FUCK THE POLICE

by The_Divine_Fool

Summary

The Park County Police Department assigns Cartman to a truancy case. He meets 17-year-old delinquent Kenny McCormick.
I did it, guys -- it happened. It's happening. Welcome aboard.
Kenny leaned over the table and tried to scratch his name into the stainless steel while a representative from Child and Family Services and a Black cop talked over his file. Every time something crumby happened, he ended up in this dim little room in the Park County Sheriff’s Department while a bunch of strangers debated over his future like he was a bit of chewing gum stuck to the floor. He fucking hated it. Marsh was okay, though -- she'd been working with him since his freshman year in high school, actually -- ever since his dad got arrested for public indecency. Or was it for brewing moonshine in the back of their trailer? Kenny didn't remember which.

The door opened suddenly and another uniformed figure entered, backlit for a moment by the fluorescent lighting from the hallway.

"Where -- " he said, then turned to the other officer. "Oh, Token. I didn't see you there. You oughta smile or something."

Kenny snorted into his hood. "You're racist."

Officer Black shoved the files into the newcomer's hands and left the room without a word.

"Fuck you too, buddy," he sighed, dropping the files on the table.

Kenny watched him fall into the chair across the table and pinch the bridge of his nose like he'd rather be digging his own grave than sitting there. Then he started flipping through his file, pretending to read it. Kenny could tell he was just pretending; he'd probably already been briefed and had a chance to go over it before they met. He was probably just trying to use the silence to make him nervous, or something. The usual dumb cop shit.

"How long y'gonna pretend to read that?"

The officer didn't move, but his eyes shifted up to meet Kenny's. Brown like rusted steel, he noticed. Red. They were fuckin' red.

"Oh, sorry," His voice, caught in an apathetic drawl. "I was arranging a grocery list inside my head. Five minutes of quiet -- even with a piece of shit like you -- is five minutes closer to clocking out of this fuckhole. But since your time is so precious, let's get started."

His eyes jumped over to Marsh. "Wendy, it's so wonderful to see you back at the station. You're looking bigger every day."

Kenny almost laughed. He was a racist and a sarcastic son of a bitch.

"Cartman." Marsh acknowledged, resting her hand on her belly beneath the table. She was probably two months along.

The guy sighed again, and pulled at the dark notches under his eyes. "Listen, Wendy -- maybe you can help me understand this. I haven't checked my calendar in a while, but I'm fairly sure I woke up in October a couple weeks ago, so it's not April First. Why is the sheriff telling me I'm the recommended asshole for walking a punk seventeen-year-old to class every day?"

"Well, since Officer Stotch requested a transfer, we thought that, maybe, he -- " Wendy said.

"Is a naive idiot. Yes?"

Kenny snickered into his sleeve. Officer Cartman's eyes returned to him.
"So what'd you do to him?" He said. "Grab his wallet? Cuff 'im to his cruiser?"

Kenny eyed the new officer. Maybe he wasn't the usual dumb cop shit, he thought. He didn't look like a cop. Well -- he was a white male in a uniform, which satisfied Kenny's basic definition, but the longer he was in the room with him the more he seemed to fill up the space; and not just because he was big, either. He was one of those bitter types, Kenny guessed. The ones who'd been cops too long to give a shit -- but, he looked young. It was hard to tell, since he obviously hadn't seen a razor in a while, but he looked young. The department always assigned younger cops to truancy cases; they probably thought it was easier for them to connect with children, or something.

"Not hard to get one over on Stotch," Cartman continued, flipping idly through the files. "I locked him in a bomb shelter for two weeks and convinced him the world was ending when we were ten."

Oh? That made him and Stotch the same age, then, or close. Kenny tried to remember the date he'd seen on Stotch's badge, when he'd lifted it off him.

"Cartman, look -- " Wendy started.

"Wait..." the officer cut her off with a distracted grunt. "This is Yellow Wolf?"

He plucked a photograph from the back of the file and chuckled at it. "Oh man, I don't believe it. I remember this case. Cost the state thousands in property damage."

Cartman put the first photograph down on the table; Kenny recognized the snapshot of glass display cases, and the orange and yellow spray paint twisting over them. Then another photograph landed next to it, and another.

"The city museum," he murmured. "The library -- shit, I didn't know you hit the fucking astronomy observatory, dude."

"Your language, Cartman, please."

"So fucking random," he ignored her, and continued chuckling over the photographs. "You've got Conrad turning in his grave, I'm sure. Oh -- does he know what that means? Wendy, translate into trailer trash for me, will you?"

"Here, I'll try -- " Cartman leaned forward and looked Kenny dead in the eye. "I like your anarchy. Is that still too complicated?"

Kenny spit.

His hood fell down around his ears as he was yanked over the table by a vice grip around his throat. Kenny heard Wendy start to shout, but his senses were soon blocked out by the hammering of his pulse in his ears and the cop's crumby coffee breath right over his face.

"I don't care what you did to Stotch," he growled. "I don't care what you did to the state, even. But if you don't respect me, and my authority, then things aren't gonna work out well for you."

Kenny snarled around his choking, kicked his legs, but only succeeded in bruising his knee-cap against the table. Wendy was at the door, trying to get someone to help.

"I have no problem dumping dead weight," Cartman hissed, tightening his grip over Kenny's windpipe. "I could dump you in the river. They'd all just think you finally ran off. I could even finish out the lease on my apartment before they found the body."
Suddenly gravity returned and Kenny fell back into his seat, coughing. He felt nothing but scorn for the crooked cop, but his body felt fear.

"Shut the door, Wendy."

"Cartman," she said, whirling around and stalking up to the officer. "This isn't one of your cases -- "

"Oh yeah?" He argued, pushing forward into her jabbing finger. "Then why are his fucking files in front of me?"

"That's not what I mean," she said quietly, as if Kenny wouldn't hear over his own coughing. "This isn't one of your drug investigations; you're dealing with Child and Family Services now, and we -- "

"What? What're you gonna do? You recommended me, remember?"

Wendy took a deep breath. Kenny could tell she was riled 'cause her nostrils flared and her brilliant dark eyebrows were twitching. "I just think -- you might be the only one capable of getting him in the doors. It's only a few months, Cartman. He just needs to graduate -- "

The cop shook his head, returned to his seat while Wendy trailed off and crossed her arms.

"What's his rating on that, uh, homelessness scale you guys use?"

Wendy's eyes flicked over to Kenny. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"We don't need to discuss this right -- "


"At risk," she said.

Cartman nodded, turned his eyes on Kenny. "Hear that? That means you got a home, but it's really shitty."

Kenny curled his lip. He really wanted to spit again, suddenly.

"Look," Wendy said. "Just worry about his attendance -- if anything else comes up, you can call me."

"I'm already working a dozen different inner-city cases, I don't -- " He picked up one of the photographs again. "I really don't have time for this shit."

Kenny pulled the strings on his hood and tried to grit his teeth, but he was pissed and powerless, and he was sick of watching his future juggled around by dicks in uniforms. "Fuck you!"

"Oh, kill yourself, will ya?" Cartman snapped. "Save the streets the fucking trouble."

"Cartman, for God's sake!" Wendy said, and circled the table to reclaim her chair beside Kenny. "Can't you act professional, just this once?"

"Act professional?" he spat. "You think that's what he needs? More legal-political jargon to cover up what everybody's thinkin' but nobody has the balls to say? That's not how I work. Fuck with me, and you get hurt. That's my rule."

"That's how all the fat cops get by," Kenny murmured into his hood.
"What did you just say, you little bitch!"

Wendy settled a hand on the back of Kenny's neck and shifted to sort of put herself between them over the table. Women were always doing stuff like that, especially the ones with Child and Family Services. They made you feel like you had a mother, maybe, or at least somebody who cared a bit. Then they signed you over to crooked cops and clocked out of your life.

"Man, people don't fuck with you a lot, do they?" Kenny sneered.

"And I don't think people've fucked with you enough," Cartman said. "The sooner you learn to shut up, the better."

"Why? You're so easy. Makes me wanna wind you up and set you off." Kenny bared his teeth in his best sneer; he knew they were crooked as all hell, but he liked showing them off, especially when he wanted somebody to hate him.

"Wendy -- " He said. "You can't possibly still think this is a good idea."

"Why don't you bring your car around, Officer?" She said, voice tight. "I want to have one last word with Kenny."

Cartman breathed sharply through his nostrils, and pushed around at the files one more time. He pocketed one of the snapshots and left the room with a slam of the door.

Kenny hunched down over the table. Wendy rubbed some circles on his back. "Kenny, it's going to be alright. You have less than one year left --"

"So this is your plan," he murmured into his folded arms. "Hand me over to Officer Friendly? Park County's token bad cop? You think he's gonna bully me back into line?"

"I've known Cartman a long time," she said thoughtfully. "And you're not wrong, but -- it's a little more complicated than all that. I think he'll suit you."

"Who the fuck is he, anyway? He don't talk like a cop." Crooked, was the word that came to mind. But Kenny couldn't be sure, couldn't yet draw the line between the show-boating and the honest threats. He needed more data. It already promised to be way more interesting than poor Officer Stotch. Humiliating a fool was only interesting before it made you feel a little guilty doing it, because it was so easy. Kenny wanted to humiliate Officer fuckin' Friendly. He really, really did.

"This was your plan," he said, sitting up. "You think I'm gonna get interested, try to fuck with him -- but you wouldn't've recommended him unless you thought he was better than me, that he'd beat me at it. Fine. I accept your challenge -- and he'll transfer in a month, I bet."

"Aviators, too?" Kenny observed, slipping into the passenger seat and slamming the door. "That's gotta be another plus ten douche factor. You're the full package, man. I bet ya drive a slick car in your off-time. Sniff ladies' underwear, doncha?"

"I smoked a dub in the parking lot," said Cartman, stepping on the gas before Kenny had his ass in the damn seat. "Buckle up. My eyes barely open."

Kenny watched the figure of Wendy Marsh grow smaller and then disappear as they pulled out of the Park County police station. He really couldn't tell where the lies began with this guy. He tried to ignore him for a while, he really did -- but then he wound up staring at the big bastard.

"How old are you?"

"Go fuck yourself, kid. I'm not interested."

Kid. Boy, Kenny hated that. All the young cops called him 'kid.' The sheriff called him 'son,' which was almost more belittling.

"It's called parens patriae; means that when kids got no parents, the state steps in and plays the role," he said, propping his wrist on the steering wheel. Like a douche. "In other words, it's the excuse the state needs to put its dick up your ass."

The cruiser was flooded with CDs. Kenny glanced in the back seat. A titanium baseball bat, a load of magazines and comic books. He got the feeling this guy spent a lot of time in his car.

"You're not a cop."

He snorted. "Do I look like a fucking cop."

Yes, Kenny thought, eyeing the radio on his belt. The tazer, the gun. The douchey aviators.

"Aside from the uniform. Which -- I might as well sleep in this damn thing, for how much I get to take it off."

Kenny climbed over the console -- the cop started cursing and he felt the car swerve and brake suddenly as he settled into his lap.

"I'll get you out of it," Kenny said. "Drop me off here, and I'll get you out of it."

"Seriously?" He said. Kenny stared at his own reflection in the mirrored lenses. "Is this how you got Stotch? I'm not that easy."

"C'mon," Kenny tried, shifting his hips. His fingers itched to tear off the stupid sunglasses. "I bet you don't get out much. I bet you're frustrated. Let me out -- I'll blow you."

"Ugh," Cartman snarled, and gripped Kenny by the back of the neck to throw him back into the passenger seat.

Kenny's head cracked against the door handle and he groaned. Then he was jostled into a sitting position and the seatbelt roped over him, trapping him against the seat with a damning click.

"I didn't sign up for this," he was muttering. "What the hell is wrong with you, man?"
The officer resettled in his seat, pulled at his uniform collar and pushed the cruiser back into drive.

"Why don't you fuckin' bribe me or something?" He said, gesturing over the steering wheel. "I'd take a bribe quicker than a blow job. Jesus. I hate this job. I really fucking hate it. But I'm not fucked up enough to start exchanging sexual favors with minors, for Chrissake. I'm not even gay, for Chrissake."

Kenny had never heard so many f-bombs from a cop -- at least not in one sitting, without any guns drawn. His last truancy officer had only said 'gee' and 'gosh' all the time.

"You don't havta be gay to take a blow job, dude," Kenny said, and flipped open the badge he'd worked out of his pocket. "You're... 26?"

Cartman reached over and pinched the tip of his ear between his forefinger and thumb, twisting viciously. "Ow -- !"

"You little shit," he said, tucking his badge away. "You did all that to find out my age?"

"I wanted another look at that tat on your collarbone, too."

He couldn't see the expression on his face, really -- from the sunglasses -- but his lips sort of tightened into a thin line, and Kenny watched him fumble with the top button on his uniform with one hand.

"You're not a cop," Kenny said again.

"Right, you got me," he drawled, putting on a turn of speed as they fled down the deserted main roads. "I bought this uniform on Ebay -- the sheriff just didn't notice the new guy on the payroll."

"Naw, that's not what I mean. I've heard of guys like you -- they hired you because you have a record, didn't they? I know that tattoo. I see it on the streets all the time. What'd you deal, huh? Dope? Blow? No, big guy like you -- was it crystal meth?"

"Jesus Christ, of all the stupid punk delinquents out there -- and I get fuckin' Slumdog Holmes. Why don't you siddown and shut up?"

"Did you even do the cop training? Or didya just beg them to give you a badge?"

"I did the training!" He snapped.

"You did it for protection, didn't you? I bet you had too much heat on ya -- needed to get off the streets quick."

"You sure place a lot of bets without anything to back 'em up, kid."

"But I'm right, though."

"Yeah-uh," he crowed. "Spot on. I worked in the trade for ten years. Up to the elbows in blood when they brought me in. You think Cartman's my real name? Fuh! I've got about a hundred aliases. This is just the one I use on Monday mornings."

"Yo, where do the lies begin and end with you? Fuck."

He smirked, but didn't look away from the road. "Watch your language. Wendy will cry her sweet pregnant tears. And everyone will blame me, of course."
Kenny sunk down in his seat. The closer the roads brought them to Park County High School, the louder his heart thumped in his throat. The early winter wiped out the landscape -- threw everything under frost heaves and salt until there was only white and gray in all directions. Kenny took his gloves out of his pocket, bounced a knee.

"I know I'm right," he said. "This is the most fuck the police CD collection I've ever seen."

Cartman heaved this fantastic, exasperated sigh. Kenny almost saw it hit the windshield. "I put on the uniform. Why should I stop listening to AZ and Nas?"

Kenny rummaged through some of the disks in the pocket on the side door, and found a familiar one. "No way --"

"Huh-huh," the cop chuckled. "Yelawolf. Figures you'd be into him. Well, I knew Yellow Wolf would be into him, anyway. Knew it since the case hit the news -- the observatory, man! Fuckin' genius. I really admire that."

"You got a helluva set of teeth, you know."

Kenny forced his lips closed. He didn't realize he'd started smiling. Cops didn't make him smile, usually.

"I wouldn't take a blow job from you for free, dude. All those jagged edges."

"You don't have a lot of friends, do you."

"I don't pick my friends based on their ability to suck my dick, actually." He said. "But you're probably right."

Kenny bit his lip, fiddled with the album in his hands. It was his favorite artist. This was so crazy -- did Wendy know? She couldn't have. Kenny couldn't picture her and Officer Friendly in the same room for more than five minutes without a damn national disaster. He opened the CD case, but it was empty.

Cartman's arm reached out again, and Kenny flinched, ducking his sore ear against his shoulder. But the cop only tapped at the dial on the stereo. The volume went up and he recognized the song instantly. He watched Cartman tap his fingers on the steering wheel for a second to get the beat, then catch the tail-end of a verse.

"Went to the Chevy, pulled out a machete, and a gun as heavy and tall as the midget Will-ow -- fuck, what a verse."

Kenny stared at his new truancy officer. "Can you freestyle, too?"

He bared his teeth. "I spend too much time in this car."

Cartman turned to the window and yawned, suddenly. Kenny bet he worked nights. He bet he barely talked to anybody outside of pissing off ethnic minorities at the station. Why else would he banter with a punk seventeen-year-old over trailer park rappers?

"Didn't know P.C. High got a new addition," Yellow Wolf observed. They were pulling into a fucking drive-thru at a Dunkin Donuts. He wasn't complaining, but seeing the off-beat officer right up against a stereotype was pretty entertaining.

"Agh," the officer scowled, like he just realized he'd been caught. "Whatever. They sell this hot
brown bean juice. It's like liquid crack."

"Get me an ice capp and one of those little French donuts, huh? I'm starved."

"I'm sure you are."

His new T.O. ordered a black coffee and pulled the cruiser around to the pick-up window.

"C'mon, man -- it would've cost you, a buck-ninety, or something -- "

"Not in the budget," he said, placing his coffee in the cup-holder. "I'm not family fucking services."

"Obviously not," Kenny grumbled, sliding down in the seat as far as the restricting belt allowed. He couldn't even take his coffee off him -- Kenny hated black coffee.

"Did Butters feed you?"

"Who?"

"Stotch."

Kenny pulled his gloves on and wiggled the fingers. He'd managed to wring a few meals out of Officer Stotch, but he didn't want to tell Officer Friendly, for some reason. He didn't like when people picked at his income, and his teeth. Cartman was a bully -- it was obvious. Better not give him the extra ammo. If the asshole didn't wanna toss a buck out for an extra fucking drink, then Kenny wasn't gonna bitch about it. Crooked cops.

"What's crooked about hanging onto my spare change?" He said, glaring over the steering wheel. "Bitches are all the same. Offer a blow job, grab at yer wallet."

*Greedy bastard,* Kenny thought. He might've muttered it into his hood, actually. But this guy had the ears of a damn *bat.*

"Greedy?" He said, and one of his eyebrows quirked up briefly over his aviators. "Sure, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm broke."

"Cops ain't broke," Kenny said, shaking his hood down to make a clear accusation.

"I'll show you how broke cops are." Cartman took the sunglasses off and folded them in front of the gear-shift. He jerked the car around a side-street. "See that guy? I will *mug* him for twenty bucks."

Kenny dug around in his pocket and threw a crumpled twenty on the dash. The car came to a sudden stop and Cartman slammed the door behind him. Kenny pulled at the passenger door -- but he'd locked him in, of course. So he watched through the tinted driver's side window as Cartman caught a man slinking along the wall around a convenience store and shoved him up against the wall. Uniform on and *everything* -- Kenny couldn't believe what he was seeing. The poor guy put up a little struggle, but ended up face first against the brick with his hands behind his head. In a few moments, Cartman was loping back to the cruiser.

"He's giving you the finger."

"Yeah?" He said, starting the car and putting his damn sunglasses back on. He rolled down the window and stuck his own finger out the window as they rolled out of the side-street and back on the main roads. Kenny never thought he'd see such blatant abuse of power so close up.

"Can't he, like, turn you in? Your name's right on your damn chest, fake or not."
Cartman grabbed the crumpled twenty from the dash, coupled it with a fifty and a Sam's Club membership card, and put them in his pocket. "He was carrying without a permit. I could've taken him in."

"Then -- you just hustled me out of twenty bucks!"

He shrugged. "I mugged him, didn't I?"

"You are crooked, motherfucker! Officer High and Mighty with your damn morals -- you won't take a BJ but you'll rob a homeless kid?"

He snorted. "You're not homeless, remember? You're only at risk. That means nobody will be surprised when you admit you're an idiot with your cash. They're already expecting it. And you're not a kid. You fucking know it, too -- the second you turn thirteen, nobody gives a shit about you. You're not cute enough any more to pass off as innocent; you're an awkward pre-legal adult creature, and the longer you put off the transition, the less people will pity you. You're slipping through the cracks, and nobody's gonna give a shit when you get ghosted out here."

They were pulling up to the gates of Park County High School. He drove around to the parking lot by the side entrance.

"You remember this, right?" He said, pulling a photograph from his breast pocket. "Of course you do."

Kenny cast a glance at the snapshot, and averted his eyes quickly, gritting his teeth.

"Your brother. Took a bullet right to the motherfucking face, and how old was he? Just about your age."

Fuck you, Kenny growled into his hood, and pulled at the door-handle -- but it was still locked.

"There's over a thousand kids in the public school system that're actually homeless. The second they graduate high school, the odds of them getting merc'd on the streets are cut in half. Now -- I know shooting up schools is in vogue now, but I still think you got a better chance in there than out here."

"Let me go."

"Fine," said Officer Dickface, finally hitting the locks. "But I've got you on radar, Yellow Wolf. And if you're not in that shithouse until three in the afternoon, I'm not gonna be so friendly."
"You filed a sexual harassment complaint!" Cartman barked, as soon as the passenger door shut.

Kenny shrugged, sliding down in his seat without buckling his ass up, as usual.

"It's been one week," Cartman continued, pulling out of the arcade parking lot with an audible squeal. "One week of chasing your ass around the county -- for a kid without a license, you sure can get places -- and you have the nuts to file a harassment suit against me? I should be filing one against you, if I thought anybody'd believe it -- I mean, motherfucker, how screwed up in the head are you?"

"Now I've got the fuckin' sheriff pushing papers in my mailbox; I got Child and Family Services banging on my damn door in the middle of the day -- fucking hell, man, you are way more trouble than you're worth. On top of the thousands from your graffiti escapades, you've probably killed dozens of trees just on paperwork, you've got about a dozen decent officers on the run from your truancy case, and now you've got me and my sad salary working for you. What the hell's the idea? Next time, put your dick in my mouth and at least have a little evidence."

Cartman had worked himself into a fucking bloodwrath since the sexual harassment claim hit his desk Wednesday evening. Well, it had probably hit his desk that morning, but since he didn't usually clock in until the night shift, it was a nasty surprise for a Wednesday that had already been looking pretty weak. His coffee maker was on the fritz, and it was the only machine next to the XBox and the keyboard that needed to be in perfect working order for Cartman's incredibly volatile moods to remain simply in the "incredibly volatile" phase and not in the "get the fuck outta my way" phase -- which was when he made most of his arrests. And on one occasion, when he'd taken a bullet in the shoulder. Not from a criminal, either: it was a misfire from his own partner Token. They weren't partners anymore, after that -- Cartman hadn't had any partners, after that -- but at the time he'd been convinced that a black-white partnership would be dope. Like, it always worked out in the movies. After the shooting, though, Cartman solemnly crossed that stereotype out of his books.

"Did you pull this shit with Stotch? No -- nobody would believe that for a second. But me, sure, pick the only guy in the fucking department with a record, and even if it's nothin' but pure as baby's breath drug dealing, they all believe I'm some kinda rapist on the side. As if I've even got time for that; I haven't had a decent goddamn meal in the past week, but you bet I've got time for molesting minors. If this case makes it past my department, and goes public, I will not only lose my wretched fucking job, I will get stabbed within the week. Do you understand that? Do you understand what your bullshit does to others? Sure, my life may be miserable and meaningless to you, but I've got shit to do. I've got names to cross off my list, still. But instead of getting on with my life, I'm riding around like a prize horse's ass just to get you to go to school, for Chrissake. As if the worst thing someone your age has got to do is go to school, for Chrissake."

Cartman glanced over at his passenger, but all he saw was an orange parka stuck to the side of the door, pushing its face against the window and probably mucking up the glass like an infant. And boy, did that grind his gears.

"You know what I really don't get," he said, and turned the dial down on the Yelawolf album he'd been playing all week. "I mean what I really don't get, is how you're smart enough to wrap your nasty little conniving mind around a false sexual harassment suit, but you can't get it into your head that you should finish high school before you start effing around all day. Yeah, high school's a dick in the ass. But you know what? That's how you get introduced to society. And if you don't sit around and get used to it, then every day in the real world is gonna feel like getting raped. Are you listening to me?"
"What's so important out here for you to do, anyway, besides get busy turning into your lousy alcoholic father?" Cartman said, gesturing over the steering wheel with no one around to look.

"Eyeing up new trailers in the lot? Maybe you got a crack-fiend sweetheart you wanna set up with a fresh view of the South Park slums, is that it? You're pathetic."

Eric lost a little steam. He was sure that last bit would rile him up, earn him a glare, at least. The one-sided argument had helped lower his blood pressure, somewhat, and he reached over the console to pull off the kid's annoying orange hood.

"What the hell happened to you?"

He looked like he wanted to spit, so Cartman fumbled to press the key to lower the passenger window -- he'd already pummeled the guy twice that week for spitting on his dashboard, but it was one of those things he'd just rather avoid. Right on the dash, like an animal.

McCormick leaned up and spat out into the rushing wind. Then he got all up in the seat to shove his head and shoulders out the window like a damned lunatic, and Cartman swore, thinking he could be suicidal or some shit -- they were only going about 65 miles an hour -- and Wendy would smother him in his two blessed minutes of sleep if he got this kid killed, he really believed it. Cartman let off the gas a little, but then realized if he slowed down too much the punk would probably have a go at it just for a good chase.

McCormick clamped his hands down on the sill and turned his head against the wind to look back at the tail of the car. Cartman had a view of the bruising over his eye, and the dried blood all up around his nose. But he had the strangest expression on his face -- wistful, almost -- as he watched the road ribbon out into the distance behind them. Cartman almost brought the cruiser into the guard-rail trying to catalog the image forever in his cluttered brain. He needn't've bothered; things like that just sort of stick.
After Kenny sat down, Cartman didn't talk anymore. He dug under his seat for an old mix CD, and replaced the Yelawolf album. Then he turned up the volume, rolled the windows all the way down, and turned off the highway to take the long way around to P.C. High.

He had to rap his way through the last half of Mac Miller's *Desperado* -- he was just getting to the
part about knowing some hoos who model, but they ugly though -- when McCormick finally uttered a laugh. So he waited the length of another song, then caved.

"You don't look like the type to take an ass-kicking easy."

Kenny slid back and propped his feet up on the dashboard, another thing Cartman had screwed his ear for a dozen times already, but he guessed since at least he'd taken his cruddy boots off this time, Eric would allow it this once. His socks looked equally cruddy, though.

"You should see the other guy."
"You're lyin'."

McCormick threw his hood back up and turned into that sour orange glaring creature that Cartman had begun to refer to as Yellow Wolf in his head.

"You didn't clean any of the blood off," Cartman explained. "People who get there asses whooped don't ever clean the blood off."

He watched the teenager slide down further in the seat and cross his arms.

"What is this song?" He mumbled finally.

Cartman touched the dial. "Beautiful, isn't it? Jazz vocalist Bessie Smith. Nas samples from her sometimes, it's so fucking sweet. This one's Body and Soul."

Cartman didn't know if he was fuckin' interested in his old person shit, but he'd asked, so might as well answer. It really was beautiful, and Cartman didn't toss that word around a lot. The song came to a sighing, bittersweet close.

"Black people make the best fucking music."

But Yellow Wolf wasn't biting -- he didn't have a single thing to offer about the generalization. So Cartman tried again. "They really do."

"I don't care," he snorted. "I don't care if you think angry unicorns make the best music. I mean I really don't care."

"Okay -- well." Cartman hmphed softly. "Just, if you wanted to argue about it, all I'm saying is, you would lose."

Kenny snorted again, scrambled up in his seat and flipped down his hood.

He turned fully to Cartman and bared his crooked teeth in a familiar sneer. "You have such a hard-on for arguing, holy shit. I bet you'll get married to someone just 'cause they can argue with you all the time. And then one day you'll get bored and move on to someone with fresh arguments, and you'll do it your whole crumby life. I bet you already know someone you argue a lot with, and you beat off in this lonely man-cruiser thinking about winning an argument while they suck your balls. Who's more pathetic -- you or me?"

He finished with a huge inhale and flopped back down in the seat.

"Why're you laughing?"

"Nice roast, dude -- that was the best I've heard in a while." Cartman said, snorting.
"You're not mad?"

"No, but I'm about to be if you keep putting your cruddy feet on the dash."

Kenny slid his feet down and ducked over his knees to lace them into his cruddy boots. "Ma-an," he said into the foot-space. "You are lonely. You're so lonely you like getting really good roasts."

"No," Cartman denied. "I'm a loner, there's a difference. I've probably talked to you more in the last week than I have to my mother. For years."

"Oh, dude," Kenny said, sitting back up and wearing this terrific stink-face. "That was a little sadder than I wanted to hear. You're kind of a sad guy, aren't you?"

"Screw you," he said, instantly pissed again.

"Lonely, sad, 26-year-old Officer Suck-My-Balls, beating off in his man-cruiser -- ow-ow! Okay! Alright!"

Cartman released him after one more warning twist. He regretted taking the back-roads. McCormick was laughing over his damned knees, like he thought he was the wit of the fucking century. Teenagers, honestly. One second they're doing this melancholy shit, looking out windows and just about breaking your damn heart, and the next second they're laughing over your failures like hyenas.

"Hey, sorry about that sexual harassment thing."

Cartman raised his eyebrows.

"But it was kind of funny, right?"

*Oh my God*, Cartman thought. *I've been punked. This was exactly* what made Yellow Wolf's "attacks" so bizarre; like, what kind of reason could you have for tagging up a museum? A library? The observatory, for Chrissake -- and that was just it. There was no point; the fact that it called up a strange contradiction, or even irony, in people's minds was only a side-effect that was taken for a purpose. But there was never a purpose; Yellow Wolf's purpose was chaos -- it was to jar you just enough out of everyday life, even if it was just to wonder whether you oughta laugh or cry.

Cartman realized he might actually be sitting next to some kind of genius or something. This kid who hung his head out the damn window, with all that gore on his face, and that weird wistfulness -- it had been sort of beautiful. And what Cartman had taken as a simple attack to his reputation was in fact a deftly directed attack of *anarchy* that had exposed him as a bigot -- someone who admired chaos only until it blew up his own monotony -- and fuck if that wasn't sort of beautiful, too. Cartman didn't always get learned. He liked to think he never really did. But here was a seventeen-year-old, doing it better than even Kyle ever had.

"You wanna gummy bear?"

Cartman glanced to the side to get an eyeful of an open bag of artificially dyed gelatin in the shapes of leering bears. "No thanks. I don't like when my food looks at me." So fucking random.

"Why not?" McCormick said, stuffing a few more bears into his mouth, even though he was already chewing. "All food looks at you, one way or another."

For some reason the way he said it made Cartman's stomach churn uncomfortably.

"Look, this one's just like you -- " He held out a gummy bear in his sticky hands. "It's got a red head
and a blue uniform."

"There's nothing red about me."

Kenny snorted like he'd made a joke. "You never looked in the mirror when you're ranting, then. Yer face gets all red, not t'mention you got those red eyes -- and then these great fuckin' veins start poppin' outa your neck, like Jake Gyllenhaal in Southpaw -- "

"Shut up, man," but he laughed at the image, kinda. Like it didn't sound human, even.

He glanced back at the passenger seat in time to see Kenny sink one misaligned canine tooth into the bear and tear off its red head.
Cartman swore as his cruiser ka-thunked over another pothole.

He hated his job -- he really did. He'd been working his cases through the night the entire month, and his biggest success was filing a near eight-mile long indictment for a laundering scheme he'd been toeing around for two years. He actually felt good about that, at least -- then again, he'd also felt pretty good about last month's 'biggest success,' another ream of paper longer than the President's fucking driveway, and it had just landed back on his desk with a cute Post-it note from the grand ball-scratching jury, saying something about 'insufficient evidence' -- which was bullshit, Cartman thought: everything was all right there, why couldn't people just open their damn eyes? -- so even his successes were becoming failures, lately.

He'd spent the previous night and a long miserable morning at his desk just plowing through a bunch of dumb cop homework that he'd procrastinated into an ominous pile on his desk; he wrote up a couple bogus traffic tickets to meet his monthly quota, filed a few reports of quiet nights on patrol that he'd pushed aside, and showed up to court for a ticket challenge. Ticket quotas were supposed to prove you weren't just a suit, make you work harder, but all they seemed to do was dump state funds -- his salary, plus those of the thousand secretary-ants keeping the cogs of the justice system churning, plus all the people just shuffling papers in the courthouse every day -- just to piss people off and then fuck them over in court. It was the kind of circus act that made Eric want to stab his eyes out for participating in. He didn't feel powerful, writing speeding tickets to meet somebody's guesstimated quota. He felt like a clown, just doing what he was told; and Cartman had never liked doing what he was told.

By the time he crawled into bed in his perma-darkened apartment -- hoping for two minutes of sleep, to maybe squeeze a dream in -- his radar was starting along the road to going mad. It beeped every two minutes, then every thirty seconds as his truant got further from school property.

He'd caught McCormick at the arcades mostly, or the drop-in center next to the shelter, sometimes lurking outside a laundromat -- and once at the skate park popping wheelies on a stolen bike. This time, on a goddamned Friday afternoon, just when Cartman was beginning to look forward to a quiet weekend of perusing case files and drinking alone -- he'd found the radio anklet in a fucking dumpster on the wrong side of town.

Those things were supposed to be indestructible, basically -- but the anklet looked like it'd been melted down by a damn blow-torch.

Of all the fuckin' punk teenage delinquents in Park County... he kept thinking. He had to get motherfucking Yellow Wolf. The formerly faceless graffiti artist was already even more of a pain in the ass than Cartman initially thought. He could see why Stotch had passed off the case; he was usually such a ride-or-die on his cases, Eric had been a little surprised to hear of the switch -- but there's no way old Butters could handle something like McCormick. He'd have better luck swallowing a fuckin' hot potato.

Cartman pulled his cruiser into a gravel lot on the border of South Park and North Park. Most of his cases took place in North Park -- and if he was being honest, Cartman returned to his hometown as infrequently as possible. He rented an apartment in downtown North Park not just to keep a closer eye on his cases, but also to stay well away from his past.

The lot was crowded with split-levels and trailers; beyond the ring of shit-housing, the gravel turned quickly into woods. Maybe it was just the time of day, but it seemed pretty quiet. Cartman wondered
if it was the sound of his cruiser banging around in the damn potholes that had brought silence down on the neighborhood. They were probably all peeking out their shutters at him, like a fucking film noir. Low-income slime, clutching at their GEDs -- at this time of day, most of them would be out doing exactly what their cruddy parents did: hustling, drinking, washing dishes -- and churning out crack babies to take up the mantle in a few years.

McCormick was a break of orange against the washed out grays of winter. He was sitting in a lawn chair camped outside one of the trailers; Cartman saw him start sneering the instant he pulled his cruiser around. No other cars were outside, but there were deep tire tracks carved in the gravel.

Cartman pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath. There wasn't an inspirational speaker in the goddamn galaxy that could prepare him for his struggles with McCormick. And he admitted it; he was struggling. Cartman put on his aviators and left the car.

"This was cute," he said, holding up the half-melted anklet.

Kenny grabbed at his crotch and flipped a terrific bird. Cartman sighed again -- he admired it, he really did. Most kids didn't have the nuts to fuck authority so hard.

"I just want -- an hour of sleep, maybe," he said, and lowered himself into the empty lawn chair on the other side of a small card table. "And what is this, whiskey?"

He leaned down and plucked a bottle of Jack Daniels from the frosty ground by the teenager's feet. "Jesus Christ -- do you have a single fucking brain cell in your head? If you get charged with alcohol possession, you're going to juvie. You know what they do to kids like you in juvie? Nothing as easy as a damn blow job, I promise you that."

"I've been to juvie."

"No, no you haven't. I got your file, bro -- you were there for like a week of solitary after the graffiti thing, and Testaburger worked a damn miracle in the courts -- "

"Who?"

"Wendy. She was called Testaburger before Stan plugged 'er up. Listen to me, McCormick. Alcohol possession means real, hard time at juvie. I know the warden -- he's exactly the kind of crooked dick you think I am. And he will fuck you."

"Like you aren't?" He said.

Eric shook his head. "No, no -- you think I'm fucking you. Tucker will fuck you, and he will enjoy every second of it. He doesn't understand that he's a sad king on a sad hill and already taking it harder than everybody else."

"What the hell're ya talkin' about, even?"

He kept shaking his head. McCormick wasn't going to understand; he really wasn't going to understand this shit until it was too late, Cartman thought.

"What're you doing here, anyways? Even if I got in the car right now, we wouldn't make it to school before class lets out."

He was right -- he'd planned the whole thing out, the little bastard, and Cartman knew it. The trip across town to the dumpsters to pick up the radio anklet, then the drive all the way to the edge of town to the address on his file had taken the whole afternoon. Cartman didn't get any sleep, and
McCormick got his wish of skipping Friday afternoon classes.

"I could take you to the station. I have enough shit here to bring you in for good," he said, waving the bottle.

"Then why don't you, Officer Threats-a-lot." Kenny spat. He really spit, right into the frost next to Cartman's feet.

*Why don't I?* Cartman thought. It would definitely pick *one* of the flies out of his eyes, anyway -- tangled inner-city laundering cases aside. He wouldn't mind sticking it to Wendy, either. But booking McCormick meant he'd lost, somehow; he would probably consider it his biggest failure of the month. Cartman hadn't realized how *difficult* it would be to get the kid to sit through a few shit hours of classes every day -- it was his senior year, how hard could it *be?"

"What would you do, if I tried to take you in?"

He snorted. "Run, probably. I know I could outrun you, fat-ass."

As usual, Cartman saw red. He knocked the table over in his rush to seize McCormick by his damn parka. When he came fully back to his senses, he was pushing the teenager's face into the frosty gravel and leaning down on the arm twisted behind his back. Cartman watched his exhales push some of the sand and salt aside in noisy gusts.

"I'm not fat."

"No -- but you're big and fucking sensitive as *fuck!*" He snarled. "So I know you used to be."

Well, that was kind of nice, actually. But McCormick needed to learn to shut his mouth, sometimes. He really knew how to pick at a guy's over-sensitivities. In the month he'd been chasing him, Cartman had risen to more fat jokes than he could count -- it was McCormick's fail-safe for pissing him off. Cartman had taken kicks in the knees, a few punches in the nuts from him -- but it was the fat jokes that made him hit back.

What the hell do I do? He thought, with a minor key of despair.

"Fuck me!" Kenny shouted into the gravel; his voice broke and went kind of hoarse in the middle. "I know you fucking want to. It's what *all* you big-dick-swinging cop types want."

He couldn't tell if he was being provoked or propositioned. "How do I say no -- without denying the fact that I have a big dick?"

His only response was a brief fit of struggle against his hold, but all Cartman had to do was wrench the arm up higher to get him to stop.

"I thought you said I don't look like a cop."

"You gonna bring me in or *not?*"

But he didn't want to. His own big personal failure of the month aside, putting Kenny behind bars seemed like a big failure of *society*, to Cartman.

"It'd be a fucking crime to put Yellow Wolf away."

The second his grip loosened, McCormick flipped and writhed until he managed to free himself, then scrambled away over the gravel. He looked like he wanted to keep going, to run for the treeline, but
he stopped in a half-crouch and eyed Cartman warily, like a dog kicked one too many times but too
desperate for a damn meal to really run far. They picked the wrong cop, he thought. Or else Wendy
knew this would happen. *I can’t take him in.*

Cartman stood up -- groaned like a fuckin' old man while he did it, too -- and approached the trailer
home. The curtains were drawn and it looked dead, but so did everything else in the lot.

"What're you -- ?"

He banged on the door.

"You don't wanna do that," said Kenny.

He banged again until it opened a crack, and a woman became half-visible. "Whaddaya want?"

"This your son?"

"You need a *warrant,*" she screeched. "I know my rights!"

"I don't wanna *search* you, lady -- "

"I don't havta tell you *nothin'*!"

Cartman looked behind her into the dark, cramped space. He caught the smell of a familiar medicine,
and realized he wasn't going to go anywhere with her. He recognized the look in her eyes -- so
typical, he'd almost expected it; the mother was a crackhead.

"Alright -- what about his father? Mr. McCormick?"

"What father?" She spat. She really spit, right out the crack and into the needles and leaf-mold
between Cartman's feet. "He ain't here."

"Look, lady, your kid's a half-day of classes away from getting arrested and *put away* for truancy -- "

"For what?"

"For playin' *hookey.*"

He watched her head shake and turn to look back into the trailer. "That's not my problem."

"Oh-ho -- you fucking *bet* it's your problem!" Cartman said, and he wanted to break the makeshift
chain right off the door-hinge. "When it's not, he'll be the *state's* problem, and then you're down
another kid, how does that sound?"

The woman's crack-fiend eyes darted around. She licked her lips. He could tell she was more
nervous about whatever was inside the trailer than what Cartman had to say. "You needa warrant,
Off'cer." And she shut the door.

*Dumb bitch,* Cartman thought viciously, yanking at his hair. She probably wouldn't know a search
warrant from a parking ticket. He could pick his tax returns out of the glove box and start an
investigation, if he really wanted to. If he didn't think he'd get *ringworm* after stepping one *foot*
inside that reeking hovel.

"Thought you woulda run off." He growled at the orange figure lurking in his periphery.

"It was a good show."
"What?" He snapped. "Huh? What d'you want now? I'm not taking you in, I'm not fucking with you -- I'm leaving this shit-hole. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"What do you want me to do? Arrest your mom for doin' crack, so they can put you in the shelter with all the slime who sold it to her in the first place? A foster home? Close my fuckin' eyes for six months and ferry you to school until it's out of my hands? Fuck, Kenny. It's not my job to think about this shit; this is Child and Family Services territory, but since they've obviously only got the budget for a bullshit category and a post-stamp, they recommended the only asshole in the police department who didn't think Yellow Wolf was just a punk with a can of spray-paint."

"Why did you show me this?" Cartman barked. "What am I s'posed to do? Arrest your mom for doin' crack, so they can put you in the shelter with all the slime who sold it to her in the first place? A foster home? Close my fuckin' eyes for six months and ferry you to school until it's out of my hands? Fuck, Kenny. It's not my job to think about this shit; this is Child and Family Services territory, but since they've obviously only got the budget for a bullshit category and a post-stamp, they recommended the only asshole in the police department who didn't think Yellow Wolf was just a punk with a can of spray-paint."

"Why is it that, just when something doesn't fall under my jurisdiction, there's no one else around to give a damn? Why isn't anyone looking at this? They've all got eyes in their heads but they're not lookin' at anything.""
Eric tossed his glasses into the car and leaned his arms on the hood, reassessing his charge. "You don't have a lot of friends, do you."

Kenny sneered at the ground with all his crooked teeth.

"Don't tell me... you've been pulling this horse-shit all month because you wanna hang out with me?"

"No." He rushed to his denial -- and when his blue eyes landed on him, Cartman raised his eyebrows.

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Fuck you!"

"Look, I get a kick out of driving you to school, man -- and I don't mind playing Yelawolf once in a while -- but I'm definitely the wrong tree to be barking up for company."

"Then just -- " McCormick pulled his hood up and tightened the strings aggressively. "Just drop me off somewhere, will ya? I don't wanna stay here no more."

No, no, no, no, no, was Cartman's train of thought. Not in the job description. He was already a glorified chauffeur almost every day of the week; and he'd worked himself into a damn lather over the massive hand-off Child and Family Services had pulled on him. That's all they did at CFS -- they came down to the station to fondle your balls with a sad case of tomfoolery, then pulled out and blamed officers like Cartman when something as crude as an arrest rocked the damn family love-boat. And then the kid would turn up with a bullet in his face, and he'd be blamed for that, too.

Besides, Cartman thought -- he was lousy company; he knew it! He'd been told as much just about every day of his life since he was a kid. He dealt drugs a while for the power and the thrill, and when things got out of control, he traded it all in for the uniform, and now Cartman got his kicks out of abuse of authority and sunglasses, for Chrissake. He didn't need friends, for Chrissake.

Kenny was pulling at the handle on the passenger door. It was kind of pathetic.

Cartman pushed the unlock button before he really formed the thought properly, then slid into the driver's seat. "You'll go to school all next week if I do this."

"Yeah, yeah."

But when Cartman eyed the minor fidgeting in his front seat, grabbing at CDs and poking around in his glove compartment like the sticky-handed white trash he was -- he knew he wouldn't change. Just like his crack-fiend mother wouldn't change -- and Cartman didn't know dick about his father, but he wasn't changing either. The thing was, he wasn't sure if they oughta change, anymore. Cartman thought that low-income slime bred low-income slime the same way addicts made more addicts; he was scratching at the stereotype now, questioning. If brilliant shit like Yellow Wolf could come out of shit-holes like this one, then maybe -- maybe the shit-holes oughtn't change, either.

The observatory, for Chrissake -- he admired it, he really did.
Kenny veered into the woods on the side of the road, plunged through a scraping thicket of black locust, and crawled up a chain-link fence to drop into the lot of an out-of-service bodega. He thought he could still hear footsteps pounding pavement, and something of the crashing echo of shouts. The distant sound of engines turning over and accelerating always put a background roar on everything in downtown North Park. Even more so in the dead of night.

After skirting around a few dumpsters, he saw the dark silhouette of a parked car and made a dive for the passenger door.

"What the fuck -- !" Kenny heard the driver shuffling around and cursing, but he focused on staring out the window for any sign of his pursuers. "Kenny?"

Amused by the high register in his voice, Kenny finally turned to address his truancy officer, but halfway through the turn he got a good whiff of the inside of the vehicle. "Holy shit, are you jacking it?"

"What the hell are you doin'?" He said, hand in his pants and red eyes wild. Kenny was getting a real kick out of this. "How did you even know this was my car?"

"I've seen it out here a bunch. It looks like you. Like, shitty on the outside, but sort of trusty. You really wanna talk with your dick out like that?"

"Do you know where we are, even? These neighborhoods are dangerous -- I'm on patrol, for Chrissake!"

"So that's what they're callin' it these days," Kenny rolled his eyes. "You're just gonna keep it out, ain'tcha?"

"I was whackin' off!" But Cartman finally seemed to recover enough from the surprise addition of a seventeen-year-old to his undercover patrol and started tucking himself away.

"Your voice always get that high when ya rub one out?"

Kenny looked the cop up and down -- planning to thoroughly enjoy this rare state of disarray. Even though Cartman was always bitching about how little time he had to do anything, he'd always managed to hide his exhaustion behind sunglasses and standard procedure. But tonight, the distracting lenses were gone, uniform was half-buttoned over a white undershirt -- edges of the tattoo clear as day over the neckline -- and Kenny was just moving his gaze down to where his belt hung loose over the seat when hands blocked his view.

He looked up to meet the cop's red eyes. "Stop looking at me."

Kenny shrugged, but shit, he was smiling. And he knew he was smiling because Cartman was glaring.

"You shouldn't be here. This is a lousy neighborhood."

"I know. There's a block-party down the road."

"I know, that's why I'm -- wait, you're... Oh, fuck, are you out here dealing?"
Kenny tongued at his lip. If he was real, being in Cartman's little beat-off palace was sort of turning him on. "Wanna buy some Molly?"

The officer groaned and dropped his head back against the headrest. That kind of turned him on, too. "God, you're not even selling the good stuff."

"How d'you know? You haven't even tried it," he said, and tugged at his pants a little from the knees. "I'll give you a bargain -- a little tune-up for your lonely night."

"Screw you."

"What? I'm serious. C'mon, it's gotta get boring, with just the one pair of hands and all."

"Every time I take MDMA I gotta beat off about a hundred times before I can get any sleep."

"After the orgies, though, right? I mean -- you don't actually take it just to sit by yourself."

"What d'you think?"

Well, that was just an invitation to think about an orgy involving his truancy officer, and Kenny was digging it. It'd taken him a month to realize the guy was a huge fuckin' dork all dressed up in a hard-ass attitude, and winding him up and setting him off were still Kenny's favorite activities during their rides around Park County, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't wanna wrestle him out of his uniform, sometimes. But that wasn't so unusual, Kenny thought. He'd had a bunch of fantasies starring police officers, even a few with Stotch; he just got off on fucking over authority, probably. Cartman would be a riot, though -- like, Kenny couldn't even do the fantasy justice in his head -- so he gave up thinking about it, kinda.

Kenny watched him tug at his sweaty hair, and thought how he wouldn't mind doin' it for him, if he'd just let him, for once. But so far -- and this was a bit surprising -- Cartman was right; he wasn't easy. A month and a half of pretty fuckin' straightforward propositioning had earned Kenny equally straightforward rejections, but occasionally he managed to work the cop up into one of his blushing rages, which were always a good laugh. At first, Kenny had only done it to bug Cartman into abandoning his case -- but now, he just liked watching his reactions. Kenny admitted it would suck to have a different truancy officer. He didn't like Cartman, or anything, he just thought he was kinda interesting.

"I was only half-serious about you beating off in your car all the time," Kenny said. "Didn't think I'd actually catch you with your dick out."

"It's nearly three in the morning -- shouldn't you be sleeping, or something? Y'got school tomorrow, don't ya?"

"It's Sunday morning, Officer Spunk-hands." Kenny said, sliding down in the seat. "So no."

"Go home, hey -- I can't have you riding shotgun if something comes up."

"I'll get out if something comes up," he mumbled, then searched for the lever on the seat so he could lean it back. Kenny stretched out with a shuddering sigh.

"You can't just lay around in here. What does this look like? A rolling shelter?"

"You wanna gummy worm?"

"No, I -- I don't like eating unnatural things with supposedly natural flavors."
Kenny chuckled, pulling the bag back. "Man, you got somethin' for everythin'."

"D'you eat anything besides candy?"

"Hm?" He licked sour sugar coating from his lips. "Should I start drinking black coffee, too? Get all my vitamins that way, I bet."

"That's different -- I'm an adult; my body's settled into its final evolution, so I can pretty much do whatever I want to it outside of birthing a baby and it won't change. You're growing, man -- you gotta be doing that food pyramid shit, right? They still teach that, right?"

"I heard gluten makes your dick fly off."

"Only if you're an idiot about it."

"Y'know, I never thought I'd be getting shit for my diet from you, of all people."

"I'm not giving you shit," he said, finally moving his hands away from his crotch and pulling at his pants again. "I'm wondering why you're in my damn car at three o'clock in the morning."

"I'm trying to shake a tail."

"You got a tail? Mother of god." He lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"I just need the heat to go down a bit," Kenny said, and reached over to tap at the dial on the stereo. "What're you listening to? An audio book? Who beats off to an audio book."

"I don't like wasting time. I have to sit out here in like six-hour shifts -- might as well read something."

Kenny dug around in the shit in the foot-space, looking for the audiobook casing. "Stephen King. Of course you're reading Stephen King. Hey, do the streets fill up with blood when you close your eyes? Do you even need Stephen King's help for that?"

"As if you even read," he hissed.

"Sure I do -- I was in the library that one time, wasn't I?"

Kenny chewed around a mouthful of gummy worms and watched the red eyes narrow. To be real, the worms kind of made him sick, but he didn't actually wanna pop a boner in front of his fuckin' truancy officer, and the damned pseudo-natural flavors were helping to keep him out of it. That and imagining the streets full of blood.

"Ha-ha. You think you're real fuckin' cute, don't you, McCormick. I can't wait for the holidays; you can go away and I won't have to tear up my colon giving a shit."

Yeah, as if Kenny hadn't heard that about six million times in the past six weeks.

"Roll your eyes at me one more time," he warned. "Seriously -- as if it's not enough that you're fucking up my sleep patterns during the day, now you're wrecking every solitary moment I have. How'd you even know this was my car?"

"How could I not? It smells like your damn cum for miles."

Kenny was rewarded with the swift reddening of his face -- and he knew it wasn't just anger -- and shit, there was nothing he liked to do more than humiliate jack-ass cops.
Cartman flung out a hand to pause the audiobook, then leaned his elbow on the sill to continue pulling at the hair at the back of his head. Silence descended on the car.

Kenny had lost his bet -- one of the informal ones, anyway -- the one he'd made with Wendy about Cartman signing off in a month. He still didn't understand quite why he'd lost, since it was obvious he was nothing but a pain in the ass to the officer. He thought maybe he had one of those sick personalities that actually liked hanging around shit they hated; that half-explained the way he bitched about his job. Then Kenny thought maybe he was doing it for the challenge; like Kenny, he thought the first one to give in to the law lost, somehow, and Officer Cartman hated losing.

"You'll miss me," he sneered.

Cartman snorted against the window. A little fog of air built up on the glass. "Eff that -- that's grabby, even for you."

"Well, you've only been crowing about how great the holidays will be all week."

"I don't crow --"

"And the giving a shit part, I think I've heard that maybe forty times since yesterday morning --"

"Oh my God, you're so full of yourself."

"Well, if it isn't the cop calling the criminal crooked," Kenny said. "You're so full of yourself you sit in this stinky beat-off palace and think up new ways to tell people you don't give a shit."

"Beat-off palace?" He squeaked.

One of the best parts about winding Cartman up was seeing just where his voice could go -- and the answer was everywhere. Thinking back to Officer Dickface from Day One made Kenny want to laugh; it was so different from the image he'd built up of Cartman. He was still a prime Officer Dickface, bitching and ranting and gesturing over the steering wheel, but Kenny couldn't think it the same way without remembering all the windy afternoons cruising in his car. He just never thought he'd see anything like a cop in douche aviators shaking his head to today's trashy tunes -- mouth moving to the voice of Wiz Khalifa, for God's sake -- Kenny'd never seen anything like it.

"Are you horny, or something?"

"Uh?" Kenny licked his lips.

"You've only adjusted your pants a hundred times in the last five minutes."

"Maybe like, twice. Why're you lookin'?"

"That's it -- get out of my car."

"Whuh? What'd I say?"

"Get out. Or I'll drive you home."

"Come on, man, you won't do that. You've gotta finish your patrol, or whatever. It looked pretty serious, just a minute ago. Hey, what're you lookin' for out here, anyway? You on Schlafes Bruder work?"

"Hey, don't just throw that around, okay?"
"Why? What's gonna happen?" Kenny said, wiping his sticky hands on his jeans. "God gonna strike me down? One of the members in listenin' distance? Oh, wait -- there's one right next to me."

Cartman heaved one of his terrific sighs, and started buttoning up his uniform.

"You can talk about it, you know. Like, who'm I gonna tell?"

He snorted. "Oh, I don't know -- maybe any one of the slime-balls you come into contact with every day on the streets. Don't talk about this shit, seriously -- the less you know about it, the better."

"I'm not askin' about it, I'm askin' about you."

Kenny watched the cop shuffle around -- even saw his hand make an aborted twitch toward the sunglasses folded next to the gear-shift -- but instead he pulled out the audiobook disc and replaced it with a CD.

"How far's your record go back, anyway?"

"They brought me in a year after I graduated college," he said, then uttered a dry chuckle. "Imagine that -- I finished high school and volunteered for another four years of the same bullshit. Damn near sold my soul to afford it, too."

"That's not what I mean -- I bet you had a record early, like before high school."

Cartman paused in dragging a hand over his face, and glared at Kenny between his fingers. "Why would you bet that."

"I bet y'got nabbed real early," he said, toeing out of his boots and pulling up his legs to lean against the door. "Like, I bet they took you in for the first degree when you was eight or something. I bet you did all that hard time at juvie you were talking about -- hot-shot like you, I'll bet you even staged an escape or something."

"You read my file."

"And you thought I didn't read."

"How did you even -- ? The only hard copy's with me, the rest of the archive is digitized -- "

"But all ya need is one login key to get into local department records."

"Well, you don't have mine," he scoffed. "But... ah, hell. Are you logging in as Butters?"

Kenny clasped his hands behind his neck. "It was so easy, man. He keeps all his keys on these Post-it notes, right? I locked him out of his dinky office, you know, and got a good twenty minutes with it all -- then I told him I thought I heard gunfire and got scared, and he believed me."

"Jesus, Kenny, you're a fucking threat to national security."

"Oh, who cares if I dug up the dirt on a few towny cops in Colorado? There's hardly anything interesting in there, anyway. Besides you, of course -- filled up a whole USB, nearly, just with arrest reports from before you hit high school. It's all really entertaining, actually -- like a damn TV show. I mean, the Tenorman thing alone was fucking mastercraft for an eight-year-old; not to mention getting cashed as a super-villain -- "

"I was a super hero, thanks. People just couldn't understand my concept."
"The Coon!" Kenny cried. He really had to wipe a tear from his eye, it was so entertaining. "You were even an eager-to-offend, big-dick-swinging cop type before leaving elementary."

"I'm not a cop type. Stop saying that. Offensive, sure -- big dick swinging, of course. But I'm not a cop type."

Kenny laughed until his sides hurt; of all the shit he gave this guy, the things that really pissed him off were cracks at his weight and comparisons to state authorities. He was talking to a drug dealer in a uniform; he knew -- and Cartman was the worst cop ever, probably. But he was the best one Kenny had ever met, anyway. In a weird way.

"Man, I oughta file a sexual harassment claim, or something, with how much we talk about your dick."

"At least you'd have some evidence this time, even though I'm the one being violated, here."

"Hey," Kenny said, scooting forward until his shins hit the gear-shift. "You know what else I found in those records? I mean, besides your mailing address and the license plates on all your vehicles. I found some old city council notes on a civil courts claim you filed against Kyle Brov-something or other because he refused to suck your balls. Man, how right was I?"

The cop pushed up against the driver's side door, leaning his head on the arm propped on the sill. Kenny just wanted to get a good look at his eyes, maybe.

"I was right on, wasn't I? I know you, dude. Your mom probably doesn't even know you -- she's wonderin' where she went wrong, why 'er son's the damn devil -- but she doesn't know you just like getting your balls sucked by people who've wronged you."

"Get out of the car."

"I'd love to, man. I probably smell like I've been trapped inside your pants for like, a week -- but I needa shake this tail. I don't feel like getting merc'd tonight just for selling Molly on Bruder territory."

"Then I'll take you home," he said. But there wasn't any inflection in it -- just a drone like an old memorized line. He wouldn't look away from the damn window, even.

"What's wrong?" Kenny asked, scooting up until his knees edged onto the driver's seat. "You got Eminem on -- Bitch Please usually makes you so happy. Was it the stuff about your mom? You know I'm just fucking with you -- "

"I know that, dip-shit. Can ya sit back in the damn seat?"

"Oh, I see," Kenny said, sliding back a few inches. "You want me to get out 'cause you're nervous, nervous your crumby morals will crumble the hell down and you'll find a few minutes for molesting a minor -- I wouldn't even be surprised if you took a liking to it, given your pure as moonshine record."

"You wish."

"Kinda."

Cartman snorted against the window. "That's one lawsuit I don't mind avoiding. Forever, Yellow Wolf."
Kenny sat up on his knees again and slid closer. "Hey, I wanted to ask. How come you haven't transferred me yet? Like, you could've brought me in easy by now, but you don't. What's the deal?"

"I don't know."

"That's 'cause you're not even thinkin' about it. Why not, huh? I'm wrecking your super solitude, aren't I? You're angry, aren't ya?"

He'd just reached a hand out to flick at the officer's lapel when Cartman's red eyes snapped to him, and in a moment Kenny's wrist bones were sort of clicking together beneath his grip and he was shoved back against the passenger door.

"I don't know, alright?" He snarled. "I should leave you in juvie to give you a taste of absolute power -- I should hand you over to those butt-fuckers and let them have their way with you until nothing's left. You're a perfect pain in the fuckin' ass and I literally feel like I'm dying when that fucking radar wakes me up. So what's stopping me? Why don't I cuff you up and leave you, goddammit? Maybe I'm just a masochist."

"Naw, you don't wanna let them have their way with me 'cause you'd rather do it, is that it?" Kenny sneered. "So you'll wait till I turn eighteen, then turn me in, is that it?"

"You think your age is the problem, here? You think I'm waiting to watch your crooked teeth go down on me? I'm a fucking cop!"

"Well, you're a whacking-off cop, at most."

Cartman groaned, slumped down over the steering wheel and put his hand on the gear-shift like he wanted to pull the car out of park without even starting the engine. Kenny thought he was having some kind of breakdown -- it was fucking hilarious. He scooted forward again put his hand on the officer's back to move it around in circles like Wendy did.

It was so weird -- he had his hand there for a whole song, almost. Got a pretty good map of his shoulders before Cartman turned his head and blinked at him. The steering wheel had left a red streak across his forehead. Kenny wanted to drink the blood out of his eyes, suddenly.

"I hate you."

He finally stopped biting on his smile and chuckled at his truancy officer. "You're so cute, man. It makes me wanna cook you breakfast, or something."

Cartman's eyebrows quirked. Or, one of them did -- the other was stuck up permanently where it rested against the wheel. "You cook."

"Well, I can make eggs and grilled cheeses. Pretty much every guy knows how to make those."

"Kenny -- you can't be here. I gotta take you home."

Kenny sighed and withdrew his hand. Cartman didn't usually use his first name. "How much longer is your shift?"

His eyes flicked to the clock nestled behind the wheel. "Forty-five minutes."

"That's like, the rest of this CD, right? Then let's wait till then. I'll even look away if you wanna finish up that important patrol thing you were doing earlier."
"Screw you," he whined into the wheel.

Kenny grinned, sliding back in his seat. So fucking cute, his truancy officer. The same dickface who flung himself into red-faced ranting over a gritty cup of coffee, with those great big veins popping out of his neck and forehead, was also the one who beat off to audiobooks and had weird quiet breakdowns over the steering wheel -- Kenny had really never seen anything like it. He wanted to wrestle him out of his damn uniform, he really did.
Cartman never really liked holidays. Not for a long time, anyway -- once you got a salary, holidays were just kid stuff; they were an excuse for everyone to act real phony happy about their miserable lives. Cartman hated it.

When he woke up on his second vacation day of the winter, Cartman thought he was in a pretty good mood -- like, sea-level, almost. For just the one week leading up to the new year, he could forget his patrols, most of his paperwork, and use the time to get ahead on some cases. Casework never stopped, unfortunately, but he was so used to living inside them that he didn't even know how else to spend his time. The schools let out from mid-December to mid-January, too, so that was a whole month without his beeping fucking radar. He'd woke up in the middle of the day a few times to phantom beeping before finally taking the batteries out of the damn thing and throwing it in his laundry nook. That settled his mind somewhat.

After a video-call with his mother, Cartman's mood plummeted. She was in L.A., hanging around with some new booze-hound with deep pockets, and she'd looked starving happy about all of it; but she spent the whole damn call asking about his dumb life -- how was her poopsie-kins getting along, and was he eating right, and had he talked to Heidi lately -- and she kept saying how sorry she was that she wouldn't make it back to Colorado for the holidays this year. Jaded, jaded, jaded, Cartman could hardly stand it. Answering all those dumb questions even though he knew she didn't have a single fuck to give. How had he not realized how fake it all was, before? She hated him, probably -- she really ought to hate him -- so why didn't she just show it?

He was so messed up after the call, he didn't bother trying to beat a cup of coffee out of his machine - instead, he broke his promise to himself not to leave the apartment, and went out to get a cup from the nearby Starbucks. He should've known better. The video-call had already brought him down to where the waves were lapping at his eyeballs, but going out into public was like having his head held under the water.

The first thing the cashier said to him was 'good morning', for Chrissake. As if Cartman had had a single good effing morning in the last six years, for Chrissake. So he said 'go fuck yourself' and got the old tight-eye the whole time he waited for his coffee. Like Cartman was the asshole. But the thing was, the cashier probably wasn't having a good morning either, even before Cartman came in. It was just that old small-talk formula that had been welded into a new language by the service industry. How are you doing, good, how can I help you, great, take care -- after a while, throwing all those lies around got tiring. Everyone was so busy square-dancing around politeness, they forgot what genuine human contact looked like, even. Cartman wanted to tell the cashier not to be such a fag, or something, but that would probably just earn him double the tight-eye, so he didn't bother.

But someone had to do it, he thought. Somebody had to tell all these people to stop being fags. Everyone was so busy pretending, scrubbing themselves clean of any quirk or funny human smell and then judging others for not doing the same -- break your back long enough observing civil rituals and social taboos and you start to forget you're really a primate, with the same competitive sex drive and a slightly more complicated formula for taking a mate. The civilized ape forgets who they are and then, how to live. Instead of building a den it rents an apartment; you borrow a space, on the condition that you leave no trace of your dwelling there. From there it's a slippery slope. Civilized people forgot how to care. Who and what to care about. The TV commands you. You start to expect good mornings and build nonsense opinions on the terrible and godlike amorphous blob important men in suits refer to as the economy. You care about sports, filial piety, monogamy, but barely spare a brain-cell for genocide, for fuck's sake.
After the ordeal, Cartman grabbed a newspaper and walked his coffee back to his building under the same cloud of existential dread. He decided to take the elevator back up to his apartment, but then the goddamn elevator man said good morning to him, too -- and Cartman grit out a 'good morning' that sounded a bit like 'go fuck yourself.' That stuff just burned on the way out, it really did.

Back in his apartment, Cartman spent a few hours going over last month's rejected indictment another hundred times, looking for flaws. He still thought it was all there. He'd asked the sheriff about it, but he'd said drop it. If the grand jury thought there was insufficient evidence, then just drop it. Cartman had bit a bloody hole on the inside of his cheek by the time he left the office. He thought of calling Kyle to see if there was some backdoor in the law he could use to sneak the indictment forward -- but then he remembered it was the holidays. Talking with Kyle would probably piss him off, anyway. He wouldn't've minded talking to someone not so full of bullshit as the general public, but he didn't exactly feel like arguing, either.

The highlight of his day was flipping through the newspaper; the center-fold stories were all shit, of course, but he found a story about an arson investigation that really knocked him out. Three officers in his precinct had been sent out to investigate an abandoned building that had mysteriously burned to the ground over the weekend. It was hilarious; an abandoned, eyesore building in one of the poorer residential areas in downtown South Park was burned to the ground -- a goddamned public service, if you asked Cartman -- and the department had to pay for three assholes to go investigate it and file a bunch of paperwork, probably. The housing in the area was so cruddy it was a crime to make people live in it, but let's hustle to slam cuffs on whoever's responsible for the erasure of an abandoned shack. This had Yellow Wolf written all over it.

He spent the majority of the day on a deep slide into self-pity, and when evening came he figured he oughta shower and eat something, then maybe pass out over some video games. Cartman knew realistically only one of those things would happen. He was several hours into a car chase on Need for Speed: Most Wanted when his cellphone rang. His work cell was off -- but he still got suspicious whenever a phone rang, since nobody really called him outside of work. And he knew Stan and Wendy were off dune-buggying in Arizona, or something, so that narrowed down the pool of potential callers to a near zero.

"Yeah?"

"Dude -- !"

He hung up, tossed the phone onto the couch, and un-paused his game.

Cartman ignored the next ring, and the next. But then he started thinking -- like, it was pretty cold out. He was in his apartment and still wearing about twenty sweaters, and when he looked out the window, the skies were already dark. He thought of that woman's crack-fiend eyes darting around, and the reeking rat-hole trailer.

Cartman heaved a sigh and wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear. "What?"

"Cartman!" came Kenny's voice. "I'm -- wait, are those sirens? What're you doing?"

"My job."

"Are you on a chase?"

"Yes."

"...Are you playing video games?"
"Kenny. What d'you want? I'm busy." How did he even get his number, Cartman wondered, but didn't bother asking.

"I'm locked in a shed."

"A what?"

"A shed, man. They've got me in a damn shed. How do I get out?"

"Who's they."

"Uhh -- bad people, dude -- they wanna take my lunch money."

"They wouldn't lock you in a shed for your cruddy lunch money. Are you being trafficked?"

"Uh, yeah, that's it. Can you help me? I needa get out of here."

Cartman paused the game, lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "What's the shed made of?"

"Huh? Wood, I guess."

He hung up the phone, and tossed it on the couch. It rang at least once more, but Cartman turned the music up on his speakers, and ignored it. Wood, for Chrissake. As if fucking Yellow Wolf couldn't get his own ass out of a wood shed. And he couldn't've been in that much danger, if he had time to heckle Cartman about playing video games. Right? He wasn't gonna run his ass around on vacation for a damn teenager, right? He'd promised himself he wouldn't. Cartman needed a break, he really did; Kenny was very nearly too fucking much for him, especially since he didn't even have a reliable coffee machine anymore.

Aside from all the teenage smart-assery he took from him on a daily basis, McCormick had found a new hobby in driving the conversation around to sex -- which hadn't been anything, really, since Cartman wasn't gay and he definitely wasn't shy -- but it had become an everyday onslaught of wandering eyes and clumsy innuendo. His truant then developed an unsettling knack for finding him on patrol in the dead of night. There were a handful of neighborhoods under Cartman's watch, but no matter which car he drove or where he parked it, McCormick had managed to drop in on him at least once every fuckin' week leading up to vacation. It made him so nervous he didn't even dare trying to wank anymore, and by the time school let out, Cartman was too sleep-deprived to even start to address the frustration building up under his damn uniform. He didn't dare volunteer for a run-in with McCormick when he was so under-sexed; he'd been planning to take care of it after this game, for fuck's sake, the last thing he needed was some pretty blond thing in his lap. Not like he was tempted or anything. He just didn't want to snap on the kid and hurt him or something. Kenny already caught him with his dick out once, which was enough that, if he wanted to go to the station, he could start an inquiry, and that would -- that would take Cartman off the case, of course. He almost gave Heidi a buzz -- but since his mom mentioned her, he banished the thought.

What if he was being trafficked?

Cartman paused the game again and groaned to his empty apartment. It was possible. It was too possible. Stinky street kid, all on his own and pretty as a damned sun-block advertisement -- it was possible.

He dug his phone out of the cushions and dialed the number on the last call received. There was no answer. He groaned again, dialed a different number, and crammed the phone between his shoulder and ear while he got up to find his shoes and dig out the keys to the Volvo he used to do average-citizen shit.
Token was on-call at the station. Cartman gave him a half-truth about a suspicious call, and after some carefully un-offensive persuasion, got his old partner to run a trace on the number, and give him the location of its last dial. Surprise, surprise -- it'd come from that trailer park, the one on the North-South border. Cartman's skin crawled just thinking about returning to the address -- it didn't even help ease his mind that the kid was so close to home; in fact, it seemed even more sinister. Why the hell would he be locked up on his own property?

Cartman tried the number a few more times on the road. If Kenny was just looking to bug him, he would answer, wouldn't he? Or maybe this was an elaborate plan to call up Cartman for a ride -- he glanced at the clock on his dash. It was almost midnight, but time had never meant anything to them.

He was just parking on the road outside the gravel when his phone rang again.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Where are you?" Kenny cried. "I thought you were s'posed to be on the Tree-streets tonight!"

"Wait, what? Calm down -- I'm not on patrol this week --"

"Huh?"

"I'm on vacation, you fuck!" Cartman yelled, feeling a surge of rage warm his face. "Why am I spending it drivin' around lookin' for you!"

He didn't get a response right away, but he heard a ton of shuffling and breathing and shit.

Cartman pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tell me you're not on the Tree-streets."

"I had nowhere to go!" He said, suddenly whispering. "My dad locked me in his crumby shed! Which -- thanks for the fucking back-up on that one, man --"

"You said it was wood! Who gets trapped in a wooden shed?"

"Just 'cause it's wood doesn't mean it don't got a gigan'ic padlock on it! What was I s'posed to do?"

There was some shuffling again. "Look, whatever -- can you come pick me up, please?"

"Oh-ho, if you think please is gonna get me out there --"

"I'm not -- " more shuffling. "I'm not doin' so good."

Cartman glanced at the thermometer on his dash. It was nine below. "Where are you?"

"The intersection of Pine and Elm -- by that old bodega."

Jesus. Why couldn't he find a damn bridge to hide under, like all the other homeless waifs? Cartman could think of a hundred safer places to run to that were better than Bruder territory, for Chrissake. But -- the kid had gone looking for him, and now he'd just feel like a damned murderer if something happened out there. Cartman could at least ferry him back home and still only lose a couple hours of his vacation time.

He briefly considered pulling into a side-street to fuckin' whack off or something, before picking up his personal pain in the ass, anything to melt the ice sticking in his throat -- but the Tree-streets, for Chrissake -- it really was a lousy area.

Cartman wanted to take a deep breath, maybe, but it was only half-way past the ice-block when a shadow peeled from around the dumpsters and dove for the passenger door.
Yellow Wolf settled in his seat and curled up tightly in his parka without a word. That made Cartman feel kinda shitty. The rant he'd prepared for him got caught behind the wreck of that half-breath and the icy worry from before, so he swallowed it. The seventeen-year-old was wracked with shivers.

"I don't need to tell you how stupid it was coming out here. Here, of all fucking places." Cartman grumbled eventually. He fiddled with the AC and pulled out onto the main road.

"What's your crazy dad doin' lockin' you in a shed for, anyway?"

After a while he caught a mumble from the orange hood. And what he thought he heard made Cartman feel so shitty, he started to get angry.

"No, no -- I don't want your motherfuckin' thank yous," he snapped back. "I want you to stop bothering me. I'm not a fucking nanny service; this isn't the damn Big Brother program. I was trying to enjoy my one week of vacation -- "

"Let me out."

"Huh?"

McCormick sat up like he'd seen a damn leprechaun outside the window and started pulling at the door. "Let me out right here!"

"No!" Cartman said, startled out of his rage. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"If I'm such a pain in the ass, then just dump me here, huh!" Yellow Wolf bit back, and he finally turned to face Cartman. He looked kinda beat up. Again. But he also kinda looked like he wanted to cry, and fuck -- Cartman didn't want to deal with that.

"I'm gonna dump you at home -- "

It was the wrong thing to say. Kenny's hood fell as he scrambled with the door until the crappy lock released -- Cartman regretted not taking his cruiser, which could at least contain the little demon -- and he started opening the door on the damn moving vehicle.

"Jesus -- " Cartman swore, pulling the car to a stop while also making a grab for the escaping adolescent. "Kenny, just tell me -- "

"Fuck you!" He spat. "I'm not going back there!"

"Okay! Okay, alright? Just sit your ass down for a second!"

He was half out of his seat and finally got the door shut with the truant inside -- but when he tried to pull the seatbelt around, he was fought tooth and nail. Cartman gave up and collapsed back into the driver's seat. He had another go at taking that deep breath from earlier. He thought of Stan and Wendy on vacation in Arizona. He bet it was warm and dry there; he bet dune-buggying in the desert would be so fucking sweet, especially with some bitch you were in love with. The breath rushed through him and Cartman felt emptied by it. What the hell was his life, anyway?

"Are you hurt?"

McCormick crossed his arms over his middle and sank down in the seat.

"Is he the one who beats the crap out of you, then?"

That earned him a hard blue glare, at least.
"Well -- why wouldn't ya say somethin', then?"

"And then what?" He muttered. "Rather have a father."

Cartman sighed. He'd heard similar reasoning from other under-18 drifters -- and he didn't have a single damned thing to say about it. Cartman grew up without a father; in fact, he grew up under constant hatred of the faceless bastard -- so he didn't have a clue how to empathize with broken houses like McCormick's. All he saw was its side-effects, and none of them were good.

"Where am I taking you, then?" He said, locking the doors -- for all the good it would do -- and pulling his car back into drive.

His response was another mumble. That would get annoying, Cartman thought, if he was a parent.

"The drop-in center?" He confirmed. "Okay."

The drop-in center was an extension of CFS that most of the homeless -- at risk, Cartman corrected sourly -- kids could take advantage of when they had nowhere else to go. The center offered snacks, 24-hour counseling, and a few cots for occasional overnight stays. It was a better alternative than the shelter, which was a carnival of bad influence and only allowed overnights if you were over 18, anyway. But -- well, it wasn't the Grand Hotel or anything.

By the time Cartman reached the center of the city, Kenny had fallen asleep against the door. It was the quietest ride he'd ever had with him, aside from the part where he'd tried to jump out the damn moving vehicle.

The drop-in center was a block from the shelter, across the street from City Hall, and nestled between the CFS main building and a theater. Cartman always got a kick out of that -- at any given time of day, you could catch a show at the Royal Theatre for thirty bucks; you could be sitting there in your miracle of 21st century engineering comfort chair, around all that popcorn-smell and red fuckin' carpeting, meanwhile the building next door is packed with kids who sell MDMA at block parties and can't afford a lousy new jacket. It was hilarious, really.

Cartman eyed the dark line of buildings. There were a couple spooks hanging on the steps outside the center smoking -- smoking something -- and he toed at the brake but never really but his foot down on it. Parens patriae, he thought.
Kenny woke up in a strange car in a strange parking garage with a breeze on his belly.

He inhaled sharply through his nose and started to tense up, but the tension reignited the pain in his abdomen. He clamped down on a the breath and shut his eyes again to force himself to relax.

His truancy officer was squatting on the ground outside the passenger door. Kenny hadn't even noticed the car stop moving -- and barely remembered the door opening. And he definitely didn't remember Cartman pushing up his shirt and shit; he was suddenly wide awake and just on the cusp of amusement -- choked back a joke and watched the officer instead. Cartman looked real disappointed. Kind of the same way he'd looked at Kenny when they argued about juvie the very first time; it was like he'd just got confirmation that everything sucked, but he had to wake up tomorrow morning anyway.

Kenny looked down and admired a couple old belt-buckle scars on his sides before eyeing the fresh bruising over his ribs. The majority was a classic case of surface bruising, probably, but some spots were sort of swollen and red; Kenny hoped none of the softer ribs were broken. He wouldn't know for sure until a few days -- for now, every movement of his torso was accompanied by a searing ricochet of sharp and dull throbbing; Kenny felt like a bagful of dead leaves.

"Told ya I wasn't doin' so good." He said, trying for light-hearted. "He was pretty mad tonight."

"Any particular reason?"

He didn't know why Cartman bothered with sunglasses, even -- he had that remarkable cop ability to go totally soulless with apathy even looking you right in the eyes. He also had a little riot of freckles collecting around his nose, Kenny noticed.

Cartman let his shirt fall and set about re-zipping his parka. Kenny tried to shrug off an answer, but... he owed him. He was literally the only one Kenny had to call. If Marsh was in town, he might've called her, but she was off on holiday, and the circumstances were kind of extreme -- and he'd panicked.

"He heard somethin' on the news, I guess. Thought it mighta been me, toein' the line again, or whatever. As if -- "

"Somethin' about a case of arson in downtown South Park, I guess?" Cartman said, standing up and moving away from the car.

Damn, he thought, but then Kenny couldn't help it; he smiled till his fuckin' eyes squinted shut, because he'd hoped that little thing might catch Cartman's attention. He'd planned to throw some shit in the news over the holidays, just to shake things up until the cop admitted he missed him, maybe; it would've been grand. Like, it would've been a grand series of fuck yous -- but this way worked, too. Kenny only had to throw one dart to hit the bull's eye -- he'd underestimated his father's overreaction to the obscure bit of news, and overestimated Cartman's under-reaction, but it all worked out.

Kenny was still surprised he got picked up -- and without a single rant, really -- and not only that, but he sure as hell wasn't at the damn drop-in center.

"Where are we?" He asked, wrapping an arm around his bruisy ribs and slipping out of the car.

They were in an underground parking garage. It smelted like cigarettes and the bog. Cartman had
paused a few feet away, facing the lit exit-stairwell. Kenny finally noticed his truancy officer was in civilian clothes; it was like seeing him unplugged from the goddamn *Matrix* and suddenly Cartman really was a sad, screwed-up 26-year-old and not just a grouchy suit who acted like he was half in the grave already.

Kenny circled the officer till he could look at his face, and -- and he was chewing, of course. Chewing at his lip like he'd just realized they landed on the wrong fucking planet, or something.

"What's on your shirt?" Kenny said, eyeing the yellow-blue-green radiation graphic on his chest under the outer layers.

"Cosmic microwave background radiation," he murmured, looking at Kenny like he was a traffic cone.

He wanted to snort because *what-a fucking nerd* but that made his chest tighten and his ribs creak and rustle. "Ugh," he grunted instead.

"I live on the sixth floor."

"Elevator?"

"We *can't* take the elevator," he said, in this huge bitch tone: as if he'd already told him a hundred times but Kenny just kept forgetting -- that was a bitch tone. "There's a douche who stands in it all day saying stupid shit like *good morning.*"

Kenny laughed even though it hurt. "And I bet you hate that."

"You'd win *that* bet. Anyway, every one of them has seen me in uniform; I can't be seen with a bruised-up minor at this time of night. They'll think I ordered you out of a *catalog*, or something."

"What? No, c'mon, I'm *barely* a minor -- just tell them we're old college bros, or something. Maybe we got into a late-night bar fight. That's perfectly normal. I can't do stairs. I mean I really can't."

Cartman snorted. "You *definitely* can't pass for a college grad, McCormick. You could probably order from the damn kids' menu, still. On a good acne day, maybe."

"Oh *fuck* you."

"Besides -- I can't say anything, I *never* talk to them; it would look even *more* suspicious if I suddenly started treating them like people."

"Listen," he said, shifting on his feet. White Adidas trainers. Like old school *Jay-Z*. "You gonna make it, even? Should I take you to the hospital?"

Kenny rolled his eyes; he obviously didn't need to go to the damn hospital -- this was Cartman in stage two of regret: try to throw everything in reverse. The worst thing Kenny could do right now -- if he wanted to avoid a night freezing his ass off in the drop-in center -- would be to crack some sexy innuendo at the poor guy.

"Just carry me, dude -- I promise I won't get a boner. Well, I'll try not to, anyway." Oops.

Cartman's eyes narrowed on him -- and it was nice to see *some* sort of expression there -- and he approached Kenny. "We're gonna make some fuckin' *rules*, alright? Rule number one: if you say *any* more shit like that, you can sleep in the *car*, alright?"
He dropped down to a squat again and glared over his shoulder. "And if a damn word of this gets out to Wendy, then -- then you can depend on her for surprise overnights in the future. 'Cause I'm done."

Kenny chuckled and climbed over his truancy officer. Cartman gripped his knees and stood, shaking him higher on his shoulders like a backpack.

"Not like she could give a crap all the way from Arizona," he continued, mounting the first flight of stairs. "You can rent a dune-buggy out there for like ninety bucks, dude, and ride around in the red dirt until the sun sets. How fucking sweet is that."

Kenny thought that sounded pretty fucking sweet. He huffed a breath over Cartman's ear and let him talk.

"Stan sent me a video of them riding up a dry river bed. There's this part called the Devil's Steps -- because it's a bunch of sharp boulders like a staircase, you know? -- and these little buggies can crawl right the fuck over them. And the best part is, after you're done off-roading, doing all that wild shit, you can just drive the buggy down the road back to the rental place. Like, how sweet is that? This little dune-buggy, man, just driving on the road like fuck those cops."

"Fuck the cops," Kenny mumbled. He was getting tired again. Sometimes it felt good to smell other people close to you. Not close like on a crowded subway or an airport where everyone is just sweaty and kind of nervous; but like when some of your brother's clothes make it into the laundry with yours, or a friend lends you a scarf. Lots of Kenny's clothes were secondhand from goodwill and shit -- Cartman even caught him looting the dryers at the laundromat a few times -- so he never really felt at home with any of them. Cartman was an only child; he probably never wore hand-me-downs.

"Hey -- thanks for this."

"No, don't say that, okay?" He paused to shake him up again. "I don't like when you say that."

"Why? I mean I kind of owe you one -- "

Cartman stopped on the next landing, let go of his legs, and starting prying Kenny's arms from around his neck. Kenny panicked.

"Wait, no, okay -- I didn't mean it. I totally wasn't going to offer you another blow job. I don't wanna sleep in the car -- "

"Shut up, hey, that's not it. D'you think I'm walking back down three flights of stairs to prove a point?" Cartman turned to him and made a vague gesture around his shoulders, like he was asking Kenny to dance. "I gotta switch you to the front 'cause I feel like I'm gonna over-balance and kill us both. Which -- I'd only regret not seeing that story in the news. Cop-truant double suicide? Unintentional man-slaughter during a rescue attempt? That's gold."

"What d'you want me to -- ?"

"I'm only going to say this once," he said, getting close with his super-cop-apathy on and pulling Kenny's arms over his shoulders. "Wrap your legs around me, man."

He groaned a little around the brief tension in his abdomen, but the pressure lessened as he relaxed into the new arrangement. Cartman clasped his arms under his ass and shook him up like a sack of fuckin' radishes. "Stop jostling me."

"Stick it up your ass, princess. I let you ride me for two and a half months, nearly, and now you're
even riding my lousy vacation time. I've never felt more like a damn horse."

Kenny wondered absentmindedly if his *parents* had ever held him like this, but if they had, it must've been too long ago to remember. Kenny tried really hard not to be pitiable. He devoted his whole life to provoking people till they didn't pity him -- he spit, he swore, he went out of his damn way with crude humor -- and he was *really* good at it. He knew just what to say, just where to strike; it was his only way to feel powerful when he was powerless. But Kenny didn't realize how much that kind of stuff impacted his personality until it isolated him, set him aside from his classmates and peers and even his parents. Fuck, even Officer golly-gee *Stotch* had kept him at arm's length.

Kenny came to a new realization that he was touch-starved, maybe, and he'd probably been taking it out on Cartman -- the only one who *had* to sit around and deal with him -- for the past two and a half months.

"What're you, like, a hundred pounds? Jesus."

There wasn't anything to do while someone was carrying you around except kinda stare at them. Kenny relaxed until his eyelids drooped.

"Is this the carry they teach you in cop school?" He mumbled.

"No," Cartman admitted, and paused on a step to shuffle him again. "But a fireman's carry would probably break your fuckin' ribs."

"Are they broken, huh?" He asked again. "You think anything's broken?"

Kenny hummed and turned his face into his truancy officer's neck. He didn't get why Cartman didn't have friends, really -- like, he seemed alright, if you overlooked his hard-on for arguing and hatred for most shit that wasn't himself. Cartman didn't pity him for getting his ass kicked; usually he just made Kenny feel like kind of an idiot. It was alright 'cause he could tell he'd only ever be *honest* about it, though.

"Shit, is that your nose? It's fucking freezing."

Kenny hummed again. He wanted to do more than warm his nose-tip against his neck. He wanted to bite into it -- right over where the big tendons in the cop's neck always jumped out to yell at him, maybe. He was so tempted, he opened his mouth and breathed right over the area. If he could just --

"Kenny -- you're grabbing my hair."

He chuckled. "You're grabbing my *ass*, Officer Double-standard."

Cartman's arms shifted. "*Not really*, though. And you know what -- give the cop jokes a rest, a'ight? I'm on off-duty, now. I'm just some dude. I picked you up in my cruddy Volvo, for Chrissake."

"*My cruddy Volvo, for Chrissake,"* Kenny mocked. "*Not even in uniform, for Chrissake.*"

"I don't *sound* like that. I wouldn't *say* that."

Kenny chuckled and drew his arms more securely around his neck until he felt like they weren't even two separate things anymore. He tightened his hand where it had crept up into the short hair on the back of his head -- fuck, Kenny was horny. He was a rustling bagful of leafy *pain* and he was *still* getting horny. And he knew Cartman was getting nervous 'cause he kept talking.

"And don't say *thank* you, anymore -- like, you shouldn't ever say that to law enforcement."
Especially not me. You don't owe me anything."

"I wasn't thankin' law enforcement, dude. But fine. Fuck you, then."

"That's okay; you can say that."

Cartman heaved a sigh and changed his pace as they reached the final landing. Kenny lifted his head to watch the numbers on the doors. He pressed his cold ear against the cop’s. He still kind of wanted to thank him, but Cartman hated that shit, and he obviously didn't want a blow-job, which is what Kenny thought all cops wanted. So he was sort of out of ideas.

"Hey -- don't tell anybody where I live, either, alright? I'm not running a couch-surfing operation, alright? The homeless spread like bacteria. Like hippies."

"Why would I fucking tell anybody."

"That's what Wendy tells everybody on the force," he said, and Kenny felt his hold shift as one hand moved to dig around in his pocket. "She says you can't take 'em home no matter how cute or needy they are, because then more come and bad shit happens. She mostly says that for naive idiots like Stotch, who still think kindness saves the damn world."

"Anyway," he sighed again, pushing open the door. "I'm the biggest idiot of the bunch, as it turns out."
The entryway smelled like road salt and melted ice. Cartman did a sort of dance over the floor mat to take off his shoes, and Kenny was afraid he'd drop him, for a second, but then he watched the front door get smaller over Cartman's shoulder as he shuffled deeper into the apartment.

"Don't steal my shit and pawn it, please," he sighed. "There's hardly anything in here worth more than a few hours selling Molly, anyway. If you still feel like you owe me, just leave the XBox."

The cabinets in the kitchen almost all didn't have doors, and there wasn't even a toaster, which Kenny thought was kind of weird -- but there was a microwave and a partly disassembled Mr. Coffee sitting on the counter, so those, at least, indicated the presence of a living human being.

"It's not much," he was saying, and Kenny felt his arms withdraw as he settled him on the counter. "But the water from the tap is safe to drink, which is more than I can say about my last place."

Kenny unhooked his arms and leaned back on his hands. He watched the chatty cop work at the laces on his boots, then craned around to get a look at the rest of the apartment. It was tough, though; the only light on was the one over their heads. He picked out the shape of a couch and a TV, and a dip off to the side that must've led to a bathroom. Or a bedroom. Kenny was gradually realizing that he was in a stranger's apartment. He was in a cop's apartment.

"-- and my neighbor had this yappy asshole rat-dog," Cartman was saying, moving back to the entryway to drop Kenny's boots onto the salty mat with a dull thud. "I wanted to bag it around my exhaust pipe until it stopped moving, I really did. But it never left the apartment."

"This place is no pets allowed," he continued, returning to the kitchen to begin fiddling with his parka again. "So, just don't bark too much."

It seemed like Cartman was kind of spacing out -- a lot. Kenny was starting to feel a little weird with his shirt hiked up and all, but this cop was staring at him like he was seeing a damn pregnant woman for the first time, so Kenny kicked his heels over the cabinets and waited.

His discomfort won out. "Hey, uh, you don't gotta -- I mean I think it's all good."

"Oh, yeah?" Cartman said. "Does this hurt?"

"Unh -- !" Kenny gasped and hissed through his teeth. "Well it does if you push on it, Officer fuckin' Kid-gloves!"

He thought he might get a rise from the cop joke, but Cartman had become a black hole. He could almost hear his inner monologue going wild. Like, Kenny bet some crazy stuff happened in there, to make him do the shit he did.

"Hey, uh, whatcha thinkin'?"

He dropped the shirt, planted his hands on either side of Kenny's hips, and pushed himself away from the counter with a noise of exasperation -- a halfway between a growl and a sigh. Kenny watched him clasp his hands behind his neck and sort of meld into the darkness outside the kitchen. He heard a thump, a curse, and then the blackness was cut by the silver glow of the TV.

*Knew it*, Kenny thought, recognizing the pause screen on a racing video game. Some music came into focus over the speaker system, and the apartment didn't seem so strange anymore; it was just a
bigger model of Cartman's police cruiser, with a TV and running water.

Kenny had a million and one beat-off palace jokes on the tip of his tongue when his truancy officer returned to the kitchen and slid in front of him -- but the cop's strange-ass red eyes were coming down on him sharp as all hell -- the nothingness from before had made a coin-flip to an *everything*ness, like something unmasked.

"You know what I hate?" He said abruptly, leering and all up in Kenny's face with a hint of old coffee breath. "I hate when *fags* get their hands on good shit, and *ruin* it for everyone else. Fags ruined World of Warcraft; they ruined music; they've *thoroughly* butt-fucked the education system; they even ruined *good mornings*. I'm *sick* of it."

"Sometimes," he said, and Kenny thought he might be losing his damn mind. "I wanna take all that good shit and *hide* it, you know? They don't *deserve* it, you know? But the world's so full of fags, man; it's *sticky* with them -- and I'm never there in time to stop them."

"Oh -- " Kenny realized. "Dude -- you think I'm good shit?"

Cartman leaned away, reaching a hand back to pull at his hair. Kenny found a loose register of laughter that didn't hurt his ribs so much.

"How can you *laugh*, man?" He said, shaking his head. "How can you still laugh so much?"

Kenny actually thought it through for a second, because if he was honest, he was in so much pain he could probably cry, but Cartman was *weird* and it was *funny* and if he stopped laughing -- even when everything sucked -- then what the hell was the point of living?

"Life is a joke," he decided. "Sometimes it's years, sometimes seconds long -- the punchline is just that you're still here, and laughing's the only power you have that nobody can ever take."

Kenny pushed his palms into the counter and continued. "And you know what? You know what *really* pisses off fags -- more than just telling them to go fuck themselves off? *Laughter*, dude. Next time somebody pisses you off, even if it's just in traffic or something, don't give them the finger. Don't try to tell 'em they're a fag -- 'cause that's what everyone's expecting. Instead, just smile at them. It'll fuck with their heads *all day*. And that's all you really wanted to do in the first place, right?"

Cartman chuckled at the floor, shook his head. He chuckled himself all the way back into the shadowed living room, and then disappeared around the corner. Kenny wanted to follow him, maybe, but he didn't feel like walking. He reappeared in the space of a few heartbeats, anyway, and began filling a glass at the tap.

"Here," Cartman said, delivering the glass and turning over Kenny's other wrist to press a couple tablets into his hand. "Wendy said not to give you drugs, either."

"No matter how cute and needy?" Kenny said, half-smiling as he brought the glass to his lips.

"Uh-huh," he confirmed. "You really *push* it, though, you know?"

He choked a little around the water but managed to get the pills down. Cartman was always saying he was pushing it, but that didn't seem like what he was saying now, exactly.

"Are you -- " Kenny paused to cough into the crook of his elbow. "Are you saying I'm *pushing* being cute?"
"And needy," He grumbled, taking the empty glass and moving it to the sink.

Kenny leaned back on his hands and bounced his heels against the cabinets, grinning. Boy, he was happy. Like, everything had really sucked today until now.

"You got a helluva set of teeth, you know."

"Fuck you," he sputtered, ducking his head.

"Hey, do I have to feed you? I'm fresh outta gummy worms, and even if there was anything else, I probably couldn't cook it into something edible..."

"We should order pizza." Kenny suggested, and licked his lips. He was starving, actually. "What're you playing, anyway?"

Cartman glanced over his shoulder at the pause screen. "Need for Speed."

"Rapido, mas mas mas!"

He rolled his eyes, but cracked a smile. And Kenny thought how if he'd just smile he'd be a knock-out.

"Hey, man," Kenny said. "I just got this brilliant idea -- let's hang out."

Cartman snorted. "What the hell've we been doin'?"

"I mean, we should be friends. It solves all our problems. You don't gotta be so sad and lonely; and I don't gotta mingle with the dope-fiends. Why didn't I think of this before?"

It seemed so obvious. But Cartman looked uncertain. "What?" Kenny asked. "There's nothing illegal about eating pizza and playing video games with your bros, is there?"

"Kenny -- " He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What? There's nothing wrong with that, right? You don't have to be a certain age to play video games with people. And -- I won't hit on you anymore, how 'bout that? No blow jobs, no dick jokes -- well, maybe not no dick jokes -- "

"Fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Does that mean -- I can use your name?"

He shrugged. "I never said you couldn't."

"What is it, then?"

"You know my fucking name," he scoffed. "It's only on my damn chest every single day."

"Yeah, but, y'never told me or anything."

"Jesus, you picked a weird time to get concerned over privacy," Cartman grit, shifting his weight foot to foot. He rolled his eyes at the tile, then lifted his gaze to Kenny's: "It's Eric."
"Okay." He continued. "Pizza. Pizza and candy. I should've known."

He stepped forward and Kenny lifted his arms, stuttering around another bit of laughter -- this carrying him around everywhere bullshit was hilarious -- and Kenny was stupid horny about it. Could he have walked his own ass over to the couch? Probably. But since he'd been sitting around like a paraplegic on a chairlift, the cop probably figured he still needed help.

"I should send my expenses to the accounting department," he was muttering. "Between gas, maintenance, and time -- and now food and utilities -- you're the easy-rider the government warned us about. Just like all the fags who listen to public radio but never donate to keep it running."

"You're never gonna stop bitching, are ya?" Man, he was cute, though. Like, the bitching was cute. Kenny didn't think he'd ever been turned on by a dude before, not really. His fantasies were more
like power-plays than sexual what-ifs.

"Let go."

Kenny glanced down and allowed himself to fall, then patted around in the cushions for a controller while Cartman moved back to the kitchen. *Fuck yeah*, he thought. The new XBox, of course -- not a single pack of instant noodles in the place, but of course Officer Dime-over-Dick would spend his "sad salary" on the newest console -- Kenny bet it was the most updated part of the apartment.

"Don't fuck up that chase," Cartman called. "I spent two and a half hours running from those fuckers, nearly. I don't want that car impounded."

"I got this, man. I'll knock over the doughnut tower -- "

But he didn't even get a chance to settle his fingers over the triggers before Cartman leaned over the back of the couch to pluck the controller from his hands. "Are you retarded?"

Kenny huffed and dropped his arms, kicked his feet up on the coffee table to see if it would piss him off. But when he glanced back -- Cartman was doing about a hundred things at once; he grit out demands to the cell phone held between his shoulder and ear, resumed the chase on the TV, and still managed to cast a dirty glare over Kenny's feet.

"The doughnut tower buys me like six seconds and a stupid cut-scene -- I've got helicopters on me, man; I need to blow up the gas station, at least." He said, eyes narrowing on the screen and fingers a-flurry over the controls. "What? Yeah, large, I guess."

"I dunno, hang on. Hey, what d'you want on it? Hey."

Kenny dragged his eyes away from Eric's hands -- they were *right there*, for God's sake, what the hell was he s'posed to look at -- and realized he'd spaced out.

"Uh -- "

He received one of the officer's fantastic eye-rolls -- because his red eyes didn't roll, really; it seemed like the rest of the world just rolled around them. "Can you drive manual? No, wait -- here."

Kenny fumbled the phone up to his ear. "Meat! Put meat on it. And those peppers, the green and red ones. You guys deliver drinks? No, nevermind -- hey, you guys got those cinnamon things? Yeah."

Damn -- how long had it been since he'd chosen something to eat outside of pocketing candy at the drug store? A while, anyway. Fuck, this was the best.

"No -- it's just pizza, dude. It's an eighteen-dollar attack of cholesterol and it doesn't even taste that good, usually." Instead of moving around, Cartman sort of fell over the back of the couch and rolled into a sitting position. And it was so far from a standard protocol maneuver, Kenny thought it was the best, too.

"One time, in college, I was constipated for like, a whole week. Season in hell." He said solemnly. "Then one night I got really drunk and ate a whole pizza; had the best shit of my life. That's the only reason to eat pizza. Terrific shits."

After ending the call, Kenny had tossed the phone over to Cartman's end of the couch -- but then he made a dive for it, realizing he'd just tossed his truancy officer's *unlocked* personal cell phone away.

Kenny whined a little over his sore ribs, reclaimed the phone and rolled onto his back to hold it over
his face. The lock screen came up, and he swore, propping his heels up on the opposite armrest. He felt Cartman's leg shift behind his head.

"What're you doing."

"I'm gonna unlock your phone."

"No, you won't."

"I will." There wasn't a pass-code in the world that could keep Yellow Wolf out. "And I'll find all the secret personal shit you don't talk about."

He only snorted. "You are retarded."

Kenny craned his neck to look up at him kind of upside-down. "Seriously? You don't have anything on here you don't want me looking at? Not even a friggin' dick pic?"

"Maybe a few death threats," he chuckled, but glared at the TV. "Some pictures of my old cat."

"Seriously?"

"Why would I put anything interesting on there? I'm too old for that cell phone bullshit, Kenny. Give it up -- you'll never guess my code, anyway."

"Well it's not your birthday."

"Don't lock me out, huh? Pain in the ass."

"I just wanna look at your cat."

Cartman paused his chase with an aggressive click and snatched the phone away. Kenny watched upside-down as his thumbs lanced over the key pad. "Man, you got nice hands. I mean you really got nice hands. You oughta play an instrument or something."

The phone fell on Kenny's chest with a thump, and he grabbed at it.

"What happened to not hitting on me?" He mumbled, as the roar of virtual car engines and sirens swung back into focus.

"That's not hitting on you -- that's appreciating. I'm just appreciating you."

"I don't understand the difference."

"This him?" Kenny asked, holding the phone out on a picture of a gray cat he'd found.

"Her," Cartman corrected after a quick glance, then went back to chewing at his lip over the video game. Kenny would do it for him, if he'd just let him.

"What's her name?"

"Mr. Kitty."

Kenny scrolled through the pictures while Cartman continued cursing over the car chase. The helicopters were dropping bombs; there were spike strips all over the main roads; a bunch of "rhino" cop Hummers were coming at him, trying to intentionally wreck his car -- Cartman was doomed.
He continued swiping idly through the digital photo album; it was mostly predictable stuff. Outside of Mr. Kitty, Kenny found a few pictures of some nice bike frames, a lot of snowy mountainside pictures with chairlifts in the background, a really good one of an epic everything burrito, and then he found one of Cartman. With a girl. She was obviously the one angling the shot -- and Cartman had done a thing where he tried to look happy but it just made him look more miserable. Kenny always thought fake-smiles were the saddest things.

"Who's this?"

"Heidi."

"You never said you had a girlfriend," Kenny said, questing.

He lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. Kenny looked at the picture, then back at the upside-down cop. "You don't seem too thrilled about her."

"What? Heidi's great. She's really smart."

"Uh-huh," Kenny hummed, trying to piece together the relationship. "So you're dating?"

Kenny waited the length of a close-call encounter with a few spike strips and an ominous line of police cruisers. Cartman crashed his car through a toll booth and plunged into the underground. His car was taking a beating, but Need for Speed never gave much of a shit about reality. Cartman never talked about dating -- well, he never talked about any part of his private life, usually -- but Kenny hadn't thought much of it because how much of a private life could a guy in uniform have, anyway? But he remembered Eric was 26. 26-year-old dudes had to get their blood up somehow, and video games and beating off all the time could only really postpone the mighty thirst.

"A long time ago, maybe."

"So you're fucking."

"It really isn't any of your goddamn business."

The longer he looked at the picture the more he felt like spitting. Like, right on the rug or something. Kenny heard a sigh and the volume on the game dipped as it was paused. The phone was snatched away once more. "Hey!"

"I'll show you some good shit," Cartman muttered. Kenny tipped his head back to watch him scroll through the images.

The phone thumped back on his chest. "You know what that is?"

Kenny eyed the picture; it was a car, a sort of plain-looking -- like, sporty, but plain -- gray sedan. He squinted at the insignia. "An old Saab?"

Cartman tsked and resumed his chase. "That's a Viggen, dude. Four-cylinder engine, turbo-charged. And it's the 2006 model, so it gets 250 horsepower. I beat off thinking about this car."

Kenny chuckled. " Doesn't look like much. Don't you wanna hot-shot convertible or something? Something in red, maybe?"

"No, man," he said, like he was correcting Kenny on the daily obituaries. "No scoops, no stickers, none of that flashy bullshit. The Viggen doesn't need any of that; it's got a turbo-charged V-6
"How much?"

"Well, they don't make 'em anymore. Since Saab went bankrupt and all. What did I tell you, huh? All the good shit, dude -- all the good shit."

"Who's is this, then?"

Cartman huffed a sigh through his nose and sunk down a little; Kenny heard a massive blast from the TV -- the gas station, probably -- but was too busy craning his neck sideways to get a load of the pout falling over his truancy officer's face. "It's Craig motherfucking Tucker's."

"Oh," Kenny said, trying to clamp down on a smile. "He sucks, huh?"

"He blows," Cartman corrected. "He wants over ten grand for it, and the damn thing's got over a hundred thousand miles on it, already. I'll probably have to do a ton of repairs, and I bet the bastard hasn't even changed the oil since the big fucking bang. And you see that? You see that thing on the rearview mirror?"

"It's one of those scented pine-tree things."

"Who hangs that in a Viggen?" He nearly shouted, even pausing the game to pinch the bridge of his nose. Holy God, nobody worked themselves up like Cartman. "He's smokin' cigarettes in a car with 250 horses, for Chrissake."

He sounded like he wanted to cry, and Kenny wanted to laugh. The buzz of the doorbell gave him a start. Cartman dropped his controller and went to get the door. Kenny stared at the plain-looking sedan a moment longer, then swiped back through all the other images of bicycles and snow and cats, and the awkward picture with Heidi didn't bother him so much anymore. He remembered exactly who he was hanging out with; Cartman might not've been gay, but he probably wasn't exactly straight, either -- he just had really particular tastes.

Kenny sat up at the smell of pizza. His mouth was fucking watering -- hot food, holy shit, hot food.

"Jesus -- look at you," said the cop, circling the couch to put everything on the coffee table, and returning to the kitchen. "I don't have any age-appropriate drinks for you. So -- water?"

Kenny waved his approval, wondered if he could start eating. What if he broke one of Cartman's crazy rules, by accident? But he was so hungry -- and Yellow Wolf never cared for rules, anyway.

"Take back everything you said about pizza," he moaned around the first slice.

"It's actually making me kind of hungry, the smell," Cartman admitted on his return to the couch. "I think I forgot to eat today."

"Yeah, you're not very good at taking care of yourself."

"That's perceptive."

Kenny was chewing, so he shrugged.

"I've lived on my own for so long -- but I never seem to get any better at it," Cartman said, and did this weird thing where he dropped his head to his hands and was quiet for a second, then sat up and reached for the food. Like he was sending a prayer to the gods of self-pity, or something. Kenny
thought it was kind of sad, but also kind of a riot -- like most things about Cartman were.

"Living alone doesn't teach you how to care for yourself, dude. I thought it did, too, for a bit, but being on my own only helped me start listening to my thoughts better. It's good for a while, but then I think you start to deteriorate if you stay that way."

"Yo -- " Cartman said, dropping his half-slice and wiping his hands before taking up the XBox controller again. "You just summed up everything I learned in four years of college. What they want you to go to school for, anyway? Jesus. They wanna beat the intelligence outa you, that's what I think."

Kenny's laughter started small and went off full-canter after he swallowed. "Holy shit, did you smoke a big blunt with the pizza guy, or something?"

"No, but I'm hitting the liquor, if you wanna know the truth," he said, and took a drink from the half-filled Mason jar he'd brought over. A fucking jar -- Kenny guessed the only glass in the apartment was the one with his water in it.

"Seriously, though," Cartman said, bringing both hands back to his controller. The chase had calmed down after the explosion at the gas station; he was pulling his car around the map's suburbs, staying low while the cops tried to search him out. "Everybody's so busy learning how to live, with a bunch of random and irrelevant laws shoved up their asses, but nobody ever gets around to wondering why they're living until it's too effing late."

Kenny licked his fingers after his second slice, and reached for the box of cinnamon things. "I don't think why is the right question, dude. I think it's just another kind of how."

Cartman pulled his car into an underpass and braked in the shadows, listening to the police radio.

"Eric -- you know what I think you should do? Well, first eat one of these, holy crap. But you know what I think you should do?"

"What?" He accepted the sugary dough thing from Kenny as if he was being handed a bullet for a gun he didn't have.

"I think you should sell your cruddy Volvo, buy the Viggen from Tucker, and go dune-buggying in Arizona. You can quit your shitty job, too, while you're at it."

As the chatter over the police radio finally died down, Cartman pulled his car out onto the road with a huge sigh of relief. The statistics of the chase popped up on screen; it was the longest car chase Kenny'd ever heard of -- three hours, nearly -- and he unlocked a shit-ton of new maps for it. Was it worth it? Kenny wondered. After all that stress and chaos, the only thing you could do once you won was keep playing the game. Kenny thought school was sort of like that, too. Like, everybody's running toward a finish line that they can't see, and even though a few might get there, in the end, the rest of them just spent their lives racing around blindly.

"Where've you been all my life, anyway?"
if you've ever wondered what a "downward spiral into self-pity" looks like --

After the chase -- which Eric was calling his biggest success of the month, until further notice -- he showed McCormick some of his other cars, since it was literally his favorite thing to do. He used to try to show girls his cars, but they always made such a valiant effort at pretending to be interested -- it really depressed him.

Cartman always liked showing off his things. When he was a kid, his favorite thing to do was bring his new toys around the block and make the other kids watch him play; his household wasn't rich or anything, but Eric learned early on how to save up birthdays and holidays to get the best shit. He'd always been partial to remote control cars and construction vehicles -- he had a sweet remote bulldozer with pick-up action when he was ten -- and then when the tides turned to collecting cards, video games, and whatever was the best skateboard or mountain bike on the block -- Cartman was the first to be into all that stuff too.

Heidi always said the funniest things about his cars. Maybe funny was the wrong word, though. She got a real kick out of changing the paint colors, picking out decals and making the rims spin. She spent an hour on his old Mustang once, just flipping through all these window-tints and shit; racked up a thousand-dollar bill at the shop just putting lighting under the box-kit. On a Mustang, for Chrissake. She spent so long at it that her lunch break was over and she had to grab a bus back into town. It really depressed him, because he started thinking about how if you were a girl all you could do was pretend to be interested in all this very boring shit from all these dopey, boring dudes. Ugly girls had it the worst, but Cartman even knew girls who were pretty hot and still hanging around real bores. It was like all they could do after college was just look around for some dopey guy to marry, and then spend their lunch breaks picking window-tints and listening to all that very boring shit about how many miles to the gallon his car got, or god forbid he was the kind of bore who liked discussing the damned scores from the game. And the worst part was they'd pretend to be interested in it all. Depressing as all hell.

The first thing Kenny did was call his Mazda a "chick car" -- which the RX-8 wasn't -- and that didn't depress Cartman but he didn't feel gay as hell about it either. That's what all poor kids said about his toys. Well, not that they were chick cars, exactly, but they always had some bullshit to say to make you feel like you lost, or something, because you made the decision to play. Cartman squeezed him in a headlock until he admitted it wasn't a chick car. In fact, it looked like something a big-dick-swinging cop would drive.

Cartman could tell Kenny liked to fuck with him. Like, Kenny was the kind of kid who would purposely throw an argument just because he lost interest, or because he wanted you to settle the hell down, or something. But he did it in that smug poor kid way, because even though he lost the argument he kept laughing like a punk until Cartman felt like the real loser. Kyle would break his own fingers before he let Cartman win an argument -- he said it went against his morals, but Cartman knew it went against his competitive Jew-nature.

If Heidi called his Mazda a chick car, Cartman would probably laugh his damn head off. He'd
probably marry her right there.

He let Kenny play after he'd washed his cinnamon-sugary pizza hands. He picked a different game. Soul Calibur, of course; Cartman knew he'd be more into the straightforward, one-on-one beat 'em up style of game. He always found him on the Punch-Out!! machine at the arcades. Soul Calibur was a little more advanced than the old joy-stick and button, but Kenny must've been familiar with the game, or else he just had good instincts for it; because he picked Link, armed him with a weapon that looked like a damn candy cane, and blew the crap out of Cartman's bloody monster character with bombs and arrows for about a hundred rounds. Link was a plant, a damn cheat character -- and Cartman was so mad at losing that he wanted to wrestle the cackling seventeen-year-old to the floor, and he almost did it, too, if the little fraud didn't yelp and whine about his ribs until Cartman felt like an asshole. No matter how cute and needy, he kept reminding himself. But Kenny just really fucking pushed it.

He fell asleep in the middle of character selection before the sixth or seventh round. That was kind of depressing. Cartman was at the height of his game -- spitting drunk and determined to take him down -- and Kenny just passed the fuck out. It depressed him because it was hella late, like three in the morning, and if he was that tired he should've said something, but instead he kept playing till he couldn't anymore. Like he wanted to keep playing with him, or something.

Cartman wasn't tired at all. He needed to win a few rounds -- even if it was just against a computer player -- before he could settle down, and he wasn't going to do it with Kenny just laying there, so he put him in his bedroom. And he might've lingered there a second, just to wonder if he was doing this right. Should he tell him to brush his teeth? Should he -- get him to change his rank clothes, or something? He almost called Wendy. He really almost gave Wendy a buzz.

"You stink," Cartman ended up muttering into the darkness. "You're only at risk, but you smell like you're homeless. By bed's gonna smell homeless, too, if you don't change."

"Too tired."

"You wanna take off the parka, at least? Come on, I'll give you somethin' else."

But then the teenager curled onto his side in the fetal position and mumbled something that really fucking depressed him.

"Huh? Cockroaches? There aren't any cockroaches in this place. It's not that shitty."

"Really?"

"Y-yeah, man," Cartman had stuttered. Jesus, the kid had to sleep with cockroaches crawling all over him in that fuckin' trailer. "Go to sleep."

He thought of giving Wendy a call, but instead he beat all the thoughts out of his head by going another few rounds of Soul Cal. He drank every time he lost a match. He was loose and sort of yelling at the game, which brought him back to his college years. That sort of sucked because college sort of sucked, too. He'd joined one of the fraternities on campus -- and wouldn't tell Kenny, if he could help it, because he knew just what the little shit would have to say about it: you were even an arrogant, big-dick-swinging cop type back then -- but he'd only done it because it provided an easy, close-knit market to sell his drugs. Cartman went from bagging up grams in high school, to selling o's out of his desk freshman year -- and after he joined the frat, the trade expanded to meet demand for everything from dope to blow to prescription meds. Business was good, and Cartman remembered thinking how happy he should've been, making a ton of dough off all those rich college kids -- but he never got happy, exactly; he just kept waiting for it. Sometimes the expectation of happiness is
enough to postpone feelings of disappointment, and regret; that's how capitalism worked, he thought. Maybe nothing in your life was going right, but if you could buy the newest XBox, then at least you could expect to be happy about that for a while. It was the same with women and Juicy Couture.

Cartman got up and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. He'd hardly ever bothered to close the bathroom door since he moved in, but he wasn't alone. It was impossible to forget Yellow Wolf, in the next room over. *I'm a fool*, Cartman thought. He'd drank enough that he'd become nothing more than a backseat driver in his vehicle of thought, forced to look out the window as it ka-thunked over potholes down memory lane. It was a feeling he hated; he really hated being drunk.

It was Cartman’s junior year of college when fit started to hit the shan. The police bust up their trade route by starting to search the interstate buses. There was a Megabus that dropped off right on campus, so the Bruders and other groups in the area used it as a supply line to and from the Midwest. Halfway through fall semester that year, the cops cashed a girl trafficking heroin into the city, seized almost half a pound of the shit -- more than ten grand of product -- and after that, the bus stop was moved an inconvenient two miles off campus, and the cops picked up the annoying habit of taking the dogs out for a sniff on Fridays and the days leading up to holidays, which were the busiest trafficking periods. Cartman's business was crushed.

He remembered a night late that semester, getting spectacularly drunk with a few brothers; he and a couple of them decided to crash a rival frat's party. It was a perfect disaster; he puked on the front lawn, then decided they oughta steal the frat's mascot, which was just some guy's pet chicken. He thought it would be funny to eat it -- all three of them thought it would be hilarious -- so they took it back to their house and Tomcat pinned its wings while Cartman sliced through its neck. He'll never forget it, that chicken. He forgot its name and even the name of the kid who tried to sue him for murdering it, but he would never forget the way the severed head kept trying to squawk after it hit the floor, or the way Tomcat -- who grew up around farm work -- had to smoosh the organs around before he could safely cut it open. He'd never forget the smell.

Cartman retched into the toilet. He wasn't drunk enough to puke, so he had to kind of force himself. All he had to do, really, was remember killing that chicken. He'd never thought about why it bothered him so much. Millions of chickens had their heads sliced off every day in the States. The only difference was he hadn't ordered this one off a menu or eaten it from beneath a crust of deep-fried batter. But Kitty died the same year, and he kept thinking about her, and how if some douche cut Kitty's head off and ate her with a couple bros, Cartman would be five-finger death-punch pissed off. He would've staged another murder and made them eat their loved ones, probably. And that got him thinking, what made cutting some things' heads off different from others? He didn't even really get in trouble for the chicken thing -- since disciplinary proceedings involving fraternities happened first inside the frat system before moving to the university-wide division. The frat court thought it was hilarious. Cartman had felt like the bloody Red Queen being tried by a bunch of his own jokers. He'd paid a fine and issued a super cereal apology to the other frat, and the whole thing went away.

By the time he returned to the living room, Cartman had lost his desire to play. A one-on-one, win-lose match sounded nice -- simple: uncluttered by chewy ethical biz and moral frown-lines -- but he was sort of wobbling on a cliff-edge between laughing at his life and abandoning it, and it was the sort of moment he needed to sit with, instead of gagging it and tucking it away like usual.

He was moving to shut off the stereo system when a song came over the speakers, one of Cole’s freebies, called *I'm A Fool*. Cartman stood swaying on the carpet like a shadow separated from its owner, and waited for the song to finish. What the hell was he doing? Cartman wondered. He had a seventeen-year-old street kid in his fucking bed, for Chrissake. His contract with the force wouldn't finish out till next year, at the earliest, and then he could finally run from all his problems instead of
losing sleep over them -- and shacking up with a teenager put all that at risk.

The next song was even worse, because he actually really liked it, but Tyler the Creator reminded him too much of himself, sometimes -- a borderline schizo, capable of going ballistic at the drop of a dime, a guy that bitched endlessly about haters and the father he never met -- and the song was about pushing someone away because they was too young for him. Cartman forgot the name of the song -- Young, or something like that -- and the worst part was, the age gap in the song was smaller than the one between him and Kenny. I don't want to be another statistic, Cartman agreed. There was already enough between them for a decent sexual harassment suit -- continuing to hang out with the excuse that they were friends would only help escalate the problem. Why the fuck had he agreed to this?

Cartman hadn't had a friend his whole damn life, how the fuck was he supposed to have one now? He'd hung out with Stan and Kyle most of his childhood, but there was never a question who the third effing wheel was, when it really came down to it. Why couldn't there've been someone like Yellow Wolf around when he was growing up? Cartman was dead serious, when he'd said it -- maybe a little drunk, but serious as a damned heart attack, anyway -- because where had the kids like McCormick been, when he was young and angry and needed to learn how to properly not give such a fuck about it all? He wouldn't have made half the shitty decisions, he thought, if he'd just learned to laugh at the pricks who cut him off in traffic.

It couldn't possibly work. When he was 41, Kenny would be 32, for Chrissake. It was fucking bizarre. He was old, cynical poison to somebody like Kenny. He already thought about him too much for it to be healthy. Thought about all those wrecked glass cases at the museum, and the riot in the news over the trashed, under-funded library. He thought about him hanging his crazy head out the window of his cruiser, with all that gore on his face. There was a Kenny-sized hole in his past, and it filled Cartman up with such lousy regret and self-pity that he could barely stand to keep breathing. When he was 16 and already deep in the drug trade, the kid was barely eight years old and probably sniffing paint and setting shit on fire.

Cartman finally shut off the speaker system and trailed into his bedroom, just to maybe move his keyboard out into the living room. Play something till he got tired, maybe. He paused over the bench and looked at his hands. That was the other thing; he wished Kenny would stop appreciating him, or whatever. He never knew how to react, or how he should feel. He knew Stan and Kyle appreciated each other all the time. You couldn't be in the same room with Stan for more than five minutes before he was showing you some video of Kyle snowboarding through a terrain park, or something. Or telling you the name of the law school he graduated from, and how terrific he was at whistling. Jesus.

The keyboard was all but hidden in shadow. It was the only thing that fit in the bedroom besides a nightstand and a mirrored wardrobe. There used to be a desk, too, but it was the perfect size only for a 13-year-old, so Cartman had moved it out into the hallway, figuring someone might take it if they were interested. But after a single night, the desk had been beaten into pieces, right there in the hallway. He'd never seen a piece of furniture so thoroughly and systematically massacred, and for no good reason. He'd seen similar brutality in college; if somebody left a chair out on the lawn or something, one of the brothers would always tell them to bring it in or else "the drunks will get it". That killed him; it sounded like packs of furniture-beating dogs were out roaming campus at night. But it was true. And it was true even after you left college. If you leave something out, and there's no obvious consequence for destroying it, then the drunks will get it -- even if they gotta climb six flights of stairs to do it -- and you won't even recognize it in the morning. That just about explained everything Cartman needed to know about the world, aside from the fact that there was always always room in it for senseless violence; it helped Cartman explain why he liked keeping secrets, keeping private shit private; it explained why he kept his dreams carefully unrealized in his head, to avoid watching them get torn apart for other people's enjoyment; and it explained why good shit like Yellow Wolf was locked in a shed and beat by his lousy parents. He couldn't stop picturing that
bruising and shit. And that big scar on his side, tight-looking and kind of mottled-brown like one of those "flesh"-colored Band-aid patches, about the size of a credit card. Cartman just didn't understand how two cruddy drug addicts could make something perfect like Kenny and then beat and neglect him until he was just as scarred and stinking as they were -- he really didn't understand it. He knew enough to expect it, now, from the world -- but he just didn't understand it. He'd carry Kenny up a hundred flights of stairs if it just meant none of the fags could get to him anymore.

Cartman wasn't so drunk as he was before puking, but he still couldn't wrap his head around the idea of moving the keyboard, so he sat down and hit the power switch, then turned the volume on the keys almost all the way down. If he sat there and faced the wall, with just the little bit of streetlight coming in through the curtains, then he could almost forget about Yellow Wolf. He'd probably been awake since Cartman started puking; he was probably cataloging all of his weird drunken weaknesses right now, planning and conniving around just how to break him apart. Cartman was a screwed-up cop. Kenny was a truant, an arsonist, a delinquent. A teenager. They were natural enemies.

*Body and Soul* really was a beautiful song. It wouldn't be half as great if a white girl sang it -- 'cause it would probably sound real sappy and cute. But Bessie Smith knew what she was doing. When she said she was lonely, you felt it too -- dripping down every note, taking you by the throat. Eric played it slow. He didn't add any tricky flutters or random flourishes, because that stuff really ruined the piano. You could tell if someone thought they were hot shit on the piano because they would add all that tricky shit and people clapped their heads off about it. Cartman didn't care for it because he'd outgrown the desire for fanfare. He didn't want anybody to clap their stupid head off; he just wanted to understand the piece, mostly; he wanted to understand what it felt like to love something so fiercely that it was necessary to separate body from soul. But no matter how he played, he didn't get it.

"You're kind of a sad guy, aren't you?" Cartman thought he was hearing shit, it was said so quietly, and so much like an echo.

Yellow Wolf straddled the end of the keyboard bench to stare right the fuck at him. Cartman couldn't make out a lot of colors in the dim light, but the glow from the streetlamps slipping through the blinds was faintly orange, so Kenny was faintly orange, too. It reminded him of that scene at the very beginning of the second episode of Star Wars, when that assassin's poison bug is trying to take a bite out of sleeping babe Natalie Portman, and Annakin comes in like Captain fuckin' Save 'em to slice the bug up and get into an epic car chase with the assassin. Kenny was probably the babe in this scenario, but Cartman was definitely no Captain Save 'em. Maybe he was the bug.

"So you can freestyle, you can sing *and* play piano -- you can field-strip a Beretta and put it back together in six seconds. Shit, man. Is there anything you can't do?"

Cartman thought that sounded like a pretty lousy resume, but he guessed it was better than drug-dealer, chicken-killer turned crooked cop. *Is he appreciating me, again?* Cartman didn't know what to do, so he kept playing *Body and Soul* but he didn't sing anymore; he played the sighing, bittersweet closing twice. Then he started a different piece.

"This one's kinda sad, too."

"That's because I only use the minor keys." When you're drunk, opening your mouth to speak is kind of like throwing yourself down a water-slide -- he had an idea what was supposed to happen, but the speed of descent and the number of rocks that cut him up on the way down were beyond his control. Sometimes half the words he needed to make the sentence whole were forgotten, and other times he tripped over all the sounds and just felt confused and cut-up after he was done speaking.
"You wrote this?"

Cartman liked using the minor keys. They always sounded a bit out of place when they snuck into pieces, so one night he wrote a melody of entirely minor notes, just to see if all those off-keys put together could turn something discordant into something beautiful.

Kenny was so close his knee was bumping against Cartman's leg, and the way he leaned over to look down at his hands almost put his chin on his damn shoulder. Somewhere in the backseat of Cartman's drunken thought-vehicle, he cursed himself for making this kind of situation possible. *I'm a fool.*

"What's wrong?" Kenny said, voice tripping over a yawn.

Everything. "Nothing. I'm drunk."

The teenager finally settled right down on his shoulder, instead of just breathing over it, and Cartman felt his temple pin his ear to his head. It was strangely warming, but he also felt destabilized by it, like a ship being tossed around on stormy seas -- one wrong turn from a nasty wreck -- and the thought that he might bring Kenny down with him was petrifying.

"What're you doing?" Cartman rasped.

"Nothin'," he murmured, but his arms were creeping around his middle and clasping over his opposite hip. "I'm appreciatin' you."

*Is this a hug?* He thought. *What am I supposed to do?* Cartman kept up playing -- he watched his own fingers sink into the right keys and wondered how they could keep going when the rest of him was a hair's-breadth from that shipwreck. He wondered if this was the feeling Bessie Smith was talking about.
Kenny slept so long he thought he might've died. He was passing into the afterlife on a sick chariot of clouds. It was the greatest morning -- afternoon, evening; he wasn't sure -- of his life. He didn't have a single conscious thought in his head about where he was, what time it was, who he was -- and that was the very best way to be.

It helped that his body was healing, and determined to rest; Kenny was numb to the point of limbless-ness, a puddle of sentient cement half-twisted in the sheets. And he was knee-deep in the tranquil waters of a slow-strange dream, looking around at a vision of world's end. In his mind’s eye a blue expanse of sky and sea surrounded him on all sides, unbroken except for the dark specters of trees like pillars shooting out of the water and into the clouds. Not trees, Kenny corrected; they were buildings -- skyscrapers, abandoned and part-submerged. There was a terrible quiet, all around.

Kenny gradually began to make a conscious appraisal of the light graying the insides of his eyelids. The animal part of him that never really slept had detected noise, movement beyond the boundaries of his skin -- the pattern of the shift in the air indicated biped. Kenny inhaled deeply through his nose -- and caught himself. Oh. Cartman. He was in his bedroom. And his name was Kenny. Funny how like echolocation the sense of smell is, sometimes. He could always tell all kinds of things just from a good whiff -- like how many people were home, if any of them were strangers, even which road they took to get there and if their cars took diesel or gasoline. The first things he'd learned to smell were the moods of his parents, through the haze of their addictions -- and after a while he got so good at it Kenny swore he could tell what day it was, sometimes, just with his nose.

Kenny feigned sleep, curled against a sudden change in lighting when his hood was tugged down, but allowed his arms to slide free as the parka was pulled away. He slit his eyes open and watched his truancy officer lurch like an Infected around the room; he realized Cartman was picking shit up from the floor, from the end of the bed -- there were even clothes hung over the back of the keyboard. Kenny almost blew his cover when the cop stubbed his toe on the foot of the bed and hissed: "Cock sucker!" But he said it like he was trying to be quiet or something; that really knocked Kenny out.

A hazy memory floated forward from the previous night -- morning? Or had it been days ago? -- as Kenny focused his sleep-blurred vision on the keyboard by the window. Knew it, he thought, smugly. He knew Cartman oughta play an instrument. Kenny hadn't even noticed the keyboard in the corner until the sound of its keys cut the darkness. He'd woke in a puzzled daze; it was a time of night-day that his bones insisted was for inactivity only -- but Kenny had learned to sleep lightly the hard way, and the off-kilter slam of a door and then the unmistakable sound of puking were enough to both jerk him into wakefulness and freeze him with apprehension going on fear. He'd almost thought it was his dad -- but then the music from the living room faded in and Kenny reconfigured his location: not at home, and not at the center; he was in his truancy officer's bedroom. The fear didn't go away.

Did Cartman drink himself into rages, like his dad? Kenny had wondered. Mostly he'd just never seemed to stop talking -- especially when he got sore as hell over getting his ass kicked at Soul Calibur. Kenny'd managed to incite a few scuffles just to test the waters, but the bruisy-ribs card never failed to get his ass out of trouble quick. Kenny had decided that Cartman was mostly harmless, but he also knew alcohol did wild things with peoples' moods; they could change between heartbeats and even shallow ones could be all-consuming. He knew better than to make assumptions on someone's drunken behavior based on a few hours of innocuous video game violence.
Kenny wouldn't've been surprised if Cartman was the type to fling himself into drunken rages -- he
didn't even need alcohol to snap into rages, actually, and it wasn't as if he was never violent -- so
when the cop drifted into the bedroom at that strange time of night-day, Kenny had started prepping
plans of attack and escape while his heartbeat wound him up into a panic. Oddly, the possibility that
he might be sexually assaulted or something never even crossed his mind -- now that he thought
about it, if Cartman had tried to come on to him, Kenny didn't think he would be able to stop
laughing.

It had taken him a while to cram his heartbeat back into his chest long enough to recognize the song.
It was slow -- it was soft; it was fucking sad as hell but it had sort of excited Kenny. He couldn't
believe somebody as bluntly offensive as Cartman was capable of recreating something like Body
and Soul -- and when a quiet, rhythmic drone started to fit words to the notes, Kenny'd buzzed over
to the piano bench like a starved yellow jacket to an especially curvy flower -- and it didn't smell
terrific, on account of the booze-breath -- but Kenny buzzed around anyway, and watched his fingers
pluck melodies from the keys until he fell asleep again. And he didn't regret a damn thing.

Kenny rolled around a bit and stretched his limbs out as far as he could in all directions, savoring the
spectacular feeling of occupying a seemingly unlimited space. Unlimited compared to his bunk in the
trailer, anyway. Even back when he'd had a bed with a mattress and shit, and his parents had a
house, he'd never had his own room, especially not one without the fat shadows of cockroaches all
over the place, waiting for him to close his eyes and drop his guard. Kenny hated cockroaches. They
were always squeezing under the bed with an audible scrabbling sound when he turned on the lights.
He couldn't think about it without wanting to puke, he really couldn't. Kenny didn't give a shit about
a lot of stuff -- it was one of his personal rules, maybe even his only one -- so he usually made a big
effort not to care one way or another about the conditions in his homes. But cockroaches were the
exception to his rule. He didn't want to share space with roaches anymore; he refused. He'd sooner
send himself to juvie.

Kenny's sore ribs complained about the stretch, so he shuddered back into a loose curl around
something he'd found in the bed last night. He squinted at it; it was a stuffed animal, some kind of
to ajuvie, though.

The distant sounds of movement in the apartment were suddenly drowned out by the sound of
rushing water and a long groan from the foundations of the building. Kenny turned his amusement
into the pillows -- his truancy officer was fuckin' domestic; he was doing laundry.

He tried and couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to sleep like this -- sleep without any of
his unwelcome fears and worries and their fat shadows skittering around in his subconscious. He
didn't have to go to school; he didn't have to clock out of the center before 9 a.m.; he didn't have to
drag himself home after a long night out, or wake to the thunder of his parents' arguments. He
imagined he was eight again, or something, and it was Saturday morning after a shit week at school;
he was going to have the most epic sleep-in of his life and then watch cartoons over breakfast. Those
days were perfect. Kenny sunk back into his dream of still-water and empty buildings. The time in
that quiet world was unclear, as well -- too bright for the morning but too pale for the afternoon; it
was the light of a cloudy day at high noon, but the skies were perfectly clear. It smelled pretty great,
too. Kenny thought it was the most peaceful apocalypse he'd ever dreamed. He wouldn't've minded
staying there forever, probably.

" -- hey. Hey."

Kenny batted away the clamp pulling on his shoulder, and pushed his face further into the pillow.
"Unh."
"Really intelligent, McCormick. Are you five? C'mon, time to get your ass up."

*Leave it to a cop*, Kenny thought dimly. To ruin the best sleep of his life. Cops were always stomping in at the worst times and ruining the best moments of your life.

"It can't be *that* great, unless you're dreamin' of me."

They were always arrogant about it, too. Like it got their rocks off, going around killing people's buzzes with their shitty attitudes. Arrogant buzz-kills.

"Did you just call me a buzz-kill? You're not buzzing at all -- you're all up in my fuckin' bed."

"Come on," He continued, and Kenny felt the frog thing being pulled from his arms and tossed to the other side of the bed. "Teenagers need nine hours of sleep, not nineteen; I looked it up."

"Yeah?" Kenny said, somewhat muffled as he turned his head sideways to crack an eye at Cartman. "And what about you? Did you ever even go to sleep, man?"

He frowned. "That's different, I'm -- "

"You don't needa sleep 'cause you're in the final evolution of manhood, right," Kenny sneered. "You spent all that time bitching about how I was keeping you awake -- but what you really meant was I was keeping you out the bottle."

Oh, shit -- he almost sat up. He regretted saying it the second it left his mouth. Kenny slowly turned two eyes on where the officer hovered at the bedside. After pinching the bridge of his nose in silence for a few moments, Cartman opened his eyes.

"Look -- I haven't had a cup of coffee all day, and yeah, I'm kind of hungover. The last time I felt like this, my partner thought putting a bullet in my shoulder was safer than letting me call the shots."

He paused, shifted on his feet and pushed his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. His truancy officer in sweatpants -- Kenny didn't think he looked very dangerous. He looked like he was staying inside doing laundry. Kenny sort of wanted to climb him like a tree. He tried to communicate the idea to Cartman, but only ended up sending him a sleepy blink.

"I've picked up the phone to call Wendy about six-hundred times today," He was saying, looking everywhere but at Kenny. "Because I'm *sure* you're not supposed to be here -- can't you see I have to make a fucking call here, dude? Why d'you wanna provoke me right now?"

"I don't know. I don't want to, really." Kenny said, and he really meant it. Then: "Don't call Marsh. She'll send that Stevens chick to pick me up."

"Well, fuck if I want Bebe knowing you shacked up with me," He said, but he said it like he was arguing with the wall, or something. Then he turned to Kenny. "But if you *push* me, the scales are gonna tip around to where it's more convenient for me to let her scrape the street urchin out of my house rather than let it keep stinking up my bed. Right now, *I'm* the government. I have everything you need to live comfortably, but if you don't follow my rules, I have the right to turn you back out into the wasteland I took you from."

Kenny turned back into the pillows. "But you *made* the wasteland -- "

"Don't whine, huh?" Cartman said. "Do you wanna stay here or not? If you wanna stay, you gotta get up and *clean* yourself."

"Okay, fine."
"...Now."

"But my ribs, man." Kenny groaned. He fought against the grip on his shoulder, but it was insistent, so Kenny changed tactics; he abruptly rolled with the pull, and reached up to sling his arms around the cop's neck. His original idea was to force him down, but it was sort of like hanging onto a tree limb and Kenny ended up pulling himself up instead. A counterproductive maneuver, maybe, but it was nice to have the opportunity to watch that careful cop apathy splinter and crack so close up.

"Seriously?" He muttered, and his red eyes were doing a dance around Kenny's face like they weren't sure what they were seeing, exactly; and then he felt the twisted covers being freed from his legs as Cartman stood up. Kenny rested his head over his shoulder and took a deep breath.

"Holy shit, you smell good." Like a fresh shower. Or a half-flooded world at an unclear time of day. His hair looked damp, but Kenny pushed his hand up in it just to make sure.

"And you smell like a shitty fuckin' hobo." Cartman sighed, engaging his arms to grapple with Kenny's legs for a moment and then shaking him up like a sack of cement. "Stop laughing -- I mean it. And stop touching me. For fuck's sake, I mean I never thought I'd be able to empathize with a public bus, but now I know how it feels to be crawling with lousy poor people all day."

"It's snowing," Kenny hummed, looking over his shoulder at the windows in the living room. Snow in the morning was the best, like pizza and video games with your bros. Only when you didn't have anywhere to be, that is. It was just a royal pain in the ass if you had somewhere to be while it was snowing like a bastard out.

"Yeah," Cartman murmured, but he didn't pause over the windows. "We got 13 inches overnight."

"Guess I woulda died, then."

"Jesus," he swore. "You would've gone home. You would've just gone home, if it started snowing."

Cartman released him as soon as they reached the bathroom, then started explaining the shower toggles like Kenny really was a five-year-old. Kenny pulled off his shirt and turned to assess his bruises in the mirror. He bared his teeth and interrupted Cartman's spiel: "Yo, how hot am I?"

They really looked like a horror movie -- low-budget, maybe -- under the fluorescent lights and all.

"Stone-cold stunner, McCormick," he said, his super-cop apathy looking strained. "You think they're broken? You think anything's broken?"

Kenny looked down and began poking around some of the most sore and swelly bits. "Probably know for sure tomorrow, at the earliest."

"And, uh, pain-wise?" He asked. "On a scale of one to ten?"

"Ten being...?"

"The most pain you've ever felt in your life."

Kenny snorted. He'd never heard anything so ridiculous. Was he in a lot of pain? Sure. But he felt like he was doing pretty good, also, so he couldn't begin to objectify his entire life's experiences with pain down onto a ten-numeral scale. Just the thought of fudging up something to fit the jargon made him so mad Kenny almost forgot he was talking to his new friend and not just some ass-licking cop.

"That's the stupidest way to measure pain I've ever heard of."
"I know," Cartman sighed again. "But that's the way the hospitals ask, and they train us to do it like that, too. Hey -- do they drug test you at CFS? I'm guessing not --"

"No," Kenny spat. "But they did at the police station; they hadda do a full strip-search! You'd think they pulled me in off a street corner for selling meth, not just spray-painting a few things -- they even wanted to poke through my shit, man..."

Kenny trailed off and watched Cartman dig around in the medicine cabinet over the toilet. He realized he'd probably had the same experience, if not more invasive, when the department brought him in for dealing. "Degrading, isn't it?" He muttered.

"Yeah..." Kenny said, turning to look in the mirror again. "They don't test at the shelter anymore, either. But now there's tests to get welfare, like some kinda eugenics policy, you know? So everyone who doesn't pass stays homeless and stays using -- the shelter's got so shitty with crack-fiends, they're coming in the damn windows. Middle-class kids like you, Cartman -- you grow up in the same house, with your own room probably, and your own toys and shit to show off to the fags on the block -- and you grow up with so little to worry about that the only times you can feel rebellious, even, is when you're bitching about the government. Because who cares if you were going 90 on a 55 at two in the morning, or you rolled through that stop sign -- but the most you do is bitch, and you pay the fine, because they all do, and it goes away. You started dealing drugs for street cred, probably, and the extra cash -- you listen to hip-hop and you wanna be like your favorite rappers, probably -- but you don't know shit about being low, man. You don't know degrading. You dunno what it's like growin' up with cockroaches and hand-me-downs and just wishing people would stop makin' fun of your damned shoes at school. I don't gotta worry about crumby speeding tickets; I just gotta choose between the streets and the crack-den for a place to sleep every night, or possibly get my ass handed to me in that friggin' trailer. I started selling when I was eleven years old, and nobody like you ever really gets it when I say I didn't have a choice."

Kenny pulled himself up onto the sink counter with a hitched groan of pain. Cartman had paused with one hand on the cabinet door. He didn't try to interrupt, but his eyebrows had climbed through a rapid series of expressions that Kenny mostly ignored because his blood was up and he didn't give a damn who he was talking to.

"And I won't go to school; I won't. I know I'm not goin' to college; nobody in my whole neighborhood's gone to college. It's never been in the cards, even. One look at my record, my address, my teeth -- nobody's gonna hire me; they wanna check my shit for drugs, too. So why bother? Why pay four years in loans on community college when I could buy a whip and get the whole hood talking? Better yet, join the guys who've been chasing me down the streets, and buy a fucking glock as if it will keep me breathing one night longer in your wasteland. So what's my pain on a scale of one to 10? Go fuck yourself; my pain's all around you!"

"How long have you been wanting to say that," Cartman said, in a very dry tone but not a sarcastic one, exactly. He'd moved away from the cabinet, finally.

Kenny kicked his heels and couldn't bring himself to lift his eyes. He didn't even know all that shit had been raging inside him -- and why did it have to come out now, in front of the guy he kind of owed his crumby life to, at this point? He did feel relieved, though, in a way. Kenny always made an effort to not give a fuck, but that didn't mean he was blinded to the bullshit that went on around him every single day.

"A long time," Kenny admitted. He was starting to understand why Cartman had to go on rants all the time, too, and why he never seemed to shut up when he had somebody with even half an ear to listen, because that kind of frustration just built up, and if it didn't have anyplace logical to go, it
found an outlet in anybody or anything that got in its way. People like Cartman, with a ton of uncontrolled anger bouncing around all the time -- people like that could tear up the world.

"I wanted to say it to Marsh," he added. "But I would've felt really guilty, after."

Cartman laughed, and Kenny looked up to watch. "Just blame me, huh? That's what everyone else does. And if it matters to you at all, I think you have a point."

He couldn't stop himself; Kenny snorted. It was probably one of the most perfectly disbelieving snorts he ever made.

"What?" Cartman said, suddenly sharp and looming into him, kind of like when he was yelling about fags ruining good shit the other night. "You think I don't see the same bullshit from the jackass-in-uniform side of things every fucking day? Don't ya think it's weird the drop-in center is right next to the Royal Theatre? People think if something's got an official name and a building and a goddamn logo then it's got a monopoly on that bit of life: healing only happens in hospitals; the right thing only happens in the courts; and entertainment only comes from inside a video game, or a theater."

The cop leaned his hands on the counter beside him with another sigh, and Kenny thought he might be losing his damn mind. "And an education only comes out of a school, right? The only way for you to be a valuable human being is if you can hang a fucking suffix on the end of your name, right? You think I buy into that? Some people get shit out of school, maybe. Some don't. Just 'cause thinking about the Ivy League doesn't give you a hard-on doesn't mean there's somethin' wrong with you. And it doesn't mean you have to be like your lousy parents, either. Sure, pretty much everything is rigged against you -- like your record, now, and random and irrelevant truancy laws -- "

"Random and irrelevant age -- " Kenny added quietly.

" -- not to mention your attitude, your foul smell, your fucked up teeth -- "

Kenny flung his hand out and enjoyed watching the cop jump and swear.

"Little shit," he accused, clapping a hand over his chest. "You twisted my nipple."

"Come at me."

"Anyway," he growled, and Kenny could tell he was struggling to let it go. He was letting it go -- but boy was he glaring about it. "The reason I brought up the drug testing thing was just because, if you're somewhere irrelevant and random on the bullshit pain scale, I have some Percocet leftover from an old surgery, if you want."

"Are you offering me opioids, Officer Hangover?" Kenny chuckled. "Wait till I tell Marsh. You really take this bad cop routine seriously."

"Dude, come on with the cop jokes. They're not even creative anymore and I'm losing respect for you."

"Fuck off, man. You literally dragged me out of bed five minutes ago; my creativity's at low-tide. You're just salty 'cause I know you're a sad drunk, now."

"No, okay, that's the other thing -- " Cartman shifted forward and did a weird thing where he tapped out a rhythm on Kenny's kneecap. "I don't drink -- I mean, I wasn't that drunk. I hate being drunk."

He knew he oughta step lightly, or something, but Kenny was a provocateur; he'd never even learned how to mince words, let alone when and where. "Spoken just like a recovering frat boy."
"How the *fuck* do you figure this shit out?" Cartman snapped. "That wasn't in my file, and I don't even keep a diploma lying around -- "

"I make good bets." Kenny grinned. "I didn't know for sure until a second ago. You're self-confirming, man. Like artificial intelligence." Kenny said, watching Cartman drop his gaze to the tile and rub at his forehead like he'd been accused of filming kiddie porn, or something.

"My dad only pukes on the worst nights."

He looked up, sharp as hell again. "No -- I did it on *purpose*, 'cause I felt like shit, okay? I don't even drink that much. Alcohol sucks. I miss the days when I could just roll a Swisher and zone out in front of nature documentaries, for Chrissake, but the only legal poisons I have are liquor and cigarettes -- which *suck*. Being drunk doesn't really make it easier to be happy, it just makes everything feel *heavy* and then all this *inertia* takes effect and shit starts rolling. And cigarettes make my hands shake. You get what I'm saying? Its that building and a logo shit I was talking about. Just 'cause it's legal, it's all I've got -- liquor is supposed to be some sort of *luxury*, but it ruins lives and it sucks even when you're recovering from frat-life and have nothing to lose, like me. So... so it's not just speeding tickets that piss off us middle-class kids, you know."

Kenny kicked his legs against the cabinet and chuckled again. "I didn't really mean you, dude. Well. Maybe a little bit -- but you wouldn't be such a shitty cop if you didn't know better, too."

"How do I say thanks without admitting I'm shitty?" Cartman pulled at his hair. "You always do this. Whatever. I know I'm a shitty cop. Hey -- you woulda just gone home, right?"

"Huh?" If he was just a little closer, Kenny thought, he could trap his hips between his knees. "If it started snowing, I mean. You woulda just gone home."

Kenny couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled forth. This guy *liked* him, he realized. This asshole cop actually liked him -- like he'd probably never stop *bitching*, but he was still carrying him the fuck around, wasn't he? And then -- because Kenny was Yellow Wolf was Kenny -- he wondered just how far he could take him.

"Hey, uh, you were right." Kenny said.

Cartman raised his eyebrows. One of them sort of twitched a hair higher than the other -- so Kenny knew he was preparing to be unimpressed. He probably wore sunglasses because his damned *eyebrows* were too expressive.

"About that song. I mean. It really is beautiful. And you got great hands, man. Like for the piano. Great hands for the piano."

Kenny watched the cop flush red up to his neck, and had to bite down on the tip of his tongue to keep from grinning his head off and all -- catching Cartman off guard with positive vibes was almost more entertaining than humiliating him with his dick out.

"So, like, thanks for playin' it, even if you were zombie-mode drunk."

"Will you *stop* laughing at me?"

Kenny got an arm back around Cartman's neck and reeled him in, sort of, but he wasn't looking to be carried, this time.

"What're you doing."
"Look at your face," Kenny chuckled into his shoulder. "Look how red your face is, dude."

He waited a very solemn minute. Maybe thirty seconds, but it was very solemn, Kenny swore. Then: "Screw you." That really knocked him out.

"Now what're you doing."

He never really got his breath back after laughing, or something, because Kenny couldn't quite settle. He inhaled again. His nose's echolocation radar was flooded with Cartman.

"I kinda wanted to stick my tongue in your mouth, actually."

And to his surprise, the cop stepped closer. Kenny felt his breathing hitch up further and he lifted his head -- feeling like that yellow jacket again, buzzing up on something primed for the taking and smelling terrific -- then he hissed as a sharp prod to one of his bruises had his whole body singing with pain.

"You look like the goddamn poster-boy for child abuse, right now," Cartman growled into his ear. "And you're still snowing a cop -- are you kidding me? You have a fuck authority complex, McCormick, and I'm not going to enable you."

He pulled away and made a half-step toward the door. "Now wash, for Chrissake. I can't fuckin' stand the smell of you."

"But what if I need help?" Kenny tried. He didn't know exactly how to look cute but he'd heard he was good at it.

"That's pushing it." And the door closed behind him.

Kenny kicked his legs and grinned without restraint in the empty bathroom. He'd already won, anyway. That was the first time he didn't say something like he wasn't even gay, for Chrissake, so Kenny figured he'd won. It was a good bet.

He did have a fuck authority complex; he admitted it. But he wasn't snowing Cartman just to fuck authority. He wasn't even sure what "snowing" meant, really, but if it was the shit he said that got the officer blushing and pulling his damn hair, then Kenny would keep snowing him with everything he had. It was hilarious. It was addictive.
Just as Kenny was considering jerking off in his truancy officer's shower, the water started to go lukewarm.

*Oh well. Next time.*

His skin was burning after using this crazy bar of soap -- kind of gritty on the outside, streaked with twisted bands of earthy colors -- it was like grinding himself down with uncomfortably high-grade sandpaper. But it smelled like a cypress tree, one of the ones really high up in the mountains and snowed over like Christmas in Siberia, and Kenny didn't mind that.

He'd sampled all the other shit in Cartman's shower, too, for the hell of it, but there really wasn't much; the bathroom was almost as Spartan as the abandoned kitchen. There was a single bottle of aggressively convenient three-in-one shampoo, conditioner, and body wash, some random hotel-sized samples of sandalwood-smelling stuff, and then that gritty bar of soap. After twenty minutes under the water, Kenny was feeling fresh as a damn newborn. Aside from the horrorshow of bruising, anyway.

He found a disposable toothbrush in a drawer under the sink, and multi-tasked scrubbing the old pizza off his tongue and teeth while digging around the laundry basket inside the door. The goosebumps from his sudden return to atmosphere were starting to gain ground on the warm shower fuzziness. Kenny tugged out a pair of sweatpants that weren't seventy yards too long and a Washington Redskins T-shirt that made him laugh a little. He didn't think too hard about borrowing, since it seemed like he was *always* putting on other people's clothing. But Kenny was buzzing about it, sort of, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't stand around for a while taking deep breaths like a guy coming out of a damn *coma* after twenty years. He just wanted to catalog the memory, was all; the basic sensation of being at once clean and warm was kind of a big deal to him. After a few weeks back on his own, squatting around North Park and warming himself next to crack-fiends cooking on spoons, he might forget how it felt. He resolved then -- again -- to try and keep Cartman in an even mood. Kenny really didn't want to tip his "scales" and get thrown out, or "scraped" out by CFS, and that meant no "pushing" it. No provocation, no verbal propositioning, and especially no overtly sexual contact of any kind. *Fine,* Kenny thought. He could handle that. He wasn't thirsty.

Kenny crossed into the living room with the last of the dampness in his hair trailing down his neck, and rolled over the back of the couch to avoid passing in front of the TV and possibly inciting a bitch-riot. He settled on his back, propped his heels up on the arm rest, and watched Cartman's Impala race through the virtual inner-city. Then he tipped his head back to watch the cop instead.

"You put on a *snapback* to play video games?" Kenny said. "Do you turn it to the side when things get really serious?"

"*Funny,*" he said, with one of those audible eye-rolls. "I was gonna go out, actually, but then I remembered the son of a *booze*-hound dicking around in my bathroom."

"Didn't quite make it to dicking around, actually -- the water went cold."

Cartman made a disgruntled *Agh!* sound and leaned his elbows over his knees. Kenny lost his view of his face.

"You look like a *high* schooler."
"Why don't you go fuck yourself, McCormick. And don't do it in my bathroom."

"You already talk like a teenager," Kenny said, trying to draw him back. "Heck, we could be classmates."

"Maybe we are. But you haven't made it to homeroom in three months, so you wouldn't know, wouldya?"

"And I do not talk like you fags," he added.

"Well ya don't talk like an adult."

"Why should I?" Cartman took a hand off his controller just to gesture. "Why should I change the way I talk to fit some other generation's standard? I don't aspire to adults. I think they suck."

Kenny sniffed. "Then I guess you gotta hang out with me more, huh?"

The cop settled back against the couch and slid down to prop his legs open wider. Typical male posturing; Kenny saw it in high school all the time. It hadn't ever turned him on, though.

"I don't aspire to trailer trash, either."

"Hah!" Kenny barked. "As if you even have what it takes."

"Do you? Let's take a ride -- I'll drop you right at home."

"No, you won't," Kenny muttered. He turned his head against his hip to squint up at him.

Cartman huffed a cold laugh. "Won't I?"

"No, ya won't. You're just trying to threaten me down into a puddle; the second y'get nervous you gotta remind everybody you can wave your dick around and it's backed by the law. That's all cops ever do." Kenny paused, pulled his feet off the arm of the couch. "But I've seen you doing laundry, dude. You're about as threatening as a freakin' Smurf. With those -- tight little white pants, you know?"

Cartman rolled his eyes.

"First of all," He said, surprisingly even-keel. "I do not wave my dick around. You bring it up a helluva lot more than I do, anyway. Secondly, I don't do laundry; just, every few weeks I gotta use that machine over there to clean the hooker blood and homeless teenager snot off my clothes. And if you compare me to a Smurf ever again, I'll tear out your fucking entrails and use your body to prove my Jewpacabra theory. Okay?"

Kenny turned a laugh into his hip: "Okay." And he thought absentmindedly that Cartman wore cruelty well. He really wore it well. Assholes were always talking about gassing their neighbors' dogs and cleaning hooker blood off their clothes -- but they didn't all wear it well. Kenny appreciated it. He appreciated it on his truancy officer so much that it was starting to become kind of endearing.

When he looked up, the cop was side-eyeing him -- they made a half-second of eye contact that felt more like an eye collision before Cartman's gaze darted back to the TV. Kenny pushed himself up on his elbow to look at him right-side up. "What?"

He shrugged. But there was a flicker of movement around his jaw like he was checking his teeth or something; like he was suspicious, Kenny realized. Of what --
"What?" He demanded.

"Don't yap at me, huh." Cartman said, and cast another quick side-glance at him. "I was just thinking how you oughta be harder to hang out with. I mean -- what're you doin' here? You don't have any other friends with couches, for real? Is there somethin' wrong with you?"

It was almost a compliment, Kenny thought, if you really dressed it down. He felt like he was learning a new language. "Are you snowing me?"

"No," he snapped. "I'm just -- I'm -- "

"You were about to appreciate me, dude -- go on, I wanna hear it."

"Screw you, McCormick. You're not cute."

"That's not even what you really think, c'mon."

Kenny watched his jaw work for a bit. "D'you really think I'm here 'cause I have nowhere to go?"

"Yes."

"Well, yeah, maybe I don't have anyplace else," he admitted. "But Eric -- even if I did... Listen, I don't choose the streets and the shelters over school and home because it's cozier out there, in those places. I choose them 'cause I like being around shitty people even less than a bullet in my guts."

Cartman raised an eyebrow, but didn't look away from his race. This map had a lot of sharp corners and traffic. He had to shift a lot, since he was driving manual and all.

"Dude," Kenny insisted. "Okay, I know I said you're a shitty cop, but I don't think you're shitty. And -- I don't think you understand how little people vibe with me, man. I'm a fiend for hate, and I know just how to get it. C'mon -- I wouldn't hang around Stotch this long, not without robbing him blind, anyway."

Kenny didn't know how to communicate exactly what Cartman wanted to hear -- so he pushed himself up on his knees and shuffled forward like he had before, at the keyboard bench. He dropped his chin to Cartman's shoulder and leaned into him until he felt the crest of his ear kind of cold against his forehead. "C'mon."

"You smell like a lumberjack," he said, and his neck tensed briefly as he pulled the Impala around a sudden turn.

"I used that tree-bark soap," Kenny murmured, turning to watch the race. "I didn't think soap was s'posed to hurt that much."

He sat back as Cartman's shoulders started to shake with laughter. "Christ," he huffed. "You used Wendy's crazy soap. She sent that to me over the holidays one year. With a postcard from Puerto Rico, for Chrissake. She said it would be good for me. She said it exfoliated."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I didn't know either," he said, gesturing around his controller again. "So I asked Heidi. Apparently it means it's supposed to hurt, because it's actually grinding away all the grime and dead shit that builds up on your skin. I used to have a kind of Axe called Snake Peel that worked kinda like that; like a snake, you know? I think Wendy sent me a fucking metaphor, or something. Girls, man. Just when you think you've got all your emotional problems cleaned up and tucked away, some girl's
gotta send you a bar of soap from the goddamn rainforest just to tell you to clean up your fucking act."

"Well, I think it works, dude. I feel like a newborn -- all raw and soft, fresh out the womb. It's incredible."

"No, it's soap." Cartman said. "Exfoliation is strictly chick shit. Besides, birth is overrated. I like my womb of grime and dead shit."

"Naw, c'mon, that's not natural." He said, but couldn't help snorting at the uncomfortable metaphor. "Push, man. I'll midwife you."

Cartman finally paused the race to pinch the bridge of his nose, but he was cracking up, too. "Disgusting, Kenny," he chuckled.

Kenny felt like he'd won, again.
"Hey, you know Alien?" Cartman said abruptly. "The whole Alien series, with Sigourney Weaver -- it's a fucking classic, you know? Like I never get tired of it, that same gag; an alien ripping out of someone's chest, mouth, or whatever, and then just shrieking and slapping blood everywhere -- it's fantastic. And the guy, the guy who inspired Alien had a theory that birth is this world-shattering, really traumatic experience; it's so traumatic, in fact, that we spend our whole lives just getting over it. Think about it; you're a little waterlogged sea-monkey in a house that gives you everything you could ever need or desire, in that pre-conscious state. And on top of it all: you're the furthest you will ever be from being alone. Utterly dependent, sure, but there's no fear or anything, because you are inseparable from this other person's heartbeat, you know?"

He left the controller on his leg and threw his arms over the back of the couch. "And then you're born. Ripped from that suspension and shoved into a new world; you're a stranger from another planet, a wailing monster, right? Suddenly you've gotta adapt yourself to all this new pain, even if that means killing your goddamned host.

"Our entire life after birth is spent looking around for shit that's already behind us, collecting junk in the present because it makes us feel safe or comfortable, and imagining what more we need from the future until everything's finally perfect. But we're just trying to build up that womb again, even though it's impossible -- there's no 'finally'; the finish line was behind us the day we opened our eyes and started slowly oxidizing ourselves to death. There's no such thing as a finally is, or a finally will be -- there's only what finally was."

Cartman paused for a breath. "Nobody gets this."

"No, I get it, dude. It's like getting out of the shower and trying to put clothes on before you get cold and goosebumpy -- but clothes aren't ever the same as a hot shower."

"Yeah, brilliant, McCormick," he sighed. "Why do I bother explaining all this, when you can sum it all up in one lousy sentence, huh? I oughta shut up."

"You know, now that I think of it -- it's also sort of like when jackass cops wrestle me out of nice dreams."

Cartman snorted, then dropped his hands back to his controller and un-paused the race.

"Isn't that fantastic, though?" He said, cute as all hell. "With the blood slapping everywhere?"

Kenny giggled. "You're a fucking madman, Cartman."

"Well," he huffed. "A whacking off one, at most."

Kenny ricocheted into laughter.

"Hey, come on, don't hang on me. I'm in the middle of a race, for Chrissake."

"But you're way out in front."

"What, look at the radar, dumb-ass -- there are like three cars in front of me."

"Can't see 'em,"

"Wait."

"Cut it out for a second, huh? Can you read this?"

Kenny wanted to growl but he dragged his eyes away from the tempting skin just long enough to
glance at the television screen. "It's the pause menu. It says it's paused."

"O-kay -- so what's it say underneath that, smart-ass?"

"I don't care, why're you askin'? I dunno what it says."

"You can read, right?"

"Yes." Kenny did growl, this time. He pulled away and glared at his truancy officer but didn't want to bite him any less.

Cartman tipped his head back against the couch to appraise him with half-lidded eyes. "You need glasses, Kenny."

"Yeah? Who's gonna pay for 'em?" He managed to say, but inside Kenny thought how he didn't need glasses, how his other senses totally made up for having crumby far-sight. No, he didn't need glasses. Kenny was a vampire, and he just needed that bite.

Cartman shut his eyes, exhaled through his nose. "I don't know. I'll call Wendy. Jesus, the irony -- everybody's blind and you need glasses. They wonder why you can't sit through a damned lecture, or pass a fuckin' math class in a room with fifty people and nothin' to look at -- gimme a break."

Whenever anybody at the center asked why he never took notes in class, Kenny just said he didn't care. His eyesight only ever bothered him in school, and fuck if he was gonna add glasses to the list of things people could rip on him for. It seemed like more trouble than it was worth.

Kenny flopped back down on his back and after a moment of silence stuck his hand in Cartman's pocket to dig out his phone. He tapped in the security code and started browsing through his pictures again. Need for Speed's background music jumped into clarity as the game resumed.

"This is such a good song," Cartman mumbled after a while. "Lupe Fiasco. Great shit."

"Why'd you take a picture of your cat with a slice of bread around its face?"

"Cat-breading."

_Uh-huh_, Kenny hummed. He effed around with the camera for a bit, pushed his shirt up to get a good shot of his bruises, then angled a selfie with half of Cartman's glare in it. That was great; that was much better than the fake-smiling with Heidi.

He pushed the phone back into Cartman's pocket when he got bored. "I'm kinda hungry."

Kenny rolled and stretched and groaned a little around the soreness in his abdomen. He preferred to sleep on his stomach, and the fetal position shit was already getting on his nerves.

"Cartman. I'm hungry."

But when he tipped his head back to look up -- his T.O.'s head was turned away and sort of falling on his shoulder. Need for Speed was still pumping its background tunes but the Impala was nosed up against a wall next to the entrance to a garage, like it ran out of gas just before it reached home. It was kind of sad.

"How long have you been narcoleptic?"

Kenny plucked the XBox controller out of the cop's loosened grip and put it on the coffee table. Then he stared at Cartman's hands for a bit, watched his chest rise and fall. Seriously? Kenny
thought. Had he really passed out, just like that? He reached out and traced along the knuckles of the nearest hand, then followed the vein twisting over his metacarpals -- the one that always stared at him from atop the gear shift in the police cruiser. Kenny slid his fingertips into the soft valleys between his knuckles.

Cartman probably had a couple screws loose. But it was his particular madness, and his frank sort of cruelty, that Kenny had started to sort of like being around. They were probably the same things that drove people away from the cop. Kenny knew he had his own share of unsavory qualities -- he was born outside the system, and he was determined to live that way, too, even if that meant pushing everyone and everything away from him -- but he was starting to think that Cartman liked those things about him. He liked Yellow Wolf, anyway. And Yellow Wolf was just code for all the shit Kenny’d done wrong; it was a persona that proved to everyone that Kenny wasn't worth the time and resources to educate. It was their reason to look down on him -- and his way of telling them to suck his fucking dick right back.

But fuck, maybe Cartman liked being provoked all the time, if it let him rant himself into a nap, once in a while. Kenny felt his resolve wavering. He didn't need to change himself to keep Cartman in an even mood -- he'd already admitted that Kenny wasn't hard to hang out with, and that was... well, that was new. He spit on the guy’s dashboard -- twice -- and he still thought he wasn't hard to hang out with.

Kenny liked him out of uniform. Except he didn't want to fuck over his truancy officer, anymore. He kind of wanted to fuck Cartman.  

Shit, he thought.

Kenny sat up and shoved the cop's hands aside by the wrists, watching his face for movement -- but he was passed the fuck out, it seemed -- and then climbed over him and carefully lowered himself into his lap. Shit, he thought again, unable to process. Kenny licked his lips, feeling his knees slide in around his hips. It was just like day fucking one, except he didn't want to work his badge out of his pocket, or break his sunglasses, or get out the car -- no, he finally got a chance to put his mouth on his neck.

Yellow Wolf flicked his tongue out over the area he most coveted -- that strip of muscle that always jumped out during the cop's ceaseless ranting -- and after breathing over it for a little while, he pressed his open mouth to it, right where it linked up under Cartman's jaw. He wished he hadn't moaned like a horse going into labor when he did it, but nobody was around to hear and Kenny was buzzing out of his goddamn mind. He slid forward until his bruised ribs pushed flat against his truancy officer, and brought his hands up to his hair. The hat fell behind the couch and thunked to the floor.

"Eric," he murmured, moving to hover by his mouth. It was hanging open a little, where he'd leaned over his shoulder -- perfect if he'd wanted to stick his tongue inside -- but Kenny didn't want to. Well, he wanted to, but he really wanted Cartman to move first. That was the game. So instead he stuck his lips just to the corner of his mouth, and worked there till he was half-conscious and rocking with desire. He didn't even notice the grip at the back of his neck until Cartman growled an ugh! and threw him off --

If they'd been in the car, Kenny probably would have fallen against the door, again. But they weren't in a car. Kenny slipped right off the couch and brained himself on the coffee table.
"You what?"

"How many ways can I put this?" Cartman pinched the bridge of his nose until he felt the pressure around his eye sockets. "I threw him into a table, Wendy. I think I need to transfer."

"You want to transfer now?" Wendy said, and her voice wasn't coming through super clearly, but he heard her disapproval like a knife in the ribs. You'd think he was abandoning the damned Iditarod a mile outside of Nome. "What did you tell the hospital?"

Cartman pictured her in some swank hotel room in Arizona with Stan. He bet there was a view of the red canyons and shit, little cactus plants on the wallpaper -- you stay anywhere tourist-trappy in the south and they think you wanna see cacti all the time -- and probably ping pong tables in the lobby, and free breakfasts. He bet they could slip right outside into the dry heat -- no shoes or anything -- and walk into one of the complimentary hot tubs. That would be so fucking sweet, probably, sitting around in a hot tub looking straight up at the stars with some bitch you're in love with. Cartman wasn't sure if pregnant bitches could sit around in a hot tub, though.

"I waved my badge around and told them I just found him that way," he said. "Wendy, they put a staple in his skull."

"Well," she hummed, with that annoying doorbell thoughtfulness hanging on the end of the word, which Stan must enjoy. "If they said he could be discharged tonight, then it can't be that serious, right?"

"I really don't know. I mean, he was bleeding splatterpunk horror all over my goddamned seats, but he didn't pass out at all -- threw a shit-fit over coming to the hospital, of course -- so I don't know. Nobody looked too concerned, you know? You come to hospitals like these, with waiting rooms in the damn emergency clinic, and nobody ever looks concerned -- "

"Maybe they didn't look concerned because he's alright. You said he was in and out in less than half an hour, right? That doesn't sound so bad. It took fifteen minutes just to put him to sleep, probably."

"...But a staple, seriously? He's gotta come back in a few days to get it yanked out. Right in his skull -- a staple."

"Stop yelling, Cartman. Please. They only do that to keep everything aligned while it heals, you know that. You said he didn't even pass out."

"Dude," he couldn't gesture at Wendy, so Cartman stopped his pacing in front of a ficus plant instead. "People can take bullets through their skulls and not pass out."

"How long has he been with you?"

"He hasn't -- I didn't -- we're not -- "

Cartman caught himself before a truly humiliating fit of blustering, and sighed. He could hear Wendy waiting over the line. Women. They get pregnant and suddenly they're waiting for you all the time. He glanced at his watch. "I picked him up off the Tree-streets, like, twenty-two hours ago."

"And you didn't bring him to the drop-in center why?" She didn't say it like an accusation or anything, even though it felt like one, to Cartman. She said it like she was looking at a blank space
on a form and couldn't get a straight answer from the applicant.

"It was nine below," Cartman insisted. "He was already beat half to death -- and you know he'd just run from anyplace he didn't want to be. What was I supposed to do?"

He was flubbing it a bit. Technically, Kenny had told him -- in his sulky, damned unintelligible muttering -- to take him to the drop-in. But Cartman still thought the argument held.

"I think you did the only thing you could."

Well that kind of depressed him. If the only thing you could do was shack up with your truant -- who the hell was crazy enough to make that call? Would he be dead if Cartman was someone else? No, he would've just gone home.

"Nobody is going to see it that way. The only physical record of our history is this bullshit truancy case, a phony sexual harassment claim, and now a bunch of fucking hospital release forms that I already signed. I was gonna use Stotch's name but they wanted my badge number, too, for Chrissake. So now there's a paper trail leading right to my fucking blood-soaked doorstep and a flashing sign for anyone who wants to look: sexual abuse of a minor. And who will be surprised?"

"Cartman, lower your voice, please. Where are you now?"

"I'm in the maternity ward, actually. They got the nicest digs, in the maternity ward. You oughta check it out, before your sea-monkey flips on its head." Cartman sat in one of the chairs in the hall, then got up immediately. He hadn't been able to stop pacing around since he walked through the damn doors -- at least the maternity ward was near-abandoned, and not full of staring drunks like the waiting room. "Wendy, what the hell do I do now? It's a fucking miracle they didn't do a physical exam and alert the department -- Red is on duty at the desk and she already thinks I'm the fucking devil -- "

"Try not to work yourself up. That's a start. I can call Bebe and have her pick him up, or you can take him back home, I suppose."

"It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't want to be at either of those shitholes -- if I take him to the drop-in center, he'll run; and if I take him back to the damned trailer park, he'll fucking run. He bit my hand when I tried to get him into the emergency clinic, for fuck's sake. It's snowing seven hells out and there's no-place else to go -- "

"This still sounds simple."

"How?"

"If you're so concerned about it, then why not let him stay with you? At least until the weather clears -- or until the staple is removed, would be best."

"That's not a good idea."

"Why? It sounds like the safest place for him, right now. And if -- "

"I threw him into a table!"
"You still haven't told me why you threw him into a table."

"Because -- because, you know why; he's a pain in my ass and he fucking pushes me, damn it."

He was one more round of heartburn away from calling the station himself to make an immediate transfer. Someone else on the force could surely handle this better than him -- the right sob story could open up Stotch's door for a few days, at least -- but that was stupid. Kenny might be smelly and just shy of unpalatable, but he wasn't a goddamn Christmas fruit cake; he couldn't just be handed off and expected to sit around in a damn cupboard until next year. Besides, the less people knew of Cartman's involvement with the case, the better, and calling up the station would just yank a ton of ears and eyes around to a situation that was better dealt with on his own time. His vacation time.

"Did you mean to throw him into a table?"

"Yes. I mean, not really, but yes."

"Let me put it this way: are you willing to let him stay with you? Just until the storm passes."

Cartman threw the last of a watery, sock-flavored cup of cafeteria coffee down his throat and crushed the paper cup, throwing it into a nearby bin with the rest of his sad crushed cups. "I get ten days of vacation a year, Wendy. Why can't it be someone else's problem, just this once?"

"Cartman, all you've told me so far is that you don't trust him with anybody else."

"Yeah -- because there isn't anybody else; there isn't a single uniform or logo on the fucking planet that is equipped to handle this; if I'm not dropping him at a crack-den, it's at the cruddy drop-in, and either way I find him on a street corner in the next five minutes with a new inventory of bruises. He was at my place for less than a day and now he's got a staple in his head -- like, he's not going to make it to adulthood, at this rate."

"I know you're upset," Wendy said, like it wasn't the understatement of the century. "And I can tell you're worried. But if you didn't really intend to hurt him, and he's willing to stay, then I don't see a problem with you taking him in for a couple days. Stan and I will be back in town this weekend, and then I can take it from there, okay? And if you still want to transfer, we can work on finding someone else in the department."

How does she make everything so nut-fondling simple? He wondered. It's not like that; nothing is like that. "Wendy, I cannot shack up with a minor for a 'few days', what the hell kind of protocol is that? I'm a cop -- I can't even use the elevator without prompting a potential controversy; and you should see the way he lays all over my goddamn couch. I don't wanna be another statistic -- "

"Cartman, stop it." She said, and it was stern enough to actually jerk him out of the rant he'd felt stirring in his gut. "I've watched you on the force for three years, now, and I know how you work. Bureaucracy is all about turning the right corners, picking the right ears and the right words; since CFS is low-tier priority, our facilities suffer in funding and management -- but the sheriff's department is a lot deeper in the pyramid. You don't turn corners, Cartman, you never learned how; you want all the walls to fall and leave a straight path to the solution, but that's almost never possible. Those walls aren't ever going to go away; they've been built up from American soil since the day the pilgrims nailed the door on Harvard in the 1600s. It's the only religion every American knows and follows. But you only burden yourself thinking about it all the time, always focused on how to bring down the walls instead of just learning how to turn the corners."

"For once, just forget them. Forget all the complicated bureaucratic crap that we have to deal with for a living -- I'm serious. Because you're right, we are on vacation. You're not wearing your uniform
and Kenny isn't just a file on your desk -- I know it sounds irresponsible, but I honestly believe that the root of your problems, Cartman, is your conviction that everything is wrong with the world, and everything that isn't wrong is about to be. For once, don't think about the paper trail. Don't think about the bureaucrats. Don't make Kenny your job. Your friend has a staple in his head, and he needs a place to crash for a couple days. Is that so complicated?"

In the middle of her speech, Cartman had finally sat down. He felt mostly frustration, anger, and a little resentment for being scolded so soundly by the chick he'd known almost his whole life. And even though he had a hundred things to say -- at least two of which were legitimate refutations -- he pushed them all down until he felt like a glass half-full of dense, acidic goop. A single deep breath settled into the empty space he created above it. He was tired, suddenly. Helpless, soul-sucking tired.

"If he goes to the station with any of this, I'm finished. I could go to jail. They probably won't even uphold the deal and wipe my record first."

"I'm sorry, who are we talking about, right now? Are we talking about your graffiti hero Yellow Wolf?" Wendy said, sassy as fuck. "For God's sake, Eric. This is a boy who would sooner spit in your face and die in the cold than talk to the law -- and you think he's going to tattle on you? What's going on with you? I've never heard you so obsessed with disaster. It's fatalistic, almost. What aren't you telling me?"

Cartman bit his lip. Could it really all be as simple as she made it out? If Kenny really wanted to fuck him over, after all, it would be too easy; he already had enough evidence to do it. What difference could a few more days make?

None, if the adolescent wasn't determined to push the boundaries of an inappropriate friendship over into an inappropriate relationship, of some kind. He couldn't even close his eyes on his own couch without waking up to a seventeen-year-old dude in his lap and up on him like bark on a tree -- Wendy didn't know that bit. She'd never know, if he could help it.

"I think I have narcolepsy."

Wendy heaved one of her wonderful, smooth sighs down the line. She was resting a hand on her Alien time-bomb belly, probably. "No, Cartman -- you have insomnia. And it's because you can't leave your work at work. You take in a ton of bullshit, every day, and then you carry it around and take it out on other people when it gets too heavy. I can't believe I have to tell you this, but you need to rest. You need to stop drinking coffee, start eating regular meals, exercise, and take fifteen- to twenty-minute naps during the day. Okay? And you can hang out with Kenny for a few days. I knew you two would get along. Okay? Are you still there?"

"Yes." Great, now his effin' lip was bleeding. Wendy had no idea what she was giving Cartman permission to do.

"I have to go, now. If anything comes up..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He said. "This isn't gonna blow up in my face, you promise?"

"Yes, I promise. I have to go, now -- there's a meteor shower tonight and Stan wants to watch it from the rocks. We'll send you some videos in the morning. Did you get those pictures of the Painted Desert?"

"Yeah. Hey, uh, they got hot tubs there? At your hotel, I mean, in Sedona -- they got hot tubs there?"

"Yes."
"Under the stars and shit?"

"Yes."

"Can pregnant bitches sit in hot tubs?"

"Goodnight, Cartman."

Cartman pushed his phone into his pocket. He hadn't even changed his clothes, before driving to the hospital, so he was stuck in sweats and his night patrol jacket -- basically looking like a fucking astronaut -- which hadn't made it any easier to wave his badge around. At least Kenny had looked the part of the homeless teenager, scowling in Cartman's ridiculous Washington Redskins shirt. It said 'Go Fuck Yourselves!' on the back, since it was from his old start-up company. Perfect for Yellow Wolf, actually.

Cartman stood around in the hallway for a few more minutes, staring at the potted ficus. The rest of the hospital wasn't nearly as cozy as the maternity ward. He'd had his fair share of surgeries and needles, but they always happened in the cold, white parts of the emergency room. This place was actually above room temperature, and painted in carefully unoffensive tones. There were even stuffed animals and Beanie Babies in the rooms, for the kids, plus these big fake potted plants in the halls, sitting right on the sort of salmon-colored carpeting. It was all strangely relaxing, even though Cartman had a thing against fake plants. His mom always kept fake flowers in vases in the house when he was younger -- since she was out on 'business' trips all the time, she couldn't take care of real plants -- and he always hated them. He seriously hated them. If Cartman was given a choice between a public pool packed with pissing minorities and a fake flower, he'd be swimming in lousy Mexican urine. It bothered him that people could put so much effort into building up a house, a box of artificial comforts to keep out the wind, the rain, and the neighbors' prying eyes, and then spend fifteen bucks on a plastic plant because they couldn't take care of a real one. They could have plumbing and air conditioning, dish-washing machines and Tivo, but what the house is really missing is that touch of artificial nature, for Chrissake; it's the soothing polyform corpse of an orchid, for Chrissake. It depressed him, it really depressed him, the way people took wild things in and sucked all the life out of them because they couldn't be bothered to learn how to care for them. As long as it seemed alive, as long as it looked nice standing in the lobby -- then that was okay.

Yellow Wolf was awake, sour, and glaring when Cartman reentered the room.

They said there was a space issue in the common ward, but the nurses seemed to like Kenny, so that was probably part of it, too. They only got to see him after the doctor put him out, when he was just a cute blond kid with a head-wound. They had no idea who was actually sleeping in the maternity ward. They didn't know he was a spitting anarchist.

Cartman crossed the cozy room and picked Kenny's parka off the chairs by the window, for something to do. He was still trying to figure out how to heed Wendy's advice -- and whether he should or not.

"I thought you left."

"I should have," Cartman snarled. But he didn't mean it. He only told Kenny he belonged in the trailer park because it's what the state thought; he told him he oughta die on the streets because that's what everyone's attitudes towards homeless kids suggested -- and he told Kenny he should've left because Kenny was used to being left; he was probably waiting for Cartman to hand him off, too. He wouldn't, though. If he cut away all the bureaucratic bollocks and standard protocol and made it simple, then he'd never really considered handing McCormick off. He'd come close. If he had any common sense, he would've done it a month ago, at least, and brought Kenny in for alcohol
possession like a good cop.

Cartman never pretended to occupy the sunny moral high-ground. He was down in the shale and the tide-pools with the common criminals, and people liked it that way. Things were so much simpler when evil people did evil things and good people did good things. It was just awkward now because he was an adult and he had a Bachelor's degree and all the fixings of a member of law enforcement - he was pulled in from the outside, dressed up and propped in the corner of the government's big bureaucratic beat-off palace like a fake ficus, and it made people uncomfortable because he was evil and therefore a contradiction. Eric couldn't believe it; he was a fake plant. _When_ had he become a fake fucking ficus?

"Healin' don't happen in hospitals, huh?" Kenny was in a spitting rage and working himself up into a sneer, all tucked into bed in the damn maternity ward; what a riot. He was so mad he was slurring. "What happened? This building don't got a _logo_ on it, or something? Or you just remembered you're a crumby _bigot_ like all the other ball-licking lesbians in the police department --"

"Ball-licking _lesbians_, dude?" Cartman interrupted. "That doesn't even make sense. Relax. I'm still here, aren't I? And I wasn't going to staple your skull together _myself_. That's one thing I can't do, anyway."

"They stapled my skull?" Kenny reached his hand back to feel around the wound.

"Don't poke at it," he said, and tossed the parka over to him. "They said it's just a precaution, so if you got any cracks or anything, they won't get bigger. What you _do_ have is a bloody fucking hole in your head, so how 'bout the next time you catch a guy _sleeping_, you leave him the fuck _alone_. Okay?"

Cartman went to pull at his hair, but if he kept up with the habit he'd probably go bald in his forties, or something, so he stuck his hands in his pockets instead. "I only had one rule; I really only gave you _one_ fucking rule, and you've gone out of your way to break it since I brought you up the damn stairs. You ever wonder _why_ you get your ass kicked so much? You just can't fucking listen, can you? You've always gotta break up the lines, fuck up the patterns, wave your damn finger around instead of sittin' _still_. Now look. You got a load of bruised ribs, a staple in your skull -- not to mention all the _other_ times you've laid around in my cruiser all crusty with blood. Why _d'you_ do it, huh? I mean why _d_ you _do_ it? Why'd you burn down that damn building?"

None of this would've happened, Cartman thought, if he'd just sat quiet for one lousy month. But he had to burn down a shack and piss off his parents and start a whole landslide of shit falling on _Cartman's_ life. Shit, if _he_ was McCormick's parent, maybe he'd wanna smack him around, too.

Kenny sat up on his knees and began shrugging on his parka. He'd finally got the damn thing washed, so it was actually _orange_ now, but it didn't make it look any less like it'd been dragged through the wasteland for a hundred years; it was scarred with old tears and stitching, pockmarked where patches and the snaps over the pockets had been ripped off. It was really kind of a wretched thing, but there would probably never be anything else exactly like it.

Yellow Wolf flipped up his hood, and shuffled on his knees to the edge of the bed. He could be half-asleep, sneering, or laughing his hyena head off, but his eyes always hit Cartman like bullets, or greyhounds tearing out the gate.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry about the -- the molesting you in your sleep thing."

There was that abrupt fucking teenage sincerity he always whipped out when he knew he could be in trouble. It wasn't going to work this time. Cartman told himself it wasn't going to work.
"You're not mad, are ya? I won't do it again."

He didn't believe that for a second. He didn't want to get close to him, either, really -- but the kid had a staple in his skull and he thought Cartman had left and he was wearing that damn super cereal apology face.

"What did -- what did Marsh say? She say you gotta bring me to Stevens? I'm not goin' to the damn drop-in center."

"I know."

"And if you transfer me, then -- then I won't go to school. I'll run."

He snorted. "Is that a threat?"

"No, it's a plan."

He couldn't help but think running was probably the best option for someone like Kenny. Well, it would suck, surely, and he'd probably have to keep dealing and stealing to stay alive, but was that any suckier than right now?

"No wonder you don't have any friends. Are all your relationships based on non-consensual contact and blackmail? How long were we friends -- one night? And now you've got a staple in your head."

"Psh!" Kenny said, and he was so close to the edge of the bed he was sort of swaying on it, so Cartman stepped forward and pushed at his shoulder to keep him from falling the hell off and putting a new crack in his skull. "We were friends for two and a half months, only."

"Jesus -- two, at most."

"Can we get outa here?" He said. "I don't like hospitals. This nurse came in to watch me pee, while you were out there yelling your head off."

"Watch you -- pee? Why?"

"I dunno. She told me not to flush, even. Then she eyeballed it an' all, and said it was nice."

"She said it was nice."

"Yeah, man! She complimented it -- said it was a nice apple juice color. I don't even drink apple juice."

"Here, shoes." Cartman said, toeing the boots by the bed and chuckling a little.

Kenny dropped to his ass and planted his feet in his cruddy boots, leaning down to do up the laces. Cartman pushed his hood back and eyed the fingernail-sized crescent of red at the back of his head, and the big damn staple planted cross-wise over it. This fucking kid. Honestly.

He finished his knots and sat up, but he didn't stand. "So you wanna get outa here, hey? You wanna get sushi and watch Alien?"

Greyhounds, Kenny's eyes. Each with its own set of teeth and claws -- blue like gray fur under sunlight.

Cartman pulled his hood back up over the staple and dropped to a crouch in front of him. There were so many different thoughts wheeling around in his head that he couldn't actually hear a single one; it...
was all a flushing noise in his ears.

"Why'd you burn that building down, anyway?"

He shrugged. "I thought you might like it."

"It made my fucking day," Cartman admitted, and started digging around in his pocket for his car keys. "I'm sorry. For cracking your skull, I mean. I'm not sorry for throwing you, because I'm still hoping one of these days you'll learn -- but I feel pretty shitty about the staple, to tell you the truth."

"Whoa -- Marsh gotcha thinking 'bout your feelings, huh? I bet you never said sorry b'fore in your whole life. Ya gonna be okay? You wanna go rip on some minorities, talk in a theater till you feel like yourself again?"

"Hey, don't do that."

"What -- "

"Cover your teeth." Cartman said. "You're always coverin' your teeth, when you laugh or anything. I hate it."

Kenny dropped his hand back to his lap and twisted both hands around like they were struggling against the compulsion to kill. His eyes curled into happy crescents. "Can I...?"

"Fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Cartman almost tipped over onto the damn floor as Yellow Wolf sort of flew at him. *Is this a hug?* he wondered. The arms were so tight around his neck he felt like he was being attacked. Cartman wrapped one arm around the adolescent and used the other to push himself up from the floor to a standing position. He felt Kenny's chest shove against his as he took a deep breath and then went loose like liquid. Before he could think about it, Cartman took a matching breath and brought both arms around him until he didn't feel like they were two separate things, anymore. Things were so simple, when Kenny was close. Because at least when he was carrying him around or getting molested on his own couch, Cartman knew the kid wasn't on the streets about to get beat into pieces or arrested -- and at the same time he had the comfort of knowing that shit like Yellow Wolf, good shit, might *survive* in this wasteland, and if that was true then maybe the world wasn't so full of fags after all. Cartman wasn't a hug-a-day kind of guy, but he admitted having the somewhat over-affectionate teenager around had been a relief for him. He was recovering a memory of what it felt like not to be alone, and he decided to savor the sensation of friendship with this wild thing with effing greyhounds for eyes, even if it was only for as long as the snow fell.

He made a lousy ficus, anyway.

"You really have an unhealthy thing with coffee," Kenny murmured. "I can smell it all over you."

"Not coffee -- ass-piss from the cafeteria downstairs. My mouth tastes like the inside of a gas tank."

"Okay, so you can say ass-piss but I can't say ball-licking lesbians."

"What -- yo, that's because ass-piss is a real thing. Lesbians *don't* lick balls -- unless they're lacrosse balls."
He snorted against Cartman's neck. "Ass-piss? C'mon."

"Yeah -- you know what I mean. Like, six hours after eating at Chipotle, when you gotta spend the night sweating on the shitter over this terrific, bloody spray -- "

"That is -- " Kenny's shoulders began to shake and he pulled away, finally. "Fucking disgusting, bro," he huffed.

"Don't be such a princess. What, I can't make shit jokes around you? Everybody has ass-piss once in a while." Cartman waited to catch his eye. "A spray, man."

McCormick’s laughter never got old. His teeth didn’t either -- they were never quite where he expected them to be, even though they didn’t move around any more than normal teeth did; you take stuff like that, like crooked teeth or honky laughs or acne scars, and they’re distracting because they remind you what you’re looking at isn’t perfect, but you can never get enough of them, anyway. Cartman appreciated that shit, he appreciated it so much he wanted to rip on it all the time -- until people were forced to look, and to change the way they thought about beauty.
Whatever Marsh said to Cartman turned him into a motherfucking black hole for two days. If he wasn't sullen and grouching over his keyboard and case reports, then he was a coin-flip away from waving his damn hands around and ranting himself into a nap.

He was a robot with only two settings: kill and self-destruct.

Kenny admitted that it was mostly the usual Cartman shit -- since swearing over car games and flying into rages over the angle the fucking sun shined at were nothing new -- but he could tell the cop was chewing on something, ever since the night at the hospital, and by the third day he just wanted to know what the hell was going on in his head. By the third day, he would've cracked the damn thing open, just to find out.

Even though the couch was Mattress World compared to the trailer, Kenny was restless, and often stayed up late reading through the police department files he'd transferred to his phone: his truancy officer's high school record, his arrest reports and such. It was good reading, anyway; it was mad. The guy -- the kid -- who Kenny read about was a perfect psychopath on paper, a stereotypical bad-egg; there was a childish arrogance to it all that he couldn't find under the cop's black hole depressing shit. It made Kenny want to spit, sometimes -- it made him want to shake the years off the officer until something of the child came back. He was becoming a fan of the Eric Cartman who incited riots from Cthulu death cults and led Neo-Nazi uprisings, the one who orchestrated ironic clashes between illegal immigrants, Syrian refugees, and political correctness, the one who orchestrated ironic clashes between illegal immigrants, Syrian refugees, and political correctness, the one who was caught on national television faith hilling at a damn Presidential debate -- where was that guy, anyway? He sounded like a fucking blast to be around. Sure, it was all too self-serving and bigoted on the outside to look like Yellow Wolf's brand of anarchy, but Kenny knew Cartman was anything -- everything -- but the uniforms he wore; he was racist, sure, sexist, undoubtedly, but not in the everyday ignorant ways. Just like he was a cop, a crooked one, even, but not in the everyday crooked cop way. Kenny bet nobody ever really got Cartman out of his uniforms.

He heard the keyboard at night, mostly -- at bizarre times of night -- from behind the bedroom door. Kenny wasn't allowed in the bedroom. It got sort of eerie, after a while, and Cartman was so damned reclusive about it; Kenny imagined his truancy officer hunched over the keys in cape and claws -- maybe he had a magic rose under a jar in there, or something, and a portrait of himself from back when he was human -- like the fucking Beast. Maybe he pissed off a gypsy at some point, and it was a curse that turned him into a depressing kill-bot. It seemed plausible, the more Kenny thought about it.

So he spent a couple days filling in the gaps, pulling pieces together where the criminal record ended and the douche-suit and sunglasses began. First, he put together the "deal" Cartman had with the sheriff; in return for three years of service, specifically on the Bruder operation, Cartman earned a clean record and anonymity when any of the Schlafes Bruder cases went to court. That meant he
wasn't just sitting around in crumby-looking cars on the Tree-streets; he was still working them. He was still showing up to deals and turf conflicts as a member of the damn squad, but bugged up with wires and microphones like a human bomb. Kenny imagined it was the kind of work that set teeth to the grindstone, and didn't let up -- even for a minute of sleep. And after watching Cartman sink hours of his vacation time into virtual car chases, constantly running from sirens, bombs and spike strips, cruisers that looked just like his own, Kenny suspected that the cop wouldn't know a moment of peace if it flew in on dove's wings and shat on his dashboard. It was kind of pitiable, in a way. Like, he oughta be doing yoga or crosswords or something, in his spare time, not stuff that just made him more stressed out and angry. Kenny mentioned yoga once, and nearly got his arm twisted out of its socket for it. Chick shit. Go figure.

On the third day of his impromptu vacation at the Beast's palace, Kenny pipped out to grab some things from home and visit a few faces from the park and the shelter. He collected money on a few bets, made payments on a debt or two, cancelled some nefarious plans, and snuck some of his clothes out of the trailer without causing too much of a stir.

Flurries of snow were still sweeping over Park County at odd times of day, but it wasn't enough to clear the streets. The commercial parts of town were perpetually busy over the long holiday. Kenny had almost forgot about the holidays, before leaving the apartment -- but there were donation bins everywhere, and lines out the door at the shelter and the soup kitchens -- so that was reminder enough. When he got a ride back into North Park, the main streets were carved into dueling currents of elbowing shoppers and Church-goers, beggars and cars packed to the gills with families leaving town. Kenny always felt like an outsider during the holidays. He wasn't on either end of it; he wasn't waiting in line at the soup kitchen or looking for handouts, but he wasn't running up his credit card or busting his ass to meet family, ever, either. There were the haves, the have-nots, and there was Kenny. The McCormicks used to do holiday shit, but that was before they went from poor to broke, from simply tense and argumentative to explosive and dangerous. They used to go to Church, even, since his dad was a bloody Catholic and all. Kenny sort of missed it, sometimes -- loading up on home-cooked food at Church potlucks and sticking boogers under the pews. Sometimes when you think you hate something, you can sort of miss it, too, after it leaves your life.

It was a relief to climb the stairs back to his truancy officer's apartment. The stairs weren't a relief or anything, since there were so fucking many and he still wasn't in top physical shape, but it was a relief to card open the door -- he'd left the biggest lock unlatched -- and take a big breath inside the bachelor pad without any crack fumes or fuel exhaust to smoke out his senses. It was snowing outside the big windows in the living room -- too heavily for other buildings to be visible in the distance, and they were too high up for the haves and have-nots to wreck the view -- so that was cool, too.
"Shoes," was Cartman's greeting. Kenny didn't recognize the car he was driving today.
He danced off the rug and back into the entryway to take off his muddy boots. He always forgot.

"Want some chocolate?" Kenny said, shrugging off his snow-flecked parka and tossing it over the counter in the kitchen. He'd get in trouble for that later, probably. "There was a bunch on sale at the drug store. Holiday stuff, you know? So I stuck myself to this fat lady on a damn Hoveround like I belonged to her, right, and loaded up. Even stood next to her in the check-out line, so they wouldn't pick me out on the cameras. Then I helped her put her shit in her SUV, and she said I was a 'nice young man.' How 'bout that, huh? Pretty suave, I thought. They call me Yellow Wolf but I'm more like Don Quixote. Or George Clooney in Ocean's."

That earned him a good snort from the couch.

"First of all, you call yourself Yellow Wolf, moron." He began. "And you've definitely got the wrong impression of Don Quixote, if you think he's pocketing Christmas candy and loading groceries for fat bitches." Cartman stopped and swore as the engine blew out on the flashy car he was driving. He restarted the challenge from the beginning in a series of menus and furious clicks that were so fluid and so practiced it was just... pitiable. "Oh yeah, and good luck pulling off George fuckin' Clooney with that wall of shattered glass in your mouth."

Kenny grinned over at the back of his head. He didn't talk a lot at school or anyplace, really, because either nobody was listening, or they'd tell him he was mumbling -- which Kenny hated -- but since Cartman didn't rise to simple 'fuck you's anymore, he stepped up his game. Mostly he continued talking until it got so ridiculous Cartman had to say something, even if it was just to rip on him for half-baked literary references. Kenny was a quick study, when he was interested in something -- and lately he was just interested in pulling Cartman out of his black holes.

"You're jealous. You're salty 'cause nobody's ever called you a 'nice young man.'"

"Agh. Stop fucking stealing, anyway. Jesus. I don't even care, I just don't want you tellin' me about it. I'm on vacation, but -- "

"But you're still a cop, for Chrissake." Kenny finished for him. "Yeah, yeah, I know. You wanna chocolate?"

"No -- I don't like eating chocolate that's 4% chocolate. It just tastes like whatever it came wrapped in."

*Picky sonuvabitch.*

"I'm not picky," he said, and Kenny knew from the tone he was probably gesturing around his controller. "I just don't like buying into bullshit and letting jackass soy producers like Nestle and Hershey make another buck on deceit."

Kenny slid over the back of the couch and waved a tinfoil-wrapped truffle under the cop's nose. "C'mon, try one. This one's coffee-flavored. Marsh said ya can't drink coffee but she didn't say anythin' about coffee-flavored chocolate."

"I'm in the middle of a drag race -- "

"Pause it, then."

"You don't pause a drag race, motherfucker," he growled. "It'll throw off my rhythm."

"I'll feed it to ya, then." Kenny threatened.
The volume dipped as the game paused and Cartman snatched the candy. Kenny tipped his head back against his leg to watch him peel the foil off. "You're the most unhealthy part of my life, you know. If Wendy really wanted to help me she'd get you off my couch and out of my house."

He bit part of the shell off the truffle, eyed the dark espresso inside like it might've been a shrapnel bomb, then popped the rest in his mouth and picked up the XBox controller. Kenny bet coffee-chocolate made him taste a lot better than the inside of a gas tank. He wanted to stick his tongue inside and find out, but remembered the One Rule, so he squirmed until he felt settled and turned his head to watch the drag race.

"New car?"

"Only a GT40, best race car ever built. Zero to sixty in three seconds, and you wouldn't believe the torque on this thing. Not that it matters in a drag race, really."

The jar was on the table. "Are you drinking? You're not drinkin', are ya?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I'm not a heavy drinker, Kenny."

"I know, it's just sad, though, like -- ya only ever get sad."

"Fuck off."

"No, dude. I'm done watching this downward spiral. You're depressed -- you don't need a depressant, you need a stimulant! You need something to remind your brain how to be happy."

"Those are some pretty big words for a homeless kid, McCormick. Do you even know what they mean?"

"Stevens gives everyone at the drop-in really boring talks about drugs and sex all the time, so it's Dr. McCormick, actually. Chocolate will help you. Chocolate gives your brain endorphins, to calm your ass down, and serotonin, so you won't be so depressed -- "

"Great, thanks. I'll stock up on soy lecithin lies masquerading as chocolate next time I go out. Happy?"

"No," Kenny grumbled, around a mouthful of soy lecithin lies. "I'm serious about this, man. You -- "

"If you're serious, then go somewhere else, huh? Then you don't have to watch my downward spiral."

"See? You're already grouchy as fuck -- your kill-switch is on, and the sun hasn't even set. I'm not leaving 'cause I like you, man -- well, yeah, I do -- like, I think you're my best friend, and I don't wanna watch this."

Cartman finished the race in silence. When the results screen came up, he dropped his controller to pinch at the bridge of his nose. He was doing it more and more, lately, to the point where Kenny imagined he might need an exorcism -- there could be a bunch of evil ectoplasm building up between his eyes, or something.

"Look, I just -- I need something, okay? And this is all I have."

"You know what else chocolate has?" Kenny said, rolling around and up to his knees to try and catch his truancy officer's eye. "Anandamide. It's a chemical that binds with the same receptor in your brain that THC does, and produces a bunch of dopamine, like a chocolate-high. Isn't that cool?"
"This is what Bebe teaches you. Right."

"She also says fuck you, fuck the police, and fuck alcohol, goddammit. Why can't ya roll a Swisher, like you said? I know they can't drug test you, man -- if you're working with the Bruders, then they can't drug test you. They know what you gotta do to stay on the inside."

Cartman slid down in the cushions until his chin was nearly on his chest. "It's not that. I quit the shit."

"What?" Kenny said. "But it's perfect for you. Stevens said weed works like an antidepressant. And it doesn't fuck you up like the pills. Unless you're, like, blowing trees -- but you don't needa blow trees, man, you just needa have some when you're in that mood, when you start digging at your shit too much, when you need something, I think. You wouldn't be so depressed all the time if you just changed your habits around to chocolate and weed -- I really think it would help you move out of this hole you're digging. Like, I hear you digging it, man, I hear you digging this hole at night."

Cartman grunted. Kenny had never seen him so noncommittal. "I smoked a lot in high school." He sad. "Had to smoke to get to class in the morning, dude -- it was the only way to do it. And when I ran out, I just didn't go to class. And then in college -- shit, I was blowing trees. I needed, fuckin', eight doobies just to get to a fucking three o'clock class. That's the Matrix, man, that's the real machine. Like, if I didn't turn myself into a mindless fucking zombie, I started considering Japanese ritual suicide in the first five minutes of a lecture. Just keep going, they say, as if there's a fucking light at the end of the fucking tunnel, as if it's all about how much you can endure, but it's a lie. There's no tunnel; it's a well, and you only drown in the end. So either commit psychological suicide, go to school and soak up all the bullshit, or quit the game and be destroyed."


"Kenny," Cartman paused his race to look up at him. "People don't think the way you do. It's not that obvious. At the time, I was halfway through college and I thought I was heading for the bloody light; I had everything mapped out. I had wealth, power, and bitches."

Kenny rolled his eyes. "That's what every frat guy in business school thinks."

"Okay, fine, you got me. I was in the business school. But my money came mostly from selling blow to med students, and moving weed and prescriptions on the main campus. Then sophomore year I was elected Treasurer of my goddamned fraternity, which meant I controlled a ten-thousand dollar budget every semester."

"That's not much." Kenny lied.

"I dumped it into stocks and doubled it."

"Shit. You can do that?"

"You'd be amazed what you can with other people's money and the ability to make good bets."

Kenny felt like he was looking a potential future of himself, for a second. How could you be depressed, he wondered, with that kind of power?"So after giving all the homies raises and buying a hot tub for the frat house," Cartman returned to his race. "I established the university's first Satanist club with eleven drunk signatures, and essentially laundered the money I was making on the frat money through the club's budget. On top of that -- each time the Satanist club met it's phony 'fundraising' goal, it was eligible to receive more funding from the university itself, since it meant students were interested. I held giant fucking hate rallies,
dude. I invited Bill O'Reilly to come talk at a Slayer concert."

"Why?" Kenny laughed into his hand for a second, dropped it when he saw the cop looking. He hadn't even paused the game, but his car was definitely not moving. "What's the point of any of that?"

He shrugged, but he was kind of half-smiling. "Our campus was full of tree-hugging hippie assholes. Someone had to show them how the world works. They probably didn't get what I was trying to say, but I got a kick out of it anyway. And since I was getting funding from the university's clubs and recreation department, I was running those rallies in part with hippie tuition money. And then a bunch of fags started coming out to protest at all my club meetings. They called me the Antichrist, dude. You should've seen it -- you've never seen hippies and Christians and shit so harmonious as when they were chanting 'kill Cartman' at every single one of my White American History Month conventions. And I had about sixty of them over the course of eight months."

"What does any of that have to do with Satanism?" Kenny chuckled.

"Nothing! I just needed something that seemed like a hate group, but wasn't -- since there were regulations against funding clubs whose only mission was to be intolerant. Technically I was running a radical atheist organization."

"What a fucking circus." He concluded. "Society is a fucking circus, dude."

His truancy officer started to laugh. Kenny thought of the arrest reports he'd been reading -- it all sounded pretty familiar. Man, this was the real Cartman. "Okay, so that's the money and the power. The bitches?"

Cartman fell back against the couch and sighed. "There were bitches, man. But I have this thing where I can't get into someone I don't connect with. It really ruins my sex life. How hard is it to find somebody with tits and a sense of humor, huh? Damn near impossible. The only chick in the whole school who ever got me laughing was a forty-something pant-suit who taught accounting in the business school."

"Accounting? What's funny about accounting?"

"Dude," he said solemnly. "I wasn't just some jerk in the business school; any idiot can get a degree in Business Administration. If you've been dealing since you were eleven, you've already got the equivalent of a fucking Business degree. I was an Accounting major."

Kenny snorted, slapped his knee. He couldn't decide if he oughta laugh or cry. "No wonder you couldn't go to class, you fuckin' idiot. Why would you pick accounting?"

"Accountants make a big salary," he said, picking up his controller. "And I already knew I was good at business, so I thought, why depend on Jew bookkeepers my whole life? I decided to learn how to keep my own books."

Kenny thought about it. "I guess that makes sense, for you. Does that mean you're a cop with a degree in Accounting?"

"No, I -- I couldn't do it, man." He paused the new race almost immediately, and reached for the jar on the table, then cursed -- since it was empty and all. He restarted the challenge and set his glare firmly on the screen. "I applied to a five-year program; I was gonna graduate with a Bachelor's, a Master's, and my Accountant's certification. I could've lived like Tyga, man. I would've been 23 years old and set for life. But I couldn't do it."
"Because you didn't like it, dude. If going to class made you feel like that -- then you didn't like it."

Cartman shook his head without taking his eyes from the screen. "You're too young, Kenny. You wouldn't get it."

"Nah, come on, I'm getting it. I get it, alright? You just gotta talk some more. I'm picking up what you're putting down, I promise."

He slammed on his nitrous and the GT40 shot past the other racers, speedometer pushing 160 miles an hour.

Kenny shuffled forward to settle his head on his shoulder. "I'm getting it. I'm smelling what you're steppin' in."

His shoulder shook under a bitter huff of laughter. "They thought I was crazy. Halfway through a program that would secure my future, you know -- and I dropped it. To them, it doesn't matter if you're interested, it doesn't matter if you'd rather stab yourself in the ears than listen to another word; you just gotta keep going. But you know what? You know what nobody gets? I liked it. I really liked accounting."

"But you didn't like the classes?"

"Not a damn one. But we had this lecturer, Joanne. She was a fucking riot. She always went on these long digressions in class. Like, hours, just talking about random shit like her old man, who started accounting way back in the day, without a license; he cooked the books for fishermen in Connecticut for like twenty years after getting back from Vietnam. Hilarious! Then some fags complained that we weren't using the textbook, and the next thing you know there's a bunch of jack-offs from the fucking administrative board camping out in the back of class, to make sure she sticks to the material. She was a practicing accountant, for Chrissake! She ran my fucking Master's program!"

He paused the game and Kenny thought he might throw the controller. "Fags ruin everything, man. Only a fag would buy a textbook. Only a fag would complain about not using it. It's like eating gummy worms; you kill yourself looking for a damned natural flavor inside something that's just processed goop -- and it's crammed down your throat for so long that you start to believe it, believe that's how it should taste -- and then when the real fruit comes along, you tell it to fuck off."

Cartman restarted his drag race for the hundredth time. "All that stuff just depresses me now, anyway."

"Dude, I think you need to stop putting yourself through this."

"Huh?"

"This game. You keep going over this same race -- but you don't even get to the finish line before starting it over. It's driving me crazy."

"What can I say?" He grumbled. "I'm a quitter."

"No, that's not it. You're just too focused on getting all the beginning parts perfect -- "

"If I screw up the beginning, I'll lose the race."

Kenny pulled away and settled back on his heels. "So? I mean -- so? Just finish it, dude, win or lose. You just make it worse waffling around like this. Either go the distance, or stop playing."
In an abrupt flurry of movements, he quit the game, threw the controller on the table with a clunk and clatter of displaced clutter, and dropped his head to his hands. Kenny was afraid he might've broken him. He reached out to his shoulder, but the cop went so painfully tense that he withdrew his hand almost immediately.

"Listen, Eric -- I didn't just go out to get my clothes. Or steal chocolate. I picked up some other shit, too."

"I know it ain't laced, either," he added, trying to gauge his truancy officer's reaction from a forecast of the thunderclouds building around his head. "Because I ran it by my buddy Axel at the center, and he's got the best nose for this stuff. Listen, don't be mad, okay? I just think it'll help. If you wanted, I mean."

Cartman sat up, sort of ruffled, like he'd just been pulled out of a dryer. He pushed his palms over his knees like his hands were sweaty or something. Then he bit his lip and glanced over at Kenny.

"How much you got?"


He shrugged again. His kill-bot motion settings seemed limited to shrugging and glaring. "I've been thinkin'."

"I know," Kenny said, slipping over the back of the couch to revisit his parka, and wrestled a baggie the size of a coin-purse from the inner lining. Six grams of Colorado's greenest. "You've been doing it for days, yo -- it's getting on my nerves. Like, what're ya thinkin' about, even?"

"What is that?" He said. "A fifth?"

"Uh-huh," Kenny hummed, tossing the bag to him and falling back over the couch. "Collected enough dough at those block parties to beat off the rat pack this week, and still have some leftover. So I thought, a celebratory fifth."

"And all I've got is a lousy 401k," he said, shaking his head.

Kenny didn't know what a 401k was, but he had a feeling the cop was mocking the way he handled his money, again.

"My dealer always gives me a complimentary jay, too," he said, brandishing the little doobie. "I think she wants me."

Cartman took the joint from him and scrutinized the paper like he was looking for flaws in the roll.

"Not bad."

"So you wanna?" Kenny asked. "You wanna smoke this with me?"

Suddenly the officer stood and padded over to the door. Kenny leaned over the back of the couch and watched him kick his feet into his shoes. "You wanna?" He tried again, uncertain.

Cartman chuckled. "You think I'm going out caroling, or something? Put your shoes on. We're going to the roof."

"The roof?" Kenny's heart shot up into his throat and he almost fell over the back of the couch. He snatched his parka from the counter and shuffled around the entryway to get at his boots.

Cartman shrugged on his night patrol jacket, which Kenny thought made him look like a member of
the fuckin' Secret Police, if it wasn't for the sweatpants and Adidas sneakers. It reminded him of the
night at the hospital, and the first Epic Friendship Hug he'd earned from him -- he still got kind of
buzzed, thinking about it. He was also kind of dizzy, from climbing all those damn stairs and only
having chocolate to eat --

Kenny was just wondering if he could get carried up to the roof when Cartman pulled open the door
and started leading the way down the corridor to the fire exit.

He trotted after him. "This is a good look for you. Is the snapback standard protocol, too?"

"Ye-ah," he drawled, pushing open the heavy door and starting up a narrow flight of stairs. "Slight
change in uniform. It's the new thug unit; instead of badges, we wear chains. I get two chains, since
I'm a big deal."

The eighth-floor landing was wet concrete, and there wasn't any door, even. "Are you allowed up
here?" Kenny asked.

"I don't understand your question."

Cartman pulled the release lever on a fleet of small metal stairs Kenny hadn't noticed; they were
folded up against the ceiling and almost hidden in a network of piping painted the same ugly shade
of maroon. He weighed them down and clambered up the steep steps. A heavy chain and padlock hit
the floor. It hadn't been unlocked; one of the chain links was snapped in half.

"You shoulda seen the size of the pliers I needed to kill that thing," he said, nodding at the chain and
then turning the latch on the exit hatch. It cracked open like a god's eye of startling white light, like
they were climbing out of a tank after a long time in the trenches.

The roof was under two feet of windswept snow, but several footpaths trampled through it; some
relatively old and iced over, others fairly fresh. There were cigarette butts in the snow, mostly around
the lip of dirty concrete that hemmed in the tiny rooftop courtyard, and some beer cans. Kenny
guessed Cartman had probably done the smokers in the building a favor by cutting the chains on the
latch.

He followed a footpath over to the western wall, where his truancy officer stood wiping a few inches
of fresh snow from the ledge, then watched him lean down over it to eyeball the streets below.
Kenny leaned over to do the same. The height was dizzying. The main road was a dark stripe like a
river carving through the grays and whites of snowed-over buildings and department stores, with a
hundred gray tributaries growing out of it and winding away over Park County. Kenny could just
make out the red-green glares of street lights, and occasionally the sound of a car-horn traveled all the
way up to their level. The rest of the noise from the bustling inner-city was a hushed rumble under
the falling snow. It was like standing over a sewage grate after a storm -- hearing and kind of feeling
that black river rushing below your feet.

Kenny dug one of his chocolates out of his pocket and gnawed on it while Cartman finished his
staring contest with society. Then he fished out his lighter and balanced it on the ledge by his elbow.
He was about to smoke up a cop, Kenny couldn't believe it -- with the snow falling and the chocolate
and shit, it was like a damn dream. This is awesome.

"No, it's just dope," Cartman said, finally looking up at him. "We'll probably get the munchies and
go to sleep. But I guess that's at least one less drunk out beating furniture."

He took the joint from his pocket and spent some time evening out the roll and checking the paper
for tears again. He was picky, Kenny thought. He was actually a pretty meticulous guy. But it got in
the way; it just got in the way, sometimes.

"Hey," Kenny said, watching his hands. "I've been pretty good, huh?"

He grunted.

"No bad touches at all. Two days. Pretty good, huh?"

"Kenny," he said, his eyes narrowing sternly on the joint between his fingers. "The no-homo part of this friendship really starts to crumble when you imply that there should be some kinda reward for keepin' your fuckin' hands off me for a lousy 48 hours."

Kenny just wanted to run his hand up his back, that was all -- claw him out of his layers, maybe -- check that he was human, still.

"That's not what I'm sayin'," Kenny said. It couldn't be that bad, he thought, lifting his hand. "But if you ever miss carryin' me around, you only gotta say so. I don't mind the rides."

"You just got the staple taken out. You want another?"

Kenny dropped his hand. He knew he'd probably come close, the other night, to getting thrown out. He didn't really want a repeat of the table incident. Well, maybe just the beginning part.

"What'you been thinkin' about so much, anyway?" He asked. "What made you change your mind, all of a sudden? You're lettin' me stay here and lighting up a friggin' joint. I mean, what's the deal? What else did Wen dy say?"

He ignored him, stuck the filter between his lips and picked up Kenny's lighter, then stared out at the skyline.

"Eric."

"I know, I'm listening to you, man, alright?" He muttered around the joint. "But I'm still thinking."

"That doesn't mean you gotta shut me out. You only started off this way after talkin' with Marsh."

Kenny folded his arms over the wall and watched him finally touch flame to the twisted paper.

Cartman took a long starting toke to get the thing burning, and then two trails of smoke poured out his nostrils and started spreading out in a pool around their elbows. Kind of mesmerizing. He felt like he'd corrupted him, a little bit, even though Kenny knew realistically he was just reinvigorating a former stoner. He didn't want him to be a stoner again -- he just wanted to pull him out of that hole, and maybe unearth some of the shit that was bothering him, too.

"It's been like living with a damn android," Kenny said. "Like you don't even run on food, man."

He held out the joint to him, all blank and thoughtful like he was moving backward in time. "I haven't been high in a long time."

"I know," Kenny huffed, took the pass and spoke around a bulb of smoke. "You've been on such a big long low, I bet you don't even remember what it feels like to be happy."

Cartman rolled his eyes. They were even more red under the white glare of clouds and snow. Inside, it was just a glimmer -- a rusty smear around his pupils -- but outside, against the white-gray backdrop, his irises dripped blood. "That might be pushing it."

"Name one thing that makes you happy." Kenny said, shoving the jay back at him. He suddenly
wanted to get him blazed, like really blazed out of his crumby mind. "One thing you really like."

His red eyes fell. He took some time french-inhaling and shit, which was hot as fuck and all -- especially in his night patrol jacket with the damn sheriff's insignia on the arm -- but Kenny just wanted an answer, a single answer out of him, before he could even think of working himself up into an inconvenient boner.

"You can't name one single thing."

"Wait a second, willya?" He glared. "Something I like a lot? Something I like a lot, you mean?"

"Cartman, this is pathetic."

"It's just not that simple!" He said, reaching over to tap some ash into the breeze. "I can't just -- I mean, Yellow Wolf hitting the observatory was -- "

"That's not what I mean. That's not a real thing, not really."

"Sure it is! It is a real thing! That's the problem, see, is nobody knows what real things are anymore - - "

"Just give me one thing that you like a lot."

He glared at the falling snow for a minute, then turned to offer Kenny the burning joint. "I like Kitty."

"She's dead!"

"Just because somebody's dead doesn't mean ya stop liking them!"

"C'mon, just give me one thing. One thing that you like right now."

"Well now I don't know what you mean."

"Here, I'll give you an example." Kenny said, taking another small hit and passing back. "I like pretty much all chocolate unreservedly. Annd... I like those gypsy carnival things that are only in town for a day. I like fire, and spray paints, and girls, and snow in the morning. I like -- "

"I still don't understand."

"These are things that are part of my life now," Kenny said. "Like, I wanted some chocolate so I went out and got some. And sure it's 90% soy, but I'm not thinkin' about that when I eat it, I just stick it in my mouth!"

"Well, sorry I can't just stick everything I like in my mouth, Kenny, Jesus. It's not always like that. What about the XBox? I like the XBox."

When Cartman glanced up, Kenny just stared at him. And he didn't let up until the cop flushed red over the collar of his jacket.

Kenny turned to lean on one elbow and face him over the ledge. "You were telling me Bill Gates has harvested more innocent souls than Satan, the other day, and video games are the government's way of getting the youth accustomed to putting a price tag on their happiness -- you compared it to mind control."

"Public relations is mind control! Advertising is mind control!" He insisted, chopping at the air with
his free hand, red eyes wild. "Besides, that doesn't mean I don't like my XBox, I just don't like it on principle."

"That's just it, though -- you hate everything. You live around all this stuff that you hate on principle. You hate where you live, and what you do, and even your own shit, and you hate everybody else and their shit, too. But it's 'cause you're thinking about it all wrong. It's all these uniforms -- shake it off, man! You're not a cop, remember? You'd make a happier terrorist than a cop!"

Cartman started laughing so suddenly he thought he was crying, for a second. Kenny took the remains of the joint from his hand.

"That's me," he chuckled, popping two fingers over his tear ducts like he was trying to keep lasers from coming out of them. "The Happy Terrorist. Fuckin' hell, Kenny, where do you get this shit? Do you just keep talking until everything's in reverse? Fuckin' hell. One second I'm getting a damned scolding and the next my career path is being mapped straight into hell."

"That didn't come out exactly how I wanted." Kenny admitted. "I mean you're a terrorist in your brain. I think we all are, sometimes."

"Oh, man," he kept saying, shaking his damn head. "You say strange shit. I mean you're one strange fuckin' kid. You must've seen some things, to say this strange shit."

"What about you!" Kenny cried, half-hysteric -- he couldn't believe he was being called strange by this fucking android. "I could publish existential screenplays with your weird fucking shit!"

Cartman snorted. "What would they be about? My GT40? The six hours I spend beating off in my car? Sounds like pretty dry stuff."

"Maybe about the cop who was scarred by an old desk getting beat up in the hallway."

His eyes narrowed, and he turned his back on the city to lean against the wall. "I'm not scarred by it. Just -- every time I think about it, I get this super wave of dread."

"How stupid do you think I am?" Kenny answered, tapping out the simmering joint. "Pretty sure that's what scarred means."

"Okay, but..."

When it stopped burning, Kenny rooted around for more chocolate and placed a coffee one next to Cartman.

Eric reached up to grip the hair at the back of his neck, staring at the truffle on the damp concrete ledge. "It sounds stupid when you say it like that."

_Damn_, Kenny thought. He was pretty fucking horny for this guy, sure, but he kind of wanted to hear him talk. Was that weird? He didn't know. It was hard to concentrate, anyway. He was pretty dizzy, if he was honest, after all those stairs, and the chocolate -- and then smoking a bit. And his truancy officer was half in uniform and angsty as all hell -- Kenny was seventeen and crushing and he couldn't concentrate worth a damn. He really tried, though. Watching the little gold foil chocolate spinning around in Cartman's fingers was sort of hypnotizing. Terrific hands, anyway.

"I don't get it, though." Kenny said. "I mean, it was just a desk. You didn't even want it, right?"

"I don't know. No. But that doesn't mean it hadda be destroyed. Like, just because something doesn't have a right place doesn't mean it should be broke up into pieces. But that's all that happens, today;
either you find a place in society's goddamn IKEA catalog, or get beat into pieces."

Kenny snorted. "Are you actually comparing people to furniture? Are you comparing me to a desk? I like breaking shit apart, dude. I'm one of those raging drunks, probably, in your crumby metaphor."

"That's not what I mean, either. I don't think people are furniture. I like breaking that shit apart, too, man -- I'm all about disestablishment."

"Whadda you mean, then?" Kenny watched the chocolate he still held pinned between his fingers. Was he going to eat it, he wondered, or do a fucking magic trick? So then he thought, he oughta put it in his mouth for him --

Cartman chewed his lip for a moment. "You really wanna know? I mean you really care what I think about this?"

Kenny looked up at his eyes. They were suspicious, kind of; digging holes, both of them. Kenny sighed, shrugged, feeling like the bag-check guy at the airport, or something -- waiting for someone to put their shit on the scale. "Yeah, man. You like to talk, I think you need to -- so go ahead. I'll listen. I might not get it, or anything -- since you're kind of twisted -- but I'll listen."

Cartman eyed him an extra moment, then turned back to face the cityscape. But he wasn't looking at the city, really -- just the empty space in front of his eyes. "Sometimes I don't know if I really have something to say or not."

"I think you always have something to say," he snorted. "You've got kind of a crazy brain, but it's always got something to say. People who've got nothing to say, they're the ones who say 'good morning'. that's when you've really got nothing to say. When politicking white dudes talk about housing and urban development, that's when someone's got nothing to say. Those're the talking heads. Or... talking furniture, I guess."

Kenny snatched the chocolate from his hands and peeled off the foil, then thrust it back at him. "Go on, dude -- I feel like I've been trying to get at your shit for months, but I just get thrown into doors and tables for it."

"Okay, but it's hard to explain. I'm kind of high and I really don't know how to explain this, but I think," Cartman shook his head. "It reminds me of this time I drove to Jefferson County, maybe a year ago, few days before I got shot. Jeff is way off my lousy beat, obviously, but I was in the area bugging the sheriff's department for access to some files that I thought might connect to this laundering case I was putting together. Anyway, the first asshole I needed to find had taken a lunch break, and the second one was out on a call. I didn't feel like talking to somebody on lunch break, since nobody ever wants to talk about important shit when they're carbo-loading at the goddamn Olive Garden. So I went after the guy on call."

He paused again, eyes refocusing on Kenny. "You don't have to listen to this, you know. I have a rule that I don't make anybody listen to my cop shit." And mother of God, if he was not gesturing with this fucking chocolate.

Kenny waved his hand. "Fuck your rules."

"Well, the Jeff County big-dicks-swinging police department had run down a kid -- I mean, he was probably sixteen, you know, barely halfway through secondary -- for trying to rob a Walmart, for Chrissake. Discharged a firearm inside and everything -- batshit crazy, this kid was. So the Jeff County boys track him all the way back to this swank little prep school, right, but when they get there he's on the damn ledge. So by the time I got there, the whole carnival was out; ambulance and
cruisers on the ground, kid's on the ledge outside his own dorm room, with officers all crawling up the stairs behind him, probably."

Kenny tongued some of the chocolate from the corner of his mouth, wiped the rest on his sleeve. "This was a prep school? Like a good prep school, fulla rich kids?"

Cartman nodded fast. Then he lifted both hands to gesture over the wall, like he was showing Kenny the fucking Spaceship Earth. "You should've seen this school, man. I mean just one look and you'd know what kind of place it was. All-boys, one year of tuition probably cost the same as a Mercedes - - all fenced in like a damn correctional facility -- and it had this long-ass drive. Like I kind of slowed down on it, because it was such a long-ass, quiet sort of drive, lined with these perfect hedges and evergreens and shit. You go to schools like those, and the hedges are always perfect, even if you never see anybody clipping them. And at this dormitory building, it was still all kind of nice and green-looking -- there was all this birdsong coming from the trees. But there weren't any birds. I looked around and there weren't even any birds, just these tiny black speakers in the branches, and behind rocks. It was fake -- fake birdsong coming out of the hedges, man. Like to create a mood or something."

"So it was a nice place."

"It was a damn nice place," Cartman corrected. "The type of place you only pay to send your kid to if you really love them or you really hate them. Anyway, the point is, you could tell a lot of effort went into making it look nice, and ignoring the emotional problems coming out the windows. So since the kid's on the damn ledge and all, they'd called over a rescue crew, and these people were all standing around the ambulance and the cars -- suits and sunglasses, thumbs up their buttholes -- half-chatting and half-staring up at this kid. Some rescue guys were getting out a parachute, one of those targetted save-your-lousy-life parachutes, you know? And I'm thinking only two things can happen; the kid turns around and gets arrested, or he flies the damn coop, gets caught, and then arrested. So they're dancing around with this parachute at the base of the building, and he jumps."

"This was a prep school, though? Rich white kids?"

"Dude, yeah," Cartman said, exasperated. "Let me tell you something, lemme tell you something real quick. People look at trailer trash like you, and can pretty much guess that your dad's an alcoholic, your mom's a crack-fiend, and both their education levels combined probably equal a participation award at an elementary school spelling bee -- but even if your dad played golf and your mom had a stable income, you'd just be getting your ass kicked in a house with a fucking Gucci belt. You get what I'm saying? Parents can be shitty -- I'm inclined to say most parents are shitty. But how much they're making and how educated they are don't have anything to do with how good they are at raising kids. I had a terrific childhood. I got everything I wanted, and if I didn't, I threw a tantrum until I did -- or until I got struck by lightning, that one time -- but I kind of had a lousy childhood, too. I was never satisfied with what I had because I didn't know what I was looking for, really, until it was too late. Then I got rich and bought a drug problem and lost everything. And I'm pretty fucked up in the head for it. D'you get what I'm saying?"

"Kinda," Kenny could guess, anyway. "So what happened to the kid? The rich white kid that mighta had a lousy childhood? Was the parachute broke?"

"Parachute was fine," he answered. "The morons missed -- they were standing around with all the uniforms and the equipment and the protocol, and they missed the effing diver on a straight shot from this three-story building. Everybody heard him hit the ground, too; like, I wasn't even that close or anything, and I heard him hit the ground. You'd think someone dropped a radio out the window. And the rescue guys went over to check his pulse and everything, even though his teeth and shit
were everywhere."

Cartman finally lifted the chocolate to his mouth and did the same thing as before, biting off a bit of the shell and then peering at the inside. "His name was Ike. Kyle's little brother."

Kenny swore. "You knew him?"

"I knew him pretty well, actually. Good shit, this kid -- smart, crude. They found acid in his dorm room, so you know where all the blame went. But Ike was -- Ike was good."

Kenny swore again.

"There's so many buildings, dude." Cartman said, scowling at the skyline with a weird, centuries-old tiredness. "Big-ass buildings. People sit inside them their whole lives, driving themselves into corners until the day they're crazy enough to exit through the window -- but nobody ever thinks to blame the building for it. Like maybe all these structures are what make good people want to kill themselves. And what's our brilliant solution to stop the bodies dropping?"

"Save-your-lousy-life parachutes?" Kenny offered.

"Exactly," he said, and threw an arm out over the wall in a long sweep of the streets below. "Like, we oughta put moats around all the buildings -- flood the streets, for Chrissake, if that's the solution to misery! Nobody ever thinks maybe it's time to stop building up the fucking diving boards. Nobody ever thinks maybe the solution is taking a rung out of the ladder instead of popping one more in and making it higher. Instead of rethinking the old brick and mortar, people would rather put phony birdsong in the trees -- dress everything up so it looks like it's how it's supposed to be. But if you got the hedges, and the trees, but the birds still ain't coming, and there's blood and teeth still all over the pavement -- then isn't something wrong? Isn't there something wrong with that?"

He turned, brandishing the chocolate between his forefinger and thumb like a damn spyglass. "This isn't chocolate," he started at a murmur. "The XBox -- it isn't an XBox. They're fake birdsong. I can't hear it anymore, though; because all I keep hearing is that kid hitting the pavement, his teeth going everywhere -- and I wonder how high on the fucking ladder I am, and how much more I can fucking take, and how much more good shit I'll have to watch hit the ground before me."
Kenny was nervous, suddenly. He wished they weren't on the damn roof. So this is what it takes, he thought. This was what it took to fuck up someone like Cartman. He didn't piss off a gypsy -- well, he probably had -- but it wasn't a curse that turned him into a hateful machine; it was the death of his faith in society. It was proof that good things didn't last; they weren't even allowed.

"I guess, since you stole these, and they're my favorite kind," he finally ate the fuckin' thing. "It's okay this time. The desk bothers me because I kind of participated, you know? Like I kind of made it possible, just by pushing the damn thing outside. I don't know. Those guys crawling up the stairs
behind Ike, and the ones waiting at the bottom, they were all just doing their jobs, but it was still all wrong, in the end. A Walmart, for Chrissake. Nobody was hurt but him, and all for a butt-fucking Walmart. The bullet in the ceiling probably cost two-fifty in Mexican wage-labor to patch up."

Kenny looked down and wrung his hands. Even though he got sort of lost in Cartman's digressions about theaters and plastic plants and birdsong, sometimes, he knew how strange, screwed-up shit could make people kind of strange and screwed-up. They grew up in South Park; it just came with the fucking territory. And after twenty-something years of it, Cartman was already so screwed up that furniture depressed him. Kenny felt guilty, kind of, for wanting to shave off the impact of his memories -- it just couldn't be done. It shouldn't.

"Look, Kenny," Cartman flicked a crumpled candy foil at him like a tiny tin bullet, and leaned back over the rim of the wall. "This was probably also a really roundabout way of saying that the only thing I like in my life right now is probably you. I'm serious -- you're not the desk, dude, and you're not the drunk, or the asshole crawling up the stairs; you never joined the damn circus. You got dealt a shit hand and instead of bending over and playing the game you fucking spat on the dealer. And there isn't anything -- I don't think there's anything wrong with that, not one damn thing. But since everything else in the world is wrong, it's gonna try and break you every step of the way."

Kenny watched his red eyes flick around, all pink at the corners but 150% there, still working -- and Kenny wondered if he'd pulled off that exorcism after all.

"I mean it," Cartman said, starting to sort of gesture. "I mean, fuck, why couldn't you been born, like seven-eight years ago? We coulda... I don't know."

Man, this was great. Kenny would remember this. "Dude, you would not have hung out with me if we were kids together."

"Nah, you're wrong. And just wait till you meet the cunts -- Stan and Kyle. They'd've liked you back then, too. Shit, you'll prob'ly like them more than me. It just sucks, anyway. Maybe if you were around I wouldn't've gone to college, or something, I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't've got arrested or sold three years of my life to the police for a clean record. Maybe things wouldn't be so shitty, somehow."

He followed up quickly: "I like your grill."

"What?" Kenny stuttered, almost brought a hand up to hide his teeth on reflex. "You what?"

"You said shit I liked, so," Cartman said, appearing deep in argument with the screen of slowly falling snow. "I like your grill."

Kenny rocked over his forearms, smiled till he was light-headed with it. "Man, you say strange shit. And you've seen things -- like, you don't need Stephen King, you really don't. The blood's all up in your eyes, already."

Cartman abruptly planted his hands and pushed himself away from the wall. "Hey, can I try something?"

Kenny turned his back on the buildings like diving boards and faced him. He wished he'd brought his gloves. "Y-yeah."

The cop scuffed around in the snow by their feet for a moment, then stepped forward without lifting his eyes really. "I wish," he breathed, and Kenny felt the little gust of air on his forehead. "I wish I didn't inadvertently throw stuff I like into tables, but, I guess that's something I never grew out of."
He wanted to lift himself up onto the wall, maybe, settle the height differential, but Kenny was paralyzed like a POW in front of a firing squad, and Cartman's laser cop eyes were looming the hell down on him.

"You're so slow," Kenny finally said, stumbling a little over his own dry mouth. "I mean you're really, so fucking slow."

Cartman leaned down and pushed his forehead against his temple. This time he felt his breath almost hit his mouth and Kenny inhaled -- wrung his cold hands around till they were just about dislocated.

"You have been good," he said. "Two days. Damn. I almost missed it."

"Almost?" Kenny said, swallowed painfully.

"I've been thinking," he said again. "I'm on vacation. Wendy said you're not my job. She promised nothin' bad would happen."

Bless her, Kenny thought. He was straining like a fish against a hook -- just breaths away from freedom or suffocation -- and buzzing so bad he could almost hear it on his skin.

"Can you just -- ?" Kenny wanted to engage his hands, but he also wanted to keep Cartman in this bizarre fucking mood -- the mood where he proactively sought out shit he wanted. "Just kiss me, man. Please."

He laughed low and quiet. "You are good. You're good when you wanna be."

Kenny was three seconds from tearing his fucking head off. "Oh my fucking God, it's like waiting for an iceberg to crawl over Pangaea."

"And I'm gonna make it slow and awkward as possible," he said into his ear, growling almost. "So I can think, okay? And you can think, too. And like, stop or whatever."

"Stop?" Kenny snorted, incredulous. "You've gotta be kidding me. Why the hell would I wanna stop you after all this time -- ? I only wish I knew weed was the answer before you cracked my skull."

"Jeez -- are you really that thirsty? I thought you said you liked girls."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Kenny choked a little as Cartman pulled away and settled his hands inside his hood, sliding in under his ears. Kenny caved and pushed his hands under the night patrol jacket, sighed with some relief at the warmth of his sides. "Sure, I never liked a dude before, really, but I'm seventeen, man; I've got a fucking archive of fantasies and when I see something I like -- I usually just take it."

"Obviously," he hummed, working Kenny's hood down. And he did kiss him, finally -- but it was in all the wrong places: on the skin just below his eyebrow, then right in front of his ear, then the space just over his mouth by his nose. Kenny felt like a damn dart board, and everywhere the darts landed burned hot with fresh blood. "I mean, you had the balls to molest a police officer in his own fuckin' home. I gotta admire it."

Kenny laughed. He was dizzy-high but didn't know that it was from the weed, exactly, or from his truancy officer doing all this weird gentle shit around his head, the same routine: dickin' around with the tinfoil and the shell before he'd even have a proper taste. "Is that it? Is that what you've been thinkin' about for two days straight -- me? Your crazy cop memories and metaphors and me?"

Cartman pulled away and Kenny was getting pretty sick of that but his next words really had him
buzzing. "More than two days."

"More?" He said, licking around his lips. "Like you thought about this before? Like when?"

"You wanna go back inside?"

Yes, Kenny thought, but he wanted a fuckin' answer even more.

But Cartman was moving away from him, tramping back over the snow to the exit door. Kenny wanted to cry. He was always somewhere between laughing and crying with this guy.

It was a relief to be back in the apartment, though. He couldn't wait to lay around on the couch with his candy -- but Cartman beat him to it; he didn't even take off his snowy fuckin' night patrol jacket before laying out over Kenny's bed, basically. He must've been frowning pretty hard about it, because the cop angled these sleepy red eyes at him and then started working his arms from his sleeves.

"I'm wicked baked," he admitted, and Kenny rolled his eyes inwardly at the high-pology. Cartman sat up against the arm of the couch with one of his old man groans of effort, bent up his knees a little, and flapped his hand around in another one of those baffling 'do you wanna dance' gestures: "'C'mere, hey."

Power flooded into Kenny's limbs and he scrambled up and over the cop -- bypassed his bent knees and sat kind of low on his abdomen. He might've been a little rushed about it, because Cartman looked terrifically pained for a second and had to bring his hands up to his hips to adjust their positions. "Not exactly what I meant, but, alright."

"You thought about us before, huh?" He asked again, enjoying the new perspective. He passed his hands over Cartman's wrists and up to his shoulders, began closing in on his neck. Kenny felt like a conqueror. "Like when?"

Cartman tilted his head up like he was buried in the sand, and the tide was coming in. "Ugh -- like every time you lick your sticky fucking candy fingers in my fucking car," he said, eyes narrowing. "Or hang your crazy head out the window. And when you made me look in the damn mirror in the bathroom, the other day -- what the fuck was that?"

"'Cause your face was all red," Kenny chuckled.

"Yeah, well, you didn't have a damn shirt on and I was between your cruddy legs, basically looking at the fucking fucked up future -- and kind of wanting it. It really messed me up for a while."

"I thought ya weren't even gay. You sound pretty fuckin' gay for me, man."

"No, remember?" he sighed, pulling his hands away from Kenny's legs to rub at his eyes. "I just -- I just have a hard time getting into people without lying to myself or changing the way I am. And it gets tiring doing that, after a while."

Kenny laughed to himself, held his hands against the cop's pulse -- not an android -- and it was pounding even though his eyes were looking slow and watery. Kenny felt pretty slow and watery, too, but boy was he happy. He hadn't had this guy wrong; he really hadn't had him wrong, and now he had what he wanted awake and willing under his hands. "So I made the cut?"

"Dude, of course," he murmured, eyes low. "Shit -- I love your grill."

"Then do somethin' about it, why don't you? Remember what I said you should do with shit you
like?"

He didn't notice the grip on the back of his neck, even, until it didn't throw him into a damn table -- and then Cartman's tongue was tracking all along the outside of his teeth, without hardly knocking on the damn door first. It helped that Kenny couldn't quit smiling. He shoved up against his chest and roped an arm around his neck, then moved his lips until Cartman's slotted against them and Kenny wished he hadn't whined -- but he hadn't, his breath was too trapped up for noise; it was Eric.

Shit, Kenny thought, and shifted up against him in his excitement. He wants me. He really wants me.

"No," Cartman said, pulling him away by the grip on his neck. "I want to make out with you. Can't I just make out with you, for a while?"

Kenny nodded enthusiastically, trying to move back in against the hold on the scruff of his neck. "Yeah, yeah. Sounds good. My tongue, your mouth, sounds good."

When he let go, Kenny knocked their foreheads together a little painfully, but his thoughts were already so slushy it didn't really matter if they got shaken around any more. He took his stupid hat by the visor and flung it away, raked both his hands up into his hair and pulled until Cartman's eyes narrowed on him. Kenny thought suddenly a Park County Police Department calendar would be pretty great -- like, a hot and bothered edition. Cartman would be December, probably. Kenny pressed a giggle to his mouth, pecked at the corners and then tracked his tongue along his bottom lip with the haphazard plan to earn entry, lick the coffee chocolate from every crevice, maybe. But when Cartman opened his mouth it was Kenny fighting him back. He could still taste the chocolate on him, though.

The first time Kenny ever made out was when he went with a girl who always tasted like old macaroni. Like it didn't matter how many gummy worms he chewed beforehand. After a while it made him wanna die. It was too bad -- terrific tits, anyway.

"What're you laughing at."

"Nothin'!" Kenny rushed, because the memory was making him laugh, but only because the present was the exact opposite of how he felt then. "I just think you taste good, is all."

His eyes narrowed again. Kenny brought his hands up to his face to trace out his favorite parts like a blind person. He'd been kind of waiting to get at his crazy eyebrows.

"Probably because you do nothing but throw candy at me. Was this your plan the whole time? You're using neurochemistry to manipulate me -- with the added bonus of a new flavor."

He thought the cop gave him too much credit, sometimes. Kenny just really liked chocolate.

"Did you just bite my nose," he accused quietly.

Barely a nibble, Kenny thought. Just where he pinched it all the time, where the bone met brow. "I think there's evil building up in there."

Cartman's hands were funny -- they were just hanging out on his legs, thumbs sort of tapping out rhythms against each hip. Kenny wanted them to move -- so he dropped his hands to Cartman's wrists for a minute until they seemed to get a clue, and started tracking up the center of Kenny's back. He was just planning another way to get in on the cop's mouth when his hands fell back down to the hem of his shirt.

"Shit! Your hands."
"Oh," he said. "Terrible circulation, I should've told you. They'll warm up, eventually."

Kenny swore, his teeth damn near chattering. But at least, once his hands started moving, it was easier to break Cartman down and stick his tongue in his mouth. It was so easy it was exciting. It made Kenny want to breathe fire into him. He might've choked him a little, or else just startled him, because Eric choked out a little sound and his palms pressed flat against the back of Kenny's rib cage. He squirmed against the chill touch and accidentally brought their teeth clacking together. Kenny realized he was kind of a hopeless noob, at this.

After exploring about a hundred new arrangements, celebrating his new privilege to the inside of his truancy officer's mouth, he felt Cartman shift away from the armrest and start to fall back, and Kenny fell with him.

"Unh," he muttered, as Kenny chomped down on his lower lip with a bit too much gusto. He couldn't even see straight, really. The officer's palms were sliding up and down his bare sides, warm, finally, though they were rough enough to set his skin prickling. He could get off on just his hands, probably. Terrific hands. Kenny was starting to wonder about maybe putting something on his neck, when he noticed the hands gradually getting lazy, trailing back to his hips and then straightening his shirt out before withdrawing completely.

"You're tired," he accused.

"Mm," Cartman's eyes agreed, flicked over to the stereo system. "We've been making out for two hours."

"What," Kenny planted his hand on the cop's chest and leaned up to squint over at the digital clock on the stereo. He couldn't really see it. The sun had set. "How d'you make out for two hours?"

The hands lingering on his back fell to the base of his spine, where a thin sheen of sweat had gathered. And Cartman turned his head into the back of the couch but couldn't really disguise the fact that he straight-up giggled. It was the most baked thing Kenny'd ever heard, especially coming from his angsty truancy officer, and it kind of answered all of his questions. Kenny looked back down at the half-lidded, swimmy red eyes, and congratulated himself on another killer idea, and several good bets.

"Why're you crying?" Cartman asked, lifting one hand to Kenny's face. "What's a matter?"

"Oh -- " He uttered a hoarse laugh and brought his own hand up to rub away the unwelcome moisture. "That's weird."

"Jesus," Cartman muttered. "Teenagers. What's the matter, huh?"

Kenny could tell he was scaring the crap out of him. That made him want to laugh more, and then he started hiccupping, which was even worse. Cartman didn't seem to know what the fuck to do, so he was using his hands to draw him down -- Kenny loosened his knees to slide backward a little and laid his achey ribs carefully over his torso. When everything seemed arranged, he took a deep breath and went limp on the exhale. Cartman's chest tensed for a moment under a soft snort.

"I'm just happy, I think," Kenny mumbled to the collarbone at eye-level, then shifted to wedge his shoulder in under Eric's arm. "And I'm sorry about your friend. You're right, now I think of it; it is a big circus act, the way people live sometimes. And it's a lot easier to just buy the chocolate and laugh your ass off in the box seats than it is to admit that it's kind of a horrorshow out there, and maybe you are participating in it, without even knowing, really, because you showed up and you're pretending alongside everyone else. There's teeth on the ground but it's just easier to keep looking for birds in
the trees -- fill up our lives with fake shit. I think I'm happy, though, right now. 'Cause you look pretty happy, and everything we just did with the weed and stuff probably broke a law or two -- and a hundred of your crazy rules -- but it's moments like these, man."

When he looked up, Cartman was blinking at him, sort of lost, like an owl waking up on the wrong end of a wood. "You are smelling what I'm stepping in."

Kenny disentangled himself to stretch up and press one more kiss to the corner of his truancy officer's mouth before settling back down. He couldn't erase all the bloody memories, but he could help excavate them, maybe, if that brought him some peace -- and claw away some of those layers while he was at it.

"Later, you wanna call a bomb threat in to a subway?" Cartman asked on the tail of a yawn, cute as all hell. "I used to get a kick outa that, shutting down the subway."

He wanted to recommend a blow job, maybe, but in the end Kenny just nodded, hummed an agreement. Slower than a damned iceberg, he thought, smiling. Slower than public radio on a Sunday afternoon. Nothing had ever held his interest long enough to teach him patience, but Kenny was a quick study, when he wanted to be.
"Wait, let me finish this race."

"You said that six circuits ago, dude," Stan said, dropping to the floor in front of the TV with his laptop and a coil of wires. "Wait till you see this fuckin' meteor shower -- and the sunsets, God damn! I'm gonna miss it. I'm gonna miss that red dirt."

"Shoulda taken some back, then."

Cartman hurried to pause his race as Stan yanked the XBox's video cables from the television and the monitor went blank. "You couldn't put a rock in your pocket down there without getting booked by the tourism police. They keep 'em in these glass cases at the tourist stops. I kinda wanted to bring one back for my dad -- found the perfect one, too -- but they wanted two-hundred bucks for it!"

"Jesus." Cartman put his controller on the table and clasped his hands behind his neck. "Was there a gram of coke in the center?"

"Not even."

"You know they can only charge that much 'cause people will pay it." Kyle added from the kitchen. "Forget it," Stan snorted. "My dad and I don't get along that well. I did find one for seventy, but it looked like it was picked up out of the parking lot. I wouldn't be able to take myself seriously, afterward."

"That's tourism." Cartman said.

"Yeah, man," he sighed. The monitor shimmered back to life over an image of a deep red gorge flooded with the tricolor rays of a setting sun. "It's kind of sad. Like, the Indians in those parts have to get by selling rocks to idiot tourists."

"Native Americans." Cartman corrected. "Because the real problem here is ignorant people like you who can't decide on the right category to put them in, in your foreign invaders' tongue."

"We say 'Native American' because 'Indian' is a misnomer, Cartman," Kyle said, responding to his unspoken critique. "Not to take the place of relevant integration policy."

"And by integration policy, you mean capitalist enslavement." He said, as Kyle rounded the couch and took a seat after setting his glass on the table. "It's genius, really. Instead of stealing the land and just wiping out the natives, we phonied up some records of legal property sales and set them all to work selling bits of their own land. And I hear the reservations make for cozy concentration camps. We keep our moral high-ground and they die out anyway. Genius."

"Barbaric." Kyle hummed.

"The Petrified Forest was so shitty," Stan mumbled, flipping through some slides.

"Yeah?" Cartman said, only half-surprised. "But the flyer looked so cool."

He looked over his shoulder at them both, wearing a deeply disappointed frown. "You guys remember zip-lining?"

"Oh," Kyle said. "That bad, huh?"
"Maybe not that bad," Stan admitted. Cartman got indigestion just thinking about their childhood zip-lining disaster. "But it was the same old shit, you know. We got roped into a big tour group of old people. They had to stop to take pictures of every fucking rock with their big Nikon cameras. Super flashes, zoom lenses, a hundred different settings -- it was a thirty-minute ordeal every time they stopped. And it's not a forest, even; just a bunch of rocks scattered on the side of the road. The two-hundred dollar ones."

"Win some, lose some," Kyle said, the idiot. "Did you guys get to the Grand Canyon at all?"

"Yeah," Stan said, perking up and flipping rapidly through a section of slides to get to his pictures of the canyon. "We hit it on the way back into state. The weather wasn't great, but at least it wasn't flooded with khaki shorts and Nikons, like everywhere else. We're thinking of going again, hike a part of the gorge, maybe. I heard you can go kayaking on parts of the Colorado, too."

"Before or after Wendy drops the warhead?" Cartman snorted. "You know you'll never get out the door again, with a kid in the house. And by the time it's grown, there won't be a river left to raft on, the way this drought's going."

"Don't be so depressing," Kyle said. As if it was that easy.

"I thought we might go the three of us, anyway," Stan said. And okay, that sounded good.

"I think someone's trying to pick your lock."

Cartman had noticed the sound just as Kyle made his observation -- he scrambled over the back of the couch and made a quick bid for the door.

"You expecting anybody?" Stan called. "Or should I call the fuzz?"

"I am the fuzz." There was only one person who would try to pick his damn lock at two in the afternoon. Cartman pulled open the door and backed Kenny into the hallway, shutting it behind them before the cunts could get another word in.

"I thought ya weren't coming back till tomorrow," he said, scanning the seventeen-year-old for signs of injury. He looked like he'd been thrown into a roadside frost heave, and he smelled like one, too: a bit like melted snow and a bit like an oil rag. Cartman had insisted he spend at least a couple days at home, to keep his parents from going to the police or CFS to report a missing child. Kenny said he'd spent months away from home, in the summers, but Cartman preferred disaster prevention, at this point.

"You -- you good?" He asked, feeling kind of awkward. After Kenny left, he thought he might get drunk and punish himself for fooling around with a minor -- even if it was just a few harmless make-out sessions -- but all he'd ended up thinking about was whether or not he'd come back. Besides, his liquor cabinet was empty and he hadn't felt like going out to restock. Hadn't felt much like drinking, either.

Kenny walked into him until Cartman was flat against his own door, and just sort of leaned on him. "I didn't wanna stay there," he said quietly.

"Okay," Cartman said, unsure how to read his tone. He glanced up and down the abandoned hallway before closing his hands on Kenny's sides. His parka was damp. "Did something happen? You're not hurt, are ya?"

"Not here, huh? Not here in the damn hallway," he added, feeling something of the scrape of curious teeth on his throat. It might've answered his question, but he knew that Kenny had the steam for dick
jokes and innuendo even half-hypothermic and beat black and blue.

"Then open the door," Kenny mumbled.

"I would, but -- uh..."

Yellow Wolf recoiled, eyes snapping and hard. "You have someone over." He accused. "Who? Is it Heidi?"

Cartman chewed his lip and took a few seconds to enjoy the sneer taking over his truant's face. He liked it so much, he took a few additional seconds on it, mapping out the jagged gap where one of his canines turned in, where his upper incisor jumped out of the line-up, and his bottom teeth elbowed with each other for space --

"You piece of shit!" He spat, and shoved at him, but Cartman couldn't go anywhere but through the door, so Kenny only succeeded in bouncing himself backward. "You call me thirsty, but you gotta put in a booty call the second I'm out the house -- is that why you made me leave? Why don't ya just --"

"Kenny. You like tacos?"

"Huh?"

"Tacos, dude. I've got Stan and Kyle over for taco night."

Someone had hit pause on Yellow Wolf's sneer, but his eyes were sort of fluttering over the new information. God, what a riot.

"Stop," Kenny said, pursing his lips in a frown. "Don't laugh at me."

That just made him laugh more.

"C'mon, man, I'm stressed," he insisted. "I'm full of hormones and I lash out. I can't help it. I'm growing."

So many excuses, Cartman didn't know which one to pick at first. "You left for one day. What's stressing you?"

Kenny uttered a despairing teenage groan and pushed up against him again. Cartman was scanning the hallway when the shock of a freezing nose-tip touching his skin and a quick exhale hitting his fucking jugular made him jump and shiver.

"I dunno." He murmured. "Life sucks out there. I missed you. I love you."

Cartman snorted, almost started laughing again. Kenny was so young -- he couldn't understand these things. "You don't love me. You're infatuated with me."

"What's the difference?"

"Right now, you think I'm the whole world to you because I am; you lay all over my couch and wear my fucking clothes, and it probably seems like the damn promised land compared to the rest of your lousy life. But give it a few days. You'll remember who I am, get over it, and life won't seem so empty."

Another gust of air hit his throat and Yellow Wolf leaned back to look him in the eye. "Fuck you. Don't belittle my emotions."
What a riot. What a fucking riot.

"You went to college, and did a bunch of Ecstasy, and had a ton of orgies -- and now you think you're some kinda relationship wizard, is that it? But you don't even know what it's like to love somebody -- "

"College isn't a bunch of orgies, dude. This isn't a fucking TV show."

Cartman wanted to kiss him, kind of, so he did. But touching Kenny was like touching a predatory, symbiotic creature; he'd only managed to plant his closed lips on the edge of his little sneer for half a second before an arm roped around his neck and another around his back -- and suddenly the full length of smelly seventeen-year-old trailer trash pressed up against him and Cartman didn't think he'd make it out alive. He tugged at his arms, pushed at his hips to avoid starting a scene, but he might as well've been trying to peel a starfish from a rock -- like, the limbs were going to tear off before he succeeded.

"Kenny," he tried, but that just gave him the opening he needed to launch his damn tongue into his mouth, and Cartman groaned, regretted initiating anything. Kenny was a pedal to the metal sort of kid, whether it was moving toward something he wanted or away from something he didn't. Cartman wondered how long he'd be in the former category.

Finally he knocked down the hood of his parka and took him by the neck to force him back. "But I missed you," he keened, like a last resort. "Why can't ya just let me -- I mean, what's the problem? You think if we have sex I won't wanna hang out with you anymore?"

"No --" Maybe, Cartman thought, with an inward eye-roll. "But I think if you stick your tongue down my throat in the fucking hallway, my nosy neighbors will post a video on the Internet or hit the fire-alarm and end my career either way."

"Man, nobody even cares that much about your crumby career." He bit back, but pulled away and disentangled himself, legs and arms and all. Then his eyes filled up with new expectation -- greyhounds eyeing up a fresh kill. He'd never seen a happier terrorist. "Wait, does that mean... does that mean you wanna -- ? Tonight?"

"Jesus, Kenny," Cartman pinched the bridge of his nose for a half-second before his arm was pulled down and away. "I don't fuckin' -- I mean, no. Why you gotta ask like that? Why d'you just ask stuff like that?"

He licked his lips, spent a whole minute rocking on his toes and dragging his damn eyes all around, then: "Should I be more spontaneous?"

Cartman rolled his eyes. "That's not the fucking problem. How can you be so sure about this, anyway? I'm -- "

"You're not a fucking cop," he said, closing in on his neck with cold hands. "Not yet."

Holy shit. "Just let me think, okay? Let me think -- please tell me you have something in your pocket."

"Wha -- oh! Yeah, actually."

Kenny drew back, giving Cartman a few precious breaths of personal space, and dug around in one of his front pockets. He pulled out his new glasses -- which were probably responsible for the hard edge he'd felt against his hip -- and then tugged out a long chord with a black lump in the center.
"I made this for you."

Cartman choked a little bit, suddenly full of dread. He hated gifts. He couldn't ever trip over himself to be super gracious about receiving them, especially if he didn't like them, so eventually people stopped trying. He never gave them, either, which broke some unspoken American law of gift-giving, even though it was sort of oxymoronic. Only his mother and the Marshes occasionally sent him things -- and it was never face-to-face, to spare them the trouble. Cartman wasn't a giver, even of gratitude. If he gave things it was a bag of dog shit in the mail to his favorite politicians. And then there was that time his academic adviser in college left the sun roof open on his car --

"It's not, like, super gay or anything -- but you don't gotta wear it if -- "

"Wear it?"

"It's a necklace!" Kenny said, brandishing the chord and it's strange black hitchhiker.

Cartman took it by the black lump and turned it over in his fingers. The chord was thick woven hemp, knotted around a bit of black rubber carved into a skull.

"You made this."

"Yeah! Started it a while ago, maybe, but I carved out the last eye socket yesterday. I just figured, since you like skulls and all -- and you can't say it's chick shit -- "

"Chick shit."

"It's tire rubber, dude!" He insisted. "Tire rubber and hemp -- it's trailer park bling!"

"You think I want your trailer park bling?"

"C'mon -- I just figgered, since you wear that bracelet all the time..."

A cold prickle shot up Cartman's right wrist as Kenny trailed off. "Ike gave it to me," he explained. "A long time ago."

It depressed him a little, thinking about it.

Kenny's eyes fell, then jumped back up. "Here," he said, taking a step forward and pulling the chord from his hands. "Lemme put the right knot in, at least. And if it's too gay then you don't gotta wear it out."

Cartman dropped his hands and let the adolescent work the chord around his neck and tie the ends together in a simple adjustable knot, then spun it around so the skull rested just over his collarbone.

Like a damned manacle -- Cartman felt his heels sink heavily into the floor. He didn't let other people weigh him down, as a rule. God knows he carried around enough of his own shit to feel its phantom gravitational pull on his fucking eyeballs. He told himself he wore Ike's bracelet because he couldn't be bothered to take it off -- but that was a surface lie that never held up when his mood dipped or his jar was empty. The fact was, the concept of emotional attachment to someone outside himself still petrified Cartman -- it made him feel like he was giving something up, somehow, by allowing himself to be shackled. He didn't even feel any particular kind of emotional attachment to his mother; she was categorized in his head as someone close to him, but he really had to try to treat her that way, since they never really managed a deep emotional connection outside of the genetic one.

Cartman refused to break his neck caring for other people or their feelings, because there wasn't anything in it for him.
He still thought Kenny was more trouble than he was worth, really. If Cartman wasn't tripping over him in his own house, then he was fucking worrying over what he might get his ass into on the streets. It sucked -- it didn't spare him a moment, not even for his downward spiral. Kenny was quickly becoming the second person in Cartman's empty fucking life to slam chains on him. He'd been too much of an ignorant asshole to save the first one, and he'd be damned if he was going to let the other one make a similar dive on his watch. Cartman admitted he'd probably been infatuated with his "graffiti hero" Yellow Wolf long before Wendy even accused him of it -- but he never anticipated meeting the kid. He never thought his hands would be around his throat. Shit.

"Anyway," Kenny said, pressing his thumbs down over his collarbone. "You're way gayer than anything you wear."

"Screw you."

Why did he do this to himself? Cartman wondered, watching the teenager creep closer and closer. Why did he only like things that were doomed? He'd tried so hard, at first, to keep him away. But then he made the mistake of giving McCormick a rule -- it was just his nature to do the exact opposite of what he was told -- and now Cartman was responsible for violating a seventeen-year-old, and unwilling to give him up because Kenny was probably his best friend.

Cartman tried to sigh but it turned into a sort of whimper. He was infatuated. "You smell like a wet tire."

"I'm hungry, too."

He wanted to bring a hand up to his face but when he moved his arm it got caught up in a half embrace over Kenny's back. So instead of pinching the bridge of his nose, Cartman moved his hand underneath the hood and circled his knuckles between his shoulder blades. "C'mon then. Shower, meet the cunts, tacos."

You'd think he'd told him all the high schools in the country had simultaneously burned to the ground. In a flash of snapping teeth, Kenny was up on him again -- his hands rioted through his hair, and wherever his mouth landed seared like branding against his skin -- and even while Cartman wondered how in hell he'd come to blushing over the attentions of a dude, he also sort of admired the clumsy teenage ferocity; he didn't really mind being at Yellow Wolf's mercy, even if it had him pinned to his own damn door in the middle of a fucking hallway.

When the door opened he was freed at last. His truant danced away and threw up his hood, and Cartman stumbled and caught himself on the doorframe, his thought process a series of unintelligible swearing.

"Jesus Christ, Kyle."

"My bad," he said, eyebrows climbing toward his hairline. "We thought you might be getting kidnapped, or something."

Cartman swept a hand through his hair and glared, but he knew his face was probably a hundred shades of red beyond the acceptable human spectrum. "Get out of the way," he grumbled, pushing past him into the apartment, then turned to grab Kenny and steer him inside too, since he was lurking in the hall and eyeing the Jew like a hound sizing up a fox.

Once Kenny was off to shower and behind a closed door, Cartman returned to the couch with a beer and finally worked out that sigh he was trying earlier. Stan had brought over a few packs of some kind of Guinness lager. Bourgeoisie beer.
"So that's Yellow Wolf."

"Yeah." Cartman confirmed. He took a long pull from the bottle and felt a little more settled, afterward. Black lager -- it was a good beer, probably one of the best. It had a subtle, bitter flavor -- almost like coffee. Or chocolate.

"Wendy told me you put a staple in his head," Stan chuckled, settling back on the floor by his laptop.

"Yeah, well," Cartman said. "That's the price of a hot shower."

"What is your -- relationship, exactly?" Kyle said, rounding the couch and sitting on the arm to look down on him, like he was prepping an intervention or something. When Cartman met his eyes, the lawyer was about a hundred fucking shades of suspicious.

"You still on his truancy case?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't think truancy assignments typically involved overnights."

Cartman listened to the water running for a few moments, stared at the last image on his TV screen: a shot of the Grand Canyon on a gray-looking day, the Colorado River winding like a blue-green vein deep inside it. That would be so fucking sweet, probably, kayaking down the gorge with some bitch you're in love with.

"You said he's seventeen?"

"So what."

"...I'm not comfortable with this."

Cartman felt his heart-rate pick up, but he tried to speak evenly. "Stan, tell your bitch to let her hair down."

Stan opened his mouth, glanced between them, and shut it again.

"You're shacking up with a homeless minor," Kyle accused.

"He's not homeless," Cartman found himself saying, already on the defensive. "He's at risk. And he's only a minor for another month or so -- what's the big deal? He picks my lock, eats my food, and sleeps on my couch."

"But why?" He insisted. "What's in it for you?"

"What's with the third-degree here, Kyle?" He growled. "Just, fucking -- meet him, willya?"

Inwardly, Cartman scrambled for a story that made sense. Kyle was already hot on the trail to the truth, but for the wrong reasons. He was trying to sniff out the conditions of some kind of fucked up deal that made Cartman willing to let a teenager invade his fucking apartment -- for once, Eric wished he could pass as the victim.

"Are you getting drugs from him?"

"Jesus H. Christ."

"Are you?"
"I'm not taking anything from him," Cartman wanted to say. Not anything that wasn't offered first, anyway. He felt like a first-prize asshole, though, as Kyle started lining up the pieces -- was he technically exchanging room and board for dope and sexual favors? No -- *no*, there hadn't even been any sexual favors, not really, and the weed was just --

"Yeah," he said instead. "Let me know if you need any off-brand **Sudafed** for your cough syrup comas. I'll get you a bargain."

"What?" Stan said into the silence of the following glaring contest. "Kyle? You're not -- ?"

"I haven't done any of that since school, and you know it." Kyle said slowly. "Don't make this about me. What is that kid doing here, Cartman? What's your game?"

"Game?" Cartman sputtered, choked around a bit of his lager. "There's no game, you fucking idiot. Can't you see? This is just a fucking joke; I've got an adult with fewer political rights than the fucking state bird in my shower, he has a solid choice between the streets and the crackhouse for someplace to *sleep* at night, and here's the goddamned punchline: Wendy thinks this is the safest place for him."

Kyle got up and moved back into the kitchen. He heard the punch and hiss of another bottle being opened, and then the young lawyer returned to the living room, his forehead lined with deep thought.

"I just don't understand what you're getting out of this."

Cartman shrugged, took another drink. Then another. "He's my friend."

"Shit," Stan said suddenly, chuckling. "I'm so proud of you, homie. All grown up, makin' your own salary, your own friends. Shit. I never thought I'd see the day."

Kyle snorted, but the atmosphere loosened. Cartman flung his bent bottle cap at Stan -- it missed and clinked off the stereo behind him. "Fuck off. We can't all knock up our childhood sweethearts and slide down rainbows to work."

Stan had a high-register, chattering sort of laugh. It was infectious, when the wind was blowing in the right direction. It reminded Cartman that he'd actually missed these two dipshits. "Dude, if you want a ride on the rainbow, get your physical trainer certification. It's the way to go; I get to work out all day, smoke prescription marijuana, and make a ton of money. It's the life."

Cartman couldn't *stand* gyms. They were so full of posturing phonies, meatheads and dirtbags. But he admitted Stan might've found a tiny loophole in the IKEA catalog of life.

"Whatever. If Wendy's still getting paid in cereal box prizes from the state when she squeezes that kid out, you won't be feeling so posh. Good luck paying tuition on that salary."

"Welcome to the system, man," Stan sighed, flipping through some more slides. "It hasn't been that easy. We're trying to move out of the apartment, actually -- but I can't wrap my head around a mortgage. I don't want to sign my soul over to a bank for thirty years, but I also don't want to raise a kid in our flat."

"You know what mortgage means?" Cartman said, chuckling around the neck of his bottle. "You know what that word actually means? It's from the Middle Ages. Means 'death pledge.'"

"You still have time," Kyle said, sliding off the armrest to take a seat and kicking his heels up on the table. "Maybe interest rates won't be so wretched next year."
"Yeah, and maybe North Korea will launch a nuclear attack. You never know; everything could work out."

Stan turned to lean against the TV stand, reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Actually, Eric, maybe you could help us out. You understand this shit better than I do, anyway -- my Biology degree isn't a hell of a lot of use when it comes to loans and interest rates. And if anybody knows how to get around a death pledge, it's you."

Cartman almost rolled his eyes. The only way to get favors out of him was to mix it in with compliments. Usually he stopped hanging out with people, once they learned that trick.

"I've got a rattle under the hood of the Wrangler, too," Stan added sheepishly. "But the dealership wants nothin' less than six-hundo for repairs."

"That thing needs to be compacted, Stanley, not repaired."

"Will you take a look, anyway? It's all we have right now, for wheels, and it's not worth a six-hundred dollar repair job. Every time I get it back from the dealer, it's got a new problem in a totally different part. I swear they do it on purpose; they go in and loosen all the screws to get me back within the week."

"So put a case together. Get Kyle to sue them for you. That's what you're supposed to do when businesses fuck you over."

Kyle snorted.

"Even if I could afford to pay Kyle, the corporate lawyers would just draw out the suit until I'm defamed and broke. Trying to argue with the law is suicide." Stan said. Then added: "Sorry, Kyle."

"Nah, you just gotta fondle the right balls." Cartman said. "Wendy can tell you all about that. Damn near broke her hand jacking off the judge presiding over the Yellow Wolf trials."

"Ah, come on, dude -- " Stan groaned.

"What? Am I wrong?"

"No, I guess not, just -- your metaphors make me really uncomfortable."

"Only 'cause they're not metaphors," he said, then reached across the couch to shove at Kyle. "Isn't that right, Kyle? That's what they taught you in law school, right?"

"Power to the people," Kyle said, grimacing, and downed the rest of the lager.

"Reconsidering that Sudafed?"

"Alright, fuck the hell off, fat-ass," he grit. "Can we get off this topic? I get enough of it at the office."

Kyle was a nervous wreck -- and he hated his work. It was one of the few things in life that gave Cartman pleasure to bring up in conversation.

The bathroom door cracked and Kenny slipped out, rubbing a towel over his head. A wave of humidity broke through the dry winter air -- he always turned the bathroom into a damn steam chamber. He shuffled over to the laundry corner to toss the towel on top of the dryer, then dig around inside it -- he pulled on one of Cartman's sweaters.
"Uhh -- So." He started. Cartman imagined some kind of introduction was necessary, although they were all kind of awkwardly aware of each other, already. "Kenny -- Stan and Kyle."

"Hey," Kenny hummed, circling behind the couch.

"Hey, man," Stan offered. "I peeked at your file. I like your work."

"Thanks," came the teenager's mild response, from right behind Cartman's head. A pair of arms grew over his shoulders and wrapped around his neck. He was always warm and languid, after showering. Cartman tried not to think too much about why, exactly.

"Ken," he warned, heart stuttering worse than King George VI on a skipping record. "What d'you want."

"Can I have a beer?"

"No," he choked. "You can have water. There's extra cups under the sink."
The arms withdrew and Cartman listened to his footsteps round the corner into the kitchen. He risked lifting his eyes, chose the less dangerous target of Stan -- but even Stan was staring at him with some measure of alarm.

"Cartman," Kyle's voice came low and dangerous from his right. "Are you fucking kidding me."

He lifted the glass to his lips, but his bottle was empty. He leaned forward and propped it on the table, then sunk back against the couch.

"Are you having sex with that kid?" Kyle hissed. Stan's eyes went wide.

"No," he answered, honestly. "What do I look like, a priest? I don't fuck kids. And I'm not gay, asshole."

"That's not what your face is saying."

"I can't find them, dude," Kenny called.

Cartman almost leapt off the damn couch, and fled to the kitchen. It was a relief to have the barrier of half a wall between him and the scrutiny of his old friends.

"How could you miss them? They're right under the damn -- "

Arms, again. Warm and languid. "I found them, actually."

"Kenny, ya can't do this, right now," he insisted, climbing a hill on the roller coaster ride to being pissed and embarrassed. They usually melded into the same thing, for him. "Kyle's a lawyer and fuckin' Oprah when it comes to humping the moral high-horse -- "

"Mm, sorry," he hummed, drawing his arms tight and pressing his cheek against his. Cartman remembered he needed to shave.

Man, it was so hard to stay pissed when he got all warm and sincere -- and smelling like a damn lumberjack. "Look, ya really can't -- "

"Okay," he interrupted. "Can I have a hug, though? I'll be good after, I promise. I'll let you guys talk about your old people interest rate shit all night."

Cartman kept one eye and an ear out for movement from the living room, and brought his arms tight around his friend for a moment. Sighed down the neck of his sweater -- his sweater, the one with the federal shield of Germany on the front -- and, what a fucking relief, actually. He pushed him away when his hands started fucking around with his hair again. A predator, he was -- a goddamned predator.

"Got anythin' to eat?" Kenny asked, licked his lips. "I don't think I can wait until tacos."

"There's a box of Lucky Charms, I think. And soy milk."

"I thought you hated soy," he said, beginning to rummage in the cabinets.

"It doesn't expire as fast as the kind pumped from breasts." Cartman explained, shrugging. He never said he wasn't a hypocrite. "Listen, dude -- I'm serious about this. No shit, okay? None of your shit. I will kick you out. I will kick you out just to prove a fucking point to Kyle, I swear."

"Okay, okay. 'No shit,'" He mimicked in a deep, somber tone.
Kenny left everything out on the counter, like a fucking child, and started back toward the living room with his bowl clasped between his hands, eyes trained on the cereal lapping at the edges. Cartman heaved an angry sigh and put the open milk away before following after his personal pain in the ass.

"So, I've been meaning to ask," Stan said from the floor, tongue in fucking cheek. "Why're you limping?"

"Because I'm sore." Cartman grit, tried to space a glare out between Stan and Kyle.

"Yeah, but... why?"

"Giantism," Kenny said. "Runs in my family."

Jesus Christ. Stan clattered into laughter. Kyle coughed into his elbow.

"Wolf, for fuck's sake, man." Cartman left the giggling morons and turned his glare fully on the smug adolescent. He should've known better than to try and tell him what to do, or to expect that he might give the friggin' dick innuendos a rest, just this once. But Cartman could barely get him to take his damn shoes off at the door -- why should he expect him to quit joking about fucking cops? Kenny grinned with all his lousy teeth and climbed over the couch to perch on the arm with his candy cereal.

"I'll show you fuckin' fags why I'm sore," he muttered, dropping to a crouch by the TV and shoving Stan aside. He dug out his phone and unplugged the chord from his laptop. "Bought a day-pass at Aspen the other day."

"Yeah?" Stan chuckled, his voice receding as he rose and found a spot on the couch. "Probably packed with bunnies, this time of year. I thought you got banned from Aspen, anyway."

"I can't believe you even left the apartment," Kyle droned.

"Screw you both," Cartman said, scrolling through his phone for the right video. "In fact, screw each other."

"You got banned from Aspen? How?" Kenny asked.

"He crashed one of the Ski Patrol's snowmobiles into the lodge." Kyle said. "Destroyed all the timeshare records in the conference rooms."

"Goddamn public service," Cartman muttered. "Timeshares are evil, and they must be stopped."

"Check it out," he continued. "The terrain park wasn't so crowded with bunnies and asshole French-Canadians. I nailed a 360 board-slide on this rail."

While the thirty-second video played, Cartman hooked up the stereo and started a playlist, hoping his music would help calm his nerves. He hadn't imagined the meeting between Kenny and his old friends would turn into such an astronomical collision.

"Dude, that's pretty fuckin' sweet, actually," Stan said.

"Tail-grab was a nice touch," Kyle admitted. "Little showy."

Cartman replayed the video. It really was probably the best grind he'd ever done. "Took about seventy tries, though, to get it right. I'm out of practice. Caught a heel edge on the last one and nearly
broke my fucking tailbone over the rail."

He stood and turned to lift his shirt to show them the bruise building up over his lower back -- it was almost two days old and at its peak of black and blue.

"Yo-o!" Stan crowed. "Not bad, not bad at all. Fuck, that musta hurt."

"You should see the part on my ass-cheek, bro. I could send a photograph to the Louvre -- hang it next to the fuckin' Mona Lisa, probably."

"Yeah-h," Kyle snorted. "Your hairy ass-cheek next to the Mona Lisa."

"Who's recording?"

"Who d'you think?"

"You board?" Stan said, turning to Kenny.

"He's way too fuckin' poor for that," Cartman answered. "This is a middle class hobby, at least."

He scrolled through his photos and selected one to take the place of the video on screen. "Makes a cute ski-bunny, though, don't he?"

He'd caught Kenny in his rental skis and boots, leaning forward on his poles in line at the chairlift and cracking his trademark sneer at the camera. Cartman thought absentmindedly that he probably shouldn't say shit like that. He did make a good skier, though -- for his first time. It had sort of been an awesome day, probably the best of his vacation. He'd woke up that morning after eight whole hours of sleep feeling fucking fantastic, and made the spontaneous decision to hit the slopes for the first time in almost two years. Snowboarding was a little bit like riding a bike, anyway -- and watching Kenny get the hang of skiing was pretty hilarious.

"Teeth like a damn Cadillac emblem," he added.

"Fuck you," said Kenny, muffled around a mouthful of marshmallow charms.

That satisfied Cartman. He reset the television and hooked up the XBox. "You guys wanna go a few rounds -- Need for Speed, or something?"

They went several rounds on the XBox, and after a few hours and a few more beers, they were howling at the screen loud enough to alert the damn neighbors. It was the usual stuff -- and Kenny was good. Kenny was good, actually. He splayed out on his spot on the arm rest and after a while Cartman almost forgot about his worries. There were three-ish people on the face of the Earth he could spend more than an hour in the same room with, and they were all there. He felt a glimmer of happiness, almost, warm and languid.

"You fuckin' bitch," Cartman swore, as Kenny's car slid in front of his and slammed on the brakes -- Stan and Kyle shot past them across the finish line while Cartman yanked his car around the unforeseen obstacle and passed the finish line in third, then he turned and shoved his cackling truant off the couch.

Kenny hit the floor with a muffled curse and a thump.

When he didn't rise right away, Cartman leaned over the arm to check on him -- another staple would certainly ruin his mood -- but in the instant the couch blocked the view of the others, Kenny lurched upward and slammed his lips on him, just missing his mouth. Cartman scowled and returned to his
After that, it was spectacularly hard to concentrate. He didn't do a damn thing out of line for the next couple races -- but Cartman couldn't fucking concentrate. The high schooler's legs were sort of split over the arm of the couch right next to him, in his cruddy trailer trash jeans all ripped up in an obviously not pre-fashioned pattern. It was just his legs -- like, there wasn't anything new or special about a pair of fuckin' dude's legs next to him; Cartman had been howling over video games next to Stan and Kyle since they were five years old, nearly, but he'd never been distracted by it before. Was he drunk? No, he hadn't even finished his third lager. Cartman tried about sixty times to rub the flush out of his face, but it was insistent.

He decided to sit out a few rounds. They switched to Soul Calibur. Cartman settled back against the couch to watch the fights and nurse his third beer, thinking it might help -- but Kenny was sliding down the arm like a damn liquid and it made him want to pull the kid into his lap -- no, it made him want to get between his legs. Fuck, he thought, embarrassed and pissed. He was actually attracted to him.

His phone -- Cartman pulled out his phone, suddenly thankful for the 21st century's spectacular array of distracting technology. He watched the video of his epic board-slide again, chuckled drunkenly over a few pictures of Kitty looking deranged with a slice of bread around her face -- and then he came across a picture he didn't remember, that he hadn't seen. And since he'd already forgot why he pulled out his phone in the first place, Cartman stared at it. It was the day he threw Kenny into the table -- the Washington Redskins shirt was unmistakable -- and he wished he wasn't in the shot, looking miserable, while Kenny grinned his wild, crooked grin at the camera. It wasn't the most gorgeous face he'd ever made, but -- he really had a great grill.
"What're you doing?" Kenny muttered from his left.
"Cropping myself out."

"No, don't do that. I like that picture. I haven't even sent it to myself yet."

"I don't like the angle. I look like I'm about to throw you into a table."

Kenny's sugary breath glanced off his eyebrow as he leaned down to appraise the photo. "That's just the way your face looks, though."

Cartman snorted. Terrific -- some people had resting bitch faces; he had a resting face like 50 Cent, or something. Murderous.

"I like it," Kenny said. "It's sad, though, kinda."

"Don't take selfies on my phone," Cartman said, for lack of any better ideas how to respond. "If shit hits the fan, and the department looks at my phone records -- "

"Oh my fucking God," he groaned, and dropped a hand to grip the scruff of his neck sort of roughly, like he was trying to shake a bad habit out of an animal. "Take it easy on the end is nigh bullshit today, okay, Rorschach? And don't drink anymore."


"Don't do that," he added. "It makes me tired."

"I don't think you need any help with that," Kenny said, but withdrew his hand. "I bet you passed out over your tax returns again, last night."

"No -- " Had he? Cartman wondered.

"I bet ya slipped right into a black hole -- thinkin', what's Yellow Wolf doing? -- and then passed right the hell out, didn't you?"

"No. You don't know anything about black holes."

"I know your black holes. I know you go into them when you get emotional and don't know how to deal -- "

"You know, if you spent half the effort on school that you do studying me, you wouldn't be in so much fucking trouble all the time."

"But then I wouldn'ta met you," he replied, and pressed a quick kiss to Cartman's temple -- which wouldn't have been so bad, if he hadn't made a ridiculous quacking sound while he did it, and then laughed his damn head off about it. "Oh, man, your face."

"I -- I gotta piss." Cartman got up abruptly, wobbled a second, and left Kenny alone with Stan and Kyle.
"What the hell have you done to Cartman?" asked Stan, his truancy officer's black-haired friend, the instant Cartman was behind the closed door of the bathroom. There was a thread of laughter in his voice, a hair on the nervous side.

Kenny slid down into the spot Cartman vacated -- he'd been fidgeting for two hours since the damn arm rest was making his ass sore -- and glanced over at the bathroom, then back to the two pairs of eyes trained on him in the dimming evening light.

"I've never seen him so... docile," said the other one. Kyle. In the few hours Kenny spent watching the three of them interact, he'd started to get an idea of how Cartman's childhood might've been; they were probably thrown together as kids because they were all pretty smart -- he bet Eric had never even liked them that much. But it was obvious that the three were incredibly familiar with each other; you couldn't hang out with the same people for so many years without getting used to them -- and forming real friendships over all the disagreements.

Kenny reached a hand back to rub at the back of his head where it had thumped on the floor earlier. Docile? He wondered. What on Earth was docile about Eric Cartman?

"Do you know what you're doing?" Kyle said.

"Kenny," Stan started, almost simultaneously. "If you ever feel like you need somewhere to stay, you can always tell me and Wendy, okay? Like, no strings attached -- it's really not a problem -- "

"I like it here." Kenny hung his legs over the arm and fell to his back to look at them upside-down. Marsh's husband seemed like a good guy. And Kenny didn't say that about a lot of people. Kyle -- he still didn't quite get what was stuck up Kyle's ass. He'd been side-eyeing him all day.

"You're serious?" The lawyer said, exchanging his XBox controller for one of the dark-looking beers on the table. They smelled really different from the piss Kenny's dad always drank. They'd turned Cartman's breath sort of bitter, like if you brewed a pot of coffee inside a gas tank. "You have nowhere better to go?"

"The fuck's up your dickhole?" Kenny said. "I said I like it here."

Kyle shook his head. "I just don't understand why. You know who you're living with, right?"

"Bet I know better than you," he sneered. He even kind of believed it.

"Then you know he's a crazy, self-loving, racist asshole."

"You seriously like getting ripped on all the time for your teeth and -- and your income?" Stan quested, leaning over his legs to look at Kenny across Kyle. "Like, it's been making me uncomfortable, even."
Kenny turned his head into the couch and spoke to his shoulder. "It's not like that," he murmured. Cartman didn't rip on him just to rip -- he did it for other reasons. He liked Kenny's teeth -- and his trailer park jokes weren't targeted at him, really; they were exaggerated commentary on society’s shit stereotypes. Kenny had learned his language -- well, he was still learning it, really -- but he trusted him, anyway. "Cartman's a genius."

Kyle barked a laugh. "He's an idiot."

Kenny tilted his head back again and glared with everything he had.

"Okay, easy," Kyle said, backtracking. "I admit he's smart, but -- he's an idiot, dude. You have to know that by now. He does idiot things."

Stan hummed his agreement.

Kenny rolled over to his stomach, suddenly intrigued. He bet these two had dirt on his truancy officer, dirt that wasn't in the police logs. "Like what kinda things?"

They both laughed and started talking at once -- about a hundred 'remember when's passed between them before Kenny could get an ear in on a familiar story: " -- that cliff-dive at Casa Bonita's -- "

"I know all this shit," he interrupted. "I've read his file -- I have all his arrest reports. That stuff's not dumb, it's just..." Well, it was pretty dumb.

"He didn't get arrested for all his dumb shit."

"Dude," Stan suddenly grinned wide and shoved at his friend. "Remember when they adjusted the national average penis size when we were in elementary?"

"Oh -- " Kyle pinched his nose just like Cartman and shuddered with laughter. "That's definitely in the running for dumbest shit he's ever done. I can't get enough of fat-ass humiliating himself -- he just gets in his own way, sometimes -- "

"Tell me!" Kenny demanded. "Shit, guys -- tell me before he comes back!"

They laughed and slurred to each other for a few moments while Kenny despaired over the annoying habits of drunk old people, then Stan started to explain.

"In fourth grade, our school held physical exams and posted the changes in everyone's height on the school bulletin board. Except Cartman thought they'd posted our ten-year-old dick sizes in public."

"What'd he do?" Kenny was jittering, he was so interested. "Change his own? How much?"

"Well, first he insisted the measurements were wrong," Kyle said, with an audible roll of his eyes. "Then he re-measured every boy in our class, and posted the new results over the board with a huge sign saying they were the actual penis sizes of the fourth grade. Our principal was pissed."


"Thirteen inches, was his first estimate, as I recall."

Kenny clapped his hands once and laughed -- he guffawed -- it was fucking hilarious. So typical Cartman --

"Actually, though?"
"Cartman had the shortest dick in the class, dude," Stan said. "And even after they dropped the national average to -- what was it, again?"


"Right -- even after they dropped it to 1.3 inches, he was still below average."

"No fucking way." Kenny tried to think back to when he'd caught the cop beating off in his car -- was it still that small? He couldn't remember; his damn hands had been in the way.

"They sent him to anger management, finally, after that."
Kyle snorted. "They tried, anyway."

"What happened with that, again?" Stan said.

"He fabricated a police report that convicted his counselor of molesting a fourteen-year-old girl. And his wife committed suicide," Kyle answered grimly. "All because he called him fat."

Kenny got caught on a decibel of laughter that was halfway to tears -- Holy shit, that was no joke. Diabolical -- diabolical son of a bitch. He suddenly understood what Kyle had meant by docile.

"Still think you know who you're dealing with, here?"

"Yes," Kenny said, wiping some of the moisture from his eyes and biting down on his smile. "Yes -- oh man, what a sensitive little bitch."

"Seriously?" Kyle said. "This doesn't wig you out at all?"

"I mean, sure it does, but -- he's my friend."

The bathroom door opened. Cartman fumbled his hand on the inside of the wall for about ten hours before finally flicking off the lights. "I'm dehydrated," he groaned.

"What're you laughing about?" He said as he trailed over. "What're you all laughing about?"

"Average dick sizes," Kenny said, grinning up at him.

Cartman's eyes narrowed dangerously in the dim light and he turned them on his two friends. "Oh, it's fucking embarrassing story time, is it?" He snarled -- he fucking snarled at them. "As if either of you two are packing anything worth showing off."

"Cartman, you have the smallest dick I've ever fucking seen."

Kenny jumped up out of the danger zone as his truancy officer lunged at his Jewish friend and pulled him from the couch. Kyle was a lot better at fighting him off than Kenny was, though, perhaps from so many extra years of experience. Eric caught him by the shirt and they grappled until Kyle slammed an elbow into his abdomen and kicked one of his legs from under him. The bottles on the table rattled as they both fell to the carpet in a tangle of curses and fists -- it was a miracle they missed the killer edge of the table.

Stan stood and began clearing away some of the empties, as if the fight wasn't even happening. He walked them into the kitchen and brought back a new rack. "I thought they might grow out of this," he sighed, setting the new pack on the table. "But it's like a sibling thing, almost. They have to have shouting matches over the phone once a month."
He brought a bottle-opener down on two of the caps, then turned and offered Kenny one of the bottles. He stared at it. "Really?"

Stan shrugged, cracked a good-natured half-smile. "You won't make it through a night with us without somethin'. Guinness is good stuff -- and you might as well get drunk on the good stuff, my dad always says."

Kenny took it, sniffed at the rim before taking a sip.

"What the hell're you -- " Cartman grunted from the floor. "Doing, Marsh? Don't give him -- "

Kyle slipped the headlock and threw his weight over his forearm in a move that probably knocked the breath out of Cartman. They struggled some more. Kenny was impressed the lawyer could hold out for so long against the cop, dehydrated and tipsy though he was.

"Didn't think law school would involve so much hand-to-hand," Kenny remarked. "Cop training must be a joke."

"Kyle's been kickboxing for, like, ten years. Not just for occasions like these, but it might have something to do with it."

"Alright, guys," Stan continued, when the fight reached a lull. "Come on -- settle the hell down. It was all a hundred years ago, anyway."

The two were caught in a stalemate of matching glares and heavy breathing; Cartman had his arm drawn tightly over Kyle's throat, but the lawyer was working at kicking their legs apart and beginning to pry his fingers off.

"Take it -- back."

"Not a -- chance, fat-ass," Kyle huffed, kicked again.

"Come on," Stan said again. "For God's sake -- it was so long ago -- "

"Eric," Kenny said. "I'm hungry."

Cartman heaved a noisy sigh and flung his arm out. Kyle rolled away. "I almost forgot about tacos."

He sat up and held the heel of his palm to his forehead. Kyle was on his feet, but had to lean against the TV stand to rub at one of his knee-caps.

"You bring your cards?" Cartman said, beginning to stand.

"Yeah," Kyle grunted.

"Just like that, huh?" Kenny said. Stan met his eyes and shrugged.

He followed behind the cop as he shuffled into the kitchen, and sat up on one of the bar-stools while he opened the freezer and dug out a handful of ice.

"You're not still below the national average, are ya?"

Cartman glared at him, dropped the ice into a dish cloth and wrapped it up, bringing it to his temple. His face was flushed with exertion, his hands reddened with carpet burn. It was all sort of hopelessly arousing.
"Deal-breaker?"

Kenny laughed, brought the Guinness to his lips. "I don't care how big your dick is, dude."

"'S'not below average," he murmured, using his free hand to pull things from the cabinets and start setting them on the island.

"You can't go five minutes without throwing fists, can you?" Kenny said -- he was vastly enjoying Cartman's reactivity; he hadn't seen him so volatile since his truancy case was first transferred back in October. "No wonder anger management class didn't work out."

"It's better, actually." Stan said, arriving in the kitchen with Kyle on his heels. "He used to have about a five-second fuse. Maybe those classes helped a little bit, after all."

Kyle pulled out the bar-stool next to Kenny's at the island. "That's not it at all. He just finally realized that impulsive, directionless rage only leads to other people finding out he has a small dick."

"I'm about two seconds from whipping it out just to you show you how wrong you are," Cartman growled. "So fucking can it, will ya? And you know what -- if you guys really wanna get into story time, then I can think of a few things you wouldn't mind living the fuck down -- "

"No, let's not," Stan said.

"You, Stanley," he started, jabbing at him with his free hand. "Were caught butt-naked on national news jacking it in San Diego. Twice."

"And Kyle had his motherfucking mouth sewn to the butthole of an Asian dude for agreeing to Apple's terms and conditions contract without reading it, first -- "

"Nobody reads those," Kyle grit.

"So leave my dick alone."

These guys were crazy, Kenny thought. All three of them were crazy. He could spend a fucking lifetime listening to them bicker with each other -- and even longer getting the fine details of Cartman's most embarrassing moments. It was kind of fun to map out the road that led from the child with anger management issues to the cop with anger management issues. Then Kenny wondered what the most humiliating moment of his life was -- and he certainly had a fucking armory of shit to choose from -- but all he could think of was the moment not three or four hours ago when he told his effing truancy officer that he was maybe in love with him -- and fuck if the memory alone didn't shove a shit-ton of blood up in his face. What an asshole -- what did he know anyway --

"Kenny, baby, what's going on?"

Kenny snapped back to reality and cashed his internal rant for later.

"You look like you're about to spit, dude," Cartman continued. "Don't do it on the taco supplies."

He swallowed around the phlegm and bile rising in his throat, with some difficulty. He chased it down with a gulp of the black lager.

"I can't believe you gave my truant a fucking beer."

"Ah, come on," Stan waved a dismissive hand. "We were all drinking at his age. Besides, this is Guinness; it's not drinking, it's an education in the finer elements of alcohol consumption. Hell, when
I was in high school, my mom and I used to pass out in front of America's Got Talent with box wine."

"You're not his mom, fuckface -- "

"Relax," Kyle said, beating Kenny to it. "Put the legal guardian hat away, will you? It's one beer. And if he's gotta put up with you, then I think he deserves it."

Kenny lifted his hand to hide a smile, but the cop's eyes narrowed on him in an instant.

"You're empowering him," Cartman grouched. "Don't fucking empower him."

"Whadda you guys want in your tacos?" Stan said, stepping back to take inventory of all the ingredients collecting on the counter.

"Got any o' those green peppery things?" Kenny asked, scanning the labels.

Cartman exhaled through his nose and dragged a hand over his face, like his cat had peed on the carpet again, or something.

"Kenny -- do I need to take you to the damn produce aisle for a lesson in vegetables?" He collected three jars from the pile and lined them in front of him. "Jalapeño peppers are the darker, spicy ones that you pick out of burritos for no good reason; peperoncini are the lighter ones from Italy that gave you a nosebleed the other day for being a pussy; and bell peppers are the red and green ones you put on pizza all the time. Understand?"

Kenny examined the jars, pushing his lager from hand to hand. "I want bell peppers."

"Good," he sighed, jerking his head in a nod of approval and moving the jars back to the area Stan was prepping with plates.

"You know," Kyle mused, his eyes sort of sliding back and forth between them. "There's only a couple ways to get out of compulsory public education -- without getting arrested, that is. One is to attend private school. The other is homeschooling."

Stan blew a snort against the rim of his bottle, choked, and had a coughing fit over the sink for a few moments. When he turned back, there were tears in his eyes. "Cartman! Teaching!"

Kenny felt a whole new wave of respect for his truancy officer's lawyer friend. But when he lifted his eyes to Cartman, he was already shaking his head.

"No, no, no. Don't look at me like that."

"How -- fucking -- sweet would that be?"

"No, Kenny."

"You're not even thinkin' about it! Why the hell not?"

"Hm, let's see -- I have a full-time job, I'm not a credentialed educator in any legal language, and you've only got months left!"

"Months!"

"Don't whine," he warned. "That's another thing. I don't have any interest in spending my free time teaching a grimy, whining teenager the fucking Cartesian planes."
"You really don't need any credentials," Kyle said, idly examining the label on a can of black beans. "The Amish get by on religious reasons, but technically any parent can pull their kid from the system on the grounds of homeschooling -- it's a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment. Studies even show higher test scores from kids without a formal secondary education."

"No," Cartman said again, turning a glare on him. "No, Kyle. Tests are all bullshit, anyway. They don't prove anything but the ability to test well -- "

"Remind me again what you got on your Boards?"

"So you can make fun of me for scoring thirty points lower than you again?" He growled.

Stan snorted. "You guys were both, like, 96th percentile."

"What are Boards?" Kenny asked.

"The SATs," Kyle supplied. "Cartman -- "

"Shut up, Kyle. What does this have to do with anything?"

"You scored a 2270, fat-ass. And you only lost a hundred-thirty points for writing your damn essay about Hitler. Admit it -- you might hate the system, but you've consistently beaten it since we were kids. Why not help somebody else do it, for a change?"

"Hey, asshole, I trained a class of like thirty Mexican border-hoppers to pass their exams, and I did it when I was ten -- "

"So do it again."

"No! He doesn't need any of that bullshit! I'd fucking stab myself before cramming compulsory education down the throat of motherfucking Yellow Wolf -- "

"You'd rather see him in juvenile detention for truancy?" He challenged. "Eric, all I'm saying is -- you could probably help him get his GED, without sacrificing much of your time. I'm just saying, it's an option."

"Wendy would totally rubber-stamp you from the CFS end of things," Stan added. "Just saying."

Kenny was about to jitter off the damn stool. "Eric -- "

"No, Kenny. I'm done talking about this."

Kenny shut his mouth with great effort. He took a deep pull from his lager and scowled at the bitter flavor, but it helped push his heart back down his throat. He'd thought the last few days had been perfect -- but they were shadowed by the constant reminder of their coming end; vacation was almost over, and he'd have to go back to the trailer, back to school, and probably back to outrunning the radio collar on his ankle. It was so stupid; homeschooling would save Cartman the trouble chasing after him, and it would erase the biggest source of misery from Kenny's life, not to mention give them the opportunity to hang out without crumby excuses like injuries and the weather. Besides, in the past four or five days, Kenny had learned more about political and sociological philosophy, nutrition, and even physical mechanics than he had in twelve years of formal education -- he learned more in the damn passenger seat of Cartman's cruiser than he did in the classroom. He even knew how to file tax returns, for fuck's sake! Yeah, it sucked to have to crawl around in loopholes just to bypass random and irrelevant laws, but Kenny didn't see one fucking thing wrong with simply carrying on their friendship under the guise of some kinda tutoring. He'd even won over Stan and
Kyle -- and they'd already spent the first few hours after Kenny's arrival suspicious as fuck over their relationship -- so if even *they* thought it was a good idea, what was the *problem*? Kenny scowled at his truancy officer, and thought distantly about biting him.

"And you, man?"

He tuned back into the conversation and turned his gaze to Stan. "Uh?"

"Hard shell or soft shell."

"Both?"

"Like, one of each?"

"Nah, man -- both!" Kenny said. "You put the hard shell *inside* the soft shell, so it's still crunchy but it doesn't explode all over the place when you bite it. It's the only way."

Stan seemed frozen in consideration over the taco supplies.

Cartman chuckled. "The only way, he says."

"Yo, you guys are taco *amateurs,*" Kenny insisted. "Why choose between two kinda crumby options when you can put 'em together and make something perfect?"

"You see this?" The cop gestured, totally fuckin' ignoring him. "This is what I was trying to tell you guys. There's a fork in the road; and Yellow Wolf goes straight."

Stan put his hands on his hips and nodded at the array of food. "I kind of wanna try it."
"Check."
"Check."
"Raise five."

Cartman narrowed his eyes and reassessed his hand for the thousandth time. He was one card away from a decent-looking straight -- but outside of that he had nothing but a lousy pair of Nines, and the pot was already looking fairly good at fifty bucks. Kyle was either raising the bet to make him nervous, or he actually had a good hand.

"I don't think so," Stan said, with a slurring chuckle. "I fold."

Stan threw his cards down and rocked away from the table, then leaned back against the couch with a groan. The last moments of Braveheart were playing out on the television screen, Mel Gibson's final tortured gasps punctuated by Tupac Shakur's "fuck you" role-call over the speaker system. Cartman tried to shift to angle his cards away from Kyle, but he was blocked by the motionless form of Kenny on his left. He'd taught the truant how to play Texas Hold 'em, but after a few rounds hiding Aces under the table and accusing them of only talking about "old people shit," he'd passed out in a half-curled lump over the arm of the couch, like a goddamned accordion.

Cartman glanced at the clock on the stereo; it was almost two -- he'd fallen asleep a little after midnight, and gradually wormed himself over Cartman's leg in the last half-hour, like a goddamned haunted accordion.

"Man, he loves you."

He managed to hold his poker-face still, and glanced over at Stan on the other side of the couch.

"I mean, he really likes you." He said. When Stan was drunk he was always sort of half-smiling. Not just his mouth, even -- his whole face, each half-lidded eye was a hiding half-smile. Which Wendy must enjoy, he guessed. "We told him some of your fucked up shit -- and he just says you're his friend."

What the hell did he say to that? Cartman wondered. It wasn't a compliment or anything, but it still made him feel pretty damn good.

"You matching or raising?" Kyle pressed.

"Match," he said, and scooted forward to push one of his chips into the center of the table. Then almost threw the whole game by giving Kyle a big gander at his cards when an arm slunk around his back.

"Jesus," he muttered, and slapped his cards face-down on the table before standing up. "Okay, I'm
Cartman turned and gathered up the limp teenager -- he tried to be careful, but working with arms and legs when he was drunk was sort of like throwing around heavy coils of rope -- and managed to deposit the body in his bedroom.

"What's happening to you, man?" Kyle said, as Cartman returned to the couch and picked up his cards. He sounded like he was taking a turn up fucking Last Laugh Lane, and Cartman hated him for it, but he was also kind of wondering the same thing.

"I don't know." He answered. "It's like living with something that's -- that's hunting me all the time. I can't fucking stand it."

"And now you've put this goddamn homeschooling idea in his head," Cartman continued, glaring at his cards without seeing them, really. "And he's going to go fucking wild chasing after it -- "

"So let him," Stan said. "I didn't really get what was going on here, at first, but this looks pretty good, actually. You get some company, and he doesn't have to go rot his brains at school. It's only a few months, anyway, and he's probably smart enough to get his GED already -- "

"GED, SATs -- so much fucking bullshit. He'll never have any of that."

"He won't, or you don't want him to?" Kyle challenged.

"He doesn't need it! He shouldn't! He doesn't want to be in the fuckin' system, making a salary and working himself into fuckin' corners all day -- "

"He's already in the system whether he likes it or not, Eric. His criminal record is enough -- he's in the red right now; having a GED would at least put him back in the black, and he can move on with his life -- "

"Don't use accounting metaphors on me, Kyle. There's more than one way to get your ledger out of the red -- and fuck that, anyway! He shouldn't have to crunch his life down into numbers like the rest of us, just to fit into the societal accounting equation of sacrifice and reward, inputs and outputs, bending over to other people's bureaucratic bullshit just to move on and start living. You were living the day you fell out the goddamn womb, and Kenny's the only person I've ever met who's understood that from day one. He's fuckin' -- he's perfect how he is. I don't want a hand in destroying it."

"Holy shit," Stan murmured, in the following quiet.

"Holy shit," he said again.

"Jesus, Stan." Cartman said, shifting uncomfortably. "Guess Wendy didn't marry you for your poetry."

"You really like him."

"All I said was I don't wanna destroy him -- "

"Yeah, and that's about the nicest thing I've ever heard you say. About anybody. But why would a few months of tutoring and a piece of paper destroy him?"

Cartman shook his head, then closed his eyes when he went sort of dizzy with it. They wouldn't understand this. "It's the first step. It's just the first step."
"You are so fucking arrogant, holy crap," Kyle snorted. "I've known you this long and it still surprises me."

"Wha -- what?" He sputtered. "Fuck you!"

"Dude -- I met that kid maybe ten hours ago, but it's pretty obvious to me that you have no fucking power over him. And you think saving him a few months of shitty public schooling is going to set him on a path to destruction? You're an idiot. I mean you really gotta be an arrogant son of a bitch, to believe you have the power to change someone like that. He's better. I already know he's better than you."

"Throw the last card, will you?" Cartman grit, jerking his head at the field and the betting pool. His new five-minute fuse was running short; it was better to argue with Kyle over the phone, when he could hang up and walk away when he got pissed. If he was honest, Cartman was probably closer to the 'embarrassed' end of the spectrum, at this point. He was a little bit drunk, too, but being drunk with people around to talk to was totally different from being drunk alone and spiraling downward into doubt and hatred; there wasn't anyone around to refute him, when he was alone.

Cartman hadn't drank since the day Kenny smoked him up and he told him all that stupid shit about buildings. And Ike. He didn't think about Ike a lot, anymore. At least, he thought he didn't. But after putting it into words for the first time, Cartman realized he'd never quite stopped thinking about it. When he finally got it out of his system, after all those years brewing it, he was struck by sudden clarity: some important things were gone from his life, and some were just entering it. Wasting time regretting the bygone things only drew color away from the present -- but he was struggling against this new mindset, because something had to be learned; something had to be learned from all that horrible shit, or else it might never have happened. A cold prickle shot up his right wrist. Cartman didn't let things go -- he was pissed off about Ike, and about six million different things, but for the first time, he couldn't find a target for his rage. He blamed the buildings, for Chrissake.

The last card to land in the field was a Jack of Clubs.

"Hell yeah," Cartman said, laying down his five-card straight. "Eat it, Jew."

"Well, this is awkward." Kyle hummed, revealing his hand.

"No," he said, looking back and forth between the cards but still not understanding the result. "I got a pair, too."

"Can't beat a Royal Flush with a straight and a pair, dude," Stan said.

"Motherfucker. It's because you dealt this round, you fucking snatch! Every time you deal, you win -_

"You dealt this round."

Cartman swore and fell back against the couch, rubbed at his eyes. "I'm the most unlucky asshole on the planet. What's your secret, huh? You sacrifice a ram to the damn fertility gods every full moon, or something?"

"Somethin' like that," Kyle shrugged. He did a quick count of the chips, then stood. "They fix the chain on the roof hatch yet?"


Stan jumped up with surprising agility and trotted into the kitchen. "I rolled a blunt, actually!"
"Excellent," Cartman sighed. "I knew I kept you around for a reason."

The roof was a pitch black reflection of the night sky, and Cartman stumbled on its threshold. His ears filled up with the distant clamor of car horns and sirens, all kind of lonely-sounding, since the rush of public activity died in the early morning, leaving only the outlier sounds -- the stuff that didn't belong. As his eyes adjusted, the small concrete rooftop began to ripple and lift out of the blackness, cragged with dark waves of wind-hardened snow and pocked with icy footprints. It wasn't like the night sky at all.

"You already wasted?"

"No," Cartman said, catching himself again. "Just losing my mind, I think."

Stan climbed up on the ledge and sat, kicking his heels against the outer wall. Even as Kyle issued a mild warning and a coalstone of uneasiness stirred in his gut, Cartman still thought it kind of beautiful, the way Marsh just sort of grabbed at life. Not grabbed, seized, seized it by the damn throat and shook it for its spare change. Stan fought a war against a common kind of 21st century cynicism that drew a lot of people into deep holes similar to Cartman's: everything was shit; the political atmosphere, the music scene, the public toilets, the vision of the future -- everything was sort of painfully obviously fucked up. Stan was smart enough to see it; and Stan was brilliant enough to brush it off and collect the shit he liked, carry it in his pockets through the wasteland; he spent his college years making a horde of nobody-friends and throwing massive parties, and he nabbed a Bio degree with a 2.9 GPA that his mother reminded him about constantly; he threw his finger up and took a job that was just something he sort of liked to do and required only minimal contact with shit; he held his childhood best friend close, and married the bitch he'd been in love with his whole life, Wendy. They'd walked through the Cloud Forests of Puerto Rico, rode through Dublin's most haunted cathedrals, crawled up Arizona's Devil's Steps in little dune-buggies. And sure, the rainforests were almost depleted, and all the historic sites smelled like piss and had little 'fuck you' carved into the stone, and the rocks in Arizona were two-hundred bucks -- but Cartman still thought it sounded pretty sweet. He admired Stan, sort of. He just needed that asshat Kyle, but he admired Stan.

"What flavor is this?"

"I don't know," Stan shrugged. "It said 'Purple Dragon' on the package. And I thought, what could go wrong?"

"I liked White Grape better," Kyle said.

Kyle's eyebrows quirked over the blunt as he took a few puffs -- what a fiend. Kyle was a fiend for doping. Six years of higher education will do that to you. And he was working for some fossil with muscular dystrophy -- esquire -- in uptown North Park; when he wasn't watering plants and shredding old case files from the '80s, he was stuck with a phone glued to his ear, pandering with insurance companies like Allstate and Geico and trying to dig around in clients' records. He said the hospitals were the worst, though; they put him on hold listening to music straight from the Macy's holiday soundtrack, and transferred him to a different hospital's patient records department, and then he had to start the whole loop over again. Cartman joked about being plugged into the machine, a lot, but Kyle was actually dragging the damn wires around.

"So I just got this idea," Stan said. "We should try a start-up company again. A little gym, or something -- like, you can teach kickboxing and do your law junk when we need it, and Cartman handles the business-y things -- "

"We should run a Fight Club in the inner-city." Cartman said, leaning over the wall to blow smoke at
the streetlights.

"Fight Clubs don't make money, though. They just build cult followings and make soap bombs."

He chuckled around his second hit, glanced at the dark silhouette bumping its legs over the concrete ledge. "Can I be Brad Pitt?"

Stan's quick snort yielded to unrestrained laughter.

"But you were so good at Jennifer Lopez." Kyle said, leaning back against the wall on his best friend's opposite side.

"Hey, did you really give Ben Affleck a handjob?"

"No -- " he said, stuffing his hand into his armpit, in part to ward off the cold. "Mitch Conner did."

"Right, Mitch Conner -- the conman who possessed your hand."

"You've got so many problems, fat-ass -- you could get a dozen separate prescriptions for medical marijuana, one for each complex," Kyle was kind of slurring, but his brain still mostly had its shit together.

"That's it," Stan said suddenly, waving his arms with half a cigar still burning between the fingers of his left hand. "We should run a marijuana operation. Like a little joint up in Fort Collins, or something, so it's not so packed with tourists as Denver."

He took his second hit, and looked like he wanted to go on with the idea, but paused to look from side to side. "What? What's the problem this time?"

Cartman took a deep breath, bit down on the chill of deep winter. Kyle exhaled through his nose.

"I -- " Eric began, then double-checked his calculations. "I don't see anything wrong with that, actually, right now."

"Me neither." Kyle hummed.

Stan passed off the blunt and leaned back on his hands. "Not bad, Stanley," he congratulated himself. "Not fuckin' bad."

"What's it take to get a prescription these days, anyway?"

"Not much," he said. "Kyle's probably right -- you could get a script just for your insomnia."

Cartman rolled his eyes, leaned over his arms to glare at the street. "Man, Wendy sure runs her fucking mouth. You got an ear in on her case files and my sleeping problems? For Christ's sake, is anything private?"

"You think I want you having private words with my wife?" Stan snorted.

"Doesn't exactly take a spyglass to see your problems, anyway," Kyle added. "The insomnia's written all over your face. And I haven't seen your apartment so clean since you moved in."

"What does that have to do with anything -- "

"You're a neurotic cleaner, dude. You get stressed and you clean. It's a fucking riot."
"Screw you guys. Sorry I don't treat stress with alcohol and cough syrup like you and bitch-face --"

"No," Stan drawled. "You just stop taking care of yourself and start obsessively cleaning -- besides, I'm totally over that. And so is Kyle."

"Whatever. Get off me, huh? Get off me, both of you."

"Just get a damn prescription, Cartman," Kyle said. "That's my advice. And keep that kid around -- I think he's good for you."

He barked a laugh. "You were just accusing me of taking advantage of him, and now you want me to put him on a damn leash -- make up your fucking mind, will you?"

"I don't think he's the one on the leash --" Stan started.

"Yeah, you know what? I've changed my mind," Kyle said, tapping a thick tower of ash over the ledge. "He kind of reminds me of us. Like, a long time ago. All I'm saying is, you shouldn't push him away just 'cause --"

"Because I'm a cop?" He suggested, through gritted teeth. "Because he's a fuckin' child?"

"Cartman, I'm only going to say this once," Kyle said, suddenly quiet. "Forget Ike."

The glowing end of the blunt flared briefly as he took another hit. It was a yellow-orange hole in the thick blanket night, like a small captive comet. Cartman took a silent, shuddering breath.

"I didn't know what happened to you, honestly," he continued. "I really didn't get it. I knew you guys hung out, a bit, but I never suspected that -- that you ever thought much of him. You never think much of anybody. And I think -- I think I blamed you for a little while, for getting him into all your backwards disestablishment bullshit, and your fucking drug trade... But what happened wasn't anybody's fault. I think it did something to you, man -- and if you keep carrying it around with you, if you keep sticking your head in that hole and looking for a way to make it right, you'll forget what right things even feel like. God knows I did, for a long time."

Cartman felt the weight of Stan's hand on the back of his neck. A habit he picked up from Wendy, maybe. He wanted to shrug it off but he was too busy fighting down the pressure building in his sinuses, humming behind his eyes like a damn electric blanket -- he always got so damned emotional when he was faded, he really hated it.

"I saw it." He said, finally, measuring his words out slowly to avoid any unwelcome, embarrassing stutters. "I never told anyone, but I saw it happen. I didn't even have to be in Jeff County that day. I didn't have to follow the idiot on call, out to that fucking school. I could've gone to the goddamn Olive Garden to talk to someone else; I could've sat at my fucking desk at the station and read the newspaper instead, for Chrissake. But it was like some shitty trap, like fate giving me the finger."


Cartman didn't speak again, afraid what his voice would sound like. Kyle moved around Stan and leaned over the wall on his other side. They didn't say anything for a while.

"It just pisses me off, you know?" He said finally, sort of shouting at the streets below. "It just pisses me off."

"Me too," Kyle muttered.
Cartman thought of the chicken, suddenly. He thought of slicing that chicken's head off and watching the severed head squawking on the ground -- he remembered how the knife had caught, a little bit, on the spinal chord. He wanted to puke. He'd always thought there ought to be some kind of punishment, for shit like that -- was the price of senseless murder only more senseless murder? Would his life become a series of punishing twists of fate, to pay for all his mistakes?

"I love you guys," Stan said abruptly. "I mean, look how far we've come."

Cartman snorted a sort of wet, hiccuping laugh. What a stupid thing to say.


"Shit, yeah -- I got the munchies. Let's get waffles."

Cartman crushed the sizzling roach into the concrete, took another deep breath, and felt the night air rush through him. Empty. "I'll get Kenny."

"You could just let him sleep, bro."

"Nah, you don't know this kid," he said. "He will lose his fucking mind over waffles."
Kenny was dreaming.

He was at school -- the fourth floor science wing. He might've been annoyed at his dream consciousness for bringing him to school when he spent every waking hour avoiding it, but instead he felt a base flicker of amusement: the place was abandoned. It was a dark gray hive of empty rooms and trashed corridors, like the beginning of some apocalyptic survivor movie.

He walked into his old Biology classroom -- he'd never seen it with less than fifty students inside, plus two or three propped on chairs outside the door -- he was surprised he could even conjure an image of the room with empty seats. Plus a tree; there was a massive gnarly tree trunk punching up through the floor, its twisted branches thick and thin and pushing through the open windows on the far wall. Its leaves tittered gently in a breeze that didn't quite reach Kenny.

When his sleep was disturbed, the whole school seemed to rattle with it. The floor tilted and Kenny fell forward into the tree's twisted bark -- he opened his eyes to find himself in bed, and a faceless shadow hovering over him. After blinking away some of the sleep-cotton lingering over his eyes, Kenny distinguished the familiar shape of his truancy officer, but he lifted his hands anyway, just to make sure. Close -- he was real close. Was he still dreaming?

"You smell like dope," he murmured.

"Not dope," said his truancy officer. "Purple dragon -- I'm a purple dragon."

"You're toasted," Kenny accused, squinting in the dark to try and make out a face. "You guys smoked without me."

"You passed out -- almost three hours ago."

His hands sunk into the mattress on either side of him -- Kenny shifted onto his back, bit his tongue. Cartman was big. It kind of thrilled him, his size -- he wanted to feel it above him; he wanted to feel it below. He wanted his damn shirt off, for once. Kenny was wide awake in the space of three seconds -- his strange apocalyptic tree dream drained down into his hindbrain with a hiccup and a gurgle -- and before a minute passed, he was sort of horny.

"How'm I s'posed to keep my eyes open with three drunk guys playing bridge, huh? And then you started talkin' about mortgages -- it was like listening to white noise in an airport."

"First of all," he said, and Kenny felt the rasp of his eyebrow against his jaw as his head dipped down. "You mean poker, dipshit. I lost about a month's food budget to that weasel Jew. And you weren't any fucking help -- "

Kenny rolled his eyes. "And secondly?" He prompted.

"...I forget what I was gonna say second. But -- " he took a quick breath and this time his brow connected with Kenny's. "It was scathing, probably."

"Why do you do this?" He snapped. "You get up to me but you barely ever kiss me, man. Stop dicking around."
His knees were shoved apart as his truancy officer lifted himself fully over the bed and the weight of one leg landed between Kenny's. "You know why people kiss? And pretty much every other species doesn't?"

Kenny thought about it. He didn't try very hard, though. "I dunno. Too busy sniffing each other's asses, I guess."

He was surprised by the sound of a single laughing snort and a sudden pressure at the corner of his mouth. But he didn't get a second to enjoy it, even, before Eric pulled away -- he tilted his jaw, questing for contact in the darkness, but he was already too far. "Exactly. Sniffing asses, pissing up trees all day -- we're all about smell, dude. But since the human sense of smell evolved to be so lousy, we had to come up with an excuse to get close enough to somebody to sniff out their potential."

"Potential."

"Pheromones," he explained. Kenny caught the edge of his shirt, wondered if he could sneak a hand up under without scaring him off. You had to be careful, around people like Cartman. They scare off, they really do. Even the dangerous things that live in caves and beat off to Stephen King can still scare pretty easy. "It's all about pheromones. Dogs piss up trees to map out who's in the neighborhood, and who in the neighborhood's worth fucking. No other creature puts their goddamn mouth on another's -- it's kind of weird, if you think about it; since there's about eighty-million different kinds of bacteria in there on a good day -- except for a couple species of ape. But that's different; bonobos have sex like handshakes."

Whatever about the bonobos, Kenny thought. He was starting to like nothing better than Eric's mouth on his -- especially when the cop was the one to put it there. He smelled a bit of the black lager on him, still, but mostly smoke, night air, and the muffled blanket-smell of cotton. Kenny tried to lean up closer, take a big breath against him, maybe, since they were talking about it. But it was like trying to stick the wrong ends of two magnets together -- the closer he got, the further away he was. Kenny fell back with an angry sigh.

"Why you gotta think about this weird stuff? Everybody kisses, man."

"No. Less than half of all human cultures kiss. Less than half."

"What? No."

"It's pretty particular to us. The West, I mean. But the earliest records of humans kissing are from India, actually. Like, three-thousand years ago. They called it 'inhaling' someone else's soul."

That sounded about right, Kenny thought. He did want to inhale Cartman, sometimes. He wanted to pry open his rib cage, sometimes, and rip out the most important things from his chest cavity. He wanted to sink his teeth into his neck.

Kenny got both hands on his hips, slid them up to the warm skin just under his shirt -- there wasn't any weight on him but Kenny could feel it, feel and smell it above him so clearly, even in the darkness.

"So when you stick your fucking tongue down my throat," he growled into his ear. "You're either trying to smell me or suck out what's left of my soul."

Kenny was so buzzed with hormones his whole body was sort of pained by it. And it got worse with every fucking heartbeat.
"You don't like it? You really don't like kissing?"

"I never said that. I just thought I'd give you an anthropology lesson."

Kenny regained some clarity. He squinted up at where Cartman's eyes were -- he could hardly make them out. "Does that mean -- does that mean you'll do it? You'll get me out of school?"

"I'm thinking about it."

Well, fuck -- that was about as much as Kenny could hope for. He took one hand from under his shirt and brought it up to the back of his neck, toyed with his collar until it slid down just enough.

"What're you -- are you biting me?"

Kenny froze with his teeth hovering at the crook of his neck and shoulder. He'd only just barely -- he didn't know what he'd do, if biting was against the rules --

The pressure between his legs increased as Cartman slid his knee up and shifted close. "Is that all you got?"

He inhaled, closed his hand around his scruff and let his teeth sink down until his nose met flesh. He was rewarded by a low groan from his truancy officer, which was better than anything he'd expected to get out of finally biting the asshole; Mine, Kenny thought savagely. This twisted mess was his.

The hovering shadow seemed to loom closer, heavier, and when Cartman breathed a final, wheezy whimper, Kenny released him. He felt like he'd shaken a rock off his chest -- like a heavy, empty desire had just been filled with the heady weightlessness of satisfaction.

Cartman crashed his mouth over his, open and impolite, then pulled back for a half-breath before doing it again -- it was the filthiest kiss he'd ever received, and Kenny hurried to keep up when Cartman forced entry on him, dodged around the irregular corners of his teeth and drew a long stripe up his tongue; it was violent, it was thrilling, and Kenny didn't question it; he only absently wondered what had opened the damn floodgates. Maybe he liked being bit, Kenny thought, and a shiver wriggled up his spine.

One of Cartman's hands wormed beneath him and pressed up against his lower back until Kenny felt their hips collide. He raked his blunt fingernails up the bare skin of his back -- mostly he just wanted to draw him down; he wanted to feel the weight of him over every inch of his body. Finally, the arm propped by his head fell to the elbow, and Kenny got his wish. And he moaned straight into his fucking mouth -- squirmed up against him like an epileptic eel trapped under bedrock.

"Shit," Eric said suddenly, breaking away with a loud clap of spit and skin. "You're hard."

Kenny struggled to make words for a second, glad for the darkness because his face was burning up past the third-degree and he was about a century past hard -- not from the damn tree dream, either.

His truancy officer rolled off him and stood, clasped his hands behind his neck and turned a circle, as if the motherfucker had just been passing by while Kenny developed an erection.

"What -- what the fuck, man -- " He rasped. "What'd you come in here for?"

"I was -- "

"What the hell'd ya come in here for, anyway?" Yellow Wolf was working up to a rage.
"Hey, keep your voice down. The cunts are still here --"

"No! You think you can wake me up and work me into a fucking hard-on just to peace the hell out? I'm not just some -- some saucy video you can stop and start whenever ya feel like it --"

"Kenny," he warned. And it wouldn't've shut him up, at all, if the shadow hadn't crawled back on the bed at the same time, which helped calm him just slightly. "I didn't mean to -- shut the fuck up, huh?"

Cartman climbed over him and laid out on his back with a sigh. Kenny chased after him, rolling up to his side to press his nose to his neck. He quested for a bit, then pushed a hand up under his shirt.

"Why d'you do this?"

"I was gonna ask if you wanted to come get waffles with us, actually."

Kenny traced the ring of hair around his belly button, managed to process the words after a few spacey breaths. "Waffles?"

"Mm."

"I'm pretty pissed. I'm pretty mad at you."

"No, you're not. You like me. Stan says you like me."

"I can still be mad at you -- like, what the hell am I s'posed to do now? Rub one out?"

"I don't know. Just will it down, man. Think of something really gross, or scary."

Kenny huffed, pushed his hand over to the opposite hip and pinched at Eric's side. "I can't think of anything."

"Think of Wendy's sea-monkey. Like, shrieking and slapping blood everywhere. That always wigs me out."

"That's because pregnant people wig you out, man."

"Maybe stop touching me, then? That could help."

He was probably right. Kenny started to withdraw, but got distracted where the edge of his boxers came over the band of his sweats. He wanted the cop more than waffles, he realized.

"More than waffles?"

Kenny uttered a groan and forced himself to roll over onto his other side and put his back to him. "Why don't you go distract them, or something? It's not gonna go away; I needa beat off."

When no response came, he glanced over his shoulder. Cartman was chewing at his lip, but he couldn't exactly make out the officer's expression in the dim light. It was like a scene from Blade Runner, all dark and kind of avant-garde. There weren't a ton of sexy scenes in Blade Runner -- being apocalyptic sci-fi and all -- but if there were, his truancy officer would fit right in, biting his damn lip with a little street-lampy glow coming in through the shades behind him. Kenny shrugged, pulled at the button on his jeans and pushed a hand into his shorts, grit his teeth at the uncomfortable tension. He was about to make an unlovely addition of spit to help ease the process along when something small bounced over and settled in front of his face --

"Where'd you get this?" Kenny grunted, snatching at the lubricant and trying to get a read on the
label. "It's so tiny. Like it looks complimentary. Where d'you get complimentary lube?"

"I'll tell you some other time," he said. Kenny imagined his red eyes rolling. "It smells like honey, though, kinda. Everything in that place smelled like honey."

Kenny worked his jeans open until he was almost comfortable, and snuck a hand down. Then he looked back over his shoulder again. Was he going to stay there? He wondered. Was his idiot T.O. just going to stay there and watch? Maybe he was just too baked to move. Kenny wondered if he could work him up. He keened a low moan as he finally got a hand around his erection -- it was mostly for show, and when he looked back, the cop was still impossible to read.

"What's it taste like?" Kenny asked.

"I dunno," he sighed. "How should I know? I don't know."

Man, what a rambling moron. Kenny was still kind of mad, but he wanted to laugh, too. Instead he started moving his hand -- God, how did he get so hard so fucking quick, it was like he was fourteen again and getting a hard-on from the bus ride to school. But at least having his truancy officer right there like an apocalyptic purple dragon wasn't exactly making it harder to jerk off. Well, he was making it harder. That was the point.

The sound of shouting and a burst of laughter came from the living room -- Kenny recognized the Soul Calibur opening theme. He looked over his shoulder again.

"They're really faded," Cartman muttered. "Okay. Fuck. I should -- I should go."

Kenny issued his complaint in the form of a scornful laugh, and turned back to his task. He wasn't surprised, really. Cartman probably had to repeat no homo to himself every time they made out. What an idiot.

He almost complained again when the bed dipped and Kenny would've tipped over onto his back if not for the surprise addition of the biggest spoon he'd ever spooned against. Cartman's mouth hit the back of his neck. Alright, Kenny thought. That was alright. He dropped his shoulder to give him more space to work with, and sped up his movements. Teeth clipped a path up the skin to his ear in a series of tiny bites. He'd never had so much going on when he'd jerked off, before.

"Can I?" There was a hand creeping over his hip. Kenny was too close to stop, or hear, really. "Can I --"

He groaned more exasperated than angry when his hand was shoved away by the wrist, but then the heavier hotter reality of his truancy officer's hand wrapping around his dick brought Kenny's thoughts to a grinding halt. It was pretty weird, having someone else's hand down there, especially since this one seemed to kind of know what it was doing. "Eric," he hissed.

"Yeah?" He said, the bastard. "Are you close, or what?"

Kenny's legs were shaking, kind of.

"It was a holiday resort in Cancun," Eric said, his hand moving achingly slow. Kenny struggled to figure out what the hell he was talking about, even. "It was called El Panal or something, I don't remember. Everything was bee-related; the maids wore black and yellow, the complimentary breakfasts always had seventeen different kinds of honey -- and the shampoos and shit were all scented."

"I took Heidi," he added.
"Uh?" Kenny's mouth was faster than his thoughts. "To -- Cancun?"

"I dunno. I thought maybe if I lined up all the pieces right, then I could make something work, for once. But even if all the pieces fit together right -- the time, the place, the scented shit, heck, even the girl -- that doesn't mean the picture on the puzzle will make any damn sense."

"Would you -- speed up?" Kenny said, straining.

His hand sped up and assumed a sort of tear-jerking rhythm, and meanwhile Kenny felt the other arm dig around underneath him, then wrap up around his belly until they were more like one spoon, one body -- no yous or mes, just a we. Kenny's eyes slipped closed.

"Quiet, huh?" Cartman grunted.

He couldn't help it, really. He'd never felt so close to somebody in his whole life, and they weren't having sex, even. Kenny took a whimpering breath and focused on the feeling of Eric's exhales over his neck. Stan and Kyle were probably on the same match when he felt the fever of an approaching orgasm.

"Fuck," he swore. "Fuckin' -- bitch-tits -- "

Cartman chuckled right against his skin and his hand stroked up from base to tip with a rough pull of foreskin that tipped Kenny over the edge. He turned his face into the pillows as the orgasm rattled through him -- luckily he was all out of wind and couldn't make a sound if he'd tried. And even though he couldn't see a single thing, Kenny felt like he didn't need to, exactly; he had a perfect map in his head from the smell of them, together -- the sweat drying on his neck and shoulders, the purple dragon breath over his ear, the bee-honey shit all over his crotch -- not to mention the pressure map of another body all up along his back.

He was so loose afterwards he didn't feel like a solid thing, anymore, and when Eric finally moved to climb back over him, Kenny just sunk down to his back until he felt like he'd drip through the sheets to the floor.

Cartman lashed out at the nightstand until the lamp flickered on, then settled into a kneeling position at Kenny's side.

"You're so fuckin' high -- " Kenny sputtered, as soon as the orange glow lit the side of his face. "God, your eyes are so crazy, man."

"First of all," he said, two blazed-pink eyes narrowing on him, slow and watery. "My eyes are brown, so, pretty fucking normal. And I didn't even smoke that much. And you really need to quit fuckin' yelling."

They were red, Kenny swore. There was just no other way to describe them. They were double-shaded, even; the one closest to the lamp had turned a sort of copper like Stan's pictures of the canyons, and the other was shadowed like a deep puncture wound, or a bullet hole. Like his soul was all split up the middle.

"So what? We'll just tell them -- we had a rousing game of Monopoly in here, or something."

His eyes narrowed and loomed closer, until Kenny could see the little glare of amusement at the corners. "Monopoly usually lasts longer than two minutes."

"Fuck you! I was -- you caught me by surprise. And I did most of the work, already -- "
"Mhm," he hummed, and reached out. Kenny thought he was going for his dick, again, but instead he dragged the pad of his thumb through the pubes around the base. Kenny grit his teeth against the sharp tugging sensation in the already over-sensitive area. "Yellow Wolf," he chuckled, like he was reading the title off a strange book, or just realizing who's dick he was staring at.

"Yeah? What?" Kenny demanded, and shifted his hips as the cool air started to get at his exposed cock. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Four? Maybe. I dunno."

"What do you know, Officer Scared-Straight?"

Cartman rolled his eyes. "That you're a pain in my ass," he muttered.

Kenny tried curling his back in what he thought was an inviting way. "Not yet."

He laughed -- Kenny liked how much he laughed, when he was high -- then leaned back over him and struck out with his open mouth, inhaling deeply through his nose like he wasn't done with him yet. Kenny's heart ricocheted in its chamber and he drew his hands up the cop's neck, tangled his fingers in his hair. He had a hunch building but it wasn't clear until Cartman dipped his head and went to work on his neck.

"You want me." Kenny accused.

Cartman's head shot up and he swore like he'd overslept on a Monday. "What am I doing?" He murmured, leaned away, and reached over to the nightstand to rustle around some more. He drew back with a handful of tissues.

"Here," he said, dropping a few sheets on him while he worked another over his fingers. Kenny wondered what they tasted like, his fingers -- then banished the thought, forced himself to sit up and wipe at the excess lube and cum. He could smell himself for miles.

Kenny was just zipping up his jeans when he remembered the waffles. "Yo, waffles would be killer, right now."

"This was -- kind of counterproductive," his truancy officer murmured, pulling at his sweats.

"You got a boner," Kenny laughed. "Oh man, this is hilarious. What're you gonna do? What d'you want me t'do?"

"Nothing." He snapped. "Don't fuckin' touch me. I just need a minute. I could kill a boner in a damn strip club."

"A minute, huh?" Kenny said. "Bet I could get you off in two."

"No, Kenny."

He frowned. "Fine. After waffles, though? They're not comin' back with us, are they?"

"No."

"Man, you're negative. I mean you're really a negative guy. What's the problem? I bet that stuff tastes like honey, too."

"Stop. Stop for a second, huh?" Cartman shut his eyes tight, like he was trying to remember the right spell for willing down a damn boner. Old people.
"Whatcha thinkin' about, anyway?"

"Kyle's mom. Kyle's mom doing piss porn." He took another deep breath. "Okay, let's go. You ready?"

Kenny nodded. "Where're we going, anyway? I didn't know there were waffle joints around here."

"The Arrow. Only 24-hour diner in walking distance." His eyes opened. "They have peanut butter chips, dude. You can put peanut butter and chocolate chips on your waffles."

"Whoa -- this is the best day of my life."

"That's all it takes, huh?" He said, with a sort of sad half-smile.

"I mean, yeah. You don't gotta go to Cancun or the goddamn rainforest just to cram all those puzzle pieces together and try to make happiness, bro. You just gotta be with the right people."

"Man, you really listen to the junk I say. I can't believe you listen to all that."

Kenny sat up on his knees and shuffled close until he could prop his hands against his neck. He pulled at the collar of his shirt to look at the ring of bite marks settling into his skin. "Remember when you said you'd dump my body in the river, and finish out the lease on your apartment?"

"I still would, too, if I didn't think you'd haunt me, afterward. File a bunch of your phony sexual harassment claims until I jump in the damn river myself."

"Well, that's kind of romantic, anyway."

Kenny pressed his cheek to Cartman's to enjoy the sound of his laughter, and he thought of inhaling his soul -- just for safekeeping.

Chapter End Notes

going home wednesday. it's been a long year.
the train job

Chapter Notes

annnnd we're back

(photo i took of the rockies when i was in CO this summer -- sorry guys. barely any
time for painting, what with finals and everything.)

When Cartman got up for work the evening of Wednesday, January 19, it was with a bit of a buzz at
the back of his throat, and the shadow of an incurable loneliness on his heels.

He knew it was, in fact, January 19, because two and a half months ago his ass that next door
neighbor signed up for the Astronomy! newsletter -- for a horoscope, Cartman presumed, to deal with
the deep-seated issues behind Sandi's past three loud and violent breakups -- but the brainless,
symbiotic slime in Accounts Receivable misrepresented the 9 in 609 West Ring as a 6, and thereafter
Cartman was the one picking the magazine subscription off his doorstep every month for updates on
the damn planetary movements.

He didn’t care if the Andromeda galaxy was on a collision course with the Milky Way and set to
swallow everything up in a few millennia. And he’d need two horses to give two shits about how
bright Mars was tonight. But after banging on that fucking Russian’s door two separate times, and
calling up the number on the back of his Astronomy! issues, Cartman had finally decided -- as he
always did -- to give up. As usual, the effort required to spooge all the shit out of his life, off his
windows and away from his doorstep, was too daunting, and he quit. Instead, he took it all in, even if
it wasn’t his. He took in all the commercial bullshit until his apartment reeked with it, until he could
no sooner enjoy a cup of coffee in his own kitchen than brush his teeth and take a shit without
coming eye-to-eye with some remnant of advertising. It was everywhere he looked, a whole heaping
ton of the same flashy color-coded logos -- logos like subliminal mind control, like he was walking
through a film of his own life and wanting out. Online shopping magnates and department store
empires were winking in the margins of his eyeballs -- unwanted magazine subscriptions, savers
coupons and newspaper ads laying on the floor of his womb. Even the bananas had little logos on
them, for Christ’s sake. What was next? Logos on your hands and feet, telling you who to be and
what to do? Logos on your emotions, and your eyelids -- telling you how to look and what to see.

Cartman didn’t even mind astronomy that much, once he realized it was totally different from
astrology, which was the chick shit he was thinking about. Horoscopes, good luck charms, and
advice columns and shit. But astronomy was pretty dope.

He was reading about the Oort cloud the other day. It was a reservoir for comets -- rock, ice, and
space garbage -- in the form of a thick blanket cloud, warped into an egg shape around the solar
system. Shooting stars came from the Oort cloud, which was why they slingshot through the skies at
odd angles.

Before the Oort cloud, Eric had barely thought of space. Not as anything more than far-off stipplings
of light stuck to galactic wallpaper, anyway. If he ever felt like looking millions of years into the past,
all he had to do was open up his MySpace page -- he didn't need space. But the Oort cloud added
terrible dimension to his reality, and he felt cold with it. Thrilled -- but cold.
Cartman hated *Astronomy!* with the fiery intensity of the Westerlund star cluster because it always shouted at him. Like, for a science mag it sure was demanding, always turning up on his doorstep with a big damn exclamation point on its face. It pissed him off. Eric could hardly take himself seriously enough for periods and capital letters in his reports, let alone self-aggrandizing punctuation like exclamation points, for Chrissake. What was there to yell about, anyway? It wasn’t like the field of astronomy was gonna *take off* anytime in the next decade -- nobody even gave a shit, and just like anything else of real value to humankind, space was rendered immaterial through mismanagement and chronic misallocation of resources. *The Martian* had a bigger budget than the fucking Hubble telescope guys, and Robert Lightfoot sure as fuck didn’t cost as much as Matt Damon.

Cartman knew it was January 19 because Mercury was at its greatest western elongation: 24.1 degrees from the sun as of that morning. And he would sooner show up at Wendy’s baby shower with a fucking edible arrangement than admit that he stood his ass out on the roof at the crack of dawn looking for an extra speck on the horizon.

The sun was easing down to a dark and gloomy winter’s evening when he clocked into the station on January 19, snow on the back of his neck, lonely as heck and hating himself for it. Cartman was an adult, goddammit -- he knew how to handle himself in the middle of a work week without hoes and drink. Not a lot of drink, anyway, he thought, with that buzz in the back of his throat. Besides, he didn’t have any reason to be frustrated. Not really. Not besides the usual ones.

Kenny’s absence didn’t bother him at all -- Cartman was a loner by nature, so it wasn’t like fourteen whole days plus a weekend of quiet had set his teeth on edge or anything. His bed was barely slept in because things had picked up at work, recently, not because he kept jumping at the phantom sound of beeping from his radio monitor, but each time he checked it the thing was dim and silent. It was like living holed up in a zombie apocalypse, waiting for a radio signal from other human life, and willing to believe you heard something even if you didn’t, because the alternative was just too fucking bleak. Eventually Cartman forced himself to stop thinking about it and simply enjoy the peace while it lasted. It wasn’t his problem if the truant monitor was quiet for once; either the little punk was a Perfect Attendance Patsy lately, or else he’d paid somebody to sign him into class and figured out some way to beat the bug on his anklet. Probably the latter -- he was smart enough for that --

Eric checked himself. *Not smart,* he corrected. Because a *smart* kid would just fucking go to high school and fucking graduate instead of running up a juvenile criminal record. Was Yellow Wolf capable of tricking the anklet? *Sure,* the kid was a damn coyote -- at least, so the name suggested -- and no leash could hold him, but he wasn’t *smart.*

So Cartman stamped the frost from his shoes, shrugged the Oort cloud like a cold cloak around his shoulders, and entered the Sheriff’s Department determined to go about his business. He found the office in a state of late-afternoon panic.

Usually the dark amber 3s, 4s, and 5s of the afternoon were spent fiddling with pencils and planning dinner over forgotten case files, but a sudden influx of phone calls from concerned citizens had thrown the lethargic office escape into mild chaos. His colleagues’ alarmed muttering and paper shuffling filled the air like the soft flutter and coo of a flock of busy pigeons. They flew into a flurry over the periodic, sharp ringing of a phone, but then settled back down into flustered paper-shuffling. The copier could be heard beep-clunking and flashing over a hot stack of A4, and the air smelled overwhelmingly of stale coffee breath and sly office farts.

Cartman, at the time intent on ignoring the cause of the panic, had swung along the path of least communication though the main office, finally dodging into the staff room like a comet on an abnormal orbit. He hadn’t been able to make anything but warm-water grinds at home, so he
depended on being able to come into work for a hot cup of motor oil, sometimes cut with Stotch’s ridiculous fuckin’ GMO-free soy milk in the fridge. But that particular Wednesday, the staff room coffee pot was used, bruised, and totally barren. The sound of the Oort cloud rushed in his eardrums, a cold blanket like a humming ocean between him and life’s sort of superficial injustices.

In his blind haste to steam and shout, Cartman prowled out of the staff room, zeroed in on the first annoyance, and seized it -- almost yanking one of the ringing phones out of the wall of Clyde’s empty cubicle.

“Sheriff’s Department.”

“Yes -- hello? I’m calling to report a -- a theft.”

He sighed and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “Where? Can you give me a description of who did it?”

“It’s been happening all day, you know. My boss, her son -- he’s three years old, he’ll be four next month -- he took Cosco out this morning, for a walk, and later he told me -- “

“Costco.”

“Yes, sir, that’s my boss’s dog, she -- “

“Named the dog… Costco.”

“Uh, uh-huh. I mean, yes, sir, she did.”

“Can you describe the thief?” He asked again, slowly.

“Well, when Jody took the dog out earlier, see, he said when he was comin’ around the Loop, the -- you know, the south central loop by the old quarry? It’s right around those train tracks -- “

“I know where it is, lady, I live here,” Cartman grit. “Look, why don’t we start simpler. What was stolen from you?”

“Oh, well, y’see, that’s the thing -- ” said the woman on the phone, in a conspiratorial tone like she was about to tell him Queen Elizabeth was real, and human just like them. “I was just walkin’ Daisy like always when she stops on the tressle bridge, the one by the park just a little ways from the quarry, and I was thinkin’ about what Jody had said and how strange -- “

“Either tell me what they stole or get off the fucking line -- this isn’t a talk show. You’re not gonna win any prizes for being on the smelliest rag.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Well ain’t the sunshine just shooting outa your ass, today -- “

“No,” Cartman confirmed. “It’s not. I don’t serve sympathy, lady, I serve justice. Now stop painting your nails, and get to the point. I promise it's not as special as you think it is.”

“Dog shit.”

“You... what?”

“He stole my dog’s shit, Officer,” the woman said haughtily. “Jumped up on me outa nowhere and grabbed at Daisy’s little load from the sidewalk like a diamond from the mud, I swear it.”

Cartman pulled the receiver away from his ear and passed it off to Clyde, who’d just returned to his
desk from a rather long sabbatical in the restroom, and an even longer period spent posturing over by Officer Dunham’s cubicle.

“Another dump call?”

Cartman stared at him, nonplussed.

“We’ve been getting them all week,” Donovan explained, taking the phone with a grimace and putting the caller on hold. “We thought it was a crank, at first -- but apparently having your dog’s poop stolen out from under you is just disturbing enough to prompt a call to the station. We’ve had to dispatch units to dog parks all over the county. Office has been a madhouse, since, like, 2 o’clock -- “

“And I’m sure you were all getting ready to do nothing, too,” Cartman said with hugely inflated sympathy.

“We thought it was Yellow Wolf, at first,” Clyde went on. “But all the callers have different descriptions -- big, skinny, tall, black-white-brown. But it’s Yeller’s M.O., for sure.”

Cartman scowled down at the flashing lights filling up the phone lines in Clyde's cubicle. He disliked the way the officer said Yeller, even though half the officers in the station had picked up the habit back when the case was active -- but today it seemed like Donovan thought they were familiar, or something -- and he hated him for it; he wanted to laugh in his face for it, because he didn't know shit about Wolf.

You never actually knew what was on a dog’s mind; it could be fighting for you tooth and nail, harder than anyone else in your whole lousy life would fight, and in the next moment abandoning you at the wave of a fat chicken leg. Cartman stared at the flashing red lights so long he felt hypnotized by it. He burned with shame; what a bitch he’d become. He was a huge bitch for this kid.

He spoke in slow, measured clips, trying to avoid any inflection that could be mistaken for passionate or overzealous, and landed exactly north of spitting threat on his four-way communication dial, which, incidentally, also included hugely inflated sympathy, poorly concealed irritation, and a phase his colleagues liked to refer to as rip and tear.

“Exactly what about people getting jumped for their dog shit is Yellow Wolf’s modus operandi?”

“Well, remember when he funneled cow manure into the city dumpsters and all those garbage trucks went up in flames, in the middle of the streets?”

“No, I heard it was garbage bags full of butter,” said Token from where he leaned over the desk across the aisle, stapling a fresh intake memo to a new case file. “Remember -- he had that connect with the line cooks downtown? That’s how he got all those tiny shrimp into the soft drinks last summer.”

Clyde screwed up his face in a schoolboy display of disgust. "That's so nasty. What kind of person does that?"

“First of all,” Cartman said, bringing his hand away from his face to level his stare between the two glorified office pigeons. “It was paint thinner, not butter, and definitely not cow shit -- morons. Secondly, there was never any shrimp -- what the fuck? It was microscopic freshwater jellyfish, and not only were they totally benign, they were the only natural ingredient in those drinks, which made public outcry ironic and sort of funny because we eat carcinogens every day. But that's besides the fact that all of this is uncorroborated evidence; none of it was ever linked back to -- “
“He signed the trucks!” Clyde burst, looking to Token for support.

"He did sign those garbage trucks."

“I still don’t see how that implicates him in the dog shit capers.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Clyde. “Semi-large scale, possibly organized act of random atrocity. Plus shit. Totally his M.O.”

Cartman heaved a sigh through his nose and glanced up at the ceiling for a second -- but it was all splotchy with those coffee-colored water-damage stains like lousy old blood coming through the cracks of his life. “Shit,” he swore. "If we’re just going on those terms, I could’ve brought him in on the release of the last Adam Sandler movie, for Chrissake. Random atrocity, my ass. Are you guys even cops?"

"I think you might be going soft on your truant, Eric," said Token, with a resounding sneer on the tail end.

He snorted. "I don’t care what you fuckers think. That’s not enough to bring someone in. I mean -- are you guys cops, or fucking CNN? Or both?"

“We called the school already, anyway,” said Donovan. “But they couldn’t track him down. Marked down as in attendance -- but not in the building. You don’t find that suspicious?"

“Jesus, Clyde -- is Yeller Wolf not where he’s supposed to be? Does it snow in the winter? Do Jews hoard gold? Do people from Jamaica really have bigger dicks?"

“On the same day as the thefts, though?"

Cartman lifted his hands in an exasperated shrug. "I clocked out of work early to take a shit on the day that Malaysian flight went missing -- what’s your point?"

“We don’t have time for this,” Token said sharply. “The department’s imploding with shit calls, and it’s the best lead we’ve got. Where’s that copy of his file I asked for, Clyde?"

“I’m trying, man,” Clyde said forlornly, shuffling some of the stacks of A4 around on his desk. "I’ve been looking for it all day, but we can’t find that or the damn kid -- even the digital logs of his original arrests are gone, so I had to call the guys at Jeff County just to fax over his state record, but now the copy machine’s broken and won’t stop spitting out copies of the intake notes, so we have 500 pages of civilians describing dog shit, and no file -- “

Cartman left his old classmates in mid-conversation and fled to his tiny corner office before he broke into a fit of hysterical laughter, or something, watching a few shitty phone calls reduce an entire police station to beep-clunking chaos. What a riot.

He couldn’t brew on Yeller for long because he had casework that day -- real, actual, boots-on-the-ground casework, not the paperwork he had to grind out every night -- and if he didn’t get to the train station by five minutes ago, his ass was grass.
He was late. He had to piss, too, but since train station bathrooms are the royal domain of perversion and disease, he decided to hold it rather than risk being shanghaied to Aurora and sold as bear bait. It wasn’t like he couldn’t put up a halfway decent fight, but -- well, he didn’t think he could put up a halfway decent fight. Cartman was always the last -- the very last -- to admit his own foibles and flaws, but even he knew that Wendy was right. He was deteriorating. Besides the fact that he was probably depressed, Cartman had forgotten what it was like to feel either tiredness or wakefulness completely; instead he wavered between them on the threshold of sleep, always hunting for it but never quite bringing it down, throwing rocks at the window of Death. The night shifts were sucking the marrow from his bones and he knew it, he felt it every moment weighing on his eyelids and cracking behind his kneecaps.

Basically, he felt like he was fuckin’ dying and all he’d be leaving behind was a paper trail of receipts and old credit card debt.

In order to avoid a small herd of backpacked high-schoolers and a pair of meatheads wearing Just Do It tees and wristbands, Cartman boarded the train at the sixth railcar.

He had only just managed to dodge around a drooping man in a sharp suit and an escaped librarian with Victorian sensibilities when a flicker of orange caught his eye and Cartman lost his focus on navigating the public glut. An elbow caught him in the ribs, a wayward purse knocked the wind out of him, and he fell out of the stream of traffic into the luggage space by the exit doors on the fourth car.
It was only a trick of the light, anyway. McCormick was elsewhere, off causing chaos with his gang of turd-burgling goons.

On the 5:30 train out of Lexington, a scattering of blue- and white-collar commuters from the southside of North Park and students from the local public schools made up the bulk of the train’s passengers, but nose-picking delinquents and disabled elderly dotted the benches in fidgeting horizontal lines like an interactive diagram on social stratification. He was trapped cramped between a high-frequency trader with his nose in the air and a girl with a lip ring and a suspicious eye.

Cartman grabbed at a hanging handhold just as the train lurched into motion and lumbered away from the riverside train station. They were just passing through a tunnel flecked with rings of light and twisting overlapping washes of graffiti when he suddenly had to cramp closer to the girl to allow an old blind woman to pass -- he hadn’t seen but heard her coming through, singing an old jazz track called Good Morning Heartache in the aching wheeze of a geriatric bridge collapsing. Cartman thought there were certain songs that shouldn’t be sung again if they couldn’t be sung right -- but sometimes it was okay if it was sung wrong. Good morning, heartache, he thought. Here we go again. As the old bag shuffled past, Cartman asked if she might sing Body and Soul. She said she only knew this one, and Ain't Nobody's Business.

Meanwhile the girl caught in the unlucky position at his side chewed at her lip ring and cast her suspicious eye over the sweat-stained armpit in her face, then up at the stress-sweater it belonged to.

“What’s with the wire?”

“I’m a cop.”

Eric lifted his free hand to rub at his eyes, and regretted it instantly; his hand was sweaty, too, and his eyelids were tender as a fat lady’s tits, red and dotted up with inflamed styes around the eyelashes. He’d definitely looked better. The stye sores were a decidedly unlovely consequence of stress, a psychosomatic habit he picked up in college around final exams -- and he’d never really settled down enough after graduation to properly shake it off. The more he thought about it, the more it worried him; Cartman only got styes when everything was about to go to hell in a handbasket, fast.

“You don’t look like a cop,” she said.

“I'm undercover.”

Teenagers. Cartman sighed. He’d rolled out of the station less than an hour ago with a hastily lain wire under his shirt and a microphone taped down at the hem of his shorts, pulled his car into an underground garage, and hustled the seven blocks to riverside on foot. He was late -- and one was not simply late to a goddamned train job.

“I can see your tattoo through your shirt.”

Cartman scanned the railcar over the girl’s head, searching for an opening in the aisle. He needed to get to the head of the train.

“It’s a birthmark.”

“Kinda specific-looking for a birthmark.”

“Pretty perceptive for a girl with one eye. Is the patch for real, or are you just a die-hard fan of Fetty Wap?”

Her lip curls, but it’s nowhere near as disdainful as Kenny’s sneer. “So you’re a professional
As the train squealed into its next station, the passengers began milling; some edged for the doors, others crammed themselves into cracks and crevices in the crowd to avoid the scuffle of departures and arrivals. Cartman planned his escape over their heads.

Just as he was stepping into the slipstream of foot-traffic, he heard the eyepatch girl’s voice -- or maybe he didn’t -- “You ever heard a cloud leopard roar?”

The rush carried him into the next railcar, and the next. He ducked his head and slunk around the dead-eyed, foot-tapping flotsam and jetsam of the commuting hour, careful to keep his right arm and its hastily taped wire pinned against his side. He snagged an abandoned jacket from a chair in the third railcar, and was just shrugging his shoulders into the arms when he made eye contact with a large gentleman blocking the connecting door to the head of the train.

“Out of the way,” Eric sighed. “They’re waiting for me.”

“You’re late,” said the man.

“It was happy hour at the Baron’s. Out of my fuckin’ way.”

“Keep this up, and we’ll run out of uses for you.”

“But we’ll never run out of uses for you, Matty.” He snarled. “Someone around here will always need their balls fondled. Now if we’re done talking about job security, get the fuck away from the door and piss off back to Cuba.”

There was a time a few years ago when Cartman would balk at the thought of ribbing the Schlafes Bruders’ hired guns – even when he was a real member back in college, Cartman had avoided falling before their crosshairs at all costs. It had taken six years to claw his way up the ranks and beat a path through the dog shit of gang life; it hadn’t been quick, it hadn’t been easy -- and he sure as hell didn’t get to his position by flinching away from the barrels of guns. The crosshairs were nothing to him, now; the crosshairs were a fucking hot tub compared to the mad-eyed Bruder chain of command. Even the microphone humming against his skin was more discomfiting than the shadow of a fucking two-ton hired gun. Especially the shadow of Matty “The Mongrel” Alvarez, a former contender at the all-in wrestling club, now the personal right paw of Rainer’s trigger-happy older brother. But Cartman once had the wrestler in tears, nearly, with nothing but a strategically placed flip-comb.

Behind the blocked door, a dog yapped. The arms of Eric’s stolen jacket were just slightly too narrow for his shoulders. The patch on the bicep bore a black and white union flag with the words ‘Special Ops’ underneath.

The Mongrel whispered into his ear as he shouldered past: “Die slow, motherfucker.”

Cartman slid the doors shut behind him.

“Shut that dog up!”

“Stop shouting at her, then!”

Rainer’s trigger-happy older brother was pacing the aisle between benches like the embodiment of an indecisive migraine; he alternatively pulled at his thin black beard and made a show of examining the time on his diamond-face watch just to show off the 40-calibur Beretta twitching in his pale fingers. Brother Fichte -- or ”Big Brother” as he was called -- was the sort of man who seemed unstuck in
time, not only lost between the ambiguous boundaries of 30 and 40 years of age, but also lost as a nervous, goal-directed individual in a scary, goalless world.

“Where’ve you been?” He barked, as soon as Cartman entered the car.

The woman with the yapping dog turned in her seat to settle one dark eye on him. She smiled coy and knowing, as if she were expecting a feast. *Women.* Across from her, a grinning smear of dirt assumed the shape of a familiar face; Cartman's old associate Tomcat had been part of the *Bruder* operation for fifteen years, almost -- since before he dropped out of high school and before the operation even had a name -- he'd been making drug deals on his fucking bicycle since before Cartman left elementary.

“Drinkin’ hisself to death, no doubt,” grinned Tomcat.

“There’s no *time* for that.” Brother snapped. “We’ve got a situation, here.”

Cartman settled in the aisle seat and took Tomcat’s offered hand in greeting, a folding of forefingers like a chain-link followed by a brief connection of thumbs.

He settled back against the bench, ignored Rainer’s brother, and side-eyed the woman beside him.

“Hey Lo,” he murmured. “Who’s the new bitch.”

Lola -- sometimes fondly called ‘Loco’ by *Bruders* unafraid of having their teeth knocked out -- was the very first female member of the gang. Cartman believed that was introduction enough.

“*Don’t* call her that,” she insisted, pushing her acrylic-tipped fingers through the small creature’s white fur and shrugging it tighter into the curl of her arm. “It’s degrading. Her name is Boo Boo.”

He snorted.

“You were supposed to be here at half past.”

Cartman turned his eyes on the slim dark figure of Brother. “*No,* I was supposed to *board* the damn train at half past. I got held up behind a troupe of singing blind people.”

“Yeah, right.”

The *Bruders* were famously well-organized, owing mostly to their elusive leader’s stringent attention to detail. Rainer rarely let his older brother call the shots; compared to the boss, Big Brother was at best hot-headed, at worst a bloodthirsty coward -- more likely to bust caps for his fix of crystal than to execute a flawless plan. Few believed the two were even related by blood. It was rumored that, Rainer did have a biological older brother, at one point, but he was the victim of fetal absorption. Cartman didn’t challenge the gossip because Rainer was exactly the kind of demented, Machiavellian *day-man* who would consume his sibling in utero.

Blood-related or not, Big Brother was under a lot of pressure on the evening of January 19. The boss didn’t always trust him with solo assignments, but it was the height of the season and Rainer was pushing territory -- and in order to gain ground *quick,* he had to be in several places at once.

“What’s the problem?” Cartman asked. “It’s just a drop. Did you make contact?”

Tomcat started laughing.

“Yes.” said Big Brother.
“And?” Cartman pressed, eyeing the cackling trailer trash across from him.

“No deal,” said Tomcat. “Brother tried to hob-knob a discount.”

“You what?” He hissed.

“So what? Those fuckin’ narcs’re always...” Big Brother turned his gaunt, hollowed eyes on Cartman and wiggled the gun at him like a Church woman waving a fork because she was too polite to talk with her mouth full. He seemed to hesitate, then brushed the small finger of his spare hand against the twisted end of his mustache. “Always shorting us product. Why shouldn’t we short them cash?”

“Because you don’t make the deals around here!”

“Neither do you -- “

“No, but Rainer sent all three of us down here to fucking babysit your dumb ass, so safe to say you’re not the one calling the shots -- “

The barrel of the Beretta suddenly jabbed at Cartman’s chest as Brother leered down at him. “You wanna dance, fat boy?”

Eric felt his lip curl. He pushed away the gun. “Maybe later. Why don’t you tell me what the fucking situation is, so we make it out of here alive, first?”

“They’re holed up on the supply tail,” said Tomcat. “Brother sent the new kid back with the message. That was back in Waterloo.”

Waterloo was six stops in the past. Had to be 35 minutes ago. Cartman’s stomach turned and he looked away from the Bruders, toward the blacked out windows to avoid addressing the pit gaping in his chest -- his eyes caught on a smatter of graffiti across the aisle, just visible behind the swaying handholds and tasteless expletives. Smells like... read a familiar, angular scrawl. Beneath the words a painting of a city skyline burned in orange-yellow flames. Something’s burning.

“You look sick,” Lola said into his ear, her black eyes carving holes up the side of his head.

“Great, thanks -- “ Cartman stuttered, trying to process the magnitude of the fuck-up Big Brother had made, while also fighting the strange dualism inside him that was caught up in the traces of Yellow Wolf around him. He couldn’t shake the feeling he was missing something obvious. “You the new healthcare policy Rainer was telling me about?”

“Here -- “

With some difficulty, Eric refocused his eyes on something long and thin being waved under his nose, and took the object just to keep his vision from blurring any more.

“What is this.”

“Jerky!” chirped Tomcat, with his wide, buttonholed grin. “Y’look about ‘alfway across the River Jordan.”

Cartman’s stomach turned over again at the horrible tailor ham smell rising from the meat wand. It smelled like New Jersey on a hot day. He hadn’t had anything to eat, though, since some buffoon at the Cheeba Hut put raw motherfucking onions on his sandwich that afternoon. Now, Eric could take a lot of bullshit, but he drew the line at raw onions all up in his sub. Throwing it out was a mercy-
“More than halfway, ‘cat,’” he admitted, and leveraged the dried meat against his back molars to tear off a strip. The flavor burned.

Tomcat offered up another stick of jerky, but Boo Boo growled at it and Lola shook her head in a small cascade of braids. “I’m on the no-murder diet. I don’t eat anything that’s been killed.”

“That’s so stupid,” Brother muttered, still pacing up and down the railcar, gun tapping the outside of his leg. “You just ate an apple. Somebody picked it off a tree -- so it was murdered.”

She lifted one eyebrow but didn’t look very interested in what Rainer’s brother had to say. It was the sort of expression you’d wear listening to rain patter against a window. “That apple fell from the tree. So it wasn’t murdered.”

“None of the above,” Cartman considered. “The reason plants produce fruit is to entice animals to eat it and shit out the seeds someplace else. It’s plant progenesis. It’s evolution -- that apple committed suicide.”

“It’s not the same,” She responded curtly. “It’s not like the chickens and cows you people slaughter every minute in excess, just for a lap at luxury.”

“I think the phrase is: ‘lap of luxury’,” Tomcat said.

“Don’t correct me.”

It would be hilarious, really, if Cartman hadn’t personally witnessed Lola and her long acrylic nails beating a man into the sidewalk for holding a door open for her. She had eyelashes like long elegant venus flytraps, and credit cards that unfolded into pocket knives. When a phone rang, or a gun fired, she was the sort of woman who didn’t drop a damn thing to go look. Lola was ten times the savage Brother was. There was a rumor she’d drowned a boy when she was nine -- and she was on the no-murder diet.

“So let me get this straight,” Cartman spoke in Brother's direction, trying to resist the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You sent a thirteen-year-old into that shark tank, to negotiate your idiot, non-sanctioned discount?”

“He won’t come back alive,” he added. Brother looked scornful. “You’re not usually the bleeding heart of this parade.”

Tomcat’s throaty chuckle cut off Cartman’s retort. “Not ‘is heart that’s bleedin’. More likely his liver.”

“Alright, we get it,” Cartman flipped a hand. "Fuck off."

Tomcat grinned his cracked gray and white grin and rocked in his seat, clutching at one filthy mule boot. “Everybody’s got a breaking point, ’buck. Maybe today’s your day.”

“Oh, for fuck’s -- will you all relax?” Brother growled, without a trace of irony, still pacing back and forth like a mangy lion in a cage. “Shooting the messenger is just an expression. I’d be more worried about Billy-goat’s trigger finger. Kid’s a -- jittering, psychopath.”

“Great,” Cartman said. “So he gets himself arrested instead -- how does another witness with a life-sentence help us?”
“Are you stupid, or something? Everybody knows minors get reduced sentences. He’d do ten years, at most.”

“That’s horse shit.”

“What’s your problem?”

“He’s right,” Lola said, examining one pink thumbnail, pinker than the harness holding Boo Boo hostage. “It’s just like my little brother. Remember? Cashed him a year back after that drive-by in Denver -- all it takes is one of the fools in the backseat getting arrested, and they’re all found out. Jury didn’t like Reggie’s attitude; they tried him as an adult -- said he was evil, a bad seed -- it’s the only way people could explain a 15-year-old with a gun. Each count of attempted murder is fifteen years, but the gun enhancements makes it 25. They looked at Reggie’s priors -- a few robberies, you know? Kid stuff -- and convicted him.”

“He’s still inside?” Tomcat asked.

Lola nodded, staring at her nail. “Serving six counts for as many bullets -- 162 years to life, they said.”

“See?” Cartman demanded, narrowing his eyes on Big Brother. “See what happens when you hand a kid a gun, and make them do your fucking work? A bullet in his brain would be more merciful.”

Brother stopped walking. “Then I guess it’s a good thing we called you in.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The way I hear it, mercy-killing is your specialty. Animals, kids -- “

Cartman was seeing in shades of red before he’d even finished the accusation halfway. “Keep talking, and I’ll show you what a mercy-killing really looks like, faggot.”

“Oh, will you? I’m a little older than you usually like them. What was that last one? Seventeen -- ?“

“Now, hang on,” Tomcat interrupted, clearing his throat with a gravelly stutter. “I know you two haven’t seen each other in a while, but catch up later, huh? We in the middle of something.”

Cartman matched glares with Big Brother for a long minute, the burn of denial almost jerking tears into his eyes and imagining the man’s death in a thousand gruesome ways.

“What’re we gonna do about Billy?” Tomcat prompted.

“Let him go mad in there,” Brother waved his free hand. "The diggers will send a response, sooner or later."

“And let him go down for your stupid decision?” Cartman accused. "You want another one like Reggie? Or Sundog?"

Rainer’s older brother lunged like a damn cobra, managed to twist his free hand up in Cartman’s shirt and stolen jacket. The muzzle of the Berretta knocked clumsily against his temple. Eric glanced down; he could just see the thin vein of the wire where it slunk over his collarbone and under the Schlafes Bruder tattoo.

“Sunny was an accident,” hissed the gaunt man. “She wasn’t even supposed to be at that drop -- ”

“She wasn’t s’posed to take a slug in the spinal chord, either, but you didn’t think about that, did
you? You pace and posture and wave your fucking guns around, but it’s other people take the bullets, who spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs. If Rainer didn’t call you his brother, I’d twist your head off myself -- “

Cartman suspected he’d got carried away when he first opened his mouth -- but he confirmed it when the barrel of the handgun came cracking down over his temple.
the train job ii

Cartman blinked awake with a pounding in his skull and Lola’s coy smile on the horizon of his blurred vision.

“Man, things are never as interesting without you around,” she hummed. “You sure know how to piss him off.”

“Everything pisses him off,” he insisted, slowly sitting up while matching Boo Boo glare for glare. He tried to pull his thoughts together, but they’d taken on a viscous, lumpy quality, and sloshed back and forth between his ears uncomfortably. “Anything that makes him feel like his dick is small, anyway.”

She put her hand on his elbow, freshly lacquered nails seeming to carve crescents from his arm. “You’re just alike, that way.”

“He’s a menace, Lo,” Cartman said, chopping a hand through the air and then staring at it for a second as he remembered one of the occasions Kenny had entertained the cunts with asshole impressions of him, all chopping hands and repetitive swearing. It wasn’t even funny, it was just true -- like, maybe he really was just chopping hands and repetitive swearing. Maybe there really was a bunch of pent-up rage and evil building between his eyes.

“The man couldn’t manage a box of packing peanuts,” Eric decided, casting aside his character flaws momentarily. "Let alone a goddamn train job. Rainer’s hanging this deal out to dry.”

Lola withdrew her hand to address the contents of her purse. There was no evidence of where her nails had rested over his arm but Cartman still kind of felt them there. Shiny, pink. Glaring.

“We’re hung up with this too, you know,” he said. “If Brother’s fuck-up is past fixing, this train is getting lit up.”

“Where is the bastard, anyway?” How can you be so calm? he really wanted to ask.

She shrugged. For a moment he thought that would be her only response, and he had to bite down on the urge to wrap his hands around her slender neck and just shake shake shake.

“Off to call up the general again, I guess. Brother’s not as confident as his gun-hand.”

“Are you telling me,” Cartman said in a low voice. “That moron has a direct communication line to Rainer?”

Lola shrugged again, looking at him like he’d done a fucking backflip that didn’t impress her. “He’s taking orders somehow.”
“And I would believe you, if I hadn’t received communication from Rainer literally encoded in laundry lines across town for my first three years. And besides the fact the guy makes the German Enigma look like two tin cans on a string, why would the general pass on direct orders to fuck up his own deal?”

“All I know is,” she said. “There is no chance in hell the big brain-dead Bruder came up with this scheme on his own.”

She was right -- and it changed everything. Brother probably sent the new kid in with the deal-breaker because he knew it was a terrible plan. They were all going to fuckin’ die -- either there and then on the damn train or later at the hands of Rainer -- and buckets of civilians were going down with them, which was a lifted truck-load of paperwork on his desk, not to mention new reasons to start his mornings on the fucking ledge -- and all the pointy-mustache bastard could do was pace back and forth and belay the slaughter with young sacrifices. Billy-goat was thirteen, for Chrissake. Cartman had only even seen him once or twice running eight balls across the street, used like a Trojan horse for dealing in plain sight.

“How much is the drop?” He asked.

Lola huffed a quick laugh low in her throat and waved her nails at him. “Baby you know you don’t have clearance for that. All you need to know is when to get on the train, and when to get off.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Lorraine,” Cartman said, glaring through his itchy eyes. “But I do a heck of a lot around here that’s above my pay grade -- and unless I know what the fuck is on the table, right now, we’re gonna be stuck on a steel tube with five-hundred sheep and at least a dozen very unhappy purveyors of amphetamine. Do you really want a repeat of the Denver fiasco?”

She pursed her lips and looked down to stroke the quivering white dog. “What do you know about Denver?”

“I know enough to know we’re trading with the same goons who ran around stabbing people over a ‘suspicious smell’ in the car. I know we haven’t been moving enough product to warrant train jobs for the past five years, but suddenly we’re throwing one every month like a fucking menstrual parade. I’m not an idiot; the boss is jerking these guys around on purpose -- throwing big, unnecessary jobs on purpose -- but why? What’s he get out of screwing up this deal? Besides possibly getting rid of Big Buttocks and the tiny hair-creature on his lip.”

Boo Boo stared at him so hard the little dog was shaking with it, the clasps and chains on the harness rattling over the rush of the train -- and when the intensity became too much it opened its triangle muzzle and yapped, just once, sharp little teeth risen like mountain peaks from its dark gums and drool-stained beard hairs.

“We wouldn’t be on this train if we were just moving a couple keys,” Cartman speculated, trying to catch Lola’s dark eyes.

She looked up and smiled. “That’s what he wants you to think.”

“How much?” He demanded. “How much are they carrying?”

“It’s not how much that matters,” she said with sing-song indifference.

“What -- ?” Cartman searched his tattered memory, but between the clusterfuck growing before him and the niggle in his hindbrain devoted to his missing truant, Cartman didn’t have the brainspace to spare for fucking riddles.
“Base, honey.”

“Base,” Cartman repeated. “We don’t buy base from these guys. We don’t get our base from Francesca and her second-city grave diggers. Rainer gets that shit from the Whites up north.”

“Okay,” Lola nodded her head, giggling. “Okay.”

“The media’s been ripping into base,” he continued. “It’s too hard, they say -- it’s filling up the schools, the hospitals. It’s on the public agenda, and Rainer doesn’t like that.”

She screwed up her face childishly, like he was dancing around the point.

“You gotta help me, here -- if this deal keeps going backwards, then there's gonna be cops, cameras - - a whole hell of a media storm on us, eyeballs on us -- “

“On us?” She said, like she was talking to the dog. “On us?”

“On… ? Oh,” Cartman realized. "He’s setting up the diggers. The deal blows, the idiots explode, the cops show -- and Rainer kills two birds with one stone; the public frames Francesca, the law eviscerates them, and we take over the speed chain without competition.”

“Lo?” He asked, questing for her favor. "Is that right?”

“Why are we here, then?” He hissed.

She rolled her eyes. “Now you’re asking the right questions. Boy, they said you were smart.”

Cartman glanced around the empty compartment, heart pounding. Something's burning, caught his eye on the opposite wall. “Where’s 'cat?”

“Gone. After Billy-goat, I guess.”

He swore, stood up, and swayed for a moment on the spot, clutching at the side of his head, tender and kind of swollen from the impact of the gun.

“You oughta sit down, honey,” she said, like the voice-over on a hypnosis video. “Just sit down and let it all play out. There’s nothin’ you can do -- sit down, now.”

“No, I gotta… “ He stumbled into the aisle as the train came to another stop. “Pull them outta there.”

As he turned toward the door to the second railcar, Cartman felt Lola’s dark eyes on the back of his neck. "Today could be the day." She reminded him.
Cartman shoved the door to the next railcar aside and prepared to dodge around the Mongrel, but neither the wrestler nor Rainer's mad-eyed brother were anywhere to be seen. Swallowing around his uneasiness, the officer weaved through the milling train passengers as fast as he could, putting a few cars between himself, the Bruder hole, and Lola’s dark eyes. *Today could be the day*, Cartman thought, snorting to himself. As if he needed reminding. He knew he could get whacked today, tomorrow, any fucking second. He was lucky a solar flare didn't crop up and cook him in his bed --
he was lucky yesterday, too, 'cause if that deer had been a hair slower, or the oncoming traffic a fraction of a second faster, he could've died on the damn commute home. But he hadn't, and Cartman wondered, if he had died any of those times, would he regret the way he'd lived his life? The answer was bleak. Just too fucking bleak.

When a weight clamped over his shoulder, Cartman ducked and pivoted, flinging an elbow up to block his face and strike his assailant.

“Shit, sorry ‘cat.”

“My fuckin’ Lanta,” Tomcat whined, rising with his forearm over his nose.

“Hey, you didn’t put any call in, did you?”

“You’re jumpier’n a fox in confession -- what’s the buzz?”

“You didn’t put a call in, hey -- you didn’t put a call in yet, did ya?”

“Hold your horses, I’m on it -- “

“No,” Cartman snapped, grabbing onto his wrist as Tomcat went for his pocket. “Don’t -- no cars. We can’t have any cars -- it’ll spook the diggers. You remember Denver -- they’ll take hostages.”

Tomcat leveled his shit-brown eyes on him and scratched at his patchy straw hair. “You know this game, man. Priority is the civilians -- we needa clear this train.”

“No, listen -- “ Cartman, hissed, and glanced around at the smattering of passengers before shoving the older male into the shadows around the door to the next compartment. “Why d’you think we’re here? Why d’you think Rainer called the two of us in, of all the Bruders on this side of town?”

Tomcat glanced around like a caged animal, back against the wall, and ran his tongue over the dry skin of his bottom lip.

“He’s throwing the deal for publicity,” Cartman said. “He never wanted this to work -- just a chance to drag Francesca down into the fire over the base trade -- “

“We know that,” hissed Tomcat. “We’ve been tracking Rainer’s expansion north all month -- the Denver train job was a false flag; he’s been throwing them up to draw police attention to the wrong corners… what’s this got to do with us?”

“We’re here because he’s rooting for rats.”

His eyes widened. “He couldn’t know -- “

“How many trains have you cleared this month?”

“I don’t know -- one? Maybe two.”

“He’s had me on five separate shipments,” Cartman said. “Sometimes handling, sometimes unloading. I let two go, but I had to clear three.”

He stared urgently at the grimy blond. “You and me are the only agents on this operation. If a bunch of cops show up and start evacuating, we’re going down. Rainer brings down Francesca, redirects the public eye, and traps the effin’ rats. He might even be trying to get rid of Brother, not that I blame him. See? If we call in the farm, the operation’s blown and we are dead fucking meat.”
Tomcat swallowed thickly and nodded. “No cars.”

Cartman released him where he’d unconsciously forced his colleague into the wall. “Which means -- we need to keep Francesca calm, and settle this deal.”

“Great,” said ‘cat, with a long, doubtful sniff. “Why don’t ya teach her the clarinet, while you’re at it?”

Cartman brought his palm to his forehead and narrowed his itching eyes, knowing he needed a fucking miracle to drag the situation out of the toilet. If he messed up, the diggers could flip on the passengers, just like Denver; they could’ve already hurt Billy-goat; he couldn’t clear the train of civilians without exposing himself and Tomcat, which would piss off the DEA and the Bruders, and he couldn’t even save the deal without undercutting Rainer’s orders --

*Just sit down, honey,* said a smooth voice in his head. *Just sit down and let it all play out.*

But he couldn’t -- if he did that he was no better than Brother, or all the fags waiting around holding parachutes -- he wasn’t gonna wait for the bodies to start dropping to *do* something, especially if one of them could be his. One way or the other, Cartman was facing death, and he’d rather go out rowing his own fucking boat than waiting around on ice for Kate Winslet.

“What’re we gonna do?” asked the DEA agent.

Cartman explained his plan in as much detail as he dared -- it wasn’t a great plan, it wasn’t even a good one, but his head was pounding and his eyes were itchy and Eric was horribly aware that if it didn’t work then their chances of making it out were next to nil.

He was turning toward the tail of the train, where Francesca waited at the supply carrier, when Tomcat’s hand clamped down on his shoulder again.

“We don’t have *time*, dude,” Cartman hissed. “Just make it up as you go -- “

“Naw, it’s just -- “ Tomcat pulled his hand away and twisted some of his silver rings around on knobbled fingers. “You don’t look alright.”

“Well, big fucking surprise,” he grit, suddenly furious. “I’m old and miserable, by job is getting beat over the head by people dumber than me, the alcohol is poisoning the goal centers in my brain, and now we’re all gonna be *stabbed* for Rainer’s publicity stunt if we don’t work a fucking miracle here, Tommy, so no -- I’m not al-right, I’m all fuckin’ left.”

“Jesus, I didn’t mean -- “

“I don’t care, okay?” Cartman cut him off with a wave of his hand. “I know what you meant. I look like shit. I’m sick of people telling me to get a doctor, or a therapist, or a goddamn prescription -- as if getting along with a shitty life is just a matter of doping yourself up enough to ignore it, as if we aren’t all riding the same train on a one-way trip back to the dirt. *Wake up,* man. Wake the fuck up -- I’m doomed. You are doomed -- the human race is fucking doomed if we don’t stop sitting around and *eating* the bullshit.”

Tomcat shrugged spectacularly. Talking to him was like throwing sand against sheetrock and expecting to make change. “Okay, okay.”

“Just go, already," Cartman sighed. "And here, take this.”

“A… flip-comb?”
“Traditional weapons are too obvious,” he explained. "But professionals know when something’s laying against their ball arteries.”

“And Loco?” Tomcat drawled. “Pretty sure she don’t have any ball arteries.”

“She won’t fight you.”

“Ha!” He barked. “I called her ‘honey’ once. She slapped me so hard I thought I was deaf -- collected workers’ comp for a whole month on temporary disability.”

“Please,” Cartman rolled his eyes, accustomed to his colleague’s tendency to exaggerate. “It cleared up in a couple hours and you didn’t collect a cent. Don’t ever call a woman ‘honey’.”

“But she says it to me all the time!” Tomcat yowled. His shit-brown eyes always looked a little hurt. “I’m a grown man, man -- it makes me feel small.”

“Look, you don’t have to understand it, just accept it. It’s what I do, every day.”

Cartman stared at his colleague in silence for far longer than was acceptable or strictly necessary -- and he realized he didn’t look into people’s eyes a lot. Just about as often as you look at dirt on your shoe, maybe. Science still couldn’t fully explain the mechanics of vision; he’d once heard of a blind man with a camera glued to his tongue who inexplicably began to 'see' through the camera lens. Cartman had a tendency to forget other people were conscious, thinking things, sometimes -- Wendy called it his Egotism -- but looking at them reminded him. The ghost in the shell sits right behind the eyes.

“You don’t think -- “ Tomcat cleared his throat. Years of smoking made it grind and stutter like old piping. And what were people, anyway, Eric thought, but walking masses of old piping. “You don’t think Francesca would pull something?”

“Honestly? I don’t understand why you guys haven’t taken her in already.”

He frowned, and chewed at one of the dry flaps of skin on his lower lip. “It’s complicated, man. They’re thinkin’ she might have interstate connects, you know? Same reason yer sunk in the Bruder business this long; it takes time to get to the middle of the spider web. If we take ‘er in, we may never find out.”

“I don’t get it,” Cartman spat. “I really don’t get it. I mean, is this the palace fucking theater to you guys? There’s a goddamn train station stabbing every week, and your little cover-ups in the news aren’t fooling anyone -- there’s thirteen-year-olds getting sent to the slaughter or fucking jail, federal agents sitting on their hands, and no one sees anything wrong with this?”

“Err, the Drug Enforcement Agency is a branch of public safety, but technically our mission statement is to manage the drug network, not eliminate it -- “

“Oh, man,” Cartman chuckled, shaking his head, and stuck his fingers in his eyes. “Shut up. You need to shut up, right now. And pray Lola slaps the stupid outta you.”

“Hey now -- I’m with the government, man. You're just a fake junkie.”

He shook his head at the floor, still laughing. “Get the fuck outta here, ‘cat. Get the fuck outta here. Do what I tell you.”

But Tomcat stayed, bobbing on his toes, leering his ashy grin. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a terrific act. You look like a basehead, man -- you look sick.”
Cartman cuffed him over the ear and forced him in the direction of the head of the train. “Probably because I’m sick of hearing that -- now go, dammit. I’ll meet you up. No cars.”

“No cars,” Tomcat agreed, taking a step in the right direction, then he paused, looked over his shoulder. “But what if she fights me, though?”

“She won’t fight you, dumbass. Don’t you get it? She’s here to watch. Rainer sent her here to watch.”

He ignored Tomcat’s wheedling half-hearted complaints and pushed through the doors to the next railcar, closer to the tail of the train, where Francesca waited at the supply carrier. It was a quarter to 7 and the train was only getting busier. The commuters were the sort of die-hards who would rather stand next to an empty seat than relax for the seven minutes between stops, but the service industry -- mostly cleaning personnel and wait staff with Hispanic origins -- were all too happy to squeeze into the seats and return the day’s missed calls in loud, insistent Spanish. Cartman remembered thinking the singing blind people had done some serious recruitment in the last half-hour -- he passed at least three renditions of the 6 o’clock Blues on his way to the tail of the train. The further he got to the back, the thinner the sounds of music became, and the crowd dwindled to twos and threes, and finally, to just one.

“Oh, fuck,” Cartman said, stopping short at the door to the last railcar. “Don’t tell me -- you’re the fucking look-out.”

“Password?” drawled the girl with the suspicious eye. She uncrossed her legs, and in one fluid movement rose from where she lounged against the windows and put herself between him and the door.

Some one-eyed teenager, not shit over five feet tall, between Cartman and the damn door.

“Even the hired muscle is getting younger and younger,” he grit.

“The average age of men killed in the Vietnam War was nineteen,” she said, pulling a duffle bag from underneath the bench under the window. Cartman heard a rumble of shouting from behind the door as the train shuddered into its next stop.

“Well, that’s a miserable statistic,” he tried. “What’re you working for the diggers for, anyway? Why don’t ya learn an instrument or something? Art Tatum did fine, even with the one eye thing. There are tons of options for -- holy shit.”

From the bag she’d unwrapped a fucking shotgun with a 26-inch barrel and swung it up to his face, like the fucking Godfather except twice as long and more than that much sexier, and Cartman was so finished with this goddamn Wednesday. As if he had nothing better to do than get shot in the head by a hot chick on a Wednesday, for Chrissake.

“I bet it’ll take you all six shots to hit me,” he sneered.

“That’s okay,” she hummed, her eye dark and steady down the shaft of the weapon. “This one’s got an extension -- I get fifteen tries.”

“What the hell d’you need a shotgun with a fifteen slug magazine for, huh? Jesus Christ.”

The muzzle dropped as she swung it around and eyed the barrel critically. “It’s actually totally legal, more or less. It’s the sawed-offs that they really look for -- more concealable.”

“Good, that means it’s registered. If the cops dig one of your bullets out of my corpse, they’ll find
you eventually. You don’t wanna do time, fam. Not with a face like that.”

She snorted. “I’m not gonna do time. These are rock salt shells. You’ll just suffer a bit.”

cartman had been hit by rock salt before -- from about fourteen feet away -- and it fucking sucked huge goblin dick. The fact that it probably wouldn’t kill him was only a small mercy. And even then, fifteen shots at close range would leave him crippled, probably.

“If you’re not gonna shoot me, let me in. You got one of ours in there.”

She smiled a slightly too-wide smile. “I don’t think so. There are no brothers of sleep allowed in there.”

“Unless I took a wrong turn somewhere on this cocksucker, I’m pretty sure you got one of mine, already. Hispanic kid, yea-high, big fuckin’ mouth? You know who I’m talking about.”

“Oh yeah -- “ She said, gazing out the window like something astronomical was happening to that frozen tundra and she couldn’t miss it. “He was cute.”

“Cut the shit, and tell your boss I’m knockin’, huh? I’ve gotta date tonight.”

She giggled and turned her eye back on him. “You’re kind of a basic rider, aren’t you?”

cartman frowned, and was reminded of Kenny. Was this some new slang he’d mentioned -- ? “What does that mean?”

“Tell you what,” said the eyepatch girl, docking the shotgun with the extended magazine against her shoulder and snapping with her free hand, like she’d just thought of a good rhyme. “Answer a riddle, and I’ll let you in.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“How far can a bear walk into the woods?”

“Give me a hint and I won’t knock you the fuck out, pirate Tink.”

She laughed in his face and squinted down at his hands curling into fists at his sides. “You don’t look like a cop.”

“I’m not a cop!” He shouted, his head pulsing.

“Password accepted,” she smiled, and rapped thrice on the sliding door.

Chapter End Notes

used a painting I did of Cardi B for Lola. Hope nobody minds.
He stepped over the threshold of the last car, wishing idly for grass between his toes and the smell of dew on windshields. The skies turned green in the summers.

Cartman shifted gears and arrived back in reality in time to greet a line of .357-mag bullets sticking out of a stripe of dark leather. He shifted his gaze from the studded dog collar up to the woman Francesca.


He noted six or seven men and women speckling the benches behind her. They had clearly never been in the same room together before today; everyone either sat or stood at strange angles from each other, at least a knife’s length between them, like a peanut butter jar scraped almost-clean.

The hanging handles over the windows cast sweeping shadows over the grave-diggers, and the movement of the train combined with the slight shift and swirl of white smoke wreathing around their heads gave his depth perception a harsh tug.

“Francesca,” he said. The air beneath the smoke had a tang to it. Like nail polish, or witch hazel.

“How did you get in here?” She barked, advancing on him in a few quick strides. Cartman suppressed a diaphragm spasm that made him feel like a bunch of dirt and hay squeezed into human clothes.

“I told the girl no more brothers, unless they have stupid little moustaches.”

“He’s on the way.”

Francesca leaned down into his space like a creature on stilts, a black powder coated blade flickering careless in her hand. “I said I would cut them up.”

“I’ll slide this,” she said to the bridge of his nose, and the swinging shadows swayed back and forth over her eyes like pendulums. “All the way into you.”

And to his horror, the ten-inch machete was tap-tapping at the fly of his pants.

“Where’s the kid?” Cartman spat, proud of the thin vein of stability in his tone, built up from years of traffic stops and irritating phone calls. “You want to get paid today or not?”

Francesca withdrew -- sliding the black machete, he noted, into a holster under her left arm -- and stood in her fucking 50s Wonder Woman power-.pose in the aisle, silhouetted alone in the wan evening light coming in the windows. A mass of tight bronze curls hung large and long around her lean, hound-like face. Like if you put a lion’s mane on an old Afghan. Francesca was the opposite of Rainer. She was a shit starter and finisher -- a hired merc with no record and no reason. Worst of all, she was conspicuous as all hell.
Every city had its diggers; they were freelancers in the drug trade -- hands for hire, people with loose morals and specific skill-sets. You could find them on Craigslist or the Yellow Pages under ads for fly-fishing and truffle-hunting. A crew of diggers could be assembled in a single night to pull a job, as long as they were all paid and went their separate ways afterward. They were pushers, small-time dealers, and occasionally, a disposal service. The key to being a good grave-digger was being dangerous, efficient, accurate, and discreet: D-E-A-D.

All the windows blinked to black when the commuter entered a tunnel. The smoke felt strangely against his skin, like a whisper.

“I remember you.” said Francesca in a knifelike tone -- ice cold, serrated with a smoker’s rasp. “You work with Tall-tail.”

Cartman fought the unwelcome memory out of his head like it was a Jehovah handing out flyers. “Once.”

“Yeah, I remember,” she said, jerking her head as if to shake a wasp from her wild hive of hair. “Private security, wazzit? The annual black market auction. It was in Aurora, that year. Greasy old hole.”

“That’s because it was in Greeley,” he corrected, thinking of the wire against his skin. No brother in his right mind would bring up the fucking auction in open-air, on a public train in front of a bunch of hired muscle with ambiguous backgrounds. On a Wednesday, for fuck’s sake.

“All the big cats was there,” Francesca went on, abruptly turning her back on Cartman to address the other bobbing heads in the compartment. “The Whites, the old Baron, and whatsername -- the chick always in animal-print -- Shinta. Even Serpiente brought a sample of his Mexican tar.”

She laughed strangely -- all noise and no emotion, hands on her hips -- and looked back over her shoulder at him. “And I saw you, clinging to old Tall-tail like a fat wart on a toad. Ye-ah -- young pug with an old vet, both of you leashed to that cardboard cutout of your leader -- what wazzit you call him? The stand-in? Rainer’s theatrical stunt-double? Big Brother. I can’t decide if it’s irony or hyperbole; like calling a dog Lucky. Does an animal live up to its name, or down to it?”

A mad twinkle arrived in her partly cloudy eyes, and she barked another scornful laugh. “How typical of Rainer to send a bowl of piss to represent him to his clients and competitors. You ever seen him, even? Him, I mean -- the underground king of the brothers of sleep. Like a cockroach, he is -- always scuttling from the light, and the shadows of bigger feet.

“I always thought of the Bruders as -- no offense -- “ She paused, chewed at a hangnail, and smiled without cheer. “Raging pussies.”

Cartman shrugged, in part to adjust the lay of the wire over his hip. He was sweating all over the itchy fucking flesh tape. He could smell his own nerves with every updraft from the vents in the floor, and wondered distantly when even the air he breathed had become artificial. “That’s fair.”

The chamber flushed once more with faint light as the train left its tube, and the conversation held its breath while their eyes adjusted. Powerlines on dark rigging lined the landscape like giant crosses rising out of white hills -- as if the land had been lain to rest. Emaciated trees grabbed at the deep winter sky with black fingers saddled with perfect strings of blue frost. It had been two degrees above zero all afternoon, probably set to drop below after sunset. The air inside the train was milky warm. It smelled like a lot of leather and oily hair, bodies crammed in a snuff box of sour tobacco -- together with that whiff of witch hazel, something like vinegar.
Cartman stifled a yawn, and tried to avoid Francesca’s hound-like eyes. He counted three dark crowns in her gray teeth. Thirteen bullets lined the dollar around her neck, but he already knew that before counting. There had only been seven, when they first met.

“I remember,” she said again. “That was a cold day in Aurora.”

“Greeley,” he corrected again. He remembered the exact dumpy Chinese restaurant they’d held the auction under that year: a place called Lucky Kitchen, probably still standing on that bleak stretch of pavement at a cross-section of 8th Avenue and 23rd Street. He remembered the walls stacked with boxes, the smells of laundry detergent and ammonia. The way the smoke had gathered up on the ceiling, as if reluctant to leave.

“Tension’s always so high at the yearly,” said Francesca. She cocked a hip and began plucking at her eyelashes with one hand. “Like Christmas with ninety-nine distant relatives. Everybody at each others’ throats, daring the pin to drop. Only one fight that day, though -- Serp, wazzit? Grimy ole Serp and that bowl of piss you brought along.”

“Yeah,” he said, trying to get a read on how many of the diggers were armed and which of them were actually D for dangerous. One hammy bald bruiser hadn’t taken his small eyes off Cartman since he entered the car, but maybe Eric just reminded him of his younger self. His much better-looking younger self with hair. “Listen, where’s the kid, huh? What’s the point of this?”

“They check guns at the door, usually,” she said as if he hadn’t spoken, spinning on her heel. Putting her back to him was Francesca’s way of calling him a pussy -- reminding him she wasn’t afraid to fight or to die, and she certainly wasn’t afraid of him. “Things get so tense at those things, you know? Buncha big cats in one place, big dicks, big Gs, new contracts and old scores to settle -- more than a few already purpin’ from the start.”

She turned her head to the side to settle a knowing half-gaze on him, as if Cartman had been the one purping at the goddamn auction. He hadn’t said dick at the last auction -- in fact, he’d worn his fucking sunglasses, if he was remembering right. Security at auction was pretty serious -- tensions did run high, bullets did tend to fly -- and Rainer wasn’t the only one who preferred to send a stand-in with instructions for the bidding, but Francesca considered herself from the Old School, and only remembered the names of those who dared show up at Lucky Kitchen in the flesh. It hadn’t been Cartman’s first time working security for Rainer, but it had been his first time at auction and something of a gruesome milestone in his Bruder career.

“Pink boy,” she spat, spinning back around to leer at him. “Clenched up all day like a virgin sacrifice, like you was just waiting for somebody to rip into ya -- but that’s all business is, ain’t it? That’s business -- findin’ ways to rip up somebody else’s asshole, and how to make ‘em come back for more. Business -- that’s business for ya.”

Cartman rolled his eyes. “Kept calling it buttfucking when I did it.”

Francesca laughed strangely again, then crossed her arms over her lean chest in a second power-pose. “You came with jokes. So what about Tall-tail? You gotta joke for what happened to him? What’re they callin’ it down in the cockroach den you crawled from -- business? Or murder?”

“He knew what he signed up for,” he said, and cleared his throat. He was sweating like a fucking pig and started sort of daydreaming about being 70 years old and retired and sitting on his ass watching Bob Saget all day. Bland shit. Sometimes Cartman thought he just needed some of that good bland shit in his life. Oatmeal, wool socks.

“I knew Tall-tail a long time,” said Francesca, and her Yosemite-bronze hands clenched into fists at
her sides. She was getting worked up. “He didn’t deserve that. Not for your sake, not for Rainer’s brothers of bumfuck, not for anybody.”

“Look,” he said. “The time was right for a killing. Everyone knew it. Serp wanted that big security gig with Whitey, but he couldn’t back up the bid with cash, so he had to show it in nuts. It coulda happened to any one of us. Blame Serp, he’s the one who killed the motherfucker.”

“Serp was only swinging at the ball in his court -- it was your idiot kingpin that pitched it at him. And you already knew that, if you got more than french fries in that thick head of yours. Rainer only sends hairlip in when he’s expecting a bomb to drop -- then he hires outside security like sandbags to take the blast. Sound familiar?”

“Yes.”

“He hired you to die!” She snapped. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” he admitted. Depressingly aware.

“Ye-ah -- I remember you. You stood by like a first-wave millennial while Tall-tail did the dirty -- too wasted to do your fucking job.”

“I was half of a security detail, not Jason fucking Statham!” Cartman snarled, accidentally making glancing eye contact with the beady-eyed baldy over her shoulder again. “What kinda idiot steps in front of Serpiente’s Chain of Command, anyway? I’ve seen him stop party buses with that thing.”

Francesca leapt forward and delivered a quick, straight-armed jab with her right hand that struck him across the windpipe. Cartman doubled over with a startled growl, holding his bruising throat and fighting for air with the moisture quivering on his lower eyelids. It was precision shots like that could kill a guy, with a little more force. Amateurs bloodied up noses, blacked eyes, or occasionally clubbed people artlessly over the head with handguns -- but Francesca struck with only moderated killing blows.

He swallowed and felt the cartilage thunk unevenly over his throat.

She bent down and hissed into his ear: “He didn’t deserve that.”

Cartman recalled the fight at that year’s auction through the pain. It wasn’t even a fight, really. Big Brother had simply overstepped Serpiente’s bounds, and Serp went at him with his famous three-pound combat chain.

Anyway, being a coward and a bastard and a fiend nobody liked, Brother had dodged. And he survived, while the old digger Tall-tail took the end of the swing. One second his head was on his shoulders, and the next -- Cartman had never seen anything like it -- it was gone; his head just sort of snapped into oblivion, like an apple bomb, or a bubble of chewing gum. He remembered the body tipping onto the floor, slow at first and then instantaneous, like an overbalanced suitcase. He remembered the bits of skull, skin, and blood over the concrete, all just two-toned dark gristle from behind his lenses.

You have an 80 to 95 percent chance of surviving a gunshot wound, and a 90 percent chance of surviving a lightning strike -- Eric had survived both, and didn’t deny he was often favored by the odds -- but he would never take his chances against a big Black dude with a fucking combat chain.

“Yeah,” Francesca hummed, right in his ear again. “You remember that, don’t you? Big fucker you think you are, watched a good man popped like a grape all so Rainer could keep peddling his poisonous feast without ever showing his face -- and I bet you hit the shine shop straight afterwards,
didn’t ya? You look like the kind of easy-squeeze that shits his problems out with liquor. I hope that memory follows you like a shadow on the wall, motherfucker. The only reason I haven’t ended you yet is pity. Supply and demand spins the web, and there’s a couple spiders here and there but guys like you -- you’re the gutless flies.”

She leaned away and her hair cast her long, gaunt face in dark shadows. “Damned pitiable, it is. We call Tall-tail’s death business. The muffins in blue call it an accident. Is murder just a killing you can blame someone for? Or is it something you decide for yourself?”

“Murder’s a killing outside the natural order,” Cartman rasped, holding his neck for what little it helped the swelling. “Isn’t that in your digger code? Glorified body-bagger like you, talking to me about wrongful deaths -- come at me, bitch, I have a whole list of names waiting for a piece of you in Hell.”

“Say, what did they call it, when you put a bullet in that boy’s head?”

Cartman held very still and imagined he was a plant. Photosynthesis, he thought. Photosynthesis. He counted three shoulder holsters among the milling diggers, and he already knew Francesca was not traveling without something sharp.

“Seventeen-year-old, wazzit?” She crooned. “I don’t gotta college education, but I grew up in dirty Jersey, and -- that sure looked like murder to me.”

“I didn’t come here for a ride down memory lane, Francesca,” he said. “Give me the kid, and we all walk away from this.”

“I’m not making any more deals with you brothers after this shit,” she snapped. “We held up our end; now it’s time to pay up!”

With her exclamation, the other diggers started to rise from their seats, crowding the car with their shadows.

“We’ll pay up!” He rasped, quickly. “We’ve got what you agreed on -- just that bowl of piss you were talking about sometimes makes his own decisions. You win -- you’ll get what we agreed on, just -- “

“Prove it,” she hissed.

“I am. I’ll even throw you a bonus -- a chance to avenge your old bosom buddy. I’ll give you Brother. You’ll have the money and a go at Rainer’s favorite stooge, if you just hand over the kid and get the fuck outta here.”

Francesca was silent for a moment. The train thunked on through the rapidly ripening evening, and the standing diggers milled like waving snakes in a pit around him. Eric tried to swallow and couldn’t, tried to remember the smell of the wild woods and dew on windshields, and couldn’t.

“Tell your one-eyed gargoyle to let my colleague through. He has your money.”

“Colleague,” she mocked, nevertheless sauntering around him to pull on the sliding door.

Tomcat was looking a little harried and worse for the wear when he entered the last car on the South Park Express, but not moreso than Big Brother, who could barely keep his feet as he stumbled at the DEA agent’s side, fighting weakly against the grip on his wrists. His twisty moustache ends were skewed at odd angles.

“You brought him?” Cartman said, incredulous.
"I thought that’s what you wanted!" Tomcat hissed, his eyes wide and flicking around the powder-keg of diggers around them.

"I thought you’d knock him out and stash him in a bathroom or something, not drag him all the way down here. How’d you get him through the whole damn train without anybody stopping you?"

"Hi, meet my retarded brother Rufus."

"Oh, man," Cartman chuckled hoarsely, waved a hand in front of Brother’s vacant red face. "He’s wasted."

"He was wasted before I even knocked him out — "

"So you brought me a present." Francesca’s voice chased the comment back down Tomcat’s throat. She circled them and stopped in front of Brother, trying to catch his watery gaze with her own predatory glare. "Two of them."

"You can have the fool with the goatee," Cartman said. "Now where’s Billy-goat?"

"So that’s what you call him," she murmured, after a long pause. "And what do they call you?"

"Err, name’s Tomcat, miss."

"I never did understand you Bruders and your name-ranks." Her eyes slid back to Cartman. "First time I saw you, they called you Coon -- even though there’s nothin’ black about you, except maybe that shriveled nut you call a heart -- and then not a month later the boys called you somethin’ else. Three years gone by, bear cub; who are you now?"

I don’t know, he thought.

"I don’t know."

The train ducked into an underground tunnel and rings of light rippled over Francesca and her goons. Cartman had never seen her appear more than mockingly thoughtful.

She spun on her heel once more, and began stalking toward the back of the car, where a few metal rungs led up to the emergency exit hatch on the roof. "Come on after me, killer. I’ll take you to the boy. We left him on ice, up top."

Cartman exchanged glances with Tomcat. "Thoughtful of you."

She waved aside the diggers in her path and paused at the foot of the ladder. "We didn’t want him puking all over the car."

Cartman narrowed his eyes on the staring beady-eyed baldie as he passed, even though the guy had at least a foot and a half and a hundred pounds on him.

The soles of Francesca’s boots were already disappearing through the emergency hatch by the time he reached the ladder. He thought twice and then thrice about leaving his back turned on the whole car, but Francesca seemed to have some kind of honor code. Cartman made his decision before he even got to the part where he wondered if he’d rather live or die, and mounted the ladder behind her.

The air went from milk-warm to blistering cold on the roof of the train. He pulled himself out of the manhole into a tentative crouch and wondered how long Francesca could stand at her full-height without fear of a low-ceiling tunnel or overpass.
“Fourteen minutes before the next tube,” she said loudly into the night over the train-track clatter. “Then we’re headed upstate. Better wrap up the shenanigans, pinkie.”

Cartman pulled himself up, his eyes finding the small shadow at her feet. Billy-goat lay curled on his side around a gridwork of piping caging off an external control panel. He was even bonier than Cartman remembered, and when he got close enough to pull on the kid’s shoulder, his large doe-brown eyes emerged slowly, red-rimmed and weeping.

“He seemed doubtful of the quality of our product. So we gave him a taste.”

“You shot up a thirteen-year-old with a hyperconcentrated dose of amphetamine just for carrying some other fuckhead’s message, and I’m the bad guy, are you serious?”

“Water,” Billy-goat croaked.

“You’ve got a rare opportunity today, my nameless Bruder friend -- I’m giving you a chance to redeem yourself, and die honorably.”

He started getting to his feet, with half a volcanic rant about not giving a shit on the tip of his tongue.

“Three cards you can play here,” she said, nearly fucking shouting. “You can be like the five-hundred people on this train, and stand around while others die -- or in this case, I put an end to you. Or, you can be just like the idiots down below, who squeeze triggers and eat lead just to get their pictures on T-shirts. This is your last play: you can fight for your life.

"I've seen you stand around," she continued. "Lookin’ at brains behind your shades, and I know you’ve eaten lead, left a body or two behind on nothing but orders from the top. Pussy! What will you do, today?"

Cartman was a coward. He was terrific at starting fights, not always so great at finishing them -- and he probably only made it this far by being lucky. Like Brother, he was exactly the kind of low-life scum the universe got a kick out of saving.

Before he could reply, he noticed Francesca sort of leaning to the side -- and then her effing boot heel swung upward with the dip of her torso, striking him a glancing blow over his nose that could’ve shoved the bone up into his brain, if he was an inch or two closer. Another kill-shot.

He ducked her next flying heel by accident, and almost slipped off the moving train trying to dodge the curb stomp that followed; the edge of her boot caught his too-small jacket and tore the sleeve from the shoulder.

Cartman rolled back to the center and up to his feet, stumbled backward over the pipe rigging and the curl of the thirteen-year-old. The next boot came for his crotch and he caught it, jerked the leg around and forced her off balance, the way they taught in self-defense classes on the force. Francesca pulled free and caught herself, then shook off her jacket with a laugh. He eyed the shoulder holster under her left arm, and the black blade it held to her side.

Cartman fished around in his pocket for a second before remembering his flip-comb was on Tomcat. The hard edge of a credit card found his fingers.

In the next breath she had back-handed him so hard across the face he forgot how to exhale. And that -- really sucked. He hadn’t been back-handed since he told his mom he was dropping out of school. He was so bummed thinking about it he took a second hit, a hard knuckle to the ear. The force of the second blow spun him to his hands and knees and he wondered if playing dead was a viable strategy.
Billy-goat wheezed quietly nearby. “You ever heard an octopus -- breathe?”

Cartman tongued some moisture from his upper lip and sucked the blood from his teeth. He had a feeling there were things at work on this odd Wednesday evening that went above and below Rainer’s little train job, and Francesca’s little blood-feud, and he wondered again about his options. What would Kenny do? How did he play the Joker, here?

He heard a swift intake of breath from the digger and had just enough time to tense up before her boot struck him in the side. He shuddered into high-definition like an old television.

On the second intake of breath, Cartman rolled up to his toes to avoid getting stomped on, started to stand and ducked to avoid another wide roundhouse kick. He stood and caught her left arm at the elbow as it came down for his head, and stepped closer to limit the range of her killer feet. With a few inelegant swipes of the credit card knife he sent her shoulder holster and its terrible black blade clunking to the roof of the train. Before he could make a move to restrain or incapacitate her with the admittedly tiny knife, Francesca spun into him and rewarded his efforts with a sharp elbow to the solar plexus. He stumbled away, hemorrhaging air. The game was probably over before he’d even decided to fight back, but it was definitely finished when a knee connected solidly with his nuts, and he sunk to his face and knees.

The train slid into a tunnel and the lights blacked out; he had time for one small breath in the darkness before she had crawled up on him like a praying mantis. From his manly curl of pain, Francesca yanked his right arm free and twisted it until the little knife came free of his fingers. She held the blade behind his ear and began to draw a line.

“You know,” she said, breathing heavily even though it can’t’ve been that much effort to bring him down. Smoker’s lungs, he guessed. “I’ve seen men die. Y’get used to seeing men die, in the business. But with animals, it’s always different. Never like to see an animal die -- they go badly.

“Once, I found a dog in the woods. It was buried alive up to the neck, tied to a bag of gravel to keep it from digging itself out. Imagine that, huh? Dying of shock, probably, or dehydration, knowing you was led down to that pit and covered, shovelful by shovelful. Sometimes, I think a bullet is more merciful than letting an animal live. Especially one that’s buried in it. Buried in the business.”

The blood from the cut growing behind his ear was moving like a warm finger around his neck. Before Francesca’s last word even shaped properly, both the knife and the body above him stilled.

“Do you smell that?”

He grunted.

“D’you smell that?” She demanded.

Before the train was even out of the tunnel, Francesca crawled over him and slipped down the emergency hatch like a spider down a drain.

A minute ticked by, maybe more, maybe less, before Cartman managed to peel himself from the roof and make his way over to Billy-goat. He had the vague idea that he oughta get them out of there, or something, before any of the diggers came back. His grand plan to hand over Big Brother in exchange for their safety had hardly done more than distract Francesca -- and she was close to an explosion, he knew it. As long as she had cargo and they had cash, she would fight.

“C’mon, man,” he murmured, pushing at the boy’s shoulder. “C’mon.”

Billy-goat stirred, cracking his pink liquid eyes. He gurgled, stuttered, said he would be fine. Then
repeated that he would be fine.

Cartman heard shouting below, then a gunshot, followed by three more shots in rapid succession.

“Oh, shit,” he said, a lancing clarity cutting through the Oort cloud numbness buzzing in his ears.
“‘We need to get outta here. Oh shit. Come on, man -- let’s move. What was with that octopus shit? What’s up with all this weird shit today?’”

The kid was just getting unsteadily to his feet when Eric had to yank him down again -- the train was passing under the arches of a raised motorway, and he didn’t really fancy another close-up of somebody else’s head being popped like a grape.

“Shit,” he swore again. “That’s the fucking interstate -- we’re almost back at Riverside. We missed the drop-off -- “

Cartman was still shaking Billy-goat around when the windows beneath them shattered, and a roar of screams and burning oxygen fled into the night.
“Oh,” he said dumbly, even as the metal beneath his heels and hands began to heat up from the fumes and the air seemed to glow red around him. “Holy shit.”

The entire tail of the train had gone from simply smelling funny to a ball of flame. It had the odor of burning vinegar and Cartman’s eyes stung as he half dragged the stoned thirteen-year-old to the roof of the next car. Thankfully the commuter train didn’t move very fast, but he still kind of felt like a low-budget Buster Keaton doing it. Like he was doing all his own stunts and juggling a bony Mexican kid. And that was pretty heroic, anyway.

The sound of a buckshot and screaming civilians meant the doors between the cars had opened, and the one-eyed girl was testing her extended mag. It also meant she had something to fire at, which had to be either that fucking tart with the pointed moustache or Tomcat and his crumby teeth. Cartman quietly hoped they would both get shot. Just a little bit. Mostly Brother, but hell, a little rock salt might do some good for the DEA agent too.

Riverside station was coming up fast and bright, a cluster of streetlamps and distant intersections like a galaxy of light stuck on a dark pond. The sound of a far-off siren wailing.

Right. They would’ve noticed something was wrong, what with the ass-end of the South Park commuter spitting flames.

Billy-goat had kicked it into fifth gear and was crawling down the exterior of the train, a ragged dark blot silhouetted against the trackside frost heaves. With not even a goddamn courtesy adieu, the kid jumped.

Eric ditched the torn and bloody Special Ops jacket and followed his example, swinging so fast down the exterior ladder he knocked his bruised side against the steel rungs. His throat wasn’t cut or anything, but Cartman still felt like reality knocked him around for fun, sometimes.

Jumping off a moving vehicle, no matter how fast, could never be elegant. He crashed into a gravelly snowdrift and nearly split his bruised ass open on a big fucking rock.

The shouting at Riverside station and the sirens grew to a crescendo. The soot-black frost melted slowly into his socks, and Cartman thought about that sandwich from earlier -- the one he’d tossed because of the raw onions.

The sound of scrabbling hands and a swift slap brought him out of it.

“No time for this now, dog. We gotta clear out!”

It was Billy-goat. Cartman cleared the snow off his legs and shoved the slender shadow away so he could push himself to his feet.

“C’mon!” the boy insisted.

He slid to the ground. The coarse crust on the snowdrift carved up his hands. They slipped into the slush lane between the tracks, and the darkness shoved its shoulders in around them. Cartman slowed his pace only once they were several blocks away, and turned to glance back at the chaos setting
Riverside ablaze.

“Hey!” said Billy-goat. He stopped in the slush and turned on the officer. “What’s so funny? That whole deal went to hell -- only a hundred people in there got their shot at you, your boss wants you dead -- and you look like shit!”

Cartman wiped at some of the dirt on his brow with an even dirtier hand, and his head pounded but he laughed to the same beat until he couldn’t anymore. “I can’t believe we made it out of that, dude.”

The boy barked a laugh of his own, and the sharp noise clattered along the concrete breezeway and all the way up the tall buildings growing like resilient weeds on the border of North Park and South Park. “No kidding. I’ve been stepped on today, spat at, and beat up -- even before Brother sent me down to the diggers with a turd to sell to the mad queen.”

He stopped walking suddenly, and Cartman nearly landed on his ass again trying to stop on the ice in nothing but his lousy old Adidas sneakers.

“You know,” the kid said thoughtfully, turning his dark eyes up at him. “Compared to Rainer, Francesca’s drugging and beating was pretty chill. Like she at least had a reason to want me dead. That’s the last time I ever enlist with the Bruders; this job really bites.”

“You’re quitting?”

He shrugged, and continued walking. The mud turned slowly into cement and jagged blocks of caved-in sidewalk. Cartman could see the dark waffle shape of the parking garage in the distance, hunched between a Rite Aid and the used book superstore.

“If you don’t say anything, they’ll figure I died back there. Another tick in Rainer’s bedpost, I guess.”

Cartman chuckled at the unscrupulous little implication that Rainer derived sexual pleasure from picking off minors. They paused again as the recently deceased young Bruder began rooting around behind some garbage cans in an alleyway leading out onto main. A drop of ice cold water stung him on the back of the neck, and Cartman looked up to find the sky strung with dripping fire escapes.

“My name’s Axel, by the way.”

Axel. Where had he heard that before?

“I know the brothers call you Starbuck now, but,” Axel straightened up with a duct-taped Mossy Oak duffle bag slung over his thin shoulders. He flashed a grin and a dark coinslot gap winked at Cartman from between his two front teeth. “I don’t think you’re that basic, or white.”

“You’re the weed-sniffer from the shelter,” he said, finally remembering the name. "You know Wolf."

“Yeah, I can tell a bad batch,” Axel sniffed, defensive. "But this time he advised me to loan out my services to the Bruders. You have no idea how easy it is for somebody like me -- " He gestured to his overall pretty strikingly shabby appearance and brown skin. “To infiltrate the most famous gang in Park County.”

“You’ve been feeding him information on our movements,” he realized. “Holy shit -- Rainer had three rats trapped on that train! I wonder if he even knew -- “

“Hey, I see my ride, actually. Gotta go collect on some debts,” Axel said suddenly, his eyes, still
pink at the corners, darting left and right along main street. “It was cool meeting you, ‘buck. And thanks for saving my life and all -- that was cool, too.”


He was already trotting away -- back toward South Park -- when Cartman called out: “Wait! What about the dog shit?”

His only reply was Axel's lifted hands and an exaggerated shrug. Cartman watched from the alley mouth as he dodged around passersby and took the crosswalk at a run. Across the street, he met up with somebody unmistakably orange at the entrance to the underground. Cartman narrowed his eyes on the distant point and his heartbeat was already halfway out the shadows when he realized that the figure was ostensibly shorter than thirteen-year-old Axel, and even at a distance did not possess the same lilt to its shoulders he had come to identify as uniquely Kenny’s.

No, it was just another orange blot person, tricking his eye. But he knew Yellow Wolf had to be around somewhere, since he’d presumably orchestrated a fucking train bomb under everyone’s noses -- he had probably even been on the damn train. Cartman shrugged his apathy up around his ears and continued trudging through the slush and glare ice back to the parking garage.

He knew there was no point looking for the king of runaways if the fucker didn’t want to be found.

Suddenly the chill in the air fell on him like a carbonated liquid, burning his eartips and clattering down his spine, finally pooling deep in the soles of his feet. What kinda idiot leaves the house in a snowstorm without a damn jacket, well, now you know. He’d lost his stolen coat, the flip-comb he’d been threatening people with since high school, the little credit card knife he’d borrowed off Lola, and what small dignity he had remaining -- all in one night. Cartman had descended to the lowest of the low; he was an action flick starring Nicholas Cage; he was James Cameron with something to prove -- he was a sweaty guy in a white T-shirt.

The slight warmth and pull of the wire arrived in time to remind him that, despite having most of his shit stolen, and his ass handed to him on top of a moving train -- that wire would always be hanging on; he was just another horse at the races, beaten into the right shape, doped up on morphine and expected to take hits, and the law was riding him everywhere he went.

On the fourth level of the garage only a few hunched shapes of cars remained parked under the lights, their noses dirtied with hanging chunks of brown snow. Cartman walked up on a crusty old Volvo before remembering he’d taken his cruiser from the station. He blamed his mistake on the half-assed lighting but he was probably just sleep-walking again.

In a drippy back corner he found the correct fucking car, and plucked the keys from under the wheel board with a tired grunt. He was just about to pull on the handle when he remembered the wire, and with a sudden, decisive jerk, tore it from his skin and dismembered the device; he snapped the microphone piece off, ripped the copper strands from the battery pack, and smashed it all on the wet cement floor of the garage. They had a million of them at the station, and the recordings were all stored remotely, anyway -- but it still gave him some satisfaction. And he was stocked out of satisfaction, lately.

“You got some anger issues, pal.”

Cartman glared at the figure materialized on the other side of the car as if it had been hanging around next to him all day. Because it actually fucking had. “You had two weeks to think what to say to me, and that’s what you came up with?”
“Ugh, babe,” Kenny snorted softly, and he couldn’t see under the shadow of his hood but he could hear the little shit rolling his eyes. “I’m sorry. Things got really busy at work -- and then my phone broke, on one of the practice runs.”

“One of the practice -- oh, of course you fucking rehearse your little anarchist train jobs,” Cartman spat. “How did you know where to paint all the damn murals? You had me strung out all day, with those -- ”

Kenny stretched his arms across the hood like he was reaching for him, or just stretching, or something, and spoke nonchalantly. “For the record, I had no idea you’d be on the train -- most of Axel’s info from the Bruders was nonsense code words and animal names... Hey, you wanna unlock the doors? It’s fuggin’ cold out here.”

“Oh, now you wanna hang out.”

The teenager turned his hands palms-up and scoffed. “Really? You’re gonna be a bitch about this right now, out here? Come on, you oughta be cold.”

Cartman stood rooted to the cement. He really was cold, and if McCormick was as wet and filthy as he looked from across the roof of the car, he was almost certainly moreso in reality. But letting him in the car meant letting in the fucking animal that had been ripping up his life since the very first day he sat in his cruiser and offered him a blow job. It would be the same thing all over again, like pulling in a stray; they eat your food, track shit on your carpet, and maybe love you for a bit -- and then one day, without warning, they bolt.

He was sick of talking to a hood, though.

“I coulda died in there,” he muttered, jerking open the car door and releasing the locks. “I was seconds from a killing.”

He didn’t mention that the fire was probably part of the reason he’d gone free, because it wasn’t that important.

“Hey, don’t worry -- “ Kenny said, as the engine chugged to life. “I knew I’d be interrupting a Bruder tea party, so I had everybody on the look-out for ya, just in case.”

“Everybody?” He said, in a higher register than he intended, and almost made a lunge for the stereo as it started up the CD player, but figured it didn’t matter if his truant knew he’d been obsessing over Trial by Fire for weeks. He probably already expected it.

“I think you met my dealer,” Kenny said, a grin in his voice. “She said to tell you you’re not as smart as your mom thinks you are.”

“Fuck her!” Cartman fumed. “You never said your dealer had one eye -- or was the eyepatch just for entertainment value, like offering up your homeless friend as a fucking sacrifice to the Bruders?”

“No, that’s for real, bro. She, like, got dirt rubbed into it when she was a baby? I guess. And it got infected, and the surgery didn’t work out. I didn’t tell you because it seemed irrelevant. Like how many nose hairs she’s got, or something.”

“Not the same, at all. I mean, with the fuckin’ shotgun, and everything? And I guess those were your asshole riddles. I thought I was losing my mind in there, dude.”

With the car humming and the rear windshield set to defrost, he pulled at the knees of his pants and sat back, finally looking over at his truant in the passenger seat.
Kenny’s torn jeans had nearly gone stiff from sand and salt, and Cartman doubted if the fur lining his parka hood would ever recover, but beneath it all Yellow Wolf was still grinning his cracked grin, fidgeting in his seat and tapping fingers restlessly against the armrest.

One thing out of place disrupted his customary once-over -- and it was very, very out of place. His graffiti hero was wearing a collar, a dark slice of embossed leather between his neck and shoulders, studded with thirteen brass bullet casings.

“So you were on the train.” Cartman confirmed his own suspicion, grim. “Please tell me you did not pry that from her burning corpse.”

Kenny chattered into knee-slapping laughter.

“You needa chill, man -- nobody died. Digger chick mighta took a hit with a rock salt shell, but it was only a friendly knock-out. Yellow Wolf ain’t about people-shooting, anyway -- “

“What’s he about, then?” Cartman demanded. “What the fuck have you done tonight, exactly? Besides try to get a bunch of people shot, me and you included.”

“Yo, don’t ask stupid questions. Don’t question my art.”

He snorted before he could help it. As if dog shit and random atrocities and destruction of public property would ever be considered ‘art’.

“You wanna know what happened tonight?” Kenny scrambled up on his knees in the seat, and shook his hood down. “I saw a buncha dumb-ass, cereal box people all got together and thinking they control the world. I knocked down their walls -- I tore houses down around them before they even realized they were in my neighborhood; I'm flipping their peace of mind into pieces -- ‘Fuck outta here! This is Yellow Wolf’s town.’ That’s what I said, to all of them.”

“Fuck outta here,” Eric repeated, shaking his head. He admired it, he really did. “You burned up a few Gs of base, by the way.”


“So what was in all the bags -- ?”

His truant began shrugging out of his sodden parka.


“Surprisingly hard to burn,” Kenny said matter-of-factly. “Cow shit is much easier. Had to make sure to only use the really dry ones, and I had to track down an odorless igniting fluid -- “

“You set a bunch of shit on fire. You chased the cops out of town and had me and everybody else squabbling over bags of dried dog shit.”

“Pretty much.”

“And the base?”

Kenny shifted up to his knees again and tossed his coat in the backseat. Cartman followed its trajectory on instinct, and it landed on the arrangement of five identical black bags stacked in his backseat.
“In my backseat?” He squeaked, eyeing up his dangerous payload.

“I figured,” considered the anarchist. “Last place you look for a bunch of stolen drugs.”

“The backseat of my car? How’d you even known where I parked? How d’you know where I hide the keys?”

“Well, nobody’s gonna come lookin’ for it, anyway. It’s supposed to be burned up.”

Holy shit, Cartman thought, slowly turning around in his seat to face the windshield. He put his palm on the gearstick, his other hand on the upper crest of the wheel. He was in a police cruiser with thousands of dollars in illegal drugs and some kinda shit-stealing genius in the front seat.

“You smell like petrol,” Eric decided. “And -- where are your shoes?”

Kenny nearly slid his dirty fucking knees into the center console in his haste to lean into the driver’s space and push his mouth against Cartman’s temple, just beyond the corner of his eye. And, maybe because it had been what seemed like a frustratingly long period of time without it, that single small act of invasive affection took the officer almost completely by surprise.

“Oh man, lookit you,” Kenny chuckled, cranking the seat back and then turning to lean against the passenger door. “You missed me.”

“You’re not wearing shoes, or socks.”

“I wagered them in a bet, just now.”

Cartman scowled and chewed at his lip, fighting the heat crawling up his neck and adjusting the dial on the air conditioning just for something to distract him from the smelly, smug truant who’d been running his mind all day. He was about to cop another big sweat, too, even though he’d been doing it all day and it was still cold and couldn’t the universe just give him a damn break already?

He pictured the most brazen, arrogant thing he could imagine and spat: “You must be a Gemini.”

“Are you kidding?” His truant snorted back. “I’m straight Ares, man. I’m a creature of fire.”

“Of course -- a selfish, Ares prick. I bet you think you’re the fucking king of this fucking carnival, don’t you? You spent two weeks orchestrating a shit caper to humiliate the incompetent Sheriff’s department; you punked the biggest gangs in the city, robbed and humiliated a fucking body-bagger with a kill-list much longer and more accomplished than my own, and if that’s not enough -- you get to bang a cop in your off-time!”

“Hey,” Kenny interjected sternly. “I haven’t banged you in any capacity -- “

“Oh, really?” Cartman said, with a sarcasm so hugely inflated it was fucking flamboyant. “Well in what capacity would you like me, McCormick? Since I’ve already got my resignation letter in the backseat, a life-sentence sitting in the front, might as well give my career a proper fucking with a sexual misconduct suit. Hey, I have an idea -- let’s go down to the station; you can put the Sheriff in a chokehold and rest your dick in my mouth -- “

“Hey, come on,” Kenny interrupted again. “You’re not mad. You’re not actually mad, are ya?”

He was approaching over the center console again like the fucking fungus he was, breathing over Cartman’s ear, scraping his teeth against the lobe, pushing his cold forehead to his bruising temple.
Agh, he thought, and curled one hand in the too-wide collar of Kenny’s gray Coors Light T-shirt to shove him back into the passenger seat. It was impossible to stay angry with him breathing all over the place. Eric had a right to be angry -- a seventeen-year-old had just put a three-year police investigation in jeopardy, gambled with lives, shoes, socks. And to what end?

That was a stupid question. Cartman should've known better.

Kenny settled in his seat with a sigh and tipped his head back. “God damn it,” he murmured.

Eric took a deep breath over the craggy remnants of fear and anxiety clogging in his throat, and then spent a moment side-eyeing -- admiring -- the creature of fire at rest. He’d never seen the adolescent anarchist so earnestly frustrated, even back when he’d put him in a cone of silence for three days over vacation, or when he accused him of becoming a lousy alcoholic like his father. Cartman couldn’t wait to get him cleaned up, to move the teenager back into some kind of fucked up compartment in his life. But Yellow Wolf couldn’t be compartmentalized, and that’s what was pissing him off. It was part of Kenny’s nature to fight. He couldn’t be trimmed, trained, or rearranged into a society-loving sheepdog -- he was one of those wild woods kids from deep down in South Park, and no nine-to-five or humding salary was gonna convince him to sit still.

Cartman made a quick decision. He nudged his snowy shoes off into the pedal-space and braced himself against the dashboard to slide over as smoothly as possible to the passenger side. Of course it was a lot harder for a grown fuckin’ man than a gangly teenager, and he probably pressed a hundred buttons by accident, but he managed to settle his knees on the outsides of the seat and brace himself with one hand on the window and another against the seat above Kenny’s shoulder, creating enough leverage to avoid crushing the lean blond with his weight.

“Whoa,” Kenny said around the corners of a self-satisfied grin, looking positively thrilled about the new arrangement. “This is not the stereotype.”

Cartman snorted. “If you were in it for the stereotype, you shoulda left a long time ago.”

“Oh, I dunno -- I mean you kind of have the Beast thing going for you. Like, friendless and rude, but in a sad cursed sort of way.”

“Yeah?” He grit. “So what’s that make you? The singing candelabra?”

“No, man, I’m the babe!”

Cartman dragged a hand over his face. “No -- will you stop that? You cast yourself as the babe in every one of these fucking analogies. I’m not David Bowie, this isn’t trippy hand-puppet land, and you’re not ever going to be a princess, dude.”

“Fuck off! I’ll be anything I want.”

“No in those pants.”

He tracked the baubles of white and gray in Kenny’s fractured blue eyes. Being under his friend’s familiar gaze was like putting on a favored shirt, or seeing the sun rise on his home planet after a while out in the brush. Something like that. But the black stripe of the leather collar drew his attention away again.

For a second he got a specious thrill from it, seeing Yellow Wolf collared, like a thing tamed -- but then he thought of Tall-tail, and Boo Boo, and Francesca’s dog buried alive, and felt a rush of disgust. He reached out and pulled at the loop of leather binding the collar, his hands cold and unfeeling. The restraint came free with a clink of steel against brass, and he threw it in the back
without looking away.

*There*, thought Cartman, pushing his thumb up the column of his truant’s neck, collar to jaw. That was much better. It had been the shittiest Wednesday of his life but it was already getting much better.

“You look like you been shot at and missed, shit at and hit,” Kenny said, smiling and shifting under his touch.

“Tough day at the office.”

Cartman inhaled, blinked to the sensation of a caress on his eyes, drank in his truant like an opiate; like everything was less shitty when he had it, but when he ran out -- or it ran out on him -- an emotional thing like a nuclear winter came through, like he was never quite sleeping anymore, never really talked to anybody but himself, eating only radioactive peaches from a can. But Cartman also suspected he was too fucking dramatic.

“Where’d you get this shirt? It looks older than you.”

Kenny looked down at the stained gray Coors Light number. “Salvation Army? My other shirt got shit on it -- and my little sister keeps taking my stuff -- ”

Cartman would’ve laughed at how poor he was if it weren’t so pathetic. “You need more than one change of gear. Don’t be wearing this nasty shit.”

Instead of arguing, Kenny pulled off the shirt and cast it aside in one clean movement. The little shit certainly had practice, given how often he was taking his damn shirt off for no good reason.

“Two weeks,” he said, because he couldn’t say anything as lame as *I missed you* to the skateboarding punk who almost single-handedly set fire to his miserable life, and didn’t expect him to be mad about it.

“Yeah,” Kenny confirmed, bringing his hands to the hem of Cartman’s shirt. “And you grew a whole beard, in just that time, huh?”

“No -- “ But with a touch of his free hand to his jaw, Eric discovered the dismal truth. “Well, it doesn’t actually take that long. I was in a hole.”

“You look like Wolverine off a bad bender. Like, if he really let himself go, first.”

“Hey!” Cartman barked, on instinct, and accidentally knocked his head on the roof. “I’m not fat,” he finished weakly.

Kenny sat up straighter, his hands were trying to draw him down and closer by the hips, but Cartman kept his arm braced against the window and resisted the pull.

“Well,” Kenny said, abruptly changing tactics. He brought one of his hands up to trail along the underside of his suspended arm. “The couch-lifting thing is paying off.”

Cartman raised an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised. Doing curls on the couch was mostly an excuse to avoid the gym in the winter. Couch-lifting was like yoga for men -- he could relax and call it a workout without really doing anything. “You’re snowing me.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, at just the right texture and volume for Cartman to find it hot as hell. Kenny passed his fingertips along the upper curve of his arm, then flattened his palm against his shoulder.
His other palm pressed to his bare side -- still trying to draw him down, and forward.

“T’ve sweat, like, all the way through this shirt, dog.”

“So take it off.”

“Err,” was the height of Eric’s wit.

“There’s -- “ His truant’s gaze narrowed suddenly to something very intense. “There’s more ink, here. You have tattoos.”

He shrugged the shoulder that didn’t have fingers questing at the sleeve. “You already knew that.”

“Yeah, but I thought it was just the dumb old Bruder brand, not -- not this secret other stuff.”

Cartman rolled his eyes. “They’re not secret -- “

“Then take it off!” He demanded. “Take it off, for fuck’s sake.”

Eric looked his passenger up and down. Yellow Wolf, for Chrissake. The fucking Yellow Wolf -- looking at him like he’d been hungry all this time, and someone only just noticed, and offered him something to eat.

Kenny tried to bring himself higher in his seat, then settled for taking Cartman by the scruff of the neck and forcing his head down. Their mouths met with bruising urgency before settling into a familiar pattern of catch-and-release; control ebbed back and forth between them. Cartman reminded himself of the exact cuts and corners of Kenny’s crooked smile, then withdrew when he got bit for it, allowing the seventeen-year-old to lick into his mouth. The grip at the back of his neck and Kenny’s rhythmic approach nearly drove his eyes closed, and he remembered how they could probably just fucking make out, for hours.

A hand snuck up the center of his back -- and in flinching away from the cool touch he accidentally came close enough for Kenny to catch him with an upward roll of his hips. Cartman reclaimed his grip on the panic handle above the window and put just enough distance between them to keep the kid from writhing the fuck around. Heavy breathing was claiming the space, and Trial by Fire bumped low through the speakers.

“C’mon,” Kenny had to pull back his tongue to growl against his lips. “You’ve seen my whole damn set up, pretty much. Why can’t you just -- “

“Only because you fling your damn shirt off every chance you get,” Cartman argued. “Doesn’t mean the rest of us need to -- “

“No I don’t! That’s only when I need to, like -- stunt.”

“Right, just like you needed to stunt on the vending machine at Red Arrow, the other day -- “

“Ohay, man, I’ll give you that, but I was pretty toasty that night, and it ate like three-fifty in pocket change. Take this off or I’ll rip it off with my teeth, like Ozzy did that bat head.”

Cartman paused with his free hand twisted in the back of his shirt, prepared to discard it. Kenny mistook his pause for hesitation.

“Hey, you don’t gotta be shy or anything -- you already know I dig you, right? At this point I just wanna get all the curves right when we fantasy fuck in my head.”
“What if,” Cartman began slowly, gesturing around his torso. “I had a dead conjoined fetus, like, right here, or something?”

“Oh, sick – ” He laughed. “But I would fuckin’ dig that too.”

That confirmation, together with the image of Kenny doing an Ozzy-with-the-bat-head impression on his shirt, were enough to convince him to cast the sweaty old thing aside. It didn’t help his nerves, however, when the truant’s quiet laughter immediately carried up into a canter again.

“Motherfucker what?” Cartman hissed, feeling blood rise to his face.

“No, it’s just -- “ Kenny skated his fingers over the fresh flowering bruises on his ribs, giggling. “Oh, how the tables have turned.”

“You should see the new ones on my ass.”

Kenny traced a long furrow from his collarbone to his hip, the grand effing Mississippi of Cartman’s old scars.

“Jesus,” he murmured. “What the hell is all this?”

“It’s old,” Cartman explained, shrugging. “A lot of it’s old. That one’s from getting struck by lightning when I was ten; this is from that Cthulu death cult thing; these are my appendix surgery and a really long story; and this is from motorcross in eighth grade. I did a lot of dangerous shit, man -- you know that.”

“You are an idiot,” he said, eyes on a slow roadtrip.

Light fell over the gray seats in bright shards, a shimmering neon blue from a vending machine selling diet sodas and cigarettes beside the dark stairwell. When the wind blew, it raced through the cement labyrinth and shook the frames of the frosty cars.

One of the searching hands lifted to Cartman’s shoulder, where a lump of scar tissue like gelatinous brown cobweb sat underneath his collarbone on the right side.. “This is where your partner shot you. You tried to hide it in skulls, I see.”

Wherever his eyes roved, his hands followed. Finally they traced the Schlafes Bruder tag across his chest.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he began. “I -- I hate the brothers of sleep, I mean I really hate them. But there’s something about the tattoo -- the way it loops -- that makes you want to look at it, all the time.”

“Kenny, there’s something I gotta tell you.”

He hummed his response, tugged on the brown hairs over the Bruder tag.

“It’s been haunting me all day,” Cartman said wearily, and shifted further back from his truant, until his lower back bumped the dashboard. “So I should probably just say it.”

“You should probably just say it,” Kenny agreed.

Cartman took a deep breath, and felt the numbness seeping in. He felt glad for it -- he would need it, for this. “I shot your brother.”

The hands fell away, leaving cold negative space as a reminder.
“I was on the Bruder case with another agent.” He said, looking without seeing, talking himself forward as if on a verbal runaway train. “We were tracking down a couple kids selling on our turf. We only needed to follow them back to the cars -- but they caught on to us and bolted. One of them pulled a gun, a fucking semi-automatic, started spraying -- and I fired back.”

“It was,” Cartman continued, unable to look up from the brown belt buckle scar on Kenny’s side. “It was the first time I ever shot somebody on duty. And I know it was the wrong thing to do. Doesn’t matter now, I guess. But you should -- I shoulda told you before."

“I just thought you should know what a piece of shit I am before doing anything else,” he added, miserable.

Cartman was beginning to shift away, anticipating a stumble over the center console and an awkward ride home, when Kenny stopped him with his hands at his hips.

“I already knew it was you, you piece of shit.”

He looked up, startled out of his self-pity. “But, those files are classified -- only the Sheriff -- “

“Yeah,” Kenny drawled. “I had to go there in person, and wait for the old fart to piss out seven cups of coffee. Took all the hard copies of my file, while I was at it.”

“When?”

“The first week after I met you -- I like to do my preliminary research.”

Cartman was dumbfounded. “And you still went around with me, and you still liked me after that? How?”

“I mean, I can’t say it didn’t bother me, dude, but I’m a McCormick. We don’t ever deserve what we get; that’s what fate is. My brother -- he kicked my ass worse than my dad, sometimes. Mom had him when she was seventeen, and he soaked up everything around him, even her alcoholic fits. He was buried alive before you even came around.”

Kenny made a motion around his head, as if he intended to pull an imaginary hood over his ears.

“I learned a lot from my brother,” he said, dark sides of his eyes on some distant point. “It really doesn’t matter who pulled the trigger, or who stood by while it all happened. It doesn’t even matter the choices he made or the things he did. You know what I’m saying? Blaming somebody won’t help -- I’m not gonna hang around waiting on a better past.”

The fact that the adolescent even had something to say about all this fate and death, time and eternity crap was damn spooky. Despite his childhood brushes with death, Cartman hadn’t actually come into an understanding of mortality until reading Kafka in high school. Until then, death had just meant going somewhere else. That was what adults preferred children to think, anyway -- that their friends and relatives aren’t molding in the ground, only “passed away” or some other bullshit euphemism. Crossing the River Jordan. Dining with the Devil.

They wanted kids like Kenny sitting still in Calculus classes. Jesus. He wasn’t even wearing any shoes.

A familiar cold cloak was settling around the officer, a reservoir of apathy to protect himself against the fucked up shit in his world. Things didn’t usually come so completely full circle and slap him in the face -- not unless they were wearing steel-toed boots, anyway -- and so Cartman managed to avoid learning from his experiences. He was a murderer, a chicken-killer, but legally he’d done
nothing wrong. And finally something in his life felt right, and it was going to get him locked up.

“You’re not a killer.”

“Huh?” Cartman grunted, surprise eking through the Oort cloud. He met Yellow Wolf’s gaze across the three breaths between them.

“There are no killers,” he said. “Just a bunch of scarred kids.”

Unsure if it was the appropriate thing to do but at a total fucking loss of logical thinking, Cartman leaned in and settled his head over his truant’s shoulder, and after a moment Kenny’s arms rose around him. The car was starting to smell like igniting fluid and ice-melt.

“I missed you,” he admitted.

“I know,” Kenny said, a smile in his tone. “You said you were strung out all day.”

Cartman pulled away to examine his truant’s expression, smug and smiling like Yellow Wolf on any other Wednesday, and wondered how he managed it.

“There wasn’t any coffee left at the station,” Cartman explained. “And everybody was calling about dog crap. There were onions in my sandwich.”

“And I bet that just about did it, for you.”

“And then some maniac set the commuter train on fire.”

“Damn! I’ve been wanting to do that.”

“And you wonder why I’m strung out,” he finished petulantly, and risked settling in a little closer -- because he was aching for touch and unsure how to ask for it.

He planted one hand on Kenny’s upper leg and slid his knees in.

“Hm,” breathed the truant.

“What?”

“I, uh, really like your hands,” he explained absently, staring down at it. “Hm, holy hell.”

“Thanks, but,” Cartman said. “You haven’t even seen what they can do.”

“Man -- ” Kenny chuckled. “You need a girlfriend. You need somebody patient enough to get to your awkward flirting stage.”

“I know. But at my age, you don’t find women like that at the bars, and I sure as fuck don’t find them at work.”

“No? What about that Stevens chick from CFS? She’s blonde, and something of a babe.”

“Dude, I’m not into you because you’re a babe -- “

“So why are you?”

“I’ve already explained this -- ” He blustered. “You already know what it is.”

“Eric, c’mon man, just say something nice. It won’t kill you.”
But earnest as he was, it was not enough to distract Cartman from the hollow of his throat, nor did he complain when he brought his mouth down on it.

“Love this song,” Kenny said, a little breathy, shifting in his seat.

Daylight, was the track. Cartman quirked a smile against his skin, drew back and brought his free hand to the back of his neck, raking it up into the short tousles of brown-blond hair.

“I like when he says he’ll knock the beef out of your top nacho.”

Kenny barked a laugh, traced the edge of his jagged canine with the tip of his tongue. “This is his new album.”

“Yeah,” he confirmed, admiring the creases under his eyes. “It was made for you, dude.”

Cartman was rewarded with the director’s cut of the seventeen-year-old’s wild grin. The sight of the familiar grill brought a rush of heat to his skin and a tremor of frustrated desire through his bones.

“Are you saying I’m king of the drop?”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

He knocked his head on the roof again when Kenny unexpectedly tweaked his nipple, and he’d just opened his mouth to curse when the teenager silenced him with his own, teeth clipping over his lip.

Eric felt around the center console and dialed the heat down, then tightened his hold on the panic handle to shift one of his knees in between Kenny’s legs. This allowed him to free both his hands without worrying about his circulation. He was just settling one at the adolescent’s hip when it became ass as Yellow Wolf lurched upward to meet him, shoving their chests together and fisting a hand in Cartman’s hair to force his head down.

“I want you,” he hummed against his ear.

Cartman rolled his eyes but bit down the corner of a smirk -- this was the ferocity he'd sort of missed. “You don’t wanna have sex in a car, trust me.”

“No -- I wanna have sex in your police cruiser, with all this fucking confetti in the backseat. When will we ever get this opportunity again?”

Eric shook his head from Kenny’s grip and pushed him back down into his seat. “First of all, we don’t really have the opportunity now -- like, this is a public place, technically. Now, if I were going to be caught with a half-naked minor in the company car, I’d prefer a fondling charge, and not any kind of full penetration scenario.”

Kenny curled his lip in the beginnings of a sneer and clasped his hands behind his neck. “You really suck the romance out of things.”

Cartman braced one hand over his shoulder and dropped the other between his legs. He hovered close enough to touch his forehead to his temple and watch his reaction.

“There’s nothing romantic about car sex, Ken,” he said. “It just means you were too cheap to take her someplace nice.”

“You never take me anywhere nice.”

“But you’re not a chick, and I don’t need to worry about that superficial crap.” Cartman
palmed him through his jeans. “I’d take you out to dinner if you didn’t spit so much, princess.”

Kenny released a delayed exhale and flung his hands at his belt to release the clasp. Black hearts and white rabbits dotted his boxers. Eric batted his hands away and found him half-hard through the thin material.

He felt the breath on his skin an instant before Kenny bit down on the junction between his neck and shoulder. Cartman probably carried a lot of stress around there, or something, because the nerves there flamed up with the odd pain-pleasure of a deep tissue massage. He sighed into the lukewarm pain and felt something of the day’s stress ease away.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but,” he said, sliding down the band of Kenny’s shorts. “I’ve never seen a good-looking cock.”

Kenny pulled away, licking his lips, and pressed his palm against the bite as if to put pressure on a wound. Cartman got the odd impression he was sucking venom from his blood.

“Does that mean -- ?” He said expectantly.

“Yeah, never thought I’d be into it. Dicks, I mean.”

“So -- “ He stuttered briefly when Cartman wrapped his hand firmly around him. “You like it?”

Eric paused in the middle of his first upward stroke. “I just said it’s better-looking than most. From a locker room perspective.”

Kenny laughed breathlessly. “I guess I haven’t seen a lot of dicks.”

“What? I mean -- don’t you watch porn?”

Despite his rapid breathing and the small twitches and rolls of his hips, Kenny still managed to scowl at this question -- or maybe it was the pull on his foreskin. Cartman didn’t like to work without lubricant, but it wasn’t strictly necessary, just required a little extra finesse. “I don’t watch it, I’ve looked at it -- “

“No wi-fi in the trailer, huh.”

“You can’t get that stuff on the library computers,” He said in a thin voice. “And it’s not like I’m gonna put it on my phone -- “

Cartman passed his thumb over the precum beading at the tip of his cock and adjusted his stroke.

“Can I see yours?” asked the teenager.

“I’m in the middle of something.”

“So, then,” Kenny took a shuddering breath and curled one arm around Cartman’s neck. “Later?”

“Maybe,” seemed the best way to put it off.

He slowed almost to a stop and watched the tension build on Kenny’s face -- cupped his balls and his hips jerked forward. Cartman wondered how long he could keep him like this. The thing with hand-jobs was that they could take forever, or not very long at all. He could feel him panting over his shoulder, though, desperate for release, if the past couple weeks had been anything for him like they were for Cartman.
He sped up his hand, and brought the other up to grip at Kenny's yellow hair. After a moment of searching, he set his teeth into the seventeen-year-old's slack bottom lip.

Between his ragged breaths a few words formed. “Eric, I'm -- gonna -- “

Cartman steadily increased in his speed until he was drawing noise from him continuously, and when Kenny finally came he drew out the finish with a few long strokes. After his climax had shuddered through him and Kenny slumped down like a liquid around his shoulders, Cartman slowed to a stop and released him. He rubbed the backs of his knuckles over his spine, around his shoulder blades, and Kenny groaned like he was having a stretch on a late Saturday morning.

Fishing for tissues and finding only Dunkin Donuts napkins under the center armrest, Cartman glared out into the darkness over his truant's shoulder, prepared to challenge the night itself if it meant a few more minutes alone with him.

“Yeller,” he murmured, at last, and Kenny withdrew, arms falling away from his neck like ropes back to the seat.

“Thanks, man,” he said, blinking at him through bleary curved eyes. “That was awesome.”

Cartman snuffed quietly at the embarrassing sincerity and tossed the dirty tissues in the footspace behind them. He slid the waistband of his boxers back over Kenny's spent cock, and ran his hands up his sides.

“You wanna go home with me?”

It was Kenny’s turn to snort and roll his eyes.

“I'll have to drop you off,” Cartman said, climbing back into the driver’s seat with half an inconvenient boner. “And check the car back into the station.”

Kenny hummed his approval from the front seat. Cartman flipped the sun-visor over the wheel and plucked out a keyring with two toothy hitchhikers. One for the gate, another for the door.

“Here,” he tossed the keys into his truant's lap. “I don’t like leaving the door unlocked.”

The roads were dark, slushy, and nearly abandoned. The traffic lights were only blinking yield signs and Cartman’s cruiser growled over the road salt like a grumpy, living thing. Somewhere between his apartment and oblivion, five questing fingers slid between the knuckles of the hand he'd rested on the gear shift. Eric turned his palm over, and everything slid into place.

Chapter End Notes

this wraps up the train job arc -- thanks for reading!
dreams

Chapter Notes

whoa! this is LONG. long-ass chapter. i luh you all.

EDIT: added some photos to help with the timeline. The first is a photo taken in NYC, credit to the blog Nell's dish... and the second, the window one -- if that looks off to you, it's cuz i took it in mutherfucking china. the last is actually a picture of a supermoon I took in burlington a few years back (but lets pretend its a sun)

Kenny had always been terrible at keeping up routines. He did what he wanted at whatever time he wanted and -- well, that obviously precluded a respectable attendance record at school. It didn’t mean he didn’t have the discipline or willpower to learn something new or complete a task -- obviously -- but it did generally mean two things: he wasn’t likely to do what he was told, and he was even less likely to be where he was supposed to be. Mostly because, Kenny thought -- he’d never really had anyplace he actually wanted to be at. Growing up in the trailer park had been growing up in a layered Hell of shitty days at school strung up alongside shitty days at home, the streets, or his great uncle’s scrapyard.

He learned to love moments in between. Like the quarter-hours before daybreak, when the sun is just climbing up over the dark pines. Or the first breath inside the Baron’s pub, searching for his dad on some weeknight in the deep winter, and the air is musky warm and woody, like barrel whiskey. He liked the way neighbors stood around on their porches and talked, sometimes, and the way the creekwater flooded the roads in the summer.

Being around Cartman had made him even worse at routines. Not only had he grown accustomed to activity in the small hours of the late evening and early morning, now he was liable to wake at a moment’s notice, attuned to the odd snufflings and sorrows of the resident insomniac. He hadn’t realized, but at some point, rides in the cruiser became his moments in between, and the apartment became somewhere he wanted to be.

When Kenny fell asleep the first time, he’d promised himself he wouldn’t.

The worst of the dirt and slush was behind him in fading footprints -- like a mud creature disappearing slowly up six flights of stairs. He shoved his key into the gate of 606 just as the hallway light flickered off and on with a loud zzzink! and Kenny had paused to let reality slam down around him. Staticky oriental music filtered up from the crack in the door across the hall, its old-timey tempo distorted by the sounds of shouting coming from the next door neighbor’s. It smelled overwhelmingly of pizza and beer.

Fuck the system, Kenny thought, finally pulling open the outer gate with a screech of iron on concrete. Break the law. He entered the apartment, and shut the doors behind him. Apart from the glittering laser-point eyes of the stereo system in the living room, and the ever-present glow from the coffee pot in the kitchen, there was no light. As his eyes adjusted the darkness receded, began to turn and mottle like a shadowed wood -- sharp corners and lopsided shapes of conjoined furniture emerged, and the lazy two-toned gaze of a crooked window-shade eyed him from the shrubbery of shadows in the bedroom.
The keys to his T.O.’s apartment were in his hands -- everything Yellow Wolf had ever wanted was at his fingertips: food to eat, stable shelter, safety from the streets, Cartman’s trust. He had implanted himself like a microchip in the cop’s brain, and shacked up with the law like a heart worm, or a brain tumor -- he’d done it, he was behind enemy lines. Now he had the opportunity to turn it all inside-out.

Or all according to plan, anyway. Fuck up the life of the asshole who shot Kevin in the motherfucking face. Small stuff, first -- his sleep schedule, his reputation at work, maybe -- then his job, maybe his love life. Take over everything, and trash it.

The real Yellow Wolf wouldn’t’ve got attached, Kenny thought. Not so quickly. Maybe he was a changeling. Just a poor, destructive copy of his original self -- the pure intentions of the anarchist mixed up and muddled with the confused emotions of a fucking teenager in love. And if not love, then at least in some serious like because Kenny was messing up all his plans, losing his fucking mind over it.

His O.G. plan to fuck the officer to Wichita and back and have a big bad Wolf laugh about it sort of fell apart when Kenny decided he wanted him in his life all the time.

There was no need to remember to take his shoes off at the door, since he’d lost them to Axel. Kenny had studied the patterns for weeks, noting the number of times train deals met cop resistance, and the times they went free. He’d thought for certain the South Park commuter would be stopped and cleared tonight -- he’d bet his shoes and socks on it -- but Axel put his money on the train going free. And thanks to Cartman and his damn undercover squad, he was right.

The water ran slate-gray off his legs and hands -- he turned the heat up even though he heard hot showers were bad. Even if they were that bad, he thought he deserved one, after tonight.

Kenny had been a lot of things, but never a bitch. He never put a hand out asking for anything; he never complained about his situation -- he never waited for the fire to carry flame to him, he carried the fucking flame to the fire until he became it, until he forgot even how to be just Kenny anymore. Yellow Wolf told himself he would never settle for safety or comfort. But he was tempted.

Raiding the dryer for clothes and crawling over an unmade bed -- he was sorely tempted.

Resolved to wait for the officer’s return, planning on both an argument and a shedding of clothing, Kenny took a deep breath and felt his skeleton settle into a comfortable, warm sprawl. Scoured clean and just pleasantly sore, he fell asleep in under a minute.

Everything was still dark shadows and gray shapes when he woke, on the tail-end of a noise he wasn’t really conscious in time to catch. It could’ve just been the heat. He wasn’t used to the clamor of a structure with central air; even the drop-in center tended to drop below 65 degrees at night -- no pipes ran through their walls, it seemed, only ancient wheezy vents trading stale breath for stale breath.

Kenny lifted himself lightly from the bed and crept back into the apartment’s steep shadows. There was a light on in the kitchen. The doormat was wet and the night patrol jacket was missing from its hook.

Music gradually stepped into focus, a soft tempo thrumming along beneath the building’s dying heartbeat. He glanced at the stereo and recognized a song not on Cartman’s standard ride-around playlist. It was his bummed-out playlist, his get drunk and lay down on the kitchen tile music --

He scanned the floor just in case, but figured his truancy officer was too humiliated from the last time
Kenny found him indisposed on the tile with a mason jar of forgotten whiskey. The funny thing was, if he’d been in his little cop outfit or some shit, it could’ve been the opening to a burlesque show, or a layout in one of those fashion mags where the girls pose in positions with their heads at odd angles, always unsmiling and looking a little stoned.

After telling him as much, Eric had had a little bitch fit about it and struggled to stand. Kenny liked to see him struggle. Especially when it came to the contradictions between his dumb decisions and his hot-shit image.

Some gloomy Tyler the Creator song came on -- called Young or Fucking Perfect, he couldn’t remember -- and Kenny rocked on his toes and sort of smiled at the coincidence. He bet Cartman listened to it just to get depressed about his age.

His parka was pretty dirty and the only shoes he could find were a measure too big, but Kenny pocketed his keys and left the apartment anyway, unsure of and frankly unconcerned by the time of night, and trotted down the hall to the stairwell.

A cold breeze funneled down from the roof, licked over his ears and ankles until small hairs and goosebumps rose all over his skin in defense. He found the source of the cold on the eighth floor: a hole in the ceiling, a gaping maw of black sky.

Kenny ascended. He thought how darkness had density, how it built itself up like a forest. Scary things were just strange things, after all; the eye just needed some extra time to warm up to them.

Yellow Wolf prowled up the ladder, through the hatch, and into the night. The cold shot down the back of his neck and the first thing he did was stumble on the lip of steel around the exit and plunge his hands into the frost. A cigarette butt rolled over his thumb.

Kenny swore and spat some gravelly snow from his tongue, then shaded his eyes against the single floodlight glowing from the exit behind him. The silhouette of his truancy officer standing on the ledge set off all kinds of alarm bells in his head, and he knew Cartman was a fucking emotional roller coaster even in the best of times, but this was just drawing a damn line.
Kenny tread noisily through the trail of footprints leading to the outer parapet, and leaned over the stone. The white of Eric’s Adidas had gone slate-gray with wear. A gob-shaped glass engraved with a bumblebee sat in the frost next to his feet, perspiration frozen solid at the rim, clear liquid at the bottom unbothered by the cold. Kenny lifted the glass to his lips, took a small sip -- coughed and sputtered until bits of his soul were coming out his nose.

“Pepper vodka,” said Cartman.

He spat over the wall. “What’re you doing up there, man?”

“I always end my days on the roof.”

“Okay,” Kenny hummed, uneasy. “You gotta end ‘em all up on the ledge, too?”

The Adidas shifted with a crunch and growl of impounding ice.

“C’mon, man. Shit -- ” he continued. “We’re pretty high up -- I mean, it’s pretty windy up here.”

“Dude, relax. This is not a cry for help.”

Kenny laughed humorlessly and leaned over his forearms until only his toes touched the snowy rooftop.

“I sleepwalk a lot,” Cartman admitted, in the slow, deliberate delivery of someone trying not to sound drunk. “Don’t remember where I am, or where I’m going. Lose my car in the damn parking lot -- talk to people who aren’t fuckin’ there. I’m a real headcase, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Kenny agreed without thinking. “But I mean, people do crazy stuff every day. At least you call it for what it is.”

“It’s like cereal.” said the slurring cop. "We eat cereal because of a deep and abiding fear of masturbation, but nobody thinks about that, they just shovel it in -- better to forget. Forget your questions, who you are, and where the truth comes from.”

And to Kenny’s horror, his truancy officer looked down and extended a hand towards him.

“Uhh.” He shook his head. “Nah, listen, Yellow Wolf ain’t about heights -- “

“Yellow Wolf ain’t shit if he can’t climb up here.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Kenny shoved the stupid arm away and set his own hands in the frost. He talked his feet nervously into joining them on the ledge. “I’ve seen things that would make you squirm, man. I’m from the underground -- I’ve been places that would make all the milk in the Sheriff’s department curdle. In fact, I’m just back from your mom’s. She knows I’m the real shit.”

Finally he settled in a crouch on the ledge and exhaled deeply, tried not to look down at the thinning, taxi-based main street traffic. “Also, I’ve got fucked up and broken falling through glass and out buildings enough times -- my parkour has a strict height limit.”

“Don’t pussy out.”

“That’s not pussying out, that’s -- that’s just refinement. I’m refining the Yellow Wolf image down to groundwork. I’m cutting out the sword to focus on the joust. That train shit was pretty sweet, right?”


“Hey, I gotta confess something.”

“Should I record this?”

“Ha-ha -- I gotta confess something, officer. I wanted to fuck you up, kinda -- I thought I’d jerk you around and get you fired, maybe. Stotch dropped my case because I locked him in the bathroom at the 7-Eleven and took his cruiser for a sail around the quarry. It would’ve been fine if I didn’t leave it in the lobby of Shady Acres.”

Cartman laughed. “Car crash at a retirement community -- genius.”

“Anyway,” Kenny rested his chin on his knee and squinted into the distance, but the night was a dark wall. “I pushed him, but I didn’t just wanna push you. You had to be punished, you know -- I had to really fuck you up, take up your job, take up your life -- “

“That’s -- literally exactly what I expected from day one.”

“That’s not the confession, though.”

Kenny slowly extended himself to stand over his center of gravity. The outer face of the building
seemed to curve beneath his feet. He reminded himself to breathe.

“I never really tried very hard,” he admitted. “It was too much fun riding around with you.”

“How is that a confession?”

“Well, I know you like Yellow Wolf for fucking around with rules, for being outside the fold -- but I’m giving up the ghost here; I don’t care anymore. When we're together I don’t care about anything that happened before, or what happens after this.”

“So, you’re abandoning a vendetta against the shit who shot your brother -- because you decided you like him?” Cartman shook his head, chuckling. "That's fucked up. You don’t have to try to be Yeller, dude; you always are, whether you're lighting up trains or not.”

Kenny inched closer to the officer and considered sliding his arm under the night patrol jacket. “I wanna bite you.”

He snorted again.

“It’s fuggin’ cold out here,” said Yellow Wolf, narrowing his eyes on the officer’s expression, but finding it cast in shadow by the light at their backs. “What’s up with you, anyway?”

“Nothin’.”

“Naw, come on. You said people forget. You forget who you are.”

“Yeah, you know,” he said blearily, and gestured at the sulfurous cityscape lain before them. “On a ledge. Everybody’s on a ledge.”

Kenny followed the hand with his eyes.

“Take a good look.” Cartman continued. “This is what you face, every day.”

“Uhh -- short step and a long drop?”

“Yeah. Yep.” He had to be drunk. "Even if you work a long time, make it all the way to the top floor, you know? Marriott. Presidential suite-ass living. Even all the way up there, you’re always one accident, just one misstep, one last hit or a car accident away from the big sleep. If you're not perfectly down with your past then at least be perfectly down with the now -- because it's all you have, really, in the end. One day people will get it, like -- it’s not where you got in life, it’s how you, effin’, lived it. Good times and shitty.”

“Is this -- everything you learned in college, or, an episode of 16 And Pregnant?”

“Agh. I’m serious, dude. It seems simple, maybe, but so many people can’t even find their way out of the buildings, anymore. Can’t leave their houses without make-up on, anything to pass for a stock copy -- you know what that does to you? Putting on a face every day? Building up a social act like a fucking personality architect?”

“Everybody’s gotta do that, once in a while.”

“Right, but then you gotta wash it off. You gotta wash all that junk off.”

“You never take off your uniform.”

“Bitch -- “ He exploded. “I had it off all day!”
“No, I mean,” Kenny reached around to tap at his chest. “This one.”

“Yeah, well, that one doesn’t come off.” Cartman pressed his palm over the Bruder logo like somebody in a heartburn medication commercial.

“Sure it does, if you stop wearing it. You don’t needa be a cop, or a drug dealer.”

“But without those things, I’m just an asshole who kinda likes cars, and music.”

Kenny shook his head, his disbelief a half-smile. “You think you need authority for people to respect you -- you thought you needed a degree, and then you thought you needed authority. You are basic.”

Cartman tensed, then shifted his feet with another crunch. “That’s fair.”

“Just like what you like -- you don’t gotta have shame about it.”

“I don’t have shame about it!” He snapped. “Look, I’m 26. My life is in the toilet -- my family doesn’t want anything to do with me, my friends are all doing better things someplace else. Everything’s in pieces, because I only ever learned how to break shit. Sometimes I think the only thing left to break is -- you know. Me. So if I don’t take this step, at the end of the day, then that means something’s left salvaging. That’s why I do this. I know it’s depressing, but I’m not ashamed of it -- it’s just this thing I’ve learned to do. Some people stand in the rain, to wash all the shit off. I do this.”

“That’s okay,” Kenny said. “I don’t want ya to be happy all the time, bro. Don’t bust a nut trying to be just happy Cartman. That’s not even half of who you are, probably -- look, I don’t want to change you, I just want to be here. I don’t wanna find you up here with this pepper vodka bitch right here, this -- this fuckin’ government cheese hoe.”

“Jesus,” he pinched at his nose. “You didn’t just call my drink a government cheese hoe.”

Kenny had uttered half a comeback when an arm tightened around his neck in a headlock that almost squeezed his airways shut. He was suddenly looking out over the hundreds of dark windows on the face of the building under their feet, and the tiny streetlights, and choking. In the grip of some chortling drunk bastard who couldn’t take a hint if it was shouted in his damn face.

“Heights -- “ he choked.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Cartman began, and Kenny caught his breath halfway to fucking shouting when he felt them fall from the ledge.

“You’re not about heights,” he finished, released him when they were both back on the snow-covered roof.

Kenny shoved his truancy officer away and took a moment to catch his breath. “You’re crooked, man -- you coulda killed me!”

“Do you have any idea what it feels like,” Cartman paused to throw back what remained of the liquid in the bumblebee glass. “To be laid out bleeding on the roof of a moving train -- just when it explodes in flame?”

“Uh-huh, well,” Kenny kicked at the snow. “You don’t gotta get salty about it.”

“I’m not getting salty about it. I’m just giving you a taste of your own fuckery, alright? Everybody
needs it, once in a while. That was my point.”

“Thanks for the lesson, officer. I could use an adult role model. So you wanna get outta here?” Kenny said, starting for the exit hatch. “Before you pass out in a snowbank, and wake up in the hospital.”

“Hey, I told you that in confidence,” Cartman said, the slow crunch of his footsteps trailing behind. “Not so you could throw it in my face. It only happened that one time. I was twenty-three -- it was a terrible birthday.”

Kenny bet he had a story for all twenty-six ‘terrible birthdays’.

“You know,” he hummed, considering the ladder and then simply dropping through the hatch back onto the eighth-floor landing. He stood slowly. “Between you and your neighbors, this place is kind of a freak show. Or a live-action remake of that crackhouse from *Hey Arnold*.”

Cartman always laughed like someone had just taken a hard fall in front of him. Someone elderly, or very religious. And because he was buzzed he sort of roared -- loud and unrestrained, with the usual note of hateful sarcasm -- until the concrete sang with it.

He calmed his ass down on the seventh floor landing and spoke: “If you thought TV was an exaggeration of the way people live -- it’s not. It’s the cleaned-up version. Like -- life with all the farts cut out of it.”

“Then how do you explain *Terrance and Phillip*?”

“You watched that show?” He said, incredulous, elbowing in beside him as they left the stairs. “Thought that was after your time.”

Kenny elbowed back. “Fuck outta here -- I was raised on that show!”

“Well, that explains a lot.”

“Oh-ho, *this* coming from the guy who holds people down to rip ass in their face -- “

“I warned you!” He interrupted, one hand suddenly chopping through the air. “*I told* you not to leave the milk out again, or there would be consequences -- “

“You’re a fuckin’ maniac.” Boy, he liked him though. “Nobody gets that hung up over milk.”

Cartman took a deep breath and spoke like he was in the same room with a sleeping baby and trying very hard not to shout. “Sometimes, I think you do all this little *annoying* shit -- just to piss me off.”

“I can’t help it. You’ve got all this fire in you, man. I want to stir it up.”

“Is *that* why you never put the cap back on the *fucking* toothpaste?” He muttered, sliding his keys all around until Kenny guided them into the lock with a nudge of his hand.

As the gate opened, the gob-shaped glass slipped from the crook of Cartman’s elbow. Kenny caught it halfway to the floor.

“Whoa, nice,” the cop hummed appreciatively, pushing his way past the inner door. “I really like that glass.”

“What’s with the bee?” Kenny trailed after him, ditching the too-big shoes at the door and heading for the light in the kitchen. “Wait -- it’s from that place in Cancun, isn’t it?”
“Jesus, I forgot I told you about that.”

“It’s okay,” he said, putting the glass in the sink and then leaning his hands against the counter. He continued to stare at the bumblebee engraving. “It sounds like something you’d do, anyway.”

Sex in Cancun. Yep. That’s how they did it on TV -- blue surf, white beach, hot girl, and smiling foreigners. Honey -- nature’s ambrosia. Kind of kinky, if you were into that.

Kenny bet he could crush the glass in one hand.

“Heidi faked labor pains to get us in first class on the plane. It was awesome. I had the best Moscow Mule I’ve ever drank; everybody seems so nice and harmless when you’re drunk in first class.”

Kenny drifted away while he talked, stopping to stand on the threshold between the kitchen and the dark living room. He heard the music gently thrumming. Dueling emotions created a drop sensation in his stomach. He hated the way Cartman lived -- but he still kind of loved the way he was.

“The hotel had a pool in the lobby that was like glass, dude. Every day was rainy, and warm -- there were geckos all over the walls, and shit. We rolled like twenty-five jays, the first night.”

“You wanna sleep?” Kenny said abruptly. “You wanna try sleeping?”

But Cartman was moving past him into dark, slamming around in the laundry closet, flicking the light on in the bathroom. “I have some things to do, first. Go to bed.”

But Kenny stood rooted in place, watching him lurch room to room, thinking glumly of the police cruiser lit by the neon blue of the cigarette vender. An abandoned parking garage could not really compete with Cancun.

“Go to bed, hey,” Cartman stopped next to him on his way out of the kitchen again. “Are you mad? Hey -- are you mad at me?”

Kenny shook his head and avoided eye contact, but Eric circled in front of him and leaned against the back of the couch. There were deep hollows on his face where youth should’ve been.

“Whadda you need to do?”

Cartman uncrossed his arms and took Kenny by the wrist. And he sulked about it, but he went with the pull and stepped closer.

“Whadda you need to do?” He asked again. “You needa lay down on the floor?”

“No,” Cartman intoned, looking apathetic, sounding impatient, but his thumb drawing circles over Kenny’s pulse. “I need to clean the blood off my neck. I need to get this shit off my face. Okay?”

Kenny nodded.

“Stop looking so bummed, suddenly. It’s making me sober.”

There was something about people under the influence that made them very easy to stare at. Kenny didn’t think that meant he thought less of Cartman, when he’d been drinking, and that made it okay to ogle -- more like there was some extra vulnerability there, something kinda shiny watery that he didn’t see every day. Like a bust open clam, you could kill it and eat it or you could admire its pearl. Kenny kind of wanted to do both.

“Gimme an hour. Then I won’t look like such a piece of shit,” he continued, rubbing at one of his
eyes. Kenny often imagined his red eyes as bullet holes but today they bore more than a passing resemblance, the lids red and raw and skin faintly purpled beneath.

“If there was, like, a Bono lookalike contest, you’d be a shoe-in.”

Cartman narrowed a weary glare on him, and his hand started to slide away but Kenny caught it by the fingertips. “There are less creative ways of calling me a big piece of shit, I guess. I seem to be taking hits tonight, so go ahead. What else you got?”

Kenny swayed forward. He’d never let a challenge go free before. “Well, from the look of you, man, not many punching bags take hits so well -- Francesca beat your meat like she was a fucking butcher. I should thank her, honestly, ‘cause at least now you look as crumby on the outside as you are on the inside. I mean, what the hell happened to ya? Two weeks ago you were demeaning women and hiding your liquor -- now it just sits out on the counter and and even Stevens says how worried everybody is. You went from a pretty convincing human being to barely passing for a used teabag. Are you huffing the copy toner at work? You want girls like Wendy mailing you soap the rest of your life? You wanna section off your sex life into some memory of Cancun and call curtains on the whole fucking love game?”

“Hey, I’m working on it -- “

“It’s been four weeks! Six weeks, now. I’m getting pretty sick of the booty embargo.”

“The -- what?” His eyes widened comically. “We’re -- we’re not even in a relationship -- “

“We’re not?” Kenny closed the distance between them and slid his hands in around his truancy officer’s neck. “We’re not?”

Cartman cleared his throat and glanced down like he was checking a water-level about to rise past his lungs. It wasn’t water, though -- it was blood, creeping up his neck, warming Kenny’s hands, leaving the tips of the cop’s ears bright red.

Seeing and feeling the emotion under his hands set Yellow Wolf buzzing; if he didn’t pull away soon he was gonna rip him apart, or something.

Kenny dropped his hands boldly to Eric’s hips and admired the shy freckles dusting the bridge of his nose. “That’s better. You already look less -- well, less dead and more living. Living dead. A reanimated corpse.”

“That’s hot,” Eric said, tone frigid but his face still red as hell. “Will you still want me when I’m eating brains and coughing up teeth?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m trying to tell you, man.”

“Although -- “ He continued, narrowing his gaze on the tracks of dirt falling under the cop’s neckline. “You really are musty right now.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Cartman snarled, sending Kenny back a few steps with a jab to his chest. “I stink. Everything in my fucking life stinks of decay -- it gathers up in the corners of my fuckin’ eyes and I can’t deal with it so I just let it fester; it’s disgusting. You gave away your shoes and socks tonight, man -- I can’t even get rid of a magazine subscription. You might’ve been to some disgusting places, but you haven’t ever fucked with anything like me before. I saw a therapist for three weeks last year -- then he quit his job, renounced his faith, and moved to Mumbai to nurse people with terminal infectious diseases. This guy wanted a stomach ulcer more than my problems.”
“Life’s a ditch,” he sped on earnestly, but his hard red eyes fell to the space between them. “My life’s a ditch -- I’m just terrific with a shovel. You don’t wanna go down with me.”

Kenny’s hands twitched but he knew enough not to reach out when Cartman was in a mood. So he stuck his hands in his pockets and stared until he caught his eye again.

“Do you want me to go?”

With a noise of frustration, his T.O. pushed himself from the back of the couch and drifted away, pulling at his hair with one hand. The bathroom door shut behind him.

Kenny loosened up on the smile he’d been biting down on; he probably wasn’t an expert on Cartman, or anything -- he sure fuckin’ felt like one, sometimes -- but he knew progress when he saw it.

Eric was looking at his life and not finding room for Kenny in it among all the clutter. Worse yet, he was realizing he didn’t need any of that old clutter anymore. He couldn’t imagine clearing away all the bullshit -- but that meant he was trying. He was trying to make space. He was reopening old questions he thought he’d found answers to -- who he was, what he was doing, who he was doing -- and struggling for better answers.

Kenny thought of waiting on the couch, but it was sort of breezy in the main apartment and he was fresh off the roof, so he fled to the warmth of the bedroom and kicked his legs under the covers until the worst of the shivers were gone. The running water set the whole building creaking and groaning -- and when it stopped, the resounding thunk jerked Kenny out of a light doze. A loud electric buzzing filled the new silence. Clippers, he assumed. Eventually they cut to a stop as well, and Kenny laid half-sleeping in the empty quiet, half-watching the twisted shadows play outside the bedroom door.

Through sleep-fogged eyes he registered a slight change in darkness just before a thump on the bed confirmed the return of his truancy officer. A familiar shadow arrived to hover over him with a flush of cedarwood smell from Wendy’s crazy soap.

“I’m really stoked you’re back, actually,” he said, as if he’d come running from somewhere, and Kenny felt the cold press of his mouth just over his eyebrow. It would’ve been super touching and shit, if he hadn’t made a quacking sound while he did it, and Kenny barked a startled laugh.

After waiting for him to settle in, Yellow Wolf rolled onto his stomach, flung his leg over both of Cartman’s, and fell asleep.
A snow squall arrived sometime before dawn and coaxed Kenny from a strange dream. The wind whistled outside the window in the bedroom in long, periodic swathes and hail the size of pretzel salt tip-tapped at the glass. The fly-by storm bruised the skies black and blue and it could’ve been any hour, really -- even a late one, after dinner or something -- but Kenny knew early morning when he smelled it. He knew an empty bed the moment he opened his eyes and drew breath in it.

A pale light scattered the darkness into gray beneath the door, and Kenny crept around it into the living room. The sounds of revving engines and police sirens came from the television, muffled under the quiet blanket of dawn. He slipped over the arm of the couch and landed in a puddle on the opposite end of where Cartman played. He felt the weight of his truancy officer’s disapproving stare -- but Kenny kept his eyes trained on the virtual drag race, even though the flashing lights and images were almost bright enough to be painful in the surrounding gloom.

He slept a little bit, between the 4s and 5s of the morning, probably, and woke again to the low mumble of the TV. This time it was broadcasting some show on MTV, and Cartman was bitching at it while he fussed with his case files over the table and took dictation notes on his laptop.

“Is it just me, or is *Wild ‘n’ Out* -- scripted as hell?” He muttered, carving rings with his pen in the margins of a piece of paper when the ink ran dry.

“And what’s with these fuckin’ anti-smoking ads in every commercial break? Why do I need those crammed down my throat? You don’t see those on ESPN, or TLC. Just because I’m watching a self-proclaimed freestyle rap show, and not *My 600-Pound Life*, I’m the one who needs help -- I’m the one who’s probably sucking death through a straw and considering getting knocked up.”
Kenny unwound one of his arms and pinched at the cop's side. The rant ended abruptly and Cartman flinched out of reach, glaring down at him like you might a black fly buzzing around your slice of pizza. Eric was real sensitive about his love handles, Kenny could tell.

After a short grump-filled silence, the cop turned his attention back to the television.

“You know how much money candy and toy industries dump into research every year? Not a few Gs, not millions, even. Billions. Billions of dollars dumped into research on how to make kids addicted to your shit in thirty seconds or less. You think Rainer and the Bruders are the ones to watch out for -- *Ha!* The real druglord superstars are on your television, dude. Talking to your dick, telling you to eat meat and buy cars. Telling women to be hairless and complacent like those inflatable sex dolls.”

“You’re a conspiracy theorist.”

Cartman side-eyed him, tapping his pen to his chin. “All conspiracies were theories first.”

Kenny snorted into the crook of his elbow, just barely clinging to wakefulness. “I bet you thought 9/11 was an inside job.”

“Show me the plane!” He snapped. “Show me the damn wreckage! Two indestructible black boxes burned up in the crash -- but they found the *paper* passports of the supposed *terrorists*? *Come on.*”

“So -- if there was no crash, what happened to the passengers?” Kenny yawned.

“They led all the passengers off the planes,” Cartman said in a grave tone. “And into gas chambers.”

“Dude!”

“What?”

Kenny shook his head against his arm, chuckling at the raw absurdity of it. Then he cleared his throat, and laughed some more.

“Okay, I’m still working on that part,” said the cop, shifting defensively. “There’s a lot of fishy shit going on there, anyway. I just gotta work on that part.”
The next time Kenny opened his eyes, the apartment had expanded with white negative space -- the partially clothed hour of daybreak -- and the TV was quiet at last, along with the ranting couch-monkey at his side.

Cartman had turned and partially extended his legs over the couch, leaving Kenny very little space to unfurl without crossing the cop’s boundaries. He loosed a whimper of discomfort as he woke, and felt Cartman’s eyes on him before returning to the file he was holding.
“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What’you looking at?” Kenny demanded, some of the dry honkiness of sleep on his tongue.

Eric huffed a breath and looked up again, eyes half-lidded and impatient. “Don’t you wanna go lay down, or something?”

Yellow Wolf uncurled and stretched his sore shoulders, sizing up the cop next to him until he made up his mind.

“Yes.”

“Hey, don’t -- “ Cartman tried to close his legs but Kenny had already moved between them and forward.

“Climb on me,” he finished lamely, as Kenny walked his hands to his hips and sunk down gratefully, turning to rest his ear over his T.O.’s belly. He took a deep breath and let his eyes fall closed, welcoming the relief to his back and shoulders, still feeling tired, but alert enough to want something to do.

“Hey -- no!” Cartman clapped his hand over his pocket and grabbed at his wrist where he’d wiggled it inside. “No phone! Not right now. I need to use it.”

He pulled the phone from his grasping fingers and held it out of reach.

“Jesus,” Eric murmured, narrowing his eyes, as if Kenny had just slithered out of a pond and tried to molest and rob him on his own couch.

_Oops_, Kenny thought absently. He’d done pretty much exactly that. More than once. He let Cartman have the phone and drove his hands underneath his truancy officer instead, warming them against his back.

He fell asleep watching the sun rise, listening to the pulse of blood under his ear. When he woke, it was at the tail-end of a noise he was just in time to identify as the lock releasing, and then the door opened.

Kenny froze, prepared to rise -- but then he noticed he was still in the loose cradle of Cartman’s legs, and the fool was sleeping, at last, head tucked into his shoulder and every other breath arriving with a faint, noisy effort. It was enough to make you smile.

But somebody was coming into the apartment, and he had to decide what to fucking do.

Making himself scarce was probably the wisest course of action, but Kenny didn’t want to leave Eric undefended on the couch, especially when he was finally at rest. If he was startled out of it now, he’d probably never sleep willingly again.

_Time’s up._

“Oh,” came a woman’s voice.

Kenny tightened his arms around Cartman’s middle, but couldn’t really disguise the fact that he was wide awake, very much attached to the renter of the apartment, and eventually, he had to look around.
The first thing he noticed about Heidi was her hair -- it was either a very pale brown or a very flaxen blonde -- as it appeared almost gray in the morning light. She had tied it up probably hours ago, and strands thick and thin sprung loose from the knot, falling limp and colorless just below her shoulders. She carried a pair of shoes tied to a bag at her hip, with a strap that ran crosswise over her chest, pinching and pulling at many layers of cold-weather clothing. Kenny could smell that she’d either come via main street on foot, or she’d taken the bus.

“It’s okay,” she said, with a thin but sincere smile. “I actually came by to return these -- “

A keyring dangled from her fingers.

Kenny watched as Heidi placed the spare keys on the coffee table next to Cartman’s favorite camouflage-patterned Xbox controller, and turned to the TV. She picked one of the remotes from the line-up and after a few seconds the stereo lit up on standby. His playlist started on the end of a quiet melody.

She wasn’t stunning on first glance but when Heidi turned and sat on the edge of the soundtable, the light from the window made her plainness very pretty.

After looking around the apartment and smiling at odd corners, Heidi’s bemused eye fell back to Kenny. She touched the tips of her fingers on one hand to the crest of her upper lip and giggled.

“Sorry, it’s just -- I had a little bet with my friend Wendy, about -- about him.”

Wakefulness returned to Kenny but he feigned drowsiness so as not to frighten her. She didn’t seem concerned whether he was listening or not.

“I thought he would find someone younger and prettier. She thought he would find someone -- well, someone male.” She scoffed another short laugh. “I suppose we could both collect on that one.”

Kenny very carefully extracted one of his arms, crossed it over Cartman’s stomach, and propped his chin on it to look at Heidi easier. She was making a truly decent effort not to stare.

“I only got his text this morning, so -- figured I’d come by on my break.” She flipped a hand at them. “He’s still sleeping at odd hours, I see. Fifteen, twenty minutes at a time. Anywhere. Nodded off on a roller coaster once, I swear.”

Kenny snorted, casting a glance at the sleeping face of his truancy officer, then settled back on Heidi.

She pulled out her phone, then, after a moment of silence, she took a half-step away from her perch and extended it to him. Kenny freed his other hand and took it.

“It drove his mother crazy in middle school,” she said. “But it also makes for some interesting photography.”

It was a picture of Marsh, standing with Stan and obviously posing at some party. Wendy wore some kind of partially-nude Statue of Liberty get-up -- all paint and few fabrics, her dark eyes stern and challenging like a suffragette smoking a cigarette -- and Stan was smiling sort of puffy-eyed next to her, one pointed Vulcan ear sagging a little lower than the other.

“That’s him in the horns,” Heidi smiled.

Behind Marsh’s shoulder stood Cartman, oblivious to the crowd, fucking sleeping.

Kenny grinned, swiping to the next picture. “What the hell -- “ he blurted.
“Oh, that’s Kyle’s Bar Mitzvah,” she explained. “He went to so much trouble to get invited, too. He heard they would have belly dancers.”

And he heard correctly, apparently -- but there he was, conked out in the front row like a day-old flower while everyone else swarmed around him. He couldn’t believe even pubescent Jewish boys and belly-dancers could put Cartman in a coma.

The next picture featured his truancy officer -- probably Kenny’s age -- not just in the background, but front, center, and dead asleep in a bathroom stall, surrounded by graffiti and suspicious stains, with the outline of a big dick with a few artistic ball hairs drawn on his forehead in black marker.

Kenny burst into a round of giggles that he only stifled to keep from shaking the whole couch. The next few photos were all of a similar nature -- up until one with Eric very much awake, one furious red eye trained on the person behind the phone; it was blurred with motion, and Kenny felt a little bit sorry for whoever took the beating for the bald stripe cut over the side of his head.

“Good,” Heidi said with a small hum, accepting the phone back from him.

At Kenny’s inquiring look, she explained: “You wouldn’t be laughing, if you didn’t know what a bastard he is.”

“Why did you keep going back?”

“Well, certainly not for his personality,” she said, and a pink flush rose to her cheeks.

“Oh,” Kenny said, then really processed her answer. “Oh.

“How old are you?” She asked suddenly, then shook her head as if to abandon the question. “Sorry, it’s just -- you look so… “

“Twenty,” Kenny decided, since his usual snarky ‘twenty-four’ probably wouldn’t fly past Heidi’s rather discerning hazel eyes.

“Oh, wow. Young -- you’re so young!”

“Sorry,” she said sincerely, taking in his frown. “I don’t mean to patronize you. Age is -- well, what’s it mean, anyway? Age is like anything else of value in the world. It doesn’t actually exist on its own; it’s all relative to what somebody else’s got. If you had a million dollars, and everyone else was making 200 bucks a week, like me, then you would be a rich man. But the same man with the same money on a deserted island is actually quite poor, isn’t he? Let’s say he grew up on that island. How would he compare with someone the same age from, say, Chicago? Money, age, power -- they don’t stand on their own; but our thoughts and preconceptions give them value, all the same. Hardship and intellect aren’t distributed based on how long you’ve been breathing, right? Age is an amalgamation of your brain’s recollection of the past, and your mind’s interpretation of it -- I’ve met very old kids, and very young adults. Everything in between.”

Kenny didn’t understand everything Heidi was talking about, but he decided he liked to hear her talk, especially since she seemed to be trying to comfort him.

“Eric used to say,” she began quietly, eyes on her folded hands. “That nobody ever really gets old, they just get very careful about things. I don’t think he’s wrong, exactly. He’s never exactly wrong.”

She slapped her leg and exhaled a forced peal of laughter. “Wow -- I haven’t talked this much in weeks. I never talk about anything meaningful at work.”
“What was it like?”

“What was -- “ she looked up with an earnest expression, searching for the right words to help him.
“ What was it like, being together?”

Kenny blinked.

“Well, I’d be lying if I said it was all rainbows and sunshine, but -- looking back, I don’t regret it. I
think it made me a better person. The longer I was with him, the harder it was to separate who I was
from who -- who he is. In the end, I’m proud of myself, for having the strength to pull away. He
needed something I couldn’t give him, and I deserved better. Because he doesn’t change, he won’t.
Please, if that’s what you’re hoping for, don’t wait up on it. Eric can put on a grown-up act
sometimes but, at his core, I know he’s the same person I grew up with. He inherited a lot of hatred
from his household, I think, and never really learned how to direct it, only how to express it. That’s
what makes him so... destructive. To others and himself.”

“But,” she continued with a sigh, and flipped her hand again in a small gesture of futility. “Every
once in a while, that hatred gets tempered before it reaches you -- squeezed out, so you just get the
drippings -- and sometimes, I mistook it for tenderness.”

While she talked, Kenny teased the hem of Cartman’s shirt between his fingers, then he pushed his
hand underneath it. He thought about every time the cop had said something al
most nice, and
imagined how hard it must have been -- coming from someone raised to hate.

“Oh -- “ Heidi circled her bag to the opposite hip and leaned back on her hands. “Did you mean
what’s it like, being with him, sexually?”

He blinked at her again.

“Unbelievable.”

Kenny felt his ears heat up at the same time his eyes widened, and he withdrew his hand to prop
himself up on an elbow. Cartman snorted, but didn't wake.

“I heard -- “ he started, stopped at the amused gleam in Heidi’s eye. How did he say this? He’d never
talked to a woman about sex before -- not one who wasn’t being paid for it or who he didn’t actually
want to have sex with.

“It’s not very big, no. But that’s if we’re talking length.”

Heidi leaned forward as if they weren’t the only two conscious people in the apartment. “But the
diameter -- it doesn’t actually have to be very long to hit the right spot, anyway, some people just
really get off on size. But you know what -- I dated a guy just last month with the biggest penis I’d
ever seen, and he did not know how to use it. Boy, what a mistake that was. The gift wrapping might
look really nice, and the package might be a nice size, but that doesn’t mean shit if it’s an empty box
underneath it all.”

Kenny bit his lip over a round of nervous laughter.

Heidi smiled and some lovely lines formed around her eyes and mouth. “You see it all the time with
penguins.”

“Penguins?” Kenny asked, crossing his wrists and dropping his chin to them.

“I work at the aquarium,” she explained. “We have colored tags on the penguins to identify the
mates, so you can always tell who’s getting it on outside of bounds, if you know what I mean. The ra-ra aggressive big-dick males might get dibs on their pick of females, but the ladies know who to go to for a good time.”

“And males,” she said suddenly. “There are gay penguins sometimes, too. I don’t mean to -- oh, shit. Sorry, I don’t even know if you’re gay!”

Kenny didn’t either. He glanced up at Cartman again, and imagined his truancy officer hadn’t touched the topic with a ten-foot pole -- they were wading through the muddy waters of sexuality together, he guessed.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Kenny.”

“Hi, Kenny,” she said warmly. “I’m Heidi. I used to date that asshole. In, like, grade school -- it wasn’t all that serious after that. But a girl gets familiar, you know.”

“Sorry,” she said abruptly. “I never usually talk about this. All my friends grew up with him, too, so - - they just think it’s horrifying.”

“Did you guys ever, uhh -- ” Kenny had formed half a descriptive hand-gesture before realizing that making an ‘o’ shape with his finger and thumb was as indicative of assholes as it was vaginas. “Do it in the -- ”

“Back?” she offered, not in a superior way, but in a gentle coaxing tone Wendy sometimes used with him when she knew what he was getting at ten years ago. Women.

“No, but once, accidentally, it went in while we were having sex -- “

“Accidentally?” Kenny said, incredulous.

“Well, they’re not actually very far apart,” Heidi shrugged. “Anyway, it hurt, so I told him to stop.”

“Oh.”

“To tell the truth, I never understood why any girl would want to do anal. For boys it make sense -- because of the prostate and all -- but I was just talking with my girlfriend about this over some low-quality wine.”

She scooted forward some on the soundtable and leaned over her knees again. “Turns out, there’s way-y more going on in the colon in terms of touch-sensitivity; the vagina is really just the one nerve cluster and some basic math -- so there is some lure there, I guess.”

Heidi giggled. “All dudes like it, she says, they just don’t know it yet. Puts her finger up her boyfriend’s butt while giving him head, and they’ve been going together two years.”

“Did you ever -- ?”

“Kenny,” she said seriously, shaking her head. “I didn’t bet against Cartman being gay, or curious; I bet against him ever admitting it. The fact that you’ve made it this far -- I mean, hats off to the effort, man, really.”

Heidi took off her bag and sat on the floor in front of the stereo, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankle. She nodded to the music for a while. It was a Lauryn Hill track.
“He was always -- “ she said, her eyebrows cinching close. “Hard to satisfy. I didn’t realize at the
time, since he was my first, but -- it isn’t actually normal to come three or four times without the guy
ever finishing. I never knew how to help, you know? I could never seem to do what he wanted,
partly because he never knew what he wanted -- and I just went with it because it was too good for
me.

“The thing with Cartman is -- well, it’s very simple, actually. He’s an artisan. He likes to do things
with his hands, to be master of a craft. That’s what drew him to piano, to gaming, and later fighting
and driving, rolling blunts and motorcross. When we were in school he never studied or anything; he
only paid attention to robotics and athletics -- nothing else held his interest. He either knows it
already, or it doesn’t matter. That’s Cartman.”

Heidi pulled her legs up and crossed her arms over her knees. He noticed her looking at the keys on
the table.

“That’s it,” she said. “I think that’s everything I needed to say to say goodbye to him.”

Kenny’s stomach clamped and he started to feel awkward laying over the former object of her fancy.
Since his policy was not giving a fuck, he didn’t move, but watched her closely.

“You’re not twenty.”

The knot in his stomach was gaining weight fast.

“It’s just -- it seems like you’ve never had a conversation about sex before in your life. I know that’s
not an indicator of age, or anything -- my friend Bebe is waiting till marriage -- but… please don’t
take this the wrong way, but -- you look like you’re falling. Hard.”

Kenny slowly dropped the lower half of his face into the crook of his elbow. He had been
thoroughly found out.

“You’re not twenty,” she said again. “And you’re not old enough to want to seem younger, so the
only reason to lie is if there’s something to hide -- “

Heidi’s breath caught. “Oh my God. You’re not legal.”

“You said age wasn’t anything -- “

“This is different! This is -- please tell me you’re at least seventeen?”

“Only for a few more months.” He grumped. “What’s a few more months? Am I gonna wake up on
my eighteenth birthday, suddenly responsible and sexually able?”

Heidi’s shoulders fell. “I guess not.”

“You won’t tell?”

She flipped a hand. “It’s gonna be hard enough convincing anyone I found Cartman snuggling on
the couch with another man. They’d sooner believe I found him at the mall buying cardigan
sweaters.”

“Your age is just -- “ She paused, tucked a loop of gray-blonde hair behind her ear. “Well, you must
really be something, Kenny.”

With that, Heidi pushed herself to her feet, reclaimed her bag, and adjusted her winter layers beneath
"I should get going. Grab the bus back to the aquarium. We’re expecting some weather later tonight, so... It was nice meeting you, really."

Since he owed her, and his neck was cramping up, Kenny pushed himself away from his truancy officer and sat up -- his shirt was just falling back into its natural order when Cartman grunted his return to the waking world.

“Wolf,” he croaked, turning his head to the opposite side. “Get the fuck off me.”

“Hi, poopskins,” Heidi said loudly, and Kenny had to bring his forearm up to his mouth to keep from blurtng out a laugh. Heidi probably threw stones at glass houses on the regular.

Cartman’s eyes snapped open, and his whole body tensed up, but he didn’t move. “Heidi. Don’t you have suicidal porpoises to feed?”

“Penguins, actually,” she said with a lofty shake of her head. “It’s not Sea World, Eric, it’s the aquarium.”

“Right, and it’s not a prison, it’s a detention center.”

She tsked and rolled her liquid hazel eyes high. “I’m leaving, anyway. I just came to drop off your keys. Since you asked me to.”

“Exactly -- I said drop them off, not come inside and poke around while I’m sleeping. How long have you been here?”

Long enough, Kenny thought, trying to make himself small as possible behind the crook of Cartman’s knee.

“Long enough to have a pleasant conversation with your -- “ Heidi’s eyes landed on him and though Kenny didn’t find them unkind, they were stern as all hell. “Wolf.”

“I trust,” she continued, untying her shoes from her bag. “I will see you both on Kidney Day. Prepare to have your asses smoked -- I am not going easy on you, and I invited my cousin Porsche this year. She's a sharpshooter.”

Cartman snorted. "I'm gonna be smoked when I walk in, thanks -- and I'll still kick your ass. And I don't remember approving any team additions at the last yearly."

"Look at it this way," she said, slowly circling the couch on her way to the door. "I'll bring Porsche, and you can have Kenny."

When she left, a heavy quiet fell. Even the tonal riot of Wu-Tang could not break the nervous shroud settling over Kenny's shoulders. He cleared his throat.

"You told her -- your name?" Cartman hissed.

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Liar!" He fucking barked. "Hide -- I don't know! You're supposed to be the master of deceit, here -- what the fuck!"

Kenny flinched.

"What else did you tell her?" He demanded. "How long was she here?"
"I didn't tell her, she guessed -- "

"Guessed what?"

Kenny bit his lip.

Realization fell darkly over the cop's eyes. "You gotta be kung-fu kidding."

"She said she wouldn't tell anyone -- "

"She's a girl!" he howled. "Everybody and her damn cousin will know by tonight!"

Kenny was cold, suddenly. He pulled his knees up, rubbed his arms -- he wanted his parka. There was nothing he could say that would convince Cartman that disaster hadn't struck -- and wasn't this everything he'd feared, from the beginning?

"Fuck!" He swore, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Wendy's gonna track me down like a fucking blood-sniffing shark."

"I'm sorry." Kenny blurted. "I fucked up."

"Sorry's not gonna work this time -- don't you get it? Even if you weren't my damn truant, even if you were eighteen tomorrow, it wouldn't matter -- one word from Heidi and I'm gonna be put the fuck away. Even if they let me off, you are getting taken a-way -- to some bumfuck foster home full of ass rapists and fake shit and -- I'm gonna lose you."

Whoa.

"Dude," said Kenny, with a certainty he didn't really feel. "It's not gonna happen. I swear. I'll deal with it."

Cartman eyed him, accusing, doubtful.

"Come on, you know what I can do," Kenny said. "I'll deal with it -- I swear."

He watched his truancy officer visibly try to calm himself down, and sort of succeed. He was managing his anger, tucking it away, forcing some long exhales on top of it. Kenny dropped his hand to Cartman's ankle and leaned his head against his knee. Eventually their eyes met.

"Were you -- " he started, his eyebrows doing a nervous dance. "On me? The whole time?"

Kenny bared his teeth.

"Son of a bitch," Cartman sighed. "I hate you so much."

He decided not to tell the cop about the subject matter of his conversation with Heidi.

"What's Kidney Day?"
“What happened to this shirt?”

“What?”

“This shirt, Cartman.” He flinched at the sharp *fwap* of an innocent, bystanding article of clothing being whipped into shape in her snappy hands. “It’s stained red under the collar.”

“I got *salsa* on it, o-kay *Wen*dy?”

He refocused on the tangle of wires behind the left-side subwoofer, intent on ignoring the woman in his apartment, even if it meant hiding on the floor behind his stereo system with his back turned to her creaking sighing presence. He wasn’t afraid of Wendy -- not at all. Just -- every lousy instinct in his whole body wanted her *out*.

“And this one? You got salsa on this one, too?”

“Yes.” He grunted, blowing some of the lint fluff off the ports panel.

“All of these?”

“I like salsa!”

“Lower your voice, please,” she miffed -- she *miffed* -- at him. “You need to stop having your meals in front of the TV.”

The volume on his speaker system had been fading, the past few weeks. It was subtle, but there was a milkiness to the left-side sound quality that bothered him just enough to pull the whole system apart and gut the wiring in the few hours he had between shifts. There was a slice of heel bread in the toaster oven that was supposed to be his meal of the day, but he’d barely pulled the mustard and his last half-tomato from the fridge before Wendy’s knuckles came rapping down on his godless peace. One look at her, frowning, arms crossed -- a pilot light of urgent promise lit deep in her brown eyes - - and his lunch was totally fucking ruined. He wasn’t scared of Wendy. Not even a little. But he’d suddenly needed a bong hit more than a sandwich, and then he’d remembered the problem with the stereo. Because this, at least, Cartman thought, was a problem he could fix -- this could be done right, and everything would be a little bit better in the end.

“I’ve been eating in front of the TV since *The Mr. Potato Head Show*.”

They’d already went at it twice since she walked in. Over *random* shit, like the lack of parking space in front of City Hall, public servant titles like ‘Alderman’ which Wendy thought were archaic and anti-feminist. They had argued about him ignoring his mother’s calls, and a seven-dollar bet from eleven years ago.
He felt her footsteps moving around his apartment. Precise, measured footfalls like a praying mantis marching across his careful spider threads -- his skin prickled with unease. Because the mantis was inedible, probably, and just slightly too dangerous to fight.

“Maybe that’s your problem, then.”

“What?”

“I said maybe that’s your problem, Eric.”

“Oh-ho, right,” he sneered at the dusty paneling, his hugely inflated sarcasm just about to go pop and start spitting up venom instead of swear-words. “That’s it, Wendy. You nailed it. Cartman’s variety of affective disorders and chronic dysphoria aren’t a malady of the soul at all; they’re from eating tomatoes -- and the indecent lure of that damn potato man -- "

“You don’t need to start shouting again.”

He wasn’t even shouting, though. He was cramped in a corner behind a 50-inch TV and a six-hundred dollar sound system, huffing old dust, and really he wasn’t even shouting.

“Wendy Marsh, ladies and gentlemen -- the supercomputer with tits! Analytical wunderkind, mankind’s fabulous female sequel to Aristotle, for Christ’s sake -- and here Freud had me thinking early sexualization of my mother and improper breastfeeding made me this way.”

He finished checking a row of wire jacks, scrutinizing all the cables for kinks, splits, and mice damage. Then he started to check them all again.

“Do me a favor, Wends, and whatever issue of Chicken Soup for the Gestating Maternal Soul you’re reading in pregnant bitches book club, leave me out of the damn test runs. I get more than my daily dosage of amateur mothering from substance abuse ads and bottles of bleach.”

Wendy took a deep breath and the exhale seemed to race around his apartment. “I only meant, maybe, some parts of your routine are unhealthy -- and you’ve just always been looking the wrong way for what to fix.”

“Uh-huh -- and the solution is yoga and avocado toast, or whatever off-brand millennial optimism you’re selling me today. That good fake shit.”

“Why don’t you let someone help you, for once?”

“I’ll do whatever I damn please. This is my house.”

“That’s not a very intelligent argument. What are you hiding in the corner for? Leave that thing alone, and -- well, how do I put this?” She snapped her fingers. “Stop acting like a nervous little bitch.”

Cartman opened his mouth with a tornado on his tongue and accidentally inhaled a shit ton of dust and old skin flakes, probably, and sneezed. His anger came back as an afterthought, and it wasn’t nearly as scathing as he’d hoped.

“Screw you. You’re the one who came pounding on my door at one in the afternoon, when you knew I’d be on my lousy lunchbreak, getting ready for a shift -- and you and I both know it wasn’t to fold laundry.”

Wendy didn’t respond right away, but her presence went from an annoyance to an ache as she came
within five feet of him. “If you know why I’m here, now might be a good time to stop futzing with that and talk to me.”

“I might need to get behind this panel,” he muttered under his breath, after finding nothing obviously wrong with the exterior wiring.

“Eric, stop.”

He exhaled through his nose and glanced over his shoulder at the Child and Family Services representative. Change of tactic. Women always appreciate the facade of honesty, even if they can see right through you. “Look, uh -- he’s not here, okay? So I don’t really know what you want me to tell you. Whatever Heidi said -- “

“I’m not here about anything Heidi said,” her voice closed around his like a pair of long-bladed scissors. He watched her lean against the arm of his couch, arms crossed over her disturbingly swollen abdomen. “Token advised me to pay you a visit, actually.”

Cartman turned fully around and allowed himself to fall from his squat to his ass on the floor by the wires and half-disassembled control panel. He frowned up at his old friend’s wife. While her presence in his apartment was not unusual -- to his great and bitter resentment -- what was unusual was the peculiar expression she wore. Wendy, like most people their age, was two-faced -- and Cartman, like some people their age, was fairly skilled at separating the two. Behind her blank maw of professional concern, he detected something like delight. Something had landed on her plate which she had longed to see dead, and she hadn’t had to lift a finger to kill it.

“No he didn’t,” he accused.

She took off her hat and brushed away some wisps of dark hair that fell into her eyes. “Well, he said you looked ready to drive screws into somebody’s kneecaps. It was either send me in to check up on you, or send in a unit armed to take out Michael Myers.”

Cartman scoffed, unimpressed, and eyed the voltage box clipped to the wire trail. Maybe the wattage was off? He wondered, and picked it up to check the dial settings.

“So where’s Kenny?” She asked, pushing herself away from the couch and beginning to wander the space some more.

“School.”

Wendy hummed, and the sound milled around him as she wandered the aisles of his home, stopping in exactly the places where his emotional poltergeists lurked: the corner between the sink and the coffee pot; the threshold between the kitchen and the living room; the mirror in the bathroom -- and she frowned at these haunted places, arms folded like they made her cold.

After resetting the voltage adjustment device, Cartman dug out the correct size flat-tipped screwdriver from his rubber-banded fasces of odd tools and began working the panel loose, screw by screw.

“So, if I called P.C. High, and asked them -- “

“They’d say he’s marked in attendance,” He said, breathing over his shoulder to avoid stirring up more dust, then returning to his task. “Because there’s more than ten-thousand students in that lousy daycare building, who speak over twenty different languages, for fuck’s sake, and they’re leaking out of the damn classrooms just so the rest of the budget can be spent on buying more departments and liars -- “
“This is your way of saying you don’t know where your truant is.”

He shrugged one shoulder against a sudden tension in the fabric of his sleeve, and while reaching back to pull one of the strings to his hood from behind his neck, Cartman noticed an ugly streak of yellow staining the chest of his favorite Macbeth sweatshirt. He frowned down at it. The soft black material had been laundered into a rusty umber and the logo on the front was chipping, but it was still his favorite sweater -- and now its washed-out darkness had been violated by this alien stain.

“-- Cartman. Are you listening to me?”

He scratched at the dash with his fingernail, but it hung on with metallic determination. There was a thin sheen to it, like paint. “It’s none of my business, where he is.”

“Your business was to keep him in school,” Wendy reminded him, with a hint of the frostiness from her early adolescence.

“Monitor’s not beeping,” he said, then leveraged the handle of the screwdriver between his teeth to work the backing off the stereo with both hands. He spoke around the shaft. “No beeping, no problem.”

“That’s not how it works. Just because you’re not wrong according to the rules doesn’t mean you aren’t failing to serve the community -- “

He cut her off as soon as his hands and mouth were free, and his sound system well and truly gutted before him. “What am I supposed to do, Wendy? Run the streets lookin’ for him? I don’t have a trace on the little ballbag -- I’m not being paid to follow him to class and make sure he stays up to fucking task. I’m not Kanye fucking West.”

“You don’t care that he’s manipulating school records?” She suggested in her damn social worker tone -- soft but certain, dire and elegant like the chasm between mountain ranges. “It doesn’t matter to you that he might not graduate?”

“What did you come here to talk to me about, exactly?” He snapped, finally looking at her just to wave his hands in the right direction. “I’m busy, here -- I’ve got important shit to do. The fact that some underage blond fucknut is making a buck running around P.C. pretending to be McCormick doesn’t bother me -- as far as I’m concerned, this kind of stunt is exactly what society needs; it serves the community, dammit -- the same way a body needs viruses to adapt, to grow, to correct its weaknesses. Don’t you get it? I don’t feel guilty at all -- watching Yellow Wolf ride the system makes me want to laugh.”

“Doesn’t it worry you?” She asked, abruptly changing direction. “When you don’t know where he is.”

Eric turned his attention back to the subwoofer and waved his screwdriver over his shoulder. “I can’t fucking control it. He’s a hood rat. It’s in his nature.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He grit his teeth against the feeling of her looking at him. He was good at lying. Always had been. And Wendy had never learned to see through his lies, exactly, but she had learned how to outrun them -- how to carve them down from boisterous hate into recognizable shapes. And Cartman was so rundown, lately, that barely fifteen minutes of conversation with the CFS rep left him feeling stripped down; the meat of the falsehoods he piled on over his skin just to get up every morning carved down to the bone. Suddenly he felt almost bare, parked in the shadow behind his stupid 21st century sound
system like a big crab spider -- scary-looking but ultimately harmless -- with nothing but the thin threads of denial between him and obliteration. But he was too fucking dramatic, sometimes. “Stop asking me fairy questions.”

“It’s not an anything question, Eric. Why -- does it scare you?”

“No.”

She shrugged her shoulders high and her eyebrows rose with them. “Then answer it. Go on -- lie to me.”

“I don’t have to do fuck-anything you say.”

The space behind the panel was dark, too dark to see much at all. He examined his bundle of odd tools for a flashlight, and slowly worked it loose from the collection.

“Cartman.”

“What?” He spat, exasperated and hoping the veins on his damn forehead would shove her out the door. “What d’you want me to say? I can’t do anything about it. Of course it fucking worries me. But I can’t fucking control it.”

“You keep saying that,” she said, like she’d suddenly lost interest.

Cartman lowered the flashlight and the flat-tip screwdriver, since his hands were shaking and he couldn’t see worth a damn anyway. He felt waterlogged like a stormsail -- all halfway hanged and shivery -- and started sort of daydreaming about being on top of a burning train, nothing in his head, none of the abstract pressures of good citizenship or the constant abiding eye of the law. The only spectator is the unseeing night sky -- just that heat under his hands and his stupid life on the line.

“So then, what about right now? You must be worried right now.”

“Get the fuck out.”

“Why don’t you stop with the wiring and talk for a second?” She suggested mildly.

“I said get out of my house, Marsh!” Cartman felt the sweat dry on his skin and the air came over him like a naked wind. “I know why you’re here.”

“Why am I here?”

“I know you talked to Heidi. Girls talk.” He dropped the tools and pushed himself to his feet. “So I want you to leave, and come back with evidence, an open case, or a damn warrant. Until then, I’m not saying dick.”

“What makes you so sure I’m here on bad business? I told you I was just checking up on you.”

“Well you didn’t come by with flowers, so I’m assuming you’re here to fuck me over Heidi’s small-mind gossip.”

“If that’s why I’m here, then -- “ She peered at him. “Do you deny it? Why aren’t you fighting?”

It certainly felt like they’d been fighting all afternoon, but Wendy was looking at him like he’d barely shrugged it into second gear.

“Look, I don’t have time for this.” Cartman advanced on her, intending to herd the intrusive pregnant
woman to the door. Wendy stood on the edge of the living room just outside the entryway, arms crossed. “If that’s all you came to say, get out. Stop quibbling away my lunch.”

“You’re the one quibbling it away, from my perspective.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your speakers, Cartman.”

He snorted. She didn’t know anything. She expected to step into his swamp of anxiety and coffee grinds and just pluck all the right threads, but it wasn’t that easy. Cartman wasn’t easy, as a rule. He was impenetrable, brick and mortar compared to bargain psychiatrists like social workers. Like her. Nobody would ever know his problems backwards and forwards like he did -- didn’t he spend hours chewing on them in the dark, after all? He was too fucking hard for whatever fantasy she’d drawn up to describe him. He was so hard he didn’t even need sleep. Or love or food or friendly phone calls like all the average motherfuckers out there.

“Listen,” she said, with the keen back-edge of a threat in her tone. “I’m not here to persecute you for having a -- a special bond with your truant -- “

He coughed around a hysterical burst of laughter. She waited for him to finish.

“But, if I find that the nature of that bond puts Kenny in any danger, physical or emotional, then I will have him removed. Understand? He’ll be transferred to another T.O., and held back in school, probably. If you cooperate, you can return to your regular casework, and Kenny will be someone else’s responsibility. If you resist, or you hurt him -- I will have you crucified.”

“Whatever.” He said, around a mouthful of ash. “I don’t care.”

“You’ll lose your pension.“

He felt his lower jaw grind and stretched his hands out at his sides. “Don’t threaten me with what I already know.”

“The door’s right behind you,” he continued.

Wendy shook her head slowly. “We’re not done here, and you know it. Allowing your truant to skip school is unacceptable -- “

“Fine!” Cartman said, his vision flipping red like fresh sushi. “Let’s go find him, Wendy. Let’s search all of Park County -- “

He brushed past the CFS rep into the narrow entryway and threw his hands at the locks on the door. “Fuck lunch. Fuck my fucking paperwork-proportional salary. I’d rather cruise around with my friend’s pregnant girl looking for a fucking -- professional -- tease -- “

The door jerked open with such force that it flung the gate outward with a screech of iron on concrete, and he heard the rattle of the heavy metal frame striking something in its path.

The familiar hallway was ugly and battered as usual, dripping with tracked-in mud and slush, faintly buzzing with antiquated flickering lights. This all registered slowly to Cartman -- then the voices flooded in, overwhelming his pulse from the soles of his feet to the back of his neck with confusion and upset. Finally his eyes landed on his latest fuck-up -- a huddled orange shape on the floor, blood.

A jab in the kidney from Wendy sent him over the threshold at last, and Cartman fell to a crouch on
the dirty hallway floor beside the spitting teenager. Some easy-breathing Taichi music was eking from underneath the Asian lady’s door. Somewhere else a cat yowled, and a radio issued an inclement weather warning.

“-- the fukkaya doin’ in there, kickin’ the damn doors down -- “ his startled slurring swam into focus while Cartman tried to assess the extent of the damage through the red.

“Let me see -- “ He tried to pull his arm away from his mouth, but Kenny seemed more interested in cursing than being examined. With sudden dread, Cartman scanned the floor for teeth.

“I’m gonna check your mouth, okay?” Without waiting for the adolescent’s chatter to stop, he pushed on his upper lip just to be sure that nothing had cut into the gums that would need stitches -- but yes, it was all there, every crooked tooth in its right place, but a hell of a split lip. Cartman’s anger came back as an afterthought.

“What were you doing standing behind the door?” He said. "Why are you always sneaking around behind every goddamn door?”

“You’re blamin’ me?”

“You were listening in.”

Kenny lifted his face and his sneer was half blood and black around the cut. “Kinda hard not to, you shouting your damn head off -- who ya got in there?”

Cartman was about to check on Wendy’s distance behind him when something caught his eye on the floor by Kenny’s pocket.

“It’s Wendy, dude,” he hissed quietly, slamming his hand down on the fucking contraband and glancing back over his shoulder into his apartment. “You can’t be here -- and you definitely can’t be here with this shit!”

Cartman brandished the four plastic sheets of white pills so only they could see. He got a look at the wording on the back of the foil, and thought of hitting Kenny on purpose. “You’re shoplifting sudafedrin -- you little fuck! Do you even know what this is for!”

“Shut up!” Kenny barked suddenly. “God, you’re so angry -- what the fuck? Marsh won’t -- “

“She might! She fucking might! I have no idea what’s gonna happen, but you’re a walking lawsuit, man. Keep working the block like this and you’ll end up, either -- either rocking orange behind bars or fucking toe-tags in the mortuary, and -- ” He hesitated, watching as Kenny pulled up the bottom of his shirt to wipe at his bleeding mouth. “And you’re gonna get brain damage or something if you keep hanging out with me,” he finished.

“You bust up my lip -- “ Kenny accused, hardly paying him any attention between dabbing at the blood and probing the cut with his tongue.

“I know,” Cartman said hastily, looking back again, but Wendy was keeping her distance just shy of the door. “I’m sorry, I just -- “

“You knew it was your fault. You knew it was your fault and you tried to blame me anyway!”

“I know -- but Wendy’s been here grilling me on my lunch hour, and you showed up with another misdemeanor -- I thought I knocked your fucking teeth out -- “

“I -- what?”

He didn’t look up from wiping the blood, even though his filthy T-shirt wasn’t doing a terrific job of it. “I said it’s okay. I forgive you.”

Cartman bit the inside of his cheek and shoved the stolen drugs deep into his pocket. “C’mon. Come -- clean it out properly. You could be chewing on old gate flakes.”

Kenny finally lifted his head, and his winter-burned blue eyes gouged at Cartman, carelessly pointed and lethally bored. “Gate flakes?”

“Iron oxide, dude.” Eric nodded, feeling a kind of futile despair settle heavily in his gut, because he knew he was attached to someone destined for hardship. “Tetanus.”

He managed to draw the bloody high schooler up from the floor and lead him shuffling him into the apartment, where Wendy waited like a black cat in the shadows.

“Hi Ms Marsh,” Kenny mumbled on his way past.

“Hello,” she said.

He dumped his parka on the kitchen counter and retreated to the bathroom. The door closed on the adults’ clipped silence.

Cartman scowled at the wet jacket on his counter and moved to retrieve it. He was just finding a hook in the entryway when he noticed Wendy outside inspecting the hallway. She bent over with some effort and picked something up from the concrete. He prayed for the first time in three years that it wasn’t drugs.

She closed his front door behind her and held up a metal ring with two dangling keys between her fingers. “Okay, explain this to me. Fast -- it’s the only chance I’ll give you. God knows you don’t deserve it.”

He swallowed, glanced at the bathroom door. *Kenny* was the one who was supposed to *handle* this, or some shit. And fuck all, anyway -- Cartman was a *cop* and a *grown* man and he could deal with this. He could wizard up something, probably.

“I can’t keep him *out,*” he decided. “I had to give him keys just to make him stop picking the damn *lock.* It’s just like you said -- it’s just like you said it would be; you let them in once, and then they walk all over you -- whenever they want. You said not to feed them and I fucking *fed* him, too.”

Wendy dashed her hair from her eyes with a flippant wave of her hand. He tried not to stare at her belly.

“That’s all?” She said. “You fed him, he slept here. That’s all?”

Cartman thought how amazing a glass of water would be. Or one of those carbonated sodas that taste a little bit fruity. Shit, he’d take an M&M from under the couch, at this point -- anything besides a dressing-down from his friend’s pregnant wife.

Instead he fled to the living room with her irritated sigh on his heels, homed in on the darkest corner, picked up his tools, and peered at the jungle of wiring behind his stereo as if the solution to his total emotional paralysis lay deep in the thicket of copper and plastic. “I told you to come back with a
fucking warrant. If you want a deposition, you gotta go through the protocol first.”

“I don’t want a deposition,” said Wendy, her voice following after him like a conscience. “I don’t want a case, or a warrant. I just want the truth from you.”

He felt her approach just as he succeeded in jamming his flat-tip screwdriver into a dark crevice, then broke a fingernail trying to work it loose. He couldn’t’ve swore harder if his hand was on the Bible.

“Cartman, come on -- “ she said with her faraway doorbell softness. “Leave the speakers alone, for a minute -- “

“They’re broken -- “

“They’re not broken,” she snapped into fifth gear in an instant, and her heel hit the carpet with a muffled thump. “You have an ear infection, you idiot!”

Cartman’s knuckles whitened with dry spiderweb cracks as he strangled the tools in his grip, feeling suddenly like he was losing his damn mind. Or perhaps he’d already lost it -- and everything he saw and heard and felt were only reflections of his own inner shitstorms.

He flinched at the weight of her hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, come away from there.” She pulled on him, and when he didn’t come, Wendy tugged on the hood of his sweatshirt until he was forced to rise from his shadowed corner and allow her to shove him unceremoniously onto his own couch.

Wendy bent at the hips and touched the back of her hand to his forehead. He jerked away. She snapped her fingers beside his right ear. He jerked away. She snapped them next to his left, and he snarled at the painful sensation echoing like underwater impact around his ear canals. He clapped a hand over the ear.

“Jesus,” she muttered, using his moment of paralysis to pull on the neck of his hood. “Why do you look like you’ve been bit -- and choked?”

“Row your own fucking boat!” He said, and paused to swallow around some of the cold nausea that had been bothering him for months. It didn’t go away, just piled around his throat, like paranoia. Or really dry mashed potatoes. “Bitch,” he wheezed.

Her eyes narrowed and more dark hair fell around them. She looked ready to snap her fingers again, and Eric squinted a little, preparing to flinch.
It was a sign of the tension in the room that just the slight squeal of the bedroom door easing open made Wendy close her mouth and look, while Cartman continued to stare dismally at the small
cavernous darkness behind his sound system, and the subwoofer eviscerated in the shadows. He felt the hairs on his skin rise.

“You recommended me,” Cartman accused quietly. “You fuckin’ did this.”

After an unclear amount of time staring into the stillness, Wendy decided the noise was inconsequential, and moved to the end of the couch to lean against the arm. She spoke even more quietly. “Forgive me for thinking you wouldn’t have a problem resisting the lure of statutory rape.”

“But did it have to be Yellow Wolf?” He argued, hardly listening to her. “Did it have to be fine ass Yellow Wolf?”

“Don’t whine -- you are too old for that. That’s a frat boy chasing tail excuse.” She warned, then took on a trepidated expression. “Have you -- you haven’t, slept with him?”

Cartman snorted.

“Things will only be better for you if you’re honest.” Wendy continued gravely. “I know that’s not your philosophy, but it’s mine, and it will affect the decisions I make from here onward. From what Heidi told me -- “

He snorted again. She waited a long moment, disapproval falling thickly between them.

“She didn’t witness anything against the law,” She said, taking a deep breath. “But, that said, if there was anything going on here, it would be a very, very serious abuse of power -- “

“Wendy.” He interrupted, and swallowed a sudden hiccup of pure frustration. “Unless you couldn’t tell, already -- I haven’t had sex since the last time Stan hallucinated a shit-spitting duck. I haven’t even had time to rub one out, since my patrols are no longer private -- another thing I have no effing control over -- and I can’t do it in the shower, or my room, or anyplace anymore, because all I can think about is -- is totally unacceptable.”

Wendy was quiet for a moment. “You haven’t done anything at all?”

“My legs are clamped so tight they’re like conjoined twins, dude.”

Chancing a look at the social worker and finding her gaze narrowed on his neck, he felt blood rise to his ears and it took every ounce of strength to will it down with boring, cold thoughts -- because Kenny bit hard enough to bruise, sometimes, and Cartman was fucking insane about it.

“I didn’t say anything about him,” he said to the suspicion in her eyes.

And Wendy did the last thing he ever expected. She leaned down to put her motherfucking hand on his motherfucking back -- like he was five, or something, and had just tried to piss on a big fire.

“Lay down,” Wendy commanded. “Go on. It won’t kill you.”

“Stop saying that.” He spat, shrugging off her hand. ‘I’m fuckin’ -- not afraid. I’m not afraid of anything.’

“Okay,” she agreed. “Why don’t you lay down for just a minute?”

Cartman pulled his knees up and glared at her while she adjusted her perch on the arm again. “Don’t you psychoanalyze me. Remember what happened to the last guy who psychoanalyzed me? And the last one? And the one before that? And -- ”
“They probably never got past your nervous little bitch routine,” she sighed.

He clamped his teeth on his tongue and trapped the wellspring of rage running up his throat. She was in his spiderweb making him play her games, and all she had to do was wound his pride to get him to go along with it.

“No, no -- “ said Wendy, as he moved away from her to lean up against the opposite end of the couch. “I didn’t say lean, lay down. You should stop sleeping sitting up.”

He was so sore and hopelessly -- endlessly -- awake that Cartman had to grit his teeth against the unfamiliar sensation of his spine easing into a comfortable line. He watched the world spin on its axes and settle into new shapes before his eyes -- and a hush came over his pulsing ears.

“When you lie down, the liquids in your inner ear reorient to tell your brain to stop producing cortisol -- which keeps you in a state of alert, normally.” said Wendy, like a fucking narrator on the BBC, or something. “As a psychoanalytic tactic, lying down is supposed to put you in a hypnotic state, which will let you listen deeply, and reflect -- “

“I thought Freud just didn’t want to look people in the eyeball eight hours a day,” Cartman muttered, propping up a knee and reaching down to scratch at his sack.

“That’s also true. But let’s try it anyway.”

“That’s what all the other guys said.”

“I’m not a man, Cartman,” she reminded him. “I’m different from all them. We’ve been working together for years -- and I hate you, but I hate you like a brother.”

“Whatever,” he rolled his eyes at the fucking understatement. “It doesn’t matter, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“I know your game,” he muttered, eyes focused hard on his knee. “You’re not gonna work any confession outta me -- I’m not gonna break down for you and your sad pregnant eyes -- I know your fucking game. You wanted this to happen. So just do your damn job, Wendy. Just do your damn job like everyone else.”

The sound of her amusement yanked his glare up to her face.

She bit down on a half-smile, and turned her head to the side until it was back under a careful mask. “I’m sorry,” she said, sassy as fuck. “It’s just so funny you should be talking to me about doing my job, when your seventeen-year-old truant has keys to your apartment.”

He colored instantly. “Suck my dick!”

She waved a hand. “I don’t do polyamory, Eric.”

“Jesus,” he swore, straightening his legs out and clasping his hands behind his neck. “As if I’d share my popsicle with you, Alien whore.”

A minute elapsed, and Wendy started to laugh, and after a moment Eric did too -- at the absurdity of it all.

“Can pregnant bitches even have sex?” He wondered. “Won’t all the hormones, like, juice up the baby?”
“Fortunately, Stan and I picked out names for a boy, a girl — and a hermaphrodite.” Wendy said with a despairing eyeroll.

“Let me guess. Halo, Harmony, and Heaven.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Hey,” he said, retrieving a sudden, bothersome memory. “Did you know I was born dead? They revived me outside the womb. In a few seconds, maybe.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Stillborn, like,” Cartman narrowed his eyes on the ceiling. “My mind never entered the matrix, maybe — my body is an illusion.”

“Okay, why don’t you — ” she started in a deceptively kind tone. “Make a rap album about it?”

He snorted, surprised. “Fuck you.”

Wendy brushed some hair from her brow before replacing her hat. “Do you know why 2 Chainz wears two chains?”

Surprised again, he thought about it. “Because a bunch of fags thought the name Tit Boi was derogatory towards women?”

“One chain is for the person he is,” she explained. “The second is for the person he aspires to be.”

Cartman contemplated this for a moment, eyes on the gray ceiling. He scratched at the yellow streak on his sweatshirt, then thought of the ink on his chest.

“Shit,” he decided. “Why did the government waste all that money on my therapy? All I needed was 2 Chainz.”

“You know, it’s okay to hate yourself, sometimes — it means you’re working through something, and we all wear those chains. But treating your mind like a member of society means jailing a whole dimension of your identity. You’ve decided what you’re thinking is wrong, but since you can’t stop thinking about it you start waiting for the punishment — and when it doesn’t come, you force the hand of fate with recklessness. Are you really surprised joining law enforcement couldn’t erase your past fuck-ups? Did you think you were done fucking up? Instead of putting so much effort into being above it all, why don’t you try taking a good hard look at your chains; who are you? Who are you going to be? You’re not doing the internal work, Eric; you’ve foreclosed on the search for self and channeled the psychological pain into a physical deathwish.”

“That sounds like a terrible sequel.” Too simple. She always made it too fucking simple.

“I’m serious.” Wendy snapped. She actually snapped her fingers. “You need to stop sleeping with Kafka. Put down Kristeva, and pick up Baldwin. Dickinson, Whitman — or Bukowski, even. Kenny’s right — you’re a black hole. Shit looks like it’s falling down around you because you’re losing your grip. You can’t expect to build anything up for yourself if the center doesn’t hold.”

“And I’d love to take your advice, Wendy, if the alternative therapy to my deathwish wasn’t fucking around with a minor.”

“Stop shouting.” She said firmly. “And you’re wrong. The alternative therapy was dropping the case — putting distance on it when you thought things were going too far. But you didn’t.”
Cartman exhaled through his nostrils and turned his gaze into the back of the couch.

“Hey -- why not?” Wendy said.

He huffed again and made a small effort to turn down the volume, but he was just loud. For a guy born dead, he was actually pretty loud about stuff -- he was pretty assertive about existing, he guessed.

“I caught him on alcohol possession, like, every other day.” He explained. “Could’ve brought him in for battery when he broke the tracking anklet. I caught him outside the skatepark with a three-thousand dollar stolen bike -- that’s a felony, man. A fucking felony! I knew if I transferred the case, it was only a matter of time. Somebody would bring him in. Somebody would do their fucking job, before long.”

He leaned up to check on Wendy, and caught her pinching the bridge of her nose, one leg crossed over the other. “Oh my God, Kenny,” she murmured.

“Welcome to my world,” he chuckled humorlessly, falling back.

“Cartman,” she said finally. “I’ll be honest; I didn’t come here expecting to say this, really -- because I had my suspicions -- but, I think you did the right thing. You’re methods are… questionable, but in the end, I can see that you’re serious about his safety.”

With that, she tossed the keys at him. “You must really like him,” she prompted, sounding fucking delighted.

“Blow it out your ass,” he griped. “You are one sick fuck, you know. You gotta be pretty sick to set me up on a blind date with an underage dude. Just to watch my life implode.”

“That is not what I did,” she said. “I would never word it like that. It was just -- well, when the case came up, I thought of you. I only hoped his attitude might rub off on you a bit, not him.”

“Agh,” he scoffed, annoyed at the little sexual entendre she kept slipping into conversation. “What exactly about that thieving, grimy, slap-the-hand-that-feeds attitude would benefit me?”

“Simple,” Wendy said, shaking her head like she just realized she was talking to the dumb polyform shell of a human being. “He would teach you not to worry so much. And I thought you might teach him how to slow down. It was forethought, after all, that used to make you so hard to catch.”

Cartman rolled his eyes and searched for the untruths in her words.

“I should go,” she said, uncrossing her legs and stretching her arms high. “There’s a stack of paperwork a mile high waiting for me. A kid was found robbing a bait car last night, with a stab wound in his side -- ”

“You’re going? But -- what about my ear infection?”

Wendy stood and angled her dark eyes down at him. “You know how to treat an ear infection.”

Cartman pretended to look around for the competent adult creature she was referring to. “No I don’t!”

“Do I have to call Bebe in to give you a review on Eustachian tubes?”

Eric blanched, suddenly disinterested in female care. “Ugh, no thanks. I don’t feel like listening to
her go on about her demented father and eyeing up my ass while I’m sick. Can you grab the ibuprofen for me, at least?”

Wendy tossed her eyes, nevertheless beginning to pick her way around the coffee table toward the bathroom. Cartman would have to crane his neck to watch her, so he relaxed his spine and watched the ceiling. Nothing ever surprised him, up there. But a streak of sunlight had arrived through the shades, gliding up the wall, cutting up the whites and grays.

“I swear,” she was saying. “The second there’s a woman around, its either straight to the pity party or ‘let’s fuck’, with you.”

“You wish we fucked in college,” Cartman muttered.

Chapter End Notes

i like salsa too but hes probably lying
paint

Chapter Summary

i feel like i cried and laughed over this ucking piece for ages. love doesn't come easy to south park

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I swear,” she was saying. “The second there’s a woman around, its either straight to the pity party or ‘let’s fuck’, with you.”

“It’s not just with women -- “ came a third voice. “He’s always like that.”

“Oh, -- “ Wendy’s ruffled but unsurprised acknowledgement, and the rattle of pills on plastic. “Thank you, Kenny. Don’t let him take these with the usual wash of liquor, please.”

The bottle of ibuprofen struck Cartman in the chest at an unfriendly velocity. He shrugged his shoulders up against the energy in the room and focused his cold hands at unscrewing the lid. Wendy’s presence faded into the kitchen. And after a half-second too long Kenny claimed her spot on the arm of the couch, arriving to lean on Cartman’s horizon like a smirking silent cloud outlined in the afternoon sun’s golden glare, and -- and he wasn’t wearing a damn shirt, even.

The sound of the tap running in the kitchen and the crack of the lid breaking off the tracks on the pill bottle split the silence. He cursed. His truant swiveled on the arm, putting his back to the windows and planting his feet on the couch on either side of Cartman’s knees.

“My bad,” he said, the curve of his mouth rising just over the right-side fringe of raw-hemmed teeth. “There’s a child lock on that.”

“You said you would handle this,” Cartman whisper-shouted at him, throwing the broken cap aside and sending a meaningful glance toward the kitchen.

Kenny turned his head to follow his gaze and scratched absently at a knee. The sunlight went right through the blue in his eyes, bleaching them white around the pupils. “I did. I handled it. And I thought you were doing pretty well, actually -- up until the point where you tried to blame her for liking me. That was a bitch move.”

“No, the bitch move was leaving me to deal with this alone when you were,” he swatted his hand around while he searched for the words. “Buzzing on the wall outside!”

“But she’s not mad.” Yellow Wolf leaned down over his bent knees, shadow falling over Cartman like a small god over a mountain. “Didn’t you wonder why she’s not mad?”

Wendy returned to the living room shrugging into her coat and carrying a hundred things -- he never understood why women had to travel with so many things -- including his jar. She put the jar on the table with an unnecessary clank and the corner of her fucking bag caught Eric in the head on the upswing, like ten rolled-up copies of Reader’s Digest.
While his ear infection rocked around his skull, Cartman thought dazedly how he’d never put water in that jar before.

“Don’t drink on your back,” she commanded. “No eating on the couch. No more of your Go-Go Gadget fix-it-all routine until you’ve set your own house in order. And I mean the house behind your face.”

“Most importantly,” Wendy paused, shifting her gaze between the two of them. “No smoking.”

“Oh,” Kenny blurted. “What?” -- as if it were perfectly acceptable for a seventeen-year-old to be lighting up regularly with a member of municipal law enforcement.

“Eustachian tubes,” Wendy snapped at him. “We just talked about this in health circle.”

“Uh.” Kenny stopped short. “Oh yeah. I was there for that.”

She narrowed her eyes and stared at them a moment longer, shrugging her thug-dropping bag higher on her shoulder.

“Kenny,” she said finally, with a despairing sigh. “You need a haircut.”

Cartman watched his truant nod slowly at the CFS agent with an expression of sincere interest and reach down to scratch at his nuts.

Wendy pinched at her brow and muttered something under her breath. Men, it sounded like. “I’m headed out, this time -- I’ll see you both Kidney Day, unless something drastic and horrible happens between now and then.”

The door closed behind her as Cartman was sitting up to swallow his pills and Kenny chirped something about What’s Kidney Day again, like a brat asking about Christmas. He forgot about the water and took the pills dry, then scrambled for the jar when they got caught up in the nausea blocking his throat. The simple task turned into a damn ordeal when he choked on the water, and Kenny started cackling at him.

“What are the odds,” He rasped, after mostly losing steam on the coughing. “Something drastic and horrible happens -- between now and Kidney Day?”

The anarchist leaned away wearing one of his easy devil smiles. “The odds are good.”

Cartman suddenly felt like nothing more than a semi-remarkable rock on the orbit of something so massive he could not even conceive of its absence. “How did you handle it? How did you handle Wendy, exactly?”

“Not telling.”

Small gods were always so childish, in their ways. He didn’t feel like arguing about it, really, because Wendy had already run him down and now she was gone but her words were in his head -- and he had to leave soon, too, but before then he had to do something to make it all matter.

Cartman pulled himself forward until he could sit between Kenny’s ankles and lift his elbows over his knees. It felt like the right thing to do, anyway.

“You listen the whole time?” He asked, picking a ball of fuzz from the seam inside his leg.

“Only the loud parts.” said Kenny, expecting him to believe it. He felt a tremor run through the
teenager, as if he needed to fidget but didn’t want to risk scaring him off with movement. Kenny didn’t know he couldn’t scare Cartman off if he tried. He couldn’t scare him off with a gas tank and a match. A chainsaw and a pair of handcuffs. He’d just be into it if he even tried, probably.

“Wendy told me you need to slow down.”

Yellow Wolf sniffed and wiped at his nose, smearing a bit of fresh blood from his mostly-clean cut. “I don’t needa do anything.”

“She doesn’t want you getting stabbed, I guess.” Cartman extended an arm, laying it along his truant’s upper leg and gripping it, briefly, just to check the width of his palm against the slender thigh. He pushed his other hand forward to pass his thumb over the belt scar above his right hip. The height differential of the couch arm was nice -- it reminded him of the night he introduced him to the cunts, and how he’d just had to sit there stinking horny about everything, angry and disturbed by his fascination but unwilling to let himself be a fag. Not a fag like thinking his brother had a good-looking dick but a fag like someone who ruins good shit; and he couldn’t think of anything more disappointing than a shabby cop getting his hands on Yeller.

“Hey, uh -- “ Cartman began, not tremendously confident in his ability to girl-talk but just sick and tired enough to let his image sag. “Remember when I said this was a mistake, a hunnid percent -- and the buck stops here, anyways, ‘cause we’re definitely not onto anything serious?”

Kenny bared his teeth in indignation but his eyes stayed lazy. “I just don’t understand how you can say that, after we’ve been going together for a month, at least -- “

Cartman shook his head. “We haven’t been going together.”

“Right -- what’s a few handies between bros?”

“Dude, a couple handjobs is less than it takes to graduate college. I told Wendy we did nothing because we didn’t do anything -- nothing she hasn’t done to get a damn promotion, anyway. And that’s not the point -- the difference between just hanging out with someone and going out with someone is -- “

“Having sex,” Kenny interrupted belligerently. “The difference is you have sex with them.”

“No, it’s not. And you’re an idiot if you think friends can’t fuck.”

“They can’t if one’s a pussy about statutes and the other’s illegal.”

Cartman dragged a hand over his face. “Kenny. I don’t give a damn about your age. I never did.”

“Are you --” He straightened his back and suddenly looked ready to spit. “Shitting me? Are you shitting me?”

“No, I’m -- ” Cartman started, exasperated by his own inability to explain, and recognizing this was probably what Wendy meant by ‘do the work’. He took Kenny’s face in his hands. “Don’t spit. Don’t spit, dude.”

He was only getting more wound up. “You were inta me this whole time and -- what? You just played like you were scared to get caught? But why, then?”

“What? No, I wasn’t playing, I -- “ Cartman didn’t want to look at him in the eye but he didn’t want to look away, either. “I’m not -- look, when you’re as fucked up in the head as me, and spend as much time alone as I do, you have to water it down for the public. You have to make yourself easy
on the public eye, and that changes you, after a while. You know what I mean?”

He paused, expecting something -- a snort, a swear, anything -- but only got the crispy silence of Kenny’s impolite stare. He was being microwaved by it.

“Who I am scares people, pisses them off, mostly -- so I need to constantly front. I put on my pig costume and go to work the same way normal people put on pants and walk on two legs without thinking about it because it’s *comfortable*; it’s easy -- sameness is so non-threatening. But sometimes watering it down means being exactly who you’re not. And you might do it *every day*, never thinking about it, because it’s easier to ignore than to change. That’s what adulthood is, dude -- a slow process of becoming the shit you hate. When I stress about my stupid ass job, and IKEA catalogs, and buildings, it’s because I’m stuck in that fucking world all the time, and can’t make any natural sense of it. I have to dress up and read from the normal script because if I don’t I’m just stuck with my lousy personality and have to admit I’m never *not* gonna be alone -- I have better odds playing pick-up sticks with my buttcheeks.”

“*Oh my god, what?*” Kenny laughed like you laugh in a rotating teacup. Not amused, just exhilarated. “*That’s* your excuse for becoming a uniform? You’re corny, man. You think you’re hard but you’re scared of the law like all the other turkey bacon smelling bitches in cubicles -- “

“No, no I’m not. Because the difference is, if I *was* like them, completely, I would’ve arrested you -- “

“Then what’s the problem?” He shot back. “You admit you hate your life, cool. So it’s not the law, it’s not age. It’s not Marsh.”

“You’re not gonna -- “ Cartman pulled his hands back to drag them over his own face, in part to take a break from his unblinking stare. “You won’t understand this -- I don’t think it’s the reality of me and you, it’s just -- the idea of me and you.”

Kenny leaned back on his palms wearing a face like he’d gone for the goal and nailed the crossbeam instead -- like he made an incredible shot but there was no reward because nothing’s in the net. He cocked his leg wider, scratched one armpit with the opposite hand, and his imperfection was so singular it had taken on a sort of mythical quality in Cartman’s eyes; some people were fit for centerfold, magazine covers and shit, but Kenny would look good in stone, on the side of some gothic building, or keeping the gates of the Labyrinth, poling people across the River Styx into Hell - - like a gargoyle, or a black cat, he warded off evil but ended up with a bad rap for it.

“I’m offering you a gift, man.” said Yellow Wolf. "And it’s exactly what you want -- don’t tell me you’re rejecting it on *principle*.”

Eric shook his head, feeling waterlogged. “No, I’m just -- “

He took too long to arrange the words, and the high schooler ranged in again like a dog after a clay bird. “You just get off on jerking me around, is that it? Put a staple in a guy’s skull, bust up his lip for laughs-- put your fucking hand on my dick just for the stunt, huh?”

“No, hey. Relax -- “

“Don’t tell me what to do anymore!”

“You can be pissed,” Eric offered. “Just don’t yell in my face -- you split your damn lip, again.”

Kenny wiped his mouth on his forearm and rocked back and forth. He muttered something, the way he always muttered in the car or behind his hood.
“What?”

“I said that’s not what took you so long. It didn’t take you three months to remember what it’s like to be you again.”

Kenny’s brow furrowed in almost comical concentration and his voice lost some of the gravel of emotion: “What are you so afraid of, anyway?”

“You mean besides the polar ice caps melting.”

“Come on, for real this time -- Marsh is gone, you don’t have to front.”

Cartman wasn’t afraid of anything, he swore it. He wasn’t afraid of danger, or darkness, or death -- or Manbearpig -- he’d seen how things tended to fall to pieces; he’d heard the sound of almost every part of the human body collapsing under various forms of pressure, even the mind. Eric sometimes heard chicken heads squawking on the subway and saw scattered teeth on the pavement, but these things didn’t ever scare him. They didn’t ever make him think he couldn’t keep going, afterward. He proved that every single day, on the ledge.

“I was just thinking, that, if we did start anything, it might -- “

“Crash and burn?”

“Um, no -- ”

“Work out,” Kenny concluded. "You were afraid it would work out."

Kenny leaned away, looked out toward the kitchen, shuffled his knees. He uttered a low-pitched noise of disappointment. “You were afraid you’d be gay.”

Eric suddenly wished Wendy hadn’t left. She knew he was full of crap but at least she didn’t say it in so many words. She tended to give him wiggle room because he lashed out and made stupid decisions when up against the wall.

“That’s not -- “

“That’s it, though.” Kenny’s gaze returned to him unmuzzled and his voice grew steadily louder. “You’ve been bugging out this whole time ‘cause you don’t know if you’re into guys or you’re into me. That’s why you pulled off on taco night... that’s why you don’t ever let me touch you. You’re a fraud, man -- you don’t mind wearing the suit and carrying the gun and playin’ at cop Cartman, but you can’t hardly go an hour at a time as gay Cartman!”

Eric looked over at his stereo and swallowed -- waited for a more substantial review, and got nothing. Finally, he looked up, his eyes feeling weary and dry against the light. It would be easier to be vulnerable if it weren’t so painfully bright. He thought of inching forward some more, but any closer and he’d be tucked under his truant’s shadow.

“Say something, you big fuckin’ twit,” Kenny demanded. “Tell me I’ve missed something, here.”

But he couldn’t say a damn thing. He’d broken his own stereo on his lunch break, he had an ear infection. He was infatuated with a seventeen-year-old and running out of reasons why it wasn’t okay. Because ‘it’s not allowed’ and ‘it ain’t right’ just weren’t holding up anymore, and he was just realizing that he was a hair too selfish to let Kenny go on with his life unhindered by him.

“This is totally opposite my image of you,” said the graffiti artist. “I mean you do kind of bitch, a lot -
- but I never had you for a pussy.”

Cartman jerked and grit his teeth like an electric shock rattled through him.

“Fight back -- ” Kenny punched him in the shoulder hard enough to almost knock him to his back. “Come on.”

“Son of a fucking land-mine -- “ Cartman sputtered, chasing coherent sentences around his head. “I’ve already given you everything. I’ve let you ride me in every other way, man. I’m the reason you have clothes -- I’m the reason you’re not sleeping with cockroaches and sucking dick for Red Vines!”

Kenny nodded, rocked backward and seemed to wait.

“You’ve broken in through every crack in my life.” said Cartman. “And I didn’t have a lot of lines left to cross, but there were a few, and you’ve fucking wrung my neck with them every chance you get; yes, I am a fucking cop -- yeah, I wear the blue, and the tattoos, and a ton of other labels for what I’m not -- and yes, I hate it. But I just gotta keep doing it, because I’m 26, and I need to have something going for me -- even if it’s just graveyard shifts and anxiety -- sorry I didn’t want to add ‘gay and bonking jailbait’ to the rest of the shit in my life!”

“Fucking, trick,” Kenny said, and his voice cracked. A sour splash of hate made his eyes shine, and Cartman knew he’d hurt him. “I can’t believe I thought you were a fucking real one. You’re just another sucker-ass trick in the land of pimps and hoes. You won’t flock with the herd -- but you still buy the XBox and watch MTV; you wear a glock and sell your wool to the fiends and feds, sucking big society tit for a pet and a pension, just like everyone else -- ”

“Hey, hop off my dick, for once.”

“You think that’s I want?” He said, wide-eyed and suddenly articulate, like Hellraiser. “You think I’m over here -- gagging for it?”

Cartman was too busy swallowing around another swell of dry potato nerves to fight the sudden weight on his chest as Kenny planted both hands and bore down on him. The fluids in his ears wish-washed madly as he was forced for the second time that day to lie flat without his consent. The breath rushed out of him as Kenny dropped his forearm over his diaphragm and used his other hand to grab not too kindly between his legs.

“Maybe, I just want to see your damn badge underneath me.” He removed the threatening hand and wiggled his narrow hips to take its place between Cartman’s legs, then continued at snarl. “Maybe you have the authority here, but I can set ya free. You think you have something going for you? Ha! Be real, man -- I’m the only thing going for you. And when I leave, I’m going to leave you in bite-sized pieces -- ”

“Fuck you!” Cartman barked, throwing inflection on the u that made it bounce off the startled gray walls. He hooked his ankle around one of Kenny’s and used the leverage together with a gip on his neck to slip out from under him. While the adolescent flung his elbows around and swore, Cartman pressed him face-first into the couch and climbed over.

When he kicked his legs apart, Kenny began to struggle with real force. Cartman dropped his free hand to pull his hips up and back against him. It was the kind of move he sort of imagined being really hot, but he was so pissed, at that point, the whole situation just made him feel spiteful. Spiteful of Kenny, for letting it get this far, and Wendy, for leaving him to it. Nothing killed a boner like spite.
“What’s the real reason you wanted to get transferred to me?” Eric said lowly, just a half lung out of breath. “Your dad’s a violent bastard, so you figured you’d find another violent bastard to throw rocks at in your off-time -- is that it? This wasn’t about your brother at all, it’s about you being addicted to punishment. I bet you wanted your own bullet, huh? You like the thought of getting pinned down and snuffed out, don’t you? And now, you’re gonna get your fuckin’ wish.”

He felt the stalk of Kenny’s neck tense under his palm as he ground his hips forward purposefully. His truant almost succeeded in flipping himself with a sudden lunge but Cartman simply applied more weight over his neck.

“No -- don’t struggle,” he warned. “I’m way the fuck bigger than you, man. Fucking -- underfed son of a crack-whore. You made this possible -- you put yourself in my hands. Don’t you realize that?”

He noticed belatedly he was yelling again. Kenny’s noises of discomfort and fury faded to snuffles and twitches until he finally stopped moving. One eye settled on Cartman from the curl of an arm.

“What? What did you say?”

His muffled voice caught an updraft and wavered to clarity. “ -- why don’t you just throw me in the fucking river!”

“Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Eric grit, shifting against him. “Big bad Wolf, too busy looking for a glamorous death to finish high school -- they all act like I’m the fucked up one but you’re just as sick as me!”

“And now you’re right here,” he continued at a much lower volume, folding down over his captive’s bare back. “And I could do anything. I could do anything I want, and leave what’s left in the river.”

He was silent for a moment to let the lesson sink in. Kenny’s eye had shut. A tremor shuddered over his back and up to where Cartman held the back of his neck, like a wild horse who wanted to kick. Cartman pushed an exhale past his hoarse throat, and leaned down over the anarchist until he could touch his nose to the outer shell of his ear.

“I won’t, though,” he said, dropping both hands and sitting back on his heels. “I’m not a fag, you know.”

After a moment Kenny uncurled, sat up and hiccuped a laugh -- not the most exuberant laugh you’ve ever heard -- more like if he’d stumbled out of a car crash with his life ruined but no broken bones. Cartman noticed with some dread that his eyes were somewhat wet-looking, and even banged up and on the verge of tears, Kenny was beautiful.

“I won’t, though,” he said, dropping both hands and sitting back on his heels. “I’m not a fag, you know.”

Kenny flattened himself against his chest and roped his arms around his neck like a fucking noose, a crying noose. Cartman was also faintly disturbed to find that the kid had an erection, which was precisely what he was afraid of: no normal teenager should be quite so fascinated by risk -- and this one actually had a hard-on for it.

“Pet me.”

“What?”

“Pet me,” Kenny demanded, not a trace of shame. “Pet my hair.”
Eric brought his hand up to the shorter dark hair under his crown. He wasn’t really sure what to do, though. Just when he thought he could sort of comprehend the slang and mannerisms of second-wave millennials, Yellow Wolf would throw something new at him.

As another long breath shook through the teary adolescent, Cartman dropped his hand -- it was hopeless, he was a cop, he didn’t know how to pet -- and thought about shifting him away, out of his lap, maybe.

“I just wanted you to know what happens, out there,” he said, starting to get sort of itchy where his truant’s tears dried. “There’s so many sketchballs preying on lost kids for cash, scratch, and favors -- and you’re not just reckless, Ken, you’re low-key suicidal. Make a bad call one of these days, make one of your bets, and you really will get your ass handed to you.”

He talked to the slope of Kenny’s right shoulder, blinking hard, blinking very hard. “I don’t wanna see your teeth on the road, dude, I don’t. It won’t be glamorous, or heroic -- it’ll just be wrong. It’ll be all wrong.”

For a second he thought his truant might’ve fallen asleep, but after a long silence he felt his face turn against him and his arms loosen.

“I wasn’t, though.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t wrong,” Kenny said, leaning back far enough to flick his eyes over Cartman’s face -- blank, like he was checking the time. “I picked you.”

He hovered close while Eric tried hard not to pussy out and look away. Kenny hadn’t had it easy, by any definition, but he still seemed determined to believe things would turn out okay -- and Cartman just couldn’t understand that.

“Hey, I was gonna say something.”

Kenny shrugged one shoulder. “Say it, then. You’ve already said just about everything else.”

“Can you -- get off, first? It’s an important thing, kind of.”

“Why?”

Cartman heaved a breath through his nostrils and closed his hands on Kenny’s sides. “Because I don’t want you exactly in my neighborhood while I’m trying to talk.”

He hefted him off his legs and parked him back on the arm of the couch. Kenny leaned on his palms and bobbed his knees, seemingly unbothered by his messed up lip, and his tears still drying on the side of Cartman’s neck. Clouds came and went but never got old, exactly. Watching Kenny’s emotions ride was like watching four billion years of weather rip across the Earth’s surface.

Cartman pulled himself further forward to snake his arms around the sunlit adolescent. He pressed his mouth to the dark patch scar above his hip, already forgetting his reason for moving him away. He tried to inhale the light from his warm skin, got nothing but the smells of stale sweat and an unmade bed -- which was pretty much the best it got, with Kenny -- and Cartman was starting to remember that yes, that’s just what teenagers smell like, and maybe he’ll grow out of it. And he kind of liked it, in a way, anyway.

“Whoa, hang on, buddy,” Kenny put his hands on his shoulders, but didn’t really try to push. “Aren’t
you a fucking cop, or something? Aren't you straight?”

Eric glanced up, clasping his hands at the wrist behind Kenny’s back, and ran his tongue along his dry bottom lip. “Not right now. I mean -- I’m not, really. I don’t care. I don’t care if you don’t care. And I sure as fuck don’t care if Wendy don’t care.”

“So you needed Marsh’s permission to date me.”

“No, that’s not what happened at all. And -- fuck that word, anyway, I’m too old for that word. I don’t date, I alleviate.”

“You needed Marsh’s permission to alleviate with me.”

“It’s not like that, piss-for-brains. It’s complicated --”

“More complicated than ‘if you can’t have me, no one will?’” He offered, tongue in cheek.

“Shut the fuck up. For Christ’s sake. That’s not --”

“Explain it to me, then.” Kenny said, lofty. He closed one hand around Cartman’s wrist and slid it up to his elbow, shoving his sleeve up with it. “Hopefully it’s got a better ending to it than your talk on how ‘Ergonomics Are Shrinking Our Brains’.”

Cartman’s frown deepened. “You really didn’t need to put that in air quotes. And I don’t know what you mean by ending, since the ending to ‘Ergonomics Are Shrinking Our Brains’ was pretty obvious -- it was in the damn title. If you have to put warning labels on bleach so people won’t drink it and sue you, then you’ve set the bar pretty low for common sense, and basically eliminated consumer accountability --”

“Eric, no,” Kenny whined, holding his fingers to his temples like fucking Professor X receiving a powerful psychic blast. “I don’t wanna hear about this again -- backtrack, brother. Backtrack to when you were realizing you’re in love with me.”

Cartman looked back over his shoulder for his water, but it was too far to reach, especially since he’d basically caged himself between Kenny’s legs in his willful desire to sit inside his skin and make Wendy and everybody else go away. He really just needed a drink -- something stiffer than water, maybe -- to get this gunk out of his throat. Then his eyes caught on the wreckage of his speaker behind the TV, and Cartman wondered if maybe there wasn’t anything in his throat at all. Maybe he was a nervous little bitch about feelings.

Hands slid warmly over his ears and he had to turn with the pull until their eyes met again. Kenny’s eyebrows were several shades darker than his darkest blond hair, with a boyish scatter of brown between them. He would probably look good dead. Not everybody would look good, with all the life taken out of them.

“What?” Cartman said.

Kenny barked a laugh that jumped into clarity as his hands fell away from his ears. “I said you’re cute A-F.”

“What does that mean?”

“As fuck,” he said. “Cute as fuck.”

“Agh.”
“Come on, man, give me something. Tell me I’m hot. Everybody gotta hear it, once in a while.”

Cartman searched his face for a second. *I bet you’d look good dead.* Holy God in heaven -- he sucked at this.

“Kenny, I suck at this. I don’t do compliments, I’m -- I’m a fucking drug dealer.”

Kenny shook his head and smiled, but it felt like a slap. “And I’m the underfed son of a crack-whore, apparently -- but why are you always so focused on the bad parts? Focus on the dope parts, for once. You’re a drug dealer, bro -- romance is in the job description.”

Yellow Wolf loomed close like the sketchy moon from *Majora’s Mask,* taking up his whole skyline with a spooky smile and abnormal teeth.

“Um -- no,” Eric protested, sensing his intentions. “You’re still bloody. You are not putting y’mouth on me like that.”

He didn’t, but he got real close, turned his face so they were trading breaths, and then just hung there. Cartman opened his mouth out of habit, but his nostrils flared at the smell of blood.

“Your earrings piss me off.” He blurted.

“There are freckles in your eyes.” Kenny said, smiling slow. "Like black stars.”

Cartman bit his lip, but couldn’t contain the discomfort, and finally: “Agh.”

The teenager hunched up closer, sweeping his hands up through his hair and then drawing lines down his throat. Cartman had never liked to be touched, even when he was a kid, but he never stopped fantasizing about it, anyway -- about finding someone who knew the hows and whens of contact, and together they would be like instruments, and every movement would be music. But it wasn’t like that at all, it never would be, as long as he kept thinking about it in abstractions, the way he did. Kenny touched him like a fucking rock climber on the final summit -- like nothing was gonna keep him from the goal. Cartman felt picked and pawed at, conquered and made lesser, and found himself wondering how it could feel so good, to be wanted, and so fucking shameful at the same time. It made him want to freeze. It made him want to melt.

“What did ya wanna talk about?” Kenny sighed, swaying backward. "You said it was important.”

“Oh,” Cartman remembered. “Right. Umm -- yo, so, the only reason I said anything, before, is because the only difference between being friends and going out with someone is -- “

He paused to recover his voice while Kenny’s eyes flicked around his face like hungry things, and his fingertips carved rifts in his hair.

“It’s -- deliberately trying to be a better person than you are,” he finished. “That’s why you put on chains and people-suits and go out, and suffer lots of time in each other’s presence -- like, it’s an effort thing.”

His movements stilled and Eric lifted his arms over his knees again, watching him process the words. He tracked all the small masculinities in his face and the lines of his shoulders, the darkness of the cut over his lip and the scars that warped the skin of his abdomen. Cartman made two realizations; Kenny was unlike anyone he’d ever made a move on before -- and perfect things were not always undamaged things.

“So, does that mean -- ?”
“It means -- fuck, I’m inta you, and when I’m not drunk sucking society tit like you said, I can sort of see options. Maybe the best thing that ever happens to me happens here and now in my twenties, and then everything blows up -- but that’s fine. I’ll count myself lucky I don’t wake up one day as a weird old guy and realize I was too pussy to even give it a shot.”

Kenny nodded, his hands falling to his lap and twisting around there. “Umm. Okay-y. I’m the best thing that’s happened to you, sure. I like that.”

Cartman rolled his eyes. “And -- “

“And?”

“I can’t whack off to my screensaver of Kate Beckinsale anymore because the only thing that turns me on is you.”

“Oh-ho, okay -- ” Kenny bared his teeth in a sideways grin, hands returning to Cartman's skin, fingertips sifting under his hood. “That’s better. Kate Beckinsale. I like that. I’ll be your blue-eyed vampire babe.”

Before he could scoff his truant wedged a thumb under his jaw and effectively silenced him with his open mouth. It couldn’t’ve been more than a few hours and a night’s sleep since they’d made out, but so many things had gone through his mind since then -- each leaving their marks on his brain’s wrinkled roads -- and his vehicle of thought shuddered and clanked over a new pothole; he met Kenny’s kiss like water, and forgot when to breathe.

After a whole minute contemplating easing back or slowing it down some, Cartman gave up every lousy ounce of resistance under his skin, dropped his shoulders and tipped his head back to allow the young anarchist full control and a better angle. Yellow Wolf slid his hands up over his ears and moved in, humming like he had something to say but didn’t care enough to pull away and articulate it properly.

“What?”


_Do what you want_, Cartman echoed in his head, and he wondered when he’d ever _stopped_ doing what he wanted; it had all come so naturally to him, before -- but somewhere along the line, he stopped doing things for himself and got caught up doing it for a better humanity. His methods had never been popular, exactly -- even when he was coaxing riots from death cults and masquerading as a raccoon in the inner city -- but regardless of whether or not he got his ass kicked in the end, Cartman had never considered his _ideas_ to be flawed. People just couldn’t understand his concept.

Now Kenny was telling him he was wrong; and the harder he tried to make things right, the more he was fucking up. He tolerated the shit he hated, he wrecked the things he liked -- for the first time since that average dick size fiasco in fourth grade, Cartman considered the possibility that his ideas were working against him.

Kenny broke away and nosed around the hair above his ear, breathing fast but deliberate. He pushed one hand down the back of his sweater and dragged his fingernails over the skin on the way back up. Cartman exhaled through his nose, tongued some of the copper tang from the side of his mouth, and admired his horizon.

“Her stomach freaks me out so much, dude,” he murmured, pressing his thumbs to the insides of the adolescent’s hip bones, then folding his palms over his sides. It was kind of nice not dealing with a
shirt or any other frilly shit -- Kenny was bitey and scratchy but when it came down to it, fairly easy-access. User-friendly. Maybe ergonomics weren’t all bad.

Cartman pushed one hand around to his back and took his time weaving it up his spine, stopping just where the shoulder blades folded over the ribs and his back sloped inward. It was one of those sweet spots -- both in the sense that you couldn’t normally reach it by yourself, and you would probably die if you took a bullet there. Kenny hunched his shoulders and stretched up to the ceiling with a faint satisfied grunt, his spine shuddering back into a curl under Cartman’s fingertips. He watched him settle down, then worked his hands a little lower, trailing along the half moon grooves of the lower ribs wrapping under his arms.

Eric found the shallow pool of his lower back and dipped the fourth and fifth fingers of one hand below the band of his shorts. Cartman didn’t consider himself a grab-ass sort of guy, but he was tempted. He reached up to touch his other hand to his truant’s chin, to encourage him to close the distance. When he came close, Cartman planted his closed mouth just over one side of his upper lip, to avoid the worst of the cut. He sucked the crest between his teeth and worked the soft skin until Kenny was fidgeting, trying to turn his head and force his attentions to the front. Just when he felt Yellow Wolf beginning to hum his frustration against him, Cartman dropped both hands to his ass, and pulled him down.

“Oh,” Kenny huffed as he slid off the arm, and settled once more over Cartman’s legs. “So I’m welcome back in the neighborhood.”

“For now.” He agreed, turning his back to the couch and arranging the adolescent comfortably in his lap.

No sooner had he settled than fingers began plucking at his hood with clear intent. “C’mon. I needa look at the real estate.”

“Just no more marks,” Cartman murmured. “I’m not a fucking subway wall. You've got Wendy rubbing my fucking back like I'm the victim.”

He ducked his head to pull his sweater over his shoulders, then shrugged the wrinkles from his shirt as he tossed it aside. And son of a bitch if there was not a dirty great stain just south of the collar on his favorite Chevy drag racing T-shirt.

“Hey,” he complained, as Kenny moved to the corner of his mouth. He waited the length of another silencing press of his lips.

“Don’t wear my stuff out bombing anymore.”

Kenny pulled away biting at his lip, and cast his eyes up and down, then up again until Cartman felt newborn naked under his sunbleached white eyes.

“This was my favorite shirt,” he finished lamely.

“What’s wrong with it now? It’s just a bit of paint. It’s the same thing, really.”

“No, it’s not, ‘cause now there’s a big yellow streak on it.”

“Aw, gee,” Kenny said with false sympathy. “And it was just about the only thing in this whole apartment that wasn’t covered in blood, already.”

“Sure. Bloodstains or paint, that’s it. How am I supposed to clean all this shit out of my life if I can’t even get it off my clothes?”
“Blood and paint is all there is to life, baby,” Kenny said, leaning back down to nose around the hair above his ear. “You either bark, or you bite.”

“Don’t call me baby,” Eric warned, jerking away when the tip of his ear met the sharp scrape of teeth. “You’re the only one doing the biting, here.”

“And you do a fuckload of barking.”

That was fair, Cartman supposed.

“I like it when Wendy comes over,” Kenny said.

“Why.”

“Because she takes care of the pity party, and I get to come in for the ‘let’s fuck’ part.”

Cartman tapped his fingers just where the curve of his truant’s lower back transitioned to ass, caught himself, and withdrew them altogether. He knit his fingers together and tried to refocus his brain on non-carnal things. Ten-hour graveyard shifts. Routine traffic stops. Desk-lamps.

But when the desire faded a huge clogging fear came back and Eric nearly choked on it.

“I gotta go soon.”

Kenny pressed a deceptively gentle kiss to his cheekbone, and dropped a hand to palm him unshyly through his pants. “I’ll come with.”

“No, you won’t,” he needed two hands to keep Kenny at bay. Who was he kidding? He needed a hundred. “I’m on assists tonight. That means a mook in the front seat, probably fucking Donovan. He’s the cream and sugar donut cop you’re looking for, by the way.”

Internally Cartman was coming to a dreadful realization: he was a nervous little bitch. And he was dodging and bushing around because he was fucking terrified that he would let somebody in for the first time and they would do exactly what Yellow Wolf promised: chew him up and spit him out. It would be a laugh to him, probably. Young and pretty -- everybody would be expecting it, on principle.

After losing all the neat identity boxes adulthood had arranged for him -- drop-out, cop, loner, loser, dealer -- Cartman didn’t really recognize the amorphous thing behind his eyes. He had -- lost his narrative, somehow. He was neither growing nor growing old, just stuck in the negative space of his own life and feeding off strong emotions like the damn Poltergeist. He wasn’t even the star of the show, anymore -- in the steep shadows and wack staircases of Cartman’s existential life story, Kenny was the fucking feature.

Something buzzed against his hip and he already knew what it was. He had Wendy shooting him periodic, remote texts that hedged and pried with just one word: SLEEP

Unending and period-less as if it were a renewable solution or just something unfinished -- like a person without arms or legs. The thing with sleep was, it didn’t have any influence on tomorrow, and it didn’t set anything right with yesterday.

“Cartman, hey,” Kenny said, suddenly somber-throated serious -- none of the usual verge-of-laughter guile in the back of his tone -- and sat back far as possible in his position. Cartman had to sink down to balance him over his knees, but Yellow Wolf didn’t seem to notice or care that his T.O. was turning to furniture beneath him. “I know what’s bugging you, I think. But -- I don’t know how to --
His mouth closed and his eyebrows drew together, and suddenly one arm lanced forward as if to go through his heart. *Go through*, Cartman thought, waiting for the blow, *impale*.

Four knuckles warmed the left side of his chest. Kenny’s thumbnail plucked ineffectively at the stain.

“I know to most people, I’m just doing all this really dumb shit.” He continued, eyes on the small but vibrant yellow bloom. “And yeah, it’s kind of taken over my life and put me in some crumby situations, but -- “

Cartman thought of the three-thousand dollar bike and the museum and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He would be in much *crumbier* circumstances if it weren’t for fans and fools like him and Wendy sticking their necks out all the time.

“Sometimes, I’m afraid I’ll graduate high school. And I’ll -- go to *community* college. Work, collect my retirement. Then die.”

And Almighty *Krampus*, if his eyes were not looking watery again.

“And here I am, thinking,” he drew his hand back and dropped it back in a fist. “I would even have a go at all that, really, if you would just fucking *be* there, on the damn ride with me -- and you know, in *South Park*, you don’t ever say *go out*. We don’t ever say that, man. Going out just means you like to be together around other people. I don’t want that. I’m not doing this because I do dumb shit all the time; I’m like 2 Chainz, man -- I’m tryna be better. And you’re not dumb shit, you’re…”

“Just shit?” Cartman offered tiredly.

Kenny grinned like he’d been clamping down on it all that time, and he leaned down like he might’ve been going for a slightly teary laughing teenager hug but actually put his hands around Cartman’s throat. It left him feeling disrobed -- having somebody else’s hands on the bloody rope that connected his mind to his body.

“You know what I’m saying, though?” Kenny said.

“Why do you keep crying, huh? You’re so fuckin’ sensitive.”

“Ya wanna go with me?” He demanded, almost knocking their heads together. “I mean go with me, for real?”

“Okay, just don’t *choke* me right now,” Cartman said, over the crash of dialogue between his heart and his groin. “I don’t want a boner before work.”

Kenny eased up, shaking his head. “You’re gonna let me in -- you’re gonna havta let me in, eventually.”

*Love Is A Dog From Hell*, he remembered suddenly.

Kenny snorted. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s Bukowski.”

Chapter End Notes
i just love when they argue. i mean the game of thrones arc was basically one big argument between Kenny and C-man admit it

who else remembers getting knocked senseless by moms purse as a kid
Rain was falling when Cartman steered his cruiser bumping and seizing into the More gas station’s tilted lot.

A winter-hot stillness had fallen over Park County in the last few days; it was 40 degrees when he left the office at dusk, and still hanging in the 30s as the night ripened around them. It was enough to shed jackets and free fingertips, enough to make the snowbanks weep and curl.

In a few days the mud would be crawling with half-frozen toads.

Donovan rolled himself out of the car onto the pavement with the most effort he’d made all night. Picture a sack of flour climbing out of a hammock. He wasn’t overly overweight for a habitual slug in his twenties -- Cartman could only guess with one hundred per cent accuracy that Clyde’s off-duty activities included shooting ranges, Cheeba Hut, and large cash withdrawals of small bills -- and the flabby fuck certainly hadn’t had the pleasure of outgrowing childhood obesity, so there really wasn’t any reason for him to shake and grunt and set everything else shaking and grunting just from the way he threw himself around all the time.

It was lack of purpose, Cartman decided, that made him hate the way Clyde moved. He hated it so much he started to examine himself for any traces of the same behaviors, and banish them to the nethermost pits of chaos.

Fortunately, Eric reminded himself he was ambidextrous. He suspected Clyde was ambi-sinister -- so while Cartman was equally capable with both hands, Donovan was equally incompetent.

Rain was still falling when the pump spat out his receipt and Eric resettled behind the wheel. There was something soothing about the rush of loneliness that hit him there. He felt like a body-wide bruise, his soul looped and knotted just beneath the surface, aching in all the most human ways, and none of the usual ones. Even some of the lingering soreness from the train job had faded, although the brandy-new scar Francesca had carved behind his left ear was still glowing.

The windows were down in the cruiser and the night sifted in over his head and shoulders, carrying with it a suite of classic urban aromas -- oil, gasoline, dirt, pulverized rubber -- and the greasy gold glare of sodium-vapor lighting. It was all so disgustingly familiar it was homely, for Chrissake.

Cartman felt like he ought to be going somewhere, all the time, but for a few minutes he let his thoughts bleed out in the stillness.

Rainwater was beginning to collect in furrows on the road. The acidity from the atmosphere reacted with petrochemicals in the pavement and the smell of gasoline sharpened to something like napalm. He felt like he was sliding side-down through space-time -- it was a gut-lurching sensation, like dropping his Self down the shaded side of a dune -- and in these threadbare bits of reality Cartman's mind grew incrementally more free. Kenny had called them in-between moments.
His mom said he was gifted. Teachers labelled him a 'daydreamer', which was not inaccurate, but in the same way that it was also not inaccurate to say Stephen Hawking was a 'pretty smart guy'. Cartman had the heightened ability of an extroverted but antisocial child with no siblings and a restless mind; he could sit in a cardboard box or bury himself six feet in snow and be entertained for days. And as he got older, he only got better at it. His trances struck in class, at work, in meetings, on the road, whenever. Shit -- even he couldn’t really separate the real and the fake, sometimes, when it came to his older memories.

The air had enough chill to it to nip at the back of his throat with a mintish snap, like menthol cigarettes.

From the smell of the cruiser -- which was not his usual or preferred ride -- Donovan had picked up smoking American Spirits, probably from his best bosom Craig Tucker. Cartman had been under the impression only rapey truck drivers and creatures that came up from the ground once a year still smoked Spirits, but apparently the worst cigarette in the Union was still popular among pool cue waving 'real men' clubhouses like Tucker and Donovan's. The two tits together had yet to master even the basics of hygiene or proprioception -- either from the lack of women in their lives, or the dangers of bathing with a poor sense of body-awareness, or both -- but they could handle those slim remnants of 20th century phallic imagery like pros. Smoking, dick-handling pros.

Cartman shook off the unwelcome exploration of his former classmates' male-bonding routine, rattled out of his calm. Sometimes even he preferred to pass on the grotesque scenarios his imagination conjured just to ruin a perfectly ordinary evening. He only expected it, at this point. Cartman's imagination had been reliably ruining ordinary things since ‘97.

"You're not even listening."

"I am."

The More gas station was a furrowed battlefield deep in the steaming jungles of Vietnam. He was surrounded by eighteen inches of slick, gray, shit-smelling mud. There had been losses on both sides -- collateral, too, since there’s always collateral the way there’s always ants, under military-grade boots. Even the water buffalo lay dead in the fields. It was a day after the fighting, maybe -- and everything still smelled like gasoline and American Spirits. This was the smell of victory.
Across the lot an oil tanker released its hydraulics, hissing and groaning over the diesel pump.

"'Alas, he hurried so fast, and the stairway was so dark…'"
Gas station coffee was like purchasing shoes ripped off from the people who ripped off Crocs, or pop music. You’re really just getting recycled backwash and the styrofoam packaging. He put down the old cup, feeling a rustle deep down in his hell-in-a-handbasket nerve system, and pulled at his uniform collar. His eyes had been feeling itchy all night. These were not good signs.

"Eric? Are you still listening?"

"Egh -- “ Cartman cleared his throat and tried again. “Yeah.”

“No you weren’t,” Yellow Wolf retaliated. “You never listen to any-body. Heidi warned me about this.”

“What? Jesus, are you -- on the rag, or something? I’m listening, alright? Old couple takes in the funny little hunchback man because they think he’s pathetic. They feed him dinner, he tries to make the fuckwits laugh by eating a big piece of fish, and chokes to death on a bone. Alright? Go on with the story.”

“So they leave the body at the doctor’s house.”

“The doctor’s house. Naturally.”

“Only, the stairs are so dark,” Kenny continued, as if they had never argued. “That old doctor mojo, in his hurry to help the new patient, falls down the fuckin’ stairs and lands on top of the hunchback. Doc thinks he's killed him. So he runs to his wife and says, 'Honey, I’ve killed a patient' -- and she tells him to dump the body in the neighbor’s yard."

“Of course. Dump the body in the neighbor's yard. People are still using that trick.”

“Just listen, man,” said the truant. “The neighbor's getting home from work when he sees the shadow of the body at his door. It's been a pretty rough day and he thinks he's being robbed, so the neighbor hits the hunchback in the chest with a mallet. But when he notices that the guy's dead, he freaks out and says -- I'm direct-quoting here -- 'A curse upon my butter!'”

That one got him laughing a little bit. Then he tried to remember the last time he’d laughed on duty.

“The neighbor carries the hunchback into the streets and abandons him in a dark alley. Who should pass by but one of the king’s men, who sees the shape of the hunchback in the alley, and mistakes him for the thief who stole his turban the other day. So he thinks, 'Hell no is this fool stealing my turban again today,' and rushes in to attack the hunchback.”

“Am I the hunchback? Is this story about me?”

“No, listen -- a watchman sees the fight, and since the hunchback is dead, he arrests righteous turban dude for murder. But when they get to the gallows to execute him, butter guy comes forward and claims responsibility for the murder. Before they can hang butter guy, the doctor fesses up, and then the fishbone couple. While they’re trying to figure out who should be punished for the death of the funny hunchback man, a barber comes forward and picks the bone out of his throat. And the hunchback lives.”

"And... ?" Cartman prompted, waiting for the moral.

"And they all become pretty good friends, I guess.”

“That’s it? That’s the end? But -- who atones?”
"Who what?"

"Who atones, man -- who pays for the hunchback's hardship? It's not fair to just leave it like that."

"Sure, but," Kenny said, a shrug in his tone. "I mean, it's nobody's fault, man -- hunchie just got dealt kind of a shit hand."

"Nobody's fault? What about the butter guy? He hit him with a mallet, for Chrissake."

"Because he thought he was a burglar." Kenny reminded him, like he was chewing on the end of a fountain pen, or something. Amused, but not invested.

"Because he was retarded. All those people were morons, and hunchie deserves a large settlement for his suffering. I can't believe even public beatings are okay as long as the law is untouched. Nobody does their jobs anymore, they just wear the badges and collect the paychecks -- "

"Alright, then. Easy. I didn't think this would make you so angry. And you know -- Cartman, nobody ever beats the odds; but the odds can definitely beat down people."

"Cute, McCormick -- " he responded, unnecessarily hostile, even by his standard. "Where'd you get that one -- Wendy's line of inspirational bracelets for the homeless? Or the back of a cereal box? Is that really the kind of world you wanna live in?"

"Actually, I don't get to decide."

Cartman settled somewhat. He readjusted his legs in the small compartment, and the tread of his shoes shrieked over the muddy floormat. He wondered if he flew off the handle too much. "What was the point of that, anyway?"

"You're always asking that. All this time and you're still asking what's the point."

The way his small-town slur clattered over the word 'ask' hung around in the air long after the adolescent finished talking -- Cartman felt it curving around the outer rim of his ear and fought a shudder of pleasure.

"What're you reading? Where'd you find that, anyway?"

Kenny sighed as if the whole world had just now caught on to the color orange. "It's from A Thousand and One Arabian Nights. Didn't you know? It's your book."

"Anyway," he continued. "Which of your Arabian nights is this? Nine-hundred ninety-nine? You've been doing all these assists, lately, it feels like you're avoiding me."

"What?" Cartman nearly fucking leapt out of his state of mind at the accusation. "That's bullshit."

"Okay, okay -- how should I know? You spend so much time with work, and this Donovan character, I get jealous."

"Dude." He gestured around the More gas station, as if the grim battlefield in all its smoky, dead body glory was the embodiment of his romantic aspirations. "It's only been three nights -- it's high season. I think of Donovan when I need to gag on short notice. You could bottle his essence, and sell it as contraceptive."

"Oh," Kenny giggled. "You're cold."

Cartman rubbed at his eye with his free hand. When had he called his truant? He didn't even
remember.

“Well, it’s your turn. Anything interesting yet tonight, or just the usual -- demons and power-hungry sultans? Chopped up bodies in grease-traps?”

“My job is nothing like the Arabian nights, Ken. Stop reading that old thing, the binding is delicate.”

“The binding is delicate.” Kenny parroted, in a tone like he was mimicking the guy from NPR, or a very boring dentist. “All the stories are so sad and violent, I can see why you like them. But they’re kind of romantic, too, in a way.”

“Well, police work is just sad. Trust me. Society life is so one-dimensionally meaningless and vulgar we need 4D movies to feel alive.”

“Nah, come on. There’s gotta be somethin’ to policing besides fast food and paperwork.”

“Nope.” He thought about it. Then: “Nope. That’s it. Well, we had a pretty long traffic stop today.”

“Oh yeah?” Kenny hummed. “What was that like?”

“Dispatch called in a truck with no front plate, headed north. Old pick-up. One of those Silverados from the 80s, maybe ‘85. He's not going very fast, but he's blowing stop signs and shit, so we flash the lights, sirens, the whole fucking Bop-It, and he doesn’t pull over, speed up, or slow down.”

“Stick to the plan, I guess.”

“But also, like -- bitch quit playin’, right?” Cartman said, waving a hand. “So we tailed the bastard halfway to Denver on the interstate, then back along the backroads into Park County, and just when we think he must be almost out of gas, crazy motherfucker leaves the road -- busts all four tires driving through a ditch onto that path between Jenkins and Murphy’s land -- “

“You mean the old bridle path?”

“I don’t know -- the shortcut to Stark Pond. With those two mastiffs always going mad around the land markers outside Jenkins’ pad. You know those dogs? They still at it?”

“Uh-huh, oh yeah.” Kenny hummed. “Like the Latter-Day Saints, man.”

He chuffed a short breath through his nostrils, too relaxed to construct any meaningful response, then lifted his arm from over his eyes and once more panned the tilted lot for signs of Donovan’s -- inevitable -- awkward loping return.

“So, guy tries to run from the fuzz,” Kenny’s voice prompted. Cartman pictured him on one of those day-lounge things, by the window, twisting a curly phone cord in one hand. Some other shit from a seventies housewiving catalog. Pineapple patterns on the walls, maybe. And an old book. “Makes it all the way to the bridle path, which -- I dunno man, how’s an old pickup with flat tires get moving in all that gravel...”

“He’s flooring it, that’s how. There’s a decent-sized V8 in those trucks. Anyway the wheels spin so fast -- the goddamn rubber rips off them, like, old balloons. Fwip! -- gone, all his tires. So he’s burning out on bare rims and tearing across this farmland -- “

“He’s still moving?”

“Hell yeah! I mean, not fast, but he’s moving.”
“Driving on nothing but rims. Over Jenkins field.”

“Yes -- “

“There’s no way he’s getting enough traction.”

“What? He was already -- he had momentum, from the road. That’s not even the end of it, dude -- the metal got so hot, it started a fire.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Cartman choked on a laugh and sat up in the driver’s seat in a rush to defend his story. “Straight up,” he insisted. “A rusty Silverado plowing through the brush, bro -- driving on bare steel, and this fire is picking up behind each wheel like the four fucking horseman of the apocalypse.”

“We finally took him down when he tried to get out and run for it,” he continued while Kenny chortled his appreciation. “Drunk, of course. Registration three years out of date, and on top of all that: this sucker’s driving with fake plates.”

“And you thought I was asking for it.”

“He said his wife got them. The plates. Felony forgery of fake documents -- blamed it all on the wife.”

“She’ll say somethin’ else.”

“We’ll probably never know, since she’s been in a coma for the last six months in Hell’s Pass.”

“Oh!” Kenny whooped with a faraway ring, as if his team had just sunk a three-pointer. “This is getting really good.”

“It’s fucking sad, man. I take these people down all day like dominoes and at the end of the night, I don’t even feel human anymore, you know? This shit is so fucking alien to me it’s like I’m not even one of them. Like I could be arresting buffalo.”

“Nah-h -- don’t look at it like that. I mean, it’s kind of romantic, isn’t it? The car chase was neat, don’t play like you didn’t like that part. Pretty sad laying the fake plates on the sick old lady, but the stuff with the fire was hot. I mean, desperate, but hot. You’re listening to the song of humanity! You have to admit that dude had heart.”

“Huh! Big old pair o’ balls, maybe.” Cartman settled. “What’re you doing?”

“Rolling a blunt how you showed me. Gonna smack it on the roof. You?”

Eric paused while a fierce, disappointed sigh ripped through him, and he fell over the steering wheel with his phone still trapped between his shoulder and ear. “Talkin’ to you.”

“Phhhhhp -- you’re corny.”

“I didn’t know you were gonna be in tonight.”

“It’s usually best to stay out of the way,” said the anarchist. “When the threads start snapping.”

Cartman found himself hoping desperately that he was still cool. Like hopefully he wasn’t some sad old sack of flour to his fucking graffiti hero. Sure, Kenny wasn’t exactly the way he’d imagined Yellow Wolf, but even though it turned out he was shit over sixteen and smelled like an empty can
of PBR, and he cried kind of a lot, Cartman would still pick him over all the dillywags at the Sheriff’s Department when it came to riding shot-gun.

In the first-person shooter game inside his head, Kenny was the epic cheat character that you couldn’t unlock without GameShark or some pro-mod. In the comics he would be like Gambit, or the Monkey King -- he only appeared in frames with slant noir lighting, maybe, surrounded by wreaths of smoke and perfect timing. He belonged there. That was Kenny.

What if he really thought he was corny?

For the first time in his life Cartman was imagining how somebody else imagined him. It was pathetic -- it was just sad.

Blazing on the roof with his new boyfriend, that was fucking Sex in the City compared to bumping around potholes and one-lane bridges all night with Donovan, dragging drunks out of burning cars. Some part of him was smart enough to dread the chaos that always followed Yellow Wolf’s schemes -- but even that special anxiety could not compete with his miserable hatred of the ordinary.

Six hours in a car with Clyde jabbing at pimples in the front seat, chasing mostly mundane disturbance calls in mundane mountain towns, and the high point of his night was the fifteen minutes he spent filling the tank and getting busy with his existential side while his old classmate took a shit.

“You couldn’t even wait up for me.”

Kenny snuffled a laugh over the line. “Lucky for you, Swishers come in packs of two.”

“You get the Diamonds like I said?”

“No, I don’t like those. They taste like my great-uncle’s basement. I got blueberries.”

Agh. “You got bitch blunts. What’s bud-slinger girl got tonight, anyway? Not more indica?”

“I didn’t ask. Kells said it was a hybrid, but I don’t really know what that means.”

Cartman tsked, soundly disappointed. “You’re probably gonna crash in like, an hour. Why couldn’t ya wait up? I’m -- well, I’m almost done here.”

“It’s only two-thirty. You have three more hours, at least, Officer Slack-off. I’ve never waited that long for anything in my life.”

Eric rolled his eyes but also understood that this might actually be the truth, for Kenny. And Cartman was sick of waiting, anyway. He was sick of staring at clocks, counting down his minutes to freedom -- he’d been doing it since grade school and things never changed even after the walls fell away.

New walls, new times and new schedules always arrived to take their place, and while opportunities flashed by him Cartman made his living as just another pendulum swinging, watching the clock, waiting for better days.

“I could -- “ He speculated, shifted, decided. “I could probably dump Donovan early, and get off sooner, tonight.”

“You’d blow off a shift -- “ A pause, and his tone changed like he was biting the inside of his cheek. “Just to be with me?”

Cartman glared at the More gas station like it had made a joke of him, somehow. “Well it’s past midnight and I’m still thinking about you, so -- it’s just a waste of energy to be anywhere else.”
“Oh, man. You’re corny.”

“Stop saying that,” Cartman snapped.

“Oh, man. You’re corny.”

“Okay,” Kenny agreed, easily. “Hey, I have a deal for you. Ditch the donut early, and I’ll finish rolling this and just put it down. I swear. It’ll be really tough but I’ll wait on you. I’ll even throw some keef on top, some of that Mullah stuff you really liked.”

“Seriously?”

“The whole hunnid, dude. But if you don’t show up before five -- no! Before half past four, then I get to ask you to do one little thing. Okay?”

Cartman rolled his eyes but didn’t think too hard about it. “Fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, I saw people living in shit-huts on Discovery Channel, today.”

“That’s great, Kenny.”

“No, for real -- you say you live in shit all the time, but these people live inside cow shit. And it doesn’t even smell that bad, apparently.”

“Nothing smells that bad, if you’re around it enough. Where was this, anyway? Cleveland?”

“I don’t remember. No. India, I think. The channel shorted out in the middle -- I think you forgot to pay the cable, again.”

Cartman heaved an exasperated sigh and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “No, I have a year-long contract, you just have to call them up and bitch for a while.”

“You really want me to call the cable company?”

Now that he said it, it seemed a little weird. ‘Spell that for me, please?’ ‘Sure, it’s Wolf, W-O-L-F.’

“Yes? It’s not that hard. If you’re gonna ride me for room and board, this often, at least give something back.”

“Uh-huh,” The distinct sound of an inhale -- he was running his tongue along the seal, maybe. “You know exactly what I’m giving back.”

“Sitting around eating candy and doing drugs without a shirt on isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Oh -- tell me what you have in mind.”

He thought of that same slant lighting. The nervy way his body talked, every sloping line of sapling adolescence, mostly elbows and knees. He wanted whole days without any knocks on the door -- and no time passing.

Eric glared at the parking lot as if it had personally conspired to give him a hard-on in Clyde's cruiser, and found himself wishing Kenny would miss a beat, once in a while. Or just once. “If you don’t call the cable company, we’ll lose Discovery Channel -- that means no more Moonshiners, no more shit-hut specials. You don’t want that, do you? All you have to do is dial a number and make
someone bend over for you -- you’re good at that, just do it over the phone, this time. You don’t even have to leave the apartment, or put a shirt on. Think of it as a lesson in self-determination -- “

“So where d’you keep your porn? Laptop?”

“What? No.” He caught on Kenny’s silence and rushed on. “Leave it alone, I mean it. If I find a fucking shortcut out of place you’ll be spending Kidney Day in the trailer park.”

“Okay, okay, fuck. I can’t believe you have a fingerprint reader on your PC. I’m getting horny -- I just wanna see what you beat off to.”

Cartman propped his temple against the steering wheel. Everything was so ordinary outside the window but now his anxiety was beating a rapid tempo under his ribs. And as if he could hear it, Kenny started throwing down bets.

“I bet Donovan’s been pissing you off all night, huh?”

He grunted his affirmation.

“You probably can’t take three more potholes without blowing up at somebody.”

“Probably.”

“It’s been just one of those shifts, right? Same shit, different day.”

It was like a magic card trick. Kid was a mind-reader. “Right.”

“And pornography isn’t ever as good as really great sex, is it?”

“No,” Cartman grit. A stray raindrop glanced off his brow and he got sort of angry. “Smoke your damn blunt by yourself, then. Fuckin’ jack it on the roof, see if I care. You’re the one who can’t wait a lousy three hours -- “

“As if you would even make a big difference, bro. I’d rather jack it on the roof than watch a hundred drag races on the couch while you will down a boner.”

“I fuckin’ hate you,” he murmured. “Fuck off.” …How did he even know about that?

“We share a bed, man,” Kenny explained. “I can tell when you’re straining.”

Cartman pulled at his collar again, hot and itchy.

“What’s the rush, anyway?” drawled Wolf, fatally unimpressed. “You don’t ever care when I pass out before you’re back -- in fact, ya usually like it that way. Big plans tonight? Gonna take me out?”

“Agh,” the officer sighed noisily and hunched further over the steering wheel. “Whennaya gonna take me out, huh? Why’s it always up to the old guy to do the patronizing shit?”

“If I wine and dine you,” said the teenager lowly. “I’ll be expecting something in return at the end of the night.”

Cartman missed him like you miss a hat that always makes you look better, no matter what kind of day you’re having. It’s unacceptable to wear it all the time, but you would if you could.

“Eric?”
“I gotta go.”

“Why?”

“Donovan’s back from the can.”

“You can’t talk and drive?”

“Not with Weenie Hut Junior in the front seat.”

With its own diesel truck stop, coffee and concessions, sandwich bar, and state-of-the-art siddown shitter, the gas station was the most happening thing in More -- and probably ten miles in any direction. Cartman had yet to encounter a single paved road or even a proper fuckin’ traffic light in the tiny town, and from the look of the church and its long white steeple hogging the city center, he was beginning to pick up some leery cultist vibes. The hills had eyes and the place was called More so that could only possibly serve as sardonic, or scary.

“Nowhere.”

“What?”

“Sounds like you’re in Nowhere,” Kenny clarified. “Spooky stuff happens in Nowhere.”

“Well right now Donovan’s happening, with an ice pack and a gas station sub.”

“Return the slab!” Kenny tried an impression of the creep from Nowhere, but he used the NPR voice again and failed, perfectly. “Return the slab!”

“Shut up!” Cartman stuttered over an abrupt round of laughter, trying not to appear light-hearted or make eye contact as his side-bitch for the night approached. “Jesus, ya fuckin’ maniac. I really gotta go.”

“Okay, I’m hanging up -- remember our deal.” He said. “I love you. See ya later.”

Cartman let his phone fall from his ear and set about trying to tuck his head into one of the irregular gaps in the steering wheel. The passenger door opened and the car’s chassis shook and squeaked with Clyde’s return. He settled for pushing his forehead against the center stalk hard enough to almost bruise between his eyes. The pressure there was a relief, sort of. Kenny had ruined the whole rest of his night, probably. He hadn’t even meant to call him in the first place, just, sat on his phone by accident, waiting for Donovan. Slipped into a trance, or something.

“Jesus,” Cartman swore again under his breath. “I can smell you, right down to the condiments, man.”

“You really didn’t want anything? We’ve been working two beats for over six hours -- you could still grab something.”

“No, I -- don’t like eating things that have been sweating in plastic wrap for three days.”

“Jeez, you must have a really sensitive palate.”

Cartman heard the sound of paper being peeled back and the satisfied chortle of a pig about to get busy with some mud. He put the cruiser in gear and hoped the radio would give him something to do that wasn’t burying his passenger and his cigarettes and his sub alive in a sleepy cult town.

“Who’s on the phone?” asked Clyde as they slid out onto the main roads, his mouth packed like a V-
W bug on a cross-country cruise. “Catching up with Ma dukes?”

“Do you even know who J Dilla is?”

“What?” He chuckled. “I know Liane’s left you about fifty voicemails in the last hour.”

“Jesus. Two, maybe.”

“She must be pretty worried. I usually hit my mom back, like, in the same day -- “

“Look, Clyde -- “ Cartman said. “I don’t tell you I respect you a lot, because, well -- I don’t.”

His utterly, depressingly, commercially unremarkable colleague burbled in the front seat. It was a very Clyde sound: the mating of a full mouth and a nonverbal comeback.

He carried on while Donovan struggled to swallow. “I don’t know what kind of ‘groovy psychiatry’ thing you people are going for, but I’m not that guy. I’m not remotely that guy, okay? I’m drawing the line right here at taking ‘be a better son’ advice from the jackass who can’t even remember to put the toilet seat down. I don’t need your little advice -- I’m on a different level; I’m reaping perceptual graveyards, up here, and you all are still worshiping math, as if it weren’t man-made. Now leave me alone, snot-clog, or I’ll punish you.”

“I’m just saying, it’s probably good you called her back. I haven’t seen you outside a bad mood in months.”

“No, you would know if I was in a bad mood, Clyde -- a weather anomaly would rip your house out of the ground, and I’d be outside your window on a bicycle. In a pointed hat.”

“We grew up together, bro, I know when something’s eating you -- ”

“First of all,” Cartman interrupted, starting to use his free hand to chop up his colleague’s conclusions as he turned onto the highway. He was in the process of eliminating repetitive gestures from his life, though, so he stopped. “My mother may be a slut but she’s not into cephalopods so I’m pretty sure I’m not your bro. Secondly, we didn’t grow up together, titty-meat, we grew up next to each other; the only things you know about me are allergies and killer birthday parties. To something like me, Clyde, you’re a non-entity. You’re a dial tone -- you’ll only ever be a dull and repetitive prelude to something greater.”

“Oh, man -- you are in a good mood. I always feel a lot better after talking to my mom.”

“I didn’t call her back!” Cartman broke. “Fuck -- why would I call Liane at two a.m. on a Thursday? I would rather gargle wet cement!”

“If it wasn’t your mom,” more crinkling. “Then who was it?”

Eric risked a glance at the passenger seat and immediately recentered his gaze on the road to avoid a spasm. Clyde clutched at the dripping remains of his sub, chasing condiments around his hand with his tongue. When Kenny spent the afternoons riding shotgun, snapping Red Vines and wiping his hands on his jeans, it was dashing, it was gritty -- but a fast food cop hot on a trail of leaky mayonnaise? It made his stomach turn.

Then again, Kenny had created belches more dashing than Clyde Donovan.

“The more compelling question is, Clyde, where were you, the day they were passing out common sense -- dicking around in the land of fairies and Birkenstocks again?”
“You know, the ‘I don’t give a fuck’ front is pretty convincing, but at the end of the day, you have to go home and sit with the evil son of a bitch you really are, Cartman.”

“Ooh, turn down your cool, Clyde -- I mean, I might freeze.” Eric mocked. What a ruthless bastard he was, he thought grimly. He fantasized about murdering himself from the outside. With a mallet, maybe. Or a fishbone.

Donovan was mercifully quiet the rest of his sandwich, and the roads widened slowly before them. Cartman strained very hard to sink himself into the groovy Q album humming underneath the sounds of work -- the squelch and shuffle of his partner in the front seat, his tires on the road, the pulse in his throat, the ever-present murmur of the dispatch radio between them. They weren’t traditionally allowed to play music while on patrol, but Cartman needed something. Anything to make Clyde go away, make the smell of the city go away, maybe even the narrative in his head telling him who he was. Forget all of that. Cartman needed a blank face. Blank face.

“Crazy that arrest this morning, huh?”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I figured you would know. He’s one of yours.”

Eric glanced sidewise and got an eyeful of the mugshot on Clyde’s phone: a man who head and shoulders appeared mountainous, face like a sand shovel, the color of a barbecue chip.

“You guys arrested the Mongrel?”

“We had him on charges for that stabbing a few days ago.”

“One accusation with no eye witnesses is not enough for a warrant -- “

“An-nd,” Clyde sang. “He was caught on camera duking it out with somebody at the Havana subway station.”

“That’s right outside my house.”

“We didn’t catch the second guy,” said Clyde. “Take a look.”

Cartman slowed to a stop on the deserted road to watch the fuzzy fifteen-second video clip of the well-known Bruder and a hooded figure one-third his size clash just a few feet from the subway rails. The time stamp on the security footage read 00:14, just after midnight the previous day.

The instant he distinguished the two figures he was sure what he was about to see. And he hated Clyde for showing it to him but he supposed you could only swing a brick around for so long before it came back to hit you in the face.

Then the video played.

“What?” Cartman said.

“I know.” Clyde grinned.

“Play it again.”

“What?” He demanded again.

Clyde regressed to giggles.
The video looped again. Cartman was sure he was about to see a beat-down for a third time and he wasn’t disappointed. The wrestler swung a huge fist at the smaller male that connected hard over his ear, then grabbed for him. The challenger dodged, and the Mongrel lunged again, this time catching on the individual’s torn coat.

For the third time Cartman watched the blurry but unmistakable shape of Kenny in the video shove a heel in the Mongrel’s gut, knocking him teetering to the tiles. Another heel between his legs. Then the teenager landed on the mountainous man and sort of pounded him limp.

“Subway personnel found Big Pimpin’ -- unconscious.” Clyde said as the video cut to replay. “The other guy ran off. Couldn’t identify him, apparently.”

Cartman could hear the little brain cell in his colleague’s head clattering around, thinking itself clever. He let his silence do battle with it, edging the cruiser back into drive. In the back of his mind, the video replayed a fourth time.

“Couldn’t identify him. The other guy.” Clyde tried again.

Cartman was very good at silences; he spun silences like wastelands -- and people didn’t just get lost in them they lost their focus in them, they grew desperate, their psyches donned assless leather pants and 80s haircuts and started fights over gasoline. This was pretty much Clyde’s mental state on any given day, but Eric was sure long silences in his cruiser had something to do with it.

“The guys back at the station were all wondering -- “

Cartman tackled a persistent itch over his left nipple.

“They couldn’t tell from the -- “

He stifled a yawn over his shoulder. Clyde’s mouth-breathing was filling up the cab but a slick beat was occurring to him now, off a track called Groovy Tony.

“Come on -- admit it, you know who that is. Your boy Yellow Wolf’s got some moves, huh! The footage might be black and white but anybody who’s seen his file would know.”

Cartman shook his head slowly. “No facial in the video, not even a partial; all you’ve got is some kid in a hood with -- fuckin’ -- huge nuts. Might as well put up a Wanted poster with a picture of some testicles on them. Maybe someone will find you a pair.”

The sound of his passenger’s unholy interest was a susurration of straining cotton and leather, the mournful clink of his holster against the seatbelt -- and Cartman’s trance growing deeper, deeper.

Kenny did have some moves.
Kenny had moves all day.

“Token said Wendy said Heidi said you guys were getting pretty close.”

“Any more words on this, Clyde, and I’ll make your face beat up my fist, again.”

Another chorus from the suffering fabrics as he shifted in his seat, but Cartman was pleased to note him frowning out the corner of his eye.

“You ruined my senior prom photo -- “

“No, I made it more memorable.”
“The stitches came out when I smiled, dude! There was blood all in my teeth!”

It was making him smile, actually, remembering it. Kenny would appreciate the photo, probably. He’d think it had heart. Or maybe he’d think it was cold.

“I didn’t think you’d wanna graduate high school without having ever been in a fight.”

“I wanted to do it without stitches inside my cheek, too, thanks. And Meg still won’t talk to me.”

“We’re getting to the root of your problems, here. Let me put this some way you’ll understand; for a lucky few, death comes nice and fast, but for the rest of us, it’s as long and painfully dull as a conversation with you. My point is, Clyde -- I saw that picture too, and it hasn’t affected my sex drive. Dunham isn’t down with your D for other reasons.”

It was almost no use -- how could he imagine making sweet elbowy love to his truant with Clyde there burbling in the front seat? Don’t start, he warned himself. Don’t start, don’t start.

It was almost no use.

People thought Cartman was so much less angry and hateful than he used to be; so they either treated him distant, assuming he was too doped up to care anymore; or worse, they treated him like a small-town miracle recovery story, as if he’d called some hotline and lost a hundred and twenty pounds in eleven months eating cotton balls and ice cubes. It only made him hate people more. He wasn’t changed. He wasn’t better.

Cartman depended on control over others; he didn’t ever put a lot of effort into controlling himself -- but in college he’d learned to compartmentalize; he’d learned there were certain times and places to indulge certain thoughts, and actions.

He had metaphysical rooms for every state of mind. He had compartments for job-related stress, for his strained relationship with his mother, and the ever-changing odds of himself flipping furniture in the next five minutes.

He had a room for every failure. A room for every death, for random acts of violence, and for disparate things that somehow rhymed. Foozball. Rickshaw. Jihad.

Eric put his ‘problems’ with anger and aggression and strangeness in carefully marked spaces, and whenever he felt them wiling out, he medicated himself back to the centerline. He medicated away the morning’s small annoyances and his own dull moods with regular doses of caffeine; he tackled his dogged discontent with sugar like cocaine hidden in everything he ate, keeping the opiate receptors in his brain fired up yelling GOOD JOB -- and his distemperment tended to slide away with booze. Eric even tried to medicate his lack of purpose with frivolous purchases of video games and expensive sound equipment.

This unlimited prescription for American coping devices and the ability to compartmentalize like a fucking Japanese shelving unit made him less volatile, but no less dangerous. They simply eased his transition over from evil son of a bitch to contributing member of society.

Even Wendy probably thought Cartman had some modicum of control. But Wendy was wrong.

He had a room for his brainless classmates. One or two for the cunts, maybe. A little garage thing where he kept his elementary school days.

He had a whole dark wing for his fantasies with Wolf.
The primal end of Cartman’s brain had been creeping through the cellar to the forefront, lately. It was true he hadn’t been able to lay down, let alone touch on himself, in a while -- nor had he been able to do those things without dismissing Kenny entirely from his mind. Maybe that was why he’d been avoiding rest, to date -- because when his mind found a degree of freedom with an idea, it tended to take root, and grow wild.

Eric reigned in his focus, back to the road. Driving in a cloud of mayonnaise and salted meat smell with his shitty passenger was certainly not one of those times appropriate for sexual abandon. He felt something white-hot like lasers rise to his eyes and, with some effort, directed them away from Clyde.

The interstate had expanded since leaving the town of More -- the road had grown four more lanes, and the street lamps sprung from the ground longer, leaner, and brighter. Graffiti tags washed by on either side of the freeway like tropical fish in a gray tank.

A McDonald’s billboard with some new heart attack in the center had been dressed with some encouragement in black paint: *Now MORE radioactive than Asbestos!* In the rearview he saw that the back of the board was signed Chum. Cartman had seen some of the artist’s other work on the KFCs in town: ‘*Now with EXTRA Nitrate!*’ ‘*Our tomatoes are picked by SLAVES!*’ Sometimes they were also marked with the letters W.G.

Another board passing in the night was an ad for the new Guinness IPA, but it had been entirely blanked out with white paint. The word *DECEIT* was slathered across it.

He turned his gaze on the big roadside sound-proofing walls and found more paint, the wood and concrete mottled with streaks from the animal human mind, from amateur dick and balls to exploding heads, hearts, and signatures lasting hundreds of yards: Adelie. Naga. Barf. Chum was signed in a couple places. Another one he recognized as Little Wolf, a curly tag that always showed up in tandem with *Golf Wang*, which Cartman had a few ideas about. *Stay Awake!* jumped out at him from a long stretch of the highway barrier, each huge panel covered by only one letter. He tried to drag his gaze back to the road.

A billboard paid for by the Sherriff’s Department was looming, and he could tell from miles away that half the Sherriff’s face and the bottom bit of the slogan -- ‘*Spot. Observe. Report.*’ -- and the phone number for the station had been covered with some new, aggressive yellow paint. The font was complex enough that he’d already blown past the advertisement before the modified slogan hit him clearly: ‘*Spot. Observe. FUCK COPS.*’

“Your phone’s buzzing again.”

“I hear it.”

Cartman considered his personal cell for two seconds and a whole ring before snatching it from the center console and balancing it between his left shoulder and ear. “Yeah.” It was the most reckless move he'd made all night. After pulling the burning man from the burning truck.

“Hey -- “ the cheery fade-out voice of one of Colorado’s graffitti elite. “Sorry, I just thought of something. Two things, actually.”

“What.” He glanced around at the sound of Donovan rustling around to face him over the console, like an owlet waiting for him to puke up something good to eat. Cartman would’ve done anything to make him disappear. He would pull over on the side of the damn road and tear him out by the belt loops. He’d done it before.
“Top or bottom?”

The flutter of Eric’s nerves died and a surge of a anger and embarrassment kicked at his bile duct. “Don’t call me on this number unless it’s important. I’m working.”

“It is important!” Kenny laughed. “Sorry. I was just playing -- that’s not actually what I -- ”

“Then tell me what it is.”

“Err, well, the first thing is I’m picking up food. That Mediterranean place is the only thing open. You want your falafel pita thing?”

He got a rush just thinking about it, actually. “Yes.”

“Word. Second thing -- are you on Bruder work tonight?”

Cartman exhaled through his nostrils, inhaled the ebony night. “I can’t talk about this.”

“Okay, okay, you’re in the car and you don’t wanna talk with soft serve in the front seat, I get it, but you should know -- there’s a hit on ya.”

He issued a threat through his eyes, and Clyde pretended to look over his shoes. “A what?”

“A hit, man -- a fucking hit! It’s been moving along the underground grapevine; there’s money on your head, and you know what that means -- you know Rainer’s ways. I hear he’s been hitting the phone books for fly fishers, if you know what I mean. He’s a bit short on muscle, these days.”

“Yeah, I just heard something about that,” Cartman grit.

“Oh -- did you?”

“Saw the whole fucking thing, as a matter of fact.”

“Well, just so you know,” the anarchist preened. “When I hit it -- I hit it like a crash.”

“Dude, come on,” Cartman said with a slight, pleading edge. He pulled at his uniform collar and glared at the centerline. “Not now.”

“Okay --” Kenny laughed like he’d trapped a mouse under his claw, then continued in a serious tone. “Your boss’s fuck-boy almost got Axel wetted, the other night.”

“Seriously? Did he try robbing a bait car, or something?”

“Yeah, look -- babe, just don’t be on the Tree streets tonight. You’re runnin’ hot.”

“I get it, thanks.”

Cartman’s logic centers whirred over the new information; Axel had been attacked -- ? For walking away after the train job, probably. Then looked the wrong way at a bait car, got arrested, and turned the police onto the Mongrel just in time for Yellow Wolf to leave the wrestler unconscious in the underground, along with video evidence of another minor assault. Now Rainer had scores to settle -- and he was short on friends.

If he thought too long about it, the whole thing started to look… purposeful.

Cartman shifted the phone to his opposite shoulder and dropped his voice without really being able
to hide the words. He glanced sidewise at Clyde to find him staring at his half of the personal conversation with the same aggressive interest, chewing around the straw of a Big Gulp twice the size of the human bladder. “What’s going on? Are you holding any cards right now?”

“What? What plan? Who’s planning?”

It was so stupid it startled him into laughter. “You, dipshit.”

“No, nothing illegal on the schedule tonight -- I’m staying in. So just a little breaking and entering, maybe.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Eric insisted, around a sudden frustrated flush under his skin. Did he fucking know? He found himself wondering. Did the kid fucking know when he was horny and just decide to cash in on it every chance he got? “You might be taking the night off but don’t try and tell me the whole damn Golf Wang isn’t wiling out ––”

“Whoa, sure you wanna bring up Wolf Gang with Weenie Hut whatever in there listening?” He interrupted. His voice had a husky, unfinished quality, like the adolescent hadn’t fully settled into it yet. It only came off sexy -- conceited, but clunky. “I mean, this is secret stuff.”


Kenny chuckled and Cartman admired the low rumble of appreciation, having not realized how much girls’ laughter kind of annoyed him, anyway. Or maybe it was just fake laughter that annoyed him.

“I was gonna ask if I had competition, but I can’t picture you taking it from a plant-baby.”

Cartman frowned, flushed. Only a few of his immediate responses were appropriate for the car, and the company. “The word is ask, idiot. The ‘s’ comes before the ‘k’.”


Cartman heard a familiar intake of breath, and the light click of teeth and tongue. “Did you just spit? You’re not in my house, are you?”

“No,” he huffed. “I’m climbing your fucking stairs, fuck-ass.”

Suddenly the sounds of distant conversation tickled his ear drum, and Cartman’s nerves sharpened to points.

“Who is that?”

“Who’s talking, hey ––”

“Chill out,” McCormick muttered. “It’s your neighbor -- I can’t understand what he’s saying.”

“Is that Omanovic?” He said, settling down. He’d known shopping bags more lethal than the toddlering beer belly that lived next door.

“Yeah, he says the weather in St. Petersburg is just like this, this time of year.”

“Tell him to climb back up the Russian byoo-tocks he crawled from, then,” Cartman griped. “What’s he doing? Little bitch never leaves that apartment.”
"I don’t know, man, something about a magazine? I’m trying to get my keys. He’s coming closer. The fuck -- "

Cartman didn’t normally need an excuse to want to beat the piss out of his neighbor, but knowing he was creeping out Kenny made him want to pull the skin off his face.

"Tell him he’s never gonna find his daughter. That always makes him go away. Tell him Katerina is gone. No, just say ‘you’ll never find her.’ He’ll go away instantly, I promise. He’ll be sad for days."

"I can’t," He heard shuffling, and the secondary hum of another voice. "That’s so cold -- it’s not my style --"

"Trust me, he can handle it. Cold is how the Russians beat Napoleon, and Hitler. They thrive on it --"

"I ditched him," Kenny continued after another moment of shuffling. Cartman heard him laugh under his breath, then the satisfying clang of the metal gate closing. "I couldn’t say it. Sometimes I forget how cold you are, man. I miss you."

"I -- " Cartman glanced around. Shit, that was close. "That was close. You’re losing it, Officer Bad-touch." Kenny snorted. "What time is it, anyway? You on the victory lap, yet?"

"Not even close."

He continued at the same low volume, thankful for the odd lexicon of references, gibberish, and double entendre that had become a sort of language between them. "I just wanna know how you tamed Sigourney Weaver's sandy strange."

"I just wanna know how big your dick is." Kenny dodged and parried. "Stop me when I’m close. Three. Four inches. Is that too high? Too low?"

"Dude!" He colored instantly. "If you don’t wanna answer the question just say so!"

"I heard that small penises make anal sex not only possible, but extremely pleasurable --"

Cartman hung up the phone on the last ring of his laughing voice. Kenny wasn’t better at ripping on people, he wasn’t meaner or colder than Cartman -- but he really had the tease down to an art form. Kenny could provoke a basket of daisies. Kenny could provoke a painting of the pope.

"Wendy said --"

"Yeah, what’s Wendy say, Clyde?" Cartman snapped at a volume Wendy would snap at him for. "What’s the world look like from where she is, hanging upside-down, wrapped in her own wings?"

"She -- "

"Don’t you smell the shit under your shoes?"

"But, then -- " Donovan looked around the cabin wildly. "Then who was on the phone?"

Cartman waved a hand. "I hope this isn’t awkward for you, but I promised my mom you’d have sex with her."

"Wh -- "
And just in time, the slight fuzz buzz of the dispatch radio sharpened to a loud scatter and they reached for it at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

have a WT throwback:
"what is it with coffee shops and homosexuals, anyway?"
Since Eric didn’t actually want to answer dispatch, he pulled off at the last second and let Clyde snatch it up like a fag. He responded in a tone far too cheery for ass past three in the morning, repeating their unit number as if whoever was on calls didn’t know who they’d paged.

Cartman couldn’t make out the fuzz from where his colleague held the radio. It sounded like Dunham, though. Her voice faded in and out, and Clyde responded with his usual complete lack of finesse.

“ETA oh four-hunnit.”

The distorted buzz of Dunham’s voice. Clipped and professional.

“A 10-80?” Clyde confirmed, grinning over at him like he’d just found a twenty-dollar scratch ticket under his shoe.

“Another one?” Cartman muttered. He eyed the clock on the dash. Another dumb-ass car chase could take them hours. “She want us on retrieval, or detail?”

Donovan moved to hang the radio back on its frame, dropped it into the center console, and tried again. “Detail -- they’re pushing it to a blockade on Paper.”

“Paper Street?” It wasn’t the Tree Streets, but it was close.

“Yah,” he confirmed. “Apparently, the chase started down there. Forty-minute chase.”

“Our 10-80 was like, two hours -- “

“Yeah, top speed fifty. Meg says this one’s B.O.H. Stole a good car for it, too, apparently.”

That was Bat Outta Hell status. Cartman rubbed at his eyes.

“What’s up with your neck?”

“Nothing.”

“Whoa-a -- “ Clyde bellowed in his fuck-boy frat-tard way, grabbing at Cartman’s collar just as he was pulling the cruiser with both hands around the sharp curve of an exit ramp. “What’s all over your neck? Damn! Baby girl needa chill out with that!”

Cartman tore away from the other officer’s hands, shrugging his shoulders against the unwelcome touch. If it weren’t so close to the end of his shift, and freedom, and if he didn’t have the fucking inklings of doom building in the corners of his eyes, it would have been the end for Clyde Donovan.

Baby girl did need to chill out with that.
He couldn't tell Kenny what to do. If he told him not to bite him, he would bite him. If he tried reverse psychology and dared the anarchist to bite him, he would bite him even harder. Cartman found himself at a rare stalemate; because he knew he could stop him, if he really wanted, but -- even the memory of Kenny's nipping teeth over his scatterwork of life's essential veins hollowed Eric's chest with desire for that sweet torture of touch.

“So who are you necking with?”

“Oh, I’ve, moved on from dead horses to elbow leeches. My therapist thinks it’s an improvement.”

“C’mon -- “ Clyde piffed, and with surprising intuition for one so uniplanar, he added: “Heidi wasn’t that bad. Not bad as you.”

“No,” He agreed. “Heidi was a nice, lovely girl.”

A silence followed his words as Clyde effectively short-circuited. Cartman congratulated himself on this sleight of hand and change of awkward topic, but the self-satisfied glow he usually got from assholery didn’t last.

Paper Street. Pine. Elm. He felt a darkness coming but not if he could hold it.

“The 10-80, Donovan. What’s the vehicle?”

“Meg said Saab. Gray.”

“They’re running it to a blockade on Paper Street?”

“Yeah -- you know the spot. Kind of on Graves. Right by that, uhh -- “

“By the old bodega.”

Cartman knew the spot well. It was right where his truant caught him with his dick out. Right where he’d fired his glock for the first time.

He thought of Wendy, suddenly -- growing something out of nothing, right over her solar plexus -- a small universe joined within her.

Cartman reminded himself he was equally capable with both hands. But all they had accomplished was destruction.

He ordered Clyde to call dispatch and tell Dunham they were closing in.

They were moving forward, but the distance between Cartman and Paper Street seemed to be growing -- as if instead of moving through space they were just wrinkling it like fabric, pinching at the folds. He could see their destination getting nearer but still feel all that distance, there, bunched up around him. After leaving the interstate, it was a series of tricky loops to the Bottom -- or as it was also known: South Park, Colorado. No roads led to it, exactly, and none out of it. He knew the moment he heard the clatter of train tracks above his head and the cruiser bumped over an illegally large pothole that they had arrived at the border between North Park and his old hometown.
“Da 5’9 coming in hot, Meg,” said his moronic colleague. “Uh -- that’s unit 59. C-man and Donovan, on scene in less than five.”

Cartman built up a mental compartment for the cost-benefit analysis of driving his cruiser into the river. Cost being his own death, the benefit, ridding the world at last of Clyde Donovan.

“Sheriff on scene? Oh-ho!”

Fuck, what was the Sandman doing at a traffic stop in the middle of a graveyard shift on a
“Ask her what’s the status of that 10-93.”

“That B.O.H. hit the blockade yet?”

“Oh -- “ Clyde nodded at the radio. “No, it didn’t. Eastbound, coming in on Graves. Tinted up. Word, yeah -- over.”

Eric snatched the radio from him and docked it to avoid watching another fumbling act. Donovan squinted out the window, his overworked brain cell clattering like old A/C.

“Craig just got tints.”

It wasn’t his heartbeat, but something was very loud around him, suddenly. Something under his ribs was winding up, spitting and hissing -- the sugary GOOD JOB signal in his head blanked out, and a new one lit up: SURVIVE.

Downtown crept in on them, then trickled into low-income housing and old mills, warehouses. He turned onto Graves as a fog was rising out of the cracked, uneven pavement. They saluted the white headstone of Brother Blood, standing tall and grieving above the rest.

The gray Viggen with the black window tints and black rims and rainy-gray finish would have been invisible against the night if not for the symphony of blue and white lights doing impressionist things with its silhouette. The whole panorama of the chaotic night splashed half-reflected over the car, a light-show on mirrored sunglasses -- so vibrantly loud that he heard the lights before he heard the screech of the brakes locking up and rubber burning over pavement. Clyde’s cruiser came to a stop where Graves ended and the Tree Streets began. He’d have to replace its tires now, Cartman remembered thinking, but the Viggen was still a beautiful car.

There was a stupid wing on the back, though. He’d get rid of that.

At the intersection of Paper, Pine, and Elm, Cartman had arrived to block the last thru-way at Graves, a side-street that thinned out between a large chain-link fence and an old bodega.

“They brought a K-9 unit?”

Something buzzed against his thigh, and he vaguely registered turning over his phone screen. A new text on the screen, short enough to scream: SLEEP

Eric switched on his lights, turned off the siren, and climbed out of the car with his head spinning but grateful for the fresh -- rancid -- city air, somehow. The fog was climbing to his calves, curling around the wheels of the cars until they resembled black half-moons hovering just over the road. The unit on point wasn’t closing in on the Viggen, which meant either the lead officer was pussying out, or there was an imminent threat.

“Clyde!” He snapped back at the window. “Quit fucking around!”

Clyde spread his hands in the passenger seat, his eyes googling. “What do you want me to -- “

“Get out,” Eric hissed. “Stand your ass up, hold your hands out like a gun, and pretend you know what you’re doing. Don’t draw your real gun, because I don’t fucking trust you with my back turned.”

Clyde stumbled out of the car but straightened up quickly, seeming to shake himself. It wasn’t
Donovan’s fault. He didn’t work nights, normally, and the most exciting part of his career thus far had been arresting a man for aggravated assault with a weapon outside of RimRocks pub last year. When asked to identify the weapon used in the crime, Donovan described it as a ‘massage wand: sixteen inches, pink silicone.’

Despite ‘massage wand’ being an unexpectedly resourceful turn of phrase coming from someone Cartman considered a mongoloid, he doubted this would be anything like a bar fight involving a lengthy dildo.

“Stand here,” he said again, having to kind of shout as the other idiots hadn’t turned off their sirens and the K-9 unit was barking up the walls of the bodega, for some reason.

Clyde was nodding, arms straight at his sides. “That’s Craig’s car, dude.”

“If somebody runs from the vehicle, chase them,” he advised.

But Clyde was still nodding, and his eyes were still googling. “Why is Craig’s -- what?”

Cartman recognized this as the third setting on the fight or flight survival mechanism: freeze.

So Eric yanked his arms up from his sides, folded Clyde’s fingers over in the shape of a shadow-puppet gun, and pointed them straight at the tinted up Saab, leaving the best shit he’d seen all night trapped between the canines rattling the fence, two more squad cars with even more behind them, and Clyde’s shaking hands.

He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw Token waving him over. Guy should seriously wear some, reflector bracelets, or something.

Cartman trotted around the perimeter created around the Viggen, eyeing the blacked up windows and seeing nothing but the scattered siren lights. It was totally still. As he approached the lead cruiser he looked back at the gray car and nearly choked around a cry of pure grief -- the driver's side front quarter paneling was demolished, and what was left of the driver’s side headlight was stuck flashing on strobe.

Token switched off the radio pinned to his shoulder strap as Cartman got close enough to pick him out of the dark.

“What’s going on?” He started. “Why aren’t you moving in?”

“Because the driver is armed, probably,” Token said, propping his hands on his hips but looking no less worn out. “Whole thing started as a public disturbance call -- six, maybe seven suspects, firing weapons outside that old building. As soon as we pulled in, they ran -- some for their cars, some for the fences.”

“Of the two who ran for the fences, we recovered one.” Token motioned at the back of his cruiser. “You can talk to him, if you need to, but we had to take a fingerprint just to get an ID. We also recovered a firearm abandoned in the bushes -- probably the second runner’s.”

“Can I see it?”

Token paused. “Sure.”

Officer Black sent the kid he was training to fetch the ‘abandoned’ gun. He rubbed at his eyes and crossed his arms. Token cleared his throat.
“So, uh -- “ Cartman said to fill the cluttered silence. “How ‘bout that shit with ‘ye?”

“Don’t talk to me about ‘ye.”

“Community cold shoulder, huh?” He nodded. “I get it. We knew he was a gay fish.”

Token’s eyes were harder than Ice T’s jewelry when a long-barreled shotgun was placed crosswise in his hands and Cartman’s shoulder gave a post-traumatic twinge.

“Thank you, Pip. Please go tell Crash and Spektor to turn off their siren. This is not a pissing contest with the dogs. We’re going to wake up the whole neighborhood as it is.”

His former partner held out the weapon as he spoke, and Cartman wasted no time taking it and turning the muzzle down to pop open the cartridge. He edged out a single slug and used his pocket knife to tease off the brass end of the shell. A few thimbles of heavy rock salt hit the wet pavement and glowed in the foggy white light.

“What does that mean?” said Token, after a moment.

“I don’t really know,” he half-lied. “You said they were waving guns around the bodega? What for?”

“That’s why we called in the K-9 unit. We don’t know -- but the dogs are going crazy around the place, so they’re prepping to go in. Then -- “

The officer hesitated and glanced once around the crowded scene, then leaned into the shadow of his car and folded his arms. “Then, fucking Sandman arrives, suddenly, and he takes his whole squad, you know, just so they can document him in action. He’s been nothing but nickel and diming me about protocol all night -- like, where’s my nametag at, and five minutes between dispatch updates, why didn’t you call Jeff County when we toed the border, fuckin’ -- dumb shit, you know.”

He paused to scan the perimeter again, turning his head all the way both directions. “And this P.O.S. does not even have his holster secured properly, which is a safety violation!”

“Steve’s a bastard.”

“Thank you!” Token clapped, then recrossed his arms quickly. “I mean, he’s fine, really -- he’s like the friend nobody wants around -- but, just a bastard, sometimes.”

“Comes with power.”

Stephen Sandies was lost in his thirties somewhere. He’d lost his mother to cancer, and then, just a few years back, lost his wife to it. Break room rumor had it he’d lost the respect of his son, too, somewhere along the line. Overall, the Sandman was one singularly directionless guy.

“Anyway -- he’s got people talking about calling the bomb squad, now,” Token sighed heavily. “Which turns this ordeal into at least a three-hour clusterfuck.”

“Fuck tha-at,” Cartman hummed, his eyes feeling heavy at the prospect. “My shoulders already hurt carrying Donovan around this long.”

“We’re gonna be here till sunrise, dude, so you’ve gotta pick up Crash or Spektor, too. I’ve got my hands full babysitting the sheriff.”

“I don’t think so -- I’ve been on two beats since sunset. I’m clocking the fuck outta here whether the
“You want my advice?” said Token, with a grim turn to his voice. “Lay down in front of that car and hope the psycho behind the wheel has one last go in him. The only way you’re getting out of here is in an ambulance.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Cartman said, snorting. “That’s Tucker’s ride, isn’t it? What’s the deal with that?”

“The deal is there’s a truly impressive amount of uncut base in the back.”

Cartman looked carefully at the officer on lead, but this was said with a straight face.

“Craig noticed when he picked it up from the shop with the new tint job,” he continued. “So we had to impound the car, and open an investigation. But so far, nobody at the shop knows anything. The car was there overnight, so it’s possible that… I don’t know.”

Token scrutinized the silent, flashing Viggen as if it had conspired to steal the base on its own power.

“Anyway, we contracted a tow, and had it delivered to the impound lot.”

Cartman waited for the ‘but’.

“Only, it never made it to the lot.” Token continued. “Description of the tow driver matches the guy we arrested here tonight, so there’s that, as well.”

Cartman eyed the backseat of his old partner’s cruiser and made unsettlingly abrupt eye contact with a big bald bruiser who looked eerily familiar.

“Sheriff,” Token snapped, suddenly standing shoulders over heels again and nodding at a distant point.

Eric turned and nodded at Sandlicker’s prominent, shiny forehead -- even shinier and more prominent in the high-powered flashing emergency signals all around them. The rest of the sheriff’s face was, in contrast, rather clustered around itself; his nose, eyes, and mouth all hemmed in like a Colorado suburb, and the forehead a shiny hillside above it all.

“Hello, boys,” he said. “Hey, Cartman.”

“What’s with the fucking dogs, Steve?” Cartman said. “We’re not shooting a music video tonight. Put that shit away.”

“Well, I hate to disagree with you, but, we don’t know what’s in that building.”

“It’s an old bodega. It’s filled with bugs and graffiti.”

His eyes narrowed nervously. “The Jeff County Sheriff has recommended a SWAT team -- “


Steve's lips thinned, and he went colorless. “Trace elements of glycerin were found at the scene, and, considering the reactions of the K-9 unit, and the events of Officer Black’s earlier arrest, and the high speed chase leading back here, I think it’s a fair call -- ”

“Alright, alright, I don’t need a breakdown of the most work you’ve done all year,” he interrupted with a wave of his hand. Token coughed into his fist. “What do you want us to do about gray lightning, over here?”
One of the unfortunate realities of any military-style hierarchy was that, the moment a higher ranking individual lands on scene, power is ripped from the field agents, and all decisions must be cleared by the person least familiar with the situation at hand.

Sandman settled his small blue eyes on yonder swag wagon, and seemed to put more effort into forming the expression of thinking than actually getting any of it done.

“We already know the driver is armed and impulsive -- best not to provoke him while he’s trapped --”

“Sir -- “ Cartman pinched the bridge of nose between his forefinger and thumb. He spoke in staccato bursts he hoped would get through to his boss, like a jackhammer to concrete. “I think -- what with the damn helicopters on the way, and the bomb threat next door -- it would be best to wrap up the traffic stop and see what information we can get on the driver. Five officers on scene, trained to handle armed motorists -- we can probably take it from here, don’t you think?”

“I think -- “ that expression, again. Gormless, was the word. “Given the situation at the -- the bo-de-ga, it’s best if you two handle this -- “

“Good idea,” Cartman praised. “And we should do it as quickly as possible, right? One grenade is less dangerous than two, after all.”

“Hm, yes, given that,” the Sandman stumbled. “Having two potential threats in one area, is, necessarily, more dangerous than just one -- best wrap this up in, uhh, in due haste.”

“Token,” Eric said, after their superior had clicked his ruby heels and left hearing distance. “Remind me later, to include ‘in due haste’ in the log for tonight.”

“Are you insane?” He snapped. “The Sandmaiden might be a few points short of a billboard’s IQ and too thick to see what you’re up to, but I’m not. Crash and Spektor are good officers -- but they haven’t been through training since we were in high school, and neither of them have done anything but confiscate moonshine in all that time -- “

“I know.”

“In fact,” he continued. “Of the three of them, Clyde has the most combat experience, and that was only fending off a -- a -- “


Token uncrossed his arms. “Seriously, man. If we’re looking at something here, it’s not the time to go off script -- if something goes wrong, it’s our asses on the line -- “

"Oh -- " The juvenile in training had returned. “Thank you, Pip. Could you also grab my coffee for me, please. It’s -- just there, in the -- yes. Thanks.”

After the young officer was sent away on another errand, Token leaned back against the cruiser.

“You’re a bastard,” muttered Eric.

“I know,” chuckled the Black officer, between sips from the travel mug. “It’s power, man. Speaking of which -- Wendy let on that you might be keeping a ‘special bond’ with your truant, the other day.”

“You too?” He stormed. “Heidi breaks into my fucking house, Wendy invades my lunch hour
whenever she feels like it, and yes, my truant drinks my fucking milk -- do you want something too, Token? You want me to lay down here, so you can step on me? Do it for the culture. Go on.”

Token was silent. Cartman leaned against the cruiser beside him, still scrutinizing the hunched shape of the Viggen.

“All I ask is some semblance of a private life -- something that’s safe from work. But no, I’ve got Wendy at my door like a damn debt collector -- only she comes twice a month.”

“You know what they say,” Token shrugged. “Beware the ides of Marsh.”

Cartman jettisoned a laugh, then shook his head. “Special bond, my ass.”

He was silent again. Then, quietly: “I think that dildo is still in evidence.”

“Screw you!” Eric shoved at his old partner but the thought of it was making them both laugh, somehow -- just the same way you’re more likely to laugh when you’re at the edge of a cliff, or the peak of a roller coaster. At any moment, something could go horribly wrong.

Cartman turned over his wrist, and tapped at his watch until it lit up.

“All right, here’s what we’re going to do.” He decided. “Send a message off to Crash and Spektor. Tell them to start closing in on the Pine-Elm side on my signal. I want you to circle around this way and join Clyde -- and start bringing in the Graves-side perimeter, on my mark.”

“What about you? What’re you -- what’re you doing?”

“Disarming,” Cartman said, unfastening his belt and releasing the gun and holster. He left it on the hood of Token’s cruiser, then unclipped his radio and left that behind, too.

“This is definitely not protocol.”

“If she sees an armed officer coming for the door, she’ll attack. She’s known for her preemptive strike. Known for it.”

“You know who it is?”

“I think so.”

Eric adjusted his belt, now free of the weight of the glock he always wore, and pushed away the niggling feeling that he was being entrapped.

“You sure about this?”

“No,” he admitted. “Never. Not ever. When can we really be sure about anything?”

He felt the weight of Token’s stare for a while before the officer waved an arm off toward the flanking cruiser. Pip arrived in an instant, breathing hard. “Tell Spektor to take point -- we’re going to close the perimeter around the vehicle. Officer Cartman will attempt to engage the motorist -- move only on signal. Act only on signal. Okay?”

Pip was off with a nod and a flutter.

“Go,” Cartman added, nodding off at the distant figure of Clyde. “He’s gonna need you, I think.”

Token started off, then stopped, turned back. “I was just kidding about laying down in front of the
Rain was falling when Cartman managed to psych himself up to dealing with death, again, within a three month period. On a wet Thursday in April. He discarded his night patrol jacket. The trick was to appear as non-threatening as possible -- if he was going down, he was going down buck-ass naked and breaking all the rules. Fuck it, maybe Wolf was rubbing off on him, a bit.

He checked his watch again and began making measured steps toward the parked vehicle with the strobing headlight. Traffic stops were no different from busting people in their own houses, really -- anything was possible behind those doors and windows, in spaces people considered their own. Just when you thought you’d searched every corner, there was a bin in the garage with two-hundred bindles of weed, or somebody with a warrant hiding in a closet. The things you hide tend to find ways to shine.

The driver’s side window was already coming down when he came within five yards of his broken dream car. He thought how the only things wrong with it were some of the surface details -- Craig Tucker’s stupid, vain tints and wings, some of life’s wear and tear -- and the fact that the person in the car was completely wrong.

“I thought it might be you,” rasped the second city grave digger.

“Francesca,” Cartman greeted, stopping close enough to get an eye on the inside of the car, and see himself sweating in the side-mirror. There were no other passengers. “You led half the department on a cruise around the city -- just to see me? You should have just called.”

“I didn’t think you were a Bruder,” she said in a smoker’s snarl more ripe than usual. Her hair seemed to grow larger as her face grew gaunt, teeth more gray. A faultline of scarring roped around her throat, where the studded dog collar had once been. It was like seeing the digger queen unmasked -- under her poise and her rules, Francesca was hiding the deep wounds of oppression. “I know a pig when I smell one.”

“Okay, but -- does it really matter? You and I are the same; we’re making our bread, any way we can.”

“No, we're not -- because you are a fake, a body-suit. You're a plant in the world of the wicked, but you don’t belong in the world of the innocent, either -- what name do they call you now? You never did say.”

Cartman licked his dry lips.

"Maybe,” she said, scrubbing out a cigarette butt on the door. "They didn't bother to give you one. Hired to die, work to die, and you're living, just to die."

“We were both hired to kill. Two different sides, maybe, but playing the same game.”

“I’ll tell you this,” Eric added. “After tonight, you’re going away for a minute, and that cockroach you were dreaming of squashing -- yeah, the one who payed you to off me? He’s gonna keep on moving his sugar. Long after you're gone, old girl, they're gonna be lining cribs with the shit. He becomes the game-master, and you'll be just another dead gravedigger.”

“Not,” wheezed Francesca. “Once your boss gets a peek -- under the bodega.”

“What?”

She laughed, not as hard and clear and apathetic as usual -- more wild. Cartman frowned.
“You want this the easy way or the hard way? You know the dance: get out of the car and put your hands on your head.”

He wasn’t exactly surprised when instead of pulling the door handle, the sunken-eyed digger flicked the cigarette to the pavement and when his eyes followed it, he heard the clink of a metal barrel coming to rest on the edge of the window, and a safety being pulled back. “Who says I pick the easy way?”

“Didn’t think guns were really your style.”

“My new associates tell me times have changed,” she said. “Everybody has guns now -- it’s easier to kill than to fight.”

“Thought the diggers had some kind of honor code,” he challenged, because it was either challenge the woman behind the gun, or fill his pants up with shit and wait for the bullet. “D-E-A-D, remember? What happened to the discreet part?”

“It died with the best of us,” she snarled, her hand steady, hovering just far enough in the shadows so that her silhouette offered no clear shot from a distance. “With Tall-tail. With my own.”

“So this is it, then? This how you want it to end? Hot shit gravedigger going down for the base trade, working a job paid for by the people you hate. This is the real you, huh -- cop-killer with a hoe-ass 22 Magnum -- ”

“I’ll blow your dick off, bitch -- then we’ll see the real you!”

“You’re already going to jail,” he tried, voice tight. “Do it without the murder count. It’s twelve years a bullet. That model backfires all the time -- “

“Shut up!” She barked. “I won’t take advice from you! I made all this from nothing -- I got all this way from nothing, and you never even took the shackles off your feet, boy. You borrow your time from the establishment but I stole it back -- and even if it ends here, I’ve lived.”

“Great, drop the weapon and step out of the car, and you can live even longer, how about that? Rainer won’t mind, he’ll hire someone else to kill me.” Behind his back, Cartman had signalled three or four times already. Since the Mag appeared, basically. It didn’t surprise him that, once again, he seemed to be on his own. His only saving grace was a -- blank face.

The digger was shaking her head and her bronze curls were tumbling and her eyes were sinking down, down. “No, I hoped I’d get one more shot at you, pink boy. And the universe delivered. I didn’t need anybody’s money for your life -- I don’t like to see an animal left suffering, anyway.”

As she raised the handgun to his chest Cartman caught himself thinking about the last time she cried, if she ever had. A long time ago, maybe.

“You’re the one buried, Francesca.”
Kenny yawned. Directionless radio transmissions chattered over one another like faraway applause in his ears. The car he was driving wasn’t really shit and he wasn’t really shit at driving it, but the little Supra was picking up all the police channels loud and clear; he heard every update on his location, the extent of his property damage, every request for backup down to the neck stubble of the officer making it.

The word *handling* didn’t mean anything to him really but it came to mind all the same -- in Cartman’s know-it-all drawl -- as the Supra fishtailed over a long stretch of grass dividing north and southbound traffic. Two shiny black civil servant vehicles lit up and pulled out of the damn bushes to join the county cops in pursuit, and Kenny eyed the growing collection of flashing blue and white dots on his radar. He was fucked, surely. Cartman would be so tetchy with him for losing another car.

Kenny paused the chase and glanced at the clock on the stereo, but he’d just piled all the guts back into the thing and replaced the paneling, so the display was just flashing 12:00 over and over like a threat. But Kenny knew things only started rolling at midnight; it was the witching hours between two and four you wanted to watch out for.

His phone confirmed half past four and Kenny sighed, dropping his controller on the table beside a bag of M&Ms he’d accidentally torn open and eaten the yellows out of. He’d won his bet but didn’t feel too gay about it. On a small rolling tray -- next to his stash, a knife, and a folded Ace of Spades -- lay the almost-perfect blunt he’d rolled for the almost-perfect rainy night.

Maybe he should just do it up now.

Waiting around on Eric sometimes felt like waiting on a miracle, and it was only a matter of time before he started to feel kind of stupid for hoping. His T.O. might work odd hours by design, but Kenny believed that people played the biggest role in creating their own boundaries. Your most valuable possession is your time -- why wait around to use it? What was the hold-up?

Yellow Wolf didn’t like to jab at people with points -- he only tried to set the stage a certain way, and let their minds draw the lines. Cartman called it induction.

Kenny rolled to his back on the couch, lifted his leg and stared down the shinbone like it was a long-barreled rifle, leg hair like nobody’s business. Then he tore off his sock and tossed it away to try again, fanning his toes like a sight. He was a nut, he was bored, he was Billy Crystal. Ch-

*BANG!*
As soon as he heard the rattle of the outer gate, Kenny docked his weapon, crushing his nose to his kneecap by mistake, and scrambled over the back of the couch.

He came skid-sliding to a stop in view of the entryway just as the lock turned, pulse beating at the top of his lungs because he hadn’t fallen asleep this time, not even close -- it was almost five in the morning but black out the windows and he was buzzing because that fuckin’ cop was back, he was early and he’d lost the bet.

A few foreign smells and extra shuffles hit his senses and Kenny rocked from his heels to his toes. Three silhouettes crowded the door, and his greeting withered to a telepathic whisper. Eric -- ?

The smart thing to do with strangers in the apartment was probably to stay out of the way but just like the time Heidi invaded the small pad, Kenny froze straight up and down, torn between running, and defending the sanctity of the apartment and its owner. He didn’t know. He’d never had his own territory before, really.

His hackles relaxed slightly when Wendy took shape in the shadows around the door. She looked exactly like someone used to being woken up at some ungodly hour to micro-manage police work -- harried expression, lopsided lapels, the whiff of yesterday’s perfume.

Sometimes, when his pain felt like bulletholes and he wanted to go mad, Kenny thought of Marsh, and the bleeding would stop, and he’d cry. It was something his own mother never taught him how to do.

“He’s doped,” were her first words, like a warning, disapproval in the downturned corners of her mouth.

“Huh?”

His T.O. was drifting through the narrow space in muddy uniform jacket, pants and socks but a shirt he could have pulled from the trunk, or something. Kenny expected to be ignored -- since Cartman got a weird case of the cold shoulder whenever they had visitors -- or maybe hey’d in some apathetic way, tucked away in his own world. He didn’t expect the officer to slow as he brushed by, or touch the bridge of his nose, briefly, to Kenny’s temple -- he didn’t expect the cool burn love that lingered there.

A stranger’s voice shattered the romance like a case of the shits on a cruise. “What’s crackin’, cuz?”

Cartman slid by and Kenny felt the long lupine ears of his alter-ego twist and lie backward -- because there was an unwelcome donut cop on the welcome mat, with too many teeth and a voice like a constant uptake of breath. He’d probably also known Eric for an eternity, too, like Wendy, which Kenny didn’t like, exactly.

“What happened?” He directed at the Child and Family Services representative, keeping his distance on the man in the doorway.

Wendy nodded as if he’d already guessed the answer to his question, and pulled him into a quick, almost professional embrace. A lukewarm palm wrapped around the back of his neck -- like she thought he needed consolation. For what? He wondered. For having a crappy childhood -- immature parents -- bad habits? For picking Cartman?

“This motherfucker -- “ chimed the stranger. “Fell asleep at gunpoint.”

Kenny watched Marsh for confirmation. She was still nodding.
“Officer Black called me after the paramedics arrived -- normally his mother would be the appropriate emergency contact, but, well.” She shook her head, and added: “It’s alright. Deathwish aside, he’s fine, actually -- ”

“Shot backfired, that’s why,” said the other cop. “I saw it -- really common with that model Mag. First shot backfired, blinded her -- marked up Craig’s custom paint, too -- and then she emptied the rest of the clip everywhere: the ground, the cars, the guys -- “

He paused to chortle. “It’s almost lucky we didn’t start closing in when -- when he should’ve signalled. He never signalled us.”

“I’m Clyde, by the way. Big fan -- I follow your Instagram.”

Kenny glanced at his chest expecting to see the words ‘I’m Clyde’ stamped across it, but he was evidently not as simple as he seemed. The two of them were flecked with rain scatter and faintly squeaked over the linoleum, except for Eric, who’d left his shoes behind before becoming one with the dark spaces behind Kenny -- as usual.

“Thank you for driving him home, Clyde,” Wendy said. “You didn’t need to come all the way up here, though.”

“Sure! I wanted to make sure, you know, everything’s okay. Should you be moving around so much, at this stage?”

Yellow Wolf frowned as he examined the pair, sensing a certain reluctance to leave, and the cheery cop’s loud curiosity was making his skin prickle. He had arrangements with Marsh, but he could only trust ‘I’m Clyde’ as far as Cartman had trusted him to bring him to his apartment.

He was still frowning at the unexpected company when he detected a small sound on the back of his eardrum, a draft that ended with a hollow sound like -olf. Kenny spun around and trotted away.

Behind him, Wendy’s impatient voice clamped pincer-like around the other officer’s shallow understanding of pregnancy and women's capacity to bear the disproportionate burden of childbirth.

Yes, he thought, that’s what he would do -- he would bring up the issue with Cartman. Nobody got rid of people like Cartman.

In the kitchen his T.O. filled a jar at the sink. Kenny tried another telepathic greeting, accustomed to tiptoeing around until he had an idea of his mood.

He watched Cartman’s throat move around the water, met the devil moons of his eyes over the glass. They stayed trained on Kenny while he put the jar down, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and shrugged the wet night patrol jacket down to his elbows.

He thought of April, in that hot and bothered calendar of his. After witnessing Clyde, Kenny decided every month should be Cartman. There was just something irresistible about the way he wore cruelty.

The only thing off was his very blank face, cop apathy like armor against the things that didn’t belong inside his walls. Kenny crept closer to see through the cracks.

“How bad is it?”

He used concern as an excuse to pull at the neck of his shirt, pleased that he would not have to peel through all the badges and buttons and other uniform shit today to see where the damage was.
“Did it hurt?” Kenny wondered, finding the gauze taped under his collar bone on Cartman’s left side. Right over the heart, a kill-shot -- if not for the backfire, probably. He’d heard diggers didn’t mess around.

Yellow Wolf stiffened at a shock of cold on the underside of his elbow, but realized it was only the touch of one long finger. He pressed forward into his space as if invited, breathed in the foggy night from his clothes, the smell of the acidic pavement, and a bit of the musk that always stuck around even after he did laundry.

Cartman didn’t seem concerned that his guests had a pretty clear view of his hands crawling up Kenny’s back, sifting under his sweater, one under his shirt. He felt teeth clip precisely over the outer rim of his ear. A spark of pleasure flared and fled to Kenny’s groin.

“Uhm,” the outside world seemed to clear its throat, collectively, but he didn’t withdraw and the touch stayed firm.

“Boys, please -- “ Kenny felt a small embarrassment on behalf of Marsh, and turned to see her just toeing the line between the kitchen and the hall. “I’ve asked Clyde to wait outside. I understand that you might -- I just, want to remind you of a few things.”

He tried his best to listen but when he’d turned around he hadn’t actually moved far and the weight of Cartman’s bored gaze fell just over his shoulder, breath warm on his neck.

“Okay,” Kenny said, not used to leading conversations around but his T.O. didn’t seem to be talking just now. “What are they?”

“Well, firstly,” she hummed, folding her arms over her belly and looking everywhere but into their faces. “Those bandages need to be changed every few hours. Once this morning and again tonight, should be fine. Sandm -- I mean, the Sheriff has left you on medical leave until further notice, Cartman. Please take it seriously. I’ve left some things on the table for you. Take a shower, and for God’s sake sleep. I don’t ever want a phone call like that again.”

“Uh-huh,” said Yellow Wolf, vaguely, feeling like something was drawing a finger up the dark side of his heart.

Wendy began receding into the shadows inside the door again, but paused just before they overtook her. “Kenny -- I just -- “

She exhaled softly and adjusted the lapels of her outer coat. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Uh-huh,” he mumbled again. “Every inch.”

A sharp breath hit his skin as Cartman snorted, and it must have been officially far too early in the morning for this shit with Wendy Marsh, because with barely a farewell and another scuffle of rubber on wet linoleum -- and the final rattle of the outer gate -- they were alone.

“Damn, dude,” Kenny exclaimed as the officer started to chuckle into the silence that followed. “The fuck was that about?”

“I thought if we were really gay they’d get uncomfortable and leave,” said Cartman. “It was all I could think of.”

Kenny turned to face him. “Good show.”

His grin widened on one side. “I know. I’m a genius. I’m a huge brain in a ripped up body -- I’m
Jesus H. Cartman.”

“You're doped,” Kenny concluded. Then glanced down at himself. "Why’d you bring them up, anyway? I mean, look at me.”

“Not my choice,” he droned, using his hands to manipulate Kenny’s hips forward and back, like he was trying to work him out of the ground. “I love when work affords me the opportunity for a free morphine injection as much as the next guy, but opiates can turn the most dignified athlete you know into a -- a silly hat.”

He lifted one hand to wave it. “Wendy thinks I’m two steps from the edge on a normal day -- she wasn’t going to let me slide by with an open chest wound, especially when I was seeing staircases in the ceiling an hour ago.”

“Oh.”

“Plus,” he continued, and his cool palms slid up Kenny’s bare sides. “I thought you wanted a look at the competition. Happy? See what I have to deal with all night? Me in a car alone with Clyde Donovan is my idea of nothing to do.”

“So… “ hummed Kenny. “You exposed another cop to your illegal sex-ploits with men -- which were giving you a damn hernia a week ago -- just to show me what a cheeseball he is?”

Cartman looked to the ceiling as if recalculating. Finally, he huffed, folded his fingers around Kenny’s sides, swept them down toward the center of his low back. “Maybe I wanted to show off, a little. I don’t know. I didn’t say I thought hard about it. I was doped up worse than a racehorse, dude. And horny as hell.”

His pupils were just a sliver too wide to be a natural reaction to the dim light, and Kenny took a half-step forward to close the distance completely, leaned into his truancy officer -- and he didn’t grind but he docked his hips against him, with just enough pressure so he’d know he was sort of interested.

“Really?”

“All fucking night,” said Eric, suddenly loud, then quiet again. “And Donovan humping on my leg with his fucking fairy questions, everyone's asshole assumptions, and this -- this special bond shit -- ”

“So you thought you’d show him you’re going with Yellow Wolf.”

A pink flush flared in his ears and faded slowly. “The whole station’s joking about it, I thought -- might as well brag about it.”

Kenny curled the fingers of both his hands over the front of Cartman’s belt. “You’re in a pretty good mood,” he tested. “You were at gunpoint an hour ago -- what ‘appened out there?”

“You tell me.”

Kenny dragged his top teeth over his lower lip, loathe to turn over his secrets.

“Did you know it would be Francesca?” Cartman demanded. “Did you set her up to blow like that?”

“I guessed she might answer Rainer’s call to get back at you,” he admitted. “Then -- I laid out a path.”

“You stole all her base, forced her into a corner with Rainer -- you had your fuckin’ one-eyed dealer
plant that salted Magnum. Your friends could’ve been picked up tonight, you know. The big bald one was.”

Kenny shrugged his shoulders. “They have nothing solid on Chum. Anyway, it’s the risk we take.”

“Why’d you do it?”

He felt his eyebrows draw together -- why had he -- ? He never even thought of the why, usually.

“They were both plotting to kill you, so -- ” Kenny shrugged. "I thought what I’d do was, adjust the odds, some.”

“Adjust the odds,” he echoed, shaking his head. “Why the Viggen? It’s gonna go into evidence, now. Shit can rot there for ages.”

"Another adjustment.”

Cartman eyed him, not doubtful exactly, but skeptical, like a man awed by the universe but suspicious of its motives. He reached for the jar and downed the rest of the water before shifting fully out of his night patrol jacket. Then his eyes fell to Kenny’s hands on his belt, and one eyebrow quirked upward.

“I like the way you look today.”

Kenny furrowed his brow. He had on one sock, his orange gym shorts with the ripped pockets, a blue *Rolling Stoned* T-shirt he shoplifted to avoid paying two dollars, and Cartman’s weird soft metal *Macbeth* sweatshirt. Basically he could be running out to Walmart any minute.

“What’re they gonna find under the bodega?”

Kenny shrugged, more focused on following the trail of hair rising over his belt and leading to a cul-de-sac at his belly button. He pinched at the soft skin there, and Cartman tensed.

“What was the point of that *fucking* hunchback story?”

He shrugged again, but with his eyes. “I just thought it was funny.”

The shirt Eric threw on after the shooting wasn’t doing any of the work his uniform had at covering up the dead-leaf scattering of bruises Kenny had been working up his neck -- part of him felt a little bad about it, but -- Cartman bruised so easily; he only had to nick something in passing for it to flare up and remember for days. It was so bad the cop set a boundary an inch or so above the shoulders, right where his collar sat, just to avoid the questions.

Kenny watched his throat move.

He leaned in with the intention of grazing his lips over the swell of cartilage bang in the middle of Cartman’s throat, but the moment of contact came with a sudden flush of urgency; he groped for a hold at the back of his neck, and used it to force his head back. Kenny sucked the thin skin between his teeth and forced a bruise into that tempting apple, different from all the rest because it was purposeful, not some accidental infatuation of the skin.

Kenny took his time because there was no fight -- hands were warming up slowly, in fact, just under his ribs -- and when he pulled away to watch the small Rorschach blot bloom, the touch at his lower back fell to his waistband. He looked up to find Eric’s eyes half-mooned -- not straining, not withdrawing, not even a little bit.
“Sorry,” said Kenny, dropping his gaze back to the flowering bruise and licking some of the dryness from his lips. “It’s over your line.”

Cartman lifted his eyebrows. “I don’t actually have plans. The next few days.”

The way he kissed him after that convinced him -- finally, unequivocally -- that his T.O. didn’t give a damn about his age. One of his hands rose to force his jaw open and the other fell under his shorts into a pretty good grip on bare ass. Kenny jumped, and Cartman’s tongue hit the roof of his mouth -- and you just didn’t make it like that, with a seventeen-year-old, if you’ve got any lingering reservations.

Kenny was winding his arms around his T.O.’s neck and about to lose track of time when the hand on his ass started to test between his cheeks, and before he could really process it's intent the pad of one finger found the sensitive ring of muscle there. Kenny was just far enough along on his storm-tossed voyage through sexuality to have thought quite a lot about that area, and at the cop’s immodest touch all the daytime curiosities and dim fantasies came rushing to mind. He changed the slant of his lips and moaned into his mouth.

But soon, he had to breathe.

“Fuck -- “ Kenny gasped. “What the -- where’d all the damn -- control go?”

Cartman laughed his cruel laugh.

“Kenny,” he said, his hands returning to the skin under his ribs and pressing in hot, now. “I’m only good at one thing, and it isn’t control. We’ve been screwing so much in my head, I’m kind of anxious to get past the introductory chapters.”

Kenny felt his face flush completely, to infinity. “What happened out there?” He rumbled, breathing steady enough to curve in close, again.
“Not sure. One minute, I’m trying to talk her down, looking at this gun the whole time, thinking -- if any, single, part of me is willing to give up, right now, then, I’m dead. It’s weird, because,” Cartman pulled at the bruised skin under one eye with his index finger. “I think she’s the one who taught me that, partly.”

He sneezed over his shoulder and his eyes came back up sort of pink. “Next thing -- I opened my eyes on the pavement, wishing I could, fucking, barf up pain. And then some prick dug salt out of my chest for fifteen minutes. It was pretty weak. It might even be kind of your fault. It kind of looks like you armed and motorized the chick who wanted to kill me. We’re only lucky, really, I’m alive and she’s in jail.”

Kenny grinned. “Are you snowing me?”

“No.” he said, firmly. “I don’t snow, man. Anybody can give out compliments. Your real friends show you the shit in your teeth. You took a lot of risks, tonight.”
Yellow Wolf felt a grand old fidget coming on -- because he had no idea -- and snaked forward to test their bodies together, but Eric stopped him at chest-height.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever been hit point-blank with rock salt before, but it’s gonna be sort of a no-touch zone for now.” He warned. “Or, I guess, more realistically, a no-biting zone.”

The black and gray label woven across his chest now read Schlafes -- just sleep. Kenny leaned away and held the tip of his tongue against the back of his teeth. Eric eyed him for a moment, then tipped his head as if to look at him from a different angle. The fingers of one hand flattened against the curve of Kenny’s lower back. For just the minute it had gone, Cartman’s touch turned cold again.

Kenny narrowed his eyes as he rounded away from the chill at his back, and remembered a piece of advice from Heidi.

“Hey, uh,” he started. “You prob’ly wanted to wash that out, huh? Marsh said to wash it out.”

The cop’s gaze flicked down to the bloody swell of gauze and tape on his chest, then back up to him.

“I’m covered in mud, gasoline, and American Spirits, so, yeah.”

“Did you -- “ the words so easy and fly in his brain turned to soft iron in his throat, and Yellow Wolf felt his eyebrows cinch together with the effort of leading them forward. “Did you want to, maybe, or, if -- “

Cartman ducked his head just enough to bump foreheads and look Kenny dead-on -- and even though he was sleep-deprived enough to black out at gunpoint, apparently, there was a curve to the officer’s lower eyelids that worked energy back into his gaze.

“Just ask the question, McCormick.”

“I was just wondering -- if you wanted any help, with -- “

Before Kenny could finish, his T.O. bent further, and spoke directly into his neck. “Jeez. I’ve never seen you shy.” While he spoke, Cartman clasped his hands under his legs and forced him off his feet. Kenny flung an arm around his neck to keep from toppling over when he shook him up in his arms.

“Here, I’ll ask -- “ he continued, moving from the kitchen through the living room. “Hey, Wolf -- ya wanna, bang in the shower?”

Kenny recalled the man who had threatened him over a table in the police department. After tracing the crest of an ear with his nosetip, he caught the lobe between his teeth and pulled. “Bad cop,” he husked quietly.

“Fine, but,” said Cartman, and Kenny registered him edging around the door of the bathroom and kicking it shut behind them. “You know what, princess -- I’m just not that worried, anymore, after seeing what you did to the Mongrel.”

The officer set him on the bathroom counter and side-stepped to turn on the water. “You learn all that just from getting your ass kicked all the time?” He added.

Kenny leaned back on his hands. “I thought you’d like that.”

“It was a killer nut-check. You really have a way of -- “ He moved to stand back between his knees, and shrugged his shirt over his head. “Beating the fake outta people.”
Kenny moved to help remove the old bandaging, at first, but ended up tracing the ink over his shoulders and arms while Eric did most of the work. When the bandage came free, he exhaled deeply, and Kenny carefully skirted his fingers around the inflamed skin and the meteoric pattern of salt burn just inside his left shoulder.

“I didn’t think I’d ever have to say this, but,” Cartman lifted his eyes. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

Kenny flung off the sweater on speed but got stuck with his T-shirt caught around his arm and neck when he heard the clink and scuffle of his T.O.’s pants hitting the floor and being sent away with a kick. He waited, fascinated, to see if the thin black Puma shorts would follow.

Eric stopped with his thumbs hooked under the band, and caught him staring. “You look pretty stupid like that.”

Kenny ducked over his knees and peeled off the shirt finally, blushing. The air was becoming thick with humidity and his hair stuck to his forehead.

When he sat back up, Cartman was at last alone in his skin, one long-fingered hand wrapped loosely around the object of Kenny’s powerful fascination.

“Just, don’t say anything about it, okay?”

“About what -- “

The hand shifted.

“You’re -- circumcised.”

“It’s a long story,” he sniffed, in the defensive, standoffish way of a dude defending his dick. “My mom was convinced it was a health thing. She wanted to bone the doctor, I think.”

Kenny let him close the distance and begin working his mouth open with his tongue, but he snuck a hand down between them to wrap around his truancy officer’s cock, which was not such an unreasonable size, really -- but he marvelled at the distinct sort of heft, and flexed his arm over it, for a second, to feel the way it pulsed in his fist. Kenny didn’t have the encyclopedia of cocks on hand but it was the thickest one he’d ever seen, anyway.

Cartman broke away and sighed shakily down his neck. Kenny stroked him again, unable to imagine fitting the whole fuckin’ thing inside him. He was still pondering the logistics when Cartman’s quick hands rid him of his shorts and last remaining sock.

“Hey,” he said, leaving Eric half-hard and urging him forward by the hips. “You remember our deal?”

He hummed and Kenny felt the reverberations up and down his throat. “I get to ask you to do something.”

Cartman lifted his head, eyes narrowed. “Seriously? Right now?”

“Right now with your dick out, man.” Kenny grinned, feeling, if not invincible before, then definitely now that he was banging PD.

The officer planted his hands on the counter and leaned purposely into his space. “Fine,” he said. “What do you want?”
Kenny lifted his hand where he’d fisted it behind him on the counter. A hemp choker and black tire skull hung from his fingers.


Cartman’s suspicion shifted from his face to his hand. “That’s it?”

He nodded. “Just put it on.”

After the hollow-eyed skull was settled sullen and staring over his collarbone, Kenny caught Cartman by the fingers and undid the clasp on his watch, and bracelet, putting them by the sink. He turned the hand over to press his mouth to the inside of his wrist, then the mound where thumb joined palm.

Kenny released him, licking his lips, and reached up to drag his fingernails along the side of Eric’s jaw, just where the skin turned to shadows of long nights without shaving. The cop leaned in as if he was asked, and Kenny undershot, catching his bottom lip with a closed kiss, then overshot, catching him just under his nose. He pulled on his ear until he resisted, immensely enjoying the sensation of Cartman following direction, wearing his marks, and his ties. It was nice. It made him want to try again.

Yellow Wolf tossed his head at the shower. “Get in.”

A flicker of irritation in the set of his T.O.’s jaw, like he was biting his tongue, but he obeyed, turning to the edge of the curtain while Kenny leapt down off the counter behind him, too horny and repressed not to grope a little below the belt as they climbed in.

“Hands against the wall,” he told the officer, matching his searing red glare.

Eric obeyed. Kenny imagined it was the necklace -- trailer park bling like a leash and as long as it was on he was Kenny's to play with.

He slid right up against his back, unable to contain his excitement. “Spread ya legs.”

Kenny slid an arm around his hips and found a grip on his cock, moving it base to tip -- a reward for his truancy officer’s uncommon obedience. The noise of excess that caught between them and the shower wall gave new life to his hard-on and Kenny grinded forward once against him.

“Um, I forgot -- “ he tried the same thing again, too warmed up and too hard to really think of separating, at this point. “Condom?”

“Fuck. I don’t, actually, have -- “

“I noticed. Luckily -- “ He was loathe to go, even for a second, but supposed it had to be done.

“They give ’em out for free at the drop-in. Stevens says safety first.”

“Wait -- “ Eric caught him by the elbow as he was stepping out, and Kenny didn’t miss the way his eyes fell to his toes and worked their way back up.

“What?”

“I, uh -- we can’t use those.”

Yellow Wolf returned to his position, pushed his T.O. back up against the wall, and nosed along the sloping line between his neck and shoulder. “Oh yeah?”
“They suck, anyway -- they break and tear off and it feels like fucking a hot glove anyway -- “

“Eric.”

“I have a latex allergy, okay?” He propped his forehead against the wet wall. “Laugh at me later.”

It wasn’t even that funny but the fact that he expected Kenny to rip on him for it made him laugh; he muffled the noise against the back of his neck and wrapped both arms around his insecurities. So fucking cute.

“Whadda you want me to do?”

“Well that should be pretty obvious.” He snapped. “But, just -- pull out or something.”

The shower walls made his skin seem paler and his hair darker, and when one eye found him over his shoulder, it was red as the deep fall.

Cartman backwards and forwards was -- like most things about him, it seemed -- coin-flip opposites. Where his chest seemed crowded with stories and scars and ink, on his back nothing challenged Kenny. He was delighted to find, on the tail’s side, a shoulder-to-shoulder expanse of his truancy officer’s creamy, lightly freckled skin. Birthmarks like distant relatives, all just far enough apart to avoid clustering.

“D’you -- you know what you’re doing, right?”

Kenny lifted his head from between his shoulder blades, licking the taste of unmarked skin from his lips. “I know you like to jack a guy off -- but you’re really gonna like this.” He boasted.

The eye rolled spectacularly and disappeared as Eric turned his head away. “Get over yourself.”

“Just as soon as you do, man.”

“Agh.”

“You have the right to shut the fuck up, by the way. Unless you have something hot to say. Or something nice about me.” Kenny thought. But he was so hard it felt like his legs were swelling. "And, well, I'll probably use it all against you in the future, so -- ”

"Don't Mirandize me unless you plan on backing it up with handcuffs."

"Oh, good idea." He settled both hands on his ass. “Damn -- are you thick from your mom’s side, or your dad’s? I never tell you what a nice ass you’ve got. It’s, like, the shape -- “

“I, really,” Eric said, small and gruff. “Fucking hate you.”

“Man, you love me. You just haven’t built a room for it, yet, in your psycho brain-castle.”

“What?” His voice tipped higher. "How do you, even -- "

"Shh," Kenny shushed him over the rush of warm water on their backs and glanced around -- where was that -- ? “I know everything about you, dude.”

There, he snatched up the Cancun lubricant from the shower shelf and wasted no time coating the fingers of his right hand. He was all about foreplay but the two of them tended to play for hours and there wasn’t time for that shit with the water running. He slicked his hand once over his dick and reapplied before stepping back up to Cartman. He folded his left arm around to tweak his nipple,
earning him an irritated hiss.

The officer’s breathing changed as one of his fingers found his asshole and circled. He waited for a deep exhale before pressing inward, and after an inch or so of initial resistance, Cartman seemed to be pulling him in instead of forcing him out, and Kenny suppressed a moan against the back of his neck at the feeling of slipping into a soft, slick heat.

He moved his finger in and out experimentally, finding the give improving enough to push in one more. Eric’s chest heaved with new breath and his back shuddered with it. Kenny tried twisting his fingers, then scissoring them just inside the tautest rings of muscle. Finally he added a third, to the low rumble of his partner’s discomfort.

Rutting against his own hand he was so horny, Kenny pushed in right to the last knuckles, then started to withdraw just as slowly -- on the way, though, one of his fingers crooked accidentally, and Eric cried out. Kenny froze.

“Did I -- “

“There.” His T.O. growled through clenched teeth.

“What?”

“There.”

Kenny shook off his bewilderment and tried the maneuver again. At a brush of the same spot, Cartman uttered another strained grunt, and his forehead thumped against the shower wall.

After a few moments getting an idea of the location of this magic man-clit, Kenny removed his fingers and lined up his aching cock, which was so eager and deprived it could’ve starred in its own late-night comedy, by that point.

“Hey, so,” Kenny said, breathing not hard but cramped, tied up around some ache he’d had for months. “D’you want me?”

He couldn’t distinguish the words over the fall of water, but whatever Cartman snarled sounded unkind. Kenny drew back with tremendous effort and laid himself up along his back instead, grinding his hips forward again. “Stevens says verbal consent is really important -- so I need to hear it."

“C’mon, I just wanna hear it once.” He continued, snaking an arm around to grip again at Eric’s thick cock. “Ya want me, don’t you?”

“Go fuck yourself, Kenny.”

It was a blank-face sober admission, but he smiled at the single red eye that turned on him, because it burned with a message that sounded more like: Fucking obviously.

Yellow Wolf -- thinking of the forbidding creature in cape and claws that haunted the apartment just a few months ago -- supposed that would do for now and he returned, gleefully, to the task at hand.

He had just pushed past the halfway point when the passage tightened and Kenny jerked backward to sudden resistance.

“I don’t think I put enough -- “
“No, you fucking didn’t! Pull out --” Eric spat. “Pull out pull out pull out --”

Kenny reversed his efforts.

“Slowly!” He gasped. “I’ll break your fucking legs!”

“Okay, okay! I’m doing it.”

“Agh -- Jesus,” He huffed, when Kenny finally slipped free. “I knew you’d be a lousy lay -- there had to be a downside. There had to be at least one downside.”

Kenny scowled, rooting around for the lube and snatching it up from the floor behind him. He tried to brush some of the water from his brow, but his hair was dripping rebelliously into his eyes and making him squint. “Yeah, well, I hate to break it to ya, fam, but you’re about ninety-nine problems and an occasional charming smile.”

When he moved behind him again, Eric’s shoulders tensed and he snapped: “Are you sure it’s -- ?”

“Yes, yes -- it’s fine.” said Yellow Wolf, folding a hand around one hip for leverage and wasting no time guiding himself in again. “I got excited, sorry.”

“Unh,” Cartman grunted, ducking his head against the wall again. “Jesus.”

“Easy,” Kenny shushed him gently, slinking his hand around again just to drag his thumb up the length of his trapped erection. “You can do it.”

It was a mercilessly tight, slow process, at first, and his somewhat narrow experience in the field -- mostly inelegant drunken high school hook-ups -- meant no helpful wisdom was coming from there. Finally, he came to rest as far as he could work with the angle, and he was so nervous about fucking up he almost forgot he was four months past horny and about to rail his truancy officer against a wall.

But he didn’t forget, and the moment it sunk in he pulled his forearm tight around Cartman’s abdomen and sunk his teeth into the nape of his neck.

When he tested his mobility, Kenny found his path much smoother and more forgiving than it had been on the first -- or second -- try, and his instincts took over from there.

The cop made a sound like a choke at the first of his thrusts, and one hand curled to a fist against the wall. “Fuck,” Kenny heard him mutter. “Just like that, I guess.”

He wondered if he should have waited longer, before starting, but the concern was very faint in the back of his head. He focused instead on finding the thing that would make his T.O. squirm and shout. Kenny shuffled his feet and tried a different stroke. Two settings later and a shade or two more forceful, Cartman cursed on impact and his shoulder blades shifted. Yellow Wolf dug his nails into the insides of hips and homed in on the point, sometimes snapping his teeth on the downstroke, clipping skin or letting it go.

Kenny was light-headed looking at the sun just beyond the high tides of an orgasm when an elbow nearly hit him in the face and Eric looked back at him with an expression of hatred.

He realized his truancy officer had come first, and he bared his teeth as his own climax approached, blinding. It was the fact that he was being watched, oddly, that pushed Kenny over the surface of that tide --
“Idiot -- pull out -- “

He remembered and did absolutely, mostly, pull out in time -- but he didn’t shift his mouth away from his skin until after the orgasm rocked all the way through him. He didn’t even feel that embarrassed about noise, really, because of the waterfall over his ears, sun in his eyes.

Kenny mumbled unintelligibly as he surfaced again, and decided to appreciate the knob of bone at the base of Cartman's neck. He pushed his wet fingers around to drag them through Eric's mostly-dry pubic hair, brushing at his flaccid dick.

“Not yet, for Christ’s sake,” he bitched. “I won’t make it through another round without passing out.”

“I’ve never gone a round two in my life,” Kenny admitted, leaving his mark a little premature but flinching a little when he noticed the other ones he’d left down his spine, not all of which were neighborly bruises.

“We’ll work up to it,” he said drily.

“Here, you might wanna -- ” said Kenny, pulling at one hip and edging around him. “Wash my cum off your back, brother.”

As Cartman moved into the spray, Kenny slipped around to his front and picked his three-in-one soap from the shelf. The scent was called phoenix, which he didn’t really get, but it smelled good anyway.

He pushed his soapy hands up over Cartman’s ears and through his hair, finding and pulling free a few grains of rock salt.

“Are you awake?”

“Mhm.” His eyes opened.

“I actually thought you’d last longer. Heidi said -- “

“Don’t talk to my ex-girlfriend about being on my dick anymore, okay? It weirds me out.”

“Some of it’s useful,” Kenny worked his hands down to his shoulders, and it was nice to see the tattoos again, and think about fucking from the front. “Like shower sex to warm your damn hands. Not that it ended up mattering.”

“See? It won’t end up mattering.” Eric insisted, halfway alert. “Whatever she says or remembers won’t be anything like what we do, man.”

Kenny put more soap on his hands, stepped up close to work them around his back. “She just said you took a while.”

“Look, I’d say it was because it’s been a while, or some shit -- but I honestly don’t think that matters.” He paused. “Maybe it just wasn’t that good for me. Maybe I tried too many different things to make it work.”

In his head he felt kind of sad for Eric but also it seemed like a compliment, which helped ease Kenny’s performance nerves. “Yeah? So it was good? How do ya feel?”

Cartman eyed him half-lidded, shifted his feet. “Like, burning, kind of.”
A palm wrapped around Kenny's neck and he tipped his head back -- Cartman kissed him on the vertical, open-mouthed but conservative, somehow, speaking on the small moments in between contact. “You’re -- fucking -- aggressive.”

Kenny was still grinning when Cartman turned the water off and started prodding him out of the tub. The cop followed slower, found his feet and leaned back against the sink counter, looking down at the salt burn on his chest, all traces of body-shyness gone from his posture. It was nice to see him relaxed in his own skin -- Yellow Wolf could only appreciate him so much before Eric had to do some of the work himself.

Kenny pulled the first aid kit from the cabinet above the toilet and fished out gauze and medical tape for a makeshift bandage.

“I was watching National Geographic the other day,” he said, tearing a strip of tape. “And -- what? Why are you laughing? I’m learning, isn’t that what everybody wanted?”

“I’m just wondering,” huffed Cartman. “When you find the time to watch television, in between climbing around on billboards, and keeping the city in a grip of terror.”

“Since you asked, I usually multi-task lunch, TV, and jerking off on your couch.”

“Oh my God -- what?” He squeaked, face creasing instantly with displeasure. “Every day?”

Kenny shrugged. “Depends on the weather. Anyway, I was watching this lion documentary. Every pride is a whole bunch of females, and like seven or eight unrelated top dogs.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“Any time a male cub reaches adolescence, he’s kicked out of the pride and forced to go it alone until he can start his own, or take over another pride. So all these roving males are out there, and some of them form alliances and work together to take down a pride. They could be roughing it together for months on their own, or years. Hunting together, sharing prey.”

Kenny examined his handiwork and found it pretty well-executed, actually, but it was weird looking at it, the bandage right there, like it could’ve been a heart transplant or something.

“Sometimes,” he continued. “A pair of males will form strong bonds even if they’re from different prides. It’s seen as an evolutionary thing to help settle intergroup conflict and maintain lion populations.”

“Okay,” Eric said, holding up one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose with the other. “When we’re all saying bond this and bond that -- I mean, all civil decencies aside -- we’re talking about fucking, right? We’re talking about gay lions -- mane-on-mane action, right?”

“Yes!” Kenny said, grin unstoppable. “Mounting, nut-licking, the whole hunnid.”

“Jesus -- this was a documentary? You watched a documentary about this?”

“Easy, you’re doing the hand-chopping thing again -- “

A cloud passed over Cartman’s eyes. “You whacked off to this?”

“I’m just a man!” Kenny cried, throwing his arms over his face as if bombs were falling, and
quivering for the full effect.

He heard Eric trying to be mad but finally his T.O. was chuckling around his curses.

“Okay, okay, stop -- “ He pried at Kenny’s arms. “You are such a fuckin’ nut. I love it.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, alright -- I am thinking of illustrating the hot and bothered calendar.
share your thoughts -- spread some love, please.
.control ii

Chapter Notes

this is just long and saucy

wouldn't be fair to say there's no plot advancement, since i consider building their relationship pretty central to the plotters -- but definitely no trains guns or drugs

this chapter's art is what happens when the tortured fool is too drunk to use references and throws markers around while weeping over dearwhitepeople

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The baby was crying.

“Karen was always hungry in the mornings before my mom got home. I picked her up, I remember, and I tried, but -- we didn’t have anything. There were some days, actually, when we didn’t have anything. Karen was too little, then. She didn’t understand being hungry.

“Mom’s night shifts went from six to eleven hours at a time, randomly, so I knew this was one of the long days. She was angry already. ‘What the fuck you doing, motherfucker?’ she said -- and I said I was just feeding the baby. She said I was gonna be late, I hadda go to school, or I would be like my fuck-up brother, seven years old and my record was already long as his. I think she really cared, still, back then. But I didn’t get it -- told her I wasn’t a fuck-up, that she was being a bitch. Then I grabbed Kevin’s skateboard and left.”

“Did you go to school?”

“I called my mom a bitch, man,” Kenny laughed on a sour note. “Sometimes -- when a day starts off all wrong, you feel like you might as well finish it all wrong, too. My friends were really dumb. We had spots -- a spot we went to before school to hang around and swear, a spot for spitting contests and shoe-fly, a spot to watch the sixth-graders smoke. That’s where we went. The older kids usually got off just ignoring us, but when that wasn’t enough, they’d mess around. Telling us stuff.”

“What kind of -- ?“

“Stupid stuff, you know,” he spat, nearly. “How to be cool, how to be hard. Eat this bug, suck this pipe -- give us your money and Tanya will let you go at her, stuff like that. My friends were stupid, but -- “

Kenny sneered around a swell of rage. “I told them to go fuck themselves!”

It was quiet and he wondered if Eric had dropped off again. Then: “So what happened?”

Yellow Wolf leaned back against the headboard with a shrug and a sigh. “They cut me up, took my shit. They broke my brother’s board, man. Then my mom found out and whooped my ass for it the same day.”

Cartman rolled onto his stomach, dragging the blankets around his legs and kicking at them to release
the tension. Kenny trailed his eye from his truancy officer’s foothills all the way to the curl of his shoulders, the familiar starmap of his back.

“There was this one time we got a load of matza, somehow, from a donation through church or school, or maybe my dad stole them, I don’t know. But it was like, fifteen boxes, man -- of these -- “

“Trash crackers?”

“Fucking trash crackers.”

“Matza is one of those things you can only eat and enjoy if there’s some nostalgic value behind it.” Cartman said, and his voice was so dirty with sleep it was about to lead a damn Viking war party. “Basically you have to be Jewish.”

“We were so poor I remember being full on those things and loving it.”

“You don’t needa say it,” Kenny added quickly. “I know it -- shit was pathetic. Really pathetic, in those days. If there was a Shitty Living magazine, or something, for people living grimy out here, our crumby trailer park would be on the cover. My teeth would have their own photoshoot.”

The air was a little frosty on Kenny’s bare skin but he welcomed it, recalling a hot, turbulent night, not for the reasons he might’ve liked -- his T.O. had passed into a semi-permanent druid sleep eleven hours ago -- but due to a round of unsettling dreams. He didn’t remember any of the dreams, really, only waking up periodically to sheet-sweats and gray visions, and a vague awareness of their passing. At a certain point Kenny stopped trying to drift back to sleep, and waited up watching the sun until he felt cool, calm and dry again.

He wasn’t always so restless. It just happened, sometimes. Sometimes you just have a bad sleep, even after a tubular day.

In a somewhat kitschy role reversal, Cartman rolled over and pressed his nose to his hip. Kenny dropped a hand to the sleep-tousled brown hair behind the cop’s ear.

His voice reached him half-muffled. “We’ve been talking for two hours.”

What --

Kenny craned his neck, and yes, according to the clock on the nightstand it was just gone five p.m., and the sun was setting. It was a dewy spring evening -- 54 degrees Fahrenheit, said the display. Slanting light from the small window sliced Kenny in half, settling warm and faintly peach-fuzzy on his shoulders while in the cool blue darkness around his legs, Eric laid, breathing slow, eyes in and out. One arm slid sly over Kenny’s legs and fell limp over his opposite hip.

Yellow Wolf took a deep breath of the urban dusk and their mingled blanket scents, deciding to let the silence linger while he spent another moment petting his truancy officer in the halflight.

Finally Cartman shifted under his hand. “Do you miss him? Or, do you still think about it, I guess?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to -- it’s like I’ve seen his death, I know it happened, but I’ve unseen it, too. Go days without thinking about it. Then it’ll come, a whisper at the drug store, or some effed up dream, and I’m back at his funeral, fourteen and forcing myself to cry so my mom won’t think I’m yonkers. But at the time, I knew he was in a better place. Everything around me sucked so hard -- so he had to be in a better place. It was the only thing I really believed.”

“I saw a lot of my dad after that, actually,” He digressed, unsure how to continue. “He used to trade
me whiskey to pee in cups for him.”

Cartman snorted. “Here’s to the fathers who didn’t raise us.”

Kenny lifted his arms over the wood-grained plastic of the headboard and yawned. Small hairs rose along his arms and shoulders as his skin adjusted to the temperature of the cool surface.

“Kevin wasn’t even the first that year,” he picked one of the sleep boogers from his eyes and flicked it away. “One of my classmates was killed when his neighbors got into a gunfight over summer break. He wasn’t even involved, just lived in a bad area. You know what they called it on the news? Black on black crime. At school they passed out bracelets with his name on it, and stuff. Remember Allie, they said. I thought you were s’posed to be sad when people you know die, generally, but I think I felt worse for Allie than Kevin. Allie had a future, probably. He had options.”

“Do you think you have options?”

It was a question edged with a little cop styling, and even though Kenny spent a lot of time and effort threshing Cartman’s labelled alter-egos apart from what he considered his ‘true self’, he also couldn’t deny that there was a melting pot mixture of all those things -- cop, dealer, psycho, killer -- woven permanently into his psyche, and it was that psychological knitting that made him sort of an adult, not really a child anymore.

“Everything really sucked back then, so now that everything doesn’t suck, I’m thinking about it all over again. That’s all. It’ll go away.”

“Wolf -- ”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” he rushed, and leaned his head back against the wall to consider the swirling, vaguely cosmic patterns on the ceiling. “No -- but it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t really matter if I have options, or if I’m going anywhere, because right now I’m not. I’m right here and I don’t wanna think about this right now. And besides, I wouldn’t change anything.”

Eric snuffed something against his hip. The meaning wasn’t clear, but it sort of tickled.

“Two hours, yeesh. I’ve never talked that long. I never talk about anything that matters, usually -- “ He paused mid-sentence.

“What?”

“Nothing. Somethin’ Heidi said.”

“I thought you liked Heidi.”

“I do, it’s just sometimes -- “

He looked down at his T.O., mostly the back of his head, and the black and gray grouping of skulls leering up at him from his shoulder and bicep. “I don’t like that she’s had a taste of what’s mine.”

Eric puffed an exhale on his skin, and it wasn’t laughter exactly but there was a step down in the middle that hinted at some amusement.
“It’s your first day off in a million years,” Kenny realized. “Whatcha gonna do?”

He didn’t withdraw his arm or anything but Cartman turned his head to the side and treated him to an early morning eye roll. “Trim my fucking bonsai and eat cocktail wieners -- the fuck do you think I’m gonna do with my day off?”

He folded his palm over Kenny’s hip and pushed himself up to his knees with a short groan. With some effort Yellow Wolf did not lift his arms from over the headboard, only watched the shape of his truancy officer as it rose from the shadows around his legs and entered the dash of sunlight at shoulder-height. As if deterred by the glare from the window, he shuffled forward on his knees and hunched close to the shadows cast under Kenny’s neck, nosing a little at his stray armpit hairs. Kenny probably didn’t smell terrific, on account of shaking and sweating through his damn dreams all night, but Cartman didn’t seem to care -- it occurred to him that his truancy officer didn’t just like him; he was pretty fuckin’ nasty for him.

The thought brought heat to Kenny’s ears, and a little anticipatory flume of desire to his groin.

“You never talk,” his T.O. murmured. “You never talk like this.”

“I guess, I listen.” he shrugged one shoulder, his small thoughtful side growing distant and even smaller, suddenly. “I don’t like to talk ‘cause I can’t ever tell what people are thinking when I’m talking -- too busy digging up the right words and trying to make sense and shit. But when you’re just listening, just watching people, you can see all the things words hide.”

The cop uttered something against his shoulder -- a short, tired whine like the last note of a yawn -- as if Kenny had said something very sexy instead of just trying to validate his tendency to lurk behind doors and mumble into his hood 90-percent of the time.

Kenny lifted his near arm and trailed his fingertips in an infinity loop around Cartman’s shoulder blades, then tightened his arm around his neck to scratch his nails through the unruly shadows under his jaw.

“Shave day,” he murmured.

An upward curl arrived in Eric’s sleep-swollen eyes. “Don’t stop.”

Unable to contain a grin, Kenny brought his other hand to his truancy officer’s face, dusted his knuckles along either side his jaw, then tangled his fingers in a hard grip of the hair at the back of his head.

“Hey, no -- “ He lurched forward and they knocked noses when Cartman tried to dodge. “Don’t kiss me, I have morning rug mouth.”

Cartman’s gaze slipped over to the window and he amended: “Sunset rug, mouth.”

“I don’t care.” Kenny knew he could force the matter, probably, but decided on closing his lips under the nearest red eye, in the shallow pool of freckles there. “Good morning.”

His eyes found him half-lidded and didn’t budge for a while. “I had a weird dream.”

Kenny ran his tongue along his bottom lip.

“We were making out. Then I had this mouthful of blood.”

“Oh,” He pulled away and tongued at the spot where his old healed cut was. “Sorry about that.”
“No,” Cartman shook his head. “That was -- that was hot. This was -- not. It was a lot of blood. And it felt like my fault.”

“Wendy says your ego makes you blame yourself for random events.”

“Fine, but, if this is foreshadowing, or some shit, don’t blame me later when it comes true.”

“Your dream of making out with me?” Kenny side-stepped his truancy officer’s morbidity and leaned in again.

“Na -- dude, I’m serious.” He dodged again, batted Kenny’s hands away, and tightened the arm over his hips to reel him away from the headboard until his back met the much warmer surface of his chest. It was a new position, for Kenny -- and his half-drowsy mind ran a little wild with it. He planted his hands on Cartman’s upper legs and shifted back against him, two hours past drunk on closeness.

The light divided him at the solar plexus and Kenny held his breath as an arm slunk around him and crossed that arbitrary divide into the shadows under his belly. The cop’s hand descended past the band on his shorts to settle loose-fingered and heavy over his dick, and Kenny dropped his head back against Eric’s shoulder, shivering from zero to a hundred horny. He’d been close to reciting funeral hymns an hour ago, and yet the weight of someone’s hand between his legs -- specifically the same person who pulled a gun on his brother -- was one of the hottest things he’d seen all year, and it occurred to Kenny that he was pretty nasty for his truancy officer, too.

He opened his eyes again when an exhale hit the side of his throat and another arm worked around his chest. He hadn’t meant to close them.

“Are you grabbing my tit.”

“Oops,” Cartman huffed, circling the pectoral and moving on. “Habit.”

He finally loosened up his lungs and exhaled when the part of his back just above the lowest part but not the center, whatever it was called -- the lunar plexus? -- connected firmly with the body behind him, and there was almost no room left to spare between them. Kenny was just chilled enough that his skin didn’t stick, and there was some pretty obvious wood against his ass.

“This is new.”

“It’s, like -- “ Cartman grazed his lips along the slope of Kenny’s shoulder. “Twenty minutes old, actually.”

“You’ve been laying around on a hard-on for twenty minutes?”

“Not used to waking up next to dimes.”

Yellow Wolf felt a coldness build up behind his ribs and turned his head to get an eye on his truancy officer. “You’ve never woke up next to a dime.”

“One or two, maybe.” he said, waited long enough for Kenny to wonder about getting jealous, then snapped his teeth a hair’s breadth from the corner of his jaw. “Small change next to you.”

“Eric, fuck -- you’re so nice when you wake up.”

“No, don’t use the n-word. It’ll make me feel like I have something to prove.”
He was halfway to hard under just the weight of Cartman’s unmoving hand, and when the pressure increased over his palm he felt himself twitch and rise the rest of the way. Kenny tried but couldn’t lean his head back again with his truancy officer working a mean hickey into the skin behind his ear. He rocked backward experimentally. Cartman grappled with him until his knees slid over the outsides of his legs and Kenny was sitting pretty over his dick.

“Man, take these off. What the fuck.”

He remembered he had hands, too, and threw them at his shorts, but only managed push the band down and free his erection before Cartman took over again. He must really have an unhealthy thing with his hands, Kenny thought, because front seat sitting watching the cop’s long fingers curl around his dick was as good as sinking his teeth into him, the first time.

Cartman timed a long upward stroke of his hand with a thrust of his hips and Kenny tried to find stability as the clothed hardness rutted against his ass, but there was nothing to hold onto, really; he just had to put his trust in the damn cop. The heartbeat between his shoulder blades.

Yellow Wolf made a note to heckle him later about being sort of a perfect jack-off. Maybe it was from all his experience in his cruiser. Or from just having some talented hands. Cartman led off with a merciless starting rhythm, but he knew when to ease off, when to graduate to fast and shallow; he even knew there was a particular window, as Kenny was winding up, when just one or two slow strokes would shatter him -- and the timing was so devastating, in fact, that he didn’t complain when Eric pulled off suddenly before the end, because he was set to blow embarrassingly quick, especially if he kept watching him at work.

Yellow Wolf didn’t much like the feeling of being manipulated, as a rule. But that was probably why it felt so good to give in to it, when the timing was right. Or, maybe, just when the lighting was.

Cartman took some time to focus on dragging his hips along the curve of his ass, managing what Kenny thought was a surprising degree of friction without ever leaving his hands anywhere long enough to bruise. He expected to feel bounced, even, but there wasn’t any jarring, just the same rise-and-fall rhythm so controlled it was dancelike. It left him wondering what it would be like, if they were actually having sex. Then he recalled the weight of Eric's cock in his hand, and he'd be riding equestrian before that shit.

When the muscles in his legs and toes started tightening up, Kenny thought distantly of bringing a hand back to his own erection. The shadow line was climbing up his chest and every movement sent stripes of warm sunlight roping over his eyes.

He’d just begun to mobilize when a hand returned to his hard problem -- only it didn’t move, just held Kenny in a fist tight enough to squeeze the breath from his lungs. He stared at his T.O.’s hand, angry, begging it silently to move, but only Eric moved, banging but not-really-banging him from behind, master of pleasurable but unsatisfactory scenarios, his whole damn aura laughing at Kenny like the devil himself was over his shoulder, grinding on him.

It wasn’t a lot, but the heavy grip on his cock was enough to tip him over the edge of a climax like a bad ending to a decent show, slow and not as hard as he’d’ve liked. He grit his teeth and suffered over the first wave, then Cartman started up a stroke that sort of shoved him through it in a way that made Kenny feel like he came twice, afterwards.

He felt no shame in slumping back while the feeling stuttered like bad reception in his legs. Cartman gradually slowed to a stop but he was still hard. Kenny swore, barely audible over the sunset, bright and loud in his eyes. He thought it was funny, how some things got more intense as they got darker - - and most other things just got quiet.
“Stop touching me,” Kenny fluttered a hand at the one pulling unkindly at the foreskin of his decidedly flaccid cock. “I’m dry.”

The shadowy chuckle against his neck registered to his dimmed senses right before Cartman’s next words and a sudden grip on his nuts. “No you aren’t.”

"Hey -- " Kenny yelped. “The fuck are you -- ?”

As he shuffled backward Kenny let himself slide back to the blankets, grateful for the opportunity to lie down again, shut his eyes for one more minute.

“No,” negativity arrived with a shove to his shoulder. “On your belly.”

He rolled around mostly to glare because his stomach was covered in cum, and found himself bullied over anyway, a pillow pushed under his hips and a touch at his -- his lunar plexus -- that held him still. He eyed the shape of his truancy officer behind him, and trusted him completely, but felt a glimmer of fear anyway.

“There’s no point of these, really,” Cartman murmured, plucking at the band on Kenny’s half-utilized shorts. “I have to do laundry today anyway, so.”

“Hold up, are we -- is this round two?”

He shrugged, and a band of sunlight caught on his occasional charming smile as he sat up on his knees and rid Kenny of his last garment. “Didn’t expect you to finish, honestly. I got carried away, I guess.”

“No. Shit.” Kenny mumbled into his folded arms.

He watched his truancy officer from the corner of his eye as he leaned over to snatch the lube from the nightstand. The temperature had dropped to 46. The sun dripped into ambers.

“Jesus, even your ass-hair is gold.”

Kenny muffled his nervous laughter over his arm, checked over his shoulder again.

“So, ha -- how’s your ass?”

Cartman paused with one hand working the lube over the other and flicked his eyebrows at him. “Like, a day after bad Tikka Masala. Or a few hours with my old academic advisor, maybe. Why?”

“It’s just, uh, you don’t seem very -- “ Kenny searched for the right words, then pushed himself up to his elbows to make a hand gesture. “Streamlined.”

Eric laughed hard and long enough for Kenny to burn up and feel like kind of an idiot. When he quieted down the cop folded over him and his mouth landed on that same peculiar spot on his back; a hand ran up the inside of his leg. “No such thing as too thick.”

“And dude,” Cartman sat back over his knees and continued in a normal tone, a grooving in the cruiser tone. “Chill out -- who said I was fucking you? Slow down. Wendy said ya need to slow down. Introductory chapters, remember?”

Kenny refolded his arms and settled back into his afterglow. Man, what a rambling idiot -- it was easy to give himself over. “Sure, I remember. You scare me sometimes, though. Like, you’ve got all these hidden parts. Does Heidi know about them? Of course she does. But does she know you’re
kind of nice sometimes -- ?"

“Heidi knew that I thought she was a self-oppressed workaholic with naive expectations for people. It got in the way, after a while."

“She sounds -- just like you."

“That’s probably why it worked for a while. Forget it, man. She doesn’t know anything. She saw words, I saw pictures."

“Women are snakes,” he added, and started to take a deep breath, so Kenny copied him, floundering on the exhale when the cop’s hand returned to his leg, not quite warm enough, and instead of a civil ball-fondling he felt one slick finger draw a slow line from his scrotum to his asshole and end with a pressure that was not what he expected.

“Besides, this would make a lousy first. If I was gonna toss your salad, it would be face to face. I’d wanna lookit your teeth.”

“Uhm,” Kenny started at the unfamiliar sensations and tried not to tense up. “Sure you’re -- doing this right?”

“What?” He snorted. “I mean -- I don’t know. I don’t think this would work well on your back, bro. Anyway the view isn’t that disappointing, for me, and I thought this would make it easier for you.”

His knuckle, Kenny realized -- bastard had bent his finger to the second knuckle.

“Easier?” He spat. “I’m talking about your fucking knuckle, dog. Excessive force, much?”

“Oh -- “ said Cartman, cruel delight in his tone, and he began to turn the offending knuckle while continuing to work it gradually inward. “That was a good one.”

After another inch Kenny still thought it was excessive.

“Eric,” he complained. Nothing hurt exactly but the pressure only grew and there didn’t seem to be any relief on the horizon. That and his dick was so uninterested it was going cryogenic.

“Yeller, come on -- relax,“ his T.O. sighed, like he was disappointed and two seconds from waving his hand around and making some stupid point. “You didn’t want a normal experience, did you? You didn’t want to know all the moves already, did you?”

Kenny rolled his shoulders, settled back on the crook of his elbow, and tried to loosen up his expectations. “Dude, keeping it a hundred -- I never even imagined we’d make it here.”

“Seriously?” After another twist, Kenny suspected Cartman had managed to screw him, down to the third knuckle at least -- and he still felt pressure right at the point of entry but his bod was feeling a weird way about the last few inches of crooked finger, like they were just almost onto something. It was pleasurable, but ultimately unsatisfactory. “It seemed like this was your plan, from the beginning. I could even, direct quote a bit, here -- ‘Fuck me!’ was the phrase you used, I think.”

“O-kay,” Kenny said, a snarl in his voice only because the prodding in his damn colon was sending an unfamiliar twinge of nerves flaring up his spine. “As if Eric Cartman has never used overconfidence to bluff.”

His hands cramped up into fists as Cartman’s finger started to unfurl, and the four-letter word forming on his tongue forgot itself and fell away like spaghetti-O characters when the small
movement produced a shock of pleasure that woke his nuts up in fucking hyperspace.

“Oh -- what?”

“Jesus,” Cartman chuckled, removing his finger and hand and leaving Kenny with nothing but the echoes. “You’re perfect.”

“That’s -- holy of you. Now say it again with my name.”

Kenny looked back, caught his truancy officer grinning his head off and wondered, if Cartman really was the dark and bitchy offspring of nighttime and negative vibes, what horrible crossroads deal had he made to acquire, on top of it all, the power of positive contact? He finally understood how someone like him could still have so many people close, like Stan and Kyle, Wendy and Heidi, maybe even some of the other guys he claimed to hate -- because for all his manifestations of rage and hatred there were hiding equal and opposite shades of humor and happiness. Childlike, but genuine. It was fun to be around, even on the bad days.

“Yo, not many people can see through my bullshit,” he said. “Let alone -- call me out on it.”

Yellow Wolf waited for the L-word to drop, waited for it like a dog for a turkey's heart, and imagined shredding it on the floor, its delicious weight in his belly.

Not anybody was so constipated about love as Cartman. Fuck -- he’d known some guys on the crew team at school for only a couple months who threw the word around anytime they’d bro down together. But Kenny had a feeling that when he heard it from his T.O., he would believe it.

“Here, just -- before I do this,” Eric was crawling up beside him. “Keep your mouth closed.”

“Before, you -- “ Kenny met his kiss half-prepared and half-sneering, but Cartman didn’t seem to mind catching teeth. “Do what?”

“Goin’ to Hole Foods,” he chuckled, moving behind him again. “On my day off.”

It took him too long to process. “You’re nasty.”

“Ya smell good.”

“You’re huffing my pheromones, dude.”

Palms pressed in hot on the outsides of his legs and Kenny felt the brush of a nosetip down his spine.

“What is that spot?” He asked. “Right there? You keep going there.”

Cartman hummed a thrummy frequency against his skin that spread over his lunar back place and dropped straight through his stomach.

“First lumbar.” He sat back and brought a couple knuckles of his dry hand down on the spot and twisted them until the friction burned down to the ligament. Kenny fell back to the crook of his elbow and vocalized, unsure.

“A bullet here is how my boss’s lunatic brother put Sundog in a wheelchair, for the rest of her life.” He continued. “And you know what people say? She got lucky.”

Cartman walked his burning knuckles down Kenny’s lower back, lumbar by lumbar, leaving them loose and warm, then drew a hard crescent down the outside of his asscheek with the pad of his thumb. Kenny felt the skin prickle on the back of his neck.
“Stop looking -- close your eyes, or something. Breathe.”

“You’re too bossy.” Kenny murmured, nonetheless turning his head away and breathing out over his arms as a mirror exhale hit the crack of his ass. Which was new.

“I know exactly the song that would help you, right now.” He sighed. “But hip hop is dead.”

“Why?”


“Dude, I fixed it,” Kenny mumbled, unfolding the fingers of one hand to flap over his shoulder. “I put your thing back together while you were getting your ass shot at, last night. Hey, what are you -- ?”

Cartman was off the bed before his next breath and an unwelcome rush of cold air ghosted over Kenny’s backside. He rolled and glared after his truancy officer. “Fucker!”

It was just like a fucking dickhead cop to jump out on a brother with lube drying on his asshole. Real top notch shit -- Cartman was the kind of guy who would go to a lot of trouble to get you to go to some grand-i-ose ball with him, then abandon you there at the wave of a fat blunt, or the sound of a custom exhaust system in the parking lot.

He climbed back on the bed in the space of a minute and wasted no time manipulating Kenny back into position, but instead of returning directly to task his T.O. climbed over him and wrapped one arm around his middle to pull Kenny against his chest.

“Sorry baby,” he murmured to the nape of his neck and it almost made it worth it. “Thanks for doin’ that.”

“Whatever.” Rude boys could always sweet-talk like monsters.

Cartman pressed in warmly like a full body apology for leaving him in the cold, and Kenny was starting to like the feeling of being underneath him. The head of a clothed erection settled against his partially prepared asshole and he caught himself thinking it wouldn’t be so lousy, for a first time.

But -- it really was the least aerodynamic piece of reproductive equipment he’d ever clapped eyes on.

“I haven’t heard this.”

“Earthgang,” said Cartman, breaking from a track of loud kisses he was leaving between Kenny’s shoulder blades and continuing to rock slowly. “Good shit can be slow without sacrificing the flow. This one’s called House.”

His T.O. abruptly pressed a groan to the center groove of his back as his dick travelled the groove of his ass.

“Yo-o, how close are you?” Kenny spoke over his shoulder, squinting his eyes open.

“I could, probably -- ” Cartman huffed an exhale and brought his hips against him again with a more forceful and barely audible snap. “Just like this.”

Kenny was about to dare him to do it when his finger, still sticky but no longer sufficiently lubed, forced its way inside him, all the way, several times further than his first intrusion. He hissed over his shoulder when it started to withdraw, because there was enough dry tugging to make it feel like
“Yeah, kinda sucks, huh?” Eric said darkly. “Imagine if it was someone’s -- entire -- shaft.”

“I said I was sorry, mother of fuck.” He was actually down to shifting his ass to reduce the discomfort, trying to ignore the laughter in the cop’s voice. “You been holding a grudge this whole time?”

“Hey, new rule -- “ he replied. “Don’t say ‘whole’ while I’m doing this.”

“What?”

“It goes along with the no puns in the bedroom rule.” He explained, pulling free at last and situating his hands on each of Kenny’s cheeks. “You know -- cats really are just small captive panthers.”

“Wha -- “

A sharp exhale was his only warning before the flat heat of Cartman’s distracting fucking tongue fell over his asshole and slunk inward in one lazy, shallow pull.

Kenny uncrossed his arms and tucked his elbows to his sides, dropped his forehead to the sheets and struggled to stay relaxed with a tongue up his ass and a strange numbing rattle in his groin. He recognized Soul Everyday bumping through the open door and really wished Cartman had asked before driving him to Hole Foods with Yelawolf on the playlist. He’d never hear the song the same way again, probably.

He already knew his T.O. could invert his tongue and shit, which the the five-year-old in Kenny thought was cool, but he’d still considered it kind of so-what until it happened inside him, leading him to discover -- not only a new appreciation for this smallest of skills -- but also a key to the door of a reality which included the sexualized bootyhole.

His awakening shuddered into hi-def when Eric withdrew to breathe and a freshly lubricated finger took his place on the bounce, nicking his prostate on the third or fourth pull. Kenny jerked his hips mostly to field the tension of his developing hard-on.

“Can’t be sure yet, but,” Cartman dug his free hand underneath him and helped release Kenny’s problem, though a boner against his stomach was little more than a consolation prize. “This stuff might actually be honey flavored.”

“Or maybe -- “ Kenny was fighting a double-pronged battle against the tightness in his lungs and overstimulation from the targeted strokes of his finger. “It's just me.”

“I know this sweet spot in the mountains.” He said, adding another one without losing the beat, and Kenny sunk his teeth into the folds of the sheets. “Oops -- was that a pun? Did that count?”

His attempt at noise suppression was coming into conflict with the need for air, and Kenny gasped a quick intake of breath.

“It’s called Silver Lake,” Cartman continued. “Hour drive. Five mile baby hike, little bit of sick rock jumping, if you pick the right track, and the lake up there is yours, man, I’m serious. Forest and freshwater like the land of the fuckin’ elves, and nobody ever around for miles.”

“You would do this -- there?” Kenny dared.

“Oh,” he said, as if he hadn’t thought of it. “I was just thinking, a couple beers, some of those killer
pitas from the Night Kitchen -- a little passion, pain, and demon slayin’ -- but we can add ass-licking, for sure. You’re just supposed to enjoy it.”

His hand was so punishingly precise Kenny was relieved to feel the return of his mouth, and let himself sink into the slow beats while the long strokes of his tongue seemed to savor him. It probably wouldn’t get him off, but he did sort of enjoy it, after a while -- like a beer on the beach -- and if anyone three or four months ago had asked if he’d be here with his truancy officer, he would’ve laughed in their face. Or showed them the staple.

It didn’t extend far but every pulse of his tongue brought along with it a hot hot heat and a tickle of the same pleasure from before. The tickle grew to an itch, the reverberations grew on each other like radiation, and when Kenny slid one of his knees up to his hip, Eric clamped his free hand down on the thigh and held it there while the other took over from his tongue again.

Yellow Wolf arched his back and shuddered over the beginnings of an abrupt orgasm when fingers pistoned several times against his prostate. He fought the urge to writhe and bit off a stream of curses into the mattress. Blinked to find his eyelids cool with sweat. There was no more light from the window.

Kenny was just pushing himself to his elbows when his T.O. fell over him, jerked the pillow from under his hips, and wrapped a hand around his cock to finish him with a doggystyle reach around that was more like two strokes and Kenny was already done and dizzy with it. Cartman rutted a few times against him, faltered, completely lost his rhythm, and came with a funny low yowl. Kenny felt his forehead fall between his shoulder blades, and counted the harried breaths on his skin.

The scrape of a blunt thumbnail over the head of his cock made Kenny jerk and accidentally throw an elbow -- they swore simultaneously and Cartman rolled away.

“Now I’m dry.” said Kenny, settling kind of delicately on his side.

“How d’you feel?”

“Honestly? Like I’ve just done a lot of work and you haven’t closed a portal properly.”

“Fuck,” Cartman stumbled over a step ladder of loose laughter. “You oughta have a radio show, or something.”

“The Uncomfortable Truth with Yellow Wolf,” he murmured back, eyelids falling most of the way shut, the rest watching his truancy officer sit up on the edge of the bed.

“Fucking the Cops -- and Your Mom, with Wolf Gang,” offered Eric, standing up and facing the window. “No, wait -- The Whole Truth, with Kenny McCormick.”

“Fuck o-off.”

“Fine. I gotta clean up. Shave. Then laundry. Chop the bonsai.”

He turned and leaned back over the bed to touch his hand to the side of Kenny’s head, carving rifts with his fingers in the hair over his ear. “I could buzz up your sides or something, later, too. Get Wendy off my back about one thing, at least.”

Squinting against the weight over his skull, Kenny felt himself burn up a little because even though the cop had said ‘buzz up your sides’, he heard something like ‘lick you to the second coming’, and turned his face into the pillows to hide. Cartman tweaked his ear and was gone.
Long after the disharmony of running water and the groan of the building’s pipes had churned back into silence, something unheard urged Yellow Wolf awake from a sound doze. Then, somewhere in the darkness, a phone rang.

Chapter End Notes

i think the key difference between porn and writing with some mucking around in it is that pornography deliberately dehumanizes the participants.

i’m in love with these losers so, i might hurt them, but i’d never try to take away their humanity.

(Romance idealizes the idea of love, porn the act of it -- but aren't both dangerously misleading?)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ask anyone in South Park about the First Regiment of Colorado Volunteers, and they’ll probably do just what Stan’s idiot father does -- kick his feet up with a bottle of s’more-flavored Schnapps and flap about patriotism and the good old days until you’re just about gagging on glory and seeing in stars and bars.

Back in those exact good old days, after the Colorado Volunteers successfully forced the Confederates back to Texas -- and Randy and all his other idiot friends took off their costumes, turning from war heroes back into common drunks -- the First Regiment settled in and became a home guard for the Colorado Territory. Manifest destiny was in vogue and the discovery of gold drew immigrants in droves. Soon settlers were bumping borders with the neighboring indigenous population.

Three years after the glory, under no direction or declaration of war, the same men of the First Regiment broke the peace treaty and rode over those borders, killing and destroying Indian camps.

Two-thirds of their victims were women and children, but it didn’t make any difference as long as they were red.

Historians at the time -- and for the next hundred years -- recorded the events of Sandy Creek as a battle, but later they called it massacre. The bodies were mutilated, scalped, chopped up into little bits -- in the aftermath there were squaws deliberately left screaming, unborn babies lying dead outside their mothers. Somebody even cut off White Antelope’s nose. Fingers were taken for jewelry and testicles for coin-purses.

Beneath the Park County Sheriff’s Department, separated from the public by maybe a hundred feet of dirt and limestone, languished a mass grave.

Excavation crews accidentally uncovered this foul feast in the late fifties. At the time America was gearing up for an overhaul, to become, if not a peaceful society, then at least one that could put a man in space. It was the gilded era of commercial computers and answering machines; no one gave a damn about landmines blowing kids to pieces in Laos -- some guy named Spud had just invented the Hula Hoop. And when bodies started turning out of the dirt on the site soon to be the headquarters of Park County’s newest home guard, the construction crews were told to work double-time, day and night -- to cover everything up, and finish the project. A great society waited for no man, not even the multitude dead.

Two stories above all those layers of earth and gore, separated from the farty office floor by one short corridor and a closed door, Sheriff Steve Sandies whispered to his desk plants under the therapeutic light of a forty-dollar sun lamp he won at the last municipal events raffle.

The corner office smelled good enough to wake up early for -- like coffee beans sourced from someplace called the ‘Eternal Spring City’, coarsely ground and brewing slowly in a thirty-four-ounce french press. The emblem on a grease-spotted bag sitting near the sheriff’s trigger-finger revealed an early-morning delivery from the Voodoo Daddy doughnut shop. ‘The Magic is in the Hole!’ claimed the slogan.

This, Eric kept reminding himself, was the view from the top of the pyramid.
He clamped down on a surge of the same raw-throated rage and disbelief that had brought him into
the land of fairies and Sandies in the first place, and managed to hold down a blank face. The sheriff
might be the sad king of this paperwork hill, but Eric was not to be fucked with; he was a capable
officer, a crucial part of the Bruder investigation, and he had clout, damn it. He was Nas in the Oval
Office wearing leather wallabies.

“What the hell is that?”

The sheriff interlaced his fingers in a way that seemed too uncomfortable around his rings and peered
at the glowing orange rock on his desk as if he’d just remembered it.

“Oh, you haven’t seen them? Doris has one, too. You know Doris, from accounting.”

“Yeah, she’s a fucking subterranean, man -- how’d you get one of her eggs?”

“It’s, uhh -- a, uh, Himalayan salt rock, actually.”

“...Okay, why?”

“It, uhh, well, it... you see, salt is a natural -- it produces negative ions, which purify -- “

“Steve,” Cartman saved him for his own sanity, bringing one hand to the bridge of his nose. “It’s
raining outside.”

Sandies looked slow and faintly fearful toward the window, which he kept shaded to avoid
overfeeding his delicate hanging potted plants. Too much D was bad for the soil, Cartman guessed.

“Yes, yes it is.”

He felt a twitch arrive in his left eye, which was from allergies, actually, but Cartman had long
speculated that the symptom was aggravated by stupidity, and the emotional strain he endured in its
presence. Normally, he tried very hard not to fold his boss into amusing shapes like the paper man he
was, because he’d learned that bosses don’t generally like to be made small -- and Cartman had been
told on more than one occasion, not in so many neutral words, that he could be somewhat
intimidating.

“If you had taken even one real chemistry class in your entire life, Sandra, you’d know that moving
water is the largest natural source of anions, and Himalayan salt is for fancy cooking.”

“Don’t -- “ Sandman didn’t go red when he was intimidated or upset, instead he went very pale, as if
he were on a rollercoaster slide back into a deep pit of dark memories. “Don’t use women’s names to
demean me, please.”

Cartman shook his head. “I’m not using women to demean you, I’m using your own feeble-minded
fuckery. Because Doris is from the planet Southside and works ten-hour graveyard shifts on the
basement floor -- and your ass is up here simulating daylight with the fucking shades down.”

“Now, Eric, I -- I understand you might be under some stress right now, but that’s no reason to -- “

“Me? No -- me?” Cartman suspected he’d flown off the handle long before he started gesturing at
himself. “No, why would I be stressed? I drove a blunt to work. Twelve motherfuckers I don’t even
know told me how fresh I look on my way in here. The cashier at the In ‘n’ Out, she asked me if I
was famous.”

It was all true -- even the chick at the front desk had told him so, when he checked in. How much
better he looked, as if it were the first time in three years Cartman had arrived at the station without being a little musty, a little bit faded, and glutted with directionless anger.

“Uh, well, I mean, you have a distinctive -- “

“And you know something else, Steve, my G -- you know, you’d be amazed how easy it is to get a good night’s sleep -- with a fucking price on your head!”

He was well-rested, relatively clear-eyed, and remarkably unmarred by visible injuries. But that only made it worse, in his opinion, because while he was forced to fence off compliments and optimism all day, Cartman was in shambles. He was so angry he felt vicious.

And he only blamed one person, this time.

“Please, just, lower your voice. The plants -- “

“Your plants?” He snatched up a small nipple-shaped succulent from the desk. Sandman gasped. “You think I give a damn about your stupid plants right now?”

“Please, that was a gift from my mother-in-law! It only grows five centimeters a year -- please just put it down, Eric -- let’s talk -- “

At the invitation for words, Cartman saw red. He seized his boss by the front of his uniform and hauled him down over the desktop. A few buttons popped free and clattered over the wood. He held the potted cactus up to one fearful blue eye until the proximity of the needles forced it to squeeze shut, and imagined shoving it in his brain.

Death by cactus. Even Vin Diesel hadn’t thought of that.

Cartman waited several long moments with Sandman’s whistling breaths, watching his boss’s chest expand and retract against the desk, like a little machine working overtime. Eric had never feared for anybody in particular.

“Loving something in excess of what it deserves is sentimentality.” He decided. “Sentimentality is the only true sin.”

“I, uhh, I know a lot is going on, right now,” Sandman huffed. “But you need to keep a clear head -- I am your ally here, Eric, if you would just let me explain -- “

“Shut up!” A clear head was days past.

“Kenneth is -- “

Cartman shifted his weight and the sheriff’s forehead hit the wood with a dull thud. “And keep his name outta your mouth!”

They breathed. The aroma of Spring City coffee was filling the room with steep mountains and fog-filled valleys. In the strange, violent calm Cartman's mind wandered; there was a particular sound Kenny made, with his mouth, that shook him around in himself in all creation. It was an everything sound Eric strained to pick all of the parts out of -- the parts that were pure exhilaration and the parts that were accusatory; which ones were really going for him and which were gunning for him -- and he wanted to tag and value these divided parts, tuck them away in his wild compartmental complex, but the sound always came at him everything at once, and like most things about Kenny, it was absolute. And he made this sound again, and again, and plenty more times again, until Cartman’s heart grew hectic with it.
Finally he forced Sandies back into his stupid European bungee cord chair and placed the tiny cactus back under the sun lamp.

“Let’s talk, then,” he said, starting on a reasonable decibel. “Explain this new fuckery to me -- I might not have the Triforce of Wisdom but the half of my brain that survived college is stuck on why you would have my truant arrested two days before his eighteenth birthday, on no charges at all -- and if it had to be done, why ya didn’t just have me do it, instead of having ten officers jump him on school property!”

“We, uhh, okay, the long and short of it is, you know, we thought he might resist. And we were right --”

“Of course he ran; you sent six squad cars to the fucking high school -- Queen Latifah would run from that!”

“Cartman, if you keep at this, I’m, uh, I’m going to have to call in Marsh.”

“Call -- “ Cartman leaned back on his heels. “Did you just threaten me with Wendy Marsh?”

“She’s uh, well,” Sandman was pale as sheetrock. “She’s the only one who can get you to stop yelling!”

“Oh, I see where this is going,” he said, deliberately quiet. “You need a chick nine months pregnant to come in here and do your job. Um, I have news for you, Sandwich, she’s probably yelling louder than me!”

A sudden gust of wind threw rain against the window with such force that each drop knocked like a fist. Cartman snorted a fat lap of allergies onto the back of his tongue. The sheriff winced at the noise.

He’d been in just the kind of mood to rage into work, that afternoon. Track mud into the office, slap the first ringing phone off the wall, maybe drink all the milk in the breakroom fridge and kick Butters’ stupid sitting ball across the floor; but Cartman had been raging all on his own ever since -- pretty much since two hours after Kenny left, and for maybe 24 hours since he didn’t come back. He was already suspicious of the unmuted, rummaging physicality of their relationship -- it was the same kind of intense, touch-and-go love you got from friends about to ditch you -- and no offense but Yellow Wolf fit exactly the flighty, break-apart male profile that had Cartman wishing he’d never once beat off thinking about ass.

But the affection had made him complacent, and everybody’s poison optimism made him stupid.

After experimenting with self-defeating violence, pity, and standing on his roof in the rain too long, Cartman had yielded to an emotional deadness that at last comforted him, curled up under his ribs and kept him company at night, humming along to the downpour outside. What Sandies was seeing was nothing at all, only the slaughterhouse by-product of his tantrum.

“I’m gonna snap your little bones, paper man, if you don’t tell me what the fuck’s going on.”

Something was thumping rhythmically in his ears, but he was sure it wasn’t his heart.

“Look, we thought maybe -- “

“Not we,” he snapped, short and savage. “Steve, you. Own it.”
Sandman stood up, one hand held to the gap in his shirt where the buttons were yanked, and took a very slow, deep breath. The voice that followed it emerged tight and wispy, like an untied balloon or a broken rubber chicken: “You have a, uh, disturbingly intense gaze.”

Cartman watched the sheriff march frog-legged to the French press by the window. The gray shadows of raindrops superimposed on his back rolled down like cartoon sweat. “I didn’t want to arrest him, only to take the boy in for questioning -- “

”That’s called *kidnapping*, in my line of work.”

He thought how the sheriff wouldn’t be calling Yellow Wolf boy if he’d even glimpsed the guy’s fuckin’ eighty-pound balls. Cartman thought of Kenny flipping him off outside that grimy trailer, and missed him the way you miss a nasty bruise -- like it hurts a lot, and if it’s on your ass or something it changes your whole routine, but people think you’re really hard for having it.

Steve sighed as if his patience was wearing thin, but the noise was so feeble Cartman’s animal instinct heard it like a whimper. The thudding was growing loud and irregular in his ears and he suddenly realized what it must be. He was hearing the sheriff’s heartbeat -- like a werewolf. Or 50 Cent.

“Don’t you think it was about time we brought in the *known* culprit of the Yellow Wolf crimes, given the recent recurrences?”


Sandies returned to his desk, creeping along in slo-mo with two handmade ceramic mugs in hand. Eric narrowed his eyes on his colorless boss, knowing he was planning to ply him with imported coffee. In the back of his mind he remembered the last time someone plied him with coffee, blue-eyed and grinning, and he remembered going down on him on the couch in nothing but Polo socks.

“I swear, if you’ve got him in the same cell as all our overnight drunks, I will -- “

“No, no, nothing like that,” said Sandies, reaching over to the monitor on the side of his desk and turning it 45 degrees so Cartman could see the gridwork on its face. Four live camera feeds in separate but equal black and white boxes: “See? It’s just the holding room.”

The southwest square showed a walk-in closet with a cot and a wall-toilet. He didn’t see any movement at first, then picked out a swinging foot and the shape of Yellow Wolf flat on the cot, the thin pillow over his face.

Cartman frowned. “You took his clothes.”

“Couldn’t be helped,” Sandies shrugged. “History of dealing -- we had to take everything.”

He peeled his eyes away from the live feed of the teenager and felt a tiny spark of hatred break through his apathy.

“Eric, don’t -- uh, don’t worry now,” said the sheriff, as if he wasn’t sure he was speaking the right language. “He’s been treated very well, considering. See? He’s fine -- asleep, this whole time.”

“He’s not sleeping, fool, he -- “ Cartman checked himself before explaining to his boss that Kenny only ever slept on his face. “He always wears his hood, but you took it. And what do you mean, *considering*?”

“Well, Officer Stotch took a crack at questioning after he was brought in -- “
“That was stupid.” He waved a hand. “So who tried next? Dunham? Token? Not Donovan?”

“I tried, actually,” the sheriff sniffed. “And I don’t like being spit at, very much.”

“Don’t take it personally.” Eric inhaled the vapors rising over brim of his mug, and decided there was no danger. “So besides perving on my truant while he pisses -- what have you accomplished?”

Sandies heaved a slightly more convincing sigh. “Bottom line, Eric, we had to do something.”

Cartman snorted and felt a little more wrath eke past his defenses, but the sheriff beat him to the punch.

“The FBI was talking about getting involved.”

“What?”

“Yes -- they requested the original case files right after that building in Ravencroft burned down, last year, and then there was the Riverside train incident, and those arrests we made on the Tree-streets a few days ago -- “

“What do those have to do with Yellow Wolf?”

Instead of answering, Sandman swallowed loudly around a long pull of coffee and busied himself pulling open drawers and shuffling files around, placing one after another on the formerly tidy desktop.

“These were taken inside that old convenience store at the corner of Elm and Pine.” He said, pushing a paperclipped stack of glossy, blown-up photos toward him.

“Jesus,” Cartman swore under his breath, recognizing instantly the labyrinthine yellow script covering the walls.

He thumbed through the first few photographs to confirm, but it was clear that Yeller had tagged every inch of the inside of the bodega.

“Like you said,” Steve flipped his hands palm-up in a placating gesture. “Could be copycat work. But -- “

He slid over a photograph from a separate collection. “This was taken from street surveillance cameras the night of the arrests.”

The two-way street sign for Pine and Elm took the center of the image. The bodega was a distant shape across the pavement behind a tall chainlink fence, overgrown with weed and vine, and low in the corner a figure was just visible, blurred like it had been passing at a trot.

“Just a -- “ Cartman paused to clear his throat. “Kid inna hood.”

“Right,” Steve nodded, putting another photo down before he could think up anything else. “And here, at the subway, where we finally took in Matty Alvarez. Alvarez was found in possession of half a kilo of base. And yet again, we see a kid in a hood.

“Remember the auto shop where Tucker left his car overnight, the car found with two kilos of the same grade racemic drug and later instrument to a case of homicidal grand theft auto? The owner just got back to us with the footage from his security cameras. They weren’t at the right angle to catch much, but there was this.”
A three-quarter image of a blurred figure just clear enough to be somebody wearing a hood. Cartman looked up. “So what?”

“Kid has priors, Eric. Defacement of public property, and the dealing -- together with possible sightings at three separate crime scenes involving large quantities of a controlled substance -- you said it yourself, he always wears a hood. It’s not a lot, but -- “

“It’s nothing!”

Steve’s eyes narrowed on him and Cartman knew he’d toed the line between being a skeptical douchebag and just space-jam unreasonable.

“It was enough for the district attorney. And it might be enough for a jury. Especially if he doesn’t give us an alibi.”

“The DA is -- pressing charges?” Cartman shook his head, hoping the information might fall back out and disappear. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying -- if the boy refuses to cooperate with us, he’s going to jail.”

Eric set his teeth into a bit of dry skin on his lower lip and tried to think over the tidal pulse sloshing against his ear dams -- usually he was a hundred chess moves ahead but, see, the problem was, he’d stopped thinking ahead, like, over six months ago, because each time he did, he ran into the words he’s going to jail and it all went full stop right there. Everything was so much more blissful in the bottle. Everything was so much simpler when he let the poison seep in; Wendy’s optimism, Kenny’s fool optimism -- but everybody was so eager for rainbows they didn't bother prepping for the rain. A pessimist might have expected the storm -- but Cartman wasn't like any of them, really. He already felt soaked to the bone.

He’d fucked up. He’d really fucked up this one, and now it was in his face just the way Wendy said it wouldn’t be and he wasn’t Eric Cartman at all if he hadn’t expected and planned for this eventuality.

He wasn’t pissed at the damn sheriff, really -- he was pissed at himself.

Because he’d sat around on his damn laurels for a week and pretended shit would just go on forever, a fat king overdosed on deceit. He grew up, Cartman realized; he grew up and got complacent. Complacency made sheep from people -- and sheep didn’t need to be happy, only contented.

“What do you mean, ‘cooperate’?” He said, then cleared his throat and wiped his palms on his legs.

“He’d be an idiot to confess.”

“Not a confession; a tip. We think he may know the location of the rest of the missing base from the Riverside train job.”

Cartman felt his eyebrows jump and the beat in his ears pick up again. “But we don’t even know how much was in that drop -- “

“But we had estimates, your estimates,” Steve interrupted, looking down his nose at him like he was about to take points away from Cartman’s fucking Hogwarts House. “And even counting for what you confiscated that night, what we got from the subway, and the stolen car -- “

“You think… “ Eric cut him off with another wave of his hand. “Hold up, are you suggesting a seventeen-year-old has been planting a bunch of stolen drugs around the county? With what motive? Just to yank the cops around looking for it? That’s like finding a hundred grand, hiding it, and then
throwing around a bunch of maps.”

Cartman gestured limply at the computer screen, the small black and gray flutter of Kenny’s swinging foot. “Look at this kid, man -- he can barely pass high school. It’s a bald-ass miracle he’s even made it this far -- if he had a hundred dollars, he wouldn’t dick around with trains and cars and subways -- he’d just fucking spend it. And here’s the other thing, Steve; how do we even know these drops are related? They could all just be -- you know -- coincidence. You’re just as likely to see Yellow Wolf graffiti in the subway as you are inside an abandoned building. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Eric… “ Sandman’s brows pinched together. “You’re very smart. That’s part of the reason I recruited you for this work. That, and, your, uhh -- relevant experience.”

The sheriff leaned forward suddenly and tapped one of the touchscreen options at the base of his lamp. The light changed from slightly blue to slightly orange.

“Something drew Alvarez out of hiding that night,” he continued. “To the subway. And something drew that woman, Miss, uhh, Pasternack, was it?”

“Francesca.”

“Something drew her to that vehicle, and we know for a fact it was stolen after the base was planted in the back -- “

“And the bodega?” Cartman interrupted. “What did your little parade find under the bodega? A bomb?”

“No -- “

“Drugs?”

“Well, no -- “

Cartman thought of the K9 units and the SWAT team busting in on an empty old building that kids pissed around in daily, and barked a laugh. Then he decided, what the heck, and let it ride until the little corner office was ringing with it. Sandman opened his mouth several times, then sipped at his Spring City coffee until the noise wrung itself dry.

“That’s the other reason I called you in here. We haven’t finished analyzing everything that we found, but, just looking at what’s been collected so far, it seems -- “

“Just tell me what it was, God damn it.”

The sheriff spread his hands. “Receipts. Carefully filed, carefully hidden, receipts.”

Cartman tried the information for a second, and felt a seed of confirmed suspicion split and grow in his mind. “And -- ?”

“And,” sang the idiot sheriff, reaching for his drawer and coming back up again with a paperclipped stack of paper in his hands and a little flush of excitement in his colorless cheek. “Recognize this? Six months ago you put together a request to the grand jury with the findings of your investigation into a laundering case -- with that restaurant as the centerpiece, yes? Up in Greeley, wasn’t it? Place called Tasty Kitchen.”

“Lucky Kitchen,” Cartman said. “Yeah, they rejected it. Thought the trail ran dry. I guess having
thirty-seven employees and sixty on payroll with addresses in all Rainer’s hot spots -- and thirty to a hundred grand in petty cash changing hands weekly isn’t enough of a damn daisy chain -- “

“They were missing the money trail,” Sandies interrupted just before Cartman really got rolling with it. “Fichte had no financial connection to the business whatsoever; he was never even seen on the premises -- but those receipts -- “

He paused like he was about to propose an alternate ending to Blade Runner or something. “We haven’t finished collecting them all, but, it looks like evidence of back-and-forth transactions between a bank account in Columbus, Ohio and the Tasty Kitchen for over ten years -- “

“Lucky Kitchen,” Eric corrected, scowling. “And that’s exactly the network I outlined in those pages -- “

“Look at it this way -- “ Sandies spread his hands. “This new evidence will seal the case, and allow us to open a formal investigation into Fichte. We might even be able to pull you out.”

Cartman cleared his throat again, found his mouth suddenly dry.


“Yeah,” he agreed, shifting to his opposite foot and glancing at the southwest corner of the sheriff’s computer monitor. Still just the one foot, swinging, endlessly. “Who woulda guessed.”

It was abruptly very obvious to Cartman that Kenny may have just ended his three-year undercover investigation for funsies, and the complete irony of underage delinquents doing police work struck him with enough force to knock another laugh out of his throat.

“If he doesn’t know anything,” Sandman started, gesturing to the incriminating photos laid out in front of them. “His record, together with assault in the second degree, sale of Schedule I and Schedule II drugs, and there’s the small matter of multiple counts of arson -- “

“Unproven -- “

“We’re looking at ten years in prison at this point, Eric -- and depending on the value of the Ravencroft property, fines in the hundreds of thousands.”

Cartman licked his lips, glanced sideways at the horizontal bars over the window. This was everything he already knew and had tortured himself with for months. In the past two days alone he’d been so fired up about impending doom that he broke into a handle of bitch whiskey he hadn’t touched since college, and hit it with the same sort of indifferent rage against vitality he remembered from his early adolescence.

“This is all… “ He wouldn’t be shit if he didn’t go down fighting, though. “You’re just speculating -- the Yellow Wolf case was closed more than three years ago -- Testaburger got him cleared of all charges; so legally, this kid was never Yellow Wolf.”

The sheriff’s voice turned mockingly soft. “Look, all of this can change if we just had an alibi, proof that he was somewhere else, at each of these times -- all he needs to do is answer our questions.“

“Wha -- “ Cartman sputtered. “He -- of course he doesn’t have an alibi, he’s fucking homeless!”

“Then that leaves just one option.” Steve said, clipped, and leaned back in his bungee cord sling chair. “He trusts you -- offer the boy a deal, a reduced sentence, in return for his help closing this
case.”

The salt rock was becoming a constant glowing coal of an eyesore, and Cartman briefly fantasized about knocking his boss over the head with it. But that would only solve one problem, and make a whole lot more. The rain eased off to a lull as the direction of the wind changed, and only the little fans on Sandman’s PC whirred in the new quiet. Everything had a sort of tap-water fogginess to it. Kenny’s foot, still swinging.

Steve heaved one more huge, fake sigh. “Once we wrap up this case, we can finally clean the streets of these brothers of sleep. This could be a new beginning for you, on the force. No more night shifts -- no more double lives. I could use a deputy.”

“That come with a raise?”

The sheriff smiled straight and wide. “And dental.”

Cartman leaned his palms against the desk, staring down at the collection of photographs on its face. He scanned the images of grime, pain, fire and destruction -- and the line of happy succulents in their little pots, soaking in the light, not realizing it was all synthetic. They had everything they could ever need or want but they couldn’t be cactuses, really, not without the blue sky above them -- right?

“What if,” he began. “What if he doesn’t know where it is -- what if there isn’t any more base from Riverside?”

The sheriff shrugged. “He might know something that could help us.”

“What more can he give you, man -- Rainer’s fucking address?”

He shrugged again.

“And -- “ Cartman licked his teeth and thought distantly of optimism but found reality. “If he doesn’t know anything, what? You let it go to court? Lock up a teenager for ten years? That’s -- that’s hot garbage, man. If you think I’m gonna go down there and just, sell out, tell him everything’s gonna be fine as long as he rats on the most powerful gang in the city -- fuck that! You know what they do to rats in this city? Of course you don’t. Billy-goat robbed a bait car just so nobody could accuse him of going straight to the cops! I’m not doing it. I wouldn’t even do it for your job, Sandman. And if you put him away, I'll make sure you lose everything.”

Sandman unfolded his hands, then refolded them. He waited a long, priestly moment. “Son, you’re -- putting yourself between a bullet and a target, at this point.”

So be it, Cartman thought. McCormick owed him a bullet, anyway.

“A reduced sentence would chip his time down to -- “

“It doesn’t matter, Steve. Seven years -- five, it wouldn’t matter, don’t you get it? Saying one word south of good will towards Fichte is bloody fuckin’ suicide. Rats don’t last, especially not homeless ones.”

“He will if his words bring down the operation -- there wouldn’t be any Bruders left; the boy could be a hero. Think about it -- “

“I’m not doing it.”

The sheriff sniffed and gestured to the files on his desk. “Eric, I’m going to arrange these and ask
you one simple question, and I want you to try for a genuine answer.”

He plucked a photograph from the first folder and laid it on top. It was the ass-end of the South Park commuter on fire, caught beautifully by one of the traffic cams on the bridge.

“Last winter, Rainer arranged the Riverside train job. According to your logs, it was a ruse to lure you and agent -- McCarthy -- into a dangerous situation with a hostile gang, is that right?”

Cartman swallowed against a dam of springtime sinus issues and managed to jerk his head as if he was listening and caring, still.

“Luckily,” said Sandies, in a bloated, insincere voice. “You escaped with minor injuries, together with a young Bruder... codenamed -- Billy-goat?”

Another photo was plucked from a pile and placed next to the burning train. It was a close-up of a gross stab wound.

“An individual matching his description was taken in, some days later, allegedly stabbed by Alvarez, Fichte’s hired hand. Forty-eight hours later Alvarez is found, unconscious, armed, right across the street from your apartment.”

“What’s your point?”

“Now just a week ago,” Steve hummed. “A hired... mercenary, let’s call her, with warrants out in Colorado as well as nine other states for crimes ranging from assault and battery, to burglary and homicide -- this woman finds her way to you with a loaded gun, and by some stroke of luck, the weapon backfires.”

The third picture he added to the line-up was a chest wound that had looked and felt a lot worse than it actually was, and Cartman resisted the urge to press a hand over the purpling surface scars and lingering scabs on his chest.

“My question is this,” said the sheriff. “Who’s coming for you next?”

Chapter End Notes

part two coming in the next day or so, dialogue central already mostly written, and after that comes some action, and then a big kidney day chapter that will put the end in sight, for this story. I wanna thank you all for sticking with me -- this can't've been easy-going and I'm proud of this project but I know there are parts that could've been better.

unrelated and unfinished art
it's been raining like hell here. all over my life
welp, off to bean-town to bro down for the fourth -- happy independence day, fools. keep your tight asses out of jail.

On the fourth ring and the third call and Cartman’s last frayed nerve, a man’s voice answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Stan, fuck off. Put Wendy on.”

He heard an intake of breath, and a harried rustling on the wrong end of his personal cell. Then: “No, Cartman, you cannot speak with my wife -- she’s in labor.”

“If she was in labor, you wouldn’t’ve picked up her phone.”

“Well,” Stan probably intended to come up with something fast but stumbled and ended up shouting just that one filler word well, leaving Cartman in a drab, monosyllabic echo chamber while his friend clambered for something better. “They, uhh, have her on some really strong drugs, man. She’s not even coherent. And what do you need so badly that it has to happen today -- on this day, the arrival of my offspring?”

Cartman realized that he’d caught Stan, generally the most socially apt and pliable of the three of them, at a bad time.

Then again, Eric was so low he was looking up at the Devil and if Wendy wasn’t screaming and bleeding splatterpunk horror yet -- he needed her to jack off another judge.

“Just put her on the phone.”

“I told you, she’s on these huge painkillers. In fact -- dude, she’s out. I think she’s sleeping.”

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose, and resumed his pacing in the ground level stairwell of the Sheriff’s Department.

“I’m serious -- “ Stan insisted. “There’s this, like, total tap-out drug. I mean, it’s childbirth, dude.”

It was pretty obvious that neither of them knew anything aboutchildbearing -- in fact Cartman would go so far as to generalize that none of the males of his species knew anything about the subject, not really, and they quite liked it that way. Way back in elementary school he’d faked a fever to get out of one of those stupid physical exams with the fuckin’ running and the bullshit sit-ups, and wound up reading an anatomy pamphlet in the nurse’s office that fairly traumatized him. It was full of those strange skin-stripped diagrams of human musculature spliced with skeleton and viscera -- and he found descriptions of something nightmarish and haunting within the female body called the birth
canal: a channel loaded with blood that ferries the nine-month-old water creature and its hastily packed sack of placenta shit into the light. The fact that Eric passed through that chamber dead seemed like a wicked trick more than simple absurdity. The thought of it left a chalky feeling in his mouth.

But he still knew enough to know that women were never knocked out during the process except under extraordinary conditions, and Stan was still flapping along just like his idiot father, the way he did sometimes.

“-- in fact, they, uh, they call it Desert Eagle, ‘cause it only ever takes, you know, one shot --”

“Stanley,” he interrupted. “Do you think I would believe, for one second, that Wendy -- good-earth, scaremongering womanist and fun-sucker for fire Wendy Testaburger -- has elected to take the Western industrial complex’s cocktail of pussy anesthetics? Get real -- your girl could birth this baby on her feet, in a hut. She could probably catch the damn thing before it hit the ground --”

“It won’t be a thing,” Stan bit back, paternal hysteria edging his tone. “It’ll be a little girl. And you are not going to ruin this landmark for me!”

“Shut up Marsh, you portable sack of sperm, and put your masculine half on the phone. This is cop stuff.”

“I --” He paused, but in a resolute way. “I don’t care! It’s not important enough for today. I’m sorry, it’s just not.”

“Okay, wait --” Eric pleaded with the faint reflection of himself in the glass of the exit door. If Stan hung up now, he had to walk into that holding cell and tell his truant he had no fucking clue what to do. Those total tap-out drugs were starting to sound pretty nice.

“No, you wait. Cartman, you’ve successfully ruined every major event of my life.” He knew the sound of his old friend gaining momentum. “On my sixteenth birthday, you wrecked my new car, and Shelley’s senior Rube Goldberg experiment, and my admittedly strained relationship with my sister, in one move --”

“Hey, come on, how was I supposed to know your driveway’s not wide enough for a donut, and what was she doing building science shit in the garage anyway? This isn’t Rick and Morty -- that whole thing was a freak accident --”

“Oh, like it was a freak accident when you set off the fucking Civil War memorial cannons during my grandfather’s funeral --”

“How was I supposed to know they would still be active? The newer monuments are all demilitarized. And didn’t you say it was kinda cool, anyway?”

“Right, just like it was kind of cool when instead of bringing a normal cake to my graduation party, which was your one fucking job and the only reason I invited you, and you brought that -- fucking -- Satanic goat head!”

Cartman winced. “That was -- really complicated, actually, because there was a witch lady on Stark Pond, and I had to destroy a gate on the astral plane --”

“I don’t care what you think you had to do. When it comes down to it, man, these special days and ceremonies might not mean shit to a deconstructionist, or whatever, like you -- but to the rest of us they mean a chance to try our best at perfection, just once, even if it means sacrificing our own needs. Sometimes I don’t think you’ll ever understand that.”
“Bones, please,” Eric tried, willing to dredge up any old nickname or pastime, if it got him back on his side. “I need your help right now. Look, ya still got trouble with the Wrangler? I’ll fix it, man, no strings. And that Led Zeppelin record -- the one you’re always looking at, that untitled album, the one that would complete your stupid collection -- you can have that, brother, that’s real.”

“Wha -- really? I mean... what do you want?”

Cartman tried to play calm. “I want you to put -- Wendy -- on -- the phone.”

“Uh uh,” Stan disagreed, in his voice some wordless suspicion. “You need to give me the situation, dude. I’m not doing anything without the situation.”

Cartman set his teeth into his lip, turned away from his faint and shapeless reflection and stalked into the shadows under the stairs. He considered making something up.

“They got Wolf.”

Stan swore. “With what?”


Stan swore again.

“Keeping this kid out of prison has been like keeping a cat out of a box.” Cartman admitted.

“No kidding. But -- what d’you expect Wendy to do about it?”

“I need her to do what she did last time, man -- juice the judge, slick up the fucksticks with legal jargon and sad stories of homeless waifs, I don’t know. She did it before, she can do it again!”

“That was the juvenile courts, Cartman. He’s seventeen, now, and a repeat offender; it’s not gonna be that easy. They’ll want to try him as an adult. When did you say his birthday was?”

The window underneath the ground floor stairwell was about the size of a women’s shoebox. There was one long deadbolt at its base and two latches on either side, and in this season, a horizontal stripe of murky green mildew speckled with perspiration trapped between the sliding panes, like a tiny unassuming garden wall.

Behind the smokey panes a few yanks of long grass and a cluster of violets bowed under the rain, glowing green as the roots soaked up nitrogen from the drenched air. They were growing in a yellowed strip of lawn looking out onto the backlot, uncared for even in the gardening months -- yet they thrived, in the stubborn way wild things thrived, in the ugliest places.

A thin shoelace vesper of blue vapor left Cartman’s nostrils and tied itself into knots around the gap in the garden wall before unraveling in the wind. The thing with living your life on a pedestal was everything looked so great up there. Big world, tiny little people, panoramic views. Steve didn’t know shit about wild things. And the sad thing was he didn’t think Stan did, either. He couldn’t tell fireweed from wormwort, probably, even though he’d been growing in this same dirt, for a quarter of a century.

“Are you vaping? I really don’t feel bad for you, now.”

“It’s the Garden. Everybody in the whole station smokes here.”
“I can’t believe you brought a vape to work. Scrape your shit together.”

“It is,” Eric meant to insist, but he put the wrong inflection on the two words and they came out sort of awkward and Shakespearean. “It is together. I’m scraping it together right now. Stan -- let me talk to Wendy. Five minutes, tops -- she can get him out of this.”

“Alright.”

“Yes!” Cartman blew a sigh of relief and celebration that dissipated instantly against the smokey glass. “Bless you, man. May the homie lion-turtle bless you with a woke-ass baby -- “

“On one condition.”


“You need to tell me, to my physical face, in the presence of witnesses including Kyle Broflovski, that you needed my wife, to do your job -- “

“What? Come on, that’s not -- “

“Nine months pregnant -- “

“You don’t understand -- “

“Just to get your boyfriend out of jail.”

“Fuck you!” He choked, and got stuck in an echo chamber of his own making for a moment. “Fuck you with a fist!”

“That’s my condition.” Stan concluded indifferently. “But if it’s not cool with you, feel free to hang up, anytime, and I’ll go back to witnessing the birth of my perfect child. No rush. Everything looks good, by the way, thanks for asking. My women are healthy and strong; I think you could use that blessing from the lion-turtle more than me, brother.”

“Is this about that goat head, you motherfucker?” Cartman grit, bent over like he’d been punched, but not entirely aware of it. “It wasn’t cruelty it was taxidermy, dipshit, I told you a hundred times. Sharon didn’t faint, she was drunk off her tight ass -- “

“Don’t bring my mom into this! You’re the reason I got kicked out of my own basement that year -- and all you had to do to fix it was apologize -- “

“I’m not going to apologize,” Eric warned. “For something that I didn’t-do!”

“But you have to,” Stan said with the sound of a shrug. “You just have to, sometimes.”

“Well it’s too late, now. If you decide to raise that kid in your mom’s basement, though, let me know. I’ll buy a Hallmark apology card and put my best sweater on.”

“No, dude -- no. I don’t want you to -- “ Stan exhaled hard enough to crackle in Cartman’s ear. “I’m not saying you need to fix all those things, but -- “

“No, you just want me to learn from my heart’s foul whims and flower into a happy rubber gladiolus, right? O-kay, got it, on my way. Thank you so much. Tune in during your next psychotic break, kids, for more Sesame Street Stan. And remember, mommy’s pills are her little secret -- ”

“That’s not it, either. Jeez -- do you even listen yourself?” Stan interrupted patiently. “I’m trying to
remind you what you used to be capable of, man. You don’t need Wendy to set Yellow Wolf free.”

“Then -- ” Stan’s words caught up to him in a rush. “Then you tell me, Stan, ‘cause I’m fresh out of C4 and terrible at tunneling.”

“What? No. What I’m saying is, what would Cartman do? Your princess is locked away, dude, and the castle looks impenetrable. What would you do?”

“Agh,” Cartman snarled, and spat into the dirt outside the little window. “Fuck off. Don’t make an analogy like that again.”

“Fine, but, I’m still not handing you over, I’m sorry. This sounds like something you can fix yourself. And today is for me and Wendy.”

“Wait -- “

“Good luck.”

The day was crushing down too soon when Eric finally put the vape away and got his shit together. The rain had slowed to a steady weep and the overcast sky was starting to settle thickly over the backlot.

The holding room was down the hall from records and accounting, next to an old water bubbler -- the kind that has hot and cold toggles, and needs to burp once in a while. A visitor might pass the holding room door and drink from a paper cone cup thinking it was a janitor’s closet, or a boiler room.

Cartman was rattling the key in the gummy lock when he realized he was sweating, and all the chill he’d gathered at the garden wall under the stairs was fleeing, unraveling like the false medication he’d been sucking. He wondered if he should prepare to be attacked. He wondered if he deserved it.

Two steps -- and halfway -- across the chamber, he forgot what he’d even talked to Stan about. Or Sandies. They seemed like small, very distant things, once he closed the door behind himself. There weren’t any windows in the holding room. It was simply wall-to-wall all day long. Immured, was the word. He’d never wanted to see Yellow Wolf immured, but he couldn’t deny having thought about it a lot. Funny how you feed your fears strong.

There wasn’t even a chair or anything and Cartman started to feel pretty awkward standing around out of uniform while the only other occupant was laying down. He looked over his shoulder at the lidless black eye watching from the ceiling over the door, and consciously put his back to it.

Yet at a loss for what to do, Eric kicked at the swinging foot, not hard enough to hurt but enough to let him know somebody was in the neighborhood.

At the second or third strike the foot stopped swinging and Kenny’s arm tightened over the pillow over his face, as if Cartman needed reminding of how smothering this place probably was, for something like him.

He wasn’t strapped with microphones or anything but he couldn’t say something obvious that someone bugged would say, like ‘I’m not bugged,’ so he went with the thing on his mind, something he knew Kenny would know he wouldn’t want overheard.

“You mad at me?”

Cartman sidled closer to his bedside, hands shoved in his pockets. In the corner of his eye he noticed
the foot start up swinging again. It was an almost unbearable irritant, in the otherwise frozen room.

“Sorry I told you to go to school.”

He rocked on his toes. He’d thought that was pretty good but Kenny didn’t even move and outside the door the damn water bubbler gulped like it was trying not to laugh. Cartman chewed the inside of his cheek.

“And, umm, sorry for, you know -- accusing you of only liking my misery because it makes you feel better about yourself.” He freed one hand to pull at his hair before remembering he’d finally got it cut and his hand closed on thin air. “I didn’t really mean that.”

The swinging leg bothered him a lot but not more than the fact that he could hear the rain all around him but not see or taste or smell it. It was like being alone together with the noise of many pages turning at once.

“I -- “ he glanced once more at the camera behind him, adjusted his position and dropped to a crouch that he never could’ve managed in uniform slacks. From the lower vantage point, he noticed a large stain the diameter of a good vomit underneath the spring-coil cot, and a few dark blobs scuttling in the shadows.

Kenny probably didn’t even hate cockroaches as much as he hated Cartman, right now. Stan cast him as the damsel but Kenny owned the castle and controlled all the pawns -- and compared to him Cartman was probably just a fairly competent bishop with luck on his side. Real princesses commanded the field without ever appearing to lift a finger, and real princesses lived double lives to free themselves from the bonds of their birthright. It helped that, like Princess Zelda, he was kind of a babe, too.

“I abuse everybody -- anybody in any sort of relationship with me. Sometimes when I can’t help it, mostly when I can.”

The form on the bed shifted, but that was all. Cartman started to grab at strings.

“I used to play this game, a long time ago, with my cat. I decided that whether or not I was nice to her depended on the color of shirt I put on that day. Red days were good ones. Everything else was bad. See? I -- I didn’t think of it as random or abusive when I was doing it -- it was just a game I played. And when Heidi left me the first time I pretended she’d ripped my heart to pieces because I got addicted to a new game; one where I was the victim. I’m twenty-fucking-six and I think I still haven’t learned that hurting myself won’t make anybody come back to me, not my friends, or my girlfriend, not even my mom.”

“I’m cruel,” he confessed, cutting his losses. “And arbitrary, I know it. I’m working on it, but -- I threatened my boss with a cactus, today, and, you’ve only had the one staple, but -- I can’t promise it’ll be the last. If you stay, that is. If you don’t hate me.”

Kenny mumbled into the thin pillow.

“What?”

Yellow Wolf flung his arms down to his sides and the pillow fell the movement. “You’re stupid.”

As soon as his eyes rolled Cartman knew he was forgiven and the best and worst thing about Kenny sometimes was how quickly he forgot things. Cartman’s second thought was how he hated seeing him walled up not only in brick and mortar but also in the station’s standardized threads, canvas-like cotton the color of rotted pumpkin. He didn’t know where to begin telling him about the situation
upstairs or the deal the sheriff offered him, but it all seemed vaguely unimportant. Down here, the facts were very clear: Kenny being locked up was bullshit, and the idea of him snitching for a reduced sentence was bullshit, and Cartman wished he didn’t live in a world where being young and reckless and a badass was against the law, but he did, and that’s what he had to work with.

Yellow Wolf at last drew his leg in and turned on his side, bending one arm under his head and letting the other fall to where his fingers almost brushed the concrete. His eyes flicked to a point over Cartman’s head.

“What did he offer you?”

“Deputy,” he answered, unsurprised.

“Oh!” Kenny exclaimed softly, eyelids suddenly curving upward into two gladdened frowns. “We’d be like, Deputy Dawg and Musky.”

It was stupid, but that one lame cop joke coucheted together with the off-color 70s cartoon reference loosened the clamp of apathy he’d jammed over his nerves, and from the fissure spilled a flood of icy desperation. Cartman thought how stupid he’d been to try and fend it off with a levy built from drugs and self-pity -- he hadn’t ever had a chance to weather a storm like this, really. Parts of Colorado were up in flames as they spoke, fires ranging thousands of kilometers wide over the forests, trampling ecosystems with little regard or distinction between the day-old flowers and the bristlecone pines over five-hundred years old. And in the meantime, Park County was drowning, the streets reeked and the water was seeping into the earth, forcing up all the things they’d hidden in the dirt so long ago.

“I guess -- ” he said, dropping his hand from the bridge of his nose with some effort. “There are less creative ways of calling me dumb, fat, and white.”

Kenny grinned and he was relieved to find his teeth just as wild, unimproved and provocative as before. Not immured like the rest of him.

Fuck, Cartman swore under his breath.

“What?”

Hand-holding was ridiculous. When they were young Heidi had always wanted to hold hands walking, or whatever, but they were always different heights and it was jumpy and uncomfortably hot after a few seconds. Sex with Heidi was another matter. Even though they were having it, one of them always seemed to be having it, and it necessarily meant the other was going without.

Cartman didn’t reach out with the intent to take or have in any way, or because he thought it was something Kenny wanted; he reached out because he was in shambles and there were so many touch receptors in the hands -- he threaded his fingers with his truant’s dangling ones so the backs of their knuckles met and thought of it as a way to share his pain.

Kenny’s responding smile was a halfway there sort of thing, worn out and not moving forward. Cartman took a deep breath through his nose and as his lungs swelled he realized he was bound tight enough to cry, and he’d probably been that way for several days.

“It’s okay,” said Yellow Wolf.

Eric exhaled a cheerless laugh, brought his free hand to his face and rubbed his tear-ducts roughly. “No it’s not.”
“I made you a mix CD, did you see it? I left it in your car.”

He hiccuped and it felt like lead in his throat. He eyed the four walls around them. “You can’t just hip-hop your ass out of this one, Ken.”

“It’s all lo-fi stuff,” Kenny said idly. “I made it so you can feel sad, but not alone.”

Cartman’s hand tensed and their fingertips touched accidentally. “I wish people would stop remixing repetitive Zelda tunes with Over the Rainbow.”

“Shut u-up,” he complained. “Don’t pretend like it doesn’t make you lay down on the floor and cry.”

“Fuck you you little piece of shit, that was one time. It was just for a second -- ”

“I bet that’s what you told Heidi when you put it in her butt.”

Cartman’s free hand darted out and boxed him over the ear before he could muster the minimum restraint to stop it, and the part of him not spitting rage hoped he was blocking enough of the camera’s vision to obscure the heinous display of police brutality. “Don’t push me,” he hissed. “But I feed off misery, remember? I get off on your suffering, remember?” He said, sneering. “So why wouldn’t I?”

Cartman dropped his gaze and tried not to seethe. There was an old rusty bloodstain on the corner of the blanket. “Please tell me you didn’t go to school and get arrested just to put that in my face. I told you I didn’t mean it -- ”

“Yeah but don’t lie to me,” he said, hawklike. “I know you do it all the time, and I can see right through your ass, but don’t do that to me anymore.”

“I didn’t mean it,” Cartman tried.

“Obviously.”

“So, then,” he shifted onto one knee as his legs started to jam up, and pushed his fingers more comfortably into the crevices between his truant’s. “Why did you leave?”

“To show you I can.”

“Kenny,” he said, taking his time with it. And he didn’t plan to leave it at that, but he did, in the end.

“What? The fuck you expect me to say? Sorry your circus boys jumped me after History class?”

“Don’t play -- you knew this would happen,” Cartman spat, then bit down on the inside of his cheek. “Didn’t you?”

His truant’s eyes fell and Eric knew he was hiding something from him, but he masked it by revealing another secret. “You know how I got Wendy to back off? I asked her for a shot with you. Just one shot with you was all.”

Cartman felt his brow furrow, and before he could stop himself, he asked the obvious question. “That’s it?”

He couldn’t believe that worked. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“Lies are free,” Kenny said, triumphantly. “But people pay for honesty.”
“I love you,” he said.

Cartman didn’t prepare to be attacked, this time, nor did he really think he deserved it, but in an instant Yellow Wolf ripped his hand free and hit him, probably not full power or anything but he really did hit him across the jaw with at least two knuckles, and he guessed it was okay for a minor to be assaulting a cop as long as he didn’t fight back, but then Kenny yanked on his ear lobe until Eric dropped his head with a strangled yelp.

“Why would you say that!” Yellow Wolf barked. “Why would you say that, here -- with that bastard watching!”

“Because it was true?” He offered.

Outside the door, the water bubbler burped. Kenny huffed an exhale, and his hand left off the assault to wander between them, finding Eric’s jaw, and the front of his throat, eyes on the hunt for some incipient wrongdoing.

Cartman rubbed his sore ear with one hand and caught Kenny by the wrist with the other, forcing it away from his neck and back to the cot.

“I want you, you know,” sighed the teenager, with not a roll of his eyes but a slow blink that came off like one, anyway, as if being attracted to him was this huge inconvenience.

“You have me. You’ve had me -- how many times?”

“I want all of you.”

Cartman ducked his head and shook it slowly. “It's not gonna come all at once.”

“Fine, dude. I mean, I’ll wait, but -- it'll be so lame if we don't do it till I'm legal.”

“Kenny,” said Eric, in a cold sweat. "What do I have to do? What happens next?"

Yellow Wolf’s lip curled and the anarchist slowly turned onto his other side, putting his back to him. “That would be way too easy.”

Chapter End Notes

off the record, i think kenny does get a kick out of cartman's suffering
**(this show is something of a lost racist gem... >>)**
Chapter Notes

it's here, it's coming, i promise -- this is part one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The table was a forgotten, cornered thing, stuck between the comings and goings of the entryway and the unbeheld quiet of the kitchen; and if it could speak for itself beneath all the clutter, it would claim to be cinder-gray in color, hard folding-chair plastic -- destined for misuse.

There wasn’t anything heavy on the table. Cartman was careful not to keep heavy things lying around; it was all lightweight stuff, inconsequential things like spare pens spare thoughts routinely tossed aside until they collected and grew heavy enough to impede, and Eric believed in always having something to impede.

Tiresome paper mail and yesterday’s news mingled with unwashed travel mugs and left-hand gloves all spreading like moss over the tabletop. Somewhere amid the chaos of misfit things he knew there was a 20-watt blacklight strip still in its box, a crystal wine decanter shaped like the head of a tulip, and a lopsided ceramic bowl he made in high school.

The night Cartman took the kitchen clock down to change the battery, he cleared a patch for it on the table, and by mistake he left it there. The clock sat for days. Every time he walked by he was struck with the urge to throw something over it, cover it up -- put a lid on it, somehow.

Soon, Eric couldn’t leave or enter his apartment without confronting the hideous clock, and he began to dread it. Before leaving for his afternoon shifts, he would linger, searching around for unimportant things, even imagining potential bowel movements just to put off passing the Table on his way to the door. Coming back in the death throes of night he would stand in the hallway, put his keys away and undo his laces all before touching the handle. Once he even gave Liane a buzz, you know -- just standing there, dripping in the hallway. He hung up before she answered, though, because by the second ring he remembered everything she had to say.

One day more than a week but less than two after he took the clock down, Cartman arrived home around midnight -- after a reasonably tolerable three to 11 p.m. shift, prepared to routinely ignore the half-finished task on the table and the abstract terror he experienced in front of physical representations of time -- only to find Yellow Wolf seated there in front of it, eating a pupusa over the clock face. Like it was a plate or something.

When asked why he decided to have his fucking munchies over the goddamn kitchen clock, Kenny said he thought it might help Cartman get over his monthly cycle of ‘existential cramps’.

He was a little sore about that for a while but the piteous truth was Kenny hadn’t been wrong; the sight of the Colorado street food and greasy paper wrappings centered over the clockface -- and the streak of grime it left behind -- revealed Time for the meaningless plaything it truly was.

Once you’ve cleaned chicharrónes off a thing, it’s hard to take it seriously again.

“I’ll like you when I’m 72,” Kenny said to him then. “And have to walk with a stick. And all your
cute baby fat goes saggy."

Cartman always believed he was simply too hateful to be loved. People had been loudly and publicly hating him since childhood, so he always just assumed he hated them back. He’d been spit on, attacked, and demonstrated against; the entire faculty of Park County Middle School raised a petition to have him expelled. The hate was so widespread, in fact, that it inspired love; in college girls saw him on his frat scene and some would climb onto him just to say they had, just to tick him off a list; outsider guys with small minds flocked to him, too, either for a cut of his business, or for more hate. He understood that these people had never known anything else, and when separated from the hatred of their parents, friends, or lovers, they came to him for it, because Cartman dealt hate like a prescription. That was probably why every relationship he’d ever had left him feeling slightly offended, in the end.

Now for the first time Eric wondered whether it wasn’t that he was full of hate -- maybe he fell in love too easy. And maybe it happened all the time, every day, even when he was a little kid. Everything, and anything at all: he fell in love with shiny marbles, patterned duct tape, and certain mugs, small mornings and bare naked words, holidays, bus stops, and amusement parks. He even fell in love with strangers, sometimes -- not in the lusty Hozier way but in the all-consuming sense of oneness sort of way. The trouble was, every single time he jumped the gun and gave his flimsy love up to something perfect, it turned out to be contrived, or flawed in some way. And if it wasn’t flawed yet it was only a matter of time before flawed ass society shoved it out a window or something, just for being.

*Whatever*, Eric shrugged on a blank-face state of mind. He was just too badass for love. Even invoking affective extremes like ‘hate’ and ‘love’ made him want to laugh -- they were MTV words, you know -- they were Hallmark and TLC and HBO words, not his.

He did *not* get existential cramps once a month. He just didn’t see the point of living if you weren’t going to think seriously about it.

The day he left Kenny locked in the holding room at the Sheriff’s station, Cartman had a small event on the commuter train.

He was sitting down when it happened, oddly -- because he’d just drawn up the illusion that he was totally calm -- blank face calm, every breath like a whole sentence. Inhale, exhale. Full stop.

He didn’t feel any way in particular, at the time. His rent was due at the end of the week; Wendy’s freak Testaburger-Marsh hybrid was paddling head-first down the birth canal; and somewhere somebody was probably calling the cops on a Black guy for entering his own home. Everything was totally normal. This was exactly the bullshit that happened all the time, everywhere, every second of any other one of his miserable normal days. And besides all that, his fuckhead serve-and-protect boss was sentencing a seventeen-year-old to walls, bells, and whistles for the rest of his young adult life.

Cartman was reading a feature earlier that day in his monthly issue of *Astronomy!* magazine -- which he only kept around for light reading on the toilet -- and it was all about Cygnus X-1: a very small, compact object with enormous mass -- similar to that morning’s bowel movement -- locked in orbit with a star six thousand light-years away. Imagine Mt. Everest, inside a marble the size of a single atom. Imagine holding that in your hands -- or its weight over your chest. Incomprehensible.

Stephen Hawking once made a bet with Kip Thorne saying that there wasn’t any black hole in the Cygnus system -- and he lost. Cygnus X-1 was the first black hole ever observed in the universe that actually resembled the theory.

Somewhere between the Lexington and Riverside stations, Cartman noticed the feeling receding
from his fingertips. A hypertensive numbness -- not like cold, more like sleep needles -- was winding up his hands into wretched claws. Even as he flipped them over for examination, the needles were spreading, ranging over his fingers and knuckles until finally, with a sudden cramp like a lightning strike in the heart of each palm, Cartman could no longer move his hands at all.

For a moment he only stared at them, straining for movement while his small inside voice despaired -

*Would he ever play the piano again, or drive his dream car?*

...Pull another trigger?

Maybe he deserved this.

No movement came. In fact, he could hardly bend his wrists. The numbing fever was spreading, creeping higher; his elbows cramped to his sides next, tucked into tight angles like roadkill limbs, and then Cartman began to really panic.

He needed to get off this train; he needed an ambulance; he needed *water*, he remembered thinking, or a pen and paper for his final thoughts. Or, maybe, just someone to listen to them. He hurried to stand.

And just as hurriedly he fell.

His feet weren’t just tingling and cramped, they were *gone* -- Cartman couldn’t feel anything at all below his ankles. The sloping plastic seat knocked his chin into his chest on the way down and he hit the rain and mud-splattered floor on his side like an undignified hot dog, then tucked his head and curled into a manly ball of strange pain. He could’ve been being *born* again, or something.

*The coffee*, Cartman realized. He’d been poisoned.

If the toxin didn’t kill him right away then it would at least take away his hands and feet -- and along with them the ability to touch and the freedom to make music.

A few of the commuters had left their seats or hanging hand-holds and cell phone screens to hover in around him. There was a scattering of suggestion and standoffish concern, uttered in a half-interested scavenger bird sort of way, all clicking beaks and lumpy gray knees. Just vampires waiting for a meal, and Cartman was at a hundred percent positive that he was dying.

It wasn’t an appropriate time to laugh, but he’d seen first-hand the fate of the vulnerable when left to the people’s mercy -- he’d even dealt the final blow, and occasionally drank over the consequences -- but he never thought he’d be the one on the other side of it all. Playing the victim was only fun until people started seeing you as one.

Rainwater was seeping into the ass of his pants, he could feel that much, but when he opened his mouth to speak, his jaw clenched and shuddered like rocks were caught in the gears; the paralysis was *gagging* him. Cartman’s fear of oblivion grew to hysteria.

Eventually an oldish Asian dude with peppered gray temples and a full raft of black hair floating high above his forehead leaned down to where he sat cramped and seething on the floor. And the guy began to slap him. Repeatedly, just over his shoulder blades. Not tenderly, but not violently either -- like he’d read about a comforting technique, but never saw it done in person before.

“*Hospital,*” Eric managed to hiss through his teeth, narrowing his eyes on the assortment of lumpy gray knees oogling at him from the ring of rubber-neckers.

“You are having a *panic* attack,” said the man, slowly, as if Cartman were deranged, or hard of
hearing. “You must calm down.”

So he told Jet Li through gritted teeth that no, he wasn’t having a panic attack; he was poisoned, and the life was draining out of his hands and feet, and he was going to be one angry amputee with murder on his agenda if somebody didn’t call 9-1-1 on the fly. Cartman may or may not have tried to iterate a threat to beat the man to death with his ‘stubs’, but he’d deny it in the aftermath.

“I know you feel like you are going to die,” insisted Mr. Li. “But you will not.”

And he repeated this phrase, over and over, while Eric sat dripping in the shadow of the bench, and the wording was just inconsequentially awkward enough to stick. The ring of knees dwindled away as passengers came and went, or else settled back into their seats and their phones. Newcomers stared for awhile at the strange pair on the floor, and then moved on. All the while this single kind of goofy phrase repeated itself in Cartman’s brain until it became white noise, jumbled out of sequence as he tried to unpack it and label its parts.

...you will not. Feel like, will not -- going to, die.

He didn’t die, really. Not any worse than usual, anyway. Cartman’s wrists loosened, and then his fingers released from their painful knots. After another stop or two he rose to his feet and wiped the sweat from his upper lip, shook his balls from his leg. The Asian guy frowned at him in a soldierly way, and Eric noticed the black umbrella tucked under his arm. That was probably how his hair stayed so floaty even in all the rain. And he was probably a wizard or something, Cartman reasoned -- probably flew around with that magic umbie or some shit. He couldn’t wait to tell Wolf about it.

The next time the doors opened, Cartman stumbled out.

The rain punished one side of his head all the way over the bridge. He’d got it buzzed down some, anticipating the summer months and desperate to avoid the hideous neck sweat that stained the backs of all Donovan’s shirt collars as the weather turned -- and so of course it was pissing rain and cold as an ice rink. He caught himself thinking how you couldn’t light a cotton ball soaked in petrol, in all this rain. There wasn’t a single burnable building in all of Park County, probably. Not with all this moisture in the air.

The pedestrian lane was narrow and every passing vehicle brought with it an accompanying lash of wind and acidic tar-water. He felt his hatred like an old friend wiping him down, brushing the water off his neck, shaking a finger at those assholes, those eyebrow pluckers who see the one fucker on the side of the road and can’t wait to piss on him as they pass by --

The gravitational pull of Cygnus X-1 is so strong it strips the outer layers from the nearest star. Nothing gets close to the event horizon or even glimpses the actual black hole; all the star stuff that touches the outer rim gets superheated to millions of degrees and then ejected as high-energy flashes of light. Like a cannibalistic love story -- or a cosmic come shot.

The South Platte River slices through Colorado from the northeast, takes a hairpin turn in the south side of Park County, and leaves the state going northwest. In the summers it submerged the streets, a vast flood plain forming in the valley of that hairpin turn. Sometimes it extended as far as Cartman’s childhood home, dunking his whole lousy neighborhood in ankle-deep warm water, its surface covered with bright, pointy red leaves from the Japanese maple tree his mom planted in the front yard after reading about it in her creepy ass Sacred Forest gardening mag. The shrubby tree was only red for a few months in early spring, the same time as flood season arrived, and Eric remembered wading around in that sick flush-water thinking it was paradise, a foreign sun-drenched land floating with leaves like little bloody arrowheads.
But soon the flood plain would recede as the rains moved on, leaving behind the impression of a body just passing through, a traveling swamp without a home. And he would remember all over again what a lousy neighborhood it was underneath it all.

Eric misstepped and took it up to the shins in mud before realizing the river had already overgrown its banks, and the dirt chute everyone used to get under the bridge had turned into a slippery deathslide of rock and thistle.

He stabilized himself with a fist in a tangle of chatty steel loops, part of an old chain-link fence collapsed long ago under a wild, thorny vine just shy of the roadside. The steel netting was all that remained of the boundary between the main roads and the untamed underbelly of the Platte, but the fence had gradually yielded to the efforts of locals, drifters, and all manner of shifty bridge dwellers from both south and north of the tracks. Kids regularly hung around the Platte to throw rocks, light trash fires, and fuck with the neighborhood bat colony. Rumor had it a local sect of the Church of Cthulhu had taken up ritual meetings under the Riverside bridge, but the night the call reached the sheriff’s station, Cartman found it too funny to investigate.

He hung on to his last inhale and leaned around the sloping overgrown hillside to get an eye on the water level. Overcast skies made the water translucent black, the way you imagine evil ectoplasm might look, and even though the river was high and wild enough to slick the banks and flick him with spittle, Cartman could swear he saw a light under the bridge.

He had to dig his hands into the earth and grab at roots just to shimmy around the grassy hillock at the river’s edge, and from there sacrifice his shoes and socks to the shallows before stepping up to the narrow concrete shelf beneath the bridge, out of the rain at last, and soaked to the bone.

The small flickering glow came from one of those rusty black grills from the public park. Cartman sidled over to the re-purposed grill and watched a tiny sidewinder of flame writhe over the South Park Shitrag. The old coals under the grate seemed to be blackening more than burning. The smoke rose only about half a foot over the grate before getting whipped away by the rapid river wind. He held his palms out, didn’t really feel any heat. He suspected the little girl simply liked to watch things burn. It must’ve been hereditary.

Her eyes were totally different from her brother’s but morons would still call them blue.

Every surface in the cramped sub-city den was layered thickly in graffiti, even some of the beams folding into the darkness above. Across the black water, on the opposite concrete shelf, stood something that looked eerily like an altar, and a collection of crates and boxes arranged in rows before it. There was a spoon caked in coke and snot laying on the ground near his foot.

“Never thought Scientology would, uh, sink this low,” Cartman tried.

Kenny’s little sister stared at him across the fire. ‘RUN, IDIOT,’ was the freshest dictate on the wet concrete behind her, thick yellow blow-letters with black lining. Some acidic uneasiness arrived to settle in the back of his throat. The message only disturbed him as much as its messenger; she was ice-skate skinny, blue-eyed and angel-haired -- didn’t look much over fifth grade, honestly -- a normal girl but for the way she stared at him, sullen and self-aware like a small predator wrapped up in an orange parka --

Little wolf, it dawned on him, and Eric felt stupid for not making the connection sooner, but he hadn’t expected Kenny’s younger sister to be an active part of the damn gravel gang. The clunky Native-sounding moniker found a new home in his head as Cartman attached a face to the name and scrubbed some of the shadows from his speculations.
“It’s… Karen, right?”

The fact that he remembered her name was a damn miracle, but he couldn’t for all the magic beans in the world remember how to talk to somebody half his age -- such an occasion only arose in Cartman’s life about as often as the urge to shit bricks -- and despite being a reasonably prideful adult male, considered well-versed in the art of silences, Cartman felt the little girl’s unblinking gaze butchering him, bit by bit, by skin, sinew, meat and bone. And he remembered thinking he deserved it.

“Wanna see something cool?”

Eric sifted around by his feet and, not finding any rocks, settled on the spoon and snatched that up instead. He dropped his shoulder and flung the disgusting thing far up into the dark yawning recesses under the bridge; it clanged audibly around a few of the arches before falling into the river with a mournful ploop. There was a soft rustling noise, like the sound of many tiny airplanes firing up, then nothing.

After an awkward moment he decided to take the L on the spoon thing, stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled loud enough to stop a cab on Havana.

Hundreds of little brown bats dropped from their roost. In an instant the air was echoing with their ultrasonic chirps as the colony swarmed the underside of the bridge before pouring into the sky. He’d seen it a thousand times already, at least, since he was a kid growing up in the area, and the Riverside bridge was the popular “spot” for skipping, spliffing, and sheisting. The McCormick kids were the sheistiest he knew -- but maybe they hadn’t seen everything, yet.

In Karen’s eyes Cartman watched the blue evening pixelate to black with bats’ wings for the first time. She didn’t smile or anything but some of the sullenness lifted, he thought.

When the skies cleared, she bolted.

“Hey -- wait!”

But she was already clinging to the overgrown riverbank, light enough to use the grass like handholds and skip over the thick mud that had been so eager to suck him down. Cartman watched his last hope flit away, feeling stranded and unsure of what to do about it, until the answer hit him like a bus.

RUN, IDIOT.

He scraped himself together and ran after her.

After dunking his soaking feet in the shallows and catching himself on the sloping bank a few times, Cartman left the Platte with mud legs and a new pair of mud hands to match, and only a bit of the blue-green graphic of cosmic microwave background radiation still visible on his shirt.

He followed the orange blot through an intersection and down a familiar alleyway strung with dripping fire escapes, then back onto the main roads. Just a block away from city hall she took a sharp turn and vanished up a side street. Cartman pulled up short at the building on the corner, splashing to a stop and narrowing his eyes on the figures milling on the stoop. As usual, the drop-in center was lousy with chain-smoking spooks.

Karen climbed over the cast iron railing and slid through the front door as Cartman hit the first step, finding his way blocked. And fuck him from behind if it wasn’t --
“Well?” said the girl with one eye. “What are you waiting for, a hug?”

Chapter End Notes

totally unrelated art bc i felt bad
“Well?” said the girl with one eye. “What are you waiting for, a hug?”

Cartman squinted at Kenny’s dealer, partly to discourage the rain from leaking into his eyes, and partly to survey the two men -- boys, really, since they had to be teenagers -- loitering against the rails behind her. They were identical, same noses, eyelids, the same shoulders, aside from one very large difference which Cartman observed immediately: one of the them completely lacked melanin.

“Salt and Pepper part of the crew too? Or is this you showing me all your homies are big and African?”

The girl tapped her chin. “It’s like -- I can’t tell if you’re trying too hard, or just not at all.”

A raucous bark of laughter came from behind her shoulder and Cartman shifted his gaze. The second-hand smoke had combined with the humid cold like roadside puddle-water and assumed the texture of mushy old leaves in his mouth. He remembered sort of dying on the train ride over and felt a rush of relief; at least he got that over with already. One of the boys leered at him with brown gums and straight teeth, then took a pull on his cigarette and blew it all over the place before even half a lungful. Cartman considered spitting, then warned himself against getting caught up in their language.

“One eye don’t make a hot chick this bitter,” he surmised. “What’s your story? Scumbag boyfriend kick you out of the car? Daddy issues? Or was it step-daddy number three, this time?”

“Sure,” she said, nodding at her own generosity. “Everything was fine till he came home one night and forced his dick down my throat. But I’m sure your pathetic mommy issues are just as bad.”

Eric closed his mouth, nostrils flared, and found himself unable to draw an exact line between the good lies and the bitter truths. His eyes roved over the twins again, drawn in particular to the pale one; Cartman knew they existed, of course, but he hadn’t ever seen a sheep in wolf’s clothing before. It left him curious, staring in his peripheral at him, waiting for slips in the disguise. He tried to ignore the incessant laughter from the other one; it had started up at a low-throated rumble with a fast, oscillating rhythm, and it grew progressively louder before culminating in a woosh of unched breath blown through the gaps in his grin. The longer the teenager laughed, even when nothing was funny, the more hated and unwelcome Cartman felt. He was a grown man and a cop and he could handle it, just like he could handle the little staring girl from before, and the salted shotgun in his face from way before -- but he did end up stepping back to appreciate the power of accosting strangeness in the wolf gang membership. Eric wondered if Kenny just had a magnetic nature for collecting that sort of shit.

“How miserable do I have to be, before you’ll be happy?”

The shotgun chick tossed her head with a patented Testaburger side-smile, strength 10, sass 50 -- as
if they were at a charity ball exchanging poison niceties over chardonnay instead of sniping at each other under the gray rain on a crowded stoop. He suspected Wendy had already infected Kenny’s dealer with that hideous obscure disease -- womanism. Which meant he’d already raped her, just by having a dick. Any minute an alien could rip out of her abdomen screaming, slapping blood everywhere.

“Here’s the deal,” she hopped down to the next-lowest step to look him in the nose. “I don’t trust you, Star-buck -- “

“Hey, no, don’t call me that -- “

“But that’s who you are.” she interrupted, unyielding. “Isn’t it?”

He set his molars against one another, unable to fish up an answer. “I told you I was undercover.”

“Well it’s a damn good cover-up!” She said, so gleeful even her blind half looked celebratory. “I’ve got used to seeing your backside -- fat rack and a white tail, head down, always looking away or looking on while other people go down around you like prey -- “

“Bitch,” he seethed. “Every time I see you it’s when my ass is running into the bullets.”

“Sure, you’re the victim.”

“Yes!”

Even Cartman didn’t believe it. He tried again, louder. “Yes!”

“Sure,” she agreed, again. “Now you listen to me, skin-bag -- I’m gonna do what Kenny asked me to because he asked, but I’m warning you: if I turn up after tonight, corpsesified and beyond recognition, I’m leaving Vincent -- “

She gestured over one shoulder and the hyena kid bared his yellowed teeth again. “And Varas -- “

The pale brother didn’t look up from his stogie.

“-- with the repulsive memory of your stupid face. They will hunt you down, chop you up into little pieces, put the pieces into boxes, and hang the boxes in trees. I get to rest in peace, and you finally get to play the victim part; it’s a win-win. Poetic enough for ya?”

"Okay," Cartman suppressed a burp and batted away the dealer’s jabbing finger. He got enough of this kind of noise from Testaburger on a daily basis. In fact, the girl sort of reminded him of college Wendy, back when she had the nads to back up just causes with ruthless personal attacks. “I understand the line between visual poetry and brutal murder can get kind of thin -- but am I really s’posed to be scared of a couple homeless kids with magnesium deficiencies?”

The dealer’s single eye widened and she gathered herself up with a look like Stan when he was too angry for words. “You -- well, look at you, asshole! You look like a toad just crawled outa the mud! You look like -- like E.T.’s extra testicle!”

Eric glanced over both his shoulders, shrugged, and popped his muddy collar. “I’ve looked worse. And I could still beat them in a fight.”

She sneered at him for a moment longer, whipped around and grabbed at her colleague’s arm, pulling him forward. “See that scar on his hand? Vince wrestled a puma one time -- “
“Right,” Cartman sneered back. “And I got these burns dueling a salt-spitting war elephant.”

“In the Congo,” she rushed. “You have to wrestle a puma to reach adulthood. That means their grandmother could put you in a pine box.”

“So ring her up! I tamed a death god when I was eight! Tell the bitch to come and get me!”

“Um -- “ It was Vincent, the laughing brother; he had a voice lightly accented, quiet -- and surprisingly polite. “My grandmother is in Tanzania.”

“I’ll wait!” Cartman retorted, almost too fast for the words to process.

The boy laughed again. And before he could help it Eric snorted back, a microsecond burst of joy at the absurdity of throwing a bullshit contest with a bunch of teenagers in the rain, while the water churned bodies out of the dirt and Wendy was in labor and his stupid life was in shambles.
together behind a blank face. “Look, I didn’t come through just to freestyle with you guys. What did Kenny ask you to do?”

The girl fist ed her hands in her over-sized jacket and rocked on her toes. “He asked us to take you to the pit.”

“Where’s the pit? What’s he want me to do there?”

"Actually," She tongued at her lip ring. “I don’t trade answers for neediness.”

“But you don’t want your boss in the jug any more than I do. So let’s skip the part where you prove by induction what a basic, self-medicating coward I am, and just tell me the plan.”

She shook her head and smiled thinly. "Oh, sweetie, I wasn't going to say anything about the Viagra."

“Wolf gang has no leader.” Vincent offered.

Cartman almost forgot how annoying and aimless conversation with teenagers could be. Just last week Kenny led him on a damn saga about his trip to Ali Baba's Kabobs, just to end it with how he didn't like when the mushrooms were underneath the cheese.

"Can we just -- " he pinched the bridge of his nose and felt a small release in pressure. "Get on with it, here? I know riddling and evasion are part of the scooby gang mystique -- but if you want my help, eventually you're gonna have to tell me what he's planning."

"What’s that old saying?" She paused and tapped a finger to the side of her chin again. “God’s plan will reveal itself in time.”

“You think it’s God you’re dealing with, here?”

“Don’t you?”

Vincent chattered off into laughter again.

“If God had a bad case of toenail fungus, maybe.” Eric muttered.

“And a thing for drug-dealing cops, apparently,” hummed the girl.

He waved a hand to try and dissipate the conversation. “I forget your name.”

“I don’t really care.”

As if he’d spoken the password, the shotgun chick abruptly turned her back on him and clapped back up the rain-slick steps; he noticed the rubber soles had separated from the heels of her old Doc Martens.

Cartman saw no option other than to follow, and the twins fell in behind him.

The drop-in was so limited in decor and building material that, no matter how many times he’d visited, on business or otherwise, Eric never remembered the interior as anything more than a blur; everything was the same drab old concrete colors as the overcast days behind him, with the additions of some hard chairs in the entry, a desiccated bowl of nuts on a card table, and further inside -- a peacock green ficus tree in a pot with an Oriental design on it, parked on the floor just visible behind the front desk. Cartman narrowed his eyes on it hatefully.
While Kenny’s dealer plunged her hand into the bowl of nuts and started up an unintelligible conversation with a flurry of ‘at risk’ youths sitting around the card table, Eric approached the desk and peered into the tiny office behind the grimy glass, where a fax machine and a Keurig sat chugging away next to one of those old ‘modern’ typewriter things Microsoft made in the early two-thousands. There was even an ancient box-PC under the counter to match, probably running Windows XP. And lounging in the spinning chair at the center of it all was a familiar coin-slot smile.

“Howdy, Eric.”

“Howdy,” he said, surprised. “Are you… how are you, um, doing?”

It was the first time he’d ever arranged those words in that order, he thought.

“I’m doing, just, ducky.” he chirped -- Axel, Cartman remembered his name -- without a trace of ill-meaning, and flapped his arms out in a sudden attempt to clasp his hands behind his neck, but he winced halfway through the motion and his right arm fell back to his side. “Only, I’m stuck on desk duty this month. On account of tearing my stitches a few times.”

The stabbing was Rainer’s fault, not his. Cartman didn’t have any reason to feel guilty over Axel’s situation, really. The kid wouldn't've been stabbed if he hadn't bailed on the Bruders, or agreed to the train gig in the first place, or went along with whatever maniac plan McCormick cooked up.

“Are you hungry?”

Cartman’s stomach groaned on command. He was starving, actually.

Axel rummaged over the contents of the desk, stood, and slid something over the high counter and under the glass. “Here. The nutritionist has us on these weird nutty date bars. They look like dung, and they kinda feel like it in your mouth, but you get used to it.”

The clear plastic wrapping disguised nothing. Eric stared at it, feeling an existential cramp coming on -- and couldn't help thinking Kenny was right; he couldn't believe he was about to have a meltdown about a health bar, for Chrissake. A turd in a clear wrapper parading as a damn health bar, anyway -- or maybe it was the fact that a homeless kid with at least one flavor of ADHD and a stab wound that could easily have been Cartman's had offered it to him.

“I had a panic attack on the train ride over,” he admitted.

“Of course you did,” clipped the one-eyed girl, appearing at his side out of nowhere. She barely spared him a glance before rapping on the glass and barking a short command. Axel jumped up, produced a ring of keys from his pocket, and ran for the back door.

Cartman wondered about feeling offended by what she said, but followed her around the glass, anyway. Mostly because Vincent and his pale shadow had arrived to hover at his shoulder, and he got the feeling all they needed to attack was the ‘go-ahead’ from Kenny's bananas dealer whose name he forgot.

“Kells!” Axel howled as they entered, fairly jumping at them.

“Sit down, boy.” She deflected him with a one-armed shove and scowled around the cramped room, as if the fax machine and the old typewriter might be listening in. “It stinks of separation anxiety in here.”

“Where’s Stevens?” asked Vincent, pawing at the supply of dung bars behind the counter. He pocketed two and ripped open another, ending it in two bites. Cartman offered him his.
“It’s addiction circle tonight.” said Axel, hurrying to close the door behind the other twin, and then standing by just bobbing on his toes. “They’re only two hours into Q-and-A, and Chum went in there with a hangover.”

“Chum made bail?” The dealer clapped down the lid on the Keurig in the corner and punched a button on the console with unnecessary force, and when the bullied device began to hiss and steam at her, she hissed back.

“This morning.” Axel rushed to her elbow, and she slapped him away.

“I said sit down!”

Apparently accustomed to the girl’s random strikes of rage, Axel fell back into the swivel chair on command. The old plastic-synthetic partnership held his weight with a groan and a wheeze, and Kells cast her eye over the room, resting menacingly on Cartman before returning to the thirteen-year-old sitting in the center of the ring.

“You can kiss all the ass you want. It doesn’t matter.” she said lowly. “There’s plenty to go around. But you’re not coming tonight. Until the stitches are gone, you’re hitched to that chair, behind this desk. Your job is to answer the phone, hand out candy bars, and act clueless around Marsh. No exceptions.”

Axel lifted his arms, slowly, this time, and clasped them behind his neck. He kicked his foot over the carpet until the chair began to spin. Vince used the hand not eating to speed the chair along, and by the time the half-rate coffee machine finished spitting hot brown bean juice into the paper cup, the boy with the stab wound was spinning faster than Cartman’s eye could follow.

Kells sighed. Axel pulled his legs in and loosed a single delighted yelp -- and Vincent, as always, laughing.

“You see what I have to deal with?” She said to him, her eye wide again. Some of the stuff slopped over the side of her cup. “You cut the soul out of Wolf Gang.”

“I thought you had no leader.”

“We don’t!” She looked around at the milling adolescents, then at the floor. “But for some reason -- they only come when Yellow Wolf calls.”

“You should try not being such a superior bitch.”

She bared her teeth, flipped back to menacing. “Kid-killing pig! Does your mama know what you do?”

“Does yours?”

“Guys,” came another voice.

Cartman looked around for the source of the soft interruption.

“It’s Karen,” Varas continued, jerking his chin at the glass. Karen was just tall enough for her sullen gaze to settle over the counter, orange hood peeked over a tangle of wet bangs.

The chair stopped spinning. Kells put her cup down. Even Vincent’s giggles fell to a hush.

Karen slid out of view, then back in as the door opened a crack. She edged around the wheezing
chair and dropped to a crouch in front of a safe box Eric hadn’t noticed sitting on the floor under the fax machine. She pulled out a miniscule silver key and slotted it into the padlock.

Cartman didn’t know what to expect -- in fact, he knew enough not to expect anything, when it came to this particular group. Weapons, frag grenades, maybe? A blue rupee? A time-travelling crystal? Rasputin's second cock? It could be anything.

“My… what?”

It was Cartman’s massive pair of long-handled pliers, formerly located in a toolbox closed, locked, and secured under his bed. He hadn’t needed them since crushing the chain on the roof-hatch back home, and he couldn't remember even bringing them up in conversation, specifically -- but Cartman knew from the start it had been futile to tell Kenny not to steal from him. What he hadn’t considered was that he’d be too dumb to even notice what was stolen. Homeless scum were supposed to steal prescriptions and pawnable junk like stereos and game consoles, not things that might actually be dangerous in the hands of a teenage anarchist with a terrible attendance record -- things like, say, chain crushers, igniting fluid, tow trucks, or microscopic jellyfish. Dog shit, even.

Karen seemed to be holding them out, so Eric took the pliers and matched her silent stare. Her eyes were dense, craggy turquoise, part glacier -- part frozen carbon dioxide.

“Your brother should be in quarantine.” He informed the little girl. “He’s a menace.”

From the corner by the Keurig, Kells spoiled the quiet with a titter of pure loathing. “He must be giving it to you good.”

“World’s sorest knees.” Axel grinned. Vince’s laughter took off at a canter before the taunt even left his mouth.

“Hey!” Cartman protested, humiliated and burning wishing he hadn’t been outed in front of almost the entire membership of fucking Wolf Gang, including his pain in the ass boyfriend’s little sister with her fucking x-ray stare cataloging his pathetic skeleton.

“Jealous?” he rasped, throwing a weak glare in the direction of the two-faced one-eyed girl.

“A little,” Kells shrugged, pushing herself away from the counter. She made as if to walk past on her way to the door, and stopped to mouth by his ear. “I always wanted to choke out a cop.”

“Piss off.”

“Grow up,” she retorted, wrenching the door open. “And get a move on. We need to go. Vincent, stop screwing with him -- you heard Marsh; the state won’t pay for another round of stitches. And stop eating.”

The swivel chair groaned as the laughing twin put his weight over the back, Axel slide down as it tipped to the ceiling, hooking his elbows under the armrests. “Hey, are your breasts tender?” he giggled. "Stevens says her breasts get tender, when she’s ovulating.”

Even with hands over their mouths nothing could totally quiet the hysteric of the former Bruder Billy-goat and the hyena twin. Kells crumpled her cup and aimed for the bin but beaned the fake ficus tree instead. Cartman watched the cup pinball down the branches and land on the floor by the Oriental pot. He swallowed.

“Why,” she started, in a whisper that filled the room. “Can’t you all understand how serious this is? I need you guys to focus for one night!”
The chair creaked. Axel seemed to chew the inside of his cheek. "I heard caffeine will also give you sore tits."

Karen yanked the strings on her hood. Vincent roared with laughter. As Kells left the room, Cartman started to understand the role of constant humiliation within the wolf gang's ranks. No leadership could thrive there. And he thought of Kenny's dumb stunts -- thought of him hanging his crazy head out the window, covered in blood. Missed him the way you miss the sun on your face, after a ten-hour shift. Eric reached out with the pliers to keep the door from slamming shut, and slipped out after the fleeing womanist.

"Look -- "

She whipped around, and he noticed with dim horror that there was a sheen over her single eye. "You see what I mean?"

Cartman shifted the pliers under one arm and shoved his muddy hands in his pockets. "If it makes you feel any better, I haven't peed in two days, and I'm nervous enough to sweat blood."

The young dealer looked everywhere to avoid blinking, hands on her hips, and nodding like he'd asked for her confirmation on a diagnosis.

"Well," She took one long sniff, brushed at her face, and spoke just as the tear fell. "You're basic."

"I guess so."

Suddenly she brought her hands together several times, hard, and the twins emerged.

"Let's move!" The tear erased, only drill sergeant remained.

"Not you, no -- " Varas was murmuring to the open doorway. "You stay." He closed the door on Karen's sullen stare.

Cartman followed them to the back of the building, where the trio hit the exit stairwell with a bounding, childish ferocity that left him feeling a little sorry for the stairs. He was not surprised that their journey to 'the pit' would take them down, but he was surprised when they didn't leave the building, just passed by the obvious fire door and continued to descend. The lights simmered as they plunged onward, dimming as they got deeper, and he knew they would probably only reach so far into the boundless depths under the drop-in.

"Child and Family Services didn't set up here until the 1960s," said Kells, landing with a double-heeled clap on the next lowest landing, and falling into the next flight. "The drop-in and other unimportant things like child welfare didn't actually get any federal funding until the 80s. But this building's been around since 1870."

"Please tell me there are bodies in the walls."

"There's nothing in these walls, genius. They're solid concrete. No insulation, no central air, nothing. See that?"

She stopped on the next landing and pointed at a section of chipping cement, where halfway up the wall Cartman could distinguish the faint faded outline of three inverted triangles arranged in a black circle. "No way… "

"This place was a fallout shelter during the Cold War. These tunnels go all the way under the South Platte."
“What, that’s sweet --”

“Yes,” Vincent agreed. “But, we are not going that far.” He edged past them and went on ahead, and Varas followed, a ghostly blur against the black.

Cartman was going to follow, but Kells lingered by the fallout sign, and she was eyeing him again, only the menace seemed to have given over to doubt. He couldn’t blame her -- he couldn’t even trust himself to fix a set of speakers properly, anymore. How could he fix this? All he did was break.

“You won’t tell anyone what you see down here. You won’t tell them about this place, or what we do.”

“I thought that was obvious.” He hid his destructive, mud-covered hands in his pockets. "What is your problem with me?"

Her nostrils flared. “Kenny says all cops are bastards.”

“I am a bastard,” Eric scoffed. “I literally fit every definition of a bastard there ever was. He’s not wrong.”

“I don’t like the way you look down on everyone.”

“No, that’s not what this is about. You don’t like the way my sex organs dangle. Right? That's what your problem is. Get over it -- Wolf’s not a prize; and even if he was, you didn’t lose to a penis, you lost to a bastard. Sorry. Thanks for playing.”

“Having a dick doesn’t give you an excuse for being a dick," she said, stalking in closer. "You’ve got a damn private yacht of privilege to fall back on every night -- the rest of us are paddling in the shadows, trying to keep vessels made of false hopes watertight. Don’t expect me to feel bad for you just because you wasted all the opportunities handed to you.”

“But I’m supposed to feel bad for you, right, because you were blessed with perfect tits? I’m supposed to feel bad because you make your living gutting blunts? Come on. You can’t honestly believe the world would be any better if you had a different downstairs set-up -- if you weren’t pretty, if you weren’t miserable. Listen, Kelly -- whatever your real name is -- even if you grew up in a big white house with lots of white things, you’d still be the same one-eyed whore. The people you hated dancing with before, you’d still hate them now. Your parents would still be dead or negligent. You’d still be alone.”

"Oh," She exhaled a single huff of amusement, took a single step down into the dark, and looked over her shoulder at him -- but it didn’t make any sense for her to do it because it was just the eyepatch staring back at him. “You’re fun.”

Cartman flushed with anger, all the way to the tips of his antlers. “D’you love him?”

“Love, lies -- death, life. Those things don’t mean anything to me. They’re not even things, really.”

Cartman moved to stand at the precipice beside her. The distant echoes of Vincent’s stray laughter clattered up the walls from somewhere below. “They’re things that mean everything, to most people.”

She shook her head. “Maybe. But It wasn’t any love for me that made him keep going. It wasn’t fear that kept me from telling him to stop. I lost my eye when I was three; not in an accident, not to any purpose or greater cause -- to sandworms. It wasn’t any mystical fate or death or deity that took my mother from me. It wasn’t the drinking, or the meth, either -- it was gallstones.”
“That’s not fair,” Cartman found himself thinking. “How do you make sense of it?”

“You don’t. We live in the natural world; and the natural state is chaos. All meaning is artificial. Making sense of life is stupid. I don’t need love. Love is putting nail polish on a pig.”

"Is that the company line?"

“No. Que sera, sera.” she answered. “What will be, will be.”

“That what they say in Mexico?” He said, tongue in cheek. “Is that what they say about the bodies piled up in the streets, and the kids with guns?”

The dealer called Kells scoffed like he’d ruined everything, and lurched over the edge into the unlit stairwell. He caught her reply through the coupled echoes of her detached soles: “How should I know? I’m from Fort Collins.”

Cartman thought that explained a lot, anyway, and followed her to the next landing, where the twins had taken the moment to light up again.

“Are you serious? I thought you guys didn’t want to be caught -- put out the damn cigarettes.”

Vince took a pull only halfway and sprayed it everywhere like before, speaking through the toxic exhaust. “Nobody, ever comes down here.”

"But they might smell you."

Vincent laughed, low and rumbling. "It is expected."

The flash in the corner of his eye was Varas falling to a crouch, and Cartman noticed a chained and pad-locked window at knee-height, utterly out of place in the stairwell not only for its placement but its utility: even though the chains allowed the latch to be lifted and the window cracked to the outside, it didn’t matter; it looked out onto a brick face. There was probably thirteen inches of space between the drop-in and the foundations of the building next door, enough room for a bit of rain -- and maybe a sliver of light.

Eric leaned down to get a better look. “Is that the theater?”

Varas blew a thin jetstream of smoke out the window before glancing back at him -- and Cartman thought he was just becoming accustomed to his oddness when he noticed a new odd thing; he had brown eyes. He always thought people with albinism had blue eyes, but now he supposed that was a generalization, and who would’ve guessed someone like that would be living here, anyway, a virtual nobody on the dirty streets of North Park, Colorado -- 10 miles from Eric’s apartment.

“You can talk to yourself,” said Varas. “But don’t talk to me.”

“Damn.” Sarcasm, his old friend. “And here I was hoping for a lecture on what it’s like -- being white, but not white-passing. Is it true what they say, the darker you are, the realer your problems?”

"You look pretty dark to me."

"I'm covered in mud; what's your excuse?"

"Born this way."

His brother stooped closer on the window’s opposite side and gestured up the outside wall. “Look there, Officer Star-buck.”
He didn’t even complain because it sounded kind of nice when he said it, and leaned into the glass to get an eye up the wall of the theater. “All I see is a vent.”

Vince nodded.

Cartman furrowed his brow, looked back out the window at the little shaft; it was a half-story up from the drop-in window, not impossible but certainly a tight squeeze. “Where does it go?”

“Catwalk,” he answered. “To the back of theater two -- free shows all day.”

The idea of homeless kids getting free luxuries and no necessities struck Cartman as very funny. “There’s no way either of you two can spider-man it up there.”

“Karen can,” said Varas.

“That’s awesome -- “

He was cut off by several loud claps from the drill sergeant behind them. He almost totally forgot about Kells. “Okay, can we go now? You guys can sniff butts and bond later. We’ve been here too long already.”

Vincent lifted his hands in a placating gesture. “All right, all right. Just a minute. I want my last smoke here.”

“Your last?” said Cartman, discomfited. “You can fuck up your lungs right here tomorrow, dude.”

He shrugged, and finished in his slow, articulate way. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Eventually they left the window with two butts burning on the ledge and resumed their hurried descent until he was sure they were well underground. At some point the flurry of stamping feet settled, and then Cartman landed in a pile of rubble on the next landing. He shifted, confused, and stared dumbly at the gray and white rock dusting his favorite shoes, as if the black river slime weren’t insult enough. Behind the modest pile of pulverized foundation material he could make out another squat-height window in the wall, chained and padlocked like the one before. The latch was already lifted and the glass leveraged open as far as the chains would allow, and behind it was a coarse, misshapen black portal.

“You guys tunneled through the wall?”

Kells kicked one of the chunks of cement down the next flight of stairs. “Well, yeah.”

“Are you insane -- “

“Are you an idiot?” She snapped.

“No.”

“Then stop acting like one.”

Cartman’s feet had gone unbearably itchy from damp socks, and if he really considered it for a second, more evidence of Wolf Gang’s destruction of public property couldn’t possibly make the situation any worse, so there wasn’t any point bitching about it.

“Of all the fucking, underage rat packs roaming the streets,” he muttered anyway. “I have to fall in with wannabe George Clooney and his band of terrorist tunneling droogs.”
He didn’t notice when Vincent slipped away, but the marked absence of Varas brought his attention back to the window. Kells dropped to her boot-heels and edged around the glass, then ducked head and shoulders into the darkness.

“Wait -- “

“You’ll want to take care of those chains,” she said from behind the glass, nodding at the thick rope of iron links she’d ducked beneath. “You’re too big.”

Cartman hefted the pliers in front of his eyes, and considered the chain on the window, and the girl behind it. “Why didn’t you guys snap these before? Would’ve been easier to dig up the foundation, that way.”

She shrugged. “We never needed to.”

“You want me to break these,” Eric reasoned slowly, pointing his stolen pliers at the dealer. “With my hands, my tools, because then, technically, I broke into this building, and you guys just moved some dirt. You’re framing me with a loophole.”

“Or -- “ she intoned boredly, beginning to back away from the window, through the wall and into whatever waited behind. “You’re too fat to get through the crack.”

“I’m not fat.”

“No, but I bet you float in water.”

“Wha -- wait!” Cartman braced a foot against the wall and crushed the chain between the teeth of his pliers in one clean movement. “Where does it lead?”

He kicked the window open all the way and peered into the black. It couldn’t’ve been more than a few feet of foundation between the drop-in stairwell and whatever part of the Royal Theatre was on the other side, but his eyes didn’t want to adjust and Kells didn’t answer for a long minute. When she did, it was from a distance.

“‘And they shall be made to crawl on their bellies into the Kingdom of darkness...’”

Cartman shouldered his way through the window frame, beginning to claw and wriggle his way through the wall. “Fun,” he spat back.

Vincent’s yip of laughter came as an almost comforting familiarity in the earthy corridor; it helped shake some of the shadows from his vision, and he was able to catch himself with both mud-stained palms on the grainy concrete shelf just before a straight drop into a musty-smelling basement.

“What the -- “

“I like to use the wardrobe and that pile of human torsos, to shimmy down.”

Cartman glared in the direction of the young dealer’s voice, his eyes taking little by little to the dim light. “Is this -- are we under the theater?”

“Over there is center-stage,” said Vince, from somewhere in the shadows. Eric’s immediate surroundings were too cluttered with towers of boxes and forgotten props to make him out. “You can hear things, sometimes. And the spotlights go down the vents.”

Now that he mentioned it, there was a faint, dusty glow from the ceiling far away -- and Cartman
gradually came to appreciate the full size and scale of the cavernous underground vault; it must’ve spanned the length of both stages, including reception and backstage areas. There wasn’t any obvious entrance or exit to the space, only a shitload of forgotten goods inside it.

He picked his way down from the unobtrusive hole in the wall to the nearby wardrobe, wobbled there for a moment, and then took a hard plummet into some cardboard boxes below; thankfully the landing was soft, only one box collapsed under his weight, spilling its feathered boa guts. Cartman pounced to his feet and stumbled against a headless woman’s torso, brushing pink goose-down from his shoulders.

“Keep up, now.”

He followed the flutter of voices away from the bolthole and deeper inside, closing in on the shallow glow eking from the floorboards over center-stage. The journey took them through a maze of junkhills a hundred times worse than Cartman’s pathetic Table, but he pretended it was his table, anyway, and maybe he’d shrunk down like Ms Frizzle and the Magic School Bus to get to the root of his nothing-problems, his meaningless pile of impediments. He shook it off because he wasn’t here for himself -- he hadn’t crawled through the mud and the dirt on his belly to save his own lousy life. Although maybe he had, in some ways.

They had picked their way halfway across the chamber before he noticed it. “What’s that smell? Did you guys light up again?”

Up ahead, Vincent laughed.

“Never worked on a farm before, have you?”

What -- Cartman shook his head, baffled, and wondered if he’d misheard him. He lost sight of Kells and her loose curls as she rounded another tower of crates and boxes, and stumbled into the stack before catching the turn, rounding the corner just in time to avoid its collapse. The acrid tobacco tang in the air became even stronger -- it hadn’t ever really left since the brothers’ smoke break in the stairwell.

Curious, he stopped to address the fallen boxes, probing at the contents expecting more costumery and junk camera rigs -- but instead his hands found warm, moist hay.

He’d never worked in any one of Colorado’s farms, fields, or croplands. He dicked around in them enough growing up near Jenkins’ and Murphy’s land, but when it came to hourly wages he preferred complex tasks to menial labor.

Even he knew how dangerous wet hay was.

Besides the fact that he had vivid memories of massive hay fires swallowing his childhood horizon in the summers, he’d dealt with similar phenomena in his three years as a cop. Just the previous summer he’d been called out to the next county over to help with an out-of-control hay fire in La Junta. It went from a few steaming bales to a four-alarm inferno you could see for miles. The fire department couldn’t do anything but surround it, and let it burn. In the end, the blaze consumed 10 acres of hay and cost $6 million in property damage.

The trouble with hay was, as anyone growing up rural or semi-rural would know -- it had a nasty habit of spontaneously bursting into flames when wet. Anything under 15% moisture in the air was fine, but anything over that threshold made hay the perfect home for heat-producing mold and bacteria. One thing led to another -- all it took was a spark.
“You know it is ready,” came Vincent’s soft voice at his shoulder. “When the smell is like an old ashtray.”

Disturbed, faintly horrified, Cartman explored the other boxes in the immediate area. He fumbled with the clasps on several large costume trunks, and found them padded with the foul hay. He ripped the lid from a nearby crate and found a similar arrangement.

“You guys -- smuggled -- hay -- “

Someone grabbed his arm, hard, and yanked Cartman off his frenzied search. “Yes, okay? We filled the pit with old hay. Murphy won’t miss it. Keep your voice down, will you?”

“Why?” He hissed back.

Her eye had gone black when Kells turned fully to him. She withdrew her hand. “We’re almost there.”

Cartman looked in the direction she indicated with a jerk of her head, and he was now close enough to pick out the lighted space beneath the stage, and how clean it was compared to the rest of the moldering basement. The only thing out of place was a dark object in the center of the clearing. He squinted and saw that it was a bag. A single black duffle, identical to the five that had appeared in the backseat of his cruiser the night of the train job, and cost him a hell of a story back at the station. The same bag as the ones found on the Mongrel, and in the Viggen with Francesca. It was the last key of Rainer’s stolen base.

“Why,” he said, throat spasming over the monkey’s fist of panic beating around where his heart would be. “Does this all seem, like a goddamn video game?”

Kells suddenly wore the happiest expression he’d seen her in all night; it was almost manic. For the moment she was backlit, a bronze nymphet leering at him, half-blind and beautiful. She spoke like she was delivering a bitter conviction on who deserved to be the last person on earth.

“In a world without meaning -- all humanity turns to really excellent theatre.”

Chapter End Notes

next part half writ. stay tuned bby
i didn't want it to be a four-parter so instead its rilly loong~
but not really, first half is dialogue heavy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“In a world without meaning -- all humanity turns to really excellent theatre.”

Cartman stared across the cluttered basement and imagined he was Jesus in the cold desert, and it was only a matter of time before he drank cactus juice and started tripping balls. All around him the hay breathed, waiting warm and crated in the darkness. “Do you hear music?”

The dealer’s eyebrows pulled together briefly, and she shook her head like she ought to be getting paid more. “Shows are over for tonight. There’s nobody -- “

“Sounds like *Felt Mountain* -- ”

“Have you lost your mind?” She snapped.

“Shut up!” He hissed back. “Humor me and listen. Slow down for a second.”

“Okay.” She arranged her hands on her hips. “We’re all standing around with better shit to do. What are you getting at?”

Cartman shushed her again, hunkering down in the shadow of some crates stacked beside an open casket. He was disappointed to find the casket lacking in dead bodies and overflowing with old records. Kells sat down on her broken boot heels beside him, and after a short symphony of shuffling shoes scuffing over concrete and the residual flutters of shifting hay, silence fell.

At knee-level, the smell in the air was so permeating it felt heavy; he was sort of panting in it, after a while. Small brown flies moved in wobbling, directionless patterns in the corners of his eyes. The heat, the moisture, and the dark subdermal thrum of the cellar were all closing in around him, putting pressure on Cartman’s precious cold boundaries. The cavern stank and stirred like a human organ -- begging for someone to set fire to it, waiting for an excuse to erupt -- and if they weren’t careful, he and the whole W.G. kids production was going up in flames with it.

One of the flies crawled into his ear and panicked. Soon Cartman was deaf and drowning in its cries.

“I don’t hear anything.” Kells announced. Imperious, hoping to rub his face in something.

The alarm effectively called off, Eric started to get to his feet, uneasiness like a gasoline slick in his stomach juices. The one-eyed girl checked him in the side at a crucial moment of counter-balance and he had to catch himself with two hands on the dusty hay-covered floor. The heel of one palm slid in something wet and sinewy. Cartman peered into the shadows to identify it as -- a pile of horse shit.

A pile of shit that had probably hitchhiked with one of the hay shipments from Murphy’s farm.
It didn’t even want to be there, probably, just got dragged along by the carefree anarchists.
Eric thought he heard a noise like God laughing at him, from far away.

He noticed with sick staring fascination that a clump of mushrooms had grown out of the mountain of horse dung: at least two handfuls of them, thin gray and white stems opening their shiny umbrellas under the thin light. Mushrooms had always wigged him out, especially when he was a kid. He didn’t like the way their moist, white bodies climbed out of the earth in a single night -- the way they would stretch, reproduce, perish and completely vanish before the week was out.

That was humanity, anyway, Cartman thought. Brutish, nasty, and short, as they say.

Once, he touched a big mushroom in his backyard on a dare; it felt exactly how you’d expect -- like a dead guy’s erection. Cold dead arousal from the spud of the earth.

“One day,” Eric said, climbing to his feet a second time. He thumbed through the record collection in the open casket and wiped his shit-smeared hand on a vinyl edition of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s poorly conceived *Double Fantasy*. “I'll drive a Beamer. And you will really need a ride.”

“And one day I’ll make a hat out of a paper bag,” she said, nonplussed, and he wondered about being offended.

“What’s the point of all this?” Cartman slapped some hay filings from his knees and stumbled over an upholstered ottoman trying to catch up with the crew. Varas muscled past him with two human skulls in one hand, and two more tucked under each arm. They were probably plastic but the effect was real enough. “Why this place? It’d make more sense to burn down the damn prison.”

Kells flipped her hair without bothering to look back at him. “Oh, we thought the theater looked cold.”

They followed a narrow path winding like a riverbed through the trove of left-behind things until it abruptly opened up onto a clearing of concrete dusted with sawdust and imprinted with the chaotic zig-zag patterns of many wandering soles.

They had arrived underneath the main stage.

At least one light was on in the upper levels -- either the theater’s night-light or else a forgotten bulb - - and at the far corner of left-stage Cartman recognized the dim red glow of an emergency exit, and breathed a sigh of relief. The building might not be up to code exactly but one door was better than nothing, if not the optimal two to four.

“Don’t get a hard-on,” Kells commanded, slowing to a stop near the center of the clearing and looking back at him. “The door only opens at the end of the show.”

He looked at her blankly.

“It’s coded and locked -- you’ll need a special key to open it,” she explained. "When we do, it immediately sends an alarm to the police and the fire department.”

“I knew that,” he decided. “You stole the key, right?”

“You think I would tell a cop that?”

“Agh, quit pussyfooting, already. You brought me this far -- “

“The property manager is a very big man,” Varas broke in. His voice never picked up past a background murmur, so you always had to *try* and listen. Cartman glanced aside to see him seated
atop the black duffle bag in the center of the underground stage.

“Big shoes, big talk -- always big problem.”

“But,” Varas sighed. “Karen is very small.”

Vincent kee-ai’d suddenly, an echoing scatter-clap of laughter that raced around the small clearing. He snagged the handles on the black duffle and yanked it from under his brother’s ass, hefting it into the air in one move. At some point picking their way over the theater’s cast-asides, the laughing twin had acquired a velvet top hat, a death’s head cane, and a necklace of teeth. Varas caught the bag at the cost of dropping one skull, and threw it back. They invented the rules to the game along the way.

Cartman thought how if Kenny had his little sister’s talent with keys then he wouldn’t’ve bothered making copies for him.

On a hazy whim, less than an idea but more than a thought, Eric tapped his muddy pocket over where his keys were, pushed his fingers inside and pulled them out. Yep, there they were. It was Cartman’s whole universe -- the keys to his childhood home, and his last apartment; he still had a copy of his dorm advisor’s master key from college, one to the bakery he used to work at, and the warehouse he used to work at. His apartment keys, of course.

And then he saw two things he didn’t recognize, two new additions to his collection: a key sporting a strange set of square teeth, too small and too thin for a normal door; and threaded through the ring right beside it was a solid rod made from some kind of black alloy, about four inches long and the width of a fat pencil.

“I have the key?” He said, processing aloud, internally feeling vaguely violated and trying to figure out when Kenny had done it.

“What is this?” Cartman added, fingering the black metal.

“Fire steel,” she said, venomous, and offered no further explanation. “Now don’t even think about using that key until the flames are up to your eyebrows.”

“Oh, good. When they find our burning corpses I’ll be a size 2.”

“And your mother still won’t love you.”

Kells paused to clap her hands a few times -- then, forgetting her recent demand for quiet, she said loud enough for the three of them: “Nobody opens that door till we’re hot enough to go platinum. Understand?”

“Hot shit doesn’t always sell.” Cartman felt compelled to say. "Look at Double Fantasy. And global warming."

Her hands balled up into fists at her sides and Kells glared at him like he’d just rubbed one out on a photograph of her grandmother, and Eric wondered what she would be capable of with two eyes.

It hadn’t grown any brighter but in the clearing under center-stage the light was more disperse. Cartman could finally make out the walls of the chamber: about ten feet of vertical sheetrock starting at the floor, topped by wood columns stuffed with plastic-covered insulation. The old insulation was surely doomed in the event of a barbecue, but the sheetrock could make a tough customer; it would probably be the only thing left standing, in the end. So when the Royal Theatre was nothing but a shag of bones and cremated comfort chairs, anyone walking by could look straight into this cellar.
They would see those sheetrock walls standing under the rain, for the first time in fifty years. If they looked a little closer, they would surely recognize Kenny’s flea-bitten scrawl.

Cartman dragged his eyes away from the painted walls, distracted by something in his foreground.

“What’s with the string?”

He was close enough to make out the long swaying shape of a shoelace -- or rather, many shoelaces knotted together -- one thin spider thread trailing all the way up to the ceiling, where it continued to run down the thick wooden spine of the building. Cartman reached out and tugged at the end dangling in front of him; the lace held fast and he noticed thick staples shining up in the rafters, keeping it pinned in place.

His fingers came away sort of greasy. Confused, Cartman lifted them to his nose.

“I wouldn’t,” came the voice of Kells. “Nasty stuff. Washes out of clothes, but you’ll never get the smell off.”

It smelled like… petrol.

“Diesel and bar soap, actually.”

“That’s -- “ Cartman stared at the swaying string. “That’s homemade napalm. That's illegal incendiary -- ”

“You wouldn’t believe how many test batches we went through.”


“We tried paraffin,” said Varas. “But wax is too stiff.”

The pale wolf was looking at his skulls, again; he turned one over and shook it until something rattled inside, then used two fingers to pull free a short section of string and unwind it a few centimeters from the eye socket, like a fuse. Cartman suspected the test batches hadn’t gone to waste.

“Soap makes paste,” he added. “But wax makes bomb.”

It dawned on him like it was written. “My whole ass-dragging department has been on you guys for months. The fucking FBI has been pulling files, apparently, since last winter. The only way to throw off the heat at this point would be to -- “

“Get arrested?” Vince offered, on the verge of laughter.

“Get arrested on happenstance,” Kells snorted. "Then stage an event. Make them think they caught the wrong one.”.

“Lay around on fucking camera, you mean,” said Eric. “While the ashes pile up outside.”

It was clear to Cartman that ‘brush with death’ to Yeller probably meant ‘apply death smoothly and gently to your life’.

He realized Kenny had two things that he didn’t -- two things that he’d lost, maybe. Some people mistook it for balls, or gumption, spunk or genius -- some other synonym for having a big dick and your pick of the females -- but what it really came down to, he thought, were courage and creative freedom. It takes both of those things to hold on to an identity in a world working day and night to turn you into everyone else. It was the hardest battle he’d ever had to fight, and he’d surrendered,
unknowingly, right up until that phony sexual harassment suit hit his desk one Wednesday afternoon, a long time ago.

Cartman thought you were an idiot if you believed anything on TV. But Kenny thought people were idiots for believing anything at all. Now the annoying little purp had managed to arrange all of Eric's half-hearted convictions in a line, call up the firing squad — and as usual Cartman stumbled into the bullets like Bambi’s mom to slaughter.

In the vestibule of borrowed light his eye fell on the single black bag, still changing hands between the two brothers. It was probably the most innocuous thing in the underground theater. Had all this begun over a few bags of expensive poison?

“I wish,” Cartman decided. “Wish I never took this case. I wish Wendy never recommended me.”

“Don’t be so ungrateful,” Kells ribbed. “Your life was not this interesting six months ago. He did this for you. He never thought more than two minutes ahead before all this.”

“Uh-huh, okay,” Cartman chortled, feeling sick to his stomach. “I don’t know what kind of Scooby-crack corn he’s been feeding you all, but in case you hadn’t noticed, already, Kenny doesn’t do anything for anyone but himself.”

“Are you serious?”

“Hell yeah!” Cartman crowed, feeling a rant shake itself loose. “I know a kosher McCormick pickle when I see it; this is all another quick fix for his addiction to reckless, suicidal horse shit. No wonder evolution favors the sheep if this is what the wolves are up to. Everything was fine before you all showed up and started taking puberty out on society. There’s no rational reason to dedicate a burning building to someone -- arson is not a token of affection, subversive train bombs aren’t romantic, and being trapped inside a damn powder-keg definitely isn’t a fucking honeymoon! Why couldn’t he take up rebellious poetry or Pai Sho? For Christ’s sake. Dodging school once in a while is cute, fine, and the billboards are kind of funny the first few times, but ya took it too far, you’re in too deep -- there’s a difference between anarchy and dying for no reason -- “

“Shut up!” She fired back, sprayed like a machine gun. “We made this game! We infiltrated the brothers of sleep! We put the diggers on puppet strings!”

Cartman snorted. “You guys’re lucky you didn’t fuck with the gravediggers six years ago, or they would’ve had your asses. You don’t know anything about the game, little girl -- you just borrowed the players and crawled around some loopholes. You think everyone’s just gonna forget who yanked them around by the balls playing scavenger hunt with ten Gs of base? Like the Bruders are gonna forget who fired up the train job? Who took the Mongrel and Francesca off the board? Rainer’s gonna squash you like bugs! And nobody will give a fuck!”

Kells flew at him and she didn’t so much try to choke him as dig her fingernails into his trachea. He dropped his keys and wrapped both hands around her wrists. A knee bruised his inner leg but missed the prize.

“You want me to be sorry?” She grit. “What do we have to apologize for, huh? Your little burn? For your DA friend? We weren’t the ones who brokered the deal on the commuter -- who decided to stand by and let it happen; we weren’t the morons who had a fucking shoot-out over a load of dog shit without even checking the bags first.”

He shoved her away and she ranged in again, nostrils flared, two seconds from snapping teeth. “Anybody looking for a place to piss in private could’ve found the stash in the bodega; we didn’t
have to ask Francesca to drag the cops’ noses around; she wanted to kill you! Maybe we greased the floor, but you brothers of fucking sleep have had it coming for years.”

Cartman wiped his nose on a muddy forearm and thought he might be getting a cold. “This is starting to sound personal. Whadda you have against Rainer’s draft? What did they do to you?”

Behind him, Cartman heard a thunk and half-turned to see the twins had dropped the bag, at last, and they were looking at him. No, they were looking past him.

Kells was shadow-boxing. “All of this would’ve happened exactly the same, with or without us; the only difference is, everything blew up a little sooner than expected.”

“Was it your dad?” He pushed, ignoring her. “Your dad had a set of Bruder tats, didn’t he? I bet every minute was living Hell. He took it out on your mom, I bet. Probably shook you as a baby, or something.”

She said something so quiet it got lost under the boys’ murmurs.

“What?”

“I said take, the better question is what did they take from me.”

He blinked. “Sure.”

“ Took my sister,” she murmured, looking up again, eye wild. “He took my sister. Brought her back without legs.”

Sundog, he realized.

“That’s not her name – ” She flipped. “That’s just what you made her!”

Cartman almost flipped back at her, like Sunny was an accident, and he wasn’t technically even a Bruder at that point but none of those things would make any difference to her. In hindsight, therapy might’ve been the more appropriate course but if burning down a movie theater was what got Kells high, then he thought she ought to do it.

“ – you sit on your hands, with your plants, and your microphones; Wolf Gang’s done more in two months than your whole department’s done in years – ”

Vincent laughed with a breathy uncertainty.


“Yeah, sure.” Cartman backtracked a few steps, stooped and snatched up the black bag. “You’re right, the world’s a little shittier than people like to admit. So if lighting this place up and stir-frying law enforcement is what does it for you, then fine. Let’s do it. Francesca told me you don’t deserve to be alive unless you’re fighting for it.”

She lifted one foot and kicked a rift in the sawdust with her dragging heel. “I thought he was insane to give you that key.”

“A fire in a theater,” he scoffed. “As if we weren’t all overdosed on irony already – “

“Not irony,” Varas interrupted.

“What?”
“It’s not irony.” Kells clarified, hands finding her hips. “What’s ironic about a fire in a movie theater? It’s just the opposite -- it’s what everyone’s expecting.”

He opened his mouth to respond but Vincent’s bark swallowed it up. Cartman shrugged the bag up to his shoulder and tried again. “There should be a special word for the category of terror you guys fall under.”

The light went out above them, then -- and Cartman heard music.

The pack of kids went silent, every set of scuffing boots. It took a minute for their eyes to readjust in the darkness, with only the faint red glow of the exit signal in the far corner to guide them.

“You guys knew Rainer was after me,” Eric started, quietly, searching.

“Yeah? So?”

“So you know he wouldn’t give up, after Francesca. Especially if he knew his base was still out there. Especially if someone told him where he might find it, and the rat he’s been looking for -- “

“What are you getting at?”

“Did Kenny really ask you to take me here?” Cartman licked his dry lips. “Because, this feels like, a trap.”
There was the sharp clink of something being struck, and suddenly a light flared up again. He turned to see a massive spark fly from Varas’s hand and catch on the string hanging out of the skull in his opposite palm. It was almost too bright to discern properly, but Cartman suspected there was a waterproof wad of diesel and paraffin wax rattling around in there, acting as a self-contained firestarter with a homemade fuse.

Varas dropped his shoulder and hurled the flaming skull toward the back corner of the cellar, close to the bolthole where they came in; it struck a tall lingerie cabinet and spun a little off course, landing with a muffled whumpf of displaced air as the hay ignited.

Something knocked into Cartman’s hand and he grabbed it, because that’s what you did when a knife was coming at you. But it wasn’t a knife. Kells was looking back at him wearing a two-chamber gas mask probably better suited to spraypainting than fire safety, but he pulled it over his mouth and nose anyway.

The dealer clapped her hands sharply, pointed at the twins, and arced her arm toward the way they came. With another clink of metal on metal and a shock of sparks, the tip of Vincent’s death’s head cane lit up, and a skull took on new life in the pale twin’s hands. They took off in matching gas masks, Vincent heading for the east corner carving fiery rings in the air with his swinging cane, and Varas for the west, still lobbing flaming heads.
The air was beginning to swelter and roar with pop-cracking hay and crumbling prop material. Kells was shouting at him.

“I’m going to tighten up these corners -- “ she seemed to be saying, waving her arm at the wall across the chamber from the exit. “When it’s high enough, light the grand finale -- “

She was pointing up and with some difficulty Cartman discerned the shoelace swaying in the heat waves.

“We’ll meet you up by the door when -- what was that?”

Kells took a step back and looked at her feet, and Cartman followed her eye but couldn’t see anything, but then he heard it: a yap, followed by a yap-yap, the kind that came from short, triangle muzzles and hateful black eyes.

“What is that?” shouted the one-eyed girl. “There’s a dog in here!”

“It’s Boo Boo. You need to go.”

“What?”

“Go,” Cartman repeated, breaking womanist code to hustle Kenny’s dealer around by the shoulders and shove her out of the clearing. She could have him arrested for simple assault, later. “Do your arson thing, this is gonna be bad -- “

A fucking gun-shot slapped away the muffled quiet of the mounting inferno. His leg burned, then it went numb. He dropped to the ground just in time for the second shot, landing mask-first in the sawdust before the shell clattered to the concrete. From the sound of the shot, he guessed .40 caliber - - from the sound of the aftermath, the shooter was using those homemade exploding hollow-points. Devastators, they were called. In the back of his mind Cartman wondered if he would be deaf, after all this.

The glow from the exit made Lola’s leopard print heels look blood-washed. His next thought blanked under a tidal wave of pain when one of the thick, murderous heels squared itself over the back of his hand and stomped with bone-crushing force over the knuckles. And she began to grind his fingers from their sockets.

Eric vaguely registered the duffle being lifted from his shoulders, and he kept telling himself pain was an affliction of the mind but it was hard to overcome when it felt like his fingers were being stretched from their homey sockets all the way to Cut and Shoot, Texas. Swift dismemberment was more merciful.

“Shame -- “ she was saying, her voice like black coffee. “I liked you, ‘buck.”

More weight was applied over the heel over his hand and Cartman clamped down on a whimper, kicking his feet in the sawdust, and curled his free hand into a fist. There was some wet dog breath blowing in his ear.

“I’ve brought myself too low just to hunt you down,” Lola continued, and it was the angriest he’d ever heard her sound. “All this, mud, and hay -- what have you been doing down here, boy? Collecting this shit? Then I thought, maybe you live down here, two-timing rat that you are.”

“I’m not -- “ he started to croak, then lost the ability to speak when a wrecking ball came down over his skull and lights filled his eyes.
“Don’t lie to me, honey,” she said, recentering the gun and cocking it audibly. “I don’t know why he let you limp by for this long. Rainer thought keeping a two-way open with the cops would help us close more deals, but I watched you fumbling for years and I don’t think it made any difference. Tomcat was an idiot. You were at least an entertaining idiot. Are all police so incompetent?”

Lola lifted her foot at last and Cartman pulled away and rolled to his back, holding his injured hand at the wrist. Long, sharp nails clawed over his ear and ripped the mask off his face.

“You can either give me the key to the door now, or I can search your corpse for it later.”

He stared down the steady steel barrel, licked his lips and noticed that he’d got a nosebleed from the fall. He felt a dull throb in his left leg and knew he couldn’t count on salted shells, this time. He wished he was baked, smoking with Kenny, or something. Wished he never got out of bed two days ago. Why had they let it end like this?

The threadbare sound of a trigger about to get squeezed -- but before she could pull the hammer a third time Lola shrieked, and the four-pound gun fell on Cartman’s nose. For a second he thought he’d been shot in the face, or maybe there was a misfire that struck Lola by accident, but when he came to, Eric identified the sounds of a scuffle nearby. He craned his neck to see the Bruder queenpin limping heavily from a long gash above her knee, and grappling with somebody not even half her size.

There was something humorous about having his ass saved by Kenny’s younger sister wielding Francesca’s black powder-coated blade.

Karen was quick and nervy but Lola had ruthlessness and experience on her side. The first thing she did was slap the young girl -- Karen’s hood fell, probably cushioned the blow the same way Kenny’s stood up to the Mongrel’s fist -- but she was dazed, and when Karen darted in slashing the air Lola snatched her wrist and twisted the blade easily from her grip. She pulled her in and grabbed a fistful of blonde hair. Karen fell to one knee and held her head in both hands.

The smoke was rolling in thickly above them now, and as soon as Cartman rolled to his elbows and knees and sat up, his eyes began to sting. He licked some blood from his upper lip and took the gun in his left hand. It was a Glock 9, same shit the cops use. He realized he was only in pain because he was afraid. Fear, that mind-killer; he’d been afraid in every single one of the worst moments of his life. Fear was responsible for every one of his lousiest decisions, every wrong turn. Like when he joined the Bruders, and when he joined the force. When he shot Kevin, he was afraid.

He was an idiot, he realized. And an entertaining one at that. But he deserved to live, today. And something told him that he would.

Cartman spun the gun his left hand and straightened his arm from the shoulder, taking aim for the two struggling in the sawdust. Then he put the safety back on, flung it away and got to his feet. He decided no more McCormicks were going to die because of him.

Convinced the numbness in his left-side toes was nothing, just a graze not a bullet, Cartman took his feet and waded toward the fight. Lola flung Karen to the floor. He dipped down to the floor, snatched the abandoned blade, and came up swinging for the side of her head. She didn’t see him coming through the smoke. Clearly he had never wielded a knife before, let alone a custom machete, because a moment after she dropped to the concrete Eric’s hand began to burn, and he realized he’d grabbed it by the blade.

After checking that Lola was unconscious, Cartman peeled off the gas mask and spat a gooey wad of blood and saliva into the sawdust beside her prone form. He wanted to howl, or something.
“Dude, seriously?” He addressed Karen, checking for injuries and finding only scratches visible on her face. “With the, machete, and everything?”

Karen blinked her bleary eyes and lifted one arm to clutch at her opposite forearm. Her wrist was sprained, or broken, he wasn’t sure which, but it was swelling up enough to be serious and he cursed. Cops were trained in CPR and the Heimlich maneuver, not splinting or treating actual cases of trauma.

He held the mask out. “Put this on, wait by the door. Look out for the happy fire twins.”

Little Wolf climbed to her feet, cradling her wrist, and stared at him but didn’t move anywhere.

“Put the mask on,” he insisted.

With some difficulty she pulled the mask on one-handed.

“Wait by the door -- “ He repeated, hedging around a touch of hysteria in his voice. “It’ll be fine. I’m gonna be there in a second.”

Her eyes drifted to the heap on the floor, and the white dog in the pink harness quivering next to it. As much as he loathed her, Cartman knew he couldn’t leave Lola there to die so lowly. She probably deserved it, but he knew better than to decide who deserved to live or die, anymore.

“Go,” he said again. “It’ll be fine.”

After Karen slunk away in the direction of the red light, the first thing Cartman did was scoop his keys off the floor. The inferno at the back of the cellar had climbed to the ceiling, and the smaller flames in his foreground clamored higher with every wheeze of sweltering air. For a second the vision of Hell surrounded him on all sides, and he was just about to address the swaying shoelace when Eric noticed in his peripheral a distinct darkness around stage-left. Everywhere else the fire was working up the walls, but the near corner was dark as night.

He crossed the clearing choking on fumes and started picking his way over another path through the junk. “Kells -- !” he coughed.

Not even two turns into the narrow path he stumbled upon her. “What -- what’re you doing?”

She was splayed in an ornate-looking Victorian chair, with clawed feet and lion-headed armrests, and everything, nestled between a gutless grandfather clock and a crate of faintly smoking hay. It would’ve looked relaxing if the dealer didn’t sit so awkwardly, kind of tilted to the side, one palm held to the side of her neck like she was waiting for a photoshoot.

“Star-buck,” she said, voice like weak tea, and Cartman noticed how dark her mouth was, had it always been so dark? "I hear it. I hear music."

He set his foot on the box of spitting hay and sent it toppling to the side. With dread high and heavy in his throat, Eric stepped close and pulled on her arm until the hand lifted away, revealing a steadily weeping gash in the side of her neck.

“She was using Devastators,” he informed her, putting pressure on the wound and knowing it wouldn’t help.


“Don’t tell me this was a stupid test. Don’t tell me that now.”
“Everybody,” she breathed with terrible effort. “Takes entrance exams. Even if they are -- sleeping with the boss.”

Cartman’s fear drowned down and away through an airlock in his heart. And then he felt it kind of beating.

Kells blinked slowly. “Although -- what’s better in bed? One eye or, one hand?”

“I’m ambidextrous.”

She smiled. “Of course you are.”

Her free arm swung upward suddenly, and something knocked into his arm. He looked down. It was her mask. “Do me a favor -- let me burn.”

Cartman shook his head. “This isn’t fair.”

She seemed to roll her eye like he still didn’t get it. “Que sera...”

“No, what? Come on -- that’s bullshit! Don’t you have stuff to do? Don’t you wanna kill the guy that raped you, or something? Don’t you wanna go back to Mexico someday?”

She gurgled a laugh and finally the darkness spilled from the corner of her mouth in a long black ribbon. Her eyelid drooped. “I’m not Mexican, idiot -- “

“I’m Muslim.” More blood puddled down her sweater. “My name is Raabia.”

“Hi.” he said, empty. “I’m Eric.”

But her eye had closed and he didn’t know if she lived to hear him say it. He pulled away when his hand went cold and sticky and the pulse was long gone, and the smoke was starting to make his lungs burn. Cartman pulled Raabia’s mask over his nasty nosebleed and walked further down the narrow path, kicking over every case of hay he could find to feed the fire. The smell was incredible and the heat was coming down on his back like gravity on Mars; but he was determined to finish what they’d started here. He felt like a small spider in a big ashtray. His past was sort of like an ashtray -- all faded, some dusty and some sticky left-behind things that gathered in gray blobs behind him, leaving an awful odor. All of his twenties could be crossed out, so far.

Finally, there was nothing more he could do to stoke the fire, and the path looped back and spit him out near the clearing under center-stage. He crossed it quickly, forgetting the graze in his leg because at least it wasn’t his neck. He stepped over the motionless form of Lola, picked up Francesca’s black blade by the handle this time, and stood just under the dangling fuse. The grand finale, he guessed.

Cartman dug his keys out of his pocket and isolated the black bar of fire steel. Not an avid camper and having considered the boy scouts flaming homos -- and not in the cool way -- he only knew the shortlist of techniques for starting fires, and guessed with the power of a single high school chemistry class that he was holding some kind of magnesium alloy that could throw a spark big as the ones Vince and his brother were wielding. Eric held the fire steel aloft and struck it inexpertly with the stainless steel blade.

The shoelace caught just the passing mention of the first spark and erupted with such force he fell back to the sawdust to avoid losing his eyes. From the floor he spied the bag of base that started it all and thought what a lovely gift it would make for that imbecile Sandman. Cartman ducked his head under the strap and tightened it over his chest, then he reached for Lola.
“Lo,” he shouted, finding the gang lord’s shoulder and shaking it. “Come on, Lorraine -- I don’t wanna carry you, it’s way too insulting.”

She stirred, groaned an unlovely groan. “Fuck you, ‘buck.”

“After this, maybe. Only if Yellow Wolf dumps me.”

He encouraged her to stand, with an eye on the flames licking at the sawdust around them, and she gasped upon reaching her feet, clapping a fist down on the slash in her leg. Cartman pulled it away, coupled it behind her back with the opposite hand, and zip-tied her wrists together.

After twenty-six years of them, Cartman didn’t take death threats personally anymore -- but he also didn’t mind if Lola suffered a little bit extra.

“I’m off-duty,” he said behind her ear. “Not incompetent.”

The light of the fire door was drowned in the inferno climbing all four walls. The shoelace lit not only the spine of the theater but also ignited branch fuses that crawled rib-like to where the walls joined ceiling. Kenny might have been a little too aggressive, with that one.

With a high-pitched whine and a groan like a miserable drunk on payday, a portion of the supporting beams in the far corner fell into the ocean of fire and all but its extremities were consumed. Generally, when the roof begins collapsing, it means you’re out of time.

“I can’t,” said Lola, halting in front of him on their slow journey toward his approximation of the exit. “My leg.”

“Ditch the heels,” he growled, pushing past her. “Or snap them off, I don’t care.”

Somehow under the sounds of cracking foundations and rushing, choking fumes, Cartman heard the short displacement of air from behind him and turned in time to grab the thing coming toward him.

The paper-thin black credit card knife caught between the middle and index fingers of his left hand, and he twisted it around mostly as a knee-jerk reaction to pain. Not only did this motion disarm the murderous vixen; it also put the folding knife handle first, point-out in his hand.

“Are you fucking serious,” he said through his ventilators, glaring into her enraged, smoke-reddened eyes. “You are way more trouble than you’re worth, sister.”

“You don’t decide what I’m worth,” Lola spat, and collapsed in a fit of coughing.

Cartman got behind her, fitted his former associate and higher-up with a new zip-tie, and arranged her in a firefighter’s carry over his shoulder. He didn’t really know if he was in any pain but for some reason hefting a grown woman on a shot leg was like running the length of his office with a loaf of rye. Like he was a mom lifting a bus off his child, or something. Even though Lola was an evil bitch and he probably shouldn’t be saving her.

Speaking of evil bitches, Boo Boo was biting his ankle. He was about to kick her aside when he noticed the little pink harness had caught fire, and it was so pathetic he reached down and pushed his mangled right hand through the loop on its back, and lifted the little rat dog into his armpit. If he ever needed a new superhero name he would go with Mudman. He honestly believed, if not for his dip in the South Platte and his intimate dance with its muddy banks earlier, his ass would be on fire right now. Especially when a hooked coat-rack fell nearly on top of him and showered them all with flaming moth balls on the way to the door.
By the time he distinguished the artificial glow of the red exit sign, Cartman was the super man of pain and had forgotten what a half-lung of air even felt like.

He did, however, remember the feeling of a hand wiggling into his pants.

“Jesus!” He swore, performing an about-face impressively light-footed for someone in his state of duress.

Karen was there, together with her sullen stare, and his keys were dangling from her fingers. Cartman was relieved to see Varas peel from the dancing shadows and dog Karen to the door. The movement in the corner of his eye became Vincent. He’d lost his top hat and cane but the necklace of teeth survived.

“Kells?” asked Vince, ash-stained from his ears to his toes.

Cartman shook his head. And it killed him because she should’ve made it, but he was also starting to accept that sometimes what will be, will be.

Karen slotted the key into the panel by the alarm system, and Varas shoved open the cellardoor.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading -- i kind of hate myself for this. ready to wind down?
Kenny leaned over the table and tried to scratch his name into the stainless steel while Sheriff Sandies made several earnest phone calls in the dry-lit hallway outside. There was a rough ‘Y’ already there from last time, and the beginnings of a scratchy ‘W’, so he shrugged his parka a little higher around his ears and set to work with his thumbnail, glad to be free from the station’s regulation clothes even if it was in exchange for his holey old shirt and secondhand jeans.

Usually the dark room with the steel table was the end of his guided tour through the Sheriff’s department; here they would make him sweat a whole hour, probably, or until Kenny was ready to break his chair over the floor just for something to do -- and then eight magicians with eight different badges and logos would walk through the door and arrange their nuts on the table until Kenny chose which one to suck off. They would take his future in their soft pink palms and goggle at it, pass it off for everyone to have a look at, and then stumble and lisp over their own moustaches and legal jargon until Kenny’s humanity was thoroughly undone and violated.

Once he told Eric about all this, he wound up thinking, all this shit they put him through -- they’d be sorry. They’d come to him begging, probably, with chocolate covered candies and tears in they eyes, asking him to make it stop. Nobody got so sore and vindictive about bureaucratic slights and the indignities of the law as Cartman. Kenny didn’t need his honor upheld but it was always nice to see someone else take it up on occasion, especially when he couldn’t be bothered to do it himself. The Sheriff’s department was only ever worth a sneer and a hot loogie, to Kenny.

By the time the sheriff came back into the dim little room, Kenny had tidied up his design with a flourish and the addition of ‘+ E.C.’ which was pretty dumb and juvenile but he’d already gone halfway there with his own initials so he thought he might as well go hard or go home with the 90s TV romantic flare. He also knew for a fact there was an elderly gentleman on the Accounting floor with the name Yosef Weinerman.

The sheriff was a thin but potbellied, slow but sleepless little man -- conversations with him slipped through Kenny’s fingers immediately to the floor, and then crunched under his shoes instead of going away.

“So are ya gonna sign over the factory, Mr. Wonka?” Kenny asked, bright-eyed. “Can’t wait to tell my folks!”

Sheriff Sandies cleared his throat and slowly closed the door behind him. He dragged the chair out past spitting distance and slowly seated himself across the table.

“We’re having a difficult time finding someone to collect you, actually.” he said. “Many of our officers request leave this time of year, to spend time with their families -- “

Here Sandies paused, as if his own words confused him. “Your parents were... unreceptive to persuasion.”
“You weren’t using the right kinda persuasion, then,” Kenny said, thinking of spitting. Instead he ventured: “And -- my T.O.?”

“Yes, he has also, uh,” he stumbled for no reason. “Yes, umm… Officer Cartman has also requested leave.”

To do what? Kenny almost asked. Fart around his apartment, probably; Cartman never went anywhere.

“Which,” the sheriff was bumbling. “Given his recent, uh, operations, may be for the best, but -- well, you can imagine how short-staffed we are. Jefferson County P.D. has been kind enough to lend us some officers, but it’s not enough to even cover the usual traffic stops -- “

“Oh, boo -- that sucks.”

The sheriff seemed to have a small awakening and looked on his conversation partner with renewed distance. He started to get up from his chair.

“I’ve contacted CFS, and Ms. Marsh will be along to pick you up shortly.”

“Marsh?” Kenny planted his trainers against the edge of the table and rocked his chair back on two legs. “She working? Didn’t she just squeeze one out?”

Sandies paused with his hand on the door. “Err, well, yes, I suppose -- “

“Do you just get up and walk out of the hospital after that?”

“Uhh, well, I don’t -- “

“Is having a baby just like a few hours of the bloody shits?”

“Err -- “

“I heard,” Kenny let his chair slam back to the concrete, and motioned pushing his fist through the looped fingers of his other hand. “Their heads come out like cones -- “

“I really don’t -- “

“Yes, that’s enough, Kenny,” Wendy’s clear voice, her familiar dark hair. “Thank you for the demonstration. Nice to hear Cartman’s been keeping up with your lessons.”

The sheriff held the door ajar and she nodded at him as she entered.

Kenny grinned at her, his victory leer, but the CFS rep smiled only weakly back, sincere in the eyes but troubled in the lines on her face. She thanked Sandies over her shoulder, which Kenny thought was weird. It was weird how, if you get anywhere fancy in life, all you end up doing is thanking people a lot, even when you feel ungrateful and they haven’t intentionally done anything for you.

“Do you need me to sign anything?” She asked, like she was picking up a dog at the pound.

“No, no -- we have everything we need, here. His transfer-of-care documents were submitted digitally,” Sandies said, nodding and shaking his head. “How is everything on your end?”

“Oh, fine,” she breezed. “EMS left this morning, and I’m getting started on the accident reports for the federal end of things. Bebe is supervising the clean-up. The drop-in will be back up and running within the week, but the renovations will take a lot longer -- luckily the foundations were built to
withstand an apocalyptic bombing, or we’d have a fairly large-scale operation on our hands.”

“Yes, lucky indeed.” Sandies hummed.

“Who signed off on the T.O.C.?”

“Oh, it was, uh, his mother. Filed under Cartman’s badge number -- Lord only knows how he got her to sign.”

“I see. Thank you, Steve.”

He lingered in the doorway. “Do, um, let me know if there’s anything I can do to, uh, help the process along.”

“Yes, will do. Thanks.” she thanked him again.

When he left at last, Wendy jerked her arm at Kenny as if to ask what he was waiting for. He shot up out his chair so fast it toppled to the concrete. He debated giving it a kick just for the satisfaction.

“Come on, then,” said the harried new mother, taking him gently behind the neck. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“My phone -- “

“I already picked up your things at the front desk. I was on my way to the station, actually, when he called.” She produced a plastic bag from the clutch of paperwork under her arm, and handed it to him on their way out of the disturbingly dead sheriff’s station.

It wasn’t the keys to Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory or anything, but inside the bag was Kenny’s cell phone, his house keys, and a bar of firesteel, the same kind every member of the wolf gang wore. The Sheriff’s jolly band of thieving elves probably threw out the half-eaten bag of Doritos from his other pocket. He’d been looking forward to those.

Marsh pushed around the same old Wrangler she had the very first time she picked him up, back when Kenny was thirteen and the first of the Yellow Wolf cases hit the news. It was a deep green, splattered up to the fenders in mud and the kind of dirt that only comes from off-roading outside the city. He was sliding into the passenger seat when he noticed a copy of the Sunday Shit Rag on the dash and snatched it up, chuckling over the front page.

“Royal Theatre in flames,’” he read, the picture of the wreckage driving him giddy. “City fire marshal… blah blah blah, ‘nothing survived the Type 2 blaze that enveloped the movie theater last night between two and four a.m. -- what’s Type 2 mean?’”

“High priority incident. It means there was a danger to the public.”

Kenny chuckled, and continued on. “Evidence of foul play in the wreckage... “

He skipped to the bottom of the article. “No reported injuries... officials recovered the remains of -- “

He paused, swallowed. “Dental records being examined for identification -- no arrests, no suspects in custody…”

“I’m sorry,” said Marsh, limply. She held the steering wheel low and loose, with her elbows in her lap. Seeing her again after all that time as an inflated incubation chamber was throwing Kenny for a
loop, so he looked away, out the window.

“What’re you sorry for?” He said. “They knew the risks.”

“Are you gonna be okay?”

“Huh? Por la mañana, miz Marsh. You don’t needa explain death to me, you know. Believe me, I get it -- “

“You can call me Wendy, now, I think,” she said, thoughtful.

“It’s a right, here,” he said, and watched his turn slide by on the wrong side of the road as Wendy kept moving along, away from the South Park border.

“I’m not sure if,” she started, sounding vague, her gaze narrowed on the road. “If he’ll be okay.”

Kenny shook his hood down around his ears. “Huh? Why not?”

Wendy tsked at him, set her dark hair swinging with a shake of her head. She took a deep breath as if to speak, and then said nothing.

In another half-second Kenny got distracted opening the plastic bag with his belongings. He tucked away his small inventory of things one by one, lunging upward in his seat to settle his phone in his back pocket and feeling it settle against the back of his leg. He wasn’t riding that low but he could never get Kevin’s old pants to sit right on his ass. He was just about to toss the baggie when he spotted his earrings glinting in the bottom and overturned them into his palm.

He was twisting the backing on the second stud when he caught Wendy’s sideways glance.

“Uh?” he said stupidly, thinking he’d ignored her by accident.

“You know how he is,” she said finally. “How he deals with things.”

“I guess… he’s kinda sensitive,” Kenny decided, thinking of opening the window, wondering what it smelled like. He wanted grass between his toes, suddenly. He wanted outside warmth on his skin.

“No, I think, destructive, is the word you’re looking for. Destructive, and, incapable of making proportional judgment calls. His mother tried to put him on a diet when we were in third grade; the boy had a psychotic break and tried to murder her -- ”

"Who puts an eight-year-old on a diet?” Kenny wondered.

He finished up with his earring, shrugged his parka lower on his shoulders, and leaned against the door, feeling fresh. He bounced a knee, forgot if Wendy said something but hummed an agreement anyway. He thought she seemed mad about something, and almost asked if they’d had another argument, but that was sort of like asking if anyone had shoplifted at Wally World recently. They took a turn onto Main and the Havana subway station came into view.

He pulled at the knees of his pants once, then again. Shifted in his seat. Then he wiggled one hand into his pocket.

“Kenny!” Wendy snapped, high-pitched panic. “What’re you doing!”

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, jerked soundly from his daydream. “I was thinking about having sex.”

The CFS representative shook her head, square-shouldered and despairing under her breath.
“Honestly...”

“What? I haven’t fucked in two days -- my shit is backed up!”

Wendy continued to shake her head. “And you got the things I dropped off for you, I take it? And you both got tested?”

“Is that why I delivered a jar of my piss to those men in white coats?”

“STDs are tested through blood samples, Kenny.”

“Pfft,” he exhaled loudly and threw his hood up, turning to look out the window. “What’s it matter? I’m clean -- I don’t do needles and any sexy stuff I’ve done has been pretty irrelevant and spotty up until, like, a month ago.”

“You won’t know for sure until you’re tested,” she said. “And you don’t know about him.”

“What?” Kenny snorted. “Officer Jack-off hasn’t been with anybody in three years. Just Heidi, kind of, and then college whoevers -- “

“Are you sure?”

“Well, yeah.”

“He’s told you this?”

“Not exactly --”

“Then you can’t know -- “

“You’re just mad at him!” Kenny spat. “You want to trick me into being mad, too!”

She gasped. “Hey! Did you just --?”

“Um,” he mumbled, ducking his head over his knees. “Sorry, Ms Marsh. If it makes you feel any better, it’s mostly on my shoes.”

They slowed to a standstill in the turn lane of the next traffic light. Wendy sighed, stroked her forehead with one hand. “All I’m saying, is, Cartman has been working with the sheriff for three years. He’s been undercover for three years. Now, that might mean he hasn’t had time for any real personal relationships, but it also means he’s had to do a lot of things not strictly in his job description, in order to build trust with this organization -- “

“I know that.”

“I’m only concerned for your safety.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not mad. I’m just a little -- bitter, I suppose.”

“Cartman says women are snakes.”

Wendy rolled her eyes with a magnificent, audible click of her tongue. “He also says the octopus is plotting to mobilize against humanity.”
“Maybe they are.”

They pulled into the parking garage and stopped on the first level, still in view of the Main street traffic outside. Kenny grabbed onto his pants, hopped out of the Wrangler, made it look sexy. He took a deep breath of the drippy underground city smells and started limbering up for the stairs when Wendy led him away with a hand between his shoulder blades. She pushed the button on the elevator.

“Good morning,” said the guy standing inside when the doors opened.

“Good morning.” she said. “Sixth floor, please.”

Kenny bared his teeth, but followed Wendy inside. The doors closed and gravity pooled heavily in the soles of his feet.

“I take it you folks have seen about that fire,” the old man said, gesturing at the newspaper in Wendy’s hands and looking gravely at her, as if he were concerned about her safety. “And with all the rain we’ve been having! Quite something. I used to take my grandkids to that theater.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Quite something. We’re very fortunate Mayor Baker set aside those emergency funds for the Child and Family Services facility next door.”

“Ah, so I heard,” he grumbled. “Don’t you worry, ma’am, I’ve been working here for thirty years -- security is tight! It’s the safest building on Main street.”

Kenny realized one of the good and bad things about being white and a woman was being perceived as non-threatening pretty much one hundred per cent of the time. The six button lit up on the panel, and the elevator creaked and groaned over the landing.

“I heard pedophiles live here,” Kenny sneered before Wendy could steer him out the doors.

“Jesus, Kenny,” she despaired again, as he took off at a trot down the sixth floor hallway, pulling his keys from his pocket and shaking his hood down.

He was working his key into the lock of the inner door when Wendy arrived behind him and knocked over his shoulder.

“I got it -- “

He finally worked the tumblers loose and fumbled the door open, left his keys in the lock and dived around the entryway. His pedophile truancy officer was just circling the couch when Kenny caught him by the neck, stacked both arms behind his head and shrugged himself close, unable to resist nipping at the skin under his ear.

For a long minute he didn’t spare much consideration for anything else in the apartment. The Mormon tabernacle choir could’ve been in front of the TV and it wouldn’t’ve made any difference.

“Is this an attack?” Cartman mumbled.

Kenny unhooked his arms and bounced back on his heels, abruptly nervous. He looked at the floor, but Eric’s feet were on floor, so he looked at those instead, and then his ankles, his knees. Black on black -- sweatpants, and a T-shirt that just said happy camper on the front -- his wilting young adulthood set Yellow Wolf buzzing. “Hey, man. Um. What’s goin’ on?”

“Not much,” said the cop. “Pats lost to the Lions last night. I, uh, just downloaded the new Fortnite.”
Kenny exhaled through his nose, glanced up to see Cartman looking at his feet. “I hate that game.”

His T.O. lifted his eyes, bit down on the corner of his lip. “Me too.”

It was kind of like the first time Kenny bugged him about being friends and telling him his first name and it struck Yellow Wolf with a sort of exhilarating comedy, how much you could miss somebody’s dumb little freckles in less than 48 hours, especially when there was a slim chance it could be a lot longer.

“How’d you get my mom to sign off?”

“I’m off-duty.” He explained. “Ya can’t have 26-year-old dudes in snapbacks picking up minors from the clink.”

“I don’t mind,” Kenny murmured, stepping up between his sock feet to close the distance again. “How’d you get my mom to sign off?”

“It was easy.” He crowed, narrowing his eyes somewhere over his head. “I told her she was pre-approved for a loan to start her new business, interest-free. All she had to do was sign.”

He found the warm skin under the hem of his shirt. “How much?”

Cartman shrugged. “Quarter-mil.”

Kenny snorted, drawing his thumbs along the line of his boxers. “She don’t think I’m worth that much.”

“That’s how much it’s gonna cost the city to renovate CFS.” He said. “It’s just lucky Wendy rammed home that emergency funding deal with the mayor last year. Jeez, you know what -- it almost looks planned.”

Kenny dug the pads of his thumbs into the soft skin just over his hips and waited, charmed by his truancy officer’s little investigative side, turned on by the hard confidence in his eyes, the kind that only came from knowing scars are tougher than skin.

“You said all you did was ask. You said you just asked Wendy for a shot with me.”

“You think I burned that building down for you?” Kenny flared his nostrils, amused. “We made that deal ages ago, bro; she needed access to the emergency funds to renovate the drop-in, and I needed her to look the other way at Wolf Gang. Then you came along, and it just -- sweetened the pot.”

He could tell Cartman wasn’t overjoyed by his classification as an accessory in Kenny’s underhanded deal with Child and Family Services, but he must’ve been flattered too because in the next breath he lifted his arm and Kenny flinched at the frigid touch of a hand on the side of his face, then leaned his cheek into the warmer rasp of his palm. It wasn’t the way you touched your homies or your girlfriend or your family, exactly -- Kenny didn’t know whether he was going to be pulled in or thrown into a table.

“The FBI has Yellow Wolf in the books as a domestic terrorist,” he said lowly. “Next to the Unabomber, dude. Some people think you killed that girl. Some think she was you.”

Kenny felt a sneer pluck at his upper lip but he held his ground like he always had in the face of good or bad; he knew the way people could twist randomness into any old shape, as long as it fit into their rules of reality. A lightning strike was a lightning strike until someone decided it was God.
Kenny knew in the end, everyone was just praying for the next turn of fortune to favor them. And he knew chaos turned the wheel.

Cartman leaned away and his hand fell under his jaw, thumb drawing slow circles over his pulse. Warmly, now.

“Sandman followed up on the receipts from the bodega,” he continued. “They all funnel through a bank account in Ohio in the name of Rainer Helmut Fichte. So the federal ding-bang parade waved around their sovereign immunity and got hold of the accounts. Pulled his addresses, froze all his cards, tracked down his cars. They thought they found him at his crib in North Park, and busted in with the SWAT team, army guns and shit. It was a fucking crackhouse -- bunch of people shooting up, getting inked, babies running around -- and they arrested BB.”

Kenny’s brow furrowed.

“Rainer wasn’t even his name, dude -- the fucker blazed a trail using Brother’s name, and now the real kingpin is off the grid again. The sheriff looks like an idiot, my operation is blown, and the brothers of sleep are basically dismantled, all except for the most important one.”

Yellow Wolf searched his eyes. “You blame me?”

Cartman shook his head and huffed a short exhale. “No. I don’t blame anyone.”

“Yeah?”

He shrugged. “I saw some shit, though.”

Kenny felt his eyes smiling. He reached for the gauze-wrapped hand at his side, but pulled up short of the cop’s blackish fingers. “What happened to your hand?”

“Six-inch leopard-print heel,” he said, frowning. “Rainer -- whatever his name is -- he only calls Lola when he’s done doing things quietly. She came in fucking up the place spraying Devastators. That’s how Kells fell.”

“Then what happened?”

“Whaddaya think? Chick was kicking my ass, so I grabbed a knife by the blade, and stabbed her with the handle.”

Kenny chittered a laugh. “No you didn’t.”

“Sure as shit!” He insisted, lifting his hands to gesture. “Ran out of that hellhole with my ass on fire, dude. Murderer on my shoulder, a key of base on my back, bitch under my arm. If it weren’t for napalm-bombing the theater and making off with a band of kid terrorists -- I’d be a big damn hero today. Instead I’m another round of station gossip, for Chrissake. Sandman looks at me like I’ve got a disease now, for Chr - “

“Oh, baby,” Yellow Wolf interrupted, shuffling forward until he could shove his navel between his hips. “I’ll carry your disease.”

“Fuck. Okay, okay -- wait.” He complained, and shoved him aside with a sweep of his arm. “Lemme get rid of Wendy before she sets up a damn tripod. Video footage for the next Sparkly Girl Counsel, and then all the tits in Colorado will have us on their calendars.”

Kenny shadowed him to the entryway but turned off at the last minute in the direction of the kitchen
instead of the door. He perused the shelves for food, opened the few cabinets with doors and then the
fridge -- found milk but no cereal, and thought how fucking weird that was. There was some sort of
organic orb sitting on the counter, the size of a smallish volleyball. It looked like a big wad of
spiderwebs, but heavy and rough in texture. Kenny left it alone after a single poke.

The window was cracked over the sink and he sidled over, gauging the late morning from the color
of the sky. He took a deep breath of ambient air, but mostly got the tang of dry old whiskey. He
narrowed his gaze on the sink and found no plates or anything, just a jar and a pair of bumblebee
glasses. He tried to remember if Cartman had looked shitty or angry or hungover, but he didn’t think
so. He just looked like he was dealing.

The rhythm of raised voices reached his ears, and Kenny wondered if it would help at all to go over
there.

He decided against it, pulled up his hood and felt a rush of air from the window pool into it like an
astronaut’s helmet of breathable atmosphere.

“Kenny!” came a rough bark.

He jolted from his reverie and almost pulled on his hood strings. He hadn’t heard Cartman bark like
that for a while.

By the second ring he was trotting around the counter into the entryway, heart rammed up under his
collarbones because somebody was definitely in trouble and his T.O. sounded ready to start snapping
heads. Wendy came into view tapping her foot by the junk table. Cartman had twisted his hat
around.

“C’mere, man,” he was saying. “I only wanna say this once.”

Kenny shuffled forward but didn’t know who to hide behind.

Cartman pointed at Wendy. “I let this fantasy script circulate in fucking chick reality because I’ve
had shit to do and no crap left to spare. But apparently my two-dimensional existence has been like
fucking Sport Center for the bitches in my life, and I need to make a few things clear -- “

Wendy crossed her arms. Cartman took a deep breath.

“I didn’t hoe my way to the top of Bruder command. I didn’t share needles or suck dicks through
holes in the wall. Nobody bought me prostitutes as tokens of good faith, there was no naked mud
fighting, and nobody directly whipped it out and pissed on me -- it wasn’t the damn Good Shepherd;
Rainer hired me to do business. Just because we were dealing crystal meth on a statewide scale
doesn’t mean we were all sex addicts abusing drugs at the same time. Shit, we were basically
pharmacists -- “

“I was only suggesting -- “

“Nah, listen,” he cut her off with a wave. “I don’t care what you think about me, or my job, or my
past. But don’t spread your wack-world shit around without any goddamn evidence just because
you’re bitter about missing out on Kidney Day. It’s not my fault you crawled on top of Stan nine
months ago and did whatever it is creatures like you do to reproduce. You need to go home, produce
milk for your slimy boring neonate, and stay away. I’m not gonna have you on the sidelines today
making plays like, fucking, Matt Patricia.”

“Eric, I don’t know who that is.”
“Of course you don’t,” he exploded. “If you watched the game with us once in a while, instead of fabricating my life story and plotting to turn my boyfriend against me, then you’d know it was a compliment -- “

Kenny curled his fingers loosely around Cartman’s wrist, above the gauze and tape.

“That’s snake shit,” he finished.

“Alright,” Wendy said, in her ease-down tone. “Where did you get your tattoos done?”

Cartman tensed. “What? You think, I’m -- an idiot?”

She shrugged.

“My last tattoo was two years ago, dude, and they were disposable needles!”

Wendy shifted her weight to her opposite foot. She glanced at the table, but didn’t budge. Somewhere far away a long time ago, Kenny thought, an ancient culture had built monuments to gods like Wendy Marsh.

“You don’t believe me,” he concluded, then, to Kenny’s dismay, he looked at him. “Do you believe me?”

Wolf rocked onto his toes, prepared to bolt, but stayed, slid his hand up the inside of his arm.

Cartman heaved a disappointed sigh and elbowed him away. “Son of a bitch.”

The laminate creaked under Wendy’s feet. Cartman glared at her shoes, then at Kenny. Somebody’s stomach gurgled.

“Okay, look,” he sighed. “When Rainer took me over -- took my trade, my name, my product -- I already did a lot of shit I’m not proud of, on my scene, and he didn’t just want to sink me into that same old shit because he knew I could handle it. The brothers don’t just disconnect their boys from families and friends, old lives and shit; they don’t jump girls, pull the hammer on kids and animals because it’s cold, slice up their enemies because it’s hard or something -- Rainer makes them do it because it rips something in them. Their voice, their will, or their lousy humanity, I don’t fucking know, but it rips and he digs in and draws new lines for them; that’s how he controls them.”

“I, uh,” Cartman sniffed, wetted his lips and lifted his discolored hand to cradle against his chest. “I did what I had to. I payed off so many fucking strippers and hoes I couldn’t afford my fucking rent. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to, sometimes, but in those days, I mean -- “

He paused, shook his head and his dead hand at the floor and plowed on: “Rainer had me on nights going into nights into days and nights; the only way to stay awake and stay alert at first was with caffeine, then it was blow. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to, but -- it could’ve been the drugs or the stress, I don’t know -- I just couldn’t get it up. In those days, I couldn’t get it up even for my hand.”

Kenny laced his fingers over his mouth but some laughter squeaked out.

“Go ahead and laugh, dude, it’s true. I had to make allies with the craziest motherfuckers I could find in there, and make sure they vouched for me. But Rainer was suspicious of anyone who didn’t participate in his spoils system; I couldn't throw him off forever, and I'd dodged too many corners already, too many bullets. So he started to test my commitment. Sent me everywhere with Brother, all of a sudden, working the gun shows, the big auctions -- always unarmed, no vest or anything, like cannon fodder -- and then there was disposals. For a while it was disposals, mostly.”
He licked his lips again and Kenny watched him stare in blank horror at a space on the floor in front of them. “The human body is slightly heavier than freshwater. Everybody sinks. Straight to the bottom, no exceptions. They only start to float back up after they decay. Gas builds up in the tissues, you know -- bacteria. Takes a week or so, sometimes, in the winter, but in the summertime when the water’s warm they start coming up in two days or less. Once that happens, it’s almost impossible to sink ‘em, even with counterweights.”


He didn't stop. “One of the rules was they only got moved in threes and fours, because anything more than that cost us an extra thirty cents per gallon of gas in the vans. Every hundred pounds took our mileage down 2%, and Rainer kept his fucking eye on it. We found ways to to stay under the limit and still get the job done. Skin -- uh, the average human skin weighs twenty pounds, you know. After a while on the job, I found muscles I never knew I had. I found switches in my brain that could shut out sounds and smells. I hummed the *Birthday Song* on the messier ones. During the slow periods disposals never stopped, but there was less funding to go around. We had to supply our own wheels, our own masks and bags.”

Again Wendy tried to speak out.

“Still he didn’t trust me.” he said, not loud but forceful enough to make her stop. “Had to report back to the moving base after every deal, every drop, every transport, and tell him what went down while the fuck held knives inside my mouth -- “

Cartman put one finger in his mouth and pinched the outside with his thumb to turn the skin inside out. Kenny heard Wendy’s sharp inhale and the *tsk* of her tongue meeting teeth. He dragged his eyes from the floor all the way up to the pale mottled grooves drawn over the inside of his T.O.’s cheek, high up in the gum-line where you wouldn’t notice on a passing examination.

Kenny felt short of breath, suddenly, and the pressure of an acute headache flared up behind his left eye.

“I was twenty-two but I was tall and big as fuck and everybody knew I could take hits. Even you know that.” He jerked his chin at Wendy. “After six months of it, I met Rainer up one night to make my report. The Mongrel knocked my ass senseless, bruised my pancreas, ruptured my spleen, split the eleventh and twelfth ribs on my left side -- then, they put something on my chest, some cream that burned and then numbed. I was in and out the whole time after, but I remember somebody stabbing at me with a bunch of needles on the end of a metal rod. Not a machine, just, like, a rod. I don’t know how long it was, exactly, but they did me up till sun-up and dropped me at Hell’s Pass with a chestful of blood and ooze.”

“That was my *initiation* day,” Eric finished. “And because I’m not an idiot, I got tested. But it was clean, the tag healed, and nobody fucked with me anymore after that. That’s why you don’t see too many frauds walking around with this tattoo. Everybody gets initiated. It was me and Tomcat, on those runs back then, just me and him doing disposals until sunrise. We weren’t even law enforcement yet.”

A breeze tickled his eartips. The wind tasted sweet and pure even though Cartman’s memories seemed contaminated and vile. There was a stiffening in the air as the silence crystallized, and Kenny wanted to draw him into his arms and call him pet names and stupid shit but they’d been apart for two days and Eric never talked about his *Bruder* stuff -- he hadn’t budged on the topic, not once, the whole time Kenny knew him.

The silence crushed him down.
“Why did he call you Starbuck?” Wendy was the first one to break it. Kenny almost smiled at her.

Cartman scoffed. “It’s the name of the only idiot in Moby Dick who challenged the captain, the only one who thought Ahab was insane for chasing that big fucking whale. He ended up dying for the motherfucker anyway.”

“You’re not dead,” she said, authoritative. “And you don’t have to carry that name around anymore. Okay? It’s over.”

“Yeah. I guess. Thanks, Wends.”

She raised her eyebrows. “For what?”

Cartman lifted his head and looked at her straight-on. “For taking his stupid deal, burning down the theater and shit. You’re a thug, for real.”

Wendy smiled a different smile from any Kenny ever saw from her -- and he knew exactly how she felt because it didn’t happen a lot, but when Eric Cartman complimented you, you felt like royalty.

“This doesn’t mean you both don’t have to get tested, because you do. Strap up, for God’s sake.”

“I have to get going -- ” She turned to the door. "Stan needs the Wrangler for Kidney Day, and I should get back to Dante. Don’t do anything too reckless. Watch that hand. And use last year’s rules.”

Wendy was in the hallway when Cartman called after her. “You guys named her Dante?”

The door snuffed shut and the gate clattered to a close on top of it.

Kenny waited a flicker of the second hand before slipping in front of the cop. He put his hands on his face and laced his fingers behind his neck. “Eric…” he said, endlessly.

“What?”

Kenny pushed at the base of his skull until it tipped forward and he stretched up to share the air with him. “None of that stuff was in your file.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” he snorted. “They call it being undercover.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well. You knew they recruited me for having a record. You know I’m not the dude in my file, anymore.”

“Mmhmm,” Kenny hummed and tipped his head further, dizzy with proximity.

“Wait,” said Cartman. “Show me your grill.”

Yellow Wolf bared his teeth on command, not even smiling, just his scuzziest sneer.

“Good grief,” his T.O. murmured, and Kenny felt his good hand drop into a familiar grip under his leg. “Okay.”

Cartman tensed, lifted as Kenny jumped at him, and backed up until his back and Kenny’s knees hit the kitchen counter, crossed his forearms under his ass and hiked him high and close. Kenny shrugged his parka off his shoulders and flung his shirt over his head, then took a deep breath and
settled his palms down over Cartman's collarbones. He inhaled deeply and as his chest swelled a tongue flicked out over the bump of his breastbone. Quick heat and a slow cool.

Kenny tipped his weight over his knees and pushed himself up till his elbows locked, buzzing high and elevated looking down on his truancy officer. Almost immediately lips sealed against his skin and a hot tongue laved over his belly button. He swallowed, shuddered through another breath. It was a simple matter for Cartman’s functioning hand to tug his jeans down -- rose to grip his ass firmly over his shorts and Kenny yelped as a bubble of anxiety burst in his throat. Cartman leaned back to suck in a breath, and looked up at him, devil's eyes on blast. Yellow Wolf bent his elbows to slide back down, falling low over his heels until they were eye-level.

Cartman dodged his searching mouth and caught his earlobe instead, clipping around the skin and flicking his tongue at the stud in the center. Kenny turned his mouth against his cheekbone, pushed on his chest to force him back, and gained access to the corner of his mouth.

He curled one arm around his neck and Eric allowed his head to be tipped back onto the crook of his elbow. Kenny took his hat by the brim and tossed it on the counter, raked his fingers over the newly sheared hair -- he missed having the longer grippy bits. Cartman’s tongue flipped against his own, but Kenny didn’t want to give up control just yet, so he denied him, taking a tip from the cop’s own book and bringing his free hand up to the side of his jaw to keep his mouth open. With new leverage he explored the soft boundary along Cartman’s upper molars, probing the area with his tongue and swallowing his muffled complaints until he found the array of scarring under his lip. Kenny uttered a small moan and withdrew just enough to seal their open mouths together. Then he lifted up on his knees to grind his hips up against him.

Cartman pivoted around the counter to reverse their positions, dropped Kenny to his ass on the cold granite and rejoined their lips. His tongue lanced into his mouth, and Kenny had to focus on defense, sneaking breaths when he could. Cartman’s good hand pried his left shoe off by the heel, and it thunked to the laminate. He trapped his other heel against his side and Kenny wiggled his ankle until the shoe fell to join its partner on the floor. Cartman tugged on the backs of his knees and Kenny had to throw a hand behind him to keep from falling to his back. His flailing hand knocked into something scaly and weird, and Kenny broke the kiss with a startled ye-erp!

“What?” the cop panted.

He waved his finger at the foreign object. “What is that thing!”

“Wha -- “ Eric reached out with his left hand and grabbed it while Kenny cringed. “It’s a melon, you moron. Honeydew melon.”

“No, melons are green!”

“It’s not peeled yet, that’s why. Are you telling me you’ve never seen one of these?”

Kenny felt his nostrils flare, and wondered if he could play it off like he wasn’t an ignoramus, somehow. He could tell you the exact amphetamine content in a sample of speed versus base by the time he was eleven years old, but his mother was never the kind of woman to pack him with Bartlett pears for lunch. He had a lie on the tip of his tongue when Kenny made the mistake of reaching out to touch the orb in Cartman’s hand.

He flinched back. “It feels gross.”

“Jesus,” Cartman chuckled, rolling the thing pretending to be fruit off into the corner by the coffee maker. “How long did it take you to get comfortable touching your own dick? You really are dumb.”
“Don’t call me dumb anymore. I don’t like when you do that.”

“I don’t like when you call me corny.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like, when -- when you leave your dang toenails lying around!”

Cartman snorted. “Okay, fine, I’m working on that. I just forget where I leave them. Honest. Anything else?”

Kenny thought about it. “I wish you wouldn’t drink out of those Cancun glasses.”

“What? Those were -- “ His blackened fingers twitched, then he pinched the bridge of his nose with his left hand. “I had the guys over for like, a minute, to watch the game replay. Stan and whiskey is like Kyle and cough syrup. I don’t even think about Cancun when I use them -- if I knew they wigged you out I would’ve done the dishes last night.”

“No, you don’t have to do that. I don’t know why they wig me out either.” Kenny leaned back on his palms, wanted to trace Eric’s crazy eyebrows with his thumbs but didn’t.

“Anything else?”

“No, not right now. Um -- what about you?”

“Nothing,” he answered, starting to lean forward. Kenny stopped him with a hand on his throat.

“What now?”

“Seriously? There isn’t anything I do that annoys you?”

“Not right now there isn’t -- why are you asking this stuff?”

“I just got out of jail. I -- I stink!”

“You always stink. You always forget to take your goddamn shoes off at the door, you always leave the toothpaste out, you’re so fucking poor it makes the shit-huts on TV look not so bad -- but we wouldn’t be here still if it all bothered me that much, or if I thought you could change.”

Yellow Wolf calmed somewhat but didn’t move his hand. He pushed on the ring of cartilage in the center of his throat. “How come ya never wear that necklace?”

He sighed noisily. “Is that what this is about? I use the glasses from Cancun but not your trailer park bling, so you think I’m still into Heidi and just playing around here -- come on, man.”

“Then why not!” He demanded.

“I just -- I think necklaces are tacky on dudes, okay?”

“Well how’m I s’posed to know that if ya never said anything?” Kenny groused, dropping his hand finally and slumping his shoulders.

“Nah, come on, Wolf,” Eric pleaded. “I didn’t say anything ’cause you’d be like this. Come on, hey -- let’s make out some more.”

“Nah,” said Kenny. “I’m cool. My boner died. Your lies killed it. Did you make up all that stuff about body-bagging just to scare Wendy away?”
“Sure, and I got these cuts from eating pinecones.” he murmured, and his arms snaked in low around him, started to pull Kenny forward off the counter. “You just had to touch the melon, didn’t you.”

He didn’t think it was exactly fair to make his T.O. carry him around, with his yuck hand and all, but he was already doing it and Kenny felt salty so he let him. It was tough to stretch his legs around with Kevin’s pants hanging so low, but he dug his knees into his sides and Cartman folded his arms underneath him. Kenny put his palms over his cold ears, dragged curled fingers over the back of his head, kind of enjoying the new softness of shorter hair.

It wasn’t long before Kenny smelled the warmer, slightly staler air of the bedroom, heavy with the aromas of listless living -- laundry, mixed fragrances and old odors. Cartman crawled over the bed, and Kenny loosened his grip when he felt mattress under his ass. He blew a long exhale from his nose and stared up at the ceiling’s familiar warps and spirals.

A quick jerk brought him back to reality as his secondhand jeans were removed from the equation at last. His truancy officer sank down over him, dragging his lower body over his crotch, and rose only far enough to stick his mouth over Kenny’s sternum, then dip his tongue into the hollow at the base of his throat. When he spoke it was so close to his skin he could feel the vibrations.

“Sorry you had to sleep with those cockroaches.”

Kenny turned his head to expose his neck, hoping to invite him further. “I mean, we didn’t get that far, but there was some non-consensual fondling -- ”

He lost his joke when Cartman took his invitation, bracing himself over a forearm to lean back before dragging himself forward again. Kenny shivered as his erection ran up the inside of his leg and made passing contact with his own. Goosebumps rose on his neck and faded slow under his heated breath. Kenny hissed, because it wasn’t enough, and fought the urge to shout at him to just do it --

“Do what?” said Cartman, in his dark laughing tone, and he leaned over his right arm to dig his undamaged left thumb into the relaxed muscle on the outside of Kenny’s right pec. For the few heartbeats before it hurt the nerves tickled with a strange pleasure.

“Bite me,” he commanded.

The murmur of breath over his neck became the rough scrape of teeth and Kenny waited for it, heart pounding for it -- but all Cartman did was suck an array of ant-bite hickies into his skin, arranged in a fine line up the ridge of muscle leading up to the underside of his jaw. Kenny bucked against him and growled his disappointment.

“I don’t wanna bite you.”

“But, I want you, to,” he protested haltingly. The shallow breathing wore him out and when Cartman leaned away he took another huge breath through his nose.

His truancy officer kneeled between his legs, folded his good hand over his hip and curled his back to touch his mouth to the small concavity under where Kenny’s ribs ended. “You breathe through your nose all the time because your diaphragm is underdeveloped.” He said, looking up expectantly as though it was a compliment.

Yellow Wolf frowned. “I feel like I’m telling you I like you all the time, but you don’t do it back.”

Cartman grinned like he was accepting a challenge, and for a second he looked seventeen, maybe -- sometime before all the shit hit the fan. “You’ll know for sure I do, after this.”
He tugged at his shorts and Kenny lifted his hips and swung his leg around to allow them to be removed. Cartman sat up on his knees and wrapped his hand around his dick, looking Kenny up and down and then straight in the eyes like he ought to fess up to something.

“Uhm,” Kenny cleared his throat, glancing down and then back to his red eyes. “I have a permit for that.”

The cop shook his head and swore, but it kind of sounded like the L-word.

Taking one of Kenny’s legs into the crook of his elbow, Eric shrugged it onto his right shoulder and pressed his mouth to the inside of the knee, then started to nip and tug his way down Kenny’s inner thigh in another line of little ant-bites. Goosebumps rose over the entire surface area of his body, it felt like, and Kenny tried to stifle the involuntary jerks of his knee.

His leg hair was just transitioning to pube when he stopped him. “Wait, uh -- “

Cartman’s eyes flicked up without lifting his head, a few agonizing inches from Kenny’s fucking two-day old erection. He really was backed up.

“When we do this, in my fantasies, uhm -- “ he said, hoarse. “You don’t have a shirt on.”

The dumb-ass happy camper T-shirt joined the mess on the floor and Cartman wedged his shoulder back under Kenny’s left leg while his eyebrows asked if he was happy now. He was going to say he probably would be in another few minutes, maybe, when the flat of the cop’s tongue ran a no-nonsense stripe up the underside of his cock. It ripped the air from his lungs, but he managed to hang on, kept his eyes from squeezing shut while the tip of his tongue probed along the sensitive head, then ran up his slit.

“Eric!”

He withdrew, looking mildly alarmed. “What?”

Kenny stared down at him, breathing hard.

Cartman rolled his eyes and sunk back down. He used his good hand to roll back the foreskin, looped his fingers around the base, and Kenny braced himself on his elbows to watch as his T.O. dipped to take the head of his cock into the chamber behind his teeth.

He cried out, again, urgently enough to pull Eric from his task. He sat up fully, shrugged Kenny’s leg more snugly between his neck and shoulder, and stroked him once with the lazy rough of his hand like he was testing him for shock resistance, the bastard.

“Kenny,” Cartman began. “Have you ever had a blow job before?”

He was aching hard and too desperate for release to endure anything so intense, but he wasn’t going to admit it. Yellow Wolf felt the rest of his blood supply rise to his skin, and usually you can’t see yourself blush and it’s not so bad after the first heat, but now he could see it all over his chest and it sucked. “Not really.”

“O-kay,” he hummed. “Yo, that’s fine -- stop clenching up.”

“I’ll take care of you,” he added smugly, and leaned over Kenny to make out shamelessly with his belly button. He was just steadying himself with another slow breath when Eric clamped his teeth down hard over the crest of his hip. The last of his exhale came out with a goofy whimper and Kenny felt his whole left side jerk and his dick twitched once, lonesome.
“Go on, please,” he said in a small voice.

“You sure?” Cartman drawled, nibbling his way back to his midline and huffing a sharp exhale over where the pubic hair got thick. Then he sat up again and Kenny groaned at the heat loss, narrowing his eyes on the loops of light and dark gray ink woven over his truancy officer’s chest, the hollow-eyed horror leaking over his shoulder.

“I’m just,” Kenny swallowed, tried to bury the rasp in his throat. “Backed up, is all.”

“Just don’t blow your load in my mouth, okay?”

Too choked up to answer, Kenny nodded a few more times than was necessary, and watched the cop’s head dip down again, slowing to a stop just over the gold. Yellow Wolf jerked his hips, greedy, then froze at a sudden pinch at the base of his cock -- glanced down to see Cartman had looped his fingers around him in a tight ring, and as he watched, dragged the cum-stopping grip all the way up his shaft. Kenny was trapped in the breathless space between vocalization and air, fighting both the urge to look and the desire to fall flat on his back, and he didn’t see but definitely felt the moment his dick was taken into the heat of his mouth a second time. His legs shuddered.

“Ff-uck!” He swore, with Eric’s special enunciation.

A hum of amusement came from his tormentor’s throat and spread through his groin till Kenny felt his nuts tighten. He kicked his foot over the blankets, every short-stopped breath arriving with faint, noisy effort. Cartman hitched his knee up further on his shoulder and Kenny noticed him leaning over his right arm just before an expansion of the warmth around his shaft, and then the abrupt tugging sensation of Cartman’s throat closing around the head as he swallowed, and everything was so flooded with congratulatory hormones and dopamine Kenny felt like his ribs were melting.

A gust of air cooled the sweat building on his navel as Cartman exhaled through his nose on the withdrawal, but just before the tip emerged he wrapped his hand back around the base and dipped again. Kenny whimpered a moan at the rippling touch of his tongue and couldn’t field a roll of his hips in time. He realized that the actual blow job had barely begun and he was already halfway there.

On the third or fourth downstroke Eric’s hand fell away and just when Kenny thought he was used to the feeling of having his brains blown out, he pulled all the way off, sat up, wiped his lips, cleared his throat, and stuck two fingers in his mouth. Before Kenny could clear the scatter-dots from his eyes and ask what the deal was, Cartman had the bell-end of his cock back in the cradle of his tongue, and a few inches of index finger wiggled into his asshole. Kenny bent his free leg in the first of his throes of pleasure following the small intrusion, and fell to his back by the second. Cartman shrugged his free shoulder under his other knee and Kenny crossed his ankles loosely behind him, opening his hips just so.

His T.O. sat up on his elbows and knees and swallowed him with a wet sound that set Kenny’s toes curling. The coy touch of his fingertip was replaced by the blunt assault of both spit-slick fingers side-by-side, curled to the second knuckle. They started to push and Kenny tried to jerk away, but the movement prompted a scrape of teeth against his shaft so he froze up, nearly in tears -- lifted his head to glare through the discomfort, and met Eric’s eyes glaring as well. Kenny couldn’t look long though because his cheeks hollowed around him and the two knuckles started pushing into him again.

Yellow Wolf hissed and swore but tried to relax and stay still even as the dark magic of long-awaited head became muddled by the ongoing act of excessive force prodding inconsiderately at his asshole.

He blinked open his eyes a few moments, or even a minute, later, and his eyelids were sweaty, his
chest was heaving, and he couldn’t believe it, but, his truancy officer’s long fingers were curled about as deep in his colon as they could go without inviting friends. Kenny exhaled as they settled, and Eric came off him again just to drag his tongue up the side of his shaft, seal his lips over the flared tip and suck sharply. Kenny groaned long and low, flexing his abdominal muscles in an effort to hold back. Then he felt the fingers start to unfurl.

“Are you -- *kidding* me -- “ he spat, eyes half-closed and delirious. “Do you really think that’s gonna feel -- “

He broke off with another hiss and growl as the fingers continued to move, and Eric only watched, Kenny’s knees over his shoulders, breath on his cock.

“You -- fucking -- bastard.”

After the widest point his fingers finally straightened and Kenny’s hitched breath of relief eased into a pleased moan as the small release in pressure brought with it a flutter of vaguely familiar heat and sensation, and his legs shuddered again.

That seemed to be Cartman’s cue, and before Kenny could really relax around the fresh invasion, he took his cock back into his mouth and moved his fingers slowly to accommodate the oral rhythm.

“*Fuck,*” Kenny swore again, quiet but tightly bound with strain, and he found himself inclined to push back on Eric’s fingers, suddenly, because the combination of head and stimulation of his prostate was bringing him unfairly quickly to the apex of pleasure. He gave up the ghost on holding out for his masculinity, and with his vision blacking at the edges Kenny remembered he needed to alert Cartman -- but it was like climbing a mountain into the stratosphere and yelling through thin oxygen at the person beneath you. His finger twitched, that was about it.

His T.O. clued into the fact he was winding up, though, and his shoulders shifted again as he allowed Kenny’s cock to slip free without letting up on his prostate. Kenny squinted his eyes open. Cartman was barely moving, just watching him slide on his fingers -- and by the time he added the third Kenny had started to come.

It was a noiseless wave up to the point Eric pulled his hand back and wrapped it around Kenny instead to stroke him through it, down to the very last drop, and his last lingering groan.

Kenny kept his sweat-cooled eyes closed afterward, feeling limp and sort of twitchy. He opened them to narrow weakly on his truancy officer when he felt the twisted dick wiping his hand off on his stomach.

“Don’t fuckin’ do that, ya prick.”

“I lied before.”

Kenny rolled his eyes. “About what?”

“I think about your age all the time.” He said, dragging his thumb through Kenny’s sticky pubes and then circling his belly. “I’ve wanted to do that since you first suggested it, I think.”

“I never asked you to blow me, dude. You’re the one who took my dick out in your cruiser.”

“I’m serious, man -- this is totally cereal.” He said, looking up with a wildness in his red eyes. “I never cared that you’re a minor *legally* -- I think I fucking get off on it!”

Kenny started to laugh so abruptly he was hiccuping.
“What are you laughing for? I really am a pedophile! I have a disease!”

“Homie,” he huffed. “My great-uncle was twenty-two years older than his wife. He grew up with her dad.”

“That does make me feel better, actually,” Cartman admitted, sliding out from under Kenny’s legs and sitting next to him with a grunt of discomfort, legs loosely crossed. He pushed his good hand into his sweatpants and Kenny watched the shape of it wrapping around his dick.

“Man, I’m glad we didn’t grow up together,” he said, overloud. “‘Cause then we’d be bros and it would be so weird liking your puny diaphragm.”

Kenny glanced at his torso; he was smeared with cum like an aftershot from a poor-quality porno. “I think it would’ve worked out.”

“I think you’re an idiot.”

“I think you’re corny, motherfucker!”

Chapter End Notes

next part already written, just in edits. part after that is also in the works.

oh!! ya boi just landed an apprenticeship at a tattoo shop so look out!!

more art coming soon i promise
“I think you’re corny, motherfucker!”

“Hey,” Cartman said. “I know this is sudden, but it’s Kidney Day, and we need to leave before noon.”


Eric bared his teeth halfway, smug. “Will you turn around while I beat off in the shower?”

“So you can fannasize about my nubile young body?” Kenny stretched his arms and legs with a whine. “Creepy old cop.”

Kenny was pleased to see his truancy officer flush. “First of all, it’s fan-ta-size. Second, no, because you’re not nubile, and you definitely don’t fit the definition of a beddable woman. I don’t know where you even learned that word. It wasn’t in any of my books. And you know what -- it’s not even that creepy, anymore, because you’re eighteen now.”

“No-o,” he intoned. “I’m eighteen later.”


“I was born overnight.” Kenny scratched at his jaw, realized he kind of needed to shave and he was terrible at it. “You were a pedophile way before today, dude -- why not consummate it now?”

“Consummate?” He squeaked. “Jesus! Did Heidi share you on her subscription to Cosmos magazine? Are they the ones teaching kids to spread their legs for law enforcement? What the fuck’s next -- how to paint your eyelashes without looking like a whore? Nine fun ways to kill off your unwanted offspring?”

“Fuck -- “ Kenny giggled. “You are such a bastard. I’m so glad she hooked us up.”

“Who, Wendy?” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “For sure, dog. What a fucking thug. Breaking a terrorist out of a 5-year juvie sentence and dropping him in my lap -- all to cut a deal and burn her own building down -- man, she must’ve liked your work more than I did. Right? I mean she musta saw something in that thirteen-year-old, grimy-ass son of a booze hound.”

Kenny rolled his eyes.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed anyway, pushing himself to a sitting position and then shuffling onto his knees in front of his truancy officer. “And you saw my headshot in the news, while you were eating your milk without any fuckin’ cereal, and you thought damn -- that’s when you became a pedophile.”
Yellow Wolf inched forward some more and plucked Eric’s hand from his pants by the wrist. It was Cartman’s turn to roll his eyes, but he caught onto his intentions, braced his working hand and damaged hand’s wrist over his sides and aided a little as Kenny clambered over him.

“You are going right into the shower, after this.”

Yellow Wolf sneered, tongue between his teeth. “You’ve wanted me in your lap since day one.”

“You were the one who climbed on -- “

“I thought you were cute.”

“Agh,” he murmured, turning his head away as Yellow Wolf loomed close. “Don’t kiss me, I’ve got a mouthful of your dick grease.”

So Kenny grazed his lips over the faint freckling under his eye and proceeded to his favorite spot under the outer corner of his jaw. He had to pull on his ear to tilt his head, since his hair was too short now.

“Little freak,” Eric hissed, as Kenny attacked the area a little too aggressively. He let his eyes slip closed and focused on working the blood vessels under his skin into an uproar. When he felt Cartman shifting underneath him, Kenny remembered his erection, and reached down to bat his hand away again.

“Just let me -- “


Cartman glanced behind him and, after deciding there was adequate space, lowered himself slowly to the mattress. Kenny sat back in the hollow of his pelvis and centered himself over his dick. One of Eric’s knees bent up and he steadied himself on it, a little daunted by the pressure on his ass.

“You have no idea what you’re doing, do you.”

“Uhm, no -- but I don’t need your fucking eyebrows to tell me that, bro,” Kenny planted his knees and shifted his hips experimentally. “It would be pretty hot, though, wouldn’t it?”

His T.O. threw off his efforts by sitting up again, grabbing Kenny under the ass and rolling to his shins and knees. He rocked up a few times, staring him down like a pitbull.

“Sure, maybe,” he said. “If I were naked. And you weren’t already juiced.”

“Y’know -- in my fantasies, you’re a little more, uh, nice?”

“Then I’d like to know who the fuck you been dreaming about,” he challenged, in his face and too loud.

Kenny narrowed his eyes. “I told you to lay down.”

Cartman matched him eye for eye for a second, then flicked both eyebrows and lowered himself back down. “Fine. How does it go in your fantasy, princess?”

“Put your arms over your head.”

He took his time about it but obliged, clasping his hands behind his neck and laying back on them looking unimpressed. Kenny liked what that did to the shapes in his chest and arms, and
congratulated himself on a good idea. He scooted forward, walked on his hands up his sides until he could look him in the eye.

“Don’t move those.” He warned.

“I’d like to see you get me off without them.”

Kenny nicked his chin with his canine tooth in passing. “I have more abilities than your left hand, actually.”

He set his teeth into the fresh bruising under his jaw and sucked on the skin till he growled, then bent his elbows to sink down over him. Kenny let his hips slide backward and felt Cartman buck against him as he explored the tag on his chest. The looping design attracted him for its graffiti-like grace, but it came off a lot meaner than a painted wall, somehow. Maybe because of its history, or its permanence. Then again, there was a part on his left pec that had faded under the salt burn -- so at least some stuff could go away, or hurt less, maybe.

Kenny followed the trail of curling brown hair from the shallow pool over his sternum down the stream along his midline, circling his navel and leaving off where it plunged darkly downward. His happy trail was making Kenny real happy, all of a sudden. He sat further back. Cartman bounced his heels apart, and Kenny slapped at his bent knees until he finally allowed them to straighten out.

Yellow Wolf pressed his palms into the soft skin of his sides and dug his fingernails into the looser flesh. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the inside of one hip, followed the diagonal groove down as far as he could, and started to fix a bruise into the taut skin there, just above the line of his boxers. He wasn’t gentle about it, and his T.O. bucked again, uttering a whimper that filled the quiet room. Kenny felt a tug on his hair.

“Arms,” he snapped, breaking away with a *clap*.

“Then, just -- get *on* with it -- “

Kenny leaned back down to sweep his tongue over the angry mark, then sat back on his heels and reached out to palm him over his pants. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know,” he scoffed, clasping his hands back behind his neck. “It’s your fantasy, dickhead.”

Kenny ran his tongue over the surface of his upper teeth. “Head? Is that what you want?”

Cartman swallowed and was silent. Kenny rolled down the band on his sweats, and he lifted up to help, which he thought was kind of sweet. Once he’d kicked off the first layer, Kenny planted his hands on his hips and shoved him back down, catching his teeth on the lower curve of his belly.

“Ken -- “

“Yeah, okay, getting on with it.” He pushed one hand under the band of his shorts, carved his nails through the bed of pubic hair and wrapped his fingers around the base of his cock, twisted his arm to get it to settle against his palm. “Huh -- damn.”

“What.”

Kenny forced a laugh that came out breathless. “You’re so thick, dude.”

His truancy officer turned his head into the crook of his elbow, but his eyes flicked back to Kenny.

“No teeth.”
He grinned because he knew he liked his grill and drew his hand up to free his dick from his boxers. There was some of the slick shine of precum at the tip and Kenny spread it around with the pad of his thumb, wondering why they didn’t just make more of that stuff.

He tongued at the corners of his mouth before dipping down to taste it, found not much of a flavor but a tang like pepper in the air and Kenny breathed it in, fascinated to find that he was already chubbing up a little, at the stink of another guy’s pheromones. He took the head carefully into his mouth and Cartman swore like nothing he’d ever heard before, high-pitched and creative. “Flipping midgets, man -- “

Kenny was halfway down the shaft when he reversed directions, pulled all the way off and wiped his mouth on his arm. “I have so much spit, dude.”

“You’re supposed to.” The cop eyed him darkly. “It’ll help to swallow.”

“Okay,” he nodded, and adjusted his angle before sinking down again, listening to Eric’s breathing go shallow and irregular.

Thick brown curls were tickling his nose when Kenny felt the tip bump the back of his throat. He swallowed, breathing in through his nose, and started to withdraw, but then accidentally swallowed again and it confused his rhythm. He tried changing the shape of his tongue but just ended up scraping him with a jagged canine. Cartman grunted and Kenny pulled off again to see him covering his eyes with his forearm.

“I think it would help if you moved.”

“Uh?” The arm lifted. “Move where?”

Kenny wrapped his fist around him. “Your dick, man. In my mouth.”

His eyebrows twitched up and the red in his eyes seemed to spread. “What? Seriously?”

“Yeah. Just, you know, slowly. I think it’ll help. You’re not that big, err, long, I mean -- it’ll be fine.”

Kenny flicked at the tip with his tongue before centering himself and taking him into his mouth again. At some point Cartman gave a small roll of his hips and he felt him rise the rest of the way to the back of his mouth without effort. Kenny hummed as he lifted his head and swallowed his next downstroke, thinking what a good idea he’d had.

Once he settled into rhythm, Kenny flicked his eyes up to check on his T.O. and found him up on his elbows, motionless but for the pulse of his hips and staring like he didn’t know what he was seeing.

Kenny pulled away kind of drippy and wiped his mouth again. “You can go a little faster.”

He nodded and Yellow Wolf mimicked the lilt of his shoulders as he went back down, fighting a spastic surge of laughter at the upside-down reality of rendering Eric Cartman speechless.

The next jerk of his hips came with a force that brought him bumping up against his soft palate and he adjusted his angle to avoid gagging -- caught the next thrust better prepared and lifted his tongue as he swallowed. The reward was a slight uptick in the sound of Eric’s strangled breathing, and he focused on repeating the move, amused as always by his truancy officer’s variety of noises, high and low-pitched.

“Jesus,” he heard him starting to strain and swear, and Kenny glanced up to see Cartman clutching at his own throat.
Yellow Wolf had to withdraw so he could laugh without accidentally nicking him again.

“Freak,” he accused, taking him in hand for a single stroke base to tip.

“Will you, just, finish?” Cartman hurled back, voice tight. “We gotta go -- “

“Wanna come in my mouth?”

“Wha -- no!”

“Why not?”

“Because Wendy will fucking find out, and put me on a cock leash!”

“Okay, fine, jeez. I’ll bring it up again after the dudes in logos poke at our shit.”

“It’s a blood test, mor -- “ Cartman caught himself, and grit: “Uhm, honey.”

Kenny reeled back cackling. “That sounded so unnatural.”

He frowned. “Yeah, that’s not gonna work for me. I was two seconds from coming and now I’d need to catch a bus across town to even get close. We’re gonna be late. We’re gonna miss the coin toss. Tucker will probably -- ”

“Oh -- that sucks.” Kenny wasn’t too sorry. “I’m hard again so I thought I would change tactics.”

“Change -- huh?”

Yellow Wolf slid back into the space between his legs and plucked at the band on his shorts until Cartman got a clue and shifted up to help discard them. Kenny rocked forward to wedge his hips between his truancy officer’s legs and grind up on him. Their bare erections made glancing contact and Cartman exhaled hard.

“Agh -- “

He centered Kenny with a touch to his side, and sort of writhed in place until the arrangement was more streamlined for the most contact. But when he started to buck Kenny stopped him with a hand on his throat.

“Arms up.”

“What, still? How do you expect me to -- “

Yellow Wolf lowered him down and planted his other hand on the bed by his armpit. He let his lower body fall in a long grind, then again with some added weight over his neck and Cartman abruptly moaned. For some reason that was good as soft core porn to Kenny and he laid into a few more thrusts, muttering to himself. “Freak cop, like to get choked -- I shoulda given you the collar.”

Cartman growled, gaze dark and hateful like the first time Kenny made him come in the shower, and Yellow Wolf thought what amazing taste he had, and how hot that fucking calendar would be, and he laid into him harder -- felt his weapon loading up and pushed down on his T.O.’s windpipe until he heard a slight wheeze in his labored breaths.

Kenny started to hum close to his release, low and expectant like a choir at the birth of a saint, when he heard the nicest thing the cop said since the L-word.
“Wolf -- “ he moaned, low and gravelly. “Lemme touch you.”

As soon as he managed a vaguely affirmative noise, Kenny felt the whisper of unsteady fingers over his left-side ribs and a firm grip behind his leg. Eric slid Kenny securely into the cradle of his hips and took over the pace. After a few trapped thrusts, he tensed and sat up until they were chest to chest -- looked Kenny steady in the eye while he took his wrist in his good hand and lifted it up to his neck, then wrapped the halting fingers of his other hand around his opposite wrist and brought that up as well. The right hand knuckles were all relocated but it still must’ve hurt like hell. Kenny pressed his palms to the knobs on his shoulders, then inward, toward the sides of his neck.

Cartman lifted on his knees and let him slide down, then crushed them together at the groin on the upstroke. Kenny caught on and leaned over his hands to help drag himself up his truancy officer’s body. The shift of weight had the added effect of choking him out a bit -- which, Yellow Wolf gathered, was exactly what the cop wanted.

Seeming to disregard his injury, Cartman shifted both hands under his hips and adjusted Kenny from slightly back to slightly forward, so he wasn’t rutting against him anymore so much as riding him. He felt his shaft settle low on the curve of his ass just behind his balls -- and at the height of each thrust the tip of his fat cock bumped against his relaxed hole.

Yellow Wolf tried a backward roll of his hips and Eric panted a few couplets of trapped breath, centered his right hand low on his sacrum and shifted the left in front to wrap around his erection, not moving it too much but applying enough pressure so Kenny reflexively thrust into it.

Cartman sped up just as he was thinking of suggesting it, and Kenny tightened his hands as the climax he’d been building on reared again. He tipped his head back without really thinking about it. A slow wave built in his groin and radiated out until his extremities began to seize up. His lungs tightened, shortening his breaths into constant noise. Eric hauled him close and held him down while he increased his pace. At some point the head of his cock pushed bluntly inside him and tugged ruthlessly on the way out, sharpening Kenny’s small grunts to a shout deep in his throat. Cartman leaned forward against his chokehold to clamp his teeth over the bundle of muscle between Kenny’s neck and shoulder. He bit down, and for the first time, they came at once.

When the movement had slowed to a gradual stop, Yellow Wolf loosened his hands and roped his arms limply around the cop’s shoulders, rested his chin over his shoulder and turned his face into his reddened neck. He watched his own chest heaving.

“Jesus -- “ Cartman managed a dry chuckle but he was breathing hard too. “Shut up, will you?”

“Hn?” Kenny didn’t even realize he was still making noise.

“You are so fucking loud, man, holy shit.” His back curled as he relaxed and Kenny felt his legs cross underneath him. “All my bonking in semi-public space scenarios are out the window.”

“Why?” he murmured.

Cartman snorted. “Uh-huh, I’m the freak. My neighbor probably thinks I’ve ordered the harem special. Or a dirty choir mixtape.”

"Nobody does mixtapes anymore, dude." Kenny opened his eyes to assess the damage at the base of his throat, decided that it wouldn’t bruise. “We should probably decide on a safe word, so I know when to stop cutting off oxygen to your brain. Unless you want me to knock you out and keep going. You’re so quiet it wouldn’t make much difference -- I mean for a naturally loud and obnoxious guy you’re kind of like Deadpool in bed.”
“Heidi didn’t like me panting in her ear.”

“Fuck -- that’s it? Heidi didn’t like your dick in her ass either, dude.”

“Yeah?” A grin tilted one side of his mouth. “That good, huh?”

Kenny rolled his eyes. “Like butter on a lobster.”

“That was just a promo, you know. The whole thing is much more exciting.”

Kenny felt his fucking hand wiping cum on his belly again, then it circled around his back and one finger travelled the curve of his ass. He hadn’t sprayed inside him or anything, but he’d come damn close and Kenny was covered in the shit -- and he didn’t really appreciate the deft fingers taking advantage of the situation. His asshole might have been wet and compliant but that didn’t mean he was. Not the second part, anyway.

“What are you doing? I thought we didn’t have ‘time’,” said Kenny, leaning away from him to establish air-quotes for his T.O.’s viewing pleasure. “Now you’re jumping the gun on round three.”

Cartman’s eyes were lazy and Kenny could feel him finally flaccid underneath him but that wasn’t enough to stop him from horsing around, apparently.

“It would just be my round two.” He reminded him, simultaneously pushing the lengths of two fingers into his ass.

“Dude,” he struggled not to tense up. “Are you serious?”

The fingers withdrew and he dragged them through the collection of semen over his taint before returning to his hole, circling. Kenny waited for their next plunge, but it never came.

Cartman relaxed and folded his arms underneath him again.

“Fine. Come on.” He started to slide off the bed. “You can sleep in the car.”

Kenny hummed that he heard, and adjusted his arms over his shoulders. “Do you like carrying me around?”

He stopped short. “Oh, crap. Nah, I didn’t mean to -- here.”

“No!” He yelped, as his arms started to loosen. “I’m a fucking mess, bro, don’t make me walk. I was just wondering -- ‘cause you always do it, since that first time.”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged him up again, exiting to the main room. “It’s easier this way. I mean, you’re not that easy to carry -- it’s like, juggling a nippy kangaroo -- but I feel like you’re gonna run off, or something.”

Kenny thought about that for a second, stretched out one arm to flick on the lights as they entered the bathroom, and held tight while he bent to start the water.

“I always come back, though,” he said, over the sound of the water’s roar. “I mean I always come back.”

“Here,” the cop grunted, releasing his arms. “You first. I gotta dig out my clothes. Stan lent me some of his old gear for you.”

“What gear?”
But he pried off his arms and left the room and Kenny stepped into the shower to address the cum dripping down his leg.

He’d finished with his hair and just reached again for the 3-in-1 stuff when Eric stepped in. He took the bottle from him and gestured for him to turn around. Kenny obeyed just so he didn’t have to watch the rotation of his damn finger through the air. They were the nicest hands on the force, he bet, and Kenny had been manhandled by most of them -- not ever in fun ways.

He wasn’t spared for long as Cartman’s soapy hands glided up his sides and tackled his front first. Without the gauze wrapping on, Kenny could make out the vaguely heel-shaped bruise of impact on the back of his hand. It stayed over his hip while his left hand did most of the work, and Kenny brought his own over to say hello, ghosting the pad of his thumb over the angry knuckles.

Cartman spent extra time around his navel and reapplied before pushing his hand further down, combing through his hair to take his dick in hand just long enough to soap it clean. He pulled a little roughly on the way off but it could’ve easily been unintentional.

At least, that’s what he was considering before his truancy officer stepped up a little closer and his good hand fell between his cheeks.

“Relax,” he said into his ear. “You wanna be clean, don’t you?”

“What kind of a stupid question is that,” Kenny muttered, shifted his legs apart but still jumped and puckered when his fingers passed over his asshole and then swept along his taint. Eric was mouthing over the aching reminder of his earlier bite when his hand curled to grip at his nuts and Kenny’s exhausted system started to spit fire again.

“I thought you said you didn’t want to bite.”

“I didn’t.”

“Liar.”

“Done,” said Cartman, poking him in the back.

“How?”

“You’re done; get out.”

“Are you gonna beat off in here?”

“No -- get out.”

Kenny stumbled onto the rug and dripped there for a second, not liking the looks of the cold tile between him and the laundry basket. He steadied himself and made a leap for the other rug in front of the sink, and let himself air-dry while he brushed his teeth. By the time he was done he was still dripping so he skipped underwear and just pulled on his orange shorts.

He was bending over his knees to towel dry his hair when the water shut off, and his T.O. performed more or less the same ritual. Kenny kneeled on the toilet seat and opened the medicine cabinet.

“You wanna wrap your hand again?”

Cartman washed his last loogie down the drain, capped the toothpaste, and seemed to avoid himself in the mirror. He copied Kenny’s commando idea and bent to continue digging around in the laundry
with his shorts so low Kenny could see the mole on his left cheek.

“You wanna wrap your hand?” He tried again.

“Huh? What’s up?” He straightened up and moved to peer over Kenny’s shoulder into the cabinet like he saw something weird in there.

“You hand, Mermaid Man,” Kenny said loudly. “You gonna wrap that shit up? You gonna fight evil today?”

“Wow, you’re not even funny after two rounds.” He drawled, shutting the cabinet over his head. “I’m not deaf, I’m hard of hearing. And the wrappings won’t fit under my gloves.”

Kenny spun around on the toilet seat and stretched up on his knees. “Your gloves?”

“Mhm,” he exhaled and the gust brushed Kenny’s cheek, then he took his chin in hand and ran his fingertips along his jawline. “You wanna shave?”

“I, uh -- thought I might keep it.”

“Seriously?” His eyebrows doubted him. “I mean, whatever you want, dude, but you’re kind of like Eminem -- like everyone will say it looks good, but your face really can’t wear facial hair.”


“Personally, I would pass,” Eric decided. “Everyone I’ve known who’s grown just the stache becomes a dick overnight. They join up with the Latter-Day Saints, marry within the family. Then -- they just, disappear.”

“You’re so full of shit, man, no wonder your mom tried to put you on a diet.”

“Fair -- except cutting waffles out of my life isn’t going to change the fact that I’m a big fuckin’ dude; it’s just gonna piss me off.” he said, folding his arms under him and lifting Kenny just long enough to deposit him on the sink counter.

Kenny giggled, remembered the cop who sat next to him in the trailer park, told him he was going to jail, and then he’d made the mistake of calling him fat.

Yellow Wolf trapped him between his knees and lifted his hands to his face, curled his fingers to scratch them over his jaw. “Are you gonna shave?”

Cartman's eyes fell to half-mast and he shook his head in slow-motion. Kenny shifted his blunt nails to scratch under his chin. Eric tilted his head, and Kenny fell in love with his corny T.O. all over again.

“I’d trust you with a razor before a matchstick,” said the cop, breaking out of his trance and returning to the cabinet. “But it still doesn’t sound like a very good combination.”

He had a plastic razor uncapped and a gob of cream on his fingers when he happened to glance up at Kenny and stop motionless in front of him. “What? What is this look?”

“Huh?” Kenny blinked. “Sorry. I was thinking about topping you.”

Cartman sighed like he was regretting something already past. “We’re gonna miss the coin toss.”
Chapter End Notes

KD is next
IT'S SO GOOD 2 BE BACK THX FOR WAITING HERE WE GO

wt throwback art:
See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Will you… ” He paused, shifted some gravel in his throat. “Tell me about your brother?”

Eric’s crusty Volvo thunk-thunked over another manhole cover on a busy stretch of main street and Kenny remembered feeling mad, mad at him for bringing it up when he knew the whole thing sucked ass. If Kenny wanted to re-live dark times he’d shove his head up a woodchuck’s butt. But then he found himself putting together an answer, anyway.

“You ever known anybody who OD’d?” he said. “Somebody close. Somebody addicted a long time.”

"Stan's towel."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Um -- " His truancy officer fell silent. He scratched at the left side of his chest. Then: “No."

“It’s not the same as losing them in a car crash, or an accident. It’s not like any sort of illness either, because they don’t forget and they don’t fade, really. You have an addict in the family, the first thing that happens is your memory of ’em goes rancid.”

Kenny paused. “Did you see Kevin’s autopsy report?”

“I didn't want to.” Cartman answered. "Did you?" Kenny hadn’t wanted anything to do with it at first, either. But eventually he decided he needed the information, if only to source the dislocated grief in his bones.

“Needle shards,” he smiled. “Six or seven of them, lodged in his arm. They gave him months to live before you gunned him down.”

Cartman shifted and Yellow Wolf let the cop sit alone in his discomfort for a while. Thunk-thunk. Another man-hole.

“I hadn’t seen him in a while when I heard what happened on the news. I'd spent years trying to track him down -- but he was always across town, surfing a different couch, with a different friend at some overcrowded crib. When I was twelve I didn't see Kevin much between emergency room visits, and I didn't recognize him, then. When things got real bad, the doctors refused to do surgery
on him. Because of the drugs. They said he'd go and get fucked up again even if they saved him. The social workers and cops couldn’t agree whether he should go to rehab or jail, so he went back to the streets.

“I saw Kevin’s girl, sometimes, when she came through to visit family in the trailer park,” Kenny paused abruptly, frowned at the footspace. Haltingly he continued. "Scabs all over her face and shit. I saw, cigarette burns on her back, bro. I asked if she was in trouble and she said nah.”

He drifted on. “I felt worse for my old classmate Allie than Kevin, that year. My brother died a long time ago. To be honest, dude, when I heard the news, a part of me -- a part of me felt relieved.”

When Kenny stopped crying -- or at least, when his shoulders stopped shaking so much, he wiped his face with his sleeve and reached for the CDs under the center console just for something to do.

Eric slapped him. “Stop that.”

He snatched his hand back and favored his knuckles. “Stop what?”

Cartman dropped his grip on the steering wheel and gestured with his free hand. “Doing that -- grabby thing.”

“I’m looking for a piece of gum, asshole.” Kenny spat. “Do I need a permit?”

“Hn,” the cop tossed his head and snorted. “Sure do. It’s a subclass of permit called ‘verbal permission’. The best part is, it’s totally free.”

Kenny delivered an eye-roll he was sure Eric would feel without turning his head. “Can I have a piece of gum? Please?”

Cartman pulled his chatty Volvo around a turn, toward downtown -- the station, and the border of South Park. Both destinations made Kenny fidget and squirrel in the passenger seat.

“Permission denied.”

“What -- why?”

“Because you got Pringles at the gas station,” Eric hissed, brandishing the perspiring black ice coffee in his near hand. Yellow Wolf eyed the nasty black straw, chewed crooked all up and down. “Knowing the artificial cheese powder would spoil and congeal and grow rapidly advancing bacteria societies in your mouth -- ”

“Gross, man -- shut the fuck up, will you? I don’t need the extras.”

“Fine, but,” Cartman huffed. “Make your nasty cheese bed; and lie in it, bitch.”

Kenny decided to let it go. He plucked one of the half-empty water bottles from the foot-space and sucked it down, tossed the plastic in the backseat. Then he worked off his shoes. Every time he asked if it was a very long ride he got punched in the arm for it, harder each time, but they had stopped for snacks, so he figured it was okay to settle in.

Yellow Wolf fidgeted. The seatbelt was carving into his neck. If they got in an accident he’d be the first to go: beheaded. It would be quick, at least.

It wasn’t hot outside exactly but room temperature got so exhausting when the air didn’t move at all. He felt the restless fatigue of car sickness coming on.
"No, you’re just bored." His truancy officer, mirrored Ray Bans and civilian clothes: that faded old *Macbeth* sweater with the new yellow stain, hood caught up on his hat visor like he just didn’t care. Kenny sank down in his seat.

"Will ya *stop* squirming? It’s been ten minutes. We’re barely off the block."

He thought he let it go, but then it swam back and Kenny snapped at it. "What’s your psychosis with food, anyway?"

"I have no psychosis with food," he waved his damn hand. "Just, every time I look at it, it makes me sick."

"Yeah, babe," Kenny hummed, fiddling with the drawstring on his shorts. He tugged on one end and held it while the other loosened, trying to even out the lengths. "What’s up with that?"

"It’s not psychosis," he said again. "It’s a psychological device I installed in my brain through special conditioning: mostly years and years of bulimia and horrific binge-eating."

Kenny abandoned the drawstring ends and released his seatbelt with a deafening *clunk* and slither of a searing edge up his neck. He waited to see if Eric would say anything about it, but the stillness only dragged on. He tipped his head to catch his eye, but the cop’s gaze was centered firmly down the endless line of inner city intersections.

"For real?" he murmured.

"Straight up." He glared like he was ripping on somebody out the windshield. "Went ten days, one time, on nothing but coffee grinds. Broke on the eleventh day with a whole jar of peanut butter. In college I ate cigarettes and drug store liquor -- it got so bad I started getting hospitalized with infections and shit. One time I remember just hemorrhaging water, dude. Every orifice, morning to dusk, two days -- forget food, I couldn’t even sneak liquids into my body; everything got rejected. The second day I was gushing the last of my water into a plastic bag, stuck to a shitter in the fourth floor dormitories.

"I was down bad." Ka- *thunk!* Another manhole. "Maybe the worst I’ve ever been."

"What happened?"

"I laid down on the floor." He shrugged. "Woke up getting strapped to a board. Two bags of IV fluid. Back to class."

"But... why would you do all that?"

"D’you know what it feels like?" Cartman said, low and even. "To be wrung out like that, stretched out on the floor so dry and still breathing? I’m talking weakness like paralysis, dude. Jesus in the desert with talking mambas."

Kenny thought about it. Ten days. He shook his head. "No."

"It’s incredible," his truancy officer murmured. "And then two sacks of sugar water later, you’re back. Your gut aches. Your mom called. You put your gloves back on and drive your ass home."

"In the end," he continued. "The experiment was a success. It took a while, but -- food doesn’t control me anymore. In fact, some of my favorite ones disgust me."

Yellow Wolf thought dimly how his truancy officer could rationalize literally anything.
“But,” Kenny considered. “I like your little thick-on.”

“Nah,” Eric crowed. “In high school, man, I decided I wanted a six-pack. And I tried everything -- well, I tried everything except those vibrating belts that’re s’posed to give you abs while you sit on the couch, because I grew a second brain cell, by that point -- but nothing worked. It didn’t matter how many sports I played, how many hours in the weight room; my diet was french fries and salad dressing.”

Kenny giggled. “There’s such a thing as fit and fat, you know.”

“Obese,” Cartman corrected, an uncompromising glare behind his lenses. “I’m obese. In my mind, in my genes. There’s no stopping it. I needed to design a complex to fight it. And it’s still hard. Being a recovering fat person is like being an alcoholic. Every social event is a wedding with five-hundred incredibly hot strangers handing out tiny cocktails. Like in a minute I’m gonna be drowning in it, so I have to hang onto my conditioning, or I’ll be crawling back to the clinic on my night-shifts for another dose of Extra Crispy.”

“I get it,” Kenny giggled. “I guess.”

“Look, I know it doesn’t sit right with how people think of normal, but it works for me. Besides. They say fish live longer when they’re hungry.”

“You’re not a fish, bro.”

“That’s not the point.” He said, brittle at the edges. “I like this. I like the control I have right now and what I don’t need is everybody and my massage therapist telling me I look sick and have I called my mother. I’m fine, okay? I got this. I’m totally awake -- y’all are the ones walking around dead-eyed and malnourished.”

“All right. So did you ever cancel that magazine subscription?”

At once, Eric’s shoulders sagged. He shoved his hat and hood behind his neck and scrubbed his hand through his hair. “I’m a mess,” he admitted. “Fuck. Good catch, Wolf. You couldn’t sop me up with two sheets of Bounty.”

“Aww,” Kenny blurted. He reached out again for the emotional livewire that was Eric T. Cartman, and this time he was allowed to slip his hand into the warm space under his hood. “I’m a mess,” he admitted. “Fuck. Good catch, Wolf. You couldn’t sop me up with two sheets of Bounty.”

“Aw,” Kenny blurted. He reached out again for the emotional livewire that was Eric T. Cartman, and this time he was allowed to slip his hand into the warm space under his hood. “I don’t mind that you’re juicy. And -- I’ll get you that sandwich you like from the Mediterranean place whenever you want. Okay? No onions.”

“Sure.” Cartman sighed like he did when Kenny had missed the point. He sped up around a traffic circle and the automatic transmission chugged into action sluggishly. “So what’s your story?” He joked.

Yellow Wolf sat back. “Well, sometimes I wake up and pretend all my friends are alive. But then,” he paused ingenuously. “I start to think, maybe they were never there to begin with -- maybe I’m the one who keeps dying.”

Cartman choked over the ancient remains of his gas station coffee. Which was just as well -- all the color was gone and the ice had melted and he’d been chewing on that damn straw for the last ten blocks of traffic lights.


His truancy officer straightened up and pitched his empty cup in the backseat. “Dude. You can’t just,
“say depressing shit like that.”

“Right, sorry. Forgot that’s your mood.”

Cartman bared his teeth to the canines, but didn’t take his eyes off the road. “No need to take a tone.”

“I’m not taking a tone,” Kenny sank further down in his seat, glanced at his T.O. and thought of biting his rude ass. “It’s just -- it’s hot, traffic sucks. We’re both on a sugar-low.”

Cartman narrowed his eyes over the dash as the dick in the Subaru-boo-boo in front of them finally took the thumb out his ass and rolled through the green light -- “See, there’s that tone again.”

Yellow Wolf scowled. He felt a temper climbing under the memory of solid bars of seatbelt across his torso. Cockroaches and an invisible gulping water jug. “Go on,” he said. “Wave your hand, Eric. Wave your damn hand at me, I wanna see it --”

“Tsst!” He hissed between his teeth. Kenny startled to a stop.

“Down, boy,” the cop commanded. “Let me rephrase. Please don’t say depressing shit like that. Think about it. It could easily have been you, any of those times. What happened to Kevin -- I mean. I think about you behind that bullet all the time. Or on the wrong end of a Bruder knife, like Axel. Or Kells, in that damn theater. It was you, man, all of those times.”

Kenny pried the lid off his Pringles.

“Alright,” he added, and Kenny saw his hand twitch but it stayed on the gear-shift. “I’m old and I’m delicate now and I can’t handle the torment, for Chrissake. So let’s pretend you’re alive.”

“Okay,” said Kenny. He fumbled his last cheese-dusted chip and snatched it up quickly from the seat, afraid Cartman might launch into another rant about his fucking interior. “None of that stuff is your fault, you know.”

They passed an ambulance flashing at the bus stop on Havana Street. Another heart-attack at the Cheesecake Factory, he guessed.

“I read a short story once about a man who never knew what time it was because his wife couldn’t read clocks.”

“Huh?” Kenny started to clean the powder from his fingertips. “What are you talking about? Is that from your weird book -- Arabian Nights?”

“No,” Cartman waved a hand, cut the gesture short and raised it to the back of his neck instead. “Maybe, I don’t know. Point is, I know you don’t think so. And I know not everything shitty that’s happened has been exactly my fault, but I still feel guilty about it. I feel guilty about your cruddy parents abusing you, and the way Sheriff shithead Sandies tried to work you over. I even feel bad about school. And I don’t know why but seeing those things all over you makes me want to ball up my skeleton and throw it out forever even pretending to be hurt.”

When society failed, Cartman felt betrayed. He took it personally; his ego was so big it was actually enveloping the people around him, and if he couldn’t identify the specific source of failure, or wrongdoing, or punish a specific person for it, then he’d slap around the next closest thing as payment. It wasn’t lashing out, exactly -- he was just, firing arrows at a target nobody else could see. True hatred was only ever forced from love, anyway.

“Forget it,” Cartman advised. “The drive won’t feel that long. Once we get out of the disgusting part
of Colorado where people actually live, it gets a lot nicer. You can hang your head out the window. We’ll roll a fat one and light up for the black cows.”

Kenny didn’t know why Colorado’s black cows were so much cuter than the other ones. Maybe it was their unbroken canvases of umber fur, black eyes like the deepest and most knowing night -- sometimes Kenny thought he simply loved cows. Everyone from South Park loved cows.

“Ken.”

Kenny hummed. Late spring snow was melting off the roof of the car and down the windows in thick rivulets. Most of winter was gone off the streets, too -- just dirty gray reminders left by the snow plows, here and there, shored up against spring like shabby fortresses of half-melted stone.

“No matter what happens today, just remember I told you all that lame stuff about me because I like you.”

“Damn,” Kenny chuckled, looking away from the window. “You’re making me nervous. Where are we going?”

Cartman shrugged his shoulders high. “Not the gay rodeo,” he grumbled. “Tell you that much.”

“What? No shirtless horseback riding, no homoeroticism -- you’re kinda crushing my dreams here, dog.”

“If I ever rode a horse without a shirt on, all you would see is the galaxy rash of giant red hives leaping out of my skin,” the officer informed him, solemn. “If you ever needed an image to kill a boner.”

Kenny giggled. “It’s still hot.”

“A rash, dude,” Cartman squinted over the dash. “Flaming and pimply, over my entire body.”

“And all your moles like little black holes.”

He frowned. “You’re confusing a benign skin deformity with theoretical physics.” The officer sighed. “Forget the horses, man. We’ll be surrounded by a bunch of off-duty cops and soulless spitheads from my past -- they’re hideous, violent people; they will talk to you about crop circles and bear-baiting until you want to tie rubber bands around their testicles -- ”

“Yeah, okay. I get it.” Kenny shrugged him off. “Sounds like school.”

“Worse than that, man. Most of these people believe I am solely responsible for ruining their lives, at some point. They want me dead, they want me publicly dead -- ”

Yellow Wolf sat up straight. “Are they gonna tell me lots of lame stuff about you, too?”

“No,” Cartman rubbed at one eye under his lenses. “Yes. Not anything you should believe, though. Just, don’t talk to anybody.”

“Should I… hang onto your belt all day? Call you ‘master’?” Kenny glanced around his seat. “I forgot the collar -- ”

“No,” the cop intoned sharply. “Just, don’t talk to Craig. Or Heidi. Or Bebe or Red -- don’t talk to any girls, okay? Especially not Tucker.”

Kenny rolled his eyes. “I get it, you don’t like the warden -- ”
“He’s not the warden. He’s a streak of vaginal discharge with a high school diploma: a civil servant. You only need to know how to walk on two legs to do his job.”

“Why does this sound so familiar?”

“Shut up!” His truancy officer snarled with surprising vigor. “We’re nothing alike.”

Kenny fidgeted, said nothing. Denial spread like a pile of unspun thread between them.

“Okay,” he said. “You might see a few, surface similarities. The important things are the subtleties -- which Tucker has none of. He’s been my customer, occasionally my client, but never the competition, know what I’m saying? Besides, I’m not a servant of the state, I’m a, fuckin’, warrior. I fight society’s shitty problems, not sleep with them.”

Kenny chewed the zipper on his parka.

Eric frowned. “That didn’t come out right. I mean metaphorically sleeping with them -- he’s the figurehead of a branch of the criminal justice system that has nothing to do with justice. If I had his job I would tie a freezer bag around my head, nice and tight.”

“Okay,” Yellow Wolf chuckled.

“I’m seriously,” his T.O. insisted. “I’d probably be smoking twenty-five cigarettes a day, too, if I was the face of juvie hall. I’d be taking videos of little kids getting undressed in closets, too, if I was him - -”

“Gross, man!” Kenny interrupted with a startled laugh. “You’re making that up.”

Cartman snorted, his gaze on the road. “You think so?”

A few seconds went by before Kenny broke; he fidgeted in his seat and pulled his legs up. Then: “You’re making that up, right?”

It set him off again, and Kenny had to weather another ridiculous rant -- part of his T.O.’s ‘Craig Tucker is a Butt Pirate’ lecture series -- and when the perfect opportunity arose to scramble over the center console into his lap, Kenny took it. Cartman swore a long daisy chain of colorful words, and Yellow Wolf settled his head demurely over the cop’s shoulder to wait while he pulled the car around, out of traffic, and into the nearest turn-lane.

“Jesus!” They jerked to a stop in a parking lot. Cartman cranked up the e-brake before turning his hands to Kenny’s sides. “This is getting a little old -- can I roll ten miles without a lap dance? Ya fuckin’ maniac.”

Yellow Wolf could tell it flattered him, anyway, and he let him keep his douche-canoe lenses on while he connected their mouths with a hunger. Eric whined and Kenny prepared to open him up.

“No, Kenny.” But suddenly he was being pushed. “No, I said. Back off.”

“What -- why?”

“Because I can’t stomach the standard McCormick tongue-fucking with all that cheese shit in your mouth!”

“Fine, fine,” Kenny rolled his eyes but dipped his head to layer some soft, slow nips at the corner of his jaw. “I’ll be right back. Stay here.”
“Hn?” Cartman grunted. He sat up like he was just shook awake. “Huh?”

But Kenny was already out the driver’s side and slamming the door shut behind him. He threw up his hood on the jaunt across the parking lot, tugged the officer’s wallet from his pocket and flipped it open. Cartman only carried petty cash in fifties and hundreds.

By the time he slid back into the passenger seat, his T.O. was sitting low and sullen, staring hard over the dashboard of his civilian bucket.

“You jumped me for Dunk’s?”

Kenny chuckled. “Don’t be mad. Look, I got you your favorite -- ” He dangled a beverage over his lap like an imminent threat till he took it. “Bean juice, black and bitter, just the way you like it.” Yellow Wolf worked the cop’s wallet back into his leg pocket, feeling generous. He stashed his own iced cappuccino with hazelnut and extra extra whipped cream in the sagging cup-holder behind the gear-shift.

Cartman was frowning but punching his straw in the hole of the new coffee anyway. Then he rotated the cup and paused. “Did you tell them to write ‘Officer Oral Fixation’ on it?”

“What? How did they think of that?” Kenny stashed his paper bag in the foot space and rummaged inside it. He’d also bought a bagel and a couple of those delicious fucking French donuts. “I got an extra straw for you, too, in case you wanna chew another one all up and down. Or,” he tossed the straw at him. “You could just blow me in the backseat.”

“I hate you so fucking much.” The sunglasses came off. Cartman scrubbed his hand through his hair again and hunched over the wheel. One eyebrow stuck up over an angled red eye.

Kenny pulled the straw out of his ice capp and cleaned the whipped cream off the end, licked his lips, dunked it back in and did it again.

Cartman swore, set his coffee down. He got out of the car and slammed the door.

Yellow Wolf sat up on his knees and swiveled to put his back to the windshield and watch his truancy officer slide into the backseat.

“Well?” He snapped, red eyes ablaze. “C’mere.”

Kenny docked his cappuccino and fairly flew over the center console, landing palms and knees against the pleather seating; he tipped his head sideways to get at the throat of the cop trapped in between. Cartman’s hands crawled under his clothing, up his bare sides, and into the warmth of his armpits. Kenny broke early off tagging up his favorite wall to shiver violently. “Oh, you shit,” he cursed.

Eric dug his thumbs in, fanned his frigid fingers around his shoulder blades, and Kenny arched his back like frostbitten wings might be ripping out of him any minute.

When he filled his lungs again he was deposited on his back across the gray seat -- even with his head brushing the door he still had to bend his knees and cramp his legs a little against the opposite door to stay flat. It didn’t seem to bother Cartman -- and when the officer sat up and discarded his shirt, hat and sweater without prompting, Kenny suspected his impish little suggestion had somehow struck gold.

“Take this off,” said Eric, flicking at the collar of his secondhand Miller High-life T-shirt. “Just this.”
Kenny obeyed, and laid back bare-chested inside the warm shell of his parka. At first he wondered if the cop thought he might get cold or something, without it -- but then Cartman flicked his dark eyes over him and Kenny saw the straight horny-ass hoodoo in his gaze; and he thought maybe his truancy officer had an erotic calendar series in his head, too.

Kenny considered the theory confirmed when Cartman pulled the loop on his belt, proceeded to take his dick out and just start, fucking, jacking it right there in the backseat, with his eyes on him and everything, like Kenny was a sexy screensaver. He watched his long-fingered hand at work, then squirmed and gathered a noise in the well of his throat, feeling ignored. “Eric -- ”

The cop chuckled. “Take your shorts off, dumbass.”

After some haplessly awkward shuffling of limbs Kenny managed to wiggle out of his shorts, then hesitated with his thumbs hooked under the band of his soft sporty boxer briefs -- like, there were lots of windows to his dick around here, he thought, and it wasn’t like the glass was tinted or anything. Even the screen to the sunroof was open. An excited shiver marched up his spine and the next moment Kenny was alone in his parka and his mismatched socks.

Cartman ducked his head back under his leg, shuffled forward and grated his palms up and down Kenny’s thighs, at last with some modicum of warmth. The smells of melting snowdrifts and gasoline carried over the pavement and a faraway ambulance sang its urgent song. Kenny giggled. It felt like they were hiding underneath something, hiding away from the shitty urban mood.

His T.O. leaned over him and their hips crashed together. Kenny groped for his face in the rush of contact that followed, and the next thrust brought his head thumping up against the car door.

“Ow.”

“Sorry,” Cartman huffed. “I’m too big for this.”

He started to sit back but not before catching his nipple between his teeth. Kenny twitched and his back curled. Eric cupped his balls in one hand and weighed the other palm-down over his belly. Sensation was slowly turning him inside-out, and Kenny bucked to try and force his way close again. His truancy officer braced one hand against his side, curled his back and sank down over his cock.

The lack of privacy was distracting but sort of thrilling too. Like, someone could walk too close at any moment, in the quiet little lot. Shadows of passing cars occasionally flooded the interior and Kenny knew it was possible that the occupants saw one or half or both of them. He wrapped his leg around his T.O. and tensed when he felt the cold frame of his ear sting his inner thigh, and then the hot stroke of a tongue climbing the underside of his shaft. Kenny dropped his head back and breathed hard. A song came on that he really liked. *Up,* he thought. People thought he was down but he was up.

There was a whole lot of spit and Kenny started to feel the run-off on a slow journey around his balls, headed down the curve of his backside. Eric’s cheeks hollowed around him and while Kenny's legs numbed and his toes curled he also felt a finger drag over his taint and work its way inside him, no lubricant except the excess spit run off his cock. He grabbed Cartman by the hair, tipped his hips, and forced the cop to give him neck. Another dry finger fought its way inside him and Kenny released the pent-up air in his lungs with a breezy moan that rippled and grew on itself until it became endless.

It was the deepest head of his life and when he resurfaced he had no clue how many fingers were up his ass or even how long ago he’d finished. Only that his T.O. was nosing around his pubes, and
there was none of the familiar sticky flake and pull of semen across his belly.

Kenny pushed himself up to his elbows. Cartman teased his foreskin with the tip of his tongue and lapped at the overstimulated head -- his legs twitched and he was about to snap at him for messing around when he was flaccid, again, when something shifted inside him the size of a fucking baseball bat, and the cop began to slowly withdraw two forefingers and his thumb -- half his friggin’ hand, basically -- from his asshole. Kenny’s eyes nearly bolted out of his head and he cried out. It wasn’t like they’d gone crazy with the lubricant, or anything, and post-head tingles had left him jittery. Finally his fingers slipped free and Cartman’s lips closed over the small gated path of Kenny’s belly button.

“You..” Yellow Wolf rubbed his knuckles into his eyelids. “Swallowed my cum.”

“You didn’t give me much choice,” said Cartman, darkly, and he straightened up at last. But then his hand started messing with him, too, and Kenny almost swatted him away before noticing that his truancy officer was still hard.

“We should have sex.”

“Technically,” Slow and deliberate, the pad of his thumb drew a line down his cock. Kenny could feel his recovery period shrinking. “We’ve been having sex since you were a lousy minor.”

“You know what I mean, though.” Kenny rolled his hips. He’d been saying it since day one: “You should fuck me.”

He snorted again. “Maybe later.”

A hundred things swept Kenny’s mind and left it blank. “What -- really?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, if you’re good.”

Yellow Wolf tsed sharply. “If you’re good, you mean. We’ve never been together in public b’fore. Not really.”

His T.O. finally left his dick alone and shifted his hand to his erection. He leaned his side into the seat like he was tired, and half-lidded eyes matched Kenny’s stare. “Just try not to jump in my lap whenever you see something you want. I don’t care if you abuse and manipulate me in private, but if my friends find out they won’t fear me anymore.”

Kenny sat up fully, hitched one arm around his truancy officer’s neck and took over his lazy stroke with his own hand. Cartman settled his head over his shoulder, exhaled a shaky breath down the fur lining of his hood and grazed his mouth over his neck.

“Nobody’s afraid of you, man,” Kenny murmured. He scratched under his jaw with his free hand and like a coin-operated machine the cop hummed and faintly whined. Kenny felt the vibrations of his familiar little purr against his skin. Biting down on a victorious grin, he quickened his stroke. Eventually, though, he couldn’t cut it and Cartman’s hand knocked his aside to take over; Kenny dropped his gaze between them and watched the cop beat himself to completion in a few aggressive finishing strokes -- he made a choked noise of climax, a longer louder one just after, and moaned low in the first finishing throe. Kenny let him sink over his shoulder. He ran his fingers through his hair.

“You said tonight, right?”

“Christ,” Eric swore, lifting his head. The cop’s categorical irritation with the whole planet re-
emerged bleary-eyed. “Calm down, huh? It’s not like I’m going anywhere. When I think you’re ready you can ride me all week.”

Kenny laid his hands around his neck and let them sink in a little. “How come you get to decide?”

His eyes narrowed. “You might be a legal adult today but I’m still a million years older than you so I call the shots.” He completely disregarded the last fifteen minutes. “Don’t choke me. I don’t want another hard-on. I’m too tired. I can’t be tired for Kidney Day.”

“What is Kidney Day?”

Cartman shifted aside and started digging around in the pocket on the back of the driver’s seat. “Can’t do Kidney Day with a handful of cum, either,” he muttered.

“Eric -- ”

“It’s a gigantic paintball tournament, dude.”

Once again, Yellow Wolf experienced a moment of blanked thought. “Uh?”

“We call it Kidney Day because it’s the only holiday in March that didn’t offend anybody. Stan’s idea. We used to throw laser tag tournaments in middle, high school once in a while, a few AirSoft battles on the front lawn, you know? But then too many people wanted in -- we had to move our battlegrounds further and further each year until we were nearly in the goddamn mountains. Then Stan’s Uncle Jimbo opened up this little paintball joint up on Mt. Evanston. Remember Evanston? That volcano that erupted and the whole town had to dig a trench to -- ”

Eric paused. “Oh wait. You were still in your dad’s beanbag. But, anyway -- now that me and the cunts are all old and suffocated career jackasses -- every year we section off some vacation time to celebrate our kidneys and shoot the shit out of each other with colored paint for ten hours, or until the sun sets. And I mean, running around the Evanston Gorge in thirty pounds of gear is probably pretty good for your renal health, anyway. Jimbo’s place is tits. There’s a chairlift up the mountain, and at the halfway hut there's a little pub with beer and free coffee and a nice place to shit. Last year Jimbo’s friend Ned built this sweet little hydroponic weed garden up there, too -- it’s some Disney Planet Earth-level majestic shit.”

Kenny thought how if anybody was going to establish an annual broliday in the trenches of some dormant volcano’s eruption site -- it might as well be a handful of overgrown kids from South Park, Colorado.

“I brought one of my old guns for you,” Cartman continued, pulling his Chevy drag-racing shirt over his head. “Helen Keller. Helen was removed from active duty because of a few illegal upgrades -- but I stripped her down and I can probably get the regulation lifted if Kyle brings the Shaft of Moses, which I know for a fact has illegal secondary firing capability because he squirted me in the eyes with something when I flanked him last year -- ”

“But, dude -- ” Kenny shrugged his parka on again over the holey Miller High-life tee and flipped up his hood. “I don’t know how to play. I’ve never even used one of those things before. And I've never been to Disney. I think I played laser-tag once when I was eight, and it was for shit over ten minutes because I had to sneak into Space Center and beat up the birthday boy.”

Cartman pinched the bridge of his nose and left the car. “Oh, man -- ” The back door shut with a heavy klunk. Kenny heard him laughing on the pavement outside. The driver’s side portal cracked, then, again: klunk. Cartman turned and Kenny looked glumly on his reflection smeared across the
cop’s douche-canoe Ray Bans.

“You need to stop being so poor,” he warned. “Or I’m going to start hucking rocks at you.”

Chapter End Notes

some of you already know i’ve been planning an American Hogwarts experience -- honestly it's the most conceptual work i've had to do for a fic in a while. but the last thing I want to do is make it your run-of-the-mill magical schooling... it's still a south park fic, after all.

anyway i’m to the point where i have actual opening sentences written so lets hope that goes somewhere in time for nanowrimo
im flying to colorado after work tonight to spend halloween w my homegirl so happy scary day friends
Eric peered at the line of cars outside the halfway hut and scowled.

Cars were like shoes. He hadn't even walked in yet and already he had a list of which people he wanted to bleach, and which only partially.

There was the Broflovski Civic, Stan’s mud-splattered Wrangler, Heidi’s Mazda. Evidence suggested Craig was driving his step-mom’s Lexus. That, or some other self-declared 'Chihuahua Mom!' with steel rims and yellow tags was at large in Colorado. The possibility was so horrifying, Cartman chose for the sake of humanity to believe Tucker was here, and he was driving his step-mom’s car. Probably squeezed Clyde in the trunk. Butters must've pooled with someone, too, because he didn’t see any Kia roller-skates anywhere. Too bad -- he’d been looking forward to a good laugh.

Eric steered them bumping and creaking into the fenced lot, chose a shady space in the soft grass and parked next to Red’s Volvo because Volvos like to park together. The overnight nurse drove an old black hard-top convertible with only two seats and a grill so rusted it could cut you. It looked like something heavy’d rolled over onto it one too many times, but he still thought it was a cute car.

Cartman could say about the same for Red herself.

'Strategic Outdoor Ballgames,' read the sign standing crookedly over the slope. Cartman sighed with relief. SOBs was tits.

It was a steep drive up the mountainside, at least 90 minutes and a few thousand feet of legitimately fearing for his life -- but the sight of the halfway hut on the hillside and its smokey wooden overwatch already promised a cold beer and the scattered screams of his enemies.

Eric breathed in noisily through the blockages in his nose. Spring had a way of clearing the pipes. He could smell the crushed bodies of insects and the faint tang of a nearby fuel dump. Late noontide crickets and cicadas set the air ringing with superimposed cascades of song. A ginger cat crouched in a stripe of sunlight over the fence and ignored them.

Cartman glanced aside. Kenny pulled his finger from his nose and stared back.

Pulling up on K-Day with the pretty minor he’d been fucking in the front seat -- Jesus, what was he thinking? He could show up with Jennifer Lopez and a swollen leg tumor and only suffer half the impolite questions.

“I need a drink.” He said.

“It’s 1 o’clock!”

It said something about Eric’s state of mind when a knock at the driver’s side window sent him flat-
backed into the seat and groping for the machete in the back pocket.

It was only Stan. Cartman reluctantly rolled the window down.

“Get moving, dude. You're late. I have that gear you asked for. We only have the range for practice shots another half hour -- you guys need to hike up the hill and get your guns approved. We postponed the coin toss and Kyle's ready to start stomping nuts -- ”

“I got it, I got it.” Cartman waved his hand, heartbeat back into the apathetic sludges where it belonged. Years of undercover drug deals and nighttime beats had left him the nerves of a jumpy porpoise in Japanese waters; at the first bellow of bad air he was strapping a knife to his nose, calling the Coast Guard, and going *kamikaze*. “Sheila’s nipples are sore.”

"What? Just, get out of the car, dude."

"O-kay. Don’t waylay me, alright? I don’t like being waylaid in the parking lot."

“Sorry. I was getting the speakers out of the Wrangler.” Stan leaned around like he was trying to squeeze in the window. Just like Randy, you know -- exchange a couple of words with the guy and suddenly he’s trying to squeeze through your window. Cartman hated people like that. “Hey, Kenny.”

“Hey Kinny,” Cartman mimicked, feeling vicious.

“Hey man,” said Wolf, shrugging on his sheep’s clothes, flipping up his hood. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. You know,” Stan leaned over the window sill. “You’re the only one who’s mentioned it? The second you have a kid, it’s like some people don’t see you anymore. I said hello to Marky -- she looked me in the eye and walked right past!”

“We are talking about *Marky*, here,” said Cartman.

Stan shrugged. “Fair enough. I don’t think she’s gotten over that double-elimination last year.”

“She shot you in the foot. You looked up and shot her in the head. That wasn’t a double-elimination, Stan; it was the lousiest ref call since Phil Luckett’s brain malfunctioned and gave the Super Bowl to the Lions in ‘98.”

“Okay, so the shots were too fast for the referee to call, but *you saw* the whole thing.”

“I had a bird’s-eye view, actually.”

Stan’s eyes narrowed. “You won’t be capturing the Tower today, fat boy. And reffing isn’t going to be an issue, either -- we got drones and GoPros this year. Everything’s fair.”

“Until someone’s brain malfunctions.” Cartman sighed. “Out of the way, Bones.”

Stan bared his teeth, and folded out of direct shot of the door. “I’m a scientist, not a doctor.”

Cartman crammed all his shit in his pockets, almost forgot his keys in the ignition, and nearly dislodged a kneecap on the way out. “Did I miss the lottery?” He shook his balls off his leg and circled the car.

“Yes. We had your co-captain draw. You got Clyde.” As an afterthought: “Congratulations.”

“Cute, Stan. Who else?” He shoved his key in the Volvo's analogical butthole. "Even policemen can
count to four.”

“Oh, we gave you Kenny.” Each four-man team included captain, co-captain, one lottery player, and one free choice. First pick was always last year's winner. You could also buy a player off another team with points cached from winning in previous years. The regulation was intended to mix up the teams and deter year-long strategizing, but the teams did it anyway, and there was always some bidding and illegal player trades behind the scenes. And somehow, every year, Wendy managed to put together an all-female team. Cartman wondered if her co-captain Bebe could keep the streak going in her captain's absence.

“That was kind.”

“How big are his feet?”

“I don’t know,” Cartman popped the trunk, and after a moment’s pause: “Mostly we screw with our socks on.”

“Oh -- dude.”

“What?”

“I know what’s going on, but,” Stan sneezed his discomfort. “I just -- don’t need you to assault me with the images.”

“Why the hell not? I’m assaulted with images from the black-and-white stereoscapes of planet Hetero-normia every single day. It’s a miracle I was able to subvert the programming.”

“What?” He sneezed again. “You’ve spent a couple of days, at the most, outside of complete and utter denial, and you’re already playing the big gay victim card? You’ve been reaping the rewards of privileged bastardism with loud, arrogant bigotry since day one!”

“Exactly, Stan,” Eric lifted his shoulders, prepared to die with, if not a solid argument, at least a thoroughly circular and confuddling one. “Don’t you see how fucked it is? I’ve been a prisoner all this time. The way I see it, I’ve got a lot of ground to cover to make up for it.”

Stan’s eyebrows flew to his hairline. “A prisoner? You’ve gotta be kidding me,” he shook his gaze at the ground, then backed neatly out of an argument. “Any movement with you behind it, Cartman, should drop their colors and run.”

Cartman scratched at his chest. This old salt wound was proving to be a bitch and a bitch’s carry-on bag. “Well, feminism is safe.”

At once he noted the anxious ripple in his truant’s eyes where he lingered near the passenger door, and stopped bickering for a second to beckon him over with a jerk of his head. “This is the speed, today, McCormick. Jump in whenever you want.”

Kenny yanked the strings on his hood. He bumped against his side like a lost balloon. “Is the whole day gonna be like this?”

“No,” Cartman chuckled, surveying the dark confines of his trunk. “It’ll be a lot worse.”

“Speak up, kid.” Stan took his cap by the visor, slapped it against his knee, and reinstalled it backwards. “You’re gonna have to, in this crowd.”

Cartman tugged a spare shirt from his bag and shoved it at his truant. Technically it was an old
keeper’s jersey from his soccer days. He’d hated the year, the lesbian coach, and the team; Eric was the best player on the field but apparently fat kids were always stuck in goalie’s mitts. He was such a dope goalkeeper by the end of that season, even parents of kids from the opposing teams were shaking his hand after the finals.

The jersey was pretty sweet, anyway: yellow, shredded black up one arm. Kenny made the old thing look like Tokyo street fashion.

“Leave that here,” he nodded at the discarded parka. “Trust me.”

“But --”

“Take this.” Cartman said, handing over a face-mask and goggles. “Your mask. You bring your glasses? No, of course you fucking didn’t, you little cretin -- but I did,” he produced a little oblong case from his pocket and forced it on the adolescent as well. “Today you wear your fucking glasses.”

Yellow Wolf scowled.

“Don’t pout. Look, there’s a hood on your jersey,” Eric tried, much too bemused for sympathy. “Strap your mask over your hood, on the field. Got it? Okay. Go on, you can spit.”

Kenny flipped up his new hood, leaned and fired a loogie into the blue grass.

Stan produced a pair of cleats from under his arm, dangling with a few stubborn clods of grass and dried dirt between the big hunks of plastic on the toes and heels. He planted them in the grass by his truant’s feet. Fluorescent orange, so bright they could be pink. They were the kind of cleat you only wore if you really knew what you were doing with your feet. Cartman almost laughed.

“Kyle let you borrow his twinkle-toes?” He said, turning back to the trunk. “He loves those fucking cleats.”

Stan shrugged. “They were the only pair we had that seemed the right size. I blew the toes out of every single one of my old ones, somehow.”

“It’s called aggressive everyday use, Stan. Kyle probably hasn’t seen grass outside a parking lot or a screensaver in ages.”

He pulled Helen Killer from her case, together with a tactical belt strung with five spare fuel pods, and arranged the gun’s strap over his truant’s shoulders while he did up the laces. Then McCormick stood, sniffed loudly -- knobby-kneed street kid in pink cleats, strapped up with the kind of firepower society did its damnedest to keep unbalanced boys like him away from -- and Eric finally got around to that laugh he was looking for.

“Jesus Christ,” he swore. “This is going to be like watching a predestined Biblical genocide. I hope you guys brought some good music,” he said to Stan. “I hope you guys brought Blood Mountain.”

“Barrel up,” he added to his truant, adjusting Helen. “When you’re in the game, keep it parallel to the ground. You know what parallel means?”

“Uh-huh,” Yellow Wolf, bouncing lightly on his toes and too dazzled by the power in his paws to feel offended. Cartman grinned.

“Jesus Christ,” he said again.
“Hedge your bets, man,” Stan chided. “A paintball gun is not a can of paint.”

“Kenny,” Cartman ignored him, waiting to catch Kenny’s eye. Blue like October skies. “I know you spend every waking moment doing the opposite of what you’re told, and you certainly aren’t waiting for my permission to fuck around -- but, look at me, man. You can do anything you want today. Nobody will stop you. And if someone tries, I’ll send them home with a little baggie to carry their teeth in.”

Stan was swearing under his breath but all Cartman could see was his truant Jimmy-beaming at him; you couldn’t find happier trailer trash outside the nearest glass of whiskey. Then the teenager shifted his weight over his toes, and looked expectantly at him. No, Cartman thought, swayed. Not here, in front of Stan, for Chrissake.

But he stepped up, anyway, on the pretense of hitching the spare fuel pods around his waist. He
snapped the buckle closed and pecked at his lifted face. Not more than twice. A bit lengthier than he intended. McCormick let the nose of his gun fall slowly to the ground again.

Instead of defending the sanctity of heteros everywhere, Stan cleared his throat and tied a polite cinderblock into conversation that dragged them back to reality. “You really think you’re gonna get Helen approved? She gave Clyde a bloody nose last year. Not to mention that poor wild turkey -- ”

“That won’t be an issue,” Cartman hummed. He retreated, leaving Kenny to fidget and test the grip on his new semi-automatic. “You said Donovan’s on my team.”

“What’re you carrying this year? Not -- Oh, dude. Are you serious?”

With a heave and a few staggering hos Cartman managed to dislodge a long case from the back of the Volvo’s remarkably spacious trunk.

“Critter Control?” said Stan, incredulous. “That’s an old pump-action grenade launcher, dude -- they don’t even sell ammo for those around here anymore. You’re going against bullets with, with spears.”

“You won’t be laughing with a .68-caliber paintball in your nuts.”

“If you can get the hopper to stop cutting balls long enough to get a proper shot in, I might be afraid.” said Stan. “There isn’t even a circuit board in that thing -- what are you planning to use it as, leverage?”

“You’re smarter than your wife gives you credit for, Stanley.” Cartman shut the trunk. “Take McCormick to the practice range. I need to go water my liver.”

Kenny was looking at him with his special teenager talent for looking at once glum and betrayed, like Cartman had just pulled out from ball’s deep to go run an errand down the street. After many years living with and around his mother, Eric was quite adept at shutting out nonverbal disappointment. Kidney Day involved a lot of adult stuff -- balances of power and reprisal, old scores and new bets -- things somebody like Wolf wouldn’t fully understand. Besides, Kenny was safe with Stan. Stan was a father now; he had to be responsible. Everything would be fine.

Cartman paused on his flight up the sagging wood planks to the hut. He half-turned. “Just, don’t make him, eat any weird stuff, okay?”

Stan squinted, turned his hat around forwards. “What?”

As long as no one found out the kid would eat cat barf for five bucks -- everything would be fine.

When you walk into a drifter’s paintball joint tucked into the mountains with something like Critter Control on your back, people tend to scatter. Sure, it was an oldie, no electronics and some irredeemable in-game flaws, but the Phantom model paintball gun was designed way back in the day when parents didn’t care if their kids wanted to imitate paratroopers on the front lawn and do lasting damage to their friends. Phantoms were built to look bad: these were the weapon-toys that competed with AirSoft and Sony. They had sex appeal.

Cartman was the first to recognize good shit and add the gun to his collection when it hit the shelves and changed the game in the 90s, and he’d never really lost his appreciation for it -- with a few after-market upgrades, some added personal touches on the hopper and trigger-sear, he still thought it could play with the bougie button-mashers of the 21st century; he’d modified the frame for two seven-ounce CO2 cylinders, gutted his old Auto-Cocker for its more reliable valve system and installed a cross-over feed to bounce balls into the breach without cutting them: 300 shots on one
charge, and 200 more waiting in the hopper. Cartman felt like American boots in third-world soil: the people that scattered -- they were the critters.

“Somethin’ to calm the nerves?”

“Thanks, Jimbo.” Cartman mounted a stool in the gloom. ”Put away the scotch, for Christ’s sake -- it’s one in the afternoon! I want a buzz, not a halftime hangover. Yes! Heineken, for Chrissake.”

Two stools down, one rock clattered around the bottom of a small glass, nearly-emptied.

Kyle Broflovski wore dingy bar-lighting like a goddamn crown and mantle. Maybe it was the way he studiously ignored him, Cartman thought. No. Maybe it took a miserable graduate degree to make the ritual consumption of toxin look dignified.

Kyle’s black tactical gloves only covered the last two fingers on each hand -- they were the kind with hard knuckles, in case you needed to drop your gun and punch a tree, or beat someone’s face in during a match, Eric supposed. Which was stupid because Kyle was the Judge with a capital J for this fucking Jew is ruining my life; you’d have to be a buffoon on a bender to try and fight the Judge. Kyle had the power -- with some minor, stuffy little checks and balances -- to approve guns, ban guns, even stop a tournament mid-match and have your gun destroyed. On one especially memorable occasion the great Broflovski buzz-kill had snapped the anodized aluminum barrel on some poor sap’s Auto-Cocker, and nearly did the same with his trigger finger when a fight broke out. Cartman still had the decapitated Cocker -- and a permanent jilt in his index finger -- to prove it.

Until he was displaced or outvoted in the annual Council meeting, no one could touch the Human Kite. Cartman snarled a much nastier title in his head, but didn’t say it aloud, staring instead at the infernal obstacle two stools down.

Without looking up, Kyle spoke. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, fat-ass?”

Another magic trick. Under any lighting at all, no more than a few words and a passing glance exchanged with his old classmate made him want to kill the motherfucker and snatch the Jew gold off his neck.

Cartman snatched up his bottle instead. He took a huge swig for show and got mostly froth, swallowed a choking fit and transformed the cough into a manly burp. Two could play that game.

“What are you talking about?”

Kyle pinched the glass in his three naked fingers and drained the last of its color in a single pull. The rock clattered around like a thing trapped and terrified for its life. Light from a single overhead bulb caught on it’s crystal surface and scattered astral patterns over the bar-top. There was as much information contained in the wood-grain of a table, Kyle said once, as in any tome or textbook. Cartman had responded with something moronic about value, embryos desiccated in the endless cycles of reproduction. Kyle said he wasn’t talking about value, only information. Raw information - ones and zeroes. Eric hated when people went binary on him.

“That artifact on your back,” said Kyle. He only spoke in slow-motion for the common folk.

“It’s got upgrades.”

“Not carbon ones, from the look of it. Stainless steel frame, huh. What’s it weigh -- five pounds? Six?” Kyle tutted. “Might come in handy if you need to bludgeon someone, today. Doesn’t change the fact that thing cuts more balls than it fires.”
“Why don’t you and Cancerous Testicle Two just worry about your own balls, alright?” Cartman had it down to the red star and he signalled Jimbo for another. “What are you carrying this year, that jacked up Shaft of Moses?”

Kyle folded his arms over the wood-grain and glanced sideways at him, finally, as if to gauge what he was up to. Then he glanced at the case on the floor beside his stool legs. “I brought GameShark.”

Made sense -- he had his Vizari green on, black at the wrists, BadFish across the chest, and Cartman couldn’t really tell because his mask was on his head but he bet he was wearing his yellow lizard-lenses, this year. It didn’t ruin his plans but it was kind of inconvenient.

“Oh, terrific,” he said. “What’s that one got, an illegal blow-hole on the side?”

“Sharks don’t have blowholes.”

“Fine --” Now he was blustering. “Frag teeth, dorsal fin blades -- I don’t care; it’s probably got some Jew mechanism to keep S.B.F. on top.”

Kyle snorted like he’d had an unsuccessful go at a knock-knock joke. Humor died in Sheila’s dark honey eyes. “S.B.F. is always on top.”

“You shot me with something, last year --”

“Prove it.”

“I could! I could start something, at least -- and the Council will table your Judge privileges!”

Kyle turned fully. “And then what, fuck-ass? Stan is elected proxy, he overturns you, and you look like a tit. Look, dude. I’m a lawyer -- and everyone seems to think that means I decide what’s justice, when the reality is precisely the opposite. You’d rather I didn’t have this power and frankly I could do without the fucking dramatics, but neither of us can fight the roles society chooses for us. So,”

The ice finally stopped rattling. He signalled Jimbo and pointed to the glass. “I see the gigantic pump-action dildo on your back, and I can’t say I really give a damn if you want to play sling-shots versus machine guns today -- be my guest. I approve it. But there’s something else you want to show me. What’s Kenny using?”

Cartman raised his eyebrows when the scotch reappeared, and the bottle tipped over Kyle’s glass. He hopped off to the side on his stool, too, just for the theatre.

“Whoa, dude -- shooting for the Ballmer Peak, or something? You don’t need to pre-game so hard; it’s not a trial, this isn’t the courthouse. We do this for fun.”


“Cartman,” said Kyle, peering at the lump of ice like it was Eric clattering around in there. “Do you think -- I’m a complete, and utter, simpleton?”

“Kyle, what?” Cartman laughed nervously. He fielded an expression of genuine confusion. If he was honest, even misdirected Broflovski fury kind of freaked him out. He felt sure it wasn’t directed at him, this time, because he hadn’t even done anything wrong yet. Had he? Cartman itched the left side of his chest.

Kyle had tied his longer nappy Jew curls back and it made him look severe as hell. Nobody should
look so scary in Vizari. “Just tell me what the gun is, Eric.”

Eric. Oh-ho, now that wasn’t good. He bit his lip. “I brought Helen Slaughter out of retirement. But wait --”

“What?” Kyle’s voice tightened with restraint, and he spoke through gasps of -- frankly insulting -- fake laughter: “Fuck you, bitch!”

“But wait,” said Cartman. “I stripped it down --”

“If I see that gun ever again, I will rip out its circuit board and grind it into little pieces under my cleat, again --”

“But wait --”

“Whatever you did to that poor Angel,” Kyle settled down again over his elbows. He sighed into his drink. “It was demonic. I mean, I thought you should be restricted to rentals, permanently, after the damage that year.”

“It was a mistake! I didn’t know what I was doing -- I got really drunk and started programming in a different language. It was like channeling commands from Elsewhere, dog, like in a trance, I swear --”

Kyle laughed and Cartman could’ve sworn the light bulb flickered. “Is that your story? I hope you rehearsed something else for me.”

“No, I mean. It doesn’t matter. Look -- last time, I miscalculated. I was excited about the new model and I wanted to see what it could do. But it’s all trimmed down, now. Link up the board to Stan’s slaptop, you can check it out for yourself; I started with a clean slate, just a bunch of stock protocols. I’ve got her shooting in stable threes, now. She’s even got a little drop-off on the tenth shot I couldn’t fix. If it was a good gun I would be using it. Just give it a chance.”

Kyle tossed back the rest of his drink, and resurfaced, shaking his head. “I really don’t give a damn. The answer is no. Find him something else.”

“Maus --”

“Don’t call me that,” he snapped.

“Just give it a chance -- one round. I don’t have anything else right now. Just let the kid play.”

“The kid,” he laughed, scary again. “Yeah, let’s talk about the kid, Cartman, because I’ve been wondering about something.” Cartman braced himself. “When I asked you, last year, if you were having sex with your truant --”

Crash!

“Woops,” Jimbo chuckled. He threw the rag he’d been polishing glasses with over his shoulder and dipped to retrieve a dust-pan from under the bar.

“Did you lie to me?” Kyle hissed.

“Uh, huh,” Cartman stuttered. “No! I mean -- Jesus Christ, Kyle.”

He was saved by the timely arrival of literally the last person he ever wanted to see. Craig Tucker rounded a corner into the dark pub and Eric imagined a limbless, spineless servant of Satan slithering
slowly between the tables and chairs. And everywhere the creature went it left a trail behind of horrible foul-smelling yellow slime.

“Well if it isn’t the Park County cavity-search,” Cartman clapped heavily. “Our hero on the homefront. Knock out any baby teeth, today? Get the jump on somebody in the showers?”

“Yeah, hey -- maybe you can give me a few tips.” Tucker leered. “None of them seem to want to shack up with me afterwards.”

Cartman growled.

“Knock it off, Cartman,” Kyle grumbled. It was just the three of them in the bar, at one in the afternoon; the games hadn’t even started yet and it was already starting to look like a fight. Cartman couldn’t help it -- he had fury to misdirect, too.

“Uh,” Jimbo interrupted with his usual nasal grace. “You can’t smoke in here.”

Craig tucked the cigarette behind his ear. His mask was on his head, full-face with two big chambers on the sides like he was anticipating chemical warfare. Tucker always went with the gas mask look.

“Hey! Did you just flip me off!”

“No -- ” Kyle interrupted. “He didn’t. Sorry, Jimbo. Craig -- ” He turned to their former classmate. “What the fuck?”

The remorseless son of a bitch ordered a couple of pale ales and hung around the bar while Jimbo finished cleaning and rustled out the bottles.

He wore black and blue, white ice flows going up his arms; an Automag with scope enhancements and flashy arctic fatigues hung across his back. A good look in Tucker’s transparent eye and you felt cold.

“Nice pipe. You know you brought a polearm to a gunfight?”

Cartman rolled his eyes. “Jesus. Tucker. I wrote all your jokes, like, ten years ago.”

Craig turned his back on the stretch of bar between Kyle and Cartman. He flicked a lighter in one hand and pretended to think. “Ten years. So, is that, before you were fucking little kids, or were you just watching him in his cradle, at that point? I hope you reimbursed the parents -- it’s getting more expensive, these days, to have crack for brains.”

Cartman advanced quickly. “Did you reimburse the parents for all those videos you took? It’s not really my department, but, I hear kiddie pornography is getting pricey, too.”

Craig pressed back -- he was a tall motherfucker but smoking had made him more wire than muscle. “Those were Gringe’s tapes.”

“Sure. Blame it all on Gringe -- Hell, I’d put all the blame on a dude named Gringe.” Cartman narrowed his eyes. “Except, I was part of the retrieval team, that day, and you’d have to be a complete idiot not to notice those private camera feeds, all those extra lenses in his office -- ”

“What was I supposed to do?” Craig snarled, hushed and rasping. And Cartman could tell the incident bothered him, too. “He was my superior -- ”

“I don’t care if he was your fucking mom, asshole, the sick piece of shit was beating off to videos of
little kids under your protection! Hey, I have an idea -- why don’t you autograph something for Stan’s spawn? It's too little yet to pick a gender but I’m sure like all good little society girls she’ll grow up to worship child-molesters and look-the-other-way dicks with authority like you!”

Tucker sucked in a breath like a hiss. He leered to get his balance. Then: “The investigation is over. Gringe was dismissed.”

“He should be in jail!” Cartman barked. “You should be demoted! He should be floating in chunks down the fucking river!”

“Now, that sounds like your department,” said Tucker, low. “Funny you should be talking about my sick boss when the people you work for are sending people down to me every day in pieces --”

“Fuck you! That’s the operation I was working to stop!”

“Really? ‘Cause you look like a big damn part of it from where I'm standing, fat ass!”

Clink. Kyle put his glass down.

“Right,” he slid off his stool. “I am so out of here.”

Classic Kyle, Cartman thought -- just when you actually kind of wanted a shitty lawyer in listening distance, he was skreezing off to the next darkest corner. “Hold up, we’re not done here --”

"I think we're done." He turned out the door.

Jimbo finally brought out the pale ales and Cartman leapt off his stool while he was still cracking a bottle opener down on them. He tossed a glare over his shoulder that met Tucker’s patient leer.

“Kyle --”

Cartman stumbled over the threshold back into the sun. Kyle dodged the hand he flung out for support.

"If you think," he interrupted. "Anyone is fooled by your charade with Tucker --"

"What? What charade? Didn't you hear what I said?"


"Fine," Eric tucked away his anger with immense difficulty. "I didn't mean to. But will you just --"

“The answer is still no, Cartman. I banned Hellen Keller.”

“Just come and take a look, anyway. She’s a totally different gun --”

Still walking, Kyle shrugged GameShark free from its casing and leaned the barrel against his shoulder. Buried somewhere underneath a sleek paint job and some obvious visual upgrades, Cartman suspected GameShark was once an Auto-Cocker -- a professional gun, but so tricked out that no professional could use it, probably. Customization was one of the benefits of having their own amateur league outside the game standard. It was NASCAR versus street-racers; and on the streets, sometimes you had to make a right turn.

SOBs had the largest acreage for a single paintball facility anywhere in the Midwest, but the grounds were pretty wild: a few trenches, but no air-pillows or bunkers to hide in. Just you, your gun -- nature
“Calm your ass down,” Kyle advised. “It’s just a game.”

“Dude, please,” Cartman decided the best approach was to embarrass Kyle with undignified pleading, and a few jewels of truth. “You shoulda seen the look on his face when I gave it to him -- he’s never played before in his life. C’mon. He’ll be so bummed if you take it away, now. Just come check it out.”
Even in Heteronormia, Eric thought. No being alive could resist McCormick’s cuteness up close.

“If it will make you leave me alone, I’ll look at the gun.”

Chapter End Notes

_to be continued_...

might put music on this later.

man, i wish ao3 had a convenient footnotes function
for cartman, i mean --
cartman would do the shit out of footnotes. he would have u laughing ur fucking ass off in the footnotes

thanks for reading, as always.

rough (ROUGH!!) plan:
next chapter is action (!) chapter.
after that a couple more to wrap up
then two (2!) epilogues, potentially: one is very fucking sad and the last is just way too fucking cute to fit into mainstream ftp

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