A New Lease on Life

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A New Lease on Life

by Ghost of a Chance 13

Summary

Amber O'Brien died with one regret: she never found love worth living for. Then she woke up in another world, on April's sofa, with a big fat purple dragon tattoo in her cleavage and a major 'dying' hangover. Stuck with PTSD and in a body not her own, she searches for answers and strength. Things are rarely what they seem, and love never comes easy. Slow burn, multipart, Donnie-centric, NOT self-insert.

Notes

I don't own TMNT, any of its characters or devices, or any songs/books/movies referenced. No money is made from this story. I DO own my OCs and this plotline.
Hey, Folks! Ghost here. Welcome to ANLoL! Just a couple things I want to cover real quick:

First off, every time this story hits a major milestone - [FFnet: +1k views, +10 reviews] [AO3: +10 comments, +20 kudos, +500 hits/views] - I write out a one-shot related to this story to celebrate and thank my readers. These are all posted under "A New Lease on Life: Gallery of Memories." Secondly, this story won't be a cakewalk. It's long, will contain some pretty disturbing topics, and the main pairing is a major slow burn that will explode before it gets anywhere. This story has an overall warning of coarse language, angst, and serious topics, and will eventually contain adult content of a sexual nature. (Citrus scenes begin in Part I but get more detailed as the storyline progresses. There WILL be full-on sex scenes in the distant future.) Secondly, this story is currently written out (mostly posted) until the end of Part II, and I've decided to go back and make necessary edits before really focusing on Part III, at least until the last chapter's posted. Con-crit is very much welcome for the entire story, especially if you're polite and tell me how to improve rather than just saying "ur awsum hav mai baybees!" or "dis story sux." If ya think it sucks, please at least tell me WHY you think it sucks so I can improve the story, 'kay? Also, need a beta for this story, folks! Chapters already posted exempt from the deal because as of this edit there's 30+ chapter backlog! That said, I hope y'all enjoy the story and I hope it can twang a few heartstrings on the way.

TRIGGER WARNING: Panic attacks.
"Don't even think about it, Mikey." Right on cue, a loud splash sounded some distance down the tunnel, followed by Raphael sputtering angrily. Donatello smiled despite himself, certain water balloons had been involved. As the two troublemakers wrestled in the gravel and debris lining the empty rail bed, Leonardo approached the brother silently studying a map projected over his arm.

"Where does he hide those, anyway?" Leo joked as he fell into step beside him. "I could've sworn he used the last one up three tunnels back."

"Apparently not," Don replied, scanning the walls for telltale signs that they were on the right path. Familiar graffiti and discreet markings in the concrete were as useful as any map when you knew the tunnels like they did. "At least he's occupied, right? We're almost there anyway."

The night before had been interrupted by a sudden blaring alarm from the security system indicating that movement had been detected in an abandoned subway station about a mile from the lair. Though nothing was ever visible on the cameras, that alarm sounded several more times that night and throughout the morning. By the time noon rolled around everyone was quite fed up with it and
Donatello, frustrated at what was likely a bug in the systems, packed up to lead the team out in search of the problem.

"This is it," he remarked as they neared their turnoff. The City Hall subway station had been long abandoned but was always a sight to see. As his brothers crept along silently behind him, he inched up the corridor, scouting for heat sources with his goggles. As he'd expected, it was completely vacant.

"So," Mikey asked brightly. "If the coast is clear, can we go home now? I don't wanna miss Glee." With a wary cringe, Raph edged away mumbling under his breath about something being contagious.

"Not yet, Mikey," Leo answered. "Not 'til Donnie figures out what set the systems off." With a mumbled 'Bummer,' Mikey slumped over to the breakerbox on a nearby wall and switched on the lights. Dim yellowed light flooded the once beautiful room, Green and ivory tile gleaming beneath years of filth. Don hastened to a bronze placard to inspect the hidden security camera he'd installed there years before. With a loose brick removed, the answer was clear.

"Mystery solved," he remarked dryly when a few wires fell out completely. Damaged, disconnected output wires couldn't transmit video. He deftly repaired the connection with practiced ease; if the camera picked up anything, he'd be able to see it when they returned.

"Uh...guys?" Leo ground out, backing away from a rubbish heap in the corner. "We've got company!" Three pairs of eyes snapped to the shifting garbage, and Donatello realized his heat sensors missed something. A body lay curled up in the rubbish pile shivering violently. The other three hung back nervously as he hurried to the person's side running health diagnostics on them the whole way. The woman was scantily clothed, only a few degrees from hypothermia, and from the looks of it, halfway unconscious...and strangely familiar, though he shoved that thought away.

"Not good," Donnie exclaimed as he dug through his pack for his medkit and the foiled emergency blanket. "She must've wandered in last night, setting off the alarms! With that little clothing on, she's lucky she didn't freeze to death!" The telltale rumble of a passing train sounded nearby as he wrapped her tightly in the foil-lined blanket, and everything went to Heck in a handbasket. Without warning her eyes flew wide open and terrified screams shattered the air; unseeing moss green eyes stared up at the intricately tiled ceiling as she scrambled out of the blanket and back to her corner. Still shrieking and sobbing she fell to her side in a fetal position, clutching her hands over her neck and shaking violently.

"Well, dere ya go, Donnie," Raph grumbled. "Junkie on a bad trip set off ya sensors." He cringed as yet another terrified wail ripped from her lungs. Donatello shook his head emphatically as he yanked his goggles back up.

"No, she's clean!" he protested at top speed as he dug through his bag again. "I'm not picking up even traces of anything—alcohol, heroin, marijuana, not even tobacco!—her heartrate's through the roof and her adrenaline levels are spiking rapidly! Leo, hold her down!" While Leo and Mikey restrained the thrashing woman screeching unintelligibly, Don injected a sedative into her bare arm. Bit by bit her cries turned to groans and sobs; bit by bit, she fell limp in their grip.

Finally, all was still. A quick scan told Don her vitals were returning to normal and the fit had raised her core temperature a little. If the sensors had been set off by fits like that one, he supposed, it explained how she'd survived the cold night. Despite himself he brushed a lock of bright red hair away from her closed eyes; it was dyed, of course, and he couldn't help wondering what the natural color was. Silently reminding himself of his task he wrapped her up again and hoisted her into his arms; across the chamber, Raph startled.

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"Wait a sec," he muttered stalking over. "I seen'er before…she—"

"—needs help," Leo cut him off, retrieving her glasses from the rubbish heap. "Regardless of who or what she is, we can't just leave her down here. It's January—she'll freeze to death!" As the two butted heads, Don shifted her to his shoulder in a fireman's carry and dug out his phone. After all, April had never refused to help them, yet.

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UP NEXT: *Amber or Kimber?*

Chapter End Notes

FYI: The short-ass prologue is intentional and is NOT indicative of future chapter lengths. ;}


Chapter Summary

Amber wakes up and freaks the frick out. Casey gets pissed. Questions are raised. Amber freaks out again. NOW with new cover art!

Chapter Notes

This chapter dedicated to Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, authors of "Inferno," a modern fictional tribute to Dante Alighieri's Inferno. That book's totally worth a read even if you're not a major nerd—like me—even though the sequel sucked.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Trigger warnings: Language, suggestive language, panic attacks, insensitive remarks.

Suggested Listening: The Rasmus, "No Fear"

1: Amber or Kimber?

New York City, January 27th, 2016

The first thing Amber noticed was cold; the second was muffled noises almost like speech, followed
by a stabbing ache right above her eyes. After all, she'd received a blow to the head...hadn't she? Details weren't coming to her in that state halfway between sleep and wakefulness. As the throbbing in her head smoothed out, she scoured her memory for answers—answers she couldn't find in the blur that her past had become. Only one thing stood out among the blank space in her history....

She was dead. How she knew this, she wasn't completely sure, but as the headache faded away, fractured memories slowly filled its place. Willsdale—the storm of the century—the school where she'd worked, torn and trashed by EF-5 level winds. Her eyes flew open in fear, searching for any sign of light or life. Blinded by a sudden light, she cringed into the foul smelling heap she lay on. The voices around her grew louder and less muted, then suddenly ceased all together.

Where was she? What happened? How had she found herself in the situation she was in—what was the situation, even? She had no answers—not even the strength to lift her head. Out of the blue, she felt a presence beside her...warm, gentle arms drew her closer and wrapped her in a cocoon of scratchy warmth. This, she could get used to, she mused weakly as she turned to nuzzle into the warm shoulder propping her up.

But nothing good ever lasts...as though summoned by her comfort and calm, a demon she knew too well manifested with a grinding roar. The slow trickle of memories became a torrential downpour—horrifying images flooded her delirious mind. Somewhere in the distance, someone was screaming, screaming as though they were being slowly gutted. The world turned sideways and crossways as the warmth surrounding her fell away; again, she fell to the fetid ground wishing the screaming would stop, wishing the memories would cease. Someone shut it all off, she cried soundlessly, her vocal chords inexplicably stilled.

A pinprick pain sprang to life, quickly becoming a spreading fire. On the heels of the fire, murky fog rolled in, choking out the life replaying before her sightless eyes. She struggled to get her head above water, struggled to breathe. A soft, gentle touch brushed from her brow to her temple then trailed along the line of her cheekbone. Sometime between the beginning of the caress and the whispering that followed, Amber's distorted world was swallowed up by a black void.

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**New York City, April's loft, January 28th, 2016**

"I'm not so sure of this, Casey," a soft voice murmured nearby. Amber twitched at the sound, disoriented and bewildered. She'd died—she remembered now, remembered being in another place—a place of endless nothing set to the sound of a clock's incessant ticking. Limbo, she wondered wearily? "We should've taken her to the hospital—she could be dangerously sick!"

"Hon, ya know we can't," a deeper voice replied. "If she wakes up an' starts jabberin' about giant turtles, it'll be trouble for da guys!"

'Giant turtles?' Amber thought groggily. 'Great, out'a the'afterlife an' into the nut house. At least it's warm, here...an' it smells nice, too.' She burrowed deeper under the scratchy knit afghan with a contented sigh, relishing the sweet fragrance of spiced cider. Later she'd question how she could be alive when she was sure she'd died but for now, she was too comfy to care, even with a splitting headache.

"Hey, she's waking up!" the first voice hissed; damn, no rest for the wicked. "Miss, you okay? You need anything?" Reluctantly, Amber pried open her eyes, fumbling blindly for her glasses; a blurry hand passed them to her and she affixed them to her face, working her way to a sitting position. A woman with dark curly hair hovered before her with a steaming mug of cider and a concerned expression. As Amber finally trudged the rest of the way to life, she reached to scratch her left knee...and found bare skin. Startled awake by the absent clothing, she glanced down at herself in
dismay.

Not only were her surprisingly toned legs nearly bare, most of her was bare! The skirt she'd woken in barely qualified as 'mini,' the skimpy top was cut so low her suddenly larger and firmer breasts seemed about to pop out, she was clearly not wearing a bra, and the clunky black boots she wore seemed more for looks than use. The fact that she had somehow lost almost a quarter of her body weight was shoved firmly into a vacant corner of her mind to be dealt with when she wasn't practically naked. Her cheeks flamed bright red as she yanked the afghan up to cover herself up to the chin. "Miss?" April asked in confusion.

"Please tell me I'm not a hooker!" Amber blurted desperately.

"What?" Casey gaped. Undeterred, Amber rambled on in disgust and panic.

"This's so not me—I'm barin' more than I'm wearin'! There should not be a fuckin' draft there, an' I'd never be caught dead wearin' a screw-me skirt. Granted, I like the hoochie boots an' my boobs finally match my ass, but for the love of Mike I'm practic'ly naked!" When she finally realized everything she'd said, she cringed. "Eheh…Sorry…brain-to-mouth filter malfunction."

"I'll say," Casey grinned; April shot him a dirty look, but he just shrugged. "So what's ya name, Miss Not-a-hookuh?"

"Amber," she replied nervously. "Amber O'Brien. An' Y'all?" The other two blinked at the blatant twang in her voice. Was it really so odd, she wondered? The vast majority of her hometown spoke with a much thicker twang than she did, so how could they be so surprised by it?

"I'm April O'Neil," the other woman replied politely as she handed Amber the mug of cider. "This is my boyfriend, Casey Jones." It took a moment for the facts to sink in.

"You're kiddin' me, right?" Amber thought sarcastically. 'What're the odds that I'd die an' wake up in the middle of a movie set?' Instead of acknowledging the elephant in the room, she asked, "Train conductor or Grateful Dead?" Their response was a blank stare. "Sorry. So…uh…how'd I wind up here? Did y'all knock me out'a that jar in the vestibule—or were the jars in Limbo?" She frowned down at the cider searching her scattered memories.

"What jar?" April was at a loss. "Some…friends of ours found you in an abandoned subway station. You were freezing to death. Do you not remember that?" Amber searched her memories, then shook her head with a confused frown.

"No, my memory's…kinda blurry," she admitted. "I remember…a storm…a bad one, worse than I'd ever…" Unbeknownst to her, her words became more and more frantic and stammered, her eyes grew wild, and she started shaking violently. Amber never noticed any of it; next thing she knew, she found herself on the floor in the corner curled in a tiny ball with April petting her hair. "…Wha…What happened?" she asked groggily. The pity in April's eyes annoyed her, but she needed answers.

"Do you have a history of panic attacks?" the reporter asked gently.

"No…I've got a pretty bad phobia so I've had anxiety attacks, but it's never anythin' serious. Why?"

"Well, now you do. Come on, let's get you into something more…covering." As Amber hoisted herself to her feet, her top dipped lower than before, revealing a flash of purple and black. Startled by the sight, Amber never noticed the shocked gasps of her hosts; she was too busy staring in dismay at the coiled purple dragon tattoo nestled in her cleavage.
"We got here as soon as we could," Leo apologized as he climbed over the windowsill. Donatello followed right behind, silently hanging his trench coat on the rack next to Leo's overcoat. "Has she made any progress?" April's worried, tight-lipped frown concerned him, and Casey's frustrated pacing wasn't reassuring either.

"Ya know anythin' about dis chick?" Casey muttered, shooting a glare at April's bedroom door; not long after the tattoo's discovery April had ushered their stunned guest to bed with a mug of tea, a pair of sweats, and a t-shirt big enough to double as a dress.

"We told you everything we knew, Casey," Don replied. "Too little clothing, no sign of substance abuse, hypothermic and possibly homeless, and nearly had a heart attack right in front of us. Why?"

"She's a dragon!" Casey spat, slamming his fist into the nearest wall.

"Casey!" April scolded. "Cool it!" Even as he shook off flecks of dried paint, he growled under his breath.

"You brought us a fuckin' Purple Dragon, Leo, an' she's clearly off her rocker! She—"

"Wait, back up," Donnie interrupted. "Why do you think she's a Purple Dragon? We didn't see a tattoo!" April blushed and avoided his eyes.

"Ya didn't look down her shirt—it's between her jugs." Leo cringed.

"Y-You're joking, right?" he stammered hopefully. "Please tell me you're joking." Casey shook his head with a dark scowl. "Great. —Donnie, where're you going?" His brother was already trudging down the hall, medkit in hand and a determined pinch to his eyes.

"Gang or not, she needs help," he answered firmly. "We don't know her story and we don't know her, and until we do, I, for one, reserve judgment." Without another word, he slipped through the door. Light from the hallway guided him to the bed and the lump curled up on the very edge of the mattress. The hair strewn messily over April's lumpy pillow was red as fruit punch, but now that it was brushed out and down out of the ridiculous updo from before, warm brown roots shone through—it was definitely dyed, and from the looks of it, with Kool-Aid.

Donnie paused hesitantly in the doorway, studying the sleeping woman. She was curled up in a ball but he recalled her figure with striking clarity. So many women were obsessed with being thin, looking thin, and feeling thin, and hid their bodies under too-large clothing if they weren't thin enough for their liking. This woman wasn't thin—quite the contrary, she was voluptuous, with soft, wide hips, a well-rounded rear, a generous bust, and from the looks of it, some extra softness around her ribs, hips, and thighs. Popular culture would have deemed her weight and body type a flaw, but he'd always admired curves; to him, she was lovely. Lovely, he thought sadly, and very much out of reach. It didn't bear thinking about, he reminded himself; he had a job to do, and more likely than not she'd scream if she ever saw him. They always screamed, really.

Don was pleased to find she'd made progress. Her body temperature had risen to a healthy 98.4, her blood pressure and heart rate were normalized, and the color had returned to her skin. Better yet she was breathing normally and he couldn't detect any wheezing, so she probably hadn't developed pneumonia from the conditions she'd been found in. Confident that she'd make a full recovery he slid his goggles back up over his forehead and brushed her hair away from her neck to seek out her pulse.

A sudden spike in the pulse fluttering against his fingertips drew a concerned frown, then a soft gasp
tore him from his thoughts. Slowly, warily, he met her eyes—moss green eyes wide open in astonishment and set off by a blindingly red blush. He swallowed noisily, counting down the seconds to her inevitable freak-out.

'Holy Mama Mary,' Amber thought as the tall turtle's hazel eyes met hers. 'If this is Heaven...’ "—I must'a been a Sainte!" she finished under her breath.

"Pardon?" Don asked dubiously, releasing her neck. Amber flushed.

"S-Sorry. Brain-to-mouth filter malfunction, jus' ignore it." Pulling the comforter almost up to her chin she dragged her glasses back over her eyes, cautiously looking him over. "Am I...dead?"

"Nope; you gave it your best shot, though," he replied with a cheeky smile. "Unless something changes, you should make a full recovery. So, what's your name?" She blinked several times, scrunched up her eyes and squinted at him, sat up with the blanket pooling around her, then pinched herself on the cheek...hard.

"Ow!" she yelped, yanking her fingers away from the throbbing flesh. "Nope, not dreamin'. Ya mind...?" Donnie was completely nonplussed but shrugged; without another word, she reached one hand out and poked him squarely in the shoulder. He stared back, clearly questioning her sanity. "A'right, Willis," she announced to the room in general, searching every corner she could see. "Ya win. I won't post that video if ya call off yer buddy. Shame really, it was a hoot."

"Video?" Don asked dubiously. Amber smirked.

"Aaron got shite-faced on Scotch whisky an' tried to milk a bull; it disagreed. Now come on out, Willis, this's getting' annoyin'!"

"Of course," Casey grumbled from the doorway. "Now I recognize ya—dat fake accent threw me off. Donnie? Dis's Kimber Bryant; she hangs out with dat little dweeb Daron Williams."

"Daron Williams?! Kimber Bryant?!" she repeated shrilly. "My name's Amber! Amber O'Brien, an' I've always talked like this! The heck're you smokin'?"

"Quit wit' da lyin' a'ready!" Casey snapped. "Raph an' I busted yer ass 'nuff times fer me ta know ya, 'specially with dat tattoo'a yers!"

"Casey," Donatello warned lowly. "Back off, you're not helping." He turned to the green-eyed woman again, troubled by the confusion in her eyes. Poor thing...she really didn't know who she was? "Amnesia, maybe? What's the last thing you remember?"

She only got out one word—storms—before losing her grip on reality. Right before his eyes she paled and shrunk into herself; her eyes grew wide, her breath sped to gasps and pants, and an endless stream of garbled words fell from her lips. Realizing what was happening, Don dug a bottle of homemade smelling salts from his kit and waved it under her nose, monitoring her pulse with his other hand. Finally, her glazed-over eyes focused fearfully on his, her voice stilled, and her breathing regulated. "I—"

"It's alright," he soothed as he drew back again. " Whatever happened isn't exactly ready to come to light, apparently. Maybe just some questions? Simple yes or no answers, perhaps?" Though she was only growing more and more confused, she nodded, following him to the living room again, the comforter draped around her like a fluffy yellow cloak. April put on the kettle for tea while the rest settled in the living room.

"Kimber Bryant?" Leo asked bluntly.
"No," she replied seriously. "Amber O'Brien. I was born to Douglas O'Brien and Ginny Devon in Willsdale, Missouri, I graduated Willsdale High in May '94, an' I spent the last several years workin' for the school district as a night janitor at Willsdale High."

"Do you know where you are?" Donnie suddenly asked. "Do you know what city you're in?" Her face fell.

"They said I was found in a subway station, right?" she asked hesitantly. "The only subway I've ever been in served sandwiches, an' had a gas station attached. So clearly I'm somehow not in Willsdale anymore." A violent shiver wracked her shoulders and she burrowed further into the blanket. "Wherever I am now, it's pretty dang cold fer May even with 2011's freaky weather."

Leo and Donnie exchanged a wary glance. "Miss O'Brien?" Donnie said softly, placing a steadying hand on her shoulder. "You're in New York City; it's January 27th, 2016."

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Chapter End Notes

*Smelling salts CAN be used for panic attacks, but should be used VERY SPARINGLY and only in conjunction with other coping skills. If you just use salts—or other 'wake up' devices like sour candies or fireball jawbreakers, for example—and never get to the root of the problem, never work on what has given you panic attacks, they become a crutch and can eventually worsen your troubles. I've never used them myself, so I can't recommend salts. I CAN recommend breathing exercises, fireballs and Altoids, and meditation.

Panic attacks CAN be beaten, and you CAN get PTSD under control enough to live a fulfilling life. Don't give up—you're stronger than you give yourself credit for.
2: Death Was Only the Beginning

Chapter Summary

Flashback to Amber's world and how she died.

Chapter Notes

Returning readers: Hiya, hope you're enjoying the story so far! New folks: Hope you like! :D

A quick note regarding dialogue and odd words: Symbols at the end of a word or statement mark vocabulary terms or references defined at the end. If a word is followed by a dash, it's translated or defined at the end of this story. I try to define most of the stuff that's really odd, heavily altered due to pronunciation, and local slang that non-local readers might not pick up. If you see a - at the end of a SENTENCE, it means the paragraph has been 'explained' in the same way; this will become necessary once Amber starts letting her oddities (and going through crisis-induced 'relapse' speech which is heavily brogued) but this isn't really a frequent occurrence until the end of Part I.

This chapter dedicated to Volunteers. You put your life on hold to bring life to others, all without any thought of compensation. My community is one of countless forever changed by volunteers, from search and rescue to donations to rebuilding. Thank you… our debt to you can never be repaid enough. Also dedicated to the real-life inspiration for 'Aaron,' whom I owe my very life to.

MAJOR TRIGGER WARNINGS! Including but not limited to Tornados, Severe weather, Town destroyed by tornados and severe weather, shock, graphic imagery, corpses, violent death, mentions of religion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Linkin Park "Iridescent"

2: Death Was Only the Beginning

Willsdale, Missouri, Sunday May 8th, 2011

The sound of violent retching woke Amber with a start; sometime during the night she'd apparently fallen off the sofa and now lay sprawled on the carpet in a pile. As sleepy disorientation faded into exhausted annoyance, she glanced off to her right. Sure enough, the bathroom door hung wide open spilling bright light out into the cramped hallway. "Good thing ya got short hair, Willis," she muttered, crawling back on the lumpy sofa. "I ain't gotta feel guilty 'bout not holdin' it back for ya."

"Fuck you, O'Brien—" her friend's guttural retort was interrupted by another round of heaving.
"I told ya that whisky'd kill ya," she reminded matter-of-factly as she swiped a long brown braid back over her shoulder. "Yer usual beer's water compared to Scotch whisky; smells like goat piss, too." Clutching her stiff back, she stumbled off the sofa and limped into the tiny kitchen seeking coffee. A note tacked to the fridge told her their host had already headed to work, and the bitter perfume of coffee filled the dog-scented air. As she dug through the cabinet for a mug a tiny, half-blind and completely neurotic black and tan Chihuahua danced at the back door, growling and barking at her. "Quiet, Nina—Uncle Aaron's hungover." Not surprisingly the dog simply snapped and growled again, then scattered when Amber came to open the back door.

"Let the damn thing out!" Aaron groaned into the toilet. "My head's KILLING ME!"

"Again, not my fault - I tried'a warn ya." Since Nina wouldn't willingly come within several yards of anyone but Ma Willis, Amber propped the back door open and returned to the coffee maker, grinning when the neurotic dog rocketed out the back door like the vet was on her heels. The door shut and her mug set up, she took a cup of water and a bottle of Mtn Dew in for Aaron. "Why on Earth your cousin thought gettin' you drunk was a GOOD idea, I'll never know."

"Oh, come'ere you sweet, beautiful bitch!" Aaron rasped; knowing he didn't mean her, Amber shoved the soda at him and left, laughing under her breath. Some things never changed, and his Mtn Dew addiction was among those things. So too, she contemplated with a crooked grin, was the way the three best friends got along by harassing one another.

The Terrible Trio started with Amber O'Brien, only daughter of a Scottish immigrant and completely unable to fit in with the locals even after she took on their twang. It quickly became a duo with the inclusion of Mercy Ross, a bristly beauty with an affinity for cows and a horrible homelife. Then in High School the two odd friends met Aaron Willis - a son of a local and the very definition of a Country Bumpkin. Years went by and the three friends only grew closer, grew more obnoxious toward one another, and grew into a fixture in town. Even after Aaron's family left Willsdale for nearby Glenville after Graduation, they still kept close contact until he moved into a double-wide trailer near Amber's home.

Supposedly Aaron Willis was completely disinterested in love, sex, and the like - he'd never shown any interest in anyone and spent years oblivious to Amber's puppy love crush on him - but deep in her heart Amber was sure he'd never be attracted to her even if he weren't asexual. That ship, after all, had long sailed...she wasn't the sort to pine after someone who couldn't return her feelings and it became clear in time that they would have been horribly suited. Still, even if romance was an option, Amber was sure she wasn't Aaron's 'type' - she was plain, barely 5'3, and morbidly overweight. Her brown hair started going grey in her teen years—supposedly a hereditary thing—and she couldn't walk a straight line if she was paid to. Love had never been in the cards for her, and ever since she was hit by a van during college, neither had meaningful work.

'God almighty, quitcher whinin' O'Brine!'—she reminded herself fiercely. 'I'm alive, I'm not dyin' in an RCF, I've gotta roof over my head, food in my cabinets, an' two kickarse friends. Things could be so much worse than monthly booty calls, sexual frustration, an' end-table ass.' Mid-rant Aaron collapsed at the rickety wooden table, burying his head in his arms.

"Please tell me Ma left donuts," he mumbled.

"Nope, just pizza," she grinned, poking his springy blond curls. "Your favorite...but it's got pickles on it."

"Sacrilege!" he spat rushing to the fridge. "She didn't—she wouldn't!" A moment later he slanted a suspicious glare at her over the rims of his glasses, his off-kilter blue eyes narrowed. "Quit pickin' on the hungover person. Pickles on pizza...you need yer head checked."
"We a'ready know that, Sugar," she grinned, snagging an éclair from the box. "Thanks for the YouTube footage, by the way: 'Drunkard milks bull,' sure to be a hit."

"I WHAT?!" he squawked. "Oh, HELL NAW! You post that an' I'll piss in your garden! On your roses!" The two friends bickered good-naturedly for the rest of the morning, never realizing that their world had changed forever.

Hours later Amber's beat up Red Civic pulled up to an empty driveway...a driveway with no standing building behind it.

Once Aaron's hangover had abated they'd returned to Willsdale, blasting Quiet Riot and Black Sabbath the whole way. As they crept over the city limits, though, the now silent car deafened the occupants stunned by their surroundings. It wasn't quite sinking in...how could so much have happened in one weekend?

The once-bustling small town was nearly gone, and what was left in its place could only be described as a war zone. Vacant cars lay crumpled along the road between downed utility poles. Fallen, splintered trees littered the landscape. There was debris everywhere—hanging in trees, pinned under fallen structures, blowing along the ground—Amber never even noticed tears streaming from her eyes or murmured reassurances from Aaron. Every structure they passed was demolished, every landmark they knew was erased. The power station, the cemetery, the house always surrounded by suicidal free-range guinea hens...all that remained was rubble-strewn dirt and asphalt. She knew what she'd find there, and she hated to see it, but before she knew it, she'd pulled into her own driveway.

Her house, the tiny shotgun shack she'd lived in for years, was reduced to a pile of timber and siding, her struggling garden buried under a ton of shattered brick and shingle.

"Amber," Aaron called repeatedly as she wandered from her car to what was once the front step. "Amber, wait!" She shook her head deliriously as she dug frantically through the debris pile over the porch; in her shock-addled mind, all she could think of was getting inside and curling up on the sagging plaid couch. It never even registered that not only was the sofa probably ruined, the house itself was no longer standing. Cursing, Aaron scrambled over fallen timber and fractured supports to tear Amber away from the ruins.

"No!" she cried frantically, fighting to get free. "It's my home! I've gotta—"

"AMBER!" he shouted, framing her face in callused hands. "Amber, it's gone! You're gonna hurt yourself if you keep this up!" Memories flashed before her eyes, blocking out the familiar blue eyes staring into her own. Without warning, dry, chapped lips met hers fiercely as strong arms held her like she was about to be ripped out of them. When he finally let go, she buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing brokenly as they slid to the sodden ground. As if mocking them, the clouds broke open anew; thunder rolled, lightning flashed, and torrents of rain mingled with hopeless tears.

Sunday, May 15th, 2011

Over a week later, Amber and Aaron were still sheltered at City Hall with countless other refugees. Neither had a home to go to, now, and Aaron wasn't able to get word out to his mother with the phone lines and cell towers down. Though he didn't understand, Amber wouldn't contact her family - her mother and father, or even the cherished and gruff grandparent she affectionately called "Gran'Da," insisting it was pointless. With every tearful story and gut-wrenching news report on the radio, the truth became clearer. The night after they drove up to visit his mother an EF 5 tornado
spawned outside of town. By the time it fizzled out, it had destroyed much of the town, many of the outlying farms and homes, and left hundreds dead or homeless. Amber's home was gone, Aaron's home was gone, and no one could get ahold of Mercy Ross; Aaron worried what this might mean, and heaved a weary sigh.

Search and rescue teams descended on the ruined town with a vengeance early on, working their way through it with military precision. Everywhere, codes had been spray painted on crumbled structures and vehicles. How many survivors, how many dead, what hazards were present...just overnight, Amber's life had become an endless parade of neon x's, scribbled codes, and body bags, interspersed with canned soup and crying children. Every hour of every day it rained more and more, and Amber sat in a quiet corner staring blankly at the wall.

Aaron Willis watched her forlornly as he helped hand out bottled water. She'd been afraid of storms longer than he'd known her and he was used to witnessing anxiety attacks over the smallest rainstorm. Now, though, now she seemed almost empty and never spoke. Something was dreadfully wrong with his friend, but he had no idea what he could do. It was heart-rending to see her so dull and lifeless. Worst of all, he'd kissed her—finally given in to his years-old hidden crush and kissed her—but for whatever reason, she didn't realize the significance. She probably thought he was just trying to comfort her, he reasoned darkly, absent-mindedly crushing an empty bottle into nothing. Frustrated and helpless, he threw himself into making himself useful in any way he could and making call after call that never went through. When the rain finally let up that afternoon, unbeknownst to the rest, Amber left her corner and slipped away.

At first, she just wandered aimlessly, hopelessly lost in the town she'd spent her whole life in but following some lure only she saw. Everything was changed, everything was gone, but she felt nothing at all. Surely she should be feeling something, she thought blandly as she walked past a bloodstained, crumpled truck wrapped around a tree. Surely the horrors around her and the circling vultures should be jarring at the very least.

A battered wooden sign came into view as she crested the hill. Though most of the letters had been stripped off by rain and grit and the building behind was half-toppled, she knew without a doubt where she was. After all, she spent the last several years scrubbing the school from top to bottom every weeknight; she'd know it with her eyes closed. She drifted through the shattered glass doors in a daze, scanning the trashed hallways without notice. Her feet led her to the library and a familiar shelf she'd spent her teen years reading top to bottom. Debris was brushed aside halfheartedly until she found her target.

Dark of the Moon. It was a poetry volume long out of print and rarely found outside of libraries, and while she was a student, the book spent more time in her backpack than on its shelf. Such a shame for such a wondrous book to be lost forever, she thought hollowly as she gently leafed through now fragile pages.

Movement out the window caught her eye; thunder rolled, clouds menaced and a jagged grey tear loomed overhead. Off to the southwest was the monster she'd feared most of her life, and it was heading her way. The numb woman watched the horizon in disinterest, uncaring of the strange disembodied ticking sound or the sudden feeling of calm that washed over her. Rain pelted the cracked glass windows and wind howled, kicking up clouds of debris from the already battered landscape. A deafening, grinding roar like a fork in a disposal shattered the air as the tornado drew nearer. Amber stared it down never flinching as her ears ached from the pressure.

Perhaps...perhaps this was her only choice - the only way she'd ever find peace. If she was in her right mind, she would be horrified by the thought...but she wasn't in her right mind at all. That foul monster stole her home, stole her town, stole her very life, but there was one thing it would never
Heedless of the broken glass underfoot she dropped to her scarred, aching knees. Head bowed, she prayed—prayed for the safety of her friends and family, prayed for the souls of those touched by the tornados' destruction, and prayed for peace in the afterlife. The window exploded inward and shattered glass rained over her head but her only regret was that she'd never found a love worth living for.

A bedraggled team searched the school for survivors. "HEY!" shouted the tall black man as he clambered toward the woman kneeling before the shattered windows. He checked Amber's neck but recoiled at the bloody wound at her temple; the body was long grown stiff and she had no pulse. "Why on earth did you come here?" he wondered aloud. "Why didn't you seek shelter?"

A block of cloudy green glass lay nearby, the corner stained with blood - a glass brick. Her cold corpse told a vile story of a woman in shock who was taken by surprise and died from head injury, and showed plainly what happened when humans pitted themselves against nature. At least, the man considered with a grimace, it was likely quick - she died on her knees, possibly praying for her life, but at least she didn't suffer.

His brown-haired companion noticed the book cradled in her arms and wrenched it free, wincing at the way the body fell to the floor from the motion. The book's title wasn't ringing any bells. "It's a shame," the first responder remarked as they eased the stiff body into a black bag and zipped it closed. Someone would come by later on and cart her to the morgue with the storms' other casualties for identification. "This book clearly meant something to her, though - she thought it was worth dying for. It'd be a pity to leave it behind when the building will just wind up razed." Moments later the team had moved on, a neon orange code on the tiles of the front entryway Amber's only memorial.

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**A vast, dark place somewhere beyond Time**

'Wha…where am I?' Amber thought distractedly as she scanned her surroundings. The last thing she remembered was a book…what book? Oh, right; Dark of the Moon, that poetry anthology that she'd coveted for years. Why did she covet it, though? Was it not hers? No matter how she tried, the details of her life were slipping away like grains of sand through her fingers.

She existed in a vast expanse of bleak, black nothingness, her only company the incessant ticking of a legion of unseen clocks. How did she get here? She couldn't recall—everything was a blur! Confused, she wracked her brain for answers that continued to evade her. In a deeply engrained stress habit, she reached to pull one of her twin braids over her shoulder, intent on tugging at the loose tuft at the end.

Nothing happened. Though she knew she'd moved and her brain had sent the proper signals, she had no braids—no hands—no body! 'What's happened to me?!!' she thought frantically. 'Did I...no, it can't be...I didn't...die...?' She trailed off, her uncertainty solidifying into begrudging realization. I'm dead. I'm farkin' dead. Well, this sucks. But if I'm dead, why'm I so alone? This place is dead even for the Afterlife. Unless...' Not for the first time, she wondered if her beliefs hadn't been rightly placed. If there was no God, no Heaven or Hell, then where was she? Of course, she reasoned, if that was true, why was she even conscious that she existed? Without a body of her own, how could she exist?

Unbidden, familiar words filled her memory in between ticks and tocks. **This is the vestibule to Hell,**
where those who would make no choices in life are condemned. Neither warm nor cold, believers nor blasphemers—you see them in the hills. They chase a banner they will never catch. 'Of course,' she realized bitterly. 'Inferno—Niven and Pournelle's take on Dante's Divine Comedy. I read that danged book to tatters, an' it never e'en occurred to me. I must be in the vestibule in a lil' bronze jar. Great….at least my fat arse finally fits in a 'one size fits all' container.'* But if I'm in a jar, that means I can get out!' Focusing with all her strength, she repeated the phrase that had been Allen Carpenter's saving grace. 'Fer the love'a God, get me out'a here!'

If she hadn't been stuck in a little bronze jar in Hell, she'd have heard crickets; instead, she only heard the maddening ticking sounds. Amber winced, going over the phrase again in case she'd misspoken; maybe her would-be rescuer had passed her by over rudeness? 'Um…please?'

Her tiny empty world was sucked into oblivion as she hoped against hope that she wouldn't wake up at the feet of Benito Mussolini.**

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**Translations**

- "Quitcher whinin' O'Brine!" - 'Quit your whining, O'Brien!'

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Up next: '"One Life Ends, Another Begins"'

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Amber calling herself fat is a self-defense mechanism—an unhealthy one. It's always much easier to call yourself fat and insult your own behind, for example, than to hear someone say the same thing about you. Remember, real beauty isn't dependent on your waist, your hips, your butt, or any other impermanent BS like that.

**Waking up at the feet of Benito Mussolini. This is a reference to Niven and Pournelle's book Inferno. When Carpenter found himself out of his little brass bottle, he woke up at Benito's feet staring at his own navel, convinced it was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. You really should read the book regardless of that scene—it's a hoot!
3: One Life Ends, Another Begins

Chapter Summary

Leo's uptight, Casey's still pissed, Amber's filter fails. Drama. Donnie saves Amber from a Darwin Award, she elects not to tell him about her world. The guys take her to Splinter.

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone's still enjoying the story, and that y'all have a great week! This chapter dedicated to fanfiction, in all its addictive, immeasurable glory, for brightening this dreary world with dreams.

Trigger Warnings: Trauma, intrusive memories, graphic imagery, language, dysfunctional relationships.

*Suggested Listening: Seether "Hang On," & Ozzy Osbourne "Crazy Train"

3: One Life Ends, Another Begins

April O’Neil's apartment, January 27th, 2016

Leo had been pacing for a good twenty minutes, Donatello mused blandly. From the living room window to the hallway, up the hallway to the bedroom door, from there to the kitchen, and back to the living room, over and over. At this rate, they'd owe April new flooring. Worried hazel-green eyes fixed on the sofa, their owner silently contemplating the strange woman slumped over half buried in an enormous yellow comforter. After the shocking revelation, she'd just stared into space, never even acknowledging another temper tantrum from Casey and several more accusations of deception. By the time Casey had calmed down again and tea was served, her shaking had stopped and a startling calm swept over her.

Over on the sofa, Amber silently read herself the riot act. Everything was becoming clearer by the moment. She died with only one regret and was somehow given a second chance but that second chance came with a price: the body she awoke in once housed a troublemaker, a Purple Dragon with no sense of modesty and a long rap sheet. On top of that, Amber found herself surrounded by people she'd believed fictional characters and had already pissed off one, two, maybe even three of them.

She shivered, dragging the blanket around herself like fluffy yellow armor. Donatello was adorable —so much more adorable than she'd expected! She knew for certain she'd never seen him depicted in coveralls and glasses when she was still alive, but deep in her heart, his appearance was familiar. After all, this was the Donnie she'd seen in her dreams for so many years. His confident smirk, his dry, tangy wit, the distinct scent of coffee and grease…even his eyes were just as she'd seen before, a unique shade of hazel that shifted with the lighting from green to gold. Those eyes of his had completely shut down all activity in her brain the first time they met hers.
What happened to Kimber, the previous owner of the body she now inhabited?

"Oh, God," she blurted out suddenly. "I'm stuck in a dead chick's body!" Everyone stared at her, alerting her to the fact that her brain-to-mouth filter had failed again. "Um, sorry. I must need'a get that brain-to-mouth filter cleaned or something."

"Since you're talking again," Leonardo started without missing a beat. "Let's get our facts straight."

"Oh, boy," Donnie mumbled, recognizing Leo's stern tone; Amber showed no sign of discouragement, but the genius was sure his brother intended on a lecture she might not need. She seemed fragile - familiar in a way, but that fragility didn't ring a bell.

"You keep referring to death," Leo reminded bluntly. "Did you die, are you dead, etc...now you're saying you're 'in a dead woman's body.'" Amber could practically hear the air-quotes. "What's with this fascination with death?" Donnie's palm impacted his face with a loud slap and he shook his head in disbelief.

"You're kidding me, right?" the stranger retorted dryly, burrowing even deeper into the comforter. "Do I look Goth? I'm not fascinated by death. I died. That damned window shattered, an'...an'..." Grey-green eyes watered and her throat clenched around the words she couldn't yet reveal. "Aaron must be h-horrified that—that I died in a library. He always...h-hated..." Without preamble, she burst into frustrated tears. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she choked as though her reaction was cause for censure. "Just...gimme a minute...to..."

"Is this really necessary?" Donnie asked Leo bluntly; the eldest brother was practically interrogating the stranger and she was falling apart. Though he had no answers, the genius was inexplicably angered by his brother's behavior - as though by making the strange woman cry, he hurt someone Donnie cared for - but he didn't know this woman, how could he care about her?! "She—"

"I'm n-not a weakling," Amber interrupted faintly, trembling even harder; unbidden, horrifying images flashed through her mind's eye even as the familiar hazel pair focused on her. Shattered glass. Crumpled metal. Crumbled buildings. Crows and vultures lurk in barren trees strewn with pulpy grey streamers. "I can do this..." Hollow window frames spiked with glassy teeth. Fallen phone lines sparking in the sodden roads. A jagged tear in the leaden sky mocks like a twisted grin. "—I can!"

"O'course ya can, Kimbuh," Casey accused condescendingly. "Ya've prob'ly rehearsed this to death a'ready."

"For the las' time, Casey," Amber protested shrilly as she fought the onslaught of distressing memories. "My name's Amber, not Kimber! I dunno what happened to Kimber, but I ain't her!" He shot to his feet, looming menacingly over her.

"How ya gonna prove it den, huh?" he shouted. "Ya ain't proven shit!"

"I can't prove it!" she cried in frustration, surging to her feet. "There's no way I can prove my innocence short'a dyne again, an' dyne once wiz bad enough!" Without preamble she shrugged off the blanket and stumbled to the door of April's apartment, pausing only to yank her clunky black boots back on. All was silent as she hesitated in the doorway, fighting tears; she turned to Casey, halfway between angry and regretful. "For the record," she muttered. "I'm sorry for any an' all bullshite this Kimber's pulled, an' not jus' 'cuz I'm gettin' blamed for it." Without another word, she slipped out the door.

The latch clicked like a gunshot in the still apartment, shattering the tense silence and pushing the
occupants to action. "Casey, what were you thinking?" April asked, hitting him with a doghouse glare. "Now she's all alone out there, and probably going to freeze to death, again."

"Ape, ya dunno what dat bitch's done," Casey countered, itching to hit another wall. "Kimbuh's Hun's favorite messenger—he wants somethin' done, he sends her. He wants someone won over, he sends her. He wants someone watched, he sends her—Anythin' he wants done dat don't need muscle, he sends her. She's knee-deep in Shreddah, Sachs, an' even the mafias' business!" Another wall felt the wrath of his knuckles. "All she's gotta do is flash those tits an' she gets'er way!"

"Funny. She seemed petrified when they were visible. And quit hitting my walls!"

'Not one of my brighter moments,' Amber thought to herself between violent shivers, huddling closer to the brick wall for protection from the wind. 'It was warm in there...an' it's freezing out here. O'Brien, if you die again, yer totally gettin' a Darwin Award.'

"Cold?" The sudden voice at her shoulder launched her in the opposite direction with an unflattering shriek and she landed on her rump on the asphalt. Donnie seemed so smug leaning up against that dumpster, she thought with a hot blush...and he smelled amazing.

"The Hell, Dee?!" she hissed, rubbing her sore rear. "You scared the livin' daylights out'a me!"

"What can I say?" he grinned. "Ninja. It's what we do." She blinked in surprise as a warm garment was draped around her shoulders—a familiar trench coat big enough to swallow her whole. She gratefully burrowed deep into the coffee-scented fabric and huddled between Donatello and the wall. "Casey thinks you're lying, you know," he continued off-handedly, pushing his glasses back up his nose out of habit. "April's more frustrated than anything else. Leo's playing peacemaker."

"Sorry I'm so much trouble," Amber mumbled into the coat's popped collar. "It's not like me to cause such a ruckus over nothing."

"It's not nothing, okay?" he half-scolded. "Casey's always a hothead, but he's taking this very personally for some reason."

"Judging by the big fat dragon tattoo in my rack, I'm not surprised—he hates Purple Dragons and with good reason. I must'a built up some seriously bad karma to die an' wake up in this body. If I didn't know any better," she added under her breath, "I'd think I spent my whole life kickin' puppies." Silence reigned for a while. When she looked up, she saw Donnie's eyes fixed on hers in a serious, calculative stare. "What? I've never kicked a puppy, thank you very much; it's a figure of speech."

"There's one thing I just can't figure out." A loud yell drew his eyes to April's living room window; moments later he cringed as an even louder crash rang out followed by April shrieking at Casey. The two had an odd way of resolving conflict, he considered with a cringe, then he asked Amber, "How do you know us? April wouldn't have told you anything without our okay, and Casey seems convinced you're the spawn of Satan. So how'd you know?"

Now, Amber thought morbidly as she stared through his grease stained trousers, would be the time to tell him she was from another world, another reality—a reality where he, his brothers, and the rest were just fictional characters. If she were living in a fanfiction, she'd totally spill everything right here and now in this gritty, muck-slicked alley, and would happily spend the rest of her days in a flurry of coffee runs, neck rubs, and sweaty stolen moments with a certain terrapin genius. If she were living in a fanfiction, she'd be set...but she wasn't a fanfiction character, and life was never that simple.
Aaron had hooked her on their story years ago when she was barely seventeen, but she'd seen Donnie in her dreams since she was only a child. She spent ages watching herself grow older while he and his brothers stubbornly remained teenagers in all canon sources. Every new grey hair Amber found was cursed with a thousand poxes and unfulfilled threats of shaving her head. Every birthday was spent buried up to her ears in fanfiction about people almost half her age and fan art featuring characters with size negative-fifteen waists. Every time she started to consider dating - instead of her usual habit of only seeking out temporary companionship when she couldn't handle her body's wants and needs - she woke drenched in sweat, clinging to steamy dreams of shifting hazel eyes, ridiculously adorable snorts, cheeky grins, and taunting reminders that she'd become hopelessly stuck on someone who didn't even exist. Every time she relied on one-night stands to keep her libido under control, she struggled with guilt afterward - not because her family wouldn't approve or because she was careless with protection, but because the Donnie in her Dreams didn't approve.

She was a mess. She wasn't some totally awesome fanfiction heroine thrown together with the turtle of her dreams simply to fulfill the bizarre notions of some mysterious author. She was a janitor, a college dropout with more gimp than grace, and even if she wasn't frustrated as hell by years of nothing but DIY treatment, wet dreams, and impersonal booty-calls, she wasn't aging gracefully at all. She was undeniably, irrefutably normal…and normal people got awkward sideways looks over admitting to crushing on fictional characters, especially if they somehow ran into said fictional characters. Never mind if said fictional character wasn't fully human...

"Lucky guess?" she attempted sheepishly; the smirk in his eyes told her quite clearly that she'd been figured out. She wilted. "Fine, fine. If I told ya, I'd have to kill ya. Someone else told me, an' whaddaya know? I died. Better?" He laughed lowly, shaking his head at her.

"You're a nut," he grinned, ambling toward April's fire escape. "C'mon, I'm freezin' my shell off out here." No sooner had they reached the window, though, a lamp went sailing past, shattering into shrapnel against the wall. Before they could so much as duck the window flew open and Leonardo sprung from the window to the metal grating, eyes wide with fear.

"Run," he warned as they took off over the rooftop evading another chorus of shouting. Amber cringed before the window, watching the flurry of thrown objects.

"Why do I get the feelin' they've got a 'Bed of Nails' relationship?" she mused aloud. Not a moment later, she uttered a surprised squeak when she found herself slung over Donatello's shoulder in a fireman's carry and staring down at the roof.

"Alice Creeper?" he clarified as they took off over the rooftop. "Hold on tight!"

"No, Alice -YAH!" A little late, she muffled her shriek in his neck. "Did I mention I really, really hate heights?" she mumbled. "Where're we goin'?"

"Home," Leo answered gravely. Amber screwed her eyes shut, retreating into Donnie's warm collar, wondering just when her life became so cliché. She was killed by the one thing she spent her whole life fearing, woke up younger, thinner, and with a major dying-hangover, and now she was being carried off to the sewers like some hopeless heroine. Granted, she had a second chance with the turtle of her dreams - a second chance she never admitted wanting! - but this situation had disaster written all over it.

'Oh well,' she thought tiredly, sure her fingernails were going to leave permanent gouges in Donatello's canvas-draped carapace. 'I died, so who's to say I'm NOT a hopeless heroine now? My life ended with the beginning of another; the least I can do is enjoy the ride…an' not toss my cookies all over Donnie's shell.'
- Dyne once wiz bad enough! - 'Dying once was bad enough,' wiz being a phonetic pronunciation of the Scottish pronunciation of was. Compare Dyin’ - Dyne to her odd pronunciation of O’Brien as O’Brine.

Up next: The Truth. Have a great weekend, Y’all!
4: The Truth

Chapter Summary

Splinter doesn't approve but postpones judgment. Amber has a panic attack, makes things awkward. Splinter sees her past in a vision, she dies again. Some questions are answered. Amber feels like a heel.

Chapter Notes

A quick note: the book Dark of the Moon is an obscure poetry volume but it's very much worth the read. The poem Amber reads aloud in this chapter is from that very book; 'The Eye' by Donald Wandrei is found on pages 381 and 382 with several other of his sonnets. Secondly: Occasional short, graphic present tense passages in italics denote intrusive memories; intrusive memories can be very overwhelming when they occur, and in my own experience, the memories they show are often exaggerated and warped, and sometimes even worse than what actually happened. This chapter dedicated to everyone reading, following, and fav'ing this story—especially ImpartingAbyss, for reviewing and just being hilarious!

Trigger Warnings: Grossness, Intrusive memories, disturbing, graphic imagery, panic attacks, religious references, violent death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Coldplay, "Fix You," Breaking Benjamin, "Fade Away"

4: The Truth

'Great, Amber,' she thought to herself as she hung face-first over the stream of running wastewater, hacking up a meal she didn't remember eating. 'Ya didn't cowk- all over Don's shell, but ya barely missed'is feet. Yer just too hot fer ya own good, ain'tcha?'- She spat once more, swiping a used tissue across her lips; hopefully, the other two hadn't seen her yank it out of her shirt. It's awkward enough getting caught using a bra for a pocket, but when you're clearly braless, people start wondering where you stashed whatever you just pulled out…and handy as boob-pockets were, it wasn't something she was ready to admit.

"S-Sorry," she said hoarsely. "I don't do so well with heights…just gimme a sec." Heat flooded her cheeks at the small metal canteen held at her eye level. "Thanks." She gratefully rinsed her mouth out and snapped the topper back on. "I'll wash that later—there anythin' you DON'T have in that bag'a yours?"

"The sink," he answered simply. Once her stomach settled, the blindfold went back on and she was lifted up over his shoulder again, thanking her lucky stars she couldn't see how high up she was. Not long after, her ears were assaulted by the screech of a rusty hinge; she felt her carrier tense.
"Better oil that," Leo said simply.

"As soon as this is resolved," Donnie replied lowly. "'Til then, it can wait." The shoulder Amber rested on slouched; she knew without a doubt what was going through his mind and it was unpleasantly familiar. Without Donatello, the lair would fall apart—the family would fall apart. As much as they depended on him, though, the others tended to take him for granted without even realizing it. It always broke her heart to see it before, knowing all-too-well just how it felt, and now it was even more distressing. She couldn't say anything, though. After all, she already proved that she knew more than she should, and would only be more suspicious. A gentle squeeze of his other shoulder conveyed what words could not, but sent a worrisome shiver through him.

"What is going on here?" a slightly raspy voice burst out. "Boys, why have you brought a stranger into our midst?!" Leonardo hurried to greet their father and master.

"We had no other choice, Master," he explained hurriedly. "The alarms were set off by this woman—she almost froze to death down here! We took her to April's, but…" He winced, trailing off.

"Casey disagreed," Donnie finished dryly. "From the tantrum he's throwing, you'd think she insulted his mother." Amber shrunk into the warm shoulder, certain she was in some serious trouble...even though she hadn't insulted any mothers lately. How could she have followed them home? How could she have believed they could bring her back to the Lair without trouble from Splinter? The Canon versions of him always struck her as crotchety but wise rather than prone to pointless anger but the idea of angering the aged Rat gave her chills. And Raphael...Casey had insisted that he and Raph had 'busted' Kimber repeatedly; she'd have no ally in Raph, she was sure of it, and that knowledge made her feel bitter.

"We did blindfold her, see?" The nervous reminder - Leo's attempt at placating Splinter's worries - drove Amber to blush.

She cringed behind the purple fabric blocking her vision. They blindfolded her alright—with a slightly ratty purple kerchief from Donnie's trouser pockets. Her lungs were too flooded with his familiar - and mouth-watering - scent (coffee, clean grease, a faint hint of spice, and clean sweat to notice the sewer funk, but she'd been forced to take drastic measures to stifle her body's reaction to the combination. By the time they reached the lair, she'd mentally replayed the most bizarre songs she could think of - *Time Warp*, *Feed My Frankenstein*, *Ballroom Blitz*, nothing was overlooked.* As hard as she focused on distracting herself by methodically dissecting every possible meaning of every lyric, she never noticed the ninjas' breaths growing more and more shallow by the moment.

Soft grumbling from the woman still slouched over Donnie's shoulder made the brothers meet eyes in an awkward wince. To the average human, the woman's scent wouldn't have registered, but they were more than human - to them, the sudden flood of pheromones was stifling, and it seemed to only strengthen.

"Bring her here," Splinter conceded wearily, settling himself at the low table in his room. Donatello followed, easing Amber to the floor as Leo went about boiling water for tea. With a gentle tug of fabric, the barrier was gone from Amber's eyes, taking with it the delightful aroma that had driven her mad. She remained silent, head bowed and eyes closed as Donnie excused himself to the lab, leaving the door parted behind him. "We're no savages, Child, you needn't hide your eyes."

"S-Sorry," she mumbled shyly, glancing furtively up at the being on the other side of the table. "I'm not afraid of you...just—well, nervous an' sorry for getting your sons in trouble." His whiskers twitched in a suppressed smile as he recognized her odd speech from his stories; she spoke with what he interpreted as a Midwestern twang that bordered on Southern drawl, but it seemed off somehow - warped in some places and some pronunciations were forced, as though the strange woman was
mimicking something foreign. He saw no threat in her posture or behavior, though, and decided to overlook the odd woman's speech quirk.

"Well, this changes things," he answered seriously. "I had no idea you forced my boys to bring you here against their own good judgment. How could an unarmed woman not much taller than myself accomplish such a feat?"

"What?" she objected frantically, finally looking up to fully meet his eyes. She was visibly horrified-good, maybe she wasn't a threat. "No, I di'n't- do any of that—I never asked'em- to bring me here! They... well, I've got nowhere else to go, an'—"

"Then you are not directly responsible for them bringing you here?" She chewed her lip a moment, staring through the lacquered wood. "Taking responsibility for others' actions is an injustice to you and a disservice to them. I am wary of their bringing a stranger home, you must understand, but we mean you no harm." Amber hesitantly met his dark eyes over the gunmetal rims of her glasses.

"Yes, Sir." At that moment, Leonardo arrived bearing a wooden tray laden with cups and a small steaming teapot; tears pricked Amber's eyes at the familiar scent wafting up the spout. "Oolong," she choked out without considering how random the comment would seem.

"Miss O'Brien?" Leo asked warily. "Is something wrong?" She shook her head, smiling weakly.

"No...uh...Leonardo. It's just—I'm just weird, I guess. All the things I could miss from my old life, an' I miss tea. Sunrise coffee, lightnin' bugs at dusk, wadin' in the crick in summer, warm dirt underfoot an' the mornin' fog—nope, I miss tea."

"Sometimes things that seem trivial can mean the most to us," Splinter admitted solemnly as Leo excused himself from the room. "I am called Splinter, Child; you have already met my eldest, Leonardo, and my second eldest, Donatello; I'm sure you'll meet my other second eldest Raphael, and their younger brother Michelangelo, before the night is out. Your name is O'Brien, yes?" She stared a hole through the bottom of the teacup, soaking in the sweet perfume rising from it.

"Yeah," she answered softly. "My name's Amber O'Brien, that much I know's- true, but I don't have many answers...at least not that I can get out. Casey seems convinced I'm someone by the name of Kimber Bryant, but I'm not—I'm just stuck in her body, as crazy as that sounds." She winced; it did sound crazy...it also sounded sexual, proof that even in this life, she was cursed to be gutter-brained. "I'll gladly answer any questions you have—if I can get the words out, at least. I can't—"

A low grating sound above drew her attention - a raspy rumble halfway between overfilled coffee grinder and rapidly approaching coal train. She fought the panic rising in her chest but scanned deliriously for the demon she knew would arrive any moment to take her away...again. Familiar, horrifying images fought their way to the forefront of her mind, manifesting with alarming ease.

"I...

Crushed foundations stained with blood. Toppled buildings groan in the night. A battered doll hangs in a stripped tree like a grotesque scarecrow. "I..."

DONATELLO!" The sudden shout from Splinter's rooms wrenched the genius from his daze; had he really missed dinner while staring through the recovered security footage? "HURRY!" The panic in his father's voice sent him barreling toward the source, only to freeze in the doorway of Splinter's room in disbelief.
Amber lay curled on the floor in a ball, her hands clasped over her neck, shaking violently. Even without his goggles in place, he recognized what was happening. Blood pressure elevated, pulse rate rising, breathing rapid and irregular, drop in blood oxygen levels imminent... Between her raspy breaths and choked sobs troubling words leaked through, hinting at what she clearly couldn't tell them. Blood. Wind. Glass. Hurt. Storm. Dead. Aaron. School. Book…Donnie shook himself out of his stupor, rushing to his father's side and skidding onto his knees.

"She's having a panic attack!" he explained frantically as he pulled her away from the broken china cup on the floor - the teacup she was given clearly suffered in the panic. "How'd I not see it before?! We've gotta—" At the sudden weight on his legs, all thought fled his mind. His eyes dropped to the shaking body huddled against him, the head buried in his armored chest, and the two low pigtails brushing against his side. He turned in dismay to his father; Splinter nodded gravely, hastily lighting some incense at the table. Donnie forced back his nervousness to focus on monitoring Amber's vital signs and ignoring the unnaturally red hair whispering across his skin.

The first thing to manifest in Amber's mind was warmth; the second was a strangely familiar aroma of coffee and clean grease, and the pungent, smoky perfume of burning incense. A strong hand rubbed slow, calming patterns on her back while another held her close to something warm and smooth, fingertips poised carefully on her neck.

Out of the darkness, a low humming broke through—soft, slow murmurs from another lifetime promised patience and understanding—promised to fix her broken soul.** Last of all, a dusky brown came into view as the memories faded from her mind's eye. That was a familiar brown, she realized fearfully. A glance upward revealed the truth, and two concerned hazel eyes fixed on hers; the humming stopped.

*HOW did she wind up in Donatello's LAP?! "Eheh...Hi?" she attempted. Though the worry never left his eyes, he cracked a weak smile.

"Hi." She glanced awkwardly from the turtle still rubbing her back to Splinter.

"How'd I get here? Please tell me I didn't jus' crawl into his lap." Neither answered, triggering a deep blush. Yup...she just crawled into his lap - didn't even buy'im a drink first. Splinter scrutinized her silently a moment, then momentarily locked eyes with his son.

"Your soul has some very deep scars, Miss O'Brien," Splinter murmured softly as he gathered the shattered china - regretful of the loss, but not condemning the cause. "Scars that are too tender for inspection, much less display. If you are willing, though, I may know of a way to see your past without forcing you to speak it. Would you care to try?"

Amber thought long and hard, still flustered at being seated across Donnie's very warm, very comfortable lap—a lap she had no memory of invading. Search though she did, though, she still came up with the same answer. "If it'd clear my name an' prove that you have nothin' to fear from me? I'd do just about anything."

"What's going on, Bruh?" Mikey whispered. Leo shushed him as Raphael lumbered over. The three of them peered warily into Splinter's room where he and Amber sat back to back, silent and still, clearly in deep meditation.

"Sensei's trying to see her past," Donatello answered gravely as he joined them. "Talking about it sends her into a panic attack; he's hoping that deep meditation will reveal what she can't, in the Astral Plane."
"Wow, she knows how to meditate?" Mikey eyed her warily. "Maybe she's a ninja—or a Jedi! OW!" he exclaimed at Raph's brain-duster.

"She's knocked out, Mikey," Donnie answered dryly. "I had to sedate her...again. From what I understand, the last train that passed over triggered a panic attack...just like we saw in the Station."

"What made her afraid of the subway?" Mikey asked dubiously as they watched their sensei at work.

---VISION---

The two people in the front seat seemed to have not a care in the world, Splinter mused. He didn't quite care for the music they were blaring, but they were obviously very happy. What he couldn't quite understand was why he was in their backseat, and where Amber was in this memory.

"Shaddup,- O'Brien!" the blond man grinned as he skipped another track. "Ozzy could kick Sinatra's ass any day of the week!" The woman in the driver's seat grinned widely, swatting his hand away from the stereo.

"Willis," she shot back. "There's more to life than who kin- kick whose arse—an' Sinatra's not that bad! His music's got a great—"

"Rammstein!" Aaron interrupted loudly, yanking a massive CD binder from under his seat and digging through it like a man possessed. "O'Brien, please tell me you've got some Rammstein in here. All this culture's gonna make me puke."

"Yer gonna make me puke." Splinter studied the driver intently; he couldn't believe it! He'd heard that voice, that awkward accent before—it was the voice and accent of Amber O'Brien, whose memories he was currently experiencing. This woman looked nothing like the Amber he'd met, though...this woman had to be at least two hundred pounds and several years older, and both warm brown braids were liberally streaked with grey. "You do realize 90% of Rammstein's music is just foul language and banging, right? Ya won't find any'a that crap in my car."

"Picky. So, word is they're gonna make a new TMNT movie soon!" Aaron piped up; the car swerved sharply and she grinned over at him excitedly.

"Yes! Omigosh, yes! When?!" Aaron burst out laughing.

"Psych!" he cackled. "Oh, the look on your face—was Donatello wearin' pants again?" Her entire face red as a beet, she whacked him in the shoulder.

"Screw you, Willis. Why did I ever tell you about that dream? I mean, seriously?" 'That Dream...' As though she hadn't dreamt of that Donnie for years, his refractive hazel eyes, his shy, gap-toothed smile, his permanent slouch...Damn. Hello, Gutter. "Ugh," she groaned reaching down to rub her right knee. "I can't wait to git out'a- this car—my knees're- killin' me."

"I'd say that'd teach ya to jump in front of a bus, but it prob'ly wouldn't."

"Dumbarse, Fer the las' time, I didn't jump in front of a bus. Some damn idjit- ran a red light an' hit me in the crosswalk. Startin' to think I preferred ya hungover—at least ya were quiet."

They had to be driving through a war zone, Splinter thought sorrowfully. What else could have turned the small town into such a disaster area? Trees were ripped up, buildings crushed, even the
very pavement the car drove on was gouged and crumbled in places. Amber, hadn't spoken since they crossed the city limits and stared fearfully around her searching for landmarks that no longer existed. By the time they reached the remains of her home, it became abundantly clear to the unseen passenger: somehow, despite the drastically different appearances, he had indeed found Amber O'Brien.

From atop a pile of provisions, Splinter watched Amber and Aaron. The Town Hall's basement, though touted as a Fallout Shelter, was never meant for so many people and conditions were ridiculously crowded. Aaron bustled from one place to another making himself useful; Splinter never expected such selflessness from him after his behavior in the car, but he supposed even his boys were prone to misbehavior among friends.

As of yet, Amber simply sat in a vacant corner staring through the wall as though she were completely dead to the world. She'd not spoken since she and Aaron broke down on her battered front lawn, nor had she eaten any of the meals the blonde tried to coax her with. It was as though she'd simply ceased to exist. Splinter's heart ached, realizing the truth; she was in shock—so deeply in shock that she'd ceased to think or feel anything. As troubled by this revelation as he was, he missed the moment she finally moved from her corner. Quickly catching sight of her he followed behind as she climbed the creaking stairs and wandered aimlessly away from the shelter as though following a distant call.

Splinter could only guess why she came to the school. Feeling certain that something terrible was about to happen, he trailed behind her as she made her way to the library. With an almost wistful expression, she traced familiar shelves, digging through the scattered volumes for a particular tome. Its plain black cover was worn and faded from age, but the sight brought tears to her otherwise empty eyes. Among the ruins of the once proud building, she leafed through the book for a particular page and in a soft, haunting tone, read aloud.

"A deep force pulls me toward the window-blind,
some impulse urges me to raise the shade;
why is it that I tremble, half afraid,
with formless terrors running through my mind?
What are the dim dread images that bind my hand?
Why is my arm so strongly stayed?
What sense of overhanging doom has made
me fearful? What the sight I shall find?
Some warning voice calls out: Go back—go back!
I could not turn though fronted by the rack.
And so I slowly raise the shade to greet
whatever on the other side should lie,
and stare and stare in horror as I meet
the leering of a huge and sightless eye." ***

Her empty eyes turned to the window, drawn by a sudden movement and crack of thunder; chills raced down Splinter's spine. He was only here in spirit and could not be harmed for that reason, but he knew something dreadful was about to happen.

Amber wandered over to the only intact window, peering about with vacant disinterest. As though summoned by the words she'd spoken, a deafening, grinding roar filled the air. A wall cloud loomed overhead as a funnel cloud touched down somewhere southwest of the battered building. Right before Splinter's eyes, she tucked the book securely in her arms and fell to her knees in the rubble
and glass, bowing her head in prayer.

"Please," she mumbled softly. "Protect my family...protect my friends...protect this town and those who live here. Forgive us our trespasses and guide us in our time of need. Help Aaron understand, and keep him under your care...he's too stubborn to ask for help." Splinter's ears felt ready to burst from the horrible pressure; surely Amber was hurting too, but she gave no sign of anything—pain, fear, sorrow, nothing! "Please, Lord...please wrap your arms around those who have been brought down by these storms, help them rise from the ashes anew, and help them rebuild their lives...thank you for everything." Finally, the mask broke - regret twisted her eyes and shook her parted lips. "If you gave second chances, I'd ask only for—"

Before she could finish, the window burst inward raining shattered glass over her prostrate body. Splinter flinched, choking up at the sight. Almost immediately a glass brick from a nearby building came careening through the window frame and struck her in the head. As the light left her eyes, and she died on her knees, the aged rat mourned the woman who gave up on life.

The sudden change in location was dizzying. Splinter gazed around him in confusion, trying to come to grips with what had happened. One moment he was in a small town high school library, standing at the side of a woman who'd died needlessly, next he stood in a familiar chamber. Intricate green and ivory tile, tarnished brass fittings, elegant bronze plaques, bright blue glass skylights and bare-bulb light fixtures...he gazed around him, struggling to make sense of the situation.

The abandoned City Hall subway station...He'd been pulled from a ruined schoolhouse to the abandoned City Hall station! Almost frantically he searched the large cavern; how could he have woken from his trance so far from his family?!

Movement in the corner startled him. He faded into the shadows with the ease of a ninja master, watching as a pile of rubbish shifted with a groan. "Aw, ma heid," a familiar voice groaned. Right before his eyes, Amber—the Amber his boys had brought to him—groggily struggled upright, rubbing her forehead right where the glass brick had struck her counterpart in his vision. The truth was all too clear now, though he still couldn't fathom how it was possible.

Amber O'Brien died at the school, died in the library from a blow to the head. Against all logic, she woke up in that very cavern in the body of another: a woman formerly known as Kimber Bryant. It made no sense, but still, he knew it was true. Right then, the roar of a passing tram echoed through the chamber. Amber screamed, falling to her knees with her hands over her neck, firmly in the grips of a panic attack. The world faded around Splinter as she fought the demons of her previous life, cowering in the rubbish of another.

When did his life become so complicated?

~*~END VISION~*~

Splinter came back to himself with a start, glancing feverishly around for his sons. In mere moments the four gathered around him, Raphael shooting distrustful glares at the still unconscious woman still seated against his back. Unbidden, the aged mutant recalled her death - the way she died slumped over on her knees, head bowed in prayer but back abnormally straight in defiance...he shuddered. Finally, sure he had everyone's attention, the aged rat answered the question hanging silently in the air.

"She speaks the truth...Kimber is gone; Amber lives again."
Amber regained consciousness to the sound of distant arguing. Never realizing she was being watched, she sat up cross-legged, rubbing her aching forehead. "Owww...Di' I skelp my heid er somethin'?" - she asked weakly, thickly.

"Blunt force trauma to the skull," Donatello muttered from the shadows. She jumped but gripped her skull again.

"When?" she asked quickly chasing the thick, gruff tone away from her words. "I don't recall an'thin'- after that injection."

Donatello took a moment to compose himself, padding toward her and dropping to one knee at her side. "It's..." His fingers dug into the worn rug beneath them, anchoring himself in the moment. "You died. Do you remember?"

"Of course, I know I died," she answered slowly, "what I don't remember is the dyin' bit...an' why's my head killin' me?" Donatello stared through the still smoking incense, his shoulders fairly trembling. "Donnie?"

"A cube of blown architectural glass," he muttered, then hesitantly met her eyes. Her lungs forgot their purpose when he gently, almost timidly brushed her punch red bangs away from her right temple. The contact sent a sharp throb through her skull; against her will, she hissed at the pain. His face fell. "The point of impact...It was quick, but I can't guarantee it was painless." It took a moment but she finally realized the connection.

"Wait..." She cringed. "Yer tellin' me I was beaned in the brain-pan- with a glass brick?! The only place in town with glass bricks was my mother's church!" She scoffed bitterly. "Oh, the irony...everythin' that congregation put me through wasn't enough, the building had to kill me, too. I take it Master Splinter was able to see everything, then...an' he told y'all what happened."

"Not everything, no, but he gave us the basics...Raphael doesn't believe him." A sudden crash rang out in the living room, followed by Splinter shouting in Japanese. "We're safer in here, trust me."

"Safe?" she scoffed. "What's that? I was killed by a church - Nothin's safe anymore." She glanced over at her silent company, her cheeks pinking. "So did Splinter figure out how I got here, in this world?" Donnie shook his head, clearly disturbed by something.

"No, but he has an idea. He thinks you and Kimber might be inter-dimensional counterparts—the same soul existing in two different worlds—and that you were somehow drawn into her body when you both died. Sensei says you had regrets which may or may not be a factor." He dug his knuckles into the worn rug, clearly fighting some unknown emotion. "She died before you got there, probably the night before we found you." Not yet seeing the subtext, she sighed in obvious relief.

"You have NO idea what a relief that is," she muttered. "I've been so worried I somehow forced'er out of'er own body—that I'm responsible for her death! I just couldn't—Dee, what's wrong? Ya look like someone kicked your puppy!" He didn't answer; instead, he hoisted himself to his feet and padded dejectedly out of the room. It wasn't until later that night when he showed her to the spare cot in the Lab that she figured out what he wasn't saying.

He had arrived in time to prevent her death, but not Kimber's...and Purple Dragon or not, the knowledge weighed heavily on him. Amber spent the whole night staring at the concrete ceiling, ruminating. It seemed even in her new life, she was too careless with her words and actions.

Somewhere between rumbling trains, memory assaults, and musings about stunning hazel eyes, the
sewer faded into the world of dreams.

Still with me, y'all? Sure hope so.

Words (Midwestern Twang unless otherwise noted)

- **Ain't'cha?** - 'Aren't you?'
- **Ani'thin'** - *Anything*, a local pronunciation similar in cadence to "Anikin" if the name started with an 'Enn.' This may be a largely localized pronunciation as I've not heard it often and have never heard it outside my own area.
- **Cowk** - Vomit, Scottish slang.
- **Di'n't / Din't** - Didn't
- **Ma heid** - Scottish slang *my head.*
- **Idjit** - slang pronunciation of *idiot.*
- **Kin** - This one has two different possible meanings depending on how it's used. If it's used as a noun, it means family, and not only blood relations but the family you choose. It's not a commonly used term anymore because people tend to associate it with family feuds and redneck living. If the word is used as a verb - as in "You kin kiss my arse," it's just a twisted pronunciation of "can," differentiated because the -a- is instead pronounced -i- like *bin.*
- **Knees're** - knees are
- **Out'a** - Out of
- **Prob'ly** - Probably
- **Shaddup / Shuddup** - 'shut up,' generally more common in the South than the Midwest, but in Southern Missouri, it's not unusual to hear either. The second pronunciation is the more common.

- **Di' I skelp my heid 'er somethin'?** - Amber's first major speech relapse, this is mostly an ungodly meshing of twang and Scottish brogue. Basically, 'Did I hit my head or something?'
- **That much I know's true.** - That much I know is true.
- **Beamed in the brain-pan** - slang 'hit in the head'

- **Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word** - means *he, his* or *him* respectively.
- **Adding 'er to the end of a word** - means *her.*
- **Adding 'ey, 'em, or 'eir to the end of a word** - means *they, them, or their* respectively.

UP NEXT: **You Can't Set a Broken Soul.**

Chapter End Notes

* Credits for songs: "Time Warp" is by Patricia Quinn, Richard O'Brien, and Little Nell, from "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." "Feed My Frankenstein" is by Alice Cooper,
(AKA, the king of bizarre music) from album "Hey, Stoopid." Lastly, "Ballroom Blitz" is by the band Sweet, best known for this song, "Fox on the Run" and "Love Is Like Oxygen."

** The tune is Coldplay's "Fix You;' two guesses as to who's humming it, and you really should only need ONE. It's pretty obvious.

*** The book Amber reads here really exists. "Dark of the Moon" is a poetry anthology compiled by August Derleth, and includes "poems of fantasy and the macabre." It's highly uncommon—there were only a couple rather limited printings and most copies are found in libraries—but it's very much worth the read. "The Eye" was written by Donald Wandrei and is found on pages 381 and 382 with several other of his sonnets. It appears exactly as it's typed in my copy of the book and it makes my inner grammar nazi twitch; the correct phrase would be "Why is my arm so strongly STAID," not "STAYED." RRRG! Pretty sure its copyright is expired, as the volume was published in 1947.
5: You Can't Set a Broken Soul

Chapter Summary

Timeskip. Amber has a nightmare about home, goes back to basics, Raph and Mikey are asses, Amber vows revenge. Donnie and Amber bonding ends badly, Donnie feels useless, April is supportive, Amber realizes she needs help.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter, YAY! Hope y'all enjoy! Dedicated to the Donnies of the world—people who stick up for others, will catch you when you fall, and never give up on you no matter how crazy you drive them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Trigger Warnings:** The usual, bad coping methods, minor bullying including self-bullying

*Suggested Listening:* Avril Lavigne "Nobody's Home"

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5: You Can't Set a Broken Soul

February 8, 2016

"Why'd you have to leave, Amber?" Aaron muttered into a mostly empty glass of cheap beer. "Why'd you go out on your own like that? You were safe in the shelter…"

Amber stared in dismay from the dark corner of the skeazy bar. Aaron would never have been caught dead in a place like this, much less drunk on cheap alcohol. He HATED the stuff, hated the memories it always brought forth—memories of the friends and family he lost to the can and bottle. Though truth hurt, Amber knew without a doubt he was drinking over her—her senseless, needless death had driven her best friend to drinking.

"Aaron…" she whispered, inching toward the bar. "Aaron, I'm sorry…" As though she hadn't even spoken, the barkeeper laughed derisively behind his newspaper.

"Dis's ruh-DICK-yulus," the portly man drawled thickly. "Dis ahticle says ova half da people who died in da twista was ig-NOR-in da sirens—any dumb bee-itch who'd go out in weh-da like dat dee-zerves—" Without warning, Aaron's heavy glass stein crashed onto the counter, shattering from the impact.

"SHUDDUP!" he slurred angrily, clumsily launching himself over the counter at the barkeeper. "You di'n't- know'er—you got no right to judge'er!"

As the two grappled and traded blows, the ceiling violently tore away. Amber turned fearfully to the
gaping rafters, her heart racing. Clouds gathered in the barren skies forming menacing grey thunderheads. Blue and green lightning cracked from cloud to cloud racing the rolling thunder.

Her lungs tight from fear, her ears aching from the plummeting air pressure, Amber fell to the ground, scrambling into the nearest corner and staring up in horror. Though torrents of rain fell, though the power flickered and failed, though wind tore through the bar like a vengeful ghost, the patrons never budged, staring blankly through their drinks as though the world weren't coming to an end. She was alone—alone with the demon that killed her and haunted her dreams.

Sirens wailed in the distance; a familiar sputtering roar deafened her. Grey-green clouds split in a merciless, mocking grin. As the world fell away around her, Amber screamed unheard pleas to the merciless winds, certain she'd breathed her last.

Amber shot up in bed with a panicked shriek; as her racing heart calmed and the phantom ache in her skull faded, the blanks filled themselves in around her. Old, stained brick walls, vaulted concrete ceiling with exposed ducts, pipes, and wiring, the distant rumble of a passing subway train, slow whirring and beeping from the ridiculously advanced machinery around her…she was safe.

"Not again," she rasped, pulling the patched quilt around her as she waited for the shaking to stop. "Damn night terrors…gettin' fuckin' old."

She glanced wearily over at the clock. It was four am…she'd gotten five full hours of sleep. In her previous life, she was useless without nine to ten hours a night; now she was lucky to get three. The hourly trains triggered nightmares and kept her awake fighting a constant barrage of graphic memories and chills that had no basis in temperature. Five hours of uninterrupted sleep? 'It's like Christmas,' she thought sarcastically, picturing a decent night's sleep packaged up in a box with a big red bow.

Without further ado, she disentangled herself from the sheet and quilt, rummaged under the cot for her folded clothes and basket of toiletries, and padded out of the room barefoot. After a quick stop in the bathroom, she set up the coffee maker on autopilot, staring blankly through the scratched wooden table as the percolating machine hissed, dripped, and belched. After downsing a cup of sweetened, creamed tar-juice, she set up a second cup with only sugar.

Stopping only to deliver it to the still slumbering genius, she hit the showers, choosing the farthest stall from the door as usual. That one had a working lock. The room's fixtures had obviously been salvaged from somewhere, but fixing the warped, vandalized locks apparently wasn't very high on Donatello's list of priorities. Maybe because the lair once had only male residents and most men weren't all that concerned about being seen in the buff by other men? She cringed, wrenching the elastics from her tangled hair; she still wasn't sure if Mikey had barged in on her on purpose, but she wasn't willing to risk a recurrence.

The moment the water started up, she started humming loudly to block out the sound. She'd once loved the sound of water—had once slept deepest when rain was falling—but that was before her fear of severe storms became a fear of even the lightest rainstorm, and long before she was killed and given another life. Now the sound of rain terrified her and the dripping showerhead sent chills down her spine. As she lathered up her hair, she thought back to better times, better days, and a soft voice that once lulled her to sleep with songs of their youth.

The roar of water rattling the overhead pipes ripped Donatello from his hard-earned sleep. As his eyes blearily cranked open, he again cursed his decision to leave the ceilings in the lair unfinished; even a suspended ceiling could muffle the noise a little. Scratching his neck, he hoisted himself up in
his bed and fumbled for his glasses. As his eyes focused, the blurry splotch by his alarm clock solidified into a mug of steaming coffee. The coffee was prepared far too sweet, as usual, and he nearly sprayed it all over the clock’s display once he realized what it read.

"Four-thirty in the morning?" he groaned, digging his knuckles into his aching eyes. "You've gotta be kidding me...this can't go on." As his bedroom was the closest to the lab, he was always woken several times nightly. Every time Amber cried out in her sleep, every time she thrashed around and fought the demons haunting her dreams, every time she woke up screaming herself hoarse, he was woken by the noise. Every time her nightmares deprived him of sleep, he spent the rest of the night struggling with his own thoughts and feelings. Sorrow at her condition—guilt about being unable to save Kimber's life—resentment over lost sleep and interrupted work—disgust at himself for resenting Amber when she clearly wasn't responsible…the list went on and on.

With every day that passed, he became ever more certain that Amber wasn't as well as she tried convincing herself. Every time the subway rumbled overhead she fell into another panic attack, and sometimes even a flashback. Several times daily she'd turn up missing without any word of where she was going, and more often than not he'd find her tucked beside the running washing machine or wedged into the foot-well of his desk, shaking violently and smothering tears in her knees. She was getting worse every day…and for the first time in his life, Donatello was faced with a problem he knew was beyond his skill.

Amber wasn't a broken machine—she was a broken woman. He couldn't fix her.

"It was down in La-wheezy-yan—AH!- Jus' about a mile from Texarkana," an off-key voice echoed from the bathroom. Donatello sank into his usual seat at the battered table, staring through his coffee cup. "OW! In them ol' cotton fields back home–DAMMIT!" The water had long since shut off; every now and then, the song was interrupted by a cry of pain or curse, signifying that Amber had moved on to impatiently wrenching the tangles from her hair. She still wasn't used to Kimber's body, especially the second set of posts in her ears and the ring on the left one, and routinely snagged them in the bristles. Between oaths and verses, Donnie dozed off at the table, nodding into his empty cup.

"Ah, shoot." The sudden phrase startled him awake, and in the blink of an eye, he was crouched before his chair brandishing his empty coffee cup as a weapon. Amber stood in the doorway to the kitchen cringing in embarrassment. "I woke ya up again, didn't I?" She brought the coffee carafe over to refill his cup as he slouched back into his seat.

"Yeah," he answered honestly, trying to stretch the crick out of his neck. "No big deal, though...not like you do it on purpose." She shook her head with a wry smile and made her way to the kitchen sink. As she passed by, he realized something was different...he stared in surprise. Instead of just keeping her hair in a high, messy bun, she'd separated it into twin tails at her nape and braided them tightly. She'd discovered the other day that even though her hair still smelled fruity, the red was starting to fade. Apparently she was so excited to be returning to her natural color that she changed things up a little. With her hair still so red...He winced. Breakfast was going to be a disaster.

"So," he attempted, striving for a casual tone and failing. "What's with the change?" She ducked around the open cabinet door to meet his eyes.

"You noticed?" she smiled brightly as she mixed up a huge bowl of pancake batter. "I got sick'a fighting my hair all day so I went back to basics—before I got here, I usually wore my hair like this. I'm lazy like that." She dug a package of wilting blueberries from the fridge, picking out the stems as she tossed the berries into the bowl. "After all the change an' drama, it's a real comfort havin' my braids back."
"It's..." He scrambled for words between the worries. "...cute. Maybe you should wait until the dye fades, though. I just know—"

"S'up, Angelcakes?" Mikey called out from the doorway. "What's for—Whoa!" Donatello cringed, retreating to the coffeemaker; he knew this was going to happen. "Blueberry pancakes?! Sweet!"

"Wait, what?" Donnie muttered dubiously.

"Yup!" Amber grinned, mixing in a little extra sugar as Mikey dug out a pair of battered skillets and spatulas. "They were about dead anyway, so I figured why not? It'll be a nice treat." As Michelangelo fried pancakes and Amber scrambled eggs, Donatello watched silently, hoping that his worries really were unfounded.

About halfway through the bowl of batter and eggs, Leonardo and Splinter sat at their places, conversing over morning tea. Right as the stove burners were switched off, Raphael lumbered through the door to the coffeemaker. Halfway there, he pulled a double-take, gaping at Amber's braids in disbelief and derision. He said nothing, retreating to his seat with a steaming mug of coffee. When Amber bustled to the table to dole out breakfast, he struck.

"So," he asked snidely. "Where's da meat, Wendy?"

"Hey, now," Leo began, but Mikey cut him off.

"Don't be such a jerk, Raphie," the youngest scolded, playing with the end of a punch red braid. Amber's comforted smile warped into a deadpan glower a moment later when she felt both braids lifted up at either side of her head. "Too many freckles! She looks more like Pippi Longstocking!"

"Hardy, har, har," she grumbled, setting the two platters down a little more roughly than necessary. While Raph and Mikey bantered over which was a more accurate resemblance, she retreated to the living room with yet another cup of coffee. Donatello was used to Raph and Mikey's antics—he'd been the butt of their jokes more times than he'd like to admit—but this time, he was pissed. He loaded her untouched plate and his own with pancakes and eggs and dug for flatware in the drawer.

"She's been nothing but helpful since she arrived," he reminded the two troublemakers coldly. "She cooks, she cleans, she picks up after your ungrateful asses, and right when she starts to relax, you tease her!" He shot them both a glare as he left. Sometimes they absolutely disgusted him, Raph especially. He found Amber on the cot in the lab, lying on her back with her head dangling over the side and brushing through her long loosened hair. Though he'd only seen them once, he already missed the braided tails; why eluded him at the moment. "Hey."

"Hey yerself," she shot back with a grin, wrestling her hair into a high ponytail. As she sat up and fastened the coiled mass into a sloppy bun, he pulled up his rolling stool and held out her plate.

"You forgot this—dig in." Moss green eyes scrutinized him seriously. He avoided her eyes, passing the plate and flatware. "Don't mind them. They're just—"

"It's okay, Donnie." Confused, he finally met her eyes; she didn't really seem upset anymore. "If unflatterin' comparisons and immature folks were all it took to ruin my day, I'd'a- died a hermit. This body? It ain't me—I was short, fat, clumsy, partly crippled, an' I started goin' grey before I hit drinkin' age. I've been called much worse'n- any'a that. It's no big deal." She halfheartedly scraped a chunk of egg around on her plate while Donatello let the description sink in. "B'sides, Aaron used to say much worse...an' he's—was my best friend. I'm used to gettin' shite from people, and I'm more than willin' to give it back." She shot an up-to-no-good grin up at him. "I'll get'em—...but not 'til they've let their guard down."
"If you're sure, Amber," he relented, then paused for a bite of his own pancakes. "Forgive me for asking, but...before twenty-one?" She chuckled.

"Yeah. Lots'a early grey in my family. My uncle Bart went shock white while he was in high school; findin' my first silver at nineteen was lucky, considerin'." She took another sip of coffee before adding, "It always hit the redheads worst. I wasn't a redhead, but there was enough red in my hair to turn me into a brown skunk." He couldn't help but grin at the mental image.

"It didn't embarrass you?"

"Course it did," she answered honestly. "For a while, I kept my hair cut above the neck an' never went anywhere without a hat or hair-scarf—couldn't afford dyein' it all the time. Course, then everyone jus' assumed I was goin' bald and started pullin' me aside to talk about the cancer I was supposedly dyin' of. I finally had it when my roommate Mercy dragged me to a cancer survivors group shpeal; flipped'er off, flashed my stripes, an' walked home. Apparently the granny-hair spoke for itself." She finally gave up on pushing her food around and passed the plate back to him. "Guess I'm not really hungry; help yourself. I better get to work, right?"

"Amber," he scolded, latching onto her arm and anchoring her in her seat. "You have to eat—you skipped breakfast and lunch yesterday, and the day before you only ate an apple! You're not getting adequate caloric intake like this—at this rate you'll—"

"I'm not starvin' myself," she argued. Against her will, a memory played through her mind's eye: City Hall's basement, Aaron crouched before her with a bowl of soup, coaxing her to eat even though her stomach felt full of concrete. She fought to keep control but that memory had a dozen more on its heels; together, they swarmed her. "I'm just not hungry! Trus' me, I spent my whole life hungry when I shouldn't be—"

"You should be hungry! If you keep this up you're going to—"

"I don't need a nanny, Donnie!" she burst out vehemently. "I'm a grown woman, not some anorexic tweenager.- If I ain't hungry, I ain't hungry, an' no amount'a shovin' food at me's gonna make me hungry!"- Without another word, she stormed out intent on silencing her memories with manual labor.

"I just don't know what to do, April," Donatello muttered into his palms as she watched him with worry. Beyond the lab's closed blast door, Amber was hard at work in the dojo, waxing the floorboards to mirror brightness on her hands and knees...for the fifth time in as many days. "She hardly eats anything and guzzles coffee like it's water," he ranted harshly. "She barely sleeps, wakes up screaming, then spends the whole day and most of the night cleaning everything in the lair in the least effective ways possible—she intentionally wears herself out every day, then crashes in the early hours, too sore to do anything! She's having panic attacks more and more often and she's been spacing out for hours at time—the other night we found her wandering the sewers barefoot talking to someone who doesn't even exist in this reality!"

He fell silent, choking up. She and Mikey had been washing dishes when someone dropped a glass, and the sound had somehow flipped some hidden switch in her brain. She walked barefoot right through the shards like a zombie and somehow found her way out the front door, muttering the whole way about hungover friends and neurotic dogs. When they finally found her—after following what felt like a mile of bloody footprints—the sight of her adamantly arguing about music with 'Aaron' silenced the long lecture he'd planned. "She's going to kill herself at this rate, April," he confessed weakly, dropping his hands to dangle helplessly between his knees. "...and there's nothing I can do to stop it."
"Donnie," the older woman murmured leaning forward for a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder. "You're a brilliant guy and a talented engineer, but you can't just 'fix' people—if someone's broken, you can't reconnect some wires, tighten a lug nut or two, slap on some duct tape and expect them to work again…and if those injuries aren't physical..." She trailed off, avoiding his eyes. "…Broken bones heal quickly once you immobilize them, but there's no way to set a broken soul. It's not your fault."

"You're waxing poetic on me, April," he teased halfheartedly. "I'm not Mikey; you don't have to play down the gritty details." Finally, she met his eyes, her own serious.

"She needs to see a doctor, Donnie…a psychiatrist. I think Amber has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder…and it's only going to get worse."

Just outside the shuttered door, Amber silently slid down the wall and landed in a boneless heap. She wasn't supposed to have heard that conversation, she was sure of it, and she wouldn't have heard it if she'd not come to apologize for taking Donatello's head off earlier. Now her overreaction and subsequent attempt at apology had exposed her to a secret discussion and triggered a plethora of fears. Even as she fought to rationalize away the knowledge, stubbornly scolded herself that PTSD wasn't caused by something as minor as a natural disaster, she knew it would explain so many things.

She'd never been in a war zone, had never seen battle, and had never seen her comrades fall one by one—she was a janitor, not a soldier!—so how could she have developed something even seasoned warriors weren't guaranteed stricken with? She'd insisted her whole life that she wasn't weak, that she could handle ANYTHING given enough time to work through it…yet she was completely broken by something as stupid and meaningless as a storm.

'Am I…' she though disjointedly, tears pricking her eyes behind her glasses. 'No…I am…I really am weak after all.' Without a word she stood, dusted herself off, and wandered out the front door, stopping only to grab a battered flashlight from the kitchen counter. A walk wouldn't fix her intolerable weakness and it wouldn't fix her, but maybe it would at least give her time to think. A line of music echoed down a storm drain from a passing car, reminding her of a time when she didn't feel so lost. 'Where were they going without ever knowing the way?'

Tolkien was right: not all who wander are lost, but she knew she wasn't among them.

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Words (Midwestern Twang unless otherwise noted)

- Adding 'er to the end of a word - Means 'her'
- Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word - Means he, his, or him.
- Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word - Means them or their
- B'sides - Besides
- Di'n't / Din't - Didn't
- I'd'a - 'I would have,'
- Know'er / Judge'er - Know her / Judge her
- La-wheezy-anna - This is an awkward pronunciation of "Louisiana" sometimes heard
in the Midwest. In the South - or other areas NEAR Louisiana - people generally pronounce it "Loozianna" or "Loo-ee-zee-anna." IRL, I pronounce it "La-wheezy-anna" because it's how I was taught, and it always drives Cold up the wall because he grew up friends with a family FROM Louisiana. At first, it was just a habit; NOW I keep that habit just to annoy my hubby. ;P

- **Shuddup / Shaddap** - Shut up, the first being a common mispronunciation and the second being more of a Southern/Midwestern slang pronunciation.

- **Tweenager** - Slang term for someone just old enough to be a pain, but too young to be considered a teenager; generally such persons are older adolescents.

- **Worse'n** - 'Worse than'

- "**Dis's ruh-DICK-yulus**" - 'This is ridiculous.' A highly twisted version of the Southern Drawl, perhaps from Arkansas. An odd way of defining the difference between the Midwestern Twang and Southern Drawl would be this: 'In the Midwest, we say as much as possible with as few syllables as we can, while in the South, people say as little as possible with as many syllables as they can.' The South tends to stretch words out and add extra syllables to words, while the Midwest tends to crop off syllables and mash words together, and both tend to warp pronunciations of common words.

- "**Dis ahticle says ova half da people who died in da twista was ig-NOR-in da sirens—any dumb bee-itch who'd go out in weh-da like dat dee-zerves—"** - 'This article says over half the people who died in the twister was ignoring the sirens - any dumb bitch who'd go out in weather like that deserves-' Twisted southern drawl. Unfortunately, there was a LOT of this after the tornado I went through - people would openly blame those who were killed for being careless or for not seeking the 'right' shelter, never considering that they didn't know all the facts OR that the dead person's loved ones might be hearing their ranting.

- "**If I ain't hungry, I ain't hungry, an' no amount'a shovin' food at me's gonna make me hungry!!**" - 'If I'm not hungry, I'm not hungry, and no amount of shoving food at me is going to make me hungry!"

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**Up Next: Cohabitation Chaos**

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Chapter End Notes

A quick rant: Developing PTSD does NOT mean you're weak, broken, worthless, damaged, or any other horrible things we often convince ourselves it means. PTSD is just your brain's way of recovering and adapting, and it's actually a healthy response to trauma. It's not exclusively a 'warrior's illness'—anyone can develop it regardless of whether or not they've been deployed. While it can be hard to accept that you 'got it from' a car accident, witnessing extreme violence, or in Amber's case, weathering a hell of a storm, what caused it has little to do with personal strength or weakness. If you start
showing signs of PTSD, TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR. Don't put it off, don't talk yourself out of it, and for Pete's sake, don't do what I did—don't spend months staring out the window, ruminating on why you lived when so many others died, and hoping to waste away into nothing—the longer you wait to seek help, the longer it takes for you to heal, and healing IS possible.

Putting away my soapbox now. Also, the song Amber sings is called "Cotton Fields"—it's a Southern folk song, and if sung in a slow, bluesy manner, it can put kids out like a light. Hope y'all're having a great summer!
6: Cohabitation Chaos

Chapter Summary

Mikey makes a mess, Amber is smart, Donnie puts his foot in his mouth and Amber overreacts. Drama. Fluff. Mikey meddles. Amber has a hot dream and Raph murders it. She gets her revenge.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! So far this story has been primarily doom and gloom - and the doom and gloom is far from over - so I figured it was time for some fluff - a little breather from the drama, if you will. After all, when people move in together madness ensues and Amber hasn't been living with the guys very long at all. Hope this light-hearted chapter doesn't disappoint! Dedicated to all us short chicks livin' in a tall man's world.

Trigger warnings: The usual plus a very mild lime—nothing too descriptive, it's very brief and practically pointless to skip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Simon and Garfunkel, "Bridge Over Troubled Water"

6: Cohabitation Chaos

February 10th

Not one step out the bathroom door, Amber's ears picked up the sound of scrambling and frantic words in the kitchen. "Not even five minutes, an' there's already more work to be done," she sighed tiredly. "I'm gettin' too old for this."

In the kitchen doorway, she was greeted by the sight of Mikey scrubbing frantically at a grimy blackened pile of something on the countertop—the countertop Amber scrubbed clean after lunch. "What happened?" she deadpanned. Mikey whipped about with a girly shriek and the grubby sponge went flying across the room to land in the corner with a splat.

"I didn't do it!" he exclaimed, waving his hands defensively. "It's not my fault!"

"Yeah, you did, and it is," Leo contradicted sternly, leaning back against the opposite wall. "You took the crumb tray off the toaster so the leftover pizza would fit. Everything melted off the pizza and burned onto the countertop...and you probably murdered the toaster." Mikey grinned sheepishly, rubbing his neck.

"Heheh," he laughed nervously. "Well, at least you didn't break it, this time, right Bruh?" Leo stared ba
With a long-suffering sigh, Amber approached the scorched cheese, sauce, and toppings. "Lemme get this straight." She grabbed the dripping sponge from the floor and wrung it out over the sink. "You packed the toaster full of pizza, left the crumb tray pushed aside and nothing underneath, then tried scrubbing the mess off with cold water and a half-dead sponge."

"The water was warm," he protested weakly. "And—" She cut him off, flinging her arms wide.

"Water, Mikey, water!" Sometimes Mikey reminded her of a less socially awkward Aaron; she forced the thought away as she chuckled the sponge in the sink and started digging through a low cabinet. "You tried cleanin' up a hot, greasy, burned-on mess with water! Water alone will never clean up grease, especially burned grease!"

Armed with a box of baking soda, a spray bottle of white vinegar, and a plastic chisel, she tackled the mess. Once she'd chipped and scraped off as much as she could, she piled baking soda on the remainder. "Towels, Mikey?" she asked, startling him into action. With a couple old towels laid around the mess as a barrier, she started spraying the baking soda with vinegar.

"Whoa!" Mikey uttered as the mixture foamed violently with every spray. "What happened?" Amber shrugged noncommittally.

"It's just a chemical reaction, Mike," she answered, never realizing Donatello slip into the kitchen for coffee. "Vinegar's an acid, an' bakin' soda's a base; when they're combined, vinegar steals a hydrogen atom from the soda. The reaction produces water an' carbon dioxide, hence the fo—" Mid-spray she turned to look at Mikey; he was staring at her, bewildered. "Bakin' soda an' vinegar make a foamy mess that's great for burnin' off stubborn grease," she simplified gruffly.

"Oh!" he exclaimed with a wide grin. "So, you got this?" A dirty look from both Donnie and Leo made him cringe. "Eh… I mean, ya need a hand?" With a humoring smile, she passed him the spray bottle.

"Keep sprayin' 'til it stops foamin', then scrub off the rest an' rinse it off. Call me if ya need help, 'kay?" He pouted, but nodded in agreement and took over spraying the still foaming mass. With a grin at Leo and Donnie, Amber returned to dusting the dojo.

"Just a chemical reaction,' huh?" Donatello smirked at her from the doorway. "You realize he probably has no idea what a 'base' is, right?"

"Meh," she shrugged, hopping up on her toes to reach part of the weapons rack. "Not my fault—I ain't his Mama. Joke's on him, anyway - he kin spray it 'til the pigs come home,- it's gonna keep foamin' up."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" The unexpected comment caught her off guard, and though she knew he meant no harm, it rubbed her wrong. "I'd never have expected—"

"What?" she retorted sharply, stretching as high as possible. "My native language is Hick, so I must be a moron?"

"No!" he protested loudly. Her tenuous balance failed and she fell into his outstretched arms. "I just didn't—I mean—Ah, shell, I messed up again." Right above hers, shielded hazel eyes winced. "Do-over?" he proposed as he helped her back to her feet. Amber sighed in frustration, but plopped down on the dojo floor cross-legged; he followed suit, stretching out beside her.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, avoiding his eyes. "I dunno why I've been so—so cranky lately… I'm
usually not the sort to get mad without damn good reason, but here I've been blowing up all over everyone for no reason. I dunno what's wrong with me…My Mama whupped my hide- far far less'n-
this."

"You've been through a lot, Amber," Donatello argued. "Your life is—" "Yeah, yeah, I died an' all that," she interrupted. "None'a that's any excuse for bein' a total bitch to y'all over nothin'. I just wish I knew what was wrong with me." Decade old rosebushes buried under a ton of shingles. Trees shaved bare of bark and twigs.

He watched her silently a moment; her head was bowed and her trembling shoulders drawn tight, a sure sign that she was again fighting memories she couldn't shut off. If only he could help…He knew it wasn't much, but he gripped her shoulder supportively. Not surprisingly, she leaned into his side, shivering.

"I jus' wish I could shut off these thoughts—these memories—" She shook her head viciously, haunted eyes staring through the gleaming floorboards. Fiberglass tumbleweeds drift across a vacant parking lot. "It's crazy, but it's almost like someone else is in control of my thoughts, my memories, an' they're trying to break me with them! I just…" she trailed off, turning to timidly meet his eyes. "Donnie…what if April's right? What if I am…broken?"

"No one said anything about being broken," he answered sternly, hoping she hadn't heard April suggest just such a thing. "I was hoping you hadn't heard that conversation." She slumped further.

"I came to apologize. It's not your fault I feel too sick to eat, yer just tryin' to help me." Outstretched hands holding a mug of cloudy soup. A familiar voice begging her to eat. "I…" Her voice cracked. "I shouldn't be here…I shouldn't e'en be alive. If I stayed dead, this wouldn't be happening!"

The bottom fell out of Donatello's stomach. "You don't…you're not wishing you were dead, are you?" he asked softly. "Amber, you got a second chance…if you hadn't, if you'd stayed dead," He swallowed noisily, avoiding her eyes. "W-We'd never have met…and without the repeated alarms, we'd never have found Kimber's body…she'd have been unable to rest, forgotten in the underground."

She blushed, distractedly hitching her tee shirt up higher. The neckline didn't bare the hated tattoo she now bore, but it still made her uncomfortable knowing it was there. She still felt sorry for the death of the body's previous occupant, but she had yet to feel anything but annoyance for the woman herself. Damned Purple Dragon punks, she thought darkly.

"Do you regret it?" Donnie asked hesitantly. "—regret meeting us?"

"Of course not," she answered with a tired smile. "How could I regret meeting you—all of you?" she added hastily. She didn't want to come across as creepy, after all. She didn't notice the mild disappointment in her companion's eyes. "I guess…I guess I just don't know what to feel, really. Of all the people who didn't make it out of that storm, why'd I get a second chance? I never use this word out of principle," she almost spat, her tone harsh. "But it just doesn't seem fair that I lived and they didn't! Whole families died—mothers, fathers, children, elderly, no one was excluded! Half my town's first-responders were killed or injured! Why'd I get a second chance when so many who're more worthy weren't spared?!"

Donatello wasn't at all surprised when she practically fell into his open arms, sobbing uncontrollably. He was a little disappointed, though. It had been thirteen days since Amber first dove into his arms in the throes of a panic attack and twelve since he admitted to her that he didn't mind it. He was her bridge over troubled water, her port in the storm, and he would never turn away someone who really needed him.
Ever since getting the okay, she sought comfort in his arms when she felt her world crashing down. When she found herself unable to fight off the demons on her own, she invaded his personal space until she could breathe again.

Not that he minded, he reminded himself silently, awkwardly petting her hair. He was only too glad to help whenever he could…and if he was honest with himself, he enjoyed the contact. Therein lay the rub…she only sought his arms when she needed comfort. She needed comfort, consolation, not affection and the like. For all he knew, she left a lover behind in her old life. The very idea stung; twice now, a woman had been practically dropped into his family's laps, and both times, that woman hadn't considered them human enough for a relationship. Though he'd never agree with any of Raphael's outbursts aloud, it was apparent to him as well…Love wasn't in their cards.

"PSST!" A sudden hiss from the open doorway drew his attention away from the crying redhead. Mikey stood just outside pantomiming an embrace and ‘talking’ with his hands.

"SHOO," Donatello mouthed back at him. The other threw his hands up in disbelief and stalked away only to return with a whiteboard from the lab. After a moment of scribbling, the board was raised and the words became clear. *Quit huggin her & talk—she needs a distraction!* The moment Mikey's point became clear, Donnie met his eyes with a wide-eyed halfway panicked stare, shaking his head frantically. Mikey scrubbed the board clean with the sleeve of the hoodie tied around his waist, scrawled another message, then shoved it at Donnie with a pout. *Don't make me 'axidently'- break something. TALK or Mr. Coffee gets it!*

'You drive a hard bargain, Mikey,' Donatello thought at his younger brother with a scowl. 'And your spelling is terrible.' Somehow he managed to throw an 'I'm watching you' gesture at his younger brother without disturbing the still sniffling woman buried face-first in his other side. Clearly content that his advice was taken, Mikey swaggered off with a smug grin.

As his footsteps faded, Donatello rubbed Amber's back. "Come on," he murmured teasingly. "I know life's a pain right now, but you don't have to suffocate yourself in my armpit." She responded with a snort, burrowing even deeper into his side. "Or not. Your choice, really."

"You don't stink," she grumbled into his plastron. "Turkeys stink—Compared to those, you're a bed'a roses, even after training." Sure she was through crying, she slumped at his side, leaning back against his shoulder. "Thanks…an' sorry for cryin' on ya…again."

"Don't worry about it, Braids," he grinned, chucking her chin. "I'm happy to oblige." They sat in silence a moment, one fighting to contain an excited girly squeal at the nickname and the other searching for ways to distract her.

"I' gotta keep busy, Dunnie," she admitted softly, staring through the weapons rack. She loved his new nickname for her - loved that he cared for her enough to give her a nickname - but it didn't change the facts. She was a mess...a mess he shouldn't have to deal with. "The moment I stop workin' is the moment I start thinkin'…and whenever I think, I remember." She wiped at her cheek to dash away the last of her tears, feeling angry and weak. "What if April's right? What if I do have PTSD?" He stood and brushed his trousers off, then held out his hand to her.

"We'll cross that bridge if and when we get there," he answered confidently. "Until then, there's no use in worrying about it, right?" She accepted the hand up with a bright blush but smiled regardless. Without hesitation, she threw herself back into her dusting.

"Sorry I took your head off…again. It's not your fault you didn't know about that button."

"Button?" he echoed back, watching her closely. She was, after all, pretty clumsy...too clumsy to be
left alone with the weapons, even if he actually wanted to leave her alone.

She shrugged. "Yeah, everyone's got buttons, you know," she reminded as though he understood completely. "Big red mental buttons that should never be pushed an' usually result in nuclear fallout when they are. Some people can't handle being called a certain name, some can't handle being reminded'a certain things..." She snorted, grinning at a fond memory. "Heck, my best friend, Mercy - one of her worst buttons was hearing people using words like bipolar, gay, and the like as insults. She wasn't really violence prone, but the one time Aaron called her a 'bipolar bitch,' she 'bout knocked one'a his teeth out." Her face fell the moment she realized it - she wasn't going to see Mercy or Aaron again and the knowledge, though logical, hurt. "I don't really get too bent out'a shape over being called names or reminded of things," she finished instead of admitting her upset. "but whenever someone implies that I'm stupid, they're cruisin' fer a bruisin'."

"You thought I was calling you stupid?" Donnie shook his head. "I simply meant that you've shown little interest in anything but cleaning and cooking in all this time—I know practically nothing about you, but it's blatantly obvious that despite your rough speech, you're not an idiot."

Amber winced avoiding his eyes. "Sammy remembered a lesson the shepherd had given her," she recited softly without much of her usual twang; the author, after all, didn't write with that twang. "…gentle spirit may express itself in the rude words of illiteracy; it is not therefore rude. Ruffianism may speak the language of learning or religion; it is ruffianism still. Strength may wear the garb of weakness, an' still be strong; an' a weakling may carry the weapons of strength but fight with a weak heart." She finally met his eyes. "Harold Bell Wright wrote that in his book Shepherd of the Hills, an' it's entirely true. I walk like a hick, talk like a hick, an' live like a hick, but I'm not an IGNORANT hick." She was more than a hick, she reminded herself tackling the rack of staves, but the hick was what people saw most - it was more acceptable than the side of her she'd suppressed, after all, especially where she came from.

"I couldn't keep my grades up during school," she admitted instead of admitting the thoughts on her mind. "My classmates were absolute terrors, an' livin' in fear of getting the shit kicked out'a ya tends to make schoolin' less of a priority. Soon as I got out'a high school an' into college, though," she grinned almost smugly. "I blew their arses out'a the water—set the curves, aced everything but mathematics an' government, wound up on the Dean's list—well, you get the point."

"Why am I not surprised?" he asked with a low laugh. "You always struck me as too smart for your own good. So you graduated, then?" Her smile cracked; it was a sore subject, but he couldn't know that.

"I was only a few credits away from graduatin' with honors when some moron decided to park their van on my ass mid-crosswalk," she admitted. "It's a miracle I wasn't paralyzed from the waist down. Between physical therapy, corrective surgeries, re-learnin how to walk, an' mountains of legal bullshite, I dropped out; by the time I could walk without a cane, my credits weren't valid anymore an' I was too tired to start over…" ...and too apathetic, she added silently, but he didn't need to know that. She stretched up to reach the top rack again, avoiding his eyes. "I've been very blessed, though - I survived, I met some wonderful people, an' despite my occasional whining, I was happy. I spent the rest of my life workin' as a janitor, but by God, I proved without a shadow of a doubt that I'm not an idiot...and last I knew, my university still hadn't seen anyone beat my cumulative GPA."

"It must have been amazing," Donatello said quietly, his thoughts far from the dojo. "What I'd give for a chance to get a proper education..."

'Dammit, O'Brien,' she thought angrily. 'Ya just had to rub it in his face—quit bein' such a smug braggart!' "For what it's worth," she said brightly. "People go to school to learn; y'already know most
of what the curriculum requires. Plus, what with all the other smarts you have piled up in yer brain, if ya crammed a whole major's worth more in there, it'd probably crash from overload—major 'blue screen'a death' stuff, really." He retorted with a sly grin.

"You're just scared I'll beat your records," he teased. "Couldn't handle havin' a turtle beat you at, say, algebra."

"No contest there," she grinned in response, surveying the impressive cobwebs in the rafters of the room; she could never reach them, and it was driving her bonkers. "A rock could beat me at algebra." Without warning, he swept her off her feet and onto his shoulders; between shrieks and threats, he chuckled,

"Get those cobwebs—they said 'yer mama wears army boots.'"

"Yeah?" she squawked, smacking him with the dust-rag. "Well, yer mama couldn't outrun a snail!"
As the two traded quips and tackled the dusty rafters, Mikey darted back to the TV, satisfied in a hard day's meddling.

"Amber?" She bolted upright in bed, scanning the dark bedroom. "Amber, are you up?"

"Yeah," she answered softly as her eyes registered Donatello seated on the edge of her lumpy bed, unmasked and wearing only his trousers. He made the dark, cluttered room seem small - granted, her little 'shotgun shack' wasn't that big to begin with, but the presence of the tall, gangly mutant seemed to make it seem much smaller. "I am now. What's going on?" He shrugged, his lips tilted in an easy smile.

"I just couldn't stop thinking about you, really." He brushed a lock of dark brown hair from her cheek behind her ear, triggering a deep blush. "You wouldn't stay out of my dreams...so I came to invade yours. You don't mind, do you?" Warmth bloomed in her core at his confident, playful smile.

"Uh..." she stammered as his knuckles traced her cheekbone and jaw. Even without her glasses, she could plainly see the heat in his eyes - AND where this was going. "O-Of course not—you're always welcome here." Her pulse raced as his fingertips trailed over to her pulse point, hovering there long enough to sense the rapid beat.

"There's no need to be afraid, Braids," he murmured leaning in to bury his snout in her loose hair. "I'm here...I'll protect you." The words were stolen right from her lungs by a slow, sensual brush of lips on hers; as though gaining confidence from her suddenly gelatinous bones, he repeated the gesture several times more, then rubbed his snout against her nose. She whimpered and clung to him as he drew away the blanket and blazed a burning trail down her body. "Let me take care of you?" Before she could argue, her clothing was gone and his head was buried between her quaking thighs.

"DONNIE" she cried aloud as he sucked and lapped at her hot, naked flesh. "Oh Lawd —Oh God, DONNIE!"

"That's it, Amber," he murmured, his voice husky from heat and want. "Don't hold back—let go, I'm here." His words sent twinges down her spine—twinges that distracted her from how unexpected they were. "Amber...Brilliant, beautiful, precious Amber..." Only a little more—just a little longer, and she'd—

"Mikey!" A deafening roar startled Amber from her sleep and onto the floor in a sweaty pile. "I said
"LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!" As Raph and Mike tussled in the living room, Amber realized what had occurred.

"Goddammit!" she snarled as she hoisted herself up onto the cot again, swatting her punch red hair back over her shoulders. 'If it ain't fuckin' nightmares, it's wet dreams,' she thought darkly, beating the lumpy pillow into submission. Finally, she had a good dream...and Raph murdered it! 'April's draggin' me out tomorrow—I gotta get some sleep.'

Unseen by the irate female, Donatello rolled his eyes and returned to fixing the toaster. The lab had been stifling with her pheromones, but the air was finally clearing.

Hours later as the sun rose over Manhattan, a badly off-key voice belted out "Poison Ivy" in the lair's bathroom. One half-asleep ninja staggered to the kitchen for coffee while two more slept soundly. Two rooms away, the remaining two snored to beat the band, both tied to their beds spread-eagled and one gagged with a dirty sock.

Revenge, Amber thought later as she texted pictures to April's phone, is sweet.

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WORDS (Midwestern twang unless otherwise noted)

- Axidently - Mikey's spelling is atrocious. "Accidentally."
- Lawd - Lord. This is actually a more Southern pronunciation than Midwestern, but it sometimes makes its way over the Arkansas-Missouri state line to southern Missouri, where Amber is from.
- Less'n - This one has two possible meanings depending on its use. First meaning is simply less than. Second meaning, also sometimes written out as Unless'n or 'n'less'n is just an elaborated version of unless. The first meaning is much more commonly used unless the speaker is being a smartass.
- None'a - None of
- Schoolin' - This isn't typical Midwestern Twang, but rather an odd term Amber picked up from her Gran'Da. Simply means "Schooling," or rather, 'going to school and taking classes.'
- Y'already - You already

- "Whupped my hide" / A whuppin' - Whuppin' refers to punishment of a child by way of spanking or noisy blows to the rear, usually with a yard stick, paddle, or belt, or in more extreme cases, 'a whuppin' stick' or switch. It's not really considered abuse except among folks who consider spanking abuse, and a child is more likely to become a heathen from never having it than from having it. As recently as Cold's childhood, it was still considered acceptable to send your kid out back, make them 'pick a switch,' then use it to smack their asses instead of spanking them. The whole point behind whuppin' a kid is not to cause injury, but to punish them by way of emotional distress. Conversely, when someone tells an adult "I'll whup yer ass," "I'll give you a whuppin'," or something similar, they're referring to laying a beat-down on them by way of fisticuffs instead of spanking them.
- "He kin spray it 'til the pigs come home" - 'He can spray it until the pigs come home.' NORMALLY people say 'til the COWS come home but my research into Scottish slang indicates that cow is regarded as a serious insult, one of the worst you can aim at a woman. Because of that, Amber replaces cows with pigs.
- Adding 'a to the end of a word - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in out'a which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.
Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note: "Poison Ivy" is a song originally recorded by The Coasters, and it's a real crackup! Seriously, the first time I heard it, after years of breaking out in hives just from walking past poison ivy, I laughed so hard I stopped breathing. Give it a listen sometime if you need a laugh.

Hope you enjoyed the fluffy reprieve, because it's time to torture Amber again.
7: Best Laid Plans

Chapter Summary

April has a bad day, enter Doc Morris. Raph's pissed, Mikey's condescending, Amber says NO. April has an idea, Amber overreacts, then has humble pie. Splinter makes a deal. Grocery run. Enter Daron Williams.

Chapter Notes

Dedicated to the real-world inspiration for Daron and Aaron, even though I'm ready to throttle him…and all the wonderfully patient readers who DON'T burn me in effigy after this chapter. Also dedicated to the following awesome readers who have reviewed this story and in so doing, goosed my mental hamster when it felt that updating just wasn't gonna happen soon. (Don't get gross, people.) ImpartingAbyss, kmm92886, DaLadyofSouls, nightow/2010, ischyros, and last but not least, lady. Warrior. 10. (FFnet censored your name for some bizarre reason - maybe thought it was a web address?) This one's for y'all, folks! Let the Amber torture begin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Linkin Park, "Crawling," "With You"

7: Best Laid Plans

February 11th, 2016

'Morning people must be insane,' April thought scathingly as she downed yet another cup of espresso. It wasn't even eight am on a Saturday, but the apartment next to hers had been echoing with blaring, thumping bass for seven hours. Perhaps she could get a good night's rest if Donatello were to sabotage it, but that wasn't going to happen. Knowing him, he'd flat out refuse to deface another's property without just cause. Even if he did for some reason agree, he'd probably find something wrong with the stereo system, get distracted by the opportunity to repair it, and it would end up even louder and more ear-piercing.

"Come on," she grumbled aloud, frantically scratching her scalp to increase blood flow. "Wake up already—you're taking that Amber woman out for supplies today." With a long last glance at her still unmade bed, she slumped off to the shower, wishing she'd never promised Donnie to look after the strange redhead.

"Miss O'Neil, hey!" The familiar voice sent April cringing. Why, oh why had she decided to use the back door? That neighbor had been trying to corner her for weeks now, and he was always smoking on the patio at this time of day!

"Miss O'Neil, hey!" The familiar voice sent April cringing. Why, oh why had she decided to use the back door? That neighbor had been trying to corner her for weeks now, and he was always smoking on the patio at this time of day!

"Hi, Mister Morris," she answered awkwardly, turning to greet the balding man perched on a dusty metal bench. "How've you been?" Mark grinned and slapped his knee, dropping ashes all over his
"Just great, April, just great. What a wonderful day, huh?" His bouncy, energetic attitude solidified her suspicions about morning people—they're *nuts*. Instead of the sarcastic retort poised on her tongue, she answered,

"Well, it's not pouring...yet." She shifted awkwardly, glancing toward the stairs. "I'm kinda in a hurry, so I'll have to—"

"Please, sit down a moment," he protested. "I've got to talk to you about something—it's important. Just a few minutes and I won't bother you again...please?" She forced her eyes to his, only now noticing that he was looking off. His eyes were hung with shadows; he looked exhausted. Even worse, what little hair he had left had started greying rapidly. He didn't look nearly his age anymore. What could be weighing on his mind so heavily, she wondered?

"I..." She firmly reminded herself that when she'd first moved into the building, he and his family had routinely helped her out when she was tight on time, money, or needed help around the apartment. Nothing had changed other than the company she now kept—company that could make even the strongest man doubt his san—'Oh, crud,' she realized with a wince. "I guess I have time...sorry, Mark. What's going on?" She perched nervously on the nearest chair, her back ramrod straight.

"If I ask you an honest question, will you give me an honest answer?" he asked seriously. She nodded. "When Johnny started talking about talking turtles out on the fire escape, Marge and I assumed he was just being a kid—kids his age have wild imaginations, right?" He shuddered.

April knew where this was going, and she did NOT like it. "April, if you're having...unusual company over, I need to know...otherwise, I'm out a job, and we're moving back to Oklahoma."

"What?" April was confused. "Why would you lose your job?"

For the first time, he couldn't look her in the eye. "I'm a psychiatrist, April," he reminded. "and a psychiatrist who's hallucinating about giant talking turtles is an *unemployable* psychiatrist."

Crap.

"Rhetorical question: Why would you think you saw a giant talking turtle, and where did you see it?"

"On Christmas day, I took the trash out late in the evening—Please don't laugh!—and there was a giant turtle climbing up the fire escape. By the time I realized I wasn't dreaming, it had climbed through your window and started cussing at the top of its lungs about splinters and brown-nosers."

'Raph,' April thought exasperatedly. 'He must've been too steamed to realize he was seen...but I can't just tell Mark about them—last time I told someone, they nearly died!' Just then, her cell phone beeped; she didn't think to hide the screen and a quick glance made the blood drain from her face. Though the number was Donnie's, Amber had just texted her photos of Mikey and Raph bound hand and foot to their beds, the first gagged with a sock. Both were tagged with the phrase *To forgive is divine, but vengeance is mine, mine, mine!*

"That's him!" Mark squawked frantically, jabbing his finger at Raph. Suddenly realizing he could see her screen, April belatedly swiped back to her home screen. "That's the guy I saw—where'd you get the photos?!" She groaned. Oh, if only she could find a do-over button for the day—*nothing* was going right!
"Mark…can we table this conversation for a bit?" she sighed, shoving her phone into her purse. "I need to get some answers. I promise you, though, you weren't hallucinating, and you don't need to quit your job. Just please, for your own sake…don't tell anyone else about the talking turtles?" They said their goodbyes, Mark seeming more confident than before. "Leo?" she muttered into her phone while she waited for the bus. "We've got trouble: Code O'Neil."

When April stalked into the lair, everyone was crowded around the kitchen. The surprisingly sullen redhead was setting up another pot of coffee while Mikey and Raph stood nearby, one shouting at her for the prank, the other insisting that she wasn't really responsible but covering for the culprit. Donnie sat slumped over the table staring down his empty coffee cup with dejection. Leo watched the arguing threesome silently, stifling a smile.

"Come on, Babe!" Mike grinned, playing with Amber's ponytail. "We know ya didn't do it—Who did?" Raph sputtered another protest before yelling at him. Finally, she'd had enough.

"You," she spat at Raph. "Chill the fuck out. You, Mikey, quit callin' me a liar! I ain't coverin' fer no one, an' you're lucky it wasn't worse! Last time Aaron called me Pippi Longstocking, I got him passin'-out drunk, hog-tied him with zip-ties, took photos with his arse stickin' up in the air, an' posted'em on Facebook!" She shot Mikey a smirk. "You weren't hogtied, naked, OR gagged with underwear…I even untied you after sufficient begging."

Finally fully awake, Donnie cracked up and began intermittently snorting, and wheezing, clinging to the table for dear life. Raph snarled unintelligibly, finally too angry for intelligible speech, and stormed off to the dojo to beat the shit out of the punching bag. "What's Facebook?" Mikey asked dubiously. "That anything like Spacebook?"

'Get your mind in the game, Amber!' she thought dryly. 'Splinter must'n't've told'em- much about my world, so they won't know about things like Facebook!' "Yeah," she answered blandly. "Probably."

"Hey, April," Leo greeted, drawing everyone's attention to the hovering brunette. "Splinter wants to see you." With a frustrated sigh, she dropped her purse on the counter and took a seat at the table, immediately burying her head in her hands. Not a moment later, Amber set a steaming cup of coffee before her and the carafe in the middle of the table.

"Rough night?" she asked quietly; April sighed and nodded.

"My next door neighbor's taken to blasting German industrial music all hours of the night; they must've replayed 'Foyer Fry' and 'Book Dish' a dozen times each, just before midnight." Amber's eyes popped open wide. "Wait, you mean Feuer Frei and Buck dich?" She gave an almost bitter laugh. "Lordy, Aaron would love those folks—he always loved Rammstei—I mean, that kind'a- music, no matter he don't speak a lick'a German. Sure will piss off yer neighbors, though." After yet another cup of coffee, April excused herself to Splinter's room.

"It's good to see you, Miss O'Neil," he greeted warmly from his low table. "Please, come sit. Leonardo tells me someone was seen." She slid the door shut and seated herself across from him.

"Yeah," she sighed, accepting the cup of tea he offered; she still wasn't caffeinated enough for this day. "A neighbor of mine saw Raph climb through my window on Christmas day, and his son's been seeing the guys for God-knows how long. Mark's been trying to corner me about it for weeks." She flinched. "Problem is, I can't just say he was mistaken or pull any other evasive tactics…he's a
psychiatrist, and he's convinced he was hallucinating.

"A doctor who specializes in affairs of the mind cannot have theirs in disorder; to be distracted by such things would be detrimental." Splinter tugged at his long whiskers in thought. "This is most troubling. Can he be trusted?"

April gnawed at her lip, considering her answer. "Experience with you guys tells me to get real, but my heart tells me he can be trusted. His family has been there for me since I first moved into that building; even now, when I don't have trouble keeping food on the table, they insist I have a standing invitation to every meal, and they've never been anything but kind to me." Guilt twisted in her gut. "Since I found you guys again, I've been avoiding them...They're probably worried about me." Her eyes were filled with unease when they met his. "I guess I could just tell him Raph was a drunk boyfriend in a costume, but there's something else..."

The whole kitchen went silent when April and Splinter finally emerged from his room. April seemed embarrassed and concerned, while Splinter wore a stern frown. No one was willing to break the tense silence, Amber realized nervously. Some dire occurrence must have come to pass; she wasn't yet a part of the family, she reminded herself, and wouldn't be part of the conversation about to occur. Just as she was about to excuse herself to the lab, Splinter fixed his eyes on her. With a nod of his head, he indicated for her and Donatello to follow, and the four returned to his rooms.

"Donatello," he asked as they all settled around the table. "What progress has been made in your searching?" Donnie shook his head with a sigh.

"None, Master," he admitted. "I've found nothing about Kimber—no birth certificate, no credit reports, nothing—it's almost like she doesn't even exist! I supposed Kimber might have been using an assumed identity, but even that's been disproven—the only significant DNA match I'm getting supposedly belongs to a runaway from Missouri who supposedly died years ago!"

"Wait, what?" Amber objected. "You seriously harvested DNA from me without my knowing, just so you could create a profile to search with? How many used band-aids did that take?" He winced, sure his cheeks were darkened in a blush.

"Just one...the broken glass incident." Her expression was completely deadpan when she replied,

"Next time, Dee, spare the sleight of hand an' just fuckin' ask. You're not the only one wonderin' about this Kimber person...I'm stuck in'er- body, remember, an' I'm sure she's got loved ones lookin' for'er, Purple Dragon punk or not."

"Yeah, even punks have families," he agreed mildly. "Even so, the amount of information I'm not finding is alarmingly vast. I seriously suspect someone has intentionally wiped out any and all proof of her existence—and I'd bet money on it being related to why she was hiding in the tunnels in the first place." He shrugged awkwardly. "Basically, more questions than answers at this point."

"Amber?" The aged rat stated carefully, tugging at his whiskers again. "It has come to my attention that you may need to see a specialist, someone who can help you with this trouble. As it so happens, April has a neighbor who works as a psychiatrist...and April believes him trustworthy." Amber couldn't believe what she was hearing! "Due to some...carelessness on the part of one of my sons, Mister Morris has already become aware of our existence; April will be facilitating a contact requesting his discretion."

Suddenly the small room was silent enough to even drive crickets mad.
"Lemme get this straight," Amber started when it became clear that no one had any more to say. "Someone got seen, by my guess, Raph, the neighbor's a shrink who's now convinced he's goin' nuts, an' somehow this is the perfect opportunity to get my head screwed back on?" She flung her arms wide in disbelief. "Does no one see how ridiculously convenient this is?! That alone's reason for caution!"

"Mark's good people, Amber," April stated lowly. "I'd trust him with my life; he—"

"—he's only human, April," Amber interrupted. "I've seen what happens when vital trust is misplaced, and it's not pretty—people die for that sort of mistake! Even if he is a good person and is trustworthy, good, trustworthy people can still do very bad things when provoked…even if he wouldn't sell the guys out, how can you be sure he won't accidentally let something slip?" She shuddered. "What if he gets loose-lipped after a few cold ones? What if someone misleads him into trusting them, convinces him they're on our side? God, April, what if he's found out and tortured for answers?!"

"You need some serious therapy, you know that?" she deadpanned. "Suggesting torture as a possible outcome is morbid. What kind'a world did you come from?" Amber jerked as though she'd been slapped; memories of the world she left behind flowed unbidden - memories, though she didn't share them, of the girl taken from her neighborhood, of the many students who never finished school, of her neighbors and how they'd never approved of her family - she looked away, eyes watering.

"Let's jus' say it sucked," she grumbled instead. "Ya take yer life in your hands just steppin' out yer front doors…ya hardly know an' certainly don't trust most'a yer neighbors…families're unfed, hatchets unburied, an' sickness untreated, an' kids aren't even safe in their schools." She curled into herself, haunted, only halfway aware of the horrors falling from her lips. "Trustin' others is too dangerous - ya gotta expect the worst." Her eyes suddenly hard, she scowled up at April. "Do you remember how many kids you graduated with, Miss O'Neil? 'cause I do—twen'y out'a eighty-three were buried before they had that chance. Seven died'a drugs or alcohol, six died in car accidents, one was killed'n a hunting accident, one died of cancer, an' five were fuckin' murdered! So please, forgive me for being unwillin' to trust someone I've never even met when people I care about could pay for it!"

"Amber?" Donatello's stunned voice startled her out of her tirade; realizing she'd been over-reacting again - and sharing things she shouldn't have - her hackles dropped in a sigh. Silence fell over the room like a lead apron.

"Sorry," she muttered, avoiding April's eyes. "I don't trust easy, but it's not yer fault. That was totally out'a line."

"Apology accepted," April answered dully. "Though it could have been delivered in a more appropriate manner," Splinter remarked sternly, "Amber's point is valid. We cannot simply hope for the best—we must also prepare for the worst. Donatello, I leave this man's safety in your capable hands; it would be wise to accompany Leonardo when he and April meet Mister Morris."

"Yes, Sir," Donnie agreed softly, already mentally going through schematics, blueprints, maps, and how to use them all in his favor when he bugged the Morris household—for the safety of the occupants, of course.

Not long after, he and April were dismissed, while Amber remained in Splinter's rooms staring through the mug of tea he'd poured her. The smell of what had to be Earl Grey tantalized her, tempting her beyond measure, but she still recalled the fate of the last teacup he set before her; she
"Broken cups can be replaced," Splinter pointed out with something akin to amusement in his voice. "but this tea, when cooled, isn't so easily remedied." Her first inclination was to snark, *That's why the microwave was invented,* but for once her filter worked. Instead, she gingerly lifted the mug for inspection. Ah, she thought with a self-deprecating grin; despite appearances, the mug he'd set before her was enameled tin. With a contented sigh, sure she wouldn't be able to break this one even if she tried, she lifted the mug and inhaled the complexly perfumed steam.

"Thank you, Master Splinter," she murmured gratefully, finally taking a single reverent sip of tea. "I'm sorry I lost my temper back there. I'm not usually so—*so combative,* but lately, I seem to be itching for a fight. I don't understand it!" The trembling hands still gripping the cup quickly returned it to the table before her then violently clenched the fabric of her sweats. The memories playing like a broken record through her mind's eye were getting old, fast. "I feel…I feel so STUCK."

"Donatello hasn't mentioned any more incidents of dissociation, but has your anxiety improved any?" the aged rat asked gently; she shook her head silently, staring through the steaming tea. "…and are you still experiencing panic attacks as frequently as before?" A weak nod. "What about the other problems we've discussed—night terrors, lack of appetite, and distressing memories coming to mind unbidden?" She heaved a forceful sigh, her knuckles practically creaking from being clenched.

"Getting worse," she admitted around an invisible flock of circling buzzards. "…worse, an' more frequent. I can't stomach much solid—Donnie convinced me to try a mostly liquid diet. I hardly get any sleep between nightmares an' panic attacks, an' I'm always jittery from all the caffeine I'm downing. And the memories…" She shuddered. "…they're just getting worse, more twisted. Sometimes I'm not even sure whether what I'm seeing really happened, or if I'm just imagining it all."

Splinter considered her words as he topped off her cup. "Perhaps," he admitted softly. "it would be best for you to accept April's offer. If you do, indeed, have a trauma-induced condition, waiting for it to go away will do no good; such things must be treated, managed, or they only worsen. I agree that it seems a bit too convenient for her neighbor, a psychiatrist, to suddenly claim knowledge of us just when we have need of his help, but we must consider the alternative."

"Sir, with all due respect, I'd rather die again than put this family in danger!" she responded vehemently. "You took me in—I blundered into your home a useless, unskilled, untrained *nutjob* branded with a farkin' *gang symbol* in my cleavage an' packin' an *arse-load* of baggage, but y'ain't been nothin' but *kind* to me. Even when I drive y'all crazy with my compulsive cleaning, frequent breakdowns, an' buttin' heads with Raph, you've made me feel safe, secure, an' accepted. Hell, I pranked two of your sons to kingdom come today an' you're sitting here offering me tea instead'a censure—Why would I ever consider putting this family, your *family,* at risk over somethin' I can't fix?!"

Realizing she was ranting again, she forcibly clenched and unclenched her fists, wrenched her shoulders back to their correct level, and stared through the steam rising from her mug. "I just need some time," she pled tiredly, finally nervously meeting his eyes. It irked her, but she'd never even witnessed *Mercy* having such sudden, drastic mood swings as she was now…and several times she'd seen the blonde go from happy, giddy, and almost nauseatingly chipper to 'One more step an' I'll *literally* bite your *face* off'—usually, because of something Aaron said or did. Aaron...Mercy...she missed them so much, it hurt... "If there's a chance I can work this out on my own, then I'd rather do so. Please, Sir…"

She choked up, fighting to suppress the riled demons with half-remembered whispers of a low voice humming Coldplay. "…I have to try… an' if I try an' fail, then…" She forced herself to swallow
around the bitter boulder in her throat. "...then I'll leave the decision up to you; I'll trust your judgment an' comply."

Splinter studied her silently, all-too-aware of what every slight variation of her posture meant. Fear, worry, humiliation, despair—the woman before him was lost, and he feared she wouldn't last much longer without serious intervention. She'd been overweight when she arrived but now she was visibly thinner and losing an average of ten pounds a week. Losing twenty or more pounds wasn't something that would hurt her - Kimber, after all, was curvy bordering on chubby - but if her body continued to drop weight at this speed without adequate nourishment, Amber could find herself in much more dire straits than having a spare tire. Donatello's concern was rightly placed; if the pattern continued unchecked, eventual death from malnourishment and exhaustion wasn't a far-fetched possibility. A regular diet she could keep down wasn't the only thing in order—she also needed to find ways to occupy her mind that didn't involve running herself ragged.

His path was clear; he cleared his throat. "Miss O'Brien?" She looked up at the unexpected formality. "You requested a chance and a chance I'll give you, but there are stipulations."

"Bring it on," she agreed firmly.

"You've been here two weeks; I give you half of that time to see if you can make an improvement." Her eyes widened in dismay, but to her credit, she said nothing. "My son Donatello has been keeping close track of your progress, or rather, lack thereof, and will no doubt assist you in any way he can. You have seven days; if in that time you have had so much as one fewer symptomatic episode, you may proceed as you please and I won't press the issue. If, however, you have so much as one more nightmare, panic attack, rampant memory, or any other symptom in that time..." His eyes, normally so calm and kind, were hard when they met hers. "...you will seek professional help, even if you must hide the truth to do so. Do you accept my terms?" She sat silently, considering his words.

"Not much of a choice, is there?" she answered. "Either seek help now or seek help later, either way, I'll still be risking your family. On the off-chance that I may spare them the risk, though...I accept—I'll give it a shot." As a gesture of good faith, she filled his empty cup; it really was a lovely blend, she mused distractedly as the spicy scent of bergamot wafted up to her. "If I may ask, Sir..." She shifted in her seat. "Donatello informed me that you told them of what you saw in my memories—my past life - but they don't seem to know much about it. How much did you tell them? How did they take it? No one's so much as batted an eye unless they don't recognize something I'm talking about!"

"To be quite honest, I felt the less said the better, Dear," Splinter admitted flatly. "I saw nothing before your return to Will'sdale, and even that was fractured at best...more moments in time than full memories. What I did see is concerning. Rather than subject my sons to the possibility that they don't exist in your reality, at least not outside of fiction—" She blushed hotly, suddenly fascinated by her mug of now-cold tea. "—I felt it prudent to exercise the ninja art of 'distraction.'"

If she didn't know any better, she'd say he was teasing her.

"My sons know you are from another time and world much unlike ours," he explained simply. "...in which our family, the Foot Clan, the Purple Dragons, and even our closest friends are not present in the way they're used to. They know that many things are different in your world, from popular culture to customs and beliefs, and that you are experiencing quite a bit of culture shock as you acclimate. They know of your death, how you died, and that your soul is deeply scarred by your last days and will take much time to heal. And that, my Dear, is all they need know until you are comfortable adding to it."
Shining moss green eyes met his and her lips curved in a watery smile. "Thank you, Sir," she breathed. "I'm evermore in your debt."

"Nonsense," he denied, patting her knuckles with a humoring smile. "you owe us nothing...I would not be averse to seeing improvement in my sons' diets, though. Perhaps while you're out with Miss O'Neil, you can encourage her to focus less on prepackaged fare?"

"UGH!" Amber grunted as she and April shoved the last boxes of groceries into the back of the party wagon. Just in time to prevent a collapse of the precariously piled bags and crates, they shoved the hatch shut, April leaning on it to catch her breath. "Ya think they eat enough?" Amber snarked, yanking off the faded ball cap Mikey had loaned her. Granted, it was emblazoned with the logo of the New York Giants rather than her Notre Dame Fighting Irish, but it made a good fan at least...and did a passable job of hiding her still-red hair.

"I ever tell you about the time I saw Mikey eating four slices of pizza at once?" April asked dryly. "This might last a week or two, tops. Those guys're expensive...at least Vern's footing the bill. After all, if not for them, he wouldn't stupid-rich...just stupid." Amber barely suppressed a grin at her companion's sulky tone, instead turning to heave the two nested carts into their corral. Only a few blocks from the lair, a sudden outburst rang through the vehicle.

"SHIT!" April swore loudly, veering into another lane. "I forgot—That CD I promised to loan Raph is on the counter! Hang on, it'll just take a tick." By the time the van skidded into an empty spot in the underground garage, Amber was sure she left claw marks on the seat and dash, and had resolutely decided she would NEVER ride shotgun with April again. "Come on, we can take my groceries up while we're at it."

"Jus' admit it, O'Neil," Amber commented dryly, prying herself from the car seat that could easily have become her coffin. "The CD's not an emergency—You jus' wan'a pack mule to carry yer crap." April laughed as they loaded their arms with bags.

"Can ya blame me?" the reporter teased as she led the way to the elevator. "Besides, I've got a bribe." Green eyes rolled, but Amber was unable to disguise her amusement.

"Chocolate? My stomach says 'Hell yeah,' but my hips say 'screw you, you're fat enough.' Think I'll pass." April's only answer was a sly smirk; silence reigned until they were through her front door and unloading themselves onto every available surface. When the cold and frozen items were all put away and the rest laid out on the counter for later stocking, April plopped the last bag in front of Amber with an expectant smirk. Increasingly concerned by the other woman's smug grin, Amber inspected the contents...and dug the contents out one by one. For the first time in this life, Amber was sure she was going to break down into hysterical happy tears.

"T...Tofu?...?" she breathed half disbelieving what April had offered. "You...you got me tofu?" She sniffled melodramatically, her lips quivering as though she were about to fall to pieces. April grinned.

"I practically had to drag you away from it, remember?" she pointed out as she wrapped the four oversized tubs of extra-firm curd in paper bags. "I knew that look in your eyes—most women get that look ogling chocolate during their periods. You're clearly not most women." A startled squeak broke from her lips when she was suddenly mercilessly glomped.

"Thank you, April, thank you!" Amber gushed. "Ohmigosh, I can't even remember the last time I had tofu—I've been seriously craving it since—since ever! 'Ever' wasn't quite the time she meant, but it was all that would pop up. "Thank heavens I thought to get extra broth and soy sauce, this'll be awesome!" she finished in a barely contained squeal of glee. April patted her head awkwardly.
"I'll take your word for it," she stated through a grin. "Stuff always tastes like 'old shoe' to me."

"I'd just dying to hear how you know what 'old shoe' tastes like, O'Neil." Halfway to the elevator, though, they passed a short, scruffy man with messy blond curls and a lemon-sucking scowl. Though she'd passed him by without so much as a blink, Amber suddenly found herself rooted to the faded carpeting, whipping around to look him over again.

"Amber?" April called from the lift. "You coming?" As though she hadn't even heard, the redhead took off after the man she'd seen. She knew him—knew his perpetual grimace, his off-kilter blue eyes, and thick black glasses, knew every ornery curl on his rock-hard head! Realizing he was being followed, he spun about with a scowl.

"What?" he barked; the moment he recognized her, two of the takeout boxes he carried fell to the floor with a resounding splat. Finally, Amber realized something was off. Both blue eyes were focused on the same target, his cheeks, chin, and lip were clean-shaven, and he was almost...shrimpy. The man before her, he wasn't...

"...Aaron?" The name wouldn't be kept behind her teeth, and her faulty filter wasn't at all to blame. "Willis, how...why...?" April's heels clacked maddeningly toward them at full-tilt. Assessing the situation with familiar speed, he grabbed Amber by her long red ponytail and dragged her to his door. Just in time April dove through, slid across the slick floor, and tumbled into the kitchen island with a yelp of pain. Even as she whipped out her taser and took aim, her neighbor stepped back to study Amber in dismay. Judging by the redhead's shellshocked expression, she expected him to drag her in for an embrace, not heave the bucket of lo mein at the nearest window with a mindless shout.

"Kimber fucking Bryant!!" he screamed in blind fury. "The fuckin' Hell're you doin' above ground?!!"

**WORDS (Midwestern twang unless otherwise noted)**

- *That alone's* - 'That alone is'
- *Glomped* - fan-speak, to glomp someone means to tackle-hug them or to give them a very intense possibly one-sided hug.

- "*Splinter mustn't've told'em*" - 'Splinter must not have told them'
- "'Twen'y out'a eighty-three" - '20 out of 83,' would sound more like 'twenny ou'da eydee-three.'
- *The fuckin' Hell're you doin' above ground?!!* - 'What the fucking Hell are you doing above ground?!!'

- *Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word* - means *he, his or him respectively.*
- *Adding 'er to the end of a word* - means *her.*
- *Adding 'ey, 'em, or 'eir to the end of a word* - means *they, them,* or *their* respectively.
- *Adding 'a to the end of a word* - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like *tryin'a* means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in *out'a* which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a' by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

*Up Next: What're the Odds?*
A/N: Okay, so I really, really prefer not to resort to cliffhangers, but this chapter just wasn't willing to stick to my usual 5-7 pages—if not for that cliffhanger…well, either the chapter would've accomplished less, or it would've been way, way longer…like two or three times as long. 0_0 Hope you enjoyed it regardless.

I can't recall where I first heard about the 'code O'Neil,' whether it be in a story or on one of the shows, but the term fits. If you rightfully coined this term, please let me know so I can give you credit—Bing brought up nothing relevant. (...we're feuding again.) Also, if you caught the Alice Cooper reference in this chapter, you're officially awesome. If not…well, you're still awesome but for other, less metal reasons. Later, y'all!
8: What're the Odds?

Chapter Summary

Daron's pissed, Kimber's story is revealed, Daron's hurt. Amber needs a tofu break, questions are answered and more are asked. Awkwardness, Major filter failure, Tension. Hun's an asshole. Donnie has a hot dream and Mikey murders it. Awkwardness.

Chapter Notes

WOOHOO! Folks, we just passed 1k views on this baby! Since y'all're such awesome readers, I've celebrated that milestone with a oneshot in the ANLoL universe: Time to Burn, found in A New Lease on Life: Gallery of Memories. Give it a look for a sneak peek into Amber and Donnie's near future! Thanks, y'all, you're awesome readers!

Hey, Folks! All y'all hopeless romantics're probably gonna be full of righteous power-of-love fury after this chapter's over, but I stand behind it: Amber and Donnie JUST MET. Though they hit it off pretty quickly, they're still only close friends—friends who just so happen to check each other out far more than they should. If you're gonna flame, don't flame over the characters having common sense—flame over something that's actually a BAD thing, like Raph and Leo being woefully neglected so far. This chapter dedicated to everyone who can discern the difference between 'love at first sight' and 'instantaneous infatuation.'

Warnings: Excessive foul language, insinuated long-term abuse and brief portrayal of emotional abuse, mild adult themes, major filter failure, and a smidgen of Mikey torture. Donnie may be just a tad OOC at the end...not really sure.

Hey, Folks! All y'all hopeless romantics're probably gonna be full of righteous power-of-love fury after this chapter's over, but I stand behind it: Amber and Donnie JUST MET. Though they hit it off pretty quickly, they're still only close friends—friends who just so happen to check each other out far more than they should. If you're gonna flame, don't flame over the characters having common sense—flame over something that's actually a BAD thing, like Raph and Leo being woefully neglected so far. This chapter dedicated to everyone who can discern the difference between 'love at first sight' and 'instantaneous infatuation.'

Suggested Listening: Breaking Benjamin, "Breakdown" and Taylor Dane "I'll Be Your Shelter"

8: What're the Odds?

Daron's Apartment
Quite some time had passed since the blond's outburst, but little had changed. Amber and April huddled on his sagging microfiber couch, nervous eyes following him from one end to the room to the next as he paced. Every step was marked by yet another foul oath and every turn accompanied by another muttered gripe about Kimber. With every word, Amber became ever more certain in her beliefs.

Though he looked similar, the furious man cursing an ever-increasing blue streak was not Aaron Willis, the friend she left behind in her previous life…he was Daron Williams, Kimber Bryant's friend and the man responsible for wiping her existence from the records. With this confirmed, all that now mattered was why.

"S'cuse- me," she asked without warning; he halted suddenly, turning to shoot an annoyed glare at her. "I guess you must be Daron Williams?" Another lemon-sucking scowl twisted his lips and he scoffed.

"Don't give me that, Kim," he snapped. "It's a little late to play the 'amnesia' card."

"I don't have amnesia," she insisted, rising and approaching him, "an' I'm not Kimber. She's…I'm sorry, but she's gone. I'm Amber O'Brien." She held out her hand in greeting, trying to soothe the guilt twisting in her gut; after all, she'd just run into one of Kimber's friends in her body, someone who clearly didn't know Kimber was dead. At her back, April stood and rushed to her side, Taser still at the ready; Daron frowned down at Amber's extended hand as if it were about to bite him. "If you an' Kimber're anythin' like Aaron an' I were, you were prob'ly- best friends…I'm sorry." Daron studied her silently, scrutinizing everything from her expression to her clothing with obvious annoyance.

"I find it hard to believe you'd put so much into your disguise without leaching the dye out'a- your hair, Kimber," he finally stated, completely disregarding her words. "The accent's a little over the top, but it might help out, and at least that tattoo's covered. Still, our agreement was for you to stay underground until I came after you—I'm still working out your death in Missouri, and it's ridiculously difficult faking death certificates from the early 2000s—most states didn't have those forms online yet, and everything's been hit-and-miss."

He suddenly shoved his hand through his hair and pulled at the loose curls on the top, fear widening his blue eyes. "God, it's a miracle Hun hasn't seen you yet—If he finds out I helped you—" He shot a panicked glare at her. "He'll fucking kill me, Kimber! I'm putting my life on the line yet again and you don't even care enough to—"

Without warning, a pair of arms wrapped around him in a supportive embrace; his words remained unfinished. Black cotton-clad breasts filled his vision—the bitter perfume of coffee stung his nose—an aching heart thundered near his ear. No matter how he dissected the situation, he still came to the same conclusion: the woman he'd loved for years had fairly tackled him, pulling him close in a long-overdue hug.

When he finally regained full control of his arms, he pushed her away enough to search her eyes, and what he found there was heartbreaking. Though they were the same shade of mossy grey-green as before, the eyes he saw held sorrow, guilt, pain, and fear; though identical on the surface, those eyes weren't the eyes of the woman he'd loved since childhood. He choked up; he pushed her away and wandered across the room to the stereo system. Amber watched in silence as the machine shuffled noisily, finally landing on a tune she recalled from another life.

*I'll never let you know,* a haunting voice admitted as Daron struggled to pull himself together. *But I love the way you laugh. I wanna hold you high and wash your pain away. I keep your photograph, and although I'll never tell, I wanna hold you high and ease your pain.* As the unfamiliar verses
rang out and Daron sank further and further into morose silence, Amber inched toward him; when she reached his side, she gently turned down the volume and caught his eyes.

"For what it's worth," she murmured as Reaver's lead singer droned in the background. "I'm sorry. It's clear she meant everything to you." He tried to force out an unaffected scoff, but it came out as more of a sniffle.

"It's pathetic, really," he rasped. "That comfort would be proof that she's gone. She'd never…she'd have just mouthed off at me, you know, insisted she had everything under control." Pained blue eyes met hers. "You're nothing like her, are you?"

"Far as I can tell," she admitted, "Yeah…we're apples an' oranges; I can't say we'd'a- gotten along even if I weren't stuck in'er- body."

"Not even gonna ask how that happened…weird enough that it did." He led her back over to the sofa, collapsing in the threadbare recliner. "I'm sure you have questions."

Amber hesitated, eyeing him nervously. She gnawed at her lower lip, glancing over at April who was clearly as confused as her. "Why was she hidin' underground, Daron? Why have you been fakin' her death, and why'd you do so much for her when she's clearly been nothin' but a bitch to—"

A sharp glare cut her off. "Don't presume to understand her," he snapped. "You may be stuck in her body, but you don't know shit about her. Kim…she was tryin' to get out'a the Dragons! If Hun hadn't met her, she wouldn't'a joined, and he wouldn't'a met her if I hadn't let her live here for so long." Guilt bloomed in his eyes; he hid them from her, staring out the sauce-spattered window. "That bastard ruined her life…and it's my fault."

"How?" April asked, shaking her head in disbelief. "How's something Hun did your fault?" A sharp glare silenced her.

"None'a your fuckin' business, O'Neil," he spat sounding so much like Aaron it hurt. "I ain't forgotten you're here, ya don't need to verify your existence." Before April could protest, Amber snapped,

"Hey! Leave'er alone—she ain't hurt ya none." Daron met her eyes and wilted, incapable of hiding his pain; though the occupant of the body was foreign, it was still Kimber's body…If he weren't sure he had no heart, it would be breaking. "So she got in over her head, wanted out, an' you swooped in to save the day."

"No saving to it," he bristled sourly. "I just got sick of her whining and did something about it." Amber's lips tilted in a humoring smile; go figure that Daron would be even more of a 'tough guy' than Aaron was. "Seeing as you're hanging out with the likes of her," he grumbled, shooting a glare at April. "I take it those stupid reptiles took you in…guess I owe'em- for once."

"Stupid?" Amber shot back dryly. "I smell sour grapes. Don't tell me Donatello out-hacked you." Sure enough, a dark blush tinted his cheeks and a sour scowl twisted his lips. "Thought so. Fer the record, he tried to help Kimber…an' he's been beating himself up over not gettin' there in time; Purple Dragon or not, she died on his watch an' it's really messin' with him."

That shut him up. Daron stared wistfully through the stereo as a haunting clarinet solo echoed through the speakers, followed by heavy drums and keyboards. Ich liebe dich, a deep, guttural voice growled. The lyrics rang through the otherwise silent room and Amber followed along, her memory supplying the translation; she'd always teased Aaron that Rammstein was nothing but 'foul language and banging,' but she enjoyed some of it, including this one. Now, seeing the forlorn young man
fight off heartbreak right before her, the song *Rumstein* had in common with *Rammstein* had new meaning.

_The pretty girls are not pretty; the warm hands are so cold. All clocks have stopped. It's no longer healthy to laugh, and soon, I'll look for you behind the light. Where are you? I don't want to be so alone. Where are you?*_

Daron Williams was hopelessly in love with Kimber, and she was gone for good; he needed time to process it. Amber silently squeezed April's arm and glanced pointedly at the door. "We'd best get going," she announced needlessly as Daron retreated further within himself. "We'll be in touch."

"Wait." Halfway to the door, Amber paused, turning to listen. Daron pried himself out of the sunken chair, slouched into the kitchen, and upturned a large metal crock from the counter. He dug through the pile of stale power bars for a moment, surfacing with a thick envelope. Hesitating a moment, he steeled himself, then shoved it at Amber. "Kimber can't use this now... just..." His voice cracked; he paused to collect himself. "Give those worthless reptiles a message for me, will you?" Amber nodded encouragingly, choosing to ignore the slight against her friends for the time being. "Hun _must_ pay—for Kimber, for _everything_—and I'm in, even if it means teaming up with _mutant jerks._"

"I'll tell'em," she agreed, hesitantly accepting the envelope. "but I can't promise they'll be willin' to help if you keep insulting'em like that. Get that anger off yer chest, take some time to adjust, an' we'll go from there. April can play go-between, right?" She shot an innocent smile at April, who gaped in disbelief.

"Don't bring me into this!" she protested. "This jerk's keeping me up every night with that _devil music!_" Amber chuckled dryly, shaking her head at her.

"_Devil music?_" she echoed with enough sarcasm to curdle milk. "Ya sound like _my mother_ when I discovered _Ozzy._" Daron glared at April, who squirmed under the force of it.

"If it'll shut you up, I'll move the stereo to the other wall—next time, just come _tell me_ it's too loud."

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### The Lair

A sudden, loud greeting drew all four brothers and their father to the kitchen where Amber and April were piling groceries on the table. In the frenzy of putting it all away, Daron's message for the guys was temporarily forgotten, and Amber's silence was, for the most part, unnoticed. As April said her goodbyes, the redhead hovered restlessly in the kitchen, contemplating the envelope she'd received from Daron. Its contents were spread out over the worn wooden tabletop in a morbid pile.

Credit cards, a bank account number, birth certificate, driver's license, library card, prepaid bus pass, a key marked with directions to a storage unit... It was baffling, but the proof was right before her in big bold print. In her attempts to disappear entirely, Kimber changed her name, and the name she chose was unbelievable...Kimber Bryant became Amber O'Brien even before Amber found herself trapped in Kimber's vacant body. "What're the odds?" she muttered as her stomach turned sickening cartwheels.

The world had officially become too weird for words; Amber needed a break. Without a second thought, she retrieved one of the tubs of tofu from the fridge, drained it, and set it up to press; as she silently mixed up a small dish of soy sauce and chicken broth and preheated the oven, Mike, Leo, and Donnie drifted into the kitchen. They were used to her acting strangely—she was, after all, an
odd duck at the very least—but it was unusual for her to be so silent. Every query was seemingly ignored; every attempt at eye contact was evaded.

By the time the tofu was cubed, brushed with marinade, and baked, Donatello had inspected the paperwork splayed across the table. Surely, he realized as she piled the baked chunks onto a plate and plopped down at the table with it, there was something he was missing. As the brothers watched her warily she popped a chunk of tofu in her mouth, chewed and swallowed, and promptly started bawling like a baby.

"...the heck?" Mikey asked dubiously. "Surely it's not that bad! Oww!" he yelped as Leo delivered a timely brain-duster.

Leo shook his head and latched onto Mikey's carapace. "You got this?" he asked Don, his voice hushed as he steered the youngest out the door. The genius nodded, watching Amber warily. He heaved a sigh and sank onto the stool next to Amber's chair, wrapping an arm around her shoulders; as so often before, she dove into his arms, curling up in his lap and crying into his shoulder.

"What am I gonna do with you?" he murmured, rubbing her back through her shirt as she hiccupped and sniffled pathetically. "What happened, Braids? Talk to me."

"I..." A sniffle cut her off. "It jus' tastes like home...an' home's...home's gone."

"Tofu tastes like home?" he repeated in disbelief; she nodded, finally getting control over herself. Though she was no longer crying, she made no move to leave his lap, and inwardly he prayed for the strength to conceal his body's response. After all, he was a straight, healthy, adult male with a woman in his lap—worse yet, a woman he was pretty attracted to. Torture. Sheer...torture.

"Yeah," she mumbled, swiping her cheeks dry and hoping her nose wasn't running. "Whenever life got too crummy, I...well, I was kinda prone to binge eating. Ev'rythin' jus' went straight to my arse, but I didn't have to feel guilty 'bout tofu; kinda became a comfort food." She stared forlornly at the plate of small brown cubes, longing in her eyes. "April an' I met Daron Williams...I guess it just made me miss Wi - Aaron Willis even more," she admitted softly. Donatello cringed, eyeing the paperwork.

"Daron Williams," he sighed. "We know him alright...have more problems with his brother, though, the guy's a total thug. I take it Daron's responsible for making Kimber disappear?"

She nodded weakly. "He said she wanted out'a the Dragons an' came to him for help. He had all that ready to give her when the coast was clear."

Shock widened Donnie's eyes and he rummaged for the birth certificate; he held it out to her, his brain running miles a minute. "But it has your name on it!" he objected. She nodded grimly, passing him the driver's license; though Kimber's hair was hidden under a black kerchief, it was obviously her photo.

"She changed her name 'fore she went into hidin'...changed it to mine. She takes my name, dies in hiding, an' lo an' behold, I'm sucked into her corpse." She scoffed, chucking the card and certificate back into the pile with a vengeance. "What're the fuckin' odds."

Donatello stared down the pile of documents nervously, silently calculating and questioning. Surely Amber wasn't brought to his world on such slim odds—surely it was more than just Kimber's choice in names that brought her to them, brought her into his life? If that were the case, even the slightest change could have changed the course of their lives—an alteration in the spelling, a switching of the first and middle name—the slightest variation would have left Amber, his Amber, wasting away in
Limbo, never to stumble into his life as she had! As his thoughts careened out of control, he unknowingly dug his fingers into her hip and back, holding her as though she'd be ripped from his arms.

"OW!" she yelped, jolting in pain. "Dee, ease up, I'm not goin' anywhere!" Startled back to himself, he abruptly released her. Suddenly not anchored to his lap she tumbled off with a startled squeak; training took over and he dove after her, flipping so his carapace took the brunt of the fall, the impact resonating with a loud, hollow THUNK. Her cheeks darkened in a bright, fetching blush as she took stock of the situation she found herself in. Donnie lay on his back on the tile floor, staring blankly up at the stunned woman sprawled out over his plastron, never realizing he still had hold of her waist. He couldn't believe it, was certain he had to be mistaken, but his lungs were suddenly filled with a familiar musky scent—the same scent he was teased with the whole way from April's the day he brought her home, and never could completely air out of the lab.

"Shite!" Amber cursed inwardly, scrambling for a way to politely extricate herself without hurting his feelings, freaking him out, or making her reaction to the position even more obvious. 'What the flying, floating fuckity-fuck'm I gonna do?! We just farkin' met—he's gonna think I'm a creeper!' With everything she had, she prayed that he couldn't smell her wanting him and that his brothers hadn't retained enough of their reptilian nature to register pheromones. "Umm..." she mumbled avoiding his eyes, sure her cheeks matched her still-dyed hair. "This's awkward. Can I get off?" The moment the words left her lips, her eyes bulged and she sputtered. "ACK!—OF you!" she added frantically. "I mean can I get off of you! I don't mean get off as in GET OFF, just—AHGH," she groaned burying her burning red face in his chest. "I'm just gonna shut up now," she mumbled, mortified beyond belief.

The chest she was hiding in shook with laughter—wheezing, convulsive laughter interspersed with the occasional shnork and shnerk. 'Great,' she thought snidely. 'I broke'im.' She lifted her head and propped her chin on his chest, glaring darkly at him. "What," she grumbled. "We all know my filter's useless, get over it." If anything, he just snorted and wheezed louder. One particularly loud, nasal SHNARK did it—she burst out laughing, clinging to his plastron for support.

"What happened?!" Mikey burst out from the doorway, then promptly froze in horror. Wheezing and weird snorty-gaspy-grunt noises echoed through the kitchen; between the legs of the table, he could make out two bodies shaking on each other on the floor. Worst yet, the kitchen smelled funny—and not a ha-ha kinda funny. The bottom fell out of his stomach. Slowly, hoping they hadn't heard or seen him, he backed out of the room and took off for the bathroom like the Shredder was after him. 'That was fast,' Mikey thought squeamishly as he dove into the nearest cubicle fully clothed and cranked up the cold water, haunted by what he hadn't seen. Only thirteen days in their home and Amber had already hooked his brainy brother, cementing herself as 'sister.' Good thing she wasn't really his type...

Back in the kitchen the two lunatics got themselves together and lay gasping for breath. Clearly, Donatello wasn't as freaked out as Amber worried he'd be...of course, after such an epic filter fail, who wouldn't laugh their asses off? Still chuckling hoarsely, she propped herself up to slide off onto the floor. Before she could even move, a massive three-fingered hand latched onto her hip, anchoring her in place.

Shyly she met his eyes; in the space of a heartbeat, the atmosphere changed. Laughter faded into nervous silence—stitches soothed into butterflies—eyes shone with sincerity rather than amused tears. Amber fought to hold back, fought to calm her racing heart, but it was Donnie—the same Donnie she'd fallen for years before though they'd only just met. Though he barely knew a thing about her, she knew practically everything about him...Not for the first time, she cursed the unfairness of being so attached to someone who couldn't logically return her feelings, at least not for
a good long while. Damn dreams...they made everything so awkward.

"Hey," he said with a lopsided smile, tucking a loosened lock of punch red hair behind her ear in a familiar gesture.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Hey, yerself," she replied with a weak smile.

Just like that, the moment was over. He seemed to take a moment to get ahold of himself, then sat up on the tile to let her push off his shoulders. Moments later they were once again seated at the table staring at the plate of tofu, avidly ignoring the elephant in the room. "So," she stated matter-of-factly, snagging another piece of tofu. "If I eat all this, I'm gonna turn into a blimp. Wanna try some? I promise it don't taste like old shoe." He shot her a hairy eyeball stare but popped a piece in his mouth regardless.

"Hey!" he grinned. "That really is good—what's the secret?" She laughed at his giddy expression, feeding him another chunk. It wasn't that great and she knew his family was sure to cook it better, but she appreciated his words nonetheless.

"Hide the flavor," she answered with a cheeky grin. "Otherwise, it does taste like old shoe."

Several minutes later Raph lumbered into the kitchen and over to the fridge; armed with a soda he turned to retreat, only to get an eyeful of Donnie trying to feed Amber a piece of tofu. "Ya two're disgustin', ya know dat?" he grumbled, then stormed out again.

The two friends just laughed at his attitude. As they teased each other, revealed past embarrassing moments, and one-upped each other's stories, they both silently relived the brief moment of connection that had passed, one doubtful the other saw them that way and the other trying to hold back a lifetime of love. Both wondered if their friendship would ever become more. Only time, they admitted to themselves, only time would tell.

Halfway across town in Daron's small flat, his cell phone rang; from the first note of the tone, he knew without a doubt who it was. 'Go fuckin' figure,' he thought, struggling to reign in his temper and terror as he accepted the call. 'Of course, he'd call now...not like enough hasn't happened.' "Hey," he greeted the caller nervously. "What's going on?"

"Where is she, Piss-ant?" Hun growled at him from the other end. "I gave ya a week; ya gonna deliver?" Daron shuddered, curling into a ball in his recliner.

"I - I can't find her, Hun," he lied carefully. "She must'a cut town or something—the name we had's pullin' up nothing—must've been an alias or something."

"No excuses!" the musclebound thug bellowed, making Daron practically leap out of his skin. His traitorous heart pounded frantically in his chest, his lungs shuddering and aching as adrenaline coursed through his veins. Fight or flight, neither would help. "Find that bitch! She knows too much an' I'm sick'a waitin! You find Kimber Bryant an' you find'er fast or I'll break every bone in yer scrawny body! Are we clear?!" Daron's stomach roiled. Bile surged up his throat and he choked to keep it down.

"Y-Yes, Sir," he stammered, hoping against hope that he could devise a plan in time to save his hide. "I-I understand...I'll f-find her." A dark laugh on the other line sent his hair standing on end.

"Ya better, Brat...I'm runnin' out'a patience." Without another word he hung up, leaving Daron a shaky, shivering mess as every call before. Kimber was dead, but Hun wouldn't believe it without some sort of proof...physical, corpse-type proof...Daron was running out of options and fast. As he
willed his heart rate to calm and his eyes to cease pouring, he cursed his parents anew.

How could such a *psychopath* be his own flesh and blood?

"Donnie?" a soft voice called from the lab's doorway. Bleary-eyed from sleep, Donatello stretched the crick from his neck and scanned the shadow shrouded room. "Dee, ya'wake- in here?" Like a dream summoned to the waking world, Amber waited in the doorway, a long, silky violet nightgown accenting her soft curves delightfully. He loved that color on her, especially how it set off the fine fiery highlights in her warm brown hair.

"Awake enough," he answered with a shrug and lop-sided grin, beckoning her near as he leaned back in his desk chair. "What's wrong? You have a nightmare?" That bright blush tinted her cheeks as she shyly avoided his eyes, hovering just out of reach.

"Not exactly," she mumbled. "I jus'...well..." She trailed off, finally meeting his eyes. "I can't sleep... not after what happened...didn't want ya thinkin' badly of me." He chuckled warmly as he caught one clenched hand in his own and drew her closer, guiding her to perch on his knee.

"Not even a remote possibility, Amber," he teased as he played with her long brown braid. "If anything, I'm glad you're so comfortable around me—I'd hate to think you felt like you couldn't be yourself when I'm around." Sleepy green eyes dropped to his lips as he spoke, then swept back up again, the smooth grey-green set off by another blush. "You are comfortable around me, right?" A carefree smile curved her lips.

"Oh, Dee," she almost gushed, leaning in to wrap her bare arms around his neck. "Of course, I am! You get me—you understand me—I wish I'd met you before I met Aaron...I wasted so much time waiting for him to love me when you—I mean—" She cut herself off, gnawing her lower lip. "—that is..." She fell silent as he traced a calloused fingertip over her lip, and her breath caught in her throat. The tentative caress left her mouth slack, the chewed lip popping loose again.

"Don't go gnawing that off, now," he teased, his voice husky with want. "I happen to like it." The moment their lips met, fireworks erupted in the shadowy corners of the room. The cramped desk chair fell away leaving them reclining on a soft mattress, Amber eagerly straddling his lap. With every breathless kiss, she uttered another soft, feminine whimper, grinding against his bare thigh. Finally, he drew back, peppering her smooth neck and bare shoulders with open-mouthed caresses. "Amber," he breathed into her collarbone. "I...I know it's sudden, Amber, but I think...I think I'm...falling for you." With a sleepy smile, she reached out to cup his cheek in one small hand, a sudden tease in her eyes.

"That's nice, Donnie," she murmured. "but you still gotta go to bed. That chair's bad on your neck." Everything ground to a halt; he gaped at the tousled minx in his lap.

"Wait, what?" As if on cue, she spoke again, but this time her voice sounded like *Mikey*!'

"Donnie, you're gonna get a neck-ache if ya don't go to bed—don't make me sic Amber on you—she's actually snoring for once!"

"AH!" Donatello woke with a jolt and strangled shout, his heart racing; as his eyes focused Michelangelo appeared right in front of him, arms crossed and almost pouting. "Mikey?!” he blurted out, fighting to shake off the lingering impression of Mikey's voice coming out of Amber's mouth; the very memory of it made him shudder.
"Geez, you'd think I wasn't doing you a favor," the younger turtle sulked. "I try to save ya a neckache an' this's I thanks I get? So ungrateful, I swear." As Mikey tapped his foot impatiently by the door, Donnie hoisted himself out of his desk chair, wincing at the loud crack emanating from his already stiff neck. Mike shot him a 'told ya so' frown and huffed his way out of the lab.

Despite the sudden bizarre ending and Mikey's odd sullen attitude, the otherwise pleasant dream lingered in Donatello's mind as he padded over to the cot in the corner. Sure enough, Amber was sleeping soundly in it, her lips tilted in a faint smile. Every now and then a soft snort or mumble would break the silence; for once, she'd clearly achieved stage three non-rem sleep; if the pattern continued, she might get an extra hour of uninterrupted rest that night.

Half-remembered impressions of violet silk, fiery brown hair, and wordless whimpered praises teased Donatello as he studied the other-worlder, reminding him that it was far, far too early to be falling for her. He barely knew her, had known her for a mere two weeks, and two weeks was hardly enough time to form a lasting romantic attachment. Despite his brain's insistences, though, he had to admit the idea was attractive to him—almost as attractive as he found Amber herself, even after all the weight she'd lost.

Attraction can take seconds; love can take years. Wasn't it Aristotle who said, "Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies?" Logically, Amber and Kimber were the same soul inhabiting different bodies, but he was sure Aristotle wasn't talking about counterparts. Either way, Donnie mused as he brushed a flyway lock of punch red hair from sleep-crinkled eyes, they weren't there yet. What point was there in rushing? Taking his time, delaying until he knew for sure, it would only sweeten the day he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was the one for him. With a last long glance, he slipped out of the lab.

"Donnie?" Mikey mumbled from the sofa as he ambled by. "Next time you an' Amber do the nasty, can ya please not do it in the kitchen? We eat in there."

His first inclination was to sputter a protest that no such thing had happened; then he recalled all the times the youngest had pelted their friend with barely-veiled flirtation. He smirked as he passed by, stretched lazily, and hummed innocently as he made his way to his room.

"Oh, gross," Mike whined on the couch, clutching the nearest throw pillow like an oversized teddy bear. "I'm gonna have nightmares."

Poor, poor Mikey…if only he knew what he DIDN'T see, he wouldn't be so scarred-for-life by what he DID see! Hope y'all enjoyed! Thanks for everything, all y'all awesome people, and have a great week!

Words (Midwestern Twang unless otherwise noted)
- Prob'ly - Probably
- We'd'a - We would have
- S'cuse / 'scuse - Excuse, nationwide slang pronunciation.
- Ya'wake? - Are you awake?

- Adding 'a to the end of a word - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a
means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in out'a which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a' by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

**Adding 'er to the end of a word** - Means 'her'
**Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word** - Means he, his, or him.
**Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word** - Means them or their

- "Evr'ythin' jus' went straight to my arse." - Women everywhere know the story behind this one. "Everything just went straight to my ass," basically meaning anytime she ate anything, she gained weight, and most of it was in her backside.
- "What the flying, floating fuckity-fuck'm I gonna do?!" - This is a favorite of mine IRL because it's so ridiculous. 'What the flying, floating fuckity-fuck am I going to do?!

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**Notes:**

*The song this lyric is heavily based on is Seether's "Broken." As with many things so far, the version of the song from the new universe differs from the version we know; in this case, it's not just a few words that have changed but the whole meaning of the song.

**Lyrics** taken from English translation of "Wo Bist Du" by Rammstein, from their album **Rosenrot.** Believe it or not, it's NOT a breakup song—look up the lyrics and you'll see why.

**Old shoe:** you can thank my hubby Cold for this description; no matter how mouthwatering my tofu turns out, he goes all 'little girl and worms' over it - seriously, ridiculously squeamish - and refuses to eat it, complaining it tastes like "old shoe." Still waiting for an explanation of how he knows what 'old shoe' tastes like...

**Up Next: Worse**
Chapter Summary

Amber becomes increasingly unstable and screws up, Donnie hits his breaking point, lids are flipped and bargains struck. We get some insight into Kimber. Enter Mercy.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Ghost, here with another update! In this chapter: Amber becomes increasingly unstable and goes too far with a reckless decision, Donnie hits his breaking point, lids are flipped and bargains struck, we get some insight into Kimber, and a new face enters the cast, throwing everything into a tailspin. If you catch the symbolism in Amber's meltdown, lemme know in a review or PM! I'm practically obsessed with symbolism and poetic description and I'd love to see this make sense to someone else! This chapter dedicated to all you totally awesome readers who pushed this story past 1,000 views! You've seriously made me cry happy buckets, people…I love you guys.

Warnings: Dubious ethics, awkward, questionable humor, disturbing imagery, and the usual. Also, a little bit of creative license in this one regarding Amber's meltdown; real flashbacks aren't quite as...dream-like. (They really, really suck.) Hope I didn't get Leo and April majorly OOC in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested listening: Linkin Park, "Castle of Glass" & Seether, "Rise Above This"

9: Worse

February 16th, 2016, 10:45 am

From the name, Amber would have assumed Budget Store-It-All would be in a dark, grungy part of town—off the beaten road, prone to repeated break-ins, and chronically surrounded by the stench of stale liquor and unmentionable bodily fluids. Surprisingly, she was entirely wrong. The maze of metal framework and roll-up doors was clean, well-kept, and Pine-Sol and bleach were the only noticeable smells. Even now, several aisles away from the recently cleaned office the strong odors burned her nose as the small ring of keys burned a hole in her hand. Her mind drifted back to the kitchen table in the lair when she and Leo shared some stout black tea.

"I don' like it, Leo," Amber muttered, a concerned glare focused on the packet of paperwork on the table between them. "It's not mine…to take advantage of this, it's stealin'! Even if she's bloody dead, I'd still be stealin' her identity!"

"Technically, you're stealing your identity," he pointed out calmly and tapped the name on the driver's license. "She already unknowingly stole your identity, otherwise, you wouldn't be stuck in
her body…and frankly, you seriously need some clothes, at the very least.” She self-consciously crossed her arms over her front. April had offered a bra, but Kimber's overly-generous bust had spilled over the modest cups obscenely and painfully. Amber finally decided it was safer to just go without and pray she stayed warm enough; unfortunately, it being late winter, she was rarely warm enough to keep off the high-beams. Not to mention she was currently restricted to two sets of clothes —clothes that were well on their way to self-destruction at the rate she wore them.

"Okay, okay," she mumbled, glaring at the table. "Amber needs clothes—point to Leo. I'm still not com'f'erable with the rest, though...clothes, toiletries, that wouldn' bother me, but jus' takin' over her bank account an' such?" She shuddered, her moral compass so far in the opposite direction she felt ready to be ripped apart by it. "I...I just couldn't!" Leo sighed, frustration leeching through in his tone.

"Amber...she's dead." Ice blue eyes met hers sternly; she flinched at the reminder of Kimber's fate. "You do realize that, right? Kimber Bryant's not going to just suddenly reappear and demand answers—she was dead before you arrived, and she's staying that way. Where she's gone?" He indicated the pile of papers and cards with a tense, sweeping gesture. "She can't use any of this...the afterlife doesn't charge, you know."

She smiled weakly at the phrase. "The Egyptians sure thought otherwise," she quipped lightly. "Ya'd think their afterlife was full'a strip malls an' casinos from ever'thin' they buried 'emselves with."

"Focus, Amber; she's not going to spontaneously rise from her non-existent grave and say 'give it back,' ya know. Not to mention, if her friend was being honest with us, we might be able to make the situation right. Perhaps she can rest in peace once Hun's been taken down, hm?" Amber remained silent, staring through her tea to the minute dregs at the bottom. Silence reigned until she finished her cup in fast but reverent sips and made to put it in the sink. "Well?"

Amber dug through the mess for what she'd need for the storage yard. "Can I borrow the car, Dad?" she teased.

An hour ago, Amber had been dead-set against even coming to the storage yard; now, here she was, in the storage yard, about to raid the belongings of her body's previous occupant. She glanced down incredulously, scrutinizing the shed key's generic shape and the still-crisp paper tag that adorned it. Of course Kimber's shed was number 69, she thought bitterly; the woman hadn't had an ounce of tact and paraded her admittedly generous 'assets' for all the world to see. It seemed everything she learned about Kimber only made her dislike her more.

"Are you about done staring down that key, O'Brien?" April asked incredulously, propped against the party wagon with one hip. "From your attitude, one could assume it insulted your mother."

"Nope," Amber quipped, shooting the other woman a smirk. "I think it kicked my puppy, though." The brunette gave her a playful shove as she sauntered over to the door, swiping the key on the way.

"The way you keep angsting over this, we'll be here all week," April teased, fitting the key into its lock. Pins tripped, clicked, and pinged, and the bolt gave way; the women heaved the deceptively heavy door upward with a mutual grunt of effort, only to gape in disbelief at the shed's contents. "Dang," April mumbled as she scanned the piles upon piles upon piles. "This must be her whole apartment!" Amber wandered over to a dark corner staring thoughtfully at a teetering rack of appliances.

"Yup," she deadpanned, "I think I found the sink." The old bar lights in the ceiling buzzed to life, nearly blinding her.
"Yeah, well I found the lights." Amber stared vindictively at the 'sink'; why the heck did Kimber have a chamber pot in her storage shed?

"That's jus' cheatin'," she grumbled at April. "Don't s'pose ya found a map, too?" Silence fell as the pair searched through the piled bins, boxes, and containers. As they went, they collected what would be leaving into the only empty corner, marveling at what they were finding. Amber was stunned; she'd formed such certain opinions of Kimber, but she had yet to find anything in her belongings to cement those opinions as facts. Of all the things she was expecting—an arsenal to rival Fort Knox, a poisoner's toolkit, a lifetime supply of bizarre sex toys and heroin—what she found was rather surprising.

Most of the toiletries were unscented or in discreet fragrances like vanilla, aloe, or coconut. She owned about the same amount of makeup as Amber thought most women would own. Much of the clothing packed into the shed was flattering—short and low cut but not especially obscene. Case upon case of DVDs and CDs were stacked against the far wall, while three shelves worth of books lay waiting in plastic totes nearby. Amber scanned titles through plastic lids, surprised at what she was finding; some classics, some poetry, lots of nonfiction...and far more dirty paperbacks than could be healthy. Cringing, she toed a bin of stained, faded bodice-rippers far away from the 'take home' pile. No. Just no.

"Hey!" April called out from the other side of the room. "I think I found something!" After wading her way through bags and boxes, Amber stared in disbelief at the small locked pistol case April was nervously eyeing; sure enough, the key was on the ring she'd been given. "What I'd give for Donnie's goggles right now," April mumbled uneasily. "What if it's rigged? We should have him look at it before we open it."

"Sound advice, O'Neil," Amber agreed, gently relocating the case to one of many 'staying here' piles. "Well, unless there's something we mis—" She trailed off at the sight of a small plastic tote marked HAIR. "Bingo." Not surprisingly, Kimber had jammed in a whole stockpile of unsweetened Kool-Aid packets in various shades of red, purple, and green, and several large bottles that clearly no longer contained sports drinks. Each had been peeled clean and marked in clumsy permanent marker. "Step One?" Amber read aloud skeptically, cracking the cap off of one to carefully sniff the clear contents; she instantly recoiled grimacing. "GUH!" she gagged. "Vinegar!" Still blinking away the pungent stench, she inspected the other bottles' contents. Baking soda, dish soap, clarifying shampoo, olive oil...

"Looks like you get to soak out that red finally, huh?" April commented at her shoulder. Amber stared down the kit as though she expected it to explode.

"...yeah...let's get out'a here. I've got a feeling we're already in over our heads."
upon seeing that the other woman shared a startling amount of her music tastes had drawn four panicked ninjas to the lab; each stared, bewildered, as she leapt out of her chair and flung herself into a ridiculously uncoordinated happy-dance. Perhaps, she admitted as Sumatra sang of learning the blues, Kimber had some redeeming qualities after all.

Now, hours later, she had settled in for research and soaking in her favorite music. 'Let's see,' she thought, contemplating the links flying past as Sumatra transitioned to Quiet Riley.* 'PTSD causes, PTSD complications, PTSD support group, signs of PTSD—PTSD self-test, Bingo.' Line by line she filled out the form, hope filling her heart. Surely this would prove once and for all that she was just stressed, not broken.

'Experienced or witnessed a traumatic event,' she read silently. 'Does dyin' in a tornado count? Intrusive thoughts...let's see, repeated distressin' mem'ries/dreams,- feelin's though it were happ'nin'-again, intense physical/emotional distress when reminded of the event, yup, yup, yup. Avoidance and numbing symptoms: Avoidin' thoughts, feelings, an' conversations, activities, places, an' people who remind ya of it? Memory blanks and forgetting important aspects of the trauma, losin' interest in activities, feeling detached, limited range of emotions...Hyper-arousal—that doesn't sound dirty at ALL,' she cringed, scrolling further. 'Chronic irritability, shortened temper, fear that relaxin' will bring another trauma, difficulty sleepin'—Boy howdy!—exhaustion, frequent fight-or-flight reactions, panic attacks, exaggerated startle response...' Right on cue, the 4:30 subway train rumbled past, sending her jerking away from the wall, her heart pounding a terrified tattoo against her ribs. 'Yep,' she thought wearily.

One by one she read down the list, clicking all applicable answers with a 'yes.' By the time she finally reached the end of the test, she'd affirmed all answers except for four—and all four referred to drug and alcohol abuse. Even in her previous life, she'd been resolutely drug and tobacco-free, and rarely drank other than the occasional Scotch whisky or Drambuie during holidays...and she'd practically grown up drinking Scotch, thanks to her Gran'da. "No," she muttered in dismay, falling back in the chair. She scrolled up and down the two-page test again, but the screen didn't lie. She was experiencing a ridiculous number of PTSD symptoms, and if the test was anything to go by, she was in big, big trouble. Half an hour later she'd torn through dozens more similar tests only to get the same results every time.

She was in trouble...and April was right. It was only going to get worse. Disheartened, she returned to Bing and searched again: PTSD cures. The search returned nothing more helpful than a forum trolled with posts like 'a bullet to the head cures everything,' and she begrudgingly searched treatments. Finally, she found some promising results.

"Exposure therapy?" she read aloud, her tone dubious. "Studies have shown that techniques commonly known as 'systematic desensitization' and 'prolonged exposure therapy' are useful in helpin' suff'rers of PTSD get their symptoms under control. At the very root, both revolve around repeatedly exposin' a patient to distressin' media relevant to the trauma that caused their symptoms, all in a safe, secure, supportive environment. When combined with talk therapy, coping skills, an' anti-anxiety medication, many suff'rers find that taking back their lives is easier than with medication or talk therapy alone. ** Distressin' media relevant to the trauma?" she balked. "I...I guess it's worth a shot. If I can beat this on my own, without havin' to see a doctor..."

There was no doubt in her mind; if it would keep the guys—her guys—safe, she'd do anything short of dying again...and even that was beginning to seem reasonable. I've gotta get things under control...I've just GOTTA!

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Shattering glass. Timbers creak and trees groan. The air hangs with the itchy scents of
mold and mildew. Watery needles pelt her bare skin. Flashes of light splinter the skies. A ceaseless deafening concussion rattles her eardrums.

Demons howl in the wind, crying 'abandon! Abandon all hope!' Amidst it all, a skull-shattering grinding roar echoes through the water-thick air, proof that the funnel careening her way is no mirage. Death knocks on her door, grinning at her with a foul, cadaverous grin.

Screams—someone screams at the top of their lungs as the sky festers into a noxious green and grey haze. Lungs ache, heart pounds, eyes burn and skin stings. The wailing voice stutters in gasps and sobs, wracking already sore ribs.

Out of the darkness, a pair of strong arms wrap her in a frantic grip. The reaper's embrace cannot be trusted, she thinks frantically, fighting and clawing to escape with her life. Warm raindrops course down her cheeks and neck; the phantom arms only tighten their grip, one shifting to seize both flailing wrists.

Out of the whirling tempest, a heartbreakingly soft tune reaches her ears; could it be, she wonders? Could the tune truly fix her, save her? She turns her back to the looming tempest, guided along the blood-slicked ground to the source of the gentle humming. Somewhere between her memories, blood clears into rain, corpses fade into stones and wildflowers, and wrecked houses and cars smooth into rustling trees and bushes. Among a field of cheerful daffodils and soothing heather stands a shadowy figure with striking hazel eyes.

'It's alright, Amber,' the figure soothes, beckoning her to its side. 'Come back to me—you're safe. I promised to protect you, to fix you, and nothing's changed—I keep my word, you know.'

'Could it be true?' she wondered wearily, fighting not to collapse at the figure's large, blurry feet from exhaustion. Could she be safe, could the mysterious figure protect her? Strong arms wrap her in a familiar grip, anchoring her in place and warming her freezing heart. As the world falls away around her, she feels no fear. Well-loved lines from a previous life rumble through her memory as the world fades to grey, daffodils, heather, and all.

"For oft, when on my couch I lie In vacant or in pensive mood, They flash upon that inward eye Which is the bliss of solitude; And then my heart with pleasure fills, And dances with the daffodils."

Oblivion.

"Wha…" Amber asked hoarsely as familiar brown canvas faded into view. What happened? Why did she suddenly feel so tired? Even lifting her head to meet the frantic hazel eyes above hers seemed to take too much effort. Why was she on the floor? When had she left the desk chair, and why was Donatello physically restraining her?

"What were you thinking?" Donatello demanded, his voice sharp with panic. Bewildered, Amber just blinked at him, too numb to realize her face was dripping with tears. "You…" His expression twisted in a mixture of horror and anger as he ranted at her, finally releasing her wrists. "You did that on purpose—you seriously sent yourself into a massive, full-scale flashback on purpose! What were you thinking, Amber Jean O'Brien?!!"
Finally, the pieces fell into place; she jolted, whipping around to see the laptop. It was shut, the distressing video footage no longer visible. "I..." She faltered, avoiding Donnie's frantic eyes. "I was tryin' to...to get rid of it. Exposure therapy helps, an'—"

"—exposure therapy," the genius retorted shrilly. "not intentionally triggering yourself into a total meltdown with graphic video footage of an EF-5 monster tearing apart a school!"*** Frustrated beyond belief, he stormed over to the security system displays, repeatedly clenching and unclenching his fists to the point where tendons and sinews jutted out in stark contrast. Shaking from anger and nerves, he forced himself to take deep, calming breaths, reminded himself that losing his temper wasn't helping things any more than her ignorant blundering had.

"Amber." When he finally spoke again, his voice was tight and carefully controlled. "You can't just dive right into the deep-end with this...you started at the end and probably made everything even worse. You've gotta take baby steps!" The sudden, smothered sniffling behind him shook him from his anger; sure enough, she was fighting another fit of tears, clearly humiliated and disgusted with herself.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammered, choking on her tears. "I...I just...I d-dunno what t-to do! I thought I c-could beat it—on m-my own!" The more she spoke the further she drifted from sniffs into sobs, and the more shuddery her breathing grew. Though he was still pretty angry at her, Donatello fiercely reminded himself that she was as much out of her league as he was...she needed support, not screaming. If screaming could repair her, she'd have attached herself to Raph from the start; instead, she dove into his lap headfirst in a blind panic, never realizing what she was doing. She needed logic, comfort, and intelligence, not a 'screw the world' attitude and hair trigger. Sobbing staggered into hiccups—hyperventilation was imminent. He stalked back over to her side, dropped to crouch before her, and wrapped her tightly in his arms, unable to resist the urge to bury his snout in her still-fruity hair, recoiling from the faint scent left by Kimber's dye.

"Braids," he muttered gently into her scalp. "You were lost when we found you, and you're still lost now, but you don't have to stay that way." Her breaths smoothed and calmed with every gentle pattern he rubbed into her back and shoulders, and he could feel her pulse slowing through her neck. "I'm here—you do know that, right?" Watery green 'kicked puppy' eyes met his through tear-streaked glasses; she answered with a reluctant nod. "You're not alone—you've got friends—you've got me! You want to beat this on your own, but sometimes you absolutely have to accept help. If..."

He hesitated; his gut told him that she needed help he couldn't give, needed to see a specialist, but she'd been so vehement against the idea. After all, more than she feared for her sanity, she feared for his family's safety. At least, he admitted, resolving himself to his decision, she only had another two days left of her agreement with his master. Cruel though it sounded, he had no doubt that she wouldn't be able to make it—she'd fail the test Splinter had put before her, and she was bound by her word to seek help if she failed. He may not know much about Amber yet, but somehow he knew she would keep her word. "Amber, please...let me help you? Let me guide you through this?"

He didn't really expect her to start crying again, but by this point he probably should have; she really was just on an emotional roller coaster from this trouble, he thought wearily. "D-Dee," she whimpered. "What'd I ever d-do to-to deserve...you?" Even as her tears soaked the front of his coveralls and chest, he smiled at the comment, recalling a similar one the day his family brought her home.

"Must've spent your whole life kicking puppies," he teased, smirking when she laughed despite herself, the sound almost rattling in her chest. "We'll get through this...You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, and on one condition, you'll have me right beside you every step of the way."
"Anythin'!" His smug grin caught her entirely off guard.

"You've lived with us going on three weeks; you seem to know my every thought, feeling, and habit, but I barely know anything about you." She winced. "You're practically a closed book, Braids. My condition is simple: Let me get to know you? Start talking with me more often?" This time, when her eyes sparkled back at him, they gleamed with mirth rather than tears.

"Twist my arm, why don't ya," she teased weakly as she swiped her cheeks clean. "I warn ya now, though, it'll be sheer torture—I'm actually pretty boring."

As the two bantered back and forth in their way, an eavesdropper outside the blast door scowled angrily. Later on, he took his frustrations out on the punching bag, distracted by memories of punch red hair strewn across torn sheets and a breathy Jersey accent crying his name.

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**Just past dusk**

Central Park was even bigger than Amber expected...and that was saying something. Earlier that evening Leo pointed out that the team was long over-due for a full patrol and three of the four brothers split up to check separate hotspots. Donatello barely managed to talk his way out of patrol over previous plans, citing that April was expecting him to drop by that evening. In a rather surprising move, Leo agreed - and suggested he take Amber along for some fresh air. Amber smelled a setup.

Their task accomplished, they tramped quietly through the empty park Central Park. It was nice to get some fresh air, Donnie pointed out as they emerged from a hidden manhole - especially fresh air without the stench of the sewers.

At his heels, Amber remained quiet, subdued. Her meltdown earlier left her weary in body and mind, and she still silently berated herself over her careless actions. She wasn't an idiot, she thought darkly; she should have known better. Now the family she lived with were surely convinced she was hopeless and utterly incompetent. Everyone had heard it - Heck, Mikey teased that the pushers in the Bronx could have heard her panicked shrieks. She could see the worry in his eyes as easily as she saw his grin. Not a month ago, all the worry and pity she saw in the eyes around her would have infuriated her to no end, pushed her into recklessness to prove that she wasn't weak; by now her ego had taken too much of a beating to even flinch.

Thus, there she was, tramping through the darkest, most dog-forsaken corners of Central Park, ducking from shadow to shadow with Donnie, and trying to focus on relaxing and not stumbling into every park bench and its brother. Just in front of her, Don scanned the park cautiously, evaluating everything with practiced ease. Drunk passed out by the restrooms: Harmless. Homeless woman snoring on a bench: No threat. Loud, giggly, probably high couple playing suck-face on the swings: Keep a distance, but clearly too stoned to be a threat to anything but themselves.

As he silently guided them through the park, Amber studied the books April had checked out for him. PTSD and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury—nothing unflattering about that title, she sulked. The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook : A Guide to Healing, Recovery, and Growth—a doorstop of a book that could probably break toes if dropped. Last but not least was something that suspiciously resembled a textbook: A Mind Frozen in Time: A PTSD Recovery Guide.*** April mentioned that one of the ladies at the reference desk had suggested it, claiming that it had helped a friend of hers get through her own recovery following an assault. Amber wasn't assaulted, though, so she wasn't sure just how well the book would help her. As hard as she focused on contemplating the books she carried, she never noticed a leg sticking out of the nearest shrub until she tripped over it.
"YAK!" she squawked, flailing to catch her balance and falling right into Donatello's outstretched arms; as the pile of books rained down around them, Donnie single-handedly collected each in turn before they could find a foot. "Please tell me that's not a dead body!" Amber whimpered nervously. A quick scan revealed the truth; the person was alive but malnourished, dehydrated, and far too cold for their own good. Probably homeless, he realized with regret.

"No," he answered under his breath, uncertain if the person was asleep, unconscious, or liable to see them if they didn't haul-ass. "We'd better—" Before he could finish his sentence, the rest of the body appeared, pivoting up out of the bushes like a risen corpse in a bad horror movie. Greasy blonde hair hung to about her shoulders decorated in twigs, dead grass, and leaf litter; bleary, sullen blue eyes threatened bodily harm from sunken cheeks. "Don't...move...a muscle," Donnie whispered to Amber, hoping against hope that they hadn't been seen. As though he'd never even spoken, the woman in the bushes snorted in annoyance, scowling viciously.

"Go fuckin' figure," she muttered under her breath as she made herself comfortable in her leaf nest again. "Crazy in my other life, gotta be crazy in this one, too...giant fuckin' turtles...bloody fuckin' Heck...Amber'd never believe this one."

At the sound of her name, Amber startled violently. She knew that voice, that accent, that bitter snarkiness - even though the face was somewhat different, she even knew that! She knew the woman's dark humor and perpetual attitude problem, and above all else, she knew the woman herself. Even as Donnie gaped and sputtered at her, she darted to the shrub-line, latched onto the woman's filthy sneaker, and threw every ounce of strength into hauling her out into the light. "The fuck, Lady?!" the woman snapped kicking at her. "Gi'off'a me—Yer muggin' someone who ain't got nothin' worth stealin'!" -

"Mercy!" Amber cried frantically, eyes darting frantically from one blue eye to the other, searching for recognition. "Good God A'mighty,- Mercy!" As realization and dismay shattered the blonde's scowl, as Amber tackled her to the filthy ground and sobbed over her, Donatello realized April was right...

This was only going to get worse.

WORDS in alphabetical order

- A'mighty - Almighty, pronounced more as "Uh-mighty."
- Com'forterble - comfortable
- Gi'off'a me! - 'Get off of me!'
- Happ'en' - Happening
- Mem'ries - Memories
- Suff'ers - Sufferers, people experiencing a certain difficulty. Amber sometimes uses it to mean 'patients' because of how much time she spent taking care of Mercy in her previous life. (Details will be revealed in future chapters.)
- To'letries - Toiletries, usually shampoo, soap, etc.

As always, if you're struck by this story, if you start seeing yourself in Amber's reactions, or if you just wanna talk to someone, hit me up on PM—I'm happy to help out and would be glad to be a sounding board. Have a great weekend, Y'all, and take care!

Up Next: Mercy
FYI, because some folks're bound to go there:

There will NOT be a Donnie/Amber/Raph love triangle in this fic. Personally, I detest love triangles and except for very rare instances where they are, in fact, crucial to the story or characters, they tend to rob me of any interest in said story. Rest assured, there won't be any brotherly pissing contests over Amber. She's NOT so awesome that 'everybody wants some;' she's actually pretty sad right now, and will be for a few more chapters yet. Thanks for reading, and have a great week!

NOTES:
*AKA, Frank Sinatra and Quiet Riot
**All information about PTSD in this chapter has been compiled from a combination of reference books, websites, and personal notes; no individual sources are directly quoted, and this information can be found in some form or other in just about every text regarding PTSD.
***Do NOT try this at home. It will NOT end well. If you choose to try systematic desensitization (SD) or prolonged exposure therapy, (PET) make sure you have a trained professional guide you along the way. Used correctly, both can really make a difference, and I personally vouch for SD; SD not only helped me get MY PTSD under control, it also helped eradicate the crippling storm phobia that hadn't helped any.
****Books: PTSD and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook : A Guide to Healing, Recovery, and Growth can both be found at the New York Public Library, according to their online catalog. Never read'em personally, but they looked pretty in-depth and weighty. Don't know if the NYPL has A Mind Frozen in Time: A PTSD Recovery Guide, but I personally vouch for that book. It's been a Godsend, really, especially since it's formatted in a way that doesn't require much focus—like many folks, I never had attention/focusing difficulties 'til PTSD hit, but have had no difficulties whatsoever with this book.
As always, if you're struck by this story, if you start seeing yourself in Amber's reactions, or if you just wanna talk to someone, hit me up on PM—I'm happy to help out and would be glad to be a sounding board. Have a great weekend, Y'all, and take care!
10: Mercy

Chapter Summary

Donnie brings Mercy home, Raph doesn't approve, Mercy's a smartass. Splinter is not amused, gives her a chance. Amber loses the red and wishes she hadn't, Donnie gives her warm-and-fuzzies, Mercy's a smartass. Amber and Mercy catch up and Mercy SCREWS up.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE! This one's a little long, pretty light-hearted for the most part, and picks up right after the last chapter ended.

Lastly, a challenge: During this chapter, Mercy teases Amber about Donnie, and their dialogue is inspired by a quote from a particular movie; name that movie! This chapter dedicated to best friends, making life miserable AND worth living.

Warnings: the usual, bizarre humor, some sensitive topics dealt with in a less-than-sensitive manner

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested listening: RUSH, "Madrigal"

10: Mercy

Tearful reunions are always awkward to witness. This one, Donatello realized almost squirming in place, was no exception.

What began as a simple walk through the park on their way back to the lair was interrupted by the appearance of a well-known panhandler—a panhandler Amber knew and was effectively drenching in frustrated tears. 'Does she always cry this much?' he wondered in concern. If she was being extra teary from trauma, that would be understandable, but if she was just naturally a crier…He shook off the thought. What did it matter if she was a crier? Even if she were to cry less when she got her issues under control, there was a 99.9% chance he'd still be drowning in the Friend Zone.


"Hey," she chastised. "Get a'hold'a- yourself!" Amber settled back onto her heels, hurt. "First off, why should I believe ya? How can you be Amber O'Brien? Ya look nothin' like'er!" By the time Amber had an answer, her cheeks were dry.

"Dark of the Moon," she answered seriously. "My favorite poetry book, the book I never could convince you to read, an' the book I died protecting." Sure enough, Mercy's denim blue eyes
"Tri-county Cancer Survivors' Support Group," she deadpanned. "A certain stubborn Scot wouldn't admit she was goin' grey at nineteen, let the whole town think she got cancer, then flipped me off when I tried to help." Sure enough, Amber gave a sheepish grin, and Donatello winced at the blonde's words. Amber told him early on that she went grey early - at nineteen - but if this Mercy person was the friend who tried to help...this was going to be messy.

"Yup, it's you a'right,- attitude intact," Amber laughed lowly, clearly unsurprised by the other woman's attitude or harsh words. "So, any idea how ya got here?" Mercy shook her head, her filthy ratty hair barely even shifting.

"Not really." She glared a hole through the dirt before her. "Las' thing I knew, I was drivin' home after..." She trailed off, avoiding Amber's eyes. "...after yer…funeral. I…I lost control'a the truck." Of course, she lost control of the truck because she was crying too hard to see a damned thing, but Amber didn't need to know that. "I woke up in the fuckin' Twilight Zone, an' next thing I knew, I was under a bridge pukin' my guts out. Lil' while after I heard a big ruckus nearby—Turns out it was New Year's."

"Wait, wait," Amber interrupted in disbelief. "Back up—you've been in this world since New Year's Eve?!" Mercy nodded, puzzled. "Donnie, when'd y'all find me in the underground?"

"January 27th," he answered without hesitation. The date was as good as branded into his memory—the date he arrived too late—the date Kimber died. "You died first…but Mercy arrived first…How's it possible?" With every word, he digressed more and more into a constant stream of half-mumbled jargon that neither woman fully understood. Every once in a while a familiar word or two would catch their attention, but for the most part, both were hopelessly left behind.

Amber wrenched her attention away from the brainstorming ninja, sure she was blushing. He had yet to lose himself in this sort of behavior around her, and the sudden occurrence made a small girly part of herself want to squee and glomp- him. It was only natural, she reasoned with an aloofness she didn't really feel, intelligent men always made her weak at the knees. Donatello was beyond intelligent—he was so far beyond intelligent that even 'genius' seemed an understatement.

"Yer kiddin' me, right?" Mercy deadpanned. Sure enough, Amber blushed hotly, forcefully avoiding eye contact with the pacing turtle. "Jeez, I'm'onna hork."-

About an hour after they first discovered Mercy in the park, the trio crept through the sewers guided by Donatello's flashlight, one blindfolded with a handkerchief and supported by another. Mercy was even weaker than he first believed, and after a much more thorough health scan, it was obvious that she was going through some majorly dangerous withdrawal symptoms. The blonde never said a word about it, though, so he held his tongue…for the meantime, at least. It could wait until later…for now, he still had to figure out how he would explain the extra guest to Leo…and Splinter.

A barely noticeable rustling at their backs was his only warning that time was up. Before he could even push the two women behind him, their pursuers cornered Mercy up against the nearest wall. A flash of red, blue, and orange in the otherwise dark tunnel was enough to calm his protective instincts; it was only his brothers, but Raphael seemed intent on getting in Mercy's face now that the blindfold was yanked down. There went all his attempts at keeping the lair's location a secret, Don thought with a mental grumble.

"Donnie," he rumbled at him, eyeing the tall blonde in open contempt. "Ya gotta tag along."
"Yeah," Don answered weakly, rubbing his neck. "It's okay, she's—"

"Mercy," the blonde answered simply, her eyes wide. Right on cue, Raph came unglued.

"The Hell?!" he snapped at her, one arm flung wide in disbelief. "Why the heck's everyone always assume we're gonna hurt'em?! We ain't done nothin' wrong, an' ya still think we' da bad guys!?" Even as he practically bellowed in her face, though, Mercy showed no fear. Instead, she grew visibly annoyed.

"I ain't assumin' nothin'," she retorted, her tone almost frigid. "Mercy's my name, Dickwad."

What? Stunned, Raph found he could do nothing but stare at her. Surely he misunderstood her—surely he didn't just hear her as good as deny any fear of them? His hackles visibly lowering, he backed away, staring at her every step. Just as he seemed about to back right off the ledge into the stream of running wastewater, he turned to stalk toward the lair without another word. Every step of the way his brothers and Amber watched him in disbelief, unable to believe what they knew they just saw.

"You just…totally…" Mikey was lost for words and instead tried to communicate his thoughts with vague but animated hand gestures randomly uttered mumbles and whimpers. Mercy was unimpressed.

"Asshole assumes too much," she retorted gruffly as she shoved the blindfold back into place. "sides, my Mama's cookin's scarier'n he is." Despite the tension, Amber cracked up at the comment; she knew exactly what Mercy was referring to. As the two women tossed friendly insults and 'remember whens' back and forth, the remaining three brothers led the way to the lair. Clearly, there would be a lot of inside jokes on the outside for quite a while—terms like 'the noodle incident,' 'gooseberry gastritis,' 'straw-pie,' and 'hedge-apple tag' were already being lobbed about like sports plays with no real explanation. While the women were distracted, Donnie filled Leo and Mikey in on why Mercy was with them. Leo was clearly concerned. Mikey, however…

"Dude!" he chirped excitedly, nudging Don in the side. "If you're gonna be bringin' back babes every time you go out, you need'a go out more often!" This time, the brain-duster didn't come from one of his brothers, but Amber. "Ow! Sis?!!" Though she was surprised at the nickname, Amber forced on a disapproving glare she didn't really feel.

"Mercy's a friend of mine—keep your hands, lips, feet—you know what, just keep everything off'er." Beneath the purple paisley kerchief over her eyes, Mercy flushed slightly, slouching in her steps. Before Donnie could get a word in edgewise between Mikey's whines and Amber's repeated insinuations, they arrived at the Lair. Though he reacted with suspicion and anger when they brought Amber home unannounced, Master Splinter just sighed and waved them into his room. As the two women dropped to sit at his table and his sons excused themselves from the room, Donatello caught a sharp, reprimanding glare aimed at Amber and a clipped, terse voice demanding explanations.

When the door finally slid open again, Mercy seemed ready to bite her tongue in two and Amber bore a defeated air about her. As she led Mercy to the bathroom she ducked into the lab for her comb and a pair of scissors, pausing only long enough for a brief explanation.

Splinter was not happy with her, especially after her first attempt at 'desensitizing' herself, and was concerned that she was forgetting her place. She was there because he invited her to be there, not because she had any God-given right to being there. Her near-constant swearing was setting a bad example for his sons, too. Of everything he mentioned, she was surprised he never brought up her revenge prank on Raph and Mikey. Of course, she couldn't find the heart to argue or even disagree—he made very good points. She was getting too comfortable, too casual.
Once the lecture was over, he agreed to let her friend stay with them as well until a better situation could be found, on one condition. Thus was her prior contract with Splinter nullified; she had to seek professional help. As before, she agreed to his terms and promised to abide by them, furthermore promising to try to reign in her language and focus on setting a better example. Before Donatello could object, she collected her basket of toiletries and ducked out the door to the bathroom.

He wasn't sure how long he sat at his desk picking apart her words for hidden meanings. Repeatedly he resolved himself to go discuss the issue with Splinter, to defend her, but something always held him back. Perhaps, he wondered as he listlessly stared at the bare concrete ceiling, it was how she seemed in agreement with their sensei's words? Perhaps she agreed with him and had taken the deal because she felt it was best, not simply so her friend would have a roof over her head? Finally, his decision was made: he trusted his father and he'd trust her.

As he made at least a passable effort at clearing out another corner of the lab for another cot from the Needle Room, he knocked over a small plastic tote sticking out from under Amber's bunk. "Hair" it read in blocky black writing. It took but a moment to realize its purpose, and he rushed back to his computer. Amber may feel that Splinter's ire was deserved, but he knew having her own hair color back would go a long way toward cheering her up.

"I can't believe ya jus' sat there an' took that!" Mercy snapped from the locked shower stall. "He jus' railed ya out, an' ya agreed with'im!" Over by the long trough sink, Amber stood sharpening a knife she retrieved from Kimber's belongings; fortunately, no one saw her retrieve it earlier and the whetstone made practically no sound.

"He's right, Merse," she answered even as her skin crawled from the sound of the water. "I've gotten careless, an' I ain't been on my best behavior...missed you an' Aaron so much I've been cussin' almost constantly. Jus' leave it be, okay?" For a time, the only sound came from the faucet and Mercy's soft grumbling. Ever more disturbed by the trigger—the sound of rain—Amber finally broke down and started to sing under her breath. "When the dragons grow too mighty to slay with pen or sword, I grow weary of the battle and the storm I walk toward..."

"Don't quitcher day job," Mercy snarked as the water shut off. "Yer still completely tone-deaf."

Mid-snip, a knock sounded at the bathroom door. Mercy turned a hairy eyeball to Amber. "The toilets're walled-in an' the showers're in stalls - why'se bother knockin?" Amber impatiently yanked her friend's head back to the front and called out,

"It's safe!" Despite her assurances, Donatello inched around the door, visibly relaxing at the sight of Mercy up on a stool with Amber at her back, armed with shears and a comb. "'s goin' on, Dee?" He hovered in the doorway a moment, shifting from one massive foot to the other, but finally approached her.

"I figured you're tired of red hair," he explained nervously, holding out the tote. As though mystified, she slowly accepted the box from him, never breaking eye contact; Mercy rolled her eyes at some inner realization. "The combination and instructions are inside." It took Amber a moment to fill in the blanks, but when she did, she beamed. Donnie sputtered and blushed as she tackled him, repeatedly thanking him, but it was the peck on the cheek that blew his breakers.

Red alert! Red alert! System overload, countdown to cerebral meltdown beginning in five, four, three, two...

Delirious and red as a beet, he stumbled out the door, drifting vaguely toward the empty lab
mumbling unintelligibly under his breath. Amber and Mercy watched his retreat, one amused, one bewildered.

"Was it something I said?" Amber asked Mercy, finally turning to meet the blonde's grey-blue eyes. Mercy shot her a 'we are not amused' deadpan and jabbed her thumb at the space behind her; taking the hint, Amber set down the tote and returned to her place, taking up the comb and scissors again.

"Nope," Mercy answered dryly as chunks of matted blonde hair fell all around her; good riddance, she thought. "You just blew his mind, that's all…an' if his brain's as big as you say it is, you may'a just triggered another Chernobyl."

"Hey!" Amber retorted, shaking the comb at her. "I was nowhere near Chernobyl when the meltdown happened, thank ya very much!"

"Only 'cuz ya weren't born yet," Mercy teased back. Amber couldn't help but grin; she'd missed the playful banter with Aaron and Mercy so much it was ridiculous. She couldn't have Aaron, but maybe with Mercy, at least, her new life would be a little easier, so she settled for a more accepted response: insulting her.

"Face forward," she ordered with a smirk and a light slap to the back of the blonde's head. "or I swear ta bog, I will give you the world's saddest mullet." For a while, the only sounds came from the scissors and their breathing. Finally, Mercy broke the near-silence.

"Thanks," she mumbled. "Fer what ya said earlier." It took Amber a moment, but finally, it dawned on her.

"It's nothing, Merse," the redhead answered quietly, trying not to make a big deal of Mercy's words. "He's a bit of a flirt but he means no harm—he jus' don't get 'back off' signals an' he's too pushy. I jus' didn't want you to be uncomfortable here's all."

Silence spanned a while longer. "Ya know, your mother's not here…she can't run your life anymore. Maybe you should, ya know, give it a shot…?"

Mercy snorted, her eyes dark with anger.

"No," she almost spat. "I don't do relationships—you know I don't, an' ya know why. Dyin' an' comin' back ain't changed that. It's got nuthin' to do with him, an' you know it." Finally, the snicker-snack of the scissors went silent behind her. Amber crept around to face her, gently brushing chunks of hair off of her shoulders onto the floor; sweeping it up could wait a few minutes.

"Yeah, but he doesn't." She anchored the blonde's sunken cheeks in her palms, forcing her to meet her eyes. "Mercy, you know me—you've known me almost our whole lives, and I know where you're coming from. Your mother was a controlling cow—she had no right to force that life on you, no right to keep you all to herself for yer whole life—an' she's gone!" She cracked a wry smile. "Ya got a second chance—a chance at life without the Mother from Hades. She's not here! You can live a different life if ya want…ya deserve a different life, no matter who it's with." She finally smirked. "I gotta warn ya, though, I take my 'best friend' duties very, very seriously. They wanna hurt you, they gotta go through me." Mercy smirked.

"Yeah…like a fist through a paper bag."

"Oi! I resemble that remark!" The two friends laughed a while, relishing the carefree moment. After a few more cursory snips at what was left of Mercy's bangs, Amber turned her toward the mirror over the sink. At first, Mercy's face fell seeing so little hair left, but she stiffened her upper lip. Amber probably would've had an easier time if she'd just shaved her bald, but she knew how picky Mercy always was about her hair. Even so, there was practically none left. The matted blonde locks were
shorn away, leaving behind an uneven, poorly executed pixie cut with numerous thin spots…but she didn't look like a hippie reject anymore.

The thought triggered a sad smile. She'd lived in the body of a homeless woman for almost a month, and finally, she simply looked sick and underfed. "Thanks," she muttered, avoiding Amber's eyes. With a gentle smile, the other woman swiped the last of the hair off onto the floor and ducked out to snag the broom. "I got this—get that dye out'a yer hair a'ready. Ya make a shitty redhead."

"NO!" Donatello startled awake, almost falling from his desk chair. When did he doze off, he wondered? And why was Amber SHRIEKING? "Why, why, WHY?! Oh, for the love'a God, WHY?!

"Oh, Lordy!" Mercy yelped back, clearly startled. "You' gotta be kiddin’ me?!" Certain that something horrible had happened—or was happening!—or about to happen!—Don bolted toward the source of the raised voices: the bathroom. On the way there, he almost ran over Mikey, barely missed Leo and Master Splinter, and knocked Raph's plate of leftover pizza from his very hands.

"'ey!" Raph barked, but the genius paid him no heed; he snarled under his breath, shaking his head. "She screams, he comes runnin’—pathetic!" Behind the door of the bathroom, Mercy frantically tried to calm Amber.

"I-It ain’t that bad, really!" she insisted to the horrified brunette. "We'll just get some—" Her words fell silent as the bathroom door burst inward, the handle cracking into the wall behind like a fist to a jaw. Too ashamed to look, Amber, stood before the trough sink, cringing and shivering; Donatello stood stock still just inside the doorway, unable to believe what he was seeing. The heavy door swung shut behind him, even as the bathroom's occupants sat still as statues.

Words from a conversation of theirs came back to them as he stared at his friend, struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. It always hit the redheads worst. I wasn't a redhead, but there was enough red in my hair to turn me into a…

"…brown…skunk…" he breathed in disbelief, unaware his own filter finally failed. Not half an hour ago, he handed Amber the key to removing the dye from her vivid red hair. Now, her still-wet locks were a rich, warm brown with obvious streaks of early grey—grey tinted slightly pink from the last remnants of dye still clinging for dear life. Even as she choked before the sink, humiliated and fighting tears, he couldn't speak. How could something as simple as removing a false hair color change her appearance so drastically, he wondered almost wistfully? Before, she was beautiful to him—so lovely and so, so out of reach. Now, with grey streaking her hair, she didn't seem quite so far away. He always knew Amber was far from perfect, but this obvious physical flaw made her more approachable in his mind—she was more vulnerable, and thus, more relatable...and if he was honest with himself, it felt familiar.

Finally, he realized that Mercy was railing at him, one step away from decking him, even, though he didn't know why. Never even acknowledging her, he padded over to stand before Amber; sure enough, her cheeks were stained with tears, her eyes red-rimmed and wet. It was already habit to dig out his purple handkerchief and dab her cheeks dry, but as every time before, she was completely surprised. Had no one ever dried her cheeks before, he wondered? "Hey," he smiled, tucking his knuckle under her chin and lifting her eyes to his. She forced a noisy swallow, physically pulling away and staring down the drain of the sink.

"H…Hey, ye…yerself," she choked out, trying to put on some semblance of a happy face. For a moment, he wracked his brain for a way to work this out—a way to convince her that her 'stripes' as she called them weren't a mark of shame to be hidden. How could he tell her that he wasn't horrified,
"Amber…your hair's like starlight." 'Mission accomplished,' he thought with no small sense of accomplishment as everything was wiped from her face but astonishment. Wide-eyed, she stared through the sink; finally, she turned to stare at him, her head cocked to one side as though doubting his sanity. "You're beautiful as you are, Braids," he added just before slipping back out the door. "and don't you forget it."

The door swung shut on a silent, still bathroom; Amber and Mercy stood staring at the steel panel door, questioning what had just happened. Finally, Amber broke the silence.

"Did he just…" Mercy nodded.

"Yup," she answered blankly. "He did."

"Donatello just Howl's Moving Castle'd me?" Amber squeaked at her friend, her normally low voice painfully shrill. "For real?!" Finally getting a hold of herself, Mercy smirked back.

"Leave it to you to turn a movie title into a verb," she teased, then added in a sing-song tone, "He thinks yer gorgeous,"

"ACK!" Amber flinched, swatting at her friend.

"He's got a turtle crush!"

"Mercy!"

"You wanna kiss'im" Mercy taunted as Amber chased her around the bathroom with the scissors. "You wanna hug'im, you wanna love'im—"

"Ya wanna DIE, DON'T YOU?!"

In the living room, Michelangelo and Leonardo exchanged a nervous glance as various oaths, crashes, and unintelligible shrieks echoed from the bathroom. Not twenty-four hours under their roof, and already they could tell Mercy was going to be trouble.

"Seriously, though," Mercy asked Amber over the dinner dishes they were washing. Despite Donatello's vote of confidence on her greying hair, Amber still piled her hair up in a braid and covered it in a slightly ratty headscarf she found in Kimber's locker. Later she'd do some research on less-obvious ways of covering the grey…maybe. Maybe not.

"Seriously what?" Amber mumbled back. Mercy glanced at her with nervous eyes before focusing too hard on the plate she was drying.

"Ya haven't told'im, have ya? Donnie, I mean." Amber blushed furiously but refused to acknowledge the elephant in the room. "Amber, how long've you dreamed 'bout him? How long've you wished for a chance to do more than dream? You spent your whole life jus' waitin' fer—"

"Angela Mercy Ross," Amber warned; Mercy flinched. God, she hated her first name. "Leave it be. He doesn't need to know, he can't know, and so long as I can prevent it, he won't know, capiche? He just met me—I've known him for most of my life, but he's known me twenty days, one of which I was unconscious for! He—"

As though the universe were conspiring against her, a subway rumbled past. Nine o'clock already,
she thought between gasped breaths. Despite the soapy water dripping down her arms, she found her way to the floor in one piece, curled up against the cabinets, and buried her face in her arms, shaking as though she were freezing to death again. Panic attacks, she'd decided, were far worse than having your puppy kicked.

For a time, Mercy just stared, recalling the world they left behind; what she was seeing was nothing new, not since half their town was destroyed. She saw this same thing every day it seemed, from almost everyone—the town vet, the owner of the gas station, the junkies next door, even the chief of police showed the same reactions every time the sirens rang. Children wailed when the skies grew dark, the elderly spoke of 'going home,' even pets and livestock had become thunder-shy. After the first tornado, not one of the cattle on her family's ranch would go out in the rain without being forcibly driven, and her father's old dog Trigger took off during the storm Amber died in…he never returned home. Without a word Mercy dropped down to sit beside Amber, pulling her shivering friend into a protective hug, only a little surprised when the shaking woman clamped on like she was about to be torn away.

Sirens scream. Winds howl. Storms squall and wail, debris pelting the walls like gunshots. Pipes burst overhead as the fractured ceiling rains fragments of bleached tile, peppering the sodden floors with white and grey. A twisted grin mocks from—

"Amber." Mercy's sudden speech startled her; grey-green eyes met hers, pupils mere pinpoints from fear and adrenaline. "It's okay…you're safe. I've got you." Time dragged on as Mercy walked her through slowing her breaths and focusing on one single floor tile to center herself, and rubbed calming patterns into her friend's back. By the time the last car was long gone, Amber was calmed—exhausted, but calmed.

"Thanks, Hon," she muttered into her knees, embarrassed. "Now ya know…I'm—"

"Reacting the very same way almost half our hometown is." Amber's eyes shot to Mercy's, wide in disbelief. "As of my last day there, the local counselor was so bogged down she had to call in reinforcements; Oakville Hospital recruited and sent volunteers. Statistics suggested that anywhere from a third to half the survivors have been experiencing post-traumatic stress and that at least half of those will develop PTSD over it." Amber shook her head in denial, unable to believe it. Mercy gave a sad smile. "You're not broken and you're not alone…back home, no one would ever judge you for it."

"My…" Amber choked, trying to force out the words. "Mercy, I didn't—didn't want to ask…but I have to know. What happened to my family? Are they—are they safe? Is Aaron safe? How's he handling…all this?" Not for the first time, Mercy avoided her eyes, held back what she should have spoken. After all, she reasoned as usual, it would only hurt Amber more to hear it. They could never return to Willsdale, and if Amber was anything like most of their neighbors, she was suffering from a heaping dose of survivor's guilt.

"Yer whole family made it," she answered; there was no need to hide it. "My father was injured when he tried to save the cattle—the barn caved in." Fingers clenched in the jersey covering her thighs, and Amber covered one with her own. "I wasn't there…he died of'is injuries before they could dig him out. Mother broke down—insisted we sell the livestock an' the ranch, or what was left of it, and move away. We were living in a hotel when…you know, happened. She didn't come."

"Of course not," Amber retorted, trying to lighten the mood. "I was the big bad bestie who stole away her baby Angie and corrupted her with my Scotch an' humor."

"Yer Scotch is shit."
"Yer face is shite. What about Aaron?" Mercy took a deep, steadying breath, reminding herself what she had to do. She laughed, grinning at Amber though the smile burned with falseness.

"He's great, actually," she almost chirped. "Moved in with Ma Willis, adopted every stray in the neighborhood, spends his days workin' in the fields an' his nights annoyin' the old folks...nothin' new, really. He bounces back pretty quick, ya know."

With that one smile, any thoughts Amber had about Aaron contentedly living on without her were proven false; Mercy was always a horrible, horrible liar. Though she now knew for certain that Aaron was in trouble and not handling her death well at all, she gave no sign of it, returning Mercy's smile. As the two returned to their chore, she elbowed the blonde with a mischievous grin. "So," she stage-whispered. "Did I tell ya he got drunk an' tried to milk the wrong cow?"

"Amber!" Aaron mourned in the brunette's dreams as she was forced to witness, present but voiceless, heartbroken but helpless. "Why'd you have to leave? Why couldn't it have been ME?!" When he finally left her dreams, they were invaded by Donatello; sometime during the witching hour, he confronted her, perching on her bed with a glint in his hazel eyes.

"How long, Amber?" he asked, his voice dangerously low. "How long have you hidden this from me?"

Sleep, it seemed, would always be a rare commodity in this new life.

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**Words**

- A'hold'a - A'hold of. Basically she's saying 'chill out already.'
- A'right - Alright'
- I'm'onna hork - a favorite saying of Mercy's. Basically means something's so 'disgusting' read 'mushy' that it makes her nauseated. "I'm gonna hork" usually means the same thing as 'I'm gonna puke.'
- Quitcher - Quit your
- Squee and glomp - basically means 'emit a high-pitched girly squeal and tackle-hug him.' It's a fan thing.
- Why's'e - Why does he

**NOTES**

* 'the noodle incident' - a running joke from "Calvin and Hobbes."

* Gooseberries are a variety of small berry that grows somewhat wild in this area. They reportedly make good pies and jellies, but if you eat an under-ripe one, you'll feel about ready to puke.

* 'Straw-pie' - this is a humorous reference to a RL family member's complete inability to cook. IRL, Granny Chance made my hubby Cold a coconut cream pie but forgot to bake the 'cook and serve' pudding in the filling. It refused to solidify beyond 'runny mess,' took a week to freeze, and Cold wound up eating it with a straw because 'ya don't waste pie.' It didn't make him sick even though it would given normal folks food poisoning - Granny Chance has poisoned us with her cooking for years but he's got a cast-iron gut and we should patent his immune system. :P
*Hedge-apple tag* - Basically those three idiots were throwing Hedge Apples (fallen fruits from an Osage Orange tree) at each other and calling it a game. Amber, Mercy, and Aaron were a little nuts...

**Up Next: Secrets**

Just a few fun facts regarding greying hair: most women start seeing their first grey hairs between their mid-twenties and early forties, while those with highly stressful lifestyles and chronic illness greying earlier than predominantly healthy, happy women. Some individuals also possess a genetic predisposition to early greying or white, like Amber and her uncle Bart Devon, and may go grey as early as high school. Bart, specifically, is very loosely based on an uncle of mine by marriage whose hair was always very pale blonde but faded to white in his late teens - Art's been 'white' longer than he's been married.

In both genders, red hair and pale blond hair fade to grey earliest; the connection is uncertain. Even if a person isn't technically a 'redhead,' they may have red 'tints' in their hair. The best way to find out is by studying your hair in strong, direct sunlight and twisting a section to catch the light; if present, you'll see small traces of reddish shine when the hairs are shifted. Even if you aren't a redhead, if you have a lot of red tints, you may find grey early.

Lastly, grey hair isn't a scarlet letter, a mark of shame - it's proof that you can take what the world throws at you and dish it back in spades!
11: Secrets

Chapter Summary

Amber meets Doc Morris. Mercy has a confession, Donnie is horrified. Enter the Scotch. Mikey assumes, Amber denies, Mercy teases. Amber impresses Donnie by being herself, misses home.

Chapter Notes

A little Mikey-bashing in this chapter, but nothing serious—I love his sunshiny personality too much to really bash 'im. Last chapter's reference wasn't recognized, or at least wasn't reported; the answer was "Miss Congeniality." Thanks for the review and mention, Drake Rhapsody! Hope everyone's havin' a great weekend!
This chapter dedicated to shenanigans, and to Cold, who first got me using the word shenanigans.

Chapter Warnings: The usual, insensitive remarks, language, addiction, alcohol use and abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Suggested Listening: Imagine Dragons, "Hopeless Opus" and Michael Nyman, "Big My Secret" from The Piano*

11: Secrets

6pm, April's Loft

"You must be Miss O'Brien."

The cheerful greeting came without warning, and Amber fairly leaped from the sofa. As she reigned in her nerves, her heart calmed and her lungs slowed; between horrid memories superimposed over the familiar parlor, a balding man in khakis grinned in welcome. She blinked away the transient demons at the corners of her eyes and forced a smile she didn't feel. "Y-Yeah," she answered, politely reaching out to shake the hand he offered her. "Dr. Morris?" Storm blue eyes grinned back at her under a thin mop of greying blond hair but gooseflesh broke out along her spine. Stormy eyes and a personality full of sunshine? This man made no sense.

"Yep," the dark-haired doctor fairly chirped, smoothing back his hair. "You can just call me Mark if you like." Though she still felt ill at ease, Amber nodded, offering her first name as well. "Miss O'Neil tells me you've got some problems ya need help with; would you be willing to talk about it with me?" She studied him a moment, searching for a chink in his armor, a flaw in his façade, anything to suggest he meant her newfound family harm.

"That depends," she said slowly, well-aware April was still gaping at her grey-streaked hair in
horror. The 'unveiling of the stripes' was even more embarrassing the second time around; at least the first time, Michelangelo wasn't around to proclaim her 'the world's hottest Granny.' "Before I say anything about anything, I need a promise—and I need to know you will keep it." He studied her as thoroughly as she did him, but his conclusions drew nothing but a knowing smile.

"You've had it rough, haven't you?" She flinched, disturbed that he understood her so easily. Her poker face was never that good, but this was ridiculous. "What with the friends you and April have in common I expected suspicion and nerves, but not to this extent. Wherever you came from, it must be far worse than the Big Apple." She avoided his eyes, but he said nothing of it. "It's through the generosity of your friends that I'm still able to continue my job—if they hadn't introduced themselves, I'd be unfit for my job despite that 'hallucination' being real rather than a fancy. Ask for proof of my sincerity and I'll give it."

For a time, Amber just stared at him. She searched his eyes for any trace of deceit, broke down every facet of his posture and expression by possible meanings, and combed through his words for even the slightest suggestion that he meant her family harm. After all, she reasoned to herself, they weren't just 'the guys' anymore…they were her family now—the only family she had left, and she couldn't bear the idea of putting them at risk. Finally, she allowed herself to slouch back into April's overstuffed armchair; all she could do was try.

"Swear that no harm will come to'em from your hands, or from the hands of others by way of your assistance," she stated firmly. "They're not just friends - they're my family, an' I will not tolerate anyone hurting my family. If I find out ya've hurt my family, so help me, I'll—"

"I swear it," he cut her off with a knowing grin. "No threats necessary, I'm a man of my word, and I'll even put it in writing if it'll ease your mind." Amber studied him silently a moment, then nodded.

"Before we leave?" she asked, her tone hushed from embarrassment. "I mean no insult, but I can't even begin to impress upon you just how important this is to me."

"Miss O'Brien, I'm a professional…I understand." About thirty minutes later, the minimal paperwork was all sorted out and basic introductions were over with; her visits and treatment would be 'off the books,' but he still had to keep records for his own use. "So," Mark began. "Miss O'Neil tells me you're exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress and that you may not be able to tell me much about it due to the circumstances by which it was caused. I believe, however, that we should hold off on investigating that until you feel ready to trust me. How does that sound?"

"Awesome, actually," Amber admitted, tugging one braid over her shoulder to pull on the tuft; old habits die hard, she admitted begrudgingly. "Seeing as my story could convince you that I'm insane rather than phenomenally screwed."

"Amber, Dear," Mark grinned widely. "You're speaking with a psychiatrist who's been seeing giant talking turtles; there's not much you could tell me that would surprise me now." The challenge was unspoken, but still blatant. She arched one brow and stared him down.

"Care to bet on it?" she muttered. "Pretty sure I'd win…but that's a story for another day, right?" Mark nodded, his smile still warm and honest.

"Indeed…another time, another place, another story to be told. I look forward to working with you, Amber O'Brien, and I hope I can help you soon regain control of your life." They said their goodbyes, promising to meet at the same time and place next week. Even as she and April ambled down the dark tunnels to her new home, she couldn't help but wonder…how do you regain control of your life after death?
It hadn't been a whole half-hour since he left Amber at April's, Donatello reminded himself as he scanned the salvaged circuit board for loose or damaged connections. She wasn't in danger, she wasn't lost in the sewers chasing friends from other worlds, and she wasn't hiding from legions of Purple Dragons out for blood. Knowing April, Amber was surely sunk into that overstuffed armchair with a mug of hot tea while the reporter watched like a hawk. As he reminded himself to be patient, to not worry about what was surely nothing, he fumbled for the spool of wire beside him and reached for the soldering iron without tearing his eyes from the damaged connection.

"Watch it!" a voice barked from the doorway of the lab; before he could discern the source, Mercy swept to his side and edged the iron away from his elbow. "’nless you just wanna burn yerself." He smiled at the dry jab, switching off the iron.

"Nah," he shot back as he turned to greet her. "not today, at—Mercy!" She cringed, swaying slightly on her feet. "What's wrong—what happened?!" Though she was clearly embarrassed, she accepted his help getting to the nearest chair and fairly collapsed in it when she reached it.

"Shut the door," she mumbled as a wave of tremors swept over her. "Please, Amber can't know—it'd kill'er!" Once they were shut in, he pulled on his goggles to find the cause. "No need'a scan…I know what's wrong." She wound herself up into a tightly coiled knot on the chair, avoiding his eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice low in warning; she flushed, though from embarrassment or fever, he wasn't sure.

"First off, let me make one thing absolutely clear, without doubt, no bullshit," she mumbled. "I hate alcohol—hate the smell, hate the taste, hate what it does to families an' what it did to mine. I drank alcohol a scant few times a year in my other life, an' that was just sharing a glass of Scotch with Amber..." The mention of her friend seemed physically painful. "Amber always brought out the Drambuie* on holidays, an' she loved sharing it...it was only ever one tiny glass, an' I just couldn't say no to'er...still can't." Pained, dull denim blue eyes met his, full of shame. "When I woke up in this world, I thought I'd gone crazy...turns out I was drunk. This body's an alcoholic."

That Donatello wasn't surprised in the slightest at the odd statement was almost disturbing; when did his life become so bizarre that such nonsense actually made sense? Instead of stunned, he was only concerned. "How have you been handling it?" he asked lowly. "Depending on how long the body's been addicted, you might be having some major withdrawal symptoms—much worse than a little dizziness and fever." She scowled, glaring the floor into submission as he checked her temperature with the back of his hand.

"I hate alcohol," she grumped, "but I hate the DTs more. Ever since the first time, I've been chokin' down enough to keep myself from going into shock...an' I can't stand it.** I was hopin' you could direct me to the nearest hospital before Amber comes back." He shook his head as though physically shaking off a disturbing thought.

"They might waive your fees if you can't pay, but Amber's going to notice you're gone. You need to tell her."

"No!" Her voice grew even more strained as a new course of shivers shook her. "I can't—she'll be heartbroken—she'll be miserable! She'll..." Pain laced her scratchy voice. "She's the only person who never treated me like a sick child, like a porcelain doll, but if she finds out about this, that'll change. I just can't take it." He held his silence a moment, scrutinizing her posture and expression with a blank expression. Finally, he spoke.
"Mercy," he said bluntly. "I mean no offense, but she'll figure it out on her own. Only a complete airhead wouldn't realize you're sick." A sudden energetic rapping at the door of the lab startled them both. "Yeah?" he called out. With a bright, sunshiny grin, Mikey swaggered through the door over to his brother.

"Hey, Bruh!" he chirped. "Ya got any tape? One'a my posters fell down." Tape dispenser was in hand, he turned to leave, winking at Mercy on the way and aiming a 'double-guns' gesture at her. "Lookin' good, Angelcakes!"

The moment the door shut behind him, Donatello arched one brow at Mercy. "I rest my case," he deadpanned.

The blonde growled under her breath, straining for another option and finding none. "If it makes you feel any better, ask Amber to show you her tattoo—her body's previous occupant was no angel either."

"You know, in another life, I'd'a punched yer lights out fer talkin' 'bout'er behind her back." Her eyes held a begrudging respect. "Fortunately fer you, I'm not who I once was. Amber's my friend, Donatello—my best friend—an' if ya ever hurt'er, I'm warnin' ya here an' now: you...will...pay."

Don sputtered a moment, wishing as so often that his mouth worked as fast as his brain.

"I'd never hurt her, Mercy!" he protested. "Shell, I've been doing everything I can to keep her from hurting herself!"

"I understand, Knucklehead, an' I ain't sayin' ya've hurt'er. I'm just sayin', ya do, ya die. She's got problems out the wazoo an' you've got yer work cut out for ya. The fact that you're tackling her issues without being bribed for it got you brownie points." Mercy's cheeks darkened in a faint blush, though he couldn't imagine why.

Struggling to compose herself, she stabbed her fingers through her short, shaggy hair, digging her fingertips into her scalp. "You ever need help with'er, you just ask...an' ya will need help, I kin-guarantee it. The denial an' martyr issues are just the beginning—yer in for a real ride if ya stick to it." Somewhere between the threats, insults, and complaints, her meaning rang clear: she cared about Amber, couldn't stand seeing her in pain, and would do anything to spare her from it.

"I promise you," he reassured, "I won't hurt her and I won't give up on her. What you have to consider, though, is that hiding your troubles from her will hurt her. We'll get you to the hospital, but you have to come clean with Amber and Master Splinter first. Deal?"

Mercy's already dull eyes dulled further, her thoughts turning inward as another bout of tremors wracked her body. "Deal."

8pm, The Kitchen

Sure enough, it took Amber a scant moment to realize that Mercy was very, very sick. In fact, she wasn't even four steps past the front door when she found Mercy seated at the kitchen table shaking like a leaf. Just as Mercy predicted, Amber was horrified that her friend was stuck in the body of an alcoholic after years of despising alcohol, but she wasn't heartbroken. Instead, she was determined and vowed to help out in any way possible. At Mercy's prompting, she even revealed the hated tattoo she still kept hidden, blushing hotly even as she explained the significance behind the coiled purple dragon resting in her cleavage. Though Amber wasn't sure what sort of reactions she expected, Mercy laughing until her face turned purple wasn't anywhere on that list.
By the time eight o'clock rolled around, their tears were dried and their arguments regarding Mercy's treatment and stubbornness were extinguished. A call later, the blonde had an upcoming appointment at the nearest substance abuse center and Amber ducked out to run an errand. She returned with a paper bag from the corner smoke shop...a paper bag with two bottles of Scotch, although of a much lower quality than she preferred.

"God, I've missed this stuff," she sighed into the small glass. Mercy rolled her eyes, focusing on her task; she'd obediently tossed back a couple fingers of whisky to ward off the DTs, but in true Grumpy Cat fashion, "it was awful." Perched in worn mismatched chairs around the kitchen table, the two were preparing ingredients for dinner. Though she felt incredibly weak and tired, Mercy was excited; had it really been a year since she last ate Amber's chicken stir-fry, she wondered? "You're certainly takin' this well, Merse," Amber commented off-hande as she set aside her glass and took up the knife again. "Ya'd think you were in another city rather than another world."

"Meh," Mercy retorted as she sliced a stalk of celery into strips. "Yer over-reactin' enough fer both of us, I reckon; freakin' out over everythin' ain't gonna help any." Amber shrugged, the smooth slide of knife through meat calming in its familiarity. "Ain't ya worried this'll screw things up?" The sudden query startled Amber from her near-trance, and she fastened confused green eyes on her lifelong friend.

"Huh?" she uttered. "Screw things up how?" Mercy rolled her eyes, tossing a stem of celery leaves at her face. "Hey, don't waste that! I dry those for soup!"

"Nerd. Findin' ourselves in their world, events changin', plots shiftin' to revolve around us, any'a that ring a bell?" Mercy snarked. "We could be screwin' up the timeline just by bein' here." Amber stared, wide-eyed and silent; a flush spread from her cheekbones outward. "Didn't think'a that, did ya?"

"Well," she admitted with a sheepish smile. "...not...really, no. Never occurred to me." The blonde scoffed, tempted to chuck another piece of celery at her.

"It's official," she deadpanned. "The fanfiction addict fails at fanfiction." Somewhere between the ensuing giggles, Michelangelo appeared in the doorway, nervously shifting from one foot to the other just beyond the tiles. "Ya need somethin', Kid?"

Amber smiled encouragingly to him, patting the seat of the chair at her left. "Wanna help out?" she asked.

Mike hemmed and hawed in the doorway, but hesitantly approached the table, eyeing the floor under the table nervously. "Mike?"

"Umm..." he shied away from the table, gripping his neck from nerves. "Donnie ain't in here, is he?" Bewildered, Amber and Mercy shook their heads. "He hasn't been, has he?"

"Mike, what's wrong?" Amber insisted, her tone and expression serious. "Did you two fight or somethin'?" If she didn't know better, she would say he seemed squeamish about something. Silence fell; fastening a determined stare on him, Amber waited for an answer. Finally, he burst.

"Please tell me you an' Donnie weren't doin' it on the floor again! We eat in here, for shell's sake!"

"What?!" Mercy gaped at Amber. "Don't tell me you've already nailed 'im! Ya said ya ain't even admitted that—"

"Mikey," Amber interrupted shortly, "Nothin's happened! Even if we hadn't just met, even if we
weren’t just friends, I’m not an exhibitionist—the kitchen floor is not a suitable location for… for…shenanigans!” she finished with a dark blush and sputter. Mikey stared at her, surprised by her response.

"But…Donnie didn't deny it," he argued feebly. "He just grinned at me!"

If the table before her wasn't covered in vegetables, raw chicken, slimy cutting boards, and other implements of destruction, Amber would surely have slumped down over it and smacked her head against the worn wooden surface. "You're kidding me," she muttered, digging her fingertips into her forehead. "You seriously asked him if he shagged me on the kitchen floor? Mikey, we just met last month!" She shook her head at his overactive imagination. "I'm not even gonna ask why you thought that happened. My guess is that he was tryin' to dissuade ya from hittin' on me so much, ya flirt."

"It's not just me, then?" Mercy asked offhandedly. "Ya really hit on everyone ya meet, huh?"

"Just chicks!" he almost whined. Amber shook her head, shooting him a lopsided grin. "Sis, tell'er I just flirt with chicks!"

"Mike?" His shoulders slumped. "Git yer butt in here, siddown,- an' help us with this before our shoulders go out. Donnie an' I ain't anywhere near that point, and I swear, if we get there, we're not gonna go christenin'- every surface in the lair. No need to be freaked out, okay?" He nodded, slouching over to the table. "Maybe you should back off on the flirtin' a lil, okay? I don't mind so long as ya keep it friendly." A sly grin crooked her lips. "An' hugs're okay—I'm a hugger."

"I love hugs!" he crowed, leaping from his chair to steal a squeeze from his sputtering friend. "No complaints!"

Once the prep work was all completed, he was stationed at the rice cooker while Amber manned the stove and oven and Mercy rested at the table. The prep took only half an hour once Mikey arrived, but she was bone-tired—without the chair, she feared she'd simply flop over in a puddle. After the initial awkwardness surrounding Mike's misconceptions about Amber's relationship with Donnie, the group hadn't stopped talking for a moment.

"You guys must'a been friends a long time," Mikey remarked after a humorous recollection from Mercy and Amber's childhood.

"Yep," Amber smiled as she tossed the veggies again. "Willsdale's a small town; we met in Kindergarten an' got stuck in the same classes almost every year after. We became friends as kids an' were almost inseparable from the very beginning."

"Don't forget college," Mercy snarked shaking a fork at Amber scoldingly. "We were roommates… until ya got a wild hair an' jumped in front of a bus." Amber flung her arms up in exasperation.

"Why's everyone always say I jumped in front of a bus?!” she demanded as Mike laughed raucously. "I was hit by a van in the crosswalk—there's a difference!"

Later that night, Donatello ducked into the kitchen for a drink, only to freeze in the doorway. Several filthy, scum-covered towels lay piled up in one side of the double sink on the floor. The newly installed dishwasher—a salvage yard project—was stopped mid-cycle. The cabinet under the sink stood wide open with light spilling out of it. Right in the middle of the mess, a familiar body lay halfway inside the cabinet, the top half grunting and cursing as the owner worked to right something.

"What happened?" Don called out; startled, Amber yelped and sat up abruptly, effectively whacking
her head on the underside of the sink and falling back again with a pained groan.

"Oww…Freakin' ninjas!" she muttered, carefully hoisting herself up again. She took a moment to rub at the throbbing ache on her forehead then quipped, "At least now I' got a solid reason for that hurting." Instead of laughing, Don was concerned; he dropped to his knees at her side.

"This has been hurting?" he asked, brushing aside a stray frizz of hair.

"Yeah," she admitted, swiping a somewhat clean rag over arms slick with muck. "Splinter says it's where that glass brick hit me in my other life, but I've never hurt myself there in this one…at least until now. Every time I wake up, it's positively throbbing." Don checked her pupillarity responses and reflexes, but finding nothing unusual, he sat back on his heels.

"Well, you're not showing any signs of concussion," he remarked. "Not sure why that's been hurting…maybe it's psychogenic pain connected to your past life?" Her expression scrunched up.

"Wow. Great. I died an' the best thing my brain can think of is throwin' a this ain't my body tantrum. Whoopee." He chuckled, handing the flashlight back and scooting over beside her. "This looks worse'n it is, really," she explained as she illustrated the problem with gestures and pointing. "The disposal shook the nearest connection loose over time. When I ran the dishwasher this evening, that loose connection finally rattled the rest of the way loose an' it all started spillin' out. Happened a lot at my old place."

As she talked, she fitted the now-clean pipe back to its connector and screwed it back in place. All the while, he watched her silently, struck by her 'been there, done that' attitude. Like the glass of Scotch she savored after dinner, it reminded him how little he knew about her. "Nice work, Braids," he smiled at her as she gave the connector one last wrench. "You surprised me yet again." She shrugged but grinned back at him.

"It's nothing, really. I lived alone—no husband, no live-in, an' Mercy moved out after my accident—her folks needed help on the ranch an' I was done with college for the time. I wound up movin' back to Willsdale into my own place - a lil' shotgun shack outside town. Bein' alone, I had to know at least the basics of takin' care of my place." She hissed as she stood, clutching the small of her back; the edge of the cabinet probably left a bruise, she thought. "My Da was a great teacher an' never hesitated when it came to me bein' independent, but Mum didn't take it well." She snorted and shook her head, unaware her Midwestern twang was slipping. "Asked'im to show me how to install a showerhead an' she accused me of being a closet lesbian. I'm very much not, by the bye."

"I'll bet THAT went well," Donnie grinned as she switched the dishwasher back on. Sure enough, no more water dripped below the sink. Satisfied that the problem was solved, they started wiping the rest of the floor clean. "So you were born there? In Willsdale, I mean." As though startled, she looked up at him, trying to connect invisible dots; finally, it hit her, and she cringed somewhat.

"Guess it's kinda obvious," she admitted as she wrung out her rag over the sink. "I was born there…my mother wasn't. Her family emigrated from Scotland during the late fifties." She gave an embarrassed smile. "After her mother, Granny Devon, died, Gran'Da moved in with us; I spent so many years tailin' after'im, some of it kinda stuck." Pain dimmed her eyes and she held back the rest of the story - he didn't need to know about how her whole family was treated like outsiders for 'talkin' funny,' how Amber forcibly adopted the local 'twang' to fit in, or that it didn't make a difference anyway. Even when she got used to talking more like a local, her neighbors treated her like a stranger - like she didn't belong. Such was the manner of small town life, but it hurt regardless. "I miss'im, really…of all my family, I miss Gran'Da most."

What could he say? No matter what Donatello said, she'd still miss her grandfather. Knowing that
words were pointless, he clasped one hand over her shoulder, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Thanks," she murmured. Though her eyes were starting to drip, she forced a smile. Sure enough, the familiar purple handkerchief appeared in her vision; instead of handing it to her, though, he gently dried the corners of her eyes himself. Her breath stilled in her lungs—her heart pounded. Coffee, grease, and sweat, and softness in his hazel eyes…this turtle was gonna kill her.

"You don't have to be okay for me, Amber," he said softly. "I'm here for you—I'll catch you when you fall." Even as cracked-out butterflies flew barrel rolls in her stomach, Amber could only think of one answer.

"Thanks, Dee," she smiled back. "I'll try not to fall arse-first."

WORDS

- Ya've - You have / You've
- Christenin' - Christening, an odd slang term used to mean 'having sex on' something.
- Kin - in this case, it's a different pronunciation of 'can.' This is a common manifestation in the Missouri Ozarks flavor of the Midwestern Twang and sometimes comes out more as 'c'n', the '-a-' being mostly silent.
- Siddown - Sit down

Up Next: Only More Questions

Chapter End Notes

A couple notes:

*Drambuie: Drambuie is a sweet, complex liqueur made from scotch whisky, honey, herbs and spices, and tastes sublime with just a hint of orange rind. NOT suggested for anyone who isn't used to anything harder than beer—the first time my cousin tried it, her face turned inside out and she started hacking like a pack-a-day smoker. Note the lack of an 'e' in 'Scotch whisky'—it's a whole different horse than American 'Whiskey' and often referred to simply as 'Scotch.'

**Alcohol, Addiction, DTs: Alcohol withdrawal can KILL YOU. When an alcoholic quits drinking, withdrawal symptoms can include anxiety, shakiness, seizures, confusion, increased heart rate, fever, hallucinations, and more; the source I found states that an estimated 1-5% of people who develop the DTs will die as a result. DTs usually begin 48-72 hours after drinking is stopped. To enable an alcoholic to 'dry out' without risk of seizures, doctors may prescribe anticonvulsants. I am NOT a trained health professional—I do NOT recommend the use of alcohol to ward off DTs until you can get treatment, as I'm not really sure that it would help any. For all know, it might kill you—I found nothing relevant to the idea in my research, part of why this chapter is so late. My reasoning lay in that Mercy was already doing it and Amber, knowing how much Mercy hates booze, felt that choking down a small amount of Scotch would be less miserable than some-odd cans of beer until she could get treatment. Lastly, I've seen what untreated alcohol addiction can do to a person, and it's NOT PRETTY. If you or your loved ones think you may have a problem with alcohol, talk to your doctor—there
can be life after addiction if you don't give up.
12: Only More Questions

Chapter Notes

If anyone didn't see this chapter's revelation coming, I'll be horribly ashamed of myself. Hope everyone's having a great week! This chapter dedicated to Kari, who played the Donnie to my Amber for a whole year, terrifying clouds included. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Maroon 5, "Harder to Breathe"

12: Only More Questions

Right, left, right, left—feint, left—haymaker, chin-check, left again... With deadly, practiced precision, Raphael's fists sunk into the old, worn punching bag in an almost endless barrage. Crack ribs—dislocate shoulder—bruise kidney—break jaw. The unending concussions mingled in a mind-numbing cadence, not unlike the pounding of a heartbeat. With every impact, he pushed himself further—harder—faster—anything to block out the memory of sly green eyes smiling at him from a waterfall of red.

'Relax,' the temptress murmured from memories full of inviting smiles and bedroom eyes. 'We got all night, Shugah...don't rush, yeah?' Harder. Faster. He had to block out the memories, even if it meant breaking his knuckles—anything to forget—"

"Hey." The sudden voice in the doorway sent him reeling and before Mercy could've said 'whistlin' Dixie,' he had her trapped between the wall and his own armored chest with one hand on her throat, clearly startled. Despite her predicament, she showed no signs of fear at his instinctual reaction; her mother's cooking was still scarier. "Ah," she mumbled tiredly. "Got it—don't sneak up on the ninja. Sorry."

"What," he huffed as he threw himself back into his assault on the punching bag. She shrugged, leaning against the wall with blatant indifference.

"Jus' wanted t'apologize," she answered, her voice failing at hiding her exhaustion. "Prob'ly-castrated yer ego when we first met—wasn't my intention." He said nothing, struggling to lose himself in the steady thump and smack of fists on leather. "Y'Alright?"

"Jus' shut up," he thought through a growl. 'get da Hell out'a- here, I don't need dis now!' Instead, though, he simply remained silent, hoping she'd soon grow bored and leave of her own accord.

Mercy watched him in confusion, searching for the key to the puzzle before her. Somewhere in the mass of pieces piled before her, she knew the answer lay waiting to be found, but finding it wouldn't be easy or quick. "You got somethin' to say to me?" she asked dryly, crossing her arms defensively. "Ya've- been pretty damn' rude, an' all I did was apologize. What's yer deal?"

Raphael's fists stilled, one still sunk knuckle-first in the sandbag, as he fought to reign in his temper. She's only human, he reminded himself darkly, she'd never been through what his family dealt with every day. Blazing amber eyes met hers over his shoulder, and to her credit, she didn't flinch.
"What's my deal, huh?" he rumbled. "I'll tell ya what's my deal…"

"Rate your reaction."

"You're kiddin' me, right?"

"Amber, we've been over this." There's that Royal We, she thought with a snort. "Before we can put together a plan for your exposure therapy, we have to get a good idea of what your limitations are. Start small, remember?" Despite her annoyance, Amber sighed and glanced at the photo on the screen, then back at Donatello.

"Donnie, it's a cloud. I'm not afraid of clouds, just what comes out of'em."- How could he be so patient when she felt ready to scream, she wondered? He pointed at the written scale again with a humoring smile.

"So, anxiety level 1 or 0?" he asked simply. Without a word, she jabbed the zero with a deadpan glower. "Excellent. Next!" Silence hung over the room like a moldy shower curtain.

"...it's another cloud, Donnie," Amber pointed out dryly. "I'm still not afraid of clouds."

He grinned slyly at her, gesturing to the photo - a bright sky overhung with clouds that resembled Mikey's last attempt at giblet gravy. "Yes," he acknowledged, "but what's important is when they appear. The formation is called 'mammatis;' they typically occur after a tornado has touched down in the vicinity." Amber's face turned sheet white, her pupils constricting. Right as her breathing patterns began shuddering into gasps, he minimized the window and pulled her chair closer. "Breathe, Braids," he reminded gently, framing her face in his hands and anchoring her focus on him.

After a few minutes of quiet, guided breathing and gentle reassurances, she let out a huge, exasperated sigh. "Better?" he asked. With a self-deprecating cringe, Amber tapped the scale again...a low five.

"Grats, Dee," she quipped. "You just turned a zero into a five. I think I'm okay, now...next?" Before he could change the slide, though, the dojo echoed with shouts and grunts. Without a word, everyone bolted to the scene only to find themselves speechless in the doorway.

"What's happening?!" Amber cried, forcing her way through the row of stunned ninjas. "Move, move—Mercy?!" Yes...Mercy, she realized in horror. Her friend sat on Raphael's chest, one knee on each arm, and her hands clench around his throat, throttling him. It was a familiar sight, but usually she saw Mercy pin Aaron like that. "Oh, Holy Moses," Amber groaned as Raph's skull cracked against the floorboards. "Here we go again...ANGELA...MERCY...ROSS! Let'im- go!"

Though blue fire still burned in Mercy's eyes, though her face was still contorted in fury and hate, she visibly reigned herself in, her arms shaking as she wrenched them away. With a final crack to Raph's jaw, she swept off of him and over to the wall, pinning him under her glare.

"What happened?!" Amber demanded as she rushed over to Raph, offering a hand up. As she'd expected, though, he swatted the offered hand away and clambered up on his own, a growl deep in his chest.

"What—That bastard!" Mercy snarled as Donatello checked his brother for injury only to be swatted away as well. "He—He—" As suddenly as her tirade started, it ceased, only a glare left on her face, aimed at Amber. "You know what he called me," Mercy spat.

Amber knew right then that Raphael had crossed the line, but not the line Mercy claimed he had.
Mercy was a terrible liar.

"Lab, Mercy," Amber warned. "Go pack a bag." As Amber knew would happen, her friend blanched; with a hurt expression, the blonde retreated. Once the door shut behind her, Amber turned to Donatello with a weary sigh. Though they knew not why, Mercy just blew her only chance of staying with them…and horrible as it sounded, Amber wasn't the least bit surprised.

"We need'a talk." Raph scowled at the words—words no man ever wants to hear from a woman. Words like that only led to fighting, women crying, and men getting blamed for everything from Daddy issues to the common cold. Despite knowing what was happening, he turned to face Amber, not at all surprised that she was silently fuming.

"I' got nothin' ta say to ya," he groused. She responded with no more than an arched eyebrow. "What?"

"I know you, Raphael. I know who you are, what you're like, an' what you will an' won't do. I also know you're not the type to call a woman a bipolar bitch just 'cause she annoys you." So that's what Mercy told her he did, he thought around a scowl. "Mercy's 'bout as tough as an overcooked noodle right now, Raph—if ya fought back or even defended yerself, she'd never'a gotten as far as she did."

"I don't hit women," he snapped at her. No reaction.

"I know," Amber acknowledged dryly. "What she did was wrong, we both know that. Thing is, the Mercy I know flew off the handle like that over one thing, an' one thing only..." ...other than Aaron's immature behavior, of course. Amber met Raph's gaze, glaring at him over her glasses. "That's someone intentionally, heartlessly spouting vicious lies about someone she cares about."

'Bingo,' she thought tersely when his eyes widened in surprise. She didn't know whether to be relieved that Mercy hadn't changed, or angry over what led the blonde to go ballistic. "So," she continued without emotion. "here's the deal. Master Splinter will not be happy to hear about this when he gets back. Mercy's out'a control. I've contacted someone willin' to take her in for a while, 'least 'til she's made some progress in rehab. Meanwhile, Raphael, you have a decision to make: Is your grudge against me worth all this?"

"What?!" he demanded.

"—you know damn-good'n-well what I mean, Buster!" she cut him off, her voice growing gruffer with every word. "I dunno what I did to piss ye off, but yeh've been a complete arse to me since we fook—FARKIN' met!" - She paused a moment to reel in her temper; it was never a good thing when she started talking like her Gran'da - when she forgot to monitor her speech and fell into old habits normally under control. "Yer better than this, Raphael—if ya got a problem with me, just bloody tell me!"

Just for one moment, Raphael wasn't seeing Amber, the crazy brunette who'd been living with his family since January. Just for one moment, she was replaced with another woman—a woman with sensually painted lips, blazing red-dyed hair, and sly green eyes full of dark promises and 'come hither' glances. His memory filled with the reek of cheap booze, foggy green eyes, the sting of a palm on his cheek, and a litany of verbal abuse tinted with the smog of Jersey City. He backed away, momentarily incapable of hiding behind the mask he was so used to wearing. "Kimbuh," he muttered, never realizing he'd spoken.

Just like that, all Amber's anger faded away; she knew that expression, knew that tone. Finally, all the pieces fit, but the finished puzzle wasn't anything she'd expected—the question was answered,
but with a plethora of even more questions. She shook her head, gently touching him on the shoulder.

"Amber," she reminded softly. "Amber, not Kimber." Lost for words, she did the only thing she could think of…

She left the dojo.

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Daron Williams answered their knock with a cold-pack clutched to his cheek, his normally sour expression weakened by a black eye and split lip. "What happened?" Amber asked in concern as Mercy, Leonardo, and Donatello climbed in off the fire escape, Mercy gaping and mentally comparing him to Aaron Willis. Daron spared the turtles only a glare but answered her.

"Hun's getting impatient," he mumbled awkwardly as she fussed over his swollen cheek and eye. "I'm supposed to be finding Kimber…been leading'im in circles. He's not happy."

"Not sure I like his idea of a pep-talk," Don remarked dryly as he shoved his goggles back up. "You've got a couple bruised ribs, your left zygomatic bone has a hairline fracture, and he got a good shot at your right kidney—I'd be surprised if you weren't passing blood."

"TMI, Donnie," Leo grumbled. "Daron, look, he's going to figure it out—Hun's not as stupid as he looks."

"Actually, he is," Daron retorted. "He keeps checking for Kimber under my couch." The two brothers exchanged a dubious glance; the couch stood less than three inches off the ground.

"Why's Hun hounding you for information?" Amber asked. "Because you and Kimber were close?" Daron held his silence, glaring out the window.

"She deserves to know, Daron," Donatello prodded. The blond shot him a lemon-sucking scowl.

"Go back to your sewer, Turtle," he spat. "Stay out'a this." Over by the window, Mercy rolled her eyes; clearly she found a kindred spirit.

"Girls, yer both pretty," she snarked. "There's enough'a Amber to go 'round."

"MERCY!" Amber shrieked with a predictable blush. "Ohmigosh, you did not just—"

Daron cut her off. "He's…" he mumbled, avoiding her eyes in shame. "He's my half-brother."

For a moment, Amber just stared at him, searching her memories for what she knew of Hun—blond, muscle-bound, a walking human tank…how could someone as small and shrimpy as Daron be related to that? Even as she struggled to believe it, Donnie's words from the day she met Daron returned to her. We know him alright…have more problems with his brother, though…guy's a total thug.

With Daron's admission, Amber finally understood his attitude problems. Hun wasn't known for tact or kindness; he was known for violence and cruelty. It wouldn't surprise her if what happened to Daron was only the latest in a long string of beatings. Hiding her eyes, she fought to reign in sympathetic tears. Pity always annoyed her—surely it would enrage Daron, who had more reason for receiving it.

"Say something." It finally hit her that the room had fallen silent. Daron still stared out the window but his shoulders were trembling, his posture stooped. She considered his words a moment before
responding.

"Does it really matter?" she asked honestly. "We can't choose our kin…if it were possible, I wouldn't be goin' grey." As expected, Daron smirked.

"That's all you'd change?" he snorted. Through the scowl and blustering, though, Amber could tell he was relieved that she wasn't horrified by his secret. A polite cough drew their attention to the front door; Donatello stood by the intercom, having studied the device silently.

"If you had enough warning," he pointed out blandly. "you could avoid another attack. I'd help you with that if you'd let me—it's no trouble at all." For a moment, no words were exchanged. Daron stared down Donatello who stared right back, both waiting for the other to blink first. Finally, the standoff broke; Daron scoffed, skulking into the kitchen.

"I'll think about it," he grumbled as he dug through the fridge for a can of Mtn Dew. Without so much as a goodbye, he gestured for Mercy to follow him, intent on showing her around. Despite the brushoff, Amber insisted on a hug from both protesting blonds. In no time, she and the two mutants were out the window and on their way.

Silence hung over the lair when the tired group returned. Amber hovered in the doorway of the dojo, torn by what-ifs and why-nots. On their way down the fire escape, the brothers and the other-worlder with them recognized a familiar voice in April's apartment. Casey was visiting…and venting. Out of the din, scattered words stood out like sores. Trouble, stubborn, Raph, and broken stood out among a variety of expletives and slang terms for loose women. Finally, Amber got her answers in the form of a single sentence. Kimber ruined him.

Now she hesitated, one foot in the beast's den, one poised for flight. She had her suspicions—suspicions that both angered her and broke her heart. What to do, she wondered wearily? Confront Raphael, demand answers she felt sure would only hurt him? Let it go and pretend nothing was wrong? Blow it all off and focus on befriending the temperamental turtle despite it all? Caught between fight and flight, she hesitated, searching for answers that wouldn't come.

A sudden snarl startled her from her thoughts. Upon facing the source, she found herself pinned by furious amber eyes. In that moment she finally saw through Raphael's posturing. He didn't hate her—he didn't resent her. Every time his eyes met hers, he fought to suppress his instinct to run; every time he lashed out at her, he smothered his pain at her presence. The soul, fortunately, has an interpreter, she recalled with painful gravity. "often an unconscious but still a faithful interpreter - in the eye." * How had she been so blind?

Without a word, he shoved past her, storming out the front door into the dark sewer tunnels. For a moment, she just stood there, staring into space. After what seemed to her an eternity, she wandered to a room lit by candles and perfumed with the fading scent of tea and incense.

'How could I not see it?' she wondered as she settled wearily at the low table. 'Raph doesn't hate me…' Wet green eyes met Splinter's as he strode toward her; she shook her head, swallowing painfully. 'He loved Kimber.'
Shugah - ‘Sugar.’ Jersey/Backstreet dialect.

Y'alright? - 'Are you alright?'

Ya've - 'You have'

- Adding 'er to the end of a word - Means 'her'
- Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word - Means he, his, or him.
- Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word - Means them or their
- Adding 'a to the end of a word - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in out'a which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

"I dunno what I did to piss ye off, but yeh've been a complete arse to me since we fook—FARKIN' met!" - Relapse brogued speech. 'I don't know what I did to piss you off, but you've been a complete ass to me ever since we fucking - FARKING met!' Ye/Yeh/Ya are all phonetic spellings of the Scottish pronunciation of you, and Fooking is the Scottish pronunciation of Fucking. Farkin’ is just a weird little non-explicit oath Amber uses that means basically the same thing.

Up next: Scattered Breadcrumbs.

Chapter End Notes

* "The soul, fortunately, has an interpreter - often an unconscious but still a faithful interpreter - in the eye." - From Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte.
Flashback time, Folks! Hope you're ready for this…if not…well, I guess you'll just have to wait 'til y'are ready, huh? Raphael lovers, this is for you—I give you the first part of "Raph and Kimber:" their untold history! Lots of jumping around in it, and Kimber's assumed "Jersey" accent is pretty dang thick - it's hard for people not used to hearing it, but it was based on extensive research. I've written it out phonetically in dialogue (as usual) and, as always, defined the worst of it at the end in the notes for ease of reading. Words/sentences followed by a- are defined at the end for convenience.

Also, Y'all're AWESOME! You awesome readers have pushed this story beyond 2,000 hits! To celebrate, I've posted another oneshot - "Castle of Glass." Both it and the previous oneshot, "Time to Burn," are posted HERE: s/12084576/1/A-New-Lease-On-Life-A-Gallery-of-Memories Thanks again for being so swell, everyone! I hope y'all continue to enjoy the story and that it meets and exceeds your expectations! Dedicated to everyone who's been in Kimber's shoes; sometimes family can be the worst threat of all.

Warnings: Language, mentions of abuse, implied violence, bullying, underage binge-drinking off-screen, one-sided adult-minor attraction, (NO minor-Adult action here, implied or otherwise!) OC-centric chapter, OC with an incredibly thick Jersey accent, and the making of a Purple Dragon Punk.

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13: Raph and Kimber – Scattered Breadcrumbs

Jersey City, a rough neighborhood, June 13, 2007

Never in all of history has a sudden pounding on the front door been a good sign, especially around midnight. To the sixteen-year-old on the outside, however, it seemed her only choice. Left arm cradled close to her chest, right eye bruised and nearly swollen shut, she hammered the peeling wood with all her might. Every now and then, one moss green eye darted around, scanning fearfully for someone who was safely behind bars. Finally, the prayers she never said were answered.

The door opened. "What?!" the tall dark-haired man rasped at her, one hand fisted on the doorframe. Once it hit him what he was seeing, though, all anger fled him. "My God, Kid," he asked, his voice scratchy as he scanned the street.

The door opened. "What happened to ya?" She sniffed, fighting to contain tears that would only sting.

"Daron," she asked, her voice hoarse and cracking. "Does Daron Williams live here?" Perplexed, he hollered the boy's name over his shoulder. Within moments a lanky blond teenager slouched down
the hallway. Still clad in his camouflage trousers and ratty black tee shirt from the day before, he knuckled his sore eyes, scowling in annoyance.

"Ron," he snarked at his stepfather. "whatever it is, I didn't do it—ask Hun." All attitude fled when he recognized the brunette on the other side of the front door. "Kimber!" he burst out rushing to her side; as carefully as he could, he led her to the stained sofa in the equally shabby parlor. "What happened?!"

All she could do was cry.

As the night wore on, Daron's mother joined them in the parlor, the two adults discussing their options. Once Kimber was put to sleep in Daron's empty bed, he filled his parents in about her abusive father, Doug O'Bryan—more than likely the reason she arrived bruised and battered in the middle of the night. Though Kimberly O'Bryan's family lived in the same small Missouri town Daron's family was from, they always spent part of summer break with his relatives in New York. Normally Doug could keep it together while they stayed with his mother, Rosalyn; normally, Kimber and her mother Jenny were safe until they went home. 'What changed?' Daron wondered as he studied Kimber's shivering form from the open doorway of his bedroom.

It wasn't until morning came that answers were revealed via the early news. Doug O'Bryan's mother and wife were both in the hospital; Jenny wasn't expected to live, Rosalyn wasn't expected to wake up, and one of Manhattan's many cab drivers was dead. Doug was booked from the ER waiting room—his 'altercation' with the driver resulted in a massive pileup on Forty-Third when the driver lost control, but, being drunk, Doug was relatively uninjured. According to the news anchor, Kimber had reportedly stayed at Rosalyn's apartment with a headache but was nowhere to be found. "A headache?" Daron scoffed at the unhearing news anchor. "Her head's the only thing not aching!"

Across the table, Leeann Williams shook her head, squeezing Ron's massive, hairy hand for comfort. They were sure it wasn't exactly legal, but Kimberly wouldn't be going home. As far as the Williams family was concerned, she was home.

July 4th, 2008, Daron's Apartment in Jersey City

"C'mon, Daron!" Kimber teased, leaning over the edge of the rooftop. Though she grinned with an innocent joy, Daron's thoughts were far from innocent—rather, they were centered on the spiky electric blue bangs falling in her eyes, the almost husky tone her voice had developed after puberty, and the way her shirt was far too small and low-cut for her bust size. "Ya gonna miss t'a- show!" On the fire escape below, Daron Williams blushed darkly, hiding his face from his long-time friend.

Much had changed in the past year. City life suited the newly-dubbed Kimber Bryant and she'd quickly taken to the city she now lived in. After a year of intense personal training, she'd obliterated her mild Midwestern twang, taking on its sharp, nasal Jersey counterpart with more ease than Daron had when he dropped his twang years before. Ron Black's ongoing lung problems finally claimed his life in early Spring and Leeann fell into a deep depression. When Daron and Kimber found a place of their own, Leeann left Jersey, retreating to the less-complicated Midwest to start over.

Now, three months into Daron's new life with Kimber as his flat-mate, he was dead certain letting her move in was a drastic mistake. At this rate, he reminded himself harshly, she'd realize he didn't see her as a friend. It wasn't a matter of money—he made enough with his 'hacker for hire' work to support them both. The problem wasn't Kimber…it was him. It was only a matter of time before his attraction became obvious.
Shaking himself out of his mental grumblings, he clambered up the rest of the creaking steps. Over by the rooftop access shed, she sprawled across a ratty blanket watching the darkening skyline eagerly. Daron stood frozen, stunned as ever by the woman she'd become. No longer was she the nervous, underfed child he'd met in Missouri. Now, she was taller than him and voluptuous, and had more curves than she knew what to do with. Full hips, a full bust, a generous round behind…other than her thick assumed accent and her penchant for baring her cleavage and dying her hair in obnoxiously bright colors with drink mixes, she was almost a carbon copy of his every adolescent dream. Naturally, she was underage and saw him as only a friend.

Without a word, he settled on the blanket beside her, pausing only to tug a flyaway lock of hair and duck the answering swing. As dusk fell, the air filled with an endless supply of sparks and shimmers from celebrating neighbors. Despite the awe-inspiring display around them, Daron's eyes never left the woman at his side. Even when a sudden thump sounded at the edge of the rooftop, he couldn't look away.

"Fancy meetin' ya here, Shrimp." Chills raced down Daron's spine; he knew that voice. His stomach in his throat, he turned to acknowledge the leering blond behemoth perched on the protesting AC unit behind them. On either side of him stood two of his top cronies in their usual attire of camouflage trousers and wife-beater tank tops—twins, one clean-shaven with a spiky purple Mohawk, the other bald with a long braided purple goatee. Both wore their purple dragon tattoo proudly on a bulging crossed arm, the first on the left and the second, the right. As much as Daron feared the mammoth gang leader, it was laughable when Hun traveled with those two. The matching tattoos, faces, and posing postures always reminded Daron of a pair of particularly ugly bookends; he'd taken to calling them 'the Bookends' in response though they went by the names Lefty and Northpaw.

"H-Hey, Hun," he greeted nervously as Kimber swung herself into an upright sprawl; even with his psychotic older half-brother staring him in the face, he found it hard not to stare at Kimber's generous cleavage. Jailbait, he reminded himself silently. "What's up?"

Hun spared him not even a glance. Instead, he shoved off the groaning hunk of metal and approached Kimber, circling like a giant blond buzzard. "Ya neva- told me ya gotta gal," Hun jeered. "Here I thought ya was hopeless—she's a lookuh."

"She," Kimber warned him harshly, "is right here. Don't talk 'bout me like I ain't here, Dillweed." Failing to read the warnings in Daron's eyes, she rose to her feet and started toward Hun. "Leave Daron alone, Jerk."

"Kimber, don't," Daron muttered to her, pulling her back. "You can't take him!" Though she halted in her steps and turned to stare at him, he knew it wasn't over his advice. Grey-green eyes scrutinized him, making him feel even shorter than he already was. A moment later, they fastened on Hun in the same calculating manner. Daron knew she was seeing their familial resemblance; though she dropped out of High School when she ran away, he knew she was no fool. Silence fell while she analyzed what she'd noticed, drawing the obvious conclusion.

"Daron's my kid brutha," Hun smirked in answer to her unspoken question. The younger man wasn't at all surprised when he found himself yanked backward into a foul-smelling armpit, one sweaty fist ground into his messy blond curls. "He's neva- mentioned ya."

Kimber sniffed, her frown haughty. "Funny," she drawled. "He's neva mentioned you, either. Can't blame'im, really…ya stink like a gym bag." Despite the jab, Hun laughed. Without warning, he let Daron fall from his armpit to the roof, the impact eliciting a sharp yelp.

As Kimber rushed to his side, the Purple Dragon leader and his two cronies turned to leave. "We'll
be seein' ya, Kimbuh," Hun tossed back as he clambered down the fire escape.

Once Daron and Kimber were alone again, Daron squeezed her shoulder, fighting the urge to haul her in and hold her until the world was no longer crazy. Jailbait, he reminded himself again—jailbait that didn't see him that way. "Don't let him get to you," he urged instead. "He's always been like that—ignore him and he'll leave you alone." Several bursts of color later, he realized she never answered him. "Kim?" he asked, turning to scan her for any sign of unease.

She gazed stoically out across the cityscape, through the fireworks, through the smog and smoke, all the way through to the bay. She was prone to such moments; sometimes Daron wondered if she was seeing anything at all when they occurred. Of course, he reminded himself as he turned back to the pyrotechnic display before them, if he'd led her life, he'd want to check out of reality on occasion, too.

"I couldn't protect ya." The sudden admission caught him off-guard and he whipped around to stare at her. Her eyes were still trained on the skyline, still seeing nothing at all.

"What?" Daron burst out. "We—He—I—" Finally, he found the right pronoun. "Kimber, you don't have to protect me—I'm a grown man! I don't need protecting! Hun's an asshole," he reasoned gruffly, "but he's not about to pound me for no reason. I don't need protecting from my own family."

"'Tat's- what I said," she shot back, grey-green eyes accusing from behind vibrant fringe. His arguments died in his throat. "I always told ya I di'nt- need protectin', always told ya my Daddy ain't gaw'na- hurt me…an' ev'ry time, I was lyin' t'rough- my teeth. He was hurtin' me long buhfor- we met, Daron." Finally, she turned away, fuming down at the gravel covered rooftop. "Blood don't save ya—kin can still hurt ya. I'm livin' proof'a t'at."

"Even so, Kim," Daron urged quietly. "It's not up to you to protect me…I can protect my own self." He tried not to take offense at her loud laughter; his worried frown twisted into a familiar lemon-sucking scowl. "What."

"Protect ya'self?!" she almost cackled. "Ya kiddin' me, right? Ya're what, five-foot-nuthin' an' one-fiddy-soakin' wet? He'd tear t'rough- ya like paypuh!" He slumped over, glaring out at the city below with his chin propped on his fists.

"Thanks for the vote'a confidence, Kimber," he grumbled into his knuckles. "I'm so glad we had this talk."

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October 8th, 2008: Hun's penthouse

The view from his penthouse never got old, Hun thought to himself with a self-satisfied smirk. And to think all it took affording it was sending his army of punks 'grocery shopping' for valuables to fence. The massive blond leered like a snake, recalling the message he'd received that morning; his two o'clock appointment was late.

As though summoned by Hun's recollections, Lefty popped his purple-spiked head through the open door. "She's—" The punk's words were cut off by a sudden blow to the temple. Stepping over his unconscious body, Kimber stalked into the obnoxiously lavish room. Without a word she perched on the arm of the sofa across from Hun, one long booted leg crossed over the other, blatant disdain in her smoke-lined eyes.

"Well, well," Hun leered, saluting her with his can of beer; she crinkled her nose but said nothing. "If it ain't Kimbuh Bryant. What can I do ya fer, Kimbuh?" For a moment, she hesitated, visibly
working herself up to the task and appalled at his roving eyes.

"What'll it take ta keep ya 'way from Daron Williams?" she asked sharply. Hun gave a low, dark laugh, his piggish black eyes trailing all the way from hers to the toes of her boots, then back up twice as slowly.

"Depends," he answered. "What's on offer?" The litany of threats and insults her eyes shot at him intrigued him; he would definitely enjoy breaking her.

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January 1st, 2010, Daron's Apartment

Daron heard Kimber's approach even before she made it into the building, and he smelled it before she made it to their door. When she burst through the front door belting out misrecited lines of "Auld Lang Syne," he stood in the kitchen fighting to hold his temper. No more was she too young for his attentions—now she was too young for the tequila she reeked of. On unsteady feet, she ambled toward him with a manic grin.

"'ey, Dar'n!" she slurred, trying to sock him in the arm and missing by almost a foot; she didn't notice. "Gue-zwhat?-"

"Why are you drunk?" he asked coldly, his arms crossed and his eyes sharp. Oblivious to the tension in the air, she shrugged, weaving toward the fridge with a crooked shrug.

"T'a guys wah-ned ta sell-ebrate," she bragged between hiccups and giggles. "I got per—per—" She paused a moment, her brow crinkling in confusion as she searched for the word; when it appeared, she burst out in another grin. "Per-moted!" she crowed. "Hunny per-moted me, Dar'n!"- Growing increasingly frustrated, Daron latched onto Kimber's bare shoulder and purple-dyed hair and steered her to the kitchen table. "Ow!" she whined when he sat her roughly in the nearest chair.

"T'at hurt!"

"Shuddup," he snapped. A moment later he slammed down a bottle of water and a mug of coffee with nothing more than barked, "Drink."

"But I've a'reddy- drunk?" she argued stupidly. "Don' wanna drink more."

"Kimber," he warned. After some mumbled smarting off, she finally obeyed. "The fuckin' hell were you thinking, Kimber?! You're nineteen! Nineteen and you're completely fucking SLOSHED! The Hell's goin' on in your head?!" It made no sense, but for once sitting still was taking more effort than moving; he lunged up out of his chair and paced the tiny kitchen like a miniature caged lion.

"Why?!"

"I tol' ya," Kimber glared at him, barely able to hold the mug of coffee. "I got per-moted...I'm t'a messenguh now! Hun's gonna send me when he needs somet'in done!"- She giggled suddenly, her cheeks turning an even darker pink. "T'at Saki guy's hot! He t'inks I'm perty."-

"No, no, no!" Daron groaned dragging one empty hand down his face. "You seriously agreed to be the go-between for the Foot Clan and the Purple Dragons?!!" Kimber looked confused for a moment, glanced down at the coiled purple dragon tattooed in her cleavage. Finally, she looked up again with a bright grin.

"Yup!" she answered proudly. "I gotta raise, too!" It was at this point that Daron realized one glaring point: Kimber was far too drunk to realize what an idiot she'd been. He growled under his breath, scowling out the window. Lecturing her would have to wait until tomorrow when she'd learn
firsthand why 'three tequila' was followed by 'floor.'

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**March 14th, 2011**

Morning light stabbing through the gaps in a worn knit blanket was followed by an army of jackhammers and a fifty piece orchestra echoing in Kimber's head. Between pained groans and garrulous oaths, she cursed Lefty and Northpaw with everything she could think of. By the time she'd run out of STDs and listed every terminal illness she could recall, the floor was no longer swaying under her feet.

As she darted from her futon to the bathroom to puke up last night's liquor, Daron heaved a sigh. In his usual spot at the kitchen table, he counted backward from one hundred and engaged in a staring contest with his coffee cup. It had been a good month or two since the last time Kimber returned home drunk off her ass, but he wasn't happy at all. She was still underage—still only nineteen—she had a good few years to go before she was legally old enough to drink. As the retching faded, Daron poured Kimber a mug of coffee and waited for her to show her face, his own safely buried in the classifieds.

Sure enough, she crept into the kitchen moments later, the very picture of shame. It was almost enough to make Daron feel sorry for leaving her drapes wide open on such a sunny morning...*almost.* As every time before, Kimber settled herself wearily at her place, downed the coffee without any alteration, then poured a second. Sometime between the fourth spoonful of sugar and the dash of milk, she spoke.

"Fa- what it's worth," she murmured to her sagging neckline. "I'm sahrry." - Daron snorted, feigning interest in the newspaper before him.

"You're only sorry because you're *hungover*, Kimber," he drawled. "Don't add *lying* to your list of vices." He didn't need to look up to know she was hurt; although he was furious, it hurt being so cold to her, but being too nice only made her behave like a heathen. Four years and increasingly delinquent behavior hadn't at all dimmed his attraction to her; if anything, it had become stronger regardless, and those feelings made her behavior hurt even more. "Who're ya blaming for this one?"

She speared her fingers through her messy acid green hair; could she really blame him, she wondered? She stifled a sigh in her coffee. "Myself," she admitted a moment later. "I'm t'a *dumbass* who assumed asking Nort'- for a Coke meant he'd gimme *just* a Coke...I'm t'a dumbass who *still* drank it after I tasted rum in it." Behind his paper shield, Daron stiffened, filling in the blanks. "I told'im no booze, an' believed 'e'd- cooperate..." She scoffed bitterly. "Such a fuckin' *maw'ron*.-"

Daron hesitated unsure what to say. Normally she'd argue with him, try to justify what she'd done, act like he was being unreasonable. For her to actually take responsibility was completely unexpected. He lay down his paper and looked her in the eye, his words cautious. "You told the Bookends no alcohol," he repeated slowly. "Believed them when they agreed, then *drank it anyway* when one of them poured rum in your Coke?" Though she blushed hotly at the implications, she nodded, avoiding his eyes entirely.

"I'm a *fuckin' idiot,*" she mumbled, fighting tears. "I should'a left—I should'a—"

"You shouldn't'a *gone there* in the first place," he interrupted sternly. "The Dragons're *trouble;* being a Dragon ain't gonna give you immunity, ya know...when shit hits the fan, you're gonna get splattered just like everyone else." Sure enough, she cracked a smile, finally meeting his eyes. "Stay away from those two, okay?" Daron broke eye contact to fumble with his coffee mug. "If you won't leave the Purple Dragons, at least stay away from those two?" As he knew would happen, the smile
fell from her face and she became equally fascinated by her cereal.

"I can't leave," she mumbled. "You know t'at. Don't mean I can't avoid Lefty an' Nort'paw— t'ey're- jerks anyhow." Across the table, Daron laughed darkly.

"Lefty and Northpaw," he repeated dryly. "You sure they didn't get those names over a lost bet?"

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*September 15th, 2011, a dark alley in New York*

Kimber sprinted down the filthy, rubbish-strewn alley as though the reaper were on her heels. Every shadow held a glint of steel; every doorway and broken window hid jeering eyes. She was a Purple Dragon, Hun's personal messenger, but there were some places even Purple Dragons never went. After losing track of time on the last bus, though, there she was in just such a place and certain she'd never make it home alive.

Shabby stoned men congregated around a crumbling doorstep, reeking of sweat, beer, and urine. Before an outstretched hand could snatch her shoulder, she ducked down another back street. Frantic green eyes darted all around her for something, anything she recognized. How could she have gotten so lost? How could find her way home?

Without warning, the ground swept up to meet her. With a shriek she scrambled onto her back, crab-walking down the alley away from the man who'd tripped her. He didn't belong in this part of town, she was certain; everything about him screamed expensive, vain, and trouble.

At the mouth of the dead-end alley Kimber blindly scrambled down, a scantily dressed woman shivered under a lamppost, watching her with a sympathetic eye. She knew what Kimber now faced—it was old news to her, now.

Kimber backed further and further away from the suit-clad man looming over her. The cherry of his cigarette glowed angrily in the dark alleyway, a warning sign if Kimber had ever seen one. "You lost, little lady?" he asked warmly, but his expression spoke only of contempt. "Looks like you took a wrong turn."

Kimber clambered to her feet again, feeling around her belt. Coming up empty, she swore silently; if Hun hadn't insisted she be unarmed when she went about her duties, she'd be able to stab the menacing scum backing her up against the wall. She wasn't the best brawler, but with Lefty teaching her knife-fighting, she wasn't hopeless. "Back off!" she barked at him, balling up her fists. "I'm warnin' ya!"

Not surprisingly, he wasn't impressed. Stars swam in her vision at the blow; a pair of fine leather shoes greeted her when she hit the asphalt. Darkness followed the stars and shoes, then swallowed up the world around her.

When she woke, she was alone. Her assailant, now unconscious, was tied up and hanging upside down from the streetlamp the other woman once stood under. For a moment, Kimber sat blinking at the dangling pimp, trying to rationalize what had happened.

"Ya okay?" a husky voice asked from the shadows. She jumped, eyes darting around her for answers.

"Who's t'ere?!" she yelped. "Whadda ya want wi'me?!" An angry growl emanated from the shadows behind an overfilled dumpster.

"Dat's nice," the unseen man snarked, punching the dumpster for emphasis. "I just saved ya ass, an'
ya think I'm gonna hurt ya! Why's everyone always assume dat?!” Now certain that he meant her no harm, Kimber stood and inched toward the dumpster, willing herself to keep calm.

"Sahrry," she answered. "I just…I got lost an' he…You helped me?" Though she couldn't see more than a vague outline, the man nodded. "T'ank ya…can ya tell me where I am?" He shoved off the wall, retreating even deeper into the shadows.

"Somewhere ya shouldn't be. Where ya belong, Kid?" She fought the urge to stamp her foot in indignation.

"I ain't a kid!" she snapped. "I'm nineteen, dammit!" Her only response was snorted laughter. Despite his attitude, she told him the neighborhood she was looking for; though she knew it was silly, she could almost swear she saw a pair of white eyes gleaming in the dark before her. After she got the directions she needed, she turned to leave. Only a few steps away, she turned back again. "Wait—I di'n't get ya—" She trailed off in confusion. The shadows behind the dumpster were vacant now… she was completely alone. "…name…?" After a moment she shook off her confusion and continued on her way.

Not too long after, she found herself at the back door of the apartment building she lived in with Daron. She still didn't understand what had happened and wished her savior hadn't fled. On the back porch, she paused a moment, scanning the dark alley for anything out of the ordinary. Finally, she slipped inside, never noticing the pair of golden amber eyes watching from the darkness.

She'd never have imagined who those eyes belonged to; nor did she realize what their owner would come to mean to her.

When did the lampposts become such great dancers, Kimber wondered with a tipsy giggle? All around her, the streets of Jersey City were bright and shiny in a way they never were when she was sober. All around her, the ever-present muck, mire, and misery had been replaced with a much more pleasant drunken illusion. With a loud belch followed by an even more unladylike cackle, she stumbled across the vacant street toward Daron's apartment building.

From the gutters of the nearest tenement, Raphael watched her, golden amber eyes squinting in distaste. It didn't take a genius to realize she was underage, or that she was as drunk as drunk could be. Of course, it was equally clear that she was all woman despite her young age. He shook his head with a low growl. It was disturbing how girls continue to develop earlier every generation, especially with the evidence of such staring him right in the face. For all he knew, she was only sixteen.

Where had he seen her before? As she stumbled along the cracked sidewalk, belting out a perfectly horrible mockery of King's "Bohemian Melody," he wracked his brain for the answer. Finally, halfway through yet another extra string of off-key "Mama mías," the answer hit him. Only a month ago, he'd come across a young woman in the wrong end of town, trapped in a dark alley with Spencer the Snatcher. Thanks to his interference, she escaped a life of forced prostitution that night; though her hair was now plum purple instead of the acid green it had been, he knew without a doubt it was the same person. With new eyes, he watched the young woman stumble down the sidewalk…

…right into a parked car. He snorted under his breath, waiting for her to get back up. How had she managed to survive this long? Surely if she was this hopeless, she'd have forgotten how to breathe years ago. "C'mon, Kid," he prompted under his breath, staring at the prostrate form on the grimy sidewalk. "Git- up…ya can't go home unless ya git up…" At his shoulder, Mikey piped up unbidden.

"She's not getting up, Raph," he remarked dubiously. "Why isn't she getting up? Do you think she
knows how to get up? OW!" Raph's knuckles stung from the harder-than-usual brain-duster, but he at least felt better.

"Shut up, Mikey," he grumbled. "She probably passed out. Cover me, will ya?"

NOTES

* One tequila, two tequila, three tequila, FLOOR.
** King's "Bohemian Melody" - Equivalent of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."
*** "Why isn't she getting up? Do you think she knows how to get up?" - you can blame this little quip on "Frozen." The first time I watched it with Cold around, when Olaf asked Kristoff "Why won't she knock? Do you think she knows HOW to knock?" Cold said "Naw, she's starin' at the door 'cuz she's a dumbass!" Olaf's adorable but Cold's a smartass.

WORDS (Jersey dialect unless otherwise noted
regualrs marked with * at the end, some may be redundant.

- A'reddy* - Already
- Buhfor - Before
- Dis / Dat / Dey / Dese* - Raphisms. In order, This / That / They / These. The Jersey dialect usually involves th- words being spoken as t- instead, but the odd 'backstreet' way Raph and Casey have of speaking usually renders th- as d- instead. Based on '03 series, '90s movies, and the CGI movie.
- Di'nt* - didn't. This pronunciation is common in the Jersey dialect from Jersey City, but also common in the Midwest, especially rural Missouri.
- 'e'd* - He'd / He would, the h- is silent.
- F'a* - For
- Gaw'nna* - Gonna / Going to
- Git* - Get. Common nationwide, especially in NYC-area dialects and Midwestern/Southern dialects.
- A lookuh - 'A looker,' generally means someone who is attractive.
- Maw'ron* - A "Kimber-ism," means 'moron.'
- Neva* - Never
- Nort' / Nort'paw* - The first is an abbreviation of 'Northpaw,' the name adopted by the right-handed 'bookend' punk and 'Lefty's' twin brother. This nickname is more common for Lefty to use, but as his 'student,' Kimber has picked it up. The second is a Jersey-ed 'silent H' version of Northpaw. Compare to "Southpaw," a fighting term for someone who is left-handed.
- One-fiddy - One-fifty. Compare to the TV Jersey Cabbie equivalent 'T'ree-fiddy.'
- Paypuh - Paper
- Sahrry* - Sorry
- Shuddup! / Shaddap!* - Both mean "shut up" and both are relatively common nationwide but the second is a thicker hicker pronunciation more common to the South.
- T'a* - The. Kimber usually pronounces words beginning with th- with t'- instead.
- T'ank ya - Thank you.
- T'at* - That
- T'ere* - There
- T'ey're* - They're / They are
- T'rough - Through
- Wi' me - With me

Kimber's Drunk words

- "'ey, Dar'n! Gue-zwhat?" - 'Hey, Daron! Guess what?'
- "T'a guys wah-need ta sell-ebrate!" - 'The guys wanted to celebrate'
- "I got per—per—Per-moted! Hunny per-moted me, Dar'n!" - 'I got promoted! Hun promoted me, Daron!'
- "I tol' ya, I got per-moted...I'm t'a messenguh now! Hun's gonna send me when he needs somet'in done!" - 'I told ya, I got promoted...I'm the messenger now! Hun's going to send me when he needs something done!' At this point, she's still trying to convince herself that this isn't a horrible idea, so she's laying it on pretty thick so as not to worry her best friend.
- "T'at Saki guy's hot! He t'inks I'm perty." - Yeah...she just hit on the Shredder. She has HORRIBLE taste in men, and Oroku Saki has been a pig, LOL! Translation, 'That Saki guy is hot! He thinks I'm pretty.'

Up Next: The Trail Leads Home

Chapter End Notes

A quick note to any of my readers familiar with New York area dialects: I am NOT familiar with them. I've based Kimber's imitated 'Jersey' accent on hours and hours of strenuous research. If you ARE a native speaker and I'm butchering it, I sincerely apologize—just let me know what's wrong and how to fix it, and I'll get right on it. :) One more chapter of flashback, then we're back to the main storyline! Hope everyone's having a great week!
14: Raph and Kimber Part II: The Trail Leads Home

Chapter Notes

Last chapter of the flashback, Folks! Hope it was worth the wait and that y'all don't wanna hang me in effigy after this...it was hinted at from the Prologue onward, so if ya didn't see it coming...well, I dunno what to tell ya. :/ ...bear with me? A few quick pointers for Kimber's dialogue - "Th-" is usually pronounced "T-'" instead, "H-" is usually dropped to "," the SPOKEN endings to many words and contracted words and are completely cut off, and

One last thing: I love hearing from you guys and finding reviews really makes my day! Not going to ask for reviews - I'm not a total hypocrite - but if anyone's willing to give some in-depth constructive criticism on this story, please hit me up? Honestly, you could PM me if you weren't comfortable leaving it in a review...just starting to wonder if the story's going downhill or something. :/ Anyway, hope y'all enjoy the chapter! Again, thick accent, lots'a hard words, worst are defined at the end, after this chapter it's not as rough as Kimber's not a frequently portrayed character. (She DID die, ya know...and death IS permanent...or IS IT?)

The exception to the 'definitions given' bit is the last scene - it's incredibly thickly accented and as such, has NOT been included in the definitions at the end because frankly, they're pretty extensive already. Instead, I've written an in-depth examination and translation of that scene in my forum, and you'll find that post HERE: topic/194762/153520546/1/#167951425.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


14: Raph and Kimber Pt. 2 – The Trail Leads Home

June 2nd, 2012

"Git- out'a 'ere!" Kimber shrieked at the approaching trio of black-clad ninja. "T'is's- Purple Dragon turf—stay on ya own side!" All around her, the streets of Downtown Jersey City echoed with equally fierce battle cries and the concussion of steel on bone. Though she wasn't a fighter, Kimber had answered the call just the same.

Once the Shredder was taken down, question sprung up regarding the ever-important boundaries and which gang had ownership of which parts of town. The moment Saki was booked, turf wars sprang up all over, from New York City to Manhattan, even to Jersey City. Disgraced Foot ninja vied for territory long-claimed by the Purple Dragons, the Mafia set their eyes on the Foot's previously vast empire, with the Dragons coveting the others' territories all the while. Day and night violence rang through the streets of the Big Apple between three warring gangs. Local law enforcement were ordered to keep their distance and let the opponents wear themselves out, and citizens were advised to keep out of the affected areas at all costs.
Right in the middle of the flock of punks defending Hun, Kimber fought like a woman possessed. She was a woman now, after all, twenty years old and baptized in blood. Blood as red as her dyed hair speckled her cheeks and her scoop-neck shirt, none of it hers. The intricately detailed dragon tattoo sprawling in her cleavage was nearly red from blood spray, and seemed grinning at the carnage around them.

At Kimber's side, Northpaw sent another black-clad ninja careening toward Lefty who clocked him in the skull with his crowbar. Kimber was sure he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. "Nice shot, Nort'!" he grinned at his brother.

When another ninja dove at the trio to avenge his fallen comrade, Northpaw sent him flying with a vicious kick. "Dat's why ya don't mess wit' da Purple Dragons!" the goateed punk jeered.

Kimber wasn't keeping up as easily as her comrades; her job had always been to look pretty and entice people into cooperation, not to kick ass. She snarled in the face of her newest opponent—Foot, Mafia, who cared anymore?—cursing her decision to join the ranks. Thanks to Lefty's knife-fighting lessons she wasn't a pushover, but she still wasn't a fighter at heart. She felt she'd never rid herself of the feeling of blood in her hair, on her hands, on her face—never eradicate the screams she heard around her. Only one thing kept her in the field, hacking away at people she felt no anger toward.

Hun wasn't happy with her. Two years she'd been his messenger—two years of running back and forth between the Foot, the Mafia, and the Dragons—and the Shredder still managed to pull the wool over Hun's eyes. Oroku Saki had intended to take the Purple Dragons down with the rest of New York and hadn't even offered a dose of the antidote to his long-trusted colleague, Hun. Now he was behind bars and the story was out.

Hun wasn't angry...he was livid. Kimber had believed her job was simple, clear-cut: she was the messenger, the errand boy, just a pretty face to deliver bad news. No one told her she was supposed to spy on the people she was sent to. Now she knew—now she realized just how tenuous her position in the gang was. Hun was watching her very, very closely now; one wrong move, and all her efforts would be for nothing. Somewhere between a sting of knuckles and a spray of blood and spittle, something occurred to her...she froze, staring in disbelief at the owner of the jaw she'd just punched.

"What?!" she yelped, backing away from the giant humanoid turtle catching its breath at her feet.

"If dat's what I get fer tryin' ta get ya out'a here," Raphael spat at her. "Screw ya!" As though he'd not even spoken, she stared, bewildered at his very presence. For a moment she simply stood there, eyes fairly bulging as they roamed from his head to his toes and back again. His appearance was entirely alien to her...so why did she have a sense of déjà vu? Finally, she spoke.

"Ta FUCK?!" she squawked. Raph's snout wrinkled at her eloquent outburst. "Whey'd- you crawl out from?!" Clearly doubting her sanity, she glanced furtively around her, searching for some evidence that she was drunk or dreaming...she found nothing of the sort, unless one counted a seriously suspicious scene between Northpaw and the leader of the 10th Street mafia. She cringed; were they fighting or flirting? Either way, she felt sorry for anyone who caught North's eye; she'd seen too many of his ex-flings listed in the obits.

"Screw dat," Raph snapped back, visually checking her for injuries. "Da fuck'er ya doin' in da middle of a turf war?! Yer gonna get yerself—" His eyes froze at her cleavage, his voice failing; when they lifted to hers again, they burned with something halfway between rage and hate. "Yer a Dragon," he growled. "Yer a fuckin' DRAGON!"
To her surprise, Kimber felt almost ashamed. "Not by choice," she admitted lowly, glancing back toward Hun and his personal guard. They were occupied by a particularly well-armed group of mafia cronies; they'd never notice her slip away. "C'mon...let's get out'a 'ere, huh?" Though his eyes burned with suspicion, Raphael followed behind, hoping he wasn't making a monumental mistake.

"So t'at's t'a stawry," Kimber mumbled into her soda can, avoiding Raphael's eyes across the kitchen table. "I got sick'a Daron comin' 'ome- beat-up, an' I joined t'a Dragons ta keep'im safe. If I back out, t'at bastard Hun's gowinna- go afta'im again...an' I ain't gowinna stand by an' let my friends git hurt. Daron deserves t'at much at least." Raph studied her silently before tossing back a sip of his own soda. "Sahrry I clawcked ya."-

"Lucky hit, Kid," Raph muttered, sub-consciously rubbing his bruising jaw. "If I'd thought ya was a threat, ya wouldn't'a- come within a yard'a me, much less punchin' range."

"I ain't no kid!" she retorted, then frowned, staring through the table. "Why do I feel like we' done t'is before?" He hesitated a moment; that moment was just long enough for Kimber to connect the dots—and his voice to another she'd heard before. "Ya're t'a guy who saved my ass in t'a alley, ain't ya? T'a one who tied up t'a rich snatcher?" Left with no reasonable options for refuting the claim, he did what he did best...he blustered forward.

"Yeah?" he grumbled, avoiding her eyes. "An' what of it? Spence wouldn't'a- just taken ya fer dinner, ya know. Ya'd neva've- gotten out once he got'is hands on ya. 'e sends the fresh meat ova' da borda' fer—" A small, feminine hand on his stopped his train of thought completely. Frantic amber eyes met hers in disbelief.

"I neva' got ta say it t'at night," Kimber explained seriously. "T'ank ya...I owe ya my life, Mista'...uh..." Her nose wrinkled in confusion. "What's ya name, anyway?"

"Jus' call me Raph, Kid," he smirked back. Before she could retort her usual denial, Daron shuffled through the door of the kitchen; Raphael froze, recognizing him as Hun's kid brother. In a flash of green, he was out the kitchen window heading home and Daron was lying stunned on the tiles unsure how he got there.

Shortly after, they sat gathered at the kitchen table, Kimber clutching a cup of coffee and Daron nursing a shot of bourbon. He wasn't really surprised at the story Kimber told him, nor was he surprised that she wasn't at all afraid of Raphael. She'd never had much sense, he thought with a lemon-sucking scowl. Silence stretched for a moment before Daron spoke again.

"Kimber," he sighed into his glass. "Stay away from that guy." He quickly cut off her subsequent protests, "No, I mean it, Kim—his world's too dangerous! You think this stupid fucking territory dispute is Hell? His family's whole life is like that! You'd never have any peace!" Even as she shook her head in denial, he stared her down, his knuckles white on his glass. "And what if Hun finds out you're hanging out with them? They're always at odds with the Purple Dragons—Hun'll have you wiped out!"

"What Hun don't know ain't gowinna hurt me," she argued sharply. "An' who said anyt'in'- 'bout hangin' out wit'im?—'e saved my ass, I t'anked-'im, end'a stawry!"—Daron shook his head, scoffing.

"This's you we're talking about, Kim," he reminded. "Since when've you left well enough alone? You're probably already thinking about seeing him again! Romeo and Juliet both died, remember?!!"

"FUCK YOU!" she shouted and exploded from her seat. Not a minute later, she was out the door, running back to the fight she'd left behind.
Daron stared down at her retreating figure from the kitchen window, torn between his warring thoughts. Was he too harsh on her? Had he gone too far? Worst yet, had he let his own feelings interfere too much? 'Fuck me,' he realized with a sickening dread, recoiling from the window. 'I'm fuckin' jealous!'

"Where ya been, Kimber?" Lefty shouted above the din as she shuffled toward him. A moment later he took off to catch her, gingerly prodding the blackening bruise on her temple. "Shit, Kid, what happened?"

"Lucky shawt,"- she answered with what she hoped was a convincing gogginess. "Sumbitch- got me wit' a club er somet'in…nut'in afta' t'at,- might'a blacked out." In all actuality she'd run headfirst into a streetlamp hoping an injury might excuse her absence, but he didn't need to know that. "'zit-bad?" Lefty shook his spiked head at her with a disapproving sniff and tucked her arm around his neck to support her.

"Yer out fer t'a day, Kiddo," he said grimly. "We've got it from here—just git back in once ya head's healed."

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*A dark rooftop near Central Park, June 2014*

"'ey Raphie!" The sudden shout tore Raphael from his ruminations about Leonardo and Splinter; he shot a glare at the redhead grinning from the opposing roof.

It was always odd seeing her wearing his color in her hair rather than the myriad of others she'd previously dyed it. On the one hand, it drove him out of his mind, almost as though the crimson dye was marking her as his; on the other hand it was slightly creepy since he'd didn't really see her that way. Granted, she wasn't bad on the eyes, and she had the kind of curves that would fit just perfectly in his over-sized hands. Furthermore, she didn't seem to find him unattractive…of course, she made her living by flirting; she'd probably flirt with anyone to get what she wanted. Overall, she was more annoying than anything else, after all, like the irritating little sister Raph never had, even though they'd become friends. Besides, as Mikey said, the punch red dye clashed horribly with the black and purple tattoo spilling across her ever-bared cleavage…nice cleavage, he had to admit, though.

Great breasts weren't enough to redeem a Purple Dragon punk.

"I told ya not ta call me dat!" Raph snapped back. "Whaddaya want!" Despite his blustery attitude, she laughed and waved him over with a sultry smirk.

"Ya can't see from ova t'ere,"- she called back. "Git ova here—T'ere's a betta' view'a t'a concert!"- So her plans were the same as his, he thought with a grumble as he stalked to the edge of the roof—watching the latest concert in Central Park from the neighboring rooftop. He said nothing about the spare cushion on the picnic blanket but arched a bare eyebrow at her; at least she had the courtesy to blush. "So," she started to cover up her nervousness. "Di'nt- expect ya to be int'a- t'is kinda' music, Raph." He shrugged, settling on the second cushion.

"Donnie said metal—'at's good enough fa me." For a moment she simply stared at him in disbelief, stunned by his answer. Finally, she burst out cackling. He didn't get the joke.

"Ya got no idee-uh what ya watchin', do ya?" she wheezed as she fell back on the blanket. "T'is ain't metal—it's classical! Donnie was prob'ly ruh-furrin'- ta t'a band's fiddy-piece- brass section, ya muscle-brained maw'ron!"-
"Ah, shuddup, Kimbuh," he growled. Hopefully his blustering would dissuade any teasing from the infuriating redhead sharing the blanket with him. For some reason he couldn't fathom, he didn't leave…he stayed there on the roof with her through the orchestra's warmups and the performance.

As the audience called for the first of what would likely be several encores, Raphael found himself glancing over at Kimber in the darkness of the rooftop. Though she hadn't struck him as the kind to enjoy the kind of music they'd been hearing, he was clearly mistaken; she was glowing with happiness in a way he'd never before witnessed, her heart bursting from the music. As the orchestra pulled out another piece in response to the encore—something called "Concert Piece for Eight Trumpets"—her eyes slid closed in blatant rapture, unshed tears shimmering at the lash-line.

Leave it to Kimber Bryant to make music appreciation look sexual; breathing was somehow much more difficult than Raph remembered. As the last notes grew stale in the air and applause rang through the SummerStage arena, grey-green eyes met his with an inexplicable emotion in them. Earlier he'd mentally lined out over a dozen reasons to stay away from Kimber Bryant. He couldn't recall a single one.
just…I need'a know…'cuz yer more'n just a rival ta me…an' I'd hate it ta be one-sided." Neither knew how long they stood there, one poised on the brink of flight and the other looking for a fight. Before she lost her nerve, Kimber stretched up on her toes and pecked him on one scowling cheek, then turned to retreat to the kitchen. Just in time he latched onto her sleeve, yanking her back to his side.

"What was dat?" he demanded brusquely. "What's ya game, Kimbuh?" She winced, struggling to wrench out of his grip.

"Nut'in'," she answered too quickly. "It was nut'in—jus' get going before ya' late." Silence stretched like an ice slick between them, both hiding their thoughts and feelings and silently assessing the other. Finally, Raph eased up his grip on her shoulder, running his eyes all the way to her toes, then back even more slowly. They were just friends, but would it really be so bad, he wondered? Kimber Bryant wasn't bad on the eyes, if you could get past the tattoo she seemed so proud of, and he'd hate to die a virgin. Finally he broke the silence.

"In dat case, Kimbuh Bryant," he rumbled at her with a meaningful stare. "When ya ready fer more'n nuthin', ya gimme a call." With that bombshell he slipped out the window leaving behind a shell-shocked redhead searching for hidden meaning in his words.

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November 19th, 2015

"Hullo?" Raphael called out from the living room window. Kimber and Daron's apartment was disturbingly quiet for being so early in the evening and Raph didn't trust it. The stench of tequila and beer in the kitchen was almost overwhelming…and unless he was mistaken, there were at least two different empty bottles shattered on the grungy tiles. "Kimbuh? I'm comin' in," he yelled again, nervously glancing about.

His worries ran rampant as he inched down the carpeted hallway, sai drawn and hackles up. Every shadow held an enemy—every light held another. Finally, a tired sigh sounded from the direction of Kimber's tiny bedroom. The sight of her sprawled across her futon bed finally calmed his worries about her safety but only enflamed others. Granted, she wasn't underage anymore, but he'd never known her to drink alone—she got sloshed when she hung out with those dweebs Lefty and Northpaw but when it was just her, she didn't see the point. To find her thus was troublesome, Raph thought with a low growl.

"'ey, Big Red!" she grinned, saluting him with an empty beer bottle. "Whey ya been? T'ere's a couple left if ya want'em!" He bypassed the remains of the twelve pack without a word, instead sitting on the edge of her mattress with a tired sigh.

"Kimbuh, Kimbuh, Kimbuh," he grumbled at her as she flopped back onto her back with a sigh. "What'm I gunna do wit' ya?" Finally the Kimber he knew came out to play; she let her eyes rake down his front, a sly smirk curling her lips and narrowing her eyes.

"Dunno," she answered in a slow, sultry tone. "What are ya gonna do ta me, Rah-fay-el?" He rolled his eyes and lunged to his feet, stalking back out to the kitchen. When the coffee maker had run its course he returned with the coffee carafe and a cup only to be surprised again. Kimber—the sly, troublesome minx who made a living by flaunting what she had—was gone. In her place was an upset young woman curled up against the metal headboard, ruminating about God only knows what. Eyes that usually shone with come-ons and threats were empty, staring off into space. From the doorway of her tiny room, Raph searched for answers that eluded him—slippery little things, always darting just out of his closing grasp.
"Raph?" she mumbled, dragging him from his thoughts. "I ain't really drunk." He snorted derisively.

"Uh-huh. Right," he retorted dryly. "Did da pink elephants tell ya ta say dat?" She said nothing, only gave a sharp, bitter laugh and stared across the room at her rickety dresser. Confused, Raphael followed her gaze. Amongst the clutter littering the surface, a scrap of purple fabric stood out like a sore thumb…a torn bandana Lefty guarded with his life. Kimber didn't know the whole story, but rumor had it the bandana belonged to his dead lover, a rookie who couldn't handle the guilt from a hellish hazing.

"Lefty's in t'a hospital," she explained blandly. '"E an' Nort'paw robbed t'a wrong shop—t'a owna' was armed. T'a cops put out an' APB…" Her eyes watered as they met his. "I turned'em bot'- in. Lefty's had my back in t'a Dragons from t'a start…t'ey came askin' fa a safe place t'a hide. I got'em drunk, sent'em home, t'en called t'a cops on'em. I want out, Raph," she sobbed, staring through the grimy wood floor. "T'is life's gonna kill me, an' Hun ain't even kept up'is end'a t'a bargain!- Nort'paw mugged Daron las' week - 'e broke'is arm!"

With that final admission out in the open, Raphael saw something he'd never seen before…Kimber broke down in tears. He felt helpless, had no idea what to do. How could he be of any help? Emotions weren't his strong point—he was the team's muscle, not its heart! Finally, unsure what else he could do, he crouched before the futon, his massive hands framing her tear-streaked face in his.

"Kimbuuh," he urged gruffly. "C'mon…dis ain't ova—things'll get betta!" He didn't really feel the smile he shot her. "Ya want out'a da dragons? You got it—I'll talk ta Masta Splinta about lettin' ya stay wit' us 'til things blow ova. Hun ain't gonna hunt down every recruit dat calls it quits, right?" She shook her head, sniffling; she hadn't the heart to correct him. She knew too much, thanks to her job as messenger. Hun wouldn't let her go easily…he might not even let her go at all.

Morning light filtered through the gaps in a set of moth-eaten makeshift drapes, speckling two entangled forms. The metal frame of the old futon groaned as one shifted, and a gruff voice answered in kind. "Who left da light on?" Raphael grumbled crossly, yanking the musty comforter up over his eyes. Tucked in the crook of his shoulder, a warm lump nestled in closer to his armored chest with a sleep-husky sigh. Raph froze; something wasn't adding up. Caught between anger, confusion, and dread, he took stock of his surroundings.

This was not his bedroom—it was Kimber's. From what he could see of the mess of tangled red hair half wrapped around his throat—not a noose, he reasoned nervously, just too tight for comfort—it was obvious who was tucked into his side…naked. The moment the realization hit, he jolted, staring frantically at the ceiling, scrambling for a way to get out of there before she woke up.

What had he been thinking?!! Increasingly bogged down by dread, he recounted last night's events. Finally, he found what he was looking for…she instigated—whatever happened. He breathed a sigh of relief. She'd offered - she'd started it—if she started it, surely she wasn't about to suddenly decide he was just what he'd always been treated like. Who would willingly offer themselves to a monster, sharing themselves in the most intimate of ways? Raph still wasn't sure how he felt about Kimber, still wasn't sure if he loved her or loathed her or if she was really 'just a friend,' but he had to admit that waking up with a woman in his arms was worth all her tears from the night before. Determined to enjoy it as long as possible, he blindly felt around under the pillow for his phone, shot off a quick message to Casey, and settled in to enjoy the moment a little longer. When his phone chimed a moment later, Raph knew Casey had his back.

Against his side, Kimber yawned, stretching out a kink in her spine. When Raph's arm reflexively tightened around her, she stiffened. With a vengeance only the morning after can bring, the night before came rushing back all at once—every gasp, every sigh, every impassioned cry and every
pleased sob. The truth became abundantly clear to her. She tucked her head lower into his armpit, fighting to hold back tears.

She'd given up almost everything after joining the Purple Dragons—safety, security, a decent job, her self-respect—but she'd never given up her virginity. After guarding it so closely, how could she lose it in such a forgettable way? Her breath hitched. She didn't regret giving it to Raph—She regretted giving it away without a single affirmation of affection. 'Who'll buy the cow if the milk is free?' she recalled bitterly.

"'ey," he rumbled near her scalp before nuzzling her hair. "G'mornin'. Sleep well?" She choked; shivers wracked her body, and it didn't take a genius to realize she was crying. "Kimbuh, what—why—" It dawned on him; he fell silent. Anger and self-hating warring for supremacy, he lurched upward and swung his legs over the bed. Kimber lay silently crying while he dressed. Neither spoke. "So dat's it, huh?" He growled at her. "Ya can't keep ya hands off me when it's dark out, but soon as da sun's up, ya can't get away fast enough?!" She sat up in bed with the blanket tucked around her shoulders like armor; anger chased away her sorrow.

"No!" she insisted harshly. "I just—I just wasn't ready—I—"

"Not ready?!" Raph snapped. "Ya sure seemed ready las' night! Ya couldn't get enough'a me den! How's dat not ready?!"

Tempers rose; hurtful words volleyed back and forth. The longer they fought the louder they grew, the more cruel their words, the more aggressive their stances, neither willing to back down. "Raph, I —!" Kimber's shriek fell short in a panicked gasp as he turned to face her; demons long buried came out to play. In his eyes, eyes she'd always been drawn to, a familiar rage lay in wait. Moments later, she had scrambled away from him, ducking into the corner of the room and cowering. She didn't see Raphael, the turtle she'd fallen in love with…she saw the monster she fled as a child.

Hours later, Daron found her there, alone, staring into space as tears rolled freely down her cheeks. He knew what had occurred—their shouting could have woken the dead—but it mattered little. Daron was her best friend, and by God, he wasn't going to let her down, no matter how much it hurt him.

January 20th, 2016

Kimber never imagined the New York underground could be so cold; nor had she thought she'd one day take to the underground to save her own skin. Nevertheless, there she was in an abandoned subway tunnel, dressed in her most revealing clothes, ready to throw herself on Raphael's mercy...if he had no mercy, perhaps he'd at least feel honor-bound to take her in lest she freeze to death.

Raphael...the name brought her pain now. She still loved him, still yearned for his company, still wished their one night so long ago hadn't ended in disaster. With a tired sigh, she shook her head silently, casting the beam of her flashlight around her. All the while, memories from the previous week ran through her mind unhindered. "Kim," Daron had muttered across the kitchen table. "There's gotta be a better way! You don't have to do this!"

"T'ere is no ot'uh way, Daron." Even now, she knew this was true. For weeks now, Daron had been holed up in their apartment doing what he did best—hacking—and Kimber was left to fulfill her end of the bargain. The dark tunnels seemed ready to close in around her but she wouldn't give up—couldn't give up—a life free of the Purple Dragons was nearly within reach.

She swore in the darkness; her light was fading. It wouldn't be long before the batteries failed,
leaving her completely in the dark. "Focus," she muttered aloud as she scanned her surroundings for ideas. As she turned the latest bend the answer manifested as a tiny glint of glass embedded above the nearest bronze placard; Raphael's brother Donnie had this area under surveillance. With ominous timing, her flashlight died; a chill raced down her spine, even as she admonished herself for being ridiculous. Her heart in her throat, she faced the camera lens straight on and cleared her throat.

"Donatello," she said to the lens. "It's me, Kimba' Bryant…I surrender. I've come ta help you take down t'a Purple Dragons."

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**The dying words of Kimber Bryant - runaway, delinquent, and Purple Dragon punk**

I gave up tryin' ta contact t'ar brut'as. It's so cold in t'a unduh-ground—empty in a way t'a streets above nev'a are. T'a turtles wouldn't'a helped me…I can't believe I eva' t'ought t'ey would.

How'd I get ta t'at point? How'd I come so far from t'a pigtailed brat who ran barefoot in Wilson's Creek in summa-time? My family's gone—Mum's gone, Gramma Devon's gone, my fat'uh's gone—I'm all t'at remains of t'a O'Bryan family, even carryin' a false name. Once my new life was a breat' of fresh air, a time'a ru'leef afta' so many years of livin' in fear; now it jus' feels like betrayal.

Raphael…I wish we could'a worked everyt'ing out; I wish he could'a forgiven me fa breakin' down on him when he needed me mawst. We could'a been good toget'er, he and I…an' I love him still. It's a moot point, but I wouldn't change t'at for the world. If anyt'ing, I'd'a told him soonuh—I wouldn't'a waited 'til the worst paw-ssible moment ta give myself to'im.

I dunno if t'ere's anyone out t'ere in t'is crazy-ass universe; Mum sure t'ought so. I'm not so sure really, an' by now, I really couldn't give a rat's ass whet'er there's a gawd or nawt. Gawds don't give second chances—t'ey don't care if a stupid mortal fucks it all up an' wishes she could try again. I wouldn't take a second chance if I got one! Not ja' all t'a love in the world, all t'a love I neva' got—I've had enough of life. Life brings saw-row…an' I've had enough of t'at.

I'll neva' wake up, neva see Daron again. Years from now, some urban explawrer may find my bones in t'a City Hall subway station an' wonder what happened to me. I couldn't care less. Let t'a Feds descend wit' red tape an' forensics crews—let t'a unduh-ground be full of light an' warmt' in a way it wasn't when I needed it mawst! I dun' care any-mawre…

Afta' a lifetime of cowering in t'a dirt, I'm free…free ta fly away.

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**WORDS**

Mostly Jersey Dialect unless otherwise noted, may have some redundancies, common-use denoted by * while specific instances are unmarked. Keep in mind, the "Jersey Dialect" is only one accent of NYC and there are many 'flavors' of Midwestern twang - usually when I refer to the 'twang' I'm referring specifically to the Missouri version, especially Southern Missouri.
- A stoopid t'ing - A stupid thing
- Aft'a'im - After him
- Any't'in' - Anything
- B afore / Buh-fore - Before
- Betta - Better
- Bord'a - Border
- Bot' - Both
- Dis / Dat / Da* - This / That / The - a more 'backstreet' dialect, and common to both Raphael and Casey, but also a twisted Jersey dialect pronunciation used by Northpaw, who is somewhere between backstreet and Jersey in tone.
- Di'n't / Din't - Didn't* - Common in Jersey dialect, big-city and Backstreet, and also in Midwestern Twang.
- Fa / Fer* - For
- Fiddy - Fifty.
- Git* - Get
- Gowna / Gowinna / Gonna* - Going to. The first two are specific to the Jersey dialect and normally sound more like the "Ah" in "Gonna" is more of an "Oh" like "Go," and the second has '-in a' at the end instead of '-na.' "Gonna" is more universally US and common nationwide, especially in the Midwestern and Rural US.
- Hawspital - Hospital
- Idee-uh - Idea with the -dee- heavily emphasized.
- I'm made'a shuggah, spice, an' all t'at good stuff. In udda words, yeah, I'm full'a shit." - I'm made of sugar, spice, and all that good stuff." (A reference to girls being 'made of sugar, spice, and everything nice.) "In other words, yeah, I'm full of shit." Boy, howdy.
- In'ta - Into
- Kep' up'is end'a t'a bargan - Kept up his end of the bargain.
- Maw-rbon / Maw'ron* - Moron
- More'n* - More than, common in big-city, backstreet, and Jersey dialects, and Midwestern twang
- Naycha - Nature
- Neva've - Never have
- Nut'in aft'a t'at - Nothing after that.
- 'ome - Home
- Ot'uh - Other
- Out'a 'ere - Out of here
- Own'a - Owner
- Ova t'ere - Over there
- Ruh-furrin' - Referring
- Sahrry I clawcked ya. - Sorry I clocked ya. (Clocked being a slang term for 'hit.')
- Shawt - Shot
- Sumbitch - Son of a bitch (common in thick accents nationwide, especially big-city and rural South)
- Surrend'a - Surrender
- T'anks / T'ank ya / T'anked - Thanks / Thank you / Thanked
- T'a / T'is / T'at* - The / This / That Recall the Jersey dialect's pronunciation of th-words as t'-
- T'at's t'a stawry / End'a stawry - That's the story / End of story.
- **Whey / whey'd** - Where / Where'd / Where did
- **Wit'im** - With him
- **Wouldn't'a** - Wouldn't have / Would not have
- **View'a t'a concert** - View of the concert
- **Ya're / Yer** - You're, but the second can also mean "Your." The first is primarily Jersey dialect and Backstreet but BOTH are used in varieties of Midwestern Twang, though yer is more common. The first comes out more "YA'er" while the second resembles "You're" pronounced like "Cur."
- **'zit** - Is it

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter marks our return to regularly scheduled plotlines! I gotta say, Kimber has been the most challenging character I've ever written...and not just her assumed accent. Hope y'all've enjoyed this brief interlude, and that everyone's having a great week!

NOTES:

* "Concert Piece for Eight Trumpets" is an impressive number by Bruce Broughton...impressive because I can't STAND brass music, but I love the song anyway. For someone who really enjoys brass, I imagine it could be very powerful and emotional like a good Piano piece is for me.

** Again, the last scene is 'translated' and examined in THIS post: topic/194762/153520546/1/#167951425 . If Kimber's dying words made your head spin, just check that post for a less literal and more understandable translation.
Chapter Notes

Updates are slowing down but this story hasn't been abandoned. This picks up about the time we left the family, right before Raph and Kimber's two chapters. Some headcanons are involved here, and I hope I haven't gotten Raph and Leo completely out of character; as always, con-crit is more than welcome. This chapter dedicated to Dark Ring of Hope for her unending patience; great author, people, you should check out her stories!

Warnings include coarse language, questionable humor, alcohol use, blunt discussion of sex and related topics, a little ranting, some pretty awkward moments…in other words, practically nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Blue October, "Picking Up Pieces"

15: Progress

If pacing never helps alleviate stress, why is it so hard to resist? After over twenty years of searching, Leonardo still hadn't found a satisfactory answer. Normally he wasn't prone to allowing worries to consume him to the point of interfering with his routine; he was, after all, the team leader. It was up to him to maintain a level head when no one else could, and barring that, he'd lose himself in training or meditation to clear his mind. Only one thing could drive him so far beyond reason that neither helped—only one thing could send him on an endless track from one end of his bedroom to the other in a rapid, dizzying course…

'Doc Crane Sat. AM,' the text had read. 'Upstate 4 a bit. Dnt wrry, Hogosha-kun! Will call soon.'

The text came in sometime last night from the looks of it, from a number saved vaguely as "B2." By now, Leo had searched the seemingly innocuous message for hidden meanings, warnings in the subtext, anything that might confirm his fears. Finally, he gave in…surely the sender was awake. The dial tone stretched on far too long for his liking, every moment bringing more worries than the last. When the other party finally answered, he felt drained from the wait.

"Heya!" a sunny voice chirped at him between static from an open window; obviously the perky speaker was on the road, taking advantage of her car's hands-free calling. "How's it goin, Leo?"

"What happened?" he blurted out; in the silence that followed, he mentally kicked himself for it. Over the buzzing of a window rolling up he caught traces of a mumbled conversation. What happened? one voice repeated under their breath. Don't look at me, the other grumbled. I told him last week!

"Didn't you get my text?" Bree hazarded a glance over to the passenger seat of her car; the occupant shrugged, never even opening her eyes. It was pointless, after all…Beverly couldn't really see her anyway. "I—"
"I repeat," Leo ground out tensely. "What happened." After a tired sigh, another voice came on.

"What part of don't worry didn't you understand?" Bev asked dryly, tucking a loose lock of black hair back under her green headscarf. "It's just a routine appointment—Doc just wants to make sure the scans still show improvement. I did tell you I had an appointment coming up, remember?" Leo held his silence a moment, mentally thinking back to the last time he and Beverly spoke. Not getting an answer, she added, "Snickerdoodles."

Finally, the blanks filled themselves in. The last time he'd been by to visit the cousins, Bree had been baking snickerdoodles to cheer Bev up over the upcoming appointment. "Ah," Leo muttered, roughly grinding his forehead under his fingertips. "Right…I forgot. Things have been…" He searched for a descriptor that was somewhat effective without being insulting. "…interesting lately."

"What happened, Leo?" Beverly asked lowly, the query punctuated with a loud honk nearby, then a deep woof from the chocolate lab in the backseat. "Quiet, Bosco," she scolded before asking, "Are you okay?" Deny though he did, he knew she was right…again. "And don't give me any of that I'm fine horse-hockey—I can hear you making that 'why me?' face."

"That's what it means?" Bree piped up dubiously. "Here I thought it meant he was constipated… guess I can stop lacing his drinks with Metamucil when he visits." Bree's missing brain-to-mouth filter could certainly give Amber's broken filter a run for its money, he thought grimly, dragging one hand down his face in frustration.

For a time, the three conversed, Beverly trying to wheedle information out of him, Bree bribing him with enough homemade junk food to send him headlong into diabetes, and him deflecting every question with ever-decreasing efficiency. "Look," he finally interrupted, mentally kicking himself for turning down a double batch of tiger butter fudge all to himself. "I've gotta go, okay? Give me a call when you're done at Crane's…Good luck."

As they said their goodbyes, Amber stood frozen outside his closed door, her reason for seeking Leonardo out long forgotten. A sigh whispered from the otherwise silent room, reminding Amber of a long-past conversation with Aaron and a few acquaintances. If TMNT characters had been noted in their high school yearbook, they'd wondered, what would they have been voted for? Mikey, of course, won "Most likely to go into the entertainment business" by a landslide, while Bebop and Rocksteady tied for "Prison Bitch in the making." At the time she hadn't agreed with Aaron's assessment of Leonardo—"Most likely to have a secret life"—but now, she found herself ready to eat her words.

"Amber?" Donatello called from the lab. "You about ready?"

'Right,' she thought, obediently trotting to her doom with a cringe. 'Exposure Therapy time again… Just shoot me an' get it over with.' Halfway to the door, Raphael lumbered from his room, intent on lunch. The two collided with a shout and a curse, one stumbling backward and the other landing hard on the concrete. Ripped from his ruminations by the impact, Raph stared down at Amber in disbelief that was quickly sharpening into anger.

"Aw, my arse!" she grumbled, rubbing her sore backside. "That's gonna hurt in the mornin'! Ya mind?" She raised her right arm for a hand up.

When had he seen her that way before, he wondered? Of course, he realized bitterly. He'd seen Kimber in just such a position the night she rejected him—legs splayed weakly, shoulders tight, one hand raised in a plea—a plea for what? Mercy? Forgiveness? She'd toyed with him, rejected him—she was the one at fault, not him! Why should he grant her mercy, forgiveness, when she used him and threw him away?!
"Raphael!" The sudden shout shattered the red haze over his mind...and revealed a horrific scene.

Splinter stood between his son and the frantic brunette, one clawed fingertip dug into a pressure point in Raph's wrist, the other hand poised to jab him in another to knock him out. As his senses returned, the younger male realized what he hadn't noticed in the midst of that red haze—he held Amber's outstretched wrist in a bruising grip. Without his sensei's intervention he could have broken it, all because she unwittingly woke a sleeping demon. His grip slackened in dismay; never taking her eyes off of him, she pried her arm free and scrambled backward, watching him for any sudden movement.

In all the time Amber had lived with his family, she'd never shown any sign of fearing him; now she was terrified, her grey-green eyes mirroring the ones that silently accused him every time his closed. 'Kimbuh,' he wondered dejectedly as he followed his sensei to a closed off room down the corridor. 'Ya happy now?'

The dead never answer the demands of the living.

To the average visitor, the lair seemed straightforward with few secrets; only the family who lived there knew the truth. What started as a defunct subway station had over time evolved into a sprawling network of rooms both open and hidden. Some rooms' original purpose were obvious, like the bathroom and the living room, one with a long trough sink and fully functioning electric hand dryers and the other lined with lockers in various states of disrepair. Other rooms like the kitchen and the lab had undergone such intense remodeling one couldn't easily discern their origin.

The hashi was among the latter. Only Splinter had a key to the cavernous room full of salvaged furniture and makeshift obstacles. In all honesty, Amber had believed the perpetually locked door by the weapons wall to be a supplies closet of sorts, or perhaps a storage room. The truth became clear when she first witnessed father and son stalk through into a large, dark, empty room she'd never expected. A small part of her was itching to snoop around the secluded room, just like it had driven her to explore every nook and cranny of her hometown's remote places on foot. She resisted, though; the stories Michelangelo had told her about time in the hashi would turn a gal's hair white. That room wasn't a chat pile, abandoned farmhouse, derelict ruin, or secluded tree stand...what went on in there was nothing she wanted to see.

If only she could find a better plan! Nothing came to mind, even after two hours of searching and debating. Covered basket in hand, she hesitantly approached the forbidding steel door. A moment later, the door swung open to reveal a still irate Master Splinter; it took everything she had to maintain eye contact and not search the shadows for Raphael.

"Sir," she greeted politely. "Is...is it possible that I could...um..." she faltered and took a moment to steel her nerves. "Speak with'im?" For a moment, the aged rat didn't speak, merely studied her without any sign of reaction to her words.

"State your reasons," he finally answered in a clipped tone. "Raphael is rather occupied with his lessons." For the first time in either of her lives, Amber found herself severely intimidated by the being before her; his expression and tone told her that 'lessons' was a euphemism for 'punishment.' Splinter was a good and trustworthy father, but as a sensei, he was harsh and humorless. She thought hard, formulating her reply.

"When I was only a girl," she answered finally. "one of the first lessons I was taught was that good people can still make bad decisions, and doing thus didn't necessarily make them a bad person. 'Love the sinner, hate the sin,' my mother told me, 'cuz someday the tides may turn. You may be the one begging their forgiveness the next time 'round.'" She finally broke eye contact, staring at the doorframe. "I know Raphael has a bad temper, an' I know he could have really hurt me, but he didn't...and...well, I worry that he'll internalize all this if we don't talk it over an' that it'll just make
things worse…if…that makes sense?” She glanced back up at him with a cringe; sometimes she really wished she were better with words.

The silence stretched longer than she was comfortable with, but finally, Splinter answered her. "Your request will be granted, Miss O'Brien, but with conditions: he is to continue his punishment, and you are to have another with you at all times.” He shot his son a warning glance, and the hulking mutant winced. It wasn't so much that Splinter worried Raph would lose his temper again, would lash out again and really hurt Amber; he knew if the two were left alone, Amber was less likely to interfere and try getting him out of his punishment.

Twenty minutes later, she and Donatello were waved through the doorway by Splinter, who promptly departed as agreed. The latching of the door wasn't particularly loud, but in the cavernous room it echoed menacingly. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, but when they did, her heart ached. How the heck had Raph not fallen and busted his arse yet, she wondered as his knitting needles continued clicking together? Her mind was made up; she hazarded a glance at Donatello before approaching his brother.

"Take a load off, Raph," she suggested as she emptied the basket's contents onto a rickety desk chair she with Mikey's name scratched into the seat.

"Amber!" Donnie interrupted nervously. "Master said—"

"—that Raph's to continue his punishment," she cut him off. "He said nothin' about continuin' that punishment…thus, I'm not goin' against Splinter's wishes." Donnie eyed her warily, glancing toward the locked door, and after a moment of internal fretting washed his hands of the situation. It took a little convincing on her end, but Raph ultimately came to join them on the worn rug. He paused in rubbing the soreness from his calves and wrists to down one of the bottles of water she'd smuggled in, touched that she'd be so thoughtful after what he did.

The water hadn't really surprised him—Amber was, if anything, a bit of a mother hen when his family was concerned—but the basket's other contents took him aback. A package of wheat crackers, three glasses, a canteen full of ice cubes, and two different brown bottles of what had to be liquor. For a while she said nothing, simply poured everyone two fingers' worth of one bottle, adding a finger's worth from the other bottle and a few cubes of ice, and passed the bowl of crackers around. "Well," she mumbled staring into the amber contents of her glass. "Cheers."

For a moment, Raph just stared at the woman slowly sipping from her glass, bewildered by her behavior. Finally, unwilling to be outdone, he tossed back his entire glass at once…and promptly started hacking it back up. "Da—Hell is—dis shit?!!" he sputtered between wheezes. "Tastes like fuckin' gasoline!" Amber gave a long-suffering sigh and shot him an annoyed glance.

"It's not shite," she retorted, absently swirling her glass. "nor is it gasoline. It's single malt Scotch with Drambuie an' ice, also called a 'Rusty Nail' on the rocks—if you toss it back like that, it'll kick yer arse. You've gotta take your time with it—roll it around on your tongue, get to know it before you swallow." She grumbled a few more things under her breath, little of which he could discern and none of which, he was certain, were complimentary. "If ya wanna try again, I'll pour ya another, but if you spit this one, so help me, I'll deck ya."

For a time, no one spoke. Donatello had yet to attempt his glass, preferring instead to simply smell it and glance worriedly from Amber to Raphael as though expecting them to spontaneously combust. Finally, she spoke the words she'd come to say. "Raph, I'm sorry."

"What?" Raphael balked. "Who nearly broke whose wrist, Kid?" She scrunched up her nose at the title but said nothing about it. Again, he was struck by how different she and Kimber really were;
again, he was forced to admit that Kimber really wasn't in there anymore.

"Not for that," she admitted. "I'm sorry that you're stuck with me now—that Kimber's gone, and that seeing me reminds you of her. If I could switch places with her, bring her back to you, I would." Amber eyes bored into hers accusingly.

"Ya think ya got me all figured out, don't ya?" he rumbled scowling darkly. "Bet'cha think I loved'er, don't ya?" Finally used to the burn, he took a slow sip. "Ya don't know shit."

"You sayin' ya didn't love'er?"

"Sounds like it, huh?" He scoffed. "An' she didn't love me, eith'a…she used me, an' I used her back, nothin' more, nothin' less. Turns out she couldn't handle me wit' da lights on, so dat was it." Amber squinted over her glass at him, searching his eyes for answers.

"What makes you think that?" she asked lowly. "Did she say as much? Did she demand to have the lights off when you were around?" Raph growled, shaking his head. "Then why?" If she didn't know any better, she'd think he was blushing; the sudden darkening on his cheeks struck her speechless.

"We—" He cut himself off. "Afta'wa'd, she started cryin'—freakin' out all ova' da place." Amber turned nervously to Donatello.

"I get the feelin' this's about to get awkward, Dee," she mumbled. "Might ought'a put yer ears into Incognito mode so anythin' ya hear won't stick around in yer memory. Raph," she asked seriously. "you said she cried afterward…might she'a been…a virgin?"

"Not a chance!" he snapped back, gritting his teeth. At her 'why,' he replied simply, "No blood, no cherry, got it?" For a moment, Amber simply stared at him incredulously. Surely he wasn't serious…of course, would it really surprise her? She sloshed another dose of her favorite poison into her glass and took a steadying drink. It seemed the majority of her peers were under the same delusions; why would someone who never had to suffer through the public school's version of 'the talk' know any better?

"Change'a plans, Donnie," she muttered. "Plug yer ears—this's gonna get messy." Before he could so much as blink, she blurted out, "Lesson one: the 'Cherry' is a myth perpetuated by boys an' virgins who read too damn many dirty books." Donnie cringed; she warned him, alright. Amber continued, her voice becoming almost snappish. "Lesson two: most women don't bleed on their first try! People always make a big deal about pools'a blood, heart-rendin' agony, cryin', screamin', borderline-masochistic behavior, an' all the horrors of 'deflowering,' but it's total bullshite! If you're careful and you're not a freakin' goliath down there, if she's ever used a tampon, had a pelvic exam, or checked out her own downstairs—Hell, if she's ever done anything other than sit on her ass for her entire life—there shouldn't be any significant blood!"

"Bullshite!" Raph snapped back. "Everyone says dere's blood—it's common knowledge!"

"Oh, for the love of—" Donnie watched nervously as Amber started ranting. "Urban legends are common knowledge, too, an' they're just as fake! WHY are people so farking delusional?! Most of the time, the hymen tears while you're still a kid—pre-pubescent kinda kid!—from roughhousin' or even jus' runnin' around—an' if that don't do it, yer first Pap smear will! Bangin' a virgin ain't like openin' a bottle of aspirin—cunts don't come factory sealed!"*

With that one sentence, it seemed all the air had been sucked out of the room. Oblivious to the awkward sideways glances passing between the brothers, Amber seethed into her glass. Finally, the
silence got to her; she shot an almost stern glare at Raphael. "Not everyone reacts the same way afterward," she grumbled. "but cryin' is kinda normal. Folks have a tendency to over-inflate the importance of their 'first time,' an' a lotta gals get really emotional afterward. If it was a spur of the moment decision, it's even more likely to leave'em bawling."

Something in Raphael's expression silenced her; she'd hit the nail on the head. She'd spoken the truth—some people did place too much importance on their first time being absolutely perfect, even though it rarely was. Others, possibly including Raph, just wanted to 'get it over with' so they wouldn't die a virgin. Unlike much of her hometown, she'd never seen shame in virginity or lack thereof, a viewpoint that had caused many arguments with her family. Against her own will, she couldn't help but silently recall her own first time with embarrassment—smelly sofa, leg cramps, and roomie-interruptus included. She'd cried, too, but only after walking in on her douche-canoe boyfriend with a skinny sorority-brat the very next day.

For a while, no one spoke, each preferring to mull over things silently. Finally, Raph broke the silence. "She came ta me fa help," he mumbled, staring a hole through the floor. "I...I wasn't dere…she died because of it. I—" He cleared his throat, his voice cracking. "She was...a good friend…I neva said goodbye." Before his brother could descend further into self-blame, Donatello broke the awkward silence, passing his untouched glass to Amber. The drink wasn't everyone's cuppa tea, but she, for one, loved it—loved the warm, woody fragrance, the stiff burn, and the faint undertones of spice, honey, and heather—and gladly drank it for him.

"Master will be returning shortly," Donnie warned them. Without a word, Raphael handed over the empty glass and choked down a few more crackers and another bottle of water. As before, he clambered up onto the rickety broken bicycle, assuming the position. For a time there was no sound other than Amber packing up the basket and the clicking of Raph's knitting needles.

"Fa what it's worth," Raph admitted fixing serious eyes on Amber. "I'm sorry, too…I ain't gotta like ya, but ya deserve to be treated betta' at least. I'll try ta remembuh dat." Amber held his eyes a moment before breaking away nervously.

"I'll be more careful, too," she offered quietly. "You need your space, I'll try harder to give it to ya. You ever need anything, an' I do mean, anything, you jus' lemme know, 'kay? I enjoy your company when you're not lashin' out at me...an' I've missed havin' a drinking buddy."

With that one sentence, she unknowingly ensured that Donatello would eventually coax himself into filling that very role, even if it meant hangovers and puking.

Later that evening, after another stressful Exposure Therapy session, Amber and Donnie sat around the kitchen table doing prep-work for dinner. Since they had agreed to co-op with lasagna, baked ziti, garlic bread, and salad, that meant lots of grating cheese and chopping greens and garlic. Aside from the radio tuned to a local classical station the kitchen was nearly silent.

"Sorry 'bout earlier," Amber finally broke in during a commercial. "I'm s'prised your cheeks aren't still burning." It took a moment of staring at her like she'd spoken in Swahili, but finally the dots connected.

"Oh." He swallowed noisily, focusing too hard on mincing the garlic cloves as finely as possible. "Um...well, we're all adults, right?" Amber smiled, laughing almost bitterly.

"I wouldn't'a given ya booze if ya weren't," she drawled, smirking at him. "Hope I didn't embarrass you too much...I've just gotten so sick'a that stupidly-widespread misbelief that...well, you were there," she finished with a mild blush. "Growing up in a small town tends to do that—you get used
to bitin' yer tongue an' holdin' everything in, an' when that final straw breaks the camel's back, the poor thing goes postal." He shook his head, smiling at the mental image. "We good?"

"Yeah," he answered simply, scraping another pile of garlic into the chipped cereal bowl. "I just…I just keep getting surprised, you know? Every once in a while you share just a little bit of yourself on accident, then you go back to being a blank slate again." Serious hazel eyes took in the sudden tensing of her shoulders, the slight pause in cheese-grating, the uncertain expression she wore, and the grey-green eyes staring through the pile of shredded mozzarella. "You agreed to start talking to me, remember? You promised to let me in and stop being such a closed book, but I know little more about you now than I did then."

"I'm sorry, Dee," she mumbled tiredly. "I'm trying, really…it's just…" She trailed off, shaking her head and frowning. "Whadda you want me to do? Tell you who I was? Tell you what I was like?"

Finally, she met his eyes, clearly struggling. "To be honest, I'm not even sure I'm me anymore—I don't know what I'm like now. I died!" He cut that train of thought off at the station, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand reassuringly; she didn't have the heart to admit she wasn't confused over losing herself in dying so much as she was the lifetime of changes she made in her formative years.

"You're starting too big again, Braids," he reminded gently. "Start with little stuff. You know, your favorite color, your favorite music, your hobbies—little stuff." He shot her an encouraging smile; she stared back, seemingly stunned. Again, that bright blush stained her cheeks and she turned back to her task.

"Grey," she mumbled softly. "My favorite color is grey…indigo, violet, and pine green come in pretty close, too. I like just about any kind of music, but I'm not crazy about rap, scream-o, an' obscenity-packed lyrics. My favorites, I guess, would be rat-pack, jazz, and swing, classical, and just about every kind of Rock in existence…an' my hobbies're pretty scattered." She gave a lop-sided shrug and an awkward smile. "Loved reading, a'course, especially classics and poetry…before my accident, I spent a lotta time hiking an' explorin' the outdoors…I enjoyed bird-watching on occasion an' always loved cooking…you know, nerdy stuff." Though she couldn't fathom why, she felt very shy, nervous.

"Nerdy stuff?" Donnie echoed with a grin. "Are you kidding? On behalf of nerds everywhere, I object. Besides," he pointed out gently as she grinned back. "You have a new life, but that doesn't mean it has to be a new you. You're still the same Amber you were before, right? So why would your hobbies and tastes have to change?" By her surprised stare, he was sure he'd read her correctly. "You didn't get a blank slate when you came to our world; don't wipe away what makes you Amber, okay?"

As she silently pondered his advice while gathering cookware, he nervously stared through the cutting board, repeatedly glancing up at her and hoping she wouldn't see. Not for the first time, he wished he had Mikey's charisma; people and socialization weren't easy for him. He'd always been more introverted than his brothers and prone to flustered rambling when he was put on the spot. Machinery and numbers came easily to him—outcomes were clear-cut and predictable, every problem had a clear solution based on set variables, and everything could be boiled down to logic and reasoning. With people, logic and reasoning went out the window.

He shot another furtive glance at Amber, admiring the full swell of her hips, rear, and bust, the faint notes of red in her greying hair, and the soft smile tilting her unpainted lips. Perhaps he would feel more confident around her if she weren't so familiar—so close to the 'ideal' woman he'd never admitted fantasizing about. It wasn't exact - her hair wasn't red or blonde, she wasn't quite as playful or outgoing as he'd hoped, and other than typing, her computer skills were depressing - but none of
that really mattered when he thought about it. Overall, she was just what he'd hoped for.

She was kind, compassionate, intelligent, and capable underneath the crippling trauma plaguing her now. He'd never met a human so thoughtful, really. Most people he'd met spent their lives glued to their phones; he couldn't imagine them leaving hot coffee and pop-tarts on their best friend's nightstand every Saturday. She really cared for him, for his family - cared despite the appearances that made others fear them. Of course, he had to admit, she also had bright, gentle eyes and curves that just didn't quit - curves he couldn't help but appreciate. Should his inhibitions ever fail, he was sure she'd be soft all over, soft and full from head to toe in a way he and his brothers would never be.

'What am I thinking?' Donnie wondered with a wince, turning away from the brunette stretching up on her toes to access a cabinet just out of reach. He felt like a total creep—a pervert! Amber O'Brien wasn't just some random woman he'd never met…she was his friend! His family didn't exactly have the best track record when it came to relationships, romantic or otherwise; they'd been down that road before, Raph's history with Kimber being only one example, and he was sure the result would be the same. Between dreams and wishful thinking, though, it was becoming harder and harder to remember why falling for Amber was a bad idea.

He shook the thought away and approached her, easily grasping the large glass pan she'd been straining to reach. She accepted the Pyrex dish gratefully and pecked him on the cheek in thanks, seemingly oblivious to the darkening skin there. He'd been the tallest of his brothers for many years, perpetual slouch aside, and had never really seen it as a positive or a negative trait - it simply was what it was. With this petite woman around, he felt inexplicably masculine and proud, as if reaching high cupboards were a skill to be mastered! Either way, he admitted silently, he'd reach things for her all day if it meant getting that kind of thanks!

Struggling to focus on her work, Amber began layering the soft noodles in the pan; Donnie took to digging out another pan from the same high cabinet. When he turned to pass it off, she quickly tore her eyes away from his arms back to her work to find she'd neatly laid three noodles on the tabletop instead. Her cheeks blazed. 'Damn that turtle's biceps,' she thought weakly. It was suddenly all-too-clear why she'd never asked Donnie to help with dinner; he was just too distracting.

The kitchen was ripe with the brunette's pheromones again...and Donatello was beginning to wonder what triggered them. 'Patience,' he reminded himself as he took to digging through the pantry in hopes of clearing his head. 'Patience….if it's meant to be, it'll happen in time.' Until that day came, he would focus on being what the broken woman needed most…

…a friend.

WORDS: (Mostly Midwestern Twang unless otherwise noted. Backstreet/Raph-isms marked by bold-italics)

- A'course - Of course
- Afta'wa'd - Afterward
- "Bet'cha think I loved'er" - 'I bet you think I loved her.'
- Betta - Better
- Dis / Dat / Dey / Dese* - In order, This / That / They / These. The Jersey dialect usually involves th- words being spoken as t- instead, but the odd 'backstreet' way Raph and Casey have of speaking usually renders th- as d- instead. Based on '03 series, '90s movies, and the CGI movie.
- Eith'a - Either
- Hobbies're - Hobbies are
- Neva - Never
- Ova - Over
- Remembuh - Remember
- S'prised - Surprised
- Whadda you / Whaddaya - A common slang pronunciation nationwide. 'What do you'
- Wouldn't'a - Would not have

- Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word - means he, his or him respectively.
- Adding 'er to the end of a word - means her.
- Adding 'ey, 'em, or 'eir to the end of a word - means they, them, or their respectively.
- Adding 'a to the end of a word - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in out'a which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

Chapter End Notes

I DID warn y'all this story would be a slow-burn. :/ Still, we're making progress with the plot, and Donnie and Amber WILL eventually get over themselves and become a couple...after they've made themselves completely miserable, of course.

'Til next time!

NOTES:
*Yeah...this is totally true. Most women DON'T bleed on their first time unless they've never used a tampon or had a pelvic exam, and as long as your partner isn't reckless, it shouldn't hurt much beyond the obvious stretching.
Hey, Folks! You, awesome readers, have almost pushed this story's views to 3,000! Y'all are so great! Just a quick reminder that every time this story hits a milestone — +1,000 views, +15 reviews, +20 faves, +25 follows, etc — I will write a separate one-shot to celebrate and thank the readers who made it happen. Those are always posted in my separate story A New Lease on Life: Gallery of Memories and I post a link in the most recent chapter of ANLoL. This helps corral the rabid plot-bunnies who attempt to slow down this story, and in doing so, helps me update more often.

The year's wrapping up for us but this story is still barely begun; I believe we're over halfway through Part I, but don't quote me on it. Either way, it's about to get messy! Hope y'all enjoy this new chapter and that everyone's having a wonderful day!

Warnings: frank discussion of mental illness, some references to addiction and drug use but nothing explicit. This chapter also introduces another LGBT minor character who will be in it for the long haul; if you haven't discovered the other two yet, (one gay and one pansexual) don't feel bad—it wasn't spelled out per se, as it didn't have any real bearing on the story thus far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Sixx:A.M. "Relief"

16: A Calm Before the Storm

March 4th, 2016

"My name's Mercy, an' I hate alcohol." All around the blonde, the circle of tired, worn people echoed their approval; they'd all been given plenty of reasons to hate it as well. This was, after all, her first meeting with the local Alcoholics Anonymous chapter. "Still not sure how I got hooked on that shit—amnesia sucks like that." Though she squirmed at the lie, it was what she'd worked out with the others. 'That's my story,' she thought bitterly as she paused for a swig of water. 'An' I'm stickin' to it.'

"Well, we're glad to have you, Mercy," the group leader answered with a smile as false as George Washington's teeth. "You're in good company here, and we can't wait to get to know you better."

"Well, we're glad to have you, Mercy," the group leader answered with a smile as false as George Washington's teeth. "You're in good company here, and we can't wait to get to know you better."

Half an hour later she hustled to the front doors of the community center intent on a swift—and uninterrupted—retreat. A full week had passed since her temper got her summarily evicted from the Lair until further notice. Now she was living with Daron, she would be attending AA meetings daily, and she was on more meds than she cared to admit. At least, she reminded herself as she burst out into the frigid afternoon, this time she really was taking Carbatrol for seizure prevention. As she shuffled along the crowded sidewalk, she reminded herself that ruminating on the past never benefited anyone.

Only a few blocks from the community center, she paused outside a small hole-in-the-wall shop
wedged in between a coffee shop and an art gallery. Could she afford to stop, she wondered? She'd been by four times already that week, had succumbed to her bizarre addiction every time, and her reluctant host, Daron, was sure to start wondering at this rate. The oncoming crowd parted around her like a cantankerous Red Sea, but she remained rooted to her spot. "What'm I thinking?" she grumbled harshly. "It ain't worth it." With every intention of stalking back to her temporary home, she turned away from the crowded window…only to notice a paper sign taped to the glass door.

*Part-Time Help Wanted*, the ad read. *Inquire within.* War waged within Mercy, her practical side struggling to suppress her more emotional, illogical side. Finally, one side triumphed; the trip home could be put off a little longer. Before she crossed the doormat, she paused, scanning the skies in a habit she found herself more and more prone to. Sometime between checking the clouds and trying to remember if storms were forecast, she realized what she was doing. The shop door slammed in unison with a mental door to a world that was now as good as fiction.

"Back again, huh?" Mercy jumped slightly, turning to acknowledge the grinning woman at her back.

"Yeah," she admitted sheepishly as she admired a familiar rack of orchids. New York City, to her, seemed a study in greys; in Red Fern Florist's, that grey was beaten back by shades of green and brown interspersed with colorful blooms. "I jus' can't stay away, I guess." She shrugged, giving the technicolor-haired shopkeeper a self-deprecating smile. "I'm a country girl at heart—there's just not enough color out there for me."

"You said it, Sugar," Abby Whitaker teased, her bright hazel eyes gleaming impishly. "The Big Apple ought'a be called The Big Blah, if you ask me. We've got some new stock in you might like—Lots of new herbs and flowering vines!" Immaculately polished nails shone as she waved theatrically to a wall nearly overrun by planters. Mercy's dull blue eyes brightened; she eagerly scanned the hanging baskets and planters.

"Fuschia," she murmured reaching out to gingerly inspect a deep pink bloom. "I've never seen it in such a dark shade—oh, but I couldn't, my roommate'll go *ballistic* if I bring home anything pink. He's probably already annoyed over the ivy..." She winced. "...an' the ferns...an' the bamboo, aloe, an' herbs..." She cringed, shrugging sheepishly. "Saw you're hiring." Abby hopped up onto the low checking counter, her feet dangling almost a foot off the floor and swinging girlishly.

"Yep," she answered cheerfully. "I'm picking up an extra class this Spring, and the beauty academy's already eating up my time as is. Need someone to cover a few hours in the afternoon. Know anyone?" Mercy hesitated.

"Not...really," she admitted. "I'd love to give it a shot, but not sure it'd be a good idea...I'm goin' through a rough spot right now." She turned to evade the chipper shopkeeper's inquisitive stare. "I'm goin' out of my mind with stress, an' I was told pickin' up an old hobby can help." To her surprise, Abby ceased playing with her short dyed plum and hot pink hair, sobering. Mercy shifted on her feet awkwardly.

"What's your poison?" Abby asked, her voice soft; Mercy grimaced and shot the bamboo nearby a dirty look.

"Apparently alcohol," she grumbled bitterly. "Can't remember how'er why...one day I jus' woke up in the park an' didn't know how I got there. I'm doin' what I can to clean up...it's...tough." Abby gave a sage nod.

"Booze and pot," she admitted softly. "It almost destroyed me—I lost Cherie over it, and winning her back took years." She glanced fondly at the silver ring on her left hand. "This year marks my fifth...
clean and sober, and we're getting married when I graduate."

In her previous life, Mercy thought solemnly, she'd never have made it this far, never have even considered taking on the job despite her current struggles. She'd worked her ass off in her first years of college and suffered a complete meltdown from the stress. Living at home had been miserable, but less miserable than the hospital. At least at home, she had a little freedom; she could help her father with the cows, bury herself up to the elbows in rich earth, and even fall asleep under her favorite tree without worry.

Every time she wound up in the hospital, she'd **suffocated** under the suspicious, pitying eyes of the techs without even so much as a silk flower. In the eyes of the staff, being mentally ill automatically made her prone to sudden, unprovoked violent outbursts—for instance, literally stabbing a stake of (fake) holly through someone's heart. Mercy called bullshit; she was prone to tears, mania, depression. In rare cases where she was pushed beyond her breaking point, she'd screamed herself hoarse - once she'd even punched a hole in the plaster wall of her bedroom - but she was no more violent than the average Joe, unless Aaron was involved. Of course, that was back when she could take her temper out on hay baling, wood chopping, and the score of other outlets she'd made use of - before she'd died, before Raphael said horribly untrue things about her best friend, and before she'd throttled him on the floor of the dojo. Perhaps she'd changed…and not only for the better.

Smiling again, Abby hopped down from the counter and bustled over to a shelf of cacti, selecting a small plant that resembled a spiny Death Star on steroids. With a reassuring smile, she scraped the price tag off, lifted Mercy's right hand, and pressed the tiny cactus' clay planter into her palm. "We're always capable of more than we expect, Sweetheart...you've just gotta keep climbing. You need anything, you just let me know."

Having bid April and Dr. Morris goodbye, Amber stood outside Daron's front door. What time did Mercy say she got home, she wondered? If she wasn't back from her meeting yet, it would be horribly awkward to greet Aaron's temperamental counterpart armed with a wilting Christmas Cactus. The plant had been healthy and vibrant when she picked it up that afternoon, but a walk in the cold hadn't been kind to it.

All at once, a crash and shatter of glass echoed through the door followed by a familiar curse. Moments later her frantic knock was answered by a disheveled blonde gripping a wet towel to one burned knuckle. "Hey, O'Brien," Mercy greeted with a cringe, ushering her toward the kitchen. Halfway there Amber slowed to a stunned stop, staring around the apartment…or, rather, at the houseplants swarming every available surface. Ferns and bamboo sat scattered around the parlor and tendrils of ivy trailed down from high surfaces. Row after row of bushy green philodendrons lined the top of the kitchen's high cupboards and a large trough of various herbs soaked up the sun in the windowsill. A few terra cotta planters lurked in the shadows of the countertop, new sprouts peeking up from black soil. Along with a planter of aloe, a small pincushion of a cactus acted as a centerpiece for the kitchen table.

Still struggling to comprehend what she was seeing, Amber turned her eyes back to Mercy slumped at the table, swabbing a spear of cut aloe over the burn on her hand. How had Mercy amassed so many plants already?! Amber slid into a chair opposite her visibly tired friend, the outclassed succulent set aside for the time. "Did Daron move out?" she asked bluntly; Mercy shot her an incredulous stare.

"No," she answered. "Why?" Amber swept her arms wide, indicating the army of greenery swarming the small apartment. "Oh..." Mercy blushed slightly, fiddling with the aloe leaf and avoiding Amber's eyes. "I...Someone in one'a my groups told me pickin' up an old hobby can help
"I won't judge," she teased. "All this time, I thought you were languishing in a plant-free prison, an' you're livin' in a jungle. How's Daron handling it?"

"Well, he's not killed anything yet...honestly, he's supplying my addiction in return for chores, errands, an' dinner." Mercy grinned and shot a pointed glance at a planter on the kitchen counter; only a few tiny seedlings broke through the dark soil. "I've got jalapenos for'im- in a few months as thanks...an' don't you dare pull the mother hen bit, I'm fine." Amber shot a pointed glance at Mercy's burned knuckle.

"So what happened?" The blonde winced, glaring over at the remnants of the coffee carafe splintered on the tiles nearby, coffee pooled around it.

"The shakes," she admitted softly. "I was goin' for a refill an' lost my grip on it. Daron's gonna kill me." Amber reached across and squeezed Mercy's uninjured hand; though she'd protested such fretting aloud, Mercy returned the gesture, comforted. "The folks at AA tell me I'm gonna fall off the wagon if I keep insistin' I ain't gonna. After smellin' Daron's bourbon last night, I'm startin' to worry they're right."

"What?" Amber uttered in surprise. "You hate alcohol—you never drank it willingly unless it was the holidays, an' even then ya watered it down beyond tasting it!" Blue eyes shrank from Amber's, suddenly fascinated by the wilting Christmas Cactus. "You only drank during the holidays when you were at my place," Amber acknowledged sadly. "Ya didn't wanna disappoint me." Mercy gave a glum nod. "Oh, Honey." Amber gave her friend a gentle squeeze and a wry smile. "If I'd known, I wouldn't'a- offered...Don't change for anyone, ya got it? Yer just fine as ya are."

"Can we just punch each other an' call it good?" Mercy grumbled, but the grin in her eyes betrayed it.

"I take it back," Amber teased as she set to picking up the glass shards. "You haven't a changed a bit." Mercy watched her a moment, her brow pinched at the puzzle before her. Finally, she stood and crouched at Amber's side, catching her by the wrist.

"What's with the obsessive cleaning?" she asked point-blank. "I saw it at the Lair, an' even now, you're cleanin' up my mess—a mess I was going to deal with once the coffee'd- cooled. What gives?" Grey-green eyes darted nervously out the kitchen window; clouds gathered on the horizon, but she couldn't see them underneath the splintered sky from her memory. "Amber!"

Shaken from the intrusive memory, Amber forced a swallow and focused on Mercy. "I..." She faltered, looking around her at the kitchen and taking in everything. A dirty bowl waited in the sink, the trash can lid seemed propped up by an over-filled bag, a couple macaroni noodles stared from beneath the oven—Though the kitchen was remarkably clean for a bachelor pad, she couldn't help but zero in on everything that wasn't clean, from the regular household chores to the stained grout between the tiles before her. She'd never been this bothered by it before—she was a night janitor, and after a week of prying gum off desks, scrubbing various bodily fluids off bathroom floors, and hauling away an entire school's worth of garbage, she was just too tired and sore to clean her own home. Other than summer and holidays, it had always been halfway between 'lived in' and 'help!' Now, she couldn't stand even seeing a speck of dirt without eradicating it. "I don't know," she finally admitted. "I just—I just can't stop cleaning!"

Mercy rocked back on her heels, studying her lifelong friend seriously. Unshed tears swam in Amber's eyes and her shoulders were shaky, drawn tight. In all the years they'd known each other,
Mercy had never known Amber to cry so often, to mope around for more than an hour, or to be so bothered by anything that it drastically altered her daily routine. This Amber was like a scratched record; every day the needle shifted back to the previous groove in an endless refrain of stuck.

'Is this how I looked?' Mercy wondered with a cringe. 'All that time, I was the one breaking down an' Amber was the one pickin' up my pieces. She looks so fragile and hopeless...if I was the same, it's no wonder she tried to shield me the way she did.' Despite how painful it had been to experience it, she couldn't help but want to do the same—to shield her friend from the world's troubles as much as possible. Mercy felt like the world's biggest hypocrite. Amber would have worried, fretted, hugged her to death and uttered her usual reminders of 'this rainy day, too, shall pass.' Mercy wasn't as soft and squishy as Amber, though—she was stubborn and proud, and more likely to bottle things up and explode than hug it out.

Mercy stood and retreated, returning with a wet rag, a small broom, and a dust pan. Without so much as an explanation, she dropped to her knees and assumed the position, dustpan at the ready. For a moment, Amber just stared at her; Mercy shot her a playful sideways smirk, waggling the broom at her. "Well?" she teased.

Leave it to Mercy to break her out of her funk, Amber thought with a wry smile, brushing the debris into the offered pan. "So," Mercy asked off-handedly. "I know you're seein' someone for the you-know-what—have ya told'em 'bout the cleaning?"

"Not yet," Amber shrugged. "Haven't really told Doc Morris about much'a-anything yet...still findin' it hard to trust'im. If somethin' happened to the guys because I need therapy...it'd kill me." The blonde fixed a stern glare on her—a glare that seemed to weigh more than she did in her previous life, Amber thought with a wince. After all, she'd weighed a LOT...

"Have ya told'im- ANYTHING?" Mercy asked in a deadpan. "Tellin' you've got PTSD ain't gonna do a thing—Docs don't like havin' patients do their jobs, especially when the patients're right. Has'e- given ya any reason not to trust'im?" The silence stretched a while, but Amber eventually replied in the negative. "Then ya need'a start tryin' to. Ya don't have'ta- tell'im you live with a bunch'a mutants an' came from another world, but you need'a at least tell'im about the tornado."

Amber froze, her back ramrod straight and her pupils constricting; Mercy swore under her breath at her carelessness.

"Preachin' to the converted, Sister," she drawled as she tossed the rag at Amber. "I spent most'a my life on meds, remember? They kept me stable. If it helps, it helps—no one's gotta right to judge ya over it. At least promise to think about it, huh?"

"Yeah," Amber sighed. "I'm thinking about it...I just..." She turned to stare out the window again. "I got an official diagnosis today...he knows Jack's-monkey-squat about me, my past, an' what happened, but he got enough proof. He asked me 'what happened on that day,' an'..." She fidgeted
with the rag. "Next I knew I was under April's kitchen table—I was exhausted an' dizzy, I couldn't stop shakin', an' apparently I puked. He said 'that's proof enough for me,' whatever that means." Mercy snorted, snatched the rag away, and rinsed it in the sink; Amber wasn't ready to stop scrubbing, but the floor was clean. Clearly, the obsessive cleaning was a subconscious attempt to focus on anything that didn't involve the life she left behind.

"I'll say it's proof," she retorted with a smirk. "At least your reveal was entertaining—I got diagnosed because I went through three drastic mood swings in one half hour appointment. Ya know, other'n when I tried to strangle Jerkface I haven't had that problem since I got here." Amber had gone to sit back down but nearly missed the chair in her shock. Mercy grinned. "Yeah. No out'a control mood swings, no mania, no depression…I'm feeling everything but I'm not drowning in it like before! Shame it took dyin' to cure my bipolar disorder, huh?"

"You're cured?" Amber practically squealed, launching to her feet. Again, Mercy was fairly tackled by her touchy-feely friend; the blonde squirmed, leaning away squeamishly but endured it without verbal complaint. "That's great! -not that you died," Amber added hastily, "it's great that your counterpart didn't have it!" Mercy pried herself free, wandered over to the fridge, and retrieved a printout tacked to it with a 'frowny face' magnet.

"Amber, I don't have a counterpart." Amber's confusion only grew as she read through the profile. "This body belonged to a woman named Donna Mays; other than appearances, we had practically nothing in common."

'Donna was born on July 8th, 1992 to Becky and Roger Mays,' Amber read in disbelief. 'She grew up in a coastal Maine suburb with three younger siblings. During her first year of college, her parents were killed in a car accident. Shortly after, her sister Kara was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer; Kara died only a year later, shortly after their younger brother Robert was arrested for felony possession and manslaughter. Lastly, the youngest brother, Kevin, went missing on the two-year anniversary of their parents' death; Kevin was never found and eventually declared dead. Unable to cope, Donna dropped out of college and moved in with distant relatives in Manhattan. She worked at a local florist until her alcohol dependence worsened, eventually costing her the job, her home, and even her remaining family.'

"She spent the last years of her life living under an overpass…" Amber murmured sadly; she searched Mercy's eyes, disturbed. "You woke up under an overpass…she died there." She visibly shook the thought off, reminded yet again that she and Mercy were both living in previously dead bodies. "We've established that Kimber was my counterpart, but we still don't know how I got here. If I'm here because Kimber and I both died, then what brought you here?" The implications worried her and she shakily dropped down into the chair. "Could the counterparts bit be just a fluke?"

"Wish I knew," Mercy admitted. "The not knowin's drivin' me nuts."

Not for the first time, Donatello wished the heat from a shower could penetrate his thick carapace to the muscles needing it most.

Dawn had been greeted by a smothered scream from the lab as Amber woke from another twisted night terror. In his half-asleep state, Donnie couldn't decide between going back to bed and going to check on her; even as she wept into her pillow, he fought to decide, ultimately dozing off against the headboard. By the time he woke up again the lab was empty, the fog on the bathroom mirror had faded, and breakfast was in the works.

The day had only gone downhill from there.
He'd been off in another world the entirety of practice and found himself unable to pin anyone even once. Splinter was quite disappointed with him and had sentenced him to fifty flips and an hour of meditation. During that time, Leo single-handedly murdered the toaster, Mikey dropped one of the Xbox controllers one time too many, and Raph accidentally knocked his radio off its high shelf. The first free moment he had, Donatello retreated to the lab to fix the abused appliances. Hours later, he woke up face-first in a pile of mixed parts to find that in his distraction and exhaustion, he'd put springs from the controller in the toaster, managed to install a new fuse for the radio in the controller, and swapped several other bits and bobs between the appliances. He still had no idea how he accomplished it all.

Despite it all, there was a silver lining…a still-warm cup of too-sweet coffee and a plate of blueberry scones waited for him, and a familiar blanket was tucked around his shoulders—a blanket that smelled like Amber. By the time he could finally tear himself away from the pheromone-saturated fabric, a loud painful crunch bluntly reminded him why the cot was in the lab in the first place…to deter him from falling asleep at his desk. Unfortunately, he'd offered the cot to Amber on an indeterminate basis; until she moved out or found a new sleeping place, crashing on that cot would probably make her uncomfortable.

Now, his back and neck were killing him and there was only so much hot water could do. 'Perhaps,' he thought, stretching his neck and shoulders with a chorus of cracks and pops. 'Perhaps it's time to pick up the renovations again…we did leave several rooms in this station untouched, after all. If Amber decides to stay…' He gulped, his thoughts racing like the scalding water pouring down on his neck. "if she stays with us for good she'll need space of her own…and Raph's always griping about being sandwiched between Leo and Mikey's rooms. Those old subway cars should've been more spaced out when we built the walkway between them…maybe this is a chance to rectify that?"

Of course, he realized with a sharp intake of breath, if Amber moved in with one of them, she wouldn't need a room of her own…maybe not even a bed of her own at the rate Mikey was flirting with her. Sure, he and Michelangelo both had a shot, just like Leonardo. Maybe even Raphael had a chance now that he and Amber had come to a cease-fire—a shot in the dark was still a shot. Don had done the calculations before and the odds of Amber committing to one of them were slim. The odds that she'd bypass calm, dependable Leo, Raph's passionate personality and possible drinking buddy status, and even Mikey's playful, sunshiny attitude, and choose him—a nerdy, socially awkward turtle who lived for technology and always smelled like grease—those odds were dismal.

That's what he told himself, at least. Every once in a while, though, he'd notice something that made him question that belief. He'd turn to her and her eyes would shoot up to his accompanied by a dark blush, as though he'd caught her checking him out. A particularly bad panic would send her diving headfirst into his arms for comfort. She'd fix him with a strange indecipherable gaze across the room, never realizing he noticed. He'd feel her eyes on him, find her lost in thought, and she'd suddenly panic and rush into another room as though recalling a pressing task elsewhere. Just a week ago, even, she'd managed to perfectly layer several lasagna noodles on the kitchen table instead of in the pan, as though she'd been watching him with his back turned. Every day more and more bizarre occurrences gave him pause, but every day he'd convince himself he was imagining things.

Then, of course, there was that strangely alluring non-scent—pheromones, he believed—that kept manifesting when she was nearby. As a scientist he refused to make an uninformed decision—officially, the cause and meaning were uncertain. While he was a scientist, though, he was also a man…and that part of him insisted it meant she was ripe, willing, and his for the taking. Donatello wasn't some barbaric jungle-turtle, though. There had to be a more logical, more subtle message there than "Me Amber, you mate." The very idea was…

"...preposterous," he mumbled aloud, leaning heavily on the tile wall. A faint ticking sound
manifested nearby, completely missed by the distracted genius. "Foolish, ridiculous, impossible...but..." He hesitated, three olive green fingers splayed out against dingy ivory tiles in blatant contrast. Their first meeting had been overshadowed by Casey's outburst, but he recalled her reaction clearly. She was shy, nervous but not afraid, and once the initial awkwardness was passed, she showed no sign of fearing him or his family. When her world crashed down around her and she had nowhere to turn, she turned to him for comfort and security; that she reached for him even when she wasn't aware of it was proof that she trusted him, accepted him as he was. "...surely she couldn't..." He swallowed noisily, every tendon in his body taut as a bow string. "...care? She wouldn't care—she calls me her friend, she needs a friend!"

"You stubborn idiot."

The strange female voice emanated from right outside the shower stall, triggering an almost panic. He'd never heard that voice before and the bathroom had been empty moments ago; worse yet, he was unarmed unless one counted the bottle of coconut shampoo Amber forgot in the stall earlier. He didn't see it being very useful in a fight, but to a master of Ninjitsu, anything can be a weapon...

...shame he wasn't a master.

"Who's there?!" he shouted shoving his glasses on and hastily tucking himself up under his plastron. "Show yourself!" Though only a moment elapsed between the strange voice and him diving out naked to confront the intruder, the bathroom was exactly as he'd left it...

Empty. Paranoia sharpened his senses as he checked all four shower stalls—empty—and all the toilet stalls—equally so—even going so far as to glance through the door to the hallway and the other leading to the utility room. If an intruder were to sneak out the first door they'd have had to sneak past Master Splinter in the kitchen and Leonardo in the living room. Should they have bypassed the front and side doors for the locked back door, a security alarm would have sounded—even Donnie in all his technical know-how couldn't touch that door without setting the alarms off! The other door—from the bathroom to the utility room—was untouched, steam still beading the handle without any sign of disturbance.

Though Donatello could have sworn he heard a voice speaking to him, there was no sign of any presence other than his own. Finally, he did what he did best: he rationalized and searched for a logical answer. Something must have tricked his senses, he reasoned. A little thing affects them, as Charles Dickens put it. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. When Donatello found himself right before the shower stall he'd burst from, though, the bottom dropped out of his stomach. All at once, he was certain the strange voice he'd heard was more than just a blot of mustard.

Right before the door, fine shimmering dust marked the faint outline of a pair of high-heeled shoe prints.

Northpaw Jackson swore as he ducked behind an overflowing dumpster. It had been weeks since he last saw his dealer, and he was becoming increasingly agitated. He itched all over—ached in ways nothing but a fix could calm—and his thoughts swam with blinding rage. That little bitch Kimber got him and Lefty thrown in the clink, he recalled with a silent snarl, scratching his stubbled chin. The long braided goatee he'd spent years cultivating was gone, deemed a risk now that his bearded mugshots were posted everywhere. The moment he and Lefty were booked, a senior officer had recognized them and had them separated. He wound up with several years behind bars; Lefty only got a few months pending good behavior.

Northpaw wasn't the type to play the law's bullshit games; he busted out the moment he got the chance. Knowing Lefty, the goody-goody was probably still in prison passing himself off as a 'model
inmate.' If not for their nearly identical appearances, Northpaw would sneer at the idea that the bleeding-heart could be at all related to him. If Hun weren't so used being flanked by both of them, he'd have killed his brother off years ago.

Finally, the police cruiser passed him by, the unsuspecting officers never realizing their quarry sheltered in the shadowed alley. Safe again...Northpaw wouldn't be getting dragged back to the pen today, not on his life. He turned to swagger out of the alley, intent on vanishing in the herd of New Yorkers oozing down the sidewalk like sludge down a storm drain.

North froze in the yawning mouth of the reeking alley, his eyes trained on a familiar body ambling down the steps of an almost as familiar apartment building. It took just a moment to recognize her —Kimber Bryant, the little slut who ratted him out to the police! Unfamiliar grey streaked her undyed hair and the tattoo in her cleavage was hidden, but he knew it was her—he swore it! His blood boiled in fury and his shoulders shuddered with tension. No one the wiser, he pulled out his cellphone, snapped several photos of Kimber and the skinny strung-out blonde she walked with, then turned to vanish in the dark alley again.

"It's me," he sneered into his phone shortly after. "Kimber Bryant's alive...I found'er, Boss."

Chapter End Notes

Like I said...it's about to get MESSY.

NOTES:

* I don't know if it's a normal thing or not, but where I'm from, most florist's shops also carry a variety of live plants, especially rare, exotic, and showy plants. Live plants last
longer than cut flowers and greenery, and many consumers prefer to spend the extra money on something that won't fade as quickly as those extravagant bouquets do. For this reason, our fictional "Red Fern Florist's" carries a vast collection of live plants.

* Red Fern Florist's name is a direct reference to a book called Where the Red Fern Grows. The book relates the legend of the red fern thus: "...only an angel can plant the seeds of a red fern, and that they never died; where one grew, that spot was sacred." Popular belief is that the red fern is a myth kept alive by 'uneducated Ozarks natives;' after last chapter, y'all know my opinions of 'popular belief.' As a flora-loving wildlife aficionado native to both the Show-Me state AND the Ozarks, I believe the legendary red fern is based on a non-legendary plant. The Southern Grapefern turns during late fall, ending up a rusty bronze shade. Honestly, I can't claim ownership of the idea - others have published their theories online with plenty of proof. The aforementioned fern in autumn is about as red as those grey "Russian" cats are blue, but that's the way the English language works!

* In the language of flowers, cacti symbolize endurance. Being a florist, Abby is well-versed in the meaning behind every live plant and cut variety in the shop. She gives Mercy a cactus as a reminder to never give up and that, like the cactus, Mercy too will eventually thrive despite the adverse conditions she's found herself in.
17: Turmoil

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! First off, I wanted to thank y'all for the latest milestone...you totally awesome readers pushed ANLoL past 3,000 views! You guys are so frickin' awesome I have no words for it! Thank you, thank you, thank you! In celebration and to thank y'all for it, I've written and posted another ANLoL one-shot—Painless—which can be found HERE: s/12084576/3/A-New-Lease-On-Life-A-Gallery-of-Memories

Things are starting to heat up, here. Other than the usual—harsh language, disturbing imagery, etc—this chapter's only warnings regard discussion of a dangerous, potentially fatal illness, Leo being an asshat, and a few brief flashbacks. This chapter dedicated to you awesome readers for pushing the story over 3,000 views!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: RUSH, "Distant Early Warning," 'Til Tuesday, "Voices Carry," Heart "Alone"

17: Turmoil

March 4th, 2016 - Manhattan

Hun was not a patient man, nor was he a merciful one. He was, however, cunning and keen, and very much used to getting what he wanted. For that reason alone, Northpaw Jackson was stunned by his boss' response.

"Ya don't want me ta drag'im in?" the stubble-chinned punk gawked stupidly. "But...but if Daron's been hidin Kimber—"

"—he'll expect an attack, Jackson," Hun rumbled back. "If we go in guns a-blazing an' she ain't there, he's gotta chance ta warn'er. No..." A predatory leer split his face. "We set a watch on'is place —sooner'er later, Kimbuh'll drop in ta see'im...an' we'll be ready."

Olde Thyme Coffee, Tea, and Spice Shoppe, Brooklyn*

"Ya said he likes green teas?" Mercy asked, scanning the looming racks of tea with increasing bewilderment. Upon first entering the quaint store, she'd been swept away by the pleasant smells and friendly staff; now she was up shit crick without a paddle. "What kind? They' got more green teas here'n- I got issues!"

Amber cringed but didn't argue. "Donnie just said 'green,'" she admitted staring through the text displayed on her phone screen. "They were about to hit the dojo, so he didn't have time to explain... an' I know exactly Jack-spit about green tea...always tastes like compost juice to me."

"You might try lemongrass." The two friends jumped at the sudden suggestion from behind. Upon turning to greet the speaker, they were struck silent.
A sharp blue headscarf hid both hair and head, and molasses-brown eyes grinned over angular glasses. At her left side, a large odd-eyed chocolate lab panted and grinned, seemingly proud of the obnoxiously bright harness marking him as a service animal. Some well-meaning person had tied a bright blue drool bandana around his neck emblazoned with the name *El Bosco*. "It's a popular blend," Bosco's owner added, "and easily found." Shifting her basket of baking spices and medicinal teas to the hand holding the lead, she offered her now-free one with an easy smile. "Beverly Hardy."

"Amber O'Brien," the brunette replied somewhat nervously as she accepted the handshake. Had she heard that name before, she wondered? The woman seemed somehow familiar to her, but she'd swear she'd never seen her before in either of her lives! "This's Mercy Ross. You seem to know your teas." Bev smirked, carefully approaching the shelf before them.

"No," she admitted simply, fumbling for a particular box; left-field blindness was bad enough without vertical double vision. Twice she overshot the box before reaching it and fumbled it slightly, but finally passed it to Amber with silent triumph. After going on half a year of treatment and vision trouble, every feat was worth celebrating. "I've a friend who does, though, and he tells me his father raves about this particular brand—something about being 'the next best thing to authentic matcha.'"*

Amber and Mercy exchanged a surprised glance; it sounded like something Master Splinter would say. "It's nice meeting you two…good luck." By the time the two bewildered women could string together a sentence between them, Beverly and Bosco were long gone.

An hour later, the Lair, Splinter's Room

"I understand what I did was wrong, Sir," Mercy mumbled to her crossed legs. "I don't expect you to overlook it nor do I expect you to accept my apology. I just…" Swallowing her pride like a twelve-inch slug, she blurted out the rest as quickly as possible. "I'm sorry for assaulting your son." She cringed, glaring hatefully at her legs. Though ripping a bandage off as quickly as possible did the trick, apparently doing the same thing with speech only made her sound like an idiot.

Splinter hummed in interest, pasting on an expression of concern. "Miss Ross, whatever unspeakable act you committed against your knees' son, I'm sure they forgive you." The tongue-in-cheek comment successfully drew her stunned eyes up to his own. "Or were you perhaps addressing myself?" She winced, awkwardly spearing long fingers through her uneven blonde hair, and nodded. "I accept your apology, but it was not I whom you assaulted—you need to speak with Raphael on this matter."

"Y…Yes, Sir," she admitted softly. "I'm…still working on that one. I just wanted to…to get yer leave first…didn't wanna intrude." Suddenly recalling the stop she made on the way to the Lair, she collected the tin of tea from the paper bag in her lap. "A peace offering," she explained pushing the tin toward him. "an' a promise that it won't happen again."

Long after Mercy was gone, Splinter stared down at the tin on his low table. It was precisely the brand and variety he enjoyed most—a rather rare blend from a local specialty shop. The odds that she'd bring him this exact tea without anyone's suggestion were remarkably slim; stranger still, it was so expensive he was sure none of his sons would have suggested it. Perhaps an answer would reveal itself after a period of deep meditation.

Donatello wasn't always the most observant turtle when he had a lot on his mind. Still, it was rare for him to be so engrossed with staring into space that he never noticed company. Amber feared what this could mean; what happened while she was gone?
"Dee?" The greeting startled him out of his haze and Amber found herself held at pen-point by the suddenly hyper-alert genius. "Right…ninja. Sorry. Y'okay?"

As his pulse regulated and the adrenaline spike wore off, he beckoned her over, pushing the microscope closer to her. "What do you see?" he asked simply.

She bent and pressed her eyes to the scope, adjusted the dials on the sides, and finally straightened up again, meeting his hazel eyes in bewilderment. "Nothin'," she answered weakly. "Just an empty slide." A worried sigh escaped his lungs and he retrieved a stoppered glass tube from the desk, holding it out for her. Trapped inside was a fine shimmering translucent powder—so faint it was barely visible. She glanced back and forth between Donnie and the test tube, non-plussed.

"That slide wasn't empty when I put it there," he stated seriously. "It had this on it…somehow, in the few seconds between preparing the slide and looking through the scope, it completely dissipated. I tested the slide afterward…it's clean." For a moment, he'd planned to tell her the rest—including why he found the powder in the first place. That would mean revealing the unexplained insult during his shower, though, and he ultimately decided to keep it to himself. He'd searched the Lair relentlessly and found no other evidence of an intruder. Amber was dealing with enough anxiety without the possibility of an intruder appearing and disappearing without a trace, and he couldn't bear to add to her worries.

"What?" She shook her head in denial. "That's impossible, it couldn't just vanish! If a substance breaks down, there'll always be traces left behind as evidence, even if they're invisible to the naked eye—matter can't simply wink out of existence!" For a moment he just stared at her, and Amber winced. "…right? College was a long time ago…I might'a got' my wires crossed." To her confusion, when Donnie finally snapped out of it, his cheeks had darkened in a faint blush.

"N-No," he answered, flinching when his voice cracked. "You're correct—not a single element in the universe can vanish without leaving trace evidence behind. Even normally invisible substances like gaseous elements leave proof of their presence in the form of chemical traces, changes in the molecular structure of nearby particles, and effects to the substance they came in contact with." The impossibly empty slide taunted him mercilessly; he simply couldn't wrap his head around it. Setting the tube down in favor of his cellphone, he showed Amber a photo of the sparkling shoe prints on the bathroom floor. "Even so, there's not even a speck of dust between the slide and slip…and the floor's the same. This photo and that tube are the only proof the powder ever existed, and if the dissipation rate continues unchanged, it'll be non-existent in 30.27 minutes."

The déjà vu Amber felt was sweltering. She knew something was off about the freaky space glitter, and yet she couldn't pull a single hint from her memories. In her previous life, she'd been a crazed TMNT fan—she could recite movie lines in her sleep, could blindly identify character voice clips by series, season, and even predict whom the character was speaking to in the clips. She knew every character, knew their backstories, strengths, flaws, habits, and quirks, and altogether was entirely obsessed. Then she died and was sent to another world.

Now, she can hardly recall any of that knowledge outside of the five ninjas, the Purple Dragons and the Foot, and April and Casey…and in moments like this, it frightened her. So often in the fanfiction she'd loved, an equally obsessed fan was sent to the world of her heroes and her knowledge of the series was vital to their very survival. Just the tiniest forewarning of an opponent's weaknesses and impending dangers could mean the difference—even a simple 'don't stand in that doorway' could save a life. Of course, Amber reminded herself, her life was not a fanfiction—it was a bad joke.

The vanishing glitter and the photo on Donnie's cell phone rang a bell, but she hadn't the slightest idea for whom it tolled.
'Of all the nights to forgo gloves,' Leonardo thought with a shudder. A cold morning had been followed by an even colder afternoon, and it seemed nighttime wanted in on the contest. Only one thing could drag him out of the lair on a night like this, especially alone. 'I hope those tests went well…Bev deserves a break after everything she's been through.' As he neared a school, the underground yawned out onto the sidewalk, crumbling steps empty. Had it really been almost half a year, he wondered tiredly? Half a year of nonstop testing, fear, dread, and tears?

"Where am I? What's happening—why can't I see—I can't see anything!" Alone in the empty station, a young woman groped along the floor. Pain splintered through her skull in endless concussions; all around her, the world had shifted on its axis. Shades of grey and shadow became stabbing lights among a murky black background. "I—I can't see! Why—God, my—WHY?!

The blaring of an ambulance siren snapped Leo out of his thoughts. How long had he been standing there on the rooftop, staring at the stairs where he found her, helpless in the throes of what had seemed a stroke? His lips tipped in a humorless smile; he saw no point in dwelling on what could have been.

"I know you're there, Hogosha," the tired woman mumbled to him with unseeing eyes the color of molasses. He winced, perturbed at being noticed, but obediently approached the hospital bed she was tucked into. It was too risky being here—a matter of moments and he could be discovered skulking in the dark room. This woman, Beverly, believed him to be a guardian spirit, but he didn't see it; he only saw her slowly wasting away before his very eyes.

"Don't worry," she mumbled. "Bree just finished finals—she ain't wakin' up…Dunno what to tell'er. Docs think it's a tumor…or a cyst…or…something. All they can agree on is it's getting bigger." Her bitter laugh came out more a grunt, the high dosage pain medicine in her IV slurring and slowing her. "I told Bree to check for missing hair clips…didn't wanna scare'er."

Though she could no more see him than the cramped window-seat her exhausted cousin had wadded herself up in, she turned to the place she felt her visitor stood. Even now with her vision reduced to shadows of impressions, she still hoped to someday catch a glimpse of the man who found her, protected her, and never gave his real name.

Hogosha. He smiled fondly at the thought as he scaled the rough brick wall of a silent warehouse. Who'd have ever thought she'd latch onto that word like she did? She likely would have recalled his presence as a hallucination brought on by pain meds, had he not given her a name to ease her mind. She'd never heard the word before and at the first chance had sent her cousin Googling. Having been raised on tales of youkai, ninja, samurai, and spirits, it never occurred to Leo that she wouldn't know the tales as well. What started out as a slip in judgment, an empty gesture to comfort a very ill woman, became exactly what she needed…

Hope.

Finally, he reached the rooftop, his eyes latching onto the highest windows of the next building over; the office building below was closed for the day, but the loft above was teeming with life. Amid the
dim lamplight, a slender feminine silhouette on the parlor curtains swayed to an barely audible rhythm. Lessons were over, then...just in time. Carefully he readjusted the bag tucked over his shoulder and took a running leap. The fire escape never once creaked as he caught the edge and rushed to the dark window still unlocked after his last visit.

Snickerdoodles. He sucked in the scent eagerly, certain a plate of them waited in the parlor. Once, he would have never entered the apartment unannounced, would have crept from room to room to evade discovery. They were far past that, though. After all, it had been almost half a year, and once the students were gone, only allies remained.

"YAAACK!" someone screeched behind a closed door as Leo strode from the dark kitchen like he owned the place. "Help, help, help! Mikey, save my squishy butt,*** I'm dyin' here!" Sure enough, she was answered by an all-too-familiar voice.

"Ya think I ain't?!” Michelangelo shot back amid a cacophony of button smashing and gory sound effects. "I'm squishy too, ya know?! And you’re level seven-hundred-something, Miss Walla-Walla-Bing-Bang—I haven’t even hit paragon yet!" Leo edged open the door and checked on the two culprits sprawled across the fluffy purple throw rug. At Mikey's side, a petite brunette in frilly pink pajamas furiously worked the controller in hand, weaving and ducking to the side with each sudden move as though to make her character move faster. Diablo 3, Leo recalled, stifling laughter at the pair's antics. Suddenly, Bree jerked away with a yelp.

"SCREW THIS!" she all but shrieked, her Witch Doctor turning into an angry chicken and streaking away from the advancing horde just enough to fast travel home. "Buh-bye."

"What?! Oh, you did not just—" Seemingly out of nowhere something about thirty feet high with four hammer-ended arms stormed up behind his Demon Hunter. "Oh, come on!" Mikey sobbed, the controller falling slack in his grip as his Demon Hunter exploded in a spray of blood. "Not cool! You ditched me with a freakin' Mallet Lord, Bree! A walking one-shot dealer!" Leo didn't see their bickering ending anytime soon, nor did he see it ending with anything more severe than someone getting tickled to death or sat on.

"Serves ya right for startin' a level 150 Greater Rift while I was out'a the room!" she retorted, blowing a raspberry as Leo slipped away. "An' the name's Ting-Tang—Walla-Walla-Bing-Bang wouldn't fit, remember?"

Lamplight and shadows painted the tidy parlor, a soft, achingly emotional tune flowing from a setup by the shuttered windows. Leo knew that tune; the deceptively frail woman teasing the rippling notes from the piano played it often when she thought no one was listening. 'Moonlight Sonata,' he recalled silently, watching as she unconsciously swayed with the rhythm. As silently as ever, he crept closer, studying her with an odd mix of concern and comfort.

Her slightly tilted eyes were closed, her narrow glasses folded up on the empty music stand; in a way he'd never seen before, her long black hair hung in waves down her shoulders and back, gleaming in the candlelight. If not for the tall IV stand beside her, the tubing pumping heavy antibiotics into her bloodstream, the large patch of bare, scarred skin on the rear right of her scalp, and her sallow skin, Leonardo would never have believed her ill.

"Well," Beverly smiled wryly to the shadows in the corner of her hospital room; she knew her Hogosha had come to check on her, though she still couldn't see him. "Good news and bad news...what do you want first?"

"I guess the good?" Leo answered hesitantly. "Did the biopsy reveal anything?" She
chuckled lowly, shrugging.

"It's not a tumor, it's not cancerous, and it's not a cyst," she related. "Who knew you could be killed by complications from a broken tooth. Before it was pulled, the infection migrated up into my brain and formed an abscess. I'll be on heavy IV antibiotics for a few months to eradicate it." She hesitated, reaching up to gingerly prod the layers of gauze strapped to the back of her head. "The swelling caused the vision loss and pain... it's drained, but I still can't see on the left field. Docs say it might be permanent."

"Your left side vision's gone?" Leo replied quietly. "You turned away when you heard me...turned your blind side to me." Color tinged her cheeks; she nodded faintly. Technically, she wasn't blind on her left side - the left field of vision in both eyes had simply gone too dark to discern. She wasn't one to nitpick, though.

"You wished to remain unseen, Leonardo, and unless you decide otherwise so you shall. I owe you my life; would it not be ungrateful to deny you that?"

The last note rang through the air; Beverly settled back on the bench, her talented hands falling slack on the keys. The clacking of claws on hardwood broke the spell of silence, and through the door burst a familiar chocolate lab mix. "Hey, Bosco," Bev greeted, turning bodily to face the doorway, only to freeze at the sight of her Hogosha scratching the dog's neck. In a flurry of movement, she yanked up the headscarf abandoned on the piano and began hastily wrapping her hair again. "Leo, I didn't hear you."

"You don't have to hide it, Beverly...I wasn't even looking." Instead of answering, she slipped her glasses back on and stood weakly, bringing him a plate piled high with Snickerdoodles; the grin splitting his face made her chuckle.

"Such a kid," she teased as he bit into a still warm cookie with an appreciative shiver. "Sometimes I wonder if you'd ever visit without Bree's baking...can't really argue, though." Laughing molasses eyes glanced pointedly at a paper bag tucked away on the fireplace mantle. "She felt bad for teasing you the other day...that's a whole pound of tiger butter# in apology."

For a time, the two friends simply lounged on the sofa making small talk and going over the news from her last appointment. Unfortunately, while scans still showed progress with the abscess' healing, there was less progress than Dr. Crane was hoping for. As a result, yet another month was added to her recovery estimate and he'd ordered her IV dosage increased again. Finally, certain she'd lulled the ninja into a sense of security, Bev struck. "So how's Amber?"

Cookie crumbs sprayed over the twin katana lying on the coffee table and lodged in Leo's lungs. Once he was finally finished hacking them out, he fixed a fearful stare on her. "How'd you—who—I didn't even—!" Finally, he realized what happened; an almost sulky frown replaced the frantic expression. "You manipulative skunk...you tricked me." Beverly chuckled lowly with a sly grin.

"And?" she retorted smugly. "I told you I'd get answers one way or another. I take it she's why life's been 'interesting' lately?"

Leo sunk back into the sofa cushions, trying to formulate a reply. "In a word," he sighed. "yes. We found her in January and we still don't have any real answers...if Sensei hadn't seen the memories with his own eyes I'd be sure she's lied about the whole thing." Pale blue eyes met hers with thinly veiled nervousness. "She's from another world...somehow she was brought here after death, and trapped in the body of a dead Purple Dragon. Mercy, a friend of hers, is in the same boat—instead of a PD, though, she woke up in an alcoholic homeless woman."
Beverly stared back in disbelief. When his expression never faltered, she knew it was true; she sagged into the sofa beside him. Never let it be said that Leo's life was boring. "If that's your idea of 'interesting,'" she drawled, "I'd hate to see a disaster."

"It's worse, actually." More out of habit than concern about the cookie crumbs, he drew a polishing cloth from a pouch on his belt and went about systematically wiping down his blades one by one. The slow methodical movements always helped him focus, after all. "Because of how she was killed, she's developed Post-Traumatic Stress…Donnie's taken it upon himself to help her conquer it. I've never seen him take such interest in anything that didn't involve technology. Hun's got a bounty on her head, she's unable to move on from her old life, and even worse…" He shook his head in disbelief. "…I think Donnie's fallen for her. It won't end well."

Beverly studied him silently, reading between the lines. "You fear she'll hurt him—that she doesn't feel the same way."

"She won't feel the same way," he corrected bitterly. "There's no way she could…she's human, and humans don't see us that way. What human would love something they see as an animal?"

Bev stared him down, waiting for him to meet her eyes before saying softly, "Love is blind, Leonardo.## It doesn't see race, gender, age, class, or any such superficial trivialities. Human men and women without a shred of decency in their souls can still be loved by others; I've never met Donatello, but if he's any bit the kind, honorable, good man you are, any woman would be lucky to call him her own." He started at the gentle hand that stilled his without warning and turned to meet her serious gaze. "Don't write off love so easily…you're no more an animal than I am an ape."

Half an hour later, Mikey and Bree emerged from her room, geeking out over stumbling into a "loot goblin flash mob." Leonardo was long gone and Beverly stared out the windows listlessly. The two friends fell silent. Earlier, Bev had been full of life; now she was tired and defeated. A glance to the now-empty mantle revealed Leo's visit and the silent loft, his departure.

"How," Beverly murmured vaguely, "can such an observant man be so blind?" Michelangelo's hand on her shoulder brought her out of her ruminations, and gratefully, she reached up to clutch it with her own.

"You've gotta tell'im someday, Bev," he reminded gently. "He'll never figure it out on his own." At one time, she'd have been stunned that he saw the situation so easily—he seemed such an airhead at times. In the last few months, though, he'd revealed an emotional intuition that amazed her. The sickly woman knew without a doubt he understood perfectly.

"Someday," she admitted with no small amount of hurt. "Until then, I'd accomplish more talking to the dog."

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**WORDS**

- **Here'n** - This can mean either 'Here and' or in this case, 'here than.' Midwestern twang.
- **Might'a** - 'Might have' - Midwestern twang.
- **Y'okay?** - 'Are you okay?' - Midwestern twang.
Olde Thyme Coffee, Tea, and Spice Shoppe is based on a similar shop I've frequented in the past during trips to a much larger city than my own. It's always a real treat, especially when you duck in back to the specialty hot sauce collection!

**Matcha** is a special variety of traditional green tea. While most teas are made by steeping ground leaves, matcha is ground into a fine powder and reconstituted with hot water. It is popular in Japan and is central to the tradition of the tea ceremony.

*** Bree is NOT making a reference to her pleasantly plump posterior. "Squishy" is gaming lingo and used to describe someone who is ridiculously low-level compared to the baddies attacking them. Basically, if a low-level zombie steps on you and you go squish, you're too squishy for the level you're on.

I never noted this before, but Tiger Butter is a particularly addictive variety of fudge. It's made by combining chocolate fudge and peanut butter fudge into the same dish, and the best is topped with ribbons of melted milk chocolate before it sets. This leaves the finished product with a tan and brown striped appearance similar to a tiger's coat.

## Yes. I seriously had to Deadpool that. I regret nothing.
18: Running, Hiding, Lying

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! This is totally awesome—ANLoL hit two milestones in a row! Not long after I posted the one-shot for +3,000 views, ImpartingAbyss and Ameless Underworld posted the 15th and 16th reviews! Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU! In thanks, I posted another celebratory one-shot—"Twenty-Six," which can be found HERE: s/12084576/4/A-New-Lease-On-Life-A-Gallery-of-Memories

I hope y'all enjoy it—it's the first 'M' rated one-shot for this story and contains some juicy bits! It takes place in the distant future of Part III, when Amber and Donnie are finally through working their issues out and are an established couple.

That out of the way, this chapter has a fair few triggers. Other than somewhat explicit adult references and alcohol, there's a trigger for past-tense child abuse, blunt references to addiction and recovery, and mild references to mental illness. This chapter is dedicated to my totally awesome reviewers: ImpartingAbyss, kmm92886, DaLadyofSouls, nightowl2010, ischryos, .10, Drake Rhapsody, and AmelessUnderworld! Also dedicated to the equally awesome guests who with AmelessUnderworld reviewed my ANLoL one-shots in Gallery of Memories! I always love hearing y'all's opinions and it always makes my week to find another fave, follow, review, etc! Y'all're the BEST, people!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Suggested Listening: The Beatles, "Help," Meatloaf, "I'd Lie For You (and That's the Truth)"

18: Running, Hiding, Lying

Saturday, March 11th, 3:25 pm; Brooklyn, Beverly & Bree's Flat

Into each life some rain must fall.

Beverly Anne Hardy first heard these words far back in her youth, perhaps in a song, or poem long lost in her memory. Much as she may wish to deny it, the truth in the words never faded. After so many years weathering Life's downpour, though, she'd become too used to rain to really recall a blue sky. The mail fell slack in her grip as she stared listlessly out her front windows; New York City, even in Brooklyn's suburbs, is always nothing but grey, grey, and more grey.

Of course, the mail brought bad news...when didn't it? Much as it pained her, she'd seen the notice coming a mile away; her future in the School System became jeopardized the moment she took off a semester without advanced warning. It wasn't like the abscess in her brain gave her advanced warning, but the school board didn't see it that way. Just like that, her cushy job as the head of the Music department was gone, kaput...she, Beverly Hardy, was officially unemployed.

As if having a hole in her head wasn't bad enough. She scoffed, mentally shaking off her self-pity. Sure she deserved it, sure she'd been dealt a bad hand, and sure she could still—God forbid!—die from the cursed pus-pocket in her brain, but she refused to give it any more power over her than it already had. She was a lot of things, but a quitter wasn't one of them.
Stashing the dismissal notice away from Bree's prying eyes, she checked the plastic bag of antibiotics still dripping away into her veins. Perhaps this latest bout of grey skies wouldn't last long. As another wave of nausea swept over her, her 3:30 appointment—a violin student struggling to catch up with her peers—knocked at the door. Bosco grinning away at her right side, Beverly pasted on a welcoming smile, resolved to meet her future head-on.

Perhaps retirement wasn't such a horrible idea after all.

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**Underground, about half a mile from the Lair**

"I can't do this." Other than Mercy's own voice echoing back to her, the tunnel was empty and silent. It was a good thing, too; she'd never live it down if someone happened upon her in such a vulnerable moment. She had enough of vulnerability in her previous drama-packed life—more than enough!—and now that she had another chance without the troubles that had held her down, she refused to let herself become that vulnerable again.

A week ago, she visited Master Splinter to apologize for the explosive incident which led to her unofficial eviction from the Lair. The more time passed, the more she realized that she was truly out of line, and the more she became convinced that Amber had done her a favor by sending her away before Master Splinter got the chance. It still stung that her best friend took the turtles' side over hers, but Mercy didn't really fault her for it. Perhaps, if the situations were reversed, she'd have made the very same choice. After their meeting, however, Splinter left her with an ultimatum: she had to apologize to Raphael in person within a week. Too much time had passed since she attacked him, the elderly rat warned, and the longer an apology is put on hold, the harder it becomes to make at all. Too long, and all hope of reconciliation may be gone.

Mercy wasn't so sure about that; it may be just her, but the elderly rat seemed far too uptight for her tastes. That in mind, she wasn't at all surprised Amber got along so well with him. All through their childhood, the brunette was bullied mercilessly, for countless reasons—her father was unemployed, her mother and grandfather 'talked funny,' even the simple act of choosing friends by merit rather than popularity was a subject of scorn. No matter what happened, though, she was too mature to retaliate. Mercy couldn't understand how a person could simply smile at someone who intentionally hurt them, say "I forgive you," and walk away without even bloodying the bastard's nose. Amber always denied it and spouted her usual 'live and let live, love the sinner hate the sin, an eye for an eye leaves the world blind, peace, love, and harmony' bullshit, but Mercy knew the truth: she had some major martyr issues. Nothing else made sense.

Of course, Amber's martyr issues weren't going to help Mercy figure out her problem with Raphael. How could she apologize to him when she could barely keep her head on straight?! "God a'mighty this sucks," she groaned falling back against the cold tunnel wall and sliding to the ground, flashlight falling slack in her grip. "How d'ya 'pologize fer throttlin' someone ya just met?!"

"Ya could just spit it out," a gruff voice suggested across the tunnel from her. Had Mercy been standing, she might've gone right through the roof.

"GAH!" she shrieked articulately clutching her racing heart. "Damn' ninjas! Ya get off on spookin' people, don't ya?!" Raphael shrugged, his shit-eating grin revealed by the puddle of light from her flashlight.

"Maybe," he teased evasively. "Maybe not. Could be just habit, ya know. So ya got somethin' ta say?" Despite her best attempts to hold it together, Mercy felt a blush tugging at her cheeks. If the
 gods had any mercy, Raphael wouldn't see it in the dark tunnel; unfortunately, a deep husky snicker
told her his night vision was plenty clear.

Stalling and searching for a witty comeback, she speared her fingers through her uneven blonde hair,
tugging harshly at the roots. The adrenaline from being startled had worn off but her heart still
pounded, and she felt as though every hair on the nape of her neck stood at attention.

The tunnel around them stank of dust and mildew, but beneath all that was a different scent—
sandalwood, leather, and musky sweat. Any other time, she'd have described the combination as
bizarre and unpleasant—similar to the reek of an unwashed biker working to earn a black eye—but
to her complete dismay, Mercy's skin wasn't crawling...It was burning. The moment she realized
what was happening, a memory broke out of her past and shot down her fledgling resistance.

"Answer me!" Another slap rings through the air, compliments of the short black-haired
woman flinging hurtful, slurred words without regard. "I know they're talking about
you—they must be! Tell me the truth, Angela!" Mercy cringes away, clutching her
stinging cheek; against her will, torrents of tears fall from her downcast eyes.

"It wasn't me!" she whispers weakly. "I swear, Ma, it wasn't me—I'm not pregnant, I
din't sleep—" Another backhand sends her falling backward again, this time narrowly
missing the wall.

"No, I'm sure you didn't do any sleeping!" her mother rages at her. "You're just like her
—You shame this family just as she did!"

"Clare'ty!" Mercy's stepfather bellows from the open doorway. "She ain' done nothin'
wrong, she was helpin' me. Leave!" Clarity and Ellis Ross fight a silent battle with their
eyes, unspoken words passing between the two. Words will be spoken later, Mercy's
sure—the two adults will fight over Clarity's drunken tantrum and Ellis' butting in, but
of what matters most, not a word will be said. Ellis never knows how to approach his
wife on that subject; how can you tell someone you love beyond reason that they're
wrong, that they're projecting their anger onto an innocent party? He'll stay to calm
Mercy down and make sure she's not hurt, but nothing ever changes. Clarity will still
drink herself into a stupor, will still hear rumors of an unplanned pregnancy around
town and convince herself they're about Mercy. She'll still take all her hatred for her
deceased sister out on an innocent teenage girl who's too terrified of her to consider
even talking to a boy without someone else around.

Finally, Clarity breaks contact and turns to leave, but hesitates on the threshold.
"Angela," she warns Mercy venomously. "You mark my words—If you follow in that—
that whore's footsteps, it'll be the last thing you do—you remember that!"

Against her will, Mercy shuddered under the onslaught of hurtful words that still taunt her from the
shadows. Whore—slut—tramp—her mother had an entire arsenal and used them with abandon, never
caring about the damage they left. When Mercy Ross died, she'd never even been kissed much less
experienced physical love; her mother's hurtful words couldn't be bothered with innocence.

Across the tunnel, Raphael watched Mercy curiously, searching for answers in the blonde's behavior
and posture. A moment before, she was as big a smartass as he was, ready for anything and willing
to take no lip; a flare of the nostrils later, she seemed nothing more than a scared little girl. He settled
back against the clammy wall, idly gnawing his toothpick. What happened to the blue-eyed powder-
keg who tried to kick his ass just for calling her friend a liar?

"Can we jus' punch each other an' call it good?" Mercy grumbled finally, denim blue eyes fixing hatefully on some distant object down the tunnel. Raph gave a snort of amusement and took his feet again; maybe this 'Mercy' chick wasn't half-bad after all. Mercy stared at his offered hand as though it would bite her, but accepted it regardless.

"Sounds good ta me, Blondie," Raph teased and ruffled her shaggy hair. All the way to the Lair, her eyes shouted obscenities and threats her lips knew better than to voice.

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**The Lair**

Donatello locked himself in the lab first thing that morning; come 3:30 he was still locked away and didn't seem ready to come up for air. Amber knew he was (again) scouring for answers regarding the *Freaky Space Glitter*, or as she'd begun calling it, the "FSG." The strange glimmering powder in the vial was long gone—dissipated like mist, just as Donnie predicted—and its impossibility was clearly driving the genius out of his mind. Amber was worried for him…and a worried Amber was, frankly, a careless Amber.

After half a day of worrying about Donatello, she'd amassed a disheartening collection of what Aaron had called 'blonde moments.' She forgot to add water before microwaving a paper noodle cup and set it on fire. She dumped fabric softener on the laundry and detergent into the softener cup. She tried to use the vacuum without plugging it in first, mopped the kitchen floor without adding anything to the water, and swept dust off the blades of dojo's fan right into her face—at that rate, Mikey wouldn't be the only one checking her roots. There was only one choice left if she didn't want everyone convinced she was a walking Darwin Award…Thus, after great contemplation and brain-wracking, she swept into the Lab armed with a basket packed with food and drinks…

…and promptly froze in the doorway. Anyone who saw the goofy lopsided smile on her face would probably think she was watching puppies, kittens, or some other insanely cute and fluffy animal doing something incredibly cute and funny. In reality, it was just Donatello slumped face-down on his keyboard snoring to beat the band. Not one word in the English language could adequately describe the warm-an'-fuzzies that turtle gave her!

If not for the half-eaten plate of pop-tarts—*breakfast!*—abandoned on the desk, she wouldn't wake him for the world. As it was, he was probably starving. Resigned to disturbing his sleep and apologizing later, she crept to his side, reached out, and gently jostled his bare shoulder. "Dee," she murmured softly. "Donnie, ya gotta wake up an'—"

A startled squawk ripped from her lungs when he jackknifed out of his chair, lost his balance, and—tangling his arms with hers because of course he couldn't not humiliate himself!—fell into a heap on the Lab's concrete floor.

For the second time in less than thirty days, Amber found herself on the floor with Donatello tangled up in a stunned blushing heap. This time, however, she wasn't on top. Instead, she found herself pinned to the dusty concrete, her legs splayed and tangled with his, and his face level with hers only inches away. Before she could experience a massive filter failure like last time, though, she found herself confronted by something new, fascinating, and delightful.

When his glasses fell off during the tumble to the floor, they left nothing to shield Donnie's unique eyes. Right before Amber's eyes, the shadow cast by his desk chair made his murky hazel irises darken to golden brown. A moment later Donnie blushed darkly and averted his eyes, and the introduction of bright light reflection made them change again, this time to a pale golden green. In
her astonishment, Amber forgot her embarrassment—forgot that she was pinned to the floor by a
mortified mutant turtle—and forgot everything she'd convinced herself about not letting her feelings
for him show. One hand caught his cheek, turning it back to the desk, and as warm brown shone
back at her, she beamed.

Donatello forced a noisy swallow, glancing every which way out of nerves. He knew his eyes were
different from Leo's and Mikey's; he knew they refracted light even more than Raph's and that the
effect was ridiculously obvious when his glasses were off. Finally, realizing she was making him
nervous, Amber let go, but still watched his remarkable eyes in silent wonder. Pointedly ignoring her
staring, he disentangled their legs and sat back on his heels to get his bearings. Amber, too, sat up
and leaned back on her palms. "You've got nothin' to be ashamed of, ya know," she pointed out
when it became clear he wasn't going to talk.

"Who says I'm ashamed?" he mumbled, meeting her eyes in a pointed stare. "I don't stare at your
hair, you know." Finally, it hit her; she winced, her cheeks darkening as she broke the staring
contest.

"I'm sorry." —sorry for making him uncomfortable, but not for staring. She couldn't help feeling
horrible for the realization. "I've never seen yer eyes uncovered...they're..." Astounding? Fascinating? Beautiful? She paused, sifting through her considerable vocabulary for a single word
that could even begin to describe her sense of wonder and admiration.

"Bizarre?" he supplied dryly. "Disconcerting? Freakish?" She shook her head and caught him by the
cheek, anchoring his eyes on hers.

"Marvelous," she corrected with a soft smile, and collected his glasses from the floor nearby, handing
them over as a peace offering. "They're simply amazing, Dee, just like the rest'a you. I'm sorry I
embarrassed you; it was not my intention."

Of all the ways he'd have expected her to react, this was not among them. Really, he more expected
her to be speechless with horror—but when had she ever reacted to any of his family's oddities with
horror? Even that time in the kitchen, when they both wound up tangled up on the tiles after a
poorly-timed bout of clumsiness on his part—she hadn't reacted with anger or fear. The way she was
left straddling his lap, she had to have felt his body's autonomous reaction to her soft body draped
across his own—Hell, if he hadn't kept her from sitting back when he did, he might've embarrassed
himself and her!—but even when faced with, well, a horny turtle, she wasn't disgusted or afraid. For
a moment, he'd thought she was about to launch herself at him and start snogging him to death, but a
moment later, she'd retreated within herself again.

'Marvelous?' he wondered as he affixed his glasses back to his snout. 'Amazing? She thinks my eyes
are...what?' When a lopsided grin stole over her face, he knew without a doubt he was blushing.

Once everything settled down again, Amber and Donatello sat across from one another at a steel
workbench covered with random bits of clutter, for all intents and purposes, ignoring each other over
lunch. Unbeknownst to Donnie, however, Amber was giving herself a silent pep-talk. Despite their
breakthrough almost two weeks ago, she'd barely held up her end of the 'not being a closed book'
bargain. She wasn't hiding things on purpose—she just wasn't used to talking about herself and never
felt comfortable being in the spotlight. Still, the turtle across from her was being ridiculously patient
with her, and she couldn't keep putting it off. 'It's nothin' ya ain't done before,' she reminded herself
sternly. 'Jus' pretend he's Aaron callin' ya 'Goodie Two-Shoes.'

Finally, his sandwiches and her crackers and meal shake choked down, Donnie thanked her for
lunch, preparing to return to staring down the FSG's impossibility. At the last minute, though, she
latched onto one of his suspender straps and tugged him back into his seat. "Amber?" he asked
dubiously as she went about pouring him another cup of coffee; before she could dump in another pile of sugar, he snagged it and offered a quick apologetic smile. Still holding his eyes, she refilled her own mug—from a Scotch bottle pulled from the basket. Finally, she spoke.

"I've never called you an arsehole." All Donnie could do was blink at the bizarre statement. *What?* A moment later, she added, "I've never worn grey," pointed to her grey shirt, and took a small sip from her glass. "Your turn."

For a moment, Donatello considered that their fall to the floor might've knocked something loose in her brain. Finally—and he blamed Mikey's rambling for it—he figured it out. "Um…I've never…been human." A moment later, he added, "I've never called you Braids," and took a sip from his mug. Her shy smile told him yes, he'd figured it out.

After half an hour of tossing admissions and proclamations back and forth, Donnie was buzzed from all the caffeine he'd downed and Amber was nursing a pleasant warmth that had nothing to do with the Scotch she nursed. After all, she *had* drunk numerous frat boys under the table in college in an ongoing bet, and Kimber *was* her counterpart. She could hold her liquor with the best of 'em. "I've never seen my best friend naked," she lied, then after a sip—and a wince—shook the empty glass in emphasis and added, "an' that's why ya never jus' show up at Aaron's place—he *streaks.*" Since his answer was true, Donnie moved on.

"I've never caught myself wondering 'What would Einstein do?" After he drank his penalty, he added, *"Every…single…day."* Amber laughed into her glass as she refilled it.

"Usually I wind up wonderin' what Socrates would do," she admitted teasingly. "Socrates or Gandhi, kinda depends on the day. I've never had entire conversations with myself without realizing it." It was a lie. "Bein' alone can drive ya nuts."

"So can being the only one who can speak on your level," Donnie added once he swallowed. "Never taken anything apart only to realize I can't put it back together." To Amber's surprise, he immediately took a deep swig of coffee, his cheeks visibly darkening.

"No way!" she muttered in disbelief. "I refuse to believe it!"

"I've never lived it down," the genius retorted dryly. "Just ask Mikey about the first Xbox." Despite his offer, Amber knew she'd never do it.

"I've never killed a houseplant without even *touching* it." After a long, deep pull on her refilled Scotch, she explained off-handedly, "It's a skill, really."

"You're kidding, right?" Her expression never changed as she shook her head in the negative. Don paused, searching for ideas. So far, they'd covered all sorts of deep dark secrets, but he'd never asked the one thing he really wanted to know most. Would…if he asked it, would she still answer? "I've never—" He hesitated, staring into his coffee and gathering his nerve, then stammered the rest. "—never fallen in love with—with someone who…might not love me back." Even as he drank to betray the lie, his eyes never left her; sure enough, she sobered, stared through her amber liquor, and drank...deeply.

"And I," she added softly, falsely, "have never kept secrets to spare my loved ones." Though it was a lie on both their parts, neither drank; they knew without a word that the game was over.

7:15 pm
A knock at the lab door drew Donatello's attention from the empty FSG vial; clearly through visiting with Amber, Mercy hovered in the open doorway, one fist still poised to knock at the frame again. "Hey," Don greeted tiredly.

"Hi," she answered approaching the desk; Donnie found himself disappointed by the absence of the teasing "Hey yerself" Amber always shot back. The realization made him feel quite pathetic.

"So," he asked and cleared his throat. "How's treatment been? AA treating you well?" She dropped into the nearest chair—the very chair Amber vacated—and heaved a stressed sigh, scrubbing her too-long bangs off of her forehead. She was building a headache.

"It sucks," she answered honestly. "but at least it's workin'. Group's been pointless at least an' entertaining at most. Really, I've gotten more help from my plants than from whinin' at other addicts."

The two spent some time catching up, Mercy filling him in on her battle with Alcohol and Donnie filling her in on Amber's fight against PTSD. He had to admit that Mercy might not be quite what he was expecting. When he first met her, she seemed full of fire and ice—unstable, sullen, and incapable of seeing beyond the end of her own nose; her subsequent assault on Raphael hadn't improved his opinion of her, either. Now, he found himself questioning that opinion. She was still far too skinny for her own good—a side effect of reviving in the body of a homeless addict—and she still seemed uncomfortable with allowing other to see her vulnerable, but she'd mellowed out. A smell of fresh herbs and lush greenery surrounded her now, and he could see potting soil under her nails. Could missing the country have so greatly influenced her instability and anger, he wondered?

While Donnie reflected on Mercy's change in attitude, she considered all he'd told her about Amber's progress...what little progress had been made. Dr. Morris had finally convinced her to try anti-anxiety medication and written her a prescription for an emergency tranquilizer, and Amber wasn't handling the change well. Mercy understood completely; she spent almost all her previous life on an insane cocktail of medications to keep herself stable but she never got over her hatred of it. Even now, with the blasted illness gone, she nearly came unglued when the doctor at the substance abuse clinic put her on a full regimen of drugs: anticonvulsants, a beta-blocker, an antipsychotic and antianxiety medicine to relieve agitation...she was on almost as much medicine as she'd been for her bipolar disorder! The medicine was keeping her clean and alive, but she couldn't help hating it with a vengeance.

"She's a stubborn one," Mercy admitted aloud once Donnie's report on Amber was finished. "Ya gotta keep an eye on'er- or she'll bottle it up. I love'er to death..." She frowned over at the lab door, her spirits low; even in here, they could hear Amber grunting and grumbling in the dojo, clearly scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees again. "She's my best friend, was the only one willin' to stand up to my Ma, but sometimes I just wanna slap'er. She can't stand seein' anyone hurt, an' she'll do anythin' to spare'er loved ones pain. Ya can't just trust'er to tell ya when somethin's wrong...She'll hide it, deny it, refuse to deal with it, an' it'll eat'er up inside before she'll ever admit it."

Never realizing the mistake she just made, Mercy turned rueful denim-colored eyes to Donnie. "Thanks fer takin' care of'er, Don. I owe ya one... anytime ya need help with'er, you gimme a call, 'kay?" Her aim accomplished, she staggered to her feet and turned to leave. "Make sure she takes that blasted medicine. If she starts skippin' it, she'll regret it—she's seen what it did to me, so she knows better. Good luck."

Their goodbyes exchanged and Mercy gone, Donatello sat tensely in his desk chair, staring through the empty vial before him. He couldn't get Mercy's warning out of his mind...Amber wasn't above hiding things to keep her loved ones from hurting. His mind ran miles a minute, pulling incidents and
evidence from his memory. Inexplicable expressions, sudden changes in attitude, inability to discuss her past life in detail, reluctance to share her history and personality with him…

Amber was hiding something—something big—something she felt would hurt him and his family. I have never kept secrets to spare my loved ones she'd admitted during their game of true and false—a declaration Mercy just revealed was as untrue for her as it was for him. Amber, however, hadn't been coerced into silence by a controlling brother—she chose to keep secrets out of a misguided sense of protection.

A sudden scuffle at the door drew his attention; the greying brunette consuming his thoughts hustled into the lab with a plate heaped high with pizza and breadsticks. Dinner already, he wondered vaguely? A glance at the clock confirmed the time, and he wondered how long he'd stared off into space.

Amber stayed only long enough to set the plate before him and give his shoulder an encouraging squeeze, then turned to retreat again. She's always running away, he realized with no small amount of disappointment, always running, hiding, and refusing to face her fears. In the doorway she paused; out of the corner of his eye, he saw a conflicted, pained expression cross her tired face. No sooner had it appeared, though, she forced on a bright smile, bid him goodbye, and ran away again, presumably to work herself into exhaustion as she always did. In the lab, fear and doubt wormed its way into Donatello's over-sized brain, the seed of suspicion planted by Amber's own friend.

'Amber O'Brien,' Donatello wondered with a noisy swallow. 'What are you hiding? What have you done?'

Oh, Mercy…if only you realized the can of worms you just opened! Folks, who's ready to smack some sense into Amber and Donnie and shove'em into a closet? I know I am! Shame the plot requires me to torture them a lot more, lol! 'Til next time, Y'all—have a great week!

WORDS (Midwestern twang unless otherwise noted)

- Clare'ty - Clarity
- D'ya - 'Do you'
- Di'n't - 'Didn't'
- God a'mighty - 'God almighty,' generally used as an oath.
- 'er added to the end of another word - 'her.' IE, "I love'er" means "I love her."
- 'im added to the end of a word - means 'him,' IE, "I wanna slap'im" meaning "I want to slap him."
- 'pologize - 'Apologize.' Recall that Missourians with a twang like to leave off the beginnings of some words and the ends of others, depending on what's before and after them. ;)
- Rest'a - 'Rest of'

Notes:

* "Into each life some rain must fall" is from a poem called "The Rainy Day" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

* If you watch closely during the latest TMNT films - or at least troll promo shots! - you can see that Donatello and Raphael's eyes go from green to gold in different shots; a
A good example is when Splinter is looking up at his sons near the end of the first movie and congratulating them on defeating Shredder. This color change is likely due to light refraction in the irises. Donnie's eye changes are more evident than Raph's despite the glass shielding them, so his likely change more easily.

* You may have noticed that **Mercy and her mother's names** are vocabulary words. Mercy's mother's family, the Barrets, had a long-standing tradition of giving daughters what we call 'virtue-names.' These were widely used by the Puritans, especially for girls, and some are still used today. Like in the Barret family, virtue-names are often given by religious and conservative families who want their child's name to have a positive impact on their life. The meaning for the name "Clarity" is given as "clear vision" and sometimes "clear vision for the future." The aunt mentioned is Clarity's sister, Charity. You'll hear more about Clarity, Mercy, and Ellis Ross and Charity Barret in future chapters.

* **A little trivia:** Every original character I create is the product of days if not weeks or months of research, brain-storming, research, discussion, and even more research - did I mention research? - because if not, research. - and sometimes finding a name alone can take weeks of research! If I just chose popular names off the top of my head, it would take seconds and would get boring. Instead, I choose each and every name for its meaning, associations, probable nicknames, elegance, cadence, and sound, ironic factor, and sometimes even events in the news and pop culture. This goes for ALL my stories, not just this one, and I love geeking out with people about all aspects of character building, including names! Feel free to hit me up if you wanna chat sometime. Later!

Chapter End Notes

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Hey, Folks! This chapter's pretty short and I apologize for it—the Flying-Crap-Fairy decided my family hasn't endured enough SHTF moments lately and she's been lobbing them at us left and right. We're still bunkered down under her barrage and it's not lettin' up any yet. In case anyone's interested, I worked up a piece of digital concept art for this story featuring Raphael and Mercy; it was completed a couple chapters back, maybe, it's in my DeviantArt gallery under Concept Art, and you can find the link to my DA account in my profile on this site. Oh, and btw? Y'all knew this was comin'—step away from the fan, Ladies an' Gents, 'cause it's a warmin' up! Hope everyone's having a great month, and that y'all enjoy this chapter, even short as it is.

Dedicated to anyone who can create Flying-Crap-Fairy repellant that actually works… especially if they're willing to share it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Suggested Listening: John Mellencamp "Small Town," Paramore "When It Rains"*
Soft cool breezes filter through the leaves of a tall, gnarled Pin Oak. All around Amber, a familiar overgrown plot of land stretches as far as the eye can see. Tall tasseled grass ripples in the wind; powder-puff clouds race across the bluer-than-blue sky. Up in the tree's middle-most branches, Amber smiles fondly, watching distant bluebirds dart from trees down to the ground then back again. She knows this place—she knows this view.

Willsdale...somehow, she has made it back to Willsdale, and not the Willsdale she left behind. Nowhere is any sign of the horror and tragedy the storm left in its wake. Off to the south, the grove of black locust trees stands bedraggled, but tall and proud, not splintered and shattered the way the trees are in her dreams. As she scans the horizon for all the old familiar sights, she realizes belatedly that this Willsdale still shows signs of the disaster she relives nearly every night. Off to the north, a vacant lot has taken the place of a rickety wooden outbuilding, and the already worn trailer house and brick shed due East are a little worse for the wear. Even the pair of hedge apple trees nearby show signs of damage.

'How am I here again?' she wonders; 'I'm dead in this world—I can't be here.' Moss green eyes drift downward and notice over-abundant cleavage and the very end of one long brown braid, the grey streaks dyed bright blue and violet. Still in Kimber's body, then, she decides, but somehow in Willsdale...a dream, then? 'Well, might's well enjoy it while I' got it.'

"Amber?" The sudden voice startles her from her cloud-gazing and she turns to greet the visitor below her. At the foot of the massive tree, Donatello comes to a stop and stares up in amusement. "Now how'd you get up there?" Kimber's body, her world, and Donatello to boot—she's loving this dream!

"I climbed, silly," she teases with a playful grin, swinging her feet girlishly. It looks ridiculous, she's sure, but being home makes her feel young again...hence her absurd desire to climb a tree she's not been able to climb since college. "C'mon up, the view's great!"

In what seems like the blink of an eye, Donnie's ninjas his way up to the limb right across from hers and settles down along one wide limb, his carapace nestled comfortably in the crook of the trunk. Bandaged fingers hang loosely while their kin fidget, fighting the urge to reach for some random piece of equipment. His complete inability to get a single bar on his phone has driven him antsy.

"Aaron an' I must'a spent half our lives up in this tree," she confesses running her fingers along the underside of a branch right overhead; within seconds she locates what she sought and points it out to the turtle. 'Ambur O, Aaron W, & Mercy R,' the poorly executed carving reads. 'Best freinds furever;' even decades later, Aaron's intentional misspellings drive her inner grammar Nazi batty. Somewhere near the top of the tree, she once carved her initials with Aaron's surrounded by a wobbly heart; after years of waiting, hoping, praying, and finally giving up on him, she hopes he never found it.

"Willsdale seems like a great place to grow up," Donnie remarks quietly as he surveys the land around them. Aaron lives in a double-wide, but he has a lot of land around it—no one wants to live that far beyond town center and the land supposedly has no redeeming qualities, and that made it dirt cheap. "Very wholesome...very calm." Amber
nods, turning back to the locust grove and picturing it the way she loved it most—
covered with bunches of white and pink flowers that last all spring and into summer.

"It's not for everyone," she admits, "but it's home, be it ever so humble. Your family
thrives in the city; this is where I thrived." Suddenly anxious, she turns away from the
wide swath of greenery. "My home was on the other side of those trees...There's
nothing left now, nothing but rubble." She startles somewhat at the hand supportively
clasped on her shoulder; she and Donatello haven't been getting along lately, and it
surprises her that he still wants to comfort her. Their eyes meet over a bunch of vibrant
leaves, sending a pang through her heart. It hasn't been that long since she finally came
clean with him—finally admitted the horrible truth about his family's role in her world—
but he still finds it hard to trust her. Now the blatant affection in his ever-changing eyes
makes her wonder if he's ready to let it go.

"Amber," he starts, but is cut off by a holler from the mobile home behind them. A
glance at the patio reveals Aaron standing by his rickety grill waving a metal spatula
over his head like a giant foam hand.

"Oi, O'Brien!" he shouts louder before shaking the spatula at them; somehow
threatening to 'Aunt Jemima' someone with a grimy metal spatula just doesn't have the
same effect as with a wooden spoon.* "Quit neckin' an' git over here!" Not for the first
time, Amber wants to carefully wrap her fingers around Aaron's neck and SHAKE
HIM.

"I'm gonna kill'im," she grumbles at Donnie. "Better go keep'im from burnin'is house
down, huh?" Donatello stares back at her with an indecipherable expression, seemingly
searching for something behind her eyes. Why is he staring at her, she wonders? Amidst
a sea of electric tension, he reaches one bandaged hand out toward her, his eyes fixing
on her left cheek.

The surprising softness of his thumb brushing a smudge of dirt off her cheek makes her
lungs forget their purpose. Amber never notices the wind pick up or the sky darken with
storm clouds; her focus is entirely on Donatello, his callused fingertips and palm, and
the unexpected softness in his eyes. Although the wind and clouds escaped her notice, a
sudden crack of thunder makes her head whip around toward the horizon. Lightning
splinters the greying sky. "C'mon," she warns the turtle in a rush. "We' gotta get to
shelter!" Donatello dives from the tree and rolls with the landing, then turns to her with
open arms.

"Jump!" he shouts; a moment later, she's safe in his arms again. The moment her feet
hit the ground they bolt toward Aaron's brick-walled shed—the safest place on the
property during a storm—and Amber fights her rising panic. Up by the mobile home,
Aaron stands on the patio staring up at the sky, frozen in place as though hypnotized.
Amber's warning shouts go unheard. In glancing over her shoulder she sees the sky
split open in a maniacal grin, funnel clouds and hail oozing from the jagged wound like
vomit. A funnel drops down right between Amber and Donatello and their destination,
cutting off their retreat—more close in from the right and left. With their doom barreling
toward them from all sides, Amber finds herself on the ground.

"Don't worry, Braids!" Donnie urges as he covers her with his own body clearly
intending to shelter her from the storm. "Everything will be okay—I swore to protect
you, and I will!" Before she can reply, the newly spawned tornadoes reach them.
This time, Amber dies with Donatello's agonized screams in her ears.

March 12th, 2016, 4 am, the Lair

It took a while, but finally Amber realized the screams she was hearing were her own. Shortly after that the clean tiled wall of the Lab—and the bizarre Nevada-shaped chip nearest her pillow—came into focus. Another nightmare, she realized as she focused on calming her heart-rate and smoothing out her breathing patterns. 'What a weird dream,' she thought as she settled back into the covers. 'It wasn't one'a my usual night terrors...Could it mean somethin'? What the heck could it mean? Nah,' she chastises herself. 'Put away the tarot cards an' use yer head, Amber—it's just a freaky dream.'

Not a moment later, she registered a large green blob hovering in the Lab's open doorway, and tugging her glasses on revealed it was Donatello. Before she could get out an apology for waking him, she realized the strange, guarded expression on his face. "You okay?" he asked, his voice low and calm without a hint of the affection it normally bore. Something changed, she realized—something was wrong. She nodded distractedly, noticing that he hesitated a moment as though not believing her, then left as abruptly as he'd come. Something changed between them...something was wrong...

Amber couldn't help but feel like she missed something; little did she know that 'something' was going to blow up in her face.

2 pm, the Hardys' Loft

"From the bottom again, Annie," Beverly instructed her student simply. "Slowly—something's not sounding right." The blonde flautist** nodded weakly, her pale blue eyes downcast, and played the scale again. "Please pass it to me?" Annie handed her instrument over with a cowed expression, clearly mentally blaming herself for something she wasn't to blame for. Instruments get out of tune regardless of how well they're handled, but Annie struggled with low self-esteem; she took the slightest mistakes as catastrophic failures and habitually assumed guilt for incidents she wasn't responsible for. Beverly silently reminded herself she needed to be a little more gentle and encouraging with this student, and help build up her confidence.

Beverly was normally a cool, collected person and little could get her riled up. It wasn't that she felt nothing—she just didn't relay what she felt at top volume. She spoke with little inflection, she used good grammar, she had no discernable accent, and her manner was halfway between aloof and serious. Sometimes people thought it meant she was angry or sour-tempered—even Michelangelo was nervous around her when they first met, all because she seemed entirely unaffected. She wasn't unaffected at all, though—the deepest parts of the ocean are still on the surface.

Beverly accepted the shining metal flute and sprayed down the mouthpiece with sanitizer. Cringing at the cloying taste of alcoholic spearmint, she brought it to her lips and played, starting at the bottom of the scale and working her way up. Every time a sour note sounded, she brought it back down to inspect the footjoints, their applicable keys, and the pads underneath the keys. After a time of adjusting, tightening, loosening, and a replaced cork pad under the joining bar of the C roller, she brought it back up for a final test. A few minor adjustments of the headjoint and crown end later, the instrument was completely in tune. In hopes of cheering Annie up, she played a bar from "Little Brown Jug;" sure enough, the teenager giggled and accepted her tuned and sanitized instrument.

That's when the world exploded.
Next thing Beverly knew, Annie was leaning over her shaking her and shouting her name. It took a moment to register things one would think obvious—she lay on the floor, her IV stand leaned haphazardly against the piano, her glasses were missing—and her head was absolutely throbbing. "Wha—" she began hoarsely, cleared her throat, then tried again. "What…happened?" Annie handed Beverly her glasses and putting them on revealed that the girl was crying and shaken; to her dismay, the ever-present black void in the left field of each eye's sight seemed to have spread a little further inland.

"You—You fell off your chair!" Annie whimpered. "You started tipping over and grabbing your head, then you just—you just fell! You—" The girl was almost hysterical and Bev settled a calming hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright, Sweetheart," she soothed as she worked herself up to a sitting position with Annie's help, "It's just a migraine—I'll be fine." By the time Annie was calmed down, Beverly sat at the small table writing out a note. "Give this to your mother," she instructed calmly. "I'm cutting today's session short, so the next one's free—have her call to schedule whenever she wants. In the meantime, practice your scales an extra half hour every day, alright?" Finally, the still frightened teenager was picked up and the loft hung heavy with silence.

Alone again, Bev yanked the curtains closed and sank into the sofa cringing at the spikes of pain still lancing through her skull. She couldn't recall the last time she felt so dizzy—it was like the world was an out of control merry-go-round and she couldn't get off! No…she could recall the last time…it was the day she lost all sight, lost all sense, lost her way, and nearly lost her very life—the day she unknowingly met Leonardo.

Leo…she sighed despite herself. Even with a jackhammer pounding away at her skull, she couldn't get her Hogosha off her mind. He was so convinced that humans were all closed-minded—not that he'd been given much reason to believe otherwise—and he couldn't believe that all humans didn't see his family as beasts, as monsters. She knew differently; monsters don't save the lives of helpless women, nor do they continue to drop by at every chance to check on them. A monster would have left her there to die or worse, taken advantage of her inability to fight back. Leonardo was not a monster.

Beverly was intrigued by what she'd heard of Leo's brothers and even more so by the possibility of another human being who can love without labels. Other than herself and Bree, she'd never heard of such a person though she knew they must exist. She smiled weakly even as another barrage of sparks splintered through her skull. Bree and Mikey thought they were so sneaky but she'd seen their budding romance a mile away.

In the dark parlor, Beverly lay curled up on the sofa clutching her head and reminiscing on better times to come, never imagining the rocky road was only growing more treacherous.

Date: 3.12.2016
Time: 16:00:00.

Subject awoke at 04:00:00, screaming from night terrors as usual. Upon approach she showed signs of embarrassment and shame; she has since been reminded that such symptoms are not cause for reproach. By 05:00:00 subject was fully awake, bathed and groomed, and had already consumed her morning nutrition supplement shake.
Note: Introduction of said shakes has improved her appetite by 23.7% and slowed but not halted her unhealthy rate of weight loss; she is currently averaging a loss of .5 lbs/week. Use of the shakes has yet to trigger weight gain or the trauma-related gastric distress that prompted their incorporation. She has expressed concern that she'll "get fat again." Must remind her that some men appreciate curves and pat self on back for finding a successful—if temporary—solution to the meal problem.

Donatello glanced away from the steno pad and its scribblings surveying the view just beyond the Lab's open doorway. For the first time since he discovered the glimmering shoe prints on the bathroom floor, the empty Freaky Space Glitter vial lay abandoned. Last night, Mercy admitted to him that Amber had a history of deceit—well-meaning deceit, but deceit just the same, and ever since, he'd kept a log of evidence for or against that conclusion. So far things weren't looking good. From his desk chair, he could see Amber hard at work as usual; she sat on the lumpy old sofa folding a mountain of clean laundry, yet another task she'd assumed without ever being asked. He turned back to the notepad to record again.

Behaviors reported in previous entries continue. Subject is also displaying contradictory reactions to stimulus. At 15:00:00, I observed the subject working her way through a week's worth of dirty laundry, little of which belonged to her; when approached about a favor, she claimed to be "not that busy" and offered to help on the spot without requesting details. Even after finding out the specifics of the favor—a 'misplaced' item which was found almost instantly—she never showed any sign of being inconvenienced. Upon being asked if she needed a break, subject replied in the negative.

Subject is evidently capable of hiding her reactions when she chooses—this might indicate she could hide anything she needs to. Along with her previous confession that she has hidden things from her loved ones, there is definitely reason for suspicion.

Donnie paused in his writing a moment and studied Amber again. Her shoulders were pulled tight and shaking, her eyes were scrunched tightly closed, and her hands seemed ready to tear a half-folded towel in half—an intrusive memory had her firmly in its grip. As though feeling his eyes on her, she turned to meet his stare, forced a smile, and gave him a shaky wave. She wasn't doing well, but she smiled anyway…because she didn't want him worrying about her.

For a moment, his resolve faltered; this was Amber, after all—she was his friend, his crush, and, it felt like, the only one in the Lair who still bothered trying to understand him. From the very start, he was inquisitive and curious, and that curiosity drove him to soak up every bit of knowledge he could find. Years later his family had all tired of trying to follow his reasoning and thought process—not that he could really blame them—and quit trying altogether. Your point, Donnie? they'd demand. Never once had Amber demanded he simplify anything for her benefit. She wasn't quite on his level, but as she'd told him before, she was no idiot; despite the wide gap between them, though, she always put forth every effort to keep up with him, a consideration his brothers never bothered with anymore.

He shook his head, staring through his notes, tongue darting out to wet parched lips, then shot a glance at his empty coffee cup. Proof that she was watching him, Amber shuffled past the doorway of the lab to set up another pot of coffee. Faced with yet more evidence of her compassionate, nurturing nature, Donatello couldn't fathom any reason for suspicion other than years of conditioning. Amber had nothing to gain from turning on his family—the very idea made his stomach turn, but his inner Leo reminded him of what he was protecting. He couldn't bear the idea of leaving his family open to betrayal…from any source. Amber was, after all, branded as a Purple
Dragon, if only in body; better to cover all their bases just in case.

*Subject cannot be trusted to relay her true feelings*, he noted in neat cursive, his brows drawn tight in worry. *Whether or not she can be trusted in other matters remains to be seen. Further study is needed.*

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**Words**

- **One'a** - 'One of'
- **Words with 'im or 'is added to the end** - Adding *'im* to a word means *'him'* while adding *'is* to a word means *'his'.* IE, "keep'im" means "Keep him" and "Burn'is" means "Burn his." Midwestern twang, but also occurs in several other dialects.

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**Chapter End Notes**

* Threatening to 'Aunt Jemima' someone – this may be a family term or a local term. Basically, to 'Aunt Jemima' someone means to rap them on the wrist, knuckles, or back of the hand with a cooking utensil, to reprimand someone that they've just committed a food related faux-pas. Sitting at the table without washing your hands, helping yourself to food before it's on the table, and playing with your food are good ways to get the 'Aunt Jemima' treatment. The best moments are made using a wooden spoon while wearing a frilly, flowery apron and chewing out the perpetrator while faking a Redneck accent.

** Flautist is a term for someone who plays the flute; the term flutist is primarily used in the US whereas flautist is primarily Brit-speak. Despite so-called continental restrictions, both terms are in popular use on both sides of the ocean, and usage appears to depend simply on preference.
20: Trouble in Paradise

Chapter Notes

Well, Folks, it's been a while...and I've got bad news. Updates have already been pretty slow but they may be getting even slower for a time; furthermore, there will be a full-scale hiatus for this story AND all others in the future. I don't know when it will happen or how long it will last.

Truth, is a close relative was just diagnosed with lung cancer; it's spread to his brain and we're being told it's terminal. I've been spending a lot of time helping out with his household and I'm not having time to write—nor am I feeling up to writing, more often than not. Not wanting sympathy so please don't waste it—just please be patient with me with the slow updates and eventual hiatus.

This chapter dedicated to ImpartingAbyss—Thanks for your inspiration in this chapter! (You'll see!)

Warning: Angst out the ass. (That's about it. Lots. Of. Angst.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The feuding has begun, folks. For some mood music while Donnie and Amber fight like idiots, hit up this playlist, and while you're there, check out other playlists related to this story or others!

The official "Donnie and Amber are feuding like idiots" playlist.

Suggested listening: Paramore, "When it Rains"

20: Trouble in Paradise

Sunday afternoon, April 10th, 2016 - Manhattan

A brunette walked into the Public Library on a Sunday afternoon. What first seemed the beginning of a bad joke was no laughing matter in real life. After all, the brunette was Amber and despite the day's name, the afternoon wasn't sunny at all. Originally on her way to visit Mercy and Daron she was chased into the forbidding stone building by a relative innocent among nature's creations. She felt pretty damn silly but still took shelter in the stacks.

'I got an apology to make,' she admitted begrudgingly as she stared through a display of magazines. 'I just ran from a frickin' cloud...Dee's gonna win that bet.' At first glance the cloud had resembled the twisted grinning sky from her nightmares—a wall cloud, as she'd since learned from Donnie—but she now wasn't sure whether the strange cloud was in the sky above or in her memories. Either way, the damage was done...she ran from a tiny, fluffy, bunny-butt cloud.

Cowed by the reminder of her ever-worsening condition, she trudged along the racks of periodicals, stalling until her heart could quit galloping through her ribs. With the worst possible timing, a familiar screeching emitted from her phone. "Oh, get your straight-jackets on tonight!" Quiet Riley, she
realized, paling...MERCY!* Somewhere between the repeated shouts of metal health! and bang yo’ head! she finally found the volume button on the side of her phone and silenced the phone. Her sigh of relief fizzled out at a disapproving glare from the prim elderly woman manning the nearest checkout. With a sheepish smile of apology, Amber ducked out to the lobby and fumbled through sending Mercy a quick text. Being chased by a scary cloud, she managed to eke out between typos and mis-keys; God, she hated smartphones. Be there once I've gotten myself together.

A whole month had passed since Mercy finally apologized to Raphael. If her life was a TV show, Amber admitted silently, this would be the time when she endured a forced montage of all sorts of crap that occurred between the previous episode and now. She was glad she wasn't a TV character... montages are annoying enough without having to live through them. The downside to no montage meant she lived through every day with distressing slowness. Wake up screaming, work herself to exhaustion, try to fight her attraction to Donatello and try even harder to let him get close enough to understand her...only her bi-weekly appointments with Dr. Morris and more-frequent visits with Mercy and Daron broke the tedium.

Of course, she realized as she shuffled out the front doors and continued her trek, something had changed...Donatello was behaving strangely. For so long he'd been only too happy to help her when he could; from the very start, he was her friend, her confidant, her knight in shining spectacles. Over the last month, though, he became withdrawn and quiet, watching her closely, intently, as though he suspected her of something.

As deep in thought as Amber found herself, she walked past Daron and April's apartment building the first time. From the alley across the street, a hateful pair of steel blue eyes watched her double back then vanish through the lobby doors.

The Lair

Is t'at- all I am to ya? –Just a Purple Dragon punk? Or—or am I more? Years later, Raphael still remembered Kimber's words—remembered the hesitant tone in her voice, the vulnerability in her eyes. At the time he'd believed she was toying with him, no more sincere than she was with all the other men she chatted up on a daily basis. Kimber made her living by flirting—she turned Hun's foes into his allies all with a wink, a wiggle, and a well-placed innuendo. She was well-suited for the job...

Yer more'n- just a rival ta me. Amber golden eyes stared through the television screen as their owner grew more and more lost in his own thoughts. I'd hate it ta be one-sided. He shook his head, scoffing. What good could it do to dwell on what happened? He screwed up, he understood that...he was so afraid Kimber would use him, then he turned around and used her instead. His throat tightened at the reminder, memories of their fight following close behind. He could still hear her furious shrieks as though they'd sounded that very morning—could still smell the salt of her tears like she was crying right in front of him. Don't ya get it, ya damn jerk?! I love ya!—I love ya, ya stoopid mawron!-

'Kimbu,' he ruminated with no lack of regret. 'Ya gave me a chance—All I did was push ya away, but ya still didn't give up on me...ya deserve betta.' No, he corrected himself silently, she deserved better...no matter how he wished to deny it, Kimber was gone. She was his first—his first friend, his first crush, his first kiss, his first—first everything, he realized.** Somehow he hadn't chased her off with his stellar personality...because she cared, she was gone.

Suddenly, the wrestling match he was supposedly watching didn't sound too appetizing...he felt like busting some skulls, or at the very least, a sand bag. Right as he reached for the remote a news
broadcast interrupted the wrestling match. April was clearly worried by the news she bore, and that alone was enough to worry him.

"Last month, a known Purple Dragon escaped custody," she related soberly. "Norton Jackson, known by the nickname "Northpaw," was to undergo trial for a long laundry list of crimes including capital murder, felony narcotics possession and distribution, and first-degree assault on an officer of the law." Raph started up in his chair.

"North's out?" he muttered in disbelief. "Don't dat just figyuh.- Kimbuh turned'im- an' Lefty in—he'll be lookin' fa payback."

"Thus far, Jackson has eluded recapture—he is to be considered armed and dangerous. His brother and partner, Leon Jackson aka "Lefty" is still in custody and is cooperating with authorities." As the report faded into a discussion of North's criminal record and the reward offered for information leading to his recapture, Raphael considered the news. He wasn't crazy about that Amber chick Donnie brought into the family, but she was stuck in Kimber's body...even if Northpaw realized the difference he wouldn't hold back.

One thing was certain: Amber could be in danger, and he'd be damned if scum like North got the drop on her for lack of warning.

"'ey, Lady." Amber startled, turning to acknowledge whoever just snuck up on her.

Her visit with Mercy and Daron over, she'd immediately headed to her usual bus station for the trip home...or, at least, close to the lair. This was routine for her, just more of the same; being approached by a rough-looking stranger wasn't part of that routine. Silently she took in his shaved head, blond-stubbled chin, stained black hoodie, spiked dog collar choker, and worn fingerless gloves. If she were to venture a guess, she'd say he looked like trouble. His pale blue eyes gave her a blatant once-over that made her skin crawl, then he grinned at her. "Ya gotta quartuh?" - he asked simply. "I'm short on my fare an' fergot my wallet."

Amber hesitated, torn between her emotions and logic. Back in Willsdale, she'd never have thought twice about helping a stranger and would never have judged another by appearances; this, however, wasn't Willsdale. In New York City, that bleeding heart of hers could very well get her killed. Finally, she came to a decision...she didn't know the young man who'd approached her and he looked like trouble, but she would be damned before she withheld assistance out of fear. With a weak tilt of the lips, she dug through her pocket making a show of rummaging through the wadded tissues and other accumulated junk, finally emerging victorious with two dimes.

"Guess I'm short a nickel," she admitted quietly. "You're welcome to this, though. Good luck."

Without waiting for his response she continued on her way, listening at every step for another close behind. By the time her bus arrived he was long gone and she wasn't worried anymore. Upon boarding, though, her worries returned; what were the odds that he needed the same bus she did? Despite the odds against it, the stranger she just evaded sat in the very back pretending not to notice her. Amber froze, scrambling for an out. Finally, she turned to the driver with a cringe.

"This bus goes downtown, right?" she asked with feigned embarrassment. "I need'a get to Broadway." The pot-bellied driver scoffed, shook his head, and jabbed a meaty finger at the mind-numbing mess of numbers, lines, and codes pinned by the door.

"Goin' uptown," he reminded. "Ya need'a get the next one if ya goin' downtown, Kid." Thanking him and apologizing for delaying the bus, Amber retrieved out the door again. Instead of waiting for the next bus as planned, though, she disappeared into the oncoming crowd to find another station
nearby. Sure enough, the bald punk vacated the bus as well and irritably scanned the crowd for her.

Perhaps, she decided as she ducked into a busy store to wait him out, it was time to re-think her routines. It wouldn't do to lead the Purple Dragons right to the Lair.

Donatello paused in his writing, thinking carefully about an incident from earlier that morning. Upon being alerted that her consumption of alcohol and caffeine has increased, subject became irate and snappish. Subject was reminded that increased alcohol and tobacco intake are to be avoided during PTSD treatment due to risk of addiction; self has since decided she's in denial. He flinched, read over the sentence again, then scratched part of it out and amended, decided to only interfere again if alcohol intake increases to +25%.

"Hey, you!" Amber's sudden greeting from the doorway startled him; just in time, he shoved the steno pad under a pile of blueprints scattered across the desk.

"Hey, yourself," he retorted weakly; just as he expected, she smiled and blushed somewhat at him using her phrase. Finally sure she wasn't unwelcome, she bustled through the doorway, settled into a spare chair, and tossed a bag of dried herbs onto his desk. "If that's illegal," he warned, "it's getting flushed." His answer came as a snort of laughter.

"It's legal, Dee," she chuckled peeling the plastic zipper open; a familiar fragrance wafted toward him and he silently identified the origins. Oregano, basil, rosemary, savory, and thyme. "Homegrown Italian seasonings blend—all it's missin's Sage an' Marjoram. Mercy sends her regards, an' wants to know how it turns out."

For a time, the two friends engaged in slightly tense small talk, both studying the others' reactions curiously and both perplexed by the other's odd behavior. Finally, Amber gave up on expecting Donatello to loosen up. "I think someone might'a been followin' me earlier today," she admitted softly. "It could be nothing, but I took a different route home just in case."

"Following you?" Donatello repeated his brow pinching in concern. "Why would you think that?" Amber obediently related the occurrence.

"He followed me off the bus," she finished up. "I slipped away an' waited'im out—fine'ly- gave up on me after a'most an hour." Donnie leaned back in his desk chair, scrutinizing her.

"You really need to be more careful, Braids," he scolded gently. "This isn't Smalltown, USA...they call New York the Jungle for a reason."

"A reason that has absolutely nothin' to do with the novel, I'm sure." He finally quirked a smile, but Amber worried; a month ago, he'd have laughed no matter how stupid it sounded. She did have to admit it'd sounded better in her head; after all, The Jungle was set in Chicago, Illinois, not New York
"The point remains, it's dangerous to go around unarmed, here. Maybe we should work on some self-defense training...just in case." For a moment, Amber was too stunned to speak; once she was able to get words out again, they came out all wrong.

"Wait, back up," she demanded. "First off, since when do you do the whole 'royal we' thing? Secondly, are you insane?! Even if ninjitsu wasn't a closely guarded clan secret, can you seriously see me doing martial arts?—you've seen me trip over things that aren't even there! I'm short, overweight, an' slow, an' I can't keep balance worth a shite—an' ya wanna risk everyone's lives by arming me?!

"Who said anything about martial arts?" he shot back. "I said 'self-defense'—you can defend yourself without using martial arts or weapons." His eyes shot to the pile of blueprints; already he had another note to add to his log, *Temper control decreasing; may be developing a concerning preoccupation with violence.*

As he withdrew into himself again, Amber stared him down over the desk, concerned, confused, and conflicted. Perhaps she was overreacting, she considered with a sigh. It wouldn't be the first time, after all...ever since dying and waking up in Kimber's body, she seemed constantly itching for a fight. Dr. Morris reassured her it was simply a part of her post-traumatic stress, but that didn't make her feel any less awful when it happened. "Maybe you're right," she sighed weakly, tugging on one grey-streaked braid. "I should probably look into some mace at the least." She scanned the cluttered desktop but found the empty FSG vial nowhere to be seen. "The Freaky Space Glitter still a mystery, Dee?"

Caught off-guard he turned to stare wide-eyed, then cleared his throat and pulled the pile of blueprints closer...and shoved the steno pad deeper under the pile. "I've gotten sidetracked, actually," he admitted passing one of the pages to her. "Master says you're welcome until we know you can live above ground safely—and you won't be safe until Hun's given up on you or been dealt with." She winced at the phrase; another reaction mentally cataloged. "The Lab's getting cramped, and if Mercy ever comes by for a stay it'll be even more cramped. Not to mention the facilities—there're four shower stalls but only three commodes open for use. If someone so much as picks up a stomach bug—"

At that point, Amber felt ready to sink through the floor, a reaction that annoyed her to no end. Sex she could handle—profanity she could handle—the kind of kinky stuff that'd make even a hardened pervert blush, yup, she could handle it—but God forbid someone should start discussing less entertaining bodily functions. To disguise her ever-increasing discomfort, she glanced over the blueprint he'd handed her. Her eyes shot back up to his, wide with astonishment. "Where're all these extra rooms?" she asked suddenly, then realized she interrupted him. "Sorry—This's the Lair, but it's different—it shows rooms I've not found—there's even a whole'nother bathroom!"

"New York's got a lot of abandoned subway stations and platforms," he explained simply. "More often than not, they're just closed off and ignored—no one ever thinks to search them for occupants. It was easier to renovate this place than start from scratch." As he went about showing her all the work they'd done before they could call it home, Amber glanced meekly between the printout and his eyes, flustered at his physical closeness and emotional distance. "There's a second bathroom we never bothered fixing up—needs a lot of repairs before it'll be safe—then there's a storage room off the dojo we use for storage, and there's a cistern we can't use—that's the inaccessible room between the Hashi and the Utility room and pantry."

He sank back in his chair and shook his head in annoyance. "This layout was pretty cramped with
five occupants—add in you and Mercy, and it's gotten crowded."

Silence stretched between them for a time; finally, Amber broke it. "So...you're thinkin' 'bout expandin' the Lair? That's why you're not worried about the FSG?"

It took him a moment to catch up. "There're more important things going on," he reminded brusquely. "It's bizarre but it's not a danger, and as such, it's been tabled."

Donnie, Amber decided anxiously, was being very un-Donnie-like. He wasn't known for letting things drop—he'd worry at a problem or difficulty like a dog with a bone until he emerged victorious. He was being evasive, he was putting things off, he was keeping his distance from her, getting snappish, and spending most of his time away from her...all were strikingly out-of-character for him.

"Dee." Her address seemed to startle him out of his thoughts, but she stood and approached him anyway, hesitantly perching on the edge of his desk. Hazel eyes watched her warily but she soldiered onward. "Donnie, ya do know you can talk to me, right? I'm not always a lot'a help," she admitted, "but ya don't have to deal with stuff alone." The hard stare he gave her made her wince; was it something she said, she wondered?

"I could say the same thing, Amber O'Brien," he answered coolly. "You know you can talk to me; I've never given you any reason to distrust me, have I?"

"What?" She shook her head emphatically. "No, Dee, I do trust you—I do talk to you!" Donatello's shoulders tensed—his jaw clenched—his breathing evened out beyond natural patterns—Amber wasn't sure what caused it, but she knew without a doubt he was only a step from losing his cool.

"Do I look like an idiot?!" he snapped bolting out of his seat to pace the floor. "Do you really think I can't see what's going on?!"

"What?—No! You're brilliant, Donnie—I'd never think you were an idiot!" Pacing abandoned, he spun around to face her.

"Then why're you lying to me?!"

Though the air was silent and still, it seemed deafening. Aaron would have called it shell shock; perhaps he would have been right. Fighting to shake off her stunned disbelief, she slowly approached him, but for every step she took, he took another backward. "L...Lying?" she finally managed to croak. "How—how could you—say that?" A boulder formed in her throat, but she fought to get words out regardless. "I've never lied to you—never! Why would I?!"

"I don't know, O'Brien," he retorted coldly; there was that surname again, she noticed bitterly. In her previous life, it was a term of affection between herself and her two best friends - using the other person's last name was just their odd little way of expressing how much they cared - but in this life, it hurt. "Why would you?"

Against her will, she recalled the world she came from—a world where Donatello and his family were nothing more than a fairy tale she held dear. The day they met, she considered telling him just how she knew his family—considered spilling her guts on the first page just like a helpless heroine in a fanfiction—and decided against it. Now, she paid the price for that omission. Sharing that knowledge wouldn't help anything, now...she made her bed, she realized as her friend, her crush, her Donnie, stalked out of the lab without another word. She made the bed, now she had to lie in it.

...in that manner, she admitted to the noise in her brain, she was lying—lying to protect him from the
horrors her world held for him. Torn between two longings—longing to protect him and longing to be loved by him—she sank wearily onto the cot. One tear turned into ten, and ten into twenty. Finally, she tucked her face into the musty pillow, remembering times when it was easier to count blessings than tears.

In the dark of his room, Donatello crouched tensely on his bed. Every now and then, he could hear a snuffle or choked, smothered sob through the walls of the Needle Room; every one wrenched his heart. Still, he refused to go to her.

Unlike his brothers, he was never a fighter by nature—he saw no point in needless violence and preferred a peaceful approach. Because he was a pacifist, though, others often took his good nature for granted. *Donnie won't fight back*, they'd assume—*he won't stick up for himself*. All lies, of course...being a pacifist didn't make him a doormat. Every time, Amber would cry and he'd come running, but not this time—if anyone should come running, it was Amber—running to apologize for lying to him and confess what she was hiding!

The longer he sat in the dark, the longer he waited for her, the longer he became convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was lying to him—hiding something. 'Amber,' he thought wearily. 'What're you hiding? What have you done?'

**WORDS**

- "Don't dat just figyuuh" - 'Doesn't that just figure.'
- Fine'ly - 'Finally'
- *im or is added to the end of a word* - Means him or his. IE, "I saw'im" means "I saw him," and "That's'is" means 'That's his.'
- More'n - Both Jersey dialect AND Midwestern twang, "More than." Sounds somewhat like adding -en or -n to 'more', with the -en / -n highly diminished.
- Need'a - Midwestern Twang, 'Need to'
- A quartuh - Jersey/Backstreet, "A quarter"
- T'at - Kimber's Jersey Dialect, 'That'.
- Turned'im - 'Turned him'
- "Ya stoopid mawron" - Kimber's Jersey dialect, "You stupid moron!"

**Chapter End Notes**

* Mercy's Ringtone on Amber's phone is supposedly from a song by Quiet Riley but it's actually from the Quiet Riot song "Metal Health." It was NOT chosen as a snide remark on Mercy's previous mental illness; it was merely chosen because Mercy is a metal-head and has a particular affection for Quiet Riot.

** Raph isn't including April in this statement as he sees her more as 'family' than 'friend.' Thus, Kimber was his first outside-the-family friend.

# Big City living rule #1: Money should never be visible unless you can't avoid it and
you should only show it in secure establishments. If you choose to give money to someone outside of a purchase—for instance, tipping a street performer, giving alms to a panhandler, etc.—never let them see how much money you have on you, never give anything higher than $1 bills, and if at all possible, give odd amounts. The reason for this? Muggers won't rob someone if they don't believe they have money or other valuables. A common trick is to beg money for food, alms, a phone call, etc. While you dig through your wallet, purse, pocket, etc. for money, they watch closely and will see that you have X-amount in cash, X amount of credit cards and gift cards, and they study your reactions to see if you're likely to fight back. Once they have the money they generally let you keep on your way but follow at a distance; once you're no longer in a 'safe place,' they go in for the kill, beat the crap out'a you, and rob you blind. By feigning to dig for money and handing over less than the requested amount Amber gave the impression that she was giving up the last cash she had. Unfortunately for her, Northpaw wasn't planning to mug her.

## The Jungle is a book written by Upton Sinclair in 1906; it was meant to portray the inhuman exploitation of meatpackers in Chicago and other cities of its like. The book is a nightmare and not for those with squeamish stomachs...or anyone who enjoys eating meat. It'll scar you for life...you'll never look at bologna the same way again.
21: The Smell of Blood and Salt

Chapter Summary

End Part I: Time to Burn

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks—Ghost, here. You awesome people pushed ANLoL past another milestone—+4,000 hits—and I've posted another oneshot in Gallery of Memories to thank y'all! Folks, it's only gonna get rougher here on out, but before we can have warm an' fuzzies, we've gotta have cold an' bitchies.

This chapter has been coming for a long time—Ladies and Gents, stay out of splatter-range…Amber and Donnie are about to go boom. Last chapter in Part I, will be followed by the beginning of Part II. This chapter dedicated to my wonderful, delightful, and overall awesome readers…y'all really blow my mind.

Warnings: Even more angst out the ass, explosive fighting, non-graphic violence, fire-starting, and in case I didn't mention, ANGST. Cannot elaborate enough for this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: Mumford and Sons "Ditmas," Linkin Park, "I'll Be Gone"

21: The Smell of Blood and Salt

May 15th, 2016

It seemed years since the Lair was so fraught with tension. Leonardo cast wary blue eyes on the doorway to the Lab, almost afraid to wonder what started this particular fight. Gone were the long awkward staring contests between Donatello and Amber – gone were the hesitant, shy glances they shot at one another over the dinner table – gone was their budding friendship and their easy camaraderie. Donnie and Amber weren't acting like friends anymore…

…they were acting like rivals.

"I'm tellin' ya," she snapped as she burst through the door like a shot. "I ain't seen yer damn papers! Why the fark would I steal anything, much less a pile'a blueprints?!!" Donatello followed, eye twitching angrily.

"You and I are the only ones who even go in the Lab!" he bit back. "And I certainly didn't lose them! That leaves you – you and your obsessive cleaning!" Just listening to them made Leo tired. It was the same thing, over and over, every single day. Ever since the twelfth of March, Amber and Donatello were at odds and neither would tell anyone what happened. Amber was angry, Donatello
was suspicious, and the slightest hint of trouble set them at each other's throats.

Leo missed Beverly...she was calm, considerate, and had the patience of a saint, and compared to the two knuckleheads fighting in the living room, she was perfect company. He hadn't seen her in weeks, and he missed her more than ever.

Of course, he reminded himself silently, if he'd just bite the bullet and introduce her to his family, he wouldn't have to hide her or Bree anymore. Introducing them would mean admitting he'd been seen, though, and he'd never hear the end of it. Leonardo wasn't careless—he was the complete opposite of careless!—but admitting that he'd made a mistake, no matter how minor, would open up further possibilities of insubordination in the team. How could they realize he wasn't perfect without seeing him as incompetent?

"Hey!" he shouted at the arguing pair. Two pairs of eyes met his, one full of hazel fire, the other full of green indignation. "Break it up—Donnie, Dojo." Donatello hesitated, nostrils flaring as he scowled down at Amber, but finally followed. Amber wilted right before his eyes; she knew from experience that Donnie was in trouble—deep trouble—and Leo intended to get answers even if it meant sparring for hours.

"Please be gentle, Leo," she pled softly, then made her way back to the lab. He watched her retreating shape melt into the dark lab, shook his head, and sighed; why couldn't those two knuckleheads get themselves together already?

Shouts, concussions, and kiais rang out in the dojo. Amber stood in the middle of the Lab staring around wearily, searching for any hint as to the location of the missing blueprints.

The fight with Donatello was just one of what seemed hundreds—they were fighting almost constantly now and she couldn't understand why! He'd act suspicious and distant, she'd put up with it until she broke and called him on it, he'd accuse her of lying and hiding things from him, and sparks would fly. Even as they shouted at one another, though, she knew she was in trouble. Her heart pounded, her pulse raced, she'd catch herself holding her breath in anticipation...even with the object of her affections practically spitting at her in anger, she was about ready to tackle him. Something, she'd decided, was screwed up in her head.

"Focus, Amber," she grumbled, stalking over to the desk. "Maybe those prints aren't lost—maybe they're just not easily seen...perhaps buried under stuff?" The desktop wasn't exactly clear; she counted no less than five used coffee mugs clustered in one corner and a couple of dirty plates waited nearby. For a moment she hesitated, troubled by Donatello's barb about obsessive cleaning; if she found the lost blueprints, though, at least he'd know she didn't lose them herself.

Lost in thought, she set to collecting the dishes, starting with the two plates; their absence revealed a stenographers' notebook, open about halfway through and covered in Donatello's neat handwriting. Amber stared down at the paper, noting several entries numbered by date and time, all brief and concise.

"He keeps a diary?" she wondered under her breath. "How...unexpected..." She felt torn—torn between her loyalty to the stubborn turtle and her concern that he was in some sort of trouble. After all, his behavior changed practically overnight and they'd been at odds ever since. What could have driven him away from her when they'd only been growing closer? She shouldn't read it—it wasn't right, wasn't respectful, wasn't her!—if she read his diary, she might find something she'd wish she hadn't!

Fuck it. She set down the dishes and flipped back to the date everything changed: March 12th. As
"What're you doing?!!" Donatello bellowed from the doorway. Amber didn't answer—she just slowly turned to him with a venomous glare, his log clenched in her shaking fist like a weapon. There was no doubt in his mind what occurred during his hour-long sparring session with Leo.

"What'm I doing?!!" she snarled at him, shaking the log at him. "What're YOU doing?!!" She glanced down at the log, whipping backward several pages. "Subject's temper control has been rapidly decreasing," she read aloud venomously. "She also may be developing a concerning preoccupation with violence!" She flipped back several more pages and read again. "Subject missed a dose of antianxiety medication, was late for her weekly appointment with her doctor, and was hesitant to undergo a scheduled Exposure Therapy session. Does she even want to get better?!" A few more pages backward. "Subject cannot be trusted to relay her true feelings—anyone capable of hiding their feelings is capable of keeping secrets, and secrets are dangerous. Subject claims to be stuck in the body of a known Purple Dragon but has yet to be contacted by anyone from the gang—no one has come after her, no one has attacked her despite being out in public, she hasn't even been mugged! We know nothing of her world that she won't tell us..."

Her eyes were full of fury—and hurt—when she met his, reading off the last, her voice cracking. "—was she a Purple Dragon in her other life?" Silence stretched between them like an unspoken challenge; somewhere in the distance, a clock noisily counted down the moments to total disaster. "How could you, Donatello?" she demanded fighting tears, her twang slipping and roughening from the overwhelming emotions drowning her. "How could ya?! I've ne'er been untruthful with ya—ne'er given ya reason to suspect I meant ya harm—you an' yer family're all I've left, why would I endanger ya!!"

"You've been hiding things, Amber," he reminded stonily. "Lying by omission is still lying—what you're hiding could put us in danger!"

"It's keepin' ya safe!" she shot back shrilly. "I'm doin' it fer yer own damn good—ya wouldn't understand!" There was no point in lying anymore—she was hiding something from him, terrified that the secret would break him the way it was breaking her. Her heart pounded—her lungs shuddered—even as she raged at him and justified herself she wanted nothing more than to give in and beg for mercy.

"Secrets don't save lives!" She paced, yanking on her braids and scrambling for a way to salvage the situation. "If you're so damned worried about our safety, just tell me the truth!"

"Ya—I—" She faltered, adrenaline spikes making her jumpy. "I can't—Dee, please!" When she turned to plead with him, though, he stood right behind her, his eyes full of hazel fire and his strong arms crossed defensively. Her lungs forgot their purpose; like a surprised doe on a twilight stroll down a backroad, she froze, unable to even move.

"Amber," he warned sharply. "No excuses...I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong!"

One moment Donatello was staring her down and barely containing his temper; a split second later he found himself yanked downward by his suspenders into a frantic embrace. Distantly he heard their glasses scrape together and felt lips pressed desperately against his own, salty from the tears trailing down her cheeks. He froze, unresponsive and unbelieving—the bottom fell out of his stomach. Torn between anger and hurt, he wrenched himself loose and shoved her away. How dare she use try to distract him with a cheap mockery of affection?! How dare she?!

"Don't change the subject!" he snapped. "That's not gonna work with me!" He'd never expected her
to kiss him but the loud slap was even more unexpected. Stunned, he just stared at her, numbly reaching up to cover his still stinging cheek without even pushing his fallen glasses back up. Her shoulders shook, her eyes hidden from him; though he couldn't see them, it was hard to miss the water splotching her lenses and the shiny salt trails streaking her cheeks.

"Bastart,"- she whispered brokenly. "Ah...Ah told ye...ya dinnae..."- With a strangled sob she bolted out the door; by the time he shook off his shock she was gone, wandering the empty tunnels and more lost than ever before.

Finally out of hearing range, Amber slid to the tunnel floor stifling tears in her knees. How could everything have gone so wrong so fast—how could she have been so stupid as to think he might actually understand?! Her phone dinged in her pocket—a text from Donatello bearing only a single word...why? She choked up and closed the message without replying, only to find herself staring at the screen...or, rather, the date on the screen...

...May 15th...as if everything wasn't shitty enough. 'Perhaps,' she wondered weakly, 'I was always meant to die on this day, if not at the hands of my worst nightmare, then by a broken heart.'

Amber wasn't quite sure where she was and was even foggier on how she got there. All she knew for certain was that she couldn't go back...she had to go, even though she had no idea where to go. She was sure Donatello would never forgive her and might even hate her, but all she wanted was to run back to the lair, apologize, and cry into his shoulder. They had a strange relationship from the start—she cried, he came running to put her back together; now she couldn't stop crying, but she was entirely alone...he wouldn't be coming to her rescue.

"Hey." She didn't look up at Leo, too mentally exhausted to be startled. "Up."

"Ah can't go back," she rasped. "He'll...Ah - Ah can't go back, Leo."

"Who said anything about going back?" he asked seriously, perplexed by the sudden change in her voice. She'd always spoken with a pronounced twang that tended to change in moments of stress, but he'd never heard the brogue now just beneath the surface. It certainly explained the phony-ness of her twang and the feeling that it was too carefully exaggerated...was this what she really sounded like? Was this an old habit come back out of stress? "I just told you to get up...there's something you need to see." Though she wanted nothing more than to sit there and cry, she accepted his hand up and shuffled along beside him. "Did you mean it?" he asked, watching her out of the corner of his eye. "Your secret was that you cared about him?"

"I love'im," she admitted, tired of secrets. "I've loved'im longer'n he's known - known me." She mentally shook herself, pushing off the slipup; she'd said it before, she tended to talk like her Gran'da when all Hell broke loose, and of all the things she didn't need right now, memories of her previous life were among them. "I knew if he found out, he'd realize that y'all did sorta' exist in my world... an' he wouldn't stop until he knew everything. My world would only cause'im horror and heartache..." She shook her head, her eyes shimmering. "I'd do anything to spare'im the ugly truth of how I knew'im, even if it meant pushin'im away."

"And we see how that worked," Leo remarked dryly. "What could be so horrible?—were we... we weren't allied with the Foot, were we?"

"Remember the story of Pygmalion?" she asked vaguely; he nodded.

"An artist found every woman he met lacking," he summed up thoughtfully. "He couldn't find a woman worthy of his love so he created one—carved her out of a block of ivory—and fell in love
"Statues don't really come to life," she admitted softly. "but people can still fall in love with dreams. Donatello was just that...he was a dream." Leo wasn't sure exactly what she meant, but found he didn't really want to know; perhaps her world would bring the genius nothing but pain. The beam of his flashlight glinted off of a bronze plaque on the tunnel wall, reminding him why he brought her there. "Where are we?" she asked.

He eyed her curiously, coming to a standstill and passing her the light. "Where this life began," he answered vaguely. Bewildered at his evasive answer, she cast the light beam around her. She drew closer to the plaque and stared in disbelief; the flashlight fell slack in her grip. Leo retrieved it from her loosened fingers, centering the light on the dusty bronze plaque. Tears stung her eyes as she absently traced the ridges and grooves.

"The abandoned City Hall station," she whispered tremulously. "I've wanted to see this place for years...to think I'm actually here..." His words from before finally sank in. "Wait...where this life began? What're ya talkin' about?" Without a word, he vaulted up onto the platform and crept to the utility box. With a flip of the switch, the whole station filled with dim yellow light.

She jolted, backing away fearfully. She knew this place, knew it better than she should, but she wasn't sure how. Images flashed before her mind's eye. Splitting pain wrecks her skull. Distant voices grow nearer as the world explodes in yellow light. Bewildered, she accepted Leo's hand up and wandered the cavernous room.

Bitter cold burns her bones as foul smelling rubbish burns her lungs. Someone calls to her and shakes her shoulder. Her memories guided her to a rubbish pile in the far corner. Gentle arms gather her close, emanating an almost painful warmth. A grinding roar splits the silence and mutterings, triggering a downpour of traumatic memories. Remembered screams echoed through her head—her screams, though she hadn't known at the time.

She knew this place.

"We found you here," Leo confirmed without being asked. "We came so Donnie could check on a tripped motion sensor and damaged security camera. He was really worried about you when we dropped you off at April's, anxious that you weren't going to make it." He reached out to grip her shoulder reassuringly. "He didn't know you, but he was afraid you would die."

"Of course," she mumbled. "Even experienced doctors can be hurt by losing a patient."

"Even geniuses can be idiots about people they care for..." His words stilled her. "Give him time, Amber...he'll come around eventually." She shook her head, sighing.

"I can't go back yet, Leo...I just need some time." Even as he led her onward, she couldn't stop wondering...time for what?

April didn't answer the door. Amber stood in the hallway a moment, staring listlessly at the doorknob, wondering where she could turn. She couldn't go back to the lair...but where could she stay? Perhaps...She glanced over at the next apartment, considering her options. Daron let Mercy come stay...maybe he'd let her stay a few days?

Before she even realized it, she was knocking; at the first touch of her knuckles, the door creaked open. Something wasn't right... "Daron?" she called out softly. "It's me...you okay?" A crash echoed from the parlor and she bolted through the door. Daron lay motionless on the carpet, dark
bruising staining his bare skin.

The door slammed behind her, and Amber spun about, staring in horror at the man leaning against it. His head and face were shaven clean, his steel-blue eyes full of unspoken threats, and his lips were curled in a perpetual sneer. She'd seen him in the bus station many times and had recently assisted him with a fare home. With his jacket off, the vivid purple dragon tattoo sprawling along his right bicep left no room for debate...she was in trouble.

"Hey, Kimber," Northpaw leered down at her. "Miss me?"

Another group session ran late, Mercy brooded as she skulked down the hallway clutching a heavy stone planter; Red Fern had a sale going on, and she'd gotten the planter of aloe for a steal. It wasn't like she was in a hurry, but Amber had a habit of dropping by to visit around the time she got home and she'd hate to miss a visit because someone wouldn't quit whining. The fact that she stopped at the florist after group ran late was conveniently ignored—plants kept her sane, after all.

Group therapy was turning out to be a double-edged blade for Mercy...being among others fighting the same problem could help, but personality clashes were common. Mercy was brusque, reserved, and more comfortable with plants and animals than with people, and she had little patience for anyone who willingly got themselves hooked on alcohol. Growing up with an abusive alcoholic mother made her resent the addiction even more, and that resentment often spread to the people trying to help her. She was ready to be done with the whole situation.

At the door of Daron's apartment, she dug for her key but a loud crash stilled her fingers. Someone cried out in pain—Amber!—and the blonde saw red. As quietly as she could, she unlocked the door and slipped through, scanning the apartment for answers.

Daron sat crumpled against the wall, bruised, bleeding, and clutching his left side. Amber cowered on the floor sobbing, insisting that her assailant was mistaken about her identity. Her face and arms were heavily bruised, one eye blackened, and her lower lip was split and bleeding. The bald punk standing over her lashed out again with a kick to the ribs and shouted obscenities.

Mercy'd had enough—screw the plant. She heaved the planter at Northpaw's head and gave an admittedly sadistic grin at the loud crack of stone impacting skull; she'd needed that all day! North fell to the floor in a heap. "I can't leave y'all alone for a minute, can I?" Mercy quipped as she helped Amber to the sofa but the attempt at humor fell short at the sight of her friend's injuries. "Can ya stand?" she asked quietly and ducked into the kitchen for ice packs. Amber shook her head. Every time she put weight on her right foot, pain shot upward; she suspected she had a fracture.

"I couldn't stop him," Daron groaned hoarsely. "We've gotta get out'a here—he called Hun, he's on his way! He'll kill us!" Amber shuddered, her eyes wide and panicky, and Mercy was sure she was one step from another panic attack. The blonde scrambled for options, her roommate freaking out on one side and her best friend freaking out on the other. In her previous life, Mercy would never have been able to help them—would have been freaking out along with them—but she wasn't who she once was.

She was stronger.

Denim blue eyes darted around the apartment as she formulated a plan. "We'll get out—grab what ya need, ya got one minute." While Daron complied Mercy ducked into the bathroom, upended the metal trash bin on the floor and piled rolls of paper in it, returning with rubbing alcohol and the tie from Daron's bathrobe. Without further ado, she hogtied Northpaw—hands to ankles and ankles to sofa leg. "Need fire an' water—an' we need'a leave a warning for the cops."
Daron tossed her a lighter and bottle of water and dug for a pen and paper. Mercy soaked the carpet by the front door, doused the inside of the trash can and the tissue in alcohol, and set it right in the middle of the puddle on the carpet. "Ready?" she snapped over at Daron.

"Yeah," he answered leaving the note by North's head. *Broke in and attacked us,* the note read. *Northpaw Jackson—Hun Williams on his way—set fire to save our asses!* Daron helped Amber to her feet. "Lean on me, Ki—" Instead of correcting himself, he just cringed and hoisted her over his shoulder, wincing at the pain in his ribs. The moment the three were out the door, Mercy blocked it open with the now-empty planter and lit the tissue in the bin.

By the time the fire alarms went off, they were long gone, heading for the only safe place they knew…the place Amber just ran from.

Donatello wasn't sure how long he'd spent staring into space. The fight was over and his anger faded into hurt, and Amber was gone…maybe, he wondered melodramatically, never to return. Even though he resented her dishonesty the idea of losing her hurt.

Shouting outside the lab brought him back to himself. "What's going on?" he called out on his way to the door but found himself almost run over. Mercy, Daron, Raph, and Leo poured into the Lair, the latter continuing to the Needle room. Donnie stared in horror at the battered brunette his brother carried.

"Anytime, Don!" Leo reminded sharply. In that moment, the brother, friend, and ninja faded into the background and the doctor emerged.

"Know any first aid?" he asked Mercy bluntly.

"Livestock count?" He'd take it—he'd need all the help he could get.

Almost an hour later, Donatello stood in the dojo staring vacantly through the weapons wall. It was one thing to patch up his brothers—they were tough, had thick skin, and could handle pain. Patching up humans was nerve wracking. They were soft, squishy, easily injured, and seemed to never stop bleeding.

Aside from bruising and abrasions, Daron's bruised ribs were the worst of it; even after a pain pill, he kept up a steady cadence of breath too deeply, hiss, swear loudly, then hiss again because speaking hurt too, and every few minutes or so he'd start all over. Amber, on the other hand, was worrisomely silent. Her right fibula had a hairline fracture courtesy of Northpaw's steel-toed boot, her left zygomatic bone was fractured, and she was black, blue, and bloody from head to toe. Still, she just lay there on the cold metal exam bench silently staring up at the ceiling. Even when he had to stitch up a deep cut on her side, he was the only one flinching.

Months before, she'd told him about a horrific accident when she was in college—an accident that left her partly crippled and dependent on opiates and a cane. At the time he'd wondered if she was exaggerating; now, faced with undeniable proof that she could handle pain, he knew she wasn't.

"I hope ta God she slapped you," Mercy snapped from the doorway. Almost in a daze, he turned to acknowledge her. "Leo told me what happened, Donatello—everything! When I told ya she hid stuff, I wasn't sayin' dig fer somethin' that ain't there!" The blonde laid into him, chewed him up one side and down the other, and took no prisoners, but he didn't respond. After all, he'd already endured a similar less vehement and more profane dressing down at Daron's hands, a stern lecture from Leonardo, and disappointed frowns from Splinter...and none of it held a candle to the way he was
berating himself. Finally, Mercy ran out of steam, shook her head at him in disgust, and stormed off to some unknown corner of the Lair.

Before he even realized it, Donnie found himself at the open door of the Needle room, staring at the far bunk. Amber lay on her back, staring at the ceiling, defeated.

"Hey." He didn't expect a 'hey, yerself,' but the lack still hurt. "Can I get you anything? A drink maybe, or a snack?" No response. Growing increasingly frustrated he padded over to her, fully intent on scolding her for being belligerent; that intent faded the closer he grew, leaving only a painfully insistent urge to pull her into his arms and just hold her. He'd spent months pushing her away, observing from a distance, and squashing his attraction to her out of worry that she meant his family harm, but none of it worked…he still cared, too much, possibly.

She kissed him…she cared…maybe it wasn't all a lie? His cheek still burned from the slap, but hers was fractured; he'd have given anything for the roles to be reversed if only to spare her the pain. After all, he was a ninja…he was used to pain.

"Braids." Still no response, still she stared up at the ceiling, eyes dry and unfocused, her breaths unnaturally even. As though his own body betrayed him, his hand reached out for her, the rough pad of his thumb carefully brushing a smear of dried blood away from her split lip. He'd spent months wanting to taste that lip for himself, and the only chance he got, he just tasted saline. Amber turned away, hiding her eyes from him and shrugging off his touch.

She was always running, always hiding, always fighting not to let herself get too close…for the first time, she'd hadn't run, hadn't hidden, and had veritably thrown herself into his arms…and he'd been too blinded by anger to catch her. He crept out of the room without a word, haunted by the smell of blood and salt filling the room.

Splinter met him in the living room, watching him expectantly; without a word, Donatello led his father down the hall to the perpetually locked door. Maybe eleven hours in the hashi would help him forget the salty taste of her lips and the burning sting of his cheek.

~*~*~*~*~*~* ~*~*~*~*~*~*~* End Part I: Time to Burn *~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

~*~ To be continued in Part II: This Time Imperfect *~

WORDS

- Ah - Brogued relapse speech, 'I.'
- Ah...Ah told ye...ya dinnae... - 'I...I told you...you don't...' Brogued relapse speech.
- Bastart - Scottish slang "Bastard."
- Ne'er - Brogued "Never"

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note: We're currently almost at the end of Part II as this is being reposted,
and this is the last chapter I've gone over and corrected for posting. I'll remove this note after I've gotten through the posted chapters of Part II. If, for some weird reason, you've decided to re-read this story, I haven't gone over anything past this and posted the changes. Thanks again, and hope everyone's having a wonderful late fall!

~Ghost.
Chapter Summary

Begin Part II: This Time Imperfect - NOW with NEW COVER ART!

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks—Ghost, here. Welcome to Part two of ANLoL! This's gonna be a rough ride, so I hope y'all're ready. Also, want to bring to your attention that the celebratory one-shot in honor of +4,000 hits on this story has been posted – "Dribble-Drabble," is a pair of long-ish sappy-ish drabbles taking place in the distant future. When the drama gets to ya, check "Gallery of Memories" (GoM) 'cuz I'm currently uploading mostly sappy romantic one-shots to get y'all through the drama-tastic BS in the main storyline. Cover Image: Check out the uncropped version on DeviantArt under "Concept Art." Details about process, references, and etc. can be found on the same site.

Hope y'all enjoy, and have a great day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Warnings: coarse language, (gotta be!) poorly-translated Scotch slang, killer drama…that's pretty much it. The drama's gonna kill ya, folks…beware the drama.

Suggested Listening: AFI "This Time Imperfect," Queensryche "Eyes of a Stranger"
The low ceiling of the Hashi-turned barracks seemed to close in on the brunette lying atop a lumpy cot. Moss green eyes drifted over to the crutches leaned against the wall – now, her only way of moving about – then to the hastily erected plywood wall separating her cot from the next. Behind the wall, Daron Williams grumbled about some nameless annoyance; nowadays, his grumbling was as constant a companion as the aching of her left cheek and right leg.

Amber's fractures weren't healing very quickly, surprise, surprise, and more and more often she was reminded of her old life. That life was full of pain, too – constant, endless, chronic pain, but she was happy; this life wasn't full of physical pain until Northpaw Jackson found her, but emotional pain seemed to be a staple. Miles above the sanctuary turned prison, heavy spring rain pounded the pavement, each concussion echoing down into the underground like cannon-fire.

Why didn't she just tell Donatello the truth about her world—that she'd come from a place where he and the rest of his family were fictional characters often preyed upon by perverse fans—instead of hiding it? The question always took her by surprise, but it really shouldn't; no matter how many times she asked herself that very question, her answer never changed…she couldn't. Secrets don't save lives! he'd reminded her bitingly. …just tell me the truth!

I'd share with you, could I only speak, just how much this hurts me.~ The remembered line seemed to come out of nowhere and for a moment, Amber wondered what its presence could mean. Ah, right…her journal—she'd included the lyrics in a recent entry. She hoisted herself into a sitting position, pausing to clutch her throbbing leg, then dug the spiral-bound book from beneath her pillow. Flipping through the scribbled pages was halfway between enlightening and depressing…did she whine that much in real-time, or was it just when she thought no one would hear her? She winced; maybe all of Mercy's recent bitching at her wasn't really that unfounded…

Suddenly, it hit her: what hurt most, she couldn't speak…but that didn't mean she couldn't share it regardless, even if it was buried in a lifetime of borrowed words.

"Ya really fucked'er up, ya know that?" Donatello didn't even bother replying; after a week of almost nonstop lectures, he was more than used to Mercy's barbs and accusations. The blonde was still angry with him and wasn't letting him live down their feud…a feud that wasn't improving in the slightest unless one counted the lack of active fighting. Amber still wasn't speaking to him; he was still avoiding her. Between the two of them, they were a right mess.

"I mean it, Brainiac!" Mercy snapped at him, shoving herself between him and the console of the Shellraiser. It didn't really need repairs, per se, but installing a new salvaged stereo was at least keeping him out of the Lair proper—and away from a certain crutch-bound brunette. "Dammit, I ain't heard Glen Devon's bitchin' since Amber's funeral—now I'm hearin'im practic'ly every time she opens'er friggin' mouth!"

The revelation gave him pause and he backed away to inspect her countenance. "Glen Devon?"

"Her ma's dad," Mercy answered, scowling. "She calls'im Grahn'Dah—Scotch immigrant, Amber tailed'im like a lost puppy, ya kin barely un'ersist'rn im most'a the time…any'a this ringin' a bell? When I first met Amber, she talked like the rest'a her ma's family…took on that twang'a hers so she'd fit in better." Don shook his head, leaning heavily on the driver's seat.

"I take it she can slip under duress?" he muttered through the mess of tangled wiring where
the stereo used to be. "That certainly explains some things..." Bastart...Ah told ya...ya dinnae... He shook off the memory; she withheld information, she read his log uninvited, and then she blew up at him over it. Perhaps he should have been more courteous, but he wasn't the only one at fault!

"Ya should'a heard the fights she an'er Ma used to get into," Mercy grumbled settling into the driver's seat. "Louder'ey got, less ya un'erstood, I swear." For a moment, she just stared into space remembering the world she came from—and, though Donatello couldn't know it, fights with her own mother, a woman more prone to violence than reprimands. "Donnie, you two' gotta work this out," she pled weakly. "It makes me sick watchin' you two—you were inseparable, now ya can't stand each other! She waited a whole lifetime fer you, ya know...don't let that lifetime tear ya'part like this."

"I'm not the one keeping secrets," he reminded curtly; touchy-feely time was officially over. "And no, I don't know that—I can't know anything about her that she won't tell me, and she's hardly told me a thing!"

"You've known'er five months, Donatello," Mercy pointed out seriously. "Yet you know more about'er'n I knew after five years. She's distant at best—emotional attachment ain't her greatest strength, an' she's bad about hidin' b'hind music an' small-talk—even if ya manage to drag somethin' out o'er, it ain't stuff that matters to'er." The blonde huffed out a frustrated breath, blowing her uneven bangs out of her eyes. "If ya don't ask, don't push, an' don't pester'er, she ain't gonna voluntar'ly let ya see past that bullshit she hides under...keep pushin', she'll get it eventually."

Clearly done with him, she stood, clapped him on his carapace as she stepped over his crossed legs. Strange how he couldn't detect any of the pheromones Amber always reeked of around him; the absence made him wonder if Amber truly did see him that way. He couldn't forget the feel of her lips on his, the salt of her tears, and the faint perfume of coffee and Scotch whisky just beneath the salt. As he stared off into space, Mercy shot him a half-assed smile from the door of the cab. "Fer the record?" she added honestly. "Yer not the only one gettin' yer ass chewed...sometimes bein' a friend means tearin'em a new one when they need it."

Donatello wasn't sure he wanted the kind of friendship Mercy offered.

A cleared throat sounded in the doorway of the lab, startling Donatello out of the blueprint he was inspecting. Amber hovered just beyond the threshold, avoiding his eyes and staring out at the lines of lockers along the living room wall. "Need something?" he asked turning bodily to face her. Finally, she met his eyes...and let go of her right crutch just long enough to dig through her pocket and toss him a key.

"I read your journal without invitation," she reminded bluntly. "It's only fair to offer the same courtesy." While the genius stared, puzzling out her meaning, she gracelessly turned to the kitchen. "Five-Fifteen." By the time everything sunk in—including that those were the first words she'd spoken to him since she kissed then slapped him—he could hear her struggling through loading the dishwasher. After so long of working herself to death during the day, she was really struggling with being bound to the crutches. At this rate, Don worried, she'd push herself too far and get hurt.

Before he even realized he'd made up his mind, Donatello found himself standing at the line of lockers, staring down at number 515 and the gleaming brass padlock securing it. After all, he reasoned, she'd all but ordered him, and perhaps the contents of the journal would help him understand her better. He couldn't come up with a single reason why he should care, but he couldn't find a reason he shouldn't, either. Armed with the large spiral-bound notebook from the locker, he retreated to his bedroom to read, never noticing the pair of tired green eyes watching him from the kitchen.
One of these days, and it won't be long, he'll know more about me than he should—all my dreams will be understood. Remembered lines from another life echoed through her thoughts unbidden. *Heaven help my heart!*~~

Perhaps Amber should have fallen in love with a hot Russian chess champion instead of a mutant turtle.

By the time Donatello reached February's entries in Amber's journal, he'd become torn between horrified by the few details of her last days, suspicious that she either was a lyrical genius or didn't have a single original thought in her head, and concerned over the multitude of secrets she was clearly keeping. Between admissions of horrors he'd never see, she'd filled the pages with snippets of what he presumed were song lyrics, quotes from remembered poetry, literature, and film, awkwardly poor sketches and scribblings, and references to the world she left behind. Legions of injured neighbors staggered through the pages like B-movie zombies. Toppled trees splintered a battered, bloodstained landscape. Vultures circled, wind howled, rain poured, and lightning flashed, and amidst it all, the sky hung with clouds split in a menacing, cackling grin—a grin the troubled brunette had repeatedly scribbled across empty pages, probably without even realizing what she was drawing.

This woman, Donatello realized begrudgingly, was full of secrets, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know all of them. She was also quite possibly off her rocker even before she developed PTSD, but for whatever reason, that realization didn't surprise or repulse him as much as he thought it should. After all, he reasoned to himself, his entire world was crazy; why should hers be any different?

One thing really worried him: from the very beginning of the journal, she frequently touched on their friendship—or, more specifically, *her* end of the friendship. Strange words and colloquialisms he didn't recognize littered all the journal entries but these were rendered practically indecipherable from them. He suspected this was a subconscious effort to confuse anyone who read without invitation.

*Dee's a'thin' I ever 'spected, one entry read vaguely. I never 'spected a speccy in breeks, but Lord'a mercy, what a change! Those een'a his…I'm sure he's not the slightest of how much they cannae hide. An', of course, the first time he brought me home, I nearly cowked on'is gutties…didn't even buy'im a drink first. Smooth, O'Brien…real smooth.*

It only got stranger from there, and even more riddled with what seemed poetry or song lyrics.

*How many times must I live this tragedy? How many more lies will they tell me? All I want is the same as everyone – Why am I here, and for how long? I raise my head and stare into the eyes of a stranger – I've always known that the mirror never lies! …I remember, now…~~~

*God, this is real—I keep wakin' up 'spectin' to hear Gran'Da fashin' at Da over some stupid bullshite. My old life…it's gone, I really died! But…if I died and was reincarnated…how can I still remember Donatello? More an' more, this whole situation reeks of a bad fanfiction—but if I was stuck in a fanfiction, wouldn't I be pure badass? I'm still FAT dammit!—I'm e'en trippin' over stuff as badly as usual! Infinite power an' sadism ain't the half'it! Here I am drookit an' gantin' over a man who barely knows me,*
A lifetime of memories...Donatello stared through the pen-smudged page, torn between concern and confusion, and feeling incredibly stalked. It would seem his family did, indeed, exist in her world, and they had something between them...but what was that something? Just outside the open door of his bedroom, the woman in question hobbled out of the kitchen only to freeze at the sight of locker 515 standing open. Don watched silently as she collected herself, silently worked up her courage, then—finally—turned to meet his eyes through the doorway.

_Pandora, I am not—I ain't gowanna open that box'a worms!#

_She waited a lifetime for you._ Mercy knew what Amber was hiding, that much was certain, but he knew better than to ask her; she had odd views on friendship, and for all he knew, she might try to throttle him for it. He waved Amber in. Maybe, this way, he could get some answers.

"Ya need something?" she asked warily, hovering in the doorway. "You've got your answers."

"No answers," he admitted lowly, gesturing to the salvaged desk chair nearby. "Just more questions." Amber gratefully sank into the seat, propped one crutch between the chair and bed, and kicked her cast-bound leg up on it.

"I never promised it'd make sense," she pointed out. "The whole point of a journal is to get your own thoughts out'a yer head, not to share'em with others—you never expect any eyes but yer own to see'em, so ya don't censor what ya write. It's gonna be unpolished—deal with it." He blinked at the unsympathetic words, and it was all she could do to not glare back; did he think that just because she was normally easy-going and sweet as sugar that she was _always_ like that? Everyone had their off days! Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and she wasn't just scorned...she felt betrayed.

"How's your cheek?" The question pulled her from her brooding with a start, and she avoided his eyes. If not for her broken cheek and leg, she could almost convince herself the past month had never happened—that they were still awkwardly close friends and she could just dive headfirst into his arms without worry of being pushed away. The pain reminded her, though—things weren't the same. It was hard enough letting him in in the first place. She handed him her heart, he didn't understand or accept it, and she wouldn't—couldn't—leave herself open again.

"Hurts," she admitted. "I'll be fine. Pain's just a reminder y'ain't dead, an' I've had worse." The brunette almost seemed to squirm in her seat. "Thanks." Her tone gave Don the impression that she'd rather have swallowed a live Banana slug than exchange pleasantries; how things had changed between them..."Look." She sighed, finally meeting his eyes defiantly. "I'm not good with words—I've never been good with words—but borrowed words or not, I mean every damn one. Savvy?" He nodded, too-intelligent hazel eyes boring into her own.

"Mercy said something interesting earlier." She tore away, her cheeks pinking. "She said you 'waited a lifetime' for me." Mercy, Amber thought venomously, needed to learn to keep her damn trap shut.

"Don't." Amber clenched her fists. _Push him away_, she reminded herself, _push him away before he gets too close—it'll happen again, mark my words!_ "Don't even go there, Donatello. I tried telling ya—ya didn't believe me. I'm not playin' that foo—farkin' game again, ya hear? I—I can't do it again!"

"I don't recall you _telling_ me anything." He stared her down accusingly. "I _do_ remember you _slapping_ me." Amber choked up; she had to get out of that room.

"Words," she repeated as she stood and got her crutches situated, "are _not_ my friends—I can never get them to cooperate without hours to arrange them. Actions speak louder anyway, an' yer focusin'
on the wrong action." Just when she seemed intent on running away—as she always ran away—she hesitated on the threshold. *Fuck the words—fuck the writing—fuck it all—if you need answers, you'll get'em from what's leftover. Not that it'll do ya any good…you won't trust me, an' I sure's Hell ain't gonna trust you again.*

"Braids." She froze. Somehow, Donatello managed to stand, approach her, and make it close enough for his breath to send goosebumps down her spine, all without being noticed…damn ninja, she thought weakly. Her lip shook—her eyes burned—her heart cried out for him. Right before his hand could clasp her tensed, drawn shoulder—to push her away, or to pull her back?—she lurched forward, out of his room and out of his company, with a hoarsely whispered,

"Stow it."

Raphael growled under his breath as he surveyed what was left of the kitchen. Daron's plants swarmed every available surface—ivy on the cabinet tops, bamboo on the table, herbs on the counters, potted ferns hanging from makeshift rope harnesses…how could anyone get anything done with all those plants in the way?! Shuffling footsteps in the doorway caught his attention and he turned about with a snarl that faded upon seeing his company.

"Boo," Amber grumbled hobbling over to the sink. "Think Mercy's got enough plants in here? I mean, granted, Leo can't reach the toaster to kill it, but still." *Mercy's plants?* Raph blinked at the realization. Perhaps…he could get used to them, given enough time… He watched silently as the brunette leaned against the counter, rummaged under the sink, and produced a bottle of Scotch whisky—already half-empty—then commenced digging through the glassware cabinet for a tumbler.

"Sit," he ordered bluntly. A moment later he joined her at the table and passed her the bottle and a pair of bouillon jar 'glasses.' "Ya look like ya need a drinkin' buddy."

"Don't matter," she mumbled, staring through the amber-filled bottle. A month before, she'd have gone slack-jawed at the idea of Raphael voluntarily subjecting himself to her company. While she and Donatello drifted apart, though, she and Raphael grew closer, and in moments like this, he was the one she sought out. "Never works," she admitted regarding the alcohol, "jus' reminds me'a when shite made sense, 's'all." He shook his head at her and pulled the bottle and glasses back over.

"Say when." Amber watched the level in the glass rise, then grumbled her answer just before it reached the rim. "Dis place's turned int'a a nuthouse…Donnie's bitchy an' yer bitchier, da place's overrun by green stuff, Mike an' Leo's always out some damn place, dat twerp Daron keeps swipin' da last Dew…Da fuq happened here?" She stared down into her glass, gently swirling the liquid.

"Too many people in too little space is part of it," she admitted. "I wish there was another option…Daron's not the most agreeable, but Hun's got a mark on'im now…with Northpaw in max security, Mercy's safe, but if she stays at Daron's place, Hun'll figure out they're connected." Her eyes were troubled. "She says she wants to do recon—get into the Dragons so y'all have someone on the inside."

"Ya know dat's why Kimbuh's d—" Raph stopped himself just in time, then amended, "Dat's why she joined…she tol' me it was ta make sure Daron wasn't in danger, but Hun an'is bookends didn't hold up dere end'a da deal. Blondie ain't gotta snowflake's chance in Hell'a gettin' out'a dere alive."

"You're nominated," Amber muttered before finally taking a sip of her Scotch. "She won't listen to me…maybe she'll listen to someone without ovaries." Raph hesitated a moment, hiding his uncertainty behind a sip of liquor and a cringe at the strong taste. Despite his best attempts to stifle it, he coughed, half-expecting to belch fire. Already he regretted his choice to forgo his usual beer in
favor of her favorite poison.

"Dis'll rot a hole in ya gut, huh?"

"No Drambuie, no ice." Amber shrugged noncommittally. "Takes practice. Been drinkin' it so long I hardly notice the burn anymore…jus' tastes' like Home."

"Kimbuh neva said much 'bout her home…jus' that'er dad was a violent asshole an' she ran off—dat's 'bout all I know." Raph glanced furtively at her over the rim of his tumbler. "Yer her counterpart, right? Maybe ya know somethin' I don't." Amber thought it over a moment.

"Counterpart, yes," she admitted, "doppelganger, no. The more time I spend here, the more sim'inarities an' difference I find b'tween us—we're more alike'n I appreciate, but we lived differently." Amber shrugged. "I learned not to pish—piss off my Da an' relied on Gran'pa instead. Fer whatever reason, Kimber didn't do that—maybe her gran'pa wasn't around — an' her da was straight violent instead'a just unhinged. My Da almos' got me fired from my first job — had' im join me for lunch while I was on break an'e decked the cashier fer screwin' up'is burger."

"An' Leo calls me a hothead," Raph remarked sarcastically. "Least I neva beat da shit out'a someone 'cuz dey forgot da mustard."

"Nope. Ya did nearly break my wrist fer runnin' into ya, though." For a moment he felt like a complete heel; then he realized she was smirking at him. No hard feelings, he realized, or she wouldn't be teasing him about it. "Gotcha. Point remains, Kimber an' I're like two sides'a the same coin…we lived accordin' to different principals an' had different trials. I valued knowledge, she valued freedom—I lived fer others, she lived fer'erself—I lived in fear, she kicked its arse."

"Dat sounds like'er," he admitted. "She wasn't much'a a fighter, but she neva backed down. What 'bout dat Mercy?" He feigned disinterest, topping off her glass; how had she already managed to nearly drain it when his lungs still stung from the first sip? "Ya don't expect green thumbs ta come wit' a temper like dat."

"Merse's probably the most loyal person I've ever known, Raph…she just has a funny way'a showin' it." Amber cringed. "She grew up in the sticks, surrounded by crops an' livestock, an' plants're the only escape she's got now—they don't allow cows at dog parks." Green eyes lit on the previously sad Christmas cactus placed stubbornly under a fluorescent light; the poor thing was nearly killed off by a walk in the cold, but after so much time in Mercy's care, it was positively thriving. "But you weren't asking about her hobbies, were ya?"

Hazel eyes—so similar to Donatello's, yet so vastly different, she mused—avoided hers, set off by—EGAD!—the beginnings of a blush. "Don't tell me," she sighed, shaking her head. "Yer serious?"

"Ya tell'er," Raph warned gruffly, "an' I'll break ya other leg." Despite his expectations, she didn't laugh. If anything, she seemed…sad…

"Raph, I'm sorry…I should'a said somethin' before now." Amber tried to wrangle her words into order. "Mercy…she…she doesn't do relationships. She has her reasons, ones I ain't gotta right to share, but she's never had any interest in men—or women. Love was a luxury she couldn't emotionally afford."

"She's neva said nothin'," he admitted. "Jus' keeps backin' off when things get comfortable…was startin' to think it was me." Amber snorted.

"Raphael," she teased dryly, "If it was you, she wouldn't give ya the time'a day an' she certainly
wouldn't insult ya. I see you two together all the time an' she's always callin' ya Asshat, so it ain't you."

"Lemme get dis straight." He fixed a hairy eyeball stare on the confusing brunette. "If she insults ya, she likes ya? What is she, three?"

"Don't ask'er, Hon—she'll tell ya she's two." Her lips split in a fond smile though her eyes shimmered. "Mercy's a smartass through an' through, but she don't let it show unless she's around people she likes an' trusts." Amber sobered. "Raph, do you really, truly care about her? I mean, as more'n a friend?" Before he could argue, she added, '"Cuz if ya do, ya got yer work cut out for ya. Ya gotta take it slower'n a crippled penguin an' ya'll need'a give'er space…an' you can count me in."

After a minute of staring her down, he finally responded. "Ya serious, ain't'cha? Ya think—ya think I gotta chance?" He winced, suddenly glancing out the door as though hearing footsteps nearing. Amber didn't comprehend Raph's reaction and jumped upright when the blonde herself stormed through the kitchen into the utility room, covered head-to-toe in potting soil, mulch, peat, and clay dust and gently cradling a naked jalapeno plant like a newborn.

"God-fuckin'-dammit!" Mercy snarled as she yanked out stashed supplies—a large basin, another planter, a more securely tied harness, a ladle, bags of dirt, mulch, and peat moss—and proceeded to replant the evicted vegetable with a gentleness that didn't match her loud temper tantrum. "I TOL' Mike that hanger wa'n't tight enough! I TOL'im it was gonna slip if any'un bumped it!" As she worked on repairing the damage she continued bitching and griping but drifted further and further from intelligible complaints and into random expletives too slurred and butchered to discern their origin. Raph stared wide-eyed across the table at Amber, who shrugged.

"She's a lil' protective'a the green stuff," she stage-whispered.

"I heard that, Dillweed!" Mercy snapped, ducking her head around the doorframe long enough to shoot her friend a venomous scowl. "'at chucklehead Mikey' better be protective of'is BALLS, 'cuz I'm'a smash'em!"## As though finally noticing his presence, she quirked a smirk at Raph. "Oh, hey Asshat." Without further ado, she returned to remedying the situation. Wide Hazel eyes met amused green ones over the table.

"That answer your question?" Amber teased lowly snagging the bottle to top off his glass. "This one's on me—you'll need it." She paused only long enough to finish off her own glass and hobble it over to the sink, then grabbed her other crutch and beat a swift retreat. In her wake, she heard Raphael's voice crack halfway through asking Mercy if she needed any help. One lost his first chance at love, the other was given every reason to fear love…by God, Amber thought with a wry smile, if anyone deserved a happily ever after, those two did.

Locker 515 was shut again, but unlocked—an envelope addressed to her was wedged underneath the door. Swallowing her pride, Amber hobbled over to investigate. Inside the envelope was a key—a surprisingly good copy of the one she'd given Donatello—and attached by a piece of twine, a note: Borrowed words are better than none. Maybe, she considered as she collected the journal from the locker again, maybe they could eventually work things out again. Maybe with enough time and talking, they could—

Her train of thought was derailed completely by the edge of a lavender sticky note popping up between the pages. Nervous, she flipped back to the marked page only to be confronted with a post-it flag pointing out a sentence—I'm still FAT dammit!—and another pointing out the word blubber. Her nose wrinkled in irritation but the words scribbled onto the sticky note above smoothed it and made her want to melt.
It is not the size of the hips that matter, Donatello’s neat print confessed, but the size of the heart. Big can be beautiful if the inside isn't ugly. For a single moment, Amber wanted nothing more than to run back to him, confess everything, beg his forgiveness, and snog him senseless. As she had for a week, though, once that moment was over, she forcefully reminded herself of what had happened. To the best of her admittedly pathetic ability she offered him her heart—finally gave in to her longing for him—and he didn't believe her. He didn’t trust her, and no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't trust him until he could return it.

This turtle, she realized yet again, was going to kill her…if not with love then with a lack of it.

UP NEXT: The Truth Can Hurt

Chapter End Notes

BORROWED WORDS
~ from AFI's song "This Time Imperfect;" this portion of the story is named for that song.
~~ from "Heaven Help My Heart," a song from the musical "Chess," which did, in fact, feature a hot Russian chess champion. ;)
~~~ from "Eyes of a Stranger" by Queensryche.

Note for future reference: Lyrics and quotes included in journal entries are frequently incomplete and full'a holes or changed around completely - they only include the parts that apply to Amber's emotions at the time of use. These quotes are not being typed out incorrectly, so please don't waste your time with 'y'all missed this, that, an' th'other thing.' Feel free to suggest quotes and songs for the journal - I love to hear from ya!

# In order of occurrence:
A'thin - everything
A speccy in breeks - he wears glasses and pants
Een'a his - eyes of his
E'en - even. NOT Scotch slang but rather one of Amber's unholy mash-ups of twang and brogue
Cannae/Dinnae - cannot/do not
Cowked on his gutties - puked on his shoes. An exaggeration since she missed his shoes, if barely.
Fash at - fuss at
Drookit an' gantin' - wet and 'ready to jump him' (use your imagination, kids!)
Gowanna - going to, or, 'gonna'

ALSO, "infinite power and sadism" - Amber's long since figured out that she's not stuck in Infernoland and wasn't knocked out of a little bronze jar in the vestibule to Hell, but she still keeps making references to Inferno. It's easier to draw comparisons to others' works when you're not that great at putting words together, and this has become a bit of a running joke for her.

### Yet another example of how Southerners' talking varies from Midwesterners'—In the South, people say as little as they can in as many syllables as possible; in the Midwest, we say as much we can with as few syllables as possible, especially if it means cutting out entire words! "I'm'a," a more widely used variant of "I'm'onna," is a prime example —four words smashed together into one! HOWEVER – because I've gotten guff for it
in real life, I must point out that not everyone from the Midwest is an ignorant hick. Most of us have perfectly good grammar and can enunciate clearly without mashing words. We just choose to ignore said grammar and enunciation on a regular basis; it can be pretty freeing to just let it fly without worrying about p's and q's! Personally, I've met a fair few locals who constantly use proper grammar and pronunciation and have about as much flavor in their speech as water, but it most of'em came from another part of the States and didn't want to take on our bad habits. Of course, there's the occasional native who stubbornly insists on speaking perfectly clearly without even a hint of flavor, simply because they're sick of being treated like a 'hick' and want to be seen as better than those who just let it fly without regard. :\ NOT saying everyone's like that, my hometown's got a lotta pretentious snotty people in it...

Hope y'all enjoyed the chapter and hope everyone's been having a great Spring!
Chapter Summary

LAST chapter in the backlog! From now on, this'll be updated along with FFnet as chaps are finished. Hope y'all've enjoyed!

Chapter Notes

Sometimes in order to progress, we must first regress. Amber's got a lot of growing up to do, Folks, so please be patient while she finds herself. In the mean time, you can find plenty of warm-an'-fuzzies in Gallery of Memories - things will improve with time. Hope y'all enjoy and have a great day! This chapter dedicated to Cold, who agrees with Mercy...a world without Ozzy must be pointless.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warnings: coarse language, (probably) poorly-translated Scotch slang, killer drama…that's pretty much it. The drama's gonna kill ya, folks…beware the drama.

Suggested Listening: DHT "Listen to Your Heart," Linkin Park "In Between," Sixx:A.M. "Give Me a Love"

23: The Truth Can Hurt

May 23rd, Monday, Morning

This world will never be what I expected and if I don't belong who would have guessed it?~

Amber stared down at the single line scribbled across the page before her, contemplating the verse she chose—another batch of borrowed words saying what she could never say herself, she admitted bitterly. People always said 'just spit it out'—as though sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings is like hacking up a blob of gunk clogging your throat. Perhaps, for most of the world, it was that easy, but for Amber, it was borderline impossible. Even before someone else was reading her journal, Amber found it hard to put anything down. Knowing everything she wrote would being read, studied, and dissected for every possible meaning terrified her; it was all she can do to not back out of the deal. Only one thing stopped her…

…she was always running, always hiding, always keeping people from getting close enough to see the parts of herself that others had never accepted. It was a fault from both her lives and one she'd always lived by. From the very beginning, she was different and different was not accepted, and over time she changed to fit the mold expected of her. Once, she admitted to Donatello that she wasn't
even sure who she was anymore; after a lifetime of running, hiding, and pretending to be someone she wasn't, she'd lost track of herself entirely. He thought she meant since her death, but death had nothing to do with it.

'When did I become so...so fake?' she wondered bitterly. 'When did hiding my faults turn into hiding my entire personality?' She shook her head with a sigh. She wanted so badly to be accepted, to be understood, to become someone that others could enjoy being with, but was she ever the opposite to begin with?

...she was tired of it all. Perhaps this feud with Donatello was a wakeup call—an opportunity to find herself without losing his friendship if it turned out she wasn't someone he'd like...after all, you can't lose a friend you no longer have. Amber wanted to change and no matter how her heart cried out for her to run away, hide away, shelter her weaknesses and peculiarities behind familiar bad habits, by God she would change! It would take everything she had to weed out the masks and secrets, but if it was the last thing she'd do, she'd do just that.

Pen in hand, she struck out the previous attempt and bled her heart onto the page in a litany of borrowed words—the only words she could ever get right in either life.

Blurring and stirring the truth and the lies
so I don't know what's real and what's not.
Always confusing the thoughts in my head
so I can't trust myself anymore.
I can't keep going under!~~

The first thing Raphael noticed was the door of the dojo standing ajar; the second was the racket blasting forth, a sound like fifteen caterwauling strays set to construction racket and electric guitar. Every now and then, a few words came through—Ma-ma-mama, don't stop, nah! and even more often, Bang yo heads! Mercy, it seemed, had bewildering opinions on what constituted 'good music.' Once Raph was able to get past the shock of the racket she was blasting, he realized her music wasn't the only thing rotten in the dojo.

Oblivious to his observation, the blonde pummeled the nearest sandbag with all she had—which, admittedly, was next to nothing. She was, after all, stuck in the body of a previously homeless addict, too skinny for her own good, and not bulking up very quickly. Bruises and abrasions littered her knuckles and arms but the sandbag hadn't even moved a single inch. Unaware she wasn't alone, her thoughts drifted back to memories of a life now gone.

"Oi, Blundie!" The sudden call at Mercy's back startled her, but the speaker's appearance was even more surprising—short and pudgy with frizzy rust-brown hair in pigtails and a bright, crooked grin that seemed all upper teeth. Mercy had seen the girl before—had been assigned to the same classes with her since Kindergarten—but neither had ever made any effort to make an acquaintance. After all, Mercy was shy and the other girl was hard to understand. "Kin I set'ere, mibbe?"

"Who's askin'?" Mercy frowned down into her lunchbox, hoping the other wouldn't see how red her eyes were. Their class was on a field trip, after all, a day trip to a larger town's science museum—she was supposed to be having fun, not crying over bullies!
"Ah'm Amber O'Brine," the green-eyed second-grader answered thickly helping herself to the nearest empty chair regardless. "Dinnae mind those dolts nae mair, 'ey're coarsin' ya 'cause'ey're feart'a ya. 'ey cannae handle a girl wit' class, ya knuw?"

While Mercy struggled to decipher what she heard, the group of kids at the nearest table—the rude brats from another school who'd teased Mercy relentlessly for wearing a dress on a field trip—started catcalling at the brunette and mocking her thick foreign burr. "Haw!" She shouted back. "Stew it ya clarty toonsers! Yer all honkin'a smawg!"

Without missing a beat, she turned back to Mercy, offering her chubby hand with a bright smile. "Dingy tha dafties, 'ey need a kip. Friends?"

"Like I' gotta choice?" Mercy mumbled still trying to figure out what Amber said.

Over the years, Amber and Mercy became thick as thieves, one learning how to fit in better and the other learning to shrug off bullies. Mercy couldn't remember the last time she heard her friend's voice as thickly burred as it had become since the big fight. Now, seeing her friend so troubled infuriated Mercy—tore her to pieces—but she'd always been the one protected, not doing the protecting. It was past time she returned the favor.

"Ya music sucks, ya know dat?" Raphael's sudden comment only inches behind her threw her off entirely; she missed the sandbag, the force of her last swing carrying her forward to the floor. Raph caught her by a belt loop, effortlessly hauling her back onto her feet. "Ya form's even worse."

"Yeah?!" she snapped angrily, catching her breath as he switched off the stereo. "Well, yer world sucks—No Quiet Riot, no Alice Cooper, no Metallica—'tain't even got Ozzy! What kinda shit world ain't got Ozzy?!" Not surprisingly, the band names made absolutely no sense to Raphael, who just stared at her blankly. Mercy heaved an exasperated sigh and slumped in defeat. "Metal Health?" she attempted to no avail. "Welcome to My Nightmare? Master'a Puppets?" She shook her head in utter dismay. "The Blizzard'a fuckin' Oz?! NO! All ya got's fuckin' QUIET RILEY! Y'all're savages!"

Seemingly out of steam, she dropped to the floor and slumped over in exhaustion and despair.

"Ya done?" Raph deadpanned.

"Yeah," she grumbled, glaring at the floorboards. "Yeah, I'm done, no need'a fork me."

"So." He cleared his throat to chase off the creak he felt building. "Ambuh tol' me somethin' crazy… said ya wanted ta join da Dragons fa recon." Denim blue eyes scowled up at him and she heaved herself to her feet, confronting the sandbag again.

"Y'ain't stoppin' me," she snapped putting everything she had—again, practically nothing—into making a dent in her opponent. Raph shouldered the bag aside and caught her balled, bruised fists in his own hands, applying just enough pressure to make his point. As much as she tried to hide it, he could see pain in her eyes and feel her tendons flinching in his grip; she was hurting herself.

"Who said anythin' 'bout stoppin' ya?" he asked lowly. Her eyes slowly widened in disbelief; he eased his grip slightly. "Ya no match fer even a rookie, right now, Blondie, much less Hun an'is bookends. Yer untrained, yer weak, ya dunno da first thing 'bout fightin'—ya can't even throw a punch properly. If ya go out dere like dis, ya'll die, an' dat won't help ya friend any—end'a story."
"So I won't join as a fighter!" she snapped trying to yank her hands loose and failing miserably. "I'll pick up the job Kimber left—Hun's—"

"Don't even!" Raph barked. "Dat job got'er killed, an' she did have'ta fight! She sucked," he admitted with a grumble remembering the day he first met the blustering redhead. "but she was able ta fight when she had'ta."

"If I ain't gotta choice, I'll manage."

"Dis ain't a zombie flick, Blondie." Raph stared her down willing the blustering blonde to accept the truth. "Ya ain't gonna suddenly turn badass just 'cuz yer getting' yer ass beat." He could see in her eyes that Mercy wanted nothing more than to fight him over it—to insist she wasn't completely hopeless—so he finally let her go, pushing her a safe distance from the punching bag. "Yer in ova ya head, Kid. Ya want proof? Watch." With a single blow, he sent the bag flying, only to cringe as the chain anchoring it to the rafters snapped. The dojo echoed long after the bag crashed to the ground, split a weak seam, and skidded to a halt.

Raph face-palmed. He tried to show her she was weak, but all he proved was that he was stupid strong. The blonde stared wide-eyed at the bag slowly spilling sand onto the wooden floor. "Dayaaaam…" Mercy finally muttered. "Remind me to ne'er pick a fight with you again." The quip gave the hulking ninja an idea; it was all he could do to not smirk.

"No dice, Kid," he countered. "Ya gotta be tough ta take down Dragons—dey live ta fight an' dey train almos' as much as we do. If ya don't stand a chance against me, ya sure's Hell can't take down a Dragon." Denim blue eyes met his in an almost panic, drawing his smirk to the surface. "So here's da deal…If ya really wanna do somethin' dat stoopid—an' joinin' da Dragons is stoopid—I ain't gonna stop ya, but first, ya gotta beat me."

"In other words," Mercy scowled, "Hell's gotta freeze over." Damn if that didn't make his head inflate.

"Take it'a leave it," he grinned. "If ya leave it, ya neva got a chance—we'll find ya corpse under anutta bridge. If ya take it, I'll help ya out—give ya some trainin', help ya toughen up a little, da works. So." She wanted nothing more than to wipe the smug grin off of his face with her throbbing knuckles, especially for the 'bridge' comment; it wasn't her fault her body's previous occupant lived under a bridge! "Whaddaya say, Blondie?"

Mercy stood silently staring at the pulverized punching bag, hoping Raphael thought she was considering his offer. Instead, she was fighting an internal battle of her own—a now-endless war between years of conditioning and her ever-increasing attraction to the turtle before her. She wished she could have met him, or at least someone like him, in her previous life; she could bale hay and split wood with the best of them, then, and had more to offer him. Perhaps, she considered wistfully, he might even have stood up to her mother. Without a word, she stalked toward him, her nostrils flaring from his salty, musky scent.

He terrified her, but not for any reason he'd expect; perhaps she wouldn't be so afraid of love if someone could show her it didn't have to hurt. Instead of speaking her thoughts aloud, she snarked as so often before, "Like I gotta choice?" Bright hazel eyes narrowed at her, too-wide lips splitting in a lop-sided smirk.

"Not really," Raph teased. "Jus' figyud I'd offuh anyway." Before she could shoot off any of the sarcastic retorts on the tip of her tongue, an exasperated sigh sounded at the doorway.

"Really, Raph?" Donatello grumbled pinching the bridge of his snout. "I just fixed that bag…"
Seeing an opportunity for payback, Mercy gave a too-innocent smile.

"Sorry, Donnie," she shrugged. "I think it called'im ugly."

"Nah," Raph shot back at her. "It called you tough—put da delusional thing out of its misery." Don stalked away throwing his hands up in disbelief, never seeing the litany insults Mercy's eyes threw at his grinning brother.

"Missy Bwee," whined the six-year-old redhead running toward her. "Kyle took'ed my cookies! Make'im give'em back!" After a good hour of nonstop troublemaking, Briallen May Hardy's smile seemed almost pasted on her face.

"Stacy," she pointed out with her best 'teacher' expression, "you have cookie crumbs on your shirt; Kyle doesn't and he looks pretty upset. Try again, and tell the truth this time." Stacy's little lip quivered, her big blue eyes darting between Bree and the little blond boy pouting in the corner. Bree crossed her arms, staring down at the squirming repeat offender without budging; she had absolutely no problem waiting for a child's conscience to kick in, and Stacy's would. Finally, the girl burst into tears and hiccups.

"I-I sa-wee-hee-hee!" she fairly wailed tackling Bree's legs and clinging like a monkey. "I took'ed 'is cookies—I sawee, I sawee-hee!" It was always hard to keep a smile hidden at that point, but Bree had plenty of practice.

"You know the drill, Stace," she reminded firmly, disengaging the child from her navy skirt. "Go apologize, then time-out." With tears streaking down her face, Stacy shuffled over to Kyle to mumble an apology; right before Bree's eyes, Kyle socked Stacy in hers. As every time before, a fight erupted between the two children. "A'right, that's enough!" Bree scolded prying the troublemakers apart; a quick assessment revealed the only injuries were to their pride, so she walked them over to the time-out corner. "Fifteen minutes, both of you, and if I hear so much as a peep, I'm calling your parents!"

Bree got the two pouting children settled facing opposite sides of the room. Why couldn't they just admit they liked each other? Oh, right…cooties. She shook her head, her dangly earrings jingling with the movement; cooties always trumped common sense. Just as she was about to help the other care worker with snack-time cleanup, a techno-heavy tune emitted from her skirt pocket startling her half out of her senses.

She knew that ringtone…that person never called her during work hours unless it was very urgent and even more important. With a sheepish apology to her already overworked coworker, she ducked out the door and hurried to the breakroom. "Hey, Leo," she mumbled in greeting, glancing nervously about the empty room for signs of eavesdroppers. "What's going on?"

"Not much," Leonardo answered evasively, though she couldn't see it, pacing his room again; why did he always end up pacing when Beverly was on his mind? Bree pulled her phone away from her ear, stared at it, checked her temperature with the back of her hand, visually swept the room for melting clocks, flying fish, talking houseplants, or any other signs she was dreaming, then put the phone to her ear again.

"Not much," she repeated dubiously. "I'm always knee-deep in munchkins at this time of day, and you called over not much?" She winced at a sudden thought. "Oh God—Mike's hurt isn't he? Tell me he's gonna be alright!"

Leo shook his head only to realize she couldn't hear his head rattle over the phone, then answered.
"Nah, he's fine—probably off conquering Pandora or something. # I forgot you had kid practice today... sorry. Classes going well?"

"Yeah." Bree's big brown eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Something's bothering ya, so spit it out before I make Bev pry it out, okay?" She didn't have to see Leo to know he winced; Beverly had an uncanny knack for getting people to cooperate, but that knack was even stronger with Leo. 'Proof that he likes her,' Bree thought with a smug grin, twining a loose brown curl around her fingers like a phone cord as she listened to him fidget restlessly on the other end of the line. "Spill it."

"How's..." Leo paused to clear the creak out of his voice. "How's she been? I... haven't heard from her lately."

"To be fair, you did tell her you were, and I quote, 'Too busy for distractions.' Changed your mind, I take it?" Suddenly, someone yelled down the hallway for her. "Look, I gotta go. My shift ends just after sunset—walk me home and visit Bev or I swear, Leonardo, I'm gonna find whatever hole you hide in and crash the party, got it? Say hi to Mike for me." Before he could get a word in edgewise, she hung up and hustled out to the hallway. "Coming, Dolores!" she hollered only to skid to a stop in the doorway of the playroom at the sight of two troublemakers all-out brawling on the floor. "Stacy, Kyle, time-out!"

8:30 pm, Brooklyn, The Hardy's Loft

The loft was dark and silent when Bree stumbled through the front door, exhausted from working the daycare after a long day of classes. Despite her threats, Leonardo hadn't walked her home though she could have sworn she saw a pair of gleaming white eyes watching from the rooftops a few times. After skipping the subway so he could accompany her, she was left traveling on foot... next time that bloody turtle showed his face, she decided grimly, she was going to lace his drinks with Metamucil again in retaliation.

Just inside the front door, she paused, staring at a closed door; no light shone from Beverly's bedroom, but she'd clearly already retired for the night. Normally the older woman spent at least an hour or two reading, crocheting, or binge-watching NCIS. 'In bed already, Bev?' Bree thought with a concerned frown, staring at her cousin's door. 'What happened today?' Lost in thought she dropped her keys into the chipped wooden bowl by the front door, cast off her heavy backpack in the parlor, and wearily shuffled toward the bed calling her name.

Just over the threshold, a hand covered her mouth and a strong arm pulled her back against a hard chest. After a moment of fighting, she realized that the arm was green. "Michelangelo!" she hissed once he uncovered her mouth. "You scared me to death! What's going on?" Finally, he released her and she whipped around to glare at him, only to find her lips otherwise occupied.

"Can't I just come by to say hi?" he teased once he finally pulled away. "It's been a week since I've seen ya—I missed you, Girl!" His excitement was contagious and melted away her irritation at him; she hadn't seen him in a week, either, and she'd definitely missed him. She tossed her purse aside then flopped onto her bed back-first with a melodramatic groan, brown eyes scrunched shut and one arm flung theatrically over them. The mattress dipped beside her a moment later and she looked up at the pair of orange-framed baby blues hovering over hers. "Rough day?" he asked with a grin.

"UGH," she responded with all the intensity of a teenage drama queen. "With a capital G! Professor Robbins is still allergic to showering and I got to class so late the only spots left were downwind! Kid practice was even more hectic than usual—Kyle and Stacy are gonna have to be put in separate groups at this rate! Add that to mid-terms coming up and falling and busting my butt in Jackson Hall, today really blew chunks."
"Dang, Angelcakes…I just had to deal with Leo being a douche-canoe and Raph throwin' a turtle tantrum! Your day's way worse'n mine…you need some spoilin', huh?" Though she was beyond tired and had a long day tomorrow, Bree allowed him to roll her onto her stomach without complaint. She lived for these moments when she could convince herself she and Michelangelo were more than just friends—friends with benefits, granted—and that he loved her the way she loved him.

Her hyperactive lover cracked his knuckles behind her in preparation to rub the kinks out of her abused spine, well aware that the backrub would slowly spread from her back to her entire body. They'd both wind up naked and sated before the night was through, but when she awoke, he would be gone…

…Some things never changed, but how she wished they would!

Donnie sat tensely on the edge of the lab's cot—Amber's cot, he corrected himself bitterly—staring off into space. Earlier that night he'd been unable to sleep and had wandered into the lab in pursuit of work, but found himself staring down the ever-present cot in the corner. Once simply a place to crash when he was too tired to make it back to his room, it was now as good as off-limits—saturated with the scent and pheromones of the woman who'd been sleeping there for months. Next thing he knew, he was curled up in the very center of that very cot, haunted by strange dreams.

Unfamiliar music echoed through the lab—smooth, bluesy dulcet chords accompanied by someone singing incredibly off-key. Donatello watched curiously as Amber swayed listlessly in the center of the cavernous room, lost in the music and oblivious to his presence. "Nights in white satin never reaching the end," she almost murmured in time with the strange tune, her rust-brown braids swinging in time with every step. "Letters I've written never meaning to send. Beauty I'd always missed with these eyes before. Just what the truth is—"

Suddenly, she noticed his presence; the change was instantaneous. Her smile fell away, her eyes watered, and her lungs fell still. The smell of blood and salt filled the air. Before Don could even speak, Amber bolted into the yawning subway tunnels spidering from his doorway. "Tell me the truth!" he begged as she vanished into the labyrinthine underground. "Please, Braids, I have to know!"

The dream fell apart from there, interrupted by a panicked shriek triggered by a passing subway. Donatello had run to Amber just as he always did, only to find her in Mercy's arms, shaking into the blonde's skinny shoulder in the throes of a panic attack. Mercy's glare lacked fire but warned him away regardless; she was sick of the feud between them.

Almost half an hour later, Donnie still perched tensely on the edge of the lab's cot—Amber's cot, he corrected himself bitterly—staring off into space. Her journal hung loosely in one hand, open to yet another entry from February. More borrowed words scrawled across the page left more questions than answers.

Just what the truth is I can't say anymore 'cause I love you…
Oh, how I love you!~
*Amber Translated - Most of this is Scotch slang, but a good portion of it is twisted around in pronunciation. Amber's mother is a native Scot, but her father's a native Hick; their conflicting accents are bound to have scrambled things up a lot and Amber spent most of her time with her mother's father.

"Oi, Blundie! Kin I set'ere, mebbe?" – Hey, Blondie! Can I sit here, maybe?
"Ah'm Ahmber O'Brine." – I'm Amber O'Brien.
"Dinnae mind those dolts nae mair." – Don't mind those idiots anymore.
"'ey're coarsin' ya 'cause'ey're feart'a ya." – They're bullyin' ya because they're afraid of ya.
"'ey cannae handle a girl wit' class, ya knuw?" – They can't handle a girl with class, ya know?
"Haw! Stew it, ya clarty toonsers!" – Hey! Stow it, (shut up) you filthy/ill-mannered city slickers!
"Yer all honkin'a smawg!" – Y'all reek of smog!
"Dingy tha dafties, 'ey need a kip." – Forget those idiots, they need a nap.

** "No need'a fork me" – MAY be a family term or it may be a very obscure colloquialism from outside my state. The original, more recognized term is "Stick a fork in me, I'm done," a sassy comparison to cooked meat and someone who's cooked their own goose with their big mouth. "No need to fork me" is a smartass variation, but a few local people who've heard me use 'fork' as a verb have falsely assumed "fork" was a euphemism for "fuck." FYI, half of said persons were major prudes while the other half had other things on their minds, and Raph probably had other things on HIS mind. ;)

*** Conquering Pandora – a shameless Borderlands reference.

Borrowed words:

~ Three Days Grace "Never Too Late"
~~ Evanescence "Going Under"
~~~ The Moody Blues "Nights in White Satin"
24: Plans and Promises

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! It may be a while before I can get the latest "Gallery of Memories" chapter up—one's due, as AmelessUnderworld posted the 20th review!!!—but I just haven't been able to get myself writing. This chapter's a little all over the place as a result—honestly, my whole life is a little all over the place right now, so it's not surprising. :/

Sorry in advance, folks. Hope it's good regardless, and hope y'all enjoy and have a great day. This chapter dedicated to Ameless and all my other awesome reviewers, and all my equally awesome readers for being so patient with me.

Warnings: language, excessive borrowed words

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Toad the Wet Sprocket "All I Want," Breaking Benjamin "Diary of Jane"

23: Plans and Promises

May 25th, about an hour before dawn, the Hardys' loft

The first thing Michelangelo noticed was muted moonlight dancing across the ceiling; the second was the soft, warm, feminine body curled up against his own, delightfully bare beneath the sheets. That's right, he realized with a slowly spreading smile—he came to visit Bree last night while Leonardo did recon, and as so often before, they wound up falling asleep together. Not for the first time, he wished they could wake up together as well.

Why Leo still insisted on keeping Briallen and Beverly a secret from their family, Mikey couldn't comprehend. The older ninja insisted their brothers wouldn't understand and that bringing the girls into the family would put them in danger, but Mike begged to differ. He knew the truth...Leo was blinded by his own fears, too blind to see that the Hardy cousins accepted his family shells and all.

Bree mumbled into his neck, smiling softly; he couldn't help wondering what dreams flitted behind her eyes. Just as he reached to brush a stray curl behind her ear, his cellphone vibrated on the nightstand. He recoiled, glancing nervously over at the offending object. Be on the roof in 5, the text read shortly, or you won't be coming back. It was a familiar threat and one that always worked. If only he could stay at least once—at least long enough to greet the dawn with the girl of his dreams!

As the errant ninja met his impatient brother on the rooftop, Bree's eyes slid open to greet the cold, empty sheets and the deep turtle-shaped indention in the mattress. On the pillow next to hers lay a small origami turtle—folded from a pizza parlor flier—the only proof that Michelangelo was ever there. Proof, and a promise that he'd see her again soon. Another paper promise for the shelf, she mused nestling into the pillow still warm with his scent; it would fit quite nicely between the takeout menu ninja star and candy bar wrapper heart.

Though she missed him already, she dozed off with a smile; some things never changed, but some might change with time.
The Dojo

Not for the first time, Mercy wanted to rearrange Raphael's teeth with her knuckles. Unfortunately, her hands were occupied with the weight bar shakily suspended over her ribcage. In her previous life, she could have thrown it around as easily as a bag of chicken feed, could have lifted it as easily as a Holstein calf, but in this life, she could barely keep it aloft. "Straighten ya wrists, Blondie," the hulking ninja reminded gruffly, lightly smacking her bent wrists for emphasis. "If ya keep bendin'em, ya'll fuck'em up."

"Torn ligaments are no laughing matter," Donatello piped up as he passed the dojo. "Neither are sprains or breaks and you're risking all of those by bending your wrists when you bench."

"Bite…me." Mercy grunted as she fought to straighten her wrists yet again only to have her arms collapse on her. "Fuck!" Raph caught the bar before it could drop more than an inch and shook his head at her.

"Kid," he drawled as he replaced the empty bar on the rack. "We got our work cut out for us…ya can't even bench da base 45."* Cowed by embarrassment, Mercy sat up on the bench rubbing her sore arms. Donna Mays' body had been wasting away for years—her muscles were atrophied and her bones weak from illness, addiction, and malnutrition—but it wasn't Mercy's fault she revived in that broken body. Despite being blameless, she felt guilty and ashamed for that weakness.

"I miss the ranch," she grumbled instead of admitting the thoughts plaguing her. "Didn't used'ta be so weak…this blows." Raph's massive right hand clapped her on the shoulder in support, knocking her forward a little; the unintentional reminder of his mind-boggling strength drew blood to her cheeks even as she fidgeted with the hem of her tank top.

"Ya'll get dere," he reassured with a confident smirk. "It's just gonna take a while…keep pluggin' at it, a'right?" Ridiculously exhausted from what amounted to a few minutes of work, Mercy collapsed backward onto the bench again, boneless and sore. At her side, Raphael averted his eyes sure his cheeks were darkening; though she was too skinny she was well-endowed, and laying back like that only emphasized the full breasts peeking over her neckline and almost falling into her armpits.

"What's going on in here?" Leonardo demanded from the doorway. Raph met his brother's eyes, rankled, while Mercy rolled hers to the leader as well, refusing to sit up. She was officially too tired to give a rat's ass, no offense to Splinter.

"Just a lil' strength trainin'," Raph answered his brother lowly as he approached. "Da kid's weak'a dan a kitten…she needs ta build her strength up." Mercy stared up at the rafters of the dojo as the two brothers argued in hushed tones. She was torn. Leo insisted that their training was a closely guarded secret—not something to share with others willy-nilly. Raph insisted he wasn't training her to be a ninja, just helping her build up her strength so she could help out around the lair. Mercy always hated being the center of attention and froze when it happened, but what was stronger—her discomfort with attention or her desire to become stronger?

Harsh words flew back and forth between the brothers, the whispers sharpening into hisses; finally, she spoke up. "I ain't gonna be a damn ninja, stick-ass,"** she snarked over at Leo. "I jus' wanna get stronger…just wanna help protect my friends, 'at's all. 'z'at so much t'ask?" Leo bristled and fixed a hard stare on her, refusing to back down and evaluating her countenance. Finally, he must have found what he was looking for; he broke the stare, glaring over at his brother.

"Just the basics," he reminded sharply, his pale blue eyes icy. "No secret techniques, no ninjitsu, no making her kunoichi. Got it?" Raph scowled but nodded agreement. "Family meeting in the kitchen —five minutes." Without another word he stalked out the door, leaving the two friends glaring at his
"Asshole needs ta get laid," Mercy grumbled as Raph lumbered back over to her. "Ee'er that'er we should throw choc'late an' run." Raph laughed lowly as he offered her a hand up, easily hauling her upright. Upon finding herself face to face with his nearly bare plastron, she felt a faint blush streak across her cheeks; as so often before, her lungs were flooded with his salty, musky scent. Above Mercy, golden hazel eyes searched hers, their owner sobering, marveling at the soft grey blue behind the glare.

"Mercy?" he asked, his voice rough and low. "Ya doin' great…stuff like dis takes time, ya know… jus' keep at it an' ya'll get dere, okay?" The blonde sighed, staring through his plastron into a memory of a short woman with sleek black hair, hateful blue eyes, and painted lips that spouted cruel words. Realizing the direction her thoughts took her, she blinked and shook her head to clear out the cobwebs. A thick, callus-roughened thumb brushed her spiky uneven bangs aside, stilling the breath in her lungs and spurring her heart into a sprint. Wide denim blue eyes darted up to meet Raph's; he gave a small, hesitant smile. "Ya ain't gotta do dis alone, Kid."

"I…" She faltered, forcing a swallow. "I can't yet…these things take time if yer doin'em right. Nothin' ya do quick'll last, right?" He nodded, his smile widening.

"Yeah," he replied chucking her chin. "Anythin' worth it takes time an' we got all da time in da world. No need'a rush it." The staring contest stretched on between them, their eyes saying what their lips could not. Both knew they were no longer discussing training; both felt their hearts race in anticipation. Perhaps, they wondered hopefully, perhaps love didn't have to hurt after all.

When the Lair housed only five ninjas, the kitchen was comfortably spacious; with five ninjas and four humans, one on crutches, it became unbearably cramped. Regardless, the family, Amber, Mercy, Daron, and April crowded around the table meant for six. The air in the room smelled of fresh greenery and coffee and crackled with tension. Amber and Donatello and Mercy and Raphael sat across from one another, the first two stubbornly avoiding eye contact and the second two sneaking furtive glances at one another. How ironic, Splinter considered regretfully, that one pair would grow closer while the other grew further and further apart.

"Kimber Bryant is gone," Leo summed up bluntly. Over in the corner, Daron winced, pointedly staring through the black and white tiles instead of at the woman who unintentionally took over his best friend's body. "Hun most likely doesn't know, but if he knows, he doesn't care—he's still after her. The Purple Dragons have gotten out of control and need to be knocked down a peg if not stopped entirely." He leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands together, and met everyone's eyes in turn. "We need to find a way to take Hun out for good. Thoughts?"

"It's too dangerous for Daron or Amber to go above ground while Hun's looking for them," Donatello remarked blandly. "but the Lair's facilities weren't meant to support this many people. With only three toilets and four showers, there's been a problem with wait times—if anyone brings home a stomach bug, we'll be in trouble." Amber winced, recalling him explain that very problem to her…before they blew up on each other and started feuding. "In addition, the 'barracks' still needs some work and the pantry isn't capable of holding enough supplies for a whole week." He shoved his glasses up his snout, his hazel eyes serious. "We need to get the other restroom operational, increase the pantry space or designate a secondary storage area, and the barracks needs some work—the flickering lights could be a sign of bad wiring and the whole area's still cut off from the furnace and air conditioner."

"A primary objective, then," Splinter accepted with a nod. "All the planning in the world will do us no good if we cannot remain safe and secure while we plan."
"Mikey and I have been running extra patrols for some time now." Leo knew his father and master would recall why, and didn't explain; the family didn't need to know about Beverly and Briallen. "We can still increase our patrols, however, and do recon to gather intel. Raph's assistance would be invaluable on these runs."

"His help would also be appreciated here." Don's bare brows pinched together in thought, and he threw a pensive glance over at Amber; she hadn't really spoken to anyone that day. Before he could fall further down that rabbit hole, he reminded himself that she made her choices, and one of those choices was to push him away. God, that hurt... "The renovations won't be easy," he continued, tearing his eyes from the silent brunette. "...and the girls and Daron aren't strong enough for the heavy work. Perhaps you could alternate between patrol and construction?" He glanced curiously over at Raphael leaned against the counter, arms crossed, chin low as he watched Daron suspiciously; the ninja grunted in agreement.

"Gonna need a hand with somethin', den," he muttered. "Been givin' Blondie some strength trainin', workin' up ta basic self-defense. If I ain't got time, she's gonna stay weak...an' weaklin's're a risk we can't afford." Mercy bristled at the jab, but her hackles lowered at the grin in his eyes. Halfway between nervous and shy, she stared down at the bamboo and aloe planters piled in the middle of the table and ran her fingers through her already messy hair.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance." Splinter stroked his beard in thought, already visually assessing his new student. "You boys have made great progress in your training, nearly beyond what I can provide...a new student would be a welcome distraction in these hard times."

"We can't just keep those three trapped down here, though," April pointed out gesturing to the other three humans. "Mercy's undergoing detox still and supposed to be attending groups at least weekly—Daron's apartment is empty, too, and Hun's going to notice. Not to mention Amber's got bi-weekly appointments with Dr. Morris—even if she weren't on crutches, she couldn't go above ground because of Hun, but she can't skip out on those appointments—they're vital!" Amber flushed darkly, staring into her coffee, but didn't say a word in agreement or opposition.

"Perhaps she could video chat the appointments for the time being?" Donnie suggested. "I've got our internet signal scrambled and bounced around enough to prevent anyone tracing it back here...even if Dr. Morris's computer is compromised, the signal puts us in Osaka." Amber glanced over, impressed, and he shrugged. "It's worked so far, and the odds of that changing are astronomical." The silence stretched for a moment, then Amber shrugged as well.

"Why not," she agreed but said no more. The subject changed, the rest discussing and conversing, but Donatello remained silent, watching Amber for any explanation behind her uncharacteristic silence. Long after the rest of the family broke away and scattered to the four corners of the Lair, she sat scribbling another entry in her journal and he sat opposite, staring down at his coffee. Every now and then he'd nervously glance up at her, searching for explanations. Finally, one of them broke the silence.

"I'm fine, Don." The assurance came so suddenly he was left staring and blinking at her; he forced a swallow, averting his eyes.

"You don't look it," he admitted softly. "If I don't know—"

"I know," she interrupted bitterly. "If ya don't know what's wrong, ya can't fix it...but there ain't nothin' ta fix. I'm fine." The tall turtle hesitated a moment, searching for words—so many words he had at his disposal, but none would come to mind! With no resolution in sight, he sighed and rose from his seat, nudging the chair back under the table.
"You're not fine," he reminded dryly. "...but until you're ready to admit it, you won't be fine. You need to talk, you know where I am." Without another word, he did exactly what she could not…

…he walked away.

Long after Donatello's retreat, Amber sat at the kitchen table staring down the hated mess of borrowed words sprawling across her journal pages.

Nothing's so loud
As hearing when we lie.
The truth is not kind
And you've said neither am I.

Nothing's so cold
As closing the heart when all we need
Is to free the soul,
But we wouldn't be that brave I know. ~

Why couldn't she ever express herself without using the words of others? Why was it so hard to get words together unless she had hours to arrange—She stilled, realizing the truth. Writing a journal on paper didn't necessarily have to be that different from writing fiction on a computer. Sure, she didn't have a backspace key, but she could scratch out what didn't work. It wasn't what she was used to… but… Amber flipped to a new page, staring it down in worry.

Where to start? What to say? She gripped the pen like a lifeline, dreading what would spread across the page should she use her own words. I... "This shouldn't be that hard!" she snapped aloud never realizing someone stood in the doorway, watching her struggle with conflicted hazel eyes. "Jus' get a grip an' spill it!" I feel...lost. After those first words, the rest followed in a sudden rush; someone once said There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.'# Never before had the meaning been so true for her—she bled her heart on the page in staggered, shaky prose.

I feel lost. I feel betrayed. I miss my family, my world, an' cannae always express it, but it never goes away! It's not all about me, I know that, but sometimes it's hard to keep my troubles from affecting the family. I've done my best, God knows I try, but it doesn't get any easier!

I'm not afraid things won't get better,
but it feels like this has gone on forever!~~

It seemed borrowed words would always sneak in, she realized begrudgingly. Perhaps, though, it wasn't such a problem—borrowed words are better than none—so long as she didn't hide behind them.

I miss being able to sleep without waking up screaming—I miss being able to get through the day without being haunted by unwanted memories. Most of all, I miss Dee...I miss being able to trust him, miss being able to rely on him...but how can I trust him when he won't trust me? How can I confide in him when he's so convinced I'm
Perhaps what? She scratched it out and tried again; if she wanted him to be honest with her, she needed to be honest with him.

The kicker is I AM lying to him—lying by omission is still lying! But...but what I'm hiding...my world holds only nightmares for him, if not a farkin' existential crisis! ...I wish I could share that burden, wish I could go back to the day we met and spill my guts. If my life were a fanfic, I'd totally have done that—totally have spilled my heart the moment we met. He'd have accepted and understood, and he'd feel the same, an' a' thin'd be dandy between us. If only life were so simple...this isn't a fic, it's a bad joke, a travesty! If he knew a'thin', knew how I feel an' how long I've felt it...God, when ya never seen a body fizzog to coup'n, it's all well'n tekul to fancy yerself lovin'em, but meet'em in person, an' a' thin' changes! Lovin' a man ya never met an' then meetin'im...I feel a sleekit stalker!

Alright, she decided suddenly, time to stop the word vomit before she confessed something she couldn't take back. For a moment, she considered scratching it all out—even ripping the page out, burning it, and starting over—but a cleared throat in the doorway stopped her cold. "Coffee," Don explained simply, pouring the last of the carafe into his mug; when the coffee ran out before the cup ran out, his snout crinkled in annoyance, bringing a weak smile to Amber's face. If she'd somehow forgotten the feud between them, the fact that he announced his purpose in the kitchen was sufficient reminder.

As the genius went about the motions of setting up another pot of coffee, Amber considered the journal before her. Every fiber of her being urged her to scrub out everything she'd confessed—while it wasn't much, it was far more than she was used to, and more than she was comfortable with sharing. That was the problem, though...she held everything too close to her heart and never shared her weaknesses...and it was a trait she'd vowed to change. While Donatello chucked the coffee grounds into the compost bucket and measured out new, she scribbled out a few more borrowed words for him to puzzle through. Half of her feared he'd understand, feared the vulnerability the lines created; the other half, a smaller, secret part of her that longed for nothing more than to throw herself into his arms, wished he'd read between the lines.

I know if I could do it over,
I would trade, give away all the words that I saved in my heart
That I left unspoken...
Lovin' you is what I was trying to do.~~~

When Don turned to break the silence with smalltalk while the coffee pot percolated, the table was vacant, Amber's journal left invitingly at his usual place. For a moment he stared down at the faded cover. As every time before, he wondered why they were still fighting—why they couldn't just get over themselves and apologize.

You won't trust me, an' I sure's Hell ain't gonna trust you. Amber's words had cut him to the quick, and the wound still burned. Neither was willing to give in and neither was willing to forgive and forget; when two hearts are intent on being separate, nothing can bring them together. Unless something changed, their situation wouldn't improve, he realized begrudgingly as he flipped back to the last entry he read.
I never really sleep anymore
and I always get those dangerous dreams.
I never get a minute of peace...
I know the reason behind it,
but I gotta wonder what it means.

Through the utility room, he heard Amber crutch into the bathroom; a few moments later, the nearest shower kicked on. For a time, she simply grumbled aloud to cover the sound of the showerhead, but finally, gave in to her normal habit of singing over the racket. Unbeknownst to the turtle, the poorly-sung tune was a favorite of her Gran'da's and featured in some of the best memories she had of Granny Devon. When the coffeepot silenced, her words came clearly to the turtle hovering curiously in the open utility room doorway. *Come by the hills to the land where legend remains; the stories of old fill our hearts and may yet come again. Where the past has been lost and the future is yet to be won, and the cares of tomorrow must wait 'til this day is done.*

'Sound advice,' he decided solemnly as he regarded the potted vegetables lined up on the utility room table. 'Hun must be taken care of, and soon, but the cares of tomorrow must wait 'til this day is done.'

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Chapter End Notes

NOTES

* My sources indicate that the average weight bar weighs approximately 45 lbs empty.
** Stick-ass – nickname referring to someone who is too uptight for their own good, refers to the stick perpetually shoved up their ass.
# This is reported to be a quote by Ernest Hemingway but there appears to be some debate over whether or not he actually said or wrote it.
## According to my research, "Come by the Hills" is a traditional Irish folk song, but in my (limited, second-hand) experience, Ireland and Scotland have a tendency to share customs, music, and such just like the US and Britain do. Take that statement with a heaping pile of salt, though—I live in the Midwestern US, have never been outside the country, and am honestly a bit biased in the Irish-Scottish debate though I've blood from both countries. ;)

BORROWED WORDS
~ Toad the Wet Sprocket, "All I Want"
~~ Toad the Wet Sprocket, "Good Intentions"
~~~ Rascal Flatts, "What Hurts the Most"
~~~~ Meatloaf, "It Just Won't Quit."
Chapter Summary

Leo gets sick of Amber and Donnie's bullshite, they make a little progress toward reconciling, and an ally joins the fight against Hun.

Chapter Notes

Ghost here with another update. I hope everyone's enjoying the story so far and I've come with good news. The story may seem kinda random but it's actually going according to a pretty distinct outline. As frustrated as I've been growing with Amber and Donnie's continued feud, however, I've decided to combine Parts II and III so they pull their heads out of their arses a little earlier. This means things may be a little awkward for the time, but you'll get more cavity-sweet fluff much sooner! In the meantime, tune in to "Gallery of Memories" [http://archiveofourown.org/work...23180001] for predominantly fluffy one shots—including the most recent, "Mush!"—and please have patience with me!

On another matter: Normally, I try to keep certain things either out of my writing or at the most vague or glossed over; one of these 'taboos' is religion. This chapter, however, breaks that pattern to elaborate on some of Amber's backstory. This is fiction, folks, and fiction doesn't involve preaching or trying to convince others; as much of that occurs in Real Life, I would never throw that shit into fiction. So please don't take Amber's rambling as a challenge, threat, or lecture when it's merely meant to fill in some gaps in her backstory and character. Also, going to point this out right here and now: Lefty is not intended as an example of 'gayness' or meant to portray 'the average gay person.' He's got a few screws loose, folks, he's not a good example of anything. No insult or injury is intended by Lefty or any other character. Dedicated to Reubens...because, Reubens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warnings: Openly gay character with flirting, language, religious references, blunt discussion including religion-related homophobia, references to amphetamine addiction

Suggested Listening: Shinedown "State of My Head"

25: Loyalty Wears Many Faces

June 7th, a prison near the Bronx
Leon Jackson sprawled across the uncomfortable wooden chair as though it was a King's throne, pale blue eyes relaxed and a faint smile tugging at his ring-decked lips. His proud purple Mohawk was only a memory now, the dye fading and the hair shaved down to stubble. After all, his favorite styling wax just wasn't easy to come across in prison, and nor was his favorite hair dye. In time he'd grow it back out…but first he had to get out.

The prison counselor on the other side of the desk—a small, mousy man with thick plastic glasses and thin black hair—seemed nervous of him. He had little cause to worry, though…Lefty wasn't his brother. Norton would have torn him up one side and down the other just for looking at him sideways; Lefty was more likely to fuck him than fuck him up. Lefty's ring-pierced lip tugged upward in a lazy smirk as the other man warily glanced from the computer monitor to the con every five seconds.

"I ain't gonna bite ya," Lefty finally announced with an indifferent shrug. "Y'ain't my type." The counselor blushed, setting off Lefty's gaydar like crazy; perhaps he was more his type after all? The little man cleared his throat, puffing up as though to make himself look bigger, a waste of effort the con thought with a disarming grin.

"You're being released, Jackson," the counselor announced, his voice creaking halfway through. Lefty's smirk warped into a cringe…nope, totally not his type, and probably still in the closet. "Bail came through, you've been well-behaved, and the prison needs every inch of space it can get. You'll be electronically monitored, need to meet with your parole officer every week, and need to keep your nose clean—if you fail to comply, they'll throw you back in the pen. Clear?" Lefty nodded, smoothing a large hand across his blond-stubbled scalp.

"Crystal," Lefty answered lowly, then asked, "Don't s'pose my bruthuh's still here, huh?" The counselor shook his head, frowning gravely.

"He broke out again," he admitted. "The police are watching for him, though…they'll find him…again. In the meantime, if he shows up, you'd best keep your distance from him—if you don't stay out of trouble, they'll revoke your parole, and Norton's trouble incarnate." Lefty wasn't the religious sort, but he almost wanted to reply with an amen. The smaller man shuffled his forms and papers back into order as though to make himself seem more important, and shot Lefty a stern glance. "Stay clean, Leon…I'd rather not see you again." As the Purple Dragon loped out the office door toward freedom, he grinned to himself. Some would have been offended by the little man's warning; to Lefty, it was little more than blustering from a little man who didn't matter.

The Lair

"I told ya, Dee," Amber grumbled into her coffee, "I'm fine."

"You've got two fractured bones," Donatello insisted regardless, growing tired of the argument. "I'm not a doctor—I could be doing more harm than good—you need to at least get checked out!"

The two friends had gone back and forth on the subject for over a week, and the rest of the family were sick and tired of their bickering. Amber would insist she was doing well and remind Donatello that she was used to pain. Donatello would argue that her high pain tolerance was exactly why she needed to get the injuries checked by a professional and remind her that she could develop a blood clot if she wasn't careful. Neither were willing to give, neither were willing to admit the other was right, and neither were willing to let the argument go.

Leonardo sat at the kitchen table, ice blue eyes volleying back and forth between the two arguing idiots like a spectator at a tennis match. Already the two had chased off Mikey, Splinter, and Mercy,
and if not for the still-warm sandwich before him, they'd have chased off Leo, too. Their arguing completely ruined his appetite but putting the sandwich in the fridge would make it fair game for any who saw it...and silly though it sounded, he didn't want to lose the sandwich. After all, Mercy had spent the weekend slow-cooking a mess of corned beef and last night, she made a batch of heartbreakingly delicious sandwiches she called "Pumper-Reubens." His family had heard of Reubens but had never heard of them made with pulled beef, swiss, cabbage, and pumpernickel. The food was delightful—so delightful it made Mikey cry—and Leo wasn't ready to give up that last sandwich without a fight.

"I'm not goin'!"

"You need to go!"

"It's dangerous up there!"

"It's dangerous down here, too!" Finally, Leo had enough.

"That's it," he scolded the two. "Do you two even know why you're fighting anymore?!" Donatello stared blankly at his brother and Amber blushed darkly.

'It's either fight'im or fuck'im,' Amber thought sarcastically. 'If I stop pushin' im away, I'll wind up molestin' im!' Donnie's nostrils flared, finally picking the familiar non-scent emanating from the brunette avoiding his eyes. His eyes wide in disbelief, he slowly turned to stare at her. Was she seriously turned on by their fighting?! The very idea was preposterous, but it would certainly explain some things!

"I'll take your silence as a no," Leo grumbled. "You two need to get your act together, and until you two can stop acting like children, you'll be treated like children. Amber, you're goin' to the doctor, Donatello, you're taking her. In ten minutes, you're both picking up April and leaving for the hospital. End of story." Both individuals turned to argue but fell silent at the menacing scowl he wore. Their mumbled agreements were music to Leo's ears. Donnie ducked out of the room to call April, and Amber limped out to freshen up in the bathroom.

Finally, Leo was blissfully alone with his sandwich...the two idiots could handle themselves for a while. Just moments before he could bite into the crunchy butter-seared bread, sharp, tangy melted swiss, and juicy, savory shredded meat, a pair of molasses-brown eyes came to mind. Beverly...he hadn't been to see her for quite a while, but he had himself to blame for it. Perhaps...with a self-deprecating smile, he rewrapped the sandwich, screeched his chair away from the table, and slipped out the front door. Bev was still undergoing heavy IV antibiotics and beef was expensive; she could benefit from the sandwich more than he ever would and their continued separation only made him miss her more. Perhaps he could go visit her, if only to make sure she was still making progress.

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**Hun's Penthouse**

"Lefty!" Northpaw's greeting stopped his twin cold. He'd expected North to be holed up in Hun's penthouse, but he'd really hoped to miss the maniac.

"'ey, North," he greeted with a forced smirk as his twin stormed toward him. "Long time no see, huh? How'v'e ya been, huh?" The bald con grabbed him by the neckline and slammed him up against the wall, his steely blue eyes raging.

"Free," North snarled digging his knuckles into Lefty's windpipe. "No t'anks t'a you or dat tramp Kimber! Ya both lef' me ta rot'n dere!" Lefty raised his hands passively—a universally recognized
gesture of surrender—and smiled weakly.

"I din't know Kimber was gonna turn us in," he reassured his brother as though he hadn't specifically asked Kimber to do just that. "I played along wit' da cops so dey'd let me out early—had ev'ry intention'a bustin' ya out when dey did an' came'ere fa backup ta do it. I got ya back, ya know?" Northpaw's track-mark stained arm bulged alarmingly as he shoved his twin up the wall; Lefty's heart raced with fear as his feet left the ground but he didn't dare let it show. "Easy, bruh, it's me! I ain't gonna turn on yah!"

North stared his twin down with murder in his eyes, his nostrils flaring in agitation. Finally, he let him down—if, by let him down, one meant 'flung him to the floor like a ragdoll.' Lefty rolled with the landing and like usual, grinned up at his brother as though they were teasing one another. Northpaw wasn't the only lunatic in the family, after all; he was just the more violent lunatic.

"I find out ya had anyt'in ta do wit'it," North snarled, "An' yer dead—Hun kin find anuddah dumbass fer his left side, I don't need ya!" As the psychotic con stormed away, Lefty sat up and leaned on his knees, recalling life before they joined the Purple Dragons and trying to convince himself that North's words hadn't hurt. They were identical twins, but Lefty had to admit they were more different than alike.

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Later that night, in the Party Wagon

"Told'ja so." It wasn't the first time Donatello had heard those words, but they were the first Amber had spoken since they left the hospital parking lot. Despite his worries, the orthopedist on duty only verified Amber's insistence—she was healing well and without complications, and because the human fibula could fully mend in four to eight weeks, the brunette was cleared to walk with one crutch. She spent the entire trip back to April's halfway between sulking and smug. Of course, he had to admit, it could be the swelling from her healing cheek was changing her expression, making him see things he wasn't seeing.

"Yeah," Don admitted begrudgingly glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "You told me, you were right, but I maintain my argument—it's better safe than sorry when dealing with broken bones. I'm not a doctor, Amber." He shrugged weakly, focusing on the road ahead. "Honestly, it's a miracle I've kept my family alive this long."

"No, Don," Amber contradicted sternly. "Mercy willingly sittin' through "Titanic" would be a miracle—me calculatin' pi without addin' flour'd be a miracle—Raph admittin' he's jus'a big softy who likes puppies an' rom-coms, that'd be a miracle.* You're not an Israelite with a miracle-stick— you're a brilliant, stubborn, ridiculously-inventive genius who won't accept anything but the best of yourself an' won't let your fam'ly down."

"You confuse me." The words weren't supposed to come out, but once they slipped out, he blustered on ahead. "One minute you're cursing and drinking, the next you're talking about miracles and Moses…are you religious or just a smartass?" A snort of laughter sounded from the passenger seat.

"Both, actually—I'm a religious smartass, why shouldn't the two coincide?" Her smile slipped as she considered a more serious answer to his question. "I grew up in the Bible Belt—was raised denominational but got sick'a bein' surrounded by hypocrites an' sycophants an' went nondenominational. Some folks'll proclaim anythin' a miracle, preach at the top'a their lungs in public an' violate their own words in private, an' insist the entire world convert ta fit their particular version'a faith." Her mother's church—the very church whose glass brick killed her, she recalled with no shortage of irony—was chock full of the sort she was describing. She'd never felt God's presence in that church—not like she did out in the wilds of the world He created—and a church without God is
just a building. "My own Mum was one of those people…it's why we weren't speakin' when I died."

"You've never mentioned it," Donnie pointed out, surprised that she was volunteering information without being pushed for it like usual. "You've hardly mentioned anyone in your family other than your grandfather." Amber shrugged, trying not to feel guilty about it; she was trying to change, though, so she didn't focus on it.

"Gran'da's the only one'a my family I really got along with," she admitted. "My Da had a nasty attitude an' a hair temper, my Mum was a narrow-minded roaster who got'er church friends to stalk me, an' between the two, I jus' got sick'a the drama."**

"Your own mother," Donatello scoffed. "She had you stalked?"

"Mercy never had any interest in men; Mum figured she had to be gay." Amber shook her head. "She's not gay, but the very idea that I was livin' with a woman, much less a gal whose life didn't revolve around gettin' married an' poppin' out babies, left Mum flappin' like a flag."*** Donatello didn't get the phrase and blinked in confusion. "…sorry…she made an arse of herself over it—told the congregation I 'lost my way an' was livin' in sin an' needed to be shown the light again.' I was livin' in another town, but my car got egged, my trees got papered, someone chucked a bag'a flamin' horseshit on my porch with a pamphlet about 'the evils of homosexuality,' an' everywhere I went, people from her church followed me an' lectured me about 'fuckin' women.'" Donatello stiffened, the party-wagon swerved, and a loud honk blared from the next lane over.

"What?!" Don squawked. She gave a humorless laugh.

"Yeah. Mercy dropped out an' moved out, an' after that van hit me, I did, too…I went back to Willsdale but lived out in the sticks. I rented a PO box, I never had any family over 'cept Gran'da, I did everythin' I could to keep hidden from Mum's pack…an' I spent every weekend possible as far from home as I could."

"I don't understand." Don turned to address her as they waited at a light. "After all that, you haven't turned your back on religion? It's enough to turn anyone's back!" Amber gave a cryptic smile.

"Y'ever seen a snapping turtle?" she asked simply. "I nearly lost a toe to one when I was a kid—damn thing probably thought my foot was a fish'er somethin'. Needed stitches an' got a helluva scar from it…I don't hate turtles, though." She shrugged. "Some turtles bite—don't mean they all bite. Some church-goers are arseholes, but that don't mean they're all arseholes. I believe in the messages of tolerance, honesty, integrity, and the like, and I've seen proof that miracles can happen and prayers can be answered."

The memory was a bittersweet one and it tugged a wry smile at her lips. As Donatello turned down a long, dark alley, he glanced curiously over at her. Finally, he asked the question on his mind.

"Proof?" Amber stared through the windshield into her past, still recalling the dry, burned grass and empty skies.

"I've feared rainstorms since I was just a kid," she explained softly. "We'd had smaller droughts before, but '05 saw a real whopper—most'a the country was dried up.# Whole towns were bein' abandoned or burned out, an' if the drought continued, Willsdale was gonna follow." Though the drought's effects were horrible and long-lasting, Amber smiled. "Crops were failing—livestock were dying—people were sick from heat and dehydration…I feared storms, but for the sake of my loved ones, I joined the rest of the town—I prayed for rain. Every day and night for a week, I went out in that dried up pasture behind my home an' prayed with everythin' I had." Finally, she turned to smile at him. "…on the seventh night, I left home losin' hope an' returned soaked to the bone from a sudden downpour. We got a month's worth of rain that followin' week. Whatever anyone else
believes, it's proof enough for me."

At the end of the alley loomed the garage door disguised as a brick wall. Just before they reached it, though, Donatello's cell phone rang. "Yeah?" he greeted the caller as the van idled in the alley.

"It's me, Donnie," Leo answered on the other end.

"Yeah, I kinda figured," Don explained dryly, "since the caller ID says "Leo."## Amber stifled a laugh in her knuckles, sure Leo was again making his 'why me?' face. After a brief conversation between the two brothers, most of which manifested as 'yeah, uh-huh, right, not really,' and the like, Don finally hung up with a 'why me?' face of his own. "Change of plans," he explained as he backed out of the alley again. "There's a surveillance camera down in China Town—feed's gone almost entirely black, probably an obstruction."

"An' Leo says 'fix it,'" Amber summed up blandly. "Why not—not like the pumpkin's gonna turn into a carriage or somethin', right?"

After twenty minutes of waiting in the party wagon, Amber wasn't so sure about that…and her bladder was screaming. Donatello, however, was nowhere to be found and probably still figuring out why the camera wasn't transmitting. She scanned the nearby rooftops for anything resembling a tall nerdy ninja turtle but came up empty…again. Her fingers tapping annoyingly on the dash, she changed tactics and looked for any open establishment likely to have a public restroom.

When she could wait no longer, she left Donnie a note and locked up the party wagon, and began the painfully slow process of crutching her way to the convenience store on the corner. Through the whole trip she was certain something was about to go horribly wrong—sure someone would jump out at her from behind a dumpster, under the counter, the stall next door—and she'd be left with no option besides beating her attacker with a crutch. By the time she left the store again that fear was faded.

A familiar face across the alleyway, however, ground everything to a halt. Pale blue eyes, nearly bald, black wife-beater, camo trousers, and work boots, a massive purple dragon tattoo sprawling along one bared bicep…_Northpaw!_ Amber stood frozen beside a tall delivery truck, staring down the man who assaulted Daron, broke her leg, broke her cheek, and beat the living shit out of her, and all while grinning like a lunatic. Maybe, she thought frantically, if she didn't move, he wouldn't notice her! It worked in Jurassic Park, right?!

The moment the thought formed, she recalled that standing still only worked on T-Rex, not raptors, and Purple Dragons were pack-hunters. Steel blue eyes landed on her, widened in recognition and shock, then darted back down the alley. Amber tried to run only to recall—Oh, _right_!—she was on _crutches_ and you can't _run_ on crutches. Before she made it more than a few hops, the bald punk reached her side and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Giddown!" he hissed shoving her down behind the truck. "Hide!" Mere moments after she made it to the ground, rolled under the truck's trailer, and yanked her crutch under after her, a soft thump at the rear marked another arrival; fearful hazel eyes, brown in the deep shade of the trailer, frantically assessed her for damage. While he sent out a silent SOS on his phone, Donatello pulled her close—not only to calm and protect her but to muffle her loud, frightened breaths. Tears stinging her eyes, she buried her face in his chest to stifle the sobs trying to break free.

She was going to die there, she was sure of it—Northpaw wouldn't let her escape this time, and he certainly wouldn't let Donatello go without doing his worst. Even if his brothers burned rubber the whole way, there's no way they'd be quick enough to save them both. She hated being so helpless,
but in the entirety of her new life, she'd been nothing but a helpless, hopeless mess! She'd never even told Donnie the truth—told him how sorry she was, how much she missed him, how much she loved—

"The fuck, Lefty?" someone called out from nearby; a pair of overpriced Nikes jogged closer, stopping at the pair of work boots poised beside the truck. "What'd ya take off like that fer? Almost got me hit, ya douche-nozzle!"

"Oops," Lefty chuckled. "Well, ya pro'ly need'a get hit more anyways, Huh? I jus' forgot somethin'—I left my storage lockuh open at midnight on Tuesday. I'll catch up, jus' gimme a sec, huh?"

"Dude," the other con muttered in disbelief. "You are one weird bitch, Lefty. Don't take too long—I ain't coverin' fer ya if Hun finds out we split up." The Nikes stomped away again, eventually vanishing through the back door of a local pawn shop. While it sank in that the steel-eyed punk had covered for her, Amber studied him silently, finally seeing differences. His scalp had a fine layer of pale blonde hair still tinged with faint purple dye and his chin was cleanly shaven. A pair of rings decked his left eyebrow and his left upper lip, his right ear bore a wide black spacer, and the edges of a black tribal pattern tattoo were visible just above his right boot. A stark tan-line wound around his right bicep—possibly from a missing bandage—and his left bicep bore an identical but mirror image to the dragon tattoo Northpaw wore on his right arm.

He was a Purple Dragon for sure, she realized curiously, but he wasn't Northpaw; aside from the piercings and tattoos they looked almost exactly the same—too much alike to be anything but identical twins! Once his tagalong was out of earshot, Lefty crouched down beside the trailer. His eyes—slightly more blue than Northpaw's—focused on the back of Amber's head.

"Storage lockuh," he reminded lowly. "Tuesday, just aftah midnight…meet me dere, Kimbuh. Bring Supah-nerd if ya wanna," he added smirking up at Donnie to indicate the aim for the slight. Without another word, Lefty lunged back upward again and strolled down the sidewalk as though he hadn't a care, whistling an out-of-tune punk number.

For a while, Amber and Donnie just lay there in the filth underneath the trailer, acclimating to their survival. He could have sworn he heard her whispering something to him earlier, but his senses were tuned to the threat above them. It had been many months since they'd been this close—months since she'd allowed him close enough to embrace her, much less invited herself into his arms—and frightened as she was, he wasn't quite ready to relinquish that closeness.

He couldn't trust her and she couldn't trust him; he wouldn't forgive her, and she wouldn't forgive him. Why did they always get along better when no words were being spoken? Her tears left his gut churning but he held her all the closer, burying his snout in her hair to block out the smell of salt and street.

"It's…a trap…" she whispered into his shoulder. He hummed in consideration brushing a stray grey lock behind her ear.

"Probably," he admitted. Though the idea troubled him, it was a trap he was seriously considering springing…with Amber safely in the Lair.

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**Thursday morning, Budget Store-It-All, Kimber Bryant's Storage Locker**

Initially, the plan was for Donatello and his brothers to ambush Lefty Jackson at Kimber Bryant's storage locker with Amber safely in the Lair. Raphael disagreed. The following Thursday found
Donnie, Raph, and Amber skulking in the dark storage locker with the door cracked open, the two ninjas in the deepest of the shadows and Amber nervously watching for any movement outside. Naturally, the family had wanted to know why Raph wanted to trust a known Purple Dragon. His only answer—Kimber would've trusted Lefty—wasn't very reassuring but it got the hoped-for results.

From his perch atop an overstuffed shelf of plastic totes, Raphael watched the door, brooding and remembering, a scrap of faded purple fabric clutched tightly in one fist. *Lefty's had my back in t'a Dragons from t'a start,* Kimber confessed to him on that drunken night so long ago. Numerous other veiled confessions had stated the same things: she cared about Lefty and trusted him with her life, but Northpaw frightened her more every year. Raph had a hunch about the left-handed bookend, but only being party to the meeting would prove or disprove it.

Amber wordlessly flashed the two ninjas a thumbs-up—a signal stating only Lefty approached—and braced herself. Just outside Lefty muttered something about 'no honor among cons' and with a deep breath, ducked under the door. The moment he cleared the threshold it slammed down, trapping him inside; the overhead light flashed on, blinding him. "I figyud as much, huh," he muttered staring Amber down almost accusingly.

"Ya wanted ta see us, *Lefty?*" Raph sneered as he hopped down from his shelf. "Ya got us—start talkin'."

"Shut ya mouth, turtle," Lefty warned dryly. ","fore I show ya a betta use fer it." Raph cringed and backed away; nope, totally not his type, Lefty thought rolling his eyes. "I jus' came ta make sure Kimbuh's a'right, huh?…ya look like Hell, Kid," he added glancing pointedly at Amber's crutches and swollen cheek.

"Your brother did that," Donatello pointed out sternly; he was tempted to list off the various injuries Northpaw inflicted, but the blatant horror in Lefty's eyes silenced him.

"Nort' did t'at?! 'E din't have a scratch on'im earlier!" In obvious disappointment, he rushed to her, inspecting every visible inch of her for further injury. "Don't tell me 'e got da drop on ya, Kimbuh—ya betta dan dat!" Amber fidgeted, wishing the dirty concrete floor would split open and swallow her up. Go figure that Kimber was friendly with the twin brother of her attacker—she was probably friendly with both of them, even. The pierced con finally realized something was off about her. "What happened ta ya hair—ya goin' grey!"

"Apparently," Amber grumbled, "Kimber kept her hair dyed to hide it." The name slipped out before she could catch it, and she stared up at him in horror. "I—I—!"

"Da fuck ya talkin' 'bout, Kim?" Lefty asked shaking his head in disbelief. "Ya hit ya head, huh? Ya got dat am-nee-ja stuff goin' on? Don't tell me Nort' got ya head, too—I tawt ya betta'n dat, huh!" Inwardly, Amber cursed a blue streak. Why did she have to keep running into people who knew Kimber? There was no easy way to explain what happened to Kimber, much less when she had no proof of her claims.

"There's no easy way to say this…uh…*Lefty,* right?" The con's face fell in disbelief. "Kimber's… she's gone…I'm not her, I'm someone else entirely." Lefty gaped at her, then turned to Raphael.

"Am-nee-ja, huh?" he asked without asking; Raph shook his head.

"Nope," the hulking ninja admitted with no lack of bitterness. "She's tellin' da truth—Kimbuh's gone, dead, an' dis Ambuh chick woke up in'er body. Been like a bad sci-fi movie, really…if Masta Splinta hadn't seen it 'iself, I wouldn't believe it either." The fact that Raphael spoke up in her defense was
not lost on Amber; that he did so after so long of stubbornly believing she was lying about the whole Amber-Kimber fiasco was bittersweet.

For a time, Lefty stared Raph down as though waiting for him to proclaim it a joke. Finally, something must have convinced him of the truth…that he was so easily able to wrap his head around that truth left Amber shaking her head. Of course, she had to remind herself, the con was staring down a giant humanoid turtle and New York was nearly taken over by an alien lunatic a few years ago—her world was almost out of mysteries, but strange things occurred in this new world all the time.

"Kimbuh…" Lefty looked like someone just punched him in the gut. "she's…gone? Dead? But—but how?!” Amber zoned out slightly as Donatello filled Lefty in on the old song and dance—Kimber going into hiding and faking her death only to freeze to death, Amber waking in Kimber's body, the myriad of misadventures between then and now, and finally, Northpaw tracking her down on Hun's orders and beating her senseless. By the time the tale wound down, Lefty was pacing and snarling to himself.

"If what ya say's true, Kimbuh's just anutha life Hun's gotta pay for." Steel blue eyes flashed to Raph's, full of an unexpected grudging respect. "Truman's got plenty a company, huh. Don't s'pose ya've found'is bandana, Meathead." In silent answer, Raph dug the ratty purple fabric out of his belt pouch and tossed it over; Lefty caught it one-handed and stood considering it a moment.

For just a moment, he could almost see its previous owner right before his eyes—curly red hair, bright green eyes, a perpetual smirk, and a row of purple rings lining one ear, all set off by the purple bandana tied around his brow. Truman was a tough guy and a helluva fighter, but he couldn't hack the initiation Hun set on him; in the months after his initiation, the redhead spiraled further and further into depression. By the time he stepped in front of an oncoming taxi, he'd become dependent on alcohol and amphetamines, and even the support of his lover couldn't pull him back from the brink.

Lefty never got over the loss, nor did he ever stop blaming Hun for Truman's death. That torn purple bandana, once a fixture on Truman's brow, became a fixture on Lefty's right bicep, reminding him every day why he wanted out of the Dragons. If not for Northpaw, he'd have dropped years ago; now, North was spiraling out of control as well—addicted to amphetamines and losing what little sanity he ever had—and they were running out of time.

"Dat settles it, huh," Lefty stated as he loped over to Amber…and tied the cherished bandana around her right wrist. She didn't quite comprehend the significance, but the brothers did. That scrap of fabric was the only thing left of Lefty's lost partner and he valued it more than his very life. He didn't know the woman in Kimber's body, but he'd cared for Kimber; so long as that body wore that fabric on one wrist, he'd never allow it to come to harm.

"Hun's gotta be taken out—da Dragons gotta be taken out'a da picture before more folks git hurt, ya got me?" Amber clutched the fabric tied around her wrist respectfully and nodded. "Nort' needs help—e's sick an' gettin' sick'a, an' he won't get any betta so long's e's doin' Hun's dirty work. If ya takin' down da Dragons…" He scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. "…Can't b'lieve I'm sayin it, huh…I want in."

Meanwhile, in a dark flat in Brooklyn, Beverly Hardy dragged herself from her bedroom to the kitchen for a midnight snack. With Bosco at her heels, she wearily dug through the cabinets only to notice a note on the fridge - a note in Leonardo's handwriting, alerting her to a meal he left for her. The foil-wrapped sandwich was proof he was there even though he didn't stay long enough to talk. It was a start, at least…maybe there was a chance he'd come around. The very thought made her smile;
go figure she'd fall for a turtle as blind as she'd become.

* In order: Mercy hates mush, (see Gallery of Memories "Mush,") Amber sucks at math but is good at cooking—see what I did there?—and 'Rom-com' is slightly derogatory slang for 'romantic comedy.'

**Roaster: Scotch slang. The definition I found is given as "Someone who is making a complete cunt of themselves."

***Flap: Scotch slang meaning "to become overly upset or worked up about something, beyond what others see as necessary." Amber grew up in a mixed-culture family - Scotch mother, Hick father, and surrounded by conflicting influences - so she's prone to twisting words to her liking. In this case, she mashed "flap" with "freaking out" and smartassed it.

# Amber's world is based on our own, and this drought actually occurred. I remember it pretty well though my area wasn't quite as badly hit. As badly as my city was ravaged by the drought - our aquifers are still pretty low and we've lost a couple local streams entirely - I can't even begin to imagine the kind of damage it wreaked on small towns, especially those, like fictional Willsdale, which are dependent on agriculture.

## One thing Amber, Mercy, my hubby Cold, and I all have in common: we're smartasses. Cold and I have a friend who always points out 'It's _' when he calls our cellphones. He's quite aware that his name and face display when he calls our phones and he even has his own special ringtone, so it's become habit for whomever answers to respond with somethin' like "Naw, ya don't say." He's so used to Cold answering the phone as 'Santa Claus' and 'Lucky the Leprechaun' that he doesn't even bat an eye. What a sport, really!
26: Renovation, Revelation, and Realization

Chapter Summary

Amber needs to get laid. Doc Morris meddles. Mercy makes an ass of herself and finds a purpose, Raph is an ass and feels heroic. Donnie and Amber manage to have a meaningful discussion without fighting about it. Neither gets laid.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Hope everyone's having a great week so far—things have been a little easier lately in Real Life and it's been getting easier to write because of it. Won't bore ya with details either way. I wanted to give a shout-out to my newest totally awesome reviewer shelshokd, to the awesome readers who've already left reviews on here, and to the equally awesome AO3 commenters CathInTheBox, mim, and shelshokd. Y'all're so sweet and encouraging—thank you so much for your encouragement and kind words! This chapter's dedicated to all my amazing readers, reviewers, and commenters, and if you haven't yet, be sure to check out "Gallery of Memories" for Raph and Mercy's one-shot "Mush!"

WARNINGS include language, alcohol, addiction to it, and Amber mentally being a pervert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Sixx:A.M. "Are You With Me?"

26: Renovation, Revelation, and Realization

The sound of metal on stone rang through the Lair, one loud concussion following another as it had all morning. The first stages of renovations were well underway, starting with the old 'ladies' room. Amber's first glimpse of the derelict washroom made her realize why it was locked away in the first place. Broken porcelain fixtures, chipped Pepto-pink paint on the walls, and crumbling pink and black tile decked the room forgotten before Beatlemania swept the nation. If a bathroom could cause nightmares, that one could.

On first sight, she couldn't get out of there quickly enough; now, days later, she wanted little more than to be in that accursed pink and black room. After all, Donatello was in there with Raphael, breaking out damaged plaster and fixtures; after all, she was still somewhat crutch-bound and borderline useless. What kept her from volunteering? 'Me, m'self, an' Moi,' she admitted with a silent grumble. If she insisted on being present, she'd probably end up in the way and relegated to passing tools…and no way in Hell would she stoop to passing tools when she was perfectly knowledgeable in how to use them!

Of course…she winced. Men had a tendency to do hard work topless—and though they looked different, the turtles were, after all, men. Not for the first time, Amber turned bright red from her
inner musings. Donatello...topless...probably sweaty and breathless from wielding a sledgehammer, jackhammer, or some other undeniably masculine tool. In her mind's eye, he dashed perspiration from his brow in a decidedly macho fashion, yanking off and tossing away his bright yellow hardhat. Canvas trousers riding low on his hips he downed half a bottle of water then poured the rest over his head. Water dripped obscenely down his neck and shoulders as he turned blazing hazel-brown eyes to her. Hazel veered more toward green in the suddenly brighter room and she felt her heart pounding in agreement, sure she was about to wind up bent over a horribly tacky pink—

"Is this a bad time?" A polite cough from the computer speakers startled her back to reality; on the other end of the video connection, Dr. Mark Morris wore a deceptively innocent smile and what looked to be a salsa stain on his lapel. Amber cleared her throat and willed herself not to develop a life-threatening nosebleed; knowing her luck, she'd get flung backward from the force and wind up with a concussion.

"Nope," she answered too quickly with a slight squeak to her voice. "N-Never better!" Doc clearly didn't believe her but didn't argue. Just as he was about to pry further Donatello—far from topless and looking more Village People than Macho Man—shuffled through the door headed to the coffee pot, pausing only to glance at her. As so often before, the coffee ran out before his cup ran out and he stared dejectedly down into his mug considering brewing a fresh pot. Amber could practically hear it as though he was saying it: 'Why's the rum always gone?' Of course, Donnie wouldn't get the reference; she had yet to see any sign of Pirates of the Carribean in this dog-forsaken world.

"Donatello, how good to see you!" Amber blanched, shooting Doc Morris a frantic glance. "You seem busy, hm?" Donnie gave Dr. Morris a smile as he went about refilling the coffeemaker.

"Yeah," he answered with a shrug. "Just some repairs, nothing serious. I didn't realize Amber had an appointment today." The shrewd hazel stare he fixed on her managed to make her blood boil in anger and arousal at the same time—how could he always do that, she wondered?

"I didn't," she explained blandly, staring him down just as intently as did. "I just figured a quick checkup couldn't hurt—or do I need to clear all appointments with my guardians first?" Don rolled his eyes and sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. A moment later the coffee pot was going and he bid farewell to Dr. Morris, retreating again to the ladies' room repairs. Even after he was no longer visible, Amber stared in the direction he went, recalling how easy their friendship was before they blew it to Hell and back.

"Trouble in paradise?" Mark asked gently; Amber winced, avoiding the LCD representation of his stormy blue eyes.

"It's been three months now," she admitted softly. "Three months ago to the day...I miss him."

"You miss him?" the balding man asked with a humoring smile. "How can you miss him? He's right there with you—he even came to check on you." Amber shook her head in denial.

"No, he ran out'a coffee." Mark's smile clearly stated 'Whatever you need to tell yourself,' but she refused to take the bait. "We were closer than close for so long, Doc—I trusted him with my whole heart—with everything—an' it was a mistake." Morris leaned back in his desk chair and clasped his thick hands together patiently.

"You have the better of me, Dear," he reminded gently. "I wasn't even aware you two were close—perhaps you could fill me in?" Her paranoid fears of vulnerability screamed for her to run the other way; her heart, however, was tired of running. Once she'd filled him in—at least as much as she could without delving into the 'new life new world' bullshit she still hadn't told him about—she finally met his 'eyes' again.
"I trusted'im, Doc," she admitted softly. "I love'im an' tried tellin'im but he didn't understand—he thought I was tryin' to manipulate'im. It was hard enough lettin'im in in the first place…fightin' like this's killin' me, but I just can't let'im in again, not yet!" Mark hummed in thought, scratching his double chin.

"Does it occur to you that he's not the only one at fault?" he asked shrewdly. "True, he betrayed your trust—analyzed your interactions like an experiment instead of simply asking and insisting—but you didn't exactly volunteer the information, whatever it was."

"I know," she sighed, staring through the utility room door. "Honestly, I'm more at fault than he is." Doc's carefully blank expression slipped for a moment in surprise before smoothing over again. "If I'd just told'im from the beginning, I wouldn't'a been keepin' that secret, he wouldn't'a gotten suspicious, an' we wouldn't'a blown up all over each other like we did! We'd still be thick's thieves, not at odds like we are!"

"It's easy to see where we went wrong," Doc reminded gently. "Knowing what to do is much harder in the moment than in retrospect. Instead of focusing on what we cannot change, we must focus on what we can change." Amber nodded.

"Yeah…I'm just not ready to try again, but not just out'a fear'a gettin' hurt again. Doc," she shook her head, her lip curling in frustration. "I'm a mess right now, I'm fifty shades'a fucked up! I'm stuck halfway between a past I can't erase an' a future that ain't lookin' much brighter, an' I'm still fightin' the same flaws I've always fought! Donnie…" She blushed, turning away in embarrassment. "He deserves better—so much better!—an' until I can get my head on straight, can be the sort'a person who'll build'im up instead'a bring'im down, I' just gotta keep my distance…no matter how much it hurts."

Before Doc Morris could reply, Donatello ducked back into the room heading straight for the coffee maker. Amber's heart throbbed in longing but she forced herself not to look at him. A long-forgotten song rang through her mind amidst the sounds of Donnie setting up his coffee.

\[
\text{Pacing the floor, detest, sweat pouring down my chest, still, I can't love you less.} \]

Against her will, her eyes snuck away from the portly man on the other end of the video-chat connection and considered the turtle sweetening his coffee.

She waited a lifetime for him; she could wait a while longer.

About an hour after her appointment with Doc Morris, Raphael stalked through the kitchen doorway and scanned the room in concern. Startled by his sudden appearance, Amber slapped an arm over her latest journal entry. "Raph, hey," she greeted with a nervous smile. "Lose somethin'?" A nervous tic in his jaw counted down the seconds before he answered.

"Ya seen Mercy today?" Though he was clearly attempting to appear unbothered by the blonde's absence, Amber saw right through it; she closed the journal and leaned back in her chair.

"Bout an hour ago," she replied then paused for a pull at her glass of Scotch; God how she loved that stuff! "She's fine, just off on a piss." Raph snarled at her answer, gritting his teeth so hard she almost expected his signature toothpick to explode in a spray of splinters.

"I checked da bathroom," he argued lowly. "She ain't gone fer a piss—she's just gone!" For a moment Amber just blinked at him, then realized the confusion.

"Sorry," she sighed, rubbing her neck in embarrassment. "She went for a walk—on a piss means for a walk." While he pondered her odd behavior she muttered to herself, though whether she was
chastising herself or him he couldn't tell. "So what's goin' on?" she asked pushing the bottle toward him in suggestion; he looked like he needed a drink more than she did. Sure enough, he dropped into the chair directly opposite hers…and took a deep swig straight from the bottle. "Haw, now!" Amber scolded gruffly yanking the bottle away and cradling it against her chest like a child facing doll-stealing bullies. "Whate'er happened it ain't worth roo-nin' the rest—if ya jus' wanna get pished, gitcher own!"

"Pished?" he repeated in a tone dripping with sarcasm only to shake his head and growl under his breath. "Whateva—I'm wastin' time, I gotta find'er before she's gone fa good!" Right as he lunged to his feet, Amber swept one leg out from under him with her foot; he crashed back down into his chair in a pile and stared across the table at the insistent brunette in disbelief.

"Raph," she asked sternly. "What's wrong? What's got ya worried she'll take off?" Right before her eyes, several emotions swept over his face in succession: anger, fear, angst, then finally, bitterness.

"Ya di'n't tell me she's anti-booze," he snapped back at her. "She smelled yer rotgut on me an' freaked out." Finally, things were making sense, Amber realized tiredly. The night before, she helped Raph and Mikey with dinner prep and shared a nip of Scotch with the former while cutting up vegetables.# Mikey, oddly enough, was content to just sit and sniff the bottle cap. Amber was incredibly, ridiculously, stereotypically fond of the stuff but she didn't see herself sitting around huffing it…unless, of course, she ran out. Again, why's the rum always gone?

"Mercy smelled booze on ya," she repeated softly. "an' 'freaked out?' Surely—don't tell me she called ya 'Ma?'" Raph's dubious cringe answered her question without a doubt. "Good. Hon, Mercy's not anti-booze but she's not altogether fond of it—she's seen firsthand what addiction can do to folks an' what that does to their fam'ly." Amber stared down at her now-closed journal recalling the visit that sparked the friends' PTSD ban list. "Still…she is an addict, ya know," she reminded him quietly.

"It ain't her fault!" Raph argued his nostrils flaring. "She di'n't have no choice i—" Amber cut him off with a placating gesture.

"I'm not sayin' that," she reassured, "I'm just sayin' she's got more goin' on than any'a us knows—if yer worried about'er, jus' ask'er. As fer where she's gone," she gave a pointed laugh while jabbing her thumb back toward the utility room. "Dee chipped'er, remember?" Technically he put a tracking chip in the blonde's right sneaker, but Amber suspected Mercy would have appreciated the irony. She did miss the ranch, after all, and it was common to chip pets and livestock.

"She's just south of the defunct rail yard," Donatello revealed from the doorway; Amber whirled about to stare him down in disbelief, surprised she'd actually pointed right at him instead of in the general direction he'd gone. Finding that words weren't coming to her, she shot him a stink-eye glare and harrumphed into her mostly empty glass.

"Blasted sleekit speccy," she grumbled weakly. "Always sneakin' up on me…yer lucky Kimber's got a good heart." Instead of responding, Donnie single-handedly pulled up his tracking app, located Mercy's beacon, then sent the info to Raph's phone, all without even setting down his coffee.

"Go get her, Bro," he teased with a wide lopsided smirk that made Amber's ovaries sing the Halleluiah Chorus. The moment Raphael was out the door, Don invited himself to the table with a refill of coffee. "So," he commented with deceptive disinterest. "Mercy's 'off on a piss,' my brother's 'getting pished,' and I'm a—what was that?—a 'sleekit specky?'## Amber blushed under his scrutiny, fiddling with the end of one grey-streaked braid; it wasn't exactly a compliment, but it wasn't much of an insult either, not that he'd know it. "You've been behaving…oddly lately."
"I' been behavin' oddly since I hit Junior High, Dee," Amber retorted dryly. "This's the most 'me' I' been since I was a kid." Shrewd hazel eyes—veering green in the bright overhead light—stared her down demanding further answers. "I'm serious—ask Mercy if ya don't believe me." She cringed. "Kids're terrors even when most'a yer family don't talk funny; everyone but my Dad 'talked funny' an' I got bullied over it. 'ventually I managed to squash my 'different-ness' enough to fit in, but I never realized how much I gave up in the process." Green darted away from hazel set off by a bright red blush. "You helped me realize that—realize I lost more'n I gained."

"So this is you not hiding," he summed up when it became clear she wasn't ready to add more. She met his eyes with a weak smile.

"This's me trying," she admitted. "I'm tryin', Dee, but I'm fightin' literally decades of bad habits here." Realizing what she just revealed, she winced. "Verbal do-over—just ignore the 'decades' part."

"Wha—why?" No amount of staring made him back down; she was trying to quit hiding her less-than-pretty sides, though. After a minute of frantic over-thinking, she did what she did best: she blurted it out in one big awkward mess.

"Thirty-five." Once it snuck out, though, she 'eeped' and slapped her hands over her mouth, wincing when it made her healing cheek throb. "ACK! I mean—I mean—Ah, shite!" Funny how Scotch never loosened her lips unless Donnie was around; Freud would probably claim she wanted him to know all the things that slipped out of her mouth, but she wasn't so sure.~~ For a moment, Don sat silently, considering the bombshell she accidentally dropped. Finally, he jabbed his thumb at himself.

"Twenty-five," he announced with a one-armed shrug. "They're just numbers, Amber—age doesn't have to define you unless you let it. Besides, the body you're in is ten years younger, too." That turtle, she decided with a forced scowl, was either going to get kissed or slapped… and she wasn't sure which, yet. Sensing that she was clamming up again, he hoisted his hand out of his chair intent on returning to work. "Just be careful, Braids. It's important to be true to yourself…don't let your desire for change make you into someone you're not."

Perhaps she didn't have to worry about him not liking the 'real' her after all.

Thudding bass, screaming guitars, and wailing vocals filled Mercy's ears as she padded along the dark ground, flashlight trained on the path before her. The blonde still wasn't crazy about the new world she found herself in but at least Raph was helping her find music more to her tastes. Already she'd filled the MP3 player from Kimber's locker with a plethora of music—Sixx:A.M., Fallout Boy, Reaver, Thinkin' Dark, Breaking Benjamin—even after all the new bands she'd found, though, she missed her old favorites—especially Quiet Riot and Black Sabbath. Every chance she got, the earbuds were in and the tunes were blasting.

"Hey, everybody needs somebody – wants somebody –
Hey, everybody cracks and bleeds
So hit your knees
And pray that help is on the way!
Everybody pray that help is on the way!"

Raph was the one who introduced her to the band—he introduced her to a lot of her new favorites. Raphael...the name brought a faint blush to her cheeks. If not for years of abuse, she'd totally have jumped that turtle by now. Back on the ranch, she was always too busy with the livestock and her garden to daydream about her 'perfect man; now she can't fight the suspicion that the hulking ninja fits the bill. He was strong—stupid strong—but he didn't really waste time in posturing for her.
Outside of training, he didn't push her around, and though he wasn't quite to Donnie's caliber of intelligence, he was no idiot. He was gruff but kind—he was aggressive but he could be gentle—he was impatient but when it really mattered, he always came through for her.

"Even though we're damaged goods
I would love you if I could
But you are so unalarmed
By my unfortunate charm." ~~~

"I really don't need that right now," she grumbled aloud jamming the skip button. She was already struggling with the tension between them—the last thing she needed was a reminder of how much her body was yearning for something she'd never had before. "GAH!" she snarled shaking her head and skipping song after song; why on earth did so many of the songs on the device have mush between the screams? It just wasn't right! "This is nuts! I'm stronger'n this!" Of course, if she was stronger than her body—Donna Mays' body—why was she jonesing for alcohol when she hated the stuff with a passion?

She'd never liked alcohol—hated the taste, hated the smell, hated what it did to people when it took control of them—but ever since she woke up under that bridge, every time she smelled booze she wanted nothing more than to drink every last drop. Her body was an addict and every time she smelled alcohol on Daron's, Raph's, and even Amber's breath, she had to stay away. Every time she smelled Amber's Scotch, Daron's bourbon, or Casey's beer on Raph, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into his lap and steal every last dreg from his lips. It wasn't really spelled out but she and Raph promised to take it slow; at this rate, she'd wind up breaking that promise.

Mercy stumbled—as loudly as she was thinking, she never noticed the gleaming metal rail crossing her path until she wound up face-down in the coarse chat lining the rail bed. Sometime between one curse and the next, she realized where she was—her eyes widening fearfully, she turned first one way then the other searching for the train surely on its way. A distant rumble neared her—a subway tram, she realized frantically—she scrambled to her feet and darted toward the head-height platform at the edge of the rail bed. There was no ladder, no steps, no quick way up to safety. The tram roared closer and closer and Mercy's mind raced faster and faster.

Surely she didn't survive an EF-5 tornado only to be flattened by a train?!

As Raphael neared the abandoned rail yard, a blood-curdling shriek split the air. His blood ran cold. "Mercy?!" With a quick glance at the screen of his cell phone, the map projected on it, and the blinking beacon that marked the blonde's location. "Hang on, Kid!" he shouted ahead in hopes she could hear him. "I'm—"

He skidded to a halt staring in disbelief. Right before his eyes, the blonde was jumping and scrabbling for the edge of the platform, frantically glancing up the tracks as though her doom was about to tear around the corner. Raph peered around for whatever danger drew the ear-piercing screech from her lungs only to come up empty. "What's'a matta, Blondie?" he asked with a blank expression.

"T-Train!" she wheezed even as she leaped up for the edge again. "Rails—move!" Finally, it hit her—the loud rumbling train had passed by without ever coming down the track she was trapped in. Feeling like a complete and utter noob, she slumped back against the wall she'd been trying to scale and fixed a pinched scowl on the smug ninja. Her heaving chest and flushed face weakened the impact but she was too tired to care. "Defunct track?" she asked dryly; surely enough, he gave her a smirk that she wanted to wipe off his face.

"Fer years," he teased. "Ain't been a train through here since the fiddies, Kid."
"Why ya always callin' me Kid, Kid?" she retorted even as her cheeks heated. "Donna's twenty-six, Jerkface!" He bristled somewhat at the idea that she inhabited a body a year older than he was; was he always destined to be the younger one?! "—An' I was eight years older before I died!" The reminder of her death made both of them wince and she turned an abashed stare to the wall of the platform; way to make things awkward, she chastised herself silently. "Never mind," she mumbled. "Mind gettin' me out'a here?" With a humoring smirk, he snagged the lost flashlight and swaggered over to her.

"Hang onta this, Blondie," he warned tucking the light under her chin and her arms around his neck. This close her scent—clean sweat, floral scented soap and shampoo, and the fresh scent of herbs, soil, and greenery—filled his nose and lungs. Shaking off the come-hither effect the unique Eau-de-Mercy had on him, he latched onto her waist and swept her off her feet.

Her squawk at the sudden change in altitude sharpened into a shriek when he leaped up onto the platform in a single lunge. The moment his feet left the rail bed, she latched onto his neck for dear life, digging her nails into his tough skin as though something was about to rip her right out of his arms. It made him feel inexplicably strong and masculine, like a warrior of old defending his lady; the moment the thought finished, he felt like slapping Mikey, certain the younger turtle was to blame for him getting soft.

Once her feet met the platform—land, precious land!—Mercy shoved away from Raph and glared at him looking as fussy as a wet cat. "You did that on purpose!" she snapped, and he chuckled in reply.

"Ya know it," he teased in return. "Yer neva livin' dat down, ya know dat right?" Clasping his hands by his face in a mockery of the typical damsel in distress, he cried in a squeaky voice, "Oh, Ra-fay-el! Save my weak lil' self from da train! Hurry, please!" The blonde glowered at him as he dissolved into laughter. "Nope, neva livin' it down!" In her previous life, Mercy could make the toughest ranch hand whine with a single punch; in this life, his bicep nearly broke her knuckles.

"Bloody Mary!" she swore shaking the sting from her fingers while Raph cut up. "What're ya made of, rock?!" Clearly, she realized, she was just embarrassing herself, and so changed the subject. "What is this place anyway? That echo's pretty loud." Raph's laughter faded into a snicker as he ambled over to the far wall and popped open a warped breaker box; a couple switches later, bright fluorescent track lighting buzzed to life lighting the massive, cavernous room. Mercy stared around her in complete disbelief at the treasure she stumbled on.

The whole of the place was over twice the size of a football field and intersected with several recessed rail beds and interchanges. Each rail bed was flanked by platforms ranging from head-height to waist-height; platforms were lined with various bits of obsolete repair equipment. Overhead soot-stained metal-grate platforms overlooked the various areas, lined with even more damaged equipment. Electrical outlets and damaged fire sprinklers dotted the ceiling, walls, and grating; power cords, rubbish, and water hoses lay abandoned. Several old subway cars—most burned beyond use—waited for repair in their respective lanes.

"Where are we?" Mercy asked in awe as she took in her scorched surroundings. "This place's amazing!" Raph leaned against a control terminal with a cocky smile.

"Old rail yard," he explained simply. "Dey brought da cars here fer washin' an' fixin' 'til some asshole torched da place." He shrugged. "Dey couldn't prove it wasn't an electric fire, so dey closed up shop an' moved on; da station we live in was abandoned a year'a so afta." Even as he explained the purposes for the mangled machinery, Mercy's mind ran miles a minute. Memories of her previous life inspired her—memories of her vast 'kitchen' garden, local corn and soy fields, neighbors who coaxed produce from vines, bushes, and even trees—Mercy was floored by her epiphany. Raphael
realized she wasn't listening but before he could get a word out, she answered his question under her breath:

"It's...It's a greenhouse!" she murmured breathlessly, staring around the cavern and already picturing it overrun by fruits, vegetables, herbs, and even flowers. Amber-golden eyes widened in disbelief.

"Da fuck?" he asked glancing around without seeing anything but a ruin. "Dis ain't no garden—it's a dump!" Despite his insistence, Mercy's blue eyes lit up in excitement and she rushed around to the various lanes.

"It's a goldmine!" she argued with a wide grin. "Think about it—this place was condemned an' abandoned—no one'll ever come'ere again! The rail beds're perfect for produce! Gut'em, improve the drainage, pile in enough rock'n dirt, an' you kin grow jus'about an'ynthin'—corn, melons, tomatoes—might even be deep enough for fruit trees!" She eagerly inspected the grated mezzanine and the intact portions of the sprinkler system. "With sufficient repair, the sprinkler system could be repurposed as an irrigation system—plants can be grown under fluorescent lighting, too, and ya've already got a ton'a workin' fixtures up there—" Raph's heart raced at the blatant joy and hope in Mercy's eyes and the wide, toothy grin she wore. Her eyes gleamed as she proclaimed in glee, "With a little work, I could grow produce fer us—I could fine'ly pull my own weight around here!"

Raphael wasn't sure what she was suggesting was possible, but if it meant keeping that gleam in her eyes, he was all for it.

"You know," Donatello remarked rubbing his chin in thought, "it just might work." Not long after Mercy's declaration, Raphael called his brother down to the yard to hear her proposal; after about ten minutes of examining the surroundings with that in mind, the genius was impressed. He and his brothers found the abandoned rail yard when they first found the station they'd build a home in, but they saw no further than what they could salvage from it. Several rooms in the Lair were built from tram cars from that yard, but for the most part, everything else was as good as scrap. Leave it to a country girl to realize they were sitting on a gold mine.

"Dere ain't gonna be anyone comin' down'ere, eitha, right?" Raph pressed almost as eagerly as Mercy—not quite, though, seeing as the blonde was darting from one rail bed to the next mentally calculating what plants needed what planting dimensions and light exposure. Don nodded with a slowly spreading smile.

"Yeah—after that so-called electrical fire, the city wouldn't waste any more time on it, even for repairs. No one's set foot in that place since it was condemned, no one but us at least." Eager hazel eyes focused on the excited blonde already lugging debris into the near corner. "It's rare to find something useful so hidden from the public eye, and it's ours for the taking...and with the proper precautions, even the increased electrical and water usage could be explained away." It hit both turtles at once and they voiced the answer in unison.

"Verne."

'Til next time, Folks!
The sad part? Even far from NYC city governments are ridiculously prone to pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into big, extravagant structures only to abandon them completely because upkeep turns out too pricey. The New York area is reportedly mined with subway stations, platforms, and tunnels that have been abandoned over expenses and even my small city is full of derelict buildings left to rot over expenses. I must say something in my hometown's defense, though; like many former mining towns, ours was built on top of a labyrinth of minshafts and we abandon more old buildings on account of sinkholes and shifting foundations than straight 'it's too expensive' BS. Plus, we've got some major urban renewal trends going on - we have fewer unoccupied, derelict buildings now than in the previous thirty years, and NOT because we bulldozed the cruddiest ones! :D Yay for urban renewal!

*** Amber translated ***
(Mostly Scottish slang with a little Hick-ese thrown in)
Off on a piss – taking a walk
# A nip of Scotch – a single measure of Scotch Whisky
Roo-nin' – Ruining (Hick-ese) TECHNICALLY most varieties of liquor have high enough alcohol content to drink straight from the bottle without worry about leaving germs; the thing to watch for is BACKWASH which'll render even the finest liquor disgusting. :S
Gitcher – Get your (Also Hick-ese)
## Pished – drunk
Sleekit – sly or untrustworthy, or in this case, prone to sneaking around
Speccy – someone who wears glasses

*** Notes ***
~ The Grass Roots "Wait a Million Years"
~~ Freudian slip: an unintentional error regarded as revealing subconscious feelings.
~~~ Sixx:A.M. "Help is on the Way"
27: A Taste Without Tears

Chapter Summary

Vern's screwed. Bree has an awful day that gets better, shenanigans ensue. Donnie conducts another experiment, Amber STILL needs to get laid, more shenanigans ensue. Weird shit happens.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Hope everyone's been having a great week so far. I've got good news for ya! You readers have been so awesome and supportive and PATIENT that I can't keep jerking a certain couple around much longer. FINALLY you get some Donnie and Amber shenanigans, yay! Not full-out horizontal mambo shenanigans but still shenanigans. I know ya didn't come here to read me blabber so hope y'all enjoy the new chapter! This chapter dedicated to chunky chicks worldwide—Donnie's right, big can be beautiful if the inside isn't ugly.

Warnings include language, major spoilers for "Out of the Shadows," and ADULT SITUATIONS. Nothing majorly graphic, but if you're under 18 ya might go blind. Don't say I didn't warn ya!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Red "Start Again," Pat Benatar "All Fired Up," REO Speedwagon "Can't Fight This Feeling"

27: A Taste Without Tears

June 24th, Brooklyn.

Vern Fenwick's day started out fine—he woke up early, beat the crowd to his favorite coffee shop, and even managed to arrive on time for the appointment with the Barbux Coffee Advertising team. From there, however, everything went south. The secretary outed him for dumping an empty Donut Heaven coffee cup in the lobby trash, painted him as being 'disloyal' to his impending business partners, and lost him the commercial deal. When he retreated with his proverbial tail between his legs, a crazy cabbie sprayed him with muddy water instead of stopping. When he finally got a taxi, he'd like to've gagged from how badly the car and cabby smelled. By the time he finally got back to his loft, he was sure his day couldn't get any worse.

…Then he found April, Donatello, and Leonardo in his living room…and gave a decidedly feminine screech of surprise. A cup of coffee and mustard sandwich later, he sat glaring at the two ninja-nuisances across the coffee table. They only came to him when they wanted something and boy did they want something this time. "Lemme get this straight," he grumbled into his mug. "You want me to buy an abandoned warehouse in Brooklyn and put something there."
"One specific building," Donatello piped up helpfully. "And specifically something that'll use massive amounts of water and electricity." Vern glared up at him; Donnie shrugged. "It's relevant." The older man gave a sarcastic smile and shook his head.

"Do I even wanna know?" he asked scrubbing one palm along his stubbled jaw. "Real estate ain't my thing. I'm a cameraman—"

"A camera wingman," April pointed out in a huff. "You haven't been behind a camera since Shredder was arrested, you've been in front of them!" With a smug expression, he leaned back in his chair and gestured vaguely to her.

"Jealous, O'Neil?" he teased. "How's that froth and foam coming?" April glared at him; clearly, he saw her recent coverage of the women's gym that opened in Manhattan. "No trampolines, granted, but you really rocked those yoga pants."

"Guys, come on," Leo reprimanded. "Vern, we know it's asking a lot, but it's important. There's an abandoned railyard right below that building and we're going to be using it a lot in the future—if there's nothing upstairs, the electricity and water usage and heat output will draw attention from the authorities." Vern visibly wilted.

"If you're growing pot, I'm not covering for ya.* While Leo was still stammering in disbelief and outrage Donnie blurted out,

"Vegetables!" He gave an appalled cringe. "Mercy's offered to grow fresh produce to feed the family—she grew up in the country and has some experience!" As the blonde's name sunk in, Vern visibly perked up. Mercy…that was a woman's name!

"Ya got a chick living with ya?" He gave a sharp laugh. "That's why you guys're going through groceries like this?"

"Technically," Don admitted lowly, "the count's up to three humans—Mercy, Amber, and for the meantime, Daron. We're going through groceries like crazy, but if Mercy can grow produce it'll make supplies last longer…and it'll cost you less in the long run." It was right on the tip of his tongue, but he decided that reminding Vern why he was now 'stupid-rich' wasn't in their best interests. Vern visibly debated it a moment, running one hand nervously over his buzz-cut.

"Can it wait 'til next week?" he finally asked. "I've got a check comin' in then—royalties—and I can't put a lot of money into this, either, maybe 5k tops." April rolled her eyes.

"Vern," she reminded shortly, "You've already made a killing selling bags of your own breath—peddle some toenail clippings or something!" His first inclination was to rise to her bait just as he always had, but thought the better of it; after all, he was now more than the sassy sidekick and she was always more than a petulant reporter. Just in time he tore his eyes away from her neckline and stared into his mug. He missed their playful arguing.

It would be a real gamble—going along with the turtles' scheme could end very, very badly for him…but if he was honest with himself, without them he'd never have been more than an overworked and underpaid cameraman. He was rich—stupid rich—and living the kind of life he'd never expected to live, but without their intervention, he'd still be poor as dirt and eating mustard sandwiches for monetary rather than nostalgic reasons. His mind made up, he smirked up at Leonardo.

"I'm not making any promises," he said smoothly without betraying a hint of his true feelings. "But I'll see what I can do…with conditions, of course." April, clearly having expected this, face-palmed,
and he ticked off his conditions on long skinny fingers. "Keep me in the loop—if I see the railyard beforehand, I'll be able to plan around it. You're introducing me to your lady-friends, both of 'em. Make sure this cockamamie plan of yours actually decreases the grocery bill. And lastly, depending on what you grow in this garden of yours—" He threw up 'air quotes' for good measure. "Don't be stingy—share the good stuff. Oh, and no pot."

Leonardo was suddenly glad he'd left Michelangelo at home; his brother would probably have piped up with something like "Oh, so kettle's okay?" which wouldn't have done anything more than annoy him. Ice blue eyes turned to Donatello; the genius nodded. "We have a deal, then," Leo acknowledged lowly. "We're in your debt, Vern." Vern laughed as he stood to usher the out the window.

"You're gonna die there, ya know," he teased. "I'm chargin' interest." April socked him in the arm as she passed him, but he caught a teasing smile afterward; it was good to see that being rich didn't change everything.

About an hour after the trio left, Vern stared in dismay at the screen of his laptop. Before he did any research on the building in question, he was sure the plan would work. That, however, was before he found out that the building was condemned because of a fire, gutted and left to rot, and heavily infested with bugs and rats, and the price tag was still in the eight-digit range. 'Who'd pay 20 million for that heap?!' he wondered in disgust, his eyes riveted to a full-color photograph of a massive rat nest in the remains of a shattered support beam. Clearly, the turtles hadn't done any real checking out of the building before approaching him about it! **

He wanted to help—really, he did!—but… His eyes drifted to a shadowbox hung on the living room wall and the ostentatious metal key displayed inside; he sobered, considering the object and the reason it was on his wall in the first place. He stilled.

"Bah," he scoffed reaching for his cell phone and dialing the number from the online ad. "I'm so screwed."

At one time, Bree Hardy looked forward to her hours at the childcare center; years later, she finally understood why her boss always looked like she'd gone five rounds with an angry cat. With Summer on the way the kids in the daycare were being even more ill-behaved than usual and that, in short, meant she had to work harder than ever to reign them in. So, after another long afternoon of Kid Practice, she wanted nothing more than to spend what remained of the day with her boyfriend.

Michelangelo, however, was still confined to the Lair with the rest of his family. They'd had an admittedly brief visit—barely more than a quickie in the closet—on the seventh, but on the way home, Leo spotted heavy Purple Dragon activity too close to home for comfort. Reportedly the whole family was on homebound for the time being…which meant no nookie for Bree…dang-it. Almost pouting at the thought, Bree slammed the front door, chucked her keys into the wooden bowl on the hall-stand, then for good measure, stomped into the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

"Rough day?" Beverly asked from the kitchen table, her dark eyes grinning over the screen of her laptop; sure enough, Bree let out a loud groan and slumped into the chair opposite her cousin, leaving only her glaring eyes visible above her crossed arms.

"Lemme put it this way," Bree grumbled into her arms. "I picked a heckuva week to go on a diet." Stunned by Bree's admission, Bev gingerly shut the laptop and stared her down over it.

"You?" Bev asked giving her cousin a quick once-over; she couldn't detect any sign of weight gain, so why the sudden interest in losing it? "Since when do you diet? Since when do you need to diet?"
Bree blew a lock of ash brown hair out of her face in annoyance and answered dryly, "Since an anorexic intern asked if it's a boy." Bev snorted before she could stop it. "Traitor," Bree groused.

"Bree-a-may," Beverly chuckled shaking her head. "You're not fat. You're petite and curvy—curves show up easily on petite women." Feeling mischievous, she waited for her cousin to take a sip of her water then pointed out, "Mike certainly seems to approve." With impeccable timing, she ducked to the side to avoid the water spray and grinned like a Cheshire cat while Bree beat it out of her lungs.

"That was mean!" Bree whined between coughs but couldn't hold her feigned insult long and dissolved into laughter. For a time, the two chatted and teased one another, then Bree got it into her head to make another batch of Snickerdoodles—the house favorite. As she leafed through her recipe box, though, her phone rang with the theme song of some old side-scroll video game—Mikey!—and with an excited grin at Beverly, she ducked into her bedroom to answer. # "Hey, Sweetheart," she greeted as she locked the door. "Missed me?"

"You know it," Mikey returned as she flopped onto her still-made bed. "Still on lockdown—this sucks!" Seeming to realize he was complaining, he asked, "So how was your day?"

"I got called pregnant by a skinny intern and she still has her teeth," she answered blandly. "You tell me."

"Don't tell me you started a diet, Bree." Before, she could hear his grin as if she could see it right before her, but he was now dead serious. "You're not fat, Babycakes…you're perfect from head to toe." Bree grinned, sure she was blushing.

"Even my butt?" she teased already knowing his answer.

"Especially your butt!" Mikey proclaimed eagerly, and because he couldn't help himself, he propped his phone between his head and shoulder and with both hands visualized that very butt for his own benefit, adding a few 'virtual squeezes' for good measure. "It's perfect, so round and plump and squishy and—" As he lauded the merits of her posterior—then the rest of her—his energy and affection melted away the stresses of her rotten day. His family's safety came first, there was no doubt, but she really, really missed her Mikey.

Michelangelo stared up at the drab metal ceiling overhead, torn between happiness and loneliness. The source of the first, Bree chattering in his ear, was just barely enough to balance out the second. He missed her—missed the way her big brown eyes lit up when she saw him, the way her soft hands latched onto his neck when they kissed, the way the rest of her latched onto his everything when they—

Dammit. He was stuck at home with his brothers—he really didn't need to be thinking about that right now! Already feeling a little too big for his shell, he squirmed, hoping the pressure would go down on its own.

"Are you—Are you in bed?" Bree asked suddenly. Mikey gave a sheepish laugh.

"No….well, yeah," he admitted. "My chair's out a commission right now." Bree knew without asking that he'd piled comics and clothes on it again and was too lazy to clean it off; she was a bit of a neat freak so she couldn't understand why he'd be happy living in what she termed 'a pigsty.'

"You know," she pointed out innocently, "If you'd keep your room clean, you would have a chair—and you wouldn't lose things so much. -And didn't you say you found a spider under your bed the
other day?"

"Oh, that wasn't a problem." Bree could hear his grin through the line and felt her own lips match it. "I just put'im in Raph's room."

"Raph's the one afraid of bugs, right?" she giggled. "Oh, Mike, you're horrible!" Though their conversation was innocent, Mikey's 'problem' was only getting worse. If they didn't always wind up naked and tangled every time he visited, would he still wind up pitching a tent just from hearing her voice? He didn't have an answer. The pressure from keeping himself confined was getting more painful by the minute. Having reached his limit of tolerance, he flexed his pelvic muscles and dropped down, wincing at the sudden rasp of denim on skin; he knew he should'a worn gym shorts today.

"I miss ya, Angelcakes," he murmured unable to stop himself from adjusting his jeans—or, rather, his tent—with the heel of a hand. "Wish you were here—Wish Leo wasn't being such a butt about letting you and Bev into the family." He gave a hopeful smile. "You could'a been stayin' over instead'a wakin' up alone."

"Yeah." Bree sighed in his ear, then he heard rustling. "Miss you too, Blue…Miss ya so much it hurts."

Blue. Once the nickname confused him; the more they got to know one another, though, the more it made sense. Bree had lived a remarkably unremarkable life. She did well in school, she never really got into trouble, she never experienced any sort of crime more shocking than someone running a red light or keying her car—Mikey suspected she didn't even dream in color before he met her. For the most part, she only had three unusual things happen to her, the first being raised by a single father and her single uncle alongside Beverly, and the second, meeting Mikey and Leo while Bev first ended up in the hospital.

The third unexpected event came during her first years of college, in the form of a brown-haired blue-eyed Texan majoring in business management. At the time, Beverly was worried Rick and Bree were moving too fast and voiced her distrust of him, but Bree couldn't see it. It wasn't until she moved in with him that she realized Bev was right. When she moved back in with Bev almost a year later, she was traumatized—afraid of her own shadow—and unable to accept that what happened was really abuse. After all, she reasoned, Rick wasn't violent—his punches never touched her—and he didn't try to isolate her—except from family. No matter how many excuses she made for him, though, finally it sunk in…she made it out just in time.

Years after they broke up, the man she now referred to as "Dick" didn't have much of a hold on her unless one counted her bizarre Dick-spawned phobia. Blue eyes. Blue eyes, Southern accents, and the smell of cigarettes all triggered anxiety attacks of various intensities. The day they met, Mike and Leo had let themselves into the girls' loft to pick up some things for Bev, never realizing she didn't live alone. Two huge home invaders with vibrant blue eyes…Bree was petrified. She screamed her lungs out and even fainted, but because of their eyes rather than their general appearance. Now, Mikey's bluer than blue eyes, the very eyes she once feared, were comforting and calming, and the inspiration for her favorite pet name.

Briallen and Michelangelo shared a companionable silence for a moment, both wishing to be where the other was. On the other end of the line, Mikey thought he heard rustling and shuffling. "Hey, Hon?" Bree asked suddenly with feigned nonchalance. "Ya got your computer handy? There's something you've gotta see." Believing she was sending him either a cat video or a news clip, he dug out his battered notebook and logged on only to notice something odd. Had he really forgotten to shut down video-chat last time he used it? Wait…
A wide grin split his face at the blinking icon on his dashboard. Oh, Bree, you stinker, he thought with a chuckle; when she finally appeared before him that laughter died. Lying across her bed on her belly put her visible curves and moderate cleavage on display in the best of ways. Curly ash brown hair framed her big brown eyes and still-painted lips. "I have a problem, Dr. Angelo," she teased batting her eyes at him and hanging up the phone. "Can you help me?"

"Maybe," he shot back with a wolfish smile, stealthily adjusting himself again. "What might be this problem of yours?" She slyly uncrossed her arms and propped her chin on one palm, revealing she was, in fact, starkers.

"You see, Doctor, my…um…downstairs is…is wet…and…" Her face suddenly scrunched up.
"This is creepy. Just strip." While he complied with her order and made himself visible as well, he caught a glimpse of green over her right shoulder—the last paper promise he left her, but definitely not the last he'd ever leave. He'd hoped that Leo would realize Bev and Bree weren't going to hurt his family or be hurt because of his family; he'd hoped that with enough pushing, Leo would relent in his determination to shut them out. Mike had done nothing but push, wait, and push some more; desperate times call for desperate measures, and if he and Bree were kept apart like this much longer, he was going to go beyond desperate.

Funny how he trusted his girlfriend’s judgment better than his own brother's.

No matter how many times Amber looked in the fridge, it remained the same…mockingly empty of enough of anything to make a full meal. Not enough meat, cheese, vegetables…the only thing they had an excess of was space. It was well past time for a grocery run but everyone was grounded to the Lair until further notice. Yanking on the frizzy grey-streaked braid draped over her right shoulder, Amber stared down the fridge as though willing it to suddenly become full again.

It was nearing dinnertime and the entire household would need feeding—the turtles, of course, would be ravenous after an entire day of construction. Even though she, Daron, and Mercy hadn't done nearly as much, they spent most of the day clearing out the old railyard. Amber was ecstatic to have her legs back again—the ER orthopedist gave her a clean bill of health the other day and cut off her cast—but her feet were killing her after so long of not using them as much. In her mind, it was like starting work at Willsdale High after summer break - every year when school let out, she took on temp work a couple towns over, but by the time school started again, muscles she hadn't used were threatening to secede from the union.

Glaring venomously at the empty egg tray, she shuffled through her mental Rolodex for any possible recipes she could work with. Poultry and dumplings…she could throw in the last of the turkey with the last of the baked chicken…but they were out of eggs. They could substitute egg noodles or pasta but they didn't have enough to go around. Meatloaf…no, they didn't have any ground beef. Perhaps…or…maybe… Before she died, she never would have struggled so much with thinking this through; since her 'revival,' though, she couldn't get her thoughts straight and she was very easily distracted. Some random tool clattered to the floor in the ladies' room nearly sending her through the roof. She was, in short, sick to farking death of Post-Traumatic Stress and all its little ass-buddies.

A pair of heavy work boots clomped through the utility room door. "Hungry?" Donatello asked conversationally as he refilled his canteen at the sink. Amber, unfortunately, was distracted by more interesting things—the violet tails of his mask draping down his bare shoulder, a sheen of sweat glimmering on his arms, a dusting of plaster particles clinging to his suspenders, the lower rim of his carapace and the way his trousers stretched across the sliver of ass right below it— Suddenly, it occurred to her he had turned around and was giving her a strange look. "What? Have I got something on my pants?"
Amber choked, her face turning scarlet; God forbid he should figure out she liked him covered in grease and grit! As though oblivious to her frantic scrambling, he craned his neck to look over his shoulder, swiped a bandaged palm over his behind to dislodge any grease or dust, then studied his clean hand in confusion. "You see it, right? Maybe it'd be easier if you got it off." She couldn't help focusing on the 'got' and the 'off.' How long had it been since she had something other than a shampoo bottle?

'Sure, Dee,' she thought sarcastically. 'Invite me to skelp the dust off yer arse! I totally won't grope you while I'm at it!' Instead of saying a word, though, she turned back to the fridge, beet red, and ducked past him to the walk-in pantry. He watched the blushing brunette curiously as she stared through an empty shelf at eye level, pondering whether or not something might be wrong with her. Cold water rushing over his hand startled him from his thoughts and he hurriedly switched off the tap and took a deep swig of water.

Pheromones. He blinked in surprise, pulling the canteen away from his lips and taking another whiff. Yep…she was practically dripping with the mysterious non-scent he'd come to both relish and dread. Every now and then he'd convince himself that their presence meant she was attracted to him—that she wanted him—but he always talked himself down. Perhaps, he considered with another steadying sip of water, another experiment was in order…hopefully one that wouldn't be as disastrous as the last.

A massive warm hand at her back made Amber go completely rigid; slowly, almost fearfully, she turned to meet the darkening hazel eyes a head above her own. Soft eyes—hopeful eyes—curious, intrigued, wondering eyes veering brown in the shadowed pantry—she forced a swallow hoping he couldn't hear her heart pounding in her tattooed chest. The hand at her back turned her bodily toward him, its brother rising to cup her chin and cheek. "What do you want from me?" he asked softly, his eyes dropping to her lips before darting back up again.

'Whaddoo I want?' she thought with a nervous chuckle. 'Fer you to hawd yer haverin' an' bend me o'er the farkin' sink a'ready!' Instead of voicing her scandalous thoughts, though, she blurted out, "Harsher sentences fer parole violators an' world peace." Finally, her filter worked, Hallelujah! Clearly realizing how nervous she was, he smirked, one bare brow tilted upward.

"You, my dear," he chuckled brushing the pad of his thumb across her still darkening blush, "are a strange bird." Slowly, as though giving her time to back away, he bent toward her, repeatedly glancing from her lips to her eyes. Her breath stilled in her lungs; at the first hesitant peck, they greedily sucked in air as though she was drowning in more than just his scent, his touch, his taste…

The first time Donatello tasted her lips, they were salty from tears and smoky from Scotch whisky; this second time, he tasted only her. Once, he realized as his left hand swept up her back to dive fingers-first into her loosely braided hair, would never again be enough. One kiss turned into another, then that one into another, then after several more brief brushes and nips, he gave up on counting. When her back met the wooden rack behind her, a soft whimper escaped, but the greedy hands latching onto his neck and cheek told him it wasn't from pain. A mere moment later his hands dropped to the over-plump rear that made his brain short-circuit; digging his fingertips in and squeezing her cheeks he effortlessly hoisted her up, bodily pinning her between the empty shelving and his hard plastron. If she wasn't already lost, the way it took him no effort to lift her would have done the trick.

Pheromones. Sweet, pungent, mind-numbingly delicious pheromones were clouding his senses and growing stronger by the moment. Finally, everything made sense…even as he lost himself in her, words rang through his memory, a thousand moments when he wondered but wouldn't believe.
I tried tellin' ya—ya didn't believe me. Deceptively strong legs wrapped around his hips, hauling him into the blistering hot cradle of her meaty thighs. Here I am drookit an' gantin' over a man who barely knows me, an' he's probably into waists! One strong hand roamed her amble curves appreciatively, the other kneading her backside. If I died and was reincarnated, how can I still remember Donatello? Blunt nails dug into his shoulder and carapace, scratching and pulling; teeth closed harshly on his lower lip and tugged followed by a soft, soothing lick. How can you put a lifetime of memories into a single conversation? A feminine hand latched onto his, pulling it away from the love handles it was mapping out and guiding it instead to a full heavy breast. She waited a lifetime for you. Hips instinctively sought each other, ankles crossing behind his rear and urging even more frantic instinctive bucking. Just what the truth is I can't say anymore 'cause I love you. Soft hands framed his face, thumbs brushing over his cheekbones and fingers tangling in the tails of his mask. Oh, how I love you! Drunk on Amber's pheromones, her taste, her scent, her warmth, Donatello urged her lips apart with his own, his tongue sweeping past them for a deeper taste.

That's when everything went pear-shaped.

Amber cried out as though in pain, tearing away and clutching her jaw—curiously, not the one under a healing fracture. Lungs heaving for breath she stared through Don's plastron in dismay. Tears welled in her moss green eyes. What happened, he wondered in growing disbelief? What changed? She—she was enjoying herself…right…?

"Ah…Ah…" She swallowed hard, unable to meet his eyes. "Ah cannae…we—we cannae…" His heart plummeted to his stomach; he carefully lowered her back to the floor and backed away a pace. The moment her feet hit the floor Amber worried they wouldn't hold her, and grabbed the nearest shelf to steady herself.

"Why?" he demanded flatly when she didn't elaborate. "Is it me? Is it because I'm—" Before he could finish, she once again yanked him down by his suspenders and stole the hateful words right from his lips. When they parted again, her eyes were drying…and angry.

"Dinnae e'en think it," she snapped through kiss-swollen lips. "It's no' goat a thing t'do wit—" She visibly shook herself taking a moment to collect her thoughts and chase the thick gruff accent from her voice. "It's got nothing to do with what you are or aren't," she admitted with carefully measured words. "It's got everything to do with me being a farkin' train wreck right now. I can't—not yet—but don't you dare blame yourself, Donatello, don't you dare!" A tense silence fell over the pantry, Amber panting and staring him down and Donatello silently considering her posture, words, and action. He sighed.

"Not now," he admitted wearily, "is at least more than never. It's not a never, right?" She nodded and allowed him to pull her into a tight—if chaste—embrace. As so often before, he buried his snout in her hair and sucked in a deep breath as though savoring the smell of her shampoo. God, she missed this—missed having him hold her so closely, so tightly it seemed he feared the world would tear her away from him. Her eyes watered, but this time, not in hurt. Already missing his lips, she pressed a comforting kiss to the juncture of his neck and shoulder; his pulse stuttered under her lips, and with a sneaky smile, she gave the spot a gentle nip.

"Mercy was right, Dee," Amber mumbled into his shoulder taking a deep lungful of his scent—coffee, sweat, grease, and now, a primal musk telling her she wasn't the only one affected by their stolen moment…she wasn't the only one uncomfortable in the nethers, at least, but whether that should make her feel embarrassed or proud, she wasn't sure. "I've waited a lifetime fer you…I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" Amber snapped at herself under the freezing water, repeatedly smacking...
herself in the forehead. "What happened to backing off?! What happened to keepin' away 'til my head's on straight?! STUPID!" As though she could make everything go away—the frigid water, the sound of rain, the sting of her skin, the still-burning want Donatello triggered in her, the works—she scrubbed her skin raw with mango-scented soap and cursed a blessed blue streak. All the while, an annoying little voice in the back of her head shrilly berated her for once again pushing Donatello away. "Stupid farkin' SCUNNER!"

Though she didn't hear it over her own ranting and the showerhead spilling over her, the soft ticking nearby grew slightly louder. "Yep," an unfamiliar voice grumbled at the cursing brunette. "You really are." Across the Lair, a soft glimmer of light flickered in a forgotten corner of the lab. For a moment, the source—a stoppered specimen vial—glowed without obvious cause. The light pulsed in a slow rhythmic pattern of brightening and dimming, brightening and dimming, then, as the last faint tick faded from the bathroom, the light vanished without leaving any evidence it was ever there. As it had been for months, the glass vial was indubitably, inexplicably, impossibly empty.

Back in the pantry, Donatello stared through the shelf he'd pinned Amber against, silently committing everything to memory. Every gasp—every sigh—every kiss, scratch, pull, and press—he wanted to remember it all. Not now was better than never, but he couldn't help but worry that now would be far too distant. Although the wait would be miserable, he had to admit that Amber might have a good point—after all, she still hadn't admitted what she hid from him and he still wasn't ready to apologize for his clinical response to that secret. If they weren't ready to apologize and forgive, were they really ready for physical affection?

Subconsciously he wet his lips; underneath the tang of sweat, he could still taste Amber on them. He'd spent months wanting to steal a kiss, to taste her lips, maybe even more…now, he realized with a small smile, he had—he stole too many kisses to count and had just as many swiped from him—and he knew just how sweet and sultry she tasted without the taint of tears.

He was hopelessly addicted to her…one taste would never be enough.

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* Y'all didn't think I forgot about the Freaky Space Glitter, did ya? ;)

Chapter End Notes

* Large crops of Marijuana can be located via satellite by their heat signatures; this method is great for large farms but reportedly less effective for smaller patches. And no, I do NOT know this from experience, LOL! Amazing what you can learn online!

** If we'd EVER contemplated living in New York, the research I did for this portion of the story made that question a resounding NO! Real estate in and around New York City is obscenely priced—the prices are so high people rent out garages, extra bedrooms, and even walk-in closets to anyone willing to pay rent! As for warehouses in Brooklyn, I couldn't find any current listings similar enough to the one described but every one I found was $20k or much more. EEK!

# For anyone curious: the music clip I visualized when I wrote that bit was from "Sonic
the Hedgehog 3," specifically the soundtrack from the chaos emerald special stage where you have to turn all the blue balls red without touching any red ones.

## If you recognize the movie this is from, lemme know an' I'll dedicate the next chapter to ya!

Amber translated:

Skelp – to smack or hit something; in regards to children it can also mean spanking.
Hawd yer haverin' – stop talking nonsense
Drookit an' gantin' – wet and wanting
Dinnae e'en think it—It's not a thing to do with [that]
Scunner – used for something that pisses you off; compare to English "Mother-fucker."
Currently Amber's pissing herself off, both for giving in to her desires AND for DENYING those desires. Yup, she's a piece'a work.
Chapter Summary

Mercy gets a rude awakening and Amber and Donnie deal with the aftermath of their time in the closet. Awkward friends bond awkwardly. Raph and Mercy are adorable. Amber makes an arse of herself and Donnie helps. The hatchet is officially buried. Snugglebunnies.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Updating early - for the first time since this story started, I've actually got a queue of chapters ready for posting! - and I've got some major fluff for ya this time—it picks up shortly after the last chapter left off so you could consider it an extension. Not much in the way of warnings other than suggestive language, cussing, and some really awkward moments. Oh, and BTW, this one's a whopper! It just wasn't ready to call it quits at seven pages and thus clocks in at 11 pages sans notes!

As promised, dedicated to "Shelshokd" for recognizing and sharing the reference to "Miss Congeniality!"

Suggested Listening: Red, "So Far Away," Kodaline "The One"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

28: Love Amidst the Loss

University of Glenville, Missouri, February 14th, 1999

Mercy hated Valentine's day with a passion. Everywhere she went, everything was dripping with pink, red, and purple, decked in satin and lace, and couples were humping and slobbering all over one another in public. Some probably assumed she hated the holiday because she was single—they couldn't be more wrong—and often times, she found herself on the receiving end of some sympathetic (read "lonely and horny") guy or gal asking her out to assuage their own conscience and libido. Every single time, she said no thanks; every single time, they presumably went to cry in their beer while cursing her for being bitter.

She wasn't bitter—she just hated being reminded of something she'd never have. Not for lack of offers, no, but for lack of trust, courage, and willingness to prove her mother right. Mercy wasn't a loose woman—she wasn't a whore—but so help her, if she so much as talked to a man she wasn't related to—at least anyone between the ages of sixteen and sixty—she paid for it when her mother found out. Her mother always found out. Shaking off her gloomy attitude like a dog shakes off bathwater, she fitted her key in the front door's lock, yanked it open then slammed it shut, and stalked through to the living room…

…and into a horribly awkward situation involving her naked roommate, her naked roommate's equally naked boyfriend, and their hideous, uncomfortable sofa.
June 24th, 2016, Dinnertime, the Lair

As she had on that horrifying February afternoon years before, Mercy froze, half in the pantry and half out of it. The moment she stepped into the recessed nook for a can of soda her nose was assaulted by a familiar smell—the smell of desperate people, she’d once joked—and no obvious explanation of how it got there. For a moment she kidded herself that maybe someone left a jar of cumin open but then recalled Amber felt the same way about the spice that stank like BO and dirty twat.* No way would there be cumin in that pantry!

Amber. It hit Mercy with the force of a sucker punch. She slowly turned to the brunette passing out pizza at the table, her blue eyes sharper than Raph's sais. Donatello was conspicuously absent from the scene and Amber's hair notoriously frizzy hair was suspiciously neat for having been in a loose braid all day. As though sensing the blonde's accusing stare, Amber turned to meet her eyes, horror washing over her face. For a moment she just stood there, frozen like a deer about to become a hood ornament. Then with a stammered apology, she piled two plates high with pizza without even looking at what she grabbed and beat a swift retreat to the lab, all at record speed.

Mercy glared through Amber's back until it vanished behind the steel door, certain she just experienced Valentine's Day of '99 all over again. As if it wasn't mortifying enough the first time!

"Hey," Donatello greeted as Amber darted through the Lab door; the moment she cleared the threshold she shoved it shut with her hip and flattened herself against as though expecting it to be suddenly kicked in. He stared in confusion for a moment, wondering what on earth happened out there. Finally, sure Mercy hadn't chased her down to force the truth out of her, Amber passed her plate off onto the nearest surface and turned the deadbolt on the door.

"Hey, yerself," she greeted back, the words bringing a goofy grin to Donnie's face; how he'd missed their strange little greeting! "Brought dinner—mind if I hide in here?"

"Hide?" he asked as she passed him his high-piled plate of pizza. "From what?"

"You mean who," she corrected planting herself at the workbench they usually ate lunch at. She couldn't help smiling at the memories of that table—memories of long drawn out conversations, "never have I ever" sessions, and many a shared lunch. "Mercy's onto us—the pantry didn't air out very well." Donnie choked on his pizza and proceeded to beat it out of his lungs.

"What?!" he croaked in horror. "She—She smelled—?!" Amber cringed and nodded.

"That burd could smell salt all the way from the barracks," she pointed out avoiding his eyes from embarrassment. "an' horny people smell stronger'n salt." As though realizing how awkward she just made everything she gave a weak smile and a shrug. "She probably won't blab about it, but I'm gonna be payin' for it fer years—Hell, I'm still payin' fer Valentine's day of '99."

"Do I wanna know?" Amber blushed.

"Let's just say first times're awkward enough without yer roomie walkin' in an' seein' yer ass in the air." Donatello halfway expected to hear crickets in the awkward silence. Finally, in hopes of salvaging their appetites, Amber joked, "So how's about them Rams?" He gave a nervous laugh and returned to his pizza only to notice her picking mushrooms off of her slice of supreme.

"Not crazy about mushrooms?" he asked, triggering a bright blush.
"Mildly allergic," she admitted. "I'll live." Without a word, Don joined her at the table, passed off a piece of Hawaiian from his pile, and held his plate out for the half-butchered supreme and the pile of mushrooms. When she looked up to protest that she'd be fine, he winked; blushing heavily, she fell silent and scooted the lot onto his plate anyway. "Thanks."

"No problem." He took a bite from his own supreme, relishing the mushrooms with closed eyes, then suddenly realized something and swallowed. "How allergic? If we—I mean—well, you know…" Amber smirked over at him, pausing only for a sip of soda.

"If we what?" she teased. As he sat and squirmed, she latched onto his suspender strap again and pulled him closer, planting a single peck on his lips; though the pull tugged on his shoulder, he found he kinda liked it. "Ya mean that? Even if ya gorge on shrooms, it won't kill me—worst I'll get is indigestion." They fell silent, both lost in thought. Finally, she broke the silence again. "If Mercy knows, yer brothers prob'ly do too. You regret it?" Hazel met green, neither flinching away from the contact.

"Do you?" he asked in return. "I don't—well, maybe that—it—happened in the pantry, but I don't regret anything else." He finally broke contact with a noisy swallow. He found it perplexing that such a momentous event could be boiled down to a single word and still hold the same weight in his mind. "I'm sick of fighting, Amber…I still wish you'd tell me what you're hiding, but I'm sick of fighting over it." She nodded agreement, her eyes distant.

"I just regret havin' to back off," she admitted. "An' I'm sick'a fightin' too…sick'a feelin' like we're livin' out a Shakespearean tragedy." She gave a bitter laugh. "I can't give ya what ya want, though—I can't tell you what you ask—an' honestly, I still think yer a sleekit bastart fer what ya did." Though the words hurt, the wry smile that followed soothed the sting a little. "I can't blame ya much, though. 'Sides, my Gran'da was a bit of a bastart'imself—loved'im nonetheless."

"You're not ready to tell me the truth," Donatello summarized dryly, "and I'm not ready to give up on getting that truth. Aren't we a mess?"

"That we are," Amber chuckled. "We can't keep fightin' like this, though—I'm liable to jump your bones if we do." He gaped at her in disbelief; she gave a 'What's the big deal?' gesture. "What? Yer cute when yer mad." Donnie shook his head, sure he was blushing. For a moment, he contemplated intentionally continuing their feud in hopes she'd rescind her 'we gotta wait' insistence, but decided against it. If and when they went to that level, he didn't want it to be spur of the moment and thus regrettable.

"Agree to disagree, then?" he asked, then added with a slight cringe, "about the fighting, not me…being…cute." With a lopsided smirk, she held out her hand for him to shake.

"Agreed." For a time they both focused on their dinner, but after three months of fighting like idiots, there was still too much laundry to be aired out. This time, though, Donatello broke the silence.

"You really feel that way?" he asked, nervously glancing from his pizza to the brunette staring through her plate. "You really…really like me?" A dark blush exploded across her cheeks as she contemplated his question. She was well beyond 'liking' him—all the way to 'loving, cherishing, wanting to screw like rabbits. No, like wasn't how she'd describe her feelings at all!"

"Like's a lil' weak," she admitted. "Ya don't have any reason to believe otherwise, but it takes more'n likin' someone to make me nearly shag'em senseless in the pantry." He gave a nervous titter, fidgeting with a pizza crust. "Sorry…I'm making things awkward." She flushed, avoiding his eyes. "I'm kind'a bad about that, huh?" He didn't agree, but she noted he didn't disagree either.
"So it's more than like." His brows drew tightly together as he stared down at the crust he was tearing to pieces. Amber could practically hear his internal processor humming as he worked through her words. Hazel veered upward then darted away again. "How much more?" Amber hesitated, torn as so often before between her feelings and her difficulty expressing and sharing them.

"Dee," she mumbled with a wince. "I know how I feel, but I don't know how to say it—I know the words, know the order they go in and all that nonsense, but I can't express it—can't spit it out. It's like…” She searched her memories for any sort of comparison that might make herself more clear. "My emotions are like a password protected document file, I guess," she attempted. "They're all neatly typed out, formatted properly, and to a certain extent, they make sense, but only if you have the password. If ya don't have a password, it'll all just show up as a bunch'a weird symbols."

"That's encryption, Amber." She shot him a weak glare. "Pardon."

"Point to Donatello," she grumbled. "Amber sucks at technology. Moving on. The whole point was I can access those encrypted files all I want but I can't share them with anyone else without…uh… fixing the encryption?" He facepalmed; there would no joint hacking with this one. "Whatever. I'm emotionally stunted an' can't spit it out but I still feel it." The touch of a soft hand on his drew him out of his dismay at her technological ineptitude. "Dee, you deserve better'n that—deserve to be told you're lo—" She froze swallowing forcefully and fighting the fear rising up her throat and choking her off.

"Told I'm…what?" he asked even though he had a feeling he already knew. Remembered words, borrowed words he heard on the radio recently, rang through his memory.

   You make my heart feel like it's summer
   When the rain is pouring down.
   You make my whole world feel so right when it's wrong.
   That's how I know that you are the one.~

"Words aren't my friends," she reminded gently. "but if you look between the lines, listen behind the lyrics, you'll understand. Until I can say it to yer face, until you can accept that I won't be able to tell you everything, there's no point in starting anything." Suddenly realizing something, he looked up at her in surprise.

"You're starting too big again, Braids," he pointed out. "You're refusing to meet a stranger because they might not like you, refusing to take a bus because you might get stuck next to the sweaty dock worker. You realize that, right?"

"Maybe," she admitted. "But my point remains—until I've got my head firmly out'a my arse, I'm no good for ya. Even if the emotional closeness bit isn't a problem, I don't wanna rush things." That, Donatello decided stubbornly, was quite enough. His appetite gone, he shoved back from the table, circled to her side, and pulled her up to stand before him.

"Amber's no good," he repeated sternly. "Amber doesn't wanna rush things, Amber's issues take precedence." He shook his head in disbelief. "Does it even matter what Donnie thinks?—What Donnie feels?" She tried to cut him off, to explain and protest that he mattered more than he realized, but a callused fingertip on her lips stilled her. "Amber, I care about you—if you're just not ready, then say it—don't use me as an excuse! Don't…don't push me away anymore." Her eyes shimmered but she nodded agreement.

"Kin…" Her voice cracked and she coughed to clear it. "Can we…take it…slow? Ah dinnae—I don't wanna screw up." He nodded agreement and held his arms open for her; just like before their feud began, she dove headfirst into them, latching on like she would be ripped from his embrace.
With the brunette tucked face-first in his shoulder, Donatello rubbed her back and buried his nose in her fragrant hair. Just like that, Amber mused as his scent filled her lungs, all was once again right in the world. All the noise in her head was fading away; all the hurt, anger, frustration, and bitterness that piled up during their feud was fading away with it.

She'd missed her Donnie.

"How slow?" he asked when her shuddering lungs soothed. Green eyes, vibrant from a sheen of tears, met his.

"How slow?" she echoed with a weak smile. "Just...Let's just take it day by day. I've waited a lifetime for ya...I'll wait e'en longer if it means keepin' ya." Don mentally puzzled out her meaning, but when he went to voice his confusion, she cut him off with a yank on his suspenders. "Ah, hawd yer haverin', ya numpty—geez'a nip!"

As their lips met again and again in soft, brushing kisses, Donatello had no idea what she'd said, but he decided it didn't matter; after all, actions speak louder than words and her actions were speaking volumes.

"Lu-ky." Mercy's voice from the kitchen doorway made Amber freeze in horror. When she ducked in to put up their dirty dishes, the kitchen had seemed deserted, and thus, safe. Donatello's plate shaking in her hand, her heart racing, she turned to acknowledge the irate blonde menacing her. "Ya got some 'splainin' to do."

SHITE. That one word was the only one Amber could think of at the moment and it manifested with flashing lights and air raid sirens. Mercy spat out only one more word—railyard—then stalked off leaving Amber rooted in her spot in horror. By the time she finally got up the nerve to meet Mercy in the railyard she was quaking in Kimber's hoochie boots and dreading the tongue-lashing to come.

"H—Hello?" she called out inching through the doorway.

"I take it you two idjits finally made up?" Mercy drawled behind her sending her through the roof again. Amber whipped about wondering how Mercy was managing to sneak up on her so often. Was the blonde taking lessons in ninja from Raph?

"Eh..." She faltered, avoiding her friend's eyes. "...mibbe?" Mercy paced toward her like a cougar stalking a wounded deer, her blue eyes hard.

"I remember that smell, ya twat," she pointed out dryly. "an' I highly doubt you an' Sir Geeks-a-lot had angry sex in the pantry."

"There was no sex!" Amber blurted out. "We—It just—Gah!" she burst out and yanked on her braid again. "We just got carried away, but there was no sex, no nudity, no missing clothes even!" The blonde stared her down, scrutinizing her expression for any sign of a lie. "In my defense, I ain't gotten laid since April of 2011!" The moment the year was out of her mouth, Amber paled and her jaw dropped, the year difference finally hitting her. She left behind the year 2011 and woke up in 2016—did she seriously endure a five-year dry spell in Limbo?! No wonder she nearly screwed Donnie against the shelves!

"So ya just humped against the Heineken,"** Mercy summarized bluntly. Amber winced but nodded. "Good thing I don't drink that shit. 'Bout time you two quit fightin'—I was gettin' sick'a chewin' ya both out all the time."
The next hour or so was passed with a long-overdue heart to heart between the two friends while they worked on scrubbing one of the lanes clean with steel wool. It was hard work and would be easier with power tools, but those tools were required for the second bathroom renovation. It would still be quite a while before the railyard was ready to be called a garden, but the humans were making progress. Somewhere between another old 'remember when' and another of their fun little insult competitions, Mercy's cell phone suddenly started blasting a number by her new favorite band.

Are you with me now? Come back from the dead - You've been inside your head for too long! Blushing like mad, she scrambled up the ladder out of the recessed railbed and bolted for the battered bar phone dancing a jig on a folding chair. Are you with me now? Find the places that scare you - Come on I dare you! Are you with— "Hey Asshat," she blurted into the speaker, sure her face was on fire. "What? No, no I just dragged Miss Scotch down to the railyard—needed—ugh—girl talk. Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm'onna need therapy."

As the blonde conversed with Raphael, Amber studied her silently; Mercy, she realized, was behaving in a very 'Un-Mercy-like' manner. Every now and then her denim-colored eyes would soften and an unbelievably gentle smile would appear. Her shoes scuffed the floor restlessly; her long slender fingers ran through her shaggy blonde hair as though trying to make it look less messy. When she laughed at something he said, she didn't cackle, didn't guffaw—she fairly giggled.

Amber couldn't believe it! As she did the day she met Donatello, she reached up to her cheek and pinched as hard as she could. "Fark!" she swore afterward, drawing a strange look from Mercy; probably shouldn't have pinched the cheek she broke. Still, it proved her point—she was not dreaming. Finally, Mercy and Raph hung up and the blonde blustered her way back to the railbed to pick up where she left off.

"So," Amber asked slyly, "You an' Raph, huh?" Mercy startled, dropping her hunk of steel wool, and burning red, dropped to the ground to find it again. "I knew it!—I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! You two're perfect fer each other!"

"Not touchin' that bullshit with a ten-foot shovel," Mercy grumbled. "Quit talkin' shit, O'Brien." Despite her prickly attitude, Amber elbowed her in the arm, grinning like a loon.

"So—cummoan, gimme details!" Mercy remained tight-lipped. "Uch. Fine, spoilsport. I'll still kick'is arse if he hurts ya."

"Ya'll break yer foot," the blonde retorted snidely. "B'sides, you an' Donnie're bein' dramatastic enough—someone's gotta have it easy!" As they argued as only best friends can, Mercy couldn't help worrying she just shot herself in the rear by not denying Amber's assumptions.

A mere hour after Amber and Mercy crawled back to the Lair, sore and tired from scrubbing away decades of gunk and grime, the blonde found herself once again in the dojo. The punching bag Raphael split thirty days ago, now patched up with a scrap of red-stained leather, taunted her mercilessly. Since that day, Raphael had taken hours of his own time to help her build up her strength. She had to endure Raph's smartassery, Leo's dirty looks, and endless "Kung Fu Kid" references from Mikey, but despite the price, she had to admit it was worth it—she was getting stronger every day. Perhaps, she wondered pulling her fist back with a smirk, she could even get the punching bag to move now?

"'ey." As often before, the sudden greeting made her miss the sandbag but this time she caught herself instead of face-planting. "Nice progress, Blondie," Raph teased lumbering toward her. "Ya're ready fa da next step, huh?" The musky sandalwood scent of him surrounded her, tantalized her, and she was sure she was blushing. Instead of answering, she spatout,
"Ya don't say." A massive hand on her shoulder made her tense but its owner simply guided her to another part of the dojo. There in the middle of the cushioned mats, he gave her an almost boyish grin.

"Ya've a'ready been liftin' weights, runnin', an buildin' up ya muscles." Without a sign of the nervousness she felt, he cracked his knuckles and popped his neck. "If ya don't keep ya muscles limbah, keep ya joints loose, it'll all be fa nothin'. Dat's da next step."

Over the next twenty minutes or so, he guided her through some basic stretches and, though he didn't tell her, a few not-so-basic ones as well. Every now and then he'd reach out to correct her form with strong, skilled hands, every time, driving her out of her mind. A sure grip on her bare knee, a gentle smack on her wrist, a coaxing prod at her lower back...Mercy wasn't used to that sort of physical contact with men. Sure, she'd spent many a summer evening 'rassling' with Aaron and even more summer mornings taking boxing pointers from her stepfather, but neither had ever touched her so gently, so carefully. It almost seemed, she realized as he once again corrected her posture, that Raphael couldn't keep his hands off her but was afraid she'd break.

"Amber thinks we're fucking." Mercy wasn't quite sure where the blurted admission came from but it nearly sent Raph pitching face-first to the mat. Catching his balance at the last moment, he gaped at her and, as though just realizing he still had his palm on the small of her back, yanked it away like she'd burned him.

"What brought dat up?!!" he blustered backing away a pace. "Dat was dem stinkin' up da pantry, right?!" The blonde nodded, flushing.

"Yeah...she an' Donnie finally pulled their heads out'a their collective asses, apparently. Not sure why she thinks we're together..." She winced, unable to meet his eyes; Raphael froze, his nostrils flaring and his golden amber eyes wide but with what emotion she had no idea. "Sorry...I didn't exactly argue with'er...was kinda dumbstruck. Ain't even sure how to set'er straight, really." She faltered, scuffing up her already scruffy blonde hair. "I just—I just froze." With a sly smirk, the hulking ninja reached out and ruffled her hair, earning a half-hearted glare in return.

"I'll set'er straight, Kid," he teased. Without another word, he swaggered out the door, knowing full well Mercy was watching him every step of the way.

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"I'll get more lovin' from that dum, dum, dummy than I-yevah got from you!" Only a few paces through the bathroom door and already Donatello's ears were ringing...painfully. It had been a long tiring day between family drama, convincing Vern to help them out, construction work on the second bathroom, and Amber... Despite the incredibly off-tune caterwauling emanating from the furthest shower stall, he couldn't help but smile.

**Amber.** Although it wasn't the best idea, he found himself mentally reliving those moments in the pantry once more—every brush, every scratch, every push, pull, and buck—they'd wasted so much time fighting and avoiding one another, he supposed it wasn't so hard to believe that one day they'd break down and find a way back to one another. Clearly oblivious to his presence, the subject of his musings continued jamming out under the water spray, vocalizing her way through an instrumental bridge complete with horribly off-tune imitation trombone blasts.

Ah, what the Hell. He was gross from long hours of work and still too riled to go to sleep, why not remedy both at the same time? After ducking back out for a towel and some clean clothes, Donatello let himself into the stall next to Amber's, got the water warming up, and proceeded to strip down. His mask and glasses hung on a hook with a clean towel, he stepped past the changing area to the shower and pulled the curtain closed. "I'll take the legs from some ol' table!" Amber bawled out
never even noticing his presence; it took every bit of self-restraint he had to not laugh aloud when he
saw two pale feet dancing (poorly) just past the divider between the stalls. Suddenly he didn't feel so
lazy for leaving the shower floors untiled—rough concrete had more traction than tile, and traction
was entirely necessary if one was to consider 'busting a move.' "I'll take the arms from some ol'
chair! I'll take the neck from some ol' bottle an' from a horse I'll take the hair! I'll take the hands an'
face from a clock an' baby when I'm through, I'll get more lovin' from that dum, dum, dummy than I-
veyah got from you!" ~~~

As the steaming water rushed down over him he draped a washcloth over the top of his head to
cover the two thin patches of cartilage protecting his inner ears; huh, he realized with a lopsided grin,
she didn't actually sound that bad with a barrier in the way! Who'd'a thought. Before he knew it all
the stresses of the day were melting down the drain with the fruity suds from next door. His weary
hazel eyes slid closed as he took in a deep lungful of the scents around him—coconut shampoo,
mango body wash, his own spicy soap, and the tangy pheromones of the warm, willing woman next
door. Clearly, she was still riled up from their encounter in the pantry even hours later, just as he was.

"Mikey, if yer out there recording this, I swear ta bog I'll kick yer arse!" The sudden warning made
him break out in an up-to-no-good grin.

"Don't," he teased back, "he might enjoy it." It would certainly explain why the youngest turtle was
always getting in trouble. Their owner suddenly realizing who was next door, the pair of feet jumped
slightly then slowly inched away from the metal divider.

"Donnie?!" Amber squeaked; he could see her in his mind's eye, wrapping herself up in the blotchy
blue shower curtain as though to prevent him from seeing her through the layers of painted metal
between them. If only—behind those walls, he was as blind as she was.

"In the flesh," he answered only to wince at how that might sound. "Renovation's dirty work—hope
you don't mind sharing a drain."

"N-No," she admitted, probably blushing; she was always blushing around him, after all. "Long's
you don't mind yer feet smellin' like the tropics threw up on' em." He chuckled pulling the washcloth
away to scrub his neck. She seemed to be through singing, after all, so he didn't have to worry about
hearing loss.

"Nah. Coconut's not that bad." If anything, he'd become quite fond of the scent of coconut; if his feet
smelled like her hair, would that really be a problem? Whatever witty remark he had on the tip of his
tongue vanished in a sudden shriek of surprise at the massive grey and brown spidery-looking mass
circling the drain halfway between the two stalls.

"Sorry," Amber piped up awkwardly and crouched to retrieve the horrifying object. "Mammals
shed."

"I thought it was a spider!" he explained as his heart rate calmed. "A huge one!" His brother Raph
was the one afraid of bugs, but who wouldn't be startled by a spider nearly the size of a golf ball?

"Of course," Amber teased back. "It's a new species! *Aranae Rodent Nidum!* It lives in shower
drains and preys on toes!*** With the hairball presumably set aside for disposal, Amber cleared her
throat. "Sorry fer blistering yer ears…if I know I'm not alone, I shut up—no point in torturing folks,
right?" Red flags flared up in Donatello's consciousness—this was a no win situation! If he agreed,
he wouldn't be lying, but he'd be insulting her—if he disagreed, she might feel better but he'd be
lying! Clearly realizing his struggle for a polite way out, Amber laughed aloud as she rinsed another
wave of coconut-scented suds down the drain. "Dee, it's okay to say it—I sing like cats fucking."
"That's...a little harsh," he admitted with a slightly nasal laugh; the sound made Amber's heart melt...among other things, unfortunately. For a time, the two simply chatted over the sound of the water, one fighting her reaction to his nearness and the other fighting his reaction to the pheromones drifting next door. Though they were both present in that steamy bathroom and separated only by a double wall of steel paneling, both repeatedly found themselves mentally back in the pantry during their brief stolen moment. Neither was ready to give up on that feeling of abandon, that hope for more, and neither was ready to call it a night—not when they could lie awake together and greet the dawn as one. Even so, they both arrived at the same conclusion as before: don't rush it.

"W-Well," Donatello admitted as he toweled off and dressed. "I'd better hit the hay soon—don't stay up too late, okay?"

"Yeah," Amber answered staring through the dingy tiles. "I'll probably be out here in a minute myself...a'ready had a shower but needed to rinse off the subway gunk an' all. Mercy's a slave driver, ya know that?!" Finally sure she'd gotten the last of the suds out of her hair she took a final rinse off and shut off the water. As she worked on drying and dressing, she could hear Donatello going through the usual nightly routine—face-washing, teeth-brushing, retainer-soaking, the works —soon to retreat to his own room for the night.

"You make my heart feel like it's summer," she half-sang half murmured, too lost in thought to register the startled clatter of a fumbled toothbrush hitting the trough sink. "When the rain is pourin' down. You make my whole worl' feel so right when it's wrong...'s'how I know you are the one." By the door, Donatello hastily stowed his toothbrush in its holder and ducked out the door, hesitating on the threshold. Damn the consequences, he decided stubbornly. Before she could finish off, he took the words right out of her mouth.

"That's why I know you are the one."
realization made her feel horrible but that soon turned into empowerment. After all, if she hid some of her own words among the army of borrowed ones, would he even realize they were her words at all?

She hadn't written anything worth a damn in years, much less poetry; before she died, her muse was comatose from neglect and her few fan readers were beyond fed up with waiting. "Heart of a Kappa," the Donatello-centric fanfiction she'd worked on for years, was dead long before its writer was. Despite the overwhelming odds, though, she managed to eke out a few lines—a few verses—all in hopes of breaking her silence without saying a word. "Why must a'thin' change, I asked?" Amber read under her breath. "Why must a'thin' end?" As though waking from a convincing dream, she blinked in surprise. Right before her eyes, the truth stood for all to see just as it did the day she put the words down...because it must.

She wasn't sure how she got there, but the next thing she knew, she stood outside Donatello's closed bedroom door, the scribbled poem clenched in her fist like a lifeline. The rest of the Lair was long asleep, the only source of light coming from the kitchen and bathroom, both rooms quite overtaken by greenery courtesy of the resident plant nut. She could turn back—there was still time—but to what? —to tossing and turning all night, to nightmares full of death and fear, and to a cold, empty bed? What could she hope to gain from this foolishness—this stupidly impulsive decision to reach out for his company? Donatello wasn't a living teddy bear—he was a grown man with a grown man's wants and needs, wants and needs like sleep! He had better things to do than calm her stupid arse down after a stupid arse nightmare!

Despite all her internal raging against it, though, her knuckles met the doorframe in a hesitant tap. A moment later she steeled her nerves and rapped a couple more times. Just beyond the closed door, she felt sure she heard someone mumble 'come in'—they did say 'come in,' right? She thought it over, her head spinning, then in a fit of bravery she felt sure she'd regret in a moment, she eased the door open and crossed the threshold.

The first thing to register, as always, was the sweet scent of vanilla from an oil plugin buried beside the laundry hamper; the second was the tiny LED nightlight projecting a clear path to the door. Donatello, she'd learned early on, had the weakest night vision of his brothers and wasn't too fond of fumbling around in the dark, but she wondered if he wasn't also secretly uncomfortable with darkness. A whisper of memory from her previous life suggested he was afraid of the dark—it wasn't an uncommon fear, but like many others, it tended to be a more convenient mask for the root of the problem. Donnie's fear of the dark was likely also fear of the unknown; Amber's fear of storms was also fear of things she couldn't control.

Enough of fear, she reminded herself firmly, still unsure why she was standing in Donnie's room watching him sleep. If she hadn't felt like a stalker before she certainly did now. As silently as she could, she lay the sheet of paper on his chair and crept closer, both hoping and fearing he'd wake and find her in his room. She tugged her braid—she gnawed her lip—she glanced furtively from his closed, unobstructed eyes to the door as though unsure whether to stay or flee.

"Huh..wha?" The sleep-husky voice startled her and she instinctively sprang away from the bedside. "Amber," Donatello greeted softly as though disbelieving she was really there, his squinting eyes immediately scrutinizing her hair. Upon finding it streaked liberally with early grey, he knew without a doubt this wasn't a dream. Whenever he dreamed of Amber, her hair was warm brown with fiery highlights, like she'd described once to him; this Amber's highlights faded long before he met her. "What—why're you here?" The moment she had an excuse wrangled together, her wretched weakness intervened and she clammed up; tears pricked at her eyes and she shook her head.

"Ah dinnuw," she lied, halfway croaking. "Ah jus'—I jus'—" Fully awake now, Donnie sat up on
one elbow and reached the other hand out to catch her chin. Amber's lungs shuddered to a standstill at the rasp of a callused thumb brushing away the salt crusted on her cheeks; how long had she been crying without realizing it?

"Hey, it's okay," he soothed hoisting himself upright and pulling her into a gentle hug. The moment his strong arms enfolded her, Amber remembered why she crept to his side in the middle of the night—why she always dove headfirst into those arms in moments of weakness. In Donatello's embrace, she felt stronger—strong enough to conquer her fears and weaknesses. "J'ya have a nightmare?" he asked softly as she sniffled into his shoulder, his normally clear and concise words somewhat slurred from sleep. She nodded weakly, all her senses tuned to the hand petting her hair and the other holding her close to his hard plastron.

"Cannae sleep," she admitted into his neck. "Keep wakin' up screamin'...cannae sleep when I cannae stop feelin'...rememb'rin'...fearin'..." He pulled away with a soft rustle of sheets, scooting back almost to the wall; for a moment Amber stared at him as though wondering if he lost his mind, but then that bright blush took over entirely.

"Maybe some company'll help," he suggested softly. "C'mon." She hesitated, visibly debating with herself and glancing repeatedly, nervously at his closed bedroom door. "They'll understand, Hon...you need some rest." The unexpected endearment was the last straw and it sent her pitiful resistance crashing down like a matchstick bridge. Suddenly feeling the weight of months of interrupted sleep, she crawled into bed next to him and burrowed headfirst into his open arms, taking a moment to soak in his musky scent, and a pair of slightly chapped lips pressed a chaste kiss to her brow. The arm she wasn't cozied up to tugged the sheet and blanket over her then tentatively draped over her side, anchoring her in place and in the present. "All ya ever had to do was ask."

That time when she drifted off, no nightmares awaited her, only dreams of strong arms, stunning eyes, and love amidst all the loss.

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*Just a quick note: Amber's poem has actually been written for several chapters now and I'm considering uploading it as a chapter in "Gallery of Memories." It's not great, but at least it's written out and gets her point across. Any thoughts on whether I should include it in GoM or not? 'Til next time, Folks!*

Chapter End Notes

NOTES:
* SURELY I'm not the only one who feels this way about Cumin—that spice is supposedly great, but it reeks like dirty, sweaty twat! I've got an uncle who puts it on pizza and it takes everything I've got to NOT ask why he wants his pizza to smell like PUSS.
** One of my closest friends in Real Life—we'll call her Autumn—is constantly coming up with bizarre 'made up' phrases like this. Some of her personal faves are "That's nastified!" [it's too disgusting for words] "Oh, Barfaloney," [similar to "Ew! Gross!"] "What a candidioicy," [someone spoke frankly but really should'a sugar-coated it and is now paying for it] and her personal fave, "Dramastic." [describes someone overreacting more than a teenage drama queen, also used for situations that just keep getting more stressful.] This crazy gal has inspired many characters for me and to an
extent, one could see a lot of her in Amber, Mercy, and Bree even though this story is NOT a self-insert or 'real' fan-insert.

*** Latin, roughly "Rat's nest spider," a play on words anyone with troublesome hair should recognize!

BORROWED WORDS

~Kodaline "The One"
~~Sixx:A.M. "Are You With Me?"
~~~Louis Armstrong "The Dummy Song"

AMBER (and Mercy) TRANSLATED

-Burd – Girlfriend or just a woman in general; in the US, 'Bird' has been used the same way during some decades, particularly the 40s to 60s.
-A nip – A kiss, or a single measure of spirits, particularly whisky.
-A sleekit bastart – A sneaky bastard; bastard is sometimes used as an odd endearment, especially with smartasses like Amber.
-Ragin’ – very angry.
-Hawd yer haverin', ya numpty—geez'a nip! – 'Quit talking nonsense, you idiot—gimme a kiss!' OR roughly, 'you idjit, shut up an' kiss me!' Note that while 'numpty' means 'idiot' it denotes affection—they're not just any idiot, they're YOUR idiot.
-"Humped against the Heineken" – Heineken, for the uninitiated, is a brand of beer; because of how close in pronunciation "Heineken" is to "Heiney," I just couldn't resist that one!
-Cummoan – roughly, 'come on' or in hick-ese, 'c'mon.'
-Rasslin' – Hick-ese. This generally refers to a sort of no-holds-barred brawling that is halfway between wrestling and schoolyard scuffling. Normally it's only acceptable for young guys to rassle, but if there's anything we know about Amber, Mercy, and Aaron, it's that they don't let pettiness like 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' get in the way of having fun.
-A'thin' – Everything

-Ah Dinnuw – a twisting of 'dunno' meaning 'don't know.' Consider that when Amber first made friends with Mercy [see chapter 23: The Truth Can Hurt] she pronounced 'do not/don't' as "dinnae" and 'you know' as "ya knuw," and also consider that her version of her Gran'da's brogue is twisted by the more common Midwestern accent she was surrounded by.
29: Only Time

Chapter Summary

Donnie has a weird dream. Mikey gets nosy. Amber freaks out. Awkward fluff. Donnie has questions, Leo has no answers, and Mikey sulks. Leo angsts. Raph and Mercy are awkwardly adorable. Shit hits the fan. CLIFFHANGER!

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Fair warning, you're probably gonna wanna throttle me after this chapter, and not only because of the cliffhanger. Cliffhanger-sensitive people might need to wait until the next chapter's out to read this one…just sayin'. This chapter dedicated to a friend who's going through hard times; Vicky may never read it this, but I hope things settle down for her soon.

Other than the cliffhanger, no major warnings beyond the usual—language, suggestive themes, etc—as this chapter's predominantly funny mush. Hope Y'all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Lifehouse "Hanging by a Moment,"

29: Only Time

Not for the first time, Donatello marvels at just how greatly the dream world can differ from the waking one. As far as the eye can see, blooming heather and wildflowers pattern the rolling hills around him in a patchwork of white, lavender, yellow, and pink. Every now and then the pattern is broken by a thicket of low thorny trees decked with grape-like clusters of small white blossoms, each surrounded by golden daffodils nodding in the breeze. Donnie rolls onto his back, pillows his head on his crossed arms, and stares up at the powder puff clouds overhead, soaking in the scents and sensations. After so long of being stuck underground, unable to bask in the light of day, the warmth of the sun and the cool of the shade feels like coming home…of course, his isn't the only face soaking up the sun from the faded crazy quilt in the grass.

"I ain't seen ya here lately," reminds the brunette sprawled out on her belly beside him, her grey-green eyes teasing behind their glass shields. "Usually yer content to hide in the shadows—why the sudden longing fer sun?" The tasseled end of a tall grass stalk trails teasingly along his bared plastron, diligently mapping out every whorl and divot before moving on.

"I'm not really sure, Amber," he admits with a shrug putting on as though he can't feel the faint vibrations through his plastron. "Just feels right for once—things have been so stressful lately in—" He startles, lurching upright to study the young woman lounging beside him. Warm red highlights gleam from unbound brown tresses spilling out from a crown woven of heather, clover, and stems of blooms from the very tree they lay under—warm fiery red, not the steely grey he's grown used to—and unless he's mistaken, she seems younger, more petite, less voluptuous, and entirely unburdened
by a lifetime of troubles. It's Amber, alright, but not the Amber he's come to know and treasure—this Amber is one he's never met outside of dreams.

With a sudden wave of sound, much like the ticking of an army of clocks, the tides turn. "It's time to remember, Donnie," the younger Amber urges with a hopeful smile as the ticking grows ever louder. "You must remember..."

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**Saturday, June 25th, 2016, just past 9 am**

Even as the strange dream faded, Donatello grasped for the rest of the warning. Remember... remember *what*? As he contemplated the bizarre occurrence, he began to notice things that had slipped his mind until then—the sweet perfumes of coconut and mango over the cloying scent of vanilla air freshener, the warmth of a curvy body pressed tightly to his chest, a pair of soft lips brushing his collarbone between breaths...and, unfortunately, a barely restrained giggle from a certain nosy younger brother.

"You should see this, Babe," Mikey whispered into his phone creeping closer to get a better shot of the content smile on Amber's face. "They're so stinkin' cute together—and she slept all night—she never sleeps all night!" Mikey's running commentary was suddenly cut off by someone scolding him under their breath; the phone seized, someone dragged the whining turtle back out of Donnie's bedroom—by his cheek from the sound of it. One lazy hazel eye drifted open and registered Leonardo standing beside the bed, smiling and shaking his head as he sent the video to Donnie's phone and deleted it from Mikey's.

"Take it easy today, Bro," Leo said with a smirk. "You've earned it." A moment later, the room was silent again and Don was alone with Amber off once more. *Remember,* the woman from his dream urged, but never said a word of what he was to remember! Stranger still, he could have sworn she was Amber—was sure it was her and had the *déjà vu* to prove it!—but though she was entirely familiar she seemed nothing like the Amber he knew!

As he silently sifted through the dream and his various theories, the body curled up against his own shifted slightly. Right before his eyes, Amber slowly worked her way back to the world of the living. Though they refused to open, her eyes squinted reflexively, her nose scrunching along with them. Her content smile widened and she nuzzled closer to his warmth somehow managing to work her way under his chin with another absurdly content little sigh. If not for the questing lips that began trailing along his jawline and Adam's apple, he could almost have fallen back to sleep.

"Mis-shu, Dee," she slurred into his collarbone. "Wilcam hame—be'n 'way too long 'gain, ya sook—nae be'n by fer a nip'er a bo—" Suddenly her eyes flew wide open in shock. Once they'd taken in the sight before her—his dusky-colored plastron and the pulse racing in his throat—she leaned backward and her eyes slowly raised up to meet his, the connection triggering a dark blush.

*That* was unexpected, Amber thought with her head spinning. She fell asleep alone—didn't she?

No, no she remembered now—she had a whopper of a nightmare and went to him for comfort like a little girl inviting herself into her parents' bed! This was just all kinds of awkward...How far did they take it? Donatello wasn't the sort who'd take advantage of a woman during moments of weakness, Amber knew without a doubt, but she couldn't really say the same about herself—after all, the last time she had a major moment of weakness around him, she nearly banged him in the pantry! Despite knowing Donnie would have been a gentleman and kept his hands to himself, she found herself frantically taking stock of everything she could feel to get a clear idea of how naked she was. Soft cotton bared most of her tattooed cleavage—the several sizes too large Knicks jersey she slept in was still there but drooping. She could feel a dull pinch at her right hip—clearly, she still had her panties
and they were literally in a twist. Itchy cloth tangled in her legs—that would be the frumpy grey cotton pajama pants that always made her legs itch when she needed to shave. Nightshirt, slacks, skivvies, yep, that's 'bout it. Of course, she was still fully dressed, but what about him? Was he already naked when she crawled into his bed last night?!

Suddenly, the calloused pad of a fingertip popped her right on the tip of her nose, the gesture momentarily sending her cross-eyed. "Morning," Donnie teased her as she blinked away her disorientation. Though he didn't mention it, he felt a little smug about finding a way to make her stop over thinking things. "You slept like the dead—didn't wake up once."

"Wh...Eh?" she asked eloquently. "N—no nightmares? No trains?" Now that she wasn't wrapped around it, he propped his head up on his palm, the arm that held her during the night still draped loosely over her hip.

"Trains?" he echoed back. "Plenty'a those—they just didn't wake you up." Before she could demand whether the trains' racket even reached his room, a ridiculously convenient subway tram rattled past somehow sounding much closer in his room than in the lab. "I rest my case."

Amber couldn't wrap her head around it—it just didn't make sense! Every day since she came to stay with this wonderful family, she was disturbed by every single train that passed nearby—more often than not, their passing tore her from her sleep and triggered horrific night terrors. How, then, had she managed to sleep through the night without a single nightmare?! "Maybe we ought'a try this again, huh?" he suggested with a lazy dimpled smile. "Next time you can't sleep, come on in; if you sleep better in here, the door'll be open."

She wasn't about to admit it aloud, but she had an idea of why she slept so well. His arms made her feel strong, strong enough to defeat whatever weakness held her down, and those arms had held her all through the night. "I..." A bright blush stained her cheeks but she soldiered onward. "I guess it's worth a shot, right?" Instead of agreeing, he dipped his head lower searching out her lips with his own. "Oi! Yer honkin'a mornin' breath, Sunshine—No' happ'nen!"

"Hm, what a coincidence—you've got morning breath too," he teased back catching her by the cheek and urging her back into his reach. "Remember, though...I grew up in a sewer—I've smelled worse." She put up at least a half-assed fight but the end result was the same: a gentle brush of chapped lips over her own followed by a teasing nip. "So. We slept together. I've just got one question..." He gave her a teasing wink. "Do you still respect me?"

Just outside, Raphael and Mercy passed the shuttered door on their way to the kitchen, startling at the sudden onset of loud giggles and snorting laughter from within. The blonde and the beefcake exchanged a confused glance—Raph shrugged—Mercy rolled her denim blue eyes, socked him in the arm, and to the best of her limited ability hauled him away from the door. She hated mush, but she had to admit if anyone deserved a mushy moment, those two idiots did.

When the door finally opened again—about an hour of dozing and cuddling later—a wolf whistle split the air courtesy of the youngest ninja. Just like that, Amber's mood soured, and she aimed a dark glower at the turtle flipping pancakes while wearing a frilly yellow apron.

Amber knew how it looked—no matter what she did, she always woke up with 'sex hair,' even if she did nothing to earn said sex hair, and her eyes always had more bags than a baggage carousel. All that and she had a full audience for the walk of shame...good thing she was shameless. Luckily for Mikey, a sudden brain-duster from Raph deterred her intention to bawl him out. While Mike whined and protested his innocence, she shuffled past the living area to the barracks, gathered some fresh clothes, doubled back to the utility room for towels, then retreated for a shower. Shortly afterward
water rattled in the pipes and a crash echoed through the bathroom.

"That klutz," Mercy grumbled abandoning her chair to go make sure Amber didn't manage to break her neck somewhere between the linen storage and the shower. If ever there was such a thing as an anti-morning person, Amber was it, and the show was just getting started.

Mikey's snickering suddenly fell silent when he turned to pass another pancake off onto the platter. Donatello, fully dressed and thoroughly unimpressed, leaned back against the countertop, a mug of coffee already steaming in his right hand and his left hooked into a belt loop on his trousers. Though Mikey could've sworn he slept through the incident that morning, the genius stared him down across the kitchen without so much as a 'good morning.' Mike winced and gave the stern genius a sheepish wave hello. Don brought the mug up for a long, slow sip, his warning glare never faltering. The moment the cup was clear, his other hand swept upward then outward in an "I'm watching you" gesture.

Perhaps, Mikey considered with a nervous titter, he should warn Amber to put a sock on the doorknob next time.

Breakfast passed without much more spectacle unless one counted Amber downing nearly an entire pot of coffee all on her own. With the dishes put away and early training over with, Donatello sat listlessly in his desk chair staring down his cell phone. The video Mikey shot was heart-warming—Amber seemed so comfy and content in his arms!—but one thing worried the genius.

Who was his hyperactive brother intending to send it to? The clip started in the vacant kitchen and transitioned to the barracks where Amber's door hung wide open revealing her bed to be empty but rumpled. As Mikey checked the bathroom, the kitchen, and even the dojo, he narrated the basics of her usual routine to someone he referred to by a wide variety of pet names. Babycakes, Sweetcheeks, Sugarplum, and Honeybuns were only a few of the options he used. By the time he reached Donnie's bedroom door, a nickname the genius didn't recognize came up—Bree. Shortly afterward, the clip ended when Leo and Raph barged in and interfered.

Who was Bree? Donatello searched his memory but to no avail.

"Hey," Leonardo greeted from the doorway with the toaster held awkwardly in his arms. "How's it going?" Translation, 'Donnie, I broke it again—please fix it?'

"Do you know of anyone named Bree?" Don asked instead of answering. Translation, 'Sure, lemme just drop everything and fix your fuck-up.' Leo seemed concerned at the name but quickly gained control of himself.

"Don't think so," he lied smoothly. "Why?" In response, Don played the clip for him. Through the entirety, Leo mentally scrambled for options. Finally, realizing his brother had been staring at him curiously for a long silent minute, he suggested, "It is Mikey—maybe he was just making a cheesy joke?" Donnie blinked at the pun but said nothing, stunned both that Leo made a joke AND that it was so horrible.

Right as he was about to point out that 'Bree' was often used as an abbreviation for several women's names—Brianna, Sabrina, Bryony—Amber stumbled past the open doorway, presumably for yet another coffee refill. Suddenly it hit him that she wasn't exaggerating about being woken up every time a train roared past—she was a night owl at heart but was always awake long before he was. How much caffeine was she ingesting to stay awake all day? Perhaps, he considered, his brows pinching together, that excess of coffee might explain her continued jumpiness and daytime nausea.
"Amber doesn't need to know," he stated lowly as the brunette fought not to doze off against the counter. Inwardly he felt a little guilty for hiding something from her—after all, hiding things was what spawned the rift between them in the first place—but as Leo once said, compartmentalization of information wasn't technically lying. Amber was under enough stress already without having to worry about Mikey sharing her story with a stranger. "Right?"

"Right," Leo agreed watching Amber chug her entire cup of coffee in one breath then go back for another. Without a sheepish smile and a mumbled 'Please?' he passed off the abused toaster and retreated before Donatello decided to chuck it at him instead. Maybe, the genius considered sourly, he shouldn't have asked Mercy to move the plants blocking the appliance; when it was buried in ferns, Leo couldn't reach it to kill it.

When he retreated to the dojo, Leo was interrupted halfway by a soft voice from the couch. "Ya know," Mikey pointed out hopefully, "if ya just told'em bout'em, ya wouldn't have to lie to your brothers."

The comment stung, reminding the born leader of a similar incident the year before. Where's da honor in lyin' to yer brothers?! Raphael had demanded then. The crisis was over and the team was working together more smoothly, but now Donatello was picking up on Leo's bad habit…where was the honor in setting a bad example for those he led? Though the eldest was plagued by these uncomfortable realizations, the only thing that came out was a familiar warning. "That happens again, Mikey, and we're not going back."

His normally cheerful brother wilted right before his eyes, eyes as blue as Leo's downcast. Leo retreated to the dojo without another word, feeling like a complete heel. Maybe, he wondered as he settled down on his favorite meditation mat, maybe he wasn't being reasonable. Maybe he really should seriously consider letting his brothers meet Beverly and Bree.

It wasn't a new thought nor even a rare one. It seemed every day he wondered if he was doing the right thing by keeping their families separate. Beverly, despite her insistence that she was doing just fine, would be slowly dying without the near-constant stream of antibiotics pumping into her blood; a bad enough relapse could even kill her, Bree could wake up and find her cousin died in her sleep. Until Bev was healthy again, Leo couldn't bear to introduce his brothers to her, lest she pass away and they come face-to-face with the loss of a friend.

Once, Leo pushed her away because he couldn't fathom any human being capable of loving someone like him—like his family. Then Amber blew that theory out of the water. She loved Donatello—truly, madly, deeply loved him—and never once treated any of them as less than human. Even though the two idiots spent months fighting, wasted so much time being stubborn and sullen, there they were that morning—sound asleep in one another's arms and showing no signs that their feelings ever waned.

Love was possible…love could happen, even between a human and a mutant…and despite his best intentions, Leonardo feared love was precisely what he felt for the sickly woman who seemed entirely blind to their differences.

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**Around Noon**

Mercy stood silently before the long slab mirror in the bathroom, considering her reflection. Despite a thorough washing and double conditioning almost every day that week, her hair was still a shaggy feathery mess. Perhaps, she considered swiping her boar bristle brush over it again, it would improve once it grew out again? She didn't have high hopes, though; every photo she found of Donna Mays
showed her with short, shaggy, messy blonde hair that frankly resembled a haystack. Mercy was always picky about her hair in her last life and spoiled it rotten with hot oil treatments, lemon juice and vinegar lightening, and regular trimmings to keep it sleek and shiny. Now she was stuck looking like a scarecrow; she wanted her penny back.

Raphael didn't seem to mind. Her cheeks darkened in an annoying blush at the thought. Ever since he started training her, he'd been taking every opportunity to get closer to her. He'd ruffle her hair, chuck her chin, correct her posture while training—he'd even let her doze off on him during movies without complaint. Mercy knew it was somewhat ridiculous, but she didn't really mind much.

"This is crazy," she mumbled chucking the brush back into the storage bin under the trough sink. Stubbornly refusing to think about the ninja she was rapidly falling for, she stalked out of the bathroom and back to the barracks only to freeze in her open doorway. The room never really seemed small to her, but the red-clad ninja silently appraising the decor made it seem no larger than a closet.

Mercy suddenly felt rather embarrassed. She missed the ranch—missed her stepfather's livestock, her garden, her home in the country—and the multitude of clipped pictures tacked to the particle board walls proved it. Horses and chickens, fields and pastures, barns, farmhouses, haystacks—she even had a few pictures of fields of corn and grain—and of course, an entire herd of cows hung spread across her walls. Besides the army of makeshift posters, she'd also managed to pile several potted ferns and ivy plants in the various corners of the room, many dangling from makeshift metal brackets and rope hangers. She was stuck living in a glorified cupboard but by God, she made it her own!

"Cows, huh?" Raph teased suddenly. Mercy suddenly realized she'd spaced out and shoved past him to sit on her bed.

"Problem?" she asked sharply. "I happen to like cows—I was a ranch hand, Asshat!" Raph's massive three-fingered hands raised in surrender but his lips split in a shit-eating grin around his toothpick.

"Ya know I heard more people die from gettin' stepped on by cows dan by shark bites."

"More people die from bein' idiots than cow-stompin'," she retorted sharply. "Even cows get rough if ya piss'em off!" Raph chuckled, shaking his head at her.

"Nice one," he admitted taking a seat on the foot of the cot; Mercy's eyes widened at the way the metal groaned under his weight but she didn't say a word. "Look, I came ta ask ya somethin', Kid. Dat band ya like is playin' Summa Stage next week an' I know a great place ta catch da show from."

"Sixx:A.M.?" she breathed. "They're playin' in Central Park next week?!" He smirked at her, his amber eyes bright in the dim room.

"Yep. So whaddaya say? Wanna catch da show with me?" Mercy froze, her heart pounding and her heart racing. Was he...was he asking her...on a date? Nah, surely not...right...?"

"As what?" she asked, her blue eyes wide and nervous. "As a...a date?" To her utter disbelief, the smartass averted his eyes, a smudge of brown streaking across his green cheeks.

"If ya want it to be." He pulled at the back of his neck in embarrassment. "If not, it don't have'ta be—could just go as friends." Mercy hesitated, thinking it over and studying him closely. The room hung heavy with the scent of him—a tantalizing medley of sweat, musk, sandalwood, and Old Spice that made her head spin—and though she still feared to take that risk, still struggled against a lifetime of
emotional abuse, she was getting tired of letting it rule her. She was always so sure that love only hurt, that it wasn't worth the risk, and it would go sour at the slightest provocation.

Whether or not love hurt, she was tired of being afraid of it.

"Ya gotta preference?" she asked softly, running her fingers through her still-messy hair. "Friends or—or whatever?" Raphael finally met her eyes again and the intensity of his stare sent tremors down her spine; a hot, burning want bloomed in her belly and spread outward, downward. As though he could smell her, his nostrils flared, his eyes narrowing and darkening at what that breath told him. Those eyes of his, she decided, could turn a nun into a nymphomaniac.

"I think ya already know da answer ta that," Raph answered in a voice husky from hormones; his eyes strayed lower to her lips as he reached out to cup her jaw, the pad of a roughened thumb tracing over her lips. "Ya know I care about'cha—ya know I ain't gonna push ya, eitha. Whateva ya decide, I'll go wit' it." He seemed lost in thought, she mused as he traced her lips again; finally, she had her answer.

"It's a date, then," she answered with a weak smile. The solemn ninja startled, his eyes wide and blinking, but a wide grin slowly split his face. If she didn't know any better, she'd have compared him to a kid who thought he was pulled out of school for a doctor's appointment but wound up being taken to the circus.

Fear, she decided with a matching grin, could kiss the darkest part of her skinny white ass.

5:30 pm, The Hardys' Loft

Briallen yawned loudly as she crept through the front door. Another day studying, another afternoon at the daycare, another evening of feeling so worn out she could barely keep her eyes open...she really didn't want to cook dinner tonight. If she and Beverly hadn't already ordered in last night, she'd totally call for Chinese...or Thai...or pizza....

Pizza, she contemplated longingly as she dropped her backpack in the entryway, cast her keys into their bowl, and shuffled to the kitchen for a drink. Until Michelangelo came into her life, she wasn't that crazy about pizza, now she had it at least weekly. She poured herself a glass of iced tea and stood staring out the window he used as a door, wondering what he was doing that night. Maybe he was glued to the television or game system...maybe he was doing whatever ninja stuff his family did...or maybe, just maybe, he was lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, and missing her as much as she missed him.

Right...dinner. "Bev?" she called out to her cousin; no answer. Immediately concerned, Bree scanned the room for any signs of her housemate's whereabouts. Bosco's leash and harness hung by the door, Bev's purse on the shelf below it and her keys in the wooden bowl next to Bree's. The parlor was vacant and dark. The bathroom was vacant, the door hanging wide open.

A loud whine drew Bree to Beverly's bedroom. The door was closed, the lights off, and other than Bosco's whining and pacing, the room was completely silent. She tapped at the doorframe. "Bevvy?" Bree asked through the door. "You alright in there?" No answer. Every hair on the nape of her neck shot to attention as she tapped the door again then pushed it open a crack. "You okay in here?" Bosco shuffled over to greet her, his mismatched eyes wide and insistent. A quick glance to his kennel revealed that he hadn't been walked since that morning and had been left to relieve himself on the training pad; the dark, silent room reeked from the stench.

Something was horribly wrong. All hesitance gone, Bree rushed over to her cousin's bedside and
gently shook her awake. "Wh...Wha...?" Bev croaked clutching the back of her head. "Wha-zit, Hon?"

"Bevvy, are you alright?" Bree demanded as the other woman winced from pain. "What's wrong?"

"Jus...jus'my head," she answered hoarsely whimpering as another spasm of pain ripped through her skull. "Jus'a hea-ache." After a full nine months of watching her cousin slowly deteriorate from a brain abscess, the situation was setting off red flags. Bev was tired, her head hurt, she wasn't talking clearly and had apparently slept the entire day without tending to Bosco...something was horribly wrong, Bree knew it. "Tu...Turn off heat?" Beverly slurred.

They'd had the AC cranked up for a solid two months. The red flags were gone—now Bree's brain rang with air raid sirens. She reached out to check her cousin's temperature but yanked her hand back with a hiss. "Bevvy, you're burning up!" she yelped. Bev didn't respond, she just stared blankly through her.

"Leo?" she asked softly. "Whe-you ge'here?" Shit. Shit, shit, SHIT! Bree wasn't the cursing type—she spent too much time around kids to pick up that habit—but right now she felt like swearing. Not only was her sick cousin tired, achy, and slurring her words, she was burning with fever and hallucinating! For a moment the younger woman's mind raced as quickly as her heart rate, but finally, she took a moment to steady her nerves. Her pink-polished fingers shook as she dialed 911.

"I need an ambulance," she explained followed by a rapid-fire description of Beverly's illness, treatment, and sudden drastic downturn. Midway through, Bev leaned over the side of the bed and retched into the trashcan, and though her stomach was already empty, she couldn't stop dry-heaving. "—please, hurry!" Bree wanted nothing more than to stay at Bev's side until the paramedics got there but time and trial taught her she had to prepare. Even as she unlocked the front door, snatched their purses and go-bags, and harnessed Bosco, tears streaked down her cheeks and her hands shook beyond use.

Why did time always drag slowest when time was of the essence?

...I warned ya y'all were gonna wanna throttle me. Don't worry, though, the next chapter's completed and it'll be posted soon, probably a week or two tops, and I love you guys too much to make ya wait long!

Up next: Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures!

Chapter End Notes

-[Only Time] song by Enya.
-"["Mis-shu, Dee. Wilcam hame—be'n 'way too long 'gain, ya sook—nae be'n by fer a nip'er a bo[sie"]] — So often in fiction, the characters wind up talking in their sleep and somehow manage to enunciate perfectly regardless. I don't know it that's how it is with
some people, but I've never seen it happen—honestly, a certain family member of mine is well-known for having entire conversations in his sleep composed entirely of grunts and grumbles, and I sometimes wonder if my hubby Cold speaks German in his sleep. He enunciates so precisely… :/ Translation: "Missed you, Dee. Welcome home—you've been away too long again, ya [big softy]—haven't even been by for a [kiss] or a [cuddle.]

-['Honkin'a mornin' breath'] – she's saying his breath reeks.
-['bawl someone out'] – A somewhat local term most common in the South and Midwest. 'Bawling out' is basically the same as 'chewing out' but it's normally done at top volume—hence 'bawling,' another word for yelling. While chewing a person out is acceptable for the most part, bawling them out is generally seen as a smidgen excessive if not entirely irrational.
30: Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

Chapter Summary

Mikey takes matters into his own hands, Leo's left in the lurch, Raph and Donnie want answers. Amber and Mercy are BFFs and put on a show to cheer up Bree. Leo and Bev hit their breaking point and get their heads out of their asses. Bev is sneaky. No one dies, but someone gets laid!

Chapter Notes

Really hoping y'all didn't decide to kill me for that cliffhanger! No sense in a long author's note after that, so just a quick point: precautions for language, Bev's illness, uber-drama, a couple mildly-suggestive bits, and maybe a possible suicide trigger. I say maybe because the situation was not a suicide but is misconstrued as a suicide attempt and other than Leo's pride, no one gets hurt.

Made some changes after posting this chapter to AFF. Will be syncing the changes made for AFF posting to other sites' posting once that site is caught up and I have the time/energy to do so. FFnet's posting process, in particular, is a pain in the ass, so it's kinda normal for my stories to have minor differences from site to site. THIS site tends to be the easiest to work with for minor edits, followed by AFF, then FFnet being the most troublesome. Meanwhile, if anyone reads this chapter and finds something doesn't look right because of the formatting, let me know and I'll fix it.

Dedicated to Garth and Hubby Cold for inspiring Beverly; y'all can blame'er on them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested listening: Nickelback "Someday"

30: Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures

Leonardo wasn't sure where everything went wrong. There must have been signs—signs that he was headed down a road he shouldn't be—but for the life of him, he couldn't recall a one. His father was gravely silent, neither defending him nor reprimanding him. One of his brothers stared at him in blatant disbelief, another one shook his head in disappointment; the last knelt before the sofa consoling the hysterical brunette he brought home without warning. Finally, Mikey shot him a surprisingly stern glance over his shoulder.

"No more secrets, Leo," he insisted shortly. "They deserve to know." Leo didn't answer; he just stared at Briallen in dismay. Her state could only mean one thing...something horrible happened to Beverly. His stomach in his throat, he strode past his brother to the dojo and disappeared inside. Raph and Donnie exchanged glances with each other, then with Mercy and Amber, but no one had any answers.
When the brothers entered the dojo, Leo stood before the weapons wall staring off into space, his eyes suspiciously wet. "What's going on?" Donatello asked softly, glancing out the door to Bree and Bosco and back again. "Who is that, Leo? How's she know about us?" Finally, the truth came out.

"Back in September we got separated during a patrol," Leonardo reminded his brothers as they settled around the meditation corner. "I didn't find you for over an hour. Do you remember?"

"Yeah," Raph answered with a smirk, "ya gave us da silent treatment all da way home."

Donatello gave him an impatient look that clearly said you're not helping, then added, "I take it there's more to the story?"

Leo nodded gravely. "While I was looking for you, I heard a ruckus coming from a subway station—the one closest to that high school in Brooklyn." He could still remember the moment as though it happened yesterday—could still hear Beverly's pained screams and whimpers—"There was a woman in trouble…I thought she was having a stroke." He avoided his brothers' eyes from shame. "I called for an ambulance and stayed as long as I could, but she left her purse behind…I followed to the hospital to return it…but…"

"Ya got seen," Raph finished when it became clear Leo couldn't.

"No," Leo admitted, "worse…I got attached." Just then, Mikey padded into the room and settled down with his brothers.

"Master gave her some of his sedative tea," he reported with none of his usual zeal. "Amber gave up her bed so she could rest—said she won't mind bunking with Donnie if Bree needs the bed." Don's eyes darted back to Leo, sharp with accusation.

"Bree, huh?" he stated accusingly. "How cheesy." To his credit, Leo looked pretty ashamed.

"Ya got attached," Raph prompted when the eldest hesitated to continue.

"Yeah…I thought…I never thought she'd remember me, but she did. She was in the ICU for well over a week and like a complete idiot I kept going back to check on her." Aching for something to take his mind off the story, he lunged to his feet and paced restlessly; why did he always end up pacing when Bev was on his mind? "Her name's Beverly Hardy; she developed an abscess in her brain after a tooth went bad. The doctors put her through biopsies, surgeries, draining operations, and endless testing, and for the last eight months, she's been stuck at home undergoing IV antibiotics via home-hospice."

"When Leo kept takin' off," Michelangelo picked up, "I started snooping—found out he was visiting Bev at the hospital after hours. If I told anyone, I'd'a wound up in the Hashi."

"Damn right," Leo muttered. "She's dying—she doesn't need the O'Neil treatment." He took a deep breath to steady himself. "Once they moved her to the hospice, she asked if I'd be willing to fetch something from her apartment—her cousin forgot to bring her tablet charger. When Mike and I got there the place was completely empty but we had trouble finding what we went for. Next thing we knew the cousin was collapsed in the entryway screaming like a banshee."

"Bree's got this thing about blue eyes," Mikey admitted awkwardly. "They freak'er out pretty bad, long story. Other'n that, she don't see anything wrong with us—she and Bev are like Amber an' Mercy, they treat us like we're normal!" He suddenly fell silent, worrying about Bree. The dojo was quiet for a moment, then Raphael spoke up again.

"So you two ain't been goin' on extra patrols all dis time," he accused. "Ya been up on da surface
visitin' a couple'a chicks…an' ya din't even think ta tell us?" He shook his head at Leo with a scowl. "Did ya seriously think we wouldn't understand? –Dat we'd blame ya fer gettin' seen?"

"For a time, yeah," Leo admitted, "but I figured it out eventually. I didn't want to bring Bev and Bree into the family, not because I didn't trust them or didn't trust you—Bev was dying, guys! She could still die from this if she—if she hasn't—!"

"Oh, she's alive," Mike cut in quickly. "Bree said she had a relapse—she's been transferred upstate so Doc Crane can take over." A shudder of relief ran through Leo's body at the news. Not dead…Beverly was not dead, she was still alive…though he knew that could still change, the news made him feel weak from relief.

"Stress can sometimes worsen serious illness," Donatello commented with his brows pinched together in concentration. "You were trying to protect her…and to protect us if the worst happened…weren't you." It wasn't a question; they all knew the truth. Even so, Leo nodded, his eyes downcast. "We understand. –right, Raph?" Raphael bristled at Donnie's stern glance but nodded, his teeth gritting almost painfully.

"We ain't kids no more," he pointed out defensively. "Ya ain't gotta treat us like'em. Next time jus' tell us, a'right?"

"Am I the only one wonderin' 'bout the mutt?" Mercy piped up from the doorway. The four ninjas startled at her sudden comment and whipped about to face her. No longer having to pretend they weren't snooping, she and Amber strode over to the gathering and took seats, one sprawling out beside Raph and the other sitting cross-legged between Donnie and Mikey. "What?" Mercy asked as though she and Amber hadn't been eavesdropping the whole time.

"Bosco's a service dog," Leo explained. "The abscess affected Beverly's eyes—she can't see anything in the left field of either eye and she has problems with double vision. Bosco compensates for her blind spot."

"Homonymous hemianopsia," Donatello remarked thoughtfully.

"Gesundheit," Mercy quipped earning a peeved glance.

"It means her eyes no longer register anything in the left of her vision field," Donnie explained, "like she has blinders over the left sides of both eyes. Depending on where the abscess formed, it's probably impacted her optic nerves—the diplopia is probably caused by the same thing. Both are pretty common in survivors of stroke, brain cancer, and traumatic brain injury." Out of the corner of his eye, Donnie noticed Amber blush and glance away. It seemed she always got flustered when he started off on one of his intellectual tangents; maybe she liked it when he 'talked nerdy?'

"That explains why she missed the tea in the shop," Amber suddenly realized turning to Mercy. "She kept reaching too high or too low—took her three tries and she still fumbled it."

"Vertical double vision," Leo agreed softly. "It's all been really hard on her—she was a music teacher and tutor but now she can barely handle a few private lessons a week. She's not adapting well."

"Enough'a dis," Raph interrupted sharply. "Yer gal's in da hospital, Leo—da fuck are ya doin' here?" Leo's eyes practically bulged out of their sockets.

"Sh-She's not—!"

"Yeah, yeah," Mercy drawled socking him in the arm. "Tell someone who believes ya an' git goin'
Mikey, Donnie, and Amber slipped out of the room while the other three weren't watching, exchanging awkward glances.

"I'm startin' to regret throwin' those two together," she admitted under her breath as Mercy and Raph practically ganged up on the embarrassed eldest turtle. "They make a helluva tag team."

Mikey nudged her in the side with his elbow, finally grinning his typical Mikey grin. "Don't take all the credit, Sis," he teased. "They'd have found their way even if ya didn't meddle."

"Bree, was it?" Big brown eyes met Amber's over the younger woman's shoulder.

"Hey," Bree mumbled turning back to her mug of cocoa.

"Hey, yerself," Amber fired back automatically, then winced. "Sorry…habit. Name's Amber O'Brien."

"Briallen Hardy." Bree sniffled in embarrassment as Amber paused to pour herself yet another cup of coffee, dumped in a slop of milk and enough sugar to choke a goat, then invited herself to the table. "Bree for short. Sorry to burst in on you guys like this…it just happened so fast…I didn't know where else to turn."

"Hey, now," the elder soothed chancing a supportive touch to the shoulder; a breath later she realized just how she looked every time she dove into Donatello's arms for comfort. The petite woman shuddered into her shoulder sobbing, and all she could do was shush her, pet her curly brown hair, and rub her back. Once it was over, Bree crept awkwardly back to her chair and scrubbed her eyes dry.

"S-Sorry," she mumbled in embarrassment. "I—"

"Oi, don't go beatin' yerself up—us lahssies gotta stick together, right?"

Through the utility room doorway, Bree heard Mercy whistle and holler, "Heeeere, Lassie—C'mere girl!"

"Haw!" Amber shouted back, "Put a sock in it, ya bleach blonde!" Bree stared at Amber like she just grew antlers, seeming to have forgotten her embarrassment and sadness; mission accomplished.

"Lassies?" Bree repeated in confusion, one brown eyebrow disappearing behind her curly bangs. "You're Irish?" Amber laughed aloud at the thought; her Gran'da would have turned red and sputtered oaths at the thought. It was bad enough that his only daughter married a man with an Irish surname.

"Hardly, Hardy. Mum's family's from Scotland, some of it stuck." The younger woman sat silently contemplating things for a bit, then admitted something aloud.

"Mikey was right."

"Pardon?" Bree blushed slightly but gave a sheepish smile.

"He wasn't allowed to tell his family about us, but he told me all about you guys…he said you're compassionate and unfiltered, Mercy's sarcastic and bristly, and that you're both a riot and prone to spontaneously insulting each other." Amber chuckled into her coffee at the thought.

"That's us a'right," she admitted. "We've been friends too long to take each other seriously."

"Bite me, Blundie." Mischief managed, the blonde held her dirt-stained hand out to Bree with a lopsided smirk.

"Mercy Ross, professional plant nut; looks like ya a'ready met the crazy Celt." Bree couldn't help smiling as she accepted the handshake.

"Actually, Mike said you're both a little crazy…crazy can be fun, though, right?" Noticing Amber's gaze drift toward the pantry, Mercy gave a suggestive eyebrow waggle. A dark blush streaked from the brunette's nose outward and she suddenly became utterly fascinated with the lip gloss print on her coffee mug.

"You've gotta be a little crazy to keep up with this crowd," Donnie pointed out as he strode toward the coffee maker, a dimpled smile splitting his face. "Welcome to the family, Briallen." Bree took note of the shy smiles passing between Amber and the bespectacled turtle with interest. Could it be, she wondered almost wistfully, that she and Beverly weren't the only ones who saw the brothers as more than mutants? Whatever the answer was, she was sure it would become clear with time.

The first time Leonardo found himself in a hospital room was both eye-opening and traumatizing. The stench of antiseptic, the incessant beeping of monitors, the frigid air that stung his skin…hospitals, it seemed, were all the same. Now, months had passed since that first visit, and his skin crawled from the feeling of déjà vu. Beverly lay still as a corpse in the narrow bed, stuck full of a multitude of needles and tubes.

She was still beautiful. She was always beautiful to him—even with her long dark hair bound up, her tilted brown eyes hung with shadows, and her cheeks growing thin and sunken, she still took his breath away. Leo hovered restlessly in the shadowed corner of the room just soaking in the sight of her, convincing himself she was really there, really alive. Every time the heart monitor faltered, his lungs balked at their work. As focused as he was on the rest of her, he completely missed the moment her eyes weakly slid open.

"H…Hogo…sha…?" she rasped trying to focus in on his face. Everything seemed more a blur than usual, but at least her head wasn't splitting anymore.

"What were you thinking?" It wasn't supposed to come out—he'd meticulously planned out what he'd say to her when she woke, mentally charted out a multitude of promises, consolations, and vows—but nevertheless, those words were shoved out of the way in the moment. Fully coming to, Bev struggled to pull herself upright in the bed; before she could hurt herself, Leo stalked over and jabbed the controls to raise the incline.

"Pardon?" she asked in confusion, suddenly realizing she wasn't at home. "What…what happened? …I don't…" When it became clear to her just where she was, she looked ready to cry. "I relapsed."

"That's an understatement," he bit out. "Bree filled me in on the way here—you've been having headaches again, been dizzy and nauseous, and you never once gave Doctor Crane a call. You just blew it off entirely!" As so often before, he found himself pacing in fury. "God, Beverly, do you want to die?!"

"Away from the edge, Beverly," Leo warned from the safety of her blind side. Bev said nothing, silently contemplating the steady stream of traffic oozing along the street.
several stories below. She never intended for Leo to find her up in the rooftop garden, much less near the end of her rope—it started as a simple quest for fresher air and a view of the night sky, but somehow she found herself standing at the widows' walk, contemplating the distance with disinterest.

"It's been over a month since you found me, Hogosha," she reminded in a murmur. "I've been undergoing treatment for a month now...there's been no improvement." Shuddering from the cold, Beverly wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she thought to grab her shawl. Was she always so cold, or was it a matter of all the weight she was losing? "I'm not getting better. For so long, they insisted I'd be recovered in a few months; now they're not smiling, not reassuring, they're just asking if I've written up a will. How do you respond to that?"

"Stand down, Beverly," Leo insisted inching toward her. She'd never seen him before and he didn't want to change that, but if it was a matter of being seen or letting her jump to her death, he knew the choice he'd make—he'd make that choice in a heartbeat. "There's still hope—there's still a chance! Don't give up, please!"

A sudden wave of dizziness crashed through Beverly; though she'd been steady on her feet all day, she felt herself tip dangerously and latched onto the waist-high concrete wall. With a hoarse shout, Leo dove for her, snatching her from the edge, tucking her against his front, and rolling with the landing. Once the spinning stopped Bev found herself sprawled across his solid plastron. She took a moment to catch her bearings, puzzled by the dusky tan surface beneath her, but quickly closed her eyes. After all, her hogosha didn't want to be seen; he made that abundantly clear and she promised to respect it. A surprisingly gentle hand cupped her chin and tilted it upward—an invitation? She hesitated, then complied, meeting his eyes between the shadows in hers.

Molasses brown eyes focused on pale blue and widened in disbelief—disbelief, but not horror. "Hogosha?" Beverly asked in wonder. Leo heaved a frustrated sigh and stared right back at her.

"Leonardo," he corrected dryly, brushing a smudge of soot off of her cheek. "I saved your life, you stubborn woman...don't throw it away."

Leonardo's accusation hurt—hurt as though he slapped her—but Beverly's blood boiled with anger more than pain. "I have never wanted to die!" she snarled at him, the heart monitor beeping in protest. "I'd never do that—I'd never leave Bree alone! How—How dare you, Leonardo?! How dare you?!

"What am I supposed to think?!" he nearly shouted. "You know better than to blow off symptoms—you know you can't write it off as nothing—if you don't get better, you'll DIE!" His voice cracked at the very thought.

"NOW you care!"

"I'VE ALWAYS CARED!"

The cat was officially out of the bag. Beverly's eyes narrowed in disbelief—his crestfallen expression changed that disbelief to shock, then finally to a soft wondering gleam. Right as her lips parted—to argue or confirm?—hurried footsteps bolted toward her door. Beverly switched on the television and began frantically channel surfing Leonardo dove into the dark bathroom, latched onto the shower curtain rod, swung himself upward, and silently wedged himself up against the ceiling. After a half-
assed knock, the hallway door swung open and cracked loudly against the wall.

"Miss Hardy!" the frantic nursing tech burst out, "Are you—" His panicked expression morphed into a cringe at the sight of Beverly apparently glued to a horrible, god-awful, drama-soaked soap opera. Onscreen, a man and woman screamed obscenities at one another then practically tackled one another.

"Shush!" Bev scolded the tech with all the tenacity of a crazed fan. "This is the best part—he's been cheating on her!" The tech's face seemed to turn inside out at the thought. He made a passable attempt at checking the room for any signs of danger, then stomped back out the door grumbling under his breath.

"Sick people'll watch anything!" The door swung shut quieter than it swung open; Bev focused intently on the departing footsteps, then when the hallway was silent and still again, she switched off the TV with a scoff.

"He's cheating on her?" Leo remarked dryly, leaning against the door-frame to the bathroom. She rolled her eyes.

"It's a soap opera, Leo. Of course, he's cheating on her."

Earlier that month, Leonardo witnessed yet another loud altercation between Donatello and Amber, and finally intervened. 'Do you two even know why you're fighting anymore?!' he demanded, but neither had an answer. They both betrayed each other's trust, they both found out in the worst way possible, they both blew up all over each other without talking it out like responsible adults, and they both proceeded to spend three months squabbling like children. Fast forward to that morning, the two idiots were zonked out in each other's arms looking sickeningly cute, and whaddaya know, they weren't fighting anymore.

Could it be, Leo wondered with a sinking feeling, that he and Beverly were falling into the same trap? The very idea appalled him, but he couldn't squash it. He pushed Bev away just like Donnie pushed Amber away; she got too close, got too comfortable with him, so he shut her out just like Amber shut out Donnie…and just like Donnie did when Amber found his log, he blamed Beverly, provoked her into a screaming match, and just as Amber had, he let his heart show at the worst possible moment.

Stress can sometimes worsen serious illness, Donatello had warned that evening. If he'd been more intent on protecting Beverly than proving his point, he would have handled things in a more rational manner. That said, though, the heart was hardly rational. When he looked back up, a pair of molasses-brown eyes watched him expectantly, their owner thoroughly unimpressed by his long awkward silence.

"I know," he admitted finally, though he wasn't sure exactly what he was admitting. "Sometimes these things just happen and we don't recognize the warning signs."

"Nice royal we," Bev pointed out sharply. "We don't want to die—we have been doing everything in our power to not die, thank you very much, and we certainly don't appreciate being treated like a brain-damaged invalid."

"I know," Leo repeated abashed; already he was feeling the urge to pace again. "I just…" He trailed off. Silently, he padded over and gingerly lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed. "Bev, I'm sorry…I didn't mean what I said." She arched a brow at him but said nothing, clearly waiting for him to try harder. "I've always got my emotions, my thoughts under strict control—I don't let things get to me, I don't waste time on things that don't matter, and I certainly don't lose my temper like that
"easily!" Heat spread through his cheeks and he turned to stare at the floor. "Whenever you're involved," he admitted softly, "that all goes out the window. I pace—I get flustered—I overreact—I don't think before I speak! I—I don't understand!"

A sudden feather-light touch on his face—an elegant hand cupping his cheek—cut his train of thought off at the station and blew up the tracks. Swallowing nervously, he met her eyes. "Gee," she commented in a deadpan, "that sounds pretty familiar, huh?" The pad of her thumb brushed over his suddenly dry lips. "Leonardo, you're my blind spot...it's only logical that I'm yours."

"Her blind spot...the very thought made his pulse stutter. "Yeah," he mumbled in embarrassment, "that sounds about right...I've never had a...a blind spot...before."

"You'll get used to it," she promised with a teasing smile then patted his cheek and folded her hands in her lap. "Worst case scenario, Bosco gets a girlfriend." He cringed at the image that popped into his head at the statement then shook his head violently to rid himself of it. Some things even meditation couldn't fix. "You didn't just realize this, Leo...why'd you hide it, to begin with?"

"Relationships mean emotions," he pointed out seriously. "Emotions mean stress, stress means losing sleep and losing energy, and that can affect your health—the last thing I ever wanted was for you to get sicker." She stared him down and it was all he could do to not squirm like a guilty child. Beverly had a knack for getting answers out of people and she seemed especially adept at getting answers from him; sometimes he didn't even need to say a word. This was clearly one of those times.

"You stubborn ass," she grumbled at him, the last word surprising him; he'd never heard her curse before. "Do you seriously think I'm selfish enough to demand a relationship with you?—when I could still keel over without warning? I wouldn't wish that baggage on anyone, much less my Hogosha."

"You weren't...you don't...?" That soft hand caught his cheek again but she otherwise maintained her distance.

"I do," she admitted, "but until I'm fully healed up, it wouldn't be fair to start anything." Wait for me? The request was implied but rang clearly anyway. It was a request he had every intention of honoring.

Late that evening, Leonardo made his way to Bree's usual hotel tired, sore, and longing for nothing more than a comfortable bed and several hours' sleep. Instead he found a sock tied to the handle of the balcony's sliding glass door and Bosco sulking by the railing sans harness. Leo heaved a frustrated sigh at the dark room beyond the glass door and blackout curtains. He should have expected this, really; Mikey insisted on accompanying them upstate to 'comfort his Babycakes,' but apparently Mikey had a strange view of comforting her. Perhaps, Leo considered as he lowered himself to the cool pavement in an easy sprawl, the canoodling couple inside deserved a little time alone. He'd put them through a heck of a lot of hardship in his misguided attempt to protect Beverly; he only hoped they'd forgive him with enough time.

Bosco whined in greeting, his tail whumping against the concrete as he army-crawled closer to Leo. "They locked you out, too, huh?" he asked the dog teasingly. "Probably for the best—you don't need that kind of education." The retriever gave a snuffle of annoyance and dropped his chin back onto his paws, one blue eye and one brown watching the distant traffic. Leo buried his fingers in the dog's thick brown fur almost immediately finding 'the spot' and scratching until Bosco was rendered a contented groaning pile of pooch. He was, after all, off-duty so long as he wasn't being Beverly's eyes.
The sky never seemed so clear back home. Leo loved New York—loved the noisy city rank with smog—but all the light pollution and the ever-present blanket of exhaust blocked out the stars at night. To think that only a few cities away, the night sky shone with more light than Broadway. Could Beverly see that skyline from her hospital room? Silly though it may seem, he hoped she had the best view in the whole city.

"You have strange tastes in art." The unexpected comment made Bree yelp in surprise, but Beverly only smiled into her book. The mutant lounging along the kitchen windowsill only just announced himself, but he'd been there for quite some time yet.

"Oh, look Bevvy," Bree snarked, "your stalker's here."

"Come in, Leonardo," Bev greeted instead of rising to her cousin's bait. "Care for a closer view of the Garden?" Instead of answering, Leo hopped down to the floor and paced into the parlor to silently consider the newest addition to the army of lithographs—a massive three-paneled print hung proudly between a star-spangled Von Goff and a surrealist print of an impossibly endless staircase. Leo wouldn't quite call himself a master of art appreciation, but he wasn't sure what to make of the new print—a trio of paintings that all seemed one giant orgy gone wrong. At his back, Bree grumbled something about 'sewer-savages who can't appreciate art' and retreated to her room, presumably to sulk. Beverly gingerly rose from her recliner and dragged her IV stand over to him, standing at his side in admiration of the bizarre images.

"The Garden of Folly," she explained in quiet reverence. "It's one of Jerome Bosch's most well-known works, and it's his most infamous triptych. Not an artist has ever walked this earth with such talent and vision as Bosch did..." She shook her head, her dark brown eyes shimmering suspiciously. "So many artists paint only what they see...If El Bosco painted what he saw, what demons the man must have had in his head."

A sudden snuffle nearby made Leonardo shove Beverly behind him, both swords drawn in the blink of an eye. "Relax, Hogosha," she chastised him gently. "It's just Bosco." Leo blinked in disbelief, wondering if he misheard her. "Come here, boy, it's okay...he's friendly." A shape hesitantly emerged from the shadows of the sofa—a large Labrador with warm brown fur, a brown left eye and a blue right. A vibrant orange with a handle stuck up from his back and a large obnoxiously bright drool bandana—helpfully emblazoned with the name "El Bosco"—hung around his neck. As the dog went about acquainting himself with Leo's bare feet, Beverly filled in the blanks.

"Doctor Crane says my...my vision damage will probably be permanent. I'm not legally blind so I didn't merit a full-fledged service dog, but Bree insisted I'd be safer with some help." Bosco growled at Leo's left foot as though expecting it to attack him; an unexpected twitch of a toe sent the dog nearly through the roof with a terrified yelp and the massive hairy animal dove behind Beverly for protection. Beverly chuckled and bent to scratch behind his ears. "He's a service training washout—something about being too rambunctious?—but he's more than enough for me. At the very least, he can cover my blind spot."

As Leonardo dozed against the glass door, he almost fancied he saw the stars begin to ripple and spread, saw the distant skyscrapers weave and dance. Even as the world around turned topsy-turvy, a pair of molasses-brown eyes grinned at him from his memories. In dreams, it was quite clear to him: Beverly didn't need the best view in the city.
She was the best view.

Cliffie's gone, Bev's alive...is it safe to come out yet? @_@ . . . 

Chapter End Notes

* Funny how a simple typo can become a running joke! I owe ya for that one, Ameless, I love it!

** Unfortunately, I did not pull all that stuff about brain abscesses out of my rear. The most common cause of brain abscesses is complications from an abscessed tooth or a helluva sinus infection; they tend to occur more frequently in men than women and according to what I've read, there's an approximately 10% mortality rate. Usually, abscesses clear up pretty easily with prompt—and effective—treatment but some cases are just one big long string of relapses and increased dosages. That happened to a loved one of mine in fact—we'll call him 'Garth'—and much of Bev's struggle is rooted in the many months I spent at his side while he was undergoing his own treatment. When a brain abscess first manifests, symptoms lead to tentative diagnoses of stroke, brain cancer, tumors, and a slew of other nasties, and yes, even after a butt-load of increasingly invasive procedures you're likely to need at least a few months of near-constant IV antibiotics to recover. The vision problems can be permanent or go away completely, or as with Garth, they may be manageable but worsen intermittently. Also, I've learned a lot more about service animals since beginning this story and I'm trying to apply that to Bosco...yeah, it's a little overdue, but I'm working on it. In my defense, I did my research beforehand but apparently missed a lot. I WAS doing said research while taking care of my grandmother, who has since passed.

# A Widows' Walk is an architectural feature common to certain types of architecture from generations past; my city's pretty small, but our downtown has several 'historic' buildings with widows' walks along the rooftops. Generally, a widows' walk is a waist-height wall or decorative railing surrounding the flat rooftop, often formed of the same material used for the façade, meant to function both as an aesthetically pleasing feature and as a safety net. THEN people started getting stupid and CLIMBING on the walls and getting themselves killed. Now older buildings with roof access are predominantly forbidden from public access and walked only by pigeons.

## Recall the name changes? Von Goff = Van Gogh, other print described is from a woodcut by M.C. Escher, "Ascending and Descending." Jerome Bosch = Hieronymus Bosch, called "El Bosco" by the Spanish; Hieronymus is a variation of Jheronimus, the Latin form of the name Jerome. Bev's new litho described here is based on a triptych painted by H. Bosch, "The Garden of Earthly Delights," and it's a total mind-fuck. I prefer "The Temptation of St. Anthony" triptych myself but if not for the Garden, I'd never have heard of Bosch…and that would be a crime. The one time I managed to find
myself in the presence of an ACTUAL BOSCH PAINTING, it was a lesser-known single-panel painting at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City...and I swear to bog, people, I was fangirling all over the place. It was like a religious experience to me, bordering on something incredibly obscene!

I highly suggest that any curious readers do some Googling of Bosch's artwork but I will warn ya—there's a lot of nudity, a lot of WTF, and a lot of religious themes…and practically none of his work is SAFE FOR work! That aside, the man was truly a genius and his creations never cease to amaze me.
Donnie and Amber are stinkin' adorable; Amber is SO not a morning person. Awkward flirting is interrupted by FSG and followed by more flirting. On their date, Mercy discovers that Raph is turning her into a perv and he's driven to distraction by her buttocks. Mercy tells Raph about her past life, he rises to the occasion figuratively THEN literally. Horny snugglebunnies - Nosebleed alert.

Amber is stubborn, Donnie is more stubborn, they out-stubborn each other, cuddles.

Precautions for the usual plus some suggestive scenes. Also a precaution for potential nosebleeds during Raph and Mercy's date - it's not super detailed but Raph fans will want to read this chapter with a hanky handy, or at the very least not eat or drink anything while reading that scene. Author is not responsible for anyone suffering traumatic cerebral exsanguination while reading this story. I've always been a Donnie fan and probably always will be, but Raph's leathers from the first Michael Bay movie...DAMN...just...DAMN...that loincloth should come with a warning label.

@__@*

Hope y'all enjoy the new chapter!

Suggested Listening: The Grateful Dead "Box of Rain," Sixx:A.M. "Better Man"

Amber slowly drifted awake to sounds and smells both familiar and strange. A familiar blend of coffee, sweat, and grease nearly drowned out the smell of vanilla air freshener and in the distance, she could hear coffee percolating. Amidst everything pulling for her attention, one thing rang clearly: she did NOT wanna get up. Nuzzling nose-first into a pillow that smelled strangely like a certain tall, gangly mutant, she let herself drift off…only to be woken again, this time by the smell of spices and the distant sound of a timer going off. Eyes barely open, she silently took in her surroundings.

She was once again in Donatello's bed, this time cuddled up against his pillows, and as every time before, fully dressed. It probably shouldn't have surprised her, seeing as she went to bed alone every day the past week but always woke up in that same spot…another slew of nightmares must've sent her crawling into Donnie's bed at the crack of dawn, AGAIN, and history repeated itself. "Fark me," she grumbled sitting up and trying to smooth down the sex hair she did nothing to earn. "This's gotta stop." Before she could delve any further into her self-lecture, the bedroom door slowly swung open. A tall, gangly ninja bearing a tray of dishes, two empty mugs, and a full carafe of coffee crept through backward and closed the door as quietly as possible without setting anything down. Donnie
let out a sigh of relief at the accomplishment and turned to set the tray on the nightstand.

He didn't expect to see her sitting up in bed watching him with bleary eyes. A yelp of surprise ripped from his lungs and he rattled his cargo. "Uh…morning?" he greeted sheepishly. Amber's initial attempt at a reply was cut off in a loud yawn she just barely managed to aim into her cleavage.

"E'ry man 'oo goes'out wi'g'mornin' on'is lips," she grumbled tiredly, "sh'be fried wi'is own bacon an' buried wi'a stalk'a cel'ry through'is heart."* It took a minute for his befuddled expression to register; funny, it made sense in her head. "Mornin'."

"Sleep well?" he asked with a smirk; while she blinked and tried to goose her mental hamster into doing its job, he unloaded everything onto the nightstand and set about filling the mugs. "Brought breakfast…and coffee." If she'd had the energy, she would have perked up at the last word; unfortunately, she barely had the energy to keep her eyelids aloft much less recognize the bacon, eggs, and cinnamon rolls piled on the two plates.

"Brek…fus?" she asked as though she couldn't recall what the word meant. Donatello was laughing at her, she was sure, but she didn't have the energy to do more than blink at him; maybe after a cup of coffee…or two…or twelve...

A knock at the lab door broke Donnie's concentration; Amber stood in the doorway, avoiding his eyes and fidgeting with the end of one frizzy braid. "Thanks," she mumbled, a flash of pink streaking across her cheeks. "I didn't…didn't expect breakfast in bed…was really sweet." Chuckling under his breath, he beckoned her over, and she perched obligingly on the edge of his desk.

"Coffee and Pop-Tarts don't just magically appear on the nightstand," he pointed out teasingly, and sure enough, her blush darkened. "Yet even when we were at odds, I still found them every Saturday morning. What's that phrase, what's good for the gander's good for the goose?"

"Somethin' like that," she admitted shyly. "Figures you'd be good at baking. Those cinnamon rolls were sinful—I feel like I need'a confess'em."

"Heh. Cooking's an art, but baking's just chemistry—nothing to it." No wonder she was so skilled at baking pig feed, Amber realized with a wince; she was almost as horrible at chemistry as she was at math.

Not really noticing that her mind was off in other places again, Donnie stood and led her by the shoulder next door to the needle room. "It's been six weeks since those fractures happened," he reminded as he guided her over to the exam bench. "You've gotten the all-clear on your fibula and your cheek should be healed as well; if you don't mind, I'd like to have a look at them." It took a moment before the request registered.

"Yer worried they didn't heal properly?" she asked, his resulting blush confusing her even more.

"N…Not really," he admitted. "I know how fractures feel—how to identify them by manual examination in the field—and how they register on my goggles' bio scanner. I just don't have any data on healed fractures." Feeling incredibly awkward, he focused on powering up the lights over the exam bench and laying out a clean sheet over it. As though it was only yesterday, he could still recall vividly the day Northpaw gave her those injuries—and how they registered on his bio scanner. He could still recall her blank expression while he stitched up the deep gash in her side without so much as a local anesthetic. The memory gave him pause, and for a moment, he almost felt he could still smell that hated stench of blood, salt, and antiseptic that had burned his lungs for days.
Focus, Donnie, he reprimanded himself silently when a comforting hand touched his bare shoulder; losing himself in things he could not change never accomplished anything. "My brothers have broken bones before," he explained soldiering on ahead. "but our healing rate is highly accelerated—approximately 5.087 times the rate of the average human of our age and body type." He finally met her eyes with a shrug. "By the time it's safe to remove a cast, there's really no discernible sign the injury ever occurred."

"So you're askin' permission to feel me up?" Amber teased, then grinned when he physically choked; she really shouldn't have so much fun teasing him. "—jus' for science?" If anything, she realized with no shortage of amusement, that only made him blush harder. While his eyes were averted from her, she discreetly reached down and smoothed her hand down one thick bare leg; she had a little stubble, but nothing worth hiding… "Go for it."

"Wait, what?" he gawked as she clambered gracelessly up onto the exam bench and winced at the cold metal under her bare thighs. Already she was regretting breaking out the jean shorts. "You—"

"I consent, Dee," she shrugged. "Knowin' my luck, I'll break somethin' again in a month's time—it'll be easier if ya know what yer workin' with, right?" He blinked a few times, seemingly stunned, then shook himself out of his stupor and got to work. Once the cheek and leg scan were over and his goggles were properly calibrated according to the new data, he pushed them up and pulled his glasses down, and tentatively reached out for her right calf.

Dear Lord…a full-body shiver swept over Amber as strong callused fingertips studiously examined the area around the healed break. With his eyes closed, he sought out each tendon, bone, and sinew in the vicinity and took note of its location and their proximity to the fracture, mapping out the injury in his mind's eye. By the time those talented fingers found the previously cracked portion of her fibula—still tender and just a hair thicker than the rest—Amber felt ready to melt into a puddle of goo.

"Fascinating," Donatello mumbled smoothing his fingers down her calf. "The cracked area's slightly thicker now like there's another layer of protection against future breaks!" …and now the nerdy talk, Amber thought staring at his lips in dismay; at this rate, she'd wind up leaving a puddle on the bench—or at the very least in her underwear.

"The human body's strongest in the broken places," she admitted instead of acknowledging that his curious examination had softened into gentle caresses ranging from her bare knee down her thick calf all the way to the cuff of her sock. "Scar tissue's tougher'n regular tissue to deter re-injury; other'n a couple wildcards—namely the spine an' coccyx what rarely heal properly—bones're a prime example'a that."* The genius stared up at her as though she had spouted something unusually obscene, his hands yanking away from her leg.

"The what now?" he squeaked. "I know vertebral injuries are prone to complications, but people actually have…bones…in their…?" he trailed off, muddy brown streaking across his cheeks. It took an awkward silence but finally, it hit her.

"Dear God no!" she almost squawked her entire face beet red. "See-oh-see-see-why-ex, the human tailbone!" The brunette visibly shuddered. "Boners don't actually have bones in'em!" The silence in the room was almost painful in its awkwardness; curse her broken filter!

"So that's how that's pronounced," he muttered almost to himself. He knew what the coccyx was—knew the basics of human sexual anatomy—but the pheromones slowly saturating his lungs had firmly seized control of his normally impressive brain. Ever since he started his examinations, the tangy non-scent had grown stronger and stronger to the point where he was swimming in it and all the blood from his more intelligent head had flown south for the winter. It seemed to take next to
nothing to provoke that response from her; was she just frustrated and needy from a long dry spell, or was she a nymphomaniac? He no longer doubted that she was attracted to him but surely she wasn't that attracted to him!

"Yeah…'at's how it's pronounced." Get it together, O'Brien, she reprimanded herself silently. Y'a'ready made things awkward—'less'n yer gonna put out, grow up an' gitcher head out'a the gutter! "That little section of vestigial bone rarely heals properly—if it's bad enough, it may never heal." Just the idea sent a ridiculous pang through her upper behind; Kimber's body was never on the business end of a drunken frat-boy in his mama's minivan, but the remembered pain was vivid regardless. "Mine never did," she added with what she hoped was an unaffected shrug.

"The van?" Donnie asked remembering what she'd told him of the accident.

"Yup…'n' the drunken idjit drivin' it. Fused vertebrae, a broken tailbone, an' a beater with bad shocks is not a good combination, trust me." He seemed lost in thought, she realized, so she added, "Were ya jus' checkin' the leg?" Hazel eyes widened slightly in realization.

"Oh, right—your zygomatic fracture!" Standing up he adjusted the lamp over the bench and the hands that were torturing her right leg swooped in on her left cheek. This time Amber wasn't lost in what she felt; instead, she was distracted by what she saw. Intelligent hazel eyes veering green in the bright light studied the angle of her cheek and jaw, comparing it to the uninjured side of her face. Nostrils flared in even deep breaths. Bare brows decked in violet cloth pinched and arched at every new bit of information. Once he located the exact location of the fracture—triggering a wince—he met her eyes.

"Still hurts?" he asked softly, and though it wouldn't help any, she nodded. "I'm sorry…I'd have…I'd have given anything to take this injury on myself…it shouldn't have happened."

"Consider it karma," she suggested with a wry smile. "I slapped you, Karma slapped me—it's only —" Chapped lips against hers cut her attempted smartassery short.

"You had a reason," Donnie admitted once she was sufficiently silenced. "Northpaw didn't."

"Reason doesn't equate right.*** Moss green eyes darted away from his full of shame. "No one's gotta right to slap people for hurtin'em…I know that, but I did it anyway. I'm...I'm sorry, Donnie." It was a shame she usually addressed him as 'Dee' or one of several other nicknames; his name sounded tempting on her lips and drove him to steal hers again. In the distance, the soft ticking of a clock drew nearer and nearer.

The moment Donatello released Amber's lips, a glimmer of light caught his eye, and despite her protests, he bolted back through to the lab to search out the cause. When he reached the source it was entirely dark...just as it had been since the day its contents faded away. Amber found him staring at the empty FSG vial in disbelief, wondering what just happened. For the second time in as many weeks, though, he decided she didn't need to know what happened; she had enough on her mind without worrying about the Freaky Space Glitter coming to life again for only a second.

"I've got to talk to Dad," he stated instead, then brushed the pad of his thumb along her kiss-swollen lips with a shy smile. "To be continued?"

"Helluva cliffhanger, Hotshot," she teased staring at his lips only to meet his eyes with an impish smile. "but somethin' tells me the sequel's worth it." Boy, was that woman good for his ego.

If Mercy ever suspected Raphael wasn't serious about the whole 'date' thing, that suspicion was
completely shattered when he met up with her that evening. For a moment, all she could do was stare in disbelief and take in the sight of him. Finally, she found her voice again.

"A loincloth?" she asked dubiously. "You're seriously wearing a leather loincloth?" Though muddy brown streaked across his cheeks, he bristled.

"Ya s'posed ta look ya best on dates, right?" he demanded shortly. "Dis's da fanciest clothes I got!"

"—but a loincloth? Seriously?" Despite the teasing, she had to admit he made the beaded leather monstrosity look obscenely good. Her capris, camisole, and checked overshirt seemed perfectly fine when she met him at the door, now she felt underdressed. The leather straps dangling from the wide belt tempted like fringe on a vintage lampshade; it was all she could do to refrain from sweeping the fringe aside to 'turn on the lamp.' Unfortunately, she was certain it wouldn't be a wish-granting genie popping out to say 'hi.'

Raphael told her before that he had a place in mind—somewhere they could watch and hear the show without being bothered—and led the way through the tunnels. Every now and then someone would break the electric silence with a wisecrack or verbal jab to disguise their nervousness…they were both pretty nervous. A short while after they reached the surface, they paused long enough to pick up takeout, then took to the rooftops. Mercy handled roof-hopping better than Raph expected and it was only a matter of time before they reached their destination.

The rooftop hadn't changed a bit since he and Kimber took in that classical show together. He could still recall it all with painful accuracy—her moss green eyes shimmering with happy tears, her punch red hair spilling down her bare shoulders, her scarlet-painted lips smirking around the multitude of smoggy suggestive taunts she threw at him—he remembered everything. Not for the first time, he wondered if he was making a mistake starting a relationship with Mercy when he'd already fucked up the one with Kimber.

"Ohmigod, I think I jus' saw Nikki Sixx!" Mercy's sudden outburst left Raph blinking in surprise.

"Duh," he finally managed laying out their blanket and pillows. "Da concert is Sixx:A.M., Blondie." She shot him an exasperated frown over her shoulder.

"I know, I know," she grumbled leaning on the high stone widows' walk. "I just can't believe this is happening—that I'll actually get to see a live concert!" The hulking ninja looked up to fire off a smartass retort but the sight of her made him draw a complete blank. Suddenly, he was very glad he wore the loincloth instead of pants; pants would have put his reaction to the sight on display.

That...ass... He blinked as though expecting to find he'd hallucinated. Nope, still there, still full and firm, and still sticking out from the oblivious blonde's slightly stooped posture. When he first met Mercy, she was too skinny for her own good—wasted away from addiction and living on the streets—but the last few months, three full meals a day, training and exercise, and sobriety had all been very good to her. She was still thin but now she had curves, the kind of curves that could turn men into blubbering morons. Even with her perpetually messy hair, she'd become more beautiful than her mouth would ever have anyone believe.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer." Crud, was he caught staring at her butt?! A glance upward—to grinning blue eyes—revealed that yes, he had been caught checking out her backside. "I'll take your silence as a compliment."

"Uh…uh…" He had to physically shake off his stupor. "Get away from da edge, ya maniac—we ain't s'posed ta be up 'ere!" With a disapproving sniff, she sauntered back toward him and dropped to sprawl out on the blanket.
"Killjoy." As the opening band played their sets, Raph and Mercy ate their meal and talked to pass the time. Both were surprised they had so much to talk about, both having expected the other to be full of awkward silences and blustering. The night rolled on and the opening band worked toward their last number, and by the time they started in on it, Mercy had made up her mind. Raphael deserved to know the truth...and she was tired of pretending she was alright.

"Thanks, Red," she mumbled into her soda bottle. The hulking ninja shrugged, missing the point.

"It's nothin', really—da city puts on free concerts like dis all da time, no biggie." Mercy blustered, her cheeks burning with irritating heat.

"I meant...for the date," she admitted under her breath. "I've never...That is...uh..." She couldn't finish and sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees and burying her chin in them. Raphael studied her silently a moment, hazel eyes confused and doubtful, but something, whether the blush she still wore or her sudden inability to string two words together, convinced him he hadn't misread her.

"Ya neva been on a date?" he asked her, giving her a more than thorough once-over while she wasn't watching. Damn, that ass...he was being driven to distraction by it, so how could anyone resist it? How had she gone her entire life without someone being driven crazy by that ass?! "Ya tellin' me no one eva took ya out nowhere? --no one eva bought ya a drink, dragged ya to da movies, no one even walked ya home?" ...or grabbed her ass? His fingers itched at the very thought and he busied them with cracking open another bottle of soda.

"No." The admission hurt more than she'd care to admit. "Not for lack of offers, honestly...I just couldn't...just couldn't do it." Neither noticed the opening band wrapping up. Raphael set down his drink and scooted closer to her, resting a supportive hand on her back. She was terrified—terrified of what, though?—and he hated seeing the confident, mouthy blonde look so small and helpless.

"Ya wanna talk about it?" Frankly, nothing sounded more horrifying to him—he halfway feared that one small step would lead down the path to ruin, a path lined with makeovers, painted nails, and all sorts of creepy girly-bonding crap—but this was Mercy—Miss 'Anti-Mush, don't make me hork, keep yer damn girly shit away from me' Mercy—and though the very idea of talking it out made his nads shrivel, he knew she needed it more than he didn't need it.

"Honestly," she admitted with no lack of bitterness, "I'd rather just keep pretending everything's fine —there's nothin' I want less'n to face it...but I' gotta reason to face it now..." Denim blue eyes nervously met his over a checker-sleeved shoulder. "I'm tired'a bein' afraid...an' you deserve the truth." Over the next several numbers, Mercy poured out her past life for Raphael in mumbled explanations.

Charity Barret was a bright, gifted young woman who went hurtling headfirst down a path she couldn't return from, only to wind up dying a single mother of a drug overdose. Clarity Flint, Charity's widowed twin sister, took her sister's failures personally and leaned too heavily on alcohol after her husband's death. By the time Clarity remarried a soft-spoken rancher by the name of Ellis Ross she was fighting rapidly worsening alcohol addiction and couldn't stand the sight of her own daughter—a daughter who suspected she was actually Clarity's niece. Clarity's distant treatment of Mercy worsened with her addiction and when Mercy hit puberty, things took a drastic downturn.

Mercy was innocent and well-behaved—barely more than a child—but she bore a deadly resemblance to Clarity's dead twin. This resemblance coupled with small town gossip bred paranoia in Clarity's heart. Everywhere she went, she heard people gossiping about the youth of the town—of some young woman getting caught with a neighbor's boy, or getting knocked up, or even just seeming slightly pudgier around the waist all of a sudden. Even the most innocuous rumors convinced Clarity's sick mind that her daughter, Mercy, was the one everyone was talking about.
Mercy was trouble—Mercy was fooling around with the neighbors—Mercy was sleeping around and probably even pregnant—Mercy, who had never even been kissed, was suddenly traveling down the same path Charity Barrett chose.

When Mercy first started talking, Raphael expected something awkward and unimportant in the grand scheme of things—maybe she had a childhood boyfriend who cheated on her, maybe the neighbor boy pulled her pigtails or teased her, maybe she even was just too shy to risk a relationship. He never expected to hear about her bitch of a mother smacking her, hitting her, even throwing her into furniture and walls for things she didn't even do. The longer he listened, the more he wished he could find a way to Mercy and Amber's world, if only to show Mercy's mother in person just how that sort of abuse felt. By the time the blonde wrapped up the story with how she died—driving home from her best friend's funeral, terrified of what her mother would do when she found out she snuck out and crying too hard to see the streets—Raph felt like his teeth were about ground to sand. When there was no more to tell, she fell silent, seemingly dreading his reaction.

"Where was ya Dad, Kid?" he asked wrapping his hand around her opposite shoulder. She shook her head and gratefully leaned into his side, comforted by the strong arm holding her close. "Why din't 'e stop dat shit?"

"I never knew my dad, Raph," she admitted wearily. "Ma's first husband, Ernie Flint, was KIA in 'Nam..." Her denim blue eyes met his gravely. "...That was two years before I was born...Ma still insisted I was hers." As she shook her head her spiky blonde fringe fell into her eyes and she swept it away again. "Charity Barrett overdosed the year Ma married Ellis Ross...I don't remember ever meetin'er, but I'm pretty sure she was my real mother...asked Ma once but she nearly broke my jaw."

For a time, neither spoke, one allowing the upsetting revelations to sink in and the other fighting to get past them. Finally, Mercy couldn't handle the silence anymore. "I din't tell ya so you'd feel sorry fer me, Raph," she pointed out. "I din't wanna tell ya 'cause...well, I was afraid ya'd treat me differently if ya knew."

The pale blue eyes that met his weren't weak, weren't afraid—if anything, they were antagonistic and determined. The story she told painted a picture of a woman-child too afraid to live, but those eyes—those eyes were an entirely different story. "I'm sick'a bein' broken, Red—I'm sick'a lettin' that bitch run my life! I spent my whole damn life afraid'a her an' I'm fuckin' sick of it! She treated me like a whore my whole life, but when I died..." She finally looked away, her cheeks pinking. "...when I died...I'd never even been kissed."

The moment the admission left her lips, she cringed, staring out over the rooftop toward Central Park. She didn't see this situation getting better—after all, what sort of man wants to date a woman with no experience?

I wanna let you know these scars are here forever—Heaven, help me be a better man!

Wait...she did a double-take to the stage across the way. When did the opening act finish up? When did Sixx:A.M. take over?

I really hope it shows—I'm mighty cracked and broken—Heaven, help me be a better man!

A large rough-skinned hand caught her chin between two thick fingers and an even thicker thumb and turned her to meet a pair of hazel eyes the color of molten gold. "Ya neva been kissed, eh?" Raphael's voice was low and husky as he traced the pad of his thumb over Mercy's lower lip. "Now dat's a damn shame, Merse—maybe I ought'a fix dat, huh?" Before she could respond—to agree or protest?—he went in for the kill.
Hot chapped lips met and fused with Mercy's; as she melted against him, the hand cupping her cheek swept back into her short shaggy hair, tangling in the messy blonde locks and urging her even closer. The world around them faded into snippets of sensation—heavy bass and heavier breathing, wide lips tugging at hers, a strangely alluring smell of sandalwood, leather, and musky sweat over the smog and exhaust of the city below—Mercy was lost in Raphael, hopelessly lost, and she hoped to never be found again.

This was what she was missing—this was the connection she'd always longed for but never been brave enough to make—and it was worth every moment of waiting. Rough hands settled at her hip and threaded through her hair as she clambered over to straddle Raph's lap, latching on and anchoring her in place. After what seemed at once to be mere seconds and an eternity, he broke away trailing open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and up to her ear. "Lemme in, Babe," he urged, his voice dropped to a murmur that rumbled in his chest; when he met her lips again, she did just that, taking everything he had to offer and giving it back in spades.

Raph couldn't believe what was happening; he couldn't believe she was accepting his advances, much less encouraging them and returning them with her own. He was lost—lost in the wonder that was Mercy Ross, her soda-sweet tongue, her greedy hands, her surprisingly feminine whimpers, the sultry, musky scent of womanly arousal clouding the floral scent of her shampoo and soap—everything she was, everything she did, drew him in like a siren's song. Everything in him wanted her more than anything he'd ever wanted before.

All his life he was different and different wasn't accepted. He could still remember the expressions of horror and disgust in the police station—could still hear the harsh screams of human women who assumed the worst even after he fought off their assailants. After a lifetime of being feared and hated, a beautiful young woman returned his hungry kisses with equal fervor, clung desperately to his shoulders, and ground against his swollen leather-clad groin with abandon, unbothered by his otherness. He never expected this to happen…and though he never said a word, he vowed right then and there…he wouldn't give up until he felt truly worthy of the affection she had for him.

I'll do the best I can—trying to be a better man—for you.

As so many nights before, Amber stubbornly retired to her empty cot in her corner of the barracks; as every night for the last week, though, night terrors drove her from her self-inflicted solitude. Staring down Donatello's closed bedroom door, she berated herself for being weak—for relying on Donnie's presence to chase away the bugbears plaguing her dreams—and silently listed out every reason why depending on him for a good night's sleep would only come back to bite her in the arse. #

"Lurking much?" With a squeak of surprise and what felt like a five-foot jump straight up in the air, she turned to acknowledge the genius who caught her staring at his closed door. A glass of water in hand, he wore a humming smile, and other than a pair of loose gym shorts and his glasses, nothing else. No mask…Dear God…that turtle was gonna kill her. Of the few times she'd seen him without the ever-present violet fabric she hadn't been able to see much for lack of light; in the light from the kitchen, though, she could see everything in startling detail, including a pair of faint streaks of reddish brown at the outside edges of his remarkable eyes.

Unable to think of an excuse she simply stepped aside to let him past; a steady hand at the small of her back guided her through first then its partner closed—and locked—the door. "You know," he reminded as the brunette sweated over what that last action might imply. "we've established that sleeping in here helps you avoid night terrors—instead of forcing yourself to try sleeping in your room then crawling in here at the crack of dawn, why not just sleep here, to begin with?" It took a
moment of staring at his lips—and vividly imagining them occupied with certain needy parts of her anatomy—but Amber finally managed to drag her mind out of the gutter long enough to answer.

"What happened to facin' my fears?" she asked instead of admitting where her thoughts led her. "If I just rely on you to chase away the boogunses, how'll I ever stop bein' afraid?" Donnie blinked at the unfamiliar colloquialism but easily worked out its meaning.

"That's why you're doing exposure therapy, remember?" he pointed out sitting on the edge of the rumpled bed and drawing her into his arms; finding herself eye-to-eye with him threw her for a loop until his arms enfolded her. "Exposure therapy will help in the long run, but in the meantime, it can lead to nightmares, and recent nightmares can affect how you handle triggers when you're awake. If you get a good night's rest, you'll be more capable of handling your day-to-day stresses." Amber sighed and tugged at the end of the loose braid she'd pulled her hair into.

"Ya make it sound so easy," she admitted softly, "like it's just a matter of takin' precautions…but if I get used to you chasin' off nightmares, what'll I do when yer not there?" A slight pop on the nose sent her cross-eyed and smoothed the worried pinch between her eyebrows; the genius smirked at seeing that his new secret weapon still worked.

"One day at a time, remember?" he teased discarding his glasses on the nightstand. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Braids." This time when he held the sheet and blanket up for her she didn't hesitate—instead, she set her glasses on the stand next to his, crawled up onto the bed and burrowed into his chest, and tucked her head under his cleft chin.

"G'night, ya sneaky speccy," she yawned into his collarpone. With a tender smile, he reached past her to switch off the lamp, tucked his arm around her waist to keep her close, and pressed a lingering kiss to the top of her head.

"Goodnight, Honey...see you soon." With the room was again bathed in darkness, Donnie nuzzled into her loose hair, reveling in its coconut fragrance and rendering it messier than ever. He wasn't about to admit it aloud but Amber wasn't the only one benefiting from the new sleeping arrangement. All his life, he'd fought intermittent periods of insomnia; it was an unfortunate byproduct of having a brain that never stopped working, and while his projects always profited from that insomnia, his body paid the price. Nothing he'd tried had ever made any difference. The first time he invited Amber into his bed, however, he discovered that her slow, even breathing on his neck worked better than any sleeping pill.

When Leonardo and Michelangelo slouched through the front door not long after, weary from a long road trip from upstate, the two lovebirds were sound asleep, one dreaming of unobstructed hazel eyes, the other dreaming of long-faded fiery highlights.

**TRANSLATIONS**

Feel free to skim these or skip them outright - I got a little carried away with the details. *6_6

# "Every man who goes about with good morning on his lips should be fried with his own bacon and buried with a stalk of celery through his heart." Amber is a morning Scrooge…Charles Dickens must be rolling in his grave.

## 'less'n, 'n'less'n, and less'n - a trio of particularly awkward colloquialisms native to the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks, two areas of the Midwest US known for skipping syllables AND twisting the ones they keep. 'n'less'n and 'less'n mean unless and tends to be used with a highly exaggerated
twang as a joke or to portray amusement, or in some cases, by certain people who tend to twang more when they're angry. IE, "Ya better quit teasin' the dog n'less'n ya wanna git bit!" and "My tired ass ain't gittin'out'a bed less'n the damn thing's on fire!" On the other hand, less'n means less than; in this case, there's nothing she wants less than to face the fact that she was abused. Sometimes these conflicting pronunciations and spellings can be confusing to non-locals, but at least in my writing, the rule of thumb is that ' indicates a syllable has been dropped or connects two words with dropped syllables [such as an', goin' and y'all] and - indicates that the word or connected words' pronunciation has been twisted around entirely. [such as DAY-AM! - damn and I-yevah - I ever, seen in 28: Love Amidst the Loss]

### "Bugbear" is a less-commonly used synonym for 'a boogieman' or any number of similar non-existent or non-threatening entities inspiring fear. The second term, "a Booguns," (Plural "Boogunses") is a term possibly native to the Midwest United States and describes the same thing. The term combines the words 'bogie/bogey' (Brit-slang that can mean a bugbear, an unwanted and/or dangerous tag-along, OR snot) and '-un,' a suffix widely in use in the Midwest for 'one.' (Consider young'un and this'n) Considering the Ozarks—and much of the Midwest—was initially populated largely by European and Scotch-Irish migrants crossing the Appalachians, it's pretty common for local slang and customs to be rooted in European and Celtic cultures. An odd - and rarely heard of - example of such cultural bleeding occurs as folklore surrounding specters or creatures often referred to simply as 'black dogs;' tales of spectral canine entities range all over the UK in varying frequency and forms and some rural locations deep in the Ozarks apparently brought the superstition and folklore with us. Being the weird cousins our UK kin don't like to acknowledge, though, we call ours "Booger-dogs." [ See what we did there? ;P ]

...yeah...I get kinda nerdy about folklore, culture, and linguistics, so sue me.

Chapter End Notes

* Everything stated here is true and backed up by much research and personal experience—I didn't just, as Amber would say, "Pull it out'a my arse an' show it off."
** Not really gonna pull out my soapbox for this one, but it bears acknowledgement: physical retaliation for mistakes is not a sign of a healthy relationship. When people hear about domestic abuse they tend to think about sleazy husbands beating their wives but women can be just as abusive to their partners as men—they tend to focus more on emotional abuse than physical and physical abuse often takes the form of slapping, scratching, and blows below the waist. Amber's spur of the moment slap can be traced back to her childhood—and her parents' unhealthy relationship—but that behavior is NOT justified nor is it acceptable.
Chapter Summary

Donnie tries to teach Amber to defend herself, Mikey suffers for it. Lefty checks in with news about Kimber's disappearance. Amber finally grows a pair. Snuggles.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Sorry this chapter's so bleepin' late…and short… RealLife's been a real pest lately, to say the least. Fortunately, I have good news – ANLoL FINALLY has a beta, and she's great! On top of that good news, y'all awesome reviewers pushed this story past SIXTY REVIEWS! Thus, I'll be updating "Gallery of Memories" THREE TIMES in gratitude. Honestly, I've got two installments finished for it but still struggling on the last, so it may be a bit of a wait. So, without further ado, here's your newest chapter, dedicated to my totally awesome beta, Wolf!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: The Rasmus "Time to Burn," (Yeah, you totally didn't see THAT One coming) Lifehouse "Hanging by a Moment"

32: Bridges Burned and Tides Turned

July 2nd, 11 am, The Dojo

Amber wasn't sure where she went wrong. Perhaps she should have taken self-defense classes in her previous life. Perhaps she should have partaken of the extra-runny eggs that morning. Perhaps she should have done something more than stammer in disbelief when Donatello declared it was time for her to learn how to defend herself, or perhaps she didn't argue hard enough when Raphael insisted that Kimber wasn't a wimp so she wasn't either, if only because she was stuck in Kimber's body now. Wherever she went wrong, she wished she could go back and do the exact opposite.

"Focus!" Donatello reminded sharply, as yet another wooden practice dart bounced off the floor behind the practice dummy. She had yet to hit the burlap and sawdust contraption a single time. "If you don't focus, you won't hit it." Wherever she went wrong, she was in serious trouble, because that one little mistake led to Donnie trying to teach her how to defend herself…and making an absolute arse of herself while Michelangelo and Mercy laughed from the sidelines. The smart-arses even brought popcorn.

Supposedly there'd been an uptick in Purple Dragon activity in the area surrounding the Lair, and April's apartment building. As if that weren't bad enough, Raphael brought news from Lefty warning that Hun was sick of waiting for Kimber to surface and was pulling out all the stops. Not for the first time, Amber wondered just what sort of information her body's previous owner could have been trafficking to warrant such relentless pursuit. Also, not for the first time, she wished for just one
chance to meet the crazed Jersey nutjob, if only to deck her. How dare she be such a badass?! How
dare she give up the ghost when the woman now stuck in her corpse was entirely hopeless?!

"Fore!" Mikey called when the latest practice dart rebounded off the floor and nearly whacked
Donatello in the face. Just in time the brainy turtle dodged and fixed a horrified stare on her.

"Like I could'a done that on purpose?!" Amber snapped indignantly at the implication. "If I can't hit
the dummy, I sure's Hell can't hit the Donnie!" Don stared her down as though unsure whether or not
to believe her. Before he even spoke, she knew just what he was going to say…and it ticked her off.

"Kimber could hold her own, Amber," Donatello pointed out seriously. "You're not in your own
body anymore—you're living Kimber's life in Kimber's body. You're not bound by the limitations of
your old body, remember? That goes beyond the permanent injuries and weakness you've mentioned
—you should be able to access Kimber's skills, if only through muscle memory!" Amber shook her
head vehemently, her twin braids snapping from the movement.

"I'd rather not root around in that burd's head too much," she insisted, her cheeks flushing.* "God
only knows the horrors I might see!"

"Yeah!" Mikey piped up too-innocently. "Raph's butt's pretty horrible, huh? Stuff'a nightmares, rea
—" In the space of a single breath, Amber snatched another practice dart from the pile beside her and
hurled it at Mikey. He flung himself out of the way as a girly shriek ripped from his lungs. Donnie
couldn't believe his eyes, but the dart's metal point was embedded right where Mikey's nads had
been! The stunned genius turned slowly to Amber and found her just as shocked as he was.

Mercy cracked up. So many times in their previous lives, she'd seen the very same thing happen:
Aaron would mouth off, Mercy would chuck some random harmless object at him, and Amber
would follow suit without so much as thinking about it. Every time the brunette hit the desired body
part—usually his head, shin, or stomach—with unerring accuracy, and often without even realizing
what part she wanted to hit until the missile connected. Their friendship had been…special, for sure.

It was a chaotic scene that greeted Donnie's twin as he lumbered into the dojo: Mercy scarlet-faced
and wheezing from laughter, Amber and Donnie stunned silent and pale, and Mikey freaking out and
clutching both hands protectively over his crotch with his legs locked together around them. "Da
fuck happened?" Raph demanded, but other than Mikey's unintelligible babbling—something about
being neutered—no one seemed capable of speech. To make matters worse, Amber and Donatello
exchanged an openly horrified stare, their eyes ultimately drawn to the practice dart embedded in the
floor mere inches from a dark scuff mark. Golden eyes darted around the dojo for clues—an
untouched practice dummy surrounded by fallen darts, another heap piled on the folding table beside
Amber, the dart embedded in the floor, Mikey's blatant shielding of his already shielded groin, a new
scuff along one edge of his carapace, almost as though he'd been sent skidding across…

"Yer tryin'a teach 'er ta throw knives?!" Raph demanded suddenly. "Kimbuh was a brawler, not a
thrower—she couldn't hit da broad side of a barn!" Finally, Mercy seemed to get ahold of herself.

"Amber could," she fairly bragged. "Amber never missed unless she aimed!" The three brothers
turned to gape at the brunette as one, and a dark blush exploded across her cheeks.

"Mercy," she mumbled burying her burning face in her palm. "Please...shut up."

"But it's true!" the blonde insisted teasingly. "Sure, it was usually hedge-apples an' trash, but ya
always got Aaron right in the—" Amber cut her off with a sputtered protest and frantic 'cut' gesture.

"If you aim, you miss," Donatello repeated thoughtfully, "but if you just react, you don't miss." She
nodded weakly, her face still hot. "Curious…usually taunting your opponent makes them sloppy and frustrated…perhaps if your reflexes are tied to emotional outbursts rather than focus…" The sudden gleam in his eyes worried Amber. "Raph?" Apparently, the hot-head arrived at the same conclusion at the same time. With a competitive sneer, he swaggered over to the makeshift target range and hoisted up the more battered dummy like a human shield.

"Woah-no," Amber stammered backing away. "Nonono...Nuh-uh, not happenin'!"

"Ya'fraid, Pipsqueak?" Raph taunted. "Ya bettu be!" For a moment, Donnie saw conflict in her eyes—fear, doubt, hesitation—and he settled a steadying hand on the small of her back. Right before his eyes she calmed, steadied, and committed herself to giving it her best shot. "Quit flirtin' a'ready, ya make me sick!" The first few darts missed, but as Raph upped the antagonism, the distance between the missed darts and the dummy rapidly shrunk. Channeling his inner Mikey, Raph pulled out all the stops. "Ya Scotch sucks! Ya cookin' sucks! Hell, you suck, Wendy!"

That did it. Raph froze at the sound of the dart embedding in the burlap dummy, spot-on between its non-existent eyes. A slow, sinister grin spread across his face. Having finally hit paydirt, he threw himself into antagonizing her and bracing for every dart that sunk into his burlap and sawdust shield. "Where's da meat, Wendy?"** Right over the heart. "Hey, Dor'thy wants 'er hair back!"*** Right in the gut. "Bet dose braids make good reins!"**** That dart sank right into the dummy's non-existent crotch; Donnie flinched violently. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea…

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**Noon, Hun's Penthouse**

Lefty Jackson wasn't the sort who'd hide from threats. Of course, anyone who survived tangling with Hun Williams quickly learned to tuck tail and cower when he was on a rampage…and he was, indeed, on a helluva rampage.

When Lefty overheard his boss hurl some random piece of furniture across the already trashed parlor, he ducked into the office to evade detection. At first it was merely an attempt to avoid getting his skinny ass handed to him—after all, anyone who crossed Hun's path right then would be in for a world of hurt. As time went by and the din outside only worsened, though, the turncoat con decided to make the best of being trapped in the dark office. In the hopes that he might find something to help Kim—no, he reminded himself begrudgingly, she was Amber now, however the heck that happened—he skillfully picked the locks on Hun's desk and file cabinets and rummaged through them for answers.

Over an hour later, Hun stormed downstairs to pound on his newest recruits and Lefty was finally able to sneak out of the office. The moment his boots hit the pavement outside he bolted toward Kimber's storage locker, texting a certain annoying ninja mid-stride. Somehow he made it the whole way without winding up a hood ornament. By the time he made it to the storage locker, Raphael waited inside with a skinny blonde, introducing her as 'Mercy.' If Lefty ever wondered if the burly ninja was his type—and everyone he ever met, he wondered if they were his type—the protective muscled arm tucked around Mercy's narrow waist shot that idea out of the water. Good thing he wasn't into turtles, the con thought with a smirk.

"I got news," Lefty professed while yanking the shutter closed and bolting it in place. "Not a lot, but more'n we had."

"Well spit it out," Raph grumbled. "It's daylight—I ain't s'posed ta be out 'ere." At first, Lefty was about to ask why he was out in the first place; then it registered that both were looking rather rugged, the blonde in cutoffs and a tank top with a pair of floppy gardening gloves hanging out of one
pocket. Interesting…maybe the turtle-twerps were burying someone in the park. What do you bet he wasn't lucky enough for it to be Hun? Lefty dragged his hand across the stubble on his scalp, shaky from nerves.

"Kim got inta some deep shit," the con admitted with a shaky cringe. "Dere's some papers missin' from da penthouse—da whole file cabinet's been ransacked an' dere's an empty file at da back. She must'a picked da lock on da cabinet an' stolen da papers, prob'ly fer lev'rage 'er somethin." Steel blue eyes darted around the room nervously, then reluctantly met Raph's. "I dunno fer sure what dat file had in it, but it ain't nothin' good."

"Ya dunno fer sure," Raph repeated lowly, "but ya got an idea, don'cha?" Lefty nodded, cringing.

"Da file was labeled sources." Mercy blinked in confusion.

"We've thought da Dragons had moles in da police force fer a while," the red-clad ninja snarled. "If Kimbuh stole proof'a dat ta turn 'em in an' take out Hun's dirty cops, it'd be harduh ta get 'is guys out'a jail. Dependin' on how many pockets 'e's been linin', dat could be a majuh blow ta da Dragons.” He gnawed his toothpick restlessly, recalling Kimber's last words—a plea for help in taking down the Purple Dragons. It would take more than turning in dirty cops to completely wipe out the gang, but it was certainly a start—enough of a head start that his brothers could have wiped up the rest. "Hun ain't gonna give up, is 'e?"

"Not a chance." Lefty scrubbed his grimy palm over his stubbled scalp again; the blonde hair growing in itched like crazy but scratching that itch would only make it worse. "He ain't gonna give up 'till Kimbuh's dead at 'is feet." The mutant across from him darted a glance over at his companion —hazel met blue, a sort of silent communication passing between them consisting solely of minor changes to the eyes, lips, brows, and shoulders. Finally, Mercy rolled her eyes and stalked toward a stack of plastic bins piled in one corner and set about rummaging through the nearest one. Sweaters and jeans went flying left and right in her search for some unknown item.

"If he ain't gonna give up," Raph repeated gruffly, "Den neithuh are we. Ya with us, Punk?" Lefty sneered, finally looking the part of a Purple Dragon maniac.

"Wouldn't miss it fer da world, Hotstuff—ya kin count me in fer da lawng hawl."

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10 pm, the Lair

Night was well underway in New York, but Donatello couldn't sleep. Fighting to calm the never-ending torrent of thoughts and worries in his mind, he sat tensely at the small desk in his room, staring down at a thick file devoted to what he knew of Kimber Bryant.

After almost half an hour of target practice that afternoon, Raph finally ran out of insults and Amber ran out of anger. Donatello and Amber soon had the dojo to themselves; Raph and Mercy took off for their own training, and Mikey ran for the hills the first time she nailed the mannequin below the belt. With the army of fallen darts cleaned up and the mutilated dummy set aside for repairs, they faced off across the softer of the sparring mats, both armed with wooden practice knives.

They'd had a remarkable breakthrough with the throwing darts and it seemed she would be able to progress with that rather quickly, but no such luck with hand-to-hand combat. Amber simply couldn't keep a good grip on her weapon. Despite Kimber's proficiency with knife-fighting, the brunette simply couldn't pick it up. She repeatedly tripped over her feet – and his – while trying to dodge. She put too much force behind her offensive maneuvers and as a result left herself vulnerable to even the simplest of evasions. She couldn't keep her head in the game, and for whatever reason, she simply
couldn't make herself follow through with her admittedly weak attacks.

Just when he started to wonder if the lost woman had a chance, Donnie thought with a sigh, she gave him yet more reasons to worry about her. His head told him she should be able to pick this up, that Kimber's body should still remember how to fight even with Kimber no longer in it; his heart, however, knew that Amber and Kimber were different people with different personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. With every passing moment, he was given yet more reason to question how much of a person is dependent on their physical body, and how much is based on their non-physical traits.

Footsteps approached his doorway, hesitating just outside before continuing onward. Donnie glanced hopefully over at his alarm clock; the weary hazel dimmed at finding the hour past ten. As every night before, Amber clearly went to bed in her small cramped stall in the barracks. Even though she knew for certain that she could avoid night time disturbances by sleeping in his room, she stubbornly insisted on sleeping alone, waking up screaming, then crawling into his bed at the crack of dawn with her proverbial tail between her legs.

It didn't bear thinking about, though…no amount of wishing and wondering could change what was or what would be. All he could do was wait for her to realize her error and not rub her nose in it when she did, tempting though it was. Resigning himself to another long night trying and failing to fall asleep while waiting for her to come to him, Donatello collected his empty coffee mug from the edge of the desk and slouched out the door to the kitchen. Perhaps, he considered silently, some of Master Splinter's sedative tea would help take the edge off.

As he went about measuring ground herbs into a metal strainer, hushed voices drifted in from the common area. With the kettle on the boil, he padded barefoot toward the source of the discussion.

"—you wouldn't approve." The genius halted just before the fork in the hallway, startled at the words that finally became clear. Soft flickering candlelight glowed from Master Splinter's room and the pungent perfume of incense hung heavy in the air. "I understand, Sir…I just…"

"My sons are no longer children, Miss O'Brien," Splinter reminded seriously. "My approval is no longer necessary for their happiness…some things a parent must simply learn to live with." A long silence stretched between them as Don listened frantically for any denial on either end. "Why do you say I would not approve?" Amber faltered.

"Why would you approve?" she asked softly. "We aren't—that is—Donnie and I…are…"

"You needn't connect the dots for me, Child—which's that they say, 'I am old, not dead?" Amber choked on what sounded and smelled like a cup of the very same tea her eavesdropper resorted to. "You may feel that the situation is dreadfully complicated and messy, but those who are not nose-deep in it can often see otherwise—this is just such an occasion." The aged rat paused for a sip of his own tea, then gave a sigh. "My sons do not have the luxury of falling into the age-old traditions their human brethren would. I will never have grandchildren, they will never have wives or lives above ground. What sort of father would I be, then, to begrudge any of my sons the few blessings they can still obtain?"

"So…so you're…You approve?" she insisted hopefully. "You'll give your blessing?" A rustle of cloth whispered from the room—a clawed hand reaching out to pat Amber's shoulder, perhaps—and Splinter chuckled.

"I approve of love," he teased, "so long as that love is not practiced recklessly…or where I will be forced to witness it." Amber choked again and as so many times before, commenced beating her chest to clear her throat. She certainly had a talent for knowing exactly when not to take a sip of something…and doing so anyway. "Choked up, are we? It's truly nothing so serious, Dear."
"Sir." Her voice, when she could speak again, was raspy from the valerian and chamomile she'd inhaled. "Anything regarding your family is something I'll take seriously...Thank you." Splinter hemmed in thought.

"Sir," he echoed airily. "There is something I do not approve of. My name is not Sir, but I am not your Master. How could we work through this conundrum?" The corners of Donnie's lips twitched upward at his father's teasing tone. Finally, the oblivious brunette realized where he was leading her.

"Umm...D...Dad...?" she suggested hesitantly, the title coming out awkwardly, the a coming out as more of an ah. "I never called my own father that—he was my Da, jus' like Mum's father was my Gran'Da. If...if you're okay with it..." The eavesdropping genius didn't stick around to hear his father's answer; he knew without a doubt that the old rat was likely pleased as punch underneath all the bluster.

Shortly afterward, tea in hand, he returned to his bedroom to stare down at the file on—er—try to sleep. No sooner had he cracked open the file again, though, a soft tapping sounded at his door. "It's open," he called out in greeting. When the door closed again he turned to greet his company, but fell silent, his eyes wide in disbelief. Amber stood scuffing her feet in the doorway, still clad in her day clothes, and bearing a pair of grocery bags loaded with what looked to be clothes and personal items. What? When it became clear he wasn't going to break the silence, Amber soldiered on ahead.

"I'm tired," she explained simply. "You're tired. We both sleep better when I'm not being a stubborn-arse. Mind if we just cut the crap an' skip the walk'a shame?" She gave a sheepish smile. "Your call."

For a while, all he could do was stare at her, struggling to comprehend what was happening. From the very day they met, Amber had spent more time pushing him away and retreating into herself than letting him in and sharing her vulnerable sides. That behavior, coupled with Mercy's warning and his resulting suspicion wound up leading them to blow up all over each other and grow farther and farther apart. Now, half a year after Amber burst into his life like the very storms she feared, she stood in his doorway armed with a bag of belongings and laid her heart bare for his acceptance or rejection.

How the tides had turned.

Amber faltered in the tense silence filling the room, reaching up to fidget with the end of her braided hair. Crap, she asked for an answer, didn't she? With a wry smile, Donnie scooted back from the desk and patted his right knee. "Well, come on," he teased when she hesitated. Finally, she found what she was looking for, whether in his eyes, his expression, or his posture, and she bolted across the narrow room dropping her bags at the door. Before her feet could fail her again, he swept her up onto his knee, wrapped her in his arms, and nuzzled nose-first into her coconut scented hair.

"Honestly?" he teased cupping her chin in his palm and brushing the pad of his thumb across her emerging blush. "I thought you'd never ask. Welcome home, Braids...welcome home."

Chapter End Notes
*Burd – Scotch slang for woman, girl, girlfriend, etc.
** "Where's da meat, Wendy?" - US readers will recognize this; for y'all outside the US – or too young to remember the commercials – this is a blatant reference to a particularly annoying series of commercials by a fast-food joint called "Wendy's"…and their logo features a redhead with her hair in twin braids.
*** "Dor'thy wants'er hair back!" - In the most recognized live-action film adaption of "The Wizard of Oz," Dorothy is shown wearing her hair in twin braids.
**** "Bet dose braids make good reins!" - If that innuendo went over your head, frankly, it can stay there.
This one's a little early, Folks – I just couldn't sit on it much longer! And fair warning: Here be lemons! One short and very mild one to start, then a longer, more graphic lime after that. In my defense, I really planned on leaving the second one as an awkward wake-up but my muse decided to swan-dive into the gutter again…and stayed there. Thus, shield yer eyes, ye young'uns, lest ye be blinded by the sinners!

Rated full-M for the citrus, this chapter comes with a nosebleed warning and a Raph-and-Mercy-Tag-Team warning. This chapter dedicated to Wolf for doing such a great job with it. Hang in there, Hon, and I hope this chapter made you smile!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suggested Listening: John Legend "Cross the Line," Lifehouse "Hourglass"

33: Lines

Soft spring breezes filter through the low-sweeping branches of a sprawling mimosa tree;* each gentle zephyr sends shudders through the tree's powder-pink pincushion blooms. The air is heady with the blossoms' perfume and the fresh green fragrance of the newly mown grass. Clouds race one another across the bluer-than-blue sky.

There is only one constant in the dream world, and that constant is transience. One dream may differ from any number of others in numberless ways, from setting and scene to emotion and action. In just such a way, this dream differs from every other Donatello recalls…and he has no complaints whatsoever. He doesn't recall ever seeing such a tree as this, but as this is a dream, he doesn't think too much of it. Shaded from view by the tree's sheltering boughs, he and Amber sprawl lazily across a faded patchwork quilt in the grass.

Hands explore. Lips meet and part. Voices raise and fall silent, their owners swept away by the emotions coursing through them. Fiery highlights gleam from Amber's unbound hair and clash with the hungry blush staining her cheeks. "Dunnie," she murmurs, her voice tinted with an unfamiliar brogue. "Yer su sof' wi'me...ye dinnae have'ta be. Ah'm no' goanna break, ye knuw."

"I know," he admits his voice creaking without warning. The sudden occurrence—and the realization that his voice is higher in pitch than it's been since his teen years—startles him. A pair of ankles digging into his rear bring him into the warm cradle of her thighs and back into the moment; bit by bit, he finds himself drawn into the dream, losing himself in memories he couldn't have. "You deserve it, you know," he remarks instead, propping himself up on one elbow to study her dilated pupils and kiss-swollen lips. "You deserve to be treated like a princess—no, like a queen."

"Ef Ah'm a Queen," she asks teasingly pulling him down by the tails of his mask, "does tha' mean ye'll do anithin' Ah ask'a ye?"#

"Anything," he teases with a small sideways smile. "Your wish, M'lady, is my—" The rest goes unsaid, his voice failing and falling into a low, growling moan; the hand that reached between them

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*Note: The mimosa tree is a deciduous shrub or small tree in the genus *Albizia*, native to tropical and subtropical regions. The flowers are yellow and the seeds are pods. The tree is often grown as an ornamental plant for its showy flowers and its ability to grow in a variety of soil types.
guides him unerringly, and the legs around his hips tighten. It hasn't been long since he and Amber first shared their bodies in this strange dream world they inhabit, and the sensation still takes his breath away every time. Warm, wet, hot, tight...he can't suppress the rattling churr clawing past his lips and instead buries it in her neck, drowning in the coconut and whisky scent of her.

"Ef ye'll do anithin', Dee," Amber whispers framing his face and urging his eyes to meet hers again. "then r'member...Ye've goat to r'member, Dunnie!" Instead of answering, he steals her lips again, focusing on the tender advancing and retreating rhythm their bodies have been drawn into. Though he promised to do anything she asked, he cannot grant that wish—he's afraid to remember.

Remembering would change everything, and he cannot allow that to happen.

4 am, Sunday, July 3rd

Amber's eyes reluctantly cracked open, seeking out the alarm clock's display. She wasn't sure what woke her, but whatever it was, it ticked her off. The dream, although odd, was a good one and she was somewhat sad to see it over. Oh well, she reasoned switching on the lamp, there would be other good dreams. She gave a languid stretch as the last lazy tremors of pleasure ran through her, starting in her lower belly and spreading outward like wildfire. As she went about hoisting herself up, intent on changing before Donnie woke up, something completely unexpected and frankly mortifying registered.

She fell asleep facing Donatello…and woke up facing away from him. An arm heavy with lean muscle lay draped over her left hip, anchoring her against his chest. Soft puffs of breath disturbed the fine hair at the nape of her neck, the cause nuzzling her unbound hair in his sleep. If it were as simple as all that, now that would be just fine—she loved cuddling, after all—but things were never that simple. She clearly wasn't the only one who had pleasant dreams and the sizable bulge currently wedged against her plump backside was proof.

Now fully awake, Amber stared at the alarm clock in dismay, trying to think up a way out of the situation. It seemed she was about to get run down by the Karma bus—she insisted on waiting to start a physical relationship, stubbornly refused to entertain the idea of giving in to the sexual tension between herself and Donnie, and ignored the outrage of her neglected lady-parts—and now she was paying for it. As the brunette's thoughts developed into an out of control whirlwind, Donnie's hand slipped lower, fingertips brushing over the fleshy mound between her thighs.

"An-thin," he mumbled into her neck, still sound asleep despite his clumsy caresses and presses. "Yeh-wzha c'mnd...muh-l-DY."

'MOLDY?!' Amber thought caught between outrage and amusement; it wasn't a new place for her, either. 'That sleekit Speccy's gropin' me over a dream about mold?! Aw, HELL naw!' She wanted to overlook the inconvenience of the incident—just lie back, enjoy his sleep-clumsy touches and maybe give his hand a little nudge in the right direction—but she knew he'd be humiliated if he woke up holding her crotch. Without further ado, she latched onto the talented hand fumbling with the waistband of her night-slacks and tried to haul it north of the border. Her attempts were in vain, though, as the appendage simply latched onto her hip and pulled her tight against the still growing bulge in Donnie's shorts, then wandered downward again. Clearly, he wasn't ready to let go of her yet…and how bloody massive was he if he was still only half-mast?!

"Oh, for the love of—Hey!" She elbowed him in the chest, making a half-assed attempt to keep their hips separate. After all, he was sure to be embarrassed...right? "Donnie, if you don't wake up right now, so help me—"
"Wha's all the racket?" he grumbled, nuzzling into the nape of her neck. "'m comfy." Amber rolled her eyes, waiting for the situation to register. Sure enough, a moment later his eyes flew wide open, and he froze, blindly feeling around to get an idea of where his hand wound up in his sleep. He physically recoiled, whipping his hand away from her crotch and wedging it between them to cover his own. "S…Sorry," he mumbled wanting nothing more than to sink through the floor. "I didn't—I couldn't—uh…" Amber lay there silently, all-too aware that his northern head was lacking in blood flow too badly to allow clear thought formation.

Perhaps, she considered as the mortified genius stammered out an ever-worsening jumble of apologies and insistences, this disaster was a blessing in disguise. Donatello rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, finally giving up on trying to protest his innocence. A sudden weight draped across his chest pulled him out of his self-deprecating internal rambling, though, and a soft hand cupped his cheek.

"Pleasant dreams?" Amber teased then bent down for a brief kiss; she was sure she was honkin'a mornin' breath but he'd never cared before. That one kiss turned into another, then that into several more, and with every one, a little more tension left him. Soon the deviant hand clutched the back of her head, fingers lacing through her hair as their lips met and parted in kiss after brushing, teasing kiss. "Was she good?" she asked when they finally parted, wiggling her eyebrows at him. He chuckled in response, trailing his knuckles along her jaw and latching onto her soft hip.

"You always are," he admitted, pleased with the shy blush that exploded across her cheeks at the revelation. "C'mere, you." For a moment, she balked, worried that they were moving too fast, that they'd wind up crashing at this rate, but an unexpected pop to the end of her nose shut down her overthinking. Right, she realized with a slow smile, starting too big again—take it day by day—live in the moment—don't push him away again…

Donatello felt sure he wouldn't have entertained such an idea if the air wasn't heavy with her pheromones; if he wasn't so overwhelmed by her scent, he would surely have brushed the incident off with an awkward joke. Despite that—or perhaps because of it?—he felt bolder than usual, felt like taking a risk. True to her nature, Amber didn't leave him hanging. Crawling over him somewhat clumsily, she quickly sought his lips again, whimpering when his hands reappeared at her hips and anchored her against his.

For just one moment, time seemed to stand still, both aware of the line about to be crossed. Once they swept away that line in the sand, they could never go back—they could never be 'just friends' again—but was that such a bad thing? Amber saw in his eyes—unblocked by mask or glass—the moment he made his decision, and that he made the same choice she did. Overwhelmed by emotion, she descended on his lips in a flurry of brushes and nips.

His hands full of her soft hips, he urged her to rock against him, arching into her in time. In no time, she took over the grinding, bucking movements for him. His hands free to wander, one slid up her back to hold her close and the other to her over-plump rear for a squeeze, both hands gentle and appreciative in their caresses. Neither spoke beyond a gasp or sigh; words would have broken the sleepy spell over the room, reminded them that their absence wouldn't go unnoticed forever and the door wasn't locked.

In the time between a gasp and a sigh, the atmosphere changed, charged with all the electricity of an oncoming storm. Amber froze, her limbs tense, desperation in her eyes. She hesitated—afraid—uncertain—torn between giving in to the pleasure wracking her body and the same fear that made her push Donnie away to start with. "It's okay," he promised guiding her hips again, this time with urgency. "Let go, Sweetheart—I'll catch you." After months of tension and desire and years of fighting off anything resembling surrender, Amber gave in. The mattress creaked from her
increasingly erratic bucking. Donnie's breathing grew harsher and shallower, an endless torrent of whispered affections and affirmations spilling from his lips.

Amber froze in his arms, burying her face in his neck to smother cries into whimpers, tremors running rampant through her body. She whined in his ear, her sensitized body alternating between tense and limp. Then, as though sensing his resolve to leave it at that and let his arousal die without assistance, she rolled off of him, hauling him with her to take her place. "C'mon," she whispered wrapping her legs around his and squeezing insistently. "Let go, Dee, let it all go." At first he had every intention to take the high road, but a single tender nip to his bare shoulder blew those intentions to smithereens.

All hesitation left him; his lungs full of her scent and non-scents, he lost himself in instinctive movements as old as time itself. When the first tremors began wracking his body, Amber latched onto his cheek and drew his eyes to hers; when the world exploded around them, she stole the guttural moan from his lips, rocking her hips into his while he rode out the crest. A little late, he separated their hips, halfway embarrassed by the wet mess seeping through his shorts and halfway concerned that their genes might actually be compatible enough to reproduce.** Suddenly nervous, he met her eyes with a weak smile.

"I don't regret it," Amber professed softly, knowing the words would bring back memories of their first such encounter. Sure enough, his hazel eyes softened, his lips curved into that wide, gentle smile she loved so much, and he leaned in for a kiss then rubbed noses with her.

"Me either, my crazy Celt," he admitted with a breathy chuckle. This time, she popped him on the nose, her lips split in a grin that seemed all crooked upper teeth.

"Ya better not, my sweet speccy."**

**Noon**

"Ya think he got laid?" Mercy's sudden question, posed in a tone halfway between sarcasm and disbelief, almost brought a blush to Leonardo's cheeks. Fortunately, he was made of tougher stuff than that…hopefully. "I think he got laid—no way can anyone be that happy without havin' their brains fucked out first."

"Speakin' from experience, Blondie?" Raphael teased knowing she was still a virgin. "Da teacher's pet wouldn't go messin' around like dat—it'll be a white weddin' fer sure." In the dojo, Leo's smile finally faltered slightly.

It all started quite innocently. He got a call from Briallen after lunch, stepped out to answer it, and spent a good twenty minutes listening to her updates regarding Beverly's relapse and subsequent treatment changes. Before they hung up, Beverly came on the line to catch up with him, her voice unable to hide her exhaustion or her relief at hearing his voice. After the call, Leo spent some time running the tunnels to clear his head.

Upon his return, he took to the dojo for meditation but found himself still unable to focus. Meditation wasn't a new habit for him—he was the first to practice it, after their sensei of course, and the only one of his brothers to still meditate regularly. Even so, his mind was a chaotic jumble of thoughts, hopes, daydreams, and wishes, and Beverly was the source of each one. That chaotic jumble left him unable to focus, and worse yet, grinning like an idiot…and that grin, coupled with his closed eyes and meditative posture, led the two bored smart-asses on the sofa to debate what caused his good mood.
"Maybe he's off his period?" Another sarcastic remark, Mercy again, brought a tic to one closed eye. "He's certainly been bitchy enough lately…maybe he's actually yer sister!"

"Nah," Raph jeered, "he's got the boobs fer it though!" Leo's eye twitched again. Obviously, they knew he wasn't really meditating and were trying to get a rise out of him. In this moment, he had to agree with Amber…Raph and Mercy made a helluva tag-team.

"Lay off, Dude," Mikey admonished out of the blue, quickly adding a teasing grin in Mercy's direction. "Bev's been released from the hospital—Bree's bringin' her home today an' we're droppin' by later to see'em." Mercy looked at Raph, Raph gave a nonplussed shrug, and the blonde turned back to Leo in the dojo again.

"Ah," she remarked loudly. "So it ain't a 'got laid' smile, it's a 'gonna get laid' smile! That makes sense, huh?" Leo gritted his teeth behind the now entirely fake smile. The evening couldn't come soon enough, with a family like his.

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Not long after sundown

Last year, Beverly would have been startled by hearing an unexpected, unexplained thump in the kitchen of the loft she shared with her cousin. After so many months of similar unexpected thumps, though, it made her smile. Electing to not address the pair of mutants sneaking through the kitchen—one silent and unseen, the other as stealthy as an obese moose clambering down Main Street at rush hour—she put all her focus on the ebony and ivory keys beneath her fingertips.

After so long of being cooped up in the hospital ward upstate, resigned to bad TV and binge-reading, being able to finally coax a tune from the black lacquered piano made her heart feel ready to burst. The tune wasn't new, and it wasn't hers, but it felt right. If her life was a movie, she considered wistfully, it might even be her and Leonardo's theme. The very idea was corny, but it drew an elusive smile from her unpainted lips as she felt more than heard Leo's approach.

As always, he paused to give Bosco his regards, but this time he didn't wait a respectful distance away. With every step closer, the notes she played fell further from Adagio toward Adagissimo, then finally, ceased altogether.*** Just as she decided to turn and startle him—because surely he believed he'd snuck up on her—she felt the weight of her hair shift slightly and froze. Silently noting her reaction, Leo lifted a sleek lock of her long, wavy black hair in his palm bringing the length to his nose. Underneath the traces of antiseptic still clinging to her clothes, he could smell her favorite shampoo—a light yet sultry bouquet of ylang-ylang, eucalyptus, and patchouli. His breath escaped in a low, content sigh.

"You seem well," he remarked softly as she turned to face him, her molasses brown eyes unusually watery. Ever since her first biopsy, a portion of the back of her head was kept shaved almost bald, and after so many procedures, tests, and surgery after surgery, that bald patch was crisscrossed with twisted scar tissue. From his position, at her left and slightly to her rear, he would have gotten a good close look at the masses of scar tissue—and the new stitches from the most recent operation—but he wasn't at all repulsed.

For all her bravado and teasing, that ever-present flaw was Beverly's Achilles heel. She routinely kept her head and hair bound up in headscarves or covered with her favorite beret, and if anyone was to arrive at the loft while her hair was unbound, she did everything she could to block their view of her scalp until she could get it sufficiently covered. For Leonardo to see it…and show no sign of distaste at the sprawling zigzag of scar tissue…

She choked back tears, nodding breathlessly. It didn't escape him how much what he just did meant
to her—it was, after all, his intent to show her that she had nothing to hide, if only from him. As he
did that night on the rooftop, Leo reached out to cup her cheek in one callused palm, brushing the
pad of his thumb along the faint blush spreading along her high cheekbone. "So... they added
another month?"

"Yeah," she admitted getting back onto more comfortable ground. Her treatment was nothing new,
and though it may seem like a sore spot, it wasn't hard to discuss anymore. After all, she'd been
dying for months now—maybe dying was an exaggeration, perhaps, but the point remained, she was
used to the topic and the gritty details. ...and anything was more comfortable than admitting how
floored she was by Leo's deceptively simple gesture. "Another month of IV antibiotics plus my
original three...and I have a checkup in two weeks. Basic procedure and all."

"I'm glad you're okay." To her disbelief, his cheeks seemed to gain a slightly darker tint for a
moment. He cleared his throat and strode purposefully over to the kitchen counter, returning with
something resembling a paper towel roller wrapped in slightly ratty tissue paper. "I...uh..." For
once, he found words escaped him, and he shoved the bundle at her, avoiding her eyes.

Curious at his bizarre behavior, she gingerly peeled away each layer of paper, noting with
amusement that her slow unwrapping triggered a recurring muscle tic near one of his eyes. The tissue
gone, she realized it was, indeed, a paper towel roller—and turned it curiously in her hands. His
reflexes sharp as ever, Leo's hands shot out to block the lowered end of the tube, and he glanced
pointedly at the object sliding out. His smile spread into a full-on grin as Beverly unrolled the white
silk scroll; eyes wide in wonder, she visually traced the delicate ink dancing across the bamboo-
framed panel. Amongst a whirlwind of dainty gingko leaves, characters she could not read
manifested in delicate strokes of black and red.^

"It's Dad's work," Leo explained, soaking in her teary beaming smile. "He's not done any calligraphy
for a long time, so he says it's a little rusty." She shook her head in denial.

"Rusty?" she echoed in disbelief, "It's immaculate! I've never seen such—such elegant brushstrokes
before—your father is too modest!" Chuckling lowly, Leo collected the top roller from her and held
it aloft; hesitantly taking her hand in his, he guided her fingertips along in the same patterns, reading
each for her then translating them. Health, wisdom, faith, family...the last he translated, sure he was
blushing, was love. All, Beverly knew, were well-wishes for the future she once thought she'd never
have.

Silence hung between them for a time, neither ready to fill it with words that weren't really necessary.
Only Bree's sudden appearance—complete with her usual startled shriek at seeing Leo when she'd
only expected her cousin—broke that comfortable silence. "That's from Master Splinter, isn't it?" the
younger woman grinned glancing from Leo to Mikey and back again as the former released Bev's
hand with a guilty wince.

"Technically, no," Leo corrected rolling the scroll back up again until a suitable place was found for
hanging it. "It's from all of us. The others know now..." He turned back to Beverly, feeling
sheepish. "...and they all want to meet you." Reading the suddenly tense atmosphere in the parlor,
Mikey guided his protesting girlfriend back to her bedroom.

"Meet...me...?" Beverly asked softly. "Bree's already met them." The leader nodded.

"...and now they want to meet you, if you're ready." Despite their promises to keep things platonic
for now, he was again drawn to touch her, this time giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze. "They
know things could still...change..." Belatedly, he decided the statement was a poor euphemism for
'she could still die.' Despite it, though, he soldiered onward. "They know the risks, and they want to
meet you anyway...I shouldn't..." His pale blue eyes avoided hers.
"You didn't tell them about me," she summed up when it became clear he couldn't, "because you were worried about me. You regret it now."

"Not the worrying," he admitted with a headshake. "That's inevitable. I regret acting like you were a dirty secret." One black eyebrow arched at him, and he suddenly felt like a chastised schoolboy.

"Hindsight's twenty-twenty," she pointed out airily, "but we're all blind in the moment. What matters is that you don't make the same mistake twice." Leo pulled at his neck, his feet itching to pace.

"Come have dinner with the family, Bev." His sudden request—or was it a plea?—startled her into silence. "The others want to meet you—the girls, especially. Mikey and Amber have already offered to handle dinner, and Bree's volunteered dessert." The frail woman gave a snort of laughter.

"Can't fight City Hall, huh?" she teased standing on weak, wobbly legs. "Name the place and time… we'll make it work. In the meantime…" She plodded around the parlor searching for an empty space on the walls. Finding none, she instead came to a stop before a frankly disturbing lithograph depicting an emaciated old man watching death from his deathbed. It hung ironically over the piano bench, flanked by reproductions of a Japanese woodblock print of a blossoming plum tree and an almond tree blooming white against a blue sky. The morbid print seemed out of place between the two beautiful floral prints; Leo wondered if it was the first to be hung, soon surrounded by more artwork, or the last to be bought and simply wedged into the only available space.

"Death and the Miser," Beverly explained solemnly, "another masterpiece by El Bosco. Bree gave it to me for graduation…" She shot Leo a cheeky smile as he approached her. "Basically, her way of saying 'knock'em dead.' She's a card, huh?" Leo shook his head, but snorted in amusement; the younger brunette really was well-suited for his youngest brother. "As close as I've come to meeting my own death, though, I think it's time to move it. Would you mind, tall person?" Instead of reminding her that she was almost as tall as he was, he handed her the scroll and lifted the framed picture free of its hook; once it was passed off to the coffee table, he hung the scroll in its place from its ribbon hanger.

Beverly contemplated the arrangement a moment, glancing from one artwork to the next with a smile to put Mona Lisa to shame. Seemingly pulling herself from her musings, she led Leo over to the coffee table. "On the surface, this painting is horrific," she admitted softly, "but if you look beyond the grisly matter, the details and execution are a delight. Like every one of El Bosco's works, it tells a story, this time of a man tempted by a demon of greed."

As she shared the tale, Leonardo found himself captivated by the eager, alive gleam in her eyes and found his lungs hesitant to do their job. "Perhaps he tried to redeem himself, we cannot know. As he lay dying, an angel of the Lord came to him, beseeched him to repent his sins; even as the angel fought for his soul, an army of demons also fought, tempting him in death as they did in life." Sorrow dimmed her eyes at the thought. "We will never know what decision he made, or where that decision led him."

Visibly pulling herself from the melancholic reflections, she caught his hand as he caught hers earlier, and without ever once letting his fingertips touch the glass, traced the focal points of the painting. "In so many paintings of this age, the focal lines lead you through the story—Death's arrow aimed at the miser, the angel's arm uplifted in a plea, the faint ray of light from the window above—the lines in our lives aren't always there to be drawn." With a rather fetching blush, Beverly finally released his hand but instead found it drawn to her jaw.

"Sometimes," Leo admitted softly, "they're meant to be followed. It's our duty to learn the difference."
BASIC NOTES

* MIMOSA TREE – a rather lovely introduced species that is actually considered an invasive in most of the US. Mimosas – or, more accurately, Persian Silk trees – are a small deciduous species seen often in the Midwest to the southern US. The tree is rather low-to-the ground with long sweeping branches, each decked with plumes of frond-like leaves that droop both at night and during rainy weather. During summer, Mimosas develop masses of vivid pink blossoms that resemble those weird fiber-optic light pincushion things. These little powder puff blooms are very fragile and dainty and are very attractive to insect pollinators and hummingbirds. Mimosas have become established in the Western US but can be found growing wild everywhere from New York southward and Westward.

** Yes, contrary to popular belief, you CAN get pregnant from dry-humping. Anytime you get his mess near your nads, you can get pregnant from it. Don't friggin' risk it.

*** ADAGIO – "At ease," means play slowly
ADAGISSIMO – play very, very slowly
Also, the tune Bev's playing is Lifehouse's "Hourglass," a soft, sweet piano ballad.

^ GINKGO LEAVES – The Gingko tree has a special meaning for the Japanese. In Hiroshima, Japan, six trees grew mere kilometers from the atom bomb explosion. These six trees were among the living organisms in the vicinity to survive the blast. Despite the death and destruction around them, the six charred ginkgos survived and were soon healthy again, and according to some legends, those trees burst into bloom early. The six gingko hibakujumoku [trees which survived the blast] are still alive and held sacred. Because these six Gingko trees rose from the ashes when all the world around them fell to ruin, the Japanese hold the Gingko tree as a symbol of hope.


###TRANSLATIONS###

# "Dunnie, yer su sof' wi'me." – Donnie, you're so soft with me. (aka, being gentle)
"Ye dinnae have'ta be." – You don't have to be.

"Ah'm no' goanna break, ye knuw." – I'm not gonna break, ya know.

## "Ef Ah'm a Queen, does tha' mean ye'll do anithin' Ah ask'a ye?" – If I'm a queen, does that mean you'll do anything I ask of you?

### "Ef ye'll do anithin', Dee, then r'member…Ye've goat to r'member, Dunnie!" - If you'll do anything, Dee, then remember...You've got to remember, Donnie!
Chapter Summary

Raph is a perv, Mercy is oblivious. Amber and Donnie follow up on Lefty's tip, she finds Roach-zilla, Donnie kills it for her, she is not amused. Amber's a mess and Donnie's adorable. Amber makes things awkward; Donnie ups the awkward; Amber needs brain bleach. Raph is in denial about being in denial about being in denial. Mercy pays for it. CLIFFHANGER!

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Hope everyone's having a great summer—what's left of it!—and that you're ready for another chapter! If not…well, I guess come back when you're ready, huh?

First off, I owe y'all an apology. I mentioned to a couple of you, maybe a few, in review responses, that we would get to see Beverly's induction into the family today…that was an unintentional falsehood. Honestly, I really wanted to write out that scene but my muse hijacked my laptop and held it ransom until I gave in and wrote this out…and made plans for the next chapter. Said muse has since been grounded, since she put a mild cliffhanger at the end of this chapter. (Very mild, nothing really worth worrying over) Secondly, we are over halfway through with Part II, This Time Imperfect, and that means we're getting closer to SMUTTYSMUTSMUT on a regular basis! Seriously. These little puppets are going to be VERY busy in Part III, you'll love it.

Lastly, we do have a few unusual warnings for this chapter - grossness, some mild sexual content, and a possible abuse trigger, though it's nothing explicit. This chapter dedicated to Cold, for not holding it against me when I sprayed him with coffee this morning Amber-style, and to my totally awesome beta Wolf for going above and beyond the call of betas. Ya totally got me hooked on some new music, Hon! Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes


34: Lust, Love, and Loss

July 9th, Saturday, the Dojo
Denim blue eyes shot insults at Raphael across the training mat; scruffy blonde hair stuck to sweat-gleaming skin. All in all, Mercy was tempting him more than ever, and all she was doing was glaring at him.

Almost two months ago, Raph started Mercy on a strict strength training schedule. Before Mercy woke in the body she now reluctantly calls her own, Donna Mays allowed it to go to ruin—she wasted away from drink, malnutrition, and apathy, and eventually passed away in her sleep. If she'd had any idea her body wouldn't simply stay dead, perhaps she would have taken better care of it…but then wouldn't we all?

As the two month anniversary loomed, Raphael felt confident that his pupil was ready to move on to the next step…well, technically combat shouldn't be the next step, but who ever said he was a good sensei? He had no illusions regarding his skill in teaching—or lack thereof—and frankly, he had ulterior motives. Those motives, fortunately, had yet to become clear to the blonde charging across the mat at him, head down and arms braced.

"Bum-rushin' only works in da movies," he reminded Mercy with a sneer, easily deflecting her attack.

"Bite me, Meathead!" Mercy spat as she lunged back up again for another attack.

"Mark da spot, Blondie!" Clearly toying with her, he let her get in a hit—only one, a rather weak blow to his plastron—then let out a bark of laughter when she swore and shook the sting out of her knuckles.

"What spot?" she snapped back throwing herself right back into her assault, "Try the darkest part'a my skinny white ass!"

"I ain't bitin' yer eyes, Kid." The insinuation infuriated her as expected, and she completely lost her cool. Outside the door of the dojo, Master Splinter winced at their language, but his whiskers twitched in amusement regardless. It seemed, he considered silently pacing toward the kitchen, his son had quite a bit in common with the abrasive blonde; neither would ever beg for her namesake, and neither had any of their own.

In her previous life, Amber would have given almost anything for a chance to see the City Hall subway station in person; in her new life, she'd give even more to never see it again.

The brunette hovered nervously at the edge of the platform, trying to coax herself into taking just one step toward the round chamber the brothers first discovered her in—that first step was always the hardest, no matter what path she might be taking. In the back of her mind, she heard Donatello wandering around the station just beyond, switching on lights and noting places the missing file might be hidden.

Why did it seem she only saw this place when disaster was imminent? The first time, though she didn't really remember much of it, she was freezing to death. The second time she'd completely blown her friendship with Donnie to bits, slapped him for not understanding her, and ran away like a child. Now…now she was being hunted down over information her counterpart stole, and the mutants she owed her life to were putting theirs on the line to protect her.

"Braids?" Donnie's sudden greeting startled her; grey-green eyes wide and pupils dilated to pinpoints, she looked up to the pair of hazel ones a head above hers. "What's wrong, Hon?" A faint blush streaked across her cheeks, her fear chased away by the memory of those eyes greeting her when she woke that morning…and being pinned to the sheets shortly after with his lips at her neck.
As always, she thought with frustration, anytime she was around Donnie, her mind took up permanent residence in the gutter.

"I hate this place," she mumbled instead of acknowledging the raunchy thoughts coursing through her mind. "Used'ta love it…now't I've been here, I hate it." She wasn't the best at communication, but the genius was slowly learning her language; he understood what she meant, even if she couldn't give him more than puzzle pieces.

"We found you here," he recalled softly, his eyes drawn to the precise corner where he found her. Half a year later, the memory—her scantily clothed body shivering violently in a pile of trash—was still vivid and still jarring.

Scarlet hair gleaming amongst the rubbish—unnaturally red, but striking regardless. She's lovely—soft and curvy with galaxies of freckles across her face and arms. Like a nymph of the wilderness cast down to the underworld, she seems pulled straight from a fairy tale. Something about her almost seems familiar, but how could I know her? It isn't possible—it isn't logical—it isn't REAL.

The genius shook his head to clear out the clouds, turning to meet Amber's eyes again. "It's been a long time, huh?"

"Not's long's ya think," she admitted under her breath. "I wound up here in May, too."

'ė don't un'erstan'—how could'e un'erstan'?! Run, Ahmber, run away, 's'all y'ever do, 's'all y'ever done! Ya goat another chahnce an' ya blew it—ya fookin' clyped'im! Run, ya coward!

Amber broke away, staring down at the tracks below, recalling the day Leonardo found her and led her here—the day she nearly died a second time, this time at the hands of Northpaw and Hun.

She and Donnie were finally progressing in their relationship, but they still hadn't mended the breaches of trust which caused the feud—she still hadn't apologized or told him what she hid from him, and he still hadn't apologized for assuming the worst of her and accusing her of deceit. That argument was getting them nowhere, so they'd decided to simply ignore it for the time being. Although it meant they were now friends again—nay, more than friends, becoming lovers—it also meant someday it would blow up all over them again.

She was already upset over the memories; of course a train would rattle past. This close to active tracks the sound was far louder than in the Lair. Right before Donnie's eyes, the events of the day he found her replayed. When Amber finally returned to herself—realized she wasn't trapped in the destroyed school, but safe in the subway—she found herself curled up in a fetal position in an all-too familiar heap of trash with Donnie's arms around her, one rubbing her back. The stench of the familiar rubbish burned her nose even as humiliation burned her cheeks, but the soft humming in her ear soothed the sting. Perhaps, she considered with a weary sigh, she wouldn't be constantly drawn back to the moment of her death if she'd actually done something to avoid that death the first time.

"You're okay," her tall lover promised when he felt her pulse stabilize again. No longer needing to monitor her pulse, his fingertips trailed from her neck upward, and he cupped her jaw and cheek in one massive hand. "It just caught you off-guard…you're still doing better on average, remember?" She gave a weak nod.
"If by better ya mean I ain't gone zombie-walkin' through the sewer again," she mumbled into her covered cleavage. Donnie sat back on his heels, still petting her back and holding her face; he said nothing about the neckline of her shirt drooping, nor of the tattooed head snarling up at him from behind it. He was glad to have met Amber—so glad to have her with him!—but every time he saw that dragon tattoo in her cleavage, all he could feel was regret for not being able to spare Kimber her horrific death.

"This place has bad memories for you," he acknowledged simply, his eyes drawn to the pinhole camera responsible for drawing his family's attention. "If you were conscious at any point before we found you, that makes it even worse." Amber considered his words silently, recalling the day she first found herself in this world.

Thunder cracks in the distance, a rumbling roar following behind. Someone screams—who screams?—as though those shrieks of terror will be their very last words. Shut it off, she cries to the owners of the hands that restrain her, shut it all off! Please, help that person, can't you hear them screaming?! A small pinch of the skin is followed by liquid fire coursing through her veins—what are they doing to her?! What has she done to deserve this?! Please, please, make the screaming stop!

Donatello felt her pulse spike, flinching somewhat at the sudden increase. "I'll take that as a yeah," he acknowledged dryly and wrapped his arms around the woman once again crawling into his lap. Before he could do more than bury his snout in her hair—partly to block out the trash smell with her coconut shampoo and partly out of habit—she stiffened, craning her neck to see around his carapace.

"Purple?" The unusually random comment left him staring at her in confusion.

"What?" he finally asked when it became clear she wasn't ready to elaborate. Instead of answering, she crawled off his lap and crept toward the far wall, eyes locked on something he couldn't see.

"You see something purple?" Donnie prodded when she didn't answer, and she nodded vaguely. Upon reaching the wall she dropped to her knees in the rubbish and pried loose a bit of tile only to drop it with an ungodly shriek and scramble away from the wall. "What?! What's wrong?!" Unable to get out anything more than another shriek, she pointed frantically at the area she uncovered…and what was crawling out of it.

That, Donnie decided with a cringe, was a very well-fed cockroach. "A bug?" he asked the spazzing woman dubiously.

"That ain't a bug!" she insisted shrilly refusing to take her eyes off the crevice in the wall. "That's a monster—thing looks like it could eat a mouse!" Donnie shrugged.

"You're in New York, Hon," he reminded dryly. "It's probably been eating rats." For a moment all she could do was gape in horror at him, her jaw dropped and no words coming out. Realizing she was apparently very freaked out by roaches, Donnie rolled his eyes, shook his head, and approached the pest with a long-suffering sigh. A moment later a loud crunch rang out through the room—triggering a protesting squeak from Amber—as the offending insect was stomped under a work boot.

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"There, problem solved." The look she gave him said quite plainly, no, the problem was not solved, and she was not sticking around in the station a moment longer than she had to.

As his perplexing girlfriend stood squirming in the doorway, Donatello knocked a couple more loose tiles away from the hole dripping purple ink. Behind them lay a rather well-hidden hole in the wall…and in that hole, a faded purple file folder brimming with soggy printouts. Kimber managed to disguise the hiding spot pretty well—well enough he'd never have noticed it. If the ink from the soaked file folder hadn't run and dripped down the wall, it might have been hidden there until the
wall came down. "Hey, you found the papers!" he called out to Amber but received only a grossed out curse...a curse he soon felt like repeating and expanding on. They found the paperwork Kimber stole but every page was saturated with rainwater. The very hiding place that kept it secure ruined it.

The information the turncoat Dragon stole died with her...the trail was officially cold.

Amber and Donnie returned to the Lair in defeat, neither ready to talk over what they'd found. Almost immediately upon arrival, the brunette hit the showers; after over half an hour of just standing there silently under the cold spray, she finally set about cleaning up and making herself presentable. After all, she reasoned weakly, life couldn't stop just because she had a rough day...she'd agreed to co-op dinner with Mikey and Mercy that night. She really didn't need to be dealing with those memories right then, there were more important things at stake!

She wasn't prepared for her reaction to the sopping wet printouts. She hadn't expected to see not stolen papers wet with rain, but piles of cherished books lost to a storm. In the library of her school, she couldn't register anything beneath the cold grey haze that had filled her. Now she didn't have shock holding her back...and she almost wished she did.

'What ever happened to all those books?' she wondered as she shambled into the kitchen to help Michelangelo with dinner. 'Surely the school district tried to salvage them...surely they didn't just give up on them!' No matter how horrible the idea was, though, she had a feeling they did just that. Small towns didn't have much in the way of funding, but the school would have received a FEMA grant to cover costs of rebuilding. That grant was sure to cover everything from new buildings to new books, but it was unlikely to cover salvage and restoration of the buildings' contents...or lawsuits over injuries incurred in salvaging those contents.

'If that ain't proof I didn't fit in,' Amber considered almost bitterly, 'then nothin' is...so many'a my neighbors died in that first storm, but I'm more torn up over the damn school'n any'a them.' The fact that those neighbors wouldn't have spared her a tear mattered not. As she dug out fresh vegetables and set to trimming and chopping them, she pondered over a decades-old debate. Would her closed-minded neighbors have been more accepting of her if she hadn't stood out so strongly, hadn't stood for things they condemned? Would they have understood her if she had done more to fit in? A lifetime later, Amber still had no answers, only one realization—one that gave her pause.

Donnie seemed to approve. Donnie's eyes always softened when she slipped up, lapsed back into the gruff broguish twang the years beat out of her voice. Her odd phrases and unfamiliar curses and colloquialisms didn't repel him the way they did her old neighbors...if anything, they seemed to draw him even closer—like a moth to a flame... That's not morbid at all,' she considered with a cringe, not realizing that not only was Mikey watching her in silent concern, Donatello was as well.

The first thing the genius did upon return was begin preparations to dry the sodden papers Amber found. Granted, what he saw in the station was illegible from running ink but perhaps something could be salvaged anyway. Now, a spiderweb of twine crisscrossed every corner of the lab, and every sheet of paper was hung to dry. Several salvaged box fans—vital when the HVAC system couldn't keep up with the summer heat—were hard at work circulating the air, and the dehumidifier he salvaged and refurbished was cranked up to the max. If there was anything to be gleaned from those papers, then so help him, he wouldn't give up until he found it!

Those were his thoughts on the matter before he ventured to the kitchen to offer a hand with prepwork; now, he felt sure he should have been more suspicious of Amber's silence on the trip home. Mikey, no stranger to the brunette's tendency to lose herself in her thoughts, seemed pleading his brainy brother to do something. Sky blue eyes darted back and forth between Donnie and the woman staring through a large white mushroom as though not seeing it. With a nod and pointed glance to his
brother, Don approached Amber and gently pried the mushroom from her hand.

"I thought you were allergic to those," he pointed out as Mikey excused himself to give them some space. Seemingly coming back to herself after a long wool-gathering trip, Amber blinked down at the pile of cubed mushrooms in confusion.

"Huh," she remarked, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "So I am...I thought...I thought those were...peppers?" The admission made her wince; how did she mistake *mushrooms* for *peppers*? "No worry, though...I didn't eat any...I don't think..." If she did, she considered with a cringe, she would know in an hour...when her stomach felt ready to implode. She trailed off as Donnie pulled her chair out and away from the table and sat straddling another.

"Talk to me, Hon," he urged calmly, his arms folded along the battered back of the old wooden chair. "What's going on in that head of yours?" She avoided his eyes, looking over to the pile of vegetables still waiting for preparation. "Those can wait," he reminded, his eyes firm but his words soft; gentle fingertips on her chin urged her to face him again. "We need to talk...you haven't spoken since we left the station, and I know it wasn't over the roach."

"Roach?" she grumbled with an embarrassed flush. "Try half foot spawn'a Satan." Donnie snorted.

"Please. It couldn't have been two inches long—they get bigger, you know."# The look she gave him plainly said 'you're not helping.' "What's really bothering you, Braidy?" Her lips parted to let out another insistence of being fine—another white lie to protect him from her troubled thoughts—but she caught herself. She wasn't fine...and he wasn't the one who needed protecting at the moment...and hadn't she vowed to stop hiding her not-so-pretty sides from him?

"Kimber's dead," she admitted softly instead, "but'er death was in vain." As though that one sentence burst a dam in her subconscious, the rest seemed to come rushing out in an angsty flood. Amber's eyes watered as she lunged to her feet to pace. "I can't stand it—it's wrong! She put'er life on the line to take down the Purple Dragons, betrayed people she cared about to do it, an' a'thin' she tried wiz for nothin'—the papers're useless!" Strong arms wrapped around her from the back, and she turned to smother her tears in Donnie's shoulder. "I used'ta hate'er," she confessed weakly. "Now I jus' feel sorry for'er...an' ef she wiz an'thin like me, she'd hate that."**

"Probably," Don answered rubbing her back; he said nothing about her lapse in speech, but found himself curious. Was she truly so broken up that she was losing control, or was she actively watching her words less than usual? Curious indeed... "Don't give up on her yet." Watery green eyes met his and he forced the smile he knew she needed, brushing a stray tear from her cheek before it could fall further. "Even if we can't salvage any of the information she stole—even if we can't turn in any of the dirty cops—we won't stop until the Purple Dragons are done and Hun and Northpaw are taken out. She wanted to take the gang out of power, and so help us, we'll do just that."

Donatello truly believed what he was saying, Amber realized in silent awe. His eyes—veering green in the bright light of the kitchen—met each of hers in turn full of promise. "Kimber's death wasn't in vain, Amber," he swore softly. "We'll accomplish everything she set out to. Besides, in a way, she was you—if you stole valuable information, what would you do?" Amber blinked at him, seemingly lost, then a trace of pink stole over her cheeks.

"I'd'a made copies," she answered with a sheepish smile. "Ya think she did?" He gave a lopsided shrug and an almost as lopsided smirk.

"The odds are pretty good...I'd say about 83.57%. The question is where she would hide said copies." Amber cringed. She knew where *she'd* hide secret documents...no one *ever* thought to check the *bookshelves.*
"Looks like I get to go digging through that tote of bodice-rippers in her shed," she grumbled squeamishly. "I'm a need gloves...and bleach...they looked far too stained for my tastes." Donnie chuckled at her pinched expression and let her go; the moment she was free, she hurried over to pull her Scotch out from under the sink and collected her usual glass from the cabinet.

"You know," he teased as she slopped about two fingers worth into the small jar and took a deep sip. "You're living in Kimber's body now...so technically whatever's staining those books is also yours." Despite her track record, Amber managed to not inhale the whisky and choke on it; instead, she turned a disgusted cringe to him.

"Thanks, Dee," she grumbled into her glass, her face almost scarlet. "As if I didn't already feel awkward enough washing another woman's fud an knowing your brother flanged it. Ya jus' give until it hurts."*** Strangled snickering sharpened into laughter, then laughter into wheezing, then, sure enough, he snorted. Despite herself, Amber felt a grin tug at her lips and her own lungs began shuddering in amusement.

By the time Mikey returned, the pair were laughing too hard to explain themselves, and he felt sure he missed something awesome.

Dinner passed by without further incident unless one counted Amber being completely unable to look Raphael in the eye, Mercy letting out a loud unladylike belch halfway through, and Mikey proudly rating it an 'eight out of ten.' After dinner, the family went their separate ways. Donatello went to work on the wiring in the barracks while Amber and Mikey did the dishes and some prep-work for the next night. Around ten, the two lovers met again, this time in his—no, the genius corrected himself fondly—their bedroom.

"Hey, Hon." Donnie's greeting was answered with a forced scowl from the brunette sulking through the bedroom door. Clearly, he realized with a grin, she felt a little playful and was 'punishing' him for laughing at her earlier. He scooted his chair back from his desk to face her.

"I'm not speaking to you," she declared shouldering past him to what they'd deemed 'the changing corner,' grabbing her night clothes on the way.

"You just did," he reminded teasingly. Instead of responding she disappeared behind the fabric screens, tugged the makeshift 'door' shut, and started shucking off her clothes. A loud thump rang out followed by an even louder, "Scunner! My foot!"

"Stubbed your toe again?" Donnie asked innocently and received a grumble in response. "Figured as much. I put a light back there for you—turn it on." A moment later the small desk lamp kicked on and he realized his error. Though he intended only to help his lover avoid injury in the dark corner, he didn't take into account the effect of light and shadow on canvas; right before his eyes, Amber's silhouette was cast onto the lit canvas screens with striking clarity. His cheeks scalding hot, he found himself unable to turn away.

Without realizing she was putting on a show for him, Amber wrenched open the clasp of her brassiere and let the garment fall away with a barely suppressed groan. "God, that feels better," she mumbled aloud tempted to fling the hated contraption across the room slingshot style. She took a moment to enjoy her newfound freedom—unaware that Donatello could see her awkwardly rubbing the feeling back into one sore breast after the other, and the unavoidable response her body had to said massaging—then begrudgingly reached for the zipper of her jean shorts. Donnie choked and tore his eyes away, forcing him to focus on the blueprints scattered across his small desk. Don't think about the breasts, he reminded himself almost frantically. Just ignore them - nothing there to see - and definitely no nip-NO, bad Donnie! Don't think about the breasts!
When Amber finally emerged from the little cubicle, clad in her oversized Knicks jersey and a pair of modest cotton sleep shorts, she found him blushing up a storm and unable to look at her. "What's your problem?" she asked dryly, one under-groomed eyebrow arching to the heavens.

"Apparently," he finally admitted, "I need to rethink the screens for the changing corner…canvas just doesn't cut it." Amber stood there staring at him for a moment, puzzling through his reply, then with a start, turned back to the cubicle. Sure enough, the outline of the desk lamp on the floor was cast on the screens. The way she saw it, she could get embarrassed—turn just as red as the genius was turning and start babbling in humiliation—or she could make things awkward. Amber being Amber, and Amber being shameless, it was obvious which she'd pick.

"Hey, bras hurt. You try wearin' one'a those things all forkin' day."

"Sorry, I don't have the parts," he declined with a crooked smile and a sideways glance. As the laughing brunette turned down their bed, he vividly recalled the way Amber had rubbed the feeling back into her abused bosom. Perhaps she was wearing off on him, because he couldn't help himself…he went there. "…Kimber does."

Sweat-slicked skin gleams under the bright lights of the dojo; sun-blond hair, perpetually mussed, brushes teasingly along Raphael's skin. He'll never be able to set foot in here again without finding himself recalling this moment—the sight, sound, scent, and sense of Mercy bodily pinning him to the mat and working her way toward his feet.

The fluid uncertainty of the situation makes the prostrate ninja wonder—could this be a dream? Surely he wasn't beaten by the mouthy blonde, surely he didn't let her win just to reap the—or did he? In this strangely ominous moment, he finds himself unable to swear for or against that suspicion.

Lips sneer against his suddenly bare skin; work roughened hands work their way under the lip of his plastron and pull his swelling length free of its confines. "Merse," he protests feebly as she leers up at him, teasing him with her hot breath. "Ya don't have'ta—I ain't gonna—"

His promise falls away in a loud, rattling groan as foreign sensations sweep him under. Hot—wet—soft skin and blunt teeth—unable to resist her, now more than ever before, he props himself up on one elbow. Watching his little minx in fascination and awe, he slips his fingers through her perpetually messy hair. Sleek blonde locks shine vibrantly against his skin—gold against green—as he cups the back of her head with a tenderness he would never believe himself capable of. Everything this woman does makes him want her more—everything she is draws him closer by the day. If she has her way, he's sure, she'll have his heart in her hands and his nads in her pocket. She lets him slip free, trailing lips and teeth along every bit of bare skin she can reach.

"I ain't gotta," the blue-eyed temptress acknowledges as her hands roam. One winds up splayed across his massive right thigh, a half-assed attempt at pinning him down. The other dives between his legs and latches mercilessly onto his tail, her fingers wrapping around it and pulling in a suggestive mimicry of the torture his other length is enduring. Swept away by her deceptively soft touch, he slumps back against the mat with a deep, throaty churr, his eyes falling closed with a shudder and his palm trailing down to her cheek. "Gonna anyway, ya lunk-head. I love ya, ya maw'ron."

Something isn't right; he lurches upward again, his wide eyes registering the change. Right before his eyes, short blonde hair lengthens and darkens to punch red. Denim blue eyes pale to mossy grey-green. Unpainted lips, curled in a perpetual smirk, have darkened and softened, and the sarcastic soprano voice has become a husky purr tainted with the smog of New Jersey.
"Kimbu," Raphael winces, averting his eyes from the naked redhead in his lap, his cheeks almost matching her hair. "I'm sorry...I can't, Kim...yer...yer dead..." His lungs ache from the razor-sharp air filling them; his eyes screwed shut and stinging, he finds himself pulling her tightly to his chest as though she'll be torn from his arms. "Yer dead, an' it's my fault—ya din't deserve dis!"

"You don't di'zerve it eit'a," she reminds him gently, seemingly unaware that her skin has been steadily growing cold. Golden eyes finally peel open, and the sight of her—inhumanly pale and fading from view—makes him wish he'd kept them closed. "It ain't yer fault, Red...sometimes t'ese t'ings jus' happen, ya know? I don't blame ya fa t'is." A feather-light touch brushes along his trembling jaw—fingertips or painted lips?—and he struggles to hold onto the minx fading away before his eyes. "I'm dead, Raphie, but you ain't—stawp blamin' ya'self an' staht livin' a'ready!"

"Kimbu, no!" He denied—he argued—he shook her by the shoulders, willing her to not do this, not to leave him again. No matter how hard he tried, though, all was in vain...like a dream fading in the light of dawn, Kimber Bryant faded away right before, him, her tender smile never leaving her cold blue lips.

"Live, Rah-fay-el...I'll see ya on t'a udd'a side."

Like so many nights before, Raphael woke with a strangled shout, lurching up in bed and grasping for someone completely out of his reach. His lungs heaving, his eyes burning, he stared into the darkness of his bedroom, the dream playing nonstop through his mind. He once swore he didn't love Kimber—that he never loved her—but with every passing day since her death, he found himself wondering more and more if he was completely delusional. Was he fighting guilt over being unwilling to listen and unwilling to help her? Was he grieving the loss of his best friend? Or worse, was he heartbroken over losing someone he—someone he loved?

He could have helped her...the others didn't know, and he'd rather keep it that way. When the truth came out, that Kimber was dead and Amber somehow stepped into her vacant body, it nearly broke him...he knew what had triggered the alarms the night Kimber died...he heard her voice on the security feed, begging for shelter and a chance to prove herself...He ignored it. Kimber died. Now, he could no more admit that horrible choice to his family than bring her back to life.

"Hey!" A sudden voice at the door tore him from his self-loathing; golden hazel eyes shot to the blonde hovering in the open doorway torn between concern and fear. "You okay, Raph? You—You were screamin'...

"GIT OUT!" he bellowed hurling the closest object—his alarm clock—at the apparition. With a terrified yelp, Mercy dove for safety; the door slammed behind her, the abused appliance shattering against it. Her skin crawling and her heart racing, she found herself back in another time—another place—and facing down another tormentor she should have been able to trust. She bolted for the door, her bare feet pounding the pavement and her cheeks streaming.

In her wake, a horrified brunette stood in the open doorway of Donatello's room. She saw everything...it wasn't the first time she witnessed it, either, though Raphael was never the cause before. As loud crashes and oaths echoed from his room—many of them bearing the name of her
counterpart—Amber turned to meet Donnie's gaze. The answer was clear to them, but Mercy was too blinded by fear to realize the reason behind Raph's outburst. Without a word passing between them, Amber yanked on her sneakers, grabbed a flashlight and her phone, and took off into the tunnels to follow her friend as Donatello rushed to the lab to track the fleeing blonde.

Mercy's previous life was a nightmare that never ended and Amber was often the only one fully in her corner. Even then, the blonde never let her down...no way in hell was Amber going to leave her to fight her demons alone.

Y'all probably hate me for that one, but I have my reasons! Raph's NOT the most stable person on the face of the earth - a significant portion of his character is centered around being brash, rough, temperamental, and crotchety, so it doesn't make sense that he'd suddenly be all lovey-dovey just because he found a gal who likes him! He's STILL gonna be bitchy on occasion...and as Mercy just found out, Raph bottling up his bitchy turns into BOOM. 'Til next chapter, have a great weekend!

Chapter End Notes

# A not-so fun fact regarding phobias: Studies have indicated that people with certain phobias—IE, spiders, snakes, rats, etc—experience a strange perception discrepancy when faced with the object of their fears. Specifically, they visually register the object as much larger than it really is—in this case, a cockroach less than two inches long appears to be several times larger than it really is. The greater the phobic response, the larger the object appears to be.

Translations

(`Scotch slang`, ^Hick-ese and Midwestern slang^)

* `Ya fookin' clyped'im!` – `Ya fuckin' hit him!' Interestingly, 'clype' has several different meanings, but when it's used as a verb, it means 'to hit something.'

** `A'thin` - Everything
`Wiz` – Was. This one made my inner linguistics nerd girly-squeal with excitement, seeing as it's incredibly similar to Midwesternized "wuz," and the Midwest was SETTLED by Scotch-Irish and European immigrants! (Yeah, I know, I'm a nerd. Sue me, you'll get pocket lint.)
^An'thin'^ or ^Ani'thin'^ - Pronunciation is somewhat similar to "Anikin" from Star Wars, but the 'Ah' is instead more of an 'eh.' Means 'Anything.'

*** Yes. I seriously went there. I've been trying to find a way to go there for MONTHS.
`Fud` - vagina and
`Flange` - to have sex with. Basically she's complaining about washing a twat that isn't hers, and worse yet, a twat Raphael knows in a Biblical manner. So. Frigging. Awkward. And honestly, what sort of grandparent would teach their young and impressionable granddaughter words like this?! Oh...right...mine taught me worse...much worse. Ne'ermind.
Chapter Summary

Mercy and Donnie bonding. Raph figures out why you don't hurt Mercy. Amber makes an ass of herself, Raph helps, Mercy is unimpressed. Splinter is even more unimpressed. Amber and Donnie bonding. Cuddles.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE TIME! :D Well, Folks, I left ya with a cliffhanger last time so this chapter is pretty dang long in compensation. Be warned, it's got some pretty intense places and more coarse language than any previous. ALSO! Much, much, MUCH more Scotch-ness from Amber, some of which I'm sure I've completely screwed up; if you have regular non-Hollywood access to someone with a thick Scottish accent and notice any errors, please do let me know about them.

In other news, I owe y'all yet another installment of Gallery of Memories—which puts the debt at two chaps—because y'all pushed ANLoL past +7000 views on FFnet! Awesomeness, thank you! I've uploaded a new chapter for GoM—"Dream Lover Part I," which features a full lemon—so if you haven't hit it, hit it! Lastly, I've set up a poll for this story which you can access through my FFnet profile. Come tell me which original characters you find yourself relating to or liking most—high vote may result in more screen time for popular choice! AO3 people - you still out there?? The site's gone pretty dead for both stories...

This chapter dedicated to Wolf—a great beta and even greater friend.


35: Collisions, Confessions, Conclusions

Get out. It was such a simple phrase, the sort few ever expected to cause more than hurt feelings and wounded pride. Still, it was those very words that would be traced back as the catalyst for a very long, stressful night.

"What?!" Donatello prattled into his headset, double-checking and triple-checking the coordinates of the blinking tracking beacon on the monitor. "She's not there? –you're sure? But—but my tracker puts her right in the northeast corner of the Railyard, not three meters from the loading bay—this thing's got a 99.99991% accuracy rate, I'd wager my staff on its accuracy!"
The voice on the other end of the phone connection—Amber—suddenly broke down in tears, and Donnie's face fell. There was a reason both women were all-but confined to the Lair without supervision, but they'd never expected anyone to find out about the Railyard… If Mercy was found there, by any of the Purple Dragons, she would be gravely injured… or worse… He swallowed hard around the knot forming in his throat and steeled himself for what he had to do. "I'm coming, Honey, don't—Wait, what?"

Just like that, his expression was back to irritated. "You found the chip, but not her? What'd she do, gouge it out with her nails?!" Her answer left him feeling like such an imbecile he slapped his forehead, accidentally knocking into the microphone of his headset and triggering some horrendous feedback and a pained shriek on the other end of the line. "A box cutter," he deadpanned his eyes clenched shut in annoyance. "Yep. That'd do it. Come on back, Hon—she's not there."

A familiar presence in the open doorway of the lab drew his attention. When he realized who it was, he scowled at his muscle-bound twin. "What were you doing?" he demanded as Raphael approached the screens making up Donnie's workstation. "You know about her mother, you know what that sort of abuse can do to a person, and you know you scared the living daylights out of her! Now the poor woman's hiding and maybe even hurt! WHAT were you THINKING?!

Raphael stared at the blinking icon slowly making its way back to the Lair; Amber clearly picked up the discarded chip. Only a week before, he and Mercy spent hours tearing rails out of the last railbed in the yard, then wound up necking against the pile of salvaged steel rails. Donnie opened his mouth again, presumably to demand answers—again—but he fell silent when Raph answered him, his voice hoarse from shouting. "I wasn't," he admitted unable to meet his brother's eyes. "I wasn't thinkin' at all…"

"I'll say," a voice snapped from the doorway. Both ninjas whipped about to face the force of nature storming toward them. Donatello didn't even recognize Amber. He knew her like no other—knew how her cheeks flushed from nerves, how her eyes lit up with laughter and shone with tears, how her pulse raced in fear, even how her lips parted in needy gasps and whimpers—but this was a side of her he'd never even considered. This Amber was unlike anything he would ever have imagined. Fury twisted her lips into a snarl, threats flashed in her mossy eyes, rage flushed her cheeks and clenched her jaw.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Studying her in silent disbelief, he struggled to wrap his head around this unexpected rage. Amber had gotten angry at him before—they spent months feuding, and she even slapped him once!—but now he found himself wondering if she was ever, truly, as angry at him as he thought she was. Of course, he reminded himself grimly as his brother and girlfriend stared each other down, he never hurt Mercy…and Mercy was the closest thing to a sister Amber had. Even if the blonde somehow escaped harm, returned safely, and forgave Raphael for his careless actions, Donatello couldn't help wondering if Amber would be so quick to forgive.

Amidst the standoff in the lab, a strange sound manifested amidst the white noise—the slow, rhythmic ticking of a legion of clocks. Unseen, unheard, unnoticed, they counted down the moments 'til disaster.

"Blundie?" The awkwardly pronounced nickname made Mercy cringe, but she didn't say a word. Shaking and breathing hard, she buried her face in her drawn up knees, wishing she could just fall right through the crust of the earth. A hesitant hand settled on Mercy's flannel-clad shoulder triggering an involuntary flinch; Amber gently knelt beside her in the shady grass, saying nothing.

"D-Don' touch me," Mercy croaked—trying, as always, to be brave, to push everyone and everything away before they could hurt her. Despite her words, she found herself buried face-first in
Amber's shoulder, her throat aching and her lungs heaving in ragged, heart-wrenching sobs. The older teen shushed her softly, rubbing nonsensical patterns into her back. As Mercy's weeping slowed and her shoulders steadied, her friend hummed familiar tunes under her breath, both to soothe and to distract.

When she was finally able to inhale without choking and exhale without nausea, Mercy settled back against the rickety wooden fence behind them. Involuntarily, Amber sucked in a sudden, harsh breath at the angry red welt across Mercy's right cheek, the red even more vibrant when framed by bloodshot eyes and salt-stained skin. The friends didn't need to say anything—it had already been said before, countless times—and simply recovered in the overgrown corner of the O'Brien's back yard.

"Merse, I'm leavin' for college this fall." Amber's voice, when she finally broke the silence, was weary. "I been accepted at th' University of Glenville...i's three towns over..." She paused, seeming to gather her nerve. "Come with me...we can be roommates, you can get away from...from her..." Mercy didn't know what to say; what could she possibly say to that? She'd never lived anywhere but her mother's home, never had any work but helping with the ranch—she didn't know a thing about being self-sufficient! Clearly recognizing the direction the blonde's thoughts were turning, Amber squeezed her thin shoulder, her eyes reassuring and confident. "Y'ain't gotta do this alone, Hon...an' I won't be able to go if I don't know yer safe."

Near the end of August, after the shouting and travel were over, two close friends moved into a small dorm off campus. One left behind everything she knew, the other, everything she feared most. For four blissful years, Mercy finally felt free, strong, and stable; at the end of those four years, she burned out, dropped out, and returned to her family like the battered woman she was, honestly believing things would be better.

Mercy turned the small plastic coin in her fingertips, staring through it and into another lifetime. Dim lamplight gleamed off of the chip's metallic purple surface as intermittent flashes and ripples of light danced along the beaded chain dangling from it. Four months had passed since she began attending meetings – over four months of treatment for Donna's addiction – and seven months had passed since she first found herself struggling with the very vice she couldn't stand. Now, half a year after she woke up in this nightmare, she found herself back in that remote corner of Central Park, contemplating the sobriety coin with disinterest.

This wasn't where it all started, per se; that place was an empty back road in Willsdale, Missouri and a twisted hunk of metal that was once her stepfather's battered pickup truck. Even if one were to ignore that beginning, maybe in favor of where her new life began, it wasn't the place where Donatello and Amber discovered her. No, her new life began under a dark, crumbling overpass, surrounded by objects and people thrown away by the city celebrating another new year. Those first months were hell; the days bled together in a constant stream of cold, hunger, weariness, and withdrawal, the only interruptions occurring in the form of shared booze that quickly came right back up.

Four months...such an insignificant number when one considered the number of years her mother spent denying she had a problem. Mercy felt more than heard Donatello's approach but didn't look up, instead staring through the foiled sobriety chip slowly turning in her fingers. Without a word he dropped to the cool turf and sat back to back with her, offering his carapace for a backrest. "You're doing well," he said simply. "Four months is an astounding accomplishment...we're all proud of you."

"I hate alcohol," she admitted softly, her fingers clenching desperately around the chip. "I hate it...
but…my body…my body loves it." The confession physically hurt. She forcefully pried her clenched fist loose again and set to turning the coin again—this time, the disc bounced from one long, slender finger to the next, bouncing across her knuckles. As suddenly as the pattern began, it halted, the chip falling off only to be snatched up by the chain. "Could…" She visibly struggled with the words, torn between admitting their existence and refusing to accept their truth. "Was it like this…for…for Ma?" Donnie stilled, eyes wide at her question, but didn't acknowledge them; he halfway suspected she didn't even realize she spoke them.

"Addiction isn't easily beaten," he reminded without censure. "Even if your heart and soul detest alcohol, your body is still addicted—you'll still have to fight as hard as others without that benefit. I wish it were as simple as realizing you're addicted and deciding to conquer that addiction, but you know what they say about wishes."

"If they were fishes, the world would feast," Mercy grumbled bitterly. "I hate fish." Her sulking tone reminded him of a pouting grade schooler being forced to eat peas. "My mother's an alcoholic, Donnie," she admitted, revealing that she was very much aware of her words before. "I can't stand that woman—I should'a been able to trust'er, to rely on'er, but—but even now, a lifetime later…" A shudder ran through her and she slumped back against his carapace, too weary to stay upright any longer. "I ne'er feared a man alive, ne'er feared a damn thing on this earth or my own…nothin' but my own Ma. It's—it's messed up!"

Donnie said nothing. She seemed to be figuring things out well enough on her own. After all, that was one way she and Amber were different—Amber would clam up, freeze up, and have to be picked apart before she could even acknowledge the obvious. Mercy wasn't prone to hiding her feeling, other than from Amber, and she didn't hold her tongue. With enough time, she could get it all worked out just from talking it out.

"I don't know any specifics, Mercy," he said when it became clear she was getting lost in her thoughts and needed a nudge. "Amber told me very little—that your mother was physically and emotionally abusive, that you endured that mistreatment your entire life, especially during your formative years, and that it left you with some serious scars." His eyes drawn to the heavens, searching for stars in between the clouds, he sighed. "I don't know any more than that, and honestly, I don't need to know anything you don't want to tell me. My family and I, we know you now, we accept you as you are, and you don't need to justify anything to any of us."

Silence hung heavy over them, stretching far too long for comfort. When it was finally broken, it was by a statement barely above a whisper. "I don't deserve you guys."

"No," Donnie contradicted firmly scooting aside to face her, "you didn't deserve your mother's mistreatment. Nothing excuses her actions—no matter what her problems were, there's no excuse for abusing someone who relies on you, much less your own child." Denim blue eyes darted back and forth across the wilting grass as though scanning a multitude of memories and thoughts; Mercy silently considered her options and the puzzle pieces give to her, turning each every which way and contemplating their purpose. Slowly, the picture was becoming clearer…and the ever-present weight on her chest lightened, if only slightly.

"She had no excuses," she agreed, finally meeting his eyes. "She chose her poison, chose her path, and refused to admit she needed help…as hard as it's been fighting Donna's addiction, though, I know it must have been even harder for her." The deep furrow between her eyebrows softened just the slightest bit and she turned toward the sliver of moon just over the horizon, spearing her fingers through her hair. "How...how can I hate her now, seeing so clearly what she went through?" The question was a strange combination of bewildered and sullen and it brought a faint smile to his face. "Maybe…maybe I wasn't the only victim in that situation after all..."
"Your mother may never beat her addiction, Mercy," He glanced pointedly to the small plastic chip still clenched in her fingers. "but you will beat yours…we have faith in you." Finally, the Mercy he'd grown to know reappeared with a lopsided smirk.

"Love ya too, Brainiac," she teased socking him in the arm—and promptly wincing at her stinging knuckles. "Enough'a the mush a'ready—yer gonna make me hork."

"A little mush never hurt anyone," he pointed out mussing her already messy hair with a grin. The grin fell away, though, when he recalled why she was out in the park in the first place. "About Raph —"

"Save it, I a'ready know," she cut him off.

"You…know?" he echoed dubiously. He was all ready to make excuses for his brother—had a whole 'intro to Raph's issues' speech mentally lined out—never even considering that those excuses might not be needed.

"Yeah," the blonde repeated with a slightly impatient expression, "I know. Amber told me 'bout his deal ages ago—b'fore we even met y'all, long story, don't ask. Honestly, with a temper like his, I'm surprised he's managed to hold it around me this long…I can be pretty bitchy, ya know."

"Perish the thought."

"Bite me, Assmunch. The point remains; I get it, I expected it, I jus' got surprised an' backslid. It happens, ya know..." She turned to glare off into the distance. "I'm sick'a bein' a scared little kid, Donnie—Raph an' I' got somethin' good, an' a lil' turtle tantrum ain't gonna screw that up." Raphael, the genius decided solemnly, was an incredibly lucky man…and he'd better not screw up again.

Mercy hoisted herself to her feet, swept the grass clippings from her behind, and started back toward the manhole cover she crept out of. Quickly following and falling in step with her, Donnie found himself glancing furtively over at the silent woman beside him. For quite some time, he'd suspected something but had no confirmation; now, after their long, enlightening conversation, that suspicion was even stronger. Still, how could he ask her? How could he honestly just ask for answers that would likely only humiliate her? "Spit it out a'ready."

"R-Right," he stammered, his cheeks darkening in embarrassment. "I've wondered for some time now…you don't have to answer, but I still feel the need to ask…" He stared blankly ahead, his other senses tuned to the woman walking beside him. "After your first trip to the clinic, the doctor put you on Carbatrol—for seizure prevention. You had no problem with any of the other medications, but that one provoked a strong negative response. That suggests you once took it for different reasons—reasons that embarrassed you."

"You're asking why I took it?" she summed up seriously, her eyes meeting his askance. "Amber didn't tell—no, of course, she wouldn't—she knows I don't like sharing that." She cleared her throat, seemingly working her way up to some horrible confession. "Carbatrol…it's..." A frustrated sigh ripped from her lungs. "Fuck it. It's also used as a mood stabilizer…I...I had...Bipolar disorder…but Donna didn't, she was stable, so—" Before she could get too deep in defending herself, Donnie stopped, caught her by both shoulders, and stared her down seriously.

"Mercy," he reminded dryly. "I'm assisting your admittedly unstable friend with her PTSD. My older brother is a perfectionist with control issues. My younger brother has the energy level of a squirrel on crack and the attention span of a dying goldfish. My twin has a tendency to throw tantrums when he doesn't get his way. And, to top it all off, our father's literally a rat and the rest of us are talking turtles." Finally, the smile in his eyes reached his lips and he gave her left shoulder a friendly pat.
"Compared to the lunacy I grew up with, you're refreshingly average."

Mercy wasn't sure what to say. If she was Amber, she'd start ugly-crying all over him and blubbering about how much she appreciated him and how she only hoped she could someday become as accepting as he was. Fortunately, Mercy wasn't Amber...she was very much not Amber. Denim blue eyes glanced down at her left shoulder—or, rather, the large green hand wrapped around it—then met his again, one blonde eyebrow arching in silent warning. "R-Right," Donnie answered sheepishly and let go of her, shoving his hands as deep into his pockets as they'd fit.

For a time, nothing was said. They reached the secluded manhole, Donnie pulled it out and offered Mercy a hand down, then switched on a spotlight conveniently situated at the right shoulder of his harness. As he led the way home, never inching ahead of her or falling behind, Mercy repeatedly found herself glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. It hadn't escaped her notice that the genius and her best friend were sleeping together every night. She'd also noticed that Amber was now sleeping all through the night, instead of waking up screaming every hour or so. During their feud, Mercy gave neither Donnie nor Amber any slack; now, she felt confident that she didn't have to worry about them anymore.

"Thanks." The sudden mumble, sounding just outside the front door of the Lair, startled Donatello, and he found himself staring in disbelief at the blonde already tapping her foot at the door. "C'mon, Dipshit," she grumbled at him, "World War Three's about to start."

A brief shining moment…and then that mouth.*

When Mercy fled the Lair in a blind panic, she left behind her lover, her best friend, and her best friend's boyfriend to pick up the pieces. With every minute she didn't turn up, the atmosphere and the occupants grew tenser and louder.

Now, nearing an hour of absence, the situation was only getting worse. No one could sleep through the racket going on—no one could have blocked out the shouting and screaming passing between the blonde's two closest companions. One blustered and threatened to knock the other's block off if she didn't quit meddling; the other verbally tore him up one side and down the other for hurting her friend, her words growing more and more twisted and gruff by the moment.** Only Leonardo, physically restraining her in an ever-weakening half-nelson, kept the situation from escalating to violence. Any other time, the leader would have laughed at the very idea that he would struggle to successfully restrain a woman so much smaller and weaker than himself. As it was, he could effectively restrain her, but the slightest miscalculation would be disastrous…and even with the brunette going berserk on their brother, Leo doubted Donatello would be very forgiving if he dislocated both her shoulders.

Michelangelo sat silently on the sofa, one blue eye volleying back and forth between the two combatants. At first, he'd tried to break up the fight. Now his other eye was swollen shut, courtesy of Raphael's fist, and he steered clear of the fray. Even Master Splinter gave up on breaking it up, if only because no blows were thrown—barring Mikey's eye.

"Yar a fookin' yellae bastard, ya knuw tha'?!" Amber spat at Raphael, her face flushed almost scarlet in rage. "She truss'ed ya—she truss'ed ya an' ya made'er bolt!"

"Come on," Leo attempted to reason even as Raphael snarled at his interruption; she wasn't much of a threat, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to restrain the raging brunette without hurting her. "This won't help any!"

"Ah'll pan yer heid in!" the furious brunette insisted shrilly struggling in his grip. "Ah'm pure dead
"YOU!" Raphael's answer, delivered in a furious roar, seemed to freeze everything in the vicinity. Amber froze. His brothers froze. His father froze. Even the very air seemed to grow suddenly, drastically colder. Like a shaken bottle of champagne, Raph's cork popped and his emotions boiled over in a vehement rush of hurtful words. "Yer my problem, ya crazy-ass bitch! Yer nothin', jus' some nut-job hijackin' Kimbuh's body—if you weren't in it, she'd still be dere!"

"RAPHAEL!" Splinter bellowed to no avail, "That is enough!"

"D'ya thinks I dunnaw tha'?!" Amber railed on regardless. "Tha' I dinnae ken tha' if I wisnae here, Kimbruh'd be?!" With a sudden burst of emotion, she managed to shake off Leo's grip and stormed right up into Raph's face. "I didn'ae wanna 'nother shot, ya ragin' roaster, no't the loss'f ony'body else! I cannae go back—I cannae ge'er back for ya, e'er! So what'll ya do'boot it?!"

The hulking ninja stiffened, staring down in disbelief at the woman a head and a half shorter than him—and likely a hundred pounds lighter—blatantly getting up in his face and daring him to react. If not for the tension thick in the air, he would have compared it to a Chihuahua facing off against a mastiff. "Will, gowan'en!" the frenzied brunette spat at him, her face right up in his. "This's my fees nuw, nae ma'er I wan'it 'er no'! Kimbruh ain't ere maer—su do summit aboot it!"

Golden hazel eyes widened frantically, their owner backing away like a child facing down a rabid dog twice their size. The rest of the family stared in horror, disbelief, and shock as Amber backed Raph up against the wall—had she a death wish?!—still railing at him to do something about her being stuck in Kimber's body. Finally, after what seemed like an hour of screaming and butting heads, he did just that…

Right before their eyes, Raphael's massive arms lashed out, wrapped around the still-pissed brunette, and held her…held her like he never held Kimber, not even when she fought tooth and nail to keep him from shutting her out. To the bewilderment of the rest of the family, save Splinter and the blonde standing in the doorway, Amber grabbed onto him just as tightly…and bawled. Literally cried as though she was being gutted, clinging to Raph as though he was the only thing keeping her upright. What the rest of the family didn't know, was that Raph was telling her the truth—whispering brokenly into her hair that he heard Kimber's pleas for shelter, assumed the worst and ignored her, and he regretted it more every day.

As messy as the altercation was, Amber found it proved her point. Back when she and Aaron used to watch the show and movies together, the blond always proclaimed Raphael wasn't so bad, he just 'needed to get laid.' At this point in their odd conversations, Aaron always turned to grin suggestively at Amber, who rolled her eyes. "Never gonna happen," she'd insist sourly. "I don't screw mirrors." Now, a lifetime later, she knew her impression was correct…she and Raphael had too much in common to get along well on a regular basis without some serious tongue-holding…or at least booze…preferably booze.

"Dayum," Mercy mumbled to Donatello, stunned at the mess her friend and boyfriend made of themselves. "I' never seen'er get that pissed at anyone but my Ma!"

"You've seen that before?" Donnie hissed back, unable to tear his eyes from the oblivious train wreck before them. He knew Amber was slightly unstable, knew that Kimber had a helluva temper even before she died, but this was a nightmare he hadn't expected. Mercy cringed and nodded.

"A lot, actually," she admitted in an almost-grumble. "I'd wind up hidin' in'er yard, she'd unleash holy hell on my Ma fer whatever made me run, an' I'd pay for it later…" Mercy avoided his eyes awkwardly, spearing her fingers through her hair and yanking. "She didn't know. If she knew, she
wouldn't'a ever let me go home. I told'ja she wasn't really mad at ya…dumbass…" Despite the grave situation, the blonde found herself smirking over at the horrified genius. "Ya know," she pointed out only half-teasingly, "we didn't call'er the Crazy Celt just 'cause she could out-drink anyone on campus."

Donnie startled, his eyes shooting to meet hers. Crazy…Celt…? He'd used the nickname on her the other day and several times since, but he'd never heard anyone else use it…of course, now that he thought about it, where'd he come up with that nickname if he didn't overhear it? Clearly misreading his reaction, Mercy pointed out with feigned nonchalance, "Some jackass got sore after I turned'im down. He brought'is little ass-buddies to try an' change my mind." A sly smirk split her lips and she met his eyes askance. "Ya've never seen a miracle 'til ya seen a short chubby chick take out a trio of jocks with nothin' but adrenaline an'er purse." Now that he'd love to see.

His secrets confessed and the red faded from his vision, Raphael found himself working his way back to the real world. A tantalizing scent—a familiar, sweet floral bouquet paired with the even sweeter scent of the sour woman wearing it—drew his eyes to the doorway. Mercy was back…and saw him holding her best friend, who was indeed ugly-crying all over him. "Yeah," the blonde pointed out with a smirk and rolled eyes, "she does that."

"…Mercy…?" It took far more effort to get her name out than it should have, but even once he did, he found he had no idea what to add to it. I'm sorry? I'm an idiot? I can't believe you can even look at me right now? Words were never Raphael's strong point, and in this moment, that weakness was as obvious as ever before. Denim blue eyes met his over the head of frizzy brown hair tucked into his chest, unspoken words passing between them. She knew he was sorry, that he hadn't meant to lash out at her, and somehow, despite his actions, she wasn't angry at him. Clearly tiring of the long awkward silence, Mercy gave a long-suffering sigh and rolled her eyes skyward, stalking toward him.

"C'mon, Scotch-Bright," she grumbled, poking Amber insistently in the shoulder. "Gi'off my man a'ready." As the sniffling brunette made a passing attempt to dry her eyes—and dry her tears off his bare chest—Raph found his gaze locked with Mercy's again. He didn't understand, not in the slightest, but for some reason, she forgave him; despite his faults and failures, he silently vowed to make it up to her.

Not long after the explosive blow-up and Mercy's return, the blonde and the beefcake were holed up in her room in the barracks, awkwardly avoiding one another's eyes. Neither cared to acknowledge the elephant in the room—it was already stomping the shit out of them, after all—but both knew something had to be said. She didn't need a verbal apology and he didn't need expressed forgiveness, but something hung between them, invisible, intangible, but immovable. Finally, the silence became too much.

"I—" he started at the same time Mercy attempted,

"You—" This resulted in both urging, "You first," then going completely silent. Before they could get any further, though, a stern rapping sounded at the open doorway.

"Raphael," Splinter greeted shortly, the younger mutant flinching at his sensei's tone. Oh no…not again… "To the dojo." Without another word, Splinter stalked out of the barracks to locate the other responsible party.

"…what?" Mercy muttered in confusion. "Why the dojo?" Raph shuddered, unwilling to meet her eyes and reveal his weakness.
"Dis wasn't always da Barracks, ya know," he pointed out in a sour rasp. "Dis used ta be da Hashi. We ain't got a Hashi now…" The rest of the sentence, 'so we're getting our asses beat in the dojo instead,' went unspoken as he lunged to his feet. "I'll catch up wit' ya, Merse." Before he could reach the door a deceptively soft hand latched onto his shoulder, effortlessly anchoring him in place.

"Raph." The address, delivered in a soft murmur, made him wince. "I understand…ya got a temper, big deal. Just blow off some steam from now on so we don't wind up here again, okay?" Golden hazel met denim blue over one bulky bicep, the first doubtful and the second confident. "I ain't a scared little kid anymore, remember? Quit actin' like I'm gonna break if ya get grumpy."

He hesitated, contemplating the events that led them there, then slowly nodded agreement and turned to offer a weak smile. That smile spread into a smirk as his cantankerous girlfriend latched onto the upper edge of his carapace and hauled him down to her level, quickly latching onto his neck and lips. A low growl in his throat, Raph hoisted her up into his arms, one massive hand mussing her already messy hair as the other held her tightly against his plastron. They would need to talk it out eventually, but for the moment, their hearts already knew the truth.

Actions spoke louder than words.

For the last several hours, Donatello sat propped up in bed with a previously engaging book nearly ignored. Several times before, he'd read his way through Anthem all in one sitting; now he found himself reading the same paragraph over and over without realizing what he just read.

The Lair was quiet now, the chaotic racket from before having faded into a tense silence. Hours before, Master Splinter collected the two individuals responsible for the long brawl—Raphael and Amber—and sequestered the three of them away in the dojo for an hour. Donatello shuddered to think what happened in that room but knew better than to meddle...with the Hashi converted to living space, their sensei was left improvising.

Again, the genius found himself at the end of the same paragraph he just finished, still unable to recall a word he'd read. Hazel eyes darted hopefully to the closed door, but the silence was unbroken. Hours ago, Amber disappeared into the dojo with Raphael...she was officially part of the family, now, and like Mercy, she was receiving self-defense training. As such, she was subject to the same discipline the rest were. Donnie had faith in his father, his master—he knew the aged rat wouldn't do anything to harm Amber—but Raphael was released over an hour ago! Surely Amber wasn't still—

"For Shell's sake," he grumbled to himself setting aside the book without bothering to mark the page. Distraction and denial were getting him nowhere, and so was sitting and staring through the same pages over and over again. Dawn would be breaking in only a couple hours, and he needed sleep…sleep he wouldn't be getting without a certain brunette tucked in his arms. She always managed to shut his brain off—how, he couldn't comprehend—and even though they'd only shared a room for a short time, he'd become as reliant on her as she was on him. With a self-deprecating snort, he stood, stretched a kink out of his stiff neck, and set off to find his missing piece.

He should have guessed he'd find her in the barracks. Standing in the open doorway of her small vacated room, he shook his head at the sight of her slumped face-down across the narrow bunk—clearly favoring sore buttocks and a stiff back. "It ain't funny," she grumbled into the musty mattress; huh, so that chuckle wasn't just in his head. "My everything hurts."

"You expected otherwise?" Donnie retorted too-innocently. "How'd it go?"

"I am never pissing that rat off again," Amber swore vehemently, her cheeks blazing against the
sheets. "He said I needed to work on my balance…then made me 'bout puke every time I got the hang of it…an' added time when I fell…an' I fell a lot. I can't feel my arse."

"You will tomorrow," Donnie pointed out simply, strolling over to perch on the edge of the bed. The mattress groaned under his weight, but not nearly as loudly as Amber groaned when he gave her a 'supportive' pat on the back. "Any particular reason you're sleeping in here?"

"You probably think I'm crazy." They weren't the words he was expecting, but he wasn't surprised by them. His arms dangling loosely off his knees, he took the opportunity to study her without notice, his eyes lingering just a bit too long at her backside.

"Crazy?" he repeated with a cheeky smile she could hear clearly. "Completely. You wouldn't fit in here if you weren't. Still, what brought that on?" She held her silence a while, trying to find any possible answer that could be honest without making her sound like a complete idiot; she didn't find one.

"Ya don't mess with Mercy," she answered instead, feeling ridiculous doing so. "Do whatever ya want to me—hurt me, hate me, beat the shite out'a me an' leave me fer dead—but if anyone ever hurts Mercy, they don't get another chance." Though her entire body was throbbing with pain—except her arse, which she still couldn't feel—she worked her stiff arms up toward her head, crossing them and pillow her chin on them. "Mercy's my oldest friend, Dee," she confessed. "I talked funny, I didn't fit in, I had some serious dental misalignments goin' on, an' I got bullied a lot…Mercy stood up for me every time. I'll never be able to repay her for everything she did fer me...she's the sister I never had."

Amber trailed off, feeling completely ridiculous and sure she just made a fool of herself. A sudden—admittedly gentle—pat on the rear shot that belief to hell and sent spasms of pain wracking through her backside. "GAH, scunner!" she shrieked rolling away and clutching her hands protectively over her behind. "The fark, Dunnie?!"

"Guess you can feel it after all, huh?" he remarked without even the slightest visible sign of mischief; if she hadn't seen his playful side many times before now, Amber might've been fooled.

"Now I can," she grumbled sourly. He was laughing at her—openly laughing at her!—and still, she couldn't be mad at him. Shaking his head, he stood and gathered her into his arms, tucking one under her knees and the other around her back. As happened the day he and Leo first brought her to the Lair, she gave a startled squawk at the sudden height different, just in time muffling it in his shoulder. "I still hate heights," she grumbled as he carried her down the hallway, through the common area, and into the bedroom they now shared.

Finally, together for the night, the pair found all the day's stresses melting away. Amidst nuzzles and gentle brushing caresses, the two drifted off in each other's arms, both tired, sore, and smiling just the same.

For anyone interested, I put together a piece of concept art for this chapter - "We have faith in you," centered in Donnie and Mercy's talk in the park. You can find that image HERE:

<<< http://fav.me/dbkuggl >>>

Hope y'all enjoyed!
"Yar a fookin' yellae bastart, ya knuw tha'?!" – You're a fucking (yellae = yellow = cowardly) bastard, you know that?!

"She truss'ed ya—she truss'ed ya an' ya made'er bolt!" – She trusted you—she trusted you and you made her run off!

"Ah'll pan'is heid in!" – I'll (bash) his head in! [Technically to "pan something in" means 'to break or disfigure' it but yeah. Same diff.]

"Ah'm pure dead scunnert wi'ya!" – I'm (completely) (disgusted/fed up) with you! [pure – very, totally, and dead – usually used with 'pure' beforehand, is considered to mean the same thing but with added emphasis. Scunnert – fed up/disgusted, based on scunner – means both 'something that pisses you off' and 'Jeez that hurt!' Compare to 'mother-fucker!'

"Ye shite-breened bawheid!" - You shit-brained (bald-head!) Taken literally, 'bawheid' is just a remark about him being bald, but the term is also synonymous with 'empty headed' and 'stupid.' Double burn…

"Wha'sher prob'm, anywae?!" – What's your problem, anyway?!

"D'ya thinks I dunnuw tha'?!"– Do you really think I don't know that?!

"Tha' I dinnae ken tha' if I wisnae here, Kimbruh'd be?!" – That I don't (understand/know) that if I wasn't here, Kimber would be?!

"I didn'ae wanna 'nother shot, ya ragin' roaster, no't the loss'f ony'body else!!!" – I didn't want another shot [at life], you (basically means 'he's making a complete cunt of himself' and doing so by his temper—really ironic since she's doing the exact same thing, lol!), not if it meant the death of anyone else!

I cannae go back—I cannae ge'er back for ya, e'er!" – I can't go back [to my old life]—I can't get [Kimber] back for you, either!

So what'll ya do'boot it?!" – So what'll you do about it?! [Very, VERY STUPID CHALLENGE!]

Will, gowan'en! This's my fees nuw, nae ma'er I wan'it 'er no'! – Well, go on then! This is my face now, no matter if I want it or not!

Kimbruh ain't'ere nae mare—su DO summit aboot it! – Kimber isn't [in] here anymore—so DO something about it!

Chapter End Notes

*A brief shining moment, and then that mouth." – I seem to be finding a lot of Miss
Congeniality parallels in this fic…curiouser and curiouser…

**It's been well established by this point that Amber tends to slip into old habits—specifically speech patterns—when she's experiencing very strong emotions. Though she's been focusing more lately on letting those old speech patterns show around Donnie WITHOUT a crisis, this is NOT such a case; instead, it's an "I talk like my Gran'Da when I'm pissed" case. I'm REALLY hoping I didn't screw these up but I'm sure I did somewhere! If anyone with experience with Scottish friends notices I screwed up somewhere, please, PLEASE let me know so I can fix it—this wasn't meant to be a mockery, but a serious depiction! Translations shown in order of occurrence.

#Anthem is a novel written by philosopher Ayn Rand, author of The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged. For those of you who haven't read it, I'll relay the description from the back of my own well-worn copy:

"He lived in the dark ages of the future. In a loveless world he dared to love the woman of his choice. In an age that had lost all traces of science and civilization he had the courage to seek and find knowledge. But these were not the crimes for which he would be hunted. He was marked for death because he had committed the unpardonable sin: he had stood forth from the mindless human herd. He was a man alone."

I first read this novel years ago when I found out it was the base for a couple of RUSH's songs—honestly, I was so young it shouldn't have even made sense to me. Only recently I began wondering how a certain mutant genius might react to the storyline. I swear, I get the weirdest ideas sometimes!
36: Dragons at the Door

Chapter Notes

I LIIIIVE!!! (although this cold is certainly trying to kill me, lol!) Sorry for the long wait on this one, folks, especially since it's so short. There IS good news - the next chapter's obscenely long and has smut. LOTS of smut. Fair warning.

If anyone has an Suggested Listening to pose, I'll gladly consider them...couldn't think of any for this one. Two chapters left 'til the Purple Dragon problem explodes! :D This chapter dedicated to Crawdads...Wolf knows why! ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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36: Dragons at the Door

When life seems intent on throwing crisis after crisis at you, the good times can seem that much sweeter. Some people will throw themselves headlong into good food, drink, and company, and drown their worries in frivolities. Sometimes they are even able to forget, if only for a moment, the demons waiting to pounce when the festivities are through. In her previous life, Amber was very much the sort of person who lived for the day, if not in the moment; in this life, she can't tear her eyes away from the demons in her dreams and the dragons at her door.

Suddenly, she realized the obvious: the smoke detector was going ballistic and she just spent a good ten minutes staring down at the bowl of salad as though it was responsible. If the rest of the small, strange family didn't already think she was bonkers, this surely took care of that. Jolted from her stupor, she rushed to save dinner. Smoke belched out of the oven the moment the door was yanked open and the shrieking smoke detector was joined by matching shrieks in the lab, utility room, and the bathroom. Drippings from the two over-filled casserole pans igniting on the heating element drew a strangled curse from the frantic brunette. Worst of all, the cheese on top was absolutely blackened.

By the time the smoke was cleared and the oven was turned off, Amber was a complete mess. The main course was irrevocably ruined. Not half an hour before Beverly and Briallen were to arrive for their first official visit, and dinner was already a disaster.

"What in the name of—" Donatello blurted, skidding into the kitchen. A quick survey of the room revealed the answers—no fire, two burned lasagnas, and a frazzled brunette slumped over facedown at the table, her face buried in her shaking hands. "Where's Mikey?" he asked hurrying to her side. "He was supposed to be in here with you," Don reminded, glancing pointedly over at the scorched pans. "This was a two-person job, you handled the salad and sides and he'd manage the oven and table!" Frustrated at his younger brother's refusal to adhere to the plan, he tugged at his neck, scanning the rest of the kitchen. The loaves of garlic bread weren't burned, Mercy's homemade pesto was fine, and they still had a large dish of naked penne and salad...and, of course, there was...
Donnie's specialty for dessert, already chilling in the fridge. The main course was ruined, true, but dinner could be salvaged.

"Whoa, Dude!" Michelangelo uttered from the doorway. "What happened?"

"You walked off and left her holding the bag," Donnie reminded him shortly. "My guess is the lasagna caught fire."

"Mid-salad toss," Amber admitted in a grumble. "It shall be missed."

"But dinner—!" Donnie cut off Mikey's whine with a stern glare.

"Pizza." If not for his older brother's disappointment and his sister's embarrassment, Mikey would have been happy enough to cry. "I'll order, you fetch. Got it?" With a nod and grin, the youngest took off for his bedroom like a shot; mid-way, he leaped up into the air with an air-punch and an excited whoop. The genius quickly called in a pickup order to the usual parlor, then set to helping Amber set the table. "We should've just done that to start with, huh?" the genius shrugged, and his girlfriend gave a wry laugh.

"Hindsight, right?" Her smile fell away as she stood and paced toward the fridge. "Sorry…I jus'—I got distracted. It wasn't Mike's fault, I should'a—" Unable to put her thoughts into words, she started over. "I just can't help feeling something horrible's 'bout to happen, Dee," she admitted. "I mean, think about it—We've been dodgin' the bullet this long, things jus' kept getting' worse, an' now we fin'ly have a break—a chance to breathe! Hell," she swore, her nose crinkled in annoyance, "if I was writing this story, this'd be when I'd randomly gank some poor sucker to force the characters' hands!" Sometimes she really worried him…

"That's just it, Amber." She turned to face him again in confusion. A rough-skinned hand cupped her cheek, thumb brushing along her healed cheekbone; unwilling to sit idly, the other hand sought her own. "This isn't a story," he reminded softly, his eyes gentle but insistent. "It isn't a dream. This is our life, Sweetheart, and sometimes in life, you just have to take things day by day. Enjoy the good times without looking for foreshadowing…when crises happen, they tend to happen without warning."

"Sometimes I wonder," she admitted wearily. "Sometimes I feel sure this is all jus' some radge-arse dream—that I'll wake up on Ma Willis' lumpy old couch an' hear Aaron retching in the other room." Amber shook her head in disbelief, remembering the last normal day she had: waking up on that sofa, Aaron hung-over, bullshitting their way back to Willsdale and bickering about music…true to life, there was no warning before everything changed.

In this life, she found omens at every door. Ticking clocks filled the white noise and impossible dust glowed in warning. Intuition and premonition crept along her skin like a creature with more legs than substance. Everywhere she turned she found reminders of her old life and faces she thought she left behind. All the while, her dreams were full of Donatello, of pleas for remembrance, of her loved ones falling apart without her. Who was to say which was the dream and which was reality? Someone once said All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream; perhaps, she considered silently, it was never a matter of dream or reality, but of many shades of grey.

Michelangelo watched silently from the doorway as Donnie folded Amber in his arms, nuzzling nose-first into her hair with a sigh. Something happened after the youngest left the kitchen, but what, he wasn't sure. Even so, it warmed his heart to see the progress the pair made. At one time, Amber was too busy pushing the genius away and trying to convince herself she neither loved nor needed him; Donatello spent much time unable and unwilling to believe he even had a chance and hung up on his suspicions.
What a difference a few months could make. Their feud was over, if not resolved, and ever since they stunk up the pantry, they were growing closer together. Shell, they were even sleeping together! Granted, they claimed it was so she wouldn't have nightmares, but Mikey wasn't fooled in the slightest. Before they 'moved in together,' even a shy glance from Donnie would send Amber's hormones into overdrive; the most innocent of gestures left her reeking of chemical come-ons.

Now, though the two were increasingly touchy-feely, the air was clear, not a whiff of horny people to be smelt. Someone's gettin' some! The realization brought an ear-to-ear grin to Mikey's face, but he couldn't help feeling proud; all his meddling paid off after all. Before they could realize he returned and assume he was suddenly growing in maturity, he nipped that in the bud. "D'aww...our lil' Donnie's all grewed-up." Sure enough, Amber's eyes flew open in surprise at the sudden tease, but Don didn't let her go; if anything, he held her closer and shot the youngest a warning glance over her frizzy hair.

"Your turn," he reminded Amber. Without ever leaving his arms, the embarrassed woman snatched a plastic spice shaker off the counter and chucked it at Mikey, nailing him right between the eyes. Even as he whined about the blow, Mikey knew it could have been worse...she could've nailed him in the nads. Again. She was definitely gettin' some.

The first time Amber met Beverly Hardy, she was struck by how strong, capable, and confident the woman came across. Bev didn't really look sick, just tired and a little worn. Now, after yet another relapse and a sudden drastic downturn, no one could ever doubt she was incredibly ill.

The woman shuffling along beside Leonardo was pale and tired, and her cheeks and arms were thinner than before. A pair of damp marks on her pant leg and shirt sleeve—sweaty imprints of two three-fingered hands—indicated Leo carried her most of, if not all of, the way to the lair. She was visibly unsteady and weak and seemed to barely have the energy to keep herself upright. Even though her molasses-brown eyes were slightly sharp behind her glasses, she had an air of being too tired to bother acknowledging what troubled her.

After the initial re-introductions were through, Leo led Beverly to the kitchen table and helped her to her seat. Even after she was seated—under silent protest and sharp looks at the eldest—he hovered awkwardly and set about making sure she was as comfortable as possible. By the time he brought over a cup of fresh tea—another of Splinter's special 'medicinal blends' that seemed to only make people sicker—it was blatantly obvious that Leo was being more than over-protective of her. When Mikey arrived with the pizzas and hurried over to give her a hug, he found himself blocked by a six-foot guard turtle.

Amber and Mercy locked eyes from opposite sides of the kitchen, unseen by the rest. A silent understanding passed between them shared in a series of facial expressions and discreet gestures, and Mercy strode out the door. "Hey, Stick-Ass, ya got a sec?" the blonde called over her shoulder. "Need a hand with somethin'." He visibly hesitated, glancing warily at Beverly, but she steadfastly refused to look at him; instead, she turned to strike up a conversation with the brunette already fussing over Bosco. Something was wrong, Leo could feel it...but what? He'd done everything he could to make her comfortable and ensure she lacked for nothing...right? Finally, he followed Mercy out to the dojo.

In the kitchen, Beverly's irritation finally broke through her carefully maintained mask. "I'm gonna clobber him," Bree groused under her breath. "He's been treating ya like a china doll all night! Not to mention last time he brought you that tea it made ya puke."

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"Not surprisin'," Amber admitted with a lopsided smirk. "It's not one of Splinter's better blends. Feel like somethin' that tastes better?"

"You wouldn't happen to stock bourbon, would you?" Bev asked awkwardly.

"Daron keeps Bourbon, but he only ever shares it with Raph...if he comes out, I'll ask, but if he doesn't, it'd be rude to just help ourselves to it." Despite the negative response, her eyes lit up in excitement. "Wait...Bourbon's a variety of Whiskey, right? Y'ever tried Scotch Whisky?" Like a cat hearing a can-opener, Raphael rumbled through the doorway the moment the bottle came uncapped, and eagerly held out his usual glass.

At the first sip, Beverly's face seemed to almost turn inside out—bourbon is made primarily from corn and is much sweeter than Scotch, and she wasn't expecting the strong bite. By the second smaller sip, notes of spice, heather, and smoky wood shone through the strong liquor. Perhaps, she mused as she joined Raphael and Amber in a cross-cultural toast for good health and better company, she would fit in with this family better than she first believed.

From the moment Mercy led Leonardo into the Dojo, he was bullish and impatient. Now, after being warned that he was babying Beverly, he was beyond irate. "I'm not being overprotective," he insisted sternly. "You don't know her—you don't know the sort of challenges she's faced, or what she has trouble with! How could you even begin to believe you'd understand what's called for and what's excessive?"

"No, Ass-Breath, I don't know her," the blonde grumbled at him. "Other'n what ya've told us, I dunno a damn thing about 'er, but it don't take knowin' someone to see the obvious. She's feelin' stifled, I kin guarantee it."

"And on what are you basing this assumption?" he demanded staring her down. "Your addiction?!"

"Fracture in L3 and L2," Mercy recited in an almost deadpan. "Surgically fused to L1 an' L4. Stable fracture in right kneecap. Four ribs bruised, two cracked. Hairline fracture in left hip socket. Nerve damage in back surroundin' fractured vertebrae. An' on top of that," she added with a stern glare, "three years restricted to a cane, four years 'a torture disguised as physical therapy, an' a whoppin' eleven years 'a pain management an' opiate pain pills." For a few breaths, Leonardo just stared at her in disbelief, then he stated,

"You lost me."

"I'm saying I' been in yer shoes, Dumbass," she clarified shortly. "I' seen what happens when ya get too careful with those ya care about. That braided lunatic," she called out loudly enough to be heard in the kitchen, "thought it'd be fun ta jump in front of a bus!

"Oi! I was hit by a van in the crosswalk—there's a difference!" Mercy grinned at the familiar banter and turned back to the non-plussed leader.

"Amber was hit by a drunk driver after I moved out," the blonde elaborated in a lower tone. "That list was jus' the major stuff...healin' took years, an' she never really got past the worst of it. Aaron 'n I spent a lotta time treatin' her like she was about to break, 'n it pissed 'er off like crazy." That was the simple explanation. A more accurate one would have acknowledged that the two blondes' over-protective bubble-wrapping nearly broke the trio's long-time friendship. Mercy swatted away the memory like a mosquito and added without emphasis, "Yer makin' the same mistake with this Beverly person, an' it ain't gonna end well."
At the beginning of the conversation, Leo was angry and denied any wrongdoing. As the skinny blonde spelled out her reasoning and explanations, though, he began to wonder if she had a point... and remembered the day he and Beverly got into their first serious fight. *We don't want to die!* the ill woman had snapped at him, turning his 'royal we' back on him with surprising fire. *We have been doing everything in our power to not die, thank you very much, and we certainly don't appreciate being treated like a brain-damaged invalid!*

He was her blind spot; it was only logical that she was his, too. "I don't know what to do," he admitted softly, his feet itching and his shoulders tight. "I don't know how to help her...how to protect her...how to stop—stop worrying about her." Two sets of blue eyes met, the lighter pair helpless and the darker pair awkward. "She's strong—the strongest person I've ever met—and she's been through so much...far too much..." He broke the awkward gaze and turned instead to stare through the meditation corner, picturing the day he finally came clean to the rest of his family about the Hardy cousins. "All I've ever wanted was to help her, to keep her safe, to take away her pain, but I just keep causing more instead."

The ninja fell into silent rumination, never noticing Mercy's eyes stray to the open door. As she suspected, Briallen hovered nervously just outside the door, one fist poised as though she'd intended to knock. At the blonde's wink—a gesture completely unnoticed by Leo—Bree retreated to the kitchen with a lighter heart, seamlessly blending in with the cheerful gathering crowded around the kitchen table.

Beverly was Bree's cousin, but honestly, they were more like sisters than cousins; they were raised together, lived together, and clung to one another in the hardest of times. Leo was the man her cousin liked, and as Bev's cousin-slash-sister-slash-BFFFE, it was Bree's job to *hate Leo's guts* and see him as not good enough to shine Bev's shoes. Despite the younger woman's determination to live up to this unspoken job description, and despite months of forcing herself to be less-than-civil every time he was around, she was starting to realize the truth.

Leonardo wasn't human, or at least not fully human, and he was undeniably male...and even human men weren't known for being bright or sensible. He was a bit of an idiot about Bev, and a bit of a meathead about his brothers, but his heart was in the right place. Maybe, she considered as the eldest brother slipped through the doorway, she should give him a break. Maybe she should lay off for a while. Better that he was too careful of Beverly than careless of her.

Dinner went surprisingly well after the drama was over, and it was quite clear the two families would be able to mesh relatively easily. Amber, Beverly, Donatello, and Master Splinter discussed the arts in great detail. Bree and Mercy compared their college education—one was studying to be a teacher, the other focused on a degree in agriculture. Other than a few rough spots—a couple passing trains, a minor flashback, bad table manners from Raphael and Michelangelo, and a perfectly timed bout of teasing that resulted in Amber spraying her water all over Donnie and Mikey getting beaned with the parmesan shaker—the dinner was a success.

Hours later, Mikey and Bree were ready to head back to the loft, even though Beverly wasn't quite ready to call it a night. The two families quickly came to an agreement: Mike would escort his girlfriend home early and Leo would bring Beverly back in time for her evening medications. Eager to have the loft to themselves for a change, the two lovebirds gladly seized the chance. After a long shared shower, they crawled into her bed to get dirty again.

Out of the blue, a loud *thump* echoed from the lower floor of the building. The naked couple froze, her lips still stretched around his shaft and his fingers still buried in her curly hair. Their eyes met in blatant alarm; Bree pulled away and ninja or not, Mikey couldn't help whining at the loss of her
mouth. Sure enough, that thump was followed by two more, then a harsh curse. The ground floor of the Hardys' building housed a small-time electronics parts store, but…

"The place downstairs is closed, right?" the mutant asked under his breath. Bree nodded, and the sound of shattering glass nearby tore a frightened gasp from her lungs. "Closet," he urged tugging his shorts back on then shoving his shell cell at her. "Sound the SOS then call the cops—don't move 'til I come for ya!" He winced; it wasn't meant to sound sexual. "Better get dressed, Babe." Before she could talk him down, he crept out to the dark parlor, intent on getting answers.

Bree watched him disappear into the shadows, her eyes watering and her fingers clenching his cell. She knew about his training—knew he could more than hold his own in a fight—but in the moment, watching him vanish into the darkness felt a little like losing him. Shutting that thought off at the station, she jabbed the big red button on the phone's display and ducked into the closet. "Be safe, Blue Boy," she murmured, phone to her ear, waiting for the police dispatch to pick up. "Please be safe…"

Leonardo and Donatello arrived to find an impending disaster—the Hardys had Dragons at their door. Lefty hovered awkwardly at the mouth of the alley, his shifty blue eyes darting around for threats. Northpaw and Hun weren't anywhere in sight, but the back door was wide open—the shattered windowpane told the leader how they got in.

On the rooftop next door, Donatello fixed a venomous glare on Lefty. The con seemed so sincere in the storage unit, so concerned about righting the wrongs of his leader…now he was acting like any other punk. How could they have trusted him?

A barely audible thump marked the arrival of the youngest ninja, and the duo turned to acknowledge him, only to freeze in disbelief at the state of his shorts "Good grief," Leo grumbled at his younger brother. "You couldn't at least tuck?"

"Ya think I planned this?" Mikey grumbled. "Like I'm gonna sit this out over a tent?! Sorry, not sorry." Leo face-palmed. "Stupid Purple Dragons…they're gonna turn my balls blue at this rate." Donnie opened his mouth to start in on a perfectly logical but entirely awkward reminder about facts and myths regarding testicles; just in time, Leo issued a brain-duster to the youngest and the genius' teeth met with a snap. Right…maybe not the best time.

The team quickly scattered. Mikey and Leo hurried into the loft for Bree, the girls' go-bags, and Beverly's supplies, while Donnie monitored the situation on the outside. Approaching sirens effectively scattered the trio of troublemakers. With the cargo gathered and the police apprised of the break-in, the brothers and Briallen took off for the Lair. Whether or not Hun or his goons realized the connection between the brothers and the Hardys was uncertain, but for the time being, everyone was officially grounded to the Lair proper.

Time for hesitation was at an end—the time for action was at hand. No longer could the strange family wait for Hun to lose interest or put off what must be done.

UP NEXT: 37: This is How the World Ends

Chapter End Notes
Notes:

A clean room means tuna for dessert – maybe if his room is clean, Bree won't be averse to Christening his bed. ;) NOT.

Radge-arse – Radge= for crazy, therefore it's a 'crazy-ass' dream.

"All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream." – Edgar Allen Poe.
Chapter Summary

Raphael goes too far, Mercy goes farther, Lefty puts his foot down. Daron has some doubts. Amber completely misses the point, the FSG ruins everything, Donnie is worried. Ghost is a shameless pervert with too much time on her hands. Cliffhanger - Ghost goes into hiding to escape angry readers with pitchforks.

Chapter Notes

I just couldn't wait to post this one, Folks...since the last one was so short, I figured you'd approve. The fact that it includes a helluva smutty scene doesn't hurt either, LOL! Seriously, though...this is a very intense, explicit scene without sugar-coating or blurred lines. If it's too much, don't report it - just let me know, I'll up the rating to explicit. (Who am I kidding...y'all been waitin' for this since the friggin' beginning, haven't ya?)

Warnings for some mild violence, explicit smut, and a cliffhanger that might endanger my life. (Please don't hurt me! It's resolved next chapter!) Dedicated to "shag carpet and chewing." ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


37: This is how the World Ends

Kimber's storage locker

If Budget Store-It-All was in a more densely populated area, someone might have called the police after the first loud crash. Three more crashes later, it was plenty clear that no one would be reporting them. As he had four times before, Lefty Jackson went flying across the interior of Kimber's storage unit and landed crumpled in a pile of junk, wondering just where he went wrong.

It seemed simple—cut and dry—obvious even to a numbskull like him—he sensed no danger when Raphael texted him for another meeting at the storage shed. Upon arriving, swagger intact, it became clear that he was wrong—dead wrong. The turtle didn't call him to exchange intel...he called him over to beat him senseless.

"Raph, stop!" Like before, Mercy's order went unheard as the hulking ninja again yanked Lefty up by the shirt collar and hurled him into another wall. The impact sent tremors through a shelving unit full of miscellaneous junk. This time, Lefty didn't try getting up—he just slumped on the floor, physically shaking off a sudden bout of dizziness. Being tossed around like a rag doll could be fun—if, like Lefty, you enjoyed a little pain with your play—but this instance ceased being fun the second time he hit head-first. "Dammit, Raph, lay off! He ain't even fightin' back!" Raphael shook off the
blonde's grip with a warning snarl.

"No," he shot back at her, "You lay off! He broke da agreement—he wen' aftah Bev an' Bree!"

"'oo?" Lefty piped up wide-eyed. Mercy could have been wrong, but it looked almost like one steel blue eye was slightly more dilated than the other.

"Shut up!" Raph snapped at him. "We can't trust'im, Merse—he'll jus' turn around'n stab us in da back again!"

"'oo's Bev 'n Bree, huh?"

"Shut ya mouth, scum!"

The longer the two men fought in the storage shed, the worse the situation grew. Beverly and Bree were unharmed and settled in at the Lair, but Raph was angry—furious at being left out of the trip to bring them home and even more furious at Lefty's betrayal. Mercy was sure if she hadn't tagged along, the con would be in even worse shape than he already was.

Mercy cared for Raph—was well on her way to loving him, if she was honest with herself—but in moments like this, she wanted nothing more than to turn tail and run, to put as much distance between them as possible. Raphael was a good man, an honorable man, and she knew he'd never intentionally hurt her, but his temper absolutely terrified her. Fear aside, though, she knew what she needed to do…and she hated it.

In the moment between Lefty's latest awkward landing and Raph yanking back to belt him again, Mercy dove between the two men. Though she crossed her arms to block the impending punch, faking all the bravery she could, she still cringed into her shoulder, unable to watch. The punch never came. When she finally managed to open her eyes again, she hated what she saw: Raphael's horrified and betrayed expression, both hands slack at his sides, and a multitude of questions in his eyes.

"This ain't accomplishin' anythin'," she reminded seriously once she could speak around the lump in her throat. "At least hear 'im out, Red." The succession of emotions crossing Raphael's face told Mercy everything—he was furious at Lefty, but now, he was almost as angry at her for using his feelings for her in the con's favor. She knew he'd never hit her and banked on that knowledge, but she never once considered that doing so would do anything more than pull him out of his rage. The ninja was putting walls up all over again—walls she'd slowly torn down over the months since they met—and she couldn't fight the fear that she'd have to start all over again. Sharp golden amber turned on Lefty again, refusing to look at Mercy.

"Explain, Punk," he growled, crossing his arms in defiance.

"Dunno what ya want me ta 'splain, huh?" Lefty admitted with a shrug but winced when the movement pulled a sore muscle. "Dunno any Bev's 'er Bree's—Hun ain't sent me aftah anyone, eitha."

"Can da lies, Jackson!" Raph snapped. "Da three'a ya broke inta a place tonight—an empty buildin' wit'a loft over it. If ya weren't afta da people dere, why'd ya break in?" To the ninja's surprise, Lefty was honestly, and obviously, bewildered.

"Ya mean da garage, da drugstore, 'er da ol'lectrahnnics shop?" the con asked with his pierced brow arched dubiously. "We ain't broken inta any lawfts, Hotstuff." A stare-off commenced between the two men, one skeptical and one oblivious, but it was Raphael who eventually broke it.

"Ya din't know?" he muttered. "Ya din't know dere's people livin' over dat ol' Radio Shack?" Again,
Lefty shrugged, winced at the pull in his shoulder, then shook his head. "Well, dere is—ya bastage brotha tried ta break inta the loft t'rough da shop undaneath—ya sayin'—" His question fell silent at the loud curse Lefty let out. When Raph called Lefty to the storage unit, he felt sure the con played them; now he begrudgingly realized it was Lefty who was played. "What happened ta keepin' ya nose clean?"

"Ya t'ink Hun wouldn't figyuh it out, huh?" the punk grumbled, scrubbing his grimy hand over his greasy blonde buzzcut in frustration. "I'm sick'a dis life, but 'til Kim 'n Truman's restin' easy in da uddah life, I can't jus' quit—an' dat means playin' da game like awlways. Hun says jump, I'm'onna do a fuckin' backflip fer 'im so 'ee doesn't figyuh out I's turned." Steel blue met amber gold in a surprisingly bitter glare. "What's takin' ya so lawng, anyway? I t'ought ya was takin 'im down! Ya gotta git off yar 'asses a'ready 'fore he stahts takin' a page out 'a da Foot's book!"

"You don't mean—" Lefty turned to address Mercy with a grave nod. "Ezac'ly." He sat up against the wall, arms dangling limply off his knees and his head bowed. "Kimbuh ain't showed up on 'er own, da odduh Dragons ain't foun'er, an' Hun's tired 'a waitin'. If ya don't take 'im down, an' soon, 'e ain't gonna wait anymaw…'e's gonna staht takin' hawstages…an' I ain't stickin 'roun' if dat happens. 'e stahts bringin' in civs cuz 'a yer lazy asses, I'm hittin' da firs' train out." Exhaustion clear in his pierced face, Lefty turned to stare at a plastic tote packed full of books, a shiver running down his spine.

When he first joined the Purple Dragons, Leon Jackson was just a teenager—just another arrogant punk eager for a place to belong. It seemed fun at first, really—he got to do all the crazy stuff his dad never let him do, got to stay out all night, got to smoke, drink, and piss his life away all he wanted. Then Norton started changing, started using…and Truman killed himself over a failed initiation…and Leon started really looking at the people he called homey. He wasn't a kid anymore, but even at thirty-two years old, he hadn't moved beyond his rebellious lifestyle.

He tried to get out, of course. He tried talking Kimber out of joining but failed. Unable to keep her out, he instead took her under his wing—taught her how to fight, how to keep her nose clean, and kept her safe. After a joint robbery went bad, he got his twin shit-faced drunk and convinced Kimber to turn them in. North broke out, of course—it wasn't surprising the prison couldn't hold him. Then Kimber went missing and died, and now it seemed like the fallout after Truman's death was happening all over again.

A hesitant touch on his tattooed bicep startled Lefty from his ruminations; the mouthy blonde crouched beside him, a promise in her denim blue eyes. "We'll get 'im," Mercy swore to him. "We won't let 'im go after anyone else…can we count on ya Jackson?" A straight man would have been distracted to uselessness by the impressive cleavage right at eye level; fortunately, Lefty had never been straight. His pierced lip quirked upward in a lopsided smirk and he offered her his knuckles.

"Ya sure can, Toots," he teased as she returned the knuckle-bump, then he turned to address Raphael more seriously. "I meant it, Turtle, I'm in dis fer da lawng hawl. Now quit screwin' aroun'—Hun ain't gonna take 'isself down."

Daron Williams wasn't a sociable person, nor was he the most friendly sort. The only person who'd ever really seen his less prickly side was Kimber Bryant, and look where that got her. He was quite happy to simply hide in his apartment all the time, run his hacking business from it, and order in every chance he got, and if not for Kimber's counterpart, that would never have changed. He never had a problem saying no to Kimber, but her more mature counterpart was a completely different story…Amber could ask almost anything of him, and no matter how much he might piss and moan about it, nine times out of ten, he'd comply.
Look where that led him. He was stuck as a houseguest with four of his least favorite people on the face of the earth. He had to share his bourbon with Kimber's crush and watch Raphael and Mercy flirt and grope each other while 'sparring.' He couldn't get any of his for-hire work done because Donatello kept booting him off the wifi signal whenever he tried; the one time Daron confronted him about it, his computer inexplicably locked up from suspiciously timely ransom-ware.

Daron was fed up—absolutely sick of it! At this rate, he was going to go stark-raving-mad from being locked up in a veritable closet all day, and when that happened, lord knew what he'd do. As happened so often anymore, this internal bitching spree drove the blond out of his hiding hole to the kitchen for another swig of his favorite bourbon. The moment he crossed the threshold he froze. The four turtles, their master, Amber, Mercy, April, Casey, and two unfamiliar women were crowded around the kitchen table with serious expressions. If Daron didn't know any better, he'd have thought he intruded on a war meeting...then again, he admitted with a sour frown, that probably was the case.

"We're out of time," Leonardo reminded the gathered crowd, meeting each of their eyes in turn before glancing over at the black-haired woman hooked up to an IV drip. Daron didn't recognize her, but then again, he did tend to avoid everyone else as much as possible. "Hun usually sends his lackeys out to commit robberies, but tonight, he personally broke into three different buildings—he was sending us a message. Add that to Lefty's warning tonight, the truth is clear." The leader ceased his pacing with a frustrated sigh. "We can't put this off any longer."

"Put what off?" Daron demanded sharply. His sudden comment seemed to suck all the air out of the room as the occupants finally noticed him. "What're you planning?"

"You know what, Daron," Amber reminded gently. "It's the same thing we've been working on this whole time—finding a way to stop Hun. You agreed, remember?" The blond startled, fixing an accusing glare on Leonardo.

"I did agree," he snapped in reply, never taking his eyes off the leader. "I also offered whatever help I could give you." He scoffed, his unshaven lip twisted in a lemon-sucking scowl. "I guess my invitation to this little pow-wow got lost in the mail, huh?" Mercy lunged out of her chair and stalked over, rolling her eyes.

"Quitcher bitchin' Fuzzy," she groused pushing him over to her chair and shoving him into the seat. "Siddown, shut up, an' drink yer sludge." The bottle of bourbon slammed down in front of him made his mouth shut with a snap, cutting off whatever retort he was working on. Feeling so many eyes on him at once, he scoffed, poured himself a tumbler, and tossed it back without even tasting it. "Good Dickhead." Amber sighed at Mercy; some people never change.

The rest of the meeting went rather smoothly other than a few hiccups. Casey loudly scoffed and argued every time Amber said anything. Daron pounded back bourbon like it was his last day on earth and repeatedly sniped anyone who so much as looked at him. Strangest, though, was when Mercy and Raph got into a surprisingly explosive argument. That argument lasted several minutes without any sort of explanation or solution, and those who knew them best were bewildered by the pair's uncharacteristic bickering. After over an hour of such drama, the plans were settled and the meeting was adjourned. Daron, halfway drunk and stinking of alcohol, slunk back into his corner of the barracks again without so much as a goodbye. He had some thinking of his own to do...and he hated it.

He spent so many years alone—blissfully independent of all but his mother and stepfather—but Kimber's reappearance in his life changed all that. Now Kimber was gone, but he had others—some he even dared consider friends. Amber...Mercy...he was even starting to see April O'Neil as more
of an acquaintance than that annoying brat next door. Even more unbelievable, though, he found
another friend in the most impossible of places: the mutant meathead he once warned Kimber away
from. After two months of shared bourbon and bitching sessions—bitching that sometimes veered
more into melancholic remembering once they were sloshed enough to forget they hated each other
—Daron was starting to consider Raphael neither an enemy nor a rival, but a friend.

**Friends.** The word made him snarl in disgust in the perpetual darkness of his barracks stall. Hunter
Williams was Daron’s blood—his brother!—but from the moment they first met the larger man threw
himself into fulfilling the role of bully. Even so, they were family—siblings! Daron hated Hun—
hated his condescending sneers, his violent behavior, his bullying and the rancid, smelly armpits he
always wound up jammed into—but they were family! Hun had to be stopped—had to be taken
down—but could Daron really, honestly go through with it? Could he really betray his older
brother?!

The world continued to turn, but for Daron Williams, time stood still, frozen by doubt and fear.

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_Spring in Willsdale once brought only fear to the brunette hunched over at the old
Formica countertop. Now, she is stronger—now, she doesn't fear rain. Has it really
been only a year since she last saw this town?—saw the people she left behind? Tucking
one lock of vibrant blue hair behind her ear, she scans the crowd in the pub wistfully,
recalling the lives and stories of every face therein._

_“This place's changed a lot, huh?” Aaron teases her over his stein. “Course, yer a
fancy-pants city-biddy now—Ya prob’ly think we’re all just a bunch’a rubes, now,
right?”_

_“Rubes?” Amber teases back with a friendly shoulder shove. “Nah…ya kin take the gal
out'a the country, but ya can't take the country out'a the gal. Gawd, I’ve missed this
place…missed everyone in it…” Aaron falls silent, clears his throat awkwardly, and
turns to stare down into his beer. Realizing she made everything awkward—when

__doesn’t__ she make everything awkward?—Amber stares down into her tattooed
cleavage, silently turning her scotch glass on the countertop._

_“I'll be right back—no spikin' my booze.” Before her longtime friend can argue, she
slides off the stool and hurries to the back, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion. At first,
she was swept away by the warm-and-fuzziness of the situation—too thrilled to finally
be home to question how she got there. Now, without his off-kilter blue eyes watching
hers askance, she can't wrap her head around the impossibility. It's not right…it doesn't
make sense. She died…so how is she back in Willsdale? She's in Kimber's body still, but
how can Kimber's body be in Willsdale? It just isn't possible—it can't be happening!_

_Halfway down the poky hallway to the restrooms, someone body-slams her through
the door of the women's room. “Hey! Watch”— Her protest falls silent at the tall woman
staring at her in undisguised contempt. Sharp bottle-green eyes, impeccable makeup,
sleek auburn hair in a fancy up-do, a black waitress' apron tied at her neck and waist…
Amber blinks, shakes her head, and looks again as though expecting the woman to look
familiar. She feels like she should know her, but she's never seen her before in her life!
…has she? She glances over at the cracked mirror over the stained sink, comparing the
woman's appearance to her own._

_“Who...Who are you?” Amber finally asks the other woman. Sure enough, as though_
Amber jolted upright with a screech. Her heart pounded a frantic tattoo in her ribs, the dream running breakneck through her mind. "Well," she mumbled rubbing her stiff neck. "That was weird!" A dream…of course it was only a dream…Her heart rate slowing and her lungs catching up, she took stock of her surroundings to anchor herself in the present. The sofa—the baskets of clean clothes and linens—the bin of freshly folded towels—the pair of clean coverall trousers slung across her lap waiting to be folded…she dozed off while folding laundry?

"What just happened?" Donatello's sudden question startled her from her thoughts; the tall, lanky ninja bolted toward her like he expected to find her on fire.

"Huh?" she asked eloquently. "Whaddaya—" Before she could finish the question, he shoved his phone at her, and she fell silent in disbelief. The screen showed a familiar stoppered vial—the same vial that held the Freaky Space Glitter. Although it still appeared empty, right before her eyes, the FSG was glowing like a star, the light pulsing in time like a clock counting down the seconds.

"That's…" She trailed off, unable to even put words together, and stared up at him, shaking her head in denial.

"Yeah," he confirmed seriously, his lips thinning around the words. "I've had it under constant video-surveillance since the first of the month." July first? She searched her memories for answers. That's right, she realized as she reached up to her healed cheekbone—On July first, Donnie checked on her healing fractures and they wound up necking on the Needle Room's exam bench—then he bolted out to the lab without warning or explanation. If he saw the vial glowing, it would certainly explain some things! "This is a live feed, Amber—it's fluorescing again as we speak—that's three times this week alone!"

Amber took a moment to let that sink in, studying the screen. Something caught her eye—a timestamp reading nothing but colons and zeroes. "How can you know when this has happened if the timestamp—" Donnie's grim expression made her trail off without finishing.

"Every time the dust reacts, there's an unexplained malfunction with the timestamp," he explained, his eyes darting back and forth between hers to gauge her reaction. "Every time the fluorescence fades, the malfunction corrects itself without leaving any discernible sign of the cause." He gave a noisy swallow, glancing warily at the open door of the lab. "If I just hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it…even having seen it, I can't believe it." As though mocking the mortals trying to work out its mysteries, the bizarre glow swiftly faded away; just as the genius said, the screen flickered and the zeroes and colons were replaced by the correct date and time.

"This can't be happening," Amber groaned in dismay, digging her fingertips into the sides of her nose. "How can this be happening?! As if we didn't have enough bullshite to deal with a'ready!" Donnie shifted from one foot to the other and back again, a perplexing gleam in his eyes. "As if that dream wasn't freaky enough, now the Freaky Space Glitter's gettin' freakier!"

"Dream?" he demanded, his voice cracking; clearing the squeak from his throat, he tried again. "What dream?"

"It—" Amber shook her head in denial, scoffing at how ridiculous it sounded. "It was stupid, really…I was back in Willsdale, havin' a sesh at the pub wit' Aaron…then this rude gal
asked me what I was doin' in 'er body!' Suddenly realizing how that sounded, she cringed. "That was not sexual—I don't swing that way."

The glowing vial—the strange dream—Kimber demanding answers—the impending confrontation with Hun—Donatello's pulse raced. His lungs hurt from trying to keep up with his heart. Even as Amber grumbled obliviously into her covered cleavage about yet another untimely filter failure, he scrambled to catch up with the thoughts running unchecked through his brain. Surely not—surely it was coincidence—surely— Physically shaking off the panic building in his blood, he snatched the trousers from her lap, flung them back into the basket of clean laundry, and with only a glance of warning, unceremoniously hauled her up over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Dee, what on—?!" she squawked, cheeks blazing at the spectacle they must be making of themselves. She hoped no one else was around to see her arse in the air.

"The laundry can wait," he insisted in a deceptive deadpan, stalking through the doorway of their bedroom. The moment they were through, he shoved the door shut…and locked it…and roughly shoved the battered dresser in front of it. He begrudgingly set down the bewildered brunette, enfolding her in a tight embrace and burying his nose in her hair. Every time before, that very embrace calmed his racing thoughts—every time before, the soft tropical scent of her soothed his fears—not this time.

"Speccy, yer scarin' me…" He didn't answer; he just held her like she was about to be ripped out of his arms. Amber couldn't wrap her head around what was happening. One moment, everything was fine—at least, as fine as it could be when the next day would see her new family facing down Hun—then the genius flipped out and went all cave-turtle on her without explanation.

A single faint sound sent her racing thoughts to a grinding halt: a choked sniffle. All the tension faded from her body at the sound, migrating instead to her heart. The strong arms holding her tightened even further; the warm snout buried in her hair dug in even deeper as though its owner sought to shut out the world around them. Finally, her lover's strange behavior made sense…finally, she connected the dots she should have connected long before. Impossible glitter…strange dreams of being back home…ticking clocks and unseen footsteps…could it be her time with Donatello was nearing an end?

No. She physically shook off the thought, latching onto Donatello's suspenders as though to anchor herself to him. She waited a lifetime for him—wasted her whole life yearning for a man she knew only in dreams—now she finally had a chance to know him, had a chance to live out the life she longed for—no way was she letting some stupid freaky space mumbo-jumbo tear them apart!

"I won't leave ya," she swore vehemently into his plastron. "I ain't gowanna let it happen, Dee, so dinnae e'en think it!"

"You say that so easily," he mumbled into her hair, "like you could actually keep something from—from—" He couldn't finish. Amber wriggled out of his arms, and tugged him down by his suspenders to meet her eyes, her own full of determined green fire.

"I won't let it happen," she repeated sharply, her words gruff and twisted in the emotion of the moment. "I don' care what Ah goat ta do—Ah waited a lifetime fer ya—suffered a lifetime'a dreams—Ah ain't gowanna go back ta tha'! E'en if Ah do get carried awae, Ah'll do anithin'a git back—Ah won't lose ya like this!"

It's just a dream, Speccy.

Donatello blinked in confusion, bewildered at the half-remembered words. They seemed to come out
Amber stared up at him, bewildered at his sudden silence and blank expression; still, the strange words flowed through his mind like memories—memories he shouldn't, couldn't have. The Crazy Celt's undefeated yet!* He tore loose from her grip, pacing restlessly as he fought to make sense of it all. He'd never heard Amber say such a thing before—had he? —how did he come up with that name? You must remember, Donnie!** Remember what?! Yanking at his neck, eyes darting back and forth as though scanning a multitude of thoughts taking form before him, he froze, swallowing around a lump in his throat. I'm tired of dreamin'! Dee, I'm tired of bein' apart! Tell me yer real—tell me I'll find ya if I wait long enough!

"Let me take care of you?***

Finally, calm settled over the bewildered genius. The hand yanking at his neck fell limply to his side as he studied his lover silently. "Tell me you didn't just have a stroke?!" she whimpered, and, gnawing her lower lip, frantically compared the dilation of his eyes. Soft hands framed his face, and he reached up to clasp one of them in confirmation of his health. He was stunned—confused—suspicious that his brain was fractured, despite the very idea being scientifically impossible—but he was safe. Finally, he found his voice.

"Don't go gnawing that off...I happen to like it."**** Pure shock washed over her expression, and the abused lip was freed when her jaw dropped. Another reaction cataloged; another reaction that made no sense. He'd never said it aloud, before...so why did she seem to recall just that?

"...Dee...?" Amber whispered. "I...you...fiyuh?!# The last was slurred too horribly for him to ever discern what she actually said, and finally dulled his shock. One eyebrow arched, he studied her in confusion, visibly trying to translate the untranslatable. "Never mind," she urged breathlessly. "Are you—are you feeling okay? Do I—"

"We're going after Hun tomorrow," he reminded catching her by the shoulders. His posture, though she couldn't understand it, showed none of the fear and confusion from before. Instead, the genius was puzzled—curious—maybe even nervous. What happened in that brain of his? "If whatever put you here decides to take you back—well, we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Hun's no pushover...I'm..." He took a steadying breath, catching her other hand and awkwardly lacing their fingers; the gesture required a remarkable propensity for Vulcan gestures, but as always, it comforted more than it hurt. "I'm worried, Honey...worried about what might happen."

"Ya won't get hurt," she declared seriously. At his arched brow, she elaborated. "If Hun knows what's good for 'im, he won't touch a hair—er—uh..." She blushed at the mistake. "Whatever—he so much's lays a finger on ya, he'll get a crash course in why ya don't piss off Celts." It did the trick

of nowhere...but the moment the thought formed, another followed on its heels as though the path was freshly cleared. Even if ya gotta live in the shadows, Ya got nothin' to be ashamed of, Dee...ya never gotta hide yer eyes from me. *
—a low rumble of laughter proved that much. Finally, the tension filling the air was fading away. Hazel met green, both softening.

"I know we haven't...haven't gone very..." His stammering trailed off; he couldn't seem to find words that were accurate without sounding juvenile. We haven't gotten very far? We haven't gone beyond necking and grinding? We haven't pushed the envelope any? He shook off the absurd thought and tried again. "If you're—if you don't mind, I'd like—to—try...something?"

He winced, looking away and trying to calm his racing pulse. He felt like an idiot—why rush things?!—but something familiar silenced his inner lecture. Pheromones. He blinked a couple times, his nostrils flaring in recognition, then he turned back to Amber hopefully. The brunette was blushing and clearly trying not to fidget; his delivery was pretty awkward, but she certainly seemed to approve! "Amber?" She mumbled her answer into her cleavage, but he couldn't hear a word. "Pardon?" he asked with a knowing smile.

"I—" Her voice cracked and she paused to clear her throat. "Y-Yeah. I'd—I'd like that...if you want to." A wide, relieved smile split his face, showcasing that familiar, if narrowed, gap between his front teeth. She wasn't surprised to find herself gathered in his arms again, or feel him nuzzle her frizzy hair. All of that was old news...all of it was just what they always did. What blew her mind was a single, simple phrase she'd heard for years, but never heard since her new life began. "Don't worry, Sweetheart," he murmured into her hair. "Let me take care of you."

When Donatello asked if he could try something, this wasn't at all what she thought he was referring to. She'd never had a lover who wasn't initially focused on their own pleasure, and honestly, she wasn't bitter about it—her turn could come next, or if he wasn't ready, she could work in a little DIY time later. She was totally cool with being the bigger person, especially since she wasn't the virgin in the room. Donnie, however, blew all that out of the water without a backward glance.

From the moment he switched on the light over his bed and laid her across the sheets, she tried not to get her hopes up—tried to fight the memories of dreams past—tried to not expect what, at least in dreams, had always followed let me take care of you. Every action was silently explained away, but with every argument, she found herself running out of lies to tell herself.

Clever hands roamed her clothed curves—he was getting in a few gropes while he could, nothin' wrong with that. Dextrous fingers made short work of her button-up shirt—men like boobs—then the clasp of her admittedly plain bra—it was an eyesore, and again, boobs. He nervously kept his eyes away from her naked bust, swallowing noisily—he's tryin' to be a gentleman, but boobs! The running internal commentary made her feel like a horny teenager sneaking off with her mum's dirty novels.

Donnie hesitated, his nerves getting the best of him. Eyes anchored to the gleaming metal button of her jean shorts, he recalled the day he discovered firsthand the effects of light and shadow on canvas. In his mind's eye, he saw Amber's silhouette projected onto the shade in striking detail—saw the way she massaged the feeling back into her newly-freed breasts and the way the mounds tightened and swelled under her fingers—he could still hear her guttural moan of relief at being free to breathe.

When he finally got the courage to look he found himself torn between two reactions: the awe and wonder of a red-blooded male discovering real, human, in-person breasts for the first time, and resentment at the purple-inked reptile sprawling between those breasts. A soft hand cupped his chin, urging him to meet her eyes. "I get it," she professed softly. "Jus' pretend it's a gecko 'er somethin' 'kay?" A gecko tattoo? Yeah, he could work with that. Even so, he moved onto the next target, and as he did so, Amber continued arguing away what couldn't be coming.
He made short work of her jean shorts—probably just wants some eye-candy not covered in gang signs. His mask fell discarded on the mattress—it's probably itchy or sweaty—and he shoved his glasses up his snout forcefully—he wants a better view, duh. Her underwear slid down her legs at his behest, a pair of calloused hands eased her legs apart, he situated himself between those spread legs right over her embarrassingly furry mound—no, this can't be, he's not—no way is he—! IZZEE?!

A single, nervous breath ground every thought to a staggering halt. Wide-eyed in disbelief, she sat up on her elbows—knocking her head on the edge of that ridiculously placed shelf on the way—and stared owlishly at the turtle between her legs—legs propped up on his broad shoulders, not his hips. He was still depressingly clothed. "You—" She hated how her voice squeaked with that one word. "Dee, it's a lil' late to pretend yer junkless—several hours'a wumpin' too late."

"I'm not pretending any such thing." His lips curled in an up-to-no-good smirk that made her ovaries—and their many needy siblings—faint dead away. What a way to go… "Are you really in such a hurry to—" His bravado cracked with a squeak and a blush, but he cleared it away, still holding her eyes prisoner. "I wear less. Don't rush me." As though he hadn't just blown her mind, he nuzzled the soft swell of her belly, breathing in the siren song of her pheromones. Suddenly realizing something, he looked back up to her in open worry. "Would you rather not?" The question was quiet, honest—he wasn't reprimanding her, only asking if she was uncomfortable. "If—If you don't—" He cleared his throat again. "We don't have to." As if she could ever say no to him with his face next to her fanny…

"It's just…" Amber cringed, avoiding his eyes and shifting awkwardly. "Guys don't like that…I just —"

"Guys don't like that," he parroted back with a mischievous grin. "But women do?"

"Well, duh." Granted, not all women liked it, but ever since the first time Dream Donnie munched her rug, she couldn't get enough of it! She expected him to laugh—to tease her or shrug off her unfiltered remark—but his silence sent her skin prickling. It was such a simple, offhand remark…she never expected it to encourage him…

"Then what's the problem?" She hesitated, scrambling for any excuse, her heart racing at the vulnerability of their position. All her life, she dreaded admitting weakness—hated letting others see her in vulnerable moments—and she couldn't think of many positions more vulnerable than lying spread out like a naked Sunday dinner. Clearly recognizing the emotions warring behind her eyes, Donnie drew her attention back to him with a kiss to the meaty thigh draped over his right shoulder. Aw, Hell…there was that I know I'm brilliant smirk again! She was doomed. If she asked him where he got the idea, he'd have no answer—it just felt right, familiar in a way it couldn't be. –at least it started like that. Now he knew it was right—knew it as surely as the potent pheromones flooding his lungs and the nervous toes curling against his carapace. He knew it was right, it was wanted and welcome…and if he had a single doubt, her shell-shocked reaction to the familiar but never spoken phrase blew it out of the water. He would puzzle out the strange memories and her stranger behavior later, though. For now, he wanted to ease her heart and calm her soul, and cave-turtle as it sounded, he wanted to stake his claim on her in a way no meddling force could mistake.

He tried to approach the situation logically—logic dictated that one should gradually ease themselves into any new practice to minimize mishaps. Her first sharp, unhindered gasp, however, told him logic was completely over-rated. Nails dug into his bare scalp as he eagerly mapped out the newly discovered flesh at his lips. Soft whimpers broke through clenched teeth in time with the tightening and loosening of her thighs. He was a novice—completely unfamiliar with this sort of intimacy
outside of a multitude of articles and videos furtively scanned under the catchall excuse of 'biology research'—but despite that undisputable fact, déjá vu swept him into a routine he knew like his own name without ever learning it firsthand.

"D—Dee! You—ya don't—" Even now, he realized halfway between annoyed and amused, Amber thought he was willingly suffering for her sake. Please. If this was suffering, he couldn't wait to see what agony was like. Before she could get out another feeble whine of protest, he wrapped his hands around her hips and wriggled even closer, diving in without the slightest reservation. Finally...finally she stopped pushing him away, and, instead, started pulling him in closer. Blunted nails raked along his bare shoulders. Heels instinctively dug in their invisible stirrups. Grey-green eyes snapped shut, flew wide, and rolled back into her head in no certain pattern. Despite her best attempts at stifling it, a strangled whimper broke past her teeth.

*How can he be so good at this?!* Amber struggled to keep quiet—sunk her teeth into her wrist to muffle herself, even!—and fought to wrap her head around the unexpected, unbelievable occurrence. Granted, in her dreams, he loved this—went down on her every chance she let him! This wasn't a dream—this was nothing like a dream! In dreams, she could somewhat manage to keep her voice down...every sensation, though magical, was muted by the haze of dreams. This was no dream... every single sensation, from the softest to the strongest, tore through her without mercy or warning. Without her teeth sunk into her own arm, she was sure she'd be wailing like a cat in heat.

An unexpectedly sharp nip at her clit drew a yelp from her lungs—she couldn't help suspect it was a substitute for popping her on the nose. Sure enough, her glare was met with a teasing wink and gentler nibble. This was Donnie, after all—their sweet, gentle, eager, and oh-so-fooking-brilliant lover. She could trust him...he wouldn't let her fall, not without diving off with her. Finally, after a lifetime of fearing and dreading surrender, she gave in. She surrendered to Donatello wholeheartedly—to his soft touch, his flicking tongue and suckling lips, and to the tension coiling in her core.

Just when she thought she was acclimated, he threw her for a loop again. A lifetime ago, she was sure his fingers would have been too thick, too rough, and would have stung at the least. In this lifetime there was only pleasure—a little stretching and some slight friction from his calloused fingertip—but she felt no pain. Though he started off with one finger he retreated once she was loosened up, then slipped in both at once. *Now* there was a little pain but nothing to even consider—she felt too full, too sensitive—but this was only the beginning. Already she was fighting to keep her voice down, and she half-worried half-hoped he'd push her beyond her limits. *Ya dinnae have'ta be su sof' wî'me, ya sweet Speccy—I dinnae wan' ya to!* Yeah...Amber was a glutton for punishment if nothing else.

When Donnie's bespectacled eyes met hers again—mouth still eagerly wreaking havoc on her nipples and his glasses smeared beyond much use—he registered something unexpected: the corner of her pillow jammed between her teeth as a makeshift gag. A warning flashed through her eyes. *You laugh,* her eyes threatened, *an' you'll die an angry lil' virgin!* He *did* snort against her snatch, but to his credit, he didn't laugh at her.

So many sensations were registered at once—so many stimuli vied for his attention. Musky womanly pheromones—the bitter tangy salt of her skin and the sour-sweet nectar streaking her thighs—spasms and twitches in the legs draped along his carapace—the silken grip of her insides—How could anyone *not* enjoy this? How could she think he was doing this out of duty? Most importantly of all, how could he convince her to let him do this *more often*?—nay, *much more often? DAILY even?*! Just as the afternoon when they boiled over and collided in the dark, empty pantry, one taste and he was hopelessly addicted...one would never be enough! ...he could think of worse addictions.
Soft muffled cries tore through her pillow-gag. Her calves twitched helplessly in time with spasms of her internal muscles. She's close, he realized, grinning smugly against her wet lips. Time to shine, Brainiac! Without ever letting up, he nudged her legs higher—urged them to his neck with one shoulder-roll after another. Sure enough, they latched on and squeezed in time, urging him closer when he could get no closer. Silently sending up a hallelujah for the impressive lungs of his non-human ancestors he pushed himself to the limit, bearing down and relishing the pheromones flooding his with lungs with miserly greed.

Suckling sharpened into nipping. Fingers curled into a flicking come-on inside her, frantically beckoning her to the point of no return. Nails dug into his scalp almost painfully, one set lashing down to his free hand and clenching it with surprising strength. Heavy-lidded hazel met frantic green, unspoken promises and pleas passing between them with squeezed fingers and smothered whimpers. The world around the thrashing brunette faded away at the edges—anything beyond the warm hazel staring up at her went unseen. Perhaps if not for that tunnel vision, she wouldn't have knocked her skull against the wall…and perhaps she would have seen the falling lamp in time to duck.

Someone once said the world ends with a whimper, and any day before this, Amber would have agreed. Now, as her eyes rolled up in her head, she knew the truth—sometimes the world could end with a helluva bang.

"So ya finally crawled out'a ya lil' hole, Runt." Hun sneered down at the younger, weaker person approaching him across the parking lot. "I knew ya'd see sense with enough pushin'." He sneered down at his company. "So whaddaya say? We doin' this tha easy way aftah all?"

"I've come to make a deal, Hun…" Daron scowled up at his much taller, much stronger brother, hating himself for every word, more than he'd ever hated anything before. "Kimber Bryant's alive, but she's got friends—tough ones who won't let her go. Guarantee my safety and I'll bring her to you at sunset tomorrow." Piggish black eyes scrutinized Daron for any sign of deception, gleaming at the fear in the younger man's eyes and the stench of bourbon reeking from him.

"What can I say?" Hun belted out a barking laugh that made Daron feel absolutely filthy inside. "Even you gotcher price, Piss-ant. Ya gotcherself a deal, lil' Brutha…ya made tha right choice."

Daron disagreed…it wasn't the right choice…it was the only choice.

...and with THAT I'm going into hiding until next chapter because torches and pitchforks scare me.
Translations

(+Scottish slang+ - /New York and Jersey-region dialects/ - ^Midwestern or otherwise regional^)

'Splain – /explain/

Anithin - ^anything^

Awae - +away+

Bastage - this one may be regional or simply uncommon. It's a branch off of 'Bastard' but without the 'born to unwed parents' bit—it means someone's a bastard by behavior rather than birth. Some simply deem it 'a step above in bastardliness.'

Civs - civilians, especially innocent bystanders not trained in certain independence-promoting behaviors. (Self-defense, martial arts, military training, medical training - basically anyone who's only options in a hostage situation are to lie low, keep the weaker and younger ones calm and controlled, provide a diversion, or - God forbid - sacrifice their lives to help those who have a chance.

Da o'lectranics shop – /the old electronics parts shop, basically a closed radio shack./

Dinnae e'en - +Don't+ ^even^

Ezac'ly - /Exactly/

Fanny, Fud – Both mean +vagina+ - or, my preferred euphemism, TWAT - but is sometimes also used to mean +ass+ IE, "Talkin' oot yer fanny-flaps," or rather, "Talkin' out yer ass," both of which mean LYING.

Goat ta - +got to+

Gowanna - +Going to, or, gonna+

Sesh - +session of drinking, commonly a night at the pub+

Whumpin' – messy wet humping without penetration. See Chapter 33: Lines for visuals. ;P

"Fiyuh?!" – I dunno about y'all, but when my brain breaks, I'm completely impossible to understand…and much worse than any of Amber's instances of the same. You can see a couple examples of this in the ANLoL parody/side-story "Blocked." In this case, Amber's combined fit? (Scottish slang for what?) and HUH?

Memories

* Gallery of Memories: Dream Lover Pt. I
** 33: Lines
*** 6: Cohabitation Chaos
**** 8: What're the Odds?
Chapter Summary

Cliffhanger resolved. The gang takes a stand and the plot goes BOOM. Someone dies a gruesome death. Things go horribly wrong then even more horribly right. Finally, we get some bleepin' answers - but NOT the ones you want most! XD

Chapter Notes

Hopefully I didn't lose y'all with that killer cliffhanger! Good news—it's resolved in this chapter! The bad news? Well…this one's pretty gritty and rough, and it's got a LOT of non-explicit gore and violence…and a pretty graphic scene that may trigger some folks. Someone's gonna die today, Folks, and regardless of who that someone is, it might just stick with you…this one's gonna be a nightmare, but you'll finally get a few answers out of it.

Warnings for violence, especially gun-related violence, some gore, character death, suicide, excessive coarse language—because Northpaw—and a few pretty offensive remarks by certain characters that do NOT reflect the feelings of the author.

Dedicated to my grandfather—always in my memory, always a reminder that death isn't the answer. Also dedicated to my kick-ass beta Wolf - you really are the best, Hon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

and a special feature for Lefty and Northpaw: Sixx:A.M. "Prayers for the Damned – Acoustic Version"

38: Resurgam

The stench of the city is never so strong as on a summer night. Fresh manure baking in a pasture, dripping rubbish fermenting in the sun, rotten exhaust belching from an abused vehicle, the sickeningly pungent stench of old, ripe death on a highway…no matter how many horrible comparisons one makes, nothing can truly describe it…or block it out. The stench of the city filled Amber's lungs—lungs long-used to more pleasant scents like coffee, grease, and spices—gagging her with its intensity. Loping alongside her, Daron Williams seemed completely oblivious—lost in thought.

"Are we almost there?" she asked him softly, her brows knit in concern. His only answer was a grunt—though of agreement or dissent, she didn't know—and she again fell to studying their
surroundings. Almost twenty minutes had gone by since they left the Lair—a bus ride and long walk later, they were further from home than she was comfortable with…and she didn't mean Willsdale. Willsdale wasn't home, not anymore—home was acceptance, coffee and spice, strong arms around her and a pair of shifting hazel eyes she could get lost in…

…who could ever have foreseen that Donatello would become more home to her than the one she was born in? "Why're we out here again?" she asked twisting a loose lock of scarlet-dyed hair around her fingers. "This doesn't feel right." There was nothing around anymore—nothing but flickering lamps, dirty warehouses, buckled parking lots, and endless rusting chain link. "The other's're prob'ly worried about us..." Around the latest corner turned, she froze—Daron led her down a blind alley?

"They should be worried." Oozing from the shadows like poison, the snide comment sent Amber's skin prickling. Terror filling her moss green eyes, she slowly turned to confront the speaker, a threatening mass stalking into the light of a blitzing streetlamp. Hun. Two identical shadows emerged, flanking him—Lefty and Northpaw. The brunette backpedaled but found herself against a wall. Betrayed…Daron…he…?

"How could you?" she whimpered at Aaron Willis' sour-faced counterpart. "I—I trusted you—how could you—?!"

"It's simple, Kimbuh," Hun jeered as he snatched his younger brother by the scruff. Squirming and squawking in protest, the younger found himself once again jammed into Hun's rank armpit and noogied. Amber cringed despite herself; she could smell the goliath several feet away, and he was not a bed of roses. "Everyone's got their price, even this little runt." The last word marked Daron's freedom and he was sent sprawling. Amber's heart pounded. Desperate for some reason to disbelieve it, she stared over at the scrawny blond who brought her here. He wouldn't meet her eyes. Fists clenching, teeth gritting, face red with anger and shame, he stalked away toward the mouth of the alley. No...no, this can't...this can't be happening..."Hand ova the goods, Kimbuh...I know ya stole it, so hand it ova."

"I didn't—I wouldn't—I'm not—not—" The closer the blonde brute came, the more she wanted to run. Piggish black eyes pinned her in place. Rancid sweat and Axe burned her sinuses. She was in trouble...deep trouble...and no matter how she screamed, she knew it would do no good.

"Hun!" The sudden shriek tore everyone's attention toward the betrayer. A shot rang out in the darkness, followed by two more. Burning heat slashed Amber's bare shoulder and she cried out in pain—she fell back against the grimy bricks, sliding to the pavement. A bellow of rage filled the alley and a scuffle cut off any further concussions.

"Ya dumbass!" Lefty screeched at Daron as they scrabbled for control of the gun. "T'is wain't t'a plan!" A crack, a gut-wrenching scream, and the whistle of a quickly approaching object—pain bloomed in a too-familiar place on Amber's skull, though not as strong as the impact of the glass brick that killed her. The noise, the alley, and the world faded away into a sea of haze, all to the tune of a legion of ticking clocks. Just like that, the ticking stopped.

Silence.

Through the soupy haze, small flashes of detail bled through. A shout, a crash, the singing of blades and the cracking of wood on bone. Coffee and grease filled Amber's lungs overpowering the stench of blood and salt. A bright pinpoint of light shone in the darkness—calloused fingertips peeled back one eyelid after the other then sought out the juncture of her neck.
"Come on, Braids." The voice was familiar—foggy, but as familiar as her own name—Donatello. "Come on back—you're gonna be fine." The gentle words pulled her from the emptiness—drew her back into the burning light. "That's it—that's it, open your eyes now—that's right."

"D…Dee…" The name came out raspier than she expected, and her bleary eyes felt heavy. "Wha… uh?" All at once, it all came back to her—she jackknifed upward but quickly found herself wobbling, dizzy and dazed.

"Easy now," Donnie urged gently easing her back to lean on his knee again. "The others have it under control, you're safe now."

"—but Daron—"

"—is a lousy shot," the genius cut off dryly. "He fired at Hun three times—one grazed you and the second got Lefty in the leg. The third's lodged in Raph's right arm." A familiar guttural roar cut through the racket at the other end of the alley, followed by a sickening crack; Donnie winced. "Obviously he's thrilled."

"What hit me?" Her hand weakly raised, fingers seeking out the perplexing ache in her temple, but was halted by a cautious grip.

"Don't touch," he warned lacing their fingers. Why was his hand sticky? "Mikey knocked a brick loose on the way down. You're exhibiting signs of concussion.

"Was it at least a real brick this time?" she grumbled. "Or was it another farking glass one?" She was quite fed up with getting hit in the head. In her previous life, she often went years at a time without so much as bumping her head on something—it helped being shorter than everything around her—but in this life, she seemed to whack herself on the noggin' at least weekly. Not to mention last night…She flushed at the memory, both at the crooked purple teeth marks still visible on her wrist and the massive goose egg left by the falling lamp. Meh. At least she got there first…didn't she…?...that lamp would die for its crimes! Her eyes were still as unfocused as her thoughts, but she could see more than before—see patterns of muted green, dusky tan, and gleaming red. …wait…red? Her stomach turned—no wonder his hands felt sticky.

"Technically it was a fragment of concrete block."

"Dang it. I'll never get hit with a real brick."

A warning shout rang out behind him and he glanced back only swiftly to duck a stray shuriken. "Hey, watch the friendly fire!" he barked at the one responsible. "We've got wounded over here!" A shouted 'Sorry, Bruh!' was met with a scoff and shake of the head. "I should've known Daron wouldn't stick to the plan...this would've gone more smoothly if he had. Nice acting, by the way, I think ya fooled 'em." Donnie shook himself out of his thoughts and released her hand to tug back her eyelids again. "Pupillary reflexes normalizing, dilation decreasing—a little bloodshot, granted, but that's expected—how's your head?"

"Splitting." The penlight clicked off again and Amber's eyes focused a little more. Blood stained his mask a deeper violet, a fine spray dotting his cheek and neck. Despite the grisly scene, her brilliant lover was smiling—that soft, warm tilt that always set her heart racing. …or was it racing because he was bloody? Surely he wasn't—was he hurt?

A sudden groan cut her off—close enough to make her skin crawl—and she craned her neck to find the source. "Wha—Hun?!" Yes, she realized open shock, that blurry blob of black, blond, and red could only be the leader of the Purple Dragons. That was a lot of red… "What'd I miss?" With a
weary sigh, Donatello commenced catching her up, all the while keeping her grounded with gentle, comforting caresses.

The turtles arrived right on time only to find absolute chaos. Lefty, upon seeing the plan blown and taking a bullet in the leg, charged Daron and wrestled away the revolver. Another shot was fired in the scuffle, and ironically, went through Hun's left thigh. Northpaw went into a rage at his twin's betrayal and joined the fray but almost immediately flung Daron aside. The twins fought—one mostly blocking and pleading North listen to reason, and the other clearly intent on becoming an only child. While Donatello tended to Amber's injuries, his three brothers took on Hun. Escaping notice for the moment and recovering the fumbled weapon, Daron fired the last two rounds at his brother's back at close-range.

Hun was out of the fight now, forced out by injuries that would have killed weaker sorts… Left knee crushed. Probable broken ribs. Concussion. Compound fracture in the left wrist. That one was especially entertaining to patch up; not much'll turn a body's stomach like a shard of broken bone punched through the skin. Three bullet wounds—one pass-through near the left femur just shy of the femoral artery, one graze on the right side of his skull, and one embedded dangerously close to, if not lodged in, his spine. At this point in the list, Donnie trailed off, shook his head bitterly, and fixed a weak glare on their longtime foe.

Hunter Williams was one of their toughest adversaries—he survived falls that would kill normal humans—he came back from deadly assaults with little more than a stagger and an unintelligible roar.* All those years they fought him and failed…and here he was taken out by a lump of lead. No matter the atrocities Hun committed, Donatello's gut churned when the other man realized he couldn't move his legs. Even if the bullet managed to miss his spinal cord, he still may never walk again.

Silence fell between the medic and his two patients. They were, after all, both patients, both in need of medical attention; Hun was their foe, but he wasn't in any shape to hurt anyone. Amber's eyes were still a little blurry, but she clearly saw the truth: his injuries were treated just as hers were. "During times of military conflict," she murmured into Donnie's shoulder, "injuries are inevitable on both sides. Anyone bearing the sign of the cross is to be spared, protected, and even aided—immune so long as they never bear arms. In return, their duty is not only to their allies but to their enemies—they cannot choose who to treat and who to turn away."** She met his eyes seriously, one fumbling hand cupping his jaw, and he clasped his own over it. "Life is life, and all life is sacred."

"He'd never do the same for us," Donnie admitted under his breath. "He's spent years trying to take us out. He tried having you killed, too—can still try again—but I can't—" Her fingertips slipped free, drifting over to seal his lips. He didn't regret treating Hun's injuries, that much was certain. The day he and Amber met face-to-face, he knew she was a Purple Dragon but he didn't let it stop him from checking on her…or hoping she'd make a full recovery…or comforting her when everything came crashing down on her. How ironic that he could be so much more humane than many of the humans she knew…

"Life is sacred," she repeated solemnly, her mossy eyes proud. "The life of a snake has the same worth as the life of a swan, and neither should be taken for granted…except mosquitoes," she added teasingly, "Skeeters are just assholes." The mutant's eyes drifted back to the battered giant staring up at the sky in silence. "Thank you for helping the snake—for being the better man. The rest of it's up to him now."

For an addict facing off against three mutants, Northpaw Jackson held his own ridiculously well…for a time, at least. All luck runs out, even his, and his luck did indeed run out. If not for Lefty's sudden interference—and emphatic insistence that Northpaw be spared, if only because they were
brothers—he would likely have been killed. That much was certain, as certain as the tension filling the back of the police cruiser the cuffed twins were crammed into.

Hun was in the hospital; his prognosis wasn't good, but there was little doubt he'd survive. The twins weren't unscathed, either, though Northpaw was the more injured, and en-route there themselves. Most of the ride passed in silence. One brother ruminated on his betrayal of his only living family; the other bitterly considered the rift that had long grown between them.

"How long's dis been goin' on, Leon?" The sudden query startled Lefty. He couldn't recall the last time his twin used either of their real names; Norton Jackson was never fond of his, and gleefully relinquished it the moment the first lines of ink were laid on his arm.

"Whaddaya talkin'bout, huh?" Lefty asked, bewildered.

"Ya know damn good 'n well," North snapped back. "How long ya been workin' against me? When'd ya turn on me?!"

"Hey, pipe down back there!" The order came from the fair-haired officer up front, accompanied by a loud banging on the bulletproof divider.

"Blow me, Doughnut-Breath!" North barked at the officer and turned to scowl at his twin again. "Yer my brutha—my twin brutha! Why'd ya do dis?!" The pierced con cringed, unable to meet the eyes a shade lighter than his own.

"It wa'n't easy, ya know," Lefty admitted softly. "I di'n't wanna—yer all I got left, huh!—but yer sick, Nort', an' yer jus' gettin' sickuh." Finally, he looked up, his eyes pleading. "Ya need help—ya gotta get clean, 'er it's jus' gowinna get worse."

"We gone dat route before, Asshole," North grumbled bitterly. "It din't work—da cravin's…I jus' couldn't hack it, dere ain't no cure fer da likes 'a me."

"It ain't jus' t'a drugs, Bruh," Lefty argued. "We joined when we was kids—jus' a pair 'a stupid kids! We ain't kids no more, we should'a got out years ago!" Up in the front seat, the blond officer exchanged a wary glance with his black-haired partner. Normally, they wouldn't let the two idiots jabber on like this, but in this case, they decided to butt out. Maybe the pierced con would be able to reach his obnoxious brother; maybe Northpaw would finally listen. If a little chatter in the back meant the scruffy cons would finally keep out of trouble, the officers were willing to turn a deaf ear this one. "I stayed in t'a Dragons cuz'a you, ya know," Lefty admitted. "I wan'ed out…but I got yer back." He stared out the cruiser window, defeated. "I awlways got yer back…I awlways did…"

Northpaw watched him silently; the cruiser pulled to a stop at the ER entrance.

"A'right punks," the dark-haired officer groused as they hauled the twins out of the back. Too late, he realized Northpaw had been too quiet—the con was out of his cuffs. With a violent crack to the officer's jaw, North took off on foot, dodging traffic. With a wince of apology, Lefty, too, wriggled free and took off after his brother, working at the cuffs on the way. The officers radioed for backup as they took off in pursuit—the chief was not going to be happy with them!

Sweat poured down Northpaw's unshaven face—his lungs burned from the humid night air—everything around him was rendered a blur, but he wouldn't admit why. All the while, his brother followed, hollering for him—stop, wait, don't run, we can still figure this out! It all sounded so tempting…but North knew the truth. He'd had too many second chances; there was no forgiveness for the likes of him.

Finally, exhausted, aching, and defeated, he came to a stop at the side of a lonely side street near the
docks; bent double, clutching his knees and panting for painful breaths, he took stock of his surroundings. Steel blue eyes rolled every which way, noting familiar landmarks. Filthy, rundown tenements loomed overhead and the reek of the city was stronger than ever. He knew this place—they grew up here...why was he back here? Of all the places he could've run, why'd he run home? Staring at the street, recalling the years he spent there, he searched for answers, finding none. Lefty skidded to a halt at his twin's side. "Nort', whaddaya doin'?!" he demanded, clutching the stitch in his side. "T'ey was gonna gitchu fixed up—yar hurt, ya dumbass!"

"It's always been you 'er me, ain't it Leon?" The bitter statement froze Lefty. Again, North used his real name...what was with that? "Ya can't stand dis life but I can't stand da one we left behind—dere ain't nothin' left fer me, Bruh...it's a shit-show, but it's all I got." He turned to stare down his twin, a strange, indecipherable look in his steel blue eyes. For the first time in years, Lefty could see his brother in there—not the homicidal maniac with a penchant for narcotics, but the strong brother he always looked up to. "It's always been you 'er me," he repeated even as Lefty shook his head in silent, horrified denial, "an' it's always gonna be dat way so long's we're bot' alive."

"No, Nort', no!" Lefty argued inching toward his brother. With every step Leon took toward him, Norton backed a step away. He stumbled at the curb, cringing at how it jolted his ribs; he was sure a couple of them were broken. "Nort', please, it ain't gotta be t'at way—we'll gitcha clean, we'll gitcha help—c'mon, I gotcher back, Bruh!" Norton scoffed but said nothing, instead glancing listlessly down the empty street. It was easy throwing his life away with amphetamines and crime...why was it so much harder to change? He couldn't change...and to be honest, he really didn't want to...and that, alone, would never give his only brother any peace. He gave a bitter, defeated laugh...there really was no other way, was there?

Arms raised in a grandiose gesture, his lips twisting into a maniacal grin, he took the last step backward. Time froze. A blare of a car horn—the squeal of tires—a sickening thud and grunt of pain. The cab swerved violently pulling over to the curb.

As the driver railed at them both, Lefty stared in horror at the crumpled body on the asphalt. He couldn't stop it...he couldn't stop it when Truman dove in front of an oncoming car...and now, he couldn't stop his own brother from doing just the same. What good was he?! What was his worth if he couldn't protect those closest to him?! Grunts and curses ripped from his lungs as he hauled Norton to the safety of the sidewalk, heedless of the scarlet trail in his wake. Even as he scrubbed blood off of his brother's skin, swept gravel out of the abrasions on his arms, Norton just stared at him as though seeing him for the first time in years.

Norton coughed—blood spattered Leon's shirt. The pierced brother froze, pale blue eyes dismayed. His twin was bleeding internally...no... Leon shook his head in weak denial. "You—" Norton rasped up at his twin as the two officers skidded to a halt nearby in horror. "er me—Leon..." He gave a bitter wheezing laugh. "Well...now's jus' you." Through the roar of blood rushing in his ears, Leon heard someone radio for an ambulance.

A feeble hand lifted, broken and bloodied knuckles offered in a familiar gesture; Leon grabbed it instead, crunching it in desperation. Norton didn't even flinch. "Y'awlways—awlways had—my back...now—ya ain't gotta." Leon froze. Right before his eyes, his brother's eyes dimmed, pupils swelling and swallowing the surrounding steel blue.

"Nort," Leon demanded—no response. "'ey, Nort, snap out 'a it!" He shook his twin by the shoulder, frantic to earn a response. "Nort, c'mon, t'is—t'is ain't funny!" His eyes streamed down his cheeks, his throat clenching around every word. "C'mon, say somet'in!" Someone in uniform—a paramedic maybe?—reached the brothers and took a knee. He searched out Norton's pulse only to hang his head in defeat. It was too late...even if they could get his heart started again, his injuries
were too great.

Amidst the stink and scum of the city, a broken man held his twin brother, sobbing into his bloody shirt, screaming profanities at the forces that separated them. They were _twins_—they'd been together from the moment of their conception, had gone through _everything_ together—time and trial drove them apart, turned them into rivals, but dammit, they were _brothers_! Shouldn't they be _inseparable_?! Shouldn't they be _together_ until the end?! This—_THIS wasn't an end_—_THIS was unacceptable, unforgiveable!_ Still, even as he screamed himself hoarse, rocking in place with the cooling body clutched like a lifeline, Leon Jackson knew the truth…it was the end Norton chose, and nothing could ever change that.

Some stars will last for eons; others are never satisfied until they've gone down in a blaze of glory...there was no glory in this death.

The lock turned with a protesting screech. On the other side of the door, the apartment was silent, still, and dark. Daron scanned his home bitterly, recalling the last time he saw it; nothing had been cleaned up since Northpaw's attack in May and the place was still a disaster. Alone with his thoughts, he stumbled through the dark parlor, ducking the furniture scattered like rubbish. Memories played unchecked—memories of better times, calmer times, and the sly woman he'd loved like no other.

Kimber was dead—dead and gone—but for Daron, she never really left. Reminders of her were everywhere in that apartment. Photos on the wall...a hairclip rusted to the shower curtain...a tube of lipstick forgotten on the sink...a flimsy pocketknife on her dresser...Daron was surrounded by memories and ghosts, just as he had been since the day he discovered her fate. Somehow he made it to her room—the room he almost refused to offer Mercy.

Fumbling fingers caught up a cracked plastic picture frame from the bedside table, bleary eyes studying the scene through tears. He still remembered that moment—remembered it with painful detail. Artfully messy hair cascaded over her shoulders and brow in spikes and loops of vivid yellow, orange, and crimson. Stooped over at the table and leaning on her crossed arms, her tattooed bust had been put on display perfectly; ever the voice of reason, Daron cropped most of it out despite her protests. As always, her saucy green eyes enticed, but he always saw beyond that—saw the vulnerability and pain she thought she'd buried.

Trembling fingertips brushed dust from the glass, remembering Kimber Bryant—his friend, his nemesis, the lover he never had. Her body still lived, but he found morbid comfort in contemplating a headstone for her nonexistent grave—rose granite, maybe, or something obnoxiously colorful—a planter of wilting petunias placed teasingly beside it—she always _hated_ petunias—an ostentatious metal vase could hold flowers she actually liked in life. Above one of her many favorite witticisms engraved in the stone, two dates would proclaim her existence to the world: born October 28th, 1991 - died January 25th, 2016. His eyes blurring, his lungs lurching, Daron traced the glass again. Her body still lived, but perhaps, at least, her soul could rest knowing that her death was avenged.

Choking back tears, Daron roughly slammed the frame back down on the dresser, snatched up the knife, and stalked back out to the parlor. Behind the sofa, he flicked the blade open clumsily and jammed it into the seam along the back. With precise, if rough, movements, he pried apart the seam, wrenching loose metal tacks and dropping them carelessly to the floor. He cast aside the flimsy knife and shoved his hand down the back of the sofa, fumbled around, then tugged out the hidden contents: a manila folder full to the brim. Without a backward glance he left the apartment he shared with Kimber; the ghosts and demons he lived with could wait a little longer.
A sour-faced blond stomped into the lobby of the NYPD Headquarters and chucked a large yellow envelope onto the reception desk. "You'll want to read that," Daron snapped at the nervous red-haired receptionist. "It's evidence—a list of people on the Purple Dragons' payroll." Safety protocol called for any and all packages to be thoroughly checked by security upon receipt, but this member of the force was new. Cynthia paused to call for assistance then unwound the twine closure, tugged out the pile of printouts, and scanned the first few pages. With every line, her big blue eyes grew wider and more astounded. Some of the names on that list were familiar—very familiar—some she even recognized as fellow office staff and officers!

"Wh—Where did you get this?" the redhead asked shaking her permed head in disbelief. "This—"

"Ki—" Daron cut himself off—no, it still hurt too much to say her name. Instead, he tried another route. "My…my sister—she was a member of the gang. She stole that from Headquarters…" He couldn't meet the receptionist's eyes any longer. "Those're the originals. She went into hiding with copies, but she—she didn't make it."

"Your…sister…is gone?" the receptionist asked carefully. It was clear, from his body language, that this 'sister' wasn't really a sister; from the looks of it, she wondered if the woman was actually the man's former lover.

"Yes," Daron agreed without emphasis. "I don't know what happened to her…word on the street is she's dead, and knowing the Purple Dragons, I'm inclined to believe it." He paused to get himself together, dug his wallet, phone, and keys out of his pockets, and tossed them on the counter as well. "I'm also here to turn myself in," he added off-handedly. "I'm a hacker-for-hire and I'm pretty sure you've seen a bunch of my work." Again, he threw off the receptionist entirely; this man's behavior made no sense!

"You're…you're willingly surrendering to the law?" she asked dubiously, unable to stop herself from scanning him head to toe. He didn't stink of alcohol or tobacco, and she couldn't detect the scent of drugs or see any of the usual signs in his skin, eyes, or teeth. If not for his unusual behavior, she would think he was just an antisocial person whose conscience got the better of them. By the time she made it back up to his eyes, she found them staring her down, one blond eyebrow arched as if questioning her intelligence. A blush bloomed across her powdered cheeks as she turned to fuss with the intercom system; whatever he was, he certainly smelled good…

Daron blinked in confusion, for once, not even frowning; what just happened? Before he could demand answers, someone came huffing around the corner. "Explain, Devine." The receptionist startled at the barked demand and hupped-to.

"H-He's surrendering, Ma'am," she explained quickly with a confused—and somewhat frightened—smile. Daron smirked; she was afraid of the chief? "He says he's a hacker for hire." The immaculately groomed chief looked him up and down, her eyes unimpressed.

"Your name?"

"Daron Elijah Williams," he answered as he smirk fell away. "I operated under the name Leth lly_BIONd."# Cynthia let out a squeak of poorly-suppressed—and halfway-snorted—laughter; Vincent stared Daron down in open distaste.

"You're kidding, right?" she demanded in a deadpan.

"Blame my sister," he grumbled in answer. "Look, I did it to keep her safe and fed—she's gone now, I can't help her anymore, so I'm turning myself in. Take it or leave it." Chief Vincent studied the grouchy blond silently, biding her time and waiting for him to crack. She recognized his handle
alright—the district had a laundry list of cases that went cold after defendants hired him for interference. The entirety of the Cyber Crimes unit was perpetually frothing at the mouth over being unable to catch the man they called "Blondie," and every time he struck again, Chief Vincent had to deal with whining and tantrums from supposedly grown adults.

Then in January, something changed—the Blondie got sloppy, but not sloppy enough to be caught. A red flag warned of interference with the NYPD's gang affiliations database and several files were altered or deleted before anyone could successfully lock the intruder out. Over the next several weeks, many related files in various government databases were also attacked; each time, any and all mention of a woman named Kimber Bryant were deleted, and all files regarding a girl named Kimberly Jane O'Bryan were drastically altered. At the time, it seemed almost as if he was intentionally leaving them a trail to follow—dropping digital breadcrumbs to lead them to the truth. The last anyone heard of the case, a forged death certificate was found suspiciously jammed into the wrong file in the NYPD's records...Kimber Bryant was alive and kicking as recently as January, but according to that paper, she died in the same accident that killed her mother and grandmother. Funny how no one at the hospital got the memo.

"You did it for her?" Vincent demanded shortly. "So you're ready to face the charges against you? You're ready to hand over your computer?" That did the trick. Daron flinched, the anger in his eyes changing to blatant horror. The chief smirked; hackers were so predictable when it came to their toys. Daron hesitated, gave a half-whine-half-groan as he searched for an out, then scrunching his eyes shut and hanging his head, he nodded. God, that hurt. "Where do you work?" Daron's eyes shot open and he fixed a particularly sour lemon-sucking scowl on the chief.

"I don't anymore," he reminded sharply. "Hacking was my job—it's the only thing I've ever been good at!" Vincent looked him up and down again, sizing him up, then turned to find Cindy furtively watching the young man over her computer monitor. The thump of the Chief's hand impacting the desktop startled her out of her stupor with a blush and squeak.

"Devine! Get Cyber Crimes down here," Vincent ordered shortly, getting a squeaked yes-ma'am in response. As the younger woman rushed to obey, the blonde gave Daron a sarcastic smirk. "I'll send an officer to pick up the evidence shortly. In the meantime, get ready to meet your co-workers." Daron winced at the reminder that he was losing his baby...then the rest hit him.

"Wait...what?" he demanded sharply. "Co-workers?! I'm surrendering—you're arresting me, right?!" This wasn't the plan—he let Kimber down, he let his friends down, he even let his own brother down—he paralyzed his own brother! How could he atone for all that if he just got a slap on the wrist?!

"You've been pissing off the entirety of the Cyber Crimes unit for nine years, Williams," Vincent answered in her usual terse, clipped tone. "You consistently managed to out-maneuver them. Trust me, you'll suffer more on the team than you would behind bars." Without a second glance, she turned to stalk away, leaving the blond sputtering and red in the face. Just before the doors slid shut behind her, she tossed back a final sarcastic jab: "Welcome to Hell, Legally Bland."

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A large dark void at the edge of time

When she first arrived in this strange place, the young woman didn't know what to think of it. There was nothing there—nothing but black emptiness as far as the eye could see—it was, and it wasn't, all at the same time, and all to the soundtrack of a legion of ticking clocks.

At first, she raged against the unfair situation. She screamed obscenities and threats to the void and cried bitterly when no one answered. She tore at hair that didn't exist—thrashed about with a body
that didn't exist—snarled and scratched and swung at all the empty nothingness around her with lips and teeth, nails and limbs that didn't exist. She was alone in this vast dark empty place—alone with maddening questions that had no answers.

She died—that much she knew—but how did she go from dead to lost in space? At first, she feared her memories would be taken from her—stolen away and replaced with madness—and she jealously guarded them with everything she had. She lost him—lost the lover with hazel eyes in another world, another lifetime—but damned if she'd lose the memories of him too! As time went by and her memory remained clear, she relaxed her grip and ceased expecting it to be stolen away. Now she couldn't find it in herself to care about much; she griped and complained to all the ears not listening, contemplating a way out.

A pinprick of light bloomed in the distance—small and faint at first, like a distant dying star—it swept toward her, growing and brightening until it turned the entire void into a blinding nova of light. The clocks in the distance neared and grew louder, louder, and louder still—the light pulsed in time with them, humming in warning. The young woman cringed away from the light, fighting to block non-existent eyes with arms that weren't there. She demanded answers—cried for an explanation—and for the first time, a voice filled the void that wasn't hers—a feminine voice tinged with a noticeably grouchy whine.

"Please try not to screw up this time?" Before she could say a single word, the void exploded in a shower of light and the blare of a car horn. Darkness fell all around her, but the young woman could only despair. Finally, after an eternity in the void, she felt something…

Pain is proof you are still alive.

A soft, incessant beeping filled air rank from chlorine bleach—the whirl of machinery hummed all around her. She fought to lift her heavy, salt-crusted eyelids. Bright lights overhead stabbed like a thousand knives, the pain echoed by a sudden increase in the pace and volume of the beeping nearby. After a few more false starts, finally, she got her eyes open and took in the sight of the popcorn ceiling overhead.

"I…” Her voice was raspy with disuse, but what shocked her most was the higher pitch; it sounded nothing like her voice! "I'm…alive?" Weary eyes drifted downward, seeking answers. Pale, weak arms that didn't look like hers—long weak legs that didn't look like hers—a lock of limp auburn hair fell in her eyes, also not hers—this body didn't look right at all! Looking around the room revealed even more wrongness. The last thing she remembered was that damnable black void; now she was tucked into a hospital bed, stuck full of a multitude of tubes and needles, and her entire body ached more than she'd ever thought it could. Pain…she was alive…no, it couldn't…she didn't… The beeping of the heart monitor quickened further—proof she still had a heart, even as it broke all over again.

"No!" she shrieked in a rage, tears streaking down her face at the unfair turn of fate. "No, t'is ain't what I wan'ed! I di'n't wanna second chance, dammit! Sen' me back!" Her voice cracked—rage turned to despair, scream to sob. "Please…please jus' sen' me back!"

An hour later, her pleas were still unmet and the irritating voice in the void still hadn't answered. Instead, a gangly nursing tech had heard her screams and called for assistance, and a sedative injection later, she found herself staring up at a giant of a man with sleek blond hair and beady black eyes. Though he looked distressingly familiar, his name tag identified him as Doctor Arnold Mason rather than Hun Williams. She didn't care—she wouldn't trust him as far as she could throw him, and from the looks of the arms she was now stuck with, she couldn't have even budge him an inch.
"You gave us all quite a start, Miss Brent," Dr. Mason remarked with a charming smile that came across as smug. She scowled at him, bottle-green eyes daring and threatening. "Do you remember anything? Do you remember what happened?"

"Yeah," she scoffed bitterly. "I remembuh freezin' ta deat' ya mawron. Git away from me a'ready." Mason blinked in confusion. He shot a wary glance over at the equally stunned tech as though expecting to be let in on a poor joke; the younger man shrugged lanky shoulders, his dark eyes equally lost behind his coke bottle glasses.

"Do you know who you are?" the doctor asked the woman. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yeah, 'a co'se I know who I-yam," she snapped, annoyed by her suddenly higher-pitched voice and the gaping doctor and tech. "I'm Kimbuh Bryant! Fuck'f I know 'a when 'er where—t'at damn void screw't wit' my 'ead. Tis's bullsh!t, I di'n't wanna second chance, I tol' em 'at!" Even as she grumbled into her cleavage—much less impressive cleavage than she once had and unmarred by tattoos—Dr. Mason and the tech spoke in hushed tones. Finally, the doctor collected a chart from the foot of the bed and approached her, his gait decidedly faltering with each step in favor of his left leg.

"You seem to be confused, Miss." His tone was full of sugar and condescension. "We have you listed as Barbara Brent. You've been in a coma since the accident."

"Accident?" Kimber demanded sharply. "T'a hell're ya tawlkin' about? T'ere weren't no—"

"A vehicular accident, specifically," Mason cut her off as though she hadn't even spoken. "I'm sorry miss, your husband didn't make it—he was pronounced dead on site."

"Neva mind t'at ya got crappy bedside mayna," she argued vehemently. "I ain't no Bahbie Brent—"

"I think you need a moment to rest." Again he interrupted her—this guy had some nerve! Without even once looking back, he limped out the door, muttering about brain injuries, amnesia, and something called foreign accent syndrome. When his back vanished down the hallway, Kimber glanced over to the nervous tech. Well-groomed, pressed scrubs, thick glasses, nervous darting eyes, and he hadn't spoken a word to her—everything about him told her he was shy and thus easily manipulated.

"'e's a bit'a grouch, 'uh?" she remarked with a disarming smile. "Don't s'pose ya gotta paypuh 'er some'tin', do ya?" Sure enough, the tech blushed and avoided her eyes.

"N-No," he admitted softly, nervously glancing from her to the door and back again repeatedly. "B-but I m-m-might be able t-t-to get the n-news on the t-t-t-telev-vision." Ah. No wonder he hadn't spoken and looked shy...that was a helluva stutter...poor kid. Blushing up a storm, he inched over to her side to fiddle with the remote, setting it to a local news channel.

"Tragedy struck the small town of Willsdale, Missouri recently, in the form of two large-scale tornadic storms," the blonde reporter related seriously. "The first tornado, registered as a category four on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, tore through rural Willsdale on the night of Friday, May the sixth; the second, registering as a high-end EF-5, carved an even wider path through the already battered town on Sunday, May fifteenth. Now, six days after this second disaster, the final name on the list of casualties has been finally released to the public. Amber Jean O'Brien, longtime local and night custodian at the local High School, was discovered dead in the school's library on Sunday afternoon. School officials have refused to comment, but a member of the staff anonymously confirmed that Miss O'Brien was at the school of her own accord rather than under orders."
A heart-rending cry startled the reporter, and she turned to seek out the source; the camera roughly turned to fix on a nearby cemetery and zoomed in on a crowd of people gathered around a recently filled grave.

A short tubby woman with frizzy auburn hair fell to her knees in the mud, wailing and pleading for her companions to forgive her daughter—the 'ungodly daughter who died on her knees because she wouldn't live on them.' Her husband drunkenly shouted at her to 'shut her damn mouth,' and an older man, stout with grey-shot beard and hair, immediately tore into them both in a rough unfamiliar brogue. Clearly sick of the drama, two younger attendants—a lovely svelte blonde in a grey sundress and a brawny young man who looked almost a clone of Daron Williams—spouted their own two cents at the deceased's mother and stormed off, pausing only to silently apologize to the occupant of the grave.

Her eyes wide at the drama unfolding within shouting's distance, the news reporter awkwardly tugged at her pressed neckline and inched slowly to the side; a moment later, the grieving family was out of view, if not out of earshot. "Today," the reporter continued nervously, her voice significantly more shrill and her pink-painted lips twisted in an embarrassed cringe, "Willsdale's mayor Gerald Whitke had this to say about the state of his battered town." The camera cut out and the television screen cut to a portly man with thinning grey hair.

"Many are our dead," he professed solemnly amidst camera flashes and waving microphones. "Great are our losses, and even greater the obstacles we must overcome. May 6th and May 15th, 2011, shall live down in our city's history in infamy as days of tragedy and terror, but we will survive—we will recover and we will restore Willsdale. We are eternally grateful for the donations sent to us—donations of food, water, supplies, and relief funds—but we ask of you now, if you truly wish to help us—to help this wonderful, wholesome town—please pray for us, and remember us in two weeks."#

May 21st…2011?! Kimber stared in disbelief, bottle green eyes wide and unblinking. The remote slipped uncontested from her slackened hand as she slumped back against the raised bed. She wasn't just given a new life…she was sent five years into the past!

"Well, I'm fuckin' screwed."

A COUPLE QUICK NOTES FROM THE GHOST WRITER:

So, Folks, there ya have it. Hope this chapter tides y'all over for a while, because there's liable to be a wait between chapters from here on out. Things in Real Life are getting hectic again, and not just with the holidays coming up, either. I DO owe y'all a couple installments for Gallery of Memories and will be posting them after my totally awesome beta Wolf has had a chance to sink her teeth into them. Anyhoo, hope everyone's having a great Fall, and I look forward to hearing from y'all!

SOMEHOW I managed to completely fudge up the 2011 dates in this story—BADLY. I'll be going back and correcting them, but to clarify, here are the CORRECT dates:

*Friday, May 6th: Amber and Aaron left Willsdale to visit his mom in the late afternoon; the first tornado struck late that night
*Sunday, May 8th: They returned to Willsdale to find the town devastated and their homes destroyed and took shelter with other displaced residents in City Hall's bomb shelter/basement.
*May 8th-15th: Amber, Daron, and many other residents sheltered at City Hall, one in shock and the other making himself useful however he could.
*Sunday, May 15th:* Amber slipped away from the shelter unnoticed, made her way to the school, another tornado struck, and she was killed in the school.

*Finally, Saturday, May 21st:* Amber's funeral held, Mercy's death, Kimber's re-awakening in a hospital in Glenville.

Chapter End Notes

Resurgam: Latin, means "I shall rise again." Though the phrase is often used in reference to belief in the Rapture and souls rising from their graves, it's important to remember that "rise" can have many meanings. In this case: Daron will grow out of his immaturity and shortcomings. Northpaw rose above his own faults and failures and finally put his brother first (albeit in a really destructive way) and Lefty will work past his brother's death. Amber and Donnie will continue to grow personally, and Amber will in time rise above the fears that have plagued her. Willsdale will recover from the tragedy it experienced. Several more characters will also in time rise above their weaknesses and their struggles, some obvious and some probably unexpected. A final example—and a more traditional one—Kimber has 'risen from the dead' and been given a new lease in a new life. TELL ME you didn't see that coming.

* Hun was first created for the '03 cartoon series and has since spread to several other series, and this statement effectively describes him from that series. If only in that series, he was a friggin' tank—could fall from any height without injury, could take a massive beating without injury, you name it, he could handle it. Still, he was only human…and the turtles didn't use firearms. Even he could be taken down with a well-placed shot.

** This has all been pulled and paraphrased from the rules of war as set by the Geneva convention. Medical personnel are obligated to treat their own wounded, but also any oppositional forces taken captive or surrendered. They are also (supposedly) forbidden from bearing arms, though in some cases personnel in the field are allowed a small sidearm for self-defense; any medical personnel who take up arms are from that moment declared 'fair game.' Lastly, captures of medical personnel—for the purpose of treating injured troops—is allowed without penalty, so long as both sides follow their respective roles and the medics are released uninjured after completing their purpose. That said, one must remember that these rules were agreed upon by every nation part of the Geneva convention, but many times, a nation has failed to follow them when the tides turned against them. Germany and Japan in WWII and North Korea in the Korean War are all pretty good examples of countries who broke the Geneva convention's rules on medical personnel when the going got tough. A last note on that bit, the debate surrounding the obligations and immunity of medical personnel was one of many reasons why I absolutely LOVE M*A*S*H—the series touched on this debate frequently, and the situation was always dealt with both bluntly and effectively.

# Leth lly_BlOnde/Legally Bland - Yes. I seriously went there. Regarding Chief Vincent's reaction to Daron's surrender: In reality, it's pretty unlikely that Daron would be hired on the spot simply because he's a kickass hacker; likewise, Chief Vincent isn't going to just slap him on the wrist and call it good because he's now on her side. He WILL be charged, he WILL have to pay restitution where necessary, and he WILL undergo punishment for his crimes. Because the Cyber Crimes unit would benefit more from having him on their side than behind bars, though, part of that punishment will be
to catch the criminals he worked for. His pride's gonna hurt so bad…

##This quote, like much of Willsdale's tornado-based history, is based on a news report from another town or city that experienced a high-level tornado—in the case of this quote, the city was Joplin, Missouri. Like much of the country, I followed the stories of Joplin's destruction and aftermath closely in the days following the EF-5 tornado on May 22nd, 2011, and one news report really stuck with me. The news outlet interviewed a local who survived the tornado, asking if she had any suggestions on how others abroad could help the town. The local's answer to that was haunting: if you would help us, remember us in a few weeks. Six years later, I cannot find any evidence of this online—the articles may have been deleted or simply archived—and cannot recall the statement word for word. Despite it, the statement remains clear: the news moves on, the focus shifts elsewhere, but while you're back to debating over what color the dress is and what the Kardashians did this time, those who live there can't just change the channel and move on. Even before my own hometown was put through a similar trauma, I felt a kinship in Joplin that I never really felt in any other city but my own. Joplin is a truly amazing city I am glad to have visited countless times, and she and her people make me proud to be a Missourian.
Chapter Summary

Timeskip ketchup. (See what I did there?) Amber and Donnie fluff turns sour over dinner. Raph's stubborn. Bourbon is bad for Amber's filter, Raph pays for it. Raph and Mercy are a couple of idiots, they decide to stop being idiots, only to realize they're idiots about each other. Raph makes things awkward, then makes them sappy. Super-fuzzy snuggle-bunnies.

Chapter Notes

We've been focusing most on Donnie and Amber lately, and it's high time for Raph and Mercy to shine! Finally, those two idiots get a break...they deserve one. Apparently there may have been some confusion regarding Raph's feelings for Kimber versus his feelings for Mercy. If anyone's gotten lost over that, I apologize - it probably means I put too much emphasis on Raph's grieving and personal confusion and not enough emphasis on the all-knowing omniscient narration meant to point out when a character's being an idiot.

Raphael has been grieving Kimber's death - she was a friend of his, a dear friend that also annoyed him to death, and not only did he completely bungle that friendship, he refused to help her when she needed him most...and it cost Kimber her life. Losing someone while on bad terms with them can really screw people up - a particularly bad example that comes to mind involved a woman who had a nasty fight with her father and left angry, only to return and find him dead from stroke. She never forgave herself, and still blames herself for his death, certain that if she hadn't argued with him, he wouldn't have died, never mind that it was from a diabetic episode rather than blood pressure. Raph's got something worse than just harsh last words - he took advantage of Kimber's feelings for him, used her and pushed her away out of fear of getting hurt, then when he had a chance to save her, he refused, never even considering that she'd die because of it. Grief is powerful and illogical at best, and it's really messing with his head and his heart, but he's slowly working past it...and growing up in the process. Even with this grief messing with his head, though, one thing has become absolutely clear to him...and that one thing will be revealed in this chapter.

So question...how many of you were confused by the Kimber-Raph-Mercy mess? Was there not enough emphasis put on narration and too much on Raph's confusion? Does it still count as a love triangle if one of the three characters is dead as a doornail and no longer applicable? Do I talk too much? (Don't answer that one - I KNOW I do, LOL!)

Anyway, mild UST warning, some Mikey torture, and Amber being a pervert...nothing new, really, she's still a borderline nympho trying to be patient for her nervous virgin boyfriend. Also, do NOT read the scene with Raph and Amber while eating or drinking —choking on or spewing of your chosen beverage or meal may occur. Scene near the end with Raph and Mercy may provoke nosebleeds, but it's more likely to cause warm-an-fuzzies. :3 It's totally overdue.

39: Unheard, Unknown, Unspoken

August 1st, 2016, Manhattan

Normally, someone requesting a large pizza delivery to a dark alley would be a red flag for any delivery driver, much less one on a particularly dorky grey scooter. Fortunately, this wasn't just any delivery driver, and the customer was a regular. Full helmet still in place, she examined her nails as though bored with life in general.

A faint scraping noise changed everything. "Yer late, Mister Angelo," the driver drawled into the darkness. Sure enough, Mikey hopped down from the fire escape and swaggered over to her—that was her cue. With all the seriousness of a fashion model, she leaned back on her scooter in a generic 'sexy on a motorcycle' pose, swept her helmet off, and threw her head back to send her hair flying…only to squawk in pain. Her audience cackled with laughter as she fought to free one of her two grey-streaked braids from the helmet's straps. Only when it became clear she was truly stuck did he lend a hand.

"Jeez, Sis," he teased as Amber grumbled into her covered cleavage. "On a scale of meh to holy frijoles, I'd give that an eek!"

"Better an eek than an ick, right?" Amber retorted with an equally playful grin; he laughed, so mission accomplished. Her braid finally fell loose against her back again and she gave a sigh of relief. "I hear ya requested 'that spunky new girl' again—if ya keep askin' for me when I'm about to leave, they'll think we're dating. Ya might get a discount." Mikey heaved a melodramatic sigh as Amber hauled the pile of pizza boxes out of their bag.

"Alas, dear sister, I must turn you down." He gave her a condescending pat on the shoulder. "The dork-mobile's just too much awesome for me."

"Thanks, Dorian," Amber griped at the innocent grey scooter, "ya just cost me the love 'a my life. Now, where's my tip, ya heart-breaker?"

'There is one girl in my life that makes me love again - as pretty as a girl could be...so beautiful. Every morning she makes me a cup of coffee with a smile on her face…I'm a man in love and she's glorious.' # The bouncy techno beat throbbed from the speakers, filling the lab with cheer.

Alone with his thoughts and Basshunter, Donatello hunched over his workbench wrists-deep in a large fire-damaged control box. The massive contraption scattered across the table once routed electricity throughout the railyard's extensive fire sprinkler system, and now that he'd opened the beast up, he wondered if the fire actually wasn't arson. By all rights, the control box was a ticking time bomb—how could it have ever been up to code, even decades ago? From the scorch patterns and melted wiring, he could easily see the blaze beginning in that very control box.
He wrenched his hands free from the soot-blackened innards with a frustrated huff. Mercy had vision—she saw a use for the railyard that none of his brothers saw—but she really had no idea the amount of work it would take to transition the fire sprinklers into an irrigation system. Even with the damaged and obsolete machinery, wiring, and plumbing replaced, the spray mounts weren't meant for high volume or long-term use. It would take countless junkyard runs just to get the control panels running again.

He sighed, scowling down at the aggravating mess of parts spread across the workbench. Maybe it would be easier to just start fresh with a design of his own making...that seemed to work with everything else, after all. It wasn't like the government was going to send an inspector to make sure everything was up to code, either—if it worked and wasn't liable to take anyone with it if it blew up, that was enough...right?

The front door slammed, followed immediately by a greeting joke from Mikey—something about a pizza dude who wasn't a dude—then a familiar sarcastic retort. Amber was home! Donnie's heart skipped a beat at the realization...then he realized what was playing over the sound system. Crap. The wheels of his stool shrieked as he shot over to the tablet streaming music, and after a moment of frantic swiping and scanning to find something a little more mainstream, he dove back into the control panel as though nothing happened.

'I'm gonna love you like nobody's loved you, come rain or come shine.'

A moment later, two bare arms wrapped around him from behind, their owner pressing a kiss to his scalp. "Hey, Sweets," Amber greeted teasingly leaning around his neck. "How's the hunk 'a junk?"

"Still junk," he retorted meeting her eyes over his shoulder with a playful grin. "How's the scooter working for you?"

"Dorian Grey cost me the turtle of my dreams earlier," she admitted with a melodramatic sigh. "Looks like you're stuck with me, Dee." For a moment, all he could manage was blinking at her, nose crinkled and eyes wide.

"I dragged that heap out of the junkyard, got it running, and gave it a sweet paint job...and you named it Dorian Grey?" He shook his head but couldn't hold back a chuckle.

"What?" she asked with feigned innocence. "It's perty an' grey an' it's older'n it looks." He guessed in a weird way it kinda made sense—she did name her old car after the jackass from Old Yeller.

"Sometimes I wonder which of us is the bigger nerd."

"Aw, that's easy—you're a nerd, I'm just a dork." Before he could get out a word in favor of or against that claim she spun his stool around and invited herself into his lap with a succession of gentle kisses and nuzzles. "Ray Charles, huh?" she teased when the singer's voice finally placed.

"Y-You know him?" he stammered sheepishly; he wasn't fooling anyone. "I mean—"

"Yeah, I know 'im." The unspoken bit was that she knew Ray Charles' music in her previous life as well. Ever since she awoke in this new world, Amber was constantly faced with inconsistencies in popular culture. Some examples of literature, music, and pop culture from her world occurred in this one, too, with and without changes and variations—Mark Twain and Jane Austen, Michael Nyman and Ludovico Einaudi, Chess and Jane Eyre—enough for her to assume it meant that genius transcended realities. Then she heard a particularly nauseating Spice Girls song played on a boombox on the subway and about chuckled her cookies...and found Barney while channel-surfing...and discovered a particularly stained copy of Fanny Hill in Kimber's novel-porn stash.## After that point,
she gave up entirely on trying to make sense of why some things changed while other remained the same—there was no rhyme or reason other than to drive her batty looking for one.

"Ya know," she remarked leaning into Donnie's embrace, "where I'm from, folks call this sorta music 'baby-makers.' Donnie flinched, his eyes shooting open wide and locking with hers set off by a deep blush. She really shouldn't have so much fun teasing him. "Ya know what they say about a man who plays crooner jazz durin' work hours?"

"...uh...?" Critical error – illegal operation - reboot necessary. Send report to admin? Seeing the panic in his eyes, Amber went in for the kill with a waggled eyebrow.

"Either he's bangin' the secretary or he's hidin' somethin'." Fatal error – HCF – abandon ship!** He almost wept with relief when she visibly let the tease drop and lifted his grease-blackened hands for inspection. "Wash up for dinner? Your pie's got extra tears an' fungus, just how ya like it." Onions and mushrooms...the very idea made his mouth water...the control box could wait.

He hung back to turn off the music and watch her hips sway ahead of him, but she paused in the doorway. Again, there was a tease in her eyes, but this one was sweet rather than sly. "Dee," she admitted just loudly enough for him to hear, "anytime you think about censoring yerself around me, don't—yer the pretty one an' yer more glorious than I'll ever be."

Boy, was that woman good for his ego.

The mouth-watering aroma of fresh pizza and the chaotic noise of seven voices filled the crowded kitchen. Packed around the table, elbow to elbow, the odd family gorged themselves after a long day in between bouts of small-talk.

"How're the Hardy girls doing?" someone, maybe Donnie, asked.

"Quite well," Leonardo answered with a deceptively boyish smile that surprised his brothers. He sure smiled more often now that he wasn't hiding the cousins from them; it kinda freaked them out. "Beverly's white blood cell count's up, as of her last checkup, and she's not feeling as tired. She and Bree should be able to come by Saturday for dinner." He paused for a swig of water. "Anyone heard from Leon Jackson lately?"

"Still in prison," Mercy muttered back, "Still refusin' any calls or visits an' still ain't speakin'. He was on board with takin' out Hun an' takin' the blame, but'e di'n't sign up fer losin' 'is only family—give 'im some time. How's the GED goin' Scotch-Bright?"

"Slowly," Amber admitted. "I still suck at algebra an' apparently I peeved-off the instructor today." She answered Donnie's questioning glance with a shrug. "What? It's not my fault the test he wrote up had more spelling and grammar errors than a kindergartner's Christmas list. I just corrected'em."

"Grammar Nazi," Mercy accused pointing a fork at her. Conversation halted for a moment as the blonde and Mikey ensued in a fork-battle over the last slice of lasagna; Mikey won, and Mercy sulked into her sweet tea. "So what's left of the renovations, D-man? The railyard's cleaned out and gutted—if we get the overhead's workin', we can make do with hose-waterin' 'til the irrigation's ready."

"The lights'll be an easy fix." Inwardly Donnie wanted to shake her for not pointing that out before he tore apart the power supply hub to fix the sprinklers. "I'll have to start from scratch on a lot of the machinery but it'd be easier than fixing what's already there—looks like it really was an electrical fire, too." Raph growled around his pizza; go figure the garden would be put as a higher priority than
getting his new room built. Another month of being stuck between Mikey and Leo was liable to drive him insane. "Once I've got the power supply and such sorted out and functioning, we can finish up your new room, Raph—gimme a couple weeks at least."

"Whatever." A belch followed his remark and Mercy seemed to take it as a challenge, but Master Splinter cleared his throat in warning, cutting off the contest before it began. "S'cuse me," the hulking ninja grumbled sourly in response to his father's stink-eye.

"'ere is no 's'cuse fer you," Mercy teased elbowing him in the side. Before she got between Raphael and Lefty in the storage shed, he'd have followed suit with another snarky comment and they'd have irritated everyone with another of their fun little insult contests. Now, he just glared at her, snorted, and snagged another slice of cheese pizza. Her face fell. Mercy missed getting along with him so well—if only she could figure out why he was angry at her!

"How's the job going, Amber?" Leo asked to diffuse the tension around the table. The brunette gave a weak smile.

"It's goin," she answered picking at a pizza crust and glancing furtively over at Donnie; fortunately he was too involved with savoring his mushrooms and onions to notice. "It's actually a lot harder than I expected...never would'a believed it, but dealin' with people and dodgin' traffic is harder'n scrapin' gum off tables an' scrubbin' toilets. Still, it's work, an' once I've got Kimber's GED, I can work my way up to something less obnoxious. Bev's been helpin' me pitch some of Kimber's junk online, too. Betwixt it all, I've managed to save up enough to get started on my plans." She set aside the pizza crust; the topic turned her stomach too much to eat anything else. "Bree an' I checked out a few places last week an' I've fin'ly found the right one."

Donatello froze. Checked out a few...places? Surely not...surely she wasn't...wasn't leaving?!

Horrified hazel eyes fixed on the oblivious brunette staring down into her iced tea, hanging on her every word and praying to be proven wrong.

"Oh?" Mikey asked excitedly—also oblivious to Donnie's response. "That's great! I knew my Babycakes could help ya!"

"I'd'a been lost without 'er," Amber admitted with a weak smile. "We're goin' out tomorrow for the preliminary BS—not really lookin' forward to it, but it's gotta be done."

Donnie's chair screeched in protest as he pushed back from the table, lunged to his feet, and rushed off to the lab. In his wake, his family sat frozen in surprise at the unexpected move. Mikey's pizza slice hovered inches from his open mouth in the awkward silence; a large section of cheese slid off and slithered down his bare plastron without notice. Amber and the youngest exchanged confused glances, each hoping the other knew what just happened, and each disappointed with their answers.

Eventually, noise filled the kitchen again, but instead of the cheerful banter and small-talk, it consisted of Raphael and Amber loading the dishwasher. This was a new habit of theirs—sharing a chore while sharing a drink. Though they started this life out constantly at odds, they now got along remarkably well as long as certain topics were avoided.

Ever since their massive fight over Mercy landed them both in hot water with Splinter, the odd pair were dangerously close to becoming good friends. Raph was finally through pretending he blamed her for Kimber's death. Amber no longer felt compelled to be needlessly nice to him, either, which, oddly enough, he seemed to appreciate. Shared drinks coincided with shared insults, and chores were a perfect opportunity for venting to spare their loved ones the brunt of the drama.
"So what's up with you an' Mercy?" Amber asked lowly. Raph fumbled the lasagna pan he was wedging into the dishwasher and it fell into place with a loud glassy clang. "I can't recall the last time I saw you two gettin' along…what'd she do?" Narrowed hazel eyes burned hers.

"Ya sound so sure it's somethin' she did," he remarked dryly filling the dishwasher's bin with soap powder.

"Well, yeah." Amber gave him a duh expression. "If you messed up, she'd bitch at me 'bout it. She ain't said a word, so logically, whatever pooch was screwed, she did it."*** Raph grimaced at the mental image; some of the two other-worlders' expressions were absolutely disturbing. Still, she called it—the feud was over something Mercy did. No matter how upset he still was over Mercy's actions, though, he was tired of fighting—he just didn't know how to get past it.

"If we're goin' dere, dere'd betta be booze involved," he grumbled ducking for the cabinet under the sink. Amber was out of Scotch—something that literally pushed her to tears the other day—but despite Jonesing for her favorite poison, she was dutifully saving up instead of purchasing more. Fortunately, Daron took it upon himself to keep the family supplied with plenty of bourbon and decent beer in thanks for the family's efforts to avenge Kimber's death. Amber was a bit of a Scotch-snob but she definitely appreciated the gesture; bourbon wasn't Scotch Whisky, but it wasn't intolerable.

Over the first round, Raphael related the incident that drove him to push Mercy away. The whole time, Mercy's braided friend was silent, listening attentively. "So dat's da deal," the mutant finished up with a humorless laugh. "She got in da way—she knew I wouldn't hit 'er an' used dat against me. As if interferin' wa'n't enough, she had ta go an' manip-yu-late me like dat."

It was bad enough confessing that he was still torn up over Mercy's interference; the worst of it was something he wouldn't confess even with a barrel of bourbon in him. If it was as simple as her getting in the way or taking advantage of the vulnerability he shared with her, he wouldn't still be angry. No, the worst part that he was confused—confused about his feelings for Kimber, confused about his feelings for Mercy, confused about whether or not it was worth it to try again after he screwed up his first chance... Ever since he found himself facing undeniable proof of Kimber's death, Raph's heart, mind, and soul were torn every which way by guilt, fear, regret, and confusion. Before Kimber's death, he would have sworn—and accurately so—that he didn't love her, never loved her, and didn't see himself ever loving her. They were good friends—great friends—but they just didn't get along well enough for anything beyond being friends-with-benefits.

Now that she was dead, that truth was too horrible to accept. If he loved her, it would make his refusal to help her even more of a betrayal. On the other hand, loving her would mean he didn't use her, he didn't take advantage of her feelings for a bout of (admittedly mind-blowing) sex without considering the consequences. It would mean he didn't completely throw her away, and that they may have someday made up and become more than friends and rivals. No matter how much he deluded himself, though, the facts remained the same...as did his feelings, or lack thereof. He never felt for Kimber the things he felt for Mercy, but that changed nothing at all. How could he deserve another relationship when he already blew one to hell and back out of selfishness and fear?

"I find it hard to believe this is all 'cause she didn't obey you," Amber remarked dryly when it became clear no more information would come from him. "'at's more Leo's shtick than you. So it's more a matter 'a feelin' like she used your feelings against ya?—that she took advantage of ya?" He wouldn't meet her eyes, preferring to glare down into his glass, but nodded. "Have you asked Mercy about 'er reasons for what she did?" He shook his head in the negative. "Has she tried to get your side of the story?" A nod. "Didja talk to 'er about it, or 'd'ja Raph it all up?" For a Grammar Nazi, Raph thought with an unintelligible grumble, she certainly had a habit of making verbs out of non-
"What's da point—it wouldn't do any good. She made 'er choice an' talkin' it out ain't gonna change nothin'." Amber openly stared at him, brows knit in irritation.

"So instead of talkin' it out an' makin' up, yer feudin' over it." She gave a harsh snort of disbelief. "Of course. Why not? It worked so well for Donnie an' me, why shouldn't everyone else waste their time fightin' like idiots over their damn pride?" Raph went to argue but she cut him off. "Look, what you do with your relationship ain't any 'a my business, an' whatever ya choose, I ain't gonna hate 'cha over it. The way I see it, ya got a couple choices here." She slopped a couple more fingers of bourbon into her glass and bluntly related his options.

"If yer not willin' to work it out, break it off before she gets even more hurt—neither of you knuckleheads deserves this kinda drama, ne'er mind that it's your own faults. I'll be pissed at 'cha fer hurtin' 'er, but it's better to let 'er off easy before you break 'er heart entirely." Another swig of bourbon down the hatch, and a cringe at the sweet flavor. "On the other hand, if yer willin' to work it out, you man up, deal with it, an' move on."

"I don't wanna lose'er," he admitted sourly. "but I ain't gonna just drop it like it di'n't happen—dis's her fault, why should I grovel over her screw-up?!" Amber fixed a stern glare on him, seemingly intent on making him feel barely a fraction of his actual size.

"So you don't wanna leave 'er," she repeated sharply, "but you're not willin' to fix things unless she apologizes first? Never mind that she may not even know what she did wrong?" The hothead winced; when she put it like that, it sounded ridiculous. "In that case, ya got a third choice." She tossed back the rest of her bourbon, then snapped, "Strap on a wah-bag, whine it out, an' get over it—if ya really care about someone, ya don't dump 'em over a pissin' contest."

Raph gaped at the woman sitting across from him—stunned by her unexpectedly harsh response. When he finally found his tongue, all he could manage was, "A what bag?"

"When a horse's hungry," she explained tersely as she topped off his tumbler, "ya strap on the feedbag so it can eat. When a grown-ass man's pouting like a toddler, you strap on his wah-bag so he can get the whinin' out of his system." Suddenly realizing something, she winced and turned beet red. "That wasn't meant to sound sexual—just ignore the strap-on part." Raph choked. "Note to self," she added with a suspicious stare into the bottom of her glass, "bourbon's bad for my filter." … and I need'a get laid before I start really embarrassin' myself."

After a long, awkward silence consisting of Amber staring into her drink in horror and Raph gaping at her in equal horror, he finally found his tongue. "An' here I e'spected ya ta spout some mushy bullshit about communicatin' an' forgivin'," he remarked dryly. "Dat was..." he couldn't find a good enough descriptor and so settled for waving one hand in a 'you know' gesture.

"Harsh?" she suggested with a sheepish grin. "Yeah...it's not me—I'd rather 'a been all nice an' sweet, but you're not Donnie. Dee takes it hard if I don't buffer these things but if I sugar-coat it with you, ya might just choke on it."

"Damn right."

Dawn was on its way, but still, Mercy couldn't sleep. Too tired to stay awake, to upset to drift off, she stared listlessly at the pitted concrete ceiling overhead, thinking back on things she couldn't change.
She missed Raphael—missed his strong arms around her, his rough fingers digging through her hair, his scarred lips locked with hers. Wistfully, she recalled the times when she had to hide bite-marks on her shoulders and neck and the smug grins he’d shoot her whenever he caught her self-consciously tugging at her neckline. They’d agreed to take it slow, but had they taken it too slow? If she hadn’t always stopped him when he reached for the hem of her shirt or slipped his hands down her shorts, would they still be together? Would he still care for her enough to not push her away?

With a snort of disgust, she lurched out of bed. This was part of why she never took a chance on anyone before. During college when she wasn't under her mother's roof, she could have taken a chance, could have had a relationship, but chose not to. She’d seen proof enough in her lifetime—love hurt, it always hurt, and any moments of happiness never lasted as long as the pain that followed. She thought she was ready to move on—thought she was finally more than a scared little kid who got slapped around too much—but was she really? Was it a mistake letting Raph in like she did?

Mercy froze in the kitchen doorway. How did she make it there when she never intended to leave her stall in the barracks? She didn't even recall opening her door, much less stumbling down the corridor through the utility room. The black and white tiles of the kitchen felt chilly under her bare feet, grounding her in the moment. Maybe this was what she needed...maybe a cup of hot tea or something would help her sleep. This in mind, she padded over to the tea kettle and turned to rummage through one of the cabinets...only to realize she wasn't the only one driven to the kitchen at this late hour.

Raphael sat stiffly at the table, unmasked and stripped down to a pair of loose gym shorts. Clenching a glass of water like he intended to squeeze answers from it, he stared stubbornly down at the tabletop instead of at her. He never intended to run into her at this late hour—as if anyone ever intended to run into someone they were avoiding. He wasn’t sure why she couldn't sleep, but a small, pathetic part of him hoped it was the same reason he couldn't sleep: he missed her. After three whole weeks of being at odds, he missed her so much it hurt.

Though he started with his eyes downcast, they drifted upward against his will, slowly creeping up those damnably long legs to that always-messy hair. With every inch he covered, bits and pieces of the puzzle known as Mercy came together with ones he'd already fitted home. A deceptively feminine nightgown—powder pink with a ruffle at the hem—brushed her calves, defying her tomboyish nature. Forever mussed blonde hair stuck straight up on one side and was plastered down the other—a side-sleeper, then. Her full breasts, unbound by their usual torturous contraptions, hung heavy and natural behind the fabric, their peaks clearly visible through the soft cotton. As though feeling his eyes on them, she crossed her lean arms over her breasts, shifting on her feet.

"Hey." The hesitant greeting tore him from his silent berating of himself for ogling her like she was a slab of meat. "Rough night?"

"Yeah," he answered taking the out she offered him. "Couldn't sleep. Yerself?" She nodded distractedly, turning to stare nervously into the tea and coffee cabinet. Now that he saw her—actually looked at her without focusing on how upset he was—he could plainly see how their fight was affecting her. He never wanted this, never thought any further than how angry and hurt he was...it was the same mistake he made with Kimber. He swore on that rooftop, the night Mercy's favorite band became the soundtrack for her leap of faith into his arms, that he'd become a better man for her. A better man wouldn't make the same mistake over and over...and he certainly wouldn't sit around and wait for her to take responsibility when they both shared equal blame. It took him awhile, but he got it now—Mercy started the trouble but he was the one who spent weeks being an ass over it.

"Ya' seen the sugar?" Her sudden question startled him out of his thoughts, and he looked up in one
of his own. She held the glass shaker jar up by its base, wiggling it a little to indicate that it was empty.

"Yeah." Raph hoisted himself to his feet and lumbered into the pantry. Perhaps, he considered as he searched for the giant bag of sugar, lending her a hand would break the ice; perhaps by the time he found it for her, he'd have thought up a way to broach the subject with her.

Out in the kitchen, Mercy stashed the not-really-empty sugar jar behind a fern and steeled her nerves. What she was planning had two possible outcomes—it could go incredibly right and they could get back to being whatever they were before that night in the storage shed, or it could blow everything entirely. She might even lose Raphael for good if it went badly enough...but was losing him entirely really worse than winding up feuding like her idiot friend and Raph's brother? Hadn't she learned her lesson from how much it tore those two up? She glanced over into the pantry—Raphael stood with his back to her, searching the shelves and grumbling to himself. Damn the consequences—doing nothing would get them nowhere, and she was sick to death of being a scared little girl.

One moment Raphael was searching for the sugar and grumbling at himself about being an idiot. Then, with no warning whatsoever, someone tackled him from behind, shoved him into the shelf he faced. Training kicked in and he whirled about swinging up an arm to block his attacker—Mercy?!

He jumped backward in his surprise—whacking his carapace against the shelf he'd been searching—and bounced off from the impact.

Next thing they knew they were both on the floor of the pantry sprawled out and tangled up like a pair of abused power cords. Mercy's denim blue eyes were crossed and she clutched her scalp muttering profanities under her breath—great, she hit her head. At this point, Raph realized the worst...she was pinned...he was...was... His face flaming from their scandalous position he scrambled to sit up only to whack his head on the very shelf she banged hers on and fall helplessly back on top of her. This time he decided hiding his face in her shoulder, he would just lie there and sulk instead of proving himself entirely hopeless...again.

Mercy was furious. This was not what she planned—this was nothing like what she planned! How the hell did she manage to screw up what should have been a simple plan, even sleep-deprived and in a nightgown?! "You...uh...okay?" The muttered question drew her out of her thoughts and she blinked away the spots still dancing across her vision.

"I'll live," she answered sullenly staring hatefully up at the shelf that beaned both of them. "It's just my head—not like I was usin' it anyway, right?" Raph carefully eased himself up to his knees and she followed suit, leaning back on her palms. "I just—I just thought if I could get you to stop thinking...and start...feeling instead..." She trailed off in a scoff, shaking her head. "Whatever. It worked for Donnie an' Amber, but clearly, it ain't gonna work fer us."

As the blonde fell further and further into grumbling about herself, him, and everything in between, the mutant between her knees found himself speechless. Earlier that evening, Amber made a similar comment—it worked so well for us, why shouldn't everyone else do it? At the time he thought she was exaggerating. Now, he knew the truth...he needed to fix this, and pronto.

"Why'd ya get between me an' Lefty?" To the embarrassed blonde, his question came out of the left field; she ceased mussing her already mussed hair and stared at him in confusion. "Please." Her hand fell to her side, and she turned to stare at what tripped Raph—the sugar bag. Go forkin' figure.

"I know you...care for Kimber," Mercy admitted with pink tingling her cheeks. "I understand that and respect it—I'm not tryin'a replace 'er. It's just...she cared about Lefty—he was her friend, Raph—an' I know she wouldn't be happy seein' you beatin' im senseless unless he started it." The pink deepened to red, accompanied by an embarrassed cringe. "Even if she wouldn't care, I couldn't stand
seein' that—seein' you lose yerself in whalin' on someone who wasn't even gonna fight back." She finally met his eyes—all honesty and no condemnation. "Yer better'n that, Red. I know ya are. You were just so angry you forgot."

"Ya know I'll neva hit ya," he reminded seriously, "an' ya used dat against me."

"No, Raph," she corrected with weary eyes. "I used it for you. I knew if I didn't stop you, you'd regret it when you calmed down—you'd get angry at yerself, start punishin' yerself, an' you'd lock me out because you'd worry that you might end up hurtin' me next." Sometimes it made him nervous how easily she saw through him. Amber stared into blue, neither blinking or shying away, the amber subdued and the blue pleading for understanding. "I know you. I know you'd never hurt me intentionally—that you'd never hit me in your right mind—but you weren't in your right mind, Raph, an' when that happens, I don't know you won't hurt me! When that red haze drops down over your eyes, you can't always see what's right in front of you…I get it…I've been there…it was another lifetime, granted, but it ain't times I like thinkin' about."

"You..." He cleared the creak from his throat and tried again. "Ya thought I might turn on ya fer gettin' in da way…but ya did it anyway?" She nodded, turning away. It hurt hearing that she didn't trust him when he was in a rage, but he didn't really blame her. Heck, he didn't trust himself when he lost control, and he didn't have her reasons.

Her mother was an abusive witch, and the years under her thumb left Mercy afraid of everyone and everything; she was getting stronger, learning to trust and take risks, but there were bound to be moments of doubt. Now, this...despite her fear of him whaling on her next, she threw herself in the way—she willingly put herself in harm's way to protect others—Lefty from Raph and Raph from himself. It was something she and Kimber had in common, that determination to defend those they cared for, even at the risk of their own safety. In Kimber, the trait had annoyed him, convinced him she was just being reckless and stubborn; Mercy, though still reckless and stubborn, didn't elicit the same response.

Six months ago, he first met the snarky blonde only to be thrown for a loop without the slightest hint of apology. Donnie brought her home without warning his family, and his musclebound twin threw himself into putting the skinny blonde in her place before she could turn on them. After all, that delusional brunette—Kimber, he'd believed then—was already walking all over him. He didn't need her strung-out friend doing it too, or so he believed. Mercy was completely unimpressed by his posturing, though, and didn't give a damn about him until he badmouthed her friend.

Six months didn't seem that long, but so much had changed in that time. He wasn't sure when he first saw Mercy as anything more than an intruder—when he first started seeing the woman behind the attitude. Was it the day she barged through the front door half-carrying her battered friend, blood streaking her skin like war paint and blue eyes wild with fury and warning? Was it further back, when he ran across her in the tunnels arguing with herself over how to apologize for throttling him? Or, even before that, was it when she lied to Amber—claimed his insult was actually directed at her instead of the braided imposter—all to spare the other woman the hurt of being called a liar? He clearly recalled when he first started getting along with Mercy…but when did that tolerance change into attraction? No...when did that attraction...change into...

The first touch—surprisingly gentle fingers cupping the angular line of her jaw—startled Mercy. She allowed the rough-skinned hand to guide her back to face its owner, all the while feeling her heart racing in both fear and excitement. "Yer right." The admission was quiet, barely a rumble in his chest, but she heard it loud and clear. "I went too far, an' I knew it. I'm—" Red streaked across his cheeks, he cleared his throat, and turned to stare awkwardly off to the side, his hand falling away. "—you know." Mercy snorted in amusement and socked him lightly in the shoulder; as usual, the
blow hurt her more than him.

"Yeah. I'm you-know too." He met her eyes again, an arched brow expressing his confusion about why she was sorry; her expression was halfway between blah and deadpan. "I lied—the sugar jar's not really empty." It started as a single snort of laughter, but soon grew to mutual guffaws and wheezing. They really were a pair of idiots, weren't they? The hilarity didn't last long, though, and in its wake, a companionable silence grew. "I mist'cha, Raphie." Though the nickname annoyed him from anyone else, from her, it drew a lopsided smirk; he didn't even care which of his brothers she heard it from.

"Mist'chu too, Kid." Sinking back on his feet, he drew her closer and into his arms; Mercy complied without complaint, the hem of her nightgown riding up as she crawled up to sit astride his lap, her legs spread and resting alongside his. The pantry was silent, but both remembered another moment so much like this and the music it was set to.

Lips locked, tongues teasing and teeth nipping, they reveled in the moment with all they had. Work-roughened hands found the back of Raph's neck and hauled him closer. A rougher, larger pair found their way to Mercy's back, one sweeping up to tangle in her hair. Its partner trailed down to her hip in squeezing caresses, and for the first time in weeks, latched onto the ass that drove him out of his mind in a reverent squeeze. Wait. He felt around the full cheek in his hand, blindly searching for something he'd always felt there. Where was it…something was missing…what…? Before he could break their sloppy liplock and demand answers, a frantic squawk sounded nearby.

"Oh, gross, guys!" Mikey's disgusted shout startled the guilty pair apart and, like deer in the headlights, they turned to stare at him blankly. "Seriously?" the youngest whined. "We keep food in there! What is it with you creeps and the pantry?!"

"Don't knock it 'til ya try it, Tent-tastic!" Mercy's taunt drove a blush across the youngest's face. He was never gonna live down meeting his brothers on the roof with a raging hard-on, was he?! Finding himself surprisingly lost for a comeback, Mikey stomped out of the room grumbling about the heathens in the pantry.

"I'm tellin' Bree!" he hollered back, then slammed his door in a huff.

In the pantry, Raph and Mercy dissolved into snickers. When the laughter fell to silence, Raph stole another quick kiss and eased her up to her feet, taking his own the moment he was free. Hoisting her up into his arms, he carried her back into the kitchen, through the corridor to the Barracks, then into her bedroom. With only a moment's pause to shove her door shut with his heel, he carried her over to her bed and tossed her onto the mattress, grinning at how she bounced in place from the landing. She giggled—actually girly-giggled!—at his playfulness, but all amusement faded when he crawled up with her.

For a moment, Raph felt uncertain—worried he was going too far by inviting himself into the cradle of her thighs—but her blush and nervous smile told him he was welcome. As though they hadn't just crossed a line they'd avoided from the beginning, he leaned down, stealing her lips again. God, she smelled good…she always smelled like flowers, thanks to her super-girly taste in personal care products, but anytime they got close like this, her scent changed—it gained a second layer that was more taste than scent, something salty, musky, and earthy—and in his opinion, it was absolutely mouth-watering.

Mercy squirmed. This was new—necking, groping, and the occasional heavy-petting and grinding was old news for them, but never once had Raphael allowed her to just lay back and enjoy it. Every time before, she wound up on top, taking everything he had to offer and working for every bit of it. His excuse was that he was too heavy, that he might hurt her, but she always argued he wouldn't;
why, then, did he suddenly change his tune now? Of all the times to decide he wasn't going to squish her, why when she was in her nightclothes? The demand was on her lips when he released them, but it still went unsaid.

Lost in the sight and scent of his Mercy, Raphael cupped her chin, brushing his thumb along the pink blooming across her cheek. His vibrant eyes—that brilliant golden hazel no human could ever boast—trailed along her drooping neckline, up the smooth column of her throat, and fixed on her parted lips. His fingertips drifted to trace them, and he finally met her eyes again. "I won't hurt ya, Merse." The words were simple but delivered like a solemn vow. "I promise ya...I ain't gonna hurt ya like she did."

She. Mercy knew without a doubt who she was. She was the one who taught Mercy to fear love—She was the one who taught Mercy that love hurt and that men would lead her down the path to ruin—She was the one who still came between them every chance she got, left Mercy worried she was making a mistake in trusting Raph with her heart—She was everything Raphael never was and everything he could never be. Even knowing this, though, there were times Mercy had to remind herself of that deceptively simple fact. Even if they didn't work out, her heart was safe with Raphael; even if they eventually crashed and burned, she knew he'd never intentionally hurt her. Still...

"How can you know that?" she asked softly against the fingertips still at her lips. "How can you be so sure...sure you'll never..." She couldn't finish and turned away, but he caught her by the cheek and urged her to face him again.

"Because I know, Mercy." He rarely used her real name, her full name, and the utterance told her he was absolutely dead serious. "Hurtin' you like dat...no mattuh what I did, if I eva raised my hand to ya..." His eyes darkened and pulled away, rearing up on his knees again. "...it'd hurt me, too, Merse. Ya dealt wit' enough 'a dat in ya otha life...if I eva put ya through dat again, in dis life..." He shook his head, unable to finish the sentence but sure she could read between the lines. No matter how crazy things got, that was one thing he could always count on—she could always understand what he was trying to say even if he couldn't say it himself. Maybe, he considered with a small smile, she understood because she spoke his language...maybe she just filled in the blanks with what she'd leave out, never realizing how right she got it.

Raphael didn't do anything half-assed—if he did good, he excelled, if he screwed up, he blew it completely. He didn't get angry, he lost himself in rage. He didn't feel sad, he swallowed it up until he broke under the weight of it. Everything he did and felt went beyond the logical limits that others seemed to respect. He drowned in every emotion just like Mercy used to—he struggled under every thought and doubt and threw himself head-first into every action, no matter how much he knew he'd regret it.

For the first time in a very long time, Raph felt sure of something. Horrible as it sounded, and no matter how his guilt and grief tried to convince him, he knew he never loved Kimber—he never felt for Kimber what he felt for Mercy. She was always so sure love had to hurt, but now he had to agree...it did hurt...and he wouldn't change that at all. Without a little pain, you cannot appreciate pleasure; without first feeling sorrow, you cannot fully comprehend joy. Finally, he met her eyes again though he was sure she could see more in them than he was ready for her to see. If he ever hurt Mercy, he knew she'd probably forgive him eventually—that was just who she was, her very name demanded it—but he'd never forgive himself. Every time he saw her, he'd look into those big blue eyes of hers and recall how he filled them with fear...and that just might break him.

"Hey." Mercy's voice pulled him from the dark thoughts crowding his mind and he looked down at her again. Leaning back on one hand, she studied him silently, fingertips tracing the outside corners of his eyes. She'd never seen him without that scalp-covering mask before, and the faint traces of red
were eye-catching; even more so was the network of fine scars sprawling across his scalp. She couldn't wait to hear the stories behind each one and to offer in kind the stories behind all the scars this new body never bore. "I trust you, Raphael…an' I…” She flinched back, visibly struggling with getting her thoughts out. "Are we…okay?" With a faint quirk of his scarred lips, he nodded.

"We're okay." A wide grin spread over Mercy's face and she latched onto his shoulder, dragging him back down with her.

"C'mere, you," she teased settling back into the sheets. "Who said I was done with ya?" The rasp of fingertips on her bare hip ground her thought processes to a shuddering halt, and her eyes fairly bulged out of their sockets; she hadn't even noticed her nightgown ride up! "Uh…"

For a moment, Raph just watched her flounder in confusion, unsure what had her so freaked out. Then it hit him. The tantalizing musky scent was stronger than before—much stronger—and his fingers weren't petting some silky girly fabric, but warm, smooth skin. He devoutly anchored his hand at her hip, his cheeks blazing. "Yer commando," he deadpanned; her eyes scrunched shut, she nodded in confirmation.

"I don't wear 'em to bed," she admitted under her breath. "Ya gotta let it air out every now an' then— it's easier to just skip 'em for sleepin'."

"Yer naked unduh dere!" he repeated loudly as though he hadn't even heard her.

"Well, tell the world, why don't ya?!" she snapped at him, her nose wrinkled in indignation; thank goodness she was the only one still sleeping in the barracks, or there'd be a helluvan awkward conversation the next morning. "It's totally normal—some gals sleep naked, ya know! At least I'm wearin' somethin'!"

The bulky mutant shuddered, torn between yanking away from her and possibly getting an unintended eyeful and stubbornly refusing to move despite the naked skin he was lying on. As if he wasn't struggling enough to do the right thing, her scent grew stronger—spicier—and traveled from his lungs to his bloodstream. The flood of scent was accompanied by renewed warmth radiating from the body beneath his own. As though in mockery of his determination to be a gentleman, he felt a damp warmth seeping through his shorts. He refused to consider who the wet spot might have come from. Knowing wouldn't make it any easier on him; either way, one of them embarrassed themselves. He refused to contemplate the reason for Mercy's increasingly horrified cringe, and likewise the cloud of chemical come-ons filling his lungs. The stay or go debate just got a lot harder…and it wasn't the only thing. The swelling downstairs didn't go unnoticed, either, if Mercy's flaming cheeks and wide eyes were anything to go by.

'Please...if dere's a God...make da floor split open an' swallow me up!' His internal panicking ground to a sudden halt at the brush of soft fingertips on his wrist—the wrist clenching her bare hip like a lifeline. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, staring down at the nervous blonde. Her eyes searching his, she pried his fingers loose and eased it upward, inward, and in a final bout of courage she was sure she'd regret soon, pressed it palm-down to the top of her thigh—waiting for him to make the next move. Floored by her actions, her offer, Raphael gaped at Mercy, but she just gave him a weak smile.

"You told me once that love doesn't have to hurt," she reminded catching him by the jaw. "I'm startin' to believe you. Is that wrong?" Hazel eyes narrowed, nostrils flared, and his lips curled into a soft smile that should have looked out of place on his rugged face; he knew what she hid between the lines. Leaning on his right arm, he trailed his fingertips upward to the hem of her nightgown—and tugged it back down. He'd spend the rest of the night fighting his raging libido, but he knew it was the right decision. He already made that mistake once—jumped at a woman's offer for physical
union without thinking it over or talking it out—and it brought him only heartache. He knew Mercy wasn't going to let him go if he decided to chicken out like he did with Kimber, but he also knew she wasn't as ready as she'd have him believe. He wasn't a virgin, thanks to Kimber…Mercy never had a Kimber to break her in.

"Dere's a lotta wrong things in dis world, Merse," he answered, his voice low and husky, and shifted off of her to lie by her side. "We ain't one of 'em." Her lungs forgot their purpose; he turned down her offer, pulled away from her, but despite it, she knew he wasn't rejecting her. What that meant, though…. "What we got…" Raph sobered, tenderly brushing her messy blonde hair out of her eyes, his own heavy-lidded and soft. No...no cop-outs. He was tired of letting his grief and fear guide him, it had only steered him wrong time and time again. Mercy deserved the truth...he deserved the truth. "What I feel fer ya, Merse…" He ducked down to her, pressing his forehead to hers. "It ain't gotta hurt."

Love. Like so many of the sentiments that passed between them, it was unspoken but Mercy heard it loud and clear—love—he—he loved— She was floored by the silent confession—thrilled, terrified, torn between laughing, crying, and proclaiming the news to the world above them at the top of her lungs! Her eyes watery and her achingly-wide smile even more so, she lashed her arms around his neck as tightly as she could, unintentionally hauling him down into her cleavage.

"Me too, Raphie," she confessed hoarsely as he nuzzled along her clavicle to her neck. "Me too." A teasing growl, a pinch of teeth on her neck, and everything was right in the world; this time, though, Mercy contemplated leaving the love bite visible the next day.

Love was too precious to be hidden.

Chapter End Notes

* An ongoing thing apparently. Recall that Amber's old red car was called "Ol' Jumper" from Old Yeller, not because of any deep literary comparisons but because it had bad shocks and was horrid to drive on rough terrain. Now she's christened the scooter Donnie refurbed for her as "Dorian Grey" because it's way older than it looks and has been painted a lovely dove grey—her favorite color being grey.

**HCF – (Cutting and pasting here from Wikipedia because I am to technology as Leo is to toaster) "In computer engineering, Halt and Catch Fire, known by the assembly mnemonic HCF, is an idiom referring to a computer machine code instruction that causes the computer's central processing unit (CPU) to cease meaningful operation, typically requiring a restart of the computer." It's reportedly been transferred to more modern use out of a taste for geek-humor. Consider this to mean "Donnie's brain just blew up."

*** NOT a literal remark—no dogs were harmed in this sentence. As mentioned in previous notes, 'screwed the pooch' is just an awkward little Midwestern slang phrase for 'made a mistake of epic proportions.'

#Basshunter – "Every Morning." Canonically, Donnie prefers classical music but that's more than a little stereotypical. Geniuses don't just like classical music—they're not
some higher form of being that is immune to human vices like kickass music and junk food. Heck, I grew up with one who was a total metal-head before he baked his brains to uselessness. (Despite the stigma, geniuses can be total idiots, too.) Anyway, head-canon maybe, but Donnie always struck me as a closet-fan of electronica, techno, and jazz along with the usual classical attributed to him. Lastly, this scene was loosely based on something in real life: when Cold and I first moved in together, I tended to shut off any music I thought was 'geeky' or 'girly' anytime he came into the room. (Cascada, the Rasmus, etc) Then I realized he was gonna bitch anytime I played anything but Ozzy and Rammstein, decided he could just friggin' suffer, and started turning it up to drown out his whining. XD Second song is Ray Charles' "Come Rain or Come Shine."

##Michael Nyman and Ludovico Einaudi are two of my absolute favorite modern classical composers. You can hear Nyman's piano work on the soundtrack of the movie "The Piano," and reportedly Einaudi contributed to the soundtrack for the movie "Dr. Zhivago." A recommendation for each would be, in order, "The Heart Asks Pleasure First" and "Nuvole Bianche" - ESPECIALLY recommend the second one, it always makes me want to write Bev and Leo! Also, Fanny Hill by John Cleland...because porn isn't a new concept at all! ;D
Chapter Summary

Donnie gets a helluva wakeup; Amber has no shame. Mikey makes things weird - Amber and Donnie have fallen in a state of mutual weirdness - record scratch. Amber is oblivious; Donnie is equally oblivious and jumps to conclusions without a parachute; Amber doesn't realize it and lets him fall. Mercy and Bree only want to help; Amber's a Scotch-snob and gets totally wasted. 

Drunk Amber. Mercy proves that Donnie's been an ass; he remembers; Amber wakes up and admits they've both been asses. Dream Donnie's finally ready to Remember.

Chapter Notes

So, Folks, I hope this note comes out clear despite how crazy things have been. During my weekend trip to Branson I got really sick; this whole month has been pretty ICK in the Chance-Thomas household. I've had to take a sabbatical on account of that illness - minor, thank God, but it resulted in an ER visit, half-a-month of drunk-walking and brain fog, and a big scare after Garth's brain abscess. It's been messing with how I type among other things. TBH, I'm still not at full (regular) health yet as of posting this chapter I THOUGHT I already posted, and still feeling pretty crappy for the most part, but I intend to continue my (slow) work on the end of Part II of this story.

I have an honest question for my readers and really hope someone will answer this...I’ve received a few statements regarding the portrayal of accents in dialogue, mostly from non-US readers, as I understand it. As a devout follower of Mark Twain (among others) and a personal believer in the use of Colloquialism in writing, I write out characters' speech as it's pronounced to accurately portray their speech and mannerisms. (Except 'Scotched' speech - it's written out as found on the net, don't blame me for that being hard, it's a pain all on its own.) Have been given statements by some folks that this habit - of writing 'as spoken' rather than 'what's spoken' makes the dialogue confusing and hard to get through in large amounts. (Read "last few chapters have had large amounts of colloquialism.") This, unfortunately, is a deeply ingrained part of how I read and write and my college Creative Writing classes didn't give me any cause to go against it; if anything, my professors reinforced and improved it rather than tried to train it out of me. Colloquialism is, after all, part of writing, like Characterization and Plot-building - some writers apply it to the whole story, some like me, only to dialogue.

That said, I have a question for you...has the way I write out dialogue been negatively affecting your reading of the story? Is it difficult to get through because of the rampant (intentional) misspellings? Or has it been easy to get past? I'm posting a poll for your responses and would appreciate your answers. I'm not going to change my writing method any, but if enough people vote against Colloquialism in dialogue, I WILL be leaning less on it in Part III and it WILL be less used in Part III. Chapters of Parts I & II will likely NOT be altered because going back and correcting typos in documents no
longer in the Manager is a pain I'm not paid enough for. (I will state, however, if you've had trouble with the dialogue, nothing personal, just do yourself a favor and stay away from "The Treasury of American Humor" and Mark Twain's Short Stories...this is NOTHING compared to what you'll read there...some parts of the Treasury even make MY head hurt and I'm use to colloquialism. Accents change over the years, especially in the Midwest, and what once passed for "Ozarks/Missourian" is now hard for Missourians to comprehend.) Poll can be found at the top of my profile HERE: ~ghostofachance13#.

I'm normally careful to define words/phrases that don't get a lot of use, but in the future, defined words AND passages with lots of defined words will be marked with – at the end of the word or first sentence. Dedicated to any and all who decide to take time out of their day to vote on the question above. Also dedicated to Wolf for being so helpful with the Suggested Listening! I started including Suggested Listening because I was coming up with it by habit; now that it's a normal thing, I tend to just draw a complete blank. :O

See the end of the chapter for more notes


40: Tattoos and Memories

August 2nd, 2016, about 10 am

The first thing to register in Donatello's mind was warmth; the second, something soft trailing across his skin. At first, he wanted nothing more than to return to his dream—it was a good one, after all, featuring a certain brunette, a clear creek on a hot day, and not a stitch of clothing between them. The gentle touches making their way down his plastron insisted, though, and by the time they reached the hem of his boxers, his eyes were blearily cracking open.

"Wondered when you'd wake up," Amber teased tracing along his waistband as he blinked at her. A mere month ago, he'd have been embarrassed as heck to see her so close to his lap in the morning, especially after a dream like the one still dancing behind his eyelids. Now, however, he knew her secrets—intimately—and he didn't worry quite as much. "G'mornin', Darlin'."

"Morning," he replied somewhat hoarsely, reaching for her cheek; she leaned into the caress, closing her eyes. His breath caught in his throat at the hand rubbing over the bulge in his boxers; a pair of moss green eyes opened and met his, smirking. "Come'ere."

"When're you gonna let me return the favor?" she asked but didn't resist. Not long after, the question was forgotten entirely, along with all other capacity for speech. After all, it was hard to even remember her own name when her Donnie threw himself into spoiling her.

Eleven o'clock found the genius and his well-sated lover at the kitchen table, flirting over coffee and cereal. Normally, Donatello had next to no difficulty keeping his eyes on hers as opposed to other more interesting body parts, but today, he was really struggling. He fully blamed her shirt—a very low cut garment that bared the entirety of Kimber's hated tattoo—and couldn't stop blushing into his
coffee. Amber normally kept the ink covered, and he couldn't help but wonder what caused her to abandon that modest habit.

A flash of light and a click startled him from his preoccupation with nuzzling her neck. A quick glance at the source revealed Michelangelo toting a battered digital camera and grinning like a lunatic. "We need'a picture for posteriority!" the youngest exclaimed, and before his brother could inquire—or correct his grammar, added, "Say pizza!"

Over the next few minutes, the couple shyly went along with Mikey's demands, one lost in thought and the other blaming the event on Mikey's longtime meddling. After all, harmless flirtation aside, the youngest had been trying to throw them together practically since the beginning. Snap after snap rang through the air marking photos of the couple in each other's arms, flirting, and generally being a pair of sickeningly sweet goofs. Finally, the last photo was taken: Amber seated at the table, chin pillowed on one hand and dragon tattoo clearly visible, and Donnie standing behind her, leaning on the back of her chair with a wide grin.

"That's perfect!" Mikey beamed viewing the photo on the screen. "Absolutely perfect! Now when it's all done, we'll have this to remember it by!"

Donnie's every thought process screeched to a staggering halt. Unbidden, he suddenly recalled the reason he fled the dinner table the night before. Amber was leaving today—she 'checked out places' with Bree and was leaving this afternoon for the preliminary paperwork. Mikey and Amber were already onto other subjects, bantering about something or other, but Donnie felt frozen inside. He could still taste her on his lips, could still hear her soft moans as he drove her out of her mind, could still feel her warm arms wrapped around his neck as they lost themselves in one another…but she was leaving as though it didn't even matter.

For the second time in as many days, Amber and Mikey were startled by the older turtle retreating to the Lab without a word. "Was it somethin' I said?" Mike asked.

"I don't think so," Amber answered softly, eyes trained on the closed door her lover disappeared behind. "I don't know what's goin' on…but I'm'onna find out."

A soft rapping sounded at the Lab door, jarring Donatello from his thoughts. "Yeah?" he called out, not really up for company but knowing the person on the other side would likely invite themselves in anyway. His Lab was his retreat, after all, but it wasn't held sacred by anyone but himself. Sure enough, the door creaked open, and he forcibly kept his eyes on the mangled collection of parts scattered across the workbench. Perhaps if he looked busy enough, they'd leave without bothering him.

"Hey is for horses," he retorted instead of following their usual greeting. Amber blinked at him in confusion, shifting nervously in the doorway. "Well, come in already—you're already halfway there."

"R-Right," she mumbled and hurried over to his side, dropping a grocery bag on the workbench beside him; it landed with a hollow thunk and he shot her a raised eyebrow. "Bree dropped this by the pizza parlor yesterday," she explained softly perching on the edge of the workbench. "I forgot to pass it along last night—she called it Mocha-spresso bark, said it's in thanks for fixing her computer last week."
"I told her no thanks were needed," he commented dryly staring down into the shell of the power control box. "It just needed a good defragging—nothing to it." For a time, no words were spoken—he avoided her eyes and put on as though tinkering with the wiring, she stared down at him in blatant confusion, trying to puzzle out his odd behavior. Finally, the silence was broken.

"What's goin' on in that head of yours?" she asked reaching out to brush the pad of her thumb over his cheek; he shrugged off the gesture, and she winced in hurt. "Talk to me, Dunnie—you're being very…passive aggressive, an' I don't know why! What'd I do?"

"You know very well what," he retorted finally meeting her eyes. "You're leaving today Amber—How do you expect me to feel about that?!" Any other person might have seen the unspoken, but Amber always was, and always would be, a complete idiot where Donnie was concerned; she didn't understand what was left unsaid.

"I leave every day," she reminded him, bewildered. "I leave every time I head to work, and I always come back—what makes today any different?" Donnie broke eye contact, scrubbed one palm over his scalp and down his neck, and heaved a frustrated sigh.

"You know very well why it's different," he insisted, but couldn't keep the anger in his eyes. "You don't have to go, Amber," he reminded, hating himself for how weak his voice sounded. "Stay here—with us—with me!"

"I've got to, Dee," she argued, still missing the obvious entirely. "We talked about this—until I've done this, I'll never be free—It's gonna hurt like Hell but I've gotta do it!"

"Then just go!" he snapped turning away to stare heatedly at the security feed displays. "Just leave already—it's not like there's anyone keeping you here!" Amber froze, stunned and hurt. Surely he didn't…did he…? "GO!" The shouted insistence made her jump back. Clearly, he wasn't going to listen anymore, she realized in regret, and stood to leave.

"I'll see you later, Hon," she promised quietly, laying her palm on the surface of his carapace and hating how it made him tense. "Whatever's going on, we'll get through it. Goodbye." Without responding, he silently counted out her footsteps leaving the Lab, listened for the door to close then for his bedroom door to open and close. Not long after, she showed up on the security feed before him dressed for work and slowly making her way to the nearest subway access.

She was leaving…after everything he did for her, she was leaving him the moment she was no longer trapped underground. Why did that hurt so much? Why was he so surprised by it? Could it really have turned out any other way? By the time the hurt and anger started to fade, it was clear that he'd need to start over completely with the control panel. As many pieces as it was in after it hit the wall, not even he could repair it. Lost, heartbroken, he sat tensely perched on the cot she once slept in, his head in his hands, swept under by memories of dreams he couldn't recall ever dreaming.

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3 pm, a bar in Queens

Three women walked into a bar: a spunky brunette, a skinny blonde, and a sulking woman with greying brown hair. It sounded like the beginning of a bad joke, but none of the women were laughing—they were there for one reason and one reason only.

"You're sure you wanna go through with this?" Bree asked Amber softly as a waitress approached. "It might be easier to go through with sober." The older woman just nodded; she had incredibly high pain tolerance, but this was a whole 'nother ball game.
"What can I getcha?" the waitress chirped, and Mercy sent the other two a scrutinizing glance.

"I'll just take sweet tea—no booze," she answered, and Bree seconded the request. "This one, however," she added slinging one skinny arm around Amber's shoulders and triggering an embarrassed blush. "We need'a get'er smashed. She's a Scotch-snob—any suggestions?" Not long after, the chipper waitress returned with a tray of drinks, two completely innocent and one absolutely reeking of what smelled like several varieties of alcohol. The stench curled Amber's nose hairs and made her stomach throw tantrums…but if it did the trick, wouldn't that be worth it?

"If this kills me," she warned Mercy dryly, "I'm'a haunt yer ass."

"'long as I don't wind up spewin' pea soup. Chug it a'ready—it stinks."

"Pea soup's possession, Dingbat," Amber grumbled, fixing the glass with a suspicious and wary glare. "Well," she muttered lifting it to her lip, "Down the hatch, be ready to catch."* The first tentative sip made her choke, and she had to force herself to swallow. "Dear God!" she rasped staring down at the glass in horror. "is shit tastes like Tussin!"

"Tough noodles," Mercy drawled. "We've got twenty minutes to get you hammered—grow a pair an' hurry up."

Maybe there was something to be said for facing things sober after all…

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5 pm, the Lair

A loud scuffling at the front door drew Donatello from his ruminations. The Lab floor was no longer mined with bits and pieces from the control box, but he hadn't had the heart to move on beyond that point yet. Hoping and dreading the source of the racket outside, he hurried to the door and popped his head out to look…only to gape in absolute disbelief.

Amber was back—clearly just shy of drunk and leaning on Mercy for support. The blonde led her inebriated friend to her and Donnie's bedroom, kicked the door open, and they disappeared inside. Confused, he followed, listening in on the hushed conversation.

"Nez-time," Amber slurred as Mercy eased her down onto the bed, "I'm'a stay sober fer-it—tha' wiz crap..."

"No one said it'd be easy," Mercy reminded bluntly dragging the trashcan over by the bed for easy access. "Don't think I've ever seen ya drunk—this's hilarious."

"'m no' drunk," Amber argued sourly. "'m fuggin' blootert!" Without further ado, the wasted brunette passed out completely.

"I'm'a just pretend I know whatcha said," the blonde grumbled at her unhearing friend. At this point, Mercy noticed Donnie standing in the doorway, eyes wide in disbelief. "Sorry 'bout this mess," she teased gesturing to the woman sprawled across the bed. "She's got high alcohol tolerance, so we kinda had to go overboard. Hopefully, she can handle the rest of the appointments sober."

"…appointments?" Donnie asked lowly, his brow creasing behind his mask. "What appointments? Didn't she sign all the paperwork today?"

"What paperwork?" Mercy echoed in confusion. Donnie's eyes drifted down to the brunette already snoring on his bed.
"For...her new place...she said she was doing that today..." It took a while of staring at him like he spoke French, and an even longer while of trying to convince herself he wasn't actually wearing his 'feud face' again—and failing miserably—but the truth became clear to Mercy.

"You thought she was moving out," Mercy demanded gruffly. "Did she say she was moving?" He shook his head but didn't answer. "Did you ask her if she was moving, or'd ya just assume it?" His answer was a wince. As if they didn't go through this enough already...Without another word, Mercy stomped over, grabbed him by the cheek, and hauled his protesting self over to the bedside. Without even letting him go, she yanked up Amber's shirt and shot him a pointed glare.

At first, Donatello was horrified by the fact that the brunette was being exposed without her knowledge, then by the fact that she was clearly braless...then it hit him that the dragon in her cleavage was clearly changed. The darkest bits of black ink were slightly faded, and blisters covered the entire surface of the tattoo. Seeing that he was finally realizing the truth, Mercy filled in the rest of the blanks for him.

The tattoo was an unpleasant reminder for all of them—a reminder of Kimber's bad choices and her eventual death, and a reminder of the ordeal just past. The brunette stuck with it couldn't bear wearing it much longer, and so with the help of Briallen, searched out a reputable laser removal parlor. "The first session was today," Mercy finished up, "an' she was so freaked about a stranger seein'er tits she had to get plastered first. Once the worst is faded, she's gonna get a cover-up done."

"She's..." He hesitated, unwilling to acknowledge the fear but even less willing to let it control him. "She's not leaving?"

"Dumbass," Mercy snapped at him. "You're stuck with'er. She's too friggin' chicken to say it yet, but she loves ya, she wants to be with ya, an' 'til ya get sick of'er an' kick'er out, she ain't goin' anywhere. You two're stuck with each other, so start talkin' a'ready, the drama's drivin' everyone nuts!" With a final grumbled oath the blonde stomped out of the room, leaving the bewildered mutant staring down at the passed out woman in wonder.

He should have seen this coming...shouldn't he? Or...or did he?

"You've got to be frying in that sweater, Braids." Amber winced, staring through the pile of towels she was folding. Despite his best intents, Donnie found himself studying her silently—the shadows under her eyes, the pale grey streaks in her braids, the shakiness of her hands as she went about folding linens—she fascinated him in a way that completely defied logic. Amber wasn't the most attractive woman, at least not according to what society viewed as attractive, but to him, she was lovely—lovely, and so far out of reach.

"It's only March, Dee," she insisted with an anemic smile. "There's a good few months left before it gets hot, right?" Right before his eyes, she reached up, yanked the sweatshirt's neckline higher, and reached for another towel to fold. "Back home, we'd be battening down the hatches right now, dodgin' thunderstorms...it's nice havin' mild weather this time'a year." Again, she tugged her neckline higher with a shaky hand; Donnie recognized the gesture easily this time.

"It's only a tattoo, you know." She froze, eyes wide and fastened on the faded lavender towel in her lap. Her throat worked around a forced swallow, and she shook her head.

"It's more than that," she admitted softly, fingers clenching the worn terrycloth. "It's a reminder of what happened to—to Kimber—it's proof of her mistakes, and proof that I
don't really belong in this world..." Haunted green eyes met his, and she shook her head weakly. "Every time I see that tattoo, I can't keep from wondering how long I'm here for—what's keeping me here...and it's..." She trailed off, cleared her throat, and threw herself back into her task. "It's a reminder to you, too—I've seen how it reminds you that you weren't able to save Kimber. It wasn't your fault, an' I hate seein' you suffer for it. If coverin' it up'll spare ya that, then I'd rather fry in a sweater."

"Maybe you could get it removed in time?" the genius suggested adjusting his glasses. "There've been some incredible advances in tattoo removal over the last decade or so—especially laser removal. —Or you could get a cover-up done, instead." Heat bloomed in his cheeks as she fixed an incredulous stare on him. "Y-You know, my brothers' tattoos were my work—I could—you know—uh..."

"Are you suggesting I let you tattoo over the lizard in my cleavage?" the brunette teased as the heat in his cheeks went supernova. Of course, he realized belatedly and swallowed noisily, in order to ink over the tattoo, he'd have to see her unclothed chest... which meant...oh dear Lord, surely — "I might just take you up on that someday if the offer stands." Her admission startled him.

"Y-You wouldn't—"

"Honestly, Dee," she admitted with a dry smile, "I'd trust you with my rack more'n anyone else around here."

"I's rude'a stare at a lass's diddies uninvited, Speccy." The sudden remark—gruff and much more brogued than usual—startled Donatello from the memory. Sure enough, Amber stared up at him askance but was clearly still too tired and drunk to cover up the breasts still on display.

"S-Sorry," he stammered and pulled the sheet up for her. She rolled her eyes but accepted it, draping it over herself and wincing when it brushed her blistered skin.

"So you forgot suggestin' it," she confirmed dryly, "an' I forgot to remind ya." He nodded, tugging at his neck and staring awkwardly off to the side. Maybe she wasn't as drunk as he thought; she was speaking pretty clearly now. Maybe he was just getting used to her odd mannerisms, maybe she always talked like she was drunk? "I dunno about you, but I'm sick'a the fightin'. Kin we just agree to start talkin' from now on? Seriously? I'm an idjit where you're concerned but talkin' it out would'a prevented this whole mess from happening."

"Yeah," he admitted with a weak smile. "We're a pair, huh...I agree we need to start talking more and fighting less."

"Hear, hear." Though it was still early in the evening and they always had a late start to the day, both were exhausted from the emotional arguments. She clumsily scooted over, and Donnie crawled into bed next to her. "I've never been drunk before...think I'll pass on a replay. Tech chewed me out an'e was gay anyway, so no need'a be awkward over showin' the goods. Go figure."

"I take it you're just fading the darkest bits then opting for a cover-up?" he asked, smoothing his fingertips over her frizzy scalp. She confirmed the statement, leaning into his touch.

"Anything to add?" she asked meeting his eyes again curiously. A thousand confessions were poised on the tip of his tongue—confessions, promises, all manner of admissions that he wasn't ready to voice. I'm sorry—I'm an idiot—I missed you, I need you, I love you—but he held them all back. There would be time to air all those secrets, after all, and that time wasn't now. Instead, he teasingly
"Will the cover-up have a gecko?" She gave a snorted laugh.

"*The Gal with the Gecko Tattoo,*" she chuckled elbowing him in the side. "Sounds like some weird-ass crime novel." The room previously filled with tension echoed with laughter, giggles, and giggle-snorling as the awkward couple cuddled in the darkness. Not long after, one of those voices was replaced by louder-than-usual snores as the owner passed out again, intent on sleeping off the terrible booze. As his perplexing lover snored into his side, Donatello studied her sleeping face silently, thinking hard about how to avoid a recurrence.

He and Amber were used to trouble—used to finding themselves bogged down by unending drama and crises—but was it really always going to be like that? Could there really be a future where they didn't have to fight tooth and nail for every moment of happiness? Maybe...maybe things really were changing for the better...maybe he didn't have to worry about losing her after all. As he dozed off with his lover tucked against his side, he dreamt of another life—an other world—and strange dreamlike meetings that he was beginning to recall.

Donatello and Amber first met in dreams but perhaps they weren't destined to always be separated outside of them.

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**A grassy moonlit knoll**

Starlight paints the turf silver and white; moonlight drapes pale light over the naked lovers sprawled out on their favorite crazy quilt. Fire gleams from her hair, and warmth shines in his eyes, both reveling in their freedom and closeness.

"Ah've Mistchu, Dee," Amber murmurs thickly against his lips, her hands eagerly roaming his shoulders and arms. "Wilcam hame—be'n 'way too long 'gain, ya sook—nae be'n by fer a nip'er a bosie...wha's a lass ta think?"

"I've had a lot on my mind," the genius admits nuzzling a path downward to her bare bosom—a bosom untainted by ink or blisters. The realization gives him pause; why would her breasts be inked or blistered? "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, *mi sol y cielo.*"^^ The foreign endearment is punctuated by gentle nips, and those nips answered with soft sighs. "You've told me I need to remember."

"Yes," Amber answers catching him by the jaw and tracing the dimple in his cheek. Her teasing thick brogue falls away leaving uncharacteristically careful speech. "Until you remember, you'll never know the truth—remembering will lead us on the path toward that truth, but blocking it out keeps us frozen in place, frozen in time."

"Maybe I like how we are," he points out weakly. "The way you put it, remembering would change everything...but I don't want everything to change!"

"Change is the only constant in life," the brunette reminds gently as his palms smooth up and down her bare legs—legs he's invited himself between. A playful gleam in her eyes triggers a smile in his own. "If we cannot progress, we can only regress. Do you really think knowing the truth could drive us apart?"

"They say curiosity killed the cat," he reminds only half teasing.

"—but satisfaction brought it back." He blinks at the familiar statement. "Remembering
will change everything, but it won't be immediate—everything will happen at its own pace. We'll be stronger for—" Her insistence falls short in a pleasured cry as he slides home, and a smug grin splits his face. No matter how many times they share their bodies in this strange dream world, she is always stunned, surprised at being able to feel him the way she does. He long ago gave up on trying to understand it—some things logic simply couldn't explain, and the smooth, thick legs locking around his thighs and hauling him closer are two of those things.

"Amber...Honey..." He hesitates, poised on the brink of something that could make or break them. Grey-green eyes lock with his, encouraging and pleading. "I—I want to remember...please help me?" Tears welling in her eyes, she pulls him down to meet her lips—his arms wrap around her shoulders from beneath, and she holds his head tenderly to her breast. He can feel and hear her heart pounding, and wonders how much of this is really a dream.

"If you would remember," she whispers as they gently rock together, "you must forget the lies you've told yourself. You must discard your beliefs of our past before the truth can become clear...and when you do, Darlin', I'll be here, just as I always have been."

**NOTES**

*Mocha-spresso bark* - a Chance family holiday staple based around simple chocolate dipped espresso beans. 1: grind up 1 bag espresso beans as coarsely as possible or beat the crud out of the bag of beans with a hammer until you have gravel-sized fragments. 2: Melt 1 bag Ghirardelli dark chocolate melting wafers and one bar of cheap-ass almond bark type melting chocolate. Combine both and mix well. 3: Slowly stir coffee gravel into the molten chocolate until it's visibly gritty and chunky, reheating as necessary. 4: Pour the mud into a baking pan lined with wax paper, spreading into a sheet about ¼" thick, then chill overnight. When it's solid, remove from pan and break into chunks. Alternatively, you can let it solidify most of the way then slice it into bite-sized pieces with a pizza cutter or mini-cookie cutter. Store covered bark at room temperature for up to a week or refrigerate in a sealed bag for longer. If your family is as crazy as mine, you can substitute regular crappy decaf coffee beans for espresso to minimize caffeine-induced fisticuffs.

"**"Down the hatch, be ready to catch"** – basically means have a bucket ready in case it decides to come right back up.

"***'is shit tastes like Tussin!'" – she's comparing it to cough syrup.

#"Nes-time, I'm'a stay sober fer-it—tha' wiz crap" – 'Next time, I'm gonna stay sober for it—That was crap!' This is an unholy mashup of Ozarks-Midwestern twang and Scotch-ness with a little extra slurring for good measure.

#'#m no' drunk, 'm fuggin' bloopert!'" – I'm not drunk, I'm fuckin' bloopered! [Blootered= Scotch slang for 'very drunk']

###I's rude'a stare at a lass's diddies uninvited – It's rude to stare at a woman's breasts uninvited. (Diddies – Scotch slang for breasts)

^*Gecko tattoo* – this is a reference to chapter 37's smutilicious scene. "The Gal with the Gecko Tattoo," I'm sure you realized, is also a reference to the book "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo."

^^ "Ah've Mistchu, Dee. Wilcam hame—be'n 'way too long 'gain, ya sook—nae be'n by fer a
nip'er a bosie…wha's a lass ta think?" – I've missed you, Dee…welcome home. You've been away too long again, you (sook= Scotch, 'big softy') Haven't been by for a (nip or a bosie, Scotch – kiss or a cuddle). What's a lass to think? [Readers may recognize this from Amber's mumblings in the beginning of chapter 29: Only Time.

^^^Mi sol y cielo – Spanish endearment, literally "My sun and sky"

Chapter End Notes

Readers may recongize the title of this chapter from the lyrics for "Good Riddance/Time of Your Life" by Greenday.
41: Standing on the Borderline

Chapter Summary

Amber has a freaky dream about Aaron; Mercy is a horrible liar; Amber gets grumpy because she's missing Donnie, who is out at Casey's Farmhouse for a trip with his brothers.

Mercy gets a rude awakening at Red Fern, makes things awkward, then runs like a pussy.

Bree is stressed; Leo is a worrywart; Bree suffers for his worrying.

(Oh...Mikey, you nut.) Awkward brotherly bonding goes awkwardly, Amber makes it even more awkward.

Shit hits the fan; Amber's brain breaks; she has to make a hard decision, and the meddling invisible weirdo isn't helping any.

Up next, the Trip to Willsdale and some resolution in the last chapter of "Part II: This Time Imperfect." [TTI] Will be followed by the beginning of "Part III: Between the Raindrops." [BtR]

Chapter Notes

I must profess I am not the first person to use 'Stinkbug' as a nickname for Leonardo—that honor goes to Padawnjinx from her delightfully-written AO3 fic Vigilance. That one's a heartbreaker, Folks, but a well-written heartbreaker—be prepared to cry at the end. Considering Bree's determination to 'dislike Leo because it's her job' means nicknames like that fit pretty well with her...especially when you consider her distaste for profanity!

I've normally been pretty good about including definitions at the end of each chapter for the 'awkward' words, but they haven't always been noted UNTIL the end. In the future - and once I've completed the past-chapter edits, in previous chapters - defined words AND passages with lots of defined words will be marked with – at the end of the word or first sentence.)

Currently "Part II" of this story is complete, even though it's not all posted yet, and I've been going through previous chapters to make a few small changes to the drafts—deal with a few plot holes or errors, get a few characters and their habits more constant, and beef up a few skimpy scenes, mostly. Once I reach the end of "Part I," I'll update those chapters so you can see the changes IF you feel like going back and re-reading, and again, when I reach the last chapter in "Part II" I've posted, I'll update those chapters; until then, all changes are in drafts only and not posted for public viewing.

The next chapter marks the end of "Part II: This Time Imperfect" and it's pretty intense in places, as it will be followed by the beginning of "Part III: Between the Raindrops." There WILL be non-dream sex in Part III of the story, so expect smut!

Both this chapter AND the next are pretty long chapters, and this one's got a pretty rough spot near the end because Amber's brain breaks - everything she's dealt with so far finally comes to a head for her, and she winds up pretty hard to understand. As always, when speech gets weird, I define the weirdest stuff at the very end for reading ease, and the "Amber's brain broke" dialogue especially is defined/translated at the end for reading ease.

For anyone curious, I'm still in recovery from that ear infection, still dealing with
dizziness and coordination problems from it, but have been mostly healthy...until my
daiht piercing got infected. I've had headaches from it every day this week especially
Sunday, but it's starting to clear up. If the inner ear problem is still an issue when
December hits, I'm probably going to get it checkeout again just in case, since it's been
an issue all month. Other than that, and a day-visit to Cold's mother (and her umpteen
dogs, whom I'm unfortunately horribly allergic to) things have been pretty calm around
here. Just been working on writing and editing, and trying to stay afloat. Thanks for
asking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The poll—and question—regarding Colloquialism in dialogue is still open and the
poll, at least, will remain open until I post the last chapter of Part II; votes in the poll,
reviews/comments for chapters 40 and onward, and PMs will all be counted , but
I'm not counting previous chapters or conversations. So far we've only gotten 'comment'
and 'review' answers; using the poll would make things easier, but if it really bugs ya,
I'm not gonna go all 'school teacher who found undated homework' on ya...even though
I left a bloody link to make it easier...sigh... Anyway, I'm patient to a fault so I'll accept
and count any answers I get that are delivered in the above-mentioned manners. As of
posting, I've received only 'keep being weird' votes and no one who's had problems with
the dialogue has spoken up...please, people, if it's a problem, I need to know, otherwise
nothing's gonna change. (If, for some odd reason, you're worried about being
ostracized or maybe chased with a pitchfork by a crazy writer, relax—I'm not upset, I
know my writing style isn't for everyone, and I'm too bloody lazy to hold a grudge. Just
make your voice heard, I suck at reading minds unless you're a cat. Cats are easy, they
usually just want fed.)

Suggested Listening: AFI "Demo—Synesthesia," 3 Doors Down "Let me be Myself," Breaking
Benjamin "Angels Fall," Lifehouse "Hanging by a Moment"

41: Standing on the Borderline

Dreams aren't known for making sense, but this one takes the cake. Empty beer cans carpet the floor
and the whole double-wide reeks of uncleaned litter boxes and piled trash. From her shadowed
corner, Amber scans the dark parlor in dismay, her eyes ultimately drawn to the lump curled up
under a black Granny Square afghan on the even more lumpy sofa.

Aaron. She flinches at the sight of him. He's always been lazy about grooming beyond the usual
showering and hair washing, and he always refuses to shave unless threatened with physical
violence...this Aaron has gone far beyond those tendencies. His blond corkscrew curls are matted
and slick with grease and grit. His beard and mustache have grown into a single tangled mess—he's
long left behind his usual lumberjack appearance and is pushing toward homeless. He absolutely
reeks of cheap beer—cheap beer he would never have touched before she died. Mercy claimed he
was handling her death as well as he could...so why is he falling apart?

Right before her eyes, Amber's friend stumbles from the sofa to the front door. Lightning splinters the
sky, sending goosebumps parading up and down her arms and chills racing down her spine.
"Aaron, it's alright," she tries to soothe, but no words come of it—she is, as always in dreams of this
nature, invisible, inaudible, and incorporeal.
Unable to hear her pleas for him to turn back, he shambles out the back door and down the rickety wooden steps, never noticing the ghost following him every step of the way. Rain pelts their skin, stinging like a shower of nails. Still, he wanders into the bedraggled field he calls a backyard. Shouting drunken obscenities, he demands the impossible—demands that God bring Amber back, bring Mercy back, put everything back the way it is supposed to be.

Lightning crashes. Thunder rolls. Torrents of rain and hail fall from the skies, the wind picking up until it moans and howls in the treetops. Through it all, the drunken blond shouts and screams at the roiling sky, never hearing the pleas of his unseen, unheard friend. Finally, as though realizing his actions have no effect, he falls to his knees in the mud, sobbing brokenly. Amber lays a hand on his shoulder, trying to reach him. Aaron startles. His lungs still, his eyes wide, he seems to work up the nerve to acknowledge something.

Hoping, fearing, dreading and praying, he turns his face to the shoulder she just touched, his eyes widening but not meeting hers. "A-Amber?" he stammers, clasping his hand through hers and visibly struggling with himself. "I felt—I felt you—are you there? Tell me you're there!"

"I'll always be here," she answers though she knows he cannot hear her. "I've always been here—just stay strong." Doubt narrows his off-kilter blue eyes, and she heaves an exasperated sigh. She can't interact with him…but maybe…

A moment after he first felt the strange presence, Aaron Willis' answer appears in the form of his back door violently swinging open and whacking against the siding. There is his answer...he begged for proof that she is still there, and she told him to get his arse out of the rain. Finally, he feels sure he can manage to live without her, if only for another day. As the back door swings shut behind him another loud crack of lightning splits the air. Even as the storm worsens, though, the invisible brunette feels comforted that if nothing else, her friend wasn't stuck out in the rain.

August 29th, long before dawn

The bizarre dream still running amok in her head, Amber took the only course she could think of—she wandered into the kitchen to put the kettle on the boil. She never expected to see Mercy slouched over at the table...clearly, she wasn't the only one in the Lair suffering sleep interruptions, though Mercy's struggles were clearly more physical than mental.

It was amazing the amount of progress the blond was making, really, and Amber couldn't be more proud of her. Donna Mays' body was an addict, hooked on something Mercy would never have wasted her time on, but the Otherworlder was making the best of what she had. For the most part, she was doing well. Every now and then, though, she'd struggle again—just like tonight, she'd find herself staring down a bottle of poison and forcibly reminding herself why she had to stay clean. She hated alcohol, hated everything about it, but her body craved it like a junkie craving a fix.

"Rough night?" Amber asked instead of acknowledging the untouched bottle of bourbon on the table; the wax seal was unbroken, so she told her insistent worrying to take a hike.

"Nothin' I ain't beaten before," Mercy admitted, shoving the bottle across the table and nearly onto the floor; just in time, Amber caught it and swept it away, stashing it back under the sink again. "What about you? You're up pretty early."

"Just a nightmare," the brunette admitted lightly as she filled the kettle. "Nothing serious." Silence filled the room for a while—a tense silence, not the comfortable kind she and Mercy were prone to lapsing into. "You mentioned before that you went to my funeral." She shot a shrewd glance to the now visibly-squirming blonde. "How'd Aaron handle it, Mercy? How was he handling everything?"
"Uh…" Mercy hesitated, but then soldiered onward—she never could lie to Aaron or Amber to save her skin! "He's handling it the best he can—he lost both his best friends, you know, but he's a tough cookie—he'll bounce back in no time." Denim blue skittered away from grey-green, fixing on the ferns lining the table. "Don't worry about Willis, a'right? He'll be fine…an' we can't exactly do anything to help anyway."

There it was—that single small insistence was proof. Amber froze, heedless of the cold water pouring down the edge of the kettle; as if the strange dreams weren't enough, now she had proof that Mercy was hiding something from her. *Mercy was a terrible liar.* "What about Gran'da?" Amber asked lowly. "What about our families?" Mercy shook her head viciously, her shaggy blonde hair growing even more disheveled from the gesture.

"I a'ready told you," she insisted weakly. "*Your family's* fine—*Aaron* is fine—there's nothing to worry about!" *Lie. Lie. Another lie!* Amber clutched the handle of the kettle with everything she had; suddenly she didn't feel like tea anymore. "*Amber?*

"I'm goin' back to bed," Amber declared shortly dumping out the kettle and setting it aside. "It's too damn early an' the guys are gonna be out'a town until tonight either way." Shortly afterward, she curled into Donnie's pillow, her thoughts a chaotic tangle. Weekly dreams of Aaron suffering…Mercy's insistence that he was fine…nothing made sense anymore, nothing but the sweetly familiar aroma of coffee, spice, and clean grease filling her lungs. Nuzzling into his pillow and inhaling deeply, she hoped the smell would calm her fears and silence her worries.

She never did fall back asleep.

The bell over the door jingled merrily, but the atmosphere inside Red Fern Florist's was anything but merry. For a moment, Mercy felt she had somehow managed to walk into the wrong florists'…then she caught sight of Abilene Whitaker's brightly dyed hair poking up between two tall shelves. Plum purple today—though her hair was almost rarely the same color—or colors—from one visit to the next, that shade of warm dark purple was a familiar shade on her head, as were the side-swept bubblegum pink highlights visible on approach. Unusually sarcastic grumbling reached Mercy, concerning her even more; Abby was always worrisomely well-behaved and sweet as sugar, even to the old biddies who loudly judged her over the roses and gardenias she happily sold them.

"Something wrong?" The storekeeper squeaked in surprise and jumped straight up in the air, upsetting a planter of Maidenhair ferns. Mercy caught it without any forethought; perhaps living with ninjas was wearing off on her. After the requisite—and incredibly awkward—greetings were out of the way, she followed Abby up to the checkout counter silently, wondering about the defeated expression the woman wore. Over the next few minutes, the blonde pretended to examine a seedling catalog on the counter and the story was explained by the tired woman puffing on an e-cigarette despite a ban on e-cig use in enclosed public places. The search for a new hire to cover Abby's increased hours failed and after a full semester of burning the candle at both ends, even after dropping two classes to lighten the load, the young woman was contemplating calling it quits on the beauty school front.

"If I'm too busy worrying about Red Fern," Abby admitted quietly, "that's focus I'm not able to expend on my studies. The beauty academy sounds like an easy degree…then you go through it and realize it's a lot of work. If I can't get a break on this end, I'm gonna have to take a semester off…and I worry if I do, that I won't go back…I'll never accomplish my goal if I'm stuck in this place."

Her goal, Mercy knew from past talks, was to join her fiancée as a stylist at *The Mane Event* salon uptown. Cherie was a genius with hair dye in its many forms; Abby was a whiz at cuts and styles.
Together, they were unstoppable...but one was currently stuck in what she saw as a dead-end job—manning the counter at her family's shop. The air buzzed with uncomfortable silence, and Mercy knew the younger woman was about to take things much farther than their short acquaintance would allow. She was giving off the same signs Amber did when Amber brought up unpleasant subjects...and Amber was one of Mercy's oldest friends.

"Well, spit it out," she urged dryly. "Ya got somethin' to say, so say it."

"Just come back to work, Donna!" In that name, Mercy could almost hear the sound of a needle scratching across a record. *What?!* "No matter what you did, Ma'll forgive you—you're family to us!" Time passed unnoticed, Abby fixing a pleading gaze on Mercy, and the blonde struggling to find some way—*any* way—to respond to her. It never once occurred to her that she might be drawn to this little shop for any reasons other than the comforting feeling it gave her—was that reaction a matter of nurture rather than nature? Did she continually find herself drawn here because of Donna's body, rather than because it was a source of color in the endless grey of the Big Apple? Her head hurt with the implications.

"I...think you have me mistaken for someone else," she finally attempted. "My name's Mercy—I'm...I don't remember anything before New Year's Eve this year—that's when I woke up under that overpass." Somehow her insistence became an admission she wasn't ready to voice.

"You're Donna Mays," Abby insisted softly, her hazel eyes bright with unshed tears. "You were hired fresh out'a high school and worked here through college...then you got word about—about your family...you started drinking to cope and showing up to work hungover." Mercy shook her head in denial, her heart pounding, and backed away toward the door. With every step away, though, Abby took another toward her, insisting, pleading, begging. "Ma took it hard when she had to fire you...then you just vanished!" Mercy clutched at her head feigning confusion. It wasn't hard—we're simply words to the sweet shopkeeper were turning around everything Mercy thought she knew!

"No...this can't be...I'm *Mercy*, not some *Donna* person!" To add on to the amnesiac who's having their brain broken illusion, she let her voice grow shrill in her denial. "This can't be—I can't—" Forcing her eyes to go wild and frantic to mimic someone backed into a corner, she took in a deep, shaky breath. "I gotta go."

"Donna, wait!" Abby cried out to her, but Mercy felt only the thudding of her sneakers on the pavement. Several streets down, she ducked into an empty alley, bewildered and suddenly bone-tired. Tell her to hide something from her closest friends and she couldn't lie her way out of a paper bag, but oh-ho-ho, ask her to fake someone else out and she was an ace!

Who would ever have thought that she would not only run into someone who knew her body's reckless and drunken former occupant but that this whole time, she was frequenting that occupant's former place of employment?! The awkwardness was at nuclear levels! Silently spearing her fingers through her shaggy blonde hair, she thought back over the countless times she'd frequented Red Fern—the numberless times she'd chatted with Abby Whitaker while trying to convince herself *no*, she did *not* need another Aloe plant or fern! What, she thought with a grumble, aloe and ferns always reminded her of the few years before Clarity got hung up over Mercy having a twat, so sue her!

Though she fought the realization, she had to admit it: in all those visits, she couldn't recall once that Abby had used the name she'd been given. The perky shopkeeper always called her by one of many affectionate and overly familiar pet-names—*Doll, Sugarlips,* and *Pun'kin* to name a few. She always thought it was just one of Abby's oddities—a tendency to treat even total strangers as besties—but was she really just skirt ing around using the name Mercy gave her? Was she really so close to
Mercy's now-deceased body-mate that she wouldn't see her any differently?

Half a year had passed since she awoke under that bridge, but life was only becoming more twisted and tangled by the day.

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**The Hardys' Loft**

The smooth, dulcet tones of Bink Krosby filled the loft with warmth. At the stove in the small kitchen, a spunky brunette in a frilly pink apron swayed in time with the crooning from the speakers. A glass of lemon-water in one hand and the other occupied with stirring a glass pan of chocolate melting on the stove, Briallen savored the rare, calm, contented mood. Naturally, something had to ruin it. The sudden blaring of her phone startled her, and in that startle, she spilled water right into the molten chocolate.

"Ohnonononononono!" she protested trying to scrape the chocolate away from the puddle of water but to no avail. Right before her eyes, it curdled into a gritty solid mass—the brazil nuts on the counter wouldn't be getting dipped after all. Even if she wasn't upset over the ruined dipping chocolate, the name popping up on the screen made her blood boil. "GAH! Oh, for the love of—This'd better be good, Leonardo!" she spat into the rhinestone-encrusted phone propped between her ear and shoulder. "You owe me a whole block of Ghirardelli dark!"

"You were baking?" Leo asked sheepishly.

"Dipping nuts," Bree admitted sullenly digging in between her scrunched-shut eyes. "Next semester's my last and it's gonna be a doozy—making junk food is my coping skill, so sue me!"

"I meant no offense." She could practically see his placating hands up, *don't strangle me!* gesture, along with the boyish grin he seemed to think would soothe her ruffled feathers. He wasn't entirely wrong…that particular crook of the lips on his orange-masked brother led to the bathroom's first christening. Sucking in a slow, calming breath through her nose, she silently counted all the reasons why losing her temper was a bad idea…unfortunately, *Bev likes him* was the only reason she could think of. It was looking pettier by the moment.

With a tired sigh, she scrunched her curly brown hair back across her scalp and tried again. Perhaps he had a good reason for calling her…but then again, did he ever call her when he wasn't being an idiot? "Lay it on me, Stinkbug," she offered wandering out into the parlor to greet her more subdued cousin. "What's eating ya?"

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**The Garden**

"What's going on?" Bree's demand—voiced in the doorway of the Railyard—echoed off the walls like a cartoon character's yodeled fall. Her intentionally grumpy entry into the garden-in-progress was met by a shake of the head and sigh of defeat from Splinter. "Leo called me in a panic because no one's answering their phones!" Absolutely covered head to toe in potting soil and mud, Mercy grinned but put her finger to her lips for silence, pointing mischievously toward the other brunette. Perched on the edge of a rail bed already lined with rock and gravel, Amber was grinning at her phone screen and blushing like crazy at the face on the other side of the connection.

"So it wasn't the air filter, wasn't a clog in the runoff pipes, and it wasn't something in the air conditioner itself," Donatello wondered aloud on the other end, "then why was the unit draining all over the foundation?"
"Algae," Amber laughed, rolling her eyes as Bree approached silently. Amber asked the same question when what they were discussing occurred, but her demand was much more frantic, irritated, and obscenely-worded; of course, she was the lucky sonuvagun who got to clean up after the ancient window unit flooded her crawlspace. In hindsight, it revealed a crack in the foundation—too small to see without inspection but large enough for water to seep through. "Summer was always really humid but that one was a whopper, an' I was runnin' that beast nonstop—it developed algae in the drain pan, an' that made the water runoff just pour right out!"

"Hey, Bree!" The greeting came from the leanest of the four mutant brothers, a genius currently sprawled across a faded vinyl lounge next to the pond. "How's Beverly?" The genius brought his juice box back up and snagged the straw, sucking out the very last dregs. Bree couldn't hold back a snort of laughter at the hollow sound OR the sight of such a lethal warrior holding a dinky little JuiceeJuice box, noisily pulling at the straw with hollowed-out cheeks. "What?" As sore as her cheeks felt, she was sure her face was turning red.

"BAY-BEE-CAKES!" Donnie squawked in protest as his younger brother literally dove over the back of the lounge chair and wriggled his way into the view of the screen, all the while pantomiming kisses at Bree. "Oh, I miss you - Do you miss me? I wish you were here, this place blows without you!" The mushy turtle went on and on telling Bree everything she was missing out on—as if she wasn't used to not seeing him for weeks at a time! At first, Don struggled under Mikey's unexpected weight—and the squirming lump on his lap—and ducked the pair of bare feet swinging wildly in his face and nearly clocking him with every swing—then, without warning he shoved the hyperactive turtle off his lap…right into the pond.

"Hey, Skype with your own phone!" the genius ordered as their significant others cracked up. "You have unlimited data for a reason!" Once the hilarity was over and Mikey was sulking off to dry out his sodden board shorts, Bree wandered away and Donnie's confident smirk softened. "I've missed you, Braids," he admitted to the only brunette still in view. "It's been hard sleeping at night—have you still been doing okay over there?"

"Aside from bein' sore an' skint?"- She gave a one-armed shrug. "Meh. I'll sleep when I'm dead." As she—too late—suspected, this led Donnie to protest anew Casey's refusal to allow the girls to join them at his grandmother's farmhouse—or, more specifically, Mercy and Amber. The vigilante didn't really know Beverly and Briallen yet, and as such, hadn't been asked about the cousins accompanying the brothers; he was asked if Mercy and Amber could come with but shot the idea down without hesitation. That protest was—as every time before—met with reminders to be patient, that Casey had every right to refuse anyone he so chose, and that someday he might allow her and Mercy to tag along for the groups' trips to the farm if he wasn't harassed over it. "Like it or not," Amber reminded Donnie, "I've still got a bleatin'- gang sign in my cleavage—it's fadin' out, but it's a reminder to him, too."

"Gang sign or not," Donnie reminded lowly, "What it's inked on is pretty nice." Her suspicion that she hadn't heard him correctly went straight out the window at his teasing grin and wink. A scarlet blush spread from her hairline downward, all the way to the still-blistered tattoo on her chest.

"Must I repeat that lesson about respect?" The sarcastic jab made Donnie startle and nearly follow Mikey's path into the pond.

"S-Sorry, Sensei!" the mutant stammered as Amber smacked her palm over her face in embarrassment. Last she saw, the rat was knee-deep in herbs at the other end of the Garden; of course, he'd sneak up the moment one of his sons 'let their hair down.' A too-shrewd deadpan pinned Amber like a still-fluttering moth on a foam board. He clearly knew the blame wasn't all on Donatello and was—at least, she thought—silently shaming her for not pulling the 'offended
southern belle’ act. Oh, Masta Splinta! I don’t know nuttin’ bout makin’ no babies!* Yeah…Scarlett O’Hara wouldn’t have been convinced either.

"We should be home shortly after sunset," Donnie reminded her with a sheepish grin and neck grab. "Thanks to that box trailer, we can leave while the sun's out…and—" A sudden noise she couldn't hear drew his attention off-screen and his nostrils flared. Amber couldn't help comparing the occurrence to the last time he pinned her to the sheets; her skin burned as her brain did a gleeful swan dive into the gutter. When his bright eyes met hers again, they were paired with a sheepish smile and scalp scratch. "Sounds like Casey's finally moved on from cussing at the grill to butchering lunch—I'd better get the fire extinguisher."

Time crawled after Amber's conversation with Donnie; evening couldn't come soon enough.

_Late that night_

Sometimes people never got a chance to revisit their moments of weakness. Sometimes, a fear would never be conquered, and a tragedy never moved beyond. Then, once in a great while, something, be it karma or fate, would reorder the world in such a way that mortals had no option but to acquiesce. This, Amber knew without a doubt, was one such time…and she wasn't quite sure how she felt about that.

In one ear, Casey vehemently reminded April that (Amber) was trouble—a Purple Dragon, a snake in the grass, and putting on as though she wasn't really Kimber, through and through. In the other ear, April argued that even if the brunette wasn’t telling the truth—if she still was Kimber—this might be the only shot she had at breaking her out of her _new-life-new-world_ delusions. If she really wasn't who she claimed to be, this would be the only way of knowing. More raised voices joined the din—Donatello and Leonardo coming to her defense—and if Raphael hadn't followed Mercy to the garden for some much-needed 'welcome home' necking, she suspected a fourth and fifth voice would sound with the rest. Amidst the fighting and yelling surrounding her, Amber was frozen—torn between the nightmarish past, the saccharine present, and the uncertain, ever-feared future.

This world, too, had a Willsdale, Missouri.# This Willsdale, like her own, experienced the storm to end all storms—an EF-5 tornado—but not five years ago, not when her Willsdale was torn to bits by an EF-4 and an EF-5, just over a week apart. This world's Willsdale only endured one tornado—an EF-4 that cut deep tracks across the city limits and a few less rural miles—and it occurred shortly after school ended that year. That Willsdale's high-school-slash-junior-high-slash bingo hall was barely touched by the monster storm, but the elementary school and City Hall were leveled. Worst yet, the New World Willsdale's death count was much, much higher…and thanks to the childcare center and nursing home in the path, a disproportionate number of those lost were children and elderly.

All those books left to ruin…all those nights of weeping over the books, the trees, and the history-packed building she loved…and now she knew her Willsdale was very, very lucky. The Fall and Winter Semester would begin on September fifth with barely 2/3 of the students of the year before. A ceremony—complete with speeches and a symbolic moment of silence—was planned for the time when Willsdale's students' lives were turned upside down.

That ceremony brought the whole story full-circle, back to the room full of grown-ass adults arguing at the top of their lungs. When disaster first struck the small town deep in the Missouri Ozarks, it was touted as one of the worst disasters of its time; a darker, angrier part of Amber wondered if being a bigger city would have made it 'more disastrous.' In the usual fashion of leaders, the President of the United States came to survey the damage, express regret over the death count, and pose for the press
shaking hands and staring at the wasteland that was once Willsdale. That president was seeking re-election the next year and desperate for votes—desperate enough to revisit a small town and give a speech before Willsdale high school in honor of the many students and staff who would never return. Reporters from every corner of the States would be attending, bringing news home with them, and April was selected to represent her new bosses: EFX-NYC, or, more colloquially known as "Channel 9." Without even thinking about how the others might react, she invited Amber to tag along, if only to act as an Otherworldly tour guide.

The president was speaking at Willsdale...people were coming from every corner of the country to stand with them in their time of regrowth. Was Amber's Willsdale given such honors? Were her neighbors and home granted such pomposity and ceremony? Or were they, as she feared, simply swept under the rug, pooh-poohed by the world at large for not having stronger structures, and altogether forgotten? There was only one way to know for certain, and it also just so happened to be the same way that Casey felt was a needless risk.

A new noise broke through the din—the ticking of a distant clock—but the others showed no sign of hearing it. The day Amber died, she was in shock—numb to all internal and external forces—the only thing that broke through that shock was a gut feeling that she had to see her school, she had to see its library. She followed that gut feeling, and it led her to her death; perhaps, knowing that, upon feeling the same gut feeling calling her to the Lab, she should've run the other way? Nevertheless, she followed it like a siren's song on the rocks.

The din behind her dulled under the blood pounding in her ears at the sight before her: that infuriatingly confusing test tube was glowing again. Right before her eyes, the Freaky Space Glitter gleamed as though it was truly there—brightening and dimming in time with the ticking pounding against her skull. Moss green eyes scanned the Lab warily, checking every dark corner for some hidden trickster or strange force and finding none. Without a word, she reached out and touched the specimen vial—felt the cold glass and the inexplicable warm pulse of its contents—and steeled her nerves.

She was always running...always hiding... She was done running and hiding—whatever came for her, well, she would damn well meet it head on like the strong woman her Gran'da supposedly raised! She never noticed the racket in the room beyond the lab or the mutant genius watching her from the doorway.

Donatello stood unsteadily in the doorway, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, torn between confusion and worry. Confusion, that he could explain by his lover's silent and single-minded approach of the vial he'd had under constant surveillance. Worry...now that emotion was harder to pin down. He worried at her mental state—somewhere between empty and intense—worried at how she didn't even notice anything beyond that damnable glowing dust. Most of all, he worried that their time was up, that whatever unexplained phenomena drew her from her world to his was about to take her back out of it.

"I know yer thar."- Donnie startled at the sudden accusation, at first, missing that Amber had voiced it to thin air. "I knuw yer watchin' us,"- she repeated addressing the strange force she could not see, her speech twisting and her volume increasing to a near-yell, then almost to harpy-shriek. "Yar been' such a sleekit creeper, ya arsehole! Quit lookin' hidin'! Tell me whot tae dae!"- The words—twisted, brogue-gruff words Donnie understood but had only ever heard from the Amber in his dreams—softened into a painful croaking plea.

"Palease...tell me whot tae dae,"- she begged falling roughly to her hands and knees and digging her fingertips into the concrete floor as though fearing it would buck her off. Amber O'Brien, the woman from another world, was at the end of her rope and barely hanging on. The light emitting from the
stopped vial brightened and dimmed as before; it had no answer. "Ah doonae want ti go," the broken woman on the floor admitted tiredly. "Thurs nothin' in the world Ah wan' less…but if Ah go…if Ah see fer meself…" A calm settled over her, steeling her nerves and stiffening her spine; right before the genius at the door, the woman on the floor went from broken to determined. "If Ah go," she asked the unhearing dust, her words sharp with warning. "...well ya take me 'wae? Well ya lemme stay here—stay'ere with Dunnie?"

"Like I gotta choice?" The words—spoken in a familiar feminine voice—sent both human and turtle flying into action. Donatello dashed into the room, slammed the door and bolted it shut, and dove to the Lair's security-system control panel. With the press of a ridiculously convenient button, the entire Lair was completely locked down—the owner of the voice had nowhere to run. Just as happened the day the strange visitor left shimmering dust on the bathroom floor, though, it got away, taking with it the inexplicable glow and the unseen ticking clocks.

When the mutant and the Otherworlder emerged from the Lab, April was beside herself with worry. Before she could get out a single word, Amber cut it off. "Ah—I have to go back," she admitted, catching herself quickly after her slight fumble. "I've gotta see Willsdale—it's not the one I left behind, an' it ain't the one I died in, but there's no doubt in my mind I've gotta see it for myself."

"What?!" Casey bellowed, but Amber shot him a perplexing smile.

"Someone's gotta keep your arses out'a Meth-Lab Motel...and no one can show ya around like a local." Casey sputtered in rage but was otherwise incapable of voicing another argument. Moss green eyes met a pair of shifting hazel ones over Amber's shoulder, both saying words that their owners weren't quite ready to speak.

_I love you, my Sweet Speccy._

_I love you, my Crazy Celt._

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**WORDS because this chapter's a doozy!**

- **Skint** – Scotch slang "Broke, having no money.' Laser tattoo removal treatments are pretty expensive and Kimber wasn't exactly rich to begin with, so Amber's pretty close to broke.

- **Bleatin'** – this localized slang term is actually a personal favorite IRL—it has all the OOMF of bleedin' but more impact from the _t._

  From the really rough scene, mostly twisted, Scotched, and slurried

- "**I know yer thar.**" – 'I know you're there.'

- "**I knuw yer watchin' us.**" – 'I know you're watching us.'

- "**Yar beein' such a sleekit creeper, ya arsehole!**" – 'You're being such a sneaky creeper, you asshole!' (sleekit - Scottish Slang for sly or untrustworthy, Amber usually
uses it as 'sneaky' when she's teasing someone with it.) (creeper – slang for 'peeping Tom, sneaky person, or that weirdo who calls you and just heavy-breathes into the phone)

- "Quit lookin' hidin'! Tell me whot tae dae!" – 'Quit fucking hiding! Tell me what to do!' (Fooking – Scottish pronunciation of "fucking," which you may recall her associating with her Gran'Da) (Whot tae dae – Scotch-mangled "what to do."

- "Palese" – no, she's not saying 'call the police,' she's just saying 'please.'

- "Ah doonae want ti go" – 'I don't want to go!'

- "Thers nothin' in the world Ah wan' less!" – 'There is nothing in the world I want less!

- "...but if Ah go...if Ah see fer meself...well ya take me 'wae?" – '...but if I go...if I see for myself...will you take me away?'

- "Well ya lemme stay here—stay'ere with Dunnie?" – 'Will you let me stay here? – stay here with Donnie?'

TL;DR: Amber is so completely messed up by the idea of losing Donnie AND going to ANY Willsdale that she's mentally regressed back to her old habits of speech, much worse than her Why bother? Donnie doesn't mind or the more rare I'm too pissed to think straight! moments, and doesn't even realize it until the bizarre unseen visitor is gone.

Sorry to say it, but this scene's dialogue is pretty indicative of how Amber O'Brien talked before she decided, during high school, to squelch her personality and took on the 'twang' of her neighbors to fit in better. (Not that it WORKED, but whatever. Small towns are fickle like that.) This 'assuming a new identity to fit in' is something she has in common with Kimber Bryant, though she doesn't know it, as Kimber trained herself out of her twang and forcibly took on the thick Jersey dialect to pass for a local rather than a runaway from Hicks-ville USA.

EXTENSIVE NOTES

^ Granny Square – if you've ever seen a crocheted blanket made with squared panels sewn together, you've seen a Granny Square afghan.

^^ E-cig ban – Electronic Cigarettes are included in the Smoke-Free Air Act, which forbids the use of them "in places where smoking is prohibited, including bars, restaurants, offices, parks, and beaches." (Found on an NYCdotGOV page dedicated to New York City area Laws) I found nothing specifically forbidding their use in stores, but – at least around here – most stores have been designated 'non-smoking,' especially anywhere the second-hand yuck might affect the merchandise. There has not been enough conclusive research yet regarding whether E-Cigs are safer for the environment, but most Mom-and-Pop stores would care too much about damaging the merchandise OR customers to allow their use. I, personally, don't smoke OR know anyone who does AND is knowledgeable about the environmental effects, so this has all been based in research.

#Bink Krosby – fake musical artist whom we can compare to the best sides of Frank
Sinatra and Bing Crosby in our world. Also, NEVER make the mistake of getting water into melted chocolate! Bree could maybe have repaired the damage with MORE water if not for the lemon juice in it.

## I'm not sure if this can happen with window-units—central A/C, Baby!—but it CAN happen with indoor central units. It happened with my old place after a long, humid summer and it happens at least yearly with our current living situation because our apartment's so friggin' humid outside winter. Unless you catch it in time, it's a MESS to clean up after—a quick fix, if you hear the usual drainage drip stop, is to dump an anti-algae tablet into the drain pan like you would an aquarium—it prevents growth and keeps things properly draining. We usually have to treat our beast yearly or more often, depending on if it starts clogging.

* Oh, Masta' Splinta! I don't know nuttin' 'bout makin' no babies! An intentionally warped reference to "Gone with the Wind." Don't read it, don't watch it, don't even think about it—that'll be time you'll never get back! Okay, a more honest answer is I love classics, especially romantic classics, but I hated this story to bits and spent the whole time wanting to strangle Scarlett. You're toates free to do as you wish—several of my family have read AND loved it, and stories become classics for a reason - I'd just recommend Northanger Abbey, Jane Eyre, and Pride and Prejudice more than Gone with the Wind because THEY were AWESOME but Gone with the Wind made me throw up a little.

* EFX-NYC / Channel 9 – I'm totally bullshitting this one based on the Bay-verse April finding another reporting job, and an episode of the '03 series where April steals a yellow jumpsuit and masquerades as a reporter from 'Channel 6' to get people away from Saki tower before it blows up. Honestly, I have no idea what episode this was and I'm currently too friggin' tired and sick to spend time looking it up based on a single remembered blurb.

Chapter End Notes

There's bound to be some confusion over the two Willdale, Missouris, so here's a quick refresher: They are both the same town, but in different worlds—they are situated at the very northern edge of the Missouri Ozarks, west and a few cities shy of Branson, Missouri, and they are primarily agriculture-based small towns. Though fundamentally similar, they will have some significant differences and are worth distinguishing. The Willsdale Amber comes from will henceforth be called 'her Willsdale' or 'Old Willsdale' or after the next chapter, simply 'Willsdale.' It experienced two top-level tornados eight days apart—one badly damaging the rural southern and a larger one carving a path of destruction through the very middle of what passed for 'in-town'; the junior-high-highschool took a direct hit after suffering severe wind-related damage and was leveled.

The Willsdale in Donnie's world will henceforth be referred to as "New World Willsdale" or "New Willsdale," the only exception being next chapter, the END of Part II. It only experienced one EF-5 tornado through the rural southern half and left most of the city unscathed, but had a higher damage cost and death count, particularly because it hit the local Senior-Citizens' meeting hall and a local child-care facility.

Lastly a disclaimer because political people are political and, even stereotyping aside,
apparently we Americans like overreacting and arguing "jus' 'cuz." I am NOT making any political statements by having the President speak at the 'school starting' ceremony or re-running. This fictional world's government is not ours, so all y'all other Americans and worldwide readers, don't take this as an excuse to assume my personal leanings – I don't put that shit in my stories because politics stinks no matter how you stir it. This event is simply inspired by something ( kinda) similar that happened in Joplin, Missouri, upon which much of Willsdale's trials were based. In the 2011 Joplin tornado, Joplin High School was totaled on 'graduation day,' PotUS came to inspect, cry, kiss babies and vow support, then returned to speak at the next graduation in honor of the many students who would never be able to walk across the stage. There were a lot of them…

As always, this story is not meant to trivialize anything OR reinforce harmful stereotypes - I do my research, I approach everything with the necessary care and honesty, and I don't do the whole 'judging' thing, not even IRL.

Rant over.
42: Full-Circle

Chapter Summary

End Part II: This Time Imperfect

Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Ghost here, welcome to the beginning of the end! Or, rather, the long last chapter in Part II, which will be followed by the fun stuff, smut, and a lot of answers in Part III! Granted it doesn't have the OOMPH of the end of Part I, but it's pretty OOMPH-y if you ignore the lack of cliffs...And the long-ass notes at the end. Since I've had a chapter queue, I've been going back and making changes/corrections to previous chapters; I made it all through Part I and have posted the corrected chapters, but am going to hold off on going over Part II for a while.

Hopefully I didn't totally give away the identity of the meddling invisible visitor in this chapter. If you figured it out, please don't ruin the surprise for other readers; either way, you'll get your answers in Part III. In this chapter, you'll also see some more name changes, especially regarding Amber's family and Kimber's family. These aren't errors but small changes, just as many things and names are different between the two worlds. A very brief rundown of the two characters' families will follow the story for convenience, and will contain some info not shared in previous chapters. Lastly, I've gotten responses from a few folks regarding the dialogue question, but it's only been a few folks - this is your last chance to make your voice heard! Once I post the next chapter - probably in a week or two - the topic's off the table, so if you really want changes, you need to spit it out before that point. Voting literally only takes a couple clicks of the mouse, people, unless you want to share your POV in a comment or review. Either way, last chance, don't let it go unused!

As always, thanks for reading, thanks to the awesome people who review and leave comments, and I hope everyone's having a wonderful December so far! Dedicated to Wolf for being an awesome, patient beta, for getting me hooked on some new music again, and for being so helpful with this chapter! Also dedicated to my hubby Cold for being so patient with my 'small town research' walks during visits to his hometown, upon which Willsdale is heavily based, and putting up with my constant questions on those walks, and for not whining too much when I spend hours on THIS story instead of the novel I'm supposed to be working on. (This story's so much more fun...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Second half: Barry Manilow "I Made it Through the Rain," and The Goo Goo Dolls "Let Love In"
For the first hour of the trip the non-stop bitching in the front seat of the rental van was deafening, maddening; after almost twenty hours of practically non-stop traveling, though, Amber was quite good at ignoring Casey Jones' nonstop irritable commentary. Headphones plugged into her ears, forgotten library book on her lap, she stared blankly out the window at the landscape passing by.

Glenville, Missouri…she hadn't seen her world's Glenville in years, but this New World version was clearly much the same. Lots of row-shops, countless ethnic restaurants, too many hills and hollers to count and endless traffic jams leading through the ritzier ends of town…another life, another world, and it still looked more college town and tourist trap than Branson a few cities north.

What finally broke her long bout of silence was yet another furious expletive—courtesy of the under-rested vigilante in the front seat. Honestly, April had claimed the middle seat—how could she sleep through the countless I'm lost tantrums? "The college campus is five blocks away—turn right at the next intersection an' pull over, I'll drive."

"Why should I!!" Casey Jones spat over his shoulder—nearly plowing the vehicle into a parked car. "Damn roundabouts!" he swore slamming his fist against the side of the steering wheel. Geez… someone had some road rage issues…

"On second thought," Amber corrected herself carefully extricating herself from her earbuds, "Pull over now—I went to college in this city, I know the way home."

After yet another argument, the bespectacled Other-worlder sat in the pilot's seat, guiding the car down hilly backroads just below the 'legal' speed. The sudden altitude changes and turns made her nauseous and made her ears hurt...she'd been away from hill-country so long she wasn't used to it anymore. Twice in the last ten miles, she'd had to brake for feral cats, but even more times, she was left dodging the suicidal free-range chickens that she no longer expected.##

Ever since taking the wheel, she found herself recounting under her breath various sights and stories she recalled and comparing them to the sights and stories around her—a noodle shop instead of her favorite burger joint—loose dogs instead of free-range chickens—the head shop and bar were intact, but the hookah lounge above had been replaced by a much classier cocktail bar and art gallery—the TexMex joint that routinely failed safety inspections was rebranded as a 'family diner'—Everywhere she turned she found memories and facts that made those memories seem more like dreams.

Casey hadn't said a word since realizing she did, indeed, know her way around the city when Kimber supposedly grew up in a poor suburb of Jersey City.### Silent, still not convinced she wasn't putting up a front after getting specifics online—or whatever kids did these days!—he watched like a hawk from the second seat, April snoring with her cheek pillowed on his bulky thigh.

"Farkin' really?!" 'Kimber' swore dodging the van past an unexpected free-range guinea hen. Back when she lived in this area, the rampant loose foul were a major problem that made her lose her cool anytime she ran into them, even as she appreciated their purpose. After all the other things that were different in this world, why did that one have to be the same?! "Fark, People, keep yer damn birds in a coop!"

Despite his best efforts to stay awake, Casey drifted off to sleep during Amber's long-winded tangent on 'Rednecks' and 'crazy people who cared more about bugs and eggs than if their chickens wound up hood ornaments.' Sometime between the surprisingly vehement grumbles of cousin-boinking
Rednecks and feathered street demons Casey's world faded to black.

By the time he woke, the van was pulling into the hilly parking lot of the sort of motel people made horror movies about—a traditional L-shaped roadside motel, honestly but with an over decorated ‘public green space’ decked with creepy little lawn gnomes, critter-proof trashcans at every corner, and a large, cracked window separating the office from the parking lot. "Dis don't feel like we ever left Glenville," he grumbled as the unusually short-tempered brunette parked the van in the overly large lot.

"We're on the outskirts of the city,' she answered shortly. "If ya'd- rather stay on the road for a few hours longer, we could stay at Willsdale's 'No-tell motel'—but yer luggage is gonna get bugs. Your choice—but the place's only redeeming quality is advertising 'kolor TV'."

"How backwoods is dat town?" Casey grumbled to himself then startled when he got an answer to a question he thought internal and unspoken.

"No one ever goes to towns like Willsdale—they jus' leave'em,"- Amber admitted as April staggered to the office still half-asleep; the younger woman kept an eye on the reporter's back through the tall window, worrying silently. "If someone stops in town, they have family waitin' for 'em an' stay with them. Ya don't go to Meth-Lab Motel."

A short while after, he and April settled into the surprisingly well-furnished room while the Otherworlder took a much-needed shower. Even as April put away the couple's luggage on autopilot, Casey scrunched his tall frame into the too-small chair at the table doing some research on April's smartphone and the motel Wi-Fi. So far, he had to admit, there were a bunch of things Amber told them about that were false—the college didn't have a library science or Literary Arts program, at least half the shops she told them about were different in name or purpose, the city had more roundabouts than four-way stops—but still, she was correct about enough to make the trip unsettling. Perhaps "Kimber" had a closer history with Glenville than he'd previously believed…perhaps he was—God forbid!—maybe a little wrong about her.

In the small and surprisingly clean bathroom, Amber sat still fully clothed on the floor against the edge of the tub, her knees drawn tightly to her chest and eyes drawn to the lidded toilet. If she was driven to vomiting by the very thought of returning to the town that killed her, how could she handle actually being in Willsdale tomorrow? Hopefully, she’d get the chance to be more herself around Casey than the rude person she'd been so far…that rudeness, like with Raphael, had actually made her presence more tolerable, her usual kindness having been met with only suspicion and anger. Yes, she was learning how to deal with Casey Jones, but her behavior 'til the motel was not wholly based in some attempt to fly under his radar.

The warming water spray in the shower mocked the brunette haunted by memories of rain—of long nights curled into the bottom of her small, musty closet to escape the sound of thunder, as though something as simple as a sound could hurt her. She'd feared rainstorms like a child fearing the Boogeyman…but she was stronger now, she wasn't the same person she used to be…so why, after less than a year of being away, was she so afraid to return to Willsdale? Could it be that the same sort of "doubt and insecurity" portrayed in the Epilogue of War of the Worlds? Could it be, rather than some aggravating fatal flaw, a simple and understandable side effect of the time she died upon her knees?*

The sound of rain churned onward, courtesy of the showerhead, but the supposedly bathing brunette had no answers for the multitude of questions it left her with.
After the drama of the day before, Amber’s arrival in her hometown’s Counterpart was remarkably anti-climactic.

She hadn’t slept well the night before. Like zombies in a horror movie, the victims of the tornado in this Willsdale rose in her dreams, clawed their way to the surface, and roamed the battered landscape of Amber’s hometown, marveling at the novelty of another town with the same name and face. She woke with a scream, unable and unwilling to recount the rest of the nightmare but unable to fall asleep again. Crawling toward the city property line, her knuckles white on the steering wheel and bile filling her throat, she almost convinced herself to turn back—to give up on this madness, retreat to the Motel, and stay there until the reporter got her scoop and they returned home. Only one thing was able to keep the demons at bay—one thing was able to coax her away from her fears and memories, down the hilly fog-laden highway between the rural knobs and hollers, and across the county line: a pair of eyes, shielded by glass lenses and shifting with the light between hazel, green, and golden brown.

She was sure Donatello wouldn’t be angry if she just couldn’t make herself go through the horrors anew…but he’d be disappointed in her, which she felt worse than his anger. Anger she could handle—anger she could hold to her chest like a grudge and convince herself she deserved to be hurt—but his disappointed eyes were the stuff of nightmares. Every time she had to back off during Exposure Therapy sessions—every time he found her wedged into some small ‘safe’ place, crying herself sick because she let a panic attack escalate instead of stopping it from the start with the coping skills they learned together—she saw how disappointed he was that she was more willing to let her fears control her than conquer them.

Is there anything more absurd than the wish to carry continually a burden which one can always throw down?** When she first read Candide as an over-worked and under-rested freshman, Amber was so sure it was merely a metaphor for human resilience; now she wondered if there was another message hidden deeper in the scene. It was human to allow oneself to fall and fail, but it was also human, even more so, to stubbornly recover from every failure. That alone—and daydreams of proud hazel eyes veering an affectionate brown as they locked with hers—drove her onward. Donatello waiting for her over a thousand miles away drove her into crossing the county line with bated breath, though she knew her greatest fears waited for her at the end of the road.

After all that fuss, she never registered crossing the city limits, never realized they were in Willsdale until she recognized the little ‘shack’ she once called Home.

"Well," she mumbled as the van idled outside the tiny, cluttered house she’d never again step foot in. "Welcome home, Crazy Celt."

To the crowd gathered around the small stage, the highlight of the day was the greying gentleman speaking onstage. To Amber, he was just a man—the man tasked with the entirety of the US Armed Forces and the world’s image of America, but a man of flesh and blood regardless. No, the truly awe-inspiring sight lay just over the hill: an ancient, battered building with a classic clock tower and familiar elaborate brickwork, Willsdale’s Town Hall, Courthouse, and Governing Center, all under one roof. Just over the rise at the back of the building, one could see the High School—a school disturbingly similar to the one she died in.

Casey switched off the mobile camera equipment with a smirk, proud of having gotten the mess of electronics to function. Technically April was supposed to have enticed Vern back to shooting, just for this trip, but whatever that skinny show-boating Nerd could do, well, Casey Jones could do...
better! He glanced around the crowd, startling at the sight of 'Kimber' wandering uphill, to a building identified by the vague moniker "City Hall." For a moment, he glanced from April—currently waiting in line for a private 'interview' with the president—to 'Kimber—wandering away as though in a daze, seemingly following a trail he couldn't see.

He called for her to come back but to no avail. After a long internal argument and plenty of consideration of just leaving the brunette to fend for herself, he remembered that Raphael had personally asked him to 'keep her safe.' At the time, he was sure Raph was worried about outside influences…now he wondered if the surly ninja had worried more about the punk hurting herself more than anyone else. Finally, with a curse at stubborn women everywhere and a moment's hope that April would be fine without him, he gave chase, watching Amber hike up the hillside toward the school.

Was this what she feared so much? Was she really so afraid of coming to this city when all that waited were memories? No answers came to Amber in the silence around her—not when she crested the hill, not when she strode through the open glass doors of the school uncontested, not even when she made her way into the disproportionately large library she recognized from her Willsdale. Fingers running reverently along the aged wooden shelves, she wandered from one end of the empty room to the other, recalling it torn and twisted by a monstrous wind.

Never even noticing Casey Jones skid to a stop in the doorway—his unfashionably long black hair whipping with the movement—she took in the sight of her sneakers splayed before a familiar section of the library. As though in a daze, she slid a familiar black-covered book from the poetry shelf and examined it with surprising disinterest. *Dark of the Moon.*

Unbeknownst to the stunned man in the doorway or the elderly secretary wringing her hands near him, the woman from another world relived the last time she saw the counterparts of these walls—relived her last moments in her own world. Cherished book gripped closely—like a magic shield, or like a holy relic, her silent rival wondered dubiously?—she wandered aimlessly over to a tall corkboard located where her library had a window.

Staring beyond the colorful papers and into her memory, she remembered looking out that window—remembered feeling absolute calmness as the sky outside split in a menacing, mocking grin—remembered her fatalistic view of the world and the—apparently not mistaken—belief that the death of her current body might bring the peace dreams and life had denied.

All her life, she was visited in dreams by a young mutant who wanted only acceptance. Despite her best intentions, she gave the gap-toothed boy—and the man he became—her heart. Then…then she came face to face with the possibility that she wouldn't survive…and she refused to make a choice, bowing down and begging protection for her loved ones instead of diving under one of the sturdy tables, all in the hopes that she might be mysteriously granted a second chance…and a life with him. Out of all this, one thing was finally clear to her: she was an idiot. Despite the realization, she smiled wryly, turning the book in her hands and wondering if she was ever truly as happy in her old life as she was now…perhaps, she wondered as the clock on the wall ticked loudly, she simply learned to settle instead of making the best of what she had.

As before, she fell to her knees, but while she first made the gesture out of surrender and exhaustion, she now gave thanks for the miracle she was living. Somehow, and Amber knew not how, she was granted all she ever wanted—a new life, a new body, and a chance to spend her days with the bright-eyed boy she knew in dreams. Along with that new life, though, there came a price—hurdles to jump, failures to move past, and plenty of time to correct the flaws she once wallowed in without notice. The road ahead was long, broken, and full of heartache—but she knew what waited at the
end was worth every step. She still feared the rain, but she would move past that fear. She was a coward who would rather cringe than face her fears, but a coward who would someday become braver. She was a fool with her head stuck in the clouds...but a fool could be educated and relieved of their folly.

"Is she alright?" The sudden question whispered nearby surprised the prostrate brunette; hands digging fingers-first into the old industrial carpet, she came back to herself in embarrassment. This wasn't her Willsdale—it wasn't her school—she just walked through the doors of a strange building and collapsed like an idiot.

"She will be...she's just had a lotta stuff ta work through." The answer, delivered in a thick backstreet accent, astounded her. As recently as Glenville, Casey Jones was still stubbornly clinging to her being Kimber and Kimber trying to fool them, but she could tell something in the man's mind had shifted. Eyes wide, lungs still, she glanced at the pair of rugged basketball shoes coming to a stop next to her right hand.

"Dis is it, right?" Casey muttered as though not noticing the reeling woman. Outside, he seemed focused on a printed calendar of events, but his every sense was trained on her answer.

"There wiz a window here," she admitted quietly, thickly, "and it wiz through tha' window tha' I stared down m'own death...an' blinked."- This was the place and posture she died in, but— A trace of wooden molding just beneath the edge of the corkboard sent her stomach into her shoes. There was once a window where she knelt...and like her school board's inexplicable decision to turn a closet into a classroom, this school's leaders decided to seal a window and 'build' a wall. The wall behind the corkboard wasn't always a wall...the knowledge made her stomach turn. Could it be someone else died at that window?

"Ya died here." Casey's admission, unexpected and even more uncharacteristic, gave Amber pause.

"In my own world, yeah," she admitted under her breath. "I worked here an' died here jus' like this...prayin' for the safety of my loved ones...an' though I wouldn't've admitted it, a second chance." She listened closely, but heard only their breathing; the secretary was gone. "Please...I worked with Myra from the day I was hired at my Willsdale's school...please go make sure her grandson is alright—Colin Jarvis Black, she calls him Colm. In my world, he attended the daycare...that was..."

She couldn't finish and Casey left her, pausing only to squeeze her shoulder. She wasn't sure when he first began to believe her, first wondered if she wasn't Kimber, but she could tell from the warmth of his tone and the gentleness of his fingertips that he did, finally believe her. Why did that feel more of a weight off her back than a victory?

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Ever since he and Amber O'Brien were first parted, half of Donatello's time was spent in staring at his phone and willing it to ring, and almost as much was spent reminding himself forcefully that she'd survived quite well enough without him so far. Sure, she was borderline dependent on him and too reliant on him...but if anything, the separation might make them both stronger. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that jazz, he reminded himself reaching for his soldering iron, and focusing on that absence wouldn't result in anything productive. If anything, he might find himself making grievous, stupid errors—like putting the new control panel together inside out or maybe finding hours down the road that he'd left a vital part out of something else.

A soft, insistent tone manifested at the edge of his hearing drawing him from the mess of salvaged parts scattered across his workbench. At first, he convinced himself it was nothing, that he was hearing something unrelated and convincing himself it was what he was waiting for...again...then an accidental glance revealed a video call popping up on the monitor nearest him. He opened the
window and answered the call hopefully, rewarded instead with the horrific gritty image of Amber's tear-puffy eyes and dried salt-trails on her cheeks.

"Hey, Honey," he greeted softly, and when she gave only a small, quiet smile in response instead of the usual "Hey, yerself!" he turned to scan the small room for the cause of her tears. Donnie knew this trip was a bad idea—knew being stuck in a car with Casey's attitude and April's crazy driving would drive a normal person to murder—and he'd insisted said point to no avail…at least to himself. Now he found himself face to face with proof of that…and immediately, he was sure Casey was responsible for Amber's tears. "Where is he?" he demanded instead of reacting how he wanted; yelling would do no good but it was damned tempting at the moment. "I knew he would—"

"Dee, I'm fine," she insisted cutting off his warpath. He fell silent, examining her face anew. Tears streaked her cheeks and her eyes were puffy, but she was beaming with happiness. Something drove her to exhaustive weeping…but it relieved her? What happened in Willsdale? "For the first time in months," she confessed softly, "I really think I'll be okay."

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**Monday September 5th, 2016, somewhere beneath New York City**

The day after the President's speech in Willsdale, Missouri, there was a mass exodus from the southeastern corner of the state—the tourists who came primarily to witness the momentous event fled back to their own homes. But days after, only one thing came to mind when Donatello found a familiar—and tired—brunette standing watching him from the doorway of the Lab: she came to say goodbye. "Take a walk with me," she urged instead of the ending the nervous genius expected. "Let's get some fresh air while we talk."

Although both knew where their feet were slowly leading them, neither spoke of it. Over the next hour—and plenty of hesitant self-conscious grumbling—the young woman finally did what she should've done from the beginning…she spilled her guts, just as she should have in the dirty, muck-slick alley months before.

She faced her demons head on in New Willsdale—saw 'Kimber's' distant family going on about their lives, already sure she was dead and uncaring of the fact. While ducking into the local feed store on the way back, Amber even had a long talk with this world's 'Glen Devon'—a bitter, crotchety man who was as different from Amber's Gran'Da as the day was long.

*Glen Devonne* and his oldest son *Bert* (the spitting image of Amber's white-haired Uncle Bart) ran the Feed Store with a cousin Amber didn't have—a lovely, friendly teenager with shock-white hair and the same dove-grey eyes Bart Devon had. Some people, Amber was still realizing, had no counterparts in her world. She wondered what made special enough for a counterpart when sweet, grey-eyed "Brenda Devonne" was barred from that chance. It…it didn't seem fair. More than ever before, the realization reminded her of something her Gran'Da often told her: Fair was a four-letter "F" word, and no less obscene than Fuck.\* She didn't have all the answers—she wasn't sure why she was given a new life—but she was sure of one thing, and that was that everything happened for a reason, even if that reason might only become clear years down the road or might never become clear to her.

The long cross-country journey - the despair of finding her only flesh and blood were quite happy believing 'Kimberly' dead and Glen Devonne's insistence that 'the others needn't ever find out Kimberly really didn't die years ago' - the miles on the road and the strange, awkward end to Casey's grudge against her - it all convinced her that some secrets just weren't worth keeping. Amber agreed to keep it a secret that Kimber didn't die young and homeless like so many other runaways. Though Amber still couldn't quite reconcile it with her memories of her own Gran'Da, Glen Devonne outright
demanded that silence to 'protect' his broken family. Amber couldn't comprehend a family so broken it was kinder to pretend someone was dead than try to reconnect; the secret, and the reasons, weighed heavily on her. That weight convinced her to come clean with Donnie about 'the horrors of [her] world. After being sworn to secrecy about a death that didn't happen, keeping a secret about someone not existing in her world seemed petty.

As the odd couple slowly made their way through gritty tunnels lined with defunct tracks, no destination in mind but heading toward one nonetheless, one confessed another lifetime's secrets—secrets and stories that made up a life. She told him things even Mercy didn't know about the accident that left her crippled by pain—about the pain management prescriptions that only made her sick. She spoke of growing up in a dying town and going back to that town no matter how bad things got—of her dreams of finally leaving that town behind, only to return after she found the world unable to live up to her expectations.

_Dreams…_in dreams she'd finally found someone willing to let her be herself without censure, a childhood friend who grew into someone she loved with all her heart. Nearly every night, they met in dreams, even now; instead of admitting the dreams to him and possibly finding out their long childhood connection was one only she knew about, she skirted the subject. "Ya know I'm from another world," she reminded instead, her footsteps keeping time with his—slow, soft, and even. "What ya don't know is that you were there, too—a dream, a fancy of sorts, but there nonetheless." She glanced furtively at him, morbidly curious about how he'd take the truth. "Ya weren't just in my head, either, Dee…a lotta people knew about you an' yer family."

"We were there," Donnie summed up as she searched for words, "but we weren't there? What, were we fictional characters or something?"

"...an' frequently paired up," she grumbled under her breath then answered aloud. "Yeah, you could say that. It's crazy to hear it, but ya weren't real to my world—no more real than any of the spandex-clad superheroes in Mikey's comic books…an' I…"

"You thought it would break me, didn't you?" Amber fell silent. "You thought finding out I'm just a fictional character in your world would be hard for me to process? That I'd, what, lose my mind over a world where I'm not real?" He chuckled at the very thought. He'd suspected, practically since the day they met, that he wasn't really a part of her world; being subject to the _poke it and make sure it's real!_ gesture reminded him of some superhero from Mikey's comics meeting a fan face to face. Fun times...a total mind-fuck at the time, but humorous in retrospect.

Donnie turned those warm, too-intelligent eyes on her and in true Amber fashion, she blurted out the truth before she could hold it back. "Tur'l-ccest," she blurted before she could stop herself. He had no idea what she was saying and stared blankly at her. Before she could get lost in his eyes again, she resolved to finish the statement; she soldiered onward. "Folks...write stories about your family…pairing up your…brothers…like…" Two hands raised for silence cut her off.

"They…write us as...as partners?" he summed up with a heavy cringe. No, surely not—

"Sexual partners...and brothers," ^^ Amber added gravely, "often at the same time." The unspoken—'people write porn about you and your family screwing each other'—was still clear and horrifying enough, but—

"Well, that's gross," he commented dryly, his expression twisted in disgust. "And that's what you were hiding?—that you come from a world full of perverts?" Her cheeks flamed. She didn't quite appreciate being lumped in with a bunch of Tcest shippers but she chose to ignore it...he was taking this ridiculously well. "You're starting too big again."
"Wait, what?" She whipped around to face him. "You're not—not horrified?"

"Never said that," he answered deceptively calmly. "I'm disgusted. I'm not as focused on labels and gender norms as Raph and Leo—maybe because I'm more interested in logic and knowledge than social mores—but the very idea of... with my brothers..." He cringed, recalling against his will some of the more graphic smut he'd found on the internet; an open mind and a thirst for knowledge was normally a blessing, but for many years, it was also a bit of a burden. He was the first one to acknowledge that humans weren't likely to accept them, and that they weren't likely to find human mates, but never once had he seriously considered sating his needs with his own flesh and blood. The very idea of engaging in those sorts of carnal activities with his family... his own relatives, and the ones who knew his every dirty secret and were there through the most embarrassing stages of his childhood... He silenced the train of thought with a visible shudder. He'd rather die an angry little virgin. "Still," he reminded all-too aware of the creak in his voice, "you were so insistent on keeping that a secret—insistent I never find out about your world. You chose to let me think you meant us harm, let me shut you out and spent months fighting me over it... all because you were afraid I'd find out my family's been victimized by fangirls who write about... us... uh..."

"...screwing each other bareback?" she finished too-innocently but got a cringe in response; clearly this was all being shoved into Donatello's mental Deal with it later box. She really shouldn't have so much fun teasing him, but he was just so easy to tease!

"You haven't read any of it, have you?" he asked, but after realizing he really didn't want to know, added "Never mind—don't answer that. The point remains... you were so worried I'd find out about that part of your world that you were tight lipped over the whole thing... doesn't that strike you as a little excessive?"

'You're starting too big again, Braids, ' he'd told her every time she shut him out over that sort of fear, but during their months-long Feud, he (rudely, really) added to it. Take things as they come—if you're afraid of something, own that fear like an adult instead of letting it rule you like a child!' The reminder pinked her cheeks, but she had to admit her total refusal over a few dirty details was a tad excessive. Even if she told him about her world early on, told him he was fictional there, did she really have to tell him about the people who wrote smut about him fucking his brothers? Oh... right... her filter would've seen to it that he knew about it. Even the most innocent of conversations turned smutty from filter-failure the moment she got gutter-brained... and she was always getting gutter brained. She always had sex on the brain, even before she found herself fighting to keep her hands off of the genius no longer present only in dreams.

"I screwed up," she admitted with a sigh. "I just—I was so afraid you'd find out in the worst way possible... and I was sure it'd be... well, nightmare fuel that—"

"That was a mistake, yeah," he interrupted with a sigh of his own. "Don't assume you know how I'll react—I'm too accustomed to Science Fiction to be surprised by this, weird as it is... and remember, my family's fought an alien before. I'm repulsed, yeah, but that's to be expected—my brothers and I were mutated from Red-Eared Sliders, granted, but there was human DNA in the mutagen. We're human and inhuman at the same time—we're sentient beings not just mindless animals. " They came to a stop, both glancing at each other and both aware that they were mere yards from the abandoned City Hall station—the place he found her the day they first met. "Taking responsibility for others' reactions only ever results in heartache—take responsibility for your own reactions and focus on virtuous, honorable behavior."

"Attack the evil that is within yourself," Amber recited softly, "rather than attackin' the evil that's in others. Confucius, right?" He nodded, distracted by silly things—Coconuts, pheromones, the thrill he always got from being reminded that his odd country bumpkin was educated rather than just another
hick… He always enjoyed philosophy and he loved that, at least in that subject, he knew she could keep up with him instead of watching his words go whizzing over her head. She was pretty hopeless when it came to computers and anything that ran off of chips rather than moving parts, but then again, he was skilled enough for both of them.

"Didn't Confucius focus more on ethics an' politics though?" Amber asked instead of admitting how nervous she was about being so close to the abandoned subway station. She died there and every time she found herself back there, something horrible happened; superstitious hoo-hah, maybe, but it was freaky nonetheless. "I seem to recall a lotta do not unto others what you wouldn't have done unto you in my readin's of his…an' if someone somewhere decided to throw me in some smut-fic about me bangin' my family, I wouldn't wanna know about it!"

"You have such a way of making discussions awkward." The reprimand was accompanied by a low laugh—evidence he was paying less attention to their 'debate' than other more interesting things. "That was what you've hidden all this time? That's it?"

"Let's see," she mumbled in feigned thought staring up at the rough concrete ceiling of the tunnel. "Fictional character bullshite, horror stories about brotherly-boinking…" She looked up, inwardly grinning at his wince. "Yep, that's about it. That's what I couldn't tell ya." Funny how it seemed such a small confession yet she felt a huge weight off her back. Was there even a point in keeping that knowledge secret to begin with?

Suddenly it hit her that she was completely alone in the tunnels with him…their family and companions were miles away and wouldn't hear if they called for help. It was the sort of realization that always led her to venture farther in her old life—to dig deeper into the woods and test the limits of her leash even further. Now, it left her with just such a longing to explore, but instead of the ruins of a farmhouse or the hollers outside of town, the territory was less land than man.

"I understand." The admission ground her every thought to a halt and she had to mentally dig herself out of her gutter to remember what he was answering. As though answering the siren's call of her wants and needs, he paced toward her, backing her up against the nearest wall. She swallowed hard, resolutely staring through his bare plastron. Why did he always insist on going shirtless if it wasn't freezing, she wondered in dismay, faintly catching the sound of a sharp inhale—why did he insist on being so naked and tempting?

"You...understand," she repeated slowly but found her voice stolen by a squeak of surprise at being lifted and pinned to the wall, her arms latching onto his neck for support. It never ceased to appeal to that small girly side of her how he could lift her like a feather pillow. Even though she knew she wasn't as big as she used to be she still felt heavier than she really was—still felt fat even though he seemed to appreciate her curves.

"Yeah," Donnie admitted as he nuzzled her neck, "but I don't think I care, anymore." She wasn't the only one being driven crazy by her hormones—he could practically taste her pheromones every time he took a breath and it was driving him out of his mind. "I wish you'd told me from the start," he confessed, punctuating the words with a gentle nip on her neck; the body in his arms went softer at the gesture but clung all the more from the meaning behind it. Whatever the world decided, they belonged together—he was hers as much as she was his, and a more primal part of the genius hoped the love-bite would leave a (painless) mark. Then again, maybe it was a little Cave Turtle to compare a small nip to a mating mark. "—You're here, I'm here, we made it here without getting lost along the way and we have each other…I care about you and you care about me, and we're not going to let anything come between us again…" He finally, shyly, met her eyes—grey-green eyes foggy with the same want he could feel burning through his veins like a powerful drug. "Can't it be enough?"
"You…you're not..." Amber was floored, couldn't quite comprehend what he was saying. "It's not a rush," she insisted trying to push him away long enough to clear his head, but he didn't even budge. "I waited a lifetime fer you—I can wait longer, as long as I've gotta wait to keep ya."

"Frankly, Braids, I'm tired of waiting," he admitted seriously. "I waited a lifetime for you, too, even if it wasn't the same sort of wait; I'm not letting you go."

Amber knew she was crying again—how could she not be driven to tears by such words?—but she felt only his lips on hers, the faint thudding of his heartbeat, and the burning, wanting pressure of hips ground listlessly against hers. Tears didn't taint this kiss—the taste of salt only sweetened the bitterness of Donatello's coffee-flavored lips, made him addictive. Tired of fighting—of waiting for the world to tear her away—she gave in, threw herself into that love with everything she had and damned the consequences. This world was his, but now it was hers, too…and heaven help the fool who tried to separate them!

A silent force haunted the City Hall subway station, contemplating the couple necking obliviously down the tunnel. They couldn't see Her—She wasn't visible in that world—but She felt awkward nonetheless in the face of their shared affections. She shifted on Her booted feet, considering what this meant...perhaps it was confirmation of Her suspicions, or could it mean She truly was at fault for the pair ever finding each other to begin with?

It started so harmlessly—shared dreams that crossed worlds and connected two souls who would never meet, all to prove a point—but those souls had other ideas when the dreams were stopped. Years passed and the dream world was again one sided, but the souls refused to be kept separate—the two souls proved themselves too connected to be kept apart, if only in the world of Dreams. Now this...the two souls were more lost in each other than ever before - one heatedly exploring her lover's neck and the other emitting low growling noises of appreciation - they were together, the story had a happy ending, but She was under investigation by the Powers that Be for Her 'point.' Amber and Kimber's deaths were an unexpected chance—an opportunity for the guilty party to make Her mistake right. Now, Amber was in Donatello's world and, against all odds, the two souls were still as closely entwined as ever. They still had no idea She was responsible for their meeting and their hardship...

...all in due time. There would come a time for them to meet their matchmaker, a time for the silent unseen woman-force to meet them face to face and confess to them Her sins against them...but that time wasn't now...was it soon? Maybe in a few years or so? She still got confused about timelines and worlds now and then, and the mutant and his lover had clearly noticed Her visits to 'key events'...of course, She had only Herself to blame for being a blabbermouth and getting noticed. If Her master ever found out—if He ever realized how badly She'd screwed up—dear God, She'd be stuck on Dust duty for eons!

She needed to leave... now . The Others were sure to have noticed Her absence and She was playing with fire dropping in even after the strange mortals before Her found out about Her visits...they even had a vial of Her space-dust to alert them when She came by, something She should've seen coming. No matter...the two idiots were too lost in one another to find traces of Her footprints before they faded into the ether.

The sound of a legion of ticking clocks called Her home—soft, undulating light guided Her way. With a theatrical whirl and a shower of glimmering space-dust that would...
vanish in moments, She vacated the subway. Next stop: the End of Time, then a particularly annoying Jersey nutcase who seemed to think herself below waitressing in a small town like Willsdale, Missouri. If only the unseen woman's meddling 'hints' caught on easier, Kimber would be easier to handle.

How could one mortal be so different from their counterpart? Kimber and Amber were really the same soul in different worlds—both the same at heart but molded in different ways by different choices and different struggles—and though Kimber annoyed the daylights out of the meddling woman-force who threw her into that other world and that other body, the meddler had to remind Herself to be patient. Kimber was still the same soul as her counterpart and with similar vices and virtues...she just hadn't fought her own weaknesses yet, and had yet to learn her own lessons.

Amber was brought to this world not only to fix Her mistakes—it was never that simple with mortals, and She was more likely to accomplish Her aim without long-term legal trouble if She put a different spin on it. Officially, Amber came to this world 'to learn from her mistakes and grow as a soul' and that was that. She'd made significant progress in that journey, but Kimber's journey in her new world—officially, for the same reason rather than just 'because She could'—well, Kimber's journey was only just begun. Mortals judge one another as lacking, are too obsessed with 'who they are' to care about 'who they will be;' it's mortal to judge Kimber lacking for having not corrected her own faults yet, but fortunately, the woman-force responsible for her wasn't mortal.

A flash of light and the ticking of distant clocks, a glimmer of space-dust, and the unseen woman was gone—somewhere at the edge of Time immemorial and far away from the reminders of Her own past mistakes and struggles. All that remained of Her was the glowing outline of a pair of boot prints—seemingly left while clicking Her heels like Dorothy in The Wizard of OZ—and in moments, that, too, faded into nothing, leaving the City Hall Subway station empty, silent as the tomb it was.

Amber startled at some distant sound—she was sure she heard a ticking noise, but the fingers buried in her bound hair drove that thought out of her mind. Her chin angled for better access, comfortably chapped lips trailed from her throat to her jaw and toward her pierced earlobe. "Did you hear that?" he whispered into her ear, and she fought to clear her mind.

"Nah," she admitted softly, all memory of the ticking gone with the cause. "Unless you meant the explosion...ya blow my mind, Speccy." A deep, low chuckle at her ear sent chills down her spine, but she grew solemn, recalling everything they'd been through thus far...it was a long, broken road that led her to her Donnie. "Ya know...this has been such an imperfect life so far."

"Seems pretty perfect to me," Donnie admitted tracing her lips with his fingertips, his eyes first following his fingers then meeting her eyes in a heated stare. "...it's just getting better." At first, he was worried—the faint ticking noise at the edge of his hearing concerned him—but like a distant dream, that worry faded with the noise that caused it.

They were only two souls from two vastly different worlds but they crossed worlds to be together. Their story was only beginning and they were ready to share the journey, come what may.

~*~*~*~*~*~* End Part II: This Time Imperfect ~*~*~*~*~*
To be continued in Part III: Between the Raindrops

WORDS

-There wiz a windae here, and it wiz through tha' windae tha' I stared down m'own death...an' blinked. - Relapse speech, heavily Scotched. "There was a window here, and it was through that window that I stared down my own death...and blinked." Wiz - Scotched was. Windae - Scotched window.
-They jus' leave'em - They just leave them.
-Wouldn't've - One of the many unconventional conjunctions common in the twang of southern Missouri. Literally would not have.
-Ya'd - You'd

Some basic rules for Midwestern Twang as portrayed:

- Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word - means he, his or him respectively.
- Adding 'er to the end of a word - means her.
Compare to adding 'im to a word, meaning 'him,' IE, "I wanna slap'im" meaning "I want to slap him."
- Adding 'ey, 'em, or 'eir to the end of a word - means they, them, or their respectively.
- Adding 'a to the end of a word - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in out'a which means 'out of.' Generally you can determine the meaning of the 'a by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

- Basic notes regarding Casey's speech in this chapter: I've based his dialogue in this story on a combination of the '03 series, the CGI film, and the 90s films, because his character in the Bay-verse films was SAD. That Casey spoke with a 'backstreet/city thug' type dialect, so th- words are instead spoken as "d-" and he often pronounces -er/- or as "-a" or "-uh." To is usually pronounced as "ta" and some words, predominantly h-words or -ing words, have the first or last letters completely cut off. ("e" instead of "He" and "Lyin'" instead of "Lying.")

Long-Ass Chapter Notes

# Knobs/Hills and Hollers – This is a landscape heavily apparent in the Ozark Mountains, the Missouri Ozarks, and most frequently attributed to the area around Branson, Missouri. The terrain around Branson is extremely hilly and driving it is a nightmare if you're not used to it. "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. A "Holler" is defined as a narrow valley or sizable decrease in altitude, often formed by adjoining hills and Knobs. While it's a beautiful landscape, it's also potentially deadly
because fog settles easily in Hollers (name based on the word *Hollow*) and lower altitude land. It 'burns off' on Knobs and hills, and unless you're down in the midst, it's beautiful. Keep in mind that Glenville is (Fictionally at least) located between Branson and the Missouri border and still in the Ozarks Hills, and Willsdale is supposed to be northwest of Glenville.

A couple quick notes regarding Small towns, Rednecks, and the region: "No one ever goes to towns like Willsdale—they jus' leave'em." Culturally there's a trend regarding the population of small towns. People tend to flock to big cities and leave behind small towns, in search of opportunity and convenience, and a smaller number sometimes 'retire' to those small towns for a less complicated life or in search of lower cost of living; the population of small towns is usually tight-knit if nosy and exclusive, and usually the number of residents dwindles by the year. Cold's hometown, upon which Willsdale is greatly based, is widely regarded as 'dying' because so many people have left but not nearly enough have come to stay. Cost of living is generally cheaper in small towns but residents have to deal with less work, less opportunity, and going out-of-city for grocery runs. Populations are normally in the triple digits or below and class sizes are normally very small; I lived in a small city when I met Cold, and after graduating high school with 200+ in my class, (actually an average number) finding out Cold's graduating class had about SIXTY people - several of whom dropped out or died before they could graduate - was a major shock to me. Over the years I've become fascinated by small town life even though we still live in a small city. For comparison: Small town - compare to Reeds or Carthage, population generally in low triple digits or in double digits. Small city - compare to Joplin or Neosho, population generally much higher than a small town but less than 100k persons. Big City - compare to St. Louis, Kansas City, etc, populations tend to be 100k+ people. A few stats to compare with: Branson/a small city-slash-tourist-trap is noted in the 2010 census as having a population of "11,430," Cold's hometown, a small town, is said to have a population of just over 1k, and Kansas City (a mentioned "Big city" and so far the most densely populated city in Missouri) has a stated population of over 481k people. The small city Cold and I live in has a population of about 50k people. On the other hand, NYC has a reported population of over 8.5 MILLION. Regarding the 'rednecks' bit, there's a cultural attitude prevalent in the southern half of Missouri regarding Arkansas as being 'cousin-screwing country' and 'redneck central,' and culturally inferior to Missouri's population. I'm not saying the beliefs are accurate, but the rivalry is deeply ingrained in the lower half of the state, possibly because Missouri is considered "Midwest" but Arkansas is "part of the South." Locals who espouse this belief often ignore the fact that rural Missouri can be just as redneck as rural Arkansas, if not more redneck, and honestly, I think the whole rivalry is pretty ignorant and cultural-centric. It's one of those things where when you hear it, the best you can do is let it go in one ear and out the other.

## Suicidal free-range chickens – this is a flaw of certain small towns and not just in the Midwest, especially the Missouri small town Willsdale's culture is based on. (Cold's 'hometown,' which we visit relatively regularly.) In that town you have to expect to dodge around gaggle of free-range chickens or guineas (mostly in rural areas and along backroads) not just because of 'free range eggs' but because they're good for pest control. Loose Guinea Hens, in particular, are a good way of dealing with fleas in your yard, even though they can give motorists heart attacks when they inevitably roam and get loose on the roads. Seeing a loose guinea in the road can cause a driver to lose control of their car, but guineas are usually pretty good at avoiding oncoming cars so long as you just EXPECT them to dodge and keep driving straight at them. Chickens, however, are IDIOTS who usually fail at 'playing chicken' and must be dodged or
they'll end up smashed to your grill.

Kimber grew up in a Jersey City suburb after she ran away from home. (or, rather, after her father's temper got her mother AND HIS killed in a car accident during an NYC vacation, Kimber ran away from HIM and was taken in as a runaway by Daron's mother.) What's unspoken is that Kimber's Father came from Willsdale—she grew up in and lived in Willsdale, met Daron there before his family moved to Jersey City during his adolescence, and until she showed up on his doorstep, they'd not really kept in contact aside from social media. Casey wouldn't know any of this and neither does Amber, and Kimber doesn't have any backstory with Glenville. I seriously wanted to include Amber's visit to the Feed Store on the way out of town, but it just wasn't flowing right.

* Doubt and insecurity - In the Epilogue of The War of the Worlds, (the book, kiddies, not the movies or whatever else) this is a common theme—the world didn't really end, but for the main character, they found themselves repeatedly and without warning drawn back to times gone and horrors seen. Thus those who have gone through Hell can still find themselves, years down the road, 'lost in remembrances' of the specific shade of Hell they went through.

** Is there anything more absurd, etc? - This one's a bit more philosophical. In Candide, there is a proud woman who suffers horribly at the hands of her fellow man; this remark, though used to refer to 'escaping pain' through suicide, also effectively describe the all-too Human tendency to grab hold of what we've endured and let it dictate our lives around that experience. A battered wife cannot abide the scent of alcohol and refuses to marry again, a tornado survivor develops a phobia of rain and refuses to return to the 'scene of the crime'—both cases are signs of PTSD and, while both are understandable trauma-responses, those people will never truly grow until they conquer their fears and confront the triggers that keep them afraid. Waxing poetic, maybe I am—maybe I'm also coming across as insensitive to others who struggle with their fears—but I've seen what can happen when a person lets their path be guided by remembered trauma and I've also seen what can happen if you are able to really heal those wounds... One of the hardest things I've ever done was go back to the place where I could easily have died and remember that I'm alive. I'd go there again, no matter how hard it was, a thousand times I'd do it over again and I'm glad I was able to return alive. No, it didn't play out directly as portrayed with Amber, but I've heavily based her emotions and reactions around my own experiences, even though her actions and 'scene' are unique to her character.

^ Fair and For a reason - This is a personal belief; not preaching, just sharing. Life isn't fair and letting yourself be swept away by expectations that it should be fair is emotional suicide. It sounds bitter, but it's actually made me happier in the long run to expect life to be unfair and regard Fair as a particularly nasty curse word. Honestly, I don't say fair IRL, and my family would be more surprised to hear me say something's fair than to hear me confess to believing I'm Ronald Reagan. (This means something, but I'm not sure what.) Another belief, "Everything happens for a reason even if we never will know the reason" is more of a religious-based belief, but is also rooted (at least in myself) in reading too much and spending life with your head in the clouds. Honestly, as much crap as the Flying Crap Fairy has thrown at my family over the years, these two beliefs are sometimes the only things keeping me sane and whole, and they do a damn fine job of it.
**Turtle-cest/T-cest** - Now ya know my reaction to T-Cest involving *blood relations*...I'm not judgin', if ya like that, that's your choice, but considering I grew up so close to Arkansas (for nonlocals, that's up here considered "Marryin' yer kuzin's legal!" territory - see note above about 'rednecks') and have seen what Real-Life incest can do to a family, it ain't my cuppa tea. ...and, honestly, I kind of see an 'ew gross' reaction being more logical in-story than "Huh...I screw my family and people like it?" even for the famed "Doctor TMI." Like what ya like, it's all the same to me and I won't judge ya, but you won't see any T-cest in my stories, *with or without* blood relationships.

Also, I'm liable to get some flack over the 'gender fluid' comment, but *gender-fluid* doesn't necessarily mean *gay* - it just means a person isn't as concerned about gender, gender roles, and such as the average person. There's no insult here so please don't take it as one...or, if ya really wanna be insulted, that's your choice, I'm not gonna throw you a pity party. A simple comparison (OCs I've written about) would be that Amber O'Brien, Alesha Woods [Elementals/BoFA/Moments in Time/Little Moments] Rio Stone [Serendipity] and Sonja Merlo [A Match Made in Metal/Ashes to Ashes] are *straight but gender-fluid* while Cordelia Stone [Serendipity] Briallen Hardy, and Nehashi Mizuchi [Homeless Hearts/HH Journey's End] are all relatively *gender-standard bordering on girly.* Mikey and Donnie always struck me as the more likely of their brothers to be gender-fluid or not-completely straight and the more likely to be open to trying new things, so head-canon. Last but not least, if anyone who's read this story from beginning to now can still convince themselves I'm a homophobe, they're completely delusional and even more completely *WRONG,* and I'm not going to waste my time AND theirs convincing them of the truth when they've already made up their minds. End of story.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Brief character rundown RE Amber/Kimber (with edits because I realized I made some mistakes in it before.)

Amber Jean O'Brien was born to Ginny Devon and Douglas O'Brien, had no siblings and spent most of her formative years following her Gran'da Glen Devon around like a lost puppy. She died at 35 years old, largely estranged from everyone in the family except Glen and uncle Bart.

The Devon family: Glen, his wife Arabel, and their two children came to the US from rural Scotland during the '50s. Ginny has a younger brother, Bart Devon. Bart was born with very vivid red hair which quickly paled to blonde then went white at an early age; he has grey eyes and is easily sickened, is unmarried and childless, and owns/operated Willsdale's only pub, "The Staggering Rat."

The O'Brien family: Douglas O'Brien drinks too much and has had difficulty holding a steady job. His parents, Flynn and Rosabel O'Brien are both long-deceased, and Douglas has two older siblings - "Brianna/Bryn" and "Roger," whom are both rather unstable and prone to fighting with one another during family gatherings. Bryn is married but childless, Roger is unmarried and childless. For the most part, the O'Brien family is a family only in name.

Kimber's Family: Kimberly Jane O'Bryan was born to Jenny Devonne and Doug
O'Bryan. She changed her name after running away, taking on the name "Kimber Bryant." Kimber was 25 when she died, but her body is still alive and still aging normally. Unlike the Devons, the Devonne family are long-time American residents because the Devonne's ancestors immigrated generations back. The family consists of Jenny, now deceased, Jenny's crotchety father Glen Devonne, Glen's long-deceased wife and his divorced second wife, and Jenny's elder brother, Bert Devonne, who has a teenage daughter named Brenda. There are several other family members from Glen's second marriage, but Amber and Kimber knew nothing about them.

The family isn't very close-knit.

The O'Bryan family consisted of only Doug, his now-deceased mother Rosalyn, a deceased father never mentioned, and no siblings; Doug spent many years incarcerated for the assault that killed a cabbie and resulted in the death of Jenny and Rosalyn, but over the last few years, Doug has lost almost all mental capacity because of his chronic alcohol abuse. Technically he's still alive, but Kimber considered him dead because of his extreme mental degradation.
43: Growth

Chapter Summary

Begin Part III: Between the Raindrops

- Now with new and improved cover art!

Chapter Notes

It's finally here! Folks, we've made it out of the majority of the drama and angst and onto the fun part of the story - the part full of romance, fluff, humor, and lots and lots of smut, and eventually, some answers to the story's long-asked questions! Currently, we've been pretty busy IRL what with the holidays but never fear - there's a long-ass chapter queue waiting for ya, so I should be able to update every week or two for a while. Hope everyone's having a great holiday season, whichever holiday you celebrate if any, and I hope the story continues to warm your hearts in this third installment!

A quick word regarding the issue voting in the last chapters: No one who ever reported issues with the dialogue spoke up while the question was on the table (I believe it was up almost a month, so plenty of time) and I got nothing but 'keep being weird' remarks from readers on both sites this story is kept posted on. Since we're starting Part III and there's been no remark against the colloquialism, the discussion's over, voting is closed, and there won't be any changes made. As always, if you have problems with the occasional awkward words and spellings of dialogue, you'll find the rougher stuff defined at the end of the chapter and I'll be posting regular 'general rules' for these instances from now on. Otherwise, the issue's off the table and I'm sure the rest of y'all are more than ready to move on.

Dedicated to my reviewers and commenters: kmm92886, DaLadyofSouls, nightowl2010, ischryos, Lady-warrior-10 whose name FFnet STILL censors as a web address, DrakeRhapsody, Amethyst, a few guests, mim, CarolineTheRebel, WhiteDemonLunarMoon, MelTheSugarBug, and Lynn_Nexus, and especially dedicated to my FREQUENT REVIEWERS/COMMENTERS AimlessUnderworld, CathInTheBox, ImpartingAbyss, Shelshokd, SupernovaWolf, and Suthnmeh for reviewing and commenting on a regular basis and for just being awesome! Also dedicated in particular to Wolf for beta-reading this story and being so helpful with it! Y'all really made my year, peoples, and I appreciate all of ya so much! Thank you for being such wonderful readers, and I hope the story continues to satisfy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*~*~*~*~*
Begin Part III: Between the Raindrops
Hold on and take a break.
I'll be here every step we walk.

Between the raindrops with you.
Suggested Listening: Michael Bublé "After All," Red "Best is Yet to Come," Fleetwood Mac "The Chain"

43: Growth

September 15th, The Lair

Amber O’Brien’s new life in Donatello’s world began in January, and all Spring and most of the summer, that life was one big shit-storm after another. Now, Fall was started—the air was cooling, leaves were turning, and more had changed than stayed the same. As she puttered home along the dusk-greyed street, still clad in her delivery uniform and carting a mountain of pizza boxes bungee-strapped to the back of her scooter, the other-worlder reminisced on the many changes she’d already seen in her new life. It was mind-boggling when she looked back at everything she’d been through in less than a year, and considered that she endured maybe half that much spaced out over a few decades in her previous life.

She died and was brought back to life, given a second chance in another world. She found out about Counterparts, learned the dirty secrets of her own, met the Counterpart of a dear old friend, and discovered an even older friend with a very new problem. Amber's Counterpart's past actions led to Amber being hunted down—assaulted, gravely injured, and nearly killed before it was all over.

Leonardo’s distance shrank over time and he agreed to start helping the other-worlder with guided meditation and pseudo-hypnosis. Once his secret life was brought into the open by the youngest—who, apparently, had a secret life of his own—Leo became unsettled but more open. He still insisted that Beverly was 'just his friend,' but his pinching cheeks and boyish grins told Amber there was more to the story. Mikey was ecstatic to not have to hide the Hardy cousins anymore, and the younger, a woman most called "Bree," became a prominent fixture in the Lair.

…and that wasn’t even the half of it. From the very start, Amber and Raphael were at odds, rivals that sometimes were driven to near-violence against one another, but now they were friends—they shared booze and bitch-fests, determined to help one another spare their family from drama. Mercy Ross, now an alcoholic if no longer homeless, was obviously and disgustingly in love with the hulking ninja, and Amber was even more disgustingly in love with his twin brother. If not for Raph and Amber's routine venting to one another, though, things would be much more chaotic around the Lair.

The greatest changes, it seemed, were changes in Amber's relationship with Donatello. Amber met Donatello and his family, begrudgingly moved in with them, fell head over heels for the genius all over again, spent more time trying to push him away than let him in, then blew up all over him and started a completely unnecessary fight. They spent months at odds until they came together in a single moment of weakness—a dark pantry and a mostly harmless attempt at making peace, and the last walls of her resistance crumbled. Once they were finally reconciled, they never looked back—neither ever apologized or admitted fault, but they gave into the attraction that had been driving them crazy. Now…now he knew the truth—knew the horrifying truth she hid about her world—still, they were only growing closer.

Not long had passed since Casey, April, and Amber traveled to the Willsdale of this new world, but Donnie was sure Amber would soon start seeing an improvement in her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It was an understandable reaction to being killed by what she feared most, honestly, but
Donatello saw it and her phobia as a challenge, a chance to use his considerable intelligence to conquer a problem. Now that she wasn't having to fight for her life, training with him was more relaxed, and now that the Lair's renovations were mostly complete, they had more free-time...and more free-time meant more time for the couple to drive one another up the wall.

The brunette faltered, her physical self pausing at a stoplight but her thoughts charging ahead with abandon. Donatello seemed to make it a point to drive her out of her mind at every chance. He never hesitated to strip her bare and render her a blabbering mess with his incredibly talented tongue, and lips, but he had yet to let his just as eager lover return the favor. His canvas trousers taunted her, reminded her that even though she gave him her all, he still feared she'd lose interest if she saw him at his most vulnerable. Amber shook away the thought, silently berating herself for it as the light turned green and she took off with the rest of the traffic. Donatello had every right to take things slowly—he wasn't keeping his distance out of an attempt to push her away, he was simply not ready...and when that day came, Amber wanted him to be ready—ready to spend at least a day unable to walk, at the very least.

Crud. She scoffed at the direction her thoughts were turning, sure her cheeks were flushing. 'Hello, gutter...it's been, what, an hour since ya last called me?'* Honestly, as often as she had sex on the brain, it was entirely likely she was driving Donnie up the wall, too; after all, as he admitted recently, her scent always changed when she got gutter-brained, and he wasn't the only one who could pick that up. Needless to say, she still wasn't crazy about wearing perfume to cover the 'horndog' scent, but she was getting used to it. At least it made things less awkward with her other family.

Family...the five mutants were once housemates, just kind souls who offered her a place to stay and a roof over her head, but now, they were her family—the only family she had left, and the kind she chose rather than 'chose to avoid.' Amber spent enough years avoiding her own blood relations, some because they simply grew apart and some out of necessity for sanity, but she couldn't see herself ever letting this family out of her sight the way her blood kin fell by the wayside. Granted, most of those kin were crazy and intent on killing one another with drama, but every family had drama sometimes.

Glancing discreetly around for followers and prying eyes, Amber quickly turned down a familiar alley, paused long enough to open the garage door, then pulled into the cavernous warehouse to park with the other vehicles. She carefully parked Dorian Grey between the Shellcycle and the Party Wagon, sighing wistfully at the pair of long, lean, canvas-clad legs draped along the creeper poking out from the underside of the garbage truck. The owner of the legs—clearly so enthralled by his task that he never even heard the door open—muttered aloud about what might have caused the oil leak he was trying to repair.

"Check the bolts on the oilpan," Amber suggested dropping to the concrete beside the tall vehicle; he startled at the sudden voice, whacking his head on the undercarriage with a grunted oath, but almost instantly recognized the scent of his curious visitor. "If there're any loose bolts there, the seal can be affected an' you'll wind up with a leak."

"That was actually the first thing I checked," Donnie admitted rolling out to greet her and rubbing his sore head. "It's an old truck, honestly, so I'm surprised this hasn't come up before."

"Degraded seals?" Amber asked, and he nodded. "How badly degraded? If it's not bad an' they're just a little shrunk an' stiff, I can pick up some leak-stopper additive on the way home tomorrow—it'd fix the seals."

"I'm still not used to this, honestly," Donnie admitted with a weak smile. "We'd normally have to make do with scrounging for usable parts...it's...nice being able to fix things properly." He sat back
against the side of the vehicle, legs splayed and arms propped on his bent knees. "Would you mind? Or would it be—"

"I'm sure you could whip up some awesome repair with just chewin' gum an' toothpaste," Amber teased inviting herself into his lap. "but it'd be no problem to hit the store on the way home—need a few things anyway, no trouble at all." He went to argue further—continue insisting she didn't have to go out of her way for him—but the little braided minx stole the words right from his lips. The situation derailed quickly, the genius' insistentses forgotten in the midst of the gentle, brushing pecks and lip-nibbles, but he had no regrets. One massive hand latched onto Amber's lower back as its owner trailed kisses down to her neck, the other sweeping up to shove her hat off and splay across the back of her skull. "I mist'cha,- ya sweet speccy,"- she admitted softly as Donnie came back up to rub noses with her.

"Missed you, too, Hon," he answered, then pulled her back in for another, more chaste kiss. He loved where this was going, after all, but they weren't behind a closed door—they were in the garage, vulnerable to the possibility of intrusion—and so he forcibly pulled away. At first, she was visibly disappointed, but let him lean back against the truck unhindered. "I already knew you're skilled in home repairs and other such tasks," he acknowledged gesturing to the undercarriage of the garbage truck. "Might you be skilled with car repair, too?"

"Well," she admitted with a sheepish shrug, "I wouldn't say skilled but I know more than the basics. I kept Ol' Jumper running right on my own, but some things were beyond me, like the shocks and more intricate stuff—that beast's shocks were a pain to mess with, an' my arse paid the price. Would love to learn more;" she added with a blush. "Would love to be able to help out more often…other'n-cleanin' an' cookin'."

"Sounds like someone needs to show you the ropes," Donnie teased, shoving away from the vehicle and urging Amber to lie flat against his front; with a few calculated boot-shoves, he rolled back under the tall truck with her. "Let's start with the oilpan seal—think it can be reconditioned with additive, or do I replace it entirely?" Amber inspected the cracked, crumbling rubber curiously, trying to keep her brain on the job rather than the pair of thumbs slowly tracing circles into her full hips and the swelling lump pressed up against her rear end. Perhaps she wasn't the only one getting gutter-brained at awkward times.

"Bubblegum an' toothpaste," she answered glancing over her shoulder at him with wide innocent eyes. "After dinner, though—I brought pizza, your favorite." …and everyone else's favorites, granted, and a rather suspicious philly-steak and feta cheese pan pizza someone ordered then forgot to pick up…** "You said Casey and April are comin' for dinner? They already here, or are we—" A brush of chapped lips on the back of her neck cut her off with a gasp.

"We're waiting for them," Donnie admitted, his voice husky from hormones and light from teasing. "Until they get here…"

"We're already here, Donnie," a woman's voice cut him off, kicking one heavy-booted foot in warning. He groaned in disappointment, burying his blushing cheeks in Amber's neck. "Quit necking under there and help us with the groceries Vern sent."

"To be continued?" Donnie mumbled at Amber's left ear as April's shoes clacked away toward Casey's car.

"Better be," she teased breathlessly as warm breath ghosted across the pierced cartilage. That turtle was really going to kill her one of those days… "Somethin' tells me it'll be a helluva- sequel."
"So how's work going?" April groaned in annoyance, picking at her pizza crust.

"My new boss is a tyrant," she grumbled in answer to Donatello's question. Every time April and her fellow reporters took a story on-air, it had to be written up before hand, and the 'big boss' was a complete grammar Nazi. "She chewed me out for a ridiculous typo today—said 'if you can't properly spell 'Bronx' maybe you should go work there.' Auto-correct is gonna get me fired."

"Hey, I thought you were workin' at the pizza parlor!" Mercy teased Amber. "When'd ya take up journalism, Grammar Nazi?"

"I didn't." Amber answered with mock offense; if she was April's boss, she wouldn't be dodging cars to deliver pizza. "Hence the pizza sauce on your chin…Messy." Instead of embarrassing the blonde, however, the remark just made her turn to Raphael and point at her face in a hint; sure enough, the burly ninja wiped the trace of sauce away and sucked it off his finger, intentionally holding eye contact with the blushing blonde. "Oi! Some of us are eatin' here, ya horndogs!"

"Not my problem," Mercy teased a little too breathlessly, completely ignoring Casey's cringe and Splinter's dirty looks. In secret, she and Raphael were still moving slowly in their relationship, but all bets were off around the rest of the family; sure, they could refrain from the rampant over-the-top PDA, but it annoyed everyone else so well!

"So I was thinkin'," Casey began, stopping to clear his throat.

"Naw," Michelangelo muttered in blatant disbelief. "When'd you take that up? OW!" No one saw the brain-duster administered, and considering he sat between Raph and Donnie, there was no telling who was responsible.

"Guess ya don't wanna go back to da- farm next week, huh?" Casey demanded of the still-whining youngest mutant. "An' here I was gonna take you nutjobs out'a- town for da weekend." Amber silently stared down into her iced tea, torn between excitement at her new family having a chance to get out of the city and regret at how she and Mercy would again wind up left behind. "Might have to clear out da attic so's Blondie an' Amber can have a place'a their own fer sleepin', but it'd be a start."

Wait…what? Confused, trying not to get her hopes up, Amber stared across the table at Casey, feeling a familiar hand reach for her chunky thigh for a comforting squeeze. "You're…yer invitin' us to come with the family? –to come stay with y'all in Northampton?" she asked the vigilante with a hopeful smile. "You—"

"Yer not Kimbuh Bryant, right?" he cut her off avoiding her eyes in favor of his plate. "You an' Blondie ain't gonna hurt anyone, an' yer part of the family now, right? Why shouldn't ya come along? It's just a weekend." He winced at April's elbow to the ribs, then added with an awkward pacifying smile, "Dis- one, at least. Maybe once we've all gotten used ta one another, we can take longer trips."

Amber turned wistful, watery eyes to Donnie; sure enough, he winked at her in confirmation of his interference, and the hand on her thigh squeezed again. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse and her smile weak. "We'd love to go with y'all," she admitted quickly glancing at Mercy for confirmation only to cringe at the sight of the blonde trying to feed Raphael a breadstick. Surely that wasn't meant to look suggestive…right? Amber needed to get laid before everything around her started looking sexual!

"One question," Mercy asked brusquely, took a bite off the breadstick she just shared with Raph, chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. "Are there cows? It ain't the country if there's no cows."

"Well, strap me to the luggage rack an' hit the road," Mercy grinned. She missed her family's livestock—missed being around cows, especially—and if she hadn't been already convinced by the 'weekend in the country,' the cows sealed the deal. She loved cows, after all… "Don't bother settin' up a place in the attic fer Scotch-bright, though—she's sleepin' with the nerd." Amber choked on her iced tea and Donatello had to start whacking her on the back to clear her lungs.

"Mercy!" the brunette objected shrilly, her voice hoarse from the tea she inhaled.

"What?" the blonde asked her embarrassed friend with feigned confusion as Casey sputtered in disbelief. "Y'are," Amber hid her face in her hand, sure it was turning as purple as Donnie's mask. "Better lock the pantry, too, Case—those two're deviants."

Long after dinner was over, the dishes were running, and April and Casey had gone home, the Lair was finally quiet again. Torn between thoughts of his family and worries about a certain woman with molasses brown eyes, Leo padded over to the Lab's open door and peeked through. Seated across from one another at their usual workbench, Donnie and Amber sat around a propped up tablet displaying a triggering video clip. Exposure therapy again, Leo realized as Amber pointed at the written scale on Donnie's notebook—the video of a rainstorm was considered a high two on the scale, whereas it once would have triggered a panic attack. In the days since April took Casey and Amber to Willsdale, Amber had begun making unprecedented progress with her PTSD and her storm phobia.

"Maybe it's time to kick this up a notch," Donnie suggested with a lopsided grin. "You've moved beyond photos, you're handling short videos pretty well…maybe we should start checking the Library for more immersive material, like movies and recordings."

"If you make me sit through Twister," Amber warned in a huff, "I'm sleepin' in the barracks."

"Better the barracks than the attic," Donnie teased reaching over to chuck her chin and triggering a shy blush. "First time it rains, you'll come running back." Still seeming blissfully unaware of Leo's presence, the couple argued playfully, exchanging meaningful glances and delving deeper and deeper into more physical displays of affection. Feeling awkward at the couple obliviously snogging in the Lab, and missing Beverly like crazy, Leo turned away, slouching back out the door without ever saying a word.

"Think'e's- gone yet?" Amber murmured into Donnie's neck, the hair at the back of her own standing at attention at the low chuckle resonating in his chest.

"Yeah," he answered pausing for a teasing neck-nuzzle. "I kinda feel bad for not greeting him…"

"If it was really important," the brunette reminded her lover, "Leo would'a-spoken up—he's too stubborn to let us chase'im-off when it really matters. Raph an' Mercy on the other hand…" She cringed at an inconvenient and rather creepy memory. "Those two're gonna drive me up the wall…I'm startin' to realize how she felt all those years ago when we were roommates." Amber averted her eyes trying to think of anything but the world she left behind and noticed the all-too familiar cot against the wall. She slept there before she moved into the Barracks with Mercy and Daron…was that really only a few months ago?

"Do you miss it?" Donnie asked lowly, recognizing the direction her thoughts were leading her. "You had a place of your own in the barracks…You're sleeping better in my room, but there's not
really much in the way of privacy."

"I don't miss it, honestly," Amber admitted with an awkward smile. "Other'n the place I lay my head, not a lot's changed. I spent months sleepin' in that cot tryin' not to jump ya...all that's changed is I'm not sleepin' in the cot anymore." He blushed, scratching his neck awkwardly, and his embarrassment encouraged her. "Still tryin' not to jump ya, honestly," she teased perching on the edge of the cot with an inviting smirk. "Ya don't make it easy on me, Speccy."

The tease accomplished her aim—the Lab door was quickly shut and locked and before she knew it, he had joined her on the cot, pushing her down into the sheets and pulling at her clothes. Before he could get very far, though, a knock at the door to the Needle Room startled him back to himself; he didn't think to lock that door. With an apologetic peck on the cheek, he crawled off and crept to answer the door, blocking the intruder's view of the flustered brunette righting her clothes.

"Hey, Bruh!" Mikey greeted obliviously from the Needle Room side of the door. "Came to ask if you'd fix my computer, but the Lab door's locked! What gives?" Apparently, Donnie developed a 'why me?' face because Amber cracked up over on the cot. Suddenly it occurred to Mikey what he interrupted. He cringed, backing away from the flustered mutant with repeated embarrassed glances at the woman he called 'Sis.' "No rush—take your time." Without further explanation he fled the doorway, fled the Needle Room, and took off to his bedroom, intent on calling Bree.

In the Lab, Donnie buried his face in one massive hand, shook his head, and shut the door, remembering to lock it this time. Over on the cot, Amber watched him with heated eyes, remembering the multitude of wet dreams this cot saw. Hopefully, she considered as Donnie joined her again and picked up where they left off, hopefully, none of his other family would be a twat-block and interrupt them again.

Even as he threw himself into spoiling his girlfriend, touching then tasting, Donatello couldn't stop thinking about the trip to come. Amber's pheromones flooded his lungs, but he couldn't keep his mind off the farm, the old barn he'd staked his claim on, the small tinker shop he'd set up in the loft, and the futon bed he'd hauled up into that loft. The other-worlder gasping in his arms had made great progress with her fears—she could handle fake and recorded rain—but could she handle real rain on the barn's tin roof, the sound he loved most? Some things, he decided as her thick thighs latched around his shoulders, only time would tell.

Rain or no rain, he couldn't wait 'til the weekend.

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The Hardys' Loft, Brooklyn.

A whole year had passed since the fateful day Leonardo found Beverly Hardy collapsed in an empty subway station...a whole year of testing, draining surgeries, heavy antibiotics, and several-times-daily IV drip treatments...What started off as 'You'll be back on your feet in no time' quickly became 'We're looking at about six to eight weeks in recovery,' but after several relapses and numerous failed excisions and draining surgeries, the techs at the hospital stopped giving Beverly or Bree a time. For the longest time, they advocated for Hospice treatment—at first claiming that Beverly 'wasn't really dying, but would be better off with constant supervision and treatment.' Then, those claims changed...eventually, there was no longer a question of whether she would live or die. She was sure she had no future.

A whole year of nothing but bad news, relapses, constant medication, and more bad news...now, Bev found herself stunned by the words given her in the phone call. After a whole year, she finally
got good news—as of her last checkup and CT scan, the abscess appeared to have finally dwindled—she was finally left to just recover from the long sickness instead of the cause. After a whole year of being sick, of being constantly on the verge of dying, Bev was finally sure she would live and would heal…and she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it.

"Miss Hardy?" the receptionist on the other line asked in her too-chipper voice. "It's great news, right? Doctor Crane still wants you to come back every month for a checkup for a while—you'll still need frequent cat-scans to make sure that abscess doesn't—"

"Yes, it's wonderful news," Beverly finally answered not realizing she was interrupting the other woman, then quickly bid her good day. The phone hung up, she wandered through the parlor hung with lithographs, over to her black lacquered piano by the window, and weakly slumped down on the seat. Her mind was reeling—after so long of being sick, she was finally healing…Bree wouldn't need to take care of her anymore…she could get a new job with the school system like before, or stick to private lessons…Leonardo wouldn't have to—wouldn't have to worry about her anymore…

Leonardo. She cringed in recalling her explosive argument with Leo after her last relapse caught her by surprise; normally, she wasn't prone to outbursts of emotion, but then again, she wasn't the only one who lost her temper in that hospital room. They finally started understanding one another that day—finally admitted their mutual affection and made plans to wait until she was healed before starting any sort of romantic relationship. So long she'd waited for him to see her, to understand her and care for her; now, she finally had her chance to live out the life she'd wanted with him for almost a year…and she was terrified.

Beverly wasn't always going to be sick, but Leonardo was a worry-wart—he was constantly asking about her health, inquiring about her treatment, and checking on her 'just in case.' He rarely spoke anymore of 'when she felt better' and the distant 'Beverly's healed' day, not since the day he promised to wait for her. Perhaps…could his feelings have changed? Could he, perhaps, be so enamored of taking care of her, of being the strength to her weakness, that he no longer considered that she would heal someday? Had his feelings changed—had he changed his mind?

Bosco whined for attention nearby—nudged her knee and pawed her pant leg. "Bosco," Beverly asked softly, relenting to his demands for attention with neck and head scratches, "would Leo still love me if he didn't have to take care of me? Will he still care if I'm not dying?" El Bosco Hardy, service training washout and piss-poor seeing eye dog, had no answers for her, but his expressive ears flattened against his skull, his mismatched eyes wide. As his owner made her way down the hall and up to the Roof Access door, he quietly tagged along behind her only to find the door shut and himself on the wrong side of it. The loft was silent but for the sound of Bosco frantically pawing at the door, hoping his mistress would hear him and let him out to join her.

Beverly's vision was clearer than usual, but in that moment as the smog-scented breeze rustled her half-bound hair, she missed her 'blind spot' more than ever.

WORDS (Midwestern twang unless otherwise noted)

- **Helluva / Heckuva** – Have used this previously but haven't defined it. Means "Hell of a" or "Heck of a."
- **I mist'cha** – 'I missed you"
- **Other’n** – ‘Other than’
- **Speccy** – recall that this is Scottish slang for 'someone who wears glasses.' It has become a nickname Amber uses for Donnie, primarily as a way of mentally reminding herself that the Donnie she knows now isn't necessarily the Donnie the rest of her world knew about – it's her way of reminding herself of how special he is to her and that she's not dreaming him up.

- **Think'e's** – At its root, this is an example of adding *he* to the end of a word, but that *he* is made into a conjunction by the adding of a third word, *is*. Translation, 'Think he is'

- **Y'are** – *You are*, not some weird pirate-talk

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**Adding 'e, 'is, or 'im to the end of a word** - means *he, his* or *him* respectively.

**Adding 'er to the end of a word** - means *her*.

**Adding 'ey, 'em, or 'eir to the end of a word** - means *they, them,* or *their* respectively.

**Adding 'a to the end of a word** - This can have two different meanings, depending on how the rest of the sentence is put together. Sometimes it means 'to,' like tryin'a means 'trying to;' other times, it means 'of,' as in *out'a* which means 'out of.' Generally, you can determine the meaning of the *a* by the preceding word - preceded by a verb usually means 'to' while 'of' can be preceded by a verb OR a non-verb, generally any word you're likely to use 'of' after.

**Da / Dey / Dis** – Casey's backstreet dialect replaces th- with d-. Casey and his dialect based on '03 series, CGI film, and '90s films. Translations: *The /They /This*

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Chapter End Notes

*"Hello, Gutter"* - This is actually something I say pretty frequently IRL because frankly, I'm a gutter-brain. I'm not a nympho, I just have a very dirty mind. AMBER, however, is just shy of a nymphomaniac and is suffering for it.

** Philly steak and feta cheese pan pizza –** Yep, this is my favorite pizza. It's weird, but not as weird as some others I've heard of.

# "Twister" – Along with "Night of the Twisters," this movie used to be a favorite of mine...then I developed a massive storm phobia and couldn't handle them anymore. My friend who helped me through my own exposure therapy, Kari, eventually worked me past photos and video clips to watching movies like Twister, and let me tell you, it's nerve-racking to sit through when you're afraid of storms. Thanks to Kari I now love the rain again and can handle big storms and even tornado warnings without the blinding fear I was once trapped by. A couple years ago, a tornado warning was sent out while I was out doing some grocery shopping, complete with sirens blowing, massive hail and rain, and panicking people crammed into the back of the store with pillows and blankets for protection...a couple years before that, I would've been freaking out the worst of all, but this time, I was calm, centered, and able to give support to a few other people instead of falling apart. The subtext is that it took ME two or three years, whereas it's only taken Amber a few months, and my excuse for this is that she's stronger than I was when I fought my own storm problem.

A lot of times, people find it hard to believe that anyone living in Tornado Alley can endure a phobia of storms or tornadoes - possibly because they think we go through them often enough to develop a thick skin regarding them - but I tell you, if anything, people in Tornado Alley are MORE LIKELY to develop a storm or tornado phobia,
and are MUCH MORE LIKELY to HIDE that phobia out of fear of being JUDGED for that phobia. In my case, I loved storms as a kid, so when I developed a phobia of storms, my loved ones refused to believe it - they couldn't comprehend that I was legitimately panicking, not just being hyperactive. Unconquered, that phobia eventually spread from severe storms to mild storms and eventually to the lightest rain; at its worst, I was unable to go outside when it was raining without either being heavily medicated or having a panic attack...and our corner of the Midwest endures a lot of rain in a year. It wasn't until I survived an EF-5 that went through our area and spiritually BROKE that I was ready to reach out for help. Thanks to my new friend Kari, I met several lovely locals who also endured phobias of storms and/or tornadoes, and thanks to Kari's help, I and many others have conquered our phobias. The debt I owe her can never be repaid...she has been such a blessing to so many people, and every time I get caught in the rain and start laughing and grinning, I give thanks anew that I found her.
Chapter Summary

Fallout from Bev's good news. Leo doesn't read the situation, Beverly overreacts, Bree picks up the pieces. PARTY! Beverly and Leo finally get their acts together. Fluffiness and first kisses - Bosco doesn't give a hoot. Finally, the wait is over, and those two knuckleheads are more than ready to get on with their lives.
Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a happy end of December to y'all and yours from us and ours!

Chapter Notes

Back in 30: Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures, Beverly and Leonardo blew up all over each other, admitted their mutual feelings of admiration and affection, then agreed to wait until Bev's healed before starting anything serious. Well, now she's healing, but those two would never be happy if they got their HEA without a little angst on the way! Rest assured, they will start working on their way to their happily ever after, starting this chapter, and it will be SICKENINGLY adorable.

Other than that, I just wanted to thank all y'all readers again for spending so much time on this little story, and to wish everyone who's celebrating a winter holiday happy holidays! To others who celebrate Christmas, also, a merry Christmas from the Chance-Thomas household to you and yours - this chapter's my Christmas gift to all of ya! If ya don't celebrate anything this month, no sweat - have a happy end of December! See y'all next chapter, Folks! Dedicated to Shelshokd, who wanted more Bev and Leo - This one's for you, Hon, you got your wish! Also dedicated to Wolf for being an awesome beta and an even more awesome friend - give that gal a round of applause, people, she deserves it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Adam Lambert "Things that I didn't Say," Nickelback "Far Away," Dishwalla "Healing Star," Basshunter "You're Not Alone"

44: Blind Spots

September 15th, around 9 pm

Many months ago, back when Beverly first saw Leonardo, he found her in her neglected rooftop garden watching traffic passing by. At the time, he'd worried she was going to harm herself—that she intended to fling herself off the roof to her death—now, he knew she just needed some fresher air and some space, and to lose herself in contemplation of the wonders of the city she lived in.

Just like the day he first revealed himself to her, Leo arrived to find her on the roof, standing by the
metal café table and chairs by the widow's walk and watching the traffic below. This time, however, he didn't say anything—he just wandered up to her, lifted a lock of her half-bound hair to his nose and inhaled the sultry scent of her shampoo, and tried to understand why she seemed to tense at his presence.

"You seem well, Koishii."* With a content sigh, he stepped up to her back and wrapped his arms around her middle, contemplating the traffic she was supposedly watching. "Today must have been rough…I don't see Bosco with you."

"I forgot him," she admitted as she realized the truth, her heart hurting. "I just…I just needed some air."

"Too much time indoors isn't good for you," he acknowledged releasing her and gently turning her toward the roof access door. "but it's starting to get cold out here…we don't want you getting sick from it."

At one time, she confessed to caring for him—promised to wait for him until she was healing up and asked he do the same—but anymore, he had trouble remembering why he ever agreed to the wait. He cared about her—probably cared more than she cared about him—and it was driving him crazy keeping his distance from her. Against his own best judgement, he squeezed her shoulder in warning and swept her up in his arms to carry her back down to the parlor. She was so lightweight to him—even before she got so thin, she was always light as a feather to him—and this close, he could almost fool himself that he wasn't the only one being driven out of his mind by her nearness—could almost fool himself that his wasn't the only heart pounding and the only pulse racing.

As the over-protective ninja carried Beverly back into the parlor with Bosco snuffling at his heels, Beverly fell silent—lost herself in the strength of his arms and the sweet, spicy scent of him. Smoky incense long burned—tea long drunk—some eucalyptus-scented soap with spicy and floral undertones—worn leather and an overwhelmingly male musk—his exotic scent was as deeply ingrained in her memory as the still, calming blue of his eyes, and it tugged her heartstrings mercilessly.

Burning her lungs and eyes with his scent and her fears, he eased her onto the piano bench and cautiously seated himself beside her as though he worried their combined weight would splinter the wood. The worried furrow between his eyes when he tested the strength of her furniture always struck her as adorable, but it also always reminded her of how much larger he really was than her. Leo and his brothers were huge—tall, muscular, and much heavier than the average human of their build—but for Leo to be so careful, so worried her furniture wouldn't hold him, well, it kind of made sense to her. He was careful and cautious if anything…sometimes too careful and cautious, but Bev had to admit it was just part of his charm; if he wasn't so careful and cautious, he wouldn't be so entertaining to unsettle.

When he first arrived at the Hardys' loft, Leo was dismayed to find Beverly not there. Bosco, clearly left behind and pawing at the roof access door, revealed his owner's location—Beverly was, as so often before, drawn to the rooftop to take in the crisp night air. It was something she did often in the beginning—a habit her guardian eventually came to appreciate, comforted by the way the night air calmed her, softened her and soothed her—but as she grew sick and weak, she stopped going out on the roof without company, grew too tired to climb the steps and too dizzy to not fall. Many months had passed since Leo last saw her out there, alone and lost in thought, and though his initial thought was to lecture her for carelessness, he realized she needed this—she needed the freedom the night wind could give her, not his harsh words. Of course, she also didn't need to catch cold, and the nights were starting to get cold quickly.
Her silence concerned him. He was always concerned about her—it came with the territory, having a blind spot—but she was never so silent like this. The unfamiliar white noise in the old loft apartment nearly deafened without Beverly's smooth, precise speech filling the parlor, and Leo wondered what was so heavy on her mind that she couldn't speak. "I take it you got a call," he attempted, recalling similar silences in the past after tense phone conversations left her emotionally shut down. "Doc Crane wanted to share your results?"

"Yes," she admitted, but wouldn't meet his eyes. "I received a call about the results…not long ago, either." She shook herself from some thought, molasses-brown eyes meeting his over her angular glasses. "You remember our agreement, don't you?"

"I told you I'd wait for you," he reminded quietly, unable to stop himself from tracing the curve of her jawline with hesitant fingertips, then forcing himself to respect her demand for distance if only physically. Normally, he'd demand the results—be so hopeful for good news that he'd insist she share what she heard—but then, he normally wasn't so driven out of his mind by her nearness. "That hasn't changed—I'll wait as long as you need me to, no matter how long it takes." He meant only to clasp a supportive hand to her shoulder—a purely platonic gesture if a little familiar—but instead he found himself gathering the frail woman into his arms and nuzzling into her covered hair. The gesture wasn't intended…but he couldn't argue that it didn't feel right. "I'm not giving up on you, Beverly," he promised, noticing how his words made her breathing stutter, her lungs stop.

In his embrace, Beverly floundered—stunned and deliciously so by the long-awaited arms around her, but haunted by the news. He couldn't already know she was recovering—he had to still think she was still sick, or he'd have brought up the good news. Once again, she wondered tiredly if he'd still have these feelings if he knew she was healing—once again, she shut down at the idea that he might not feel the same about her if he knew.

"I'm not just here because you need me, Bev," Leo professed into her hair, clearly mistaking her tension and the cause. "I'm here because I need to be here—because you're here and that's where I belong. I want to be your reason for getting better," he admitted into her half-covered hair, contemplating the blue paisley hair-scarf silently. He'd never admit it aloud but Leo envied Donatello's ability to nuzzle into Amber's hair at the slightest provocation without worrying she'd think him too forward. Beverly wasn't like Amber was…Bev was cool, remote, collected, and entirely too civilized to entertain the entirely uncivilized thoughts running breakneck through his head. He didn't understand it but the slightest whiff of Beverly's scent, the simplest word from her lips, even the briefest glimpse of her ink black hair or molasses-brown eyes could send the most explicit thoughts and yearnings through his mind and body...she made him feel more animal than human, and more carnal than serene. "I want to be your reason for fighting this—this illness," he confessed into her covered scalp instead of admitting the near-painful pressure building in his groin region. "...I care about you, Beverly…and seeing you like this…” He trailed off, shaking his head at how sappy he sounded, but holding her all the tighter. "I don't want to lose you—not now, not ever."

I need to be here. I want to be your reason for getting better. I want to be your reason for fighting your illness. The words were meant to be comforting, meant only to tell her he wasn't leaving, but they instead gave fire to the doubt already plaguing her mind. She was getting better but still, he took it upon himself to carry her around like she was too weak to walk, still seemed certain she was about to fall over at the slightest breeze. Now he was even holding her close—had wrapped his arms around her and was breathing soft, warm breaths against her cotton-clad scalp—as though by holding her, he could protect her…but she didn't need protecting, did she?

Leonardo saved her life that day he found her in the subway station—he got her the help she needed, kept tabs on her, and continued to come visit her every chance he got. The first wasn't so out of character—she knew she wasn't the only damsel in distress he'd ever saved, and she knew he
secretly got a kick out of his family's heroics. A hero would've left her in the hospital, he wouldn't have returned time and time again to make sure she was safe, comfortable, content and healing. A hero wouldn't have smothered her with careful affection and protective gestures, pulling out her chair for her and making sure she ate enough...would he? Leonardo was more than the 'name' he once gave her—he was more than her *Hogosha*—but what that *more* was, Beverly was afraid to consider.

Lost in thought, she pried herself loose and swept over to the windows to stare through the sheer white drapes down at the street below. Leo stood—the long piano stool's brass feet shrieked across the hardwood floor at the movement—and after a moment of cringing and silent reminder for himself to be more careful, he hesitantly approached Beverly, taking up a spot beside her—blocked from view by the heavy curtains but able to see around them, and kept his hands to himself. Theoretically, the sheers should hide the occupants of the parlor from prying eyes, but the overhead light was on...and he'd seen before just how well a lit room could be seen from the outside, with or without sheer curtains. "Would you feel the same if I wasn't sick?" she asked quietly, considering the endless neon gleaming in the distance. "Would you still care about me if I wasn't—wasn't dying?"

A rhetorical question, he wondered silently? Very well...he'd humor her. "Of course, I'd feel the same," he reminded gently, "but does it really matter? You're still sick...we have time before you need to worry about that." He didn't notice the fire in her eyes.

Great...he really was just 'humoring the sick woman.' Before the abscess, Bev would never have let herself suffer the sort of babying she was now constantly subjected to, and now, that knowledge burned bitterly. "I'm tired," she remarked stiffly, "and you're surely needed back home."

"Not really," Leo admitted, bewildered at her change in attitude and scrutinizing her posture for clues. "There's no rush getting home—I'm not needed there, and you—"

"I can take care of myself, *Hero-boy,*" she reminded dryly as she swept away to stare through one of the many framed lithographs on the walls. "I managed this long...I'll manage longer, without your help."

Beverly's voice was still cool, precise, and her words still calm, but her tone was clipped and terse. Her shoulders were drawn tight and her spine tense. She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't face him when she spoke to him. She was angry about something—what, Leo didn't know—and that *not knowing* made him worry it was his fault.

"We're leaving tomorrow," he admitted instead, silently watching for her reaction and analyzing every nuance. "Casey's invited us up to the farm for the weekend for a trial trip—he's invited Mercy and Amber, too, but isn't ready to spend more than a weekend away with them. I—"

He faltered, turning away, thankful she couldn't see the blush streaking across his cheeks or the weariness in his eyes. He wanted to take Beverly and Bree out to the farm, too—wanted to see the sunlight on Bev's olive-toned skin and hear the wind in the trees, the rain on the roof as he and Bev fell asleep in one another's arms—but the time would come eventually. For now, Bev needed to be home in case of emergency, needed regular doses of IV antibiotics and plenty of rest...and honestly, even though Casey no longer treated Amber and Mercy with suspicion, the gruff vigilante was pretty awkward around the girls. It was hard enough adding those two to the family dynamic...no matter how tempting it was, pushing Bev and Bree on the over-stressed vigilante right then was a bad idea. "I just wanted to see you before I left—I wanted to check on you and all."

"Well, now you've seen me," Beverly reminded stiffly. "I'm just fine, you don't have to worry about me while you're out of town." She stiffened at his approach, her lungs shuddering at the hand gently smoothing down her tense spine. Careful, skilled fingertips brushed just the right pressure points, loosening her shoulders and spine, and urging her to calm.
"I'll always worry about you," Leo admitted even as he petted her back, focusing too-hard on relieving the tension in it. "You're my blind spot, remember? I'll always worry about you..." ...even when you're healthy again was the end of the sentence, but Beverly brushed past him to the piano before he could finish it.

"I have a late lesson coming in," she warned sharply. "You'd better head home before you're seen, Hogosha." The nickname held none of its usual affection, coming out more like an insult.

Leo didn't want to leave—he wanted nothing more than to stay with her!—but the threat of exposure got to him. Pausing only for a gentle squeeze of the shoulder and a kiss on the scalp that made her stiffen, he left, slipping soundlessly out the kitchen window.

Across the street, a shadow skulked at the edge of the roof, pale blue eyes fixed on the scene through the windows of the loft across the way. Though he couldn't hear it, Leo knew the parlor echoed with snifflies and sobbing—knew that the woman collapsed on the antique sofa wasn't crying quietly. Moments before, Beverly was stern and solemn, practically pushing him out the door; now she slumped in the corner of the fancy brocade-upholstered sofa, weeping into her arms as though her heart was breaking.

What could have changed? What news could the phone call have brought to bring the normally unflappable woman to tears? She was already upset when he found her on the roof, but everything took a turn for the worse when he admitted his promise to wait for her hadn't changed. Perhaps...did she change her mind about him? Could her feelings have changed since they made that promise? His certainly hadn't changed, but humans, as his family had always seen, were fickle creatures—they thrived on change, and couldn't stand being tied to one destiny for their entire lives.

A car door slammed nearby—a silver hybrid pulled into the building's single parking space. Leo begrudgingly tore his eyes from the weeping woman in the parlor to see the expected student for himself, only to be faced instead with Briallen Hardy, home from classes. Beverly never had students after Bree came home...and Bree was, indeed, home. Bev lied—lied about a student coming over, just to get him to leave...Lord, how that hurt.

In the time the skulking mutant spent staring off into space, Bree climbed the back steps, let herself into the loft, and dropped her belongings off in her room. Right before his eyes, the chipper brunette entered the parlor, found Beverly weeping, and hurried to her side. Though no sound carried to the ninja, he could surmise the situation from their expressions—the sheer curtains were as useless as he expected them to be—Bree was demanding answers and offering to kick the behind of whoever hurt the sick woman.

Bree never really liked Leo much...she probably assumed he was at fault. Was he at fault? What could be bothering Beverly, what could have driven her to tears? She was always so calm and collected—the only variations he'd ever seen were her sly playful side and a single instance of cold fury. In this moment, Leo wondered if he really knew Bev as well as he thought he did and if this was a side of her he'd never yet seen.

For a moment, Leo was determined to return to the loft and confront Beverly for lying to him—determined to go back and demand answers, and do his best to comfort her and mend whatever rift spawned between them—but a small, niggling doubt crept in. Perhaps...could the call have been bad news? Could her lab-work for Dr. Crane have revealed something horrible, maybe that the abscess was no longer simply remaining, but worsening? Could—could Beverly be—be actually dying?!

The very thought horrified Leo, but it wasn't really that unbelievable. Most instances of a patient with a brain abscess span a matter of months—most patients diagnosed with a brain abscess start seeing improvement in their scans in an average of two-and-a-half weeks and are fully recovered in under a
year.** Beverly's case was unusual—an abscess that went undetected until the worst possible moment due to her frequent migraines, resisted the usual choice antibiotic treatments, and repeatedly worsened despite proper treatment. It wasn't that far-fetched an idea that this extreme infection would take her life…but if she…died…

Forcibly putting it out of his mind—or so he tried—Leonardo stalked away from the edge intent on returning home. Beverly was his blind spot, and he was hers, but sometimes, having a blind spot can be dangerous, even deadly. The ninja could only hope that he'd someday see a future where Beverly was healthy, happy, and his.

"What'd he do?" Briallen demanded, stalking over to yank the drapes shut. "What'd that scum-swilling skunk-bag do to hurt you?!"

"Please, Bree," Bev muttered swiping her cheeks clean but to no avail; the moment the tears were gone, more took their place. She was a mess…no wonder her cousin was worried. "Leo's done nothing—he's done nothing wrong." She gave a weak sniffle, gratefully accepting the tissue her peeved cousin held out for her. "I just—I just got news from Doctor Crane, and it's—it's got me…"

Right before her eyes, Bree slumped and her eyes widened fearfully; she automatically assumed the worst, and after so many relapses, Beverly couldn't really blame her.

"It's gone," she admitted hoarsely, unwilling to see the expressions sure to wash over the younger woman's face. *Oh, so I'm not needed here anymore?* Bev was sure that would be Bree's reaction. *If you're healed and don't need me anymore, I'll just be moving out now—don't mind me jumping for joy!* She felt rather ridiculous for dreading the change—it was, after all, a good change compared to death—but she couldn't shut off her worries.

The upholstery at her side depressed under a still body; Bree stared at her in disbelief, warm brown eyes wide and hopeful. "It's…gone?" she parroted back barely above a whisper. "The—the abscess—it's not showing up on the scans anymore?" Bev looked away, her dark eyes drawn to the familiar calligraphy scroll hung above the piano, and nodded. "That—that's wonderful!" A pair of arms wrapped around her middle like a vice, choking her with the hug's exuberance. "You're healing! You're free, we can finally get on with our lives!" Finally…yeah, right…she knew this was coming.

"I'm…sure Michelangelo will be happy to help you move," Bev muttered as Bree slowly released her. "Whether you're moving in with his family…or…or elsewhere…"

"Are you kicking me out?" Beverly turned to address the soft, confused question and found Bree no longer excited, but now hurt. "I know you won't need me around anymore…but I thought—I thought I could stay anyway."

"You want to stay here," the older woman summed up, brows knit in confusion. When Beverly first moved to Brooklyn for college, Bree was still in high school and wanting to change schools; Bev let her younger cousin move in with her—became more of a parental figure than a cousin and sibling. Over the years since Bev and her father joined households with Bree and her father, the two cousins had only ever lived apart one year—the year Bree spent living with her ex-boyfriend Richard. "You're old enough to live on your own now," she reminded her younger cousin in confusion. "You even have a boyfriend you could move in with—"

"Yeah, and we saw how well that went last time," Bree reminded with a half-hearted scowl. "I still have nightmares about Dick coming back for me—you know that—I'm not ready to move in with anyone else again." Before, she was confused, hurt; now she was seeing the situation clearly. "Bevvv, I'm not just here because you need me here—I'm here because I belong here—because we're family, and family sticks together in sickness and in health!"
Realization washed over Beverly's face—realization that her fears were unfounded. "I'm no Leo-fan, Sis," Bree reminded taking the older woman by the hand, "It's in my job description to not be a Leo-fan, but I know he feels the same, and I know Mikey feels the same—we didn't stick around through all this just to cut and run when the going got easy—I didn't stay up all night with you at the hospital just to leave when you don't need a barf bucket anymore." Bev winced at the reminder, remembering Bree wadding herself up into the tiny window seat of the ICU room instead of going home, but Bree smiled and hugged her again. "We're staying—until you don't want us around anymore, we're all staying."

Perhaps, Beverly wondered as her cousin held her, healing wouldn't change everything…perhaps she was just so used to being sick that she forgot how to be well. Changes could be frightening, but would this one change really change everything? By the time Bree let her go, the weary woman was finally calming, finally feeling like things would get better, and lost in her thoughts.

Unnoticed by her ruminating older cousin, Bree ducked into the kitchen, made a quick call to Mikey, and started pulling down mismatched long-stemmed glasses and tumblers from the top cabinet. As she set about tidying up the small kitchen and unlatched the window, she turned to contemplate the tall bottle of expensive red wine waiting beside the coffee maker. She bought that bottle when Bev first got her diagnosis—a much better brand than they were used to and more expensive than Bev would ever have bought. She ate noodles for lunch for a month to make up the cost, but it was well worth every penny. Ever since then, the bottle waited on the kitchen counter, saved for the day when Bev finally got the all-clear from her doctors. That day had come…it was time to celebrate.

Bree bustled into the parlor still unnoticed, stepping over the whining Labrador to reach Beverly, and offered her hands. "Come on—why don't you go get a shower, I'll handle dinner."

"But Leo," Beverly sighed, half-heartedly reaching up to straighten her hair-scarf. "I thought—He's probably hurt…I should call him, I should—" Bree grounded her in the moment with both hands at her shoulders and an encouraging smile.

"We'll handle Leo, Bev," she promised. "I called the others over, you can apologize in person once you've cleaned up…and you do need to apologize to him." Bree lightly clapped her right shoulder, her smile widening. "Leo didn't know you before all this started, but he's always wanted to know you after it's over—now it's finally over, and you don't have any excuse to push him away."

The last statement froze Beverly in place, and she turned a horrified cringe to Bree. The younger woman winked at her, cementing Bev's suspicion. Who told Bree about Bev and Leo's agreement? "Go get yourself lookin' good, Girl," Bree teased. "Let the mutant sweat it out a little—he's been a butt lately." Of course, according to Bree, Leo was always a butt. Nevertheless, Bev gave a weak smile and wandered into her bedroom to grab some clean clothes to change into after her shower.

The last item on her list—a clean hair-scarf—made her freeze in place, hesitating and considering. The drawer standing open and a new scarf right at her fingertips, Beverly stood silently, wondering and ruminating. Finally, she shut the drawer without ever pulling a new scarf out, peeled the blue paisley scarf from her hair, and tossed it into the hamper. She still had a bald spot and a pretty noticeable scar on the back of her head, but she was tired of being ruled by it—tired of hiding a flaw everyone already knew was there. Leo seemed to think nothing of it—he never gave her any sign that it bothered him.

Perhaps…perhaps it was time to move on from that fear; perhaps it was time to really let her hair down.

"We got here as quick as we could," Donatello apologized to Bree as he stepped over the
windowsill. Already, Raphael and their father were in the parlor with Michelangelo, inspecting the Hardys' vast collection of artwork and lithographs. Leonardo stood up on the rooftop, watching carefully as Mercy and Amber made their way from the Party Wagon to the back stairs. "The girls should be—" A knock at the front door cut him off. "—right outside," he finished with a shrug.

Chuckling at the timing, Bree rushed through to the front door and let in the other two women. Almost immediately she found herself receiving an affectionate hug from the braided other-worlder and a companionable tease from the blonde laden with a stack of pizza boxes. "I brought the good stuff!" Amber proclaimed excitedly holding up two brown bottles—one said Drambuie on the label, while the other was an expensive brand of single malt Scotch Whisky Bree recognized from the liquor department. Clearly the girls dropped by the liquor store on the way there. A plastic bag hung from one of Amber's wrists, weighed down by what resembled a couple of two-liter bottles of soda.

"Screw that shit," Mercy grumbled hauling the stack of pizza boxes to the kitchen. "I brought the good stuff—the food. Hey, Bosco, how-zit- hangin'?"-

A short while after, Beverly emerged from the bathroom smiling and more confident, and the cousins finally cracked open the expensive 'Bev's healed' bottle of red wine. Mikey was stunned silent at seeing her hair down, loose, and styled, and her scalp completely free of any sort of covering, but he didn't confront her about it - he just grinned, hugged her, and led her by the shoulder into the parlor to join the others.

All through the impromptu dinner and the repeated congratulations and well-wishes, though, Beverly couldn't help but notice one face was missing from the crowd—one pair of eyes, ice blue and intense, wasn't watching her from across the room as though worried she would wind up hurt. Leonardo was missing—for whatever reason, he wasn't with his family in the loft filled with laughter —and Beverly knew without a doubt it was her fault. Finally, fed up with waiting for him to come to her, she smiled an apology to Master Splinter and excused herself from the noisy shuttered room. She paused only long enough to grab her favorite shawl from the hall tree, took a deep, steadying breath, and with Bosco at her heels, ducked out the roof access door and mounted the steps.

There he was—her blind spot, her Hogosha, her reason for reason—he stood at the edge of the roof by the café table and chairs just as she had earlier in the day, staring out across the city in silence. Whereas she always stood there in wonder, calmed by the night winds and captivated by the city lights, Leonardo was tense as though he expected to be jumped at any given moment. Perhaps, Bev admitted silently, he was used to that; perhaps he really did have to be always on guard anytime he was out in the open. She couldn't imagine living like that and wondered how he'd managed it so long, so well.

"I know you're there." The words startled her and she lost her grip on the roof door; it swung the rest of the way shut, the latch clicking with a fearful finality. Bosco, no longer concerned his owner might fall back down the stairs, bounded across the gravelled rooftop to Leo, dancing in place for attention. Clearly glad to see the dog, but not quite as excited as the dog was to see him, Leo knelt down to give Bosco the attention he wanted. Skilled hands rubbed the animal's sides, thumped his ribs and patted his behind teasingly, brushed his floppy ears between calloused fingertips, and scratched all the right spots, rendering Bosco a happy, groaning puddle of fur. Rubbing Bosco's head between the ears—just rough enough, just gentle enough—he turned ice blue eyes to Beverly still standing frozen by the door. "It's a nice night," the ninja commented, startling Bev out of her ruminations.

"Y-Yes," she agreed slowly approaching him, slipping the shawl around her arms on the way. "It's not too cold yet, but the night's barely begun—it's liable to get colder, later." For a time, they simply
sat in silence and stared above, looking for stars—one sprawled out on the gravel next to Bosco, the other seated primly on one of the metal chairs—both wondering what to say. Finally, the silence was broken, but not how Beverly expected it to be broken.

"My family and I have spent our whole lives underground," Leo reminded solemnly. "We cannot live aboveground, can hardly even go aboveground without being in danger. At first, my brothers and I were forbidden from ever leaving the sewers—grounded to the underground to keep us safe—but eventually, we disobeyed." He kept his eyes on the stars instead of her, but Beverly watched him closely, astounded by the range of emotion running unhidden across his normally stoic face. This was the Leo she always knew was there—the Leo she only ever saw when they were alone—did he really only allow himself to be so vulnerable around her? "When Father found out we broke that rule, he was furious…and afraid. After we proved ourselves capable he finally gave us leave to go aboveground but only so long as we kept one another safe. It was several years ago, but he still gets nervous when we go out for patrols…and he still stays up until we come home, still can't sleep until he knows we've returned safely."

"He really worries about you," Beverly acknowledged when Leo hesitated but fell silent when he finally turned to address her.

"Worry comes with love," he reminded softly. "He loves us, so he worries about us. It's completely illogical, but it's in the nature of sentient beings. It's only natural for us to dislike change as well, to fear it, but change is the only constant in life—the only certainty we can be sure of. Change is neither good nor bad—it simply is."

"Change…can be frightening," Bev admitted breaking eye contact to stare down at the already snoring dog. Without her notice the ninja stood and sidled over to her, crouching beside her. When she turned to him again, intent on asking something, she startled at seeing Leo's face so close to her own, his pale blue eyes fixed on hers.

"Change can be frightening," Leo acknowledged, reaching up to tuck a fallen curl of inky black hair behind her ear, "but so is having a blind spot." The air crackled with tension unheard and unseen by the mutant or his human companion. Even without seeing or hearing that crackling tension, though, they felt it—felt it as surely as though some unknown presence was trailing its fingertips down their spines. So often before, Beverly found herself lost in the realization of how intense Leo's eyes could be and wondered what it would be like to find herself on the receiving end of those eyes, not as a friend, but as a lover. Now, that very pair of eyes was fixed on her, intense and full of intent, and she wasn't quite sure if she was still breathing. Not even a scrap of clothing out of place, and she felt more naked than ever before.

"I know what Mikey told me," he remarked lowering himself to his knees on the gravel-strewn concrete, "but I want to hear it from you. I didn't push you earlier because I didn't want to upset you if it was bad news…but I need to know…I need to hear it…" Beverly choked, breaking the nerve-wracking eye contact and turning to stare at the wrought iron and glass table next to her. Callused, bandaged fingertips caught her by the chin, gently urging her back to meet his eyes again then sliding up to cup her cheek. "Please, koibito***…I need to hear it from you."

For a moment, Beverly couldn't find the words to speak—couldn't get her lips to move or her tongue untied—but finally, she managed to calm the entirely uncivilized thoughts Leonardo's touch was eliciting in her. One of these days, she really needed to look up the meanings of the many foreign pet-names he'd pinned on her. "It's over," she admitted softly, and as though that one admission had held her hostage, she felt her lips tug into a beaming smile. "The scans are clear…I'm healing, Ho—" The nickname was cut short at the gentle brushing of a callused thumb tracing her lower lip. Shallow breaths passed unhindered through Bev's parted lips, but she was too distracted by Leo's eyes and
her racing heart to feel like an idiot for sitting there with her mouth gaping.

"Leonardo," he corrected just as he had the night she finally saw him, but this time, he traced her lips instead of brushing soot off her cheek. There was no soot on her cheek this time, after all, and they were well beyond that careful distance. "My name isn't Hogosha—it's Leonardo." Before she could argue—make a point about nicknames and pet-names and the like—the hand cupping her cheek slid back into her hair and the man kneeling at her feet leaned in, easing her closer.

After almost a year of fighting to keep her hands off of him, the first brush of his lips on hers felt like coming home after a long, miserable journey. The kiss - their first kiss, Beverly realized with watering eyes - was chaste, hesitant as though Leo expected her to slap him for it, and ended far too quickly for Bev's taste. As the ninja leaned back on his heels, focusing on calming his racing heart, Beverly licked her lips silently; underneath the peppermint of her lip balm, she could taste something new and very much welcome—traces of tea, salt, and an indescribable sweetness she knew was purely him. "Leonardo." At his name, he startled back to himself, meeting her eyes again and clearly on-edge; smug for having so unsettled him, Beverly latched onto one of the leather straps crisscrossing his plastron and pulled him back into her arms. "Leo..." Finally, whether from the utterances of his name or her insistent touches, Leo gave in—he took Beverly into his arms and stole her lips, losing himself in the taste, smell, and sensation of her.

Alone on the rooftop, Leo and Beverly became entangled in one another—arms enfolding, hands grasping and caressing, lips meeting and entwining—from the moment he found her to this day, he kept his distance and she kept hers. They were tired of distance—tired of always waiting for the other shoe to drop—now, more than ever, they felt sure of what their hearts were always telling them, and that was that they were never really that different after all.

Finally, Leo pulled back, determined to be the bigger person even as he held her to his chest. "You're finally healing, Beverly," he acknowledged, breathless from the woman sneakily trailing kisses along his bare shoulder. From the very beginning, Beverly had a knack for getting him off-balance, and the lips brushing his neck were accomplishing that with ease. Still, this wasn't the time or place...when that time came, he didn't want to experience her on an open rooftop in the cold with Bosco snoring nearby. No...when the time came for him to make that stubborn, confusing woman his, he wanted them both to be ready - ready for her to be unable to walk for a week if nothing else.

Physically shaking off the explicit thoughts and instinctual urges, he leaned away from Bev, meeting her eyes with a small smile. "You're finally healing, Beverly," he reminded admiring how desire made her already dark brown eyes seem even darker, "at least until you were healing. You're healing now...do you still want to—" A pair of lips latched onto his silencing the question. When they finally parted again, Beverly's eyes dropped to the lips she just stole then rose back up to meet Leo's eyes, a familiar sly smirk splitting her own.

"I'm tired of waiting, Hero-boy," she teased, finally feeling more like herself. "We should probably get back to the others, though, before they assume we're otherwise engaged." The reminder made Leo drop his head into his hand with a frustrated groan.

"I completely forgot," he grumbled as he helped Beverly to her feet. "Raph and Mercy are going to have a field day...they've become a tag-team to be feared."

"I'm sure you'll manage," Bev teased as Leo shook Bosco awake only to get growled at. Despite his grumpiness, though, the dog sullenly stretched and slunk toward the door, plopped down on his haunches, and turned back to fix an impatient glare on Leo. Leo didn't even notice.

"That's nice," Leo teased Bev dryly, "You're not the one who has to go home with them. I'll never hear the end of this." For a moment, Beverly faltered, nervously glancing over at the mutant walking
She was not all that surprised to find Leo waiting for her when she emerged from her second-floor bedroom. "You're worth it," he'd said to her when she'd been down on her luck a few days back. He'd been routing through her store's planters, trying to find the right one, and she'd let him know that he was spoiling her. "It's worth it, though," Leo had said, squeezing her shoulder in warning. "You're worth it." That had surprised her, the thought that he thought she was worth it, and seeing him sweep her up into his arms had been a nice surprise too. They were in the middle of a night when she'd found out about her parents' divorce. It had been a tough one, and Leo had been right there, holding her, saying things like "You're worth it." It was a comfort she needed, one she didn't always get from others.

At first, Beverly was annoyed by this—saw it as him pointing out her weakness and implying that she couldn't make it on her own—but a soft nuzzle into her unbound hair soothed that hurt and made her see things in a different light. Leo insisted on helping her, insisted on carrying her around, not because he thought she couldn't do it herself, but because he wanted to show her that he cared about her. He couldn't help with what she really needed help with—he couldn't help with her students, couldn't manage the tenants renting the store downstairs or make needed repairs to the building, and he couldn't help Beverly run the errands—but he was strong enough to catch her should she fall and skilled enough to protect her should she need it. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing to let him help her...perhaps it wouldn't hurt to let the overprotective ninja baby her now and then.

Catcalls and whistles rang out when they made it back to the parlor, but Leo didn't put her down. Instead, he carried her over to her favorite chair, eased her down to the cushions, and ducked into the kitchen while the ruckus continued. Shortly afterward, he returned bearing a plate of pizza—all her favorite toppings and nothing she wouldn't eat—and a long-stemmed glass of the celebratory red wine. It seemed the whole room was watching them, now, and Bev could feel her cheeks heating up. Finally, the long, awkward staring contest ended with Leo standing behind her chair, silently watching for any threat or weakness. For so long, Beverly felt like it meant he thought her weak, or that he wanted to keep her all to himself; now she could see it was just the ninja's way of showing he cared for her.

The wine, Scotch, and soda bottles were passed around again, and the stoic leader finally followed Splinter's example and accepted a couple fingers of wine. Someone, probably Mikey, called for a toast. Several voices called out a kanpai! One declared something gruff and slurred from brogue Beverly could only interpret as "Slanj'-uh va!" Finally, all attention turned to the purely American revelers, and Beverly cleared her throat and recited something she once heard her father say.

"Oh, Lord God divine who turned the water into wine," she repeated with a mischievous gleam in her eye. "Please forgive us foolish men—soon we'll turn it back again!" Mercy choked on a sip of soda and commenced beating it out of her lungs, but other than Bree, the rest of the room's occupants were too engaged in staring at Beverly in disbelief to assist. Mischief managed, Bev saluted the gathered company with her wine glass. "Here's to good company, and to you people, too." The silence as she took a dainty sip of her wine was deafening, but that silence made the chuckle behind her all the more apparent. A strong three-fingered hand took up a comforting grip on her shoulder, and despite all the eyes on her, Beverly reached up to cover it with her own.

She spent quite long enough working around her blind spot; it was time to start working with it instead.

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**Words**

*Koishii* – Japanese term of endearment. Through research I've found the following as possible meanings: *Beloved, Darling, Dear, and Wanted*. (Aiming for "Darling" or "Dear.")

*** Koibito – Japanese term of endearment. Through web research, I've found the following as possible meanings: *Lover and Sweetheart*. (Aiming for the latter)
# Kanpai – Japanese toast

## Slanj'-uh va’ – Proper spelling "Slàinte mhath." Scottish toast, means basically "Good health!" This and pronunciation based on web research so might be incorrect.

- How-zit hangin'? – How's it hanging? (Basically "What's up?")

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**Notes**

**Brain Abscess** – According to my research, this is true. It isn't true in all cases, as my relative Garth endured many months of treatment and a couple of bad relapses, but instances such as his and Beverly's are few and far between. Usually, if the abscess is caught in time—in this case, no, it was not—it is easier to treat and the time for recovery is a matter of months. In this case, Bev didn't go to her doctor, assumed she just had a bug or something,' didn't take good care of herself while undergoing treatment, and relapsed several times due to stress and a weak immune system. The good news is she's going to survive, I'm not killing her off, and we'll be seeing more of her and new sides of her in the future. Also, a note regarding her fear—she's been sick so long she's gotten used to it, and while it may seem ridiculous to those not in her shoes, it can be frightening to 'finally be well.' When Garth first got his 'all-clear' he couldn't believe it—he was in complete denial for about a week, but even after he finally comprehended that the abscess was gone, he became paranoid about it coming back. A few years have passed since he got the all-clear on his abscess, and he still worries it'll come back, and still suffers from side-effects caused by the abscess, particularly vision problems.

Change is scary sometimes, especially when you've been dealing with serious illness, and when you've convinced yourself you won't survive it, to finally hear 'you're healing, you're cured' can be seriously brain-breaking.

### Beverly's Toasts - I found both these humorous toasts on a website dedicated solely to toasts. (Beverly acts civilized and polished, but you'll soon realize she's not nearly as civilized and polished as she acts!) Both toasts have been re-worded for this chapter, so I'm including them here in their original wording: 1: "O Lord God divine / Who turned the water into wine / Please forgive we foolish men / We are going to turn it back again." 2: "Here's to good friends...and to you guys too!"

**Hogosha** – In case anyone's forgotten or hasn't seen the first Bay-verse movie, this is a Bay-verse term first applied to April by Splinter, supposedly meaning 'a great guardian spirit.' Recall that when Leo started visiting Bev in the hospital after he rescued her, she kept insisting he give her his name, and the only one he could think of that wouldn't give away his identity was 'Hogosha.' He expected her to forget this name and his visits, due to being hopped up on pain medication, but instead she remembered it and attributed it to him. Even after he finally told her his real name, the day he first let her see him, she continued calling him Hogosha as an affectionate nickname. As Leo's the most entrenched in his family's assumed Japanese culture (mostly due to their training in ninjitsu) he wound up appreciating this nickname; his insistence, here, that Beverly use his real name is his way of saying "I'm ready to move forward—I'm ready to be more to you than just your guardian and protector."

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Chapter End Notes
Lastly, a quick note regarding Bev and Bree – There’s probably been some confusion regarding Beverly and Briallen Hardy's relationship to one another, so I just wanted to give a quick explanation. Bev and Bree's fathers are brothers, so Bev and Bree are blood cousins—Bev is twenty-five whereas Bree is twenty-two. Bree's mother died when Bree was very young—too young to really form a bond with her—and her father never remarried. Bev's father and mother split up when Bev was in early grade school; her mother is not in her life and for very good reasons. Bev and her father moved in with Bree and her father in Northampton after the divorce, and the two cousins were raised like sisters. Because of this, they sometimes call one another "Sis" and other times "Cuz," as they feel both nicknames fit the same. After High School, Bev planned to move to NYC for college and Bree wanted to come along to change schools because of bullying, so with their fathers' permission, she moved in with Bev in a small, crappy apartment off-campus. Years later, Bev's schooling was completed and she was working for a high school in Brooklyn, Bree was going through her own college classes, and after coming into some money through a legal settlement with Bev's absent mother, the two women bought a rather shabby place with a small store and a loft apartment above it. They moved into the loft, renovated the whole building, and rent out the store below for extra income; they're currently renting the store to a radio shack type business that keeps very sparse hours and does most of its business online. In September 2015 Beverly's brain abscess made itself known and she met Leonardo. The rest is history.
Chapter Summary

Amber and Mercy's first visit to the farmhouse is marked with more questions than answers. At least Raph's enjoying himself. ;P

Chapter Notes

So. To put it briefly, I have a queue of chapters ready for posting and am still doing pretty well in getting new ones written. After all, I've been itching to get started on this part of the story ever since I started Part I! XD For a while, we'll be seeing regular weekly or bi-weekly updates, unless my regulars stay silent. (Not hostageing for reviews because that's immature and pointless - I'd just hate to find out my regulars have been unable to read for whatever reason then found themselves swimming in an umpteen chapter backlog because of their absence. That can be pretty frustrating.)

On the other hand, I've picked up a pretty nasty flu bug of late, and it's hanging on like a fat tick. Sucks...but so far I've had a better time of it than my mother and Mom-in-Law did. Lastly, a bit of personal news. Back in Part II, I believe, I warned that a full-scale hiatus may be in the future due to a loved one struggling with cancer, and I have news about that. Readers who have been keeping up with "Blocked" and have read "Blood and Water" will have read that the cancer WAS kicked for a while but has since returned. Over Christmas, we found out more...the cancer is no longer responding to treatment and is, instead, spreading to other vital organs. Uncle Bob's in stage 4 now and he's really starting to decline in health despite the radiation and chemo...the future isn't looking too bright for him, and most of the family are certain when he dies, Granny Chance will die soon after. If any of you are spiritual - any kind of spiritual, no matter what religion you do or don't follow - I'd greatly appreciate if you would please spare a prayer for comfort and peace for my Uncle Bob and Granny Chance. Thank you for your patience in this time, and as always, please don't waste your time offering sympathy - it only makes things harder to handle.

That over with, on with the show while it can still go on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


45: Freaky Dreams and the Farmhouse

'Where am I?' Amber studies the landscape around her in confusion, searching for clues. Rolling hills decked with fog—weed-strewn unkempt yards—the distant smell of mist and manure—a thicket of low green trees surrounding her, each hung with clusters of white blooms...home. She's home, in the Willsdale she left behind. Marveling at this impossibility, she studies the scene in confusion, wondering how she's come back. She's
dead in this world…isn't she?

The scene changes with a dizzying speed—the new place is a dark parlor, the heavy floral curtains drawn to block out all light, all but one. Before the only un-shuttered window, a rocking chair creaks back and forth, back and forth, the aged occupant staring blankly out the window before him. His greying beard and sideburns are long past due for a trim, and his normally neat hair—grey with a little black remaining, like damp earth peeking through the fog—is entirely unkempt. Bright blue eyes—once they were lake blue, Amber recalls in dismay, but now those eyes have faded to a murky foggy grey-blue—the eyes are focused somewhere beyond the window he stares out, perhaps on a distant memory.

"Gran'Da?" Amber mutters thickly inching toward the wizened man, caught between hope and fear. "Gran'Da, it's me—ish yer Ahmber, Gran'Da..."- No response from the man in the rocker—not even a twitch of once bright eyes. Amber creeps up beside him but still, he gives no response. Finally, it hits her that this is another of her strange dreams—another dream of being home with her loved ones, but unable to make contact.

Resigned to being unable to make any contact with her beloved grandfather, Amber steps around behind his chair, following his eyes. Glen Devon's eyes are focused on a familiar sight: beside her parents' home lay a fallow field, and on the other side of that field, the town cemetery. Slowly rocking in place, Glen stares out beyond the field, beyond the starlings fussing on the phone lines and the trash blowing along the street, all the way to the cemetery his only granddaughter is buried in.

Before Amber can fully come to terms with this, the scene changes again in a whirl of shades of grey. Now she's upstairs in another room hidden from the sun. Dusty grey curtains block out the light—grey, her favorite color in life and in death, and the color she insisted on decorating her bedroom in as a child. The room has not changed since the day she moved out—not a single piece of furniture has been moved.

A large form sprawls across the twin bed still made with old floral sheets—a woman with frizzy auburn hair now strewn with white. Sorrow, Amber realizes approaching the woman weeping into her musty pillow, has been stealing the color from the tubby woman's vibrant hair. "Mum...no, not you too!" As before, the living have no ears for the dead, and Ginny O'Brien continues to weep without notice of the ghost in her midst. "This can't be happening—why'm I seein' this?"

This time, she expects the change—the whirl of color and light doesn't take her by surprise. The sudden transition from silence and darkness to noise and light is dizzying—dim overhead lights, blinding neon signs along the walls, bright lights lining the ceiling over the bar—The Staggering Rat Pub, the local watering hole her Uncle Bart owned and operated, and the very bar she, Aaron Willis, and her father all frequented at one time or another.

The stench of cheap beer turns her stomach, but even more so, the man hunched over at one of the rickety tables. Half-greyed dark curly hair, worn flannel and faded jeans, an ever-present aura of negativity and 'don't touch me'... "Da?" Amber mutters at the unhearing man, weaving between the dusty tables to reach him. Grey-blue eyes stare down into a tankard of craft beer—Samuel Adams' Boston Lager, from the smell of it, Douglas O'Brien's favorite beer—grey-stubbled always-frowning lips are instead formed in a solemn, hard line. "Da, can ya hear me? It's me..." The lack of response
hurts—physically closes off her windpipe and tightens her chest, "Goddammit, say somethin'? I'm right here, I'm—"

"Kin I gitcha a tawp-awff?" - The waitress's unfamiliar accent—somewhat similar to the one Amber recognized from Lefty Jackson—startles the unseen woman. The woman is one Amber's seen before—once in another dream occurring in this pub. Tall, slender bordering on skinny, sleek auburn hair in a fancy updo and bottle-green eyes lined with impeccably drawn black eyeliner—As before, the woman's appearance was both familiar and foreign, and the sense of 'should know her' was suffocating. "Ya had t'a Bawston Lahger, right?"

Blind to his unseen daughter's confusion, Douglas O'Brien grunts an affirmation, shoving his half-empty stein at the strange waitress—a waitress, Amber realizes in dismay, who is wearing an id badge with the name "Kimber" printed on it. Startled, Amber backpedals—bolts behind her father and away from the woman bearing the name of her counterpart—and in her haste, bumps the empty table behind her hard. Condiment containers fly as the table falls, glass shakers shatter on the floor, and every eye in the bar fixes on the disaster…the table and the mess, not the unseen woman who caused it. No one can see her—as in one other dream, she was able to physically impact something in her surroundings, but she couldn't be seen. Amber was dead in this world...did that make her a ghost?

Kimber's bottle-green eyes are wide in horror, darting around for the cause of the accident but find nothing to explain it...and in those eyes, Amber feels like she can see a hint of recognition. Empowered by this, she creeps around the toppled table and the mess and reaches out to the table her father sits at. With a single hard shove, she knocks over the sugar shaker on the table, and with shaking hands, carefully traces two words in the pile of spilled sugar—a message for her family.

"Ab-dee...bide...?" Kimber reads in a fearful mumble, setting down Douglas' tankard for fear she'll drop it. "T'is—t'is can't be—"

"Ab'dy, bide," - Douglas corrects her without concern, his normally gruff voice low in awe, and he snatches the tankard back to down the rest of his beer in a single breath. "My daughter said that sometimes, 'ab'dy bides'...it means 'everybody lives.'"

"But—but wit' t'a 'ess' missin'—"- Sharp blue eyes pin Kimber in place, their owner shoving the tankard at her.

"'Everybody, live." His face is expressionless, but Amber can see in his eyes that the message has reached him. "Never mind the top-off—I'll take my check now...I need'a get home."

As Kimber hurries off to collect Douglas' tab and check, he stares down at the message in the sugar. "We do bide," he mumbles under his breath, hoping against all hope that the incident is a sign that his daughter is still there...and that she can hear him. "We will bide...we jus' mi'sha, Jeanie-bird."- Emboldened by her success, Amber sweeps the word away, scattering the sugar again, and scribbles another message for him just as the room begins to turn again.

I anaw. - "Me, too, Da," Amber mumbles as the world fades away in shades of shadow and light. "...Me, too."

Friday, September 16th, Casey's Van
Amber swatted blindly at the source of the tickling on her nose, growling under her breath. When her eyes finally opened—shooting daggers over her being woken up—she registered Mercy Ross leaning over the back of the seat before her, grinning like a lunatic and holding the end of one of her braids. Clearly, she was tickling Amber's nose with it to wake her up. "G'loff, Blundie,"- Amber grumbled at the blonde, yanking her hair loose and settling herself more comfortably in the nook of the van's back seat and the wall.

"Ya slept the whole trip, Scotch-Bright," Mercy teased with a toothy smile. "We're at the farmhouse—the guys've already carried everything inside, even." Amber blinked at the revelation, wondering how she could have slept through an entire car ride with Casey and April—specifically Casey's road rage and bitching or April's crazy driving. "C'mon in a'ready."

Still a little out-of-sorts because of the strange dream, Amber collected her carry-on and unbuckled, stretched the kinks out of her spine, and stoop-walked her way from the backseat of the van to the sliding door. She hit the ground with a stumble, shook herself as though to wake herself up more, and took in her surroundings. Mercy hopped down from the van's middle seat with much more grace than her still-half-asleep friend and studied her.

"Y'okay?" Mercy asked lowly, and Amber turned to her in confusion. "Ya slept the whole ride, but yer still practically dead on yer feet…an' you were mumblin' the whole time. Some Scotchness about yer folks…an' ya said somethin' ya used to say to yer Dad, too, 'A—"

"Ab'dy bides," Amber cut her off quietly not meeting the blonde's eyes. "It was just—jus' another freaky dream, Merse…I was just dreamin' about my family." She shot Mercy a forced smile. "Da was gettin' pished- again—nothin' normal 'bout that, huh?"

"Was yer Dad ever not drinkin'?" Mercy shot back teasingly. "He drank almost as much as my Ma."

"Yep." The two stood silently for a moment, staring at the big red barn before them. "If that's the farmhouse, I'm callin' bullshite."

"The house is behind us, Genius," Mercy laughed, swatting at Amber and leading the way around the van. As she rounded Casey's old van, the farmhouse came into view—old and rustic, but not quite as big as she'd expected. She'd certainly not expected the peeling burgundy paint on the siding or what seemed three stories of rooms. Unlike the farmhouse she could somewhat remember from her previous life—snippets and flashes of memory rather than big details—she expected it to be sprawling, white-washed or bare logs, and either run-down or well-maintained. Instead, it was built upwards instead of outward and halfway between shabby and chic. As the two women made their way up to the porch steps, someone darted from window to window, shutting curtains and turning on lights.

"Speakin' of freaky dreams," Mercy teased jabbing Amber in the side, "Casey said this place has a pantry." Predictably incensed by the taunt, Amber swatted at the blonde, her face red.

"Hey, you two," Casey called out from the doorway. "If yer comin' in, behave yerselves!"

"What if I don't wanna behave?" Mercy shot back, and Casey rolled his eyes. "What? Well-behaved women rarely make history, right O'Brien?" Amber rolled her eyes and stumbled past her without a word. "Wait…I smell cows!—Jason, ya said yer neighbors have cows, right?" Before Casey could correct her or answer her, the blonde took off like a shot to seek out her quarry.

A loud crash rang out from the kitchen, followed by several voices shouting Mikey's name. Already dreading what disaster he was sure to find, Casey lumbered back inside to help the rest. Just inside the doorway, Amber turned back and scanned the cloudy skies. It looked like rain. Rain was hard
enough to deal with when she was underground, sheltered by miles of concrete and bedrock. Could she handle being up there with the thunder and lightning? Either way, she'd find no answers on the porch. With a sigh of resignation, she took the last step inside and let the screen door slam behind her.

The moment all the unloading was done, Mercy went missing, and when he realized this, Raphael started worrying. He searched the farmhouse for her, both stories and the attic, the yard, the barn, and even the swimming pond, but found nothing. It wasn't until he confronted Amber about the blonde's absence that he got a clue; granted, "find the cows" wasn't much of a clue, but it was the best he had. Now, half an hour after the frustrating blonde turned up missing, Raph's heart was finally calming down.

Mercy sat perched on the top rail of the corral in a way that made her jeans tighten temptingly over her perfectly plump backside. Following the call of _dat ass_, Raph crept toward the corral of heifers, scanning for threats and finding none. The stockyard was empty of people and the only house was barely within shouting's distance—no one could see them and no one would disturb them. Clad in flannel and jeans, her booted feet swinging girlishly, Mercy murmured praises and affections to the barrel-ribbed jersey heifer munching an apple from her hand.

"So." Startled, she turned to greet Raphael, fingertips still buried in the heifer's coarse hair by her horns, and the animal grunted as though to say 'Who said you were done? Keep scratching!' "Cows, huh?" Mercy gave her boyfriend a sheepish grin as he made his way up to the split-rail fence and leaned on it with his arms folded along the top rail.

"Cows," Mercy admitted turning back to the huge smelly animal licking the apple juice off her hand. "I used to work with cows, ya know—My stepdad owned a ranch, an' e gave me a job as a ranch-hand. The lil' buggers kinda grew on me." Even as she stared out into the listlessly circling herd, Raph studied her silently, marveling at the change he was seeing in her. Here in the country, Mercy already seemed more like herself—more free. Her grey-blue eyes seemed more blue than grey, her smile less sarcastic, and her always-messy hair more windblown than disheveled. Raph learned early on that Mercy Ross was a country girl and she would never truly fit in in the city, but now, he had undeniable proof of just how true this was. Not even an hour in the country, and already, the side of Mercy he'd only ever heard of was out in the open.

"I guess dey're... _kinda_ cute," he admitted instead of acknowledging the change he was seeing. "Dey still _smell_ pretty nasty."

"Cows're gassy," Mercy laughed, shrugging off the comment even as the heifer she just fed let out a loud, rancid belch. Raph smirked, wondering if that was why she saw nothing wrong with letting out her own belches at top volume; Mercy burped like a man, loud and proud. "Ya spend enough time around'em, ya get used to it—especially if ya ever work with calves like I did." She shot him a teasing smile. "These ladies stink, but lemme tell ya, a newborn calf smells a _lot_ worse. Ellis usually had me workin' with the calves an' yearlings...didn't have to be around the other 'hands as much that way, an' Ma..." The memory sobered her, her smile falling away, but she forced herself to finish the statement. "Anytime I was around men, other'n Ellis, Ma got it in'er head I was gonna start gettin' in trouble...she was so—so sure I'd drop my drawers for'em without the slightest hesitation, an' no amount'a promises to the contrary could convince'er otherwise. If Aaron Willis hadn't told'er to'er face he wasn't _into girls_, she'd never've let me hear the end of it...he was prob'ly _lyin'_, but it meant I could at least hang out with _one_ guy between six an' sixty other'n Ellis without gettin' _in trouble_ for it."

Silence reigned for a moment, neither sure what to say and neither ready to break that silence. Both
knew the truth—both knew the story and the secrets—neither needed confirmation of that fact, either. Finally, Raph cleared his throat and started another topic. "My new room in da Barracks is about ready, back home," he revealed snatching up a tall stalk of tasseled grass and fiddling with it. "Donnie an' Amber wanna put in some carpet, den I'm movin' in. Dey put in a lotta work on dat room...not sure how ta thank'em enough." He glanced at the silent blonde out of the corner of one hazel eye, soldiering on ahead and steeling his nerves. "I' been wonderin' dough...da barracks's been opened up mostly now, other'n yer room...an' with me livin' in my new room, I'll—I'll be right next door to ya."

"Yep," Mercy acknowledged without looking at him, a small smile playing on her unpainted lips.

"If—have ya considered...uh...movin' into my old room when I leave it?" Raph faltered, stubbornly not looking at her. "It'll be out'a da barracks an' it'd be a lot bigger but ya'd stuck be between Leo an' Mikey...an' Mikey snores pretty loud." Mercy studied him askance with a teasing smirk.

"Ya know anywhere I sleep's gonna be full'a cows an' plants, right?" she pointed out slyly. "Would ya really be fine with me tapin' cows all over yer old room an' fillin' it with flowers? 'Cuz I'd do it." The idea rankled him, but not so much, he had to admit, because it meant she'd be changing his old bedroom to suit her. No...it would upset him because she'd be so much farther away from him...and distance wasn't something he ever wanted when she was concerned.

"Dat ain't so bad, I guess," he mumbled, his cheeks heating up in what he was sure was a blush. "...or...or ya could just...ya know...move in with—with me..." He left the invitation hanging between them, and Mercy contemplated the suggestion—and the unspoken reasoning behind it. She always could read between the lines with him—unspoken words were as clear between them as spoken ones.

Raphael loved her like she loved him, and he wanted to keep her close...on the other hand, he understood what it was like to need space, and wanted to make sure she had the space she needed. Someday, she was sure, she and the muscle-bound mutant would wind up in the same situation as Amber and Donnie were in—sleeping together, sharing a room, waking up in one another's arms and stinking up the room every morning... That time, however, wasn't now—she offered herself to him once, but he realized she wasn't ready and respected it. Their relationship was complicated already—she was fighting a lifetime of abuse and conditioning, he was fighting not to make the same mistake with her that he did with Kimber, and between them, neither of them wanted to move too fast and screw it all up. They weren't ready to take that step yet—not by a long-shot—but Mercy knew Raphael needed reassurance.

"I'm pretty happy in the barracks, honestly," she finally answered with a mild shrug, and when she immediately felt his eyes on her, she gave a wide, lopsided smirk. "With you livin' there, too, I'm sure I'll be even happier." She turned to fix a flirtatious smile on him, grinning at his embarrassed expression. "Besides—maybe this way it'll be easier to spend time together without the others gettin' in the way. Maybe I could sleep over once in a while to start with?"

Once again, Raph realized sheepishly, she saw right through him—saw his fears and worries—and soothed them without ever once confronting them directly. Dropping the grass stem, he reached out to her, splaying one massive hand on the middle of her back and rubbing circles into it as they watched the cattle together. "I said it before, Asshat." Her words, quiet and affectionate, stilled him, but a strong hand laid on his mask-clad scalp, calmed him. "I love ya, Raphie...ain't nothin' gonna change that, 'specially not gettin' closer. Love ain't gotta hurt, right?" She glanced at him for confirmation and he nodded with a rumble of agreement. "So what's the sleepin' situation here, anyway? I ain't been inside yet—had to see the neighbors first."
"Dere's three bedrooms on da second floor, a small one on da first floor, an' the attic's finished as da guest room," Raph related with an easy smile as her hand trailed down to his neck, the fingertip rubbing and massaging away the tension there. "Casey an' April usually share da master bedroom, Splinta always takes da bedroom on da first floor, den da two other rooms on da second floor've got bunk beds—Leo an' Mikey usually share one an' Donnie an' I usually share da other, unless 'e sleeps out in da barn—'e's got a futon out dere in da loft an' crashes dere a lot so I usually got da room ta myself. Da attic's finished as a guest room'a sorts an' it has a bed, but just da one...it's pretty lumpy an' uncomf'terble an' da attic's always really dusty, so we never really bothered with it—everyone'oo ever tried jus' got a backache'er headache."

"Not sure how well that plan's gonna work now," Mercy remarked seriously. "Donnie an' Amber're sleepin' together back home, ya know—she always wakes up with screamin' nightmares unless she's with him, even happens if she falls asleep in the laundry again, unless someone wakes'er up. It was loud enough havin'er wake up screamin' next door—not sure I can handle bein' in the same room with it happening." She glanced over at him with a 'why not?' expression. "Guess we could stick those two idjits in the attic or the barn...an' I could bunk with ya instead...right?" Pink streaked across her cheeks and she turned back to the circling herd. "It's just for the weekend anyway...an' if those two horndogs shared yer room, I get the feelin' you'd wanna gouge out yer eyeballs."

"Don't remind me," Raph cringed. The genius and the braided other-worlder never went as deep into PDA as Raph and Mercy did, other than sickeningly sweet mushy stuff, but none of the family were comfortably going in Donnie's room anymore. Even with a better oil plug-in and potpourri, the room always smelled like fresh-fucked. "Ya want top bunk'er bottom, Blondie?" Mercy hopped down from the fence and turned to head back, swatting him on the rear as she did.

"Both." She grinned, knowing without looking that he was watching her backside, and threw a little more strut into her walk just to tease him.

"In utha words," Raph summed up coming up alongside her, hands thrust deep in his pockets, "ya wanna take over da beds an' make me sleep on da floor, right?" He dug one hand back out, reached over, and grabbed one rounded butt cheek, smirking at how Mercy stiffened in surprise but didn't give any sign of disapproval.

"Nope," she corrected albeit a little breathless from the hand slipping possessively into the rear pocket of her jeans to cup her rump. "Whichever bunk yer sleepin' in, I'm'onna climb in an' push ya out once ya fall asleep." His deep, husky chuckle sent a shiver down her spine and made blood rush to her cheeks. In her previous life, she was always torn between two sides of herself—she was a girly girl who loved wearing dresses, shopping, and painting her nails, but she was also a tomboy who enjoyed working with livestock and working in the garden, hated mush, and often 'rassled' with Aaron Willis when they and Amber hung out. Now, in this life, she was more tomboy than ever, but Raphael's strength, confidence, attitude, and physical affections always managed to make her feel girlier than ever. The hand clutching her shapely rear gave another appreciative squeeze and urged her closer, then swept up her back to wrap harmlessly around her waist.

"Ya make dose jeans look hot, Kid," he teased lowly, delivering the compliment right into her tousled blonde hair, then leaned in to nuzzle her. Determined to not break first, Mercy went in for the kill, but her breathless voice lessened the impact.

"This from the guy who showed up for our first date in a leather loincloth.***
- Ish yer Ahmber, Gran'Da. – Recall that Amber always spoke to her grandfather with the same accent she grew up with, instead of the twang she adopted; this is just such an example. "It's your Amber, Gran'Dad."

- "Kin I gitcha a tawp-awff?" – Kimber's Jersey dialect, "Can I get you a top-off?"

- "Ya had t'a Bawston Lahger, right?" – You had the Boston Lager, right?

- "But wit' t'a 'ess' missin'"— But with the 's' missing—

- "We jus' mi'sha, Jeanie-bird." – 'We just miss you, Jeanie-burd.' Glen Devon and Ginny often called Amber "Jeanie-burd" as evidenced in Part I of "Dream Lover" (found in the Gallery of Memories, a matter of making her middle name of "Jean" into a petname) but Douglas would have interpreted that "burd" as "bird"—while 'burd' is Scottish slang for 'girl,' Douglas would have interpreted that as comparing his daughter to an actual bird, maybe a songbird or something.

- "Gi'off, Blundie." – Get off, Blondie.

- "Da attic's finished as a guestroom'a sorts an' it has a bed, but just da one." – The attic's finished as a guest room of sorts and it has a bed, but just the one.

- "It's pretty lumpy an' uncomf'terble an' da attic's always really dusty, so we never really bothered with it—everyone'oo ever tried jus' got a backache'er a headache." – It's pretty lumpy and uncomfortable and the attics always really dusty, so we never really bothered with it—everyone who ever tried just got a backache [from the bed] or a headache [from the dust].

- Utha – other

Scottish slang/Dialect, or as Mercy puts it, "Scottness"

Ab'dy - everybody

Bide - stay/live. Like Ab'dy and Anaw, this is Scottish slang. Traditional use probably refers specifically to a place of residence, but remember that Amber has used several other such terms differently as well—she's essentially cross-cultural, and whenever cultures mingle, things get twisted around. In this case, Amber uses words her Gran'Da's family use, but some with slightly altered meanings. In this case, she focused on the 'live' part of it, and told her father 'ab'dy bides' to say essentially, 'we all live our own lives—leave well enough alone.' (IOW, 'we're all weird, quit being a dick about other people's weirdness.')

I anaw - I as well, or basically, "Me, too—I miss you too."

Pished / Pissed / Rat-arsed – All Scottish slang for "drunk." The last, while not used here, is the inspiration for the name of Willsdale's pub - "The Staggering Rat" - as Bart Devon, Ginny O'Brien's younger brother and Amber's uncle, owns said pub.

Midwestern Twang

- Other'n – other than

- Amount'a – amount of

- Never've – never have

- Prob'ly – Probably

- Out'a / Full'a – Out of / Full of

- Unless'e / 'e's – Unless he / He's

- Top bunk'er bottom? – Top bunk or bottom?

- I'm'onna – I'm going to

- Rassled – Rasslin' is a term used in the south and parts of the Midwest to denote horseplay, particularly the sort involving impromptu wrestling around and noogies. In
the case of Aaron and Mercy, it would mean wrestling in the dirt combined with kickboxing and boxing from Mercy and 'annoying older brother moves' like noogies, wedgies, "I'm not poking you" gestures, and the like from Aaron.

Chapter End Notes

* Fallow land – This term refers to land that has been left along – not seeded for growing, not built up for use, it's just left there, empty and unused, but may someday see use. Commonly land adjoining railroad tracks, cemeteries, factories, and other unpleasant or dangerous sites will be left fallow either out of necessity or in an attempt to 'pretty up' the area. Sometimes fallow land occurs as fields, river bottoms, or wooded areas.

** Mercy calling Casey Jason is a reference to his wearing a hockey mask while out busting skulls, comparing him to Jason Vorhees of Friday the 13th fame. Recall Mercy's habit of giving people odd and somewhat derogatory nicknames and nicknaming people she likes by calling them insulting nicknames.

*** Recall Raph and Mercy's first date—the Sixx: A.M. concert played at SummerStage—and that he wore that beaded leather loincloth shown in the first Bay movie because 'they're the fanciest clothes he had.' That loincloth…damn…just…dayam. It could win any gutterbrain over to being a Raphie fangirl!
46: Hard Decisions and Tough Love

Chapter Summary

Ghost isn't dead yet!!!
First day at the Farmhouse winds to a close. Amber's first storm above-ground goes badly; Donnie has to make some tough decisions and Casey shows his soft side. Amber and Donnie are stupid-sweet; Casey's gonna hurl.

Chapter Notes

WELL. THAT sucked! Hey, Folks, that flu-bug did it's dang-dest to ensure otherwise, but I ain't dead yet! ...Seriously though...I'm actually still just shy of not-sick but it's better than I've been dealing with. First a cold, then a flu-bug that kept trying to turn into pneumonia, THEN pink-eye related to said flu-bug, antibiotics, a visit to the clinic, out-of-home isolation from my family before it could spread...yeah, this last few weeks has sucked ROYALLY. :( Fortunately, I'm finally well enough to be home again and (aside from intermittent lifelong-smoker-hacking-up-a-lung coughing) I'm finally well enough to get home and get some writing, updating, and replying done - FINALLY!

SO. Here we are, I apologize for the wait on replies, and I hope this chapter satisfies! Still the first day out on the farm, but it's got some moments so friggin' sweet you'll wind up with cavities. And just think - NEXT chapter has SMUT! XD This chapter dedicated to Kari, who helped me conquer my own storm demons, and to Wolf - keep your chin up, Girl, you're worth it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


46: Hard Decisions and Tough Love

Friday, September 16th, Northampton, the Farmhouse' Barn

The first time Amber saw the big red barn, she was still half-asleep and dreaded that it might be the farmhouse they were going to spend the weekend in. The second time, not an hour after that mistake, she was fully awake and being shown around that barn by the excited genius who used it as a retreat and tinker shop during visits. Donatello's excitement was contagious as he led her all around the big open room on the first floor, showing off all the work he'd done on it, the features he'd installed for convenience and comfort, and everything else he could think of. The genius was like a kid in a candy shop, and Amber couldn't help getting swept up in that excitement.

The moment she set foot on the staircase leading to the loft, however, all excitement fell away in blinding terror at the sound of a distant rumble outside. One foot on the straw-strewn wood floor, the
other poised on the lowest step, she turned to the barn's open doors, searching the sky for answers and easily finding them. A storm was moving in, just as she feared it would, and from the sound of it, it was a big one and almost there...she needed to get inside. In truth, it was only a mild rainstorm and she would have been just as safe in the barn as she would be in the house, but in the barn, the thunder was loud, close, and hard to ignore...and even if not, she spent most storms in her other life huddled in the bottom of her closet hiding like a child expecting a scolding.

Above her on the staircase, Donnie looked back mid-sentence to see why she wasn't following him. His explanation of how he managed to install a refurbished electric heater in the loft fell silent at the sight of his girlfriend's clearly terrified expression. "What's wrong?" he asked, but in his heart, he already knew the answer...and that answer, though it didn't surprise him, disappointed him.

"Storm's comin'," Amber answered quickly turning back to the door. With every step, another bolt of fear lanced through her heart. Her heart raced—her blood rushed—her lungs shuddered in quick, shallow breaths—her eyes, wide and dilated from adrenaline—darted from one end of the horizon to the other, scanning the skies for threats, but she couldn't tell for certain whether the threats she saw were real or imagined—remembered. "We need—we need'a- get inside, Dee—I—I—" Her panicked explanation fell short as a pair of large, roughened yet gentle hands framed her face, urging her to meet their owner's eyes.

Donnie's stomach churned at the sight of her—her fear was so evident on her face, fear that was both blinding and illogically intense, and all because of a little harmless thunder. Amber reached up and covered one of his hands with one of hers and squeezed it hard, trying in vain to slow her breathing as they'd practiced. It was easy enough to slow your breathing in a safe environment, and almost as easy to do it when you were only seeing pictures of your greatest fear—pictures couldn't harm you. The rain, thunder, and lightning wouldn't harm her, either, but it was a fear she'd suffered under for years—a phobia she developed long before she died on her knees. Now, faced with the object of her fear, she found herself tipping over the edge into fight-or-flight despite all the progress she'd made.

"The rain hasn't started yet," Donnie pointed out gently, sliding one hand around to her neck to rub soothingly, upward for a certain number of seconds then downward for another in a reminder of the breathing pattern she'd practiced. Sure enough, she caught the cadence and began fighting to time her inhales with the upward strokes and her exhales with the downward ones. It took a while before she could last the whole several beats before exhaling over several more—could hold that breath instead of letting herself fall to gasping and panting—but slowly she got the hang of it. As much as it disappointed him that his plans were interrupted, Donnie had to admit he was proud of the progress she'd made. When he first began working with her, she went straight from zero to panic too quickly to stave off a panic attack with controlled breathing; now she was capable of working herself from what seemed an anxiety level of high-six and an impending panic attack, even in the face of a real in-her-face rainstorm.*

"We can beat the rain if we go back now," the genius pointed out gently. "The rest of the tour can wait, right?" He half-hoped she'd argue—that she'd insist on staying out in the barn and facing her fear head on—but logically, he knew that she wasn't ready for that step. That would be so her, though, starting too big and ending up paying for it...He shoved the thought away and gave her a comforting, confident smile. To everything, there was a time and a place, and there would be a time and a place for Amber O'Brien to confront her fears head-on, but now was not that time.

Taking a deep, still-shuddering breath to center herself, Amber nodded, swallowed hard, and released his hand. The hands on her cheeks slipped away, but one found its way around her back in a comforting embrace as he led the way out of the barn. As he turned back to secure the doors against the rain, Amber's eyes shot up to the sky and her pulse spiked; recognizing this and pulling her back to herself, he squeezed her hip. "Remember," Donnie urged softly as he and Amber made
their way back to the farmhouse amidst the rolling thunder with forcefully slow steps. "I'll be right here, every step of the way."

She didn't have to run and hide anymore—even if it meant dragging the stubborn woman out in the rain, Donatello would do anything he could to help her fight her fears.

Not long after the impending storm chased Amber and Donatello back inside, Casey found the genius alone in the kitchen setting the kettle on to boil for tea. Amber wasn't with him—she was frantically pacing the living room with all the curtains closed, jumping at every rumble of thunder and just barely staving off a panic attack. Compared to her, the mutant in front of Casey was calm, collected, and completely sane.

"What's goin' on with'er, Donnie?" Casey asked lowly, glancing out the door to the wild-eyed brunette pacing like a frightened animal in a cage. "It's just a rainstorm—it ain't even a big one! Da others're out on da porch watchin' da lightnin', but she's freakin' out like da world's about ta end!"

"Big storm, small storm," Donnie sighed digging through a cupboard for mugs, "the size of a phobic element is irrelevant, especially when you're dealing with more than just a phobia." He ducked past the steaming kettle to the cardboard box of supplies on the counter, quickly digging out a tin of Master Splinter's sedative tea blend; the stuff tasted pretty nasty, but it worked every time. "You know how she died, but that's only the half of it—she's got Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Casey, and if that's not enough, she already had a phobia of rainstorms." The genius paused to measure out loose herbs into a metal tea strainer and plunked it into the first empty mug, quickly dosing the other with instant coffee grounds for himself. "She's had that phobia since she was just a kid—apparently, by the time she died she couldn't even go out in the rain without a panic attack and spent even the weakest rainstorms cowering in her closet. It doesn't make sense, but phobias are illogical by nature."

Casey let the explanation sink in for a moment, curiously glancing out at the woman still pacing the living room. She was terrified—terrified beyond reason—but she was still visibly trying to reign in that terror. Right before his eyes, another crack of thunder made her leap up in fright, she stopped in her tracks, closed her eyes and forcibly worked her breathing patterns back into the more calming cadence. For good measure, she reached out to her opposite arm and harshly pinched the skin between her nails, flinching at the pain.

"The human brain cannot process emotions as effectively when distracted by tactile pain," Donnie explained at Casey's shoulder; he'd seen it too, and recognized the gesture for what it was. "When the brain is registering emotion, like fear, the introduction of physical pain overrides the non-physical input in favor of the physical input. It's why some people cut or hurt themselves when they're depressed or anxious—it blocks out the emotional pain and replaces it with physical. It's a dangerous habit and can become an equally dangerous addiction, but if a pinch can stop a panic attack and it's used sparingly, the benefit outweighs the risk." He turned back to the kettle, silently urging it to hurry up. "Amber already had that phobia, but after being killed by her worst fear, her PTSD is tied in with the phobia. As far as I know, this is her first real encounter with a rainstorm in this life—at least the first one without several stories of concrete protecting her from it."

Casey shifted awkwardly in the doorway, glanced out at Amber again, then turned back to Donnie. "I'm still pretty confused over all'a dis," he admitted lumbering up to Donnie and clapping one hand on the mutant's carapace in a show of support. "an' I don't get da big deal about storms...but I know what it's like ta be afraid.# She ain't just afraid—she's terrified, an' it's obvious. If dere's anythin' I can do, ya just lemme know, okay?" He glanced back out at Amber again, his eyes drawn to the hallway leading to Splinter's room. "Hey—dis place's got a storm cellar," he revealed eager to help, his lips split in a lopsided smirk. "It ain't very big, 'bout ten-by-ten an' six feet high, but maybe she'd feel
Donatello considered the offer silently, watching Amber's pacing form through the open door. If he'd worried that she could hear them, her lack of response at the word 'cellar' would have convinced him otherwise. She would feel safer in the cellar—after all, that's where people were supposed to seek shelter when really rough storms came through—but he couldn't shut out the memory of her admitting she spent rainstorms hiding in her closet...and sometimes didn't emerge from the closet until hours later, or even slept in that closet and didn't come out until the next morning. A safe place in a storm could be a great comfort...but when the storm was mild and you were fighting a phobia of storms, that safe place could just as easily become a crutch, and in time, make that phobia even worse. His mind made up, he turned to meet Casey's eyes seriously.

"Listen to me, Casey," he urged quietly. "There is no cellar—unless a tornado drops down nearby, there will never be a cellar here. The cellar door actually leads to a storage room and it's kept locked. Capiche?" Casey shook his head in confusion, his brow furrowing as he tried to understand the genius' thinking.

"But if it would help'er—" Donnie cut him off sternly.

"It wouldn't help her," he insisted gravely, "and it might actually make things worse. That woman out there was so afraid of storms she used to spend hours locked in a closet—hours after the rain stopped, long after any real danger was past—that safe place offered security, but it became a crutch." He heaved a sigh, turning back to his oblivious girlfriend. "If she finds out this place has a cellar, Casey, she could easily spend whole visits down there, and it would undo a lot of the hard work we've done together. If we never face our fears, we can never conquer them...if she always has the option of running to safety, she'll never push herself to face her demons." The kettle whistled behind them, startling them both, and Donnie hurried to pour boiling water into the two mugs. "She needs to endure the rain, Casey," he added softly, "or she'll never stop being afraid of it...and everyone deserves to live without that sort of fear."

As the mutant before him stirred the water and coffee grounds in his mug, Casey scrutinized him silently—the slumped shoulders, the shadow-hung eyes, the tired, defeated expression—Donatello wanted nothing more than to steal the troubled woman away from whatever might frighten her and let her continue to seek him out every time she was afraid, but he knew it was taking a toll on her living like that. Because he cared, he was forcing her to confront her fears and making the hard decisions she couldn't yet make for herself. His mind made up, Casey nodded slowly.

"I'm still pretty confused about dis whole deal," he admitted gruffly, "specially how she's here in da first place, but I've gotcher back—if ya think it'll help, den I'll go wit'it." The vigilante gave the mutant a playful sock in the shoulder on his way past to the far cabinets and rummaged around for something.

"Thanks," Donnie sighed staring down into the swirling coffee in his cup. "Please tell the others before someone says something to her...and please just be patient with us while we work through this." Instead of answering, Casey returned to his side and held out a small electronic device. The puzzled genius looked it over curiously, fiddled with a few buttons, then in excitement, realized just what he held. "Double-A batteries?" A moment later, Casey plopped four mismatched but fresh batteries in Donnie's other hand, grinning at the eager gleam in the genius' eyes. "This'll help, I know it will...thanks, Case."

Thunder rumbled outside, rattling the windows; lightning flickered behind the curtains. With every crack and flash, Amber's pulse stuttered anew and another distorted horror forced its way from her memory into her mind's eye. She paced frantically from one end of the faded rug to the other, with
every step losing her grip on the present more and more. Chills raced up and down her spine—rain hammered the rooftop and windows, the sound amplified exponentially by her fear.

Rain. Thunder. Lightning. It was normal for a child to fear them, but when that fear continued into adulthood, a person tended to get awkward sideways glances—bereft of understanding and emotional support, they would instead bottle up that fear around others and drown in it when they're alone. Eventually, that fear would become too powerful, too vivid to be stifled, and the loved ones who never saw the moments of weakness were left reeling and disbelieving. They wouldn't understand, wouldn't see it coming, and might accuse the anxiety-ridden person of acting out for attention or being ridiculous; such disregard of the anxious person's very real emotions and fear could be devastating and could drastically worsen their troubles, adding in the complications of bitterness, anger, humiliation, and self-loathing.

Amber's case was just one of countless others like it—she once loved rain as a child, once slept best when it was storming...then she was given reason to fear what she once loved. As a child, she came face to face with a vomit green sky spitting hail and torrential rain. The unexpected tornado siren was disregarded by an ignorant, reckless teacher who didn't realize what the siren meant and refused to follow the safety plan because it would interrupt her lesson. As though it was only yesterday, Amber could still hear the old woman's shrieked threats of detention and still feel the impacts of her sneakers pounding along the tiled floors to the basement door. She glanced at the shuttered windows of the living room, recalling vividly the moment she froze before the tall glass windows lining the grade school's lobby and stared down the approaching storm. Right before her, a sickened sky—a nasty blend of green, grey, and black that turned her stomach—split in a mocking, menacing grin of a wall cloud, and the surrounding clouds began to churn violently.

She remembered nothing after that—nothing before coming-to in the nurse's office almost an hour later and hearing her mother shrieking at the ignorant woman who put her lessons over her students' safety. The woman wasn't a native of Tornado Alley—she grew up on the west coast, earthquake territory, and somehow managed to make it three decades in Missouri without figuring out why the sirens were blowing and without getting herself killed by ignoring them. Though the rotation in the atmosphere never produced a funnel cloud capable of descending, there was significant damage to the area surrounding the school; the teacher wound up being replaced after that term because of her mistake.

Meanwhile, Amber, the child who loved storms, grew to fear them. Every time rain came down, she remembered the vomit-green sky and the menacing grin in the clouds; fear filled her heart where once she felt only joy. Years passed and Amber grew, but as she grew, so did her phobia. Her family didn't understand—her mother and father couldn't reconcile their daughter's fear with her previous love of rainstorms—and Amber took to spending more time with her grandfather than with anyone else. Now, a lifetime later, she still struggled under that same old fear...how small and weak that realization made her feel! Scoffing angrily at herself, she turned to pace the other way again, but instead, ran face-first into a familiar body—someone with a hard-armored chest and suspenders and a mug of familiar-smelling tea. The both yelped at the impact—and at the hot tea splashed on them—and stepped apart in embarrassment. "Sorry, Dee, I—" The object in his other hand made her fall silent, and she turned questioning eyes up to him.

"Uh..." he gave a sheepish grin and held the small device out to her. "It's a little old, but it's a battery-operated weather radio, fully functional, too—if any watches or warnings are posted for this area, it'll go off to warn us." Belatedly he also held out the cup of sedative tea, wincing when he realized almost half of it was spilled in their collision. "This'll take the edge off, at least, right? And maybe if you know the radio'll go off if something does happen...maybe you'll be able to focus more on keeping your fears in check?"
For the first time since the storm began, Amber couldn't hear the thunder over the sound of her own thumping heart. The lengths that turtle would go to just to help her...how could she ever deserve him? Her eyes stinging, she bypassed both offerings and instead tucked herself into his front and reached up for his shoulders, uncaring that his bare plastron was dripping with tea and she was getting it all over her shirt. Realizing she was too choked up to say anything, he set down the mug and radio and enfolded her in his arms, nuzzling into her hair and hoping she'd forgive him if she ever found out about his newest deceit.

The loudest crack of thunder yet rang out, and this time, Amber heard it plain as day. She didn't even realize she'd jumped straight up in the air until she found herself at eye level with the familiar hazel eyes always a head above her own. Seemingly equally surprised, Donnie stared back at her but his grip on her back and thighs never wavered. "Jumpy?" he asked with a teasing smile.

"Smidgen," she answered sheepishly as he shifted her into a more comfortable grip. "Nice catch." She expected him to put her down and go about his business, but instead, he backed toward the old, lumpy sofa.

"Hang on," he warned, then slowly and carefully crouched down, easing himself back onto the sofa without ever putting her down. It was easy to say it, but much more difficult to accomplish such a thing without a hernia at the least. Settling back into the sofa, he shifted her to sit across his lap and lean back into the arm of the sofa, then dug through the cushions for the TV remote. "Maybe a movie or something will help keep your mind off the storm, huh?" he suggested as she stared at him in disbelief, still stunned that she not only jumped as high as she did but that he managed to catch her with ease. A few moments of button-mashing later, the genius emitted a wordless sound of interest—the station he landed on was showing a documentary about the Nazca Lines.

"Whoa!" Amber blurted out suddenly, her eyes finally wrenched away from his to the screen. "Y'all got the Nazca Lines here, too? Freaky!"

"Yep," Donnie acknowledged as she settled back into his shoulder to watch with him. "Did they ever solve the mystery in your world? We still haven't—a lot of people here think they're related to ley lines or aliens." Amber scoffed.

"Are you kidding?" she teased. "We couldn't even figure out who killed JFK—no way could we figure out something like the meanin' behind the Lines! General consensus back home was aliens or religious ceremonies." Just like that, the storm outside faded into the white noise—blocked out by the fascinating history and the even more fascinating being sharing that history with her. Gentle fingertips smoothed soothingly across Amber's denim-clad thighs where they crossed Donnie's lap; another set of fingertips intermittently petted her hair and back, gradually urging her closer and closer into his neck. By the time the documentary was over, the storm was long passed and the couple on the sofa had no eyes or ears for the television—they'd fallen asleep, Donnie nuzzled into Amber's hair and Amber tucked face-first into his neck, both smiling in their sleep.

"Dat's just disgustin'," Casey grumbled at April. Though his words were harsh, he wore a grin just like she did. The sight before them was, indeed, nauseatingly cute.

Night fell hours before and dinner was long past along with the rainstorm and the documentary. Now, only four people were still out of bed...and two of them were asleep on the couch in front of the TV instead of out in the barn like everyone thought. "Maybe we should wake them up," April suggested softly, inching closer to the sofa. "Donnie's liable to get a neckache like that." As though hearing his name, Donatello roused slightly, hazel eyes opening a crack and focusing on April. "Hey," she teased as Casey headed to double-check the locks and latches on the doors and windows before heading up to bed. "Ya look comfy."
"Am comfy," he rasped softly. "Neck's killing me though."

"Mercy told me about the arrangement." April's smile was a little awkward, now, but she soldiered on ahead. "We got the attic dusted and aired out, and the bed has fresh linens—it's all ready for you two if you can make it up there okay." Blinking away the last of the exhaustion, Donnie nodded in agreement and gratitude and sat up. Gathering Amber closer to his chest and leaning forward almost off the sofa, he slowly eased himself up onto his feet and took a moment to stretch out the kinks in his neck and legs. The old chenille sofa wasn't easy on a normal person's back, but for Donnie and his brothers—people with the added difficulty of a spine and a carapace restricting their posture—it was killer.

With a whisper of thanks and a goodnight, the genius made his way past her up the first flight of stairs, then the second, narrower set to the attic. After shouldering the door open, brushing through, then easing it closed with his hip, he surveyed the small, low-ceilinged room he'd be sleeping in for the next couple days. Moonlight filtered through the small windows at the eastern and southern ends of the room, lighting his way and glinting off of the pair of glass-shielded grey-green eyes slowly opening to meet his. "Sorry I woke you," Donnie murmured as he approached the old brass bed against the far wall and western window. "I tried to let you sleep."

"S'okay,- Speccy," Amber yawned, belatedly covering it and blinking away the watering of her eyes to look around. "I'll fall asleep again, no harm—" Suddenly realizing something, she fell silent, her eyes opening wide. "The rain stopped."

"Halfway through the show," Donnie pointed out with a teasing smile. "You didn't notice?" She gave a stunned shake of her head. Rain terrified her…yet she was too enthralled with the movie and cuddling with Donnie to even register the rainstorm. Her eyes hopeful, Amber turned to gaze out the window at the sky but found herself falling short at the bed between them and the window—an old bed frame with traditional brass-beamed head and foot-boards, and glass-inset bed-knobs to boot. The queen sized behemoth was tarnished and dented and probably older than her Gran'da, but she was distracted by the borrowed words ringing in her memory.

"Yer kiddin', right?" she asked, but he shook his head, gently easing her down sideways onto the lumpy, poky mattress. "Feelin' a lil' Bob Dylan, are we?" she teased scooting fully onto the bed, but the taunt fell silent as he crawled up with her.

"That depends," he joked inviting himself into the cradle of her spread thighs. "Do I only get to see you in the morning light, or can I reach for you in the night, too?" Comfortably chapped lips stole away her response before she could speak it, then proceeded to brush across hers in several more soft, slow kisses. No matter how hard she thought about it, she couldn't find a way to tell him the truth…she always reached for him in the night, if not in real life then in dreams. Either way, she wouldn't change it for the world. She would face a million storms down, all for one more kiss, one more nip, one more desperate embrace, gentle nuzzle in her hair, or caress of her cheek or jaw.

Though she still didn't know how it happened, she knew the truth—she traveled across time and worlds to be with this wonderful, gentle, brilliant man, and if need be, she'd do it all over again, as many times as it might take. He was worth the pain of death…and even more worth the uncertainty of life.

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**WORDS**

S'okay – It's okay.

**General rules**
Adding 'e or 'is to the end of a word – means he or his
Adding 'er to the end of a word – means her
Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word – means them or their
Adding 'a to the end of a word – means either of or to, depending on the rest of the sentence. You can generally figure out which one with little difficulty just by considering which word the 'a is added to and the rest of the phrase.

Words ending with –in’ – This word ends with –ing but has been shortened to portray accent.

With Casey or Raph: Da / words beginning with d- – Generally, non-Bay Casey pronounces th- words as d- instead. Specific examples include da – the and dere – there. The Bay-verse Casey is NOT a very traditional OR canon portrayal of the character, so I've based this Casey on a rough blend of the Casey from the '03 series, the '07 movie, and the 90's movies. THOSE Caseys weren't pretty-boy dumbasses, just knuckleheads. - _-

Chapter End Notes

*Anxiety Scales – An integral part of the treatment of panic disorders, PTSD, and phobias is the use of an anxiety scale to determine your reaction to certain stressors so you know what you need to work on most. Some common scales number from 1-5, 1-10, and 1-100, each with 1 being completely relaxed and content and the highest number being 'the worst fear you've ever felt.' When my friend Kari was helping me through conquering my own phobia and panic attacks, she taught me to use the high-to-low 1-10 scale—the number denotes the level of anxiety surrounding a stressor while high, mid, and low numbers denote intensity of emotion. Just as a basic example, a high-10 for Amber would be 'enduring another tornado,' a high-to-mid seven would be an average panic attack, and a low-four might be mild intrusive memories. Because this is the scale I've had the most experience with, I've got Donnie using this ten-step scale with Amber's treatment, and for that reason, you've been occasionally seeing numbers and high, mid, or low attributed to instances of anxiety and panic. Another thing to keep in mind is that the items on your anxiety scale will not always be at the same level—they may get higher with relapses, and they will lower with proper treatment, and with enough time and treatment, they may no longer even merit a place on the scale. A personal example would be that for me, being out in a thunderstorm was at first a mid-five but has since fallen off the scale entirely because they no longer cause anxiety—I lived many years with a phobia of severe storms that extended even to the mildest rain shower, but now I love getting caught in the rain and actually tend to start laughing and grinning like a lunatic when it happens. :D

** The connection between physical pain and emotions – This bit is entirely true—the human brain is wired in such a way that non-sensory input like emotions is usually overridden when coinciding with sensory input like pain. There are exceptions, such as shock in the event of an injury and adrenaline dulling pain, but normally, experiencing sufficient pain will interrupt your brain's ability to register fear, anxiety, and sadness. When you're dealing with panic attacks or severe anxiety, being able to dull that emotion with a pinch or such can be invaluable, but it's a slippery slope—using it too often or causing actual harm to yourself to dull emotion can become an addiction that's hard to break. If you decide to exploit this ability, always, ALWAYS use it sparingly, never cause yourself lasting physical harm, and ALWAYS back off if it becomes habit
or you realize you can't manage an emotion or stressor without resorting to blocking it out with pain.

# Casey understands fear – This bit is mostly based in the 90's films, in which Casey suffered a pretty embarrassing case of claustrophobia. This story's Casey draws pretty heavily on that version of him, in that he is stubborn, gruff, and a little bit of an asshole, but underneath it all, he's much more sensitive and compassionate than he'd ever let you know. (IOW, he's a non-mutant Raph, LOL!)

## The moon visible in the eastern and southern windows – I'm gonna be perfectly honest with y'all about this one, I have absolutely no clue whether this would be accurate in New York or not. I live in Southern Missouri, a good fair distance south of NYC, and we always see the moon clearly from our southern-facing windows, year-round. (We've got a full panoramic view from east to west with those windows, it's wonderful for watching fog settle or rain clouds moving in. And don't even get me started on the sunsets and snow!) For all I know, the moon might not be visible from the southern windows up in the North during Fall. If anyone lives in the Northern states and has a correction for this, please do let me know so I can make that correction!
Chapter Summary

LEMON WARNING!
Amber and April bond over beefcakes. Donnie jumps to conclusions, Amber gets irritated and overloads him with TMI. Donnie's brain should've been in "In Cognito" mode.
Makeup fuzziness. FIRST BARN SMUT! FIRST CONFESSION OF FEELINGS!
Leo needs brain bleach.
Mercy's a troll. Mikey isn't nearly as oblivious as he acts. Deer-in-the-headlights. Leo STILL needs brain bleach.

Chapter Notes

Great news, Folks! You're about to get your first dose of Farmhouse Shenanigans! LEMON WARNING for the middle of this chapter—no intercourse yet, but it's still pretty intense and less vanilla than previous scenes. It's also more passionate than sweet - because frankly, those two idiots have been driving each other insane - but hopefully it didn't come out 'porny.'

Also a warning near the beginning for an Amber-Rant with some really awkward and explicit explanations regarding human reproductive horrors, and a descriptive explanation of naked mutant turtle bits as per this story. (Yeah, I got a little detailed— I'm a detail-oriented gutter-brain with unregulated internet access and I have a way too vivid imagination, so sue me.)
Lastly, a quick note: yeah, Cold and I are both STILL sick AND we're currently "snowed in." First ice storm of the year...yay... Anyway, I haven't been able to get much writing done lately because of the sick but we still have, I believe, one chapter left of the queue. On a more amusing note, my pinkeye has been downgraded from "demon-spawn on a three night bender" to "just got bitch-slapped with a cactus." Hopefully by the end of the week it'll be down to "sprayed mace into a stiff breeze" or "no, I really haven't been bawling my eyes out." BTW, if you have pale-colored irises and get pinkeye, it scares the living crap out of people! My eyes are blue-green and the other day at the store the cashier about jumped through the roof when she first saw me. X'D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Toad the Wet Sprocket "Architect of the Ruin," Skillet "Whispers in the Dark," The Afters "Beautiful Love"

47: Burn with Me

September 17th, Northampton, the Farmhouse
The rising sun just barely peeked through the small eastern window, sending soft rays of light over the occupants of the attic bedroom. Donatello still slept blissfully, mumbling into his pillow every now and then, each time sniffing then breaking into a comforted smile as though reassured of something being near him.

On the other side of the lumpy mattress, Amber perched on her hip watching the dreams flit behind his eyes and the light dance across his skin. This wasn't the first time she'd seen sunlight on Donnie's skin—at least not since they arrived at the farm—but she was sure she'd never tire of the sight. Someone as wonderful, as precious, as gentle and sweet as her Donnie didn't deserve to waste away in the underground, restricted to creeping out under dark of night like some sort of B-movie monster. Donatello, like the rest of his wonderful family, deserved the sunlight, deserved to relish the freedom of fresh breezes and warm rays of light so many of Amber's kind took for granted.

Finally, she tore herself away from the still-dozing genius, crept down the stairs, ducked into the bathroom to straighten the sex-hair she still hadn't earned, then stumbled down the second flight to the kitchen. It was there, babysitting the coffee pot, that another female presence caught her unawares.

"You look pretty put-together for a girl who just spent the night with a hunka-hunka-mutant-love." The corny jest—delivered in an over-the-top Elvis impersonation that would've made Mikey proud—made Amber laugh, and she greeted the other brunette with a bright smile. April had sex-hair, too, she recognized with a chuckle, but something told her the reporter stumbling to the table actually earned hers. After all, she didn't seem the sort to sleep in baggy men's sleep pants and a tank top.

"Nice," Amber remarked as she searched the cabinets for coffee mugs. "I didn't wake up like this, though—I always wake up lookin' a hot mess, even when I sleep alone, an' didn't wanna give anyone the wrong idea or make anyone uncomfortable." The coffee maker let out a final belch of steam as Amber pulled down three mismatched coffee mugs, and filling one, passed it to April to treat as she chose. April silently thought over the admission while she doctored her coffee, then set it before her to cool.

"I'm confused, Amber." The other-worlder met her eyes silently, patiently waiting for her to finish her statement. "I thought you and Donnie were together—as in together, together, not just sleeping in the same room. You two certainly seem pretty affectionate around the rest of us…did I miss something?" Amber blushed, looking back down to fill the other two mugs of coffee.

"There goes my filter," she muttered under her breath; her mind was already halfway in the gutter, but April's innocent question sent it excitedly diving off the ledge into gutter-ville…and when she got dirty-minded, her brain-to-mouth filter failed.

"Pardon?"

"Nothin'," she corrected herself aloud. "Yeah, O'Neil, Donnie'n I are really together. We're sleepin' together mostly because I get night terrors a lot—if I'm with him, I can wake up from them without trouble, or even get through them without wakin' up at all, but when I'm sleepin' alone…" Amber cringed, embarrassed by the confession and irritated by that embarrassment. "Until he opened his room to me, I woke up with every passing subway train, an' almost every time, I woke up screamin'. The first time I fell asleep with him was the first time I'd actually slept through the night in this entire new life. He quickly figured out the connection, bein' a genius an' all, an' started tryin'a talk me into movin' into his room so I could get some sleep." She gave the reporter a sheepish smile. "I fought'im tooth'n nail over it, but it's obvious who won…an' it's worked every time."

"So you're just sleeping together for convenience?" April asked dubiously.
"Aw, heck no. Sure, it started for convenience but we're honestly, hopelessly stuck on each other." Amber shrugged, sure she was blushing. "At risk of being too blunt, we're just not at the point where I would be waking up with fresh-fucked hair if I wasn't already prone to it. My hair's got just enough natural curl to be frizzy but not enough to look anything but messy, so I always look like hammered horse-hockey when I get up."

"Lemme get this straight, Girl," April demanded after a quick swig of coffee. "You're not blind, you're a straight adult female without obvious mental or medical limitations or moral misgivings, and you're sleeping with Donnie, but nothing untoward has happened?" Untoward…did waking up naked with his head between her legs count as untoward? April shot a cautious glance at the doorway as if to check for approaching persons, then continued in a lower voice, "You've got eyes, right? You've seen those four, right? They're all absolute beefcakes—they've got the kind of muscles that make women swoon! Heck," she scoffed as if still finding it hard to believe, "If I hadn't found Casey, and if those four didn't feel so much like family to me, I'd totally have hit that!" Stunned by the unexpected revelation, but grinning in agreement, Amber asked,"Which one?"

"Pick one, they're all tempting," April admitted wryly. "They're all pretty handsome, green skin and shell aside…if I absolutely had to pick one most likely candidate…" She considered it a moment, then admitted, "I'd probably have gone for either Raph or Donnie." Blue eyes shooting skyward, she contemplated her words a moment, then clarified, "Make that just Raph…that bloody loincloth he used to wear would turn a nun into a nympho."

They laughed over the admission for a moment, enjoying the rare moment of feminine bonding. "I couldn't handle Raph," Amber admitted with a sly grin as she popped a packet of poptarts into the toaster. "We're too alike—we'd be fightin' more often than fuckin' and frankly, brains're hot. Donnie's perfect for me, even if he wasn't such a sweet, gentle soul…" Her smile finally faded a little. "Not so sure I'm perfect for him, though…I've got a long history, another life with a lotta mistakes, an' I'm barely a step away from nympho myself. It's—it's hard waitin' and all…but Donnie's—he's probably never had another woman willing to let him do what comes naturally…I'm worried I'll push him too far and he'll regret it, or figure out just what a farkin' mess I really am…an' decide he wants somethin' better."

"Clearly he's pretty distracting," April finally stated when Amber fell silent doctoring the two cups of coffee. "That big cup's for him, right? Ya poured in enough sugar to send him headlong into diabetes—he takes his coffee—"

"I know," Amber cut her off with a smirk. "Black, boilin' hot, an' strong enough to bite ya back, I know."

"So why'd you sweeten it?" Amber smiled, chuckling at a memory, and made her way over to the kitchen table to top off April's cup.

"Lemme tell ya somethin', O'Neil…my Da was a heavy drinker—a beer snob who enjoyed his lager too much. At the worst point, he'd plow through half a dozen bottles of his favorite beer a day, every day, and Sam Adams ain't cheap by the case when yer goin' through cases a week." The expense, as a matter of fact, was so stiff they actually had to choose between food and power a few times during the worst of it…and Douglas O'Brien, at the time, was unemployed again and tired of looking for work in a town with next to no work to be done. "Mum eventually got sick'a his drinkin' bankruptin' us, told'im the store didn't sell it anymore, an' started buyin' him some nasty cheap crap she knew he hated. Lo'n'behold,~ he cut it down to a case every other week, sometimes even longer than that."
Her tale over, Amber shot April a sly grin. "I can be pretty ditzy and weird at times, Hon, but I'm not blind—I've seen Donnie slam back his usual coffee in one go without ever comin' up fer air, then a lil' while after, it's worn off an'e needs more, an' later that night he's either still hopped up on caffeine or he has heartburn from all the acid. Anytime I sweeten'is coffee, though, he sips it as slowly as possible out of avoidance—the caffeine absorbs better, he doesn't need as much as often, an'e sleeps better that night."

"Huh." April considered the big purple coffee cup thoughtfully. "I…never thought of it that way. He hates it so much he makes it last?"

"Drags it out like a kid takin' medicine," Amber confirmed with a big grin. "It worked fer Da, too, fer a while…then'e found out my uncle Bart sold his favorite beer from the tap at his pub, an' Da started drinkin' at the bar instead'a alone. It did get'im out'a the house more an'e wound up findin' new work a while after that but Mum never did let Bart live that down, bless'is heart." She laughed, shrugged, and grinned at the memory of her short pudgy mother shrieking at her much taller and skinnier younger brother, seemingly intent on turning Bart's already white hair grey. "I can't stop Donnie from gettin' his own coffee, but at least if I bring'im coffee, I know he'll go easy on it…not like he can just pop into the corner coffee shop for espresso, right?"

It was meant to come out a tease, but the reminder made both women solemn instead. Fortunately, at that point, the toaster finally popped up the two poptarts and Amber hurried to transfer them to a plate, then the plate and mugs to a plastic tray from the counter. "You do know we'll have breakfast later, right?" April pointed out as Amber turned to leave. "Once everyone's up, Mikey usually goes all out with pancakes, omelets, and the works." Amber blushed at some inner thought—a deceptively innocent one, but in her gutter-brain, it seemed perverse.

"Yeah," she admitted sheepishly, "this is kinda our thing, though. Every Saturday mornin', I bring'im poptarts an' coffee a hummin'bird~ wouldn't drink, then watch'im pretend to enjoy the coffee and steal bites of his pastries on the sly." She shrugged at the silliness; April laughed, shook her head at her, and gestured for her to 'get goin' already.'

One moment, Donatello was blissfully lost in a familiar dreamscape—a tall half-bald knob of a hill strewn with unfamiliar wildflowers and surrounded by mist in the hollers below it, and though he was curiously alone, an even more familiar crazy quilt spread out in the tall grass. The next moment, the bitter perfume of coffee stirred him from his sleep. In the very next, a cold draft at his waistline and a suspicious tug there tore him the rest of the way to consciousness. His shorts were being tugged down.

Going from half-asleep to fully alert and defensive in a split second, he lashed out for the hand at his waistband and gripped the wrist tightly in warning. Stunned silent by his sudden waking and reflexive movements, Amber crouched beside him on the lumpy mattress, her eyes wide. A closer look revealed to him that she'd only pulled away the sheet and snagged a loose thread on his waistband—she wasn't intending on pantsing* him in his sleep—and he carefully released her wrist, carefully checking for any sign he might have hurt her. All through his apologetic inspection of each sinew, tendon, bone, and joint, she just silently watched him, clearly confused by his reaction.

"Jumpy, much?" she asked curiously as he released her hand, but her face fell when he self-consciously hitched his boxers back up on his waist, making sure they covered everything. "Donnie, what's—"

"I'm just not ready for that," he cut her off reaching instead to collect her coffee cup from the bedstand and pass it to her. "Please don't push it. Good morning, by the way."
"Good…morning…" Amber stared at him blankly, scrutinizing his behavior and body language, stunned at what she was seeing. He was afraid of something…and she had a feeling she knew what. "Ya know," she remarked blandly returning her mug to the bedstand without ever taking a sip, "disregardin' the fact that you falsely assumed I was stripping you in your sleep without prior permission, you've already seen all'a me…if you were any other guy, I'd'a~ woken ya up with head before ya ever offered the same."

Instead of striking a positive chord in him, though, the admission clearly horrified him; as his throat worked to swallow back his nervousness, Amber realized he was genuinely afraid of something, and determined to soothe that fear. "Donnie, I care 'bout'cha—I accept ya as-is, warts'an' all—even if ya somehow had farkin' tentacles or a five-foot elephant trunk in yer trousers, I'd still feel the same." The visual predictably made him cringe. "It's the man that matters," she insisted more gently. "His package ain't that important—it's just somethin' to help us drive each other insane, nothin' we ain't already got plenty of."

"Why is this an issue?" Donnie asked seriously, grumpy from the sudden wake-up and frustrated by both his own fears and her determination to love him despite them. "Can't you just accept I'm not ready to show myself? Is it really so horrible to want to stay clothed a little longer?"

"Yer the one who woke up freakin' out because I tried pullin' a loose string off yer boxers," she reminded shutting him down entirely. "Yer helpin' me fight my fears, Donnie, an' my fears're a helluva lot more ridiculous than yer nads. If you're afraid to open up, let me help—give me a chance to prove that fear's misplaced! If yer freaked out by the oral bit, whatever, that's fine, some guys get squeamish about it an' that's their choice—I won't do anythin' yer uncomfortable with, just—just stop shuttin' me out every time I reach for your pants!"

The silence stretched uncomfortably between them, one considering her words and the other waiting for him to make his move. Finally, he crumbled…he confessed. "I'm…Amber, I'm not like what you're used to," he admitted in a huffing sigh. "My brothers and I aren't like human guys down there, we're really…really different…"

"Hawd it, ya numpty,"~ she drawled at him. "I'm a gutter-brained sexoholic who hasn't gotten laid since farkin' 2011, an' I've had unregulated internet access—I've probably deleted more questionable search history than you've ever accrued…I know what turtle junk looks like."

"We're not regular turtles, either, Amber Jean," he argued meeting her eyes sternly. "We were mutated as hatchlings—dosed with mutagenic ooze laced with human DNA! We're not human down there, and we're not fully terrapin, either—we're a really awkward combination and it's—it's just…" He was finally opening up, albeit only a little, and it encouraged Amber to do what she did best—provoke him into spilling the rest by making things awkward.

"What, have ya got a twat, too?" she asked sarcastically. "Two dicks? A shell instead'a foreskin? Maybe yer spunk's- radioactive?" Before she could spit out another intentionally off-the-wall and vulgar suggestion, she accomplished her aim—he finally just blurted it out.

"A normal turtle's genitals retract into their tail when not in use," he snapped but his fire faded into embarrassment and he couldn't meet her eyes. "My brothers and I wear pants for a reason, Amber…we…we can't retract anymore, not since we were kids…we kept growing, but our tails stopped growing when we hit puberty. We're lucky none of us wound up stuck in them because it would've meant…" He shuddered. "...amputation. Some human males go through something similar with their foreskin—Phimosis, the foreskin gets too tight or stops growing and can't be retracted without injury or removal. Well, we're stuck with the opposite—we can't retract into our tails anymore, so
everything's just...kinda..." He trailed off, sure he was turning beet red with embarrassment.

"Left danglin' like us mammal-types' junk?" She shrugged. "Ya can't tie it in a knot, can ya? Big whup."

"No, smartass," he grumbled, then admitted, "Yeah, it's just—just there...there're a few differences, too, but..." Her arched brow and unimpressed expression spurred him on to finish the explanation, again quickly turning to stare at the bedspread instead of her. "We're...well, if we were regular turtles and our proportions were the same, we'd be too under-developed to ever successfully breed, much less attract a mate."

"Regular turtles can get pretty big I've heard," Amber commented with a visible shudder. "If you're small for turtles, that's actually a good thing. Compared to human males, though..." She glanced pointedly at his crotch and shrugged. "Compared to the average human male, yer obviously hung like a horse, but us human women don't lay eggs—we push fully formed babies out of our twats, sometimes in double-digit poundage without too much fuss. Well, not compared to someone gettin' ripped apart from the inside by an alien or somethin' but you've got the idea—fannys~ can take a beatin' an' still work." He gave a nervous laugh.

"Yeah...uh...I mentioned we still have our tails, right?" He glanced furtively up at her then just as quickly looked away. "And we don't really have...external testicles—they're internal." Another glance revealed her reaction—a 'Meh' shrug, of all things, and he finally began to wonder if he really was overblowing the whole thing a little. "We—normally we all keep tucked up under our plastrons for protection—they're only fully fused down to about the waist, and there's enough room to tuck in if we're not...not fully erect. It hurts to stay tucked when you're not flaccid...and still hurts getting kicked in the groin."

Amber waited to see if he had any more confessions—anymore supposed dirty secrets he wanted to air out, then finally, asked, "So that's it? That's what you've been hiding yerself over—what you've been freakin' out over every time I suggest returnin' the favor?" He nodded an awkward yes, unable to meet her eyes. She was sure he was secretly projecting his own fears onto her—silently convincing himself she really was as horrified as he thought she would be—and frankly, after so long of that happening, it irritated her. Normally, she had to sugar-coat things like this with Donnie...this time, though, sugar-coating wouldn't do him any favors. She'd tried many times before to help him realize she wouldn't judge him for being different, but it never worked...this time, she needed to go where she'd never gone before.

"Dee, you're so hung up on thinkin' I'm gonna be weirded out by you, but I'm not—aren't you weirded out by my nads?" Stunned, he finally met her eyes, and she launched into what might possibly be her most vulgar and awkward rant ever. "Genitals are weird in any species—human genitals are weird, too, Dee, an' there's a lot that can go wrong with'em. You know I wasn't a nun—you know I had several partners in my last life and lemme tell ya, I saw some friggin' nightmares in'em. One ex had no shaft, just a glorified clit, but he gave great head. Another one had a hole in one side—he pissed straight and sideways an' always left it fer me find on the wall then blamed the cat—I didn't even have a cat! An' don't even get me started about that ninny who found a tick on his left nut an' fainted like a girl."

Donnie blinked at her, his only response, so she ramped it up a notch. "Even more often, you've got regular problems. Uncircumcised guys develop some pretty nasty stanky spunk~ under their foreskin that can actually cause cervical cancer.** Humans got hair down there, too, an' it can get stuck in some pretty weird an' painful places. If ya keep it short, it's easier, but too short an' it feels like you're humping broken glass." Nope, still nothing. "An' God forbid yer a ten-second Tammy who pairs up with a two-hour Tommy—once ya get oversensitive, havin' a pair'a balls smackin' ya every
time he moves really hurts!" Finally some response—a slight cringe, not nearly enough to shut her up but it was progress.

"Dicks aside, us female humans have weird bits too, ya know." She shuddered in emphasis. "Twats always smell funny to us no matter how well we clean'em but the guys never really seem to care. There's a delicate balance in there, an' if anything's off, ya can wind up with an infection from it—even havin' too much sugar can make some women prone to yeast infections, an' those're a bugger to get rid of!" Another wince…still not enough, and honestly, she was finally feeling a little less stressed from all the verbal vomit.

"Not to mention periods—ARG! Every month we have to go through the horrors of painfully purging unused placenta, and damn that shite's foul! We get moody an' bitchy, an' guys start actin' like little boys afraid'a cooties! Ya can still screw on your cycle but it's a mess—couples who aren't willin' to put up with the mess an' pain end up goin' without for a week every time, an' more often than not, both parties can still feel frisky despite it! Even if ya don't dive headfirst into Red-Wing Hell, ya can wait until it seems clear—days after any traces of red—only to find out, nope, ya weren't done, after all, an' he looks like he farkin' murdered ya with his nads! That sort'a 'oh shit!' look stays with a person, too!"

Okay…Donnie was looking a little greener than usual and she probably made her point. Belatedly deciding to skip the rest of the horrors, she shot him a deadpan glower. "Y'all think yer junk's weird? Y'ain't seen weird 'til a licensed doctor actually tells ya to stuff yogurt up yer twat if the antibiotics don't work."*** Pointedly ignoring the long awkward, horrified silence she created, Amber snatched her coffee and one of his Poptarts from the bed-stand, took a big bite out of the Poptart, and stared at him, chewing through her I'm so not bluffing stare.

The crickets that might have once filled the silence, she was sure, were all elsewhere now and needing therapy. Just as Donatello opened his mouth to speak, a distant voice rang out below—Mikey hollering that breakfast was ready. Without a word, the couple decided to table the conversation until they were both feeling less grossed out and upset and slouched down to meet the others for breakfast.

"Geez, Bruh!" Mikey piped up the moment he saw Donnie stumble into the room. "What happened? Ya look like yer about to chuck!" Feeling unusually devious—and honestly still pretty irritated at him for assuming she'd judge him over something he had no control over—Amber struck before he could answer. She patted the genius on his arm sympathetically, then turned to April who was digging through the fridge for something.

"Don't suppose we' got any yogurt, do we?" A loud choking sound filled the room and Donnie bolted for the back door; from the sound of it, he barely made it to the trash barrel before he started dry-heaving into it. The pathetic sound kind of made Amber regret the tease…but then again, she was still pretty pissed at him, too. Without saying a word, Amber took a seat at the table and started loading her plate with pancakes and bacon.

"What'd you do?" Mercy demanded with her arms crossed. Amber glared across the table at her.

"Curiosity didn't kill that cat—satisfaction turned it into street-pizza."

Donatello didn't return to the kitchen after his dramatic retreat, or show up for lunch; as day turned to dusk, he was still missing. Long after the plates were cleared away and as the horizon began to dim and grey, Amber sat slumped over on the brass-framed bed staring at his big purple coffee mug and the other Poptart—still untouched—and ruminating. It was obvious even to her that she went too far in making her point—it was even more obvious now, that she probably made things a whole lot...
worse. Even if she hadn't totally screwed up, she regretted that she'd actually made the genius physically ill with her overload of TMI and that after even hearing about people pairing him up with his brothers was met with just a cringe and "Well, that's gross." The overload of dirty facts she dumped on him was worse than garbage…and she felt worse than even that for having dumped them on him, even out of hope it would help him realize he wasn't quite so weird compared to her species. On top of all that, she spilled unpleasant details about past partners—even though her previous relationships were kept out of discussion because they made him intimidated—and even though she intended only to help, she probably made him wonder if she'd someday spill details about his junk to someone else, too! She'd never spoken before of such details to any partner, but he couldn't know that…and it shamed her.

One thing was certain: Amber needed to apologize…but to apologize to him, she had to find him first, and no one had seen hide or hair of him since he bolted out of the kitchen. Amber had searched all over for him but to no avail, worried sick he might really be hurt or missing…only one place was left untouched, and that was the one she had intentionally avoided. Donnie was so excited to show her the barn's loft yesterday, but now…just inviting herself up there now might be incredibly unwelcome. Checking her other options and finding none, she turned to the second, untouched poptart, still waiting for him. Finally, steeling her resolve, she snatched up the pastry and the mug and stormed down to the kitchen, paused long enough to toast the other packet of poptarts, dump out the coffee, rinse his cup, and pour him fresh. Sure she was about to make yet another monumental mistake, she slipped out the back door and headed to the barn.

It took some coaxing to convince her to mount the rickety steps to the loft—more out of embarrassment and shame than fear—but when she reached the top, sure enough, she found her quarry. Silent, still, slumped over at a massive metal desk and staring down a foot-and-a-half-high stack of empty noodle cups, the topmost crammed full of empty food wrappers, he didn't give any sign of noticing her even though the door stood wide open. "So that's how ya skipped lunch after missin' breakfast," she mumbled without greeting him or taking the last step up.

"I tend to get pretty involved in my work out here," he admitted blandly, still not looking at her. "I keep a stash of easy food and drinks on hand just in case…it didn't last as long as I hoped." They fell silent again, both lost in their thoughts and trying to find a way to get past the elephant in the room.

"Uh...ya never got your poptarts or coffee this mornin'," she reminded him awkwardly. "I brought'em up...an' some fresh coffee...it's unsweetened." The elephant in the room seemed intent on smacking the stuffing out of her, so she backed a couple steps downward and set the cup and plate on the floor. "I'll just leave'em here for you."

"Or you could just bring it over instead of running off like I'm going vomit on you." She looked up again, this time finding herself eye to eye with him…and to her absolute confusion, he almost seemed like he was teasing her like she so often teased him. "Please?" That word got her brain working again. She cleared her throat awkwardly, bent to retrieve the dishes again, and carefully made her way up the rest of the steps and over to set them on the desk before him. He glanced casually down at the plate, registering that the untouched poptart from that morning was joined by two more freshly toasted, and he met her eyes again with an arched eyebrow.

"Those were for tomorrow...figured you'd need'em more now." He reached out to the mug, gave it a suspicious sniff, then took a tentative sip and cringed.

"You didn't sweeten it?"

"You don't like sweet coffee," Amber acknowledged softly, refusing to meet his eyes. "If it's sweet, you don't guzzle it...I just figured you shouldn't have to suffer the sugar this time." His expression
perplexing, he shoved the mug back toward her, dug through his apparent 'snack drawer' for a pile of little white packets, and dropped them on the table next to it in a silent hint.

"Every Saturday," he reminded her with a faint smile. "Every Saturday since the day we first brought you home, you've always brought me Poptarts and too-sweet coffee, even when we were at odds...is one incident really worth ruining that record?"

"But you don't—"

"It's grown on me, Braids." He shrugged, giving the pile of packets another hinting nudge toward her. "Humor me—dump all those in the coffee, please?" Was this—was this some sick way for him to get back at her? He did tend to get passive aggressive when he was angry, but this didn't seem passive-aggressive...it was just weird...but...he did say please... As requested, she dutifully shook down and tore open each packet, and one by one dumped their contents in the coffee cup. When she reached the last one, Donnie snagged a plastic spoon from the snack drawer, stirred the cup, and raised it to his lips for another sip. "That's better," he remarked. "Completely disgusting and completely perfect."

"Have you been drinking?" Amber finally demanded visually comparing the dilation of his pupils and sniffing the air for any trace of alcohol or drugs, or anything that might be making him act so oddly.

"Just my too-sweet coffee," he answered with a shrug. "I'm not sick, either, and I'm not under any influences."

"Then why're you being so farkin'—nice to me?!" This demand was almost spat at him, but it carried an undertone of hurt. "I can take it, Dee—ya don't have to butter me up before ya bawl me out!"~

"I'm not being nice to you, Amber," he insisted softly even as she shook her head in denial. "I'm just..." He heaved a sigh, dug his fingertips into the back of his neck, and tried to find words that weren't coming.

"I'm sorry, dammit!" she snapped, turning away so he wouldn't her watering eyes. "Ah'm~ sorry fer—fer dumpin' all'a that—"

"Don't apologize for telling me what you did," he cut her off sharply, and the sudden appearance of the tone she'd been expecting startled her. "I would've figured it out on my own anyway, and some of it I already knew...I just didn't realize you were so—so—"

"Oot ma nut?"~ Amber supplied over-emphasizing the unfamiliar pronunciation sarcastically.

"...hurt," Donnie corrected softly, reaching out to lay a hesitant hand on her back. "I didn't even think about how you might feel about my fear of our differences—or how it made you feel when I kept pushing you away then blamed something that never even entered your head. You're not a judgmental person, Hon, and I know as surely as I know my own name that you'd never judge me lacking for being different...that you'd never do the same thing others did to you as a kid."

"That was different," she insisted sourly. "That was human beings judging another human being for talkin' funny, actin' odd, an' not fittin' into their preconceived notions'a normal, not—"

"It's not different." He bodily turned her back to him. "I'm only partly human, granted, but all this time, I've been convinced I was Amber and you were the townsfolk—I assumed you'd be horrified by so many things that just make me who I am—my eyes, my tastes in music, my attraction to you—" He shook his head and gave a humorless laugh. "This was just one more incident of assuming you'd
react with disgust rather than acceptance, even though you'd never given me any sign you'd do so… you finally told me about your world, about the ugly truths you tried so hard to keep from me, and I told you not to assume you know how I'll react…as if I haven't been doing the same thing to you this whole time."

He turned to stare at the mug of coffee, scowling weakly. "I've been a hypocrite and you called me on it. Don't apologize for that, Braids. If you really want to be sorry for something, be sorry for being so bloody patient with me, for not calling me on it sooner, and for taking responsibility for the whole mess when half of this 'pooch' was mine." Amber had to snort at that.

"I'm usually pretty adept at screwin' the pooch all on my own," she admitted with a dry laugh. "Sharin' one's a new experience…any clue who had the end with teeth? Cuz they might need a rabies shot." Cringing at the mental image, Donnie threw one more demand at her.

"Who cares? Don't forget to apologize for eating my poptart, either, you pastry-thief." She shot him a 'seriously?' expression and he shrugged. "What? You know blueberry's my favorite…and you forgot to sweeten the coffee, too."

"Well, sah-ree~ fer yer poptart," Amber teased sarcastically. "An' you'll regret the coffee bit—next time I'll dump the whole shaker jar in it instead'a just half!" Finally, sensing that the air was cleared between them, he held his arms open for her and waved the reluctant brunette over; a breath later, he pulled her down to perch on his knee like so often before, holding her close and petting her hair, and nuzzling her scalp contentedly. "Is this where you turn into some weird Freddy Kreuger creepoid an' cut off my face in retaliation?"

"Nah," he teased. "This is where I admit I was an idiot for assuming you wouldn't do your research before you moved in with me…and that you were right…humans are the weird ones." His eyes grew a little more solemn, and he seemed to work himself up to something; the hand not cradling her to him lifted to her cheek, his knuckles brushing along her jaw then teasing the corner of her lips back up into a smile. "It's…it's also when I say I'm…ready to—to let you prove what I should have already known…and ask if you're…uh…ready for that, too."

Surely he wasn't…no, he…no way! No matter how she turned the statement in her head, though, she still came up with the same answer. "You're—yer ready to move on? To let me—"

"You lay yourself bare to my scrutiny without hesitation," he reminded quietly, "and I'm ready to lay myself bare to yours, now. Whatever you choose to do when that happens, I'll go with it." Floored, Amber realized there really was no possible way to misconstrue those words again.

"Eh…ya mean…when we get home? Or…um…"

"Unless you'd rather wait, not really…I'd…I'd rather not have someone else in earshot this time," he admitted catching up her wrist and studying the unbroken skin pointedly, and she winced. For weeks after the first time let me take care of you was actually physically followed by taking care of her sexual needs, Amber's wrist bore a dark, distinctive bruise pattern from her own teeth…At the time, it was too hot to wear long sleeves and the rest of the family picked up on the significance pretty quickly when Amber suddenly started wearing Lefty's bandana around her wrist. Even now, while the general catcalling and teasing from the others was over, Mercy still sometimes teased her about it when she knew no one else was listening. Best friends really could make life a living hell…but boy it was worth it!

"After what happened last time," Amber admitted with a sheepish smile, "it's probably best
we don't wait for an audience. I just—I just don't wanna rush ya, Dee, I waited a—" Callused fingertips on her lips silenced her, but he still smiled fondly.  

"I know, Honey," he reminded gently. "You waited a lifetime for me and you'd wait as long as you had to if it meant keeping me…but we've done that dance long enough by now—you're going to keep me even if you don't wait anymore, and frankly, haven't I made you wait long enough?" His eyes dropped to her lips and the fingertips on them traced them thoughtfully. "Aren't you ready to quit waiting for me to catch up and start dragging me along with you instead?" He gave her a nervous smile, and she reached up to entangle the fingers still at her lips, stealing the smile from his with a kiss. She was ready—more than ready.  

Everything was well again between them…everything would be alright…finally content that she didn't ruin everything, Amber let herself fall into her old habit of teasing Donnie. Running her hands over his bare plastron and trailing her lips along his neck to the sensitive spot where his pulse raced, she turned to straddle his lap instead of perch on his knee. She could feel the truth pressed up against her groin—he wanted her, there was no denying what his body told hers—and she suddenly dipped one hand down between them to cup his swelling groin.

"Gantin' fer a lay,~ are we?" she teased trailing her lips over to his again as he sighed and arched into her touch, then halted to brush them across his skin just below the cartilage shielding his inner ears. "Me, too, my sweet speccy," she whispered against his skin. "I've been wantin' ta git those breeks~ off'a yer backside ever since we met…even before then, if I'm honest with meself." When she sat back to take in his expression, she saw only eagerness, affection, and naked desire.

Donnie's eyes darted across the loft to the far wall, where an old bifold futon sofa was tucked up under the low pitch of the roof, already lying flat like a bed after his nap earlier. This glance was Amber's only warning before the world turned topsy-turvy; a moment later, she found herself inexplicably relocated across the room onto the mattress, still undisturbed in his lap. "Ninja?" she asked for lack of a better way to ask what just happened.

"You know it," he teased, then urged her out of his lap. Clearly intent on approaching the unveiling of the uglies like ripping off a band-aid, he shakily reached down to his fly to fumble with the zipper. Gentle hands stilled him, pulled his hands away from his pants and guided them instead to her hips.

"Relax, Sweets," she urged crawling back into his lap again and pushing him onto his carapace in the musty sheets. "You can rush lust, but ya can't rush love-makin'—'til I met ya, it was always just scratchin' an itch, but as long as I've been yours, it's always been more about feedin' the burn." Her right hand trailed across his plastron seeking out the faint thudding of his heart, and she guided his opposite hand up to her own heartbeat. Before he could ask for clarification, she came down to meet him, brushing her lips over his. "Itches go away in time and it's not so tough gettin' rid of'em…but fire won't go out until it's given no other choice—until it's smothered from mistreatment or until it's left you a pile of cinders…any scratchin' will just fan the flames, an' every bit'a contact will make the heat rise." She saw it in his eyes the moment he finally figured out the meaning behind her riddle, her words between the words—his eyes widened, misted over, and he drove his other hand up into her hair, urging her back down to meet his lips.

"Amber," he whispered against her lips between brushes and nips, relishing the ever-increasing cloud of pheromones enticing him. "My sweet—precious—confusing little Celt…burn with me?"

"Always."
time only two articles remained—her simple grey cotton briefs and his sensible black boxers—both felt lightyears away from the way they were when they first sprawled across the futon's mattress. Amber didn't rush him—she first explored him through his boxers, then when he was ready to tear them off himself, she slipped her hand past the hem, acquainting herself with skin on skin if not revealing that skin.

When she finally peeled the garment away, the chill of the air startled a gasp from his lungs—a gasp she quickly stole away with her lips secretly allowing herself her first real look at him. For a moment, she felt worry—worry and intimidation, and concern that he might actually be big enough to do her some lasting damage if he wasn't careful—but she silenced that fear and gave it to the goosebumps-parading up and down her skin. Donnie was always careful with her—he'd never be reckless with her—fear had no place in any bed they shared. One thing was certain, though...she'd never manage to get her mouth fully around him past the head, not with her small jaw and harsh overbite...somehow, though, that realization excited more than worried her.

When she first began backing away from his lips, first started easing herself down toward his feet, Donatello followed every inch of the way, not ready to relinquish her lips. Ultimately he wound up leaning back on his elbows, looking down at the perplexing woman sprawling between his spread thighs, watching in both fear and anticipation as she acquainted herself with the secrets bared to her. Long, steady strokes of soft fingers—eager breaths teasing his sensitive, overheated skin—when finally he felt the first tentative lap of her tongue on his head, it felt his more intelligent head combusted from the shock. Before he could do more than register the cold air again, that wet warmth returned tenfold—lips stretched around his head, her always sharp tongue soft and teasing at the pronounced dip in his glans. A guttural, raspy moan ripped from his lungs, rattling at the end from another of his secret oddities—the churr he'd always managed to at least mostly suppress by holding his breath. The little minx responsible clearly took it as an encouragement, though, and she quickly repeated the teasing movement, again and again, intent on provoking more.

Time slowed even further—slurred into an endless jumble of suckling lips, teasing tongue, hands tangled in hair, tail coiling around fingers and their partners squeezing his shaft, pleased, hungry whimpers and whines against his over-sensitive skin, hoarse moans and rattling churrs—the next point of reference came as a warning twinge that was almost painful. The genius shuddered, one hand clutching in the musty sheet and the other falling from Amber's hair to grip her shoulder. "Get up here," he ordered hoarsely. "Please, Honey, c'mere!"

"Are—" She didn't get time to finish the statement, finding herself instead hauled up to his chest and bodily turned toward his feet. Relief rushed through her at the frantic hands yanking away her underwear and fingertips digging into her soft, full hips. He wasn't trying to rush their first time...he was just so lost in her he wanted to return the favor. Normally, he eased her into their encounters, tempted her with soft, teasing licks and kisses before he really started ramping her up...however, he normally wasn't being driven insane by the same torture. Amber's legs turned to jelly as her lover hauled her down to his mouth and threw himself straight into sucking, nipping, and digging his nails into her hips and rear. It was all she could do to take up her own end of the torture again—all she could do to keep from digging her teeth into his sensitive skin when his near-constant groans and churrs sent electric jolts straight from her clit up her spine.

"Your—your scent," he explained hoarsely as he dug both his fingers into her channel without preparation. The first time, it hurt to take both thick fingers at once even when he went slowly—now, there was no pain, not even from his rough strokes and finger-flicks. "You're driving me insane, Honey..." Amber reluctantly let his head slip from her lips to answer.

"Turnabout's fair play," she teased tugging at his tail. "Now ya see what you've been doin' to me this whole time."
"I don't see it," Donnie admitted palming her hip as she returned to eagerly sucking his head—the only bit she could really get past her teeth. "I've smelled it, though—smelled you for months now—you're killing me, Braids." Though she didn't release him to say so, the brunette had to agree with him...he was killing her, too.

The tides turned in the blink of an eye—it was too strong to hold back, came too fast to do more than yank her mouth off of him before she gritted her teeth too hard—searing fire spread from the lips still working her clit all throughout Amber's body, from her curling toes to her gasping lungs and tearing eyes. Tense, sensitized, shuddering and alternatively clenching and slackening, she cried out for him—whined his name in a voice that went straight to Donnie's groin. Before he could even manage a warning, the world fell down for him, too—exploded in a shower of light, heat, and fire that nearly blinded him.

By the time his rattling churrs were fading into sated moans and his wet leavings were cooling on his thighs, he finally came back to himself again only to find his teeth sunk into a soft, fleshy cheek. Amber was still panting above him, slumping down against his front, but said nothing. Silently chastising himself for losing control enough to bite her—an evolutionary hangover he hadn't expected but probably should have—Donatello carefully pried his still-clenched jaw loose and his teeth out of her skin; by some miracle, it seemed, she wasn't bleeding, but the teeth marks imprinted in her skin were sure to bruise pretty badly. No sooner was she freed, she stumbled off of him and slumped to the mattress beside him, too tired to favor her surely stinging rump.

"You bit...my arse," she muttered breathlessly and gave her head a weak shake. She didn't seem too upset, though, to Donnie's befuddlement; maybe she wasn't surprised?

"You bit me first," he argued, blushing and embarrassed, but he didn't really feel the shame he thought he should. Of course, the slight closing of her teeth around his head stung, but it wasn't liable to leave any marks. Amber gave a tired chuckle.

"What can I say?" she slurred reaching over to feebly pat his bare thigh. "Yer damn good at that.

Despite having already been driven to exhaustion, the very mention was enough to trigger another wave of pheromones—or was the air in the loft just not clearing up? Either way, the non-scent drew Donnie all over again, and before he even had the energy to contemplate ignoring it, he found himself crawling between her legs again and hefting her chunky thighs over his shoulders.

"You've gotta be—" the tease fell short in a surprised cry and her hands found their way to his scalp. "Oh, jeez, Dee, yer insatiable! Ya really like that, don'cha?"~ He didn't answer her, just chuckled against her wet lips, grinning smugly at how the vibrations made her jolt and moan. Amber was sure this was his way of saying, 'you know it'.

When the loud, shrill beeping first started echoing through the farmhouse's living room, Leonardo was bewildered and couldn't think of any possible source. That changed when he set aside his book and went to check the smoke detectors, only to find the weather radio sitting on the end table going ballistic. Surprised to see it there instead of glued to Amber's hip, Leo approached and switched the dial from 'alerts' to 'weather band,' turning the volume down to hear the forecast warning.

"A possibility of Severe weather has been forecast for this area starting Monday evening," the automated report stated in a canned, robotic tone. "Expected hazards include high winds, severe thunderstorms, and damaging hail. Mild to moderate damage may occur to vehicles and buildings. This is a radar-indicated threat, and—"

The creak of the kitchen's screen door opening startled the ninja into action; he shut off the broadcast station and turned the radio around so whoever came in wouldn't see the flashing red alert light on
the front. Sure enough, Amber and Donatello strode into the room, attached at the hip and positively *reeking* of one another. Leo, horrified, was sure he knew what happened out in the barn… but at least he didn't have to hear it in the room over his. Upon seeing him in the living room witnessing their walk of shame, Amber turned beet red and tried to hide behind the taller mutant; Donnie gave his brother a sheepish smile and wave. Leo responded with an awkward, forced smile and glanced pointedly at the stairs.

"Main bathroom's open," he remarked pointedly. "You know where the towels are." The abashed couple mumbled their thanks and hurried upstairs to get cleaned up. In their wake, Leo cringed and turned back to his book, trying to convince himself he didn't just run into his brother and that brother's girlfriend reeking of sex. At least, he had to admit, they'd be returning home the next afternoon, and the couple tended to be more behaved at home.

Dinner was just like any other dinner the odd family shared—Mercy and Raphael flirted outrageously to annoy the rest, Mikey talked almost non-stop, Leo shot his brothers reprimanding looks over lapses in manners, and everyone ate far more than they should have. The only unusual occurrence was Amber repeatedly squirming and shifting in her seat as though favoring a sore buttock. Leo refused to contemplate the reason, after having run into the guilty couple earlier, and pointedly ignored her blushing and the creaking of her chair. Unfortunately, someone didn't get the message.

"You okay, Sis?" Michelangelo asked after yet another loud creak; in her embarrassment, the brunette dropped her fork onto her plate with a loud clatter and tried to cover up her embarrassment by taking a long swig of water. Red-faced with embarrassment, she nodded in answer and tried to focus on her casserole. Misinterpreting her reaction, Mikey turned a glare on Donnie, completely missing the brainy turtle's horrified expression. "Bruh, I *told ya* you need'a *bug-bomb* that loft," the youngest scolded. "Somethin' probably *bit her*!"

Amber choked on her water and started hacking it back out of her lungs; though he'd normally assist by whacking her on the back, Donnie just stared at his brother in silent horror. "We don't need Sis turnin' into *Spider-Dudette* over some *radioactive* spider bite from your *mad-sciency* stuff out there," Mikey continued uncontested despite Leo kicking him under the table. "That kinda stuff never works out well, even in comics!" Still coughing and beating her chest, Amber screeched her chair back from the table and rushed out of the room before she embarrassed herself further.

Mercy glared at her friend's retreating back. She recalled the suspicious tooth-marks on Amber's wrist not too long ago…and she suspected this was another such incident. Grinning slyly, she hollered out the door at the fleeing woman, "Didja at least *bite it back*?" A gruff curse rang out on the stairs in reply, and Mercy noticed that Donnie was practically purple in the face; she silently interpreted this as a 'yeah, she *did*.' Meanwhile, Mikey continued on in his tangent about radioactive spider-bites being a menace to public safety and started listing off the first signs of having been bitten by a radioactive spider. Leo wouldn't look at anyone and he seemed to have lost his appetite.

Mercy turned to Raph, glanced pointedly at the mortified genius and Amber's empty chair, then shot her boyfriend a suggestive eyebrow waggle. Raph, easily following her train of thought, cringed in disgust and elbowed her in the side. Supposedly oblivious to the tension filling the room and not connecting the dots for himself, Mikey continued his rant unhindered.

At least, Leo considered as he stared down his half-empty plate, Amber and Donnie were stinking up the barn's loft this time instead of the pantry.
- Lo'n'behold – Lo and behold
- Hummin'bird – *Hummingbird*. The joke is that hummingbirds drink necter which is mostly sugar, but Amber makes Donnie's coffee so sweet even a hummingbird wouldn't touch it. ;)
- I'd'a – I would have
- About'cha – About you
- Hawd it, ya numpty – Scottish slang, *hawd it* – stop that/hold it, *numpty* - lovable idiot, denotes affection and teasing.
- Fanny / Fannys – Scottish slang for either *female genitals* or *a person's backside*; Amber usually uses it with the first meaning.
- Spunk – Can refer to just about any substance involved with genitals, be it semen, smegma, etc, but is most often used for unpleasant-smelling substances and fluids. Amber's getting pretty vulgar here, lol.
- Buttering up / Bawling out – slang, *being overly nice to soften something unpleasant or to get your way* / verbally lecturing someone over doing something wrong, usually at *top volume*. Both are commonly seen as excessive.
- Ah'm – Scottish dialect pronunciation of *I'm*
- Oot ma nut – Scottish slang *out of my head* or rather *gone crazy*, or *being ridiculous*.
- Sah-ree – Smartassed exaggeration of *'sorry*, used in sarcasm and generally the *sah* is drawn out over several extra syllables.
- Gantt'fer a lay – *Gantin' –* Scottish slang for yearning for/begging for sex and *lay* – general slang for sex.
- Breeks – Scottish slang for *pants*
- Don'cha – Don't you

**GENERAL RULES**

- Adding 'e or 'is to the end of a word – means *he* or *his*
- Adding 'er to the end of a word – means *her*
- Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word – means *them* or *their*
- Adding 'a to the end of a word – means *of*, *have*, or *to*, depending on the rest of the sentence. You can generally figure out which one with little difficulty just by considering which word the 'a is added to and the rest of the phrase. (IE, "sort'a" - sort of, "should'a" - should have, and "wanna" - want to."
- Adding 'n to the end of a word - means *and*, as in Rock'n Roll.
- Words ending with –*in’– This word ends with –*ing* but has been shortened to portray accent.
- With Casey/Raph: *Da* / words beginning with *d*- – Generally, non-Bay Casey pronounces *th*- words as *d*- instead. Specific examples include *da* – the and *dere* – there.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm sure some of y'all are confused or irritated that I didn't have Amber confess her feelings for Donnie in those exact words, but I have my reasons. Consensual, healthy sex of any color causes a spike in endorphins and dopamine and it tends to make
it easier to confess your love for your partner...unfortunately, it's the same even if you DON'T love said partner, and pillow-confessions aren't a reliable indicator of feelings for most people. IMO, if you haven't told someone you love them BEFORE you're both naked, you shouldn't tell them until AFTER the chemical warfare in your brain has calmed down. Amber's not just being difficult, she's trying to make sure Donnie has no reason to doubt her feelings.

Also, a note regarding coffee in case it slipped anyone. This chapter spells out what's been alluded to previously and in Gallery of Memories - Donnie doesn't like sweetened coffee. "What?" you demand, "What about that scene in chapter 26 when he ran into Amber skyping with Doc Morris - Donnie sweetened his coffee! What gives?! Plthole! Plthole! Boo! Hiss!" Sorry, Kiddos, that wasn't a plthole. :) The unspoken: after Amber got into the habit of bringing him too-sweet coffee, he started associating sweet coffee with her, and thus, the times when they were still getting along. Outwardly he's still putting on a front and refusing to budge but inwardly, he's sick of fighting just like she is, and sweetening his coffee for sentimental purposes is proof. Rant over. ;D

NOTES

*Pantsing someone – Generally done as a prank, it means yanking someone's pants down in public without warning or permission, especially if the person doing the yanking runs off while cackling like an idiot. Donnie's being a little sarcastic there.

**Smegma – This 'nasty stanky spunk' naturally develops under the foreskin with uncircumcised males, and there has been a connection between it and HPV/cervical cancer in women AND some studies have suggested it might also cause cancer of the mouth and throat if it comes in contact with them. Smegma smells absolutely foul, is completely impossible to prevent and difficult to completely clean out, and the best way to prevent it is to get clipped. So many people raise a fuss over circumcision on account of it being 'mutilation' and 'primarily for aesthetic purposes' but they never consider the health benefits. Not to mention couples are less likely to pass yeast and bacterial infections back and forth despite all care if the male is clipped—foreskin can, indeed, be a health risk.

***Regarding yogurt, sugar, and infections – A lot of times, it's easy to mistake a bacterial infection for a yeast infection and vice-versa. If you start taking antibiotics for a bacterial infection and it actually gets worse, it probably means you actually had a yeast infection, the antibiotics worked TOO well and you've got an over-abundance of yeast, or they didn't work well enough and the infection has gotten worse…and gross as it sounds, unsweetened, unflavored yogurt with active cultures can actually help a bacterial infection in a pinch. Also, some women can go years or even decades without a yeast infection but some can't even go a month between them. A lot of times when a woman is incredibly prone to recurring yeast infections, it turns out she's diabetic or for some reason passing excess sugar, because sugar encourages yeast growth. If you're fighting recurring yeast infections without any obvious medical reason why (and your partner isn't unclipped) you may need to start getting your blood sugars tested when you've come up with another infection.

Knobs and hollers – it's been mentioned before, but just in case anyone's forgotten, this is a geological feature of the landscape in far Southeastern Missouri and the southern-most portions of the Missouri Ozarks—in brief reminder, knobs and hollers are tall hills full of native rock and the deep valleys between said hills, and fog tends to form and collect in the hollers. Bald knobs are rocky hills devoid of trees or significant vegetation at the top, aside from grasses and low-lying plants, while a half-bald knob might have a
few small trees or some brush or shrubs.
48: Did I Have a Dream, or Did the Dream Have Me?

Chapter Summary

Mercy faces the music; Abby makes her do a double-take. Amber dreams of home. Are the dreams fiction or reality? Donnie has no answers and Amber refuses to ask the question. Disaster seems poised to strike again.

Chapter Notes

Things are starting to heat up again! Later on in this chapter, I will warn ya, there's a rough patch language-wise because it features Glen Devon. As always, these rough spots have been translated at the end, so please be patient with them and me. Also, a quick note - the end of this chapter may come across as a cliffhanger but I promise, it's not meant to be one. This chapter dedicated to Wolf - keep your chin up, Girl, Cold and I are rootin' for ya! Also, we're one review away from hitting 100 reviews - I've had to freeze Gallery of Memories installments (partly out of intention to focus on the main storyline and partly because I've completely run dry on workable one-shot ideas) but whomever posts the 100th review will get the next chapter dedicated to them! Lastly, I don't recall if I've ever mentioned it before, but if anyone ever has any prompts or ideas for Gallery of Memories installments, feel free to send them my way! I've written at least one previous installment based on a prompt, and sending one in is a great way to ensure you see what you want in that story AND getting that chapter dedicated to ya!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Suggested Listening: Sick Puppies "Maybe," Evanescence "Bring Me to Life," The Rasmus "Night After Night (Out of the Shadows)"

48: Did I Have a Dream, or Did the Dream Have Me?

September 29th, Red Fern Florist's

Open the door. Just open the door, Mercy, it's not that hard. Quit bein' such a pussy an' open the door! Despite her silent self-encouragement—or, rather, berating—Mercy still stood just outside Red Fern's glass door, hesitating, second-guessing herself. It seemed, in that moment, that everything in her new life led to this moment, this place, and this one inescapable fear—fear of confronting the past she never lived—and the question of how to finalize her ownership of this new life without completely tossing Donna Mays aside. After all, despite all the mistakes Donna made, Mercy owed her new body to her—owed her for all the growing that new body was making her do. Already, she was a stronger person for having to work through Donna's addiction and struggles, and the other-worlder was sure she would only continue to grow.

Mercy would never tell Amber, but in her eyes, the brunette had it easy, if only in one way—her new body's previous occupant already had all her documentation in order, already changed her name
before she died—Amber O'Brien was in a new body, true, but at least that new body officially shared her name. Mercy didn't have that sort of luck...she was an addict, still too skinny for her own tastes, and she couldn't quite adapt to the differences in Donna's body and the body Mercy was born to. Worse yet, that body had no documentation after Donna's years of living on the streets, and getting new paperwork was a chore and a half, much less getting her name officially changed. Now, though, the red tape and bureaucratic bullshit were over with—she was once again Angela Mercy Ross in spirit and in name—but she still had one massive hurdle to jump.

The last time she went to Red Fern Florist's, she found out the hard way that her body's previous owner had a history with the store. Donna worked at the store, was close to the family who owned it, and until she went off the deep end, destroyed her life, and burned every bridge she had, that family always had her back. Fast forward a few months, Mercy obliviously showed up at the store never realizing what drew her there, and had no idea that Abilene Whitaker knew her in the slightest.

The last time Mercy saw Abby, the blonde other-worlder heard something she wasn't ready for—she ran, fled the awkward tense situation and didn't go back. Now, a full month later, she stood right outside the florist shop, one hand clenched painfully on the door handle, torn between facing the music and running as far from the problem as she could. No matter how long she stood there, though, one thing was absolutely certain: some things you just couldn't run from, and she knew this was one of them.

Running would rob her of a friend she never knew she needed—someone else who'd fought their own addiction and conquered it and someone who could understand what she was going through. Sure, Abby couldn't understand what it was like being stuck in a world that wasn't her own—she couldn't understand why heavy storms made her skittish or why she couldn't talk about the people she lived with—she couldn't gossip with Abby about the man in her life, the mutant she fell head over heels for, if only because the other woman wouldn't understand.

There was a lot she couldn't tell Abby...but at least Mercy didn't have to worry about the petite clerk reeking of alcohol and triggering the cravings that disgusted her. No matter how considerate Amber was and no matter how much she tried to support Mercy through her addiction recovery, Amber never realized that drinking around Mercy made it harder for her. If Mercy ever asked Amber to stop drinking around her, she was sure it would hurt the brunette and make her feel horrible...and that was the last thing she wanted. Besides, the cravings weren't quite so bad anymore. She could handle the stench of Amber's Scotch, Daron's Bourbon, and even Beverly's wine—she could even handle tasting them on Raphael's lips and tongue without triggering cravings—but every now and then she just needed someone who could understand her troubles. Abby was in Mercy's boat—she was a recovering alcoholic but had been clean much longer; she understood the struggles Mercy was going through.

By the time she realized she'd made her decision, the bell above the door was jingling and her feet were crossing the heavy black mat inside the doorway. A head of fuchsia and electric blue hair popped up over the counter, the hazel eyes beneath it focused on her, and the owner winced. "Hey," Abilene Whitaker greeted quietly ducking back under the counter to return to her task.

"Hi," Mercy replied awkwardly, inching around the counter to see what was going on. From the looks of it, a box ripped and scattered rolls of receipt paper everywhere; right in the thick of the mess, Abby knelt on the memory foam mat collecting and coiling up the paper rolls and returning them to the taped up box. Without bothering to offer, Mercy dropped to her knees as well and began assisting with the cleanup. For a while, neither spoke, but Abby repeatedly shot furtive glances up at the silent blonde who took it upon herself to help her.

"You haven't been by for a while," the petite clerk finally pointed out.
"Yeah," Mercy admitted softly, her brows knitting as she fought not to lose her nerve completely. "I just...I needed some time, Abs." She finally looked up and met Abby's eyes, her own apologetic. "Sorry fer runnin' off on ya like that...I never knew Donna—I mean I—had a history with this place...it kinda threw me off."

"You say 'Donna' like she's not you," Abby remarked quietly, studying Mercy's eyes and posture for clues. "You do know you're Donna...right?" Mercy sighed, carefully coiling up another strung out roll of paper.

"I remember nothin' of my previous life, Abby." She met the younger woman's eyes seriously. "The paperwork says I'm Donna—the people I've met say I'm Donna—even the hospital's records say I'm Donna—but I recall nothin' about being Donna, I don't remember anything before wakin' up under that bridge on New Year's Eve." Mercy cringed at the reminder and the pity in Abby's eyes and turned back to the roll of paper in her hands. "Every day, it seems, I learn more about the person I supposedly was...an' every day, I can't stand that person even more. I'm not who I once was an' I'll never be that person again." She met Abby's eyes again, nervous, and glanced from one to the other, searching for any sign of comprehension. "I'm Mercy now, Abs—Mercy Ross—an' the chapter of my life I don't remember is officially closed."

Abby held the shared gaze, her lip trembling in what Mercy was sure was an attempt not to cry. Finally, she roughly scooped up the last rolls of paper and shoved them into the box without bothering to straighten them up, then lunged to her feet to shove it back under the counter again. "So this is it, huh?" she asked gruffly with no small amount of bitterness. "You burned your bridges once before, and now you're burning them all over again."

"I'm not burnin' anything," Mercy corrected seriously as she stood up, "I'm just straightening my life out...sometimes in order to move on, ya gotta clear away what holds ya back. Donna holds me back, Abs, an' if I haven't gotten her—my memories back by now, I'm not likely to ever get'em back." The blonde fell silent, sharply reminding herself to keep a clear head—Abby couldn't know she was an entirely different person—she wouldn't believe her. Honestly, Mercy sometimes found it hard to believe it herself, and she was living with it every day! Every day, she woke up in this strange new world, and every time she looked in the mirror, the eyes of a stranger stared back at her, still, she knew in her heart this was no dream. She took in a deep, steadying breath, then finally asked what she came to ask. "Abby, have ya managed to fill that part-time position?"

"I'm not burnin' anything,"Mercy corrected seriously as she stood up, "I'm just straightening my life out...sometimes in order to move on, ya gotta clear away what holds ya back. Donna holds me back, Abs, an' if I haven't gotten her—my memories back by now, I'm not likely to ever get'em back." The blonde fell silent, sharply reminding herself to keep a clear head—Abby couldn't know she was an entirely different person—she wouldn't believe her. Honestly, Mercy sometimes found it hard to believe it herself, and she was living with it every day! Every day, she woke up in this strange new world, and every time she looked in the mirror, the eyes of a stranger stared back at her, still, she knew in her heart this was no dream. She took in a deep, steadying breath, then finally asked what she came to ask. "Abby, have ya managed to fill that part-time position?"

"So you didn't come to say goodbye," she acknowledged in a hushed tone. Mercy shook her head in agreement.

"Naw," the blonde admitted with a wry smile. "I came to see if ya still want me around...I know ya cared about Donna, but she's gone...I'm here now, though, an' if you can learn to see me, Mercy, instead'a Donna, I'd rather stick around." Abby stared her down for a moment, her gaze making Mercy fidgety and nervous.

"You know," she remarked slowly, "I have a cousin on my mother's side who's cut off all communication with the rest of us...he got in a car accident without his seatbelt on and suffered a traumatic brain injury." She watched Mercy closely, her expression completely blank and giving
nothing away. "He coded at one point, but the doctors were able to save him, put him in a medically
induced coma to heal. When he woke up, he was a completely different person—he didn't recognize
any of us, he didn't have any of the habits or quirks we knew him to have, and he thought he was
someone entirely different." Mercy winced, turning to inspect a potted cactus on the counter and
trying to hold her tongue. "His name was Mark and he was a career businessman who'd never lived
anywhere outside Manhattan…but when he woke up, he claimed to be Jacob, a firefighter from
Georgia and a father of three boys. He even spoke with a southern drawl, even though he'd never
had any distinguishable accent before."

"That's…odd," Mercy commented weakly when it became clear Abby wasn't going to continue.

"Yeah," Abby agreed with a pointed stare. "What's just as odd is that Donna spoke like a Bostonian
and was a natural with people…but your speech twangs like a guitar string and you clearly have
some social anxiety going on." CRAP. "My cousin became a stranger when he woke up—kept
insisting he was someone else entirely and that 'Mark was gone,' and eventually, he shut us all out
because we couldn't accept that he wasn't the person we knew and loved anymore."

Mercy hesitated, thought over her words carefully, and finally decided the question was worth the
risk of asking. "Abby, what'd he say about it? What'd he say about the time before he woke up as
someone different? Was it…was it anythin' about clocks?" Abby blinked in stark astonishment.

"Y-Yes!" she answered in an almost-squeak. "He kept going on and on about ticking clocks and the
smell of dusty books…no one ever understood what he meant or where he came up with that." Mercy
cursed inwardly and dug her fingers through her riotous hair. Right before her eyes was proof
that she and Amber weren't the only souls brought to this world for another chance—they weren't the
only ones granted a new lease on life, and they weren't the only ones who kept their memories in that
new body. "Are you telling me…?"

"Ticking clocks," Mercy admitted instead, warily meeting Abby's hazel eyes. "The smell of dust, an'
a strange light that brightened an' dimmed…a light that nearly blinded me, then vanished into pitch
black darkness when I opened my eyes." Abby stumbled over to the counter and leaned against it,
shaking her head in disbelief. Silence choked the room—a tense silence that Mercy was sure would
end in a blood-curdling scream. Instead, it ended with a question that wasn't a question.

"Donna's dead, isn't she?" Mercy couldn't meet Abby's eyes. "She's dead…and somehow you've
been dumped in her body…just like that Jacob person was dumped in my cousin's body."

"Believe me," Mercy muttered wearily, "I can barely believe it myself, but it's—it's true…my best
friend an' I both wound up in the same boat, dead an' brought here for another chance, but we had no
idea it happened to other folks…maybe it's not as uncommon as we thought." Abby shook her head,
still struggling to process the inconceivable explanation. Finally, she turned to dig through the
counter's storage shelves for a stapled sheaf of papers; she held them out to Mercy but didn't let go
when the blonde reached to accept them.

"When did you come, Mercy?" Abby asked seriously. "How long has Donna been gone?"

"I first awoke in this world on New Year's Eve of this year," she admitted nervously. "I had no idea
you were connected to Donna…an' until a few months back, I didn't even know anything about'er
except that she was a homeless alcoholic. If I'd'a known, I'd never'a come here—you didn't deserve
this sort'a—"

"Stuff it, Sweet-Cheeks," Abby cut her off bluntly and finally let go of the papers. "Stay clean—
keep working on your sobriety and stay out of trouble—once you've got all your paperwork in order,
bring that back—fill it out for Mercy, don't put anything of Donna's on it, don't even add her name as
an alias. Donna's gone, so let her stay gone...hearing about her would only hurt Mother more. If you can hack the training and my mother agrees, you've got the job...but you can't tell her about Donna, or any of that. Got it?" Mercy nodded, not even glancing down at the application in her hands.

"Yer takin' this suspiciously well," she remarked blandly, searching Abby's expression for any sign of a broken brain.

"Yeah," the petite clerk admitted with a cringe. "Well, after that alien invasion a few years ago, it takes a lot to freak out a New Yorker. I've seen ya and talked to ya a lot since you first came here, and I'm pretty confident you'd never hurt me. Right?"

"Right," Mercy admitted with a sheepish smile. "Thanks, Abs." Sensing that the discussion was over, she turned to stride out the tall glass door. One foot inside and one on the front stoop, she paused, turning back to smile at the quirky little clerk. "Even if I can't hack the job," she admitted with an anemic smile, "I'll still come by to visit and shop...I don't know what you were to Donna, but I consider you a friend." Before Abby could answer her—to agree or to refute—Mercy burst through the door with renewed energy. She was homeward bound...funny how the word 'home' now conjured concrete walls and hazel eyes rather than faded wood and musty straw.

Maybe this new life wasn't so bad after all.

When Amber left Willsdale behind, Spring was nearly over; now, Winter holds the small town in a familiar death-grip. Ice-laden trees glitter in the dim sunlight and the hills shine with frost. As usual, there is no snow—it almost never snows in Willsdale until late December—but the square has been decked out for Christmas.

The town square melts away in shades of light and shadow, leaving behind another familiar place—a rustic wrap-around porch lined with wind chimes hung from the eaves, worn wooden furniture, and dead plants in decorative planters. Amber shakes her head, smiling wryly. Ginny O'Brien was even worse at caring for plants than her daughter, but she never gave up on trying to keep them alive.

A low creaking noise draws Amber's attention to the far corner. A familiar man sprawls in his favorite rocker, staring out across the fallow field behind the house, all the way to the cemetery. Amber recoils in horror at the sight. Glen Devon has always been a stout, sturdy man who refused to let his advancing age affect him beyond his greying hair and beard. She cannot reconcile the man before her with the man she knew in her past life—this Glen Devon is thin, weary, and weak with shadow-hung eyes and unkempt hair, too weary to do more than rock back and forth in the old rocker. Worst of all, the unseen woman can hear him wheezing...every breath rattles in his lungs, whistling on the way in and rasping on the way out.

"Gran'Da, what're ya doin' out'ere?" Amber demands thickly hurrying over to stand right before him. "Ya'll get sick—ya need'a be inside, y'auld codger, i's frezzing out'ere!"~ As every time before, though, he neither hears nor sees her—she's dead in this world, despite her frequent returns to it, and no one in this world can see or hear the spirit of a dead woman. "Gran'Da, please," Amber pleads brokenly, her eyes burning with unshed tears. "Please, dinnae throw yer life awae o'er me! Dinnae do this to yerself, to Mum an' Da! They need ya, Gran'Da!~

"Da, what're ya doin' out'ere again?"~ The unexpected voice sends a bolt of ice down Amber's spine and she warily turns to greet the new arrival. Her mother...Ginny
O’Brien is lumbering across the porch to her father’s side, armed with a woolen blanket and a heavy coat. The last time Amber dreamed of her mother, Ginny was developing a few traces of yellowish-white in her unruly auburn hair, but now, those traces have become thick streaks. "Yer not even wearin’ a coat, y’auld coot! Yer gonna get sick again!"

"Leave." If Glen's appearance startled his unseen granddaughter, the new raspy weakness of his voice breaks her heart.

"No!" Ginny argues planting her feet and crossing her chubby arms in defiance. "The doctor said you shouldn’t breathe cauld air anymore—you got pneumonia once, and you’ll get it again if you keep breathing cauld air like this! Come inside, Da, fer pity’s sake!"

"Pneumonia?!" Amber demands shrilly. "When'd ya get pneumonia?!" Clearly unaware of her presence, Glen turns to scowl at his daughter.

"Then su be it," he spits. "Leave me, Jennet." Amber flinches at the name—Ginny's birth name, and the name Glen only ever uses when he's about ready to wring her neck. Clearly recognizing the significance, Ginny recoils at the address, but her worry for her father wins out in the end. Visibly steeling herself for the argument about to occur, she storms over to Glen's rocker and reaches out to grasp his thin, bony shoulder. He shrugs her hand off roughly, his murky blue eyes flashing in rage. "I's too late," he insists sharply. "Ye made yer bed, now lie in it!"

"Don’t try’n pin this on me!" Ginny insists, her temper rising. "No one's makin' ya sit out'ere in the cauld like a fool—yer doin' it all on yer own, I'm just tryin’a help ya!"

"Ye pushed yer own daughter awae!"~ Amber shakes her head, recognizing what is going on right before her eyes. In all her years, Glen never confronted Ginny about what she put Amber through—at least not anywhere Amber heard of it—now, it seems nothing holds him back. "Yer own bairn—she wiz yer own daughter, Ginny, an' ye pushed'er awae—cahst'er oo tae!"~ In a rage, Glen bursts up from his chair, staggers when the blood rushes to his feet, and catches himself on the porch rail.

"Da, be care—!"

"Stew it, Ginny!" he barks even as he fights for breath. "This's all yer fault—if ye hadnae driven'er off, Amber wouldnae've been all the wae across toon—she'd stell be arond 'ere—she'd stell be alive!"~ Ginny chokes, her eyes welling up.

"Stop it!!" Amber cries at her unhearing relatives. "Stop this, right now! It was no one's fault, no one but mine!!"

"I…" Ginny sniffles shaking her head. "I never—never meant to—to drive'er off…I just—I just—"

"Meant'er no, ye did drive'er off! If ye hadnae chased'er off, she would've been seefer—she would've called us fer help instead of bidin' wit' the neeburs in the hall like she did—because ye chased'er off, she never called us, never reached out a'tawl—and she died!"~ Ginny backs away from her father, frantically shaking her head in denial; Amber's denials never register to either of them, no matter how loud she screams them.
"An' on tap of all'a tha','"~ Glen snarls at his daughter, "tha' fuss ye kicked up at'er funeral would shan any spirit—Ahmber's surely pure scunnert wit' ya!'"~

Unable to handle any more of it, Ginny bolts across the porch and through the back door, sobbing uncontrollably. Glen only manages to keep his mask of fury in place a moment longer, then heartbreak overwhelms it. Murky blue eyes watering, he feels his way back to the rocker and collapses in it, staring out across the fallow field to the cemetery where Amber is buried. "Ah'rn sorry, Jeanie-Burd,"~ he croaks aloud burying his face in his hands. "Ah should've done tha' years back…I should've stood up fer ye years before now…mibbe…mibbe i's my fault, too, after awl."~

The world is already fading away, falling away in shades of shadow and light, but Amber struggles to remain in the dream if only long enough to pass along a message. She snatches at the rocker intent on urging her grandfather onto his feet, but her hands pass right through it. She reaches for the back door intent on opening it in hint, but she cannot feel the doorknob under her fingers. Raging at her helplessness and the horrific situation her loved ones have built themselves, Amber refuses to surrender to the blackness creeping around the edges of her vision. As the world goes solid black around her, the last thing she sees is her grandfather openly weeping into his hands.

She's dead in this world…the living never hear the demands of the dead.

Soft humming pulled Amber from her sleep—a familiar tune she hadn't heard in a while. Rough cloth scratched her and worn leather straps stuck to her skin. Blinking away tears she didn't recall crying, she pried open her eyes, taking stock of the situation. Tucked in bed, slumped up against the old metal headboard, book sprawled on the covers…she tried waiting up for Donatello and his brothers to return home from patrol, but fell asleep…and dreamed.

Donnie, fresh from patrol and still musky from sweat, held her tucked into his chest, soothingly petting her hair and humming that so-familiar tune.

*Lights will guide you home and ignite your bones, and I will try to fix you.*

In her previous life, it was a favorite of hers that always brought her hope, but she had yet to hear it a single time in this life…at least, she admitted silently, she only ever heard it from Donatello. She still wasn't sure what to make of that; it was just another inconsistency that made her head spin. She sat up against Donnie's plastron, silently trying to banish the nightmare.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly, still petting her hair.

"Yeah," Amber answered hoarsely and scrubbed a frizz of hair out of her eyes. "I' wiz—it was just a nightmare—just another freaky nightmare. How was patrol?" Donnie stared her down, shaking his head.

"Forgettable," he answered dryly, "nothing out of the ordinary. Now what do you mean another freaky nightmare? You were crying out in your sleep, Hon—You woke Mercy and Dad couldn't wake you…You were speaking clearly, too, but I could barely understand you." Amber blushed, avoiding his always intelligent eyes.

"Go figure," she muttered under her breath. "As if it's not bad enough talkin' funny when I'm awake, I've gotta talk funny in my sleep, too. What'd ya hear?" The genius visibly hesitated, but his curiosity won out and he answered.
"Gurahn-Dah," he answered softly, completely butchering the pronunciation of the endearment. "Mum, Dah, and deena threw yer life uh-wee—or something like that…that one was the worst of it." Inside, Amber was horrified; on the outside, she was cringing.

"Ya totally butchered that, ya know?" she pointed out dryly. Donnie shot her a sharp glance.

"My mispronunciation of unfamiliar dialects is not the issue here," he reminded dryly. "You were dreaming about your family—and if your explanation of 'it was just another freaky nightmare' is anything to go by, you've been having these dreams often." The weary brunette settled into his shoulder with a sigh. There was no point in arguing it—she never could hide things from Donnie well, and she'd promised to quit hiding her weaknesses from him.

"Don't throw your life away," she translated in a sigh. "It's ridiculous—they're just weird dreams, dreams don't come true—"

"How often are you dreaming about your family?" Donnie cut her off, urging her to meet his eyes with gentle fingertips at her chin. "What are you dreaming about them?" She started to demand if it even mattered, but fell silent at the worry in his eyes. "Tell me, Braids…don't bottle this up." Amber's eyes watered and she closed them, shaking her head in defeat.

"It started out maybe a couple dreams a month," she admitted, her voice creaking. "Over Summer, it started happening more and more often—several dreams a month, then even a dream or two weekly." She finally met his eyes again. "I'm dreaming about my loved ones almost nightly now, Dee…an' it's always the same thing…they're fallin' apart without me. Aaron's drinkin' too much an' he's given up entirely, Da's drinkin' more an' shuttin' out Mum, Mum's fallin' apart, Gran'da's sick an' blamin' my Mum…" She choked; she'd always been closest to her grandfather, and seeing him struggling, even in dreams, was killing her. "Gran'da blames Mum fer what happened…he's pushin' everyone awae an' spendin' all'is time starin' out at the graveyard…the place I'm…buried…"

The tears she struggled to smother broke free and she buried her face in Donnie's neck with a choked sob. As always, Donnie was her rock, her shelter from the storm; it hurt to see her like this, but he wasn't sure just what he could do to fix the problem. Dreams, after all, weren't his area of expertise… and until recently, he'd have entertained no doubts that dreams were entirely fictional, merely the fanciful constructs of a resting brain. Then he started remembering a series of dreams he still didn't recall dreaming. Long summer nights chasing fireflies with a braided brogue-tongued girl child… lazy Autumn afternoons exploring hills, valleys, and interesting rock formations with a shy brown-haired teenager…best of all were the cool spring nights he dreamt—nights full of rain, wind, and love-making with a fascinating woman he'd fallen for over a lifetime of dreams. Those dreams taught him to love rain…now, he knew that woman in real life, and still saw her in his dreams.

It made no sense to him, it couldn't be explained, but the truth remained: he knew Amber before he ever met her, dreamed of her long before she ever wound up in this world, and for some unknown reason, he mentally blocked out the dreams he was remembering. Every now and then, some uncanny occurrence would make him wonder if she, too, dreamed of him. A mere three days after she burst into his life, she snuck into his room while he was still sleeping and left him a plate of pop tarts and a mug of too-sweet coffee, without ever being told of his fondness for pop tarts. The first time she ordered pizza for the family, she ordered him a thin crust with chicken and extra mushrooms and onions—his favorite—without ever asking his preference. Every day brought another incident that made him wonder if she, too, dreamt of him, but every day, he convinced himself against the possibility. After all, it was odd enough that he dreamed of her before he met her; for her to have dreamt of him as well was pushing it.

"Why do you do that?" Her unexpected question startled him back to himself; he never even realized
"Hm? Oh…I guess it's just a subconscious thing," he admitted with a sheepish smile at the calming woman finally emerging from his neck. "Master used to sing to us when we were afraid as children, then when we started growing up and getting embarrassed, he started humming instead." He gave a self-deprecating laugh and easy shrug. "Kids think they're so tough, pretending they aren't scared of the monster in the closet even with their knees rattling from fear. At least humming was more discreet…even if he only knew lullabies and soap opera theme songs."

"Heh. Dahd sure loves'is soaps, huh?" Amber's smile was small and forced.

"Yeah." Donnie urged her closer into his shoulder, smoothing his palm soothingly up and down her side. "I'm still not sure where I heard that song, but it fits—the meaning remains the same, no matter where it came from. I promised to protect you, to help you, to fix you, and I don't break my promises."

Amber fell silent again, ruminating into his neck. "They're just dreams, Dunnie," she reminded him solemnly. "…just ridiculous, fictional, entirely unrealistic dreams. My family…" She scoffed, shaking her head at the thought. "They wouldn't fall apart like this—they're too strong to let something like my death destroy them…it's just my imagination, that's all."

"But what if it's not?" the genius pressed her. "What if what you're seeing isn't—"

"It can't be true," she insisted weakly. "I refuse to contemplate the possibility…because if—if what I'm seeing is really happening..." Haunted grey-green eyes met his, brimming again. "…there's nothin' I can do about it. I can't go back to my old world…I can't go back there, not even to help my loved ones…The dead don't rise again, no matter how much their loved ones cry on their graves."

He wanted to argue the point—wanted to remind her that she rose again, if only in another world—but eventually decided to withhold that reminder for the time being. Instead, he settled back against the headboard, clumsily peeling away as much of his equipment as he could without making her move. By the time he was through, she was already asleep again, tucked into his side and pillowing her head on his plastron. Her eyes darted rapidly behind her eyelids, her breaths short and quick—clearly she was already dreaming again, and this dream was no more pleasant than the last.

Dreams were only fiction—fanciful constructs of a tired mind—weren't they? Donatello silently studied the sleeping other-worlder in his arms. For her sake, he hoped they weren't real…the alternative was too painful to even consider.

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Wind moans through the barren trees. Fog hangs heavy in the air, all the way from the valley floor up to the tops of the surrounding hills. In the distance, Donatello can hear crying—heartfelt sobs and hiccupping gasps that twist his gut into a pretzel. He scans his surroundings warily, searching for the source—there, a familiar woman kneels before an unfamiliar and solitary grave in the lowest point of the holler. "Braids, what're—"

"Tha's me doon thar,"~ Amber whimpers thickly without looking away from the sagging soil atop the grave—her grave. "Ah'm buried 'ere—Ma family needs me, but Ah'm buried 'ere! Ah cannae help'em—they cannae e'en see me! "~

As though called by her distress, four figures manifest around her—a tall, lean man with grey hair and grey-blue eyes, a short, tubby woman with frizzy auburn hair and bottle-green eyes, a massive, broad-shouldered older man with pale blue eyes and
mostly greyed hair, and a young man who seemed a rougher, sturdier clone of Daron Williams with off-kilter blue eyes. Not even noticing Amber kneeling at her own grave, the four people come together at the site and start yelling at one another. Amber begs them to stop, pleads for them to rely on one another instead of pushing one another away, but they never hear a word. Distraught with her helplessness, Amber turns to Donnie, her eyes streaming without notice.

"Dunnie…help me…please, help me!"

**WORDS in order of occurrence**

(Scotched/Brogued, Midwestern Twang/slang/dialect)

~ I'd'a – I would have
~ Never'a – Never have
~ Out'ere – Out here
~ Ya'll get sick—ya need'a be inside, y'auld codger, i's frezzing out'ere! – You'll get sick—you need to be inside, you old codger, it's freezing out here! (Codger - Basically 'crotchety old person')
~ Please, dinnae throw yer life awae o'er me! Dinnae do this to yerself, to Mum an' Da! – Please, don't throw your life away over me! Don't do this to yourself, to Mom and Dad!
~ Da, what're ya doin' out'ere again? Yer not even wearin' a coat, y'auld coot! – Dad, what are you doing out here again? You're not even wearing a coat, you old coot!
~ Cauld – cold
~ Then su be it. – Then so be it.
~ I's too late—Ye made yer bed, now lie in it! – It's too late—you made your bed, now lie in it!
~ Don't try'n pin this on me! No one's makin' ya sit out'ere in the cauld like a fool —yer doin' it all on yer own, I'm just tryin'a help ya! – Don't try and pin this on me! (blame me for this) No one is making you sit out here in the cold like a fool—you're doing it all on your own, I'm just trying to help you!
~ Ye pushed yer own daughter awae! Yer own bairn—she wiz yer own daughter, Ginny, an' ye pushed'er awae—cast'er oot all because she wouldnae fit the mold ye wan'ed'er tae! – You pushed your own daughter away! Your own child—she was your own daughter, Ginny, and you pushed her away—cast her out all because she wouldn't fit the mold you wanted her to! (Bairn – young child)
~ Stew it, Ginny! This's all yer fault—if ye hadnae driven'er aff, Amber wouldnae've been all the wae across toon—she'd stell be aroun'd'er—she'd stell be alive!" - Stow it, Ginny! This is all your fault—if you hadn't driven her off, Amber wouldn't have been all the way across town—she'd still be around here—she'd still be alive! (Toon – taken from tooners meaning 'people who live in the city – roughly means 'city'.)
~ "Meant'er no', ye DID drive'er aff! If ye hadnae chased'er aff, she would've been seerer—she would've called us fer help instead of bidin' wit' the neeburs in the hall like she did—because ye chased'er aff, she never called us, never reached out a'tawl—and she DIED! – Whether you meant it or not, you DID drive her off! If you hadn't chased her off, she would have been safer—she would have called us for help instead of staying with the neighbors in the Town Hall like she did—because you chased her off, she never called us, never reached out at all—and she DIED! (Bide –
Stay or live)

—An' on tap of all'a tha', tha' fuss ye kicked up at'er funeral would Shan any spirit
—Ahmber's surely pure scunnert wit' ya! – And on top of all that, that fuss you
kicked up at her funeral would shame any spirit—Amber's surely disgusted with you!
(Shan – shame, usually used as 'that's a shame.' Pure - Scottish slang for 'very' or
'totally,' often followed by dead. Scunnert – disgusted, related to scunner, an oath that
can be used in pain, anger, or disgust.)

—"Ah'm sorry, Jeanie-Burd…Ah should've done tha' years back…I should've
stood up fer ye years before now…mibbe…mibbe i's my fault, too, after awl. – I'm
sorry, Jeanie-Burd…I should have done that years ago…I should have stood up for you
years before now…maybe…maybe it's my fault, too, after all.
—An'e's – And he has
—Awae – Away

~ Tha's me doon thar! Ah'm buried'ere—Ma family need me, but Ah'm
buried'ere! Ah cannae help'em—thay cannae e'en see me!' – That's me down there!
I'm buried here—my family need me, but I'm buried here! I can't help them—they can't
even see me!

Chapter End Notes

Title from Rush's song "Nocturne," from their album Vapor Trails.
* "Fix You" by Coldplay.
Chapter Summary

Amber's dreams are becoming more alarming; Donnie is worrying about her more. Another freaky dream leads to an overdue confession, then we get a glimpse into their not-so-distant past. Meanwhile, Leo comes to the realization that there is still much he doesn't know about Beverly, and Bev teases him mercilessly.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update, y'all...and even more, sorry for the upcoming drama you'll be seeing in the next few chapters. It's gonna hurt...ALMOST as much as the continuous headache I had for going on three weeks. (Hopefully that'll calm down now that I've hacked off almost all my hair again. Went from waist-length to chin length, so that's a lot of weight to lose with it.) Anyway, hope you enjoy the chapter (filler-ness aside...) and look forward to hearing from ya! As promised, this chapter dedicated to AmelessUnderworld for posting the 100th review on this story! Thanks, Hon! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Helluva lot of Suggested Listening: My Chemical Romance "The Light Behind Your Eyes," Plumb "Don't Deserve You," The Beatles "In My Life," We are Harlot "Someday," The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus "Your Guardian Angel"

49: The Only Constant is Change

Wednesday, October 26th

Date: 11.9.2016

Time: 17:45:05

A. O'Brien had a restless night, woke hourly from night terrors, and could not bring herself to discuss them. Over the past 5.5 weeks, she has experienced a drastic increase in symptoms, including several that were previously improving. 57% increase in night terrors and nightmares. 49% increase in panic attacks. 74% increase in intrusive memories and flashbacks. 60% increase in anxiety and depression, and 74% increase in survivors' guilt-related symptoms. At this time, there has been no increase in alcohol or caffeine consumption, but she has been experiencing increased fatigue due to nightly dreams of the world she left behind.

Donatello stared down at Amber's chart silently, contemplating the words before him in resignation.
Many years had passed since he last felt so useless—so helpless—and it wasn't a feeling he liked reliving. A faint whimper at the darkened end of the lab drew his attention. The exhausted woman tucked into the Lab's spare cot thrashed in her sleep, mumbling incoherently at what was surely another dream of her loved ones falling apart.

She was already sleeping poorly to start with, thanks to all the caffeine and anxiety. Now, she was lucky to get an hour or two between nightmares of the world she left behind. Donnie's eyes softened in regret, taking in the weariness evident in his lover's sleeping face; only 5:45 in the afternoon and Amber was already so exhausted she didn't even have the energy to argue when he insisted she take a nap. If she were anyone else, this mightn't have been cause for worry, but Amber was stubborn at heart when it came to her own well-being. It was something they had in common, but like her, he was a bit overprotective of those he cared for—he'd rather tick her off than let her drive herself into the ground.

"Aar'n," the sleeping brunette muttered thickly, thrashing back and forth as though fighting something her ninja lover couldn't see. "No—no, gi'way—com'way fra ther—com'way a'reddy!~" Without hesitation, Donnie abandoned her chart for the moment and crept over to the cot, gently brushing her hair out of her face and trying to soothe her. The sleeping brunette latched onto him for dear life, still arguing in sleep-thick words with someone she left behind. In all his life, Donatello had rarely felt more useless than he did at that moment.

He could protect Amber from herself, but how could he protect her from her dreams? How could she conquer her fears when those fears were so closely tied to her lost loved ones—loved ones she would never see again? No matter how he searched and scoured, the silence had no answers.

'Wilson's Creek' has run through the heart of Willsdale since before the town even came to be. Never more than waist deep during the dry seasons and remarkably clean, the 'crick' always been a favorite for local youth wanting to cool off in the summer heat.

It is not summer…it's late winter in Willsdale and Wilson's Creek is a death trap. After a short rainy autumn and even rainier early winter, the creek is at its deepest, nearly six feet deep in places. Ice covers the surface of the water, but a scant half-inch below the surface, the water is still running, sluggish and barely above freezing. Every local with half a brain knows to stay away from the creek in Wintertime—knows that the muddy banks freeze and grow slippery and that the slightest pressure would cause the ice to shatter and send everything atop it into the swollen and freezing waters. Many a life have been claimed by the creek in the winter time, and many are those who've chosen that route out of despair.

Knowing all this only worries Amber more...after all, Aaron Willis has no reason to be out on the banks of Wilson's Creek in winter, much less alone. The woods around the creek is silent, still, and the blond's halfhearted mumblings seem loud in the silence. "I've been tryin', Amber," he admits aloud staring into the murky green water below the ice. "I swear, I' been tryin'...it just—it ain't gettin' any better...it's jus' gettin' worse." He reaches up to his overgrown and unkempt blonde curls and harshly ruffles them, heaving a sigh. "I lost you...I lost Ross...you two were—were everythin' to me...how can I keep going on like this?"

"You have to try, Willis," Amber urges softly, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder but flinching when her hand just passes right through it. "Please...ya gotta keep goin' on—ya gotta keep livin' without us!"

"Yer Mom says it's my fault, ya know," he adds without any sign he heard her...
all, he can't hear her. "She says I should'a kept a closer eye on ya—that I should never'a let ya out'a my sight, should'a made ya go home to'er—"

"Mum's full'a shite, Willis," Amber snaps trying with everything she has to get her hands on something, anything, just to show him she's there. "Don't listen to'er—My death wasn't yer fault, it was all mine." Her fingers pass through another slimy rock, and she huffs in frustration.

"Sometimes...sometimes I feel you," Aaron admits weakly, drawing his knees up to his chest. "Sometimes it's like I can hear you—can feel your presence or the way you used to smack me upside the head when I talked shit." What she'd give to be able to smack him upside the head now... "Are you still here? Are you really here with me, or am I—am I losin' it?"

Amber turns to unleash another reprimand he won't hear but freezes...his eyes, bright blue and never trained on the same target, are swollen, red, and brimming with tears she knows he'd never have cried before. Old salt stains trail down his unshaven cheeks and vanish into his coarse reddish winter beard. No...Aaron Willis wouldn't...surely he... No matter how she argues it with herself, she knows the truth. He lost both his best friends—both his partners in crime—and as if that wasn't enough, he may even have lost his home in the same storm that destroyed hers. This Aaron is nothing like any other she ever saw before because he has suffered more than the Aaron she knew ever did. He's depressed, heartbroken, lost, and unpredictable...The Aaron she knew would never lose himself so completely that he'd never find his way out.

The only ones who go to Wilson's Creek in the winter time go there because they don't want to leave. Now, Aaron Willis, heartbroken and desperate, stares down into the murky water below the thin ice, his bloodshot eyes resigned and his knuckles white on his legs. Amber protests—pleads for him to see sense—fails about trying to get her hands on anything to prove her presence and fails every time. As the world fades into stabbing shades of black and grey, Aaron slowly stands, reluctantly shuffling away from the half-frozen river. He is safe...but for how long will he remain so?

The living never hear the demands of the dead...the dead can never defend the living, not even from themselves.

By the time Amber realized where the screaming was coming from, she was already tucked into Donnie's arms and sobbing into his shoulder. It took a while before she could fight off the tears—before she could get out a single word that wasn't a sob—but finally, she managed. He didn't ask what happened—this wasn't a new situation, after all—instead, he did everything else he could. He held her, shushed her, petted her mussed hair and rubbed her back, and whispered promises that she knew he couldn't keep. He couldn't make this better, no matter how he tried...nothing could make it better.

"Are you alright now?" he asked softly when it became clear she couldn't speak. "Is there anything I can do to help?" Amber's eyes burned, and she shook her head.

"No," she admitted hoarsely, "I'm not alright...and there's nothing anyone can do." The genius struggled to swallow back his helplessness, fought back his despair at the emptiness of his lover's eyes. He heard the name she woke up screaming—heard plain and clear that she was dreaming about Aaron Willis again and saw just as plainly how torn apart she was by the dream. If this dream was like so many others of late, he was sure Aaron was falling apart, perhaps even in danger. What hurt
was that Amber wouldn't tell him about it—she never really confessed her dreams about Aaron, only
the ones about her family, and though he was sure it was nothing, Donnie wondered what that could
mean. She met him less than a year ago…but she grew up with Aaron Willis. A lifetime was plenty
of time to fall in love with someone…

"There's no burnin' there." The unexpected statement startled Donnie back to himself, and he found
Amber staring him down seriously.

"Pardon?" She scoffed at his confusion, gingerly reaching up to cup his cheek; he reached up to
cover her hand with his own, searching her eyes for answers.

"Aaron and I are friends," she explained seriously, 'nearly family…he an' Mercy an' I were almost
inseparable…now he's all alone…he never did well with bein' alone. I love'im, Dee, jus' like I love
Mercy, an' Mikey, an' Leo, an' Dahd…" She wrinkled her nose. "…maybe even Raph…jury's still
out, I might just wanna hit'im."

"You love my family and your friends," Donnie repeated slowly but decided to leave his question
unasked. She was a mess right now…she didn't need to be pushed. After all, he'd never told her as
much in words, either…she'd tell him when she was ready…

"A-Are…are you..." He shook his head, forcing a swallow and trying not to get his hopes up.
Finally, after weeks of being tormented by near-constant dreams and disasters, Amber smiled—
granted, it was a small, crooked smile and her eyes were watering, but it was a smile nonetheless.

"Donatello, ya silly braw speccy,"~ she teased gently. "Do ya really think I'd be so stubborn about
ya if I didn't love ya? If I didn't, I wouldn't be here—I wouldn't be tryin' so hard to do this right…"
She winced, turning to stare down at the rumpled sheets and releasing his cheek. "I told ya before,"
she reminded, ashamed, "I made some mistakes in my other life. I had a lotta exes, an' I didn't really
love any of'em—it was just physical, emotions were a deal-breaker from the start…when your heart's
already taken but yer hormones drive ya crazy, you can make some pretty big mistakes." She
nervously met his eyes again, seeming to consider her words and carefully arrange them before she
spoke them. "You're worth takin' it slow…sometimes I wonder if ya grew out'a spores like a
mushroom, but yer everythin' to me…I love ya, Donnie."

Grew from spores like a mushroom?!! The phrase stunned him and his teeth clacked shut in surprise.
Granted, it sounded like just another of her odd, off-the-wall teases—they both had many equally
ridiculous teases and nicknames for one another after all—but something about the phrase sounded
familiar. He was sure she'd never said that since she arrived in January…but something about the
words tickled from the litany of forgotten—then remembered—dreams about her. Instead of
acknowledging the coincidence, though, he bent to steal her lips in a slow, tender kiss, forcing away
the realization until he could more closely examine it.

"Te quoque amo, Dearest."

"No? Perhaps ti amo anch'io?"~ A sly grin tugged at the corners of his lips at her complete and absolute befuddlement. "Je t'aime aussi?* Watashi mo anata o aishitemasu?*"

"English, Donnie," Amber grumbled, "or so help me, I'll start spittin' Gran'Da's Gaelic at ya so fast
ya'll spin…bloody smart-arsed polyglot." He wasn't intimidated—she already confessed once before
that her memory of Gaelic was spotty at best and her grammar obnoxiously flawed. Content that he'd
sufficiently teased her for the time being, he laughed low in his chest, bending to rub noses with her.

"I love you, too, Amber O'Brien...my crazy little Celt."

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**Another time, in a world that isn't really a world**

"It's jus' sex, Dee," the tired woman insists bitterly, her tired eyes still trained somewhere beyond the fog filling the valleys below. On the other side of their favorite worn crazy quilt, Donatello stares out across the misty hollers as well, his every sense trained instead on the confusing woman beside him. "If'e ain't you, love ain't got nothin' to do with it—it's just scratchin' an itch, nothin' more."

"I don't like it, Amber," Donatello admits quietly, studying her askance. When they first met, they were children—barely old enough to have lost all their baby teeth—now he is twenty-five but Amber has been visibly aging faster than him. She is in her early thirties, half-crippled, mostly greyed, and for the last few years, beyond curvy and into obese... she is tired, broken, seemingly little like the child he met long ago in these strange shared dreams of theirs...but his feelings remain unchanged...he loves her just as she loves him, for who she is not what she is.

Still, he can't be there with her outside this strange dream world. He was the one to push her to find someone else, anyway—someone who could be there for her more than in dreams. He loves her, she loves him, but what good is love you can't act on outside dreams? "Did you even give him a chance? What happened with this one, anyway?" he asks seriously, no longer pretending to admire the scenery. "Matt, wasn't it?"

"Mort," she corrects sourly, "He asked me to marry'im. No warnin', bought a big-ass man-ring, told all'is buddies we were gettin'hitched, then'e dragged me to the cemetery an' took a knee in front'a 'his mama's grave.'" Donnie blinks in surprise, but that surprise becomes a cringe at the last sentence. "His mama's name wasn't 'Bubba Brown.'"

"Well, that's weird," he remarks dryly. Maybe losing this one wasn't such a bad idea.

"He's weird," she corrects sarcastically. "I told'im from the start emotions were a deal-breaker, but'e was sure I didn't mean it 'cuz I'm female. Apparently, anythin' with a uterus can't know what they mean 'til someone tells'em what they mean. Who'd'a thought?" Donnie face-palms at the sarcastic revelation; yep, this one was better dumped than kept, if only because Donnie couldn't kick his ass for being a pig. "D'I~tell ya he thinks he's a werewolf an'e hatched out an egg?"

"Hey—I hatched out of an egg!" he counters in mock-offense instead of remarking on Mort's obvious psychotic delusions. "Mammalist!"

"Aw, here I thought ya grew from spores like a mushroom," she teases, but her face quickly grows serious. "I love ya, Dee," she reminds him solemnly, "an' I ain't settlin' fer no one else...it's one thing to scratch an itch but I won't marry anyone I don't love, anyone who can't set my heart on fire like you do...I just..." She sighs, turning back to the misty valleys below. "I just wish we could someday get past this—that somehow we could really be together, not just in dreams, but in real life."

"I wish, too, Braids." The genius wraps one long, lean arm around her back and pulls her into his side, nuzzling nose-first into her coconut-scented hair. At one time, he
wasn't crazy about the sickly-sweet smell of coconut; now, anytime he encounters the fragrance, it reminds him of her. "Maybe it'll happen someday," he suggests with a small smile. "New York was invaded by an alien warmonger last Halloween, so maybe there's hope yet...?" Hesitant grey-green eyes drift up to meet his.

"What if you've forgotten me, though?" she asks weakly. "What if—God, what if we've forgotten each other when that happens?"

"If that happens, then we'll have a chance to do everything all over again." he points out cupping her full, round jaw and brushing his thumb along a spattering of freckles along her cheekbone, then ducks down to brush a tender kiss on her still-parted lips. "How about this...if either of us forgets, the other can remind them, can share something we would never tell anyone else as proof. Hm?" Amber hesitates, unsure of how such a thing could work. "Let's see...what would work..."

He thinks it over hard for a moment, scrounging his memory for something so absolutely horrifying he'd never willingly share it with anyone, and finally comes up with a viable option. "You know my brothers and I were all assigned a specific weapon based on our strengths, weaknesses, and temperaments, right? Raph was assigned the sai, Leo was assigned the swords, and Mikey was assigned the nunchaku...but I was the only one of the family assigned a single weapon instead of a pair." Amber blinks in surprise, clearly wondering how she never realized that before. "We didn't start serious training until we were about nine or ten, but Dad started us on light training years before. Originally, he thought I'd be a better fit for Tonfa, another weapon used in pairs...First time I used them in practice, I gave myself a concussion. Every time after that, I continually managed to injure myself with them." An embarrassed giggle-snort bursts up through his throat and SHNERKS out his nose. "That's how we figured out I have hyperopia and can't see an inch in front of my face without glasses."

A pregnant pause stretches between them, and finally, he works up the nerve to look over at Amber; she's smiling but not even looking at him. "For what it's worth," she points out, "far-sighted or not, your eyes are marvelous..." She glances up at him, her smile widening to show a few poorly-aligned upper teeth. "Besides—I'm near-sighted, you're far-sighted—even if we both lose our glasses at the same time, we're set so long's we're together, right?" Her smile fades and she turns back to the distant horizon—dusk is falling over the hills and hollers around them, and shades of grey and lavender streak across the dimming skies.

"You know I don't exactly hide embarrassing stuff like that," she reminds seriously. "Gran'Da taught me if ya get caught with yer barn door open, it's better to tell'em 'go catch the cows' than get embarrassed.** I don't have any embarrassing moments I can share that I can swear no one else'll ever hear of...there's only one thing I know that might work...somethin' I've never told anyone, not even my Gran'Da, an' honestly planned to take to my grave." She leans closer into his side, subconsciously reaching down to rub her right knee, remembering. "I've told you about the accident—about the drunk kid who clipped me with a van...but I didn't tell ya 'bout Clayton Gregory."

"Clayton...Gregory?" Amber nods, her eyes weary.

"I wasn't the only one that guy hit...I was just the one who survived it. Clayton Gregory was a business student in his last year—he came from a pretty poor family an' got in on scholarship—we dated a few times but nothin' came of it, obviously." She pauses, collecting herself. "I was walkin' home after a shift at the campus library an' wasn't
payin' enough attention—the van clipped me, sent me flyin' a ways—I survived, but with permanent damage to my knees, spine, an' some other fun shite. It wasn't 'til I got out'a the hospital that I found out the driver hit someone else first—Clayton..." She chokes up, shaking her head and shuddering. "He never saw it comin'...never even made it to the hospital. A bright kid like him, with so much promise, an' a complete mess like me... an' I'm the one who drew the long straw."

Donnie isn't sure what to say. Finally, he settles for "You never told anyone?" Amber shakes her head.

"I knew the driver, Dunnie," she admits in an almost whisper. "He was a spoiled rich kid an' my most frequent challenger in that runnin' 'outdrink the crazy Celt' bet... challenged me almost weekly an' I drank'im under the table every time. I never even considered he might'a had a drinkin' problem or that'e might'a been drivin' home afterward...I must'a made three hundred bucks off'a him the last time, but when I found out about Clayton, I couldn't keep it—I had someone get it to'is parents for the funeral."

Haunted eyes meet Donnie's. "I held that challenge to keep the cabinets stocked with somethin' other'n noodles, but if I ever thought it would'a hurt someone, I'd'a been happier starvin' an' livin' in a box. No, I never told anyone...they already pity me too much, and if they knew about this, it would only get worse."

All around the hills and hollers stars wink into view as the sky goes dark. The couple on the hilltop soak in the cooling breezes, each wondering what to say and each finally coming to the same conclusion. Silence can be sweeter than the sweetest conversation if only it is shared with the right person...after the painful confession before, this silence they share is the sweetest yet.

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**Brooklyn, the Hardys' loft, shortly after Sunset**

For a while, all he could do was stand there, staring at her, and wondering how on earth he got so lucky. Even so, he couldn't come up with a satisfying answer.

Leonardo hovered in the open doorway of the dark bedroom lit only by the flickering of the muted television and the dim glow from the hallway, eyes fixed on the lovely dark-eyed woman dozing upright tucked in her bed. He and Mikey promised yesterday to come visit this evening, but when they arrived, the loft was practically dead—the only light came from the hallway's ceiling fixture and the only sound outside Bree's room was Bosco's snoring. A mere few weeks ago, Leo would have been disappointed, maybe a little hurt that Beverly wasn't awake to greet him. That, however, was weeks ago—now, he was content just knowing she was there—just admiring the flickering light dance across her olive-toned skin and dark hair. She was tired and weak, granted, but she was alive...alive, recovering, and his.

"Please close the door." The sudden address startled him from his mushy musings about the flash of bare shoulder peeking up from the neckline of her tunic. Her voice was quiet and more than a little hoarse, and her eyes scrunched shut behind her glasses.

"Did I wake you?" Leo asked softly, and she shook her head. He hesitated, debating whether going along with what she asked was a horrible idea or a possibly good one. After all, he'd been in her room before, but never with the door closed. A few months ago, the idea wouldn't have bothered him, but now...

"Oh, for Seurat's sake, Leo," Bev grumbled, her eyes cracking open just enough to shoot him a bleary hairy-eyeball glare. "My head's splitting—I'm hurting too much to steal your virtue." He
winced, turning to gingerly push the door closed as requested.

"Mine's not what I'm worried about," he remarked under his breath.

"I'm blind, not deaf," she reminded dryly as he approached and cautiously, tensely sat on the very edge of her mattress, visibly blushing. "Fortunately for you, mine's safe, too, thanks to this bloody migraine."

"You have a migraine?" Leo blanched, already connecting dots that needn't be connected. "Have—"

"It's not a relapse, Hon," Bev countered, her sarcasm fading into a softer reassurance. "I just had my monthly scan done last week, the abscess is still gone. I've had migraines since I was a teenager—that's why the abscess went unnoticed so long—that's all this is, just another migraine." Leo sighed, turning away. "I could no more expect you to stop worrying about me than expect you to pluck down stars from the sky, but please trust me to keep on top of this, alright?"

His eyes drifted to hers again, pupils blown wide from the darkness of her bedroom, and he reluctantly nodded. She offered him a small smile and scooted further toward the opposite side, then patted the spot beside her invitingly. After a moment's consideration, he complied, kicking off his shoes so they wouldn't dirty the linens. Without any of his hesitation, she curled into his side, ducking under his arm and laying her cheek on his collar. "Comfy?" he teased grinning down at her.

"Quite," she answered simply, fixing her eyes on the television screen again. Once he was able to pry his eyes away from the lovely woman tucked into his side, Leo took in the show as well only to grimace in horror. Onscreen, a group of people crowded around an autopsy table bearing what looked like either a very juicy mummy or a slow-roasted human.

"What are you watching?!" he demanded in disgust, glancing down at the captions at the bottom of the screen. 'Fourteen kills,' the text read, 'all women—drugged, strangled, left to rot near rural, interstate highways. Every one of them missing the toes on their left foot. They were gnawed off.' Leo turned back to the fascinated brunette in absolute disbelief. "A serial killer who eats toes?! Seriously?!"

"What?" Bev asked as though not seeing anything wrong with the picture. "They found that guy in a furnace chimney with a gut full of toes. Good episode, the plot twist actually caught me by surprise the first time." She finally looked back up at him, one elegant black eyebrow arched pointedly. "Some people enjoy romantic comedies and soap operas—I enjoy a nice violent crime drama." Still cringing, Leo turned back to the grisly scene playing out on the screen—now the mummy's severed head was being projected in gruesome detail on a computer screen in a lab that would probably make Donatello weep with joy.

'I've been rehydrating Smokey the Bear's head since yesterday—it makes it easier for identification.' "That's not weird at all," Leo remarked dryly, unable to turn away from the train wreck before him.

"Oh quit whining," Bev grumbled at him. "No one's making you watch it. If you're that squeamish, I could just throw on something less gory—maybe we can find something with talking animals and smiling flowers." He scoffed in offense turning to fix her with a withering glare but found her smirking up at him over her glasses. "…then again," she suggested playfully, "Netflix just added a new season of Space Heroes." His irritation fading, he chuckled, urging her closer and rubbing his palm up and down her far shoulder.

"Now you're speaking my language," he grinned down at her. "How's this—we'll finish this one, then alternate. Sound good?" She nodded, reaching up to tuck away a lock of hair fallen in her eyes; he beat her to it, letting his fingertips linger at her temple then trail down to cup her jaw. A fetching
blush bloomed in her cheeks at the gesture, driving him to lean down and steal her lips. After a slow, chaste kiss that ended far too soon, he drew back and turned back to the television, but instead of watching, found himself staring right through it for the most part. Naturally, Beverly noticed.

"What's on your mind, Hogosha?" she asked softly, cupping his cheek and turning his eyes back to hers. "You're tense—more so than usual. Are your family not well?" Not for the first time, the ninja was unnerved by how easily she managed to read him.

"Things at home..." he admitted with a sigh. "...well, they've been rough. Something's happening with my family—something to do with Amber and Mercy and the world they left behind—and I have no idea how to even begin to understand it."

"Amber and Mercy came from another world," Bev remarked blandly, recalling their conversation so long ago about just that. "Are they happier here? Are they wanting to return?—or could they return even if they chose to?" Leo shook his head, subconsciously tugging her even closer as though afraid she would be snatched from his arms.

"They both died, Koi...the dead don't rise once they've fallen. For them to even be here at all makes no sense—it's completely against everything we've always been taught about mortality and spiritual existence." Suddenly recalling the rest of the question, he steadied himself and answered, "From what they've said, they're happier here—Mercy's past life was an absolute nightmare because of abuse and Amber was partly crippled from an old injury. I don't think they want to return, per se, so much as they're worried about the loved ones they left behind." Bev made a wordless sound of understanding, focusing on the dusky brown of his exposed plastron. "Things are changing back home, Bev...and I'm worried how everything will end up when they do."

"You know," the solemn woman pointed out gently, "a wise man once told me that change is the only constant in life, and that's neither good nor bad, entirely amoral and faultless." Leo gave a quiet, humorless laugh.

"You sure he wasn't actually a wise-ass?" he asked with a wry smile, but fell silent at the thumb tenderly tracing the very edges of the paler skin spreading outward from his lips and muzzle.

"He is that," she admitted with a gentle smile, "but his heart and mind are much wiser than his temper and mouth would have you believe. I know you can handle this, Leonardo...you know you can handle it." Comforted, he reached up to cover her hand with one of his and turned to brush his lips against the tender skin of her wrist. "There's that smile," Bev teased echoing his version with a much wider one. "Don't let it fade away again so soon, hm?"

"If I do, I'll be sure to call you," he promised, then shot a pointed glance at the screen, still flashing with unfamiliar characters. "So. Who's your favorite?" Clearly recognizing the question for what it was—digging for information—she smirked, snagged the remote, and scanned forward in the episode. When she stopped again, a silver-haired man and an exotically lovely woman stood out in the foreground.

"The woman's name is Ziva," Bev explained simply. "I identify with her, most, but Gibbs is my favorite—he's the older man beside her." Leo studied the actor curiously, searching for clues to explain her preference, and Beverly slyly filled in the blanks for him. "His character is strong, sturdy, and incredibly stubborn, but he's a natural leader—he has a remarkable intuition about people and those he leads, even though he tends to be stern and unyielding with them. Underneath all the bluster and bravado, though, he's just as human as the rest—he swallows his pain and throws his everything into protecting those he cares for, even though they don't always understand or appreciate it."

Leo startled, realizing the connection. He studied the actor on-screen—from his rugged, unsmiling
face to his pale blue eyes—and turned to Beverly with a question in his own. "Being a leader isn't easy," he stated slowly, and her spreading smile confirmed his belief.

"Nothing worth doing ever is easy," she reminded with a sly smile, "but the outcome is always worth it…and you, my dear, are worth it."

Later that night, Leonardo woke with a start when the innuendo in her statement finally hit him like a sucker punch. Eyes fixed on the warped steel ceiling of his train car bedroom in a wide, panicked stare, he tried to ignore the obvious and struggled not to wonder how she knew. He loved Beverly… and the simplest antonym for easy was HARD.

**WORDS**

~ "Aar'n—No—no, gi'way—com'way fra ther—com'way a'reddy!" — Sleep-slurred relapse. 'Aaron—no—no, get away—come away from there—come away already!'

~ Braw — Scottish slang for beautiful or good-looking. If ya don't remember what Speccy means after all this time it just means he wears glasses.

~ D'I — yet another awkward improper conjunction you might hear in the deep Midwest and Southern Missouri, and like so many others, it sounds pretty smooth IRL but looks like butt when written. Simply means "Did I," sounds like 'die' with the –I slightly shortened. Sometimes with those with a very thick drawl or twang, it may have a negligible (read 'you'll only notice it if you really look for it') nasal 'silent syllable' right after the 'd.' (another similar silent syllable occurrence would be the nasal nh at the beginning of 'nless'n, an elaborated and Southernized variation of 'unless.'

**NOTES:**

* According to the online translator I used, these ALL translate into English as "I love you, too," but I can't guarantee their accuracy. The only language of these I'm truly familiar with is French and I'm not even halfway fluent with it. (I tend to mix it up with Spanish…a LOT.) Pretty sure the French statement is correct, but I can't shake the feeling that 'aime' is a bit weak, meaning 'like' rather than referring to the sort of love one would have for their romantic partner. ["Te quoque amo." — Latin] ["Ti amo anch'io." — Italian] ["Je t'aime aussi." — French] ["Watashi mo anata o aishitemasu." — Japanese] …yes, Donnie's showing off his big-ass brain, lol.

** If ya get caught with yer barn door open, tell'em go catch the cows — 'getting caught with your barn door open' is an odd slang term for having someone point out that the fly of your pants is unzipped. Tell'em go catch the cows' can mean anything from 'make it awkward' to 'joke it off and be a goofball' or even 'make it EXTREMELY awkward by pointing out that the person who noticed it wouldn't have noticed if they weren't staring at your crotch.' As mentioned before, Amber got her 'make it awkward' habits from Glen Devon. XD IN THIS CASE, Amber's saying she was taught 'it's better to laugh off embarrassing moments and joke about them than to hide them and let them become ammo to be used against you.'

# Georges Seurat — A French Neo-Impressionistic artist known for his work in a style known as "Pointillism." One of his most well-known works is "Sunday Afternoon on
the Island of La Grande Jatte."

## The show described here is an episode of NCIS—"Smoked" from Season 4. The main character, Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs always reminds me of an older and more emotionally scarred Leonardo, especially because of their similar eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Leo—I just had to! XD
A note regarding the dream-sequence in this chapter because I'm not sure it came out properly. That scene was meant to illustrate the last year of Amber and Donnie's long-distance dream-sharing and the way that dream-sharing changed over time. If you've read the first part of "Dream Lover" in the Gallery of Memories, you'll have a pretty good idea of the beginning and middle of their shared dream connection already, and this just fills in the blanks of the end.
In short, Amber's in her last years of life - she's crippled from her accident and getting weary and bitter - but Donnie's still in his prime and still has some hope left. Amber's given up on the possibility that they might ever be together outside of dreams and has never been able to love another the way she loves Donnie. Because he wants to see her happy, even if he can't be the one making her happy, he's been pushing her to find someone in her life who can love her the way he would. Amber's stubborn, though, and has essentially been self-sabotaging her attempts to find love like he asked her to. By the time of this passage, she has become convinced that she'll never find love outside dreams and has, instead, decided to simply focus on impersonally 'shutting up her hormones' in real life. This decision was made so her time with Donnie can be more focused on their love for each other than slaking her rampant libido. Donnie's not very happy with that decision, not because he sees it as 'cheating on him' but because he realizes she's killing her only chance for finding love in real life. Since he tried pushing her to find someone, he expected her to slowly drift away and was aware he'd have to watch her living her life as someone else' lover, but it upsets him to see that she's completely disinterested in finding someone else. He wants to see her happy, wants her to live her life to the fullest instead of waste it waiting for him, but he's not really ready to let her go if she DOES find someone to love her, and she's not ready to let go of him, either.
TL:DR - those two are a complete friggin' mess, they're losing hope that they'll ever be together, and Amber's making some pretty bad decisions in hopes of coping with the distance and their no-win situation.
50: The World We Left Behind

Chapter Notes

Possible trigger warnings in this chapter. Mild possible trigger for abuse, less mild one for death by vehicular accident. (Contains flashback to the day of Amber's funeral, including Mercy's death though it's not graphic or described very much.) Also, at the end of the flashback this chapter includes Mercy's dying words, similar to the passage of Kimber's dying words at the end of the Raph and Kimber flashback. This passage will be plainly marked by being separate from the main story and in all-italics, and because it's so long AND in Mercy's words, I'm not defining the odd phrases and spellings in that portion of this chapter. There are just too many to define all of them. Instead, you can find a complete translation of that passage here, in the forums: Honestly, it's nothing y'all haven't been reading from Mercy this whole time so I doubt anyone really will need to go for the cheat sheet, but if ya have trouble with it, just hit that link, no worries. :)
Since waking up in this world, in this new and different body, she made a habit of examining it as little as possible—of stubbornly avoiding seeing how very different it is from hers. As long as she didn't see her reflection, didn't think about it, and didn't consider the many differences between her old body and this one, she could somewhat forget that she was a body-snatcher—that the eyes that stared back were the eyes of a stranger. At first, some of the differences seemed improvements—she was taller, voluptuous but a more healthy weight, and the many physical ailments and injuries that kept Amber down in her previous life were nonexistent. There was no chronic pain, no weakness and exhaustion, and more brown in her hair than grey.

Over time, though, Amber had no choice but to accept the truth…this wasn't her body, it was the body of a dead woman who had her own screwed up life and lost it in a completely horrifying way. Kimber's hair was less grey, but her eyes were harder—her ass was smaller and her rack was bigger, but her mouth was bigger and her fuse was shorter. Worst of all, the body Amber now reluctantly called her own had a rather explicit history with Raphael…sure, Amber wasn't in the body at the time of Raph and Kimber's one night stand, but the previous occupant screwed Donnie's brother. This new life was more drama-soaked than the most atrocious fanfiction Amber read in her previous life—the only real improvement was that the people around her weren't fucking everything that wouldn't complain on every available surface while using words like pussy, cock, and moist.*

"Y'okay, O'Brien?" Amber startled at the address, finally recognizing that another face had appeared in the mirror—Mercy, fresh from the shower with her hair piled up in an old tee shirt. "Ya look like ya seen a ghost." Amber sobered, turning to regard their reflection in the mirror.

"I'm seein' ghosts every day, now, Ross," Amber admitted. "Every time I see you, I see a ghost—every time I see a mirror, I see another…the only times I don't see'em is when I'm lookin' at the guys'er~ the Hardys or…" She shuddered. "…or dreamin'. Even in dreams, I'm not seein' ghosts 'cause I am the ghost there."

"Geez, way to be a downer," Mercy muttered unwinding her hair and digging through the storage bins for her comb, brush, and other weapons of mayhem. "It's a mind-fuck, yeah, but ya just gotta get used to it—if ya don't get used to it, it'll drive ya crazy an' there's nothin' you can do to change it." Tackling Donna's aggravating hair with a grumble, she tossed a sideways glance at the still ruminating brunette. "This ain't about bein' stuck in Kimber's body, is it? There's more to it than that." Amber nodded.

"You know me so well, Blundie," Amber admitted sliding down the wall to sit on the cold tile floor.

"I'm yer best friend, Scotch-Bright," Mercy reminded pointing a hair-pick at Amber with a smirk. "I've got enough dirt on you to bury ya—it's my job to notice when yer fallin' an' to shove my boot up yer ass when ya won't pick yerself up. So spill it a'ready." She faltered at the almost-scowl aimed at her.

"No, Mercy Ross," Amber contradicted sternly, "you spill it. Ever since we met up again, you've told me my family's fine, that Aaron's fine, that everything in the world we left behind is fine, but I can't believe you." Mercy flinched at being addressed thus, her hands falling away from the damp haystack atop her head. "You've never been able to lie to me or Aaron, not without us seein' right through it…an' every time you've told me everything's fine, you've been lyin' through yer teeth." Mercy's eyes watered, downcast and focusing on the tiled sink. "I'm not angry at ya," Amber amended softening her tone. "I know ya just wanted to help—ya didn't want me worryin' about those we left behind—but I need to know what's going on, I need to know if these dreams…if they're…"

"You've been dreaming about our world?" Mercy asked softly abandoning her tools to come sit by her friend.
"Every time I fall asleep, now," Amber admitted. "Mum's fallin' apart, Da's drinkin' too much, Gran'Da's sick and pushin'em away, Aaron's...he's..."~ She faltered, her throat clenching at the memory of the dream she just woke from. "He's depressed, drinkin' too much, an' I think'e means'ismelf harm."~

Mercy's lungs caught—she turned away from her lifelong friend, drawing her knees up to her chest and winding her arms around them. When she finally found her voice again, it cracked from sorrow. "Ya deserve the truth, Amber…I just hope you can handle that truth…an' that ya can forgive me fer hidin' it."

...another time, another world, another life...

Willis Residence, Glenville, Missouri, Saturday May 21st, 2011

If Mercy Ross had any choice in the matter, she wouldn't be here right now. She wouldn't be standing out on Ma Willis' stoop in a grey sundress, being barked at by a neurotic Chihuahua and hammering at the door for Aaron, and she certainly wouldn't be driving him back to Willsdale today...not for a funeral. Mercy's wants, unfortunately, weren't enough to change the course of history. Thus, there she was, picking up the last remaining member of their awkward trio to attend the funeral of the one they lost. Any other funeral, Mercy would have worn black; this funeral, however, was for a friend—a friend who always loved grey most of all.

Amber's funeral...Mercy choked at the thought turning watering eyes to the peeling yellow siding along the double-wide. Amber was her best friend—really, her first friend—with her gone Mercy wasn't sure how she'd manage to keep going. Amber always stood up to Mercy's mother—she always stepped in when Clarity went too far and Ellis couldn't bring himself to confront his wife. Amber always sheltered Mercy when she showed up out of the blue and scared out of her wits...the brunette never tired for details or judged her younger friend for going back to that house, time and time again like a whipped dog...just the knowledge that she had somewhere to turn made it easier for Mercy to endure her mother's worst episodes, even when Ellis couldn't bring himself to step in.

Now...now Amber was gone...Ellis was gone...their homes were gone, and Mercy and her mother were living out of a slummish hotel in Glenville. Clarity denied her daughter permission to go to the funeral—she never liked Amber, partly because the brassy half-Celt never pulled her punches when Mercy's well-being was at stake and partly because Amber had a habit of calling Clarity a 'sadestic shite-breened cow-fud~' right to her face. Clarity never liked Amber and forbade Mercy to attend her friend's funeral...and for the first time in her life, Mercy deliberately went against her mother's direct orders knowing Amber wouldn't be there to protect her when she went home.

Technically, Mercy was on the run, all so she could do something she had every right to do. She waited all night until Clarity passed out drunk in their hotel room, stole Ellis' truck from the parking lot, loitered in a McDonald's parking lot until dawn, then burned rubber across town to Ma Willis' trailer court to pick up Aaron. Now, if she could just get the hopeless fluff-head to answer the door, she'd drag him to the funeral—kicking and screaming if necessary! Amber was his friend too, and by God, he could drag himself from his drunken moping long enough to say goodbye to her!

Finally, the door creaked open—the face behind it, however, was not Aaron but the youngest of his four younger sisters, Tracey Willis. "Hey, Kiddo," Mercy greeted the sleep-rumpled blonde co-ed through the screen door. Already the familiar stench of cheap alcohol, unwashed bodies, and old vomit curled her nose hairs. "Yer brother up?" Tracey shook her head, shooting a dirty glare at the unseen sofa pushed up against the front windows. Aaron still had a room at home, but Amber always
slept on that lumpy old sofa when she and Aaron came to visit his family...now it seemed the grieving man claimed it as his own.

"Still passed out," Tracey grumbled. "He puked on'imself, too. Told the dumbass to stop drinkin' but e didn't listen. At least he didn't ralph on his duffle bag." Just wonderful, Mercy considered with a silent snarl. Knowing Aaron lately, he wouldn't wake up unless someone threw him bodily into a freezing shower. At least the water would wash off the puke.

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**The open road, just outside Glenville**

"I'm not goin' through that again, Willis," Mercy growled clenching the steering wheel in a white-knuckle grip. The horrors she saw in the Willis' house would stick with her for the rest of her life—heck, they might even haunt her after she died! "So help me, if I ever, and I do mean ever have to see your naked ass again, I'm'onna jam a shovel up it an' break it off!"

"Shut up, Ross," Aaron groused into the two litre of Mtn Dew she grabbed him. "No one told ya to come in the bathroom while I was showerin'."

"I heard a crash!" Mercy spat back at him, tempted to perform a sudden 'brake check' on him. "Fer all I knew, yer drunk ass was drownin' in there! God a'mighty, ya never wear clothes at home, inside or out, so how the hell's yer ass so fuckin' white?! It's practically fluorescent!"

"Fine, next time ya wanna ogle my ass, I'll put on some pants, happy?!" Maybe, both considered as they traded insults and threats, if they focused on being pissed at each other, they wouldn't notice who wasn't there to bullshit along with them.

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**Willsdale Cemetery, noon**

The moment Mercy and Aaron stepped foot in the cemetery, they knew the funeral would be a disaster. All around the still-open grave and draped pine casket, Amber's family gathered in various states of disarray. Douglas O'Brien—Amber's acerbic father—slumped against a tree at a distance, reeking of booze even more strongly than Aaron had that morning. Glen Devon, Amber's mutton-chopped Scot expat grandfather, refused to meet anyone's eyes, instead glaring silently across the cemetery where a news reporter filmed a piece about the town's recent struggles. Ginny O'Brien sobbed and wailed at the top of her lungs, clinging to a tall, lean, white-haired man Mercy and Aaron recognized as Amber's Uncle Bart. Bart Devon glanced around for assistance, cringing awkwardly at his older sister's clinging and crying, but the redness around his dove grey eyes was proof he'd done his share of crying lately. The family was broken, pushing one another away instead of growing closer to weather their loss...Amber would be heartbroken.

The pastor—a member of Ginny's church, the very church whose members habitually harassed Amber in life—said a few brief and solemn words. All through the ceremony, Ginny wept bitterly and Douglas grumbled under his breath, shooting her disgusted glares. When Amber's casket began its descent into her grave, Mercy's hand shot out for Aaron's, latching on for comfort; perhaps he needed some himself, because he didn't shrug her off, instead squeezing her hand tightly. Her throat burned from holding back her tears, but she wouldn't let herself cry—Amber always hated seeing her cry, and for her friends to cry at her funeral would have broken her heart. "It's alright," Aaron muttered to Mercy with another squeeze of her hand. "When this is all over, we'll do it right—she won't be there, but we'll hold'er a wake fit for a queen."

"She wasn't Irish, Willis," Mercy mumbled.
"No, but I am," he countered seriously, "at least by part. O'Brien always said she wanted people to be happy at her funeral—to celebrate her rather than mourn her, and that's exactly what a wake is—celebrating life instead of mourning death." Mercy thought it over a moment, contemplating the gravestone solemnly.

"Then I think she'd like that," she finally answered. "Just the two of us and Amber, just like old times." Even as she spoke, though, the blonde knew there was a very real possibility such a thing would never happen—the blonde did, in fact, steal her step-father's truck and go on the run to attend this funeral—and her mother was entirely unreasonable. She always feared going back to Clarity Ross, but now she feared for her life as well as her safety.

The first clod of dirt dropped into the grave set off a horrific chain reaction. Ginny, distraught, fell to her knees in the muddy grass, letting out a pained cry. "M—My baby—she died on'er knees!" she wailed, shaking with her tears. "She died beggin' fer mercy—fer forgiveness—her whole life she strayed an' when she wiz—was called home, all she could do was pray fer mercy!" ~ At Mercy's side, Aaron snarled and tensed to lunge for Ginny but Mercy latched onto his hand tighter, anchoring him at her side; he shot her a furious glare but she just shook her head, denim blue eyes pleading and watering. "Please, forgive'er—forgive'er for dyin' on'er knees instead of livin' on'em! Live on yer knees—live a godly life so you don't die out of God's graces!" ~

"Shut yer damn mouth, Gin!" Douglas barked at her, working himself up into a rage. "Amber never did anythin' wrong—if anyone screwed up here, it's you!"

"Both'a ye shut yer fookin' gobs!" ~ Glen bellowed at his daughter and her husband. "Yer a' yer dawter's funeral—cannae ye e'en once be civil wit' each other?! Cannae ye once make'er proud'a ye?!" ~ In the distance, Mercy noticed the reporter startle and turn to them, the camera man panning and zooming in on the fiasco. If she was caught on camera at Amber's funeral and her mother saw that video…she ducked nervously behind Aaron, carefully keeping her face turned from the reporters. To her dismay, though, he broke free and stormed over to Ginny and Douglas.

"I've had it with ya!" Aaron shouted at the still-kneeling older woman. "Yer the reason Amber never stuck around on the weekends! Yer the reason she was so scared'a bein' around here an' leavin'er home—you an' yer church cronies!"

"Tha's rich comin' from you, Willis!" Ginny fired back, bottle green eyes sharp with censure. "You blame me for her struggles, but you're the reason she's dead!" Glen and Douglas both shouted at her —Aaron's face paled, his expression as pained as though the older woman tore his guts out—still she continued, intent on tearing him down a few notches. "You were there—you could have protected'er, but you let my daughter die! You should've watched'er, you should've—should've stopped'er!" Mercy scowled; this had gone on far enough. Screw her mother finding out she was at Amber's funeral—Amber always had her back in life, and like hell was Mercy going to let her down in death!

"Amber made her own choices, y'old hag!" she snapped at Ginny. "Aaron did everything he could to protect her, especially from you! He's not at fault for this, that's all on you!" Snatching Aaron's rumpled black shirt by the collar, she stormed off toward the half-filled grave, hauling him behind her protesting and sputtering; behind them, Amber's surviving family continued to lash out at one another, flinging hurtful words left and right. Upon reaching the gravestone, Mercy reached out to brush her fingertips over the mottled grey granite. "Fer the record, Scotch-Bright," she murmured to her lost friend as Aaron deflated beside her. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry I went back to Mom an' left you in Glenville, an' that I wasn't there with ya when this all happened. I love ya an' I won't forget ya." She glanced pleadingly up at Aaron; his lips a hard line, he sighed through his nose and laid his own meaty hand on the stone marker.
"I'm sorry too, O'Brien," he confessed quietly. "I miss ya...an' I..." Off-kilter blue eyes watering, he choked, but forced himself to finish his piece. "I love you, you crazy woman...I really love you, an' I won't forget you." He dug through his pocket, retrieved an old, weathered piece of jewelry—a simple silver ring bearing a single triangular piece of warm brown amber—and gently set it at the base of the stone. "Sorry I never got this to ya," he added, his voice cracking. "I've...had it since—since we graduated...just never found a way to tell ya...it's not much, but you always liked silver...and I always liked...liked amber."

Mercy's eyes welled up in sorrow, dismayed by his long-overdue confession—fate could be cruel, but she never thought it cruel enough to make him hold his tongue until Amber was out of his reach. She always wondered if Aaron cared for Amber more than he let on, but with every year that went by without any sign of a relationship between them, she wondered more if she was mistaken. Now, the truth was out...he did love her, and that love made the loss even harder to accept.

"Let's get out'a here, Ross," he suggested quietly. "This is just gonna get worse." Mercy nodded and turned to lead the way back to the truck to the sound of the fighting family behind them. As they reached the parking lot, she turned back to Aaron, sobering at the lines of saltwater trailing down his face and into his scruffy russet beard. "It's rainin'," he stated without emphasis. She blinked, confused, and searched the skies—they were clear and blue, not a raindrop to be seen. Amber always hated rain... "It's rainin'," Aaron insisted not meeting her eyes. "She wouldn't want anyone cryin' over her, so it's rainin'." Her heart clenched, realizing the truth of the statement, and she reached up to brush a few 'raindrops' from her own cheeks.

"You call this rain," she mumbled climbing into the driver's seat. "I call it a downpour...but as O'Brien always said 'This rainy day, too, will pass.'" Aaron nodded, settling back against the smelly seat of the truck as she started up the engine. His trailer was mostly shielded by the grove of Black Locust trees between Amber's home and his, but there was a lot of work to be done...worst of all, though, only a splintered stand of trees away lurked the ruins of his best friend's home. How could he recover from her loss when every day, he'd be reminded of it? The answer was one he knew he wouldn't find anytime soon.

Outside the truck's rolled down windows, the hilly back-roads of rural Willsdale flew past in a blur. Inside the cab, salty rain poured unchecked down Mercy's already shiny cheeks. She was alone again...after so long of having both Amber and Aaron at her back, she was completely alone and going back to her broken home all over again. Aaron's trailer was mostly livable and he offered her his couch but she declined. Her mother was already going to kill her—she didn't need to add gallivanting around with a man to her list of sins.

Always with the fear—always dreading what her mother would do, always stuck hiding normal behaviors behind lies and bitten lips only to pay for crimes she never committed... She choked, her chest tight, and she shook her head at the thought. So many years ago, she finally got a taste of freedom. She finally escaped her abusive home and lived on her own for a few precious years—she even got to work toward an agricultural degree and hold a part-time job! Then she got overwhelmed, she panicked, and against everyone's pleas, she ran back to the very home she was running from to start with. Sure enough, her mother was livid...Mercy still carried scars from her first day back home, both mental and physical.

Amber was dead...her savior, her protector, her sister from another mister...Amber was gone, dead, and would never be there to protect her from her own flesh and blood again. Ellis was gone, too—he never really did much to reign in Clarity's destructive behavior but at least he tried...Mercy no longer had anyone in her corner, no one but herself. Even after apologizing on Amber's grave—apologizing for having ever gone back to her mother in the first place—here she was doing the very same thing
That settled it, she decided as she haphazardly swerved around a corner, changing course entirely. She wouldn't go back to her mother this time—she would break that cycle! Amber always begged her to break it, always tried to help her realize she had the power to stop what was being done to her, but Mercy always caved and went back anyway. Her mother was living in Glenville, now—she just needed to stay away from Glenville, maybe she could camp out on her stepfather's old ranch until she could find a better shelter. Tears blurring her vision, foot nearly grinding the gas pedal into the floor, she focused on her destination—an open corral gate at the end of the road and the empty pasture beyond it.

All her life, she struggled to break free from her mother's abuse; now, she would break that cycle or die trying.

All my life, I struggled an' fought for ev'ry moment of peace; that I only found that peace in death is the bitt'rest sort'a irony. Almost as ironic is that I died on the way home from the fun'r'al of a friend. I almost feel like someone should'a been blarin' Elton John when the truck spun out'a control.**

I'm not gonna make excuses fer what happened—I know I was bein' reckless. If I'd been drivin' the speed limit, I would'a seen that bloody chicken in the road in time to brake. If I'd pulled over 'til my eyes were dry, I would'a seen that there was no shoulder to swerve onto, just a deep drainage ditch on either side. At the time, though, I di'n't really care…I was hurt, scared, an' distraught, an' I let those emotions take control'a me just as I always did.

It's never easy livin' with an abusive parent, but when ya factor in other troubles—in my case, Bipolar—it can be e'en worse. Emotions were always my weakness—I drowned in'em, was swept away by every one, an' I couldn't handle much stress. Perhaps…nah, e'en if Ma was worried 'bout me 'cause'a my unstable emotions, she had no excuse—ain't nothin' can excuse hurtin' yer own kid, not the way she hurt me.

I always wan'ed to break free of'er—always wished I was strong enough ta fight back, ta make'er ree'lize jus' how badly she was screwin' me up—most of all, I wan'ed to get past'er treatment, to heal the scars she left on me an' fine'ly b'come the person I should be. Now, I'm dead…it's too late ta change my past, too late to decide my future…I have no future. If I had a future, I'm sure I'd do everythin' diff'rently—I wouldn' let Ma rule me like she did, I'd finally let myself hate'er fer all I'm worth instead of fearin'er retaliation. Maybe…maybe I'd even find love - real love, not the kind that hurts, the kind that heals. O'Brien always tol' me real love heals rather'n hurts, but I've never seen such a thing. Whether it's real or not, I'd'a loved ta've seen it someday…an' fuck me runnin', I'd deserve it, too!

It took death ta convince me I deserve to live a life free'a fear…if I was still alive, the irony alone'd kill me.

November 9th, The Lair, back in the spare bathroom

"It was over almost instantly," Mercy croaked staring through Donna's bent knees. "I'm lucky in that, at least, because I didn't feel any pain. I don't know anything past the accident, obviously, but your family…Aaron…" She shook her head, tearing up anew. "I didn't know how to tell ya…as much as you've been hurting, I couldn't stand seein' it get worse…an' knowin' all'a that, it would'a gotten
Amber slumped back against the tile wall, struggling to process what she heard. It couldn’t be possible—it was entirely impossible! Her...her dreams...they were true. Through the deafening static buzzing through her brain, she registered a familiar sound—Mercy's lungs seized and wheezed in half-smothered tears. "I'm s-sorry!" the blonde whimpered diving into her friend's side as she always had years back. "I'm sorry—fer—fer hidin' that—i'was kill—killin' m-me—b-but—" She fell silent at the pair of arms hauling her closer—Amber held her like she’d never let go.

"I forgive ya," Amber rasped into Mercy's messy blonde hair. "I un'erstahnd—I'm not angry wit'ya...I'm sorry, Merse—sorry fer—fer puttin' ya in tha' position—fer givin' up like I did..." A hoarse, choking cry ripped from her lungs and she buried her streaming eyes in Mercy's hair. How could anyone apologize enough? How could she ever apologize enough for completely giving up on her life, for leaving her best friends to fight their demons without her?

Outside the bathroom door, a tall, lanky eavesdropper stumbled back to the very wall the two women leaned on and slid down to the floor in a heap. Donatello could hear Amber and Mercy's conversation—and the tears and apologies that followed—with devastating clarity, and what it told him was heartbreaking.

Those 'freaky dreams' Amber told him about—dreams of her loved ones suffering and falling apart—they weren't entirely fictional after all. If they were as true as he suspected, even worse, things back home were only getting worse...but what could be done about it? The dead don't rise again—there was nothing they could do to help their loved ones, not with world dividing them!

No. He steeled his nerves, his eyes narrowing in determination. 'Nothing' was unacceptable—if Baxter Stockman could open a wormhole and if an alien warmonger could bring his battleship in from another dimension, there had to be a way to get the two women home! There absolutely had to be a way, and he wouldn't rest until he found it!

The sound of the door opening startled him; glancing up, his eyes met Mercy's still watery denim blues. She seemed unsurprised to find him there, and he suspected she knew he heard every word. The genius stood, carefully unfolding himself and hazarded a supportive hand on her shoulder. "Raph's in his room," he said softly, glancing pointedly down the hallway to the open doorway that once led to the Hashi and the Barracks. "Go on—I've got this." The blonde gave a defeated nod; eyes to the floor, she slumped away to find her other half.

The sight in the bathroom tore out Donnie's heart. Unlike Mercy, Amber wasn't actively crying—she slumped against the wall, staring blankly ahead, expressionless and visibly numb. Shock...that had to be what was going on. She didn't even notice him kneeling before her until he reached out for both of her shoulders, urging her into his arms. Sure enough, though, she latched on in desperation, her lungs starting to heave again with suppressed sobs.

"Shhh," he murmured carding his fingers through her loosened hair and rubbing her back. "It's alright...we'll figure this out, we'll find a way to fix this. Just leave it to me, alright?" Even as he whispered promises and she nodded in mute acceptance, he wasn't sure he could keep those promises. He was a genius but getting her home would require a miracle...and failure was not an option.

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**NOTES**

* Yes, I seriously went there. There are very few things that can make me completely give up on a story, fan or otherwise - describing a character in minute detail all at once,
canon characters behaving in very non-canon ways, (we're talking Splinter NOT being a hardass when he normally disapproves or Leo having a secret 'Daddy' fetish) characters engaging in illegal and dangerous behavior 'just for lolz,' etc - and this is a big one. Pussy, cock, and moist always make my brain want to vomit...and brains are incapable of vomiting so they also make it HURT. I know I'm not the only one bothered by those words, so please, spare your readers' brains the nausea and pain and find other words that aren't quite so cringe-tastic?

** A quick recap for Aaron Willis' family - Reagan "Ma" Willis is a single mother who had Aaron and over time adopted four younger daughters from the foster care system. Oldest to youngest they are Nancy, Lynn, Annie, and Tracey, whom you saw in this chapter. There is no father figure in the picture ever since Ron Willis - Aaron's stepfather - died. This lack of remarriage is actually a good thing considering Ma Willis' horrible taste in men. Ma Willis lives in Glenville and manages a cafe, and Tracey lives with her while attending Glenville University. Now, that said, I want to point something out in case no one's noticed it yet...Although I've not based any characters in ANY story on ME, I've based a total of THREE characters on my hubby Cold in various amounts of detail and focusing on various aspects of him. Those characters are Aaron and Daron in this story and Thomas in my "Elementals" stories. Though those three are heavily based on Cold, they're not an exact depiction and not meant to be. You can see an accurate depiction of the real Cold (and, unfortunately, the real Ghost, be warned,) by reading the completely ridiculous sidestory "Blocked." For the curious and those who just want to rot their brains, here's a link. Don't say I didn't warn ya.

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/12031110>

#Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding - this passage, Mercy's sarcastic dying words, references "Funeral for a Friend," the instrumental intro to Elton John's song "Love Lies Bleeding." That instrumental is good SL for Mercy's final moments.

WORDS

~ Guys'er – Guys or

~ Mum's fallin' apart, Da's drinkin' too much, Gran'Da's sick and pushin'em away, Aaron's...he's...He's depressed, drinkin' too much, an' I think'e means'imself harm. – Mom's falling apart, (emotionally) Dad's drinking too much, Grand'Dad's sick and pushing them away, Aaron's...he's...he's depressed, drinking too much, and I think he means himself harm. (specifically, Amber thinks he's becoming suicidal in his depression.)

~ Sadestic shite-breened cow fud– this is a long-ass and incredibly Scotched compound insult well into the realm of absurdity. Sadestic – sadistic. Shite-breened – shit-brained. Cow – supposedly an incredibly offensive insult when aimed at a woman. Fud – can be used as a euphemism for vagina OR as a way of calling someone a 'dickhead' or a 'cunt.' Either way, we can assume Amber first spouted this when she was beyond pissed—see chapter where Raph scared Mercy—then upon realizing how much it pissed off Clarity, decided to start using it even when she wasn't ready to blow her stack on her.
—M—My baby—she died on'er knees! She died beggin' fer mercy—fer forgiveness—her whole life she strayed an' when she wiz—was called Home, all she could do was pray fer mercy! - M-My baby - she died on her knees! She died begging for mercy - for forgiveness - her whole life she strayed and when she wiz (relapse) - WAS called Home all she could do was pray for mercy! - This passage is rife with Religious references that may not make sense to those living in other countries or outside what's known as 'The Bible Belt' of the US, so I'll explain as briefly as possible. By emphasizing that Amber died on her knees, Ginny is insinuating that Amber was praying when she died, and that is, indeed, true. The next insinuation, that she died praying for mercy and forgiveness, is NOT true - her dying pleas were for the safety of her loved ones as shown in the scene of her death. 'Strayed' is a common term used in the local churches to indicate someone has been living their lives according to their own terms instead of according to the terms of the church, and compares the person to a lamb who has wandered away from the flock and found themselves in danger. Sometimes this 'straying' is genuinely a bad thing - the person has gotten involved in crime or drugs, or they've become violently abusive - but, unfortunately, in many churches you would be declared 'straying from the word' for harmless actions. Though they're not the same in all churches, some will consider you straying for such actions as befriending a homosexual, living with a roommate, taking birth control even for medical reasons, or even getting married if you don't plan to have children. IN THIS CASE Ginny has been convinced that Mercy's a lesbian and was worried Amber would become a lesbian too since they were living together and Amber wouldn't go to Ginny's church with her. The next phrase, "called Home," is a reference to dying - specifically to the dying person's soul being sent up to heaven for divine judgement and presumably INTO Heaven to await the Rapture. In cases like Amber's, their religious comrades often believe that in order for the deceased person to make it into Heaven, they must atone for their sins, and if not, pray for mercy and forgiveness even on their deathbed.

—Please, forgive'er—forgive'er for dyin' on'er knees instead of livin' on'em! Live on yer knees—live a Godly life so you don't die out of God's graces! - ...in case ya haven't figured it out yet, Ginny O'Brien's a bit of a spazz and she's trying WAY too hard to get the approval of her church-going neighbors. Words: 'Please, forgive her - forgive her for dying on her knees instead of living on them! (IE, dying praying for forgiveness as opposed to spending her life praying for forgiveness) Live a Godly life (according to what the church agrees is moral) so you don't die out of God's graces!' One last blip on this section: I'm NOT promoting any religion here, merely portraying the sort I unfortunately see every day. Cold and I actually got pulled over in the grocery store the other day by some complete stranger wanting to take us to his church and convert us...because Cold said "Crap" in public. Seriously. W...T...F... It took reciting the Lord's Prayer to get that creep off our backs, so he probably thought I was, I dunno, a vampire or something.

—Both'a ye shut yer fookin' gobs! – Both of you, shut your fucking mouths!

—Yer a' yer dawter's funeral—cannae ye e'en be civil wit' each other?! Cannae ye once make'er proud'a ye?! – You're at your daughter's funeral—can't you even once be civil with each other?! Can't you once make her proud of you?!!

— Yer the reason Amber never stuck around on the weekends! Yer the reason she was so scared'a bein' around here an' leavin'er home—you an' yer church cronies! - 'You're the reason Amber always left town on the weekends! You're the reason she
was so uncomfortable being in town and leaving her home - *you and your church cronies!* Crony/ pl, Cronies is a term meaning 'a close friend or companion' but slang usage often has the word used to indicate that the person it's describing is immoral or ill-behaved. In this case, Aaron's basically saying that Ginny’s church-going friends aren't half as moral and admirable as they pretend to be.

- Tha's – Scotched 'that's.'

- Y'old– You old

- I'was– It was

- I forgive ya. I un'erstahnd—I'm not angry wit'ya...I'm sorry, Merse—sorry fer —fer puttin' ya in tha' position—fer givin' up like I did. – I forgive you. I understand—I'm not angry with you...I'm sorry, Merse—sorry for—for putting you in that position—for giving up like I did.

Again, full translation of "Mercy's dying words" can be found HERE, along with the full translation and discussion of "Kimber's dying words." - topic/194762/153520546/1/#169848000

**GENERAL RULES**

Adding *'e, 'is, 'imself* to the end of a word – means he, his, or himself.

Adding *'er or 'erself* to the end of a word – means her or herself

Adding *'em, 'emselves, or 'eir* to the end of a word – means them, themselves, or their

Adding *'a* to the end of a word – means of, have, or to, depending on the rest of the sentence. You can generally figure out which one with little difficulty just by considering which word the *'a* is added to and the rest of the phrase.

Words ending with –*in’* – This word ends with –ing but has been shortened to portray accent.

With Casey/Raph: *Da / words beginning with d*— Generally, non-Bay Casey pronounces th- words as d- instead. Specific examples include *da* – the and *dere* – there.
51: Secrets, Solutions, Certainty

Chapter Summary

Donnie has questions; Splinter has answers. Insert Mikey-esque 'mind is blown' gesture. The grumpy old rat has a few secrets left after all. Amber's thinking too much; Donnie thinks she's being ridiculous. Plans are made and promises extracted. Raph is sulking; Mercy is unimpressed. Mercy helps him realize he's being a ninny. They're so fluffy we're gonna die! Mercy's thinking too much but at least we got fluff.

Next stop: Returning to the world they left behind.

Chapter Notes

Hey, Y'all! Long time, no see...again...ahem. Updates have been slowing down for a while and I'm incredibly sorry for it; it just seems like it's going to be going a while longer no matter how irritating it is. TBH, lately Real Life has been about 97% in the crapper and the remaining 3% has been spent hiding from the Flying Crap Fairy because sh*t's STILL hitting the fan. Oy. Seriously, we really need some Flying Crap Fairy repellent because we're apparently good targets. Anyways, I won't bore y'all with details on this latest disaster, but Cold and I are both very lucky to even be alive right now, along with several of our closest neighbors. We came very farking close to NOT being alive anymore recently and, although Cold's shrugged it off with his usual attitude, I've been an absolute mess of nerves. I just haven't had either time or drive to sit down and write lately but hopefully things will ease up soon. (If for some weird reason you want a better explanation, no worries, just PM me on FFnet or one of my usual accounts and I'll fill ya in, no worries. Misery loves company, but Anxiety's even clingier...and no, I do not plan on including this scare in a Blocked installment.)

Anyhoo, a word of warning: this story has, from the start, been an awkward mishmash of the Bay movies universe and a few other 'verses, but as of this chapter, that mish-mash becomes heavier with 'other -verse' than previously. Specifically, we're going to be seeing a lot from the '03 series, but you don't need a good understanding of that series to follow the plot. Not everything's going to be exactly as per that canon because I'm altering some things to better fit the Bay-verse canon. Either way, I hope you'll enjoy, and hope to hear from y'all soon!

Suggested Listening: The Goo Goo Dolls "Iris," Red "Best is Yet to Come," Ashes Remain "On My Own"

51: Secrets, Solutions, Certainty
November 10th, afternoon

Somewhere along the line, Donatello miscalculated; where or when that miscalculation was, he had no earthly idea. All he knew for certain was this: against all odds, the most unlikely of sources brought answers to the conundrum of Amber's strange dreams of home. How this happened, the genius still wasn't sure—his head was still spinning from the unexpected admission from his father and sensei and that was hours ago.

"This…this makes no sense," Donnie muttered digging his fingertips into the bridge of his snout as though warding off a headache. "Amber's having prophetic dreams of her home world...because you saw her past?"

"That's the best explanation I can find," Splinter sighed. "Ordinarily, there should be no lasting effects, harmful or otherwise. Because she is from another reality than our own, the shared meditation technique I used may have inadvertently opened a psychic door to the world she left behind—a door she regrettably is unable to close under her own volition."

"This is insane." Donnie scoffed, his hands dropping to dangle off of his knees. At the time, he was too focused on getting answers to ask how his father could get those answers. Now..."Where did you even hear about that technique, anyway?" he asked. "It's not in any of your books about the martial arts—I checked. Where did you learn about it?"

Splinter hesitated, dark eyes focused somewhere beyond the cup of tea steaming on his low table. Perhaps...yes, the time was now. "Gather your brothers," he told Donnie calmly, "and the two young ladies as well. I hoped to put this off a little longer, but it appears the time has come."

Splinter's life began as a simple lab rat—his future should have been set in stone. Instead, he was freed, mutated, and left to fend for the four young turtles who endured the same testing he did. Every new parent faces struggles, but most will have some semblance of assistance, somewhere to turn when they needed help or advice. Splinter had no such thing...at least not to start with. That eventual assistance, while gravely needed, was something he was never sure how to explain to his boys. Now, he had no choice but to explain and hope they could understand his reasons for keeping it secret.

"You all know my training in Ninjitsu began with the discovery of a book," the aged rat related to the four mutants and two humans crowded around his bedroom. "There is, however, more to the story that I have not told you." As he spoke, he collected the book in question from his shelves and opened it to the very first page, where a cryptic inscription was scribbled in roughly-scrawled Japanese. "The book only provided the barest of essentials in ninjitsu training—one cannot learn something as complex as a martial arts discipline through the written word alone. This inscription contains coded instructions...directions on how to open a portal to another realm commonly called the Battle Nexus."

"The what now?" Leonardo shook his head in denial. "You—" Splinter shot him a stern glance, and he fell silent again.

"The Battle Nexus is a world meant to be accessed by those studying the ancient martial arts," Splinter continued seriously. "The book revealed the basics central to most martial arts disciplines then decoding the inscription therein revealed the Nexus to me. It was in that other realm that I met a powerful master of Ninjitsu—a man by the name of Hamato Yoshi—and studied under him in hopes of keeping you four safe."

"You studied under a master?" Leo repeated in disbelief. "How have we never met him? Until we
met April, we were the only ones who ever found the Lair—how were you able to keep such an important visitor secret from us?"

"Master Yoshi never came to our world," Splinter explained. "I always went to his world for training—the moment you boys fell asleep, I left for an hour or two of training..." Here, he shot Michelangelo a stern frown.

"Oh, this is my part!" Mikey grinned excitedly. "Can I tell'em now? Please? Pleasepleaseplease?" Splinter rolled his eyes.

"Tell us what?" Raphael demanded.

"When we were still kids, I caught Sensei sneakin' out once," Mikey explained without once losing his grin. "I woke up to pee and when I came back to bed, I saw him walking through a glowy hole in the wall and followed him. If I told anyone, he would'a put me in the Hashi. You're lookin' at the youngest Battle Nexus Champion ever, Bruhs! OW!" After Splinter's timely brain-duster, Raph and Donnie exchanged a bewildered glance, struggling to comprehend what they were hearing. Last year, they never would have believed Mikey capable of keeping secrets to save his life, but now they had undeniable proof that he could keep them. The Hardy cousins were a sizable secret alone, but interdimensional travel and their father training with a ninja master from another world? That was pushing it.

"I always intended to tell you, my sons, when you became older," Splinter admitted with a sigh. "I just never could find a way to start that conversation...by the time you were old enough to understand, my Master Yoshi was gone, passed away, and I'd become a master myself."

"This...this is a lot to take in," Leo admitted scratching his head. "It's hard to believe you managed to keep this a secret from us so long."

"My son," Splinter asked with deceptive innocence, "which is more unbelievable: that a grumpy old rat has a few secrets left, or that he could learn everything about Ninjitsu from a book?"

Later that afternoon, everything was settled and a plan was developed, and Donatello was diligently studying the steps to opening an interdimensional portal. While he worked out his end, Amber took care of her own. Almost a year after leaving her world behind, that night, she would be going home... Why did that realization frighten her so much? For the moment, she had no answers.

"Amber?" The greeting startled the brunette from her thoughts and she turned to acknowledge the genius hovering in the kitchen doorway. "What did I miss?" She gave a sheepish smile, tugging nervously at one of the many grey locks streaking her hair—those grey locks were now hidden, disguised with bright blue and soft violet dye courtesy of Mercy's handiwork and Kimber's drink mix stash.

"I'm dead in that world," Amber reminded Donnie as he poured himself a cup of stale coffee and invited himself to the table with her. "That me looked pretty different from how I do now but the resemblance is strong enough people might panic. I need'a avoid notice while we're there, an' the easiest way to be ignored is to look like I don't belong."

"That makes absolutely no sense," Donnie remarked dubiously. "If you stand out, wouldn't you be more noticeable?"

"Not in small towns," Amber shrugged, still absently toying with the stray lock of grape violet hair. "I didn't fit in, remember? Because I didn't fit in, I was mostly ignored until Mum set her church
cronies on me. If I look like I'm just another glaikit toonser,~ the locals'll trip over'emselfs to ignore me~...it's safer bein' outlandish than ordinary when hidin' in a small town." Donnie tore his eyes away from the violet streaking her hair, a faint blush blooming in his cheeks. He wasn't crazy about the raspberry blue streaks, but she wore his color well...yes, purple looked very nice on his Amber.

"If you think it'll work," he sighed turning to stare down into his coffee, "then I'll trust you. You're used to the small town mentality whereas I've never been out of New York state for long." Silence filled the kitchen—cold, uncomfortable silence full of electricity and fear—until one of them was again driven to fill it.

"I'm...afraid." Amber's admission caught the genius off-guard.

"Master says the portal technique is safe, Honey," he reminded gently. "He's taught me everything he can. I'll be bringing notes just in case, and if we're not back in a week, he'll come for us himself. There's no need to be afraid."

"I'm not worried about the portal malfunctioning," she admitted with an embarrassed cringe. "I..." She faltered, took a steadying breath, then soldiered on ahead. "You know hardly anything about that me, not even what I looked like...an' I'm not foolish enough to assume you'll make it the entire trip without ever catching a glimpse of that me in some bog-awful photo or something. I'm just not lookin' forward to that happening."

"Does it really matter?" His words were blunt but his eyes softened the blow. "It's not the body that matters, remember? The soul in that body is what's important. I highly doubt your previous appearance could have any negative effect on my affection for you." Amber stared him down over her glasses, seemingly searching for any sign he was bluffing.

"Five-foot-three in shoes," she listed off in a deadpan tone. "Over two hundred pounds. Half-crippled at thirty-five an' on the far side of awkward. Constantly slouching because of fused vertebrae. Always tired. Frequently bitching even in a good mood. My hair was almost entirely grey an' startin' to thin an' my ass was big enough to prop a lamp on. Shall I continue?"

"If you wish," he shrugged. "It makes no difference to me—you've already told me most of this and it doesn't bother me." She finally broke eye contact, her eyes sad.

"There's more, though," she admitted softly. "I told you about Aaron...I told you there was no burn there...but it wasn't always like that." Though the admission worried him at first, Donnie patiently waited for her to fill in the blanks. "Mercy an' I met Aaron when we were in grade school, but we didn't really become friends until high school. I had a massive crush on him for years but never got any sign he felt the same an' eventually let it die out."

Unbidden, her memory reminded her of the day she and Aaron found her home destroyed— reminded her of the frantic way he clung to her as the skies broke open overhead. "The day we came back to find Willsdale in ruins, he kissed me...I thought he was just tryin' to calm me down, but Mercy..." She choked up, shaking her head bitterly. "What Mercy told me today suggests otherwise. If we somehow manage to make it there before he's done'imself harm, I can't guarantee how he'll react to seein' me."

Donatello considered her posture silently a moment, thinking over her confession. "You told me you love him," he reminded solemnly, "as a friend, not as a lover."

"That's correct—he's practically my brother."
"Then you're not worried about how you'll react to seeing him, only that I'll get jealous if he gets too close?" She winced.

"You know, when ya put it like that, it sounds ridiculous," she admitted under her breath.

"That's because it is ridiculous," he teased saluting her with his mug. "Real men don't mind other men coveting their lovers, only their lovers coveting other men."* Amber laughed and gave him a cheeky smile.

"Someone's been readin' Jane Austen, huh?" she teased. "An' here I thought you were more 1984 than Northanger Abbey." Her smile faded somewhat and she turned back to her tea. "I'll be honest with ya, Speccy…I don't see this goin' well. I'm dead in that world—we can't just expect that I'll be able to go back without any repercussions, even for a short time." Donnie studied her silently—from her brightly dyed hair to the faded traces of ink visible peeking up over her modest neckline—intent on burning the moment in his memory.

"You're worried about your loved ones," he reminded gently, "and until you know they're safe, you'll keep worrying about them until it breaks you." She nodded weakly. "I refuse to watch that happen, Amber, not when I can do something to prevent it." He reached out, clasping a supportive hand on her shoulder, and she looked up to meet his eyes over her glasses. "I won't let anything happen to you," the genius swore tucking a raspberry blue lock behind her ear. "Did you call the pizza parlor?" She blinked at him in confusion, but a moment later caught up.

"Yeah," she mumbled back. "I got a week unpaid to take care of my 'family emergency' but they're cuttin' my hours for the rest of the month over it…an' if I'm not there early on my first day back I'm fired. Never thought I'd say it, but my boss is even more of a dobber~ than my Da." She shrugged, torn between a smile and a cringe. "We shouldn't need a whole week—shouldn't even need more'n a few days—but I packed extra just in case." A frustrated sigh in the doorway drew the couple's attention—Mercy hesitated on the threshold, visibly torn. "What's wrong, Merse?" Amber asked the blonde. Mercy fidgeted, mussed her hair, then soldiered forward.

"I'm not goin' with ya." Donnie blinked in surprise.

"We didn't expect ya to," Amber answered her friend slowly. "If—"

"Good," Mercy cut her off brusquely, "as long as we're clear on that. That world's got nothin' left fer me, an' I ain't goin' back." Amber and Donnie exchanged a confused glance, both hoping the other had answers and both disappointed to find they didn't. Recognizing their confusion, Mercy rolled her eyes and stalked over to the fridge to pour herself a glass of iced tea. "Asshat's sulking," she grumbled fishing out a tall glass. "He thinks I'm goin' back an' won't listen when I tell'im I ain't. If y'all have everythin' together, please just get goin' before he demands to go with." Donnie couldn't quite stifle the snort of laughter that burst up his throat, and it earned him a sharp glare from the blonde. "Git.~"~

"Well," Amber chuckled nervously pushing herself back from the table. "You heard the lady...guess it's time to get a move on, huh? Mind grabbin' the bags?" With a quick peck on the cheek, Donnie ducked out to collect the packed duffle bag and carry-on from his room, leaving Amber and Mercy alone in the kitchen. "I understand yer reasons for not wantin' to go," Amber said softly, "an' I respect them. Is there anythin' you want us to do fer ya while we're there? Anyone ya want checked on?" Mercy avoided her eyes.

"You know the answer to that," the blonde muttered dropping into Donnie's vacated chair. "The only people I ever really had any interaction with were you an' yer family, Aaron, an' my family… an' all that's left of my family's Ma. Anythin' material we were able to save from the ranch is gonna
be with her, too, an' I ain't sendin' ya after anything. Better that ya don't have to deal with her."

"Mercy." The blonde looked up, blue eyes wide and nervous, and registered her friend's tired eyes. "It's alright to wonder...it's alright to wanna know she's safe, even after everything she did to you." Mercy grimaced, staring through the table before her.

"That obvious, huh?" she asked with a bitter sneer.

"Only to me," the brunette admitted settling back in her own chair. "I know you too well to not notice, Hon...an' I understand."

Mercy thought hard over her friend's words, distractedly reaching up for the beaded chain around her neck; just as the night Raphael's temper sent her fleeing to the park, she fiddled with the foiled sobriety chip dangling from it. It wasn't the same chip she wore when she and Donatello finally broke down and talked one-to-one—after all, she was well beyond her fourth month sober now, coming up on her ninth. Clarity Ross never even made it nine days without a drink... Denim blue eyes darted down to the metallic red chip in her grasp, contemplating it silently. Her mind made up, she twisted the chip free of the flimsy jump ring it hung from and tossed it to Amber.

"Ma had Ellis buried in the family plot," the blonde stated seriously. "He'd want to know I'm alright...please leave that for'im?" Amber visibly hesitated. "I'll be gettin' another one soon, anyway...I'm nine months sober next Friday." Mercy's lips quirked up in a humorless smile. "If you wanna check on Ma while you're there, I won't argue."

"Are you ready to go?" Donnie's voice in the doorway startled the two women, and, realizing he interrupted them, he gave them a sheepish smile.

"Yeah," Amber answered, then accepted the red foiled chip from Mercy and wrapped her in a tight hug. "I'll get this to'im...'til we're back, I'm countin' on you to keep everyone in line, a'right?" Mercy smirked and gave her friend a confident nod.

The odd family gathered in the hallway to the repurposed Barracks to bid their farewells; only Raphael was absent from the send-off, and Mercy was sure this was no coincidence. Armed with chalk and detailed notes, Donatello carefully scribbled the ceremonial seals on the concrete wall before him, all the while muttering a quickly memorized chant. With the last stroke and the final word, the pasty white lines began glowing with a bright unearthly light then vanished entirely... along with the concrete. A pitch black void yawned before them, not even a speck of light to be seen. He turned to Amber, swallowing down his nerves. "This part's your job," he explained quietly.

"What?" Amber squeaked in surprise, her eyes shooting over to meet Splinter's.

"Ordinarly," the older mutant explained patiently, "this ceremony would open a door directly to the Battle Nexus, but the destination can be altered through focused intent." The brunette turned to Donnie in confusion but he had no answers, so she turned back to Splinter. "Visualize the place you wish to arrive in." Splinter explained with a slight frown. "In your mind's eye, contemplate a location where your arrival will be both safe and unseen, in as much detail as possible." Amber glanced over at Mercy.

"What about the ruins between Aaron's house and your step-dahd's Ranch?" the brunette asked the blonde curiously. "Were they still standin' after the storms?" Mercy nodded in agreement, and Amber turned back to Donnie. "The ruins then—the area's been abandoned since the cabin there burned down—ya never even find any graffiti there, kids're always too scared'a the rumors." With every word, a tiny pinprick of light in the void grew larger and brighter, 'til it seemed like a light at the end of a tunnel. "That's not creepy at all," Amber mumbled edging closer to Donnie.
"Be safe, you two," Leo urged quietly. Donnie and Amber bid their final goodbyes, both worried what they'd find on the other side. With a shared steadying breath, they stepped into the void, following the light to a world apart from their own.

Mercy watched solemnly until their backs vanished into the void, then even longer until the portal in the wall faded back into stained concrete. Long after the others were gone, she still stood there in the hallway, hoping, wondering, and dreading all at once. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong—something about the whole plan to send Amber home to check on their loved ones sent chills down her spine. Eyes focused somewhere beyond the stained concrete wall, she watched, waited, and worried.

Screw this…driving herself up the wall would accomplish nothing. Struggling to clear her mind, the blonde ducked into the barracks to retrieve her boots and a jacket, then stalked out the side door. There was always something to be done in the garden, after all, and not much could clear her mind like yardwork.

In the open doorway to the massive green space the family created from the abandoned Railyard, Mercy paused, eyes locked on a familiar shape crouching beside a bed of freshly transplanted peppers. Raphael…he hadn't heard her, hadn't seen her, and for all intents and purposes, seemed too lost in his own brooding to register her presence. For a moment, she took advantage of her unintentional invisibility—seized it as an opportunity to soak in the sight of him and contemplate her strange and wondrous reactions to seeing him.

Warmth blooming in her stomach—downy fuzz filling her subconscious—sweat-slicked palms and a fluttering pulse—no other man ever drove her so out of her mind that she lost herself at the mere sight of him. Never before had the mere scent of a man's sweat driven her to distraction. Never before had she craved the touch and taste of another the way she craved Raphael. A lifetime ago, she would have let him go, would never have taken a chance on anyone for fear of proving her mother right. In this lifetime, she knew better…in this lifetime she had Raphael and she knew he'd never allow her to be hurt again, not while he still breathed. How did she get so lucky? Over four months had passed since Raphael opened his heart enough to let her in, but still, she didn't have an answer to that question.

Heaven, help me to surrender, she thought silently, eyes locked on the mutant who decided to be a better man for her. Show me mercy an' I'll never ask fer anythin' again.** Before she fell further into reflection, she broke herself loose, grabbed the handles of the rolling mulch bin, and strode confidently toward the mutant ruminating over her peppers. By the time she sank to her knees in the dirt and commenced shoveling out wood chips for the jalapenos, Raph was watching her in mute confusion. She didn't acknowledge him or greet him—when he was ready to talk, he'd do so without her prompting. Sure enough, he soon broke the tense silence.

"When's Donnie an' Amber leavin'?" he asked in a low rumble. Mercy shrugged, methodically heaping mulch around the first plant.

"Ya missed'em," the blonde answered, visibly untroubled. "They're gone—been so about twenty minutes now, I reckon." As she dipped back in for more mulch, Raph studied her seriously, combing through her words for anything that might have been lost in translation. He found nothing…even so, it didn't comfort him any.

"Ya didn't go with'em," the mutant confirmed aloud. "They're goin' back to yer homeworld an' ya didn't go with'em." Denim blue eyes rolled and Mercy shook her head with a long-suffering sigh.

"I told'ja I wasn't goin' with'em," she reminded dryly, but her unaffected expression pinched into a
vicious scowl. The plant she was working with had some mild bug damage, from the looks of it, some sort of beetle. "Boris, yer lettin' me down," she grumbled snipping off the damaged foliage. "Start earnin' yer keep or I'm'onna take a can'a Raid after ya, mark my words." ~ The massive mutant beside her cringed, well-remembering the huge, hairy wolf spider Mercy named Boris and released into the garden. How he managed to stack up enough bad karma to wind up with a spider-loving woman when he himself fea—er, hated bugs was quite beyond him.

"I don't get it." The grumbled words drew her eyes to his in bemusement. "Dat world's yer home—yer a country gal, Merse, but yer stayin here, in da city...why?" He shook his head with a scoff, quickly riling himself up for a fight. "Ya should'a gone with'em! Ya don't belong here, Kid, ya—" With lightning-fast reflexes, Mercy snatched the trowel out of the mulch bin and whacked him on the shin with it, eliciting a startled shout; the pained bellow was quickly followed by a snarl and scowl as the indignant mutant clutched his stinging shin.

"I told'ja I'm stayin'," she reminded shaking the trowel at him like a scolding finger. "I ain't changin' my mind, not fer all the cows in the world. This's my home now—yer my home now, ya meathead!" Rolling her eyes, she turned back to her task. "Quit tryin'a chase me off before I give ya a reason to want me gone." Raphael stared at her, half stunned, half confused, and entirely speechless; Mercy paid him no mind, instead, falling to grumbling at him under her breath. "I also told'ja they're jus' goin' back to make sure no one's offed'emseolves but did'ja listen?~ No, no one ever listens to Mercy!~" After a few more grumbled complaints, Raph finally worked up the courage to interrupt.

"Yer sure, Merse?" he asked, hazel eyes sweeping from the frayed knees of her jeans to her messy blonde hair and over every inch between them. "Ya gotta chance to live in da country again—ya could get out'a da city." He shook his head, sinking to his backside on the dirt-strewn concrete and reaching up to dig his fingers into his stiff neck. "If ya stay here, in da city...Babe, I can't give ya everythin' ya deserve, not when we're stuck livin' in da sewers an' subways."

"What exactly is it ya think I deserve?" the blonde demanded, pinning him with her eyes. "Safety? Security? Happiness, love, a reason fer tryin'?"

"All'a dat!" Raph answered flinging one arm wide in exasperation. "All'a dat an'—"~ She cut him off again.

"Ya a'ready gimme all'a that, Raphael,~" Mercy insisted soberly. "I feel safe with ya—I feel secure in yer home. Ya make me happier'n~ I've ever been, ya gimme a reason to keep tryin' an' keep fightin'..." A faint hint of pink darkened her cheeks and an uncomfortable cringe twisted her naked lips. "As fer love...I love ya, ya love me, an' that's more'n~ I ever thought I'd have. Maybe ya can't gimme cows an' country air more'n once in a while, but yer worth it, ten times over."

Muddy brown darkened the pale skin around his muzzle but he wore a wide, lopsided smirk. Crossing his legs he patted one bulky thigh and when she accepted the invitation his smirk spread into a grin. The peppers, the cows, and the other world were all but forgotten as the two lovers clashed, first at the hips, then at the lips, neither content with being apart.

"I love ya, Raphie," Mercy repeated softly into the crook of his neck, smiling at how his pulse thundered against her lips. "AIN'T nothin' gonna change that. Quit waitin' fer me to run off, okay?" A contemplative rumble of acceptance vibrated against her shoulder.

"A'right," Raph accepted soberly, carding his thick fingers through her mussed hair. "I still think ya should go home for a lil' while at least, anyway," he admitted. "Ya got family an' friends dere...it might do ya good ta go back fer a visit, you know, get some closure 'er whateva it is Donnie was talkin' 'bout earlier."
"No." The denial was surprisingly vehement, and he eased her away to study her expression for answers.

"No?" he asked.

"Make that a fuck no," she corrected sourly. "Amber's checkin' on Willis, Raph, an' other'n Willis, the only other person I ever cared about in that world was my Ma... an' there's no way in Hell I'm goin' back to'er again!" The massive mutant said nothing, but Mercy felt that nothing was a rather infuriating way of saying something. "I made that mistake too many times a'ready—I died determined to never go back to'er again!" She winced, reaching up to clutch the ever-present sobriety chip from her necklace, only to recall its absence and let her hand fall uselessly over her knee. "I've finally got the balls to live my own life, Red," she summed up with a weak shrug. "If I go back to'er anyway, I'll have died fer nothin'... an' I can't take that."

Raph considered her words a silent moment, gently petting her messy hair. "I find it hard ta believe ya eva' lacked balls, Kid," he remarked without emphasis. "I gotta feelin' ya had plenty'a will ta fight, jus' like now, but'cha just didn't find nothin' worth fightin' fer."– A rough, callused fingertip curled under Mercy's pointed chin, urging her to meet the amber eyes a little above hers. "Yer worth fightin' fer," Raph swore leaning down to rest his brow on hers and hold her eyes. "It ain't gotta happen anytime soon, an' ya won't go alone, but someday, ya really need'a face'er again, just ta prove yer stronger'n she is... yer not alone, Sweetheart... ya'll neva be alone again as long's I'm breathin'."

Touched, choking up, Mercy stole his lips in a hungry, wanton kiss, leaning into the scarred palms cupping her jaw and the small of her back. Even as she let her feelings sweep her away and threw herself headlong into the wonder that was Raphael's softer side, she struggled against silent doubt. She'd rather walk barefoot through the hottest depths of Hell than ever see her mother again, but even now, she was held back by the years of abuse she suffered at Clarity's hands. If she never faced Clarity again, never confronted her demons, how could she ever move beyond her fears of intimacy and shame? More so, if she were to face Clarity again, would she emerge stronger than before, or would it entirely break her?

The salty-sweet lips against hers had no answers, and neither did she, but for the moment, she was totally fine with that.

WORDS

~ A "glaikit toonser" – Scottish slang, glaikit– stupid and toonser – someone from the city. (Compare to cliché 'city-slicker' or Southern 'dumbass Yank'.)
~ "the locals'll trip over'emselfes to ignore me." – 'The local population will do everything in their power to pretend I don't exist, even if it means making asses of themselves.' Not speaking for EVERY small town, but my experience with small towns has taught me the easiest way to be ignored and left alone is to act like an oblivious tourist. This is ESPECIALLY effective in Cold's hometown—all it takes is being surprised by chickens in the road to render you 'a dumbass Yank' to the local populace, who will then avoid you like the plague.
~ Dobber – Scottish slang for fool, stupid person, or dickhead. She's using the latter definition.
~ Git – Midwestern and Southern slang verb, not Brit-slang insult. When used in a sentence it's just an awkward pronunciation of 'get' [pronounced exactly as written] but when it's used on its own, like in this passage, it's an emphatic insistence that someone leave. Pronounced Gyit or GEE-it with the GEE (Soft g as in gift) shortened and bleeding into the less-emphasized –it. The 't' is usually insinuated rather than
enunciated, especially in the Midwest.

~ Boris, yer lettin' me down—Start earnin' yer keep or I'm'onna take a can'a Raid after ya, mark my words. – Boris, you're letting me down—Start eating the bugs or I'll spray you with Raid, (bug killer) just you watch me! (Recall that "Boris the Spider" was named for a song by the same name, by, I believe, The Who.)

~ I also told'ja they're jus' goin' back to make sure no one's offed'emselves~ but did'ja listen? – 'I also told you they're just going back (to Amber and Mercy's world) to make sure no one has killed themselves, but did you listen?' This is a direct reference to Amber's dream of Aaron contemplating drowning himself in 'Wilson's Crick.'

~ All'a dat – all'a dat an' [more] – all of that – all of that and more.

~ Ya a'ready gimme all'a that. – You already give me all of that.

~ Happier'n / more'n / other'n – Happier than / more than / other than. Both are Midwestern/Southern-isms. First is pronounced like adding urn to happy, the second and third sound somewhat like MORE-un and UTHER-in.

~ I find it hard ta believe ya eva' lacked balls. – I find it hard to believe you ever lacked [the] balls [to do something.]

~ I gotta feelin' ya had plenty'a will ta fight, jus' like now, but'cha just didn't find nothin' worth fightin' fer. Yer worth fightin' fer. – I've got a feeling you had plenty of will to fight, just like now, but you just couldn't find anything worth fighting for. You're worth fighting for.

~ It ain't gotta happen anytime soon, an' ya won't go alone, but someday, ya really need'a face'er again, just ta prove yer stronger'n she is. – It doesn't have to happen anytime soon, and you won't go there alone, but someday, you really need to face your mother again just to prove you're stronger than she is.

~ Yer not alone, Sweetheart...ya'll neva be alone again as long's I'm breathin'. – You're not alone, Sweetheart...you'll never be alone again as long as I'm breathing. [Alive] Verdict: Raph has a mushy side but it takes some digging to reach it. :3

Get your Raph&Mercy fluffiness on with this playlist!

or

Kick up the mushy-mush with this playlist!

Chapter End Notes

If anyone didn't see this coming, I'll be horribly ashamed of myself. Okay, not really, I'll just assume I need to try the mallet next time I need to hammer a point home. ;)

NOTES:
*1984– George Orwell. "No man is offended by another man's admiration of the woman he loves; it is the woman only who can make it a torment." — Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

** "Heaven help me to surrender / Show me mercy, please believe me / I will never ask for anything again" – "Give Me a Love," Sixx: A.M.
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

A disclaimer for this chapter, Folks. I normally make a habit of confronting the proverbial elephants in the room in this story and especially focus on acknowledging the gritty and unpleasant sides of reality to balance out the fluffy mushy stuff, but this one has more than usual. Honestly, it's liable to upset a few folks, but I stand by it…and, unfortunately, it's true.

There's a lot to be loved about Missouri, especially southern Missouri and the Ozark Mountains, but there's a lot of unpleasant stuff here, too. I've been all over this state and have yet to find a single part of it that doesn't reek from agriculture and idiots cooking meth. The weather's unpredictable and the people even more so. The list of embarrassments goes on forever, but just like it, so does the list of positives—we have the most biologically diverse ecosystem of any US state, and our conservation department is rated among the highest. There are plenty of ignorant hicks, but there are just as many—if not MORE—honest, genuine, and amiable people to be found among them. Despite the difficulties we face from calling this state home—high heat and humidity, crazy weather, rocky dirt and susceptibility to tornadoes, droughts, floods, earthquakes, AND fallout-storms from hurricanes hitting the Gulf, AND at least one (inactive) volcano—many who call this state home do so by choice rather than by necessity—we live here, love here, and thrive here against all odds.

Anyhoo. That said, when you read the unpleasant sides of Willsdale—unpleasant sides common to many Missouri small towns AND much of the state—please also keep in mind the positives you'll also read. Don't let the ugly stuff scare you off—if you give MO a chance to prove herself, by gor, she will. She IS the "Show-Me State" after all, and this chapter's dedicated to her. ;)

Lastly, the next four chapters are going to be way more OC-centric than previous ones—the only canon you'll be seeing for the most part is Donnie and you're mostly going to be seeing Amber and her family. Those are the primary reasons these chapters have been a PitA to get cranked out quickly enough. These chapters ARE, unfortunately, vital to the ongoing plot-line and will provide answers to a few ongoing questions, so please be patient. As of Chapter 56, we'll be back to the usual routine and variety. That said, hope y'all enjoy!
Check out the official "Return to Willsdale" playlist on Spotify!

Suggested Listening: The Rasmus "No Fear," Nickelback "Far Away"

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52: Absolutes 1 - Crossing Worlds is Impossible

Another world, Willsdale, Missouri

Day 1

The first thing to register was blindingly bright light; the second was an unparalleled stench that tripped Donnie's gag reflex. By the time he was sure exhaling wouldn't lead to vomiting, the yawning portal behind them was fading into crumbling, soot-stained brick. At his side, Amber cringed, her nose wrinkled in disgust. "Crime-in-it'ly!~ she swore clapping both hands over her nose and mouth. "I don't remember it smellin' this bad!"

"This place normally stinks?" Don asked dubiously through his own hand.

"Unfortunately," Amber admitted with a wince, "yeah. Willsdale's a farmin' town, an' the state it's in is often called the 'meth capital of the country.' The Missouri Ozarks are a beautiful an' amazing place, but there're enough morons cookin' crank to make the whole state reek." Still grimacing from the oppressive odor in the air, she warily scanned their surroundings for any sign they were spotted. Nothing—no one was in the area as she expected, and the area was far too remote for anyone to ever be nearby—but one thing was definitely off about the area dappled with sunlight from above and shadow from neighboring trees.

In utter disbelief, she stared at the ruins around them—barely visible concrete foundations, a few scattered stones, a pile of crumbling wooden shake siding… "What happened to this place?" she muttered as she wandered around inspecting the faint remnants of the former residence. "This ain't right...there was still a whole wall left last I saw—an' that pile'a wood was a shed, still half-standin'! What—" Having turned a full circle, she fell short, staring in befuddlement at the queasy mutant half-crumpled in front of the only standing remnant of the long-burned cabin: the fireplace. "Oi," Amber muttered with a crooked grin. "Harry Potter, eat yer heart out!"

"Really, Amber?" Donnie muttered dryly. "You seriously went there?"

"Well, someone had to," she teased with a shit-eating grin, but that grin faded into confusion as she scanned their fog-hung surroundings more closely. "Still," she remarked approaching the stand of trees just beyond the ruins. "Somethin' just ain't right here... As Donnie slowly acclimated to the stinking, humid air and wandered over to her, the brunette solemnly came to a stop at the base of an odd tree. Sharp, menacing thorns littering the trunk and branches, palmate branches of odd round leaves, long bunches of small pinkish-white blooms dangling like grapes on the vine...she reached up and caught one of the bunches in her fingertips, easily twisting off a single tiny bloom.

"This is...this is a Black Locust," she muttered, face pinched in bewilderment as she inspected it closely. "But...but they—it shouldn't—!" Before Donnie could get out a single word, she bolted—sprinting through the thick tree-cover off into the distance with a surety of step that only living in the hills could bring.

"Amber, wait!" he called out taking off in pursuit. Even with the way well-lit, he struggled to find his footing—the earth was hilly and rocky, thick with years' worth of fallen leaves and debris and marshy from recent rains. It seemed every step he stumbled over a rock, a hole, an up-thrust tree root, or even just an uneven patch of turf. "Amber, slow down—hold up!"
Unhearing, drowning in dismay and disbelief, Amber sprinted through the close-growing Locust trees, ducking thorny branches and side-stepping fallen limbs. All around her were signs she recognized—signs that made no sense considering how much time had passed since her death. The massive grove of Black Locust trees was almost a carpet of pale, pendulous blooms, interspersed with flowering Pawpaws and pink-decked Redbuds. Fog hung heavy along the ground, every now and then interrupted by blooming umbrella-shaped may-apples. Off in the distance, familiar wildlife called—woodpeckers hammering and knocking, the musical trilling of Gray Tree Frogs, the raspy comb-striking bark of a grey fox posturing for its mate—No…it wasn't possible, it—

"Amber!" Donnie's sudden shout finally broke the horrified brunette from her thoughts and she turned to acknowledge him. The very sight of him, scratched and bleeding from the thorny trees and slightly limping from a possibly cramping ankle, reminded her that he wasn't used to the terrain—he was used to the city and this hilly, rocky deathtrap she was familiar with wasn't easy for non-natives to navigate.

"Sorry," she muttered carefully picking a few stick-weed seeds and bramble twigs from his suspenders and mask. "Something doesn't make sense, Dee…I don't understand it." He waited patiently, for once unable to fill in the blanks she left him. "Black Locusts, May-Apples, Pawpaws, an' Redbuds bloomin', tree frogs singin'…" She scoffed scanning the overgrown tree stand around her. "None'a that happens 'til late spring, early summer, but when we left home, it was late fall! I've been in yer world about ten months, Dee, it should be about February, here! There ought'a be ice-storms all over the place an' it ought'a be too cold fer much to be bloomin!'" A pair of strong hands latched onto her shoulders, grounding her.

"Honey," Donatello reminded gently, "breathe." It took a moment to see his point, during which she could do nothing but stare at him in dismay, but she finally conceded. "Now," the mutant continued in a low, calming tone, "maybe time moves differently between different worlds. What exactly has you so worried about us arriving in Spring?" She avoided his eyes, glancing nervously to the patches of hazy sky visible between the trees overhead.

"If…If I'm readin' all this right," she explained, "then it's probably May…" Haunted green eyes met Donnie's again. "Willsdale's smack-dab in the middle'a tornado alley, Dee, an' May's the middle'a the first tornado season!"

"Wait, the first one?" he asked finally releasing her.

"Yeah." Amber reached up to her shoulder to latch onto one of her braids, only to remember she left her hair in a tail instead of braiding it, and her hand instead fell to tightly grip her opposite wrist. "Officially there's only one season, Spring, but unofficially there's a second, shorter one in Fall—anytime ya got enough hot an' cold air collidin' durin' the transitional seasons, ya got a chance of tornadoes. I'm…Dee, I'm not ready fer another May yet…"

The unspoken, hidden between the lines out of embarrassment and shame, hit Donnie like a sucker punch. "May fifteenth," he muttered under his breath, unable to meet her eyes. "You died on May fifteenth." He tugged at his neck. "Surely we didn't…arrive before then? –or shortly after?"

"No," Amber acknowledged weakly. "World-hoppin's weird enough, no way can time travel be possible. That's just ridiculous…but so's the idea that I've only been dead a few weeks." She shuddered at the very thought and turned to lead him up a steep forested hill to the North. "Aaron's place isn't far, just outwith~ the edges of the Locust grove…if we haul-arse, we'll make it out in no time. Stay close an' ya won't stumble as much." After only a few paces through the underbrush, a harsh, raspy chittering noise split the air echoing as though coming from every direction—something
almost like a dog coughing, rapid-fire scoffs interspersed with wheezing ku-ku-ku-KWAAAAY-KWAAAAY calls. Several more followed in swift succession from seemingly every direction and Donnie nervously scanned the surrounding area for the source.

"What on earth?" Donnie muttered, his brow furrowed in irritated confusion. "That's an annoying bird call!"

"'S not birds," Amber explained with a teasing smile. "Jus' squirrels cussin'. Ya never gotten bawled out by a squirrel before?" It took a moment for him to register that she was teasing him, then he gave a sheepish grin.

"Not really – they're usually only in parks, and we don't exactly fit in in the parks." Shortly afterward, they reached the crest of the hill and drew up short. As far as the eye could see, the land bucked and dipped with tall hills, some heavy with trees and others nearly bare of vegetation; between each hill stretched low valleys hung with thick misty fog. About a mile to the northwest lay Willsdale proper centered on the Town Square and surrounded on every side by sprawling farmland and rippling, jutting hills and hollers. Most remarkable of all, up on that hilltop as Amber and Donnie were, they seemed on top of the very world—almost high enough to reach out and touch the blistering surface of the star just above them.

"They say that he got crazy, once, and he tried to touch the sun." Amber's voice, relating borrowed words from her last lifetime, was hushed with wonder. "John Denver was singin' 'bout Colorado, but the meanin's the same here—when the sun rises over the bluffs an' sets over the knobs an' hollers, it seems close enough to reach without the aid of wax wings."

"So this is your home," Donatello remarked in quiet awe. "It's...it's incredible...and it seems almost—almost familiar..."

Amber hesitated a moment, debating asking for an explanation, but ended up deciding against it. "See that white box at the edge of the trees?" she pointed out instead. Donnie nodded, his eyes quickly fixing on a small structure flanked by two smaller outbuildings; it wasn't far off, maybe half a mile away. "That's Aaron's place—we should be there in about fifteen minutes tops if we follow the path right." As they made their way down the steep side of the hilltop, though, Amber's thoughts weren't so much on Donnie or Aaron as on the world they were now in. 'Well O'Brien,' she thought to herself with a slightly snide expression that made Donnie blink in confusion. 'Welcome home...try not ta gitcher arse killed this time.'

The last time Amber was in the dark, shabby trailer home, she, Mercy, and Aaron Willis were piled around his living room with takeout and the two blonds were engaged in a particularly vicious Halo match. That was a lifetime ago—New Year's Eve of 2010, if she recalled correctly—and the room was entirely different. Before, the room was full of clutter but clean; now it reeked of dirty cat-boxes, cheap beer, household garbage, and unwashed bodies and laundry. Other than the towering shelves of water-spotted game cases, the furniture, and an old, cheaply-made flatscreen TV, the room was unusually empty...perhaps, she considered, because Aaron's trailer received heavy damage from the two storms that ended her life in Willsdale. If his belongings were destroyed, he wouldn't have been able to replace much of it; he was among the stubborn sort who believed maintaining insurance was a sure-fire way to end up needing it, then suffered for it when shit hit the fan anyway.

Though he never admitted it aloud, Donatello was appalled, partly because the back door was unlocked and propped open, partly because he saw no less than three cats lounging on the sofa alone, and partly because of the state of the mobile home. Empty beer cans lined the surface of the coffee table like sloppy soldiers blowing a surprise inspection. Empty pizza boxes and beer cartons were stacked on top of the trashcan. Dirty clothes littered the floors and draped over furniture. Amber
froze in the doorway to the living room, her eyes instantly locking on the unmoving lump sprawled across the sofa half-buried in cats and a familiar black afghan.

Aaron. Amber hesitated, one foot on the kitchen's grubby peeling linoleum, one foot on the living room's gritty stained carpet, stunned by the sight of her dear friend fallen so far. Finally, she got herself together and crept forward, a cautious glance reminding Donnie to stay in the shadows. "Hey, Numb-Nuts," she greeted the fluffy black tomcat, reaching out to teasingly pat its backside; when it snorted and began ignoring her—his way of accepting her presence—she turned to scratch the perpetually-itchy cheeks of the twin calicoes curled up on the nearer armrest and the couch occupant's hip. "Asshat, Assbutt, you two been takin' care'a Daddy for me?"

"Why're you insulting the cats?" Donnie whispered.

"I'm not," she answered with a cringe. "Those're actually their names...Aaron's a piece'a work.# There should be three more around here somewhere—Kirk's probably patrolling for mice an' Barf-Breath an' Dillweed are a lil' wary of strangers."

"I can't imagine why," the genius muttered in derision. "With a name like that, I'd hide too." Amber rolled her eyes at him—a gesture he interpreted as something like 'preachin' to the choir'—and reached out to shake the shoulder of the body curled up on the sofa.

"Aaron." No response—of course, he stank of stale beer and old vomit, so she wasn't too surprised. She shuddered to think how he managed to reach this point—a level the awkward country boy only ever sunk to after his stepfather died and left Aaron, his mother, and his younger sisters deep in debt and even deeper in medical bills. "Aaron, please wake up."

No response from the man passed out on the sofa. Amber carefully peeled the afghan away from his face only to recoil in disgust; his reddish winter beard was long-since grown into full-on mountain man and his blond corkscrew curls were greasy and matted. 'I take it back,' she considered amidst the aching of her heart, 'he's never been this bad—even after Ron died he still bathed every now and then.' These were desperate times for Aaron Willis...and desperate times called for desperate measure. "Willis! I brought yer favorite pizza an' it's got pickles on it!"

The result was instantaneous. Off-kilter blue eyes shot open wide and their owner gasped in horror, nearly sending Donnie through the roof. Without so much as stopping to grab his perpetually-bent glasses, Aaron vaulted off the sofa, got tangled up in the afghan and hit the floor, fought free, and took off for the dark kitchen like a shot. In the doorway he slowed to a stop, silently taking in the empty room that didn't even remotely smell of pizza; his shoulders slumped, his face fell, and to Amber's complete disbelief, his eyes welled up. The sound of his fist impacting the wall rang through the air; Aaron crumpled to the floor, choking. Without a second thought, Amber stalked toward him and did precisely what she'd been longing to since the last time she dreamed about him: she whacked him upside the head.

"Aaron Elvin Willis!" she barked as he turned to her in absolute disbelief. "What'd I tell yer arse about gettin' tanned~ alone?! Ya can't hold yer liquor worth shite—ya stink'a~ vomit!" Aaron gaped at her, silent, disbelieving; his eye darted around the room, perhaps searching for some proof he was dreaming, then landed on her again, wide and bewildered.

"Amb...O'Brien?" After the false start, the name was soft, hushed, almost reverent despite the disbelief.

"Naw," she scoffed pointedly. "I'm the ghost'a Scotch-snobs past, here ta skelp yer arse fer drinkin' without me. Yes it's me, ya honkin' mink!~" For a moment, nothing happened—Aaron stared at her in disbelief, soaking in the sight of her as though expecting her to vanish into thin air. Finally, he
reacted…by poking her in the arm. Unsurprised, Amber crossed her arms, arched an eyebrow at him, and waited for the inevitable freakout when she didn't vanish right before his eyes. The realization that his fingertip impacted something solid was followed by a cascade of emotions playing across his face—joy, fear, despair, then, finally, determination.

Amber would later realize that determined glint in his eyes should have warned her about his intents; for the moment, she was taken completely by surprise, both by his sudden launching himself to his feet and the equally sudden way he planted his lips on hers, latching onto her like he'd never let go. Sputtering and cringing from the feel of his greasy beard and the smell of old vomit and older beer clinging to his clothing, Amber frantically pushed at his chest. Finally, satisfied that she was actually there, he relented and backed away a pace. Massive paws gripping her arms with surprising gentleness, he drew his eyes from hers down to her feet then back up again, reassuring himself that she was unharmed.

"How's this possible?" he asked as she led him back over to the sofa to sit. "Amber, how're ya here? You—ya died! We buried ya!"

"It's a long story," Amber admitted nervously brushing a stray tendril of hair back behind her ear. "I've got time."

The explanation seemed simple in her head; in reality, it took the better part of an hour. By the time everything was in the clear, Donnie's presence was revealed, and Aaron was off to get himself cleaned up, the sun was beginning its slow descent. His initial return was greeted by a startled shout from Donnie. "Don't diss the white 'fro," Aaron grumbled smushing his bouffant blonde curls flat to his head; in defiance, the locks sprang right back up again. His already dry hair stood out almost straight, surrounding his head with a frizzy woolly puff the size of an inflated beach ball.

"...right..."

Now, clean if not clean-shaven, the blond stood silently in the doorway, good eye locked on the woman silently loading his dishwasher. "Yer really here," he muttered shuffling over to help her. "I thought…well, ya know what I thought." Amber uttered a wordless sound of agreement and gave him a fond smile. "Ya look different…younger, healthier..." He hazarded a quick once-over and his nose crinkled in distaste. "...skinnier..."

"The body I snatched is younger an' healthier." She shrugged. "Kimber dropped out, ran away, an' joined a gang, but she never got hit by a minivan. Ya win some, ya lose some, right?"

From the doorway, Donatello studied the older man curiously, particularly curious about the blond's pale blue eyes—eyes that were visibly trained on different targets. The genius didn't realize he was caught looking until Aaron turned toward him, pointedly focusing first one eye on him, then the other, then going back again in a 'shifting' motion. Ruddy brown streaked across Donnie's cheeks in embarrassment and he averted his gaze to the floor. "Sorry," the mutant mumbled awkwardly. "Amber never mentioned you have Strabismus…I just wasn't expecting it."

^ Aaron smirked, clearly amused by the other's embarrassment over something that didn't really bother him.

"I didn't think it mattered," Amber remarked pausing to elbow Aaron in the side in reminder of his promise to be at least halfway polite. "It's not like he's blind in one eye or something." To her disbelief, the blond blanched, turning to haul another load of plates out of the sink. The Aaron she knew would have had a dozen smartass remarks to follow up with and wouldn't have hesitated to use any; this Aaron was hiding something and she knew exactly what that was. "What?!" she demanded bodily turning him to face her again. "When'd that happen?! When I died ya could still see out'a yer
"It was a'ready goin' to shit when ya died, O'Brien," Aaron grumbled at his upset friend. "'bout a year'n a half ago it finished the job." Amber stared at him, brow furrowed in confusion, and shook her head in denial, and Aaron busied himself with breaking down the boxes piled next to the trashcan.

"How's that possible?" Amber asked quietly, glancing to Donnie for confirmation. "That can't be—I haven't even been in his world a whole year!"

Aaron froze. His stubbled throat worked around a swallow, the motion visible now that his facial hair was trimmed back to his usual handlebar-goatee. For a moment he seemed to work himself up to something—seemed to gather his wits and steel his nerves. Eyes weary, he turned back to Amber, setting aside the cardboard to catch her by the shoulders in a steadying, calming grip. "Amber," he professed in all seriousness, "You died two years ago tomorrow…it's May 14th, 2013."

It was bad enough for Amber to think she was back in Willsdale shortly after she died there; to find she arrived just before the second anniversary of her death was almost unbearable. By the time she managed to process this she knew there was only one thing to do—there was only one way to cope with such an insane situation as she was in…getting completely rat-arsed.~

Thus, after a nerve-wracking ride to town on Aaron's handlebars without a helmet, Amber and Aaron crawled into the local watering hole—the Staggering Rat Pub—and seated themselves at a dark corner table. Up at the bar, a pair of dove-grey eyes noticed them, widened in surprise, then darted around the room for some sign their owner was hallucinating. Bhaltair Devon studied the young woman and the older blond in confusion trying to wrap his head around the occurrence, with or without his ponytail of fine white hair. Only the arrival of a familiar face—the solemn green-eyed waitress he hired a couple years back—broke him from his thoughts.

"Yew been by table five yet?" "Bart" asked under his breath. A mere couple years ago, his pronounced brogue would have stunned Kimber Bryant almost as much as finding out she socked a mutant turtle in the jaw during a gang war. After almost two years working for him, though, the other-worlder didn't even bat an eye; after all, Bart's father Glen Devon had a much thicker accent and Kimber herself had a pretty thick Jersey accent before her death – an accent she was attempting to fade just like the twang she eradicated as a teenager. Never let it be said she didn't appreciate a challenge.

"Naw, not yet," Kimber answered with a chagrined half smile. "I had to duck into t'a~ powder room, was just on my way t'ere." Bart waved her off with one hairy mitt, the other snagging a pair of menus from behind the bar he manned.

"Ah've goat'em," he insisted with a reassuring smile. "The young lahss looks a lil' fameliar."~ Before Kimber could question him, he brushed past, headed to Amber and Aaron's table, and set the menus on the old oak surface with a disarming smile. "Ahfternewn, Wellis," he greeted the horrified blond, easily recognizing that Aaron's younger companion was likely kicking him under the table in reminder to keep cool. "Who's yer lahss?"~

"I'm not'is lahss," Amber corrected with a tight smile, unaware that her pronunciation of the word—the use of a flat-a instead of a sharp-a—gave her away completely. She spoke like someone used to the word rather than a local hijacking the term…and her observant uncle recognized it instantly. "I'm just a friend of'is—name's Kimber, I'm from up North." The white-haired older man gave a wide, disarming smile that seemed all crooked upper teeth.
"Funny, tha',"~ he remarked with an easy laugh. "Yew see tha' lovely young'un at the bar? Her name's also Kember, an' she's a Northerner, tew."~ Amber froze, struggling to keep her nerves from showing.

"I-It's a common name up there," she stammered hoping to throw him off. After all, the middle of a bar during the lunch hour wasn't the time or place for a dead woman to reunite with her family, and there was sure to be drama when that reunion occurred. Right now all she wanted was a moment to process the passage of time and enjoy a glass of her favorite poison with her friend. "There were three of us in my graduatin' class alone—drove the professors insane." The staring contest with her uncle spanned a few moments longer, every breath of which passed with the brunette poised for flight. Increasingly frantic, she cringed and added onto the mistruth in hopes of derailing his suspicion with humor. "They ended up callin' us by our last names to keep us straight, so I was just 'Butz.'^^ It was awkward." Finally, Bart gave another wide grin and laughed as though imagining the young woman hiding her face at roll call.

"Ah'll say!" he teased nudging the menus toward them in a silent hint. "Ah'll send the other Kember yer way in a wee bit fer yer orders. Welcome to Wellsdale, Kember Butz, we're glahd to have ye."~

He cut himself off suddenly, eyes locking on the tall, slender redhead approaching their table with a confident sway in her step. "Hey t'ere," she greeted with a coy smile. "Can I take yer order?" Amber looked up. A pair of glass-shielded grey-green eyes locked with a pair of bottle-greens impeccably lined with smoky eyeliner; the owners of both gaped in disbelief, Amber recognizing the waitress from dreams and the waitress recognizing her from the mirror. The air crackled with tension as the Jersey Nut-Job locked eyes with her old body and the Crazy Celt stared up at the owner of the body she unintentionally snatched. Bewildered by the two women's awkward, intense stare-down, Aaron glanced back and forth between them, searching for answers.

Finally, the stare-down was broken but not in any way Aaron expected. By the time he realized what happened, Amber was already out the front door, sprinting toward his bike like the Jersey Devil was on her heels.

Not twenty minutes after Amber and Aaron headed to the bar for "a sesh,"~ the front door of the trailer wrenched open with a screech and slammed shut so hard the windows rattled. "Remember what I said about time travel bein' ridiculous?" Amber called out to the mutant sprawled out on the lumpy sofa. "It's back on the ta—" Upon seeing the old photo album open on Donnie's lap, propped up by the head of one of the clingy calicoes from the look of it, she pulled a verbal about-face. "What're you doing?"

"Found it under the sofa," the mutant explained with a half shrug. "Your smelly friend doesn't have cable and I couldn't see a router. I got bored."

"The router's in my room," Aaron contradicted with a narrow-eyed scowl that made him closely
resemble his cantankerous counterpart. Donnie brushed it off, scooting over for Amber to sit beside him. The moment she did, she caught sight of the page the album was open to—or, rather, the only photo on that page.

"Oh jeez," she groaned, slapping her palm over her eyes and shaking her head in disbelief. "Willis, I told ya to burn that photo an' salt the ashes."

"What?" Aaron's expression was entirely innocent—as innocent as Mikey's puppy-dog eyes when the last soda went missing. "It's proof ya had a rack under those tents ya wore."

"I'll say," Donnie muttered glancing from the photo to Amber and back again in contemplation. "Kimber's hair is more brown—here, it's almost auburn." He considered the photo a moment longer, inwardly comparing it to the Amber he only ever saw in his dreams, then closed the album and set it aside. "Now what do you mean time travel's back on the table?" She seemed lost for a moment but soon caught up.

"Kimber's workin' at my uncle's pub," she explained gravely, holding Donnie's eyes over the rims of her glasses. "My uncle hired my counterpart, Dee, an' she recognized me—I mean her—I mean—" She gave up on finding the proper term and gave a 'screw it, you know what I mean' gesture with a loud, frustrated utterance the mutant could only interpret as "GACGH!~"

"Kimber's in this world," he repeated slowly. "She died in 2016..."

"...an' now she's in 2013," Amber acknowledged. "Just like I died in 2011 an' showed up five years later. Whatever's responsible fer this travesty's got a sick sense'a humor." The couple avoided one another's eyes, both considering the impact this new twist would have on their mission. It was already going to be difficult to make sure everyone was safe and get home without being found out, but with Kimber there, too...

"This...complicates things." Amber slumped back into the cat-hair-covered sofa, shaking her head weakly.

"Now I really need that drink."

Memory was a fascinating thing—sounds, smells, sights, all manner of sensation came together to save moments for future recollection. Every now and then, though, the process could go awry, convincing people they recalled something that never happened. This moment was one such instance—a memory without a moment to fall back on.

Soft Spring breezes rippled tasseled grass. Cotton-tail clouds drifted across a field of forget-me-not blue. As far as the eye could see, bunches of white and powder pink blossoms carpeted the hills all the way down to the foggy hollers. Willsdale...this was Amber's Willsdale, the world she came from and the world she just made it back to. Perched tensely in the middle-most branches of a familiar gnarled Pin Oak, she studied the landscape silently, ruminating, recalling a dream she almost forgot.

"Amber?" She startled, losing her grip on her freshly-plaited braid and nearly falling from her limb. Down below, Donatello waited with arms crossed, lips spread into an amused grin. "Now how did you get up there?" the genius asked through a chuckle.

"I climbed, ya silly speccy," she teased back, but her smile fell away. Haven't we been here before? Footsteps lead down to the open front door, but how have I come here once more?^ Easily recognizing that she was lost in thought, Donnie latched onto the lowest branch, swung himself upward, and skillfully made his way up to settle along the limb nearest hers. It took a moment of
staring her down in open, obvious worry, but she finally spit it out. "It...it feels like we've done this before."

"It's probably just déjà vu, Braids," Donnie reassured with a small smile. "I know for a fact I've never seen this place before, much less climbed this tree, so the likelihood we have done this before is nil to none." She shot him an mildly irritable glance.

"I know we haven't been here before," she muttered. "It was a dream, months back. You found me here, we were chatting...and you kept playing with your phone." Donnie froze, wide eyes torn from the screen of his cellphone to fix on Amber. …she couldn't have seen him pull it out…could she? The tender scales at the back of his neck tingled, a sensation he mentally compared to what hair standing on end must resemble. "We talked a while," Amber continued nervously without ever noticing him ease his phone back into its pocket, wary eyes fixed on her as though expecting her to spontaneously combust. "A storm hit out'a nowhere...we ran for shelter but...you..."

'Everything will be okay—I swore to protect you, and I will!' Screams—bloodcurdling screams and the sound of an oncoming train. Amber forcibly shook herself from the memory, took a moment to regulate her breathing, and reached out for Donnie's hand. The gentle, encouraging squeeze was just what she needed to regain her grip on the situation. She wasn't the same person she was when she had that nightmare—she was stronger now, capable of stopping panic in its tracks and steering herself back to confidence.

"Even if the first part of the dream was true," she insisted with a wry smile, "the rest was absolute horse-hockey. It's not unheard of for multiple tornadoes to touch down in the same place an' time, but hundreds at once is farkin' ridiculous." Still. Despite her insistence she reached straight above herself —felt for the tree branch Aaron carved the trio's names into as teenagers—but her hand closed over thin air. "Huh?" she muttered turning to investigate. Sure enough, the branch was gone—broken off —and from the weathered, splintered wood at the trunk, it wasn't anytime recent. "That's different, too—limb's gone. Maybe we're not gonna croak after all." At first, all Donnie could manage was staring at her in confusion, but he finally came to the conclusion she was making a morbid joke. "You're about to say this seems like a great place to grow up."

"I wasn't about to say anything," he argued shaking his head. "I was just thinking."

"About?" A trace of muddy red darkened his cheeks.

"That...photo," the embarrassed mutant admitted. "The one in the album from under Aaron's sofa." Amber blushed hotly, cringing into Kimber's cleavage. "You were so worried I'd find out how you looked in this lifetime—worried I'd be disgusted. You know what was on my mind when I found that photo?" Moss green darted toward him—nervous eyes meeting his askance with an obvious question. "How did you manage to get down from that tree limb without breaking your neck, especially with your shirt falling off like that?"

"No idea," Amber laughed nudging him in the side with her elbow. "One minute Aaron was bein' a smartass an' takin' that picture, next minute he was bleedin' an' cryin'." Donnie stared her down suspiciously. "Tree branch broke. I landed on'im. He makes a good pillow." Chuckling at her overly innocent expression, he wrapped one lanky arm around her shoulders; Amber leaned into his one-armed embrace with a sigh. One thing was certain...even with her worries about her family, she was glad to have a chance to show Donnie the world she called her own. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"Not a clue," the genius teased and leaned closer to nuzzle into her hair. "I look forward to finding out a little at a time, though...and I suspect it's about as much as I love you." Drowning in sappy feels, Amber tipped her head intent on stealing his lips, but a holler from the house stopped her in her
tracks.

"Oi! O'Brien! Nerd!" Aaron stood on the back porch, grinning and waving them over with, not a metal spatula, but a folded takeout menu. "Quit neckin' an' git in here – I ordered pizza!" Another thing, Amber realized with a chuckle, that was different from her dream. At least she wouldn't have to keep Aaron from burning his house down.

Donnie hopped down from his limb and held his arms open to catch her; no matter how far she fell, he always caught her. His arm wrapped around her waist, her head leaning on his shoulder, the couple made their way back to Aaron's trailer. About halfway there, Amber paused, turning to scan the skies for a danger not present; recognizing the significance, Donnie squeezed her opposite shoulder. "It's alright, Braids," he reminded his nervous lover triggering an embarrassed blush – a blush he gently nuzzled away. "I'm right here with you—I'll be here every step of the way." Grateful green eyes met his, then turned instead to the setting sun.

"We're doin' a Karate Kid marathon over dinner," Aaron declared as the couple followed him into the kitchen. "No arguments accepted—an' if I catch you two spit-swappin' durin' the movies, I swear, I'm'onna barf in yer laps."

"Aw, but Willis," Amber teased the blond already tearing through the pizza boxes on the table. "We did it all fer the glory of love!"

"Heh," he sniggered with all the maturity of a ten-year-old. "You said did it." Never again would Amber take Aaron Willis's childish nature for granted; for that reason, she gave him an extra-hard brain-duster, all the while rolling her eyes. However long it would last, it was good to be home.

Day 2, just before dawn

Aaron Willis couldn't recall the last time he was woken by a blood-curdling scream. Was it when his youngest sister dropped by unexpectedly and found him napping on the sofa naked? Was it when Kirk caught a mouse while Amber was staying over and left its furry little carcass on her pillow as an offering? Whenever it happened, he didn't care much—this scream came from his living room where his somewhat-deceased best friend was sleeping on the sofa.

In record time, Aaron yanked on a pair of shorts, smushed his glasses onto his face, and bolted out the door of his bedroom. In the hallway, he froze, taken aback by what he was seeing. Amber and Donatello sat facing each other on the short sofa, the mutant murmuring gentle reassurances as the brunette worked through the dream-triggered panic attack. She inhaled slowly, held her breath, then exhaled twice as slowly, all the while focusing on the sensation of Donnie's fingertips rubbing circles into the skin of her upper back. Once her breathing was steadied and her pulse slowed, Amber tugged Donnie down by his suspenders, stealing his lips in a slow, gentle kiss. Right before Aaron's eyes the genius cupped her salt-shiny cheek in one massive hand and returned that first kiss with several more – each more tender than the last – then followed up with a teasing nose rubbing. Her fears fully calmed, Amber gazed up into Donnie's eyes, beaming like he was the best thing that ever happened to her.

Can you really lose someone you never had? Aaron had no answers…if he ever had Amber to begin with, it was clear that somewhere along the way, he lost her. His whiskered lips slanted downward into a confused frown. Why didn't that realization hurt as much as he thought it should? Perhaps he knew from the beginning that he and Amber weren't good together…perhaps that was why he never told her he loved her. Whatever the answer, he wouldn't find it watching her necking with a supposedly fictional character on his sofa, especially since he was still struggling to wrap his head around that fictional character being not-so-fictional after all. What a mind-fuck his life became.
The blond turned to silently retreat to his room, but at the last moment, looked back. Hazel eyes, veering brown in the dark room, met Aaron's over Amber's hair—Donnie held her tucked into his plastron, a rueful smile at his wide lips. It's alright, that sympathetic expression promised. Don't worry, I'll take care of her. A bit rankled that Donnie thought he needed reassurance—even though he probably did—Aaron rolled his eyes, snorted, and stalked back to his bedroom. The moment the door creaked shut behind him, though, the front disintegrated and left sorrow behind.

He loved Amber, so he let her go... she came back, but when the time came, he'd let her go again. He loved her too much to cage her and he knew he wasn't the one she needed. Still, it hurt that the one she needed was so little like him.

WORDS

~ Crime-in-it'ly! – actually spelled "criminently," this is a generic (somewhat localized to the Midwest) oath meant to portray disbelief, disgust, etc. The awkward spelling here reflects the way my closest family and I actually pronounce it, and the most common pronunciation in our area. First time I said it around Cold he thought I was talking about the Italian Mafia, LOL!

~ Outwith – Scottish slang (SS) for 'outside of.' "Outwith the locust grove" means Aaron's home is just beyond the trees.

~ Gettin' tanned / A session/sesh – SS. First, regarding people: getting drunk. Regarding structures or objects: getting/being vandalized. Second: a night out drinking or a visit to a bar.

~ Ya stink'a vomit – Aaron reeks of puke.

Naw, I'm the ghost'a Scotch-snobs past, here ta skelp yer arse fer drinkin' without me. Yes, it's me, ya honkin' mink! – No, I'm the ghost of (people who enjoy Scotch Whisky way too much for their own good) past, here to (SS, Skelp your arse – swat your butt) for drinking without me! Yes, it's me you (SS, honkin' – smelly/dirty/stinking) (SS, mink – person with poor hygiene)! The 'ghost of Scotch-snobs past' bit is a direct—and horribly groan-worthy—reference to Scrooged, a modern parody of A Christmas Carol. Specifically Amber's evoking the Ghost of Christmas Past who spent most of her time onscreen beating the crud out of the MC while maintaining a cute, innocent, poisonously sweet smile. It's a HOOT!

~ Getting rat-arsed – SS for getting drunk. This phrase is the origin of the name Bart gave the pub he owns and operates—the Staggering Rat. Needless to say, Amber's exaggerating a little here—after finding out Aaron's been drinking too much she's not going out to get wasted with him, she just needs a break.

~ Ah've goat'em—the young lahss looks a lil' fameliar. – I've got them [will take care of their orders] – the young lass [SS "lady"] looks a little familiar.

~ Ahfternewn, Wellis, who's yer lahss? – Good afternoon, Willis, who's your lady-friend?

~ Funny, tha'. Yew see tha' lovely young'un at the bar? Her name's also Kember, an' she's a Northerner, tw. – Funny, that. (That's funny/suspicious.) Do you see that lovely young lady at the bar? Her name is also Kimber, and she's a Northerner, (usually from the Northeast) too.

~ Ah'll say! Ah'll send the other Kember yer way in a wee bit fer yer orders. Welcome to Wellsdale, Kember Butz, we're glahd to have yew. – I'll say! I'll send the other Kimber your way in a little while for your orders. Welcome to Willsdale, Kimber Butz, we're glad to have you here.
~ GACGH! – a non-word sound indicating frustration and disgust. Starts like 'gal' and ends with phlegm. You can blame this one on my friend Autumn.

GENERAL RULES

~ Adding 'e or 'is to the end of a word – means he or his

~ Adding 'er to the end of a word – means her

~ Adding 'em or 'eir to the end of a word – means them or their

~ Adding 'a to the end of a word – means of, have, or to, depending on the rest of the sentence. You can generally figure out which one with little difficulty just by considering which word the ‘a is added to and the rest of the phrase. (IE, "sort'a - sort of, "should'a” - should have, and "wanna" - want to.

~ Adding 'n to the end of a word - means and, as in Rock’n Roll.

~ Words ending with –in’ – This word ends with –ing but has been shortened to portray accent.

~ With Kimber, words beginning with t’ – this word actually begins with th- but she's dropping the -h-. examples include t'a – the and t'ere – there.

NOTES

* Explanation of the fauna and flora described here. Black Locust trees have been mentioned previously, they bloom May to June but sometimes last longer, and the wood is incredibly hard, ranked at 7th hardest of any tree in North America, even harder than the infamous hickory family. Locusts can spread by seed but more often, they spread by root suckers creating large groves—this rapid root-spreading can lead to a single tree growing thickets of off-shoot trees that can span miles in each direction. Pawpaw trees are an unsung native fruit tree; they flower March-May and fruit September to October. Eastern Redbuds are a local tree that makes a wonderful blooming Bonsai tree; they burst into bloom late March to May and remain covered with deep pink blooms long before they ever develop leaves. May-Apples are a bizarre wildflower that resembles a tiny green umbrella popping up out of the ground; plants with more than one leaf will bloom with a single white flower and eventually develop a small round fruit underneath that frankly resembles 'plant testicles.' Missouri has a few different varieties of frogs, including the ever-popular Spring Peepers, but the little Grays are most commonly seen tree frogs. I'm not 100% certain but what I've read in my research indicates that Grey foxes are more common in the bootheel region and Missouri Ozarks than Red foxes, which are more common in the rest of the state. Of course, what call "Ky-oats" (proper spelling is 'Coyotes') are spread statewide and normally more common than either breed of fox. Even in urban areas like ours coyotes aren't exactly rare. Lastly, ‘stick-weed' isn't so much an actual plant as it is a slang term referring to any wild flora that tends to hitch a ride on passers-by; these species are spread across the world and can be a major PitA to get out of clothing and fur. Some common varieties of ‘stick-weeds' or 'stick-tights' include Beggarticks, Spanish Needles, Bur-Marigolds and Water Marigolds, and Tickseeds.

** Quote from "Rocky Mountain High" by John Denver. – "He climbed cathedral mountains, he saw silver clouds below. He saw everything as far as you can see, And they say that he got crazy once and he tried to touch the sun, And he lost a friend but kept his memory."
*** Numbnuts, Asshat, Ass-butt, Barf-Breath, and Dillweed, and Kirk – Alas, this is from experience. My hubby Cold—the nutjob Aaron and Daron are based on—is HORRIBLE at choosing names, but loves cats. When we first met every single one of his dozen-plus housecats and farm-cats was identified by a different insult-name with only one exception, and she was named for the Grim Reaper. Yeah. Guys. Supernatural fans may recognize Ass-butt as Castiel's failed attempt at name-calling, LOL! The last name, Kirk, was Amber's attempt at breaking the 'insult name' trend—it's Scottish slang for 'Church,' chosen because the cat was found at a local church. On a personal note, when Cold and I first met, his mother had a cat named Churchill, or, "Church."

### "Don't diss the white 'fro." - IRL, this is something Cold's known to say since he has the same hair. It's a little off-color but the description is 100% true - he's white but his hair is literally afro-bushy. It's extremely thick and curly, and the combination results in a gravity-defying POOF of blond curls surrounding his head no matter how long he lets it get. For visual, if you've seen the second "Hotel Transylvania" movie, consider the part of the movie where Dennis has his hair slicked back in the middle and it spontaneously SPROINGS back up. Yeah. Cold's hair does that, especially when it's freshly washed. It's a freakin' hoot.

^ Strabismus is a vision problem characterized by the eyes being unable to focus on the same target at the same time, rendering the eyes perpetually crossed or, as in Aaron and my hubby Cold, facing opposite directions. The disorder affects more boys than girls and is caused by a weakness in or differing length in the ligaments that control eye movement and, if caught early enough and effectively treated, it can be reversed. I've read that it can also be surgically corrected but haven't found much on the effectiveness or risks. Because he was lazy about his treatment and his mother didn't push it, Cold is perpetually (as he puts it) "Able to keep one eye on [me] and one on the waitress' ass at the same time." (He's a pig, LOL!) Aaron's 'eye-shifting' here is a common behavior of Cold's, but Cold usually does it simply because someone's making eye contact and he wants to be a smartass. ;) Unfortunately, when you have un-treated Strabismus you eventually learn to 'block out' the signal from your weaker eye in favor of the stronger one, and this can in time be detrimental to your vision. It isn't uncommon for people with Strabismus to eventually lose all vision in their non-preferred eye; in many cases this blindness isn't a matter of the eye but rather the brain—there's physically nothing wrong with their 'bad eye,' the nerves and muscles responsible for receiving signals from that eye atrophy. True to that statement, Cold's bad eye has been growing weaker and weaker over the last twenty years - longer than I've known him - and we suspect he'll be completely unable to use it well before he hits his fifties. It sucks but he's made his peace with it, and even half-blind, he'll still be able to out-game young'uns without trying.

^^ Butz – this is actually a valid surname. It's uncommon in the US and derived from High German bütze meaning 'well or puddle.'
Willsdale Cemetery was always a calming place to Amber O'Brien—a place for quiet reflection on lives that were gone and renewing appreciation for being alive. Now, two years after her death, the cemetery was much the same as it was in her lifetime but the feeling was different. After all, she realized with a strange sort of cringe, she was buried in this cemetery now and visiting in a new body. Once she was sure her new life was like a particularly horrible fanfiction; now she was starting to think it was more of a travesty or an exercise in irony. Either way, it was entirely screwed up.

Logically, she knew she was buried in the grave before her—buried beneath that speckled grey headstone inscribed with her name, beneath the nosegay of wilting locust blossoms and the bouquet of silk florals—but she also knew she was standing above that grave alive and well. Faced with proof of her death - a sagging grave housing her rotting corpse and her name on a headstone engraved with some ambiguous flower - she cringed and struggled to wrap her head around it all. She was dead…but she was alive…but she was dead…she needed a drink.

Amber shook the thought away and turned to seek out Ellis Ross' grave as promised, but stopped in her tracks. Mere yards away stood a tall, stately Yellowwood Tree already decked with bunches of delicate white blossoms; beneath the tree stood a wrought iron bench bearing a memorial plaque. Upon closer inspection, the message became clear: This rainy day, too, shall pass. It was something she often told her loved ones in her previous life—a promise that hard times wouldn't last forever. Sure enough, the connection wasn't just in her head—the placard also bore the words In Memory of Amber Jean O'Brien. A sad smile tilting her lips, Amber reflected on the sight. Sure, it was proof that her loved ones remembered her and missed her, but more importantly, it was proof that she finally managed to get through to them—that her reminders of patience, faith, and determination got through to them over time. Shame she had to croak for it to sink in.

Enough brooding over her fucked up existence. She made a promise to Mercy – promised to visit the grave of Mercy's stepfather and deliver to him proof of her success in her life after death. Upon turning her back on her gravesite, finding the Barret family plot was easy enough – Clarity Ross' birth family was one of the only local families well-off enough for their own plot, and in a coincidence that surely infuriated Clarity, Amber's grave was right outside the Barret plot's wrought iron fencing. Amber was sure Clarity would have insisted on her second husband being buried in that plot.

Sure enough, the gamble paid off – a simple stone marker bearing the name of Ellis Ross stuck out among the more elaborate stones engraved with virtue names. Beside Ellis' headstone, barely a yard away from Amber's grave, stood another – a pink granite marker engraved with the name of the also-somewhat-dead best friend Amber left behind in her new world. "Angela Mercy Ross," she greeted the unhearing occupant of the grave with an odd smile and laid her offering of wildflowers across the top of the headstone. "Funny seein' you here, Merse – yer here but I just saw ya yesterday. I know
yer holdin' down the fort for me like ya promised. Just hope that you an' Raph aren't givin' Leo too much shite while I'm not there to feign disapproval."

Shaking her head and reminding herself of her purpose in the cemetery, the braided other-worlder turned back to Ellis' gravestone, retrieving a small round object from her pocket – Mercy's eight-month sobriety chip. "Hey, Mister Ross. Long time no see, huh?" Amber nervously glanced around the cemetery feeling a bit ridiculous for talking to a rock but continued anyway. "Mercy says hi—I'm takin' care of'er for ya, just like always. She misses you – you an'er Ma both though she won't admit it. She always did have more heart than she knew what to do with, huh?" Enough heart, even, to worry about her abusive mother's safety, but too much pride to outright ask Amber to check on her. Typical Mercy…and typical Amber to pick up the unspoken request anyway.

"Mercy's always been a strong woman," Amber continued fingering the metallic red chip. "She's even stronger now…she's learning to get past everythin' yer crazy-arse wife did, learnin' to fight the demons her own mother couldn't. It's sick that Merse got stuck in an alcoholic's body after everythin' Clarity put'er through, but she's making the best of it…she wanted you to have this, proof she's happy and safe." With another awkward glance around the cemetery, she laid the chip atop of Ellis' headstone; ridiculous though it sounded, the metallic surface seemed to wink at her in the bright sunlight as though Ellis' spirit was thanking her for the message. "I never thought I'd see the day, either, but there's more…she's found someone to love. Our little Blundie is in love, Mister Ross, after so long of bein' terrified of it…she's finally realizin' love ain't gotta hurt. Raph treats'er right, too, so ya don't have to worry about'er anymore. She's among friends an' we're takin' care of'er for ya, every one of us. Heck, even my Donnie's got'er back an' their personalities are complete opposites."

"Angela?" Amber froze, easily recognizing the hoarse, slurred voice from her previous life; her blood shot straight from warm to frigid in a single breath. Instantly sharp eyes shot over her shoulder to the pale-haired woman standing at the entrance to the Barret plot. Hovering just inside the open gate, the sickly woman visibly shook herself from some delusion or inner turmoil. Once she was lucid again, her pale blue eyes focused on Amber's moss greens, sharp as glass. "Wha—Who are you?" the woman demanded shortly. "What are you doing here? This is a private cemetery plot!"

Clarity Alma Ross…of all the people Amber didn't want to run into. Worse yet, Clarity was visibly still struggling with the deaths of her husband and daughter—she was barely shy of sloshed, the stench of stale tequila clinging to her disheveled clothes and her long hair coarse and slick from lack of care. As if all that wasn't proof enough she was falling apart, her hair was undyed—her natural pale ash blonde shone through the grey instead of the jet black she always stubbornly wore when Mercy was alive. Clarity lost everything that ever mattered to her and she was falling apart. It was almost enough to make Amber feel sorry for her…almost, however, was overruled when she recalled the many times she found Mercy hiding in her backyard, terrified out of her wits and nursing yet another new bruise or scar.

"Funny," Amber remarked to the sallow-skinned woman, quickly countering the other's hands-on-hips posture with her own crossed-arms stance. "I wasn't aware I needed written permission to visit the grave of my friend…or did I, perhaps, need to purchase a ticket from you?" Predictably Clarity scowled, eyes darting to Mercy's gravestone then back to Amber.

"You're too young to have known my Angela," the older woman snapped, "and she'd never be caught dead in the company of a hussy like yourself. Your hair is a disgrace—you should be ashamed." Defying the other woman's declaration, Amber reached up to catch one of her many greyed locks; thanks to Mercy herself, those grey streaks shone vibrant blue and soft purple amidst her natural brown hair. Clarity was so sure her daughter would share her mother's small-town distaste for the slightest sign of abnormality, but just the day before, Mercy was all in favor of dyeing Amber's hair into an eye-scarring rainbow. Thankfully Kimber's 'dye' stash only had a few flavors
"If my hair's a disgrace," Amber retorted tucking the dyed lock behind her ear, "then you're a farkin' crime against humanity, ya bloatert boot!"— Predictably, Clarity just blinked at her, confused and perhaps a bit concerned, but Amber couldn't quite make herself regret it…yet.

"Leave," the strung out older woman ordered with a scowl, "before I report you for tress—"

"—Ya did yer damndest to keep Merse away from me in life, Clair'ty!" Amber cut her off, her temper once again going straight from irritable to near-shouting at a moment's notice; Kimber's temper, it seemed, didn't improve any with stress. "Aaron an' I were th' only ones in'er corner—the only ones who never hurt'er!—Ya couldnae chase us aff in life, ya'll sure's Hell no' chase me aff in death, ya sadestic shite-breened cow—"~

Upon recognizing the familiar insults slipping past her lips and the harsh guttural tint coloring it, it was all she could do to cut off the end. Closing her eyes, she sucked in a forceful, calming breath through her nose, hissed it back out through her teeth, and tried again. She was already caught alive; the last thing she needed was to get arrested for finally yielding to the old urge to rearrange Clarity's perfectly aligned teeth. Time to leave—she needed to get the heck out of that graveyard before she blew her cover even more. Intent on a swift retreat, Amber stalked past Clarity with a grumbled "Go crawl back in yer bottle a'ready—yer gonna anyway, so why wait?" Clarity gaped after her, visibly torn between bewilderment and horror.

"Who…Who are you?" the older woman demanded, her voice cracking and her pale blue eyes wide in open fear. For Mercy…this was for Mercy, Amber reminded herself with a silent snarl. Mercy mattered more than Amber's grudge against Mercy's psychotic mother.

"Y'already know the answer to that," she retorted instead—admitting nothing and answering even less. "Go home, ya jakey—yar honkin'a worm."~

It no longer mattered what Ginny O'Brien and Glen Devon fought over. In their eyes, nothing mattered ever since Ginny's only child was killed—nothing could make her and her father see eye to eye before, and that impossibility was even firmer now. This was just another such instance, a moment when Glen was stubborn, Ginny decided to be more stubborn, and the two butted heads when they couldn't out-stubborn one another.

Hurtful words flew between father and daughter in a near-constant volley. Sharp tongues spat poison at one another, the din filling the entirety of the upper floor of their home. Over on the landing, Amber stood frozen, eyes locked on the open doorway of her childhood bedroom in dismay. One hand clenching the wooden banister for dear life, she took in the sight of her mother and grandfather, struggling to comprehend that she was seeing her own kin. Half of her didn't want to believe it—half of her was sure her family would never have turned on one another over her death. The other half, however, realized that Ginny, Glen, and Douglas fought almost constantly even while Amber was alive; without a reason to continue pretending to get along, all bets were off.

"Put yer hands where I can see'em."

The sudden order from behind, coupled with the bitter cold of something slick and metallic at the nape of her neck, jolted Amber back to herself. Glen and Ginny fell silent, turning to confront the intruder Douglas cornered on the stairs. This wasn't going to get any better, Amber realized with a dry, forceful swallow—not unless she could diffuse the situation. Shaky arms lifting in cooperation, Amber locked eyes with her grandfather. She never intended to get caught—never intended for her family to realize she was really there. The whole plan was to leave them messages of patience and
maybe, if she found someone sleeping, to wake them and pass off their visit as a dream. Of course,
since when did anything ever go according to plan?

Parallel worlds do not collide. Travel between worlds and times is not possible even with secret
ninjitsu techniques. The dead do not rise and the living cannot hear the dead. All these were plain to
Amber in her last life - her very reality revolved around those absolutes - but this was no longer her
world. She died in this world. She rose in another world to try again. She came to the defense of her
grieving loved ones to save them from themselves. Now, one of those loved ones held the muzzle of
his revolver to the back of her neck in warning.

"Who are you?" Douglas demanded from behind her. His voice was even raspier than she
remembered; she already knew he was drinking more, but the increased rasp in his voice suggested
he also picked up smoking again. "What're ya doin' in my home?" Amber's eyes drifted to the floor;
there was no alternative. Her new body – the body of her counterpart Kimber – was very different
from the one Amber died in, but there were still similarities. Ever since her revival in her new world,
Amber forced herself to not consider those similarities and differences; now her very life depended
on those similarities and the differences could easily get her killed for invading her own home.

"Da," she mumbled to her father with shoulders sagging. "Mum, Gran'da…it's me…ish yer
Ahmber."~

If Amber thought it was awkward meeting up with Aaron again, that reunion had nothing on this
one. After all, Aaron didn't have a gun to her head for the better part of the explanation—thanks,
Da—and Aaron didn't spend the entire explanation repeatedly interrupting her and arguing with
himself every time he did so. No, Aaron's awakening had nothing on this one.

It took the better part of an hour to convince her family of the truth—she really was their Amber
despite the different appearance, she was really alive despite her best attempts, and she came back to
keep them from killing each other with drama.

Once Douglas' itchy trigger finger was no longer aimed at her brainstem, nothing held Amber back
from what needed to be done. She threw everything she had into her tangent—every horrifying
dream, every worry for their safety, every nasty word she heard them flinging at one another in her
dreams, not a single punch was pulled. It was a lot to take in, especially with her rotting corpse
housed a scant block away, but after enough proof, the family finally had no choice but to accept the
truth.

Messages in spilled sugar and fogged windows – ghostly hands smearing mirrors and windows –
little unexpected appearances of wildflowers on the table and curtains open in the parlor – from the
first moment when she was able to impact her environment in those dreams, Amber did everything
she could to tell her loved one "Stay strong, I love and miss you." Now, however, she was finding
out that some of those attempts didn't exactly pan out the way she expected. Messages were spelled
backward, the 'flowers' she left were actually long-dead weeds, and in one instance, the curtains
weren't drawn but yanked right off the rods. Oh well, it was the thought that counted, right?

It took a while for Glen, Ginny, and Douglas to accept that their Amber was no longer completely
dead, and understandably so. When all was said and done plans were made to meet at the Staggering
Rat the next day around noon. After all, the last member of the family to notify owned that bar, and
no matter how crazy the world got, to the O'Briens and the Devons, booze made it all better. Now,
long after the impromptu meeting was disbanded, Amber and Ginny sat across from one another on
the back porch, silently considering one another over hot tea. There was still much to be discussed
before Amber could be confident in her family's safety from one another.
"Ya know," Amber admitted into her teacup, "I never thought you three would fall apart like this. I hoped you'd rely on one another instead'a blame each other."

"Ya wouldn't understand, Jeanie-burd." Ginny stared off into the distance. "We tried, God knows we did…it just wasn't enough. Why didn't you come home?" she demanded, completely changing the subject. Amber easily recognized the tactic as her mother's go-to method of shifting the attention from her faults to the failings of others. "When yer house was destroyed, ya went to the Hall with the rest—ya never even let us know you were safe." Amber squirmed at the hurt in her mother's eyes. "We thought ya were dead, Amber—why didn't ya come home?"

"I dunno what to tell ya, Mum," Amber admitted quietly. "I wasn't really all there—if I was in my right mind, I wouldn't've gone wandering off. If I was in my right mind…well, I probably still wouldn't have come home, to be honest."

"But why?" Ginny demanded in an almost shrill tone. "You would'a been safe here…ya could've come home fer a spell, we'd have taken care of ya, you an' Aaron both!" The name stopped Amber's heart cold—reminded her of what Mercy told her of the fiasco at her funeral.

"Mum…don't." Ginny flinched at her harsh tone. "Mercy told me what ya said to Aaron at my funeral—you blamed him for my stupidity even after he did everything he could to protect me. Now you have the nerve to tell me you'd have taken him in?" Amber set her cup down a little too roughly and lunged to her feet, pacing away to stand at the porch railing, eyes trained on the cemetery across the way. Calm…she needed to keep calm…what was done was done and being angry over water under the bridge was pointless…but Kimber's temper never failed to sweep her away with it.

"I wouldn't have come home an' you know it," she tried again, her words stilted and sharp from her forcibly deep and steady breathing. "After everythin' yer church cronies did to me an' Mercy, ya really expected me to come home to you? From the time Mercy an' I got to Glenville we suffered for it—I was harassed in public, my home was vandalized, Mercy was threatened and followed, and all because we shared an apartment and split the bills!" Ginny shook her head in open confusion, visibly lost. "Those lovely ladies in your bible study group were convinced Merse an' I were a couple. Someone kept calling the cops on us over false charges of public indecency an' we were always finding pamphlets in the mail warnin' about 'the sins of homosexuality!' You set your dogs on us an' you expected me to come home when I was at my weakest?!" It finally hit her that her voice was nearing a shout and her blood pressure was spiking; Amber forcibly reigned herself in, reminding herself yet again that she didn't come here to yell at her mother over past mistakes.

"Is that why you shut me out?" Ginny's voice was quiet, almost gentle; as much as Amber expected her mother to launch into a long tirade, the unexpected softness confused her. "I didn't send anyone after you an' I never told anyone you an' Miss Ross were anythin' more than friends. I told a few friends you were leaving for college together, asked'em to pray for your safety an' success, an' asked'em to check in on you if they found'emseleves in Glenville." Ginny sighed through her nose, staring off in the direction of the ruins of her old church—a ruin not visible from her home. "I take it someone misinterpreted an' ran with it." Amber gaped.

"If you consider homophobic slurs painted on the siding an' flaming bags of horseshit on the front stoop running with it," she deadpanned. "You honestly had nothing to do with it?" Finally, Ginny looked more like herself again—glass-green eyes narrowed, one eyebrow arched in warning, and her arms crossed.

"I've never been anithin' but proud of ya, Amber-Jean," she reminded shortly. "I've worried about ya, I've tried to steer you away from danger, an' I've done nothin' but wish the best for ya. I worried over yer never marryin' but if bein' with a woman makes ya happy, I'll deal with it." Amber winced.
"I don't do women," she retorted bluntly, "yer congregation's delusional." Ginny's wrinkle-lined lips quirked into a crooked smile and she gave a low, nasal chuckle. The tension completely diffused, Amber returned to her seat, taking up her now-cold tea and considering her mother silently, from her worn canvas shoes to the streaks of ivory shining in her auburn hair. Amber knew the older woman wouldn't want any more fuss made over their long feud—it wasn't in Ginny's nature to hash things out once the air was cleared and for once, Amber was fine with it. If her mother was, indeed, mostly blameless in the rift between them, Amber neither needed an apology from her nor wanted to upset Ginny by offering one of her own. There did, however, remain a small problem…

"You worried about my not marrying," she attempted nervously, and Ginny nodded in confirmation. "I had a reason for staying single…it's hard to explain, but there was someone I was waiting for…someone I already loved but couldn't have."

"Yer talkin' about that little speccy ya used to dream about, hm?" Amber winced. "Ya told us about'im a few times when you were just a babe—said ya knew he was real, ya just had to find'im. We didn't have the heart to set ya straight, then ya suddenly stopped talkin' about'im; we figured ya realized he wasn't real. Ya never stopped waitin' fer'im, did you?~ The younger shook her head, embarrassed. "Are ya still waitin' fer'im, then?"~

This, Amber realized nervously, had the potential to go incredibly wrong…but it also had the potential to go right. Was it worth the risk? If Ginny knew her daughter was in good hands, wouldn't it be worth it? After a moment of silent consideration, Amber gave a small, wry smile.

"No, Mum," she admitted softly. "I'm not waitin' fer'im anymore…I found'im. I found my Dunnie, Mum, an' he's worth all the time I spent waiting."

"Ya never told us his name was Donnie," Ginny remarked with a pointed frown, and Amber blanched. "Yer computer survived the weather, Amber-Jean, an' we found yer story. If the Donnie ya wrote about is the same Donnie you dreamed about, he's not even human—I'd rather see ya with another woman than—than—"

"—Well, fortunately, ya'll never have to see me with'im," Amber cut her mother off, cheeks blazing. "I don't expect yer approval, Mum, I never have expected it." She never expected approval, Amber admitted to herself, but nothing would have made her happier than getting said approval whether as a child or now, as a woman in love. "All I want is to know you can see past it and be happy for us," she added quietly. Ginny reached out to her daughter, smoothed her fingertips over the frizzy hair at her scalp, and gave a crooked smile.

"If he makes you happy," she answered honestly, "if he's good to you an' good for you, an' if he's everythin' ya ever said he is, then I'll try to see past the scales."

The sleep fogging Donatello's brain slowly drifted away, leaving drowsy confusion in its wake. Fumbling upright on the old, lumpy sofa, he scratched at the cat hair stuck to his left arm and took stock of his surroundings. Two calico cats sprawled across his lap—Asshat and Assbutt, if he recalled their insults correctly—sleeping and snoring in tandem. Across the room, the fluffy black mop called Numbnuts glared at him in open derision from the back of the recliner. The sunlight seeping in between the blinds was starting to fade; Aaron should be home from work in about an hour or so.

Donnie somewhat remembered falling asleep on Aaron's sofa—at least, he remembered anxiously waiting for Amber's return, pacing himself into exhaustion, then fairly collapsing on the sunken sofa with the faded notebook he smuggled along—what woke him? The answer came to him with a familiar sound—the sound of falling water and a familiar voice singing off-key. Lips curling into a
fond smile, the mutant carefully relocated the two clingy cats to the sofa, shoved Amber's journal under the sofa, and hoisted himself to his feet.

Sure enough, the bathroom door was closed, the sound of rain and an unfamiliar song filtering through the particleboard. After gently knocking to alert the occupant of his presence, he stepped through and locked the door behind him. Upon turning to greet his bathing companion, though, he was struck speechless—eyes locked on the textured glass shower door and the tantalizing glimpses of curvy flesh showing between the lacy whorls and condensation. Amber's hair, still streaked with blue and purple dye, was freshly washed and filling the bathroom with the sweet scent of coconuts; suds clung to her visible skin adding mangoes and pineapple to the tropical mix. She smelled like a vacation in paradise… "Hey, you," she greeted flashing a cheeky smile at him through the glass.

"Hey, yourself," he fired back playfully and set to stripping off his own clothing and his ever-present wraps and gear, folding them up on the duffel bag by the door. After all, he reasoned setting his glasses on the vanity, Aaron's over-sized shower stall was just large enough for two, the blond wasn't due back for a while yet, and if Amber wasn't up for company, she'd tell him so herself. Immediately upon closing the door behind himself, he took up a spot right behind her and pulled her into his arms. She eagerly leaned back into his plastron, humming in content at his gentle nuzzles. "I take it you found your family?"

"Yeah," she sighed, her head lolling to the side as his clever lips trailed down her neck to trace her shoulder. "I got caught an' almost shot, but it worked out. Da's started smokin' again an' Gran'da's almost entirely grey now. Mum's startin' to go white, too…an' she knows about ya." Donnie flinched, turning her to face him.

"You—you told her?!" he demanded in a near-squeak, but Amber rolled her eyes at him and ducked under the spray to finish rinsing off.

"Sure, Donnie," she snarked tossing him Aaron's shower gel. "I totally just waltzed right in there an' told my Mum I'm datin' a talkin' turtle. She's thrilled an' wants grand-eggies." His nonplussed expression told her the sarcasm went right over his head for once. Heaving a pointed sigh, she snatched the bottle back, sploted some soap on her scrub cloth, and bodily turned him away to scrub his carapace. "She's my mother, Dee—mums are friggin' psychic about their daughters. She figured it out on'er own, don't ask how. Mum's finally accepted I ain't a lesbian—now she thinks I'm farkin' Scalie."*

Over the next few minutes, the rest of the story came out and Amber filled Donnie in on all the insanity of her day. By that point, both were cleaned up and the water was running cool. Reluctantly they crept from the stall, dried off, and donned clean clothing from their bag. "I've mist'cha, Dee,"~ Amber admitted as they made their way out to the sofa. "I know it's only been one night, but I missed fallin' asleep in yer arms…missed waking up with ya, too." …and missed knowing he wouldn't wake up with a massive crick in his neck from sleeping on his stomach.

"Sure you didn't just miss waking up with your legs over my shoulders?" he teased with a knowing grin; her faint blush and sheepish smile made that grin spread. "I certainly missed it," he admitted settling on the sofa and urging her to sit sideways across his lap; a hint of familiar pheromones wafting upward told him he wasn't the only one who missed their morning antics, either. "I talked with Aaron before he left for work earlier," he related changing the subject to something less loaded. "This place only has one bedroom but the brick shed out back is set up as a storm shelter now—it's wired for electricity and mostly finished inside. He's offered it to us for the remainder of our stay… and he had me haul his mattress out there for us." ...after issuing a threat against leaving any 'sticky stuff' on it. The blond was certainly a character.
The trailer was cramped, that was for certain. Aaron and Amber were the only ones small enough to fit on the short sofa, but Amber, being taller now, had to sleep scrunched up into a ball. Donnie, as a large, heavy, and ridiculously chivalrous sort, resigned himself to sleeping belly-down on the kitchen floor on a makeshift mattress of linens. Amber stilled, leaning back to meet his eyes. "Has he given you any trouble?" she asked honestly. She didn't see Aaron volunteering to sleep on the sofa without dishing out some fake whining to go with it.

"Nothing I can't handle," he promised and ducked to nuzzle his snout against her nose. "He's a handful, I'll grant you that, but he's not totally unreasonable. He kinda reminds me of Mikey, in a way…if Mikey was a smartass redneck." Her intended response was cut off by an eager yowl from the kitchen, and both turned to confront the source: a small, lithe feline with sleek black fur and bright golden eyes.

"Kirk!" Amber beamed at the cat bounding toward them; a heartbeat later he leaped up into her lap and sniffed her over, scrubbing his cheeks on everything he could reach and uttering insistent mews.

"Kirk?" Donnie asked, a little disgruntled at the cat for interrupting his cuddles.

"Kirk," Amber agreed, easing the squirmly little critter up to his favorite shoulder and grinning at how loudly he purred. "He's my lil' buddy, Dee. Aaron always wanted me to keep'im, since he always followed me home but it never—" She trailed off, feeling around the still-squirming Velcro-cat's ribs with a concerned moue. "Kiddo, ya've lost weight—yer gettin' skinny, what gives?"

"So the little shit-brick finally came home, huh?" Aaron called out from the kitchen just before the back door slammed. Amber and Donnie exchanged an awkward wince; they never even heard the door open. Despite their compromising position—Amber in Donnie's lap and Donnie looking entirely guilty—Aaron said nothing. He just lumbered over, plopped down beside them, and reached out to ruffle the fur between Kirk's ears. "He's never around anymore, not since ya died; he just hangs out where yer house was like he's waitin' for ya or somethin'." The couple exchanged a solemn glance, one worried and one resigned, both well-aware that Kirk would only get worse if he was left behind again.

"He is a good mouser," Amber admitted turning back to the purring lump on her shoulder. "Mercy's work in the garden's gonna start paying off come spring, then we'll need some help keepin' mice out'a the veggies…" Donnie warily reached out toward Kirk, flinched away when the cat moved unexpectedly, then cautiously smoothed his fingertips down Kirk's side. To his surprise, the scrawny feline leaned into his touch, purring loudly and arching its neat white whiskers at him in appreciation.

"He's a little underweight," he acknowledged feeling along the bumpy ribs almost visible through Kirk's fur. "Leaving him here would be cruel, especially since losing you affected him like this…I'll talk to Dad when we get back, okay? We'll see what we can do." As though realizing he was being discussed, Kirk gave an absurdly cute little sigh and nuzzled up under Amber's chin, already drifting off to sleep.

Amber and Donnie knew they couldn't stay in this world long—they didn't belong there and they were needed elsewhere—but for the moment, they were content to simply breathe. Aaron was safe, Amber's relatives were safe, and Clarity Ross was safe if a little more unhinged than before. Still, problems remained to be confronted, and first on that list was Kimber Bryant.

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**WORDS**

~ Aaron an' I were th'only ones in'er corner—the only ones who never hurt'er! – Aaron and I were the only ones in her corner - (Amber and Aaron had Mercy's back
and supported her no matter how rough things got) – the only ones who never hurt her!

~ Ya couldnae chase us aff in life, ya'll sure's Hell no' chase me aff in death –
(Again, Kimber's temper plus Amber's habit of lapsing when pissed beyond reason equals Glen Devon's bitching times twelve. She's getting Scotched here.) You [couldn't] chase us [off] in life, you sure as Hell won't chase me [off] in death! (Clarity couldn't keep Amber away while Amber was alive, and she can't keep her away even now that she's dead.) It bears noting that Amber's temper change after death is a result of two separate problems: the first of these is that Kimber had a nasty temper (Nature Vs Nurture) and the second relates to Amber's PTSD. It's been explained to death already, but Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has more effects than most people ever notice or realize unless they're exposed to it frequently. One particularly frustrating effect is a shortened fuse, anger problems, difficulty managing anger, (if not completely biting people's heads off for peanuts) and periods of being generally ill-tempered. Like most sides of PTSD, this CAN get better with time and treatment, but there is no cure – PTSD is for life, and so are the personality and temperament changes it can cause. If someone in your life struggles with PTSD, please be sure to be patient and compassionate, and don't take it to heart if they bite your head off over nothing – it's not about you at all, and they'll feel horrible afterward even if they never admit it. That said, however, if you can't handle their temper, it doesn't make you a horrible person – PTSD can be incredibly toxic for your loved ones. There's a lot of give-and-take in relationships like this, on both ends, and if one side won't give and will only take, then TBH, the other side is better off getting the heck out of dodge.

~ Sadestic shit-breened cow— (fud) – As in chapter 50, this is a long-ass and incredibly Scotched compound insult well into the realm of absurdity. Sadestic – sadistic. Shite-breened – shit-brained. Cow – supposedly an incredibly offensive insult when aimed at a woman, and fud – cunt.

Y'already know the answer to that, ya blootert boot.– You already know the answer to that, you (blootered – 'very drunk') (boot – skanky or ugly woman. Recall that Amber has a habit of using the term 'ugly' for 'ugly inside' rather than 'ugly outside.' Basically she's both making a dig at Clarity for getting knocked up while her husband was overseas and claiming Mercy's his, AND she's saying Clarity is a horrible person with a nasty attitude.)

Go home, ya jakey—yer honkin'a worm. – Jakey – Scottish slang (SS) for (someone addicted to class A controlled substances) or an alcoholic, and who has screwed up their life as a result; compare to "junky." Honkin' – SS 'reeking' or 'foul-smelling.' Worm – a slang term for Tequila used in some US regions, derived from certain brands of Tequila which feature a dead worm in each bottle as 'proof this is made from real agave.' (Yeah. Seriously. YUCK.) Basically Amber's saying "Go home, you drunkard – you stink of tequila."

Ish yer Ahmber – A phrase Amber only ever uses with her family. "It's your Amber," Scotched to the extent she used to speak in but intentionally Scotched to show affection.

~ Wouldn't've – Another non-traditional and grammatically incorrect contraction from the Midwest. (Again, 'say as much as possible in as few syllables as possible' territory.) Looks complex to the uninitiated but it just means 'would not have.' Sounds like WOOD-n-ta or WOOD-n-tev.

~Yer talkin' about that little speecy ya used to dream about, hm? Ya told us
about'im a few times when you were just a babe—said ya knew he was real, ya just had to find'im. – You're talking about that little (Speccy – person who wears glasses) you used to dream about, aren't you? You told us about him a few time when you were a young child—you said you knew he was real, you just had to find him.

~We didn't have the heart to set ya straight, then ya suddenly stopped talkin' about'im; we figured ya realized he wasn't real. – We couldn't bear to crush your hopes and tell you he wasn't real, then you suddenly stopped talking about him; we assumed you realized he wasn't real. (Little kids have no filters. As a young child, Amber didn't understand that her family wouldn't believe that Donnie was real, so she talked about her dreams of him. Once she reached the age when she realized they might think she was delusional, she stopped mentioning it in hopes her family would assume she was just playing pretend.)

~Ya never stopped waitin' fer'im, did you? Are ya still waitin' fer'im, then?" – You never stopped waiting for him, did you? Are you still waiting for him, then?"

~She's thrilled an' wants grand-eggies. – Amber's being a smartass. Grand-eggies – a pun combining gran'babies (an affectionate term for grandchildren, often used in the south and southern Midwest) with 'eggs' because female turtles lay eggs.

~I've mist'cha- Have used this one before but not sure I ever noted it. "I missed you," exaggerated twang. "Mist'cha" is pronounced almost exactly as written, but sometimes comes out as more of a 'MISS-chuh.'

NOTES

"I don't do women – your congregation's delusional." – Just to clarify, this scene is NOT to be taken as "Amber's homophobic" nor is it a statement supporting intolerance. (There are a lot of people around here who honestly refuse to tell the difference. Telling someone "purple is a good color for your skin tone" can honest-to-god be followed by "You think because I'm gay I should only wear girly colors?! How dare you?! I'm boycotting your business!” "...I didn't know you were gay...I'm just doing my job..." Intolerance, alas, goes both ways with every form.) There's a big difference between intolerance toward certain lifestyles and intolerance for being misjudged and not believed. Amber is straight but because she never married (in a small town full of holier-than-thou gossip-mongers) she was accused of being lesbian. Her discomfort here is over not being believed and continually being slapped with the same false assumption all over again, not with being compared to a homosexual. Her entire character is formed around tolerance, patience, faith, compassion, and sarcasm, and bigotry don't fit with those.

* Scalie(s) – My gut tells me I probably shouldn't have to define this one but my brain can't wait to watch people cringe. "Scalies" are "Furries" of the reptilian/amphibious persuasion rather than the soft, cuddly, hairy type. If ya don't know what 'Furries' are... well, Google it...with safe-search on...then delete your browser history.
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Hey, Folks! Yep, it's update time again, YAY!

Some things to keep in mind for this chapter: This chap has a sizeable scene with Glen Devon so there's going to be a LOT more difficult speech than usual. I've done his scene a little different, though, because he's so hard to understand - readers should be able to discern most of what he's saying without having to consult the translations at the end, other than a few intentionally vague sentences. Hopefully I managed that. If not, as always, there are translations at the end. Bart and Ginny have allowed their accents to weaken over time or, in Ginny's case, actively squelched them to fit in. Glen is the exception here - he's either refused to change or has been unable to change and his speech is still incredibly thick.

Never fear, Amber's family won't be a common character and after the trip to Willsdale's over, the Scotchness will drop back to normal levels.

TBH, feedback is ALWAYS appreciated, but it would seriously make my day to get some feedback on this chapter if no other. Literally WEEKS of binge-reading and binge-researching went into this chapter - that's plowing through every bit of Scots literature I could get my hands on, devouring my volumes of Scott and Byron, hunting down online language sources...ahem. "Etc" works, I guess. LSS, this chap took more research and reading than most others do. Finally, after this chapter, we've got only ONE more installment of Absolutes - as of #56, we're leaving behind Willsdale and all who call her home. Hope y'all enjoy!

To my US readers - Happy Fourth of July! Please resist any and all drunken urges to shoot off fireworks from your bodily orifices and be mindful of neighboring veterans and pets. Non-US readers - Love y'all to bits just the same and wishing you a lovely Wednesday in July! ;D This chapter dedicated to Wolf for being an awesome and ever-patient beta, and to AmelessUnderworld for acting as a consultant on the Scots in Glen's scene. You two really blow my mind, no joke, and I appreciate all your help - Thanks!

Suggested Listening: Red "Yours Again," Our Lady Peace "Somewhere out There," Survivor "I Never Stopped Loving You"
When Donatello opened his eyes, what they saw made no sense. Not long ago, he was in his own bedroom, crawling into his lumpy cold bed purely to get Leonardo off his back about resting. Now he stood in a familiar alley – from the looks of it, the dark alley behind April's apartment building – with no recollection how he got there. Stranger still, the sun was high and the sky clear, but for the first time in his lifetime, the city was silent. New York was never quiet...this made no sense.

Struggling to catch his bearings and understand what couldn’t be possible, he crept toward the mouth of the alley, careful to keep to the grimy shadowed walls. At the very end of the darkness, he found proof he wasn't alone in that illogically empty neighborhood: a young woman, perhaps about his age, leaned back against the filthy brickwork, beaming up at the sky as though her wildest dreams were all coming true.

Taking advantage of the shadows concealing him, Donnie studied the stranger. She was petite—a good head shorter than he was—and somewhere between curvy and voluptuous. The hair pulled into a messy ponytail was an unnatural shade of red - surely dyed - and her clothes were comfortably sloppy. Though rather plain, to him, she was lovely—lovely, and, at least outside of dreams, out of reach. Silently contemplating the human female before him, he wracked his brain for an explanation. Despite her unfamiliar appearance, something about her seemed very much familiar —something tickled from the deepest recesses of Donnie's memory like a favorite song long forgotten. Surely he was mistaken, though; the only human female he knew in person was April, and April looked nothing like this woman.

A surprised gasp tore him from his thoughts. The bottom fell straight out of his stomach...he was seen. Despite his expectation, the strange woman grinned up at him like he was an old friend. "Dunnie!" she cried shoving off from the wall, and in a manner all-too-familiar, she launched herself into his arms. Stunned at the sudden tackle-hug, he found himself unable to do anything more than stand there, arms feebly outstretched at his sides, and wide eyes locked on the top of her head; lost for a purpose, his hands reflexively clenched mid-air, unable to pull his attacker closer or push her away. Why would he pull her closer?! "Donnie, I did it, I found ya, I really found ya!" As she rattled off her excited proclamation and the equally rapid-fire explanation following, he gingerly settled his hands on her shoulders in preparation to push her away. "Ya told me we'd find each other someday, an' we did! I died, granted, but I found ya, I really found ya in real life!"

Confused, partly by her words and partly by his inexplicable reluctance to push her away, he, craned his neck to meet her eyes. Perhaps something in his eyes worried her because the smile fell away from her face and she backed away. "You...found me?" he asked with a forced smile.

"Just today," she explained, excitement fading. "Technically you found me, but you didn't recognize me...you brought me home with you." She shook her head in confusion, a small, hopeful smile tilting her lips. "Don't you remember? You and your brothers found me in the subway—you took me to April—you saved my life, Dee!" No...when did...he didn't remember ever meeting this woman before, much less taking her to April! Still, it made no sense—something told him he knew this—this person—knew her from the fine specks of grey in her eyes to the smallest and most hidden pattern of freckles on her skin. He couldn't know her, though, this was only a dream—just a strange dream!

Her expression twisted in hurt, in dismay, but why would she be hurt or dismayed? "You forgot me," she sighed. "I knew it—I knew one of us would forget." Visibly steeling herself, she reached up to his face, cupping his cheek in a gesture that, despite being unexpected, felt entirely accepted. Against his own better judgment, Donatello's hand drifted upward to cover hers, his thick fingers lacing awkwardly with the four narrower digits curving along his jaw.

"Remember what we agreed on, Dee," the stranger insisted even as he struggled to understand the conflicting signals he received—familiar and unfamiliar, old and new, accepted and dubious—the
whirlwind of worry and wonder left him speechless, struggling for air. "Remember the secrets we shared—you told me why you were assigned the bo and that you started out with tonfa,* and I—"

"Why would I tell you anything of the sort?" he demanded, finally finding his tongue; though it made his gut twist in protest, he pried her hand away from his face and backed a safer pace away. "Who are you? Why am I dreaming about you?" The woman winced but quickly steadied herself.

"My name is Amber Jean O'Brien," she explained solemnly. "We first met in dreams as children, and we've been meeting here ever since. The last several dreams, you've been confused and lost, so I guess it's not too surprising you've forgotten me completely." She gave a slightly bitter smile, turning to stare off into the distance; overhead, the sunlight dimmed, rain clouds building on the horizon. "I don't understand why our timelines aren't meeting up, but maybe it's got to do with why I aged faster than you...maybe there's still a chance you may remember me in time."

A sharp glance cut off his impending protest. "On January 23rd, 2016, you'll find a half-starkers- lunatic in hoochie-boots lost in the underground—freezing to death in an abandoned subway station. You'll take her to April, Casey will be an arse, then you'll decide to bring her home. I'm gonna be a mess, Darlin', but I know it'll get better in time...and once you remember me, I can tell you what I couldn't tell you in the alley today...then you'll understand."

"Wh—What you couldn't tell me?" he scoffed in disbelief. "What can't you tell me?"

"Hawd yer fashin', ya silly braw speccy,"~ she reprimanded solemnly, then grinned when he blinked back in silent confusion. She smiled at some secret thought, then shook it away and turned pleading eyes to him. "Dee, you've got to remember—ya gotta remember, and when you do, ask me about Clayton Gregory."

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**Willsdale, Missouri – The Staggering Rat Pub**

**Day 3**

"As you can see this is the heart of Willsdale proper – the Town Square and what passes fer Downtown Willsdale. Funny, huh?" All around Amber, passersby shot her scornful glances and rolled their eyes. Of course, she couldn't really blame them too much—she was the one wandering around outside a local bar with a Bluetooth headset clipped to her ear and her phone in the air like some delusional tourist shooting their pathetic vacation. What the good people of Willsdale couldn't realize, however, was that she wasn't just shooting a video—she was live-streaming it to Donnie's phone, introducing him to places and people he could never see in person...starting with her uncle Bart's pub.

"Unusual name for an establishment," Donnie remarked from his end of the call, the butter-smoothness of his voice sending goosebumps down her bare arms. "You said your uncle owns it? Was the name perhaps chosen in the old European standard of choosing names that could be illustrated for the illiterate?"

"Not exactly, ya cannie-fanny,"~ she teased, gleefully visualizing the slight flush surely blooming in his cheeks if he mistook the playful barb for a compliment. "It's a pun – the rat's staggerin' 'cuz it got rat-arsed—or 'drunk as a skunk.'*** A low chuckle echoed through the headset, sending even more chills down her spine; she could practically feel it along her skin—just like she felt it this morning when she woke up to find him curiously mapping out her vertebrae through the tender skin of her back and mumbling the terminology and such to himself. Criminy...if he kept up being brilliant and
curious around her, he was liable to find himself tackled the moment she got back to Aaron's trailer, witnesses or no witnesses.

Right—her family was waiting. "Well," she muttered turning the camera to her face to offer Donnie a somewhat nervous smile. "On with the show. You're gonna love what he's done with the place!"

The moment she crossed the threshold, she found herself swept up in a bear hug, courtesy of her much taller and leaner uncle.

"Yew really thought yew were foolin' me, Lil' Burd?" Bart teased with a lopsided grin that seemed all upper teeth. That crooked and misaligned grin was one common to every Devon Amber ever met, and at one time, it embarrassed her to pieces; now, it was just more proof that she was finally home. "I wasnae born yesterdee," Bart reminded shooing her over to the bar. At the old formica-topped counter, her family gathered, finally unified again, and a fresh tumble of her favorite fine Scotch whisky waited for her. "Now," the white-haired Scot-expat grinned as she settled on her stool, "how aboot~ yew fill us in before the lunch crowd hits?"

Over an hour later, the Devon family and Amber's father were disbanded; Amber and Aaron remained at the bar catching up while Bart looked on, seemingly waiting for something to happen. He always seemed a bit flighty before—long-haired head permanently in the clouds and pale grey eyes always focusing on sights no one else could see. Now Amber couldn't help but wonder if they all misjudged him. Other than Aaron, he was the only person to recognize her in her new shape. Perhaps Bart wasn't just daydreaming or hallucinating all these years—perhaps he was actually seeing things his family could never see or believe. Her family would never believe even half the lunacy Amber now knew to be fact—perhaps she and her endearingly awkward uncle had more in common now.

All around her, familiar sights, sounds, and smells tugged at her senses. Between Aaron's updates on their hometown, Amber heard the clack of resin on resin—her father was clearly shearing another local over the pool table. Bart's prematurely faded hair, as always bound in a loose tail, shone clean and white in the unnaturally bright lights over the bar. The sour tang of stale beer hung in the air, countered by the smoky perfume of her scotch—scotch she still, after over an hour, had barely touched. Separately, those sounds, sights, and smells meant little; taken together, they meant everything. Be it ever so humble, Amber realized with a faint smile, distractedly tracing the rim of her glass, it was good to be home. Wait…did she get that wrong? Oh, who cared—the company was good and the whisky better, so what could possibly matter?

Wait…there it was again—a slight prickling of the hair at the back of her neck. Eyes fixed on her glass in determination, Amber drew on everything Donatello taught her in hopes of ferreting out the answer. Eyes on her—she could practically feel the gaze of another crawling down her spine. Aaron, bless his heart, didn't pick up on her sudden silence or her tense posture and went on about her being "a fancy-pants city-biddy now." Of course, Aaron tended to miss any social cues that weren't delivered with a sledgehammer. Oblivious to her growing discomfort, he prattled on about things that should matter to her—the many changes the town went through, the vast differences between this town and what she was now used to, and a slew of other, equally familiar comments.

Her eyes darted upward, and over the brim of her glass, the cause became clear—the waitress, Kimber, hesitated in the doorway to the kitchen, bottle-green eyes uncertain and painted lips locked in a slight frown. Amber met that stare for a while, hoping a good, long, hard stare would deter Kimber from confronting her, but eventually, she faltered. In the time between Amber looking to Aaron for comfort and returning to the staring contest, the other woman vanished among the bodies oozing through the front door.
Without warning, Amber shoved her stool back from the bar and lurched to her feet, startling Aaron. "I'll be right back," she told him with a weak smile. "I gotta hit the ladies'...keep an eye on that waitress." Before he could question the odd order or get out one of his usual jabs—for instance 'Don't ya mean hit on the ladies?' or 'Call me if ya want me to shake it for ya!'—Amber hustled to the back of the pub. With every step, the feeling of being watched intensified...and so did the already overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

Footsteps behind her—her pursuer tackles her, shoving her through an open door. An unfamiliar face in the mirror—she's never seen the woman before, so why does she seem familiar?

"Ya hussy! T'a fuck're ya doin' in my bawdy?!"~

Kimber. Amber shuddered at the realization and quickened her step; sure enough, the footsteps behind quickened as well. Her dream about Donnie and Aaron in Aaron's backyard played out differently, though, so maybe the dream of Kimber could be changed too... Determined to not fall into that trap, Amber put on an extra burst of speed, darted past the door to the women's room, and ducked into the men's room instead. Sure enough, the footsteps outside paused, their owner hesitating—hesitating long enough for Amber to prepare herself to meet her counterpart.

The sound of a familiar tune startled Donnie from his ruminations, drawing his eyes from the notebook page to his cell phone. Amber. Shaking off his stupor he checked the message. 'Gran'da just left,' he read silently scrolling down the screen with a distracted thumb. 'It's just Aaron and myself now so we'll probably be back early. See you soon, Darlin.' How soon? He shook his head. Not for the first time he wished Amber was better at communicating, or that he was better at reading between the lines. Either way, he wouldn't find answers staring at his phone.

The distraction set aside, he stared down at the worn notebook splayed open across his lap. Overall, Amber seemed to have forgotten her journal, or else she simply stopped writing in it. Perhaps there was no longer a need for it, in her mind? No matter. Now it had a new purpose—a different person scrawling out their problems and struggles in its worn pages, starting from the back and working forward.

'Specky'~ – where have I heard that name before? Obviously from Amber, but she's the only one I've ever heard use it – why did it feel familiar the first time she used that name? Even stranger, why does the Amber I dream about use that name? Surely it's only a coincidence. Then there's 'The Crazy Celt' – it's not the sort of nickname I'd come up with but at the time, it fit. Then to hear Mercy use it – AFTER I used it on Amber! – and claim it was a common nickname in her previous life – how is that possible? Then there's the Amber in my dreams again, bragging about how 'the Crazy Celt' out-drank another victim...this makes no sense!

Even nicknames aside, there's too much to ignore. "Here I thought you grew from spores like a mushroom." To hear that in person after hearing it in a dream...is it just an Amber-ism, is it coincidence, what? Physical appearances – Kimber's hair is more brown than red, but if the photos in Aaron's album are to be believed, Amber's hair was almost auburn. The Amber in my dreams has the same color hair! This can't be possible—it's completely illogical!

Realizing his scribblings were becoming more and more frantic, Donnie paused, slowing his breathing and stretching the crick from his neck.

No matter how I may agonize over the questions, I won't get any answers just thinking about them. There's only one thing I can do at this point – I have to hunt down answers,
confirm a few things I've noticed regarding the Amber in my dreams. Did the real Amber have braces as a child? I know she had back trouble and fused vertebrae from the accident, but did the scars on her back stretch vertically or horizontally? What about that birthmark – dream' Amber has a blotchy brown birthmark just above her left glute, shaped somewhat like a half-deflated football. Did the real Amber have a birthmark like that? ...okay, maybe that's not the best question to ask. I need answers, not a knuckle sandwich. This is getting out of hand...

With a frustrated sigh, he dropped his pen to the couch cushions and flipped back a few pages. Ah, yes...there it was. The mere sight was enough to bring a small quirk to his lips. The first time he found the poem – scribbled on a wrinkled sheet of paper lost between his nightstand and the wall – he was sure the verses were copied. Now he knew the truth – they were original, written by the confusing woman he now called his own. Transcribed to the notebook by his own hand, now, he studied anew the riddles hidden between the lines.

I met my lover in a dream. Why hide ye in the night? The shadows are my right. He was never very good at this sort of thing...perhaps that was why Amber felt confident enough to put the words down. Shaking off the realization, he trailed down to the second half of the poem.

The dream is done but he is here
I've met my lover 'gain.~
My life is over, a'thin's~ changed,
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."

Friends...well, that would explain why she kept pushing him away. Still...Amber never spoke like that aloud—at least not when he was around, or when she wasn't furious beyond measure. Clearly, she was imitating someone—hiding her words behind the style of another, hoping he'd be fooled. She underestimated him. "The dream is done," he muttered aloud, flipping back to his notes and scribbling out another. "She references dreams a lot in this, and in her journal...maybe there's a connection?" Mibbe~ someday he will see – Someday the truth I'll tell. What truth? Was there something beyond what she confessed that May? Something even more unbelievable than his family being fiction in her world? In dreams...I fell...in dreams...

With a frustrated sigh, he slumped back into the over-stuffed sofa, tugging at the back of his neck. Perhaps he was wrong...perhaps he was misreading the signs given him...but if he was wrong...if they really did know one another from years before, why didn't Amber bring it up before now? If she dreamed of him and he of her, why did she still maintain silence about it? If their roles were reversed – if he was granted a new chance at life in her world after dreaming of her – he would have brought it up before now...wouldn't he?

Now my lover watches me
His eyes as hard as stone.
The love we knew in dreams is through...
My lover-friend is gone.

Her lover-friend...if he was reading this right - if she truly knew him before he knew her, how she must have suffered for hiding it from him, especially when they were fighting like idiots...

The back door creaked open in the kitchen, and a moment later, clicked shut. Stashing the journal
under the sofa, Donnie dug out the photo album and feigned interest in its contents. "Hey, Hon," he called out thumbing through the crackling pages. "How'd it go?"

"So yer the one she's hidin'." The unfamiliar voice sent Donnie's heart-rate through the roof—a stranger stood in the doorway, clear blue eyes fixed on him in amusement. Of course, that amusement might be more due to finding himself face-to-face with a ninja armed with a dusty table lamp. In the hands of a master of ninjitsu, anything could be a weapon...unfortunately, Donnie was no master, so he probably just looked silly. Frozen in place, lamp held at the ready, Donnie scrutinized the stranger hovering in the doorway to the kitchen.

The stranger was tall – almost taller than Donnie himself – and though he was now visibly frail, he was clearly strong and sturdy in his youth. Clear grey-blue eyes, a shade or two clearer than Mercy's and several shades murkier than Mikey's, stared right through him. His hair was overlong and curly—dark brown between the grey and white spread like patchwork across his scalp—and his greyed beard, sideburns, mustache, and mutton-chops were trimmed bushy. Despite sneaking up on him, the elder strode confidently into the living room and lowered himself into Aaron's recliner, visibly waiting for Donnie to realize he meant no harm. "How did you get in here?" Donnie asked when the other volunteered no explanation.

"I's a small toon,"~ the elder replied thickly with a disaffected shrug. "Nuwun locks their dares when they're hame; some folk never lock'em even when they're gane."~ The mutant stared back, blinking in confusion and struggling to decipher what he heard. The stranger was difficult to understand, but then again, so was Amber when she got angry...and angry Amber sounded a great deal like the stranger before him if a good deal more understandable. Something about not locking doors...?

"We've never met – Ah'm—"~

"Glen Devon," Donnie finished for him. "Amber calls you Grahn'Dah." Sure enough, Glen grinned at him, baring a glimpse of familiarly misaligned upper teeth. Huh...a crooked overbite was a family trait, then, maybe?

"An' yer the cannie speccy she waited fer," Glen acknowledged gruffly, "the one'oo brought'er hame to us an' brought tha' sparkle back in'er een."~ Despite the thick broguish accent coloring the elder's words, the meaning was somewhat clear—it was either a confirmation or a compliment. Donnie ducked his head, hiding an awkward smile.

For a time, the two simply compared notes, both surprised the conversation was as easy as it was, language barrier aside. After all, it wasn't exactly normal for someone in Glen Devon's world to find themselves chatting with a mutant turtle, let alone the mutant turtle dating his no-longer-dead granddaughter. "I'm surprised you're taking this so well," Donnie remarked after a time. "Normally when my family first meets someone, there's screaming and stammering, or at least fainting. Some people even wet themselves."

"Ma yoongest has seen thin's fer years, Lad,"~ Glen retorted rolling his eyes, "thins nuwun else ever sees, but thins that sound awfy familier an' factional. Compared ta what he's told us aboot, yer pure dead tame. Ef ye wan'a body tae faint, ye'll have tae meet ma daughter."~ Donnie wasn't sure what to say about that—partly because he couldn't understand even half of it—and held his tongue. "Ah'm grateful tae ye, Son—ye brought ma Ahmber hame, ye've tekken good care o'er, an' Ah'm sure ye mean'er nae harm, but Ah need a promise. Ah need yer word tha' ye only want the best for'er—tha' ye'll no' hurt'er."~

It took a moment of bewildered staring on Donnie's end for Glen to realize the other didn't understand him. Growing a tad frustrated, the elder tried again, slowing down and enunciating more clearly; that careful enunciation, however, also resulted in some pretty warped pronunciation that
didn't quite work out. "Swear tae me ye willnae—will no' hurt Ahmber," the elder summed up gruffly. "Swear tae me ye'll dae right by' er." ~ Promise you won't hurt her—promise you'll take care of her - that much, Donnie could understand.

"I wouldn't dream of anything otherwise," the genius admitted avoiding Glen's eyes. "She means too much to me. I can't promise I'll never hurt her, though…I...I kinda...already did." To his surprise, Glen didn't automatically jump all over him for the confession; instead, the elder leaned back into the recliner's plush backrest, his hairy arms crossed, and waited for explanation.

It took a bit to get out the whole story, from first finding Amber in the subway to their long feud and all the way to the present day—the juicy bits censored out, of course. So far, Glen seemed almost comfortable with him being a mutant, but should Donnie let slip that he and Amber were intimate… EEK. His family might never find all the pieces of him. "I love her, Sir," Donnie summed up once he finished, "and there's little I wouldn't do to make her happy. We've made amends and moved on from that fight, but I'm—I'm afraid I've done something else—something even worse than not trusting her."

Glen waited for him to elaborate but to no avail. "What have ye done, then?" he asked lowly. Donnie turned back to him, looking much like a kicked puppy.

"I forgot her," the mutant confessed, gaze dropping to the photo album again.

"Fergot'er?" Glen repeated, grizzled brows pinching in disbelief. "How cud ye've fergotten'er? She's been wit' ye this whole time, yes? How cud ye ferge't when she's right under yer snoot?"~ How could he forget her when she's always with him? Even with Glen's thick accent, the question was clear, but the answer was far from it.

From the moment Donnie first found Amber, freezing to death in the underground, she seemed familiar; he was sure he'd never seen her before, but something tugged at him from the depths of his memory. That tugging only grew stronger over their first few months with her, months peppered with hints and secrets seeping from the past and into the present in the form of remembered dreams and deja vu. Then came the day he thought sure would be their last together—the night she dreamed of Kimber demanding answers, the night he first showed her his heart, first explored her through touch and taste, and the night before they faced down Hun and Northpaw for her freedom. That night, the slow trickle of memories swelled to a tsunami—memories of dreams long forgotten, some recalled in the light, others relived in the night, and most featuring an older, wearier version of the Amber he knew now. It took a few weeks to realize he'd been remembering all along - that the Amber in his dreams was trying to tell him so - but the overload of remembered dreams nearly drowned him.

"It sounds too far-fetched to be true," he summed up still afraid – ashamed, angry, frustrated – and unable to meet Glen's eyes. "Logic indicates shared dreams are impossible, based in fiction, but I've seen logic proven faulty many a time, often by my sensei—a master of ninjitsu and the wisest man I know. Not to mention this inter-dimensional travel bit," he added under his breath. "So much makes me wonder if these dreams of Amber...if they're another instance of logic being overruled by reality." He heaved a sigh, tugging at the back of his neck and struggling to center himself despite his thoughts skittering every which way. "If...if we really did - crazy as it sounds - experience a shared dream-state throughout our lives, then how could I forget her? She means the world to me...how could I possibly forget someone so important to me—someone who wasted her entire life waiting for me, who even died waiting for me?" Before he could launch even further into self-deprecating stammering, Glen spoke up.

"Never underestimate the ability of a broken heart tae brak the mind," he warned crossing his long
legs. "Ef ye truly forgot'er, why'd she seem fameliar?"~ Why did she seem familiar if you forgot her? Donnie blinked in surprise; it never even occurred to him to wonder that. "It sounds like ye blocked oot'er memory, Son, perhaps oot'a sorrow. Her las' few years, she wiz jus' a shell of'erself – wur lil' Jeanie-burd wiz fallin' apart. It brak wur hearts seein' it frae the distance she kep' us at; Ah cannae imagine how much it would've hurt tae see it up close."~

Amidst the thick words, a few stuck out that made sense. Blocked, memory, sorrow, falling apart, hurt...Donnie was sure there was more to the explanation, but the bit he understood was clear enough. Could he have been so broken-hearted over watching Amber fall apart that his own mind tried to spare him from it by striking those dreams from his memory, by declaring her a fantasy and dismissing her? Donnie wasn't sure what to say to that. What could he say? It hurt watching her wasting away her life, even now long after the fact when all he had were echoes of dreams past; surely in the moment, it must have been even more painful to see it. Nervously, he looked up to meet the eyes of the elder—the grandfather Amber mourned more than anyone else in her world. "Did...did she d-dream..." He faltered, losing his nerve and turning away in embarrassment.

"Ah cannae deny nor confirm tha',"~ Glen warned calmly. "Ef ye wan' answers, ef ye would knuw whether yer dreams were yers aloone, then ye'll have tae ask'er yerself. Ah've goat no answers fer ye on tha'."~ Glen studied the other silently, searching for any reason to distrust or doubt the strange being before him; he found none. "Ah've a question fer yew now...well she be able tae come back again? Es thes the only chance we've goat tae say goodbye?"~

Donnie startled from his ruminations. "Can she come back again?" he repeated to ensure he didn't misunderstand the other's words, then upon receiving a nod, answered with a shrug, "I don't see why not. We used a portal technique to get here—a spell of sorts meant for travelling to other dimensions for ninjitsu training. The technique is easy enough to manage, timeline variance aside." That timeline variance, of course, being two years gone by in Amber's world for less than a year in his world. He shook off the realization; it wouldn't help his case any, but the elder deserved to know. "We should be able to come by once in a while but I can't guarantee it'll be regular or frequent – she's been in my world less than a year, but Aaron Willis told us she's been gone from yours for two years."

"Did ye truly expect defferent worlds tae march tae the same drumbeat?" Glen chided with a grin. "Yer world an' wurs cannae ever cross, su what wud be the point o'em mahtchin' up?"~ Donnie stared back at him, struggling to grasp the other's point; failing that, he searched instead for what he wasn't hearing or seeing and still failed.

"You really aren't disturbed by any of this?" the genius muttered disregarding his confusion for the moment. "Your granddaughter's dating a mutant turtle and came back from the dead, but you're not the slightest bit disturbed?"

"Desturbed?" Glen parroted back with a smirk. "Entirely. Aboot tae lose ma heid? Naw. Ef it'll comfort ye, Ah'll be sure tae faint the morn."~

One moment Amber O'Brien was being chased down by a counterpart demanding answers; the next she held that counterpart pinned to the dingy ivory tiles of the men's room wall, faithful Buck knife at the other's throat. "Lemme guess," the braided other-worlder remarked with a calm she didn't at all feel even after the fact. "I'm Kimber Bryant, what're ya doin' in my body, have a knuckle sandwich."

"Ya don't have ta do t'is," Kimber urged instead, slowly reaching up to the shaky hand at her throat and easing it—and her favorite knife—aside, never remarking on the blatant threat. "I don't mean ya no harm...I jus' want answers."

Hours later, Amber still wondered if she should have fought harder—should have insisted more and
refused to trust the woman whose corpse she wore like a fugly Christmas sweater. Hours later, though, she was alive and unharmed, and so was Kimber Bryant...and come sundown, the Jersey Nutjob would meet Amber, Aaron, and Donatello in Aaron's home for a long overdue talk.

Kimber claimed she only wanted answers—swore up and down that she had no intention of causing trouble—but after seeing the disaster the younger woman made of her life before dying, Amber was reluctant to believe that. "This could be a trap," she muttered to hugging herself, unable to tear her eyes from the blind-shaded window. Gentle hands at her shoulders turned her about, one migrating to tip her chin up; sure enough, hazel eyes, veering brown in the dark parlor, met hers.

"It might be," Donnie conceded enfolding her in his arms. "Then again," he added into her hair, "it could also be she made the request at face value. It could be she really just wants answers."

"...and it could be she wants'er body back," Amber snorted into his shoulder. "Not sure how the heck that could work. At least the world didn't blow up when she touched my hand." He craned his neck back to shoot her a bewildered glance. "Doctor Who. Doc took Rose back in time to see'er Da before he died, she ended up creatin' a paradox, then'er parents blew time to hell an' back by makin'er hold'erself." # Donnie blinked; Amber winced. "Okay, that sounded way dirtier than it was meant to."

"Something you're trying to tell me?" the genius teased. His expression was entirely innocent but Amber knew otherwise—a callused thumb hooked in one of her belt-loops and the rest of the massive hand cupped the curve of her rump with a playful squeeze. God forbid she even contemplate what the other hand was occupied with—she needed her sanity intact.

"You're really distracting, ya know that?" she groused but smiled all the wider.

"I'm happy to oblige." For a moment, he looked like he wanted to say something—looked like something heavy wore on his mind—but that moment passed, and instead, he nuzzled into the warm crook of her neck and shoulder. A gentle pinch of teeth at her pulse - a firm squeeze at her hip - who cared that Amber would face down her psychotic counterpart in half an hour? The present, spent with her brilliant, remarkable, impossible lover was far more pleasant a distraction than worrying over what she couldn't change.

Whatever would be, would be.

~LONG-ASS WORDS NOTES~

My advice? Skip or skim unless you're confused. Most of the following are Scottish slang, Scots-English, or pronunciations warped to fit the most well-known Scotch dialect. (Henceforth noted as "SS.") Other instances will be noted. In the instance of entire sentences being explained, I have sometimes simplified and translated the sentence as a whole rather than tediously define every single word. Keep in mind, as always, dialects and intensity of speech color vary from person to person. Glen's incredibly thick speech isn't an example of how 'everyone' from his home talked, only how HE talks; Aaron and Mercy's intense twangs, too, are only to show their personal flavors, not to say 'everyone from Missouri talks like a hick.' Lastly, regarding Glen's portions below, unless otherwise noted, his speech defs are all SS.

--Half-starkers – Starkers is a regional variation of 'stark naked' so half-starkers means half-naked. Consider that Kimber wore her skimpiest skankiest clothing when she took to the underground in hopes of either coaxing Raph's cooperation or at least earning sympathy cooperation when she turned up freezing. Also, hoochie is a slang term for either 'a woman of questionable chastity' or 'a hot-mama.' Basically Amber's calling Kimber's clunky black boots hooker boots. That said, she's not
insulting the boots, she's just being a smartass…as evidenced by the fact that she's still wearing them regularly even now that she's been able to afford something else.

~Hawd yer fashin', ya silly braw speccy – Hawd – hold, as in 'stop' and fash – to raise a ruckus or be fussy. The most commonly used phrase, traditionally, is hawd yer wheeshd – basically a fancy way of saying 'shut the frick up already,' but Amber's always had a tendency to twist phrases around to suit herself. (Turning non-verbs into verbs, twisting words she learned from her Gran'Da into new combinations and assigning alternate meanings, etc.) One such example is a repeat offender from her, "Hawd yer haverin,'" with havering meaning 'talking shit,' 'speaking nonsense,' or 'being ridiculous.' (Side note: anyone who's ever heard the Pretenders' "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)" that verse uses the word haverin', not some other mistaken word. From what I've read, the band (or at least the lead vocalists) are native Scots and were normally ordered to suppress their accents for music by their managers/label. This song is reportedly one of the only tracks they were allowed to really be themselves for, and it made a world of difference. Nerd rant over.) The last one, braw, is also SS and means beautiful, handsome, or otherwise good-looking.

~Cannie-fanny – another SS Amber-ism. Cannie – smart or clever, and as before, fanny – twat or arse. Basically, she called him a smartass. ;D

~Criminy – this one's a less elaborate form of the regional slang term criminently, a non-obscene swear. Some consider the terms interchangeable, some consider criminily weaker and less emphatic than criminently. Pronunciations: CRY-mi-nee and CRY-mi-NENT-lee or CRY-mi-NEH'lee, with the -neh- being pronounced with a half stop. (In the latter case, the "-nt-" is usually dropped and replaced with a sharpening of the syllables before and afterward to create a stop.)

~Yew / Ye / Ye've / Ye'd / Ye'll – You / you / you've / you'd / you'll [SS] As always, I've based this mostly on extensive research, but the presence of two different pronunciations of 'you' is largely based on the region this is set in. In some regions of the US, particularly the Midwest, it's not unusual to hear one person use three or more different pronunciations for certain words (the, or, for, and you are a few common culprits) differing only by what words they're used with. Because our application of the 'twang' can change by the sentence (you/ya/yeh/yew being a particularly common example of variations of the same word) this region's speech patterns are alternatively linguists' nightmares and wet dreams. In this case, Glen's adopted this 'multi-pronunciation' habit along with a few other changes as per his residency. Personal note: IRL, I've got a pretty thick twang (honestly even thicker than is shown in Blocked) and Cold remarked something about this recently. We were on the subject of me misunderstanding something he said, he responded with a teasing "You have trouble understanding me? Fuck, I've heard ya pronounce "or" in 'bout half a dozen different ways all in the same conversation an' I still understand ya. Hearing. Aid." (I don't need a hearing aid. He mumbles. Doctor. Verified. Mumbler.)

~Lil' Burd – Bart's nickname for Amber, compare to "Jeanie-burd" with burd/burds referring to females in general. SS.

~I wasnae born yesterdee – I wasn't born yesterday, SS

~Aboot – about, SS.

~T'a fuck're ya doin' in my bawdy?! – Kimber's Jersey twist, "What the fuck are you doing in my body?!!"

~Specky – Donnie doesn't know how to spell Speccy, which just means he wears glasses. SS

~'gain – again, SS

~A'thin – SS Everything so a'thin's would be "everything's" as in everything has

~How much, I dinnae ken – How much it's changed, I don't know. SS. Amber's imitating the works of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, and very poorly. Real writings by Scott and Burns are obscenely different and, IMO, an absolute delight to the eyes and ears.

~Mibbe –maybe, SS

GLEN'S PORTION:
-It's a small toon – 'It's a small town.' It's would be pronounced like hiss without the h-. SS

-Nuwun locks their dares when they're hame; some folk never lock'em even when they're gone. – No one locks their doors when they're home; some people never lock them even when they're gone. SS. Believe it or not, this is true of many small towns. It absolutely boggles my mind that only a few cities away, people can sleep with their windows open and their doors unlocked without getting murdered in their sleep!

~Ah / Ah'm / Ah'd / Ah'll – I / I'm / I'd / I'll, SS

-The one'oo brought'er hame to us an' brought tha' sparkle back in'er een. – The one who brought her home to us and brought that sparkle back to her eyes. (Made her happy again.)

~Ma yoongest has seen thin's fer years - thin's nuwun else ever sees, but thins that sound awfy fameliar an' fictional – My youngest [child] has seen things for years - Things no one else ever sees, but things that sound awfully familiar and fictional. SS. Glen's referring to Bart's problem with seeing things/hallucinating. There's every possibility he's not so much hallucinating as picking up things most people don't see. Believe what you wish, but I've seen that sort of sensitivity before IRL. (Growing up with a verified poltergeist doesn't do much for skepticism, either, TBH. Damn "Gopher.")

~Compared tae what he's told us aboot, yer pure dead tame. – Compared to some of the things he's told us he's seen, you're nothing impressive. SS.

~Ef ya wan' a body tae faint, ye'll have tae meet ma daughter – If you're expecting fainting and conniptions, try Ginny – she'll oblige. SS.

~Ah'm grateful tae ye, Son. – I'm grateful to you, Son. SS. "Son" - in the Midwest it's not uncommon to hear older generations referring to younger males as "Son" even if they're not related. Sometimes this is done out of affection or to comfort, and sometimes it's meant as a warning. (Anytime my own father calls COLD "Son" we know he's PO'd to the max and reminding himself why making me a widow is a bad idea.) In this case, Glen's calling Donnie "Son" to comfort him and say-without-saying that he accepts him, trusts him, and approves of him.

~Ye brought ma Ahmber hame, ye've tekken good care of'er, an' Ah'm sure ye mean'er nae harm, but Ah need a promise. – You brought my Amber home, you've taken good care of her, and I'm sure you don't mean her any harm, but I need a promise. SS.

~Ah need yer word tha' ye only want the best for'er—that' ye'll no' hurt'er. – I need your word [a promise] that you want only the best for her—that you won't hurt her. SS.

~Swear tae me ye willnae—will no' hurt Ahmber. Swear tae me ye'll dae right by'er – Promise me you [will not] hurt Amber. Promise me you'll do right by her. (Doing right by someone has a broad meaning that can include protecting, supporting, caring for, and loving someone.) SS & regional slang.

~Fergot'er? How cud ye've fergotten'er? She's been wit' ye this whole time, yes? How cud ye ferget'er when she's right under yer snoot? – Forgot her? How could you forget her? She's been right there with you this whole time, right? How could you forget her when she's been right under your nose? SS.

~Never underestimate the abelity of a braken heart tae brak the mind. – Never underestimate the ability of a broken heart to break your mind. (IOW, emotional distress can negatively affect the rational mind in ways we don't always understand.) SS.

~Ef ye truly fergot'er, why'd she seem fameliar? It sounds like ye blocked oot'er mem'ry, Son, perhaps oot'a sorrow. – If you truly forgot her, why did she seem familiar to you? It sounds like you mentally blocked out her memory, perhaps out of sorrow. SS.

~Her las' few years, she wiz jus' a shell of'erself – wur lil' Jeanie-burd wiz fallin' apart. – Her last few years [alive], she was just a shadow of herself – our little Jeanie-burd was falling apart. [Amber was fighting depression and apathy, nothing new] SS.

~It brak wur hearts sein' it fraw the distance she kep' us at; Ah cannae imagine how much it would've hurt tae see it up close. – It broke our hearts seeing her fall apart from the distance she
kept us at; I can't even imagine how much it must have hurt seeing that up close. SS.

~Ah Cannae deny nor confirm tha'. – I can neither deny nor confirm that ["That" being 'whether or not Amber was dreaming about you, too.'] SS.

~Ef ye wan' answers, ef ye would knuw whether yer dreams were yers alone, then ye'll have tae ask'er yerself. Ah've goat no answers fer ye on tha'. – If you want answers, if you wish to know whether or not your dreams were shared, then you'll have to ask her yourself. I've got no answers for you regarding that. [Gran'da washed his hands of this. He ain't gettin' involved. Nope, not touchin' it.] SS.

~Ah've a question fer yew, now...well she be able tae come back again? Es thes the only chance we've goat tae say goodbye? – I have a question for you, now: will she be able to come back again? Is this the only chance we've got to say goodbye to her? SS.

~Did ye truly expect different worlds tae march tae the same drumbeat? Yer world an' wurs cannae ever cross, su what wud be the point of'em mahtchin' up? – Did you really expect different worlds to march to the same drumbeat? [exist in perfect sync?] Your world and ours can't ever cross, so what would be the point of them matching up? [synchronizing] SS.

~Desturbed? Entirely. Aboot tae lose ma heid? Naw. Ef it'll comfort ye, Ah'll be sure tae faint the morn. -- Disturbed? Entirely. About to lose my head? [experience a mental breakdown] Hardly. If it'll make you feel better, I'll be sure to faint sometime tomorrow. SS. Two guesses as to where Amber got her smartassery from. ;)

NOTES

*Tonfa – *Tonfa are a blunt wooden weapon typical of some Eastern martial arts and normally used in pairs. The basic shape is a sturdy length of wood, similar to a bo but just longer than the upper arm, with a peg or handle jutting out of one side, almost at the end. Generally, the handle is held in your fist with two basic positions for defense or offense. For defense, the long portion of the weapon is laid along the outer edge of your lower arm to enable blocking, bracing, and bashing; the shorter portion will extend a short distance from your knuckles and is good for jabs and punches. For strictly offense, some reverse that position – the long portion is extended beyond the fist and the shorter portion is laid along the wrist to brace; in this manner, you can really whallop someone and easily concuss them. Some varieties of tonfa are built for easy switching, and will thus have a two-piece handle – the inner portion is attached to the staff and the outer grip is built to rotate, so you can rotate the weapon as needed. (For visual: If you've watched the first Hellboy liveaction movie, Krœnen used a pair of tonfa modified into blades instead of staves.) Tonfa, according to my research, have been commonly used in the Japanese military and police force because they can be lethal or non-lethal depending on their usage – no carrying a pistol AND a stun-gun and fumbling between them.

On the bit about Donnie starting with *Tonfa*, this is a head-canon of mine. ALL THREE of his brothers were assigned weapons in pairs—Donnie's the only one who was assigned a single weapon. Keeping to the weapons theme - "two sharps and two blunts" - I feel like Tonfa would have been a good dual-weapon for him. TBH, the single weapon was most likely chosen by his creators because a single weapon makes it easier to perform his super-special-geniusy-background-support stuff than stuffing one weapon under his arm to chuck a smoke bomb. In the Paramount verse, however, Donnie's shown with vision problems, probably far-sighted, and that made me mentally picture him accidentally bashing himself in the head during training before he got his glasses. XD I couldn't resist, LOL!

** The Staggering Rat Pub – As Dee mentioned, traditional English/European pubs and taverns were given names that could be shown on the sign in pictures – a few examples from pop culture would be *The Prancing Pony* and *The Green Dragon* from the Lord of the Rings and *The
*Hanged Man* from (I believe) the Dragon Age game series. The practice was started during times when illiteracy was more common than literacy, but over time, kept because drunks don't read so well while they're puking in the gutter. "The Staggering Rat" is a pun based on the SS term 'rat-arsed' meaning 'drunk.'

# Reference: *Doctor Who* episode #163 "Father's Day"
55: Absolutes Part 4 - The Dead Do Not Rise

Chapter Summary

Last part of Absolutes, and last chapter before return to NYC.

UPDATE: It's been MONTHS since I posted this chapter and I JUST realized I screwed the pooch in Kimber's scene...I gave her new body the wrong name entirely! The realization hit completely out of nowhere while working on an update and it was all I could do to refrain from banging my head on my desk.

....SIGH. Well, it should be fixed now. Anytime in the future if you see Kimber's "corpse donor" called anything but Barbara Brent - or "Barb/Bahbie" - please let me know so I can fix my fudge-up.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Kimber was a little shit in her last life and she's still a little shit in her new one. At least now she's a little easier to understand. BIGGER WARNING: This chapter has a massive SHTF cliffhanger at the end which will be resolved with the next chapter. If you're cliffhanger sensitive, you might ought'a put off reading this one until the next one's out, which will likely be at least two weeks. The good news? So far that's the only 'probable-cause-for-murder' grade cliffie you should find for a while. It's not just coming out of nowhere, either, it's been in planning since planning for this part of the story began. (FYI: read "since the story first began")

Honestly, I'll be pretty disappointed if no one leaves any angry-reader comments or 'how dare you?!' flames—it would mean I've failed to twang y'all's heartstrings sufficiently. That said, please don't kill me. I have kitties.


55: Absolutes Part IV - The Dead Do Not Rise

Willsdale, Missouri, Aaron Willis' trailer

Day 3, evening

Dying sunlight filtered through the treetops, scattering patchy shadows across the half-dead yard. In the driveway, two women squared off – one tall and svelte with immaculate makeup and neatly styled auburn hair, and one mid-height and curvy with suspicious grey-green eyes. "Kimber Bryant?" the shorter woman demanded of the taller, who nodded. "Glad you could make it. Come on in." Without another word, Amber ducked through the front door of Aaron's home, letting the screen door close behind her.
Out in the yard, Kimber hesitated, clenching one hand painfully on the pair of battered metal dog-tags dangling around her neck. She turned back to her old run-down car—a relic too young to be a classic but too old to be anything but junk—contemplating making a run for it. She well remembered the mess she made of her life before checking out of it, and she remembered just as well the feeling of her own knife being held at her throat. Could she really trust these people? Could she really trust the woman who now lived her life? ‘What choice have I got?’ she asked herself, shaking her head in aggravated disbelief. Without another moment's hesitation, she stalked up the creaking wooden steps, through the screen door, and into a small, dark parlor that stank of cat-boxes and cheap cherry air freshener.

Behind her, the front door shut with a bang; it took all the courage she possessed to keep from bolting like a spooked cat. Again, she snatched at the dog-tags, forcing herself to meet the eyes of the three others occupying the room. One person was familiar if only in passing—Raphael's twin brother, Donatello, the lanky brains to Raph's brawn. The second was familiar as well, though not nearly as familiar as his counterpart—Aaron Willis, a rough and rugged local with a startling resemblance to Daron Williams. The last face was one she knew as surely as her own. After all, the face was her own, albeit with a new owner...an owner who shared the name she tried to disappear with.

"Kimberly Jane O'Bryan," Donatello greeted as she shifted on her feet, "or should I say, Barbara Marie Brent?" Even after two years, Kimber's birth name made her grimace and the name of her new used body made her throat catch.

"Don't call me t'at," she snapped stalking over to the sofa to make herself at home, "or I swear, I'll deck ya. It's Kimber or not'in." Aaron's eyes volleyed back and forth from the three people engaged in a tense standoff, completely lost.

"Is this national talk over the rube's head day?" he demanded with a shrug. "Who's Barbara Brent? Who's this? What's she gotta do with anythin' an' why's she here?" Amber rolled her eyes and turned to remind him, but a husky, smoggy voice beat her to it.

"Yer Willis, right?" Kimber asked; Amber exchanged a concerned glance with Donnie over her shoulder. "Kimber Bryant. I'm from Donnie's world, dead an' brought back in a corpse like t'at one." The last was delivered with a sharp thumb-jab in Amber's direction. "T'at's my bawdy^ she's wearin', give or take~ a few pounds. She let it get skinny."

"You call this skinny?!" the other woman demanded, gesturing to her wide hips and full rear.

"I call it depressin',"~ Kimber retorted eyeing the brunette derisively. "Back when I was wearin' t'at, I had an ass t'at could kill an' the kinda hips a guy could really grab onto. How much pukin' did it take ya to lose'em?"~ Amber sputtered in disbelief, struggling to formulate a reply. "So guess ya got my temper but not my smarts, huh?" Donnie dove between them, latching onto the raging brunette before she could dive at the smug redhead.

"Ladies, please!" he protested even as his furious girlfriend seethed—seethed, fumed, and snarled, but made no move to approach her ill-mannered counterpart. "This isn't helping anything!"

"Actually, brain-trust," Kimber contradicted, her tone now surprisingly civil, "it helped jus' enough. If t'at was me, I'd'a~ been at my troat by now. T'a bawdy-snatcher's got a better head on'er shoulders t'an I ever did." Amber stared back at Kimber, stunned; the redhead shrugged. "What? First time I ever approached ya I got a knife at my troat, can ya blame me fer bein' a lil' cawtious?"^
"killed by yer old pals!" She yanked at the modest neckline of her tee shirt, hissed in pain when she snagged a healing blister on her nails, and showed off a portion of the half-faded and mostly blistered tattoo. "Even now, people see this damned lizard an' wanna beat my arse just for wearin' it! Fer all I knew, you were gonna shank me or somethin!"

"...I'll go order pizza," Aaron mumbled shuffling out of the room. Donnie gaped after him a moment, turned back to scrutinize the two counterparts trading glares over the coffee table, then came to the same conclusion: they needed some time to clear the air and having company might not help. The genius made his way over to Kimber and tugged her to her feet; amidst sputtered protests, he impersonally patted her down to check for weapons, then pocketed her can of mace.

That done, he turned to repeat the process with Amber but found her voluntarily surrendering arms—or, rather, digging out all her hidden self-defense mechanisms and laying them out on the coffee table for him, all with a betrayed scowl. When she stopped, she smacked her sides, hips, then rear pockets to double check, then crossed her arms in defiance. He wasn't fooled. After dumping her assorted weaponry—a wallet of Donnie-exclusive throwing knives, a can of mace, and a rather dull utility pocket knife—into his cargo pockets, he held out one hand expectantly.

The recognition on her face melted into fear then into defiance—he wiggled his fingers, arching a chastising brow at her—she snorted in refusal. Finally, rolling his eyes at her, he bent down, snatched her by the ankle, and retrieved the final weapon from her boot sheath: the Buck knife she never went anywhere without. When he took his feet again, her scowl was well beyond betrayal and into threats of bodily harm. "Confiscated," he warned pointing the knife handle at her and swept into the kitchen with the women's loot.

"Dang," Kimber muttered staring at his retreating shell. "T'at one was my favorite."

It took the better part of an hour, but finally, the two counterparts were able to communicate with a somewhat civil tongue. Soon after, Donnie and then Aaron drifted back into the parlor armed with pizza and sodas, both watching the spectacle with a mix of morbid curiosity and trepidation. At first, Donnie pulled Amber onto his lap in the expectation he might have to restrain her; soon after, it became clear that the animosity was gone. Even without the threat of spontaneous violence, though, he felt more comfortable with her enfolded in his arms. It helped distract him from the facts that Kimber screwed his brother and that he was unable to save her life.

"To be honest, Kid," Kimber remarked to Amber after all the hashing out was through, "I'm surprised ya ain't after my head. I know what a shithole I made out'a~ t'at life, an' I know what a mess t'at left ya to wake up to." Now that her temper had cooled—or was it Kimber's temper?—Amber had no threats or biting accusations to hurl back.

"Takin' it out on you wouldn't do any good," Amber pointed out without emphasis. Why did so many people insist on calling her kid? She was in her thirties when she died! "We cleaned up your mess—Hun's never gonna walk again an' he's behind bars. Northpaw's dead. Lefty's locked up too, unfortunately...he insisted on taking the fall for Hun's injuries an' he won't see anyone who comes to visit. The Purple Dragons're officially disbanded, sans a few stragglers, an' the jack-wads on Hun's payroll have all been turned in. Daron Williams is in the clear, too, an' workin' off his hacking sentence." Kimber nodded gravely but said nothing. Amber hesitated, wary of overstepping. "Your death wasn't in vain, Kimber...we made sure of it. Everything you fought for, we finished."

For a time, Kimber seemed unsure of what to say; she held her silence tightly, staring a hole through her empty soda can and searching for something, anything. "Ya gotta prawmise^ me somethin'," she said when she finally found her tongue. "Keep an eye on Lefty fer me...Nort^ was a maniac but he was Lefty's brother—he was all Lefty had, especially after Truman..." She trailed off, shook away
the memory—a horrifying and vivid memory of Lefty showing up on her doorstep still covered in his lover's blood, haunted, empty-eyed, and completely silent. "He's all alone, now," she continued shoving aside the memory. "He needs ya more'n he'll admit…an' Daron's the same…he's prob'ly a mess."

"I promise," Amber replied softly, chancing a weak smile. "Lefty an' Daron have been good to us…good to Mercy an' me, especially. We'll keep watchin' out for'em." The other returned the smile, though hers was more sad than faint.

"Since we've got all that ironed out now," Donnie started, "there's something that's been bothering me about the whole 'new life, new world' bit. Amber, Mercy, and you all received second chances after death, and Mercy's told me a friend of hers has a relative who experienced the same."

"Don't tell me," Aaron grinned, "her mother's father's sister's uncle had a puppy who came back as a goldfish?" The blond got a throw pillow to the face.

"Don't strain yerself, Willis," Amber snarked. "Mercy's workin' for a florist now, an' the owner's daughter has a cousin who got the same thing we did—he died an' someone else woke up in his body." Aaron grinned over at Donnie.

"See? Mother's father's sister's uncle." This time, he ducked the pillow thrown at him. "So yer lookin' fer similarities?" Fist poised to chuck something else at the smartass blond, Amber paused, considered his words, then lowered the empty soda can back to the table and looked to Donnie for confirmation. The mutant nodded.

"Well," Amber recalled aloud, "Mercy an' I remember some similar stuff—the smell of dust, ticking clocks, brightening an' dimming lights, an' a creepy whirring sound…"

"I heard a voice sometimes," Kimber grumbled. "A really frickin' annoyin' one, always whinin' about somet'in. —an' let's not forget t'at freaky empty void," she added in a grumble. "I must'a~ spent a year screamin' into t'a darkness wit'out any response—I din't wanna second chance. Not only did t'ey gimme one anyway, t'ey stuck me in some bitch who was cheatin' on'er reserves husband wit' a married cab driver." The other three cringed, and Kimber shot Amber a scowl.

"Next time ya feel like bitchin' over t'a lizard in my cleavage, remember how bad cabbies stink an' try not to feel too lucky."

"I take it those are her husband's tags?" Aaron asked eyeing the twin metal tags dangling just above Kimber's rack, then purposefully letting his eyes drift a little lower. "Why're ya wearin' 'em? Ya never knew'im."

"Two reasons." Kimber avoided his eyes, sure her cheeks were pinking underneath her powder. The blond resembled her childhood friend, Daron, to an extent that was disturbing, but already she could tell they had more in difference than in common. Daron would never have openly eyed her like that, and if he had, she probably would've busted his teeth in. Strangely she felt no urge to punch Aaron Willis…she wasn't sure what to make of that. "People expect a widow ta mourn, even if t'is one prob'ly wouldn't'a cared less; wearin' Jordan's tags makes people t'ink twice about askin' me about'im, an' since I hardly know a damn t'ing about'im, t'at's a lifesaver. T'at's only t'at excuse, tough."^

She fidgeted, finding herself again drawn to clutch at the tags and rub her thumb over the worn embossed lettering. "I don't know if anyone else is gawnna get stuck in t'is body when I leave it…an' I don't know a damn t'ing about what anyone else might be dealin' with." Finally looking up again, defiantly, she held the tags aloft in a pointed gesture then let them fall again. "T'is reminds me ta be mindful—to fix all'a~ t'at ways I used to screw up an' conquer all'a~ my old faults."
Amber winced, leaning into Donnie's shoulder for comfort. After all the time she spent cleaning up Kimber's messes, she never would have expected the other woman to have that much insight or that much heart. Clearly recognizing the brunette's reactions, Kimber sneered at her and lurched to her feet. "Ya may wear my face now, Scotty," she reminded Amber gruffly as she stalked to the front door, "but ya don't know jack shit about me an' ya never will. Stawp judgin' me an' staht cleanin' up yer own messes a'ready."\^ 

"We came here to tie off her loose ends," Donnie warned her, one hand gripping Amber's hip to steady her; she didn't seem to be upset, though, so maybe he was the one who needed steadying. "We came to make sure her family and friends are alright. You know nothing about Amber, either, Kimber, so don't judge her either. She's already made great progress in conquering her faults, and in less than a year; how long have you been here?" Kimber halted, her fingers slipping away from the door handle.

"Two years now," she admitted quietly. "T'at's two years I never wanted."

"Maybe we could get you home for a couple days," Amber offered, leaving Donnie's lap to approach the other woman. "If we could get me here for a few days, surely—"

"NO." Kimber's answer, delivered in a sudden, harsh snap, made Amber step back a pace. "I wasn't s'posed~ ta come here anyway—Dead is dead, ya got t'at?!"

"But—" 

"Dammit, I din't wanna come back!" Kimber burst out. Underneath the anger, however, something else came through…hurt. "I din't wanna second chance, not when I fucked up my first one t'at badly! I ain't gawnna screw up t'a natural order'a t'ings any more'n I a'ready have!"\^ Even as Kimber seethed, struggled to control her outburst and staunch the burning in her eyes, Amber didn't back down; instead, she reached out, took the other by the shoulder, and uttered a single question.

"What about Raph?" That one question sucked all the hot air out of Kimber in one fell swoop. She turned away, opting to stare through the front windows rather than chance anyone else seeing her brimming eyes.

"What about'im?" she demanded hoarsely, her words thicker than ever. "I'm dead in t'at world, an'e din't want me even when I was alive. T'at's t'a end of it."\^ 

"You might be surprised," Amber countered. "He's…he hasn't handled this well…he blames himself for your death." Kimber snorted in disbelief. "He knows the truth now, too…he knows you…loved him…" This time, Donnie urged Aaron to vacate the room, though they hovered in the kitchen listening in.

"Love." The response confused Amber, and she asked for clarification. "I still love'im, ya bleedin' heart. I never stawped lovin' 'im."\^ The admission physically hurt; Kimber choked up. "Not t'at it makes a difference. I just wish…" Before something even sappier could sneak out, she steeled her nerves. "Ya said yer livin' wit' t'a brothers, right?" she demanded, and Amber nodded. "Well…when ya get back, when ya see'im again, just…I guess just…" She trailed off, torn between saying too much and saying too little. A hand on her shoulder startled her back to herself.

"I'll tell him you're safe," Amber promised, "and that you're thinking about him and hope he's well." Unable to even speak, Kimber nodded, gingerly patted the hand on her shoulder with one of her own, then shrugged it off. Amber followed her out to her car, noting absently the stars peeking through the evening fog and gathering clouds.
"Are ya gawnna tell Bert—I mean Bart?" Kimber's question caught her off guard. "He—he took a big risk hirin' me…t'is gal wasn't qualified, an' I ain't either, but I need t'is job…" She sighed, leaning on the cold hood of the car; Amber joined her, but she didn't argue. "Bitch-face wasted all'er money on'erself an'er stanky cabbie, an' all'a Jordan's money was wiped out by hawspital bills…by t'a time I was released, t'is ol' heap'a junk was all I had, t'at an' t'a lil' bit I could fit in t'a back." A sniffle broke through but neither acknowledged it. "I'm livin' in t'a—t'a hotel outside town…an' most'a what I'm makin' is goin' ta pay off t'a homewrecker's debts. I ain't what I used ta be…I'm tryin'a—straighten up, but…it's just…"

Amber considered the other's words silently, staring up at the night sky overhead. She well-remembered how hard it could be to make it in Willsdale; she remembered struggling to make ends meet even with a decent job and fighting to pay off the monstrous medical bills intent on crippling her the rest of the way. Do we expect these things to change by wakin' up, an' suddenly, there they are? All I need's a starting place an' nothin' ever seemed so hard.* "It's hard," she admitted aloud when it became clear Kimber couldn't. "You put everything you can into doing things right, an' you fight to conquer your own weaknesses…then every now'n then,~ you find out you haven't really made as much progress as you think…an' you wonder when yer going to screw up again." Another choked sniffle snuck through the silence; shiny trails split Kimber's cheeks, running her makeup and gleaming in the moonlight.

"I'm sahrry," Kimber blustered scrubbing her cheeks dry. "Apparently t'a bitch I'm wearin' was a crier. T'at ain't me! I ain't a crybaby, I'm a hothead! I just can't get used ta t'is…"

After almost a year of living in Kimber's body, walking in Kimber's hoochie-boots, and seeing first-hand what Kimber's life was like, Amber was relatively sure she had a solid idea of who Kimber was. Kimber was rude, ill-mannered, obnoxious, and abrasive, and by all rights, was surely not the sort of person anyone would enjoy being with. Still, one thing made no sense…if she was so horrible, why did her friends consistently take her side? Why did Daron defend Kimber when Amber called her callous? Why did Lefty nearly fall apart when he found out Kimber was dead? Why, if Kimber was so horrible, did Raphael tear himself apart, even now, and hold himself accountable for her death?

At that moment, Amber saw a little of herself in Kimber—she saw the heart behind the tattoo and the soul behind the snark—and she was speechless. If she was Mikey, Amber would probably have given his characteristic 'mind blown' gesture; because she was Amber, though, she offered a figurative olive branch.

"I'm not gonna tell Uncle Bart," she promised quietly. "I have a feeling he already suspects it, though, so you may not need to tell him, either. He's…" She paused, searching for adequate words and searched the heavens for familiar patterns. "He's always seen more than most people do," she settled for, "whether something we couldn't believe or couldn't understand. If he hired you, he did so because he knew you needed the job an' you could be trusted."

"Ya sound so sure'a~ t'at," Kimber mumbled, refusing to meet her eyes.

"I am sure of it." Amber winced, scrunching her eyes shut, and reached up to clutch her forehead; all the stress of the day must have triggered a headache. "Listen, Hon, this town's not easy to make it in an' a lotta~ people can't hack it. Even so, a sickly kid who sees things, a crotchety immigrant most people can't understand, an' a half-crippled college dropout all made it in this town…an' if Uncle Bart, my Gran'da, an' I all made it," she grinned at the surprised glance Kimber shot her, "then so will you."

"…half-crippled?" was the only thing Kimber could get out.
"Apparently," Amber teased nudging the other in the side, "I got a wild hair an' jumped in front of a bus. Unless ya ask people who really know the story, though, they'll tell ya I was clipped by a drunken frat-boy in his mama's minivan." Kimber cracked a smile at the joke, although it was a weak one, and slid off the hood. "Talk to Bart," Amber urged following suit. "Tell'im yer livin' in Methlab Motel an' you need'a pick up extra hours to get out.~ He won't let ya down." Let her down? Please. The man would most likely clean all his junk out of the loft over the pub an' insist on renting it to Kimber for peanuts. If Amber knew her family, too, they were sure to take the other woman under her wing, and in a small town like Willsdale, a support circle was everything. At one time, the thought would have horrified Amber; now, however, she realized the truth. If Bart Devon saw Kimber as worth his time, then she wasn't about to hurt their family.

After the two counterparts bid their goodbyes, Amber stood in the yard watching the dust trail from Kimber's car fade in the distance. Again, another twinge of pain lanced through her head; again she clutched the tender skin. Some aspirin was surely in order.

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Day 4 – Not long before Dawn

By the time Donnie and Amber woke again, the night's rain was long gone, leaving only mud and fog in its wake. Perhaps because of how long Donnie kept her just on the verge of exploding last night while the rain pounded on the rooftop - the reason for which he never really explained to her - Amber's head was absolutely splitting. Even with that headache, she felt relieved—calm and full of hope.

Once the first pot of coffee was brewed and half-drunk, she gathered a few items together and led Donnie to the back porch. "Come walk with me?" she asked him. He hesitated, glancing back into the kitchen. Already he could feel the fog condensing on his skin in cold dew that slithered down his neck like an unwanted grope. And the coffee…they'd be leaving the coffee behind! Granted, it was lousy coffee, but still…

"I don't know," he admitted tugging at his neck and fighting the whine halfway to his lips. Coffee… "It's still dark and it's pretty marshy…we really need to start working on heading home anyway." She blinked at him, lost. "You only got a week off, remember? Your family's safe, Aaron's safe, and Kimber's not going to be a problem…why risk staying any longer? Wait…why are you smiling like that?" The soft smile was followed up by a chuckle; her smaller hand caught one of his and tugged him down the steps. With every step away from the coffee pot and comfortable kitchen, his heart broke a little more.

"It'll be fine," Amber promised leading him across the yard to the edge of the treeline. "One more day won't hurt." '…especially if I can get rid of this farkin' headache,' she added in her own head. "Dee, you've never hesitated to show me your world." She tossed a teasing grin back at the mutant trailing helplessly behind her. "Now, let me show you mine."

At first sight, the hill she led him up seemed just like any other hill in the area—just a tall, grass-strewn mound of rock and dirt looming over the fog-strewn hollers. The top, however, was nearly vacant of life—no trees, no shrubs, nothing but grass, weeds, and tall dolomite crags. Together, the odd couple lay out a tarp and old horse blanket and settled in to watch the horizon, one listening with half an ear and the other telling him everything she could about the world she called home. Little by little, the sun rose, gleaming pale through the fog; moment by moment, the world below them came to life. By the time bright morning light painted the treetops and burned through the haze, the couple on the bald knob were silent, their words and breath stolen by the sight before them.

"I've seen this before." Donnie's words, delivered in an awed half-whisper, were never meant to pass
his lips; even so, they were true—as true as the birdsong awakening all around them, and as true as the warm solidity of the stone beneath them. He scanned the world below—searched for something he couldn't name and found it straight east, just beyond the far edge of the locust grove bordering Aaron's land. A…a pile of rubble? No, that couldn't be right…it was… "That's where your house was, isn't it?" he asked gesturing to the ruin half-taken over by the surrounding land. "You had roses...roses and…dead grass?" That made even less sense, but he remembered it clearly—recalled in great detail the crunchy brown turf set off by lush rosebushes.

Amber was already stunned that he correctly pegged her old home turf. To hear the rest—a reminder that the only flowers she ever managed to grow were roses and her yard was chronically neglected—sent her blood cold. She glanced off in the direction he stared; she couldn't see any roses remaining and the whole area was already becoming overrun by locust saplings and weeds. "Aaron told you?" she attempted, but the genius shook his head, visibly frustrated and reaching for something he couldn't quite see.

He knew what he remembered—he remembered seeing that very view, countless times in countless dreams. He remembered teasing Amber about her perpetually dead yard and fooling himself he could smell her roses a mile away. So many dreams happened here, on this very hill. Childhood games of hide-and-seek amongst the craggy rock formations…lazy summer afternoons sunning themselves on the grass…rainy days stretched out on that same old crazy quilt, bare to the sky and tangled beyond hope…he knew this place.

"So no one told you," Amber summed up startling Donnie from his thoughts. "You must've figured it out on your own—yer bright like that." She cast a wary smile at him. "Course, yer also talkin' to a dead gal. Stranger things have happened, right?" She sobered. "The school's been rebuilt," she admitted. "Aaron's takin' me by later to see it…I'm afraid of what I'll find, but I've gotta go…I just have to." Donnie had no answer; he couldn't break himself from the thoughts spinning through his head—memories, dreams, hopes and wishes and fears…

"Do you believe in destiny?" The question came in a near-whisper but struck with the impact of a scream.

"Huh?" The moment it was out, Amber cringed; so much for effective communication.

"Destiny," Donnie repeated leaning back on his palms and taking in the scenery below. "You know, the idea that some aspects and events in life are predetermined and out of our control...like..." His throat worked around the words trying to stay behind his teeth. "The odds that we would ever meet—two people from entirely different worlds—was it pure chance, or do you think it could be—"

"Fate?" Amber finished for him with a slight frown; his eyes rolled aside, meeting hers askance. "I don't believe in chance or coincidence," she admitted. "I've always believed everything happens for a reason even if we never know that reason...but on the other hand, I don't believe in fate or destiny either. With fate, there's no free-will; with no free-will, what's the point in ever aspiring to anything beyond your lot?"

"That makes no sense," Donnie deadpanned. "If everything happens for a reason, there has to be a predetermined reason for everything—that's an argument for destiny. If there's no preset path we follow, then everything's just up to the roll of the dice and may not have a purpose. You contradicted yourself completely."

"Maybe," she admitted with a teasing smile and turned to lean back across his legs. "Maybe not. Some folks look at life like reading a novel, some see it like writing a novel, an' some of us see it like one of those crummy choose-your-own-adventure books." Donnie blinked down at her, thought it over, but still didn't follow. "I believe that we write our own stories but they can sometimes take us in
directions that make no sense to us until after we've passed them. In the moment, we may see no further than 'the market pays better than the gas station' or 'the gas station is closer to home' but those decisions will shape our futures. If you're working at the market, you won't be working the gas station when it's robbed, but if you're working at the gas station, you might meet a hot trucker an' get hitched in Vegas."

"You're a nut," Donnie teased ruffling her hair.

"Takes one to know one," she retorted with all the maturity of an eight-year-old, then her eyes softened. "Besides...if meeting you was my destiny, that would take out all the impossibility—all the wonder and mystery. No matter whether I died in utero or died in a nursing home with my knockers at my knees, we would have found each other no matter what." The genius shuddered at the visual but said nothing. "We were a shot in the dark, Dee," she reminded taking his hand. "We weren't just a checkmark on some celestial to-do list...we're a miracle." A slow smile crossed his face and his eyes softened—proof she managed to calm whatever nerves were bothering him before. "What brought that up anyway?" she asked. A streak of muddy brown followed the smile; he avoided her eyes.

"N-No reason," he insisted to no avail. "I was just...just thinking about...uh...string theory?"

"Whatever ya say, Speccy...whatever ya say."

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**Day 5 – after Noon**

The back door drifted shut with a bang. In the parlor, familiar racket emitted from Aaron's TV; onscreen, some nameless boss resembling an unholy amalgamation of Jabba the Hutt and The Incredible Hulk stomped around a battered landscape in pursuit of...a little girl with pink pigtails? Donatello scratched his head. Gamers were an odd bunch.

"Where's Amber?" he asked Aaron. Before the mutant left for the hike he just returned from, Amber was still asleep—trying to sleep off the headache she never kicked the day before. "Still sleeping?" Aaron's character exploded into a spray of blood and gore, triggering a frustrated groan.

"I guess," the blond answered as the loading screen cycled. "She never came inside, so I figure she's probably still sleepin'. Why?" Donnie glanced pointedly at the clock by the TV on his way to the back door. "Shit, I'm s'posed to be leavin' for work in an hour...lost track'a time." Resigned to tackling the boss again later, Aaron saved, quit, and shut down his Playstation, and ducked outside to check on Amber. Instead, he found the shed door standing wide open, Amber motionless on the mattress, and Donatello frantically trying to rouse her. "What's—" The question fell short—Amber was sleeping—she was just sleeping, she had to be! Frustrated and afraid, Donnie yanked his goggles down for a closer look...

He stilled, falling back on his heels his face contorting in open horror. "What?" Aaron demanded, rushing to his side. "What'd'ja—" Donnie lifted a hand to her face, gingerly pulling her hair away from her forehead. Aaron's stomach lurched—he bolted out the door, retching onto the grass.

In the shed, Donnie stared through the impossible sight previously hidden—a compound fracture, bleeding and bruised. Fractured—the parietal plate was visibly crushed inward—shards of gleaming
white perforated her skin. Donnie's fists clenched, his knuckles pale against the canvas of his trousers. Her skull was fractured…her brain was hemorrhaging…this was the wound that killed her once, the fatal injury that brought her to his world. This…this couldn't be happening… Heedless of the blood slicking her skin, he tenderly brushed a fallen lock of hair—a blue streak purpled from blood—behind her ear, tracing along the edge of the injury…an echo of the injury that killed her.

Just like it was yesterday, he remembered the day he brought her to his father—remembered how the slightest touch to her brow made her hiss in pain even with no injury there—remembered his father relating to him and his brothers the sudden, grisly way she died—remembered her confessing she often woke with a throbbing pain, a psychogenic echo from her previous life. She died in this world…the dead do not rise…he should never have brought her here.

'We write our own stories.'

At the time, he was distracted by other things—memories of dreams, knowledge he shouldn't have, sunlight highlighting the curve of her jaw and shimmering in her eyes…

'We're a miracle.'

Maybe…no surely…perhaps…

Right as Aaron shuffled back into the shed, Donatello went unnaturally still—his trembling stopped and his eyes hardened. Hands steady, supporting her head on his thigh, he eased Amber onto her side, tugged at the waistband of her night slacks, and exposed a small, blotchy patch of brown skin—a faint birthmark right under the waistband of her briefs. For whatever reason, that mark seemed to give him answers—answers and determination. As though in agreement, her eyelashes fluttered, her eyes shifting behind their lids—a sign of brain activity if he ever saw one. "There's still time—I need chalk, charcoal, something I can draw with!" The demand spewed out at twice his normal pace sparked an equally rapid response. In a matter of moments, the seals of the portal sprawled along the inside wall in messy vivid spray paint; another moment of incantation and they gleamed with unearthly light. Without a moment's waste, Donnie hoisted Amber into his arms, carefully cradling her head; without ever looking back, he bolted into the emptiness.

Completely lost and even more afraid, Aaron stared blankly at the yawning portal in the wall of his shelter. It seemed familiar—he saw something like this before, perhaps years ago on TV… With a shout of frustration, he smacked himself on the back of the head for wasting time and took off in pursuit. Fuck it…he lost Amber once, he wasn't going to just give up on her again! Even as he sprinted toward the faint light at the end of the tunnel, he broke a long-held conviction—he gave in to a habit he always believed pointless…

For the life of a friend, he prayed.

Notes:

* Bert Devonne / Bart Devon – Recall that though Amber and Kimber are essentially the same person in two different worlds, Kimber's family and Amber's family are markedly different. Kimber recognized Bart Devon, as he's the counterpart of her estranged uncle Bert Devonne.

** "Do we expect these things to change by waking up and, suddenly, there they are? And all I need's a starting place and nothing ever seemed so hard." – from "Whatever I Fear" by Toad the Wet Sprocket. That tune is a pretty good depiction of the mistrust and wariness Amber and Kimber have for one another.
^T'— in a word – this word has a th- in it but she's dropped the h.
^T'a – the
^T'a – to, note the lack of an apostrophe.
^Bawdy – body
~Words ending with -in' – this word ends with –ing.
~Lose'ern – lost them. (no, Amber's not really skinny, she's somewhere between curvy
and overweight. Kimber's just intentionally being an asshole.
~I'd'a – I would have
^Firs' time I ever approached ya I gotta knife at my t'roat, can ya blame me fer
bein' a lil' cawtious? – The first time I ever approached you, you stuck a knife at my
throat – can you blame me for not trusting you?
~Out'a – out of
^Prawmise – promise
^Nort' – Northpaw, or rather, Norton Jackson.
~Must'a – must have
~Din't – didn't
^Cheatin' on'er reserves husband – Caitlyn was married to a man in the army
reserves and was having an affair behind his back.
~Wearin'em / knew'im – wearing them / knew him
^People expect a widow ta mourn, even if t'is one prob'ly wouldn't'a cared less;
wearin' Jordan's tags makes people t'ink twice about askin' me about'im, an' since
I hardly know a damn t'ing about'im, t'at's a lifesaver. T'at's only t'a excuse,
t'ough. – People expect a widow to mourn even though this widow wouldn't have
cared; wearing Jordan's dog-tags makes people reluctant to ask me about him, and since
I hardly know a thing about him it's a lifesaver. That's just the excuse, though – there's
another reason, too.
^Gawnna – going to
~All'a – all of
^Stawp judgin' me an' staht cleanin' up yer own messes a'ready. – Amber honestly
kinda deserves this. "Stop judging me for my faults and start fixing your own."
~S'posed – supposed
^I ain't gawnna screw up t'a natural order'a t'ings any more'n I a'ready have! – I
refuse to screw up the natural order of things any more than I already have!
^I'm dead in t'at world, an'e din't want me even when I was alive. T'at's t'a end of
it. - I'm dead in that world, and he didn't want me even when I was alive. That's the end
of it.
^I still love'im ya bleedin' heart. I never stawped lovin'im. – I still love him, you
sappy moron. I never stopped loving him. (Did you really see that going any differently?
Raph's a heartbreaker, really.)
^Bitch-face wasted all'er money on'erself an'er stanky cabbie, an all'a Jordan's
money was wiped out by hawspital bills...by t'a time I was released, t'is ol' heap'a
junk was all I had, t'at an' t'a lil' bit I could fit in t'a back. – Caitlin wasted her
money on herself and the cabbie she was cheating with. All of Jordan's money was
spent on hospital bills. (Recall that Kimber was in the hospital and woke from a coma to
be told 'your husband didn’t make it.‘) By the time I was discharged, this crappy car was
all I had to my name, just the car and what little I could fit in the back. (Kimber spent a good while living out of her car.)

- **Tryin'a** – trying to
- **Every now'n then** – every now and then, occasionally
- **I'm sahrry** – I'm sorry. You can see especially here that Kimber still has a long way to go before she's completely eradicated her assumed accent.
- **Sure'a** – sure of
- **A lotta** – a lot of
- **Tell'im yer livin' in Methlab Motel an' ya need'a pick up extra hours to get out.** – Recall Casey, April, and Amber's visit to New Willsdale, when Amber argued against them staying at the motel in Willsdale? This is what she based it on. Basically "tell him where you live and ask for more hours—he'll help you out."
- **Track'a** – track of
- **What'd'ja** – what did you
56: The Choice Between Darkness and Light

Chapter Notes

First off, may I mention just how disappointed I am at receiving no death threats? Really, y'all just rained on my poor lil' parade with that. I didn't leave that massive cliffhanger just to screw with ya or something - the storyline actually called for it - but your endless patience bwoke my poor widdle heart. I mean seriously, do I really seem like the kind of writer who'd kill off Amber TWICE? That's a little overkill.

Ahem. Moving on. By the time this chapter's up, we're nearing the end of Part III… and I owe y'all an apology over that. I really tried to fit Part III's events with Part IV's events but it just ain't workin'—there's too much that needs to happen in too little time. I COULD keep the plan from before, but I'd have to cut out a lot of important stuff. The story would get sketchy, rushed, and boring. It wouldn't have the 'oomph' the rest of it has had, and the writing quality would suffer BIG TIME. Rest assured, things are slowing down again – now that we don't have to worry about the folks in Willsdale – and the mush and smut will quickly start kicking up again…and you've still got a few answers on the way, too, along with – GASP! – shenanigans! The First Time is ON ITS WAY! X'D

Regarding that, I've posted a challenge on my Tumblr page for this story regarding the couples. The four main couples include four non-virgins and four people who will have or did have their first time together. We already know the status of three of those people - Donnie's a virgin, and Amber and Raph aren't - but what of the others? Fill in the blanks! You have three pairing options - both are virgins, both are non-virgins, and one's a virgin, one's not. The couples you have to choose from are, in no particular order, Merse-ael, Bever-Leo, and Bree-angelo. Share or message me your answers!

Reader challenge for this chapter: In the first scene, there are three instances of heavily broken dialogue marked with parentheses. (Tex—xte—texte—) Take a guess what these three passages are saying and share it! The person who gets the closest answer will get a shout-out next chapter!

Suggested Listening: Skillet "Not Gonna Die" and "Salvation," APOGEE "Raindrops," Creed "With Arms Wide Open"

56: The Choice Between Darkness and Light

The last thing I heard is you whispering goodbye…
…and then I heard you flatline.

The first time Amber found herself in this place, she was struck by the darkness, the emptiness, and the complete lack of sensation. Now, smaller details are emerging from the Void. A soft whirring, thrumming sound fills the air, almost beyond the capacity of the human ear. The musty scent of dust,
old leather, and parchment tantalizes her nose—or rather, it would if she had a nose to tantalize; here in the Void, she is whittled down to merely an existence, a spirit without a vessel. Struggling to acclimate, she stares out into the blackness—staring from eyes that don't exist into a blackness she cannot see.

'How'd I get here again?' she wonders surveying the empty nothingness around her. 'I got out—I got a second chance, I was sent to another world and…and…oh no...NO!' If she had eyes, they would surely burn with tears; instead, she has nothing, only the lung-burning sensation of her heart breaking. She went home—she returned to the world she came from in hopes of saving her loved ones from themselves. 'I should'a known better,' she realizes as pain lances through her body—pain in a body that doesn't exist. They'd'a managed on their own in time. I never should'a gone back.' She died there once before, and now she's died again. 'One more day,' she rages to the unhearing Void, 'ONE MORE DAY! I was so sure one more day wouldn't hurt! I never learned anything, did I? I just made the same damn mistake all over again...just like I always have...just like I always...'

Wait...something's not right. In the Void, nothing exists—she don't exist—so why does she hurt? Why does her head feel ready to split like an overripe melon when she has no head to hurt? How can she feel hands jostling her when she has no body and there are no hands? The whirring sound grows louder, clearer—clocks, it sounds like the ticking of an army of clocks! No, wait, there's a buzzing noise, too—buzzing and...shouting?

(What hap—way a mugg—did thi—!) ~

No, it's useless. She'll never make it back to Donnie this time. After everything he went through for her...after so many years of waiting, hoping, dreaming, and praying, she finally found him...after all of that, to simply lose him all over again? She lost him once before, when the dreams became cold and he ceased to share them. Then, like nothing ever changed, he came back—older, stronger, wiser, and very much not a child anymore. She can still remember it like it was yesterday...after three years of being apart, her heart felt ready to fall to pieces and burst from happiness, all at the very sight of him.

It matters not. Cold seeps into her skin—skin that cannot exist. Someone shouts in the distance, garbled orders in a world with nothing. No, it's useless...still...no matter how useless, small things tug for her attention...small facets of Donnie that addicted her to him. The taste of him...the smell of him...the way his eyes change with the light...the goofy playful moods that make her laugh and the stubborn side that makes her frustrated and needy all at once...the way he held her—tightly, protectively, nuzzling into her hair and wrapping himself around her—he always held her like he feared someone would rip her from his arms.

(Hurry u—e's fibru—osing her—'s codi—to try!)

What...what is this noise? This buzzing noise in her ears—ears that do not exist. Pain—how can she feel pain? She does not exist in this void, nothing exists in the Void!

So you're just gonna give up again, huh? Amber startles, searching the emptiness around her for the owner of the voice—an irritating soprano that would make her ears threaten secession from the union. Fortunately, in the Void, she has no ears to revolt. Stranger still, though she knows precisely how the voice would sound, she hears nothing—it she can only feel it. This makes no sense to her. How can you feel a voice? You gave up once before, remember? You just gonna give up again,
not even gonna try to get back to him?

"You don't understand," Amber argues, bewildered by the aggravating, judgmental, inaudible voice and the splitting ache in her skull. "I'm dead—twice dead! The dead don't rise again!" The voice gives an unimpressed 'meh.' "If I come back again, Darwin's gonna end up spinnin' in his grave!"

Kid, Darwin's too busy fighting for android rights in 3092. He's not gonna care.

"...WHAT?" The sigh that follows makes her think the unseen tormentor is pinching their nose in aggravation.

You're not dead yet, genius – you're only mostly dead, you know, like that hokey rom-com with the smokin' hot farm-boy. Anyway, last time, you refused to make a choice—you just laid there on the floor whimpering and waiting to die. You gonna do that again, or have you learned anything at all? Glimpses of reality flicker in the void—stabbing bright light, the stench of antiseptic, bone-chilling cold. Not...not dead...yet...?

"I...I have a choice?"

There's always a choice, you nincompoop—choose to live, or choose to die...or if you still haven't learned your lesson, choose not to choose. Watch it blow up in your face again. No promises you won't wind up in a blooper video on TimeTube.

Silence fills the Void—silence between the ghosts of voices too muddled to fully discern, and between the droning ticking of the unseen clocks.

(—IGHT—DAMN YOU, F—!) 

Pointless though it is, Amber searches for another pair of eyes in the void. Choose to stay dead...choose to not choose...or choose to go back to Donnie... "I don't know who the fuck you think you are," she warns the entity in the Void, "but if you think I'm just gonna roll over and give up again, you've got another thing comin'? I didn't give up because I was stupid—I was IN SHOCK! I was already half dead! Why would I make that same decision when I'm fully aware I have somethin' to live for? I won't give up again, I won't do that to Mercy an' Aaron again, an' I WON'T do it to DONNIE!"

So you've learned your next lesson then. The voice, previously antagonistic and irritating, feels almost proud...proud and irritating. You learned to ask for help. You learned to allow yourself to be vulnerable. You learned to embrace what makes you unique instead of hiding and trying to fit in. You've learned that you don't have to hide behind nonsense to be accepted and that words only have as much power as we give them. Now you're learning to forgive yourself for your past mistakes. Wait...what? The doc's calling ya, Grasshopper. Go home, I'll check on you soon—and I'd better not find you in my filing cabinet again for at least fifty years.

"Wha—FILIN' CABINET?!" Again impossible shouting fills the Void—an oppressive white noise full of endless ticking and painful pressure—before Amber can say another word, the pitch black world explodes in blinding light and a deafening ringing noise. Finally, the ticking stops.

This is how it feels when you take your life back.
Amber's eyes flew open—instantly, the only one she managed to even crack open screwed back shut again—she sucked in a hissing breath at the strange buzzing feeling in her skull. Wait…buzzing?…she was—she was numbed, anesthetized? Struggling through the sluggishness and the disconcerting prickle spreading from her scalp down to her cheek, she reached upward, dreading what she might not find. If she still had no skull…if she was still stuck in that damnable Void…

A latex-gloved hand latched onto hers, shutting off her brain and stopping her just shy of her forehead. "Don't touch," the owner of the hand warned quietly, easing her hand away from her face but opting to not let go; through her confusion, Amber appreciated the comforting gesture. She cracked open her one bleary eye—the other, for whatever reason, refused to cooperate—and cautiously examined what her senses took in. The stench of antiseptic and chlorine—people bustling about in pastel scrubs, rumpled bonnets, and paper masks—several eyes pinning her in place in a mixture of shock and horror—she knew this setting.

"H…Hospital…?" Amber rasped to the lanky young man staring down at her in disbelief; he still held her hand, his bony thumb rubbing soothingly over her knuckles. He had big, nervous dark eyes with thick round glasses, somewhat sallow skin, and a tall skinny frame practically drowning in oversized sage-green scrubs; his ID tag read James Peters – Resident. "Manhattan?"

"Uh…Brooklyn," James answered. "Are…are you—" A shout from the hallway cut him off, followed by several crashes and what sounded like a stampede of buffalo. The racket grew closer and louder, then a loud metallic screech—the Operating Theater door flew open faster than its automatic-opening mechanics could handle then banged into the wall.

"What now?!
"an older man across the room barked. Grey eyes, greyer eyebrows, and even greyer scrubs—normally Amber loved grey, but this guy made it look dismal. Was he a surgeon or a coroner? In the open doorway, a pretty, petite young woman in pale yellow scrubs panted and stared at Amber as though seeing a ghost. "Well, Reynolds?" Startling back to herself, Reynolds tore her eyes from Amber and rushed over to the theater's computer console and hurriedly pulled up a file on the LCD display. The surgeon joined her there, scrolling through the images—X-rays, MRIs, CT scans perhaps? Whatever they were, Amber vaguely recognized their subject as a human skull and brain—her skull and brain? With every new slide, the grey surgeon grew redder in the face. "What's the meaning of this?!" the surgeon snapped at Reynolds—was she perhaps a tech assigned to radiology? "How'd you foul these up?!"

"I—I didn't, Sir!" Reynolds protested, eyes flickering warily to Amber again then returning to his. "The captures were perfect as always and Radiology signed off on them—I didn't make any mistakes!"

"Then how else can you explain that?!" he almost shouted jabbing an accusing gloved finger at the screen; if not for his mask, he would surely be spitting at her with every word. "If you took those a month apart, that would make sense—the human skull cannot mend itself at the rate of several weeks per minute!" Wait…WHAT?! "Goddammit, when she came through those doors she was a step away from coding—her skull was caved in like she took a cinder-block to the face!"

"I'm…sorry, Sir," Reynolds backpedaled, visibly torn between two fears: the ill-tempered surgeon screaming in her face and the impossibly alive trauma case staring at her from the table. "I have no explanation—there's no sign of any injury on the inside, not after the first three shots!" The surgeon swore, startling Reynolds into jumping back.

"Don't give me that garbage—she was DYING! The DEAD don't come back to life!"

A faint snort sounded just above her, as though someone found the surgeon's declaration amusing. Sharp-smelling fumes burned Amber's nose—antiseptic on a gauze pad, maybe?—and wrenched a
choking gasp from her lungs. James the Resident gave her an apologetic smile—or, at least, his eyes crinkled at her over his paper mask—and he continued gingerly dabbing away the dried fluids crusting her skin. He froze. He stared, blinking rapidly as though seeing something he couldn't believe, his eyes full of stunned recognition. Clearing his throat, he turned to the still shouting grey-clad surgeon. "D-Doctor Lloyd?"

"WHAT?!" James glanced pointedly at their patient, sure showing would be more effective than trying to explain. His quiet voice always irritated Dr. Lloyd anyway, and when Dr. Lloyd got angry, James started stammering. Sure enough, the surgeon stormed over like a bull on a rampage; the moment his steel grey eyes landed on Amber's bare forehead—unbroken skin bruised a sickening black and green instead of the grisly compound fracture he saw before—all the wind was sucked right out of his sails. Visibly struggling to comprehend the impossibility—proof that the X-rays weren't faulty after all—he reached out one trembling gloved hand to trace the worst of the bruising. Pale, shiny scars stretched where fragments of bone once protruded; plating once shattered inward was properly rounded and smooth, if a tad spongy to the touch.

Steel grey met grey-green in a standoff. "This can't..." Dr. Lloyd trailed off, then shot a stern glare to James. "Recovery, new scans, then a room for observation," he ordered sharply. "There's got to be a logical explanation for this." Without another word, the elder stormed out of the theater, the door slamming behind him. James watched the others a moment, then turned back to Amber with an odd look in his eyes. Amidst the bustle around them, he seemed to work up his nerve, leaned down closer to her level, and whispered in her ear.

"The clocks." A cold chill ran down Amber's spine, and not from the warm breath on her neck. "Did you...hear...the clocks?" Surely...but Abby's cousin...and Kimber... The risk was worth taking. She nodded faintly.

"Did you smell the dust?" she countered under her breath, her words sparking certainty and recognition. "Did you see the darkness and the blinding light?"

"Tell no one," James warned in a hurried whisper as a pair of nurses arrived to work on transferring her. "Stay safe - I'll find you soon."

Amber was sent back to radiology twice, and underwent three more rounds of lab-work—the impossible was proven true. By the time she was moved to a room for observation, the fracture in her skull was completely healed, the bone strong and solid, and the swelling and bruising on her face was steadily going down. No one had any explanation for it and many a time the staff demanded answers. Amber, recalling James' warning, clammed up claiming amnesia and (poorly) faking confusion.

Now she sat alone in an empty room meant for two patients, confused, worried, and missing Donnie like she couldn't believe. She almost lost him again...her own naivety nearly cost her the second life she received and her stubborn nature hadn't helped. You're learning to forgive yourself for your past mistakes. The voice in the void, inaudible but understandable, said that before, and now, she couldn't get it out of her mind. Amber didn't just make mistakes, she habitually made the same mistakes enough times to earn an honorary PhD in some of them if not a Darwin Award. Even so, focusing on those mistakes – reminding herself of her failures and holding them against herself instead of working to avoid a repeat – never accomplished anything. Now more than ever, she was sure that the second chances she and Mercy were given came with a task: their new lives lacked some of the troubles that held them down before, but they also came with new challenges...this was a chance to correct the faults and failures riddling their previous lives. The universe never did give anything without taking something away in return.
A sudden near-deafening commotion in the hallway drew her attention to the door; a moment later a
tall athletic blonde burst through the door, denim blue eyes wilder than her shaggy windblown hair
and her face crimson in fury. "You crazy-ass bitch!" Mercy practically screeched storming over to
Amber. "AMBER JEAN! How dare you?! How dare you die on me again?!"

"Nice to see you, too, Ross," Amber grumbled halfheartedly. "If you're just gonna insult me, I'm
goin' back to sleep."* The snark earned her pain – a sock to the arm from bony knuckles, then
another to the shoulder.

"Sh-Shut up!" Mercy sputtered. "You—You—YOU!" In their previous life, Amber was well-
acquainted with Mercy's temper and how such moments played out. Mercy bottled things up until
they blew up, then the moment they boiled over she went from screeching in rage to bawling her eyes out, drowning in her emotions the whole while. Now, however, Mercy was stronger, stable, not bound by the limitations of her previous life, and she'd learned that anger wasn't in and of itself a sin—she could be angry without risking a black eye. Even so, this Mercy was like a
blast from the past—a reminder of how broken the younger woman once was.**

Her voice cracked—her shoulders shook—her eyes scrunched shut to keep from dripping. Falling to
her knees and choking on her own breath, Mercy latched onto the bed-sheets, clenching them so
tightly her knuckles turned white. The blonde couldn't get out any more words between her choked
crying and settled for burying her face in the hard mattress and scratchy sheets. Had Amber expected
this sort of reaction, she wouldn't have tried lightening the mood with humor. In apology, she
reached out and smoothed Mercy's wild hair, trying to calm her as she used to in their last life.

"Well, dat went well." The comment by the doorway revealed more company – Casey and April,
both bewildered. "Ya don't look so bad, Kid; from da fuss dese two were kickin' up, a guy'd think ya
were on death's door or somethin." April shot a nervous glance at Casey over her shoulder.

"Apparently I was on death's door," Amber contradicted blankly. "I wouldn't believe it myself if I
hadn't seen the x-rays…I was dyin'…again…apparently some irritating little good fairy decided to
whack me with her magic wand an' heal me instead of turnin' me into a goon." Mercy lifted her head
just slightly and shot Amber a sour 'Oh no you didn't!' glare through wet clumping eyelashes.
"Maybe I shouldn't'a been boppin' field mice on the head." Predictably Casey and April were
speechless with something akin to discomfort or bewilderment. "Never mind. Painkillers make me
loopy." She wasn't on any painkillers, but no way would she admit it; the couple probably already
thought she was nuts without nursery rhyme references popping out of her mouth from nerves.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," April urged gingerly settling in the chair by Amber's bed. "In your
previous life, you died of brain damage—blunt-force trauma to the skull caused by flying debris.
Right?" Amber nodded gravely, reaching up to gesture to the still-bruised skin of her forehead.

"I don't remember it, obviously," she admitted, "but Splinter was able to see it with some fancy ninja
technique." She gently tapped the bruise, wincing at the pain. "This is where that damn glass brick
hit me, an' it's where the x-rays showed a massive messy fracture. On the third day home, I started
getting a headache, an' the last thing I remember is going to sleep on the fourth night. This mess
probably developed while I was sleeping. If that ain't connected, then—"

"Wait, hold the phone," Casey demanded gruffly. "You two left on Thursday night, right? It's
Saturday, ya ain't been gone a whole three days yet!" Amber stilled, considering his words.

"I've been in this world less than a year," she muttered to herself, "but I've been dead for exactly two
years…we spent four, maybe five days in Willsdale but we've been gone less than three. Time—"
A sudden knock at the door cut her off, and a moment later, a perky young nurse popped through. "Miss O'Brien?" she greeted glancing down at the paper chart in her hand for confirmation. "I can't believe I'm saying it…but you're cleared to go."

'Time must move differently between worlds,' Amber finished silently as the nurse went about unhooking her from the monitors and saline drip. 'I'm lucky I made it back alive...Dunnie...please be alright.'

When Donatello returned to the Lair well ahead of time, carrying a bludgeoned and bleeding out Amber, the family didn't have time to debate their course of action. He and Mercy drove her to the hospital in the party wagon, the rest following in the garbage truck and picking up April and Casey on the way. After she was admitted, all they could do was wait...wait and pray.

Donnie never handled idleness well when he was younger—he always had far too much to do and had to be bribed into taking breaks. Over the last few years that improved, he learned to pace himself and came to value his leisure time. Now, the only pacing he could stomach involved his feet.

The sun was blinding outside the walls of the parking garage, adding to his nerves. His family was outside during daylight, crammed into the garbage truck and parked in a massive cavernous area surrounded by empty diesel trailers, impatiently waiting for news. Thanks to Leo calling in a favor owed them—a favor executed with barricades, disabled security cameras, and a protective screen of empty big-rigs parked in protective rings around the truck—they didn't have to worry about being seen. That, however, didn't help their nerves any.

A phone bleated in the back of the truck, and Leo immediately put the call on speaker. "She's okay, guys!" April was grinning as she shared the news, they could hear it plain as day. "There's no sign of any injury so they're—" The sound of a fist suddenly impacting a wall cut her off with a squeal; Leo, Mikey, Raph, and Splinter all turned to Donnie, stunned by what they saw.

"I saw that fracture!" Donnie cut her off sharply, flexing through the pain in his knuckles. Okay, so maybe punching a steel-paneled wall wasn't the brightest move he could have made, but in a way, he kinda felt a little better. Maybe Raph had a point after all. "I saw it with my own eyes, she was dying! Don't try telling me she's perfectly fine when she—she—" A clawed hand settled on Donnie's carapace with just enough pressure to notice; he winced, easily understanding his master's silent urging. "Sorry," he muttered at the phone. Without another word, he yanked open the door and jumped down from the truck, trying not to slam the door behind him.

At first, he was too restless to do anything but pace—lurch from the front bumper to the back in a rapid restless trek—but it wasn't helping any. Pacing never helped. Amber paced in fear, Leo paced in worry, and Raph sometimes paced in anger, but it never worked for any of them. It strengthened fear, frazzled nerves, and worsened tension every time...pacing never helped anything.

With a forceful sigh, Donnie slumped down on the running board, head in his hands, struggling to center himself. Outside the parking garage, the sun shone as bright as ever, but inside, he was drowning in rain. "This is most concerning." Splinter's voice drifted through the metal door. "It seems Miss O'Brien and Miss Ross aren't merely dead in their world—they're dead to their world. If they should return and remain too long..."

"The injuries their souls remember will manifest in their new bodies," Leo finished solemnly. "Amber was lucky this time...next time, she might not make it."

'There won't be a next time,' Donnie thought, scowling down at the grease-blackened concrete. 'I lost her once before...I won't let it happen again.'
A wheelchair. Why, for the sake of all that was holy, did she have to be put in a wheelchair?! Logically, Amber knew the answer—it was a safety policy in many hospitals to transport trauma or accident patients to their vehicles via wheelchair to minimize the possibility of falling. Still, rational as the explanation was, she couldn't shake off the sulky irritability she felt at being pushed around in one of the hated contraptions. "Quit pouting a'ready," Mercy grumbled from behind her, "you're bein' ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?" Amber groused back at the blonde literally pushing her around. "Accusin' a cripple of usin' a wheelchair because they're FAT is ridiculous. Never mind that I was in leg braces an' had my crutches in the bin in plain view," she added under her breath. "Obviously, I was doing my grocery shopping in a motor-chair 'cause I was FAT an' LAZY, not because I couldn't farking walk." 

"My heart bleeds fer ya, really." Mercy rolled her eyes. "Next time don't jump in front of a damn bus."

"It was a van! In the crosswalk! An' it hit me, I was innocent!" Beside the two bickering friends, April and Casey exchanged matching cringes. "Why're we out here, anyway? The guys—"

"—called in a favor, Genius," Mercy cut Amber off. "Apparently the police owe'em or somethin'—this level's supposed to be closed for repairs but the Chief threw around the right words." 

Before Amber could get out another word, whether a question or an argument, they cleared the last row of trailers. In the center of the circled diesel trailers a glimpse of mustard yellow and Kelly-green caught her eye; right after, she noticed the tall, lanky mutant slumped on the running-board, head in his hands and his shoulders drawn tight.

Donatello. She choked, her eyes burning with tears—tears of sorrow or joy, she had no clue, they all burned the same.

As though hearing her sappy, blubbery inner rambling, he shot upright. Bright hazel eyes fixed on hers, widening until they fairly bulged—a tense swallow bobbed his Adam's apple—his nostrils flared, his lip and chin quivering and his eyes watering. Donnie lurched to his feet, heedless of the protesting screech of his carapace scraping the door of the truck.

Like so many reunions in so many sappy romances, it started with a single, tentative step, then that step was followed by another, and another; by the time he reached Amber those steps had become a full sprint and he skidded to a halt a mere yard away. There, he stood as though frozen—too far away to touch, but close enough to see the yellow and purple bruising spanning from her hairline almost to her jaw. Neither heard the truck door creak open; neither saw the four faces crammed around the open doorway watching in silent disbelief. They all saw her when Donatello brought her home and remembered it in stark detail, but now, she looked nothing like they remembered. One by one, the three brothers looked to each other for confirmation that they weren't the only ones confused by her non-crushed skull.

With shaky hands, Donnie weakly tugged his goggles down over his glasses; a few button presses later, he scanned for an impossible injury long-since faded from sight. When he shoved the goggles back up again, Amber realized what she missed before…old salt trails streaking his cheeks and dried tears crusting the corners of his equally dry eyes. "Hey," she attempted weakly. He didn't answer—couldn't answer—all he could do was stare as though he expected her to vanish right before his eyes. Suddenly, the embarrassment, regret, and shame she felt was stifling. Avoiding his eyes, she carefully hoisted herself up from the chair, wobbled on unsteady feet before catching herself, and shuffled toward him. "I was wrong," she admitted softly. "You tried to warn me…I thought one more day wouldn't hurt, but—but it did…I should'a…I should'a…"

An unexpected, but oh-so-longed-for sensation cut off her stammering—gentle fingertips, rough in skin yet tender in touch, brushed her bangs away from her brow and back behind her ear. The day
she and Donnie first met, that very gesture triggered a remembered pain with no injury; now she had a recent injury but felt only relief. Grey-green eyes lifted to hazel, both shimmering from unshed tears, their owners' hearts pounding in time. For a moment, Amber couldn't tell whether he was about to kiss her or scream at her; when his fingertips left her skin, that confusion sharpened into worry.

A sudden, if light, pop to the tip of her nose shut all that down. By the time her eyes were no longer crossed and blinking, she could see what she missed: a tiny tilt of his lips and softness in his eyes. He dropped to one knee, arms held open in invitation. "Well?" he asked, wiggling his fingers at her with an encouraging smile. Without further hesitation, Amber dove into his arms, hers latching onto his neck mid-air; in one fluid motion, he latched onto the backs of her thighs, lifted her up to his level, and lunged up to his full height.

In his arms, Amber recalled the multitude of little things about him that called to her in the Void—the salty-sweet taste of his lips, the coffee, grease, and spice scent of him, the almost desperate way he held her and the gentle rasp of his work-roughened hands. A flurry of brushing, nipping kisses and tearful laughter ensued, neither ready to let the other go and neither capable of giving a damn that they were being watched.

Finally content to simply breathe her in, Donnie lowered his forehead to rest against hers with a clink of plastic on plastic, bespectacled eyes sliding shut in contentment. His soft, warm snout nuzzled her nose then trailed over to brush across her cheek to her neck, a sigh blowing a gentle warm breath across her sensitive skin. "I almost lost you," he whispered into her neck, voice creaking and one hand sliding up her back to dive into her hair. "I almost lost you all over again..." Wait...again? "I love you..." He choked, nearly crushing her against his plastron. "I love you so much, you stubborn, infuriating, impossible woman." Amber's impending confession was cut off by another voice.

"Yeesh. Dat's just shameful." The playful barb—courtesy of the resident hockey-goon—reminded the couple that they had an audience.

"I dunno," April teased Casey, nudging him in the side with her elbow; Donnie glared a warning at him over Amber's cotton-clad shoulder. "I think it's kinda cute." Cute. The very idea made him snort into her trapezius, torn between amusement and offense. Instead of rising to the other couple's bait, he burrowed even deeper into Amber's neck, calmed by the whisper of her warm skin brushing across his cheeks and muzzle. The blare of a nearby car horn reminded him of their position—aboveground in the early afternoon, exposed and vulnerable—they needed to get home.

With one more peck on the lips, Donnie set Amber back on her feet and turned to lead her to the truck; halfway there he changed tactics, effortlessly sweeping her off her feet and tossing her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Someone, she realized with a grin, was feeling playful. "OI!" the brunette squawked in mock offense. "What am I, a sack'a beans?~ I can walk!" The laughter behind them made her cheeks pink but that pink turned to scarlet at a chastising swat to her backside. She squeaked in surprise, the girly sound instantly cracking her up.

"Pipe down," Donnie warned with a grin, "you're still in trouble. One more day my fanny."

In every life there are moments when it seems the world is about to come to an end; when that feeling is revealed incorrect and, instead, life goes on uncontested, it can be easy to miss small signs in the midst of relief. Silence in a place normally full of noise—a smell of unfamiliar body-wash in a home usually reeking of pizza and sweat—a faint prickling of finely-tuned senses twigging to the presence of another. At this moment, when the approaching brothers, sisters, lovers, and father were still high on endorphins from an averted death, these small signs went unnoticed.

"Swear to bog, O'Brien," Mercy snapped at her grinning braided friend, "I hear one more Princess
"As you wish!" she quipped then loosed an evil cackle. Mercy gave an undignified sputtered curse, repeatedly swatting at Amber's back and missing every time; it was hard enough to hit a moving target when it wasn't being carried by someone with ninja-level reflexes.

"Stand still an' take yer—" She suddenly fell silent—her nostrils flared, easily picking up a familiar odor and even more easily recognizing it. Irish Spring, Tidy Cats litter, and stale Mtn Dew, while not a particularly pleasant combination, was practically the signature scent of a face hadn't seen in almost a year. She spun about, grey-blue eyes frantically scanning the visible portions of the Lair for the intruder. Sure enough, she found him—off-kilter blue eyes, gravity-defying blond curls, threadbare camo trousers and perpetually crooked glasses—perching on the catwalk railing in front of Leo's bedroom like an accusing floof-haired gargoyle. "Willis?!"

The man on the railing nodded, his good eye never leaving Amber's bruised, stunned face. Without a word he slid off the railing to hit the floor—an almost six-foot fall—and landed in a crouch, recovering with ease. Showing no sign of discomfort from the landing he stalked over to the group hovering just inside the front door. Donnie glanced over at the hallway wall—the chalk-scribbled portal was gone, not a glimmer left behind. Aaron must have followed him through, but how did he escape notice in a household full of ninjas? Despite the mystery, Aaron Willis was no threat to the notoriously reckless woman in Donnie's arms. Suddenly reminded of her position - halfway between thrown over his shoulder and tucked into his neck - he carefully set her on her own two feet.

When Aaron reached Amber, for a moment he just stood there, visibly looking her over as if to ascertain her health. When he finally made his move, Amber expected him to poke her in disbelief or even sock her in the shoulder and call her an idiot; those would have made sense, considering Aaron's temperament. Hesitant, visibly afraid of what he might find, he reached up to brush aside her bangs; upon finding only bruising, not the nauseating bloody mess he saw before, his eyes softened. Seemingly content that she was unharmed, he let her hair fall again and flicked her right between the eyes.

"You fuckin' idjit," he teased Amber with a wry smile. Yep, that was him alright. "Wasn't dyin' once enough?" His eye drifted over to Donnie's, sobering, but all he had to offer was an acknowledging nod; Donnie returned it, dipping his chin even lower in respect. Just like the night when Aaron found Amber and Donnie on the sofa, the mutant comforting her after a nightmare, a silent understanding passed between the two men.

I love her...take care of her.

I know...and I will.

NOTES

* "AMBER JEAN!" as an insult – It's been shown before that Amber, Aaron, and Mercy usually call one another by either their last names or nicknames unless they're upset. This is an odd way of showing affection but that's just what it is. Consider that when Amber found Aaron, he started to call her by her first name but caught himself and corrected it to her last name – this was his way of trying to hide just how upset and stunned he was. Amber and Mercy are more likely to use each other's first names but still stick to nicknames or last names more often. In this case, Mercy is trying to get across to Amber that she's beyond pissed and even more beyond terrified, so thus spouting Amber's first and middle name but omitting her last name like an insult.
**Mercy going from pissed to crying** – This is based on a real-life tendency shared by many people who have endured long-term abuse, particularly during their formative years. It happens because of conditioning – the victim has learned that lashing out is dangerous and that responding to anything with anger is likely to get them hurt. Because anger is deemed dangerous, this usually results in a sudden outburst of tears the moment their temper is lost because fear and sadness are 'safer' than anger. For this to show up now, when Mercy's become prone to letting her temper fly when need be, it evidence of just how badly it fucked her up losing her best friend in the first place. Amber's the one with verified PTSD, but Mercy's also got some survivors' guilt going on regarding her; seeing Amber dying of the same injury that killed her before would be enough to break her.

# A'right, let's just get this over with. Yes, this is based on something that happened to me IRL A LOT after my accident. Readers of "Blocked" may recall that I, too, had the pleasure of experiencing a person-versus-vehicle accident—some text-happy bimbo backed her car into me and I wound up trapped between her bumper and another car. Thanks to my fat ass and stupid-strong bones the worst of the damage was to the cartilage in my knees and some compression damage in my hips and back. I was luckier than Amber, obviously, as the vehicle wasn't going very fast, but I was stuck on crutches for a good long while until everything healed up. ("healed up" being a relative term as some of that damage, particularly to my knees, is permanent.) If you've ever been on crutches, you'll know that trying to push a shopping cart while using them is a good way to break your neck. Cold was only able to convince me to use a motor chair to do the shopping a few times while I was on crutches. Even with my right knee in a brace, my left leg bound from thigh to ankle in a sport wrap, healing bruises and abrasions visible all over my skin, and my crutches in the freaking basket, I got a stupid amount of dirty looks, micro-aggressions, and outright "Quit being lazy, fatass!" heckling…all because I was a fat chick in a wheelchair. It'd bother me more being subjected to that but I'm pretty comfortable with how I look…not to mention if I was SKINNY I'd probably have been paralyzed from the waist down, so yeah. Big butts make great cushions, lol. The sad thing is the 'fat person in a wheelchair' harassment isn't unusual, either—I see it happen all the time while running errands. A while back I overheard some snotty gals gossiping amongst themselves over a hefty woman in a motor scooter—just the usual stuff, "It's shameful that she's using that, she's fat not handicapped," etc. They never even noticed that the poor woman—who heard them clear as day and was visibly trying not to cry—had her left leg in a CAST up to the KNEE. She literally couldn't walk on that leg if she tried, not without injuring herself further, but all they cared about was 'the fat chick in a wheelchair.' (Yes, seeing that happen pisses me off. I'm not sorry.)

## Deisel trucks circled around the garbage truck – this is loosely based on an IRL practice utilized by many police departments. If someone is threatening to jump off a bridge or overpass, a distress call will be put out over radio to any and all big-rig drivers in the area. Drivers who respond will line their trucks up underneath the bridge or overpass, as closely together as possible. This practice decreases the distance the person would fall should they follow through with jumping. On the one hand, it lessens the possibility of fatality and increases their chances of survival, and on the other, knowing they're more likely to survive AND be in a world of pain afterward dissuades people from trying to take their own lives. Another, and more similar, practice involves lining up big rigs to create a barrier or block in a threat. A good example of that would be a story my IRL friend Autumn told me about her hometown: Westboro Baptist Cult made plans to travel to that town after a major disaster to picket a memorial rally – yes,
planning to protest that the town was nearly wiped out because [their usual hate-speech bullshit which I won't dignify with repeat.] The plan was leaked online, the Freedom Riders either couldn't make it or chose not to come, (as it wasn't a military funeral) so someone put out a distress call over the radio. On their way there, the WBC caravan stopped for a meal out on the highway a couple towns over. When they got back to their buses, they found them blocked in by big rig trucks on all sides – trucks whose owners were conveniently 'out of gas and out of cash.' The WBC were trapped at the truck stop for hours after the rally was over and the only demonstrations at the rally were messages of hope, faith, and determination to rise from the ashes. :) According to Autumn, the WBC never bothered trying to picket in that town again, having decided the citizens weren't a suitable target. Fuck hatred. Seriously. Fuck it.

- TITLE from lyrics, RUSH, "Double Agent" from album Counterparts. I feel like the song fits the first part of this chapter, namely Amber's return to the void and everything that happened there. Excerpt from spoken lyrics:

On the edge of sleep, I heard voices behind the door
The known and the nameless, familiar and faceless
My angels and my demons at war.

Which one will lose depends on what I choose
Or maybe which voice I ignore.

On the edge of sleep, I awoke to a sun so bright
Rested and fearless, cheered by your nearness
I knew which direction was right.

The case had been tried by the jury inside
The choice between darkness and light…
The choice between darkness and light.

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WORDS

~Should'a / Shouldn't'a – Should have / Should not have

~They'd'a – improper contraction, MWT, 'they would have'

~(What ha—way a mug—did thi—!) – this speech—and the similar examples following it—is intentionally garbled. It's not meant to be understood, only suspected. Compare to listening in on a conversation while underwater. Also, recall the challenge in this chapter – whomever posts the closest guess as to what these are saying will get next chapter dedicated to them!

~"Darwin's gonna end up spinnin' in'is grave!" – "Spinning in the grave" is an awkward mainstreamed figure of speech you hear a lot in the south and Midwest. The more common variant is "rolling" in the grave" but some variants tend to be largely regional. Basically she's saying that her failure to stay dead would leave Charles Darwin's spirit so appalled he wouldn't be able to rest.

~A sack'a beans – a sack of beans. It's pretty common to hear someone refer to 'throwing someone over their shoulder like a sack of beans,' at least around here, but in more rural areas and further east, you also hear variations like 'like a feedbag' or 'a bag of chicken feed.' Then there's the ever popular 'sack of potatoes.' They all mean the same, so in this case it's just a humorous way of Amber saying 'this is friggin' undignified and I'm enduring it under protest.'
-Out'a – out of
-I'm'onna – MWT, "I am going to." Compare to the more widespread and Southern "I'm'a" meaning the same thing.
57: The Parting Glass

Central Park, November 12th, noon

Somewhere beneath Manhattan, three best friends newly reunited after a long separation quickly retreated to the dojo for privacy. Meanwhile, in Central Park, the scenery was a delightful contrast to the somber mood in the Lair.

An older man – stooped in posture and stocky in build – lounged on a pollen-dusted park bench. Faded patches scattered his threadbare coat and trousers with muted color. Grizzled, frizzy hair the color of dark concrete puffed out from the brim of his old felt hat and his weary eyes were an even drearier grey. The little skin not covered was weathered, tagged and liver-spotted and almost the color of an age-darkened penny. A thick book hung in his ungloved hands, but his eyes were focused far beyond the pages – beyond the reaches of the bench and across to a colorful calamity of joyful noise.

Children of all ages swarmed the playground and its structures, bundled up in puffy coats, mittens, and pompom hats and uncaring of the chill in the air. They were like any other children one might see in any park in the nation – too-loud, over-excitable, needlessly reckless, and entirely perfect.

The stranger's eyes softened. Children were never bothered by his presence; they knew neither race nor class. Of all the times he was judged by others his age and younger, never was one of those

Dedicated to Wolf - not only is she an awesome person and a swell friend, she nailed the reader challenge from last chapter. Go you, Hon! :D Also dedicated to Heiferlump Chance, my incredibly fat cat, for always purring no matter what anyone says or does. (...really, she's always purring, she never shuts up. It's unnerving.)


Chapter Notes

This chapter introduces a couple new characters and sets up some stuff for the upcoming fourth part of the story. We've still got a little while longer in Part III, though, so don't get too antsy just yet – after all, Donnie's still a virgin, an' that just ain't right! We're gonna fix that before Part III ends, mark my words! A quick word of warning for this chapter: there's some real angsting but hang in there, it doesn't last. This is currently the final chapter in the queue but there will be more to come.

Reader challenge this chapter – there's a small, kinda vague reference in this chapter to another story – a timeless story which has been made into a movie series, from one of which a slightly similar line to the line in question came from. Yeah, not a lot to go on, right? Well, if ya recognize that line and what it came from, speak up!
'others' a child…children were, he felt, proof of the inherent goodness in the hearts of humanity. A simple child that lightly draws its breath and feels its life in every limb. What should it know of death? He shook his grizzled head as if to forcibly banish the morbid memories. True, those children - his children weren't dead, but with such distance separating them, they might as well be...after all, he was dead to them, and rightly so.

A dismayed squeal split the air, and a heartbeat later, something collided with his shoe. A bit more alert now, the stranger straightened to inspect the cause: a worn, well-loved football in faded green and dirty white wobbled by his foot. A whimsical smile spread on his haggard face as he caught up the toy, silently considering the bearded and derby-clad mascot imprinted on one side.* Shortly afterward, a sheepish little boy about five skipped toward him, all smiles, messy black curls, and gapped teeth. "Sawwy," the little tike professed, sheepishly digging the toe of one tiny sneaker in the mulch underfoot. "Kin I have my bawl back?"~ The stranger arched an eyebrow at the boy, and with a playful grin, drew back his arm.

"Go long." The child excitedly complied and bolted away, then turned to eagerly wait; a chuckle bubbled up in the stranger's throat as he tossed the boy his football as offered. Right before the catch, however, it was intercepted – or, rather, the boy was snatched up by his well-dressed mother and the ball sailed right past, hitting the dirt with a protesting bounce.

"Ricky, come here!" the woman chided her son and carried him away – away from the ball and the stranger who returned it. Despite her feeble attempts at discretion, the stranger easily picked out words amidst her mutterings – 'shouldn't touch—homeless—sick, maybe on drugs—filthy now!' Before, his heart was lightened by the child's innocence and trust, but now it sank in the face of the familiar judgment. These accusations, after all, were ones he was used to; he was, after all, homeless in every sense of the word, though neither sick nor on any drugs. How could he afford to feed an addiction when he couldn't afford to feed himself?

"Bu—Bu Ma!" the boy whined, squirming on her hip. "My bawl! My brudder gave—"~

"I'll get you another ball," she cut off sternly. "Heaven knows what might be on that one now, you don't need his germs. No, don't look at him, Ricky! If you pay those people any attention, they'll only ask for handouts." Another nasal whine of protest went unnoticed as she turned to fix a scolding glare on the stranger. "I shudder to consider why he's at a playground at all," she remarked more loudly, clearly intent on him overhearing. Please. The pushers in the Bronx could have heard her telling her son he was on drugs, and they'd be just as unimpressed by her calling him a pedophile. "Someone should call the police before he hurts someone."

With a final derisive sniff, she hauled the sniveling boy up to her shoulder mid-tantrum and stalked away to the bus stop. Not understanding what he did wrong, the child settled on his mother's shoulder and watched the stranger plaintively as she carried him away. With a feeble wave goodbye from a chubby mitten-clad hand, the boy and his mother vanished behind a screen of trees.

The stranger turned back to his book, weakly sliding the cover closed and brushing the pad of his thumb across the slick plastic-encased cover. Another day, another search for peace and hope, and another complete stranger casting snap-judgments on him without allowing him a chance for rebuttal. The good people of New York never cared to hear his story—they wouldn't believe he was once a highly educated and well-paid professor at an Ivy League university, nor would they believe he was suffering this undignified lifestyle through no action of his own. Nor, he admitted to himself with a frustrated sigh, would they ever guess he was once of the same beliefs as they were and prone to casting the same snap judgments. It was a shame, really, that correcting those mistakes cost him his life.
Mid-rumination, another came up behind him—a tall, lanky man in his late twenties with messy brown hair and big dark eyes with even bigger round-framed glasses. He was clad in rumpled sage green scrubs with a wrinkled black coat over it and armed with an even more rumpled cloth grocery bag. James Peterson, a resident from a Brooklyn hospital, slumped down on the bench beside the stranger without care, unbothered by his presence. "Hey, Teach," he greeted the older man, digging out a plastic-wrapped sub sandwich and water bottle and passing them over. "What's the news?"

"Hawking's theories are a delight as always, Jimmy," Professor Wilkes replied accepting the offered meal, "but I found nothing in them to support my suppositions. In other news, to my surprise, I'm apparently a vile filthy addict trolling a playground for nefarious purposes." Jimmy snorted, already digging into his own sandwich.

"Baloney," he grinned heedless of the crumbs sticking to his face. "Anyone with eyes would know you're just a grandpa missing his grandkids." Wilkes took the out gratefully and passed the borrowed book to his younger companion; it was, after all, near its due date and the New York Public Library staff weren't too fond of having vagrants borrowing their books. How he missed being able to go out in public without being shamed…

Jimmy sobered, dark eyes fixed on the cover, remembering what he came to share. "I've found another one, Sir," he explained more quietly and with more respect. "A patient at the hospital today—she's been to Limbo, I just know it." He dug out his smartphone and easily pulled up three photos he snapped on the sly: one shot of Amber's file with identifying numbers, one of the visit summary paperwork, and one shot of her face, blurry from being snapped through a glass window at a distance. Wilkes accepted the phone and scanned the images gravely, easily scrolling down the visible portion of the report for details.

"Her name was given as Amber Jean O'Brien," Jimmy continued, "and she's twenty-six years old. When she arrived, she was unresponsive and bleeding out—her skull was crushed inward, BFT compound fracture, little chance for recovery but Doc Lloyd insisted on trying. She went into a-fib and nearly coded on the table but the team managed to pull her back." He met Wilkes' eyes, then, entirely serious. "When she regained consciousness, her skull was healing and her skin unbroken. I took this photo a few hours later when they released her—all that was left was bruising and swelling. She arrived dying, and in a matter of hours, she looked like she'd been healing for weeks, if not months."

Wilkes hemmed in thought, gravely considering the blurry pixelated photo of the undead patient. "I trust you encouraged caution?" he asked under his breath, meeting Jimmy's eyes askance. "We cannot lose her, not like the last one—a blunder of that magnitude mustn't happen, not ever again. These lives are…" He sighed, passing the phone back. "They're too precious…there's too much at stake to risk another loss."

"She won't tell anyone," Jimmy promised running his fingers through his hair, disheveling his already messy locks. "I made sure of it…and I told her I'd be in touch soon." A feeble laugh twisted his lips into a grimace. "Not sure how I'll manage, though—the address on file belongs to an unrelated woman named April O'Neil, and she lives alone. There were no other contacts or names in the file, though Miss O'Neil identified another woman as Miss O'Brien's 'sister.' I can't believe someone as scary as that blonde lady could really be family, though—she spent almost ten minutes screeching at the patient and the rest of the time berating and bullying her. She even hit her a few times." Wilkes gave a knowing grin as he wrapped up the remaining half of his sandwich then shoved it into one deep pocket.

"I don't suppose this blonde lady was tall and thin with blue eyes and disorderly hair?" he asked without asking; Jimmy blinked, stunned. "Did she answer to the name Mercy?"
"Uh...as a matter of fact," Jimmy answered blankly, "yeah, she did. Miss O'Neil referred to her as Mercy and I heard the patient, Miss O'Brien, call her Merse when they left for their vehicle. How'd you know?"

"I've met the young lady before," Wilkes explained without emphasis. "She was homeless for a time, and recalled nothing about herself. She was certain she was someone else entirely, a woman named Mercy Ross, even though I knew her as Donna Mays. I approached her about Limbo but she..." He winced, recalling Mercy's vehement—and obscene—overreaction. "Well, I lost track of her after that. I'm sure if your mystery woman was familiar enough for Miss Ross to feel comfortable striking her, where we find one, we'll find the other. Birds of a feather do, after all, keep company with their own, especially when those birds have endured what those from other worlds endure."

After a brief sip of water, Wilkes moved on. "I'll see what I can dig up on this Amber O'Brien, and I have faith you can manage whatever portions of the search I cannot. I'm sure Miss Baker will be of some help with sufficient incentive, hm?" A violent shudder clattered from Jimmy's shaggy head down to his bony ankles. Danni Baker, after all, terrified him; still, he nodded in reluctant agreement. "If, by some chance, we find her sooner rather than later, let's give the young lady some time to recover before we attempt contact. The last thing we need is to spook her and lose another body."

Jimmy nodded, clearly remembering the same disaster that still flitted behind Professor Wilkes' eyes – haunting green eyes, cold pallid skin, old, dark, coagulated blood... Jimmy physically shook off the image with a barely audible whine; Wilkes easily saw the reason and offered a comforting squeeze of the shoulder. "You've done well, my boy – far better than you would believe, and you are quite capable of whatever task you should set for yourself." He paused, then asked, "Now, what progress have you made in your mission? What have you learned?" Jimmy hesitated, fumbled, then, finally, gave a weak shrug.

"Nothing," he mumbled in defeat. "I've found nothing...I can't figure out the answer. I'm sorry, Teach." Wilkes sobered, contemplating the younger man a moment longer, then hoisted himself up off the bench with a pained grunt. "If you continue in that manner," he warned, "you'll never succeed. Before you can find the answer, you must first discover the question. Discover the question – ask it – consider it in length – then, and only then, will you find the answer." He clapped a comforting hand on Jimmy's still-slouched shoulder and gave him a crooked smile. "Thank you for the luncheon, Peterson, and happy hunting...the Society is counting on you." Without another word, the shabbily-dressed elder slipped away, venturing into the more remote and dangerous reaches of Central Park the way one can only if they have nothing left to lose.

After all, a life was a petty thing when compared to such a treasure as the knowledge of many lifetimes.

Meanwhile, down in the Lair

Not so long ago, perhaps a whole twenty minutes prior, the Lair was full of laughter and joy. The four brothers and their master returned with Mercy and Amber in tow, all high on elation over the brunette's narrowly avoided second death...and, as the brunette in question grumbled, her avoidance of "finally earnin' that Darwin Award, an' in my pajamas no less." Yeah. She nearly died in her sleep, was brought home in her nightclothes, hauled to the hospital in her nightclothes, and finally, sent home in her nightclothes. Now, not yet having had an opportunity to change, she
was still in her nightclothes and pointedly ignoring the blood stains on what was once a comfy nightshirt.

All the festivity was brought to a halt, however, with the appearance of a face familiar to some and foreign to others – Aaron Willis, who slipped through the portal behind Donatello and, despite all odds, arrived in the Lair after the occupants rushed to the hospital. Now the air was quiet and those who breathed it even quieter. Almost immediately after the cursory introductions, Amber, Aaron, and Mercy all retreated into the Dojo to speak in private, heedless that their voices would surely carry without a solid door.

Earlier, Donatello ruminated on the futility of pacing; now he again fell prey to the useless occupation, but this time feeling lost rather than frantic. His listless feet led him in an endless circuit – from the living area to the hallway, from the hallway to the living area, and back again, and at every turn, his eyes shot to the curtain of chipped wooden beads shading the doorway to the Dojo. Beyond that vintage drape, his lover and her two best friends were huddled together, all searching for some way to say the goodbye they were once cheated out of.

Seemingly unaffected by the tense mutterings from the room beyond, Mikey sprawled against the old brick wall separating the Dojo from the living area; he leaned back on one bandaged palm, his right knee bent upward and his left leg folded underneath, and his free arm lazily draped over the upright kneecap. He was calm and unusually quiet and seemed to have not a care in the world, a faint smile at his lips. Veering back toward the living area again, Donnie shot an exasperated glance at Mikey. The three people in the dojo were saying goodbye after a lifetime of being inseparable; how could Mikey not realize how much they must hurt when he was usually the one with the most emotional intelligence? Instead of confronting his younger brother, Donnie spun on his toes and lurched back toward the hall again, senses tuned to the soft murmurings in the dojo.

A harsh, strangled sound split the silence – halfway between a choked sob and a smothered shout. Abandoning his pacing, the genius nearly bolted to the beaded doorway; before he could swipe the curtain aside, a three-fingered hand shot out, latched onto his trousers, and yanked him down onto the floor beside its owner. Mikey returned his silent demand with a solemn shake of the head; he shot a pointed glance at the curtain. Donnie, realizing the point, rubbed his scalp in embarrassment and leaned over to peer through between the strands of beads.

Mercy stood leaning back against the far wall, sourly considering the punching bag with wet eyes that belied her supposed anger. Amber slumped on the padded mat at her feet, her knees drawn and feet tucked. Aaron sprawled limply against her front, eyes buried in her neck, both hands feebly gripping one of hers, and his shoulders and back trembling in a familiar manner. Her eyes were red-rimmed and weak but dry, and she held him close, gently petting his hair and his back.

For once, Amber wasn't crying; instead, Aaron was crying and he wasn't hiding it, only forcing himself to stay quiet. Over the four-and-a-half days Donnie spent getting to know Aaron, the genius came to the conclusion the blond was unbelievably strong in spirit for a human. Donnie couldn't even imagine giving up Amber unless she, herself, asked him to; Aaron swallowed his feelings for her, put on as though he wasn't heartbroken over her, and let her go without a word, all because he wanted her to be safe and happy. Now he was driven to tears and clinging to his friend, and Donnie had his answer. Aaron was, indeed, among the strongest in spirit Donatello had ever met. A weaker man might have smothered his feelings and forced himself to 'look tough,' or maybe bawled like a baby, made a scene, and whined about how unfair the situation was. Aaron didn't retreat behind toxic masculinity and deny his feelings and he didn't throw himself over to his heartbreak entirely— he accepted the feelings, he showed them, and he owned them - he only kept his voice down to avoid drawing attention. "Aaron, Mercy, an' I were almost inseparable," Amber told the genius oftentimes before. "Now we're gone—he's lost both'is best friends, forever. He's all alone now."
Alone…losing those he cared about most was heartbreaking, but instead of fighting his emotions, he accepted them. What could be stronger than allowing yourself to be vulnerable when so many others couldn't bear to show weakness?*

Choking up, Donnie retreated from the doorway, slouching over beside Mikey in defeat. The younger patted his knee, offering a small wry smile that both bewildered and hurt. "How can you stand this?" he demanded of the younger. "How can you sit there smiling? They're hurting—their whole world is falling apart and it'll never be the same again! What about that deserves a smile?" The sharp censure faded, leaving behind only sorrow.

"The whole thing deserves a smile," Mikey explained quietly, "because it was real." Donnie faltered, eyes wide and watery. "They're hurting because everything they had together, everything they feel for each other, is real, true, and certain; it never hurts to lose something that means nothing to you." The genius looked away, eyes darting back and forth along the floor as though arranging invisible puzzle pieces; to his surprise, the picture he came up with finally matched the box. "All this?" Mikey pointed out with a wide-sweeping gesture and let his other arm drape around his brother's slumped shoulders. "Someday it'll all be behind us—those three will adapt an' learn to live their new lives. Sure, Merse an' Sis'll probably always miss Afro-man in there, but someday it won't hurt anymore…they'll be too busy reliving the laughter to remember the tears."

Donnie's eyes drifted from the floor to Mikey's, blending from brown to gold to green in the changing light. "How did you ever get to be so smart?" he asked in all seriousness. Mikey reclaimed his arm and crossed both in an I know I'm awesome pose. "Didn't I tell ya?" the youngest teased with a toothy grin. "Brains, brawn, and a dazzling personality." Comforted, Donnie let out an amused huff and gave him a teasing shove. Mikey had his qualities, but modesty was not among them.

In the dojo, Aaron's cracking voice broke the tense silence between the three friends. "I—I know ya—can't come back," he rasped into Amber's collarbone. "I jus'—I jus'—" Another choked sob broke through. "It wain't s'posed to—to end like this—it was always us—you, me, Ross, us against the world! We—We were s'posed to g-get old together—" A sharp inhale creaked in his lungs. "Jus' the th-three of us—jus' a group'a ol' f-farts—bitchin' each other out—d-drivin' each other c-crazy—r-rasslin' 'til someone broke a-a hip—"~ Despite the admittedly humorous image, no one was laughing. "This—it ain't right! It—We—I—" After several false starts he gave up, his voice too hoarse and his brain too scattered.

"Don't forget racin' motor-chairs~ in Walmart," Amber offered, clearly hoping to make him smile. "Can't skip sittin' on the porch an' wallapin' the lil' wankers trespassin' on our lawns, either—I even had a cane already." No response; the tease fell flat, unsurprisingly. "Wil—" She cut herself off in a sigh. "Aaron."

The sudden silence in the dojo felt deafening; Aaron froze against her shoulder, his still-wet eyes wide at the significance. Amber and Mercy used each other's first names on occasion, but they almost never used Aaron's first name—he was always Willis to them, and to him, they were always O'Brien and Ross or some other teasing insult-name. It was their thing—their little inside joke and their way of showing each other they cared. After all these years, there was no doubt they cared about each other. Now, Amber used his given name to comfort him, but also to remind him of the truth: things would never be the same again, but that didn't necessarily mean they'd be bad. "Aaron…Hon, I know it hurts," she murmured thickly, "I know we never wan'ed this to happen, but it did, we can't change that. I died in tha' world…I almost died twice…in some ways, death's still permanent.~ I belong here, now, no matter how much we may wish I didn't."
"Y-Yeah," Aaron rasped and sniffed, and extracted himself from her neck to slouch beside her; he was still a bit of a mess, but he was regaining control. "But...but even if you could come home—an' an' stay there without—" He trailed off and skipped over the end. "You w-wouldn't...be..."

"No," Amber answered his unfinished question with a bittersweet smile and a thickened tongue, "I w-wouldnae be happy...Ah'd be heartbroken 'cause my heart would a'ways be here...wi' my Dunnie." ~ Aaron stilled, his eyes still wet but his jaw set firm. Tentatively, as though participating in a luxury he'd never allowed himself, he lifted a shaky hand, fingers curled, and traced the curve of one salt-stained cheek with his knuckles.

"Amber," he almost whispered as though uttering some sweet pet-name, "you stubborn, psychotic, crazy Scotch nutcase." Pet-name? Definitely. Sweet? Though sour to most, to the trio, it was saccharine. He shook his head with a silent scoff, burying both his hands in his armpits. "I love you, ya delusional woman—I've always loved ya—always...even back when we were kids. I didn't drop slugs down your shirt fer nothin'." Amber's lip quirked at the memory, her cheeks flushing from containing a laugh. The confession, long overdue, was all Aaron to a 'T'—blunt, sarcastic, and halfway between offensive and ridiculous. "Still...it wouldn't be enough...would it?"

"Someday you'd run out'a slugs," she pointed out as Mercy rolled her eyes, pantomiming a gag. The bleak mood over the room was lifting, at least a little. "Someday I might actually put pickles on yer cheeseburger pizza.*** Nothing lasts forever, you know?" He gave a glum nod. "Besides...you waited all these years to tell me—Heck, I spent most'a our childhood thinkin' the sun shined out'a yer arse—"~

"It ain't the sun," Mercy grumbled, "he's naturally fluorescent." Amber snorted.

"Willis' whiteness ain't the point,"# she snickered as the two blondes glared at each other then, without any sort of warning, crossed their eyes and stuck their tongues out at each other in unison. Some things never changed. "You never told me how you felt for a reason, right? Yer not shy, Aaron—ya had a reason for hidin' it, otherwise you'd'a told me, just like that, years ago." Aaron sobered, unable to meet Amber's eyes.

"Y-Yeah," he admitted under his breath. "We just...we're not a good fit, ya know? Yer a bookworm, I'm a redneck—you' got culture, I just cuss—yer fuckin' brilliant, ya know?" He scoffed, his lip curling halfway between amusement and derision. "I ain't smart—I'm just a smartass."

"You're not stupid," Amber insisted hauling his eyes back to hers by his scruffy goatee, "an' you're not a total rube. You're strong—you're genuine an' determined—ya know who ya are an' don't try to change that for anyone, ya wear it proud an' slap folks across the face with your sass if they judge you."

"In other words," Mercy offered with a too-innocent smile, "yer a proud redneck in a world full of normal people." Amber shot Mercy a reprimanding glare; the blonde shrugged. "What? It's true." The other rolled her eyes in defeat.

"We digress," she grumbled. "Look, Hon, Merse an' I love ya to bits—" Seeing Mercy's lips part to argue, Amber reached out and poked her on the ankle in warning. "—an' we know ya love us, too, in yer weird little way. It hurts to lose people ya love...no one's ever really ready to lose someone they care about for good, but it's just part of life." She gave him a teasing fist-bump to the shoulder. "Besides, even if I can't ever come home without bitin' the dust, who says you can't visit us?"

Aaron jerked, his eyes darting up to meet Amber's, then flashing to Mercy's, then back again. "You—y'all want me to come see ya?" he parroted back in surprise. "But how—" Mercy pounced on him
"Let us worry about that, Lightbulb-butt," Mercy teased noogie-ing him relentlessly as he fussed. "I got the barn, she's got the brew..." She trailed off, eyebrows arching in an open hint. Aaron's nose twitched, but he scrubbed his eyes clean and grinned all the wider.

"I'll bring the barbecue," he finished in a laughing wheeze. Content that the worst was over, Amber exchanged a pointed look with both blondes, and threw her arms open wide, wiggling her fingers in suggestion; when they balked, she latched onto their clothing and yanked them into a group hug. As always, they 'endured, but under extreme duress' and muttered insults at each other over her frizzy hair...at least until something occurred to Mercy. She cringed, craning her neck to get as far away from Amber's shoulder as possible.

"O'Brien?" she grimaced. "Ya know yer shirt's still got blood on it, right? An' now it's covered in Willis' tears an' snot?" Amber yanked her back in with an evil laugh. "Oh, gross!"

"Ross," Aaron grumbled from Amber's other shoulder, his voice muffled by blood-stained fabric, "just friggin' roll with it."

Donnie made to protest the insults but Aaron cut him off again, this time, entirely serious. "I can't always be around to protect those two anymore; I'm passin' that buck to you. I'm warnin' ya though, I find out any of ya hurt'em—either of'em—there won't be a world y'all can run to where I won't find ya, an' I'll turn all four'a yer shells into fishponds. Crystal?"

"Really, Willis?" Amber drawled as she latched onto his shoulders and bodily moved him out of Donnie's personal space. "Fishponds? That's the worst you could come up with?"

"Yeah," he groused, "well, I'd say 'feed yer asses to my cats,' but the lil' buggers have gotten picky. They won't even eat pepperoni anymore – well, Ass-Butt will, but it gives'er a real rancid case'a—"

Two hands lashed out and slapped over Aaron's mouth to cut him off, the owners respectively cringing and grimacing. Clearly, Donnie realized with a blank stare, the threat was empty but the request was the same: 'take care of my friends even though I couldn't kick your butt if I tried.'

"That's it," Amber warned marching Aaron toward the kitchen, "I'm gettin' a fork, yer done."## Shortly after this, she spoke again. "I'm changin'—All in favor of burnin' these clothes?" The suggestion was favored with a several-voice chorus of ayes from every corner of the Lair.

Over the next hour—after Amber finally got a chance to change out of her blood, tear, and snot-tainted PJs—Amber and Donatello filled in the others with their observations about the days leading up to Amber's near-death. After some consideration, the genius came up with a theory: she might be safe in her world so long as she left before 72 hours was up. Mercy, too, was likely subject to the same rules, as she, too, died in that world. Aaron, having never died in either world, was probably free to come and go as he pleased. Everyone knew the theory would remain just that until it was proven or dis-proven but no one was willing to try it just yet. Likewise, everyone knew the
surprisingly comfortable gathering had to be broken up soon, but no one was willing to suggest such.

Thus, long after all the questions were asked and the answers were given, the gathering transitioned into other activities—getting to know one another, watching movies, making dinner, eating it, then yet another movie with even more lounging around. By eight o'clock, a contagious yawn started making the rounds through the three world-hoppers, and Splinter finally put his clawed foot down: the fun was over. Aaron needed to be taken home and Donnie and Amber's luggage needed to be collected from said home. Donatello already missed three nights' patrol and was sure to miss more due to inter-dimensional 'jet lag,' and they weren't sure how much time had passed in Aaron's world without his presence. This, in particular, horrified the blond, who promptly began fretting about his cats, his game system, and his job, in that exact order.

In the end, it was all agreed. Donnie and Amber were ordered to make it an early night. Leo and Splinter vowed to take Aaron home, pack up the couple's belongings, leave word about the developments for Kimber, and return without delay. Mercy made some excuse about 'yard work,' but the validity of that excuse was put into question by her silent conversation with Raphael—a conversation executed with nothing more than facial expressions and discreet gestures.

After seeing and hearing the three friends fall apart in the dojo, earlier, Donnie honestly expected a long, tearful goodbye. Instead, Mercy and Aaron exchanged a shoulder-punch and a couple odd insults that sounded a bit like terms of affection, and both promised to beat the other's ass next time they met. Aaron and Amber, on the other hand, weren't quite so prickly together—she roped him into a hug and they shared a few quiet words the others couldn't quite hear. "Next time," she then promised with a wry smile, "I'll see ya off with a nip'a the good stuff, jus' like ol' times...if'n ya promise not to try milkin' any cows afterward."

When all was said and done, Splinter, Leo, and Aaron were gone, and Mercy and Raphael were off to the Garden, Amber slipped away, seeking quiet. Donnie found her in the dojo staring through the weapon racks lining the far wall. This, of course, worried the genius. She was quiet—too quiet—and despite watery eyes and a croaking voice, she never broke down and cried once in the entire time since they returned to the Lair. When he first met her, she would have been bawling the moment she saw Aaron and would have fallen apart—she would be struggling under memories, seeing images of destruction flashing behind her eyes—the horrors of her previous life would have held her hostage and left herbroken long afterward. Now, she was silent, calm, and contemplating the grouping of lesser-used weapons hung along the wall. Was she in shock?

She didn't show any signs of surprise when Donnie came up behind her and gathered her into his arms; she wasn't lost in thought, then. "The worst is over now," he reminded, briefly nuzzling into her hair then tucking her head under his chin. "It'll take some time to adjust, but we'll get through it, I promise." To his surprise and disbelief, she didn't break down—she didn't tremble or latch onto him with every ounce of strength. Instead, she looked up to peck the underside of his jaw then leaned back into his plastron, wrapped her arms around his.

"I know," she answered with a soft smile—a smile that, though hard to believe, didn't seem fake or forced at all. "The world turned on without me, Donnie. I was so sure my family was fallin' apart—that Aaron couldn't handle livin' without me." She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Some ego, huh? My father was already moving on an' my Ma an' Gran'Da were workin' on it. Aaron was doin' better, too, an' if we hadn't arrived on the anniversary, he prob'ly wouldn't have been so out of sorts." She shrugged, laying her head on his shoulder, content. "Life goes on, even when we feel like it's fallin' down around us. If they can rise above their grief, who's to say I can't rise above my fears?"

"Are you really alright, Honey?" Donatello released her only to turn her to face him and tilt her eyes
up to his; she wasn't showing any sign of being upset or hurting, but neither did she seem to be in shock. He cupped her jaw in his hand, brushing the pad of his thumb along her cheekbone – a cheek that would normally be stained with tears. "You're...well, you seem to be...coping with this."

"I've spent a lot of time not copin', haven't I?" Amber admitted and covered his hand with hers. "I've spent far too long livin' in the past when I should'a~ been enjoyin' the present. Back in my last life, I'd never've~ been so—so mopey—an' I wasn't a crier...in this life, I've been an absolute mess...an' I've been leamin' on you too hard, too." She cringed, ducking her head in shame. "I'm sorry for that...you deserve better an' I can do better—I will do better. I can't go back an' change that, but I can try harder not to let my emotions carry me away. You deserve better an' I'll do what I can to become better." The silence stretched uncomfortably, so she met his eyes again. He seemed stunned—bewildered and pleasantly so.

"You're...you're really alright?" he asked bringing his other hand up to her other cheek; Amber covered that one with her other hand, heedless of how ridiculous they must look, him framing her face and her holding his hands in place. "You're...not afraid? Or hurting?"

"Of course I'm hurtin'," she corrected with a wry smile, "I just said goodbye to the best friend I ever had, outside Mercy, an' I may never see my family again—I'm still sad, I'm just not wallowing in it like I have been. Life went on for them, an' it'll go on for me, too...Aaron an' my family aren't here, but you are...yer worth endurin' all the sorrow an' fear in the world, Dunnie." Donnie's throat visibly clenched, his eyes misting over, and he leaned down to steal her lips. Amber sighed into the kiss, reaching for his neck; that kiss was followed by several more, each slower and more sensual than the last, and she dug her nails into his skin, relishing the soft moan it triggered.

Somewhere between nip and tug, she recalled the moments before she awoke on the operating table —recalled the voice in the Void—and knew she had to tell him. "I've told you about...the Void...haven't I?" she asked haltingly. Donnie nodded, his eyes reluctantly leaving her swollen lips for her eyes.

"I take it you returned?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I dunno how long I was there," she answered, "I only know when I left—that's right before I woke up on the operating table. This time was different, though."

"Different how?"

"The Void...it's...well, it's hard to describe." Amber disentangled herself from his arms, wandered over to the meditation corner and sprawled out on one of the mats. Donnie joined her, listening intently. "It's a world of nothingness. There's no sound, no sight, no sensation of any sort—when yer there, yer nothin', you have no body but you can sense things anyway. The blindin' light an' pitch darkness...the endless ticking an' maddening white noise...the smell of dust an' old books..." *I'd better not find you in my filing cabinet again for at least fifty years.* 'Nope. Not dealin' with that just yet. She shook off the memory of the whiny voice and carded her fingers into her hair, digging her nails into her scalp as if to remind herself that she was alive and could feel things again.

"The first time I was there, I was alone," she continued, "but this time, there was another – a voice, mibbe~ the same voice Kimber mentioned. It was sure irritating enough." She shook the thought off and turned a smile to the genius beside her. "I wasn't put here by coincidence...the Voice mentioned lessons—I've learned some already, but I got the feelin' from the conversation that I'm meant to learn more in the future."

"What manner of lessons?" Donnie asked leaning on his bent knees. Amber shrugged.
"The ones they mentioned all pertained to faults from my last life," she explained. "I learned to ask for help an' let myself to be vulnerable—I learned how to accept myself for who I am instead a hidin' behind nonsense an' tryin' to fit in—I learned that words aren't somethin' to fear an' hold back an' that sharin'em doesn't have to be like pullin' teeth." She shot Donnie a lopsided grin. "The Voice asked if I was gonna give up an' die again, an' I tore it a new one; apparently, now I'm learnin' to forgive myself for mistakes I've made, like givin' up on life so easy last time." He chuckled, pulling her into a sidelong hug and smoothing his palm up and down her side. "I owe it all to you, ya know," she added, her voice soft with emotion. "You're the reason I've made so much progress."

"Nonsense." Amber startled. She leaned away and blinked at him in confusion, but he didn't look upset. "Our trip made me realize something, Braids," he explained with a fond smile. "I've spent all this time trying to 'fix you,' but you never needed fixing. Fixing something implies it was broken to begin with—you're not broken and you never were—you're a little battered but you won't always be that way." Before, Donnie was stunned by the dryness of Amber's eyes; now, they were shimmering with happy tears. "I can't solve your problems for you," he added as she crawled into his lap, then his embrace. "All I can do is support you while you fight your battles," he summed up breathing in the sweet coconut of her hair underneath the astringent scent of the hospital, "and believe in you, no matter what."

Amber's breath hitched against his collarbone; he nuzzled into her hair and rubbed her back, comforted by her closeness. In just under a year, they came a long way—they became friends, fell apart, and grew together again, and now, they could only grow stronger. His unoccupied eyes drifted along the wall before them, sliding from one grouping of weapons to the next before landing on a familiar sight: an old, age-faded pair of wooden *tonfa*. His nickname was scribbled on the handles of those weapons before age faded the markings, and despite routine cleaning and oiling, he would bet they both still had traces of his blood in the grain. Last he checked, he still had some scars from them; it would only be fitting for them to also still bear traces of the injuries he caused himself with them.

His eyes dropped to Amber's scalp as he considered his intentions. *Ask me about Clayton Gregory.* The Amber in his dreams was adamant about this—she insisted that when he remembered, he needed to broach the subject—but as of yet, he still held his tongue. Today, he nearly lost Amber all over again—if he spent even an hour more hiking, or if his gamble on moving her despite a head injury hadn't paid off… He shuddered, gathering her even closer. She could have *died*…the last time he lost her, she still lived, but this time would have been permanent…he couldn't lose her again, not without knowing the truth, not without telling her what she meant to him.

"Amber, there's something I need to ask you." His voice was shaky from nerves—and understandably so—but she should still have heard him. Instead, she said nothing; she just breathed steadily into his neck. "Hon?" No answer. He carefully eased her away, craning his neck to see her, half-afraid her injury was manifesting again. Instead, she slumped with her chin almost to her chest, eyes closed and shoulders drooping. 'Oh man…I knew this would happen,' he thought with a wince. 'She really was in shock—now it's all hit at—'

A quiet snore cut off his train of thought. He blinked. She was…*asleep*? A quick inspection revealed that her forehead was still healing and the last of the bruising nearly gone; her eyes were shuttered but relaxed and her lips were curled into a small, tired smile. There he was, *angsting about his dreams*, and she *fell asleep* on him. 'You nutty woman,' he thought at her with a breathy chuckle, 'you couldn't wait until I dragged you to bed?' Careful not to disturb her, he shifted her to the mat, stood, and lifted her in his arms bridal style to carry her to bed; she nestled into his neck almost immediately, and gave a contented sigh in his ear. This moment, he decided, was sweeter than the coffee she always left him on Saturdays.

With Amber tucked in their bed, he crawled in beside her, gathering her against his plastron. He
knew he needed to confront her about the dreams—needed to find out if she really shared those dreams after all—but it could wait another day. They both needed some rest after the day's drama. His mind made up and his heart lighter, Donatello gave his worries over to the night, eagerly awaiting his dreams and even more eagerly, the much-beloved woman who surely waited in them. From his dreams, she beckoned him, her hair still a little pink and her grey-green eyes weary.

"Remember me—I remember you."

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**NOTES:**

**Title** from a popularly-covered traditional Scottish folk song. The song is based on the tradition of offering guests a final drink to bolster their spirits on their journey home, and carries undertones of both sadness and tenderness. Amber and Mercy, and Aaron are being separated again, here, permanently if not perpetually, like distant relatives returning home; I feel like the overall tone and mood of the song fits here for that reason, even if the specific lyrics aren't spot-on. My favorite rendition of the song is by Celtic Thunder and it's absolutely haunting. On a personal note, the Chance family has a similar tradition after a big gathering like Christmas or Thanksgiving. Once the last visiting Chance family relative has left and taken their drama with them, Papa Chance, Mama Chance, my hubby Cold, and I all gather in their living room, we all pour ourselves a glass of our chosen poison, and give a toast something along the lines of this: "Yay, they're finally gone!" And with that we all toss back our drinks—Scotch in my case—and we all pass out where we sit.

^ A simple child that lightly draws its breath and feels its life in every limb. What should it know of death? - This verse is from "We are Seven" by William Wordsworth. Despite the morbid tone, the poem was actually somewhere between sober and whimsical, centered around a conversation between the poet and a young girl he met. In the poem he asks how many siblings she has and she answers "we are seven" but upon being prompted to let him meet her siblings she answers that two have left home, two have gone to sea, and two are dead and buried. He protests that if two children died and five live, then she only has four siblings, but in the innocence of childhood she insists no, there are seven of them. This poem has an overtone of childish willfulness and whimsy but is also a reminder that even when our loved ones have left us, they're never really gone.

* Green and white, mascot has a beard and wears a derby hat – Just name-dropping on my favorite college-league football team, the Notre Dame Fighting Irish.

** Crying isn't something to be ashamed of, regardless of your gender. Boys and men feel sorrow like women and girls—having testicles instead of a twat shouldn't revoke your right to cry when you need to. Yes, I'm a feminist.

*** Someday I might actually put pickles on your cheeseburger pizza. – Recall all the times in this story Amber has teased Aaron about this – "Ma brought your favorite but it's got pickles," and "I brought your favorite pizza and it's got pickles!" This is the explanation: Aaron's favorite pizza is cheeseburger, and some people put PICKLES on cheeseburger pizza. He's appalled by this, so naturally, Amber teases him about it… because he, Mercy, and Amber are ALWAYS teasing each other.
"It ain't the sun—he's naturally fluorescent." "Willis' whiteness ain't the point." – an ongoing joke is how Aaron, who has a habit of running around naked anytime he's home inside OR out, can still be pale as a fish instead of tanned all over. His stated 'whiteness' isn't a reference to race – it's describing his pale skin. Also, recall the scene where Mercy picked Aaron up for Amber's funeral, got an eyeful while he was showering, then described his backside as 'so white it's fluorescent.'

"I'm gettin' a fork, yer done." – another reference to the phrase "stick a fork in me, I'm done!" Usually the phrase you're done, when used in this manner, means basically "y'all have made a complete ass of yerself, so shut up before your foot's permanently lodged in yer throat!"

The Lair - if it hasn't become clear by this point, I just wanted to get this out here - I am NOT basing the Lair in this story on any single Lair portrayed before. In all series the guys tend to change homes a few times for various reasons, and we can assume that's what happened here - sometime between the end of OotS and the beginning of this story, their former lair was either found or outgrown and they moved on to a new home. I have put together a rough floorplan of this lair (VERY rough) and may eventually post it to the ANLoL Tumblr. (For ref, that's "Get-a-new-lease-on-Life" on Tumblr.)

**WORDS**

- Kin I have my bawl back? – This kid's got a pretty thick northerner's tongue already; since his mother's speech is untainted by it, we can only wonder where it came from. "Can I have my ball back?"
- Bu—Bu' Ma! My bawl! My brudder gave— [cut off]— "But Mom, my ball! My brother gave [it to me]!" The implication is that his older brother attends or perhaps attended Notre Dame University, received the ball at a game and gave it to him. Since little brothers generally idolize their older brothers at this age, he's very attached to the ball.
- It wa'n't s'posed to—to end like this—it was alwaysus—you, me, Ross, us against the world! We—We were s'posed to g-get old together—Jus' the th-three of us—jus' a group'a ol' f-farts—bitchin' each other out—d-drivin' each other c-crazy—r-rasslin' 'til someone broke a-a hip. – MWT. "It wasn't supposed to end like this—we were always together—it was just you, me, and Mercy against the world! We were supposed to grow old together, just the three of us—we'd be just another group of old farts (basically 'someone who's grown crotchety and aggravating in their old age) complaining at each other, driving each other crazy, horsing around until someone broke a hip..." Basically, Aaron wanted the three of them to stay the same until they died—he and Amber would always be verbally sparring, he and Mercy would always have insult contests and tussle like children, and they'd only be parted by death at a ripe old age of ancient. Needless to say, this wasn't a rational aspiration and he's struggled with the truth.
- Racin' motor-chairs in Walmart – This is an aspiration of many young pranksters anticipating their old age – racing wheelchairs in their local nursing home and the little electric scooters in their local Walmart.
- Wallapin' the lil' wankers tresspassin' on our lawns – this is MY aspiration for when I'm old instead of just decrepit – waving my cane and shouting "Gi'off ma lawn ya lil' hooligans!" when neighbor kids come around. Wallap/wallop – to hit or strike something, first spelling is Scotch slang, second is regional slang used in the MW US. Lil' wankers – a lovely little insult common to Brit-slang and Scotch slang, basically means the same as calling someone a little fucker, with the difference that wank generally refers to solo-shenanigans rather than traditional
two-or-more-people shenanigans.

- **Wan'ed this ta happen/died in tha' world** – "Wanted this to happen" and "died in that world." Scotched relapse.

- I wouldnae be happy... Ah'd be heartbroken 'cause my heart would a'ways be here... wi' my Dunnie. – "I wouldn't be happy in that world. I'd be heartbroken because my heart would always be here, with Donnie." Scotched relapse.

- **Out'a** – out of, MWT.

- I spent most'a our childhood thinkin' the sun shined out'a yer arse—" – "I spent most of our childhood thinking you were the most amazing person in the world." Compare 'the sun shines out of your ass' to the more polite phrase 'you make the sun rise and set.' MWT.

- **You'd'a** – MWT, you would have.

- **You'/ I'** – This has been shown before but I'm not sure I ever noted it. Conjunctions shown with only the first word and apostrophe are pronounced the same as the base word. Thus, you' could be you're, you've, or you'd based on the context and I' could be I've, I'd, or I'm. MWT, also common in some Southern and city dialects.

- Ya see those two idjits? They're gonna get'em selves hurt someday, especially that klutz. Yer job's to keep'em from gettin'em selves hurt an' to keep that braided blockhead from earnin' 'erself a Darwin Award. – MWT. "You see those two [idiots]? They're going to get themselves hurt someday, especially that [clumsy person]. Your job is to keep them from getting themselves hurt and to keep that braided blockhead [Amber] from earning herself a Darwin Award." The Darwin Award, often used in connection to Amber, is an unofficial status given in jest to persons who died from incredibly unbelievable acts of stupidity or ignorance, 'thus proving Darwin's theory about the survival of the fittest.' Look up "Darwin Award DOT com," it'll relieve you of all hope for the future of humanity.

- I'm warnin' ya… I find out any of ya hurt'em—either of'em—an' I'll turn all four'a yer shells into fishponds. – "I'm warning you, if I find out any of you hurt [Amber or Mercy] I'll rip all four of your shells off and make goldfish ponds out of them." (...because they're a tad too big to make ashtrays out of.) MWT.

- Next time, I'll see ya off with a nip'a the good stuff, jus' like ol' times...if'n ya promise not to try milkin' any cows afterward. – Next time you visit, before you leave, I'll share [a couple fingers' worth of quality Scotch] with you first, just like we used to...at least, if you promise not to try milking any cows afterward. MWT with nip from Scots, meaning 'a drink of some alcoholic beverage.' The concept of sharing a drink with a departing guest is a tradition in some countries including parts of Scotland, and the basis for the song "The Parting Glass" and the poem it came from. The second bit, about milking cows, is a jab about Aaron's drunken exploits in Glenville the last time he and Amber visited his mother. (See chapter 2: Death Was Only the Beginning) Simply put, he and his cousin got drunk, they challenged each other to a cow-milking contest, and Aaron—in his inebriation—accidentally tried to milk a bull instead of a cow and got peed on. We can only hope Amber hosed his drunken ass off outside.

- **Prob'ly** – MWT, Probably

- **Should'a / Instead'a** – MWT, Should have, Instead of

- **I'd never've** – MWT, I would never have

- **Mibbe** – maybe, Scots.
Chapter Notes

For most of this story, some vital questions have been repeatedly raised but remained unanswered: Did Amber and Donatello truly experience a shared-dream state as children? If so, is this Donnie the same one Amber dreamed of? Lastly – and most importantly – "We already know those answers, what's keepin' those two from fessin' up?! Feels, here, they're kickin' us in'em!"

Well. If that last question has been reverberating in your brain, then fear not! This chapter, my lovelies, is the MOMENT of TRUTH! …hence why it's so frickin' long. Oy. Also, today you get to see TWO sides of Leo we rarely get to see in this story - the "Power-tripping jerkwad" and the playful, sappy, panty-melting side Beverly brings out of him. Hope y'all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Also, a worthy mention and story-wide theme for Donnie and Amber's beginning:

Andrew McMahon in the Wilderness – "Rainy Girl"

58: The Moment of Truth

Willsdale, Missouri – Aaron's shed

Once Leonardo got past the 'interdimensional travel by secret ninjitsu technique' bit, he promptly began over-analyzing everything as usual. The seals were meant to be inscribed in a temporary manner – preferably with chalk or charcoal – so the ninjas using them could vanish without a trace. Scrawling them on a wall in bright orange spray paint was appalling. After a long drawn-out rant on that, Leo moved onto other topics – the cluttered state of the shelter-shed they appeared in, the lumpy mattress lying right on the dirty floor instead of proper sleeping rolls, the obvious need of a good dusting and sweeping – only five minutes in his world, and already, Aaron wanted to strangle the uptight mutant.

One step outside the shed and all Aaron's irritation at Leo vanished—everything to do with ninjas, mutant or otherwise, was gone. Poof. Kaput. Erased from his memory. Who's Leo? To Aaron Willis, the tall, svelte redhead sprawled across his rickety back steps was much more interesting. "Kimber?" he called out; the other-worlder startled, noticed him frozen in the doorway of his storm shelter, and stood to make her way over with a crooked grin.

"I figured ya had to cut an' run," she greeted as Splinter and Leo cautiously crept out into the dim sunlight. Aaron fumbled for words as he led the two mutants inside.

"What're ya doin' here, Kim?" he asked; the nickname startled her but a slow, shy smile softened her
"Yeah." She shrugged. "A certain farmhand didn't show up for work an' Bawss Englert~ came ta bitch at t'a pub. Ya missed two shifts on t'a poultry farm, Willis; Bawss ain't happy." Aaron swore, slapping his palm over his eyes so hard his glasses went askew. "I tol'im ya had a family emergency so ya ain't fired but ya better call'im." She hesitated, eyeing the two mutants in his living room. "So what happened?"

It took about half an hour to get all the blanks filled – from Amber nearly dying in her sleep and their frantic retreat to Donnie's world to Aaron's eventual return, there was a lot to cover. Especially, he considered as Kimber silently processed Donnie's theory, the whole part about other-worlders dying after four days in their home reality. "It's just a theory for now," Leo reminded dryly, "but Don believes if any of you spent too long in your home realities—three days or more—it would kill you. He's not too eager to prove that theory, though, not if it means risking anyone's life."

"Ya mean…?" Kimber couldn't finish. Leo nodded gravely.

"This technique gave Amber and Mercy a chance to see their loved ones again, but it could also kill them. Better to cut ties than risk their lives." Leo stayed a moment longer, suspicious eyes pinned to Kimber, then retreated with the excuse of packing up the couple's belongings. Splinter and Aaron broke away as well, venturing next door to the ruins of Amber's old home. In the dark, lonely, dusty parlor, Kimber sat on Aaron's lumpy sofa, brooding.

There were many things about this 'Amber' person she wasn't altogether fond of—they were too different to get along and too alike to even tolerate one another—but in a way, Kimber admired the other woman's guts. After all, Kimber left a helluva mess in her old life. Amber, from the sound of it, not only didn't get herself killed, she worked it out and moved on. Kimber's hand lifted, fingers idly tangling in the beaded metal chain around her neck, thumb tracing the engraving of the dog-tags she wore. She never wanted another chance at life and, even after hearing that she could go back to see her loved ones, she refused to consider it. Dead is dead…but…still… Her eyes hardened—her fingers clenched around the tags, the rough edges cutting into her skin—she lurched upward and bolted out the back door in pursuit of Splinter.

"Take me with ya," she demanded upon reaching him. The rat and his human companion turned to face her, the blond holding a small black cat with bright yellow eyes. Before a demand for answers could make it past his gaping lips, she elaborated. "A t'eo'y's just a t'eo'y 'til it's proven or disproven, yeah?" Kimber added. "Well, t'a only way ta do t'at is ta try again with someone else—I'll do it."

"Wait, hold the phone," Aaron argued passing Kirk to a rather bemused Splinter; the cat blinked in surprise, gave the rat's ear a cursory sniff, then flopped down on his 'favorite shoulder.' "Amber offered to bring ya back for a visit, Kim, an' ya tore her a new one—somethin' about screwin' up the natural order or somethin'—now that ya know it could kill ya, yer all for it?" He flung his arms wide in a 'what's up with that?' gesture. "Do ya hate livin' that much?"

"It ain't fer me, Willis," Kimber retorted and crossed her arms in defense. "She can't come back unless t'ere's a way it won't kill her—someone's gotta confirm Dahnnie's t'eo'y or she's never gawnna see her family again. Aaron and Splinter said nothing—they just looked at her, one bewildered and one closed off, and both waiting for an explanation. She held out as long as possible, every second crawling down her spine like an unseen spider, but finally caved. "Mista Splinta, ya know what a mess I made'a my old life—I don't really like t'a bawdy-snatcher much…but I know what she went t'rough in my skin. T'a messes I left behind—she had ta deal with'em, an' she's been cleanin'em up t'is whole time…but even after all'a t'at…"
She trailed off, keenly remembering the last time she saw Amber. After all the rude things Kimber said to her in Aaron's parlor, the two counterparts wound up sitting on the hood of her car and staring up at the stars in an almost companionable silence. Kimber broke down—cried like a weakling over something that didn't really matter—she bristled and threw accusations and insults, and all-but stuck her breasts in the other's face just to start a fight...and after all was said and done Amber encouraged her, comforted her, and offered her help. Kimber's throat locked up. Amber went through Hell because of her mistakes and never once blamed her for it; what manner of person would she be if she refused to help the other woman when she had the ability to do so? "I gotta at least try," she settled for.

"Not going to happen." Kimber jerked around to face the speaker; when did Leo turn up? He followed her?! "You've done enough damage to my family already, Kimberly," he elaborated, looking down on her literally and figuratively. As always, the use of her real name set her hackles bristling; after everything she did to ensure that her old self died, why did people always have to remind her she was still alive? "Now you have the gall to make demands and claim you want to help us?! I won't stand by and watch you tear—"

"Leonardo." He silenced, blue eyes warily rolling to meet Splinter's; how could his father always manage to rebuke him so thoroughly with only his name? His eyes narrowed, his lips flattening and pursing into a more irritable version of his infamous 'why me?' face. "Miss Bryant's actions have caused much trouble for our family and others, there is no doubt of that, but she has suffered from them as well. Would you deny her the chance to reclaim her honor?"

"But—but she has no honor!" Leo protested torn between speaking the truth and contradicting his master. "She's just a punk—just a Purple Dragon punk! How can anyone with honor be willing to subject themselves to that sort of lifestyle?!!"

"She wishes to help your brother and his partner," Splinter amended lowly, "to make right her mistakes. Would it not be unreasonable to refuse her that chance?" Leo flustered, his skin darkening in an angry flush and the skin of his lips tightening. Pale blue eyes pinned Kimber in place like a bug on a foam display board. She made no move to defend herself, he noticed with a begrudging respect, but nor did she agree with his accusations—she held her tongue completely. Finally, after a long, tense moment of considering his sensei's words, Leo had his answer. He sucked in a steadying breath between his bared teeth, sighed it back out his nose, and scowled down at her like she was some nasty insect he ached to squish.

"You offered to confirm Donnie's theory," he reminded in a clipped tone. "You have one chance to get this right—only one." She nodded shortly, her apparent lack of fear and humility grating Leo's last nerve. "You're to stay away from Raphael while you're in our home—you've already done enough damage." Finally, there was the leverage he needed: she flinched, so harshly one might have thought he slapped her. "We'll return in a week—that'll be two weeks, here—be ready or we're leaving without you." Kimber gave a shaky nod and fled the scene before the tears in her eyes made it to her cheeks. Without another word, already dreading the upcoming visit from the Jersey Nutjob—the woman directly responsible for Raphael's broken heart and ongoing guilt—Leo stalked back to Aaron's shed to finish packing up.

"Well," Aaron mumbled to Splinter. "That could'a gone worse." He couldn't tell, but it looked like the rat was smirking behind his whiskers. "Getting back to Kirk—"

"He is clearly well-tempered," Splinter volunteered before Aaron could finish. "You mentioned he is skilled at dispatching pests?" The blond nodded, digging his fingers into his poofy curls.

"Mice, crickets, other nasties," he added, "you name it, if it don't belong, he'll either kill it or chase it
off. If Ross's growin' veggies for the family, there's gonna be bugs an' rodents comin' after the harvest—Kirk'll be worth'is weight in gold." He sighed and reached out to scratch behind the cat's ears. "He was always Amber's cat, really," he added soberly as Kirk's purring hitched then grew louder. "I could never keep'im around when she was here...now that she's gone..." He couldn't finish, and just shook his head in defeat.

"An owner can choose their pet," Splinter confirmed, easily feeling Kirk's ribs through his fur, "but unless the pet chooses them in return, neither will ever be fully content." Aaron heaved a sigh, halfway between morose and resigned; he reached out to scratch Kirk's cheeks.

"Go figure you'd dump yer Daddy fer the gal who gave ya a sissy name."

Less than an hour after their arrival, Leo and Splinter made their way to the shed to make their departure. Just outside, Aaron held Kirk cradled on his back—harness, leash, and all—giving him a send-off fit for a mother sending her child off to war. Splinter was amused. Leo was impatient. Kirk was entirely unimpressed and Aaron was studiously ignoring the cat's stink-eye glare. "You be good fer yer Mama, ya hear?" Aaron's mumblings, carrying into the shed, made Leo shake his head in defeat. "Catch'er lots'a bugs an' mice an' earn yer keep. Don't go runnin' off like ya did here. Give Mama lots of snuggles, ya know she needs'em. Don't bite the brainiac, he's not food." A sniffle followed the last order.

"Are we supposed to just—" Leo's frustrated whisper fell off into a yelp at the sting of a tail-swat to his Achilles tendon.

"Yes."

Finally, with a final order – "An' if Raph makes Ross cry, poop in his shoes—if he don't wear shoes piss on his bed" – Aaron stalked around the corner to wait for the other two, only to freeze in the doorway. "...you heard every word'a that didn't ya?" he deadpanned. Their silence told him everything, and that everything sent blood rushing to his cheeks. "Animals ain't stupid," he insisted gruffly passing Kirk to Splinter. "They can't talk but that don't make'em stupid—they understand more'n we'd ever expect'em to. They—" Mid-sentence, he went silent, cringed, and face-palmed.

"I'm tellin' a pair'a mutant animals that animals ain't stupid. Brilliant."

The Lair, about 9:00

The moment Leo and Splinter stepped through the portal into their hallway, the younger ninja instantly knew something was different. The Lair was quiet—too quiet—and unless he was mistaken, he smelled wet dog. Even stronger than the stink of dog was the perfume of a much-favored shampoo scented with ylang ylang, eucalyptus, and patchouli. Beverly. He stopped only to deposit Donnie and Amber's luggage outside their bedroom door and followed his nose to the kitchen.

Sure enough, Bev, Bree, and Mikey were gathered around the kitchen table and Bosco sprawled out at his owner's feet, tail thumping and tongue lolling in a toothy grin. Even after the stress of running into Kimber at Aaron's house—and, of course, the power struggle that led to—the mere sight of his lover and her family soothed his nerves. To his surprise, Kirk was already loose, unharnessed, and curled up on Bosco's side, looking for all intents and purposes like he was dozing. Splinter worked even faster than his son expected. "Huh," Leo muttered crouching down to greet Bosco and stare down the whistle-snoring cat. "I thought Aaron said you don't like dogs."

"That cat doesn't like dogs?" Bree retorted leaning down parallel to the table to stare sideways at...
Kirk, her curls dangling humorously from the position. "He seems pretty dog-friendly to me."

"To be clear," Splinter reminded from the parlor, "the boy never stated that the cat doesn't like dogs—his claim was 'Kirk once tried to eat a pug.'"* Bree blinked in surprise, and turned to glare at the now entirely awake cat, still leaning sideways.

"Bosco…friend," she warned pointing at Bosco. "Friend, not food. Got that?" Kirk blinked—answer enough for her—and she straightened back up at the table, wild brown curls flopping back into place with the movement. "So you went to Amber's world and brought home a cat. Got everything you need for it?" Leo's blank look, unfortunately, told her everything. "Apparently not," she sighed and screeched her chair back from the table. "Don't worry, I've got this."

Once Bree and Mikey left for 'new pet shopping,' tension filled the kitchen. Leo leaned back against the row of worn cabinets, eyes locked with Beverly's in an intense stare-off. Both waited for the other to crack first, reveling in the minute steps to their little silent game. One smiled—the other raised a teasing eyebrow—the first upped the ante with a pointed glance toward the catwalk above the living room—finally, Beverly rolled her eyes, stood, and led the way. The moment the bedroom door closed a pair of powerful arms hauled her up to eye-level, their owner carefully wedging her between his plastron and his bedroom wall.

For a time, no words were spoken—their lips, after all, were otherwise engaged. Finally, Leo reluctantly pulled back to catch his breath, his forehead resting against hers; most of her weight rested on his right thigh and the heat there was mind-melting. "I take it Mikey told you what happened," he murmured.

"He sang like a canary," she teased. "I didn't even have to try worming the answers out of him this time." He dropped his eyes to the floor, sure she was hurt that he didn't call the moment Amber showed up bleeding to death. "Is everyone alright?" Wait…what? He mentally replayed the conversation thus far, from his question to Beverly's, unsure how they got from the expected indignation to worry. As so often before, she easily recognized his confusion and pinpointed the source of it, all without a word from him. "He told us Amber was taken to the hospital for emergency care," Beverly explained, her face free of censure. "Something about a sudden manifestation of the injury which killed her before, if I understood correctly. I heard two distinct snoring patterns coming from Donatello's room, so I'm assuming she's home now."

Leo shook himself from his thoughts and backed them toward his bed. "Yeah," he answered carefully sitting down and easing Bev closer to straddle his lap. "She's fine, full recovery. She's pretty tired from the ruckus and Donnie's sleep schedule's been off for a while so Sensei sent them to bed early." Beverly hemmed curiously and trailed her fingertips down the middle of his plastron—from the hollow of his throat all the way to pluck at the upper-most of his twin belts—then smirked at how his Adam's Apple bobbed at her teasing.

"What about you?" she pressed as though she wasn't silently torturing him. "Are you well? How have you handled this…crisis?"

Now, he understood where she was coming from. Donatello wasn't the only one feeling trapped at the hospital. The whole time they waited for word from April, Leo was lost in memories. The day he met Beverly—times he sneaked into the hospital to check on her—nights when he perched on the roof of the parking garage and watched the window of her room for any sign of activity, hopeful and fearful to the point where he couldn't sit still—all those memories and more were fresh on his mind. This time Donnie was the one pacing like a caged lion and Leo couldn't find the words to reassure him. Words would never have reassured him when Beverly was dying, so what could he possibly say to comfort the genius? Words were never his strong point…nor were emotions…
"It was…" He faltered, shook his head, and tucked her under his chin with a frustrated sigh. "This whole day's been rough…and the nearest hospital was the one in Brooklyn…the one you…" No, shut down that line of thought—that's a road that doesn't need following. To block out the uncertainty in his thoughts, he focused on more tactile feelings—the fuzziness of her black cable-knit sweater vest, the lean firmness of her shoulders beneath her navy turtle-neck top, the humid warmth of her breath on his collarbone—slowly, these feelings silenced his fears with reminders that the present was more than he ever hoped for.

"I understand why you couldn't reach us this time," Beverly told him between nuzzles. "It was an emergency, and your other friends arrived faster than we could have. Don't feel like you have something to apologize for, alright?" Leo sighed into her hair, his eyes focused far beyond his bedroom door.

"How do you always know what I'm feeling?" he asked weakly. He couldn't bear to bring up the threat of Kimber coming back to tear Raphael apart again. "Even when I don't yet know it myself, you always see it…you always know just what to say." His arms tightened around her; he fooled himself he could feel her heart beating right up against his, though he knew it wasn't anatomically possible.

"I do work primarily with teenagers," Bev teased, one elegant black eyebrow arched. "Even after the high school laid me off, most students I tutored were in their teens, and the trend continues. As a breed, they're completely inept when it comes to effective communication. Anyone foolish enough to willingly make their living teaching teens must be skilled enough to read the unreadable." Leo gave a wordless sound of understanding—she waited, lips curling in a sly smile—he startled and turned offended eyes on her.

"Did you just compare me to a teenager?" he demanded as she sniggered into her fist. A 'yes,' then. Without warning, he pitched them both to the side and rolled with the landing. One moment she had all the power; the next he pinned her to his mattress, his arms braced on either side of her head and one massive knee supporting his weight between her thighs. Finally, he realized with no small amount of arrogance, he caught her off-guard. "Who's laughing now, huh?"

As other information vied for his attention his teasing grin sobered. Sleek, wavy black hair spilled over his pillows like spun silk—wide espresso-dark eyes gleaming at him over her glasses, more eager than afraid—anticipatory breaths heaved in her lungs, her lightly-painted lips parted and her moderate bust rising and falling with each breath. She was… "...beautiful," he murmured lifting one of those ink-black locks of hair to soak in the scent of her. "You're so very beautiful, Koibito."~

"Is that…your…professional opinion?" she asked breathlessly—inclined to tease, as always, but for the moment incapable of keeping up the appearance. A broad, gentle smile split his lips.

"Indeed," Leo answered nuzzling at the pulse throbbing in her neck. Before he could lose himself further he backed away a pace and stretched out alongside her. Her eyes shot all manner of insults at him for cutting the teasing short but he couldn't find it within himself to disagree—not while drunk on her scent. He was growing bolder with time but Bev's responses to his advances always withered his control; it was for her well-being that he backed down when the less civilized parts of himself insisted on stepping up.

"I'm not the easiest person to live with," he admitted as Bev propped herself up on one lean arm; it took every ounce of self-control he had to not contemplate how the pose emphasized her moderate bust. "I'm not intuitive like Mikey, smart like Donnie, or confident like Raph…I tend to push people away and forget what really matters…" He sighed, shook his head, and cut off that line of thought. "If the time ever comes when I start shutting you out again—if I ever start to forget just how much—
how much you *mean* to me…” He trailed off, unable to finish the request.

A teasing smile splitting her lips, Beverly latched onto the tails of his mask and tugged him back down to her level. For a while, there were no doubts or worries, no obligations or fears, only the slow, sultry dance of lips and teeth. At a familiar sensation—work-roughened fingers diving into her hair—she broke away with a final teasing nip and sealed his lips with a fingertip over them. "If the day ever comes," she promised, eyebrows arched in jest, "I'll be sure to remind you."

If ever Leonardo doubted Beverly was good for him, that one sentence would confirm it; it took her only eleven words to tell him she trusted him with all her heart. Once he would have responded with disbelief. This time, instead, he nipped the fingertip at his lips and chased her breathy laughter right back to her lungs.

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**November 16th**

The next few nights were uneventful, thankfully. Once Donatello's sleep schedule was again nocturnal the brothers went on a long-overdue patrol of a few high-risk areas in the Bronx and Downtown. Mercy and Amber worked their shifts by day then worked off their frustration and worries in the garden until dinner.

The garden was coming along very nicely, complete with a few Donnie-exclusive 'greenhouse' enclosures and a heated 'hot-house' for seedlings. The lights and heaters were hooked up with timers even before the structures were complete and having the irrigation system – built from salvaged fire sprinkler parts – cut Mercy's work in half. If anyone had any doubt Mercy could make the garden work, now, the answer was clear every time she brought home another update about the vegetable crops for Spring.

Thanks to Kirk's recent arrival there was already a significant impact on the number of trapped rodents and the amount of bug damage. Unfortunately, the little bundle of sass was already on Raphael's bad side. Apparently, the massive mutant didn't quite appreciate the cat's offering of a dead cricket…on his pillow…while he slept…okay, maybe Raph's grievance was justified.

As busy as life in the Lair became post-Willsdale, Donnie and Amber had little time alone. For that reason, it was rather suspicious when the rest of the family suddenly had other places to be on a Wednesday night. Leo and Mikey left to visit Beverly and Bree. Raph and Mercy left early intent on "catching a game" but as *no one* played Wednesdays in November, Amber had a feeling they really intended to sneak into a theater for some gory action movie. Splinter, too, was absent from view, though she suspected he was simply enjoying the solitude of his room off the dojo. Even Donatello was out of reach—most likely still barricaded in his Lab to finish the wrist-monitor he designed for Kimber's upcoming visit.

Despite the oddly evasive behavior of those she shared the Lair with—or perhaps because of it?—Amber sat alone in the kitchen, staring down her latest bottle of cheap Scotch whisky. It was unopened and she intended it to stay so for a time. Still, she stared it down with all the sobriety of a mother considering her child's imminent flight from the nest.

Ever since the day she first awoke in this new reality, she’d had little time to simply sit and reflect—little opportunity to examine her new life between crises. Now she finally had time but she wasn’t too keen on doing so. Home was never far from her mind before she made it back; after that trip came close to killing her it was still on her mind but balanced out by other topics. *Lessons—obligations—dreams—love—loss*—all were demanding her attention in this time of peace but she couldn’t make up her mind which breadcrumb-trail to follow. A chill ran down her spine, almost like a sensation of someone breathing down her neck; in the silence of the kitchen, she fancied she could hear the faint
ticking of a distant legion of clocks.

A sudden tapping at the doorway startled her from her thoughts; Donatello seemed nervous, one hand still raised from the knock. "Hey, Hon." Her greeting had an immediate effect—a mild tilt to lips she couldn't tear her eyes from. Her timing ever inappropriate, she recalled vividly just how those lips tasted that morning...and where they were when she woke up. **Crud. Hello, gutter. Been a while, huh?**

"Something wrong?" he asked glancing pointedly at the unopened bottle instead of acknowledging the scent of her. Amber gave an unconcerned, lopsided shrug.

"I need a nip."~ she answered bluntly. She, too, felt indisposed to confront the horny elephant in the room. **Just nope.**

"You haven't poured one yet." Hazel eyes scanned the table curiously for some reason behind it. "Why?"

"I haven't poured a drink," Amber answered with a quiet, wry laugh, "'cause I don't want one, I need one." Donnie blinked at her, visibly lost. "Wantin' a drink an' needin' a drink are two very different things, Darlin'," she explained patiently. "If I drank every time I needed a drink, I'd be an even bigger mess than Mercy's ma—I only drink when I wanna, never when life drives me to it."** Perhaps he was comforted by the explanation—proof that she wasn't quite as 'lost to drink' as she might seem—because he responded with a lazy smirk.

"So, what then?" he teased. "You're just going to stare at the bottle until you want a drink?"

"Heck naw," Amber laughed pushing the bottle toward him. "I'm tryin'a convince myself bribin' Uncle Bart to send me a case'a my favorite blend is a bad idea." An amused snort burst up Donnie's throat and broadened her grin. "He always got the best Scotch fer that pub'a his," she recounted fondly, "said it made the place more authentic. —as if his patrons cared whether it was a UK pub or a Hicksville waterin' hole. Compared to what he stocked, this stuff's rotgut."

Donnie responded with a wordless sound of consideration—he neither agreed nor disagreed Amber noticed gleefully—and made his way over to her. "Follow me," he urged stashing the scotch bottle on the far counter. "I've got something to show you."

His request was odd enough; for him to lead her to the dojo, of all places, was even more curious. Still, she didn't confront him; she just let him lead her through the beaded curtain, past the padded mats, and up to the long wall decked with racks of weapons. At a grouping of weapons she never saw in use, he faltered and glanced at her as if in need of reassurance. Perhaps he found it because he sucked in a deep, steadying breath, lifted a pair of old wooden short-staves from their pegs, and carried them over to her.

A second glance revealed they weren't staves at all; each was about a hand over the length of his forearm with a thick handle protruding from the side. Amber accepted the offered weapons as though in a trance, a lifetime of memories flashing behind her eyes. Torn between anticipation and dread, she scoured the faded wooden surface of each for carvings long-worn off. "Do you know what those are?" The question jolted her back to the present.

"They're—they're tonfa," Amber replied nervously, eyes quickly locking onto the oiled wood again. Why would this moment make her nervous? Why, after a lifetime of hoping, dreaming, and longing for this moment, would she fear it when it finally came? "Yours?" A work-roughened hand cupped her chin and lifted her eyes to his. Sweet, slightly chapped lips tasting of too-sweet coffee stole hers in a kiss halfway between steadying and desperate. When the lip-lock was broken, Donnie's eyes
met hers, determined.

"Clayton…Gregory." Two words—he only said two words but those two words made Amber's blood subsequently run cold in dread then warm with longing. Logic dictated she needed to confirm what he was asking her.

"Wha?" Amber, unfortunately, couldn't string enough words together to answer the call of logic. Go figure. "Uhh…"

"Clayton Gregory," the genius insisted, "he was a business student at Glenville University and your classmate. Tell me about him." Now, Amber realized with a shaky laugh creaking up her throat, there was no doubt what he was asking. Her eyes darted every which way as if searching for an escape.

"You told me about him once," Donnie reminded gently trailing his fingers from her jaw back into her loosely braided hair; this close, the sweet smell of coconut filled his lungs and soothed his equally frazzled nerves. "You worried we'd forget so we shared secrets—you told me about your classmate—the student killed by the same drunk driver who clipped you—and I told you about those." He glanced pointedly down at the twin tonfa in Amber's trembling hands. "This is your chance, Amber…I told you why I don't use those anymore. Why?"

Amber forcibly swallowed. Timid green eyes lifted from the faded wood to his. After nearly a year, the moment of truth was finally come.

When Splinter first detected voices in the dojo, he was unconcerned. If his presence was needed, after all, the responsible party would surely come pounding on his door in no time. So far it seemed he was safe—safe to enjoy his book and peace—and the newest member of the family still slept undisturbed in his lap. That a cat would routinely seek out the company of a mutant rat was irony of the strangest sort.

"This is your chance, Amber." The voices in the dojo were loud enough to be overheard, now, and the words they spoke piqued Splinter's interest. Why would Donatello be showing Miss O'Brien the weapons he was first trained with? "I told you why I don't use those anymore. Why?"

"You…ya kept hurtin' yerself," Amber answered thickly, softly, nervously. "Ya even concussed yerself a few times. Tha's how Splinter found out yer far—"

With a sudden rustling the explanation devolved into a squawk, then an almost whine; someone, Splinter realized with a cringe, was being (as Amber would put it) "snogged senseless." Kirk, displeased with the racket, snorted and glared up at Splinter. "Do not look at me with such irritation," he chided the grumpy cat. "I have been nothing but considerate to you." Kirk, unimpressed, stood, circled around, then flopped back onto his side with his rear now facing the lap's owner.

'I see the saying is true…you are no one until you have been 'dissed' by a cat.'

After a lifetime of dreams and nearly a year of doubt, the truth was out: the dreams were shared. Donnie always held Amber without hesitation—so tightly he seemed to fear someone would rip her from his arms—and now was no different. With his snout buried in her hair and her hands clutching his shoulders, the couple swayed in place as the revelation soaked in.

The genius was the first to regain his voice. "It was you," he breathed and brushed his lips over her hair in insistent nuzzles and kisses. "It really was you…all this time, you were really there…" Amber
choked and nodded. "You were—we were—" Words failed him and he was left shaking his head in disbelief.

"We were a'thing,"~ Amber finished for him between cracks in her voice. "Ah thought—I thought ya—"

"I forgot you." The bitter admission came with an even more bitter smile. "I don't know how, or why, but I forgot everything about those dreams...I only started remembering when we found you in the station...over the last few months, it's all come back to me." He ducked to brush a lock of still-violet hair out of her eyes—watery eyes turned up to his in wonder. "I remember now...all those dreams we had are coming back—some I've remembered and some I've dreamed again." His smile cracked, weakened. "In every dream, you beg me to remember...I guess I just..." He fell short, unable to meet her eyes.

Never underestimate the ability of a broken heart tae brak the mind.~ Despite Glen Devon's thick accent, his point was clear enough. Donatello 'blocked oot' Amber's memory entirely, whether consciously or unconsciously, but how could he explain that? How could he possibly tell her that he not only forgot her, he mentally repressed everything to do with her? "I guess I just...couldn't handle watching you fall apart...when I couldn't do anything to help you," he settled for, finally looking up again. "I—" The sobriety in her eyes cut his impending apology off at the pass.

"If the words I'm sorry pass your lips," Amber warned, one grey-shot eyebrow arched, "so help me, I'll tell Raph you ordered praying mantis egg cases for pest control in the garden."

"Seriously?" he muttered, glaring but fighting a smile trying to break through. "Mercy bullied me into that—how can you be so heartless?"

"Don't be sorry an' I won't have to be." Soft, small hands framed his face, thumbs tracing the pale edges of his muzzle, the teasing fading into affection and her speech thickening. "We both knew the plan, we both had opportunity to ask what needed askin', an' of the two of us, yer the one 'oo had the courage ta do it." Amber gave a harsh, deprecating laugh. "All tha' talk'a findin' ya, an' I was too feart ta even try. If onybody deserves a sorry, it's you, ya selly bawheid."~ A moment later she realized he looked a tad perplexed and rolled her eyes. "I'm the one who's sorry," she translated. "Yer brave, I'm a chicken. Cluck."

It was at that very moment that Donatello realized a long-sought truth: Amber's life with his family was thus far one disaster after another, but someday, the endless storms would be over and done with. Now the clouds were parting—long-sought sunlight was breaking through and drying up the rain, promising a future full of endless blue skies. The two star-crossed souls stood in silence, content for the moment to simply breathe one another in. They were both too lost in one another to register another heartbeat throbbing eerily close by—a heartbeat impossibly present and timed to the ticking of an invisible legion of clocks—and the unseen entity it heralded.

'Finally, we're getting to the good stuff!' Unseen, unheard, the entity fled to Her own realm in a flurry of impossible cosmic dust, never realizing She caught the notice of a shrewd hazel eye.

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**Notes**

- Title from Survivor song of the same name. I'm finding looooooooads of Survivor songs for those two, it's like a conspiracy! Also, Nuvole Bianche is one of my favorite piano pieces that has featured in a healthy number of movies and shows. (Including Insidious, a fact which made me literally girly-squeal with delight when I stumbled across it...and hit replay...again...and again...and again.) The title is Italian translating
to simply *white clouds*, which fits nicely with the imagery of the final scene.

* 'Kirk once tried to eat a pug' – this little tall tale, alas, is loosely based on an incident regarding my cat Heiferlump. One time we went to stay with Cold's mother out of town for a few days and brought the cats – *Heiferlump the Gluttonous* and *Dex the Loyal* (the late predecessor of *Woozle the Flatulent*) – with us. Cold got the idea that since all of *his* previous cats were dog-friendly then *my* cats must be *too*, and he left the guestroom door wide open so they roam around. His mother, for reference, had at least a dozen housedogs at the time. The moment Heifer and Dex ventured out to sniff around, Ma's Chihuahua-mix made the mistake of sampling their cat food. I had to rescue him from Heifer who – *I shit you not* – got him *pinned under her fat butt* and started *frantically chewing on him*. She had no injuries—the dog healed but he was petrified of cats after that. Heifer, meanwhile, has only gotten fatter, no thanks to the dog we wouldn't let her eat. A lot of Kirk's sassitude, alas, is coming straight from Heifer and his "Mama's boy" nature comes from Woozle and Dex.

** "I only drink when I want to, never when life drives me to it." – This is advice to live by, especially for anyone with a family history of alcohol problems. (…this coming from a crazy-cat-lady descended from a genuine red-haired Irish first-generation immigrant with abusive tendencies and an alcohol addiction. Thanks, Great-Gran'dad, ya totally stereotyped yerself.) The quickest way to wind up with an alcohol problem is to use booze as a coping mechanism instead of an occasional treat. Amber, having grown up around Mercy's mother and with a father teetering on the verge of addiction, discovered this advice early on and lives by it – she often says "I need a drink" when life gets crazy, but she only drinks when she wants to, not when life's crazy. Sharing this because she *does* imbibe in her Scotch quite frequently on-screen but it may have escaped notice that when she says "I need a drink" she never follows up with drinking. The fact that Donnie chose to leave the bottle out on the counter instead of hiding it under the sink (as per usual) is his way of acknowledging "Okay, so you're not as big a lush as I thought."

~ *Bawss Englert* – Real name Robert Englert. He's the owner of Englert Farms, a company comprised of poultry farms, a cattle ranch, feed-crop farms, and smaller farms that supply area stores with produce. As Englert Farms employs about 30-50% of Willisdale's workforce on its various locations – including Aaron – the locals have come to call him "Boss Englert." Kimber's pronunciation – *Bawss* – is on account of her accent. Pronunciation: "Boss" with the -o— pronounced a bit like the exaggerated kissy-noise (mwah) without the m-. If that makes your head hurt, instead try bo-ahss with the -o-ah- sounds mashed together.

~ *Koibito* – in case anyone's forgotten, this is a term of affection in Japanese meaning roughly *lover, sweetheart*, etc.

~ A *nip* – Scots slang for a drink of alcohol, often whisky. In this case, Amber's basically saying "Life's nuckin-futz. I need a drink."

~ *I'm tryin'a convince myself bribin' Uncle Bart to send me a case'a my favorite blend is a bad idea.* – "I'm trying to convince myself that bribing Uncle Bart to send me a case of my favorite blend of Scotch [assumedly through Aaron] would be a bad idea." Wishful thinking…or a plan? ;)

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He always got the best Scotch fer that pub'a his, said it made the place more authentic. —as if his patrons cared whether it was a UK pub or a Hicksville waterin' hole. —He always bought the best Scotch whisky for his pub – he said it made the establishment seem more authentic. –as if his patrons really cared whether [they were visiting a genuine UK pub] or just [guzzling cheap beer at a crappy small-town bar.]

Rotgut – has been given a few different meanings but most often, it's used to describe an alcohol that is A, insufficiently aged compared to the usual practice, B, cheaply made and of very low quality, or C, incredibly potent and liable to make you belch fire if you're used to higher quality booze or weak beer. Normally one most hears harder liquors described as rotgut rather than beers, wines, and weaker stuff.

A 'thing / A 'thin' – Scots everything

Never underestimate the ability of a braken heart tae brak the mind – from Donnie's conversation with Glen Devon in a previous chapter. Again, "Never underestimate the ability of a broken heart to break the mind" or 'traumatic sorrows can affect more than we might think.' Also, blocked oot – blocked out. Both instances are from a rough blend of Scots, Scots-English, and very twisted MWT.

We both knew the plan, we both had opportunity to ask what needed askin', an' of the two of us, yer the one 'oo had the courage ta do it. – relapse, intentional. We both knew the plan and we both had opportunity to [initiate the "Hey. I think ya forgot me!" measures] but you're the only one who had the courage to [follow through.]

All tha' talk'a findin' ya, an' I was too feart ta even try. If anybody deserves a sorry, it's you, ya silly bawheid. – Again, relapsed, intentional. After all that talking I did about finding you [in reality someday] I was too afraid to even try [to verify that you were my Dream Donnie.] If anybody deserves an apology, it's you, you silly [bald-headed person.] Keep in mind that bawheid can also be used to say someone's an idiot or 'empty-headed' so PROBABLY not the best nickname for that friend who shaves.

Chapter End Notes

BTW, can't recall if I've mentioned this before, but this series has its own Tumblr! Check out "get-a-new-lease-on-life" for artwork, randomness, blurbs and excerpts, music and playlists, and SPOILERS for this story!
59: A Matter of Honor

Chapter Summary

The time has come for Kimber Bryant to reclaim her honor. Buckle up, folks - it's gonna be a bumpy ride.

Chapter Notes

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 it happened out of the blue. 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. 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.

This chapter is the first I've been able to finish since SEPTEMBER, largely because all of my stories are currently in plot-required angsty-dramatic phases and I CANNOT WRITE SAD SCENES when I'm depressed. It's entirely IMPOSSIBLE, they always come out farcical or they just don't flow. 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're reading this on Tumblr – they recently enacted a WORDBLOCK LIMIT on text posts of 100 blocks. Yeah. We're now limited to 100 paragraphs including the title. If the chapter's low dialogue and has no notes, that's fine, but if not? Well, we're just screwed because THIS ONE ran 86 ¶s WITHOUT the notes, glossary, and pre-story stuffs. I'm not sure yet how I'll be handling that limit, whether that means posting links to sites without the bullshit limits, posting long chapters in pieces, or linking to the separate posts with the notes and glossary, but I'll figure it out in time.

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 chapter is dedicated to the memory of Granny Chance and Uncle Bob – may they ever rest in peace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Check out Spotify for a playlist centered on this arc - features suggested listening for this chapter and the next few, and much, much more.

Suggested Listening: Fuel "Hemorrhage [In My Hands]," Paramore "The Only Exception," Prince "Purple Rain," Survivor "I Never Stopped Loving You"

59: A Matter of Honor

The Lair, November 19th - around noon

Donatello wasn't known for being a fool; regardless, he felt rather foolish anytime the obvious failed to register until it was staring him in the face. This was just such a time. He didn't recall sequestering himself in the lab much less falling asleep at his workbench, but the proof was self-evident: a crick in his neck, a strand of insulated wire still stuck to his drool-sticky cheek, and sweat-smeared glasses half off his face. It took a moment of tired lip-smacking and searching to comprehend the facts—ah, right, he pulled an all-nighter to complete the vital signs monitor for Kimber's visit. From what he could see, the device was, indeed, completed. Too tired to consider the absurd picture he must make, he peeled the wire trimming off his cheek and set it aside.

What woke him? He searched his memory, found nothing, then turned to more closely examine his surroundings. A plate of now-cold PopTarts and a cup of coffee (helpfully covered with a cracked saucer) waited a safe distance from his elbow. Right - it was Saturday. This time last year he easily lost track of the days between all-nighters and the sleeping-binges that always followed them. Now he had a weekly reminder in the form of too-sweet coffee and half-burned pastries, courtesy of the confusing woman whose scent still clung to his skin. How blessed he felt in this moment…

The moment ended with a familiar sound—a sleep-slurred phrase he could recognize anywhere but never quite understood. Ya been away too long he got, and he recognized the terms sook, e'en, and nip though he wasn't fully certain of their usage.* Beyond that the half-Celt tucked into the cot may as well have been speaking Greek for all he knew. The oft-repeated tease fell short in a particularly nasal snore. Donnie hoisted himself out of his chair with a chorus of protesting joints and slowly rounded the workbench. Silently, he regarded his sleeping woman, soaking in all the silly little details that caught his eyes—the freckles spattered across her skin, the flash of faded ink peeking up over her drooping neckline, the stubborn silver cowlicks sticking up at odd angles from her loosely bound hair—anything to remind himself she was still alive.

He shook his head in weary defeat. A full week after their desperate flight from Willsdale and every time he woke he still half-expected to find Amber cold to the touch, lifeless and painted in blood. Perhaps, he considered as he gathered her in his arms and made his way to their bedroom, this was one scar which would only be healed with time. Perhaps, he considered as he lay her across the neatly tucked quilt and curled up behind her, he could only conquer his fear of Amber's death by focusing on her life. Even as he tugged her flush against his plastron and groin and nuzzled into her neck, he couldn't erase the memory of her: bruised, bloody, and broken, and rapidly fading in his
arms. He shuddered and sucked in a steadying breath of her scent.

She wasn't dead, she was alive now…it was enough…right?

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Red Fern Florist, Noon

Normally, Red Fern Florist was a calm place – a quiet and classy establishment that just so happened to be run by people who didn't care about being quiet or classy. This, alas, was not a normal day, not even in the slightest.

Abilene Whitaker manned the register, eyes focused somewhere beyond the neon-streaked pages of her textbook and not registering a word. The backroom echoed with near-constant racket—crashes, curses, objects falling or being thrown… Abby sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose, and dragged herself off of the barstool to investigate. Sure enough, Mercy was stocking the shelves a tad too roughly—if by roughly one meant throwing the bags of supplies around like a spandex-clad steroid junkie at a WWE grudge-match smackdown.

"Alright, that's enough," Abby snapped at her blonde subordinate; Mercy froze, embarrassed grey-blue eyes meeting Abby's over a lean, hunched shoulder. "You've been stomping around and slamming things all afternoon. What on earth could be so horrible you've gotta torture the mulch?"

Mercy cringed, fixing guilty eyes on the bag of mulch in her grip. "Well?" The blonde uttered a sound halfway between a groan and a growl, snorted, then slid the bag onto its shelf with more care than necessary.

"My man's ex is comin' by tonight," she admitted under her breath. "She's stayin' a few days."

"WHAT?!" Abby squawked in protest. "He's bringing his ex over?! Aw, Hell naw! Girl, you drop that boy before I find him and punch him in the man-fritters!" Man-fritters?** Mercy couldn't help it – she sniggered at the visual – but her laughter faded into regret when she registered the rest of Abby's threat.

"No can do," she sighed, "it's kinda unavoidable." Abby crossed her arms, scrunched her lips into an almost exact replica of Leo's 'pissy leader pout,' and waited for an explanation. Mercy rolled her eyes, spearing her fingers into her hair and yanking. "Kimber…well, she's like me an' Amber," she explained under her breath. "Remember I told ya Amber…uh…went home for a few days? Well, she almost…um…didn't come back. Bitch-nipple's comin' over to see how long any of us can stay home without that happening. She invited herself, we voted, Raph lost, she won." Abby took a moment to let that sink in.

"Your guy tried to vote her off the island?" A grim nod from Mercy. "They broke up before she left, right?"

"...and she left before he an' I met," Mercy added even as she rolled her eyes.~ All the code-talk really got on her nerves but they had to be mindful of the security cameras. Abby leaned against the doorframe, lean shoulders at a sharp slant, and hazel eyes puzzled behind her fuchsia-streaked hair.

"You think she wants him back?" she asked quietly. "He won't…" She sucked in a nervous breath. "What if she tries to win him back?"

"You're kiddin', right?" Mercy scoffed. "He dumped her! He's been angsty as fuck over breakin' her heart, yeah, but I know'im—she could make all the moves she wants, he ain't gonna budge." ~ Not to
mention Kimber's still dead she added in her own head then shook it. After all, she was dead, too. The whole situation stank like a crappy soap opera. "I trust'im, Abbs," she added under her breath. "Raph chose me, not the Jersey-Devil-wannabe…jealousy's pointless when I already know the end result, an' that end result is he's with me."

Abby watched her a moment, scrutinizing and studying; just as suddenly as she issued the threat against Raph's genitals, she smiled. "You're a strong woman," the neon-haired clerk remarked lightly. "I ever heard one of Cherie's exes asking to stay, I'd bash the twat's teeth in. You need anything, you give me a call, alright?" Mercy nodded, halfway between a cringe and a grateful smile, and went back to the stocking. "So how are things going between you two, anyway?" Abby added taking up her share of the lifting. "You never bring him by, you never tell me much about him… how's he treating you?"

Mercy paused, brow furrowed, and scrambled for an answer that didn't make her sound like an absolute sap. She couldn't find one. "He makes me wanna listen to Faith Hill, watch him sleep, an' punch his ex in the teeth," she grumbled. The heat in her cheeks went nuclear at Abby's excited squeal. "Oh-em-GEE!" the younger practically shrieked. "You love him!" Mercy shot her a sour glare.

"Woman," she groused, "shut yer ass – the bullshit's leakin' out."

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**The Lair, shortly after dusk**

00:00:00

Two weeks ago, Kimber Bryant faced down Leonardo and demanded the opportunity to make right the trouble she caused his family. Now she stood in the hallway, practically quaking in her mud-stained canvas sneakers, unsure how to proceed. It didn't exactly help that Leo was still glaring at her from behind and her other escort, Donatello, kept fiddling with the tablet strapped to his left forearm.

"Now remember, you've gotta keep the leads from getting tangled," the genius rambled without ever once looking at her. "A little perspiration shouldn't cause any unwanted interference—I insulated the outer casing well to deter any outside condensation or humidity finding its way into the monitor's internal components but there are limits." Kimber rolled her bottle green eyes over at Leo in hope of rescue from Donnie's babbling but received only a glare. "It's not fully water-tight," the genius continued with a shrug and 'meh' expression, still without even glancing her way, "so we'll need to cover it with a water-resistant dressing when it comes to bathing but other than that it—"

"Today, Donnie," Leo grumbled. The younger startled out of his thoughts, fingertips still poised on the holographic chart projected over his tech-tab. He blinked a few times in rapid succession as though refreshing his memory then turned to Kimber in question. From the looks of it, she seemed ready to chew her ankle off to escape the lecture. She really was so very different from Amber…how could they possibly be the same person underneath it all? Could a person's history and past choices really have that big an impact on their personality and attitude?

"Uh…right," he uttered with a wince. "Anyway, it's natural for your core temperature to fluctuate a certain amount over the day but if it drops too low, I'll get an alert. We may not have much time to get you back…so..." he trailed off in hopes she'd pick up the slack.

"Don't get comfy," she finished sourly. "Yeah, I got it. Git lawst."~ He crinkled his nose at her demand but said nothing; instead, he rolled his eyes in defeat and took off toward the lab.
"Remember our agreement," the eldest warned under his breath as he shouldered past her. "You have one chance, and you're to stay—"

"I got it, I got it," Kimber snapped in response. "Go dig t'at stick out'a ya ass before it gets stuck up t'ere."~ Other than a deep-chested growl of warning, Leonardo said nothing—he just stormed past her to some destination she didn't care to know. Rolling her eyes at his attitude, she made her way toward the light at the end of the hallway. The closer she came the more clearly she heard a familiar voice—a voice that still haunted her fondest dreams and worst nightmares.

Familiar laughter led her into the living area where two people were cuddled up on a lumpy sofa. The larger wore a familiar boyish grin that stole the breath right from her lungs. In her grip, the duffle-bag strap slid loose—sweaty palms, she realized. A fluttering, weightless sensation filled her veins—oh, no… 'Gawd dammit…why've I gotta still love'im?~ She choked around the damned butterflies doing barrel-rolls in her gullet. Steeling her nerves, she shook off her mushy thoughts and turned the corner. 'It don't change nothin'—dead's dead, an' he never chose me anyway. It's better t'is way.'

Raphael…he looked so much the same and yet so different. His eyes shone with laughter where they once burned with distrust; his posture was relaxed where he always kept up a front before. Tucked into his side and 'narrating' the boxing match with absurd faked voice-overs was a tall, lean woman with short messy blonde hair. Kimber's lip ached to curl in a sneer as the blonde loosed a raucous laugh but she fought it back—Raph wasn't hers. If this…this woman in his arms was enough for him…well, she'd respect that. She only ever wanted to see him happy and by God, she'd do so, no matter how much it hurt.

One moment, everything in Mercy's world was perfect. There was a decent match on TV, Raph had 'bullied her' into not-cuddling with him, and for the moment they had no other obligations. As it always seemed to, though, everything fell apart in a single breath…a breath that carried a perfume of vanilla, sugar, and musk. The smell wasn't entirely unpleasant but it was strong enough to make her sinuses burn and her head hurt. Why must so many people marinate themselves in perfume and cologne?

As Mercy and Raphael turned to greet the newcomer in unison the arm around her waist slackened—bright golden hazel eyes widened—full, scarred lips fell slack in dismay. Those lips formed a single word—a name Mercy spent hours cursing that afternoon—but no sound came forth. Torn, she held her silence, eyes darting from Raphael to the stranger and back again almost desperately. She knew this moment would come, she just didn't realize how much she'd want to scream obscenities when it did.

The stranger broke the stare first, bottle-green eyes flustered behind their impeccable smoky eyeliner. She reached up to her modest neckline, grabbed at the pair of worn metal dog-tags at her chest, took a deep breath, then looked up again with a weak smile. "'ey, Raphie," she murmured in a voice still thick with smog. "Long time no see, huh?" The hulking mutant couldn't even get out a single word; he just nodded, his chin and lips unnaturally stiff. Even as he stared down Kimber Bryant he clenched his fingers even tighter to Mercy's waistband. Mercy glanced down at the sight of his three-fingered hand anchoring her in place by a belt-loop. Just that morning, she woke up with that hand tangled in the hem of her nightgown anchoring it at mid-thigh. She had nothing to fear.

She pried Raph's fingers loose, stretched an imaginary crick from her neck, and rolled off the sofa to her feet. "I'll catch up later," Mercy remarked with an entirely faked smile and made her way to the side door. "Compost prob'ly needs a turnin' 'bout now."~ On the way past, she silently took in what details she could, mentally comparing them. The other woman was her height but beyond thin and
into skinny. Her hair was coarse—naturally red from the looks of it but with a texture similar to unraveled jute twine. A sharp glance told Mercy the other had practically no ass; no competition there. She rolled her eyes, punched in the security code to pass through, then let the door drift shut behind her.

Before she could get anywhere a pair of large, powerful hands snatched her by the shoulders, spun her about, and pinned her to the tunnel wall. "Why you leavin'?" Raph demanded sharply. His voice was barely below a shout but as so often before, Mercy saw underneath that posturing—she saw the suspicious shimmering in his eyes, the nervous tic in his jaw, the vulnerable hunching of his shoulders, and the lurching of his throat and plastron from frantic heaving breaths. Fear was the one thing he really had no reason to feel in this case but it was written all over him. She cupped his squared jaw, thumb tracing the scar splitting his lip.

"I ain't leavin', ya meathead," she corrected as he covered her hand with his in a frantic grip. "You were friends, right? Ya never got to say goodbye. I've seen how this's been tearin' you apart an' I'm sick of watchin' it."~ Her lips curled in a tease but it was entirely true—she was beyond sick of having another woman in their relationship, even a dead one. "Ya need closure, I get that—I'm backin' off so you can get it. Got it?" Raphael said nothing—he just stared back, visibly searching her words for subtext. When he finally spoke, what he asked made no sense.

"Why?" he demanded in a near-deadpan. Mercy wrinkled her nose but before she could speak, he continued. "Why're ya testin' me like dis? What've I done ta deserve dat?"

"Testin' you?" Mercy shook her head and scoffed. "I'm not testin' ya, Red," she promised. "I know you and I trust you—you're not about to cheat on me with anyone, much less a dead chick, right?" He shook his head in agreement and his eyes softened; he belatedly released her hand, choosing instead to cup her cheek.

"I wouldn't do dat to ya," he confirmed gruffly. "I'd never…I promised not ta hurt ya an' I meant it…but..." He faltered, flustered and struggling to find the right words. "Dis ain't right...ya ought'a be pissed at me fer even lettin' 'er come here...heck, if dis happened to any other guy, he'd get slapped fer lettin' it happen!"

"You're not any other guy," Mercy reminded shortly, "an' I'm not any other gal. Jealousy won't help anything, it ain't healthy, and you weren't too keen on her comin' over, to begin with. I've got no reason to be mad at'cha, an' especially no reason to hit ya."~ Her eyes drifted back toward the side door, now closed, and she sighed. "I don't like it," she admitted as her hand drifted down to his thick neck, "but I know you need closure an' I trust you enough to not interfere."

Raphael said nothing—what could he possibly say?—instead, he took a step back, eyes wide. This wasn't the first time she professed her trust in him, nor would it be the last, but this utterance seemed the most improbable of all. Wait...no, there was one other moment even more unexpected—a recent moment, the moment he first witnessed Mercy Ross fall apart at the seams, right there in his arms.

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Tousled blonde hair spilled across his pillow like scattered straw. Unpainted lips, swollen from friction, panted around gasping breaths. Work-roughened fingertips clawed at the equally tough skin of his bare scalp and shoulders as he unleashed all his pent-up frustration on her finally bared skin.

"I trust you," she'd promised only moments before. "When are ya gonna start trustin' yourself?"

"Ya shouldn't trust me," he'd blustered, but despite his denials, he caved to her
temptation. He knew from the first breath it would take weeks to clear her pheromones from his lungs; he'd never forget the taste of her or her keening cries of completion. When the madness left her eyes and the fire dulled in his blood, Raphael knew he'd never be able to see his Mercy the same, nor would he ever cease to be humbled by her seemingly unshakable faith in him—trust he couldn't recall doing a damn thing to earn.

That July, Raphael took a chance on happiness in the middle of an open rooftop—a single kiss followed by countless more, all sound-tracked with heavy metal. Ever since then, anytime he fell to the temptation of Mercy's lips, he lost himself completely. He wanted her—he needed her—he craved her—she was the air he breathed, vital to his very survival and responsible for every beat of his heart. Far below the filthy streets, in a dark passage forgotten by the world in general, he stole her lips and breathed her in reverence.

He loved her—loved her beyond the limits of his fears and follies—and that was why she knew he wouldn't let her down.

"So you two, huh?" Raphael ducked his head to avoid Kimber's eyes, hoping she couldn't see the traces of stickiness at his lips or the tenting of his patched trousers. She said nothing, choosing instead to examine the worn red tweed of the sofa arm she perched on.

"What of it?" he retorted slumping onto the seat at the opposite end of the couch.

"Looks like ya found a good one, 'at's all," she shrugged. He studied her silently a moment, searching for signs of deceit. In his heart, he knew this stranger was Kimber—his Kimber, the friend he threw away over his insecurities and fears—but her appearance was largely unfamiliar. Kimber was always on the chunky side of curvaceous but with an undeniable sex appeal. This new body was built like a scarecrow - all long limbs and frizzy hair - but underneath he could see the same sensual confidence Kimber had before she died. That sensuality was all Kimber - Amber lacked it completely, always coming across somewhere between odd and awkward. This woman, though visually unfamiliar, was definitely Kimber. Something in her eyes spoke of mischief…and regret.

"Fer Gawd's sake," she swore under her breath and turned an acidic glare on him. He refused to meet it, locking his eyes on one padded and splayed knee. "I know t'a drill—I'm dead, not stoopid."

"Ya were never stupid, Kim, jus' stubborn an' naive," he protested but she waved him off.

"I'en quit lookin' at me like t'at." After a moment of resistance, he finally bit the bullet—he met her eyes. "Yeah, like t'at," the redhead grumbled, "like I'm gonna jump ya if ya take yer eyes off'a me or somethin'. I may be livin' in a homewrecker but t'at don't make me a homewrecker." This time, she was the one to hide her eyes.

A long, tense silence filled the room, broken only by the occasional sound from the Lab or utility room. In this unexpected but overdue moment, despite the drastically different appearance, Raphael saw Kimber as she was when they first met—not the over-confident temptress with the venomous smile and devil-may-care attitude but the lost, lonely, frightened runaway searching for her place in the world. Her new body was thirty-five if it was a year old, but she'd never looked more like a child to him than she did now. The night she turned Lefty and Northpaw over to the police and fell apart, Raph let the wrong head do the thinking and her heart suffered for it. So much heartache came from that one bad call—Kimber's death, too, was a result—how could he ever make it right?

"Rah-fay-el." The quiet – almost reverent – utterance of his name startled him from his brooding. Kimber faced the far wall but her eyes were locked on his askance. "Tell me t'a truth…did ya ever love me?" He blanched; she scoffed and picked at the faded red tweed covering the sofa. "I know
we was close," she clarified in a soft tone void of accusation, "friends to be sure, but did ya ever love me like I loved you?"

He didn't answer—he couldn't answer, not around the painful lump in his throat. For so long, he wondered the very same. Loving Kimber, after all, would have made his betrayal a crime of passion rather than a bad move made in paranoid self-defense. Despite all his brooding introspection, though, he always came up with the same answer: he could have loved her, but he didn't...if he'd kept his head, maybe, someday, he could have loved her, but he didn't. "Exactly." Kimber's near-whisper broke his train of thought. "I knew ya didn't love me," she admitted even as her shoulders drew tight and her painted lips stretched in a sort of sneer. "I always knew it, I just t'ought...eh, no matter. I'm not gonna fuck up yer life again."

"I think ya got dat backwards," Raph pointed out dryly. "I fucked up yer life—I'm why yer..." He faltered, his throat clenching around the word as though to prevent him from voicing it. "Ya know," he settled for with a weak half-shrug, "like dis." Kimber watched him silently, eyes sharp enough to cut away his protective façade.

"Say it," she challenged. He flinched; she slid off the armrest and stalked over to face him, arms crossed in defiance. "Say it, Raph," she ordered, "ya know what I am—ya know t'a word, so use it. I'm..." She trailed off, one eyebrow cocked in expectance.

Raphael cringed. Of all the times he wished it was possible to completely withdraw into his shell, this was one of the worst so far. Weary hazel eyes drifted from Kimber's dirty canvas sneakers up her faded jeans and cotton blouse, up to her unimpressed eyes. "Yer...dead," he whispered as if confessing some great sin.

"Exactly," Kimber harrumphed and jabbed him between the eyes with one clear-lacquered fingernail. "Dead folks an' live folks jus' don't mix, ya muck-brained mawron.~ It wouldn't work an' I ain't about to waste my time tryin' ta make it work. Capiche?" He nodded, glaring up at her retreating back.

"Den why'd ya come back?" he asked, letting his hand fall back to his knee. "Dere had to be anutha way to test Don's theory, so why'd ya volunteer?~ Kimber stilled in her pacing, carefully arranging her words before they could all spill out without concern for her feelings.

"I never got ta say goodbye," she admitted in a near-whisper, "not ta you, not ta Daron or Lefty, not ta anyone who mattered...but I've neva been t'at big on goodbyes anyhow, ya know?" Her voice cracked on the last words and she took a moment to compose herself. When she spoke again, she turned to the side as though watching him over her shoulder but her eyes remained hidden. "I made a lotta mistakes, Red—a lotta stoopid decisions t'at hurt a lotta people—an' much as I wanted to just stay dead, I lived ta regret every one'a t'ose decisions. T'at's why I came back...t'a fix t'a shit I broke an' atone for my sins. If t'at means stayin' here fer t'ree days while you an' Blondie play suck-face, so be it."

"Ya know you're puttin' yer life at risk, right?" Raph reminded, ignoring the suck-face comment. "Donnie ain't sure about da timing on dis thing, ya know. He an' the braided nutcase passed five days in her world but they weren't gone a whole three days, here. Who's to say ya'll have a full three days here? Who's ta say ya won't drop dead in an hour, or three hours, or even a minute from now?" He shuddered at the thought, his mind helpfully supplying several months' worth of nightmares to choose from, most of which ended with Kimber dying in his arms. "Ya froze, Kim, an' dat ain't an easy way to go; are ya really willing to risk goin' through it all over again?"

"It's my choice," she reminded with a stern expression reminiscent of an unimpressed schoolmarm. "No one asked me ta make t'at choice. Besides, see t'is?" She tugged her neckline aside to show him
the small plastic device hung from her neck and the line of wire trailing down to her armpit. "T'is lil' t'ing's monitoring my core temp—we've got t'is covered. Trust me?"

Raph considered the plea a moment—for it was, indeed, a plea in every sense of the word—then gave a slow, reluctant nod. "I don't like it," he admitted in a throaty rumble, "but it ain't my job ta like it." There was much more to say, but for the moment, he hadn't words.

"Nope," Kimber agreed with a sly grin. "It's yer job ta help me give Daron a heart attack. What say we give'im a visit from t'a Livin' Dead Girl?" It was just a tease—just another excuse to ignore the elephant in the room—but for the moment, Kimber didn't care. She had more important tasks to focus on—messes to clean up, mistakes to correct, sins to atone for, and honor to regain. For now, the rest could wait.

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_The Lair – 00:35:00 and counting_

_Time stops for no man_, people often said, and the same could be said for _women_. Never mind that Amber's cantankerous counterpart was staying in the Lair for the weekend…lurking around every corner…stinking up the place with her perfume…just _waiting_ for a chance to bitch-slap Amber back into her place at the bottom of the food chain…

Amber shuddered at the thought and firmly shoved it into the back of her mind. Kimber Bryant made Amber all kinds of nervous but her presence didn't excuse Amber from her chores. There was too much to do—laundry to put away, studying to do, dinner to prepare—Something soft and furry brushed against her calf, startling her from her thoughts. "Right," she muttered as Kirk bypassed the laundry basket at her feet and hopped up onto Donnie's bed. "Gotta clean the litterboxes an' feed _Kirkland_ too." After a _mrrruhl_ of warning and a superfluous butt-wiggle said feline launched himself right into a pile of folded undergarments and began viciously mauling a sock big enough to double as an oven mitt. As he lay on his side, wrapped around the sock and kicking like a homicidal kangaroo, Amber sighed and shook her head in whimsical defeat. After how much she'd missed him she couldn't really be upset with the little murder-machine; cats, after all, would be cats, and socks could be darned.

"It's inevitable, Kirk," she teased as she hung a pair of patched canvas trousers in the frame-and-fabric 'closet.' "You're just gonna have to get used to sharing me with Donnie. I know I'm _Mom_ but he's _mine_ - you can't resent him _forever._" With an adorable cotton-muffled _urrrr_, Kirk glared at her over a mouthful of beige knit as if to say _watch me_. Ah, the jealousy of spoiled cats.

"Honestly, I'm lucky to have Donnie," she added to herself, doubts and worries filling her thoughts between wire hangers. Back before the dream connection was confirmed—before Donatello confronted her with his old _Tonfa_ and confessed the name of her dead classmate—Amber could fool herself he wasn't the same Donnie she grew up with. She could tell herself that he didn't know all her dirty little secrets. He didn't watch her fall apart over the last few years of her life, partly from illness and her and partly from depression and apathy. He never heard how her poor choices in college may have led to the death of a classmate. He never knew she routinely slaked her carnal needs in impersonal encounters so her time with him in dreams could be focused on _more important_ things than her hormones. If _this_ Donnie _wasn't_ her Donnie, then the mistakes of her past were only a secret to keep.

The problem was…now she knew this _was_ her Donnie…and by the sounds of it, he remembered _everything_. Amber paused, fondling a strip of worn purple fabric. Even after countless washings, every one of those masks smelled strongly of his oddly comforting blend of coffee, machinery, musky exertion, and spice. "How can he even look at me, Kirk?" Amber murmured into the sweet-
smelling fabric. "I screwed up with him so many times...I gave up on him, I – I gave myself up to other guys...how doesn't he hate me by now?"

This last question seemed the most perplexing. Sure, the purpose of those impersonal booty-calls was to shut up her hormones so her scant time with Donnie could be put to better use, but she always regretted them afterward. Regret, though, didn't count if a person intentionally committed the same crime over and over again, and she was guilty—guilty of closing her eyes, mentally replacing the other men with Donnie, and crying herself to sleep after they left. Regret was a weak word, really; what she felt wasn't weak. After all the time she spent hating herself for the infidelity, the idea that Donnie didn't hate her for it made no sense.

The dead silence tore her from her ruminations; odd, considering Kirk had a habit of 'answering' her every time she spoke. After a quick glance at the bed, it was all she could do to keep from laughing. The little furball was out cold, wrapped around her favorite bra and snoring into one generous cup. The battered sock sprawled on the floor half under the bed—the enemy was vanquished. Chuckling at the absurdity, Amber crouched to retrieve the sock but paused when she noticed something wedged between the mattress and box spring. A warped silver wire binding, traces of green beyond the rings...surely she was mistaken, but it wouldn't hurt to check...right?

Amber tugged the notebook loose and promptly cringed in recognition. It was her journal, the one she hadn't written in for months then misplaced. Why was it jammed under the mattress like a nudie magazine? Curiosity drove her to investigate and she quickly discovered the litany of notes scribbled upside-down in the back. She quickly lost herself in the writing—questions and memories, hopes and fears Donatello couldn't bring himself to share with her, all centered around their years apart. Though she didn't dig too deeply, there wasn't a single word of blame or judgment anywhere—nothing that indicated resentment or disgust. Amber almost missed the sheet of loose-leaf that slipped out and fluttered to the floor—almost.

The pencil-scribbled contents might have made her stumble if she hadn't already seated herself before. "I met my lover in a dream," she whispered in recognition. "That poem...I thought I lost it...I guess Donnie found it?" Soon enough, she hit the final lines:

\begin{quote}
Mibbe someday he will see –
Someday the truth I'll tell.
For now, I've only memories,
And dreams I shot tae Hell.
\end{quote}

Or, rather, those should have been the final lines—they were the last she wrote. Someone, however, clearly thought the poem wasn't finished and added their own verse...in pen...neatly printed by a familiar hand straddling the border between calculating and persnickety. "No way," Amber muttered thickly as she scanned the added verse, wide-eyed and breathless. "Naw fookin' way!"—No matter how she protested, the words remained clear, impossible yet obvious. Still marveling at their presence—and at the subtext—she never heard the soft ticking of a distant clock, or the even softer inhale accompanying.

\begin{quote}
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.
\end{quote}

There was no stopping it, no holding back: Amber crushed the paper to her pounding heart in elation. He remembered. He understood. He loved. Perhaps, even...he forgave?

Sometimes emotions are too powerful for words; fortunately for Amber, squealing unintelligibly
Notes

- **The vital signs monitor** – At first I wasn't quite sure if such a device was on the public market, at least aside from 'smart' devices like FitBit and such, so I did what I do best: I researched the fuck out of it for funzies. Turns out there are more varieties out there than I expected, each monitoring different signs in different fashions and to different accuracy levels. Since Donnie's never been the sort to simply COPY others' ideas, we can safely assume he's combined the best of several devices. The result is a small electronic monitor [about the size of a 9-volt battery] hung from the neck by a lanyard, which measures core body temp by way of leads attached to an adhesive-backed electrode stuck in the armpit. We can also assume fitting the device on Kimber was incredibly awkward because she intentionally MADE IT awkward.

* **Full statement including what Amber's snoring cut off:** "Ya be'n 'way too long 'gain, ya sook—nae be'n by fer a nip'er a bosie. Wha's a lass ta think?" – This little bit of Scotchness is a routine in-dream tease from Amber. *You've been gone* [from our dreams] *too long again, you old softy—you haven't even come by for a kiss or cuddle. What's a woman to think?*

* **Man-Fritters** – Alas, I cannot claim authorship of this little snigger-inducing euphemism. That honor belongs to author *Mimi Jean Pampfillof* in her *Accidentally Yours* series. While the first two books were pretty recipe [if you know what I mean] they were HILARIOUS recipes. I'm not ashamed to admit that the scene in the first one where the heroine belts out 80's pop hits to keep sane made me laugh so hard I spewed my tea, CHOKED ON IT, then spent the rest of the day CROAKING. It was WORTH IT. (That said, the author also used a lovely little nonsense-word coined by my IRL friend Autumn back when we were in high school but didn't notate it. I'd encourage Autumn to stop starting word trends without first seeking a copyright but that'd mean I'd have to pay her every time I stole her stuff, heh.)

Also: *Abby has no accent.* She's intentionally warping the *Oh, Hell no!* in hopes of showing Mercy just how upset the news makes her.

# **Implied smut** – The encounter referenced here didn't make it to in-story occurrence BUT it took place during the Absolutes arc, which took up too much time-and-space for the intended back-and-forth between worlds. It's written up and included in the "Gallery of Memories" as The Blonde and the Beefcake and it can be found [HERE](#). It's almost entirely adult content, BTW. ;P

## **Kirk tends to 'answer' Amber every time she talks to him** – I am SO not basing this on our cat Heiferlump. Nope, not at all! …fine. Yes. Heifer responds to EVERYTHING she hears, no matter who says it, and it's rare to find someone she can't bait into answering back. She's particularly adept at getting my father to argue with her and routinely tries to argue with the microwave beeper. O_o It's awesome.

^ **The Poem, "Dream Lovers"** – I've not posted the entirety of the poem in any chapters or even the GoM installment of the same name. NOW, however, you can find the entire poem in comic format [HERE](#), on this story's [Tumblr](#), OR on [DeviantArt](#). The comic includes Donnie's additions and a small blurb of backstory leading to this scene, and the Tumblr/AO3 posts include a glossary for the many odd words used in the
poem. For convenience's sake, I've included the translation of the included verse below.

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**General rules:**

~**Verb ends with** *–in’* – This verb ends with *–ing* but the ending has been verbally shortened. Common in MWT, mid-southern dialects, and some northeastern dialects.

~**An’** – *and*, mildly shortened. *‘n* as in *rock ‘n roll* is a more intensely shortened variant.

~**‘im, ‘is, ‘er, ‘ers** – MWT/Jersey *him, his, her,* and *hers.*

~**Kimber: words with** *t’* – This word has a *–th* in it; the *–h* has been dropped. This is fundamentally similar to Raph and Casey's tendencies to pronounce some *th-* words as *d-* instead. Kimber's variation is less common with the replacement consonant coming out sharper. For a spoken example of Kimber's dialect, see THIS VIDEO _ of her dying words.

~**Kimber: words** *t’a* and *ta* – With apostrophe is *the,* WITHOUT apostrophe is *to;* the pronunciations are almost identical though *ta* tends to have a sharper emphasis on the consonant.

~**Raph: words with** *d—* or *–d—* - The *d* replaces a *th* in some words. For instance *Dis and dat* for "This and that."

**Specifics**

~**Git lawst** – *Get lost.*

~**Go dig t’at stick out'a ya ass before it gets stuck up t’ere.** – *Go dig that stick out of your ass before it gets stuck up there.* We ALL know Leo has a stick up his ass. Kimber's just trying to prevent an awkward hospital visit if said stick becomes hopelessly lodged in place.

~**Gawd dammit…why've I gotta still love'im?** – *God dammit…why must I still love him?* Note that she isn't asking *‘why do I still love him?’* so much as *‘why me?’*

~**It don't change nothin’—dead's dead, an' he never chose me anyway. It's better t'is way.** – *This changes nothing. Dead is dead [meaning 'I'm dead and that's not going to change…again] and he never chose me anyway. It's better this way.* Rationalizing to herself, obviously, and reassuring herself she's making the right decision.

~**The compost prob'ly needs a turnin' 'bout now.** – *The compost probably needs to be turned soon.* Compost is a great way to enrich your garden but generating it takes more than just heaping scraps in a pile and letting them rot. You have to properly layer it to start with, and you have to toss and mix it regularly to ensure proper aeration. It can be a pretty effective method for working off aggression, BTW. ;)

~**I've seen how this's been tearin' you apart an' I'm sick of watchin' it.** – *I've seen how this [business with Kimber and Raph's guilt over his part in it] has been tearing you apart, and I'm sick of watching it [knowing there's nothing she can do to help.]*

~**Why're ya testin' me like dis? What've I done ta deserve dat?** – *Why are you testing me like this? What have I done to deserve that sort of treatment?* FYI, testing your partner like this is NOT a healthy response to distrust and can WORSEN your relationship problems.

~**I wouldn't do dat to ya…I promised not ta hurt ya an' I meant it** – *I wouldn't do that to you…I promised not to hurt you and I meant it.*

~**Dis ain't right…ya ought'a be pissed at me fer even lettin' 'er come here…heck, if dis happened to any other guy, he'd get slapped fer lettin' it happen!** – *This isn't right…you should be pissed at me for ever letting Kimber come here. If this happened to any other couple, someone would be slapped for letting it happen! DANGER, Will
Robinson, DANGER!

~At'cha – MWT at you. pronounced AH-chuh or sometimes AH-chyuh.

~Muck-brained mawron – Kimber's favorite insult-name for Raph. Muck-brained moron originated as muscle-brained moron but she changed it when she realized the muscle bit was just inflating his ego.

~Dere had ta be anutha way – There had to be another way [which wouldn't have involved risking Kimber's life.]

~I made a lotta mistakes…a lotta stoopid decisions t'at hurt a lotta people. – I made a lot of mistakes [in my past life] … a lot of stupid decisions which hurt a lot of people. For pronunciation, play Alice Cooper's "Hey, Stoopid!"

~I lived ta regret every one'a t'ose decisions. T'at's why I came back…t'a fix t'a shit I broke an' atone for my sins. – I lived to regret every one of those bad decisions. That's why I really came back – to fix the things I broke and atone for my sins. Here you see the truth of the matter – as much as Kimber will bluster and front, her decision in verifying Donnie's theory was really made in hopes of regaining her honor.

~If t'at means stayin' here fer t'ree days while you an' Blondie play suck-face, so be it. – If [making amends] means staying here for three days while you and [Mercy] make out like horny bunnies, then so be it. Nope, she's not bitter, not at all!

~Y'all VS Ya'll – The positioning of the apostrophe here is key as these are two different contractions based on you. Y'all is an oft-heard informal pronoun used in Southern, Midwestern, and some Western dialects, and sometimes in Ebonics; it combines you+all but is sometimes used even when addressing a single subject, especially in the so-called "Mozark" region. [the southern half of Missouri, the northern half of Arkansas, and the full extent of Arkansas' portion of the Ozark mountains.] It sounds similar to wall or bawl. Ya'll on the other hand combines you+will – it's really just you'll with the you pronounced ya or yuh, similar to the -uh- in fun.

~T'is lil' t'ing's monitoring my core temp—we've got t'is covered. – This little device is monitoring my core temperature—Donnie and I are taking care of everything.

~The verse translated: Maybe someday he will see – Someday I'll tell him the truth. For now all I have is memories and dreams I've ruined my chances at living.

~Naw fookin' way! – Scotched no fucking way! Yep. Amber's mind is completely blown.

Chapter End Notes

SO. Mercy's met Kimber, Kimber's met Mercy - everything's fine...right...? Please. As if it's EVER that easy. ;)

As always, thanks for reading and I hope to hear from you soon!
60: I Slipped Along the Way

Chapter Summary

End of Kimber's first day home.
Kimber and Daron bond awkwardly.
Dinner makes everyone sick. Leo's an ass.
Kimber needs brain bleach - Raph agrees - Donnie and Amber make everything awkward.
Kimber offers Mercy an olive branch; Mercy beats her with it.
Counterparts bonding leads to another olive branch; this time, Kimber ducks. Well-played, Kimber - well-played.
Kirk does NOT approve of Donnie and makes his protests known.

Chapter Notes

WHEW! Okay, this has been a rough couple weeks but I'm gonna try not to get into the bulk of it other than one thing. Suffice it to say I'm currently dealing with a sudden health problem which has kept me from accomplishing much and in excruciating pain. I've had to resort to medication that knocks me flat on my ass for hours at a time and have been reduced to sleeping it off as much as possible. The kicker is I've lived with chronic pain for years now; I practically never take prescription pain medicine no matter how badly I've hurt myself and I resort to mild/OTC painkillers MAYBE 10% of the time. Even after my accident (yes, the one where I was hit by a distracted driver and narrowly avoided waist-down paralysis) I never used prescription pain medicine even ONCE. THIS sonuvabitch has got me hurting so much I've been taking a heavy pain script every eight hours AND supplementing with TYLENOL because it wears off too quickly…and it's STILL not kicking the pain entirely. (Yes, I checked, it's safe to combine the two. As soon as I feel less like someone's jabbing a burning hot poker through my ear and neck, I'll cut back; in the meantime, this is more than I can handle without going batshit crazy.) I've got a procedure scheduled to get this problem taken care of in the next couple weeks, so bear with me if I'm a bit snarkier or more absent than usual.

Also, some lighter news: Cold's and my NINTH anniversary is coming up soon! XD We're not planning anything special this year on account of other obligations, but will probably wind up tearing through an entire season of M*A*S*H or NCIS together on the day. There's really not much like spending an evening with your favorite introvert just chilling, right? Finally, since ANLoL's first-chapter anniversary is coming up in May/June, I'm thinking about doing something special for the time leading up to it. Any ideas? I've been thinking about posting little "things you didn't know" snippets on Tumblr regarding the story, characters, etc. to celebrate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter precautions: More coarse language than usual, along with Kimber talking. Leo is an power-tripping ass. Some citrusy bits later on, a couple instances of unusually silly humor, and BARRELS upon BARRELS of AWKWARD. Also, possible trigger warning for a couple brief mentions/implications of past abuse, but nothing too specific or spelled out. I think these are vague enough to not be a problem but everyone's different; I'd rather be overly careful than risk someone getting slapped in the face with an unexpected trigger. That always sucks and I like y'all too much to subject you to it.

Suggested Listening: Our Lady Peace "Somewhere Out There," Toad the Wet Sprocket "Whatever I Fear" and "I'll Bet on You," John Legend "All of Me – Tiesto's Birthday Treatment Remix," The Mamas and the Papas' Cass Elliot "Dream a Little Dream of Me"

60: I Slipped Along the Way

Aboveground - 00:45:00 and counting

Some supposed life-changing occurrences in life can have a remarkably brief impact on those they affect. A change in place of employment or address, for instance, will cause varying degrees of turmoil and stress but in time, they can be moved beyond. Someday one might walk into the grocer's they worked for, now a customer rather than a cashier, or sell their home and move across the city for a new start. In both cases, life would go on and, soon, that person would eventually cease to think of that change in everyday life. This situation was entirely different. Kimber didn't lose her job, she lost her life; she didn't just change addresses, she changed worlds. With such drastic changes, the chances were nil of picking up lost friendships like nothing ever happened.

Something between Raphael and Kimber was different now; if it wasn't apparent before, it was apparent by the time Raphael heaved the heavy manhole cover aside. Kimber wasn't quiet or withdrawn—in fact, she was as sassy as ever before—but there was still something missing. Somewhere behind her bottle-green eyes was a wall, and in her smoggy voice, a distance not rooted in reality. Many years ago Raphael and Kimber were close, nearly inseparable; now, in the muck-slicked alleys of the present, the gap between them felt too broad to be bridged.

"Looks like we got a cawld night on t'a way," she stated in hopes of breaking the awkward silence. Raphael nodded, eyes locked on the fire-escape overhead.

"It's November," he countered, then leapt up to yank the groaning metal stair downward, anchoring it to the ground with one massive—and stubbornly bare—foot. "Gonna be a lotta cold nights fer a while."

With every word spoken, and every thought left silent, the distance between Kimber and Raphael grew wider.

One minute, Daron Williams' world was at the highest and brightest it had ever seen. He was in line for a citation after helping his NYPD team bring in a particularly scummy Anonymous-esque hacker – he'd finally paid off all the fines, fees, and damages from Northpaw's attack in May – tomorrow, he even had a date, the first he'd cared to set since Kimber moved in with him! Kimber. He stillled at the thought. Her name once meant an onslaught of regrets and sadness; he still missed her, still hurt from missing her, but at least he was finally able to remember her without choking on the pain. A large part of that progress he owed to Cynthia Devine.
After so many years of watching Kimber hide under a flirtatious mask to manipulate those around her, Cindy's openness confused Daron to no end. The police station's sweet, quirky receptionist was genuine to a fault—she couldn't keep a straight face when amused, she couldn't lie her way out of a paper bag, and she hadn't the slightest hint of a poker face. Her thoughts, feelings, and heart were worn on her sleeves for the world to see, and after so many years of digging for the truth, Daron found he liked it.

Ever-stiff lips tilting into a ghost of a smile, he leaned back against the kitchen counter, smartphone in hand. Onscreen, a lovely young woman with curly red hair stuck her tongue out at the camera while giving him 'bunny ears.' Out loud he'd grumbled throughout the entire ten-seconds of the selfie —after all, he was in the photo, too, and the NYPD had a strict 'no selfies' policy—but underneath that grumbling, he loved every bit of the moment. Cindy felt everything and hid nothing, and he couldn't get enough of it.

Last year, the unexpected sound of a window opening would have been cause for panic; now he had a visitor who liked to drop in at random times and always came in through the kitchen window. Daron swiped away the photo and jammed the phone deep in his pocket, and turned to greet the visitor. Raphael, he expected; the gawky redhead beside him was an entirely different story. "Oh, Hell no!" Daron barked mid-glare. "I don't care what you say, Raph, I ain't takin' in another one of your weird-ass friends – the last one nearly burned down my apartment!"

"Ya dumped someone on'im?" Kimber asked Raph; he grimaced.

"Da others asked'im to take Merse in for a while." Raph avoided Kimber's eyes. "We...uh...didn't get along at first." Kimber waited for details, staring him down over her glasses. "She tried to choke me," he admitted under his breath. Kimber cracked up.

"I like t'is chick!" she wheezed. Raph considered, for a moment, explaining exactly why Mercy throttled him on the floor of the dojo, but he shrugged it off. Kimber didn't need to know how long he spent pushing Amber around, especially since he'd believed Amber was Kimber. If Kimber didn't already know he spent a long time resenting her on account of her supposed betrayal, then she didn't need to be told so. Let the dead rest—this one would be going home soon anyway. "So Mercy tried to burn down our dump, huh, Daron?"

Daron stared at Kimber, visibly struggling to make sense of the various cues and hints and failing. The longer he stared, the more uncomfortable the silence grew, and the tenser the three-way standoff became. Finally, Kimber acted: she heaved a frustrated sigh, wrenched her carrot-red hair out of its neat bun and shoved it atop her head in a messy pile, glaring at him over her glasses all the while. It took the blond a minute to make the connection but when he did, it hit with the velocity of a cinder-block through a school window. "Wha—n-no way!" Daron sputtered instead of dodging, "you—you can't be—that ain't possible!"

"It's possible," Raphael deadpanned clapping Daron on the shoulder a bit too roughly. "It's just fer a few days, den she's gotta go back." He turned to Kimber, carefully adding another yard to the metaphorical distance between them. "I'm'a~ go check on April, give ya some time before we head back—an hour work for ya?" Kimber winced, her eyes dropping to the floor. "Kimbuh, dat's just tonight," he added a little more gently. "I can bring ya by again tomorrow, yeah? I ain't a monster, he wanted to add, but wisely kept it back; the last thing he wanted was to remind her of the traumatic ending to their complicated relationship.

Kimber's eyes shimmered behind her glasses; her rose-painted lower lip crinkled, gnawed from behind. She sucked in a shaky breath, crushed Jordan's dog-tags in a white-knuckled fist, exhaled slowly, then finally met Raphael's eyes. "Ya'd do t'at?"~ she asked in a near-whisper. "I...ya
"I do," he countered, stubborn nostrils flaring; his nose crinkled as if smelling something odd, followed by a streak of muddy brown spilling across his muzzle. He snatched his hand back, physically putting distance between them. "I owe ya, Kim," he clarified avoiding her eyes. "Nothing'll ever make it up to ya but I can give ya dis much at least." ~ Kimber studied him in silence, glancing back and forth from one amber eye to the other—both of which were stubbornly fixed on the floor—then she turned away. Brick by brick, the wall behind her eyes grew higher.

"Be safe out t'ere," she ordered, then turned to open the cabinet Daron always kept the bourbon in. Raphael hesitated, torn between the two halves of his heart and the two women occupying them, then left without a word. One hand clenched on the cabinet door handle, Kimber glanced back at the click of the window latch and got a brief glimpse of a faded mask tail and battle-scarred shell. Her throat ached—her lungs ached—her stomach ached—her very heart ached. She let go of the cabinet and weakly grabbed at Jordan's dog-tags. 'Don't make t'at mistake again,' she reminded herself as always, fingertips tracing the letters stamped into the metal. 'I di'n't get t'at second chance fer not'in'. ~ Don't fuck up again—t'is is yer chance to make right—don't blow it, Bryant!'~

An unexpected sound drew Kimber from her thoughts—a tinny dial-tone from the smartphone Daron held to his ear, followed by a distinctly female voice. "Cindy, it's me," Daron greeted as Kimber gaped in open disbelief. "Something's come up, I've gotta reschedule tomorrow." Kimber arched one fine red eyebrow at him and mouthed the name in question; Daron rolled his eyes and gave a sharp 'knock it off' gesture. On the other end of the line, Kimber heard Cindy's voice grow quiet, perhaps hurt, followed by asking for an explanation. Yet another surprise: "Ya know that sister I told ya about?" Daron asked dryly; Kimber cracked up, smothering her laughter behind one hand.

"The one who died?" Cindy's voice echoed from the other line.

"Yeah," Daron answered pinning Kimber with a warning glare, "well, apparently not. She just crawled through my fucking window."

"Like the Beatles song!*" Cindy squealed. Daron yanked the phone away from his ear, cringed at it, then put it back to his ear.

"My God, you're a nerd," he deadpanned and got a giggle in response. "Look, she's only here for a few days then she's leaving town again. Next Saturday work instead?"

By the time Kimber could breathe without hiccoughing and her eyes were dry, the call was finished and Daron was pouring the first of two bourbons. "None for me, t'anks," she interrupted before he could pour the second.

"No?" he asked, the bottle still tipped to pour; she shook her head.

"I don't touch t'a stuff anymore. Ya got somet'ing else?" Daron scrutinized her a long while, once again comparing this 'new' Kimber to the Kimber he remembered. The appearance wasn't the only change—she was older now, calmer and dressed more conservatively, and from what he could see, less confrontational…and that wasn't the half of it.

"There's always Dew in the fridge." He stoppered the bourbon and took a deep swig from his glass, coughing away the preliminary burn. "Kimber Bryant declining booze," he muttered as she pulled a two-liter from the fridge and filled her glass with Mtn Dew. "Where's the pod?"

"Sahrry, Daron, t'ere ain't a pod."~ She shrugged, a wry smile tilting her lips. "I started drinkin' too
early. Every time I drank, I drank too much, an’ my life went to shit. Figured t’ere was prob’ly a connection; I don’t drink anymore." The soda burned on the way down, not due to alcohol but due to her still tight throat. She cringed off the discomfort and added, "Besides, I work in a bar now. Even I hadn’t a quit, t’at stink ‘a all ‘a t’at booze would’a done it…smells like my…”~ She shuddered and cut herself off, downing a deep pull of soda instead.

"So how are you even here?" Daron didn't acknowledge the unspoken admission. Kimber's father, after all, was an abusive alcoholic, and the strongest memories were tied to smells. "Last I heard, dead was dead and you weren’t coming back, not even to visit."

"Let's jus' say I'm cleanin' up my messes," Kimber muttered tilting her glass and dragging it in a circle on the table. "T'a bawdy-snatcher tried goin' home an' almost died. T'at nerd of hers t'ought maybe t'ere's a time limit on how long we can be home without buyin' t'a farm; I'm here ta prove it."~ She answered the unspoken question in Daron's eyes by tugging her collar aside; insulated wires trailed from her armpit up to a small device hung from her neck. "Donnie-boy says whateva killed us is what'll kill us again if we stay too lawng. I get too cawld, t'is t'ing's gonna go off, an' when it does, I gotta go back, warning or not.~

The uncomfortable rambling, too, was part of this new Kimber. Before, she was obstinate, stubborn, brazen, and had a chip on her shoulder the size of Jersey itself. Now she was visibly older—she seemed ashamed, embarrassed, and subdued, and she was actively putting her life on the line to help someone she barely knew. Could this be what she would have eventually become, had she not frozen to death that January? Maybe, Daron considered if only to himself, Kimber was finally maturing…maybe he didn't need to shelter her anymore…or should he have sheltered her so much, to begin with? Perhaps…well, it was worth the chance, right?

"I'm hitting the prison tomorrow for visitation." His announcement caught Kimber off-guard; mid top-off she fumbled the two-liter bottle but caught it in time to prevent a spill.

"Lefty?" she asked, carefully recapping the bottle, and he nodded.

"He's there, too. He won't accept visitors but he always had a soft spot for you; maybe you could reach him." The redhead across the table stared Daron down, waiting patiently and quietly for the other shoe to drop. "I'm not visiting Leon, though." He paused; again, she held up, not reacting, just waiting. Perhaps… " Hun's in the same prison; I'm visiting him." Kimber reflected on the name for a moment, swirling the soda in her glass and breathing evenly.

"Raph said he's paralyzed," she remarked without emphasis, "waist down, wheelchair, t'a works. I take it t'at's why you're dealin' wit' his nasty attitude?"

This Kimber, Daron admitted if only to himself, made absolutely no sense. He learned early on how to see behind her masks and identify when she was hiding something. Now, she was hiding nothing, and her calm seemed entirely, honestly, impossibly legit. Only a year before, she would've been screaming obscenities, guzzling his liquor, and spouting vivid, gruesome threats against Hun's genitals.

"It's my fault," Daron answered instead of voicing his thoughts. "After everything he put us through, I couldn't take anymore…shit went down and I…" He faltered. All-too-well, he remembered that night in the alley—the rancid stench of over-flowing dumpsters—the cold metal and warm resin grip of Kimber's stolen revolver—the resistance of the trigger giving way to recoil—the stomach-turning sound of the two rounds that hit their target—he shook the memory away. It was over…it was in the past…let it go. "Hunter's always been an asshole," he continued weakly, "I handled it fine when he was just screwing me over, but after everything he did…to you, to the others…I just lost it." His knuckles crackled—when did he start clenching his fingers around the glass? "I shot my own brother
in the back, Kim…I aimed right at his head and hit his spine. *I paralyzed him.*

Kimber thought it over a moment, giving him time to chase the shimmer from his eyes and the croak from his voice. Daron always got touchy when people tried to comfort him when he got emotional. "Bein' in a wheelchair don't make'im any less of an asshole…*crippling 'im* don't make'im a saint." For the first time in a long time, Daron was too stunned by Kimber's words to argue. "I know ya, Daron," she reminded without any sign of judgment, "I know ya've taken responsibility for what'cha done an' you're still beatin' yourself up over it. What about him? Has he turned a new leaf, or is he t'a same ol' scumbag?~

"Mom…lied to us," Daron sighed after considering the question…and deciding against answering it. "He's my half-brother, yeah, but he's not *her* son…he just came to stay with us when it got too rough to stay with our dad. I never met the old man 'til recently; apparently, the wardens keep him in solitary for his own safety." Kimber winced, easily following the breadcrumbs to the unspoken secret. Whatever Hun's father did, it wasn't anything she wanted to know about; some crimes were too heinous even for hardened criminals to condone. "It's taking time," Daron added when it became clear Kimber was too repulsed to trust her own voice, "but Hun—we're actually *talking* now instead of just *fighting*. I almost look forward to seeing him now; give it a few years and maybe I *will* look forward it."

"With an attitude like t'at I'm sure ya will." Kimber reached across the table and patted the back of his hand. "I'm proud of ya, Shortstack."

"Not my fault you're so friggin' tall," Daron grumbled but shrugged off the tease otherwise. Truth be told, he missed her playful barbs. "So you wanna go with me tomorrow, check on Leon? –yeah, he won't answer to Lefty anymore."

Kimber nodded. "Hun knows I'm dead here, right?" She shifted in her chair, already feeling a pinch in her lower back from the long slouching session. "Does he know t'a rest? T'at Ambuh's from anot'er world an' I got t'a same treatment?" ~

"Knows it?" Daron shot back a slug of his drink. "Yep, but *believes it*, probably not."

Kimber thought it over a moment, weighed the potential consequences, then took the chance. "Ya t'ink I could have a minute wit' him tomorrow?" Daron went to object but she cut him off. "You're not t'a only one who's growin' up, ya know," she reminded with an unusually civilized smile. "I ain't gonna cause trouble. Just t'ink it over tonight, okay?" He nodded agreement, and the silence threatened to grow stale. "Actually," she added to prevent the awkwardness, "I'm surprised ya actually told me you're goin' to visit 'im—figured you'd panic, try to hide it, t'en freak out when I found out."

Daron shrugged, lips twitching into a smirk. "Don't get me wrong," he insisted, "I thought about just that...seemed like an idiot move though. Better to just get it out and over with before we're under armed guard, right?"**

A familiar—and overdue—sound cut off Kimber's retort: the window latch creaked open then squealed when the window got stuck in the track. Both turned to address the mutant scowling at the too-small opening, then exchanged a sigh. "I'm comin' a'ready," she told Raphael as she stood up, "just stay out t'ere or you'll chip t'a paint." His only answer was an irritable huff. Kimber tossed back the last of her soda and turned to offer Daron a tentative—and blantly *familial*—hug. "Oil t'at later an' call me tomorrow—we'll work out t'a details, 'kay?"

"Will do," Daron agreed as Kimber climbed through the window. Before he could close it again, though, she stuck her head back through with an impish grin.
"Daron's got a girlfriend!" He was so sure she was maturing…then she threw a sing-song playground taunt at him on her way out. Maybe she hadn't changed that much after all.

02:15:00 and counting

Dinner in the Lair was normally a relaxed affair marked with good food and better company. It was never quiet—the time was always passed with banter, a little roughhousing between certain brothers, some obnoxious flirting from Mercy and Raphael, and plenty of talking and laughter. This dinner, on the other hand, was anything but normal. It was quiet—a little too quiet—the kitchen table was cramped—a little too cramped—and Leonardo was being…well…a little too Leo.

From his customary seat at Splinter's right side, he kept a steady watch on Kimber at the end seat. Sure, she was seated between Raph and Donnie and sure to be taken care of if she caused any trouble, but so far, she was infuriatingly polite. "Please pass t'a potstickers?" Amber obliged, sending the platter by Donnie with a smile; Kimber answered with something halfway between a smile and a cringe, and a "T'anks." Her manners weren't lacking and she hadn't started any fights but Leo couldn't relax. A pregnant silence shrouded the room, sparking from a multitude of unvoiced worries.

In his distraction, a lo mein noodle slipped loose from his chopsticks; he didn't realize it until he lifted them to his lips and found empty wood. He looked over at Splinter—nothing—to his brothers—no sign of upset—then to the two women he was beginning to consider sisters. There, at least, was some indication that something was wrong. Amber was much quieter than usual and exchanging awkward side-glances with Donnie. Donnie, in turn, kept turning to Kimber as if concerned about her comfort. At Leo's right, Mercy was completely silent, her nose scrunched and her eyes fixed on her Broccoli Beef and fried rice; ordinarily, the blonde would be on her second plate by now but she'd barely touched it. Lastly, Leo turned to study Kimber again, considering the small amount of food on her plate, her rigid posture, and her still-painted face. He tried for another noodle—it slipped free like the last.

Kimber cleared her throat and turned to Amber. "So…uh…I hear you're studyin' fer my Equivalency —" The screech of a chair shoving back from the table cut her off.

"I need to be excused," Leo told Splinter through gritted teeth; all the while, he pinned Kimber under a stern glare. Splinter thought it over a moment, ultimately waving him out; forcing Leo to stay when he was struggling to bite his tongue would only result in a fight. The younger bowed a rigid thank you then stalked out of the kitchen.

"Hey, where ya—" Mikey's question fell short at the slam of a door—the front door. "Well, that was rude," he muttered helping himself to Leo's barely touched plate.

"He's probably goin' to check on Bev an' Bree," Amber excused gently. "He does worry about Beverly. I keep tellin' those two to come by more often—we're all family in this story but they keep actin' like minor characters." This time the silence was more dead than tense; the occupants of the too-crowded table all exchanged chagrined looks, trying to find some way to follow the odd statement. "Alrighty then," Amber muttered, "no more metafiction jokes at the dinner table."

"I wanna see them x-rays," Mercy grumbled into her sweet tea. "You're even weirder'n I remember."~

03:00:00 and counting

Immediately following dinner, the group dispersed like silverfish fleeing a work boot. Amber and
Mikey hung around to put away leftovers and work on cleaning up from dinner. Raphael took off for the dojo, Donnie for his lab, and Splinter in search of someone named "Kirkland." Kimber hovered on the catwalk, nervously watching the blonde woman carting a watering can from room to room. This wasn't Kimber's home and she wasn't comfortable just sitting on her laurels while the natives worked, even after a long day at the pub. Already she'd offered to help in several different ways and places but was turned down each time. There was only one person she hadn't approached yet…and frankly, that person made her nervous.

Mercy.

Mercy, it turned out, was a skilled gardener, and if the stories were true, she'd managed to set up an underground garden not far from the Lair. Kimber was never very good with plants, granted, but if it meant being able to earn her keep… Mercy hauled the watering can back into the main bathroom a final time, dumped the remaining water down the sink, and swept back out again. Maybe Kimber was overreacting—maybe Mercy wasn't such a frightening person after all—maybe they were both just nervous and waiting for the other to attack first?

That hope in mind, Kimber sprinted down the ramp to catch up with the blonde at the back door. Without even acknowledging her presence, Mercy tensed up, fingers poised at the keypad to beat a swift retreat. Kimber faltered, reconsidered, then shoved on anyway. "Uh...Raph said ya got yard work to do," she attempted. Mercy turned just slightly, fixing the very corner of one narrowed denim-colored eye on her in warning; even if she wasn't going to attack Kimber, the blonde certainly knew how to be intimidating. "...can I..." The redhead scrunched her eyes shut and took in a shaky breath. "...can I help?"

"No." That one word jarred Kimber from her nerves.

"Wha—no?" Kimber parroted back as Mercy rapidly jabbed in the access code with her right hand, hiding the buttons behind her left; she messed up on the last digit and swore under her breath. Someone was definitely having a rough day. "I just—"

"I said...NO," Mercy answered through gritted teeth, digging her fingertips in between her eyes. "I don't need yer help. Go play somewhere." Kimber's initial impression of Mercy's character was now reversed—she thought the blonde was quiet, considerate, and patient, if a little standoffish, but here she was dismissing Kimber like a naughty child.

"What'd I ever do to you?" Kimber demanded sharply. "I've been nothin' but nice to ya an' ya won't even talk to me—I just wanna help an' earn my keep an' yer treatin' me like—" Mercy lurched around to fix a warning glare on her, seething with an anger Kimber never saw coming.

"Baggoff!~" Mercy stalked toward Kimber; every menacing step forward, Kimber took two smaller, quicker steps backward, until they reached the end of the hallway. "You listen to me, an' you listen good," Mercy snarled blocking Kimber from the hallway. "You're here to fix yer shit—I may be toleratin' yer presence here but I am not your friend." Again, she grabbed at her nose, digging two fingers in on either side and cringing. "Stay away from me—an' lay off the fuckin' perfume!"

This time when Mercy stalked off down the hallway, Kimber didn't follow—she was too busy trying to calm down and fight off a crying fit. Why did she have to be brought back in a crier?! Before she died, she would've ripped that Mercy bitch a new one for getting up in her face like that; now she was a mere step away from blubbering like a tweenager with acne.

The electronic lock beeped to signal the door locking again; Kimber ducked into the main bathroom and hunched over at the sink. Splashing cold water on her face always seemed to help though she couldn't understand why. When she straightened up again she was taken aback by what she saw—
even after two years, the sight of a stranger's face staring back from the mirror never failed to catch
her off-guard. She wasn't the same Kimber as before, but neither was she someone completely new;
she was some previously unheard of blend of two people who, by rights, should never have crossed
paths. She couldn't help but wonder if other people in her situation felt the same—torn between two
worlds and slowly losing themselves in the process. Would she ever get used to seeing the wrong
face in her reflection?

"What'd t'at bimbo mean about my perfume anyway?" Kimber muttered to her hijacked reflection. "I
came here straight from work, did she expect me ta shower first?!" Fuming, she recollected the way
Mercy kept pinching and kneading the fair skin around her nose and eyes, almost like she had a
headache. Maybe...maybe Mercy wasn't angry at her, per se, but just angry in general...? Either
way, it couldn't hurt to bathe off the lingering smells from the pub. She turned to her shoulder and
gave a cursory sniff, immediately cringing; underneath her *Warm Vanilla Sugar* perfume, she
positively stank of liquor, stale beer, and ripe sweat.^ No wonder people kept sending her elsewhere.

A plan in mind, Kimber made her way up the catwalk to collect her toiletries and fresh clothes.
Splinter had put her up in what he called 'a guest room,' but judging by the dents in the metal walls –
each roughly the size and shape of one of Raph's oversized fists – she suspected it wasn't always a
guest room. The room even still smelled like Raph. She drew in a deep breath of it—that smoky,
musky blend of sandalwood and sawdust, leather and sweat that was all him—all the while, silently
chastising herself for the audacity. No matter how good he smelled, he wasn't hers to huff.

Now, where would a family of mutants keep their towels?

"Stars shinin' bright above you...Night breezes seem to whisper 'I love you.' *Birds singin' in the
sycamore tree. Dream a lil' dream of me.*" There was no music playing in the kitchen, let alone a
recording of the song at her lips, but tone-deaf or not, Amber was never put off by singing without
accompaniment. She was visibly tired, forearms livid from the scalding water; a few wisps of fading
blue and lavender hair stuck out from her sloppy bun, lazily dancing in the breeze from the overhead
fan. A gentle smile on her face, she hummed the wordless parts of the song and swayed in time to the
beat, eyes content. Not for the first time, Donatello wondered how he was ever lucky enough to meet
her, let alone to find her again in another life.

Leaning against the counter by the doorway, hands deep in his pockets he took this opportunity to
admire his quirky lover unobserved. She could get so awkward when she caught him checking her
out—her voice would catch and she'd sputter, ruddy color would flood her cheeks and she'd avoid
his eyes—she loved teasing him, true, but she was equally fun to catch off-guard. At least, he
considered with a lopsided grin, she finally stopped sucking in her gut and clenching her backside
when she caught him eyeing her. His eyes slowly, deliberately trailed from her bare neck to her
plump rear and wide hips, then down her thick thighs and full calves, and back up again. She really
was soft all over...how he loved that softness.

Originally, Donnie thought she'd have company in the kitchen. He expected to squeeze past Mikey's
carapace to reach the coffee pot, to spill it on himself when Mikey inevitably decided to bust a move
without warning, and to be left dripping his way back to the lab sans coffee. Michelangelo was
supposed to be helping Amber with dinner cleanup but he probably hurried off to parts unknown
once the leftovers were packed away. The youngest of the four brothers rarely stayed in one place
for long...all the better for the cuddle-deprived genius.

"Say nighty-night an' kiss me." Amber crooned as Donnie sidled up and wrapped her in his arms
from behind; she must have heard him after all because she didn't miss a beat. "*Just hold me tight an'
tell me ya'll miss me. While I'm alone an' blue as can be, dream a lil' dream of me.*" His hands
flattening over her soft midsection (so as not to hamper her work) and her rump flush against his groin, he rocked on his feet in time with her. "Stars fadin', but I linger on, Dear, still cravin' your kiss..." Happy to oblige, he leaned over to give her a peck on the cheek. She stilled, aiming a cheeky smile at him over her shoulder. "I'm pretty sure that's not what Mama Cass was talkin' about, Speccy."

"Probably not," he agreed nuzzling the flash of bare skin just beyond her collar; she canted her head to the side in an invitation he gladly accepted. "I actually have something better in mind." He paused to suck in a coconut-scented breath of her hair; was that a splotch of perfume on her collarbone, too? He was getting a hint of vanilla and vetiver from somewhere. "There are...limitations, though."

"Oh really?" Amber grinned askance. The dishes may as well have been forgotten. "Lemme guess: I'm already in the kitchen but I'm not barefoot an' pregnant?" A deep rumble sounded somewhere between his vocal cords and ribs—not for the idea of his Amber subjugated like a 1940s wife, but a much more pleasant vision.

Her belly swollen with an impossible child—she sprawled across the kitchen table in nothing but her glasses and faded ink, maybe a length of lavender silk at her throat—parting her legs and lifting her thighs onto his shoulders, he leaned in to feast.

"No," he managed before she decided to lecture him about women's empowerment. "The kitchen's the problem. I was thinking somewhere more...hmm, private."

"Ya don't say?" This time, she shifted in place for a much less innocent reason than music; the contact, while brief, drew another barely-muffled churr and shifted his grip to her hips. "Hawd yer gantin', ijyannen,"~ she told him in that now-familiar guttural brogue she was slowly using more and more. "I'm almost done—you can bide a bit longer."~ The gruff, foreign words were quickly becoming one of Donnie's greatest weaknesses; a barely-audible whine clawed at the back of his throat. If she kept teasing him like that, he'd end up biting rather than biding.

He quickly glanced over her shoulder into the sink—there were only a couple platters left to scrub and rinse. Maybe it wasn't such a long time to wait...right? With a final teasing nip, he released her, grabbed a dishcloth, and took up drying beside her. Maybe the wait would calm his libido down enough to avoid getting an embarrassing tent-based nickname of his own if they ran into Mercy.

Raphael froze in the doorway to the utility room, confused by the sight that greeted him: Kimber slouched by the linen shelves with an armful of clean clothes and a faded tapestry trunk, cringing at something in the kitchen. He followed her line of sight and choked—apparently the resident nerds in love didn't realize they had an audience. With the amount of fuck-me pheromones those two were pumping out, how on Earth did he not smell them all the way in the Barracks?

"T'is is even more awkward t'an I expected," Kimber told him under her breath. "T'at's my bawdy he's droolin' on." Raph snorted in agreement and nudged her through the door of the main bathroom.

"Yeah," he agreed, snagging a couple towels and a washrag on the way, "it's also my sloppy seconds. Trust me, I get it."

"Yeah, well I don't get it," Kimber countered as the door swung shut behind him. "She talkin' funny 'cause she t'inks it's cute? It's weird."

"Your family don't talk like dat?" Raph asked in surprise. Kimber and Amber were, after all, the same soul existing in different realities and different bodies; if Amber's family was made up of immigrants, wouldn't Kimber's be, too?
"My dad was a drunk an' my ma was a Baptist," she deadpanned, "t'at was t'a only t'ing special about'em." Raphael let the irony soak in a moment.

"From what I've heard, Amber's da first in'er Ma's family to be born American—'er ma's family came over from Scotland when'er ma was a kid." He averted his eyes when Kimber started brushing the tangles out of her hair, though he wasn't quite sure why. For some reason, watching seemed too...intimate. "Merse says Ambuh talked like dat as a kid, just like'er family," he added in hopes including Mercy would settle his nerves. It didn't. "She quit 'cause she got picked on a lot, now she's lettin' it out once in a while." Donnie certainly wasn't discouraging it, either—every time Amber brought out the brogue, any mutant in smelling's distance knew exactly what was on his mind.

"T'ey t'ink t'ey're bein' real sneaky, huh?"~ Kimber had easily recognized the cause for his repulsed expression. "Yep," Raph agreed with a cringe. "Dey ain't foolin' no one."

_Around midnight - 08:15:00 and counting_

In hindsight, Kimber wasn't sure exactly what woke her. It might have been an unexpected thump from Leo's room, snoring from Mikey's room on the other side, or a burst of residual acid from the night's tense dinner. Regardless of the cause, there she was—wide awake and scrunched up on a rather uncomfortable cot retrieved from some damned place with too much dust. It took a moment to collect herself and remember where she was and why, then everything came back in a rush. "Right," she muttered glaring hatefully at her knees, "I'm back." She still couldn't quite wrap her head around it. Perhaps a drink would help.

She bypassed the ramp this time for the stairs—after all, reaching the ramp meant passing Leonardo's room, and she wasn't so sure he wouldn't barge out and growl at her for being noisy. The stairs, at least, were just past Mikey's room, and his snoring should cover any footfalls. Upon reaching the kitchen she realized she wasn't the only one awake. Amber slouched at the table with a chipped glass, staring into the caramel-colored whisky as if it held the answers to the world's questions. "Rough night?" Amber startled at Kimber's unexpected question and shot her a weak smile before turning back to her drink.

"You could say that," she sighed. "I really hoped this whole dreamin' about my family's daily lives shpiel would stop once I came back but it's still happening. Last night Gran'Da left'is readin' specs in the fridge an' a pub-goer barfed on Uncle Bart. Tonight my Mum an' Da got in another screamin' match an' I couldn't even knock over a trash bin to shut'em up." She looked up at Kimber, her face completely deadpan. "It's like a shite soap opera I can't turn off," she drawled.

"Yer why t'at sugar jar spilled, aren't 'cha?"~ Kimber remembered the scare at The Staggering Rat well—Douglas O'Brien drowning his bitterness in Boston Lager, then furniture and condiment containers flying every which way and an unearthly message drawn in spilled sugar granules. _Ab'dy, bide – Everyone, live._ The ghostly words made no sense to Kimber but they were enough encouragement for Douglas to tip well and leave without finishing his beer. Kimber's father would never have left a beer unfinished, let alone tipped fairly.

"Yeah." Amber shrugged, topped her glass off then tilted the Scotch bottle in offer; Kimber declined, opting for the jug of sweet tea in the fridge. "Sometimes I can make a difference—leave messages, knock things over, poke people, little stuff. A few days ago I managed to chase Numbnuts off Willis' coffee table in time to save his dinner."## She grinned at the memory—the big, fluffy black cat's acid-yellow eyes wide, pupils shrunk to pinpoints at the sight of a spray bottle supposedly hovering in thin air. "It's rare, though; more often than not, I can't do a damn thing or it comes out upside
down an' backward." Amber heaved a resigned sigh, swirling her Scotch. "Dahd—I mean, Splinter's offered to help me harness this..." She faltered then continued with a vague limp-wristed waving gesture, "whatever this is. If I can learn to control it, it may help us keep in contact with the folks in my world but we've kinda got bigger fish to fry now."

Kimber nodded and finally took a sip of her tea, immediately gagging on it. "How much sugar do t'ey put in t'is stuff?" she croaked shoving the glass away from her.

"A cup-an'-a-half per gallon," Amber grinned. "It's way too sweet for me, but Ross likes her sweet tea Southern-style." Kimber blanched; her eyes shot up to Amber's in dread.

"Ross?" she hissed glancing pointedly at the utility room door—or, rather, the unseen plant-infested bedroom beyond it. "Yer not tellin' me t'at's Mercy Ross?! Clarity's kid?!" Amber gave a sober nod. "My Gawd...now it all makes sense," Kimber groaned and buried her face in her hands. If Mercy was Clarity's daughter—the same Clarity Kimber was too-familiar with after almost two years living and working in Willsdale—her aggressive, defensive, and bristly behavior was no surprise. How could anyone raised by Clarity Ross not come out with baggage and people-issues?

Kimber well-remembered the countless times the older woman showed up at the Staggering Rat already half-sauced, wailing about her lost daughter. In between despair at Mercy's death and hateful shrieks at anyone who dared tell her to calm down, she launched into long rants about Mercy's supposed transgressions—transgressions which, she claimed, were all the fault of Amber and Aaron. Sometimes Clarity spent hours on end drunkenly arguing with anyone too polite to ignore her, insisting that Mercy was still alive. "She ran away and had a fake headstone put in just to hurt me!" was a common claim, along with "That grave is empty—my daughter is just hiding from her sins!" At first, Kimber took the accusations at face value...then she started hearing the gossip left in Clarity's wake. If the rumors were to be believed, Clarity and Kimber's father had more in common than she was comfortable with.

Near the close of Kimber's first year at the pub, Clarity finally went too far: in a drunken rampage, she threw a chair at Bart, missed, and sent an entire shelf of expensive liquor smashing to the floor. It took two burly farmhands to subdue her long enough for the police officer on-call—a friendly pot-bellied sort who seemed straight out of Mayberry—to handcuff and get her in the squad car.

After that fiasco, Bart barred Clarity from ever returning to his pub under threat of being sued for damages. She still swore to anyone who'd listen that he was "just an irrational albino who can't handle the nasty truth about his heathen niece!" Most of what came out of Clarity Ross's mouth made Kimber sick to her stomach; the rest would once have tempted her to bitch-slap the older woman to her senses. Albino. Anyone with eyes would know Bart just went white early. She couldn't comprehend how Bart was able to just shrug everything off with a bad joke and crooked grin; she suspected sainthood was in order. "Lemme guess," Amber said when it became clear the silence in the room was stagnating. "The ol' cow's just gettin' crazier."

"T'at old cow t'rew a barstool at Bart's head fer cuttin'er off," Kimber retorted.~ "If t'at ain't crazy, I dunno what is." Amber considered the risk for a moment, idly sipping her Scotch and again contemplating ordering a case of Glenmorangie 10-year-old through said uncle. He always did get the best Scotch...

"You know Clarity," Amber summed up almost too quietly to be heard, "so you should have some idea of what Mercy's life was like before the Void." Kimber nodded grimly. "You were right, you know. These second chances don't come free—a new life comes with lessons to learn and injustices to rise above. I revived in a gang-affiliated runaway—no offense—an' you revived in a spoiled adulterous crier. We were both dropped into the lives of people who lived against our personalities
an' beliefs." Amber looked up at Kimber over her glasses, serious and weary. "With what you know of her mother, the injustice Mercy was reborn into should be no surprise." It was, indeed, obvious in hindsight.

"An' here I showed up stinkin' like a frat-house," Kimber muttered and took another sip of tea. Again, she cringed at the syrupy sweet flavor but bore it without verbal complaint. "I t'ought..." Her lips pursed, her eyes narrowed, and her throat contracted as if to deter the rest from escaping. "I t'ought it was about Raph...t'at she t'ought I was gonna try an' steal'im back. T'at don't even make sense."

"You were wrong." Despite the harsh words, Amber's tone was gentle, blameless. "Everyone we meet is fightin' their own demons, an' Mercy's no different; you just happen to remind Mercy of hers, an' she's never been very good with reminders. Perfume headaches aside, it's nothin' you've done; just give'er space an' give'er time." Kimber gave a weak nod, staring into her tea. "You don't have to finish the tea—I won't say a word." She responded to the feigned innocence of Amber's tone and expression with a smirk.

"It is pretty nasty," Kimber chuckled.

Amber rolled her eyes and nodded in agreement. "Sour women an' sweet tea, I'm tellin' ya. That's why I keep unsweet next to her tea—if ya mix'em it's tolerable."

Only a short while later the two counterparts bid one another goodnight for the second time that day. Amber cleaned up her mess and crept back to Donnie's room, pausing to collect the small black cat maowing at the door for entry. Mere minutes afterward, a pained yelp rang out behind the door followed by a string of curses; a bleary-eyed Donatello hauled Kirk back outside, unceremoniously dumped him on the floor, and locked him out again. Kimber rinsed out her tea glass and made her way back to the borrowed room that smelled like Raphael.

Almost as soon as she left the kitchen, though, something else caught her attention—a cacophonous blend of muted noise in the dojo. Low, gruff curses, grunts and hisses, and hollow fwumping impacts. Wary of what she might find but too curious to walk away, Kimber crept to the door and peered through the curtain of glass-beaded fringe. At the opposite end of the long, cavernous room, a familiar figure unleashed a vicious and practiced beat-down on the worn red punching bag.

Disheveled flaxen hair stuck to the woman's brow and neck—stormy blue eyes burned in the lamplight—livid color tinted her face red from exertion and sweat shone on her skin. Mercy held nothing back, laying into the patched leather bag with the ferocity of a cage-fighter on steroids. Kimber shrunk back from the doorway, stricken by the other woman's feral appearance...then her shoulders slackened in realization. Mercy was trembling and her lungs were heaving for breath. Every now and then she'd slow and grip the bag, waiting for the shakes to subside, then she'd snarl something to herself and renew her assault on the punching bag. Kimber recognized those shakes... no, surely not...

The unwitting blonde feinted to the left and buried her bare foot in the side of the punching bag. A strangled curse ripped from her lungs as she stumbled, all-but collapsing on the floor and gripping her abused appendage. Clearly, Mercy was too lost in her berserker's beat-down to recall kickboxing barefoot was a bad idea with a punching bag built for mutants. Eyes scrunched shut, even white teeth bared in a pained sneer, she roughly massaged the burning from her abused ankle. What could possibly be wearing on her so heavily she'd—

As if in answer to Kimber's silent confusion, dim light reflected off of something hanging just above the neckline of her camisole—something metallic, vividly colored, round and sticking to her skin. With every pant and hiss, the muscles underneath heaved, the skin retracting and expanding; each
time, light reflected off in a purple flash. A sobriety chip—purple for nine months. Kimber's father never even made it nine DAYS without a beer. She never saw the plastic chip earlier, only the beaded chain disappearing into Mercy's shirt; for it to be around her neck at this hour of the night, Mercy may well never take it off. Kimber knew that Mercy was revived in an alcoholic's body—she could think of little worse than living a life similar to someone who abused you. Still, it never occurred to Kimber that Mercy would be left fighting the addiction as hard as anyone who came by it honestly...and here she was, shaking like a leaf and wearing herself out in the night to fight cravings that she never chose. How strong this Mercy Ross must be to bear all this without complain and to fall apart only when others weren't there to witness.

Without warning, Mercy stilled other than her heaving lungs—her eyes shot to the doorway and pinned Kimber through the strands of beads, venomous and daring judgment. Despite her unease, Kimber said nothing. She gestured to her neckline, glanced pointedly at the plastic chip hanging just above Mercy's, then gave a thumbs-up and an impressed smile.

Mercy faltered—lost, confused at finding approval instead of derision. Her long, slender fingers raked through her always-messy hair then her hand drifted down to the floor to brace herself; all the while, her breathing slowly evened out and the fire in her eyes faded. Before, she looked ready to jump down Kimber's throat and rip her heart out; now, everything about her was unguarded and uncertain. Perhaps Amber was right, Kimber considered; perhaps Mercy was just as wary of her as she was of Mercy. 'Well,' she decided with an impish grin, 'one way to find out!'

Kimber gestured to the punching bag then Mercy's hands, pantomimed licking one lacquer-tipped finger, then poked herself in the hip with an ember-smothering hiss. Translation: "Girl, you're on fire!" The blonde replied with a gesture almost universally known; the finger she chose needed no translation, but a ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Kimber could see this blossoming into a strange sort of friendship...at least, it might have if they had the time to build one.

Kimber was a stranger in this place—an intruder, if only for a short while—and she knew better than to expect a welcome. Suddenly, though, it didn't seem quite so frightening. She had allies here, albeit allies who weren't necessarily friends. Having a support group could make all the difference, especially when your own past might soon return to kill you.

Only sixty-three hours to go.

Notes

Title – From "Slipping," a track on Geddy Lee's solo album My Favorite Headache.

*"She Came in Through the Bathroom Window," by the Beatles.

**"That seemed like an idiot move" – This bit is directly inspired by some back-and-forth with the helpful folks on FFnet's "Writers Anonymous" forum. Months ago, back when I was still working on the "Absolutes" chapters, I took to WA about the possibility of Kimber running into Hun while visiting Lefty because Daron was too chicken to tell her he was visiting Hun. Someone, and I can't recall who, said the way I had it planned out sounded like "an idiot plot" and that made me laugh so hard I choked. The original idea was rough and ridiculous, considering Daron and Kimber have both done plenty of growing, and I have no doubt it would have been a nightmare to write. Hopefully, the changes worked out. (We'll see next chapter.)

^"Warm Vanilla Sugar" – This is a fragrance sold by the chain Bath and Body
Works, and a prime example of why most of the Chance Family have largely stopped shopping there. All the women and most of the men in our family have sensitivities to certain chemicals, and a lot of artificial fragrances give us migraines. BBW, over the last few years, began adding migraine-inducing floral & musk notes to products that really don't need them. (THIS one is safe if it's just handsoap but the perfumes ALWAYS have flowers and musk in them. It's MURDER.) Although it's only been shown clearly in the GoM installment "Sweet Sensation," Mercy has a similar, if less-serious problem —some chemical fragrances give her headaches. That's what happened here: Kimber smelled like a bar, yeah, but the real issue was her perfume was making Mercy's head throb.

Please don't marinate in your perfume, Folks—chemically-induced migraines really aren't an uncommon problem and the susceptibility runs in families. Generally if you can smell your own perfume without huffing the skin directly, you're choking people around you with it.

^^Coconut, Vanilla, and Vetiver – Speaking of perfumes, Pacifica makes environmentally friendly, vegan, cruelty-free fragrance products, and so far, they're Chance Family Safe. (Not sure what chemicals they're omitting but it works.) The scent described – Indian Coconut Nectar – immediately made me think of Amber when I first found it. My preferred scent—Tuscan Blood Orange — smells like "Fruit Loops" and I'm totally cool with it. Yeah, that probably says something.

# Dad was a drunk, Mom was a Baptist; that was the only thing special about them. – Devout Baptists, by doctrine, don't drink alcohol, hence the term "Dryer than a Baptist [picnic/wedding/funeral]."

## For anyone who's forgotten, Aaron named his cats after insults. Numbnuts is the big fat black-and-grey long-haired lump with the nasty attitude, and he's also the oldest of Aaron's cats. If you haven't hit Tumblr, Twitter, or DeviantArt for the animal-OC pics I'm putting together and posting, fix that shit. So far we've got Bosco and Kirk, and a certain yellow tabby who will be showing up later on in the story. XD

###Southern-style Sweet Tea, if you believe Cold, is a crime against humanity. Despite Missouri not being part of the South, about the only kind of commercial sweet tea you can find is 'Southern-style.' Specifically, it's weak, syrupy sweet, and many varieties have a strange aftertaste similar to stale corn syrup and pipe tobacco. (don't ask.) At home, we generally brew our iced tea strong and use about ¾ cup of sugar per gallon.

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**Glossary: General rules**

~Adding 'e, 'is, 'im, 'imself to the end of a word - means he, his, him, or himself.

~Adding 'er or 'erself to the end of a word - means her or herself.

~Adding 'ey, 'em, 'emselfes, or 'eir to the end of a word - means they, them, themselves, or their.

~Raph, Da / Dey / Dis, words which shouldn't start with d- but do anyway – the most prominent replace of Raph's dialect replaces many th- words with d-, particularly if it's a hard th. Just replace the d- with a th. Also, The / They / This.

~Kimber, words with t' - this word actually has a th- but she's dropping the –h- as per the stereotypical Jersey dialect. Examples include t'a – the and t'ere – there.
Glossary: Specific Instances

~Cawld – cold
~I'm'a / I'm'onna – I'm going to
~Ya'd do t'at? – You would do that [for me]?
~Nothin'll eva make it up to ya but I can give ya dis much at least – I can never make up to you [he's referring to ignoring her when he heard her on the security feed the night she died] but at the least, I can help you get closure.
~I di'n't get t'at second chance fer not'in' – I didn't get a second chance at life just so I could make the same mistakes all over again.
~Where's the pod? / Sahrry, Daron, t'ere ain't a pod. – A shameless Invasion of the Pod People reference. "Sorry Daron, there's no pod – it's really me."
~Even I hadn't 'a quit, t'a stink 'a all 'a t'at booze would'a done it.– Even if I hadn't quit drinking [because it was ruining my life] the stench of all the alcohol in the pub would have convinced me to quit. The point here isn't that individual alcohols stink; while the smells may be pleasant on their own, many different kinds of alcohol blended together tend to result in a stink fit to singe your nose-hairs. Plus there's the added notes of sweaty farmhands, tracked manure, and stale vomit added to the mix…
~Bawdy-snatcher – Kimber's apparent preferred nickname for Amber –Body-snatcher.
~T'at nerd of hers t'ought maybe t'ere's a time limit on how long we can be home without buyin' t'a farm. – Donnie thinks there may be a time limit on how long [we other-worlders] can spend in our homeworlds without dying.
~Whateva killed us is what'll kill us again if we stay too lawng. I get too cawld, t'is t'ing's gonna go off. – Whatever killed us the first time is what will kill us again if we stay in our worlds too long. If my core temperature drops too much, this monitor will sound an alarm.
~Ya've taken responsibility for what'cha done an' you're still beatin' yourself up over it. … is he t'a same ol' scumbag? –You've taken responsibility for what you've done but you haven't forgiven yourself for it. … Has he made amends like you have?
~T'at Ambuh's from anot'er world – That Amber's from another world.
~I wanna see them x-rays - you're even weirder'n I remember. – Basically, Mercy's saying Amber's behaving even more oddly than usual and probably has some residual brain damage from nearly dying in Willsdale twice. Yeah, harsh.
~Baggoff! – No, it's not a grocery-bagging competition, she's saying Back off so quickly the syllables blur together.
~Hawd yer gantin', ëyannen - you can bide a bit longer. – Roughly keep it in your pants, Sweetheart – you can wait a little longer. Direct translations of Scots/Scots-English: Hawd – hold or stop. Gantin' – demanding/begging for sex. Bide – Live, reside, or wait. The last word, Leannan, is a Scots-Gaelic term I've used in other instances, but with (I hope?) a more accurate pronunciation. Someday it'd be AWESOME if English-to-other translation sites included audio pronunciation for people who don't comprehend the phonetics for the other language.
~T'ey t'ink t'ey're bein' real sneaky – They think no one realizes they're horny motherfuckers.
~Readin' specs – reading glasses.
~Yer why t'at sugar jar spilled, aren't 'cha? – You're what knocked over the sugar jar that one time, aren't you?
~T'at old cow t'rew a barstool at Bart's head fer cuttin'er off – Bart refused to serve Clarity any more alcohol and asked her to leave, so she threw a barstool at him. Yeah, she's nuts.
Kirk, obviously, isn't acclimating to 'sharing Mommy' very quickly. As seen in the Gallery of Memories drabble "Mom," he's a jealous little Mama's boy and he thinks Donnie is hurting her. Now, the question is what exactly happened that got Kirk kicked out of the bedroom? Tell me what you think, the best answer wins!

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