot of vodka, she might've been sober even after a bottle and half more!* Mercy's elbow to his side yanks him from his increasingly racing thoughts and he turns to see a sly grin splitting the blonde's face.

"Yer not a drinker, Donnie-boy," she teases, "an' Amber ain't gonna want ya to change for'er. Ya can't outdrink'er stubborn ass, but two out'a three ain't bad."

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**The Kitchen**

The smoky scent of Scotch whisky and the tang of cut peppers and tomatoes fills the kitchen. Raphael hovers before the stove armed with a wooden spoon, impatiently poking the pulverized vegetables simmering in the stockpot. "Playin' with it don't make it cook faster," Amber teases, emerging from the walk-in pantry with an armful of clean canning jars. "It'll just slow it down." The hulking ninja blusters on the surface, but the moment she looks away, a smile breaks through. "So how're you an' Mercy doin'?" Her sudden question startles him. For a moment, he stares down into the stockpot considering how to answer.

Long before he met Mercy, he took a chance on a relationship and that relationship went down the toilet. Granted, he didn't respect Kimber the way he respects Mercy—though he and Kimber were close friends, he was more interested in a physical relationship with her, more focused on not dying a virgin. She loved him for who he was, he knows that now, and that knowledge only makes him feel worse about blowing off a more permanent commitment to her. If he hadn't overreacted, jumped to conclusions, and broken off all contact with her, would she still be alive? If he'd listened when she told him how she felt, had given her a chance to prove those feelings, would he be so nervous about commitment?

What-ifs and why-nots can't change the fact that Raphael broke Kimber's heart; as far as he's concerned, nothing can wash away her blood from his hands. He made mistake after mistake with Kimber and he is determined to not do the same with Mercy.

"Been takin' it slow," he finally admits in a low rumble, his golden hazel eyes darting away from Amber's. "—don't wanna push'er or anythin'." A sudden presence at his side—a cheeky brunette armed with two tumblers of Scotch—startles him; Amber offers him the fresh tumbler with a grin. "Kanpai," he smirks saluting her with the glass of liquid fire.

"Slanj'-uh va'," Amber retorts mischievously then pauses to savor her own sip. Once Raph's sure he won't belch fire, he grins back.

"So," he asks with feigned indifference, stirring the impending pasta sauce to hide his nerves. "Gotta question fer ya. Merse told me she ain't dated before—din't pay no attention ta guys. Dat true?" Amber, seeing right through his disinterested façade, smirks, and ducks past him to poke the minced garlic and herbs simmering on the stove.

"She never dated, no," she admits airily. "But she did look—she'll tell ya she never looked at guys, but I'm tellin' ya she did—Ev'ry time we went out, she'd spend most'a the time people-watchin.'" She
chuckles to herself. "Anytime she liked what she saw, she'd start fashin'im fer bein' a mingin' munter." Raph's nonplussed stare and shrug point out the obvious: while Donatello has been learning her lingo, he clearly hasn't been sharing what he learned. "Sorry—she'd bitch about'em."

"If she likes ya she insults ya," Raph recalls with a smirk. "Yeah, dat sounds like'er. So ya eva notice anythin' dey had in common? What kinda guys got'er attention?" Moss green eyes roll as their owner sighs.

"Ya got nothin' to worry 'bout, Big Guy," Amber reassures with a dry smirk and a pat on one bulging bicep. "Trust me on that, okay? She never gave anyone, guy'er not, the time'a day 'less'n they were one'a three things." Tossing her grey-streaked side-set braid back over her shoulder, she pries the wooden spoon from his slackened grip and stirs the sauce. "They had to be strong'er loyal or at least non-drinkers." Raph gives a startled glance down at the still half-full glass of Scotch clenched in his fingers, but a soft hand stills him from setting it aside. "Ya drink, Raph, but yer not a drunk; Mercy understands that and wouldn't wanna change ya. Still, yer strong an' loyal, an' Meatloaf said it best: Two out'a three ain't bad."

Later that night, Donatello ambles out of his lab toward his bedroom, or more specifically, the bed already warmed by a certain sassy brunette. "Leo and Mikey are off at Bev and Bree's," he reports methodically stripping down to his boxers. "Raph and Mercy took off, too…they packed enough junk food to feed a small family so they're probably catching a movie or something."

"Ya don't say," Amber teases with a lazy grin and waggled eyebrow, her glasses drooping down to the very tip of her nose.

"Someone's gettin' lucky tonight." Don flinches away, shooting her a squeamish cringe.

"Dear," he points out in half-whine, "the last thing I want on my mind is my brothers engaging in carnal relations! I still haven't figured out the science behind brain bleach!" Despite the litany of traumatizing images now coursing through his mind's eye, he continues stripping, refusing to look at his disturbed girlfriend and sure he's blushing. A sudden rustle later, cool bare arms wrap around his waist from the back and a familiar tangy non-scent sends his nostrils flaring; perhaps, he considers with a noisy swallow, he's been going about the whole brain bleach idea all wrong. Amber's bare flesh pressed against his never fails to make him draw a complete blank.

"Who's talkin' 'bout your brothers? Yer Da's asleep, we're alone—was talkin' bout you, mo kully'a." As always, the half-remembered Gaelic comes out rougher and clumsier than she'd prefer, but it has the desired effect; in the span of a single breath, she finds herself enfolded in his arms and feels a telltale nuzzle at her scalp. Despite her best efforts, though, he seems to be holding himself back, almost as though he's working up the courage to say something. "Wha's on yer mind, Darlin'?" she asks gently leading him to their bed. Sure enough, he seats himself right in the middle, leans back against the headboard, and avoids her eyes, one massive hand digging shyly into the back of his neck.

"I…" He turns to stare through the laundry hamper with a blush. "I talked to Mercy…about, well, guys you dated." For a moment all she can do is blink in surprise at the confession. "Sorry."

"For what?" she asks honestly shifting to perch on one massive thigh. "Ya would'a gotten better answers if you just asked me. Mercy wasn't exactly supportive of any non-platonic relationships." She winces a faint blush streaking across her cheeks. "She put up with me dating 'til we moved in together, then she got sick'a watchin' me get hurt. She's not the most reliable source regarding my ex-flames." Don cringes, still unable to look her in the eye. "Dee, Darlin', I ain't mad—I ain't hurt. If ya got questions, ask'em an' I'll answer to the best'a my limited ability." Her point made and the offer open, she tugs the sheet up over her back and nestles up against his bare plastron, idly tracing a few
faint scars in view. It takes a lot of convincing on his end, but finally, he takes a leap of faith; when has she ever let him fall?

"Why're you with me?" he asks honestly. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be and I'm not saying you don't love me—I just—" He heaves a frustrated sigh, wishing he could better articulate his query; were his communications skills this questionable before he met Amber, the queen of miscommunication? "I know you knew me before we met and may have even loved me then, too. What did you see in me that you didn't see in anyone else? You could've had a full life—a human life—"

"What?" she asks too-innocently. "You mean I could'a been a housewife, married to a career businessman, lived in a little pink house in the suburbs with a white picket fence, had a dog an' two-point-five kids, the whole American Dream shebang?" She giggles at his pinched irate expression. "Fer one, I didn't want all that—I wanted more out'a life than marriage an' poppin' out babies. Fer another, you don't want to know my reasons, do you?" Sure enough, his cheeks darken slightly and he gives her a weak smile. Cupping his chin in her palm, she studies his appearance with a tender smile.

"I didn't just wake up one day an' decide to fall for a mutant turtle, ya know," she teases slowly shifting to straddle his lap. "I started dreaming about you when I was only a child. Those dreams were vague at first, then made clearer by something admittedly juvenile, but as I grew, so did they. All my life, I searched for someone to fit standards I never knew I had—someone smart, sensitive, gentle, compassionate, affectionate, strong, loyal, honorable..." With every murmured character trait, she traces another nonsensical pattern into his bared skin. "I tried, you know...I found men with big brains and bigger egos, men with gentle peaceful natures but no sense in their heads...strong men who cared only for what they could gain with that strength and weak men who wanted only to taken care of..."

Finally, the random caresses lead back to his chin, the pad of her thumb brushing the corner of his lips upward into a lopsided smile. "No matter how hard I looked, Donatello," she confesses softly, "all I found outside my dreams was disappointment, and every time, I gave up on the men who couldn't measure up."

"And...in your dreams?" he asks hopefully.

"In my dreams waited a man with every trait I'd ever hoped for and so much more besides." Soft lips sweet with peppermint brush his and trail down his jaw to his neck, then part only long enough for a nip. "His heart is only eclipsed by his mind—his voice soothes me when nothing else can—his eyes bring out the best and the worst in me and challenge me even when I'm ready to call it quits. His arms make me strong and his hands make me weak..." Said hands lift to frame her face, and she follows them to his lips without a moment of hesitation.

For a time, nothing is said between them, their lips occupied with gentle brushes and teasing nips. By the time they break apart, one silently reminding her lungs to do their job, the embrace has long since gone beyond sweet to sensual. "Cummoan oot, Sweetness," Amber whispers into his neck, relishing the faint shudder the thicker, coarser speech always triggers; if she'd known years ago that someone someday would find it tempting, she's sure she'd never have forced herself to stifle it. "Ah'm su empty without ye."

As they've done countless times before, the partners work in tandem to come closer together, one shedding her lover's remaining clothing and the other laying himself bare for her. In the time between a gasp and a sigh, two become one, bodies and souls entwined in a time-honored dance they've only just begun to hone. One murmurs the words of a multitude—praises and promises in a litany of
tongues she'll never understand; the other meets each with one of her own in a thick, gruff burr.

"D'ya ken nuw?" Amber asks Donatello breathlessly as they move in time. "Ah'll have nuwun else—ya spoilt me from the start, iyannan, my sweet braw speccy."

"Amber…" The name comes out in a half-moan, half-whisper that makes chills run up and down her spine; she can't resist stealing his next words right from his lips. Strong arms pull her tightly to his chest, cradling her like something more precious than life. One hand migrates down her back to her over-plump rear pulling her closer than ever before as the pace of the dance slows from a tango to a waltz. "I...I love you, Braids…"

"I love ya, too, Darlin','" she breathes into his neck. "Yer not human, but it don't matter—Yer more'n I e'er wanted an' all I e'er needed…" As she pushes him down into the sheets and sits up astride him, her amorous expression morphs into a teasing grin. "Mercy's right, ya know."

Wait…what?! Donatello stares up at her halfway between shock and horror. Surely Mercy didn't tell her what he asked…surely?! "Doghouse?" he asks with a sheepish grin. Instead of answering, his woman gives a soft low chuckle and drapes herself across his chest with another teasing brushing kiss.

"Trus' me, Sweets," she whispers almost against his lips, "Two out'a three's jus' perfect."

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**AMBER TRANSLATED**

-Slanj'-uh va’ – Proper spelling "Slàinte mhath." Used as a toast, means basically, "Good health!" Compare to US "Here's to your health!" I'll readily admit I'm basing the pronunciation on web research so it might not be correct. Remember, I live in Hicksville, US of A?
-"fashin'im fer bein' a mingin' munter" – roughly, she's bitching about the person being horrible, dirty, and ugly.
-Mo kully'a, proper spelling "mo Gaol" - Rough pronunciation; reportedly there's no English equivalent to the Gaelic pronunciation for [ao] *Mo Gaol* means 'My love.'
-Cummoan oot – Come on out
-D'ya ken nuw? – Do you know/understand now?
-Ah'll have nuwun else – I'll have no one else
-iyannan – Proper spelling "Leannan" is Scots Gaelic for 'Sweetheart,' spelled as pronounced unless I've botched the pronunciation, which as always, is a distinct possibility.
-Braw – Beautiful or handsome
-Speccy – someone who wears glasses

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* Vodka is reputedly one of the more intoxicating liquors on the market; I've heard it takes less vodka to get someone drunk than most other liquors. Of course, I could count on one hand how many times I drink per month - not a heavy drinker - and I rarely venture beyond 'girly drinks,' wine, Scotch, or champagne during holidays. I really
wouldn't know anything about Vodka from personal experience.
Chapter Summary

Thanks for 30 reviews and 6,000 hits, Peoples—you're really the best!
A short little celebration of Raphael's relationship with Mercy, shown through a selection of memories.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! I know I've said it several times before but I really can't say it often enough—I have the world's most awesome readers—you guys!—and I appreciate Y'all more every day! You totally awesome readers pushed A New Lease on Life past TWO new milestones recently! First reviews hit 30 then hits passed 6,000, both on FFnet—No matter how rough things get in Real Life, I can always count on you awesome readers to cheer me up with your views, reviews, comments, kudos, and all that other great stuff. SO. It's a little short but here's a goofy Raph and Mercy one-shot. Once I've got this posted I'll be responding to the reviews I've missed…sorry it took so long to catch up with'em. :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Phillip Phillips, "Gone, Gone, Gone"

Mercy, Mercy Me

When Raphael first met Mercy Ross, she seemed pretty normal—that is, normal compared to his family. Over the next year, he got to know her better—got to understand her oddities, eccentricities, and bizarrely opposing traits, and she has no lack of those. Mercy's a woman of many secrets, and Raph's sure he'll still be finding more 'til the day he dies…and if he's honest with himself, he wouldn't have it any other way.

Sometimes those secrets come to light in a nerve-wracking if memorable way; one such secret involved one of his greatest fears.

Raphael was a tough guy—a strong, stubborn, bull-headed macho-man—or, so he seemed. There wasn't a thug alive he couldn't take down, not a risk in the world he wouldn't take on, and so far as his brothers believed, nothing in the world could scare him…nothing, that is, except the large furry eight-legged critter staring up at him from the bathroom floor. Seemingly oblivious to the shrieking ninja towering over it, the furry grey spider stared up at him, blinking its many eyes and cleaning one hairy foreleg.

"Raph," Mercy yawned in annoyance as she shambled through the door scrubbing one bleary eye. The boyishly short blonde hair sticking up in every direction seemed at odds with the ruffled nightgown brushing her ankles. "What's with all the—" Upon noticing the critter on the floor, it seemed a switch flipped; suddenly, she was wide awake and grinning with excitement. "Wolf
"Spider!" she crowed with inexplicable glee and rushed through the utility room to the kitchen. A moment later she returned with an empty jar only to find the spider and Raph still staring each other down, one completely unimpressed and the other questioning Mercy's sanity.

With no sign of the horror he felt, Mercy dropped to one knee and deftly caught the arachnid, then brought the jar up to eye level. On the other side of the glass, the little furry critter stared at her, one foreleg rising up as though to wave hello. "Hi there," Mercy grinned at the bemused creature. "I'm a call you Boris."

"Oh, HELL NAW!" Raph sputtered finally finding his words. "You're not keepin' that thing! Flush it!" Sure enough, watery denim blue eyes met his over the lip of the jar; a sad sniffle followed the puppy dog stare. "No! No, no, no! It's a spider—it's not stayin!'" Mercy visibly pouted, staring longingly down at the jar.

"He won't hurt ya," she insisted pathetically with one finger dangling down into the jar as though offering a dog her knuckles. "He's jus' a lil' wolf spider—they're non-venomous an' non-aggressive—he'd be handy to have around!" Raph's left eye twitched.

"NO!" The spider hesitated a moment but finally crawled onto the offered digit and up Mercy's arm; upon reaching her shoulder, it turned to Raph as though asking 'what's your problem?' Suddenly, Raph felt incredibly ganged up on.

"Hm," Mercy sniffed crossing her arms under her generous breasts—breasts he couldn't help but remember were completely unbound. After all, he reasoned weakly, she'd crept from their bed to investigate the racket—why bother throwing on a bra just to snoop? It took every ounce of strength he had to keep his eyes above the drooping lace-trimmed neckline, but the threat of being blinded by her hi-beams became less imposing when he realized the spider, too, seemed to have crossed its arms at him. "Ya know," the blonde pointed out with a slowly spreading smile. "Jus' 'cuz' jer scared'a spiders don't mean they're dangerous."

"I'm not scared'a nothin'!" The spider seemed to sneer at him, its mandibles twitching in amusement.

"Oh?" Mercy's smile spread into a malicious sneer. "Well, then. If y'ain't scared, prove it: Pick'im up off my shoulder an' flush'im...with your bare hands." HELL to the NO, Raph thought frantically, but all that came out was a strangled squeak. Mercy shrugged. "Suit'cherself—I'll take'im out to the garden." Without another word, she turned heel and shuffled through the utility room, the hem of her nightgown swishing in her wake.

That Raphael, an Arachnophobe, would fall for a woman with a fondness for spiders seemed at first a living nightmare. Over time, though, he came to accept it as it was: she was raised in the country and taught to respect all life regardless of how many legs it had. Plus, having spiders in the garden cut down on the need for pesticide.

In the years she's lived in the lair, she's rescued countless critters from his family—bugs, rodents, stray cats, and yes, many, many spiders—and though she routinely begged to keep them, she always resigned herself to releasing them a safe distance away. The garden, once merely a means for growing food for their table, swiftly became a sanctuary for the multitude of evicted vermin—some as pets, some as food for those pets. No matter how many critters she collects in that underground sanctuary, though, she can never bring in the ones she longs for most.

Mercy grew up on a ranch; that in mind, it shouldn't have surprised Raphael that she'd take to the farm so quickly. Sometimes it seemed she lived for the chance to get out of the city and back to the
farm—lived for wide open fields, sunlight on her face, and the musky stench of an occupied barn. The moment she returned to the farm with the others, the moment the unloading was done, she’d always take off like a shot to the edges of Casey’s property. At first, it worried Raphael to have her out of earshot; then he realized what was drawing her away.

Deep lowing echoed through the pasture, interrupted now and then with soft murmurrs and laughter. Raphael, bundled up in sweats, a woolen hat, and a heavy overcoat, grinned over at the figure balanced haphazardly on the bottom rung of the split-rail fence, one hand scratching a barrel-ribbed Jersey heifer between the ears. Marvelously tight denim jeans hugged Mercy’s strong legs and plump rear in all the right places; a long-sleeved flannel shirt—red, like his mask—brown hiking boots, and a black ball cap finished the job nicely. The antagonistic hellion he sparred with every morning seemed to have everything and nothing in common with the country girl before him and for a moment, it took his breath away.

"Oh, yer a pretty girl, ain't'cha?" Mercy teased the massive grunting beast munching an apple out of her hand. Every now and then she'd brush a fly away from the animal's eyes and rub the base of its horns. "Such a pretty gal... ya must have the bulls wrapped ya lil' hoof, don't ya?"

"How did I know?" Raph teased Mercy as he lumbered up beside her. The heifer warily rolled one wide brown eye to him as though expecting him to steal her apple. "Cows, huh?" Mercy gave a sheepish grin, a fetching blush staining her cheeks. Her eyes always seemed bluer in the country air than in the city—as though she left a part of herself behind every time they returned to the Lair.

"Cows," she agreed bashfully as the heifer licked the rest of the apple juice from her offered hand then waddled away toward the feeding troughs. "Go ahead—tease me. I won't blame ya." Instead of teasing her he leaned on the top rail and watched the herd circle restlessly.

"I ain't gonna tease ya," he smirked. "Dey are kinda cute." As though to prove him wrong, one nearby heifer let out a loud belch and another emitted an even louder fart. Raph grimaced at Mercy, who laughed at him.

"They like ya," she teased hopping down from the fence-rail. If that's how a cow shows someone it likes them, he decided with a cringe, he'd be quite fine with the whole herd hating his guts.

Raphael never ceases to be amazed by his Mercy. She could make a rock burst into bloom—she can revive the sickliest of plants and make them thrive—she even managed to get a pair of orange and apple trees to grow underground, albeit in heated greenhouses. Mercy is a child of nature and is wasted on the city, but for whatever reason, she’s stayed at his side. She misses living in the country—misses the sunlight, the plants, the animals—and grumbles often about living a cow-less existence.

Of course, Raph recalls with a grin, she can’t have cows in the garden, but they’ve made a few compromises...

Chickens. Raph scowled down at his breakfast plate and the food covering it—a massive omelet, scrambled eggs, and French toast with a side of bacon—sure she had chickens on the brain again.

It started out as a joke, or so he thought. Raph grumbled about Mercy releasing spiders into the garden instead of killing them. Donatello pointed out they needed to figure out a more reliable method of preventing insect infestations and reminded her that the last few heads of lettuce she’d harvested had bug damage. Amber explained it was expected—that you needed to 'plant a little extra for the bugs.' Finally, Mercy suggested they bring in some chickens for bug control. All four brothers cracked up, Mikey spewing Orange Crush out his nose from laughter.
Mercy stalked out of the kitchen without a word. She spent the rest of the day awol, avoiding the family entirely, and for the rest of the week, she was unusually withdrawn. Finally, Raph went to the only other person liable to know where she went. Amber, unfortunately, was offended on Mercy's behalf and chewed him out for being insensitive—as though the rest of the family hadn't laughed as well!—and reminded him as Mercy's mate, it was his responsibility to stick up for her. After a good long tongue lashing, the brunette finally pointed him in the direction of the garden.

He found the blonde swaying on a salvaged bench swing, looking out over the recessed beds of greens and the many hand-built greenhouses filling the vast underground rail yard. A trio of stray kittens tussled in the tall grass near Splinter's favorite flowerbed, clearly hopped up on the catnip Mercy planted for them. As the three kittens wrestled and played, Mercy stared off into space, surveying her domain. It was, after all, hers—she saw its potential, she vowed to get it up and running, she kept everything down there alive and prospering, and though she didn't do it alone, she drastically reduced their grocery bill with every harvest.

"Hey." The blonde didn't answer as he dropped into the swing beside her; one arm draped along the back, he turned to offer her a smile. "Chickens, huh?" She gave a non-committal shrug.

"Free-range chickens are great for controlling pests in the garden," she mumbled back. "an' so long as they have a steady supply of grain an' greens, they tend to leave the veggies alone. The eggs're handy, too, an' so's the manure." Though she didn't mention it, it was also safe to keep chickens indoors; anyone who tried keeping cows indoors took their lives in their hands, what with the animals' flammable methane-heavy flatulence. While her thoughts wandered back to the world she left behind—a simpler time and place where she really, truly, fit in—Raphael studied her silently with a smirk.

"Ya' done a great job with dis place, Merse," he pointed out, and when a faint blush bloomed in her cheeks, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and hauled her up against his side. Though she put on as though annoyed with him, she relaxed into his side and lay her cheek on his shoulder. In her previous life, Mercy would have bristled at the very suggestion—would have pushed him away and accused him of patronizing her or getting fresh—but she wasn't the woman she once was. Raphael was massive and stupid-strong, and outside of sparring, that size and strength made her feel incredibly girly—a feeling that surprisingly didn't annoy her. "Ya got vision an' ya got some great ideas—don't let anyone tell ya differently." Finally, the Mercy he knew came out to play with a mischievous gleam in denim blue eyes.

"Bite me, Meathead."

"Mark da spot, Blondie."

A few weeks have passed since what the family dubbed as 'the chicken incident,' and Mercy seems to have gotten over the slight. The only thing that's changed is the amount of time she spends in the garden checking for pests…and every hour wasted on bug-checking is an hour Raphael doesn't get to spend with his mate. Enough, he decided after a mere week, was enough.

Somehow she doesn't seem to have caught on. He hesitates in the doorway to the garden, willing the noisy, smelly fluffballs in the cardboard crate to remain quiet. She wanted chickens, after all, so by God, he got her chickens! His Mercy gave up on life in the country to waste away in the city's underbelly with him—if only for that reason, she deserves the very best he can give her! Finally working up his nerve, the hulking ninja lumbers toward the blonde kneeling over a row of tomato plants watching something with rapt attention.

"Look, Raphie!" Mercy grins; the bottom drops out of Raph's stomach and the box nearly drops out
of his hands. A familiar hairy spider perches on the back of her hand and stares up at him innocently, its back covered with a multitude of tiny moving specks. "Boris had babies!"

Chapter End Notes

WOLF SPIDERS – These furry arachnids are intimidatingly large but nonvenomous and overall timid; a trait that sets them apart from other spiders is the females' habit of carrying around hatchlings on their backs. That sight will send the average arachnophobe through the roof!

COWS – Most of us have heard that the beef industry is a major source of methane emissions, but what's normally unspoken is that cows are some of the gassiest critters on the face of the earth…and their gas is totally flammable. That's why those commercials with smoking cowboys are ridiculous—anyone who spends lots of time around cows should know better than to light up near a herd.
Make it Rain

Chapter Summary

Thanks for +40 reviews!

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Hope everyone's having a great summer so far. Something totally awesome happened recently...ANLoL got REVIEW BOMBED! X'D Thanks to SupernovaWolf, I now owe y'all THREE installments in "Gallery of Memories." The first two are complete. Because this one is entirely OC-centric, has no canon characters, and is a songic, I'm posting the second shortly after; if you'd rather skip this chapter, I won't be offended, it's not for everyone. Either way, I promise the next is worth it! The third...well, there's gonna be a little bit of a wait for it, sorry y'all. Also, ANLoL now has a beta!

Again, thank you so much for pushing ANLoL past another milestone! This installment dedicated to all you awesome reviewers - you never cease to blow my mind!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Ed Sheeran "Make It Rain" (From Sons of Anarchy)

Gallery of Memories: Make it Rain

July 2005, Willsdale, Missouri, a small shotgun shack outside of town

In every life, there comes a time when we must move beyond our fears and faults in the pursuit of the greater good. This, Amber realized a week before, was clearly that time for her.

Not so long before, Amber's front yard was covered in lush, green grass and greener clover, and frequented by birds and beasts alike. Now everything is dry and brown; parched brown foliage crunches underfoot. "Lord," Amber mutters as she stares out her dusty kitchen window, "I know yer probably busy right now, but we need you...this whole nation needs you..."

The Midwestern United States isn't known for its predictable weather. One year might bring torrential rain, the next a killer drought, and the next absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. In Tornado Alley this mercurial weather is even more pronounced, and it isn't unheard of for certain states to experience 'all four seasons in a week.' Missouri is one of those states. Like the majority of the country, the Show-Me state is being hammered with a long, harsh drought and fire season that some inhabitants have likened to another Dust Bowl in the making.

How long has it been since the sky last darkened outside of nighttime? How long since the earth's thirst was quenched? Amber shakes her head and turns away from the long-vacant kitchen garden. Nothing would survive that soil now, even if she wasn't the type with two black thumbs. Cane in
hand, she half-limps and half-stumbles to the dark parlor, easing her sore body onto the sagging plaid sofa. The news brings only sorrow and the radio stations are even worse, but the record player and hi-fi are full of fond memories. As a jazzy number by Sinatra fills the small dark room with false cheer Amber collects the phone from the table, intent on checking her messages.

*When the sins of my father*
Weigh down in my soul
And the pain of my mother
Will not let me go…

"Amber Jean!" an older woman snaps from across town, seemingly ready to crawl through the phone's earpiece and box Amber's ears. "Ye still havenae shown up fer the services! Where did we go wrong with ye? How did Ah raise such an ungrateful, ungodly—!" Without a moment's hesitation, Amber erases the message and moves on to the next one.

"Simple," she grumbles aloud though her mother cannot hear. "Ya taught me to think fer myself, then punished me fer havin' a brain. What *were* you *thinking?*" Another message sounds out—her Gran'da dryly warning her to stay low for a while as her mother was on the rampage again. His familiar husky burr and foreign colloquialisms always bring a smile to his granddaughter's face, even with the state of the world.

A loud rumbling crash echoes from outside – so similar to thunder it makes her skin crawl – but the moment she reaches the window, she finds instead that another one of the black locust trees has given up the ghost. Every year prior, the belt of locust trees had spread further and further, and every blooming season Amber's breath was taken away by the masses of pale, delicate blossoms dangling from every branch. Without rain, though, the grove is drying up, dying, and tumbling down one by one. Only thorny trunks remain of the largest trees now, and Amber longs for their shade.

*Well, I know there can come fire from the sky*
To refine the purest of kings,
And even though
I know this fire brings me pain -
Even so
And just the same,
Make it rain!

*Make it rain, Lord!* Amber prays, silently choking up at the ever-worsening state of her world. She hates rain – fears rain – and would once have been happiest if she never had to suffer another rainstorm again so long as she lived! Despite that phobia, however, she's learned her lesson: no matter how much she hates rain, the world around her needs it.

*All seed needs the water*
Before it grows out of the ground,
But it just keeps on getting harder
And the hunger more profound.

When the drought first began Amber, like so many others, felt sure the rain would return soon, and suspected the media of overplaying the danger. The longer they went without even the slightest bit of
precipitation though, the more real that danger became. Like so many other small towns in the Midwest, Willsdale is a community reliant on agriculture; some residents grow grain, soybeans, and produce, some raise cattle, poultry, or wool-bearing livestock, and some simply take advantage of the open space to raise food for their own families. Over the last few months, those who rely on the land have been slowly forced away from their dried up property. Willsdale is slowly dying like the land around it; if the drought continues much longer, the small town Amber loves may soon fade away entirely.

Crops have withered. The most well-cared for kitchen gardens have been reduced to dirt and dried remains. Herds of livestock have grown skinny and sick and died of dehydration and malnutrition. Worst of all, in the last couple of months Amber's neighbors have been growing sicker, weaker, and more disheartened, and every day brings another report of another life claimed by the heat and drought.

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**Well, I know there can come tears from the eyes**
*But they may as well all be in vain.***

*Even though*
*I know these tears come with pain -*
*Even so*
*And just the same,*
*Make it rain!*

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When dusk falls over the small town of Willsdale, Amber creeps out into the sweltering heat. The empty log-fenced pasture behind her property was once ripe with life - hedgeapple trees and zealous native bracken provided shelter for wildlife, the wide crick running through the middle provided relief on hot summer's days, and all in all, it was heaven on earth to Amber, Mercy, and Aaron. The three friends have made that empty lot their own, if not on paper then in heart, and spend as much time there as possible.

The pasture, like the rest of the land around it, has dried up. Though the sight of the once vibrant landscape chokes her up, Amber's unsteady feet lead her there without hesitation. Just as she has every day and every night for the past seven days, she stares forlornly across the scorched turf. She imagines it swarming with tall, tasseled grass, buried under blankets of fallen leaves, dusted with fresh snow and dripping with icy gems, and bursting into bloom anew every spring. As every day and night for the past week, she falls clumsily to her scarred, aching knees in the dust, closes her eyes, and sends up yet another plea for mercy.

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**Let the clouds fill with thunderous applause,**
*And let lightning be the veins,*
*And fill the sky*
*With all that they can drop*
*When it's time*
*To make a change.*
*Make it rain!*

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"Please, Lord," Amber whimpers aloud, her eyes stinging from the failed attempt to produce tears. Her tears dried up with all the other water around, after all, and no matter how she hurts, she cannot produce more. "Please, we need you—we need your help! Please, make it rain—make it rain, Lord, make it rain!" Words fall from her lips in an increasingly desperate and helpless torrent. She fears the
rain – she hates the rain – but for as much as she fears it and hates it, she needs the rain as much as everyone else does! Rain could save her hometown as easily as it could send her cowering; with enough of it, the drought could be broken and the country could get on with their lives again.

'No more death,' Amber pleads silently when she can no longer get words out between choked sobs. 'No more fear, no more dread. No more waiting for our prayers to be answered. Please, make it rain, make it rain, make it rain!' The words have become a bizarre mantra for her in this time of drought, an endless plea that has never been answered. Then, in the space between one breath and another, something completely unexpected takes her breath away.

Cold liquid slithers down the back of Amber's bare neck. The frantic brunette falls silent, her grey-green eyes wide with fear, hope, and wonder. The sensation returns on her right shoulder, then once more on the back of her left arm. Fingers clenching the scorched turf desperately, Amber fights the urge to look at the strange coolness on her forearm, afraid her hopes would be dashed to pieces by sweat or bird droppings. Finally, her mind is made up by a low, distant rumble…

Rain…RAIN! Raindrops send up clouds of dusty earth all around her. Silver trails streak down her bare skin toward the parched earth below her. What started as a few measly drops swells with every passing second, until it becomes a steady downpour. Anyone who witnessed the sight might question the sanity of the obese woman sprawled on her hands and knees in the dirt, halfway between laughing and crying as she stared in unadulterated glee at the water quickly turning dust into mud. Amber slumps over onto her back in the dirt, staring up at the gathering clouds through water-specked glasses, giving thanks for every drop and rumble. Even as they send chills up her spine and make her want nothing more than to cower in the dirt, she gives thanks for what she feels certain to be an answer to the prayers of a multitude of people. Hundreds, thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of people in the drought-stricken areas have been begging their chosen deities for relief, and finally, relief has come.

Amber hates the rain – fears the rain – but right now, she wants nothing more than to strip off her muddy clothes and dance in the downpour.

______________________________

New York City, early Spring 2016, the Lair, Donatello's Lab

A lifetime after she prayed for rain, a broken woman stares through the unfinished ceiling overhead. Spring rain pounds the pavement above, each drop echoing like a gunshot. Nothing can completely block out the sound, Amber's learned, and on stormy nights like this one, she cannot sleep from the fear wracking her heart. Another life, another world, another chance to find a love worth living for… but she still fears the lightest rainstorm.

What happened to the woman who prayed for rain? What happened to the strong woman who put the safety of her hometown before her own comfort? Who faced her fear for the sake of others? Amber has no answer, and that absence infuriates her. Thunder cracks overhead and her mind is made up. She died in Willsdale, died in the library of Willsdale High School, but even in the body of another she's still the same person she always was, and with the same faults she always had. If not for her own sake, then for the sake of her new family and her loved ones, by the breath in her very lungs she will find a way to conquer those faults! Defiant green eyes stare up at the ceiling, picturing a putrid green sky split with a maniacal grin.

Thy will be done, she reflects silently, entreating her own chosen deity for strength and guidance. Help me become stronger Lord, help me conquer my fears and faults, and until I can dance in the downpour, please…make it rain.

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*Hedgeapple trees – as noted previously, Hedgapple is another name for the Osage Orange tree.

*Black Locust trees – may have been noted previously. Black Locust trees are quickly spreading mid-height trees with thorny trunks and palmate branches with round leaves, and when they bloom, they develop long grape-like clusters of dainty blossoms that can range from white to pale pink. Locust trees spread can be spread by seed but primarily spread by roots – one tree can over time cover an area miles in each direction when new trees develop from the roots of the parent tree, then develop their own off-shoot trees from roots.

*Lyrics are from the song noted as suggested listening and are intentionally incomplete.
Chapter Summary

For many months, Mikey wanted to stuff Amber and Donnie in a closet; finally, with the Cistern room broken open, he has his chance. Now they're stuck in there, Amber's even more gutter-brained than usual, and Donnie's slowly being driven insane. This, Folks, is why you should NEVER turn your back on meddling younger brothers.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Here's the next installment of "Gallery of Memories," in honor of my awesome FFnet reviewers for pushing "A New Lease on Life" past +50 reviews! Thank you, thank you, thank you all! Extremely mild lime ahead, so rated M, and also rated M for character torture by UST. It's gonna be a long, fun ride! Takes place in the not-so-distant future before Amber and Donnie start seriously experimenting.

Dedicated to all y'all sweet reviewers, and to my new Beta SupernovaWolf for editing this, giving a great suggestion for the suggested listening, AND for releasing this rabid plot bunny on my computer! You're the best, Wolf!

Suggested Listening: Ariana Grande "Into You," Ellie Goulding "Love Me Like You Do"

Of Lovers with Brothers

Sometimes the toughest battles are completely devoid of bloodshed. It wasn't a new concept to Donatello; after all, battles of the mind were nothing new to him. Still, he never once considered that he'd someday find himself battling his baser instincts with everything he had.

It all started out so innocently. The bathroom renovations were completed, the Barracks wiring was all repaired, Amber and Daron's former bunks were torn out, and the framework for Raphael's new bedroom was put into place. With everything the family had accomplished, there was still much more to be done; one of those tasks involved the defunct cistern accessible through the Barracks.

From the moment she saw the small round room on the blueprints of the station they built their home from, Amber was fascinated and filled with ideas. Unlike Mercy, who saw a garden in a ruin, Amber saw the cistern – and the room built around it – as a hot tub or pool in the making. At first, Donnie wasn't sure how such a feat could be accomplished; then he managed to break open the old steel security door for a better look. A week after, the cistern was filled in halfway, the visible portions were scoured clean, and the worn brick walkway around it was covered with fresh particle board and ready for decking.

"Was pretty deep, huh?" Amber remarked, curiously leaning over the edge of the round brick-lined
pit in the floor. Before her clumsy nature could show its face, Don swept one arm out as a makeshift safety rail, inadvertently brushing her breasts; she didn't seem to notice but his cheeks darkened in a blush. "Probably about the same size as the average rooftop cistern back home – most likely meant to keep the station from flooding, right?"

"Yeah," he agreed, after clearing the impending squeak out of his voice. "It wouldn't have been much help if the tracks were to flood, but it held about 9.78 hundred gallons. I've filled it in to a little over four feet, but it'll still hold about 500 gallons – plenty of space for a hot tub, right?" She agreed with a shy smile and dark blush, her mind most likely already delving into more risqué uses for said hot tub; she was nothing if not predictable. That, of course, was a problem for Donnie…a problem that has continually led his brain to stubbornly manufacture increasingly suggestive scenarios to torture him with.

It wasn't a new situation, nor an uncommon one. For the most part, he and Amber had been a couple since that first explosive evening when they nearly christened the pantry, but months later, their interactions were still depressingly innocent. They share his bed, but other than the occasional clothed make-out session, they hadn't shared their bodies. It would have made more sense to him if she were the one responsible for the enforced celibacy, but instead, he was the guilty party – every time things between them got too hot and heavy, panic rose in the back of his throat. What he feared, unfortunately, still remained a mystery to him…and Amber was clearly getting impatient.

As focused as he was on pretending he couldn't smell her reaction to the dirty thoughts filling her head, he completely missed the sound of the door closing behind them. "Wha—Hey!" Amber shouted and rushed over to body-slam the heavy door, letting out a pained groan when she bounced right off. "Aw, fark me—Let us out!" On the other side, they heard scrapes and creaks—someone shoving some heavy piece of furniture in front of the door, probably a dresser from the barracks—and Michelangelo almost cackling. Donatello froze in disbelief. No…surely not…

"Mike, ya munter!" # Amber shrieked banging her clenched fists on the door. "This ain't funny—let us out!"

"Not 'til you two sort yourselves out!" Mikey retorted teasingly. "You're stinkin' the place up—just give in already!" Without another word, the youngest strolled away from the door, hands in his pockets, whistling innocently. In the bright beam from the work-light Amber's wide grey-green eyes met Donnie's in absolute befuddlement.

"Stinking the place up?" she asked. "What's he mean by that? I've showered!" The frustrated genius dragged his palm down his face with a loud groan. The situation could only get worse.

Earlier that morning, Donatello would have been completely confident he could survive being stuck in a closet with Amber without embarrassing himself. Now, trapped in the cistern room with her, that confidence was stripped away. If he was honest with himself – and he usually was – he'd admit surprise that Mikey hadn't pulled something like this before. After all, Mikey had played matchmaker between them from the very beginning and the ongoing renovation continually provided unending opportunities for the green-skinned cupid to meddle. Donnie glanced warily from the door to the brunette slumped along one brick wall, sweat dripping down his neck and arms from exertion; no amount of force would break that door open again, not without moving the dresser.

"We ever get out'a here," Amber grumbled fanning herself weakly, "I'm'a skin yer brother."

"Step in line, Hon." He forced himself to breathe through his mouth, stubbornly trying to convince himself he couldn't taste the pheromones thick in the air. As if it wasn't hard enough detecting them by scent… "When we get out'a here, he's getting his shell waxed." …but first, he admitted silently,
he and Amber needed to get out of the closet. Before that happened, he'd need to survive being stuck in that small poorly ventilated room with his frustrated girlfriend...most importantly, he'd need to accomplish all that without succumbing to his baser instincts, all of which have done nothing but point out all the wrong things. They were alone, they weren't going to be interrupted, no one had answered their calls for help so the room was probably partly soundproof...

'No! Don't think about it, don't even think about it, Donnie! This is not the time or place to...to...'

Against his will, his hazel eyes drifted back to Amber still sulking against the curved wall. It seemed years had passed since he finally comprehended the cause of that delightfully tempting non-scent she was putting off, but in reality, it was only a few months ago. Now he wished he could still claim ignorance – that he didn't know for a fact that the room was stifling with pheromones because she was sexually frustrated – if only because he wouldn't be quite so tempted to take advantage of their situation.

"Maybe I need'a change deodorant," she mused aloud, seemingly oblivious to the direction her boyfriend's thoughts took him. "Y'all've got better noses than us human-types—if y'all think I'm honkin', I'd better make some changes, huh?"

"What?" Donnie blurted out before he could catch himself, then shook his head. "No, it's not that—just—just ignore him, he's being ridiculous."

"But he said I'm stinkin' the place up!" she argued feebly. "If I ain't reekin 'a BO, what is it?" Instead of answering, he threw everything he had into hammering on the door.

"HELP!"

"Ya never answered me."

"I'm not going to, either." If Donatello ever wondered what it would be like to be trapped in a closet with a woman, he'd have painted it very differently. Amber was way past freaking out over being stuck in the small rounded room and well on her way into grouchy. He gave up on trying to budge the door open—the hallway was narrow and poky, so Mikey probably blocked the door by wedging the dresser in the hallway length-wise—and instead found himself silently contemplating just what cosmic being he must have ticked off.

He was trapped with his girlfriend in a room barely bigger than a walk-in closet, no one could hear them screaming for help, she was a familiar mix of irritable and aroused, the room was absolutely saturated with her pheromones...he was about ready to run up the white flag. "I guess it could be worse," Amber grumbled into her tattooed cleavage.

"How could this be worse?!" Donnie demanded shrilly. As though completely unaffected by the situation, she gave a shrug.

"Someone could need the bathroom."

Amber watched her boyfriend pace the length of the rebuilt walkway inside the blocked door – over and over he traveled that path, each time nervously edging away from the spot she was curled up in. It seemed hours had passed since they first realized their predicament, and while she was actually considering a nap, Donnie was growing more frantic with every lap past the door.

Something wasn't adding up...something didn't make sense. Her brows furrowed in thought, she stared down at the deep round pit in the floor, mentally laying out the facts like pieces of a puzzle.
Mikey trapped them in the room and complained that she—or was it they?—stank. Donnie was freaking out badly enough to win gold at the Drama-lympics.* No one was answering their pleas for help. The genius kept giving her frantic cringes in between pacing and hammering the door, his nostrils flaring with every breath. No matter how she put it, the puzzle pieces made no sense…the box had dolphins on it, but somehow she wound up with a rose, a bird, and a cactus.

"Ya know freakin' out ain't gonna help any, right?" she pointed out dryly as her despairing boyfriend clawed at the back of his neck and – for what had to be the fiftieth time – checked every single one of his pockets for the phone he managed to leave on the kitchen table. "We've got air, we've got light, we've got space – they'll figure it out eventually, right?"

"You're not helping, Amber!" he ground out. "We've gotta get out'a here, now!" Realizing he was only getting more wound up, Amber snagged a bit of loose brick from the edge of the pit and chucked it at him, the impact on his carapace resounding with a loud *thonk*. Annoyed hazel eyes accused her over his shoulder.

"Dee," she groused, "shuddup an' go sit in the corner."

"What corner?! This room is round!" he protested.

"…exactly."

Donatello sat before the door, staring at it in deep concentration. Before the renovations started, the door opened into a small corner of the Hashi-turned-barracks. Fast forward a couple months, the laundry setup was relocated to the second bathroom and the utility room was dubbed 'storage overflow.' Now that the cavernous room was used for living quarters instead of pounding lessons into their stick skulls, they needed better access to it. To facilitate said access, a section of the utility room's back wall was knocked out, and the odd corner became a poky hallway.

He hated to admit it, but Mikey clearly put more thought into this prank than usual. The unfinished hallway was barely wide enough for the cistern room's door to fully open. If it opened inward, he could have taken it right off the hinges…but if it opened inward, Mikey couldn't have blocked it shut from the outside. The faintest sliver of light from the utility room shone through underneath the door, but the gap wasn't wide enough for him to attack the dresser through it. The only tool in the room that would fit was a rust-stained handsaw; granted, he could saw the legs off the near end of the dresser, but that wouldn't help them any.

"Donnie." The sudden address tore him from his thoughts and he met Amber's eyes with a wince. "Is it too dark in here? Is that it?" It took him a moment to catch up, then he shook his head.

"No, that light's plenty. Why?" She had the nerve to pin him with a hard stare.

"Yer actin' like *me* when ya drag my arse out in the rain—like the shadows're about to bite ya." Before he could get out a protest of 'I'm a *ninja*, I *live* in the shadows!' she stood, padded over to him, and framed his face in her hands. "It's okay to be afraid, remember? I know you're not crazy about bein' in the dark…ya don't have to hide it." It took a moment for the unspoken part to register. With a wry smile, he gently pried her fingers loose from his cheeks and held them away, awkwardly lacing their fingers.

"I was afraid of the dark as a kid," he admitted, "but I'm an adult—I've conquered that fear. The darkness has nothing to do with…" He blushed, searching for words that could accurately explain his discomfort. "…that is…uh…" Her scent was driving him out of his mind, all the blood from his brain racing for the southern border. Despite his best intentions, his arms wound around her of their
own accord, pulling her soft curvy body into his chest. With his nose buried in her hair, the coconut fragrance was a welcome distraction from the womanly musk that had been driving him to distraction…until, as she reacted to the embrace, the musk strengthened twofold. "You're killing me, Braids."

"Killin' ya?" the brunette echoed back in confusion leaning back to meet his eyes. "I don't understand…This got anythin' to do with what yer brother said? –'bout me stinkin'?

"We both stink," he admitted weakly, "just like we stunk up the pantry." …the…pantry? Her brow furrowed in confusion, she mulled over his words searching for answers.

The PANTRY. It hit her like one of Raph's punches; she leaped backward, gaping at Donnie in mortification. "You can—You can smell me?!" she squawked squishing her legs tightly together and slapping both hands over her crotch with a dark blush. "—as in—"

"…yeah…every time you get gutter-brained." He yanked at the back of his neck with a cringe, avoiding her eyes. The kicker was, she was always gutter-brained. "If it was just smelling you, I could handle it, but you're giving off enough pheromones to choke a goat. That's what Mikey's complaining about…that's why he locked us in here."

"Lemme get this straight," Amber demanded in blatant horror. "Not only can you tell when I'm hot'n bothered, your whole family can tell." Finally meeting her eyes, he nodded weakly. Her pale cheeks flushed almost scarlet and she buried her face in her hands, sliding down the wall to the floor. "That's it—I'm dyin' in here. Please say nice things at my second funeral." That declaration spoken, she fell to grumbling under her breath into her tattooed cleavage; every now and then a word would reach him but his mind was in other places.

His relationship with Amber was almost at a standstill. Their explosive encounter in the pantry occurred in late June and October was just around the corner but as of yet, their interactions were still mostly innocent. Well…as innocent as any interaction between them could be. Neither had seen the other unclothed other than that one time he burst in on her during her shower, and they'd gone no further than the occasional tentative grope and grind. She was ready to go further, he could tell—the constant cloud of pheromones she emitted was proof of that—but he couldn't help worrying that first big step would lead them right off a cliff. Though he was mutated with human DNA like the rest of his family, he wasn't fully human…he wasn't like any of her previous partners.

Even so, she'd never judged him for being less than fully human; why would that change just because he took his clothes off? It wouldn't, he admitted to himself, but that didn't make his fear go away—fear of rejection—fear of being judged and found lacking—worst yet, fear of hurting her even if she wasn't put off by his non-human side. Normal turtles, after all, tended to be rather alarmingly large to compensate for their shells, and the average human female only had about six inches of space to work with. He was small for a turtle, but for a human…well, suffice it to say even if she didn't wind up injured, she wouldn't be able to walk straight for a while. In the meantime…Steeling his nerves, he cleared his throat and settled down next to her.

"Maybe…" He faltered, gave a noisy swallow, then tried again. "We could…you know…maybe we could…" Realizing what he was struggling to say—why was it so hard to express himself around her?!—she looked up in surprise.

"—take the edge off?" she finished curiously; he nodded weakly, a blush streaking across his cheeks. "If you want to…you're nervous about somethin', though…I ain't gonna push ya if yer not ready." All the while, her needy ovaries were screaming obscenities at her for being mature and compassionate instead of mounting and humping him into the floor. No matter how desperate she felt, though, his comfort and confidence meant more to her than anything else. Her internal
monologue fell silent at the rasp of a callused palm cupping her cheek; green met hazel, the former hopeful and the latter nervous.

"Braids." Amber blinked at the seriousness in his low voice. "Tell me…tell me you…" When it became clear he couldn't finish, she did so for him

"I love ya, Darlin', all of ya—you could be totally junkless an' I'd still love ya." She shrugged. "Would be awkward as hell, but—" A pair of chapped lips pressed to hers cut her off, pulling away then returning in a series of soft brushing pecks; with her heart at her lips, Amber eagerly returned each kiss. By the time he moved on to her neck, it hit her that she was no longer fully vertical.

Pheromones…sweet, pungent, mind-numbing pheromones filled the air. Refusing to relinquish her lips for more than a breath, Donatello eased his lover to the floor, one arm behind her lower back more to keep her close than for support. A breath later her legs drifted apart in invitation—an invitation he could only accept—and her calves tucked around his hips, hauling him into the cradle of her thighs. The particleboard walkway underneath them was almost cold, but he couldn't feel it—not over the heat Amber's body was putting off.

By the time her ankles locked behind his rear, Donnie was lost—lost in her, lost in her scent and warmth, lost in the instinctive buck and pull rhythm they fell into. The sudden sting of teeth sunk into his shoulder tore a whine from his throat and spurred him to steal her lips again. "Honey," he asked when they parted, his eyes insistent. "Do…do you trust me?"

"Always," she answered pulling him in for another kiss. He seemed to gather his courage, then with one more lingering brush of the lips, he pulled away, backing toward her feet. 'No way…no farkin' way! He ain't gonna—iz'ee?!'

Her hopeful and doubtful internal monologue fell silent as he made short work of her jean shorts, tugging them down and off one ankle after the other. A violent shudder ran through his body; without the denim obstruction, her scent was even stronger, and he couldn't resist pulling away the last obstruction. In the back of her mind, Amber thanked her lucky stars that she gave herself a trim the week before. Even with her normally overgrown nethers trimmed down to a crewcut for comfort, she still squirmed in embarrassment; it wasn't long enough to floss with but men tended to get squeamish about furry women.

"Braids," Donnie urged softly, his eyes meeting hers with a shy smile that silenced her worries. "Let me take care of you?" So many times she'd heard him say those exact words in her dreams; hearing them now, with his breath teasing her bare skin, made her throat clench with emotion. She nodded. He hesitated only long enough to discard his glasses and hoist her meaty thighs onto his shoulders, then set about exploring the flesh newly bared to him.

This, he decided as his lover let out a long keening whine and clawed at the tails of his mask, he could definitely get used to.

Raphael stood in the utility room doorway, silently contemplating the obstruction before him. Earlier he took the shortcut hallway through the utility room to the barracks, intent on checking on Mercy. Though his intentions were innocent from the start, she had other ideas and insisted he stay a while. After an hour of necking and heavy petting, she finally let him go on the condition that he bring back lunch.

Now, the hallway to the utility room was blocked…by a dresser. Raph stood regarding the article of furniture wedged lengthwise in the hallway, wondering how and why it was there. "Hullo?" he called out curiously but received no answer. Shrugging off the mystery, the burly ninja vaulted over the top of the dresser and set about shoving it back among the other spare pieces of furniture piled up in the barracks. Now that the dresser was out of the way, a trace of light shone from beneath the
That night, Briallen crept through the front door of the Lair. Though she saw no one, a dramatic
soundtrack emanated from the common area. "Go along now," a male actor urged his female co-star
as Bree strolled past the kitchen. "I won't be chasing you anymore. Fare thee well."

"I don't wanna run, anymore," the co-star admitted.** Suddenly, the top of a green head popped up
over the back of the lumpy sofa, two hazel eyes noticed Bree and widened, and the occupants of the
sofa scrambled to right themselves.

"Hey, Bree!" Donatello greeted sheepishly, the greying brunette sprawled across his lap echoing the
sentiment with extra twang. The two looked too stinking cute cuddled up on the sofa, Bree decided,
and she almost felt sorry for interrupting their snuggle-fest... almost. "How're your classes going?"
Bree gave a melodramatic groan and fairly threw herself on Mikey's bean bag chair.

"I'm supposed to graduate next Spring," she reminded them dryly, then added, "I won't make it that
long. Professor Robbins is still allergic to showers, and he stinks!" A scarlet flush streaked across
Amber's cheeks at the last word; she choked on the sip of tea she'd taken and so commenced beating
it out of her lungs. Donnie accomplished what she couldn't with a single calculated whack on the
back, then gave Bree a nervous grin as his girlfriend gasped for breath. "What's gotten into those
two?" she wondered.

"Well, that's lovely," he remarked dryly. "At least you're almost done, right?" Bree nodded. As fun
as Donnie and Amber two could be, she had to admit, she hadn't come to visit them—she came to
see her Mikey. "He's in his room." The unexpected explanation made her blink in surprise, then a
grin split her still-painted lips.

"Thanks! Enjoy your movie, you two!" Before either could point out that the movie was over, Bree
was on her way up the stairs. When she opened her boyfriend's bedroom door, however, she halted,
staring at his bed in disbelief. Michelangelo was bound to the bed—hogtied naked with his wrists
bound to the footboard, his ass in the air, and his legs tied down with a fitted sheet. A familiar pair of
Hawaiian print boxers wedged in his mouth functioned as a gag. "Do I even wanna know?" she
asked him dryly as he attempted to protest his innocence around his boxers. As Raphael lumbered
down the catwalk outside, he answered for his brother.

"Nope."

Chapter End Notes

* Drama-lympics - Another lovely little made-up word from my friend Autumn.
   Basically, if someone's trying out for or winning at the Drama-lympics, they're being
totally over-dramatic to the point of being ridiculous. "Trying out for the Drama-
lympics" is WAY worse than simply being "Dramatastic" and "winning" or "placing at
the Drama-lympics" is worse than both combined.
** Quote is from the 2009 film "Sherlock Holmes." TECHNICALLY this is "Old life" versus "New Life," but it was just too good to pass up, considering Donnie and Amber BOTH have a history of running from their problems. (Amber more than Donnie, of course.)

Translations
#Munter – "an ugly person." Another Scotch slang term Amber's twisted; Munter means ugly in appearance but oftentimes, in certain parts of the US, ugly is used to describe a person who is cruel, rude, or generally ill-behaved. (IOW, ugly on the inside instead of on the outside.) Amber isn't saying Mikey's unattractive, she's saying he's being a horrible person for locking her in a veritable closet with Donnie.
#Honkin' – Scotch slang, smelly and/or dirty.
#Iz'ee – Is he, a common pronunciation in the Midwest. (Remember, we like to drop syllables.)
* "Dream Lover" *

Chapter Summary

Thanks for +60 reviews on FFnet! :D

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Just dropping in long enough to post the new installment in honor of +60 reviews on ANLoL! This installment's a little different from the rest - it centers around Amber and Donnie's bizarre dream-world connection and the poem mentioned in 28: Love Amidst the Loss. Because there're so many instances needing translation, I have not marked them for once - they're all repeated at the end for translation. General notes have still been marked. This is a long one, folks, so I hope it satisfies! Also, warning for lemon and WAAAAAAAY more symbolism than usual. I have posted a brief rundown of symbolism used here on my forum for anyone curious, bored, or wanting a headache. ;)
Link: topic/194762/153520546/1/#165478853
So! Without further ado...THANK YOU SO MUCH, guys, for +60 reviews on A New Lease on Life! Y'all're the best readers, really! This installment of Gallery of Memories is dedicated to all y'all awesome readers! AO3 readers...is anyone still out there? You've gone really, really silent...

Dream Lover

Late May, 2016, Amber's corner of the Barracks

Not long after Amber found herself in her new world and new life, she took to scribbling down her thoughts in a faded notebook. That journal kept her sane and kept her secrets, and after she and Donatello blew up all over each other, it became her only way of sharing what she couldn't speak. After all, she admitted staring down at the ink-smudged page in resignation, she never could express herself without censoring her thoughts or borrowing the words of others. Borrowed words, though, were still better than none.

Back before Donatello gained access to that journal, she had no trouble finding things to fill the pages with. Now, knowing he would eventually read them, she continually found herself drawing a blank. She couldn't think of anything to scribble down—no lyrics, no verses, no quotes or random smartassery—nothing!

For once, she missed her old life; back then, she saw Donnie in her dreams every week, sometimes every night, and she could convince herself that he loved her. Now, he could barely stand her. He couldn't trust her (granted, she WAS keeping secrets from him, even if only to keep him from experiencing a complete existential crisis) and he made that perfectly clear. Once, he dried her tears and calmed her fears; now he'd become distant and cold, his eyes full of bitter contempt. At least they were somewhat getting along again—they were still feuding, but they hadn't fallen into any loud
shouting matches since the day Lefty found her.

Amber wanted nothing more than to share her secret, to tell Donnie how she knew him, but she couldn't find the words. Perhaps, she decided, the tip of her pen slowly dragging across the paper, she could hide that confession amidst the borrowed words—a story disguised as some bit of verse, maybe from her Gran'da's old favorite poets. If she hid the story between the stanzas, hid her love behind the lines, maybe, just maybe the weight on her heart would lift.

*I met my lover in a dream…*

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**Sometime in the eighties**

The first time Donatello saw the pudgy brown-haired girl child in his dreams, he was too young to really differentiate between reality and dreaming. He was also too afraid to let her see him and spent the entire dream hiding in the shadows of some strange thorny trees. One dream led to another, and that one to another, until it got to the point where he saw her in his dreams several times a week.

Every time, she capered around the strange, illogical dream world unaware of his presence, and every time, he watched from some hiding place, wondering what would happen if she were to ever see him. A few years down the road, when he was a child of six, his luck ran out and began all at the same time.

"**Ah knuw yer thar, Speccy.**" The sudden words—unexpected and twisted with a thick, unfamiliar accent—made Donnie freeze. He already regretted trying to climb the tree out of boredom...he was no good at climbing, yet, and even the lowest branch was just too high for his little heart to handle. "**Cummoan oot—I ain' goanna hurt ya, ya knuw.**" No, he didn't know, he argued in his head, scrunching his eyes shut and gripping the low tree branch like it was about to buck him off. His father warned him about humans—warned him and his brothers that humans wouldn't understand them, would fear them, and may even try to hurt them.

Eventually, the silence convinced him she was gone, and one hazel eye cracked open. Sometime between the onset of his panic over discovery and the subsequent feeling of being watched, the strange child had approached his tree. Right underneath his branch—and almost at eye level with him—she stood studying him, her grey-green eyes curious and confused but not cruel. When his eyes first met hers, though, his fear of discovery and harm seemed to fade. Without a word, he soaked in all the details he never saw from a distance—mid-length brown hair tied in frizzy pigtails, warm flashes of red and copper shining throughout that hair, an impressive collection of freckles across her face, arms, and other bare skin…

Neither child spoke, both occupied in scoping the other out. Finally, a crooked grin split her face and she held her hand up to him.

"**Hi," she greeted through her toothy grin,** "Ah'm Ahmber O'Brine. An' yew?" For a moment, he couldn't string together enough words to make a sentence and simply hung there silently, his eyes glancing back and forth between hers as though expecting her to suddenly attack him. Then he steeled his nerves, shoved his over-sized glasses back in place, and nervously offered a weak gap-toothed smile.

"**D...Donnie,**" he answered, his voice even squeakier than usual. "**Just Donnie.**" Amber giggled at him, something that halfway annoyed him and halfway worried him.

"**Yar cute,**" she teased with all the eloquence of any six-year-old girl and turned to sprint off toward
the sunny meadow beyond. "Cummoan, Dunnie!" she called out over her shoulder. "Las' one'a the crick's a ninny!"

"Oh yeah?!" Donnie hollered out indignantly and hopped down to give chase, his normally impressive brain too distracted by her teasing to come up with a good retort. "Well—well—well, you're a—a GIRL! You're already a—a whatever that is!" If anything, that only made the strange little brunette laugh harder. What started as simply a race to the crick fell into a long game of tag; even though she played dirty by climbing trees and putting obstacles between them, he found himself wishing he didn't have to wake up.

I met my lover in a dream -
In dreams, we were good fellows.
Heather bloomed and filled the air
As we roamed through the meadows.

Over the years, Donatello and Amber continued to meet in dreams, and every time, frolicked in the impossible landscape as only children can. The dream world changed almost every time they saw it—sometimes they met in a wild, hilly landscape with plants and flowers only Amber recognized, other times they met in places Donnie recognized from his favorite books and movies. Together, they conquered Never-Neverland, explored tropical jungles, skipped down roads paved with yellow brick, and lived out great adventures under the sea.

By the time they first met on more familiar ground—in an underground labyrinth much like the sewers his family lived in—they'd both grown and changed. Donnie was growing taller, as adolescent boys do, and Amber was growing shyer in a way that had nothing to do with the new height difference or the braces she now wore. As long as he could remember, her words were thickly twisted with that unfamiliar accent; now, she seemed intent on hiding that oddity under a façade of normality, but continually found herself lapsing back into her old tongue.

Over the next several months of dreamlike meetings, she admitted that her peers at school 'weren't very kind' to her. She stuck out 'like a sare thom,' and children were often quick to villainize anything and anyone they saw as different. Only one of her peers, so far, was able or willing to see past her so-called faults—the fact that she 'talked funny,' her braces, her disinterest in popularity, and her determination to treat others better than they treated her. Amber didn't talk much about "Mercy," but Donnie knew without asking that the two were thick as thieves in the waking world. Amber's eyes lit up with laughter every time she told him some funny story about her new friend.

Donatello had felt envy before—envy of the multitude of people who were able to live aboveground unmolested, simply because they were born human—but until Amber met Mercy, he'd never really felt petty jealousy. His odd companion had something he'd never have, a friend in real life, not just in the dream world, and that lacking hurt. By the time he turned thirteen, he had withdrawn from Amber and begun avoiding her when he woke in that strange world, and tried convincing himself that it was for the best.

Amber's eyes flew open suddenly, quickly searching the darkness of her bedroom for anything out of the ordinary. No ravens roosting over the doors, no mystical astral scene outside the windows, no unexplained glowing lights or dancing fireflies...this was no dream. Disappointment weighed heavy on her heart as she realized the cause of her waking—shouting and screaming coming from behind
a closed door down the hallway—and she wished like Hell she wasn't hearing it. Not again... seriously?! With a frustrated groan, she yanked the pillow out from under her head and buried her head under it, hoping the lack of oxygen would make her forget the words she already heard.

Almost a month had passed since the last time she saw Donatello in their strange dream world. She still found herself there at least weekly, but somehow, he always managed to avoid her, no matter how many stones she turned and bushes she flushed. Half of her was starting to wonder if she'd simply imagined him all those years—if he was just some figment of her imagination, his only purpose, keeping her from feeling as lonely as she was. Every time she found herself contemplating this, though, she viciously shut it down.

She first met Donatello in dreams as a six-year-old—in 1982—and just as she began wondering if he was anything but a dream, that unexpected cartoon came out...featuring a mutant turtle named Donatello. Sure, he was little like the Donnie she knew in dreams, but there was still some resemblance! Her Donnie was tall, strong, and surprisingly playful; he wasn't scrawny, but he was lean, and at least in her opinion, he really rocked those oversized glasses...and that adorable little gap between his front teeth...and the awkwardly oversized trousers and boots he often wore...and that goofy, dorky smile he got whenever she managed to catch him by surprise... Crap. Amber shook away those thoughts. It wasn't exactly surprising, she WAS a TEENAGER, but she couldn't help wondering if that sort of thing was why Donnie hadn't come back.

Down the hallway, her mother and father's screaming voices grew louder and louder; finally, a door slammed into the wall opposite Amber's room and the occupant stormed toward the couple's room. "HAW, ye BAWBAGS!" Glen Devon bellowed at Amber's mother and father. "Shut yer fookin' gobs—yer lass's got school'in' th'morn, an' yer kippin'er up! Jus' screw an' get o'er it!" Without another word, the furious Scot-expat stormed out of his daughter's bedroom—amidst Ginny shrieking at him for being a dirty old coot.

When the screaming finally stopped—followed by a far-too-awkward silence that made Amber's dinner threaten reappearance—Amber heard a soft knock at her door. "'s yer Gran'da, Jeanie-burd," Glen rumbled as the door creaked open. "Ye well?" Amber couldn't meet his eyes and instead found herself staring through his grey-spattered beard.

"Ah well be," she admitted in a mumble. Even if the rest of the world didn't understand her—even if Donatello didn't accept her—she still had her Gran'da, and he accepted her, all of her, even the sides others didn't approve of. Of course, her Gran'da didn't know she was crushing on a mutant turtle she met in dreams; if he ever found out, he was likely to call the funny farm on her.

"I met my lover there alone
But brought him when I woke.
He followed me through waking dreams
As tangible as smoke.

"I miss ya, Donnie," Amber confessed to the empty landscape around her. She vaguely recognized the setting—the sweeping forests, sprawling bluffs, and hills, knobs, and hollers reminded her of the time her family went to Branson on vacation.## Like most other family vacations, it wound up a disaster, but her Gran'da was there to make it all right.

That vacation was years ago back when theme parks were 'the best thing since her Da's pies.' Now
she was seventeen and still dreaming of a young man who couldn't logically exist outside of dreams...someone she knew existed anyway, somehow, somewhere, and who had barely spoken to her for a year before going completely missing. Three years after she last caught sight of him in that world, and Amber still hadn't seen or heard from him...she was worried sick.

"I wish ya hadn't left," she continued softly, hoping against hope her words would reach her friend. "...wish I knew why...if ya were ever comin' back..." Sprawling out on the grassy top of a half-bald knob, Amber stared listlessly through the patchwork of fall colors sprawling out below her. "Wherever y'are, I wish you were here to see this with me...but that's not gonna happen, huh?" she added with a self-deprecating, bitter laugh. "Guess I jus' hope yer happy...an' whatever I did, I'm sorry for it."

"It's not your fault." The voice, quieter and deeper than she remembered it being, startled her, and she whipped about to face the speaker, nearly rolling down the steep slope in the process. A large, strong hand latched onto her wrist just in time and hauled her back up. She couldn't believe what she was seeing—it was Donnie, her Donnie! ...but even so, there were some major differences.

In their time apart, her braces came off but she wound up having to get glasses. It seemed all the other girls in her classes had become tall and skinny and grown melons on their chests, but she only grew a few inches taller and probably ten pounds heavier for every inch—an unfortunate occurrence that emphasized her still-developing curves in a not-so-flattering manner. As if that wasn't bad enough, she had gotten lazy about dealing with her back-length hair and constantly kept it in two long, frizzy braids.

Donatello didn't seem to have been plagued with such an awkward transition. He'd shot up to almost six feet in a matter of four years, and he'd amassed a rather impressive amount of lean muscle. She felt silly, but wondered if this was due to some super-secret ninjitsu training, like in the show and movies she'd found. A brief glimpse of his teeth revealed that his iconic gap was shrinking a little more every year, a realization that saddened her.* Of course, she'd suffered through braces to correct her crooked teeth and improve her massive overbite, so she couldn't blame him if he'd done something to correct his own dental misalignments, cute though they were.

Gone was the gawky gangly turtle boy she played tag with; in his absence was a heartthrob just a few years shy of being a man. Her heart pounding from something clearly not fear, she shyly met the bright hazel eyes that finally fit his glasses...eyes peering out of a deep purple bandana mask.

Ninja. She blinked, unable to stop herself from staring. Her Donnie was a ninja now...a very FINE ninja! Right as her teenage hormones seemed ready to boil over, the purple-clad stranger cringed. He tugged at his neck, and avoided her eyes, a slightly muddy blush streaking across his cheeks. "Uh..." His voice creaked unexpectedly and he paused to clear it before continuing. "It's...been a while, huh? Dad's had us doing...stuff. Training stuff. I'm usually too tired to dream, anymore, but he gave us the weekend off." He didn't acknowledge the unspoken—that he'd been avoiding her before. He got over his jealousy of Mercy and his bitter resignation in less than a year, but by that time, he was too tired from training.

"Yer Da's trainin' ya?" she echoed in interest unable to stop her eyes from roaming. "Looks like it's goin' pretty well, huh?" As though they had only been kept apart for four days rather than four years, the two friends settled in to talk, complaining about their families and teasing each other playfully over how much they'd changed. Every now and then, she would catch a sideways glimpse of Donnie's eyes curiously roaming her body, but every time, he'd turn away with a blush before she could be certain she even saw it.

"It's..." He squeaked again, flinching at the creaky noise, then tried again; puberty officially sucked.
"It's been a while since I've seen the sun...I've missed it."

"Really?" she feigned confusion, but suspected she knew why; his answer would prove or disprove that suspicion, she was sure. "Why haven't ya seen the sun? Ya been sleepin' all day or somethin'?" He gave her a humoring smile and reached over his shoulder for something, only to realize in disbelief it wasn't there. Of course, he realized with an annoyed snort, he didn't sleep with his bo staff, so why would it have followed him into his dreams?

"Dad's training us, Amber," he revealed with no small amount of pride. "We've been studying ninjitsu—Dad's training us to be ninjas!" The pride fell away then, and he found himself staring longingly out over the horizon, to the slowly setting sun. "We're ninjas, Amber...and ninjas live in the shadows. We can't go above-ground anyway, so it's really nothing new."

A soft hand hesitantly caught him by the cheek, turning him back to face her; he swallowed hard, sure she could have heard it a mile away. There was no denying it...she wasn't the same Amber he met years ago...he was growing up, and so was she. "Even if ya gotta live in the shadows," she professed brushing her thumb across his cheekbone with a small smile, "Ya got nothin' to be ashamed of, Dee...ya never gotta hide yer eyes from me."

"Why hide your e'en," I asked him once,
"Why hide ye in the night?"
"Because I must," he answered me,
"The shadows are my right."

Many years went by like the many before. Amber and Donnie shared strange, wonderful dreams, but as they matured, so did their dreams. It started out so simply—so innocently—a comforting squeeze of the hand, a bashful peck on the cheek, an occasional unintentional ogling that reminded them how much the other had changed.

By the time Donnie's nineteenth 'birthday' rolled around, Amber was no longer even mistakable for a teenager like him. It became all-too clear that his dear friend had a few years he didn't, even though he could have sworn they were the same age up to his fifteenth year. Amber was a woman, now—a full-time college student with a roommate, rent bill, a part-time job, and everything—and Donnie wasn't sure when it happened. It seemed one moment she was about to graduate high school—BARELY—then a few months later, she was in her third year of college and playing catchup after changing her major twice. How, he wondered, could she be progressing through life so much more quickly than he was?

"Took ye lung enoof," Amber teased as he sat upright, arms dangling between his bent knees and a sideways smile splitting his lips. On the other side of the faded crazy quilt in the grass, his friend, companion, and crush lay sprawled innocently on her belly.** A crown woven of white and red clover perched atop her hair, somehow making the red highlights in it seem more faint than usual. Shifting to lean on her hip and one elbow, she gestured theatrically to herself, unintentionally drawing his eyes to the moderately sized breasts behind her loose tank top.

"Yer lookin' at a rich gal, Dee," she explained proudly, dropping the guise to explain her sudden bout of Scotch-ness. "I drank three more futerin' fratties un'er the table this week—made a hundred bucks a pop!" She let out a bark of laughter. "The Crazy Celt's undefeated yet!" The nickname made his smile fade.
"You're still holding that challenge?" he asked with obvious concern. A month before, she told him about the standing bet she and Mercy advertised in the student common areas. From that time forth, party-loving peers would seek her out, bet that they could 'out-drink' her, and they'd make a wager to be paid; every time, Amber managed to hold her liquor even when the challenger passed out in a puddle of vomit. "Amber, you're underage," Donnie pointed out seriously. "You shouldn't be drinking, much less out-drinking jocks for money!" She blinked in confusion. Her lips parted, seeming to form the word 'underage,' then she burst out laughing, confusing him.

"Dunnie, you silly speccy," she teased playfully shoving him, the gesture briefly sending him down onto his carapace before he popped back up again. "I ain't underage—I'm twen'y-three, ya dafty! Ain't you, too?" His face fell, answering for him. Amber visibly regretted the assumption, and seemed as confused as he was. The silence hung awkwardly for a moment, only broken by the buzzing of some nearby insect and the call of a meadowlark in the distance. "I'm sorry, Dee."

"I don't care." The words were out before he could arrange them in a more polite fashion, and sure enough, she winced, hurt. "I don't care that you're older than me, Amber...you..." He turned away with a dark blush. "You weren't always older...and age doesn't have to define you, right? You're still the same girl I—" He froze, his voice dying off in a small, sad squeak at what he nearly revealed. "I—I mean—ah, Shell!"

Amber watched silently as he fell further and further into his 'oops' habit—increasingly self-deprecating babble that only succeeded in making him feel worse—then decided she'd had enough. Somewhere between the words 'idiot' and 'imbecile,' she sat up, crept toward him, and pressed her fingertips to his lips to silence him. Eyes wide and nostrils flaring, he seemed to be counting down the moments 'til she turned on him; she never would, though, and deep down, he knew it. Her eyes darted down to his covered lips, her own slightly parted, then back up to his eyes, and she found herself repeating the process twice more.

"Age doesn't have to define?" she murmured curling up against his side, her eyes finally meeting his—hopeful, fond, and heavy-lidded with want. "I'm not the same girl you played tag with, Dunnie." She didn't notice the slip of his name, finding herself fascinated by the ripples of green the sunlight sent through his wide hazel eyes. "I'm more, now—much more, just like you—and I wouldn't change a thing." Finally, she released his lips, only to frame his face in her hands and press her lips to his in a single, slow brush.

When two hearts are bound and determined to be one, there's little that can stop them...and neither wanted to stop. Though their interactions 'til then were barely PG-rated, something about sharing that dream world emboldened both of them. Lips mingled, hands wandered, clothing fell away and flew in every direction. By the time they realized what was happening, they were sprawled naked across the faded quilt, joined at the lips and the hips and in no hurry to separate.

His name whimpered in his ear was joined by hers whispered into her neck. Nails raked down the flesh of his shoulders in ardent, wordless praises. His lips, tongue, and teeth explored every inch of her he could reach as the sensations swept him under. Hot—wet—tight—more, need more, don't let me go—Donnie's normally impressive brain short-circuited and his body went into autopilot, quickly picking up the rhythm from his friend—no, he corrected himself as she whimpered his name, tears brimming her eyes, she was more than his friend. Friend, companion, lover, no words could adequately describe the feelings he had for the dream woman writhing in his arms.

The world fell down around the couple learning each other's bodies. Clouds overhead burst into constellations, stars falling from the heavens by the millions. The sun and moon met and eclipsed overhead, the world around them falling to darkness. Dew fell, wildflowers sprang up, bloomed, and went to seed, clouds of fireflies filled the air and danced on increasingly powerful breezes. Through
it all, neither saw a thing—nothing beyond each other or their crazy quilt in the grass. As though their lives depended on it, they fought their way toward the pinnacle, both determined to send the other over first.

Thunder cracked overhead; lightning splintered the sky. Finally, Amber realized what was happening, and fear filled her eyes. Donnie shushed her gently, rearing up onto his knees and cradling her to his chest as though to protect her from the storm. He knew about her fear, but she didn't have to face it alone. "It's just a dream, Braids," he reminded softly as their frantic race calmed to a slow, sensual dance. "I've got you...I'm right here." Tears trailed down her cheeks as their lips met and mingled—tears of joy, of fear, of pain, of love?—and he quickly realized they weren't only hers.

Mere moments later, his Amber tensed in his embrace, her entire body clenching around his own in every place they met. A ragged, rapturous sob ripped from her lungs—his name, the name he first gave her so many years before—and the skies broke open overhead. Donnie lowered her back to the quilt again, shielding her from the cool raindrops with his own body and striving to join her in bliss. One word changed the tides—a breathy, foreign endearment he could only translate as 'kully'a', quickly followed by many more secret words. The whispered promises and pledges pushed him over the edge, her name at his lips and his heart in her hands.

As their bodies cooled and their hearts calmed, the rain faded into drizzle, then the drizzle into mist, then finally the last droplets settled upon the grassy meadow. The sun broke through the clouds in a radiant shower of light. Rain, tears, and sweat gleamed on their skin like dew on grass. Lips met and mingled in soft, brushing kisses and nips, fingertips trailed down damp skin, palms cupping curves and angles. All around them, their world changed yet again. Flowers familiar and foreign sprang up from the grass—clover, heather, daffodils, violets, and forget-me-nots broke through the grass—yellow currant bushes and lilacs sprang into bloom, filling the air with their heady fragrance.

As the breeze brought lovely, inexplicable music to their ears, the two lovers realized the truth. This world was a dream world—only dreams occurred there, and everything that occurred there was only a dream—but dreams would never be enough. They would do anything to find each other in the world beyond their dreams...even if it cost them their lives.

I met my lover in a dream.

Hope that was worth the time! One last thing before we hit the notes: I've set up a poll for this story. Please take a moment out of your day to vote for your favorite original characters, popular vote might lead to more screen time for chosen characters!

General notes

#Jus' screw an' get o'er it! – Lemme put it this way: some women fight because they're annoyed, others fight because they're horny. Like Amber will be, Ginny is of the latter sort, and her dad figured it out YEARS ago. Also, note that Amber gets her 'let's make everything awkward' habit from Glen. ;)

##Knobs and Hollers – terms specific to the Ozarks, which Branson, Missouri, is a part of.
"Knobs" are defined as narrow, high hills crowned with exposed rock and dirt. Knobs come in two forms, the regular, which has trees and other such flora, and "Bald Knobs" which have no trees and boast mostly grass on top. In this case, the knob Amber's sitting on is still technically a full knob—since it has some trees—even though it's only got a few and is otherwise bald. Also, some folks abroad will recognize the term Bald Knob as the base for the term "Baldknobbers," which is a whole 'nother story. Trust me, Google will explain better than I could. A "Holler" is defined as a narrow valley or sizable decrease in altitude, often formed by adjoining hills and Knobs.

*Donnie's teeth – In the beginning of TMNT 2014, when Splinter catches the boys sneaking in, Donnie makes the excuse that he 'forgot to soak his retainer.' Add this to the Nickelodeon version of him having a pronounced gap between his front teeth, we can assume that the recent live-action version of him has been wearing a retainer to correct that. 'Correct' being a relative term as it's friggin' adorable.

**Crazy quilt – a colloquial nickname for patchwork quilts formed from 'scrap fabric' rather than sewn-together 'block' patterns. Crazy quilts are usually very random and feature no distinct color or pattern theme, and when made from randomly shaped scraps, they're actually pretty difficult to put together neatly. It's like trying to make a seamless panel of glass from a bunch of oddly shaped fragments—you just can't do it without trimming the edges and filling in the gaps.

Translations

*Bold/Italic, Italic: Scotch slang/context/pronunciations*

Ah knuw yer thar, Speccy – I know you're there, Speccy. (Speccy – Someone who wears glasses, or, "geks"

Cummoan oot – Come on out

Ah'm Ahmber O'Brine. An' yew? – I'm Amber O'Brien. And you?

Las' one'a the crick's a ninny! – Last one to the crick's a ninny! (Crick – Midwestern slang, usually refers to a body of moving water smaller than a river but larger than a creek.)

Like a sare thom – Like a sore thumb.

HAW, ye BAWBAGS! – HEY, you BAWBAGS! (Scotch slang insult, basically he's calling them a pair of nut-sacks. Compare to slang "Dickhead.")

Shut yer fookin' gobs!– Shut your fucking mouths! (quit fighting)

Yer lass's got school'in 'th morn, an yer kippin'er up! – Your daughter has school tomorrow and you're keeping her awake with your shouting! ('The morn' being Scotch slang for 'tomorrow' and 'schooling' being a rather obsolete term for attending school.)

Ah well be – I will be (okay).

E'en – Scotch, "eyes"

Took ye lung enoof – Took ya long enough!

Futerin' Fratties – Comprised of Scotch slang 'futer' meaning to twiddle or mess about with something and 'Fratties,' a play on the term 'frat boy.' Basically, she's saying the guys she outdrank were a trio of fraternity man-whores who didn't know what they were messing with.

Dafty – a silly or foolish person

Kully'a - The term "Mo Gaol," roughly pronounced "mo KULLY’a," is a Scots-Gaelic term of endearment meaning 'love,' specifically deep, intimate love.

A quick character run-down for rarely seen names in this chapter:

Ginny O'Brien (MN Devon): Amber's mother, daughter of Glen and Arabel Devon. Ginny has serious anger and control issues, is mildly codependent, and has made many bad choices out of desire to be accepted.

Douglas O'Brien: Amber's father, son of Flynn and Rosabel O'Brien. He has a bad attitude and
even worse temper, and drinks too much, but he genuinely loves his family. He taught Amber most of what she knows about just about everything.

**Glen Devon:** Amber's Gran'da, her mother's father. His wife, Arabel Devon, is deceased and Glen has taken to living with Amber's family for company and to keep her parents in line. He often calls Amber by the nickname "Jeanie-Burd" which is a play on her middle name—Jean—with the addition of "burd" which is a Scotch slang term for girls in general.
* "Sweet Sensation" *

Chapter Summary

+60 reviews, +7000 hits on FFnet

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Long time no see, huh? Things have been pretty rough in Real Life lately and I've been fighting some pretty bad writers' block because of it. I've owed y'all two installments here for a while now, but it appears I'm gonna have to combine'em...again...sorry, guys. Honestly, it's a miracle I managed to get this installment eked out for ya. Hope it's worth it regardless.

Without further ado... ::Deep inhale:: THANK YOU WONDERFUL READERS FOR PUSHING A NEW LEASE ON LIFE PAST 60 REVIEWS AND +7000 HITS ON FFNET! You're truly wonderful, amazing, awesome people, and I'm grateful to ya for your continued awesomeness! This installment dedicated to my hubby Cold - the love of my life, the apple of my eye, and the pain in my arse.

Precautionary statements: Freeform, non-explicit sexual content, language, and mentions of pregnancy and contraception. This takes place in the far distant future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: John Legend, "Stay with You," Cascada "Everytime We Touch," Kodaline "The One"

Sweet Sensation

Many years before her death, Amber heard it in a song: Love is a many splendored thing. Now, in her new life, she's found the truth...love has many faces, many names, and many facets. Every day, she finds a new side of Donatello to fall for; every day, she wonders yet again how she managed to ever convince herself she could ever be only his friend. Love, she's found, boggles the mind and overwhelms the senses...and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Leaning on one elbow, Amber watches her mate's sleeping face. Soft breaths flare his nostrils, accompanied by the occasional light snore. Closed eyes dart back and forth, surely chasing dreams. Every now and then his lips quirk upward in a brief smile and he nuzzles into her shoulder. Only one thing keeps her from simply crawling into his arms and snoozing along with him...

It's Saturday. Since their friendship first began, she's surprised him with coffee and breakfast on his nightstand every Saturday morning, to remind him how much he means to her. With a long last look, she carefully extricates herself from his sleeping embrace and rolls out of their bed, padding out to the kitchen in her long nightgown. Not long after, she creeps back through the door armed with two mugs of coffee and a large plate of scones.
"Coffee." The sudden raspy remark—and the bleary hazel eyes peering back at her—startle a squeak from her lungs and it's all she can do to hang onto the tray in her hands. Though he was sleeping when she left him, her brilliant lover is half-sitting/half slumping and blinking at her.

"Right here," she laughs passing him his cup and setting the tray on the nightstand. The bittersweet flavor of the strong brew explodes across his taste buds as he downs the entire mug without once coming up for air. As the caffeine begins coursing through his bloodstream, sending his nerves tingling and his pupils dilating, he sets aside the mug.

"C'mere, you," he teases pulling Amber down to the bed with him. Amidst teasing and sighs, he hoists her nightgown above her hips and slides off her underwear, pulling her over his lap. A crimson flush flares to life in her cheeks when he lays back and urges her up to his shoulders, but before she can so much as utter a word of protest, she finds herself unable to do much more than whimper and enjoy the ride.

Before he met Amber, Donatello wondered often how anyone could actually enjoy giving cunnilingus; that question was blown to bits the first time he actually tried it. Now, he can't get enough of it—he's addicted to the bittersweet taste of her, the way her pheromones fill his lungs, and the way her thighs clench around his neck and her nails dig into his scalp.

Though his morning starts with his face buried between her thighs, it's only the first intimacy they share. By the time they finally separate, both well satisfied from their impromptu lovemaking, Amber's coffee has grown cold. Undeterred, Donatello reaches out for her coffee mug. "I'll get you a refill," he promises bringing it to his lips.

"Don't—!" Amber's warning goes unheard and she winces; the moment the coffee hits his tongue, Donnie chokes. Forcing himself to swallow, he stares in horror at the mug's sweetened contents, holding it a safe distance from his mouth. "It's spiked," she admits with a sheepish smile. "…with Scotch." His face nearly turning inside out, he meets Amber's eyes in dismay. She bursts out laughing at the sight and flops backward onto the bed again. Intent on wiping away the strong, smoky flavor of the Scotch-tainted coffee, Donnie sets her mug aside with a wary cringe and settles around his shoulders again. Her laughter fades into shuddering whimpers and her thick thighs wrap around his shoulders again.

Donatello can't get enough of his mate, can't get the taste of her out of his mind, but he could go a lifetime without suffering her favorite poison.

The first time Donatello heard Amber speak, he felt she'd have a lovely singing voice; that early supposition was quickly discovered to be completely unfounded. Amber couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. At first, he was borderline horrified by how completely awful her singing was and did everything he could to avoid subjecting himself to it. That is no longer the case.

"Get Thai'd, you're talking to a tourist whose every move's among the purest: 'I get my kicks above the waistline, sunshine!'" There's something freeing about belting out music as horribly as one can, and he's become rather fond of their impromptu song-murdering. Crammed into her usual shower stall like sardines in a can, the couple serenade the presumably empty bathroom with completely god-awful acapella singing, one with a goofy grin and the other with a washcloth covering his cartilage-shielded ears. Some days that washcloth is the only thing standing between him and total hearing loss.

"One night in Bangkok makes the hard man humble - Not much between despair and ecstasy! One night in Bangkok and the tough guys tumble - Can't be too careful with your company - I can feel the devil walking next to me!" By the time they've effectively slaughtered the entire song, they couldn't
keep a straight face to save their lives; they break down laughing at themselves and each other. "Yer brothers probably think we're torturing a cat," Amber wheezes as she rinses the coconut-scented suds out of her hair.

"Nah," Donnie teases openly watching the bubbles trail down her slick skin. "Mikey's singing on the other hand…"

"Will you two shut up a'ready?!" Raphael's sudden outburst—coming from the furthest stall—makes the couple flinch. Amber's cheeks flare scarlet at being caught showering with her mate. "It's too damn early fer dis!" Donnie opens his mouth to fire back a retort, but another voice cuts him off.

"If yer awake enough ta bitch," Mercy reminds Raph in a tone dripping with sarcasm, "yer awake enough to scrub my back. Shut up an' do yer job!" Hazel meets grey-green, both pairs of eyes torn between horror and embarrassment. Somehow they never heard Raph or Mercy enter the bathroom…or guessed that they weren't the only couple prone to sharing the shower in the morning. Some things, they decide with a mutual nod, are better left unheard.

Aboveground, Spring is in the air, and that means many things. For one, Donatello and his brothers are becoming restless…and in the case of her Donnie, Amber's found that 'restless' tends to transition to 'horny' at the drop of a hat. For another, the brunette will soon be forced to leave behind her worn, comfy jeans and capris for shorts…which for whatever reason, don't want to fit this time around.

Alone in the room she shares with Donnie, Amber stands silently before the tall cracked mirror, contemplating her reflection with annoyance. Last year, the denim cutoffs were a little too loose; this year, she can't get the fly to close. She doesn't recall any sudden drastic episodes of weight gain since last Summer but the results are plain to see. Dejected, she stares down the partially inflated spare tire around her waist.

"Hey." Donnie's greeting from the doorway startles her, and she drops the hem of her shirt back over her still-gaping fly.

"Hey, yerself," she fires back as the door shuts behind him. They share a teasing smile at the familiar exchange, Amber shucking off her pants to put on something that fits. A hand on her shoulder stills her and her blood runs cold. Feeling inexplicably nervous, she turns to meet his eyes and finds those eyes slowly sweeping from her bare feet upward.

"You look lovely," her lover professes softly, honestly. He says nothing of the extra inches she's gained or the pair of too-tight shorts puddled at her feet. His Amber is beautiful to him—she always has been—and nothing could ever change that. Even so, he's a little concerned by the sudden weight gain, all focused around her midsection. As he pulls her into his arms and nuzzles her hair, he silently thinks back over the last month or so, trying to recall where she is in her monthly cycles.

For a time, Amber endured regular contraceptive injections; eventually, though, the side effects became overwhelming. Even after discontinuing the shots, her normally thick hair is still thinner than it was before, she still has frequent dizzy spells, and her cycles haven't been the least bit regular. They've been meaning to research other methods, but in the meantime, have been playing with fire by simply pulling out; no one makes 'mutant-sized' condoms, and even the largest size can only stretch so much without risking breakage. Now, faced with the sight of his mate visibly a few pounds heavier than the previous month, Donnie wonders if their carelessness is about to bite them in their collective asses.

On the other side of the door, a certain impatient blonde hollers for Amber to 'move her ass already.' "Dammit," Amber grumbles into Don's shoulder. "She's gonna drive me nuts…haven't even gotten
"Store?" he asks as she leaves his arms to dig a pair of slightly too-tight capris out of the closet.

"Yeah," she sighs hitching her pants up. "Some big sale goin' on out at the mall, she wants to meet up with Bree for—blech—clothes shopping." Her sullen attitude tugs at the corners of his lips. "'f I don't go with'em, Mercy'll go overboard…that crazy blonde loves shopping." With all necessary articles of clothing in place, she brings him down to her level with a tug of his suspenders. Their lips meet in a slow brushing kiss, and he threads his fingers through her already messy hair. "Gonna miss ya, Speccy," she breathes against his lips. "To be continued?"

"Better be," he teases back, rubbing noses with her. "I'm collecting interest." With a chuckle, she reluctantly leaves his arms and turns to leave. Outside, Mercy has been tapping her foot and sulking, and rolls her eyes at them. Already bickering teasingly, the two women make their way to the side door intent on leaving via the garage. From the open doorway of his bedroom, the genius watches silently, his eyes fastened to the smooth sway of his woman's hips.

His Amber is lovely, always lovely to him, and even with a few more pounds than usual, she's just as lovely as ever. His thoughts stray to possibilities, picturing a long-held and always-ignored dream—tired shadows under her eyes, her cheeks glowing with happiness, her breasts heavy with milk, her hips and belly swollen from an unexpected miracle… He feels sure she'd make a wonderful mother, whether they can safely conceive or not, and as he grows older, he finds himself wanting to settle down.

Shaking off these sappy thoughts, he reminds himself of the obvious: don't count the eggs before they're fertilized. In the meantime, he admires his mate's voluptuous figure and watches the back and forth swinging of her soft, round hips.

Hours later, Bree is lost in the intimates section and Mercy's ducked into the fitting room with yet another armload of clothing to try on. Growing increasingly bored, Amber loiters in the jewelry section with their already full cart. As much as she enjoys the company of her two friends, she really, really hates shopping for clothes. Books, tea, heck, even office supplies get her more excited than suffering through clothes shopping. After finding a couple pairs of capris and shorts and a cute grey tunic top that somehow fits well, she is more than ready to head home to her turtle. Go figure…Mercy spends so much time bitching about mush and refuses to put much effort into her appearance, but she loves shopping as much as any girly-girl…maybe because she has no problem getting clothes to fit.

'Jeez, O'Brien,' Amber grumbles mentally as she fingers a pair of purple anodized hoop earrings, 'quit'cher bitchin' an' be thankful fer whatcha got. Sure ya got a big ass, but Donnie likes that ass!' Of course, that inner admonishment is followed by a dark blush when her perverted brain inevitably goes there. Their relationship is still a little new to be venturing off the beaten path…unfortunately. Growing increasingly bogged down with her even more increasingly dirty—and vivid—thoughts, she wanders distractedly over to a glass display case full of blinding rings.

When she was a younger woman—and a single one at that—she fantasized about the same things other single women did. Her future husband, their wedding…their whining children…the flowers and fancy-ass jewelry her hubby would throw at her to assuage his conscience when he screwed around or got thrown in the drunk tank…okay, maybe it wasn't so much 'fantasizing' as 'dreading.' At least she was honest with herself.

In her previous life, she never imagined she'd one day be committed to a mutant turtle—a life-mate, if not a wife—and spinning his ring around her finger while mentally criticizing all the over-the-top...
finger-weights being marketed as 'engagement rings.' The ring he gave her isn't some blue diamond-encrusted rose gold monstrosity—it was a gift from the heart, a perfect balance of practical, sentimental, elegant, and symbolic. Donatello hand-etched the simple titanium band with intricate knots and set it with a round cabochon of deep green glass etched in a turtle shell-like pattern. It was a chip of tile from the City Hall station where she was discovered, a reminder of the day her new life began.*** Her mind wandering to her sweet, precious Donnie and the nervous smile he wore when he presented it to her, she turns the ring around and around, staring through the display case.

"Hi!" an all-too chipper voice interrupts Amber's daydreaming. She startles, turning to greet the speaker, her left hand deep in her purse clenched around her can of mace; old habits die hard, especially old habits born from being stalked by crazy Purple Dragon punks. The source, a perky blonde co-ed leaning over the counter of the perfume and cosmetics hub, puts Amber's mind somewhat at ease. The much younger woman's big blue eyes are eager behind her oversized glasses and the tops of her likely padded breasts are nearly spilling out over the neckline of her pink baby-doll tee. "Have you ever considered trying a new fragrance? Maybe a little something to attract a man to your life?" It takes everything Amber's got to keep her impending 'why me?' face from surfacing, but she manages. She's a lone woman loitering by the wedding ring display; naturally, everyone's going to assume she's a bitter single person.

"Thanks for your concern, Hon," Amber remarks carefully, raising her hand from her purse to show off her clearly occupied ring finger, "but I really don't need another one. I'm just bored stiff waiting for my friends."

"Well, let's get you unbored!" the clerk chirps excitedly—clearly too horrified by Amber's bare face and lack of perfume to accept the 'no.' What follows can be best described as a long, frustrating exercise in patience. No, she doesn't wear makeup and doesn't want to wear makeup—it irritates her skin. No, she isn't interested in any so-called 'hypoallergenic' makeup, it's not worth the hassle. Yes, she's sure. Yes, she's happy not wearing perfume, the stuff stinks and her 'husband' has 'chemical sensitivities.' The last one she has to do some serious BS-ing on. Donnie's not shown any signs of chemical sensitivities, unlike Mercy, but he and his brothers all have incredibly sensitive noses; a light scent might be strong enough to give him a migraine.

"Have you heard of this new brand?" the clerk prattles regardless, holding up a perfume bottle almost as large as one of Mikey's 'chucks and probably as expensive as the monster rings behind her. "They were started by a group of people allergic to perfume—every one of their fragrances is made from only all-natural ingredients so it doesn't give anyone headaches!" Amber blinks at the clerk in annoyance, frustrated at her refusal to take no for an answer. She is highly tempted to point out that people weren't allergic to perfume but the chemicals used in it, but she holds her tongue. After a quick glance at the clerk's name tag—resulting in a blush when she realizes the name tag is what's pulling the neckline of her shirt down—she tries one more time.

"Look…Zephyr, is it?" Amber points out irritably. "I'm not in the market for any makeup, perfume, or whatever—I'm just here because my smart-ass friend got lost in the fitting room. Please go offer your considerable skills to those two lovely ladies on the other side of the counter?" Unfortunately, upon hearing that, the two 'lovely ladies' look up in blatant horror and quickly shuffle away before Zephyr can make eye contact. 'Traitors,' Amber thinks at their backs. Zephyr stares vacantly at her, her big empty blue eyes bright behind her dramatically sweeping blonde bangs, seemingly unable to comprehend that her company isn't wanted.

Well, what can be done? The pushy clerk isn't going leave her alone and she's starting to get a headache from all the perfume…finally, the crafty brunette comes up with an idea. "About that new brand," she asks off-handedly. "Don't suppose they have anything really light and tropical, maybe with mango and coconut?" Though she intended to stump the clerk by asking for something
unlikely, she quickly realizes she instead presented a challenge. Blue eyes brighter than ever, Zephyr ducks down to dig through the glass case then pops right back up, presenting a bottle of perfume like one would present an Oscar.

"It's called Island Escape!" she giggles completely missing Amber's crestfallen expression. Well, *that* didn't work! "The fragrance is based around fresh mangos and mandarin oranges with notes of coconut and papaya and just the slightest hint of passion fruit!" Before Amber can even get a word out, Zephyr sprays into the tiny cap and hold it out for her to sniff…as though she could even smell a skunk over the stench from the rest of the perfume.

"What smells good?" Mercy pipes up behind Amber startling her. "Usually this counter stinks like a French hooker."# The brunette chokes back her laughter and turns nearly purple, both at Mercy's complete lack of a filter and Zephyr's disappointed pout. Seemingly not realizing she said anything off-color, Mercy ducks forward to tentatively sniff at the cap offered, and blinks in surprise. "Hey, that's you!" she points out to Amber with a grin. "Y'ought'a try that!"

Great…now she has *two* pushy blondes trying to force perfume on her.

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Hours after Amber and Mercy left to meet Bree for shopping, Donatello stares through his main computer monitor, contemplating the information displayed. He hoped by doing some research, he'd be able to confidently rule out the possibility of pregnancy. Unfortunately, all that research did was make him more and more worried, and convince him he'll never be able to tell without a test.

Right as he's scanning yet another article, something hits him: pregnancy causes a change in hormones and pheromones, hormones and pheromones affect a person's scent, and he and his brothers have a very impressive sense of smell. Perhaps…no, surely not…but maybe…maybe if Amber *smells* different, that would be a sign? If nothing else, it would let him know she needed to be tested…

His blood freezes in his veins. Someone stands at the door—Amber's back!—and she does, indeed, smell different…*drastically* different. Dear God, surely not… As she approaches, the truth hits him. She *does* smell different, but no hormone or pheromone could ever make a human smell like mangos. Mangos, oranges, coconut, and a couple other tropical fruits…sweet relief!

"That bad?" The nervous question a few feet behind him brings him out of his thoughts and he belatedly minimizes the browser window, turning to greet her. She hovers in the doorway with one hand clapped over the junction of her neck—an attempt to cover a splotch of cologne?

"What?" Before he can try again, state his question more concisely, she clarifies.

"Mercy convinced me to try a new perfume," she admits awkwardly. "I brought a free sample home, but if it hurts your nose—" His teasing smile and 'come here' gesture silences her, and she somewhat meekly obeys. All hesitancy and embarrassment fades away as he tugs her onto his lap, folds her in his arms, and nuzzles her neck, soaking in her natural scent, the coconut of her shampoo, and the sweet perfume dabbed at her pulse point. He can't for the life of him detect any changes in the pheromones quickly clouding his senses, but for now, he finds he couldn't care less. Basking in the warmth and weight of his mate, he trails his lips along her neck and jaw in gentle, brushing kisses.

"Does that answer your question?" he teases, then reaches up to catch her pierced earlobe between his teeth. Her breathing growing more shallow by the moment, she nods, breathing in the familiar scent of him. Coffee, grease, and clean sweat, and underneath that, remnants of spice, Dragon's blood, and citrus from his favorite soap...she breathes him in like the bouquet of a fine wine, relishing his closeness.

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# The phrase "French hooker" is a euphemism for prostitute.
"About that interest you're collecting…" Laughter rumbles in his chest as he buries his nose in her hair, a gesture both comforting and enticing. Finally, after a long, stressful day, all is right in the world.

Around midnight, the soft brushing of skin on skin rouses Amber from her sleep. Calloused but careful fingertips trace along the lace-trimmed hem of her nightgown—the silky purple number that makes Donatello's brain short circuit. The gentle hand cups her hip, the pad of its thumb painting nonsensical patterns into her skin. She drifts awake with a sigh, leaning back into the arms of her mate, sure he'll return the gesture with a nuzzle. That nuzzle will be surely followed by lips tracing her trapezius and fingertips pulling her bare rear into his groin, and—because, Spring—maybe even a rare pinch of teeth on her bare shoulder.

She waits…and waits…nothing happens. No mumbled endearments or foreign pet names whispered into her skin, no warm lips or smooth teeth tracing her skin, not even a snore. Something, Amber realizes without a doubt, is bothering her Donnie…and it's her job to figure out what. Abandoning her previous lay-back-and-get-ravished attitude, she cranes her neck to meet his eyes. Sure enough, they're out of focus and staring off into space.

"Wha's wrong, Darlin'?" The question startles him, his eyes almost immediately focusing and meeting hers. "Hmm?"

"I can't sleep," he admits softly, tracing the same path as before with less hesitation. "My brain just doesn't want to shut off." Green eyes blink, their owner halfway between surprised and bemused. Donatello has told her many times, after all, that having her snoring in his ear is all it takes to shut up his over-working brain. If it's not the season keeping him restless, whatever's on his mind must be heavy indeed.

"Mibbe we need'a do summit 'bout that, huh?" she suggests teasingly, pressing her rear tightly to his groin. The lack of a prominent bulge tells her in no uncertain terms he's awake due to mind, rather than matter. She slips out of his one-armed embrace uncontested and sits up against the headboard; sure enough, he inches closer, pillowing his cheek on her offered lap. Concerned, now, Amber pets his bare head, smoothing the worry lines between his eyes and tracing the faint streaks of reddish brown framing them.

"Wha's on yer mind, Dunnie?" she asks again, softly. He says nothing…and yet, he says everything. Hazel eyes fix on her lower belly—unsmiling lips thin, his tongue dips out to wet them, then they soften—one hand reaches out, callused fingertips catching on the silky fabric of her nightgown. Palm cupping the ever-present curve of her belly, he seems feeling for movement. Amber's heart stutters; Donnie's eyes meet hers, concerned and worried, but not upset.

She should have known he'd figure it out. He was a genius, after all—and it didn't take a genius to connect the dots between her weight gain and her irregular cycle. Silently berating herself for ever thinking he'd miss it, she breaks eye contact and fixes an embarrassed stare on her shoulder. "I'm…late," she admits under her breath as he sits up beside her. Despite her embarrassment, he pulls her into his side, holding her as tenderly as always. "I've always been pretty irregular, really, but that shot I was takin' seems 't've screwed up my cycles perm'nently." The arm wrapped around her tugs her closer still, the hand smoothing up and down her skin.

"Irregular for a woman can be right on time for her ovaries," Donnie points out with his 'I know I'm brilliant' smile. That particular crook of the lips always makes Amber want to tackle him and do horrible, wicked, delightful things to him; as usual, though, all she can do is look away with a blush. "An adult woman's menstrual cycle can last anywhere from twenty-one to thirty-five days—yours are normally about thirty-two days long."
"Look who did his homework," she teases despite the praises her needy ovaries are singing for him. "There's just one thing wrong." The singing falls silent in horror and rage, she winces, then in true Amber fashion, she blurts it all out at once. "Thirty-five days was up two weeks ago." The genius's silence—and the seriousness in his eyes—tells her with no uncertainty, he knew that already.

"It's probably just a little weight fluctuation," he reassures as she rests her head on his shoulder. Both to reassure himself and comfort her, he takes advantage of the position to nuzzle her coconut-scented hair. "Not to mention you've been off by about a week since your third month of those shots." Another woman might be embarrassed or even horrified that her partner kept such close tabs on her cycles without invitation; Amber knows it's just part of what makes Donatello so wonderful. He overthinks things, he overanalyzes reactions, he keeps records, takes notes, and sometimes he sticks his nose in her business without invitation...and she loves him all the more for it. "It could be nothing."

"And it could be something," she answers without emphasis. A soft sound of acknowledgment rumbles in his rib cage, his hand lifting to her hair. Slowly, softly he cards his fingers through the loose locks, contemplating the unspoken. "Dee...if I'm...what'll we do?"

"What we always do," he answers simply as she meets his eyes in disbelief. "We'll adapt, we'll cope, and we'll work through it...together." Her eyes tear up, but she gives a watery smile. "For the record, I think you'd make a great mom." Chuckling and shaking her head, she leans into his shoulder again. "I see you tellin' a lotta' dad jokes,'" she teases. "There's no guarantee our genetics would match well enough for a healthy child, but if they do...and if you're willing...I'd want—want to keep it."

"Then we're agreed?" Hazel darkening to brown, he studies her expression for any sign of displeasure; finding none, he breaks out into a tender smile that makes her heart throb. "Having kids won't change how I feel, Amber—I love you, always have loved you, and always will love you."

"Even if I turn into a blimp?" she grins. "Pregnancy makes ya fat, ya know."

"You're not fat," he insists firmly tugging her to straddle his lap. "Fat is an insult—You're curvy, voluptuous, even a little pudgy, but you're not fat...and no matter how much weight you gain or lose, you'll always, always be beautiful to me." Her heart melting, Amber buries her face in his shoulder as he tugs up the hem of her nightgown. "Besides," he adds with a teasing 'cheek squeeze,' "I happen to like your pudge."

"Ya don't say." Though he cannot see her face, he hears her suggestive smirk plainly. "An' here I thought ya brought yer staff to bed for kicks." Spring is a wonderful time of year, full of early mornings, late evenings, and a restless partner who can't get enough of her. Any emotion can and will easily turn into lust, and like so many nights before, Amber can already see the moment turning into something more...and she couldn't approve more. "Ya'll knock the nympho out'a me yet, Speccy."

Loving Donatello is nothing new to Amber; she's known him, loved him almost all her life, after all. Even so, everything is different now...everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed, all at the same time. When they met in dreams, every sense was muted, muffled by the logic of dreams. Now they're together in reality, and oh, what a difference it has made!

Touch and taste...sight, sound, and smell...every sense is overwhelmingly real, now, and every moment brings yet more proof that this love of theirs is no dream.
*Ladies, take heart! Just like there are guys out there who like chunky chicks, there are also guys who really, REALLY enjoy muff-diving! Clearly, our dear Donnie is one of them.

** Lyrics taken from One Night in Bangkok, a track from the musical Chess and popularized by artist Murray Head. Old Life – pre-2011 – but reasons. Chess is a tearjerker, as it has no HEA and everyone hates each other by the end, but my God, the music makes up for it! Plus, the fact that it's centered around the Cold War and a US vs USSR Chess championship is awesomeness.

*** So often in fan fiction the guys are somehow able to give expensive jewelry to their lady-sues despite their lifestyle; while it sounds great, it's just not likely. Another problem I've had with that is the gift of gold rings—every one of them is stupid-strong and that strength is especially apparent in their hands…and gold alloys are SOFT. Heck, even my husband was able to dent a gold ring once just because he squeezed my hand too tightly. Thus, titanium—which is one of the strongest metals used for jewelry and can be ordered online.

#Chemical sensitivities are no laughing matter, and in no ways limited to perfumes. Nearly everyone in my family has some degree of sensitivity to airborne chemicals, most of us being prone to migraines when exposed to airborne chemicals and artificial fragrances. Perfumes, colognes, and body sprays, particularly the more expensive ones and Axe-type products, are MURDER. Also, funny note here: A while back, some fancy-ass perfume company began advertising their perfumes with the song "Lady Marmalade," which is about a French hooker in New Orleans…their perfume makes you smell like a French hooker, but they're owning it dammit!
Chapter Summary

+20 kudos and +500 hits!

Chapter Notes

So, folks, this installment of Gallery of Memories is a little different. Instead of being a single one-shot that focuses on one drawn out plot event or concept, this one's a pair of drabbles centered around the two main couples of the New Lease universe. (For anyone who's been hiding under a rock this whole time, that's Donnie/Amber and Raph/Mercy.) These are short, sweet, mostly clean, and with any luck, they might make you spit your coffee.

Without further ado, Thank you awesome readers on Archive Of Our Own for +20 kudos and +500 hits! This one's for y'all awesome people for being awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Dribble-Drabble 2: Sick Day / In Stitches

Sick Day

When Mercy Ross first met Raphael, she was unimpressed by his macho-man posturing. Over time, she learned to see beyond the mask and grew fond of the soft, squishy inner-Raph that he didn't often let show. Now they're mates…and she wants nothing more than to shake him silly.

Raph is sick—not dangerously sick, granted, but from the fuss he's been putting up, a gal would think he's dying. Nausea, vomiting, cramping, a few more unpleasant symptoms—it's just the usual stomach bug type nonsense, but he seems to have convinced himself he has hours to live. He never struck her as a sick-wimp, but then again, she's been wrong before.

At the edge of her hearing, she picks up a familiar conversation—Raphael's scratchy voice in the Lab, Donatello reminding him yet again that he just needed to wait it out, and Raph getting unreasonable—and creaky from all the puking—insisting that what he was going through was infinitely worse than 'a friggin' stomach bug.' Finally, after yet another fruitless argument, the bulkier ninja stomps out of the lab, stomps through the kitchen and hallway to the barracks, then stomps into his room and slams the door behind him. A crash in the utility room sounds immediately after the shockwave. Mercy wonders which potted plant he murdered this time; if it's the Christmas cactus Amber bought her, she's gonna skin him. Denim blue eyes narrow, staring venomously through the television screens. Enough, she decides, is quite enough.

A particularly pitiful sight greets her eyes in the doorway of their bedroom: Raphael hunched over on the bed holding an empty trashcan like a teddy bear and—yep, she's callin' it—sulking. What she'd give for a camera right now…this has blackmail written all over it. "Still sick?" she asks instead of
admitting her nefarious thoughts. Raph glares at her over the rim of the trash bin, seemingly daring her to judge him.

"Dat lil' dweeb says it's nuthin'," he grumbles into the empty bucket. "Dis ain't nuthin'—dis's Hell." Mercy rolls her eyes but decides to humor him. "Wanna second opinion." Oh, heck yes...he has no idea what he just walked into.

"A'right," the blonde smirks at him. "Lay it on me—what's eatin' ya?"

"Pukin'," he grousers, the very word twisting his snarl into a grimace. "Cramps. Feelin' weak an' tired. Can't stop runnin' ta da can. Da works." Mercy tugs her invisible beard in thought then strides over to the bedside.

"Are you feeling dehydrated?" Affirmative. "When did this start?" The day before yesterday, so late May. Amidst sputtered objections, she reaches out, pries his lips back to look at his gums and tongue, then lets them snap shut again. "Hmm...ulcers on the lips and tongue—this ain't good." Granted, the one on his lip's a scar and the one on his tongue was a bite from a particularly violent chucking session, but who's counting? Once he got over his annoyance at her man-handling, he scowls up at her.

"Da fuck'll dat tell ya?" he demands. Mercy bows her head, shakes it, and rests a comforting hand on his near shoulder.

"Sorry Asshat," she answers sympathetically. "Necrotic Enteritis—we'll have to put ya down before ya infect the rest'a the herd. Oh yeah," she adds offhandedly as he sputters in disbelief, "we gotta send yer brain out fer testin' afterward, but y'ain't usin' it anyway, right?" As predicted, Raphael blew up. For a long, delightful moment all he could get out were unintelligible squawks and snarls, then he finally managed a single sentence.

"It's just a stomach bug!" The moment it got out, his face went completely blank at the realization that he just agreed with Donnie's diagnosis.

"Yep," Mercy chirped. "And Necrotic Enteritis is a cow disease. Moo, Raphie."

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* Necrotic Enteritis: a cattle disease of unknown cause affecting mostly calves. This uncommon but serious disease is usually only seen in late spring/early summer. Symptoms include—aside from the usual human stomach bug symptoms sans vomiting—bloody passings, ulcers on the lips, gums, or tongue, and an over 95% death rate. There is no treatment for this disease—sick animals must be put down, or they'll spread the disease and die anyway.

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**In Stitches**

In her previous life, Amber didn't really feel useful at all; perhaps this is why she insists on making herself useful in this one as much as possible. Housework? She'll do it! Laundry? Let'er at it! Keep Mikey from poisoning everyone with gummy bear and anchovy pizza? With gusto! That said, it is only natural to find her sprawled out on the sofa with a pair of Donatello's trousers across her lap, needle and thread spool in hand, and studiously examining the ripped inseam. She isn't sure how the tear occurred—her dirty mind is quite happily supplying all manner of obscene and unlikely instances for her, and in vivid detail—but since the fabric itself isn't damaged, it should be an easy fix.
"What're you doing?!" The squeaked demand over her shoulder draws her eyes from the crotch of the pants to the owner of the pants—a turtle blushing almost crimson at seeing her inspecting the insides of his trousers. Please. It's not like she's never seen what goes into the pants; compared to that the pants're nothing.

"Ya split a seam," she answers simply, snipping a length of thread off of the spool. "Figured I'd fix it for ya." To her confusion, Donnie only blushes harder and avoids her eyes.

"You're…" She pops the end of the thread through her lips to slick it down, and the sentence falls off in a squeak; the squeak transitions into a choke at the sight of her carefully pushing the damp thread through the eye of the needle. Would the action have been translated as an innuendo were it not Spring? "…uh…"

"It'll just take a minute," the brunette points out stabbing the needle through an intact portion of the inseam. Donnie flinches at the visual and tries not to remember what was in those pants less than an hour ago. He fails. Ouch. Indifferent or oblivious to the mental torment she is putting her mate through, Amber deftly gathers the two panels of fabric together with a quick line of basting then doubles back for a neater and more secure slip-stitch.

Unseen by the blushing mutant or his traumatizing mate, a third party creeps around the corner. Michelangelo perks up at the sight of his brother seemingly about to have an aneurysm, and eager to snoop, ninja-sneaks toward the sofa. There, his eyes practically bulge out of their sockets—Amber's finished the mending and tied off the thread, and brings the garment up to her face to nip off the excess thread. Donatello struggles not to consider the fact that his pants now have traces of her saliva in the crotch…or, again, what was in those pants recently. He fails miserably. He really hates Spring.

"Dude!" Mikey pipes up with an up-to-no-good grin over the back of the couch. "If you're fixin' stuff I got somethin' you could stitch up!" Donnie sputters angrily, but Amber just shoots Mikey a stern school-marm frown.

"I don't do underwear, Mikey," she points out; his suddenly blank expression confirms her suspicions and earns him a head-slap from his older brother. "If it rips, get a new pair." Unperturbed by Mikey's harmless flirtation, Amber stands and saunters toward the bedroom she shares with Donnie. Just outside the door, she turns back, slowly sweeps her eyes from her mate's toes up to his eyes, and gives him a sly smile. "Let's make sure these still fit," she teases him; perhaps because she's turned him into a pervert, Donnie wonders how angry she'd be if he tore his trousers more often. Footsteps stumbling toward Amber send chills down her spine—almost as though she can feel a pair of rapt hazel eyes visually peeling away every layer of cloth between them.

God, she loves Spring.

Chapter End Notes

...yeah...like I said, SHORT as HECK, but it got the point across!
...but is it art?

Chapter Summary

+80 Reviews on FFnet!

Chapter Notes

Time for another installment of Gallery of Memories, People! This one's pretty short, too, but it's a little longer than the last one and focuses on a much-neglected pairing - Leonardo and Beverly! Thank you, you awesome readers on FFnet, for pushing A New Lease on Life to +80 reviews! I cannot even begin to put into words just how grateful I am to y'all, and I hope the story continues to satisfy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Michael Nyman/Jeroen van Veen "Why?," Lifehouse "Hourglass"

...but is it art?

From the first time Leonardo found himself in the Hardy cousins' loft, he was struck by the vast collection of artwork filling every available space. Some people collect antiques and oddities—others collect sports memorabilia and creepy faceless angel statues. Beverly's hobby is different: she collects brushstrokes and brass, ink and glaze, reproductions of known masterpieces and one-of-a-kind wonders from local artists. The countless gems lining the walls and shelves make the roomy loft seem more art gallery than home, but Leo's never felt out of place within these walls.

Even after so much time in her company, so many months doting on her while she recovered and so many more months working up the courage to offer her his heart, Beverly is an enigma to Leo. Outwardly, she is cool, collected, classy and cultured in a world of people who throw caution and self-respect to the wind. Her smooth, precise speech stands out amongst the many accents that tint New York. Her expressions are always genuine but hold just enough back to make others question her sincerity. Even more confusing is her remarkable ability to effortlessly tie Leo's tongue in knots, twist his words around with a single arched eyebrow, and pry the most sensitive of information out of him without so much as a pinch. Beverly confuses Leo as much as she enthralls him, and he looks forward to many more years of being absolutely bewildered by her. In the meantime, though, he wishes he could just once see what's going on in her head.

"The new grouping is nearly complete," the bespectacled woman relates leading him over to a small corner of the private parlor. "We never have guests here—my students only ever see the classroom, and we rarely have visitors upstairs—so you're the first to see this." She trails to a stop next to a surprisingly bare wall—or, rather, the trio of new prints surrounding a tall display stand with a cast
replica of a much larger statue. The topmost print, a traditional Japanese woodblock print of a mist-shrouded mountain crowned with blooming trees—is familiar. As children, he and his brothers discovered a battered copy of that image in a discarded calendar and gave it to Splinter for Father's Day; though it is worn well past its prime, the page still hangs in the dojo.

With an elusive smile, Beverly explains the prints on the left and right and the cast replica to her captive one-turtle audience. "La Fornarina," Beverly names the painting of a dark-eyed and well-endowed woman—bare to the waist and seemingly reaching for one naked breast. "It was painted by and depicts the mistress of one Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino." She sweeps around to the opposite painting—a detailed portion of a much larger image, it centered around two large figures, one surrounded by creepy cherubs and the other hovering with its rear bared to the viewer. "A single small portion of Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni's masterpiece, the Genesis displays in the Sistine Chapel: "Creation of the sun, moon, and planets." Despite her reverent eyes seeking out the slightest nuances of color and detail in the print, her mutant lover can't tear his eyes from the two pink-garbed ass cheeks presented by the sassy figure on the left. He's starting to see a pattern here…

"Lastly," Beverly finishes, resting her hand gently on the display stand with a sly grin, "David," the most well-known work of master sculptor Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi." Leo has to force himself to follow her gesture to the replica statue, recalling all too well the disturbingly shrunken naked genitalia the original statue bore. This dread falls away in a shudder of relief; at least this replica was given a handy fig leaf.

It isn't until he registers her raised eyebrow and amused smile that he realizes the other connection. The three pieces all featured some unnerving nudity and suggestive behaviors from its subject, but the artists' names were ones he knew well. Raphael—Michelangelo—Donatello—but no Leonardo? "I think you're missing one," he remarks with what he hopes comes across as a flirtatious smile; Bev's soft, husky laughter tells him it's probably closer to a 'you forgot me?' face.

"That's why I brought you here, Silly," she explains teasingly and leads him over to the bay window, daintily seating herself on the vintage blue mohair sofa. "The others already chose their contribution to the family gallery. I'm just waiting for yours. Have you a favorite of your namesake's work?"

"Hold on," he argues gesturing back to the grouping again, still standing but at least not pacing. "You're asking me to pick something that'll fit in? None of Da Vinci's work would fit that grouping—he didn't—he wasn't—"

"Perverse?" Bev supplies innocently, and Leo cringes. "There is a fine line between perversion and artistic nudity, and all of those pieces toe the line, if barely." She chuckles at some secret thought, collects her tablet from the coffee table, and pulls up an image search. "As for his supposed refusal to engage in perversion, Hogosha…"

Leo warily accepts the tablet and glances down at the screen…only to gape in horror at the sketch sprawling out across the screen. With nowhere near the amount of grace Beverly showed, he fairly collapses onto the sofa next to her, the wooden frame cracking in protest at the sudden increase in weight. Nearby, he hears Bosco utter a displeased groan at the noise, clearly woken from a deep sleep. Desperate for the travesty before him to be a sick joke, Leo swipes down the screen to inspect the title and artist. Leonardo Da Vinci - Studies Of The Sexual Act And Male Sexual Organ. NO! NO, no, no, NO! He swipes back upward again, cringing at the vivid anatomical sketch and the gory details it relays for his viewing torture.

Suddenly it all makes sense. When he and his brothers were children, Leo took great pride in reminding his three brothers that their namesakes made art of naked people, but Da Vinci had some class! The first time he overheard this declaration, their father broke out in a suspiciously sudden
bout of loud barking coughs, made an excuse about needing some air, and hurried off before his sons could follow. At the time, the eldest took this as evidence that Splinter was ashamed of his younger sons’ namesake artists’ lascivious artwork. Now—faced with the traumatizing image of two bodies with missing limbs copulating right in front of him, complete with an x-ray vision peepshow of the internal goings-on—Leo realizes without a doubt their father just wasn’t sure how to correct the misunderstanding without giving his sons nightmares. As if he wasn't already embarrassed by his childish behavior before, now he’s proven himself completely hopeless in the eyes of his lovely cultured woman.

"Can we not hang that one?" The statement comes out deadpan, but Beverly only chuckles at him as she closes the tab of horrors.

"Whichever of his works will join the rest is your choice," she reminds, molasses-brown eyes gleaming with amusement. "Your brothers made their choices based on things they value—bravery without shame, humor in the face of censure, determination to rise above all challenges—all that remains is for you to choose what you would have displayed with them. Once all five of your treasures are on display, Bree and I will approach the rest for their own additions…without you, after all, none of us would even know one another." Leo meets her eyes in confusion; once again, she blindsided him without the slightest warning.

This time when he surveys the three artworks on the opposite wall, he looks beyond the breasts, buttocks, and too-small fig leaf. Margherita Luti bares her breasts to the viewer, but holds her head high as if in defiance of his judgment; he could almost see Raphael in that pride. The grizzled deity in the clouds is stern and seems ill-tempered, but the incarnation of the moon seems more intent on playful antics—much like Mikey when Leo starts lecturing him. David stands triumphant over the severed head of his enemy Goliath but seems to pay it no notice, instead lost in thought and seemingly contemplating the meaning of life. Similarly, Donatello has a way of mentally distancing himself from the violence that fills their lives in favor of pursuing knowledge—capable and skilled, but overall uninterested. Leo blinks in surprise, stunned at what this second viewing revealed; how can he ever match up to his brothers’ ingenuity in their choices?

It hits him like a sucker punch to the jaw; he turns to address Beverly, a faint tinge of muddy pink blooming in his cheeks as their thighs touch, if barely. "You said to choose something that reflects something I value?" he confirms. "May I borrow that?" She dutifully passes him the tablet, studying him intently for the slightest sign of his thoughts. After a short internet search, Leonardo passes the device back to her, his choice open on the screen.

"The Mona Lisa?" his lover asks without emphasis. "You value recognition and longevity?" He smiles and shakes his head in the negative. One calloused hand rises to her cheek, tentatively brushes a sleek black curl back behind her ear, then trails southward to cup the soft curve of her chin.

"What I value is a certain woman," he admits with a teasing smile. "One with dark eyes and darker hair, and a smile that never gives anything away." Her heart flutters at the unspoken words in her lover's pale blue eyes. "I value you, Beverly…you, your faith in me, your odd tastes in art, and your Mona Lisa smile." Beverly's molasses-brown eyes shimmer behind her glasses but drift shut as he urges her to meet his lips. The kiss is sweet, slow, and chaste, a tender mingling that makes her heart both ache and sing and as always, it ends too soon. Catching their breath and silently urging their hearts to stop racing so quickly, the ninja and his lady hold one another's eyes, unspoken promises passing between them.

"I have odd tastes in art, you say?" Bev teases once she's sure she can formulate words around the butterflies in her stomach. "You wouldn't happen to be referring to my affinity for Bosch and Von Goff, would you?" A sheepish smile tells her she hit the nail on the head. "Odd to one mind is
delightful to another," she reminds gracefully standing and pacing away to stare out the sheer-shaded bay window; the older man comes to meet her and reverently brushes her long wavy hair away from her nape. "There is a lesson in that, Leonardo," Beverly points out breathlessly, driven to distraction by the warm lips tracing a path between the goosebumps spreading along her neck. "No matter how skillfully a piece may be executed, if it consistently fails to elicit either wonder or discomfort, is it even art, to begin with?"

There's that elusive smile again, Leo muses slipping his arms around her middle and just breathing her in. He is her blind spot and she is his, but in moments like this, it seems like the rest of the world is blind and they are the only ones with sight.

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Chapter End Notes

*Jerome Bosch and Von Goff – Equivalent of Hieronymus Bosch, a favorite of Beverly's, and the artist we know as Vincent Van Gogh.

*Mohair – silky fabric or fibers made from the hair of the Angora goat. Mohair is very shiny and silky but durable and resilient. In this instance, I'm referring specifically to a mohair velveteen upholstery – a relative of mine had a piece of furniture upholstered in red mohair velveteen years back, and good grief it was gorgeous! It's still in pretty good shape, too, so the resilience is impressive!

Leo always struck me as the sort to be a total softy with the one he loves—we're talkin' rose petals, neck rubs, bubble baths, and calling her sweet nicknames. Seeing as this occurs pretty early in his eventual relationship with Beverly—before any serious physical affection—you get an early glance at this softer side of Leo. She'll bring him out of his shell eventually - figuratively AND literally! XD
Bree's got a test tomorrow. Mikey's trying to be good while she's studying for it but she isn't making it easy on him. It's only fair that he returns the favor.

SIGH. Mikey...you nut.

Hey, Folks! Long time no see, huh? Well, I've FINALLY got another installment for the Gallery of Memories for ya and hope you enjoy. It's 100% pure fluffy humor, centered around a quiet evening with Mikey and Bree back during Part II; Mikey and Bree started out as FWBs but by this point they've made it to smitten. He tries so hard to take care of her and to support her...alas, he's a young, virile male and she has a smokin' hot booty. I wholeheartedly blame the entire idea on Cold - this is his fault.

So, without further ado, thanks again for all recent reviews, favorites, follows, comments, kudos, and whatnot! As much as this is slowing down - thanks, muse, yer lettin' me down - I think it's probably best if I just post these when I manage to finish them instead of agonizing over "Oh noes! I just passed +10 reviews and I can't get out a new thank-you chapter!" D8 Seriously. No-update guilt is a real thing and it sucks. SO. The Gallery of Memories exists to thank regular readers for their reading AND to share moments that don't make it into the main storyline, but the structure's not the same. There'll still be a dedicated thank you but you won't have to see the "_reviews/comments/Etc" blargh in it. You already know what you've done, you awesome readers, and you're wonderful for it.

Dedicated to y'all for being wonderful patient readers, and to Cold for inspiring this lunacy. Please don't hurt me.

Check out The official "Bree-Angelo" playlist on Spotify!

Suggested Listening: Queen "You're My Best Friend" and Billy Joel "You May Be Right"

On weekdays, the Hardy cousins' loft is always abuzz with energy—there's always music playing, or a television running, or somebody chattering on about their day. This, however, isn't a weekday…it's Sunday night.

Honestly, it's probably not the best idea for Michelangelo to be over tonight, Briallen admits to herself, but she can't find the heart to send him home. She's got a huge exam tomorrow. Worse yet,
the professor responsible for that exam is Professor Robbins—the same Professor Robbins who showers exactly once monthly unless threatened with bodily harm, staunchly believes that deodorant use is a gateway to drug abuse, nymphomania, and liberal political leanings, and has been known to clear entire hallways during warmer weather. She sighs through clenched teeth in frustration. Bev warned her not to take his class over the summer semester—she warned her up one side and down the other!—but Bree was so sure the older woman was being melodramatic. Hilarious. The temps have been in the high nineties all week… that classroom's going to be suffocating.

Bree knows quite well she's quite capable of passing his exams—nay, capable of acing them with flying colors with little effort—but the tenured professor's obnoxious body odor tends to make her brain cease functioning the moment she steps into his classroom.

Thus, here she is on a Sunday night—sprawling half-naked across her bed with her nose in a textbook and her eyes on a pile of handwritten notes, reviewing for that test instead of enjoying the company of her ever-patient boyfriend. Mikey, the sweetheart, has been working unusually hard at being quiet and still so as not to distract her. Tablet in one hand, he silently reads his way through his newest digital graphic novel, from the looks of it, a newer Naruto volume. The very idea tickles Bree—a real ninja reading about a fake ninja for ninja pointers. He's even reading it in the original Japanese because (and she mentally quotes, here) "something might've gotten lost in translation."

Sitting propped up against her quilted headboard, legs spread out before him and crossed at the knees, Mikey silently admires her soft, curvy figure from head to toe. Her ash brown curls are piled haphazardly on top of her head with an alligator clip, little sweat-shiny piggy-tail curls poking out every which way. Pale pink spaghetti straps drape teasingly down her shoulders, the slacking material revealing the lack of anything beneath. Sleek colorful fabric—pinkish pastel orange cotton trimmed in matching stretchy lace—clings frantically to her plump backside, showing off just enough cheek to make his hands itch. Smooth-waxed legs with full, curvy calves idly kick in the air, each movement accompanied by a flash of orange and fuchsia glitter from her polished toes. 'Humans have such weird feet,' he considers, tablet falling slack in his grip; he's sure Rock Lee would forgive him if he ever saw Bree's adorable little feet. 'They're so tiny, so fragile—and their toes are dinky, like little kitty toe-beans but on the front instead of the bottom!'

Against his will, his eyes drift back up her legs again—up those shapely ankles, round calves, and thick, firm thighs—and back up to her panty-garbed backside. He stills, drawn in by the call of dat ass. 'No, bad Mikey! Babycakes needs to study, this is important!' But…but booty… 'NO! Eyes forward, soldier!' Bright blue eyes wide and shoulders tense, he sits back ramrod straight against the headboard, trying to put the enticing sight out of his mind. He fails. His eyes, the stubborn things, insistently drift lower and lower. Just before he can catch another glimpse of that tempting coral-colored fabric—almost the exact shade of a fresh frosty orange creamsicle—Bree groans in frustration, digging her fingers into her hair and nearly wrenching her clip loose.

"Ugh. This heat is killer," she gripes latching onto the neckline of her camisole and fluttering it to get some fresh air down her cleavage; alas, all it accomplishes is revealing the tops of her full breasts to the eyes of her already struggling boyfriend. He gulps. As if the backside wasn't tempting enough, she had to bring the boobs into play, too. Sometimes he wonders if she really doesn't realize how much she's teasing him, or if she's completely aware and just loves watching him squirm.

Despite the deceptively innocent peepshow playing havoc with his hormones, Mikey's noticed something much more pressing. Tension in her shoulders, back, and neck—circles under her eyes—a frown halfway between exhaustion and frustration—his lovely lady is pushing herself way too hard over this exam. She's told him about smelly Professor Robbins before, he recalls, and she mentioned that the exam she's studying for is in an advanced art history class… Robbins teaches that class. Clearly, she's dreading the effect of the heat wave on his poor grooming habits. Mikey frowns down
at his tablet, half-forgotten in his lap. 'How can that geezer be smart enough to teach college,' he wonders, 'but still be totally oblivious that his BO could drop birds right out'a the sky?' Instead of commenting on this, however, he forces his eyes back to the screen and reaches for her hand, lacing their fingers together with a comforting squeeze. Sure enough, Bree casts a grateful smile at him over her shoulder and squeezes right back. Neither one relinquishes the other's hand.

For a time, the pattern remains unchanged. Bree studies her brains out, intermittently muttering to herself and checking her notes. Every now she adds another gripe about the heat or the irritating professor or reaches up to swipe a fresh sheen of sweat off her face. Mikey halfway focuses on his tablet, every now and then narrating a particularly funny scene aloud (translating it to English so she'll understand) complete with over-the-top character voices and goofy sound effects. After all, she's stressing out too much and a good laugh might help break the tension. After a particularly classic "meeeeeeeruuuuuuuuw-FOOM!" mortar-dropping sound effect that doesn't at all match the 'paper bomb hitting a tree' action, Bree pries her hand out of his with a groan. At first, he worries he's annoyed her…then that hand takes up residence on her lower back, digging into the crease right above her rear end.

"What's'a matter?" Mikey asks setting aside his tablet and pinning all his attention on his girlfriend. Sure enough, she startles as though she was lost in thought and then, blushing, winces. She probably didn't realize she even moved.

"It's just my back," she mumbles in embarrassment, eyes stubbornly trained on the page before her, hoping that's the end of it.

"Our sense of gravity intensifies the overall feeling of motion...The painting, once described as "an explosion in a shingle factory," has remained an inspiration to painters who—"

"Holy shell...who threw up an' called it art?" Sniggers burst up Bree's throat at the unexpected and off-the-wall comment.

"Marcel Duchamp," she answers mid-laughter, poking the jagged black and yellow image on the page for emphasis. "That's a futurist-slash-cubist-slash-thisguy'sondrugs oil painting of his: Nude Descending A Staircase, No. 2." Mikey leans closer, eyeing the image seriously with one eye screwed halfway shut as though trying to see the dolphin in one of those hidden picture doohickeys. He doesn't see any naked ladies on stairs in that picture but at least the end of the title fits.

"I'll take your word for it," he deadpans setting his tablet aside and flopping down on his plastron beside her. "So, what's wrong with your back?" Nope, totally not the end of it—once again, the little sneak caught her off-guard with a joke to make her feel less awkward. What a sweetheart…

"What's wrong with it?" she asks with a mock glare. "A certain two-ton shell-for-brains has completely wrecked my mattress with his bony back. I've got springs digging into my duff all night. Thanks for that." Mikey grins, gripping his neck sheepishly, then shrugs. Instead of teasing her right back, though, he effortlessly rises to his knees and hobbles over to her, settling over her thighs. The first touch—calloused fingertips seeking out a particular nerve cluster between her shoulder blades—triggers a groan of relief. Suddenly boneless, Bree slackens against the mattress, her face falling flat into the seam of her open book with a smack. Forget Cubism—modern art annoys her anyway and that 'nude' really does look like someone threw up and called it art.

For a time, Mikey focuses on his self-appointed task—one by one searching out all the tense muscles and tender spots in Bree's back, working them loose, smoothing them out, then soothing them with gentle caresses, all to the chorus of Bree's low moaning. The further south his hands drift, however, the slower and more distracted his movements grow; finally, eyes fixing again on her taunting
orange-clad rump, he stills entirely. Entranced by the sight—full, round, blushing cheeks half-hidden by cotton and lace—he completely loses track of his earlier intentions.

A sudden, unexpected sensation startles Bree—her head snaps up again, eyes wide. Rough-skinned fingertips trace the swells of her backside in a mirrored circular motion, from her lower back down her full hips to the crease of her thighs, then right up main street to her tailbone. Right as she opens her mouth—to object or sass?—Mikey leans a little closer to firmly cup a cheek in each hand, stealthily squeezing.

Bree's teeth snap shut on her words and she turns a suspicious glare over her shoulder. He's visibly entranced—lost in the wonders of the plump backside that always used to make her feel like a fat cow—his eyes locked on her rump and wide like a child on Christmas morning. Then, without warning, his lips split in a toothy ear-to-ear grin. Squeezing the cheeks, he alternates between pulling them apart and squishing them back together as though making her rump talk. "Nu, pleashe!" he says in a goofy squeaky lisp. "Don't poke me!"

Bree bursts into hysterical laughter, her face crashing back down onto her book and her lungs heaving for breath. From her backside, Mikey grins triumphantly at the loud hissing and croaking of her belly-deep laughter, giving a couple more squeezes for good measure. "Really, Mike?" she wheezes over her shoulder at him. Mikey, the cheeky little skunk, responds with a shrug and a shameless grin. Squeeze.

The textbook and notes hit the floor. She tips him off her back, rolls over, and drags him down into the cradle of her thighs, still laughing at his antics. A flash of reflected light from below her waist draws his eyes to her panties. From the back they were simple, a mix of classy and playful—sherbet-colored fabric in a tempting cheeky cut, all bordered with lace—but from the front, they're perfect. All across the fabric concealing her lightly cropped mound are shiny little decorations—tiny pink-foil surfboards. Like a deer in the headlights, he snaps his head up to meet her eyes in question; her pink-glossed lips split into a smirk, one leg lifting to trail her toes along the back of his bare calf. She knows—she's been intentionally teasing him, hasn't she? Oh, who cares anyway—it's not like he doesn't do the same to her.

Eager to please, he leans down, braces his weight on his knees and arms, and boops her nose with his snout. Two feminine arms wind around his neck, her legs wrapping around his hips and her toes curling behind his rump. Mikey isn't sure who won this match of willpower, but at the moment, he finds it hard to care. Along her collarbone, a familiar galaxy of freckles is calling his name and he can't wait to map them out all over again.

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Notes:

* This passage isn't from an advanced art history book, TBH—it's from an old Art History textbook left over from my father's and my college days: Artforms by Duane and Sarah Preble, fourth edition. When I made it to college, the same book was being used many years and several editions later, and it was still similar enough that I didn't have to buy a new copy for my classes - I just 'swiped' his copy. (...with permission...and kept it...he doesn't care.)

Bree's panties in this oneshot are, as of writing, sold on the Victoria's Secret website: AO3 and Tumblr readers get to see a picture after. FFnet readers, sadly, can't see the picture and will have to either google or use their imaginations. Was looking for something flowery and tropical for the fic, found the surfboards, and realized they were perfect to tease a certain orange-clad sewer-surfer. ;D
Poor Mikey...Bree just broke his brain. XD
Well, this isn't a CHAPTER, per se - it's a comic I put together showing the poem from "Dream Lover" in its entirety. (The oneshot only used the first half of the poem and frankly, I don't see the second half making into a sequel.) First image is the comic in its entirety; after that, since it's HUGE and the writing doesn't show up well at that size, I've posted the individual panels in order of reading. Lastly, in case any of the pics don't show up well, I've typed the poem out in its entirety at the very end.
You can find details about this piece and its execution on both DeviantArt and the ANLoL Tumblr - that's "Get-a-new-lease-on-life."
ALSO! This appearing in-story is an AO3 exclusive because FFnet's no-images restriction sucks pickle juice. That is all.

Amber's Poem: "Dream Lovers"

I met my lover in a dream -
To dream of me was good fortune.
Heather bloomed and filled the air,
As we wandered through the wilderness.

I met my lover in the night
Come down, my sad heart breaks.
Our love seemed like a waltzing dream...
...my trouble, my joy.

The dream is done, but so is here -
I've found my lover dying.
My life is ever a thing done
And how much I change too.

"Why must o' this change?" I asked.
"Why must o' this end?"
"Because it must," I realized.
"Just smile and be his friend."

The poem was never really meant for
My eyes but her own - it was just a
Sickly attempt at capturing wondrous
Dreams with a thin for deciphering
Reality hidden behind the words of
Another. By the time Donatello and
Amber reconciled, the poem was missing
And presumed lost - perhaps never to be
Found.
"Truth be told, it wasn't lost - it moved
With the wind. Once the bridal connection..."
I'll see you in our dreams.
I met my lover in a dream -
In dreams we were good fellows.
Heather bloomed and filled the air
As we roamed through the meadows.
I met my lover in the night
Come dawn, my auld heart broke.
Our love seemed like a waking dream...
...as tangible as smoke.
"Why hide yer e'en?" I asked him once.

"Why hide ye in the night?"

"Because I must," he answered me.

"The shadow are my right."
The dream is done but he is here -
I've found my lover 'gain.

My life is over - a'thin's changed,
And how much, I dinnae ken.
“Why must a’thin’ change?” I asked.
“Why must a’thin’ end?”

“Because it must,” I realized.
“Just smile and be his friend.”
Now my lover watches me,
His eyes as hard as stone.
The love me knew in dream...
...tis through...

My lover-friend is gone.
Text from the panel located between “shot tae Hell” and “Donnie’s Addition”

The poem was never really meant for any eyes but her own – it was just a feeble attempt at reconciling wondrous dreams with a thus far disheartening reality, hidden behind the words of another. By the time Donatello and Amber reconciled, the poem was missing and presumed lost, perhaps never to be found.

Truth be told, it wasn’t lost – it was, instead, found. Once the dream connection was known and their hearts were once again whole, Amber found the poem again...this time, however, it had an addition...
Dreams can sometimes fall apart,
And memories can fade.
The truth you shared can’t
change my heart...

Your lover-friend I’ve played.

I’ll see you in our dreams.

“Dream Lovers”
I met my lover in a dream -
In dreams we were good fellows.
Heather bloomed and filled the air
As we roamed through the meadows.

I met my lover in the night.
Come dawn, my auld heart brak.
Our love seemed like a waking dream…
…as tangible as smoke.

“Why hide yer een?” I asked him once.
“Why hide ye in the night?”
“Because I must,” he answered me.
“The shadows are my right.”

The dream is done but he is here -
I’ve found my lover ‘gain.
My life is over - a’thin’s changed,
And how much, I dinnae ken.

“Why must a’thin’ change?” I asked.
“Why must a’thin’ end?”
“Because it must,” I realized.
“Just smile and be his friend.”

Now my lover watches me,
His eyes as hard as stane.
The love we knew in dreams…t’is through…
My lover-friend is gane.

Mibbe someday he will see -
Someday the truth I’ll tell.
For now, I’ve only memories,
And dreams I shot tae Hell.

Dreams can sometimes fall apart,
And memories can fade.
The truth you shared can’t change my heart…
Your lover-friend I’ve stayed.

I’ll see you in our dreams.
Missed Steps

Chapter Summary

It was bound to happen sooner or later, right? Funny how a person's priorities can change over time.

Chapter Notes

Well, after much long and hard consideration, I've come to a decision. This installment WILL make you want to RETCH from all the sweetness…and I am NOT sorry. You've been warned.

This takes place in the distant future, about ten years after Amber first revived in Kimber's body. There are spoilers but none about upcoming vital plot events. For the record? I totally blame this on a bizarre antics of a former classmate of mine IRL: Beck's been married four years, has three kids already, and is still VERY MUCH young enough to pop out more. She "won't use birth control because that kills babies." Anytime someone she normally associates with winds up pregnant, Beck blacklists them from her company and property until they've given birth "because threatening pregnant women with Lysol makes me look crazy." I've seen this very situation countless times…and I STILL have no words. This grown-ass woman seriously thinks she can CATCH PREGNANT like a COLD. . . . . So much second-hand embarrassment there.

This chapter dedicated to Aeroza, Shelshokd, my nutty-hubby Cold, and all you other wonderful people who (maybe unintentionally) talked me into the madness about to happen. After all, in the immortal words of Cold Thomas, "Quit agonizin' over bullshit an' just knock'er up a'ready." Wish granted, Cold...this is gonna be hilarious!

Chapter warning: Glen Devon - he talks.
More important chapter warning: Here be munchkins - prepare for cavities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Carrie Underwood "What I Never Knew I Always Wanted," Savage Garden "Truly, Madly, Deeply"

Missed Steps

Many years ago – sixteen years ago, in fact – a woman named Amber O'Brien died with only the regret that she never found a love worth living for. That was the official story but the truth was much more complicated: she found that love as a child in dreams of a boy from another world but the connection was doomed from the start. Two people from two different realities could never meet
outside of dreams...at least, so they thought until Amber died and was given a new lease on life in his reality. Sixteen years, Amber considered with a wide, crooked grin, was really not that long after all—not when one considered she left behind the year 2011 and awoke in 2016. Ten years, now that was a much more impressive number to her. After all, a little over ten years ago she and Donatello pledged themselves to one another and began a new life together.

After over a decade the Lair was still very much the same as the day she first arrived there, if a little more spread out, expanded on, and improved. There were some changes - the kitchen was cramped nowadays what with all the extra mouths at mealtimes and the home's upkeep was more time-consuming. There were always repairs to be done, too. Things broke, structures weakened, little hands found new ways to injure themselves on supposedly safe surfaces...hence why Amber sat plopped down on a stool in the pantry doorway, screwdriver in hand, finishing up the install of hardware for a long-overdue door.

A wheezing nasal giggle drew her attention from the lock to the culprit responsible—a young boy barely six who had a naughty habit of climbing the pantry shelves to reach the cookie stash and getting stuck at the top. Byron Isaac, or "Zack," was her little miracle—well, one of them at least.

At first glance he seemed simply human—a little oddly formed with unusual proportions, granted, but he wasn't obviously a mutant. Still, anyone who looked closely enough could see the truth. His skin didn't match either parents'. The color was a smooth olive tone—paler and browner than Donnie's skin but much greener in color than a normal human could boast without terminal illness or a steady diet of pennies. Even at six years old his family could see that he would have his father's lean build and his impressive height. He had a flat, wide nose, chubby cheeks, full lips, small, flat ears, and an adorable gap-toothed grin that practically matched Donnie's as a child but with crooked teeth—and that was saying nothing of the most obvious trait. She shook her head at the irony, her grin only widening. He got her grey-green eyes, ears, and overbite but Donnie's thick, rough skin and complete inability to grow hair. Even now, hunched over with a hand-whittled brain-teaser puzzle and nearly cocooned in his favorite green afghan, his bare head was carefully covered with a matching knit cap.

"Check." Amber followed the proclamation to the man sitting at Zack's left. Straddling an old wooden chair, arms crossed across the backrest, Donnie stared down his opponent fairly exuding the sort of confidence that never failed to send her brain straight to Gutterville. Despite knowing he wasn't the only male in the kitchen who could pick up her 'screw-me' pheromones she couldn't resist a thorough once-over. Donnie's opponent scowled, grumbled something thick with brogue, and studied the blank pieces on the board for a way out. Unfortunately for Glen Devon, Blind Chess* was much more complex than traditional chess, and Donatello wasn't an easy opponent at either.

Amber's Gran'Da never fully recovered his health after developing pneumonia in the first year after his granddaughter's death. Every winter he grew weaker and wearier, and his family worried he wasn't much longer for their world. All that changed when Splinter reminded them of a rather obvious fact—every year in Amber's new reality was marked by two in her old one. Not too long after the family was first reunited from beyond the grave, the eldest mutant extended a standing invitation to his son's future grandfather-in-law—anytime, any day, for any length of time. After a short while of getting to know one another, the two were decided: the stay was permanent. Living in this new, slower-paced world was extending Glen's lifespan and being away from Missouri's harsh winters and humid summers was much easier on his weakened lungs. …and, of course, being out from under his daughter's roof, away from his son-in-law, and in the company of his beloved granddaughter and another similar in age, was a drastic improvement in his stress levels, temperament, and blood pressure.

The situation couldn't last forever—Glen would eventually pass on from this life to the next—but in
the meantime, he had only one thing to say: "Hah!" he barked into his tumbler of fine single-malt. "Tak' tha'!"~ The taunt followed a rather well-executed move involving swiping Donnie's Bishop with a Knight. There was just one problem with that move…

"Not so fast," the mutant warned glancing pointedly at the piece Glen just moved. "Check it." Glen glared in open suspicion but obediently lifted the Knight he just moved…and swore a guttural Scots blue-streak only he and Amber understood. All the pieces on the board were pale unstained wood—unidentifiable by camp when upright—but every piece in each 'camp' was marked on the bottom with a dab of black or white paint. The Knight he used, like the Bishop he captured, was a black piece…and he was playing white. This twist was what made Blind Chess so tricky—players had to keep track of all their pieces at every move and there were consequences if they made a mistake.

"Aw, soak yer heid,"~ Glen groused shoving his small pile of captured pieces toward Donnie. The genius hummed thoughtfully as the other replaced the captured Bishop, contemplating his options, then replaced the pieces and returned a black pawn to the board…blocking his previous check on Glen's king. Glen smirked behind his thick beard and mustache, grey-blue eyes glinting, but said nothing of the concession.

A faint raspy noise split the silence in what used to be the barracks; Amber stilled, her every sense fixing on the small room just off the hallway. Sure enough, another cough followed, then a bout of sharp hacking and wheezing. The three at the table turned to her as one but she was already gone from their sight.

Amber tapped softly at the partially-open door; her instincts told her she was needed, that the occupant might not be able to answer her, but experience told her barging into the room was a definite no-go. "Emily?" No answer. She tapped at the door again, this time a little louder. 'I'm comin' in, okay?' Not even one foot inside the small lavender and lace-decked bedroom and Amber could hear the young one's ailing lungs rattling; the underground, alas, wasn't the best place for a child with a cold. "Aw, Emmy," she murmured brushing the child's soft ginger curls off of her brow. The heat coming off that skin made her wince. "My poor lil' lahss…are you feelin' even a tad better?"

"N-N-ho," Emily croaked. "Throat h-hurts…"

"A cold'll do that, Em." It was the truth but one which wouldn't reassure anyone facing it, much less a child of six years. She stepped away to collect a glass bottle, medicine dropper, and small carton of some fruit-flavored drink from the dresser; after a glance at the sparkly blue clock on the wall, she turned to scrutinize her daughter's appearance. Emily Jane's olive-toned skin was even less brown and more verdant than Isaac's but now it was far too pale; sweat shimmered on her little round face from the fever and exertion of coughing. Further evidence of her struggle ringed her remarkable hazel eyes in puffy shadows, that evidence all-the-more visible without her purple-rimmed glasses. Her mind made up, Amber deftly drew another dose from the syrup bottle and popped open the juice box. "Still, you're not coughin' as badly today, an' you were able to handle some soup earlier—it may not seem it, but you are gettin' better, Lil' Scribs."~ She didn't mention the fact that Isaac was already mostly over his cold. It seemed he inherited their father's impressive immune system while Emily got stuck with her weaker defenses.

"N-hot fast en-hou—" Halfway through the word the tickle in her throat struck again and she delved into another hacking fit. It was silly to hope for anyone to recover from a bad cold overnight but Amber couldn't help but wish for just that—every moment Emily and Isaac were sick, even with the common cold, was a moment too long. How did her own mother manage to stay positive and pushy all the times she got sick as a child? "N-N-ho, duh' wan'—"
"Aw, wheesht now,"~ Amber chided mid-whine and helped her daughter sit up. "I know, this medicine tastes somethin' awful but it is helping—if you don't take it, you won't get better, hm?" Emily shot her mother a pucker-lipped, openly suspicious glare and Amber had to bite her lip to keep from laughing; it reminded her of her mother, Ginny, facing down a car salesman promising a low finance rate. "C'mon, Sweets, your Da blended this just for you an' your brother—it'll hurt his feelings if you won't take it." The scowl weakened, Em's little lips quivering just the slightest bit; she was, after all, Daddy's little princess no matter how much the nickname supposedly embarrassed her. "If you take it without arguing, I'll have Uncle Mikey bring you some orange sherbet later, okay?"

The magic words had an immediate effect, though Amber couldn't be sure whether the winning combo was orange sherbet or Uncle Mikey. Both were equally likely considering Emily's sore, scratchy throat and Michelangelo's 'professional fun-uncle' attitude. Even after silently downing the cough syrup, though, the girl pulled a gruesome face and gulped down the juice in one breath to rid herself of the after-taste. As she fought off nausea from the foul-tasting cough syrup, Emily turned to a favorite past time. "Mum…why y-hou…call me…lil'-—"

"Lil' Scribs?" Amber finished when her daughter started coughing again. "We've told you that story so many times, Sweets. How aren't you tired of it yet?" Her answer was a shy smile and a lopsided shrug. Children weren't as prone to growing bored of the same tales over and over, as evidenced by the thrice-replaced binding on Isaac's favorite storybook; parents always tired of telling a story long before their children tired of hearing it. "When your Da an' I found out you an' your brother were on the way, we knew we needed to find the perfect names for you. We needed names that would tell you just how special you are to us, give you room to grow, an' remind you of what really matters in life."* Emily scooted her little bottom over on the bed to give her mother room; the moment Amber was seated the little redhead curled up against her mother's side.

"Your Da chose Isaac an' Jane," Amber continued, petting Emily's shoulder-length curls. "Your brother is named for a brilliant scientist Da greatly admires, an' who made great discoveries in his field. Your middle name comes from a strong, clever woman whose stories far outlast her; her name is Jane Austen. I chose Byron and Emily—your brother's name is for a poet my late Gran' loved, an' you're named for another poet—Emily Dickinson, one of my favorites."

"B-hut wh-hy Scribs?" Emily piped up; a gentle pop to the tip of her nose set her giggling, although with a pronounced wheeze in her lungs.

"There are few adults who've never heard any of Dickinson's poetry," Amber explained, "but beautiful as it is, the poetry's only part of her story. Like you, Miss Dickinson lived most of her life apart from the rest of the world but she was happy. She didn't need the world to love her so long as she loved herself. Granted, Emily Dickinson was a hermit and may have wanted to socialize more but the message of self-acceptance and confidence was just what the little hybrid needed.

"As for the nickname," Amber continued with a crooked smile, "Miss Dickinson had a funny way of writin' poetry: she wrote some of her best poems on envelopes an' sent them to friends an' family with letters. Her writing wasn't the neatest—more scribbles than handwriting—" Emily's shadow-hung eyes brightened in realization; even after countless retellings this part of the story always excited her most. "The messy handwriting might make people think she was plain, simple, an' nothin' so special. If they look beyond the writing, read the lines behind the scribbles, the truth is obvious: she was a beautiful soul with a beautiful mind, an' she accomplished great things in her time." Another fudge, alas—Emily Dickinson's moment in the sun didn't come until her time on earth was over, but it all happened because the right person saw past the scribbles and seclusion. Amber let the half-truth roll of her shoulders like a promise of Santa's yearly visit, again rationalizing that the message was what mattered, and she summed up the tale the same way she always did. "You're a beautiful soul, Sweets, with an equally beautiful mind; not everyone will understand you because of
...how truly special you are—"

"C-huz my Da's a mun...uh...h-he's a...a moo..." Her nose wrinkled in confusion, trying to recall the word she heard from Uncle Raphie last week.

"He's special," Amber corrected gently; she suspected the word was mutant but if Emily heard it from Raph during one of his self-disgust-fired-turtle-tantrums it might also have been monster. That was one word Amber hoped the twins would never hear attached to their family, especially to them. "Da, your uncles, an' yer Gran'da Splinter are all special—they're not human on the outside but on the inside, where it matters, they're more human than most of New York. They aren't easily accepted by others because they look different, but that doesn't make them ugly—different isn't always bad." Emily's face fell, as always saddened by the realization that her father, uncles, and grandfather may never be accepted by the world. "You know what your Da said the first time he saw you?" Amber prompted to redirect that thinking; Emily shook her head, hazel eyes hopeful, and Amber repeated Donnie's words to the letter. "She's beautiful. You an' your brother don't look just like him, Em, an' you don't look just like me—you're each a wonderful mix of both of us. You an' your brother might not always be accepted by others because you look different, but to us, an' to anyone else who really matters, you're perfect, inside and out."

As always, the affirmation triggered Emily's shy nature and she burrowed into her mother's side to hide her blush and sheepish smile. Amber said nothing—she just petted Emily's hair and let her process the story and promise all over again. Normally, she'd recover quickly and want to hear more—stories, songs, poetry, anything went in these quiet moments. Normally, however, her daughter wasn't weak and weary from fighting a cold; for that reason, it came as no surprise when Amber felt the little body tucked into her side start to sag and slide down toward the mattress. She carefully extricated herself from the tiny lump leaning on her and laid Emily down to rest some more. As she tucked the blanket around the girl's shoulders and smoothed her frizzy hair away from her cartilage-shielded internal ears, she found a pair of light-refractive hazel-green eyes peering up at her. "Wuhun more?" Amber hesitated. "...please?" That did it—how could her heart ever allow her to resist the puppy-dog eyes?

"Just one," she agreed softly, "then you need to rest a bit, a'right?" Emily gave a sluggish nod and squirmed into a more comfortable position in the blankets as Amber settled on the edge of the mattress again. "This poem was written by the woman you were named for," she revealed gently carding her fingers through her daughter's thick hair, "Emily Dickinson."*** She took a moment to collect herself, gather her breath, and pull the lines from her memories, then recited in a slow, careful murmur.

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
    That perches in the soul –
    And sings the tune without the words –
    And never stops – at all –"

A gentle sigh broke the silent pause; dimming hazel eyes blinked slowly. Amber momentarily choked, her voice stolen by the sweetness of the moment, then continued softer than before.

"And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
    And sore must be the storm –
    That could abash the little Bird
    That kept so many warm –"

This time the breath was a yawn, partly smothered in a frilly purple pillowcase. Amber slowed and softened her words, petting Emily's riotous hair instead of playing with it. "I've heard it in the
chilliest land," she professed to the darkening eyes sliding closed, "and on the strangest Sea... yet... never... in Extremity..." She paused—a soft, wheezy snore answered her silence—a crooked grin split her lips. She ducked to leave a light kiss on the rust-colored hair. "...always, and entirely," she whispered altering the words and the message, "my lil' girl you'll be."

Mere minutes after she left the kitchen, Amber breezed back through the utility room again. "Hey, Hon," Donatello greeted his mate, "how's—" The question fell flat when he got only a watery smile and a squeeze to the shoulder on her way out of the kitchen. The genius twisted in his seat just in time to see her duck into the Lab and switch on the lights.

"Yer lahss is daein' jus' fine," Glen remarked, pointedly arching one grizzled eyebrow. "Hawd yer fashin'.”

When they first met—nay, even for the first couple years of the two men's acquaintance—Donnie wouldn't have understood even half of what the elder said. After he moved in, the two immediately began interacting regularly thanks to Amber's meddling. Thanks to that the genius was learning to 'talk the talk' – or, at least, how to interpret it. "I know," he admitted tugging at his already stiff neck. "It's just a cold. She's going to be fine and logically there's no reason to worry or fuss over something so small—but—"

"She's yer lil' lahss, Son," Glen countered with a smirk. "Logic has naethin' fur tae do wi' it."~

Donnie nodded in silent agreement—all his prized logic and rationality went right out the window when the twins or their mother were involved. Curious how they could be his Achilles Heel and give him strength all at the same time... "Save a' 'at worryin' fur when she brings hame 'er firs' boyfrien','"~ the elder added with a smirk. The genius nodded mutely, eyes locked on the lab's open door; when it hit him what Glen said, though, he lurched around so hard he knocked into the table and toppled half the chessboard.

"Oh, Hell no!" he blurted, eyes practically bulging. At his right, Isaac burst out laughing at him and quickly devolved into wheezing snorts and SHNERKS. "No boyfriends! Not gonna happen, not over my dead—" An unexpected impact—a tossed pawn—hit him square in the forehead right over the bridge of his glasses. He physically cut the threat off with his teeth in an audible snap. Glen's smug grin sucked all the wind out of his sails—a favor he returned with an accusing glare as he worked to right the fallen chess pieces. After how many boyfriends Emily's mother had before they met in life, who could blame him for being wary of boys around their daughter?

"What's wrong with Mum?" The two adults turned to Isaac in open confusion; how did he get from cackling to concern so quickly? Donnie blinked. He smelled Mikey's influence. "She's gone quiet again...is she okay?" Donnie craned his neck to see around the wall of cabinets, searching for some explanation. Amber was, indeed, quiet—too quiet—and after so many years of fighting her demons along with her, Donnie knew it was happening for a reason.

"I'm sure she's fine, Zack," he reassured Isaac but he didn't really feel the smile he wore. "She's probably just thinking too loudly again." He glanced over at Glen—the elder gave a slow, pointed nod—he turned back to his son, sliding off his chair. "I'll be right back," he promised, heading toward the hall. "Keep an eye on Grahn'Dee for me, okay?" Predictably, Glen grumbled under his breath about his son-in-law using the kids' nickname for him but aimed a sly wink at the already grinning boy. The moment Donnie was out of sight and earshot, Glen reached for the chessboard and smoothly turned it around a full 180 degrees. The genius' black pieces—and field advantage—were now switched with his few remaining white pieces. "...an' naow," Glen stage-whispered to the laughing, wheezing, snorting six-year-old, "we wait."
In the silent Lab, Amber stared through the bookshelves lining one wall, wondering just how she
found herself in that situation yet again. No, that didn't quite fit. She knew why she was in the lab—
she came to find her favorite volume of Emily Dickinson's poetry on the thought that Emily might
enjoy 'reading it' with her after her nap. How she wound up frozen in front of the bookshelves wasn't
the question at all. The real question was why, after so many years, she still froze upon realizing the
book wasn't on the shelves and never had been.

Ten years had elapsed since her new life began—ten long, confusing, heart-warming years of
managing the healing scars from the death that led her to a new life. After ten years moments like this
were nothing new but every time, they never failed to catch her off-guard. It was always something
simple, so harmless she never thought to guard herself against an impending shock. The children
asked about her life before she met their father, prompting her to search under the bed for a photo
album. She heard the tail-end of a forgotten song on the radio and dug around on her computer for a
digital file from a ripped CD. On movie nights, the brothers and their mates couldn't decide on a
movie suitable for any young eyes watching with them and she hurried to find the perfect family-
friendly classic on her shelves.

Every time she fully expected to find what she sought, exactly where she sought it; every time she
was suddenly hit with the reality that what she searched for was never there to begin with. There
were no photo albums under the bed she shared with her mate—the albums she remembered were all
stashed in a footlocker under the bed in her old house. The computer she searched wasn't her rusty
rusty '04 Toshiba dinosaur—it was a newer, higher quality laptop Donnie scavenged and
refurbished for her without ever being asked. (He claimed Kimber's computer was 'older than Raph's
turtle-tantrums and even less cooperative' but she suspected he just wanted to spoil her with some
him-exclusive awesomeness.) The movie never existed in this reality, nor the shelves she kept it on
along with the rest of her disks and tapes. Now the story was the same. That much-loved volume of
poetry was gone with her old life; it fell apart with the storm-driven collapse of her old home and
wouldn't be found on the bookshelves of this one.

All of those things—those pointless, silly, petty possessions that mattered none in the grand scheme
of things—they were long gone with her old home, the home she left behind with her old life and old
world. It was so ridiculous…that sudden moment of comprehension never failed to catch her off-
guard. She didn't mourn her lost belongings; she simply dreaded recalling her death after having
momentarily forgotten it.

Once, she sought to describe to Donatello the fallout after a panic attack, building off the words of
another describing the death of a loved one: "It is like walking up the stairs to your bedroom in the
dark," the writer explained, "and thinking there is one more stair than there is. Your foot falls down,
through the air, and there is a sickly moment of dark surprise as you try and readjust the way you
thought of things." The description was accurate she considered when concerning the death of
another. Her situation was entirely different. This feeling was like rushing down the stairs in total
darkness, realizing she counted one step short, and finding thin air beneath her outstretched sole.

A moment of weightlessness followed by the sickening pull of gravity…the expectation of solid
ground and the threat of an unfeeling void…the certainty of a measured descent interrupted by the
dread of an impending crash landing… Amber shuddered, cringing from the sick, twisting feeling of
adrenaline flooding her bloodstream and turning her stomach. Learning of another's death was like
counting a step too many; being reminded of her own death was counting a step too short and
landing in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

A wrought iron bench dusted with pollen—a stately Yellowwood tree in full bloom—this place is for
"Amber?" The unexpected address startled her, but not nearly as much as it once would have.
Donnie hovered in the open doorway, right hand still poised at the frame from knocking. "You alright, Honey?"

Amber gave him a small smile and nodded. "I will be," she promised with a shrug. He studied her silently, analyzing the smallest tells—from the precise compression of her developing crow's feet to the balance of blush and pallor in her cheeks, he always read her like a picture book. As always, he found the answers he was looking for…and right now, what he found was just what she always tried to spare the others. Once he would have pushed her for details, pled for an explanation and promised to take care of her, to fix her broken soul. Of course, during that time he would have found her cowering into the foot-well of his desk or drowning out an onslaught of memories with the pain of fingernails gouging her wrist. They were both well beyond that point—years beyond it—and they both knew it well.

He glanced out the door for witnesses or eavesdroppers. After a steady nod and thumbs-up at the concerned blonde and greener-than-usual brother watching from one of the old red tweed sofas, he pushed the door closed behind him. "There," he smiled and held his arms open in invitation. "No one's watching and worrying—if you're not fine, you don't have to pretend to be."

Amber's eyes watered at the unspoken truths hidden behind his words but no tears fell. In their first year together, she and Donatello were complete idiots about each other and everyone suffered for it. They couldn't communicate effectively and suffered over every miscommunication. He couldn't let go of his determination to save her from her problems long enough to realize she didn't need saving. She was sure every attempt she made at recovery was hopeless, never realizing she wasn't putting enough effort in it, to begin with. They hid their fears, worries, and dreads, and every time one of them stumbled over those secrets they couldn't believe the other felt like they had to hide any of it. He fell prey to suspicion and fear, and she to tears and anger. Now…

Amber sighed, stepping into her mate's protective embrace and soaking in his calming scent. Rich, pungent coffee—sweet spices and a note of citrus from his soap—the chemical tang of clean oil and the salty musk of honest sweat—she breathed in every note, mentally connecting sweet memories to each one. Within moments the churning in her gut smoothed and her scattered thoughts settled.

Now, she silently admitted to herself, they were more. They were past all those silly, ridiculous vices that once kept them apart and they were only growing stronger. She knew she wasn't the same person she was before she died. Something was taken from her in the storm-wrecked school—something else was left in its place when she woke in the underground—but those somethings were only a small part of her. Now she knew that she was capable of withstanding much more than memories of a time long gone. Donatello knew he couldn't solve her problems for her. He couldn't make all the dark memories of her past life go away, set her broken soul, or make good on his age-old vow to fix her. Now he was confident such things weren't needed. She was strong enough to weather life's downpour; she'd dance in it, too, especially if he joined her.

The atmosphere changed without any of the crackling that once made his scales crawl. Her breathing patterns were even; the fingers clutching his shoulder and opposite suspender strap were steady and gentle. Following their lead he dipped his head to nuzzle the juncture of her bare neck, grinning when she tilted her head invitingly. With one gentle pass of his lips over her pulse-point, he knew she was in control again. After a couple more pecks and a teasing nip for good measure, he leaned back to meet her eyes. "Better?" he asked without asking; she answered without speaking.
"A missed step," she explained without emphasis or shame. He nodded in understanding, well remembering her analogy of the stairs and the original she derived it from. "It's not as bad as before, not nearly that bad. It just always hits so…so suddenly…an' it takes a while to sink in, every time."

"Your thoughts realign and your memories fall back into place," he countered to show he understood, "and while it sinks in, you're vulnerable all over again—you feel lost, trapped, maybe even frightened…" Though she nodded she grimaced as though in disagreement and backed out of his arms, both hands quickly wrapping around her gut. "Nauseous, too?"

"Never to this extent," she muttered staring down at her stomach in accusation, "not for years." Her face went blank—her eyes drifted out of focus—then just as suddenly she shook it off as though discarding a ridiculous notion. "I'll be alright, Dee," she promised and let go of her stomach to cup his cheek in her palm. The pad of her thumb brushed along the pattern of prominent scales scattered across his cheekbone like freckles; her eyes followed the path wistfully as if mapping out a new constellation in the skies.

"I know you will," he answered returning the gesture and raising her a playful snout-to-nose nudge. Not so long ago, a moment so tender as this one would have ended with a long, breathless bout of lovemaking. Donnie wouldn't have thought twice about locking the doors and heeding that call, whether by spreading her naked across his workbench or bending her over his desk—the only question would be whether he wanted to meticulously draw out every last breath and shudder or crash her brain all at once like an over-worked processor. As sweet as the present was, he certainly missed the spontaneity from the years before the twins.

Now, alas, they had a reason to dial it back—technically two reasons, and one of them sat at the kitchen table chatting with his great-grandfather. Isaac had no idea yet what it meant when he noticed that 'funny smell' around his parents but neither was willing to endure answering those questions just yet. He was only six, how could they possibly explain sex pheromones to him without permanently scarring him?! Heck, he still got grossed out anytime they kissed around him and they never went to the lengths Raph and Mercy always did. Those two really needed to come with a parental advisory warning or something. At least one of the twins was probably too congested to notice any lingering Eau-de-Horndog on her parents…and if not, she should still be sleeping.

Immediately upon arrival in Emily's little blue and purple room, Donatello was all-business. He deftly checked her temperature, lungs, pulse, and a mess of other vital signs and organs that didn't necessarily need monitoring. He wasn't just checking on one of his human 'sisters,' or trying to figure out why Raph was ralphing when Mercy was the pregnant one.## Emily, she was his baby girl—he learned early on that there was practically nothing he wouldn't do for her, or for Isaac.

All the while he mentally charted their daughter's progress, Amber quietly wandered around the room needlessly tidying the already tidy room. Once the room was again neated to her satisfaction and the vaporizer on the nightstand was verified still acceptably full, she turned to address her mate…only to find herself speechless and choking up.

It was like staring through a window to another time and another life, where an older, more bristly man tended to his flu-stricken granddaughter. In that life, Glen lounged in his massive old armchair with Amber curled up half on his lap and half on his shoulder. He read to her until she dozed off, then refused to move a muscle or let anyone move her until she woke of her own accord. In an adorable contrast, Donatello perched just on the edge of the twin bed, darkened eyes suspiciously shiny. He seemed unaware that he'd long since stopped petting Emily's hair, and even less aware that a few riotous red curls were wound around his fingers. The visual was too precious for words—Em always had him wrapped around her little fingers and the rust-colored locks tangled in his proved the
feeling went both ways.

Without warning, a pair of bespectacled hazel eyes lifted to meet Amber's, brown in the shadowed room. "Was your hair ever this red?" he asked in a whisper.

"No," Amber admitted rubbing his bare shoulder, "but Gran's hair was to the day we lost'er...an' if Gran'Da's tales are true, my uncle's hair was nearly this bright before he faded to blond."

"Wh—he went blond? —but his hair's white!" Amber nodded, her eyes drawn to a fine trace of paler color gleaming from Emily's otherwise russet hair.

"I told you early greying runs in the family," she reminded him as they gingerly rose to their feet. "Red in your hair can fade fastest, but true redheads tend to fade to blonde long before they go white. Bart went white while he was still in high school...Mum says he wasn't much older than Emily when his red started fading." She thoughtfully tugged at the end of one waist-length braid shot with thick grey locks, considering the hint of strawberry blonde in her daughter's hair. "Her hair's always been so bright, so warm," she sighed, "the ultimate ginger. I hoped the early greying skipped over her since Mum only started blonding when I was in college. I didn't start seeing grey until I was a teenager...but...Em may end up white before she's old enough to drive."

For a moment the room was still, the silence only broken by the sniffles and faint wheezing of the still-sleeping child. Perhaps that silence was why the unexpected contact—a work-roughened hand cupping Amber's jaw and cheek—gave her a start. Donnie's eyes were soft and his smile even softer, almost humoring. "When you see yourself," he pointed out, "you tend to miss the brown and see only the grey. When Emmy's hair starts to fade, I'm sure you'll see the blonde more than the red...but if you break that pattern, you'll see something wonderful."

Amber glanced up at her grey-shot bangs—momentarily going cross-eyed from the awkward angle—then down at Emily's russet hair, and finally back up to Donnie's eyes. "I don't follow ya," she admitted. "What're ya haverin' 'bout now, Speccy?~

At first, he didn't answer—he just curled one arm around her soft waist and coaxed her close enough to share breath. He caught her right braid in his thick fingers and pointedly wound it around both. He ducked to inhale the lingering perfume of her shampoo. A few years back the generic coconut was slowly replaced by a more mature coconut oil and shea butter blend; he approved more every time he smelled it on her. "You see grey and blonde, Braids," he professed into the grey-streaked plait, "but me? I see silver and gold."

Silver and gold...someone, Amber decided with a decidedly wet sniffle, was intent on killing her with feels. Vividly she recalled the day Donatello first discovered her greying hair—the day she and Mercy started leeching out Kimber's punch-red dye and found the nest of coarse grey vipers infesting her otherwise brown hair. When the color started fading from her hair at nineteen, Amber quickly learned to despise it. She endured endless stares, unwanted advice for hiding the grey, and scornful looks when she decided dying it just wasn't worth the cost or trouble. Donatello took one look at those wire-coarse streaks and compared them to starlight in a scene straight out of a cheesy anime.

"Besides," he pointed out leading her back toward the kitchen, "remember what Issac got from me?" He cast a pointed glance up toward the ceiling with an entirely too innocent smile then playfully waggled his bare eyebrows at her. "Bald. He got bald." Amber couldn't contain her convulsive laughter; he barely dodged the teasing swat to his bicep.

"Oh, Dunnie, yer horrible!"
When Donnie and Amber stepped into the kitchen, all activity and sound suddenly cut off and the two occupants stared at them intently. The couple exchanged a suspicious glance, easily communicating their concerns without a single word. Amber checked Isaac's clothes for cookie crumbs but found only the bright, lip-gnawing grin of a child anticipating something hilarious. The genius, meanwhile, searched for clues from his crotchety chess partner but gave no sign of his thoughts. Finding no reason for suspicion Amber shrugged it off, put the kettle on to boil for some Echinacea tea, and set to emptying the dishwasher. On his way back to the table Donnie paused to teasingly ruffle the soft yarn blanketing Isaac's scalp. The boy squirmed, yanked his cap down over his ears, and giggled a protest at the teasing almost-noogie; the moment Donnie took his seat again Zack hop-scooted his stool closer anyway.

"Weel?" Glen reminded dryly as the boy snuggled up against his father's side. "It's still yer turn."~ It was a challenge, Donnie realized with a smirk—a challenge he'd gladly accept. His eyes dropped to the board, quickly taking in the locations of each remaining piece and their proximity the rest. Never taking his eyes off the board, he reached out to a seemingly random pawn, tapping the rounded top in a show of consideration. The smug grin in Glen's eyes fizzled out when the genius returned the taunting stare over his glasses. He shifted to a piece on the exact opposite side of the board, flashed the rook's *black dot* at his opponent, and replaced the piece right in the *kill zone* of the nearby *king*. Glen visibly deflated, seeming to sag from his faded hair to his stark white mutton-chops; he repeatedly glanced from the board to Donnie and back again in disbelief.

"Well?" the younger reminded in with no small amount of sarcasm and a high-arched eye-ridge. "*Now* it's *your* turn." A muscle by Glen's left eye twitched and a flood of heat followed it.

"Really boys?" Amber chastised, passing mugs of hot tea to her mate and son then sitting down. "Do I need'a separate you two?" The answer came, as it so often does, from the mouths of babes—or, rather, one young boy laughing so hard he could barely breathe between snorts and wheezes.

"Da' b-beat Gran'Dee!" Isaac howled as the embarrassed blush on Glen's face darkened to an irritable heat. "He—he even cheated—an'—an' Da still won!" Amber shot a stern glare at the elder but the crooked, toothy grin at her lips contradicted it.

"Oh, really?" she drawled. Her question went unanswered so she inspected the bottom of the trapped king herself. It was, indeed, Glen's king, and he didn't have any way of getting out of the trap. "You cheated an' still lost? What an excellent example to set for the young'uns, hm?" Glen bristled and fired back a long stream of unusually thick brogue in protest.

"Ah wiznae cheatin' th' bludy bawheid,"~ he groused at her, for once not bothering to tone down his burr for their benefit. "Ah wiz jist tryin' tae keep'im oan his taes."~ Donnie and Zak exchanged equally perplexed glances then shared a mutual shrug—after all, other than *cheatin'* the insult, and a couple of commonly twisted words, the rest of it was far too thick for either to understand him. Amber, of course, understood every word and snorted in dismissal.

"Secretly switchin' sides hardly strikes me as keepin' him on his toes," she countered with a teasing wink at her mate. "Just admit it, ya sleekit auld sook, ya were tryin'na make Zack live up to his name."~ At first, the only result was the red fading from Glen's face; then a deep, guttural chuckle rasped upward from his lungs.

"Ah'll drink tae tha','~ he rasped aiming a grin at Isaac then Donnie; he tipped his glass of Scotch to his granddaughter then lifted it for a sip. One moment, everything was fine—the mood of the room was jovial and the stress level nonexistent; the next every eye was fastened on Amber's suddenly pale face in horror. Eyes wide, hand covering her mouth and nose, she lurched out of her chair and bolted from the room, clipping the doorframe on her way through the utility room. Glen's glass never
made it to his lips, instead, hovering mid-air as he puzzled out her bizarre reaction. "Weel, 'at was odd! She loves th' reek ay—" Mid-sentence he picked up a trace of a familiar noise from the bathroom beyond. He froze. Slowly, menacingly, he turned to fix a dark, accusing scowl at Donatello. "Ahmber loves this stuff," he reminded as clearly as possible. "Why cannae she now handle the smell?"

Easily recognizing the insinuation and the threat accompanying it, Donnie stammered an apology, scrambled out of his chair, dodged around the table, and bolted after her. A moment later he ducked back to the doorway wearing a forced smile. "It's probably nothing," he told his son with a weak, tinny laugh. "I've got this." When he fled again, Isaac turned to his grandfather with a suspicious whine.

"Mum's gonna get fat like Aunt Mercy, isn't she?"

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Sure enough, Donatello found Amber bent over the nearest commode retching like a frat-boy coming off a three-night bender. Heaving a sigh he stepped into the tiled cubicle, pulled her twin braids to safety, and started rubbing her back. When the dry-heaving was over and the mess dealt with he followed her back out to the sink. He held his silence while she rinsed her mouth and splashed water on her face; she turned to him with a cringe. "I don't suppose that was another missed step," he deadpanned.

Amber held up one finger – a universal 'hang on a second' gesture – dug out her phone and checked the calendar. As she swiped further and further back in time her eyes grew wider and wider, then finally screwed shut entirely. She let out a rather pitiful sound halfway between a whine and a groan and slumped against his front, smacking her forehead against his plastron repeatedly. "Yup," she finally muttered to his waistband, "a big one."

In hopes he was misreading the situation but doubtful just the same, Donnie retrieved the phone from her grasp. Sure enough, 45 day-slots in a row were unmarked with little red icons in the corner, and there were no less than three missed reminders at the top of the screen. "You missed a shot?!" The braided head buried in his chest nodded weakly. A closer look at the screen revealed a probable explanation – her last contraceptive shot was due a couple days after Briallen brought a cold home from work and started generously sharing it with everyone in the Lair. Everyone spent the next two-and-a-half weeks playing hot-potato with the virus, then Isaac and Emily finally picked it up, too… and when the kids got sick, all bets were off. Between nursing the rest of the family and their usual tasks, they hadn't even had the energy for a half-awake tussle in almost a month... Donnie scrubbed his hand down his face, shaking his head in disbelief. Ridiculous though it may seem, he totally blamed the mutagen; how else would his swimmers have survived camping out until the coast was clear? "Glen's gonna kill me," he groaned, "again."

"If it's twins again," Amber snorted, "I'm'onna kill ya first."

"Heaven forbid you should appreciate we only had two." He rolled his eyes. "In the wild, a typical red-eared slider female would lay anywhere from two to twenty eggs per clutch." A tense, awkward silence followed the remark—he cringed. "That just buried me deeper, didn't it?"

"Yep," Amber answered dryly. "Good thing I like ya, Speccy; that's grounds for neutering."

After a long, rough day at the grade-school, all Briallen wanted was to come home, shower off all the sweat, kid snot, and finger paint, and curl up for a rom-com with her Mikey. Alas, this was not to be; one step through the bathroom door and she was faced with the worst news possible.
Amber and Donnie were necking against the trough sink. Amber's closed eyes were crusted with salt...her cheeks were stretched taut around a grin...one of Donnie's hands was protectively cupping her belly...and they were freaking glowing. There was only one possible explanation...

"He knocked you up again?!” Bree's horrified screech startled the couple apart mid-nuzzle. Her eyes darted frantically around her for some sort of defense but all she found was a can of disinfectant spray on the garbage can lid; she snatched, shook, and aimed it, all in one rapid movement. "Back!" she warned. "Back I say!" Amber and Donnie exchanged matching 'you're kidding me' expressions then turned to glare at her almost as one.

"Bree," Amber said dryly, "ya can't catch pregnant. It's not like that cold you brought us."

"Yeah?! Well, you two also said humans and mutants can't procreate!" she reminded shrilly. "Now we've got two hybrids underfoot and Dog knows how many more on the way when Mercy pops! I work with kids! They're terrors! Having my own would be like bringing work home, I'm not ri—"

The bathroom door swung open without warning, the handle cracking into the shower stall door behind it hard enough to dent the metal; before it even cleared Mikey barreled through in search of the fire. It took a minute but he figured out the situation rather quickly. After all, there was only one reason he could think of for his mate to threaten Amber and Donnie with a can of Lysol. All emotion drained from his face leaving him visibly exhausted. "Oh for Pete's sake, Bree," he sighed dragging his hand down his face. "Lighten up already. It's not their fault you're late."

Even after everything that happened that day, no one would have ever expected the once-in-a-lifetime event that followed...

Briallen Hardy swore.

- TITLE from a quote from Lemony Snicket's "Horseradish," also used in the first "Series of Unfortunate Events" film. This quote is included word-for-word in the scene in the Lab. That scene is actually what spawned this entire one-shot, to tell you the truth, and it's based on a very real occurrence. Almost a decade has gone by since my own storm happened and it's gotten easier to handle; that said, there are still moments that trip me up, usually out of the blue. A ridiculously common one is like what happened here, and it plays out almost identically. I'll go looking for a book, usually a non-fiction or a non-reference book I use for writing references, fail to find it, then suddenly realize I can't find it because it's gone...and it's been gone for years. I lost over half of my belonging when my home was destroyed but it never really strikes me as important or tragic. They were just possessions - clothes, dishes, keepsakes, all stuff I can live without - no one was hurt or lost, and that's what matters to me. The only exception to that is the books...my books are the only possessions I ever really mourned the loss of.

*Blind Chess – I don't believe this game exists IRL – or at least I've never heard of it – but it sounds like something Donnie would come up with to make regular chess more of
a challenge. He's a genius so he's gonna have to give most opponents a handicap, hence this version. All the chess pieces are carved of the same wood and unstained, and they're identified as black or white by paint on the underside. Gameplay is very much like regular chess but with a 'card-matching' element to it. To play you have to keep close track of which pieces are whose WHILE preventing the owner from muscling in on your turf. If you lift a piece to check whose it is and it's yours, you have to play it; if it's theirs, you lose a turn. If you capture one of your own pieces or, in this case, capture your opponent's piece with one of their pieces, your opponent gets to pick a captured piece from your stash and put it back into play on any square they prefer provided it's the right color for that piece. Because Donnie's friggin' brilliant and IS going to have the advantage, he would give the other player a handicap if he's ahead—for instance letting them have the first-turn advantage by playing black, letting his opponent pick where his reclaimed pieces go, and as shown here, putting his piece back in play in a way that breaks his 'check' on his opponent's king. Lastly, it isn't mentioned in-story because Amber wouldn't be aware of it, but Donnie's games with her grandfather are an attempt on his part to keep Glen's brain healthy and lucid. Glen is getting on in his years by this point—Ginny was eldest, born in his early twenties, Amber was born in HER twenties, and Amber was in her thirties when she died in 2011; add the number of years that passed in Amber's world before Glen agreed to come to the new world, and he's at an age where Alzheimer's would most likely have already set in. It's not a cure but by encouraging critical thinking and logic-heavy mental exercises in an elderly brain, sometimes the onset of Alzheimer's can be slowed if caught in time.

** Byron Isaac and Emily Jane – in TMNT fanfiction it's common for kids to be named for artists or given Italian names to 'complete the set.' Honestly, that's done so often I felt more comfortable breaking the pattern, especially since in the Paramount-verse Splinter didn't choose his boys' names – they were chosen by April as a child. That said, I felt it would be fitting for the guys to choose names of people they admired based on the message they wanted to send their children. I personally expect there will be a LONG argument between Raph and Mercy about why it's a bad idea to name their kids after Vin Deisel or Alice Cooper.

*** The poem is Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with feathers." It was the first poem of hers I ever came across and remains the one I love most out of many favorites by her.

# The memory of the Yellowwood tree and bench – Recall the return to Amber's Willsdale in "Absolutes." (Ch. 52 - 55) In chapter 53 Amber went to check on her family, stopped by the cemetery on the way to deliver Mercy's sobriety coin to Ellis Ross and found her grave. This memory depicts that moment, and the quote is from the scene.

## Raph's ralphing because he has 'sympathy morning sickness' – alas, this IS a real thing – sometimes new fathers start developing similar pregnancy woes to their expectant wives. Common problems are food cravings, food and smell aversions, fatigue, morning sickness, abdominal pain and bloating, and back pain. The scientific term is Couvade syndrome. If you look it up, be prepared to read a lot of Freudian "men want to bone their mothers" theories. XP
Note – I've deviated from my usual method for Scots in this installment and am not yet certain how it worked. After literally YEARS of searching for a reliable online English – Scots translator I finally found one that seems at least halfway legit. Thus most of Glen's speech here has been directly translated thus with a few small changes to keep it in accordance with his previously-shown speech patterns.

~Tak' tha'! – Take that! (he's bragging at what he thought was a kickass maneuver. SOOOOO mature, right?)
~Aw, soak yer heid – Go soak your head. Basically, he's saying 'screw you, ya braggart.' (Totally mature.)
~Lil' Scribs – In case anyone missed this, the name is an abbreviated version of "little scribbles," a reference to the noted habit of Dickinson's. (that is "scribbling poems on envelopes." A relative of mine introduced me to a book last year called "The Gorgeous Nothings" which reproduces Emily Dickinson's envelope writings in print and photos; I'd highly recommend it for anyone who enjoys poetry.
~Wheesht – Scots hush or be quiet, doesn't necessarily indicate aggression or cruelty; often used in a teasing or affectionate manner.
~Yer lahss is daein' jus' fine, hawd yer fashin' – Your daughter's doing just fine, stop this silly fussing.
~She's yer lil' lahss, Son - logic has naethin' fur tae do wi' it – She's your little girl, Son – [you're going to be worried,] logic has nothing to do with it.
~ Save a' 'at worryin' fur when she brings hame 'er firs' boyfrien' – Save all that worrying for the day she brings home her first boyfriend. YES, he SERIOUSLY went there! XD
~ What're ya haverin' 'bout now, Speccy? – Scots and MWT blend, roughly What nonsense are you spouting off now? Also, in case anyone's forgotten, Scots "Speccy" just means he wears glasses.
~Ah wasnae cheatin' th' bludy bawheid - I wasn't cheating the bloody bawheid. Bawheid – ballhead / bald person. Considering Amber picked up her tendency to tease her loved ones from Glen and Bart we can safely assume they both use the term simply as a way of saying 'that bald guy.' Keep in mind, though, the term can also be used to mean stupid or empty-headed so neither would ever use it as a serious insult OR aim it at Isaac. He's bald, true, but it would come across more as a real insult than a tease.
~Ah wiz jist tryin' tae keep heem oan his taes – I was just trying to keep [Donnie] on his toes. [challenge him]
~Ya sleekit auld sook / you were tryin'a make Zack live up to his name. – you sly old softy. / The name "Isaac" is from Hebrew, and the meaning is usually given as "he will laugh." Thus, Glen was being silly to make his sick grandson laugh. Like my own late grand'dad, this old softy is bristly with adults but turns into an absolute goofball around kids.
~Ah'll drink tae tha'! – I'll drink to that!
~Weel, 'at was odd! She loves th' reek ay— [pause] Why cannae she now handle the smell? – Well, THAT was odd! She loves the smell of [Scotch whiskey.] Why can't she handle the smell now? Basically, he's demanding "What did you do to my precious gran'baby?" (No, he really doesn't want to know, he's just being intimidating.)
Yeah, that's a Once-in-a-lifetime event because BREE DOESN'T CUSS. She spends too much time with kids to let herself pick up the habit.

A quick note: I'm not 100% settled on the timeline in this - it may change as the story progresses. I have a feeling that being a parent would mellow out Raph and strengthen his control, but the same would probably drive Donnie a little loony. After all, there's so much that can go wrong with kids - he's going to be worrying himself to death over everything from proper nutrition for a mammalian-reptilian hybrid to the dangers of gluten, sugar, and bleached diaper fabric. And let's not even get started on when his little heartbreaker daughter starts showing an interest in boys... I see a hacked Skype session in the future, with a MUCH more effective threat than he sent April:

"You don't know me and I don't know you, but if I find out you made my daughter cry, they will NEVER find all the pieces of your body. You've been warned."

Meanwhile Raph would probably just jump the BF in an alley, scare him straight, and act menacing anytime he saw the kids around each other. LOTS of vicious grins because he's an incredibly violent teddy bear.
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

This installment, focusing on Raphael and Mercy, WILL have a LONG smutty scene. Honestly, this chapter's really just an excuse to let my gutter-brain roam free in Merseael-ville for a while. Thus, this is at least 50% NSFW, and officially the first Raph/Mercy SMUT. Raph's squishy side is shown A LOT and there's really no major plot. You've been warned.

On a less pleasant note, I've got news. Cold and I have been struggling financially for most of our relationship but over the last year-and-a-half it's gotten steadily worse. It's gotten to the point where we're no longer just 'tightening our belts' and 'living hand-to-mouth' but fighting to dig ourselves out of a crisis-and-slashed-income-induced debt. (…thanks, Uncle Bob. We love you, too.) We're literally at the point where we're stuck weighing the importance of working electricity over not starving, and any other costs we could cancel will only end up costing us more in the long run. Updates of ANLoL are slowing down because IRL life is taking precedence…as in 'making sure we don't wind up on the street.' …because that's honestly a threat if we can't get this under control.

It's killing me to say this—especially my pride, or rather what little is left of it—but we could really use a hand. I've set up a Patreon account under the handle GhostChance13 if anyone has a couple bucks to spare. Honestly, any little bit would be helpful. As always, I'm open for commissions on DeviantArt. In the meantime, please be patient while Cold and I dig ourselves out of this mire we're in. Thanks for reading, and hope everyone's been having good weather so far.

LASTLY, in case I've forgotten to mention it here before, the "New Lease on Life" series now has its own Tumblr page. Hit up "get-a-new-lease-on-life" for music, art, randomness, SPOILERS, and occasional Tumblr exclusives. Aside from that, y'all can find me on Tumblr as Ghost-Chance.

This chapter dedicated to Cold for his heroic actions earlier this week…specifically, when we ran across Walker, my "Psycho Ex from Hell," Cold stopped an impending panic attack right in its tracks by pointing out Walker had his hair in a RATTY MAN BUN. PBTHT! Just like that, scary-ass abusive scumbag becomes a walking Dad joke. Thanks, Cold, I needed that! Also dedicated to ALL Y'ALL AWESOME READERS for reading and being patient!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The official Raph & Mercy playlist on Spotify

Suggested Listening: Survivor "How Much Love" and "American Heartbeat," KISS "I Was Made for Lovin' You," Boston "To Be a Man"
Denim blue eyes pried open a crack; free, they focused on their immediate surroundings, taking stock of what they could see. Dusky tan, scarred and scuffed—deep green, mottled in some places and paled in others—faded burgundy and even more faded black—ah, yes, that's right. Despite the compromising situation, Mercy's lips quirked up in a small smile.

Warm, chapped lips brushed her disheveled hair with every breath, the snout above them intermittently nuzzling into her scalp. A beefy arm around her waist held her close—anchored her against Raphael's bare side in his nest of pillows and blankets. The large hand attached to that arm cupped her distracting rump, fingers tangled in the hem of her favorite nightgown intent on keeping the powder-pink cotton from riding up in their sleep. Just above her head, Raph snored to beat the band, every now and then nuzzling into her scalp with a sleep-husky grumble or a sigh.

Mercy shifted a little more onto her side, leaning on his bare plastron andpillowing her pointed chin on her crossed arms; the powerful arm around her waist squeezed a fraction, urging her tighter against his side. All her life, she dreaded any sort of intimacy, disdained romance, and loathed all things mushy. Now she found herself relishing everything she once reviled. Now she couldn't help focusing on the silliest of details—faint lines of ruddy brown and pale green splintering from the outside corners of his eyes, the way his scarred lips tilted up in a content smile, the way he nuzzled and cuddled her in his sleep... Raphael was already one of her favorite people in her life, and now sleeping Raphael was well on its way to becoming one of her favorite things in life.

'Why'd it take so long to get here?' Mercy wondered wistfully. If she knew how safe, how secure, how cherished his embrace could make her feel, would she still have dawdled as she did? The blonde had no answers...and really, if she was honest with herself, she was still dawdling to a degree. After all, this was only a sleepover on the sly—a mostly innocent situation meant only to bring them closer and comfort them while her friend and his brother were gone to her home reality. Heck, Mercy even went against her usual habit and wore her panties to bed, but Raphael was still nervous about her nightgown riding up. As though confirming that realization, his fingers clenched at her hip, tangling in the hem of her nightgown. Once she feared he would hurt her—that he'd use her and throw her away just like her mother told her all men would. Now she knew she could trust Raphael; even in his sleep, his only wish was to keep her safe, if necessary, from himself.

One of these days, the tension between the couple was bound to snap. Until then, Mercy decided, nestling into the warm crook of his neck and chin, she was thankful for Raphael's patience with her. It was funny really...his personality gave no hint that he could ever be so tender with her. When she first met him, she was sure he was nothing more than a bratty meathead with no sense of humor. It just went to show that her first impressions of him were entirely, incredibly, undeniably wrong.

The sounds of grunts, curses, and flesh smacking flesh echoed through the dojo; panting for breath, sweat beading on their already slick skin, the opponents held a tense gaze of blue and gold. A heavy industrial beat filled the air, courtesy of an old boom-box and played-to-death CD. Just like that, the
standoff ended—the blonde dove at her partner fist-first, intent on knocking the smartass grin right off his lips.

"Yer gettin' a lil' betta, Merse," Raphael teased easily dodging her punch, and before she could retreat again, gave her a taunting poke to the arm. "At dis-rate, ya might actually manage to hit me!"

'It hits us like a bolt of lightning.  
Deeper down  
It's the sound of the American heartbeat!'  

"Shut yer mouth, Asshat!" Mercy barked back at him already winding up for another lunge. "Stay still an' lemme pound ya!"– For a time, the pattern continued unchanged—Mercy threw everything she had into her assault, Raph jeered and taunted her while easily evading and blocking, she snarled threats aimed at his various body parts, and the pair bantered almost non-stop.

To an outsider, the whole scene might look pretty offensive; anyone witnessing might rage at his harsh words and provocation and pity Mercy for putting up with his 'abuse.' That couldn't be further from the case, though. Raphael loved his Mercy—loved her far too much to ever intentionally hurt her. In moments like this, when he pushed her to surpass her limits and she pushed herself to wipe the grin off his face, he felt like his heart could burst right through his plastron; he couldn't tear his eyes from her, couldn't help but take in her sweat-slicked hair, flushing skin, and burning grey-blue eyes.

The massive mutant was proud of her—so proud he could just spit. Granted, she still couldn't land a punch on him unless she caught him off-guard, and she still struggled to acclimate to Donna Mays' *left-hand-dominance* after being *right-handed* before.* Even so, she was improving and Raph wasn't having to hold back as much now; little by little, she was slowly catching up to him, and she was already beyond the level of the average New Yorker. He pitied the mugger who ran into his Mercy in a dark alley. Now he didn't have to worry about some asshole getting the drop on her—she'd break a punk's teeth before he even got close enough to touch her.

The tides turned suddenly, the only warning a loud growl of "Fuck this!" from the over-heating human. Right before Raph's eyes, Mercy snatched at the hem of her sodden green tee shirt, wrenched it up and over her shoulders, and hurled it off to the side. The dismayed ninja followed the flying garment the whole way, wincing at the wet *smack* as it hit the wall and slid down to puddle on the floor. Swallowing around the knot twisting his throat, he slowly turned back to Mercy, wide eyes frantically fastened at her eye-level. 'Don't think about it—don't look, it don't even exist—just don't even think about it!' As focused as he was on keeping his eyes above the shoreline and his instincts in check, he was stunned to feel a set of knuckles sink right into the middle of his face. Even more surprising, the blow managed to off-balance him entirely.

Mercy gaped in disbelief as her hulking lover hit the mat ass-first. She closed her eyes, shook her head as though to clear out the cobwebs, and looked again, but the scene remained unchanged: Raphael still half-sat half-lay in a crumpled heap on the mat, visibly stunned. Without a second thought, she dropped to her knees in front of him, gingerly examining his bleeding—and possibly broken—snout. "Jeez, Hon," she muttered yanking out her red paisley kerchief to dab away the blood. "I'm sorry, I didn't—" Thick callused fingertips latched onto her wrist; she hesitated, cringing at the blood still dripping from his nose.

"Ya got me," Raph remarked in a daze. "Ya actually fuckin' got me." He shook his head, increasingly peeved with her. "If ya wanted ta hit me dat bad, ya didn't have ta strip fer a chance."~
"I didn't strip, Dingbat."~ Mercy retorted yanking her wrist free and poking him soundly in the plastron. "I'm still dressed." On the verge of shooting back an argument, Raph glanced pointedly down at her chest but fell silent. He expected the worst—expected her to be down to a bra or, even worse, completely topless, considering she slept in nothing but a nightgown—but instead, he stood corrected.

"Da heck's dis thing?" he demanded, picking at the noodle-thin strap of her black camisole with derision, but froze at the sight of a wider strap underneath. Red satin, he realized with a muddy blush—sleek, silky fabric the exact shade of a ripe Bing cherry… He couldn't tear his eyes off the flash of red even long enough to meet hers. "Ya weren't tryin' ta distract me, were ya?"~

"No," the blonde answered rolling her eyes. Men and boobs, honestly. "I'm gross an' sweaty so I took off a layer. Big whoop."~ Raph said nothing. His eyes were riveted to the strip of crimson peeking out beneath the spaghetti strap—his nostrils flared, already drying blood cracking and flaking with the movement. Red… His woman was wearing his color—even more so, she wore it where only she would see it. Before he met Mercy, it used to irritate him when he found Kimber wearing his color, whether it was punch-red dye in her hair or cherry red paint on her nails and lips. It always felt like she was using his color to stake her claim on him, but with Mercy, it felt like the opposite—it felt like she was acknowledging his claim on her.

Red never looked that good on Kimber…but Mercy…

If his head wasn't in the clouds, perhaps Mikey would have realized that the dojo was occupied. Perhaps if he wasn't daydreaming about his sweet little Angel-cakes, he would have registered the music and noises coming through the bead-strung doorway and run the other direction. Instead, he was completely zoned out, and upon realizing what he missed, he froze in horror, oversized feet rooted in the doorway and eyes burning.

It was no secret that Raphael was training Mercy in self-defense—the practice began while Hun was still after Amber but over time, it intensified. It was common knowledge in the Lair that the mouthy couple spent entire sessions flirting with their fists and screwing with their eyes only to vanish into some other room for hours afterward. Every time, when they finally reappeared with sly grins, Mikey shuddered to think of what happened behind that closed door. Alas, now he knew exactly what he was being shielded from…and it was worse than he thought.

"Oh, gross guys!" Mikey screeched at the couple tangled up in the middle of their favorite mat—Mercy straddling Raph's lap, Raph grabbing her backside in fistfuls, and both locked at the lips in a sloppy, tongue-y kiss despite blood drying on his face from a likely broken snout. All the while, Raph's favorite pirated Survivor album played on shuffle, "Eye of the Tiger" blasting from the speakers. "Seriously?! We train in here! Get a room!" The couple separated a second but before Raphael could confront his brother, Mercy yanked his head down into her half-bared cleavage and turned to scowl at Mikey.

"We have one," she snapped at the horrified mutant. "Yet in it—git!"~ Mikey found it hard to argue with that logic. He bolted for his room, a shrieked EW! bursting from his lips every time his feet hit the pavement. At the sound of his door slamming, Mercy turned back to Raphael with a grin; he was struggling so hard to stifle his laughter that his face was turning almost purple. "Now," she teased him as a loud guffaw finally broke loose, "Where were we?"

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**Raphael's Room, the next day, around Dawn**

In her previous life, Mercy was accustomed to a relatively strict schedule. She'd wake up around
dawn to help her stepfather with the cattle then work with the calves until quitting time. After the hands went home, she'd spend a few hours in her garden or the barn, or with her friends, then she'd crash for the rest of the night around nine. She was used to that schedule and rarely found herself waking up too early or sleeping too late. Now, in this life, she often woke at odd hours and had difficulty sleeping. This night was no exception.

For a time, she simply stared up at the ceiling of Raph's bedroom in disgruntled confusion trying to figure out what woke her. The answer came from the least expected source—the door creaked open. She bolted upright, denim blue eyes instantly fixing on the massive ninja-turtle-shaped silhouette hovering in the open doorway. "Whur ya goin'?"~ she demanded, her voice thick from sleep. Raphael froze, the outline of his shoulders tensing and his head ducking.

"Couch," he admitted gruffly. Mercy shoved the blankets off her legs and scooted toward the edge of his mattress, but before she could make it the whole way, he cut her off. "Don't," he warned still not looking at her. "Stay dere…an' cover up a'ready."~ The blonde shook her head in hurt confusion and reached over to turn on his lamp; he dared not look back, knowing exactly what he'd see. Long, damnably long legs, bare beneath her nightgown—sleep-mussed hair the color of ripe wheat—big denim-blue eyes hazy from sleep—maybe even the smooth curve of a full breast or the corner of a lean shoulder peeking up behind her sagging neckline… Mercy was fast becoming his greatest temptation.

"What's wrong?" Raphael said nothing, still holding tightly to the open door like a lifeline. Her voice cracked on a rephrased repeat of the question but he couldn't get out a word. He dared not open his mouth to speak knowing what might come out of it. His room was his normally his haven, his place of refuge in a home with three brothers, their father, and one brother's girlfriend. Mercy, of course, normally didn't count among those stressors; normally, however, his bedroom wasn't stifling with her pheromones. "W...What'd I do?"

"Ya ain't done nothin' wrong," he insisted, hating the quiet creak in her voice. "I just…" Exasperated, he stepped back, let the door swing shut, and slumped against it, pressing his forehead to the cool wood in hopes it would center him. "It ain't yer fault," he rumbled low in his chest. "Ya can't control what yer dreamin' about…an' ya can't control what it does to ya, or what dat does to me." The room was silent a moment, long enough for him to think he got through to her, then her response blew that out of the water.

"The fuck're ya talkin' about?"~ He cringed against the door panel, highly tempted to bang his head against it, but settled for a single light thump. "What's dreams got to do with the price'a beans?"~ She was really gonna make him say it, wasn't she? She really had no idea what she was doing to him. Before Mercy, Raph would have noped his way out of the room long before now—left before she had a chance to try dragging the embarrassing truth out of him—that, however, was before Mercy. Now, he knew running wouldn't solve anything; now, he had a reason to stay, no matter how the very idea made him want to bolt.

With a deep, steadying breath, he pushed off the door and lumbered back over to his bed, cautiously sitting on the far edge of it. His blonde lover watched him, her eyes seeing more than he wanted her to, as always. He always felt naked when she turned those too-intelligent eyes on him, but now, without even his mask and leather to hide behind… "I can't sleep, Merse," he admitted, absently popping his neck. "You were dreamin'…good dreams, da best kind…"

He glanced up, hopeful she could fill in the blanks as usual; instead, she was completely lost and responded with a shrug. The burning in his cheeks made him grimace with embarrassment. She was such a virgin… "See..." He looked away again, unable to meet her eyes. "...ya...ya smell too good...yer keepin' me up..." Sure enough, shocked blue eyes shot down to his boxers-clad groin,
offset by a blush that nearly matched his shorts. "Yeah," he added with a feeble smile, "in more ways
dan one."~

"Lemme– get this straight," Mercy demanded belatedly tearing her eyes away from his all-too-visible
tent and forcing them back to his. "You can't sleep 'cause I was dreamin' about'cha."~ About...him?!
Before he could demand clarification—confirmation that she was having a wet dream about him—
she added to it. "You can smell me, ya know what yer smellin', an' it's keepin' you awake...an' yer
runnin' like a pussy 'cause yer worried yer gonna do something stupid.~ Ya think you're gonna push
me into somethin' I ain't ready for."

"Give da lady a prize," Raph snorted, sure his cheeks were blazing. "Nailed it." For a moment,
neither said a word, then her left hand shot out knuckles-first and a sting blooming in his bicep. "'ey!"
he snapped clutching the muscle she just socked. South-paws really irritated him. "What's dat fer?!"~

"Fer bein' an idjit."~ she retorted crossing her arms under her unbound breasts; it took all the
willpower he possessed to tear his eyes away from the flashes of blushing skin peeking up over her
neckline. God, his Mercy was tempting... "You invited me to stay over, to begin with, an' ya know
what I woke up to? Your hand tangled in my nightgown keepin' it from ridin' up." He blinked at her,
thrown off-guard. "Even in your sleep, you're afraid of pushin' me too far, an' it's ridiculous. I trust
you," she finished off her rant, her tone softening and one small hand making its way up to his cheek.
"When are ya gonna start trustin' yourself?"

"Ya trust me?" he asked softly, humbled, but quickly shrugged it off along with her hand. "Ya shouldn't trust me." His jaw clenched, his mind obstinately replaying a multitude of his own dreams
for his torture. "You have any idea what ya do to me, Kid? You got even a clue what happens when
—when I start smellin' ya like dis? –what it makes me want?" Mercy crossed her arms and leaned
back against his headboard with a lopsided shrug, the very picture of nonchalance.

"I grew up on a ranch, Raph," she reminded dryly. "Granted, people probably go about it differently
than barn-cats, but it's basically the same thing, right?" He cringed; she had such a way of making
thing awkward. "You're not an animal," she reminded reaching up to his jaw and tracing her thumb
over the scar splitting his lip. "An animal wouldn't stop. If a bitch is in heat an' a dog smells'er, he
ain't gonna ask'er 'you good with this?' He ain't gonna hold back if she don't want'im—he'll just
plow'er with or without her consent if'n she don't bite'is ass.~

"Yer makin' dis real weird," Raph warned; she rolled her eyes in response.

"The point is I trust you," she explained softly. "If I say no, I know you'll stop. You'll stop if I freeze,
or if I get uncomfortable, or show any sign ya might not ought'a~ continue. I trust you...an' that trust
ain't misplaced."

Raphael said nothing, outwardly dubious but inwardly marveling at her faith in him...and worrying
it might be unfounded...and also wondering if his lack of faith, instead, was unfounded. Maybe he
worried for nothing...maybe she was right and he should start trusting her. Mercy's eyes shifted
between his, searching for something in them, her face softening and her cheeks pinking.

When it became clear he couldn't speak, she shifted away and went to let him go; he caught her hand
in his, anchoring it at his jaw, hopeful she would be able to read between the lines. "Raph," she
sighed in an almost reprimand, "if you don't trust yourself around me right now, I get it, but you don't
have to sleep on the couch. It's your room—I'll just go back to mine for the night, no harm, no foul."
Golden hazel, nervous to the point of fearful, burned into denim blue.

"Yeah," he rumbled, releasing her hand and lifting the other to brush her spiky blonde bangs behind
one ear; his fingertips then trailed down her neck, detoured along her angular jaw, then caught her
pointed chin in a gentle cradling touch. "You could leave...or..." His eyes shifted away, his cheeks darkening with muddy brown, then he met her eyes again. "...or I could...take care'a ya."

Mercy stilled, balking. Raphael could see it in her eyes as surely as if it was written there—he could see her recalling the unfounded accusations and warnings she lived with before they met. She still worried that allowing herself to experience physical affection would prove her mother right—that giving in to her emotions was an unforgivable sin. That, he decided, steeling his nerves, had to be stopped. "Was yer mother right?" he asked bluntly.

"What?" Mercy recoiled, eyes wide and watery.

"I asked if ya think yer mother was right," he answered, releasing her jaw and leaning back to physically give her space. "Are ya some kind'a loose woman? Are ya out screwin' anythin' dat won't complain?"

"How—How dare you?!" Mercy snapped shoving him. "No, I am nothing of the sort! I'm not a loose woman, I've never been a loose woman, and I never will be a loose woman! No amount'a sex would ever make me a loose—" Mid-sentence, she fell silent, stunned. His point was finally sinking in, her fire was fading, and judging by the proud smirk on his face, Raphael knew it.

"Exactly," he teased and reached out to ruffle her hair. "Ya got nothin' to be ashamed of, Merse, 'specially not fer doin' what comes natural. Ya deserve ta feel good—Hell, ya deserve ta have dat body'a yers worshipped,"~ he added under his breath unable to keep his eyes from drifting downward, but quickly lifted them back to her blushing face with a smug grin. "Ya deserve everythin' any other woman deserves, maybe even more than they do; stop thinkin' about what'cher mother said an' start rememberin' she was wrong."

Though the very idea was anatomically impossible, Mercy felt like a two-ton boulder spontaneously appeared in her throat; it would certainly explain why she was choking on thin air. Her massive lover easily recognized this and urged her to crawl into his lap with careful hands and gentle tugs. She buried her tearing eyes and blushing cheeks in his beefy neck, considering his words.

In her heart, she knew he was right—logically, there was nothing wrong with allowing herself to experience all the pleasures open to any other adult. Fears, however, were rarely very logical, and her mother's cruel treatment left deep marks on her. Still...that was a lifetime ago...she was stronger now, she wasn't just some scared, unstable little kid anymore. She had a paying job she earned on her own, she had a family she was helping support, she was working to accomplish goals and helping others accomplish their goals—she was doing so much now that a lifetime ago seemed merely a pipe dream. She was stronger now and facing her fears would only make her even more so. Raphael. She retreated from his collar, almost timidly meeting his eyes. If she jumped, he'd catch her...he'd never let her fall. "I..." She faltered, then soldiered on ahead. "I wanna try. Just...take it easy on me, okay?" A low, husky growl rumbled in his chest. One massive hand swept up her back to dive into her perpetually messy hair and eased her into his plastron—close enough, she fancied, to feel his heart thudding against her ribs.

"I wouldn't dream'a anythin' different, Babe,"~ he promised and traced the shell of her ear with his snout. A chill skittered down her spine—a pleasant chill, she admitted as rough fingers tilted her chin and chapped lips brushed hers. "Ya trust me...now trust yaself."

When this night began, Mercy was sure it would go like any other night they shared together. She and Raphael would drive each other crazy until she started getting drowsy, Raph would leave to finish getting ready for bed, then he'd return and take over the bed. When she inevitably woke in the
wee hours of the morning, she'd find herself cradled against his side, warm, safe, and secure, and quickly fall asleep again. In the afternoon she'd wake up for work, still cradled against his side, and find a sweating glass of sweet tea on the nightstand waiting for her. She still had no idea how he managed to fetch it without waking her.

Any other night, that routine would have been the case; tonight, however, was a whole new beginning. Tonight she lay sprawled on her back in his nest of lumpy pillows and musty blankets, her nightgown hitched up to her hips, squirming in both anticipation and discomfort. At her side, Raphael watched her silently, his focus entirely on her eyes rather than the unshaven skin under his fingertips. "Relax," he urged leaning in to steal her lips and ground his palm against her again. Something strange, almost like an electric current, sparked along Mercy's skin at every brush of his skin against hers.

"I'm trying," she insisted, unable to meet his eyes. Her body sang with pleasure; her mind, however, trembled in dread. She wasn't ready—she couldn't do this, she needed—

"'ey." The word, quiet and non-threatening, cut off her building panic; she lifted her eyes to his. He wasn't upset—there was no anger or impatience in his eyes—he was worried about her. Though his pupils were dilated with desire, she knew he wouldn't give in to until she was ready. "It's okay, I ain't gonna push ya," he reminded easing his free hand over to her side, fingertips tracing the full curve of her hipbone. "Is dere anythin' I can do to help? Anythin' dat might make ya feel safer?"

There he was, Mercy realized almost bitterly, being driven crazy by her scent, one hand cupping her crotch, and all he wanted was to comfort her. This was ridiculous…yeah, there was something she could use—nay, even needed—but he was doing enough…right? Surely—"'s'okay. Maybe some other time." Wait…he…?

"Y-You don't have to—to stop," she insisted even as he tugged her hem back down. "I-I just—"

"Yer scared out'a yer wits, Blondie," he pointed out matter-of-factly, propping himself up on one bulky arm. "I get it—okay, I really don't get it," he muttered in correction, "but I get dat ya ain't ready an' I ain't gonna push ya." Mercy fell silent, mentally berating herself yet again. She wasn't a scared little kid anymore…right? How could she move past this?

"Maybe…" She hesitated a moment, her eyes dropping to fix on his shoulder. Long elegant fingers, roughened from sparring and yard work, dove into her hair, yanking at the roots. As always, his meaning was clear to her—actions spoke louder than words, and she heard clearest what was left unsaid. Still...sometimes..."Sometimes…I really do need to hear it," she finished, the words slipping out in a mumble. "Sometimes the words do matter." She steeled her resolve. "Say it, Raphie," she urged, this time speaking intentionally. "Tell me, in words, why I don't have to be afraid—tell me what won't hurt."

He said nothing—he just stared at her, contemplative and sober. For a moment, she worried she upset him; her eyes fell to his plastron, contemplating the difference in color between her fair skin and his leathery green scales. Callused fingertips at her cheek silenced her fears, urging her chin up again. The moment their eyes met, grey-blue and golden hazel, her mind blanked, stunned by the gentle smile he wore. Once, she felt sure such an expression would be completely out of place on his face; now, she knew it was right at home, even though she was sure she was the only one who ever saw it. He took a moment to make sure she wouldn't pull away, then leaned down to claim her lips in a kiss that, though brief, stole the breath right from her lungs.

"I don't say it a lot, do I?" he sighed propping his chin on one meaty fist. "Words ain't easy for me—it's easier to show dan to tell." He caught her hand in his; under his guidance, her fingertips splayed across the warm keratin of his plastron. It was faint, but she could still feel a distant vibration through
the thick keratin—the throbbing of a heart beating faster by the minute. "I wait for ya because yer worth it...I'm patient with ya because ya deserve it." His scarred lips tilted up a little more on one side, his eyes momentarily dropping to her lips. "I'll keep waitin' an' keep bein' patient as long as I have to, Merse...I love ya."

Mercy sucked in a steadying breath—her vision wavered, eyes tearing up—she rolled onto her side, tucking herself into his front and hiding her tearing eyes in his neck. That one phrase, so often felt and so seldom heard, was exactly what was needed. "I love ya, Mercy Ross," he swore again in a soft rumble, nuzzling into her hair. For good measure, he repeated the sentiment a few more times, each time softer until it fell to a whisper.

"I—" Warm, deceptively soft lips snatched at her earlobe, cutting her off in a gasp. "I love you, too, Raphael," she breathed when he retreated. "I want...I want to keep trying..." A hum of consideration answered her, then a rumble of interest, then, finally, the lumpy mattress shifted.

Mercy's last life was full of fear, doubt, and pain, and they weren't welcome in this life.

Mercy lay back, eyes clenched shut and lips parted, one arm curled around Raphael's neck. Tucked between her spread legs and propped up on one elbow, he trailed kisses and nips along her shoulders and neck as he ground his palm into her center. The fear from before was gone, her discomfort replaced with desire. In all their time together, this was the most of Mercy's skin Raph ever had the opportunity to see—to feel, taste, and torture. It was well worth the wait.

Mercy once told him she died untouched, unused to any hands but her own, and in this long-awaited moment, he knew it was true. Every time his callused fingertips dipped between her lips, she trembled; every time he ground his palm against her clit, she keened. Everything was new and intense, so much more intense without the layers of cloth in the way, and she loved it—wanted it, needed it, couldn't get enough of it. With every moment and every movement, the chemical come-ons filling the air grew stronger and his resolve grew even more so.

Raph shuddered, stealing her lips as he dipped between the other set again to tease her entrance. He offered a distraction—a deepened kiss, heavy with nipping teeth—and eased inside. She winced, whimpering into his mouth before he even sank to the first knuckle; he sobered at what that told him and finally reliniquished her tongue, trailing nips down to her neck. "Fuck me runnin'—tight," he muttered against her racing pulse—an internal admission he never intended to voice aloud. His Mercy died a virgin, true, but he never expected the body she now wore to have done the same. This...well, it would complicate things, to say the least. It would take a lot of extra care before she was anywhere near ready to take him, even his fingers.

Mercy was lost in what she felt—drowning in desire the way she once drowned in her emotions. Her lungs heaving for breath, she couldn't even protest when Raphael broke their lip lock and never registered those lips trailing downward. They followed the sharp slope of her jaw down her neck, paused to paint the tender skin of her clavicle with a deep red love-bite, then traveled onward.

By the time she realized he had ulterior motives the painful stretching sensation was forgotten, replaced by something else entirely new—near-blistering heat clad in skin smoother than his work-roughened fingertips, slowly tracing a path between her lips. She bolted up onto her elbows, sure what she felt couldn't be what she thought it was. It took only a glance—just long enough to register two darkened hazel eyes glinting up at her over her untrimmed mound—to confirm her suspicions. If her senses were to be believed, her cheeks were well on their way to spontaneous combustion.

Raph arched one bare eyebrow at her over her dark blonde curls as though daring her to demand an explanation; the moment her lips parted to do just that, an awkward and intentionally loud slurp blew
that idea right out of the water. His lack of reservations melted hers away without protest. Eyes rolling back in her head, she flopped back into the nest with an unrestrained groan. Her hands lashed out, latching onto the skin of his naked scalp and raking her nails across it. This...she could get used to this, she decided and yanked at his skull. There was no pain from the stretching now, only nipping teeth, sucking lips, the clumsy lapping of an inexperienced tongue... A particularly well-placed nibble sent sparks across her vision; yeah, once the ick factor was out-of-sight, out-of-mind, she could totally get used to this!

Raphael was used to being driven out of his mind by the mouthy blonde but this was an entirely new level of insanity. He thought her pheromones were stifling when they woke him earlier; now, this close to the previously unexplored flesh responsible, he knew there just was no comparison. His lungs were swimming with the addictive little things, every breath sucking in more to torture him with. Even as he focused on Mercy—threw everything he had into answering the call of the chemical come-ons—he kept a tight rein on his own urges. Anything more than listlessly rocking against the mattress was stubbornly refused, deemed too risky to consider.

A small, vulnerable sound, halfway between a whine and a sob, drew his eyes upward to check on her. Tears gathered along her eyelashes but the bluer-than-usual eyes they framed were full of wonder, need, and adoration—they held no fear, and definitely no reason to back down. A deep, guttural churr rumbled through his chest, the vibrations triggering a startlingly feminine yelp of his name. He drew back with a breathy chuckle. "Such a girl, Merse," he teased sliding one thick finger between her lips again; this time there wasn't so much resistance though she was still tight—far too tight.

"F—Ah!—Ya—" Mercy finally gave up on getting out a single word in protest and settled for a frustrated whine; Raph, after all, was cutting off every attempt with a nip or a finger-flick, and that wasn't exactly conducive to intelligent thought completion.

"Relax," he reassured against her lips and urged her legs—those damnably long legs—up onto his broad shoulders. A hot, heavy, longing sigh escaped his lungs, punctuated by a gentle nuzzle at her mons. "Ain't nothin' wrong with bein' a girl." He cupped her distracting rump in one massive hand, lifted her lower half right off the mattress, and buried his snout in her heat. No, there was nothing wrong with his Mercy letting her feminine side show...if anything, this side of her could be the most intoxicating one yet. More than ever, he couldn't wait to learn every single inch of her body; more than ever, he knew when that day came, it would be well worth every day of waiting.

It seemed like hours passed but Mercy was sure it was only a matter of moments. Whoever heard of a virgin lasting hours, especially when their partner wasn't that experienced either? She shuddered, aftershocks still rippling through her well-tortured flesh. Even with her vision blurry and her eyelids drooping she clearly recognized the proud—almost arrogant—smirk splitting her lover's scarred lips—lips, she realized with a hot blush, he kept distractedly wetting with slow sweeps of his tongue. A breath shuddered out through her teeth.

"The things that tongue just did to her..."
and nerves, and swung her left leg over to join the right beside him.

"Yer still…" She faltered, cleared her throat, and tried again. "Um…need a hand?" He sat back on his heels, unsmiling but not upset.

"Dat depends," he replied without emphasis. Mercy shifted awkwardly, eyes darting everywhere except the prominent tenting of his wine-red boxer shorts.

"Depends…on what?" she asked. Instead of answering verbally he brushed a spiky lock of blonde hair behind her ear, trailed his fingers down her shoulder, and took her by the wrist. Without a word he slowly, cautiously guided her hand down to his groin, never taking his eyes off of her. The first brush of her fingertips on his cloth-covered length sent an alarming twitch through the flesh under them; Mercy flinched, eyes wide and borderline panicked. Was it supposed to do that?!

"Depends on dat," Raph rumbled tugging her hand away from his crotch and laying it instead in her lap. "Yer not ready yet, Merse," he reminded without censure, "an' dat's fine…I'm good fer now." She choked—her eyes tore away from his, fixing wetly on the floor beside the bed—even white teeth dug into her kiss-swollen lower lip. Anyone could have seen the unease in her eyes, but that unease was coupled with even more visible frustration. After everything he said, everything he did for her, she still wasn't ready…she still couldn't shake the dread crawling up her spine or the memories of unfounded accusations. She wasn't a tease—she wanted Raph, with every fiber in her body she wanted him!—but she just—she couldn't—

"'ey—Merse, lookit me."~ The demand, while not harsh, was firm; she reluctantly met his eyes, half-expecting to see disappointment. She saw none—if anything, his eyes were tender even with his pupils blown wide from lust. His words and tone said I understand, I'm not upset but his posture and eyes said something entirely different—they told her he wanted nothing more than to strip her bare, spread her across his sheets, and deal with 'that pesky virginity.' If not for the words ringing through her mind—cruel, untrue words that taught her to fear love years before she and Raph ever met—she'd likely agree with that idea wholeheartedly. "It's alright, Babe," he insisted cutting off that line of thought. "I ain't upset an' you don't have ta be either. I can wait 'til yer ready."

"I just…" Mercy sighed, darting a nervous glance back toward his groin; a harsh, irritable breath hissed out through her teeth. She had no qualms about riding him like a workhorse while he was fully clothed but the minute he stripped to his shorts, she felt like his crotch was about to bite her. She felt ridiculous. "What if I'm never ready?" she asked weakly. "What if I'm——"

"You'll get dere,"~ Raph cut her off with a gentle, encouraging smile, his voice a low rumble she felt more than heard. "I'll take time but it will happen—when you can touch me wit'out gettin' scared an' you can lemme in wit'out makin' a mistake…dat's when you'll be ready, an' not a day before."~ She uttered a wordless skeptical sound; he caught her by the jaw, brushing the rough pad of his thumb along her cheekbone. Distantly Mercy wondered if the hand was the same one he tortured her with earlier, but she ultimately decided she didn't want to know. "Yer worth waitin' fer, Sweethearts."~

As always, the seldom-used nickname choked her up. When she and Raphael first began this complicated dance of theirs, Mercy expected all sorts of pet-names from him—macho, piggish, rude, generic, she thought of them all and prepared protests for each one. She wasn't surprised when he transitioned some from their friendship to their newfound relationship—Kid, Blondie, Merse, they all still fit even now that they were making out more than hanging out. Babe, too, made sense to her—it was a common choice and not too mushy, and it fit with his ultra-masculine personality. Then Raphael, the turtle as bristly and mush-resistant as she was, blew her mind completely…he called her Sweetheart. The first time he used it on her, the name ripped open the floodgates and drowned her in
mush but she found she didn't really mind all that much. He never let it show around anyone else but Raphael really did have a soft side.

"If yer sure," she relented, and pointedly fixed her eyes on his. "...Darlin'." His eyes widened as he processed the new name; his gentle smile spread into a boyish grin, and he ducked his head, practically radiating an air of 'aw, shucks.' Yes, he definitely had a soft and squishy side underneath all the bluster... Mercy patted his thigh and swung her legs over the side of the mattress. "I guess I'll go get a drink or something," she offered as she tested the steadiness of her legs. "You know, give you some time." She glanced down at his lap again in consideration. "Uh...how long will you need?"

"How long?" he retorted with a wolfish grin. "Babe, the longer ya dawdle, the less time I'll need." She seemed to consider the idea a moment, thoughtfully tapping one finger against her pointed chin, then abruptly sauntered to the door with a shrug.

"I'll give ya five," she teased over her shoulder, "an' I'm not sleepin' in the wet spot." With that, she left him to get himself together; he deflated.

"Aw, dat's just cruel," he muttered but made no attempt to call her back. After all, he still had a problem to take care of...and that problem was one Mercy really wasn't ready to help out with despite the temptation in her eyes. Without further delay, he rolled onto his back in the pillow nest, wrenched his waistband down, and got to work on the problem at hand.

Mercy Ross was a league all her own—the smartassery to his blustering and the blonde to his beefcake—and she was steadily driving him right out of his gourd.~ 'Dat crazy woman's makin' a soft-shell out'a me,' he thought to himself as he focused on the memory of the lustful abandon in her eyes mere moments before. For being a woman so averse to mush, she certainly had a knack for making him feel as mushy as a lump of raw pizza dough...and damned if it didn't feel right.

~WORDS~

- Yer gettin' a lil' betta! – You're getting a little better! (Progressing in your training, specifically Mercy's doing better about suppressing her innate urge to right-hand everything when she's now a lefty.)

- Dis / dat / da other thing – With Raph, basically anything that starts with d- that doesn't normally start with it actually starts with th-.

- Stay still an' lemme pound ya! – Sit still and take your beating!

- If ya wanted ta hit me dat bad, ya didn't have ta strip fer a chance – If you wanted to hit me THAT BAD, you didn't have to take your clothes off for a chance!

- Dingbat – Just another lovely little nonsense insult sadly neglected by modern language. Not just a symbol font – it's generally used to blend 'someone with bats in their belfry' together with 'this person's dinged.' (Dinged – pronounced like the bell sound ding but with the past-tense -ed on the end. Insult, but more silly than offensive, usually used to imply that someone's brain isn't fully functional or that they're 'more than a little odd.'

- Ya weren't tryin' ta distract me, were ya? – You weren't trying to distract me after all, were you?

- Big whoop – Roughly "big deal" implying something isn't a big deal. Not to be confused with a whoopin.' We have one—yer in it—git! – We have a room—YOU'RE in it! Get out!

- Whur ya goin'? – Where are you going?

- Stay dere...an' cover up a'ready – Stay over there...and cover up already. This one's a sight more harsh than what I usually have Raph spouting, TBH.
The fuck're ya talkin' about? – What the fuck are you talking about?

What's dreams got to do with the price'a beans? – a Midwestern colloquialism. "What's _ got to do with the price of beans?" generally means "What's that got to do with anything?" or "How the heck does that even matter?"

In more ways dan one – In more ways than one. Basically Yeah, you're keeping THAT up, too.

Lemme – MWT let me

About'cha – about you

You can smell me, ya know what yer smellin', an' it's keepin' you awake…an' yer runnin' like a pussy 'cause yer worried yer gonna do something stupid. – She's pulling no punches here. You can smell me, you know what you're smelling, and it's keeping you awake…and now you're running like a coward because you're worried you'll do something stupid.

ey! What's dat fer?! – Hey! What was that for?!

Fer bein' an idjit! – For being an idjit! (Idjit is generally used as a more humorous alternative to idiot, and tends to imply the person is being an idiot because they're stubborn rather than stupid. (Ya know how the Inuit have bundles of words for snow? Well, that's what Missouri's got goin' on with idiots.)

If a bitch is in heat an' a dog smells'er, he ain't gonna ask'er 'you good with this?' He ain't gonna hold back if she don't want'Im—he'll just plow'er with or without her consent if'n she don't bite'is ass. – The awkwardness level just went nuclear. If a [female dog] is in heat and a [male dog] smells her, he's not going to ask for consent. He won't walk the other way if she doesn't want him, he'll just [redacted on account of obscenity] with or without her approval if she doesn't bite him first.

Ya might not ought'a – you probably shouldn't

Take care'a ya – take care of you. Raph's mush is showing. :3

Amount'a – amount of

...specially not fer doin' what comes natural. Ya deserve ta feel good—Hell, ya deserve ta have dat body'a yours worshipped - ...especially not for doing what comes naturally. [Sex, people. He's talking about sex.] You deserve to feel good—Hell, you deserve to have that body of yours worshipped. Poor Raphie's brain just swan-dived into the gutter.

Stop thinkin' about what'cher mother said an' start rememberin' she was wrong. – Stop focusing on all the horrible lies your mother buried you under and start focusing on the fact that they were never true.

I wouldn't dream'a anythin' different – I wouldn't dream of being anything but gentle and patient. No, he's not always going to be a soft-shell with her – eventually once she's no longer scared of his junk, he's liable to pound the stuffing out of her in a Raph-ier manner.

Fuck me runnin'! (FMR) – an oath sometimes heard in the deep Midwest and South. Usually expresses disbelief or shock. When accompanied by an unrelated statement it can be used to emphasize that someone's completely serious, like FMR, I ain't done nothin' wrong!

'ey—Mercy, lookit me – Hey—Mercy, look at me. He's trying to draw her out of her ruminations and back into the moment.

You'll get dere, it'll take time but it will happen. When you can touch me wit'out gettin' scared an' you can lemme in wit'out worryin' yer makin' a mistake…dat's when you'll be ready, an' not a day before. – You'll be ready eventually—it won't be soon but you will be ready someday. When you can touch me without getting spooked and you can let me touch you without worrying you're making a mistake…THAT'S when you'll be ready—then, and not a day before. Food for thought if you haven't had your chance yet, JS.

Yer worth waitin' fer, Sweethaht – You're worth waiting for, Sweetheart. FIND A
HUMAN VERSION OF THIS RAPH! Screw the "let's just get it over with" Raph, ladies and gents, you DESERVE THIS RAPH!

- **Out of [his/her/their/etc] gourd** – this is a colloquialism that is falling into disuse, at least in my little corner of Missouri. This statement—Mercy's driving Raph out of his gourd—means she's driving him crazy.

Chapter End Notes

*Mercy's right-handed, Donna's left-handed*
- I realized in writing this installment that I never spelled this out before! It's mentioned in-story countless times that Mercy's stepfather taught her free-style boxing to boost her confidence and she spent long hours rasslin' with Aaron, but come her arrival at the Lair she can't even throw a proper punch. This wasn't a plot-hole, per se, so much as a "OOPS! Ghost forgot to explain her reasoning here, D'oh!" So. Mercy was right-handed so she automatically tries to use her right hand for everything; her new body's previous owner (Donna Mays) was LEFT-HANDED so everything Mercy's tried with her right hand has failed abysmally. Raph started out with building her strength back up but after a keen observation by Lefty (yes, he's literally "a lefty") he extended that to improving her control of both hands. Eventually she will wind up functionally ambidextrous – something somewhat common in left-hand dominance but almost unheard of in right-hand dominance. (Righties have to practically have our dominant hands lopped off to make much improvement in our left hands. It's sad.)
Dribble-Drabble-Drop: Rain / Thirst / Mom

Chapter Summary

"Rain" - deleted scenes rainy-night smuts with Donnie and Amber in Willsdale.

"Thirst" - Donnie tries to get used to something Amber likes very much. It goes adorably badly.

"Mom" - Kirk the cat takes the spotlight in this deleted scene. That poor fuzzy Mama's boy is gonna be so traumatized...

Chapter Notes

(If you've already read the update for "A New Lease on Life" then it's safe to skip this author's note as it's practically identical...just in case there's still someone following THIS story but not the MAIN story.)

WELL. It's been about a donkey's age since I've been able to update this. Normally I'd apologize for the wait...but...well, honestly, I've been beating myself up enough as it is and it's not like I could have prevented it. Kinda-brief update for anyone wondering: I've warned about an impending grief hiatus since my uncle Bob's cancer diagnosis, and the hiatus came to pass in December. Uncle Bob finally lost his fight to cancer after two years of treatment and fading, shortly before Christmas. The end came on rather suddenly but after the deathwatch he went peacefully and without pain. His death really messed me up, especially since I was already suffering from depression. Our first Christmas without Bob was also our last Christmas with Granny Chance, his mother and my grandmother...she suffered a massive stroke in January and died soon afterward. In the space of a month, my family and I lost two members, one right after the other. In a word, the whole situation has been FUCKED and it's still not completely over. There are good days, and bad days...and, to quote a certain Del Toro film, "Then there are the really bad days." Between those, we're all slowly working our way through the fallout and healing process. It SUCKS.

TBH, I don't know for certain if I'm going to be able to catch up to my previous writing abilities or pace anytime soon but I'm certainly going to try. Also, quick note if you've been reading this on Tumblr – they recently enacted a WORDBLOCK LIMIT on text posts of 100 blocks AND the admins flagged "The Blonde and the Beefcake" and hid it without giving me the option of appealing it. Hello, Staff, you specifically said WRITTEN erotica was allowed - guess what, that's written erotica! ...sigh. Tumblr's new policies are really pissing me off. From the looks of it I won't be posting my stories over there anymore unless they're squeaky-farkin'-clean.

Lastly, I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone for their patience and understanding, and give a shout-out to some wonderful people who've made this new chapter possible. This chapter is dedicated to Wolf, Newt, and Ihlni for their invaluable support and kind words – to my hubby Cold for letting me ugly-cry on him without complaint and never failing to remind me that life has to go on – to my ma-in-law for teasing me about earning a nasty hangover instead of acknowledging that I looked like death-on-the-rocks and was obviously crying before I answered the door – to my mother for being a bloody
SAINT and to my father for intentionally being an asshole when someone to fight with was just what I needed – to Wanda Farmer on AO3 and vbt22220 on FFnet for their encouragement in reviews, the folks on Tumblr who offered kind words when I needed them most, and to all you wonderful people who’ve stuck by me, read my stories, and are still reading after all this time. Above all, though, this installment of the Gallery of Memories is dedicated to the memory of Granny Chance and Uncle Bob – may they ever rest in peace.

Dribble-Drabble-Drop: Rain / Thirst / Mom

- **Part I – Rain** was originally to be a scene in 3rd or 4th "Absolutes" chapter. Those four chapters ended up being so massive, however, I decided to skim and skip it for later. Because this was cut before being finished, it's a bit rough and scant in details but it still gets the point across. Now here you have it: The official first "Rain is a good thing" moment, even if Amber doesn't quite realize it yet. Rated low-M if not high-T for a ridiculously mild lime.

- **Part II – Thirst** was intended to be a much longer and more detailed one-shot for the Gallery of Memories. The plot was my basic 'fluff with smut' installment – Donnie tries Scotch, it goes badly, Amber plots, Amber feeds him Kahlua in his coffee, he likes it, transition to some smut on the workbench just 'cause, end with some cutesy mushy snippet. Well, that's how it was MEANT to go but I just couldn't get it past the "Amber plots mischief" scene. :| This is set in the future, sometime after the beginning of Part IV and well before the birth of the twins. Rated T for drinking and one or two instances of foul language.

- **Part III – Mom** was written for chapter 59 but it ran too long. Considering everything else that has to happen over the next three or so chapters, I elected to trim it off and release it elsewhere…after releasing it as a preview for the chapter. Yeah. Brilliant, right? Writer's block makes us all idiots, I guess. Anyway, set shortly after Kirk comes to live at the Lair and written 3rd person but from his POV. No, Kirk doesn't get any respect for his hard work. Yes, he's going to be traumatized. No, Donnie has no clue and yes, he will find himself inexplicably on the wrong end of Kirk's unending jealous wrath. Rated high-T for a brief vague scene of a suggestive nature and language.

Rain

*SL: Poets of the Fall "Carnival of Rust," Gary Allen "Every Storm Runs Out of Rain"*

In the first three days Amber and Donnie spent in Willsdale, there wasn't a single rain-shower; this, of course, was very much abnormal weather for the height of May in Southern Missouri. The night of the third day a real whopper of a storm rolled in while the evening fog rolled out. The sound of rain hammering the shed's corrugated metal roof was soothing to Donatello until a loud, rolling concussion rang out. That first thunderclap was punctuated by an ear-piercing shriek from the other-
worlder tucked into his chest.

Now, over an hour after the storm began, both were wide awake and the weather was only worsening. Often before, Donnie wondered if Amber could ever learn to enjoy the sound of rain on the tin roof of the barn in Northampton; now he knew for certain she was still too afraid to even tolerate it. Despite all his reassurances, and despite all her attempts at calming down and regulating her breathing, Amber was a complete mess. Every thunderclap sent her pulse skittering, and every new wave of rain and gust of wind sent her wheeling about to pace the other way. She was doing so well before...was this all it took to send that progress out the window?

'Always with the pacing,' he thought with a frustrated sigh as she lurched to the other end of the small shed and turned again to retrace her steps. 'Pacing never helps, it only makes things worse. If I could just—just get her to stay still and listen...' His eyes widened behind his glasses. Maybe... maybe that was the idea? He steadied his resolve; it was certainly worth the risk. He shot off a quick do not disturb text to Aaron—after all, the blond had already come to check on them twice since the storm hit—then cleared his throat. Amber jumped straight up in the air, her frantic eyes latching on his. She was losing control and incapable of blocking out her body's responses to stimulus...but maybe—just maybe—that was exactly what the doctor ordered.

"Come here, Honey." Reluctantly, Amber crept over and joined him on the old creaky mattress on the floor. Without giving her a moment to ask for answers, he tugged her into his lap, wrapped one arm around her waist, and cupped her cheek in the opposite hand. "Do you trust me?" he asked. It was plain from her eyes that she didn't understand his point; she was still lost to the sound and smell of the rainstorm. Another crack of thunder outside tore her eyes from him to the roof, and he gently guided them back to his. "I need you to focus, Honey," he insisted, rubbing a soothing pattern up and down her back—upward for a few beats, down a few beats more, reminding her of the calming breathing cadence she needed. "Do you trust me to protect you?" he asked when she caught on and started trying to regulate her breathing. "You know I'll protect you, provide for you, and keep you safe, right?"

Amber's eyes watered; she nodded. She trusted him with all her heart—she always did—but in moments like this when the sky turned foul and lightning splintered the clouds, it was hard to brush off her fear. Before she could even get a word out, however, Donnie threw her for a loop. His lips curving in a sly grin, he tipped her off his lap and onto the mattress, and nestled himself between her sprawling legs. "I love the rain," he reminded as she stared down at him in flushed disbelief. "You used to love it as well, before your fears...and you'll learn to love it again, I promise you."

"Donnie," Amber muttered, bewildered. "What...what're you—"

"Trust," he reminded and tugged off her soft jersey pajama pants and sensible cotton briefs. "Let it go," he urged easing one leg after the other up onto his shoulders, "let go of your fears—grab onto me instead. Focus on what you feel, and focus on what you hear." Before she could get out another word he dove in without hesitation.

By the next thunderclap, he was silent, throwing his all into driving her out of her mind. He wasn't usually rough with her—occasional unintentional biting aside—but now he held nothing back. Gentility wouldn't help. The rain wasn't gentle—the thunder wasn't considerate—it would take intense emotions and overwhelming pleasure to conquer her panic.

By the time the thunder softened and the storm began moving on, Amber's cries of fear were entirely gone, replaced by utterances of a more pleasurable sort. When the rain, too, began to die down, Donnie eased his exhausted lover down from the last blinding peak. He nuzzled her soft belly, caressing the fragile skin of her wrist and noting her stabilizing pulse, then looked up to meet her
eyes, full of pride and relief.

"Dee…I don't…" Amber trailed off as he crawled up beside her. Unable to find words, she lost herself in his eyes, cupping his cheek in her hand and tracing the softer, paler scales trailing along his jaw. His hand covered hers, lacing their fingers and squeezing.

"Rain is a good thing, Braids," he promised instead of explaining himself. "You knew that once before. I'll help you see it again if you'll let me."

Choking up, she tucked herself into his plastron, nodding into his shoulder. She didn't understand how he could accomplish that promise, or what it had to do with repeatedly blowing every circuit in her brain during a rainstorm, but one thing was certain… "I trust you." Outside, a gust of wind hurled a torrent of rainwater at the side of the shed as if demanding her fear; Amber didn't even so much as flinch. "With all my heart, I trust you."

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**Thirst**

*SL: Rush "Entre Nous"

It's all you, Donnie. This is your time to shine – your chance to show Amber just what you're made of – to show everyone you can be as much of a badass as the rest are!

Regardless of the genius' running internal commentary, the juice glass on the kitchen table seemed to pay him no mind – nay, worse, it was taunting him, shoving its caramel-colored contents into his face and laughing! Gritting his teeth, he stared down the Scotch as though it challenged him to a staring contest, refusing to budge.

No one told him to drink the foul sludge. No one even offered it to him. Amber tried once, back when they were still only awkwardly close friends, but she no longer bothered to offer. After all, she told him once before, if he can't enjoy it, offering it to him would just be rude. Now many years have gone by. Amber is his woman, his mate, his everything, and she's only ever respected his choices in not drinking. For that reason and that reason alone, Donatello sat at the table, staring down a half-full glass of Amber's favorite Scotch and willing himself to be the badass he once told Raph he could be.

Enough thinking about it – enough putting it off and waiting for the nerve to drink it – the time was now! His face twisting into a horrendously disgusted grimace, he held his breath, lifted the glass to his lips, and tipped it back. He promptly choked, torn between swallowing the offensive poison and letting it burn a hole in his gut, and spitting it across the table only to face Amber's wrath for wasting it. Unable to make a decision, frantic for relief from the stout, smoky fire burning in his mouth, he tried to force his throat to contract – tried to choke down the liquid fire before it came belching right back out.

Nope. *Nope, nope, NOPE!* Unable to swallow, afraid to spit, he lurched out of his chair, bolted through the utility room to the main bathroom, and promptly upended himself over the nearest porcelain fixture. As he violently hacked up the mere spoonful of whisky – and what felt like every meal he ate in the last week – one thing was entirely clear to him: that was so not worth impressing Amber!
Amber stared at the kitchen table in open confusion. Or, rather, she stared at its contents: her freshly-opened bottle of Glenmorangie, a clear beveled glass chipped at the rim, and two fingers-worth of liquid gold gleaming in the bottom. Moss green eyes darted around the kitchen searching for the culprit but found no one. What she was seeing made no sense – she just got home from work, after all, and she didn't drink before work. Mind spinning in circles, she scrounged for an explanation.

She and Raphael had an agreement regarding her whisky: anytime he wanted a drink he was welcome to it so long as he let her know to pick up more before she ran out. Raph, however, always cleaned up after himself, and while he was more fond of beer and bourbon, he wouldn't just leave a glass of anything lying around. Leo was out of the question – he only ever drank Sake or wine once in a great while – and cooking aside, Mikey was largely uninterested in alcohol. That left only one possible culprit, but it made no sense – absolutely none! Donnie couldn't stand the way her favorite poison smelled, so why would he drink it on the sly?

A moment later, she got her answer. Granted, that answer came in the form of renewed retching from the main bathroom and a few disgusted grumbles.

Oh, Donnie. She shook her head at the realization, her lips tilting into a crooked grin. When would that silly speccy realize he didn't have to be anyone else to impress her? When would he realize she loved him for who he was and she didn't want him to change for her? A sly grin splitting her lips, Amber snagged the glass, slowly tipped it back, and savored the delightful liquor she once called nectar of the gods.

Once the glass was drained, she set it in the sink and poured a cup of coffee – over-sweetened with a bit more cream than usual – and returned the Scotch bottle to its rightful place in the tea cabinet.

A plan was already forming in her devious little mind—a plan which might be more productive than her lover's plan to impress her. Donatello was hypersensitive to the burn of alcohol and he loved coffee; perhaps Kahlua might be more to his liking.

~*~

I'll readily admit that scene was loosely based on something which happened IRL at a previous Chance Family gathering. The first Thanksgiving after my youngest cousin turned 21, she decided it was time to pop her booze cherry. She'd tried wine the night before (some light fruity Moscato) and enjoyed it, and decided she was ready for something harder. My father called her bluff. He offered her a mere thimbleful of Drambuie and—like a complete noob—she SHOT IT. I regret every day that I didn't get her reaction on camera. (—because YOUTUBE!) The best part? When she FINALLY hacked the last of it out of her lungs she turned this scandalized gape-mouthed stare on me, blanched at the half-empty Scotch glass in my hand, and looked ready to cry. "HOW can you STAND that stuff?!" she croaked at me. "It tastes like lava!" Maybe, Cuz, but that's some damn fine lava you're missin' out on! ;D

Mom

_SL: The Stray Cats "Stray Cat Strut," Chicago "You're the Inspiration"

Silence filled the underground house; no light escaped any rooms not overrun with green stuff. Unusual though it might be, it was the norm for this family—a family who lived a more logical
lifestyle than most two-legs Kirk encountered. Other than the yellow-haired not-Mom grumbling to herself in the food-room, the inhabitants of the house wouldn't really come to life for several more hours at least. Though it was a logical lifestyle, it was unacceptable. Every moment that the odd family hid was a moment Kirk wasn't getting any attention, especially from Mom, and he refused to accept that! It was just wrong!

Bright golden eyes narrowed in a sour glare, he scanned the visible portion of the house from his perch on the food-room counter. Still—silent—nothing in sight was moving. This was beyond frustrating. His tail smacked against the tall planter of smelly green stuff behind him with a quiet whump.

"Watch it, Rodent," not-Mom groused pointing a yellow-smeared knife at him in warning. "You knock over that lemongrass an' I'll make Cashew-Kitty out'a your hairy ass." Kirk's ears flattened against his head, his eyes narrowing in offense. "Off the counter. Go catch Raph another cricket or something."

Alright, that he could do. With a derisive sniff, Kirk casually hopped down from the countertop and moseyed out of the room. He glanced around the area in search of prey—nope, nothin' there, what a bummer, Not-Dad would just have to go without a present for a while. Kirk would make it up to him later...he'd catch Not-Dad the biggest, crunchiest eight-leg he could find and surprise him with it. Maybe this time Not-Dad would approve of the sacrifice instead of screeching at him. Honestly, two-legs could be so picky.

An unexpected sound nearby froze Kirk in his steps; his big black ears twitched in search of the source. Ah, there it was—the noise came from Mom's room. Maybe she was waking up? Maybe she was done hiding with the suspicious green two-leg who stole her from him? Maybe she realized how much he missed her and was coming to bring him in for cuddles? He padded toward the shuttered door hopefully, his eyes wide and eager and his fine black whiskers arching hopefully. Halfway there another noise broke the silence...an odd sound accompanied by an even odder smell halfway between fish and sweaty two-leg. He halted in place—one paw still raised, his nose crinkled, and his upper lip curled—evaluating the sounds and smells for answers. The rustling noises he vaguely recognized but the other sound—something between a whine and a whimper—escaped him.

"Dee, c'mon, you need more sleep." The whispered insistence was followed by a metallic creak and a low, breathy chuckle. "Darlin', we—Oi, don' gimme tha' ya num—" ~ This time Mom's voice was cut off by a much louder sound—a groan. "Aw, bludy 'ell...ugh, fine, ya win, jus'—" ~ Another strange sound cut her off, somewhat like an ill-mannered dog getting too involved in its grooming. Kirk's ears flattened to his head and his pupils narrowed to slivers; he slowly backed away from the door, never taking his bulging eyes off it. An unexpected squeak sent the fur on his spine bristling. "Hey! Watch the teeth or I'll bite ya back!"

NOPE. Traumatizing images burning holes in his furry little mind, Kirk Scooby-Doo-scrambled away from the door and bolted. Whatever the treacherous two-leg was doing to his Mom was not something he wanted to consider. He could only hope she was strong enough to recover from the trauma...it would take some heavy catnip to get the sounds and smell out of his head. As he scrambled around the corner into the food-room, the fur on his back standing straight up from neck to tail, the yellow-haired not-Mom snorted at him. "That'll teach ya to creep on'em," she smirked at him. "Dumbass." Kirk scowled up at not-Mom but his ire was short-lived—another creaking sound reached his ears, though not-Mom showed no sign of hearing it. He cringed at Mom's door. Were two-legs really that deaf? Poor Mom...

"Hang on," the suspicious green two-leg muttered from Mom's room. "Did you hear something?"
~ C'mon – *Come on* as in *Give me a break, you can't be serious!*

~Oi, don' gimme tha' ya [numpty] — *Oh don't give me that [look] you [lovable idiot.]*

~Aw, bludy 'ell…ugh, fine, ya win – *Aw bloody Hell…ugh, fine, you win.* In other words, Donnie wanted some morning lovin' and Amber *tried* to be responsible and make him get more sleep…*he won.*

Also: despite what you may think, the **Chicago song** is NOT for the slurp-fest going on behind the door – it's for our adorably jealous and now traumatized Mama's boy, Kirk! News flash: he's a Velcro-cat being denied Mommy-time. It's pitifully hilarious.

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