Summary

The Adventure Zone Roller Rink and Arcade opened in 1979 and has been struggling ever since. There is really only one thing that keeps the doors open, and that is roller derby.

Aka, the Late-90s-Roller-Derby AU that no one asked for but you're getting anyway.

Notes

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In the sweltering bosom of the southern United States, nestled amongst cornfields, woods, and pig farms is the town of Faerun, a modest city where the rumor that a Hardee’s might soon be opening on Highway 412 is actually news. Ten years ago, the high school women’s basketball team won the state championship and people still talk about that game. It features two elementary schools, a handful of churches, two movie theatres, but most importantly, for some people in town anyway, a roller rink. The Adventure Zone Roller Rink and Arcade opened in 1979 and has been struggling ever since. There is really only one thing that keeps the doors to The Adventure Zone open, and that is roller derby.

Julia snapped her gum and pushed open the door of The Adventure Zone Roller Rink. The smell of the place greeted her like an old friend--not that it was a great smell, mostly feet and sweat and popcorn and wood polish, but it also smelled like home.

Ah, and here was her family now. Hurley came flying up to her, yelling something unintelligible, and punched her in the hip, which was about as high as she could reach.

Julia grinned and threw up her hands. “What?”

“I said, are you ready to beat the Felicity Wild Women?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Hell yeah!” came a shout from across the rink. It was Killian, and she was flexing. Carey poked her head out of the door to the locker room, cackled at the sight of Killian, and fanned herself dramatically.

“Let’s go, let’s go, get your skates on, c’mon!” said Hurley, bounding her way over to their friends at the door. Julia strode after her.

The locker room was hardly anything more than a closet. Merle, the guy who owned The Adventure Zone, had cut some kind of party room in half to jerry-rig two locker rooms together. One was permanently theirs, but the nicer one was for visiting teams. Personally, Julia liked theirs, which was covered in old posters and photos from past seasons. Killian had gone in with her, so now everyone was there: Killian, who wore dresses every day, but none with sleeves because no sleeve could handle her biceps; Hurley, who was short and stocky and a ball of energy, and was currently doing a handstand on a bench just because she could; Carey, whose smallest motions were precise and quick and whose grin spelled trouble; Sloane, the car grease all over her arms making it look like the Korean tattoos on her arms were smudged, her lithe form slinking through the room; Noelle, chipper as always, fitting her prosthetic skating leg on single-handed, her prosthetic arm lying beside her on the bench; Taako, who was already in uniform and putting on illegal amounts of eyeliner; and Lucretia, arms crossed, observing them all with an expression of stone, though Julia did occasionally see the corners of her lips twitch.

“I’m just saying,” Carey was telling Noelle, “since they lost whats-her-face, the Wild Women haven’t had a single solid blocker.”

“Good blockers or no, they still don’t have any problem beating us, do they?” drawled Taako.

Julia swung her skates off her shoulder, popped open her locker--no use using the lock, it was
broken—and pulled out the elements of her costume. Electric blue shorts and jersey, kneepads, elbow pads, long socks, and Julia’s personal touch, some ridiculous orange fishnets. “This time we’ll do it for sure. Right ladies?”

“Hell yeah!” returned the chorus, all but Lucretia.

“Don’t get overconfident,” said Lucretia, in her Coach Voice. “Taako’s right. This isn’t going to be an easy match. Especially with a new referee.”

Hurley fell out of her handstand and stuck the landing. “New ref? What happened to Merle’s guy?”

Lucretia shrugged. “It doesn’t matter for this bout, does it? I just want you all to be especially vigilant, understand? There’s no telling what this new guy will be like.”

“I heard there was a fire,” said Sloane, pulling back her long hair.

“Gundren’s dead?” said Killian.

Sloane rolled her eyes. “I didn’t say he died. I said he was in a fire. I heard he was injured.”

“Hatchi matchi, that’ll mess up your day,” said Taako.

“Do we know anything about the new guy?” asked Carey.

“Word is that Avi knows him,” said Lucretia.

“If he’s Avi’s friend, then he can’t be that bad,” said Noelle. “Anyone’s better than Gundren.”

“Weell, I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Julia, pulling her jersey over her head. “Avi’s friends with everyone. Even Gundren.”

“He’s already here,” said Sloane. “I saw him.”

“Where?” Killian demanded.

“Out back.”

Hurley had her skates on now; she darted toward the door. “Let’s go see!”

They caravanned out of the locker room to the rink’s back door, tucked between the regular rink and the banked derby track. Hurley got there first and poked her head outside. “Oh, yep, there he is. Where’d Avi find this guy?”

Carey poked her head out too. “Oh my god. What a weirdo.”

Taako stacked his head on top of Carey’s. “I dunno, he’s kinda cute.”

“Are you looking at the same guy I am?” said Carey, backing up to look at Taako.

“Whatever,” scoffed Taako. “You’re so gay you’d think Usher was a weirdo.”

“All right, fine.” Carey waved Julia over. “Julia, you’re straight, what do you think?”

They moved out of the way so Julia could see. She leaned her head against the doorframe.

The first thing she saw was the van. It was a Dodge van from the seventies with one of those
airbrush paint jobs, except instead of space or a unicorn or something, all that was on this one was a giant woodcutting ax. The back bumper was half hanging off and the whole thing was covered in dings and scratches. The side door was open, and sitting on the edge of the van in a ref’s striped shirt was a Hispanic man probably best described with the phrase “Brick Shithouse.” He was putting kneepads on.

Julia fell away from the door snickering. “Oh my god .”

The others took their turns. “What’s with the van?” demanded Killian. “Who drives a car like that?”

“Maybe he lives in it,” said Carey.

“That bumper is really dangerous,” Noelle commented.

“All right, ladies. And Taako. That’s enough.” Lucretia herded them back toward the locker room. Julia lagged behind to get another look.

Taako was right, he was fairly good-looking, in a professional wrestler kind of way. His hair was short but not military short, and he had overlong sideburns. His kneepads were on now, and he was struggling with the straps of an elbow pad. She looked behind him, in the van. It seemed to be full of wooden chairs.

Julia must have made a noise or something, because he suddenly looked up.

“Hey,” he called out, “can you hold the door?”

Oh, goddammit, she was being creepy. Nothing for it now. She opened the door like she’d always meant to go outside. “Yeah, sure.”

He grabbed a pair of old, dirty skates by the laces and stood up. He was beefy and tall, though not quite as tall as Killian. From here she could see a scar over one eye, which cut a notch in one of his eyebrows. “Thanks.” He paused in the doorway and stuck out a hand, which she shook. “Magnus Burnsides. You a player?”

“Oh, goddammit, she was being creepy. Nothing for it now. She opened the door like she’d always meant to go outside. “Yeah, sure.”

He untied his boots and started putting on his skates. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe he was just distracted, because god , she was beautiful. The sparkle of her brown eyes, the warm sepia brown of her skin, the black floral tattoo sleeve on her upper arm, and the relative softness of her hand—relative because his own hands were like tree bark—

“Stop,” he told himself, because of course she was hot like fresh pancakes, but he had a job to do.

“Stop what, sir?”
Magnus yelped and threw up his fists, but it was just a kid, hanging over the rail around the track. The kid didn’t flinch, he noticed. Magnus relaxed. “Oh. Sorry. You scared me.”

“Sorry, sir!” He smiled. The boy had ears too big for his head, only slightly mitigated by a mess of curly black hair and a pair of glasses that looked like they were for an adult. His face was covered in freckles. “Are you the new referee?”

“Yeah,” said Magnus, and scanned the stands. A couple of people were wandering in, but nobody close by. “Uh, are your parents here?”

“No, I came with Killian and Carey, sir. They’re playing tonight.”

“And they just left you out here?”

“I can’t be in the locker room while they’re changing, sir. That would be inappropriate.” He considered Magnus carefully. “Have you been a referee before, sir?”

“Not a head referee, but yeah,” Magnus said. The kid was cute, but Magnus had a strange feeling he was being interrogated.

“I’m glad to hear you say that, sir! Mr. Gundren wasn’t nearly so experienced.”

“You don’t have to call me sir, you can just call me Magnus.”

The kid smiled again. “Nice to meet you! I’m Angus McDonald.”

“Nice to meet you too, Angus.” Magnus finished tying up his skates. “Are you excited for the bout?”

“Sure am, sir! The Wild Women just got a new captain, and I’m curious about whether they’ve changed their blocking strategy.”

Magnus’ face broke into a surprised smile. “You know a lot about roller derby?”

Angus nodded solemnly. “I come to every bout.”

“Maybe you can be one of my volunteer refs tonight,” said Magnus, tightening the laces on his skates. He was supposed to pick two from the audience, which seemed ludicrous to him. Why wouldn’t they just hire more refs? Of course, looking at the state of this place, maybe the owner couldn’t afford it.

“No, sir! No reffing for me, sir. I can’t skate, and anyway, Mr. Highchurch said I’m not allowed.”

“Maybe someday, then,” said Magnus. He stood up and ruffled the kid’s hair. “If you’re here all the time, do you know who they usually pick?”

“Avi and Mr. Boyland, sir.”

“Hell, you know Avi? Uh--sorry. Heck.”

“You can swear in front of me,” Angus shrugged. “I’m pretty certain everyone knows Avi, sir.”

“Someone mention me?” Avi strolled up beside Angus, another man following behind. The other man was a white guy, and he was wearing those...surf pants? With the dropped crotch and the tight ankles. They were pink and green and yellow. And a beanie. This was in stark contrast to Avi, with his mullet and jeans and plain white t-shirt. Avi was quite a bit shorter and a shade more olive than
Magnus and had finer features. Pakistani, he’d said. “Hiya, Magnus. Hey, kid, who’s the favorite tonight?”

“The Wild Women, unfortunately,” said Angus. “I’ve heard they’re taking a pretty subtle approach this season.”

“Hmm. Subtlely,” intoned the man with the surf pants. “Not the Bureau’s strong suit.”

Avi nudged the man. “Optimistic as always, eh bud? Magnus, this is my roommate Johann.”

Magnus stuck out a hand. “Pleasure.”

Johann shook it weakly. “Is it though?”

“Oh, yes?”

Johann shook his head, as if disappointed. “Avi says you just moved here from Neverwinter?”

“I did, yeah,” said Magnus. “Avi, thanks for getting me this gig.”

“Hey, I’m glad you could do it! You’re helping the team out too. No ref means they’d have to forfeit.” Avi pulled a flask out of his back pocket. “How’s the job hunt going? Still lugging your portfolio around in your car?”

Magnus laughed. “Afraid so.”

Avi offered him the flask, which he accepted. “You’ll figure it out soon.”

“Portfolio?” said Johann. “You an artist?”

“More of a craftsman. I’m a carpenter.”

Johann clenched his fist to his heart. “Sometimes to make the really good stuff, you gotta suffer.”

Magnus frowned. “I’d rather have a half-assed chair and a roof over my head.”

Avi chortled. “A chair for only half your ass?”

“Yeah!” Magnus burst out laughing. Even Johann cracked a smile.

“Sir, if you’re looking for a place to live, my neighbors just moved out,” Angus piped up. “The rent at Moonview is very inexpensive.”

“Really? How inexpensive we talking?”

Angus told him. He was impressed. “How do you know that?”

“I balance the checkbook for my grandpa.”

Avi spoke up. “I’m not sure, dude. Moonview’s kind of a dump.”

“It doesn’t matter if I can’t find a job anyway,” said Magnus. “It’d just be nice to have a shower somewhere other than the YMCA.”

“If you get too sick of it, you can shower at our place once in a while,” said Avi.

“Thanks, man.” Mangus was touched. He’d only known Avi for a few days and already he’d
shown more kindness than most of Magnus’ old friends back in Neverwinter. “Hey, Ango here says you’ve been a volunteer ref before. Would you want to do that again?”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” said Avi.

“Great! Um.” Magnus patted his pockets. “Merle said I was supposed to give you a whistle and a hat?”

“I know where they are.”

Magnus ducked under the rail of the track and carefully lowered himself to the ground. Avi waved him over to a cupboard built into the outside of the track, using the space underneath the slope of the bank.

Magnus glided after him and crouched expertly to reach into the cupboard. “So why is everyone so down on this old ref, anyway?”

“Who, Gundren?” Avi rubbed the back of his head. “I mean, he wasn’t a bad guy, but we’re pretty sure he forged his certification. He had no idea what he was doing.”

Magnus handed a striped baseball cap and a whistle up to Avi, and took one more of each for the other volunteer and another whistle for himself. “That’s stupid. Why didn’t the league kick him out?”

“It’s a small league,” Avi said. “We’re always short on refs, and players too sometimes. Last season the only reason the Bureau got to the second round of finals was because the Goldcliff Golddiggers had to forfeit.”

Magnus nodded thoughtfully and stood. “I’m glad I know. Maybe I can help.”

“You already are, dude,” said Avi.

The speakers in the rink crackled to life and started playing Devo. Avi looked up. “Hey, it’s starting! Boyland should be here soon, I’ll introduce you.”

The stands were filling up now, and Julia could feel the anticipation jumping in her gut. She and her team congregated around their bench, getting out last-minute jitters. Sloane was dabbing lavender oil on her temples. Hurley was spinning her helmet, which was emblazoned with two stickers shaped like ram’s horns, in her hands. Carey stretched. Killian stared at the floor. Noelle strapped on her arm. Taako was draped over the bench, examining his nails.

Julia took a deep breath and listened to the crowd. God, she lived for this.

Avi glided over to them. “What’s up, B.o.B.?”

The team chorused hello. Julia high-fived him. “Hey, Avi, what’s happening?”

Avi hooked a thumb over one shoulder. “The ref wants to talk to coaches and captains.”

Julia blinked. “Why?”

“One of those refs?” Lucretia nodded. “I’ve seen it before. Trying to get cozy with us?”

Avi shrugged. “Ask him, I guess.”
The two of them followed Avi to the spot between the two benches to wait for the ref. The Wild Women’s captain and coach met them on the way. Their captain smiled sweetly.

“Well hello, Julia.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “Lydia.”

“Looking lovely as ever, Lucretia,” said their coach.

“Save it, Edward,” Lucretia growled.

“You’re not still mad at us about last season, are you?” said Edward, his tone saccharine.

“You could have seriously injured Taako,” said Lucretia, her tone like granite.

“That wasn’t our fault,” Edward oozed. “Just a little bad luck.”

They were in earshot of the ref now, so they left off talking. What had he said his name was? Mango?

“I just wanted to introduce myself,” he said, looking them all in the eye. Julia frowned. Except her? “I’m Magnus Burnsides. I expect a good clean bout. Good luck to all of you.”

“Thank you,” said Edward, offering his hand. Magnus shook it, and then shook with Lucretia, and then Lydia. She let her hand linger and leaned in toward his face.

“I have to say, I like a man who takes charge.”

A puzzled look crossed his face. “Thank you.”

“Looking forward to playing around with you,” she said.

Julia turned on her heel and skated back to the bench. Any more and she would puke. Just like Lydia to pull something like that. If this guy was a buddy-buddy kind of ref he probably loved it.

Julia shook her head. No more of that. Time to focus. Time for the chant.

She took a deep breath and belted out, “Ladies, your attention please!”

All six players looked at each other and immediately started talking over each other as obnoxiously as they could manage. Julia smiled and let them go for a few seconds before she banged her fist down on the bench, which boomed. The players quit immediately.

“I hereby call this session to order. Who are we?”

“THE BUREAU OF BADASS!” her players shouted back.

“DAMN STRAIGHT. All rise for a word from the Director!”

They leapt to their feet, hands over their hearts. Lucretia narrowed her eyes, making them wait to see what she would say this time...

“Fuck ‘em up, girls.”

The team dissolved in whoops and hollers. Killian started stomping the beat, and the others joined in, chanting, *Who are we? The B.o.B. Who are we? The B.o.B. Who are we? The B.o.B… around*
Magnus watched the Bureau pumping themselves up. Avi nudged him. “Johann wrote that chant. Look at him.”

Magnus looked; Johann had a hand over his mouth and tears in his eyes.

“He does that *every time*.”

“What a wuss,” scoffed Boyland. Boyland was short and stocky and had an army crest tattoo on his arm and the unlit nub of a cigar in his mouth. Avi had brought him over from a group of about twenty children that Avi claimed were all his.

“Johann’s just passionate,” said Avi.

“Speaking of passionate, was the captain of the Wild Women flirting with me just then?” asked Magnus.

“Worked like a charm on Gundren,” said Boyland.

“I told you, man, this isn’t exactly the big leagues.” Avi gestured to the crowd. “We love it, though.”

He was right, because now the fans were shaking the stadium, stomping and shouting the chant. Magnus grinned. He knew how they felt.

“Llllllaadies and gentlemen!” It was the only thing that could stop the chant, the voice of the announcer on the speakers. The rink erupted in cheers. “It’s time for the first game of the season! Please join me in welcoming...The Felicity Wild Women!”

There were a lot of boos, but there were more cheers than he expected. Now that he was looking, he noticed a lot of fans were wearing that toxic green/hot pink combination the Wild Women were sporting. As for the Wild Women, they made a lap around the track, voguing all the way. Their costumes were unusually sparkly for derby, Magnus thought. The captain blew him a kiss.

Yeah, okay, definitely flirting.

“And now...your team...”

The cheering swelled.

“She’s the silent scourge, the omen of death...Jenicide!”

The slimmest member of the Bureau swooped out of the center, circling the track in elegant curving swoops. She was East Asian; if Magnus was identifying the tattoo lettering on her arms correctly, Korean. She didn’t so much skate as float; she seemed to barely be touching the track.

“She will hunt you down, dead or alive...give it up for Robocop!”

This skater was young, with curly light brown hair that poofed out of the bottom of her helmet in a frizzy ponytail, but Magnus found himself doing a double take. Her leg was...not a leg. A prosthetic, which looked like it was built into her skate. Her arm was a prosthetic, too, and ended in a pair of grabby tongs. Despite this, she was skating backwards.
“If you mess with her, there’ll be hell to pay...it’s Lil Diablo!”

The skater was Latina, like him. She darted out of the center, seemed to trip—Magnus’ heart jumped into his throat—but she landed in a one-handed handstand, skates still spinning in the air, before falling back onto the track in a crouch and finishing her lap.

“It’s the baddest little lady in the league...let’s hear it for the Battling Ram!”

Midget wasn’t a nice word, but this skater couldn’t have been more than three foot six. She jumped onto the track, pawing the ground like an angry bull, and charged around the track, a streak of red hair and freckles around the rink.

“Let me hear you make some noise for the most magical girl in the world...Abby Cadabra!”

This skater did a few fancy twirls and then blew a dramatic kiss into the audience. Magnus stared at them, not quite sure if they were a man or a woman or someone else entirely. They seemed to be playing jump rope with gender roles. The screaming crowds didn’t seem to care; they were obviously a fan favorite.

“She’s the whole package, ladies and gentlemen, and way out of your league...Beauty and the Beast!”

A huge woman—taller than Magnus and way fitter too, with a braid as thick as a rope sprouting from her helmet—barrelled around the track, flexing the whole way. She had black geometric tattoos up her legs and one arm, the kind that looked ancient, some sort of Samoan or Hawaiian design, maybe.

“And finally...your hero and mine, oh captain our captain...Jule! Be! Sorry!”

The most beautiful woman Magnus had ever seen stepped onto the track and lifted her arms like a conquering empress. The crowd lost its collective mind.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Bureau of Badass!”

“That’s the strangest team I’ve ever seen,” Magnus commented as the crowd went wild.

“Wait ‘til you see them play,” grumbled Boyland.

“I guess it’s time.” Magnus rolled into the middle of the track. Avi and Boyland took their places on either side of the gathering players. Jule Be Sorry and Lydia took their spots behind the blockers, both looking ready to kill. Magnus held up his hand, and blew the whistle. And the bout began.
He Owns the Place

Merle Highchurch hit the hot dog machine with a wrench. It shuddered and clunked to life.

“Jeez, Merle, how do you do that?” said Robbie from behind him.

“The grace of God, probably,” said Merle. “Now quit messing with it.”

“Yeah okay,” said Robbie.

“And get your elbow out of the cheese.”

Robbie turned and pulled a gooey elbow from the big pot for the nachos. “Aw, damn. Sorry.”

“Get ready for the rush. The bout’s about to end.” Merle hopped up and over the concessions counter and headed for the broom closet. He’d sweep out bleachers as they emptied. It seemed like the game was going well. There were asses in seats, and asses in the seats meant people were buying food. The first game of the season was always a toss-up in terms of profits, but people seemed to like the B.o.B. this year.

The whistle blew to end the bout. The whole rink went up in cheers. Apparently the home team had won today. Dandy. He unlocked the closet and pulled out a push broom.

Merle wandered over to the track, where the teams were lining up for high fives. He had to pay that new ref before anything else.

“Howdy, Merle.” Boyland strolled over to stand next to him.

“Evening. How’d the new guy do?”

“Takes this very seriously. Maybe a little bit of a stick in the mud. Good kid, though.” Boyland moved his cigar nub from one side of his mouth to the other. “You want to do Refuge tonight?”

“Sure, I haven’t got the kids.”

“Well I do. Gotta take them home first.”

“I’ll meet you there. Sweeping needs done.”

Boyland nodded and left. Merle watched the kid, Magnus, officiating the “good game” high fives, reclaiming the whistles and hats from Boyland and Avi, and shuffling back toward the cupboard under the track. Merle met him beside the cupboard and held out a check.

“Fifty bucks, as promised,” Merle said.

“Thanks,” said Magnus. “I really appreciate the opportunity. Roller derby was the one thing I was gonna miss the most when I moved here.”

“I didn’t ask for your life story, kid,” said Merle. “Next bout’s two weeks from today.”

“You got it.” Magnus stood up, much taller than Merle. Not that that was atypical, but this kid loomed. “You know, you’ve got some warping on the underside of your track here. That could be dangerous if it gets much worse.”
Merle frowned. “Let me see.”

The guy pointed inside the cupboard. “There’s some bad water damage here. It doesn’t extend very far, though. I could probably fix it on the cheap, if you’ll pay for the materials too.”

“I guess you’re just the answer to all my prayers, huh?” grumbled Merle.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m a carpenter,” the guy said, visibly uncomfortable. “This is what I do.”

Merle stared at the kid. He was usually pretty good at telling if someone was lying. “You trying to scam me?”

“No, of course not,” the kid said earnestly.

Merle relented. “Sounds pretty good, then. Why don’t you come by after free skate tomorrow? Give me an estimated cost.”

The kid looked surprised. “Yeah, sure.”

Boyland was right, a good kid. “Say, Gundren used to grab a drink with me and Boyland after bouts. You want to come with?”

Magnus rubbed the back of his head. “I’d better not, I have an interview in the morning. Thanks, though.”

Merle nodded vaguely and tottered off to sweep the bleachers.

Refuge was warm and comfortable, all good old wood and dark green leather. Merle knew the owner, Ren, had gone traveling when she was younger in Europe and had fallen in love with the idea of a pub—not a bar, not a place to drink and pick up strangers, and not a restaurant, where you were bound to a table until the bill came, but a meeting place for a community, a low-pressure environment. It certainly was that; Merle liked it because it served good food and interesting drink.

Merle got to Refuge before Boyland, ordered his usual, an Old Fashioned without the garnish, and sat at a table where he could people-watch. Refuge always got interesting characters, not the least of which were the derby girls. Today’s post-bout celebration consisted of an arm-wrestling contest, the big one versus three others. She was watching them, amused, as they strained against her.

Lucretia caught his eye and nodded. He raised a glass in response. Lucretia was good people, had been one of his first employees at The Adventure Zone after he’d taken over. He suspected she could very easily murder him if the mood struck her, and sometimes he wondered why she didn’t. She cared so much about her reputation, and Merle had met her in a very dark place.

That had all been years ago, though. Look at her now, she was a...some kind of office professional. Not slinging hot dogs at the rink, that was for sure. He knew because he’d stopped paying her.

Boyland sat down with him with a mug of beer almost as big as his head. “Sorry to make you wait.”

Merle waved his hand to dismiss the comment, and gestured instead to the derby girl with the arm
and the leg. “What do you think about that one? Desert Storm?”

Boyland glanced over. “Her? No. She’d’ve been in diapers.”

Merle frowned. “Was Desert Storm that long ago?”

“You’re getting old,” said Boyland. “The Gulf War was eight years ago.”

Merle adjusted his own prosthetic. It was a little more subtle than the derby girl’s, ending in a plastic hand instead of a pair of tongs. A hook was an option, and he admitted that he was tempted, but mostly he wanted to be left alone about the whole thing. “Can you believe she skates on that leg, though?”

“It’s not that leg,” said Boyland. “That clunky thing? She has a different one for skating.”

“She does?”

“Do you pay attention at all?”

Merle shrugged. “They make money, that’s all I know.”

“‘Spose you didn’t know about Mookie’s little shitshow, either.”

Merle waved a hand. “I bet you’re going to tell me.”

“He bit a teacher. Put a bunch of glue in her hair.”

“That’s my little fireball, fighting the power.”

“Don’t start with this hippie-ass crap. You didn’t know, did you?”

“Well how the hell did you know? You been talking to Hekuba behind my back?”

“My Rissa’s in his class. She told me. It was the biggest thing that happened at their school since a kid threw up on the merry-go-round.”

“So not a big deal then,” said Merle, a little relieved.

“You know, I thought so too, but apparently not.” Boyland knocked back a third of his beer. “You’d know that if you weren’t so stuck in your own ass.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be friends?” griped Merle.

“We’re not friends. We’re army buddies. That’s different. Means I can tell you that your hair makes you look like an elderly cult member.”

“And I can tell you that your wife pops out kids like—”

“Watch it,” growled Boyland.

“...a rabbit.” Merle finished weakly.

Boyland leaned back in his seat. “Still getting laid more than you.”

Merle scoffed and downed the end of his drink.
Was there anything worse, Magnus thought, than going into an interview with your one good shirt all wrinkled because you live in a van?

And the answer was yes. It was going into an interview with your one good shirt all wrinkled because you live in a van, and getting there late.

He pushed open the door to the bar—Refuge, it was called—and glanced around. There was nobody here except the bartender.

“Morning,” she called, and turned to face him, and Magnus’ heart dropped into his stomach. Here it was, a new horizon of worse, in which he was showing up late to an interview in a wrinkled shirt, finding not the person he was supposed to be interviewed by, but the most beautiful girl he had ever seen instead, who, if last night was any indication, seemed to actively dislike him.

He drew himself up straight. He’d had worse days, right? Right.

“Hey, you’re Jule Be Sorry,” he said.

“Around here I’m just Julia.” Her hair had been pinned up last night, but now it was only tied back in a bandana, and he could see that she had a mound of brown curls. She was holding a stack of glasses on a tray, which she put down behind the bar and started stacking. “Can I get you something?”

“Little early for a drink, isn’t it?” he said, taking a seat at the bar.

“We’re a pub, not a bar,” she said. “We’ve got food too.”

Magnus wasn’t sure what the difference was. “Oh. All right. Um. Coffee?”

“Sure.” She disappeared into the kitchen. Magnus located a neon Budweiser clock on the wall that read 10:08. Meet at Refuge at ten, the man had said on the phone. Magnus had spent the last couple of days crammed in a phone booth calling furniture makers and flooring guys and construction companies, and this guy was the first one who said he was hiring.

He drummed his fingers on the bar, trying to think of all the things he hated more than waiting. There weren’t very many.

Julia reappeared with a steaming mug and put it down in front of him. “Cream or sugar?”

“Yes please,” he said.

Her eyebrows jumped up. “I had you pegged for a black coffee kind of guy.”

“Why would I want to suffer?” he asked. It was only sort of a joke, but he saw the corner of her lip twitch before she disappeared behind the bar and reappeared with a sugar bowl and a tiny cream pitcher.

He fixed up his coffee. “So you work here?”

“Sometimes. I’m a student, too.”
“What are you studying?” Magnus asked, because that was what you asked students.

“Accounting.”

Ah, good, something so uninteresting that Magnus couldn’t think of a single follow-up question. Then again, that was probably what she wanted. He stirred his coffee and sipped it. What did you say in an interview? He hated interviews. See this chair? I made this chair. You like it? Hire me.

“Do you often wander into places just to order coffee and look nervous?”

“I’m meeting someone,” he said, glancing at the clock again. 10:11 “Or at least I was supposed to.”

She followed his gaze. “Oh. You’re the first customer we’ve had today.”

Magnus breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed a little. “Thank god.”

“Hot date?” she asked.

“I wish. Interview.”

The joke didn’t seem to go over as well as he hoped. She pursed her lips and took the empty tray back to the kitchen.

The bell above the door jingled, and in walked a man who oozed “craftsman.” He was wearing a dusty flannel and a cowboy hat and had a mustache you could lose a piece of pizza in. He approached the bar and stuck out his hand. “You’ll be Magnus?”

“Yes, sir.” Magnus shook.

“I’m Isaak.” He took a seat next to him and put his hat down on the bar. “Sorry I’m late. Lost track of time.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Julia appeared. “Hey, can I get you something?”

“Coffee’d be treat. Is Ren back there?”

“Yeah, she’s doing the books.”

“Tell her I said hello.”

“I will.” Julia smiled at Isaak and left for the kitchen. God, was that her smile? It was beautiful.

“I’ll cut to the chase, Magnus, I hate interviews,” said Isaak. “You said on the phone you’ve got some examples of your work?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some chairs I made out in my car,” he said.

“Then let’s see those.” Isaak pulled a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and put it on the counter. “Lead on.”

Magnus hopped off the stool and strode out of the bar. Yeah, this wasn’t so bad after all.

Julia came out of the kitchen with another cup and was greeted with an empty bar and a five-dollar
bill. She set down the cup of coffee with a glare. The money was from Isaak, that she knew. He did this fairly regularly, show up to meet someone, order something small, and give her a fiver whether or not he ate or drank it. This Magnus guy, on the other hand, had just skipped out on his bill.

Julia rolled her eyes. What a jerk.
“Oh my god, it’s him. He’s here.” Taako said, immediately getting an iron grip on Julia’s forearm.

“Who-ow, ow, nails. Nails!” Julia pulled her arm free and checked to see if Taako had broken the skin.

“Oh, sorry,” he said distractedly looking back at the crowded stands. The Goldcliff Golddiggers were short a player, and the teams had decided to play with only four blockers a jam. Julia and Taako were both on the bench this jam, while Noelle was making quick work of darting between the blockers of the Golddiggers. Lucretia was pacing back and forth, closely observing the movements of her players.

“Who’s here?” Julia said, leaning around Taako to look into the crowd. She didn’t see anyone noteworthy. Suddenly Taako pulled her back upright.

“No, don’t look. Then he’ll know!”

“Taako, I don’t even know who I’m looking for.”

“Him!” Taako said fervently, as if that should mean something. “The guy from last season.”

Julia scrunched her eyebrows. “You’re going to have to be more specific. You dated a lot of guys last year.”

Taako rolled his eyes. “Four is not a lot, Miss I-haven’t-been-laid-in-two-years.”

“Whoa, hey.” Julia recoiled, leaning back a little.

“Sorry, I’m a little...right now…” Taako turned back to look into the stands. The crowd let out a collective ‘Ooh’ as Killian knocked two Golddiggers to the ground. “There. Right there, first row with the camera.”

Julia looked over Taako’s shoulder and scanned through the front row. She finally saw the man Taako was talking about. He was tall, with dark skin and dreadlocks pulled back from his face. He held an expensive looking camera to his face as Noelle and the Golddigger jammer sped past. He was very handsome, to be sure, but he didn’t look especially familiar. Till it clicked.

“Wait. That’s the guy who—”

“Fell on the track, yeah!” they said together. Taako turned back to stare at the mystery man some more.

“Didn’t you have to like jump over him? And you said something…” she thought for a moment. “Come with me if you want to live,” she said in a very poor impression of Taako. Taako looked back at her as the jam ended and the rest of the team came over for a quick break.

“I’d never say anything so stupid,” he retorted.

“So’d you get his number?”
“Did who get who’s number?” Killian asked, slamming down on the bench next to Julia and picking up her water bottle. The rest of the team crowded around the bench and began quickly talking over each other.

“Taako.”

“Taako got whose number?”

“No he didn’t.”

“Taako didn’t what?”

“Get someone’s number.”

“Who’s got Taako’s number?”

“Why is Taako giving out his number?”

Lucretia snapped her fingers quickly, stopping the game of Telephone they were losing.

“Hey, hey, focus. Okay, we’re only down by two and we can make that up before this first half is over. Jenicide, you gotta stay with the pack.” Sloane nodded from where she was kneeling. Hurley grabbed her shoulder comfortably. “Abby, you’re jamming, watch out for the wall. If you’re the lead, call it when you get three points.” Taako pulled the star-emblazoned panty from Noelle’s helmet and slipped it over his own.

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.” He saluted with a smile.

“Alright, you got this.” The group put in their hands, “Who Are We? B.O.B.!” Julia and Noelle cheered and clapped from the bench as the rest of the team joined the Golddiggers on the track.

“Abra-ca-look out, folks! Abby Cadabra will be jamming this jam, and when she’s on the track, you never know what to expect,” the announcer’s voice rang through the rink.

A loud cheer came up from the stands as Taako skated over to stand next to the Goldcliff Golddigger jammer. He blew the crowd a kiss. The cheering grew even louder.

“I love you Abby Cadabra!!” a loud shout cut through the roar.

Taako took a deep breath as he watched the formation of the pack 30 feet ahead of him on the pivot line. The Golddiggers were already arranging themselves into that wall Lucretia warned him about. His core seemed to chatter with anticipation as Avi joined them just on the inside of the track. The first whistle sounded and the pack took off.

To Taako, time always seemed to slow and sound seemed to dull till the moment that the second whistle blew and he took off. The other jammer tried to bump into him at the start, but Taako was too fast. The Golddigger wall was doing a pretty good job of blocking the inside of the track, so Taako swung to the outside and dodged the majority of blockers. Carey booty blocked the last blocker and Taako slipped past the group, swinging his long legs over each other as he rounded the corner.

He quickly rounded the track and approached the pack again. He only needed to pass three blockers to get the necessary points for the B.O.B. to be tied going into the second half. However, the wall that they had been using had broken up a little bit and there wasn’t a clear path through them as he approached. Hurley held off a blocker at the furthest end of the pack, and the rest of the Golddigger blockers managed to corner Taako on the outside of the track.
Suddenly, Sloane came sailing back on the inside. Her upheld arm caught Taako’s eye and he stepped back from the blockers. Killian, Sloane, and Carey swarmed at the Golddiggers, giving Taako just the split second he needed to dart to the inside and pass the three of them. Hurley’s blocker reached for Taako, but he slipped past as the crowd cheered.

He tapped his hands against his hips and Magnus blew the whistle.

“Aaaannd that’s the half folks. The Goldcliff Golddiggers with 46 and your Bureau of Badass with 47, thanks to some totally righteous jamming by Abby Cadabra!”

Oh, that was a nice feeling.

Now that the jam was over, Taako allowed himself a glance at The Man. He had the camera lowered and a sort of awestruck expression on his beautiful face. Taako smiled and winked at him as he skated past.

He skated directly over to Julia, “Is he looking?”

Julia surreptitiously looked over Taako’s shoulder; she grinned at the expression on the man’s face. “Oh, yeah. He’s totally into you.” Taako bit his lip and smiled.

The B.o.B. maintained their lead the rest of the game, and finished 9 points ahead of the Goldcliff Golddiggers. Post game was always a busy time for the players, taking pictures with fans, working the merch tables to help keep the league afloat. Taako was doing the latter; he and Carey were manning the t-shirt table.

The lines were always long, but by now they’d finally emptied out. A few straggling fans wandered about, chatting and making plans for the rest of the evening.

“Man, I hope someone got footage of that jam of yours.” Carey said, putting some shirts back in a box. “You were just like ahh! And then Sloane just zoomed in, peeww, and then you were like zooop! And the crowd went wild!” She held her hands up to her mouth and imitated the roar of the crowd. “Total game changer, right there.”

Taako smiled and laughed before turning to a customer that had walked up to the table. “Ah, yes, which one do you--” he drifted off mid-sentence as he saw who it was. “It’s you.”

The man smiled and pulled on the strap of his messenger bag. “Hullo,” he said in a distinctly English accent. Taako’s eyebrows raised.

“Wow, I didn’t expect you to be British.”

“I’m...not.” he said, the accent disappearing and looking uncomfortable. “Sorry, just when I get nervous I sometimes gain an accent.”

Carey laughed, and Taako gave her a look.

“Oh, uhhh, I’m gonna go help Killian.” She quickly scooted away, heading towards nowhere in particular. Save maybe a good vantage point.

“So,” the man cleared his throat. “You’re Abby Cadabra, right?”

“Yes that’s me. Though I usually pronounce it Taako.” He held out his hand as if for a royal kiss.
The man laughed. “Taako, got it. I’m Kravitz Sinclair.” He took Taako’s hand and gave it a business-like shake. Taako frowned a little, but brushed it away with a winning smile. “You did great in the game today. And last year too, if I remember right.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“No problem.” Neither said anything for a moment, looking around a little.

“So did you want to buy a t-shirt, or could I interest you in something different, like say my phone number?” Taako gave him a lopsided grin.

Kravitz’ eyes widened and he looked a little flustered. “Oh, um—” he started.

“I mean, I did practically save your life last year, so at the very least you could repay me with a cup of coffee.”

Kravitz looked down and pulled at his strap again. “Oh, well I mean, yes, but I–Just I don’t…I don’t know if it’d be right.”

Taako blinked a few times, some very old feelings creeping to the surface. He looked away. “I see,” he said without inflection and crossing his arms.

“No, wait.” Kravitz smacked his hand against the side of his head. “Ooh, boy. I’ve messed this all up. Uh, let me start again.” He pulled around his bag and pulled out his camera and a manila folder. “I’m a photographer- documentary mostly.” He set the camera on the table and opened the folder. Inside was a collection of black and white photographs of their roller derby league. Taako uncrossed his arms and picked up the stack of photos, looking carefully at each one. “I’ve been looking for my next story, and I think I’ve found it here at the derby, specifically, the Bureau of Badass.”

“Don’t you have to get permission before you can start following us around?” asked Taako, only half-teasing.

“Mrs. Moreau was my actually first contact with the league.” Taako looked up from an especially good photo of one of the Wild Women from a bout last year.

“Mrs. Moreau?”

“Oh, uh, Lucretia.”

Taako gave Kravitz an exasperated look. “I know my own coach’s last name...just didn’t know she was married,” he finished quickly. He put the photos back into a stack and handed them over to Kravitz. “Now, why does this mean that you can’t take me out for coffee?”

“Well, just...as a documentarian I try not to interact with my subjects too much so that I don’t cause an impact on their reality. I’m here to document...not influence.”

Taako thought about that for a minute while Kravitz packed away the camera. “Do you ever interview your subjects?”

Kravitz nodded as he tucked the flap of his bag back over the opening. “Occasionally, yes.”

“Perfect!” Taako quickly wrote down something on a slip of paper and held it out to Kravitz, who slowly took it. “You can interview me here tomorrow at 4.”

Kravitz looked between the slip of paper and Taako a few times before slowly nodding and
walking away. Carey instantly reappeared at his side.

“So how’d it go? From behind the bleachers it appeared like a B+.”

Taako slapped a hand across Carey’s shoulders. “I’ve got a date, baBY!”
It's A Date

Kravitz checked one more time that he had the address right. 116 8th street was what Taako had scrawled on the paper slip in almost indecipherable chicken scratch. There was a 116 above the glass door and he was definitely on 8th street. But the sign over the door gave him pause. It was a handpainted wooden sign reading The Pothead. The artist had drawn some sort of vase looking thing next to the word. Feeling like he was part of some horrible prank, Kravitz picked up his tape recorder and camera. He crossed the street and cautiously opened the door.

A bell tinkled over the door and he looked around in shock. For a place called the Pothead, it certainly wasn’t what he expected. There were pottery wheels scattered about the large open room, and patterned pastel tile on the floor. Large wire shelves were pushed against the back wall, on which sat many pottery projects in various states of completion. A trio of older ladies turned as he walked in.

“Oh, you must be Kravitz,” said one, stepping around a stool and surveying him through cat-eyed bejeweled glasses that made her eyes look twice as big. “I’m Joan. This is Grace and Tracy.”

“Taako, your little friend is here!” Tracy called. She had on a sweater that had ‘My Other Car is a Ball of Yarn’ appliqued on the front and brightly colored manicured nails.

“Just a minute,” Taako’s voice came from an open door that most likely led to the back room.

“Though I wouldn’t call him little,” Grace muttered a little too loudly.

The other two giggled; Joan elbowed her. “Grace!” But that only made Tracy and Grace laugh louder.

Luckily for Kravitz, Taako appeared in the doorway. “Alright, ladies, I said you could see him and then you promised you’d leave.”

The trio took another look at Kravitz, then stepped around him for the door, winking as they passed by.

“See you next week, Taako, dear.” Tracy waved as they left, the bell jangling as the door shut. There wasn’t anyone else in the store.

Despite the clay covered apron, and the fact he had a smudge of pink paint on his cheek, Taako was impeccably dressed. Dark tights, high waisted black shorts and a white top with the sleeves rolled up. Kravitz suddenly had the distinct impression that he was unwittingly on a date.

“Hey, you can set your things down anywhere. We’ll be at those wheels by the window.” Taako gestured to the front of the store before disappearing into the back again. He returned quickly with two hunks of red clay, which he dropped onto the wheels. He snagged a bucket of water from another station and sat down. Kravitz hadn’t moved from his spot by the door, so Taako patted the stool next to him and smiled. Kravitz frowned and reluctantly sat down next to Taako, setting his things on the wide window ledge.

“Now it’s very simple, you push the pedal to spin the wheel. Don’t make it spin too fast, and don’t let your hands get too dry.”

“What do I make?”
“Whatever you want.”

Kravitz frowned at the lump of mud. He had never been very good with infinite possibilities. Nor with unscheduled plans, so he reached forward and hit record on his tape machine. “Is it okay if I record this interview?”

“Sure thing, doll face,” Taako said, dipping his hands in water and starting his wheel.

Taako was really revelling in how delightfully uncomfortable Kravitz looked. But he had to give it to him, the man was a trooper. Kravitz rolled up his long sleeves and Taako couldn’t tear his eyes away; he’d revealed black ink tattoos that had not been previously visible. His left arm had a geometric, futuristic design on it, but the other looked like a forest with barren trees and a flock of birds taking flight. An errant thought wondered how far the tattoos extended up his arms, but Taako quickly squashed that and focused on his clay.

He pulled the clay up into a conical shape. Taako never decided what he would be making till he already had his hands on the clay. He’d been going through a bowl phase recently, so he hoped that it would be something different.

“So, ah, do you work here?” Kravitz asked, mimicking Taako’s movements to not quite the same success.

“Only on weekends. I came here all the time for quite a while just cause I find this relaxing. Last year, the owner asked if she could hire me so she didn’t have to work on Saturdays, and I was gonna be here anyway.”

“So where do you work during the week then?”

“Sazed’s Bakery. It’s only a couple of blocks from here.”

“You’re a baker?”

Taako nodded, pushing the clay down. He guessed he was making another bowl. “Was a waiter for a really long time, but finally got out of that a couple of years ago when I started at the bakery.”

“What do you bake?”

“Cakes mostly. Sazed handles the pastries and so on, but I’m the Master of Cakes.” He sat up a little straighter and struck a noble pose. Kravitz laughed. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“How you makin’ that paper, homie? Does documentary photography pay the bills?”

“Oh, yeah, actually. It didn’t at first, did a lot of portraiture.”

“Senior photos?”

“Yeah.”

“On railroad tracks?”

Kravitz smiled. “Yeah, so many.”

“So what changed?”
“Do you remember that hurricane that went through Bottlenose Cove a couple years ago?”

Taako frowned and thought. “Vaguely.”

“Well, I was one of the first people on the scene. I went as a volunteer and just happened to take some photos. I ended up being able to sell those to the AP and a couple other places.”

“Wow. That’s awesome.” Taako’s lump of clay was starting to take the shape of a wide decorative bowl. Kravitz’s was a sort of smooth lump.

“So Taako... why roller derby?” Kravitz asked, trying to pull the conversation back on track. Taako didn’t answer for a minute, staring intently at his spinning bowl. He sat back and wiped at his nose, leaving a little smudge of clay on his upper lip.

“Because everyone needs a family,” he answered, a different tone in his voice, matter of fact and clipped. “And if I didn’t do roller derby, I wouldn’t have one.”

Kravitz didn’t say anything, just watched Taako’s face, the invitation to elaborate hanging in the air.

Taako glanced at Kravitz then quickly grabbed back at his bowl. “Whew, okay, you really don’t want to go there, brocephus, let me tell you that.” The languid drawl returning to his voice.

There was now a large dent in the rim of Taako’s bowl. Great. He folded the clay back in on itself, starting over.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. How about... uh... how’d you discover roller derby?”

Taako laughed, though he wasn’t smiling. “You’re just really knocking ‘em out of the park.”

“I’m sorr--”

“No, no. I’m the one who wanted to be interviewed.” he said in mock exasperation, holding the back of one of his hands to his forehead. “It’s my burden to bear.” He faked a sniffle and looked to see if Kravitz was enjoying the show. But he was studying Taako, like a scientist watching a petri dish.

Taako wetted his hands and started the wheel up again. “There was a flyer for a tournament,” he began, that clipped tone returning to his voice. “At a shelter I was... living in at the time.” He decidedly did not look at Kravitz. “Uh, it was kind of a... dark time in my life, but I went to the bout and knew immediately that when I had the money, I would do derby.” He smiled slightly. “I’ve been on the team 4 seasons now. Derby really, ah...” He paused, but nodded and continued, “It really saved me.”

Kravitz didn’t respond right away, and Taako didn’t look up from his wheel. Taako didn’t seem to be forming it into any particular shape, just working the clay between his hands.

“If you don’t mind me asking... what did it save you from?”

Taako didn’t reply. It seemed like he didn’t hear the question. Kravitz almost changed the subject then Taako said, “Myself, in the end.” He let out a deep breath. “I think it’s important for people to have goals for their life beyond just survival, if their situation allows for it. Um... derby was mine.”

Kravitz nodded and noticed that the clay in Taako’s hands was changing shape. Growing taller and rounded, probably going to be a vase.
“Well,” Taako began, slipping back into his usual drawl. “Now that I’ve bared my soul, I have some questions of my own.” He smiled wickedly at Kravitz.

“That seems only fair.” Kravitz braced himself for any number of questions.

“Why’d you call Lucretia Mrs. Moreau?”

“Oh. Um…”

“Don’t worry, I have other more personal questions, but this kept me up all night. I gotta know.”

Kravitz smiled. “I’ve known Lucretia for years. My mother used to be her coach.”

“Oh, your mom did derby?”

“Oh, no.” Kravitz seemed to pause and laugh about the idea. “No, she’d never. Doesn’t like confrontation, prefers to subtly manipulate from behind the scenes.”

“So what did she coach Lucretia in?”

“Figure skating.”

Of all the things Taako thought Kravitz might say, that certainly hadn’t been on the list. Taako took a minute to factor this into what he knew about Lucretia. It illuminated a whole new side to her.

“You didn’t know?” said Kravitz. “She was kind of a big deal for a little while, she actually qualified for the Olympics... she really never told you?”

Taako just shook his head, staring out the front window and trying to make sense of this new information. “So wait, something must have happened. ’Cause she’s not an Olympic athlete, she coaches roller derby and is a P.A..” He turned abruptly to Kravitz. “What happened?”

“Look,” Kravitz began, shaking his head, “If Mrs. Moreau hasn’t told you, she has a reason. And I don’t want to overstep-”

“Nonono, Kravitz, please, Kravitz, please, please Kravitz, for once in your life stop being such a stand up guy 100% all the time.”

“...we’ve known each other less than 24 hours.”

“Yeah, and I already know that you’re a Good Person, but please just tell me one thing.” Taako clasped his hands as if he was going to pray. “It’s all I want for Christmas.”

“Alright, one.” Kravitz held up a clay covered finger.

“Okay...I’ve known Lucretia for four years. And never once have I seen her with a spouse, heard her mention a spouse, or even seen her with a wedding ring on. So what happened?”

Kravitz frowned, “Well...he died.”

The word hung between them like dead weight. Taako instantly felt like he had opened a door that he wasn’t meant to.

“Oh,” he said simply.

“Yeah. It was pretty sudden…” Kravitz turned back to his wheel. “Anyway, if you want to know
more you’ll have to talk to Mrs.--Lucretia.”

There was silence between the pair for a few minutes. Taako’s vase was turning into quite the work of art. Kravitz’s clay was a sort of bowl/cup hybrid, not very practically shaped or masterfully done.

“So…” Taako began, the first word almost seeming too loud in the quiet shop. “Did you do figure skating too?”

Kravitz shook his head. “No. Mother tried, but I was never any good at it. Didn’t have the coordination.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, I was rubbish. Couldn’t even land a waltz jump.”

Taako grinned. “And here I thought I was the idiot for not being able to do a quadruple salchow.”

Kravitz laughed, shaking his head a little. They both turned back to their wheels, and quietly smiled to themselves.
It had been a bad week. Noelle’s project proposal was flat out rejected by the projects committee. Killian and Carey’s landlord was falsely claiming that their rent hadn’t been paid. And Sloane’s best mechanic just walked out during his shift.

Without any of them talking about it beforehand, they all showed up at Refuge on Friday night. Julia was the first one there, she just didn’t leave after her shift was over. Lucretia showed up last, throwing her briefcase on the table and ripping off her tweed blazer.

“Rough week?” Sloane said, holding her glass up out of the blast zone. Lucretia slammed down next to Taako and ran her hands over her short greying hair.

“Two hours,” she growled. “He lectured me for two hours of how I should be ‘grateful zat I even have zis job,’” she said in a fairly accurate impression of her boss’s accent.

The whole booth let out a low ‘oooo’. Taako scooched an arm around to pat her shoulder. The booth wasn’t really meant to hold 8 people, but that didn’t stop them from crowding into it anyway.

“Some lady yelled at me cause her son apparently isn’t progressing to orange belt fast enough,” Hurley commiserated. “He’s been at the dojo for a month and is late to every practice.”

“I forgot to put the eggs in a $2000 cake,” Taako commented as he finished his second pina colada.

“Did it even work?” Noelle asked.

“Nope, nope. Had to throw out 5 full sheets worth of essentially Tahitian vanilla flavored duck food. Sazed was not a happy camper.”

“I got barfed on,” Julia said glumly, swirling the remnants of her whiskey sour in the glass.

“Ewww. You win,” Carey said, scooting as far away as she could, which was about one inch.

“I changed!”

“Still…” Killian teased, also attempting to scoot away as well.

“I’m getting a drink, anyone want another round?” Lucretia stood up. Everyone raised their hands. “Sounds about right.” She left for the bar.

“This week could not get any worse.” Julia shook her head.

“Careful, the universe likes to play tricks on people like us,” Taako warned. As if on cue, the door opened and in walked Avi and Johann, and they had Magnus in tow. Julia groaned and downsed the rest of her drink.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she grumbled under her breath.

“That’s the new ref, right?”

“Yeah, and right out of the gate Lydia was making moves,” Julia said in a lowered voice. Avi
waved when he saw the booth and started making his way over. “This guy’s no better than Gundren was—Hey Avi.”

“Heyyy guys, room for three more?” He laughed at his own joke. The girls smiled weakly, a little bit worried that he wasn’t kidding. “Ehhh, I’m just joshing. Do you guys know Magnus? He’s new in town. And Gundren’s replacement.”

“In more ways than one,” Julia muttered into her glass. Carey was the only one who heard her and she started laughing and choked on her drink. Julia patted her back a few times while she coughed.

“Well, uh, Magnus, this is the B.o.B.” Avi continued, undeterred. “This is Taako, Noelle, Killian.” He pointed to each one, and then switched to the other side of the table. “And Hurley, Sloane, Carey, and, oh, you’ve already met Julia.”

Magnus smiled and gave a small wave. Julia stared him up and down, her crappy mood and couple drinks pulling down any attempts that she might have made at civility. Plus, he still hadn’t paid his tab.

“We’ll let you ladies-and-Taako get back to it.” He slapped hands down on Johann and Magnus’ shoulders and steered them towards the bar.

Magnus glanced back over his shoulder at the table. If looks could kill, he mused to himself as he sat next to Avi at the bar. The B.o.B. coach was a couple of seats over; the bartender put an incredibly large glass of red wine in front of her.

“Thanks, Ren,” she said, before drinking quite a bit of it.

“Rough week, Lucretia?” Avi asked, leaning over the bar and grabbing a basket of chex mix.

“You could say that,” she said, nodding to the trio. She turned and headed back for the booth. Magnus could see Julia with her head thrown back in laughter. If he was a poetic man, he probably could write a book about the way her curls moved. He turned back and picked out the rye chips from the chex mix.

“Dude, did you like shoot Julia’s dog or something?” Avi asked.

“So it’s not just me?”

“Nah, man. She is not happy with you.” Avi looked over at the table. “What did you do?”

“Hell if I know. I think I’ve said ten words to her.”

“What’ll it be, gentlemen?” Ren said, stepping up and refilling their basket. She was a youngish black woman whose hair was straightened and pulled back in a spiky ponytail.

“Port,” Johann said, not looking up from the notebook he was scribbling in.

“I’ll have your cheapest beer, my fine mademoiselle. And put whatever this guy’s having on my tab,” Avi pointed to Magnus.

“Hey, thanks man.”

“No problem. Welcome to Refuge! When you’re here, you’re family.”

“We’re a pub, Avi. Not Olive Garden,” Ren said, grinning.
“I’ll have the same,” Magnus said, nodding back to Avi. Ren walked away and began pouring the drinks.

“So you really don’t know why Julia hates your guts?”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d go so far as ‘hates my guts’.”

“Johann, what do you think?”

Johann heaved a sigh and looked up from his notebook. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Ren returned and set down the beers and Johann’s port.

“Ren, could you help us?” Avi asked.

“Wait, we don’t need to--” Magnus started.

“Friends don’t let friends be hated by other friends,” Avi assured him, putting Magnus’ beer in front of him. “Julia ... is not the biggest fan of Magnus, to put it mild sauce.”

“Can you offer us insight into the female psyche?” Johann finished.

Ren looked between the three of them and chuckled. “Look guys, I know I’m a bartender, but I’m not a relationship therapist. Besides, Julia hasn’t even mentioned a Magnus to me.”

“Hey that’s a good sign.” Avi tapped Magnus’ arm and took a swig of his beer.

“She has been grousing about this new referee though,” Ren mentioned as she walked away to tend to another customer.

Oof. Magnus picked up the beer and took a drink. Double oof. He grimaced and looked down into the glass. “Avi, thanks for the beer, but this is terrible.”

“Oh yeah. But it’s $4, soo,” he shrugged and took another large swig. “The key is to drink it fast, cause once it’s room temperature it is literally undrinkable.”

“Pretty sure it’s undrinkable now.” Magnus looked over as Taako and Carey were snickering by the juke box. They slipped in a couple of quarters and pushed their selection, high fiving with devious smiles on their faces. Suddenly a loud song came over the speakers.

“Yoooo, I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want

So tell me what you want, what you really, really want.

I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want

So tell me what you want, what you really, really want.

I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha)

I wanna really, really, really wanna zigazig ah.”

Taako and Carey immediately started dancing and singing along, each taking a part in the song.
They knew all the words, and even had a couple coordinated moves. They waved over to the rest of the team still in their seats in the booth, though they were watching with big smiles on their faces. Sloane hopped to her feet and joined Taako and Carey on the floor as the first verse began.

“If you want my future, forget my past
If you wanna get with me, better make it fast
Now don’t go wasting my precious time
Get your act together we could be just fine.”

As she sang and danced along, Sloane pulled a pin out of her bun and her hair tumbled down, dark and wavy and almost to her waist. Sloane held a hand out for a blushing Hurley, who took it and the two began dancing together. Hurley laughed as Sloane dipped her.

“I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want
So tell me what you want, what you really, really want
I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha)
I wanna really, really, really wanna zigazig ah”

Killian was deeper in the booth than Noelle, so she ended up pushing her out onto the impromptu dance floor as she got up. Killian immediately joined in the dancing, surprisingly light on her feet for her stature, but Noelle stood awkwardly to the side for a minute. Till Taako hip bumped her and Noelle smiled, starting a small dance and quietly singing the echoes.

“If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends
Make it last forever, friendship never ends
If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give
Taking is too easy, but that's the way it is.”

As the next verse began, Julia and Lucretia were the only ones left in the booth. They watched as the rest of the team grooved around in the small space they’d cleared between tables. The group on the floor kept waving the two of them over, but neither made any move to get up.

“Oh, what do you think about that
Now you know how I feel

Say, you can handle my love, are you for real

I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try

If you really bug me then I'll say goodbye.”

Suddenly, when the chorus began, Julia jumped up on the seat of the booth, singing along with the song. The rest of the team cheered and Julia hopped down to the ground, throwing her arms up and swaying her hips to the beat. Magnus watched her movements; she looked just as home out there as she did on the track, whipping her dark curls around and smiling cheesily at Noelle. She was breezy, languid. Free.

“Yo I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want

So tell me what you want, what you really, really want

I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna, (ha) I wanna really, really, really wanna zigazig ah.

If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends

Make it last forever, friendship never ends

If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give

Taking is too easy, but that's the way it is.”

Rolling her eyes, Lucretia stood up and joined the team on the impromptu floor. She hip bumped Carey and Taako grabbed her hand, giving her a twirl. She laughed and her arms moved effortlessly moved in a complicated pattern across her body as she swayed to the beat. All the other people in the pub tolerated the song and the ruckus, but Magnus watched, entranced and not even just with Julia. He felt like a kid with his nose pressed up to the glass at a candy store. He longed to be a part of their fun.
Magnus Makes Friends

Johann blinked a couple times, and then rested an unsteady hand on Magnus’ shoulder. “Do you ever think about Beethoven and cry?”

Magnus laughed. “Not usually.”

“Oh god, don’t get him started,” chuckled Avi.

It was sometime around ten now, and Johann was already plastered. He ran his hands through his very deliberate Leo Dicaprio ‘do. “Ohhhh man. Oh man. Shit, man. Beethoven. Guy was deaf, right? Deaf. Writes some of the best music there ever was and he can’t even hear people play it.” He tapped his temple. “He hears it all in his head.”

A ruckus over at the B.o.B.’s table drew Magnus’ attention; most of the ladies were saying good night and leaving, including Julia. Magnus made himself stop watching them. “That, uh, kinda sucks.”

“Nah, it’s the artistry, man! The musicality!”

“I swear you make most of these words up,” said Avi.

“Hey, fellas. Mind if we join you?” Taako swaggered over, somehow managing to look like David Beckham, complete with frosted tips, despite being skinnier, swarthier, and gap-toothed. Killian loomed behind.

“Please do,” said Avi. “Johann’s just talking about Beethoven.”

“Oh, do you know the story of his ninth symphony?” asked Taako, sliding onto a stool beside Avi, while Killian took the one by Magnus.

Johann slouched toward Taako. “No.”

“Yeah, it was crazy, my dude. He was onstage after the performance, right, turned toward the orchestra, and the audience was losing their fuckin’ minds about it, right, but he couldn’t hear.” Taako took a sip of what looked like a piña colada. “So the mezzo-soprano soloist had to turn him around so he could see how much they loved him.”

“Oh god.” Johann laid his head down on the bar and sobbed.

Avi patted him on the shoulder. Taako hid an impish smile.

“Now how’d you know that?” asked Killian suspiciously.

“Please, Killian, I’m a man of culture.”

“Well I’m a woman of tequila. Ren?”

Avi stood up, one hand still on Johann’s back. “Do you need to go outside for a bit? Get some fresh air?”

Johann blubbed something unintelligible. Avi helped him away from the bar, whispering to Magnus, “We’ll be right back.”
Magnus wondered if he should start a conversation, but Taako beat him to it.

“So Magnus, we’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

“We’ve noticed some things,” said Killian. “We thought you should be aware of—oh, thank you, Ren—some facts of life?” She waved her shot glass as if it were a decanter of the finest wine.

“Uhh...what do you mean?” Magnus huddled into his shoulders.

“We saw the way you were looking at us dancing,” said Killian, leaning in close, shaking some salt onto the webbing between her thumb and pointer finger.

Magnus leaned back. “Oh...oh! No, shit, no, I wasn’t trying to be creepy.”

“Somehow you managed,” said Taako.

“Who did you have your eye on, hmm? I swear to god, if you say Noelle, I’ll end you.”

Magnus gulped. He was pretty sure Killian could rip him in half. “Look, you all just looked like you were having fun. It was fun to watch.”

Killian eyeballed him. She licked the salt, drank her shot, and popped a lime wedge into her mouth, never moving her gaze, and placed the glass carefully on the table.

Magnus was suitably intimidated.

She took the lime wedge out of her mouth. “Taako? What do you think?”

“Hard to say,” said Taako.

“Look, I don’t know what I did to make you guys mistrust me so much,” Magnus blustered. “I’m sorry I stared. I’m new here, I don’t have many friends.”

“You won’t make any more if you keep flirting with players,” said Killian.

Magnus paused. “You mean the captain of the Wild Women? No, she flirted with me. I’m not into that. It’s bad sportsmanship.”

Taako took the last drink of his piña colada and raised an eyebrow. “I notice you’re wearing the same pair of shorts as you were during the bout.”

Magnus shifted uncomfortably. There was only so much laundry you could do in a van. They’d passed the sniff test. “Passable,” Taako decided, and patted the seat to invite Magnus back up.

Are you done interrogating me?” asked Magnus.

“We’ll say yes for now,” said Taako.
“Hey Ren?” said Killian. “Can I get this man a better beer than the swill Avi’s been feeding him?”

“Sure thing,” said Ren, ducking away to grab a mug.

Reluctantly, Magnus took his seat again. He admitted to himself that if some random guy was staring at his friends, he’d probably do the same thing. “You’re really protective over each other.”

Taako shrugged noncommittally, as if he hadn’t just hosted a minor inquisition.

“We have to be,” said Killian. “Some men are weird about derby girls.”

“I can’t see why,” said Magnus. “Four of you are pretty clearly taken.”

Killian raised her eyebrows. Taako looked impressed. “No wait,” he said, “this is a fun game, which four?”

Again Magnus felt like someone was putting the screws to him. “Uh, Sloane and Hurley? Right? They’re together.”

“Correct,” said Taako. “And?”

Magnus gestured to Killian. “You and Carey?”

Killian smiled. “Isn’t she great?”

“No one ever guesses Carey,” said Taako.

Magnus frowned. He tapped his own shoulder. “She’s got that tattoo. Two female symbols interlocking.”

“Right, you’d think between that and the butch haircut and the flannel it’d be obvious, right?” said Taako.

“She thinks it’s a spicy Latina thing,” said Killian.

“My cousin gets the same thing,” said Magnus.

Ren appeared with a beer, for which Magnus thanked her, and then thanked Killian once he’d tasted it.

“So Neverwinter, huh?” said Taako. “Why would you move to a podunk place like this?”

“It’s not podunk,” protested Killian.

“Two movie theaters does not a city make, Miss Priss,” said Taako. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s home, but it’s like the moon out here. Devoid of life.”

“I uh, was trying to get away from some… trouble.”

“What, do you owe someone money?” asked Killian.

“No, there was this gangbanger I pissed off in my old neighborhood. Got him thrown in jail.”

“Hatchi matchi,” said Taako.

“Yeah, his friends weren’t too pleased with me.” Magnus took a long swig of beer. “I needed a
change of scenery anyway.”

Avi and Johann reappeared, taking the seats next to Taako. Johann leaned over and wrapped Taako up in a hug. “You’re so great, man. Like. So great.”

Taako looked as though he were suffering rigor mortis. “My fella, I’m gonna ask you once to stop.”

Johann dragged himself off and wandered over to the piano in the corner. He started playing a very pleasant jazz riff.

“Maybe you two can tell us why Julia hates Magnus,” said Avi.

“Just a misunderstanding, I think,” said Killian. “She thinks he’s another Gundren.”

“Gundren wasn’t so bad,” Avi said.

“Come on, Avi,” scoffed Killian.

Avi put up his hands. “Fine, fine. He wasn’t great. But Magnus, for what it’s worth, I think you’re a good guy.”

Magnus was touched. “Thank you.”

“Oh, this reminds me,” said Killian. “I have to tell you about the moron I was training at the gym the other day.”

As Killian launched into her story, Magnus relaxed.
“So you’re telling me he’s cool?”

Killian shrugged and opened the door to the stairwell. “That’s what I’m telling you. Magnus is cool.”

“Not a douche,” said Carey, tapping down the stairs.

“If he was, he wouldn’t have seen the plain fact that you and I are gay as hell.”

“Huh.” Carey hopped onto the bannister, slid to the next landing, and opened the door for Killian. “So then why was he staring at us dancing?”

“He’s just lonely. Thanks, babe.” Killian shuffled down the hall, carrying both their skate bags in one hand and holding Carey’s hand with the other. “It takes time to make friends.”

“He’s lucky Avi found him first, then,” said Carey. “ Plenty of friends, in no time.” She paused, mid-step. “Did I turn off the stove?”

“No, but I did,” said Killian.

“You’re so good.” Carey narrowed her eyes at Killian, hiding a smile. “Almost too good.”

Killian kissed her on the top of the head. “Anything interesting come in the shop today?”

“A woman tried to pawn a cheese slicer. Said it was a rare artifact from some island somewhere.” Carey snorted. “I almost felt bad for her.”

Killian laughed. They stopped in front of a door marked 344, and Carey knocked.

Angus opened the door and hopped outside. “Hello, Miss Carey and Miss Killian!”

Carey mussed his hair. “Hey, buddy. You’ve got popcorn kernels in your teeth.”

He sucked noisily at his teeth. “That’ll be on account of the popcorn I had for dinner.”

Killian groaned. “You had popcorn for dinner?”

“It was all that was left. Grandpa said he’ll bring something home this morning.”

“Goddammit, old man!” Carey shouted.

“Please don’t talk that way about my grandpa, Miss Carey,” Angus pleaded. “It’s really much better here than the group home.”

Killian placed a hand on Carey’s shoulder. “Anger later. Angus now.”
Carey sighed. “Yeah. Angus, do you want a sandwich?”

“But we’ll be late for practice!” said Angus.

“Not if we hurry. I’ll race you up to our place! Ready-set-go!”

Angus bolted, laughing, with Carey close behind. Killian followed at a walk, suppressing a sigh. Angus’ grandfather had taken him in a couple years ago after there were allegations of abuse at the group foster home Angus had been staying in. The old man barely had a paycheck from a night watchman job and was slowly losing his memory. Normally he wouldn’t be considered an appropriate guardian, but blood relatives were given preference, and the system here was already overwhelmed with kids, and Angus was just on the cusp of the time when any older meant “unadoptable,” and on, and on, and on.

So they tried to help out when they could. The old man wouldn’t let Angus spend the night while he was at work, but they could at least watch him in the evenings. They’d talked about taking him in themselves, but it was hard enough for lesbians to adopt kids, much less minimally employed lesbians, one of whom had a brief but inescapable criminal record.

It got Killian’s blood boiling, that was for sure. Life wasn’t fair.

She relaxed a fist she didn’t know she was making. She should take her own advice. Anger later. Angus now. They had a practice to get to.

Carey pulled neatly into a parking space behind the rink and looked up. “Huh. What are they doing?”

Lucretia, Noelle, and Julia were waiting by the back door. Lucretia was wiggling a key in the lock.

The three of them unbuckled and got out of the car. Killian called, “What’s happening?”

“Merle said the rink was closed for the evening, but that we could still practice,” said Julia. “Except that his stupid key won’t work.”

“C’mon, you cheap-ass dwarf, don’t tell me you gave me the wrong key,” grumbled Lucretia.

“Have you called him yet?” asked Killian.

“That’s what Sloane and Hurley are doing,” Julia answered.

“Here they come now,” said Noelle.

They rattled up in Sloane’s Frankenstein junker. Hurley jumped out of the car, still wearing her gi.

“No good,” she said. “He’s not answering.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” said Taako, who came stalking around the side of the building. “His daughter’s in a play. It’s not like he’s got a cellular. No other doors or windows open, Coach.”

Lucretia pulled the key out of the lock and threw it on the ground. “Dammit Merle.”

Sloane and Hurley had joined them now. “So what now,” said Hurley, “we just cancel practice?”

Carey bounced on her toes. “No, wait. I’ve got it. Sloane, do you have a bobby pin?”
Sloane pulled a pin from her hair and handed it over. A few black strands fell out of her bun.

Carey knelt down in front of the lock. “I’m a little rusty on this, but we’re not exactly breaking Fort Knox here.” She stuck the pin into the lock, feeling around carefully.

“You can pick locks, Miss Carey?” asked Angus.

She paused. Very gently, she took Angus by one shoulder and pivoted him so he was facing away. “Yes. I used to do it a lot. And then I got thrown in juvie.” She went back to work. “Don’t do crime, Angus.”

“Okay, Miss Carey.” He stared dutifully at the side of the building.

“I mean it. Ever.”

“I understand, Miss Carey.”

The lock clicked, and Carey pulled open the door. “Here we go.”

“Hell yeah!”

“Nice job.”

“Thanks, Carey.”

Killian squeezed her. “That’s so sexy.”


“Oh, of course.” Killian rested her arm on Carey’s shoulders and, together, they walked into practice.
Chapter Notes

Physical violence in a possibly triggering situation--take care. <3

“Why does Merle have so much Gloria Estefan in his pre-game playlist?” Noelle asked, as she and Julia skated through the lobby.

“I think he used to have a crush on her,” Julia snickered as *Get on Your Feet* came over the speakers.

The lobby was beginning to crowd with people. A group of fans waved at Julia and Noelle, holding signs and wearing the electric blue of the team. The concessions stand already had a line forming and Robbie was running between stations like a madman. The pair skated over to the water fountain by the door, Julia bent down to fill her water bottle. Noelle leaned against the wall, crossing her arms and surveying the crowd.

“There’s a lot of Robes fans here,” she said quietly, her eyes darting between groups dressed in red. Julia looked over her shoulder.

“Eh, it’s early yet. Our fans aren’t very punctual.” She grinned as she spun the lid on her bottle. They traded bottles, and Julia began to fill Noelle’s. “Hey, how’d that project of yours turn out?”

“Which one? The lunar mining one?”

“Yeah...I think.”

“Pretty good. We’re still troubleshooting right now. The problem is the code,” Julia stood up and they began to skate back to the track, dodging around fans and spectators. “For some reason the programming is telling it to drive in circles, and--”

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t a couple of B.o.B. star players.” Julia and Noelle stopped skating; they both recognized that voice. “Though I suppose it’s not hard to be the best when the whole team is garbage.”

They turned around to see Lup, team captain of the Rad Robes, flanked by a couple of her cronies. Lup was several inches taller than Noelle, and was all olive-toned skin and hard-packed sleek muscle. She bore an eerie resemblance to Taako, though he always insisted that he couldn’t see it. She put her hands on her narrow hips and smirked.

“Really? Trash talk?” Julia retorted, crossing her arms. Most of the time a little trash talk wasn’t a big deal, but there was something about the Rad Robes, and Lup in particular, that just set her off. “You’re about as classy as that rat’s nest you call hair.”

Lup stopped smirking and her cronies exchanged a glance.

Noelle started to edge away. “Uhh, Julia, maybe we should…”
Suddenly, Julia felt a hand on her shoulder; Lucretia had skated up with Hurley in tow.

“Sour Scream, excellent to see you, as always.” She nodded at Lup and maintained a placid expression. “I look forward to a good bout today. But I’m afraid my captain doesn’t have time for pleasantries—”

“Hey Lucretia,” Lup interrupted, that smirk returning to her face. It was echoed by her buddies. “Uh, my teammates and I were just wondering if you found it as funny as we do that you’re now a has-been in two different sports?”

Julia made to step forward, but Lucretia’s grip tightened on her shoulder. Hurley was getting the same treatment, but was trying to pull herself free, one finger pointing at Lup’s nostrils. “Hey, why don’t you shut the hell up?”

“Uh, Magnus?” Avi asked, the straw from his juice box still in his mouth.

Magnus didn’t look up from where he was bent over, adjusting the laces on his skates before he put them on. “Yeah?”

“There seems to be a storm a-brewin’ on the horizon.”

“What?” Magnus sat up to look at Avi. Avi gestured with the box towards the lobby. A circular group was starting to form near the foosball tables.

“Ooh, it’s been awhile since we’ve had a fight,” Boyland commented. Magnus groaned and rolled his eyes, but got up to go over and break it up. It always seemed so useless when players would fight during the bout. No one ever accomplished anything, except bruising each other’s egos.

“Ladies, ladies, let’s break it up,” he said, pushing his way through the gathered spectators and standing beside the shouting players. He was surprised to find Julia at the center, and the way her eyes were alight with fury made his gut flip-flop.

“Ref?” the Rad Robes captain, Lup he thought her name was, raised a finger up. “We were wondering if the Bureau would have to forfeit this bout?”

“On what grounds?” he asked, though he felt like it was playing right into her hand.

“They don’t have a full team,” she simpered, her mouth curled into a cruel smile. “Considering they’re missing a quarter of one player,” she looked pointedly at Noelle, “and about half of another,” her gaze turned to Hurley.

“Oh, FUCK NO.”

Lup abruptly disappeared from vision; Julia tackled her to the ground. It took everyone a second to realize what had happened, and in the meantime Julia did not so much punch as clobber Lup’s face.

The crowd started yelling and pushing in. Magnus grabbed her wrist. Julia wrenched out of Magnus’ grip and swung again. Lup was screaming and blood gushed out of her nose, her arms flailing.

Magnus locked his arms around Julia’s waist and hauled her up off of Lup. The crowd backed away as he turned--Julia was kicking, still trying to break free. He threw her over one shoulder, and
“LET ME GO!” she roared. God, she was strong; she almost got out of his grasp a couple of times. She kept up a steady string of insults against Lup, and a couple for Magnus, up until Magnus kicked open the locker room door and dropped Julia unceremoniously on the floor. Lucretia was close behind.

“You’re out of the game.” Magnus said flatly. Julia reacted like he had tossed a bucket of cold water on her.

“What?”

“No, please, I know she--” Lucretia skated around between the two of them.

“No! It’s the league rules. She assaulted another player, technically she assaulted a ref, I’d be within rights to ban her for the rest of the season.”

“But she was goaded! You heard what Lup was saying about Hurley and Noelle!”

“And she said a lot more before you finally got there, ref!” Julia added harshly. Lucretia shot her a sharp look and Julia looked down at the ground.

“I know.” Magnus looked between the pair, feeling conflicted. “And that’s why she’s only out this bout.” He wanted to say something more, about how he would have done the same thing in her situation. But it didn’t seem fair, so he just said, “Don’t let it happen again,” and left the locker room.

The door clicked shut, and Julia looked at Lucretia. She didn’t turn around, just pinched the bridge of her nose and took several deep breaths.

Neither of them said anything for a minute. Finally Lucretia let out a breath.

“You realize that you did exactly what the Rad Robes wanted you to do, right?” She turned and looked at Julia, her gaze like a punch to the gut. “Without you, this game is going to be much easier for them to win.”

Julia opened her mouth to retort, but she realized that she was right.

“You’re a good player, Julia. But you’ve got to start thinking a couple steps ahead, or it’s going to be your downfall.” And she left Julia alone.

After checking that Merle had someone on lobby clean up, Magnus returned to where he’d left his skates. He pulled harshly at the laces and jammed his foot into the boot. He wasn’t sure why he was angry. He was just doing his job. Yeah, Lup had been a bully, and she definitely deserved the broken nose Julia had given her. But it still didn’t feel right to kick Julia out of the game.

“Did you see her? Wham! Bam! K.O.,” Avi said returning to the ref’s bench with Boyland.

“Sour Scream never even had a chance,” Boyland laughed.

“It’s crazy how much she and Taako look alike,” Avi said, looking back at the group of Rad Robe players.

“Right now, she looks more like a Jackson Pollock painting than anything else.”
“Hey, good work, breaking up the fight,” Avi said, elbowing Magnus’ side. “Gundren would usually let them go a few rounds before he’d intervene.”

“You suspend Jule Be Sorry?” Boyland asked.

Magnus nodded, switching to the other skate. When he didn’t say anything, Boyland and Avi looked at each other.

“Hey, don’t feel bad, man,” Avi said. “It’s our job, we gotta enforce the rules. The players know that.”

He was right, Magnus shouldn’t feel this way. So why did he?

The door to the Bureau’s locker room banged open and out stalked Julia, back in her street clothes, dragging her skate bag behind her and making a beeline for the door. She looked about two words away from punching someone else, but Magnus got up and skated over to her.

“Julia, I just wanted—” he started, stopping at her side. She blew right past him, heading for the door.

He watched her go a ways, wondering if he should give it up. But no, this was important.

He ended up having to go outside to catch up with her, skates rattling on the rough asphalt, but managed to reach out and touch her arm. “Julia, wait.”

“What?” she snapped, turning around to look at him, her jaw tensed. Some part of him realized that this may not have been a great idea.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I don’t want to kick you out, but the rules are—”

“Why are you telling me this?” she replied tersely.

Magnus blinked and looked away. Why was he telling her this? Why was he so compelled to convince her that he wasn’t a bad guy? Why?

When he didn’t reply, Julia rolled her eyes and pulled her arm out of his grasp. Magnus watched her get into her car and speed away, the realization dawning on him as his fingers felt like they were on fire from where they had touched her skin. He stood there, frozen, watching her car disappear around a corner.

After a minute, the door opened behind him.

“Hey, boss? You ready to start the bout?” Avi asked.

“Yeah.” Magnus blinked a few times, as if breaking the spell. “Yeah, let’s go.” Mentally he shoved those thoughts in a box and sealed it shut. He wanted to be a good ref, and a good ref was impartial and balanced. He would deal with this later.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everybody,
I just wanted to jump in here real fast and hopefully address some fears you may be
having after this past chapter. So a little backstory, we started this fic back in The Suffering Game, back when Lup was just a name associated with the Rad Robes who were ostensibly the bad guys. Obviously Griffin has flipped the script on all of us several times since then. But by the time that happened, certain plot elements in our fic were already cemented, as seen above. BUT I promise you that this is not the last time we will see Lup. We love her very much and we love the character that Griffin & Justin made for her. So don't worry. We have some good good things in store for her, her arc is honestly one of my favorites in this whole dang fic. It will take a bit to get there, but I promise it's coming. As always, if you have questions or concerns, please feel free to reach us here or on the tumblr. Thanks for reading and see you next chapter!
Julia ground her teeth and fumed as she drove down the country highway. Her radio was off and all her windows rolled down, the wind tangling her hair. She snapped her headlights on as the sun finally dipped below the treeline, casting the road in shadows. It had been several hours since she’d been ejected from the game, and she’d been driving the entire time. She’d initially headed for her apartment, but arrived there far too soon. So she headed for her dad’s, but he’d known she had a bout and would want to know why she wasn’t there, so she drove past. The whole town seemed too small, so she left city limits.

Neighborhoods turned to industrial districts turned to farms turned to just countryside. She hadn’t seen a car for several miles, and finally she began to breathe a little easier. Not that she wasn’t mad, oh no, she had a list. Enemy number one was definitely Lup. That smug bitch deserved more than what Julia had been able to get in before she was so rudely interrupted by enemy number two. Where did that bastard Magnus get off? Flirting with Lydia, and now defending Lup. She gripped the wheel a little harder and went a little faster down the two-lane road.

Yes, she was fighting. And yes, technically, fighting was not allowed in the league bylaws. And yes, the punishment for fighting was expulsion... But she was still mad!

Her attention was drawn away from figuring out the scathing remarks she could make about Magnus when her little old car sputtered, shook, and started decelerating.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, pressing on the gas pedal. “Nonono, please.” The car moved forward, but she watched in horror as the speedometer continued to drop. As it reached zero, she turned off to the side of the road and came to a shuddering stop. She stared catatonic as a few moths lazily buzzed through the glare of her headlights, the realization of her colossal stupidity welling up through the floorboards. With a groan, she slumped forward, her forehead on the horn. The sound echoed across empty fields.

She stayed like that for several minutes, trying to come to terms with everything but failing. Eventually, she sat back up and turned the car off. With the headlights extinguished, the true dark of the countryside came crashing in. She waited for a minute, half-way hoping that a car would magically appear on the road.

Taking her keys with her, she got out of the car and looked up and down the road. There was no one. From how clearly she could see the stars in the sky, she realized just how far from civilization she had driven.

“Oh,” she said out loud, finding that talking to herself was sort of comforting. Her breath left little puffs of fog in the night air. “Okay, okay. It’s gonna be fine.” She looked back up and down the dark empty road again, her minimal comfort evaporating. The memory of the time Carey made her go see Scream three summers ago suddenly jumped to mind.
“Goddammit, Carey.” She clenched her fists and jumped up and down a few times, trying to shake the memory away.

She paced across the road a few times, debating whether it would be better to wait with the car or try to walk to somewhere with a payphone. The very very empty road, and the completely rational thought that there might be a crazy serial killer in the ditch, made her choice for her. She grabbed her purse, jacket, and after a moment’s thought, grabbed her wrist guards. She set off down the road, strapping her guards on. If she had to punch for her life, she wasn’t going to sprain her wrist doing it. Besides, she was fairly sure that she was only a few miles out from Wave Echo, or at least she hoped she was.

“This hour of music has been brought to you by the Foundation for Ali Forney Centers, dedicated to providing homes and help to LGBT youth. Next up is Stuart Weisman with another hour of jazz-”

Magnus leaned forward and snapped the car radio off. For some reason he was only able to pick up the public radio station, and a man can only handle so much smooth jazz in one sitting. He still had another hour of driving before he got to the hotel Isaak had put him up in. Magnus yawned a little and shook his head, forcing himself to keep vigilant. It was hard on the dark country roads, no other cars in sight. Just the hum of the road, whistle of the wind, and whatever music he chose to put on. And right now his choices were public radio or the Kool & The Gang cassette that had been stuck in the deck for the past four months. So Magnus chose silence.

But in the silence, his mind wandered back over the events of the day. The rest of the bout had been fine; the Rad Robes had taken the Bureau to the cleaners. The team seemed really off their game after the fight and subsequent ejection of their captain. Magnus let out a long breath. He’d done a good job of boxing up those feelings… till now.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ her voice echoed in his mind. He gripped the steering wheel and gritted his teeth a little, edging his van left as he passed an abandoned car at the side of the road. He knew why, a small part reminded him, but the much larger part wasn’t quite ready to open that door. He was afraid if he did, he wouldn’t be able to close it again.

He’d been in love once before, or at least he was pretty sure he had, and it had seemed as if his world surrounded her. If he opened this door, everything would be Julia. Every song, every movie, every person he saw on the street would be Julia.

Wait.

Magnus slammed on the brakes, his van coming to a screeching halt in the empty road. He looked into the sideview mirror; surely it was just a coincidence that that hitchhiker looked like…

“Julia?” he called, shifting the van into park and leaning out the driver’s window. Many yards back, dimly lit by the brake lights was a figure. He got out of the van but stood by the driver’s side door, ready to jump back in if the situation went south. The figure jogged a few yards forward and Magnus was glad that he wasn’t hallucinating hitchhikers in the form of Julia. But now worried that it was actually Julia.

Julia, on the other hand, wondered what she had done to accrue such bad karma. She’d been pleading internally for help, any help, for the past 30 minutes. Now she had half a mind to just keep walking past Magnus and his stupid airbrushed van. Safety be damned. Magnus walked to the back end of the van, the red brake lights giving him a sort of devilish halo. She sighed, and waved, not taking her hand out of the pocket of her jacket.
“Hi, Magnus,” she said, dejectedly, not walking forward.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Fishing for lake trout,” she replied, sarcastically. Magnus frowned, and stopped walking towards her, standing a few feet away.

“Do… you need a ride somewhere?”

God, there he went again with the stupid questions. “Oh, no. The magical taxi that I called on my non-existent cellular phone should be here any minute.”

Magnus stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. “Alright, see you at the next bout.” He turned and started walking back towards his van. She let him go a few steps to see how committed he was to his bit, but when he opened the driver’s side door, a panic quickly overwhelmed her.

“No, wait, WAIT!” she yelled, running a few steps forward. She ran her hands over her hair and blew out a huff. “My car ran out of gas. I just need a lift to the nearest payphone.” Magnus didn’t reply, so she added, “Please.”

He turned back to look at her and waved her over with his chin. “Get in,” he said, jumping up into the cab. Julia quickly ran around to the other side of the car and hopped in before he could change his mind.

Neither of them said anything for the first few miles. Julia was very grateful to be going faster than a snail’s pace again, even if it took enemy number two and his weird spaceship van to do it. She surveyed the interior. There was the usual: fast food wrappers, Walmart bags, skate gear. Also, the very unusual: stacks of wooden planks, a dress shirt on a hanger. She wasn’t entirely sure in the dark cabin, but it seemed like there was a fish tank installed in the front dashboard. She almost asked him about it, but decided not to out of principle.

She then noticed that she still had on her wrist guards; great, he probably thought she was weird now. She tried to surreptitiously pull them off, but the velcro gave her away.

“May I ask why you’re wearing your wrist guards?”

Julia frowned. “I was worried about… serial killers,” she said quietly.

“What?”

She pursed her lips and quickly said, “I was worried about serial killers.”

“Serial killers?” Magnus repeated, a smile in his voice. “You realize that you were in more danger from deer than from Freddy Krueger?”

“Look, when you’re alone on an empty country road with no phone and no gas in your car, logic is not the foremost thing on your brain.”

“So what was your plan with Ghostface? Gonna give him the ol’ 1, 2?” Magnus punched the air a little and laughed, looking over at her. Julia looked out the window and didn’t reply. “Hey come on… sorry. I’m sorry. But you gotta admit, that’s a terrible plan.”

Julia looked back at him. “It would have worked,” she insisted.

“Right. If it’s you and your wrist guards against Jason, my money’s going to be on Jason.”
“Of course I’m not going to win against Jason, no one can win against Jason. But I could totally take your garden variety serial killer.”

“Well, if the state of Lup’s face is anything to go on—” Magnus immediately stopped, the grin disappeared, and he turned abruptly towards the front again. Julia looked down at her wrist guards clutched in her lap. Another mile dragged by in agonizing silence.

“Was it bad?” Julia asked quietly.

Magnus nodded. “You broke her nose. She didn’t skate the whole bout.”

Julia couldn’t help but feel a little pleased. “Good.”

Magnus glanced at her. “Bureau still lost though. 119 to 57.”

She frowned, avoiding his gaze. “...I don’t usually… it’s just, there’s just something about her that makes me...” she shook her head. “Not that it matters now. I let the team down.” She propped her elbow on the windowsill and rested her head in her hand.

Magnus glanced at her. “Yeah, you did.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“Now, let me finish. I may not know you and your team all that well. But even still I know that you guys love and support each other...” He searched for the right word. “...Fiercely. More than any other team I’ve seen. You’re like a family. And family supports, protects, and even fights for each other, despite what the league bylaws say. They’ll forgive you.” Julia looked over at him and he smiled a little.

Julia nodded slowly. “You know you’re very wise for a person who still drives a ‘77 Dodge.”

“Hey, if you’re gonna knock Rail Splitter, I will pull over and you can walk the rest of the way to Wave Echo.”

Julia chuckled a little. “Sorry, sorry. But just a quick question, what is this?” She tapped the glass of the tank in the dashboard.

“It’s a fish tank.”

“Oh. Of course it is, how silly of me.” She leaned forward and peered into the dark water. “Seems to be lacking in fish... did a shark eat them?”

“Since it’s a tank, wouldn’t I be able to see a shark?”

“...It’s a glass shark. He ate all the fish.”

Magnus chuckled. “Damn, those lil suckers didn’t have a chance.”

“So besides the glass shark, what got them?”

“I ran into some issues with climate control last winter.” He grimaced and shook his head. Julia actually laughed at that. “It’s not funny, I felt really bad about that.”

“I’m sorry, but what did you think was going to happen? It’s a van, not a house.”

“I just needed a couple more hot water bottles and then it totally would have worked.”
“Right, sure. You’ll have a fish tank in your dashboard, and I’ll fight off the Zodiac Killer with my wrist guards.”

Magnus grinned, then looked at Julia and made a mock tough face. “You could take him.”
“So why are you all the way out here?” Julia asked, unbuckling her seat belt. She pulled on the handle to the door, but it didn’t open.

“Oh, yeah, hold on. That’s busted.” Magnus slammed the driver door shut and jogged around to the other side of the van. He opened the door and held out his hand to help her down. She took it and hopped to the ground, reaching back for her purse and slipping it over her shoulder.

“My boss has me working a job here in Wave Echo this week,” Magnus explained, his hands shoved in his coat pockets as the pair walked towards the front door.

They had stopped at the first open place they found, which turned out to be a 24-hour diner just outside of Wave Echo city limits. It was a small, greasy spoon type place, and the whole building was shaped like a felled log for some reason. The bell over the door rang as Magnus and Julia entered; there was only one other customer and a very sleepy looking skeleton crew. “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” played quietly over tinny speakers. Julia quickly headed off to the payphone by the bathrooms, and Magnus lumbered into one of the booths against the front wall.

The phone was ancient, the coin slots marked for dimes and nickels. Julia fished a handful of change from her purse and stacked it on the shelf. She slipped in a few dimes, picked up the receiver, and reached out to press in a phone number, but paused. Who should she call?

She didn’t want to call her dad because then she’d have to explain the whole fight story, plus running out of gas in the middle of nowhere, and he’d feel the need to lecture about responsibility and that wouldn’t do either of them any good. Lucretia would usually have been next, but Julia felt like she shouldn’t be asking her for any favors after the game. So she punched in Taako’s number. It rang a few times.

“Come on, come on, Taako. Pick up,” she said under her breath.

“Hey champ, you’ve reached Chez del Taako. I’m not here right now, but if you leave--” Taako’s answering machine came on after a couple rings. Julia hung up and the dime clattered into the coin tray. She picked it up and tried Killian and Carey’s number. She let the phone ring for a couple minutes, but it became increasingly obvious that no one was coming to the phone. She tried Sloane next, then Hurley, and finally Noelle. No one picked up. She put the receiver back and glanced at the Ovaltine clock above the door. 11:21, it said. Maybe they were all still out after the game. She quickly dialed in another number; it rang twice.

“Refuge Pub, this is Ren speaking.” There was loud music in the background of the call. At least someone was enjoying Karaoke Saturdays.

“Ren? It’s Julia.”

“Oh, hey girl, I heard about the game. Tough luck.”

“Yeah.” Julia rubbed the back of her neck. “Hey listen, is any of the B.o.B. there? Anyone?”

“Lemme check.” Julia drummed her fingers on the coin shelf till Ren returned. “Nope, sorry. They were here earlier but they must have left.”
“Really? I tried their houses…”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. I’m just trying to find a ride. If I can’t find one by last call, I’ll call you back.”

“Okay, let me know.”

“Alright, bye.” Julia hung up the phone glumly. She picked up her small stack of change and went to sit in the booth with Magnus.

“You get ahold of anyone?” he asked, putting the menu down. Two brown plastic glasses of water had appeared on the table while she’d been at the phone. Julia shook her head.

“No, they’re out somewhere. I’ll give it 30 minutes then try again. Maybe someone will be home by then.” Magnus nodded and picked back up the menu, perusing its limited offerings. “Thanks for the ride, but you don’t have to wait with me. You’ve probably got an early start tomorrow.”

Magnus frowned, “No, I’ll wait with you. It’s not a problem.”

Just then the waitress walked up. “What can I get for you?” she said in a disinterested tone, pulling the pencil from behind her ear.

Magnus smiled winningly up at her. “I would like the Lumberjack Special with scrambled eggs, please, Hannah.” He nodded to her nametag.

The waitress scribbled it down and looked at Julia. She glanced at the menu in a panic. “Uh… I’ll…I’ll have the same.”

The waitress grabbed the menus and turned on her heel for the window to the kitchen.

“What did I just order?” Julia asked, leaning forward a little.

“Pancakes, eggs, sausage, bacon, and four slices of toast. All for $3.99.”

Julia nodded, “That actually sounds amazing. I haven’t eaten since before the bout.” She took a sip of her water, distant noises of cooking drifting out of the kitchen. “So what kind of job? Like… she paused. “What do you even do?”

“I’m a carpenter.”

“Really? That’s still a thing?”

“Yes, in a way. Isaak, the guy I work for, he does more contracting, but I do the woodwork.”

Julia nodded. “So you’re… carpenter-ing something in Wave Echo?”

Magnus chuckled at the word ‘carpentering’. “Basically, yes. The country club on Wave Echo Lake is building a new restaurant-clubhouse thing. They need wainscoting in every room apparently.”

“Well, long-time members Brenda and Glenn Jones will accept nothing but the best,” Julia said in a jokingly posh manner, leaning forward on the table with her arms crossed. “After all, they have a reputation to uphold.”
“Exactly. Though I’m not complaining, hotels are fun to stay in and I’ll be right by the lake.”

“Sounds nice, kind of like a half-vacation.”

“Yeah.”

Julia looked out the window as a semi drove past. “My dad and I used to come up to Wave Echo lake. One of his bosses had a house and would let him borrow his fishing boat occasionally. We’d leave our house before dawn and be on the lake all day. Never really caught anything at all.” Julia smiled a little, turning back to look at Magnus. “And Mom would literally hose us off in the backyard when we’d get back, claiming we still smelled like fish and lake water.”

Magnus was interrupted when the waitress returned with their orders. The plates took up most of the table, and everything smelled mouth-wateringly delicious. He quickly dug into the stack of pancakes.

“Now I realized something while you were at the phone,” Magnus said around a mouthful. “If your car just ran out of gas, we could get one of those little portable tank things and I could take you back to your car.”

“Oh… well…” Julia shook her head. “I mean, we’d have to find one of those things at midnight in Wave Echo, and then it’s an hour back to my car, and you’d have to drive another hour back here. I don’t want to put you out like that.”

Magnus looked at her for a moment. “But you’d put one of your teammates out like that?”

“Well, yeah, they’re my friends.” Julia took another bite of bacon, before she realized what she had implied. Magnus wasn’t looking at her anymore. “Shit.” The waitress stared daggers at Julia from behind the counter. “I mean, I just know them—”

“No, no. I get it.” He shrugged and shook his head. “I did eject you from a game just this afternoon. It’s fine.”

It was very obviously Not Fine. Julia sighed and shrugged. “Well, there is that, but that’s not even the problem.”

“What is the problem?” Magnus said, a sudden intensity in his gaze that snapped to her face. “Because it really feels like you’ve had something against me since the moment we met. And if there’s something wrong, I’m the kind of person that likes to right it. What, did you really like the old ref or something?”

Julia scoffed. “Gundren? God, no. He was terrible.”

“Is it something I said? Did I look at you weird?”

“No,” Julia said, rolling her eyes a little.

“So what is it? What’s your problem with me?” Both of their tempers were starting to simmer.

“Gundren was a total slimeball, and when you first came I thought you were exactly like him,” Julia snapped, leaning forward in her seat.

“Well, I’m not.”

“I know that!”
“Good!”

“Fine!”

They both sat back in the booth and realized that they had an audience. The waitress was actively leaning across the counter in rapt attention. Julia went back to silently eating, but Magnus wasn’t satisfied.

“But you still have a problem. And it’s not just ‘cause Gundren was a jerk,” he said, low enough that the whole diner wouldn’t hear.

“Fine, it is because you are the ref,” Julia said, matching his volume but her tone sharper. “And frankly, being friends with the ref has always seemed like a real dick move in my book.”

“That’s ridiculous. I was friends with players at my old league.”

“Yeah, well, that league is not this league.”

“Well, maybe you need to give people a chance!”

“Maybe you need to stop living in the past!”

The audience was back. This time both Magnus and Julia turned back to their food. The rest of the meal was spent in silence. When she finished, Julia scooted out of the booth and headed back for the payphone.

She dropped two dimes into the slot and punched in Taako’s number. Her foot tapped rapidly on the floor. The phone rang four times, then, miraculously, he picked up.

“Yello?” Taako drawled.

“Taako? Oh, thank god. It’s Jules.”

“Hey, slugger. Where you been? We missed you tonight.”

“I’m… stuck, Taako. I need a favor, a pretty big one.”

“Ooh, I could always use a pretty big favor from my dear friend Julia.”

“Ah, nooo. This would be in repayment for last summer’s JNCO debacle.” Taako didn’t say anything. It was so quiet that Julia wondered if she’d been disconnected. “Taako?”

“We both said we’d never speak of that again.”

“Uh, you said that, I said no such thing.”

“My word is law, Jules, everyone knows this.” He sighed dramatically, but she could hear his smile. “Fine. What do you need?”

“I need a ride. My car ran out of gas.”

“Oh, sure. No problem, I can leave right now. Where are you?”

Julia paused and screwed her eyes shut. “Wave Echo.”

“Did you just say Wave Echo? Julia, that’s like two and half hours away.”
“I know.”

“Julia, it’s past midnight!”

“I knowww. I’m sorry. That’s why it’s JNCO scale.”

“Were you angry driving?”

“...Yes.”

“You gotta start doing that in city limits, babe.”

“Yeah, someday I’ll learn. I’m sorry.”

“Where are you right now?”

“That diner that’s shaped like a log.”

“Listen, would you be okay staying there till morning? I have to work tomorrow, so I can’t spend 5 hours driving to the ends of the earth and back tonight. But I’m delivering a cake for a retirement party at the Wave Echo country club tomorrow at eleven.”

Julia sighed, “I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Did you call Lucretia? She’s probably still awake.”

“I can’t call her, Taako,” she said in a small voice. “Not after the stunt I pulled at the bout.”

“That’s true. I’m so mad I missed it. Hurley did a particularly vivid reenactment during half-time though. She might have a future in show business.”

Julia smiled a little. A voice on the phone informed her that she only had 30 seconds remaining on her call. “Hey, I gotta go. But you can’t miss the diner, on the left as you hit city limits.”

“Okay, see you in the morning.”

Julia hung up the phone and paced a little bit. She didn’t want to head back into the seating area and face Magnus again, not when she knew that he was right. She sighed and waited another minute before leaving the small alcove, making sure that she at least wasn’t going to bite his head off again since she wasn’t quite ready to make nice.

Magnus was at the counter, paying the bill. He was groping around in the pockets of his cargo shorts for the tip.

“Here, let me.” Julia pulled out her wallet and put a couple of bills down on the counter. The waitress took the money but didn’t walk away, obviously wondering what other juicy details she could get from the mysterious couple.

Magnus walked towards the door, and turned to face Julia. “So it looked like you were able to get ahold of someone,” he said, not really looking at her. She nodded.

“Uh, yeah. Taako is going to pick me up here tomorrow morning.”

Magnus looked back at her. “Tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah, he has to deliver some cake to the country club tomorrow, so we’ll get it all sorted then.”
“What are you going to do in the meantime?” His dark brows furrowed.

She shrugged. “Wait here, I guess. I don’t have any other choice.”

Magnus’ jaw flexed a few times: he seemed to be weighing some options. But he finally said, “Look, Isaak put me up in a motel for the week. It was really cheap, and they probably still have vacancies. I can give you a ride over there so you can get some sleep. And then,” he shrugged, “if you want you can come with me to the country club tomorrow and meet Taako there.”

Julia’s first instinct was to be suspicious of how nice he was. But she beat that back and simply nodded. “That… would be really nice. Thank you.” She looked cautiously up at him.

He nodded matter-of-factly. “You’re welcome.”

The motel had obviously been built, like the rest of Wave Echo, during a long since past heyday. A very overdone nautical theme decorated the room, complete with a water bed for some godforsaken reason. But it was still better than a diner booth all night.

In the morning, she still felt like she needed to make amends, so when Magnus arrived at his van, she was already there with two cups of coffee in hand.

“Morning,” he said, his eyes squinted in the early morning sunshine.

“Morning,” she held out the cup. “Two creams, and sugar, right?”

He took the cup and smiled a little. “Thanks.” They both took a sip of their coffee and Magnus immediately grimaced. “Ugh, no. No, no.”

Julia looked up at him. “What?”

“Uh, thanks for the coffee, but this is terrible.”

“It is?” she took another sip. “Tastes fine to me.” Magnus blinked at her. Twice. He poured the coffee into a nearby sewer grate and then tossed the cup in the trash.

“You deserve better coffee. But we gotta get going.” He opened the door for her, and then headed around to the other side of the van. Julia finished her coffee as they pulled into the country club.

Manicured lawns and tanned people in linen slacks surrounded them. Everything was Greek revival, and simply reeked of old money. Julia felt very conspicuous in her slept in jeans, old derby bout t-shirt and leather jacket. Not even taking into account the very obvious racial divide.

“You ever forget how rich other people are?” Magnus asked as he parked his van next to a Land Rover. Julia slowly nodded. A man in a tux at eight in the morning scurried out of the main building and informed them that they’d need to move their vehicle. They ended up parking under some tall pine trees right next to the restaurant under construction.

Magnus set up shop on the back porch of the restaurant, pulling large planks of walnut from the back of his van, and Julia decided to take a walk by the lake. She had all morning to kill so she wasn’t especially speedy about it.

She returned back to the restaurant after a couple hours. The sun had fully risen and the day was
quickly turning into a warm one for March. Julia had shed her jacket, not caring the looks she got.

She watched a very shirtless Magnus exit the building through one of the open French doors. He whipped a tape measure off his belt and quickly measured a plank of wood standing on some saw horses. He marked the measurement with the pencil from behind his ear, then he took it over to the miter saw he had set up a few feet away.

What was that phrase from that movie she had watched with Angus? Oh, right. Rippling pectorals. Mentally she kicked herself. *Stop being gross.* Magnus looked up from his work and waved her over. Great, he caught her staring. Again. As she walked over, she noticed that in addition to the muscles and the classic Americana tattoos, he had several scars, long, lighter colored slashes on his sides. She wondered what they had come from. Magnus picked up a rag and wiped the sweat from his face.

“It’s gonna be a hot one,” he said, taking a breath and tucking the rag back into one of his pockets. Julia nodded, not quite sure what to say. She turned to look out at the vista so she would stop looking at the many glistening facets of Magnus. “You want something to drink?”

“Oh, sure.” She took the water bottle he was offering. As they looked out at the lake, a flock of birds took off and swooped against the blue sky. “It’s like a postcard.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t mind having a view like this someday,” he said, looking at her. But she didn’t notice. “So, what you been doing?”

“Oh, just walking. Scaring old people playing golf, you know. The usual.” She smiled up at him. Then the smile disappeared; she bit the inside of her lip and looked away. “Magnus, you were right.” Magnus looked at her, his eyebrows furrowed again. She sighed and looked back to him. “About… how I treated you. I never gave you a chance to prove yourself as someone different than Gundren, and then you did anyway, and… I was just being stubborn. I’m sorry, and I hope that you’ll forgive me.”

Magnus smiled, and nodded. “Of course.” He took another sip of water. “Does this mean we’re friends now?”

Julia pretended to think for a moment. “Well, you have been carting me all over hill and dale today, so I guess so.” She smirked at him, a teasing twinkle in her eye.

Just then she saw another van roll up the long driveway, “Sazed’s Bakery” emblazoned on the side, and a Brandy song blasting out of the open windows. It pulled up in front of the main entrance, and the song suddenly stopped. Taako hopped out, looking very professional in checkered pants and chef’s jacket, though he still wore his round iridescent blue sunglasses. He quickly gave some directions to a couple of the staff that came out, then headed over towards Julia and Magnus.

“Well, I guess that’s my ride.” Julia took a few steps. “Thanks, Magnus, you… you really helped me out. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” He grinned.

Julia smiled and nodded. “Right. See you later.” She turned and went to meet Taako. Taako flicked down his shades, and gave Magnus a wink and a finger gun before turning to walk back with Julia towards the van, which was surrounded by club staff.

“I see you got my note at the diner,” Julia said.

“You didn’t tell me you were with Magnus,” Taako said in an accusatory tone once they were out
“Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t.” Taako shook his head, pushing his shades back up his nose and surveying the staff. “Hey,” he snapped his fingers and pointed at a suddenly very frightened staffer. “You drop that cake, you owe me $1200.”

“Yes, sir!” The staffer carefully scurried away.

“Anyway, you did not tell me you were with Magnus.”

“Oh, well, he found me at the side of the road, he really helped me out.”

“Plus, he’s pretty easy on the eyes.” Taako smirked at Julia, quirking an eyebrow.

“Oh my god.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on. I know your type, sweet cheeks.” He looked back over his shoulder where Magnus had returned to work in the distance. “And he is one prime specimen of Your Type.”

“It’s not like that. We kept fighting all night, but... I think we’re friends now.”

“Mhmm.” Taako smirked a little, going around to shut the van door now that the cake had been safely delivered. “Think what you want to think, but I better be goddamn invited to your wedding.”

“If you keep making jokes about it, you won’t be.” She walked around to the passenger door and jumped into the van. Taako got into the driver’s seat and started it up. The Brandy song immediately resumed at deafening levels.

“I changed my mind. I want to be wedding coordinator,” he said over the song, pulling away. “I like being in charge.”
Magnus whistled as he drove through the rain. It’d been a good week’s work, and he’d given Isaak’s card to a few folks, too, with his name written on the back of it. Rich people loved handmade furniture.

He rolled back into town. It was late afternoon, so people were out and about despite the rain. He took a sharp right, laughing when a couple of kids in raincoats fled from the splash.

Where should he park the van tonight? He usually put it in an empty lot by the train tracks, but it had a really bright streetlight nearby that made it hard to sleep. Maybe he could hang up some kind of blanket fort.

He paused in that line of thought. On the sidewalk just ahead--was that Carey?

She wasn’t wearing a coat, just a t-shirt. She was hunched over a backpack, hugging it close to herself, short hair plastered to her forehead. Magnus pulled up beside her, reached over the passenger seat, and cranked open the window.

“Hey, do you need a ride?” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “You mean you haven’t heard? Drowned Rat is the new look.”

Magnus chuckled. “Well like, I don’t want to get in the way of fashion.”

“Ah, what the hell.” She yanked open the door and plopped her backpack on the floor of the passenger side.

Magnus fished a towel from the back. “Sorry, it’s kinda… covered in sawdust.”

She took it anyway and rubbed off her face and head. “I’m dusty from work anyway.”

“Where we headed?”

“Ugh, other side of town. Sorry.” She buckled her seatbelt and rolled up the window. “You know where Moonview is?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. It’s not like there’s going to be a lot of traffic.”

Carey snapped her fingers. “Right, Killian said you moved here from Neverwinter.”

Magnus laughed. “It’s actually kind of nice when across town means fifteen minutes no matter which way you go.”

“For sure.” Carey held up the towel. “What should I…”

“Oh, just toss it in the back.”

Carey did so. She spent a moment observing the back’s contents, and then knocked on the empty fishtank. “What’s this for?”

“Fish.”

“Why, though?” She picked at the seal around the tank. “Is this from a glue gun?”
“I just wanted some company. It didn’t work, though. Lost a lot of good fish.”

“Their sacrifices will not be forgotten,” said Carey.

Magnus glanced over at his passenger. He couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not. “How’d you get caught out in the rain?”

“Eh, I walk home most days. I didn’t know it was going to rain. I ought to sue the weatherman.”

“Across town’s a long way to walk,” Magnus commented.

“Well, sometimes I skate.”

It was still something like five miles, Magnus didn’t say. He got the feeling that Carey and Killian didn’t have much. They fell into silence.

Magnus took a left, and immediately ran into what was considered around here to be a traffic jam. Six cars were ahead of him, all waiting behind the flashing lights and striped arm of a railroad crossing. A train was passing through.

“Aw, man,” he said.

Carey leaned back and rested her feet on the dashboard. “Might as well get comfortable. We have to cross to get there.”

He pulled up the emergency brake. “At least you don’t have to wait in the rain.”

“Yeah, as far as I’m concerned, this is a good day.” She spotted something in the door of the passenger side; it was his tape collection in a clear plastic case, unopened for months. “We could put on some music. What do you got?”

Magnus sighed. “Don’t even bother. The same tape’s been stuck in my radio since September.”

Carey took her feet off the dash and started fiddling with the tape deck. “Has it?”

“‘Fraid so. You know any good radio stations around here?”

“The local station’s pretty good after like, 3 p.m. The DJ does a country music hour that most people like. Lasts ‘til seven or so.”

“A four hour hour?”

She laughed. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“I don’t know, I’m not a big country fan. Especially not the newer stuff.”

“Ha! It’s a local station, you think they play anything new?” She clicked a button or two on the deck, but Kool and the Gang refused to budge. “There’s also an okay Spanish station, in case you’re feeling nostalgic.”

“Oh, god, with the oompa music?”

“Yeah, that good polka rhythm!”

Magnus laughed. “I’ll remember that if I ever feel like blasting my neighbors’ party music at two in the morning. Why is it always two in the morning?”
“Oh my god, we must have somehow lived next to the same people,” said Carey. She was sticking her fingers in the slot now.

“Did you grow up in Neverwinter too?”

“Nah, I’ve been here my whole life. My party neighbors were next to… let’s call it my childhood home.” With a clunk, the cassette slid free of the deck. Carey pulled it out, trailing a little tape behind it. “Voila!”

“Holy shit.” He took it from her. “This goddamn thing has been stuck in there for so long. I just figured it was my life now.”

She grinned. “Glad to be of assistance. I may have messed it up though.”

“I don’t care. I don’t ever want to hear ‘Celebrate’ ever again,” he said. “How’d you do that?”

She pulled the tape case from the passenger door and popped open the latches. “I have a very specific set of skills left over from some stuff I did as a teenager. Now what do we have here?”

Magnus took the pencil that was still behind his ear and used it to reel in the tape. “I’ve got some good stuff in there. None of this new crap.”


“Disco’s great,” said Magnus, sliding the tape into a space beside Grand Funk Railroad.

“Listen, you’re preaching to the choir here, I’m just saying that some people think it’s a major character flaw.” She picked up a tape and slid it in the deck. The end of “Las Vegas Turnaround” played. “You don’t like any new music? What about like, Indigo Girls?”

“Who are they?”

“Who are they,” she scoffed. “Indie rock.”

“You mean punk’s ugly stepsister?” said Magnus.

“Ohoho! You want to take this outside, my man?”

Magnus grinned. “Yeah, let’s fight in front of a train.”

Carey laughed. “You know, I like you. Killian said you were cool.”

“She did? I didn’t think you guys liked me very much.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Especially since I threw out your team captain?”

“Rules is rules,” said Carey. She put on a smug smile. “It was almost worth losing just to see the look on Lup’s face.”

The song ended and another one came on with a quiet steady beat. Carey looked at the radio. “Oh hell yes, I love this song.”

“You sing?” asked Magnus.
“Not well…”

“C’mon, sing it with me. Hall to my Oates.”

Carey chuckled. “Well, if I get to be Hall.”

“Yeah!” said Magnus, and sang along with the tape:

_Everybody's high on consolation_

_Everybody's trying to tell me_

_What is right for me, yeah_

_My daddy tried to bore me with a sermon_

_But it's plain to see that they can't comfort me_

“Now you,” he said, and Carey jumped in:

_Sorry, Charlie, for the imposition_

_I think I got it (got it added Magnus ),_

_I got the strength to carry on, oh yeah_

_I need a drink and a quick decision_

_Now it's up to me, ooooh what will be ._

She was at least karaoke good. “Yeah! Get it!” said Magnus, and they sang the next bit together:

_She's gone, she's gone_

_Oh I, oh I_

_I better learn how to face it_

_She's gone, she's gone_

_Oh I, oh I_

_I'd pay the devil to replace her_

_She's gone, and she's gone_

_Oh why, what went wrong?_

“Why the _hell_ are you going for the high part?” laughed Carey.

“It’s the music in my soul!”

“Oh, hey, look,” said Carey. The train rattled away, and the striped arm began to lift.

“Sweet,” said Magnus, putting the van back into gear. “Must be convenient, not changing the pronouns for songs by guys.”
“So you change the pronouns for songs by girls?” asked Carey.

Magnus considered. “No, but when I don’t most people just think it’s funny.”

Carey scowled. “When I don’t change pronouns people think I’m being cute.”

“I bet Killian thinks it’s cute,” Magnus offered.

Carey’s scowl fell into a smile. “Fine, cheer me up.”

“How long have you guys been together?”

“Five years. God, I love her.”

Magnus smiled. Was there anything better than people in love?

His thoughts tried to drift over to Julia. He pulled them back in.

“So Julia says you’re a carpenter,” said Carey.

Goddamn, had she read his mind? “Yeah, that’s right.”

“You know those um… what are they called. Puzzle boxes? You ever made one of those?”

“Yeah, I’ve made a couple. They’re a lot of fun.”

“All right, riddle me this: is it possible to make one in the shape of a duck?”

Magnus laughed, but stopped when he saw she was serious. “Uh yeah. It’d take some tricky design work, maybe, but I don’t see why not.”

“I was afraid of that,” mumbled Carey.

“Wait, what?”

“You ever think of the most perfect present ever?” said Carey. “Killian’s birthday is coming up—and you know, she’s so good, she’ll like whatever I get her, but a duck-shaped puzzle box would be the best. But I’m pretty sure I can’t afford that shit.”

“I could make you one,” said Magnus.

“Yeah okay, for how much?”

Magnus shrugged. “Make me an offer. I have enough scrap wood to make a small one just out of the stuff in this van.”

“Hmm.” Carey rubbed her chin. “You live in this van, correct?”

Magnus bristled. “Did Avi tell you that?”

“It’s not that hard to extrapolate, hombre. No shame. But why?”

He set his jaw. “Up until a couple weeks ago, I didn’t have a job. It was cheap.”

“I’m serious, no shame. Relax.”

He tried his best. “Now, though, I just can’t find a place. Apartments are in high demand around
here. Angus said there was an opening at your complex, right? But when I went and asked about it, the landlord said they were full up.”

“I mean, that could just be him being a dick, but I wouldn’t be surprised. It is a college town.” She thought for a moment. “All right, you tell me if this is a fair trade for a puzzle box. I happen to have an in at a complex called Raven’s Roost. I know the super, and he’s always got a few extra places open, but he’s an absolute dinosaur when it comes to advertising them. I could send you his way.”

“Hell, that’d be--”

“Before you say yes,” she said. “I cannot stress enough how crappy Raven’s Roost is. It’s falling apart in a big way. But the rent is the cheapest in town.”

Magnus shrugged. “You know what? That sounds good to me. You’ve got yourself a deal.” He extended a hand.

“Hell yeah!” She shook it. “This is going to be the best present ever.”
“All right, all right, line up, everyone,” said Hurley to the half-dozen tumbling gradeschoolers. They scurried into a line, some of them taller than her, wearing borrowed gi and tousled from practice. “Judo is about respect, and about wisdom. After every practice, you are to bow to and thank the master. Like this.” She demonstrated. “Now you.”

“Thank you, Master Hurley,” they chorused.

“You’re dismissed,” she said. The line dissolved as the kiddos went to the bathrooms to change.

Hurley strolled into the waiting room, where a few parents were doing some paperwork. Let’s see. Six parents, but two of them looked married. That was disappointing; this was a free beginner’s class, and parents were more likely to sign up if they saw what their kids were learning. The parents said hello, turned in paperwork, asked questions about billing and belts, while the kids filed out and they began to leave. As she suspected, there was one left, a tiny towheaded girl. She didn’t seem overly concerned.

“Your name is Kaitlyn, right?” asked Hurley.

The girl nodded.

“Do you know who’s picking you up?”

“My dad. He’s coming.”

As if summoned, a man who barely fit through the door carefully entered the dojo. He was the biggest person she’d ever seen, bigger than Killian. Hurley tried to stand up straighter.

“Daddy!” said the girl.

“Hi, Pumpkin. Did you learn a lot?”

“Mmhmm.”

“She did very well, especially for her first time,” said Hurley. “Would you demonstrate, Kaitlyn?”

The little girl smiled and put down her backpack. She fell forward, rolled, and landed back on her feet.

The man nodded. “That’s very good.”

“Are you interested in signing up for a class?” asked Hurley hopefully.

“With respect, Miss…”

“Master Hurley,” she said, before he could patronize her any more. \textit{With respect.}

“Right. Master Hurley. If I wanted her to go to a tumbling class, we could try the recreation center. I think we’ll pass.”

“Awww, dad!” protested Kaitlyn.

“If I may, sir? Would you join me on the mat?” Hurley gestured through the waiting room.
He frowned. “What for?”

“We start with falls because we do a lot of falling in this class. I want my students to be safe. But I can show you what she’ll be learning.”

The man considered. “All right. I’ll bite.”

She led him to a mat. Kaitlyn followed, wide-eyed.

“Now Kaitlyn,” Hurley said, squaring up her stance, “do you think I could beat up your dad?”

Kaitlyn giggled. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Cause he’s so big and you’re so small,” said Kaitlyn.

“Be polite,” said the man automatically.

“No, she’s right,” said Hurley, throwing Kaitlyn a smile. “I am really small. Now sir, if you would be so kind as to put a hand on my shoulder?”

The man hesitated. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t.”

He reluctantly held out a hand.

She took hold of his shirt and, using her leg as leverage, pulled him over her hip and to the ground before he’d touched her.

“That’s called the harai goshi. It’s one of many techniques Kaitlyn will learn. It just takes time.”

From the floor, a little hoarsely, the man said, “I’m convinced.”

Hurley smiled and offered a hand, pulling him into a sitting position. “I’ll get you the paperwork.”

In a few minutes, he was signing his name. Hurley accepted the form with a smile. “I’ll see you two next week.”

“I’m glad someone in this town is interested in teaching girls self-defense,” said the man. “I suggested it to a committee I’m on and people laughed.”

“The martial way is for everyone,” she said, looking over the paper. “Oh, I need your first name, sir, not just your title.”

The man grimaced. “Captain is my first name.”

Hurley’s eyes went huge. “You’re Captain Captain Bain? I just turned in my application to the police training program!”

Captain Captain Bain raised an eyebrow. “I’ll be on the lookout for it.”


“Thank you, sir.”

Sloane waited until they left, then sauntered over and leaned down close to Hurley. “Good day?”
“That was the chief of police,” said Hurley. She tilted her head up and stood on her toes to peck Sloane on the lips. Sloane crinkled her nose. ADORABLE. Hurley grinned. “I threw him to the ground.”

“I thought you wanted to be a cop, not beat a cop.”

“Cops have beats, right? I was practicing.”

They giggled. “You ready for date night?” asked Sloane.

“Just need to get changed.”

“I can’t believe you bought a dress,” said Sloane in mock derision.

“I may have modified it,” said Hurley, more than a little pleased with herself.

“Oh, really?”

Hurley swaggered into the Olive Garden in her new pantsuit. Sloane still hadn’t forgiven her for buying a dress, but Hurley took solace in the fact that she could feel Sloane checking out her butt.

“Excuse me?” she said, peeking over the top of the hostess’ podium. “Table for four, for the Bureau?”

“Oh, yes, the rest of your party has arrived.” Hurley saw the hostess’ hand hover over the kid’s menu for a split second before taking two regular ones.

Carey and Killian were already in the booth waiting, talking about something in low voices. Carey had on a men’s suit that looked like it was from the seventies, while Killian looked like a vision in a red dress. They waved.

“Nice suit, Hurley,” said Carey.

Sloane sighed. “It is, isn’t it?”

Hurley grinned.

The waiter appeared. “Good evening, ladies. This looks like fun. Business meeting or girls’ night out?”

“Double date,” rumbled Killian.

The server’s smile froze. “Er. Of course! Can I get you all something to drink?”

Hurley snorted at a particularly bad pasta pun. “Alfre-don’t get started,” she said.

“Yeah, spaghett-er not,” replied Sloane.

“Boo,” said Carey. “What is it with you dorks and puns?”

“It’s called a shared interest,” said Hurley. “Like you two and your gymnastics or whatever.”

“At least team sweet flips is good,” said Killian through a smile. “Puns are the worst. This is
worse than training has-been football players.”

“I’d think they’d be easy to train,” said Sloane.

“No, they think they still got it,” said Killian, rolling her eyes. “They don’t. And then they spend
the whole session talking about their high school glory days.”

“What must it be like to have high school glory days?” wondered Hurley.

“I don’t know, my high school days were fun,” said Sloane.

“Mm, let me guess,” said Carey. “You were a big deal in shop class, because most of those boys
had never even seen a girl before.”

“Like that would have mattered to me,” scoffed Sloane. “I’ve always known who I’m into.
Anyway, I wasn’t talking about school.”

“You’re not the only criminal, Carey,” said Hurley.

Carey was shocked. “No way. Not you.”

Sloane shrugged, looking a little pleased with herself.

“What was it, shoplifting?”

“As if,” said Sloane. “Carjacking.”

Carey smacked her palm to her forehead. “You own a garage, of course you were a carjacker.”

“Did you ever get caught?” asked Killian.

“No. I was lucky. And fast. No use in stealing slow cars.” She shrugged. “And you know, I
never tried to sell them, I’d just ditch them somewhere.”

“I caught you once,” said Hurley.

“Citizens arrest doesn’t count,” said Sloane, sticking out her tongue. “And I didn’t jack that car, it
was just one from the garage.”

“You were lucky,” said Carey, picking at a breadstick. “I got another application rejected today.”

Killian gritted her teeth. “It’s ridiculous. Why do you have to have a perfect record to work at a
damn music store?”


“I keep telling you, I’ll give you a job,” said Sloane.

“I don’t know anything about cars,” mumbled Carey.

Sloane hesitated. “You could do billing?”

“No. Thank you, Sloane, but it’s really okay. At least I’ve still got the pawn shop.”

“Okay, everyone!” The server appeared with a massive tray full of plates of pasta and began to
pass them out. “Carbonara, seafood alfredo, and two ravioli with pesto.” He smiled, and leaned on
his tray. “Now would you lesb–ladies like anything else?”
“No thank you,” said Carey. The poor server looked mortified; he hurried away.

“That poor man has never seen so many gay people in his life,” said Killian. The other three laughed.

“A gay-splosion,” said Hurley.

“A lesbonado,” returned Sloane.

Carey held up her hands for silence. “A hurri-gay-ne?”

“Oh, no, not you too,” groaned Killian, as Hurley and Sloane dissolved into giggles.
The first practice back after Julia Did a Hit, as it would come to be called, was rough for Julia. Not only was it an endurance practice, she could hardly bring herself to look Lucretia in the eye. Afterwards, she sat in the locker room, waiting for the rest of the team to leave so she could talk to Lucretia privately, while feeling both bone tired and incredibly anxious. She looked at the clock on the wall. Noelle had been the last one out, and she left over 10 minutes ago. Lucretia hadn’t come back for her purse or shoes, so she hadn’t left the building yet. Julia heaved a sigh; there was no sense in putting this off any longer. She stood up.

Ow.

Sitting down was not the smartest idea, as the muscles in her thighs were now complaining. Loudly. She picked up her already packed skate bag and headed for the locker room door.

Julia always kind of liked the rink at night. The arcade was quiet and there weren’t 80s pop hits blaring from the speakers. It seemed like the place was holding its breath. She didn’t see Lucretia in the darkened lobby or flat rink, and some of the lights above the banked track were still on. It sounded like someone was casually looping around the track. Curious, Julia walked closer to the track.

“Come on, come on. 27 in 5. You can do this.” A voice seemed to be talking to itself. Julia stopped at the very edge of the light pool, and the breath leaked out of her.

Lucretia was crouched, like a jammer at the start of a jam. At the sound of a silent whistle, she took off, speeding around the track. Her statuesque form bent low and her face focused, determined. It had been so long since Julia had seen Lucretia on the track as anything other than a coach, she forgot how... lethal she always looked. Her strides were long and powerful, extracting the precise amount of momentum she needed. Julia watched the clock as the five minutes ticked by, keeping tab of how many laps Lucretia did around the track. She found herself clenching her fists, enraptured and silently cheering Lucretia on. She was so close--

But it wasn’t enough. 5 minutes arrived and Lucretia had barely made it 20 times around. She stood up and let her momentum carry her around the corner, her hands on her hips. She squatted and ended up sitting on the track, scooting another few feet before arriving at a stop. She buried her face in a hand and didn’t stand back up. Julia wavered, not sure if she should let Lucretia have some privacy. But she found herself approaching anyway.

Lucretia looked up when Julia jumped up onto the track. She obviously hadn’t known that she had an audience. Her dark brown eyes were tinged with red and she looked down at her lap.

“I thought everyone had gone home,” she said quietly. Julia set her bag down and dropped onto the floor next to her. “How... How much did you see?”

“All of it.” Julia looked up at the ceiling, noticing an oddly shaped water stain. Lucretia was silent for a minute, then shook her head.

“I stretch... I train... I practice... and it’s still not enough. It’s not even close to what it used to be.” Julia looked at her. “If I push any harder, the knee starts to hurt and--” she stopped and looked down again, biting her lip.
“And you’re afraid you’ll lose what you do have,” Julia finished for her. Lucretia nodded. She glanced at Julia, then quickly looked away.

“I’m happy to be your coach. I’m so proud of every one of you guys.” She took a shuddering breath. “But I’m only 34... I should still be skating.” A brittle laugh bubbled out of her. “Hell, I probably could have been sponsored and on a travelling team.” Julia reached over and took Lucretia’s hand. “Get to the fuckin’ Olympics of roller derby.” She looked at Julia with a melting smile. It took her a minute to speak again, after she had swallowed hard a few times. “That’s why I’m tough on you, Julia.” She met her gaze, a different softer look in her eyes. “You remind me so much of myself at your age. You have the potential to be amazing, but if you don’t start thinking a couple steps ahead… It can destroy you.”

Julia’s bottom lip quivered and she looked away, nodding quickly. “I’m really sorry... about the bout. I shouldn’t have--”

“It’s okay, it was just a game. But I worry…” She stopped and squeezed Julia’s hand. “I don’t want you to make the same mistakes that I did.”

Julia looked up at her. “You know the injury wasn’t your fault, that Rad Robe--” Lucretia shook her head.

“There’s a lot I haven’t told you.” She let out a long breath. “I’m not the best about opening up to people, even people as important to me as you.”

Julia smiled a little, “Yeah, same.”

“Maybe we can work on that. Being more open and honest with each other.”

Julia nodded and sniffled. “Well, let me start by saying that you should know that you’re the best goddamn coach I’ve ever had. None of us would be half the athletes we are without you. And most of us would be lost to the world without this team.”

Lucretia slowly nodded. “Thanks.”

“And if you ever want someone to train with, I’m here.”

“Even after endurance practice?”

Julia smiled. “Yeah, even then.”
“Alright, listen up!” Lucretia’s voice cut through the pre-practice chatter of the team. They were all in the middle of stretching. Carey had to spin around to face her coach. “Got a couple of announcements before we get going. First up, Killian wants me to tell you all that Angus’ school fundraiser is happening next week.”

“Ooh, are they doing the buckets of cookie dough like last year?” Hurley asked, stretching her arm over her head and holding her elbow.


“Anything is better than the lotions from two years ago. That smell still hasn’t come out of my rug,” Sloane said, leaning back on her hands.

“Agreed,” Lucretia said, looking back at her clipboard. “Ah, Merle is claiming that the smell from the locker room is growing too noticeable again, and I have to agree with him. Remember, weekly vinegar baths of your gear will keep away the derby stank. We don’t want a repeat of last summer.”

“Yeah, Carey,” Taako accused, batting her shoulder with the back of his hand.

“Hey, in my defense I didn’t know that those pads were at the bottom of my locker the whole time.”

“And finally, you might notice that we have a visitor in the audience tonight.” She gestured to the stands behind the team. They all turned to look. “Wave hi, Kravitz.” Kravitz waved from his seat in the empty bleachers. Taako smiled, but it faded when he saw the waggling eyebrows and shit-eating grin that Carey was giving him. “I’ve known Kravitz for many years, and he’s a documentary photographer who’d like to do a piece about our team. So he’ll be at our bouts, and most of our practices for the rest of the season. He may get into contact with a couple of you to do more with you outside of the league, but don’t feel obligated to participate in that part if you don’t want to. Ah, did I miss anything, Kravitz?”

Kravitz had walked down and he rested his elbows on the edge of the track. “Um, if it’s okay with you M… Lucretia, I’d like to do quick preliminary interviews with each of the players? Just one at a time, name, age, occupation, that sort of thing.”

“Sure. Julia, you go first. The rest of you, line up on the jammer line. We’re doing agility drills.” Lucretia blew her whistle and the girls hopped up onto their feet. Julia skated over and hung onto the railing.

“Here, I’ll make this quick. Julia Waxman, 26 years old, part-time bartender and part-time student. We good?”

Kravitz looked up from the notebook he was scribbling in. “Oh, I have a few other questions. You might want to sit down.”

Killian tapped on Taako’s shoulder. “I think you’re the last one,” she said, pointing back to where Kravitz was standing at the edge of the track.
“How’d yours go?” Taako asked.

She shrugged. “Fine. He’s nice… kinda a dork though.”

“Yeah,” Taako replied dreamily. He took a minute to smooth out his tank top before skating over to Kravitz.

“So how did it go?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the track, his skates swinging back and forth. Kravitz looked up from his several pages of notes and looked to be brimming with excitement.

“This is incredible!” he enthused. “The stories these women have, and the diversity of everything: race, socioeconomic background, careers. This is amazing!”

“Yeah, we are a pretty wild bunch.” Taako leaned back on his hands.

“And these were just preliminary interviews. Oh man. I knew this was going to be a good piece, I could just feel it, but wow. I had no idea.” He shook his head and watched the pack roll by. Taako was studying Kravitz’ face.

“You really get a kick out of this, huh?”

Kravitz looked back to Taako. “This is my favorite part of documentary.” His eyes lit up with the fire of a man who had found his life’s passion. “Everyone, and I mean everyone, has a story. And I love getting to share people’s stories with a much bigger audience than who otherwise would have heard it. It’s just… humblingly incredible.”

Taako didn’t think it was possible for Kravitz to become any more handsome than he already was before, but he was wrong. He looked away, a half-smile on his face.

“So who do you think you’ll do further interviews with?”

“I’m actually not sure.” Kravitz picked up his notebook and flipped through the pages. He tapped a long finger on his upper lip as he reviewed his notes. “Lucretia really has an incredible story, but I don’t know if she’ll let me publish it…” he mused. “Noelle is fascinating. Skating with the prosthetics, AND the engineering work she’s doing. But then Sloane and her car shop… Oh, Carey mentioned someone named Angus?”

“He’s a neighbor of theirs, lives with his grandpa. Kinda a little brother of the whole team.”

Kravitz wrote that down. He shook his head. “It’s going to be hard to decide on just a couple of subjects.”

“Well, I really underestimated how fierce the competition was going to be,” Taako mused, watching Noelle artfully jump over Killian.

“Actually, I’d really like you to be one of the main subjects, Taako. If you’re willing.”

Taako smiled back at Kravitz. “I thought you’d never ask.” He spun around and rejoined the practice.

Kravitz watched him go. He was both certain that Taako would make a fascinating documentary subject, and worried that his own interest in him was already extending beyond just telling his story.
Noelle rode in the passenger seat of the truck, opening and closing the hooked tongs on her prosthesis methodically. The arm was fitted to use the muscle movement of her shoulder and bicep to manipulate the tongs. When she first got it, it took a lot of practice to use, but now she tended to flex as an unconscious tic, especially when she was nervous.

“Hey, Lucas? You still haven’t told me what this machine’s primary function is supposed to be.” Noelle gestured to the mechanical monstrosity in the truck bed with her good hand.

“Who’s the P.I. here?” asked Lucas.

“What’s a P.I.?”

“Primary investigator. My research. I’m in charge.”

“Well, you are, then, but your setup looks downright--”

“Look, do you want the extra credit or not?”

“Yeah, but--”

“Then shut up and try to learn something.”

Noelle quieted. She hated people telling her to shut up, but it wasn’t exactly a new sensation. What had Killian said? Trust her instincts? Right now her instincts were telling her that this teacher’s assistant was crazy, but a B in Fluid Dynamics meant she could keep her scholarships, so maybe she should go with it? Lucas was a grad student, studying something in theoretical physics. She had no idea what this machine of his was for, but she was pretty sure some of the wiring was faulty.

“I’m sorry, I’m just very nervous,” Lucas said. “This is the first field test of my invention. It could be big!”

Noelle said nothing. It had better be big. She was missing derby practice for this.

“You uh, wanna know what it does?”

“That’d be helpful, if I’m going to assist you.”

“Right, so you’re familiar with the electromagnetic energy that neurons use to fire thoughts?”

“As much as an engineer can be, I think.”

Lucas pulled to a stop. Noelle looked up. They were somewhere familiar. Was that the rink in the distance? This must be the woods behind it. She slid out of the car, gathering the frizzy fluff of her hair with the end of her hook and twisting it through the elastic on her wrist with her good hand. They were on a dirt road. Up ahead it crossed the railroad tracks. She could hear a dog barking in the distance.

“Help me carry it over there,” said Lucas. He hauled the thing to the edge of the bed. It looked like the lovechild of an engine block and a switchboard, and had a bunch of quartz crystals wired into one side for no discernable reason. Exposed copper wiring, backwards switches...Noelle half expected to be electrocuted just looking at it. Nevertheless, she put her arms underneath it as he dragged it out, ignoring the sharp corners digging into the skin of her good arm and scratching the
They placed it in a small clear spot among the brush. He pulled some wires that seemed to be attached to golf tees out of the top of the thing and handed her two. “Walk them out at a right angle. Make sure they’re taut.”

Noelle winced. “These aren’t going to be live, are they?”

Lucas gave her a look of incomprehension. “What?”

“Never mind.” She took the wires and walked them out about ten feet. They were lying over brush. Please, please don’t let them be live.

“Hello, Miss Noelle!”

She looked up. Angus was up ahead, and he had Lucretia’s dog, Miyagi, with him. She waved. “Hi, Angus.”

“Are you doing science?” He approached, the dog following behind. Miyagi was some kind of English bulldog-pitbull mix, dense and muscled and ugly as hell.

“Probably,” said Noelle, sticking the golf tee into the ground. “Do Carey and Killian know you’re here?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I’m staying off the train tracks.”

Noelle nodded and followed the wire back to the machine so she could measure a right angle. Angus and the dog followed her. “What sort of science are you doing?” he asked.

“Theoretical physics, I think. Angus, do you have a book with you?”

“Yes.” He handed her a ratty paperback. She used the bottom corner to measure the angle and then handed it back and walked out the other wire.

“Excuse me, Noelle, who’s this?” The scorn in Lucas’ voice was palpable.

Noelle suppressed a sigh. “This is Angus. He’s a friend of mine. He won’t be any trouble.”

“Hey, can you maybe get your dog away from my machine?” Lucas snapped. Noelle looked up. Miyagi was sniffing the contraption.

“Miyagi, heel,” said Angus solemnly. Miyagi abandoned his investigation to go sit by Angus’ feet.

“What were you saying about electromagnetic energy?” asked Noelle.

“Right! Yes.” Lucas stood up from fiddling with his machine. “In keeping with the laws of thermodynamics, that energy from the brain is not lost and cannot be destroyed. Even with death.”

An uncomfortable feeling started bubbling in Noelle’s gut.

“It’s my hypothesis that the observable phenomena attributed to the supernatural is in fact lingering electromagnetic energy, and thus, I have built this machine to detect it!” He looked over the horrible thing with the pride of a new mother. “Isn’t it magnificent?”

“Lucas, in the spirit of scientific inquiry, can you be straight with me?” asked Noelle.
“Yeah, sure.”

“All right, we’re ready.”

“Are we ghost-hunting?”

Angus gasped. “Ghosts! Wow!”

“If you want to put it crassly, sure,” said Lucas. “But that’s a little reductive, don’t you think? Typical engineer.”

“And we’re probably here because of Tharden Rockseeker, right?” said Noelle.

“The town’s not exactly drowning in prominent deaths. It’s disappointing, really.” Lucas bent down to make more adjustments.

“Who’s Tharden Rockseeker?” asked Angus.

“He died out here in the woods, many years ago,” said Noelle. “It was very sad.”

Lucas didn’t notice this. “All right, we’re ready.”

“Lucas, do you mind if I just adjust some of the circuitry?” said Noelle. “If it’s wired wrong it could explode.”

“It’s not wired wrong, it’s perfect,” said Lucas. “Now I’m going to switch it on.”

Noelle felt a surge of panic. She turned to Angus. “Why don’t you go run back to the rink?”

“But I’d like to see if it detects anything, Miss Noelle.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “That thing is basically a bomb and you need to get clear now.”

Angus’ eyes widened. He said, “Come on, Miyagi,” and took off running.

Lucas was scribbling in his notebook. “Test 1. Rockseeker location. Here we go.” He flipped a switch.

Noelle watched, edging backwards. Nothing happened. Lucas stepped back and tapped his pencil to his chin. “Huh. Maybe if we--”

Magnus carefully fitted the new board into the hole. It was snug, but he didn’t have to force it. Perfect.

“How’s it going?” said Merle, from outside the cupboard. Magnus scooted out and sat up.

“Pretty good,” said Magnus. “I should be all done before derby practice. I just need to nail it in.”

“And there’ll be no more warping?”

“Nope. You said there was a leak there last year?”

“Yeah, should all be fixed now. Piece of shit rink.”

Magnus frowned. “Why do you own the place if you don’t like it?”

Merle shifted uncomfortably. “I inherited it. Can’t seem to get rid of it.”
The back door slammed open and Julia booked it inside. Magnus felt a pang of happiness as he
realized he could say hi to her, since they were friends now. He raised his hand. “H--”

“Can’t talk! Late!” Julia shouted as she blew past.

Suddenly, from the still-open door, came a low echoing BOOM, immediately followed by
something that sounded like shattering glass.

All three of them froze. Julia turned a wide-eyed look at Magnus. She looked petrified. “Angus.”

Magnus jumped to his feet. Merle reached into the cupboard and pulled out an old army kit bag
with a red cross on it. Together, the three of them ran out the back door.

Noelle’s ears were ringing. She very carefully sat up.

The machine was smoking heavily. She could see from the way the brush under the copper wires
was going brown that it was only a matter of time before the woods caught fire. She staggered
upright, stepping carefully through shards of broken crystal, and hit the switch on the machine. A
faint electrical buzz stopped.

Lucas groaned. He was on the side of the machine that hadn’t been studded with unnecessary
quartz, so it didn’t look like he was cut at all, just thrown backward.

“Medic! Medic coming through!”

Noelle looked blearily toward the rink. Three figures were coming through the trees. The one
shouting “medic” was Merle. He hurried over to her, kicking shards of crystal out of his way. “Here,
sit down. Let me look at you.”

She dropped to her knees, puzzled. He checked her eyes with a tiny flashlight and her pulse at the
same time, so quickly that she hardly realized it was happening. “Good thing that didn’t get you in
the flesh leg, huh?”

She looked down at her leg prosthesis. There was a five-inch crystal shard sticking out of it, just
below the place where her actual knee ended.

“You stay here a minute, I’m going to look at this guy.” Merle hopped over a wire to Lucas.

“Noelle?” Julia was suddenly there, hand on her back to steady her. “What happened?”

“I tried to tell him the wiring was faulty,” she said. She couldn’t hear her own voice.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” demanded a third voice from over by Lucas. The ref? Magnus?

“Noelle, do you know where Angus is?” said Julia.

“He ran,” she whispered. “He’s okay, I think.”

“No you hear me?” said Magnus. He was crouching next to Lucas, who was sitting up now,
getting the same medic treatment from Merle. “Who are you?”

Julia scowled. “Oh I know you. Lucas Miller, right? Always complaining about the noise level at
Refuge?”
“‘M in the midst of a very... very important experiment,” he mumbled.

“You’re pretty well concussed is what you are,” said Merle. “If you throw up, try not to do it on me.”

“He said if I helped him, I could get extra credit,” said Noelle.

“Help you do what exactly?” said Magnus. He snapped his fingers, trying to get Lucas to focus his eyes. “Hey, you better tell me right now.”


“Hello?” came a fourth voice from the woods.

“Over here, Lucretia,” called Julia. “Noelle, you said you knew it would do this?”

“He wouldn’t listen,” Noelle replied.

With a nearly inaudible fwoomp, the machine burst into flames. All five people drew back, but the flames were covered in a thick white foam almost as soon as they appeared. Lucretia was brandishing a fire extinguisher.

“What the hell’s this Angus tells me about a bomb?” Lucretia said, in a tone so level you could have hung shelves on it.

“‘Snot a bomb,” muttered Lucas. “Very sensitive instrument.”

“Yeah, real sensitive,” said Julia.

Lucretia crossed her arms. “Well well well. Lucas Miller. Experimenting in the woods, just like when you were a kid.”

“I’m a serious scientist,” he groaned.

“Uh huh. Noelle, how do you know this boy?”

“He’s a teacher’s assistant for my Fluid Dynamics class,” she said.

“Didn’t you say something about extra credit?” prompted Julia.

Lucretia raised her eyebrows. “Are we exploiting undergrads, Lucas? Putting people in danger?” She asked. “What until your mother hears about this.”

Lucas’ head rocked back. “You can’t tell her.”

“You bet your ass I can. Noelle, why don’t you come back with me? Julia, Magnus, help this idiot take out his trash.” She gestured to the wrecked machine.

Julia helped Noelle to her feet. Noelle accepted the shoulder to lean on from Lucretia and limped away. Julia could hear Lucretia saying, “You know, that crystal in your leg looks kind of New Age. You should keep it.”

Julia started yanking up the wires that were stuck in the ground for whatever reason. She lifted the machine itself, hoping that whatever this foamy stuff was, it would come out of her blouse, but only managed to pick it up a few inches.
“I’m going to need your help with this,” she said to Magnus. He was gathering crystal shards using the front of his shirt as a basket.

“Yeah, hang on,” he said. “Where should I put all these?”

Julia pointed. “That’s his truck, throw them in there.”

“You need to go to the hospital,” Merle was saying.

“I’ll drive right there,” said Lucas, getting unsteadily to his feet.

“Oh, no you won’t,” Merle shot back. “You’re in no condition to drive.”

Magnus dumped his shirtful of crystals in the truck bed and crouched down to help Julia. “Ready? One, two--” They hoisted the machine up and carried it to the truck.

“Do you have anyone you can call? You can use the phone in the rink,” said Merle.

“Um. Yeah.” Lucas staggered forward.

“Hang on, Merle,” said Magnus. He shot a look at Julia; Julia got the impression he was asking for backup. She followed him.

Magnus took a handful of Lucas’ shirt and lifted him up. “Listen to me. If you endanger people’s lives like that, you’re not a scientist. You’re reckless and stupid.”

Aha, this was the play. Julia stepped up, sticking a finger in the boy’s suddenly terrified face. “How dare you bring Noelle into this? How dare you use that thing even when she told you it was dangerous? With a child around?”

“If we ever see you around here again, we will not hesitate to kick your ass,” growled Magnus.

“And you better give Noelle that extra credit you promised, or we’ll be after you,” Julia added.

Magnus put him down gently. Julia brushed some dust off his shirt. “Now get lost,” she said.

With a wild-eyed stare, Lucas turned and teetered off toward the rink.

They watched as Merle steadied him on his way. Julia glowered at his back. “Punk.”

“You said he calls noise complaints on Refuge?”

“All the time. What did he expect living by a pub?”

Magnus nudged her gently with his elbow. “That was some good teamwork just now.”

Julia glanced at him. “I’d kick ass with you any day, Burnsides.”

Noelle was quiet all the way to the rink door. Lucretia was just talking soothingly, filling the space with noise.

“I forgot to ask, did you ride here with him? We can bring you back if you did,” said Lucretia. “You could even join us for part of practice, if you’re feeling up for it. Your skate bag is here, right? And your other leg?”
Noelle opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out was a sob, and then the floodgates were open and she was crying in front of her derby coach, dammit.

Lucretia didn’t seem bothered. “Ssh. It’s okay. You can sit this one out.”

“I don’t want to,” Noelle blubbered.

“All right, then we can find a spare jersey. No need to be sad.”

“I’m not sad,” said Noelle damply. “I’m--I’m mad! The one time I get to be involved in research and it’s a stupid ghost-hunt that ends in an idiotic accident. Nobody takes me seriously in the engineering program, and the one time someone does--” Another sob surfaced and choked out any more coherent words.

They were at the rink now. Lucretia stopped in front of the door and looked Noelle in the eye.

“You have every right to be angry,” said Lucretia. “And so help me that boy is going to get a three-hour crash course in scientific integrity, if I know his mother. He won’t get away with that again. Okay?”

Noelle nodded, trying to reign in the crying.

“But in the meantime, how about you bring that anger with me? I know something we can do with it.” She pulled open the door.

Inside, the girls and Taako were gathered around Angus, who was saying, “And then Noelle said it was basically a bomb, so I--”

“Noelle!” said Sloane, and the party broke off to skate over to her. “Are you okay?”

“Way to make an entrance, bubele,” said Taako.

“Holy crap, your leg,” said Hurley, reaching out to touch the crystal.

“Enough,” said Lucretia. “She’s gearing up for practice. The rest of you run some warm-up laps on the flat rink, I think they’re still fixing the bank track. We’re practicing push blocks today.”

“Yes!” said Killian, pumping her fist. “I love pushing people into people.”

“Noelle here needs more practice on blocker.” Lucretia patted her shoulder. “Now get to it!”

The team skated off to the flat rink. Lucretia gave Noelle’s shoulder one final squeeze and followed them.

Noelle took a deep breath and managed a small smile.

Angus hung off the half-wall of the flat rink as he watched their practice. Miss Noelle hadn’t come out of the locker room yet. She had seemed so shaken after the explosion, which made a lot of sense. If he was honest, it had scared him too and he was halfway to the rink when it blew. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t exciting. He’d definitely have the best story on the playground tomorrow. The back door opened and in walked Miss Julia and Magnus. He smiled and waved at them, traipsing over.

“Oh, Angus, there you are,” Julia said with a relieved sigh. She jogged up and knelt in front of
him, taking his head in her hands. Magnus stood close behind. “You’re okay, right?”

“Yes, of course, Miss Julia. Miss Noelle sent me and Miyagi away in plenty of time to get out of the blast zone.”

Julia laughed a little, and rubbed his cheek with her thumb before letting him go. “It really scared me.”

“Both of us,” Magnus said, crouching down to be on their level.

Angus smiled and looked between them. “I’m fine, really. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Julia pulled him in for a hug, Angus’s face on her shoulder. “We’ll always worry about you,” she assured him. “That’s what you do for people you care about.”

Miss Julia’s hugs were always the best. She smelled like flowers and her arms were soft and homey. Angus turned his face so he could see Magnus, who reached out and ruffled Angus’ hair. Angus grinned at him as Julia let go.

“I gotta get to practice. You sure you’re okay?” she asked again. Angus nodded. “Alright.” She stood up and both Angus and Magnus watched her go.

“Well, little man, you want a hot dog? All this danger has made me hungry.” Magnus patted his stomach.

“Yes, sir!” Angus said, racing off for the concessions stand.
Kravitz always liked how someone’s home reflected who they were as a person. He had an ongoing series of photos, a project that he suspected would never be completed, of just showing people inside their homes. So when Taako invited him over to try some homemade pasta, Kravitz asked if he could bring his camera to continue the series.

Usually by the time he went to a subject’s home, he had a pretty good idea of what to expect behind the front door. Japanese minimalism, or Shabby Chic, or stacks of newspapers and old tuna tins. But as he pressed the buzzer to Taako’s loft over the travel agent’s office, he realized he had no clue what to expect on the other side.

“Yello?”

“It’s me… uh, Kravitz.”

“Hey my fella, come on up.”

The front door buzzed and opened and Kravitz walked inside.

There was a small landing, on which a sagging shoe rack with a truly astonishing collection of footwear was located, and then an immediate flight of stairs upwards. Kravitz took off his shoes as Taako appeared at the top of the staircase.

“Come on up.” He winked, and then disappeared back into the apartment. Kravitz walked up the stairs, the old wooden boards creaking under his sock feet.

It was a studio, and from the top of the stairs, Kravitz could see the whole apartment. It was an older building; the floors were wooden and the walls were brick. A small kitchen, in which Taako was stirring several different pots at the same time, was to his right. There was a large wooden table that seemed to act as both an island and a dining room. Mail and a small collection of cacti and herbs sat in the sunbeam at the end of the table. Taako’s bed was shoved in the opposite corner from the kitchen. It was piled high with pillows of all colors and shapes, a collection that really shouldn’t work together yet somehow it did. A lime green couch was pushed up to the foot of the bed and there was an old TV in front of that. However, the most dominating feature in the whole space, the thing that took up a solid third of the floor plan, were the clothes.

Taako had racks and racks of clothing that he had arranged to form little aisles up against the right wall. Kravitz couldn’t help but immediately wander over and investigate. The clothes were of all sizes and eras. There were hoop skirts and kimonos and royal robes. He saw a costume that looked like it would inflate and turn into some sort of dinosaur. There were accessories too, button boots and Jackie O pocket books and Ancient Egyptian headdresses.

“Holy crow,” Kravitz said quietly, whipping his camera off his shoulder and beginning to take a few shots. “This is incredible. Do you wear all these?”

“Hm?” Taako turned away from the stove for a minute, setting up a cutting board on the table. “Oh, gracious no. Some of them, but not all of them.”

“What are they for?” Kravitz said, focusing on some beautiful jewel-toned embroidery on a sleeve that seemed to be hand-done.
“Costumes, of course.” Taako peeled an onion and began expertly dicing it on the cutting board.

“Like for Halloween?” Kravitz asked, his head poking up from one of the aisles.

“Well, I did have an excellent Scarlett O’Hara one last year, but not just that. I help out with the local community theatre.” Taako scraped the onion into a steaming pot, then turned to pinch a leaf off a basil plant. Kravitz stepped out from the aisle and snapped a shot of Taako in his kitchen. Taako looked up at the shutter sound. “Hey, I thought you wanted to get pictures of the apartment.”

Kravitz shrugged his shoulders. “You are as much a part of your space as your space is a part of you.”

Taako half-smiled and turned back to the stove. “Well I’m a chef, not a model. So I revoke my permission if I look bad.”

“That’s impossible,” Kravitz said, kneeling down to get a different angle on the kitchen. He took the picture, then realized what he’d said. Very professional. Luckily, Taako didn’t seem to hear him so he breathed a sigh of relief. “How long have you been involved in theatre?” he asked in a louder voice.

“I’ve worked with the troop in town ever since I moved here, so like… 5 years? But I did theatre in high school too.”

“Did you start in costuming or…?” Kravitz took a seat at the table.

“I started on stage, but apparently they don’t like it when you improvise your own lines.” Taako grinned over his shoulder, and turned the heat off under a pot. “But the costumer was always nice to me, and she taught me everything I know.”

Kravitz nodded and snagged some carrot slices from the salad bowl. “So you didn’t grow up in town? I guess I just sort of assumed you did.”

Taako leaned away from the pot of boiling water he was straining in the sink. “Nah. Here is home.” He snapped his fingers at Kravitz. “Stop sneaking carrots.”

“Stop sneaking carrots.” Kravitz said, smiling sheepishly. Taako pushed the cutting board over towards Kravitz.

“Here, chop those bell peppers. Sauce is almost done,” Taako said, turning back to the stove. Kravitz picked up the knife and started chopping the vegetables, careful to keep the seeds separate. “How about you? Where’s home for you?”

Kravitz frowned as he chopped. “I’m not really sure these days. I grew up in Neverwinter, even went to school in the city. But now I only go back there for holidays with Mother.”

“That sounds nice. Holidays with the family.”

“It’s not.” Kravitz scooted the pieces to the side of the board and started on another pepper. “My mother’s parents and siblings come and bring their families. Last Christmas they spent the whole dinner arguing about whether Bush or Hatch was going to get the party nomination. They even agreed with each other and they were still shouting.” He shook his head and dropped the peppers
into the salad bowl. “A couple years ago, I was in Mongolia at Christmas and couldn’t get home in time. That was the best.”

“That’s usually what I do at the holidays.” Taako took a plate from the table and dished out a generous serving of pasta. “Stay in, have some wine. Sometimes Julia invites me over, her family is a hoot.”

“You don’t go back to New Elfington?” Kravitz asked as Taako switched the plates.

“Nope,” he said simply, dishing out more pasta. He set the plate back on the table and turned to open up a very crowded cooking utensil drawer, snatching a ladle from the depths.

There it was again. That feeling like there was something very large and very obvious that Taako very much didn’t want to talk about. Normally Kravitz would prompt a little and give enough space for his subject to feel comfortable to open up. But Taako was already different than any other subject he’d worked with. And the more time he spent with him, the further and further they seemed to drift away from the relationship Kravitz had set out to form and into very different waters. So instead he said nothing.

Taako turned around and set the second plate on the table. “Look, Kravitz. I think the project you’re working on is really swell, and I’m happy to participate, and I like spending time with you.” He took a breath, and the clipped tone came back to his voice. “But the things that you are wanting to know… are not easy for me to talk about. I’m not saying that I won’t ever speak of them… but I-...I need time. I’m working on it. I promise.”

Kravitz shook his head. “No, that’s fine. There’s no rush. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Taako smiled and nodded. “Well, then. Now that that’s out of the way, how much sauce do you like on your noodles?”

“Whatever the chef thinks is best. I put myself in your hands.”

Taako grinned wickedly. “Wise choice, buckaroo.”
Magnus took a gulp of his beer and winced, not at the beer, but at Avi’s rendition of “Come on Eileen.” Come to karaoke night with the B.o.B., he’d said. It’d be fun, he said. Magnus didn’t realize it would involve hearing Avi strangle every member of Dexy’s Midnight Runners one by one. Was anyone good going to sing?

At least he was there with friends. He threw a glance at Julia, who was talking with Hurley and Killian. Yeah. Friends.

“What really gets me is the passion,” said Johann. He was watching Avi like a man at an art gallery. “Truly karaoke is an expression of the deepest parts of our psyche.”

Magnus laughed. “If you say so.”

“Hey Magnus!”

It was Hurley, and she was standing on a chair, her cheeks flushed. She leaned over the table toward him. “You don’t look like you’re having much fun.”

“I don’t think I’m drunk enough for karaoke,” he said.

“I’ll say you’re not!” said Killian. “You’re drinking beer. Lemme get you something else.”

Magnus shrugged. “I’ll take it if you’re buying.”

“This time,” promised Killian, and left for the bar.

“What have you got against karaoke?” said Hurley, leaning close enough that even in the dimness he could see her freckles. “You some kinda Asian racist?”

“I don’t know—”

“‘Cause it’s Asian,” said Hurley.

Julia stifled a snicker. “Like Sloane?” she provided.

“Sloane!” Hurley tottered back upright on the chair. “I love Sloane. Love her. Where is she?”

“Over there?” Magnus pointed to the bar.

Hurley stepped up onto the table—Magnus hastily moved his beer—and grabbed his face. She looked him dead in the eye. “Thank you.” Then she kissed him gently on the nose, released him, and fell forward off the table.

“Oh god!” Magnus reached out to catch her, but he needn’t have bothered; she landed in a roll, sprang up, whirled around, gave him some finger guns, and hustled over to the bar.

Magnus’ eyes were huge. He turned to Julia. “And she’s drunk?”

“Wasted,” said Julia. “She teaches Judo.”

“Does Judo give you supernatural powers?” Magnus demanded. Julia laughed. Damn, she was beautiful when she laughed.
“So what’s the story?” she asked. “How come you don’t like karaoke?”

“I don’t really like hearing drunk people sing bad music.” He took another swig of his beer and shrugged.


“I’ve heard the same riff in like, six other songs from the same era,” said Magnus. “It’s repetitive. And boring.”

“It’s common because it’s good,” said Julia. “Catchy.”

“It was the first twenty times I heard it,” scoffed Magnus. “There hasn’t been a good original song since 1982.”

Julia looked personally offended. “All right, wise guy. What’s a good karaoke song? Any era.”

He finished off his beer and thought. Good songs. Quality songs. “Hmmm…’Layla.’”

“’Layla?’ By Derek and the Dominos? Hell no!”

“It’s a good song!” Magnus protested, impressed. Most of the time he had to hum songs for people.

“It’s seven minutes long! And the last three minutes are instrumental.”

“What’d you suggest, then?” asked Magnus. “Nirvana or some shit?”

“No, you’re missing the point,” said Julia. “Crowd favorites don’t have to be new. They just have to be good. And have enough words that you don’t have to dance if you can’t.”

“I can dance,” said Magnus.

“Brave words,” she said. “Seven minutes is a long time.”

Saving him from trying to come up with a comeback, Killian arrived and put a glass down in front of him. “Drink!”

He picked up the glass. “What is it?”

“Rum and coke,” said Killian.

Magnus tasted it. He sputtered a little. “This is not rum and coke.”

Killian grinned. “C’mon, Burnsides.”

Magnus paused. He shot a glance at Julia. She was stone-faced.

He’d be damned if Killian got the better of him in front of Julia mid-argument. He took a drink. What was this, Long Island iced tea? “What were you saying?”

A devilish smile crossed her face. She poked his chest with one finger. “I’m saying you wouldn’t know a good karaoke song if one bit your ass.”

Magnus drew himself up. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”
Goddammit, it was a challenge now. “Fine. Catchy, right?”

“Yeah, something catchy.”

He stood up, downed half of the drink, and walked up to the DJ. Well, shit. Now he had to actually come up with a good song.

Let’s see. Maybe he should avoid love songs. Of course that took most music off the table. What was both platonic and catchy?

“You got a song request or what, buddy?” asked the DJ.

“Uh, yeah. You got any Earth Wind & Fire?”

Julia waited, not bothering to hide her grin anymore. If he was going to be their friend, this was where he’d prove himself. She nudged Johann, who was congratulating Avi on a truly soulful performance.

Magnus took the microphone and swaggered up the step to the stage.


The music played, and Julia knew the beat immediately. Her mouth fell open.

Saxophones blasted, Magnus threw out a hip and sang—

“Yeahhh, Hey!!

When you wish upon a star,
Your dreams’ll take you very far, yeah,
But when you wish upon a dream,
Life ain’t always what it seems.”

What had she been expecting? Classic rock maybe, but not this. He wasn’t half bad. His claims of dancing were suspect; mostly he just moved his hips, but he could move ‘em.

The other girls had caught on and were cheering and catcalling too. Killian was losing her mind.

Julia threw back her head and laughed.

Magnus sneaked a peek at the table. She was laughing again.

He threw his hand out to the table, to Sloane and Hurley at the bar, to every member of the B.o.B. he could find, singing,

You’re a shining star
No matter who you are
Shining bright to see
What you could truly be

The pub went nuts. Magnus tried to hit the highest harmony on the last part. His voice cracked, but no one seemed to notice. The song ended, and he shouted into the mic, “Good night Refuge!”

Magnus rode the applause down the stage and swaggered back to the table. “How was *that* for catchy?”

Julia was still in stitches. “That’s pretty good!” she managed.

“Now you gotta do it, right?” said Avi.

Julia stopped laughing. “What, me?”

“Yeah, you’re a good singer!” said Avi. “Haven’t you actually taken classes for singing?”

“Have you?” said Magnus, delighted.

She rolled her eyes. “I figure if I’m going to take twice as long to get my degree I might as well take some fun classes. I’m not going to sound good, though.”

“Nobody sounds good at karaoke, Jules,” said Killian. “C’mon, give us something good!”

“I’m not going up there unless one of you goes with me,” she said, staring them down.

Avi, Johann, and Killian eyeballed each other for a few seconds.

“I’ll do it,” said Magnus in the silence.

They turned to look at him. “Oh really?” said Julia slyly.

“As long as you choose something good,” he said.

“Something catchy?” she said.

“Yeah.” Magnus grinned. “Or would you not know a good karaoke song if one bit your ass?”

“Oh, all right, I see how this is.” Julia stood up. “A duet, I assume?”

“Of course.”

“Wait here,” she said, and sauntered over to the DJ.

“You’re in for a treat,” said Johann. “She’s a very good singer.”

“I bet she goes with Elton John and Kiki Dee,” said Avi.

“Oh, god forbid Elton John,” said Magnus.

“Carey says you love those high notes,” said Killian.

Julia looked back at them and waved Magnus over. He made his way toward the stage and took the proffered microphone. “What’d you pick?”

“Just roll with it,” she said, and hopped up the steps to the stage.

Magnus braced himself, but as soon as the music started he relaxed. “Good call,” he said.
“You’re gonna miss your cue,” she said, and he almost did, but he started just in time:

“Listen, baby,

Ain’t no mountain high,

Ain’t no valley low,

Ain’t no river wide enough, baby…”

Magnus thought his voice wasn’t bad, but he was legitimately shocked when she sang.

“If you need me, call me,

No matter where you are

No matter how far…”

She was good, damn. He was so impressed he missed his line, which didn’t seem to make a difference, because now they had the attention of the bar. He joined her on the chorus, singing the high part, and damn if she didn’t harmonize.

“Oh baby there ain’t no mountain high enough

Ain’t no valley low enough

Ain’t no river wide enough

To keep me from getting to you, baby…”

They went back and forth gleefully on the verses. Magnus started to get into it, dancing a little—she tried to mimic his movements, keeping her distance but swaying with him, curls flying.

He felt his heart melt as she sang,

“My love is alive way down in my heart,

Although we are miles apart…”

Oh, he was screwed.
Julia Takes a Hit

Steven settled onto a bench, munching on popcorn. That Robbie guy smelled like weed, but he didn’t skimp on the butter. Probably because he smelled like weed. Steven hoped he could see the action from here. He’d forgotten his glasses.

He tapped his foot, not steadily like he usually did when he was sitting still, but erratically. He always got nervous watching Julia’s bouts. He tried very hard not to be the sort of father who locked up his daughter in a tower, but the casual approach to danger put him on edge anyway. Julia had mentioned how friends or competitors got injured. She hadn’t yet herself, but still…

Even if he couldn’t make himself come to every bout, it was a treat to watch her play. Her look of determination as she passed the opposing team’s blockers on jammer or slammed into someone on blocker...it reminded him of her mother.

Steven smiled to think of Ella, their adventures together. Like that time before Julia was born, when they were young still, and Ella brought him out to the frozen lake. She’d pulled him out onto the ice to try and walk on it, and they’d both ended up knee deep in frigid water, running toward his truck with shuddering jaws and cranking up the heater all the way.

He chuckled to think of it. Young and foolish. If Julia wanted to be young and foolish for a bit, he could hardly fault her.

“Is anyone sitting here?” asked an unusually rich voice.

Steven scooted over on the bench. The man thanked him and sat. He was linebacker-shaped with an unruly beard and an almost comically small briefcase, and he was wearing a suit he looked stuffed into. He loosened his tie and took off his jacket, folding it neatly and placing it on the bench beside him.

Steven’s eyes wandered over to the center of the track. Julia was giving a pep talk to her players. He nudged the man beside him. “That’s my daughter.”

The man did a double-take. “Jule Be Sorry is your daughter?”

“Yes,” Steven said, a little smugly.

“I’m such a fan! She’s the best captain they’ve had since Destroy Her.”

Steven frowned. “Who’s that?”

“The coach there? She used to be amazing.” The man pulled an orange out of his briefcase and started to peel it in one long strip. “Bad injury laid her out in ‘92, but she’s still a good coach.”

“You’ve been following the team for a while,” said Steven.

“Oh, yeah, the B.o.B. is easy the most interesting team in the league. They always keep you guessing.” The man stuck out his hand. “I’m Klaarg, by the way, Klaarg Daniel.”

“Steven Waxman.” He shook the man’s hand. “Julia—Jule Be Sorry—says they’re doing well this season?”

“I’d say so, yeah, won four out of six bouts. The new ref is something though, calls a lot more
penalties.” Klaarg carefully rolled the orange peel into a ball and took a bite straight out of the orange.

Momentarily unsettled, Steven found himself unable to look away as juice dribbled into Klaarg’s beard. “Uhh...that’s…”

“It is safer for the players, of course, but there aren’t near so many fights.”

“Are there usually fights?” asked Steven. Julia neglected to mention…

“It depends on who they’re playing. It’s just the Rockport Riot today so most likely nothing too crazy. Not like when they played the Rad Robes.” He reached into his briefcase again and pulled out a thermos and a cup. “Tea?”

“No thanks.” Steven watched in horrified fascination as Klaarg finished off the orange with another bite, poured a steaming cup of tea from his thermos, and sipped it daintily. The man was huge, but more than that, there seemed to be something about him that took up more space than most people.

“I love a good Oolong, don’t you?”

“I mostly drink iced Lipton,” said Steven.

The chant started, the one that the players began and the crowd took up. Steven started stomping and shouting along. Who are we? The B.o.B...

The announcer called out the names, one of which made Klaarg snort into his tea. “Jess the Behead-her? I thought she skated for Goldcliff.”

The skater in question was a densely built woman who looked like she could lift Steven bodily. Klaarg leaned forward. “Oh, this will be interesting.”

And the bout began.

The Riot took an early lead in points. The boy, Taako, was their starting jammer while Julia waited and watched.

After three jams where Taako was held back by the opposition’s wall, Julia traded off with him. There it was, that look of determination, just like when she was little. This was going to be good.

The whistle blew, and Julia took off, neatly lapping the track far ahead of the opposing jammer. The Riot’s blockers formed up a wall again, but the tall one, Beauty and the Beast, took hold of Julia and whipped her straight through it. Like a cannonball, she broke through their line, her blockers following fast behind. She weaved through the Riot like a dart, narrowly dodging each one. The Behead-her barrelled toward her to hip check her--but lil’ Diablo pushed the short one, Battling Ram, into the Behead-her, and the two of them hit the rails. With an extra burst of speed, Julia sailed around the curve as the two minutes sounded.

“It’s a grand slam, folks!” said the announcer. The crowd burst into cheers.

Steven shouted, “That’s my girl!”

Klaarg clapped politely. “Very impressive! Very well done.”
After the half, the Riot stopped depending on the wall so much, and the bout turned into a back-and-forth of points. Steven was on the edge of his seat. Now Julia and Noelle were trading off on pivot, and between Julia’s skill, Taako’s fancy footwork, and Noelle’s preternatural ability to see every player at once, the B.o.B began to pull ahead. That Jess the Behead-her, though, seemed to make it her personal mission to bring down the jammer. Steven winced as she knocked Julia down for the third time.

“If this ref is so good at calling penalties, why won’t he call them on this Behead-her character?” Steven grumped.

“None of her hits have been illegal yet,” Klaarg replied. “If I know Jess, though, that won’t last long.”

Klaarg’s words could have been prophecy. A new jam began, with Julia as the jammer; she lapped the track and began weaving in between the blockers. Taako was shouting something from the center, something Steven couldn’t make out, and drifted onto the track.

It happened in quick succession. The whistle blew to stop the jam--too many players on the track-Taako jumped back into the center, and from one end of the track, a crack .

Steven looked just in time to see Julia slump to the ground beside the rail on the outside edge of the track, Jess the Behead-her standing over her. One of the volunteer refs, the one with the mullet, was mid-spin; he’d been facing away. The crowd started to shout. Steven jumped to his feet.

The head ref ran over and knelt next to Julia. She sat up, holding her head. Steven released a sigh.

The refs held a quick conversation. The mulleted ref was shaking his head.

“He didn’t see it?” demanded Steven. “What happened?”

“I believe Jess threw her into the rail,” said Klaarg.

“Is she okay? Julia!”

The refs exchanged a few words with Jess. Steven couldn’t tell from here if she looked guilty or not. Lucretia and Taako skated onto the track to help Julia up. She made it fairly easily to her feet, using Lucretia’s arm to steady her. As she made her way to the center, she searched the stands with her gaze.

Steven waved, in case she was looking for him. She was; she held up a thumbs-up, and then a hand palm-out.

All right, she was okay, didn’t need immediate help. He sat down and looked to the refs. They signaled for no penalty.

“Ladies and gentleman, it looks like the referees have determined this to be an accident,” said the announcer, and he was immediately drowned out by boos and catcalls from the audience, and from the B.o.B. members on the track as well.

Steven shouted, “Oh come on, ref!”

“Bad form,” commented Klaarg. “There’s very little chance that was an accident.”

Steven was filled with boiling fury. “Where does that guy get off?”
“I’m fine. I can go back in!” Julia was reaching for her helmet.

“Not with a goose egg like that you can’t,” said Lucretia, holding it just out of her reach. “You might be concussed.”

“What the hell is wrong with Magnus?” demanded Carey.

“He didn’t see it,” muttered Julia. “What was he supposed to do?”

“Grow a pair maybe?” said Sloane. “That was a shitty call.”

“Why are you defending him?” snapped Hurley.

“I’m not! It doesn’t matter anyway, because I’m going to keep playing.” She stood up, a little unsteadily, paused, and gagged.

“That does it.” Lucretia snatched the panty off Julia’s helmet and tossed it to Taako. “Throwing up means concussion.”

Taako caught it. “Don’t worry, sweet cheeks, we’ve got this.”

Julia sat back down and tried to swallow back the bile. “Fine. Just--Diablo, Jenicide, keep an eye on Jess. Don’t let her pull that shit again? Right?”

“Right,” said Carey.

“Good. Who are we?”

“The B.o.B!”

“Let’s go.”

It was a close thing, but with Julia on the sidelines looking alternately very disoriented and out for blood, the B.o.B maintained a growing lead and finished things 85 to 69. Jess had tried to pick a fight, but her teammates pulled her off.

Just as well, Magnus thought, as he made his way toward the cupboard under the track, feeling like he’d swallowed a billiard ball. He didn’t trust himself to be fair right now. It had been a bad call, letting Jess get away with hurting Julia. He’d known it was a bad call when he was making it. But at the time--

He yanked off his whistle, angry at--at who? The Behead-her? Jess hadn’t made the stupid call.

Angry at himself. Julia was hurt. Maybe not badly, but still, hurt. And in the moment all he’d felt was fear for his own reputation, that someone would accuse him of showing favoritism. His ego, dammit.

He put the whistles and hats inside, and searched for injury paperwork.

“Hey, Avi?”

Avi’s head appeared above him, looking over the rail of the track. “What’s up, boss?”
Magnus gestured inside the cupboard. “Where do we keep injury forms? I thought they’d be in with the ref supplies.”

“Injury forms? What are those?”

Magnus looked up. “You know? Records of incidents? So the players can’t sue or press charges or whatever?”

Avi looked mystified. “Is that a thing?”

“My league in Neverwinter did it,” said Magnus, more than a little horrified.

“We’ve never done that.” Avi shrugged. “Small town league, man.”

Magnus settled back on his heels. “Jeez, how is this place still functioning?”

Avi made a gloomy face and said in his best Johann, “It’s the passion.”

Magnus didn’t laugh. “I should at least touch base with Julia, then, make sure she’s not seriously hurt.”

“You’re too late,” said Noelle. She was on her way to the merch table with a box of shirts on each shoulder, still wearing her skate prosthetic. She rested on her other foot, which was skateless at the moment. “She already went home.”

“Oh. Great.” Magnus stood up and slammed the cupboard shut. “No accountability anywhere.”

“You want accountability?” said Noelle. “What about calling out Jess?”

“She’s got a point,” said Avi.

“I know!” he shouted. “I’m sorry! It was a bad call!”

“Dude,” said Avi, quietly.

Noelle was looking at him wide-eyed. She was scared. Magnus deflated. “I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you.”

She swallowed and looked away. “It’s okay.”

Magnus took a deep breath. “Was Julia seriously hurt?”

“Lucretia thinks she’ll be better in time for practice on Monday,” said Noelle quietly.

“Good. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

She nodded, balanced herself on her skate prosthetic, and pushed off toward the merch table.

“Just so you know,” said Avi, “if you ever yell like that around Noelle and one of the other ladies hears, they will kill you.”

“I’d kill me too, probably,” grumbled Magnus.

“You’re really taking this to heart,” said Avi. “Everyone makes a bad call sometimes.”

Magnus sighed.
“I’m fine, Daddy, really.” Julia tried to hold still as Steven squinted at her head. “That’s why we wear helmets.” They were out in the parking lot, out of the noise, which was a mercy. Her head was aching.

“All the same, I’d like to make sure you get home. Where’s your car?”

She made a face. “Busted. I walked. It’s only a half a mile if you cut through the woods.”

Steven looked a little pained. “Do you often walk a half mile through the woods after bouts?”

“No, Dad, I get a ride.” Usually. “I know you’d kill me if I was murdered.”

His face cracked a smile. “I would, too. I’ll drive you back, how about that?”

“That’d be nice. Thanks, Daddy.”

He walked her over to his truck. “Need a boost up?”

“I’ve got it.”

They hopped into the rattly old pickup. Steven pulled out of the parking lot.

“How long’s your car been busted?”

“A week or two. My friend Sloane is fixing it, it’s no big deal. It’s just taking a while.”

“You getting to school on time and everything still?”

“Yes, Dad. Don’t you worry about me.”

Steven couldn’t help it. “Somebody ought to get that ref a pair of glasses,” he muttered.

“Somebody ought to get you a pair of glasses,” she said back. “Where are they, by the way?”

“I can see just fine without them.”

“Then why’d I get you that special welding visor that fits over?” she teased.

He hid a smile. “This is why I can’t come to these things.”

“I’m glad you came today. I’m just sorry it was to see me play for only half the bout.”

“You’re very good, you know. Do they have Olympics for this stuff?”

“I’m not that good.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

Julia leaned her head against his shoulder. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.”
What's Up Doc?

Chapter by miceenscene

The waiting room was empty save for the receptionist and Lucretia. She flipped the pamphlet that she’d been glazing over to the back side. ‘So long as we live, they too shall live on inside us,’ she read, and rolled her eyes. *Yeah, okay then.*

“Lucretia?” the large dark wood door opened and a short man stepped out. She put the pamphlet down and smiled at her therapist, Dr. Davenport. “You ready?”

She nodded, and picked up her purse before following him back into his office.

“Thank you for being willing to reschedule,” he said, walking over to his desk.

“It’s no trouble,” she assured. Her footsteps were muffled in the thick carpet. “Your assistant mentioned some sort of conference?” She sank down in between two cushions on the couch, folding her hands on her lap.

Dr. Davenport chuckled. “Yes, their keynote speaker had to cancel last minute, and the organizer is an old friend of mine. So I helped her out.”

He picked up the notepad he always used, and pulled up the chair on the other side of the coffee table.

“Actually, I was able to go to some very interesting seminars. So it was a productive weekend.” He sat down in the chair, and jotted the date quickly at the top of the page. “So how have you been?” He looked earnestly at her.

“Fine, you know, life as usual. Derby, work, dog, sleep. That sort of thing.”

“And how is Miyagi these days?”

Lucretia smiled. “He’s good. He got out of the yard last week, still haven’t figured out how he managed that. Found him a couple hours later, just having a grand time on a porch with some old ladies. They made me sit down and have a lemonade with them before I could take Miyagi back home.”

Dr. Davenport smiled. “And the team? Are you whipping them into shape?”

She nodded. “We didn’t get any new players, so we’ve been able to really focus on honing skills and techniques. They’re really doing a good job.” She shrugged. “We might have a real chance at the championship this season.”

“When was the last time the B.o.B. won?”

Lucretia blew out a breath. “We won a couple back when I was still playing, but since then it’s been… kind of a dry spell.”

“Does that frustrate you?” he asked. Lucretia’s mouth twitched to the side and she thought about it for a moment.

“No, it’s still rewarding even when we don’t win. For me, derby’s always been about more than just winning.”
“Winning would still be nice though,” he replied, a slight smile on his lips. Lucretia chuckled and nodded.

“Yeah, winning would be nice…” She frowned a little and sighed. “…playing again would be nice too.”

“How is your knee doing?”

“Not any more trouble than it usually is.” She looked down and frowned deeper. “...I went to go see a specialist again last week...”

“And what’d they say?”

She sighed, and shook her head. “Same thing as they said five years ago… it’s too far gone. Replacement surgery is the only option.”

“And you don’t want the surgery?”

“No.” She looked up at him and shook her head quickly. “I’d-I’d take the surgery in a heartbeat. It’s just I started my current job with the bum knee… and insurance is claiming it’s a pre-existing condition. It’s ridiculous.”

“They won’t cover it?”

She shook her head. “And I’ll never be able afford it otherwise.”

“Physical therapy won’t work either?”

“Wouldn’t get me back up to the level where I could join the team again…”

Dr. Davenport was quiet for a moment. “That’s a frustrating situation to be in,” he said.

Lucretia let out a long breath. “It’s my own damn fault--sorry.”

Davenport waved a few fingers. “It’s fine, continue. Why do you think it’s your fault?”

“Well, because it is. I came back too fast after the first injury. Blew it out all over again...” She pulled over a pillow and put it on her lap, smoothing out the fringed edge. “If I’d known then…” She shook her head. “Just add it to the pile of poor life decisions, I suppose.”

“Do you feel you’ve made many of those?” he asked, looking up from his notepad.

She chuckled without smiling. “I’m basically limping evidence of poor life choices.” She twisted the pillow’s fringe around a finger. “I mean, on the surface, I like my life. I do. I have good friends, an okay job, a fun hobby. ...Just... I wonder if I couldn’t have liked it more if I’d taken a few other turns... if just a few things ended differently.”

Dr. Davenport nodded slowly. “It’s perfectly normal to wonder what might have been, but it becomes a problem if you end up spending too much time wondering.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know.” She heaved a sigh. “It’s just hard not to with everything that’s happened.”

Dr. Davenport regarded her for a moment. “You know, I think I might have something to help with that.” He stood up from his chair and went back to the desk. “One of the seminars I went to was about coping methods.” He opened up a drawer and pulled out a canvas totebag. “The doctor giving
the talk was saying that her patients had found a good deal of success in—ah.” He rifled around in the bag, and then pulled out a black leather book. “Journaling.” He held the book up and headed back to his seat.

“Like a diary?”

He nodded and sat down, holding the book out to Lucretia. “Precisely.”

She took the journal, and flipped through the empty pages. The scents of leather and paper drifted upwards.

“Really, any method of self-reflection is helpful when dealing with loss. She was specifically a grief counselor, but that’s not too far off-base for you.”

Lucretia nodded. “Yeah, makes sense.” She looked back up to Dr. Davenport. “So you want me to keep a diary?”

“If you want to.”

“What should I write in it?” she frowned at it.

“Could be a daily record, or important events or memories from the past. Really it’s what you want to make of it. If it ends up not being for you, we can find something else. But I think this might help you. Give you a chance to look over everything and weigh it out.”

She looked at him. “Will you read it?”

He shook his head. “Only if you want me to.”

Lucretia slowly nodded, and ran a hand over the cover.

“Yeah, okay. I think I can do that.”
“Good work today, kids. It’s the end of class.”

The kiddos lined up and bowed. “Thank you, Master Hurley,” they chorused.

“Thank you. You’re dismissed.”

The class swarmed out of the class to meet their parents. As usual, little Kaitlyn stayed a little while after putting on her shoes. She pulled a video game thing out of her backpack and sat down in the waiting area.

Hurley kept half an eye on her while she made some notes for class. Some of these kids were ready to advance. She’d have to make an announcement for an advancement ceremony... order some new belts...

The door opened. “Hi, Daddy,” Kaitlyn said. Hurley looked up.

“Hi, Pumpkin. Evening, Master Hurley.” Captain Bain waved from the doorway. “Ready to go?”

“Yep,” said Kaitlyn, putting her game back into her backpack.

“Oh, uh, Captain Bain?” Hurley hopped out from behind the desk. “I was just wondering. How long does it usually take to hear back about training program applications?”

He frowned. “You haven’t heard back yet?”

“No, sir.”

“How long has it been since you turned it in?” he asked.

Hurley did a mental count. “Two months? And a week?”

“You should have heard back within six weeks.”

She scowled. “I see.”

“Here. Uh.” He pulled a small notebook out of his pocket. “You have a pen?”

Hurley snatched one off the desk and handed it to him. He wrote something down.

“This is the officer in charge of the desk down at the station. Tell him I sent you. I’ll let him know you’re coming. Can you spell your last name?”


Captain Bain looked up. “Maybe you should just tell him when you get there.”

“Excuse me?”

Hurley could just see over the tall front desk of the station. A soft sort of guy was sitting behind the desk. He spent a few seconds looking straight ahead before looking down. “Oh, hello.”
“Hi. I’m here to check on the status of a training application?”

He snapped his fingers. “Yes, right, the captain said someone would be coming. What’s your last name?”

“It might be easier if I write it down. Starts with an O-apostrophe-S, though, if you want to start looking?”

“Right. When did you send it in?”

“Nine weeks ago.”

The man slid a piece of paper and a pen over to her and swiveled his chair to open the drawer of a file cabinet. “Oh apostrophe ess. O’Shea?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm.” He closed one door and opened another, flipping through the paper inside. “O’Sullivan?”

“Here.” Hurley stood on her toes and held out the paper.

He looked at the paper and froze. “Uhh... hang on. Redmond?” he called over one shoulder.

“Yeah?” came a voice from the hall behind the desk.

“Can you get me an application from the...other file?”

“Sure, whose?”

The guy looked at Hurley. She said, “Oh shawn essee.”

“O’Shaghennessy?” repeated the man.

“Oh, is that how you say that? Sure thing, Luca.”

The guy looked unaccountably nervous while they waited. Another man, one who looked very similar but bearded and fatter, appeared with a familiar sheet of paper. “God, this is one of my favorites.”

“Redmond...” said Luca.

“I mean, they’ve got to be joking, right? The height and the name--”

“Red mond.”

“A prime example for the joke file.”

“REDMOND.”

“What, do they think we’re going to hire a--”

“A what?” asked Hurley sharply.

Redmond noticed her now. She glared at him. He floundered. “You know…”

“Say it,” she spat.
He gulped. “A leprechaun.”

What Hurley really wanted, more than anything in the world, was to fly screaming over the desk at this bitch. She also wanted to work here, though. Assault charges would probably make that difficult. What did Sloane always say? Quiet was scarier than loud. She breathed in and out slowly, through her nose.

“Does the Faerun Police Department make a habit of straight up ignoring applications to their training program?” she said, as calmly as she could manage.

“Listen, obviously there has been a big misunderstanding,” said Luca. “We’d like to apologize. It’s just...you know, it sounded kind of ridiculous.”

“Does it?” she said. “Does it really?”

“Now see here, ma’am--” Redmond began.

She pushed herself up taller, legs dangling off the floor. “No, you see here. I’d really really hate for Captain Bain to hear about this--what did you call it? A joke file? Now I’d like to be treated as a regular applicant, if you don’t mind!”

Luca held up his hands. “I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“What?!”

“Our training program only runs twice a year,” he said. “You can always apply at the academy in Neverwinter if--”

Hurley let herself thump to the ground. “I already have. Thanks for that.”

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry--”

“You’re gonna be! Where’s the captain?”

Redmond leaned back. “I don’t think we need to bother the captain.”

“Bother me about what?” Captain Captain Bain appeared from the hall and handed Luca a file. “Oh, hello, Hurley.”

“Hi, Captain,” said Hurley, talking faster. “Did you know your officers sometimes treat applications like jokes and put them in a joke file without processing them?”

Captain Bain narrowed his eyes and turned to Luca and Redmond. “Is this true?”

“Sir--” Redmond began.

“Yes,” said Luca. Redmond shot him a betrayed look.

“I’ll speak to you about this joke file in a moment. At length.” Both men flinched. Captain Bain turned to Hurley. “You have every right to be angry. Trust me, I’m angry too. But I found out this morning that the training program is two weeks in, and we can’t admit you now even if you qualify. So what would you like me to do?”

Give me five minutes alone in a room with these yahoos, she thought, but what she said was, “When I reapply in six months, I don’t want to pay the fee.”
“That’s reasonable. Luca, make it happen.”

“Yes sir,” groaned Luca.

“I’ll see you both in my office. Now.”

“But sir, she’s a--” Redmond attempted, but Captain Bain held up a hand.

“There is no minimum height requirement. And that woman could kick your ass. Now get to my office. Good day, Master Hurley.” He turned down the back hall.

Redmond punched Luca in the arm. “You idiot.”

“Why am I the idiot?”

Hurley turned on her heel and left.

“A leprechaun, Sloane! A leprechaun!”

Hurley laid with her head in Sloane’s lap on her couch. Sloane was running her fingers through Hurley’s hair. Sloane had just showered, so she smelled like that peppermint essential oil she used.


“They used to call me a leprechaun in school,” growled Hurley.

“So you kicked their asses.”

“No, this was pre-judo. I just yelled a lot. Didn’t stop them.”

“I would have kicked their asses,” said Sloane.

“You couldn’t kick a fly’s ass, you beautiful flower.”

“You have a fly’s ass.”

“You have a fly ass.”

Sloane snorted. “Thanks, Curly Hurley.”

“You’re welcome, my long, lean love machine.”

Sloane kissed her, and Hurley tasted peppermint. She sighed, let Sloane’s fingers pull the tension out of her neck for a minute or two.

“Do you think they’re right?” said Hurley morosely, after a while. “Do you think I’ll ever be a cop?”

“If you aren’t, we’ll have to become famous street racers.”

Hurley smiled, just a little. “Still illegal, babe. Carey said don’t do crime.”

“She should be a spokesperson for like, public service announcements.”

Hurley took on a raspy sort of voice. “Hey, kids. This is Carey Fangbattle saying, ‘Don’t do
Sloane laughed and mimicked the voice. “Hey, kids, this is Tom Carey Brokaw Fangbattle.”

Hurley cackled.

The egg timer in the kitchenette dinged. Hurley jumped up. “Oh good!” She snatched the hotpads off the counter and pulled the pan of roast potatoes out of the oven. “These are gonna be so good.”

“Thanks for skipping the chicken, babe.” Sloane pulled a couple of plates out of a cupboard.

“I couldn’t eat chicken in front of a vegetarian. Especially not my favorite vegetarian.” Hurley put the pan on the counter and shut the oven door. “If I’m honest I really like the potatoes better.”

“You are painfully Irish.”

Hurley shot her a dark look.
Kravitz took a deep breath and stared out his windshield. He’d been sitting in his parked car for the better part of a half hour, working up the nerve to leave it. In his mind, he ran over what he wanted to say once again. Preparation always helped him feel more calm and collected, though his fingers still tapped erratically on the steering wheel. He knew that all the preparation in the world wouldn’t make what he wanted to say any easier. But it had to be said. They could not continue like this any longer.

The light above Taako’s yellow front door seemed brighter in the dark and rain. He should just go for it. If he sat in the car any longer he was in danger of never leaving it. Thunder clapped and the street momentarily was bright as day. Taking the plunge, he finally opened the car door.

Immediately, he was soaking wet. He jogged across the street and stepped onto the stoop. *Here goes nothing*, he thought and raised a hand to knock on the door, but it suddenly opened. Taako was standing there in a yellow rain jacket, a look of surprise on his fine features.

“I was just coming out to meet you,” Taako said.

“Taako, there’s something I have to tell you,” Kravitz began hesitantly.

“Yeah, me too.”

“I should go first.” Kravitz stepped a little forward, put Taako stopped him with a hand to his chest.

“No, let me.” Taako moved his hand and looked at the ground. “I think I’m finally ready to tell you about my past. I was--”

“Wait. Don’t. I have to tell you I’m….” His stomach twisted into a million knots. “I think that you shouldn’t be one of my documentary subjects anymore.” The words fell out of him and splashed in the puddle on the stoop.

Taako took a half-step back and blinked a few times. “Why? Was it something I said?”

“No! No, of course not. It’s not you, it’s literally me. It’s just...” Kravitz paused; his heart felt like it was beating a million miles a minute. But it was now or never. “The way that I feel about you and think about you is not a respectable way for a professional documentarian to be.”

Taako looked away and appeared to be processing through this information.

“And I don’t want,” Kravitz continued, rubbing the back of his neck, “for the documenting process to make you open parts of yourself to me that you wouldn’t have otherwise. That doesn’t
seem fair or right, especially when I feel this way about you.”

Taako looked back to Kravitz’s face, and Kravitz couldn’t read his expression. The hovering panic began to set in full bore. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, y-you would have made an amazing subject. But you turned out to be such an--” Kravitz gesticulated wildly with his hand, his speech speeding up as he kept going, “An interesting person that I just kept thinking about you and I wanted to talk to you and spend time with you. And I’m a selfish enough person that I would like to be more to you than just… what we are… right now… if you’ll have me.”

Kravitz bit his tongue to keep himself from talking anymore. Taako’s expression was still unfathomable. As the silent seconds ticked by, it began to feel like the floor was dropping out from under him.

Until Taako finally said, “Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one who feels this way.”

Kravitz’s eyebrows raised sky high, and a dopey smile spread across his face. “Really?”

Taako smiled too. “Of course. I liked you from the moment I saw you.”

“I think I did too… I was just too stupid to realize it,” Kravitz said. Taako laughed a little and Kravitz felt like he could float away. “Um… I would very much like to kiss you now. If I may.”

Taako stepped out onto the stoop, and smoothed the lapels of Kravitz’s wet suit coat.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He grabbed the lapels and pulled Kravitz down for an earth-shattering kiss.

The storm had finally ceased, but gentle rain still pattered against the windows of Taako’s loft. Taako’s eyes were open, staring at the ceiling as he laid in bed. He could never sleep when it was raining, not for many years now. Somewhere in his costume stores a mantel clock that he could never find chimed 2 am. He turned to see the dark slopes of Kravitz’s back, slowly rising and falling with each breath as he slept on his side next to Taako. Kravitz had pulled his dreads into a topknot, exposing the back of his neck. Taako rolled over and placed a kiss at the nape, draping an arm across Kravitz’s middle.

“Are you awake?” Taako asked, curling up behind him. “I can’t sleep.” Kravitz let out a half-conscious mumble, but stretched and put his hand over Taako’s, their fingers intertwining.

“...not usually the little spoon.” he mumbled, his voice still groggy and deep.

“Everyone likes being the little spoon, makes you feel safe.”

Kravitz hmm’d. Taako liked the way he could feel his voice reverberating solidly in his chest. He rested his cheek against the back of Kravitz’s shoulder.

He took a deep breath. “I know that you don’t want me to be part of your documentary because you felt like it wasn’t fair to me, or it was manipulative… but you once said that you share people’s stories with audiences that wouldn’t hear them otherwise. And I think… I don’t know… maybe my story might help some people…”

“You’re shaking,” Kravitz replied. He turned over towards Taako, but his face was covered in shadow. Taako looked down anyway, gripping his hands together to hide the tremors.
“Taako.” Kravitz put a hand on his shoulder. “If you’re not ready, you don’t have to tell me or anyone. That’s okay.”

“I am though. And I want you to know this before we go any further, but I…” He took a quivering breath. “I haven’t told anyone this before.”

“What about the derby team?”

“No… not yet. I will someday but it’s… hard.” He sat up in bed, cross-legged, and shook his hands out. Kravitz sat up across from him, cautiously searching his face. Taako took a shuddering breath, and tried to pick a place to start. Then Kravitz reached out and took his hands.

“If you really want to do this now, that’s fine. I’m here,” he said calmly. Taako nodded.

“I mean, you may have already put two and two together,” Taako began, that clipped tone returning to his voice. “I told you at the pottery shop that I did derby because if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have a family.” He swallowed hard, “Uh, I wasn’t… ah, exaggerating. Outside of derby, I don’t have one anymore. Mine… I was kicked out,” he finished in a hoarse whisper, gripping Kravitz’s hands for dear life. Kravitz didn’t say anything for several minutes, just let Taako get a hold of himself again.

“How long ago?” he asked quietly.

“I was 17.”

“Whoa,” Kravitz breathed.

Taako continued, “A kid in my class outed me to my parents and they said I could either leave or, uh, get… therapy. So I left.”

“Is that when you were at the shelter?”

“I found the center a couple months later, yeah,” he nodded. Kravitz’s head tilted to the side.

“Where’d you live in between then?”

Taako shrugged his shoulders, trying to appear casual. “Nowhere.”

“Really? Your friends, they just let you be—” An indignant tone started creeping into his voice.

“Kravitz, it was ‘87. You remember how scared everyone was back then.”

Kravitz was quieted and he nodded, rubbing his thumbs over the backs of Taako’s hands. “That doesn’t make it okay.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Taako said. He was trying to maintain that casual exterior, but it was slipping quickly. “New Elfington had a lot of parks with some nice trees, and I found a gym that I could keep some things in a locker at. It was only really bad when it would rain at night…”

“Anyway, so the shelter got me off the streets, and I was able to get my G.E.D. I met other people like me… learned that even in my situation I was one of the lucky ones. At least I wasn’t…” Taako couldn’t even bring himself to say the word. Faces that he’d never forget danced in the back of his mind. He pressed on. “But in the end derby is what really saved me.” He looked out the rain-splattered window, but Kravitz watched Taako’s face.

“Why?”
Taako’s gaze drifted to his lap. “Because… it’s hard to want to keep going if your only goal in life is just survival.” He gnawed on his bottom lip. “Derby gave me something to aim for… even if it took me another six years before I was in a place to actually join.” He nodded a little and finally looked back to Kravitz. “And those wild girls have become my family in the years since.

“So, uh… I want my story told because,” he sighed, “I don’t know, when I was younger if I could have seen that someone else could be in my situation but somehow make it out or through it, ’cause it really feels like so few of us did… that would have been good.”

Kravitz slowly nodded and squeezed his hands. “May I ask a question?”

Taako nodded.

“Have you talked to your parents since then?”

Taako shook his head. “I haven’t even seen my parents or talked to my sister since that night.”

Kravitz was quiet and Taako looked at him for a moment. “You have another question, don’t you?”

“Just… is there a specific reason you haven’t told anyone before me?”

Taako bit the corner of his mouth and looked down. “I guess I’m just worried that if I tell anyone, they won’t want to be with me anymore. It’s much more appealing to be friends with Taako the Glamazon than Taako the sad gay kid whose own parents didn’t want him.” He brushed at his eye with the back of his hand. “I know it’s irrational and stupid but… that’s why.”

Kravitz was quiet for a moment, then whispered. “You are so much more than either of those things. You’ve always been fascinating to me but now you’re inspiring too. I just…” he shook his head. “Taako. You are incredible.”

Taako smiled.

“Are you okay?” Kravitz asked. Taako nodded.

“Yeah, I am now.”

“You sure there’s not more to your story? Saving drowning babies from rivers? Curing cancer?” Kravitz smiled as Taako laughed.

“Well, not yet.”

They sat for a moment, still holding hands. “Can I kiss you?” Kravitz asked.

“You know you don’t have to ask every time,” he drawled, leaning forward. Kravitz let go of Taako’s hands to cup his jaw.

“Yeah, but I kinda like asking.” He leaned forward to press a kiss to one cheek and then the other.

“I kinda like you ask--” he was cut off when Kravitz’s lips met his.
“Should we have gotten him those adjustable ones? He’ll grow out of these in a year.” Carey wondered out loud as Julia and Killian wrapped the box in wrapping paper covered in dogs wearing bow ties. She was walking around the locker room, giving each team member a conical party hat and noisemakers.

“Those things are nothing but plastic death traps covered in Disney branding,” Hurley said from her spot on the bench as she swung her legs back and forth, two party hats on her head. It gave her a sort of goat-like look.

“And he’ll like that these look just like ours,” Taako assured her, snapping the elastic band of the hat under his chin.

“Let’s hustle, ladies-and-Taako. I know we have a special occasion, but we’re still going to get in a full practice,” Lucretia warned as she left the locker room.

“Okay, everyone ready?” Julia asked, the present tucked under her arm. They all nodded back and they snuck out of the locker room, the only sound the whirring of their skates.

It was mid-week practice, so there were just a few skaters over on the flat rink. And there was only one person in the stands, Angus McDonald. He was in the very first row with his nose was buried into some children’s fantasy novel so he didn’t notice as the entirety of the team snuck up behind him.

Killian held up her fingers. 3, 2, 1--

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ANGUS!!!!” They all cried and blew the noisemakers. Angus’s book flew out of his hands to the floor, and his surprise immediately turned to delight.

“Oh, wow! You remembered??” he said, his eyes all lit up. Carey skated around and snapped a party hat on his head.

“Of course, we did, little man. How could we forget the birthday of our favorite fan?” Taako said, sliding along the bleachers to sit one row behind him.

“Well, you have a lot of fans.”

“Ah, but you’re our favorite,” Sloane said, sitting beside Taako, smiling fondly at Angus.

“We all chipped in and got you a present. We’re pretty sure they’ll fit,” Julia said, setting down the box on Angus’ lap. He just looked at it for a moment, his hand running over the colorful paper.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

He looked up and snapped out of his reverie. “Oh right!” The colorful paper quickly disappeared and Angus lifted the lid off the box, and he stared open mouthed at the contents inside. Even with each team member chipping in just $10, the skates they got were practically top of the line. They looked exactly like the ones the team wore, black leather boot and bright blue laces. He picked one up and spun one of the wheels, staring at it in awe.
“Oh, wow,” he said in a hushed tone. “Thank you so much! I love them!” He smiled so big it seemed like his face might burst.

“Here, here, take off your shoes and we’ll help you lace ‘em up,” Julia said, taking the box from him and sitting on the bench. Angus quickly threw off a worn tennis shoe and then the other. Julia made a mental note to get some new socks for the poor boy as both of his big toes were sticking out of large holes.

“Happy Birthday, Angus,” Lucretia said, skating to the edge of the track. “We’re very proud of you, but I’m afraid I have to take my team back. Let’s go!”

Julia quickly helped him tie one skate and then the other as the rest of the team started practice. She pulled him to his feet.

“Now, we don’t have outdoor wheels on those yet, so be sure to just use them here in the rink.”

“Yes, ma’am!” He hopped up and down with excitement and quickly lost his footing, he staggered around and fell back into his seat on the bleacher. Julia smiled.

“Hey, you’re already doing better than when I started,” she said, and she skated away. Angus took a deep breath and stood up slowly this time. His feet rolled back and forth, but managed to grip his way along the bleachers till he reached the flat rink where a poorly attended public skate was happening.

He spent the entirety of the practice making very slow wobbly loops around the rink. More than once he fell on his front, his rear, his side. One time he ran into the wall. But it was without any real injury, and it did not deter his spirit. Eventually he was the only skater left. The team came to stand at the edge of the rink once their practice was done. Angus concentrated carefully to keep from falling over in front of them. He wanted to make them proud.

“You’re doin’ great, buddy!”

“Make sure to keep low, it’s easier to balance.”

“Remember to fall small!”

“Block with your butt!”

He waved excitedly at them and lost his balance, flailing around a little bit before remembering to squat down. And he remained upright. The group cheered for him and he got so excited that he jumped back to standing and fell over anyway.

“Keep at it, my dude!”

“Hey, Angus, we’re gonna change, and then we’ll drive you home, kay?” Killian called across the rink.

“Okay!” Angus said, picking himself up off the floor and starting back. The team disappeared into their locker room. Angus hoped that he could make it around a couple of more times before he’d have to stop. As he made it to the back corner, the back door to the rink opened.

“Magnus, sir! Look what the team got me for my birthday!!” Magnus smiled and walked up to the edge.

“Look at those hot rods! You’re a regular derby pro in those.” He let out a whistle. Angus
laughed and came to an unsteady stop.

“T’ve been practicing the whole practice, and I’m getting much better.”

“Hey, that’s all it takes. Practice, practice, practice...and more practice.”

“Could you give me some pointers? If you’re not too busy, I mean.”

“I’ll do you one better.”

Julia zipped up her skate bag and threw her hair up into a ponytail. It would probably need to be washed before tomorrow. Carey and Killian were going over some plays with Lucretia, so for the first time in a long time she wasn’t the last one out of the locker room. She waved to the three of them as she left, hoisting her bag over her shoulder. The lights over the banked track had been turned off, but the lights over the flat rink were still on.

Julia smiled as she saw Angus still going around the rink, though he wasn’t alone. She recognized Magnus skating along next to him, sometimes coming around in front to skate backwards, always within arm’s reach. Even in just the fifteen minutes she had been in the locker room, Angus’ form had improved, as had his speed.

She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but whatever pep talk Magnus was giving, it seemed to be working. She wandered a little closer and leaned against the half-wall of the rink.

“Now you can’t let the fear of getting hurt stop you from trying,” Magnus said, skating along in front of Angus. “You gotta trust your gear to protect you, and you gotta trust yourself.” Angus skated a little faster, but leaned too far forward and started to fall. But Magnus was right there to catch him. “Hup, oh!” He set Angus back upright and tickled his ribs. “Though we should get you some pads, gotta protect those joints if you’re going to be a pro-skater.”

Julia smiled as she watched the two of them, a warm feeling growing in her chest. Magnus was such a good guy with Angus, and really with everyone. Loyal, and friendly, yet upright and honest, very dependable and pretty handsome too-

She stopped smiling and looked away.

Oh, no.

“Miss Julia! Look! Magnus helped me go faster!” Angus called as he passed by her corner.

“Great form, hun.”

Magnus came up and leaned against the wall next to her. Her breathing became shallow and all the nerves in the arm closest to him felt sparkly. They just watched him make his way down the length for a minute.

“It’s really nice of you,” Julia began. Magnus turned to look at her. “To teach him, I mean.”

Magnus smiled at her. That warm feeling from earlier grew a little bigger, dammit. “He’s a good kid. Though I don’t think we’ll ever be able to get him out of those skates ever again.”

Julia laughed, a little too loudly. And she immediately looked away.

“I gotta go.” She picked up her skate bag and quickly turned for the door, silently berating herself
as she left.

Magnus watched her go. He hoped that she hadn’t noticed how just standing near her had given him goosebumps.
Julia checked her watch again. She was definitely late now. For as small as the downtown was, one would think that parking wouldn’t be much of a problem. But she had still ended up circling around twice before finding a spot that was three blocks away from the coffeeshop. She jogged the last couple of steps and held the door open as a mom pushing a stroller left the shop.

“Bye-bye!” the toddler waved from his perch. Julia smiled and waved back before going into Pour Joe’s.

The place was fairly crowded for a Tuesday afternoon, but it was always popular. Tantalizing scents of coffee and cinnamon wafted around, accompanied with the hiss of the espresso machine. The brick and plaster walls were covered with sharpie drawings and quotes.

Taako waved from one of the two seater booths along the side wall. Julia hurried over and dropped her purse into the seat before sitting down herself.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she sighed, dropping her elbows on the table and running her hands through her hair. “Parking was a nightmare.”

“It’s fine. I already ordered for you.”

“Ooh, did you get--”


“I can be kinda predictable, huh?”

“Nah, I just know you.”

The barista appeared with two large cups and saucers. “Mocha latte for Julia, an americano for Taako,” She set the two cups down, and then grabbed a dozen sugar packets from her apron pocket. “And sugar for Taako. Can I get you guys anything else?”

Julia shook her head.

“I think we’re good, Rachel, thanks.” Taako said. “Hey, how’s your mom?”

“She’s feeling much better.” Rachel put her hands in her apron pocket. “Oh! She wanted me to thank you for the cupcakes. She said the orange creamsicle one was her favorite.”

Taako grinned. “Glad to hear.” Rachel nodded and returned to the counter.

Julia picked up her mug and took a sip, immediately burning her tongue. “You know Rachel’s mom?”

Taako tore open five sugar packets and delicately stirred them into his coffee. “Rachel’s mom,” he said in a conspiratorily low whisper. “Owns half of downtown. If I ever want to own my own bakery here, I gotta be on her good side.”

“So you’re bribing her with cupcakes?”
“I’m not a heartless monster.” He took a sip of coffee, frowned and tore open three more sugar packets. “I also care that she had the flu last week…and I care that she sees how delicious my baking is.”

“You sly fox,” Julia said, shaking her head. She took a tentative sip, still hot but manageable now.

“Anyway, my business dealings is not why I called a meeting of The Brain Trust.” Taako put his hands flat on the table. “I have news.”

Julia’s eyebrows raised. “Do tell,” she said in a faux English accent.

“You know Kravitz.”

Julia’s eyes narrowed as she mentally rooted around. “That’s…the documentary guy, right? He wanted you to be one of his main subjects.”

“Yes, correct. Full marks. And what else?”

“Gah, no one told me there was going to be a pop quiz today.” She took another sip. “Ummm…you hung out at the pottery shop, he came and took pictures at the bakery, you made him pasta, and…oh oh,” Julia snapped her fingers. “Last week you saw that Heath Ledger movie together.”

“10 Things I Hate About You, yes, which you should see. I think you’d like it a lot.” Julia pumped her fist. Taako smiled at her. “Alright, so you are completely caught up with everything…except…”

“Except?” she leaned in.

“He came by a couple nights ago and…we kissed.”

Julia’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“And he spent the night,” Taako gushed.

“What?! I thought he was keeping things super professional.”

“I mean, he was but I kind of wondered…? But I wasn’t sure and I didn’t want to say anything ’cause I was afraid I’d jinx it.”

“So are you two dating now?”

Taako took a sip of his coffee-flavored sugar solution and shrugged. “We haven’t officially said so. But he said he wants to take me to dinner tomorrow, soo…” he smiled.

“Oh my god, Taako. That’s awesome. Where’re you going?”

“27 Springs.”

Julia made an impressed face to echo Taako’s. “Wow. Fan-cyy!”

“Right? I keep forgetting that he’s not completely broke like the rest of us.”

“He can like actually wine and dine you.”

“He can support me in a manner to which I am not accustomed but definitely could become so.”
They both laughed and sighed. Julia watched an unconscious smile slip across Taako’s face as he swirled his cup.

“You must really like this guy,” she commented, taking a long sip.

“Is it that obvious?”

Julia shook her head. “No. I just know you,” she said, repeating Taako’s tone from before. Taako smiled and nodded.

“I do, Jules. I really do.” He sighed. “I honestly like him so much I’m scared I’m gonna mess it up somehow.”

Julia shook her head. “Not possible. As long as you’re honest with each other, be open and communicate about what you’re feeling and what you want.”

“Well, that’s easier said than done.”

“True. But even if it doesn’t work out, he obviously didn’t understand what a good thing he had with you. And you say the word, and I will come after him with a baseball bat.”

Taako chuckled. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Julia finished off the last of her latte, and set the cup back down with a clink.

“So what about you?”

“What about me?” Julia replied. Taako leveled her a look.

“The Brain Trust is not a one-way street, The Brain Trust goes both ways.”

Julia tilted her head. “Do you know what a Brain Trust is?”

“I heard it on the news and it sounded cool. Now stop avoiding the question, Senator Waxman. How’s Magnus?”

“He’s fine, I guess. I don’t really know because we’re friends. Just friends.”

“Friends, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Totally platonic.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So you’re telling me that seeing six feet of hunky Mexican muscle tutoring Angus at the rink did nothing to stir up a lil somethin-somethin deep inside?”

Julia tried to keep a dead-pan stare locked on Taako, but she had to drop her gaze. “Shit.”

Taako rapped his knuckles on the table. “Ha! I knew it.”

“Okay, but we are just friends! Just because I might, I don’t know...like him as something a little more, doesn’t make us any more than just friends.”

“For now.”
Julia rolled her eyes. “Oh, boy. This was a mistake.”

Taako chuckled and rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything to him. It will be fa-ar too much fun to just watch this play out on its own.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen.”

Taako shook his head. “Nah, girl, I have a feeling.”

“Uh-huh.” Julia said, sounding very unconvinced. “Wedding coordinator right?”

“Yes. Right now, I’m thinking a nice navy with lemon yellow and coral accents.”

Julia thought about that for a second. “I don’t actually hate that.”
Kim's Cars

Chapter by Chemicallywrit

Chapter Notes

Some threats of violence in this chapter. Take care. <3

Sloane stared at the invoice. Hell yes. Finally, proof.

She yanked it off her desk and stormed out of her office. “Marvey!”

Marvey rolled out from under a ‘89 Subaru Legacy. “What?”

“Come here.” It was a power move, and she knew it, but she wanted everyone to see this.

Marvey stood up, took his sweet time getting there. Sloane stayed stone-faced. She held out the invoice. “What’s this?”

“An invoice, boss,” he said.

“You weren’t finished with that sentence,” she said. “You mean to say that it’s an invoice on which you overcharged someone for a new transmission. In fact, you charged them double, Marvey.”

He shrugged. He had a smug little smile on his face, which was absolutely infuriating, but Sloane knew that the moment she showed how angry she was was the moment she lost, and now the other mechanics were watching. “That’s just good business, boss.”

“Huh. Strange. I remember saying something about this kind of ‘business.’ Do you remember what that was, Marvey?”

“Can’t say that I do.” His smile was starting to fall.

“I believe it was something to the effect of, if you pull this shit again, you’re fired.” She folded the invoice neatly and put it in the pocket of her overalls. “Guess what, Marvey? You’re fired.”

He went from uncertainty to rage in less than a second. “You can’t fire me!” he barked.

Sloane raised her eyebrows. “Oh. I can’t?” She snapped her fingers at another mechanic. “Little Jerry. What does it say on the sign out front?”

“Kim’s Cars, boss,” yelped Little Jerry.

“Oh does it? And Little Jerry, what’s my name?”

“Sloane Kim?” he said.

Sloane smiled. “Huh. Look at that. I can fire you.” She dropped her smile. “Now get your ass out of here.”

Marvey snarled, looked like he was ready to punch her. Sloane didn’t even blink. He growled and
stormed out.

“You shouldn’t have done that, boss,” said Little Jerry. “Marvey’s into some bad stuff.”

Sloane shot him a murderous look. “Not badder than me.”

She stalked back into her office, closed the door behind her carefully, and exhaled, resting her head against the door. She hated that Dragon Lady shit. Why couldn’t they just do their jobs?

She sat down at her desk and opened a drawer, fishing around until she found a small brown bottle labeled “Lavender Oil.” She unscrewed the cap and took a deep breath.

“Relax,” she whispered to herself on the exhale. “It’s going to be okay.”

Sloane wished she could put some on her wrists, but she was afraid the mechanics would smell it and figure out she’d been scared. She put the cap back on, took a couple more deep breaths, and left her office again.

The Subaru needed her attention, which was honestly a bit of a relief. She’d been doing the books all day. Time to get some real work done.

“Excuse me?” A woman had wandered into the garage, clutching her purse in both hands. “I’m um, looking for Kimberly?”

Sloane stopped herself from rolling her eyes. “I think you mean me. I’m Sloane Kim.”

Business continued.

Sloane slid out from under the Subaru and wiped her forehead with a rag. Done. And in record time, too. The other mechanics had long since gone home, but she was feeling good about the repair and wanted to finish it. It was only...oh, two hours after closing. Oh well.

She put her tools away, grabbed her purse and jacket from her office, and locked that door, and then the garage doors. She’d walked to work this morning. Better for the environment, she’d thought. Now, though, it was dark, and she was regretting it. Only a mile to her apartment, she told herself. Let’s go.

The street was quiet. It was an industrial part of town, so nothing was open. No people, except a guy leaning against the office building across the street, smoking a cigarette. Sloane ignored him and started walking.

She had to pass through the three blocks that were downtown to get home. Sometimes she stopped at Sazed’s Bakery to buy a slice of carrot cake and chat with Taako, but at this point it’d be closed. Shame, that, Taako would have loved the story of her firing Marvey.

The echo of footsteps sent a shiver up her spine. Sloane sneaked a glance; the guy across the street was keeping pace with her.

Probably nothing, she told herself, but she tightened her fists anyway. What had Hurley taught her? Thumbs outside the fist, not sticking out past her knuckles. Use your knees and elbows. Use your teeth. Don’t get scared, get angry.

Sloane took a deep breath and kept walking. As she passed Sazed’s, she snuck another glance. The
guy across the street passed under a streetlight just in time for her to see that it was Marvey. Of course it was Marvey, that prick. He probably just wanted to scare her. She got angry.

They walked for a few minutes more before Sloane heard a metallic thunk, and then the rattle of something being dragged along the sidewalk. She felt her blood freeze in her veins. Very carefully, trying not to move her head more than she needed to, she slid her gaze over to him.

Oh, god, he was dragging a tire iron. Sloane glanced wildly up and down the street. Something had to be open. Anything. A pottery shop, an art gallery, a coffee house, no, no, no--

There, there was a light on in a florist’s shop. The sign said closed, but she darted toward it anyway, filled with relief when the glass door yielded to a push. The bell above the door rang, and she slipped inside and put her back against the wall, panting.

“We’re closed,” said a voice, one that was strangely familiar.

“I know, I’m sorry, can I just--” She paused when she saw the man rooting around in a refrigerator full of boutonniers. “Mr. Highchurch?”

It made sense. She’d always seen Merle as kind of a hasbeen flower child, long gray hair and balding on top and perpetually wearing Hawaiian print shirts. Of course he was a florist. He was always complaining how the rink made no money.

He looked up, one bushy eyebrow raised, and waved a hand at her vaguely.

“You’re one of the derby girls. Uh... Jenicide?”

“My name’s Sloane.” She tried to look out the door. Marvey was still across the street, but he looked like he was about ready to cross. “Can I just stay in here for a minute? I fired a guy today and I think he’s after me.”

Merle frowned. He closed the fridge and strolled over to where he could get a look out the door. His frown deepened. “I see him. Yeah, come on over here.”

Merle showed her to a chair behind the cash register, out of direct line of sight of the door. He himself opened the register and began counting cash.

“That’s a bad idea,” she warned.

“Relax,” he said, a little too flippantly for her taste. He seemed to have lost his grumpy demeanor. Sloane shifted in the chair.

The bell above the door rang, and Marvey came in, the tire iron gripped in his hand.

“We’re closed,” said Merle, in a tone that suggested benevolent boredom more than anything else.

“That’s fine,” said Marvey, leveling a finger at Sloane. “I’ll just take my friend and go.”

Sloane was more afraid than she’d ever been, but she managed a glare at Marvey. He would not see her scared.

“Nah, sorry, pal,” said Merle. “Like I said, we’re closed. If you wouldn’t mind leaving.”

Marvey pointed the tire iron at Merle. “Don’t fuck with me, old man. I’ll kill you too.”

“Hmm.” Merle reached under the counter and almost casually pulled out a revolver. He opened the
cylinder, which was full, then closed it again. “Listen, buddy. I’m already going to call the police. All you’re doing is helping me decide whether I do it before or after I shoot you.”

Marvey lowered the tire iron, face contorted in a snarl. He spat, “This isn’t over,” to Sloane, and then threw open the door and left.

Merle snorted. “Yes it is, you moron.” He pulled a cordless phone out from under the counter and dialed. “Go see which way he’s going.”

Sloane realized he was talking to her. She jumped up and looked out the door. “He turned left. Uh, south.”

“Hello? Yeah, I had a guy just now trying to rob my store and threaten one of my customers. Pan’s Blooms, 365 Main. He just left, he’s headed south on Main. Yeah, my customer knows him. His name is…” Merle looked up.

“Marvey Norris,” Sloane provided.

“Marvey Norris, she says. Yeah, we’ve got him on tape.” Merle pointed at a dried bouquet on a shelf behind him, which was very poorly concealing a camera. Sloane grinned. Merle may have smiled back. “Yeah, we can wait around.”

He hung up the phone. Sloane breathed a sigh of relief. “God damn. Thank you, Mr. Highchurch.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, sliding the gun back under the counter. He offered her the phone. “You should probably stay with a friend tonight.”

“Good idea.” Sloane picked up the phone and dialed Hurley, who picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Curly Hurley, it’s me. Could you come pick me up?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong? Where are you?”

“Pan’s Blooms? Downtown? It’s a long story, I’ll tell you when you get here.”

“Sure, Sloane Ranger. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Hurley hung up, and so did Sloane, more slowly. She was shaking, she noticed.

“Boyfriend?” asked Merle.

“Girlfriend,” said Sloane, preparing herself for an uncomfortable conversation. She heard a police car siren in the distance. The police station was only a few blocks away.

“No, this Marvey guy.”

“Oh. No, I told you, I fired him today.”

“What’s a gorilla like that do?”

“He was one of my mechanics. I own Kim’s Cars.”

Merle looked properly surprised. “So, you’re Kim Sloane?”
“Sloane Kim,” she corrected him. She clasped her hands together, trying to stop shaking.

“Here.” Merle reached for the dried bouquet in front of the camera and pulled from one stem a couple of buds of lavender. He held them out to her. “Grind this up and smell them.”

Touched, Sloane accepted the buds and rubbed them in between her fingers. “Thank you.”

“I’d uh...appreciate it...if you didn’t mention this to your friends on the derby team,” he said, waving his hand to indicate the shop. “Especially Lucretia. I have a reputation to uphold.”

Sloane shrugged. “Least I can do.” She of all people understood the importance of reputation.

The bell above the door rang, and Sloane froze, but it was just a cop. She relaxed.

“Evening,” said the cop. “We were called about an attempted robbery?”

“That’s right,” said Merle. “This is the customer he tried to assault.”

The cop pulled out a notebook and a pencil. “Right, and you said you knew the assailant?”

“I could give you the bastard’s W-2,” said Sloane. Next to her, Merle chuckled.
Angus screwed up his face in deep concentration. This was it. He’d practiced for several weeks now and he was ready to do a lap on the derby track.

The bank of it made him nervous. Even the little ramp that led up to the concession stand made him nervous. But Magnus said he could be a ref someday, if he learned to skate, so he had to try.

He carefully stepped up the stairs in his skates, swung open the little gate in the rail, and took a deep breath. He’d just roll down to the center for starters, and then try to go fast around the inner edge. No big deal. He put one foot forward, ready to take the plunge.

“Hey, get off the track!”

Angus started, lost his balance, fell on his backside, and skidded down the bank to the center.

“Aw, what the he--heck.”

“Ow,” said Angus, and pulled himself to his feet on one of the benches. Merle appeared at the top of the track stairs.

“Take off your skates and get up here,” Merle snapped. “This area is for players.”

“Sorry sir! I thought it would be okay since thebout doesn’t start for--”

“Listen kid, I said you could use the rink when free skate was closed,” said Merle. “Don’t push your luck.”

“Sorry,” Angus said again. He plopped down on the bench and yanked off his skates as quickly as he could.

Merle left the stairs as Angus shuffled up the bank in his sock feet. He was surprised to find two kids in the stands, a girl with glasses and a dirty tow-headed boy. The boy was playing a red Gameboy furiously. The girl was watching Angus with interest.

“You’re in my math class,” said the girl. “You’re Angus. They say you’re a genius.”

“I don’t think I am,” said Angus, exiting the little gate and sitting on the steps to get his skates back on. “Your name is Mavis, right?”

She looked a little self-conscious. “How do you know me?”

“From when you were called up to the board last week.”

She made a face. “Don’t remind me.”

Angus tied his laces carefully. “You got the right answer. I don’t know why Mr. Jenkins got so upset. Just because you did it a different way.”

Mavis smiled a little. “Yeah. How’d you get to be in Pre-Algebra, anyway? You’re not even a sixth grader.”

“I told my teacher I was bored in fifth grade math.” He tightened his laces and stood up carefully. “It’s hard, but I like the challenge!”
“You raise your hand for every question, though,” said Mavis. “You mean you don’t always know the answers?”

“Sometimes you can learn more from being wrong,” he said.

The boy groaned, still pushing buttons in a frenzy. “I don’t want to talk about school. I thought this was going to be fun.”

“Some people like school, Mookie,” said Mavis. “They don’t cause trouble and not do their homework.”

“School’s dumb. When do we get to see people beating each other up?”

“You can’t beat people up in roller derby,” said Angus. “At least not anymore. Magnus will kick you out of the game.”

“The whole sport seems kind of dumb to me,” said Mavis. “Racing around in a circle. Like football on skates.”

“It’s pretty interesting once you know the rules,” said Angus. “Do you want to watch together?”

Mavis shrugged. “Okay.”

“Can I use your skates?” said Mookie.

Angus felt a pang of terror. “Umm…”

“Dad said to stay put,” said Mavis.

Mookie stuck his tongue out at her. Angus was relieved.

“What about the one with the striped helmet?”

“That’s Noelle. She’s the pivot. A pivot keeps an eye on the movement of the pack and calls plays. She can even become a jammer, if she has to. The jammer just has to pass the…helmet cover with the star on it to the pivot, and suddenly she’s the jammer!”

Mavis watched with a frown of concentration. “So they could do that if the jammer couldn’t get through.”

“Yeah!”

Mookie whooped as Sloane knocked a Goldcliff Golddigger out of bounds. “Hit ‘er again!”

“That would be a penalty,” said Angus.

“But it would be awesome,” said Mookie. “Hey, how did Noelle get her arm and leg cut off?”

“She says they were lost in a terrible accident,” said Angus. “She doesn’t talk about it much. But she built her leg herself!”

“Dad has a fake arm, and he hates it,” said Mookie.

Angus hesitated. This sounded like the sort of thing that was none of his business, but he was
curious. “Mr. Highchurch has a prosthesis?”

“Yeah, from here down.” Mavis indicated the midway point of her upper arm. “He lost it in the army.”

“Was he in a battle or something?” asked Angus.

“We don’t really know,” said Mavis. “He doesn’t want to tell.”

Mookie snickered. “I know.”

“No you don’t.”

“Do too! I heard him tell Mr. Boyland once.”

“What’d he tell Mr. Boyland?”

Angus felt uncomfortable. This conversation wasn’t for him, but he didn’t feel as though he could politely leave--

“He said it rotted off!”

“Eewww, no he didn’t.”

“He did! He said if he wasn’t such a cuss cuss moron, his cuss arm wouldn’t have rotted off.”

Mookie looked thoughtful. “He was real angry.”

Mavis looked horrified. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I went back to bed.”

“Poor Mr. Highchurch,” said Angus. Mavis and Mookie seemed to remember he was there. Angus panicked. “Sorry, I--”

“It’s okay,” said Mavis. “Dad is weird about stuff.”

Angus decided not to pursue the vagueness of this comment and instead turned his attention back to the game. “Oh, look!”

Julia was caught between two of the Golddiggers’ blockers and out of bounds, with Killian and Hurley off after their jammer just ahead and Carey knocked down somewhere behind. Noelle was coming in fast on the other side of the Golddiggers’ blockers. Julia hung back for a split second, yanked the panty off her helmet and passed it.

With one fluid motion, Noelle took it with her good hand, slid it over her helmet, and took off past the Golddiggers.

Mavis, Mookie, and Angus cheered and clapped. “Lookit her go!” crowed Mookie.

“Hey kids.” Merle scooted between the benches carrying two hot dogs in paper boats. “Behold! Your dinner!”

“Thanks, dad,” said Mavis, accepting one. Mookie took his with grabby hands and stuffed half of it into his mouth before saying, crumbs spewing, “‘Nks.”

Angus tried to ignore how good it smelled. It had been dry cereal for dinner today. He watched as
Killian plowed through two Golddiggers blockers, then clapped and tried to whistle with his fingers, like Johann did. He succeeded in getting spit on his fingers.

“Look at that, Mavis,” said Merle. “Would you want to be strong and tough like her someday?”

Mavis swallowed a bite of hot dog. “Not really.”

Angus looked at Merle, curious to see what his reaction would be. Merle looked worried. “Why not, sweetheart? You could play on the derby team. You’d have lots of friends.”

Mavis shrugged. “I don’t really want to play derby.”

“Oh. Okay.” Merle really did look worried. Angus didn’t understand why. If he’d had a kid, he’d be more worried if she wanted to play derby. Unless she was big and strong like the derby girls were, and “big and strong” weren’t words he’d use to describe Mavis.

“Do you kids want any drinks?” asked Merle.

“Can I have a pop?” asked Mookie.

“Sure, Fireball. Mavis?”

“I’m okay.”

“All right.” Merle shot a suspicious look at Angus and left them to watch the rest of the game. Magnus blew the whistle for the half.

“That’s Magnus, right?” said Mavis.

“Yes.”

“It would be so cool to be a referee for this,” said Mookie. “Smash! Bang! All the time.”

“I want to be ref,” said Angus. “Magnus says if I get good enough at skating I could be.”

“You know enough about the rules,” said Mavis.

“What’s he staring at?” said Mookie.

They looked. He was speeding pretty quickly along the side of the track, looking at the center.

“I think he’s looking at Miss Julia,” said Angus. And then, “Uh oh—”

Magnus crashed into Merle, who was coming back with a soda. The soda burst, splashing them both.

“Aww, my pop!” said Mookie.

Magnus apologized and hurried away, looking like he was trying to sink into his own skin.

The bout ended with a Golddiggers win, but a narrow one, 64 to 65. Overall a good game, Angus thought. It wouldn’t be too long until Carey and Killian were done in the locker room. Probably not enough time to skate, unfortunately.

“I see why you like this game so much,” said Mavis. “I think you’ll be a great ref someday.”
Angus beamed. “That’s so nice of you, Mavis.”

“Hey, kids,” Merle waddled over to them, carrying a push broom. “We’re leaving just as soon as I sweep up. Why don’t you two go grab a candy from the concession stand?”

“So late at night?” Mavis asked, but was drowned out by her brother shouting, “Can I have two?”

Merle chuckled. “Okay, two. Small ones, though, not those big old licorice ropes.”

Mookie whooped and ran off. Mavis ran after him, saying, “Mookie, wait!”

Merle turned suddenly on Angus. “Okay, kid, what’s the deal?”

Angus cringed. “I’m sorry about the track, sir, I really thought it would be okay—”

“No, not--what are your intentions toward my daughter?”


Merle’s eyes narrowed. “How old are you, anyway?”

“I just turned eleven, sir!”

“So you don’t go to school with either of them?”

“I’m in Mavis’ math class, sir.”

Merle’s eyebrows shot up. “Is she that behind in math?”

“No, sir. If she keeps passing math classes, she’ll be in Calculus in high school.”

Merle leaned on his broom. “I see.” He looked back at Angus. “Smart kid, are you?”

Angus shrugged. “People keep telling me so, sir.”

Merle considered this, looking Angus over. “All right, tell me something. Why doesn’t Mavis want to join the derby team?”

Angus screwed up his face in concentration. “From what I’ve observed of her, sir, she isn’t very aggressive. She’s more sensitive.”

“Sensitive, huh?”

“Yes, sir. She cried in class last week, sir. But in her defense, Mr. Jenkins is not a very patient teacher.”

Merle sighed. “How’s she ever going to be tough if she cries about math?”

Angus hesitated. This could get him in trouble. “Why does she need to be tough, Mr. Highchurch?”

“Because.” Merle shifted the broom under his other arm. “There are people who’ll hurt her. She’s gotta be tough to survive it.”

“What people, sir?”

Merle opened his mouth to answer the question, and then shut it again. He glowered at Angus.
“Mind your own damn business.”

He steered the pushbroom away, muttering under his breath. Angus watched him go, kicking his legs under the bleacher seat.
Taako opened his yellow front door and smiled widely as he saw Kravitz waiting on his stoop. He always looked so put together, even in just some jeans and a plain navy t-shirt. Plus he was drop dead handsome too. *Damn*, Taako thought, wondering how he got so lucky.

“I just expected you to be in the car,” Taako said, turning to lock the door behind him.

“My mother always said that only barbarians and yankees honk at the curb. And she didn’t raise me to be either,” Kravitz replied with a smile, holding out his hand. Taako happily took it and they walked down to the car. “Is this okay? You said it was casual.” Kravitz pulled on the front of his shirt. Taako nodded.

“It’s perfect.”

Kravitz opened the car door for Taako and after he got in, jogged around to the other side.

“Now before we get there,” Taako said, turning in his seat to face Kravitz as they pulled away, “there are some things you should know.”

“...okay.”

“B.M.G.B.N. is more than just a bowling night. You are going to be part of an elite team of masterminds, you are getting a chance to commune in our inner sanctum.”

“Carey said that you all drink cheap beer, eat nachos, and then Hurley always wins.”

“Well...I suppose technically that is what we do. But I just want you to be prepared. You’re not going tonight as Kravitz the documentarian. You’re going tonight as Kravitz, Taako’s new boyfriend.”

“Ohhh.” Kravitz nodded slowly. “You could have just said that.”

“That would be far too boring. Now attend, I love my friends. But they’re weird and pushy so I’m sorry ahead of time if they give you the third degree. Be prepared for questions about us, your time in college, your romantic past, your medical history, your intentions towards me, etc.”

“My med--?” Kravitz looked, wild-eyed, over at Taako as he pulled into the parking lot.

“Oh, and while this is a very decidedly *gay* Bi-Monthly Gay Bowling Night, you will be the first date I’ve ever brought with me. So there is that. Let’s go!” He opened the door and jumped out. Kravitz put the car into park and got out. Taako was already at the front door.

“You coming?” he shouted back.

“Yeah, hold on. I have to grab my bag.” Kravitz popped the trunk and pulled out his monogrammed bowling bag.

“You have a bowling bag?” Taako asked when Kravitz finally joined him at the door.

“You don’t?” Kravitz asked, holding the door open.
“There you guys are!” Killian said, looking over from the old Paperboy game she was playing. She ran into some virtual bushes and the screen dissolved into green-tinted, ‘You lost. Try Again?’ screen. “We’re over there.”

The rest of the group already had the end-most lane claimed. Sloane and Carey waved when they saw them. Hurley was dutifully typing in players’ names into the computer.

“Heads up!” Sloane said, tossing a pair of shoes to Taako. “Size 11’s incoming.” Taako caught one but the other went astray.

“We weren’t sure of your size, Kravitz.” Carey said. “So we guessed...12’s?” She held up a pair.

“That’s actually correct.” Kravitz smiled. “But I already have my own.”

Carey’s eyebrows raised. “People can own their own bowling shoes?” she asked, genuinely surprised.

Kravitz bit the corner of his mouth, feeling a little self-conscious. “Uh, yeah.”

“Wow! Cool.” She looked down at his bag. “Here, here, I can put your ball on the stand.” She took the bag from him, and set it down on one of the plastic seats. Carey let out a low whistle when she pulled the ball from the bag. It was black but had streaks of a rainbow of colors in it.

“Nice, it’s like a goth Pride ball.” Carey said, adding it to the stand.

“Alright!” Killian clapped her hands together and jumped down the half-step into the chair area. “Beer and nachos are ordered, AND I beat my high score on Dig-Dug.”

Taako looked up from tying his shoes. “So you got to the third level this time?” He grinned.

“Still two more levels higher than you, mon frere.” She pointed down at Taako. “I can feel it. This is my night, the night I finally defeat Hurley.”

Hurley looked up from the keyboard. “In your dreams.” She made a fierce face, then laughed. “Kravitz, what do you want your bowling name to be?”

Kravitz looked up at the screen. Hurley hadn’t put in any of their actual names, or even their derby names. There was The Hot One, The Good One, Aloha Suckers, Baddest Puta, and a Garryl. He blinked up at the board a few times.

“Uh...I’m not sure.” he said, tying a double knot on his laces.

“Well, it can’t be Kravitz. That’s boring.” Carey said. “And one of the rules of B.M.G.B.N.”


“Nah, it’s gotta be badass.” Hurley said, drumming her fingers on the plastic console.

“But you always make mine The Hot One.”

“‘Cause it’s true, babe. You’re so hot it’s scary.”

Sloane narrowed her eyes at Hurley, but she blushed anyway.

“Agent of Death!” Killian declared.
“Ooh, I like that one. You okay with that, Kravitz?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Taako scooted over a seat. “I like it. It’s dangerous...but also sounds like you might wear a tie.”

“Let’s play ball!” Hurley said, hitting a key. The machine at the end of the lane started up and dropped the pins down.

Sloane stood and grabbed her ball, lining dutifully up to the lane. Three long strides and she threw the ball down, and it went directly into the left gutter. She twirled around and took a bow as they all clapped for her.

“Thank you, thank you!” After a minute, she lobbed another gutter ball and then sat down next to Hurley. “We’re off to a great start.” She grinned and kissed Hurley’s cheek.

“So Kravitz, did you bowl a lot back in Neverwinter?” Killian asked, standing to take the two beer pitchers from the waitress. Hurley was taking a while lining up her shot at the lane.

“Kind of, I guess. After college, I was part of a league with a couple friends. We were pretty heavily invested there for a couple years, then we all got busy.”

“Were you good?” she asked, pouring a cup for everyone.

Kravitz shrugged. “I was okay.”

Hurley made a spare, and she moon-walked back to the seating area. “The Good One will reign supreme!”

“Not for long!” Killian took a quick swig of her beer and then hopped up to the lane to take her shot. 6 pins, and a gutter ball. “Okay, so maybe you will,” she said, sitting back down. Carey took her turn and also did a pretty poor job.

“You may have already guessed, but all of us here suck at bowling. But on Tuesdays it’s $3 for a pitcher and the nachos aren’t half bad,” Killian explained as Taako stood up to take his turn. Double gutter ball for him too.

“Your turn, Agent Reaper,” Taako said as he passed Kravitz, dragging a hand across his shoulders. Kravitz flexed his hands a few times; they were always cold, but they became frigid if he got nervous. Not that he should be nervous; they were all just there for drinks and a good time. He picked up his ball, and watched the machine release the pins and disappear behind the cosmos patterned wall.

Deep breath. 1, 2, 3 steps and a smooth release. The ball sped down the lane and hit the 3rd pin. Strike.

When he turned around, they were all clapping and cheering for him. He sat down next to Taako, who squeezed his shoulder.

“I was okay,” Killian said in a terrible impression of Kravitz that for some reason had a British accent. She chuckled.

“You better look out, Hurles. Looks like there’s a interloper aiming for your crown,” Sloane said.

“We’ll see about that.”
“So how did the B.M.B.G.N. start?” Kravitz asked, reaching for a chip from Taako’s plate.

“Hey, get your own,” Taako said, pulling his plate away. But Kravitz’ arms were longer, so he still easily snagged a chip.


“...yeah. That,” he said, around a mouthful of processed cheese and jalapenos.

“It was by accident, right?” Carey chimed in.

“Last year, was it?” Taako said. Killian nodded. “It was supposed to be a bowling night for the whole team, but everyone ended up bailing except for the five of us. We ended up having so much fun that it just sort of became a thing.”

“Yeah, plus it’s just kinda nice to be with people who understand because, you know, they’ve been there too,” Carey added.

Hurley sat down in her seat after her turn and huffed out a breath. It was the fourth frame, and Kravitz was already leading by almost 30 points. Hurley was in second, and the rest of the group was trailing far behind. She was trying to be a good sport about it, but it obviously bugged her.

“Ooh, I have a fun game!” Carey drummed her hands on the chair seat beneath her. “It’s called, The One Who Made You Realize.”

Hurley and Taako laughed.

“Realize what?”

“Krav, you’re at the Bi-Monthly Gay Bowling Night,” Taako explained.

“Oh, right.” He smiled sheepishly.

“I’ll go first,” Sloane said, raising her cup as if for a toast. “1986, Demi Moore. I saw About Last Night when I was way too young. But that’s when I realized.”

“Gay as hell?” Carey asked.

“Gay as hell.” They clinked their glasses and giggled.

“Gillian Anderson,” Killian said, looking off into the middle distance as she waited for her ball to return. “I was obsessed with X-Files, mostly Scully, and I didn’t even realize that not everyone felt that way. It wasn’t till I was talking about it with a friend that I realized that she didn’t see it at all like I did.”

“Man, you didn’t know till 1993?” Hurley said.

“I mean, there’s knowing and then there’s knowing, you know?” She turned to take her turn.

“How about you, Hurley?” Carey asked.

“There was a girl at a Catholic summer camp I went to in junior high, Andrea Ricci. She made me a friendship bracelet, and we kissed behind the pool shed on the last night. Never saw her again.”

Carey snickered. “Mine was Lynda Carter. Watched Wonder Woman reruns every day after school for three years. Finally realized why in fifth grade.”

“Alright, Kravitz, you’re the last one.” Killian sat down in Carey’s seat as she left to take her turn.

“Well, I didn’t have a clue till college. And I just looked over at my freshman year roommate one day and realized that I liked him as more than a friend and had for some time. I never said anything, and he’s married now with three kids. Wish him all the best, but...he was the one.”

“So are you out?” Carey asked, rejoining the conversation.

“To my mother, yeah, and friends,” he said, sipping his now lukewarm beer. Taako stood to take his turn. “I don’t know about the rest of the family. They’ve probably already figured it out, but I just haven’t dated anyone that I liked enough to bring him home for them to meet.” He turned to watch Taako take a spectacularly awful turn and he smiled a little. “Well...till now,” he said quietly.

Killian and Carey still heard and they smiled knowingly at each other.

“Now, wait a second, wait a second,” Kravitz said, leaning forward in his seat and looking intensely into each of their faces. “You’re telling me that not a single one of you has e-mail?”

It was the 8th frame, and Hurley had managed to narrow the gap between her and Kravitz. He was still several points ahead, but it was within the realm of possibility for her to still win. She was laser-focused on the game. Kravitz, however, was very distracted with the news of Taako and his luddite friends.

“It’s kind of hard to have e-mail when you don’t have a computer,” Carey said, as she sprawled across several chairs and put her head in Killian’s lap.

“But-but the internet is the future,” he insisted.

Killian chuckled. “Come on, the web is neat and all, but it’s just a fad.” She was kidding, but Kravitz didn’t seem to realize that. He sputtered for a few seconds, much to the amusement of the rest of the group.

“A—-the….It’s not a fad. I mean...it’s just a matter of time before the internet is everywhere.”

“What would you even do if it was everywhere?” Sloane said, matching Killian’s tone.

“Everything! You could look up and access all the information that humanity knows! You could connect to friends and family across the globe in an instant! You could shop online! Businesses can sell their goods on the web.”

“That seems sketchy,” Taako commented.

“Well, now it’s risky. But the day is coming where that will be the norm. And the businesses that are on the forefront of this wave will benefit from it. Like Sloane, your shop.”

“No one’s gonna want to buy cars on the web,” she said.

“Maybe not, but your business should have a website. A portal for a broader audience of potential
customers to find out about your shop, get your contact information, and hire you.”

She scrunched her mouth to one side. “I don’t know if i want just anyone to know about my garage.”

Taako returned to his seat. “Your turn, Krav.”

Kravitz sighed and went up to take his turn.

“Is he okay?” Killian asked Taako quietly. “Usually he’s so mellow.”

“Oh, yeah. There’s just a couple things that get his feathers all in a bunch. You just happened to find one. Isn’t it adorable?”

Killian chuckled, and noticed the expression on Carey’s face. It was her thinking face. “Nacho chip for your thoughts?”

Carey looked up after a moment. “Well, I was just…” Kravitz returned, having bowled a very distracted and terrible frame. “Kravitz, you know who you should talk to about this whole website stuff?”

“Who?”

“Magnus. You know, the ref?”

“I’ve seen him around.”

“He’s a carpenter and works for a contractor in town. The whole ‘broader audience’ thing would probably appeal to him. Make sense in his line of work. I’ll mention it to him next time I see him.”

“Okay, yeah! …Well, anyway point is, you should all get e-mails.” He picked up his beer again. “The day is coming when that’s going to matter more than your home address.”

“Listen to this crazy man,” Killian joked. “Next thing we know he’ll be saying that everyone’s going to have to have a cellular phone in the future.”

It was the final frame. Hurley had just broken 200, and the rest of the group hadn’t even reached 100. But Kravitz was still yet to bowl. He was just five points behind Hurley’s final score. He flexed his hands a few more times, before picking up the ball.

“Come on, Kravitz!” Killian cheered.

Deep breath. 1, 2, 3 steps and a release. However the ball rolled off to the right, and only knocked down 4 pins.

“Yes!” Hurley hissed, fist pumping.

“Oh, come on, Hurles. He just has to knock over one more pin, and he hasn’t thrown a gutter ball this whole game,” Carey reasoned as Kravitz waited for his ball to return.

“Taako, can you help me out here?” Hurley asked.

Taako glanced sideways at her. “I don’t think that would be very ethical if I did.”
“B.M.G.B.N. isn’t about ethics, it’s about rules. And rule number 1 is Hurley. Always. Wins. It’s in the bylaws,” she insisted. Kravitz picked up his ball and lined up his shot.

“What will you give me if I help you?”

“A medium sized I.O.U.”

“Make it a large. I am betraying my boyfriend.”

Kravitz took a deep breath and took his first step.

“Fine! A large! Please!” Hurley held out her hand, and Taako shook it.

“HOT BOY!” he called in a loud echoing voice at the last moment. It was just enough to startle Kravitz and the ball fell from his hand. Kravitz turned around to look at Taako, but the rest of them watched the ball roll down the lane. It started down the middle, but then slowly curved to the right and fell into the gutter.

“YES!! HURLEY. ALWAYS. WINS!!!!” she jumped up and down in the seat several times, jumped off into a somersault and hopped back up. “WOOHOO!”

Kravitz chuckled and shook his head, coming to stand next to Taako and out of the way of Hurley’s continued celebration. “Hurley always wins, huh?”

“Sorry, Krav, I don’t make the rules.” Taako shrugged. Kravitz smiled and gave him a kiss.

“Hey, good game, Hurley,” he held out a hand, which Hurley shook enthusiastically.

“Yeah, yeah. Good game. Sorry about pulling out the nuclear option there at the end, but you know, all’s fair in love and bowling.”

Kravitz laughed, and bent down to take off his shoes.

“Well, what now?” Taako asked. Carey and Killian were putting up the bowling balls.

“We’re probably gonna head out,” Killian said. “I have an early shift at the gym tomorrow.”

“Yeah, same for us,” Sloane said, changing her shoes.

“Aw, come on,” Hurley said, her celebration finally winding down.

“No, you said that you had to go in early to fill out the insurance paperwork, remember?”

Hurley sighed. “Fine.”

“Well, how about you?” Taako said, turning to Kravitz. “Do you have an early shift at the photo...store?”

Kravitz zipped up his bag and shook his head. “Nope. You want to get some food? We could take it back to my place.” He slipped an arm about Taako’s waist as the group headed for the door.

“Kravitz, I’m going to be honest with you, and say something that might be hard for you to hear. But it’s only because I like you so much...your apartment makes me sad.”

Kravitz held open the door. “Why?”
“Because it’s a beige box of nothing.”

“It’s not nothing...I have some art...that I haven’t hung up yet...and my iBook...yeah you’re right. It’s terrible.”

Taako nodded and waved to Carey and Killian as they got in their car. Sloane honked twice as they pulled away. Taako took Kravitz’s hand as they walked to the car.

“I think I have some leftover rice and a salmon filet, ooh! I could make kedgeree.”

“So how did I do?” Kravitz asked, opening the passenger side door. “Will I be invited back to the inner sanctum of B.M.G.B.N.?”

Taako smiled and leaned on the top of the door. “You did perfect.” Kravitz let the door swing a little further open and kissed Taako, brushing his jaw with the backs of his fingertips.

Taako pulled away after an extended moment, and had to take a deep breath. “That… hmm… yep. Good.” He cleared his throat and sat quickly down into the car, a large smile spreading across his face. Kravitz had a similar one on his own face as he shut the car door.
Chapter Notes

Where all your dreams come true, GOT SOME SAP FOR YOU!!

‘The minds of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov rejected this style of working in the mid-1920s, and developed the Russian (or Soviet) Montage.’ Julia stopped typing on her electric typewriter for a second and reread the sentence.

“Crap,” she whispered. She’d misspelled the last name. She pulled the page out of the carriage and grabbed her wite-out pot. She delicately painted over the extra o and blew on it to dry. This would be so much easier on a computer, she thought for the 18th time that hour. But she had a whole paper to write for her Film Theory class and she didn’t want to spend the entire night in the lab at the college. It always smelled like old Cheetos in there. She put the paper back in the carriage, scrolling it to the correct spot and tried to pick up her train of thought again.

‘The point was to draw attention to the camera work, the actors, and especially the editing, all through the juxtaposition of images through the use of montages.’ There was a tapping sound on her window. She looked at it, but there was nothing there. She ignored it and turned back to her paper.

‘To an uneducated audience, those who were well trained in watching invisible editing,’ Another plink against her windowpane. Still there was nothing there, so she kept typing. ‘watching Battleship Potemkin was a jarring experience.’ Another tap at her window, and Julia turned to look just as another small pebble came up and tapped against the glass.

Furrowing her brow, she stood up and went to the window. She raised the blinds and looked down to see Magnus, arm raised and ready to throw another pebble. She smiled and waved, opening the window.

“What are you doing?” she asked, folding her arms and resting them on the sill.

“I wondered if you wanted to go to Chi-chi’s?” he asked, dropping the pebbles on the ground and dusting off his hands.

“You could come to my front door, like the grown-ass adults we both are,” she said, smiling.

Magnus nodded and put his hands in his pockets. “Honestly, that thought never occurred to me.”

Julia laughed, and left the window, shutting it behind her. She grabbed her keys and a few bucks, slipping on her converse as she rushed out the front door. Magnus was waiting around the corner of the building, swinging his van keys on his finger. He dropped them when she came into view.

“Alriiiight. Chi-chi’s, let’s go!” he stooped down to pick up his keys.

“I’m technically supposed to be working on a paper.”

“So just time for the one Chi, got it.”
Julia laughed, and shook her head. “You’re weird.”

“But loveable.” He finger-gunned her and winked. Julia looked away and felt her cheeks grow warm. “So you wanna drive?” he asked.

“Actually, do you know the back way?”

“There’s a back way?”

Julia grinned and started walking around the back corner of the building. “Follow me.” There was a gravel parking lot, if one could call it that, behind her apartment building. Then a field of tall grass, which ended in some woods. Julia headed straight into the treeline.

“Kinda feel like you’re going to murder me now. They’ll find my body in three days and my tongue will be missing or something,” Magnus said, his foot slipping off a rock and catching himself on a tree.

“Oh please,” Julia said, stepping over a fallen tree and sounding a little too casual for comfort. “If I wanted to murder you, they’d never find the body.”

The woods ended suddenly, as space had been cleared for the train tracks that ran through town. “Welcome to the back way.” Julia pointed right. “Down that way is the rink.”

“Oh, these are the tracks that run behind it.”

Julia nodded. “Yup. And Chi-chi’s is this way.” She started to the left, her footsteps crunching in the gravel by the tracks. “It’s only about half a mile when you go this way. Me and my friends would do this all the time in high school before any of us had cars.”

“So you’ve been here for a long time?” Magnus asked, falling into step beside her.

“My whole life.” She reached down and picked a Queen Anne’s Lace as she passed by. The sun was setting behind them, painting the sky with pinks and oranges and just the faintest hints of navy. “When I was a kid, I always thought that as soon as I graduated I’d get out of this little podunk town. You can see how well that happened.”

“What stopped you?”

She picked a bit from the flower and let it flutter to the ground. “Money, mostly. And right when I graduated, my auntie, who was like a second mom, she got sick. So I stayed around to help take care of her.” Julia noticed the look of concern on Magnus’ face. “Oh, she’s fine now. Been in remission for, what, 7 years. Plus she met her husband in the cancer ward. So it all kinda turned out for the best.”

“Except you’re still here.”

“For now, yeah. Next year I’ll have my degree, finally. I’ll figure out what I want to do then.”

“So let’s say that money is no object, what would your dream job be?”

Julia thought for a moment. “Can I say heiress?” She grinned and laughed at her own joke. Magnus rolled his eyes, but smiled too.

“Fine, I was just trying to start some interesting conversation--” he said in mock exasperation.

“No, wait wait wait, I got it: a witch who lives in a gingerbread house in the forest. But instead of
“Eating the children, I just feed them a bunch of candy and send them back to their parents all sugar high.”

“I’m ignoring you,” Magnus said, walking faster. Julia jogged to keep up, grabbing his arm so he’d slow down.

“Alright fine, you tell me yours and I’ll try and think of an acceptable one.”

He looked at her with eyes narrowed, before snapping into an excited expression. “Okay, I think I’d be a pretty good knight.”

Julia stopped in her tracks. “A knight? Like with swords and armor and stuff?”

Magnus nodded, smiling earnestly. “Yeah! Knights are so cool, they save people and fight for justice. Get to ride around on horses and...you know...other knight stuff.”

Julia started walking again, “What about something from this century?”

“Hey, I said money was no object. Knight is a valid answer.”

“Knight is as valid as candy witch.” She pointed a finger up at him. He sucked in the corner of his mouth.

“Well...if I can’t be a knight...I’d probably be a carpenter.”

“But you are a carpenter.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “And I like being one.”

Julia looked up at him, her eyebrows furrowed. “You really like it here, don’t you?”

Magnus nodded, looking down at her. “Of course. I have a steady job, a roof over my head, good friends, a fun hobby, and you...gurt.” He winced but powered through his thought, “What more do you really need in life?”

Julia looked away, and thought about what he said. “Huh.” She continued walking. Magnus fell back into step with her.

“You didn’t say what job you wanted.”

“Oh, right.” She tossed the remaining stem to the ground. “Money’s no object, right?”

“Right. Sky’s the limit, spread your wings and fly away.” He snapped his fingers and sang in a purposefully awful R. Kelly impression. “I believe I can soooooarrrr, I see me running through that open doo-o-o-or!”

“Oh, god, please, no,” she said, laughing at his falsetto attempt. He grinned and took a bow.

“Okay, sorry, I’ll stop goofin’. So what’s the dream?”

“If I could be anything...I’d want to be like Billie Holiday.” She nodded and smiled a little.

“Who’s he?” Magnus asked. Julia looked at him with a shocked expression.

“Billie Holiday? You don’t know her? She’s one of the most influential jazz singers of the 20th century.”
“Ohhh, yeah, I don’t listen to a lot of jazz.” he offered. She shook her head.

“You should. Jazz is the only truly American music style.”

“What about disco? That was pretty American.”

“I’m not sure that even qualifies as music,” she teased, crossing the tracks and heading for the sparse woods on the other side.

“Hey! Them’s fightin’ words!” he called after her, before running to catch up to her.

Chi-chi’s was the only fast food Mexican joint in town. It was a crumbling corporate pueblo-styled building from the early 80s that had mauve sombreros and other horrifying mashups decorating the interior. But it had 75¢ tacos and long business hours, so it remained open.

Magnus and Julia stayed till the employees asked them to leave. They’d spent hours talking, but it felt like no time had even passed.

“I still have my whole paper to write,” Julia groaned as they reached the stairs to her apartment. She stood on the first step and leaned back against the railing. Magnus leaned against the other railing.

“Just tell your professor that your friend Magnus couldn’t go get tacos alone and you had to keep him company. That’s a very reasonable excuse, I’m sure she’ll understand.”

They both laughed and sighed. When their gazes met again, the moment suddenly changed. It felt like the few feet between them was somehow both a mile wide and a hair’s breadth apart. Every hair follicle was thrumming with anticipation. Magnus broke the moment when he blinked and looked away, clearing his throat.

“Well, you should ...probably get to your paper.”

“Yeah, right,” she replied, suddenly finding herself out of breath. She swallowed hard and took the next step up. “Good night,” she said, waving a little and jogging up the stairs.

Magnus waited till she was safely indoors before he turned and headed for his van. He ran a hand through his hair and took several deep breaths. He had to start keeping a better lid on those feelings; he almost did something really stupid just then at the stairs. Besides, she doesn’t even think of you like that, he reminded himself as he started the van and drove away.

Julia watched Magnus’ van pull away through the crack she’d pulled in the blinds. She let them snap back into place and stood in the dark of her room for a second. Surely she hadn’t misread that moment on the stairs. It hadn’t just been her that time, right? Did he feel something too? Don’t go mixing up what you want with what’s actually happening, she told herself, flicking on the light and sitting down to write again.
Julia shimmied and jumped around her childhood bedroom, trying to pull the top of her pantyhose up to an acceptable location. The fishnets she wore for games never gave her this much trouble, she thought as she stopped to catch her breath. She went for one final tug, and her hand slipped off, smacking a picture frame off the dresser.

“Crap,” she said quietly, picking it up and replacing it. It wasn’t broken, which was both good because Auntie Josephine wouldn’t fuss over it, and bad because it was a particularly awkward photo of Julia. Twelve years old, a mouth full of braces, hair very frizzy from the at-home Farrah Fawcett treatment she’d tried, and proudly displaying a short story she had written. A story about horses.

“Everything okay in there?” Josephine called from the other side of the door.

“Yes, just a second.” Julia pulled the skirt back into place on the dress, and slipped into the heels she was wearing. She stopped to look in the mirror on the back of the door. The entire outfit was borrowed. The shoes were Auntie Josephine’s, the necklace and earrings came from her neighbor, and the dress was, at one point, her mother’s. However, her mother had been a bustier woman than Julia was, so Julia ended up fussing with the cowl neckline, trying to get it to do something that would be acceptable in public. The black velvet was not complying.

“I’m coming in,” Josephine said, pushing the door open.

Julia jumped back out of the way, then held out her arms a little. “What do you think?” She twitched her mouth to the side.

Josephine brought a hand up to her mouth. “You look as pretty as a picture,” she said, smiling broadly. “What you gonna do with your hair, baby girl?”

“Um, leave it like this…?” Julia had let her curls simply lay where they fell. Josephine made a shocked face. “Or let you do something with it?”

Josephine nodded, heading over to the table that was part desk, part vanity. Julia sat in the chair and picked up a few bobby pins, holding them up for her aunt to reach. Josephine chuckled a little.

“Reminds me of when your daddy brought you over that first time.” Josephine finger-combed Julia’s hair back and away from her face. Julia smiled.

“Dad had no idea how to braid my hair.”

“I said, ‘Steven, you’re my brother and I love you. But you need help with this baby’s hair. She’s gonna look like a wild child if we don’t fix this now.’” They both laughed a little. But Julia’s thoughts drifted to the plans for the evening, and she began to frown.

“Nervous?” Josephine asked, looking at Julia through the mirror and sweeping the hair up with a deft twist. She took a pin from Julia’s hand.

“A little. I don’t know if Johann and I have practiced everything enough. Plus, you guys are making such a big deal about this.” Julia’s head rocked forward as Josephine anchored another pin in the twist. “It’s just Uncle Arnie’s club, it’s not Radio City Music Hall.”

“Honey, for this town, my Arnie’s club is Radio City Music Hall. Hold your breath.” Josephine
quickly blew on a layer of hairspray, then pulled a few hairs around Julia’s face out from the sweep. “What you think?” Julia turned her head side to side; Josephine had pulled her hair up into a very sophisticated French twist. It made her neck look longer. Julia smiled.

“I look like Whitney Houston.”

“Whitney Houston wishes she looked like you.” Josephine leaned over and opened one of the drawers. She pulled out a small bottle, and handed it to Julia. “Here. Your grandma’s perfume always helped me when I got nervous before a show.”

Julia spritzed a little on her wrists and neck. She rubbed them together and inhaled the lavender scent. Memories of baking snickerdoodle cookies together, caring dutifully for baby dolls, and reading Dr. Seuss books in that old rocking chair immediately sprang to mind. She smiled.

“Better?” Josephine asked, smiling too.

Julia nodded.

“Are you decent?” Steven called from down the hall. “We better be heading out soon, or we’re going to be late.”

“Come see your baby girl, Stevie,” Josephine yelled back. Steven cautiously entered the room, and Julia stood up. His eyes immediately teared up, and he nodded. He coughed and laughed a little hoarsely.

“She looks so much like Ella,” Steven said. Josephine nodded and they shared a smile. Julia turned back to the mirror. Her relatives were always saying that she looked like her mom, but Julia never really believed them. She always remembered her mother as much prettier than Julia had turned out to be. Though in this moment, in this dress, she could almost see it. Steven came up behind her. “She’d be very proud of you.”

“Dad, you promised you wouldn’t cry.”

He smiled and nodded. “And I’m not. We should be leaving now; Arnie doesn’t like it when his performers are late.”

Steven and Josephine left the room, but Julia took another minute in front of the mirror. Deep breath; she could do this.

Uncle Arnie’s club was right in the middle of the four blocks of downtown their little city boasted. It had a bright blue neon sign above it that just said, ‘Jazz’ in looping font. You had to immediately walk down a flight of stairs, but then it opened into a large room with darkened lighting, red leather booths surrounding the edge, round tables scattered across the floor and always a crowd of customers. There was a band already on the stage when Julia, Steven, and Josephine arrived, and a large crowd in the audience. A very large crowd, most of whom Julia both recognized and looked like.

“Did you invite the family?” she asked, turning back around to Josephine.

“I may have mentioned it and they wanted to be here.”

“Auntie Josephine, I didn’t tell anyone ‘cause I’m worried it’s going to be bad. And I wanted to embarrass myself in front of the least amount of people.”
“Hey, Julia!” Uncle Arnie said, appearing at Josephine’s side. He pressed a kiss to her cheek, and helped her with her coat. “We got a big crowd of people just for you.”

“Is there a way we could call the Fire Marshall or something? I mean, surely this is too many people at one time.”

“You could ask him, he’s right over there.” Arnie held up a hand. “Hey Paul.” Paul waved back.

Julia frowned and shoved her hands in her jacket pockets, realizing that there was really no way out of this situation, only through it.

“Oh, Julia, two things. One, you’re on after this act. And two, does that skinny white boy in the $400 suit belong to you?” Arnie pointed over to the bar, where a jumpy Johann was nursing something in a tall glass. Julia headed over towards him.

“Be sure to take off your biker jacket before you sing!” Josephine called after her as she left.

“Hey,” Julia said, sitting next to Johann, who immediately looked relieved.

“Oh, you came. I was so worried.”

“Of course I came. Why, how long have you been here?”

“Since it opened at four.” Johann nodded quickly, taking a drink. Julia nodded slowly, looking out over the crowd. She waved at some cousins.

“My entire family is here,” she said, smiling but with a panicked look in her eyes.

“Hey that’s great! I invited everybody else.”

“What do you mean everybody else?” She turned abruptly to look at him.

“Friends from derby. Though I think I only got one person who said they’d come see me perform. So it’s good your family’s here. Nice to have fans in the audience.”

Magnus pushed open the door to the club, and walked down the stairs. The band on the stage finished a loud chord and the whole place broke out in applause. He scanned the large room, but didn’t see Johann or even a single person who looked vaguely familiar. He’d dubiously accepted Johann’s invitation; it seemed like the sort of thing friends do, though Magnus definitely expected more of a coffeehouse open mic night if Johann’s karaoke skills were anything to go on. This place was classy and the band sounded downright professional.

He took a seat at one of the few open tables that was off to the far right. A waiter came by and he ordered a whiskey as the band left the stage. He drummed his fingers on the table and continued to look for Johann. There was no sign of him. Magnus decided that if he couldn’t find him by the time he’d finished his drink, he could call it. No use sitting in a club by himself all night.

“Alright, alright, let’s hear it one more time for Neverwinter Jazz Quintet.” A lanky man in a dapper navy suit hopped onto the stage, holding a microphone, as the audience applauded again.

“Thanks for coming out here tonight, fellas. And thank you to all of you for joining me here at Arnie’s. I am, of course, Arnie.” He smiled a charming grin and winked. The audience laughed and there were a few whistles. “And I have a spectacular line up for y’all tonight. To kick it off, we have our first act. Now, I’ve known half of this act for quite a few years now, ever since I married her aunt
Josephine.” He pointed into the audience and winked as there was a ‘whoop’, probably from Josephine. “And the other half, I had the pleasure of meeting this evening. But I can already tell you this is gonna be a good one, folks. You ready?” The audience gave a loud cheer, and Magnus took a sip of his whiskey. “Alright, appearing for the first time at Arnie’s, it’s Johann and Julia!!”

Magnus spat part of the whiskey back into the glass, and inhaled the other half. He coughed as the audience clapped and cheered. Julia and Johann walked out on stage, and Magnus’ mouth fell open. Arnie whispered something in Julia’s ear and she nodded, taking her place behind the microphone next to the piano. Johann sat at the keys and looked up at her. She nodded to him, and he immediately launched into a jazzy upbeat tune.

Magnus couldn’t take his eyes away from Julia. She was always beautiful to him, but the way she looked right now, he didn’t have the words to describe. She smiled shyly at the audience and brought a slightly shaking hand up to the mic.

_The way you wear your hat,_

_The way you sip your tea._

_The memory of all that_

_Oh, no, they can’t take that away from me._

He could tell she was nervous, but as she continued, she got more confident and her tone grew smoother. Her voice was rich, and warm. He knew she was a good singer from karaoke, but that didn’t even compare to how she sounded now. Magnus never wanted her to stop singing. His toes kept curling inside his shoes and he had to remind himself to breathe more than once. Right now, it was more than just that she was the most beautiful woman Magnus had ever seen. She was radiant, glowing with confidence and joy.

She beamed and her shoulders visibly relaxed as the song finished and the crowd cheered.

“Say, that was pretty good, Johann,” she said.

“You think so?” he said, fanning his face in an exaggerated way. “I feel red as a to-mah-to.”

She shot him a look. “Do you mean to-may-to?”

“That’s what I said, to-mah-to.”

Julia pulled a face. “You know, I don’t think this is working, let’s call the whole thing off.”

“Well not before we sing about it,” said Johann.

The audience laughed, and Johann began to play and sing,

_You say to-may-to_

_I say to-mah-to_

_You say po-tay-to_

_And I say po-tah-to_

Julia took it over:
To-may-to, to-mah-to

Po-tay-to, Po-tah-to

Let’s call the whole thing off.

Johann’s voice was a little whitebread for the style, but they worked well together, harmonized great. Magnus was hardly a jazz aficionado, but it was easy to tell Julia’d had formal training. Or maybe she was just that good.

They sang a few more songs, sometimes with jokes in between. They seemed to be keeping things deliberately playful and not romantic between them; when Julia sang love songs, she sang them to the audience. Break-up songs, on the other hand, they sang together, playing up awkwardness.

“I thought I’d found a man I could trust,” sang Julia at one point, and Johann feigned a look of grave offense.

What a bust!

This is how the story ends,

I’m gonna turn him down and say

‘Can’t we be friends.’

The whole bit had the audience in stitches, Magnus included. He’d always liked the aesthetic of jazz. He’d had this book when he was a kid, just a crappy pulp novel he’d found in a library’s cast-off pile, about a noir detective and a lounge singer.

God, he hadn’t thought about that for a while. Maybe he still had it somewhere. Or no, his mom had taken it, because she’d cracked open to a random page and--

Oh, yes. It had been that kind of pulp novel. Thirteen-year-old Magnus had found it very educational. Funny that he should think of it now.

“We’ll be taking a little break after this next song,” said Julia, “but first, look around you. Find someone you love. This song is for you.”

Her words drew him in. He finished off his whiskey and listened intently.

Johann played something slow and quiet. Julia closed her eyes, swaying a little, and sang,

After one whole quart of brandy

Like a daisy, I'm awake

With no Bromo-Seltzer handy

I don't even shake...

Magnus nearly fell off his chair. That was the song, the song from the book!

Men are not a new sensation

I've done pretty well I think
But this half-pint imitation

Put me on the blink.

Magnus felt the blush creeping up his neck. Now he remembered all kinds of things he’d imagined as a teenager, himself as a manly, mysterious noir detective, meeting a sexy lounge singer in the dead of night...

I’m wild again, beguiled again

A simpering, whimpering child again

Bewitched, bothered and bewildered

Am I ...

And now, suddenly, the lounge singer had a face, a voice, a--oh god--a body. Mortified, Magnus covered his mouth with his hand and stared at the table for the remainder of the song.

Johann’s last note died away, and the club burst into applause. Magnus buried his head in his hands. Of all the places, for all the people, why did he have to have such a vivid set of images in his mind now?

“Magnus!”

Magnus looked up. Johann meandered over from the stage.

“Thanks for coming,” said Johann. “It’s nice to have a familiar face in the house.”

Magnus would have paid big money to see no familiar faces ever again. “Yeah, yeah, of course.”

Johann looked at him quizzically. “Are you okay?”

“Great,” Magnus yawped.

“Cool, cool. Hey, Julia will want to know you’re here. I’ll bring her over.”

“No!”

Johann blinked. “Why not?”

Magnus got up and ran, calling behind him, “I have to go!”

Johann looked after him, mystified, and then looked at his empty glass on the table. “Hey!” he yelled. “Magnus, did you even pay your bill?”

But Magnus was gone.

Julia tore herself away from a cousin reunion when Johann came back to the stage. “How much time do we have left?”

Johann checked his watch. “Another minute or two before the second set.”

“Great, I can say hello to whoever came from the B.o.B.” She stood on tiptoes and scanned the restaurant. “Who did you say it was?”
“Oh, Magnus.”

Julia froze. “…Magnus is here?”

Johann shrugged. “He was. He just left.”

She turned to face Johann. “What? Why?”

“I don’t know. It was kind of weird.”

Julia sputtered. “Well, did he say anything?”

“No, he just ran out. Stuck me with his bill, too. Why does he keep doing that?”

“Johann.” She grabbed him by the shoulders. “This is very important. Was he upset? Angry? Bored? What?”

Johann leaned away from her. “I don’t know! He didn’t seem bored—”

“Give me something, Johann, anything!”

He furrowed his brow in concentration. “I don’t know, maybe he looked kinda—” Johann’s face fell into an epiphany— “turned on?”

Julia’s jaw dropped. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Time for you to go back on,” interrupted the cheerful voice of Uncle Arnie. His smile dissolved when he saw the looks on their faces. “You two having problems?”

Julia released Johann. “No. No, we’re fine.”

Johann brushed the wrinkles out of his suit. “We’re ready. Come on, Julia.”

“But—”

“The show must go on,” Johann said, as though intoning sacred text. “We can deal with Magnus later.”

“We?” Julia squeaked.

He was already sitting back down at the piano. Julia stared wild-eyed at the stage. She couldn’t possibly—

No. No. She had to. She would finish the set. She would completely ignore this turn of events. Julia took her place onstage. She could do this. Focus. Focus.

“Julia?”

Her head snapped up. “Sorry?”

“I said,” said Johann, “you seem distracted.”

The audience laughed. Julia took a deep breath. “Sorry, I was far away.”

“Must’ve been pretty far,” said Johann.

“It was. A little place called Birdland.”
Magnus leaned against his van and watched the stars come out. Maybe he’d wait a little longer.

He’d started by dumping a bottle of water on his head, which helped. Then, of course, his good shirt was all wet. He’d tried to dry off with a towel from the back, which only meant that now he was damp and covered in sawdust. And embarrassed, don’t forget embarrassed.

It was probably for the best he couldn’t go back in, he reflected. So he’d wait out here. He had to at least tell them he’d enjoyed their act.

Maybe not specifically how much he’d enjoyed their act, but still.

Unfortunately, when Julia emerged, it was in a group of family members. He sighed. Oh well. He’d just talk to Johann tomorrow.

But as he opened the door of his van, he heard Julia say, “Hey, I’ll catch up with you guys.”

He turned. She was coming toward him. He tried his best to look nonchalant. “Hey.”

“Hi,” Julia, for her part, tried to look him in the eye instead of at the ridiculous dusty shirt he was wearing. Had he worn that inside? “Um. You’re still here.”

“Yeah,” he said sheepishly.

“Johann told me you’d left?”

Magnus stopped himself from saying something stupid. “I uh, spilled something on myself.”

Julia glanced at his hair, which was wet. “On your head?”

“Yeah…”

They were quiet for a moment, neither looking at the other.

“It was a great show,” he said. “The first half, anyway. You’re a really good singer.”

Julia relaxed a little. “You think so?”

“Yeah,” he said, relaxing himself.

“I was so nervous,” she said.

“After the first song, I couldn’t even tell.”

She smiled, and Magnus’ heart danced. Well, it was now or never. Time to rush in.

“Hey,” he said, “I was thinking--”

He was interrupted by Julia’s hand on his neck, pulling his head--his lips--to hers in a kiss.

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her back.

The stars were out now.

After a moment that seemed both too long and never, never long enough, Julia released his neck.
“I should… get to my family,” she said, her voice breathy and low.

“Okay,” he managed, even though he felt like all the air had been sucked out of the world.

She laughed, softly. “You’ll have to let me go, then.”

He dragged his arms to his sides, and then brushed a curl from her face. “That was…”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“I’ll, um.” He swallowed. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Oh! Yes. At practice.”

“After practice?”

She smiled, and his knees went weak. “After practice.”

She left. Magnus fell back against his van and ran his hand through his hair, and laughed.
Julia kept a straight face. She kept it when she rejoined her family around the corner. She kept it through the celebratory drink they took her out for afterwards. She kept it the whole ride home. She felt like cracks might be forming in her face as she said the quickest good-bye possible, claiming homework and important practices and work in the morning, anything to get her back into her apartment.

But soon enough she was pounding up the stairs, her hands shaking as she argued with the lock on the front door. It took her several tries to get it open. Then she slammed the door shut behind her and finally --FINALLY-- she was alone.

In the quiet dark of her empty apartment, she took a deep breath and kicked off her heels. Wow. That had actually happened. She had kissed Magnus Burnside. And Magnus Burnside had kissed her back. All at once the emotions she’d been keeping a lid on since the kiss suddenly sprang forth. Letting out a joyful shriek, she leapt into the air, and spun around in a circle, like she was in a damn tampon commercial. She had kissed Magnus. And Magnus had kissed her. She walked quickly around her small living room for several minutes, shaking her hands and smiling so wide that it felt like her face might combust. She felt like she could run forever or jump to the moon. She’d kissed Magnus! Magnus had kissed her! She had to talk to someone.

She grabbed the phone and quickly typed in a number with shaking hands.

“This is Lucre-”

“MAGNUS AND I KISSED,” Julia interjected, not able to contain herself any longer.

“Wait, what??”

“We kissed! We kissed! We kissed!!! Magnus and I!! We kissed!” Julia practically sang, jumping up and down in her kitchen. Every time she repeated it, her heart grew brighter.

“Okay, calm down,” Lucretia said, laughing.

“Calm??! I can’t be calm!! Did you hear me?? We kissed!” She plopped down to sit on the floor of her kitchen, keening joyfully. She slipped her stocking feet back and forth against the linoleum, and slapped a hand over her mouth to keep herself from repeating the words over and over again.

“So, do you want to tell me the whole story?” Lucretia said in a very amused tone.

“Yes, please!” Julia launched into the story of the whole evening, sparing absolutely no detail. Every moment, every emotion, every breath was carefully combed over and examined. Lucretia listened, asking just the right questions, and graciously letting Julia just giggle for several minutes in a row. When she finished, Julia let out a breath and fell over the rest of the way onto her floor. The cool linoleum and the fact that she’d finally been able to tell someone was helping her calm down.

“I just… I’m really happy right now,” she said, a large smile still on her face.

“So you really like him, huh??"
“I do… I haven’t felt this way in a very long time, if I’ve ever even felt this before.”

“Magnus is a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is,” she repeated dreamily.

“When are you going to see him next?”

“After practice.”

Lucretia chuckled. “So I guess you have some phone calls to make if you’re going to tell everyone before tomorrow evening.”

“Actually, I figured I would just have to call one more person.”

There were a lot of things about Taako’s apartment that Kravitz really liked. Taako had the softest sheets he’d ever felt in his life. When he’d stay over, Taako would bake scones in the morning and they’d eat them while watching reruns of old Looney Tunes on his staticky television. And it always smelled nice, like pomegranates and eucalyptus and flour. But if there was one thing that Kravitz would change about Taako’s apartment, it would be the fact that he kept his phone right by the bed. And that phone had a habit of ringing at odd hours of the night.

So when it started ringing at 12:17 in the morning, Kravitz had half a mind to toss it out the window and gleefully watch it smash into oblivion on the street below. But Taako was faster than he was; Taako had leapt half across Kravitz and was now lying perpendicular on Kravitz’s stomach, the blasted phone already in hand.

“Yello?” he said, sounding much more awake than Kravitz felt.

“Taako, I can’t breathe,” he mumbled. Taako waved a hand to shush him.

“Jules, can you repeat that?”

“Tell Julia to call back in the morning,” Kravitz said, pulling the pillow up and over his head. Why couldn’t people call at normal times of the day? Surely nothing was that important.

“You WHAT?” Taako shouted, pushing himself up to sitting. Kravitz let out an ‘OOF’ as he suddenly had Taako’s hand where his diaphragm used to be. “OH MY GOD, I KNEW IT. I called it! I totally called it. Kravitz, tell her I called it!” He took the pillow off Kravitz’ head and held the phone out. He grumpily put it up to his ear.

“I’m sure whatever it is, Taako did in fact call it. Goodnight, Julia.” He hung up the phone and put it back on the nightstand.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Taako scrambled across Kravitz and picked back up the phone, hitting redial and turning on the lamp. Kravitz groaned and pulled the pillow back over his head. “Julia? Sorry about that, Kravitz is not a morning person. Now, tell me everything. I want every infinitesimal detail.”

Somewhere in the next 45 minutes, Kravitz ended up drifting back off to sleep, which was pretty impressive, given how Taako was pacing about the apartment, alternately tripping over shoes and yelling with Julia. From what he gathered before he fell back asleep, Kravitz guessed that Magnus and Julia had finally bitten the bullet and gotten together. Bully for them, he thought, now let me
sleep.

However the sound of Taako’s keys jingling woke Kravitz back up. He cracked an eye open to see Taako in a very old red skort with a 1992 Neverwinter Pride button on the butt, and an unbuttoned faded tropical print shirt. Taako was shaking out a paisley patterned blanket, and the keys fell out and smacked onto the floor.

“Ah-ha!” he said, quickly grabbing them and heading for the stairs to the front door.

“Where are you going?” Kravitz asked, sitting up and fully awake now.

“I have to tell everyone!” he said, rushing down the stairs and out the door. Kravitz jumped out of bed after him.

“Taako! You don’t even have on shoes!!”

Magnus hopped into his van. He tapped the steering wheel manically with his thumbs. That had really happened. That had really happened!

He pumped his fist. “YES!”

He could jump off of buildings. He could break bricks with his head. Anything was possible because Julia had kissed him, and he’d got to kiss her back.

He leaned into the steering wheel, laughing breathlessly. He had to do something! Anything! Something dumb, maybe! Going home to his depressing, cold apartment was out of the question.

He started up his van and drove to Avi’s.

The van flew as if powered by the glow in his own chest, and he only almost got into a wreck once.

He leapt up the walk to Avi’s front door and pounded. “Aviii!”

Avi opened the door quicker than Magnus expected, wearing sweatpants and no shirt. “Magnus? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, nothing could be wrong, ’cause--”

“Sssh!” Avi stepped out onto the stoop and closed the door most of the way behind him. “Tony’s sleeping.”

“Who’s Tony?” said Magnus.

“Have you never met Tony?” Avi looked perplexed. “Do you ever assume that all your friends know each other? I’ll have to introduce you later. But anyway--”

“Julia kissed me,” Magnus blurted. “She kissed me! I never thought--like I didn’t even hope --but she likes me!”

“My man!” Avi slapped him on the back. “We should go out right now .”

“What about Tony?”
“I’ll leave her a note. We’ve gotta celebrate this!”

Refuge didn’t have set closing hours; Ren tended to kick everyone out by sometime around 1am, although she’d stay open for special occasions, like when Magnus burst in and declared he was buying a round.

The ten people left in the pub cheered. Ren rolled her eyes and pulled out more glasses.

“Tell me how it happened,” said Avi, scooting onto a chair at the bar. “Oh, look, there’s Sloane.” He waved.

Sloane was turned toward the wall of a booth. She waved, and then turned back inward.

Magnus hesitated, kept his voice low. “I’m kind of worried what the B.o.B. will think. They’re so protective, and--”

“I would not worry about it, dude,” said Avi. “They have a betting pool.”

Magnus was both relieved and offended. “They thought we’d--”

“We all did, man, it was really just a matter of time.”

Magnus considered. “Who won?”

Avi shrugged. “Probably Killian. She always wins.”

Magnus took a long drink of his beer. “I just can’t believe we kissed.”

“You did WHAT?” Hurley appeared behind Sloane, face covered in Sloane’s lipstick, clambering over her girlfriend to the bar. “I knew it! I KNEW IT!”

Sloane followed her and smiled sweetly at Magnus. “Thank you, I just won the pool.”

“Ohhh no you didn’t,” said Hurley. “I won. It’s like two weeks over your date.”

“It’s still way closer than your date,” said Sloane.

“I thought we were doing Price is Right rules!”

“We have never done that.”

Avi raised his glass to Magnus. “See? Even her friends like you.”

“Ren!” The door burst open again, and Taako ran in half-dressed to the bar. “Ren you’ll never guess--”

“Magnus and Julia kissed,” said Ren. “Oh my god, Taako, where are your shoes?”

“Taako!” Kravitz appeared in the doorway in grey silk pajamas and Oxfords, holding a pair of flip-flops in the air. “For the love of god--”

Taako spotted Magnus, Avi, and the bickering Hurley and Sloane. “What the hell, guys, I wanted to tell everyone!”

Magnus was overwhelmed. Julia’s friends, who cared about her so much, thought they were
destined for each other. He wrapped Taako in a hug. “I didn’t know you cared!”

Taako stiffly patted him on the back. “Uhhhhhh the drama, my dude. I love the drama. Now maybe don’t…”

Mangus released him, and Kravitz moved in, shoving the shoes into his stomach. “I swear, if I wasn’t here, you’d run around naked---”

“Thanks, babe.” Taako said, holding onto Kravitz’s shoulder as he slipped on the flip flops. Kravitz looked moderately satisfied and sat down next to Hurley at the bar.

“Gin and tonic, please, Ren.”

“Taako, tell Hurley I won the bet,” said Sloane.

“It depends, are we playing Price is Right rules?” said Taako.

She threw up her hands. “When have we ever done that?”

Magnus sat back down, watching his friends, feeling a high that wasn’t just from Julia, although--god, Julia. Holy shit, Julia. But this was something else, too, something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

This felt like home.

Chapter End Notes

Hey Everybody!
We’re back!! We have a whole bunch of great chapters for you AND a brand new posting schedule. Chapters will now be posted 4 times a week! Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, & Friday. Thank you so much for all of your wonderful comments and kudoses (kudosi?) and fanmail. We’ve read all of them, and they’ve all meant so much to us. As always, if you ever need to talk to us, you can find us here or at bureauofbadass on tumblr. See you next chapter!

<3, Hannah & Kaitlyn
It was well past 3 am by the time Magnus’ van rumbled into the parking lot of his apartment complex. Despite the late hour, and the celebration he’d just left, he knew he’d have trouble sleeping. A smile slipped across his face as he shut the van door and jogged to the stairs. He whistled a jaunty tune and swung his keys around his pointer finger as he walked to his front door.

“Hello, Magnus,” a cool voice came suddenly from the darkness.

“Puta madre!” Magnus practically jumped out of his skin and he looked around wildly. It took a moment, then he spotted her. Lucretia was sitting in his neighbor’s plastic lawn chair by the front door. She seemed very out of place on the sagging porch of his apartment. She quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Careful, you might wake the neighbors,” she said in that same cool tone.

He cleared his throat. “Um, what are you—how did you… how long have you been waiting?”

She shrugged. “Not that long.”

“...How did you know where I live?”

She smiled slyly and looked away. “I heard about you and Julia,” she replied instead. At the mention of her name, that warm feeling returned again, though it was accompanied by confusion and, if he was honest with himself, a little fear. She looked back at him and seemed to notice his confused expression. “Taako called me from Refuge.”

“Oh.”

“But Julia called me even before Taako did.” She stood up and crossed her arms. Somehow she seemed even taller than he was in this moment. “Which is why you and I need to have a little chat.”

He relaxed a little. Oh, that’s what this was about. “Sure.” He nodded and unlocked the door. “Come on in.”

Lucretia waved him ahead. “After you.” Magnus paused, but went in anyway. Lucretia shut the door solidly behind her. “Have a seat.” she said, clicking on a lamp. It felt weird to be taking, well, orders in his own house, but he sat down on the futon that he’d gotten from Goodwill the week before.

“Sorry, I don’t have much in the way of furniture.”

Lucretia pulled up the end of the coffee table and sat down across from Magnus. She rested her elbows on her knees and steepled her fingers, calmly studying Magnus’ face. Magnus tried to match her gaze, but found that he couldn’t hold it for very long without breaking into a sweat.

“Look, I… I think I know what this is about,” he began cautiously.

“Do you?” she asked, not breaking her gaze.

“Yeah, this is the ‘she’s my best friend, if you hurt her, I’ll hurt you’ talk. Right?”
“Is it?”

Magnus tried to search her face for any shred of a hint, but it was a poised mask. He began to feel like he was wrong, but he pressed on anyway.

“Well, yeah. I don’t know what other reason you’d have for showing up at my house at 3 o’clock in the morning.”

Lucretia blinked and smiled a little. She stood up and began to slowly walk around the room, which somehow Magnus found more unnerving than her sitting still. He swallowed and continued, “I’ve dated girls before, I know what the talk is. I promise, hurting Julia is the last thing I would ever want to do. I really like her.”

“That’s nice to hear, Magnus. And you’re not completely wrong,” she said, looking at the three books Magnus had on the built-in shelf. “Julia is my best friend. And there will be consequences if you hurt her.” She turned around to face him, crossed her arms and leaned back against the shelf. “But I should tell you that if such an occurrence happens, I will be second in a very very long line.” She was quiet for a moment, looking at him expectantly. “Do you know who will be first?”

Magnus thought. He was pretty sure Julia didn’t have any brothers. “Her… dad?”

Lucretia closed her eyes and shook her head. “Julia,” she said.

“Oh.” He looked down, a little confused. This wasn’t how the talk usually went.

“Now, I know you two just kissed this evening, and it’s all still very new, and you might not even like the term dating.” She rolled her eyes a little. “But before you dare to take one more step down this path with my best friend, there are some things I need to make sure you understand.”

Magnus nodded. “O-okay.”

“I have known Julia for almost a decade; in that time do you know how many men she has decided to go on a second date with?”

Magnus slowly shook his head.

“It’s five. She’s not a person who pursues romance with just anyone, and that tells me that you must be pretty special.” Magnus blinked a few times. This wasn’t so bad. “In fact, she called me in what can only be described as a tizzy after your kiss.” Lucretia paused. “I don’t think that’s ever happened before.”

He smiled and ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck where he could still faintly feel her fingers. “Yeah, I feel about the same.”

“Have you ever been in love, Magnus?” Lucretia asked, moving back towards the coffee table.

“Um, maybe once before, but I’m not sure.”

She shook her head as she sat down on the table across from him again. “Then you haven’t. When you’re in love--and I mean real love, not the stuff that those dopey songs and perfume commercials are about--you know.” For the first time since she’d been there, the placid mask slipped a little as she looked away from him and frowned.

“...And you have?” he asked quietly.
“What?” She blinked as if being brought out of deep thought.

“You’ve been in ‘real love’ before?”

Lucretia nodded. “I have,” she said, smiling though her eyes still looked solemn, even sad. “And I think that you and Julia have a very good shot at getting there too.” She sat up a little straighter. “Now I’m not saying that you and Julia will get married, have 18 children, and die in each other’s arms.”

Magnus chuckled a little.

“But this has the chance to become something real. And that is not to be taken flippantly.” Her dark eyes seemed to bore in Magnus. “A relationship like this will take everything you have, every ounce of courage you possess. You have to be brave enough to be completely honest with her, to open up and leave yourself vulnerable. Because if you try to protect yourself, if you try to hide, if you try to run, if you keep yourself closed from her, it will not work. The relationship will shrivel and die.” She paused and shook her head. “It is the scariest thing a person can possibly do in this whole lifetime.

“But if you can find it, if you can be brave enough for it…” she looked away from him, a far-off look in her eye, “Nothing else will compare. It is… as close as we get to Heaven on this side.”

Magnus thought deeply for awhile in silence. “...That seems… dangerous.”

She looked back to him and nodded slowly. “It is. You will get hurt. There’s no way around that. The only way to keep yourself from being hurt would be to keep yourself completely closed off. And that’s no way to live life, let alone a relationship as special as you and Julia.”

He nodded, and looked up when Lucretia put her hand on his shoulder.

“So my challenge to you, Magnus, is to decide if you are ready for something real. You need to take stock and figure out if you have enough to give Julia the chance she deserves. Take some time, and really think about it. Because Julia is ready. And if you’re not, you’d both be better off if you ended it right now.”

She nodded and gave his shoulder a solid pat. She stood up and left the apartment.

Magnus heard her car start after another minute and it drove away. He didn’t move for a while, till finally he stood in a daze and clicked off the lamp.
Angus frowned and untangled his fingers from the string once again. Mavis had made it seem so simple on the playground that afternoon.

“Hold it tight between thumb and pinky,” he said under his breath, jostling a little as Killian’s car turned a corner. “Then one pointer, and another.” He slipped his pointer fingers under the string, which was actually an old shoelace, and pulled it across. He was about halfway to a Cat’s Cradle, or maybe a teacup since he was just playing alone.

“So what do you think’ll change?” Carey asked, sitting cross legged in the front seat.

“What do you mean?” Killian brought the car to a stop in front of a cross walk, glancing at Carey.

“Well, he can’t go on being the ref, now can he?”

“Oh, I hadn’t even thought about that.” Killian signaled her turn. “This’d be a pretty big conflict of interest, huh?”

Angus looked up from his failing and tangled string game. “What do you mean ‘conflict of interest’?”

“It means when someone wants two things but they can’t have both at the same time.” Carey offered.

“I know what it means, I meant what do you guys mean? Why can’t someone be the ref anymore?” Carey and Killian made eye contact and had one of those silent conversations that adults often have around children. “Did something happen to Mr. Avi? Or Magnus?” his voice was rising a little in panic.

“No, nothing happened to them. They’re both doing fine.” Killian consoled him.

“Magnus is doing more than fine,” Carey said under her breath and smirking a little. Killian gave her a look. “Sorry.”

“Um… how do I say this?” Killian said, as they pulled into The Adventure Zone parking lot. She unbuckled her belt and turned around in her seat. “Magnus and Miss Julia are… dating.”

“Kinda,” Carey added.

“Yeah, kinda. Nothing’s official yet. It’s really new for them.”

Angus smiled and nodded, carefully putting away his string. “I see now.” They all got out of the car, and started heading for the door. Angus looked at the grassy field behind the building and got an idea.

“Actually, um, is it okay--can I um, play in the field today?” he asked.

Carey and Killian looked at each other. “You’ll stay off the train tracks?” Carey asked.

“Oh, of course.”
“Not too long, alright? You come inside before it’s dark.”

Angus nodded quickly, “Yes, ma’am!” and he ran off to the field. Carey and Killian shook their heads and went into practice.

Julia stopped at the water fountain, bending low for a long drink. Practice went well, they were going to be more than ready for the bout that weekend. But even better, practice seemed to fly by and she was expecting Magnus any minute. She smiled at just the thought of him, but first she’d better go get changed. She spun around and almost tripped over Angus, who was standing right behind her.

“Whoa, didn’t see you there, buddy,” she said, steadying herself on his shoulders. “Gotta watch out where I’m going.”

Angus, however, seemed to be concentrating on something. He had his hands clasped behind his back, and his little mouth was squished into frown.

“Are you okay?” she asked, leaning down to his eye level. “Everything okay at school?”

Angus nodded. “Oh, yes. I just… wanted to give you this.” He held out a bundle of wildflowers that he’d tied into a small bouquet with a shoelace.

“What’s this?” Julia knelt down and cupped his hands in hers, leaning forward to smell the flowers.

“Miss Killian and Miss Carey told me about you and Magnus,” he explained. “And my grandpa says that when you’re happy for someone, you should get them flowers.”

Julia’s heart melted. “Oh, Angus.” She pulled him in for a tight hug, rocking side to side a little. “Thank you.” She placed a kiss on top of his head and sat back. “It means a lot to me that you’re happy for us.”

Angus’s whole face lit up when he smiled. “Of course I’m happy for you, Miss Julia. You and Magnus are some of my favorite people.”

Julia smiled. “Well, you’re one of mine.”
Real Talk

Chapter Notes

Brief mention of past violence, take care of yourselves. <3

Magnus drove up to the back door of the rink. Did he have time to wash his face in the rink sink? He wished he’d managed a shower after work.

He’d been thinking in turns about Julia and about what Lucretia had said about Julia. She was ready for something real. He turned off his van and tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel. Something real, something that took serious courage. Well dammit, so was he. This was just the first step. Time to go for it.

He swung himself out of the van just as the rink’s back door opened. Julia exited, holding a tiny bouquet of wildflowers tied up in a shoelace; she caught his eye and smiled. Magnus felt weak. He picked up his pace--

“Magnus! I’m glad I caught you.” Johann appeared between him and Julia.

“Oh. Uh. Hey, man, what’s up?” Magnus glanced at Julia, who was now meandering over to him. So much for rushing in.

“I wanted to talk to you about last night. You know, put everything on the table.”

Magnus dragged his gaze back to Johann. “Whuh… what do you mean?”

“I mean it was pretty obvious what you were thinking about when I talked to you.”

Magnus was stunned into silence. He felt the blush creeping back up his neck. He shot a mortified glance at Julia, who was now within earshot and listening with amused interest.

“Hey, it’s okay,” said Johann. “Music does funny things to us sometimes. I get that better than anyone.”

Julia looked like she was suppressing a laugh. Magnus sputtered, “Listen, I--”

“You don’t have to explain.” Johann patted him on the shoulder.

Magnus exhaled. “That obvious, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. I just wanted to make it clear where I stood.”

“Um. Okay.”

“It’s not that I’m not flattered--”

Julia’s hand flew to her mouth. Magnus’ jaw dropped.

“And actually, thinking about this helped me come to terms with some things.” Johann frowned at the ground. “A lot of things, actually.”
Magnus attempted words. No words came. Julia’s face was turning red with quelled laughter.

“I have to say I’m indebted to you for it,” said Johann. “Like I know myself a little better now. But I don’t think this—” Johann pointed to himself and then Magnus—“could work out right now. My heart lies with someone else.” He sighed expansively and looked into the distance.

Magnus managed an, “Oh.”

Johann gave him a look of deep and totally unwarranted understanding. “I’m sorry, man. I’m sure you’ll find a good guy someday.” He patted Magnus on the shoulder.

At this point Julia rescued him. “Hey, guys, what are we talking about?”

“Julia! Hey.” Johann dug around in his pocket. “I wanted to give you your half of the gig money.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” said Julia. “It was a favor for my uncle. You played the whole time.”

“Listen, I play jazz on the piano? That’s just background music.” He pulled a neatly folded stack of twenties out of his pocket and handed it to her. “And I know my voice is better suited to other genres. You made the act, Jules.”

She took it. “Well, thanks, Johann.”

“Thank you for my first real gig. I’ll see you later.” He looked Magnus in the eye and raised a fist in a sort of “be strong” gesture. Magnus just nodded, unsure what else to do.

As Johann circled the building and left, Julia dissolved into a fit of snickers. Magnus sagged.

“Should I tell him?” he said. “I feel like I’m lying!”

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “You heard how much it means to him.”

“I just don’t want him to think I was faking or something, now that you and I—”

“He’ll figure it out, don’t worry.” Julia looked at the wad of cash in her hand. “Um. Do you want to get something to eat? I’ll treat.”

He laughed. “Sure. Hey, what’s with the flowers?”

“Angus gave them to me.” She offered them to him for a sniff.

He sniffed. “Ah, man, I can’t compete with class like that.”

“Well, they’re kind of for both of us. He said we’re some of his favorite people.”

“Jeez,” chuckled Magnus. “I love that kid.”

Julia gave him a look of such sweetness that Magnus’ heart sped up. He wondered what he’d done to deserve it. Right! This was a date. “Uh, hi, by the way.” He spread his arms for a hug.

She put the flowers through the buckle of her skate bag and squeezed him. “Hi.”

He sighed contentedly. God, it was like holding the sun.
Her arms relaxed and he let her go. “So,” she said. “Chi-chi’s?”

“Yeah.” He offered her a hand, which she took, her tiny soft hand in his. “How was practice?”

“Tough one today. We’re playing Phandolin on Thursday and they totally trounced us last year.”

They walked down the street together.

“Okay, how did you get this scar?” Julia said, brushing her fingers over her own eyebrow.

“Oh, that?” Magnus’ hand floated to the notch in his forehead. “That’s not even a good story. It was a bar fight.”

“How is a bar fight not a good story?” asked Julia.

“I don’t know, I was drunk. Some guy was trying to pick a fight, and I was feeling like fighting myself. I used to be a real punk-ass kid.” Magnus rubbed the back of his head. “I was just angry. I didn’t know he had a knife.”

Julia winced. “Jeez. You could have been stabbed.”

Magnus hesitated. “At that point I was kind of looking for trouble. My parents had just died.”

“Oh.”

Magnus took a rattling sip from the last of his soda. He seemed very far away. Julia put her hand on his. His look softened.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” she said.

“No, it’s okay. I just… still miss them.”

“How did they die?” Julia said softly.

“Drive-by.” He swallowed. “My old neighborhood… there was this guy. A gangster. He had the whole place under siege, basically. Needed a place to run drugs and we were lucky enough to be it. People got caught in the crossfire all the time.”

“That’s awful.”

“It’s better now, but yeah. It was awful.”

Julia traced a knot in the table with the hand that wasn’t on Magnus’. “My mom died too. Car crash.”

Magnus moved his hand so their fingers were interlaced, tracing the tendons of her hand with his fingers. “How old were you?”

“Eight. My dad and I were with her in the car. We were thrown clear, but--” her voice broke. She turned her face away.

Magnus brought his other hand to enclose hers. They sat in the silence for a while, each in their own thoughts. She sniffed and cleared her throat. “Anyway. Just a bar fight?”
“Yeah. Guy was tweaking. You’re right, though, I could have died, or at the very least lost an eye. It was sobering in more ways than one. The next day I joined the neighborhood watch.”

Julia met his eyes again. “That sounds like the start of something.”

“It was, yeah. We started youth programs and stuff. Trying to keep kids out of Kalen’s gang. And we’d keep an eye out in dangerous areas. Watching out for each other. It worked pretty well.”

“Sounds like real community.”

“For sure.”

Julia’s brow crinkled. “Then why did you leave?”

“Ha. Well.” He let go of Julia’s hand. “I saw Kalen in an alley once when I was walking home from work. I decided to follow him. Turned out he was down there for an execution. I saw him shoot someone.”

“God,” breathed Julia.

Magnus shuddered. “It wasn’t great. But I called the cops, and they caught him with the gun. I got to testify, put him away forever.”

“But that’s good,” said Julia.

“Sure, until his cronies started hunting me down.” Magnus clenched his jaw. “They almost got me a couple of times. None of ‘em left without bleeding, but I was getting tired of watching my own back.”

“The cops—” Julia began.

“They couldn’t do anything, they said.” Magnus shrugged. “So I left.”

Julia leaned back in her chair. “Damn, son. You’re a man on the run.”

“But really. I was more like low-level target practice, I think. So I told everyone I was moving to New Elfington, and then I came here instead.”

Julia whistled. “Who knew I was dating the guy from *Die Hard*?”

Magnus laughed. “Nah, I’m nowhere near as cool as John McClane.”

She frowned a little. “I thought it was Bruce Willis.”

“Yeah, Bruce Willis plays John McClane.” He gave her a searching look. “Are you trying to tell me you’ve never seen *Die Hard*?”

She shook her head, laughing. “Should I have?”

“We need to rent it sometime. You’d love it.”

“Oh would I?” she teased. Magnus laughed, and she smiled.

They were both quiet for a minute. Magnus spoke first, quietly: “Did you say dating?”

Julia’s smile dropped. “If that’s cool. Sorry, I kind of just assumed—”
“No, that’s totally cool. That’s… you know, that’s what I want to do. Is date you.”

A little flustered laughter escaped her mouth. “Good. ‘Cause that’s what I want to do too. With you.”

They looked at each other at the same time, and then burst out laughing.


“Psh. Who do you think you’re talking to?” Magnus waved a hand. “Easily the best Candlenights movie there is.”

“Oh no, hang on,” she said. “Candlenights movie? Is there a heartwarming message about the true meaning of Candlenights in it? Because otherwise it’s just a movie set at Candlenights, like the end of Jumanji.”

“Of course there is,” scoffed Magnus. He paused. “Well, I mean, it depends.”

“Depends on what?” she demanded, cackling.

“I mean…”

Chi Chi’s closed at ten. They were there up until the teenager behind the counter threatened to lock them in.
“Come on, Marnie. You have to give me something.” Kravitz said, pacing around Taako’s apartment with his cell phone pressed to his ear. “You and I both know these are powerful stories.”

“They are. But you know the board. They’re skittish around these kinds of... things...”

“What kinds of things?”

“You know.”

“No, Marnie. I really don’t. So why don’t you save me and you a whole lot of time and just spit it out?”

“Fine. They don’t like the... gay stuff.”

Kravitz stopped in his tracks. “What?”

“They were fine with the rest of your pitch, but they didn’t like the parts about the girls having girlfriends... and you know, you dating the one male subject.”

“You must be joking.”

“They said if you took that stuff out, then maybe they’d be interested in buying the story.”

“That stuff is one of the major components of the whole piece! Taako’s story alone doesn’t make sense if it was just omitted!” Kravitz said, resuming pacing.

At the mention of his name, Taako looked up from the dress he was sewing, pins in his mouth. He’d never seen Kravitz angry before; he was always so calm and collected. If he was honest, it was kind of hot. But he kept that observation to himself.

“Hey, hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just telling you what they told me.”

Kravitz pinched the bridge of his nose, and took several deep breaths.

“If you want to leave that stuff in, maybe try a different magazine. Like Out. They might be interested.”

“These stories are deserving of a national audience.”

“Well, you’ll have to try someone else’s. Sorry, Kravitz.”

And Marnie hung up. Kravitz pushed the antenna down and then threw the phone at the bed, making a deep dent in one of the throw pillows.

“Hey, easy on the merchandise, broseph,” Taako said, looking over his shoulder. Kravitz looked back at Taako, and the storm passed when he let out a breath.

“Sorry.” He clenched and unclenched his fist several times. Taako turned around in the chair.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, sliding pins into the cushion.
“No.” Kravitz paced into one of the costume aisles, and then paced back out. “It’s just…” He clenched his fists again and paced into the aisle, and out again. “Why are people stupid?”

“I take it they weren’t interested?”

“No! It’s just, agh--” he rubbed his hands over his face. “I know this’ll be a good story. An important story! But all the magazines I’ve talked to have their heads stuck too far up their asses to even give it a chance!”

He glowered and dropped down onto the couch. When he looked over at Taako, his hand was covering the bottom half of his face.

“What?” Kravitz asked, grumpily.

“Nothing, nothing, sorry,” Taako said, pulling his hand away and trying to maintain a calm expression.

“No, what?”

Taako smiled a little at him. “Just… you’re very cute when you’re angry.”

“Hmph,” Kravitz retorted, crossing his arms and slumping further on the couch, a deep frown on his handsome face.

The phone rang from deep inside the pillow pile, and Taako turned back around to his sewing machine. Kravitz grumbled but hauled himself off the couch to go answer it.

“Kravitz speaking. ...Oh, hey, Bill. Thanks for getting back to me. Did you have a chance to look at the proofs I sent you?”

Taako finished the seam and cut the trailing strings. He turned it inside right and held it up. The director at the theatre had been hinting she was going to do Oklahoma that fall, so he’d figured he better get a jump on all the prairie garb. It wasn’t his best work, but it would do for a chorus member.

“Wait, wait. Say that again.” Kravitz said, standing stock still. Taako turned around to look at him. He looked like someone had just punched him in the gut. Taako stood and hung the dress up, keeping an eye on Kravitz, whose face continued to fall.

“But there must be-- ...No… I understand.” he said, in a quiet and hollow voice. “Thanks for trying… yeah. Bye.” He hung up the phone, and numbly placed it back on the stand. He just stood and stared at the wall for a while.

“Kravitz?” Taako asked gently.

“I... just got fired...”

“What?” Taako walked closer to him. Kravitz dropped down on the bed, and leaned his elbows on his knees, his hand covering his mouth. He stared at the ground in shock.

“How can you be fired?” Taako asked. Kravitz blinked a few times and looked up at Taako like he was noticing him for the first time.

“They… my biggest client has decided that my work does not ‘reflect the family values that they hold as an institution,’” he quoted bitterly. “And they don’t want to do business with me anymore.”

“They can’t fire you for that… can they?”
Kravitz looked back down at the floor and shrugged. “They can do whatever they want. I’m just a freelancer and there’s a million excuses for why they won’t use me anymore… even when we both know the real reason.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Kravitz shook his head slowly. “I just… I thought they knew.” He met Taako’s gaze; his eyes looked tired. “I thought they didn’t care.”

Taako sat on the bed next to him and rested his head on his shoulder. Kravitz reached over and took Taako’s hand, intertwining their fingers. Neither of them said anything for a long while.

“I should probably go,” Kravitz said finally, squeezing Taako’s hand before letting go. “I need to make some calls.”

Taako stood up and followed him down the stairs to the door, helping him find his shoes amongst the throng. “Krav? Will you be okay? Like money-wise?”

“That’s what I need to call about,” he said, slipping into the second shoe. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He gave Taako a distracted kiss and quickly jogged out the door. Taako watched him get into his car and pull away before he shut the door, a sinking feeling forming in his gut.

“And so I check her air conditioning compressor, it’s working just fine. Fuses are just fine. Plenty of coolant. But there’s still not a puff of air coming out of the vents, and a slight clicking noise from under the dash.” Sloane said, before taking a sip of her drink.

“So what was it?” Julia asked as she cleaned a glass. Across from her at the bar were Sloane and Taako, who was absent-mindedly stirring his piña colada. The rest of Refuge was pretty empty. “A mouse?”

“Almost. The cabin air filter. It was so full of gunk that it had fallen out of its place and was stopping the fan. I’m telling you, there’s no way that it was changed in the entire 13 year lifetime of the car.”

“Ew. Gross.” Julia said, setting down the glass.

“Yeah, there was dirt and leaves and feathers. It was disgusting. Worst I’ve ever seen.”

Julia thought for a moment. “...has mine ever been changed?”

“Yeah, I got you a new one last time you came in for an oil change.”

“Oh good,” Julia said. She looked over at Taako, who had been quiet the whole time, just staring at the top of the bar. She and Sloane shared a look. “Earth to Taako. Come in, Taako.”

“Hm?” He looked up and between them.

“Are you okay?” Sloane asked. “You’ve been kind of out of it the past couple days.”

“More so than usual,” Julia added with a wry smile.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine…” He looked down at his drink with a frown.

“Oh yeah, you seem great,” Sloane said, finishing her drink. “Come on. Spill.”
Taako looked between the two of them. “I’m fine, it’s just… Kravitz.”

“You guys fighting?” Julia asked.

“Hurley and I fight sometimes, it’s not a big deal as long as you make up.”

“I wish we were fighting; I’d know what to do then.” Taako shook his head. “He… He’s been trying to find a magazine interested in publishing his story about us. But every single one he’s talked to has said no and, even worse, his biggest client ended their contract with him because of it.”

“Whoa,” Sloane said.

“They didn’t like the derby story that much?” Julia asked.

“They didn’t like the gay people in the story that much,” Taako said, bitterly. “And they don’t like Kravitz now since he’s dating me.”

“Taako, that sucks.”

“And the worst part of all of this is Kravitz has fallen seemingly off the earth.”

“What do you mean?” Sloane asked.

“After he got the call that he’d been essentially fired, he said he had to go make some calls and that’d he’d see me the next day. But that was four days ago, and I haven’t seen him since.” Taako tapped his thumb against the tabletop. “I stopped by his place this morning, just to check on him, and he’d left a note that he had to go out of town for a couple days and I shouldn’t worry.”

He looked back and forth between the two. But they didn’t seem to understand.

“Don’t you guys see?” he said, his voice rising in pitch.

“I mean, I don’t,” Julia said. Sloane shook her head as well.

Taako sighed. “He’s going to dump me.”

“Oh, now, hey.” Julia and Sloane started at the same time.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You guys are great together.”

Taako counted his reasons on his fingers. “He’s become emotionally distant. He just left a note, instead of telling me in person. And we have only been dating two months, and--and--and already I’ve cost him his job! Imagine what I could do with more time! I could, I don’t know, kill a beloved family member!”

“Alright, hold on a second.” Julia grabbed Taako’s wrist. “Take a breath, you’re spiraling.”

Taako took a quick breath.

“Okay, so point of order, you did not cost him his life’s work. Him being gay is what cost him his life’s work, which, admittedly, is not great. But at least it’s not you,” Julia offered.

“They would have never found out if he hadn’t started dating me,” Taako countered.
“You don’t know that!”

“But I do know that!”

“Hey, hey! Shut up!” Sloane said, smacking the bar top and silencing Taako and Julia. “As the only person in this group who has had a relationship that’s lasted longer than a loaf of bread, maybe I should say something, hm?” She looked between the two of them. She put a hand on Taako’s shoulder. “Now. I know you’re feeling insecure about the relationship, but right now, you shouldn’t focus on that. If you’re feeling like this, imagine how Kravitz is feeling. He just lost his job. Even if there are no financial repercussions, that kind of change can rock a person at their core.”

Taako blinked a few times and looked down. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

“He needs you right now,” Sloane continued. “More than ever. You need to be there for him. This is part of being in a mature relationship. You put the other person first. And he’ll do the same for you when your time comes.”

“You’re right,” Taako said, nodding slowly.

“Course I am,” Sloane said, sitting back in her seat. “Seven years with Hurley is nothing to sneeze at.”

Taako stood up quickly, pulling a couple dollars out of his pocket. “I have to go, guys.”

It was still two more days till Taako spotted Kravitz’ car outside his apartment when he was driving back from work. Taako quickly slammed on the brakes and pulled into the Pegasus Fields parking lot. With Sloane’s words echoing in his mind, Taako knocked on the door.

Maybe he should have gone home and changed first. At least he wasn’t in his uniform, but he was practically coated toe to tip in powdered sugar. There had been an incident. But when Kravitz opened the door, Taako was floored to realize that he was the better dressed of the two of them.

“Oh, hey,” Kravitz said. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had several days’ worth of scruff on his face. His t-shirt was wrinkled and his socks didn’t even match. Taako had never seen Kravitz in a state even close to this before.

Taako blinked a few times, before managing. “H-hey. ...I got your note.”

He looked confused for a moment, then he remembered. “Oh right. Good. Here, come on in.”

Even the apartment was different. Normally it was a beige box with a few pieces of landlord-supplied furniture, impeccably clean. But now there were bank statements and spreadsheets scattered over the kitchen table. Several groupings of moving boxes were in a couple corners, and some large wrapped pieces of art were leaning against the walls. Luggage and camera equipment were haphazardly strewn across the floor.

“Here, let me--” Kravitz stepped around Taako and picked up a tripod and a sweatshirt, setting them on top of a box. He cleared some room on the couch so that at least one of them could sit down.

Taako looked warily at Kravitz. “Are you okay?” he asked him bluntly.

Kravitz looked around at the apartment and frowned. “This looks pretty bad, doesn’t it?”
“For a normal person, this would be pretty bad. For you, this,” he gestured to the mess, “is catastrophic.”

“I’m sorry.” Kravitz said, rubbing the back of his neck, “This past week has been… not great.”

“No.” Taako picked up a bounce board and set it against the wall so he could walk into the room more. “Don’t apologize. Just… let me help. Tell me what happened, where you’ve been… what you need.”

Kravitz sat slowly down on the couch. “I hardly know where to begin.” He looked up at Taako for a moment, then dropped his head and sighed. “I have spent the entirety of my career developing contacts, fostering relationships, finding avenues to tell the stories that I found. Very nearly a decade of work… and it’s just gone.”

“I thought it was just the one,” Taako said, picking up a stack of mail from the floor and setting it down on the kitchen table.

“I think Bill told people… or everyone else just arrived at the same conclusion that he did. I’ve had four more magazines say that they don’t want to work with me anymore.”

Taako attempted to organize the papers on the table, at least sort them into useable piles. He noticed that in addition to the bank statements and spreadsheets, there were several monthly itemized budgets written in Kravitz’s exacting handwriting.

“I kept trying to find ways to make it work still,” Kravitz continued, resting his face against his hand. “But the phone just kept ringing. And eventually it became clear that it would not work at all.”

Taako turned back to look at him. “So what did you do?”

“Well, initially I left to go to Neverwinter and close out my apartment, ‘cause I certainly can’t afford that rent anymore. If things don’t change, I won’t even be able to afford this place soon.”

Taako stepped over a moving box and picked a lens bag off of the floor, setting it out of harm’s way.

“And then while I was there, I ran into an old college friend who was going to Pretoria to cover the presidential changeover. She wanted to know if I knew anyone who could be a second shooter for her, and I… I had to take it. Two weeks ago, I would not have even looked twice at a job like that. But now--” he shook his head, boring a hole into the floor with his gaze. “It’s like the last decade of my career never even happened. I’m 31 years old, and I’m back at square one.” He covered his face with his hands.

Taako let him be for a few minutes and continued to try and provide some order to the space. Move boxes out of walk ways, make sure expensive equipment wasn’t in danger of being stepped on. It certainly wasn’t up to Kravitz’ normal standards, but at least it was better than when he had arrived.

“…I probably should have called you before I left the country,” Kravitz said after a while. “Shit.”

“Hey,” Taako said, coming to stand in front of him. “Don’t even worry about that. The floor was dropping out from under you, you did what you had to. If anyone understands, I do.”

He sighed and shook his head. “It’s like… I don’t even know who I am anymore. I mean, who am I if I’m not--” he glanced up at him. “Oh, Taako… why are you even with me?”
Taako looked down at him for a moment. “Kravitz, I’ve dated… a lot of different guys. And not one of those relationships lasted very long. They all ended up being selfish, or immature, or, you know, just interested in a hook-up. And over the years, I came to the conclusion that that would be the best that I could do, the best that I could hope for. But then, out of the blue, you came along. And you’re handsome, and talented, and passionate, and charming, and kind, and we get along well, and you like my weird friends, and we both enjoy dim sum and farmer’s markets and Julia Stiles.”

Taako approached Kravitz, tilting his chin up with one hand and running the other over his hair. His voice lowered to a whisper. “And I’ve told you things about my past that I’ve never told another living soul, and you still accepted me.” He paused and carefully regarded Kravitz’ face. “I’m with you because I have waited my whole life for someone like you, and I never thought that I would be so lucky as to meet anyone who could be half of what you are. You are so much more than what you do. And no matter what you end up doing next, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m with you, for you.”

Kravitz stood and wrapped his arms around Taako, pulling him in for a surprisingly tender kiss. It was long and slow, enveloping. Kravitz rested his forehead against Taako’s, their eyes still closed. The only sound was their intermingling breaths.

“Taako?”

“Yes?”

“…Thank you.” Taako opened his eyes to find Kravitz already open, and looking at him with such tenderness that it made Taako’s heart skip a beat. “With everything that’s going on… I’m just so grateful you’re with me.”

A smile escaped Taako’s lips, and he had to look down to try and contain it.

“Well, you’ll have to try a lot harder than this to get rid of me.”

Kravitz chuckled quietly, a slight smile on his face. Then he grew solemn, and brushed the back of his fingers against Taako’s cheek. “I hope I never am.”

“…I hope so too.”
Carey hopped up onto the counter and grabbed the peanut butter from the high shelf. “Why do you always put it all the way up here?”

“It’s fun to watch you get it down,” said Killian, offering a hand. Carey took it and leapt back to the floor. Killian leaned down and kissed her. “I’ll get the jelly.”

Carey pulled a knife out of the silverware drawer, twirled it once just because she could, and started spreading peanut butter on bread. “I wish we had something more substantial.”

“What are you talking about? PB&J is a classic picnic food.”

“So is fried chicken,” said Carey wistfully.

“I get paid on Wednesday. We’ll go to KFC or something.” She put the jelly down on the counter and twisted off the lid for Carey.

“I wish I still had my mom’s recipe. I could make some.”

“Maybe there’s a good recipe in a book at the library.”

“Not like my mom’s,” said Carey. She scraped off the peanut butter knife on the jar and dipped it into the jelly. “What else do we need?”

“I’ve got some apples and carrots, and cookies. And this.” When Carey looked over, Killian was waving a bottle of whiskey.

Carey snorted. “What kind of picnic are you taking me to?”

“A fun one.” Killian smiled and put the bottle into the canvas bag that was serving as their picnic basket. “It’s such a good idea.”

“A little cheesy, maybe,” said Carey. “You said it was Avi’s idea?”

“Yeah, he wants us to meet the girlfriend.”

“Oh yes, the mysterious Tony.” Carey closed the sandwiches and wrapped them in Saran wrap. “I guess it’s cheaper than a night out at Refuge.”

“And if we’re lucky we’ll get just as drunk.”

Carey laughed and added the sandwiches to the bag. “In that case, let’s go.”

Killian handed Carey her windbreaker. “Let’s.”

Carey traded her for the bag and slid it on. As soon as she flexed her shoulders, it split up the back. Carey froze. “Shit.”

Killian laughed. “You’re so buff you broke your jacket!”

Carey pulled it off and looked at the ripped nylon with disgust. “This was my only jacket!”

“I’ll keep you warm.” Killian wrapped her arms around Carey and lifted her around the middle.
“Ready to go to a picnic?”

“Put me down,” laughed Carey, squirming.

“Must! Keep! Girlfriend! Warm!” Killian carried her out the door and closed it behind them.

It was chilly for June, but not too humid or windy, just right for a picnic. The McElroy Memorial Park wasn’t much more than three blocks in the middle of a neighborhood, but it had a little playground and some nice shady trees. Avi was already there, laying out a blanket under a particularly lovely maple. A woman about their age leaned against the tree trunk, holding a proper picnic basket.

Killian insisted on carrying Carey to the blanket, so they approached their friends the same way they left the apartment, with Carey dangling from Killian’s arms.

“Hi Avi,” said Carey from her perch. Killian put her down carefully on the blanket.

“Hey guys,” said Avi. “This is Antonia!”

"Hi!” she said brightly. Antonia was petite and on the plump side, with tawny skin and a flat nose. She didn’t look at them, more past them.

“The tall one is Killian and this is Carey,” said Avi. “They’re on the team.”

“Avi!”

Magnus and Julia appeared. It was Magnus who shouted. Avi introduced them as well while Carey and Killian settled into the blanket. Killian leaned back on the heels of her hands and Carey sat cross-legged beside her, one hand on her knee. “Pst. Look at Jules.”

Killian looked. Julia was talking to Antonia, but she and Magnus were holding hands shyly. Killian giggled. “They’re so cute.”

“Johann’s around here somewhere,” Avi was saying. “He’s walking his dog.”

Magnus gasped hugely. “There’s a dog ??”

Julia laughed and plopped down onto the blanket beside Carey. “How are you two?”

“It’s so nice to have a Saturday off for once,” said Killian. “Both of us having Saturday off at the same time is damn near a miracle.”

“I could’ve used the hours, though,” sighed Carey.

“Your boss cut your hours again ?” said Julia.

“Yes. I don’t know why he doesn’t just fire me,” Carey growled. “I mean, I’m glad I still have a job, but I’m sick of wondering if my paycheck will cover rent.”

Killian ruffled her short hair.

“You said you applied to some new places, right?” asked Julia.

“Rejections. Across the board. No one wants to hire a thief.”
“You’re not a thief anymore,” said Killian.

“Tell that to my rap sheet,” said Carey. “I’m tired of talking about this. Let’s talk about something more important.”

“All right, like what?” said Julia.

“Something absolutely crucial.” Carey glanced at Magnus. “Julia, have you hit that yet?”

Julia’s mouth dropped open. “God, Carey!”

Killian threw back her head and laughed.

“Seriously, though, how’s it going?” said Carey.

Julia relaxed and lowered her voice. “Really well. Like… really well. He’s just… I’ve never been in a relationship with someone so easy to be around.”

“That’s key, right there,” said Killian. “If you’ve got to work while you’re just hanging out, it’s not worth it.”

“It’s certainly nice to date someone who doesn’t care if I can’t go out because I have homework,” said Julia. “That Finance class nearly killed me, I swear. I’m so glad the semester’s almost over. Oh, look, Lucretia!”

Lucretia approached with Miyagi on a leash and a bag from McDonald’s under her arm. “Hey, everyone.”

“Dog!” said Magnus, abandoning a conversation with Antonia and dropping immediately to his knees to scrub Miyagi behind the ears. “Hello, puppy! Who’s a good dog?”

Miyagi, for his part, looked delighted by the attention and immediately started licking Magnus’ face.

“I’m happy to see you too, Magnus,” said Lucretia, taking a seat beside Killian. “This is Antonia?”

“Yeah, pleased to meet you,” said Antonia, again looking past them. “Sorry for the lack of eye contact. I’m pretty blind.”

“Here, let’s sit down.” Avi offered a hand, which Antonia took, and led her over to join the circle. “I don’t want to brag or anything, but this is a great day for a picnic.”

“Sure is,” said Killian. “So Antonia, what do you do?”

“I do air traffic control, same as Avi,” she said. “Now let me see, Avi’s told me so much about all of you. Killian, you’re a personal trainer?”

“That’s right,” said Killian.

“And Carey works at a pawn shop,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Carey, bristling a little. Easy, she thought, easy.

“How did you two meet?” she asked.
“Oh, man, that’s a great story,” said Julia.

Killian laughed. “Oh god, how long ago was that now?”

Carey grinned. “Five years.”

“Yeah, we had this promotion thing at the gym where I work, an hour of free training. Kind of get people hooked so they hire us on for longer. We don’t do that anymore, thanks to Carey.”

Carey nudged her shoulder. “You’re getting ahead of yourself, babe.”

“Right, so Carey comes in for that free hour of personal training.”

“Really just trying to mooch off free stuff,” said Carey, shrugging. “I did not expect to meet the love of my life.”

“We hit it off, though, big time,” Killian said. “Not that Carey needed any training, like she was already a spectacular athlete. But after that hour I was like, on my knees praying that she would sign up to be trained.”

“I couldn’t afford that,” said Carey.

“But you came back anyway, and I swear, you had a shawl and a beauty mark and a freaking French accent.”

“No way,” said Antonia. Avi started laughing.

“I mean I was going for more of a Belgian accent, but yeah,” said Carey. “I managed to convince the guy behind the desk that I was a different person.”

“So you got another hour of free training?” said Antonia.

“Damn right I did,” said Carey. “I was afraid I was being a creep, though, so I tried to stay disguised for Killian too.”

“I saw right through it,” said Killian. “Your handstand technique is unmistakeable.”

“So you got her number,” said Antonia.

“No, I thought she was just trying to scam the system,” said Killian. “I just let her do it because I liked her. And then she came back again.”

“Oh my god!” Antonia was delighted. “How many times?”

Carey shrugged, laughing. “Like, seven or eight?”

“The last time it was just your normal clothes and a fake mustache,” said Killian.

Magnus looked up from rubbing Miyagi’s belly to say, “That’s the goddamned funniest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“They wouldn’t let her in, but I managed to run out after her and finally get her number,” said Killian.

“We’ve been together ever since,” finished Carey, looking at her girlfriend fondly.
Antonia laughed. “That is a great story.”

“Hey guys,” said Johann’s voice from behind Carey. He joined the circle between Antonia and Magnus, trailing a scruffy black mutt on a leash.

“TWO DOGS!” said Magnus. The black dog bounced over to Miyagi and the two investigated each other briefly.

“Aw, c’mon, Void,” said Johann, trying unsuccessfully to pull her away.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s eat,” said Avi, and everyone spent the next few minutes passing food and offering to share. Magnus and Julia put a bag of chips in the middle of the blanket, and Carey added their apples and carrot sticks. Antonia started pulling out enough tortillas and taco filling for everyone.

“That smells amazing,” said Magnus, sneaking a bit of ham and cheese sandwich to each dog. He had Miyagi in his lap and Void stretched out by his leg.

“You’re welcome to have one,” said Antonia, holding out a taco in his general direction.

He took it and took a bite. “Mmmm, gracias. Eres un sol.”

Antonia frowned a little. “I don’t speak Spanish. I’m Filipino.”

“Oh!” Magnus swallowed. “Sorry. Bad assumption.”

“It’s okay, I actually get that a lot.”

Carey chewed a PB&J thoughtfully. “My Spanish is pretty rusty. Did you call her a sun?”

“Yeah, it means like…” Magnus waved a hand. “A dear, or a doll. Like saying you’re a peach.”

Antonia smiled. “Well thank you.”

“You know who’d like that?” said Julia. “Taako.”

“He probably already knows it,” said Magnus. “It’s pretty common.”

“He doesn’t speak Spanish either, Mags,” said Julia.


“Huh,” said Magnus. “All this time I thought it was just a nickname.”

“That’d be kind of a racist nickname,” said Carey. She considered. “Although if anyone could pull it off, it’d be Taako.”

“What about you?” Magnus asked Carey.

“I’m fourth generation, hombre,” said Carey. “I picked up what I know from my grandparents. And most of it’s swearing.”

Magnus finished off the taco and rubbed the two dogs’ heads. “I’m not used to being the only one who speaks Spanish.”
Johann looked up. “Hablo español. Conversacionalmente.”

Most of the circle exclaimed in surprise. Magnus threw out a hand. “Look at this gringo!”

Carey laughed.

After lunch and a few shared drinks in Dixie cups, Avi pulled a frisbee out of the picnic basket and most of the group spread out to play catch.

Carey wasn’t in the mood, and Antonia couldn’t play anyway, so Carey sat with her. Lucretia stayed as well.

“Sucks that you can’t play,” said Carey, watching Killian take a flying leap and catch a bad throw by Avi. What a babe.

“It’s okay,” said Antonia. “I’m not really an athlete anyway, not like you all.”

“Gosh, I hope you don’t have to be an athlete to play frisbee,” said Carey.

“I used to have one with a beeper in it, so I could hear it,” said Antonia. “I broke it last summer. I should get another one.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” said Lucretia, “how does air traffic control work with being blind?”

“I have a really big magnifying glass and a good memory,” said Antonia. “I’m not totally blind. Most blind people aren’t.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Carey. “What can you see?”

“Anything within about an inch of my face,” she replied, demonstrating with her hand. After that everything’s just unfocused and blobby.”

“Sounds like my life,” said Carey, and Antonia laughed.

They watched their friends play for a little bit in comfortable silence. After a while Magnus threw the frisbee to Void, who ran off with it. Johann and Magnus both ran after her; Magnus got to her first, and wrestled it out of her mouth. Void’s tail was wagging the whole time.

“I wish I had a dog!” shouted Magnus gleefully.

Johann said something inaudible. Magnus replied, “Dogs are the best people! I think dogs should vote!”

Carey, Antonia, and Lucretia all laughed. Carey said, “I hope Julia’s a dog person.”

“They do seem pretty crazy about each other,” said Lucretia.

“You and Killian seem pretty crazy about each other too,” said Antonia.

“Oh yeah,” said Carey. “We’d have gotten married years ago if we could.”

“Maybe someday,” offered Antonia.
“In this state?” said Lucretia. “Not likely.”

Antonia looked uncomfortable. “You could move, I guess.”

“Nah, this is home,” said Carey. And anyway, her criminal record would follow her. “We’re already about as married as we can be anyway.”

Antonia chuckled. “I can’t believe she recognized you by your handstand technique.”

“I’ve seen it,” said Lucretia. “It’s pretty distinctive.”

“How so?”

“Well, here.” Carey curled up into a ball, put her hands on the ground, and pushed herself up into the air, uncurling from the waist.

Antonia squinted, and then her eyes widened. “Oh my god! I wish I could do that.”

Carey grinned at Antonia’s upside down face and rebalanced herself onto one hand. She pretended to clean the nails of the other. “No big deal.”

Antonia laughed. “Amazing. You know there’s this adult gymnastics class at the rec center. You should do it!”

Carey lowered herself to her back and rolled up, facing away from Antonia. She knew of the class, and the registration fee was too expensive. “Not really my thing. I prefer roller derby.”

“So sexy!” shouted Killian from the middle of the park. She’d been watching Carey. Carey blew her girlfriend a kiss.

The frisbee players were recongregating around the blanket. Killian offered a hand to Carey and pulled her to her feet.

“Join me for a little walk?” she asked.

“Sure,” said Carey. They walked away as the rest of their friends spread out lounging on the blanket.

“You seem kind of upset about something,” said Killian as they passed the little playground.

“Do I? I don’t mean to be.”

“I don’t think anyone else noticed,” said Killian. “You okay?”

Carey was silent for a while. “I don’t know. It seems like everything today is trying to remind me how poor we are. The jacket. The fried chicken. Even the fact that we’re both off today.” Carey squeezed Killian’s hand. “I know it’s stupid and ungrateful, but I’m so sick of being poor.”

“Mmm. It frustrates me too.” They reached the end of the park and turned back around. “But it won’t be like this forever.”

Carey looked up at Killian’s face. “How do you know?”

“Call it hope. But I’m sure things will change.”

Carey leaned in, resting her head on Killian’s arm. “I’m glad you have hope. I’ll try to have hope
Killian stepped in front of her and caught her under the chin. “Good.”

Care stood up on her tiptoes and kissed her, long and slow.

“And in the meantime,” said Killian, when they broke apart, “the things that really matter are totally free.”

“Things like what?” said Carey.

Killian gestured at the sky. “This beautiful day. You and I getting to be together.” Killian turned and kept walking, back toward the blanket. “And our family.”

“There you guys are!” said Avi, who was laying flat on his back and looking at them upside down. “We’re looking at clouds!”

“I haven’t done this forever,” said Julia, who was snuggled up next to Magnus.

“It all looks terrible to me,” said Antonia, who was greeted by a chorus of laughter.

“Sounds like fun,” Carey said. Killian stretched out on the grass, and Carey laid down too, her head resting on her girlfriend’s stomach.
“Hey, babe, can you take a look at this?” Kravitz said, sitting cross-legged on the lime green couch in Taako’s apartment. He was frowning at the screen of his iBook.

“Sure.” Taako scooched up to the end of the bed, and took the blue and white computer from him. He scrolled down on the webpage, glancing over the text. “I thought you said Magnus was still on the fence about the whole website thing.”

“He was last time I talked to him, but I figured if I had something more concrete to show him, maybe I could convince him that this idea will work.”

“That makes sense. He’s very much a work-with-his-hands-and-what-he-can-see kind of guy.” Taako shrugged. “These chair pictures are nice.”

“Yeah, I figured it would make sense to put in pictures of his work.” Kravitz took the computer back. “I didn’t have anything he’d done though, just got some shots of a chair from my kitchen.”

“I think he’ll like it.”

A knock came from the front door down the stairs. “God, I hope so.” Kravitz stood to go answer it.

“Magnus!” Kravitz smiled widely as he opened the door. Magnus looked visibly relieved.

“Oh, good. I’m at the right place.” Magnus said.

“Yes, the one with the yellow front door.”

“Hail Magnus!” Taako’s voice floated down the stairs. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I could eat.”

“Come on in,” Kravitz said, stepping aside.

Magnus let out a low whistle when he stepped inside. “That’s a lot of shoes.” he said, taking off his work boots. Kravitz’ mouth twisted into a smile.

“Oh, just wait.”

Magnus stared open-mouthed at Taako’s costume collection, which was fine because it gave Kravitz a moment to set up at the kitchen table.

“Alright, now as you can see--Magnus?” Kravitz asked, trying to get his attention back. He blinked and looked over.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Magnus sat down in one of the kitchen chairs, and Kravitz scooted the computer over to him.

“Now I know last time we talked you were a little unsure, so I went ahead and built a mock-up just so you have a clearer image of what I’m talking about. Feel free to read, click around. Let me know when you’re done.” Kravitz left Magnus with the computer, went to go tidy up magazines on
Taako’s coffee table. Magnus dutifully examined every corner of the website, and Taako rummaged in cabinets.

“How does cilantro-lime chicken thighs with black beans and rice sound?” he asked, reaching down to pull a large skillet from the back of a cabinet.

Magnus looked briefly up from the computer. “That sounds fantastic,” he said, before returning to the website.

Kravitz sat on the couch, his heels bouncing quickly, and he tried to look like he wasn’t observing Magnus’ every move, even though he was. Magnus sure was taking a long time. That was a good sign though. Or was it?

Magnus looked over at Kravitz. “I’m done.”

Kravitz popped up like he was spring-loaded. “Great!” He joined Magnus at the table, turning the computer so they could both see it. “So what did you think?”

“Well--” Magnus started.

“Merde.” Taako said, looking at a cabinet. They turned to look at him. “I’m out of chicken broth. I’ll be right back.” He grabbed his keys from the TV stand and a few loose dollars. “Try not to have too much fun without me.” He gave Kravitz a quick kiss on the cheek before jogging down the stairs, his flip-flops thwapping with every step, and out the front door.

“So, thoughts?” Kravitz asked, folding his hands on the table.

“...So is this a weblog?”

“No, it’s a true website. Multiple pages, unique address. Completely customizable if there’s something you don’t like.”

“Well, it looks great. I mean, if I saw this, I’d hire me.” Magnus smiled. “You made this IKEA chair look damn fantastic. Do you think you could do that with some of my pieces?”

“Oh, definitely. Yours will look even better; they have actual craftsmanship.”

Magnus nodded slowly, scrolling down the page again. “Do you really think this will work? I mean… it’s the information superhighway, how’s it going to help me?”

“First, no one calls it that anymore. And second… honestly, I don’t know that this will work. But I’m dedicated to giving this site the best shot that I possibly can. Maybe nothing will come of it, or maybe it’ll take off and having a Burnside coffee table will be the new status symbol amongst upper-middle class white couples.” Magnus laughed. “There’s really no way to tell. It’s kind of crazy out there on the web right now. We’re all still figuring it out.”

“Alright. I’m in.”

“Really?” Kravitz’ face lit up.

“Yeah.” Magnus shook his hand. “I just wish I could pay you for this. You’ve already put in a lot of work.”

“This is as much an advertisement of my services as it is of yours. If I can prove this concept, I could take this to other businesses, larger businesses, and hopefully get back on my feet again.”
Magnus looked over at Kravitz. “How’s that going by the way? Are you alright?”

Kravitz sighed and closed the computer. “I’ve been able to get some jobs helping out on other friends’ shoots. Looking at going back to portraiture, and this web design work was Taako’s idea actually. Maybe if I just keep throwing enough spaghetti at this wall, something will stick.”

“I take it the roller derby story is officially a no-go?”

Kravitz frowned. “Yeah, probably so. I just don’t think anyone will want to publish it.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

Kravitz looked back at Magnus. “Why don’t I what?”

“Publish it.” Magnus pointed to the computer. “Like on the internet.”

Kravitz looked back at the computer, a thought slowly forming in his mind. “...I hadn’t thought about that before.”

“It probably wouldn’t be like publishing it in a magazine, but, you know, at least the story would be out there.”

“That’s… an excellent idea, Magnus.” Kravitz’ mind was slowly picking up speed as he chased down this thought. “I need someth-ah!” Kravitz stood and snatched a legal pad, immediately starting to write rapid notes on the page. Magnus watched him in curiosity for a few minutes till Taako returned from the store. He smiled bemusedly at the frantically writing Kravitz.

“So what’d you tell him?” Taako asked, opening up the package of chicken.

“I asked him about the derby story, and he said he’d probably not find someone to publish it. So I suggested he publish it himself on the inf-internet.”

Taako looked impressed. “A pretty face, and brains. I see why Julia likes you.”

Magnus laughed.

Taako took in a sudden deep breath, and found himself awake. Unfortunate. He blinked a few times. The sheets next to him weren’t slept in, but the clock said 4:18. He didn’t remember Kravitz leaving. He leaned up and rubbed an eye.

The apartment was completely dark, save for some lights from the street lamps through the windows, and Kravitz’ computer at the kitchen table. Oh there he was, fast asleep, his head on the keyboard. Taako smiled and got up, picking up a blanket and throw pillow from the couch.

He draped the blanket over Kravitz’ shoulders, carefully tucking it so it wouldn’t fall down. Delicately, he lifted the computer up, and snuck the pillow in before letting his head rest back down. And he still slept on. Taako went to shut the computer, but he stopped to see what Kravitz had been working on.

It was a website, if Taako was using that word correctly, titled, *Everyone’s Story*. Or maybe it was a weblog, he realized as he scrolled down the first page. There was a simple black background, with a wide white bar and some fill-in text. Some parts didn’t seem to be working properly yet, but it was an impressive start for just a couple hours. The one link on the page that did seem to be working
was to an About the Author page. Taako checked to see if Kravitz was still sleeping before he read,

*I have failed as a documentary photographer. I defined my success by my ability to publish stories, to get them in front of national, international audiences. I defined my success by how many awards I had won, how many cover pages had my photos, how many people wanted to interview me. And now by all my own definitions and most everyone else’s, I have failed.*

*Somewhere in the past decade of my career all these other things came to matter more than what should have always been first: the people telling their stories.*

*That is why I’m starting this project, Everyone’s Story. Once a week, I’ll post a person’s story that they’ve shared with me here on this blog. I hope you enjoy hearing them as much as I have.*

*Every person that I have ever met has a story. Big or small, wise moral or personal reflection, ongoing struggle or past triumph, everyone has a story to tell. And I’d love to share them with you. My name is Kravitz Sinclair, and this is my story.*
Noelle looked away from the computer screen and scrunched her eyes shut. The stupid lunar bot was due tomorrow. It was so close to being perfect, and most of the project team had left for the night, but she just knew the prof would take five percent off if it kept pulling to the right, so she’d stayed to fix it. Unfortunately, so had Gerald.

“Before you say anything, picture this with me,” he said in that squeaky voice of his. “On Friday, after finals are all finished, you and I, on a date.”

“Friday I have—” Noelle began, but Gerald kept talking.

“We could go to the park, grab something to eat. There’s that really good food truck there, they do those street tacos.”

“They only serve—”

“Then, we go for a walk in the park. Nothing high pressure. Nothing fancy. Just you and me, getting to know each other.”

He wasn’t going to listen to her anyway. She turned back to the computer and kept checking the code.

“Well? What do you say?”

“Oh, you’re going to listen to me now?” mumbled Noelle.

“What is that supposed to mean?” said Gerald.

There was another typo. Amazing how many there were even in functioning code. By her fifth read-through she should have gotten them all. Still, that shouldn’t be causing these issues.

“I mean, Gerald, if you had asked me a single question about who I am as a person, you would know exactly what I think about this date idea of yours.” She corrected the typo.

“What are you talking about?” he scoffed.

She reached the end of the code and entered the “save” command. “First of all, Friday I have a derby bout. We’ve been practicing a lot and I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’m really excited about it, actually.”

“Then we could do this another day,” he said.

“No, we can’t. That food truck? I know the one you’re talking about. Sure smells good, but they only serve pork. I can’t eat pork.”

“Can’t? Oh, Noelle, you don’t need to worry about your figure.” He oozed condescension.

Noelle gritted her teeth. “Okay, won’t, then. Because I’m Jewish, Gerald. It’s not kosher.”

“We’ll have something else, then,” he said. “There’s a little cafe over there too. We’ll pick up something after our walk.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s another thing.” She turned in her chair, so he could see her prosthetic leg under
her knee. “I know it doesn’t look like it, but this thing is tough to haul around. I can do it, if I have to, and I don’t get tired easy, but a long walk would be really uncomfortable.”

Gerald looked genuinely concerned. “I should have asked. I’m awfully sorry.”

The annoyance bubbling in her gut settled a little. She sighed. “I accept your apology. Would you go up on the catwalk and see if she drives straight now?”

“Yeah.” He hopped up the stairs. The engineering workshop was set up so that students could work on tall or awkwardly shaped projects from about any angle. The catwalks criss-crossed the ceiling. The bot itself was on a little track outlined in yellow tape. Noelle picked the controller up off the desk and carefully eased it into forward motion while Gerald watched. He shook his head.

“No good,” he called. “Still pulling to the right.”

“Ugh.” Noelle let the bot roll to a halt. Gerald hopped down the stairs and rolled it to the reset.

“Maybe it’s a mechanical problem,” Noelle said, putting the controller back down on the desk and massaging her forehead.

“Nah, I doubt it. Our mechanics are spot-on. Maybe check the code again?”

Noelle felt her eye twitch. Of course it was possible she’d missed something. And it was possible that snow would fall on graduation day, too. She knew what this was really about. The team had barely let her touch the actual bot. *You’re the best at coding,* Merrick had said. *Leave the mechanical stuff to us.*

“Maybe we both need a set of fresh eyes,” she said carefully. “Why don’t you check my code, and I’ll check your mechanics?”

“Okay, but you’re not going to find anything,” said Gerald.

She got up to let him sit down and strode over to the machine. “Neither are you,” she murmured, and laid down to look at the axles.

“So not a walk, and not Friday, and somewhere kosher? We can do that,” said Gerald, his face lit by the glow of the monitor.

“I think you’re maybe missing the point,” said Noelle, examining one of the crownwheel fixings. Was that what she thought it was?

“Listen, you’re nervous. I understand. It’s hard to believe that you’re beautiful sometimes. Especially… you know. With the arm and the leg.”

Noelle sat up. “What?”

“But you are beautiful.” He wasn’t even looking at her, just scrolling through her code.

“My arm and leg are none of your business,” she said.

“Sorry to bring it up, it’s just--”

“No. Stop. Just--stop.” She’d interrupt him now, see how he liked it.

“Listen, I don’t get why--”
“No! *You* listen!” She was shouting now, sitting on the floor shouting at someone who wouldn’t even look at her. “I was in a bad accident, okay? Really bad, but the alternative to that bad accident is me being dead.”

He looked up now, struck silent for once, thank God.

“I am……” she swallowed, suddenly nervous, but no, he had to hear this. “I am perfectly happy with who I am. I don’t care who thinks I’m beautiful, okay? I don’t care what you think about me. I don’t want to go on a date with you!”

He frowned. “Jeez. Rude much?”

“Rude?” she snapped. “You didn’t even ask me! You just told me! And furthermore--’” she jabbed her hook at the axle. “This bevel pinion is stripped. How’d y’all miss that? Did you just assume it was my coding?”

He rolled his eyes and got up to look. “It’s not stripped.”

She stood up and let him lay down. He was quiet under the bot for a minute.

“Well?” she said finally.

“It’s not *that* bad,” he grumbled.

“It’s enough to make it pull to the right,” she said, marching over to the toolbox. “Get a new one. We’ll replace it.”

“We’ll have to take apart the whole rear axle setup!” he protested, pulling himself out from under the bot.

“You want to lose that extra five percent or what?” She hauled the toolbox over. He huffed and headed for the scrap pile.

Noelle put the jack under the bot and pumped the lever. Gerald joined her in a minute with a new bevel pinion. She handed him a wrench and they went to work.

“So who is it, then?” said Gerald after a few minutes.

“Who’s what?” asked Noelle.

“What guy are you into if not me?”

“No guy,” said Noelle. “It’s nothing special about you.”

His eyes went wide. “You hang out with all those dy--”

“Don’t you say it,” she said, pointing a wrench at him.

He leaned away. “Lesbians. You’re into girls, then.”

“No! I’m not into anyone!”

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” he said. “It’s actually kind of sexy.”

“Do you hear yourself talk sometimes?” she demanded. “I’m not a lesbian, and even if I was--”
“Then what’s the answer?” he said. “Boys or girls? C’mon, Noelle.”

She snatched the bevel pinion from his hand with her prosthesis. “I’m into science.”

Noelle stood at the back of the group, trying to keep from falling asleep, while the others demonstrated the bot to Professor Hudson. It wasn’t pulling to the right anymore, and the code was perfect, and that was all that mattered.

“You’ve made a lot of improvements,” Professor Hudson said, looking at her clipboard. “I see you finally found that mechanical issue.”

“What mechanical issue?” said team leader Merrick.

“The one that was screwing with the steering,” said Gerald.

“Did you fix that last night?” Merrick asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Gerald, who looked as though he’d been drinking coffee for days. Noelle blinked a few times. Something about this was important.

“So you found the issue?” Professor Hudson asked Gerald.

Pay attention, Noelle, pay attention.

“Yeah, we uh--”

“It was me!” she piped up.

Professor Hudson looked at her for what may have been the first time that semester. “I’m sorry?”

“I found the issue,” Noelle said. “It was a partially stripped bevel pinion on the back axle.”

“Really?” She raised one eyebrow. “What took you so long to find it?”

“I was focused on the coding, ma’am,” she said. God, she must be out of her mind, speaking up like that. It was probably the sleep deprivation.

The professor turned her gaze on the team. “And the rest of you? Why was it only last night you discovered this?”

“We thought it was a problem with the coding,” mumbled Merrick.

“Why would you build a bot with a partially stripped bevel pinion in the first place?” asked Professor Hudson.

None of the boys knew how to answer. Noelle didn’t either. She’d been asking herself the same thing when she occasionally drifted into lucidity. Professor Hudson glanced at her. Was it Noelle’s imagination, or had the professor just looked sympathetic?

“Some of your design choices are a little impractical, and you’re just at the threshold of what I consider a reasonable weight to launch into space, but overall, well done.” She scribbled something down on her clipboard and passed out four pieces of paper. “Have a good summer.”

“God, I’m so glad that’s over,” sighed Merrick.

Noelle looked at her paper. At the bottom of the sheet, on the “Final Grade” line, it said, 92%.

She hugged the paper to herself and smiled.
The Death of Boyland

Chapter Notes

Brief mention of war violence in this chapter. Take care. <3

Merle dropped his keys on the counter and flipped on the radio.

“--and welcome one and all to the country music hour. I’m Hekuba Roughridge, and--”

Merle switched it off again and went to the living room instead. His record player sat on a shelf. He put on Willie Nelson and went back to the kitchen.

The little message recorder by the phone was blinking. He held out a hand to push the playback button, but hesitated and glared at the radio instead. “You can wait, you nag.”

Instead he pulled out a frying pan, some butter, some eggs, and some spinach, and made himself a veggie omelet.

“I just never took the time,” he hummed along with the record, whisking the eggs. “You were always on my mind…”

He poured out the eggs and watched it sizzle. It needed to sit a minute. Better bite the bullet. He reached over and pressed the playback.

“Beep. Merle? It’s Hekuba. Next weekend I’m going to a conference. You’ll have the kids an extra day. I swear to god, if I hear they got to swim lessons late again, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Mehh, hell to pay,” Merle mimicked. Mavis must have told her about last time. It seemed Mavis hadn’t told her why, though, or he’d be getting an entirely different lecture about fire safety. Merle wondered what she thought happened to Mookie’s eyebrows.

“Beep.”

Oh, a second message today? Probably the United Way or something.

“Hi, Mr. Highchurch? It’s Charlie Boyland.”

Huh, that was weird. Merle flipped over his omelet and slid it onto a plate. Why would Boyland’s oldest be calling him?

“I, uh. I’ve got some bad news. Dad’s in the hospital. It’s uhh. It’s not looking good. He’s been in and out of lucidity all day but he was just asking for you and I thought you might want to see him before… well he’s in room 205 at St. Jude’s. It’s about… 3:30 in the afternoon right now.”

Charlie went on talking, but Merle had already put down his plate, switched off the stove, and picked up his keys again. The door slammed shut behind him.

In a minute, the record quietly ran out.
Merle knocked at the hospital room door. It was closed, and all the blinds were drawn. Charlie was the one who opened it. His eyes were red.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Highchurch, you’re too late.”

Merle didn’t recognize his own voice saying, “No, I can’t. I can’t be too late.”

Charlie nodded sadly and opened the door.

The room was full of Boyland’s family, which wasn’t difficult; the man had nineteen sons and two daughters. Despite this, the room was quiet. Six or seven of the boys were crying, being comforted by other boys. The two daughters, who were eight and eighteen, were holding hands silently on the floor by their mother. Barbara Boyland was the only person in an actual chair, cradling Boyland’s youngest, who was two years old and asleep.

All this centered on an empty hospital bed. Merle tottered inside, hesitantly. He was an intrusion in this place, an unneeded old man in a room grieving another old man. It felt like stepping into church.

“Hi, Merle,” said Barbara softly.

Merle nodded a hello, unable to tear his eyes away from the bed. The sheets weren’t even stripped off yet. He’d been right here.

“How did it happen so fast?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“A stroke,” said Charlie.

“And how long--”

“About an hour now,” said Barbara. “Not long after Charlie called you.”

“If I’d gotten the message sooner--”

“You wouldn’t have been able to talk to him,” said Charlie. “He was delirious for a pretty long time.”

“Could’ve… seen him. At least.” Merle reached out to touch the sheets. His throat felt thick. “You bastard.”

The funeral was three days later.

It was really more of a memorial service. Boyland hadn’t seen the point in coffins and ceremony, but nevertheless the service went on for hours. Each one of his children spoke, oldest to youngest, starting with Charlie.

“I wouldn’t be in medical school if it weren’t for dad,” said Charlie.

“He came to almost all of my swim meets,” said Beebee, “even the ones where we had to get up at four in the morning to drive there.”

“Dad showed me how to change a tire,” said Andrew. “I teach people all the time now.”

“Daddy quizzed me all the time for mathletes,” said Tyler. “I’d never be state champion without
“He taught me how to make a paper plane,” said Henry, and then demonstrated.

“Daddy always drew pictures for my stories,” said Rissa, showing off a handmade book. “He said they weren’t good, but I liked them.”

“What do you love about Daddy?” Barbara asked little Patrick.

“He makes sprinkle pancakes,” he said, with all the solemnity a two-year-old can muster.

Merle thought he’d be bored, but he was struck by how much time Boyland must have spent with each kid. The man had never even hinted. Merle used to think Boyland was just a homebody. It turned out he was working hard on the nights he wouldn’t go for a drink with Merle.

“Thank you for giving us all a chance to speak.” Barbara addressed the audience, which was considerable. “We only have one more person left, a man who knew my husband the longest.”

Merle’s turn. He hadn’t wanted to speak, hadn’t known what to say, but Barbara was right. He’d known Boyland for years, and it seemed only fitting. He stood up and took the podium at the front of the church.

“I’m Merle Highchurch,” he said. He cleared his throat. There were a lot of people in this room. Merle looked at the back wall, trying to ignore the weight of the listening silence. “Uh. Boyland hated this story. Truth be told I don’t like it either, but I think… I think it should be heard. The story starts by saying that Boyland’s the reason I lost my arm.

“He and I were in ‘Nam together. Some of you might know, he was a sergeant, and a good soldier. I was a medic, and a pretty terrible soldier. I had tried to dodge the draft, unsuccessfully. Wasn’t even really good at that. But I’d had a year of nursing school, so they put me in charge of helping folks.

“We weren’t in the thick of the fighting. We never got the worst of it, and we always had backup. It came as somewhat of a shock when the Kong attacked our camp one night. Set off a shrapnel bomb right near my medical station. I took a shard of metal to my arm.

“We managed to beat them back, only had a few casualties, but there was no one to pull the shrapnel out of my arm, so I had to do it myself. Did a pretty rotten job of it. I missed some.

“Over the next few weeks it got pretty badly infected. I was really sick, but trying to hide it because I just knew they’d chop off my arm, and I’d be another sad case of a war-ravaged veteran back home. It got worse and worse.”

Merle cleared his throat again, remembering. He brought his attention back forward.

“I made myself pretty damn unlikeable on principle. I was a big hippie then, or I thought I was, and I made a big deal of not wanting to be there. People avoided me, or if they noticed I was sick, they thought I was faking to go home. It was Boyland who ordered me to take off my jacket and shirt to see it, and it was Boyland who dragged me over to another medic’s tent. There was gangrene, and it stank to high heaven. Much longer and I would have died. Boyland’s the reason I lost my arm, but he’s also the reason I’m still here today.”

Merle paused, lost in thought for a moment. He hadn’t planned this part, but he was going to say it anyway, he supposed.
“If there’s one thing we can learn from Boyland, let it be to pay attention.”

He stepped down. The preacher said, “Thank you, Mr. Highchurch. Please stand and join in singing the departed’s favorite hymn.”

The organ struck up, and it was all fiddling with programs for a moment to see the words. Merle pulled his out and stared through it, mouthing along rather than singing.

*Encourage my soul*

*And let us journey on*

*For the night is dark*

*And I am far from home*

“I never knew that about him,” whispered Barbara, leaning over to Merle. “Thank you.”

*Thanks be to God*

*The morning light appears.*

*The storm is passing over…*

Merle felt himself choke up.

“Next up, I’d like to play a song in honor of a friend of mine who passed away this week.”

Mavis opened the back door and slid across the backseat. Mookie followed and slammed the door behind him. Merle checked the rearview mirror to see if they were putting on seatbelts.

“Hi Dad,” said Mavis. “Is that Mom on the radio?”

“Yep,” he said. Hekuba had approached him at the funeral, and they’d had their first civil conversation in about six years. She’d asked him what song Boyland would have liked her to play. He’d forgotten; Boyland was her friend too.

“You don’t listen to Mom usually,” said Mavis, a little accusatorily.

“Maybe you’re just not around when I do,” said Merle.

“It’s ‘cause she’s gonna talk about Rissa’s dad,” said Mookie. “Rissa said so.”

“--loved by his children, his wife, and his friends. He will be missed.” The song began to play as Merle pulled out of the rec center parking lot. Merle wasn’t sure Hekuba would actually play it—she’d made such a face when he suggested it, but there it was, Johnny Cash singing “These Hands.”

“Rissa went to lessons?” said Mavis. “Henry and Tyler didn’t.”

“Yeah, but she went to the locker room halfway through and didn’t come back.”

“It’s so sad,” said Mavis.

They were quiet for a little while, listening to the music play.
“Don’t die, okay?” said Mookie, looking furiously at the back of Merle’s head.

Merle felt something hard in his chest melt right away. “I’ll do my best.”

Merle stared at the road, thinking about twenty-one kids with memories of their father, and one old man who should take his own advice. He hesitated, but not for long.

“So. Mavis. How were lessons?” he asked haltingly.

Mavis looked up at him, surprised. “Um. Good, I guess. I learned the breaststroke.”

Merle nodded. “Good. Good. How… did it go?”

Mavis squinted. “The way you kick is weird. I don’t like it as much as backstroke, but it was okay.”

“Good. How about you, Fireball?”

“Zack B. peed in the pool.” Mookie made an ugly face, and then relaxed it. “But I found a cockroach in the deep end.”

Merle chuckled. “What did you do with it?”

“I traded it for a Pokemon card. See?” Mookie pulled something yellow and blue out of his pocket.

“Now what the heck’s Pokemon?”

The song on the radio ended, and was followed by a commercial for a tire place, and the three of them went home.
“Practice is over, Angus,” Lucretia called over the half-wall around the flat rink.

“Aw, beans,” said Angus, who was trying to skate backwards.

“Hey,” she said with mock sternness. “Who taught you how to swear?”

Angus giggled and skated to the wall.

Lucretia smiled a little and turned to leave. Merle intercepted her. “Lucretia,” he said. “Question for you. Don’t suppose you’d give up coaching for a while to be a ref.”

“What do you think?” she said.

Merle sighed. “Didn’t think so. Damn, where am I going to find new refs?”

Lucretia paused. She’d heard about Boyland. “Refs plural?”

“Magnus just told me his next game will be his last,” Merle said. “Conflict of interest or whatever.”

Lucretia raised her eyebrows. “Did he now? Well I’m not going to have any less of a conflict. You know I’ve played here for years.”

“I know it,” grumbled Merle.

“Can we borrow refs from other rinks?” she asked.

“I’ve already called around. They’re all volunteer refs too, nobody’s willing to make the drive.”

“Is the B.o.B going to have to forfeit?” asked Angus from the half-wall at the rink.

Merle shrugged. “If it comes to that, maybe. And there goes my most popular attraction at this place. You don’t know anyone who could help?”

Lucretia considered. “I’m meeting a friend on Thursday who might have something. I’ll let you know.”

“I appreciate it.” Merle nodded and walked away.

Lucretia thought about what Merle had said all week, which was only a distraction, and she didn’t need those. She’d been trying to buy flights for her boss, and today in particular the airline was being a pain.

“You’re certain those flights are full up?” she asked the phone in her right hand, jotting down the times with her left. Brian was going to kick up a fuss about having a layover. “Even first class?” She sighed. “Yes, of course. All right, one seat on the four fifteen, then.” She set the phone in the crook of her neck, passed her pen to her right hand to keep writing, and reached for Brian’s flight info with her left. “Last name is Schwarze-Spinne. Yes, with a hyphen. S-C-H-W-A-R-Z-E. Spinne with two n’s and an e.”
The little light on her phone that was the bane of her existence lit up. Brian wanted her attention, and immediately. She sighed and tried not to channel her vitriol into this conversation. “Yes, that information is correct. Thank you. Yes. Thanks.” She traded her pen back to her left hand, very carefully hung up and did not slam down the phone, and then she picked up a clipboard and opened the door to the boss’s office. “Yes Brian?”

“Ah, Lucretia,” Brian said, steepling his thin fingers. “Yes, I need to look you in ze eyes and make sure that you’re going to get my lunch order right.”

Lucretia held her pen at the ready. “Of course, Brian.”

“Right, I would like a sprout sandwich, yes? Bean sprouts, turkey, and zat good cranberry spread zey do. Please get it right zis time.”

Lucretia tightened her jaw. “And if they don’t have the cranberry spread?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure somesing out.” He waved a hand. “Zat’s all.”

Lucretia didn’t budge. “Sir, have you given any more thought to the raise I asked you about?”

Brian gave her a look of sad condescension. “Lucretia, you are doing adequate work at a job zat is really not very hard. Maybe if you show some more initiative I’ll consider, yes? But not at zis time.”

“Yes, sir.” Lucretia took this as a dismissal and left the office. She made sure the door was closed behind her before she said, “Eurotrash.”

“Pardon me?”

Lucretia looked up. There was a man waiting at her desk, a fairly good-looking guy with a long but tasteful ponytail and some serious cheekbones. He looked maybe Native American. He was holding a clipboard too.

“Hello,” she said, putting on her most professional voice and taking a seat at her desk. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I’m actually here to see you,” he said. “You’re Lucretia Moreau?”

“I am.” She frowned. “What’s this about?”

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong,” he said. “My name is Brad. I’m from H.R. I’m just here to ask you a few questions.”

Lucretia checked her watch. She had lunch at 12:30, and if she wanted to get Brian his precious sandwich with time to have a full break, she should leave now. “I’ll answer questions, but do you mind if we walk and talk?”

“Not at all,” said Brad.

Lucretia grabbed the company credit card and left her blazer behind--it was too hot out to look professional in a deli--and walked through the office. Brad followed.

“So Miss Moreau--”

“Mrs.”
“My apologies. Mrs. Moreau, you’ve been working here for three years now, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Stairs or elevator? Maybe elevator today, her knee had been acting up this morning. She strode over to the doors and hit the down button.

“Based on our records, you were hired out of a fairly limited pool of applicants.”

Lucretia wasn’t surprised by this. As far as she’d been able to tell when she applied, the position was cursed.

“I’m going to be frank with you,” said Brad, looking under a paper on his clipboard. “Based on your resume, you were not expected to do well.”

Ah, yes, her resume, which consisted of her high school diploma, a smattering of college classes, and a large chunk of time when she was unemployed, followed by a minimum wage job at a roller rink. Not exactly a business professional ideal. The elevator arrived, and they stepped inside. Lucretia pushed the button for the ground floor.

“Thing is, though, you are doing well. Extremely well.” Brad let the paper fall flat on his clipboard. “I don’t need to tell you that Brian is very difficult to work for.”

“You’ve got that right,” Lucretia muttered. The elevator dinged and the door opened; Lucretia crossed the lobby of the office building and pushed her way through the revolving doors. The Clinton Building was the biggest buildings downtown, and the only one with more than three stories. Lucretia always thought it was pretty ugly, a dumb pseudo-skyscraper in what was otherwise a comfortable downtown area. It was, however, right next door to the deli.

Brad followed her out the door, waiting to speak further until they were in line at the deli. “I’ll also tell you that you hold the record for the longest lasting P.A. since Brian began as regional director in ’87. No one else has lasted longer than a year, especially right before you applied.”

“Get to the point, Brad,” said Lucretia.

“I suppose what we’re all wondering--that is, everyone over in H.R. is how you do it. How do you put up with that guy?”

Lucretia considered. “I’ve been here two years longer than anyone else?”

“That’s right.”

“Huh. Hold that thought.” She smiled at the deli worker. “Hi, I was wondering if you had that good cranberry spread today?”

“Sure do,” said the gal behind the counter.

“Great. Could I get eight ounces of that spread, and a turkey and sprout sandwich with it as well?”

“You got it,” said the woman, and went to work. Lucretia allowed herself a sigh. No more fits over lack of cranberry spread, not if she had anything to say about it. How was that for initiative, Brian?

Ha, that was the answer, then. “You know, Brad? I think I stay on out of spite.”

Brad looked concerned. “Spite?”
“Yeah. That, and I probably need the job more than most. Oh, thank you.” She accepted the small plastic container and the sandwich from the woman and handed over the company card. “I mean, let’s be honest. You’ve seen my resume. What else am I going to do?”

“You might be surprised,” he said. “Time as Brian’s P.A. carries a lot of weight.”

“Really? It’s not like I could get a good reference from him.”

The woman handed back the credit card and a receipt. “Thank you, have a nice day!”

“You too,” said Lucretia. She and Brad exited the deli.

“You know,” Brad said. “If you couldn’t get one from him, you could get one from me. It’s truly astounding. You’re a little bit famous.”

Lucretia straightened a little. She liked the sound of that. “I just channel all the rage into roller derby.”

“What’s roller derby?” asked Brad, as they entered the revolving doors.

Lucretia looked to him, and smiled wickedly.

“I can’t believe you told H.R. that you stay at your job out of spite,” cackled Maureen.

“It’s true, though!” said Lucretia.

“I wouldn’t have believed this from anyone but you,” she said.

They were sitting at Pour Joe’s, sharing a pot of tea over their sack lunches. They tried to do this once a month, although it was tough with Maureen’s teaching schedule and Brian breathing down Lucretia’s neck.

“What else, then?” asked Maureen. “How’s your knee?”

“Holding me back, as usual, but no worse than normal,” said Lucretia. “How’s your son?”

Maureen scoffed. “I swear, you let a kid move out and suddenly he’s convinced he’s the adult in this relationship. Yesterday he tried to lecture me about how a serious scientist shouldn’t have her derby team picture in her office.”

“Did you tell him that a serious scientist doesn’t blow up undergrads?” said Lucretia.

“Something to that effect. He’s learning, though. The part-time job is good for him. He’ll be a more humble scientist when his suspension is over.”

“Where did he get this ghost-hunting idea from anyway?”

“Who knows? That damn fool sci-fi show he watches, maybe. With Moldy and the scullery maid.”

Lucretia thought about this. “Are you talking about X-Files?”

“I thought that was a comic.”
“No, that’s X-Men.”

Maureen shrugged and poured herself more tea. “Who can keep track? Not me.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about derby. We lost two of our refs this month.”

Maureen grimaced. “I was at Boyland’s service. What a shame.”

“And the other one started dating one of my players, so he quit.”

Maureen took a long drink of her tea, eyes narrowed. “I don’t like that at all. We had a name for boys who helped with roller derby just to get in the girls’ pants. Do you remember what it was?”

“Dicks?” said Lucretia, chuckling. “Yeah, but this one’s okay. I’m more concerned that we’ll have to start forfeiting.”

“So what do you want me to do?” asked Maureen. “Be a ref?”

“If you’re up for it.”

“And why wouldn’t I be up for it?” she said haughtily. “You think just because I’m getting on in years that I can’t still outskate any of you whippersnappers?”

“I don’t know,” wheedled Lucretia. “It’s been a long time since you were coach. Even longer since you were a player.”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t write checks your body can’t cash, gimpy,” said Maureen. Lucretia laughed, and Maureen smiled. “Anyone still on the team that I know?”

“Beauty and the Beast and Jule Be Sorry are still there. Everyone else is new.”

“I can’t wait to call them on every single penalty,” said Maureen. “I’m in.”

“Great! I’ll tell Merle.” One down, thought Lucretia…
Angus thought hard about what Merle had said, about needing new refs. It was a puzzle, for sure. Who was enough of a fan of roller derby to come to every bout? No one, except him maybe, and he still couldn’t skate well enough to do a good job. Also he was eleven. He wasn’t sure that was allowed.

He thought about it when he walked to the elementary school, where there was a Summer Program for Children Twelve And Under. He thought about it during Free Play on the playground. He thought about it during Indoor Quiet Play inside, when most of the kids were playing board games or reading. He did not think about it, however, when it was time for Team Play. He thought about how much he really hated Team Play.

Lately they’d been playing basketball, and it was mandatory. The component parts of basketball were easy enough. Angus could shoot at a hoop and make it most of the time, provided he was standing still. Basketball rarely included standing still, though. When they actually played, Angus was usually picked last for teams and only actually had to get on the court when Coach Roswell made them play the bench.

Unfortunately, today Coach Roswell made them play the bench.

“Come on, Angus,” shouted the coach. “Get hustling!”

Angus picked up his pace a little. Now that he was skating all the time it was easier to keep up with the action, but that didn’t guarantee anyone passing him the ball. He was supposedly playing point guard, but it was hard to do much guarding when everyone was faster and taller than him.

The other team’s offense got the ball, so back Angus ran to guard his basket. If he was lucky, the ball would stay on the opposite side of the court and--

Oh god, oh god, it was coming right for him, oh god, he caught it, oh god--

“What do I do!” he wailed.

“Pass it!” said a voice, and he did, blindly, a solid chest pass toward the voice--

Pwunk . The ball hit someone’s face.

Coach Roswell blew their whistle. “Time-out! Hang on!” They jogged to the middle of court. Angus didn’t dare look.

“Ow,” someone said. Well that didn’t sound so bad. Angus snuck a peek.

“Oh god!” he said, because he’d hit June, and now her nose was gushing blood.

“I’m all right,” June insisted.

“That’s enough for today, everyone,” said the coach. “It’s the end of the day anyway. June, let’s get you to the nurse.”

The volunteer who escorted them from place to place had them line up and led them back to a classroom. Angus felt terrible.

“Good job, foster kid,” said someone behind him, and someone else snickered. Angus wondered
if it was possible to burst into flames from humiliation.

The end of Team Play was the end of the day, but the thought of walking past all those kids waiting for their parents was nearly unbearable, so Angus stuffed his things in his backpack and escaped to the school library, which was mercifully open all summer.

Just walking inside calmed him. He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of books.

Caleb Cleveland, kid cop, would never have hit someone in the face with a basketball. He might have been hit in the face with a basketball if it was a clue, but he was much too clever to panic in the midst of a basketball game.

“Psst.”

Angus opened his eyes. It was the librarian. She looked left and right theatrically, and then revealed from under her desk a copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Angus’ face lit up. “You got it?”

“Been saving it for you all week,” she said, and handed it over. “Go ahead and put your name in there.”

Angus dug a pencil out of his pocket and put his name down on the card inside the book, along with the date. He accepted the book reverently. “Thank you!”

She winked. “It’s a good one. You can’t tell me how it ends, though, I haven’t finished it yet.”

Angus ran his hand along the spine. Ron might hit someone in the face with a basketball. He’d be sorry about it, though. Harry might, if he was being especially introspective at the time. Even Hermione might, although she’d probably do it on purpose.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I think I need to go.”

“Enjoy that book,” said the librarian, waving as he left.

By the time Angus got outside, most everyone had left, which suited him. He opened the school doors to find June, holding a wad of paper towels to her nose. He hesitated.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know,” said June. “It’s okay.”

“Does it hurt?”

June shrugged. “The nurse said my nose wasn’t broken. I just need to wait for it to stop bleeding.”

Angus grimaced. “Did you miss your ride because of me?”

Again, she shrugged. “I hate that bus anyway.” June was a foster kid too, and all the foster kids went to the Summer Program.

Angus had another question, but he paused. They’d been in the same group home, before... well before things got better for Angus. June had had to stay. There were times when they’d banded
together back then, for survival, but they weren’t ever really friends. June was tougher than he was.

Aw, heck it. “Do you want to walk home together?”

“You don’t live there anymore,” she said.

“I don’t live far away.”

“It’ll take a long time to walk there.”

“Only about thirty-five minutes.”

June made a face. “We’d have to walk through the gross part of town.”

On this matter, she was right, but Angus shrugged. “I walk through there almost every day. What are you going to do otherwise?”

“Wait two hours for them to pick up the kids from soccer practice.” She grimaced. “Okay, let’s go.”

They set off down the street, not saying anything for a bit. After a few minutes, Angus asked, “Do you still read Caleb Cleveland?”

She smiled a little. “Yeah. Did you read the one with the murder on the train?”

“And the lockbox with the handprint scanner! That was a good one.”

“How quick did you guess the bad guy this time?”

Angus smiled. “Page 34. A new record.”

“Wow. I didn’t get it until the thing with the hands.”

Angus made a face. “Gross. Have you read Harry Potter?”

“The first one. I can’t find the second one anywhere.”

“That’s ‘cause the new one just came out and everyone’s trying to catch up. The librarian has a special copy. She let me borrow it. I’m sure she’d let you too, if you asked.”

“Thanks, Angus.” June smiled, wad of paper towels still stuffed up against her nose.

They were quiet for a while longer.

“Do you like living with your grandpa?” she asked.

Angus nodded. “It’s not like we used to talk about. You know. With parents. But it’s better.”

“Good.”

They walked a little farther.

“What about the home?”

June had a determined look on her face. “It’s not as bad as it used to be.”

“Well good.”
“Hey! Hey, you kids!”

They both turned to look across the street. Coach Roswell was coming towards them on a pair of skates. Coach Roswell was tall and quite fat, but Angus had never seen them out of breath in all the years they’d been his P.E. teacher and Team Play coach. Seeing them on skates was like seeing a living balloon.

“Hi, Coach,” said June.

“What are you up to?” they asked.

“Walking home,” said Angus.

“Do you live around here?” Coach seemed alarmed. They were well into the gross part of town by now, although Magnus lived nearby, Angus was pretty sure.

“No, we’ve got a little ways to go,” said Angus. “It’s okay, though.”

Coach capitulated for a moment or two. “It’s not really safe for you two to be walking alone through here. Do you mind if I…god, I don’t know. Make sure you make it to the other side of Elm Street at least?”

Angus looked to June. She gave a curt nod. “Okay,” Angus said.

They carried on, Coach gliding along in the gutter beside them. “I didn’t know you skated, Coach,” said Angus.

“It’s a hobby,” they replied.

“I’m learning how to skate too,” said Angus. “If I get good enough I could be a ref for roller derby.”

“Where have you seen roller derby?” asked Coach. “TV? Do they put that on TV now?”

“No, Coach, I watch my friends play about every week. At the Adventure Zone.”

“At that crappy--” Coach checked themself. “They have a league?”

“Yeah, a small one,” said Angus. A thought occurred, a very good thought. “They need a referee. Really bad. Someone to keep the players safe.”

“Do they.” Coach rolled along. “You know, Angus, you could play roller derby yourself.”

“I don’t think I’m tough enough,” said Angus. “And anyway, we don’t have a boy’s league.”

“They’ve got one in Neverwinter,” said Coach. “I’ve played both leagues.”

“I just think it’s more fun to watch,” said Angus.

“Are the refs volunteer? Do you know?” asked the coach.

“Yes,” said Angus, “except for the head ref, I think, but the head ref just quit.”

“Huh.”

They were quiet for a little longer. June pulled the paper towels away from her nose, dabbed a
couple times, and then crumpled up the towels in her fist. “So I found an old book you’d like. *Encyclopedia Brown.*”

“Is it a detective story?” asked Angus.

“It’s short stories, and they’re all really good. You have to solve the mysteries yourself.”

They continued on, Coach Roswell listening silently beside them.

Merle shuffled the papers in front of him and stared at the calculator. Nope. No way this place was staying open without derby, and no more derby without at least one more ref. He’d even tried calling the league in Neverwinter, but they had exclusivity rules about unofficial leagues. They’d offered to call some people for him, but they didn’t sound optimistic.

He put down his calculator and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. No more. He had to clean the hot dog machine and clear out free skate.

He stumbled out of the tiny office. Maybe it was for the best. It wasn’t as though he’d asked for this. The flower shop was what he really loved, what made money, what relaxed him. This place had been foisted on him against his will. It was just a…

Sloane and her little girlfriend, Hurley, entered through the back door. They waved when they saw him and headed to the locker room. Angus was skating along the wall of the rink and gave him a, “Hello, sir!” as he passed. Lucretia was putting on her skates in the center of the derby track. She nodded when he caught her eye.

This was a community, that’s what it was. Ah, hell, he couldn’t give up just yet.

Merle went to the gate in the derby track and let himself in. “Lucretia, you talk to your friend?”

“I did,” said Lucretia. “You remember Maureen Miller?”

Merle raised his eyebrows. “She founded the league, course I remember her.”

“She said she’d like to be a ref. Here, ask me after practice, I’ll give you her number.”

“Thanks,” said Merle, surprising himself with how much he meant it. He felt considerably lighter as he strolled over to the DJ booth and announced that free skate would be over in ten minutes.

As all the skaters but Angus left the rink, Merle headed over to concessions. Robbie was packing up.

“I'll close today,” said Merle. “I’ve got to stick around for derby practice anyhow.”

“Oh, jeez, thanks,” said Robbie, poorly concealing a boat of nachos behind his back.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t mention it.” Merle took the last two hot dogs out of the machine with the tongs and pulled out the good scouring brush. Robbie not-so-subtly took them, laid them on top of his nachos, and pulled down the grate in the window of the concessions stand.

There was something sort of zen about scrubbing down the hot dog machine. Merle had been at it a few minutes when he heard someone say, “I don’t get why you’re mad at me.”

It sounded like Magnus’ voice, floating through the grate. Merle shouldn’t eavesdrop.
He tried to scrub a little more quietly.

“I’m not mad at you.” That was the team captain, Julia. Oh boy, was she lying. Merle had heard that tone before.

“Are you sure? Because that’s what it feels like.”

“All right, I’m a little mad. I wish you would have told me!”

“What would that accomplish? I’d still have to quit.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I mean, I’m trying to do the right thing here.”

“I know. As usual.” She sounded a little resentful.

Merle could practically hear Magnus gritting his teeth.

“You want to actually talk to me?” he said, and his tone wasn’t combative so much as pleading. “Please? I’m trying to understand.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know.” She huffed. “I know you can’t really ref anymore. That’s fair. You’re right. But this is how we met! I don’t want to lose this. You know?”

“Yeah. Okay, that makes sense.”

“Does it?” This wasn’t combative either, she was genuinely asking.

“Yeah, yeah. In that case I am sorry. I didn’t know it meant this much to you.”

“I guess I didn’t either.” She didn’t sound upset anymore.

Merle stopped scrubbing. Had he ever had a conversation like that with Hekuba? One that ended in understanding?

“I’ll still come to every bout. I wouldn’t miss seeing you play.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know.”

“Julia, you’re late.” This was Lucretia’s voice.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“Go gear up. Magnus, I’m glad I caught you. I need to take on an assistant coach. Are you interested?”

There was a moment of silence. “W--yeah, I mean, yes. Absolutely.”

“You mean it?” said Julia’s voice.

“I’ve been thinking about it for quite a while, as it happens,” said Lucretia. “The girls and Taako all like you. It just works out.”

“Okay, sure! When do I start?”
“Right now, if you’ve got skates.”

“Yeah, I’ll go grab them.”

Merle smiled to himself and kept scrubbing. He wasn’t the only one who was suddenly having a good day, it seemed.

He was about halfway done, hearing the rattle of skates on the track and the background noise of practice when he heard someone say, “Hey, Angus?”

“Oh, hi, Coach!”

“Hi. Who’s in charge of this place?”

“Mr. Highchurch is! I think he’s in the concessions stand. Are you here to ask about being a ref?”

“We’ll see. Thanks, Angus.”

The day just kept getting better and better. Merle tried to brush the black burnt flakes off his shirt and turned around. “Hi there, what can I--” He paused.

The person on the other side of the grate was the roundest person he had ever seen. They filled the window. “Good evening. I was told you might have a volunteer position open for refereeing roller derby?”

“I certainly do, sir.” The person frowned, and Merle panicked. “Uh--ma’am--”

“Coach will do. Or Roswell.”

“Right. Coach. Let me join you out there.” Merle hung up his scouring brush. Unconventional, that was the word he was thinking. Just like everything else in this league. How fitting.
Kravitz typed in the numbers in his calculator and he frowned at the result. He pulled off the long strip of paper from the top of it, and double-checked his inputs. He had been accurate, and that was the problem.

He scratched at the top of his head and took a deep breath. *It’s fine. Just think about it logically,* he reminded himself. What could be cut? He already didn’t have cable, but he needed to keep the phone and dial-up for his job, or rather his attempt at one. He frowned some more and then scratched off the ‘Eating Out’ line of his budget. Maybe if he went to that discount grocery store instead, he could cut another $50 out of his grocery budget. Thank goodness he’d paid his car off last year, or that would have been a major headache. But gas prices were ever rising. Faerun was relatively small, he could walk. He looked over his shoulder at a bag of lenses still on the moving box from where Taako had placed them. Or maybe he could sell some equipment and get a bike. But what if he needed the gear in the future? *Okay, we’ll come back to transportation.*

Maybe if he signed a year-long lease he could get a reduction on his rent. Month-to-month was always more expensive. Or maybe he should move. Rent in Neverwinter would be more expensive, but there might be more job opportunities there. But Taako was here, as was Lucretia and the rest of the team. Oh, he was getting bogged down in possibilities again. He set the pen down and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was getting more and more difficult to make budget cuts logically when reality kept being tied to emotions.

He glanced at the clock. If he left now, he could make it over to Sazed’s before they closed. He wanted to see Taako; just the sight of him always lifted Kravitz’s mood. Hacking the budget could wait.

The heat fell like a heavy wet blanket on him as soon as he opened the door. Sweat immediately started gathering on the backs of his knees. Even still, he took off walking. It was only half a mile away.

Three blocks later, he very much regretted his decision. The downtown sidewalks were deserted, everyone rightfully inside to avoid the oppressive mugginess. He passed by The Pothead and the former King Crab Jewelers, now long since closed and boarded up like a lot of the stores in the downtown area. A sign in the window of 27 Springs across the street caught his eye. Help Wanted. He stopped and looked at it for a minute, before crossing the street and going inside.

Kravitz pushed open the door to Sazed’s Bakery and an electronic chime sounded. Three people turned to look at him with absolute delight on their wrinkled faces.

“Taako, your boyfriend is here,” the one with the bejeweled cat eye glasses called.

“Yes, Joan. I can see him too.” Taako stood up from behind the baked goods display. He waved at him with a smile. Oh, these were the ladies from the pottery shop.

“How are you today, Kravitz?” asked the one that Kravitz was pretty sure was Tracy. Her nails were a bright red, and this time her sweater read ‘Yes, I do have a retirement plan. I plan on knitting.’
“I’m well, Tracy,” he replied with a smile. She tittered to Grace on her left.

“Are you here to see Taako?” Grace asked. She was obviously the youngest of the three, her face round and eager. “You two are such good good boys together.”

“Well, I’m happy you think so,” Kravitz replied, chuckling a little.

“Our Taako is quite taken with you,” Joan teased in a sing-songy voice.

“Alright, you three.” Taako quickly taped a baked goods box shut and pushed it across the counter. “Here’s your order. Now scoot, don’t make me call your children.”

They chorused good-byes, and each gave Kravitz a solid once over before they left with their box in tow. Taako laughed and leaned on the counter.

“Just as I remembered them,” Kravitz commented, coming up to stand in front of Taako.

“Yeah, they’re a hoot.” Taako looked up at Kravitz and smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi. ...is it okay if I kiss you?”

Taako looked over his shoulder, and turned back. “I think Sazed’s in the back, so yeah.” Kravitz leaned down and gave him a kiss, his fingers gently brushing his cheek. Taako smiled when Kravitz pulled away, his eyes still closed. “Mmm. Well. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company on this fine Wednesday afternoon?”

Kravitz shrugged. “No reason. I just wanted to see you.”

“What’s that?” Taako nodded to the folded piece of paper in Kravitz’s hand.

“What? Oh. Job application.”

“To where?” Taako asked, deftly snagging the paper from Kravitz before he could protest. “27 Springs? Seriously?”

“Yeah, they had a help wanted sign in the window.”

“No, I meant, are you seriously thinking about doing this? What about the websites?”

Kravitz heaved a sigh and looked away. “The websites are a sort of long term solution, that may or may not even solve anything. But ...I’m starting to have some immediate cash flow issues.”

Taako frowned. “I didn’t know it was so bad.”

“It’s not yet, honestly,” Kravitz assured him, putting his hand over Taako’s. “I still have some savings left, but if something doesn’t change in the next month… it’ll get there.”

“Krav, if you need money, I can help. I have some savings.”

“No. That’s for your--” he stopped, checked around for Sazed and then mouthed ‘bakery.’ “I couldn’t take that from you.”

“It’d just be to tide you over. It’s not a big deal.”

“No, I won’t.”
“Kravitz.”

“Taako, I swear to God, if I see your money anywhere near my bank account, I’m marching it back over to yours and depositing an extra $100.”

“You don’t have an extra $100.”

“Exactly.”

They kept up a fierce staring contest for a minute, till Sazed came in from the back.

“This is a place of business, not a social club,” he grumped, sliding a tray of croissants into the display.

Taako blew out a quick breath, and smiled sympathetically at Kravitz. “Is there something you wanted to buy?”

Kravitz frowned and looked at the display. “What do you have that’s cheapest?” he asked in a low voice. Taako picked up a sugar cookie and put it in a bag. When he rang Kravitz up, he quickly added his employee discount and thankfully Kravitz didn’t seem to notice.

“I get off in a little bit. I’ll give you a ride to my place.” Taako said quickly. Kravitz nodded and left the bakery.

Taako stirred the onions around in the sizzling pan, and huffed a breath. Kravitz was filling out the application at the coffee table. Neither of them had really said anything since they met back up, and drove to Taako’s apartment. The quiet was almost palpable.

Taako didn’t know how bad of financial straits Kravitz was in. But if he was willing to entertain becoming a waiter, it definitely wasn’t good. And he wasn’t helping anything by stubbornly refusing help.

“Can I put you down as a personal reference?” Kravitz asked, his voice cutting through the tense silence.

Taako quickly chopped a celery stalk, his knife slapping back down on the board.

“Taako?”

“If you must,” he answered tersely, swiping the celery into the pan and giving it a stir.

Kravitz set down his pen with a sigh and walked over to stand across the kitchen table from Taako.

“Do you want to tell me what the problem is?” he asked, gently.

“I don’t have a problem.”

“Fine. Will you tell me what my problem is that is making you act this way?”

Taako turned around to look at Kravitz. “You won’t let me lend you money.”

“Taako,” Kravitz began, rolling his eyes a little.
“Nope, I’m not done yet.”

Kravitz set his mouth and looked at him.

“And you won’t tell me why,” Taako finished.

“I already said why. Because you have been saving that money to open your own bakery. It’s your hard-earned savings. I’m not going to take that from you.”

“Stop being noble.” Taako shook his head. “You’re to the point where you’re applying for minimum wage jobs, but you won’t let me lend you money. You—you built an entire website for Magnus, but you won’t let him pay you. Kravitz, why won’t you accept our help?”

“Because I don’t need help,” Kravitz insisted. “I can do this on my own!”

“But you don’t have to!”

“But I need to!”

“Why?”

Kravitz struggled for a minute, then shut his eyes and admitted, “Because I already feel like a failure. I don’t want to be a charity case too.”

“Well, tough. Because you already are one,” Taako replied, unsympathetically. Kravitz’ head snapped back up and he blinked at him a few times. He sputtered a few responses. Taako turned the fire off under his pan and turned back around to look at Kravitz, who still seemed to be spinning his wheels emotionally speaking. “Look, Krav. I know that this is a difficult time for you, but you are making it so much harder for yourself.”

Kravitz didn’t reply, just sat down into one of the chairs. A hand covered the bottom half of his face and he stared at the table top.

“Every single one of us has been a charity case at one point or another in our lives.” Taako continued. “You know that your not being one till now doesn’t make you better than us.” He reached out and tilted Kravitz’ chin up so he had to meet Taako’s gaze. “But being one now doesn’t make you any less either. You know that right?”

Kravitz looked down and slowly nodded.

“So swallow your damn pride and accept a helping hand. Life is a whole lot easier if you do.” Taako crossed his arms and looked down at Kravitz, who, thankfully, seemed to understand what Taako why trying to say.

Kravitz opened his mouth as if to speak, but ended up just letting out a long breath. “...well, what do you think I should do then? Because I am-...lost and I don’t know how to proceed.”

“Well, for starters, I don’t think you should take that waiter job. Trust me, it will eat up your entire schedule and if something better comes along, you might not have time to pursue it.”

“That makes sense.” Kravitz nodded slowly. “But that doesn’t solve my budget issue. I’m still in the red.”

“I wasn’t done...” Taako paused and took the plunge. “I think you should also move in here with me.”
“What?”

“You’re here all the time anyway. And the rent would definitely be less than what you pay right now. Really this is more for my benefit than it is for yours, splitting my current rent in half would go a long way to help me save for my bakery. Plus I’m selfish and want to see my boyfriend more than I currently do.”

“You’ve thought about this before,” Kravitz said, looking surprised. Taako didn’t answer that question, but kept laying out the plan he’d been thinking about for a couple weeks.

“I could take some of the costumes to the closet on Maple, make room for you to bring your gear and get a desk. We could split the food budget, and utilities. ...It makes a lot of sense, for both you and me.”

“Are you sure? You have a pretty good setup here, I don’t want--”

“Don’t you try to nobly excuse your way out of this, we both know this is a good idea.”

“But--” Kravitz started but Taako held up a finger.

“The only excuse I will accept... is that you don’t want to.” He pursed his lips and held his breath. Kravitz looked down at the table top.

“No, I want to… I just wish it could have been in better circumstances.”

A wave of relief washed over Taako. “We can’t change the circumstances, only how we deal with them, my fella.”

Kravitz nodded. “Well put.”

“That’s a Taako original.” Taako smiled a little, and Kravitz returned it.

“Okay then. I’d be happy to move in with you.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, good.” Kravitz stood and walked back over to the coffee table. He folded up the application and tossed it into the trash can.

“Something’s going to come up, Krav. I can feel it. You just need to keep yourself open for the opportunity.” He turned back around to continue cooking. He heard footsteps and then Kravitz’ arms wound themselves across Taako’s middle, and he rested his chin on his shoulder.

“Thank you.” Kravitz said quietly. Taako squeezed his hand.

“Don’t mention it.”

Kravitz pressed a long kiss to the skin just below Taako’s earlobe, which made Taako’s toes curl.

“Ah-hah. If you keep that up, dinner will be ruined,” he said, clearing his throat a little. Taako could feel Kravitz’ chuckle resonating in his chest. Taako gave the now sizzling pan a vigorous stir.

“I love you,” Kravitz said simply.

Taako stiffened in shock and turned a little to look at Kravitz, his eyes wide. Kravitz was already looking at him tenderly.
“You--? I’m--...what?” His voice rose in pitch.

“I love you,” Kravitz repeated again, as if it was the easiest thing in the world for him to say.

Taako gaped and grappled around mentally. “It’s okay if you’re not ready to say it...”

“No! J-just you have to warn a person before you say things like that!” Taako said, looking up at Kravitz. Kravitz reached around him and turned the fire back off, then folded his hands around Taako’s waist. Taako’s hands finally fluttered to a resting spot on Kravitz’ chest. Taako expected to feel his own pulse racing, but when he looked up into Kravitz’ dark eyes time seemed to slow. And the world was at blissful peace for Taako. He smiled up at him.

“...I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Today's a very special day! Six months ago today at around 10:15pm, this fic was inspired by some fantastic art. The following 24 hours were a feverish storm of brainstorming and we've been writing it ever since. Thank you to each and every one of you for being a part of this journey with us. We're so blessed by your encouragement and enthusiasm. See you next chapter! <3, Kaitlyn & Hannah
Steven squinted at his hand. “Two, I guess.”

“All right. Garfield?”

“Just one for me,” Garfield uttered.

“Cassidy?”

“Three.”

Leon took two cards for himself. “Place your bets.”

The four of them sat at a large round poker table in Leon’s study, which was a cozy wood-paneled room lined on one side with bookshelves full of antique volumes and curios. The table itself was likely antique too, but the felt had been replaced recently and was now home of their glasses, cards, and the stacks of quarters that they used for chips.

“I’ll bet three,” said Steven, moving three quarters to the center of the table.

“Mmmm! What an interesting choice!” proclaimed Garfield. “I’ll raise you to twelve!”

“Boy howdy, that there’s too rich for me,” said Cassidy. “I’m out, fellers.”

“Me too,” sighed Leon.

Steven eyeballed Garfield. The man was a fax machine salesman, and a damn good one. He knew how to bluff, and he’d been doing it for the last three hands. Garfield grinned like a cat.

Steven squinted at the pair of fours in his hand. “All right, I’ll call. One pair.” He laid down his cards.

“Isn’t this a happy coincidence! I just happen to have a pair of fives!”

The table filled with groans.

“You cain’t go bluffin’ every dadgum hand,” groused Cassidy.

“Have a little respect for the game,” said Leon.

“Maybe you should respect this game! Boo-yah!” Garfield pulled the quarters to his steadily increasing pile.

The doorbell on Leon’s little house rang. “It’s open!” he called. “Your deal, Cassidy.”

Isaak entered the close room, along with a young guy Steven didn’t recognize. “Howdy, folks,” Isaak said, taking the seat beside Cassidy. “This here’s Magnus, my carpenter.”

“Howdy!” said Cassidy, shuffling the deck. “You two’re jest in time to deal in.”

“I’m not great at poker,” said the kid. He sat between Leon and Steven.
“Mmm, you don’t say?” said Garfield.

“Be nice,” said Leon.

“This here’s Leon,” said Isaak. “He’s in the antiques business. This is Steven, he’s a welder. That’s Cassidy, she does demolitions for me sometimes.”

“And I’m the best there ever was, too,” she said, passing cards around the circle.

“Sure as shit,” agreed Isaak. “And that there’s Garfield, nobody knows what the hell he does.”

Garfield smiled brightly. “The world of electronic correspondence holds a magic none of us can comprehend!”

“Glad to meet you all,” said Magnus.

“We only got one rule at this table,” said Isaak. “No shop talk. Most of us work together in some capacity anyhow, so no need to perpetuate that.”

“Cain’t we lift the restriction this once, Isaak?” asked Cassidy. “Ain’t never met a proper carpenter before. How long you train for something like that?”

“I apprenticed with a guy named Bauer for about three years,” said Magnus, picking up his cards and rearranging them in his hand.

“What do you specialize in?” asked Steven.

“I do pretty much everything, but I like making furniture.”

“A time-honored tradition, furniture-making,” said Leon.

“Those good good sitboys!” said Garfield.

Magnus laughed. “Sitboys. I’m going to use that.”

“All right,” said Isaak, “cut the yapping and let’s play.”

“New kid first,” said Cassidy. “How many you taking, sonny?”

“I’ll take two. So you all know each other from work?”

“More or less,” said Steven. “Isaak contracts out to me and Cassidy sometimes, as you know.”

“I go to pretty much all of you for repairs at some point or another,” said Leon. “Many a turn-of-the-century wrought-iron garden bench would be much the worse for the wear without Steven. Four please, Cassidy.”

“I’ll take two,” said Cassidy. “What for you, chief?”

“Three,” said Isaak.

“None of you work with me!” said Garfield. “Cassidy, do be a dear and give me one?”

“No, but you’ve tried to sell us all one of your damn-fool contraptions at one point or another,” said Isaak.

“A fax machine might help your business,” said Steven. “You have a lot of contacts. I’ll take two,
“I’ll get a fax machine when somebody proves they got more lasting power than an 8-track,” said Isaak.

“The march of progress continues!” trilled Garfield. “You don’t want to fall behind, do you?”

“All these new things,” grumped Isaak.

“It always does surprise me what has lasting power,” said Leon. “Take the world wide web, for example.”

“I think they call it the internet these days,” said Magnus.

“Just another fad,” said Steven. “What’s the point of it?”

“Connecting to people, I guess,” said Magnus. “You get to talk to people you’d otherwise never get to.”

“Who wants to talk to someone they’ve never met in person?” said Steven.

“Maybe it’s for the purpose of makin’ communities based on shared interests,” said Cassidy.

The men shot her a variety of looks, ranging from Magnus’ delighted to Isaak’s perplexed.

“What’s y’all’s problem?” demanded Cassidy. “I know about things. Place yer damn bets.”

“Uh, fifty cents?” said Magnus, pulling a roll of quarters out of his pocket and cracking it open on the table edge.

“I’ll match that,” said Leon, tossing in two as Magnus struggled with the roll.

By the time Magnus got his quarters into the pile, it was Garfield’s turn. He smiled slowly. “I will raise… to ten quarters!” He slid a stack.

All but Magnus groaned. Steven threw down his hand. “Can’t you let someone else play?”

“Uh, I’ll call that,” said Magnus.

“Don’t encourage him,” said Isaak.

“Fold,” said Leon.

“Me too,” said Cassidy. Isaak put down his hand and crossed his arms.

Garfield grinned and leaned toward Magnus. “I raise to twenty.”

“Listen, kid,” said Steven. “You seem like the type who doesn’t back down from a challenge. I’m telling you right now you can’t win this.”

Magnus frowned. “Twenty-five.”

“Mmm, I’ll be calling that, young man,” said Garfield. He laid his cards on the table. “What do you say to my three queens?”

Magnus spread his cards. “Straight.”
Garfield’s smile fell and the others burst into hoots and hollers. Magnus smiled.

“You said you were bad at this game!” crowed Cassidy. “You lil scamp!”

“My dad used to say there were two things you should always lie about,” said Magnus, taking his quarters. “Your friend who’s on the run, and your skill at poker.”

The table laughed, and Isaak collected the deck. “Y’all shouldn’t have underestimated him. I don’t hire stupid people.”

Steven elbowed him. “I like you, kid.”

Magnus smiled. “Thanks.”

“All right, folks, ante up.” Isaak passed out a new hand.
Julia’s eyes blearily blinked open. The blinds cast shadows across the ceiling from the rising sun. She rolled over to check the time. 8:32, the red display read. She should probably get up and get going. But surely another 5 minutes wouldn’t hurt. She settled back into the nest she had created in her sleep and started to drift off again. But the sound of her sheets rustling snapped her awake again. *What the--* She reeled over, but relaxed when she saw Magnus, fast asleep. Right, he had come over for dinner and the evening had gone well.

Very well.

She smiled; his face looked so peaceful. His broad chest rose and fell with each slow and deep breath. She reached over to trace the flying eagle tattoo on his left pectoral, but as soon as she touched him, he woke up. He blinked a few times, and rubbed at his eyes, before noticing her next to him.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice still thick with sleep. She smiled, and rested her hand over the tattoo, faintly feeling the beating of his heart.

“Morning.” Her smile kept growing wider as she looked at him, and she hid her face in the pillow.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, smiling now himself and turning over to look at her. She peeked an eye out, the corner of her mouth still turned upward.

“Last night was pretty great,” she admitted. Magnus chuckled.

“Y-yeah.” He nodded, reaching out and wrapping one her long curls around his finger.

“Do you have to work today?” she asked, turning her face from the pillow.

“No till this afternoon. How ‘bout you?”

She frowned. “I have class at ten. Test today.”

Magnus looked up to the clock. He sighed. “We should probably get going, huh?” He didn’t sound very convinced.

Julia groaned, but rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. She pulled her hair over one shoulder, and began running her fingers through it to work out the tangles. She did that for a couple minutes--there were a few more tangles than normal--then noticed that Magnus hadn’t moved. He was still lying in bed, just watching her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, feeling a little self-conscious. He shrugged.

“It’s not everyday that I get to look at something as beautiful as you. It’s important to appreciate these moments.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “Oh, please,” she said, but was smiling when she turned back around and stood up to walk to the dresser.

Magnus watched her prepare for the day. Before he’d wondered if it was something that she did,
or some product she used that had made her so pretty. But when she returned from the bathroom, face freshly scrubbed and a toothbrush hanging out of her mouth, she was every bit as beautiful as she ever was. Maybe even more so, which he didn’t know was possible. She snagged a hand towel from one of the drawers, and winked at him as she left the room again.

Magnus hopped up and put back on the shorts he’d worn over the night before. He practically skipped into the kitchen. If they had to go, that was fine, but he was gonna at least make them some breakfast to start the day off right, not that anything could make this day go wrong. Julia’s fridge was mostly empty, but there were some eggs and a stick of butter.

“Perfect,” he said to the empty kitchen as he retrieved the ingredients. He opened up a few cabinets, looking for a pan. Dishes, nope, take out menus, nope, ah, pots and pans. He twirled then slapped the frying pan on the stove as he hummed a little tune. Man, today was just the best day.

He cracked an egg into a bowl as the phone rang. Without thinking about, he quickly wiped off his hands and grabbed the receiver from the stand in the living room.

“Youuuve reached Julia’s residence,” he said. But there was silence on the other end of the line for a long moment. “Hello?” Julia suddenly appeared in the short hallway, half dressed in jeans and a bra.

“What are you doing?!?” Julia asked.

“........Magnus?” Carey’s voice came from the other end of the line, sounding incredulous.

“Gimme the phone!” Julia ran at him, jumping over the back of the couch and onto him.

“MAGNUS!?” Carey’s voice crowed from the receiver as Magnus dropped it like it burned him.

“OH MY GOD, DID MAGNUS STAY THE NIGHT?!” The receiver hit the floor and rolled away.

“Shit!” Julia scrambled to grab it, accidentally kicking it towards the front door.

“OW OW!! HEY KILLIAN! KILLIAN!”

Julia finally grabbed the phone and held it up to her ear. “Thanks for calling Carey, I’ll wake you up and goodbye.” She hung up as Carey cackled. She groaned and leaned back against the door. Magnus stood frozen in the middle of the living room. “Oh goooood, I forgot I asked Carey to give me a wake up call for my test.” Shaking her head, she put the phone back on the stand.

“I’m sorry…” he said, grimacing.

“No… it’s not a big deal, just...” She blew out a breath. “Prepare yourself.” She pulled his shoulder down to give him a kiss on the cheek before disappearing back down the hall.

That afternoon, Julia pushed open the door to The Adventure Zone, her senses on high alert. She had no idea what Carey would be planning, but there was no way that she wouldn’t be planning something. However, the rink looked like business as usual. A few skaters at the flat rink, Robbie at the concessions stand. Lucretia was in the middle of the banked track, writing something on her clipboard. But the unassuming quiet just made Julia more suspicious. So when someone touched her shoulder, she reflexively almost punched them.

“Whoa! Hey!” Magnus said, stepping back. “Easy.”
Julia let out a sigh and dropped her fist. “Sorry. Thought you… never mind.” She kept looking over her shoulder, ready for any sort of sneak attack.

Magnus looked at her with a concerned face. “Are you okay?”

“No! Carey hasn’t done anything yet, and it’s killing me.” She looked back at him, the look of a conspiracy theorist in her eyes. “This is the most likely place for her to strike, but I don’t see anything.” She spun back around, tapping her fingers rapidly on her chin. Magnus reached around and took her hand, squeezing it comfortably.

“Maybe she’s not planning anything,” he said, starting to walk towards the locker room. Julia dragged a few steps before coming alongside him.

“Nooo. There’s definitely something. Last time they found out I slept with someone, there was a cake after practice that said ‘Congrats on the sex’.”

“Well… at least you got to have cake,” he offered, stopping near the locker room.

“Yeah.” She frowned. “It was pretty tasty. I think Taako made it.”

Just then Carey left the locker room, followed closely behind by Killian. They were holding some sort of paper banner between the two of them, which they quickly whipped behind themselves when they saw Magnus and Julia.

“What’s on that banner?” Julia demanded, marching over.

“What banner?” Carey asked, rolling up the banner behind her. Julia reached around to grab it, but Carey held it away. “Killian, go long!” she shouted, spinning around with Julia and holding the paper roll just out of her reach. Killian jogged past Magnus.

“I’m open, I’m open!” she cried.

Carey tossed the banner, it sailed past Julia, and Magnus snatched it deftly from the air.

“Naw, beans,” Carey said, snapping her fingers in an exaggerated ‘aw shucks’ motion. Magnus let the creased banner unfurl onto the floor. ‘CONGRATS ON THE SEXY TIMES!’ was in bright pink marker. There were a few illustrations of balloons as well.

“No cake this time?” Magnus asked, actually sounding a little disappointed. Julia quickly picked up the other end of the banner and crumpled it up.

“Taako was too busy today.” Killian shrugged.

“Bummer. I really want cake now,” he said. Killian nodded in agreement.

“Alright, haha. We all had a good laugh,” Julia said, wadding up the banner tighter and tossing it into a nearby garbage can. “Now can we please never speak of this again?”

“Oh, come on,” Carey said. “It’s funny.”

“No, it’s not,” Julia said, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s only funny when there’s a sort of back and forth of teasing, but I didn’t even know Carey when you got together it was so long ago. And you’ll never break up because, you know, you’re perfect for each other. And adorable together. And a good team, and I’d never ever want you guys to break up even if it meant I’d get to tease you about relationship firsts. And! ...and! ...and I lost my train of thought.” She huffed. Carey and Killian
looked to each other.

“We love you, Jules,” Killian said, going over and hugging her at the same time as Carey.

“Love you too, whatever,” she grumbled. “Losers.”

They laughed and went back into the locker room.

“Chi-chi’s after practice?” Magnus asked.

“Sure thing.” Julia blew Magnus a kiss and followed behind them.

Practice was a doozy. Lucretia hardly gave the girls, and Taako, time to think, let alone catch their breath. Even Magnus was wiped at the end of it; he almost nodded off as he waited for Julia to return from the locker room afterwards. She ruffled his hair and he snapped back up.

“Wake up, sleepy head.” she said, smiling. He grinned sheepishly.

“Do you want to walk to Chi-chi’s?” he asked, taking her hand as they walked out of the back door. The sun had set but the sky was still only half-dark, a few moths buzzed around the parking lot lights.

“Please, no.” She shook her head. “I don’t even want to drive.” She waved to Hurley and Sloane as they pulled out of the parking lot.

“I can drive.” He pulled his keys out of his pocket as they reached his van.

“Can I put my gear in the back?”

“Sure, sure,” he said, unlocking the side door and rolling it back. As soon as he opened it, the sound of something, or rather many small somethings, falling out and hitting the asphalt met their ears.

“What the--” Magnus said, leaning into the van. Julia bent down to pick up one of the things that had fallen. It was a small, mostly flat, square-shaped package with a raised circle in the center. As soon as she picked it up, she knew exactly what it was.

“Goddammit. They got us,” she said, clutching the condom in her fist.

“How did they have so many? It’s literally full of condoms.” Magnus leaned back out, clutching a handful. Julia stormed around the front of the van. Headlights immediately flicked on and momentarily blinded her.

“That should keep you going for a while!” Carey said, leaning out the passenger window of her car, a big smug grin on her face.

“Banana flavored?! REALLY!??” Julia shouted, throwing the condom at their car, and hearing the satisfying thwack of it hitting the windshield.

Carey started laughing, but stopped when Julia started running for them. “Shit, Killian. Go drive! Go go!”

The car peeled away as Killian shouted back, “No babies this season, you two!”
Julia skidded to a stop and watched their car race down the road. She shook her head, but a laugh bubbled out of her. She walked back to Magnus and the van, he was picking up the ones that had fallen on the ground.

“Figured we shouldn’t just leave these. Kids come here,” he said, tossing them in the back of the van.

“Good call.” Julia picked up her bag and put it in the back. “Was it really completely full?”

“Actually, seems like they used a couple planks to make a sort of dam… for condoms.” He grinned and shook his head. “...My life has gotten a lot weirder since I moved here.”

“ Weird in a good way, I hope,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“ Weird in a ‘holy cow how did my life get so amazing’ way,” he said, smiling as he wrapped his arms around her and gently brushed his lips against hers.
Dinner with Dad

Julia scooped up the last bit of chili from the bowl. “Thanks for dinner, Dad.”

“Thanks for bringing cornbread. That was really good with the jal-open-os in there.”

She pointed her spoon at him. “You and I both know it’s pronounced jalapeño.”

Steven leaned back in his chair, pleased with himself. “No idea what you’re talking about. You want some ice cream?”

“Sounds great.”

He stood up and took her bowl to the kitchen. She could hear him rinsing it in the sink, and from the radio in the living room she could just hear the sounds of Hekuba Roughridge’s Country Music Hour on the local station. She stretched and flexed her shoulders, gaze wandering around the familiar room, with the china cabinet and the small dining room table. Her eyes coasted automatically over her mom’s collection of bird plates—the robin, the bluebird, the cardinal, and her favorite, the chickadee. No dust on them, her subconscious registered. Huh. Dad must have dusted them recently. She remembered the Great Culling that happened a couple months after Mom died, where they got rid of her clothes and her knitting basket and her untouched toothbrush, but they had agreed to keep some of her things in their places of honor. Her books and paintings, and these plates.

“So,” said Steven from the kitchen, “we’ve talked about work and friends for both of us, and school for you. What else is there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Chickadee, I raised you. I know what you look like when you’re keeping a good secret.”

Julia nodded cautiously. “Well I did have something I was saving for last.”

Steven appeared with two bowls of rocky road and handed one to her. “All right, spill it.”

“I’m dating someone new,” she said. She was tempted to gush, but her dad was funny about these things. He was never overprotective, not in a way Julia ever felt smothered by, but she’d never dated anyone he’d liked. He had high standards, sometimes unreasonable standards. Usually Julia just tried placate him as best she could, but this time she didn’t want to. It was important that he like Magnus. The thought surprised her when she’d had it, but it rang true. And hell, if Magnus didn’t meet his standards, who on earth did?

Steven took a bite of ice cream and nodded. “Someone good, I hope,” he said around the mouthful.

“I think he’s pretty good,” Julia said. “You’d like him, Dad. He’s a craftsman too.”

Steven raised his eyebrows. “He treat you right?”

“Yes, he’s extremely respectful.”

“I like to hear that. Do I know him?”

“I don’t think so.” Julia ate a bite of ice cream and tapped the spoon against her chin while she swallowed. “I met him through derby. He used to be the head ref before we started going out.”
Steven’s lip curled in disgust.

“What’s that face?” asked Julia.

“What face?”

Julia copied the look. “That face. What are you thinking?”

Steven chewed for a good long time on what must have been an especially nutty spoonful. “I’m thinking,” he said deliberately, “that this ref was the one who let you get hurt in that game a couple months ago.”

Julia tried to remember what he was talking about. “Who were we playing?”

“Rockport, I believe.”

Oh, the concussion scare. “That? That wasn’t anything, Dad.”

“If I recall, he didn’t stand up for you on a call where he should have,” said Steven.

“He made one bad call. The rest of the time he was a great ref--no. You know what, it doesn’t even matter because he’s not our ref anymore. He’s my boyfriend.”

“If he doesn’t stand up for you in a game, how’s he supposed to stand up for you as a boyfriend?” He poked at his ice cream. “I know you can take care of yourself, baby girl, but relationships are about taking care of each other, too.”

“Well duh, Dad. I know that.”

Steven shrugged. “I know you know it in your head, sure. But your last few boyfriends--”

“What boyfriends? I haven’t dated anyone in two years!”

“All I’m saying is I see a pattern.”

Julia gritted her teeth. “You mean the pattern of me meeting someone and you deciding you don’t like him on principle?”

“Hey now, when have I ever--”

“No, you never say it, you just make it perfectly clear that you don’t approve, and yeah, I know you’re trying to be supportive or whatever but it grates on me, Dad.”

“Am I doing that now? I’m not doing that now. I’m sharing my concerns!”

“Concerns about a guy you’ve never met! A guy you’ve seen once do one thing!”

Steven threw up his hands. “What do you want from me? He hurt my daughter!”

“Another skater hurt your daughter, Dad, in a sport she chooses to play of her own free will, and damnit, I’m going to date this man of my own free will too!”

“Why not? You’re an adult! Do what you want!”

“I will!” Julia stood up. “I have to go.”

Steven leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Fine, go ahead and storm out.”
“I have a goddamn paper to write, Dad.” She snatched her jacket off the back of her chair and stomped out of the room.

“Watch your language!” he called after her.

“I’m a fucking adult!” she shouted back, and slammed the front door behind her.
Kurtze brought a stack of trays from on top of the trash can by the door and dropped them by the register. “Here are these.”

Lucas pulled a face. “You can’t just put them back on the stack. You have to wash them.”

“We never have before.”

A look of horror crossed Lucas’ face. “I’ve eaten here before!”

“It never touches the food,” said Kurtze, shrugging.

“That’s disgusting. Go wash them.”

Kurtze rolled his eyes and picked up the stack. “Whatever.”

“And quit dragging your feet, that’s no way to make money.”

“You know what else doesn’t make money, Lucas? Physics.”

Lucas glowered. “I am going to be a famous inventor one day, dammit. What are you going to amount to, Kurtze?”

“Dunno yet. See, I haven’t been suspended from graduate school, so the world’s still full of possibility.” Kurtze took the trays back to the dishwasher and listened to Lucas’ stammering with more than a little satisfaction.

By the time he’d finished loading the dishwasher, a couple of new customers were waiting. Was it that hard to hop on a register, Lucas? Where was he, anyway?

Kurtze attempted a smile at the customers, but he needn’t have bothered. He groaned internally. It was Them, and as usual They were in their own little world.

“I mean, you don’t exactly come here for authentic Mexican cuisine,” the girl was saying. She had a ton of curly hair, tied back in a bandana; very pretty, Kurtze thought.

The guy laughed. He was big and pretty built; he looked like he fought trains for a living. “If I wanted authentic Mexican, I could just make some.”

“Amazing,” she said in mock disbelief. “What would you make for me?”

He considered carefully. “Spaghetti.”

She grinned. “All right, what’s the punchline? How is that authentic Mexican food?”

He gestured to himself grandly. “Because an authentic Mexican would be making it for you.”

She punched his shoulder playfully. “Boo. Terrible joke.”

“You still laughed.” He smiled and finally noticed Kurtze. “Oh, hi, can I have like, eight tacos?”

Kurtze took their orders, noting that this time the guy paid. They took turns. The two of them took the best table, as per usual, and settled down to talking.
Kurtze turned toward the kitchen to make the tacos when he heard a *pst*!

He looked under the counter. Lucas was crouching under there, wringing his hands.

“They can’t know I’m here,” he hissed. “They can’t see me, especially like this.”

“Ugh. Okay, why?”

“They said the next time they saw me they’d beat me senseless!”

Kurtze was surprised. “What’d you do? Hit on his girl?”

“It was for science!”

“You hit on his girl for science?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter, just help me hide.”

“I can’t, I’ve got to go make their food. And someone’s got to watch the register.”

“I’ll make the food.” Lucas crawled across the floor to the kitchen.

Kurtze allowed himself a sneer. Sucker. The register was boring, but at least it was easy.

He settled in to wait for customers. There were only a few people in here right now, what with it being 7:30 on a Tuesday, and all but Them were just eating quietly. Because there was nothing else to occupy his brain at the moment, he heard the guy say, “Johann’s doing a coffee house open mic next week. We could go to that.”

“Sure,” said the girl noncommittally.

“Maybe that one guy with the beat poetry about horses will be back.”

The girl didn’t respond. The guy looked unsure of himself.

“Are you okay? You seem distracted.”

“Hmm? Oh. Sorry. Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Nothing you want to talk about?”

She was facing away from Kurtze, so he couldn’t see her face when she said, “It’s my dad, I guess.”

“Is he okay? What’s wrong?”

“He’s got some issue with you.”

“Pst.”

Kurtze looked up from the conversation. Lucas was holding out a tray of tacos from the kitchen; from here, it looked like a disembodied hand. Kurtze took it with an eyeroll and brought it out to Them, since there was nothing better to do.

“Enjoy,” he said half-heartedly.

“Thanks,” said the guy, not taking his eyes off the girl. “I don’t understand. He’s never met me.”
“He hasn’t met you, but he’s seen you,” said the girl as Kurtze walked away. “You remember that bout against Rockport?”

When Kurtze got back to the counter a family with a bunch of kids had arrived. He spent the next few minutes helping them with their order and accepting food from the Floating Hand of Tacos. By the time things quieted, Their conversation had just got interesting.

“I can’t believe you’re taking his side!” said the girl.

“I’m not,” he said, his face buried in his hands. “I’m just saying I see where he’s coming from.”

“You know you can’t protect me from everything, right?” she said.

“I know, but I should at least be able to protect you from my own ego!”

“We weren’t even dating yet,” she said. “I understand why you did it. I forgive you! You need to forgive yourself.”

He looked up and gave her a pained look. “What is this? Pop psychology?”

“Try common sense.” Kurtze wished he could see her face.

The guy said nothing, only averted his gaze.

“Magnus?” she said softly. “Do you feel guilty like this all the time?”

He looked back up at her with the most helpless look Kurtze had ever seen.

“Yo! Curtsey!”

Kurtze’s head snapped forward. Oh, great. It was those kids from school. Chaz was grinning like an idiot. “There he is. We were afraid we’d lost you, space cadet.”

Kurtze snarled. “Can I take your order or what?”

Sometimes Kurtze resented the way adults talked about teenagers, and sometimes he agreed with them that teenagers were the worst. It took almost twenty minutes to wrangle a set of three-dollar orders from eight teenagers before they settled at the opposite end of the restaurant. Kurtze tried not to admit to himself that he wanted to hear the end of Their conversation, before giving in and glancing over there.

The guy’s head was down on the table, resting on his arms. Kurtze couldn’t see his face. The girl was rubbing his head gently, comfortably. It was strangely dissonant, seeing such a private moment in such a public place. It kind of ruined it knowing that the table hadn’t been wiped for two or three days. Kurtze looked away.

After a while he heard the guy say, “When do we get to talk about your tragic character flaws?”

Kurtze glanced over. The guy was wiping his eyes with his thumbs.

“Never. I don’t have any,” the girl said. He burst out laughing. “But seriously,” she added, “you know how stubborn I can be.”

“Ambitious,” he said. “And independent. I like those things about you.”

She leaned forward. “I like that you’re responsible and protective.”
“Mm, do you?” He leaned across the table too, and kissed her.

Kurtze rolled his eyes and looked away. God, did they have to make out in the restaurant? They were so weird. Why would you want to make out with someone right after they’d been crying? He couldn’t imagine being that… vulnerable.

He glanced over again. Man, they were really going at it, weren’t they?

An idea occurred. Kurtze suppressed a sly smile.

“Hey, Lucas?” he called back into the kitchen.

“What? Are they gone?”

“Nope, still here. You’re the manager, right? I have a question for you.”

Lucas’ face appeared, looking suspicious. “What is it?”

“What’s our policy on PDA? We’ve got a couple of customers causing trouble.”

“PDA?”

“You know. Public displays of affection.”

Lucas still looked confused.


“Oh! That’s very inappropriate! Make them leave.”

“Okay.” Kurtze made sure no customers were coming and then meandered over Their table. He knocked on the tabletop, and they broke apart.

“The management requests that you leave,” said Kurtze.


Kurtze rolled his eyes. “Because you’re making out in a restaurant? Duh.”

“Sorry,” said the girl. “We’ll behave.”

“He still wants you to leave,” said Kurtze, sliding the half-truth in seamlessly.

“But if we stop--” said the girl.

Kurtze shrugged. “Sorry. I’m just the messenger.”

“Let me talk to this manager,” said the guy, standing up.

“Magnus, don’t bother,” said the girl. “It’s probably a race thing. We’ll just go.”

“All the more reason to talk to them!” said Magnus, marching up to the counter.

Kurtze rubbed his hands together. This was gonna be good. “I’ll call him over for you.” He hopped behind the counter and stuck his head into the kitchen. “Lucas? This gentleman wants to speak to the manager.”
Lucas took a pair of gloves off and exited the kitchen, the picture of a man who was definitely not hiding. “What gentleman?” He saw Magnus and froze.

Magnus’s eyes narrowed. “Lucas.”

Lucas’ hands floated up. “Hey. I--I don’t want any trouble.”

“Then why are you trying to kick us out?” growled Magnus. “Can’t I enjoy your crappy tacos with my girlfriend?”

“Did you say Lucas?” The girl was coming up behind him. She crossed her arms. “Well. I heard you were kicked out of grad school. And now you’re here. Justice is real.”

“I’m allowed back at the end of next semester,” he mumbled.

“Huh.” She shrugged. “So you want us to leave?”

“No, no, you can stay, I don’t care,” he babbled.

“Speak your mind, Lucas,” she said, almost sweetly. “We don’t want to go where we’re not wanted.”

“It’s fine. It’s fine! Stay. Or go. Whatever you want.”

“That’s good of you, Lucas. I think we’ll stay.” She smiled at him, a smile with teeth, and sashayed back to the table.

The guy stayed, but took a break glaring at Lucas to address Kurtze. “Could I get two more tacos, please?”

“Don’t even ring him up, I’ll get them,” Lucas said.

The guy shot Lucas a look of utter contempt. “You think I’m going to blackmail you for a couple of seventy-five cent tacos? God.” He pulled two dollars out of his pocket and handed them to Kurtze. “Thank you.”

Kurtze rang him up, almost disappointed. He was hoping to see Lucas get punched. Insufferable moron. Watching him squirm was pretty fun, though.

The guy and girl sat back down, picking up a conversation about music or something. It wasn’t so interesting anymore. There were no new customers right now, so Kurtze wandered into the kitchen to watch Lucas make the food.

“So, when you hit on that girl for science, was it before or after you’d seen her boyfriend?” he said, picking at his nails. “Because that guy could destroy you.”

Lucas sprinkled some cheese and groaned. “I hate this job.”
Arm Wrestling

Chapter by Chemicallywrit

Chapter Notes

*danny devito voice* can we offer you some fluff in this trying time?

happy last episode day, everyone. special shoutout on this chapter to our friend Rissa (kelenloth) who has been our first and best reader and is much better at writing kissing than either of us.

<3, K&H

“So hang on hang on hang on.” Magnus waved a hand. The team was at Refuge. He knew he was pretty tipsy, but they had just won a decisive victory against the Felicity Wild Women, and he was surrounded by friends, and Julia was beautiful and also sitting on his lap. “You betted… you bet on all of this? Like all of it?”

“I will say, the beginning of your relationship was pretty hotly contested,” said Taako, leaning back with his chair on two legs. He’d promised to drive everyone home, so he was not partaking. “One of our more interesting wagers, to be sure.”

“That seems unethical,” said Kravitz from beside Taako. He looked amused nevertheless.

“Mmmmm nannahh,” Carey was draped over Killian’s shoulders like a cape. “We bet on shit all the time. All the time.”

“I don’t usually play,” said Julia dreamily. “It’s not… nice?” She blinked a few times. She’d been matching him for drinks.

“Nahhhhh, nooooo, Jules,” said Carey. “You don’t play ‘cuz you never win.”

“I always win,” said Killian, who had also been matching Magnus for drinks and looked none the worse for wear. “You’re just bad at it, Jules, no shame in that.”

She pouted. “I won once. ‘Gainst Carey.”

“Did not,” said Carey.

“Did too, ‘cuz Killian was arm-wrestling and you bet against her.”

Killian looked hurt. “You did? When?”

Julia squinted into the middle distance. “Do you remember Ash? The telemarketer? Their cousin.”

“That guy? I beat him easy,” said Killian. “Carey, why’d you bet against me?”

“Babe, he was massive. What was I supposed to think?”

“How massive? Like me massive?” asked Magnus.
“Nooo, no no no,” said Julia. “Baby no, he was seven feet tall. But Killian won, ‘cuz Killian always wins.”

Magnus considered. He wasn’t thinking super clearly, but a thought was forming in his head. He tried it out loud.

“Killian. Your legs.”

His friends all looked at him blankly. “What?” said Killian.

“‘Cuz you skate? That’s most of your strength. Your legs. Not your arms.”

“Is this going where I think it is?” Taako let his chair thump to the floor.

“I think…” Magnus looked at his right hand for a moment, and then put his elbow on the table. “I think I could take you.”

Killian raised her eyebrows. “You? Oh hell no.”

Taako rubbed his hands together. “Hoo, boy, this is too good. Ladies and gentlemen, place your bets!”

“What’s up?” said Sloane from the next table over.

“Magnus versus Killian, arm wrestling match of the century! Who will triumph?”

“I got five on Killian,” said Sloane.

“Mm, five on Magnus, then,” said Hurley.

A few others called out bets--Magnus stopped listening to who after Hurley, until Julia slid off his lap and leaned in front of Kravitz toward Taako.


“You’re a brilliant woman and I reflect your choices,” said Magnus. He blinked a couple times. “Respect.”

“Nuh-uh, Killian is really dr-hic. Drunk.” Carey pulled herself off Killian and rested an arm on Taako’s shoulder. “Ten on my best friend Magnus.”

“Isn’t this just the juiciest?” Taako grinned. “All right, beach hunks. Get ready.”

Killian slammed her arm onto the table and grabbed Magnus’ hand. “Let’s do this, rough boy.”

Magnus grinned. “You’re on.”


But for the sudden strain and focus on both their faces, Magnus and Killian appeared not to move. The only sign they were actually trying is that in a minute or so they both began to sweat. The pub went quiet, and got quieter.

Carey reached over Taako’s head and poked Julia in the arm. “Magnus is gonna win.”

“Is not,” said Julia, poking her back. “Killian beats everyone always.”
“She’s real drunk, though, one more drink she passes out,” Carey insisted. “It’s Magnus’ game.”

“Magnus is not as strong as Killian. Sorry, babe. He’s just not. I’m sorry, you’re wonderful.”

“Thanks, Jules,” Magnus said through gritted teeth.

“You don’t know Killian like I do,” said Carey.

“Well, you don’t know Mags like I do.”

“Yeah? Well… watch this.” Carey leaned back over to Killian and started whispering in her ear. Killian and Magnus’ locked fists shifted, almost imperceptibly, in Magnus’ favor.

“Hey! That’s cheating.” Julia whacked Taako on the arm. “That’s cheating.”

“I’ll allow it,” said Taako gleefully.

Julia scowled. She swooped over beside Magnus and whispered into his ear.

The fists shifted not so imperceptibly this time, very clearly in Killian’s favor.

“Hey!” Carey snapped. “Magnus, get it together.”

“You get it together,” said Julia.

Carey shot her a dirty look, then turned back to her girlfriend with a smile that meant trouble. She scooted a little closer and pressed a kiss to Killian’s cheek. It made no difference, and so Carey’s kisses continued down Killian’s neck.

Killian’s eyes went wide and she made a tiny sound. Magnus took a small lead.

“Nope.” Julia turned back, determined. Placing her hands upon Magnus’ shoulders, she lifted herself back into his lap, completely blocking his view of the contest. Before he could say anything, Julia ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him. Hard.

For just a second, it looked as though even this wouldn’t faze Magnus, before Killian slammed his hand down on the table.

Julia broke off for a second to say, “Ha! I wi--ope.” Magnus pulled her back.

“Not cool,” groaned Carey.

“I’ll be collecting on these bets now!” said Taako. “Jeez, you two, get a room.”

There may have been other jeers and jibes, but Julia could no longer hear. Her world had narrowed significantly in the last few seconds, and now consisted mainly of warm lips, close breaths, and trying to see if it was possible to fuse her face with that of the man beneath her. It was sloppy and tasted a little too much like cheap beer, but it was a taste she was very quickly acquiring.

She felt someone give her a little shove from behind and heard “Get a room!” once more. With a deep breath Magnus broke them apart. “Jules we should… we should go…” he panted, his eyes still locked on her lips. “We should go right now. Immediately.” He nodded dumbly.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” She took another breath.

“Oh my god, you guys, stop,” laughed Killian.
Julia could feel the heat flushing her cheeks, but she was too busy trying to extract herself from Magnus’ lap enough to let them both out of the seat to come up with any kind of reply.

By the time they had untangled themselves and scooted into the open, Magnus was already fed up. “Here we go!” he exclaimed, hoisting Julia without warning into his arms. Julia gave a little shout, which was echoed by most of her friend’s cheering. The cheering turned to laughter as Magnus took one step, nearly tripped over a chair, and had to transfer Julia to lay over his shoulder in order to keep his balance. “Byeguys!” he yelled back as he made a beeline for the door.

Laughter and catcalls followed the couple, and Julia threw all of them the bird from her perch on Magnus’ shoulder before disappearing into the night.

“God damnit, Magnus!” shouted Ren from the bar. “Pay your bill, you animal!”

“You’ve got to stop selling that guy drinks, Ren,” said Taako.

Carey leaned down and kissed Killian’s cheek. “You want another drink babe?”

“Nah, you’re right. If I have another I’ll pass out.” Killian patted her girlfriend’s face. “Maybe we should head home toooo?” she drawled.

“I was gonna drive everyone in Rail Splitter,” said Taako.

Kravitz was peeking out the window. “You might want to wait on that.”

Taako shrugged. “No rush, I guess. How long ’til those crazy kids move in together?”

“I bet they decide to once they’ve been dating four months,” said Killian at once.

“I’ll take that bet,” said Carey.

Taako grinned and spread his arms. “Any other takers?”
Magnus woke up to water dripping on his forehead. He grunted, ham-handedly wiping it away. It was the ceiling leaking again. Dammit, no matter where he moved the mattress on the floor that was his bed, it always seemed to get him right in the face.

Raven’s Roost apartment complex was a wreck. The super was a ghost or dead or something; he never fixed anything. The rent was cheap, though. Between that and the orders starting to trickle in thanks to his brand new furniture website, Magnus’ savings account was thanking him. He had big plans.

A soft snore turned his head. Julia lay on her side beside him, curls splayed everywhere, one hand resting on the pillow by her head.

Magnus’ face broke into a smile. Big plans. He watched as one curl floated in and out with her breath.

He pushed himself up a little to look behind her, to the alarm clock on the floor. In about forty minutes it would go off for him. Julia had class in an hour.

“Jules,” he said softly. “Jules?”

She didn’t even stir. He didn’t really want to wake her. This was so much better.

A drop of water dripped onto her hand, and another fell on her nose. Still, she remained motionless.

“Really? Nothing?” he said, keeping his voice low. He leaned his head down and gently kissed her fingers. They flexed, very slightly, and then relaxed.

“We’re being attacked by aliens,” he whispered.

Nothing.

“This hellhole is being cleansed by the wrath of God.”

Still nothing.

He chuckled. “I could say anything I wanted, couldn’t I?”

Inhale. Exhale.

He hooked a finger under her unresisting fingertips and ran his thumb along her knuckles. “The other day I was thinking about building a bedframe, and I realized I was wondering what kind of mattress we would get, what kind of designs you liked.”

Inhale. Exhale.

“I love you, Julia.”

Inhale...exhale.

He’d finally said it out loud. Not to her face, like a stupid coward, but at least he’d admitted it to
himself. And he meant it, from the deepest parts of himself, he meant it. God, though, they’d only been dating for two months. He didn’t want to scare her.

“Julia?” he said a little louder. “Julia!”

Her eyelashes fluttered and she inhaled sharply. “Mmmwhat?”

“You’ve got class in an hour, babe.”

She opened her eyes and smiled. “Want to get rid of me so soon, huh?”

“Nah, never,” he said.

She burrowed in closer, against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her.

“I don’t want to go to Business Ethics,” she mumbled into his collarbone. “I want to stay here.”

He kissed her hairline. “We could.”

“You’re a bad influence.”

“Cough cough. Oh no, do you feel that? It’s a cold coming on. Better stay in.”

The feeling of her laughter at his neck was delicious. “I can’t miss it, we’re going to have a quiz.”

“Your professor just doesn’t understand.”

She kissed his jaw sweetly. “I’m going to shower. Are you going back to sleep?”

“No, I’ll make breakfast.” He lifted his arm.

“Can’t wait,” she said, and rolled off his mattress.

Magnus sat up and yawned hugely. He rubbed his face. Wake up. “I was thinking about your dad,” he said.

“When, exactly, were you thinking about my dad?”

Magnus blinked a couple times before he got it. “Aww, already with these jokes?”

He could hear her laughing from the other room. “What were you thinking?”

“Well,” said Magnus, stretching his shoulders and back, “it seems like we could fix this whole bad impression thing if I just met him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. He never likes anyone I date.”

Magnus stood and stepped off the mattress. “At least if I talk to him, he won’t like me because of who I am as a person instead of one mistake.”

“No, it’s just… no I don’t think so.”

He paused. “Why not? Maybe he’ll come around.”

“I don’t want him to get used to you.”

Magnus froze. In slow motion, the billboard in his head that said “Big Plans” came crashing to the
ground. No. Surely he’d misunderstood. “What?”

“You know, I want it to be immediate.”

“It’s uh. It’s a little late for immediate. He’s already got an opinion of me.”

“I know, but I want more than just him to tolerate you. I want him to like you.”

Magnus exhaled. He’d misunderstood. Stay cool. He took some sweatpants from his closet shelf and slipped them on.

“Mags?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“Sorry, the way you phrased that had me worried.”

“Phrased what? I don’t want him… oh! Jeez. I’m sorry.”

A weight lifted. He sighed in relief and padded to the kitchen as the shower turned on. Let’s see, he had pancake mix, and those blueberries were probably still good. Blueberry pancakes was a good meal to feed your girlfriend, he reflected. Wholesome and delicious. Just like him. Dammit, why wouldn’t Julia’s dad like him? He took out a bowl and the Krusteaz and flipped on the stove.

Ah, yes, because he’d seen her physically injured and blamed him for it. Right. Magnus whisked some water into the pancake mix. Let it go. He took a deep breath and let it out.

Pull out the good skillet, put away the mix, take out the blueberries, run them under the sink. Truth be told, he wanted Julia’s dad to like him, too. Being on bad terms with in-laws only worked in sitcoms.

He turned off the sink and paused. He’d just thought the word “in-laws.” As in marriage. As in marrying Julia.

He could see the billboard in his head again, and this time it didn’t just say Big Plans. It proclaimed, “I’m going to marry this woman.”

A smile crept over his face. Yeah. He sprinkled the blueberries into the pancake batter and poured out a few spoonfuls on the pan. He turned the thought over and over in his mind. It only got sweeter.

He stared at the backsplash, grinning like an idiot. In a few minutes Julia appeared, tying her hair back in a bandana.

“It’s not that I think he’ll hate you or anything, I’m just scared, you know? I don’t want my family to be at odds with my boyfriend.”

He put a hand on her hip and pulled her gently over to him, wrapping his arms around her stomach and kissing the back of her head. “I know. I understand.”

She turned her head until she could see him in one eye. “You’ll meet him soon, I promise. I just. Want to be ready.”

“I’m okay with that,” he told her curls.
“And for the record, I definitely do want to keep you around. Everyone’s gonna be used to you if I have anything to say about it.”

He laughed, found her hand, and spun her out like they were dancing. “Thanks, Jules.”

She beamed. “So. Pancakes?”

He glanced down at the pan. The pancakes hadn’t cooked at all. He let go of Julia’s hand and flipped the switch on the stove once or twice. The little light that indicated a burner was on did not light up.

He sighed. “Broken. Of course it is. Want some cereal?”

“Depends. Do you got any Lucky Charms?”

“Actually I do.”

Julia laughed. “Where are the bowls?”

He pointed to a cupboard and opened the fridge.

“You could move, you know,” she said behind him. “This place is the worst.”

“I’m saving up,” said Magnus, trading the bowl of pancake batter for the milk. “When I move next it’ll be into a house. A real house, with a yard and a garage and everything.”

“That sounds really nice,” said Julia wistfully.

An image crossed Magnus’ mind: the two of them on a porch swing he’d built himself.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “It does.”
Kravitz’s car bumped over another pothole in the gravel road, and he silently cursed. His car was not meant for driving on anything other than a smooth asphalt surface. But thankfully, the directions that Magnus had scrawled on the back of a receipt were delivering him to the correct destination. The workshop was larger than Kravitz had expected, red corrugated siding and one large door that was propped open.

Kravitz parked next to Magnus’ van and a scarily old Ford truck. As he got out of his car, the sound of power tools met his ears. He picked up the camera bag from the backseat and approached the opened doorway.

Magnus looked up from the power-sander he was using and waved to Kravitz. He turned the machine off and pulled off the mask he’d been wearing.

“You found it,” Magnus said, coming around the work table and giving Kravitz a sweaty hug.

“Yes, your directions were perfect.”

“Aw, man, I got you all covered in sawdust.” Magnus brushed off some of the more egregious spots. Kravitz chuckled.

“It’s fine, I figured I’d get a little messy one way or another.” He hoisted the bag further of his shoulder. “This isn’t it, right?” Kravitz asked, looking at the project Magnus had been working on.

“Hm? Oh, no. This is a banister for a house Isaak is building.” Magnus walked to another work table, Kravitz following carefully behind. The table had something on it covered in a dusty sheet. “This is what I wanted you to see.”

Magnus pulled the sheet off with a flourish, the sunlight catching dust as it flew into the air, revealing a mission style coffee table. Kravitz gave a low whistle and ran a hand over the top. The finish was as smooth as silk, and a rich reddish brown. There was expert carving on the top and the legs. Kravitz walked slowly around it to inspect it from every side.

“This is the third order I’ve gotten from that site you made me, but this is the first one that I really liked, you know?”

“Magnus, this is a masterpiece.” Kravitz said. He stopped as something that wasn’t sawdust and wood glue met his nose. “Do I smell… lavender?”

Magnus nodded eagerly. “Yeah! I infused the varnish with lavender.”

“Wow.” Kravitz slowly nodded his head. “Yes, we definitely need to document this before you ship it off to the client. When’s the latest you can send it?”

“I have a couple days before I need to get it to the shipping company.”

“Good. I can take it back to my place today, get the photos, and you can have it back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sounds good. Oh, and Isaak let me set up a phone line out here for the site, I can get you the
“Wonderful. Here, stand next to it and I’ll get your picture real fast.” Kravitz said, putting his bag on a bench and opening it. Magnus dusted off his Bee Gees t-shirt and propped an elbow up on the edge of the table, he smiled extra wide. Kravitz snapped the 50mm onto his camera. “Oh jeez, did I forget—nope. Brought an extra roll, we’re good to go.” He picked up a film cannister and set it next to the bag and a longer lens on the bench.

“So where’s the table going, out of curiosity?” Kravitz asked, as he held the camera up to his face. Magnus was too dark, the light coming from the door behind him was overpowering the work lights. Plus, he was making that terrible face Magnus always made when photos were being taken. Kravitz would have to find a workaround for that too. He jogged around and slid the door shut.

“Neverwinter. To this really fancy school.” Magnus said, trying a different pose next to the table, this time holding his hands in front like a bodyguard.

Kravitz chuckled as he returned to his original spot. The lighting was better this time, the pose was still awful. “Wouldn’t happen to be Neverwinter Academy, would it?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Kravitz stopped adjusting his focus for a second and lowered the camera. “Wait, it really is Neverwinter Academy?”

“Yeah. Apparently they’re redecorating their offices and the interior designer found the site.” Magnus relaxed and leaned on the table.

“This is crazy. I went to Neverwinter Academy, and my mother is friends with the president, Istus Kader. Wow.” Kravitz brought the camera back up to his face and focused again.

“Must be fate.” Magnus said, laughing a little. Kravitz snapped the picture. “Oh, wait, I wasn’t ready.”

“No, trust me, that was a good one.”

“Okay, how about this time I do this?” Magnus quickly pushed up the sleeves of his shirt and flexed his biceps while making a macho face. Kravitz laughed and took another picture.

Kravitz parked across the street from the apartment and popped the trunk of his car. He grabbed Taako’s dry-cleaning from the hook in the backseat, and the bags of groceries from the trunk. It was a bit of a struggle, but he’d be damned before he took two trips. He kicked the trunk shut and jogged across the street, right as the mailman walked up.

“Afternoon, Will,” Kravitz said, as he tried to pull his keys from his front pocket and not drop the milk.

“Hey, Kravitz. Do you want the mail in the box, or…?” Will looked uncertainly at Kravitz.

“Here, just drop it in the bag.” Kravitz held out the grocery bundle and Will slipped it inside.

“Have a good one!” Will waved as he walked down the street. Kravitz deftly opened the door and hip-bumped it shut behind him. He kicked off his shoes and hung up the clothes. He noticed the answering machine was flashing with a new message, he made a mental note to check it in a minute.
after he finished sorting the mail.

A new Penny Saver, a couple credit card offers, several other pieces of junk mail, all of which Kravitz threw away. He ended up with one final piece, his bank statement. He frowned at the white envelope and put it down on the table, unopened.

He was a responsible adult. He kept a diligent record of every cent that went in and out, mostly out, of his accounts. But still, seeing the record on official stationary just seemed so much more foreboding. Moving in with Taako had helped, and finally Magnus was starting to see a couple orders trickle in from the site. But it hadn’t changed the overall trajectory of his account. By his most recent calculations, he had about 2 weeks left of budget in his account. Then he officially would be at the end of his rope.

The envelope stared at him menacingly as he put away groceries. It was even worse when he finished. He’d done all the errands for the day, tidied the apartment, and it was still only 1:30. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Give me an occupation, Miss Dashwood, or I shall run mad, he quoted his mother’s favorite movie to himself. Run mad indeed.

He snatched up the envelope and walked over to the small filing cabinet he had moved into the apartment. He dropped it, unopened, into the hanging file marked, ‘Financial Records’. He paused, looked back at the clock, checking that somehow three and a half hours hadn’t passed in the blink of an eye. 1:32. He pulled the drawer out all the way, and pulled a crumpled and then smoothed paper from the very back file. He grabbed a pen and sat down at the kitchen table, and began filling out the application for 27 Springs.

He’d tried waiting, he’d done everything in his power to try for something better. But he was two weeks from the precipice, and it terrified him to be so close to the edge. So he filled in his name, birthdate, social security number. Jotted in his work history. The word ‘overqualified’ kept drifting through his mind as he wrote it.

The phone rang and Kravitz literally jumped in his seat. He clutched a hand over his chest and tried to catch his breath as he let the call go to the answer machine. It rang twice more, then the machine beeped.

“‘Yello, you’ve reached Chez del Taako and… Krav, that’s where you come in.’

‘It is? I thought I was the beep.’

‘No, you say your name and for them to leave a message after the beep.’

‘Oh, okay. I’ll get it right this time, I promise.’

‘You’re lucky you’re so pretty,’ ” the machine said and then beeped. Kravitz’ lip twitched into a smile.

“Hey, Kravitz. It’s Magnus… Ah… I-um, well. I don’t really know how to explain this on a message. So maybe just give me a call back when you get a chance.” Kravitz stood and quickly looked around for the phone. “Nothing’s wrong, promise, just um… it’s the site. I’m not sure I’m looking at it right…? Anyway, when you get a chance--”

“Magnus?” Kravitz said, finally finding the phone by the TV and picking up.

“Oh, Kravitz, hey.”

“Sorry, I screened you.”
“Not a problem, I do that all the time too. Julia says that I should just pay for caller ID, but it just seems so needless, ya know?”

“Yeah… so there’s a problem with the site?”

“No, just… I was at the library this morning, and I was looking at the page that shows how many people visited the site and the numbers were... up.”

“Up?”

“Way up. Can you look at it?”

“I mean, I’d have to hang up on you and turn on the modem.”

“Right. Well, two weeks ago when I shipped that coffee table off, I checked the numbers and there were 9 hits on the page. And I think most of those were me reloading it. But just since Saturday, there have been 498 hits.”

“Whoa.” Kravitz stopped in his tracks for a second. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure, because when I got to Isaak’s workshop Monday morning, the answering machine had run out of tape.”

“Wait, people called the number?”

“Yes, I have almost a hundred orders for that coffee table! And that’s just the ones that called before the tape ran out.” Magnus’ voice sounded concerned.

“Magnus, that’s amazing!”

“No, it’s not!

“Wait, why not?”

“I-I don’t have the materials to make a hundred tables, or the time to output them fast enough, and then shipping’s always a--”

“Wait, wait, Magnus, take a breath. You said they’re all calling about the coffee table?”

“Yeah, all the messages I started making order forms for were all asking for the table. I think they all saw it at some benefit for the school and wanted one too.”

Kravitz chuckled. “Well, this is very simple. Write everything down for all the orders, and then just make a waiting list.”

“A waiting list?”

“Yes. Rich people love waiting lists. It makes them feel exclusive. And if they saw your table at Neverwinter Academy, then they are very rich. Just estimate how many you can make in a month, and let people know how long they’ll have to wait.”

“But… some of these people will have to wait like 9, 10 months.”

“They’ll love it.”

“They will?”
“Yes. Trust me.”

Magnus heaved a sigh. “Well, I guess you’ve been right so far.”

“You could also think about raising the price too.”

“I mean, it’s already not a cheap table.”

“You don’t have to, but they’re in demand. So you should take that into consideration.”

“Yeah, I’ll think about it. Though even with the current price, by the time I finish the current orders I’ll have enough money to… Man, I don’t even know. Buy a whole house. Hell, buy two.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Oh, and several of them also wanted to know where I got my website, so I passed on your name too.”

Kravitz froze.

“You did?”

“Yeah, figured it’s the least I can do. Or would you rather I don’t?”

“No, no. Please. Yes. Thanks. …thank you, Magnus.”

“No, thank you.” Magnus laughed. “Well… I guess I have some wood to order. See you at the bout Saturday.”

“Yeah, see you then. Bye.” Kravitz hung up the phone. He slowly turned towards the answering machine, and the little red light was still flashing. Oh gods. He’d always thought the answering machine greeting with him and Taako was cute. He never thought that someone interested in hiring him might call and hear it. He took a deep breath and pushed the play button with a shaking hand.

“You have 18 new messages. First message, July 28 at 9:04AM,” the machine said.

“Hi, this is Oriana Bishop. I’m calling for Kravitz Sinclair. My law firm is looking for someone to build a site, and I saw your work for the carpenter, if you could give me a call back--”

Kravitz skipped to the next message.

“July 28 at 9:27AM.”

“If this is the Kravitz Sinclair that built the website for Magnus Burnsides, I’d appreciate it if I could get a call--”

“July 28 at 9:43AM.

“I’m trying to reach Kravitz Sinclair in hopes of hiring him to build a website for my--”

Kravitz staggered back as the messages continued to play, one after the other. They’d heard the greeting, they’d heard Taako and him flirting. They’d all heard it and they didn’t care. A wide smile spread across his face and he ran his hands over his dreadlocks. There were law firms, plastic surgeons, boutique stores, even someone from the Mayor’s office of Neverwinter. There was enough work on the machine right now for an entire year. A laugh bubbled up from inside him. He cast a look at the half-finished application still on the table. With an air of elated finality, he balled it up and
tossed it into the trash can across the room. He knew exactly where he was taking Taako to dinner that night, and Kravitz would pay.
8:30 am
Johann woke up bleary-eyed to the sun. He could have sworn the curtains were closed.

“Let your goddamn dog out, I’m not gonna keep doing it for you.”

Johann blinked a couple of times. What was Avi doing in his room? “Come on, you can’t wake me up like this.”

“Just did.”

Johann leaned himself up on his elbows. “You’re in a bad mood.”

“No I’m not. Now let Void out. I’ll see you later.”

Johann laid back down, just for a minute, mumbling, “Come back, baby, we can talk this through…”

10:30
Cold nose. Johann jerked awake. Void was nosing his hand and whimpering.

Johann dragged himself out of his bed and through the hall to the kitchen. He opened the back door. Void rushed out gratefully. The glass door was cold. Johann rested his forehead against it. Felt good.

He stayed like that for a minute before his eyes snapped open.

“Oh god, I called him baby…”

10:45
Johann ate the rest of a leftover burrito he’d bought from 7/11 a week ago, standing in the kitchen. Void wagged her tail and watched the burrito.

“I mean, he probably didn’t hear me, right?” he asked Void.

Void did not respond, except with a small drip of drool.

“He can’t know. It’d be… no, we’ve been friends for too long.”

He took another bite, chewing through the stiff tortilla.

“You were there,” he said. “Did he seem wigged out by it?”

Void licked her chops.

“Bark once for yes, twice for no,” he said. “Ready? Speak!”
Void slobbered a little more.

“You spoke for Magnus yesterday,” he pleaded. “Come on, speak.”

She whined.

“I’m gonna take that as a no,” he said.

11:30

Johann turned the tap in the shower. It shuddered a couple times before turning on, but at least it didn’t make that horrible low groan anymore. Offering to pay for repairs really got their landlord moving. He cleared his throat.

“Do re mi fa so la ti do. Do, mi re, fa so, ti la, do do do. Do ti la so fa mi re do.”

He squirted some shampoo directly on his head. Now let’s see.

“If you change your mind, I’m the first in line
Honey I’m still free
Take a chance on me
If you need me, let me know, gonna be around
If you’ve got no place to go, if you’re feeling down…”

11:46

“La donna e mobile
Qual piuma al vento
Muta d’accento

E di pensiero.

Sempre un a mabile
Leggiadro viso,
In pianto o in riso,
Mensognero…”

12:01

“Wicky wild, wicky wicky wild wild wild west,
Jim West, desperado, rough rider
No you don’t want nada
None of this, six gun in this, brotha runnin’ this,
Buffalo soldier, look it’s like I told ya
Any damsel that’s in distress
Be out of that dress when she meet Jim West…”

12:14
“You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog
Cryin’ all the time
Yeah you ain’t never caught a rabbit and you ain’t no friend of mine…”

Outside the door of the bathroom, Void howled.

12:23

Aw, what the hell, the hot water was running out. Johann scrubbed the conditioner out of his hair as fast as he could manage. Cheap piece of junk water heater.

12:24

Johann rubbed the towel on his head, tied it around his waist, and then took out his toolkit: a comb, a hairdryer, and the gel. He took a moment to visualize what he wanted.

There it was. All he had to do was reach out and grasp it.

Leonardo DiCaprio’s hair would be his.

1:15

Exhausted, his hand shaking, he carefully adjusted his bangs and whispered, “Yes.” This was it, the masterpiece. There was real artistry in hair styling. If anyone had ever asked, Johann would say he didn’t have bad hair days, but if he was honest with himself, then a bad hair day was when his hair refused to do this.

God, his hand really was shaking. He held it out flat and watched it. Was this the price you paid for perfection? To spend yourself so thoroughly that you were little but a husk, weak, lending all your strength to your art?

His stomach growled. Oh, okay.

1:20

Johann stood in his towel, eating Trix yogurt with a spoon that was too big for the opening. He’d carved out most of it, but there was a little left at the bottom.

He jiggled the container until it was mostly loose from the sides and knocked it back like a shot, but it hit his throat in a way he didn’t expect. Coughing and trying not to choke, he bent over the sink.

Void licked his ribs. He shied away with a yelp. “I’m too ticklish for that, girl.”

The sentence gave him pause. It sounded kinda...
He gave the mirror his best finger guns. “Hey girl. Did it hurt? When you fell from heaven?”

No. Terrible. He tried again.

“Hey girl, are you an angel? Because you… look like Della Reese.”

He scowled. What? No.

Maybe if he…

Finger guns. “Hey boy, are you from Tennessee?”

Boy? No.

“Hey man. My man. Are you from Tennessee?”

Yeah, not bad.

“My dude? Are you from Tennessee?”

Eh. It sounded more gay when Taako did it. Really, everything did. This whole… Johann didn’t want to put words to it, in case a label was a promise… thing was new. He was still getting used to the idea. He couldn’t go comparing himself to Taako. The guy was practically a professional.

He leaned in to the mirror. Finger guns? No finger guns. He met his own gaze. “Hey, Avi, did it hurt when you fell from heaven?”

Damn, that felt good.

1:40

Johann rooted through the pile of clothes on his floor. Was this the clean pile or the dirty pile?


He picked out a shirt with a neon orange and yellow squiggle pattern and gave it a sniff. He frowned, and sniffed it again.

“When did I have curry?”

1:45

He finally settled on a gray tank with a peach-and-green floral shirt over the top. As an afterthought he added one of those bead necklaces from that girl Avi worked with. What was her name? Antonia? He liked her, she had good taste in independent music.

Johann picked up his guitar and sat down on the floor. What was it he’d written last night? It had been really good.

Void nosed his hand and barked.

“What?” he said back, with the same tone and timbre.
She growled a little, trotted to the door and waited for him to follow. He scoffed. “I don’t have time for this, Void, it’s music time.”

She barked again. He swore she saved the highest pitched barks for him.

“Oh wait, have I fed you yet?”

2:02

Kibble was in the bowl, and he could hear Void crunching happily in the kitchen, so he again sat down on the floor with his guitar. He pulled his notebook off his bedside table, where he kept it in case the muse struck in the middle of the night. Good, he’d remembered to write it down.

He strummed through the chords he’d written. It was kind of a weird progression, but he could remember thinking it was absolutely groundbreaking. Playing it now it just sounded discordant.

He played through it again. No. It was an absolute mess. He tore out the page in his notebook and tossed it into an overflowing wastebasket. It bounced off and landed in his laundry pile.

He’d thought of something better anyway while he was in the shower. Pen. Where was a pen? He snatched a pencil nub from off the bedside table and started writing.

2:28

This was too good. A work of genius. He strummed through the chords, did a little finger-picking, too. This would be so choice on an electric guitar…

Wait a second, something was familiar about this. He played through it again.

Johann loosed a groan. “Dammit, I rewrote ‘Killer Queen!’”

He let himself fall to the floor, his guitar resting on his stomach. Void wiggled over and licked his face. Johann let it happen.

“You’re the only one who understands my suffering, Void.”

He stayed like that until Void lost interest, then sat up and laid his guitar in a corner. If he couldn’t write, then he should partake in the one thing that was guaranteed to inspire him.

He went to the living room, clicked on the TV, and slid a tape into the VCR. He had to rewind it first; he listened to the hum impatiently, then fast-forwarded through the commercials at the beginning.

The slow sepia shots began, and he hummed along to the vocalist as the screen announced, “Paramount Pictures presents: Titanic.”

3:48

“Jack,” said Kate Winslet, with accompaniment by Johann, “I changed my mind.”
He stared, hardly blinking, at the best scene in cinematic history. The trick was not to think about what happens on the second tape, or else--

Oh no, now he was crying. Well, he was going to be crying anyway, and this wasn’t the earliest it had ever happened. Sometimes he cried at the opening credits.

“I’m flying, Jack!” breathed Kate Winslet. God, he wanted to be her.

6:26

Johann woke up from a nap he didn’t know he was taking to the sound of Void barking and the door opening. “Johann? Tony’s here. Hope you’re dressed.”

Johann looked to check. He was. The TV screen was black, humming softly. He switched it off. “Hey, Antonia.”

They appeared from the front hallway. Antonia waved. “Hi Johann.” She was facing the right direction but looking past him.

“She’s coming to the derby bout. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure, yeah.” Johann was mildly disappointed. He enjoyed the time he got to spend with Avi on the way to bouts. Avi loved derby so much, and Johann loved--well. Loved.

But Avi needed time with friends, too, and Johann was willing to give him that. Anyway, Antonia was cool.

“Uhh…” Avi stood in the living room. “I wanted to um. Make something for you before we left but with traffic and all… I don’t want to be late for the bout. They’re expecting me.” He looked paralyzed by indecision.

Johann looked at his watch. It was pretty late. “Why don’t we just grab some Wendy’s or something on the way?”

Avi looked annoyed. That was strange. “I don’t really want to--”

“Come on, I’ll treat. For all of us.”

“That’s so nice of you, Johann,” said Antonia. She elbowed Avi. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I guess.” Avi picked up his keys from the table where he left them. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Johann picked up his wallet. “What’s this mood you’re in?”

“He’s been like this all day,” Antonia muttered. “All jumpy.”

“I’m fine! Nothing is wrong! It’s gonna be great!” He walked out the door.

“I’ve never seen him like this,” Antonia whispered. “Is he okay?”

“He used to get like this sometimes during college,” Johann said, letting Antonia leave before him and locking the door. “Especially during finals. He’s nervous about something. Watch the step.”

She put her hand on the rail. “What could make him this nervous? I’ve seen him land planes in
Johann shrugged. “He’ll tell us when he’s ready. You think this is bad, he used to just drink when he got anxious.”

Antonia winced. “He’s told me about that. It worries me that he still carries the flask around.”

Johann glanced at Avi’s retreating form—good butt, his brain registered—to check his back pocket. “He doesn’t have it with him now.”

“Well that’s good, right?”

6:52

Johann led Antonia to what was in his opinion the best seat in the house.

“Like, sometimes you miss what’s happening on the end of the rink, there, but you can really see the passion on their faces.”

Antonia laughed. “Is that why you come to derby? The passion?”

“I come for a lot of reasons,” he said, watching Avi skid across the track toward Roswell.

“You’re going to have to describe what’s happening for me anyway, passion or no,” she said. “I know the rules, but it’s hard to understand without seeing.”

“I was going to say, I’m kind of surprised you wanted to come at all. Avi’s said you’re not big into sports.”

“It’s one of Avi’s favorite things, so I thought I should give it a shot,” she said.

Down on the track, Julia pounded on the bench. “I hereby call this session to order. WHO ARE WE?”

“THE BUREAU OF BADASS!”

“DAMN STRAIGHT!”

Johann leaned forward. “It’s starting.”

As the call went up, and the crowd started chanting, Johann felt the tears come. This was his work as it was meant to be.

“Johann? Are you crying?”

“This is the only place in the world I’m appreciated,” he sobbed.

9:45

It took a long time to tear themselves away. The B.o.B had won 77 to 74 in a tight game against the Phandolin Fireworks, and the crowd would not stop celebrating. Soon, however, Johann and Antonia met a sweating Avi near the door.
“Do you guys want to go to Refuge?” said Avi, maybe a little too loudly. “You can meet some more of my B.o.B friends, Tony.”

“I’d love to,” she said.

“I’m always up for Refuge,” Johann said.

They wandered down the street and ducked inside. Johann looked around for a place to sit. “It’s really full in here tonight.”

“Hey, Antonia!” called someone from the bar.

“Oh my god, is that Rowan?” Antonia squinted. “Hey!”

Two guys at the bar turned and waved. Antonia turned to Avi. “I’m going to go say hi. I’ll be back.”

“Sure!” blurted Avi.

Antonia winced. “Are you okay? Do you want to go home?”

“I’m fine!” He was not fine. His skin looked gray.

“If you say so,” Antonia reluctantly left for the bar.

Johann laid a hand on Avi’s shoulder. “Seriously, I don’t want to be an enabler or whatever, but do you need a drink?”

“No.” Avi shook off his hand. “That would spoil it.”

“Spoil what? What gives, man?”

“You’ll see,” said Avi. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Johann drew back a little. He’d heard talk like that. He’d said talk like that. “Come on, Avi. You’re not alone.”

Avi looked down. He took a deep breath. “Thanks. I needed that. Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Would you play something on the piano?” Avi gestured to the stand-up in the corner. “Something romantic?”

Johann felt as though he’d been electrocuted. He said, barely breathing, “Yeah. Yeah, all right.”

He floated over to the piano, waited for the jukebox to stop playing “Fly Like an Eagle,” and stretched his fingers.

“My Heart Will Go On.” It had to be. It was a sign. He’d watched Titanic that day.

Nah, but Avi didn’t like the movie as much as Johann did. He cracked his knuckles and played, “Can You Feel The Love Tonight.”

Avi looked a little better. He marched over to Antonia and took her by the hand, brought her to the center of the pub.

Johann frowned, but kept playing. What was going on?
“Attention everyone--friends, family, guests,” said Avi, in a voice that wobbled down. “I need to ask Antonia a, uh, a very important question.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny box. A ring box. He knelt, took out the ring, and put it in her hand. “Antonia, will you marry me?”

Johann played a wrong note. Plonk. The world froze.

Antonia’s face spread into a smile as she felt the ring. “Yes!”

The whole place exploded in cheers, and everyone mobbed the couple.

Everyone except Johann, who sat stock-still, hands still frozen on the piano.

10:12

It was… a sort of numbness. He once fell off a horse when he was little, broke his arm. He remembered thinking it didn’t hurt so bad. It was shock, the doctor had said. It would hurt plenty later.

Now he was just remembering things he’d willfully ignored. The way that Antonia always stayed late when she came over. How they moved around each other, how often Avi talked about her. Had Avi ever said the word “girlfriend?” Yes, he had, and now Johann’s brain was providing him numerous examples.

And you thought it didn’t matter, his brain said, like Avi was just biding his time before he confessed his love for you.

Johann made himself stand up and stagger over to the center of the bar, where Antonia and Avi were still receiving congratulations. Now that Johann was looking, he saw friends from all the groups Avi hung out with, the whole place packed to the brim with celebration. Avi must have wanted everyone to be there.

Avi turned and saw him. “My man!” He wrapped Johann in a hug. “Thank you, that was perfect.”

Johann managed to say, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You suck at keeping secrets,” laughed Avi, letting him go. “Sorry, I’ll make it up to you. Will you be my best man?”

Johann looked over to Antonia. She was talking to the B.o.B. ladies, shaking hands with Noelle. “Uhh…”

“Come on, you have to. You’re my best friend.”

Johann must have nodded, because when he looked back, Avi was smiling. “Thanks. You’re awesome, you know that?”

“Avi!” Magnus appeared, lifting him bodily in a bear hug. “Congratulations!”

Johann wandered out of the pub.

11:16
Johann walked around the block for the fifth time.

Now it hurt.

And the worst part was that he was happy for Avi. The man looked elated, and despite the hurt, it made Johann happy to see it. He just wished…

Johann ran a hand down his face. He suspected that he was not a very good friend. Avi didn’t deserve him. Of course he deserved Antonia.

The least he could do now was be there for Avi. He rounded the corner again and opened the door to Refuge.

The place had calmed down a bit. Johann recognized Avi’s groups of friends mixing and mingling. Magnus was at the bar with that Rowan guy. Work friends and derby friends together.

“Johann! There you are!”

Avi put his hand on Johann’s shoulder. Johann tried not to shudder. “Hey, Tony and I are taking off. Are you riding with us?”

The thought made him feel physically ill. “No, I’ll catch a ride with someone else.”

“Cool.” Avi smiled. “See you later.”

Johann sat at the bar, a chair down from Taako and his boyfriend, and called Ren over. “Ren, can I get like, a vodka or something? On the rocks?”

Her eyes narrowed. “How many have you had?”

“You haven’t even opened my tab yet,” he said.

“Okay.” Ren didn’t stop looking suspicious until the drink was in his hand.

He nodded thanks and took a sip. “Hey Taako?”

“What’s up, homie?”

“Is Avi gone?”

Taako looked lazily around the bar. “Yeah.”

“Great.” Johann took his drink to an empty booth, the seat of which was sticky with beer. He climbed in, curled up into a ball, and sobbed quietly.

12:34

Taako slid into the booth across from Johann, followed by Kravitz. “Hey, my dude, we’re taking you home.”

“Leave me alone,” he said, his voice muffled in his knees.

“What’s your malfunction, Johann?” demanded Taako. “Is it Beethoven or what?”

“I said, leave me alone.”
“Is it about your friend Avi?” asked Kravitz quietly.

Johann looked up, glaring. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“What, are you upset to be losing a friend?” said Taako. “He’s getting married, he’s not dead.”

Kravitz gave Taako a pointed look. “That’s not what I mean.”

It took Taako a minute. His mouth formed a small o. “I uh. I didn’t know you played for our team, kemosabe.”

Johann blushed furiously and rolled back into a ball.

Taako leaned back in the booth. “You didn’t know either, huh?”

“I don’t want to talk to you about this.”

“We should take you home, though,” said Kravitz. “Pretty much everyone else is gone.”

Johann looked around the bar warily. He was right.

“I already took care of your tab,” said Kravitz. “Just let me give you a ride. You don’t have to say anything else about it.”

Taako looked as though he disagreed, but he didn’t say so.

Johann wiped his nose on his sleeve and climbed out of the booth.

12:44

It’s funny, Johann thought, how you don’t realize that all of your friends’ cars are pieces of crap until you find yourself in a car that actually works. Kravitz drove a ’95 Chevy Malibu that looked like no living human had ever sat in the backseat. The only sign of life was a nearly untouched box of tissues.

Johann gave some terse directions and fell silent. He was so thirsty.

“Did you ever tell him?” asked Taako finally.

“Taako,” scolded Kravitz.

“What? Is he just gonna sulk back there forever?”

Johann picked at the exposed threads on his seatbelt. “No. I never told him.”

“Really missed the boat there, didn’t you, bubele?”

“Taako!”

“He did though!”

“I thought it would ruin our friendship!” Johann protested.

They were silent for a while.
“Are you going to let this ruin your friendship?” asked Kravitz.

Johann thought about Avi’s arms around him. You’re my best friend. He rubbed his forehead and sighed. “No. I just don’t know what to do with the pain in the meantime.”

“Shit, you’re an artist, you should know,” said Taako.

Johann scowled. “What should I know?”

“You gotta use it.”

12:52

Avi’s car wasn’t in the driveway. Johann unlocked the door and stepped inside. Void scrambled to meet him and then rushed to paw at the back door. He let her out.

There was big smudge on the glass where he’d rested his forehead that morning. He put his forehead there again. Still felt good.

He managed to down some water in one of those plastic cups from the kids menu at Fazoli’s before Void was back at the door.

He let her back in and then wandered to his bedroom, plopped himself down on his bed.

Use it. Huh.

He picked up his guitar and his notebook, and started writing.
Killian checked the backseat in the rearview mirror. She was driving Angus to the summer program thing he did so he didn’t have to walk. He’d be about half an hour early, but at least he’d be under someone’s supervision instead of wandering town. He’d been uncharacteristically thoughtful the whole ride.

“What’s got you so quiet?” she asked him.

“Did you know that two-thirds of the Netherlands is susceptible to flooding?” he said.

“Woah, what?”

“From the ocean. So they have all these dams built up along the coast. They have a story about a boy who noticed a hole in one, so he plugged it up with his finger to keep his town safe and he saved everyone.”

“Oh, really?” Killian smiled to herself.

“Yeah, a boy at the program said it was important to know, so I got a book about it. I just don’t know why.”

“It’s probably important to the Dutch,” said Killian. “Is this boy Dutch?”

“I don’t think so, he just said I should know about dikes.”

Killian’s heart sank. “Angus, I… I don’t think that’s what he was talking about. Some people use that word as a mean name for lesbians.”

“Oh.” Angus frowned. “That makes a lot more sense in context.”

Killian snorted. “I should tell that pun to Hurley and Sloane.”

“If it’s a mean name you shouldn’t,” Angus said earnestly.

“Eh. Maybe you’re right.”

Killian stopped at a stoplight and waited for no cars to go by. Honestly, this was the most useless intersection to have a light at. She glanced at Angus again. He didn’t look thoughtful now so much as uncomfortable.

“Do they make fun of you a lot?” Killian asked quietly.

Angus nodded. “That’s kind of normal, though. I don’t like it if they make fun of you.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” she said. The light turned green, and she pulled forward. “Nobody’s ever called me a mean name and hurt my feelings.”

“Never?” said Angus in disbelief.

“Nope,” she said.

“How do you not get your feelings hurt?” said Angus, leaning against the strap of his seatbelt.
“Hmm. Good question.” Killian thought about it for a moment. “Usually people say that I’m too tall, or not skinny. Or a lesbian. But I am all of those things, aren’t I?”

Angus nodded. “I guess, but people are so mean about it.”

“Sure, they’re trying to be mean. They try to say that me being tall is a bad thing, right? But it’s not a bad thing. In fact, I like that I’m so tall. It’s almost like they’re doing me a favor by reminding me of things that give me value.”

Angus considered this. “But what if they say things about you that aren’t true?”

“Like what?”

Angus averted his gaze. “Like if they call you a geek.”

“Well, what’s a geek?”

“Someone who’s smart.” He frowned. “But also bad at relating to people. I’m good at relating to people.”

“So it’s not true. They’re misinformed. At the very least, they’re reminding you that you’re smart.”

He nodded. “I think I see. The things that are… are you, that make you good… that doesn’t come from other people.”

Killian grinned. “That’s right. Other people don’t get the privilege of telling you who you are. That’s your job.”

Angus nodded. “I’m going to try that today.”

“Good.” Killian pulled up at the elementary school. “Have fun today.”

“Okay.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and grabbed his backpack. “I love you! Bye!”

“I love you too!”

She watched him hop down from the car and scurry inside before she drove away. What a good kid. Man, he was used to getting made fun of? The very thought made her blood boil. Where did kids get off, calling her Angus names?

She drove out to the edge of town, where her gym was, next to the last Arby’s before Rockport and across the street from a whole lot of nothing. The location wasn’t great, but it was the only gym in town, except for the one at the university, and it did pretty well for itself.

She looked down the road to Rockport. She hadn’t been back in a while. She should go visit her parents. They were finally used to the idea of Carey, so maybe they could go together, make a weekend of it or something. It’d be better to go when her siblings were there, of course, but they were kind of scattered to the four winds these days. Maybe Thanksgiving.

She felt a pang of guilt as she pulled into a parking space. That was something she hadn’t told Angus. It was a whole lot easier to brush off mean names when you and your siblings were all called the same things. And her siblings had always been there to sympathize or laugh with her. Up until senior year of high school of course, but--

Killian stopped that thought before it started. There was no need to think about that. It wasn’t who
she was now.

She locked the car and hurried inside, before any other ugly thoughts decided to rear their heads.

The schedule behind the desk told her that she had a packed day, so she wouldn’t be able to pick up Angus from his program or Carey from work. She would get home just in time to grab a bite to eat, though, and drive them all to derby practice. The thought made her smile. Oh, and a new client! What a good way to start off the day. The first session was usually just introductory stuff, but if she was lucky they could get half a workout in. She waited by the desk and watched people pass through for a few minutes.

A short squat woman approached the desk. She had that self-conscious look some first-timers have, as if she was ready to be judged. She told the desk guy, “I’m here for an appointment with Killian?”

“That’d be me.” Kilian jumped in and stuck out a hand. “You must be Brogden.”

Brogden did a rather poor job of hiding her disappointment. She shook Kilian’s hand. “Oh. Yes, that’s me.”

“Come on in to my office,” said Killian, and led her into the gym proper. She brought Brogden to a corner opposite a couple of meatheads lifting and sat her down on a bench.

“So you’ve signed up for six weeks,” said Killian. “That’s a pretty big commitment. Have you done much physical training before?”

Brogden shook her head. “Not for a lot of years. I’ve been to the gym before, but I feel like I never know what I’m doing.”

“We can definitely fix that,” said Killian. “One of my favorite things is working myself out of a job.”

“Huh.” Brogden looked distracted, kept glancing back at the front desk. Killian watched her for a minute.

“So I’m thinking I’m not what you expected?” said Killian.

Brogden’s eyes swiveled forward guiltily. “Uhh, no, no, it’s just--you know, they said you’ve been a personal trainer a long time.”

Kilian nodded. “Six or seven years now.”

“So I wasn’t thinking… oh, never mind.”

Kilian looked her right in the eye. “Go ahead. You’re not going to hurt my feelings.”

Brogden sighed. “I didn’t think you’d be fat like me.”

Kilian nodded. This happened pretty often, especially coming from the women. “Most of the time, when you think of a woman personal trainer, you think of someone supermodel-shaped.”

“I’m sorry,” said Brogden miserably.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Killian assured her. “It’s a common misconception. Can I ask you a question?”
Brogden nodded.

“What do you want to get out of our time training?”

Brogden took a deep breath. “I just want to look good in a swimsuit.”

Killian chuckled. “All right, but I have to tell you, that’s not something we can do here. That’s something you have to do up here.” She tapped her temple. “No amount of body sculpting is going to change the way you see yourself.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, I can’t teach you to like your body, but I can teach you how to take care of it. I’m looking at your biceps and something tells me you’re an athlete.”

Brogden glanced at her arms and smiled a little. “I used to be a swimmer. I could bench more than any other girl on the team.”

“That’s what I like to hear! We can get you back using that upper body strength. How’s your aerobic endurance?”

“Not great. I get winded going up stairs.”

“We can work on that too. We’ll get you a little stronger, a little leaner, a little more confident. How does that sound?”

Brogden smiled. “Sounds good.”

“Good. Now let’s get you on a machine and see where you’re at now.”

Killian wiped her face with a towel and checked the clock. Perfect, time for lunch. She had a good long lunch break today, which was good, because she needed to get some toothpaste and toilet paper pronto. Neither she nor Carey had had time to run to the store the last few days and things were getting desperate.

She tossed the towel into the laundry basket and headed to the front desk, where her lunch was kept in a little cupboard with the rest of her stuff.

“Hey, Killian,” said a customer, passing her with a gym bag.

“Oh, hey, Jeff! How’d the season end?” Jeff was the coach for the high school girls’ basketball team.

“Not bad, not bad at all,” he said with a smile. “We even made it to finals. One round anyway.”

“Excellent!” Killian slapped him on the back. “Trying to reclaim that former glory, huh?” The team had won the state championship about ten years back.

“It’s all the parents will let me think about,” he said. “Still, this class of juniors was pretty promising. We might have a good season next year.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Say.” He stroked his chin. “You’re about the right age, and I’ve seen you play basketball. You
weren’t on the championship team, were you?”

Killian laughed. “No, I wish. Maybe I could have gotten a basketball scholarship. I played for Rockport.”

“Oo, didn’t they beat Rockport in the first round?”

“Sure did.”

“Tough break,” said Jeff. “You’d have been amazing in the WNBA.”

Killian laughed. “Who watches the WNBA?”

Jeff laughed and waved goodbye. Killian picked up her lunch from the cupboard and meandered out to her car.

She hadn’t thought about that game for so long. It had been such a disappointment, she remembered, to lose to Faerun High of all schools. And then afterward, at what was supposed to have been a party by the lake but ended up being a rather morose gathering, when Brad had asked her out--

Killian shuddered. No. Not who she was, not what defined her. Ignore it.

She sat in her car and pulled a sandwich out of her bag. Peanut butter and jelly. Surely one of the most important foods in a healthy diet. She chewed and watched the wind move the trees in the woods across the street.

She hadn’t ever told Carey about Brad.

The bite of sandwich sat on her tongue like a lump of paste. She forced herself to swallow and started the car. *Forget* about it. It hadn’t been a big deal then, and especially didn’t matter now!

She stuffed the rest of the sandwich in her mouth and pulled out of the parking lot in a huff.

Think of anything else. Anything at all. Her clients. Brogden had a lot of promise. She’d do well. Slowly, Killian relaxed.

She was relaxed as she entered the grocery store and picked up a tiny basket from the rack by the door. She was relaxed as she picked out the tp and the toothpaste and a couple of chocolates for her and Carey for a treat. She was relaxed up to the moment she turned a corner and caught sight of Brad peering into the dairy fridge.

She whirled back around the corner and flattened herself against the cereal selection. No. There was no way. It was her imagination. Like when you start thinking about your friends in Neverwinter and then you think you see them on every street corner. It couldn’t be Brad.

She peeked back around the corner. Nope. It was Brad. He still had that dumb ponytail, although it was longer now. Where had he come from? Had she fucking *summoned* him?

Killian could feel her heart thudding against her ribcage. She tried to calm herself down. Now. It was okay. They’d dated for, what, two or three months? The worst they’d done is a little terrible kissing. Their break-up had been almost mutual and definitely a relief. It was okay. Nothing to worry about.

“Killian?”
Indescribable terror. She turned her head just a little to the right. Brad’s face was lighting up with recognition.

“I thought that was you. Do you remember me?”

“Brad?” Killian managed.

“Yeah!” He was pretty handsome, and one of the few people in the entire world taller than her. “Gosh, it’s been like, ten years. How have you been?”

Killian managed a shrug. “P-pretty good.”

“Swell. Have you lived in Faerun long? I just moved here recently. I’ve been commuting from Rockport for a couple years and I just decided it was silly to keep it up.”

“I’ve been here a pretty long time now,” Killian mumbled.

“Do you know of any good bars in town? I’ve been trying to make friends and I haven’t had a lot of luck.”

“Uhh.” Something in her brain clicked into motion. “Me and my girlfriend really like Refuge.” No! Dammit, why did she say Refuge? Now he would go there.

“Girlfriend?” he said, eyebrows raised.

Shit, shit, shit, shit. “Yeah.”

He chuckled a little. “You too, huh?”

She frowned. “What?”

He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “You were… you were kind of a last-ditch attempt for me. I’m not… straight.”

Killian blanched.

“I actually kind of admitted it to myself after we broke up,” he said.

From deep within, a manic little giggle escaped Killian’s mouth. “Both of us?”

“Funny, right?” Brad laughed too. “When did you know?”

Killian tried to control herself. “It took me a little longer.”

“You and your girlfriend--how long have you been together?” he asked.

“Five years.”

“Amazing,” he said. “That’s the kind of commitment I’d like to find someday.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said. A little intimate for the cereal aisle, huh Brad? He’d always been like this, though, going straight for the real stuff.

“That’s real sweet, Killian. You always were so kind.” He smiled. “Anyway, I’d better get going.”

“Me too,” said Killian. “Uh, good seeing you.” She beat a hasty retreat, leaving him to stare at
jars of peanut butter.

“So what did you do today, Ango?” asked Carey, as Killian drove the three of them to derby practice. Killian tried to pay attention. She’d been thinking about Brad all day, which was more than she’d let herself think about him in about ten years.

“I practiced not being bothered by what people say about me,” said Angus.

Carey whistled. “That’s a tough habit to get into. How did you do it?”

“I tried to be the only person who told me who I am.”

“Aha, the Killian method.” Carey shot her a smile. Killian tried to smile back. “How’d it work?” Carey asked.

“Not so good.” Angus looked very tired. “Geek I didn’t mind. Or nerd. Or dork. Those were okay. But then they called me an orphan.”

Killian winced. Carey sucked in air through her teeth. “Oh no.”

“I’m not an orphan,” he said carefully. “At least, I don’t think I am. I haven’t heard from my mom or dad in a long long time, but still. So I tried to find the good thing in the thing they were saying, like Killian said to, and um. I couldn’t find anything.” He sniffed a little. He wasn’t looking at them. “It just made me sad.”

Carey reached her hand into the backseat. Angus took hold of it and held it. Carey cleared her throat. “Sometimes the things that make us who we are are things we don’t have any control over. You don’t have to like them, but it’s important to acknowledge them.”

“Acknowledge them how?” said Angus.

Carey thought about this for a minute. “Okay. I went to juvie. I was there for a few years, and now I have a felony on my permanent record. That’s bad, right?”

Angus looked up at her and nodded.

“But I also know that if I hadn’t been caught when I was, if I hadn’t been sent to juvie, then I would be into some much worse crime now. I might have been caught or I might not, but I wouldn’t be with Killian, and I wouldn’t have you or any of my friends in my life. And that’s not so bad, is it?”

“I guess not.” He smiled a little.

“That’s not always the case, of course,” said Carey. “Sometimes our pasts just suck. But they do shape us. You’re the only person who gets to tell you who you are, but you have to tell the truth.”

Angus nodded solemnly. Carey squeezed his hand and let go. “Do you have anything to add, Miss Sticks-and-Stones?”

Killian shook her head, suppressing a sigh. “No. That was just about perfect.”

It was later that night, practice over, Angus delivered to his apartment downstairs. Carey was
doing the dishes from dinner. Killian leaned silently against the counter, fidgeting with her duck puzzle box.

“Why so quiet?” asked Carey.

Killian was startled out of a train of thought. “Hmm?”

“You haven’t said a single word since the end of practice.”

“Oh. There’s a lot on my mind.”

“Tell me all about it,” said Carey.

Killian was silent for a long moment. She put the box on the counter behind her. “Do you have any regrets?”

“You mean, besides all of my choices between the ages of fourteen and seventeen?”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Carey rinsed off a plate and put it on the rack to dry. “You know me, Killian, I’m a ball of regrets.”

Killian sighed. “I guess so.”

Carey waited for her to speak and, when it became clear she didn’t intend to, said, “Do you have any regrets?”

“I didn’t think I did,” said Killian. “Til today, anyway.”

“And now?”

Killian buried her face in her hands. “I have two regrets. One is not telling you about my regret.”

Carey wiped off her hands and joined Killian, leaning against the counter. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Killian stiffened as their shoulders touched. “You know back when we first started dating. How we were talking about who we’ve dated before.”

“I said five or six, depending on if I was actually dating Teresa,” Carey said. “And you said--”

“One,” finished Killian.

“Right.”

Killian looked away. “I lied. It wasn’t a girl. His name was Brad.”

Carey tried not to look as surprised as she felt. “Oh. Okay.”

“He asked me out when we were seniors, and all the other girls were into him, so I thought I should be too, you know? So I said yes, even though none of it felt right, and… like nothing ever happened. He didn’t… he didn’t pressure me or anything. I just… yeah.”

Carey examined Killian’s face. She was really messed up about this. But high school… that was before Killian had known. “I’m trying to understand, babe. Why didn’t you want to tell me?”
“It wasn’t who I wanted to be,” Killian said, her voice cracking. “I was…”

“Ashamed?” Carey guessed.

“Yeah.” Killian wrapped her arms around herself.

Carey pursed her lips. This was the kind of crisis she’d usually have. What would Killian say to her?

Carey carefully took hold of her girlfriend’s hand, and faced her. “Do you remember what you told me? About how you figured out you were gay?”

Killian nodded slowly. “I talked to Maureen and Lucretia and the girls on the team. Things started to make sense.”

“Because not everyone felt the way you did about boys, right?” said Carey. “And because of Gillian Anderson?”

Killian’s lips twitched into what may have been a smile. “Yeah.”

“Do you remember what you said to Julia? You told me the story, remember? That night after a bout, when you finally knew?”

“I said it was a relief,” said Killian quietly. “I was afraid I’d be alone forever.”

Carey nodded. “Were you afraid of that because of the way dating Brad made you feel?”

Killian looked like she was holding back tears. She nodded.

“Listen. You weren’t alone then, and you’re certainly not alone now. I’m here, okay?” Carey looked her in the eye. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Killian’s loosed a sob and curled around Carey. Carey threw her arms around her.

“Ssh. I’m here. You’re okay.” Carey smoothed her girlfriend’s hair, running a hand down her braid. “You’re okay.”
“Saw you at the library, Cassidy,” said Magnus. “I’ll take two, Garfield.”

“So conservative! Such an interesting choice! Here you are, my good man.”

Steven rolled his eyes. Everything was a big to-do when Garfield was the dealer.

Cassidy glared at Magnus. “What were you doin’ followin’ me around, sonny? You some kinda stalker?”

Magnus was surprised. “No, I was just there for a book.”

“Were you up to something worth stalking, my dear?” asked Garfield, leaning forward.

“Why don’t you mind yer own damn business?” Cassidy snapped.

“Leave her alone,” said Leon. “She doesn’t want to talk about it, we won’t make her.”

“It seems we’re all down in the dumps today!” said Garfield.

“Ain’t down in no dumps, I jest want you mindin’ your own,” grumped Cassidy.

“Come on now, Poker Time is Sharing Time!” said Garfield. “What’s upsetting you, Isaak?”

Isaak hadn’t said a word since he’d come inside. He hadn’t even asked for cards, he’d just held up fingers. Steven couldn’t read him behind his usual stoney demeanor.

Now Isaak surveyed the room through narrowed eyes. Finally, he grunted out, barely audible, “Kidney stone.”

A sympathetic groan went up from the table. Garfield patted him gently on the back. “Can I offer you the comfort of a card or two?”

Isaak held out three fingers. Garfield dealt them. “Now how about you, Leon?”

“Cards, or what’s been bothering me?”

“Both!”

“Three, then. And...oh my god.” He massaged his temples. “I had a beautiful 1885 NCR cash register. All the original buttons and plating. It wasn’t even tarnished. Do you know how rare that is?”

“Haven’t the foggiest,” said Steven.

“I’ve never seen it before!” Leon waved a hand helplessly. “It’s impossible. It’s a miracle. And do you know what happened? Some... some... some person. Walks into my shop. Has the nerve to call me ‘my dude.’ Leans on that incredible 1885 NCR cash register and knocks it to the ground. And then. And then! He just... leaves! Walks out the door!”

Magnus frowned. “Was this guy kinda pretty?”

The table’s attention shifted. Magnus didn’t seem bothered.
“Now that you mention it, yes,” said Leon.

“Jeez. I know him. I’ll talk to him for you.”

Leon sighed. “Don’t bother. The damage is… well, more than I feel comfortable asking anyone to pay. I might as well take his firstborn.”

“You wouldn’t get any return on that,” muttered Magnus. “Unless they adopted.”

“I’ll break even. It was just…” Leon shook his head sadly. “So beautiful.”

“Now what’s young Magnus’ difficulty?” Garfield oozed.

“I don’t know. My apartment is a dumpster fire. I’m in love with a girl. It’s a roller coaster.” He shrugged. “There’s so much right now that’s up in the air, stuff I have to wait for. I hate waiting.”

“Shoot, does she love you?” said Cassidy.

Magnus smiled a little. “I think so.” His expression morphed into a worried frown. “I hope so. I mean I know she likes me. But does she love me.”

Steven elbowed Cassidy. “You made it worse.” Leon and Garfield laughed.

“You’ll know soon enough if she do or don’t, I wager,” said Cassidy. “Jest gotta wait and see.”


“Time to place your bets, everyone!” said Garfield. “Don’t be shy! If we’re lucky, Steven will share after he bluffs!”

“I’ll do four,” said Steven, pushing the quarters into the center. “I don’t know, it’s not entirely my business.”

“All the more juicy to know!” said Garfield. “I’ll match your four, sir!”

“Well… my daughter started dating this guy. Can’t say I care much for him. I worry about her, choosing guys who are mediocre. She could have anyone she wanted.”

“She’s young,” said Leon. “She’ll learn.”

“Don’t much understand why young girls don’t hold out for the best,” said Cassidy. “I’ll raise to five.”

“I’m no young girl, but the movies certainly make it seem more exciting to date a bad boy!” said Garfield.

“It’s certainly a strange phenomenon,” said Leon. “Magnus, have you noticed this?”

“Tell you the truth, most of my women friends are lesbians. I don’t think it applies.”

Leon raised his eyebrows. “I guess not.”

“I’m probably not the best person to ask, anyway,” said Magnus. “I’m kind of on the other side of this. My girlfriend’s dad doesn’t like me much.”

The table protested.
“Who could possibly disapprove of their daughter dating you?” said Steven. “I’d set you up with my daughter if you both weren’t taken.”

Magnus grinned sheepishly. “Thanks. I’ll uh, I’ll fold this round. I’m pretty sure it’s just a misunderstanding.”

“Hell of a misunderstanding,” said Steven.

“Do you think he’ll come around?” asked Leon.

“I don’t know. I hope so.” Magnus shrugged. “I think we’ll work it out soon, but in the meantime, more waiting.”

Isaak slid five quarters into the pile and nudged Leon. Leon said, “I raise to six. What have you got against this boy anyway, Steven?”

Steven sighed. “More of a feeling, really. Like she’s distancing herself from me, because of him. I’ll do six.”

“That could be bad,” said Magnus, “but it could just be a feeling.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Look at us, working through things!” said Garfield. “I’ll do seven! Teen! Seventeen!”

Cassidy eyeballed him. “You don’t scare me, feller. I’ll take it.”

“So brave, dear Cass!”

“I seen scarier things than you in my breakfast,” she muttered. Isaak put his cards down, shaking his head.

Leon sighed. “I’m going to regret this, I think. I’ll call.”

“I’m out,” said Steven.

“Let’s continue revealing deep dark secrets, shall we?” cooed Garfield, and showed his hand. “What do we have here? A straight?”

Leon groaned and flipped his cards. “Beats my three eights.”

Cassidy slapped down her cards triumphantly. “Full house! Take that you yeller fax machine peddler!”

Leon and Steven laughed. Magnus slapped her on the back. “That was great.”

“It seems being upset makes you better at poker!” said Garfield, taken aback.

“You’re pretty good at reading people, Garfield,” said Magnus, passing his cards to Steven to shuffle.

“It’s the magic of sales!”

“Cain’t read me though, ‘cause I ain’t upset,” said Cassidy, sliding the quarters into her pile.

“Something’s got you all in a tizzy,” insisted Garfield. “My powers of observation are never
wrong!"

She flexed her jaw and stared him down.

“Hmm. Do I detect the slightest hint of a blush on your person, Cassidy? I don’t suppose—could it be true—our Cass has reentered the dating game?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Damn you.”

“You’ve never been shy about it before,” said Steven. “Meet someone nice?”

“Not as such. Givin’ something new a try.”

Magnus looked up. “Is that what you were doing at the library?”

“How do you date at a library?” said Leon, mystified.


Leon and Steven shot Cassidy horrified glances. Garfield’s usual unsettling grin went downright manic.

“That’s not--isn’t that dangerous?” stuttered Leon. “Scammers and malcontents and that.”

Steven shifted uncomfortably. “And it’s kind of… weird though, right?”

Cassidy snarled. “What do you bastards know about dating in a modern era anyhow? Know for a fact you two haven’t been on a date with anyone ‘cept yer wives in more’n twenty years! And Isaak, you ain’t never been innerested in such things nohow!”

Isaak nodded in concession of the point.

“And you ‘specially ain’t got nothin’ to say about this,” said Cassidy, poking a finger in Garfield’s chest. “You told me yesterday you cain’t find anyone who’s not driven off by yer horrifying voice!”

“It’s true, it’s a big turn-off!” said Garfield, still grinning. “Don’t get me wrong, Cassidy, I think your forays into the world of electronic romance are downright inspiring!”

“Yep.” Isaak spoke at last, just above a murmur. “Good for you, Cass.”

“Damn straight.” She turned to Steven. “You dealin’ or what?”

Steven shuffled the deck. “I guess I am. Ante up.”

They were quiet for a while as Steven passed the cards. Leon finally spoke up when they were examining their hands.

“So does it work? Online dating?”

Cassidy looked as though if there were a spittoon, she’d use it. “I got two dates next week.”

“How about that?” said Leon.

“Two of your finest cards please, Steven,” said Garfield.
Taako untucked the heather grey turtleneck and pulled it smooth. He turned in the locker room mirror. No, that looked terrible. Tuck it back in. But that looked terrible too. Maybe the problem was the pants. He should try the jeans again. Or maybe a skirt. No, not on a first impression.

He glanced up at the clock. They’d need to leave soon to make it there by 8. But they couldn’t go anywhere when Taako looked like a disheveled wreck.

“Taako?” Kravitz called through the door, while knocking gently. “Are you almost ready to go?”

“Just a second! A few last minute touches and I’ll be done!” he yelled back, pulling off the terrible turtleneck and grabbing the white button down shirt instead. Tuck it in, roll up the sleeves, brown belt, did he forget to pack those oxfords? Nope, here they were. Taako frowned as he checked himself in the mirror again. It was okay… but was it ‘Hello, I’m the man dating your son’ okay? Would anything be??

The door creaked open and Lucretia poked her head in.

“What you’re wearing is fine, Taako. Now let’s go.”

“Are you sure?” Taako asked, throwing the scattered selections from his wardrobe back into the duffel.

“Yes. Ms. Sinclair will care more if we’re late than what you’re wearing. Trust me,” she assured before shutting the door. He didn’t feel very reassured. Taako zipped up his bag, fixed his bangs and left the locker room.

Lucretia was standing over by the door. She looked very smart in a black dress and heels. She had a peacock blue cardigan draped over her arm. Kravitz was waiting outside by the already running car.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Taako said, tossing his bag into the opened trunk and wringing his hands.

“Hey.” Kravitz caught Taako’s chin and gave him a quick kiss. “It’s all going to be fine.”

Taako’s heart was still beating a million times a minute, but now at least there was more than one reason for it. He tried to take a deep breath as he got in the front seat.

Lucretia briefly looked up from the magazine she was reading in the back seat and gave a tight-lipped smile to Taako.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” she said, flipping the page. “Ms. Sinclair is scary.”

“She is?” Taako asked, turning in his seat. Lucretia looked up without moving her head.

“Where do you think I learned it from?” she replied flatly. Kravitz got into the front seat.

“Neverwinter, here we come!” he said, turning on the radio and pulling away. Taako smoothed the front of his shirt and calmly wished that a hole in the ground would open up and swallow him whole.
The three and a half hours to Neverwinter passed by all too quickly. As they drew closer to the large city, Taako felt his general unease gain a new level. Kravitz navigated the busy streets of downtown with practiced ease, and they came into a very nice neighborhood next to a large park. Kravitz stopped at the gate to Astral Acres and entered the key code, and the wrought iron gates slowly, majestically opened. French country and Greek revival houses rolled past. *This just keeps getting better and better,* Taako thought to himself.

“I thought she moved?” Lucretia said, slipping her heels back on.

“She was thinking about it, but she said that she liked her neighbors too much,” Kravitz said, pulling over to the curb behind a long line of cars. Very nice cars, Taako noted. “Since we’re a little late, I figured we can just leave bags in the car and get them after all the guests leave.”

Lucretia nodded and got out, slipping her cardigan on in one smooth motion. Taako took another minute, one last deep breath, before joining them on the sidewalk. Lucretia walked a few steps ahead and Kravitz took Taako’s hand. Kravitz’ hand was cold, like it always was, but it was still comforting. And he’d take every scrap he could get as they approached the house.

It was more modern in style than its neighbors, with immaculate landscaping and strategic outdoor lighting. Every light in the house seemed to be on; laughter and music wafted out of the large opened windows and across the front lawn. Lucretia’s heels echoed on the slate walkway. Kravitz opened the front door and the show was on.

The ceiling was two stories high, and a grand staircase swept through the entryway. Groups of crisply dressed people passed through the lobby, on their way to the kitchen, or the living room, or the sitting room. Golden-toned wooden floors and oriental rugs effortlessly complemented the modern clean lines of the furniture. There was an honest-to-God jazz trio in the room to Taako’s left. *Just perfect.*

A short woman with long curling white hair and fine lines around her mouth like parentheses looked up from her glass of chardonnay as they entered.

“Oh, Kravitz! You came!” she said, quickly grabbing him in a one-armed hug.

“Hello, Mrs. Kader,” Kravitz said, smiling brightly down at her.

“And you brought friends, how nice. Your mother will be so pleased.”

“You might actually-- do you remember Lucretia?” Kravitz said, stepping to the side.

“Oh, Lucretia Simon, of course.” The woman held out her hand.

“Actually, it’s Lucretia Moreau,” she gently corrected her.


“Pleasure,” Lucretia simply replied.

“And this is my boyfriend, Taako Peynirci,” Kravitz introduced.

Istus took Taako’s hand in a warm embrace. “Welcome, Taako. That’s an interesting name. Is it Greek?”
“Turkish, actually,” he managed. She smiled at him before turning back.

“Well, I think your mother is in the back. But come and see me before you leave, won’t you dear?” She patted Kravitz’ arm before waving at another group of people and heading into the living room.

“Shall we?” Kravitz asked, waving an arm down the hall. Lucretia headed towards the back of the house, and Taako and Kravitz followed. There were more people back here too. Waiters in black suits wandered around with platters of caviar and crème fraîche tartlets and pâté toasts. An actual oil painting of a young Kravitz and Ms. Sinclair hung over the fireplace.

“There’s my mother.” Kravitz nodded towards a pair of people standing in front of the open french doors. “Now the man next to her is her long time friend, Pan Duin. He’s been the leading tenor in the Neverwinter Opera the last 13 seasons, so he expects everyone to know who he is. I’d recommend just going along with it. Hello, Mother!”

Raven Sinclair turned and smiled serenely at her son. “Welcome home, dear,” she said, setting down her empty wine glass before taking him in a hug. Though she was obviously over 50, she was still almost as tall as her son. They shared the same warm brown skin tone and insightful dark eyes. Taako admired the burgundy dress, with dyed heels to match, that she was wearing. “I’m so glad you could make it.” She squeezed his hands before turning to see Lucretia standing just behind him.

“Oh, Lucretia. It has been far too long.” She hugged her too.

“Hello, Ms. Sinclair. It’s good to see you again.”

“Mother?” Kravitz came and stood next to Taako, placing two hands on his shoulders. “I’d like you to meet my boyfriend, Taako Peynirci.”

The gaze she turned on him made Taako instantly understand why Raven Sinclair was one of the top attorneys in Neverwinter. It wasn’t unfriendly, but he suddenly had the impression that she knew. Knew what even he wasn’t sure. But she definitely knew. Taako held out his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Sinclair,” he said, attempting a smile. “Kravitz has told me so many things about you.”

“Good things, I hope,” she replied, taking his hand and smiling coolly. Her hand was cold, just like her son’s. Behind her, Pan chuckled, the chain on his waist jacket jingling a little.

“Of course,” Taako said.

“You may already know Pan--”

“Duin, yes,” Taako finished, extending a hand to the large man. Raven looked suitably impressed. “I saw you in Cyrano de Bergerac and you were excellent.”

“Well, thank you, young man.” Pan’s hand completely encompassed Taako’s. “It’s always nice to see young people interested in the height of man’s artistic achievement--opera.”

Taako smiled blithely and nodded a few times.

“There’s a bar in the front room, and waiters are all around with food. I have to go talk to Mayor Sterling for a minute, but I’ll come find you three after that,” Raven said quickly, before walking away.
“I’d say that went pretty well,” Kravitz said as they headed towards the bar.

“About as well as could be expected,” Lucretia said, crossing her arms.

“Oh, I had no idea you came to the opera.” Kravitz turned to Taako.

Taako laughed. “I don’t. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Well, how did you know Pan was in *Cyrano* last season?”

“You said he was a tenor, right? I figured in 13 seasons he had to play the role at some point.” Lucretia and Kravitz stared at him in shock. “What? I know things.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Kravitz said, chuckling and squeezing his hand.

Kravitz seemed to know almost everyone at the party, and they were all curious to meet his significant other. After almost an hour of having the same conversation 14 times, Taako decided he needed a break.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Taako said quietly, patting Kravitz’ arm and stepping away from the conversation.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his eyebrows raised with concern.

“Yeah, yeah. I just want some air.” He smiled and walked into the back room and out the open french doors.

The night air was still surprisingly warm for September, but at least there was a breeze out on the back porch. Taako set his glass down on the wide stone railing and rested his elbows against it.

“Catching your breath?”

Taako looked over his shoulder to see Lucretia. She swirled a very full wine glass delicately in her hand before taking a sip.

“Trying to,” he said, turning back to face the dark garden. She stood by his side for a moment, taking another sip.

“You want to see my hiding spot?”

Taako looked up at her. “Of course.”

She smiled slyly. “Follow me.” She walked quickly down the stairs and headed to the left across the grass. Taako followed behind her, and she almost reached the back corner of the yard when she ducked behind some tall rose bushes. Taako followed, pricking himself a few times but emerging in a cleared area between the tall bushes and the back fence. Lucretia sat down on a small stone bench and patted the spot next to her. She crossed her long legs and leaned back against the fence, drinking more of her wine. Taako sat down next to her.

“We would come here when Ms. Sinclair would have parties that I had to be at,” she said, smiling a little. Taako got the impression that she wasn’t really speaking to him, though. “We’d sneak away… Kravitz would come and find us if she started looking for us…” Taako looked over at her, but she was looking up at the house next door. “...Do you ever feel that no matter how far you run, you’ll never escape the past?”
“Yeah.”

Kravitz checked around the upstairs. No sign of Taako, or Lucretia. He even checked behind the closed door of his old bedroom, but they weren’t there either. However, he did find his mother at the top of the stairs.

“There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she said, setting her glass down on the small table against the wall. She quickly adjusted the painting above the table, making sure that it was hanging perfectly level.

“Sorry, I was just looking for Taako… or Lucretia. Have you seen either of them?”

“Not since I last saw you. You’ll find them, they can’t have gone far.”

“True.” Kravitz nodded slowly. “Well, while it’s just the two of us, I want to say congratulations, Mother. The Tellinson’s quite an achievement.”

She smiled softly at him, rubbing his cheek with her thumb. “Thank you, dear. It means a lot to hear it from you. And since it is just the two of us, tell me about this Taako. How’d you meet?”

“He does roller derby. He’s on Lucretia’s team.”

“She still does derby? Good for her.”

“Yeah, she coaches now.”

“That makes sense. So what does he do?”

“He works at a bakery in town. Someday he’d like to own his own shop though. He’s working on that.”

“In Faerun?”

“Yes, in Faerun. He grew up in New Elfington, but Faerun’s home now.”

She nodded, and Kravitz noticed her lips purse ever so slightly. He sighed. “Mother, don’t.”

“I’m not--”

“Yes, you are.”

She started to protest again, but they both knew he was right. “Alright, fine. Maybe I am.”

“You’ve said a grand total of 10 words to him. You don’t know him.”

“Honey, what makes me so good at my job is that I can read people. And I know the whole mysterious secret thing seems sexy--”

“Oh my god.”

“--at first. But trust me, it does not work out in the long run.”

“Kravitz told me… that you ice skated… and… were married,” Taako said, drawing a pattern in
the mulch with the toe of his shoe.

“He told me he told you.”

Taako smiled softly. “That sounds like him.”

“I’ve known Kravitz a long time. He’s good people.”

“Yeah, I definitely lucked out.”

Lucretia looked at Taako. “Hey, don’t let the oil paintings and the BMW’s and the personal relationships with the Mayor of Neverwinter blind you. They’re just people, just like you and me.”

“Oh, please. Take a look around us. This is like a whole other level of people.”

“That’s just the nerves. Taako, everyone’s nervous when they meet the parents. I know I was. And Kravitz will be too when he meets yours. It’s the circle of life.”

Taako didn’t answer, just finished off his drink in a large gulp. Lucretia looked at him, her eyebrows furrowed.

“My parents…” he started, “Aren’t exactly a part of my life anymore. I doubt they’d want to even meet me, much less Kravitz.”

Lucretia frowned and looked at the ground. “Wow, I really stepped in that one.”

“It’s okay.” He looked down at his empty glass. “It’s taken me a long time but I… someday soon I might finally come to terms with that.”

She also finished her glass, and set it down next to her. “You have any tips on how to do that? Asking for a friend, of course.”

Taako smiled a little at her. “Honestly, just finally telling someone was what made the most progress. I told Krav the whole story when we started dating. I think part of me wanted to see if I couldn’t scare him off… but he’s still here. It’s just nice that someone else knows the whole story.”

Lucretia was silent for a while, then took a deep breath. “Listen, this may be the four glasses of pinot noir I’ve had, or the fact that I’m literally surrounded with memories in this house, but…” She paused for so long that Taako wondered if she’d even finish her sentence. “Can I tell you about Cam?”
Raven shut the double doors to the master suite behind her and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Will you, please, sit down?” she asked. Kravitz paced wildly across the large room.

“No!” he insisted. But at the face his mother made him at least continued in a quieter tone, “What is this about, Mother? Really? Is it about that I brought home my boyfriend instead of a girlfriend?”

“No, I don’t care about that. I love you, Kravitz, and I don’t care about the gender of your chosen partner.”

“Well then, what is the problem? I have chosen Taako! And I like him enough that he’s the first man I’ve dated in 13 years that I’ve wanted you to meet.”

“I know! I know. And Kravitz, believe me I wanted to try and be warm and welcoming, I promise I did.” She shook her head.

“It didn’t feel like much of a try,” he said, crossing his arms. “You found out four facts about him and immediately wrote him off.”

“Honey… were you listening to yourself when you said them?” she sat down on the bench next to the door. “He wants to own a bakery in a town with less than 50,000 people in it. That is his life’s goal.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Kravitz, you were born in Neverwinter, you’ve spent your whole life living in the Astral Acres, you graduated top of your class at The Academy! Did this Taako even go to college? ...Did he even graduate high school?”

“You don’t like Taako because he’s not rich?” He looked at her with eyes wide. “Are you mental?”

“You were both born into very different worlds. And those kinds of differences are extremely hard to reconcile.”

Kravitz clenched and unclenched his jaw. Ah. There it was. Finally. He made sure to choose his words carefully, “Taako and I… are not you and Dad. And hang on, even if we were… wouldn’t Taako be you in this crazy scenario?”

Lucretia settled more on the bench, and heaved a deep breath.

“I don’t know how much time you’ve spent in Neverwinter, but it’s not very aptly named. There was a small duck pond in the park across from my house, and it would be frozen solid about four months out of the year. All of us children from the neighborhood would slip and skid across the ice. My mom found me a pair of used Barbie skates from the Goodwill down the road. And I would skate there any time I wasn’t at school.

“When I was in fifth grade, there was an after school program run by the district. A way to give
the poor kids some... cultural enrichment. They took us to the ice rink a couple times a month. Ms. Sinclair had skated in college, but now that she was a wife and mother, she needed more to do. So she taught classes down at the rink, and volunteered with the program. She tried to teach us all how to do a single toe loop. I ended up being the only one who could land one by the end of the day. She showed up at my parents' house the next week—I still have no idea how she tracked me down—and said that she would personally train me in figure skating.

“I spent almost all of junior high and high school either at the rink, or at this house. I was terrible in school, but I was excellent at skating. We all knew that that was my ticket to a better life. And by high school, I was qualifying for Nationals, and the Olympics were in our sights. And that's when Cam and his family moved in right next door.”

Lucretia stopped telling her story and looked over the high fence. Only the tall peaks of the roof next door could be seen from their angle. Taako found himself sitting on the edge of the bench, completely enraptured.

“Cameron Moreau was...” she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, “the sweetest boy I've ever known. He was clumsy, he would have forgotten his head if it wasn’t attached.” She laughed a little. “He had curly brown hair and blue eyes and freckles across the bridge of his nose. His favorite movie was The Karate Kid. He was a devoted fan of the Flyers. And we fell in love like only 16 year olds can.

“We knew everything about each other... every hope, every fear. We talked several times of marriage, even though we were both just fresh out of high school. Our parents tried to convince us to wait at least until he was done with college.

“But we eloped June 17th, 1985, and we returned to the rink and classes the very next day. I was training full time then, and I had just missed the games in Sarajevo. Calgary would be my last shot. Cam was studying to be a doctor, and he joined an amateur ice hockey league at the rink. He said that if he was going to spend so much time there for me, he might as well get some exercise too. He wasn’t very good,” she laughed. “He had this showboating habit where he’d yell, 'shot!' before he’d take one. Other team always knew when it was coming. I loved it though... and I loved him.”

“That is not what I’m saying.”

“No, that’s exactly what you’re saying,” Kravitz shot back, taking up pacing again. “I-I can’t believe this! Do you hear how illogical you’re being?”

Her nostrils flared. “I... I’m your mother. I’m allowed to be,” she countered.

“No, no. There’s a difference between being protective and being wrong,” he said, his mouth forming a hard line. “Just because things fell apart between you and Dad, doesn’t mean that the same thing will happen to Taako and me.”

“I know-”

“And even if there may be some similarities between our initial backgrounds, you, of all people, should not be rooting against Taako in this.”

“But--”

“No! There is no but. I intend for Taako to be a part of my life on as permanent a basis as the government will let us.” She stared open-mouthed at him. “He’s smart and funny and compassionate
and he’s my biggest cheerleader and he hoards costumes and he’s loyal and I... ...I love him, Mom.”

“I… didn’t realize things were that serious.”

“I didn’t tell you because I thought you might freak out if I let you know… I now realize that was a fool’s errand, you were going to freak out no matter what I told you.”

Raven looked down at her lap. Kravitz sighed. He sat on the bench next to her and took her hand.

“Look, I know this probably brought up some old fears that you didn’t even know you had. But I promise you, you will like Taako if you just give him a fair chance. You actually have a lot in common. You’re both the strongest people that I know.”

She scoffed a little, but replied after a moment, “I will, I promise. I’m sorry I didn’t before. I just… well, you already said it yourself.” She looked at him and patted his cheek. “Oh, my little boy. When did you get so smart?”

“I had a very smart woman who raised me,” he said, smiling.

“That you did.” She kissed his forehead and stood up. “I should probably go check in one last time with everyone before they start heading out. And you need to find Taako and Lucretia, wherever they went.”

“Actually, I think I just figured out where they are.”

Lucretia stopped when they heard the bushes in front of them rustle. Kravitz’ head popped out of the roses. “Thought you might be here.” He smiled at both of them. “I brought the necessary gifts to enter Moreau-via.”

“You brought Pudding Roll-Ups and a six pack of light beer?” Lucretia asked, sounding thoroughly impressed.

“Ah, no. But I did steal a bottle of wine from the bar, and I grabbed a whole tray of cucumber sandwiches.”

Lucretia pretended to think for a moment. “That is acceptable, you may enter Moreau-via.”

Kravitz passed off the bottle of wine and sat down against the corner of the fence. He refilled their glasses, and they all had several cucumber sandwiches.

“These are amazing. What’s in here?” Taako asked, pulling one open and examining the spread.

“Lemon zest,” Lucretia and Kravitz said at the same time. They laughed and she clinked her glass against his bottle.

“It’s Ms. Sinclair’s secret ingredient,” Lucretia added with a wink.

“So what were you guys talking about?” Kravitz asked, before popping another sandwich in his mouth.

“I was telling him my life story,” she said, relaxing back against the fence again.

“The short or long version?”
“It was pretty long… we were just getting to ‘88 Nationals.”

“Oh wow.”

“You are both slowly murdering me with suspense right now. I just thought you should know,” Taako interjected. Kravitz grinned at him.

“So you want me to keep going?”

“Lucretia, I have never wanted anything more in my life. I’m sorry, Kravitz, but it’s true.”

Kravitz laughed. “I understand. It’s an incredible story… maybe someday she’ll let me publish it.”

Lucretia swirled her glass, “Maybe someday. But not today… So, where was I?”

“You eloped, Cam was on a hockey team, and you loved him,” Taako gushed.

Kravitz laughed. “Shot!” he said.

Lucretia smiled and nodded. “Right. Now Nationals is how a US skater qualifies for the Olympic team. And in 1988, Nationals was held right here in Neverwinter. My short program went well, and I just had the free-skate left. I was supposed to skate next. Then Ms. Sinclair’s pager went off.”

Ms. Sinclair read the message ticking across the small screen and frowned.

“Isn’t this like the fourth skater using Clair de Lune?” Lucretia said, twisting side to side on the bench. “Like at some point, they are going to have to stop using that song, you know?” The sequins on her leotard sparkled as she jumped up to balance against the half wall and swing her leg back and forth. “Though Debi totally stole my Carmen piece.”

Lucretia looked over at Ms. Sinclair when she didn’t answer. She was frozen, reading the beeper over and over.

“What is it?”

Ms. Sinclair looked up from the beeper, just stared at her for a minute. Lucretia could practically see the cogs working in her brain. “…Cam’s going to the hospital,” she finally admitted.

It felt like the ground shook beneath her skates. “What? Is he okay?”

“…I… I don't know.” Ms. Sinclair shook her head. “It doesn’t say.”

“He… he could be fine, right? I mean, he was there just last week ‘cause he sprained his wrist.” The skater finished her piece with a flourish and the crowd cheered. Lucretia’s heart rate sped up to a million beats a minute. “…What do I do? Ms. Sinclair, what should I do?!” She panicked, reaching out and grabbing the arm of her windbreaker. Ms. Sinclair just looked at her.

“I can't tell you, Lucretia. This… only you can decide.”

The announcer called her name, and Lucretia stared out at the ice as the crowd cheered for her. Somewhere in the stadium, her parents were there for her. News crews for waiting for interviews after her performance. The very Olympics hung in the balance. But …Cam.

“…If I skate, can we leave as soon as I'm done?” She turned back to look at Ms. Sinclair.
“Of course! Yes, yes.” she let out a breath and smiled widely.

“Okay…” Lucretia slowly nodded, a heavy weight settling in her stomach. “It’s only 4 more minutes, right?”

“Right. Exactly. We’ll leave the moment you’re done.” She put her hands on Lucretia’s shoulders and leaned in close. “Now, you can do this. Put it all aside and focus. This is your moment. Do it.”

Lucretia attempted a deep breath and removed the guards from her skates. She stepped out onto the ice as the crowd cheered.

Lucretia released the corner of her cardigan that she had been twisting around her thumb. She was decidedly not looking at either Taako or Kravitz. “I think it was because there was so much going on that I just mentally shut down and relied completely on muscle memory. I don’t have any memory of how the routine actually went, I don’t even know if I took a bow. We didn’t even wait for the scores, just ran out of the stadium and raced to Memorial. But we…”

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “He’d had an aneurysm. Just collapsed out of nowhere. He hemorrhaged, and was… dead by the time I got there.”

She stopped and took a deep breath. Kravitz was looking down at the ground, his face melancholic. Taako wasn’t entirely sure what he should do. Kravitz reached out and Lucretia took his hand. He could see her knuckles whiten as she continued with her story.

“I quit the next day, refused my spot on the Olympic team. I never said why and a lot of people in the league said I was rude and ungrateful. But I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t care about anything. In those months, I was so lost and volatile. I was just as likely to scream and throw things as I was to stare at the wall for hours upon end. I pushed everyone away…the only one who wouldn’t allow it was Ms. Sinclair. She refused to let me board up and waste away… I hated her for that.” She smiled a little.

“I could hear you through the floor,” Kravitz mused. “The walls were shaking.”

“It made me so mad that I decided to leave Neverwinter. I packed half a bag and just started driving. Broke down in Faerun, and I met Maureen while I was waiting at the mechanic. I joined her team two weeks later.”

“Derby saved you too,” Taako said quietly. Lucretia nodded.

“At the very least it was a place to take out my anger, and it gave me people I had to look out for. It wasn’t just about me, I was part of the team. We did the best when we trusted each other… I had to relearn that.”

Taako nodded, and there was silence between the three for a minute. She reached over and squeezed Taako’s hand.

“Thank you for listening.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

“I don’t know if I feel any better,” she said, biting her bottom lip.

“Give it time,” Taako assured.
The last guests left around midnight, and Ms. Sinclair put the three of them all up for the night so they wouldn’t have to drive home. Taako got enormous joy from the pictures of young Kravitz and Lucretia that were scattered about the house like little treasure troves. He wished that he had a camera because he was certain Ms. Sinclair would notice if one went missing.

The next morning, Taako woke up before Kravitz, like he almost always did. It was still early; the sun was just barely rising. He wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself as this was definitely not his house, but Kravitz wasn’t stirring. He slipped on some leggings and a large t-shirt he’d bought at Lilith Fair the summer before and ventured out, hoping he could find some leftover food from the party.

But the house was pristine. Not so much as a spare champagne flute was left out in the front rooms. It didn’t even look like anyone at all had been there the night before, let alone several dozen. Maybe the food had been stored away in the kitchen. Taako padded down the center hall.

He about jumped out of his skin when he saw Ms. Sinclair, sitting at the table in the window. She calmly looked over to Taako.

“Morning.” She had a monogrammed bathrobe on over coordinating pjs. She delicately sipped her steaming cup of coffee. “You’re an early riser,” she said, setting down the newspaper she had been reading.

Taako quickly ran a hand through his hair, trying to seem at least a little presentable. “Y-yep,” he croaked.

“Can I get you some coffee?”

“Yes, please,” he said, still standing in the doorway. Not sure if he should help or not. Ms. Sinclair poured his coffee in a mug that matched hers and set it down at the table before sitting back down herself. Taako sat down across from her and added several large scoops of sugar from the china bowl to his coffee.

Now that it wasn’t dark outside, Taako could see that the trees in the backyard were just beginning to turn shades of red and orange. A robin hopped in the grass, leaving a trail in the dew, before taking off.

“I like the early mornings.” Ms. Sinclair said, also looking out the window. “A little patch of quiet before the day begins.”

Taako nodded. “I completely agree.”

They were quiet for a minute, before Ms. Sinclair spoke again. “Taako, I wanted to say I’m sorry if I seemed… brusque last night. It wasn’t my intention.”

“No, you’re fine. It was quite a party. Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Kravitz tells me you’re from New Elfington, where about?”

“I grew up in a suburb about 20 minutes south of the city.”

“So did you leave for school, or…?”

Taako took a sip and considered for a moment. “No… just… needed a change of scenery. I spent
a couple years here in Neverwinter, but I really like it in Faerun.”

“You and Lucretia both. There must be something in the water.”

Taako chuckled a little. “There probably is. But I think it’s more that… it’s not as important
where you live, but who you live with. We’ve found good people out there.”

“I think Kravitz feels the same,” she said reflectively, tapping her thumb on the handle of her
mug. “I had hoped that he’d return to Neverwinter,” she looked up and met Taako’s gaze, “but I
don’t think that’s going to be the case.”

Taako looked down at the cup and took another sip. He wasn’t sure how to reply.

“But that’s parenthood. If you do it right, you work yourself out of a job… I’m happy that he’s so
happy,” she continued. “He’s been sort of… wandering these past couple years. It seems now that
he’s found his feet again. Thanks, in no small part, to you, I’m sure.”

Taako smiled down at the mug before looking back to her. “He… Honestly, I didn’t know that I
could be as happy and fulfilled as I am with him,” Taako said, the clipped tone coming to his voice.
Ms. Sinclair smiled and pressed the back of a finger to the corner of her eye.

“Gracious. Look what you’ve done,” she laughed quietly. “So… tell me about yourself. What do
your parents do?”

Taako moved his jaw side to side, but said, flatly, “My father was a plumber. And my mother was
a secretary at the church.” He looked up at her, she was studying him intently. “We’re… not really in
touch anymore. Haven’t been in years.” He hadn’t thought he’d end up telling that story so many
times this weekend.

Ms. Sinclair reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Come here,” she said, standing up
and pulling him up too. Without even asking, she wrapped him in a hug. At first he stiffened, he was
very not good at hugs. Particularly with people he didn’t know well. But this hug was different, it
wasn’t the hug of a partner or a friend. It was decidedly the hug of a mother. Oh. He hadn’t realized
how much he’d still needed that. He swallowed hard, and hugged her back.

“Now don’t be a stranger,” Ms. Sinclair said to Lucretia, holding her hands in the curved
driveway later that afternoon. Kravitz was loading their bags into the trunk of the car “If you’re ever
in the city, you know you have a place here, right?”

Lucretia nodded. “And, if you want, we have a bout--a game two weekends from now. We’re
going to crush the Felicity Wild Women.”

“That’s sounds fascinating. Taako, tell me.” She wrapped an arm across Lucretia’s shoulders.
“What’s Lucretia like as a coach?”

“She’s terrifying,” Taako said, from where he was leaning against the hood of the car.

“Good girl.” She hugged Lucretia as Kravitz shut the trunk and came around the front.

“Ready to go?” he asked, pulling a stray dreadlock out of his face.

“Not yet, not yet,” she said, releasing Lucretia finally. “Now you two, I will see you at
Thanksgiving.” Kravitz started to protest, but Ms. Sinclair gave him a look that instantly made every
muscle in Taako’s body clench. Scary, indeed.


“I love you too, dear,” She kissed his cheek and gave him a hug.

“Good-bye, Ms. Sinclair,” Taako said. She gave him another hug too, much to the surprise of both Kravitz and Lucretia.

“I look forward to seeing you again, Taako,” she said, smiling broadly at him. “Take care of Kravitz for me.”

“I will.”

She stood in the driveway and waved to them as the car pulled away and they started for Faerun.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find a way to get us out of Thanksgiving,” Kravitz said as they left the neighborhood.

“Oh, please, don’t,” Taako said.

“You mean you want to spend Thanksgiving with my crazy family?” he asked incredulously.

“There is literally nothing else I would like more.” Taako smiled. Kravitz looked at him in concern for a while, before turning back to the road and pulling out into traffic.

“Wonders never cease.”
Give It to Me Straight, Doc

Johann stood by the vet table, stroking Void’s head. “It’s gonna be okay, girl. Nothing to worry about.”

Void whined. She hated the vet, and Johann didn’t blame her. Usually he was able to keep her calm, but not today. Today she must be picking up his own nervousness.

A woman in a white coat entered the exam room. “Hi, Johann. I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“Hi, Sydnee.” Johann shook her hand. “We haven’t needed to come to a vet, I guess.”

Sydnee scratched Void under the chin. “Hey, girl. What seems to be problem today?”

“She’s been acting really weird. Kind of… clingy? More affectionate than usual. And then for the last couple of days she’s thrown up like every morning.”

“Well that’s not good,” said Sydnee. She pulled out her flashlight and began examining Void’s eyes and ears. “How’s she been eating?”

“Normally, I guess. I haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“Hmm.” She put her stethoscope in her ears. “Saw your mom the other day.”

“Yeah?”

“Brought Trull in for his check-up.”

Larsen’s Trullbus Succotash was his parents’ prize-winning Belgian shepherd. Johann’s family had bred dogs for almost a hundred years. Mom and Dad had almost died of shame when he picked Void from a random animal shelter.

“He looks very good,” said Sydnee.

“But of course he does,” said Johann, a little bitterly. “He’ll probably take the title in New Elfington this year.”

“Well Void looks healthy too.” Sydnee moved the stethoscope down her belly. “Hmm.”

“What is it? Is she sick?” pleaded Johann.

“When’s the last time she’s been around other dogs?”

“Uhh… I mean we go to the park pretty regularly. Sometimes with my friend’s dog. I brought her to my parents’ house last month, so she’s been around Trull, but if he’s not sick—”

“Last month?” said Sydnee.

“Yeah. Oh, god, what’s wrong with her?”

“I have an inkling. It might be nothing, but… well, here.” She opened the door to a closet and pulled out a contraption with a screen on a cart. “Would you have her lay down?”

“Down, Void,” said Johann. Void licked his face. “Aw, c’mon.” He pushed down gently on her
back until she laid down, head on her paws.

“Good girl,” said Sydnee, scratching at Void’s belly. “Now just turn a little bit… there we go. Could you hold her head down, Johann? Keep talking to her.”

Johann mumbled affirmations to his dog as Sydnee smoothed back some of the fur on Void’s belly and put on something that looked like petroleum jelly. She switched on the contraption.

“An ultrasound?” said Johann.

“Yep. And… look at that.” Sydnee moved the wand over Void’s belly. “She’s pregnant.”

“She is?” Johann looked at Void. “You are?”

“You said it was about a month ago she was around Trull?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Unless your friend’s dog isn’t fixed, I’d say he’s the most likely culprit. Which, can I just say?” Sydnee grinned. “Hilarious.”

“How many puppies?”

“Hard to say this early. I count at least five. Probably more, though.” She towelled off the jelly. “You can let her up now.”

Johann released her and gave her belly a good scratching. She let her tongue loll out of her mouth. “Look at you! You’re going to be a mom!”

“Larsen’s Trullbus Succotash and Void,” said Sydney, wiping off her hands. “What would you even call the breed?”

“There is no dog more deserving of the flower of motherhood than you,” said Johann, rubbing her face with both hands.

“Her build says labrador, her ears say shepherd, her coat says spaniel, and her coloring...well who knows.”

“You are a Lady Godiva among peasants. Dog peasants.”

“And her with a champion dog. It’s a regular Romeo and Juliet.”

Johann gasped. “You’re the Jack to his Rose!”

“It’s just a splinter,” said Magnus, sitting on the floor of his apartment, arm outstretched. “I get them all the time. OW!”

“It’s in there really deep,” said Julia thoughtfully. She sat cross-legged in front of him, digging into the meat of his palm with a pair of tweezers.

“It’ll come out in a little bit,” he assured her.

“You said it’s been in there for two days. It’s going to get infected.”
“I’m fi-- shit, Jules!”

“Quit squirming.”

The phone rang. Magnus reached behind him and picked it up. “Magnus speaking. Oh, hi, JohhaaaAAAAUGH JEEZ, JULIA.”

“Almost got it.”

“No, Johann, it’s fine, she’s just--no we’re not busy. Yeah, really. What’s up?”

“Splinter’s the size of a fence post.”

“She is? Congratulations! You’re like a grandpa now!”

Julia shot a look over shoulder. “What?”

Magnus’ jaw dropped. “Really? You mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“Then yeah! Hell yeah! When?”

“ Weirdo.” Julia turned back to her task.

“Yes! Thanks, Johann. Seriously, you’re the best.” He hung up the phone.

“What was that about?”

“I need to buy a house in three months.”

“You what?” Julia pulled the tweezers out of his hand.

“HIJO DE PUTA.” Magnus yanked his hand away.

Julia held up the tweezers. “Got it!”
My Son Agnes

Taako slammed the oven door and shook the flour out of his apron. The last cakes of the day were now on the cooling racks, a set of German chocolate cakes that, if he was right, would be the most moist cakes that ever existed. It was a shame they were all going to people’s picnics and potlucks and meetings, to be untouched because, moist or no, they were still German chocolate cakes.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. After these cooled he could go home, unless Sazed—

“There you are,” said Sazed, passing through the kitchen. He was on his way out, putting on his jacket. “You’re only getting those out now?”

It took all of Taako’s considerable self-control to keep his eyes unrolled. “Yeah.”

“The front is a mess. Fix that up before you leave.” He left via the back door.

“Sure,” said Taako. He waited for the door to click shut before he said, “I’d like to see you get those cakes out of the oven after making six custom orders in a single day. Oh, wait, you couldn’t. Which is why you hired me. Asshole.”

He snatched up a broom and a rag to clean the front, which was not a mess, but needed to be wiped down anyway before they closed, and started sweeping behind the counter. Someday this would be just a memory while he worked his own place. His bakery, where he’d be a real baker instead of some kind of cake monkey, and he would actually throw out eggs that were recalled from salmonella instead of using them and letting his employee take the fall for the Salmonella Incident of 1997, Sazed.

There was a streak of dried frosting on the floor. Taako grabbed a paper towel and a spray bottle from under the counter and crouched down to scrub.

The electronic bell on the door chimed. He looked up; from his place on the floor he could see the door opening and closing, but nobody seemed to come in.

“Hello?” he called. A thought occurred. “Hurley?”

There was no answer. Spooky.

Taako crumpled up the paper towel and pulled himself halfway up on the counter. A pair of eyes met his on his way up.

“Augh!”

“Hello, sir!”

Taako stood the rest of the way up. “Jeez, Angus.”

“Sorry, sir. I thought I’d surprise you at work!” He grinned. The little guy looked fresh from school, backpack and all, which was weird, because it was almost 5:30.

“Well you did that.” Taako tossed the paper towel in a trash can. “What are you doing here, little man?”
“I came to ask for your advice, Mr. Taako.”

“Well, depending on what exactly you’re looking for, I might be vastly unqualified,” he said, picking up the broom again. Advice, huh? The little guy didn’t have many men in his life, Taako knew. From what Carey and Killian said about his grandpa, the old man was verging on senility. Oh god, what if he wanted The Talk or something? This was parent stuff. Taako could barely parent himself.

“Me and this girl at school--”

“Hold it right there, buddy, maybe this is a question for… Magnus or somebody--”

“--are doing a project for Civics. Why would I ask Magnus?”

Taako clutched his chest. “Oh thank god. No, it’s fine, sorry. You can ask me.”

“Okay, well, it’s a presentation, and the teacher said we could get extra credit if we add a little pizzazz.”

“Angus.” Taako leaned toward him on the counter. “You have absolutely come to the right place. What kind of pizzazz?”

“That’s what I’m here to ask you,” said Angus. “We don’t know. June says some kids are doing home videos or songs. We can’t really sing and we don’t have a tape recorder.”

Taako picked up his broom again and started sweeping. “What’s your project on?”

“Why people have national pride. We were lucky, the teacher assigned us America.”

“So why do you think people have national pride here?”

“A history that focuses on personal freedoms and independence. We’re going to talk a lot about history.”

Taako shot him a look. “Did you do most of the reading for this project?”

“Yes. But I have more time to, and June’s going to do most of the presenting, so it’s fair.”

“History, huh?” Taako swept the detritus from the floor into the dustpan and dumped it into the trash. “I might have something for you. You like costumes?”

Angus smiled. “Like costumes to present in?”

“Yeah, if that works with your presentation.”

“That’s perfect! Where do you keep the costumes?”

“Oh. Um. Hmm. They’re at my apartment. Uhh.” Taako rubbed the back of his head. He needed an adult. “Who brought you here?”

“I walked.”

Taako frowned. “From where?”

“From school. It wasn’t too far.”
“Ango, that’s almost four miles.”

Angus shrugged.

“So no one knows you’re here?”

“I wrote a note to my grandpa this morning.”

Taako pinched the bridge of his nose. “What exactly does that note say?”

“That I’ll be with a friend all afternoon. Why?”

“Did you mention me specifically?”

“No. I don’t understand, why don’t you want him to know I’m with you?”

Taako laughed nervously. “Hoo, boy. Hatchi matchi. How do I put this?” How to explain to an eleven-year-old how it looked if a grown man took a child home… “I’m not… a great adult. Do you see? Like I am barely competent.” He put his hands together and pointed them at Angus. “Children need… supervision. From adults. Preferably more than one adult at a time.”

“You have a job and a house and a boyfriend,” offered Angus. “What else do you need to be an adult?”

“We’re just asking all the big questions today, aren’t we?” he said. “Maybe I could call Carey or Killian?”

“They’re both still at work,” said Angus.

“Aw, jeez.” Taako covered his face. “Well this is just a doozy of a situation we find ourselves in.”

“It is?” said Angus.

The chime on the door rang, and Taako’s salvation entered, covered in car grease.

“Hi, Taako,” said Sloane. “Oh, hi, Angus.”

“Sloane! Great. I need a favor.”

Sloane gave him a dry look. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it for carrot cake.”

Sloane watched, fork in hand, as Taako adjusted the length of Angus’ sleeves. He was wearing a long-tailed blue coat with a patterned vest and short pants.

“You’re lucky,” said Taako through a mouthful of pins, “that our Jefferson was about your size. Scrawny kid.”

“What play did you say this was from?” asked Sloane through a mouthful of cake.

“1776. Our local theater did a truly awful rendition of it.” Taako finished pinning the sleeve and moved on to the coattails. “The costumes were choice, though.”

“People used to wear this every day?” said Angus.

“They sure did,” said Taako. “All this and wool stockings too.”
“No wonder the Continental Congress was so miserable and hot,” Angus said.

Taako stood up and looked over Angus. A curly-haired freckle-faced boy of ambiguous ethnicity in a Revolutionary War-era costume.

“You know, it’s strange,” said Taako thoughtfully, “but something about this just seems right.”

Angus smiled.

“All right, you can take the coat off. It’ll just be a couple of stitches and it’ll fit just fine.”

Angus slid off the coat and handed it to Taako. “Thanks, sir! It’s perfect.”

“You are talking to an expert here, Ango,” he said, hanging the jacket over one arm. “Now this friend of yours, is she taller or shorter than you?”

Angus considered. “Uhh, this much taller?” He held out a hand just above his head.

“What is that, an inch and a half?” Taako tapped his chin. “And is she thinner or fatter than you?”

Angus shifted and looked away. “It’s not very nice to--”

“I promise I won’t tell her.”

“Um. About the same, I guess?”

“Well that’s convenient. Angus, how would you feel about being a dress model?”

Angus considered. “You wear skirts sometimes.”

“That I do,” said Taako solemnly.

“Then I think it would be okay.”

“All right, then.” Taako turned to one of the costume racks and shuffled through the selection. “How about a yellow?”

Angus nodded. “I think that would look nice. She’s got dark skin.”

“Brilliant.” Taako handed him a dress. “Go ahead and put this on. You can just put it over your shirt and jeans, it should fit okay either way.”

Angus took the dress to the bathroom.

Sloane swallowed a bite of cake. “You’re really into this stuff.”

“What? I am?” Taako sat down at a table with a sewing machine and switched it on. “I thought I just kept all these clothes around for kicks.”

“Don’t you sass me,” said Sloane.

Taako laughed.

Angus appeared from the bathroom, pulling the voluminous skirt up so he wouldn’t step on it. The back of the dress was only half-buttoned over his t-shirt. “I couldn’t reach the rest,” he said.

“That could be a problem,” said Taako. “Now that I think about it, all my dresses require some
“I could help her,” said Angus. “I don’t mind.”

“Would she mind, though?” said Taako.

“It’s only three buttons.”

Taako nodded. “All right. If you’re sure. Here, step up on this stool for me.”

Angus did as instructed and released the skirt. Taako buttoned the last three buttons on the back of the dress and knelt down to start pinning the hem.

“How did people move in these things?” asked Angus.

“Killian says you can do anything in a skirt if you’re not a coward,” said Sloane.

Angus laughed. “I guess I’m not very brave, then.”

“It takes practice, is all,” said Taako.

“ Wouldn’t catch me wearing a dress ever,” scoffed Sloane.

A sound from the bottom of the stairs made Taako look up, the sound of a key in the door. “Mm! That’ll be Kravitz.”

And yes, Kravitz’s voice floated up the stairway. “Taako?”

“Up here, darling.”

Taako heard footsteps coming up the stairs. “Oh. Uh. What’s this?”

Taako caught Angus’ eye and winked. “This is my son, Agnes.”

Angus put a hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Your son—did you say Agnes?”

Sloane snickered.

“You didn’t tell me you had a son.” Kravitz’ tone was so soft it made Taako look up. He had the gentlest look on his face.

“Youp, he’s our boy,” said Sloane, taking a bite of cake. “Bought him fair and square.”

Kravitz’s face fell into confusion. “Wait. You two--”

Sloane choked on her cake.

“I believe Killian and Carey mentioned someone named Angus McDonald?” said Taako, before Kravitz could chase that rabbit. “This is the man himself.”

Angus smiled. “Hello, sir! I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, too,” said Kravitz, his face settling into a look of comprehension.

Sloane coughed in the background. “I’m fine,” she croaked. “Don’t worry about me.”
“Actually,” said Kravitz, sitting down on the floor beside them, “I’ve wanted to interview you for some time, for this blog project. I gave Killian a release form for your grandpa to sign…”

“Oh! I have that in my backpack.”

“Did he sign off on it?”

Angus paused. “It’s signed,” he said carefully.

“Ango, did you forge your grandpa’s signature?” said Sloane.

“If I didn’t, nothing would get signed,” said Angus.

“Maybe it’s just better if I ask you some questions off the record,” said Kravitz. “Is that okay with you?”

“I think so,” said Angus.

“You still need me?” asked Sloane, polishing off the last bit of cake.

“It would be helpful to have another adult present,” said Kravitz.

“There’s more cake in the fridge, killer,” said Taako, pinning up the next bit of hemline.

Sloane shot him a finger gun and strode over to his kitchen.

“So Angus,” said Kravitz, “How long have you known Killian and Carey?”

“Since I moved in with my grandpa,” he said. “So, since I was eight.”

“That’s three years,” said Taako.

“Right. Do you know why they take care of you?”

“That’s a very easy question, sir. They love me, and they’re good people.”

“Do they tell you they love you?”

“Yes, sir. With both their words and with what they do.”

“We all love Ango,” added Taako, reaching up to ruffle his hair.

Kravitz smiled at him. Taako felt sort of melty.

“So what are we doing here?” said Kravitz. “Uhh… exploring some… things?”

“It’s for a school project,” said Angus.

Kravitz frowned. “What kind of school project?”

“The dress is for his friend,” said Taako.

“That’s right,” said Angus. “We’re just the same size.”

Kravitz rubbed the cloth between two fingers. “Looks kind of princessy.”

“It was from a high school production of Beauty and the Beast, I think,” said Taako, placing
another pin. “I’ll take out some of the more ridiculous flounces. It’ll pass for period dress in no time.”

“Did you volunteer to help with this?” asked Kravitz, a little amused.

“I asked him,” said Angus. “I knew he could help.”

“How did you know?” asked Kravitz.

“He’s good at pizzazz, sir,” said Angus solemnly. Kravitz’ mouth twisted into a smile. “And he always looks out for his friends.”

“Does he, now?” said Kravitz, a little secretively.

“Yep. Sometimes he pretends he doesn’t care, but he always does.”

Taako felt a little affronted. He pointed at Angus. “Stop giving away my secrets, little man.”

“Sorry sir, but it’s true.”

Kravitz laughed. “You care about the derby team an awful lot, Angus.”

“Yes, very much. It’s only fair, sir, since they care about me.”

“Tell me something. You’re not living with your parents, is that correct?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Do you feel like you have a family anyway?”

Angus pondered this for a moment, then nodded.

Kravitz nodded too. “Can I tell you a secret, Angus?”

“Okay, sir.”

He theatrically held up his hand to exclude Taako in the secret and said, in a stage whisper, “Taako does too.”

Angus beamed.

“Would you two quit baring my soul to each other?” grumbled Taako. “I’ll have no credibility by the time you’re done.”

Kravitz placed a cold hand on Taako’s knee. Taako stuck a pin into the hemline before reaching down and squeezing his boyfriend’s hand. “All right, Ango. Stand up on your tiptoes for me?”

Angus did. The hemline hit just where it should.

“Perfect. You can take that off now. I’ll get started on sewing.”

“Can you do the buttons?” asked Angus.

Taako undid the first three or four buttons and, once Angus had done the rest, helped him pull the dress over his head. Kravitz stood up. “I wanted to let you know, I got a call from a friend who needs help with a story for the Post, so I’ll be in Neverwinter for a couple of days.”

“Is this the investigative reporter?” asked Taako, taking the dress and the jacket over to the
sewing machine.

“That’s right, and I figured it’s an easy paycheck.” Kravitz picked up his camera bag from its place on his desk and unzipped it to check inside. “Anyway, I owe her a favor.”

“What’s the story, Wishbone?”

“Dogfighting,” said Kravitz. He shot a panicked look at Angus and said, “I mean--”

“That’s how Grandpa lost his seat in the senate,” said Angus.

Taako threw a look over his shoulder. “Your grandpa was a senator?”

“A state senator,” said Angus. “Before I was born.”

“Golly,” said Kravitz, in lieu of anything else. “Um. Right. So.” He collected himself and stood up straight. “I’ve only got a few minutes before I have to leave.”

“Get over here, you big lug,” said Taako, reaching out to him.

Kravitz hesitated. “Is this… appropriate?”

“He hangs out with Carey and Killian all the time,” said Taako. “You think it’s anything he hasn’t seen before?”

“You can kiss in front of me,” said Angus. “Oh, unless that makes you uncomfortable.”

“Angus, would you go ask Sloane if she wants to stay for dinner?” Taako asked.

Angus nodded and left for the kitchen.

Kravitz chuckled. “That kid is so polite.”

“He’s a good kid,” Taako agreed. “Now kiss me, you fool.”

Kravitz did, wrapping his arms around Taako for a good long moment before releasing him. “I’ll be back on Sunday. We can go out for dinner.”

“That sounds exceptionally good,” said Taako.

Kravitz paused. “You ever think about that? Kids?”

“I don’t think I’d be a very good dad, Krav.”

“I disagree.”

For once, Taako didn’t know what to say.


“Bye,” breathed Taako, as his boyfriend walked down the stairs. God, he loved that man.

Sloane stuck her head out of the fridge. “How am I supposed to eat dinner when you’ve stuffed me full of cake?”

“What if I made bibimbap?” asked Taako, joining them in the kitchen.
She narrowed her eyes. “With my dad’s no-meat meat sauce?”

“Oh Sloane. Sweet Sloane. There is no other way to make bibimbap.”

She crossed her arms. “All right. I guess so.”

“What do you say, Ango?” said Taako. “Is your grandpa expecting you back for dinner?”

“Nope. What’s bibimbap?”

Sloane mussed his hair. “You’re in for a treat.”
Moving Concerns

Hurley hopped up onto the barstool and let her legs dangle as Carey, Killian and Taako greeted her. “Hey, guys.”

“Where’s Sloane?” asked Carey.

“She’ll be here in awhile. Said there was a repair she wanted to finish. Where’s Kravitz?”


Killian laughed at the dreamy look on his face. “Look at this guy.”

“Hey, Hurley’s here,” said Julia, coming up from behind the counter and taking out a shot glass. Hurley always ordered shots. “What can I get for you?”

“What’ve you got that’s new?” said Hurley.

“Um, well, Ren went and visited a cousin in Montana and brought back some kind of huckleberry vodka.”

Hurley pointed. “Yes, shot of that, please.”

“Coming up,” Julia pulled the bottle from the rack behind her.

“No Magnus today?” asked Hurley.

“No, he’s out househunting,” said Julia.

“Oh yeah, he told me about that,” said Carey. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going okay, I guess. Here you go.” Julia put the shot down in front of Hurley.

“Just okay?” said Carey. “He said he found a few places that were strong possibilities.”

“Welllll.”

“Hmm, trouble in paradise, Jules?” said Taako. “Dish.”

Julia hesitated. “Don’t tell him I said this, okay?”

“Lips sealed, sweet cheeks. Right everyone?” Taako leaned forward. “So spill.”

“It’s just… ” Julia bit her lip. “How do I say this? I want to be supportive, right? But he keeps asking me all these questions. How many bedrooms? How big should the yard be? What do I think of this layout, or this other layout? And I’m like, I don’t know?” Julia looked pained. “This is a big deal for him, but it’s getting annoying. It’s his house. Oh, hang on.”

Julia was called away by other customers. As soon as she was out of earshot, Hurley threw out a hand. “I’m not the only one seeing this, right?”

“Seeing Jules being totally oblivious?” said Taako. “No, no you are not.”

“Magnus moves fast,” commented Carey. “Asking to move in after what, four months?”
“Barely even that,” said Killian.

“Except he’s not asking, he’s just—” Hurley waved a hand—“beating around the damn bush!”

“Who bet it’d be four months?” asked Carey.

“That’d be me,” said Killian. “If she keeps this up, though, I might lose.”

“We have to tell her, right?” said Hurley.

“Don’t do it,” said Taako. “You’ll ruin the bet. She’s got to figure this out herself.”

“I’ll ruin the bet? This is our friend we’re talking about here!”

“Listen, tough stuff, I’d like to help her overanalyze every aspect of her relationship too,” said Taako, “but what if we’re wrong? This is Magnus we’re talking about. For all we know, this could be completely about dogs.”

“We could ask him,” Hurley began, but Killian held up a hand.

“No middle school shenanigans here, Miss O’Shaghennessy,” Killian said. “Let them be adults.”

“Who’s an adult?” Noelle appeared and took the seat beside Hurley.

“Hey, Noelle,” said Carey. “Joining us at the big girl bar?”

Noelle smiled. “I’m just here for the company today. And the food.”

“Luckily, we’re serving up both,” said Julia, reentering the conversation. “What would you like?”

“Fish and chips. And a lemonade.”

“You got it.” Julia jotted down the order and brought it back to the kitchen.

“What were you guys talking about?” asked Noelle.

“Middle school shenanigans, I guess,” mumbled Hurley. “I don’t like watching my friends be dummies.”

“Then what are you doing here?” asked Taako, which was greeted by laughter.

Julia returned with a glass of lemonade. “This is what sucks about hanging out while I’m working. I miss all the good jokes.”

“It was just the timing,” said Taako. “Now what were you saying about Magnus?”

Julia shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I’m just being oversensitive about this househunting thing.”

“Househunting?” said Noelle. “Are you two moving in together?”

Hurley’s face broke into a grin. The others stared at Noelle, and then at Julia.

Julia, for her part, looked dumbfounded. “Honestly… the thought has never occurred to me.”

“Not even once?” said Noelle. “But y’all are so good for each other.”

“Sure, but… moving in? That’s a big deal.”
“Yeah, but if anyone could pull it off, it’s you two,” said Noelle.

Julia shook her head. “That’s fast, though, that’s so fast.”

“Well no one’s asking you to, I just wondered.” Noelle took a drink of her lemonade. “I wouldn’t be all that surprised, though, if you did. You always hear stories about someone’s parents or a couple of friends who like, knew each other for two months before they were married. I know you’re not supposed to strive for that kind of thing, but it does happen.”

Noelle took another drink while Julia examined the bar with a worried frown.

“What’s eating you about this, Jules?” said Killian.

“I’m not sure.” She picked up a rag and wiped down the bar half-heartedly. “Am I--are we--ready for that? Is that even what he wants?”

Julia’s audience exchanged glances. Killian said, carefully, “You’d have to ask him.”

A bell sounded from the kitchen. Julia snapped out of it. “There’s someone’s food. Uh, I’ll be back.”

She walked away. Hurley whacked Noelle on the arm. “What about the bet--ow!”

“That’s the fake arm,” said Noelle. “What bet?”

“I’m so gonna win this,” said Killian.

Julia and Magnus sat at a table at the library. Magnus was poring over a newspaper. Julia was theoretically writing a mock budget for Strategic Management, but she was so distracted. Why did his constant talk about houses annoy her? It wasn’t because she didn’t know how to answer. He would have accepted “I don’t know,” and he had, many times. It was because he was making these plans without her.

Not really without her. She was there, after all. But they weren’t her plans too. And she wanted them to be. The thought had struck her like a baseball bat. She wanted to be a part of this, and yet… there was still the persistent feeling that she had no right. He hadn’t yet invited her in, not properly. Maybe that’s what all the questions were about.

God, if that was the case, it was too subtle for her taste. Why not just come out and ask her?

Because they’d been dating four months, and they’d really only known each other for nine, and that was crazy, right? To move in with someone after that? To buy a house with someone? He didn’t want to scare her.

If she was right about what was in his head. She could be dead wrong, and she was afraid to find out which one.

He interrupted the train of thought with a sigh. He rubbed his face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

He laid his hand on the newspaper, matching her library-appropriate tone. “The problem is that I’m short a few thousand dollars. The houses I really want, the ones that I like the best… they’re just out of my range. Like this one.” He pointed to a listing. “Down payment of sixteen thousand. I have
eight.”

Julia’s accounting brain clicked into motion. “You have 8k? Like, liquid?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not nothing. Immediate payment with no loan is a big deal. You could almost certainly talk them down further.”

“Eight thousand further?”

She hesitated. “Maybe not eight. But five.”

“That’s something, at least.”

They said nothing for a moment longer. A thought entered Julia’s mind: her savings account had just about three thousand dollars in it.

She tried to drag her mind back to her project. The thought wouldn’t leave her alone.

“What if,” she started, and then stopped. That wasn’t the place to start.

“What if what?” he said, looking up from his newspaper.

Right place or not, it looked like she was starting there. “What if I helped? I’ve got a little stashed away.”

He frowned. “When you say ‘helped,’ what…” He let the sentence trail off.

Oh god. Okay. Now or never. “I mean… that I… I love you.”

His eyes went wide.

“And… and you know, if you… if you feel the same way…”

Magnus’ face spread into the most radiant smile. He laughed breathlessly. “You. You love me?”

The relief left Julia dizzy. She found herself mirroring his smile. “Yes. Yes!”

“I love you, Julia,” he said, and it sounded like behind it was a wave of anticipation satisfied. Julia felt tears spring to her eyes.

“Oh, god, am I crying?” she whispered.

He covered his mouth with his hand and shook with silent laughter. She was laughing too now, inaudible, her gut aching from the effort of keeping it silent.

“Hey,” she said, through tears, “sir, this is a library. Could you keep it down please?”

This was it, the last straw. He guffawed out loud, and was immediately shushed by the other patrons. He slapped his hand back over his mouth.

They were like that for several minutes, suppressing bursts of giggles and shushing each other. Finally they caught their breath.

“I totally interrupted you,” he breathed. “We were talking about the house.”
Julia tried to swallow back some of the mirth. “I was trying to say that if you’re up for it… I mean if you want, I could help you buy your house. Because then it’d be our house. Which I want, because I love you.”

“Our house,” he murmured. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“That’s all I want.” He reached across the table, took her hand. “That’s everything I want.”

She pulled him toward her and kissed him, long and sweet.

They broke apart smiling. Julia sighed. Everything he wanted. Everything she wanted too.

“Tell me about our house,” she said.

“How much richer are we?” he said.

“Three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-six dollars.”

Magnus grinned. “Well in that case…”
Magnus Conoce al Padre

Steven looked at his hands, carefully folded on the familiar contours of the kitchen table. His house was so much quieter than usual. He’d turned off the radio, so the only sound was the tapping of his own foot. He looked at his daughter, searching her for any signs of change from the last few months, when all they’d had were terse phone conversations. She looked the same. Worried, but the same. For that matter, he was worried too. Ella always said he was a worrier, and months of radio silence had done nothing to soothe his fears.

He said carefully, “You are buying a house.”

“Yes,” said Julia. She was trying to be matter-of-fact about it, as if it was nothing. No big deal. Buying a house.

“With your boyfriend,” he went on.

“Yes.”

“A man I have not met. That you have been dating for…” He did a quick calculation. “…Five months?”

“Four,” she said, wincing.

Then he’d understood her correctly. He was afraid of that.

“And you’re giving him your savings,” he said.

“We’re pooling our resources,” she countered.

Steven unfolded and refolded his hands a couple of times.

“I read an article recently about signs that someone might be in an abusive relationship,” he said. “If you’re convinced to give up your life savings, for example.”

“I mean, it’s not my entire life savings, Dad, just what I’ve managed to put away while I’m in school.”

“The article also mentioned isolation from friends and family.”

“That’s not fair. I did that, not him.”

“I’ve missed you,” said Steven. “I don’t like not being in your life.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I was afraid…” She sighed and buried her face in her hands. “You already didn’t like him, and I didn’t want to… to confirm your opinions of him or… or… this looks bad, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” Steven unfolded his hands again, drummed his fingers on the table. “Do you need help, Julia?”

“No,” she groaned.

“I can help you, if you need it. I’ll do whatever it takes. You can come stay with me for as long as you want if you feel unsafe.”
“He would never-- never,” she emphasized, “do anything to make me feel unsafe. I love him.”

Steven felt his heart sink. The article had said that, too, that abused persons often protect their abusers. “Okay. Does he love you?”

“Yes,” she said, with more confidence than he expected.

“And he doesn’t… hurt you or--”

“He doesn’t hit me, Dad, you know I know better than that.”

“I’m not just talking about hitting you. He doesn’t ever make you feel… scared, or uneasy maybe? If you’d read the article--I have it around here somewhere--”

“I know what abusive relationships look like, Dad. This isn’t one.”

Steven backed off. “All right. All right.” He ran his hand through the graying fuzz of his hair. “I’m just… trying to understand. I can’t help but worry. I see you rushing in to who knows what--”

Julia mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“I said, you did. Rush into things.” She leveled a stare at him.

Steven sighed. “We’re talking about this, huh?”

“You did, though. You can’t judge me for--”

“I’m not judging you, Julia. It’s because your mother and I did what we did that I worry for you.”

“What do you mean?” she said, settling her hackles a little.

Steven leaned back in his chair. “We were both in college. We had bright futures, you know? Aspirations. And then we fell in love and got married and you came along… I’m not bitter about it, Julia. I wouldn’t do anything differently, but your life will be so much easier than ours with your education. I don’t want you throwing anything away.”

“I’m going to finish,” said Julia reproachfully.

“Will you? What if you get pregnant?”

“I won’t.”

“That’s what we thought too.”

Julia scowled. “Okay, then what if I do? You ended up just fine.”

Steven shook his head. “And then she died. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“No! Not at all!” Julia didn’t look angry so much as lost.

“I see you getting all caught up with him, and it reminds me that Ella was everything to me. My whole world, Jules. And when she died--” His voice caught. He looked back at his hands, again folded on the table. “I was no kind of parent to you for a year. I was so wrapped up in her that I couldn’t take care of you properly once she was gone. Do you see?”
He looked back at Julia. Her eyes sparkled with tears, but she said nothing.

He cleared his throat. “If this man isn’t who you think he is, or if he isn’t as invested as you are, or God forbid, he dies—Julia, I don’t have the words to describe how much it will hurt.”

They were quiet for a little while, and again, the only sound was the tapping of Steven’s foot.

Julia swallowed. “But that’s always the risk, right? You open yourself up to the possibility of hurt. That’s what love is.”

Steven grunted. “You’re not wrong.”

“It’s just got to be for someone who’s worth it,” she added.

“And you think this guy is?”

“I know he is.” Julia had that look on her face, the look of determination. “I want you to meet him. You’ll see.”

Steven spent a moment or two rubbing his forehead before saying, resigned, “I hope you’re right, Julia, I really do. When?”

“We were thinking Friday. Just at Applebee’s. Nothing fancy.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be there.”

“Good.” Julia got up and kissed his forehead. “I love you, Daddy.”

He wrapped her up in a hug. “I love you too, Chickadee.”

Magnus tugged at the collar of his good shirt. Buttoned? Unbuttoned? Buttoned made a good impression, but unbuttoned meant he wouldn’t suffocate and die in front of his girlfriend’s dad. Magnus unbuttoned the top button and walked into the Applebee’s.

He hovered for a moment in the lobby. She wasn’t here. She was supposed to meet him at the hostess’ counter.

“How many tonight?” asked the hostess.

“Uhhhh, three? It’s um, a table for Waxman?”

The hostess smiled. “Ah, yes! One of your party has already arrived.”

Magnus breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll show you where he’s sitting,” said the hostess, stepping into the dining room.

Magnus tried to take a breath, and found he couldn’t. He tugged at his collar again and followed her. Oh god. Oh, god, why did Julia have to be late? Usually he found it kind of a funny quirk but today she had doomed him.

He tried not to panic as the hostess led him to a secluded booth. He’d met dads before. All they wanted was their daughters’ safety and wellbeing. That’s what he wanted too. Right? Right.
None of this stopped him from feeling more scared than he had been in a long time. Julia said her last conversation with him had been intense, *Dios mio*.

With his thoughts racing, it took him a minute to register that the heavyset black man in the booth was familiar until he said, “Magnus?”

“S-steven?”

At the same time they said, “You’re Julia’s--” before stopping.

Magnus turned to the hostess. “Waxman, right?”

“That’s right.” She smiled. “I’ll leave you two to it. Your server will be along shortly.”

Magnus took the first full breath of the evening and sat down in the booth. “Uh, so. I’m not going to lie, this is… about the best case scenario.”

Steven leaned forward. “I’m confused. You’re dating Julia?”

“Yes,” said Magnus. “Uh, yes sir.”

“You have been for four months now.”

“Has it only been that long?” said Magnus, starting to relax. “It feels like I’ve known her my whole life.”

Steven considered this. “You told the poker game that you were in love with her about two months ago.”

“I was. I am.” Magnus leaned forward. “I think I’ve loved her longer than that.”

“And she loves you.”

Magnus smiled. “Yes. She says so.”

“She tells me you two are looking at buying a house together.”

Magnus’ smile grew wider. “We sure are.”

“You’ll be staying in town?” asked Steven.

“This is home, yeah. This is where all our friends are.”

Faster than Magnus expected, Steven grabbed a handful of his shirt, pulled him close, and whispered, “Because I really need to know if this is some sort of cult, where I’ll never see my little girl again, or maybe a scam, where you leave her heartbroken and penniless.”

Magnus was close enough to feel Steven’s breath. Steven was shockingly strong. Of course he was, he was a welder. Magnus swallowed. He was suddenly grateful he’d unbuttoned the top button. “You know me, Steven. You know I’d never do that.”

Steven released him, eyeing him. Magnus tried to smooth his shirt in as non-threatening a manner as he could.

“How come you didn’t say anything at poker?” asked Steven.
“I didn’t know you were her dad,” said Magnus. “Isaak never said last names. I don’t know any of your last names.” Magnus paused. “Did Julia never say my name?”

Steven thought back. “Come to think of it, I don’t think she did. You know, that day at the rink, when I first saw you, I didn’t have my glasses on.”

Magus grimaced. “That day at the rink--you know, I lost so much sleep over that call.”

“It wasn’t a good call,” said Steven thoughtfully. “Why buy a house, though? Why not just move in together for a bit?”

“To be honest, sir, I just wanted a dog at first,” said Magnus. “My friend’s dog is having puppies soon. And you remember how much my apartment sucks. I’m ready for something permanent. And then I started talking about it with Julia and… well we both liked the idea of home, home together.”

“Julia says it’s going to take all her savings,” said Steven.

“All of mine, too. But I have a steady job, and we pay more for rent between the two of us than we would a house payment. Julia figured it all out.” Steven nodded. Magnus took it as a good sign and went on, “And you know, this is just the beginning. I’m not planning on tying her to a house and leaving or anything.”

Steven’s eyebrows raised. “Are you saying you intend to marry my daughter?”

Whoops. Well, nothing for it now. “If that’s what she wants, then yes.”

Steven’s expression was unreadable.

Well, this couldn’t get any worse, so he might as well go for broke. “You did once say that you’d set us up if we weren’t both taken,” Magnus added.

Steven’s expression was unchanged. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“We’re pretty taken with each other.”

“Was that a pun, young man?”

Could he make this any worse? No, this was it, this was the nightmare scenario. “Yes, sir.”

Steven’s expression softened. “Funny.”

Magnus let go a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“I don’t know too much about you, I guess,” said Steven, flipping open his menu. “Isaak says you’re a damn good carpenter.”

“I’m glad he thinks so,” said Magnus. “I do my best.”

“Where’d you grow up?”

“Neverwinter, city proper.”

“Family?”

“Lots of cousins. My parents are passed on, though.”
“You and Julia have no shortage of cousins,” said Steven.

Julia flew into the Applebee’s. Late. Late. Late. Why did her shift have to run long? Why did nothing work out the way it was supposed to? Magnus would be on time, and so would her dad, confound them. She was surprised to see the restaurant wasn’t on fire or something.

“Waxman?” she wheezed to the hostess, who led her to a booth. She was expecting nuclear fallout; she wasn’t expecting laughter.

“Julia! There you are,” said Steven. “Late again, just like your mother.”

“Oh is that where she gets it?” said Magnus, reaching out a hand to take hers. She let him, dumbstruck.

“It’s a chronic problem on that side of the family,” said Steven secretively. “Julia, why didn’t you tell me that your boyfriend was the best damn poker player in this town?”

She thumped into the booth and turned to Magnus. “This is a dream, right? I’m dreaming?”

“I hope not,” he said, and kissed her on the head. “I ordered you a tea, is that right?”

Julia let out a long breath. “Yeah. Just right.”
Magnus shut the front door behind him with his foot, flipping through the stack of mail he’d gotten from his mailbox.

“How about this one?” Julia called from the kitchen. She was eating Lucky Charms at Magnus’ half-finished kitchen table, several newspapers spread out in front of her. “Totally remodeled spacious home close to downtown. Hardwood floors, granite counter tops and custom cabinetry. Perfect for entertaining. Move-in ready.” She read for him.

“Downtown is kinda far from the rink,” he said, tossing several fliers into the trash.

“I mean, it’s Faerun. Nothing’s really far from anything.”

“That’s true,” he tore a credit card offer in a couple pieces before throwing it away. “Are we the sort of people who do ‘entertaining’?”

Julia thought about that for a moment. “Maybe we could become the sort of people, if we had this house.”

Magnus laughed. After sorting out all the junk mail, he only had one piece of real mail left: a crisp envelope with looping calligraphy on the front.

“Who’s that from?” Julia asked, nodding to the envelope. The return address had been written on the back.

“Uh, Taako actually,” Magnus said, frowning in confusion. Julia’s eyebrows practically jumped off her face.

“Oh, here here. Just—” She whipped the card out of his hands. “Roaring 20’s! Hell yes!! Oh my god, this is gonna be the best.”

“Wait, what?”

Julia gasped. “We should totally do a coordinated costume! We could be Gatsby and—and… whatever her name was. Dolly? No that’s too easy. We’ll never win with that.”

“Wait! What is happening?”

Julia looked at him blankly. “Oh, right! Sorry, babe. It just feels like you’ve always been here.” Magnus smiled a little and sat down, taking the invitation back from her. “Taako has done a huge Halloween party every year since he’s lived here. There’s tons of gourmet food, a costume contest. Like it’s a big deal.”

“So why is there a theme? Isn’t Halloween a theme?”

Julia made a face. “Have you met Taako? The man does not do anything half-assed. This party is
legendary. Two years ago, he was a scarily accurate Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra.”

Magnus slowly nodded. “What was last year’s theme?”

“Literature. He was Scarlett O’Hara, white and green dress, hat and everything. Angus won the contest though, he was an adorable little Sherlock Holmes. He had a bubble pipe.”

“What’d you go as?”

“Madeline. You know, from the children’s books? My hat wouldn’t stay together though.”

“So people really go all out, huh?”

“Oh yeah.” She glanced up at the clock. “Ugh, I got to go. Be thinking about costume ideas, okay? I’ll do some research after class.” She pressed a kiss to his temple and picked up her backpack to head out the door.

“Hey, wait,” he said, meeting her just outside. He cupped her jaw and gave her a proper kiss, languid and slow. “I love you.”

Her eyes slowly drifted back open. “Love you too.” She stood on tiptoe and pulled him down to give him another quick kiss, partially disrupted by the smile on her face. “Okay, bye!”

Magnus waved to her as she got into her car and watched her leave before going back inside.

“I figured it out!” Julia yelled as soon as she got to her apartment that evening. Magnus was already there; sounds of something sizzling came from the kitchen. He poked his head out.

“Figured what out?”

“The costumes!” She kicked off her shoes, and threw her jacket over the back of a chair. “Or, at least mine. Did you have any ideas today?”

Magnus was browning some sausage in a skillet. “Not really. Maybe like Al Capone? I don’t know. I didn’t really love it.”

Julia hopped up on the counter next to him. “Well, I loved mine. Maybe we can find something to match. But-but-but,” she put a hand on his shoulder, “Are you ready for this?”

He grinned at her. “Lay it on me.”

“Billie Holiday! I’m gonna be Billie Holiday!”

“Like the jazz… singer.” His expression dropped off for some reason, but she paid no attention. She clapped her hands together.

“Yes! I mean, technically she wasn’t discovered till 1933, but it’s close enough and I really don’t care.” she continued to gush as Magnus’ face grew more and more scarlet. “Taako says he has some dresses I could try on, and Auntie Josephine said she knows how to do those little finger waves. Maybe I could learn one of her songs! No, wait that might be too much.” She drummed on the countertop, then she finally noticed Magnus’ mortified expression. “Why is your face all red?”

Magnus tried to wrangle in his face, but it was a losing battle. “No reason,” he squeaked.
“No, there’s definitely a reason. Come on. Spill.”

He shook his head. She leaned in closer to him.

“Magnus, we’re buying a house together and I’ve seen you naked, like a lot. I thought we were past the point of embarrassment by now.”

Magnus heaved a sigh between clenched teeth. “…Fine.”

“Yes.” Julia pumped her fist, but then quickly returned to a calm, listening expression.

“God, this is embarrassing.” He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand.

“Just do it quick then. Like a band-aid.”

He took a deep breath but then said in a blindingly fast rush, “When I was a teenager, I had a dirty pulp novel about a detective and a lounge singer and it was really educational for me in a lot of ways, but since then I’ve always had this fantasy.”

Julia took a minute to parse apart the words and make sure that she was understanding him correctly. When it all finally clicked, a smile spread across her face, but she tried to cover it with her hand.

“I see,” she said, barely keeping a lid on her absolute delight at this discovery. He was staring a hole into the frying pan, his mouth scrunched together. “Wait…” something else clicked in her mind. “Is that why you ran out of the club that night I sang with Johann?”

He nodded, still not looking at her. A little giggle escaped from her, but she tried to cover it with a cough. Oh this was delicious. Another thought came to her mind. She leaned forward, closer to him, a wicked smile on her face.

“Does the thought of me as a lounge singer turn you on?” she asked.

He didn’t move a muscle, then stiffly nodded again.

“Aw, babe.” She kissed his cheek, before sitting back again. “That’s precious… and flattering.”

He let out a breath. “Okay, so that’s over and done with and we never have to mention it again, right? Right.”

She watched him turn distractedly to try and grope around for the can opener. She chuckled a little and pulled it out from the drawer behind her knees. She waved it out, and he sheepishly reached for it, but she pulled it away.

“But first, I just have one more question: what was the title of this little book of yours?”

Magnus didn’t answer for a while, tried to stare her down, but he sighed. “To Kiss or Kill,” he finally admitted.

“Of course it was.” She held out the opener, and he took it from her to open a can of stewed tomatoes. “Okay, I promise that we won’t speak of it again, honey. But like,” she put a hand on his arm, “you don’t have to be embarrassed about this stuff anymore. That’s one of the perks of being in a relationship.”

He nodded. “I know. It’s just… embarrassing ‘cause just the thought it is enough to… you know.” She noticed that the base of his neck started to turn pink again. She smiled, but didn’t say anything. They were not done with this, not by a long shot, but she’d at least give him some time to
recoup his dignity. Though the beginnings of a plan started to form in her mind.

He added rice to the pan, giving it a quick stir. Julia put the lid on it, and Magnus set the timer.

“So how was the rest of your day?” he asked, coming to stand in front of her. Julia draped her arms over his shoulders.

“Who cares?” she said, before giving him a long building kiss, running her fingers up through his hair. She smiled internally as he let out a throaty moan and pulled her by her hips to the edge of the counter. She then slipped her hands down his broad back and tugged at the bottom hem of his shirt, but he grabbed her wrists and pulled away. He blinked a few times to refocus his eyes.

“We only have 25 minutes,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“We have 25 minutes,” Julia said back.

“...Yeah, okay.”
Angus marched into the rink, Carey and Killian behind him. Sloane was by the door, and her face broke into a smile when she saw him.

“Hey, buddy, what’s with the mask?”

Angus smiled, even though he knew she couldn’t see. “It’s for a school project, Miss Sloane! I did a presentation on kabuki theater for Civics.”

“He won’t take it off,” said Killian with mock frustration.

“I worked really hard on it, and I want to make sure everyone sees it before I have to throw it away,” Angus explained, which was mostly true.

“Well, I think it’s wonderful,” said Sloane solemnly. She paused. “That’s for the same class you did costumes for?”

“Mr. Griffin encourages creativity,” Angus explained.

Carey mussed his hair, which knocked his mask eskew. “Be careful skating in that thing.”

Angus readjusted it carefully. “Of course, Miss Carey.”

As the ladies made their way into the locker room, he hurried over to the flat rink, pulled off his shoes, and yanked his skates out of his backpack. While he was untangling the laces, Merle passed by, whistling and steering a push broom. Angus looked up, and Merle yowled, “What the hell--”

“Sorry, sir! It’s just me, Angus, your very good friend, sir!”

“Oh, god.” Merle put his hand on his heart. “I thought you were a demon.”

“No sir! I made this for a class project.”

“Huh. Say, that’s pretty good.”

“Thank you.”

“Let me see it.” Without waiting for an answer, Merle pulled it off.

Angus’ hands flew to his face. “No, wait, sir, please!”

“I just want to… Angus?”
Angus had both hands over his eyes.

“Let me see your face.”

“Please, sir, if you’ll just give me my mask back--”

“Come on, now.”

Angus started to cry. His hands fell to his lap. He knew the bruise around his eye was huge, and it sure smarted. He looked up, ready for Merle to be mad at him, but Merle’s expression held only horror.

“What happened?” asked Merle, more gently than Angus had ever heard him sound.

Angus shuddered and sniffed. “There’s--there’s a boy--at school--”

“Take your time.” Merle lowered himself to the floor.

Angus tried to take a couple of deep breaths before he started again. “There’s a boy at school who is. Um. Unkind.” Angus dragged his arm under his nose and sniffed. “It was just my turn, I guess, sir. He took my backpack. He would have taken my skates!”

“So you tried to fight him?” asked Merle.

“Yes, sir. I’m not very good at it, sir.”

“Well, you are pretty small. Did you tell a grown-up?”

“There wasn’t one around.”

“No, I meant…” Merle waved a hand. “Your… whoever looks after you.”

Angus looked at his hands. “I don’t think Grandpa would do anything, sir.”

“Well what about your derby girls? They’d show that kid--”

Angus looked at him wide-eyed. “They would murder him, sir.”

Merle huffed. “Someone should have helped you!”

“Oh! Someone did, sir! I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.”

“What?”

“Mavis, sir. After he hit me, Mavis walked right up to him and clotheslined him.” Angus threw out his arm to demonstrate, and added an explosion noise for effect. “And then she told him she’d do it again if she ever caught him picking on anyone else.”

Merle leaned back. “Huh. Mavis did that.”

“Yes sir.” Angus sat up a little straighter. “Your daughter’s very brave, sir.”

Merle seemed lost in thought. He tapped his finger on the kabuki mask.

“Um, sir? You won’t tell Miss Killian or Miss Carey or Miss Julia or anyone, will you?” Angus looked him dead in the eye.
“Mm? Oh.” He handed the mask back. “No, I won’t tell.”

“Thank you, sir.” Angus put it back on. Merle stood up and hovered for a second.

“Listen,” he said finally. “If you ever need an adult who... well, I’m a dad, so... so I’m not going to kill anyone, right? But I can talk to the principal or something.”

“Thank you, sir. That means a lot.”

“Right. Well.” Merle picked up the push broom and steered it away. Angus smiled, just a little, and finished tying on his skates.
"You're telling me that all this time, you were dating Steven's daughter?" said Leon.

"That's what I'm saying," said Magnus, laughing.

"Maybe we need to be better about communicating," Leon muttered. Isaak chuckled.

"This is like a classic sitcom blunder!" Garfield uttered. "Seriously, can I borrow the story?"

"You writing a sitcom?" said Cassidy.

"I'm dabbling!"

"I guess if you want to," said Magnus. "Uh, is it my deal?"

"Sure is," said Cassidy, handing off the deck. "Where is Steven, anyhow?"

"He called and said he'd be a little late," said Leon.

"So you and Julia, huh?" said Cassidy. "I hope you know, you're a lucky kid."

"She is amazing," said Magnus seriously, shuffling the cards.

"She tends to get herself into sticky situations, if I understand Steven's distress correctly!" said Garfield.

Magnus passed out the cards, frowning a little. "I wouldn't say so. Uh, ante up."

"We've all known her for years, of course," said Leon, pushing his quarters into the center. "I'll take two cards, Magnus."

"Remember that time she came here all in a tizzy because she crashed her car into the Walgreens?" said Garfield.

"Y'all remember when she got into that fight with the football coach?" said Cassidy.

"Steven said fight," said Isaak. "It was an argument. Two cards, please."

"What kind of an argument?" asked Magnus.

"Something about the football team hogging the track, if I recall," said Leon. "She did cross country or track in high school. One of the two."

"Serves the damn coach right, I reckon," said Cassidy. "Football team ain't even won a homecoming game in twenty years."

"And she crashed into a Walgreens?" said Magnus.

"Jest a little," said Cassidy. "Only hurt her own car. She has run into more'n her fair share of deer, though."

"Oh, she's talked about that," said Magnus. "I don't get it. They seem to find her."
“She’s secretly a deer witch!” said Garfield. “One card for me, if you please, Magnus.”

“Garfield,” Leon scolded.

Magnus chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, she’d probably think being a deer witch was funny. How many for you, Cassidy?”

“Three,” she said. “Now y’all are buying a house?”

“We’re going to try,” said Magnus, taking four cards for himself. “I know it’s fast, but--”

“Just about what we’d expect from Julia,” said Isaak.

“The girl can’t be stopped!” said Garfield. “I imagine she’s a force to be reckoned with in roller derby!”

Magnus smiled wistfully. “She sure is.”

Leon smiled. “I’ll bet two, I think.”

“Nice thing is, if you find a place that needs work done, you already know the best damn contractor in town,” said Cassidy.

“No need for flattery,” grumbled Isaak. “Raise to three.”

“That ain’t flattery,” scoffed Cassidy. “You know I don’t jest say shit.”

Magnus was still stuck on the idea of high school Julia. “What was Julia like? As a teenager?”

“Bit of a hellraiser,” said Isaak. “Not a bad kid, just didn’t think things through.”

“I’ll match your three,” said Garfield. “I’m going to be a little vulnerable here and admit that teenage Julia scared the living daylights out of me!”

“Scared Steven too, more’n once,” said Isaak.

“Well that’s the thing, isn’t it,” said Leon. “Most of these stories are filtered through Steven. They’re probably not as bad as they sound.”

“I’ll raise to four,” said Cassidy. “Now explain that, Leon, what’re you saying?”

Leon shrugged. “Steven worries too much. He has as long as I’ve known him.”

“How long have you known him?” said Magnus. “Uh, I’ll match four.”

“Since college,” said Leon. “Raise to five.”

“I fold!” said Garfield.

“You what?” said Leon.

“I should think I know when I’ve been beat!” said Garfield. “This hand’s just not my hand!”

Isaak shook his head and frowned at his cards. “This changes things. Gimme a minute.”

They sank into a brief silence. Magnus broke it.
“So, Leon, you knew Julia’s mom.”

The silence crystallized and turned fragile.

Leon looked up, and nodded, very slowly. “Yes. Ella was a good friend.”

They were silent for a moment more.

“Well go on, Magnus,” said Leon. “I know you want to ask.”

Magnus hesitated, but not for long. “What was she like?”

The table’s attention slowly turned to Leon as he pondered the question.

“There’s a lot of her in Julia,” Leon began. “Ella was… she was stubborn in the same way. Same sense of humor, too. She could always defuse a tense situation with a joke.”

Magnus smiled. That did sound like Julia.

“She wasn’t quite so…” Leon hesitated. “I suppose rough-and-tumble. As Julia, Steven doesn’t know where she got that. Ella was sweet. Really sweet. Very southern. And artistic.”

“Makes sense,” said Isaak. When the group looked at him questioningly, he added, “Seems like the sort of person Steven would go for.”

Leon nodded. “They were pretty crazy about each other, that’s for certain. Ella’s parents weren’t too pleased about it. She was white, you know, and it was the seventies, but Ella was adamant about marrying Steven.”

The table was quiet, thinking this through.

“She had a full three inches on him,” Leon added.

Cassidy laughed. “She didn’t either.”

“She did!” Leon smiled. “They cut a funny picture, that’s for sure. She was a gawky old bird. Watching her run after Julia…” He laughed. “Here’s little Julia, barrelling along to her next adventure like a juggernaut, and here’s Ella running after her like a chicken.”

Magnus grinned. The mental image was delightful.

“It was terrible, what happened to her,” said Leon, smile faltering. “A damn shame.”

They were quiet again for a little while.

“I know Steven don’t talk about her,” said Cassidy.

“I don’t think I would either, under the circumstances,” said Garfield, his usual manic tone missing.

Isaak pushed five quarters into the center. Cassidy folded. Magnus called. Isaak took the hand with three kings.

“Sorry, that was kind of a bummer,” muttered Magnus, handing off the deck to Leon.

“It’s all right,” said Leon, shuffling.

“I cain’t imagine what Steven must’ve been through,” said Cassidy.
You can’t,” Leon agreed.

The front door opened in the next room. “Leon?”

“There he is,” Leon said as Steven entered the kitchen.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Steven, sitting down at the empty place between Cassidy and Magnus.

“You’re just in time to deal in,” said Leon, passing round the cards. “Magnus was just telling us that he was the boyfriend you didn’t like all along.”

Steven laughed. “Funny old world, isn’t it?”

“That’s for damn sure,” said Cassidy. “How’d you not recognize him?”

Steven shrugged. “I wasn’t wearing my glasses when I saw him first.”

“You’re not wearing them now, either,” Magnus commented.

“I left them at the shop,” said Steven, waving a dismissive hand.

“Be careful there, Steven!” trilled Garfield. “Magnus might tell on you to your daughter!”

“I don’t need glasses to play poker,” scoffed Steven.

“We won’t be able to tell the difference if you can’t see the cards anyway,” said Leon mildly.

The table Ohhh-ed collectively at the trash talk. Steven laughed. “You’re gonna eat your words, Leon.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Leon good-humoredly.

“How is everyone, anyway?” said Steven, looking over his hands. “Haven’t seen you all for a while.”

All but Cassidy gave general affirmations.

“Cass?” said Steven.

She shrugged. “Been a rough stretch for a bit.”

Steven hesitated. “Is it your web dating thing?”

“Guess we’re goin’ straight to the heart and soul of the matter, ain’t we?” she grumbled.

Steven winced. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s--” She stopped. “It ain’t nothing.”

“Don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want,” said Isaak.

“Ante up,” said Leon. “We’ve just been worried, is all. You see those stories on the news--”

“I ain’t a news story,” she said. “It jest ain’t working for me, is all. Met some mighty fine folks, but none I’d like to carry on with.”

“What a shame!” said Garfield. “I personally think you’re quite the catch!”
“Maybe I’m just too old,” she mumbled.

“Oo, don’t say that,” said Leon. “That means I’m old.”

“You are old,” said Steven.

Magnus laughed. “There’s someone out there for everybody, Cassidy. You’ll find them.”

“Easy for you to say,” she grumbled. “Are we playing or what?”

Isaak nodded. “I’ll take four, Leon.”

“Sure.” Leon passed him the cards. “Are you going to keep doing this web dating?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” she said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Two cards for me, good sir!” said Garfield.

There wasn’t too much parking space in the close little neighborhood where Leon lived, so Isaak and Cassidy had to walk down the street a ways to their cars.

“You all right?” Isaak asked her. She’d been despondent the whole rest of the evening.

“Reckon I will be,” she muttered. “Least I got good friends.”

Isaak nodded.

They were quiet up until they reached Isaak’s rusty old Ford. Cassidy raised a hand to wave goodbye and kept walking. “Evenin’.”

Isaak pulled out his keys, but paused. “Cassidy?”

She turned to look back at him.

“Would you…” He hesitated. “Would you ever consider… would you like to… maybe… maybe we could get a drink sometime,” he finished lamely.

Cassidy raised a perplexed eyebrow. “We went and got drinks together last week.”

He swallowed. “Well, this time it’d be a date.”

She frowned and took a few steps back toward him. “You feel sorry for me? That it?”

“Nope.” Isaak tried and failed to look her in the eye.

She looked him over. “Known you for years and you never once showed any interest. In me or anybody.”

“I’ve… I’ve always been…” He swallowed again. “I find I got to know somebody a while before I have any… strong feelings towards them.”

He finally managed to meet her gaze. She was frowning at him. He could practically hear the gears in her head working.

Finally she hocked some spit onto a nearby lawn. “Well, shit, I done dated everyone else in this
town. Might as well date someone I know I like. See you Friday.”

She turned away to walk up the street.

Isaak turned back and unlocked his truck. Under his mustache, his lips twitched into a smile.
Killian glanced over to look at her girlfriend. Carey was seething, ready to hit someone. Killian tried to focus on the exercise.

They were practicing push blocks again, with Hurley playing jammer. She wasn’t as fast as Julia or Taako, but she was a hard target to aim for, and that was kind of the point.

“Ready?” asked Killian.

“Just do it,” Carey snarled.

Magnus blew the whistle. Hurley took off down the track. Killian steeled herself--Magnus blew the next whistle, and she and Carey bolted.

It was all a matter of precision. The right moment to get within range of Hurley. The right moment to take hold of Carey’s shoulders. The right moment--and that moment was now--to give her momentum to Carey, to throw Carey into Hurley and knock her down. They’d done it a million times.

So why did Carey land on Hurley elbow-first?

It took a moment for Killian to register what had happened. Carey had landed on Hurley elbow-first, hitting Hurley under the ribs. Oh, god.

Hurley made a wheezing sound. Killian glided forward. “Oh my god. Ram, are you okay? Hurley?”

Carey was lying on her side on the track. Killian shot her a look of disbelief. “What was that?”

“What was what?” snapped Carey.

Killian knelt down beside Hurley. “Ram, say something.”

Hurley coughed a couple of times. “Did you get her license plate number?”

“See?” said Carey, getting to her feet. “She’s fine.”

Magnus appeared too, offered Hurley a hand. “Can you stand up?”

Hurley nodded, but when she got to her feet she was doubled over. “Goddamn, Diablo, that was a good hit.”

“Would you help her over to the bench?” Magnus asked Killian.

“Yeah, sure.” Killian had to bend down to offer Hurley her forearm.


Hurley was taking very careful breaths. “Is she okay?” she rasped.

“Are you okay?” asked Killian.

“I’ll live.” She coughed a little more. Killian rested her on the bench and sat down beside her. The
others were doing speed drills over on the flat rink; over the sound of their skates, Killian couldn’t hear what Magnus was saying to Carey.

Her arms were crossed. She wasn’t listening, or was trying not to. Magnus looked concerned, asking her questions.

Finally she threw out her hands, and Killian could hear her say very clearly, “Why don’t you leave me the fuck alone?”

“Hey,” he said, matching her volume, “I don’t know what’s got you so pissed off, but you don’t get to take it out on your team.”

Carey let out a roar of frustration and—oh god—threw a punch at Magnus. Killian jumped to her feet—But Magnus caught her fist in his hand. “Don’t.”

For a moment, Carey looked so furious that Killian prepared to drag her off, but then… oh god… her face crumpled and she let out a low, choking sob.

Killian could see Magnus’ heart breaking from here. He let go of her fist, caught her under the elbows. “Hey. What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“Oh my god,” rasped Hurley from the bench beside her.

“Do you ever—” Carey had to stop and cough, horrible, tearful coughs. Killian covered her mouth.

“Killian, do something,” said Hurley.

“I’ve been trying,” whispered Killian. “She needs this.”

“Do you ever feel hopeless?” Carey managed.

“What happened?” asked Magnus.

“My job.” She shuddered and sniffed. “I lost my job. Do you know… how long… I’ve been trying… to find another… job?”

Magnus nodded, very slightly. “As long as I’ve known you.”

“What am I going to do now?” she said, almost pleadingly. “What are Killian and I going to do? I can’t ask her to take me on as dead weight.”

“You’re not dead weight,” said Magnus, looking her dead in the eye. “She loves you.”

“Okay, but we’re going to starve,” Carey spat.

“That’s not true. We won’t let you. You have friends, Carey.”

She pulled away from him. “So I’m supposed to mooch off my friends for the rest of my life?” she said. Killian could nearly taste the bitterness in her voice.

“Don’t be stubborn.” Magnus put a hand on her back, gently. “Of course it looks hopeless if you try to do things yourself. I learned the hard way—you aren’t supposed to go through life alone.”

Carey swallowed, didn’t respond.
Magnus patted her on the back. “And quit stabbing people. Your elbows are so pointy they’ll kill somebody.”

“Fight me, cabron.”

“No puedo luchar contra mi amiga.”

“Quit being so nice.”

“Never. Let me know if Julia or I can help.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think while you skate. You’re running that block again. Hey Hurley!”

Killian and Hurley immediately joined the All-Star Ceiling Examination Squad.

“Ram, you okay to skate?”

Hurley looked up as though she wasn’t listening intently the whole time. “Huh? Yeah, I think I’m good.”

“Good. Run it again.”

Killian plopped down close beside Carey on the bench of the locker room. Carey seemed… maybe not okay, but more level. Killian never knew what to do when she would stuff feelings. Apparently the answer was to throw her at Magnus.

“How are you feeling?” Killian muttered, under the noise of the rest of the team.

“Not great.” There was no more bitterness in her tone, thank god. “But not like a time-bomb anymore.”

“Good.” Killian kissed Carey’s sweaty forehead. “You’ve got to talk to me.”

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” said Carey. “If I’d said… if I’d told you I felt like dead weight?”

Killian looked down. “Yeah. That would have hurt.”

“I love you. I’m sorry I exploded.” Carey rested her head on Killian’s shoulder.

“I love you too.” Killian wrapped her arm around her girlfriend and held her close. “Are you going to do it, then?”

“What?”

“Ask for help?”

“Eavesdropper.” Carey looked up. She wasn’t angry, just resigned. “I’m going to have to.”

“What are you going to do?”

Carey untangled herself from Killian’s arms. “Hey, Sloane?”

Sloane pulled her head out of her locker. “Yeah?”
“Is that job offer at your garage still open?”

“Oh, can you alphabetize things? Because none of my mechanics can, and don’t tell them, but neither can I.”

“Yeah, I can. I can keep books too.”

“It’d be nice to actually fix cars at work for once,” said Sloane. “Yeah, why don’t you come by tomorrow? We’ll work out the details.”

“Sure.”

Killian kissed the top of Carey’s head and mumbled into her hair, “I’m proud of you.”

Carey slid her arm behind Killian’s back. “Thanks, babe.”
This is Halloween

Magnus tucked the red flannel shirt into his jeans and took a moment to carefully roll up the sleeves to expose the white henley underneath. He’d probably be too warm at the party, but since he wasn’t even close to obeying Taako’s theme, he’d better go all out as much as he could.

In the weeks since the invitation had arrived, Julia and he had never settled on a 20’s costume for him. So he just went with what he usually wore at Halloween. He pulled the suspenders up over his shoulders and picked up the comically small toy axe he’d gotten from the dime store. Oops, can’t forget the beanie, which he’d borrowed from Johann. There. He checked himself in the mirror. He made a pretty good lumberjack if he said so himself.

There was a knock at his front door and Magnus checked the time. He wasn’t supposed to go pick up Julia for another hour. He shrugged and went to open it.

“Hey Kravitz,” Magnus said, surprised to find him on his doorstep. Kravitz smiled at him, still in his normal clothes, and slung the garment bag he was holding off his shoulder.

“I have been messengered here to deliver this to you.” He handed off the garment bag and another smaller box. Both were surprisingly heavy and there were several coat hanger heads coming out the top of the bag. “And to tell you that you’ll be wearing this tonight.”

Magnus looked at the bag. “...Okay?”

Kravitz shrugged. “I’d just go along with it,” he suggested, before heading for the stairs. “See you at the party.”

Magnus gave him a wave before going back inside. He put the box on the floor, and hung the bag over the bedroom door and unzipped it. A pair of black and white oxford shoes fell out the bottom. He picked them up, then delicately pushed open the bag a little. Was what he thought was in there, actually in there? He set the shoes down and pulled the bag open the rest of the way. His face lit up. No way.

It was a single-breasted black suit, with a white shirt and a deep burgundy red tie. Behind that was an honest-to-God camel-toned trench coat. He quickly tore open the box.

Inside was a fedora and a small leather notebook. Yes yes yes! He quickly ripped off the lumberjack costume, and pulled on the suit. It fit him well, surprisingly well. Had someone--Taako--snuck into his apartment and taken measurements while he slept? He buttoned up the suit jacket and stopped to look at himself in the mirror. The tailored suit made his shoulders look even broader. I look kinda like an upside down dorito, he thought. Not that that was a bad thing. He then swung the coat on and tilted the hat at a jaunty angle.

He tried to make a macho expression in the mirror, but it quickly dissolved into an excited grin. It was like he’d stepped out of every film noir he’d ever seen. He had an idea, and he checked around to see if anyone was watching in his empty apartment. He made a gun with his finger and held it up to the mirror.

“Hold it right there, punk!” he said, trying to sound like those old timey actors and not really succeeding. The rest of the hour flew by pretty quickly as Magnus enacted his favorite scenes.

“...You know, with my brains and your looks, we could go places.”
“Maybe I’ll live so long that I’ll forget her. Maybe I’ll die trying.”

“Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world,” he stopped to puff on an imaginary cigarette, “she walks into mine.”

He was about to launch into a scene from The Maltese Falcon when he noticed his alarm clock. Oh, no, he was late to go pick up Julia. He quickly grabbed his keys and wallet and ran down to his van, which really didn’t go with the aesthetic he was rocking but there wasn’t anything he could do about that. He raced across Faerun and stopped in a spot that definitely wasn’t meant for parking. He quickly jogged up the steps to her door, but there was a note taped to it.

‘Check the notebook,’ it said in Julia’s hand. He looked at it for a moment--oh--before remembering the notebook. He pulled it out of the breast pocket, and on the first page was written, ‘8 o’clock. 116 Broadway. I’ll be waiting. -J’

Well this was an interesting turn of events. He smiled and tucked the notebook back in his pocket and headed for the van again. Broadway was the main drag of the downtown, and if he hurried he could just make it in time.

When he reached the 100 block of Broadway, he was suddenly very sure what 116 would be. He hadn’t been back to Arnie’s since that wonderful night in May. He parked the van and headed up to the door marked 116, over which a blue neon sign reading ‘Jazz’ flickered. He walked down the flight of stairs, just as the piano began the opening chords to a very familiar tune.

He stepped into the packed club; whether it was because of the holiday or just to hear the singer on stage, he wasn’t sure. He looked around for Julia but didn’t spot her as the singer began.

“After one whole quart of brandy
Like a daisy I awake
With no Bromo Seltzer handy,
I don't even shake.”

Magnus’ eyes snapped to the stage, and there she was, dressed in a fitting floor length red sequined dress, with a slit that went up dangerously high. Julia looked like she had stepped straight from the pages of Magnus’ teenage imagination. His heart stopped and he practically floated to the bar.

“I’m wild again
Beguiled again
A simpering, whimpering child again
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I.”

He stared at her, enraptured.

“Are you Magnus?” the bartender asked, pulling him out of his reverie.

“Yes?”

The bartender put a rye whiskey neat in front of him, the exact drink the detective from the book always drank. “Oh, I didn’t--”

“She said to give you one as soon as you came,” he said, nodding up to the stage. She must have spotted him from the stage because now she was singing straight to him, her warm brown eyes twinkling in the spotlight.
“I'll sing to him, each spring to him
And long, for the day when I'll cling to him
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered - am I

He's a fool and don't I know it
But a fool can have his charms
I'm in love and don't I show it
Like a babe in arms.”

Magnus found himself wishing that the song would never end. This moment that she had made surpassed anything from his imagination. Perhaps because he wasn’t a hard-boiled detective and she wasn’t a sultry lounge singer with a dark secret. They were just Magnus and Julia, and they were very much in love. And that was better than any other story to him.

After the song ended, she left the stage and headed over towards him. He was leaning against the bar in an obvious pose, sipping the whiskey she’d gotten him. She came up behind him.

“Don’t you look like trouble in a trench coat,” she quoted from the book, leaning on the bar next to him. He didn’t reply, just immediately pulled her over for a kiss, a very long and urgent kiss. After an extended moment she pulled away; they were still in public after all.

“I take it you liked it?” she said breathily.

“Of course.”

“You know, I actually found a copy of your book, tried to fit in as many details as I could. Did I do a good job?”

“You have… eclipsed the book in every way. You’re so much more than I could have ever imagined.”

She looked very pleased at that. “Well, you know,” she said, running her fingers up and down the arm of his trench coat, “we probably have time for one more thing before the costume contest ends at 9.”

“What?”

“Chapter three,” she said, quirking an eyebrow.

Chapter three? Was that the--oh, yes. Yes it was. She looked sultrily up at him and leaned in close.

“Come along, detective.”

And she headed for the exit, her hips swinging. Magnus gaped after her for a few steps, then quickly tripped after her.

“Hurley, why are you dressed as small Hitler?” Avi asked, flipping down his aviator shades. Taako’s apartment was thronged with people. Antonia stood nearby, twitching her lip back and forth. The large fake mustache she wore as part of their 70’s cops costumes must have itched.

“Why does everyone keep thinking that?” Hurley asked, putting her bowler hat back on. “I’m--” she proceeded to walk a few steps, her toes completely out-turned and the ends of her long shoes flapping a bit. “Get it?”
Avi looked even more confused; he put his thumbs through the belt loops on his uniform.

“I didn’t see anything,” Antonia replied, grinning a little.

“I’m Charlie Chaplin!”

“Who?” Avi asked.

“Oh, never mind.”

“Sorry, hun,” Sloane said, putting a hand on Hurley’s shoulder. “People just don’t appreciate genius.”

“I didn’t think hippies were around in the 20’s,” Avi said, noting Sloane’s bell bottom jeans and tie-dyed t-shirt.

“And ChiPs were?” she asked back.

“Fair enough.”

A short blur in a white suit ran past them and over to where Taako and Kravitz were chatting.

“Taako, the pocket square won’t stay in,” Angus said, holding out the yellow handkerchief that coordinated with his tie. His hair had been greased down, but the ends were starting to curl back up to their normal place.

“You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to, little man.”

“No, I want to. At least until the costume contest ends.”

“Alright.” Taako knelt down and quickly folded it into a two peak square and tucked it back into the chest pocket of Angus’ white suit. Suddenly a very bright flash next to them went off, and Kravitz looked up from his camera. “I thought we agreed that gangsters don’t have cameras,” Taako said, looking up at him.

Kravitz shrugged. “I’m a rebellious gangster. Now get together and say, bee’s knees!”

Taako put an arm around Agnus. “Bee’s knees!” Agnus and Taako said in unison. The flash momentarily blinded everyone standing near by.

“Have you voted yet, Ango?” Kravitz asked, setting the camera down on a shelf. Taako was trying to get his Velma Kelly wig to stay on straight.

“Yes, sir! I voted for Killian, she promised me a piggy back ride if I did.”

“She promised everyone a piggy back ride, champ,” Taako said.

“Oh.”

“Speaking of--” Kravitz said as Killian sauntered up, wearing an old timey New York Yankees uniform.

“So, I think we can all agree that Babe Ruth--” she pointed two thumbs back to herself-- “has pretty well locked down the costume contest. Why don’t you just go ahead and announce me and I’ll take my fame and glory now?”
“There’s still a few minutes till the contest is officially over, Miss Ruth,” Angus said.

“I’ll go count the votes,” Taako said, sauntering away, the tassels on his dress swishing.

“So are you having a good Halloween, Angus?” Killian asked.

“Who’s Angus?” Angus said, trying a transatlantic accent. “Why, I’m Jay Gatsby, the richest man in West Egg, old sport!”

Kravitz laughed.

“He really charmed all the old ladies in our apartment building with that schtick,” Killian added. “He’s going to be sugar high for months.”

“There ain’t no party like a Gatsby party, because a Gatsby party don’t stop till someone’s dead in the pool and everyone is disillusioned with the Jazz Age as a whole,” Angus rapped, doing a little Charleston. He was probably already pretty sugar high.

“Did you read The Great Gatsby?” Kravitz asked.

“Of course!”

“Is that appropriate literature for 11-year-olds?” Kravitz asked, looking up at Killian, who was frowning.

“It was in the school library.” Angus shrugged.

Carey sauntered up and slipped an arm around Killian’s waist. “Hey Babe.” She winked at her. Killian laughed.

“Who are you supposed to be, Miss Carey?” Angus asked.

“Wait, wait. I know it, give me a minute,” Kravitz said, looking closely at Carey’s gelled hair and penciled-on mustache. He snapped his long fingers. “Dali!”

“Correct!” She gave him a high-five. “Have any of you seen Magnus or Julia?”

Angus and Killian shook their heads.

“I saw Magnus a couple hours ago before the party,” said Kravitz. “Taako had me deliver a costume to him. I think there’s some sort of plan afoot.”

“Taako’s plan or Julia’s plan?” Killian asked. Kravitz shrugged.

“May I have your attention?” Taako yelled out, standing on a chair above the crowd. Someone turned down the jazz music a little. Everyone turned to face Taako at the back of the apartment. “I’m going to announce the winner of the costume contest, as determined by a definitely rigged voting system.” Killian let out a ‘whoop!’ “But first, thank you all for coming, this has been the best Halloween party so far, my dudes! There’s still plenty of food, and once our younger guests head out here in a few minutes, the booze will start a-flowin’, so be sure to stick around!” The apartment shook a little with the cheers of the crowd, and no one noticed as the front door opened. “So now, without further ado, I am pleased to announce that the winner of the 1999 Roaring 20’s Halloween Spectacular Costume Contest is… drum roll please.” Everyone leaned down to pat their thighs, and Taako’s mouth dropped open. “HATCHI-MATCHI!”

Everyone turned to see what Taako was looking at behind them. Lucretia was standing at the top of
the stairs in a purple body suit and a banana skirt. Her hair had been greased down into a swirl on her forehead and two on her cheeks, and she had Miyagi on a leash wearing some sort of cheetah-patterned sweater. She stared wide-eyed back at everyone else.

“All those in favor of making Lucretia as Josephine Baker the winner, raise your hand,” Taako said. Immediately everyone, including Killian, raised their hand. “Done. Lucretia is the winner!!!”

The floor seemed to shake with the cheer that followed and Lucretia was immediately swarmed with people asking a million questions.

“Do a dance, do the dance!!” Carey yelled, her Salvador Dali mustache smudged across her upper lip. Lucretia did a quick Charleston, then crossed her eyes and smiled goofily. Everyone clapped and yelled. “Yes! Yes!”

The music returned to full blast and the party resumed.

Killian and Angus met Magnus and Julia on the stairs as they arrived.

“Oh, did we miss the contest?” Julia asked.

“Yep,” Killian said, grinning at the two of them from behind Angus.

“Miss Lucretia won. You have to go see her costume!”

“Yeah, oh, and nice dress, Jules,” Killian said, ushering Angus out the door.

“So they all know?” Magnus asked, walking beside Julia up the stairs.

“I mean, we are two hours late for a party,” she said, brushing her hair out of her face. “Taako only knows about the costumes though, everything else was my doing.” A chorus of wolf whistles and high pitched ‘ooo’s’ greeted them when they reached the top of the stairs.

“Give us a twirl, baby!” Carey crowed. Julia spun around in a little circle and blew them a kiss.

“You too, Mags!” Magnus spun around quickly and the group cheered for him.

The crowd that still surrounded Lucretia ended up separating them. Magnus made a few loops around the apartment, taking time to say hello to everyone and admiring everyone’s hard work. Julia had been right, they really did go all out. Taako also seemed to have stolen several set pieces from some play as the apartment looked like it was straight out of a movie.

It was a little while later that Magnus finally found Julia again. She was talking animatedly with Noelle, dressed as a literal black-and-white movie star with her skin and hair dyed grey, and Killian. Magnus leaned back against the wall and just watched Julia for a bit. Wow. He was a lucky man that she had picked him. Taako approached and stood next to Magnus up against the wall.

“So did you have a nice Halloween?” he asked, a ‘cat who ate the canary’ smile on his face.

Magnus blushed but smiled anyway. “Yeah… thanks, Taako. These costumes are amazing. I don’t think I’ve ever worn something that fit so well before.”

“Keep it.”

“What?”

“I mean it,” Taako said. “It’s not like there’s a lot of guys running around out there with your measurements. If I need it, I’ll borrow it back.”
Magnus looked down at the suit and back to Taako. “I… I don’t know what to say.”

“Think of it as an early wedding present.”

“Oh! Oh, we’re not--I mean…”

Taako just leveled him a look. “Not yet,” he said, a sly grin on his face. He turned to walk away, but then turned back around. “Oh, but I will need Julia’s dress back. So try not to tear it, okay, detective?” He cackled as he sauntered away, leaving a blushing and sputtering Magnus in his wake.

The party lasted well into the night; Julia and Magnus got back to her place around 3 in the morning. Julia dropped into the bed already asleep. Magnus laid down next to her and stared at the ceiling, his fingers drumming lightly on his chest. Though he should have been rightly exhausted, he couldn’t sleep at all. Taako’s words kept going round and round in his mind.

He got up and went to the kitchen. Her backpack was on the table, a textbook and notebook opened beside it. He pulled a sheet out of the back of the notebook and found a pen in the drawer.

He sat down at the table and stared at the blank sheet for a minute. He was really doing this, it just felt right. He was ready to take the plunge. A shy smile spread across his face and he wrote at the top, ‘Proposal Plans’.
Sloane oozed into Hurley’s kitchen, blinking in the bright fluorescent light.

“All good morning!” said Hurley, hopping down off the counter.

“Mmph,” said Sloane. She desperately loved Hurley, but there were a lot of reasons they didn’t live together, and this was one of them.

“Oh, sorry, babe, here.” Hurley pulled out a chair for her. Sloane stared at a spot on the table until a cup of coffee appeared in front of her. Sloane carefully took a drink and waited for the world to come into focus.

“Curly Hurley?” she mumbled.

“Yes, my long, lean love machine?”

“You have any butter?”

“On the table. You want some toast?”

Sloane located the butter, carefully scooted it toward herself, carved off a hunk, dropped it in her coffee, and gave it a stir. She looked up to find Hurley staring at her in horror.

“It’s good for you,” she mumbled, and took another drink.

“I love you,” said Hurley, still wide-eyed, “but that is weird as hell.”

“Mm.” Sloane focused on keeping her eyes from falling shut for a while. Hurley went back to whatever it was she was doing over there—making eggs, by the smell of things—and humming tunelessly.

“You’re in a good mood?” wondered Sloane aloud.

“That’s right!”

Sloane furrowed her brow. Why was Hurley in a good mood? She knew the answer to this. Cops. Something about cops.

“Because… today… is the last day of the training program,” Sloane attempted.

“Yep! And I’m finally going to be able to apply for jobs with police departments! My dream is coming true, babe! And then there’s the bout tonight, of course. This is a beautiful day!”

This was a lot of information. It took Sloane a few minutes to parse.

“What if… they don’t hire you?” said Sloane.

“I know you just woke up, so I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say that,” said Hurley, and now her tone had an edge.

Sloane considered. It was not a kind question, said a voice in her head that was considerably more
awake than she was.

“‘M sorry, babe.”

“It’s okay. Eggs?”

“Yeah.”

Sloane leaned around the hood of the ‘89 Chevette. “Try it now?”

Little Jerry turned over the ignition. It purred. Sloane grinned and shut the hood.

“Nice work, boss,” said Little Jerry, shutting off the car. “I gotta admit, I had my doubts.”

Sloane tilted her chin up imperiously. “Never doubt. What’s next?”

They had a pretty big backlog today, but so far every repair was going smoothly, no surprises. Little Jerry pointed to a Dodge truck. “That one needs its starter replaced. I can do that. Then there’s the Cherokee that’s having electrical issues.”

“I’ll work on that, then,” Sloane said, brushing off her hands. It was so nice to be doing this instead of paperwork. Carey was a lifesaver.

Speaking of, the office door opened and Carey leaned her head out. “Hey boss?” she called out over the din. “I’ve got someone on the phone who wants to know if you work on European cars.”

“Do I look like a coward?” said Sloane. Her mechanics laughed.

Carey gave her a blank look.

“Yes, we work on European cars,” Sloane clarified. “That’s Barbara’s specialty, right Barbara?”

“Sure is!” said Barbara from under a Volkswagen beetle.

“Great, and then I have some more questions for you when you’ve got a second,” said Carey.

“Be there in a minute. Jerry, will you fill out the work order for this before you start on the Dodge? I’ll park her.”

Little Jerry handed off the keys. “Sure thing, boss.”

Sloane hopped into the Chevette, started her up—oh yes, mechanical poetry—and drove it into the parking lot before heading back to the office. She opened the door just as Carey was hanging up the phone.

“We’ll have an Audi 90 in here later today,” she said.

“Great,” said Sloane, replacing the Chevette’s keys on the rack. “What did you want to see me about?”

“It’s this backlog,” said Carey. “I’m starting to get calls from people wondering when their cars will be fixed.”

Sloane frowned. “We’re only a day or two behind.”
Carey shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell them, other than you’re working on it. You’re in high demand.”

“I ought to be, I’m the best mechanic in this town,” she said, leaning against the desk. “Keep telling them what you’re telling them.”

“All right,” said Carey. “You ever think about expanding?”

Sloane frowned. “Like, more mechanics?”

“Like another garage. Space is your big issue right now.”

“Ugh, no, I don’t want to have to run two places.”

“You wouldn’t necessarily have to,” said Carey. “Little Jerry’s pretty capable as a manager. He could run one location, you could run the other.”

The thought gave Sloane an unusual rush of panic. “No! Hell no. No.”

Carey frowned. “Are you okay?”

Sloane hesitated. Was she? “Yeah, just… no, I know this space. It’s mine, you know?”

Carey shrugged again. “Your call, of course. I just think it would help your business.”

“Thanks for the suggestion,” said Sloane. “I’ll take it under advisement, I’m just… we’re good here.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Sloane snorted. “It’s still weird for you to call me that.”

“I don’t want your mechanics thinking you’re playing favorites,” said Carey.

“Carey, you are a model employee and a goddamn saint.”

She smiled. “I am pretty great, right? That’s all I needed from you, you can get back to work.”

“Have you got the work order for the Cherokee?” Sloane asked.

Carey pulled a sheet of paper from the top of a stack and handed it off. Sloane took it, grabbed the corresponding keys from the rack, and sauntered back out into the garage.

Expanding the business. No. Too many variables. Too many things out of her control.

The ‘95 Jeep Cherokee was already nestled in one corner of the garage. Sloane unlocked it and popped the hood.

Of course it would be nice to have more space, double the turnover. But then she’d have to hire more mechanics.

She grabbed a socket wrench off a nearby work table. With one hand, she snatched a rag out of her pocket and put it over the positive post of the battery, while loosening the nut on the negative terminal with the other.

And putting all those mechanics under Little Jerry? Terrible idea. The guy was likeable, sure, but could he handle the kind of shit a manager had to handle?
She pulled the terminal off, put the rag back in her pocket, and loosened the other nut. Then again, she wasn’t a scrawny Asian lesbian. He was small, but that mattered less when you were a man, she supposed.

Expanding the business. No. Terrible idea.

“Flying colors, that’s what Captain Bain said,” Hurley crowed, wiggling in her seat as she drove them to the bout in her ’91 Ford Crown Victoria. Something about this car always made Sloane nervous. It was the same kind of car the Faerun Police Department used, for one thing. At least she wasn’t in the back seat.

“I always knew you were an overachiever at heart,” Sloane quipped.

“Ha, can you tell that to my third grade teacher?” Hurley grinned. “Captain Bain said he’d hire me himself if Faerun PD had an opening.”

Sloane frowned. “Wait now, there’s not a police job in town?”

“No, but that’s all right. I can apply other places.”

“Like where?”

“You know, Rockport. Ipré. Wave Echo. Even Goldcliff. There are lots of places hiring right at the moment. I might even look at Neverwinter, although I think they mainly hire out of their own academy.”

“Are you…” Sloane shook her head, trying to stave off a sudden wave of panic. “Are you going to move, or what?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see what happens.”

“Well you can’t commute for five hours a day,” said Sloane, more snappishly than she meant to.

Hurley shot her a glance. “I haven’t thought about it much. It’s my dream, Sloane, I’m just trying to go for it.”

Sloane crossed her arms. “And what happens to us in this dream of yours?”

“I told you, I haven’t thought about it much.”

Her blasé tone was infuriating. “I don’t think I can move,” said Sloane.

“Okay, well, we’ll work it out.”

“Because I’m thinking of expanding the garage.”

“Oh! Are you? That’s a great idea!”

Sloane dropped her arms, alarmed. “*Really*?”

“Yeah, you should!”

The whole world was spinning out of control. “No, I shouldn’t! It’d be a ton of hassle, and I couldn’t be the boss over two places at once, and it’s too much to handle.”
Hurley pulled to a stop at a light and looked at her with concern. “I don’t get it. You don’t want to expand?”

“Why should things change?” demanded Sloane. “It’s fine like it is.”

“If you want more, though, shouldn’t you chase it?” asked Hurley. She smiled a little. “You’ve always been good at chasing, Raven.”

“No, I’ve been good at holding the lead,” Sloane countered.

The light turned green. Hurley pulled her attention back to the road. “What’s going on here? Are you mad at me?”

Sloane opened her mouth and realized she was going to say yes, she was angry that Hurley was pursuing her dream. “No,” she said instead.

“Then what’s wrong?” They pulled into the rink parking lot and Hurley turned to look at her.


“Sloane, hey, c’mon.” Hurley got out after her. “You know we play like shit when we’re fighting.”

“Are we fighting?” said Sloane bitterly, walking around to the back of the car. “Open the back.”

Hurley followed her around but made no move to unlock the trunk. “They’re gonna lock us in the closet again until we kiss and make up.”

“What’s there to make up? Open it, Hurley.”


Sloane set her jaw and stared.

Hurley sighed and opened the back. Sloane snatched up her skate bag and went inside the rink.

Phandolin beat them soundly, 88 to 57. Hurley and Sloane weren’t the only ones out of sync; Noelle and Julia seemed off their game too.

The team went to Refuge, as they always did, but Noelle, Hurley, Sloane, and Julia were so morose that everyone else moved off to relax in another part of the pub. The four of them ended up at a booth by themselves, nursing drinks.

Hurley first stared carefully at and then downed a shot of fireball. She hated the feeling of sitting with miserable people, but she felt so miserable herself that there was something satisfying about it. And the day had started out so good, too.

She considered the empty shot glass in her hand, then looked to her friends. Julia was looking into her whiskey as if it held all the answers. Noelle stared into the middle distance above Sloane’s head. Sloane was glaring at her own folded hands.

An idea occurred to Hurley. She left for the bar and came back with four shots of vodka.

“All right, ladies, I’m about sick of this,” she grumbled, passing out the shots.
“Sick of what?” said Julia, seeming to wake up.

“We are going to drink alcohol, like adults, and then talk about what’s bothering us,” she said. “Like adults.”

Noelle hesitated. “I don’t… I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to drink it if you don’t want, but you do have to spill your guts,” said Hurley. “I’m going first. Are you ready?”

“Hurley, I--” said Sloane.

“Here we go.” Hurley knocked back the vodka. She took a moment, feeling it burn its way down her throat, and then said, “I’ve always wanted to be a cop.”

Noelle’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Yeah. I even completed the training program the police department does. But now that it’s really happening, that I have the qualifications to be hired, I’m afraid to actually do it, because I’m scared they’ll say no. And I realized that because I’ve been scared, I haven’t thought about what would happen if they did hire me. Like, what would happen to my judo kids?” Hurley waved the glass. “They could find another instructor, I guess, but I’d miss them.” She plopped down the glass. “So that’s me. Someone else go now.”

The three other women exchanged glances. Noelle straightened. “Fine. Fine. Okay. Um.” She took a deep breath, and then took the shot. Her face scrunched up and she coughed a couple times.

Julia patted her back. “You good?”

“Yeah,” she croaked. “Um.” She coughed again and wiped her eyes. “Last semester I tried to propose prosthesis design for a project. Like, I wanted to improve my skate prosthesis. They rejected it.”

“I remember that,” said Hurley. “That day we danced.”

“Yeah.” Noelle grimaced. “Julia, can I have a sip of your drink? It’s still burning.”

“Whiskey’s not going to to help that, hun,” said Julia, holding out her drink anyway.

“It might get rid of the aftertaste.” Noelle took a sip and handed it back. “I made the mistake of telling Maureen about it. She’s a professor, you know?”

“I didn’t know,” said Sloane. “Really?”

“Yeah, and now she wants me to bring back the proposal for my senior project. She says it’s a civil rights issue.”

“Civil rights?” said Hurley.

“Yeah, cuz I’m disabled, or a woman, or Jewish, whatever. Take your pick.” Noelle shook her head. “And I really want to do the project, but I can just as easily do it on my own time, you know? And like, I’d really rather not kick up a fuss. It’s just a project. But she won’t take no for an answer.”

“That sounds like Maureen,” said Julia, giving Noelle’s shoulder a squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

Noelle sighed. “It’s okay. I’ll try talking to her again… what if she’s right though? What if this is a
“Is the project good enough to be a senior project?” asked Sloane.

“Maureen thinks so, but she’s not an engineer.” Noelle folded her arms and rested them on the table. “I don’t know. I’ll figure it out, but I’m glad I told y’all.”

“We’re glad you did too,” said Hurley. “Now who’s next?”

Julia shook her head. “Okay, I’ll go.” She knocked back the shot, carefully, and swallowed with a wince. “Ugh.”

“What’s on your mind, Jules?” asked Hurley.

She put down the glass and shot a glance at the rest of the team on the other side of the pub. “One of my classmates saw Magnus drop me off at class yesterday and asked if he was my husband. And um.” She grimaced. “I kind of freaked out on her. And I feel really bad about it, ‘cause like, why did I freak out? It’s an honest mistake.”

“Does the idea of him being your husband freak you out?” asked Sloane.

“A little,” said Julia. “I mean, it was just–suddenly a whole lot to think about, I think. Ugh.” She rubbed her temple. “I don’t want him to know it freaked me out.”

“Why?” asked Hurley.

Julia thought about this. Her eyes went wide. “I want to marry him. Holy shit.”

Sloane and Noelle smiled at each other, and Hurley felt the mood lift considerably. She started to relax. “Good. This is good, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, this is good,” said Julia. “I just have to… I don’t know, process all this for a bit. Sloane, you go.”

Sloane’s smile collapsed. She hesitated.

“Come on, babe,” Hurley wheedled.

She frowned and picked up the shot. “Straight vodka is the worst.”

“That was vodka?” said Noelle. “I hate it.”

“You have better taste than Hurley,” said Sloane, and took the shot.

Her face didn’t even crack as she swallowed. She thumped the glass back down on the table and glowered at Hurley. “You didn’t think one time about how being a cop in another city would affect our relationship?”

Hurley was stunned. “No. I didn’t think about anything, Sloane, I was too scared.”

“How can you not think about anything?” demanded Sloane. “Doesn’t that make you feel out of control? Like you’re going off a cliff? How can you just not think?”

“If I think too hard, I never try anything,” said Hurley. “Nothing would ever change.”

“Why do things have to change?” Sloane wailed. “We’re already winning!”
“Maybe you are,” said Hurley. “I’m stalled out!”

“Woah, woah!” said Julia, holding up her hands. “I think we’re losing track of the argument here. You’re both feeling like you’re not each other’s priority, right?”

“Yes,” said Sloane. Hurley swallowed and nodded.

“Okay. So then… what is it you really want?”

Hurley and Sloane locked gazes, just staring for a moment.

“Here, you two talk about it, okay?” Julia scooted out of the booth. “Noelle, let’s give them some space.”

The two of them left, heading off toward the others. Hurley didn’t move. Sloane swallowed.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Sloane said, after a silence that lasted too long.


“But this dream of yours—”

Hurley looked down at the table. Well, fuck it. “Look, if my dream means leaving you, I’d rather never be a cop.”

“I can’t… I can’t ask that of you,” said Sloane. “I won’t.”

Hurley looked back up, and the look in Sloane’s eye was the fiercest she’d ever seen.

“Well I’m not moving unless you’re coming with me,” said Hurley. “And you can’t move away, right? You’ve got the garage, and that’s your dream.”

“It’s not, though, not really,” said Sloane. “I don’t dream big like you, Hurles. I love my garage, but you’re more important to me than that.”

Hurley had to look away or she was going to cry. She reached out and took Sloane’s hand in her own.

“Maybe…” said Sloane. “Maybe we can… compromise or something. You could get a job somewhere else, and wherever you go, that’s where I’ll expand my garage to. Our second location.”

Hurley looked up at her girlfriend. “You’d do that?”

Sloane’s eyes were glazed over. She was terrified, but nonetheless she said, “Yes.”

The offer was tempting. Hurley sighed. “No, if you’re going to expand, it’s got to be on your terms.”

Sloane sagged with relief. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I mean, we’d be leaving all our friends, too. And there’s no guarantee we’d end up somewhere good, either. Faerun is home,” Hurley ran her thumb over Sloane’s. “Why would I want to work anywhere else?”

“But they’re not hiring here,” said Sloane.

“They will be eventually. It’ll be good, give me time to find a replacement at the dojo.”
Sloane’s lip trembled. She wrapped Hurley in a hug.

Hurley hugged her back. “I love you, Sloane.”

“I love you too.” Sloane buried her face in Hurley’s neck.

Hurley smiled as she felt Sloane’s hands slide down to her hips. She ran her hand over Sloane’s hair and whispered in her ear, “Hey. You copping a feel or what?”

“More like feeling a cop,” Sloane murmured. Hurley threw back her head and laughed.
“You’re sure you don’t want to go with me?”

Julia leaned over the bar and pecked Magnus on the cheek. “I trust your judgement.” Which was true, and she didn’t want to say that one puppy was pretty much the same as another to her. She was almost certain Magnus would break up with her on the spot.

“If you’re sure you don’t want to play with puppies,” he said, with half a smile.

“Trust me, I’d rather be doing anything than this stupid Strategic Management project,” she said, lifting some bottles by the necks to wipe the counter underneath. “It’s just crunch time now. Gotta get it done.”

“I understand, it’d just be more fun with you,” said Magnus. She looked up; he was being totally sincere, bless him.

“I love you,” she said.

He smiled broadly. “I love you too. See you tomorrow? You can meet the puppy.”

“So you are taking it back to your apartment?” Julia said. “I thought your super was totally against pets.”

“My super,” said Magnus carefully, “doesn’t need to know.”

Julia nodded, eyes narrowed. “Sneaking a dog, huh? Didn’t know I was in love with a criminal.”

Magnus laughed. “I’m a dangerous man. A man of many secret dogs.”

Julia feigned a hurt expression. “I can’t believe you’ve been keeping your seventeen dogs from me.”

“They’s the brakes, cupcake,” he said in his best gangster impression. “I’m afraid my seventeen secret dogs and I are a package deal, see?”

She laughed. God, she loved him.

“Hey Magnus,” said Ren behind her. She set a box on the counter. “Here to pay your bill?”

Magnus paled. “Did I forget another one?”

Ren chuckled. “I’m teasing. Assuming you pay this one.”

“He already did,” Julia assured her.

Magnus stood up. “I guess I’ll let you get to work.”

“How ‘bout a kiss?” said Julia.

Magnus shot a glance at Ren. Ren just smiled. “Go on, young lovers.”

Julia pulled a face. “Ew, I don’t want to now.”
Magnus laughed and caught her under the chin. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she murmured, and kissed him.

Magnus knocked on the door of Avi and Johann’s house. Several yips and the bark of a full-grown dog replied. Magnus grinned.

Johann answered the door, opening it just a crack. “Hey Magnus. Careful, don’t let them escape.”

Magnus squeezed carefully through, puppies swarming at his feet. He shut the door behind him and crouched. “Oh my god!”

There were four puppies, little fluffy black pups. Void gave Magnus a thorough sniffing and then sat down by Johann’s feet. Magnus let the puppies run around and bark and nip.

“They’re so cute! Are you all good dogs? Yes, yes you are.”

“They’re a lot of work,” said Johann, patting Void’s head. “But good pups.”

“I thought you said there were six?” said Magnus.

“Two of them already went to good homes,” said Johann. “Here, c’mon, let’s go to the kitchen.”

Magnus stood up and followed, stepping carefully as the puppies scattered and tumbled after them. “Oh god, they’re beautiful.”

Johann had set up a corner of the kitchen as a sort of puppy corral, blocked off by chairs. He sat down in one of them. “I basically live in this room now. It’s a lot easier to clean up messes in here.”

Magnus plopped down on the floor and picked up all the puppies at once. “Look at them!”

“One of them’s already been claimed, but the rest are fair game.”

Magnus drew his attention away from the squirming pile of adorable in his lap. “I could walk out of here with three dogs?”

Johann shrugged. “Technically yes, but I should also mention that Julia called and said not to let you have more than one.”

Magnus picked up one of the puppies and looked it right in the eye. “Then I have a very important decision ahead of me.”

The puppy licked his nose. Magnus’ face lit up.

“You can take your time, if you need to,” said Johann, yawning. “I got nothing planned.”

“Cool.” Magnus moved the puppies to the floor and rested his head in his hands, watching them. “Which one is claimed?”

Johann watched them for a moment. “That one,” he said, pointing to one with blue eyes instead of black, like the rest.

“Hmm.” Magnus considered carefully. There was one with a small white spot on its chest, and the blue-eyed one, and one with a couple white spots on its paws, and one that was all black. “Every
dog’s got a personality.”

“These ones sure do,” said Johann.

The totally black puppy was walking with its head cocked to one side. Magnus watched it carefully. It seemed to be permanent. He scooped it up in one hand. “Hey, lil guy. Does this one always walk like that, Johann?”

Johann nodded. “The vet said it’s probably a small neurological problem, but she’s healthy otherwise. I’ve been calling her Yorick.”

The puppy looked at Magnus and absentmindedly bit his thumb. Magnus ignored the pin-sharp puppy teeth and scratched her behind the ears. “Yorick? Like in Hamlet?”

“Yeah, you know, he was a court jester.”

“I thought he was a skull.”

“Eventually, aren’t we all?” Johann yawned again, oblivious to Magnus’ look of disbelief. “You can call her whatever, I know Yorick’s not a great name.”

Magnus put down Yorick/Whatever and watched her as she first investigated and then tried to untie his work boot. He smiled indulgently. “What a good girl. A smart girl.”

“Thanks,” said Johann sleepily. His eyes were closed, his chin resting on the back of the chair.

Magnus looked him over. “You okay, Johann? You seem exhausted.”

Johann lifted his head and blinked a couple of times. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“’Cause of the puppies?”

“Not just that.” He rested his chin back down and stared glumly into space.

Magnus picked up the puppy with the white spot on its chest and handed it to Johann. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Johann accepted the puppy with a wry smile, and sat silent, scratching its belly for a minute. Magnus waited, dangling his fingers in front of the other puppies to watch them play.

“You and Julia are dating, right?” said Johann after a bit.

“Yeah.”

“So that night at Arnie’s…”

Oh god. Magnus stiffened.

“When you were… shall we say…”

He could feel the blush creeping up his neck. Please, please…

“Distracted?”

Oh thank god, that could have been so much worse. “Yes?”

“That wasn’t me, was it?”
Magnus swallowed. “It was Julia.”

“I thought so.” Johann almost sounded disappointed.

Magnus took a breath. Relax. “How’s uh… figuring out things about yourself… how’s that going?”

Johann put down the puppy and sighed, draping himself over the back of the chair. “Do you ever feel like you missed out on a crucial fact until it was too late, and now you can’t change your fate, and you’re destined to die alone, forgotten even by the ones you call friends?”

Magnus exhaled slowly. “I mean… not specifically that feeling maybe. But I think I know what you’re saying.”

Johann reached down to pet Void and sighed again.

“I mean, you and Avi are tight, right?” said Magnus. “What's he say?”

Johann muttered something.

“What?”

“I can’t… I can’t talk to him. About this.”

Magnus frowned. “I’m sure he wouldn’t think it’s a big deal. He’s really understanding, you know. Accepting.”

Johann shook his head. “No you don’t… he just got engaged and everything. I can’t… I can’t.”

“…Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to be specific,” Magnus offered.

“I don’t think I can be anything else,” said Johann. “And it sucks. I feel like I’m hiding. But the last thing I want to do is complicate what he’s got with Antonia. They’re--” Johann grimaced. “They’re happy.”

Magnus nodded. This was… this was uncharted territory. Damn, Johann’s life was like a soap opera.

Magnus picked up Yorick/Whatever. “I think you’re the one,” he told her. “And I think I’m gonna call you Fish.”

Johann broke out of his reverie. “Fish? Why?”

“That way if my super asks if I have pets, I can tell him, just Fish.”

For this, Johann managed a chuckle.

“And it’s a funny name for a funny little dog,” said Magnus, holding Fish up to his face. “Isn’t that right? You’re a funny little dog.”

“She won’t be little for long,” said Johann. “You sure you’re gonna have enough space?”

“I won’t be in an apartment for much longer,” said Magnus. “You hear that, Fish? You won’t be a secret dog forever.”
Johann frowned thoughtfully. “That’s a good metaphor.”

Magnus looked up from high-fiving her little paws with his finger. “For what?”

“For me. Like… like I might have to hide for a while, but… I don’t know, maybe once Avi’s married and stuff…” Johann nodded. “Yeah.”

Magnus shrugged. “I guess if it helps, man.”

Johann nodded. “It does. Thanks, Magnus.”

“Hey, thank you. You have no clue how excited I am to have a dog.” He hugged Fish to himself gently, ignoring her wiggling, and whispered, “You are the perfect dog, and have no flaws.”

“Cool, uh,” Johann stood up. “I’ll get you her vet records and stuff.”

“Oh, yeah, what shots does she need?”

“None right now. She’ll need a rabies shot when she’s a year old, but the rest are taken care of.” Johann shuffled through a stack of paper on the kitchen counter.

“Really? For all of them?”

Johann looked at him in surprise. “Yeah, of course.”

Magnus didn’t say the word he was thinking, which was expensive. Wasn’t Johann a musician? He couldn’t make that much money. “Well, thanks again, then.” He looked at Fish, and then at the other dogs. “I guess… I guess it’s time to say goodbye.”

Johann settled back into the chair and handed off some paper to him. “You can come visit Void anytime.”

“We will,” said Magnus. He didn’t get up.

Johann raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to stay and play with the puppies?”

“Can I?!”
Magnus shut the driver’s side door and crossed the street to the small brick house with the daylilies out front, though they were all long dead now. He’d been over here a bunch of times before, for dinner or to watch a baseball game on a Sunday afternoon. But Julia had always been with him all those times. He walked up the stairs and pressed on the door bell, reminding himself that there was no reason to be nervous.

The front door opened and Steven smiled at him through the screen door.

“Well, hello, Magnus.”

“Hey, Steven.” Magnus tried to smile but somehow it felt like it didn’t come out right. “Um, may I come in?”

“Oh, sure, sure.” Steven opened the screen door and walked into the house, Magnus following behind into the kitchen. “I was just about to start on dinner, do you want to stay?”

“No, I don’t want to be any trouble, and I can’t stay long. We have practice tonight.”

“If you’re sure, then,” Steven said, looking back at him. Magnus nodded and looked around, his hand quickly bouncing against his pants unconsciously. “…Do you want to sit down?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Sitting. Fine,” Magnus said, sitting quickly down at the kitchen table. Steven sat across from him and folded his hands, resting them on his stomach. Magnus was leaning forward, his thumbs tapping the tabletop.

“You know, Magnus, you might as well come out with what you want to tell me, because I’m certain that what I’m imagining is a whole lot worse than what you’re actually going to say,” Steven said after a moment. Magnus looked at him and nodded.

“Well, uh… sir.”

“Sir? This must be important,” Steven replied, smiling a little.

“It’s not, well, it is. But you already know the most important part… already. So there’s no reason for me to be nervous… but I am… sir.”

Steven just nodded. Magnus took a breath.

“I’ve already told you that I love Julia, and I intend to marry her,” Magnus said, clamping down on his nerves. “And I wanted to tell you that I’m going to ask her once the season is over.”

Steven looked down and nodded a little. “Remind me how long you two have been dating.”

“It’ll be almost six months.”

“That’s not very long,” Steven commented. Magnus tried to see if he could discern what he thought about that, but his face was placid.

“It’s not, but… I was always taught that love is not so much a feeling as a choice to put someone else first. And when you find someone that you’re willing to make that choice for, and they the same for you… time doesn’t really matter then.”
Steven nodded. “Well said.” He leaned forward and put his hand over Magnus’. “I wish you both every happiness.”

“Really?” Magnus asked, a heavy weight instantly lifting off of him. “Of course.”

Magnus let out a breath, a smile forming on his face. “Thank you, Steven.”

“So when are you going to pop the question?”

“Well, I have some ideas.” Magnus pulled a folded sheet of notebook paper out of his back pocket. “I definitely want to wait till after the season is done; the team has a really strong chance in the final tournament and I don’t want to distract from that. So after the tournament, but before Thanksgiving, somewhere in there.”

“Sounds like a plan. Do you have a ring yet?”

Magnus frowned. “I don’t, unfortunately. I’ve been trying to put some money away, but I also feel that every extra dollar I have should be put towards the house. But I don’t want to ask without something.”

Steven got a thoughtful look on his face. “Wait right here,” he said, getting up from the table and going down the hallway towards the bedrooms. Magnus waited there a few minutes, looking over his proposal plans. He put a line through ‘horse-drawn carriage’; probably wouldn’t be able to find one in Faerun.

Steven returned and sat back down. He put his hands on the table, and in them was a small ring box. He opened it and turned it towards Magnus. Inside on white velvet was a silver ring. There was detailing in the metal and a single small diamond rested in the center.

“This was Ella’s,” Steven said simply, setting it down closer to Magnus. “Couldn’t afford a ring when we first got married, but I saved up for a full year and got her this one just after Julia was born.”

“It’s beautiful.” Magnus looked up at Steven, and he nodded quickly. Magnus delicately picked up the box and extracted the ring.

“She didn’t get to wear it as long as I would have liked. But I think she would have wanted Julia to have it.”

Magnus nodded, his throat too thick to speak for a moment. “Thank you, Steven… It’s ah, it’s perfect.” He put it back in the box and snapped it closed.

“You might have to get it re-sized. I’m not sure if it’ll be too big or too small for her. Leon might be able to help you with that.”

“Thanks.” Magnus smiled at him.

“You know, my father-in-law never much cared for me for a lot of different reasons. And after Ella died we both went our separate ways. But I just want you to know, Magnus…” He moved his jaw back and forth. “Aw, hell. You’re a good man, son, and I know that you’ll be just as good for Julia as she is for you.”

Magnus smiled at him, and Steven wiped at his nose.
“I’d like to hug you now,” Magnus said.

“Alright.”
Avi spilled coffee on himself. “Shit!”

The other people in the breakroom shot him some alarmed glances. Avi glared and grabbed a couple paper towels.

“Hey.” Antonia moved behind him, put a hand on his back. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what,” he snapped.

“You’re like a big old anxiety machine,” she said quietly, taking a paper towel of her own and dabbing his shirt beside but not on the coffee stain. The sight took his mind off the squirming snakes in his stomach. He guided her hand to the stain.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it.” He squeezed her hand.

“Are you nervous about the tournament tomorrow? Everyone says you’re doing fine as head ref.”

“Fine for The Adventure Zone maybe. But Roswell and Maureen know so much more than me.” He huffed. “I keep thinking how much more experience refs from other rinks will have. And this is kind of a big deal, you know? I’m going to be the final authority on calls.”

“If it was such a big deal, you’d be getting more than fifty bucks for it,” she said.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“I know. You don’t want to disappoint your friends?”

He nodded. “I guess that’s it, yeah.”

Antonia smiled at him. “I got good news for you, Prince Charming. You couldn’t. They like you too much.”

Avi found himself smiling. “You think so?”

“How do you have so many friends and doubt that they actually like you?” said Antonia gently.

He shrugged.

“Trust me. I’ve never met someone so likeable. That’s why I’m marrying you.”

This made him laugh. “All right, if you’re the proof of this concept.”

She smiled. “Quick, give me a work-appropriate kiss.”

Avi smiled and did so, although it was on the long side for work-appropriate. She smiled. “I have to get back. Try not to drive yourself crazy, huh?”

“I’ll try,” he said. She left, leaving him to mop up the coffee on his shirt.

Avi and Antonia showed up at seven in the morning, an hour before the bouts would start. People were already settling in to watch. There would be six today, three semi-finals, two finals and the
championship. Merle had set up a leaderboard on one wall, posters for each game set up like a bracket and little placards for each team. Avi picked at the one for the Felicity Wild Women. It came away with the rip of velcro.

“Nice touch, isn’t it?” said Merle, a little proudly.

“Sure is.” Avi put it back. “Why are all the i’s dotted with hearts?”

Merle kept his face expressionless. “My daughter made them.”

“I see. And all the hearts that have sad faces? With x’d out eyes?”

“My son helped.”


Merle ignored this. “I’ll be your medic today, standing by to help, but you’ll be in charge on the floor. You’ve got eleven refs between all the teams. You can split them up how you like.”

“I’ve got a plan for that,” said Avi. Just like air traffic control.

“Good. They should be here in a few minutes. I’ll go tell the announcer to get the music started. Good luck.”

Merle strolled away toward the DJ booth, whistling. “He’s in a good mood,” Avi commented.

“From the sound of the crowd, this is probably his most profitable day of the year,” said Antonia. She kissed Avi on the cheek. “You have everything you need?”

“Yep,” he said.

“You ready?”

“Not remotely.”

“You’re going to do fine. This is fun, right?”

“Ha. Yeah.”

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll drive over to the corner store and grab you something.”

Avi gave her an alarmed look. “You’ll what?”

“Joke. Blind joke.” She gave him a hug. “Good luck, Prince Charming.”

“Thanks, Princess.” He kissed her, and she left to sit in the stands.

Avi took a deep breath. Okay.

“Avi?” Roswell loomed into his field of vision. “We’re gathering over here.”

“Right.” He followed Roswell into a gathering of variously striped people, pulling a stack of index cards out of his pocket. Maureen was already there, laughing with a couple of men who looked about her age. He put on a smile. “Hello everyone. Welcome to the tournament. I’m Avi. Hey, uh, you. What’s your name?”

The man he addressed matched Avi’s smile. “I’m Tom Bodett. Volunteer for the Rad Robes.”
“Glad to meet you. Would you shuffle these please?” Avi handed him the index cards. “Tom’s going to pass these out in a second. They’re your game assignments. Each of us will ref two bouts, and we’ll have four refs to each bout. Four of us will be lucky enough to ref the final.”

“That’s not how we’ve done it before,” said a man with black and white sequins sewn into his ref’s cap.

“Right, and before we’ve had fights between refs as well as players,” said Avi. “Random means fair. Fair means better bouts. If I see any cheap calls or favoritism, I’ll trade you out with someone else. Cool?”

“What a good idea,” said Maureen. The man with the sequin hat looked as though he had something to say, but bit it back when Maureen spoke. God, it was so good to have someone with actual authority on your side.

“Cool. Tom, if you would?” said Avi. As Tom passed out the cards, Avi said, “Thank you all for coming. Without us, this tournament wouldn’t happen. Let’s all do our best to ensure a safe and fun day. Now if those of you who are head refs could send coaches and captains from your respective rinks my way, I’d be grateful. Roswell, if you would get the B.o.B?”

The group dispersed, except for Tom and Maureen. Tom held up the last two cards in confusion. “There’s an extra.”

“Nope, that one’s mine.” Avi reached out a hand.

Tom looked surprised, and gave one to him. “You mean you’re not going to choose which bouts you ref?”

“Wouldn’t be fair,” said Avi. His card said games one and six. Hoo boy, he was reffing the last one. Cool. Right.

“Huh.” Tom wandered off as well, looking at his own card.

“That was very well handled, young man.” Maureen nudged him. “About time we got some accountability.”

The constant fluttering in his stomach calmed down a little. He smiled. “Thanks.”

“Remember, there’s a good chance we won’t even be playing for an hour,” said Julia. Her team was putting the finishing touches on costumes, stretching, shaking out jitters. “Stay loose.”

“I hate waiting so much,” growled Hurley, rolling her neck and jumping up and down.

“You and me both, Ram,” said Magnus. “Just bring it all out on the track.”

“I still can’t believe we’re fourth in points!” said Carey. “We won most of the bouts!”

“We won just about half of the bouts,” said Noelle, “but the Rad Robes especially tend to destroy the competition rather than just win.”

“Take it from a scientist,” scoffed Taako.

“Whatever happens, you ladies have played a damn fine season,” said Lucretia. “Just don’t lose the first bout, or I’ll disown you.”
Killian laughed. “Who did you say we were playing?”


“Ew,” said Julia.

“Least Lydia won’t be trying to steal your man this time,” said Sloane. “Oh, god, can you imagine her trying to flirt with Roswell?”

There was a knock at the door. “Everyone decent?”

“If you mean we’re clothed, then yes,” said Taako.

Roswell poked their head in. “The head ref would like to see coaches and captains.”

“Thanks, Coach,” said Lucretia. Roswell left. “Magnus, I’d like you to stay and review the Wild Women’s tactics with the team,” said Lucretia. “In ten minutes, head out to the rink. Come on, Jule.”

They headed to the space between the rink and the track, where Edward and Lydia were already waiting with a ref Julia didn’t recognize nearby.

“Edward. Lydia.” Lucretia didn’t make eye contact. Julia tried not to either, but Lydia’s sweet smile caught her eye.

“Good to see you again, Jule Be Sorry,” said Edward. “Lucretia, you’re looking well.”

“Are the rumors true, Julia?” asked Lydia. “Are congratulations in order?”

“What angle are you working now?” said Julia derisively.

“Angle? No angles.” Lydia waved a hand. “Just word of mouth.”

“Maybe you should focus on the game for once,” said Julia.

“I wouldn’t be so high and mighty if I was screwing a ref,” she trilled.

Ohh, that was the angle. Julia smiled. “Are you jealous, Lydia?”

“Enough,” said Lucretia, and Julia didn’t wait for answer. The look on Lydia’s face was payback aplenty.

The other teams were gathering now, six in all. There was Lup and that bland-looking guy that coached the Rad Robes, first place in points; then the Phandolin Fireworks in second, the Felicity Wild Women in third, then the B.o.B., the Rockport Riot, and the Goldcliff Golddiggers, who were struggling this season. The first bout would be either third vs. fourth or fifth vs. sixth, depending on who won a coin toss.

Speaking of, here came Avi, and congregating around him were more refs than Julia had ever seen in one place. They must have had extra volunteers this year.

“Good morning everyone,” he said. “I’m sure you’re all anxious to get started on warm-ups and stuff, so we’ll keep this short. If I could get the captain of the B.o.B. and the Golddiggers to step forward please?”

“Point of order?” interrupted Edward. He held up a sheet of paper. “The Felicity Wild Women don’t have correctly tabulated points. We should be in second place, not third.”
Avi frowned. “You’ve had those final point calculations for like two weeks now. You should’ve said something earlier.”

“I only noticed it yesterday,” he insisted. “Please, I ask that we delay any decisions until you’ve taken a look.”

Avi hesitated. “I don’t think—”

“Wait a moment.” It was Maureen. She was adjusting her glasses. “Is that… is that Edward and Lydia Vogler?”

Edward flinched. Julia couldn’t believe her eyes. He flinched.

“Good grief, I haven’t seen you in years! How’s your brother? What was his name now… Keats?”

Edward didn’t say anything. Julia looked at Lydia--she was frozen.

“Oh. Silly me.” Maureen adjusted her glasses again. “That’s very unprofessional. Don’t worry, I’m not reffing your games. Do go on, Avi.”

Avi seemed to collect himself. “Right. It’s too late to review tabulation right now. You can be in third place or you can forfeit.”

Edward snatched the piece of paper away. “Fine.”

“Now, uh. Jule Be Sorry? Queen Sabine?”

Julia stepped forward along with the Golddiggers’ captain, a woman wearing a masquerade mask and altogether too much lace for Julia’s taste. She nodded to Julia.

“Queen Sabine, if you’d call it in the air,” said Avi, and flipped a quarter.

“Tails,” said Queen Sabine.

It bounced to the floor. Avi leaned down to look. “Tails it is. Do you want the first or second bout?”

“We’ll take first,” said Queen Sabine.

“Awesome. Good luck everyone. Please feel free to warm up. The bout starts in a half hour.” Avi gestured to one of the refs. “Would you change the bracket over there to reflect the game order?”

“Yes.”

Julia took a deep breath. Waiting was the worst part of the tournament, but at least now she could prepare herself and her team.

Steven put his wallet back in his pocket and walked into the Adventure Zone. Man, this place was packed. He’d promised both Magnus and Julia that he would come, and here he was, worrying. Ella would have laughed.

He surveyed the stands. There weren’t many open spots, but he did notice that that guy Klaarg was here, this time in jeans and a NASCAR t-shirt and still looking huge. He was arguing with--was that the white boy in the $400 suit? Not that he was wearing the suit now, but yes, it was that Johann fellow. Steven wandered closer.
“The B.o.B. has to win,” Johann was saying. “It’s not narratively satisfying if they don’t.”

“Narrative--what are you saying?” Klaarg said. “Listen, I love the B.o.B more than anyone, but you can only use the argument of narrative satisfaction if you’re certain whose narrative it is!”

Johann was taken aback. “But they’re the team with the most spirit, the most passion!”

“So you’ve hung out with all the teams, then, and come to that conclusion?” said Klaarg.

Johann sputtered. “Y-you know--you know what? Here. Angus?”

A kid hanging off the rail of the track looked up and hurried over. “Hi, sir!”

“Hi, Angus. Can you tell this man that it would be ridiculous for the B.o.B. to lose?”

“It’s pretty likely, actually,” he said. “The B.o.B. have some home-rink advantage, but if the Wild Women keep their cool, they may not even make it past the first round, and failing that, they’d have to play three more bouts to win. The farther they go, the less likely they are to win.”

Klaarg threw out a hand. “That’s what I’m saying!”

Steven stared. He knew who this kid was. “You’re Angus McDonald, right?”

All three of them turned to look at Steven. Johann spoke first. “Mr. Waxman?”

“Oh!” The boy’s face lit up in a smile. “You’re Miss Julia’s dad!”

“That’s right,” said Klaarg. “We met before. Would you join us?”

“Sure, yeah,” said Steven, stepping over the bleacher to sit down next to Klaarg. “Angus, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you too, sir!” said Angus. “Magnus says you’re kind and a very good welder, and Miss Julia says you read books with the best funny voices.”

Steven smiled. “I haven’t done that with her for years.”

“It must have been very important to her then, sir.”

“Oh, I already like you,” chuckled Steven. “So if the B.o.B. isn’t the favorite, who is?”

“The Rad Robes have had their strongest season in several years, sir. They’ve won most of their games by very wide margins.”

“The Rad Robes can’t win,” scoffed Johann.

“I don’t understand your logic, young man,” said Klaarg.

“It’s not about logic,” Johann mumbled. “It’s the story.”

“It would make a very good story,” said a voice from behind them. It was that boyfriend of Taako’s, Kravitz. He smiled nervously when they all turned to look. “May I join you gentlemen?”

“Of course,” said Steven.

Kravitz sat behind Steven, beside Johann. “It’d just make this story I’m writing about them if they won the championship. From what I understand it’s been several years since they’ve done so.”
“They’ve been close a couple times, Mr. Kravitz,” said Angus. “Oh look, it’s starting!”

The music faded, and the announcer called, “Good morning, ladies, gentlemen, others--are you READY for the 1999 roller derby tournament?”

The stands burst into cheers. Steven and his friends joined in the hype.

“Your first bout of the day features the grudge match of the century. Captained by Jess the Behead-her, we have the Rockport Riot!”

The cheers were mixed with boos.

“Versus her former team, captained by Queen Sabine, the Goldcliff Golddiggers!”

The cheers were a little more sincere this time.

“Let’s seeeee some derby!”

“Is Jess favoring her left leg a little?” said Sloane hopefully.

“No,” said Hurley. “She’s killing it, as usual.”

The team winced as she knocked down Sabine for the twelfth time that bout. “Why doesn’t Sabine let someone else be jammer?” said Noelle. “She’s going to get hurt.”

“Or Jess is going to get called on penalties, thrown out of the tournament,” said Killian.

The others oo’d at this idea. “I knew there was some bad blood there, but I didn’t know it was this bad,” said Sloane.

“This isn’t going to end well,” said Killian. “For either of them.”

“It’d be a lucky break if Jess got kicked out on penalties if we play them next,” said Hurley.

“She’s too smart for that,” said Carey.

A new jam started. Queen Sabine and the Rockport jammer raced around the track. The Rockport pivot called something out to Jess the Behead-her; Jess crossed to the outside of the track just in time to booty-block Queen Sabine into the rail.

The crowd groaned sympathetically. Queen Sabine tried to get up, but crumpled. The Rockport jammer zoomed past her, narrowly avoiding a similar booty block, and called off the jam after three points.

“That’s the end of the jam, with Rockport leading by ten, and Queen Sabine is still not on her feet,” said the announcer. Merle hurried onto the track.

“Jeez, Robocop, you’re psychic,” said Hurley, craning her neck to see. “What’s happening?”

Merle knelt next to her, felt her ribs. She gasped, so loudly the B.o.B. ladies could hear her.

“Shit, that’s not good,” said Carey.

Merle signaled to the ref and helped Queen Sabine back to the center.
“Looks like a cracked or broken rib, folks,” said the announcer. “There’s an end to the more intimate side of this grudge match. Will Queen Sabine’s team avenge her?”

“Not likely,” said Julia.

Magnus and Lucretia stood off to the side of the track a little, watching the team watch the bout. Lucretia thoughtfully stroked the divot on her upper lip. “I want them warming up fifteen minutes after the half,” she said.

“Sure thing,” said Magnus.

“Leave at least half the rink for the Wild Women, they’ll kick up a fuss if we don’t,” she added. “The last thing we need is those two trying any more delay tactics.”

“I wish I could have been there to see Avi shut them down,” said Magnus wistfully.

“With an assist from Maureen,” Lucretia said.

“Julia made it sound like she just distracted them for a minute.”

Lucretia rolled her eyes. “Trust me, she knew exactly what she was doing.”

They watched their team watching the bout for a few more minutes.

“They’re talking tactics,” said Magnus. “That’s good.”

“Very good,” said Lucretia. “By the way, speaking of Jules. This… plan of yours.”

He smiled, a little manically. “It’s good, right? It’ll be perfect.”

“Well… hmm.” Lucretia considered. “It’s good, certainly. I can’t imagine anyone saying no to a proposal like it. It’s just… a little complicated.”

“That’s why we’ll need the team’s help,” said Magnus. “If I just tell them--”

“We can’t tell them until the tournament’s over,” she said. “They’d be too distracted to play.”

“I know, there’s just not a lot of time before next weekend.”

“Does it have to be next weekend?” Lucretia asked.

Magnus capitulated. “The week after that is Thanksgiving. And then it’s Candlenights season.”

“I see your point.” Lucretia crossed her arms. “Call it the P.A. in me but I keep thinking over the logistics. I don’t even know if there’s a greenhouse in Faerun.”

“There’s a florist,” said Magnus. “Got to be a greenhouse somewhere.”

“And all the balloons?”

“Is there not a party store in this town?”

“No.”

Magnus frowned. “Then we’ll ask Taako.”
“Okay, fine,” said Lucretia. “And then the song--”

“That’s the easiest part,” insisted Magnus. “I have the tape already, and I’m sure one of us has a boombox.”

Lucretia sighed. “If you’re sure we can put this all together in a week.”

“This team can do just about anything,” said Magnus firmly.

Lucretia conceded the point. “Fair enough.” She smiled wryly. “It’s a pretty good song.”

“You think she’ll like it?”

“Magnus, I would never have agreed to help if I didn’t,” said Lucretia.

Magnus looked relieved. “It is a little disco.”

“It’s also a little jazzy.”

He smiled. “Thank you, by the way. It means a lot to me--and it will to Julia, I’m sure--that you think--that you approve--you know. That you’re helping.”

Lucretia nodded. “I’m glad you were ready for something real. I have a feeling you two will last.”

Magnus was touched. “I’d like to give you a hug.”

“Don’t push your luck,” she said, and left to sit by the team. Magnus grinned, and turned back to the bout.
“The first winner of the tournament, moving on to the second round, it’s the Rockport Riot!”

Steven booed along with the crowd for this one. That Jess woman seemed to relish hitting people just a little too much, even for derby. Even so, the Riot fans in orange and black were losing their minds.

“We’ll be back in just a few minutes with the Felicity Wild Women versus your very own Faerun Bureau of Badass!”

“Oh boy oh boy oh boy oh boy!” said Angus, bouncing in his seat.

“Who’ll the B.o.B. play next, if they win?” said Kravitz, craning his neck to look at the bracket on the wall.

“Rockport, but not until after the Rad Robes and the Fireworks play,” said Johann. “Are they going to do my chant? I hope they do my chant.”

“Your chant?” said Klaarg.

“Yeah, I wrote it,” said Johann, watching intently as the B.o.B. skated to the middle of the track.

“You wrote the chant?” said Klaarg. “I’m a huge fan of your work!”

Johann froze. He turned his head slowly toward Klaarg. “Y-you are?”

“ Heck yes!” said Klaarg, hand to his forehead. “Man, I can’t believe I’m meeting you!”

Johann’s eyes were huge. “This is the greatest day of my life.”

A bubble of chatter began at the B.o.B.’s bench, all the players talking over each other. Johann clutched his chest. “Oh, god, they’re doing it.”

Julia pounded her fist on the bench, louder than usual. “I hereby call this session to order. Who are we?”

“THE BUREAU OF BADASS,” the players shouted.

“Damn straight! All rise for a word from the Director!”

Steven leaned forward to hear Lucretia as the team jumped to their feet, but he needn’t have bothered. Today she made her voice echo.

“The Adventure Zone is your home,” she intoned, her words sliding into place like slabs of stone. “This tournament is your tournament. Let’s show these ladies some… hospitality.”

The cheer went up from the whole crowd, even from fans of other teams, and Killian started stomping. The chant started with the players and spread until the whole place was shaking with it. *Who are we? The B.o.B. Who are we? The B.o.B. Who are we? The B.o.B…*

“You heard it here first folks,” said the announcer, cutting into the chant. “Captained by your hometown hero, a Faerun legend, Jule Be Sorry…” the announcer had to leave off for a moment while the crowd cheered… “It’s the BUREAU OF BADASS!”
Steven thought he might go deaf from the cheering. He was certainly going hoarse.

“Versus a team that is artful in every sense of the word, last year’s champions… captained by WonderSlam, it’s the Felicity Wild Women!”

The thunderous cheering carried over for the Wild Women as they posed on the track.

“I’m getting the signal from the refs--yes, the bout will begin without any further ado. Get ready for some derby!”

Julia braced herself for a last minute taunt from Lydia as the two of them stood on the line, but none came. All business then, huh? That suited Julia.

The whistle blew, and they took off. Lydia outpaced her--jeez, no messing around today, was there? Julia picked up her own pace. They made it around the first time without incident, looped back, and hit the pack.

Their inside blockers were so tight. As soon as Julia thought she found an opening it closed again. She was behind--Lydia had already made it past Hurley and was gaining on Carey and Taako.

“My beauty! Inside!” said Noelle’s voice from up ahead.

Like a battleship, Killian appeared in front of Julia and hipchecked one of the Wild Women into another of the Wild Women, knocking them both into the center. Julia took the opening and zoomed past them and another blocker. She’d almost caught up with Lydia--

Lydia glanced over her shoulder and hit her hips, calling off the jam. The ref blew the whistle.

“That’s three points for both the Wild Women and the B.o.B., a conservative start,” said the announcer.

Julia growled. It was going to be a long bout.

The second half began, and the B.o.B. was down seven points in a methodical back-and-forth.

Steven threw out a hand. “It’s like they don’t even care about the points just so long as they’re still ahead.”

Angus nodded. “That’s happened a lot this season. The Wild Women won more bouts than Phandolin, but by fewer points.”

“Artful indeed,” said Kravitz, snapping a picture.

“There’s something wrong with their captain,” muttered Johann.

“What are you talking about?” asked Steven. “She looks like she’s doing a good job to me.”

Johann shook his head. “She’s distracted.”

The four men and one boy stared at her.

“I don’t see it,” said Klaarg.
“You’re sure?” asked Magnus.

“I swear it on my goddamned Irish ancestors,” said Hurley. “Lydia’s lip was trembling. She’s going to make a mistake.”

Lucretia nodded. “All right. Then let’s make it easy for her, switch things up. What do you think, Magnus?”

“Robocop, are you good for jammer?” Magnus asked.

“I think so, but if they hit me, I may not be able to keep my balance,” said Noelle.

“Then we’ll make sure they won’t hit you. Got it, Beauty?”

“Got it,” said Killlian.

“Okay,” Magnus nodded. “Abby and Jule, stay outside, just ahead of her if you can. Psych her out. You’ll be pivot, Jule. Your only job is to be faster than her.”

“Gotcha.” Julia traded panties with Noelle.

“And we’ll put Jenicide with you, Beauty. Ram, hold that center. Diablo can hold down the fort here on the bench. Everyone good?”

The team chorused a “hell yeah!”

“Who are we?”

“THE B.O.B.”

“Give ‘em hell,” said Lucretia.

Angus leaned forward. “Oh, boy, Noelle hardly ever gets to be jammer.”

“Will she be safe?” asked Kravitz.

“She’s been knocking people down all season,” said Klaarg. “She’ll be fine.”

The jam started, with Lydia easily outpacing Noelle on the first loop and attempting to pass Hurley again, but Hurley kept her walled with considerable grace until Noelle joined Killian and Sloane in the pack.

Hurley seemed to let Lydia slip past in order to take out a Wild Women blocker, hip-checking her in the knees, but now Lydia was trapped behind Taako and Julia, and Noelle had gained a point. The other opposing blockers converged on Noelle; Sloane, Killian, and Hurley headed them off, with Hurley taking a hit and falling so that two of them couldn’t get past.

Lydia glanced back behind her over and over again with increasing alarm. Her pivot shouted, “Call it!” Lydia lifted her hands to claim a single point--

Killian grabbed Noelle’s shoulders and flung her forward. She flew past the rest of the pack and Lydia, and slapped her hips to call the jam.
The boys jumped to their feet cheering as the announcer called, “That’s five points for the B.o.B. and one for the Wild Women. This is Robocop’s first five-point jam of her career—let’s hear it for her, folks!”

Noelle skidded back into the center with a huge grin. “Did you see! Did you see!”

“I saw!” Magnus gave her a high five. “Want to do it again?”

“Hell yeah!” Noelle shouted.

Lucretia said, “Then hurry! They’re trading out jammers. You did it! You broke Lydia!”

“Get out there, Diablo, call Ram in,” said Magnus.

“You got it!” Carey flew out of the center.

Lucretia allowed herself a small smile. “Don’t tell them, Burnsides, but I think we just won the bout.”

Final Score
Bureau of Badass: 75
Felicity Wild Women: 61

Both teams lined up for high-fives, and then the Fireworks and the Rad Robes took the track.

Though Angus and Klaarg both agreed that it should be a good bout, it consisted mostly of the Rad Robes brutally and mercilessly taking points from Phandolin. Fifteen minutes in, the Rad Robes were up by 34 points.

“This isn’t any fun,” said Klaarg. “I think I’ll get something to eat.”

“Mm, I’ll join you,” said Johann. “Kravitz? Steven?”

“Sure,” said Kravitz, getting up and stretching. “Might be good before everyone rushes in for lunch.”

“I’ll stay and save seats for now,” said Steven. The others wandered off to the concession stand, except for Angus, who looked thoughtful. “Angus? You’re not hungry?”

“No, I am,” he said. “I’m just thinking about a budget.”

Steven smiled. “A budget, huh?”

“Yes. I have five dollars to spend today.” He pulled a crisp five dollar bill out of his pocket, folded in half. “Four of it is for lunch and dinner, because hot dogs and nachos both cost two each, so I have one dollar left for a drink. And I’m very thirsty.”

“So what’s your dilemma?” asked Steven.

Angus pointed to the arcade. “There’s a gachapon machine in there that costs twenty-five cents.”
“A what?”

“The machine with the little prize capsules,” Angus explained.

“Oh, is that what it’s called?”

“Yes, and inside there’s a prize I really want, but it’s one of six. So if I spent my dollar there, I’d have a pretty good chance of getting it.”

“What’s the prize you’re after?”

“A temporary tattoo with Velma on it,” said Angus.

Steven held back a laugh. “Velma? As in Scooby-Doo?”

“Yes sir, she’s my favorite.”

“Really?” said Steven. This kid was great. “Why’s that?”

“She’s smart, sir, and she’s not afraid of ghosts.”

“Very good reasons.” Steven thought for a moment. “Here, I’ll tell you what.” He dug in his pocket and took out a handful of pennies and nickels and—good, they were still here—three quarters. He handed them to Angus. “I won these off a wily steel-willed fax machine salesman. I was going to use them for gum, but I think this is a much more important cause.”

“Gosh, Mr. Waxman, thank you!” Angus took them gingerly and jumped to his feet. “I’m going to go get my prizes right now!”

“Get something to eat first!” Steven called after him.

“Okay, I will!”

He was back in a few minutes with a hot dog in one hand, a drink in the other, and a pocket full of gachapon capsules. He sat down, took a bite out of the hot dog, and showed the capsules to Steven.

“Well, let’s see what you got,” said Steven.

Angus nodded and swallowed his mouthful before popping open one of the capsules. “A sticker with Tommy on it,” he said, a little disappointed.

Steven frowned at the sticker. “That’s an ugly baby.”

“Yeah. It’s okay, my friend Mookie likes that show. I’ll give it to him.” He carefully put the sticker back in the capsule and shut it, shoving it in his pocket and opening a new one.

“A parachute boy!” he announced, holding up the plastic figure. “I like these. This is a good prize.”

“No tattoo though,” said Steven.

“Maybe this one is it.” Angus held up the last capsule gingerly and opened it, revealing a ring made of green lanyard cord. “Aww.”

“Sorry, kiddo.”

Angus looked a little disappointed. “It’s okay, I guess.” He brightened a little. “This is my favorite color, at least.” He tried it on his ring finger, and when it slipped off, put it on his thumb instead.
“At least you’ve got a parachute boy out of it,” said Steven.

“Yeah! And a drink!”

The others were making their way back, hands full of food. It looked like Klaarg had dumped nachos onto a hot dog. “If the Robes play like this, the B.o.B. are going to have a hell of a time,” he said, gesturing to the track and taking his seat.

“They’re going to win,” Johann insisted.

“It’s a million-to-one chance,” scoffed Klaarg.

“Everyone knows million-to-one chances work out ninety percent of the time,” Johann said.

Kravitz squinted into the middle distance. “How…”

“Ooo, that’s going to leave a mark!” the announcer called. The men looked to the bout.

A blocker for the Fireworks was on the ground, clutching her knee, tears streaming down her face. Merle was already kneeling beside her. He said something to one of the refs.

“Getting word now… it’s a torn muscle, the medic says. Looks like Polly Block-it is out of the bout and on her way to a hospital. That’s cold, Rad Robes.”

“That’s not good,” said Kravitz.

Rad Robes: 117
Phandolin Fireworks: 59

“Your reward for winning this bout will be a one-hour break, and then another bout,” said Lucretia, addressing the team in the locker room. “And then, if you win that one, you’ll have a ten minute break followed by another bout. This will be the toughest test of stamina you will ever have. If the pressure lets up, it means you have lost.”

She let that thought sink in, regarding her team. Julia, Carey, and Sloane looked nervous, but determined. Hurley was greeting the challenge with a wicked smile. Killian had a look of intense resolve, and to Lucretia’s surprise, so did Noelle. Taako was doing the same thing she was, looking at everyone else, gauging reactions with his usual air of indifference, but his knuckles were white.

“Do not waste your energy unnecessarily. No showboating. Every action for a purpose. Now look around.”

Her team did so, meeting each others’ eyes.

“I know I’m not the only person who considers this team family. Out there, protect your family. Make each others’ lives easier. Make their lives harder. Rockport’s not as good as you, but they’re sure as hell not going to give up without a fight. This might be just the first leg, but make it count. Am I understood?”

“Hell yeah,” said Julia, and the others echoed her.

“I said, am I understood?”
“HELL YEAH.” The lockers rattled with the sound.

“Good. And now, a word from the captain.”

Julia stood up. Her eyes flashed. She put on her helmet. “Let’s fuck ‘em up, girls.”

The team left the locker room, suitably pumped up, Lucretia thought. They were going to do fine. She glanced up at Magnus, who’d been standing behind her.

The boy was looking after Julia with such contented admiration, she couldn’t help but smile.

She hummed the first few lines of “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” quietly enough that only he could hear. He broke out of his reverie and looked at her.

She chuckled. He crossed his arms, game face back on.
Heads up: this chapter contains a transphobic remark and some discussion of alcoholism. Take care of yourselves.

<3, K+H

Rockport was giving the B.o.B. everything they had, with a frustratingly thick defense. The stress was beginning to show.

The team congregated in the center after a particularly disheartening jam. Hurley tore off an elbow pad and hit Sloane with it. “Hey, do you maybe want to warn me next time you toss a blocker in front of me? You know I can’t jump over them like you do.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a problem,” snarled Sloane, “if you would listen to the pivot instead of trying to do your own thing!”

Taako elbowed Julia. “Do we need to lock them in a closet again?”

“We don’t have time for this,” snapped Julia. “Guys!”

“I’m not looking for flying blockers, I’m looking for the goddamn jammer!” shouted Hurley.

“I can’t be responsible for your space and mine,” Sloane shot back.

“Hey!” Magnus stepped in, took them each by the shoulder. “We’re going to lose if you two don’t get your shit together now. Make up or I’ll take one of you out of the rest of the bout.”

Sloane and Hurley glared at each other for a full ten seconds.

Finally, without changing her expression, Sloane said, “Looks like we’re in a jam.”

Hurley gulped and slipped the panty on. “I’ve got your back,” said Sloane, kissing her helmet. “Let’s go.”
“What are they doing?” said Steven. Kravitz was snapping pictures like a madman as Hurley rolled up to the line.

“Something new!” said Angus.

“I’ve got to get down there,” said Kravitz, pushing past Johann out of the bleachers.

“This is why I like ‘em,” said Klaarg, throwing out his hand. “Always something different with the B.o.B.”

“Hurley’s only ever played jammer in practice!” said Angus.

The whistle blew, and Hurley and the Rockport jammer took off. Hurley lagged heavily behind, but no sooner did the Rockport jammer reach the pack then Carey knocked her down. Hurley caught up with the pack about the same time the Rockport jammer got to her feet.

“A slow start to the jam, but if I know the B.o.B., it’s all part of the plan,” said the announcer.

“They’d better hurry, though. Time is running out!”

Hurley wasted no time. The Riot walled her in--she ducked under a blocker’s legs and slipped through.

“Woah!” said Steven. Angus looked absolutely delighted.

Hurley gained some ground past the pack before the Rockport jammer outpaced her again and circled around. This time the Rockport jammer maneuvered past Carey only to find Killian and Julia in her way. Hurley, meanwhile, had no sooner reached the pack and pulled in front of two blockers than one pushed the other into Hurley, knocking her down.

“Ouch,” said the announcer, “a solid hi--wait, wait!”

Hurley fell into a roll, landed in a crouch, and pushed off the track with her hands, back on her feet.

“Holy smokes!” said the announcer. “Battling Ram is a bit of a mountain goat!”

“Did you see that?” said Angus.

“Holy hell,” said Johann, transfixed.

There were more blockers ahead. Hurley stayed on their flanks, hovering for an opening. Sloane plowed through the line and gave her one, knocking down a blocker. Hurley darted forward, past Jess the Behead-her.

Jess didn’t let Hurley pass. She drew back for a hip check--

“Oh no!” said Angus, covering his eyes.

But the hip only clipped Hurley in the shoulder, sending her skidding off to the side, while Jess overbalanced and fell.

“Yeah!” shouted Klaarg.

Hurley tried to redirect herself. Julia caught her and pushed her forward, past another Rockport blocker, just as the whistle blew to end the jam.
“Some truly impressive jamming by Battling Ram,” said the announcer. “That’s four points for the B.o.B. against Rockport’s one, and with that, the B.o.B. has taken the lead!”

The boys in the stands cheered wildly. Klarg smacked Steven in the shoulder. “Didn’t I tell you they were the most interesting team in the league?”

Steven cringed. That was going to bruise.

“I’m not doing that again,” declared Hurley, panting. “Don’t make me do that again.”

“You were incredible!” said Sloane.

“Not doing it.” Hurley pointed at Lucretia.

“You don’t have to,” said Lucretia. “But now we’ve got them off their game. Let’s keep that up. Diablo, when’s the last time you played jammer in a bout?”

Carey’s face lit up. “Not since Taako joined. Are you saying we bring back team sweet flips?”

“Against my better judgement, yes.” She glowered at them. “Don’t you dare get injured out there.”

Killian pumped her fists. “Hell YEAH.”

“What’s team sweet flips?” said Magnus.

Lucretia shooed them onto the track. “You’ll see.”

The boys in the stands watched slack-jawed.

“She just–launched her!” sputtered Steven. “Into the air!”

Klaarg nodded.

“That can’t be a legal move,” Steven insisted.

“You can’t prohibit something that’s never been done,” said Klaarg.


“I love derby so much,” said Angus, eyes like saucers.

“Listen everyone, we’ve had a lot of fun here today,” said the announcer, in a weary tone. “I just want to remind everyone that these derby players are trained professionals who have, and I cannot stress this enough, signed release forms. Please, please, don’t try this at home.”

Rockport Riot: 68
Faerun Bureau of Badass: 84

After good-game-high-fives were over, the B.o.B. retreated to their locker room, whooping and
hollering.

“Oh, shit, sweet flips!” said Taako. “That was incredible!”

Killian looked Carey deep in the eyes. “I’ve missed that so much. Your agility is amazing.”

Carey returned her gaze. “You’re the strongest person in the whole world.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

Lucretia snapped her fingers. “Focus. We have one hour before we play Phandolin. Get something to eat and get hydrated.”

“I brought sandwiches!” said Magnus, pulling a cooler out from under a bench.

“Phandolin’s entire team could outrun us, even Abby, so we need to outthink them,” said Lucretia. “Let’s talk tactics.”

Magnus passed out the sandwiches, and they settled down to prepare.

Avi was draped over some bleachers, eyes closed, eating a carrot stick while Antonia rubbed his head.

“You’re doing great,” she said. “At least, I think you’re doing great. I haven’t heard any fights so far.”

“Everything’s going okay,” he mumbled through carrot. “Two more bouts to go, though.”

“Are the other refs giving my man the respect he deserves?”

“I don’t know about that. They’re listening to me, and I’ll take what I can get. Maureen is helping a lot. They’re terrified of her.”

“Yeah, didn’t you ever take her chemistry course in college? Dr. Miller nearly destroyed my GPA.”

“I took astronomy,” Avi mumbled. “You have magic fingers, Princess.”

“You know I do.”

“Scuse me?”

Avi opened his eyes. It was Merle. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s okay,” said Avi, sitting up. “Thanks, Tony. What’s up?”

“I’ve been checking out the Fireworks, since so many of them were hurt,” said Merle. “I can only approve four of them to play.”

Avi’s eyebrows shot up. “Four?”

Merle nodded. “Two of the girls were already playing with injuries, and that last game only made ’em worse. One of them I’m certain is concussed, and I’m pretty sure about another one. Then there’s the poor girl who tore her ACL… they’re going to have to forfeit.”
“Oh my god,” said Antonia.

Merle hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Their coach is going to tell you formally in a minute. I just thought you should be prepared.”

“Yeah. Uh. Thanks.”

Merle nodded again and left them. Avi felt a wave of panic. He’d have to rearrange the refs, which meant some people would be reffing less than others, he’d have to either move the final bout up or wait an extra hour, and people weren’t going to be happy. He reached for the flask in his pocket and unscrewed the lid.

“Avi,” said Antonia softly.

He looked at the flask. “Sorry. Old habits.” He screwed the lid back on.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said. “Just like air traffic, right?”

“Yeah, but if I delay a flight to Dallas, a jet full of people isn’t going to come to the tower and yell at me.”

“What do you need to do first?”

“Talk to Phandolin’s coach.”

“And then?”

“I’ll ask my refs if we should delay.” He considered. “We’ll take a vote.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Thanks.” He stood up. “A kiss for courage?”

“Always,” said Antonia, and kissed him.

“They what?” said Magnus, his mouth half full of sandwich.

“They forfeited,” Maureen repeated. “Too many of their players were injured.

“The Robes didn’t just beat Phandolin, they destroyed them,” groaned Hurley.

“What does that mean for us, then?” asked Lucretia.

“We’re playing the next bout at 4, so you have an extra hour to prepare,” Maureen said. “This bout will be for the championship.”

“At least it’s one less bout to win,” said Carey.

“Thanks, Maureen,” said Lucretia. “You’ll let us know if anything else develops?”

“Certainly,” she said, and left the locker room.

Lucretia clapped her hands together. “All right. Take a minute, everyone. Get used to the idea, grab another sandwich. Then it’s back to strategy.”
Julia picked up her water bottle and stood up. “Be back,” she said to anyone who was wondering, and headed off to the water fountain.

The audience had dwindled a little since the bout ended. They were still on the one-hour break, she supposed, off getting lunch, maybe, or their favorites had lost. More folks would come for the last bout. They always did.

There was so much time left to wait. The ache in Julia’s calves and thighs was enough to make her very glad they didn’t have to play Phandolin and the Rad Robes. Killian and Carey probably had some aspirin or something.

She held the button on the fountain and watched the bottle fill. It’d probably be quicker to have Robbie fill it, but there was a line at the concession stand and anyway she didn’t feel like breaking her focus trying to talk to a stoner.

“Do you ever get the strangest sense of deja vu?”

Julia very deliberately didn’t move her head. She knew the voice. She slid her eyes off to the side. Lup was leaning against the wall, water bottle in hand, examining her nails. Julia noted with some satisfaction the slight crookedness of her nose. Another Rad Robe hovered nearby and smirked.

“Wasn’t it right here that you lost your temper? Got pulled out of a game?” Lup looked at Julia. “Tell me, Jule. Was that your worst defeat of the season, or was it the next time you played us?”

“Wasn’t it right here that I broke your nose?” said Julia, screwing on the top of her half-filled water bottle, turning to leave. Don’t engage, she told herself. Don’t fight. They’re just trying to sabotage you.

“And yet, somehow, you’re still the ugly one. You and that jigsaw puzzle you call a team.”

Julia paused. No. Don’t. She forced herself to keep walking.

“Amazing they got this far,” said the other Rad Robe, snickering behind her back.

“Well, Brady Punch,” said Lup loftily, “that’s what happens when you fuck the refs.”

Julia stopped. She turned around, slowly, and took a couple steps back toward Lup. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Lup cocked her head. “You mean it’s not obvious?” She leaned in close, close enough that Julia could feel her breath. “I want to watch you crash and burn.”

Avi was sitting hunched over on the bleachers, taking long, slow breaths. Everything had gone way smoother than he’d thought. Antonia had been right, it would all be okay. He felt kind of dumb now, for being so nervous. The refs had accepted his decision to treat this bout like the fifth game, for the purpose of ref assignments, which meant he didn’t even have to ref again. Roswell and three other good refs were assigned to this bout. Nothing else to worry about.

Avi sat up straight and stretched his arms, trying to get some of the tension out of his shoulders. How did he ever make it through college?

Oh, that’s right, alcohol. He took his flask out of his pocket and looked at it. It was almost empty. It was always almost empty these days. Usually he could stave off the urge to partake with the fear that
he might need some later. He put it back in his pocket. There hadn’t been a day this bad since… well, since he’d proposed to Tony, but before that, not for several years.

Things were not going to get less stressful in his life. He’d be married this time next year. Maybe… maybe he should get some help.

The thought made him more nervous. He sighed. Maybe he should just dump the flask out in the water fountain--

Uh-oh. A couple of the Rad Robes and Julia were nose-to-nose. Fight brewing--he stood up. Backup. He needed backup. No way he could pull apart two people who were taller and definitely stronger than him--

“Roswell,” said Avi, a wave of relief washing over him as they passed. “I need your help, come on.”

Avi hurried over, Roswell following without question, God bless them. “Ladies,” he said as he approached, “what seems to be the problem?”

“There’s no problem, Avi,” said Julia. “I was just leaving.”

“Oo, first name basis, huh?” said Lup. “You fuck him too?”

Avi frowned. “Miss, I’m going to have to ask you to lay off. This is unsportsmanlike.”

“What about that thing?” Brady Punch asked Julia, pointing to Roswell. This seemed to be too far even for Lup--her head snapped to snarl at her teammate.

Julia’s nostrils flared, but she did nothing. Avi’s head jerked to look up at Roswell. Their eyes were narrowed, but otherwise they didn’t seem all that bothered. “Avi, you’re the head referee. I’d like to make a somewhat unconventional call, with your permission.”

Well Avi sure as hell didn’t know what to do. “Permission granted.”

Roswell nodded. “Congratulations, Miss. You’re the first person I’ve ever penalized before the bout has even started.”

The woman’s jaw dropped. “You can’t do that!”

“I’ll allow it,” said Avi, shrugging. “If your coach has an issue with it, he can take it up with me. You’ll start off the bout with a penalty.”

“That’s not--you can’t do that!” said the Rad Robe. “Scream, tell them.”

Lup set her jaw. “They just did,” she said flatly.

“Yes,” said Roswell. “I recommend you rejoin your team.”

The woman looked like she might fly at Roswell, but instead she glared at Julia. “C’mon, Sour Scream, let’s go.”

The two of them stormed away. As they left, Avi could hear Lup saying, “You fucking moron, you don’t insult the refs--”

Avi exhaled. “Julia, maybe you should go back to your locker room.”

“Just leaving,” she said, and did so.
“Sorry about that,” Avi said.

Roswell shrugged. “It’s unfortunately common. Still, she should know better.”

“You might want to keep an eye on them during the bout,” Avi said. “They like to instigate.”

“I will,” Roswell promised.

Avi had a thought. He dug his flask out of his pocket. “Could you keep an eye on this for me too?”

Roswell looked puzzled, but they took the flask and put it in their own pocket. “I suppose.”

“Thanks.” Feeling no less nervous but considerably lighter, Avi walked away.

When Julia got back to the locker room, her team was arguing.

“Don’t play recklessly,” Magnus was saying. “We only have one extra player at any given time. If even two of you get injured, we’ll be screwed.”

“You saw what they were doing,” said Sloane. “The Rad Robes are out for blood.”

“We’ve got to be tougher than them,” said Hurley.

“Listen, tough stuff, we’re a scrappy group, but we can’t outmuscle them,” Taako shot back. “Not all of us are Beauty, here.”

“They’re way meaner than us,” said Noelle.

“Where have you been?” Carey asked. The team turned to look at Julia.

She shook her head. “The Robes tried to pick another fight.”

“Julia, you didn’t—” Lucretia began.

“I didn’t take their bait,” Julia assured her. “Brady Punch ended up insulting Roswell. She’ll start off the game with a penalty.”

“Hell yeah, serves her right!” said Carey.

“Listen,” said Julia. “I think that’s the answer. They’re not just trying to win, they’re trying to hurt us. They’re playing angry.”

“You’re supposed to play derby angry,” said Hurley.

“No,” said Lucretia. “You’re supposed to channel anger into derby. To build something where someone else has tried to tear you down. Right, Jule?”

The room went silent, eyes on Julia. She set her jaw, and nodded. “I think… I think all of us have something that gets us ready to play, right? Something we only think about when we need to focus on bringing someone down. You’ve all seen mine, when I fought with Lup the last time. I know most of yours.”

She hesitated. No one was meeting her eyes. She didn’t blame them. She wasn’t even sure she should be bringing this up right now—did they need to be thinking about their deep dark secrets, the
sources of their rage, when they knew someone out there wanted them broken?

She realized Magnus was still looking at her. He was listening. Go on, he mouthed.

She pointed to the locker room door. “The Rad Robes have that too, except it’s not personal or private or shameful, it’s just hate, straight up hate, and they do it not because they know anything about us, but because it’s fun, and it helps them win. And you know, I’m tempted to hate them back, but mostly what I feel for them is pity, because they’re missing out.”

They were looking up again, listening again. What was it she was trying to say? Whatever it was, she better say it. She rallied her thoughts. “I don’t know that what we have is special. I don’t know that there’s anything special about us, other than the fact that we’re a bunch of weirdos, but I know that their hate can’t match what we have, what we feel for each other. That’s what we need to bring out onto the track. We can’t be meaner than them, so let’s not try. Let’s be better.”

There it was. Julia watched them chew on the idea. Noelle was nodding, Killian and Carey were holding hands.

Taako ducked his head and sniffed. “That was cheesy as hell, dude.”

“Are you crying?” said Magnus, concerned.

“No,” lied Taako.

“C’mon,” said Magnus, spreading his arms. “Bring it in.”

“Hell no!”

“Aww, c’mon Taako,” said Sloane, hugging him. “Group hug everybody.”

“God, no!” Taako protested, as everyone moved in. Julia ended up outside Carey and above Hurley, hugging her team, grinning. Lucretia watched, not even trying to hide her smile.

“This is it, this is my affection quota for the next ten years,” came Taako’s voice from somewhere inside.

“All right, all right,” said Lucretia. “Let him be.”

The team spread out, leaving Taako a little mussed and holding back a damp smile. “You guys are the worst,” he said.

“Julia’s right,” said Lucretia, once they’d all settled back down. “They have too much ego and too much anger. How can we take advantage of that?”
Steven settled back onto the bench for the final bout. He’d taken a walk around the block a few times, to get the blood back flowing. His kingdom for a chair with a back.

“This is going to be very good,” Klaarg was saying to Kravitz. “The B.o.B. is bringing back tactics I haven’t seen in years. I think they’ll need them.”

“It’s not victory if it’s not hard-won,” said Johann.

Steven noticed a young lady slowly making her way around the track from the other set of bleachers. She didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular, but her head was cocked as if she was listening.

“I can’t wait to get these pictures developed,” said Kravitz. “There’s one of Hurley in particular that I’m very excited to see.”

The young lady had turned and was now passing in front of them.

“I want to see them, when they’re developed,” said Johann. “Photography is a fascinating art form.”

“I’m sure I do my best,” said Kravitz, obviously flattered.

The young woman turned her head toward them, looking more past them than at them. “Johann? I thought I heard you earlier.”

Johann seemed to go stiff. He didn’t look at her. “Hey, Antonia.”

“Hi. Um, do you mind if I sit with you and your friends? I’ve been having trouble understanding the bouts. Sometimes the announcer’s confusing.”

“I guess,” he said.

Klaarg smacked the back of his head. “Don’t be rude. Of course you can, young lady. Please, there’s a space right here.”

“Ow,” muttered Johann, rubbing a fresh goose-egg on the back of his head.

She smiled. “Thank you. I’m uh, pretty blind, so mostly it just looks like blobs on a blob.”

“Would you like us to describe it for you?” asked Klaarg.

“I’ll ask for clarification when I need it, if that’s okay,” she replied, settling beside Johann.

“Certainly,” said Steven. “Antonia, you said?”
“That’s right.”

The others introduced themselves. Turned out she was a friend of Julia’s and Taako’s, so she knew of both Steven and Kravitz.

“Sweet of you to come and see them play, even though you can’t see it,” said Klaarg.

“I’m also here for my fiancé. He’s the head ref,” she said.

“The boy with the mullet?” asked Steven.

“That’s him,” she said.

“That’s awfully supportive of you,” said Klaarg.

“He’s very supportive of me,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many hours we’ve spent at garden nurseries with him reading off labels to me.”

“I’m getting a snack,” said Johann abruptly, and left.

Steven frowned after him. “What’s wrong with that boy? Leaving you here with a bunch of strange men?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “When you’re with Avi you learn to make friends fast. Anyway if you’re Julia’s dad and Taako’s boyfriend, you’re probably good people.”

“Speaking of good people, where’s Angus?” asked Klaarg.

“That’s the little boy, right?” said Antonia. “He’s… someone’s son on the team.”

“All of them, I think,” said Kravitz. Steven laughed.

“I just saw him,” she said. “He found my wallet—I dropped it out of my purse, and he didn’t steal anything out of there, so I gave him five dollars. And then, it was the funniest thing, he said something about a gazpacho machine and ran off.”

“Oh, you just made that boy’s day,” said Steven. “There’s a gachapon machine in the arcade, one of those with the prize capsules.”

Antonia laughed. “That makes a lot more sense than soup.”

“Sirs! Sirs! Miss Antonia!” Angus came barrelling toward them with an armful of gachapon capsules. “Look, look!” He dumped all the capsules under his seat and yanked up his sleeve. Yes indeed, there was a tiny Velma Dinklage on his arm.

“You got one!” said Steven. “How many tries did it take you?”

“Only seven, which means I have money left over for candy! Look, Miss Antonia!”

She squinted at his arm. “Hmm. Some kind of orange monkey.”

“It’s Velma from Scooby-Doo,” he said. “It’s exactly what I wanted and you helped me get it. Would you like one of my prizes?”

Antonia laughed. “Sure, what have you got?”
“Two parachute boys, four Rugrats stickers, a ring, a sticky hand, and a tiny kazoo.”

Antonia considered carefully. “Can I have the kazoo?”

“Yes.” He sat down on the ground next to the capsules. “Uhh, I just need to find it again.”

“LLLLLLLLLADIES AND GENTLEMEN!” The music stopped abruptly as the announcer greeted them. “You’ve waited quite long enough! Finally, at long last, I am pleased to present to you the championship bout, the final round of this year’s derby tournament!”

The cheer was deafening. Steven hadn’t noticed, but the whole place had filled up to call-the-fire-marshall levels in the last few minutes. He cheered and clapped along with the others as the wave of applause swept through the rink.

“For those of you just joining us, it’s been one heck of a tournament. There have been stunts. There have been thrills. Sadly, there have been injuries. A surprise forfeit by Phandolin left fans flailing. But now it’s time to determine a winner. On the one side, we have the big… BAD… RAD ROBES!”

A cohort of Phandolin fans on the other side of the track were booing loudly, but otherwise the cheering grew even louder.

“And on the other--never boring, always unexpected--Faerun’s own… BUREAUX OF BADASS!”

And if it was possible, the cheering grew louder still.

“What are you ready for some derby?”

Once they had a game plan and they’d warmed up a little, Julia found it hard to focus on anything. For a few minutes all she really got was a series of impressions. The fwip of laces pulled tight. The smell of sweat that pervaded the locker room. A whiff of the lavender oil Sloane was putting on her temples. The crunch and zip of velcro on people’s pads. The roar of the crowd as they left the locker room. The announcer saying their names. The familiar track beneath the wheels of her skates. The awareness of Lup beside her on the jammer line.

“Ready to bleed, Jule?” muttered Lup beside her.

And then the world regained its edges and lost its soft filter. The track and her task lay ahead of her. She glanced at Lup and smiled.

The whistle blew.

“There they go--ooo, and right off the bat, Sour Scream tries to take out Jule Be Sorry.”

The Rad Robes’ captain had hip-checked Julia as soon as the whistle blew. Steven watched her recover her feet and catch up. Good grief, she was fast. Where had she gotten all this athletic talent? Neither he nor Ella had ever played sports.

“Go, Miss Julia, go!” cheered Angus.

Julia and the other jammer hit the pack. A Rad Robe blocker swung around to booty block Julia--
Julia laid her hands on the blocker’s back, vaulted over her leapfrog-style, and skated away past the pack.

The crowd cheered. Steven clapped while the others shouted and whistled.

“Folks, you’ve just witnessed a signature move by the unstoppable Jule Be Sorry! There’s a reason they made her captain.”

She circled the track just ahead of Lup, who was hot on her tail, and again ran into the pack.

“Neither of these teams is messing around this afternoon. The Rad Robes may be ready to rumble, but the B.o.B is hungry for a win in the way only an underdog team can be.”

“What are they doing?” said Kravitz.

“Who?” said Klaarg.

“The Robes. They’re kind of—”

Steven saw, just when it was too late. The Robes blockers seemed to move, like a flock of birds, and converge on Julia. She was hit in three directions at once, and knocked out of bounds into the center.

“Ooo, it took three blockers to do it, but the Rad Robes have stopped the unstoppable!” said the announcer. “Sour Scream takes the lead!”

The Robes jammer zipped past Julia and called off the jam.

“That’s three points for the Robes, and none for the B.o.B. If this jam is any indication, this bout is about to get LEGENDARY.”

Julia was back on her feet, rolling back toward the jammer line. Steven expected her to be seething, but no, she only had that familiar look of determination.

The other jammer rolled up beside her, all players reset. The whistle blew, and this time Julia kept right on the other jammer’s tail, just out of reach. Sour Scream tried twice to take her out, but Jules skidded out of the way both times.

“Why doesn’t she pass?” said Steven, watching intently.

“They can’t swarm her if she sticks by Sour Scream!” said Angus.

And he was right, as they hit the pack, the flock-like movement had to go around Sour Scream. Julia deftly dodged her way through and out the other side.

“That’s my girl!” said Steven.

As Sour Scream attempted to break through the pack, Taako hit her with a shoulder, knocking her out of bounds.

“That’s my girl!” said Kravitz, jumping to his feet.

Steven shot him an amused glance. His expression turned from ecstatic to horror. “My--my boy--my boyfriend.”

“Oh, was it Taako?” asked Antonia, squinting.
Sour Scream was half a lap behind Julia when she hit the pack again. Noelle was shouting, directing—the flocking movement of the Robes was disrupted by Carey and Killian, who slammed blockers aside to give Julia an opening. She waltzed through their wall, deftly avoided a booty block and a hipcheck; as soon as Sour Scream hit the pack, tearing past Hurley, Julia called off the jam.

Julia turned, skating backwards, and blew a kiss back at Sour Scream.

“That’s four points for the B.o.B. and one for the Rad Robes, tying it up nicely.”

Sour Scream shook a fist at Julia and yelled something. Julia gave her a smile.

“What’s she doing?” demanded Antonia.

“Taunting them,” said Klaarg, rubbing his hands together. “So it’s this kind of bout, huh?”

Twelve minutes in--
Rad Robes: 23
Bureau of Badass: 20

The team met in the center for a breather. Killian flexed her hands. “Ugh, these points games are killer.”

“You holding up, Jule?” asked Lucretia.

“I could play all day, Coach, but they’re starting to get wise to my patterns,” said Julia.

“Then it’s time. Abby, you and Jule will trade off jams until I say stop, got it?”

“Hell yeah,” said Taako, accepting the panty from Julia. “Let’s kick it, sweet cheeks.”

“Show your twin what for!” said Hurley.

“Don’t call her that,” snapped Taako, and slipped the panty over his helmet.

“Hey!” Lucretia snapped her fingers. “They don’t get to play head games with us. This is our bout, not theirs.”

“Wreck her, Abby,” said Magnus, slapping his back. “Make it look like you’re not even trying.”

Taako smirked. “That I can do.”

Johann came back sullen and snackless to find the four boys talking over each other to Antonia.

“And she did that thing, you know, where you like… swing your hip?” Kravitz was saying.

“She tried to block him, right, but—oh, wait, he wasn’t there yet,” Steven was explaining.

“Reminds me of a bout back in ‘91 when Destroy Her—” Klaarg was equivocating.

“And then Sour Scream was like, whooosh! And Sloane was like, blam!” Angus was animating.
“No--stop, stop, stop,” she said. “Listen, you’re all so kind, but you’re very terrible at this.”

“What’s going on?” asked Johann.

“Oh, thank god, Johann. Sorry, guys, can you let Johann do this? He’s done it for me before.”

The boys grumbled, all except Angus, resigned to this turn of events. Antonia turned to him.

“They’re trying to tell me that Taako and Julia are making fools out of the Robes, but I can’t understand what’s happening. Can you…”

Well this sucked. Okay. “Yeah, sure.” He settled back into his seat, unfortunately right beside Antonia. Jealousy, that’s what this was, although it made him feel guilty, being jealous of Antonia. She was so damn nice. “Uhh, a new jam is starting.”

“Right, I’ve got that bit,” said Antonia, squinting at the track. “Who’s the jammer?”

“This time it’s Taako. That’s weird, he looks so much like the Robes’ jammer.”

Antonia huffed. “Yes, they said that too. What are they doing?”

Johann studied their faces. “Nothing much. They’re ignoring each other.”

The whistle blew. Johann leaned forward. “Jeez, Taako’s pulling way ahead.”

“He’s one of the fastest players in the league!” said Angus.

“The Rad Robes don’t look like they’re ready to let Abby pass this time,” said the announcer.

“Why, what are they doing?” demanded Antonia.

“Forming up a wall,” said Johann. “Uh, Killian’s trying to break through--oh damn.”

The audience gasped.

“What?” said Antonia.

“They knocked Killian down! I’ve never seen that before!”

“Not since she was a new player,” said Klaarg.

“Rack Attack using some serious leverage on Beauty and the Beast!” said the announcer.

“There’s a hole in the wall now, though,” said Johann. “Uh, looks like--yeah, yeah, Taako’s taking it! He made it through!”

“Where’s the other jammer?” asked Antonia.

“She’s already past the pack, but Taako’s catching up--yeah, he caught her! He’s outrunning her now… he’s with the pack…”

“Did they bring back the wall?”

“No, Carey and Hurley are making it hard to. Ooo, Noelle just took one out!”

“Nice!” she said, as the boys whooped.

“Taako’s lead jammer, got two points now. Uh, oh! Three! Noelle’s saying something--watch your
back?”

“Why?”

“Oh, I see, um, the other jammer looks like she’s on the warpath—holy shit, she just blew right past Sloane. Uh, she’s going to catch him soon if he doesn’t—oh my god!”

Antonia grabbed his arm. “What?!?”

“He slid! He slid like in baseball or something!”

The others cheered—the whole rink did, really.

“That’s the jam, folks! Abby Cadabra calling it off with four points to the Rad Robes’ two, in a manner worthy of the prettiest girl in the league!”

“He dropped to his knees and slid past that last blocker,” said Johann. “Jeez, that’s some serious road rash. He’s wearing fishnets, too.”

“What an athlete,” said Kravitz breathlessly.

Johann smiled. “Now he’s waving at us.”

Antonia laughed. “At one of us, maybe.” She let go of his arm. “Sorry, I got excited.”

A wave of resentment washed over him. He berated himself. This was his best friend’s chosen companion for life. Deal with it, Johann.

He took a breath. Right. “No problem.”

“Who’s jamming now?”

“Back to Julia.”

Twenty-seven minutes in--
Rad Robes: 49
Bureau of Badass: 49

Taako broke free of the pack and charged onto the open track with Lup hot on his trail. He cut into the track with long strides, trying to pull every bit of momentum out of every motion. Damn, she was fast, had she always been this fast? Or was he just getting tired? Fuck, here she was. Her body crashed into his, trying to slam him into the rail. He pushed her back—just get her off, then he could outrun her—but she was just as strong as he was, and he just couldn’t—

She threw an elbow and hit him in the face.

Crack.

“Augh!” Taako cried out as the whistle blew and he fell to his knees. Oh shit oh shit oh fuck what the fucking fuck fuck just FUCK-- His whole world was red and throbbing—his face HURT. What the fuckitty fuck had she done—
He blinked a few times and, for a split second that seemed to last forever, locked eyes with Lup. She stared him down as she rolled into the center of the track. No one else would have been able to tell, but Taako could see just the slightest hint of a smile on her face.

So that’s how it was, huh? But wait, the jam, the jam was still going, and Lup was out for a minute on a penalty. He could take the whole thing. Just get up. He staggered upright, spitting onto the track, and tore forward into the pack.

He could barely see--his eyes were watering and something was dripping off his chin--he bit down on his mouthguard and hopped between blockers, ripping through the wall, tearing through the pack-as soon as there was no one ahead of him, he called the jam.

“Five unanswered points by Abby Cadabra, all while bleeding!” said the announcer. “This is the kind of derby I came here to see!”

Bleeding? His mouth was full of tangy liquid. He spat again. Huh. Spit wasn’t normally that color. Taako swayed, suddenly dizzy. Sloane and Julia appeared under his shoulders.

“Damn, Abby,” Julia muttered.

Taako watched with interest as blood dripped onto his jersey. “Teach her to try that shit again,” he mumbled.

“Shit, dude, it sure will,” chuckled Sloane, sliding the panty off his helmet.

They sat him down on the bench. He heard Lucretia’s voice saying, “Reset quick, everyone on board. Robocop, you’re jammer. Sour Scream is still out of play.”

“Got it.”

His world was soft and swirlly. It was pleasant. Suddenly Merle was there in front of him, wiping off his face with a rag.

“Ow!” Taako pulled away, fending him off feebly, the renewed pain bringing everything back into sharp focus. “Get away, gerblin!”

“Quit squirming,” Merle muttered. “You’ll make yourself look more like a prizefighter.”

“Prizefighter?” Taako demanded, looking back at him in horror. “What the fuck did she do to my face?”

“Hold still and let me find out!” Merle cupped his hand behind Taako’s helmet and gingerly felt the bridge of his nose. He flinched. Fuck that hurt.

“Leave me alone, you quack!” He pushed Merle off, and gingerly touched his nose himself. Ow ow OW!

“Yep, you’re gonna have a crooked nose, pretty boy.”

Taako’s blood ran cold. “What? No!” Taako wailed. “Oh god. My-my face!” What the fuck, Lup? This how you do me?

“Hey, listen.” Merle slapped the side of his helmet to stop Taako’s cries of anguish. “I can fix it, splint it up for you.”

“What are you waiting for, Sawbones?? Fucking do it!”
“If I splint it,” said Merle, “I can’t let you play.”

Taako froze. Merle waited. He looked over as Noelle reached the pack a second time, and Lup finally got off the bench to join the jam. Her first move was to body slam Hurley to the ground and send Sloane and Carey teetering to either side as she burst through the pack.

“All right, don’t fix it,” mumbled Taako. He sniffled a little. Shit. That hurt too. He wiped away a couple goddamn tears. It was like he was in fuckin’ junior high again and crying behind the athletics shed. He’d been punched then too, but for an entirely different reason. And she had been the one to come find him and sit with him after she’d heard.

This time definitely hurt more. And not just because his nose was ruined. He watched Noelle call off the jam as Lup made it back to the pack the second time. She decidedly wasn’t looking at him now.

Merle handed him an icepack and some gauze. “Put the gauze up your nose and stay out until the second half.”

Kravitz jumped down to the rail as soon as the jam was over. When Merle handed off the ice pack, Kravitz called out, “Taako!”

Taako lolled his head sideways to look at Kravitz out of one eye, then quickly snapped his head back. He held out a hand flat. “No, darling, don’t look, I’m hideous!”

“Taako! Are you okay?”

Taako nodded. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Kravitz exhaled. “Be careful, please?”

“You know me, Kravvy, I’m always careful.” Taako lifted the icepack and a few drips of blood crept past the gauze in his nose, adding to an already gruesome bloodstain. He shot Kravitz a finger gun. Kravitz’ eyes widened.

“Oh god.”

The whistle blew to start the next jam, and Kravitz retreated reluctantly to his seat.
Heads up: this chapter contains ableism. Take care of yourselves.
<3, K+H

“Unacceptable,” said the Rad Robes’ coach.

“What do you want from us, John?” demanded Rack Attack. “They’re laughing at us.”

“So make them quit laughing,” snapped Lup. “Go after the gimp.”

The players looked to the coach. He chuckled. “Oh, I like that. Do it.”

“But what if you had really really good hearing?” asked Angus.

“It might help, but I’m still not sure I could play,” said Antonia. “I’m not Daredevil.”

Steven brightened. “Do you read comics, Antonia?”

“I do, although I confess I’m more of a DC girl.”

“I’m a fan of Spiderman, myself,” said Steven.

“How do you read comics?” asked Klaarg, with some surprise.

“She has a big magnifying glass,” said Johann, clearly annoyed. Antonia suppressed a smile.

“I bet you like comics, huh, Angus?” said Steven.

“Never read any, sir!”

“Oh, we ought to fix that,” said Steven, nudging Antonia.

She nodded. “Remind me to lend you some Batman, bud.”

They were interrupted by the voice of the announcer. “The second half of this stunning bout will begin shortly! Please take your seats. Don’t worry, you’ll only need the edge.”

“I honestly thought this would be a tougher bout,” said Klaarg.

“I told you, the B.o.B. has to win,” said Johann, although less enthusiastically than before.
“It’s not over yet, sirs!” said Angus.

“Looks like our team captains are saving their strength, with Brady Punch on jammer for the Robes and Abby Cadabra back from the brink for the Bureau,” boomed the announcer.

“I can’t believe he’s playing,” said Kravitz. “His nose is surely broken.”

“That’s derby, friend,” said Klaarg.

The whistle blew and the jammers took off. Taako was easily outpacing this Brady Punch. They reached the pack, then all was swarming confusion, Johann trying to keep Antonia up to speed--

*Crack.*

The sound seemed to echo. Antonia jerked her head. “What was *that*?”

“I don’t know… I can’t see…” Johann mumbled.

The refs called off the jam. All the Robes blockers seemed to be piled in one place. Where was everyone--Hurley, Sloane, Killian, Carey, Taako… who was missing?

“It’s Miss Noelle!” cried Angus in anguish.

Roswell shooed blockers away, revealing Noelle, crumpled over her leg, the prosthetic one. It was broken in half.

“Oo, Robocop seems to have suffered a malfunction!” said the announcer.

“It’s her leg, her skate leg,” Johann was saying. “They snapped it right off!”

“Oh my god,” said Antonia.

She was holding the broken end, skate wheels still spinning, with a look of blank dismay.

Julia bolted onto the track, glaring down the Robes blocker that she was pretty sure was responsible. She held out a hand to Noelle.

Noelle took it, allowed herself to be hauled up, but didn’t look away from the leg in her hand. Julia got under her shoulder and took her weight. “You balancing okay?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“We’re going to the bench, okay?” Julia led her to the center and sat her down. Lucretia and Magnus waited nearby.

Lucretia massaged her forehead. “You don’t happen to have another leg?”

“This was my only prototype,” said Noelle, gripping the end of the leg in both hands now. “I d--I don’t understand, it’s carbon fiber.”

“Maybe we can splint it,” Magnus said. “I’ve got some duct tape in my van--”

“The tensile strength will be totally wrong, it’ll snap as soon as I lean on it,” Noelle muttered.

“How…” She finally looked at Julia, holding out the leg, her eyes filled with tears. “It was *carbon*
Julia felt helpless. “Noelle, I’m--”

“B.o.B!” called Roswell. “The jam’s going to begin!”

“Give us a minute, ref!” Lucretia called back.

Roswell shook their head. “She’s not injured. I can’t.”

Magnus nodded to Julia. “Go. We’ve got this. Let Taako be jammer a bit longer, they’ll need you on pivot.”

Julia took a quick breath. “Noelle? Hun? I’m going to take the panty, okay?”

Noelle was holding one hand over her mouth. She nodded.

Julia took the striped panty and skated toward her team--her team, with Carey and Hurley as shocked as she was, Sloane staring in incomprehension, Killian full of rage, Taako still bleeding--as behind her, Noelle burst into tears. Julia gritted her teeth and shot a death glare at Lup, over on the Robes’ bench.

Lup blew her a kiss.

“Just like that, she can’t play?” Antonia demanded.

“Not unless she’s got another custom leg lying around,” said Klaarg.

“This does not bode well,” said Johann darkly.

“Poor Miss Noelle,” said Angus.

Forty-one minutes in--
Rad Robes: 78
Bureau of Badass: 68

Julia grabbed Taako’s arm as he skated back toward the jammer line. “You good?”

“Peachy,” said Taako, with a grin. He had blood on his mouthguard.

“You’ve done like ten straight jams,” she said. “Do you need to trade off?”

“They need you on pivot,” he said, shaking her off.

“You’re getting tired,” she muttered.

“You’re getting tired,” he said, and skated away.

She huffed and joined the pack, Killian on one side and a Rad Robes blocker on the other. The blocker next to her snickered. “How’s Tiny Tim?”
Killian turned with a roar.

Julia threw up her hands to stop Killian. “No! We need you.”

Killian froze, muscles twitching. The blocker shrugged and smiled.

Killian settled back into her stance with a growl. Julia did the same, troubled. The crack of Noelle’s leg kept echoing in her head.

The whistle blew, and the pack rolled forward. Their wall was weak; the jammers would tear right through. And here they came, Taako hot on their jammer’s tail, coming up on Carey.

“Diablo! Inside!” Julia shouted, and as soon as the words left her mouth, she was horrified, because outside, she’d meant outside--

Carey swung a hip in the wrong direction. The Robes jammer blew past, and Taako went down.

The boys in the stands groaned. “She hit the wrong jammer!” Johann said, for Antonia’s sake.

“No!” Antonia cried. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s back on his feet, but he’s way behind now,” said Johann.

“Don’t tell me anymore,” said Antonia, squeezing her eyes shut.

They watched in sullen silence until the end of the jam.

“That’s five points for the Robes and the B.o.B. is lagging seriously behind,” said the announcer.

Taako snatched the panty off his helmet and held it out to Julia. “If you wanted to be jammer that bad, you could just say so.”

“I’m sorry, it was a mistake,” said Julia.

“Don’t worry about it.” He shoved the panty into her hands. “Who’s pivot?”

“Uhh…” Julia glanced at the center for some guidance, but Lucretia was talking through something with Noelle, and Magnus was nowhere to be found. “Who’s played it before?”

“You traded off with Killian before Noelle came,” Taako reminded her impatiently. “I’ll give her the panty, get your ass to the jammer line.”

Julia shot him a glare. “Can you just--”

“Just what?” Taako demanded.

“Just--we’re on the same team, Taako,” she hissed.

“We’re kinda falling to pieces,” he snapped, gesturing to Noelle. “Literally. We need our captain.”

“I’m trying,” she said, more desperately than she meant to.

“Try harder,” he said, snatching the pivot panty off her helmet and skating away.
“Found ‘em,” Magnus said, holding out two forearm crutches to Noelle. “I put your car keys in your bag. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She took the crutches, fitted her hook onto the handle of one, and stood up, stooped because of the height of her skate. The broken pieces of her prosthetic lay beside her on the bench.

“We could get you your other leg, your normal one,” said Magnus.

“I can’t skate in that thing,” she said.

“Could you skate like this?” asked Lucretia.

She sat down and adjusted the height of the crutches. “Not well, but I think so. I’ll be slow.”

“No more jamming, I guess,” sighed Magnus.

They watched the jam end--four points for the Robes, two for the B.o.B.--and Lucretia waved over a ref with sequins sewn into his hat.

“We’d like to approve our plan with you, ref,” said Lucretia, gesturing to Noelle, who was standing now, testing her movement.

He considered. “I’m not sure. Aren’t those technically considered weapons?”

“It’s not… c’mon man, it’s crutches!” scoffed Magnus.

“I’m not sure that’s allowed either,” said the ref. “Er… here. Roswell?”

The next jam was put on hold. First Roswell and the ref discussed, and then the other two refs were brought over.

“Accommodation shouldn’t be an issue like this,” said Lucretia, throwing out a hand.

“You have no idea,” said Noelle.

Roswell called Avi over from his post on one side of the rink. The rest of the team joined Noelle in the center.

“Good to see you back on your feet,” said Killian, nudging Noelle.

Noelle sighed. “Well. Foot.”

Hurley snickered. Sloane whacked her shoulder, but Noelle smiled.

They watched as Avi listened. He and Roswell exchanged a few words, and then Avi came over to talk to them. He was sweating, a lot.
“Hey, um. I figured I should tell you myself.” He swallowed. With skates, all of them but Hurley were taller than him. “I can’t let you play with crutches.”

“C’mon, Avi!” said Magnus. “It’s not any different than a prosthetic!”

“It is, though,” he said. “They’re in your hands, for one thing. They’re not weight-bearing all the time and there are no guidelines if you hit someone with them, because it’s not technically a weapon and not part of your body.” It looked like every word hurt coming out of him. “I’m sorry, Noelle.”

The entire B.o.B. protested all at once, and Avi’s eyes went huge, but Noelle held up a crutch to silence them. “No, no, stop. Stop.”

The team quieted. She pushed herself forward, took hold of one crutch in the other hand, and held out her hook. “I understand. Thanks, ref.”

Avi exhaled and shook the hook. “Good luck, Robocop. Good luck, B.o.B.”

He left, and Noelle turned back to her team.

“Ugh!” Julia clenched her fists. “This sucks!”

Noelle sighed and resituated her crutches. “I guess, then, y’all better get your shit together.”

They all looked up in surprise.

Lucretia spoke up. “She’s right. Quit playing like it’s the end of the bout. Ram, I want you on jammer. The plan’s the same as it’s always been. Make them look stupid.”


“You’re good at that, Ram, otherwise we wouldn’t make you do it,” said Magnus, as Taako handed off the star panty.

She grunted and slid it on her helmet.

Lucretia glanced at the other team setting up. “One more thing. Jenicide, kiss your girlfriend.”

Sloane blinked in surprise. “Yes ma’am!” She immediately took a knee, grabbed Hurley by the jersey, and laid a kiss on her.

“Ow ow!” called Carey, and the team joined her in catcalling.

When they broke apart, panting, Hurley eked out, “Kissing during a bout? You’re in troubleeeee…”

“I won’t tell Coach if you won’t,” said Sloane. “Let’s do this.”

“Hell yeah!” said Hurley.

“Hell yeah!” repeated Noelle. “Don’t make me come out there! Fuckin’ avenge me!”

The team glided back out on the track.

Noelle heaved a sigh and sat back down on the bench. Lucretia sat down next to her. “Good work. They needed to know you’re okay.”

“Do you want me to get your other leg?” said Magnus.
Noelle flicked her good leg. “Can’t skate with it, and I’m not taking off this skate.”

“You’re making that up, Johann Larsen,” said Antonia.

“No, no, it’s true!” said Angus.

“Swear to god, she did a handspring on the track,” said Johann, eyes glued to the bout. “Like she didn’t get much air. It is Hurley.”

“Be nice,” said Klaarg, swatting the back of his head.

“Ow!” Johann scowled.

“Why.” Antonia stuck out her hand. “Why did she do a handspring on the track?”

“Listen I don’t know, she could have just skated through the gap, but it was amazing,” said Johann.

“I don’t think she was fast enough to skate through the gap,” said Steven thoughtfully.

“You’re telling me it was easier for her to do a goddamn handspring—sorry, Angus—than it was for her to skate in a straight line?” Antonia demanded.

“It was more of an arc than a straight line,” Angus said.

“This is more like it,” said Klaarg. “Good to see their morale is back.”

“Will it be enough?” asked Steven.
Fifty minutes in--ten minutes left--
Rad Robes: 91
Bureau of Badass: 83

“The refs are letting our players have a two-minute break before the final few jams of the bout,” called the announcer. “It’s only fair, since the B.o.B. has been fielding the same six players since the half. These ladies have been working hard to catch up with the Rad Robes. Will it be enough?”

The rink filled with cheers.

“Or will the Rad Robes triumph?”

There were cheers, but now there were boos too.

Julia looked up from her water bottle. “Who are they booing?”

“The team that took out a crippled girl, maybe?” said Noelle. She was pacing, using her crutches like oars. “The whole rink is on your side, and y’all are playing like a bunch of ninnies.”

Killian dragged her hand across her forehead. “It’s hard to focus when they’re out there calling us names and shit.”

“I thought you weren’t bothered by names,” said Taako.

“They’re not calling me names,” snapped Killian.

“It’s me, isn’t it?” Noelle whipped around to face Killian. “What’d they call me?”

Killian set her jaw and shook her head.

“What did they call me, Killian?”

Julia spoke up. “It was Tiny Tim, Noelle.”

Noelle’s eyes flashed. She whirled to face the Rad Robes bench. “TINY TIM?” she shouted. “YOU THINK THAT’S ORIGINAL?”

Julia and Carey both jumped up to shush her, move her away. She shouted over their shoulders, “I GET MORE ORIGINAL INSULTS FROM SECOND GRADERS AND MY GRANDMA!”

“Noelle!” shouted Julia. “Calm down!”

She started screaming something in the most Southern Yiddish Julia had ever heard. Julia forced her down on the bench. “Shut up!”

“No!” snapped Noelle. “When did I become the one with the thickest skin? We know they’re insulting me. Of course they’re insulting me! They’ve always insulted me! All of us! That’s what
they do! Why does it bother you now?"

“They broke your leg!” said Carey.

“They can’t break what I don’t have!” Noelle shot back. “I can make a new leg. What I can’t do is convince the Rad Robes that even snapping my prosthesis can’t beat us. And Jule, I’m begging you, don’t you dare tell them they can. Don’t you dare lose this bout.”

Julia nodded fiercely, feeling the weight of Noelle’s command settle heavily on her shoulders.

“Time’s up!” Roswell shouted, looking at their watch. The Rad Robes rolled onto the track, grinning at each other and giving high-fives. Julia straightened the panty on her helmet and followed her team onto the track. She could see it starting to form in all their eyes: resignation.

Julia just happened to look up into the stands, and she met Angus’ gaze. She tried to smile encouragingly, but she could tell that he could see it too.

Angus frowned and thought quickly. The team needed help or they were going to lose, but obviously he couldn’t just jump onto the track. He looked over at Antonia as Johann explained something to her.

Wait. That was it. Johann.

Angus jumped to his feet and stepped up onto his bleacher in the front row, facing back towards the crowd. Steven looked curiously at him as he brought two hands to his mouth.

“I hereby call this session to order!!” he shouted as loud as he could, gaining the attention of everyone sitting with him, and several other strangers sitting nearby. Antonia and Johann looked up at him, puzzled, but Klaarg looked delighted.

“Who! Are! We!” Angus shouted.

“The B.O.B.!!” Klaarg yelled back. But he was the only one who did.

Angus looked impatiently at Steven, Kravitz and the rest, and he repeated, “WHO. ARE. WE.”

“The B.O.B.!” they shouted back, catching the attention of even more spectators.

“WHO! ARE! WE!” Angus and Klaarg shouted together.

“THE B.O.B!!” the whole section returned. Klaag began banging a rhythm on the bleachers as the chant started to take off.

“WHO ARE WE!? THE B.O.B. WHO ARE WE!? THE B.O.B. WHO ARE WE?!”

It spread across the stands like wildfire, every repetition growing louder and louder. The bleachers were shaking and booming as everyone stomped along. Even the announcer couldn’t be heard over the din.

Back down on the track, Julia looked around as the stands were cheering. Cheering for them. She looked over and Lucretia, Magnus, and Noelle had joined in too.

“WHO ARE WE!? THE B.O.B. WHO ARE WE!? THE B.O.B.”
Julia caught the eye of her blockers. Carey was grinning wickedly. Sloane rocked back and forth on her skates to the beat. Killian cricked her neck side to side and settled lower into her powerful squat. Hurley was chanting along.

“WHO ARE WE!? THE B.O.B.!”

Julia looked twenty feet behind her and met Taako’s fierce gaze. He was leaning down low, and looked ready to kill. The resignation was gone, burned away into glorious determination and passion. They could do this. They would do this.

“Who are we?!” Julia shouted.

“THE B.O.B.!” her team returned as the whistle blew.

“The final countdown! This is it folks, and Abby Cadabra seems to have found her feet again—”

“Taako’s going… so fast,” Johann choked out, trying to stop crying from the chant.

“Look at ‘em go!” shouted Klaarg.

“You can take a break from narrating,” said Antonia, patting Johann on the back.

“Gotta… see this through… can’t let you miss—holy shit, Killian and Carey—”

The crowd exploded.

“Killian just spun Carey in a circle, took out half the blockers!” squeaked Johann. “Taako’s just—just sailing on through!”

“Go, Abby, go!” shouted Kravitz.

“What about Sour Scream?” Antonia demanded.

“She’s still walled up—Taako’s almost back around the track—he’s lapping her, Tony, he’s gonna lap her!”

Noelle rolled back and forth in front of the bench, watching as Taako looped back around. Lup broke free of the pack and started around the track just in time for Sloane to slam a blocker aside for Taako. He sailed past Lup, arced his arms gracefully, and hit his hips to call off the jam.

Noelle threw down a crutch with a metallic clatter. “YEAH! SUCK IT!”

The crowd went wild. “Don’t call it a comeback, folks, they’ve been here for years!” said the announcer. “Five points for the B.o.B. in a beautiful grand slam!”

Noelle turned on her skate toward the other bench. “Hey Rad Robes! Hey!”

“Noelle, don’t—” Magnus began.

She waited until one or two of them were looking before throwing out her arm. “GOD BLESS US, EVERY ONE, MOTHERFUCKERS!”
“It’s anyone’s bout at this point. All the B.o.B. needs now is to one-up the Rad Robes, and they’ve been giving it their best shot. This could be the final jam of the bout.”

The team was given just a few seconds to huddle.

“Any chance you see, you take,” said Julia. “Bring back team sweet flips if you have to.”

“Got it,” said Killian, and Carey grinned.

“Abby, you beautiful man, do what you have to do,” said Julia. “You know they’ll be playing Lup.”

“She won’t even be able to catch me,” said Taako. He still had blood in his mouthguard, and now his nose was swollen and his eyes were beginning to black. He looked ghastly.

“Good. Jenicide, Ram, the three of us are a wall. Nothing gets past.”

“Got it,” said Hurley.

“Robocop, anything you want to add?”

“I love y’all so much.”

“We love you too. Now are we ready?”

“Hell yeah!” said her team.

“Who are we?”

“The B.o.B.!”

“I’m so proud of all of you,” said Magnus.

“Me too,” said Lucretia.

Julia’s heart swelled. She grinned. “Let’s go.”

“Are they lined up yet?” said Antonia.

“Yeah, yeah, everyone’s ready,” said Johann. “Kravitz is already down there taking pictures.”

“Oh my god, I’m so nervous,” she said.

“Do you think they can pull it off, Angus?” said Steven.

“Sir, from what I’ve seen today, I’m pretty sure anything’s possible!”

The whistle blew, and the jam began.
“Taako’s going crazy fast again,” said Johann. “He’s way outpacing Sour Scream, but I think the Robes know, because… yeah, their blockers are doing the thing they did before, all converging on one spot.”

“Does Taako see it?” Antonia demanded.

“I don’t think so, he’s heading right for it, oh god--oh, but Julia sees it, she’s saying something… oh my god.”

“What?!”

“Oh my god.”

Magnus watched in horror as Carey leapt into Killian’s cupped hands, and Killian flung her up. Carey flipped in the air and landed right in the midst of the three blockers who were about to hit Taako, taking the hit from all of them.

The sound was colossal, all clatter and thud as all four players went down in front of Taako. Taako took a flying leap and sailed over the knot of people, landing gracefully on the other side in the midst of the pack.

Magnus’ hand flew to his head. “They--they’re insane! They’re out of their damn minds!”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Noelle was banging one of her crutches on the ground.

“This is why we don’t do team sweet flips anymore,” said Lucretia. Her tone was level, but she was wringing her whistle’s lanyard in her hands.

“Is she okay?” Magnus demanded. “Are they okay?”

“Carey’s only been injured once by these shenanigans,” said Lucretia, and sure enough, Carey was pulling herself to her feet far in advance of the other blockers, bolting to catch up to the pack.

They watched as Taako broke free of the pack. Unfortunately, thanks to the hole left by Carey, so did Lup.

_Don’t think. Don’t think. Just skate. Push it push it push--_ Taako could feel Lup’s eyes boring into his head. He didn’t have to see her to know that the look meant _murder_. _Fasterfasterfaster_. From somewhere he found a remaining breath of energy. He put on an extra burst of speed and didn’t look back.

“Did he make it around yet?” Antonia was gripping Johann’s arm for dear life.

“Ow, ow, ow, Tony, nails!”

She released him. “Sorry, sorry--”

“Here, he just hit the pack!”
“He’s walled in,” said Magnus.

“He’ll make it,” said Noelle.

“Lup’s almost there.”

“He’ll make it!”

Julia crouched lower, Hurley and Sloane to her left. Lup was coming from the inside, Taako was swooping in outside, toward Carey and Killian. Good.

Killian shoved Carey into a blocker. Taako passed. That was one point.

Another blocker tried to hit him with her shoulder. Taako skipped deftly out of the way. That was two points.

Here came Lup, careening into the pack. Killian and Carey went for her—she ducked low, crouching under Killian’s legs and emerging on the other side. Two points.

The announcer was bellowing. The crowd was screaming. Julia tuned it out, laid a hand on Hurley’s shoulder, shouted, “Behind you!”

Hurley hung back and booty-blocked automatically, but Lup skidded out of her way and passed her. Three points.

Julia shot another glance up at Taako, who was walled up behind three blockers, trying every trick to get past—skip around, outrun, jump over—being pushed back every time.

Behind her, Sloane was pressing against Lup, shoulder-to-shoulder. Sloane could hold her. Julia knew what she had to do.

She shouted, “Abby! Pass it!” and took off.

The whole world seemed to slow down. She put on every bit of speed she had, reached out a hand, hoping, praying that Taako had heard and understood—

He glanced over his shoulder, pulled the panty off his helmet, and slapped it into her outstretched hand.

Yes.

The world regained its usual speed, and with one smooth motion, Julia slipped on the panty, ducked toward the inside of the track, and took off into the open ahead of the pack.

_Run down the clock run down the clock run down the clock_

The whistle blew. The jam ended. The rink erupted.


The relief and triumph in Julia’s gut welled out of her throat into a roar. She sailed around the track, her team swarming behind her, screaming, slapping her on the back and helmet. The whole rink was in an uproar, every fan on their feet.
Julia skidded into the center and collided with Magnus, grabbing his legs and lifting him into the air. “We won!”

She could feel his breathless laughter against her shoulder, where his stomach had landed, but if he responded she couldn’t hear over the cacophony of the crowd. She dropped him to his feet and pulled his face to hers and kissed him, and released him, and shouted again, “We won!”

He said something--she couldn’t hear what--and grinned.

“You won!” Magnus shouted back, and grinned. God, the whole place was losing it--the speakers were blasting “We Are the Champions,” Killian had Carey on one shoulder and Noelle on the other, Sloane and Hurley were mobbing Lucretia with a hug, Taako had made his way to where Kravitz was hanging, camera in hand, halfway over the track’s rail and was very carefully kissing him--

And Julia, his Julia, here in front of him, was pulling off her helmet, and she was covered in sweat and had tiny curls stuck to her forehead, and she looked at him with such euphoric triumph and god, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

The song changed, and it was the song, their song. Listen, baby… ain’t no mountain high, ain’t no valley low…

Magnus heard the roar that was their family and friends celebrating with them, and he made the decision even as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“Julia, will you marry me?”

She squinted. “What? I can’t hear--”

“Ohh my GOOOOOOOOODOOD!” crowed Carey from her perch on Killian’s shoulder. Noelle squealed. Killian’s eyes went huge.

Julia was bewildered by their reactions. “What? I don’t--”

“OH MY GOD!!!” Hurley shouted, jumping away from Lucretia and shaking Julia by the arm. “CONGRATS!”

“Wait!” Julia tried to say, as more and more people pressed in to celebrate and the cheering grew louder. “Magnus, what did you sa--”

“EVERYONE! QUIET!” Lucretia’s commanding voice cut through the din, bringing the celebration to a grinding halt. Their attention turned to her, towering over everyone as she stood on the bench. The song still played in the background. From that day on, I made a vow. I'll be there when you want me, someway somehow. “Magnus, I believe you had something to ask Julia.”

Magnus turned to face her, and swallowed hard. He could feel the entire rink holding its breath, watching him, but his nerves left as quickly as they came when he looked at her hopeful face. Yes, this was absolutely better than anything he could have planned, and goodness, how thankful he was that life had brought him here to this place, these people, this moment.

Well if he was doing this, he’d better do it. Magnus dropped to one knee, took her hand.

“Julia Waxman--”
Her other hand slapped over her mouth, her eyes like saucers. Dammit, the ring, the ring was still at Leon’s getting resized—he patted his pocket for something, anything--

“Sir!”

Magnus looked up. Angus pushed through the front row of the crowd, ducked under the rail, slid down the track, and offered a closed fist to Magnus. “Here! Here!”

He held out his hand and Angus dropped in a green string ring.

Magnus grinned, at the ring, at Angus, and then at Julia, and held it up to her. She still had her hand over her mouth, but now there were tears in her eyes as well as his.

“Julia Waxman, will you marry me?”

She nodded, the hand sliding away from her face, “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“Yes?” he said, standing up.

“Yes!” she shouted, and for the second time that day their friends and the crowd exploded in cheers as Magnus slipped the little ring on her finger. She wiped her eye with the heel of her hand and threw herself into his arms, and kissed him.

And in that sparkling clear moment, the world was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I’m sure you’ve seen the new chapter count; we have what the kids call “no chill.” We’ll be taking two weeks off while one of us crosses an ocean, but we’ll be back October 16th with tons of new stuff, including: awkward family dinners, music lessons, weed brownies, denim scientists, angst (sorry), and, starting in the very next chapter, LUP. In the meantime, we’ll have a little extra content on our tumblr, bureauofbadass. You guys are the best readers we could ask for. Thank you. <3, K+H
The party at Refuge was a madhouse. Everyone wanted a piece of the team, and especially of Magnus and Julia. Angus didn’t go home and nobody said a word about it; he sat on the bar beaming and drinking juice that Taako was pretty sure Magnus was paying for, if he managed to pay his bill tonight. Even if he didn’t, there was no way Ren wasn’t making a solid profit off the evening; the place was packed. Everywhere he looked there were friends that had practically become family.

Taako tore himself away from some fans and made his way back to Kravitz, who was sitting with Johann for some reason, both of them facing the crowd and leaning on the bar.

“There you are,” said Kravitz, spreading out an arm on the bartop. Taako fit himself into the crook. “How’s your nose?”

“Hurts like a motherfuck,” said Taako, grinning. “One hundred percent worth it.”

“You look like a ghost,” said Johann. “Like you’re going to tell me to avenge you or something.”

“That’s very flattering, thank you,” scoffed Taako. “Krav, will you still love me now that I’m hideous?”

“You’re no such thing,” said Kravitz solemnly.

“Oh, no,” said Johann, backtracking. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Cool your jets, music man, it’s okay,” said Taako, chuckling a little.

Kravitz gestured with his drink. “I was just saying to Johann that he should come bowling with us.”

Johann looked embarrassed, a thing Taako had never seen him be before. “He was saying it was kind of exclusive? But I think I fit the criteria.”

He said it with such seriousness that Taako snorted, which hurt. “Ow. Yeah, sure thing, my dude.”

The phone rang behind the bar. Ren picked it up. “This is Refuge.”

“I won’t be like, a third wheel or anything?” asked Johann.

“Johann, you’ll be a seventh wheel,” said Taako with a grin. “It’s not so bad, that was me for the longest time.”

“Hey Taako, I’ve got a call for you?” said Ren, holding up the phone.

“Who from?”

“Can I get a name?” said Ren. She paused, then made a face. “I told you kids to quit prank calling me. Cut it out or I’ll call the cops.” She slammed down the phone.

“Oh, I get it, some kid calls for Taco, thinks they’re being funny,” said Kravitz.
“It’s a new one on me,” she said. “Usually they’re a little more creative.”

“What’d they say?” asked Johann.

“Lup, as in ‘Chalupa.’ What kind of idiot—”

“Ren.” The blood felt frozen in Taako’s veins. “Hit redial.”

“But…” she trailed off when she saw the look on his face, pushed the button and handed him the phone.

It rang once, twice, three times. Then someone picked up. “Hello?”

“Lup?” said Taako.

The other two watched him listen, his face deadly serious. “You don’t have to… yeah.” He paused. “Where are you?” And then, “I’ll be right there.” He handed the phone back to Ren, eyes searching. “Krav, can I borrow your car? I’m… not sure when I’ll be back.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, digging out his keys and looking concerned. “It’s still parked over by the rink… are you all right? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot?” He took the keys and kissed him, distractedly. “I’ll tell you everything later, I swear, but this is not something I can wait on.”

“Okay,” said Kravitz, still puzzled. “Call me? If you need anything?”

Showing no indication that he’d heard, Taako pushed through the crowd to the door.

Taako pulled up to the deserted corner by the Arby’s and the gym. There was the payphone. Where was she?

There. Leaning in the lee of the Arby’s. Oh boy. Taako shut off the car. He sat there for another moment, then gathered up all his willpower to leave it.

Approach with caution, that was the ticket. How long had it been? More than ten years, god.

She didn’t look up. He expected that. He leaned up against the wall next to her. “Hey, Munch.”

Her expression didn’t change as she said, “Hey, Flip.” She stared off into the night for a while, moving her hands in the pockets of her jacket. Taako tried not to shiver in the chill. He was still wearing his derby skirt and fishnets.

“I wondered if you recognized me,” she said finally.

“It took me a while,” he admitted. “You look different.”

A small smile flitted across her face, just for a moment. “Hormones are magical things.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“…Did you recognize me?” Taako asked.

“Almost right away.”
Taako shook his head. “You didn’t say anything for two seasons.”

“I thought you were still mad at me.” Her tone was stiff.

“Maybe I am. I haven’t decided yet.”

Her mouth tightened. She said nothing.

He rested his head back against the wall. God, his face hurt.

The question was right there. He shouldn’t care anymore, but no, he had to know. “How are mom and dad?”

“I don’t know,” she said, bitterly. “They kicked me out not long after they did you.”

Taako looked at her with alarm. “How’d they find out?”

“Same way they did you. Someone at school outed me. Same guy, too.”

“Fucking Greg,” Taako snarled.

“Yeah, fucking Greg,” she said, venom and bitterness dripping from every word. “So Mom and Dad offered me the same deal they did you.” She threw out a hand. “They didn’t even try to understand, they thought I was gay too.”

Taako didn’t know what to say, dammit, because all he felt now for Lup was pity, and he’d been where she was, feeling what she felt right now, which mostly consisted of pleading, of god, please god, not pity. Anything but pity. He choked it back and remained silent.

“I tried to find you,” she said softly, after a minute.

“Didn’t try very hard,” he muttered. “Check the nearest park bench.”

She looked at him, finally, with a look of absolute fury. “I did. I was sleeping there.”

His eyebrows shot up. “When?”

“A few months after you, I told you.”

“You must have missed me. I was… I was in a shelter by then.”

“You were okay?” she snapped.

“I wouldn’t call it okay,” he snapped back. “I was trying to survive.”

“So was I!” she said. “I just thought it’d be easier with you, and when I couldn’t find you, I thought--” She stopped herself, looked away.

“You thought I was dead?” said Taako quietly, feeling strangely indignant.

“Or wasting away somewhere. In a hospital. On a street corner. Alone.”


“Nice of you to let me know, once you figured out it was me.”

“Nice of you to say something, like, I don’t know, hey long lost twin, it’s me, your sister, here in
your roller rink! Good to see you and also sorry for being a jackass! Glad you’re alive!” Over ten years’ worth of frustration and hurt poured out of Taako. “I thought you were ignoring me this whole time! I thought you never wanted to see me again after I left!”

“Why the hell would you think that? I knew you were gay before you did!”

“And I knew you were a girl when no one else did! If anyone understood, if anyone spoke up for me, it was gonna be you, and you didn’t say a fucking word .”

“I was scared,” said Lup through clenched teeth, but her voice sounded hoarse all the same.

“Wow, I wonder what that feels like,” said Taako sarcastically.

“Yeah, I get it, you were homeless first. Heartbreaking.”

“That’s not--that’s not the fucking point ! We were a package deal and you left me alone!”

“You think I didn’t think about that?” she spat. “You think I didn’t regret that? You think I don’t still?”

“Well damn, Lup, how much longer were you gonna wait before you said anything?” Taako demanded. “Two years not long enough for you?”

She crossed her arms and looked away, glowering at the ground. He deflated, just a little. She wanted to apologize, he realized. She wasn’t going to, but she wanted to.

“This is why I didn’t want to talk to you,” she said, quieter now.

“...So why did you?”

She didn’t answer for a long moment. Taako waited.

“I--...I saw you kissing that guy, when you won,” she said finally. “Black guy. With the dreads.”

“Yeah, I’m familiar,” he said dryly.

“You seem happy.”

He considered this. It wasn’t something he thought about often. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

“Good,” she said. She seemed like she meant it. “What’s his name?”

“Kravitz.”

She snorted. “At least he’s pretty.”

He considered her for a moment, then asked, “How about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you happy?”

Her shoulders seemed to be relaxing. “Getting there, I think.”

“You’re doing the… dressing like…” Taako gestured to her outfit, which was a dusty pair of hip-hugger jeans and a crop top. “I don’t know the right words for this.”
“I transitioned,” she said cautiously.

“You like it?”

She thought about this for a moment. “Good days and bad. Mostly yes. Derby helps.”


“Jule Be Sorry?” She shrugged. “I don’t know. She annoys me.”

“Used to annoy me too,” said Taako, smiling wryly. “She’s good, though.”

“She’s really fun to get a rise out of, I know that. Easy to psych out.”

“Except when she’s clobbering your face.”

“I admit, there was a line there, and I crossed it.” She looked at him. “Sorry about your nose, by the way.”

He shrugged. “At least it’ll match yours again.”

They fell into silence. The years apart seemed to yawn between them.

“Do you wanna come to Refuge with me?” he said, cautiously.

“Where all your B.o.B. losers hang out?” she shot back, not unkindly. “Hell no.”

He was instantly reminded of so many similar conversations they’d had from years ago, though then it had been theatre friends and Steak N’ Shake. It was good to know that at least one thing hadn’t changed in twelve years. “Sounds about right. Alternatively, we could order something truly awful from this Arby’s,” he said. “I’m really feeling that liquid cheese shit they do.”

She shook her head. “It’s a long drive home.”

Something in her tone made his heart sink. “I decided, by the way. I’m not mad at you.”

Lup didn’t respond.

“I missed you,” he admitted.

She sighed. “I missed you too. I’m sorry, Taako, I have to go.”

He watched her take a few steps before he leaped to catch up with her, walking backwards in front of her. “Okay, no, this is dumb. Hang on. Can you—can you come over to the car?”

She frowned. “Why?”

“’Cuz Kravitz keeps pen and paper in his glovebox like a grandma, and I want you to at least have my number so Ren doesn’t think you’re a prank caller again. Here.” Taako stumbled over to Kravitz’s Malibu, yanked at the passenger door, unlocked the passenger door, ripped open that and then the glovebox, and scribbled something down on the notepad inside. Leaving the car door and the glovebox open behind him, he scrambled back over to Lup, who was watching with just the slightest hint of amusement.

“Great job,” she said.
He ripped the piece of paper off the pad. “Here. Take it.”

She did, folding it carefully and putting it in her pocket. Good. “Thanks.”

“Don’t lose it, turdmunch.”

“I won’t, dipflip.” She looked at him, long and hard, and pointed to his outfit. “This is such a look. I can’t believe they let you play.”

“Puh-leeze. They know a good player when they see one.”

She was still frowning. “You’re not transgender too, are you?”

“Nah, I’ll leave that to you. I think this counts as drag.”

Lup shook her head. “It took me a full season to convince the Rad Robes to let me play and you just waltz on in drag.”

That bitterness was back in her tone. Suddenly unsure, Taako shrugged. “The B.o.B.’s good people.”

“Hm.” She didn’t seem convinced.

Taako smiled, just a little. “Maybe you should join us.”

Lup chuckled a little. “I’d rather chew on glass.”

“Nah, I think you’d fit right in, if--”

He was interrupted when she tackled him in a hug, an achingly familiar hug. He melted into it. They hadn’t gotten through it together, but at least they had both made it through. Maybe soon they could work on fixing that first part.

“You’re kinda busty now,” he muttered.

“I’m a late bloomer,” she said.

The laugh started out as a chuckle and graduated to a quaking crotchle in Taako’s gut. He could feel Lup laughing too.

She let go, gave him half a smile. He returned with the other half. And then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's back, back again. BOB is back. Tell a friend.

Welcome to the third act of the story, guys, gals, and non-binary pals! Like Hannah said a couple weeks ago, we have good good stuff in store for you. However, some of it we (@Kaitlyn >.>) are still working on the whole writing bit. We overestimated how quickly we’d continue writing once we started posting, also life Happened. Anyway, it will be a bit of a slower posting schedule. Mondays and Thursdays. That way we have a chance to catch up to you and make sure that this story finishes well. The chapter count will probably increase a little bit as we iron out the necessary scenes and pull things to a
close. If there's a storyline that you think we missed, let us know in the comments. We think we have all our bases covered, but we are only human and in the 10 months since we started there's probably things we've forgotten. This has been such a wonderful journey and we're so grateful for each and every one of you. See you next chapter! <3, H+K
Magnus rinsed the razor off and tapped it against the edge of the sink before putting it into the brown leather toiletry case. He toweled off his face and did a final inspection. He couldn’t bring himself to shave off the sideburns; they just looked too cool. And Julia had insisted that her family wouldn’t care. She knew her extended family better than he did, but he’d do anything to make a better first impression. Steven liked him well enough, of course, but would her grandparents, her cousins? He’d probably better give himself a quick haircut; he was quickly approaching mullet country.

He fished his trusty clippers from under the sink and plugged them in. He clicked the button to turn them on, but nothing happened. He flipped it back and forth a few times, then tried the button on the outlet cover. Still nothing. He sighed.

“Come on,” he muttered. He double checked his hair in the mirror. Yeah, it couldn’t be left alone, not for a long weekend out of town. He zipped up the toiletry case and tossed it into his packed bag. According to the alarm clock, he still had about an hour till Julia was done with class. Just enough time to get a haircut.

Even though he’d lived here for almost a year, Magnus still only knew of one barber shop in town. Faerun Barber Shop was right in the middle of downtown. It even had a spinning barber pole outside as Magnus walked up. A bell jingled over the door, and a Willie Nelson song played on a radio in the corner just barely heard over the buzz of the razors.

“Whatcha need, son?” asked one of the barbers, spreading shaving cream on his customer’s face. The four chairs in the shop were all occupied.

“Just a haircut.”

“Alright, take a seat. It’ll be a few minutes yet.”

Magnus sat at one of the chairs along the right wall, where several other men he didn’t recognize were already sitting. They nodded to him and returned to their conversation. There was a poster above Magnus’ head showcasing the 15 different styles that one could get. He looked at it for a bit; number 7 seemed to be the most similar to the cut he usually did for himself. He tapped his fingers on his knee.

The bell jingled again and a towheaded boy with a dirty face zoomed into the shop, followed behind by a man with long greying hair and a hawaiian shirt.

“Afternoon, Merle,” several of the men in the shop chorused.

Merle waved a hand. “Afternoon.” He smiled.

Magnus waved enthusiastically at him, and Merle nodded. He took a seat a couple chairs down from him. The boy plopped down on the floor in front of him and pulled a red Gameboy from his pocket. It chimed with the start up of a game.

“Magnus scooted down another chair. “I didn’t know you had a son,” he said, nodding down at the kid.
“Yep, yep. This here’s my little fireball, Mookie.”

“...is that short for something?”

“Nope.”

Magnus nodded. This was about how long every conversation he had had with Merle had ever lasted. Maybe it was time to change that.

“So,” Magnus began. “...How’s the rink?”

Merle looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Fine,” he said, after a moment.

“Any plans for Thanksgiving?”

“What interest is it to you?”

“Just trying to make conversation… I thought that’s what people do in barber shops.”

Merle grunted and didn’t answer. But Magnus wasn’t ready to throw in the towel just yet. If Merle didn’t want to talk, he could listen.

“Julia and I are going to her grandparents. They live over in Rockport. Her whole family is going to be there, well, except for her Aunt Josephine and Uncle Arnie. Do you know Arnie? He owns the jazz club down the street.”

“...Can’t say that I do,” Merle replied.

“He seems like a nice guy, haven’t gotten a chance to meet him outside of the club yet. Say, listen Merle, Julia and I are looking to buy a house. You’ve lived in town for a while. Are there neighborhoods that we should avoid?”

“Don’t buy near Raven’s Roost,” one of the barbers chimed in.

“That’s where I live right now,” Magnus replied.

Merle looked up at him. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah? I’ve been there over six months now. It hasn’t been so bad.”

“And how many times have the cops showed up in the last week?”

“Four...” he admitted.

Merle nodded. “Exactly.” He folded his hands and rested them on his stomach. “Actually the neighborhood by the rink’s not bad. The houses are a little older, but well-made.”

“Dad, can I get M&M’s?” Mookie said, looking up from his game.

“Sure, sport.” Merle leaned over and pulled a couple quarters from his pocket. Mookie raced over to the dispenser by the front door, and dropped several in the process of retrieving them. Mookie gave Merle a few M&Ms before plopping back down onto the floor and continuing his game.

Magnus watched the whole process with a bemused smile on his face. And when Merle leaned forward and tussled Mookie’s hair, something in his gut seemed to ache.
“Dad, sto-op,” Mookie whined, scooching out of his reach. Merle chuckled and leaned back in his seat.

“Next,” the barber said, looking at Magnus. But Magnus turned to Merle.

“You can go.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I have plenty of time.”

Merle smiled a little. “Alright, Mookie. Hop on up to the chair.”

Mookie stood up but didn’t look up from his game; Merle guided him by the shoulder to keep him from running straight into the chair.

He took the Gameboy from Mookie, who let out a very loud groan as the barber pulled the cape around him. Merle sat back down next to Magnus, a sigh escaping from him and the seat cushion.

“Merle, can I ask you a question?” Magnus asked quietly, after a moment.

“If I say no, will it make a difference?”

Magnus chuckled. He watched as the barber did he best to not clip Mookie around the ears despite his squirming.

“What’s it like being a dad?”

Merle’s bushy eyebrows raised and he cleared his throat. “…Why do you ask?”

Magnus shrugged his broad shoulders. “You’re the only person I know in town who has kids. What’s it like?”

“It’s…” Merle paused, and Magnus looked down at him. The buzz of another razor started up. “Hard. A lot of the time you’re scared you’re going to mess it up… sometimes you do anyway. …I’m probably not the best person to ask.”

“No, no, it’s good to know.” Magnus frowned and looked at the floor. Merle looked at him and blew a breath out his nose.

“I mean, it’s pretty good too. Like when you teach ‘em how to catch a popfly. Or they win a ribbon at the science fair. It’s reassuring to see that even if you didn’t do a perfect job, they’re turning out alright.”

The barber finished the haircut in record time and pulled the cape off of Mookie, who immediately jumped down from the chair.

“Dad! Dad! Gameboy! I just found a wild Poliwag!” he yelled as he ran over to Merle, who handed off the Gameboy. Merle stood to go pay the barber, and then he guided Mookie to the door, making sure that he didn’t bump his head against the door as he was once again focused on the game.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Magnus. Have a good time with Julia’s family,” Merle said.

“Thanks, I will,” Magnus called after him as the door shut.
The sun was setting behind them as they made the drive to Rockport. Julia’s bare feet were up on the dash, and she dozed lightly. Magnus stared at the highway ahead of them, his thoughts still very much with the conversation at the barber shop.

“Hey, Jules?” he said.

“Hmm?” She stretched and sat up a little. “Are we there?”

“No, we still have another half-hour.”

She grunted, but pulled her feet off the dash.

“I was just thinking…”

“Oh?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“Do you remember back before Arnie’s? When we went to Chi-chi’s that one night?”

“Maybe?”

“I asked you what your dream job would be.”

“Oh, yeah.” She laughed a little. “I said candy witch… you said you wanted to be a knight.”

“I thought of another one.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded, and glanced at her. “I want to be a dad,” he said, plainly. “Doesn’t have to be right away or anything… but I want kids.”

Julia smiled at him. “Me too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah… I have for a long time.”

“...do you have thoughts to how many?” he asked, glancing over at her.

“Two to four, somewhere in there. I always wanted siblings growing up. How about you?”

“Eighteen.” She burst out laughing, and he grinned. “No, two to four sounds perfect.”

A smile grew on her face and he glanced at her again.

“I think we’ll make pretty good parents someday,” he said, reaching over and taking her hand.

“Me too.”
Taako opened the oven and a blast of hot air met his face. He pulled the pie out and set it on the counter, hip-checking the door shut. Kravitz looked up from the cowl-necked sweater he was carefully folding.

“That smells fantastic.” He walked over to the suitcase open on the bed, and set the sweater inside. The air was adrift with scents of apples and cinnamon and a hint of something unexpectedly savory.

“Damn straight,” Taako said, fanning the top of the pie with his oven mitts. “When I make an apple pie, I do it right.”

“Will you tell me the secret?” Kravitz smiled at him.

Taako pretended to think about it for a minute. “Yes, but only because you’re so handsome.” Taako grinned as Kravitz chuckled. “It’s cheese!”

“Cheese?”

Taako nodded. “I grated gruyère and put it in the crust and the crumble topping. Brings a good tone of savory to all the sweet cinnamon the apples are bringing to the party.”

“I never would have thought of that.”

“It’s an old family secret. My aunt taught me.”

Kravitz put his toiletry bag in the suitcase and zipped it shut.

“You packed, right?”

“Yup.” Taako pointed his chin over to the top of the stairs where a large duffle was stuffed to the gills. The swelling on his nose had finally gone down, but he still had two killer bruises across the tops of his cheeks.

“You know we’re just going to be there for three days...?”

“Yes, but there’s many different scenarios to prep for. The dinner is formal, but we won’t be in formal attire the whole time. And then there’s the outliers to consider. What if we go on a hike?”

“My mother would never go on a hike.” Kravitz set his suitcase down next to Taako’s duffle.

“No, she wouldn’t. But your Uncle Charles might, he just got back from that safari in Kenya, he’ll probably want to talk about it. Or Cousin Fran is still doing her yoga nonsense, have to be prepped for that.”

“Did you do research on my weird relatives?” Kravitz asked, walking over and leaning against the kitchen table.

“I may have called your mother, and I may have… kept notes on the things she told me.”

Kravitz laughed and wrapped his arms around Taako’s waist, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You
“I’m not, because I’m prepared.” Taako picked the pie up and shuffled over a few paces, Kravitz still wrapped around him, and put the pie in the carrying case. “I figured if I leave the lid off, it can finish cooling in the car.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kravitz said, pulling Taako’s chin over for a kiss. Taako’s eyes fluttered shut and his hands drifted to Kravitz’ shoulders. Kravitz pulled him closer and his kisses began to trail across Taako’s jaw and down his neck.

“Don’t we-ah…” Taako seemed to be having trouble forming words. “Go? Have to go soon?”

“I don’t care if we’re a little late,” Kravitz whispered, his breath running across Taako’s skin and raising goose bumps.

“Well, good.” Taako cleared his throat. “M-me neither.”

Kravitz gently ran the backs of his fingers over Taako’s cheek, and leaned in for another kiss.

Just then there was a curt knock at the door.

Kravitz straightened and looked over his shoulder. “Were you expecting someone?” he asked, his voice a little deeper than normal.

Taako shook his head. “Maybe they’ll go away?”

That was answered with another knock at the door. Kravitz sighed and let go of Taako to head for the door. Taako quickly brushed his shirt back into place and took a steadying breath. Good gravy could that man do things to him.

Kravitz stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked through the peephole.

“What the--” he said quietly, before stepping back and opening the door. “Mother?”

Ms. Sinclair’s shoulders relaxed and she smiled at her son.

“Oh, good. I was worried I didn’t have the right house.” She pulled off her sunglasses and did a quick sweep of the doorway, noting the pot of long dead violets on the front stoop and the shoe collection on the landing.

“What are you doing here?” Kravitz asked.

Taako came up behind Kravitz and his eyebrows jumped up.

“Ms. Sinclair.” Taako’s voice rose a few octaves.

“Taako, what happened to your… face?” she asked, looking concerned.

“Just a derby injury, broke my nose,” Taako said, gingerly touching it.

“Gracious. Kravitz, it’s rude to keep people waiting on the landing.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He exchanged a look with Taako, and opened the door wider. Taako stepped aside and followed her up the stairs. She took off her trench coat, draping it over her arm, and looked around the studio apartment.
“Something smells wonderful,” she said, turning to look back at Taako. Kravitz hopped up the last step and shoved his sleeve up his arm.

“Mother, what are you doing here? We were just about to leave to go to your house.”

“This is quite the collection,” Ms. Sinclair said, wandering over towards the costumes.

“This isn’t even all of them. I had to put some in storage when Kravitz moved in,” Taako added, leaning against the kitchen table.

“Mother, what are--” Kravitz tried to jump in.

“Did you make all of these?” she asked, pulling out a very convincing British WWII uniform.

“Most of them, yeah. Some of them I inherited from other costumers, but I tend to fix them up after I get them.”

“Mother!” Kravitz said, finally loud enough for the two of them to turn back and look at him. “I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you here?”

“Thanksgiving has been cancelled,” Ms. Sinclair said, bluntly. She hung the uniform back on the rack.

“What?”

“Thanksgiving has been cancelled,” she repeated, turning abruptly back to the rack. “What show was this one from?” She pulled out a mint colored dress.

“Babes in Arms,” Taako answered, looking concernedly towards Kravitz. Kravitz held out his hands wide in an exasperated expression, and Taako raised his shoulders and scrunched his face.

“Oh, my mother loved Judy Garland. We watched In the Good Old Summertime every time it came to the theatres growing up.”

Kravitz sighed. “Mother, you’re ducking the question.”

“I told you, Thanksgiving--”

“Has been cancelled, yes we got that. But why?” Kravitz finished.

“Because I’ve had enough of them,” Ms. Sinclair said, pushing a section of costumes down the rack. Their hangers squealed loudly on the metal bar.

“Them being the family?”

“Yes.” She huffed out a breath and turned to look at her son. “Marjorie called me and was complaining about how last year the white wine was too dry. And don’t I know how that upsets her Frederick’s delicate digestion--and, and I just had it! I’m done. I told her exactly where she could put her nauseatingly sweet Riesling, and if she had such strong opinions about everything, why doesn’t she just host Thanksgiving. And then I packed a bag, and drove here.”

Kravitz just stared at her open mouthed for a minute, but Taako broke out into applause.

“Fucking amazing.”

She smiled at him and nodded her head. “Thank you.”
“Aunt Marjorie is going to be furious.”

“It’s fine, I’ll deal with her at Candlenights. Buy her one of those horrible blown glass sculptures she’s so fond of.”

Kravitz rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. “So… I guess we’re doing Thanksgiving here then.”

Taako’s gaze drifted off to the side and he clasped his hands in front of his mouth.

“No, no. Thanksgiving takes weeks of planning and preparation.” Ms. Sinclair waved a hand. “I’ll take you boys to a nice restaurant. I’m sure you have one somewhere in town.”

“I guess we could go to 27 Springs… I should probably call and see if they still have any reservations left,” Kravitz said slowly.

“No!” Taako suddenly jumped back into the conversation. Ms. Sinclair and Kravitz turned to look at him. “We don’t have to go to a restaurant. I’ll make Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be exactly like a traditional Thanksgiving meal. But I can certainly pull together a nice supper before tomorrow night. Hell, I already have the pie done.”

“I don’t want to put extra work on you, Taako. It’s not your fault our family has… issues.” Ms. Sinclair exchanged a glance with Kravitz and shook her head.

“It would be a pleasure to cook for you, Ms. Sinclair.” He smiled winningly at her.

A slow smile started forming on her face. “Alright. If you’re willing, I am as well.”

“Perfect!” Taako declared. “I have to run to the store.”

“Take my checkbook,” Kravitz said, watching Taako run around picking up his keys and coat.

“Thank you, love you, bye!” he called as he jogged down the stairs. The door slammed, and both Sinclairs chuckled.

“Well…” Kravitz shoved his other sleeve up. “Do you want me to help you check into a hotel?”

“Yes, please. I didn’t think you had a spare room, and…” She looked around the studio apartment. “Now I know for certain. But this is nice. It’s cozy.”

“It’s home,” Kravitz said, nodding and looking around. Ms. Sinclair studied him for a moment, but didn’t reply.

“Well,” Kravitz said, sitting on the second bed in the Best Western hotel room. “Do you want to go back to the apartment?”

Mrs. Sinclair was shaking out a deep purple pantsuit and she hung it up on one of the 4 wooden hangers provided.

“Isn’t there a club or a lounge we could go to? I wouldn’t mind a drink.”
Kravitz laughed a little. “We have a pub we go to, but I don’t think it’s quite your scene. There is a jazz club downtown, but it closed for the weekend already.”

“A jazz club closed for a holiday?” she asked.

Kravitz shrugged. “Small town.”

She hmm’d, and pulled out a second suit. This one was maroon with a skirt.

“You brought two suits for a weekend to visit your son?” Kravitz asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You must be prepared for every scenario when packing,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“How about just a walk downtown?” Kravitz suggested. “You’ll be fine with your coat.”

Ms. Sinclair closed the door to the closet and nodded. “Sure.”

The dead leaves swirled around their feet and across the street in small whirlwinds. The clear November sky was already starting to turn soft oranges and pinks. They were the only two people in the whole of downtown.

“Gracious, it’s quiet,” she said, looking down the empty road.

“Yeah, this is pretty unusual. On Saturdays there’s typically a few people out. But I guess everyone’s preparing for tomorrow.”

They walked by 27 Springs, and an old arts and crafts store that somehow remained open.

“That’s where Taako and I had our first date,” Kravitz gestured to The Pothead across the street as they passed it. “It’s a pottery shop.”

“Like that movie with Patrick Swayze?”

“Sure, something like that,” Kravitz smiled. They passed the old King Crab Jewelers, which was empty, like many of the other storefronts on the street.

“It’s really a shame there’s no businesses in these stores,” she said, taking a moment to peer into the dark building.

“I did some research on the town back when I was writing the derby story. This area was really busy through the 70s. But then they built that ugly mall out by city limits, and all the commercial traffic followed it. Downtown just sort of shriveled up after that.”

They kept walking down the street a little further.

“This place is due for a revival. People like to return to their roots,” Ms. Sinclair said, patting the brick of one of the buildings. “It’ll take some dedicated people to bring the spirit back.”

“Taako has plans for opening a bakery downtown someday.”

“Plans, or dreams?” she asked.

“A little of both, right now.” Kravitz stopped and pointed to a building across the street. “That’s the building he wants. Says it has good light, and it’s just down the street from Pour Joe’s, which is a
really popular coffee place.”

The building was two story brick; the store had large windows with space for displays. The door was tall, wooden with a decorative window.

“He thinks there’s space for an apartment on the second story too. So either we could live there or rent it out.”

“Does he have a name for his business yet?”

“It changes every time I hear it. I think last time was Sizzle it Up with Taako… though that may have been the title for his cooking show.”

“Cooking show?” Ms. Sinclair looked up at her son.

“He could honestly be the next Julia Child, he’s that good.”

“So what’s the hold-up?”

“Money.” Kravitz frowned. “He’s got a decent bit saved, but he doesn’t have any investors yet. That building would take a lot of refurb to turn into a working bakery. I think also… he might just be scared.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you work your whole life for a goal like this, but what if you get it and it fails, or it’s not what you thought it would be? I get it, it’s tough to think about going through that.”

“But you think he has what it takes to run a bakery?”

“He practically runs Sazed’s right now. That place would have failed years ago without him.”

Ms. Sinclair chuckled a little.

“What?” Kravitz asked.

“Nothing, just… this is an interesting man you’ve chosen, my dear.”

Kravitz smiled and nodded. “Yeah, he is.”

A cheery 8-bit theme sounded from the TV.

“Okay, now, which driver do you want?” Kravitz said, sitting next to Ms. Sinclair on the couch in their apartment. Taako was busy in the kitchen, conjuring delicious smells with the occasional clatter of a pan lid. “Taako usually does Toad, I like Yoshi.”

Ms. Sinclair frowned and looked down at the controller.

“Which one is the fastest?” she asked, carefully studying the screen.

“Here, you be Toad, he’s a good one.”

Kravitz quickly picked the raceway and then the music sounded again as he handed the controller back to Ms. Sinclair.
“So when it’s green, press A to accelerate. B is brakes. Z uses any special powers.”

“Why are there so many buttons?”

“Gogogo!” Kravitz shouted, jumping to the edge of his seat.

“What are those boxes?! Why are they on the road?”

“Three green shells, goodgood. Use those to get the others to fall behind. See, see Peach’s coming up on your left, press Z!”

Taako heard Peach let out a yelp as he pulled the main course from the oven. The little cornish game hens were a mouth-watering golden brown. He turned off the oven and tossed the rolls back in to warm up again.

“Alright, you two. We are moments away from Thanksgiving Spectacular 1999. Prepare yourselves.”

“Here,” Kravitz took the controller from his mother and pressed pause. “You can come back later.”

“How am I already in second to last place?”

“Don’t worry, you can catch up.”

Ms. Sinclair dusted off her hands and walked over to the table that had been pulled into the middle of the room. There were already three place settings, and a bottle of decanting red wine, on the table along with an artful arrangement of tiny pumpkins and colorful leaves.

“Can I help with anything, Taako?” she asked. Taako was spooning brussel sprouts into a shallow serving bowl.

“Everything’s already done, but if you want to start bringing those dishes there to the table, that’d be good.”

The table quickly became crowded with heaps of food in Taako’s mismatched fiestaware. It was verging on chaotic, but that somehow just made it more festive.

“Taako,” Ms. Sinclair started, sounding awed, as Kravitz pulled out her seat. “This looks… miraculous.”

“And it will taste even better.” Taako smiled at her as he poured her wine. “So we have cornish game hens with garlic, herbs, and lemon for the main course. Mashed sweet potatoes with rosemary, roasted asparagus and hollandaise. Roasted brussel sprouts, and homemade golden knot rolls.”

Kravitz pressed a kiss to Taako’s cheek as he pulled out his chair for him.

“Amazing,” Kravitz said, sitting down himself.

Taako picked up his wineglass and cleared his throat. “So… when I was a kid, my family had a tradition that we would go around the table and say what we’re thankful for. I haven’t done this in a while, but, ah,” he frowned and nodded his head, “I have a lot to be thankful for this year. Thankful for finally fucking winning the derby championship again.” Kravitz chuckled. “Thankful that Brad Pitt and Jen Aniston are together, saw that one coming a mile away.”

“Amen,” Ms. Sinclair added, to the delight of Taako and the surprise of Kravitz.
“...but mostly, I’m thankful for Kravitz this year.” Taako looked at his boyfriend, a soft smile on his face. “I’m so happy to have you in my life. I love you.”

Kravitz matched Taako’s smile and put his hand over his. “You’re what I’m thankful for as well.”

They smiled at each other for an extended moment, till Kravitz remembered his mother was sitting to his left. If his blushes were visible, he would have matched Taako’s plates. “Sorry, Mom.”

Ms. Sinclair chuckled. “Don’t be sorry. I’m thankful for Taako as well this year. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Kravitz this happy. It makes the mother in me very content.”

Kravitz raised his glass, “To family.”

Ms. Sinclair and Taako raised theirs as well. “To family,” they repeated and clinked their glasses together.

“Well, let’s have my delicious food before it gets cold. Would you please pass me your plate, Ms. Sinclair?”

Ms. Sinclair handed it over but didn’t let go of it as Taako grabbed the plate.

“Raven,” she said. Kravitz’ eyebrows about shot off his forehead, but Taako just smiled.

“Raven,” he repeated and she let go of the plate.

After the trio ate and drank till they couldn’t eat and drink anymore, the dishes were half-heartedly placed in the kitchen with promises of ‘getting to them tomorrow.’ The three of them wound up on the roof of the building next door. They had to crawl through a window to get there, but Taako had managed to sneak a couple folding chairs and a table out there. They were all wrapped in blankets with outrageous patterns and steaming mugs of cider in their hands.

“I’m just going to say that this was the best Thanksgiving, sorry Mother,” Kravitz said.

“Don’t be, I was about to say the same thing,” Raven said with a smile. “That was the best meal I’ve had...” she stopped to think. “Well, I was going to say a long time, but now I can’t remember the last time.” She waved a hand and took a sip of her cider. “Truly magnificent, Taako.”

Taako bowed his head. “Thank you, thank you, I’ll send you both the bill in the morning.”

Raven laughed. “You could charge for this, frankly you almost should,” she said, closely regarding Taako. She paused for a minute. “Kravitz told me about your bakery, showed me the building.”

“Rosemary and Rye, yes,” Taako said.

Kravitz snapped his fingers. “That’s the name, I couldn’t remember.”

“Why haven’t you opened it yet?”

“Oh, you know,” Taako shrugged and took a sip. “Money, what else? I’m almost there, though. Maybe by next Christmas I’ll be able to get the ball rolling.”

“How about this Christmas?” Raven replied.
Taako laughed, but his smile died as he looked back at her.

“....What?”

“I’m guessing that having an investor would move up your business plans?”

Taako blinked a few times. “Well… yeah...”

“I’d be willing to be that investor.”

Taako just stared at her. “...What?!?”

“Mother, are you serious?” Kravitz asked, leaning in.

“Oh, of course, I’m always serious,” she said with a slight smile. She pointed back to the apartment. “Taako, that was the best cooking in longer than I care to admit. Kravitz has full faith in you, I trust his judgment. And I’m always on the lookout for good investments, so I’d be happy to be your investor. If you’ll have me.”

Taako ran his hands through his frosted tipped hair and looked at her open mouthed for a minute, then he quickly nodded his head. “I mean, of fucking course I’ll have you as an investor!”

Raven smiled, and held out her hand which Taako grabbed in both of his and shook vigorously. “I look forward to doing business with you, Mr. Peynirci.”

Taako kept nodding his head, and Kravitz was almost certain he saw tears welling in his eyes. He gave Kravitz the widest and most gap-toothed smile he’d ever seen on Taako.

“I… I’m going to open my bakery.” he said quietly, almost reverently. “I’m going to open my bakery!!”

“You’re really part of the family now,” Raven said, smiling too.

“Yeah, being in business together is part of being a Sinclair,” Kravitz quipped back.

“Say what you want, but Charles’ dot com company is doing very well.”

Raven and Kravitz went off on a tangent about unsustainable growth and speculation, but Taako was quiet.

Every once in a while he whispered to himself with an odd expression on his face, “I’m going to open my bakery.”
Thanksgiving at the Waxman’s was an interesting affair. Julia had even more cousins than Magnus did, which was quite an achievement. They both got very efficient at telling the story of how they met, and the engagement. The food was delicious too: table after table piled with turkeys and dressings and greens and pies and rolls. After so much food, and so many people, Magnus had half a mind to stay away from the party that Avi and Johann were throwing at their house on Friday night.

“No, trust me,” Julia assured him from her bedroom. “You’ll want to be there. Tons of food, and beer, and we haven’t seen a lot of the derby people since the season ended.”

“Alright.” He heaved himself off the couch and went to get ready.

They parked behind several other cars down the street from the house, and they could already hear the music.

The walls were vibrating with the beats, platters of food and pitchers of drinks were stacked onto every flat surface. Everyone from derby was there, even some friends from other teams. Julia was immediately taken away by Taako. Magnus waved to her as she disappeared into the throng. He stopped to talk with Carey for a minute, but eventually wandered into another room where even more food was laid around. He grabbed a red solo cup and poured himself a glass of water. He’d better eat something before he drank anything stronger. The hard part would be choosing what; he surveyed the various options. Dips, cookies, mini sandwiches, little smokies…but wait.

There was a whole pan of brownies just sitting there untouched. A little sign next to them read, ‘Robbie’s Brownies’. Well, surely Robbie wouldn’t mind if I had just one, Magnus thought as he picked one up and bit in. Damn. Robbie sure knew how to make some good brownies. Eh, maybe a couple more wouldn’t hurt.

“Yeah, I think it’s a good idea too,” Lucretia said, leaning forward on the lawn chair and setting her cup on the ground. “But I just don’t know if a town our size could support both a women and men’s team.”

“We’re not exactly Neverwinter,” Hurley added, swinging her feet as she sat on the porch railing.

“See, I totally think we could!” Avi enthused, his cheeks flushed. He spun around to see if there was anyone else out on the back porch that could support him. “You just...here. Magnus!” He waved to Magnus, who had just poked his head out the back door. Magnus walked over, a plate of food in hand. “The league you came from. Was there both a women and a men’s team?”

Magnus nodded. “Yeah. The women’s team was always more popular, but there was both.” He picked up a brownie from his plate and ate it one go.

“Aw, man, you brought brownies? I missed those,” Avi said, eyeing Magnus’ plate.
“No, Robbie brought these. Julia and I brought soda and some… spinach… dip. Why is everyone staring at me?” He looked around to the trio, who were staring at him with both horror and delight.

“Magnus,” Lucretia asked, a worried look on her face. “How many of those brownies did you have?”

He swallowed the last bite. “…two?”

Lucretia’s eyebrows jumped sky high.

Hurley threw back her head and laughed. “Oh my god, you’re about to get soooo fucked up, dude!” she said, punching his arm.

Magnus looked down at his plate in horror. Robbie’s brownies indeed. “Oh god,” he managed. “How can I...can I drink water?”

“I mean, you can. But it’s really only a matter of time now,” Avi said, a grin forming on his face.

“Yeah, Robbie doesn’t fuck around. Most people only go for one,” Hurley said, wiping away a few tears from her smiling face.

“Have you ever had pot brownies before?” Avi asked. Magnus weakly shook his head no. “Have you ever even been high before?” Again, no. Hurley laughed harder.

“If it had to happen somewhere, here’s probably the best place,” Lucretia said, picking up her cup again. “You’re surrounded by friends, there’s plenty of food, and Julia can drive you home if it gets too late.”

“Speaking of, HEY JULIA!” Hurley shouted, her hands cupped around her mouth. Julia’s head appeared out of one of the open windows on the second floor.

“What?!” she shouted back.

“Magnus had some of Robbie’s brownies!!”

Julia’s eyes went wide and Taako’s head suddenly appeared next to hers.

“How many?!?” he shouted.

“Two!!”

“You had two of Robbie’s brownies?! Are you nuts?!” Julia shouted to Magnus.

“I just thought they were good brownies!!” he cried.

“You’re about to get so fucked up, my dude!!” Taako said through tears of laughter.

“That’s what I said!” Hurley said, pointing up at Taako.

Julia spent the next hour by Magnus’ side, partially for emotional support and, like everyone else, she wanted to see what the effect would be. But he seemed pretty normal, maybe a little nervous. They built a fire in the pit in the background, and pulled up lawn chairs around it. It was nice to have the whole team together again.
“It was mind-blowing, how did you not see it?” Johann asked.

Noelle shrugged. “I don’t like scary movies.”

“But Sixth Sense was so much more than a scary movie, it was MIND BLOWING!” he insisted.

A high pitched giggle came from one side of the circle, and everyone turned to look as Magnus’s face was turning red from the giggles he was holding in. Both of his hands were clapped over his mouth, and his middle was shaking with laughter.

“Thar she blows!” Killian called as Magnus continued to giggle. “Let’s see that 64 minutes on the dot. I believe that means I win. Thank you very much. Pleasure doing business with ya.”

“No, now wait. Hold on. I thought we were playing Price is Right rules!” Sloane argued.

“We have never played Price is Right rules,” Killian shot back.

Julia comfortingly rubbed Magnus’ back as he doubled over with laughter.

“I’m sorry,” he wheezed, tears rolling down his cheeks. “I’m sorry.” He took a couple of deep breaths and laughed a little more.

“Do you want some water?” Julia asked. Magnus nodded, coughing and continuing to chuckle. He took the cup from her and drank all of it, letting out a large breath when he finished. Julia took the cup back and he giggled a little quieter again.

“How you feeling, my dude?” Taako asked from where he was seated in front of Kravitz, leaning back on his legs.

“Taako.” Magnus slapped his thigh, and looked meaningfully at Taako. “I am doing just great, Taako. Thanks for asking, Taako. You’re a real swell guy and you and Kravitz are just great together.”

Kravitz chuckled into his cup. “Thank you, Magnus,” he said, smiling.

“Hey, where’s Angus?” Magnus asked, looking under his chair.

“He’s at home with his grandpa, like he’s been all night,” Carey replied.

“Aw, he’s not here anymore?”

“Dude, we’re not bringing an eleven-year-old to a party where there’s beer and special brownies,” Carey laughed.

“Drink some more water,” Julia reminded Magnus, holding out the refilled cup. He turned to look at Julia and just sighed.

“Julia...you take such good care of me. I’m the luckiest guy in the whole damn world.”

“Okay, Mags,” she said chuckling and waving the cup. He took it.

“No, I mean it!” He sloshed a good bit of water onto the grass. “Oops. Julia, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Fine. Here, we’ll let Magnus decide. Magnus!” Killian called from across the pit. Magnus flipped his head around to look at her. “Do we do Price is Right rules?”
“Psshh. You guys don’t do no rules! No Rules! Just Right! You live by your own code! Like birds. Fly away birds, go go, be free.” Killian and Hurley both laughed, but Magnus paid no mind. “Y’all are just like so...badass. Whoa. ...is that why it’s called that?”

He turned to look wide-eyed at Lucretia, who at least trying to hide her laughter behind a hand, even if she wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“Sure,” she managed. “That’s why we’re the Bureau of Badass.”

“Lucretia… I gotta say… you kinda scare me. But!” Magnus whipped up a finger. “If I ever need to run from the police, I don’t know why, but I’m comin’ to you.”

“I mean, I think we all would,” Julia said, leaning back in her chair and enjoying this overly honest and affectionate Magnus immensely.

“Julia!” Magnus turned to look at her. “You’re here!”

“I never left, hun.”

Magnus nodded sagely and patted her hand. “’Cause you’re there for me.” He frowned and nodded some more. “There. For. Me. And hey hey guess what? I’ll be there for you,” he said, deadly serious.

“I know, dear.”

“’Cause I love you. And you’re my friend too. You know who else is my friend? Careyyyyy!!” He spun around to face Carey on the other side of him. “Carey!! Hey, hey.”

“What’s up, Magnus?” she asked. Magnus grabbed her around the shoulders and pulled her close.


“You already asked me to be your best man.”

“...What did you say?”

“I said, of course. I’d be honored,” Carey grinned. Magnus nodded solemnly again.

“Good.” He released Carey and sat back in his seat again. He looked at Julia, a big dopey smile spread across his face.

“Hey Magnus,” Hurley said from across the circle. “Do you like Julia?” A couple people laughed, but Julia just leveled a look at Hurley who grinned back.

“Oh, man. Yeah!” He nodded with his whole body. “I just like can’t believe it sometimes that that that she!” He waved a hand at Julia. “Is gonna marry me! And I’ll be her husband, and suck it. I won. Jackpot.”

Everyone laughed at that, even Julia. Magnus took hold of her hands and cooed, “Te amo. Mi amor. Mi corazón. Mi querida.”

Julia suppressed a smile. “I know what most of those mean.”
“Sólo conocer un chico se llamado Querido,” he said earnestly. “Era extraño. Porque lo verías a la escuela y dirías, ‘hola, querido.’”

She laughed. “What are you saying?”

“Porque ese era su nombre,” Magnus explained.

“Speak English, bro,” said Avi.

“Estoy hablando Inglés,” he insisted.

Johann laughed. “No you’re freaking not.”

“I’m not?” said Magnus, wide-eyed.

After a couple more rounds of compliments and a lengthy Spanglish lecture about why dogs are the best ever, Julia patted his arm. “Maybe we should be heading home.”

“No, these are my friends.”

“Eh, I’d listen to her, Magnus,” Johann said. “Trust me, when you’re coming down, it’s nice to do that where there’s a shower and a bed.”

“You guys are so smart. You’re all the best friends--” he sniffled a little and a tear ran down his cheek-- “I’ve ever had. I love you, guys. I’m just so lucky to have you in my life.”

Avi and Killian walked with Julia and Magnus back to their car, and Julia drove them to her apartment.

Magnus kept up a pretty steady string of compliments and general affirmations for everything he saw as they passed by, but mostly for Julia. She saw him safely into the shower, and when he returned he looked a little more clear-headed.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, setting her book aside and pulling back the covers on his side of the bed. He got in and curled up on his side towards her.

“Better...I think. I don’t really know...did I compliment you like a bunch of times?”

Julia smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Me and everyone else we know. Mostly me.”

“Well now you know my true feelings for you.” She laughed and he smiled up at her. “Every time I look at you it’s like...fireworks in my brain.”

“I think you might still be a little far gone.” She brushed some hair from his forehead.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not true,” he replied, yawning and rolling over to his back. Julia picked back up her book, and tried to find her place on the page again. “We’re gonna be married.”

“Yep.”

“Like forever?”

“Most definitely.”
“And have children?”

“Hopefully.”

Magnus didn’t reply, and it seemed like he’d drifted off. But then he chuckled a little.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if Angus was our children?”

Julia looked up from her book and over at him. “What did you say?”

He yawned and stretched. “Angus is a good kid, all freckles and smarts. He deserves a good home.” And with that, Magnus dropped out of consciousness.

Julia shut her book, and just stared at Magnus’s sleeping face for a while, before turning off the light.

“He really does.”
Taako pushed open the door of Pour Joe’s, noting that they’d replaced the usual bell with sleigh bells. Just in time for Candlenights. It was early Sunday morning, not too busy yet. He glanced around the snowflake-festooned room and spotted Lup, sitting in a two-person booth with a pot of tea. She lifted a hand in a half-hearted wave.

“I’m gonna order a coffee,” he told her, stifling a yawn as he passed.

When he came back from the counter, Lup had poured herself some tea and was sipping it lazily. “You didn’t used to like coffee.”

“That’s ‘cuz the only coffee I’d ever tried was Dad’s Turkish stuff,” he said mildly. “Which you liked, if I recall. When’d you become a tea drinker?”

“It’s soothing,” she said, repositioning her hands around her cup. “Anyway, nobody makes Turkish coffee like Dad.”

Taako nodded and stared past her head. It was weird enough sitting here making small talk with his estranged sister; he shouldn’t have brought up Dad. The awkward silence lingered.

“So, Thanksgiving with the boyfriend’s mom, huh?” Lup said. When he looked back, she was smirking.

“It was a surprise to us too,” Taako said.

“That’s some Friends shit right there.”

“You watch Friends?”

Lup rolled her eyes. “Everybody watches Friends, Taako, it’s the nineties.”

“Not for much longer,” he said. “Are you ready for the incoming Y2K apocalypse?”

“I think it’s sensationalist bullshit,” she said, and took a sip of tea.

Taako rolled his eyes. “Just trying to make a joke.”

Lup frowned a little. “Oh.”

She was right there in front of him, not even three feet away, but there was so much distance. They used to riff for hours on stuff like this.

Rachel appeared, interrupting the heavy silence. “One americano.” She set a cup down in front of Taako, and dug in her apron for a handful of sugar packets. “And sugar. Would you two--” She saw Lup and paused. “Oh!”

“Thanks, Rachel,” said Taako.

“Taako, I didn’t know you had a twin!” said Rachel, getting that very interested look that people got upon first meeting both of them together. Oh yes, he’d forgotten that look.

“He doesn’t,” said Lup. “We’re married.”
Taako snickered. “Rachel, this is my sister, Lup. Please excuse her, she’s terrible.”

Rachel’s look of interest was gone, replaced by confusion. Lup had always been good at that, getting people to leave them alone. “Er...pleased to meet you. Right, can I get you anything else?”

“Some cream would be treat, Rach,” drawled Lup.

“Sure thing.” Rachel walked off.

“Hey, be nice, okay?” said Taako, pouring five sugar packets into his coffee and giving it a stir. “I’m trying to shmooze. Her mom owns half of downtown.”

“Hmm, what are you up to, Flip?”

“Gonna start a bakery.”

Lup was genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“Yep.” Taako felt a little put out. “Why so shocked?”

She considered. “I think I just expected you to like, go be a big movie star or something.”

Taako paused. That had been the dream, hadn’t it? Before homelessness, before roller derby, before the B.o.B. and Kravitz. “A bakery’s just a titch more...realistic.”

“We were so naive once,” she said, smiling sardonically.

Naive. The word rubbed him the wrong way. “A kid’s allowed to have dreams.”

“And then the kid grows up and realizes the world is a cold place,” she said.

“What’s this beef you’ve got with the universe, Lup?”

She shot him a glare over her teacup. “It’s the universe that’s got beef with me.”

Taako was spared having to come up with a response when Rachel reappeared with a small pitcher of cream. “Here you are, Lup.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” said Lup, taking the cream pitcher and refilling her teacup to the brim. “I like this shop, really nice place.”

Rachel smiled. “Well, thank you. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Lup shot Taako a smile as she walked away. “See, I’m a good sister.”

“Yeah,” Taako muttered.

Her smile fell. “I thought you said you weren’t mad at me.”

Taako looked into his coffee, watching the reflection from the light above the table on its surface. “I’m not, I just--god, I don’t know.” He took a drink. “I don’t even know you anymore.”

“I haven’t changed,” she muttered. “People don’t change.”

“Well that’s just blatantly untrue, Miss Vavavoom.”

She rolled her eyes. “I meant inside, you cretin. Listen, you want to know what you missed? I’m
here. Just ask.”

Taako considered, tapping the rim of his cup.

“I’ve got questions too, for the record,” she added quietly.

“About what?”

“Oh, lots of things. We can take turns.”

This felt like a game. Taako relaxed. “Only if I can go first.”

“Oh.”

“Right. So you drove here, which means you have a car, which means you have money to fill that tank, which means you have a job. What is it?”

“My job?” She quirked an eyebrow. “That’s really what you want to know?”

“Who’s asking the questions here?” he demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I write copy and edit. Freelance.”

“For who?”

“A bunch of people. Companies. Clients. I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Anyone I don’t have to meet in person.”

“Working by mail?” Taako was mystified. Lup was too much of a people person to be satisfied with such impersonal work, wasn’t she?

“Listen, I haven’t been the resplendent example of femininity you see before you for very long,” she said hotly. “Passing… is new. It sometimes still—people still—I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Taako immediately. “Your turn anyway.”

She leaned forward. “I want you to dish on this Kravitz guy.”

“Oh. Wehehehelle. That I am glad to do.” Taako leaned forward as well. “Let me tell you about my boyfriend.”

The next week they met again.

“I don’t know, it was um…” Lup frowned at the table. “It was a tournament. Back in New Elfington. You know, I didn’t even know what was going on, I just heard the noise and I wanted to know what the deal was.” She snorted. “I remember thinking what a relief it was that I wasn’t the grodiest person in there.”

Taako chuckled.

“And then I saw them play and I was like…that.” She snapped her fingers. “That’s gotta be me. Don’t know how or when but…it’s gotta be.”

“Almost the same deal, Munch, hell!” said Taako. “When’d you figure out your name?”
She pulled a face. “Still haven’t. Sour Scream is okay, but it’s not mine. The Rad Robes suggested it.”

“Gross, they don’t let you choose your own name?”

She shrugged. “It was good enough. They let me play, didn’t they?”

“I guess?”

“But you said same deal? What do you mean?”

“Yeah, I went to a tournament too. There was a flier for it at the shelter. New Elfington Electrics versus the Capital—”

“The Capital Thwompers?” Lup interrupted.

Taako’s eyebrows shot up. “No way. When?”

“Uhh, ‘89?”

“No way.”

“We went to the same tournament?” she demanded.

“How did I miss you?”

“How did I miss you?”

“Fuck!” Taako leaned back in his seat. “We were so close!”

Lup crossed her arms and glowered. “All this time. Wasted.”

They sat in silence for a while. In a minute or so, Lup extended a hand. Taako took it.

“Not gonna happen again, right?” Lup said, giving him a look of fierceness that he’d sorely missed.

“Right.”

And the next week.

“No tea today?” said Taako, sitting down across from Lup in their usual booth.

Lup surfaced from a world of whipped cream. “Gotta try that gingerbread latte, boyo. It’s Candlenights.”

“It’s an excellent point, but it loses something in the arguing with all the stuff on your face.”

Lup attempted to lick the whipped cream off her nose, with limited success.

“You’re disgusting,” he laughed.

“’Lmost got it,” she said, still stretching her tongue.

“Good morning,” said Rachel, breezing by with another mug piled high with whipped cream.
“One peppermint hot chocolate, and...do you need a napkin?”

Lup put her tongue away and sighed dramatically. “Why does no one believe in me?”

“That’s a yes,” said Taako, still laughing. “Thanks, Rachel. How’s your mom?”

Rachel grimaced as she handed Lup a paper napkin from her apron. “This is the third time she’s been sick in six months. They’re worried about pneumonia now.”

Taako nodded. “Mm. This calls for some very special cupcakes then.”

Rachel smiled. “Should I tell her to expect them?”

“Nah, it’ll be a surprise.”

“You’re too sweet, Taako.” Rachel laid a hand on his shoulder. “Seriously. Thank you.”

“It’s no big deal for a friend,” he said. Rachel smiled once more before going back up to the counter.

Lup carefully wiped off her nose. “This is a lot of trouble to go to just to get on a landlord’s good side.”

“Well they’re friends, too,” said Taako. “It’s not like this is all asskissing.”

Lup pointed to some imaginary dimples on her cheeks. “Oh Taako, you’re so sweet!”

“Shut up,” he scoffed, taking a drink of his cocoa and coating his own nose in whipped cream.

“Sweet like honey,” said Lup. “Sweet like marmalade.”

“I said shut up,” he said, now genuinely irked. “Don’t make fun of her, she’s going through some bad shit.”

“Okay, fine,” said Lup indulgently, dropping her hands and taking another swig of her latte.

“Next time we’re going to your local coffee shop,” grumbled Taako.

“Ha. No.”

Taako frowned. “Why not? Kravitz would let me borrow his car, I’m sure. It’d be two less hours of driving.”

“The driving’s worth it, to avoid trouble with the team,” said Lup loftily.

“Trouble? They gonna kick you out for...for what, fraternizing with the enemy?”

“Yeah.” She took another drink, and then frowned at his look of disbelief. “They’d at least remove me as captain.”

“Sorry, hang on, they’d kick you out for having coffee with your brother because he happens to play on another team?”

“Your team wouldn’t? Isn’t that why we’re meeting at half past too damn early on a Sunday morning?”

“No, I--I just didn’t want to explain myself to people. They don’t care what I do with my time.”
Lup raised an eyebrow. “They don’t care. At all.”

“I mean, if they do it’s because they’re my friends.”

“Yeah, so my friends are a little more insular.” She shrugged.

“Uh, hey Lup?” Taako shook his head. “Important Breaking News: friends don’t act like that. That’s gross.”

Lup stared at him, expressionless, for a full three seconds before saying, “I can’t take you seriously with whipped cream all over your face.”

Taako sighed. “C’mon, Lup.”

“Don’t worry about it, okay?”

“I guess it’s your funeral,” Taako said, wiping the whipped cream off his nose with his thumb and then licking it.

“Ugh, you’re gross.”

“Oh, I’m gross,” he scoffed, flicking some whipped cream from his drink. It landed on her cheek, and she squeaked.

“Oh, you fucker,” she said, flicking some back. It landed right in his eye.

“Jesus Jones!” he yelped, trying to carve it away from his eyelid.

“Oh god, dammit, sorry,” she said, grabbing the napkin and trying to dab at his face. Tears streamed out of his eye and he started to laugh. “You suck.”

“Hold still,” she said, wiping the remnants away carefully. “I was aiming for your big dumb mouth.

“Good thing you do derby and not archery,” he said, trying to blink away the rest.

“Yeah, William Tell we are not,” she said, and crumpled the napkin in her hand. They fell into silence, and took drinks simultaneously to fill it.

“Thanks, by the way,” she said after a while.

“Why?”

Lup looked at the wall beside them, making a great show of reading the words sharpied onto the plaster. “It’s just...nice to know I matter to someone as something other than team captain.”

“Sure.” Taako stared at his sister. She didn’t seem to notice.
Killian woke up with a start. Someone was pounding on their door.

“What the helllll…” mumbled Carey from behind Killian.

Killian sat up, carefully so Carey still had covers, and rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Mmm. Three.” Carey pulled at her shoulder. “Ignore it. Probably someone’s drunk or something.”

“I don’t think so.” Killian blinked a few times. What else was she hearing?

Carey sat up next to her, suddenly awake. “You have a feeling?”

“Maybe it’s nothing.”

Carey kissed her cheek. “I trust your feelings. Come on.” She slid out of bed, wearing the blanket over her shoulders like a cape. Killian got up and followed her, yawning.

Whoever was at the door wasn’t letting up. What was that other sound? Like a low moan. Carey opened the door.

Angus stood in the doorway in pajamas, sobbing. As soon as the door was open he barrelled inside and buried his face in Carey’s stomach. Carey immediately wrapped her arms around him. “Angus? What’s wrong?”

He blubbered something incomprehensible. Killian dropped down beside him and put a hand on his back. “Ssh. It’s okay. You’re okay here.”

Angus calmed down enough to say, haltingly, “I—I need—to go—to the—h-h-hospital.”

“Oh god.” Killian felt a surge of panic. “Oh, god, what’s wrong? Are you sick?”

He shook his head and forced out the word, “G-g-grandpa.”

Killian looked at Carey, who looked about as horrified as Killian felt. She let go of Angus. “Let me get some real clothes on.”

Killian pulled Angus close, hugging him until his sobs started to quiet. “Now tell me what happened,” she said, low and soft.

“The phone—the phone rang and—and—-they said—-they said Grandpa collapsed. They said he was—at St. Jude’s—that I needed to—tell an adult—-but it was j-j-just—me, and—”

“Ssh. You did the right thing. We’ll drive you there.”

Carey appeared and handed her a massive sweatshirt. “Let’s go.”

The drive there seemed like a blur, with Carey at the wheel and Angus in Killian’s lap in the backseat, Angus letting out shuddering sobs and then hiccupping into silence. They found the front desk and Killian tiredly told the woman in scrubs who they were there to see.
The woman’s businesslike demeanor fell away when she pulled up the file. “Oh. I’m so sorry, that patient was D.O.A.”

“What...what does that mean?” said Angus’ voice. “Miss Killian, what does that mean?”

“There’s got to be a mistake,” said Killian.

The woman grimaced. “He was dressed in a night watchman’s uniform? Collapsed on the job? It was a massive heart attack. There was nothing we could do.”

“Oh my god.” Killian drew back from the counter. “No this...this isn’t right.”

“Ma’am, why don’t you sit down?” The nurse hurried out from behind the desk and took her arm. Killian yanked it away.

“Miss Carey? What does that mean?” Angus was crying again. “Please, someone tell me what it means.”

“You’re the family?” asked the woman.

“He is,” said Carey. “This is his grandson. Angus?” Carey crouched down. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry, sweetheart. He’s gone.”

Angus didn’t say anything, only shook his head over and over again while his face crumpled in on itself.

Killian made herself focus. She picked up Angus, let him rest his head on her shoulder while he bawled, and moved over to a nearby waiting area. Carey followed close behind. The woman behind the desk let them go.

“What do we do?” said Killian.

Carey shrugged helplessly. “We gotta call his caseworker.”

Killian set her jaw. “No.”

“What do you--” She checked her volume and hissed, “What do you mean, no?”

“They’ll just take him away,” Killian said through gritted teeth.

“So, what, we just kidnap him?” said Carey. “We can’t, Killian. We will go to jail. And baby, love of my life, you are too pretty for jail.”

“We could be his foster parents,” insisted Killian.

“We can barely feed ourselves,” snapped Carey. “If we ever want to see him again, we need to show willing now.”

Killian ground her teeth. She was right, and Killian hated that she was right. “It’s not fair.”

“Hell no it’s not. But we have to.”

Angus’ crying was flagging. Killian looked at him. The poor kid was exhausted.

“Can it wait ‘til morning?” she asked in a whisper.
Carey opened her mouth, then closed it again and shook her head. Then, to Killian’s surprise, she started to tear up.

“He doesn’t deserve this,” she muttered.

Killian used the arm that wasn’t holding Angus to pull Carey into a hug.

After not nearly long enough, Killian relaxed her hold on Carey and touched Angus’ shoulder. “Angus? Do you know your caseworker’s number?”

A trembling “yes” came from over her shoulder.

“Would you type it into the phone for me?”

“O-k-k-a-y.”

Killian brought him back to the desk. “Do you have a phone we could use?”

The nurse nodded and pointed to one built into the wall, under a sign that said “Courtesy Phone.” “Do you happen to know of any other relatives? He had no emergency contacts.”

“Sorry, no.” Angus alone. The thought made Killian feel sick. She went to the courtesy phone as slowly as she could and arrived all too soon.

“Angus?” She pulled him away from her shoulder and picked up the phone.

He didn’t meet her eyes, only put in the number and leaned back into her shoulder.

Carey had wandered over, put a hand on Killian’s other shoulder. “Let me. He doesn’t need to hear this.”

The line had started to ring. Killian quickly passed it to Carey and moved Angus out of earshot.

Carey listened to the phone ring, only a couple times before a voice with a vaguely Scandinavian accent said, “This is Paloma’s emergency line. How can I help you?”

“Hi, um. I’m calling about Angus McDonald? It’s Carey Fangbattle. We’ve met before, I think?”

“Ah, yes, Ms. Fangbattle. What seems to be the trouble?”

“Angus’ grandpa just died.” The word caught in her throat. She swallowed and tried again. “We’re with him right now.”

“Goodness. I’ll be at his home in about an hour. Thank you for calling.” She hung up.

Carey did too. Just like that, huh? She was going to take him out of their lives just like that? And then he’d be alone.

She shook her head. No. No, he’d know he wasn’t alone if it was the last thing she did. She typed in another number and listened to the ring.

“Yello?”

“Taako? It’s Carey.”

“Hail and well met, Carey--ssh, Krav, I’m on the phone--what can I do you for?”
“I need your help calling people. It’s about Angus.”

There was dead silence for a moment.

“Taako?”

“Who do you need me to call?”

Their living room was filled with people and completely silent. Between Taako and Carey, they’d gotten in touch with everyone from the team and they’d all come over as fast as they could. But once everyone had arrived, no one was sure what to do.

Angus’ pitifully small collection of worldly possessions fit easily into his Power Rangers backpack, though his skates took up most of it. He sat on the couch between Julia and Killian, holding both of their hands. His freckled face was solemn and drawn. Magnus alternated from sitting stone still and jumping up to pace in the kitchen. He returned once from the kitchen, looking like he was about ready to say something, but Julia looked significantly at him and shook her head. He sat down and remained quiet. At one point, Carey stood and turned on the lights on the Candlelights bush. But when she sat back down, everyone was staring at it in abject horror, so she turned it back off. All of the once-cheerful Candlelights decor now seemed harsh and garish.

The polite knock at the door gave them all a start. Angus’ grip on Julia and Killian’s hands immediately tightened. Lucretia slowly stood and opened the door.

A small older woman in a navy suit, her grey hair pulled back into a neat bun, smiled up at Lucretia.

"Hello there. I’m Elin Paloma, Angus McDonald’s case worker.” She had a soft and pleasantly lilted voice, but her presence still felt like a grim omen. Lucretia nodded stiffly and opened the door further. “Goodness, look at all these people.” She stepped into the apartment and surveyed the motley crew. “You certainly have a lot of friends, Angus.”

Angus didn’t reply, just looked down at his lap. Paloma looked around, but no one could even bring themselves to look at her.

“Um, wait. Here.” Killian quickly stood, and grabbed a package from underneath the Candlelights bush. She unzipped Angus’ backpack and placed it inside. “It’s not much but… Carey and I got you a present. Open it whenever you need to.” Angus nodded solemnly.

“Well… come along now. You can say good-byes down at the car,” she said, still trying to sound chipper. Everyone stood and followed behind her, Julia carrying Angus’ backpack and Killian carrying Angus.

The sky was just starting to turn a shade of light purple and a few birds tweeted in the trees surrounding the parking lot. The plastic snowmen had a layer of frost over them, and the air was still and chilly. When Killian set Angus back down, the ten feet to the car seemed like an impossibly long journey to make. He hugged Mr. Kravitz, Miss Lucretia, Miss Sloane, and Miss Noelle. Taako ruffled his hair, and said in a stilted voice, “Take it easy, champ.”

Miss Hurley gave him another hug. “Remember, you’re not allowed to get any taller, got it?” Angus smiled a little and nodded quickly.

Magnus knelt down and put a hand on Angus’ shoulder. “Now this doesn’t mean that you stop
practicing skating,” he said in a mock serious tone. “What’s the best way to keep your balance?”

“Keep low.”

“And the safest way to fall?”

“Fall small,” Angus dutifully answered.

Magnus bit his bottom lip and nodded. “G-good man.”

Miss Killian and Miss Carey picked him up again, holding him in a long group hug.

“We love you, Angus,” Carey said, trying to keep on a brave face.

“Never forget that,” Killian added, her dark eyes tinged red. Angus nodded. Killian set Angus back down, and smoothed out his hair.

Miss Julia knelt down in front of him, and helped him put on his backpack. She pulled the front of his jacket smooth, and took a shuddering breath.

“Please don’t cry, Miss Julia,” Angus said, his voice shaking.

A breathless laugh escaped from her and she nodded, tears in her eyes. She took his hands. “This-this is not good-bye, Angus, okay? This is just a see you later. I-I don’t know when, and I don’t even know how… but we all love you enough that we’ll find a way to move heaven and earth to see you again.” A tear dripped off her chin, and she cupped Angus’ cheeks, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Be safe. I love you.”

Angus threw his arms around her neck, and Julia held him, rocking side to side. After a long minute, he reluctantly let go and stepped back. He looked around at these people that he loved so much, and that loved him so much. Oh, how he wanted to believe that this was not a good-bye.

Paloma opened the door to the back seat, and let Angus step inside. The door shut with a solid and echoing thud. Paloma nodded to the gathered group, then got in the driver’s seat and started the car. Angus held a hand up to the window, and the tears finally broke loose as the car pulled away.

The group watched in silence as the car left the parking lot, and no one moved after it was long out of sight. The sun just barely broke over the trees, cold and harsh, and the world started to wake around them. For the longest time, none of them said anything. What was there to be said in such a moment?

They stood in the cold, their fingers slowly growing numb, and eventually Killian and Carey turned back to go into their apartment. Everyone else drifted silently to their cars, and headed for their houses, leaving all of them to sit amongst the wreckage of their little world alone.

For the team, the rest of the week passed in a stupor. The world around them was bright with twinkle lights and carols, but it was almost impossible for any of them to bring themselves to participate in the trappings of the season. Carey found herself just laying on the couch most evenings after work, scents of turkey and sounds of Bing Crosby drifting through the walls from their neighbors. Killian tried to keep up a brave face, but she’d often end up joining her and they’d sit in silence in the dark.

One evening around 9:30, there was a knock at their door. Killian looked to Carey, who hadn’t
moved, and she stood up. She turned on a lamp and went to the front door. She could see their slimeball of a landlord through the peephole.

“Rent isn’t due for another week,” she said through the door, her voice craggy from disuse.

“I’m not here for the rent,” he said. “It’s about the McDonald place.”

Killian unlocked the door and opened it about half-way. “What about the McDonald place?”

“I was clearing it out this afternoon, and I found these.” He held out a half-full black garbage bag towards Killian. “Your names were on a couple, figured you might know the rest.’”

She opened the door a little more, and took the bag from him. He nodded, and started walking away, “Happy Candlenights.”

Killian shut the door and locked it again.

“What is it?” Carey asked, sitting up on the couch. Killian opened the bag and found a package wrapped in the Sunday comics. The tag read, ‘To Miss Killian Love, Angus’. Oh, no.

Killian immediately had to sit down, and she ended up on the floor, leaning back against the door. She covered her face with her hand, and just focused on breathing for a minute.

“Killian?” Carey went over to her, and gently took the package from her. “Oh…” She sat down next to Killian. “That kid.” She shook her head and tried to smile, but it never quite arrived.

Killian nodded, and handed the bag over to Carey, who opened it and pulled out the rest of the packages. They were all of similar size, wrapped in newspaper, and there was one for every member of the team, plus Magnus and Kravitz. Carey picked up hers, and carefully unwrapped it.

It was a cup. Angus had obviously made it and decorated it himself. It was sort of lumpy and leaned a little to the side. But he had painted a picture of him and Carey on one side, and the words, ‘Don’t Do Crime’ on the other side. Carey laughed breathlessly when she read it. Killian looked over and smiled a little.

“Do you want me to open yours?” Carey asked her. She nodded. Carey unwrapped Killian’s. It was also a cup, like they all probably were. But this one was a little bigger than Carey’s, glazed a bright blue. Angus had painted a large yellow duck that wrapped around the cup. Killian took it from Carey and turned it over and over in her hands.

Carey looked back at the collection of packages. “You know what we should do?” she asked.

Killian nodded. “Yeah.”

They spent the rest of the evening driving around town to everyone’s houses and delivering Angus’ gifts. More than a few tears were shed, but it was still good to see everyone again. Angus had made them all cups, with some help from Taako and the pottery shop. The glazing he had done all on his own though, and it was obvious that he had put a lot of thought into everyone’s design. They all featured a special memory, or their favorite color. Lucretia’s had a fairly accurate painting of Miyagi on it. Noelle’s had an intricate crystal pattern. Magnus’s was the ax from the side of his van. Julia’s had several Queen Anne’s Lace drawn on it.

As Carey and Killian delivered, the people would come along with them. Before long the whole
team was together again, and they ended up at Refuge as snow started to fall. Ren filled the new cups with warm spiced cider and they pushed a few tables together so they could all sit at the same one. A quiet carol played over the speakers and colorful lights twinkled in the front window.

Killian cleared her throat and stood up, her chair squeaking on the floor. “Um, I know this has been a pretty shitty Candlenights for most of us… all of us. It hasn’t really even felt like the holidays at all…” She looked around the table, “Without… Angus. But I’m certain that we will see him again. And in the meantime, we shouldn’t let our fear, our doubts, our sorrow push us apart. We’re stronger together.” She picked up her duck mug and raised it. “So I’d like to propose a toast. To Angus. Even though he’s not with us right now, he’s still bringing us all together. May we be able to do the same for him someday soon.”

“To Angus,” the group repeated, and took a sip from their own Angus cups.

Angus shut the door to his room, and left the light off. The moonlight reflecting off the snow on the ground cast a glow about the dim room. He sat slowly down on his bed, and stared out the window. Snow was gently falling outside, and laughter echoed down the hall from the other children. When he’d first returned to the group home, it felt like he was being slowly submerged underwater; he could hardly breathe. Now he’d grown numb. It was odd things like the smell of the kitchen, the feel of the sheets that bothered him the most.

Well, not the most.

He knew what was bothering him the most. He wiped quickly at his eye with the back of his hand and took a deep breath. He took off his shoes and curled up on the bed, pulling his knees to his chest and gripping his hands tightly. An errant memory of when he and Miss Julia had watched that old movie together came to mind. It seemed to tear a ragged hole in his chest, but he could practically hear the last few lines of the song.

“Someday soon we all will be together
If the fates allow
Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little…”

He hoped that the team had all had a much better Candlenights than he had.
Lup knocked on the bright yellow door and took a deep breath, in and out, watching the steam billow in the frigid air. Like a dragon, hell yeah.

She wasn’t nervous. Why should she be nervous? It was just dinner with her brother. She’d get to see if he remembered all the stuff Auntie Rosemary had taught them about cooking, see what kind of life he’d built for himself, which she was decidedly curious about. And meet his boyfriend.

No, nothing to be nervous about.

The door opened, and Taako appeared, wearing an apron.

“You came,” he observed.

“Yeah, I almost got lost,” she said. “You know, what with your town being so giant and your door so unassuming and humble.”

Taako smirked. “Come in.”

She tramped up the stairs after him, sparing a glance for the shoe rack. The place smelled amazing, but of course it did. She sniffed.

“Fennel?”

“Well spotted,” he said, already back to the kitchen. “This turkey is going to be fucking delicious.”

Lup hung her coat on the coatrack and adjusted her sweater. “Stuffing?”

“Sausage, apple, and cranberry.”

“Hell yeah.” She gave everything a careful once-over. This place was banging, just the kind of place she’d pictured Taako living in. Just the kind of place she’d like to live in too, except maybe replace the costume racks with bookshelves. “Nice digs.”

“Thanks.” Taako took the lid off a pot, gave the contents a stir, and replaced it. “Wish I could say the same for horrible fuzzy thing you’re wearing.”

Lup looked down at her sweater. “It’s fashion, Taako. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Uh huh, clearly.”

She chuckled and pulled a gorgeous ballgown from the costume racks. “Oh my god. I love this.”

“It’s from uh…” Taako stuck a finger in a pot and tasted it. “Mm. Nice. It’s from The King and I.”

Lup dropped it like a hot poker. “Ugh, theater again?”

“You know you want to try that shit on.” He gave the pot a stir. “Pick it up, it’s one of a kind.”
Lup did so and hung it back up, carefully. Damn, it was pretty. “So. Where’s Kravitz?”

“He’ll be along shortly.”

“You’re sure he’s okay with me being here for your…” She waved a hand. “You know. Cute first Candlenights together or whatever.”

“Of course. Candlenights is for family.”

“So cheesy.” Lup circled a rack, examining the costumes.

“Don’t pretend you don’t want to meet him.”

“I do look forward to grilling him.” Was that a dirndl on the rack? It was, and it came with matching lederhosen.

“He’s looking forward to meeting you too.”

She rolled her eyes. Thanks, Taako, that was really helping her be not-nervous, she thought but didn’t say. Not that she was nervous. She flipped through the costumes lazily.

“Merde,” Taako said.

Lup snorted. “Je sais que tu ne parlez pas Français.”

“Don’t swear at me in Spanish. I need more cornstarch.” He patted the pocket of his apron, pulled out his wallet, and padded down the steps. “Be right back!”

Lup waited until the door clicked shut behind him, then pulled off her sweater gleefully and snatched the ballgown off the hanger.

Kravitz opened the door and put his keys in the bowl. God, this place smelled amazing. He made his way up the stairs.

Taako was standing in the middle of the apartment, facing away, wearing one of his costumes. He was affixing a hat to his head. Kravitz smiled to himself and crept up behind, grabbing him around the waist.

“What are you up to?” he murmured into Taako’s neck.

Faster than he could process, an elbow landed in his stomach, and someone had grabbed his face.

Kravitz had never seen Taako angry, properly angry. Frustrated and annoyed, or dead set on something on the derby track, maybe, but never full of fury like this. And he realized why immediately.

“Oh fuck,” he wheezed, her thumb digging into his jaw. “You’re not Taako.”

Lup--because who else?--glared at him a second or two more before letting go of his face. “Got it in two, I guess.” She took off the hat. No frosted tips, and longer hair. “Kravitz, I presume?”

Kravitz rubbed his face. “I am… I’m so sorry. I thought-- I’m so sorry.”

“Already stealing my brother’s man.” She considered the hat before putting it carefully into an
open box. “I am good.”

Kravitz cleared his throat, feeling a little affronted. “Lup, right?”

“That’s me.” She winked. “Turn around, will you? I’m going to change back before Taako gives me a hard time.”

“Of course,” Kravitz did so. “Though I assure you I am… exceedingly gay.”

“Then let’s keep you that way, big guy,” said Lup behind him. “Hand me my sweater?”

Kravitz glanced to the rack beside him. A purple sweater that bore a distinctive resemblance to a skinned muppet, and therefore could not possibly be Taako’s, was draped over it. Kravitz handed it backward, feeling like his face was slowly melting off. “I am seriously… very sorry.”

“It’s not the first time it’s happened,” she said. “Ah, there we go. All clear, sweetie.”

Kravitz turned back sheepishly. Lup was fluffing her hair with one hand and holding up the dress with the other.

“Hot damn,” she said. “I’m going to steal the everloving hell out of this.”

Kravitz cleared his throat again. “We uh… we got off on the wrong foot.”

She hung up the dress carefully, turned, and gave him a once-over. Kravitz couldn’t remember feeling so uncomfortable. Her face was just… uncannily like his boyfriend’s. The expression was wrong, though. It had an edge to it.

“Taako was right,” she said. “You are kind of a dork.”

Goddamn, she was trying his manners. He frowned. “And he was right about you, too.”

Lup raised her eyebrows.

“You’re kind of the worst,” said Kravitz.

She grinned. “Glad that’s out of the way. So!” She strode over to the kitchen and gave one of the pots a stir. “You having a good Candlenights so far?”

Uneasily, Kravitz sat down at the table, which was already set and decorated with three candles nestled in a holly wreath. He tried and failed to make himself comfortable. Why did he feel like a raccoon had wandered into his house? “You having a good Candlenights so far?”

“You’re kind of the worst,” said Kravitz.

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Uneasily, Kravitz sat down at the table, which was already set and decorated with three candles nestled in a holly wreath. He tried and failed to make himself comfortable. Why did he feel like a raccoon had wandered into his house? “Pretty--pretty good. And you?”

“This is the first celebrating I’ve done, so we’re off to a great start.” She rolled her eyes and adjusted one of the dials on the stove.

Kravitz frowned. “Are you sure you should mess with that?”

“Well, yeah, unless you want the potatoes to coagulate.” She waved a spoon, watching the steam rise off it.

Kravitz hesitated, but not for very long. “It’s just that…Taako’s very particular about his cooking and--”

“Yeah, where do you think he got it?” Lup said mildly, testing the gravy. “Mm. Needs something.”
Kravitz shook his head. “He got it from you?”

Lup paused. “That was poorly worded, let me rephrase. We learned from the same person, so I’m puh-retty sure I know what I’m about in his kitchen.”

Kravitz clenched his fist on the table. Aha, that was what this feeling was. “My kitchen too.”

“Hm?”

“It’s my kitchen too,” he said again, a little louder. And this woman had decided she’d just mosey on in.

“Feeling a little territorial, are we?” Lup, turning to face him. “Don’t worry, sweetie, I don’t plan on moving in or anything.”

He frowned at the table. Somehow the sentiment didn’t help.

She leaned back against the stove. “Though I suppose now’s as good a time as any for a shovel talk.”

“I’m sorry?” said Kravitz, looking up.

“You know,” She steepled her fingers, and some of her flippant tone melted away. “If you in any way harm my brother’s heart, soul, or body, I will personally murder you.”

Kravitz’s eyebrows shot up. “I beg your pardon?”

“You mean you’ve never gotten one of these before?” Lup raised one eyebrow. “It’s pretty standard stuff.”

“Standard--you--” Kravitz sputtered.

“Oh, have y’all been tested recently?”

His spine went rigid. “That’s--that’s none of your business.”

“I have a vested interest.” Lup’s cool expression was unruffled. “He is my brother.”

Kravitz leaned back in his chair, all his embarrassment turned into fury. “Your brother. You expect me to take this from you because you happen to share blood.”

Almost too subtle to spot, Lup’s calm was replaced with laser focus. “That’s the basic idea.”

“That’s odd,” said Kravitz, forcing his voice to stay level, “because not only have you not been in his life for a number of years and deliberately ignored him for two more, you literally injured him, permanently scarring him, to--to win a goddamn game!”

Lup’s expression turned downright predatory. “I see how this is gonna be,” she said, her voice low. “And I was all ready to like you too.”

“Forgive me if I can’t say the same,” said Kravitz, every syllable measured. “You’ve been actively antagonistic to Taako and our friends, and what’s more--what’s more, he hasn’t exactly had the best luck depending on family.”

Lup drew back as if she’d been slapped. She attempted to say something, and couldn’t seem to get the words out.
Kravitz’s anger was briefly drowned out by guilt. It had been a low blow. He looked away.

After a minute or two, she turned back to the stove. “Where’s a whisk?”

Kravitz looked up. “What?”

“A whisk, dammit, I don’t know where anything is in your kitchen and the gravy’s growing a skin.” Her voice wavered, just a little.

Kravitz stood up, opened a drawer, and handed off a whisk. Lup took it without looking at him and furiously stirred at a saucepan.

Was she… was she crying?

Kravitz swallowed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know your parents… your parents kicked you out, same as Taako.”

“Pff,” she scoffed, still not looking at him. She was staring into the gravy as if it held answers. “He told you a lot about me.”

“He did,” said Kravitz, leaning with his back against the counter, facing the opposite direction as Lup. “I was… rigorously prepared for this dinner.”

She finally turned to face him, her eyes only just tinged with red. “Did he tell you it’s my fault?”

The question was a challenge. Kravitz shifted. “What’s your fault?”

“That I abandoned him? That I could have gone with him when he left home, but I chickened out?” she spat. “That the reason we were both alone is that I was a fucking coward?”

Kravitz leaned away. Good god.

“So I know, okay?” she said, slamming the whisk into the saucepan with a rather unsatisfying *splat*. “I know I haven’t been here and I know that my--my jurisdiction or whatever is limited, but I have to make up for this somehow because I am *not losing him again*.”

The residual anger coiled in Kravitz’s gut evaporated. He examined the floor. She was, in her own brash, brutal way, just trying to protect Taako. Just like he was.

“Where’s the pepper?” she muttered.

“Above your head and to the left,” said Kravitz.

She opened the indicated cupboard and pulled out the pepper grinder.

“He doesn’t want to lose you either, you know,” said Kravitz quietly.

Lup turned the little crank and gave the gravy another sound whisking. “Yeah?”

“Mhm.” Kravitz watched her carefully. Her expression had that edge to it again.

She nodded. “Good.” Lup ran her finger along the dripping whisk, tasted it, and nodded again. “That’s more like it.” She turned to lean against the stove again, facing the same direction as Kravitz. “So. Rigorously prepared, huh?”

He nodded, warily.
“He tell you why I got kicked out?” she muttered.

“Yes.” Kravitz examined her face, but she was doing the same to him. He cleared his throat. “He shouldn’t have outed you to me. It’s not my place to know unless you tell me.”

Lup seemed to relax a little. She shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a secret to anyone except my clients.”

Kravitz raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“I mean, I’m not gonna hire a skywriter, but I don’t really care who knows.” She waved a hand. “Taako treats his whole life like a secret. I just don’t care.”

“That’s…” Kravitz shook his head. “That’s dangerous though. Especially for you--”

“Please,” she scoffed. “I can take care of myself.”

Kravitz conceded the point. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“Right.” She looked at her nails. “Sorry about the uh… elbow to the gut, by the way.”

He shrugged. It might bruise a little, but it didn’t hurt anymore. “If I can ask a potentially uncomfortable question--”

She snorted. “Sure, why not?”

Kravitz picked his words carefully. “Why exactly did you break Taako’s nose?”

“The same reason I do just about everything.” She shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Kravitz exhaled slowly, trying not to get angry again.

“I’m not saying it was actually a good idea,” Lup drawled. “That’s just kind of what we do on the Rad Robes. Wreck shit. And I am captain. It’s expected.”

Kravitz nodded so that he didn’t shake his head in disapproval and sat back down at the table. Lup joined him.

“You know, I’ve never met a boyfriend of Taako’s before,” she said, leaning her chair back on two legs.

This was a surprise. “Never?”

“Well we didn’t exactly date in high school,” she said. “I knew all his crushes, though. And let me tell you.” She let her chair thump to the ground. “His taste has improved dramatically.”

At this, Kravitz couldn’t help but laugh. “Thank you? I suppose? I’m almost afraid to ask.”

Lup leaned in conspiratorially. “He had a thing for jocks. Which, let’s be honest, when you’re gay in high school, is just an exercise in self-loathing.”

“Ouch,” said Kravitz. Poor Taako.

She nodded. “He has grown wiser, from what he’s told me about you.”

“He’s told you a lot, then?” Kravitz asked warily.
“Probably more than you wanted him to.” She pulled a face. “Definitely more than I wanted to know.”

Kravitz covered his face, which was now growing hot again. “Oh god.”

“Yeah, sorry. If it makes you feel better, it’s definitely because he loves you a lot.”

Again, he was surprised. “I love him a lot too.”

Lup smirked. “Oh, you better.”

That was a joke, right? Kravitz was pretty sure it was a joke. He took it as a good sign.

“Now I’m dying to know what he told you about me, sans our rich and Tolstoy-esque family history,” she said.

“Well.” Kravitz settled back into his chair, exhaling slowly. “He said you hate theater because it feels fake to you.”

“It does, and I do. What else?”

“He says you’re into quote, ‘nerd books,’ which I can only assume means something like…”

Kravitz shrugged. “Science fiction, maybe?”

“And high fantasy,” she added haughtily. “A girl’s got to read. What else?”

“You’re a freelancer, like I am,” Kravitz said.

“Ah, that’s right,” she said, resting her arms on the table. “You do--what--web design and photography?”

“Yes,” said Kravitz, a little relieved that the interrogation portion of the conversation was over.

She nodded. “I saw the site you did for the city of Neverwinter. Quality stuff.”

Lup was just full of surprises, wasn’t she? “You looked up my work?”

“Sure I did,” she said dismissively. “It was good. You know, except for the three typos on the homepage.”

Kravitz paused. That’s right, she was a copy editor. “There were three of them? I only remember one.”

“There were three,” she said, shrugging. “Why didn’t you fix it?”

He sighed. “That was a particularly difficult job. The client insisted I use the copy as provided and change nothing. I even pointed out the error and they refused.”

“Oh my god, I hate that,” Lup said, grinning. “That happens to me all the time. Like, you hired me to make you look like not an idiot.”

“Oh, I know,” he said. “It’s even worse in web design. Everyone thinks they can code now.”

“Was it bad in photography?”

Kravitz rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say there’s a reason I stopped doing weddings years ago.”
At this, Lup laughed out loud. “Oh god, not bridezillas!”

“It was terrible,” said Kravitz, smiling.

The door opened downstairs. “Lup, you better have stirred that gravy!”

Lup shot Kravitz a smile. “I set it on fire, because it was so bland,” she called.

“Oh you best be joking, Buttmunch.” Taako appeared in the stairwell, carrying a box of cornstarch. “Oh, Krav. Hey.”

“I like this man, Flip,” said Lup, pointing at Kravitz.

Kravitz was surprised to hear himself say, “I rather like you too.”

“Against all odds,” said Taako, bending down to kiss Kravitz on the temple. “She’s the worst. Now lemme thicken up that gravy.”

“Don’t even touch it,” said Lup. “It wasn’t thin, it was up too high and bland as hell.”

Taako shot her a betrayed look. “What do you mean ‘was’? What’d you do to it?”

“Fixed it,” she said.

Taako snatched up the whisk, licked it, and stared into space for full five seconds. “Damn.”

“Mmhmm. You’re welcome. How long ‘til we eat?”

“Eh. Let’s serve it now.” Taako pulled some hotpads off a hook. “This baby is gorgeous.”

“Let’s eat a gorgeous baby,” said Lup, rubbing her hands together.

“Oh god.” The realization hit Kravitz like a sack of rocks. “There’s two of them.”

Lup and Taako exchanged a grin.

“Happy Candlenights, everyone,” said Lup, slapping Kravitz on the back.

“Happy Candlenights,” Taako replied, pulling a crackling turkey out of the oven.

“Happy Candlenights,” sighed Kravitz, and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

We’ll be taking a week off from posting--next chapter goes up on Nov. 16th. <3, K+H
Magnus pulled at the collar of his good shirt and tried to swallow. Julia glanced at him as she chewed at the corner of her thumbnail.

“I thought you were going to buy some new dress shirts,” she said quietly. A phone at the receptionist across the hall from them rang. They were sitting side by side in chairs against the wall of a busy hallway. There was a small wooden nameplate on the door next to them, which read Elin Paloma - Social Services.

“I was, but I ran out of time yesterday.”

“I could go to Kohl’s after this, I think I know your sizes.”

Magnus nodded and pulled at the collar again, grimacing. Julia watched him, concern in her eyes.

“You know you can undo the top button.”

“I want to make a good impression,” he insisted.

“I think you not passing out in her office would be a better impression.”

The door next to them opened and they both jumped to their feet. Mrs. Paloma stepped out. Somehow she seemed smaller than Julia remembered, and her navy suit was creased. She smiled up at the pair.

“Hello dears, Julia and Magnus, correct?” They nodded. “So sorry to keep you waiting. Please come in.”

She waved them in and shut the door behind them.

The office was small and dark. The bookcases against the walls were overflowing, and the desk had stacks of file folders on top. On the small window, hung two suncatchers: one was a teardrop-shaped crystal, the other was hand-painted and shaped like a butterfly. It looked like it had been done by a child. On the wall opposite the bookcases was a shelf with around 10 framed photos arranged neatly in a row.

“I do apologize for the mess; it’s been a busy week,” Paloma said, picking up a thin blanket and pillow and tossing them onto what looked like a sleeping palette in the corner.

“Do you sleep here?” Magnus found himself asking. He quickly bit his lip.

Paloma chuckled a little. “No, I had an emergency placement last night. Took a little bit to find a home. Please have a seat.”

As Julia sat down on the cold metal chair beside Magnus, she noticed that the pictures on the shelf were of children. They didn’t seem related to each other or Paloma.

“Well.” Paloma sat down in her chair behind the desk, setting aside a few more folders. “I imagine
that you are here about Angus, yes?”

Julia nodded. “Yes. Ah… we care very deeply about him, he’s a very special boy to us and our...family.” Julia looked to Magnus who nodded to her encouragingly. “And… I don’t even know where to start. I’ve been doing research for several weeks now, but everything I find just makes me more confused about how the system works. And now that he’s been taken away-” Julia stopped and swallowed hard. Magnus reached over and took her hand.

Paloma waited a moment for Julia to pull herself back together.

“...We want him home,” Magnus filled in for her. Julia nodded. “We love him, and he should be with people who love him.”

Paloma didn’t answer, but stood and walked over to one of her large filing cabinets. She pulled open a drawer, and flicked through a few files, before pulling out a folder. She shut the drawer as she sat back down.

“So, are you saying that you’re interested in adoption?” she asked, looking down at the folder.

Julia and Magnus both nodded.

“Yes,” Julia said.

“Would you be applying as a couple or as a single parent?”

“Couple.” Magnus said, then looked at Julia. “Couple?”

“Yeah, couple.”

Paloma looked between the two of them for a moment, her eyebrows twitched downward for an almost imperceptible moment. She then opened another drawer and pulled out an empty form.

“Lucky for you, Mr. McDonald is eligible for adoption. He is a ward of the state. Has your home been licensed for adoption?”

Julia and Magnus both froze, then they slowly shook their heads.

“Have you had a home study done at all?”

Again, they shook their heads.

“...Have you both lived in this state for the past six years?”

“I have, but--” Julia started.

“I haven’t,” Magnus finished.

“Very well. So you are at the very beginning of this journey, that is fine…” She paused for a moment, then pressed forward, “I will warn you, this is a very long journey you have chosen.”

“How long?” Julia asked.

“What do you mean, dear?”

“If we start this journey today, how long till Angus is with us?”
“Ah.” Paloma nodded. “It varies from case to case, but recently I helped a couple adopt and it only took eleven months from start to finish.”

Julia felt her stomach drop.

“And where would Ango be in these eleven months?” Magnus asked, leaning forward and frowning.

“I cannot disclose Angus’ exact whereabouts for his safety, but he would be in foster care.”

“So living with strangers?” Magnus’ tone was rising in volume.

“Magnus,” Julia cautioned, putting a hand on his arm. He looked over at her and sat back in the chair.

“He would either be in foster care, or in one of our group homes.”

“He hated the group home,” Julia said quietly to no one.

“Now because Angus’ parental rights have been terminated, you may have a shorter time. Or you may not, I’ve seen family members crawl out of the woodwork and dash months of hard work at the final hearings.”

“He doesn’t have any family left,” Julia insisted.

“That would have to be checked.”

“And during all of this ‘checking’,” Magnus did air-quotes, “Angus would be living god-knows-where.”

“...That’s one way to put it.”

Julia and Magnus sat back in their chairs for a minute, a mountain leering suddenly ahead of them.

“Is there any way we can get him with us faster?” Julia asked, looking to Paloma.

“Yes.” She opened another drawer and pulled out a different form. “You can apply to become foster parents yourselves.”

She handed that form over to Julia, Magnus leaned over to look at it.

“There is still a process to go through. There’s a class, and home studies, and background checks. But a child can be placed with you in approximately six months.”

“Six?” Magnus asked.

“That’s like twice as fast, yes. Let’s do this one.” Julia looked up at Magnus, then handed the form back to Paloma.

But she held up her hand. “I should warn you. I cannot guarantee that Angus will be placed with you if you do this.”

“What?” Julia asked, leaning forward again. “You mean, we could go through all of this bureaucratic bullshit and still not get him?”

“Jules,” Magnus cautioned this time.
“No! No, Mags, you know I’m right. This is ridiculous! We love Angus, you know that, Paloma! Why wouldn’t he be placed with us?”

Paloma didn’t reply, just sat stoically through Julia’s outburst.

“Are you finished?” she asked calmly. That seemed to cause Julia to deflate.

“Yes,” she said, quietly.

“What you need to understand, Ms. Waxman, is that I am just doing my job. I don’t know what you do for a living, but if I don’t do my job to the best of my ability there are dire consequences.”

When Julia looked up at Paloma, she wasn’t looking at her but at the row of pictures on the shelf.

“It is my job to make sure that these children are safe and taken care of when their families cannot. And it is my job to see that Angus is in the best situation possible. Maybe that’s living with you two, maybe it’s not. But I haven’t done my job, I haven’t helped Angus, if I don’t thoroughly investigate every possibility.” Paloma folded her hands on top of the folder stack.

“I am not your enemy,” Paloma continued, “In fact I’m one of your best allies in this fight. I can help you through the …’bureaucratic bullshit’, but you need to understand that Angus is my first priority, not you.”

There was silence between the three for a moment, before Magnus softly asked, “So what should we do?”

“If it was my decision to make, I would pursue foster care right now. You can still pursue adoption later, but fostering would potentially lower the amount of time he spends away from you.”

Julia nodded, and looked to Magnus, who looked back at her.

“I think we should do that then,” she said.

“I agree.”

Paloma nodded.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step...and your first form. Fill this out for me, dears.” She pulled a pen out of a cup and slid the paper across the desk.

Julia picked up the pen and clicked it, diligently filling out her name. She jotted in the rest of the information, then slid it over to Magnus so he could sign too.

“Can you… at least tell us how he is?” she asked gently, hoping that she wouldn’t regret asking.

Paloma hesitated, then answered, “Adjustment is always difficult, but he seemed in ...positive spirits. He’s a very cheerful boy, he’ll find his way.”

She regretted asking.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyyyy everybody, we back! Sorry about that, interviewing for jobs is stressful. Whoda
thunk? Anyway, we missed you and we love you and we'll see you again Monday! <3,
H+K
“What did our friend Taako ask of us?” asked Killian, presiding over a gathering at the end lane of the bowling alley.

“Be cool,” chorused Carey, Sloane, and Johann, with about as much enthusiasm as a funeral. Hurley, typing names into the computer, rolled her eyes.

“So what are we going to do?” asked Killian.

“Be cool,” they said again, possibly with even less vim and absolutely no vigor.

“Hurley, I didn’t hear you,” said Killian.

“This is a mistake,” said Hurley. “Lup sucks and this is going to suck. I don’t care if she’s Taako’s sister.”

“I still think she’s behind Noelle’s leg snapping,” muttered Sloane.

“She has done more than enough to lose your trust,” said Johann blithely.

“Hey, all of those things could be true, and we’re still gonna do it, right?” said Killian. “It’s for Taako, guys.”

“I’m only here because he called in every favor I owe him,” said Carey.

“Same,” said Sloane.

“Me too,” said Hurley.

“I actually wanted to come,” said Johann.

“Pfft, lame,” said Hurley, giving him a nudge and a grin. He smiled a little uncertainly.

“You’re telling me you’re genuinely here just to support Taako?” Sloane asked Killian.

Killian hesitated. “He may have called in one favor.”

“Are we talking about the perm incident?” asked Carey.

“No, we’re not, and we never will again,” rumbled Killian.

“Whatever,” said Hurley. “I’m here. I just hope he doesn’t expect me to be nice.”

“Careful,” said Carey. “You keep grousing like that, you’re gonna lose your focus and Kravitz will win again.”
“Last time was a fluke,” said Hurley. “Hurley always wins.”

“Does she now?”

The voice immediately raised Hurley’s hackles. Lup was here, walking slightly behind Kravitz and Taako.

“Almost every time,” Taako explained, plopping down beside Killian. “We all kind of suck.”

“You said it, not me,” said Lup, sitting beside him.

It had always been obvious that Taako and Lup looked alike, but now, seeing them side-by-side out of derby costume, Hurley was sure they must be twins. They were the same height, or close enough that there was no visible difference, had the same facial structure and body type. Even their voices had the similar pitch and tone. Lup was curvier, of course, maybe had a slightly rounder face, but Hurley was pretty sure if they switched clothes she’d mix them up. And speaking of clothes--

“Matching, Taako, really?” teased Sloane. Lup was in a red tank top and loose jeans with one knee torn out. Taako’s shirt was more of a muscle shirt than a tank, and his jeans were tighter, but they were the same colors as Lup’s outfit.

“I told you you should change, goofus,” said Taako, nudging Lup.

“I live an hour away, dingus,” scoffed Lup. “Are you gonna introduce me or what?”

“Yeah, that’s Carey, Killian, Sloane, Hurley--you know them from derby, of course--and our good buddy Johann.”

Killian stood up. “I’ll grab you some shoes if you want to tell Hurley your bowling name. You’re kinda tall--they’re all dude sizes, so… size 8?”

Lup frowned suspiciously. “Size 11.”

Killian just nodded and made her way to the counter.

“What did she mean, bowling name?” Lup asked Taako.

“Something tough, not your derby name,” he explained.

She looked up at the screen and read the names Hurley had already typed in. “Can I borrow one of yours?”

“For this first time, I guess.”

“Dupree,” Lup said to Hurley. “That’s with a double E.”

Hurley narrowed her eyes, but added Dupree to the list after Agent of Death. “That’s everyone, then. Evil Bach, you’re up first.”

Johann jumped up and took the lightest ball from the ball return, making a lot of effort at holding it only with great effort.

“C’mon, Johann,” called Sloane.

Johann pulled back his arm too slowly, released too late, and watched the ball lethargically roll halfway down the lane before drifting into the gutter. He turned back around; Taako, Carey, and
Sloane burst into exaggerated applause. “Well done, sir, well done,” said Carey.

Johann stared into the middle distance. “This whole game is metaphorical, I swear. It has none of the hallmarks of a real sport.”

“You hit the pins with the ball, homie, what’s so metaphorical about that?” said Taako.

“It’s Sisyphus, that’s what it is,” he said, looking morosely at the ball return. “You knock down the pins, and they’re set back up. There is no test of strength against your fellow man or your own limitations. Only to knock down the pins, and knock them down again.”

Lup snorted. Johann didn’t notice; he picked up his ball and returned to the lane.

“Hatchi matchi, what is his deal?” Lup asked Taako in a low voice.

“Johann sort of lives in his head,” said Kravitz.

“He’s kinda cute,” Lup said. Hurley looked up with a frown.

“No dice, Munch, he plays for my team,” said Taako.

Lup tsked. “All the good ones are gay.”

Hurley exchanged a glance with Sloane, who was looking equally uncomfortable. Did she not know?

“I think I speak for every single person here when I say we will take that as a compliment,” said Carey offhandedly.

Lup quirked an eyebrow. “What, you...wait a fucking minute.” She glared at Taako.

“Did I not mention this was our Bi-Monthly Gay Bowling Night?” drawled Taako.

“This is you and your damn theatre friends all over again,” she muttered, slumping down in her chair.

“I hope that’s not a problem,” said Sloane pointedly.

Lup shrugged. Hurley’s fists clenched.

Killian reappeared holding a pair of shoes by the laces. “Here you go. And welcome to the Giant Feet Club.”

Lup took the shoes without so much as a thank you and slid off her Chuck Taylors.

Killian settled back down, waiting for her to respond, and when she didn’t, said, “Seriously, though, I can relate. It’s a nightmare trying to find a decent pair of heels.”

Lup didn’t look up. “Pft. You get stuck with those lousy grandma shoes.”

Killian smiled a little. “Yeah, for sure.”

The slow roll of Johann’s ball met its end with a single pin knocked down. Johann trudged back to his seat.

“You’re next, Sloane Ranger,” said Hurley.
Sloane stood and patted Johann on the back. “Maybe you’ll break twenty this time.”

Hurley was bowling like shit, she knew, but at the moment she was hardly bothered. After all, what was the point of upholding the sacred rule that Hurley Always Wins when Taako had broken the far more sacred point of B.M.G.B.N.?

She set down the pitcher of beer she’d just grabbed from concessions, poured herself a cup, and took a minute to survey Lup again. There was something about her...something that just seemed different. What was it?

“For not being identical twins, you two sure do look alike,” said Johann, digging into some fresh nachos.

“Nah, I’m the pretty one,” said Lup.

“We are identical,” said Taako, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t ask if I can feel his pain, though,” scoffed Lup. Killian laughed, and to Hurley’s surprise, so did Carey.

“No psychic twin powers, huh?” said Carey with a grin.

“I don’t know, I always get a strange feeling in my toe when you’re about to do something really dumb,” said Taako.

“Yeah, well I get an itchy fist when you’re about to run your stupid mouth,” Lup shot back. Hurley tensed, but Taako just laughed. How the hell were they bantering? This was Lup! She’d broken his nose!

Hurley squinted at her again. What was it?

“Wait, no, though, you can’t be identical,” said Johann.

“Johann, maybe--” Kravitz began.

“Well, we are,” said Lup. “The doctors told us so.”

“But--” Johann began.

“Johann,” said Kravitz sharply, but Johann pressed on.

“--you’d both be guys. Or girls.”

Hurley saw Lup tense, but Johann didn’t notice, only kept talking. “Like genetically--”

“Adam’s apple,” Hurley blurted. That was it, Lup had an Adam’s apple!

The group went silent.

Slowly, Lup stood up and glared at Hurley. “You want to make something of it, shortstack?” she said, her voice low with the threat.

Hurley’s fists curled automatically, but she was feeling something other than mad now.
“First of all,” said Hurley, putting down her beer and standing up on her chair, “I could take you, so let’s get that out of the way.”

Lup snarled, fists clenched.

“Second of all,” said Hurley, as the anger drained out of her, “…no. I don’t want to make something out of this. It’s…it’s whatever.”

Lup’s snarl was replaced by uncertainty. Hurley started to say something else, but no, anything else wouldn’t help. She sat back down, leaving Lup suddenly standing in the center of the group. Hurley watched her meet their stares, fiercely.

“Hey Lup?” said Killian.

Lup faced her as if preparing for a fight.

Killian kept her tone even. “You want us to keep calling you ‘she’ and stuff?”

Lup glared, but nodded.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” said Killian, looking pointedly at the rest of the team.

“Like we don’t really care, okay?” said Carey. “You know you best. We’ll take your word for it.”

Lup’s frown slowly relaxed. She nodded, and sat back down.

The group was quiet. Hurley looked over at Taako; he had one arm behind Lup, protectively, but didn’t seem fazed by the conversation at all.

“Ohh, I get it,” said Johann. “You’re transgender.”

Killian swatted him on the back of the head. “Shut up! You can’t just go outing people.”

Johann rubbed the back of his head with a scowl. “There’s nothing wrong with it, I just--”

“It’s like if I told a certain friend of ours about some particular feelings of yours,” said Kravitz quietly.

Johann’s eyes went wide. “Oh. Oh, god.” He turned to Lup. “I’m very sorry.”

She went from defiant to genuinely surprised. “Uh…”

“I wasn’t thinking. It won’t happen again, I swear,” he assured her.

Lup looked utterly lost. “Don’t…don’t sweat it.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes more. Carey got up to take her turn.

“Well,” said Kravitz, in a shockingly normal tone. “Johann, Lup, did you know you’re both writers?”

Johann raised his eyebrows. “Really? Are you a bard like myself?”

Lup swallowed, but seemed to be regaining some of her composure. “Like a songwriter? No, I’m barely a writer at all.”

“What do you write?” Johann asked.
She shrugged. “Copy, mostly. And I edit, freelance.”

“You did mention you were working on a novel,” said Kravitz.

Lup shot him a scowl. “That’s not...that’s nothing.”

“Art is never nothing,” said Johann solemnly.

Lup snorted, but nevertheless looked just a little pleased. “Speaking of art, what’s the deal with Evil Bach?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” said Johann, shooting Hurley a dark look. “I wanted to be Salieri.”

“Nobody knows who Salieri is, Johann,” said Hurley, hopping up to take her turn.

“I told you, he was Mozart’s rival--”

Hurley waved a hand and picked up her ball, trying to tune them all out. C’mon. Chuck the ball down the lane. It wasn’t that hard. Just like always.

She took a breath, exhaled slowly, and drew back--

Lup laughed in concert with Taako, and Hurley’s thumb slipped. The ball lost its spin and drifted down the lane-- clatter . 7-10 split. Hurley scowled and marched back to the ball return.

“I think Evil Bach is kind of clever,” said Taako.

“Why?” asked Johann.

“Because Bach’s name was Johann too,” Hurley grumbled, watching the wheel gag up her ball.

Lup smirked. Hurley’s scowl deepened and she went back to the lane.

Now. If she got a good enough spin on this...

Hurley took a breath, let it out and threw.

The ball spun to the corner and hit the left pin, which ricocheted into its twin.

“Yes!” said Hurley. Freakin’ finally. She turned to receive her well deserved adulation.

No one saw. They were all looking at Lup, telling some story.

She wasn’t jealous. It was just--she gritted her teeth. This was Lup . She didn’t belong here. This was more than she deserved. She didn’t even like them.

Hurley plopped down in her seat. “Your turn, Killian.”

Killian stood up. “I feel good about this one.”

Lup stood up too. “Be back.” She sauntered off toward the bathrooms.

Taako watched her go, waiting until she was out of earshot before kicking Hurley in the knee. “What the hell ?”

“Ow!” Hurley pulled her knees into her chest.
“Of all the people to make fuckin’ personal remarks, I didn’t expect it to be you, shrimpie,” Taako spat.

“Yeah, okay, I’m sorry!” said Hurley, releasing her legs. “I shouldn’t have said anything!”

“Damn right you shouldn’t,” said Taako, crossing his arms. “I didn’t bring her here so you asswipes could out her!”

“To be fair,” Sloane interjected, “you didn’t exactly warn us.”

“Or her about us, apparently,” said Carey. “Why didn’t you tell her everyone here was gay?”

“Same reason I didn’t out her to you chucklefucks!” said Taako, standing up to look down at all but Killian, who stood frowning with her ball in hand. Taako still tried to stare her down. “I didn’t think it would be a big deal!”

“Of course it’s a big deal,” grumbled Hurley.

“If we’d known, maybe we could have related—” Killian began.

Taako stuck out a finger. “No. Don’t even consider that you know what she’s been through.”

Killian stared at the finger. Taako lowered it.

“We at least have some idea—” Johann started to say.

“No we don’t,” Taako said. “Listen, you know why she works freelance? It’s so she can do all her work by mail. We might be fired because we’re gay, right, but she never gets hired in the first place!”

Hurley saw Carey wince.

“I was just trying to bring her somewhere safe, okay?” said Taako, holding out his hands in front of him. “So can you please. Just. Be. Cool? For once?”

Sloane looked him over. “I didn’t realize it meant this much to you.”

“Well what do you think, I’m gonna bring my straight sister to gay bowling night for shits and giggles?” Taako demanded.

“Taako, we’re still getting used to Lup being not an enemy,” said Sloane. “Give us a break.”

“Yeah, well, she’s getting used to this too, okay? And the least you can do is cool it on the hostilities!”

“She’s coming back,” said Johann.

Killian pulled her hand out of her ball and slapped Taako on the back. “Why the hell should I take bowling tips from you? I’ve seen you play.”

Taako didn’t skip a beat. “Well, fine, then, ask Kravitz.”

Kravitz froze. “Uh—er—”

“Sage advice there, sweetheart,” said Lup, taking her seat back and putting her feet up on Taako’s chair.
“This is sabotage, isn’t it?” scoffed Killian playfully, walking up to the lane.

“You don’t need my help for that,” said Taako.

“Ha ha,” said Killian. “You won’t be laughing when I finally beat Hurley.”

Hurley shook her head. “No chance.” Just like that, huh? Argument over? Back to bowling?

Killian bowled the ball. It wavered, crept dangerously close to the gutter, and then curved back into the pins.

“Strike!” Killian whooped. The onlookers jumped to their feet.

“What the hell?” shouted Hurley.

“That’s my girl!” crowed Carey, leaping onto Killian’s back. Killian laughed.

“Now all you gotta do is that same thing like, seven more times, Miss Priss,” said Taako.

“There are only five more frames, babe,” said Kravitz, giving Killian a high five as she piggybacked Carey back to their seats.

“Don’t bother me with details,” said Taako, stretching his hands. “This is where it turns around for Garyl.”

“You riding my wave?” teased Killian.

“Like a goddamn surf champion.” Taako picked up his ball.

“Get it, Garyl,” called Carey.

Taako drew back, bowled, threw out a hand to counterbalance, and watched it skid into the gutter.

They burst into applause. Hurley felt herself relax. This felt a little more normal. She glanced at Lup. She was smiling sardonically, clapping along.

Fine, then, if Taako wanted her to feel safe, she’d be safe from Hurley. Hurley would just ignore her.

Kravitz won, in the end. Taako was surprised Hurley didn’t ask him to intervene, but given her score it probably wouldn’t have done her much good anyway.

Taako, Kravitz, and Lup meandered out of the bowling alley, waving goodbye to Johann, who was very proud of his twenty-two points.

Lup had parked at Taako’s house, so they’d all get there together. Taako hopped into the passenger seat of Kravitz’s Malibu.

“You wanna join us for dinner, Lulu?” he asked as he buckled his seatbelt.

“Call me that again and I’ll wreck your shit,” she said absentmindedly, sliding into the backseat. Kravitz started the car.

“All right, Lup. Food?”

“Yeah, sure.”
“Cool, we can make some eggs benedict. Whip up some Hollandaise?”

Lup didn’t reply. She was staring at the upholstery.

“That sounds great,” said Kravitz, sliding a hand over to Taako’s knee.

Taako put his hand on Kravitz’s. “Hey Munch, what’s on your mind?”

She shrugged. “Your friends always like that?”

“Yeah, sorry about Hurley and Johann, they--”

“No, like--” she waved a hand. “You know.”

“I don’t think I do,” said Taako.

“You know. Chill. With each other.”

Taako pulled a face. “Like, friendly? Like friends are?”

She shook her head. “Whatever.”

“Are your friends not?” asked Taako.

“Your friends are weird, Flip, that’s all.” She shrugged. “Anyway. Hollandaise?”

“Yeah.”

“All that real butter and stuff?”

“Who you talking to?” Taako scoffed.

“That sounds pretty rich,” Kravitz commented.

“It’s the only riches I can give you, darling,” trilled Taako. Lup laughed.

Carey took Killian’s hand as they drove home. “So what do you think?”

Killian shrugged. “Kinda elusive, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I don’t get her.” Carey settled back into the seat.

“She seems like she’s been hurt pretty deep,” murmured Killian.

“Maybe, sure, but like, does that excuse her being such a jerk in the past?”

Again, Killian shrugged. “You know who she reminds me of?”

“You mean besides Taako?”

“Actually I was going to say Taako, back when he first joined the team. Same kinda guardedness.”

“Taako’s still pretty guarded.”

“You make a fair point.” Killian picked up her hand and kissed it. “Still, she’s not as bad as I
“Yeah, it was nice to not be insulted all night.” Carey traced Killian’s knuckles with her free hand. “That’s what I expected.”

“That’s probably why Hurley was so riled. The Rad Robes do tend to give her more shit than us.”

“Even so, Taako’s right. She could stand to chill.”

Sloane and Hurley lingered at the alley, cleaning up after everyone. It didn’t hurt to keep the place nice, since they were blatantly having a gay bowling night. No need to give the owner a reason to kick them out.

Afterwards, they took their time getting back to their cars.

“So what do you think?” asked Sloane, as they slowly made their way to the parking lot, hand in hand.

“Of Lup?” Hurley groaned. “I don’t understand why everyone’s so quick to just adopt her.”

“I’m not,” said Sloane quietly.

Hurley looked up at her girlfriend. “That’s a relief.”

“Although...you know, after what I’ve seen today, I don’t think she’s as bad as we thought.”

“She doesn’t belong with us, though,” grumbled Hurley.

“I don’t think Taako should have brought her,” said Sloane. “Refuge or something would have been better.”

Hurley snorted. “Bring her to karaoke night. Think she can sing?”

“God, that’d be something to see.”

They reached the place where their cars were parked, but opted to lean against Hurley’s rather than leave right away, looking up at the stars.

“Never met anyone transgender before,” Sloane said.

“Yeah you have,” said Hurley. “Roswell.”

“Oh.” Sloane frowned thoughtfully. “I forgot about them. Still, at least they look kinda halfway—” She stopped herself. “I shouldn’t finish that sentence probably.”

“I know what you mean,” said Hurley.


Hurley made a face. “We all have our struggles.”

They stayed until the lights in the bowling alley went out.
Sincerely, Angus

Chapter by miceenscene

Chapter Notes

Happy (American) Thanksgiving! We will be with our families tomorrow, so have tomorrow’s chapter today!! <3, H+K

Julia slammed the bearing puller into her wheel and yanked. *Come on, come on, almo-shit!* It flew out of her hand as the bearing suddenly came free and skidded across the empty locker room. She threw the wheel down and it rolled away.

“God DAMNIT!” she cried, pressing the palms of her hands against her eyes till she saw colors. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go. He wasn’t supposed to get taken away again, this process wasn’t supposed to have taken so long already. None of this was as it was supposed to be. She clenched and unclenched her jaw several times, digging her nails into her palm. She had to get a grip on herself before the rest of the team came in for practice. Anger wouldn’t solve anything, she reminded herself as she stood. Only dogged persistence would.

A timid knock sounded at the door.

“Come in?” Julia said, kneeling down to grab the wheel from under a bench. The door cautiously opened, and Mavis poked her head in.

“Are you Miss Julia?” she asked. Julia stood up and dusted off her knees.

“Yeah, that’s me. You’re Merle’s daughter, right?”

She nodded and walked into the locker room, carefully shutting the door behind her. “Um,” she pulled her backpack around and unzipped the main pocket, “Angus wanted me to give this to you.” She pulled out a folded and slightly crumpled sheet of notebook paper.

“Angus?” Julia breathed, looking between the paper and Mavis a few times. Mavis nodded and Julia reached out for the sheet with a trembling hand. She quickly unfolded it, and had to blink a few times before she could focus enough to read his handwriting.

_Dear Miss Julia, Miss Killian, Miss Carey, Miss Hurley, Mr. Taako, Miss Sloane, Miss Lucretia, Miss Noelle, Mr. Kravitz and Magnus,_

Julia pressed a hand to her mouth to cover her wavering smile.

_My friend Mavis Highchurch told me that she could give you guys a letter from me if I wanted to send you one. And I really wanted to send you one. So I’m writing this letter to you. Though now that I’m writing it, I’m not sure what to say.

I am okay. I’m back at the group home and there’s new house parents this time. So it is better than last time. It’s not quite as nice as when I was with Grandpa and Miss Killian and Miss Carey. But I am fine. I have a roommate and his name is Carter. He’s kind of messy. I really wish I could see you guys again._
Julia had to stop reading for a minute. She let out a long breath and looked up at the ceiling to try and hold in the tears that were threatening to break. Mavis pulled out a small package of tissues and offered one to Julia, who gratefully accepted it.

*My house parents say that roller derby bouts are not appropriate outings for our group home. So I don’t know when I’ll see you guys again. But I hope it is very soon. I just wanted to tell you guys to not worry about me. I am alright. I love you all. A lot. And I know that you’re going to win against the Goldcliff Golddiggers next month. Their defense was really weak last season. I love you.*

*Sincerely, Angus McDonald*

Julia looked away from the letter, and pressed the tissue to her mouth. Mavis gave her some privacy by becoming very fascinated with the loose thread on her shirt sleeve.

“Thank you, Mavis,” Julia finally said, her voice thick.

Mavis nodded. “He’s at the Coyote Hill Group Home,” she offered. “I think you could send him letters there, and it would be okay. He says the house parents will read them just to check, but you know.” Mavis shrugged. “It’s better than nothing.”

Julia nodded and the locker room door opened again. The rest of the team had arrived for practice, though the usual jovial banter was absent this time. Everyone was quiet and sullen. Mavis ducked out when the group came in. Julia took a moment to catch her breath, then held up the letter.

“Um, we got something,” she said, everyone turned to look at her. “From Angus.”

It was like his name suddenly broke them all out of the stupor. “What?” Lucretia asked.

“Angus sent us all a letter via Merle’s daughter,” Julia explained.

“Read it, read it!” Carey demanded, dropping her skate bag and trying to see the letter over Julia’s shoulder. Julia took another breath, and then read the letter aloud for everyone. At the end, everyone was sitting on the benches, faces downturned.

“He’s miserable,” Killian said quietly. Everyone nodded.

“Can anything be done?” Lucretia asked after a minute. Julia pulled some athletic tape from the first aid kid, and taped the letter to the wall.

“He’s in the system,” Carey said with a sigh. “He has no family left, and the parental rights were terminated years ago. The group home is just a holding place till they can find a foster family.” She shrugged. “He’s going to be 12 this year, and his chances for adoption just drop the older he gets till he ...ages out... like a lot of us do.”

Killian took Carey’s hand.

“Well, couldn’t one of us adopt him?” Taako asked.

“Taako, they’re not gonna let a bunch of gay people adopt a kid,” Carey reasoned.

“They might.”

“Even if they did finally come around on that, and that could take years, not one of us is in a place to take a kid. Sloane and Hurley don’t even live together. Killian and I sometimes struggle feeding ourselves, let alone a kid. And there’d be no way we could swing the lawyer’s fees and adoption
“Well, Kravitz has some money now, and we live together. I think Kravitz wouldn’t mind having Angus.”

“Taako,” Sloane cautioned, “this isn’t something you can just volunteer your boyfriend for.”

Taako sighed and looked down at the ground. “You’re right… I just...I hate feeling helpless.”

“We all do,” Carey agreed.

Julia toed the ground as she leaned against the wall. It was time to tell them.

“We’re not completely helpless,” she started, looking up and around at them. “...Shoot, where do I start? Um, Magnus and I have been taking a foster parent training course over in Rockport for the last couple weeks.”

The team just looked at her in silence, a silence heavy with a million questions.

“W...When...?” Killian managed.

“We’ve been thinking about it actually for a couple months now,” Julia continued. “We all knew that the situation with his grandpa wasn’t the best, so after the engagement we started wondering if there was a possibility that we could adopt Angus. I did some research, and it was made apparent that that process will take a very long time and he’d spend the whole time in that ...situation. So we decided to work on becoming foster parents to start. The course was kind of the first step down that path.”

“No, no. I mean... when were you planning on telling us this?” Killian finished, her mouth setting into a hard line.

Julia stuttered for a second. “I’m...I’m telling you now,” she offered.

“Wow, thanks .” Killian stood up and ripped open her locker.

Julia’s mouth fell open and she took a half step back. “I thought...” she started.

Killian slammed her locker shut, making everyone jump. She swung around to face Julia again. “What? You thought what, Julia?! You know--” she sputtered, “you’re not the only one who loves Angus.”

“I know that!” Julia snapped, her eyes flashing.

“He’s important to all of us!” Killian’s volume started to rise. “You can’t just go and-and-and make these big decisions for him without at least giving the rest of us a fucking hint! You didn’t even tell Angus!”

“I didn’t tell Angus because there’s a fucking good chance that all this will come to nothing and he will spend the rest of his childhood in the damn foster system!!” Julia’s voice broke and echoed around the cement walls.

Killian stopped, stood frozen.

Julia took a breath. “Look... we know that Angus is important to all of us, but Magnus and I are the only ones in a position to do something about his situation right now... I’m sorry if it feels like we cut you out. We didn’t mean to. It’s just... every day he’s not here with us, it feels like he’s
slipping a little further out of our grasp,” she finished hoarsely.

Killian stood there for another minute, then stepped over the bench, and slowly walked over to Julia. She captured her in a long hug.

“I know what you mean…” she took a shaky breath. “Sorry for yelling.”

“It’s fine.”

“I just wish…” She shook her head and sighed. “Since it can’t be me, I am glad it’s you.”

“Well, that’s the thing. That’s why I didn’t tell you either. There’s so much to do, the course, the home visits, the interviews; we need character witnesses, adoption lawyers… we could somehow manage to jump through all those hoops and even still…” Julia looked down at the floor. “I guess I didn’t want to fail you guys too.”

Killian put a hand on Julia’s shoulder. “Well, you at least have 7 character witnesses in this room right now.” Everyone on the benches nodded.

“Kravitz’ mother is a lawyer,” Taako offered. “Even if she couldn’t help, she could definitely point you to someone who could.”

“If you need help studying for the course, or with your other classes, I’d be happy to help,” Noelle added, a small smile on her face.

“I’ve got some cars down at the shop I could sell you at a discounted price, in case they don’t like those junkers you two drive,” Sloane chimed in.

“And hey, if anyone knows the system, it’s me,” Carey said. “You don’t spend your growing up years in it without learning a thing or two. I can help too.”

Lucretia stood up. “Basically, we’re here for anything you might need. We all love Angus, and we’ll all help you two get to the finish line, whatever that may look like.”

“Thanks guys.” Julia smiled, feeling a weight lifting off her shoulders.

“Alright, get dressed.” Lucretia slipped on her whistle and nodded. “Tryouts are next week and you don’t want to be in worse shape than the freshmeat.”
Merle strolled out of the rink’s tiny office, whistling. The rink had been popular since the tournament, almost twice as many people at free skate, and on a Monday, too. They might turn a profit this month.

Over on the bank track, the team was geared up and racing around in some kind of...must be an agility practice, because they were jumping over each other. It looked like a lot of fun, and damn if those girls didn’t make it look easy.

Merle stopped whistling. Something was off. What was it?

He checked his pockets. Keys, wallet. He looked over the track and then the flat rink. All seemed well there. He shot a glance over at Robbie. He was selling someone a soda, that was fine.

What was it?

Something about the flat rink drew his gaze. There were quite a few more girls than usual, all trying out Candlenights skates for the first time, practicing to be derby girls someday. In fact, all the kids were girls, laughing and chasing each other around the rink.

Where was Angus?

Merle furrowed his brow. That was it, that was what was missing. Weird. But maybe he’d joined an afterschool club of some kind, like Mavis had. This musical of hers was taking up three or four afternoons a week. He knew because he was the one picking her up after every rehearsal, since it fell right in the middle of Hekuba’s show.

He checked his watch. Almost time to pick her up now. He ambled over to the DJ booth to call the end of free skate.

Mavis hopped into the front seat and buckled up. “Hi, dad.”

“Hey, sweetie. Good rehearsal?”

“Maybe if the boys ever stay on tune,” she grumbled. “I don’t get why Andy gets to be Harold Hill. He can’t sing for beans.”

Merle was not all that familiar with *The Music Man*, but he’d seen part of the movie once, and a middle school rendition sounded like a particular circle of hell. “Who should be Harold Hill?”

“Manuel’s way better, but his voice hasn’t changed yet.”

Merle tried not to laugh at the idea of a kid interested in theater whose voice hadn’t changed in eighth grade.

They rode in silence for a while. Hekuba lived near downtown, a ways from the middle school. Merle frowned as a thought occurred. “Is Mookie at home alone?”

“He’s with a neighbor until I get back,” said Mavis. “Mom said he shouldn’t be a latchkey kid ‘til he’s ten at least.”
“What the he--heck is a latchkey kid?”

“A kid who goes home alone for a bit while their parents are at work. That’s what we do when I don’t have rehearsal.”

“You go and stay home alone until your mom gets home?” said Merle in disbelief.

“Yeah, you didn’t know?”

He should have, he realized. He knew when Hekuba’s show was. He knew when school got out. Do some math, Merle, dammit.

Psh. And here Hekuba was always acting as though the moment he let the two of them out of his sight they’d be grievously injured.

...Speaking of out of sight. “Hey, Mavis, that Angus kid.”

She looked at him, eyes wide.

He frowned. “What?”

“N-nothing. Nothing.”

“Mavis,” he said, his tone a warning.

“I didn’t think it was wrong! It was just a letter!”

“Now, sweetie, calm down. What in blazes are you talking about?”

“Angus asked me to give a letter to the derby team, and he said it was a secret. I didn’t know it was wrong!”

“...Why?”

“He’s my friend, I didn’t know, I’m sorry—”

“No, no, Mavis, why did he need you to send a letter?”

“He said it was the quickest way to get it to everyone, ’cause the regular mail wasn’t fast enough.”

“And why on earth is he sending secret letters?”

Mavis paused. Merle glanced over at her. She was chewing on her lip.

“C’mon, it’s not a good idea to keep secrets from your old man,” said Merle.

“No, this part’s not a secret. I just don’t know all of it. Um. He’s a foster kid?”

Merle’s eyebrows shot up. “He is?”

“Yeah, he’s at the Coyote Hill Group Home. He didn’t used to be, though, he lived with his grandpa, but something happened.”

“So when he lived with his grandpa, he’d come to roller derby practice?”

“I think so?”
“And now he can’t,” Merle muttered. “So he had you bring a letter.”

“Am I good, Dad?” said Mavis.

“Mm? What?”

“Is it okay?”

“Oh. Nothing wrong with passing notes.”

“Phew. Okay.”

“Smart kid. Both of you.”

Mavis didn’t respond. Merle glanced over again. She was smiling a little.

The idea of Angus being a foster kid haunted Merle for the next few days. He’d assumed that the kid came to derby practice because he was someone’s nephew or son or kid brother, or that one of the girls was babysitting. It had never even occurred to him to ask which one, or why.

And this group home he was at--he remembered the name from the paper. A few years back there had been some big scandal there, some creep hurting kids. How had that ended? He remembered someone getting thrown in jail.

He tried and failed to convince himself that Angus would be just fine. He almost managed to think the sentence, “The boy can take care of himself,” before realizing he had no reason to think that. Well maybe this would be good for him, toughen him up a little, he thought, which was followed immediately by the memory of the boy trying to hide a black eye behind his demon mask. Damn, he didn’t need toughening up, he needed protecting, by of all people Mavis, who was, much as Merle hated to admit it of his own daughter, a nerd!

It was this cycle, of unusually fatherly thoughts on the one hand and the idea that this was none of his damn business on the other hand, that had him sitting in the bleachers, staring at the derby team the next practice. They were doing some kind of endurance drill, round and round the track and then stopping to do pushups or situps, and then again around the track. He’d seen them do this a few times before. It reminded him of basic training, which was to say that it looked terrible, but usually they took the challenge with good humor.

Not today, though. They were quieter than usual, and now that he thought about it, they had been since the season started. They should be riled up, fresh off a tournament win, but no, their hearts weren’t in it.

He watched the practice wrap up, saw the skaters go back to the locker room. One of them, the big one, Beauty and the Beast, sat down on the steps to the track, trying to adjust a wheel.

This was none of his business, he grumbled, walking toward her.

“Evening,” he said.

She looked up. Good lord, she was huge. She would have been huge for a man, but for a woman she was colossal. “Evening,” she rumbled.

“I don’t think we’ve ever been introduced,” he said, sticking out a hand. “Merle Highchurch.”
She raised an eyebrow, but shook his hand. “Killian Mahi’ai.”

He nodded. “How’s the team?”

“We’re fine,” she said mildly. Oh, she was lying. She was definitely lying.

“You sure? You seem a little discouraged lately.”

She gave him an affronted look. “Do we?”

“Just slightly off,” he said, trying to be placating. “I know you had a couple of injuries at that tournament.”

“Yeah, that kind of threw us for a--” she paused. “A loop.”

“And then there’s the kid,” Merle went on. “Angus.”

Killian abruptly stood up, and up, and up. Merle tried not to cower as she glared down at him.

“What about Angus?”

Merle gulped. “Oh, you know, I haven’t seen him around lately…” he trailed off.

Killian didn’t stop staring.

“And…you know…” Fill the silence, fill the silence-- “My daughter’s a friend of his, so I asked her if something was up… she said he’d been sent back to a group home?”

She glowered for a full five seconds, and then sniffled and looked away. “Yeah.”

Okay, sad, he could work with sad. “That must be really tough.”

She looked at him, and she was definitely crying. Oh, god, he’d made the giant woman cry. She said, voice quavering, “Yeah. It is.”

“I can see how much y’all care about him,” Merle said, nodding sagely. “No wonder the team’s been…” he trailed off as her expression hardened. “What?”

“I’m trying to decide if I should rip your arms off for making me cry,” she said. There was no lie here, she meant it.

Merle backed away. “I’ll uh…I’ll let you finish up here.”

None of his business, he thought all that evening.

None of his business, he thought, taking orders all day at the florist shop for a winter formal at Faerun High.

None of his business, he thought as he supervised free skate.

None of his business, he thought, pulling up at the middle school to pick up Mavis.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Buckle up,” he said distractedly, as she did.
“Can I see who’s on the radio today?” she asked as he pulled away.

“You mean besides your mom?”

“She’s home sick today. Can I?”

Merle frowned. Huh. “Yeah, go ahead. What’s she sick with?”

“She’s got a bad cold.” Mavis flipped on the radio, which was already turned to Hekuba’s station. A Johnny Cash song was playing.

“Gotta look after the pipes, I guess,” said Merle absentmindedly. None of his business, his brain reminded him, like a mantra.

“At least she’ll be around to make Mookie do his homework,” said Mavis. “He always waits til someone makes him and then he never finishes.”

None of—no wait, now, that was his damn business.

Hmm.

“I think we’ll make a quick stop before we get home, Mavey.”

“Okay.”

Mavis unlocked the door with her key and shouted into the house, “Mom, I’m home! And Dad’s here!” Merle followed her inside, holding two bags from the deli.

“Dad’s here?” said Mookie’s voice from the kitchen.

“Homework. Sit down.” That was Hekuba’s voice, much more hoarse than usual. She appeared from the kitchen in sweats and a bathrobe, arms crossed. “So. Merle. You’re in my house.”

Even with heavy bags under her eyes and no makeup, Merle was struck by how pretty she was. The cute snub nose and blonde hair that she bequeathed to Mookie, the sharp blue eyes that still cut him to the quick.

“You look like hell,” he said.

“I’m sick,” she croaked. “What’s your excuse?”

Well, he’d walked into that one. He held out the grocery bags. “We brought you dinner. You still like matzo ball soup?”

She raised her eyebrows. “What do you want?”

“Can’t a man bring his sick ex-wife some soup?” said Merle, a little offended.

“Would this man bring his sick ex-wife some soup?” she countered.

That was a fair point, but he wasn’t going to say so. “I just thought I’d do something nice. I do have a question for you, though.”

“Ah, here it is. Mavis, would you take the food to the kitchen, please?”
“Yep,” said Mavis, and Merle handed off the bags to her.

When she’d gone, Merle said, “I was thinking it might be good if the kids came and hung out with me at the shop after school, instead of going home alone.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“Then they’d be supervised, right? You can come and get them after work.”

“The bus brings them from school. You going to pick them up?”

“The bus passes through downtown every day. They just need to get off at a different stop.”

Hekuba considered this. Merle waited.

“Do you want to spend more time with them? Is that what this is?” she asked finally.

“Yes. But it also means someone would be around to make sure Mookie does his homework.”

Mookie groaned from the next room. Mavis shushed him.

Hekuba rolled her eyes. “Trial basis.”

“Sure.”

“Starting next week.”

“Sounds good.”

She looked him over suspiciously for a minute more. “I’m trying to figure out what your agenda is.”

“C’mon, when have I ever had an agenda with you?” said Merle.

“I don’t have the energy to give you a laundry list,” she said, waving a hand and heading back to the kitchen. “Good night, Merle.”

He took this as his dismissal and left Hekuba’s house feeling like a man who’d just avoided a trainwreck. That could have gone south fast.

He hopped into his car. Agenda. No agenda. The only agenda was taking care of his business.

His thoughts went back to Angus. None of his business, right.

Unless it was ...after all, the team made money, right? And if the team was down in the dumps, then they weren’t going to play well, which meant the rink would lose money again, and that was his business in more ways than one.

Right? Right. He started the car.

“What do you mean, Merle made you cry?” said Sloane, pushing open the door of the rink for Killian and Carey.

“He mentioned Angus,” said Carey, rubbing Killian’s back.
“I feel like an idiot,” muttered Killian. “Just remembering that he’s not here…”

“We’ll get Angus back,” Carey assured her. “And then we’ll kill Merle.”

“I threatened to rip his arms off,” Killian sighed.

“We could do that too,” said Carey. “Whatever you want, babe.”

“Thanks, Care Bear.”

Sloane smiled behind them as they reached the door to the locker room.

“Aw, what?” Carey squinted at a note taped to the locker room door.

Sloane leaned to look over her shoulder. “What’s it say?”

“Dear B.o.B., we’ll be renovating the locker room this week, please move your gear to the other locker room until Saturday...ugh.” Carey pushed open the door. “Figures.”

“Maybe that means they’ll get the mold out of that corner,” said Killian.

The three of them dug their equipment out of their lockers and carried the armfuls to the guest locker room. It didn’t have any of the old derby posters or photos. It did smell nicer, though, Sloane had to admit.

“What’s this?” Killian shifted all her stuff to one arm and picked something carefully up off the bench. She turned, revealing a huge vase full of flowers.

“Oh!” Carey dumped her stuff in a random locker and reached out to touch the bouquet. “Who’s it for?”

“Has it got a tag?” asked Sloane, opening a locker.

“Yeah, hang on...turn it a little, babe.” Carey flipped open the card. “It says...For the team, from a fan. Chins up, ladies.” Carey looked up. “Huh.”

Sloane frowned. “Someone knows we’ve been down?”

“I guess so,” said Killian, carefully setting the vase down on the bench. “I bet it was Magnus.”

“Aww, what a sweetheart,” said Carey. “Bet he never admits it.”

“I’ll take that bet,” said Killian with a grin.

Sloane reached over and checked the tag. It said, “Pan’s Blooms.”

“Huh.”

Mavis focused very carefully. This was a top secret mission, and the very important secret knowledge she had obtained from arcane sources, i.e. her dad, who knew the custodian, was the key.

She slowly turned the locker’s knob. 7...19...6. The Master Combination.

Angus’ locker popped open. Mavis threw a glance over her shoulder and pulled the box of Cosmic Brownies out of her backpack. She very carefully put it on top of the neat stack of Angus’
books, fished the note out of her pocket, placed it on top, and shut the locker.

She exhaled. No more secret errands. It was too stressful.

Angus watched her go from around the corner before going up the hall. He opened his locker quizzically and took the little note off the box of Cosmic Brownies.

*Hang in there, kid.*

He didn’t recognize the handwriting; it wasn’t Mavis’.

Tears welled up in his eyes. He wiped them away behind his glasses and very carefully folded the note so it could stand up. There, now he could read it every time he opened his locker. Right now, he needed it.
“Well that was disappointing,” Magnus said, watching the door swing behind the last potential team member.

“We had more than last year,” Julia countered, stacking up waivers and information sheets. The rink was empty now; Merle had closed it for the try-outs that had just finished. Winning the championship the season before always led to a boost in people interested in joining.

“But none of them were anywhere close to eligible,” he replied, turning the table over and collapsing the legs underneath.

“I have to agree with you, Magnus. I don’t anticipate our roster changing this season.” Lucretia walked up. She flipped through the few information sheets of players that had done better than the rest. None of them were very promising. “If you’ll take that to the supply closet, I’ll lock up and turn off the lights.”

“Great. See you tomorrow,” Magnus said, picking the table up and walking for the closet. Julia waved and then followed after him.

“The realtor left me a message on my machine this afternoon,” Julia started as they walked off.

It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing that they weren’t getting any new blood, Lucretia thought as she headed to the locker room. They hadn’t had a new player since Noelle joined the season before last. At least they wouldn’t have to spend the first month of practices getting used to each other. And besides, Lucretia reasoned, her team had a good balance, which was honestly one of the most important traits a team could achieve. Still, it would have been nice to have a back up so they wouldn’t have to cut it so close if one of them got injured again.

She put the try-out forms in a folder and put it on the top shelf of her locker. There was always next season. She grabbed her purse, and fished around for her keys. Oh, she’d need to stop by the grocery store and pick up some dog food on her way home, Lucretia reminded herself.

“Did I miss it?” a warbling voice asked as Lucretia locked the door.

Lucretia looked over her shoulder, and her eyebrows rose at who she saw.

“Lup?” she asked, very confused as to why the captain of the Rad Robes was standing in her rink, holding a beaten up pair of skates. Lup shoved her free hand into her coat pocket and leaned on one hip. “What are you doing here?”

“…”I’m here for try-outs,” Lup said.

Lucretia waited for the punch line, or for someone to come out and say, ‘Smile, you’re on Candid Camera,’ but there was just silence. Lup glanced around the room then back to Lucretia.

“I’m sorry… did you say you’re here for try-outs?” Lucretia asked, walking forward a little.

“Yes.”

“For the Bureau of Badass?”
“...Yes.”

Lucretia stopped a few feet away and carefully regarded Lup. Torn jeans, choker necklace, older jacket, but a determined look on her face. She narrowed her eyes.

“Why?”

“How?” Lup repeated, quirking an eyebrow.

“Yes, why?” Lucretia repeated, but didn’t elaborate. She set her mouth into a hard line. Certainly everyone was welcome to try out for the team, but she wasn’t going to open her players up to a rogue operative from a rival team.

Lup huffed out a breath and kicked the toe of her shoe around. She shrugged, and didn’t look at Lucretia. “I just… don’t want to play for the Rad Robes anymore.”

Lucretia didn’t reply. Mrs. Sinclair had always taught her the best way to get someone to tell the whole truth was to simply just let them sit and stew. Lup tried to match Lucretia’s gaze, but she faltered after a minute.

“And… Taako’s told me what it’s like on this team...”


“Yeah.” Lup frowned.

“You two talk a lot.” It was technically a question, but came out as a statement.

“Not really,” Lup replied, sounding like her patience was wearing thin. But then a thought occurred to Lucretia.

“You’re related.”

“Yeah, he’s my brother.”

Lucretia took a deep breath and looked carefully at Lup, weighing her options. Lup was one of the best skaters in the whole damn league, and adding her to their team would increase their chances of holding the championship title for more than just one season. But then there was also every interaction that she had ever had with the B.o.B.

“Look--” Lucretia began.

“Wait, just let me put on my skates. I can run some drills for you, you--you can see how I play.”

“I’ve seen how you play, and that’s precisely the problem.”

Lup mouth clacked shut, and Lucretia continued, her tone deadly level.

“Here at the B.o.B, we play with respect. We don’t run scorched earth tactics.”

“I know,” Lup replied through clenched teeth.

“And I have very little patience entertaining practical jokes from a team who irrevocably injures our players.”

“If you’re talking about that girl with the leg, I wasn’t the one who broke it--”
“I wasn’t talking about Noelle,” Lucretia said. Lup’s eyes drifted down to Lucretia’s knee, and she seemed to deflate a little.

“Oh.”

“Exactly.” She pursed her lips. “So you see why I would be hesitant to let any member of the Rad Robes join our team.”

“But I’m not a member of the Rad Robes anymore,” Lup jumped back in, looking at Lucretia. “I… I quit the team.”

Lucretia’s eyebrows flickered downward. “You quit?”

“Yeah.”

“Before joining another team?”

“Look.” Lup rubbed the back of her neck. “I know that the Rad Robes have been shitty to the B.o.B. in the past, and I know that I was part of that. But the shittiness wasn’t just an outward thing. They were pretty shitty to each other too, and it’s gotten to the point where I’d rather not skate at all than skate with them.”

Lucretia folded her arms and frowned more deeply.

“And I’m sorry for the parts that I had a hand in,” Lup continued. “I don’t have any excuse. I fucked up. But I don’t… I don’t know. I want… something more.”

Maybe it was something in Lup’s expression. Lucretia had seen it before in every member of the team, that searching, groping around in the dark for something solid, something remotely comforting. Granted, their darkness had all been different, but they were all still looking for a home… a family. And yeah, Lup had pulled some real crap in the past, but if this was real...

Lucretia’s shoulders lowered as she let out a breath. *I hope the players forgive me.*

“On a trial basis, you can skate with us.”

Lup’s eyebrows lifted, and her mouth grew wider. “Really? Gods, thank--”

Lucretia stepped closer and somehow managed to look down at Lup.

“But make certain that you understand this,” she said, her voice dropping to just above a whisper and every syllable razor sharp. “If I *ever* see you willfully ‘fuck up’ again, even just once, you will be off of my team so fast you won’t know what hit you. Are we clear?”

Lup nodded dumbly as Lucretia’s dark eyes seemed to bore into her.

“Good.” Lucretia stepped around her and headed for the door. “See you Tuesday, 6:30.”
“But it’s soon, right?” said Magnus, holding open the back door of the rink. “They’ll let us know soon?”

“Yeah, they’ll probably kibitz about it for a while, try to get us to offer more,” said Julia, proceeding inside.

“We don’t have any more,” muttered Magnus, following her inside.

“So we’ll stand our ground. It’s just a negotiation technique--” Julia froze. Lup was leaning against the wall, a few feet down from the locker rooms, beskated and for all appearances ready to go to practice. She looked up at them, almost disinterested.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Julia.

Lup shrugged. “Here for practice.”

“Hell no!” spat Julia.

“What, Jule, you can’t blame a girl for wanting to join the winning team, can you?” she said, examining her nails. “Even if that team is this freak show.”

Julia clenched her fists. Magnus put a hand on her shoulder.

“C’mon, Sour Scream, why are you really here?” said Magnus, his tone level but low.

Her eyebrows shot up. “You don’t believe me? Go ask your coach.” She tilted her head to their locker room.

Julia set her jaw and yanked open the door.

“Like you’re kidding me, right?” Hurley was shouting, standing on the bench. Nobody was in their gear yet, but everyone was here, Lucretia standing over them all with her arms crossed.

“This is not the portion of the practice when I’ll be accepting team input,” Lucretia said, her voice like iron. “That’s for after you’ve seen her play.”

“Fuck that,” said Hurley. “We know she can play. She doesn’t belong here!”

“She hates us,” said Noelle.

“I don’t think she does,” said Killian. “Still--”

Hurley threw a finger out to Taako. “Did you know she was going to do this?”

Taako threw up his hands. “Don’t look at me, tough stuff.”

“Why would she tell you?” asked Julia. Behind her, Magnus closed the door.

“Lup is Taako’s sister,” Sloane said, every syllable clicking into place carefully.

Julia was slackjawed. “Wh--She--What?”

“I mean, it’s not like it’s not obvious, Jules,” said Taako, irked.
“You knew about this?” Julia whirled on Sloane.

Sloane didn’t move. “We all did. She came bowling.”

“I didn’t know,” mumbled Noelle.

“Cool, great.” Julia turned to Taako, teeth bared. “Were you going to tell me about this, or--”

“We only started talking again like two months ago! I was trying to ease folks into it.”

“Ease--what the hell, Taako? You can’t tell me?”

“I was going to,” said Taako. “I didn’t know she was gonna pull this shit!”

“Coach, you’re not actually considering letting her join up, are you?” said Magnus.

Lucretia’s look hardened. “I’m not considering anything. This is her first practice. As far as I’m concerned she’s our newest teammate.”

“Hell no!” shouted Julia.

“I’m with Jules,” said Hurley.

Killian shook her head. “I think we should give her a chance.”

“She’s not that bad,” added Carey.

“Who are you people?” said Julia. “This is Lup! She picks fights and calls people names because she thinks it’s fun!” She threw out a hand to Taako. “She broke your nose!”

“She’s my sister, Jules,” Taako snapped. “What do you want from me?”

“An explanation, maybe,” said Julia.

Lucretia cleared her throat. It was a small noise, but the room fell silent.

“I don’t know where the hell you get the idea that this is a democracy,” she said, her tone level enough to lay a foundation. “Lup is joining up today. Barring something truly disastrous, that’s final. We’ll discuss this further after practice. Now gear up.”

Julia’s mouth snapped shut. She stormed over to her locker, twisted the new lock on it and slammed it open.

Lucretia motioned to Magnus and left the locker room. Magnus followed.

They reentered the rink proper. Lup had moved from the wall to the track, and was making lazy loops around it in the wrong direction. Lucretia watched her. Magnus waited for Lucretia to say something, but she didn’t speak.

“I don’t like this,” he said finally. “This is a bad idea.”

Lucretia shot him a glance, and then looked back at Lup. “Maybe so.”

He looked at her. “Why, then?”

Lucretia shrugged. “She’s looking for the same thing we are. Someplace to belong.”
“She has that with the Rad Robes,” said Magnus.

“No, I don’t think she does,” said Lucretia.

Magnus shot her a quizzical look.

“You seriously think that a team whose main strategy is cruelty could be a family?” she said.

Magnus tried for some time to think of a response and couldn’t land on one. Instead he said, “She’s hurt our players. She hurt her own brother.”

“I know.”

He frowned, familiar protective feelings surfacing. “Why are you so sure she’ll change?”

The team began to skate out of the locker room. Lucretia watched them for a moment before saying, “I’ve seen it happen before.”

Magnus huffed. “Listen, Lucretia, I trust you, but this seems like a really bad idea.”

“Your trust means a lot to me, Magnus,” said Lucretia mildly. “Today, though, your support’s going to mean more. Do I have it?”

Ugh, why couldn’t he just protect everyone? Magnus gritted his teeth. “Yes.”

“Good.”

As Julia exited the locker room, Lucretia blew her whistle to get everyone’s attention.

“Everyone onto the jammer line,” she called. “We’re doing a 27 in 5 to warm up. First one done gets to sit out of 4-on-2 drills.”

Lup got there first; she glided lazily to the line and about-faced on the inside edge. Taako took up a place beside her. The others were quieter than usual, glancing at Lup or pointedly not looking. Julia was staring ahead of her with boiling fury. She took a position on the outside edge, as far as possible from Lup.

Magnus pulled out his whistle and a stopwatch from his pocket. Lucretia nodded to him, and he blew the starting whistle.

As they took off, Magnus braced himself for things to get ugly, but Lup only skated straight ahead. It really was remarkable, he thought, how similarly Lup and Taako moved, the long-limbed graceful strides that cut the track like butter. He wondered why he’d never noticed before.

Taako was the fastest player on the team, but Lup kept pace with him up until three minutes or so, when first she and then he began to flag. After that Julia took the lead—she’d always had better endurance—and finished 27 laps with several seconds to spare.

As the rest finished up, Lucretia ducked under the rail and made her way to the center, Magnus following. “Good work, Jule. Stretch it out, everyone. Beauty, Diablo, Ram, and Jen, you are the four, Abby and Sour Scream, you are the two. That puts you on jammer, Robocop. Sour Scream, are you familiar with this drill?”

Lup stretched an arm over her head and shook her head no.

“It works like this. The two are on defense, and the four are on offense, going directly after the
jammer. Your job will be to protect Robocop. You get her through, you win; they stop her, they win. Understood?"

“Yeah,” said Lup noncommittally, trading out her arms to stretch the other one.

Magnus shot a glance at Noelle, who was staring at nothing and looked a little ill. Why would Lucretia do this?

“Good. Line up.”

Julia took a seat on the bench, watching with narrowed eyes. Magnus watched with a worried frown, suppressing the urge to go stand between Noelle and Lup.

This drill was one of Lucretia’s own invention, a way of dealing with the fact that they rarely had more than seven players at a time. It was designed to frustrate the defense, force them to work together. And, well, yeah, okay, if Lucretia wanted to see how well Lup worked with the team, this was the way to do it, but judging by the look on Julia’s face, Magnus was steeling himself for blood.

Lucretia nodded to him, and Magnus blew the whistle, once, and then again.

Noelle took off into the pack. Immediately Killian moved in to hip check her. Lup lazily put herself in the way, and the swing of Killian’s hip threw her directly into Noelle. The two of them landed into a tangled heap.

Lucretia blew her whistle. “Reset.”

“What the hell is she doing?” said Julia through clenched teeth.

Lup rolled off of Noelle’s legs and jumped back to her feet, rubbing a spot on her side. “Jeez, what’s that thing made of?”

“Carbon fiber-reinforced polymer,” Noelle muttered, accepting Killian’s outstretched hand up.

“She didn’t think they’d actually hit Noelle,” Magnus realized.

“She’ll learn,” said Lucretia.

Once they’d reset, Magnus again blew the whistle. Noelle hit the pack again, and this time Lup put her shoulder into staving off Killian, while Taako got between Hurley and Noelle. Carey and Sloane converged in front of them and hit Noelle together.

“Oof,” groaned Noelle when she hit the ground. Carey pulled her up this time.

Fweet. “Reset,” said Lucretia.

The drill began, and Noelle started this one with a fake, which bought her more time as Taako and Lup attempted to break through the wall, but Hurley barreled in from the side and knocked her down. Lup growled in frustration.

Fweet. “Reset.”

“This might be a little easier if our jammer could maybe keep up?” said Lup under her breath, but not quite under her breath enough that it was inaudible.

“Hey!” snapped Taako. “We don’t play that, Munch.”
“You try skating on a leg you made yourself,” scoffed Carey.

Lup glowered, but shut her mouth.

“Lup,” said Taako as they lined up, and whispered something to her. She nodded.

Magnus blew the whistle again. Noelle swooped in, and as she did, Taako grabbed Lup’s hand and swung her in a wide arc into Sloane and Hurley. In the resulting dogpile, Noelle slipped right through the pack.

*Fweet.* “Good work. Robocop, take a seat. Jule, you’re in the pack, Abby, take jammer, Diablo, defense.”

The players shifted around and the drill started again.

The first time Killian and Julia knocked Carey and Lup into each other, leaving Taako to leap over them both and directly into Hurley’s path. Hurley brought him down.

*Fweet.*

Carey tapped Lup’s shoulder. She drew away, but Carey leaned in and murmured something.

When Taako hit the pack, they flanked him, driving into the center of the pack, and then Lup pushed Carey into Sloane, leaving a hole for Taako.

*Fweet.* “Diablo, jammer. Abby, on the bench, Robocop, offense, Jule, defense.”

Julia scowled, but lined up next to Lup. Magnus braced himself.

Carey darted into the pack, swerving a little too much for the purposes of this exercise, but that wasn’t a problem for long. Lup took hold of Julia’s arm—Julia yelped—and whipped her into Killian. Carey slid through the opening.

Julia whirled on Lup. “What the hell?”

Lup spread her arms wide. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Jule,” called Magnus. She shot him a glare. He shook his head. “It was a legal move, Jule. We do it all the time.”


Three drills, half-hearted attempts at defense by Julia and Hurley both that led to Lup knocked down twice and out of bounds once more.

“Battling Ram! Jule Be Sorry! Protect your jammer!” shouted Lucretia.


“Don’t give me that shit, Ram,” said Lucretia. “I haven’t seen blocking this bad since you tried out. And Jule, you’re playing like you’ve got all day.”

“Maybe I feel like playing offense,” said Julia, crossing her arms.

“Maybe I feel like replacing you with a faster jammer,” spat Lucretia, gesturing to Lup.
Julia’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t tempt me. Play like I know you can.”

Julia growled, but lined back up. Just before the whistle blew, Magnus saw her exchange a glance and a nod with Hurley.

_Fweet._

Hurley and Julia plowed forward into the pack, getting between Sloane and Killian--

_Fweet._ Lup cut down the track like a shark. As she reached the pack, Julia and Hurley turned sharply to the sides of the track--

Hurley hit Sloane in the legs, driving her into Carey, and Julia swung herself into Killian, who narrowly missed Noelle. Lup sallied through without a hitch.

“That’s more like it,” said Lucretia. “Sour Scream, sit down. Ram, you’re jammer, Beauty, defense, Abby, with the pack. Reset.”

It wasn’t perfect, but by the time practice was over, Lup was at least working like a part of the team. Magnus watched as Julia’s fury was replaced by familiar, solid determination. He started to relax.

And Lup really was good, very good. She saw openings where none should have existed, took risks that usually paid off. She wasn’t quite as agile as Taako, but was more creative and easily as fast.

Lucretia called the end of practice. “Good work, everyone. Huddle up.”

They did, with everyone but Taako giving Lup a little space.

“I told you earlier this is not a democracy,” she said. “Even so, this team is unlike any other, and I realize my decisions have far-reaching consequences. If anyone has objections to making Lup a part of the team, they should speak now, and I will take them under consideration. I hope you will too, Lup. Now, anyone?”

Magnus glanced at Lup. She was staring at the floor. He looked over to Julia, who looked like she was chewing on a thought.

“Julia? You have something to say?” said Lucretia.

Julia opened her mouth, and then closed it again, before saying, “Look, I don’t know that we’ll ever be friends, but I’d sure as hell rather play with you than against you.”

Lup looked up to meet Julia’s gaze and nodded briefly.

“Good,” said Lucretia. “Hurley?”

Hurley threw up her hands. “Whatever. Julia’s right.”

Lucretia nodded. “Anyone else?”

The group was quiet for a moment before Noelle cleared her throat. “Stop talking about my leg,
please.”

Lup looked over to Noelle and shrugged. “Fine.”

“Then welcome to the B.o.B., Sour Scream,” said Lucretia gravely.

Lup held up a hand. “Point of order? I think I want to change my name. Don’t know what to, yet, but Sour Scream was a Rad Robe name.”

“Of course. Let us know when you’ve landed on something.” Lucretia waved a hand. “Good practice, everyone. See you on Thursday.”
Steven watched Magnus and Julia cleaning up the dishes. They were usually so relaxed around each other, but today Julia was jumpy. Something was up.

He leaned back in his chair, looking around his daughter’s apartment. She’d started taking pictures off the walls, packing up, which was strange. He was pretty sure the two of them hadn’t even made an offer on a house yet, but she’d always been a bit of an eager beaver. Perhaps she was anticipating something soon. Or maybe that was why she was jumpy, she had news about the house, but there was no reason why she’d wait to tell him.

Steven studied Magnus’ face. Yeah, no, he didn’t know Magnus as well. He looked like he had something on his mind, maybe?

Why the hell did she feel like she had to build suspense? The suspense only made him nervous, which was a bit silly, of course. She’d already met and gotten engaged to a man in a year, and that was working out just fine. How much worse could this be?

Oh god, why had he asked that? The rhythm his foot was tapping went erratic.

“Do you want some coffee, Dad?” asked Julia, handing off the last dish to Magnus to dry.

“I’ll pass for now, thanks,” he said. Like his worries needed any help.

“I’ll take some, babe,” said Magnus, putting away the last dish.

“Sure.” She pulled a coffee can out of the cupboard.

“So how’s this house hunt going?”

“Well, we were going to wait to say until we knew for sure…” began Magnus.

“Oh, go ahead and tell him,” said Julia. “He’ll be the first to know.”

Magnus grinned. “We called a realtor to make an offer on a place last week. Had to leave a message, so we’re waiting for a call back, but...I mean, it’s perfect.”

“It’s so nice, dad, you’d love it,” said Julia. “Right down the street from the rink.”

“Congrats, you two,” said Steven. “I know the neighborhood. Older houses, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” said Julia.

“Those can be tough to maintain,” he warned.

“Nothing Mags can’t handle,” said Julia, shooting her fiancé a smile over her shoulder.

“I hope this gets somewhere,” said Magnus. “The place is just right for what we want to do.”

Steven raised an eyebrow. “Do?”
Magnus’ mouth snapped shut. He looked to Julia. Julia looked back, and Steven knew this look. It was the same one she’d had when she’d been caught after she broke a window in her room and hid it for a week.

“That’s…” she started, and then cleared her throat. “I’m glad you asked, because we wanted to talk to you about that.”

Nice recovery, kid. “Oh really?”

“Yeah.” She pushed a button on the coffee maker and sat down at the table. “Huh. Where do I start?”

Magnus beamed. “How’d you like to be a grandpa?”

Steven’s eyebrows shot up. Was that all? Was that all? No wonder she hadn’t told him right away, after he’d made a big deal out of her having to quit school if she got pregnant...at least this was her last semester...

“No, dammit Mags--” Julia held her hand to her forehead. “I’m not pregnant, dad.”

“Oh...all right?” Steven was very relieved and a little disappointed.

“We’re training to be foster parents,” said Magnus explained.

“Oh! Well.” Steven rubbed his forehead. “This is...unexpected.”

“You remember Angus?” said Julia.

A lightbulb clicked on. “This is for Angus? That little boy?”

“Yeah, exactly,” said Julia, and she seemed to relax. “He’s stuck in the system, and we thought we could help.”

“You’re going to take in Angus,” said Steven. “A child.”

“We’re going to try,” said Julia, and now her face was set in determination.

“When, do you think--”

“Six months, if we’re lucky,” said Magnus. “If we’re not...well we don’t know.”

“This isn’t just us, either, the whole team is helping,” said Julia. “He’s going to live with us, but you know, he’s kind of...we all love him, dad. We just want what’s best for him.”

“Six months is before you’ll even be married,” said Steven. “You’re sure you’re ready to be parents?”

They exchanged a glance, the kind of glance that seemed to strengthen them both. Julia looked back to him, mouth quirked in a little smile. “Were you?”

Steven shrugged. “I suppose that’s fair. He’ll be a teenager before too long, though. That can be rough, even for a good kid like Angus.”

“Most people seem to manage,” said Julia.

“And, you know, he’s been in the system for a while. He might have...issues you don’t know
“Every kid’s got issues,” said Magnus.

This was a fruitless effort, but Steven tried one more time. “Being a parent can change the whole landscape of a relationship, too.”

“We know,” said Julia. “But we decided on this together, and we intend to do it together too.”

Steven nodded slowly. “You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“We’re going to need your help,” said Julia. “Interviews and...and character witnesses and things-...”

“Yes, of course I’ll help,” said Steven. “If you two are certain about this.”

“Dead certain,” said Magnus.

“Then...then I suppose I’d love to be a grandpa,” he said, struck by the idea. And Angus...what a good kid. What else could he hope for in a grandson? He surprised himself by laughing. “You two. I tell you what.”

Magnus was beaming again. Julia grinned and leaned over to squeeze him. “I love you, Daddy.”

He returned the squeeze. “How’d you kids get so good, anyway?”

“Some very good people raised us,” said Magnus.

“Ah, get over here,” said Steven, standing. The two of them jumped up to give him a hug.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to say here real quick, thank you guys so much for the wonderfully thoughtful comments. We read every last one of them and many times I have been moved to tears by your kind words. I speak for Hannah as well when I say that you do not know how much they mean to me, how affirming it is. The past couple of months have been very difficult for me personally and you guys are a constant source of joy. Just thank you. So much. I love you all. <3, K
Magnus signed his name on the paperwork, then passed it to Julia, who signed hers. She handed it back to the realtor.

“Done!” said the realtor. He tore off the carbon copies and gave one to the elderly couple from whom they’d just bought a house. Julia couldn’t hide her grin. They’d just bought a house!

“I hope you two get a lot of good use out of the place,” said the old man. “We’ve loved it for a long time.”

“We certainly will,” said Magnus, shooting a smile at Julia. Julia bounced on her toes.

“Now how long have you two lovebirds been married?” asked the old woman.

Magnus’ expression froze.

Julia thought fast, grabbed his hand. “Just a month now. Isn’t that right, dear?”

Magnus swallowed. “Y-uhh. Yeah. Thirty-four days. To be exact.”

Nice touch, Julia thought, and gave her sweetest smile.

“You seem very happy together,” said the old man. “Do you remember being so young, my dear?”

“I hardly remember yesterday,” said the woman. “But I do remember being in love.”

The man smiled at her, and then at Julia and Magnus. “Y’all take care of each other, now, you hear?”

“Yes sir,” said Magnus solemnly. Julia squeezed his hand.

They walked out to the car, still holding hands. Magnus kept staring at the paperwork. “I can’t believe it. We did it!”

“Good job, my doting husband,” said Julia.

He snorted. “Likewise, my sweet wife. Thanks for that, by the way. It’s good to stay on good terms with previous owners.”

“Anything for my husband,” Julia said. When Magnus didn’t respond, she looked up.

His ears and neck were red.

“Are you blushing?” she said, delighted.

Magnus ducked his head. “How did I get this lucky anyway?”

Julia leaned her head against his arm. “Now all there is left to do is move,” she said.

“I’ve always kind of liked it,” said Julia.

“Really?”

Julia looked up again. He was giving her a look of utter disbelief. “Yeah, it’ll be fun. You ought to see Killian lift a couch by herself.”

“I don’t want to put out our friends,” he said. “Everyone hates being asked to help move.”

“Nah, with us it’s a tradition. We’ll need some things though.”

“What kind of things?”

Julia counted them off on her fingers. “Coffee, donuts, pizza, and beer.”

“Sounds like a party.”

“It kind of is, except you have to move boxsprings up and down staircases.”

Magnus laughed.

Kravitz poked his head in the open door of the apartment. “Julia?”

“Come on in!” Julia appeared, carrying a box, and stacked it on top of another box in the front room. “You’re the first ones here.”

“Please tell me there’s coffee,” said Taako through a yawn, as he and Kravitz entered.

She hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “In the kitchen. Donuts, too.”

“The good kind, right? None of this grocery store shit?”

“What do you take me for?” she demanded.

“Nobody’s fool,” said Taako, wandering into the next room. “Krav? Coffee?”

“Yes please,” said Kravitz, smiling after his sleepy boyfriend. “Where’s Magnus?”

“He’s on his way. He insisted on packing up all his stuff yesterday, since he didn’t have a lot, so we’re just moving me today.” She wiped her forehead. “Thanks for doing this, Kravitz. Technically it’s only Taako who owes me.”

“This is out of the goodness of my heart!” called Taako from the kitchen.

“Four hours with all your costumes would beg to differ,” Julia said back.

“I’m glad to help, if I can,” said Kravitz.


“Hi!” She hugged Aunt Josephine. “Thanks for coming.”

“We had to see this place you bought with our own eyes,” said Uncle Arnie.
“And meet this man Stevie’s told me so much about,” said Auntie Josephine secretively, looking past Julia. “And here he is!”

Julia frowned. “What?”

Josephine approached Kravitz and gave him a thorough looking over. “Baby girl, you didn’t tell me how handsome he was.”

Kravitz leaned away. “Uhh, ma’am, I’m not--”

“Don’t be modest,” said Aunt Josephine. “You’re a tall drink of water and no mistake.”

“Auntie, no he’s--”

“I’m just sorry we missed you at Thanksgiving,” said Josephine. “We were with Arnie’s family this year.”

Uncle Arnie leaned over to Julia. “Baby girl, is your boyfriend gay?”

“Auntie ,” snapped Julia. “This is my friend Kravitz. And--” she raised her voice-- “his boyfriend! Taako! You remember Taako?”

Taako appeared from the kitchen holding two styrofoam cups of coffee. “You rang?”

“Oh.” Josephine blinked a couple of times. “So sorry, honey.”

“Quite all right,” sputtered Kravitz. “I’m sure if I was--your niece is lovely--”

“Hey Jules?” Magnus strode through the door. Kravitz sagged with relief.

“Aunt Josephine, Uncle Arnie,” said Julia, crossing the room to stand beside him. “This is Magnus.”

He stuck out his hand to Arnie. “So pleased to meet you both. I was at your club when Julia sang, sir. Really classy place.”

“Well, I do my best,” said Arnie, shaking the outstretched hand and looking pleased with himself. Josephine gave Julia a knowing look, and a wink. “So where’d you get that coffee, Taako?”

“Right this way, madam,” said Taako.

Between the entire derby team plus Kravitz, Josephine, Arnie, and Steven, Julia and Magnus were moved in by two that afternoon, leaving them with a single leftover box of pizza, furniture and boxes in approximately the right rooms, a dog thoroughly investigating each corner, and a house, filled with the cold light of a January afternoon.

“I’m glad we got the heat turned on beforehand,” said Magnus, popping open a box. Fish gave the contents a businesslike sniffing. Magnus scratched her head. “Good girl. All books in this one. Oo, and we can make a fire!”

“That sounds amazing,” said Julia, opening a box of her own. “Oh, I found the pictures!”

“Are mine still in there?” asked Magnus, leaning over to look.
Julia held up two small frames. One held a picture of three people laughing, a young Mexican couple and a gap-toothed boy. The other was statelier, but no less happy: a black man and a white woman under a tree, holding a baby. “Look.”

Magnus put his arm around Julia. “We’ll hang them someplace special. Like above the fireplace.”

“In our house that we have,” said Julia.

“Yeah.” He kissed her temple.

She laid the pictures back in the box carefully. “What’s in that one?” She gestured with her head.

Magnus walked over on his knees, accompanied by Fish, and opened it. “All my tapes! We should get a tape player.”

“Oh. I have one.” Julia stood up. “It’s around here somewhere.”

“You’ve had a tape player all this time and you never told me?” said Magnus from the floor. “I feel so betrayed.”

“Here you’ve been listening to tapes in your van like some kind of barbarian,” said Julia, searching the boxes. “My dad got it for me, but I have like, two tapes. And one of them is broken.”

“What kind of a musician are you?” Magnus demanded.

Julia spotted the box she was looking for and pulled it open. “Uhh… telephone, odds and ends… here we go.” She pulled up a small but serviceable radio.

“This calls for music,” Magnus declared, digging around in the tapes box.

“Gonna play me some of your old man music?” asked Julia, plugging the radio into the wall.

“Hey, look who’s talking, Billie Holliday.” He tossed her a tape. “Put that bad boy in there.”

She caught it and looked at it. “Crosby, Stills and Nash. Never heard of them.”

“What? Music that I like that you’ve never heard of?”

“Miracles do happen. Which side?”

“Doesn’t matter, just play it.”

“Please tell me it’s not disco,” she said, sliding the tape into the slot and pressing play.

Magnus got up. “C’mon. Let’s dance.”

“I can’t dance,” she laughed.

He took her hand and put his hand on her waist, rocking her back and forth. “Just move with me, baby.”

Fish barked and ran around their legs. She laughed and rested her hand on his shoulder. “This song isn’t bad.”

“It’s about us,” said Magnus.

“Oh is it?” she said.
“Yeah, hang on...this part.” He sang with the tape:

“Our house

Is a very, very, very fine house

With one dog in the yard

Life used to be so hard

Now everything is easy ‘cause of you…”

He picked her up and spun her, singing la la las while she laughed…

If this was every day, said a voice in the back of her head, then that would be okay with her.

Chapter End Notes

psst. over here. word on the street is that ya boy barry will be in thursday's chapter. but you didn't hear it from me. ;) <3, K
“Professor, are you sure about this?” Noelle asked, trying to keep up with Maureen as she hurried down the life sciences hall of the Old Science Building.

“Of course I am,” Dr. Miller said. “Those fuddy-duddy engineers just need a little perspective. Any damn fool undergrad can build a bridge out of tongue depressors.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” said Noelle.

“Your project certainly is, and it deserves to be worked on.”

Noelle sighed and tightened her grip on her skate leg. It was new, and stronger, she hoped. Carbon fiber was strong, but brittle, so a layer of strong plastic should fix the problem. It still felt a little unfamiliar on her leg, though; it could probably use shaving down in a couple of places.

She did believe in the project. Of course she did. It was just that this was so much effort for a panel of professors that couldn’t care less...

“Don’t you worry, Noelle,” said Dr. Miller. “Barry’s an accomplished scientist. If anyone will be able to convince the committee to accept your project, it’ll be him. Ah, here he is.” She rapped sharply on a door labeled “Barry Bluejeans, Assistant Professor of Biology.”

On the other side of the door, Noelle heard a yelp, followed by several thumps and a strange rattling noise.

“Oh, dear. Barry? Do you need a hand?” called Dr. Miller.

“Uhhhh, yes?” came a muffled voice from the other side. Dr. Miller opened the door.

The man inside seemed to have knocked over a small bookshelf onto himself, and had an arm stuck in the ribcage of a skeleton. He looked like that guy from True Lies, if that guy from True Lies had a pair of glasses with duct tape holding the nose bridge together. He was wearing a bow tie and a tweed jacket, too. With jeans.

“Oh, hi, Maureen,” he said. His voice was kind of raspy. “I uhh, seem to find myself in a bit of a pickle.”

“Gracious, Barry,” said Maureen, hurrying in and trying to disentangle his arm from the skeleton. Noelle followed, trading her skate leg to her hook and tipping the bookshelf back onto its base. It was a cheap composite wood one, really not designed to hold all the giant textbooks that were now pinning the professor’s legs.

“Thanks,” said Barry, as Maureen goaded his arm out of the skeleton’s ribcage.

Maureen weighed the skeleton in her hands. “Is this real?”

“Yeah!” Barry pulled his legs out from under the books and started stacking them. “Cool, right? I found it at a hospital that was closing down in North Carolina.”

“That doesn’t sound shady at all, Barry,” said Maureen, hooking the loop of string in the skull on
a hook on the wall. Noelle crouched down to help the professor stack books.

“So what can I do for you? Who’s this?”

Noelle deposited the stack of books on the bottom shelf and stood up. “I’m Noelle Redcheek. We uh. I guess we have a question for you?”

“We sure do,” said Maureen, pulling Barry to his feet. “Noelle could use some expertise with her project. She’s in the engineering program.”

“Oh, sure, sure,” said Barry, turning to Noelle. “Er, what’s the project? I’m no engineer, but—”

“That’s actually what we’re counting on,” said Maureen. “The project committee isn’t sold on the project yet, but you might be able to change their minds.”

“Why me?” said Barry.

“Show him, Noelle.”

Well, here went nothing. Noelle laid her skate leg flat on one palm and the crook of her hook hand. “Uh, this is...a prosthesis I invented. For roller derby.”

Barry adjusted his glasses and looked over it carefully. It was thin, and had a plastic fitting with straps on one end and a pear-shaped ball joint nub at the other end that Noelle tied into her skate. This model was thicker than the previous version, and had a chunky white layer of plastic behind the dark gray of the carbon fiber.

“Interesting.” He held out his hands gingerly. “May I?”

She handed it off to him. He looked it up and down carefully, rotating the footpiece.

“The project plan is to design several similar prostheses, for other sports, custom-made,” said Maureen.

“Only, I’m the only amputee I know,” said Noelle. “I could probably find some more, with some funding, but that’s only if the projects committee changes their minds.”

“I might be able to help,” said Barry, putting his hand on the bottom of the footpiece and pressing. The leg gave a little, but not enough to snap again. “I know some folks at the teaching hospital at Neverwinter. This is really something. You think you can rollerskate on this?”

“I do skate on it,” said Noelle.

He looked up with a smile and handed her leg back. “Really? You have proof of concept?”

“This is actually the second prototype,” said Noelle, accepting it. “The last one was too fragile.”

Barry nodded thoughtfully. “And the committee doesn’t want to fund it because…”

“They say it lacks significance,” said Noelle. “The problem’s too niche.”

“I know a few people who would disagree,” said Barry, putting his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Tell me, what’s that thing do to your knee?”

Noelle winced. “It does tend to get sore after a while.”
“You ought to take an Anatomy class,” said Barry. “It’d probably help with your design. I’m teaching one this semester.”

Noelle shook her head. “I don’t have any biology prereqs.”

Barry waved a hand. “Pff. Prereqs. You don’t need prereqs for Anatomy. I can waive them. We’re only a week or two into the semester, right?”

“Then you’ll come talk to the committee with us?” said Maureen.

Barry frowned, considering. “Well...I would like to see this proof of concept. When do you speak to the committee?”

“Next week,” said Noelle. “But our first bout is on Saturday, if you want to decide.”

Barry nodded. “All right, sure, I’m free. Either way, I think this project has promise.”


“Derby’s the one with the uh, the sticks and the ball, right?” said Barry.

Maureen grinned. “You’ll see.”

Julia rolled her shoulders in the center of the track. “All right everyone. Stay loose.”

Killian cricked her neck. “I love the first bout of the season.”

“You ready, Lup?” said Carey, hopping a little on her skates.

“That’s not my name here,” said Lup archly, leaning down the length of her leg.

“Still not gonna tell us?” said Sloane.

Lup reached up and smiled. “You’ll find out when everyone else does.”

Julia stretched her arms, full of pre-game jitters and other assorted feelings. The impending first bout had her elated, but then there was the lingering distaste associated with Lup, mixed with a growing reluctant respect. Lup was like a more cutting, defensive Taako. She was like Taako was when Julia’d first met him, really. Huh.

“Look at this team,” said Magnus, grinning. “Rockport’s not gonna know what hit ‘em.”

“We do look good, don’t we?” said Taako, holding out a hand for a high five from Sloane. She obliged.

“Is it time?” Hurley asked Julia.

“It’s time,” she said. “You know the chant, Lup?”

“I’ve heard you chucklefucks do it enough times, I should think so,” she shot back.

“Hey, now you’re one of us chucklefucks too,” said Carey, nudging her. Lup snorted and grinned.

“Go on, Jule,” said Lucretia.
Julia grinned “Ladies! Your attention please!”

The team burst into chatter, Lup half a beat after everyone else. Julia let them go for a few seconds before banging her fist on the bench.

“I hereby call this meeting to order. Who are we?”

“THE BUREAU OF BADASS !” The call echoed around the rink.

Julia grinned. “Damn straight! All rise for a word from the director!”

They jumped to their feet, hands over their hearts. Lucretia considered them carefully.

“New team,” she said. “New season. Same game. Let’s go play.”

The team whooped and cheered, and Killian and Magnus started stomping out the beat. Who are we? The B.o.B. Who are we? The B.o.B ...

Barry walked into the rink just in time to catch the tail end of the chant. He tried to stand up straighter, look a little less self-conscious than he felt. He had...perhaps the word was aesthetic. Yeah, an aesthetic appreciation for sports in general, but he didn’t often connect to individual teams. This B.o.B. seemed to be a favorite, though.

“Ladies and Gentleman! Welcome to the opening bout of the season! It’s gonna be a good one, folks...”

Barry searched the bleachers for a seat. It was pretty full up, but he wanted to be able to see Noelle in action...

“And now, let’s hear it for...the Rockport Riot !”

Ah, there was a spot, next to a black guy with a camera, patting a white guy awkwardly on the back. The white guy was crying. Barry approached them as the announcer called out the names of the Rockport team. “Uh, hi. Sorry to interrupt. May I--”

The camera guy looked up and scooted over. “Oh, yes, of course.”

Barry took a seat and pulled a notebook and a pencil out of his coat pocket.

“Aaand now...introducing,...your hometown girls, the baddest of the badass…”

Barry shot a glance over at the crying guy. “Is uh...is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” the camera guy assured him.

“It’s just beautiful,” blubbered the crying guy.

Barry nodded to himself and listened to the announcer. The captain first, that was Jule Be Sorry...she looked somewhat familiar. Ah, yes, it was that upperclassman in his freshman Biology course. There were always one or two that put off their science credit until the last semester. He didn’t know she played. Then a larger woman called Beauty and the Beast, a smaller woman called Lil Diablo, one called Jenicide, an even smaller woman called the Battling Ram, each one flexing or doing some kind of jump or trick. He hadn’t expected the secret identity-style names, those were fun.
“She suffered a bad break last season, folks, but we rebuilt her...faster...stronger...it’s the B.o.B.’s favorite pivot, Robocop!”

Barry leaned forward to watch. Noelle smiled and jumped onto the track. She took a few strides to build up speed and then launched herself into a jump--Barry braced himself for a disaster--she landed on the prosthesis, other leg extended out behind her, skating backwards.

The crowd erupted, and Barry couldn’t help but applaud. The girl was a genius!

He leaned over his pad, scribbling. *Excellent tensile strength, strong enough to withstand heavy impact, maneuverable...*

“And last but never least, especially in our hearts, it’s the prettiest--oh, but what’s this?”

...*manipulation of ankle joint?...controlled by knee or thigh?...*

“Uh oh! Oh no! Double Trouble!”

“Taako wouldn’t stop talking about how good this was going to be,” said the camera guy to the crying guy, who was no longer crying quite so much. Barry glanced up.

“You know and love one, but meet the world’s only rival for the title of the Most Magical Girl in the World...”

Two skaters entered the track arm-in-arm, each with one eye painted over, one with a star, one with a moon. They were twins, that was for certain, but the one with the moon painted over her eye was...like an abalone shell. Opalescent.

“Ladies and gentleman, may I introduce for the first time together, Abby Cadabra--”

The star-eyed twin threw out a jazz hand--

“--and AlakaSlam!”

The moon-eyed twin did a high-kick and brought her skate down on the track with a boom.

The crowd roared. Barry stared open-mouthed as they set off around the track, orbiting each other and blowing kisses to the audience. *Damn*. That high kick, though! Damn!

“That’s some quality wordplay right there,” said the crying guy, to his left, still clapping. Barry snapped his jaw shut. He was ogling, and that was gross. He checked to see if the guys next to him had noticed.

The camera guy was staring with a gooey smile. “They sure are something.”

“Do you think Taako considered changing names?” the crying guy asked.

“You know them?” Barry blurted.

They both looked up at him. The crying guy said, “Yeah, Kravitz here is dating one of them.”

Barry felt a pang of dread. “Which one?”

“Abby Cadabra,” said the camera guy, Kravitz, looking a little embarrassed.

Barry tried not to show how relieved he was. “You’re a lucky guy.”
Kravitz smiled. “Yeah.”

The score was 29-29 when the team were given a quick break for water. Killian and Taako met them with high-fives and back-slapping.

“Hell of a jam, Jule,” said Killian, tossing her water bottle.

Julia caught it. “Hell of a pivot,” she replied, and took a swig.

Noelle smiled and nudged Sloane. “Hell of a blocker.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” said Magnus. “The Behead-her’s got your number, Robocop. The rest of you keep an eye out for her.”

“AlakaSlam--” Lucretia began.

“So choice,” said Taako. Lup grinned.

“Slam, you’ll be jammer for the next three rounds,” Lucretia finished with an eye roll. “Don’t let Jess shake you.”

Lup rolled her shoulders. “She can’t touch this.”

“Who’s Kravitz’s friend?” asked Carey, looking up into the stands. “No don’t--don’t everyone look--”

Everyone looked, but luckily the nerdy-looking guy beside Kravitz was bent over a notebook, scribbling furiously.

“Don’t know him,” said Taako, shrugging.

“He’s here to watch me skate,” said Noelle. The team’s attention shifted to her, and she blushed at their alarmed looks. “I mean, he’s a professor. Helping me with my engineering project.”

“Oh, god, I think I’m in his biology class,” said Julia, squinting at him.

“He keeps looking at you two,” said Carey, gesturing to Taako and Lup.

The twins exchanged a glance. “Well, who can blame him?” drawled Lup.

Taako looked back at the man, just in time to see him glance up and then hastily back down again.

“Ohohoho!” oozed Taako. “Not us, Diablo, Tom Arnold over there is looking at Lulu.”

“Oo, first bout and you’ve already got a fanboy!” crowed Carey.

Lup smacked Taako on the shoulder. “Don’t call me Lulu. And forget that guy, he’s not even cute.”

“You’re not into that kinda nerdy look?” asked Magnus.

The team’s attention abruptly shifted to their assistant coach. Magnus didn’t seem to notice.

“Uh, if this guy creeps you out, just say the word and we’ll kick his ass,” said Killian.
A surprised little smile crossed Lup’s face, almost too fast to see, replaced quickly by a smirk. “Not if I kick his ass first.”

“All right, enough crosstalk,” said Lucretia. “Ram, Jule, you’re out this jam, got it?”

“Got it,” said Julia and Hurley together.

“You ready to jam, Slam?” said Magnus.

“I swear, if someone starts singing *Space Jam*, I will flip my shit,” said Lup.

“Oh really?” said Hurley with a grin.

“Focus,” said Lucretia. “Let’s get out there. Jule?”

Julia cracked her knuckles. “Right. Who are we?”

“*The B.o.B.*!”

“Go get ‘em, ladies,” said Julia, and the team took off onto the track.

“So why is Noelle’s helmet different from the other...you called them blockers?” asked Barry.

“She’s the pivot,” said the crying guy, whose name, Barry had learned, was Johann. “She directs traffic, sort of thing. Keeps the team apprised of everyone else’s whereabouts.”

“Noelle plays jammer occasionally too,” added Kravitz. “A very talented young skater.”

“And all on a prosthesis,” said Barry in an awestruck mumble, jotting down a couple more notes. “She’s an absolute goddamn genius, you know. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“You said she’s trying to turn this into some kind of undergraduate thesis?” said Kravitz.

“Something like that,” said Barry. “All the engineering students do projects, but this has implications far and away past her undergraduate degree.”

“I wonder if she’d be willing to do a follow-up interview,” said Kravitz thoughtfully.

“Looks like AlakaSlam is trying her luck as jammer for the first time for the B.o.B.,” said the announcer.

Barry looked up, and then cursed himself for looking up so quickly. Obviously the woman was beautiful—obviously—but he was here for academic purposes, not to gawk.

He was just going to…very scientifically…watch the jam.

The whistle blew, starting the pack. Now that he knew what to look for, Barry could see that Noelle was keeping an eye on the whole group of them, directing her teammates with terse instructions or taps on the shoulder. It was hard enough for him up here to keep an eye on the action, much less play at the same time. Talented young skater indeed.

The whistle blew for the jammers, and AlakaSlam took off down the track, outpacing the other jammer by far. Without too much difficulty she wove her way through the pack—with, Barry noted, assistance from Jenicide, who was responding to direction from Noelle, well done. AlakaSlam
looped around the track just ahead of the other team.

Barry tried to see patterns in the way the pack was moving and interacting with each other. The B.o.B. seemed rather in sync with each other, touching each other’s shoulders and arms to communicate. The other team communicated too, but mostly through shouting. Very interesting.

The jammers were back with the pack. The captain of the other team, the Behead-her, barreled toward AlakaSlam along with two other blockers--

But Noelle had seen them go, and sent two of her own blockers to intercept them.

The blockers hit each other with a mighty clatter, creating a huge pile directly in front of AlakaSlam. Barry winced, preparing for her to trip over them--

She jumped, and sailed over them like a gazelle. And maybe it was his imagination, but he could swear that mid-air she looked at him and winked.

She landed and immediately called off the jam.

“Three points for the B.o.B.!” called the announcer. “Folks, this sister act is downright mystical! AlakaSlam is a wizard in her own right!”

Barry felt weak. Goddamn.

Barry confessed being very pleased to see the B.o.B. win 85 to 79, and after bidding Kravitz and Johann good evening, approached Noelle at the t-shirt table when the game was over. She waved as he approached and broke off from the team to speak with him.

“So what do you think?” she asked. She was still wearing the skate prosthesis, but had taken off her other skate, and was getting around by pushing off the ground with her foot and skating one-legged.

“What do I think?” Barry repeated. “That was incredible! Noelle, you’re an amazing engineer.”

She looked surprised. “You think so?”

“I know so. I’d be pleased to argue your case to the projects committee.”

Noelle smiled. “Thanks, professor.”

It was good to see a student understanding their potential, Barry thought. He glanced over at the table where the rest of the team was. Abby Cadabra and AlakaSlam were signing autographs.

“Noelle, could you--”

The words “introduce me to AlakaSlam” were almost out of his mouth before Barry realized how awkward and creepy he sounded. He cleared his throat.

“Could you get me a copy of your proposal sometime this week?”

Noelle nodded. “Sure. The committee meets on Thursday afternoon.”

“I’ll be there. See you later.”
Noelle smiled again and took off back toward the team. Barry threw one last glance at AlakaSlam before nodding to himself and leaving the rink.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, We're curious about something. If we designed t-shirts like the team shirts in the story and put them up somewhere for sale, would y'all want them? Mainly, I want to make a t-shirt for myself and Hannah, and I realized that maybe you guys would want them too. Anyway, if that's something that would interest you, let us know. Here or on tumblr. <3, K
Noelle massaged her forehead as she walked into the rink. It had been a long day, and her nerves were totally frayed. Practice would be good for her today, relaxing.

At least the projects committee had finally accepted her proposal. Between Dr. Miller and Professor Bluejeans, they were convinced that maybe a project that involved living beings might be a good idea for once. The proposal itself probably helped, or at least she hoped it did. Three semesters of being rejected and she’d made one that was totally ironclad. Dr. Miller said it looked like a graduate proposal, which Noelle was secretly very pleased with.

She walked into the locker room, saying hello to the others. Sloane, Hurley, Carey, and Killian were already there, chatting.

“I’m just saying, it looked weird,” said Killian, pulling on a tank top. “Especially after that podracing stuff? Hi, Noelle.”

“That’s just how Yoda looks,” said Hurley, folding her gi. “At least he can act.”

“Not this again,” said Carey.

“Listen, the kid was obnoxious.” Hurley stuck her gi into her locker and hopped up on the bench to put on her socks. “That’s not how kids act anyway.”

“It was a little cheesy,” said Sloane, repinning her hair.

“It’s probably George Lucas’ fault,” said Noelle, wrangling the poof of her hair into a scrunchie. “He’s not a great director.”

“How can you say that?” Hurley demanded.

The door of the locker room opened and Lup breezed in. The conversation stopped.

Noelle sat down and started taking off her regular prosthesis. Lup still put her on edge. She seemed to be at least trying to be a better person, there was that, but she was still unpredictable. Self-consciously, she slid off her regular leg and traded it out for her skate prosthesis, which was leaning in the corner of her locker.

After a few moments of silence, Hurley pointed at Noelle. “Okay, but seriously though, how can you say George Lucas is a bad director?”

Noelle shrugged. “I’ve seen a couple of interviews with the cast. And he wrote the script, you know.”

Lup snorted. “We talking about the dialogue in Star Wars? Absolutely pitiful.”

“If you don’t like it, you don’t have to see it,” grumbled Hurley.

“Who said I didn’t like Star Wars?” said Lup, kicking off her shoes. “Although can we talk about the walking disaster that is Jar-Jar Binks?”

“I liked Jar-Jar,” said Killian.
Carey sighed, reached up, and clutched Killian’s arm. “Babe, you know I love you dearly, but I might have to disown you.”

Noelle smiled and laughed. God, if the engineering guys she knew could hear them, six women talking about Star Wars, they’d lose their minds. She could hear it now... *I’ve never met a girl who was into Star Wars...* She rolled her eyes and slipped on her skate prosthesis.

Julia opened the door. “Hey, is it cool if Magnus comes in?”

The six of them spent a moment glancing around, silently checking with each other before Killian said, “Sure.”

Magnus poked his head in. “Hi, team, I just wanted to let you know that Lucretia’s out sick today, so I’ll be coaching.”

“Oh, gross, did she get that flu going around?” said Hurley.

“Yes, ‘fraid so,” said Julia. She rubbed her hands together. “Still, when the cat’s away--”

“The mice will do boot camp,” Magnus interrupted.

Julia scoffed. “Hardass.”

Magnus grinned before ducking back outside. Julia swung her skate bag onto the bench and opened her locker.

Noelle’s smile fell as she straightened the straps on her skate prosthesis. Oh no.

Boot camp was a bunch of different stations on the flat rink. You skated in between the stations as fast as you could, do a bunch of squats or push-ups or jumps or whatever at the station, do a lap around the rink, and go to the next station. It was all about pacing yourself. Usually Noelle liked it; the methodical nature of the exercise was almost meditative, which would have been great since she felt so frazzled, but today, Magnus was coaching.

“Get those knees up, Jenicide!”

“Slam! You gonna let Abby outrun you?”

“Quit skimping on push-ups, Jule!”

Every *time*. Every time he yelled Noelle felt the need to run, a jolt up her spine that meant danger. She tried to focus on skating. The adrenaline was okay. It was the accompanying panic, the nails-on-a-chalkboard feeling at the base of her neck that got to her.

“Pick it up, Robocop, you’re lagging!”

Noelle gritted her teeth. She just needed to get through it, and it’d be fine.

Usually Noelle skipped it when the team went to Refuge after practice, but she didn’t have any early classes tomorrow, and she was still on edge, so she decided she needed a drink.

She hopped up to the bar with Sloane. “What should I get?”
Sloane was surprised. “You drinking today?”

“Yes. I just don’t know what to get.”

“How fast do you want to get where you’re going?”

Noelle hesitated. “Not that fast. But I don’t like beer.”

“May I suggest a white Russian?” said Ren from behind the bar. “It’s not too crazy. Cold and creamy and sweet.”

“Good call,” said Sloane.

“Sure,” said Noelle.

As Ren fixed her drink, Sloane patted her on the shoulder. “Now what’s driven you to drink?”

“I just feel totally burnt,” said Noelle, accepting the drink and taking a sip. It was pretty good. “Thanks, Ren.”

“School?” asked Sloane.

“No really. I mean, sort of?” Noelle shrugged. “It’s not the work, I can do the work. I just get so sick of the guys in the engineering program.”

“They are the worst,” Sloane intoned. “Are you the only girl?”

“There are a couple of freshmen, but other than that, yeah.”

Sloane smiled. “I bet they look up to you.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. We all know you’re brilliant.”

Noelle sighed. “If you say so. I don’t feel very brilliant.”

From the other side of the bar, Julia, Magnus, Taako, and Lup burst into laughter. Magnus shouted something Noelle couldn’t quite make out, and she winced.

Sloane saw. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s not a big deal.” Noelle took another drink.

“I can go ask them to keep it down,” said Sloane.

“That’s not the problem,” Noelle mumbled.

“Then what is?”

Noelle hesitated. “Do you think Magnus knows how scary it is when he yells?”

Sloane’s eyebrows jumped up. “He scares you?”

“A little, yeah.” A lot, it was a lot.

Sloane looked uncomfortable. She lowered her voice. “This isn’t a race thing, is it?”
“No,” said Noelle sharply. “If it was, I’d be scared of...of Kravitz or Avi too, right? And I’m not.”

“I guess so,” said Sloane.

“It’s just that he’s big, is all.” Noelle looked Sloane in the eye. “You mean you’ve never been scared of him?”

“Of him? No.” Sloane sipped her drink, which was some kind of vodka and elderberry concoction. “He’s a goof. My mechanics give me more crap than he ever has.”

“I guess if you’re used to it…” said Noelle.

“Maybe you should tell him.”

Noelle looked up in horror. “No, Sloane, I can’t--”

“Communication is important with your friends,” said Sloane. “He’d want to know. Wouldn’t you?”

“I mean, maybe, but Sloane--”

“Here, he’s coming over now. Hey Magnus!”

Magnus was coming over, along with Lup. Noelle grimaced. Oh god, this could not get any worse.

“What’s up?” said Magnus. Lup leaned up against the bar to wait for Ren.

“Go on, Noelle,” said Sloane.

Noelle buried her face in her hands. “Just don’t worry about it--”

“Worry about what?” said Magnus.

“Great. There was no getting out of this now, was there? She took a long drink and a deep breath, and the words spilled out of her in a flurry. “Sometimes when you shout it scares me.”

She looked at him, ready for him to be...what, angry? Scornful? Dare she hope for understanding?

He wasn’t any of those things, though. He looked hurt.

“Oh,” he said.

Dammit. “I’m sorry.”

Magnus was frowning. “You know I’d--I’d never do anything to...to hurt you or anything, right?”

“I know,” said Noelle flatly.

“Like, you’re my friend,” he said. “I don’t--I wouldn’t--”

“I know,” she groaned. “Look, this isn’t intellectual. If it was I could stop, but I can’t, so--”

“I don’t understand,” said Magnus. He was getting annoyed now. Hell, so was she.

“Just--you know what, forget it.” She took her drink and headed for an empty booth.
Magnus turned to Sloane. “What was that?”

Sloane rubbed her face. “Shit. It’s all my fault, that’s what it was. Noelle?” Sloane hurried off after her.

Magnus watched them go, unsure what had just happened.

A seat down, Lup accepted a mimosa from Ren with a nod and took a sip. “So, Boy Scout, how’s your ego?”

Magnus looked at her. “Uhh…”

“Feelings a little hurt, maybe?” Lup drawled.

“I mean, yeah.” Magnus leaned back against the bar, frowning. “I don’t get it. I thought we were friends.”

“You probably are,” she said noncommittally.

“Then why doesn’t she trust me?” said Magnus, exasperated.

Lup surveyed him carefully. “How’d she lose her arm and leg?”

Magnus shrugged. “She doesn’t talk about it.”

“Then something tells me Cindy Lou Who has gone through some shit,” said Lup. “Some shit you know nothing about, am I right?”

“Probably, but—”

“So maybe you should worry less about why she doesn’t automatically trust a flesh rendition of the Iron Giant and worry more about how you can make it easier for her, sasquatch.”

Magnus let out an irritated sigh. “So I have to police the way I talk around her all the time?”

Lup raised her eyebrows. “You hang out with more gay people than are in the rest of the state and you haven’t figured out how to do that yet?”

“Well like—that’s just common courtesy.”

“What’s the difference whether it’s a slur or a volume problem?” asked Lup. She mimicked his tone and said, “I thought you were friends.” She left the bar and headed back toward Taako and Julia.

Magnus frowned, staring into space.

“I really am sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking,” groaned Sloane.

“It’s okay. Really.” It wasn’t okay, but Sloane felt so bad about it that Noelle couldn’t think of what else to say. “I know you only meant to help.”

“I didn’t expect him to be so defensive about it,” Sloane mumbled.

Noelle had. She downed the end of her drink. How was she ever going to face Magnus again?

“Hey Noelle?”
Dammit, here he was now. She forced herself to look him in the eye. “What?”

“Can I talk to just you?” he said, and then added, “If that’s okay.”

Sloane looked at Noelle with concern. Noelle shrugged. “Why the hell not.”

“I’ll be right over here,” said Sloane, slipping out of the booth. Magnus sat down across from her.

“I just wanted to apologize for the shouting,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

Noelle looked him over carefully. God he was big, like a human billboard. He seemed sincere, but guys always did, didn’t they? This is the part where most of the guys she knew would start lecturing her on how she was being too sensitive.

Maybe it was the drink talking--she always had been a lightweight--but she just wanted to get that part over with. “And?”

Magnus frowned a little, but only for a moment. “Oh, right. And I’ll try not to let it happen again.”

“Oh.” Noelle was genuinely surprised. “Um. Really?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay then…I…accept your apology.”

Magnus nodded and got up to leave, but paused. “Look, Noelle--”

Ah, here it was. She braced herself.

“I don’t ever want you to feel unsafe around me,” he said. “If it happens again, let me know, okay?”

Well then. “Okay.”

“Cool.” He got up and left the booth.

Noelle stared at the bottom of her glass and smiled a very small smile.

Practice rolled around again, and Lucretia was still sick. They were doing 4-on-2s. Noelle was on offense. The pack moved forward. Where were the defense?

Killian and Lup were guarding Sloane. Wait for it…She hung back just a second, zipped past Killian, and clipped Sloane on the shoulder.

Magnus blew the whistle like, five times in a row. The jam stopped.

“More precision, Robocop,” he called, deliberately keeping his voice level.

She smiled. “Yes, Coach!”

“Reset.”
Taako slammed his hand down on the alarm and sat up. The clock read 4:15. He yawned. Sazed was killing him with these opening shifts.

“Mm, no,” mumbled Kravitz, reaching a long arm out to pull him down by the shoulder. “Come back.”

“Gotta get to work, babe,” said Taako, yawning again, and gently sliding his boyfriend’s hand off his shoulder.

“You should quit,” said Kravitz, groping on the sheet where Taako was just lying. “Then you can stay here with me.”

“This is gonna be every day once I’ve got my own place.” Taako leaned down and kissed Kravitz, gently. “Gotta get used to it.”

“Mmm.” Kravitz smiled, eyes still closed. “When?”

Taako paused. “When what?”

“Your bakery…” he trailed off.

Taako waited for him to finish the sentence. “Krav?”

Kravitz snored softly.

Taako smiled, kissed Kravitz on the forehead, and slid out of bed.

There was something so peaceful about being up so early. Maybe it was leftover from being on the street, when 4am was the safest time of night, but he liked the darkness, the quiet. No pretense was asked for or provided at four in the morning.

In the quiet, he showered, sucked down some coffee, deliberated over two different sweaters for twelve minutes in the near dark, settled on a third, and then decided to walk to work, since it wasn’t far and the night was clear.

Hands buried in his pockets, his chef’s jacket hung carefully over his arm, Taako made his way through the empty, quiet streets of downtown. In the summer there’d be cicadas and crickets for ambiance, but now there was nothing but his own footsteps, crunching the frost on the sidewalk that sparkled under the occasional street lamp.

At one point he paused, across the street from the two-story brick building that he now owned.
It had taken all of his savings to buy the place. The shop was everything he could have asked for, space for a front counter, gas and water hookups in the right places for the baking appliances, tall ceilings, natural light, the whole kit and kaboodle; but the ceiling had been shot through with termites, which meant that not only was the space itself in serious need of refurb, but the apartment above it was, at the moment, unusable. Buying the building had taken two months, finding a contractor had taken two weeks, and then when the contractor’s estimate came back…

It was a lot of money. Almost everything Raven had invested, and the contractor had warned him that additional problems were bound to show up. The building was at least eighty years old. And all that wasn’t even accounting for the cost of appliances and decorating.

Here across the street was as close as he’d dared get to the building since the estimate came back. He was still going to get his bakery, sure, but something about the numbers existing on a page made him antsy.

Eventually, said a part of him he’d rather ignore, he’d have to take the next steps. It was just… all these morning shifts Sazed had him doing. It was hard to get things done when it felt like the day should be over at three in the afternoon. That was it. Yeah, that was totally it.

He walked the last few blocks to Sazed’s, leaned on the door to retrieve his keys, and found it open. Great. Sazed was here. Taako steeled himself and breezed inside.

“Morning!” he said with cheeriness that was only sort of forced, slipping off his coat and on his chef’s jacket. Sazed was doing inventory, it seemed, ticking off items on a clipboard.

“You’re late,” said Sazed without looking at him.

Taako checked his watch. 5:02. “Sorry, traffic was terrible.”

“Do you think my business is a joke, Taako?” Sazed’s tone was daggerlike. He’d been so paranoid lately, god.

“Sorry, in future I’ll be sure to provide your business with all the respect I can give in two extra minutes.” Taako took down a bag of flour from a shelf. There was bread to start, and then he could make and bake some cupcakes while the dough was rising.

“Hm.” Sazed gave him a side-eye and went back to his clipboard.

Taako ignored him. Time to get to work.

They opened at 8am. Usually at about this time, Sazed would leave to run errands or whatever, but today he decided to ruin a batch of snickerdoodles. He spent five minutes chewing Taako out for having the oven at the wrong temperature before Taako pointed out that he forgot the flour.

Sazed’s apoplectic silence was fortunately interrupted by the bell above the door up front.

“I’ll just grab that,” Taako said, and exited to the blissful safety of the public eye. And even better, his customer was Kravitz, who was leaning down to examine the cupcakes in the display case.

“Hey, babe,” said Kravitz, straightening up to lean over the counter.

Taako shook his head and mouthed, Sazed.
Kravitz glanced at the kitchen and cleared his throat.

“So, what can I get for you, stranger who I have never met before in my life?” asked Taako in his most customer-servicey voice.

Kravitz stifled a laugh. “I’m in the mood for a cupcake. Red velvet, if you have one.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any red velvet fresh today,” trilled Taako. “Can I interest you in a chocolate ganache, or maybe this lovely strawberry buttercream?”

Kravitz pretended to think hard about this. “Well, handsome baker, I do like strawberry.”

“You are too kind,” said Taako, laying a hand dramatically over his heart. “Let me get that for you.”

He plucked the cupcake from the display case and put it in a little box, batted his eyelashes at Kravitz, and handed it over. “That’s three dollars and seven cents, good-looking customer.”

“Taako, that’s enough,” snapped Sazed from behind him.

Taako’s stomach turned. He turned to Sazed with his most angelic innocent look. “Enough of what?”

Kravitz was radiating anger behind him. He could practically hear Kravitz challenging Sazed to say something.

Sazed snarled as if he’d smelled something nasty, but only said, “I’ll be back at the end of your shift.”

Neither of them stopped staring until the door shut behind Sazed.

“Ugh, I hate that guy,” said Kravitz, digging his wallet out of his pocket.

“He’s in fine form today,” said Taako, ringing up the cupcake on the cash register. He gave Kravitz his employee discount.

“Why don’t you just quit?” asked Kravitz, handing over a five. “It’s only a matter of time before you get your bakery up and running.”

“I can’t quit, Krav,” Taako muttered, trading the five for Kravitz’s change. “You saw how much the refurb is going to cost. I need to feed myself.” He held out the change.

Kravitz took his hand instead. “You’re really going to make that argument? After you carried me, unemployed and freelancing, for weeks?”

Taako squeezed his eyes shut. “This is going to be longer than weeks, Krav.”

“I’m willing to go years, if need be.” Kravitz gave his hand a gentle squeeze and released him. “Just think about it, okay?”

Taako put the change in his boyfriend’s hand. “Look, I’ll quit when I’m ready, all right? But for now I need the cash.”

“Well, when are you going to be ready?”

Taako sighed. “We had this same conversation this morning.”
Kravitz frowned. “When?”

“When I woke up. You fell back asleep.”

“Sounds about right,” said Kravitz with a chuckle. “What did you answer?”

“What do you think?” scoffed Taako.

Kravitz considered. His next sentence was careful. “I’d assumed you were scared.”

“I’m not scared,” said Taako dismissively. “You need anything else?”

Kravitz tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I think I could use a kiss.”

Taako smiled. “Yeah, you and me both, customer. Luckily there’s a special.”

“Oh really?” Kravitz leaned in close, and Taako kissed him.

“Two for the price of one.” And he kissed him again.

Scared. He wasn’t scared, Taako thought at 10:45, sliding a half-dozen loaves of gorgeous golden bread out of the oven, just in time for the lunch rush.

Maybe he was a little scared, he admitted to himself at 11:16, selling a moist-as-hell chocolate cake to a customer. Starting a business was more intricate than he’d thought. The prospect of running out of money was both terrifying and very possible.

And what if his winning personality and perfect baking wasn’t enough, he considered at 1:04. What if people decided that they’d rather have Sazed’s shit than food from a gay baker? Not that he planned on being much more out than he already was, but he knew how people could be.

He could do all this work and refurb everything and do just about everything right and still… still…

He set the cooling rack full of carrot cake rounds on the counter at 3:28. Nope. He couldn’t finish that sentence, not yet.

Taako sighed and put a cardboard disk on the lazy Susan he used to frost things. Not a single one of these thoughts was new, he realized that now. They’d always been hovering, like brain vultures, and he’d been ignoring them. Now they were taking turns dive-bombing him one by one.

He dabbed a little cream cheese frosting in the center of the disk and laid a layer of carrot cake carefully onto it. What did this say about him, that he’d had these fears—real, legitimate, sensible fears—but rather than confronting them and working around them or whatever, he just ignored them? Let them literally drive him away from the building that was his dream?

He dolloped frosting onto the carrot cake. He was an idiot, that’s what it was, an idiot who maybe wasn’t cut out to run a business if he couldn’t get his head right.

The back door opened, and the teenage dishwasher Sazed just hired walked in.

“Hey, Joaquin,” Taako said halfheartedly.

“What’s up?” Joaquin was tying an apron around his waist.
Taako decided this was a hypothetical “what’s up” and opted to keep spreading frosting.

“Man, what’s with this?”

Taako looked up; Joaquin was holding a sheet pan over the sink that was caked with Sazed’s snickerdoodle disaster. Taako snorted.

“The boss man thought he’d get creative.” Taako placed the second layer on the carrot cake and gently pressed it into the frosting bed he’d made for it. “Didn’t go well.”

“This is gonna take forever to clean,” grumbled Joaquin, grabbing a scraper from beside the sink.

“Tell you what.” Taako dolloped more frosting onto the cake and spun it on its wheel to spread it evenly. “You finish up dishes early, I’ll let you whip up another batch of cookies.”

“I don’t know about that,” sighed Joaquin. “After last time Sazed said I wasn’t supposed to touch the baking stuff.”

“Oh, drop the idiot act, Taako,” spat Sazed. “I know what you do, going out of your way to deliberately make me look bad.”

Like you need any help with that, Taako thought, but did not say. He smoothed icing onto the cake. Just ride this out, just like always. Poor Joaquin was trying to wash dishes in stealth mode.

“Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on here,” Sazed went on. “This is corporate sabotage! You’re trying to make way for your own place!”

Taako froze. Shit.
“Yeah, don’t think I haven’t heard about a competitor opening up down the street,” Sazed sneered. “What, Taako, you thought you could run your own place? It’s bad enough you bring your… homosexual nonsense into my place of business. How do you think that’ll go over in your new place, huh?” Sazed demanded. “In this town? In this state?”

Taako bristled. Props to Sazed for pulling the thoughts right out of his head.

“Not to mention the salmonella incident. Think people will just forget about that? How are you going to get any kind of business with that following you around?”

Something small, deep in Taako’s gut, went snap.

Taako put down his spatula and drew himself up. He was shorter than Sazed, and smaller, but at the moment he felt like he could lift the man. He stuck a finger in Sazed’s face. “That was your fault,” snapped Taako. “You bought the eggs, and you ignored the callback, and everyone knows that, Sazed, because everyone knows that the only reason this fucking bakery is successful is because of me.”

Sazed took a step backward. Joaquin was frozen above the sink, eyes huge.

“You--you--I won’t tolerate this kind of--”

“Save it,” Taako spat. “You won’t have to tolerate it anymore. I quit.”

“You can’t--”

“Just try and stop me,” Taako said, struggling out of his jacket. “I’d give you this back, but if I recall, you made me buy it. So fuck you, and I’ll see you at the grand opening of Rosemary and Rye.” He threw the chef’s jacket over his shoulder, pushed past Sazed, and spun around in the doorway. “Hey Joaquin? What’s he paying you, like five bucks an hour?”

“Uhh--” Joaquin shot a frantic glance at Sazed. “F-fi-five fifteen?”

“Assistant bakers at my place start at ten.” Taako let the offer drop like a lead weight into the room.

Joaquin glanced again at Sazed, who was seething, then back at Taako. “Assistant bakers?”

“That’s right,” Taako said airily. “You interested?”

“You bastard,” spat Sazed. “You slimy fa--”

“Hold that thought,” Taako interrupted. “Joaquin?”

Joaquin grinned manically and whipped off his apron. “Fuck yeah.”

“Fuck yeah!” Taako turned to Sazed and purred, “Should have paid him more than minimum wage, Sazed.”

“You’ll regret this,” railed Sazed. “You’ll see, Joaquin, he doesn’t have the means to pay you. He has nothing!”

“Yeah, buuuuut…he’s not a dick. So you know,” Joaquin draped his apron over the sink. “Bye.”

“Bye forever, Sazed, thanks for basically paying for my new place,” said Taako, and he turned on his heel and left, Joaquin following close behind him.
“Taako!” howled Sazed, but the bakery door was closing behind them, and the brisk winter breeze blew them down the street, to freedom.

“God, I’ve been wanting to quit there forever,” said Joaquin, throwing up his arms exultantly.

“You and me both, my man,” crowed Taako, letting out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He felt so good. This was like a derby high.

“So you’re my boss now?” asked Joaquin. “I didn’t know you were starting a bakery.”

“I am! And it’s gonna be the best one within a hundred miles!”

“Yeah, cool, when do you open?”

Taako stopped dead. All the adrenaline drained into the street.

Oh, shit.

Oh.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Since it Candlenights in real life, I'm going to post Monday's chapter early tomorrow, and then we'll be away till the 28th. Happy Candlenights! -K
And Rye

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Taako?” said Joaquin’s voice.

Why had he done that? Why had he done that? This wasn’t the plan. This was the exact fucking opposite of the plan!

This was it. The end of everything. Forget sabotaging Sazed, he’d sabotaged himself! For the sake of his goddamn fucking pride!

“Taako, you look kinda pale.” Joaquin sounded echoey and far away.

It was over. He was an idiot, and all those brain vultures were settling in for a feast.

“Hey, Taako!” Joaquin grabbed his upper arm.

Taako remembered to breathe. He blinked and pulled away from Joaquin. “I fucked up.”

“What?” Joaquin’s face came back into focus, looking worried.

“I fucked up!” Taako whirled to face the kid, making Joaquin take a step back. “It’s ruined, everything’s ruined.”

“What are you talking about?” said Joaquin, matching Taako’s panic. “What’s ruined?”

“Everything!” Taako raked his hand through his hair. “You need to go get your job back.”

“What? No!”

“If you go back right now, maybe Sazed will forgive you!”

“I don’t want him to!”

“Listen, I’m not gonna have your job on my conscience too,” snapped Taako. “Just go and tell him-”

“I’m not telling him shit!” Joaquin scoffed. “I would have quit anyway, nothing is ruined.”

“But you don’t understand--”

“I understand that you need to chill, okay?” Joaquin held up his hands, as if in surrender. “Just chill. For a second.”

Something in Joaquin’s tone gave Taako pause. He deflated, feeling a little dizzy.

“You should…you should sit down or something,” Joaquin glanced up and down the street. They were in front of the arts and crafts store. Joaquin pointed to a barren concrete planter a few feet away. “There. C’mon.”

Taako let himself float to the planter and sat carefully, forcing himself to breathe. Joaquin settled
uncertainly beside him.

“Joaquin, Sazed was right,” Taako managed to eke out. “I have nothing.”

“Sazed’s a dickhead.” Joaquin leaned back, hands in the dirt of the planter.

“Well yeah, but—but I can’t actually pay you ten bucks an hour! I can’t pay you anything!”

“That’s okay,” said Joaquin, shrugging. “It’s not like I need the money.”

“I do!” Taako threw his hands out in front of him. “My bakery isn’t even close to fixed up, and now I don’t have a job while I’m waiting ‘cause I’m such a fucking moron—”

“Wait, you have the bakery already?” Joaquin interrupted. “Like, the place?”

“Yes, I have the place,” groaned Taako, burying his face in his hands. “It’s riddled with termites and structural issues.”

“Where is it?”

Taako pointed a finger down the street without looking up.

Joaquin hopped to his feet. “Can I see it?”

Taako gave him a look of disbelief. “Why?”

The kid grinned, braces flashing. “Cuz I think I work there now.”

“I told you, I can’t pay you,” Taako moaned.

“And I told you I don’t need the money,” said Joaquin, taking a couple steps backward down the street. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Much to his chagrin, in mere moments, Taako found himself unlocking the front door and letting Joaquin inside the building he owned. Joaquin strolled through the door, looking unimpressed.

“This is gonna be a bakery?” he said.

“It was.” Taako let the door fall almost-shut behind him and looked gloomily at the empty space, at the dust motes floating through all that perfect natural lighting.

“Where’s the counter supposed to be?” Joaquin kicked at the floorboards.

Taako waved a hand. “Over there.”

“Here?” Joaquin pointed to completely the wrong place.

“No--no, here.” Taako stepped into the spot he’d envisioned it.

“Mhmm.” Joaquin nodded thoughtfully, staring at the spot.

Taako sighed. He held out another lazy pointed finger. “Seating over there.”

“Like, just a couple tables right?” said Joaquin, strolling over in the indicated direction.

“Yeah,” said Taako halfheartedly. “Three.”
“And ovens on this wall?” Joaquin jogged toward the back of the space and pointed.

“The opposite.”

“Okay, I see it.” Joaquin nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, this is gonna be great.”

“No, it’s not, okay?” Taako couldn’t even bother to raise his voice this time. “I fucked up my plan and now everything’s awful.”

“So you don’t have the money to fix it up?”

Taako hesitated. “No, I do, but--”

“Oh, but you depended on your job to eat,” said Joaquin understandingly.

“Well--not entirely--” Kravitz had said he’d take care of them both. And he could, too, Taako knew that--

“So what did you ruin?” asked Joaquin.

“It just wasn’t supposed to happen this way!” Taako wailed. “I was gonna give my two weeks’ and make Sazed really wish I was staying, and then I was going to sweep out the door into my own place’s grand opening! And he’d be out of business in a month, and I’d steal all his customers, and I’d have the best bakery in the state!”

“So it didn’t work out that way,” said Joaquin, shrugging. “So what? You’ll think of something better.”

Taako considered listening to this wise-sounding advice, but his brain rebelled. “How can I possibly think of anything better than that?”

Joaquin shrugged again. “I don’t know. But this place looks great, and you’ve got everything you need to fix it, right? You’ve even got an employee.”

Taako threw back his head and rubbed his temples. “You really want to work for me for zero pay?”

“What I want is to be able to tell my dad I have a job so I don’t have to work the sales floor at his showroom,” said Joaquin. “Shit, this is a promotion as far as he’s concerned.”

Taako looked up. “Seriously.”

“Yeah, trying to sell fridges all day sucks ass. I’d way rather learn how to start a bakery.”

“This could be months without money,” Taako warned him.

“I don’t need it.”

The sick feeling in Taako’s gut was starting to settle. Not disappear, not completely, but at least he didn’t feel dizzy anymore.

Maybe this was okay. Maybe he hadn’t ruined everything.

Shit, he’d have to tell Kravitz that he was going remora fish on him. Kravitz wouldn’t mind, but it felt gross--

No, shake off that shame. He’d done the right thing today, finally calling out that homophobic ass
and taking Joaquin with him. It had been a long time in coming, and it had been so goddamn
satisfying. Things weren’t gonna be like he’d envisioned, sure, but at least he was doing something
now.

A tiny gear in Taako’s head clicked into motion. “Selling fridges, you said?”

“Yes?” Joaquin frowned, puzzled. “What about it?”

“What’s this showroom sell?”

“Big appliances.” Joaquin’s frown melted into realization. “Oh.”

“Yes, how would your dad feel about you bringing him a customer who’s in the market for some
industrial stuff?” said Taako. That high from earlier was creeping back. “Would he wheel and deal?”

“Wheel and Deal is my dad’s middle name,” said Joaquin with a grin. “So you’re doing this?”

“Fuck! Sure!” Taako threw his hands up. “Why not! This is insane, and I’m terrified, but fuck yeah
we’re doing this!”

“Fuck yeah!” Joaquin pumped his fist.

“All right!” Taako dropped his hands in front of him, palms together, and pointed them toward
Joaquin. “But I’m going to find a way to pay you. You’re not going to do this for nothing.”

Joaquin opened his mouth, and hesitated. “I might have an idea.”

Taako flung open the door. “Welcome to my bakery.”

His friends came through the door, the whole derby team, including coaches. Lup and Kravitz were
already inside, chatting with Joaquin, who was holding a plateful of cookies.

“Place has got a lot of potential,” said Killian, looking up into the termite-riddled ceiling.

“I like the sun,” Sloane commented.

Taako resisted the urge to wring his hands like a middle-aged antebellum matron as his friends
scoured the place with their eyes. He’d talked to Kravitz, and Kravitz was not just understanding but
glad that he’d quit. He’d made Taako agree to give up on some of the theatrics he’d planned for
opening the bakery, in favor of getting some help. It didn’t feel right to have so many people see this
place before it opened, before it was even sort of a working bakery, but Kravitz was right as usual.
So he’d rallied the troops to...ugh. Ask for help.

Joaquin broke off from his conversation to approach the assembled derby team and held out his plate.
“Refreshments?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Magnus, taking four cookies.

“This is Joaquin, my intern,” said Taako. “This recipe was his genius idea, by the way.”

“It’s very good!” said Magnus with his mouth full.

“Intern?” said Julia.
“Yeah, it’s a pretty sweet setup,” said Joaquin, lowering the plate for Hurley. “He doesn’t have to pay me, but I get credit at school for it.”

“And he gets hands-on entrepreneurial experience,” Taako added. “And a nice line on a resume.”

“That’s what I told the school board, anyway,” said Joaquin, grinning.

“Sneaky, I like it,” said Carey, returning the grin.

“This place needs a lot of work,” said Lucretia.

Taako’s heart sank. He’d been hoping for more in the way of enthusiastic encouragement.

“I’ll say,” said Magnus, spewing crumbs and waving a cookie at the ceiling. “You got termites?”

“Afraid so, big guy,” said Taako, glaring at the ceiling. “It’ll be the most expensive thing to fix, I hope.”

“You mind if I ask how expensive?” Magnus asked.

Taako told him. Magnus frowned.

“You’re getting robbed,” said Magnus. “I can fix it for like...two thirds of that. You haven’t signed a contract yet, have you?”

A weight lifted off Taako’s shoulders. He shot a glance at Kravitz, who was smiling, pleased with himself. “No, not yet.”

“Good, then I’ll do it,” said Magnus.

Thank god he’d procrastinated, Taako thought. “You’re hired, my man.”

“I can take a second look at your budgets, if it’d help,” added Julia.

“It absolutely would, sweet cheeks,” said Taako.

“How about us?” asked Noelle. “What can we do?

“Oh, from the rest of you, I’m going to need some hype.” Taako spread his hands. “I want people to be champing at the bit to walk into this place.”

“Mm!” said Hurley with her mouth full, and hurriedly swallowed. “Some of the kids in my class invited me to a bake sale next week. I bet they’d take some donations to sell.”

“Donating desserts is a great way to make friends in general,” chuckled Killian.

“What should we tell people?” asked Sloane.

“That there’s a great new bakery opening downtown called--” he paused for dramatic effect--“Rosemary and Rye.”

“Rosemary after Auntie Rosemary?” asked Lup.

Taako pointed to her. “Exactly.”

She nodded approvingly. “It’s perfect.”
“Where’s the counter going to be?” asked Sloane.

“Ah, let me give you the nickel tour.” Taako strode to the center of the room and waited for everyone to look at him. “Picture this with me…”

Chapter End Notes

Pshshhh, late? Who's late. No late chapters here. Pshah. (Happy Candlenights, all!) <3, H.
Someone Finally Appreciates Carey

Carey picked up the phone. “Kim’s Cars. How can I help you?”

“Yeahhh, is this Kimmmerly?” said Killian’s voice on the other end.

Carey chuckled. “Hey, babe.”

“Hi. How many times today has someone asked for Kimberly?”

“Running count is twice today, not counting you. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to ask if you could get some bread on the way home. We need some anyway and I want to make garlic bread with dinner.”

“Sure. You have a good day at the gym?”

“Pretty good. One of my clients did their first chin-up today.”

“Clearly you are the greatest trainer of all time.”

Killian laughed. “Clearly. How about your day?”

Carey sighed. “How do I tell my close friend and also my employer that this job is sucking out my soul?”

“Not good, huh?”

“There’s not enough work to do! I feel bad staying and costing her money. But I feel bad leaving early, too. I just–ugh.”

“You need to talk to her about this.”

“I can’t.”

“Then you’re gonna be stuck in this forever.”

Carey groaned. “What other choice do I have?”

“You can talk to her?”

“She’s going to think I’m ungrateful. What if she fires me? Or what if she wants to but she doesn’t because we’re friends?”

“It’s because you’re friends that you can talk about this, Care bear.”

“This is my last chance at a job, Killian!”

“No, it’s not. You can’t think like that.”

“What else am I going to do?”

“We’ll figure it out. Please, for your own sanity. Talk to Sloane.”

Carey closed her eyes and grimaced. “I’ll try.”
“Hey. Day’s almost done. Then you can come home.”

“Yeah.”

“And I’ve got something very special planned.”

“Special, huh?”

“Yes. It involves...That Thing.”

Carey cleared her throat. “I see. So um. How much of That Thing?”

“All of it, babe.”

“Hhhhhokay.”

“I love you!” Killian hung up.

Carey hung up the phone and swallowed. Well. Right then. Focus...focus. Okay.

She settled back into the office chair. One hour left. She could sort through the invoices, but that would leave her nothing to do all morning tomorrow. She could reorganize the filing system. Again. Maybe she’d missed something the first six times. She could...try to understand cars?

She buried her face in her hands. This was hell. And Sloane was so damn nice about it.

There was a knock at the door, and one of the mechanics came inside. “Here’s another invoice, Carey.”

“Thanks, Little Jerry.” She took it from his hands.

He paused in the doorway. “Hey...so...sorry if I came on a little strong yesterday.”

“Good apology,” muttered Carey, sticking the invoice in the pile. “Real sincere.”

“You’re just such a first-rate gal, you know? I gotta at least get your number.”

Carey rolled her eyes. “Thanks, Jerry, really. But like I said yesterday, I’m taken.”

Little Jerry grinned in what he must have thought was a winning manner. “Respectfully, Carey, I don’t see no ring.”

Carey pressed her lips together. She rolled up her left sleeve to her shoulder and pointed to her lesbian tattoo. “Do you know what this means?”

Little Jerry shrugged. “I don’t speak Greek.”

Carey slapped her forehead.

Sloane pushed past Little Jerry. “What are we, comparing tats instead of working?”

“Sorry, boss, I’m just trying to convince Carey here to give Little Jerry a chance,” he said, pointing to himself with his thumbs.

Sloane gave him a long look before laughing out loud.

He huffed and turned to leave. “You don’t gotta be cruel about it.”
Sloane shut the door behind him. “I honestly expected better of him.”

“Don’t worry about it, next time I’ll just say the word ‘lesbian.’ That usually works.”

“Maybe not on those idiots it doesn’t,” said Sloane, checking the wall of keys against the paper in her hand. She selected a set and put both keys and paper in her overalls pocket.

“It has so far,” said Carey.

Sloane turned to her. “On my mechanics?”

Oh, damn. “Yeah.”

“Have they been hitting on you? Which ones?”

“It’s honestly not a big—”

“Which ones, Carey?” Sloane rested her hand oh so understandingly on Carey’s shoulder.

Carey sighed. “Jerrre and Barbara. Seriously, Sloane, I get it all the time.”

“Not in my garage you don’t. I’ll talk to them.”

Carey grabbed her arm. “Please. Don’t.”

Sloane examined her face for a long moment before replying. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t want to make waves.”

“This is your workplace. You should be comfortable enough to get work done.”

Carey grimaced.

Sloane saw. “What’s this? What’s wrong?”

“Ohhhhh...you know....”

Sloane looked to make sure the door was closed and lowered her voice. “Is it you and Killian? Things okay there?”

“Oh, yeah, no. We’re fine.”

“Home is good?”

“As good as it always is.”

“You miss Angus?”

“Yeah, but that’s not...that’s kind of perpetual.”

“So this is work-related?”

Carey tried to make a sentence come out. All that she managed was, “Grateful?”

“What?”

“It’s not--I’m not--Sloane, you’re my friend and this is awkward.”
Sloane’s mouth turned into a small o. “Right. This whole boss relationship thing. You know you’re my friend first, right?”

Carey eked out, “Yes?”

“Right. So you don’t need to worry about it.” Sloane patted her on the shoulder. “Our friendship is more important to me than work stuff.” She turned to leave.

“Sloane, stop.”

Sloane paused with her hand on the doorknob. Carey sighed, ran a hand through her hair. “Look. Um. I’m not...I want you to know that I’m grateful for this job.”

Sloane nodded slowly. “But?”

“But...you’re paying me a full-time salary for part-time work. And I kind of...feel like a charity case.”

Sloane’s hand floated up to her chin. “Oh.”

Carey felt like her insides were squirming. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m uh. I’m glad you told me.” Sloane tapped her chin. “That sucks.”

Carey leaned back in the office chair. “Which part specifically sucks?”

“Me, I think. This is a really crappy situation I’ve put you in.”

Oh god. “No, I didn’t mean to--”

“It’s okay, you’re absolutely right.”

Carey threw up her hands. “Maybe, but--”

“Here you’re just trying to do the best you can with what you’ve got, and I know your job market is limited--”

“Don’t blame yourself for this, I should’ve--”

“I was honestly just grateful to not be doing paperwork--”

“I’m sorry, I’m just so miserable--”

Sloane stopped the spiral, held up a hand. “You are?”

Carey rested her head in her hand. “Yes.”

“Okay. Okay.” Sloane nodded. “This is good.”

“It is??” Carey said in disbelief.

“Yeah, because now it’s friendship. Friendship comes first. My friend is miserable in her job. And?” Sloane smiled brightly. “I can help.”

“Because you’re my boss?” said Carey miserably.

“Noooooo.” Sloane looked like she was keeping a good secret. “I just happened to see a Help Wanted sign in the window of Pan’s Blooms.”
Carey frowned. “Downtown? The florist?”

“Yeah. You want to work for a florist, Carey?”

She considered. “That does sound kind of nice. I used to be really interested in design and stuff.”

“Right. So, here’s what you do.” Sloane grabbed a piece of scrap paper and a pen from the desk and scribbled something down. “When you go and apply, you need to make sure the owner reads this note. He owes me a favor. You are not allowed to read it, okay?” She folded the paper and handed it over.

“I’m not--how do you know he’ll hire me?”

“I don’t! Which is why I’m not accepting your resignation until he does.” Sloane beamed. “I’m just giving you the rest of the afternoon off. You should go home. You look a little ill.”

Carey hesitated. “The invoices--”

“They’ll still be there tomorrow. Now hurry, he’ll only be open for another couple hours.”

Merle looked up from a very lovely centerpiece arrangement when the bell on the door rang. “How can I--oh damn, not another one.”

It was one of the derby girls, the pretty Hispanic one. Diablo. Carey? She stopped dead when she saw him. “Merle?”

“I don’t suppose there’s someone after you with a tire iron,” Merle sighed.

She frowned slightly. “Not that I know of? I’m here to apply for a job.”

“So a gun isn’t gonna solve this,” he muttered.

“Do you own this place?” Carey’s face was starting to light up with amusement. “Both here and The Adventure Zone?”

“Yes,” he said. “Unfortunately we’re not hiring.”

“You have a Help Wanted sign in your window,” said Carey, pointing. “Oh!” She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. “I’m supposed to give you this.”

He took the note from her and unfolded it.

Merle,

This is my friend Carey. Give her a fair shot at the job, and I won’t tell Lucretia you spend your day job dallying with the daffodils. Consider this a letter of recommendation; she’s worked for me and she’s excellent.

Sloane Kim (Jenicide)

(From that one time with the angry mechanic with the tire iron)

Merle looked up. Carey was looking at a display of bouquets, smelling a lily.
“Dammit. “All right, so we’re hiring.” They had been for two weeks with only college students applying, and college students didn’t have the hours he wanted.

“Great,” said Carey. “Uhh, do you have an application I can fill out, or…”

“Just a few questions. Take a seat.”

He pulled out a legal pad and a dirty pencil that he’d used to test soil depth a few minutes ago while Carey sat in the chair behind the desk.

“So, uh. Carey?”

“Carey Fangbattle,” she said.

“Right.” Merle jotted that down. “Current employment?”

“Kim’s Cars, administrative work.”

“And before that?”

“Graham’s Pawn. I ran the front most of the time.”

“Reason for leaving that job?”

“I was fired.”

Merle raised his eyebrows. “How come?”

Carey shrugged. “He’d been whittling down my hours for months. I think he wanted to quit the game and go be a train conductor or something.”

Graham’s Pawn had recently closed. Merle jotted that down. “Reason for leaving current employment?”

“I’m...underemployed. I’d like a new challenge.”

Merle looked up. Her gaze was steely-eyed. She had guts. He wrote down guts.

“Any prior convictions?”

“...yes.” That steely gaze faltered.

Ah, here was the catch. He nodded slowly. “I’m legally allowed to ask what for, and you are legally allowed to not tell me.”

She tapped her knee with her hand a couple of times. “We’ll just say...I made some bad choices in friends when I was a teenager.”

She probably wasn’t arrested on possession, that wouldn’t have gone on a permanent record. Something worse, then. “You a drug runner or a thief?”

Carey grimaced. “A thief.”

He stared at her pointedly. Time to see how honest she was. “When was the last time you stole something?”

“I don’t know, like eight years ago?” The poor girl looked miserable. More importantly, she was
telling the truth. He relented.

“Then I don’t care.”

She looked bewildered. “You don’t...care.”

Merle thought of his arm. “You’re not the only one who did stupid things when you were young. College?”

“No, but I’m a quick learner.” She still seemed to be recovering.

“Any experience with plants?”

“Killian and I have little pots with herbs on a windowsill. Does that count?”

It was more experience than these college kids had. “Good enough.” He flipped over a page and handed the pad and pencil to her. “Write down your number. I’ll call in a day or two about an interview. Don’t worry, you’ll get that at least.”

She took the pencil and scribbled something down, looking a little dazed. She stood up uncertainly.

“I’ll see you later,” said Merle meaningfully.

“Oh. Right. Thanks.” She stuck out her hand. Merle shook it. She wandered away, and almost got to the door before pausing beside the bouquet display.

“Can I get a few of these carnations from you?”

Killian heard the door open from their kitchenette, where she was opening a can of tomatoes. She looked over her shoulder. “You’re home early.”

“Yeah, funny thing about that.” Carey was holding a grocery bag in one hand and something behind her back in the other.

“Did you talk to Sloane?” A thought occurred. “Oh, god, did she fire you? I’ll kill her.”

“No, no.” Carey was smiling. “I mean, yes, I did talk to Sloane. And I’ve got good news.”

“Good news?” Killian put down the half-opened can and wiped her hands on her apron. “What kind?”

“Well first, a surprise,” said Carey, and whipped a small bouquet from behind her back.

Killian lit up. “Flowers? You old romantic!”

Carey grinned. “I think...you know, I’m not sure yet, but I think you were right. Things are looking up.”
As Lup drove into Faerun on the highway, she realized she could feel some of the muscles in her neck and shoulders relaxing.

There was something about this place. It wasn’t as though the people were any friendlier or the buildings were nicer or whatever. If anything, this place was more run-down, less cultured, and much smaller than Ipré, her own town. Even if her brother was here, even if derby was here now too, there was nothing special about the place itself. It was just that being here made her feel a little less…

Angry. That had been her base emotional state for a long time. Angry at the world. Angry at people. Angry at herself, sometimes, because she could be so goddamn stupid…

She glanced at the rental violin in its case, lying across the passenger seat. Maybe this was stupid, too, but she had missed playing. And playing in a practice room at the university, an hour away from anyone who would mock her about it, was the only way she could think to start again. Being in Faerun was just an added bonus.

Lup sped down the road, taking a few twisting turns into town until she hit the university parking lot. She snatched up the violin, her purse, and an exercise book, huddled into her coat in the chilly wind, and hurried across the grass to the building marked “De Rochefort Music Building.”

They rented out practice rooms for thirty bucks a semester, which as far as Lup was concerned was a steal to make sure no one heard her. She paid the smiling old lady at the front desk, was given a key and directions, and proceeded down the hall just in time to run into someone holding a stack of papers and cellophane projector sheets. The stack flew into the air and scattered.

“Dammit,” said the guy, bending over to pick up the papers.

“Shit, sorry,” Lup said, leaning down to collect one or two. She straightened to hand them off to him, but paused. The guy was looking at her with an expression of intense fear.

She narrowed her eyes. “What?” This better not be about what she thought it was about. “Have I got something in my teeth? What’s your damage?”

“P--uh, d--mm…” He swallowed. “Sorry, I--uh--”

She frowned. “Wait a second. Do I know you?”

He froze. “No, I… I don’t… um.”

Lup rolled her eyes. “Real articulate. You want these?” She held out the paper. They were covered in what looked like notes about plants.

He took them and swallowed again. “I am… so sorry, but are you AlakaSlam?”

“Oh. Lup relaxed. That’s where she’d seen him. “Tom Arnold?”

“I’m… sorry?”
She gestured at his face. “You look like Tom Arnold. You mean no one’s ever told you?”

Some of his fear seemed to be wearing off. “Oh, uh. No.”

“You’re Robocop’s professor. You were at the first bout.”

He nodded. “That’s right.” He seemed to collect himself a little. “It was a very good game. You’re all incredible athletes.”

Lup smiled like a cat. “Always nice to meet a fan.”

He returned the smile cautiously, then dropped it. “Shit. I have to go. Um--thanks.”

She watched him hurry off down the hall. The hell was he thanking her for?

Once he was out of sight, she turned back around to find a practice room. This had happened to her before a couple times, when she’d played for the Rad Robes, but the Robes tended to attract creepier fans, it seemed. This guy was a mess, but at least he was sweet. And it was immensely satisfying to be recognized by the derby name she’d picked herself.

She approached a little windowed closet deemed Practice Room E and unlocked it. It was tiny, and contained a music stand, a keyboard, a chair, and mirror. Lup set the violin down on the chair and the exercise book on the stand. Right then.

Violin out. Rosin on the bow, but not too much, she thought, remembering her high school orchestra director’s warning. Tighten the bow’s strings, just a little. She set the violin under her chin and tried a note.

Skreeeetch. Lup winced. Damn, it had been a while.

Right. She had work to do. Try again.

Barry collected his notes, clutching them tightly so he didn’t drop them again, and left the classroom in the social studies building. Class went fine, barring a few minutes spent shuffling through his notes to find the right page for the overhead projector. At least he knew he was competent in biology.

He sighed. Why didn’t they put science classes in the science building? If they had, he wouldn’t have been running late, and he wouldn’t have had to take the shortest route across campus through the music building, and he wouldn’t have run smack dab into AlakaSlam, who was even more gorgeous in person, and made a goddamn fool of himself.

Barry rubbed his forehead. Idiot. He felt like a dumb kid, babbling because of a stupid crush.

She’d had a violin case. Great. An athlete and a musician. She probably gave lessons to children or something. Fascinating and complex and light years out of his league.

He walked out the door and the wind cut through his polo like a sword. He shuddered; he’d been in such a hurry that he’d forgotten his coat. Maybe he should take the shortcut again. Yeah, just cut through the music building. Nothing wrong with that, especially because he could feel his ears starting to ache as he walked.

The rush of warm air from the music building as he came through the door was a relief. He took his time picking through, meandering past a student playing guitar in the lobby and waiting for a group
to leave a classroom--probably Dr. Marlow’s Music Theory, if the dead look in their eyes was any indication. And then down the hall where the practice rooms were.

He paused. The practice rooms weren’t properly soundproofed. The music department had been complaining about it for twenty years, according to Maureen. You couldn’t hear anything much, usually, but today the building was quiet, and he distinctly made out a halting, awkward violin.

Barry stopped beside the door and listened for a minute.

The technique was okay, as far as he could tell. On tune, at least. Whoever it was, they would play a few notes, miss one or pause, and then start over. He didn’t hear any voices or direction. She was the only one in the room. If it was her, that is. And if it was her, then she wasn’t teaching children, she was teaching herself.

Barry loosed a little breathless chuckle. He’d put her on a pedestal, which was stupid, because she was a person. A person who was trying to learn violin as an adult. He felt his heart flutter. That was so… was ‘cute’ the right word? Felt a little condescending. Maybe… endearing?

Well, if it was her. Now he had to know. Carefully, he peeked into the window of the practice room.

Alaka Slam was there, glowering at a music stand, violin in hand. She glanced at the mirror--oh shit at him!

He ducked away, frozen in place. For a second that seemed to stretch for eternity, nothing happened.

Then the door slammed open. Startled, Barry dropped all his notes.

She turned on him like the angel of death. “What do you want?”

“N-n-no-nothing.” He bent over and hurriedly gathered the scattered sheets. “I’m sorry, honestly, I shouldn’t have eavesdropped--”

“Are you stalking me or something?”

“I was just passing and heard you playing--” His notes were in a messy stack now, all together. He turned to leave. “I’m sorry, I’ll go.”

“Stop.”

Grimacing, he faced her. Damn, he had been stalking, kind of, and now she was mad and he was going to get chewed out by her and never see her again, and it was his own damn fault.

She stared at him, eyes narrowed. “How much did you hear?”

Not the question he expected. “Uh, just the last couple of minutes.”

She was silent, just staring him down. She had at least two inches on him, though at the moment it felt like more.

“I haven’t played in twelve years,” she said flatly, as if--as if she was explaining herself. Holy shit. She was embarrassed.

“I’d say you sound pretty good, then,” said Barry carefully, straightening up a little.

She huffed, and looked away. She didn’t seem so tall now. “I used to at least be decent at this.”
“You sound better than my niece,” he offered.

AlakaSlam looked back at him, one eyebrow raised. “How old’s your niece?”

“Six.”

She snorted, and her posture relaxed. “I guess I’ve got that going for me.”

Barry chuckled.

“Well,” she said, turning back in toward the practice room, “I won’t take up any more of your time.”

He paused. Maybe, if she wasn’t angry at him, this was worth a try. “Before I go--I’m Barry.”

She unlatched her case and laid her violin in the velvet. “Barry…”

“Uh, Bluejeans.”

She wasn’t facing him, but he could hear the smile in her voice. “Nice to meet you, Barry Bluejeans.”

“Right. Um. Likewise.”

“Loop,” she said, laying the bow in the case and closing it.

“Sorry?”

“My name. Lup Peynirci.” She stood up, picking up the case in one hand and her purse and music book in the other. “Which way are you headed?”

Barry pointed. She nodded and walked the same way. He hurried to stay beside her.

“That’s pretty admirable, picking up an instrument you haven’t played in twelve years,” he said.

“It’s something, all right,” she muttered.

“Everyone talks about doing it, but nobody does,” he went on. “I’ve told myself for years I would play piano again if I was given the chance.”

Lup said nothing. Barry looked up; her face said ‘mild contempt.’

“What?” he said.

“What kind of chance are you looking for, exactly?” she scoffed. “Unless you’re not really looking.”

This was, Barry had to admit, a good point. “Well, what made you want to start again?”

She pursed her lips. “Nosy.”

All right. He tried to think of something else to talk about.

Nothing was coming to mind.

“Listen,” Lup said, breaking the silence, “they said on Oprah that playing an instrument is good for your mental health, and I need some fucking good mental health in my life, okay?”

She spat the words into the air directly in front of her. Barry looked away and adjusted his glasses.
This beautiful, athletic, musical woman was being very vulnerable with him. Why? What was it she was so embarrassed about?

“That’s clever, I think,” he said.

She scoffed. “What is? Watching trash television?”

“Oprah’s a pretty good show. But I meant maintaining your mental health. There are a lot of recent studies that are saying it’s just as important as physical health.”

Lup shot him a quizzical frown. “What are you a professor of, anyway?”

“Biology, specializing in human anatomy,” he said.

She smirked. “You flirting with me, professor?”

Barry felt himself turn scarlet. “Wh—no!”

She laughed, a musical laugh, like a bird. A resplendent quetzel, maybe. “Pity. You’re easy to talk to, Barry, you know that?”

Please, please, please stop blushing. “Thank you,” he managed.

They reached the double doors leading out of the music building and luckily the frigid wind took the color right out of his cheeks. Lup shuddered and huddled into her jacket. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Yes,” Barry said, although he was warmer than he had been coming in. “It’s all right, though, the science building’s just up there.”

They reached a fork in the sidewalk. “Well, I’m going this way,” she said, gesturing to the right, the way to the parking lot.

Barry nodded. “It was very nice to meet you, Lup.”

“Hey, hang on.” She considered him briefly. “Were you serious about wanting a chance to play?” she asked.

“...Why?” said Barry.

Lup flipped open the exercise book and held it out. “Half these exercises require accompaniment. I can do it by myself, but it’s not the same.”

Barry looked over the page, trying to make his brain process what she was saying. “Those don’t look too complicated.”

“Could you play them?”

“I’d uh—I’d need practice.”

“Do you always get out of class at this time?”

“On Tuesdays and Thursdays, yes.” His fingers, unbidden, were shaping themselves into proper piano form.

“And the practice room’s already got a keyboard. It’s obvious, Prof,” said Lup, closing the exercise book and blessing him with a mischievous smile. “You should practice with me.”
Barry was reeling. Of all the ways he thought today would go, this was not it. “I’m going to sound just… really bad.”

“You did hear me playing earlier, right?” she said.

The wind seemed much colder now. The thought of her laughing at his rusty piano skills was already filling him with dread.

But she’d been embarrassed too, hadn’t she? She’d been open with him. And now he was going to pass up a chance to spend time with her? What kind of an idiot was he?


Lup smiled. “Rad. We can start on Thursday.”

“Yeah. Rad.” The word felt weird in his mouth, but he didn’t care. “Great. Uh. See you then.” He turned to the left sharply and promptly tripped over his own feet.

His notes went flying and he felt his knee scrape the cement. He started to scoop up the papers, but the wind caught one and blew it up behind him. “Dammit, no!” He snatched at it and missed--

With one fluid motion, Lup dropped her purse and exercise book and snatched the paper out of the air. She was still for a fraction of a second, a tableau of triumph, before handing the paper down to him. “Here.”

Barry accepted it with something approaching reverence. “Thank you.” He added it to the stack and stood up.

“You okay?” she said. “You tore your jeans.”

The icy draft on one of his knees confirmed this fact. “I’m fine. Just kind of a klutz today.”

Lup picked up her purse and book, transferred both to the crook of her other arm, and plucked a paper clip from the pages of music. “I think you need this.”

Barry accepted it gingerly, careful not to touch her hand. “Thanks.”

She nodded. “Later, Barry.” And she headed off to her car.

Barry carefully slipped the paper clip on his notes. He glanced after her, just once, and then walked onward, hiding a grin.

Lup started her ‘84 Toyota Corolla, cranked the heater, and paused.

Why had she done that?

Slowly, she put on her seatbelt. Because she was always more comfortable playing and practicing with people, like she had in orchestra in high school. Because she knew at a certain point she’d be tempted to quit, and she’d be less likely to go through with it if someone else was doing this too. Because…because this Barry guy seemed like a genuinely wholesome person, even if he was hopelessly nerdy. She’d been meeting all kinds of new people in Faerun; it’d be nice to meet someone who didn’t automatically associate her with betrayal and broken noses.

Above all, she thought, checking her mirrors and taking off the emergency brake, she’d done it
because it had seemed like a good idea at the time. She shrugged.

“Guess I have a duet partner now,” she said to the violin in her passenger seat, and threw her car into reverse.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who were interested in shirts, more info can be found on the tumblr. :) <3,

K
“A care package?” said Carey. It was the end of practice, and Magnus was lingering behind as the rest of the team headed off to the locker room. Carey was taking her time unlacing her skates.

“Yeah,” said Magnus, offering a hand to pull her up. She slid off her skates, and grabbed the laces in one hand and Magnus’ hand in the other. He watched her carefully. Killian seemed better this past month or so, but he could tell Carey was still missing Angus. The new job was helping, but sometimes she got this look in her eye…

“Will they give it to him?” asked Carey, shuffling toward the locker room in her sock feet alongside him. “He used to say they searched his backpack every day after school.”

“Julia thinks so.” Magnus stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Like it’s a legal issue. They have to, as long as everything inside is safe.”

Carey nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. What are you going to put in it?”

“That’s why we need your help,” said Magnus. “You and Killian spent the most time with him. Like we know he’ll want some books, but we couldn’t remember the name of that mystery series he likes—”

“Caleb Cleveland,” said Carey automatically.

Magnus smiled. “Right. And Julia said her dad promised him some Spider-man comics. And I know he likes Skittles.”

“You should get him some socks, too, he’s always wearing through the toes,” said Carey. “And he likes those cookies that Taako makes with the smiley faces on them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Magnus, smiling. “We found some pencils, too, that say Angus.”

Carey grinned. Good, Magnus had missed that grin. “Kid’s gonna love that.”

They reached the door of the locker room, and Magnus turned to face Carey before she went inside. “Hey, is this...is this okay with you?”

“Is what? A care package?”

“Me and Julia trying to be his foster parents.” Magnus rubbed the back of his neck. “I know you and Killian love him as much as we do, and...you know, you two were the ones who took care of him most of the time—”

“Oh,” said Carey quietly.

“Listen, I know you would do this if you could, and I don’t want to--to make light of that--”

“Magnus, your parents,” Carey interrupted. “Where are they at? Back in Neverwinter?”

Magnus paused, frowning. “No. They, uh, they’re gone now.”
“But you grew up with them around?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “Thought so. I didn’t.” She crossed her arms and took a deep breath. “I know exactly what Angus is going through right now, and I can’t— it sucks, okay? The system is not built for kids like Angus. Hell, it’s not really built for kids. If you can get him out, then goddamn do it, okay?” She glared at him.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Magnus relaxed.

“You promise?” she said.

“You know I do,” he said, dead serious.

“Then fuckin’ do what you have to,” she said, poking a finger in his chest. “And don’t get him the last Caleb Cleveland book, okay? ‘Cause we got him that for Candlenights.”

Magnus chuckled. “Okay.”

“Good.” She dropped her hand, wiped one eye with the heel of it. “He likes the third one.”

“Aw, whatever,” she said, leaning back and socking him on the shoulder. He grinned.

Carey smiled wryly. “Gotta share my Angus knowledge with you, newbie.”

“Teach me your ways, sensei,” said Magnus with mock seriousness.

“Of course, grasshopper,” she said, and pulled him into a hug. “You’re gonna be a good dad,” she told his shoulder.

He squeezed his friend. “You’re kind of already a good mom.”

So they had socks, Skittles, cookies, a slinky, a kaleidoscope, those personalized pencils, two pens that wrote in four colors, a pack of Pokemon cards, and the third and fourth Caleb Cleveland book in well-loved paperback. All that was left was the comics.

Steven had given Magnus specific instructions on which plotlines to avoid, which Magnus had tried to remember before giving up and resolving to just ask whoever was working at the comic store.

Manalito Comics was a little shop front in a strip mall on the south end of town. According to Julia it had been there forever, as long as she could remember, and she remembered it because Steven apparently brought her there regularly when she was little. Just ask for Lenny’s help, she’d said.

Magnus strolled up from the parking lot to the brightly colored windows and pushed open the door.

“Woah,” he said. This place was...magical.

Two walls were top to bottom comics, arranged neatly by what looked like superhero, both loose comics in plastic sleeves and compendiums. Magnus wandered over to look at three shelves worth of Batman. The third wall held shelves and shelves of board games, stuff Magnus had never heard of, and below that shelves stuffed to the brim with sci-fi and fantasy novels from the eighties, stuff with
“trilogy” and “cycle” and “world” in the titles. The fourth wall had a doorway with a bead curtain, in front of which was a glass display case that seemed to double as a desk.

“Woah,” said Magnus again, and crouched to look into the display case. The whole thing was full of tiny figurines, elves and dwarves and goblins and hobbits in armor, in wizard robes, with swords and axes and hammers and wands. He stared transfixed at the figurine of a knight.

“I’ll be right out!” said a throaty voice from behind the bead curtain.

Magnus didn’t move. He vaguely heard the bell on the door ping and ignored it. This was cool as hell.

“You play?” asked a raspy voice. Magnus looked up.

A nerdy looking guy who was vaguely familiar was standing next to the counter. Dude was wearing a bowtie with jeans.

Magnus stood up. He had a good six inches on the guy. Where did he know him from? “Play what?”

The guy gestured to a small bookshelf sitting on the counter, full of tall thin books that said things like *Advanced Rule Set* and *Monster Manual*. “Dungeons & Dragons,” the guy said.

Magnus’ eyes went huge. “I’ve always wanted to.”

“No way!” The guy lit up. “I’ve been trying to get a damn group together forever. You want to join?”

“What, just like that?” said Magnus.

“Yeah, if you want to play,” said the guy.

“I’d be brand new though,” said Magnus. “You know, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Listen, pal, this is a small town in the South,” said the guy, not unkindly. “I don’t expect experts. I’m lucky I’ve found one person so far. If you want to play, that’s enough for me. You in?”

Magnus shrugged. “I mean, yeah, I guess. Yeah!”

The guy grinned and stuck out a hand. “I’m Barry.”

Magnus shook his hand. “Magnus. Hey, I think I could get some of my friends involved, if you want.”

“That’d be great!” Barry nodded. “We need at least three to play, but four or five would be better.”

“And you’ll be the--the whatsit, the dungeon guy?”

“Yeah, the dungeon master. Here, can you write down your number? We’ll set something up.” He dug a scrap of paper out of his jeans pocket and took a pen from the pocket protector in his shirt.

“Sure,” said Magnus, grinning. This guy was eager as hell, but Magnus was no stranger to eager, and anyway, he was excited too.

The bead curtain parted and a man who looked like he’d been a rock star twenty years ago entered the room. “Hey, Barry. You want the new issue?”
“That’s why I’m here,” said Barry, turning to the counter.

The rock star opened a drawer in the wall behind the counter and took out a comic book with a rabbit on it. The rabbit was wearing samurai armor.

“Thanks, Lenny,” said Barry, accepting the comic book and digging out his wallet.

“No problem.” Lenny punched a couple buttons on the cash register and accepted Barry’s proffered bills. “How ‘bout you? What can I do for you?”

“Oh, I’m here for some comics,” said Magnus. “I, uh, I need some guidance.”

“Sure thing,” said Lenny. “Just let me finish here...Here’s your change, Barry.”

“Thanks.” Barry took the change with one hand and pulled a book from the little shelf on the counter with the other. “Hey, Magnus, you’ll need this.”

Magnus traded the book for the scrap of paper with his number. “Yeah, thanks.”

“That’s the old edition, Barry,” Lenny said, closing the drawer of the register.


“Good to meet you too!” called Magnus. He ran his hand over the book. It had a couple of guys on it stealing the eyeball out of a gold statue. Sweet.

“So about those comics, what are you looking for?” asked Lenny.

“Oh! Uh, Spider-man.”

Lenny grinned. “Ah, my man Steven said you’d be coming. Lemme show you some stuff.”

The team gathered around the box, handing things off to Julia as she arranged them in striped tissue paper leftover from Candlenights. She carefully fit the kaleidoscope in between the socks and the Skittles. “It’s just a little nerdy.”

“It’s not that nerdy,” Magnus protested. “Just a game.”

“Where you pretend to be wizards and shit,” said Killian, handing her the Pokemon cards.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun,” Magnus said.

Julia slid the cards into a space between the socks and the books. “Can I be a candy witch?”

Magnus snorted. “No.”

“Then it’s not for me, I think,” she said.

Taako handed off a little ziplock full of smiley-face cookies. “Lup, you used to be into that junk, right?”

Lup was the only one not in the circle, laying down on the bench with one leg sticking up, tracing the tiles of the ceiling with her toe. “No,” she said sharply.

Julia fit the cookies into the hollow of the slinky. “Sorry, Magnus.”
“C’mon, one of you has got to be interested,” said Magnus. “Hurley?”

Hurley pulled a face. “I’ve tried it, it’s just not my thing.”

“I’d play,” said Noelle quietly.

“Yeah! See?” Magnus held up a hand for a high five. “Noelle’s in.”

Noelle gave him the high five, smiling a little.

“Is that everything?” said Julia.

“Everything but the letters,” said Lucretia. She handed a carefully folded piece of office stationery to Julia.

Julia took it, reverently, and laid it on the top of the box. “Who else?”

“One from me and Kravitz,” said Taako, handing off two or three poorly folded pieces of paper from a yellow legal pad. Julia took it.

“Here’s ours,” said Sloane, handing off an envelope to Hurley, who gave it to Julia.

Carey and Killian wrote one each. Noelle had one torn out of a graph paper notebook. Magnus handed her a small stack—theirs, and then Steven’s, and one from Avi and Antonia too. The stack of paper made a small snowdrift on top of the presents. Julia folded the tissue paper over the letters and fit the lid on the box. “There.”

Killian kissed her hand and laid it on the box. “Godspeed.”

“I’ll mail it tomorrow,” said Julia, placing it gingerly on the bench.

“Whoever this kid is, he’s lucky,” said Lup to the ceiling.

“All right,” said Lucretia. “We still have to get a practice in today. Let’s go.”

The team skated out into the rink. Magnus let them all leave before him before throwing a glance at the box. He wished they could do more.

“Hey,” said Carey, hanging in the doorway.

Magnus looked up.

“This Dungeons & Dragons thing,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Could I be like...Aragorn?”

Magnus brightened. “There’s a class called ranger.”

“Hell yeah,” she said, and took off onto the track.

Magnus grinned and followed her.
Do you want to join the Bureau of Badass? Unfortunately, they're fictional. :( But do you want a team shirt so you can pretend they're not??? I know I do!! Wander on over to the tumblr for the info on how to get that thing. <3, H+K
“Rise and shine, everyone!”

Angus woke up in a panic before he remembered where--actually no, when he was.

They’d put him in the same room he’d had before. It was just a coincidence, of course, but every time he saw the pattern of old glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, it filled him with dread.

His roommate Carter groaned and buried his head in the covers. Angus squeezed his eyes shut so he couldn’t see the ceiling and sat up. It was okay, it was okay, he repeated to himself.

“C’mon, everyone! Up and at ‘em!” The call of the house mom came from the hall again. Angus rubbed his eyes and yawned, sliding out of bed and padding to the door. He paused to look at Carter.

“They’ll just come and make you get up,” he said.

“Mind your own beeswax, Mickey D,” grumbled Carter from somewhere under the blankets.

He should have, but Carter got in trouble just about every morning for getting up late, and Angus couldn’t help but try and…

Help? Maybe it wasn’t really help. Angus left the room and shuffled down the hall to the boy’s bathroom.

There were eighteen bedrooms in the Coyote Hill Group Home, each one with two kids living in it. He knew that there were twenty girls and sixteen boys, the youngest ones four or five and the oldest ones seventeen and eighteen. The place was pretty stuffed. He had to wait a few minutes longer than usual to get to one of the four sinks in the bathroom.

“Did Ryan lock himself in a stall again?” Angus asked one of the boys waiting in the hall. The boy shrugged.

Angus stared at the wall. This place was...better. Better than it used to be. If he was honest, it would be very difficult for it to be worse than it used to be. And there was no reason to complain, really. He had food and clothes and a place to sleep. It was just…

Like being buried in mud. All the time. Yeah, that was the word: stifling. And it’s not like he could make himself forget what it was like here before, either. The staff were different, a lot of the kids were different, but almost everything about the house, down to the way it smelled, was the same.

Eventually one of the staff convinced Ryan to unlock the door and Angus managed to brush his teeth and shower quick enough that his oatmeal was still at least room temperature when he got to breakfast.

He ate without too much enthusiasm, sitting between Carter and Ryan at the table for his Group, which was five boys between the ages of nine and fourteen. They were Encouraged To Socialize With Their Peers, despite the fact that none of the boys cared much for each other or had anything in common. Angus threw a glance over at the next table, where June was sitting with the girls in her Group, staring at the tabletop and poking at the oatmeal while they chatted quietly. He wished he
could sit by her, but that was Not Allowed.

He shoveled in another spoonful of oatmeal and wished for cinnamon. His grandpa wasn’t great about food all the time, but he always had oatmeal for breakfast, and he always made sure there was honey and cinnamon to put in it. They ate together most days, Grandpa just home from work and Angus waiting for the bus.

He sniffled. Nope. No crying into oatmeal this morning. Think about something else.

School. He’d be at school soon. They were reading *The Outsiders* in English class, and though it wasn’t Angus’ typical fare, he was enjoying it--

“Hey Mick.”

Angus winced at the nickname, but looked up. It was Jamal, or Too-Tall Jamal as they called him at school, who was thirteen and almost six foot. He looked at Angus pleadingly. “You gonna finish that?”

Angus pushed the tasteless bowl of oatmeal across the table. Jamal nodded his thanks and dug in.

Angus looked carefully at the two or three staff members who were making their way through the large dining room. None of them were looking this way. He carefully leaned back in his chair and opened the book in his lap, a battered sci-fi book called *Johnny and the Dead* he’d found in the library.

“No books at the table,” said a staff member, passing behind him.

Angus sighed and closed the cover.

The fifteen minutes until it was time to wait for the bus passed like fifteen years, but finally the staff rounded them up, made sure everyone had their backpacks, and sent them to stand, under supervision, at the bus stop. As if by accident, June ended up standing next to him, but neither of them said anything, not yet.

The bus pulled up for the high schoolers first, and then the elementary schoolers a few minutes later, and then last of all for the middle schoolers. Angus tried not to run up the steps.

He and June took a seat near the middle, and as the bus doors closed, they breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief.

“What were you telling me yesterday?” asked Angus.

“Oh, about this book.” She pulled a small thick paperback out of her backpack. “*Watership Down*.”

“It’s about rabbits, though?” he said. “Like *Redwall*?”

“No, more like…” She squinted into the middle distance. “Like *The Jungle Book*.”

“I haven’t read that one either,” he said.

“You should, it’s really good.” She leaned back in the seat and flipped through to find her page. “What about your ghost book?”

“It’s good, but not because of the ghosts,” said Angus, taking *Johnny and the Dead* out of his backpack. “I like the protagonist.”
The group home was the first stop on the bus route, so the two of them had plenty of time to read, which they did, occasionally showing each other especially good or interesting lines. The dialogue in his ghost book made June laugh, which was good to hear, Angus thought. Any time they were away from the group home was a good time, not constantly supervised or on a minute-strict schedule. School was freedom.

The bus made a couple of stops. For the most part Angus didn’t pay attention to the other kids, but sometimes they were difficult to ignore.

“Hey, it’s McDonald’s!”

Angus tried to not to react. Read the book. Brody was just a bully.

Brody took the seat behind Angus and June and mussed Angus’ hair. “Can I get a large fry, Mickey?”

“Leave him alone, Brody,” said June. “Or do you want to get beat up by a member of the chess club again?”

Angus smiled a little. Brody was the bully Mavis had clotheslined.

“I’m just talking to my good friend Mick here,” Brody wheedled.

Bullies don’t get to tell you who you are, Angus reminded himself. “That’s not my name, Brody.”

“You mean you’re not Angus McDonald?” said Austin. “Don’t you foster kids even know your own names?”

Angus gave up. Brody wanted him to cry or get angry and Angus didn’t feel like doing either. He went back to reading.


June clenched her fists. Without moving his head, Angus brushed his hand against hers, hoping she’d get the message. Ignore him.

She seemed to. Her hand relaxed and she went back to her book too. After a few minutes Brody lost interest and turned around in his seat to talk to someone behind him.

“Why do you let him call you that?” June murmured. “Why do you let anyone call you that?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Angus, matching her volume.

“You hate it, though.”

Angus shrugged.

She frowned, but didn’t pursue the question further. They read in silence the rest of the way to school.

The bell rang for lunch, and Angus carefully wrote down the homework problems Mr. Jenkins had put on the board in a flurry of frustration at the end of class. He slipped his math binder into his backpack and made his way to his locker, relishing the fact that he could take as long as he wanted to get to the lunch line, even if it meant a little bit of a wait for food.
He opened his locker. As usual, the little note sat there, encouraging him to *Hang in there, kid*. For some reason today all it did was make him sad. Usually it helped.

He considered the near-empty box of Cosmic Brownies to one side. No...no not today. It wasn’t even a really bad day. He’d save them. He traded his math binder out for his history book and closed his locker.

Why wouldn’t the note make him feel better? That was a bit of a mystery. He joined the lunch line, frowning into space. It had the tone of an adult’s writing, which always made him feel like someone was watching out for him. Now, though, there were adults watching him all the time, much more to see if he was doing anything wrong or dangerous than because they were actually interested in his wellbeing. This adult, whoever they were, *did* seem interested in his wellbeing, but still…

It was the name, that was it. Why hadn’t they used his name? There was nothing wrong with *kid* --at least it was better than Mickey--but why not Angus?

The logical conclusion was that the writer was trying to express or create distance, just like in the ransom note in that Caleb Cleveland book. That was it, distance. It meant there was, somewhere in this world, an adult who cared about him, but not enough to actually do anything to change--

Careful. Angus picked up a tray from the stack and slid it onto the little track in front of the lunch counter. No sense in getting worked up. He might be stuck in this situation until he turned eighteen. If he kept his head, he could make it. It was okay. Don’t think about it.

He focused on thanking the lunch ladies scooping food onto the tray. Today it was an unidentifiable meat masquerading as chicken-fried steak with tepid mashed potatoes and corn. At least there was meat.

He brought the tray to the table where June was and took the seat across from her. Maybe he should just ask Mavis who left the note. She wouldn’t want to tell him; if it was anyone from the team they would have just signed it, or better yet, sent a letter. He’d gotten a few letters from the team, but they’d petered out lately. They cared. Of course they cared. He *knew* they cared. But--

Nope. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about how he might not see them again for years. Don’t wonder if they’d miss him. He’d see them again before too long. He could make it.

“Why don’t you just ask Mick?”

Angus looked up. Brittany, an eighth-grader who was sort of a friend of June’s, was staring at him. “You’re a genius, right?”

“I don’t think so,” said Angus.

“Whatever. Have you ever heard of a single grown-up using algebra for their job?”

Angus hesitated. “Well, my friend Miss Noelle does.”

“What’s her job?” asked a boy named Jimmy. “Math teacher?”

“She’s in college, studying engineering,” said Angus.

“Okay, but like, a regular job,” said Brittany.

Angus frowned. “I guess not.”
“See?” said Brittany triumphantly. “So why do they make us learn it? I hate school.”

“You wouldn’t hate it if it was the only way you got to leave the house,” said June.

“It’s not like there’s anything interesting going on outside,” grumbled Jimmy.

“I want to leave my house,” said Brittany. “Like forever. I can’t believe I have four more years of this.”

Angus poked at his food. Four more years. Six, for him. And summers, long, boring, lonely summers.

God, it had been--what, two months? Two months since Grandpa died. And he was looking at facing another--six times twelve plus the next four--seventy-six. Seventy-six months before he saw anyone on the roller derby team again. Seventy-six months before he could live anywhere but that same room in that same group home.

Oh, sure, he could be placed with a foster family. Some folks he didn’t know. And he’d have a little freedom, maybe, but at what cost? They might even be good people, but he knew who his family was, and they were who he wanted, not some random family, and it might be seventy-six months ‘til-

The tears that had been lurking since breakfast swelled into his eyes. He stood up abruptly and ran.

Mavis stared at the game board. Courtney had set up a trap with a rook, which was easy enough to spot. The trick was finding a way around it.

“Hurry up,” said Courtney.

“This is a thinking game,” mumbled Mavis. She reached up to take out her rook with a knight, but paused. Courtney might send her queen out after the knight...but then it’d be a clear path to checkmate...

“Come onnn ...” said Courtney.

The door of the library opened. Mavis glanced up, and then looked again, because it was Angus, holding back tears, frozen in the doorway. He must have forgotten the Chess Club met in here on Wednesdays. He turned on his heel and left again.

Mavis knocked down her king and went after him, ignoring Courtney’s protests behind her.

Angus was sitting in the shadows backstage in the auditorium, choking out the most gut-wrenching sobs Mavis had ever heard. She closed the door very carefully behind her, so it didn’t click. She wasn’t positive that coming here was the right thing to do. After all, whatever was wrong, she might make it worse...

Actually based on the way he was crying, there wasn’t a whole lot she could do to make this worse. She took a few hesitant steps forward. “Angus?”

The sobs shuddered to a stop. She came closer. There was a bush prop near the back wall of the stage, leftover from some show long forgotten. Angus was sitting in its shadow, back to the wall,
curled into a ball. Mavis carefully sat down beside him.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

“How did you know I was here?” he croaked.

“I go here to hide too.” She folded her hands in her lap, waiting for him to respond.

He had a couple of sobs left, the wheezing, aching kind. She didn’t move.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, still in a whisper. “You miss your friends?”

He nodded, grimacing to try to keep back more tears.

Mavis bit her lip. “Is the group home that bad?”

Angus shrugged and covered his face.

“How long do you have to stay?”

“Seventy-six months,” came the muffled reply.

Mavis’ eyes went wide. “Woah.”

“I can’t do it.” Angus’ voice wobbled. “I thought it was like...like a book. You just keep reading until it gets better.”

“But seventy-six months?” said Mavis. “That’s crazy.”

“I thought, Johnny could last while no one was taking care of him,” said Angus, not really listening to her anymore. “But Johnny had his friend’s mom to notice when something was wrong, and--” his voice cracked and was overwhelmed by tears.

Mavis hesitated, and then laid a hand on his shoulder, and let him cry.

After a few minutes he was back to shuddering quietly.

“Who’s Johnny?” asked Mavis.

“From a book,” Angus choked out.

Mavis nodded. “You have people who notice you.”

“They’re not the people I want,” he mumbled.

She sighed. There was really, really nothing she could do to help. Poor Angus…

Mavis scooted closer to him and wrapped him in a hug. He was stiff in her arms for a moment, but only briefly. They sat like that for a while.

Angus broke off first, and dragged his sleeve under his nose.

“Are you gonna be okay?” she asked.

Angus took off his glasses to wipe his eyes. “What else am I supposed to do?”

Mavis shook her head. “I don’t know.”
“Thank you for the hug.” Angus put his glasses back on. His face still looked blotchy, but suddenly all that despair was gone. “They don’t hug us at the home.”

Mavis’ jaw dropped. “That’s terrible.”

Angus shrugged again. Jeez.

The backstage door opened. “Angus?”

Mavis looked over her shoulder. It was that friend of his, June. She was a foster kid too, wasn’t she?

“I’m here,” said Angus, standing up behind the bush.

June walked into backstage and handed him a history book and a backpack. “The bell rang.”

“Oh, yeah, you can’t hear it in here,” said Mavis, standing up too.

“Are you okay?” asked June.

Angus shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does too!” Mavis protested.

Both of them looked at her as if she’d grown a second head. She gritted her teeth and pulled them both into a hug. Just a short one, but tight enough to show them she meant it.

“Look, just—” Mavis released them. Angus’ calm had cracked to reveal a little sadness, and June looked downright shocked. “Sorry. But look. You’re not—you’re not alone, okay?”

The two of them exchanged a glance with each other and then looked back at Mavis.

“Now—now get to class, sixth graders. Ugh.” It was kind of gruff, but Mavis was feeling awkward now and she just wanted to end the dang conversation. Angus and June looked at each other again and scurried back to the door.

Mavis sighed. This was so sad.

“Mavis?” June stuck her head back in the doorway.

Mavis looked up. “Yeah?”

“Thanks.” And June disappeared.

Riding home on the bus always felt like a funeral procession, but today it did especially. Angus tried to read, but his brain wouldn’t focus on the words. He’d have to go back to the home and do homework and pretend to socialize with his Group and watch TV and go to bed and get up and do it all over again for seventy-six months.

He didn’t feel like crying anymore. All he felt was empty, nauseating dread.

“You don’t look so good,” said June, who hadn’t taken out her book either.

“I feel sick,” said Angus.

“Is that why you didn’t eat any lunch?” she asked.
Oh, he hadn’t, had he? But the idea of the lukewarm mashed potatoes was making his nausea worse.

“Maybe they won’t make you go to school,” said June.

“Don’t say that.”

June sighed. “Sorry.”

The bus stopped with a groan and some kids got off. Angus watched them go without really seeing them.

“Mavis is kinda weird,” said June as the bus started again.

Angus blinked a couple of times to refocus. “Sorry about the hug. I know you don’t like being touched.”

“No, it was...it was okay.” June swallowed. “I think I needed it. You definitely needed it.”

Angus nodded. “How do you...how come you’re so brave?”

June frowned. “Brave?”

“Yeah.”

She stared at the back of the seat in front of them for a few minutes. “I’m not brave. If I had made all those friends, like you did, and then just lost them, I would be as messed up as you are.”

“I need to stop being messed up,” said Angus. “I need to last. To be tough.”

“Nope,” said June firmly.

Angus looked at her in surprise. “But you’re tough.”

“Maybe, but...” She hesitated. “You want to know a secret?”

“If you want to tell me.”

“Okay. You remember how we used to talk about parents? About how someday we’d be adopted and they’d take us away?”

They must have been about seven years old, but Angus remembered the conversation. He nodded.

“I still think that’ll happen. I have to. Otherwise...” Her face fell into an expression he didn’t see often, something soft and worried. “Otherwise what’s the point?”

Angus’ brow sank into a worried frown. As bad as he’d had it, as terrible as this was, June had had it worse and lasted longer. She was right.

“I need to have hope?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“In what?”

“Whatever you can find.”

They sat in silence for a bit.
“How long have you needed a hug?” asked Angus.

June shrugged.

“‘Cause I’ve needed one like every day.”

June nudged him with her elbow. “See, you’re not tough.”

“You can hug me, if you want,” Angus offered.

“People are gonna think we’re going steady or something,” said June.

“Oh.” Angus blushed. “Sorry.”

June laughed and threw an arm around his shoulders. “No, it’s okay. As long as we’re not.”

“No, that’d be weird,” said Angus.

“Yeah. Oh, hey, in my book they adopted a bird.”

“The rabbits did?”

“Yeah.”

“Well in my book, the ghosts turned into electricity.”

“What? Why?”

Angus got his homework done pretty quickly and managed to pass off *Johnny and the Dead* as school reading for long enough that by the time one of the staffers sent him to Interact With His Group, they were already halfway through a game of Monopoly and it was too late for him to have to join in. He watched with half his brain while the other half pondered what he should have hope in.

Things still looked bleak. There had to be a bright side somewhere...he just couldn’t see it.

Mavis, maybe, that was a bright side. She hadn’t needed to be so nice today. She was always nice, delivering letters and such. Maybe she’d deliver another letter.

There, that was a bright side. He could write another letter to the team. Tell them about...maybe June and Mavis. That would be a happier letter.

“You cheated,” said Angus suddenly. He’d just seen Ryan palm a community chest card.

Ryan glared at him. “Shut up, Mick.”

“That explains why there’s like five ‘get out of jail free’ cards,” scoffed Jamal. “You suck, Ryan.”

“Whatever, you suck,” spat Ryan. “This game bites anyway.”

“It’s supposed to,” said Angus. “It was invented to illustrate economic disparity.”

Carter made a face. “How the hell do you know that?”

“Language,” said a passing staffer.
“Let’s play something else,” said Jamal. “Where’s Clue?”

“The girls have it,” said Ryan. “Anyway that one sucks too.”

“We could play Candy Land,” Angus suggested.

The collection of scornful looks he received made Angus sorry he’d ever even heard of Candy Land. Luckily, he was rescued.

“Hey Mickey.” A staffer approached the rug the group had been relegated to for Peer Interaction. “Can you come with me? House Dad wants to see you.”

“Ooo, you’re in trouble…” crowed Ryan.

“It’s karma for your bad taste in games,” said Carter.

“He’s not in trouble,” the staffer said over her shoulder as they left the room.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the Group, Angus realized where they were going. The office.

There was no reason to be nervous, he told himself. True, terrible things used to happen in the office. But the people who did them were all gone. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Even so, a rush of panic hit him when he followed the staffer through the door.

House Dad was sorting through a stack of mail. He looked up when they came in. “Ah, Mickey. You can go, Sandy. Leave the door open?”

The staffer nodded and slipped out of the office. Angus couldn’t stop eyeing the open door.

“Did I do something wrong, sir?” asked Angus.

“No, nothing’s wrong.” House Dad put down the mail in his hands and opened a desk drawer. He pulled out a package the size and shape of a shoebox and held it out. “This came for you today in the mail.”

Angus took it. It had been opened, because they’d had to search it. It was clearly addressed to Angus McDonald, but he didn’t recognize the return address. It was pretty heavy.

“I thought it might be prudent to let you open this in privacy,” said House Dad. “No reason to cause jealousy or something. You can do that here, or you can be excused to your room.”

“I’d rather go to my room, sir,” said Angus quickly.

House Dad nodded. “That’s fine for today. If I were you, Mick, I’d be discreet about who you share this package with. Do you know what discreet means?”

“Yes, sir,” said Angus. What could he be talking about?

“Good. You can go.” House Dad went back to his mail.

Angus took his leave and hurried to his and Carter’s room. Maybe...maybe...he wasn’t going to let himself hope, but no, after what June said today...maybe it was proof he hadn’t been forgotten.

He reached the room and closed the door. Now. Deep breath. Be ready to be disappointed, just in
He sat cross-legged on the floor and unwrapped the package, carefully, and slid off the lid.

A pile of papers cascaded to the floor, revealing—oh god—two books, and comics, and toys, and pens and pencils...more presents than he saw at a time ever. Angus touched them reverently, nestled in what looked like old Candlenights tissue paper.

The papers—what were the papers? He snatched one up at random, three yellow pieces of paper folded very badly, and smoothed it out on the floor.

*Hey, little man. Bet you thought we forgot about you, huh? But old Kravitz and Taako would never forget our favorite boy—*

He flipped open another sheet of paper.

*Dear Angus, I can’t tell you how much I miss seeing you around the rink—*

And another one, this one on graphing paper—

*Hi, Angus! I hope you’re doing well—*

And another—

*My dear sweet Angus—*

And another—

*Dear Ango McDango—*

*To Mr. Angus McDonald—*

*Dear Angus—*

*Hi, Angus—*

Angus slapped his hand over his mouth. They remembered! Thank god, they remembered.

Shaking with the effort of holding back the first happy tears he’d cried in *forever*, Angus gathered up the letters into a neat stack, leaned back against the side of his bed, and started to read.

Chapter End Notes

Friendly neighborhood reminder here that the team shirts are up for sale now! Find the info about those on the tumblr, first batch should go to print tomorrow, but you can jump in any time. <3, H+K
Merle double-checked that the doors to his shop were locked, picked up the last crate of vases from behind the counter, and set them down on the worktable, where Carey was sitting with a basket full of daffodils. “Just nine more, and we’re all set.”

Carey took one of the vases and started filling it with flowers. “Sick. I’m ready to go home.”

Merle cut a few lengths of yellow ribbon from the spool. “How is that girlfriend of yours?”

Carey paused for a moment and gave him a puzzled glance. “She’s all right. Why?”

“Well.” Merle cleared his throat. This whole giving-a-damn thing was so awkward sometimes. “I understand she was...upset. About Angus.”

She pressed her lips together and handed him the vase. “We both are. But Killian’s better about handling stuff like this.”

“I see,” said Merle, looping a ribbon around the neck of the vase.

Carey filled another vase in silence and put it down in front of him. He was still working on tying the bow with his prosthesis. There was a trick to it, but it took him a while.

“Why do you want to know about Angus, anyway?” she asked. There was a bit of an edge to her voice.

Merle pulled the bow tight, unhooked his plastic finger from the knot, and put the vase back in the crate, which gave him just enough time to come up with an answer. “He’s friends with my kids. They haven’t been able to hang out with him for a while, you know?”

Carey nodded and crammed a handful of flowers just a little too hard into the vase.

“Hey, cool it on the merchandise, would you?” grumbled Merle.

“Sorry.” She took a moment and sighed. “The state took him back.”

Merle nodded. “My kid told me.”

“I can’t stand the thought of him all alone in there.”

“It’s probably not so bad.”

She looked him dead in the eye. “Trust me. It is.”

Carey was telling the truth, straight from the heart. A thought occurred.

“You were in the system?” he asked.

Some of the fierceness went out of her expression. She looked down again. “Yeah.”

Damn. Merle felt an unfamiliar pang of sympathy. This girl had had a hard life. “This group home
he’s in. You know anything about it?"

She shook her head and went back to filling vases. “Never been. But I know what group homes are
like. They’re not made for long-term housing, right? Just someplace temporary until you can find
kids a foster family.” She set a vase down and took another. “But if there’s not a family looking for
that age group, or if…you know, if there’s siblings, and you can find a family for one sibling but not
both…”

Carey trailed off. Merle carefully pulled tight another ribbon. “Sounds like purgatory.”

She looked up at him again. “That’s a pretty good way to describe it.”

“Poor kid.” Poor kids, really.

Carey nodded, slowly.

“Can you do anything?” he asked.

“Magnus and Julia are working on it.” She set the vase down in front of her decisively.

He raised his eyebrows. Magnus and Julia, huh? “No shit.”

“Mhmm. We’ll get him back.”

“Good.”

They worked in silence for a few minutes.

“Who did you say this order was for?” asked Carey after a while.

“Rotary Club,” said Merle. “Some kind of charity benefit dinner.”

“What do Rotary Clubs even do?” Carey wondered.

Merle shrugged. “Search me. They’ve always been good customers, though.”

“What are they raising money for?”

Again, Merle shrugged.

“You don’t know?” Carey teased with a grin. “Don’t all you old men know each other?”

“Oo, I should fire you just for that,” Merle said mildly. Carey laughed, handed off a vase, and took
out the last one.

He finished tying another ribbon thoughtfully. He had received an invitation, but he figured it was
leftover from when Boyland was still alive. Boyland was always trying to get him to join. He was
most likely still on some mailing list. There were a few folks he knew in the club, but none that he
knew very well, or at any rate knew well anymore. He could go--Mavis and Mookie were at their
grandparents’ for a few days, so no need for a sitter or something, but even so--

“Got any plans for the weekend?” asked Carey.

Merle frowned. “Nah.”
Merle opened the door to his house and flipped on the radio.

“--was Billy Corgan with ‘I’ve Got a Girl. Next up is McGuff, singing ‘Live Like You’re Dying.’ I’m Hekuba Roughridge--”

He switched it off. Why did he always do that? It was like he subconsciously still wanted to hear her naggy voice. He set his keys down on the table and looked through the mail. Junk, junk, birthday party invite for Mavis from Boyland’s twins--aww, how sweet. He tossed it onto the look-at-this-later pile, on top of the invitation letter to the Rotary Club dinner.

Merle paused, then slid the birthday invite off the letter and read it again.

...All proceeds will go to the Coyote Hill Group Home for Children...

Merle sighed. “Dammit.”

Merle handed his invite to the nice old lady at the table in front, taking half a second to admire the vase of daffodils by her guest list, and wandered into the hall. It was just a public hall, gymnasium-shaped and festooned with yellow and white streamers, but in a pretty classy way, Merle thought. Some country music played softly on speakers Merle couldn’t see. There were folks milling through the hall in fancy dress, like they were at a cocktail party instead of in what was essentially a basketball court. Merle smiled to himself as he waddled his way through the crowd.

A passing woman brushed his shoulder. “Oh, sorry--”

Oh god, it was Hekuba. They both paused to look at each other. She looked good. Red had always been a good color for her.

“What, did you get lost on the way back from the rummage sale?” she asked finally.

Merle looked down at his Hawaiian print shirt and slacks. “This is my favorite shirt.”

“Well that’s just sad,” she said.

“How about you? Finally embracing your age by joining Rotary Club?”

“For your information, I’m here with a date,” she said acidically.

Merle frowned. “Who?”

She rolled her eyes. “Mr. Business.”

“Mr. Business,” Merle repeated sardonically. If you were gonna fake a name, at least make it sound believable.

“Yes, as in None of Yours. Bye, Merle.”

Merle turned to the bar as she walked away. Damn, she’d gotten him again.

The bar was a horrible eighties holdover that was a permanent fixture in the hall. A twitchy young man in a vest was tending bar, pulling a cup from a stack.

“Hey, can I--” Merle began.
The young man started, sent the cup flying, fumbled to catch it, and dropped it with a clunk.

“You all right?” said Merle, leaning over the bar. “Did it break?”

“No, it’s—I’m good, it’s fine.” He ducked under the counter and reappeared with the glass. “What uh--what can I get for you?”

Merle checked his nametag. “Yeah, Tom, can I get an Old Fashioned? No cherry?”

“Sure,” he said, and fixed the drink, hands flying.

Merle slid a couple of bills in the donation box and accepted the drink. “Thanks.” He took a sip and blinked in surprise. “Damn! This is good!”

“Thank you,” said Tom, putting the glass he’d dropped in the sink.

Merle looked up and down the counter. “Where’s your tip jar?”

“Oh, no tip jar,” Tom said.

There was something in his voice that caught Merle’s attention. “No? You’re volunteering?”

“Yeah,” said Tom, with false enthusiasm. “You know, it’s for the kids, right?”

Merle rubbed his chin. “They didn’t tell you no tips, huh?”

Tom grimaced. “Well…no.”

“Tough break.”

“Yeah.” Tom sighed. “It’s hard enough to find steady work in this town.”

“What do you do right now?” asked Merle.

“Ohh… you know. This and that.”

“So making trouble, huh?” joked Merle.

“Hah ha ha.” Tom looked terrified.

Oh. Well then. Merle nodded and took his drink. “Have a good one, Tom.”

Tom nodded damply and turned back to his work.

It was still a while before dinner would be served, but Merle figured he’d find his seat anyway. He wandered around the tables until he found a place set for Merle Highchurch, right next to a gorgeous redhead in a black dress who had gravitas written all over her. She was watching the party and drinking what looked like a gin and tonic with three limes. She nodded to him as he sat down.

“Evening,” he said, trying his most charming smile and offering a handshake. “Merle Highchurch.”

“Justine Troth,” she responded, and shook his hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Merle. “What’s a good-looking lady like yourself do?”

Justine gave him a long, slow look, that communicated that further attempts at flirting would be met with summary execution. “I am the justice of the peace.”
Merle swallowed. No more of that, then. “I see. You a lawyer, then?”

“It’s an elected position, so passing the bar is not a requirement.” She nodded to her place card, which said *Justine Troth, Esq.* “But as it happens, I am.”

“A politician, eh?” he said.

“It is surprisingly easy to get elected when you are the only one running,” she said solemnly. “But I wanted to do right by my town.”

Merle nodded thoughtfully. He knew the Rotary Club was technically a service organization, but he didn’t expect people to be quite so dedicated to the idea.

“And you, Mr. Highchurch? What do you do?”

“I own a couple of businesses in town,” he said vaguely.

“Which ones?”

“Pan’s Blooms,” he said, and then muttered, “and The Adventure Zone.”

Justine quirked an eyebrow. “The roller rink?”

Damn. “The same.”

“I thought I recognized the name Highchurch,” she said, nodding. “There was an old casefile, I believe? Something about a disputed inheritance?”

Oh this party kept on getting better and better. “Yeah, I was the one doing the disputing.”

“I remember. It was a bit of an odd case.” She took a drink. “You didn’t want to inherit the rink, if I recall.”

“That’s right,” Merle grumbled. “Problem was, no one else did either.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “You seem to have stuck with it, though.”

“I have,” he said, and thought of the derby team. “It worked out okay.”

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!” said an alarming voice from a speaker at the front of the room. A pudgy man with a toothy smile and a shock of frizzy ginger hair was at a microphone on a platform at the front of the room. “I’m Garfield, the president of the Rotary Club of Faerun, and I’d like to welcome everyone to our benefit dinner!”

The crowd clapped and Merle joined in. He knew this guy. He’d tried to sell Merle a fax machine once. He was hard to forget, no matter how much you wanted to.

“If you’re here, you’re already supporting those sweet kiddies at the Coyote Hill Group Home, but if you’re looking for another way to be generous—” he winked—“and I hope you are, check out our bar and silent auction! Now please make your way to your seats, as dinner will be served soon! Thanks again!”

Merle winced at the immediate feedback from the microphone. “That guy needs to cut it out with the caffeine.”

“Would you believe he doesn’t drink it?” commented Justine.
Merle snorted. “No.”

Justine may have smiled. “He is a dedicated president, though. I’m on the board of directors.”

“Anything you don’t do, Justice Troth?” Merle quipped.

“Suffer nonsense,” she said flatly, but her eye twinkled. A joke, possibly. Merle smiled.

His thoughts wandered a bit. “Say, if you’re on the board, maybe you can tell me. How did y’all choose the group home as a charity?”

“The system in this county is overstretched,” Justine said. “The Rotary Club is dedicated to making communities better.”

Huh. Merle tapped his glass with his finger. “Listen, I don’t know much about the foster system, but those group homes get state funding, don’t they? Wouldn’t we be better off supporting groups that train foster parents?”

Justine paused. Her next words were very careful. “As a member of the board, I say that this particular fundraising project will most directly impact the lives of children.” She lowered her voice. “But as a justice of the peace… you are unfortunately correct. It’s just complicated.”

“Hey, Justice Troth!”

Merle looked up; Ren was sitting down on the other side of Justine, offering a handshake.

“Good to see you, Ren,” said Justine, shaking her hand.

“Is that Merle?” asked Ren, grinning. “I’ve never seen you at one of these before.”

Merle was surprised she remembered him, but she was a very attentive bartender. “Hell, I would have thought you were too young for the Rotary Club.”

“You’re never too young to get involved in your community,” Ren said with mock solemnity, and flashed a smile. “Oh, hi!”

“Howdy, Ren,” said a mustached man in a cowboy hat and bolo tie, sitting down next to Merle. He was accompanied by a large woman—derby-shaped, Merle thought— in a badly tailored suit.

“Name’s Isaak,” said the man to the rest of the group, settling in his seat. “This is Cassidy, my girlfriend.”

Cassidy grinned. “Ain’t he proper? Never been a plus one afore.”

The others introduced themselves, ending with Ren. “Say,” Ren said. “You ended up hiring Magnus Burnsides, didn’t you?”

Isaak’s eyebrows shot up. “I did. Damn good craftsman.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Ren, and then added for the benefit of the rest of the table, “I employ his fiancée.”

“Shit, you know Julia?” asked Cassidy.

“Oh, I love Julia,” said Ren. “I’ll be sorry to lose her.”
Merle frowned. “Lose her?”

“She’ll have her degree soon,” Ren explained. “Going to get a real job, I suppose.”

“We’re awful proud of her, ain’t we?” said Cassidy, nudging Isaak.

“Damn straight,” said Isaak.

“I am too,” said Ren happily. “She’ll be good at whatever she does, I’m sure.”

“Hey, if you’re looking for a new bartender, you might talk to the kid over there,” Merle said, gesturing to Tom. “Makes a better drink than you do, and that’s saying something.”

“You don’t say,” said Ren, leaning back. “I’ll have to do that.”

“Evening,” said a voice behind Merle. Merle paused. He knew that voice.

A dapper gentleman with a handlebar mustache came around the table, greeting people as he went. “Justice Troth, good to see you. And Ren!”

“Evening, Dr. Davenport,” said Justine with a nod.

Davenport took the seat between Ren and Cassidy, shaking hands with Isaak as he did. “And Isaak, how do you do. This must be the lovely Cassidy.”

“That’s right,” said Isaak, a hint of a smile under his mustache.

“Shit, ain’t you sweet,” said Cassidy, shaking hands with him next.

“Great to finally meet you,” said Davenport, smiling, before finally seeing who he was sitting across from. His eyebrows shot up. “Merle?”

“Davenport,” said Merle, and he could tell his tone didn’t sound as friendly as he meant it to. He tried again, a little more gung-ho. “I haven’t seen you in years!”

“Decades,” Davenport confirmed. To Merle’s relief, he sounded just as shocked. “Wow. Er…how have you been?”

“Ah, you know. Ups and downs. Life.” The thought that this was uncomfortable for both of them gave Merle a little courage. “We’ll have time to catch up, I’m sure.”

“Certainly, yes,” said Davenport, and Merle detected an undertone of relief.

“Hey everyone!” came President Garfield’s voice from the speaker, accompanied by a squeal of feedback. “Never fear, boys and girls! Dinner is served!”

“So how is it you two know each other?” Ren asked Merle and Davenport over a pretty damn good lemon poppyseed chicken dish.

Davenport swallowed a bit and pointed his fork at Merle. “Was it sixth grade or seventh?”

Merle chewed thoughtfully. “Seventh. Because you asked Mr. Goodfriend if he wanted to see a magic trick.”
“That’s right, he was new that year,” said Davenport.

“Are we talking about Art Goodfriend?” asked Justine.

“The art teacher?” asked Isaak. “At the middle school?”

“The same,” said Davenport, chuckling.

“Oh, I remember,” said Cassidy. “Poor bastard looked like he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown ‘bout every damn day.”

“He didn’t used to,” said Merle.

Ren looked delighted. “What did you do to this poor man?”

“Oh, you know.” Merle waved a dismissive hand. “Raised hell, caused trouble. Kid stuff. It all started with that magic trick, though.”

“I had a prank pen, with disappearing ink,” said Davenport. “Y’all know how I like illusions.”

“Oh you still do!” said Merle. “No shit.”

“Yes sir,” said Davenport. “Well, I squirted my pen at Mr. Goodfriend, only I missed his shirt entirely. Got him right in the eye.”

“Oh no,” said Justine, wincing.

“So he starts screaming, right,” said Merle, leaning in, “and the school nurse is passing by, and she rushes in to see what’s wrong, but she can’t see anything.”

Ren gasped. “Because it was disappearing ink!”

“Exactly,” laughed Merle. “It was the funniest goddamn thing I’d ever seen, and I told Davenport so.”

“And we were friends from then on,” chuckled Davenport. “And poor Mr. Goodfriend was never the same.”

“What happened to him, I wonder?” mused Justine.

“Oh, he retired when my big sister was in middle school,” said Ren. “She said he was like, ‘Friendship was the real treasure,’ and he cried, and then he left.”

“Sounds about right,” said Isaak.

“I find it hard to believe you were a troublemaker, Dr. Davenport,” said Justine.

“I was a good kid!” Davenport protested, good-naturedly. “It was Merle who was always getting into trouble.”

“Yeah, well you were right there with me every time,” said Merle, chuckling. “All up through college.”

“Did you two go here in town?” asked Ren.

“Yep, in almost the same program,” said Davenport.
Merle shook his head. “I can’t believe you gave in and became a doctor.”

“A psychiatrist, mind you,” said Davenport.

Merle’s jaw dropped. “Oh you sneaky son of a gun.”

“What’s so sneaky ‘bout that?” asked Cassidy.

“I always wanted to be a counselor,” Davenport explained. “But my parents weren’t going to pay for school unless I was studying to be a ‘real doctor.’”

“So you did both,” said Merle, grinning. “Sly.”

Davenport smiled, pleased with himself, but the smile fell. “Fared a little better than you did, I guess. You still ended up running the rink.”

“Making an honest living just like Dad always wanted,” said Merle, keeping his tone jockular. “It’s all right though. Ended up just fine.” Merle avoided the other guests’ eyes.

Fortunately, Ren cut in. “I know that the rink is what kept me in business my first couple of years,” she said.

“Magnus and Julia love the place,” added Cassidy. “Shit, derby’s what brought ‘em together.”

Merle nodded. “It’s grown on me.”

“That’s good,” said Davenport, looking relieved.

“You also own Pan’s Blooms, you said?” asked Justine.

“You’re a florist!” said Davenport, surprised.

“That’s right, I did the arrangements here,” said Merle, gesturing to the centerpiece.

“Oh, they’re lovely,” said Ren.

“Good craftsmanship,” said Isaak, nodding.

“Hey, speaking of craftsmanship,” said Ren, “Isaak, it’s your company doing the refurb of City Hall, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” said Cassidy, elbowing Isaak. “Pretty, ain’t it?”

Isaak nodded, a little pleased. “I do my best.”

The conversation moved on.

Their plates were taken away with the promise of dessert to come, donated from that second bakery that was starting up downtown. Privately Merle thought a second bakery wouldn’t last long, but cheesecake was cheesecake.

“I think I’ll get another drink,” said Justine, standing up as a coffee was offered.

“I’ll come with you,” said Ren, smoothing her skirt as she got up. “I want to talk to that bartender.”
The song on the speakers changed as they left, to Willie Nelson, “Always on My Mind.” Cassidy perked up. “Oh, I like this song.”

Isaak nodded. “Me too.”

“We could dance,” Cassidy suggested.

Isaak’s eyebrows shot up. “What, here?”

“You should take her up on that,” said Merle. “Dancing’s good for your soul.”

“Still a dancer, huh?” said Davenport.

“Oh, yeah. You gotta dance every day.” Merle leaned back in his chair. “And if you’re lucky, you can embarrass your kids at the same time.”

Cassidy laughed at this. Isaak shot her a fond look, and shook his head. “Hell, all right.” He offered a hand to Cassidy. She took it with a grin, and they moved off into the open area between the tables and the stage.

Merle watched them go. Both of them were the sort of dancers who mostly just swayed to the beat, but they seemed to be having a good time.

“Embarrass your kids, huh?”

Merle looked to Davenport, on the other side of the table. “Yeah. I’ve got two of them.”

Davenport nodded thoughtfully. “How old?”

“Mookie is ten and Mavis just turned fourteen.” He chuckled. “Shit, I’m old.”

Davenport smiled, but distractedly. There was something on his mind. Merle waited for him to say it, until it was clear he wasn’t going to.

“How about you?” Merle said finally.

“Never found the time.”

“Mm.”

The silence stretched out for about thirty years.

“I’m sorry I never came to see you,” said Davenport finally, the guilt streaming off of him. “When you got back from Vietnam. I er… I chickened out.”

Oh, that’s what this was. Merle sighed, and shrugged. “Look, don’t…don’t beat yourself up about it. I wasn’t much good for visiting anyway.”

“Even so. It was…just plain fear. That you’d be different.”

“I was different,” said Merle, tapping his fake arm. “I am different. Nothing wrong with that.”

“I suppose not,” said Davenport.

“And like I said, it ended up okay.”

Some of the worry seemed to slough off Davenport. “Better than okay, with two successful
businesses.”

“One’s more successful than the other,” Merle muttered, taking a sip of water.

Davenport chuckled a little. “What would your dad think, you being a florist?”

“You know what he’d think,” said Merle, gesturing toward Davenport with his glass. “And ‘girly’ would be the nice version. The thought of him rolling over in his grave helps get me up in the morning.”

“Spite isn’t a good motivator,” Davenport warned.

“Nothing spiteful about it,” said Merle. “It’s just a bonus.”

Davenport chuckled. “Merle Highchurch, legitimate businessman.”

“Doctor Davenport,” Merle returned in a snooty accent.

“College us would die from shame,” Davenport said.

“College us wouldn’t know what they were missing,” said Merle.

Davenport’s eyebrows shot up. “You really mean that?”

Merle considered this. “You know what, I do.”

“I thought you hated the rink. When I heard you were fixing the place up in ’79, adding the arcade and that--”

“I did hate it.” Merle couldn’t keep the bitterness from curdling his tone. “But it was what I needed.”

“And now?” Davenport prompted.

Merle looked up. “You psychoanalyzing me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Davenport earnestly. “If I was, I’d be charging you.”

This made Merle laugh. “Fair enough, then. The rink’s…done a lot of good.”

“More than you know,” said Davenport. “You know, I get to hear things. That place is--”

“A community?” said Merle.

“That’s the word for it.” Davenport nodded. “And I’m glad to know you’re at the center of it.”

“Eh, more… off to the side.”

“What do you mean?”

Merle hesitated. “I don’t want to be in the way of things.”

Davenport frowned thoughtfully. “Where’s your community, Merle?”

“Ah, who needs that?”

“I mean, everybody. I’ve been to entire conferences on the subject.”
Merle shrugged. “I don’t know then. Where’s yours?”

Davenport opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Oh, I see how this is,” Merle chuckled. “Not taking your own advice, huh, just like always.”

“With my practice and all, I just--”

“Never found the time?”

Davenport sighed. “Is this why we were friends? You telling it like it is?”

“Nah, we were friends because you shot Mr. Goodfriend in the eye with invisible ink,” Merle laughed. Davenport laughed with him.

The song on the speakers changed. Merle glanced over to Isaak and Cassidy to see if they were coming back, but they were off in their own little world, and now other couples were joining them. He smiled.

“Listen, Merle,” said Davenport. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Merle waved a hand. “Don’t sweat it.”

Davenport frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah, you know, I tried dragging grudges around for a while. Didn’t care for it.” Merle shrugged. “It’s easier to look for the good things.”

“To choose joy?” Davenport suggested.

“Yeah, that’s pretty good,” said Merle. “I’m gonna use that.”

“You were right, Merle.”

“What about?”

Davenport met his eyes solemnly. “You have changed. And it’s a good thing.”

“Have you changed?” Merle asked.

“Me?”

“Only fair, Cap’nport.”

Davenport snorted at the ancient nickname, and finished off his glass of wine. “You ever think about the things that define you?”

“Not too hard,” said Merle. “You?”

“I do, and then I think about how I’ve lost pretty much all of them one way or another.”

Davenport’s face was a mask of poise, which was strange. Merle would have expected him to be angry. He would have been, when they were young.

“So yes, I have changed,” Davenport finished. “I’m not sure who I am, but it wasn’t who I thought I was. And…that’s also a good thing.”
Merle nodded thoughtfully. “Hey Davenport?”

“Hm?”

“Are we friends again?”

Davenport loosed a surprised chuckle. “You know, I’d like that.”

Merle smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Team shirts? Team shirts. They’re still available for order up on the tumblr! (Hannah has already bought two, what a nerd.) <3, K+H
Best Man

Johann did what he’d been doing for the last six hours: staring at a blank page.
He moved his pen to the first line. He paused. He rested his hand again on the table.
He took a drink of his coffee and stared a little longer.

“Johann?”
He didn’t take his eyes from the page. “Yeah, Ren?”

“You know this is a pub, and you’re welcome to stay as long as you like…”

“Mmmhmm?”

“But you’ve had nothing but coffee since you got here this morning. Do you...I don’t know, do you want something to eat?”

Johann broke his staring contest with the piece of notebook paper and turned to look at her. “What time is it?”

She checked her watch. “4:46.”

Johann considered. Was he hungry?
Yes. Yes he was. “Could I get a burger?”

“Sure,” she said, writing it down on a pad of paper and looking a little relieved. “You want some more coffee?”

“Please.”

She topped off his mug from the pitcher in her hand. “Writer’s block, huh?”

“It shouldn’t be this hard,” said Johann. “It’s not like it’s a groundbreaking piece of art, except insofar as anything is.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“My speech for Avi’s wedding.”

She smiled. “Are you best man?”

“Yes,” he said gloomily.

“It shouldn’t be too complicated, then,” she said. “You’re happy for them, you love them, drunken racy sex joke, and boom. You’re done.”

Johann cringed. “I don’t plan on drinking at all.” Who knew what would come out of his mouth if he did?

“Then you’d better start with the joke. All the best speeches I’ve heard do.” She winked at him. “Let me get you that burger.”
Johann turned back to the empty page. There weren’t words to describe how much he valued Avi’s friendship and his happiness, or for that matter how much he liked and appreciated Antonia. And there were too many words to describe the hurt of loss that Avi could never know about. And jokes? There were supposed to be jokes?

Surely he knew some jokes. Any jokes.

God, did he not know any jokes?

He stared at the page.

He wrote, “Knock knock.”

He scratched it out hurriedly.

“Here you go,” said Ren, putting a plate in front of him with a steaming hot burger and some fries. “Sorry for the wait.”

“It’s fine,” said Johann. What wait? “Thanks.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Got any jokes?”

Ren laughed and walked away.

He put down his pen and muttered, “I was being serious.”

The burger smelled amazing. The food here always did. He took a bite, and it was exactly as delicious as it smelled. Why didn’t he write at Refuge more often? It was nice to be away from distractions, focused completely on your art. If only the damn words would come. Music was so much easier.

Johann chewed thoughtfully. He had considered performing a song, and for a few months that had been the plan, but the more he thought about it the worse the idea sounded. None of his original works would match the tone of a wedding, nor did any of them capture the right sentiment, and for something like a best man speech he didn’t want to do a cover. No, it had to be a speech.

“Hey, Johann!”

He looked up from his burger. Sloane and Hurley were ambling over, hand in hand. He swallowed hastily. “Hey guys.”

“Fancy meeting you here,” said Sloane. “What are you up to?”

“Trying to write a speech,” he said. “It’s eluding me right at the moment, though. And you?”

“Date night,” said Hurley with a grin. “What’s your speech about?”

“For Avi’s wedding,” grumbled Johann.

“Oh, we were invited to that,” said Sloane.

“I don’t know if we’ll go,” said Hurley. “I mean, Avi’s our friend, but like...would we stick out? Like his family’s gonna be there probably, right?”
Johann shook his head. “You should go. Avi invited everyone. It’s gonna be...” he sighed. “A huge party.”

Sloane and Hurley exchanged a glance. “Feeling a little intimidated? Giving a speech in front of all those people?” asked Sloane.

Intimidated wasn’t quite the right word. More like an undercover agent, but they didn’t need to know that. “Something like that. I think the speech needs jokes, but I can’t think of any.”

“Well, may I humbly suggest the magic of puns?” said Hurley. Sloane snickered.

“Puns are the lowest form of humor,” scoffed Johann.  

“Aw, no, they’re punderful,” said Sloane, straight-faced.

“Would you say they’re so low they’re--” Hurley elbowed Sloane-- “punderground?”

Sloane giggled. “That’s a groundbreaking revelation.”

“Oh my god,” said Johann, head in hands. “This is hell.”

“Some people have no taste,” said Hurley with mock regret. “Good luck with your speech, Johann.”

“Thanks,” he groaned, and went back to his burger as they left.

It wasn’t as if he wasn’t moving past Avi emotionally, either. Sometimes he went entire days without remembering that he loved...well. Loved.

The feelings were getting less acute, anyway. It was just...why would he joke about this? Avi was his best friend. He and Antonia were great together and going to be happy. This was no joking matter.

He polished off the burger and the fries and went back to staring at the nearly blank page.

Maybe he could keep it comically short. We’re happy for Avi and Antonia, and we love them. The end.

No, that would be just as much of a disservice.

Maybe he could write a poem.

No. Terrible. Poetry was gauche for a wedding.

He stared.


“Jokes?” Taako’s head popped up from the next booth.

Johann sighed. “Sorry, I didn’t realize I was thinking out loud.”

“No worries, homie.” Taako rotated and rested his arms on the top of the booth. “Didn’t know you were here. You starting a career as a stand-up comedian?”

“God forbid,” said Johann.

“I don’t know, I’d see your act,” said Taako, grinning.
“I’m just trying to write a speech for Avi’s wedding.”

“Hatchi matchi. And it’s jokes you’re looking for, eh?” Taako rubbed his chin theatrically.

Johann considered Taako carefully. “You’re pretty good at jokes.”

“I can dish out a classic one-liner or two,” said Taako, examining his nails. “I don’t think that style would work for you, though, compadre.”

“Style? What style?”

“Biting remarks borne of observation of character and some personal insecurity.” Taako flicked a bit of lint from under one nail. “You take yourself too seriously for that.”

“I don’t take myself too seriously,” said Johann.

Taako looked down his crooked nose at Johann. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

Johann frowned. “Yes?”

“Amazing.” Taako regarded him carefully. “Listen, you want to be funny, Seinfeld? Go for something self-deprecating. Now if you’ll excuse me--” He slipped back down into the booth.

Johann looked down at the tabletop, examining the dark wood.

After a few minutes, he began to write.

Kravitz and Taako got out of Kravitz’s car and started the trek up the sloped sidewalk to the McElroy Memorial Park. It was a beautiful day in March, the sun shining bright, a good day for a wedding, if this breeze didn’t pick up. The park was usually crowded on a Saturday morning, but not necessarily crowded with people in fancy dress, as it was today. Taako adjusted his own fawn leather jacket, which laid over a black turtleneck tank and tight black slacks complete with chunky silver belt, and looped his arm through Kravitz’s. Kravitz had settled for a suit, sans tie, but he’d at least worn a rather fetching purple shirt underneath, at Taako’s suggestion. They looked very good, and they weren’t the only ones.

“Johann was right, this is a big party,” Kravitz commented. There must have been a couple hundred people, all heading toward the bandshell in one corner of the park. Chairs were arranged in a wide arc around the bandshell in three sections. “I always forget, which side is the groom’s side?”

“The right, unless they’re Jewish,” said Taako promptly.

“Then what’s the middle section for?” asked Kravitz.

“Dunno, folks who are friends of both?” Taako pointed at a smiling guy standing near one of the aisles, who seemed to be passing out programs. “Let’s ask him, he looks like an usher.”

The guy smiled and offered them a program as they approached.

Kravitz took it. “Thanks, uh--where should friends of the groom--”

The guy shook his head and tapped his ear.

“Oh,” said Kravitz. He unhooked his arm from Taako’s and handed off the program to him. “Uh…”
Kravitz made a fist, laid it on his heart, and rotated it in a little circle. “Sorry. We’re uh…” Kravitz gestured to himself and Taako, then did a couple of motions that were too quick for Taako to process. “…friends with Avi?”

The guy lit up. He pinned the programs between his arm and his side and motioned back.

“You’re…Antonia’s brother,” Kravitz said, translating as he watched. “A-N-G--oh, Angelo! Nice to meet you,” Kravitz said and signed.

Taako watched in delight. “Ask him where we should sit, babe.”

“Oh, god, okay,” said Kravitz, furrowing his brow. “Uh…what…” he held out his hands questioningly, and then rested two fingers from one hand on two fingers from another, like little legs. “…chairs?”

Angelo took a puzzled moment before he realized what Kravitz was asking, and signed again.

“Anywhere you want,” Kravitz translated with a sigh. “Okay. Um. Thanks.” He touched his chin with his fingertips and brought his hand forward.

Taako mimicked the motion. Angelo grinned and turned to go back to passing out programs.

“Well aren’t you just full of surprises,” Taako crowed as they walked up the aisle and located a couple of free seats in the middle section. “I didn’t know you knew sign language.”

“Just enough to get by,” said Kravitz. “I took a class on it in college and then ended up using it for a project a few years ago. I’m really rusty, though.”

“You should teach me,” Taako said, settling into his seat. “Then we can shit-talk from across the room.”

Kravitz chuckled. “Can I see the program?”

Taako handed it off. “Never been to a wedding with a program before.”

“I have,” said Kravitz, opening it up and starting to read.

“Little much, don’t you think?” Taako drawled. “I mean your average wedding is pretty standard as far as structure, right?”

“Not this one,” said Kravitz in surprise. “Listen… ‘Because we both come from rich cultures, we are combining several traditions from our ethnic backgrounds, our religious faith, and from the culture which we now call home’…Did you know they were Muslim?”

“They are?” Taako leaned over to look over Kravitz’s shoulder. The program had the basic itinerary on the right page--interesting, the sermon and prayer came after the vows. On the left, they had explanations of traditions: the bride has been decorated with henna, the veil pinned on the couple is a Filipino tradition, etc. Taako skimmed it with interest.

“So it looks like they’ll start with a variation on something called a baraat, which is the processional,” Kravitz said, examining the program studiously. “At least, I think that’s what this is saying…this is very interesting. Oh, look, later on the bridal party is going to steal Avi’s shoes and hold them ransom.”

Taako laughed. “Hell yeah, I like this party.”
The sound of drums made Taako turn around. At the back of the left aisle came what looked like the groom’s party, led by Johann and another guy, drumming away with a pretty fresh rhythm. The crowd started to cheer. Now this was how you started a wedding.

“How do you think he’s doing with all this?” Kravitz asked.

Taako examined Johann, who looked laser-focused, but was moving to the beat nonetheless. “Looks okay.”

The rest of the groom’s party followed, dancing to the beat up the aisle. So Avi would be at the back of this group--

Taako froze. “Holy shit, Kravitz.”

Beside him his boyfriend leaned over, as if to get a better look. “Is that--”


“Did Avi cut off his mullet?” whispered Kravitz.

Sure enough, in a brand new haircut and a beautifully embroidered kurta, Avi grinned his way down the aisle.

“He’s--he’s--” Kravitz sputtered.

“Avi is hot,” muttered Taako, hardly believing the words as they exited his mouth.

“One haircut should not be able to do that,” Kravitz hissed.

Taako watched him take his place in the bandshell. “Motherfucker.”

The ceremony had gone off without a hitch, pictures taken, and the party started, to Johann’s relief. There had been that weird moment in the receiving line where Taako had spent about ten seconds shaking Avi’s hand and glaring, but besides that no drama or awkwardness.

The bride and groom were now safely delivered with the wedding party to the main table in the reception area, which was the tables set up around the basketball court-turned-dance floor on the other side of the park. The lumpiang sariwa and rellenong pusit had been served, and now it was time for speeches, just like they’d planned. Oh god. Johann nudged Avi to let him know they were starting, and hit a fork a couple times against a glass, which played a lovely F sharp. Oh, god, now everyone was looking.

Right, which was what he wanted. Right. He stood up, crinkling the piece of notebook paper in both hands. “Uh, hi, everyone. I’m Johann Larsen, the best man.” Here goes nothing.

“Also known as ‘that white guy.’”

There was a murmur of laughter from the audience. Johann looked up. They were listening, and smiling. Okay, good.

“I first met Avi when he walked into our freshman dorm and saw me with my stupid hippie haircut and a guitar and didn’t immediately say, ‘Oh god, not one of you.’”

There was more laughter, louder this time. Johann loosed a little breathless laugh, feeling some
confidence come back. Cool. One more joke to go.

“Although to be fair, I also didn’t say anything about his mullet.”

Antonia snorted, and the rest of the audience laughed too, especially the derby team. Johann glanced down at Avi. He was grinning.

Johann smiled back briefly and took a breath. Now the important part.

“When we were freshmen, Avi wanted to be a pilot. That didn’t work out, but he used to talk about flying all the time, and when he did he’d get this glint in his eye, like flying was the most sublime thing he could imagine. When he described it, it made me want to understand what he saw in it, to understand his joy.”

There was a hollow ache forming in the pit of Johann’s stomach. He was afraid of that. He powered through.

“After Avi decided not to be a pilot I didn’t see that glint in his eye for a long time. Until he met Tony.”

His audience responded, Awww, which he hadn’t expected. Great, perfect.

“And the way he talks about her shows me that she is, to him, sublime.”

He paused. This was going to be the worst part, but the feeling he was feeling wasn’t heartbrokenness, but friendship, and it was fiercer than he expected. He poured the tone into his next line.

“I think pretty much everyone here considers Avi a friend, and we all want what’s best for him. I can say with reasonable certainty that Antonia is what’s best for him, and hopefully, he’s what’s best for her. So, if you’ll all join me in a toast.” He picked up his glass, which had lemonade in it. The audience shuffled to do the same. Johann raised his glass to Avi and Antonia.

“May you two have every happiness. To our friends!”

“Our Friends,” the audience echoed, and drank. The applause broke out a moment later. Johann hastily sat down as the conversation continued.

Avi stretched an arm around his shoulders to hug him. “Good speech, buddy.”

Johann leaned into the hug. “I’m glad you think so.”

Avi laughed, and there was something about his tone--Johann looked at his friend just in time to see him wipe away a tear. “Jeez, I think I’ve cried more today than I have in years.”

“It’s a good day for it, I guess,” said Johann.

Avi met his eyes. “Hey, I love you, Johann.”

Oh no. Uh, uh, where was that feeling, that feeling of fierce friendship--there it was. Hold onto that. Johann nodded, looking away. “I love you too.”

Avi slapped him on the back and turned back to Antonia. Johann sagged. Thank god that was over. He wished he was drinking something stronger than lemonade.
After cake and food and more speeches and the apparently obligatory drunken racy sex joke made by Antonia’s “maid” of honor Rowan, dancing started, both traditional and not, and Johann retreated to a chair far off to one side with his lemonade to watch the festivities. He was surprised to find he was enjoying himself. Maybe it was something about weddings, with all the people you love in one place to celebrate the beginning of a new life together. How poetic.

Kravitz sat down next to him after a while. “How are you holding up?”

Johann paused. He’d forgotten that Kravitz knew. “Not too bad.”

“You’ve done remarkably well, given the circumstances,” said Kravitz. “I was in a similar situation and I didn’t handle things nearly so smoothly.” He took a drink of something that was decidedly not lemonade.

Johann frowned. “Similar situation, huh?”

“Also my freshman roommate, as it happens,” said Kravitz. “You and I aren’t all that different, Johann.”

Johann nodded slowly. “Hm.” He watched Avi pull Antonia out onto the dancefloor. “Except that you’re way better looking.”

Kravitz laughed. “Well, thanks.”

Johann smiled. Maybe there was something to this self-deprecating humor thing.

“Kravvy!” Taako sidled up and snatched up Kravitz’s hand. He looked a touch worse for drink. “We should dance.”

Kravitz stood, but hesitated. “Are you sure we should—”

Taako pointed to the dance floor, where Carey and Killian were dancing tango-style along one edge. As Johann watched, Carey dipped Killian gracefully.

Kravitz shrugged and put down his glass. “Well, all right then.”

Johann watched them go, observing the smiles on their faces. There was a new feeling now, one he hadn’t had in a while, a tiny flicker of hope.

The songs changed a few times, the couples moved across the dance floor, the sun started to go down. What a pleasant way to spend an evening. He watched the dancing get sillier, freer, as people relaxed with each other, made friends. Avi would be pleased.

Speaking of Avi, he and Antonia seemed to be having fun, talking even as they danced, smiling with every look. Antonia asked Avi something, and Avi spent a few seconds looking around the dancefloor before catching his eye and leading Antonia over.

“Johann!” said Antonia in generally the right direction. “You should dance with me!”

Johann hesitated. “I only know ballroom styles.”

Her eyes went wide. “Do you know swing?”

“Oh, East Coast or West?”

Her face lit up. “Hell yes, you have to dance with me now. I’m the bride and I say so, c’mon.”
Johann shook his head and stood. “Okay, I guess. Avi, you good?”

Avi laughed. “Yeah, I’m fine. Anyway, uh--” He lifted one foot up, and Johann realized he was in his socks. “--I better go rescue my shoes from the bridesmaids.”

“Oh,” said Johann, digging Avi’s wallet out of his pocket. “Here. Let me know if they ask for too much.”

Avi traded Antonia’s hand for the wallet. “Thanks,” he laughed, and turned to leave them. “You have fun reminiscing about the ten seconds where everyone was into swing music, Princess.”

“Some of us don’t forget!” said Antonia after him, and turned back to Johann. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Johann knit his brow. “Really?”

“Of course!” She threw her arms around him. “You’re a good friend, Johann.”

He let himself relax into the hug. God, he was gonna cry. Again.

“Now let’s go!” She released him and tried to lead him onto the dance floor, nearly colliding with Hurley and Sloane before, laughing, Johann steered her into an empty space.
Noelle stared at the huge graph paper pad sitting on an easel. She’d set up in a corner of the engineering workshop, a spot with a chalkboard on the wall and a small workbench she’d more or less claimed as her own. The two pieces of her old skate leg were sitting on it, along with a stack of papers and textbooks, her calculator, some fidgety machine bits, and a prototype of a forearm that was too big for her but just the right size for a man she’d been calling Tennis Guy in her head. The forearm was just an empty shell at the moment. It was the insides that were going to matter.

She considered the diagram she’d drawn up. It wasn’t going to work. Tennis required wrist movement. She looked at her own hook, opened and closed the tongs. And wrists weren’t like this, just bidirectional, they were--she turned to the workbench and pulled her open Anatomy book out of the pile--like webs of ligaments between the ulna and radius and all these little carpal bones, sort of like the ankle joint.

She picked up the foot piece of her old prosthesis and looked at it. It seemed pretty clumsy now. All she’d done was a close ball joint, something she could manipulate between the floor and her knee with gravity. That wasn’t going to work for tennis. The first really good serve that hit the racket would just push back the ball joint. This needed something more subtle.

She put down the piece and picked up a piece of chalk, starting up a calculation on the blackboard.

Noelle had been at it for a few minutes when a voice asked, “What are you calculating angular momentum for?”

She started and turned. Lucas was standing on the other side of the workbench, reading her chalkboard. She hadn’t seen him since he’d blown them up, almost a year ago. He’d grown a beard, the kind some guys substituted for a personality.

“A tennis swing,” she said shortly. What was he doing here, anyway? Come to humiliate her again?

He nodded. “I wondered why the mass was so small. Have you accounted for the weight of a racket?”

“Oh.” She hadn’t, damn. How much did a racket weigh?

Lucas didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. “This is your senior project?”

“Yes.” She picked up the eraser and brushed off a couple of lines. These would need recalculating.

“Prosthetics?”

“Mhmm.” Why didn’t he just go away? She’d never be able to focus with him hanging around. “Did you want something?”

“Ah. Yes. Right.” He cleared his throat. “I was suspended, you know.”

She raised her eyebrows. After the ghost hunting incident, Dr. Miller had taken her aside, asked her what happened, and that had been the end of it as far as she knew. Lucas had been replaced by another grad student as her Fluid Dynamics T.A.

He rubbed his scruffy chin, weighing his words. “I’ve been in and out of this university my whole life, and literally not being able to set foot on campus...having no access to a laboratory and little
scientific conversation--”

Noelle felt herself lose interest. She turned back to the chalkboard.

“Er, Noelle?”

She turned back. “Did you want something or not?”

“Yes, right, getting to the point. Um. I’m trying to say that my priorities were wrong. Before. Too focused on the work and not enough on the consequences.” He looked at her hopefully.

She said nothing, waited, like Lucretia did when she wanted to get people to talk.

He took the bait. “I suppose...I’m not trying to make an excuse, of course, I just thought if I explained...at any rate, I’m sorry.”

This took a moment to process. Lucas, who she had pegged as insufferable from the first time she met him, seemed to be...taking responsibility for his actions? Maybe she was dreaming. She looked at her hook. Nope, not dreaming.

“You’re sorry?” she said quietly.

Lucas looked a bit nervous. Amazing, when had she ever made someone nervous? Aside from on the derby track, maybe.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry I put you in danger. And that I didn’t listen to your...critique of my machine. My m--Dr. Miller says you’re a very gifted engineer.”

Noelle looked down. “Dr. Miller is very kind.”

“She doesn’t say things like that about just anybody, I’ll have you know,” he added.

Now this stank of flattery. But he did apologize.

“Anyway. That’s all I came to say, and I’ve said it, so.” Lucas dithered for a second or two, and then said, “Bye,” and left.

Noelle watched him go. What was the word she was looking for?

Humility. Hmm.

“Hey Noelle!”

She looked up. Gerald had called to her from up on a catwalk. He pointed a wrench after Lucas. “You dating a grad student now?”

She rolled her eyes. “Give it a rest, Gerald.”

Magnus pulled up to the comic store just in time to see Noelle hop out of her Jeep. He shut off Rail Splitter and met her in the parking lot.

“Man, I’m so ready for this,” he said, grinning. “I’ve been thinking all about what kind of character I want and backstory and stuff. Barry said that’s what we’d be doing today.”
Noelle smiled back. “I think I’ve already got a character mostly put together.”

“Great! What class are you gonna play?” He pushed open the door for her and followed her inside.

“I was thinking a thief,” she said. “They have interesting--Professor?”

Barry had set up a folding table in a corner of the comic shop, and was busy shuffling papers when Noelle spoke. He looked up.

“Noelle? What a surprise!” He put down his papers and strolled over. “Magnus, you and Noelle know each other?”

“Yeah, from derby,” said Noelle.

Barry snapped his fingers. “That’s right, you were one of the coaches. I thought you looked familiar.”

Realization dawned on Magnus. “Oh, yeah, you were the ner--the guy in the stands with Kravitz!”

“Small world,” Barry said. “Well, small town, really. Noelle, I’m sorry, this must be weird for you.”

Noelle shrugged. “A little. Is it weird?”

“Noelle! What a surprise!” He put down his papers and strolled over. “Magnus, you and Noelle know each other?”

“Yeah, from derby,” said Noelle.

Barry snapped his fingers. “That’s right, you were one of the coaches. I thought you looked familiar.”

Realization dawned on Magnus. “Oh, yeah, you were the ner--the guy in the stands with Kravitz!”

“Noelle, I’m sorry, this must be weird for you.”

Noelle shrugged. “A little. Is it weird?”

“Playing D&D with a professor?” Barry raked his hand through his hair. “I mean, as far as your project is concerned we’re more colleagues, but if this makes you uncomfortable at all...”

Magnus watched Noelle carefully. She considered the idea for a long time.

“Well,” she began. “I’m only auditing Anatomy, so it’s not like you could play favorites with my grade.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Barry. “I just wouldn’t want to put you in an awkward position here.”

“If Magnus and Carey are here too, I’ll be just fine,” said Noelle firmly. Magnus smiled.

“Good! Good.” Barry straightened. “So, yes, your friend Carey is coming as well?”

“That’s right,” said Magnus. “She’s on the team too, actually.”

Barry laughed. “Damn, everyone in this town plays roller derby. Come on over, have a seat.”

They settled into a couple of chairs around the table. Barry passed them each a character sheet with boxes to fill in. “So we’ve got you two, and your friend Carey, and my friend as well. A good number for a party, I think. You might know him, Noelle, he’s Maureen’s son.”

Noelle frowned a little. “You mean Dr. Miller?”

“Yeah, he’s--oh, look, here he is.”

The bell above the door rang to reveal Barry’s friend, and Magnus’ eyes narrowed. “Lucas.”

Lucas stood petrified in the doorway. “Oh no,” he squeaked.

Magnus stood up. “I don’t think this is going to work out after all, Barry, this guy is--”

“Noelle?” said Noelle.
He turned to look at her, ready to punch Lucas if he was making her uneasy, but she looked totally serene. “It’s okay.”

Magnus looked at her in bewilderment. He threw out a hand to Lucas, trying to keep his voice down. “Noelle, c’mon, he--”

“I think we should give him a chance,” said Noelle evenly.

Magnus frowned. Noelle could be a little bit of a doormat sometimes. But this wasn’t doormat behavior, was it? And anyway, who was he to protect her if she didn’t need protecting?

“Are you sure?” he said quietly.

She nodded.

Carefully, Magnus sat down. “Have a seat, Lucas.”

Lucas made his way haltingly to the table, looking back and forth between Noelle and Magnus, easing himself into the chair. “Um. Hello, Barry.”

“Hi,” said Barry uncertainly. “Do you want to tell me what that was all about, guys?”

“Hopefully nothing, Professor,” said Noelle, looking over her character sheet. “Do we roll for base statistics?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah. Sorry.” He picked a plastic pencil box up off the floor and flipped the lid open, revealing a veritable rainbow of dice. “Here you go.”

Magnus kinda wanted to stick his hands in the dice box, but just took out a dodecahedron instead. “I made a box like this once.”

“You made a d20 box?” said Noelle. “That’s so cool!”

“D20,” repeated Lucas. “You’ve played before, Noelle?”

“A little,” she said. Her smile fell. “Some guys in my class got a group together, but it was…” She made a face. “Gross. They wouldn’t stop making rape jokes.”

Magnus was taken aback. “What the hell’s wrong with them?”

“They suck, that’s what,” she said darkly. She took on a mocking tone. “‘You’re too sensitive, Noelle. It’s just a game, Noelle.’ Ugh.”

“You’re not going to have that problem here,” said Barry firmly.

“Thank you,” said Noelle. “Lucas, you’ve played before too?”

Lucas nodded. “I uh, played a lot in high school.”

“Magnus, you wanted to be a paladin, is that right?” said Barry.

“Yeah, like a knight,” said Magnus. “And Noelle said thief.”

“Lucas, what were you thinking?” said Barry, handing him a character sheet.

“I’m partial to druids,” said Lucas loftily. “They’re a little more challenging than traditional wizards.”
“And Carey?” said Barry. “Did she have something in mind?”

The door flew open, the bell clattering against the doorframe, and Carey burst in. “What’s up! We ready for this? ‘Cuz I sure am!”

Magnus laughed. “Hell yeah!”

She tossed him his players manual and took the seat next to him. “Here’s this back. Thanks for the lend. You’re Barry?” Carey looked Barry dead in the eye.

“That’s me,” said Barry. “You must be Carey.”

“Got it in one. Listen carefully.” She counted off points on her fingers. “I wanna play a half-orc. She’s gonna be a ranger. And she’s gonna have a crossbow. How fly is that shit?”

Barry looked a little dazed. “Pretty...pretty fly. Yeah, you can do that.”

“And her name will be--” Carey held up her hands. “Susan Crushbone.”

“That’s badass as hell,” said Magnus, holding out a hand for a high five.

Carey hit it, solemnly. “I am well aware.”

Barry handed her a character sheet. “Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a party. Kind of a weird one, but I think we can make it work.”

“If you’re rolling with us, it’s gonna be a weird one,” said Carey, shrugging.

“No, I’m glad,” said Barry, looking delighted. “This is gonna be fun.”
Magnus placed his hand over Julia’s knee to stop it from bouncing. She met his eyes and stopped. Her fingers started tapping instead, so she folded her hands to hold them still.

“It’s going to be fine,” Magnus said, looking ahead. She glanced at him.

“Is it?” she asked, looking for the eighty-millionth time at the empty desk in front of them.

“I have no idea,” he replied honestly, his own knee starting to bounce now.

The door behind them opened and they both immediately jumped to standing. Julia pulled on the front of her blazer as Mrs. Paloma walked into the room carrying a thick file. She smiled calmly up at them before going around to her side of the desk and sitting down.

“Please, have a seat,” she said, scooting the chair up and pulling out a pen. Magnus and Julia slowly sat back down, and Magnus grabbed Julia’s hand. Paloma opened the file and started to review its contents. “Everything looks good so far. Your character witnesses were … interesting.” she commented, flipping to next page. Julia’s stomach dropped and she clenched Magnus’ hand. “Glowing recommendations, but … uniquely delivered.”

Julia tried to guess whether that was a plus or a negative but Paloma’s face was imperceptibly pleasant. Julia and Magnus looked at each other again, maybe they should have used Lucretia instead of Taako.

“Home visits were very good too. It’s always nice to have a room just for the child.”

Julia nodded, feeling that if she actually spoke her voice just wouldn’t work. Paloma flipped to the final page in the file. She nodded and capped the pen before setting it down, and then folded her hands across the file and smiled at the pair.

“Well, I think you two are fairly strong applicants.” Julia zeroed in on the word ‘fairly’. Fairly. Not great, but not terrible. Just… fairly. “Obviously, you will still need to be approved by the state board, but this is a pretty good application. I can submit it today, if you like.”

Magnus smiled, but Julia leaned forward.

“Is there anything more we can do?” she asked intently.

“You’ve completed all the necessary steps——” Paloma began.

“No, I mean. You said we’re fairly strong applicants.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Is there something we can do to be very strong applicants?” Julia asked, that hovering panic that had followed them the last several months settling in. “Or to be excellent applicants? We-we have other people to be character witnesses, or-or the house! We’ve done more work on the house since you came by——”

“Jules.” Magnus put his other hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. Deep breath. Fairly strong is pretty good.”
“I don’t want to be pretty good, I want to be outstanding.”

“I do too, but I don’t think there’s anything more we can do—”

Paloma cleared her throat quietly, immediately drawing both of their attention.

“There is one thing,” she said, flipping back to the first page in the file and she pointed to an unchecked box. Julia and Magnus leaned forward try and see what she was pointing at. “It says here that you’re not married.”

They exchanged a glance. “No. Not yet,” Julia said.

“We have a date, June 19th,” Magnus added quickly.

Paloma nodded. “Now, you must understand that technically there is no policy against unmarried couples becoming foster parents, or even single people becoming foster parents. But I can tell you that from my past experience preference is given to married couples.”

“Are you saying that we might be rejected?” Magnus asked, his voice rising in pitch.

“Not necessarily, not from what I see here.” She tapped the application. “But other couples, married couples, may be approved before you are.”

“Would you assign Angus to one of them?”

Paloma let out a breath. “Again, I cannot discuss the case of the McDonald child with you.”

Julia sat back and tugged on Magnus’ shoulder so he sat back too. “But what you are saying,” Julia said cautiously, “is that our approval could be delayed. And it may be a couple extra weeks before …a child is placed with us.”

Paloma nodded. “Maybe even a few months. The system is very overtaxed.”

“But getting married before we submitted our application would prevent this,” Magnus finished, doing the math in his head.

“It would make you very strong applicants. Yes.” She nodded to Julia.

“Well, let’s get married,” Magnus said, shrugging.

Julia looked at him, her eyebrows scrunched together. “We can’t just move up the wedding up two and a half months.”

“Right.” He slumped back in the seat.

“I mean.” Julia’s mind began clicking along. “Unless…”

“Unless?”

Julia turned to look at Paloma. “The state board wouldn’t care if it wasn’t a fancy wedding right?” Paloma shook her head. “We could… you know, go to the courthouse. Get married there, just for the application…”

“And have the real wedding later,” he finished.

“For us and everyone else, yeah.”
“That makes sense.”

“Would you be okay with that?”

“Of course! Would you?”

“Yeah!” she smiled wide, matching the smile on Magnus’ face. “Are we--”

“Yeah! We are!” They laughed, grasping each other’s hands. Magnus turned to look at Paloma.

“What time does your office open tomorrow?”

“8am.”

“We’ll be here,” he said, before they rushed out the office door. Paloma smiled to herself and shut their file, setting it just off to the side.

They ran out the front door of Paloma’s small office building and onto the downtown sidewalk.

“Okay, okay.” Julia stopped and looked around. “What do we need?”

“Let’s see.” Magnus began to count on his fingers. “You, me. Rings, which are at the house. Justice of the Peace guy, he’ll be at the courthouse.”

“Marriage license. We have to go together to get that and bring IDs. And we need witnesses!”

“And your Dad!”

“Right, right. Yes.” Julia took a shallow breath. “What time is it?”

At that moment the clock on the courthouse down the block struck 1pm.

“Well, that’s convenient,” Magnus said, looking up at it.

“Crap, there’s so much to do.” She hissed in a breath through her teeth.

Magnus put his hands on Julia’s shoulder. “Hey, hey.” He looked down at her and smiled. “We’ve got this. This is going to happen. One step at a time.”

She nodded. “Okay. ...home first. Rings, ID’s, call some witnesses.”

“Good thinking, babe.” He kissed her forehead and they ran for the van.

Steven tossed his keys into the bowl on the table by the door. He took off his shoes, and ambled into the kitchen. He was pretty sure that leftover chili would still be good, and it would be enough for lunch. He hit the button on the answering machine and opened up the fridge.

“You have 2 new messages. First message, from 10:26am,” the machine said, as Steven opened the fridge.

“Good morrow, Steven!” said Garfield’s voice. “Listen, my good good friend, I’m just wondering if you’d changed your mind about letting me borrow your acetylene torch! I promise I’ll also borrow the safety equipment! Hit me back!”

Steven shook his head at that terrifying thought and he pulled out the tupperware of chili.
“End of message. Second message from 1:14pm,” the machine said. Steven opened the chili up and gave it a whiff. ...Eh, it would do.

“Hey, Dad. It’s me.” Julia’s voice came over the tinny speaker. She sounded excited. “Um, I’m just calling to, ah, hoo boy. Um, Magnus and I are getting married. ...Like today. At the courthouse this afternoon. I can explain why when I see you. Obviously we want you to be there, but I must have missed your lunch break. Maybe call me back--or no, we’ll probably be out getting all the stuff. Anyway, courthouse. Wedding. Me. This afternoon, probably 3-ish. I’ll try you again later. Okay, love you, bye!”

Steven didn’t even hear the last part of the message, he was already out the door and to the car before it ended.

Lucretia stroked the divot in her upper lip as she re-read the letter. No typos, that was good. She moved the mouse and changed, ‘Let us know’ to ‘Please alert us at your earliest convenience’. Not the most forthright, but Brain always seemed to like the more flowery phrases anyway. She finished reading as the phone rang and she picked it up before the first ring ended.

“You have reached the office of Brian Smir-”

“Lucretia? It’s Julia.”

Lucretia covered the end of the phone and leaned over her desk a little. Brian was in his office, leaning back in his chair and tossing a ball of rubber bands up in the air. He dropped it.

“This better be an emergency,” she whispered, rolling back as far as she could in her chair without pulling the phone off the desk. “Not supposed to call me at work. Brian gets pissy.”

“It is, I promise. Listen, do you think you could leave work this afternoon?”

“I doubt it, why?”

“Magnus and I are getting married, this afternoon at the courthouse.”

“You’re doing WHAT?!” Lucretia’s voice rose and she looked up in terror. Thankfully Brian hadn’t come out of his office… yet. She didn’t have much time.

“And you’re already going to be my maid of honor, and I’d love it if you could be one of the witnesses,” Julia said quickly.

“Yes, yes of course. What time?”

“Three?”

“Alright. I’ll do my best.”

Lucretia hung up the phone as Brian emerged from his office.

“Who was zat on the phone?” he asked, eyeing her suspiciously. She looked up at him.

“Telemarketers. I had them add you to a ‘Do Not Call’ list,” she said, rather convincingly if she thought so herself.

He let out a ‘hmph’ and turned to go back into his office.
“Brian?” She stood up so she was at least as tall as he was. “I need the rest of the afternoon off. I have a personal emergency.”

He quirked an eyebrow and glanced down at the phone. “Vat kind of emergency?”

“It’s personal, and according to section 9.2 of the Employee Handbook, I don’t have to disclose the exact nature of my need for absence.”

Brian frowned, and Lucretia silently thanked whatever gods were listening that Brad liked Human Resources so much he talked about it during his time off.

“You don’t have any appointments today, I’ve already confirmed tomorrow’s, and,” she hit print on the computer, “The letter to Claire Wright is finished. You might want to take this afternoon off yourself.”

He let out another ‘hmph’ and turned back for his office. “I suppose zat is acceptable,” he grouched before shutting the door behind him. Lucretia quickly gathered up her purse and lunch bag, then a thought struck her. She checked to make sure the door was still closed, before picking up the phone and quickly typing in a number.

“The Thai restaurant closed! Stop calling my bakery to order Gaeng Phed Gai, you little mons--”

“Taako, it’s Lucretia. I need you to make some calls.”

With a freshly printed marriage license in hand, Magnus and Julia threw open the doors to the Justice of the Peace’s office. Steven was pacing nervously about the waiting area, much to the obvious annoyance of the clerk.

“Oh, thank god,” he said, clutching his chest as they entered.

“Good, you’re here!” Julia grabbed him in a hug. “I was so worried you wouldn’t get the message.”

“Damn near killed me with that message. What is this all about?”

Magnus walked up to the clerk’s desk. “We would like, uhh… one marriage, please.” He smiled. She blinked at him, nonplussed, then looked down at the planner.

“Wait, Lucretia isn’t–” Julia began as the door swung open again and Lucretia stepped in, still in her work clothes.

“I’m here. I’m here,” she said, shutting the door behind her. Julia smiled.

“Thanks so much.” She squeezed her arm.

“I wouldn’t have missed this.”

“Was Brian mad?”

“He’ll recover.”

“Wait a second,” Steven said, looking between Magnus and Julia. “Can one of you tell me why this is happening?” He leaned a little closer to Julia and lowered his voice. “Are you pregnant?”

“Dad.”
“It’s okay, if you are,” he added quickly, his hands reaching towards her. “You know, things like this happen sometimes, and it’s okay,” he emphasized. Something in his tone made Julia pause for a moment. She put a hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks for that, but I’m not pregnant. It’s for the application… for Angus,” Julia explained. “The caseworker said that if we were married, we’d be stronger applicants, so we threw this together so we’d be married before we submit it.”

“You’re still having the wedding in June?” Lucretia asked.

Julia nodded. “Oh, yes.”

Steven nodded, looking more than a little relieved. “For Angus. Right.”

“Do you have any other guests coming?” the clerk asked, cutting back into the conversation.

“We just need the two witnesses, right?” Julia asked, going to stand by Magnus. The clerk nodded.

“I assume you have your license?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Magnus handed it over, and she added it to a clipboard. She stood up and went into the door to her right. The four waited for a minute till she returned and said in a unenthused voice.

“Justice Troth will be with you in just a moment. You can wait over there.” She pointed to the chairs along the wall, and they all meekly sat down. After all the rush to get things together, it was starting to feel a little anti-climactic.

Steven settled down with a sigh, and Julia sat next to him. Lucretia sat next to her, and stretched her knee slowly back and forth. Magnus settled for pacing about the waiting area.

“So when did you decide to do this?” Steven asked.

“A little before 1pm today,” Julia replied.

Steven chuckled. “I’m amazed you were able to pull this together that fast. Took your mother and me the better part of a week.”

Julia’s head snapped to look at him. “I thought you and mom were married at Brightside Baptist?”

“Josephine threw a reception for us there, but that was almost a month after the actual ceremony.”

“But why--” Julia frowned and then something clicked. She silently counted back the months between her birthday and her parents anniversary. Her eyes grew wide as saucers. “You had a shotgun wedding?” she whispered.

Steven raised an eyebrow. “You’re just now realizing this?”

“I—I… I guess?” she continued to think. “…Is that why Mom’s parents don’t talk to us?”

Steven shrugged and scratched his nose. “Along with the more obvious reasons.”

“Wow… A shotgun wedding, huh.” She frowned a little.

“Well, don’t give yourself too much credit, Chickadee, we were always planning to get married after college. Things just didn’t quite go to plan. They rarely do.”
She chuckled. “I guess not. It worked out for you two, though.”

Steven nodded. “Yes, it did.” He took her hand and straightened the ring on her finger. “You and Magnus make a good team. And—” he took a shuddering breath, “I’m very proud of you, sweetie.”

Julia blinked quickly and laughed breathlessly. “You know if you cry, you’re going to make me cry.”

Steven nodded, and pulled her over to press a kiss to her cheek. “That’s my job as your Dad.”

She gave him a watery smile and delicately wiped at her eyes.

The door opened and a tall red-haired woman in judges robes walked out. She double-checked the clipboard.

“Julia Waxman and Magnus Burnsides?” she asked, in a voice that somehow had more gravitas than Lucretia’s. Julia stood up and walked to Magnus’ side.

“That’s us,” Magnus said, taking Julia’s hand and smiling down at her.

Troth nodded. “Are these your witnesses?” she asked. Julia nodded as they stood up too.

“This is my dad, Steven Waxman, and my best friend, Lucretia Moreau.”

“Oh, like the figure skater?” Justice Troth asked, smiling a little.

“Like the what?” Julia asked.

Lucretia’s mouth dropped open. “How’d you…”

“Wait, you are the figure skater?” Justice Troth walked a few steps closer and looked thoroughly impressed. She held out a hand and smiled. “I followed your career all through my college years.”

Lucretia took her hand, bewildered yet pleased, and gave it a shake. Magnus and Julia both looked confused.

“Wait, when you say career, what do you mean?” Magnus asked.

“Well, she qualified for the Olympic games back in eighty-six, right?”

“Eighty-eight,” Lucretia corrected quietly.

“Right, that was it.”

“We have been friends for almost a decade,” Julia said. “How is this the first time I’m hearing about this?”

“Man, if I was an Olympic athlete, I think I’d get that tattooed on my face,” Magnus added.

Lucretia cleared her throat. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later, Julia. But right now—”

“Would you—” Justice Troth interrupted. “I’m sorry, I never do this. I promise, we will do the ceremony in just a moment. But will you be in town long?”

“She lives in town,” Magnus said, ignoring the look he got from Lucretia and grinning widely.

“Oh, imagine that. What a small world. May I buy you a cup of coffee sometime?”
“What?” Lucretia asked, a bit of alarm cutting through her even tone.

“It’s just, I used to admire you so much when I was younger, it’d be wonderful to have just... a twenty-minute conversation, if you wouldn’t mind terribly.”

Julia elbowed Lucretia, and Lucretia smiled. “That sounds ...nice,” she said.

“Perfect. Does Saturday at 1 work for you? We could meet at that place downtown, Pour Joe’s I believe it’s called?”

“She’s free then,” Julia chimed in with an all-too-innocent smile.

Lucretia nodded after a moment.

“Wonderful.” Justice Troth smiled warmly at Lucretia and then the other three. “Well, then. Since it’s just the four of you, we can conduct the ceremony in my office.” She waved an arm back towards the door.

Just then the door to the office slammed open, and Taako burst in. Everyone whirled around to look at him in surprise. He had to take two deep breaths before he could manage to speak. He pointed a finger at the group, and tried to look menacing despite hanging on the doorknob.

“You… thought… you could,” he wheezed, “Get… married… without me!?”

Kravitz ran up behind him and doubled over, clutching his side. His camera was hanging off a strap on his neck and he was carrying a large totebag.

“How did you--” Julia began.

“I called Taako,” Lucretia said.

“And he,” Kravitz swallowed and stood up, grimacing, “Called… everyone else.”

At that moment, a short man with long grey hair in a ponytail and holding a large white box walked by the door.

“Merle?” Kravitz said, stepping inside to let him in.

“Oh, here you are.” Julia and Magnus looked at him in surprise. He cleared his throat. “Er… Carey said you were getting married at the courthouse.”

“Yeah. Thanks for coming, Merle. It means a lot.” Magnus said, smiling even wider now. Merle nodded quickly, and he flipped the lid off the box.

“Here… thought you might need this,” he said in a gruff voice. He pulled out a small bouquet of flowers. There were a white roses, lavender sprigs, and Queen Anne’s Lace wrapped up with a navy ribbon.

Julia gingerly took it from him, and the smell instantly reminded her of her grandmother. She smiled.

“Thank you, Merle.” Without asking, she grabbed him in a hug. He patted her back a few times.

Voices echoed from down the hall and Carey appeared in the doorway.

“I found them!” she shouted back down the hall. Killian appeared quickly after her, filling the door frame. Sloane and Hurley and Noelle pushed in after them. The small waiting room suddenly very
full and very loud.

“Congrats, Mags,” Carey said, giving him a high-five.

Taako reached into the bag that Kravitz was carrying and fitted an alice band with a piece of tulle attached onto Julia’s head.

“Do you just have these things lying around all the time?” she asked as he fluffed the fabric.

“I’m magic, Jules. You should know this already,” he replied simply. Kravitz snapped a few photos as the din continued to increase.

“This is so exciting!”

“You crazy kids.” Killian laughed.

“If I may?” Justice Troth tried to cut through the noise, but no one heard her.

“Those flowers are beautiful,” Sloane said.

“Merle brought them!”

“HEY!” Lucretia’s authoritative voice, however, caused everyone to drop into silence.

“Thank you.” Justice Troth nodded at Lucretia. “Are all these people with you?” she said to Julia and Magnus.

“Oh, yes,” Julia said, smiling. “They’re family.”

Julia picked up the fountain pen and signed, ‘Julia Burnside.’ She smiled down at it for a moment before handing the pen off to Magnus. After signing too, he capped the pen and slid the file back across the desk to Paloma. She nodded and closed the file, before sliding it into a large envelope.

“I must say, I’m amazed you were able to make it happen,” she said, sealing the envelope shut.

“Us too,” Julia said, as Magnus took her hand.

“Well, you’ll receive a letter in 10-15 business days regarding your acceptance or ...otherwise. And if you are, I will call you when I have a child for you to take in.”

They nodded, and both stared at the thick envelope. It seemed to grow with importance.

“I know this is hard,” Paloma said, drawing their attention back to her. “But I can assure you that you have very literally done everything in your power to do. Now, it’s a waiting game.”

“I hate waiting,” Magnus muttered.

“Thank you, Mrs. Paloma,” Julia said. They stood up to leave her office.

“When you get your letter, dears, will you call my office? No matter what it says, I would like to know.”

“We will.”
Lucretia pulled on the t-shirt, and looked around her room for her other shoe. She’d found one, but where was the other?

“Miyagi,” she yelled down the hall, and she heard the skittering of nails on the kitchen linoleum. She stepped out into the hall, and Miyagi had the other shoe in his mouth. His stump of a tail wagged back and forth happily and he jumped back into the kitchen. “Come on, boy, you’re going to make me late.” She jogged down the hall—ow. Shit.

Heels at the office yesterday had been a bad idea. Well, they’d been a fine idea till Brian had decided he needed a million and a half errands run all over downtown. Her brace was on the kitchen table, and she frowned at it. Miyagi dropped her shoe and slipped through the doggie door, chasing wildly after a squirrel that dared to enter his backyard domain. She sat down at the table and put on the other shoe. She sighed and put the brace on over her jeans.

Great. Hopalong Cassidy goes on a date.

Well, except it wasn’t a date. She was meeting… a fan. She wasn’t sure which seemed worse. Lucretia grabbed her peacock blue cardigan off the hook and put it on as she hobbled out the front door.

What do people do when they meet fans? The roller derby fans typically just waved from afar or wanted her to sign things and then they left afterwards. Mrs. Sinclair had always kept a pretty solid buffer between her and any fans back in figure skating days. Did this Justice Troth want to be friends? How do people even make friends? Lucretia’s friends always just seemed to spontaneously happen.

Silently cursing Julia and Magnus, she pushed open the door of Pour Joe’s.

The espresso machine let out a loud hiss, and the barista called out, “Small caramel macchiato.”

Thankfully, she was already there. Justice Troth definitely looked less intimidating out of her robes and in a jean jacket and sandals. She nodded at Lucretia and smiled a little. Her red hair was cut into a long bob, and it swung around as she moved her head.

“Sorry to be late, Justice Troth.” Lucretia said, trying not to limp.

“Justine, please. And don’t worry about it, parking is always a nightmare downtown,” Justine replied. “If the city board could ever get out of a gridlock, maybe something could be done.”

“Is that why nothing’s been done to fix it?”

“Oh, yes. It’s all partisan bickering. Every meeting is filled with grandstanding and finger pointing. It’s enough to make you sick.”

Lucretia chuckled a little, and turned back to look at the menu board. “Have you ordered yet?”

“No, I wasn’t sure what to get. I’ve only been in here once before.”

“I usually get a pot of tea and split it with someone.”
“That sounds nice, would you want to do that?” Justine asked. Lucretia met her gaze and nodded.

“Alright. I’ll treat.”

Justine put a hand on Lucretia’s arm. “No, please allow me. What kind?”

“Earl Grey?”

Justine nodded and went up to the cashier and ordered. Lucretia rubbed her arm and found a booth along the wall. She pulled at a thread in her sweater. So far was so good. But then, it was only a few minutes in. Twenty minutes could be a very long time. Justine sat down across from her and Lucretia sat up straighter.

“May I ask how you hurt your knee?”

“Old derby injury,” she said, putting her hands in her lap.

“Like… Kentucky derby?”

Lucretia laughed a little. “No, like roller derby.”

“Oh. You play?” Justine’s eyebrows raised.

“Used to.” Lucretia waved down at her knee. “I coach a team now. We won the championship last season.”

“How’s this season going?”

“Okay,” she said simply. “We lost the last bout, but I think we have a good shot winning our next one.”

Justine leaned forward, crossing her arms and resting them on the table. “Do you have a derby name?”

“Destroy Her.”

Justine smiled. “That’s very badass.”

“That’s our team name. We’re the Bureau of Badass.”

The barista appeared at their table, holding a tray, which she set on the table. “Do you ladies need anything else?”

“No, thank you, Rachel,” Lucretia said, and Rachel walked away. Justine turned over one of the mugs and began to pour the tea. Lucretia added a packet of sugar to her cup before holding it out so Justine could fill it for her. Lucretia gave it a stir before taking a sip.

There was a pause of uncomfortable silence. Justine’s thumb tapped the rim of the mug, and Lucretia looked out at the baristas scurrying back and forth. When she looked back at Justine, she was looking at her. They both smiled and Justine chuckled.

“Well, this is awkward,” Justine said.

“I mean… yes,” Lucretia replied, before taking another sip of her tea.

“I was worried it would be after I asked…” Justine shook her head. “But I just couldn’t pass up a
“Well, here I am,” Lucretia said. “More than a little underwhelming.”

“Oh, please. I’m a Justice of the Peace in a town with less than 20,000 people in it. I’m the queen of underwhelming.”

“Ah, see I’m just a personal assistant for a middle management asshole. I’m the empress of underwhelming.”

Justine laughed, Lucretia noticed that her nose always scrunched up when she did. It was a good look on her.

“That’s fair, but I think being a practical Olympic athlete permanently disqualifies you from being underwhelming.”

“Lots of people have not competed at the Olympics,” Lucretia pointed out.

“But very few have qualified,” Justine countered. “And even less qualified but didn’t go. You’re very exceptional.”

Now it was Lucretia’s turn to laugh. Justine had an odd look on her face.

“What?” Lucretia asked.

“I… it’s probably none of my business. But I was just wondering… why didn’t you go?” she asked hesitantly. Lucretia bit on the corner of her mouth. “It’s just, I was there. At the Neverwinter Nationals. Your program was incredible…but then, you know, you… stopped.”

Lucretia looked down at her tea. “...My husband died,” she said in a level tone. “Very suddenly.”

“Oh,” Justine said.

Lucretia looked up at her, expecting to see that infuriating pity that she almost always got if people found out. But Justine’s face wasn’t turned down in saccharine sympathy, it was calm. Almost understanding. It put Lucretia off her guard.

“It’s hard to lose someone anytime, but especially when you don’t expect it,” Justine said. She took a sip of her tea.

“Yeah… exactly,” Lucretia said, quietly. They sat in quiet again for a moment, but it was different this time. The awkwardness seemed to have dissipated.

“So do you ever ice skate?”

Lucretia shook her head. “No, I haven’t been…” she thought about it. “Wow, I guess I haven’t been since that… day.”

“That’s very dramatic,” Justine commented, a slight smile on her face. Lucretia had to smile too.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“The rink in Rockport’s nice. I’ve been there a few times.” Justine said, finishing her tea. “It’s not the Gremaldis Center by any stretch of the imagination, but it’s nice. The pretzels are pretty tasty.”

The words came from Lucretia before she even realized she was the one saying them. “Would you
want to go sometime?” Where had that come from?

Justine’s eyebrows rose. “Yeah.” Her wide smile seemed to light up her face. Lucretia blinked a few times as she realized what she’d just said.

“R-really?”

“Of course! I love ice skating.”

“Well… great.”

“Do… you have any plans this evening?” Justine asked.

Lucretia thought for a moment. “I don’t, no.”

“Would you want to go now?”

Lucretia was surprised to find that, “Yeah, I would.”

“Well, let’s go,” Justine said, starting to scoot out of the booth. She picked up the tray and carried it over to the dish return. Lucretia met her at the front door.

“I’ll have to take it kind of easy with my knee… and I haven’t been in over a decade,” she cautioned. Justine smiled brightly and held the door for her.

“Good, so you won’t still outpace me by too much.”
Dungeons and Dragons: Enter the Wizard

Chapter by Chemicallywrit

Lup climbed out of her car and huddled into her oversized Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. It did not match the tie-dye skirt, but that was just fine, because she was in disguise. She flipped her sunglasses down over her eyes.

It was time to seriously consider moving to Faerun. Like, she could work anywhere, which was convenient, so commute wasn’t the issue. She’d still be far, far away from New Elfington, so also not an issue. Taako was here, derby was here, and now music was here too. She and Barry had been playing together twice a week, getting better all the time. Driving an hour to hang out and play music with him was dumb.

And there was that pesky ban from the Ipré Public Library to consider.

But there were other things she needed to know before moving, which is why she was sneaking her way across the parking lot of a Faerun strip mall to someplace called Manolito Comics.

Probably no one would recognize her. Probably. Like really, she only knew the derby team, and none of them seemed too nerdy. And Taako wouldn’t be caught dead in a comic store. She should be just fine.

Lup pushed open the door and couldn’t stop herself from smiling. Yeah, perfect. The comic store down the street from her apartment didn’t have nearly this selection. And there on the back wall was what she was looking for, shelves full of sci-fi and fantasy books. This was a place she could see herself patronizing on the regular.

“That’s a fifteen on checking for traps,” said a voice from the corner. Lup glanced out of the corner of her eye, trying not to look too close. A D&D group, apparently. Cool. She made her way to the counter, where a guy was sitting in a stool, reading a Green Lantern comic.

“You don’t find any traps in the cave entrance,” said a familiar voice, raspy with a Yankee accent. Lup froze mid-stride. Fuck. Barry was here. Of course he was, dammit, the nerd. And he was DM, too.

“It’s very dark,” continued Barry. “Sylvano, you have dark vision, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” said one of the players.

“Half-orcs have dark vision,” said Barry. “So Sylvano and Susan, you see a wide open space

“Half-orcs have dark vision,” said Barry. “So Sylvano and Susan, you see a wide open space
overhung with stalactites, water dripping from the ceiling into rivulets, which are flowing deeper into
the cave. There are no plants or animals in this cave that you notice right now. Ulysses, Tilly, you
don’t see jack.”

“I’ll light a torch,” said Magnus.

“Go for it,” said Barry. “Once Ulysses lights the torch, you can see a little better.”

Lup ignored them and addressed the guy behind the counter, as quietly as she could manage. “‘Scuse
me.”

He looked up and smiled. “Howdy, what can I do you for?”

She nodded over to the shelves of books on the back wall. “How often do you restock those?”

“Whenever I have space,” he said. “I’ve got boxes of old copies in the back to fill shelves with. And
whenever there’s a new addition to a series.”

“Rad. You have the good authors, right? Not just the shitty book-a-year alien tits authors?”

The guy raised his eyebrows. “Give me an example, I guess.”


“The only thing you smell in here is the damp,” said Barry.

“Hell yes, this book selection was really good. She picked up a book called *The Mote In God’s Eye.*
She’d had to return this half-finished to the library after she was banned. And here was the new
Pratchett book, as promised, and yes, *Foundation’s Edge,* she could never find this one. She took all
three.

“Does the water smell weird?” asked Noelle.

“The only thing you smell in here is the damp,” said Barry.

“What are you up to, you sneaky bastard?” asked Carey. Lup frowned over her shoulder, but Barry
just shrugged good-naturedly.

“Ulysses rushes in!” said Magnus.

“Oh good!” said Barry brightly, and rolled a die behind the screen.

“Oh no!” laughed Carey.
“Yep, look at that.” Barry tsked. “Unfortunately, one of the stalactites detaches itself from the ceiling, sprouting tentacles as it falls, and lands on your head. You take…” he rolled another die. “Six damage. And you’re suffocating. Roll for initiative.”

The players groaned. “What is it?” the nameless player demanded.

There was never just an empty cave. Lup shook her head and went back to perusing the books. Was Ender’s Shadow worth reading? She wasn’t sure she was interested in some Ender’s Game side character.

“I’m gonna shoot it,” said Carey.

“Don’t shoot me in the head,” Magnus warned.

“I’m not gonna shoot you in the head.” Carey rolled a die.

Dead silence.

“Oh my god, I shot him in the head.”

“No!” cried Noelle.

“Let me see,” said Barry. “Oh, yep, that’s a 1. You missed the creature entirely and hit Ulysses. Roll for damage?”

“Oh nooooooooo,” Carey groaned. “I’m so sorry.”

“Can I hit it with my sword?” asked Magnus.

“You want to hit yourself on the head with your own sword?” asked Barry.

Okay, so Carey was the range fighter and Magnus was the tank, thought Lup, putting Ender’s Shadow back on the shelf and picking up something called A Song of Ice and Fire. Hmm, she’d heard of this. Just another guy who put Tolkien in a blender, but this time the characters die or whatever. She put it back.

“Your turn, Tilly,” said Barry.

“Umm… I’m sorry, guys, she’s gonna run out of the cave.”

“No, Noelle, c’mon,” said the unnamed player.

“Sorry! She’s true neutral and she doesn’t want to die! What’s she gonna do, lockpick it?”

Ah, a thief. That meant the fourth player must be their mage.

“That’s you, Sylvano,” said Barry.

“Uhhhh… right…”

Blast the thing, magic man, thought Lup, picking up a book called The Queen of Attolia. What was with the cover on this one?

“I cast… animal friendship?”

Lup dropped the books and whirled. “You what?”
The table looked at her in bewilderment. Magnus said, “Lup?”

“Tell me you’re not a goddamn druid,” she said, snatching off her sunglasses to glare at the fourth player.

“Oh, well, I am—”

“You don’t have a wizard? Like at all?” she demanded, marching over to the table. “What the hell good’s a druid when you’re all melee focused?”

“We seem to be managing—” the fourth player began.

“A darkmantle is suffocating your tank,” said Lup. “Seriously, what the hell?”

The fourth player was sputtering. Carey, Noelle, and Magnus stared wordlessly.

Damn.

“Lup, I didn’t know you played,” said Barry, his voice shockingly calm.

Well, might as well ride this suck-train to the end of the line. Lup shifted her attention to him. “What kind of a DM lets them get away with such an unbalanced party?” she snapped.

“It’s a beginners’ campaign,” said Barry, shrugging.

“Hey there, hi,” Carey interrupted. “You guys know each other?”

Lup shot Barry a glare that she hoped communicated, If you tell them we’re learning music together I’ll bury you with a violin bow through your spleen.

Barry blinked a couple of times at her, and then nodded to Carey, as if it was no surprise. “You all know each other from derby, of course.”

Carey said, “Yeah, but—”

“You said you weren’t into this stuff,” said Magnus, sounding just a little hurt.

“I don’t recall,” Lup lied. “And if this party is this much of a mess—”

“Doesn’t have to be,” Barry interrupted. “You could fill in. Would everyone be okay with that?”

Lup glared at them while they thought it over. Anything to hide the withering embarrassment she felt. She could just walk away at this point, let them stew in the knowledge that Lup had mysterious insight into Dungeons & Dragons and then deny it ever happened.

The problem that kept her standing there like a silent glaring idiot was that she wanted to play. She’d missed D&D hardcore. And hell, when was the last time she’d played with people who weren’t assholes? The last group she’d been in--

“I’d be down for it,” said Carey, shooting Lup a grin. “You could complete the fellowship and shit.”

Magnus nodded. “Yeah. Hell, why not?”

“Now hang on just a minute,” said the fourth player.

“We do need a wizard, Lucas,” said Noelle. Noelle wanted her to play?
Ah, fuck it. Lup sighed expansively to hide her sudden excitement. “I guess I could play.”

“Great, I’ll find you a character sheet,” said Barry, digging around behind his screen.

“You need a figurine too,” said Magnus, hooking his thumb over his shoulder to the desk. “Lenny will lend you one.”

The guy behind the desk hopped off his stool and slid the back of the glass case open. “Which one you want?”

Lup wandered over to the case and examined the contents carefully. She pointed. “That one.”

“This one?” asked Lenny, pointing to a wizard with a long white beard.

“No, next to it. With her titties half hanging out,” said Lup sharply.

“Still your turn, Lucas,” said Magnus behind her.

“I guess I’ll cast faerie fire on it?” Lucas sighed. “We won’t hit you in the head again.”

“Thank you,” said Magnus.

Lup accepted the witchy little figurine. She looked amazing.

“I’m going to buy this and those books after the game,” she told Lenny quietly, and turned back to the table. “All right. Advanced rules, Dungeon Master?”

“That’s right,” said Barry, handing her a piece of paper. The hell was he smiling about? “Basic quick stats. We can roll to change them later, if you want.”

Lup plopped down in a chair and snatched up a pencil from in front of Magnus, filling in the boxes. IQ at 15… “Where do you want me?” she asked Barry.

“How about right outside the cave?”

She set her figurine down outside the outline of the cave that one of them had drawn on graph paper. “All right, Barry. Paint me a goddamn word picture.”

Barry grinned. “First, what’s her name?”

Lup considered for a moment. “Pam.”

“Pam?” chuckled Magnus.

“You heard me,” said Lup, staring Magnus down.

Barry adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. “Right. As you struggle to free your companion from the creature, a wizard appears in the doorway. Lup, what does Pam look like?”

Lup considered. “Tall. Built. Pockmarks all over her face.” She smirked. “And she’s smiling.”

Barry nodded. “Wow. This apparition appears in the entrance to the cave, immediately drawing your attention. She’s not trying to hide, I imagine.”

“You imagine correctly,” said Lup.

“Then we’ll just say it’s your turn,” said Barry.
Lup settled into her seat. “I cast magic missile, light the son of a bitch up.”

Magnus handed her a die, and she rolled it, and smiled. “Nineteen. Hey guys?” She took on her favorite accent, the guttural Slavic one. “Next time you invite Pam!”

Carey burst out laughing. Magnus held out a hand for a high five. “Shit yes,” he said.

“Hell yeah!” whooped Noelle.

Barry chuckled. “Roll for damage.”
Hekuba pulled up in front of the crappy roller rink and turned off her car. Time to go see Merle again. Ugh.

She was so late. Stupid sick late night DJ. She’d had to record some stuff to go between songs for him, which was the worst. She knew nothing about R&B, and his listeners would miss him, which meant some poor sap was going to spend a few hours tomorrow fielding angry and distressed voicemails wondering why the afternoon drivetime country DJ was encroaching on their soothing late night turf.

Now instead of greeting her kids at home after Merle dropped them off, she had to go to The Adventure Zone. She steeled herself. It had been a long time since she’d been back. She admitted a morbid curiosity about what had changed, but there were so many memories…

“Come on,” she told herself. “You are a strong independent woman. You’re going to retrieve your children from the jaws of irresponsibility.”

She got out of the car and wandered inside.

The smell of the place hit her like a brick wall. Jeez. She took a look around. Nope, nothing had changed, same bad carpet in the lobby, same ratty old bleachers, same--oh, no, actually, it looked like the leak in the roof had been fixed at some point. There were several folks on the flat track and--oh, the derby team was at practice.

Hekuba sighed. The sound of the skates used to bring her so much joy. Now it just made her remember bad times.

She looked around the bleachers. Where were Mavis and Mookie? For that matter, where was Merle?

She wandered over to the tiny office, but the door was open and no one was inside. She did see the kids’ backpacks, though, lying zipped up beside the desk. Where could they be?

Hekuba left the office, taking another look around. Over on the bank track, a whistle blew and a familiar voice said, “That’s all for tonight. Good work, ladies.”

Hekuba looked a little closer at the folks on the track. Most of them she didn’t know, but the sharp profile of Lucretia was unmistakable.

“Destroy Her?” said Hekuba, without thinking, as the team left the track.

Lucretia looked up, and her eyebrows rose. “Heckfire?”

Hekuba smiled and approached the rail. “You remembered!”

“Did you say Heckfire?” said one of the players, and damn if it wasn’t Jule Be Sorry and Beauty and the Beast looking back at her. The four of them congregated at the rail.

“Heckfire! I haven’t seen you in so long!” said Beauty. “You cut your hair!”
Hekuba smiled. “I did. I got sick of it, chopped it all off.”

“It’s a good look,” said Jule. “How have you been? You know my dad listens to your show every day.”

“Oh, that’s good of him,” said Hekuba. “I’ve been… you know, okay.”

“When we talked last, you said you were getting a divorce,” said Jule with concern.

“I was, yeah. And I did, and I don’t regret it,” she declared.

“Listen, the offer still stands to beat the shit out of him,” said Beauty. “You just point him out.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve seen him,” said Hekuba, exchanging a glance with Lucretia. “Small town and all that.”

“How are your little ones?” asked Jule.

Hekuba smiled. “Not so little anymore. I swear, they’re gonna be taller than me soon.”

“Not too hard,” teased Beauty.

“Speak for yourself,” said Hekuba, whacking her on the arm. Something on Jule’s hand caught her eye. “Oh–Jule! Is that an engagement ring?”

Jule grinned. “Yep. Caught me a good one, I think.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Hekuba sincerely. “And how about you, Beauty? You meet any nice girls?”

Beauty sighed contentedly. “Like you wouldn’t believe. You’ve got to meet Carey, Heck, you’d love her.”

“We’ve missed you on the track,” said Jule.

Hekuba pressed her lips together. “Yeah, well. Doing the single mom thing and all that.”

“That takes more guts than derby, if you ask me,” said Beauty.

“We need to catch up sometime,” said Jule. “Oh, you should come to a bout! We can do Refuge afterward, you can meet the rest of the team.”

“That sounds really nice,” said Hekuba wistfully. “Maybe I will.”

“Babe!” A pretty Latina woman stuck her head out of the locker room. “You coming?”

Beauty glanced over her shoulder. “Yeah, just a sec!” She nudged Hekuba. “That’s her. What to meet her?”

“I’d better go, honestly,” she said. “I just stopped by to say hi.”

“Well if you ever want to rejoin the team, you’re more than welcome,” said Jule. “We could use another solid blocker. Whip these new kids into shape.”

Hekuba laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind. Y’all take care of yourselves, okay?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Beauty, grinning. She and Jule took off toward the locker room.
Lucretia waited until they were out of earshot before saying, “You here for the kiddos?”

Hekuba nodded. “Have you seen them?”

“They’re in the arcade, I think,” she said, nodding in that direction. “You still don’t want them to know it was Merle you were married to?”

“C’mon, Lucretia,” said Hekuba. “You remember how down we were on people who dated within derby. I don’t want them to think—”

Lucretia held up a hand. “Four of my players are dating each other. One of them–Jule–is engaged to my assistant coach, and he used to be the ref. And a sixth one somehow managed to woo a documentarian who was writing a story about us. It’s not like it used to be.”

Hekuba still couldn’t shake the squirming feeling in her gut. “Still.”

Lucretia looked at her thoughtfully. “Listen, I know we haven’t talked in a long while, so take this with a grain of salt.”

Hekuba raised an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

“Guilt can help you become a better person,” she said carefully. “Shame does not. Shame does nothing for you. It’s better to let it go.”


“Actually, it’s something a therapist told me,” said Lucretia. “But like I said. Grain of salt.”

Hekuba nodded a little. “How have you been?”

Lucretia considered the question carefully before saying, “Better than I’ve been in a long time.”

“Good,” said Hekuba, and she meant it.

Lucretia smiled, just a little. “It’s good to see you, Hekuba.”

“Good to see you too,” said Hekuba, and as Lucretia turned to leave, she made her way to the arcade.

What seasons had she played? ‘84,’85, and just the beginning of ‘86 before she’d realized she was pregnant with Mavis. And then she was back in ’90, right when things started to get rocky with Merle, and then again in ‘93, when she was looking for anything to put a little joy back into her life. It hadn’t worked, just like having Mookie to fix their marriage hadn’t worked. She’d just been running from the real problem, which was Merle.

Maybe it was this place, but she couldn’t help but remember what he’d seemed like when she’d met him. He was older than she was, which had held its own mystery for her at the time, but he still seemed so down-to-earth, so relaxed. It didn’t take long before she realized he was really just self-absorbed and apathetic, but even so she thought she could fix him.

She shook her head. She was ashamed. Even thinking about how much she’d loved him made her feel like an idiot.

Maybe Lucretia was right. Maybe it was time to let that go.

She reached the arcade, but stopped in the doorway, listening.
“Come on, Mavis, get ‘im!” said Mookie’s voice.

“Thumbs, don’t fail me now!” declared Merle’s voice.

There was a flurry of staticky thumping noises and a voice declared, “You Win!” followed by electronic applause.

“Yeah!” said Mavis’ voice.

“Aw, you cheated,” teased Merle.

“No, dad, it’s ‘cause you just mash the buttons. You have to have some style.”

“Oh, style, huh?”

Mavis dissolved in giggles. Hekuba stuck her head around the corner. Merle was lifting Mavis over one shoulder. “How’s this for style?”

“Me next, me next!” Mookie demanded. “I bet I can beat you.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Mavis, grinning at him from Merle’s shoulder. He plopped her down and handed her another quarter.

“Don’t beat him too bad, okay?” he said.

“I can’t let him win,” she said, accepting the quarter. “Then he’d never learn.”

Merle looked up. “Oh. Hey.”

Hekuba acknowledged him with a nod. “Merle. All right, kids. You ready to go home?”

“Can we play one more game, Mom?” asked Mookie, hands clasped in front of him. “Please, please?”

No, she wanted to leave. But that wasn’t a good reason, and anyway, Mavis already had the quarter. “All right, one more game. If you finished your homework.”

“We did,” Mavis assured her.

Hekuba was genuinely surprised. “Well, okay then.”

“Yes!” said both her children, and Mavis slid the quarter into a game called “Street Fighter.”

Hekuba frowned. “A little violent, isn’t it?”

Merle shrugged. “Better than really punching each other, right?”

“Ready….Fight!”

Hekuba tried to watch them play, but the graphics made her a little dizzy. She found herself looking at Merle instead. “Y’all have a good evening?”

Merle nodded. “We’ve just been hanging out while the team practices.”

“They didn’t do anything cool today, Mom,” said Mookie, eyes still glued to the screen. “They just skated back and forth a bunch of times.”
“Endurance practice, huh?” said Hekuba.

“Yep,” said Merle.

“And all homework done, really?” She was still having trouble believing it.

“I just had to write a paragraph and do two algebra problems,” said Mavis. “Dad helped.”

“He helped me too,” said Mookie. “Long division is the cussing cuss.”

“Hey,” Hekuba warned. “Just because you don’t understand something doesn’t make it bad.”

“But it takes so long,” groaned Mookie.

“That’s why you have to know those multiplication tables really well,” said Merle. “Like I said, you’re only gonna get better if you practice.”

Mookie made an unintelligible grumbling noise.

They sank into silence. Hekuba frowned at the ground. Who was this Merle who played with his kids and helped them with their homework? She felt bitterness bite her. Why couldn’t he have been like this when they were married? She shot a glare at him.

He looked over at her. “What?”

“You’re acting very strange lately,” she said.

Merle shrugged. “You’re acting just about the same.”

“Well at least one of us is dependable,” she said, gratified by his wince.

“How many hours late are you today?” he grumbled.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sorry, I can see I put you out big time.”

Merle opened his mouth reply, then shut it again, and gestured with his head toward the kids.

Part of Hekuba didn’t care if her children knew just how little she thought of their father, but unfortunately he was right. She gave a sharp short nod to signify a ceasefire.

Dammit, when had Merle become the better person? She sighed. Maybe Lucretia was right. God, she couldn’t believe the words were coming out of her mouth, but here it went. “Thank you. For taking them for a few hours.” Eugh. Gross.

He gave her a look of genuine surprise, dumbstruck for a moment. She looked away. Nope. Mistake. She had made a mistake.

After a short silence he said, “No problem. Least I can do.”

It wasn’t though. She’d seen the least he could do, and it wasn’t nearly this good. Something had changed, she just didn’t know what.

Maybe she’d never know.

Mookie groaned as the game declared, “You Win!”
“Tolja you couldn’t beat me,” said Mavis.

“No fair,” said Mookie, but without much malice.

“All right, you rascals, go get your stuff,” said Merle, shooing them out of the arcade. Hekuba turned to follow them, but paused in the doorway.

“Hey, when’s the next derby bout?” she asked.

“Saturday,” he said.

Saturday. Merle would have the kids.

“Would it be… awkward… if I came to watch?” she said.

Merle exhaled slowly. “You’ve always done what you want. Far be it from me to stop you now.”

It should have been a potshot, but for some reason it didn’t feel like one. “Then that’s what I’ll do,” she said.

“I’ll try to stay out of your way,” he said, switching off the lights to the arcade.

Hekuba left him in the glow of the video game screens. Mavis and Mookie were already by the door, backpacks over their shoulders. She ushered them out into the fresh air and out to the car.

What a surreal day. She’d been in the studio for so long she hadn’t seen the sun set, Merle was being a responsible person, she’d caught up with old derby friends, and now she was going to a bout on Saturday for the first time in almost seven years.

“I’m about ready for bed, I don’t know about y’all,” she said.

“Aww,” said Mookie, more on principle than anything. Hekuba smiled, glad that in the dark they couldn’t see it.

“Mom?” said Mavis.

“Yes?”

“Do you hate Dad?”

And the surrealism continued. Did kids actually ask questions like this in real life? She’d thought it was a movie thing or something.

“No, but he and I have a hard time getting along,” said Hekuba. “We both love you, though. That’s something we have in common.”

“Oh.”

There was probably a better answer to that question, but Hekuba didn’t know what it was. She suppressed a sigh. “Hey, has your dad been acting… sort of different lately?”

She could see Mavis mulling it over in the rear-view mirror, but Mookie spoke up first. “He’s not so grumpy.”

“Do you know why?”
Mookie shrugged. After a moment, so did Mavis.

Maybe she’d never know.

Hekuba pulled into her driveway. Maybe that was okay.

Chapter End Notes

*blows noisemaker* Exactly 1 year ago today, this fic was born! Hooray! Thank you all for joining us on this absolutely mind-boggling journey of the past year. We love you bunches and bunches. <3, H + K
Taako and Lup sat cross-legged and facing each other on the locker room bench. They were both already in costume, and now they were doing each other’s nails. Most of the team was there, getting ready for the bout. Taako and Lup ignored them.

“Look at the state of this,” Lup tsked, carefully polishing his thumb in electric blue. “Been hitting that acetone, huh?”

“Gotta take it off somehow,” said Taako.

“You got weak nails, Flip. You know that shit only makes it weaker.”

“Yeah, well, gotta keep things neat, since I’m hustling,” he muttered. “Gotta make a good impression in the community or whatever. You should have seen the way Sazed flipped his shit the one time I forgot.”

“What an asshole,” she scoffed.

“You have no idea.” He blew on his nails. “Now you?”

“Sure.” She handed off the bottle to him and held out a hand. He took both the bottle and her hand, but paused.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

“Am I?” Lup said vaguely.

“What’s wrong?”

“You don’t get twitchy before bouts?”

Taako carefully uncapped the bottle. “So it’s got nothing to do with the fact that we’re playing the Rad Robes?”

“Nope.”

He painted her index finger. “Don’t lie to your big brother.”

“We are the same age.”

“Your wise old brother who’s older than you.”

“We’re twins, you dipshit.”
“My sweet tiny baby sister.”

“You suck.”

“Taako’s the oldest?” Magnus interjected, reaching over their heads to open a locker.

“No,” growled Lup. Taako cackled.

Magnus pulled a water bottle out of the locker and took a drink, watching Taako paint Lup’s nails.

“I’ve always wanted to try that,” Magnus commented.

“What, nail polish, homie?” said Taako, trading out Lup’s hands.

“Yeah.” Magnus put the bottle back in the locker and turned away.

Lup frowned after him. “Hey Magnus.”

He looked over his shoulder.

Lup reached into her locker and tossed a bottle of nail polish to him, cherry red. He caught it, and grinned. “Thanks.”

As he turned away, Taako raised an eyebrow at his sister. “That was...nice.”

She shrugged one shoulder.

“Almost friendly,” he added.

“You hang out with someone once a week and suddenly people are claiming you’re friends,” she groused.

“You hang with Magnus once a week?” Taako demanded. “Since when?”

She set her jaw. “Not just Magnus. And yeah. For a couple weeks now.”

“Why?”

“It’s a...an improv group.”

“No it’s not, you hate theater.”

“It’s sort of an improv group.”

“Your lies are tearing this family apart,” he said. “Turn your hand, lemme see your thumb.”

She did, waving her other hand to make it dry faster. “I don’t bug you about what you do in your free time.”

“I just want to know your dark secrets,” he replied, recapping the nail polish. “There, perfect.”

Lup took a look. “Sick.”

“Hey Lup?” Noelle approached the two of them, already in skates.

Lup blew on her nails and tried not to look at her prosthetics. “What?”
Noelle swallowed. “I just wanted to say, it’s been fun having you these past couple of weeks. And um. Here.” She handed something off to Lup and rolled away.

Lup looked at the object. It was a violently orange twenty-sided die.

“Ohh, you’ve been back playing your nerd games!” crowed Taako.

“Shut up,” Lup growled, hastily putting the die in her locker.

“You shut up, the lone wolf finally has some friends!” Taako grinned. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?” she demanded.

“I knew you’d fit in here.”

“I don’t fit in here,” Lup mumbled. “Shut up.”

Taako stopped gloating. “You do, though.”

“I said, shut up.”

Taako dropped the topic and stood up, feeling just a little hurt. He’d hoped...this was his family, after all. And so was she. They should all be family together. Lup was just too damn stubborn.

“Whatever. Ready to show your old team what for?”

She shrugged and stood up next to him. “It’s just another bout.”

They left the locker room together. There were already fans in the stands. Someone yelled at them, “I love you, terror twins!”

“I think you mean terrific twins!” shmoozed Taako, and Lup blew a kiss in the general direction of the shout.

“I don’t know, I kind of like terror twins,” Lup murmured as they made their way to the center of the track.

“You would,” he said, searching the stands. As he expected, there were a lot of Rad Robes fans already there. Maybe more than usual, though.

“The energy in this place is really…” he trailed off.

“Bad?” said Lup.

“Not good, yeah,” said Taako. “It’s felt like this before.”

“When?”

“When Julia broke your nose.”

“What are you saying?” Lup asked him.

“It’s not just another bout,” he said. “Hey, Coach, you seeing what I’m seeing?”

They reached the center of the track; Julia, Lucretia, and Hurley were already there, stretching and talking tactics. Lucretia looked up from a clipboard as they joined the team on the bench. “If you’re talking about trouble brewing, then yes.” She addressed Hurley and Julia. “Don’t let them get to you,
understood?”

“Yes, Coach,” said Hurley, and Julia nodded.

“Well, well, well,” called a voice from the other bench. Two of the Rad Robes were facing them. “The prodigal returns.”

“Oh, you can say prodigal son,” the other Robe assured her teammate. “We all know what she is.”

Taako’s fists clenched, but Lup just rolled her eyes. “Ignore them.”

“What are they talking about?” asked Julia.

Taako froze. He’d forgotten Julia didn’t know.

Lup turned her head lazily, so both Julia and the Robes players could hear her. “Well, Jule, misgendering is Rack Attack’s only joke.”

“You can’t fault us for falling back on a classic, Sour Scream,” called the first player, and the two of them turned away.

Hurley made a disgusted face. “A classic?”

“Whatever they say today,” said Lup, leaning into a lunge to stretch out her calves, “it’s nothing they haven’t said before.”

Julia looked at Taako in perplexed horror, looking for an explanation. Taako could feel himself mirroring her expression. He didn’t have one to give.

“So are we warming up or what?” asked Lup.

Introductions went smoothly up until the announcer called the name AlakaSlam, which elicited some boos and one or two cries of “Traitor!” Taako was disturbed—he’d never seen that happen for a player other than Jess the Behead-her.

Lup still seemed unruffled, playing up their glamazon act as per usual. Taako tried to match her energy.

The bout began with Julia on jammer, trading off with Taako to start. Taako was glad to be jammer, because playing blocker meant all he heard was the Rad Robes, snickering and whispering. He constantly looked to Lup, to check on her, but still she seemed rock solid. Damn, she had thick skin. She’d always been tough, but this was some serious psychological torture. He could barely stand it himself, and they weren’t even whispering about him.

Twelve minutes in--
Bureau of Badass: 38
Rad Robes: 35

Taako and Lup skated side-by-side, holding off a couple of Robes blockers. Noelle signalled to them--Julia was coming up right behind. Taako looked to Lup just as she looked to him, and that
moment, they knew exactly what to do.

They drew together and then leveraged off each other, each launching into one of the Robes blockers, pushing them aside neatly so Julia could sail on through. Ahead of them, she called the jam.

“Four points to nothing on this round for the B.o.B.,” the announcer called.

Taako pulled away from the Robe he’d just hit just in time to catch a high five from Julia.

“Great work,” she panted.

“You want to trade?” he muttered.

“Next jam,” she said. “Let’s reset.”

Taako nodded and skated back to the line, Lup on his left.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this sister act cannot be stopped!” said the announcer. “They’re mystical! They’re magical!”

On Taako’s right, Rack Attack groaned. “Mystical, magical,” she repeated mockingly. “They’re soooooo good!”

“Think they’re good enough to magic away a dick?” said another player.

Taako’s mind went very carefully blank.

“Flip,” whispered Lup. “Whatever you’re thinking—”

Beside them, Maureen blew the whistle to start the jam.

Immediately, Taako cut in front of Rack Attack to the other player and threw an arm into her face, clotheslining her. She dropped to the ground with a yelp.

“That magical enough for you?” Taako shouted at her prone form. The whistle blew.

“Out for two minutes!” he heard Maureen shouting.

“Abra-ka-fuck-you, how about that?” Taako spat.

“Abby Cadabra!” snapped Maureen. “I will not hesitate to remove you from the bout!”

Killian’s hand appeared on his shoulders and pushed him toward the center. “Get out,” she rumbled. He did, coasting into the center, where Lucretia was already glaring at him.

“Would you care to explain what the hell that was?” she demanded.

“They were talking shit,” Taako spat.

Hurley, who was out this round with Carey, said, “What the fuck did they say to make you—”

Taako told them, and watched the horror spread across their faces.

“That is not okay,” growled Magnus.

“You still can’t let them get to you,” Lucretia insisted.
“I’m not gonna let them talk about my sister like that!” shouted Taako.

“Sit. Down.” Her tone was like iron.

Taako did, next to Hurley, glowering at the track. Hurley hesitated, then leaned over. “You did the right thing.”

“We’re not gonna let them get away with this,” said Carey, her tone low.

“Let me talk to their coach,” said Magnus, turning to go over to their bench.

“No,” said Lucretia. “We’ll talk to the refs.”

They watched a piss-poor jam that ended just as Taako was about to be allowed back on the track.

“That’s five unanswered points for the Rad Robes,” said the announcer. “I guess this is what happens when you break up the dream team. Could this be a turning point?”

The refs called for a brief break, and the team swarmed back into the center for water. Lup went straight for Taako.

“You idiot,” she snarled. “I told you to ignore them!”

“I’m defending you here,” he shot back.

“I’m fine,” she said, in a tone like ice.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Lucretia interrupted. “I want you on jammer. And if I see any dissention in the pack, I’ll kick your asses out of this bout myself, understood?”

“Yes, Coach,” came the mumbled reply.

“Sorry, what was that?” she said.

“Yes, Coach!” the team said, a little more lively this time, though Taako’s jaw was clamped shut.

“Better. Abby, Jule, you’re out this jam. Let’s go.”

“I’m just saying, you need to get your players under control,” Avi said to the Rad Robes coach.

“Of course,” the man said earnestly. He was a neat man wearing a decent sports jacket, wholly unremarkable in every way.

“If me or any of the refs hear any more unsavory language, we’ll start disqualifying players,” said Avi.

“I don’t know who gave them the idea they could talk like that,” said the coach. “Please send my apologies over to the B.o.B.”

“All right,” said Avi, and skated away. As soon as his back was turned, the coach rolled his eyes.

“Can I get a little more subtlety from you ladies, please?” he said quietly.

“Is it time for Part 2, John?” asked Brady Punch.
“Not yet. We’ll wait ‘til halftime. You’ve almost got her. But subtle, please.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Lup knew she was still shaking. She hoped it wasn’t visible. Taako hadn’t noticed, so probably no one else had either.

She would not break.

The B.o.B. were keeping the Rad Robes well away from her for the most part. She was trading off with Taako now, taking the lead as jammer, and she knew she was doing okay, but with the team’s help she was doing great. They were holding that ten point lead steady.

It was just when the blockers did manage to get through and hit her that she was aware she was still shaking.

“Sorry, he-she.”

“Oops, you okay, tranny?”

She’d forgotten how much the words stung.

But no. She would not break.

Halftime--
Bureau of Badass: 51
Rad Robes: 41

They were winning, Julia couldn’t deny that, but emotionally they were all frazzled. Taako didn’t lose his temper. That was her job, or Hurley’s or Killian’s, maybe. It was putting them all on edge.

Julia drifted to the center and threw a glance at Lup. The Robes were laser focused on her. Angry to lose her, of course, and… well, if what they were saying about her was true, she was the easiest target among them. Still, though, her expression betrayed no hurt. She might as well have been carved of marble.

“Great job, guys,” Magnus was saying with forced heartiness, passing out water. “You’re doing great.”

The attitude was sour. None of them were talking. But they were winning…

“Excuse me, Coach?” It was the Rad Robes’ coach, who had strolled over from their bench, and he was addressing Lucretia. “May I discuss something with you?”

“Is it your players’ foul language?” said Lucretia in a tone like a knife.

“No, a matter of fair play. If you don’t mind?” He motioned her to the space between the benches, where the refs were gathered.

Lucretia frowned, but nodded to Magnus and joined them.
The players glanced at each other. Julia held up a finger to keep them quiet and nonchalantly skated as close as she could get to them without being conspicuous.

“I just wanted us to discuss an issue going forward,” said the Robes coach. “One male player is a novelty, sure, but two of them on the same team seems unbalanced.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Lucretia.

“Well, this isn’t a co-ed league,” said the coach, and he was chuckling.

“Avi, you’re not considering this shit, are you?” Magnus said.

“...Well--”

“Avi!” said Roswell’s voice. “You’re not serious?”

“He might...have a point,” said Maureen carefully. “Physically speaking--”

In front of her, Taako jumped to his feet. Killian grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. He submitted, but seethed.

“Taako does make a precedent,” Avi considered.

“A precedent for what, ref?” Magnus demanded. “She’s not a man!”

Julia looked to see Lup’s reaction to this, but Lup was nowhere to be found. Julia searched the rink wildly, just in time to see her slip into the locker room. Julia jumped forward without thinking and started to follow her.

“Where are you going?” asked Killian.

“Going after Lup,” she said.

“I’ll come too,” said Taako, standing again.

“You stay there,” she said. He was too invested in this, he’d just fight with her. She skated to the gate in the track, ducked under, and rolled over to the locker room.

As soon as she opened the door she regretted not letting Taako come. Lup was huddled on the bench, crying silently into her hands.

Well, she was here now, and she was the team captain, and this was her job, dammit.

She sat down next to Lup, drumming her fingers on her kneepads. What to say?

Lup peeked in between her fingers and gave her a tearstained glare. “Why you?”

It was a fair question. Were they even friends? They at least weren’t enemies anymore. Julia shrugged. “You okay?”

“What do you think, sweetie?” said Lup, and her tone was nasty.

Also fair. “I think,” said Julia slowly, “that you didn’t expect them to get to you.”

Lup swallowed back another sob, forcing herself to stop crying. It was about the worst expression Julia had ever seen.
“Do you know I used to be grateful to be on the Rad Robes?” said Lup, and her voice had an edge. She barked out a mirthless laugh. “Grateful! At least someone let me play, and on a girls’ team, even. And then they made me team captain, and boy, I’m really living it up now, aren’t I?” She wrapped her arms around herself, squeezed, and released, and Julia could see angry pink lines from where her nails dug into her arms. “And then I quit and come here, and you’re all so goddamn nice that for a second I forget what a shithole the world is to people like me, and it’s got me all softened up like an idiot as soon as someone says the word tranny.”

“No one expects you to just sit there and take it,” said Julia. She certainly wouldn’t have.

“If I don’t, they win,” Lup snarled. “We can get all the points in the world and they’d still win.”

“We’ll make them pay,” Julia promised her.

“Why would you bother?” Lup snapped, looking Julia dead in the eye.

Julia was at a loss. “Why--because you’re on our team. Because you’re Taako’s sister. Because--because you’re our friend, Lup.”

Lup glared at her for a full three seconds before dropping her eyes. “Just--just leave me here, all right? You’ll do fine without me. I can’t take it anymore.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” said Julia. “You don’t have to take it, okay? At least--at least not alone.”

Lup looked up at her, still so damn suspicious. Was this even working?

“Fuckin’ kumbaya shit,” Lup grumbled. “Useless. How’s my makeup?”

The moon painted over her eye was all streaks. “It’s looked better.”

Lup exhaled sharply. It might have even been a laugh. “Perfect.”

An idea occurred to Julia. “Oh my god. I’m an idiot.”

Lup raised an eyebrow.

“I know how to fix this, but you need to come with me,” said Julia.

“Excuse me if I’m skeptical,” scoffed Lup.

“C’mon, trust me.”

Lup pulled a face. “At least give me a hint.”

“Do you remember the tournament?” said Julia. “What made you guys take the nuclear option and break Noelle’s leg?”

Lup frowned a little. “You were laughing at us.” Her frown relaxed. “Oh.”

“Yeah, c’mon.” Julia jumped up and left the locker room. To her relief, she heard Lup follow her.

By the time they got back to the center of the track, Taako was being physically restrained by both Killian, who was pressing down on his shoulders, and Hurley, who had him in some kind of arm hold.
“Just let me fuck them up,” he hissed.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Killian through gritted teeth.

“Abby, that’s a bad way to fight,” said Julia as she passed. The team looked up. She ignored their questioning looks and drifted toward the gathering of coaches and refs.

“This seems less and less like you actually want fair play and more like a vendetta against one particular player,” Avi was saying, his arms crossed. “Frankly, I’m getting tired of it.”

“There’s no vendetta here,” the Robes coach said, cool as a cucumber. “I don’t think it’s unreasonable to ask a bit of restraint when it comes to the second male member of your team.”

“Hey ref,” called Julia. God, could he have packaged that line up any better for her? This was like Candlenights.

The group turned to look at her.

She sighed dramatically. “He’s right. It’s time to come clean. I’m the second male member of the team.”

Magnus’ face cracked into a smile immediately. Everyone else was dead silent.

Behind her, she heard Lup snort.

“No, no wait, no,” said Hurley, who suddenly barrelled up beside her. “You don’t need to do that Julia, it’s me! I’m the second male member of the team!”

“No, you’re both very kind, but it’s me,” sighed Sloane, who rolled up beside Hurley. “I’m the second male member of the team.”

“If you’re going to make a mockery--” the Robes coach began.

“You’re doing a pretty good job of that all by yourself,” said Maureen sharply. “Perhaps you should go sit down.”

“Ladies, please, take a seat,” said Killian, skating up in between the team and the refs and flexing her arms. A burst of cheers came from the crowd. “I’m obviously the second male member of the team.”

“Hey, no fair,” shouted Carey. “I’m the butchest bitch here, I should be the second male member of the team.”

“Oh my god, guys,” said Noelle, jumping to her feet. “I think I’m the second male member of the team.”

Lup was laughing now, breathlessly laughing. Taako was looking, bewildered, from one player to the next.

“I don’t much care what you choose to call yourselves,” said the Robes coach. “The fact of the matter is--”

“The fact of the matter is, I’m kind of done with this conversation,” said Avi, rubbing his forehead. “Look, Goldcliff didn’t have any trouble beating them two weeks ago. You’re just sore you lost your captain to a better team.”

“In the interest of fair play--” the coach tried again.
“Oh my god, stop whining!” said Avi. “Please! Or I’ll have you removed!”

The coach shut his mouth and muttered, “Very well.”

“Thank you,” said Avi, skating away with Roswell and Maureen in tow. “Jeez.”

“Yeah!” said Killian. “Damn right!”

“Hey, huddle up, everyone,” called Julia. “C’mon.”

It took a minute to gather them all together. Lucretia and Magnus joined them. Lup was still shaking with laughter. It was the first time Julia could remember seeing her genuinely happy.

“You with us, Abby?” Julia said to Taako, who still looked a little perplexed.

“I uh...yeah.” He blinked a couple of times. “Kinda...lost my head there.”

“It’s understandable, but you can’t do that again,” said Lucretia.

“Listen, this has been a rough bout,” said Julia. “The Robes have been very bad girls.”

“They’ll pay for all the shit they’ve said,” said Carey, punching her palm.

“No, Diablo, don’t be silly,” said Julia, almost sing-song. “You don’t beat naughty children. That’s abuse. Right Magnus?”

He was following her line of reasoning with interest. “No, she’s right, they’re very clear on that point in foster training.”

“Where are you going with this, Jule?” asked Killian.

“You can’t beat the children, but they do need to be punished. So I think the responsible thing to do is ground them, right?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” said Sloane.

“I say, no more points for them until they apologize to our friend. Don’t you think?” Julia smiled sweetly.

Lup laughed again. “You are going to drive them up the fucking wall with this.”

“I think I see what you’re saying,” said Lucretia thoughtfully. “How exactly do you propose to... ground them from points?”

“With your permission, Coach,” said Julia, “by any means necessary.”

The group went silent. Lucretia stroked the divot above her lip, considering.

“I think...” she began, after a long pause. “Yes, I think that my favorite part of this plan will be the look on that sanctimonious bastard’s face.”

“So that’s a yes?” said Julia.

“Yes.” Lucretia nodded. “All right. Team Sweet Flips, be careful, but do your worst.”

“Oh hell yes,” said Carey, immediately pecking Killian on the cheek.
“Ram, would you be willing to play jammer a few times?” said Lucretia.

Hurley sighed. “If it’s for Lup, I guess.”

Lup looked genuinely surprised by this sentiment. Julia was too, come to think of it.

“And we’ll need that excellent teamwork from you two,” said Lucretia to Lup and Taako.

“You got it, Coach,” said Taako.

“Right.” Julia rubbed her hands together. “Now. Who are we?”

“The B.o.B!” her team shouted.

Julia threw out a hand to Lup. “And who is she?”

“The B.o.B!” said all but Lup, whose mouth dropped open as they shouted.

“And who are we?”

“The B.o.B!”

“You’re damn right we are!” she shouted.

“Somebody’s got to tell the kids the bad news,” said Carey, smiling wickedly. The team laughed

“Jule, you should do the honors,” said Killian.

Julia grinned and broke out of the huddle. The Rad Robes had gone from pointing and laughing to glaring at them suspiciously. “Hey Rad Robes!” Julia shouted

“What do you want, bitch?” spat Brady Punch.

She treated them to her sweetest smile. “You’re grounded!”

Final Score--
Bureau of Badass: 102
Rad Robes: 47
It was one of those warm May days that felt like the beginning of summer break, Johann reflected, even though he hadn’t had a proper summer break since college. He sat on the couch in a pool of sunlight from his window, picking out half-tunes on his guitar, not really working on anything in particular.

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Johann asked Void, playing three chords. Void, sitting by the couch and panting, did not so much as look at him.

“Thou art like, way more slobbery,” he said, and sighed. Restless, that’s what he was. Since Avi moved out, he had no one to tag along with. It was amazing how much of his social life was Avi-centric. Johann still went to derby bouts, but it wasn’t quite the same. He didn’t get invitations at all. Just the other day Killian had asked him why he’d missed a movie night that he hadn’t been aware was going on.

“Why do people assume I know things?” Johann asked Void, picking out a blues riff. “I don’t know a single thing, girl.”

How did you maintain friendships, anyway? Avi had made it so easy. It was like having an instant friend machine. Now being friends with people was like…work.

Johann rolled his eyes at himself. Well yeah. Of course it was work. All relationships took work. Even with Avi, now that he was married. They made a point to hang out, but it wasn’t like it used to be, and if he was honest with himself, that was good. The heartache was starting to fade. He just…missed his friends.

He put down his guitar, slid off the couch, and took Void’s face in his hands. “I know what I need, girl. I need to take some initiative.”

Void panted into his face.

“Ugh, I know, I’m tired too,” he groaned. Did he really want to go out tonight? It’d be so much easier to just order a pizza and watch Titanic again.

Void licked her chops and went back to panting.

“Yeah I know I did that yesterday,” he said. “That’s not the point.”

Void leaned forward and licked his face.

Johann sighed. “Yeah. All right.” He scratched her behind the ears and let her go. “It’ll be fun, probably.”

Void gave his ear a sniff.

“Well, it won’t be boring, anyway,” he amended, standing up. “Maybe something interesting will happen.”

He shuffled into the kitchen and picked up the phone. He reached out to dial Avi’s number, but paused, and dialed a different one.

Ring. Ring. “Yello?”
“Hey, Taako, it’s Johann.”

“Afternoon, music man, what’s the skinny?”

Johann hesitated, suddenly worried. “I just--is there anything going on tonight? I feel like I keep missing invites now that Avi’s not around.”

“Uh, yeah, a few of us were going to hang out at Refuge. You want to come?”

Johann was instantly relieved. “Yeah, sounds good. When?”

Taako sipped his margarita and watched Johann talk with Kravitz. It was true, now that he was thinking about it, that Johann hadn’t been around so much. He’d figured the guy was just in mourning for unrequited love, but he seemed to be in pretty good spirits. Avi was here in the bar, and Johann hadn’t talked to him, but he didn’t seem to be avoiding him. Maybe he really did just need to get out of the house.

“I can’t believe you know Pan Duin,” Johann was saying to Kravitz. “He’s one of the best tenors of his generation. I saw him live once--blew my mind.”

“He’d be pleased to hear that,” laughed Kravitz. “I didn’t know you frequented opera.”

“I wish,” said Johann. “Neverwinter’s a long way to go for a show.”

“I don’t see the appeal,” shrugged Taako.

“You’re just not listening,” said Johann earnestly. “Opera harnesses depth of emotion like no other style. There’s nothing like a good miasma to--” He froze.

Kravitz glanced at Taako, alarmed. Taako waved a hand in front of Johann’s eyes. “Johann? Ground control to Major Tom?”

Johann blinked a couple of times. “Sorry--who is that ?”

Taako looked over his shoulder to where Johann had been staring. “Oh, that’s Brad. Lucretia works with him.”

Brad was standing out from the crowd, listening to a conversation between Lucretia and Magnus. It was hard not to stand out from the crowd, really, when you were taller than even Killian. Nevertheless, he seemed to going for inconspicuous.

“A colossus,” whispered Johann.

“Pardon?” said Kravitz.

Johann tore his gaze from Brad to stare at Taako. “What do you know about him?”

Taako shrugged. “Not much. Friendly guy.”

Johann looked back to Brad. “I gotta take initiative.”

“What?” asked Kravitz.

Johann finished his port in one swing. “I’m gonna go talk to him.”
“Attaboy, go get ‘em,” said Taako. Johann marched forward.

Kravitz shot Taako a look. “Why’d you say we don’t know him? We had coffee with him last week.”

“Sssh,” said Taako, face alight. “This is gonna be good. Hey, Sloane!”

“Rockport was all right. There’s a lot of good folks there, but I’ve worked in Faerun for years, and you know, the longer I did, the more I saw of the community and the people—well, I just had to admit to myself that home is where you make it, not where you grow up.”

Johann’s chin rested on his hand. He and Brad had been talking for almost an hour now. “That’s deep,” said Johann.

Brad smiled. “Is it?”

“Extremely. What does it look like, to remake a home?”

Brad looked a little sheepish. “You tell me. I’ve been trying to make friends for awhile. Only recently has it started working. Lucretia’s helped a lot, introduced me to some people.”

“I have a hard time believing someone like you has trouble making friends,” said Johann solemnly. “Especially since you’re taking initiative.”

Brad shrugged. “That’s kind of you to say. And I am trying, but it’s a lonely process.”

“You know, a little solitude is good for the soul,” said Johann earnestly. “You must have had an experience of self-discovery moving here.”

“I don’t think I’m that deep,” Brad chuckled.

Johann held out a hand. “Some of the best artistic works in history have come into the world after long periods of reflection.”

“I’m no artist,” said Brad. “The only thing I want to make is community.”

“Maybe community is your art,” said Johann.

Brad considered. “I kind of like the sound of that. People are my passion. That’s why I work in human resources.”

“Your passion?” said Johann.

Brad nodded and smiled.

“That’s beautiful.”

“You know,” said Brad, “I didn’t think I’d end up talking so much tonight, but it’s nice to talk to someone who’s so attentive.”

“It’s hard not to be attentive to someone so interesting,” said Johann. “Do you like music?”

“Very much. You said you’re a musician?”
“I am.”

“I’d very much like to hear you play,” said Brad.

Johann swallowed. “Uhh...there’s a...a short film festival at the university. I was thinking about going. Would you...want to come with me?”

Brad smiled. “I’d like that.”

Johann nodded. “Cool.” He took a drink.

“Of course, most movies are kind of ruined for me since I saw Titanic.”

Johann spewed his drink, coughing and sputtering.

“Gosh, are you okay?” Brad said, hand on Johann’s shoulder.

“Fine,” Johann croaked. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You’ve got tears in your eyes--”

Johann hacked and waved his hand to the door. “Air. Gonna. Grab some air.”

“Yeah, sure.” Brad was all over concern.

Johann wheezed, “Don’t go anywhere.”

Brad smiled to himself as Johann stumbled away.

“That is too cute,” said Sloane, from across the room.

“What did I tell you?” Taako shook Kravitz by the shoulder.

“I wouldn’t have guessed it,” said Kravitz.

“Incredible,” said Lucretia, sipping her drink.

Avi was watching too. He shook his head a little. “I never knew.”

Taako and Kravitz exchanged a glance.

“I mean, I thought--I had a feeling. Back when we were in college. I thought he liked me.”

Sloane regarded him carefully. “And?”

Avi shrugged. “I sure liked him, for a while.”

Lucretia frowned. “You’re married.”

Avi chuckled. “Yeah. I uh. I’m bad at picking sides.”

“Well lookie here, partners, we got ourselves a gen-u-wine bisexual,” Taako drawled in an exaggerated Texan accent.

“Crikey,” said Sloane in a very bad Aussie, “he’s a beauty! Rarely seen in the woild!”
Avi laughed. “There are more of us than you think.”

“Yeah? Name one,” said Taako.

“Well, my wife.”

Sloane’s jaw dropped. “Noooooooo, no way.”

Avi grinned. “It’s how we met.”

The table exploded in whoops.

“You have to come bowling with us,” said Sloane. “Don’t you think, Taako?”

“Oh, sure thing,” said Taako. “The Bi-Monthly Gay Bowling Night welcomes all sexual minorities. Might have to change the name though.”


“It was already a mouthful, why not?” said Kravitz.

“I have no idea what you guys are talking about,” laughed Avi.

Lucretia held out a hand. “Bisexual?” she repeated.

“Yeah, that’s us,” said Avi.

She was frowning. “Huh.”

“What’s the matter, Coach?” asked Taako.

Lucretia shook her head. “Nothing it’s just...it never occurred to me that it was an option. Oh, look, Johann’s back.”

Sloane and Taako exchanged a wide-eyed glance before turning their attention back to the boys at the bar.

Johann fussed with his bangs for a minute before going back to Brad, and then motioning him away from the table.

“Where are they going?” said Sloane.

“Moving fast, are we, Johann?” said Taako.

“Brad wouldn’t, I don’t think,” said Lucretia. “Oh, see?”

“The piano! Good choice, music man,” said Taako.

“Smart, to play to his strengths,” said Kravitz.

Johann began to play a mellow jazz riff. Brad leaned against the piano and listened, transfixed.

“What’s my job here?” said Avi. “Should I give him the best friend talk? Like, don’t hurt my best friend?”

Lucretia nodded. “It’s what I would do. But honestly, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”
Brad leaned down and said something to Johann. Johann looked like he might cry, but instead, he stopped his jazz refrain and started to play “My Heart Will Go On.”
“Ugh!” Lup snatched the violin out from under her chin. “This is hopeless.”

Barry frowned a hole through the music in front of his keyboard, hands hovering over the keys. The song was a piece they’d dug out of the music building’s library. “I don’t understand it. Why won’t it mesh?”

“It’s like, we play fine individually!” Lup gritted her teeth. “This is stupid. We’re not getting any better.”

“Maybe we need a teacher,” Barry said, stroking his chin. He’d forgotten to shave that morning, Lup noticed. How do you forget to shave?

“Ugh,” she said again.

“We’ve been working on this piece for weeks now,” Barry said. “We’re not going to improve if--”

“Yeah, I know.” She didn’t want to invite anyone else into this peaceful little arrangement, but she recognized this as a middle-school impulse not to share friends. Anyway, the last few weeks hadn’t been peaceful, they’d been like pulling teeth. She remembered hitting this point when she was first learning violin, the point where you began to wonder if it was worth it. Barry helped. He was at that point too, she was pretty sure.

“Don’t you have a friend who’s a musician?” said Barry. “Maybe he knows somebody.”

Lup frowned. “What, Johann? No.”

“Why not?”

She scoffed. “I’m not going to tell Johann I’m trying to relearn violin. He’ll blab to everyone.”

Barry set his jaw. “I see.”

“What?”

He tapped his fingers on the keys, lightly so they made no sound. “Listen are you--are you ashamed of this? Of me?”

She shot him an incredulous look. “What?”

“That’s what it feels like, is all.” He sighed. “Your friends--and my friends too, now--they still don’t know we do this, and look, I’m glad to keep a secret for you, if you like, but I can’t help but wonder why.”

Lup drew back, blinking several times. “It’s not--this isn’t about secrets. And I’m not ashamed of you, Barry, god. I just don’t know why I should tell everyone everything I do in my free time.”

He looked at her for a long time. “I don’t understand you.”

“What particular aspect of my multiplicious nature are you pondering, Barold?” said Lup, just managing to keep the annoyance out of her tone.

“You’re so sure of yourself in-in so many ways, but then with things like this--” He huffed. “Why do
“You care so much what people think?”

Lup was aghast. “Um, I don’t?”

“Well, then I’ll ask Johann for help.”

“No.”

“Why not, Lup?” demanded Barry. “What’s this obsession of yours with reputation?”

“I’m not obsessed! I just want to choose what people know about me. Is that so wrong?”

“I mean, in your position I would too, but the things you’re keeping secret are so arbitrary!” He scooted away from the keyboard to face her. “You told me you were transgender the third time we practiced together, but you won’t tell your friends you’ve picked up the violin?”

“It’s not about secrets,” repeated Lup. “I don’t keep secrets.”

Barry sighed. “That’s—that’s just blatantly untrue, Lup, and… I don’t know, I feel like I have something to do with it.”

“And I’m telling you that you don’t,” she said.

He leaned back against the wall. “I don’t know, maybe it’s my own self-esteem issues, but I have a hard time believing you. I see why you wouldn’t want just anyone knowing you’re into D&D, but this is just music.”

“Why does matter so much to you?” Lup said, throwing her hands up, still holding the violin and bow.

“I could ask you the same thing.” He stood up, switched off his keyboard. “I’m gonna go.”

Lup’s mouth fell open. “What the hell, Barry?”

“Like you said, we’re not getting any better. Not today anyway.” He zipped the keyboard into its soft case. “I’ll see you next week, Lup.”

And he left.

Lup cracked the eggs into the bowl and whisked furiously.

“Woah, woah, slow your roll! You’re gonna overscramble them.” Taako grabbed her hand to stop the whisk.

Lup shot him a look of such venom that he leaned away.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Munch?”

“I’m not in the mood.” He was right, she was overscrambling the eggs, but screw him anyway. And also screw Barry. She’d come over for dinner because Kravitz was off meeting some client about some internet thing, blah blah blah. She hadn’t been listening, except to the part where Taako had invited her over, but today even Taako was not lifting her spirits.

“Hatchi matchi, fine. Just don’t overscramble, this ain’t no greasy spoon.” He spread the aromatic
tomato-pepper-onion mixture in the pan to make a hole for the eggs. “Salt and pepper’s on the 
counter.”

Lup snatched them up and shook both shakers at once into the eggs. “Is it ready?”

“Yeah.”

She poured the eggs into the pan and watched Taako fold the mixture over itself.

“It looks right, anyway,” he said.

“What kind of peppers did you say they were?” Lup asked.

“Padrón peppers.”

“Not the right ones.”

“You try getting Turkish peppers in Podunk, USA.”

Lup scowled, because she had.

“What’s got your undies in a bunch, anyway?”

“Nothing.”

“So you’re just in a mood because… what, the moon’s the wrong phase?”

“More like my friend is being a whiny baby. Scoot over.” Taako moved, and Lup opened the oven.

“Bread’s done. Where are your potholders?”

“Third drawer. Which friend?”

Lup took two potholders out of out of the drawer and pulled the bread out, mumbling.

“What?”

“Barry.” She waved one potholder over the flatbread and slid the pan onto the stovetop.

“Who the hell’s Barry?”

“The guy I’m learning violin with.”

Taako stopped stirring the eggs. “You picked up violin again?”

“You’re gonna let it burn.”

He resumed stirring. “So why’s your violin teacher a whiny baby? Dish.”

“He’s not my teacher, he’s learning piano. We’re learning together.”

“Cool, totally normal. And the whiny baby part?”

“Ugh.” She tossed the potholders back into the drawer and slid it closed with her foot. “He’s like, 
convinced I’m ashamed of his existence or something. Trying to make it sound like I lead a double 
life full of secrets.”

“Hm.” Taako prodded at the mixture in the pan and turned the stove off. “It’s ready.”
Lup pulled a couple of plates from a cupboard, carefully flipped a piece of flatbread onto each, and held them out while Taako served menemen onto both. Still standing, they both dug in, using the flatbread to scoop it up to their mouths.

After a moment, mouth half-full, Lup said, “Well, it’s closer than anything else so far.”

“Still not quite right,” said Taako around a bite, and swallowed. “Where did Auntie even get the right peppers for this?”

Lup frowned. “Wasn’t there a specialty shop or something?”

Taako snapped his fingers. “That was it.”

“It’s pretty good either way,” said Lup, taking another bite.

“The bread’s on point.”

“Thank you.”

They spent a few more minutes eating.

“How long have you been doing violin again?” asked Taako after a while.

Lup thought back. “Since February.”

Taako laughed.

“What?”

“Surely you see the irony here.”

“What irony?”

“A double life full of secrets?” Taako repeated. “And you didn’t tell me you were violining because…?”

Lup’s eyes narrowed. “Why is my social life suddenly so interesting to everybody?”

“Why do you think I wouldn’t be interested in my sister’s life?” Taako shot back. “Are you actually ashamed of this Barry guy?”

“No,” scoffed Lup.

“Then, what, you like him or something?”

“No! What is this, middle school?”

“Might as well be,” said Taako. “I got news for you, Munch, you do keep secrets. A lot of them.”

“No I don’t.”

“Oh yes you do. There’s this, and your nerd games, too, and don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to move here.”

Lup narrowed her eyes. “Who told you?”

“Rachel said you asked her about realtors,” drawled Taako.
“She had no right--”

“Why shouldn’t she?” he demanded. “She assumed I knew, because you know, moving to the same town your brother lives in is something a normal person would tell their brother.”

“I was going to tell you--”

“When? When you bought the damn house?”

“When it was relevant,” she spat. “You’re not entitled to the details of my life.”

“Then who the hell is?” Taako threw up a hand. “Not your twin brother? C’mon, Lup, your friend Barry is one hundred percent right. Secrets galore.”

“Sure, I’m the one with secrets,” Lup snapped. “Who was it now who only told someone he was kicked out as a teenager last year? You’re the goddamn king of secrets.”

“Well yeah, not all of us wear our life story like a fucking prize belt!”

“Not all of us are ashamed of who we are,” she said, the sentence rolling off her tongue like acid.

Taako drew back like he’d been slapped. “I am--I am not ashamed. I just don’t feel the need to pick a fight with every human being that crosses my path.”

“I find it saves time, just coming right out with it,” she sneered. “That way I can weed out the garbage.”

“Did a great job weeding out the Rad Robes.” He leaned toward her. “I swear to god, you wouldn’t have a single friend if it weren’t for me. You just push and push everybody away.”

Lup felt like she’d been punched in the gut. “Yeah? Well sorry I’m not a fake-ass attention whore.”

“Excuse me, am I attention whoring by having friends?” He stuck a finger out toward her. “You just like the feeling of having a grudge to chew on. It justifies you being a stupid coward.”

“Oh a coward?” she yelled. “A coward! I’m the coward! How about your non-existent bakery, Taako? You have the lease, you have the money, and you’re still too scared to fucking open the place! Take a goddamn risk for once in your life!”

“W--You--” Taako sputtered. “Yeah all right, fine, and meanwhile, you take every risk, and for what?” He threw out his hands. “Everything’s a fight, but what the fuck are you even fighting for? What do you want, Lup? You ever going to stop and think about your goddamn future?”

“ *What future*?”

The question echoed against the exposed brick of the tiny apartment. Taako stopped dead.

Lup glared at him. When Taako spoke again, his tone was maddeningly quiet.

“You’re--are you shitting me right now? You’re serious?”

“Yeah I’m serious!” she spat. “What do I have to look forward to? I do my job and I play derby and I’m fine, okay? But it’s not like I have anywhere to go from here.”

Taako looked bewildered, with just a touch of horrified. “God. You honestly--” He sputtered. “You don’t want things to be better?”
“And how would I manage that?” she said sardonically.

“You could stop pushing people away because you’re afraid, for one thing,” said Taako. “You want to keep being lonely?”

“Who said I was lonely?”

Taako threw up his hands. “That’s how you fucking act all the time! You’d rather fight everyone now than let them hurt you later!”

“I call that smart.”

“I call it dys-fucking-functional! You can’t keep doing that!”

“Why can’t I?” Lup demanded. “It’s worked out puh-retty well so far.”

“You want to live without love? Because that’s how you do it.”

“I don’t need people, okay?” Lup shouted. “I don’t need anybody!”

Taako looked her dead in the eye. “What about me?”

Lup stopped, breathing hard.

It was true, the thought of Taako being taken from her was akin to the thought of losing a lung. Damn.

“You’re the exception,” she said, her tone back to normal. “You’re family. That’s different.”

“Fat lot of good depending on family has done us,” Taako growled. “Our parents are shit, Lup. If it’s family you want, you’re gonna have to make your own.”

“And you suggest I do that by--what, just ripping open my chest and playing show and tell with my heart?”

“Yes!” said Taako, grabbing her shoulders. “Please! With somebody! With me, at least!”

The force of his response shocked her. “Jesus Jones, Taako.”

He let go of her shoulders, but none of his intensity left. “Look, I--you have people who genuinely love you. I love you, do you get that?”

Lup was struck speechless.

“And I do the same thing! All the time! Keep a wall up! Nobody can know what’s inside Taako!”

He held his head in his hands. “And that means no one can help, either, even if they want to. Please, Lup, for the love of god, let me in!”

The air in the room felt heavy, hard to breathe. Lup shook her head. “I don’t--I don’t need --”

“Everyone needs someone eventually,” Taako said, his voice shaking. “If the universe has got one thing through my fucking head in the last twelve years, it’s that.”

Lup put her hand over her mouth. Her heart felt raw, exposed. They were silent for some time, before she took a long, shuddering breath.
“What do you want to know?” she said, barely above a whisper.

Taako swallowed, looked away. “Why are you moving to Faerun?”

Lup squeezed her eyes shut. “Because it’s the only place I’ve felt at home since Auntie died.”

He said nothing, but when she opened her eyes, he was nodding. “Yep. Yep. Me too.”

Lup let go a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “What else?”

“Why’d you start violin again?”

“Oprah said it’s good for your mental health,” she muttered.

Taako loosed a surprised laugh. “Oh god. Was she right?”

Tears sprang unbidden to Lup’s eyes, tears that felt like relief. “It’s fucking Oprah, dipflip, of course she’s right.”

Taako burst out laughing, and Lup did too, shaking silent laughter. Without thinking, without even looking at each other, they moved together into a hug and stayed like that, for a good long moment.

“Just—just so we’re clear,” came Taako’s voice from behind her, “I’m not holding up the bakery because I don’t want to take the risk.”

She pulled away so she could see his face. “You sure about that?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m pretty scared shitless about the whole sitch,” he admitted. “But it’s not just that. I kind of wanted to wait until… you know, things got a little less soap opera-like around here.” He waved a hand. “Once Jules and Mango are married, and maybe after we get Angus back.”

“So you can be the center of attention,” she said with a smirk.

“Well, yeah.”

“I mean I guess that’s an okay reason.” She shrugged. “But couldn’t you like… at least have the storefront running? Do a grand opening later, or whatever?”

Taako paused. “Huh. A soft open?”

“I guess.”

He rubbed his chin, considering. “Huh.”

They were silent for a while. Lup replayed their argument in her head, and froze. “Oh my god.”

“What?” said Taako, breaking out of his reverie.

She shook her head in disbelief. “I have told someone all of this. That I’m moving, and...and why and stuff. Everything”

Taako frowned. “Who?”

“Barry.”

His frown turned into blank surprise. “Who even is this guy?”
Lup threw out her hands in an exaggerated shrug. “The repository of all my secrets, apparently! Goddamn it. No wonder he felt like wanted to hide him. I did.”

“Why him?” said Taako, mystified.

“Beats me. He’s a good listener, I guess.”

Taako shot her a loaded look, but went back to his now lukewarm menemen. Lup sighed, and picked at hers.

“I’m sorry I called you a fake-ass attention whore.”

Taako swallowed a bite. “Sorry I called you a bitch.”

“You didn’t call me a bitch,” said Lup suspiciously.

“Yeah? I was thinking it.”

Lup whacked him in the stomach. “Fuck you.”

“Whatever.”

Lup picked up her food again and took a bite. It really was good, even if it wasn’t an exact copy of the comfort food of her childhood.

“So tell me about Barry,” Taako said.

So this was how it was going to be now, huh? Lup suppressed a sigh. Taako would want to know everything. And… and really there was no reason why she wouldn’t tell him. He was right. The secrets thing wasn’t working, especially if she wanted to keep Barry as a friend.

“All right.” She considered. “Picture this. I’m playing violin. And there on the keys--” She held up a hand. “Tom Arnold.”

It took Taako a second. His eyes went wide. “Wait--Noelle’s professor?”

“The very same.”

“No way.”

“I shit you not.”

“I want to know everything.”

Lup nodded, slowly. “Okay.”

Barry paused at the door of the music building on the way back from class, keyboard in hand, notes tucked under his arm. Maybe he shouldn’t have come.

No, he should. He opened the door and heaved a sigh. This fight with Lup had ruined his weekend, and he dreaded facing her again, but this was no time to chicken out of a good thing.

He was in love with her. It was easy for him to admit that to himself--it happened to him fairly often, although this was an intensity and flavor of love he wasn’t quite used to. He was in love with her,
but more importantly, she was his friend. Maybe he shouldn’t have called her out, but if he didn’t, what kind of spineless jellyfish would he be? It would do her no good for him to indulge her every whim, and it would certainly do him no good to keep suffering under the delusion that she was ashamed of him. He only wished he could believe her.

Well, if Lup said it, he would try. Time to get this over with.

He turned the corner toward the practice rooms. She was waiting outside their usual one, sans violin. He frowned. What did that mean?

She looked up as he approached. “Hey.”

“Hi. Uh, are we--”

She held up a hand. “Hang on. Um. I want to apologize.”

Well, this was a surprise. Barry felt like a ten-pound weight had just been removed from his chest. “Oh. Uh, sure.”

“Right.” She crossed her arms and tapped her fingers on one bicep, thinking. “I’m sorry I put you in a position where you felt like I was hiding you. ‘Cause I was. Um. Sorry. I’ve… confided in you a lot, Barry, and I was scared that… that you would tell people things I should have been… telling them all along… dammit.” She uncrossed her arms, put her head in her hand. “This is the stupidest apology.”

Barry couldn’t stop the smile from creeping onto his face. “No, no, it’s… it’s fine.”

She shot him a thankful glance. “Well. Anyway. You were right about secrets and I don’t plan to keep so many anymore.” Lup sighed. “And thanks. You’re like… the only person I’ve really talked to for a while. Do you know what I’m saying? Like really talked. And it was unfair for you to be the only one, but I’m… grateful you’ve been here for me.”

Forget a weight lifted, Barry felt like a balloon. “I-uh… I’m glad to be. Here for you.”

Lup exhaled, and then gave him a smile. “Thanks. Seriously.”

“Sure, you’re welcome. Uh.” Barry gestured to the practice room. “Shall we…”

“Oh, we’re in here this week.” She strode down the hall, toward Practice Room A. “We’ll need the space, if that’s all right.”

“Oh, why--”

She opened the door, revealing Johann in a slightly more spacious closet, who was carefully tuning her violin. He looked up.

“Oh, hi, Barry. Lup, this thing was way out of tune.” He handed it off to her. “I think I fixed it.”

“Can you show me how to do that?” she said, accepting the violin. “I used to know, but--”

“Sure, yeah,” he said, nodding. “So, Barry, Lup said you guys need a teacher?”

Barry glanced at Lup, surprised. “Yeah, we do.”

“Turns out, Johann plays both piano and violin,” Lup explained.
“And guitar,” Johann added. “And cello, and dulcimer. And clarinet. And bassoon. And most things in the xylophone family.”

Lup shot Barry a wry look. Barry stifled a laugh.

“And most drums, if they’re not a drumset,” Johann went on. “And bells, if I have to. And electric bass, although I’m not very good at it. Is anyone really good at electric bass?” He paused, caught them looking. “I’ve never taught before though. If this doesn’t work out I have some friends I can call for you, but uh… you know, Brad said it might be good for me, so--”

“Only one way to find out,” said Lup, whipping her violin up under her chin. “Let’s go.”

Barry nodded and knelt down to unzip his keyboard. “Yeah, let’s give it a shot.”

“Cool,” said Johann.

“Okay, stop.”

Lup paused, and so did Barry. Johann was nodding furiously. “Right, I see what the problem is. You’re treating it like two different pieces of music. It’s got to be a conversation, guys.” He pointed to a place on Barry’s music. “Like here, Barry, what is this phrase trying to say?”

Barry frowned at the music. “I don’t--I don’t know.”

“Well how does it sound? What’s the tone? What’s the emotion?”

Barry exhaled. “I guess… it’s repeating something Lup just played. Like a confirmation.”

“Yeah, exactly,” said Johann. “And she played it with all this raw emotion, right? And you’re just playing the notes.”

“Am I supposed to not play the notes?” said Barry.

“Just play them with some passion. Here, start here.”

Lup leaned against the wall to rest as Barry plonked out the phrase. This was going really well, better than she could have hoped. Barry had made apologizing so easy, but of course he had. And Johann was actually a decent teacher for having never done it before. She might not set him loose on an elementary school class with recorders, but he would do just fine for them.

She let out a slow breath. Letting people in was hard. She wondered if it ever got easier.

“Nope, still no passion,” said Johann. “Do it again.”

Barry hesitated, then played. *Plinkitty plink, plonk plink* --

“No. Again.”

Lup covered her mouth to stop from snickering.

*Plinkitty plink* --

“No.”
Barry paused, and slowly extended a finger. *Plink* ---

“Terrible.”

Lup could feel her face turning red with suppressed laughter. Oh god, poor Barry.

“Listen, it’s not that you’re playing it wrong, I just don’t know what you’re feeling when you play,” said Johann. “You’re echoing Lup, right? Listening to her, taking her phrase and then turning it into something new. Does that make sense?”

Barry frowned. “I guess so.”

“Show me how that feels.”

Barry paused, thinking for a minute, and then played the phrase again. And it did sound less clinical this time, flowed a little smoother. She smiled fondly.

Something caught in her throat. What the hell? What was *that* emotion??

“That’s more like it,” said Johann. “Now Lup, you’ve got the passion just fine, but you keep missing notes.”

Lup shook her head, tried to focus. “Um. What?”

“Your technical is lacking. Here, start from here.” He pointed. “Take what you’re feeling and make it more precise.”

Lup swallowed, and raised her bow, tried to do what he asked. Concentrate on the notes, keep the bow under control…

“Right, just like that. Now play it together. It’s a conversation, remember. From the same place. Ready?”

They both nodded, and he counted them off. “Two, three, four—”

Lup ignored the buzz in her brain and played, focusing on precision, listening for Barry. She played the phrase that always tripped them up--and he repeated it just after, and they played on, moving into the next part of the song. Not perfect, still fumbling, but now at least they were together.

When they were finished, they looked at each other in delight.

“It worked!” said Barry with a grin.

“Finally,” Lup drawled. “Thanks Johann.”

Johann’s eyes were wet. “Yeah, that was a lot--a lot better.”

Barry laughed. “Wow, we must be good.”

“Yeah,” breathed Lup, looking at that honest smile, those rather pretty hazel eyes of his. Her gut stirred.

Well, shit.
Julia flipped through the coupons in the Pennysaver as she kicked the front door shut behind her.

“I’m home!” she called. Yeah, they’d never use most of these. She tried not to look at The Letter from where it sat on the dining room table. A place of honor for their acceptance. But that letter had arrived almost two weeks ago, and even though they’d called Paloma like she’d asked, the phone had remained frustratingly silent.

Magnus’ van had been in the driveway, but he wasn’t in the kitchen. She tossed most of the coupons in the trash and looked out the back window. There was a light on in the garage.

She crossed the deck and the few steps across the backyard. The tire swing spun lazily in the light spring breeze. The daylily bulbs she had planted last month were just starting to poke through the dirt, she noted, along the garage. As she opened the side door, loud sounds of KC & the Sunshine Band and a lathe met her ears. She turned the boombox down and Magnus looked up from his work.

“Hey.” he smiled. “I’d kiss you but I’m all dusty.” She walked over anyway and he leaned down to give her a kiss. He turned the lathe off and she sat down on the beginnings of another Burnside Original coffee table.

“Did someone finally order something other than the coffee table?” she asked, nodding to what looked like a chair leg on the lathe. Magnus dusted his hands off on his jeans and walked over to the large cabinet of supplies.

“No, I wanted to finish another chair tonight.” he pointed to part of a chair leaning on its back. When it was finished it would match the three that were already at the table in the house.

“Do you mind that after working all day you come home and do more work?” she asked, looking back at him. He’d picked up a few sheets of sandpaper, and he shook his head.

“It’s different when it’s for us.”

“Plus, it’s not the coffee table.” she smiled and knocked on the top beneath her. Magnus nodded and pulled his safety glasses back in place.

“I’m very grateful for Kravitz and that website, but I never in a million years thought I would make so many damn coffee tables.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” she suggested. “Make them limited edition, sell them for more. Master Carpenter Magnus Burnsides will only make 20 more of these designs. Get yours before they’re gone forever.”

“That’s a pretty good idea.”

“What do you feel like for dinner?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to just order a pizza? ...I think we just got some coupons for Domino’s.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” he fired up the lathe again and she left the garage.
When she reached the back porch, she realized that the phone was ringing inside. She rushed for the door and fumbled with the doorknob before tripping inside. Where was the phone?? There it was, on the dining room table. She ran to it and picked it up.

“Hello???” she said, trying to catch her breath.

“Julia? It’s Mrs. Paloma.”

Julia’s stomach immediately tightened and seemed to drop out of her.

“H-hello.” she said, trying to sound like some semblance of normal. “How are you?”

“I’m well, dear. How are you?”

“Fine… fine.” Julia gripped the rung on one of the chairs. Paloma laughed lightly.

“Well, I’m calling because I would like to place a child with you and Magnus.”

“Really?”

“Yes, dear. A boy, almost 12 years old.” Julia could hear the smile in Paloma’s voice. “Named Angus McDonald.”

Julia collapsed to her knees and tears immediately started rolling down her cheeks. It was almost a solid minute before she could speak.

“R-really?” she managed, her voice quivering.

“Yes, dear. I’d like to bring him tomorrow afternoon, after school lets out. Will you be ready then?”

“Yes. Yes! Yes, of course. We’re,” she took a breath, “We’re ready for him.”

“Good. We’ll be by the house tomorrow afternoon. See you then.”

“Okay. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

Julia hung up the phone and placed it on the ground. She clasped her hands and pressed them over her mouth, rocking back and forth on her knees. Tears fell down her face, and a laugh ripped from her chest.

The backdoor opened.

“Hey, hun? Have you seen my--” Magnus called, then he saw Julia on her knees by the dining room table. “Are you okay?” he rushed over and dropped at her side.

She nodded, tears still flowing freely. She smiled up at him.

“Paloma called. ...We got him.”

“W-what?” Magnus asked, his eyes growing wide and starting to brim with tears too.

“Angus is coming home tomorrow.”
“How about that?” Magnus asked, leaning across the porch railing and holding the edge of the banner.

“Little lowerrr--Right there!” Julia said, standing down on the front walk. Magnus taped it to the post and hopped down. Julia took a seat on the front steps, tapping her fingertips together and bouncing her leg. Magnus sat next to her, both of them looking down the quiet street. It had taken them so long, but finally they were here.

“You ready?” he asked, looking at Julia. She looked at him and nodded.

Angus closed the binder to his math homework, and took it back down the hall to his room. The boy he shared the room with, Carter, had made a right mess of his side, but at least it was contained to his part of the room. He slipped the binder in his backpack, and then went to the small dresser at the foot of his bed. Angus checked to make sure that no one was around before sliding open the top drawer. It was okay if he didn’t do this too often, just if he needed a pick me up.

He pushed aside a couple socks, and pulled out an envelope. It was filled with pictures. A few of his grandpa, one of Miyagi, but the rest of them were of the derby team. One from a couple years ago where he was riding Miss Killian’s shoulders. Another one was from Fourth of July, Miss Hurley and Miss Carey were trying to light sparklers for him. One was from the time Taako helped Angus win the Halloween costume contest at school. His favorite wasn’t from any particularly special day. It was just him, Miss Julia, and Magnus on a bench at the rink. Magnus’ eyes were half-closed and Miss Julia held up bunny ears behind Angus who had his tongue out, but they were happy.

Angus sniffled and put away the envelope. The pick me up hadn’t really quite worked like he’d hoped. He quickly rubbed at his eyes, no one needed to know how he was feeling. Not that anyone really cared anyway.

A gentle knock sounded at the door, Angus turned around to see the house mother standing there,

“Angus? Your caseworker is here.” she stepped back, and, Mrs. Paloma stepped into the room.

“Hello, Mr. Angus, how are you today?” she asked, quietly looking around the room. Angus shrugged.

“I’m fine.” he said simply.

“I have exciting news. We have found a foster family for you!” she smiled widely.
“Oh. Great.” Angus replied.

“So let’s pack up your things and we’ll head on over. I think you’ll really like them.”

Angus’s clothes, schoolwork, and skates still fit neatly into his backpack. He waved good-bye to June as Mrs. Paloma escorted him out to her car. It felt like he could finally breathe again once they finally left the group home, but no part of him wanted to be excited about his new foster family. No matter who they were, it would never be home.

They passed by the small commercial district and turned into the tree-lined neighborhoods of the town. Angus stared wistfully as Mrs. Paloma drove right past The Adventure Zone. It was time for practice and the team’s cars were in the parking lot. Except he didn’t see Magnus’ van, which was odd. He hoped to catch a glimpse of even one team member, but the lot was empty save for cars. They drove a few blocks further up the same street, before Mrs. Paloma slowed down and started to pull over.

The house was a little older with a deep front porch and a maple tree out front. It had both brick and white siding, and there was a banner strung between two of the posts on the porch. ‘Welcome Home, Angus!’ and sitting underneath on the steps were the last two people he expected to see.

“Miss Julia! Magnus!” Angus shouted, yanking on his seatbelt and pulling on the door handle. It was child-locked, so he had to wait for Mrs. Paloma to get out and open the door. As soon as she did, he tripped out the door and ran towards them full-tilt. A moment later he found himself wrapped tightly in their arms as both knelt down to meet him. Angus closed his eyes and leaned into their warmth, praying that this was not just a dream. They smelled like sawdust and like lavender soap. Angus could feel the scratch of Magnus’ sideburns on his forehead, and Julia’s fingers in his curly hair. They were real. They were here.

“W-What are you doing here?” he asked at last, leaning back to look at them but not out of their arms.

“Well, Angus,” Julia said, chuckling, “We live here.”

“What?” Angus asked, his heart starting to beat faster.

“Yeah.” Magnus said, ruffling Angus’ hair. “We’re your new foster parents.”

Angus looked between the faces of these people that he loved so much, tears starting to form in his own eyes now. “W-what?” he said, his bottom lip started quivering. He couldn’t have possibly heard him right.

“We’ve got a room all set up just for you here.” Julia said, cupping his chin, “And there’s a tire swing in the backyard. And we’re just up the street from the rink.”

Angus turned to look back at Mrs. Paloma, who was smiling. “It’s true, dear.” she said. Angus turned back around and buried his face in Julia’s shoulder, fat tears rolling down his cheeks. Something deep inside him finally relaxed.

“Oh, Angus. Is this okay?” Julia rubbed his back and rocked side to side. “We know it’s a big change, and this is all new for all of us.”

“But we’ll figure it out together.” Magnus added.

“I’m not,” he stopped to catch his breath and wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve, “I’m not s-sad, I-I promise.” he said, smiling and another tear escaping his eye. “I’m just ...really happy.” Magnus and
Julia both let out a breath of relief. A giggle escaped from Angus, and soon all three were laughing.

“Welcome home, Angus.” Magnus said before he wrapped both of them up in a hug again, and for the first time in Angus’ life, it finally felt true.

Angus jumped when he felt something lick his hand. There was a large fluffy black dog with its head tilted to the side behind Magnus, it let out a happy bark and licked Angus’ hand again.

“You have a dog?” Angus said, letting go and rubbing the dog’s ears.

“Yeah, this is Fish. She’s one of Void’s puppies.” Magnus explained. Fish barked and bowled Angus over to the grass as she licked his face over and over. “Ah! Fish, down!” Angus laughed and sat up, rubbing Fish’s head again.

Julia stood up and held out her hand, “Do you wanna go inside?” she asked. Angus took her hand, and Magnus took his other one and they swung him upright. Mrs. Paloma patted Fish as she passed by to follow the group inside.

Magnus pushed the front door open and Angus walked inside, his mouth agape. The wooden floors gleamed in the afternoon light. There was a real fireplace in one wall. He ran a hand over the back of the gingham blue couch.

“Well, this is the living room.” Julia said, following behind him. “And the dining room’s right there.”

“There’ll be six chairs when I’m done.” Magnus said, shutting the door behind them. There were only 3 chairs at the table right now, but a vase with sunflowers was on the table.

“The kitchen’s through that doorway.” Julia said, stepping around Angus and leaning against the banister. He peeked into see cherry red cabinets and a black and white checkered floor. “You room is right at the top of the stairs. First door on the right.”

Angus looked between the three adults, then quickly thundered up the stairs. The door was cracked open and he pushed it the rest of the way. The windows looked out over the backyard, where the tire swing spun lazily in the breeze, and the walls had been painted a fresh green, Angus’ favorite color. The bedframe had an ‘A’ carved into the head and footboard, and a soft plaid comforter was spread across the mattress. There was a desk with a spinny chair, and the bookshelf next to it had several well-loved copies of Caleb Cleveland. On the wall above the dresser was a collection of framed photos of Angus and the derby team.

“We asked the team for any photos they had of all of us together.” Julia said from the doorway. “We ended up having a lot.”

Magnus stepped around her and pulled a box from the bookshelf. “And! Angus, I really liked model planes when I was your age, so I thought… I don’t know, maybe we could build one together.” Angus nodded eagerly.

“Yeah! That sounds like fun!” He shed his backpack, and looked at the model box. “A Mustang fighter?! I read about that one, it’s the best!”

Paloma let out a quiet cough from the doorway, “If I may,” she looked between Julia and Magnus, “I’d like to speak to Angus alone for a moment.”

“Oh sure.” Magnus handed the box to Angus and he shut the door behind him as he left. Paloma turned to look at Angus.
“Now I know you know these people, Angus, but if you ever need me, you know you can call, right?”

Angus nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Paloma smiled, “I will call tomorrow to check in with you, and I’ll visit next week. But I hope you’ll be happy here.”

“I already am.”

“Good.”

Paloma opened the door and Julia and Magnus were waiting just out in the small hallway that led to the master bedroom. Paloma nodded to them.

“I’ll be calling tomorrow, and I’ll be by for a visit next week too. So until then, good-bye.” She trotted down the stairs and headed for the front door. Magnus and Angus looked to each other and quickly rushed back into the bedroom to start the model.

“We gotta spread all the pieces out and make sure we have everything.” Angus said, flicking on the desk lamp.

“Wow, usually I just start gluing and figure it out as I go.” Magnus said, ripping open the box.

Julia, however, snuck down the stairs and quickly ran out the front door.

“Paloma?” she called. Paloma turned around in the front walk and Julia hopped down the stairs towards her. “I just… I wanted to say thank you. You have no idea how much this means to us, and to …so many people.”

“That’s nice to hear, dear. …It’s easy sometimes to forget why I do this job. But it’s moments like these that remind me why. Every child deserves a good home like this one.”

“Well, we’re going to try our hardest to make sure Angus gets a good one.”

“That’s all any of us can do, and most of the time, that’s all it takes.” Paloma smiled. “I’ll see you next week.”

Julia waved as her car pulled away from the curb and drove down the road. She opened the front door and could hear the excited voices of Magnus and Angus echo from the upstairs. She just leaned back against the door and just listened for a minute with a smile on her face.

“Do you want to start with the wings or the body first?” Magnus asked.

“Hmm… let’s do the wings!”

Julia walked to the foot of the stairs. “Hey Mags, are you forgetting about the surprise?” she called.

“Oh, right!” Magnus said, “We can finish this later. You have somewhere you need to be.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You still have your skates, right?”
The three of them walked hand in hand down the street back towards The Adventure Zone. Angus didn’t care one bit that maybe he was a little too old to be holding hands all the time. Miss Julia and Magnus refused to say what was happening at the rink, just that he needed his skates. It felt like his heart grew brighter and brighter the closer they got to the rink. Angus ran ahead the last couple of steps and threw open the door.

The lights were turned off and Angus looked around in the darkness, not quite sure what he was supposed to be surprised about. Then the lights kicked on and everyone he knew from derby jumped up from behind the half-wall of the flat rink.

"WELCOME HOME, ANGUS!" they shouted. Angus’ face lit up like the sun. The music started as Killian and Carey vaulted over the wall to scoop him up in a long group hug.

“We have missed you so much.” Killian said into his hair. Carey wiped tears away and smiled broadly. Angus lost track of how many people he hugged and how many times everyone cried. Even Miss Lucretia looked more than a little misty-eyed.

After a few minutes, Taako magicked a cake out of somewhere and set it at one of the tables. It read, ‘Welcome Back, Ango, and Happy Birthday!’ and had skates exactly like Angus’ piped on it. A growing pile of presents appeared on another table.

“You remembered?” he asked, as Killian lifted him up to stand on a chair. Kravitz snapped a photo.

“Of course!” Hurley said, ruffling his hair and standing on a chair next to him.

“We would never forget the birthday of our favorite Ango.” Magnus said, sitting next to him.

“What flavor is it, Taako?” Noelle asked.

“Alright, everybody lean in and say, ‘cheese!’” Kravitz said, taking a couple steps back and holding up the camera. Angus teetered a little as everyone leaned in close, but Killian and Magnus held him upright. In the photo, he was smiling as wide as he could, with tears in his eyes.

That photo ended up being his new favorite, and it quickly joined the wall in his bedroom along with all the others. They were the first thing he saw when he woke up and the last thing he saw before he went to sleep. A permanent reminder of his family and how much he was loved. Welcome home indeed.
Lup drew the bow across the strings of her violin, perfectly in time with Barry’s careful notes on the piano. She played a phrase, and he echoed it, and joined her in harmony. The sound seemed to fill up her ribcage, reverberating in her core.

And then the song ended, the last note drawn out between them, fading into the quiet, and she let go a breathless sigh and shot a look at Barry. He was looking at her, too, in a state of rapture. “Wow.”

Lup felt like she might burst. It was probably the music, but could he just look at her like that all the time, please?

“Damn, we’re good!” she managed. She glanced over to Johann. “Right?”

“Hell yes.” He was tearing up. “All that practice really shows.”

“Thank you, Johann,” said Barry. “I don’t think we would have gotten this far without you.”

“You guys are good students,” Johann said, wiping his eyes. “You two should really consider performing this piece. Or any piece, really.”

Barry’s eyebrows shot up. “Performing?”

Lup whistled. “You really think we’re ready to do this in front of people?”

“Definitely.” Johann was dead serious. “Actually, I was going to say this earlier, but there’s a community concert in a couple of weeks. There’s an audition, but it’s mostly a formality. It might be a good place to start.”

“I know the one you’re talking about,” said Barry. “Really, though? You think we won’t…I don’t know, embarrass ourselves?”

“You couldn’t possibly, not if you play like that,” said Johann. He checked his watch. “Uh, sorry, I have to run. I got another lesson. But hey, let me know what you decide.”

“Sure thing, music man,” said Lup, leaning up against the wall. A community concert. Wasn’t exactly Radio City, but the idea appealed to her. “We’ll talk it over.”

He grabbed his ridiculous monogrammed leather folio and opened the door to the practice room, but paused in the doorway. “I just remembered. Would you guys look at something for me?”

“What kind of something?” Lup asked.

He started digging around in his folio. “You kind of inspired me. I wrote something…it’s not perfect, but I’d love to hear your thoughts on it…ah, here it is. Take both copies.” He held two small sheafs of papers out to Lup and Barry.

“You ought to keep at least one copy for yourself,” said Barry as he took his sheaf.

“Oh, no, I’ve got it memorized,” said Johann, as if this was no big deal. “See you guys.”

Lup snorted as he left. “This guy.”

Barry grinned and took it. “This guy.”
“So what do you think about performing?” Lup asked, flipping through the pages. It was titled “Agapē,” which was what, Greek? 6/8 time, interesting. Some of these notes looked a little tricky, but the key looked okay.

“I think we should do it.”

Lup looked up in surprise. “Really? You wouldn’t be nervous?”

He smiled wryly. “Lup, I am always nervous. But I’ve been to the community concert. It would be hard to find a lower-stakes venue.”

She chuckled. “That kind of a community concert, huh?”

“It’s always an adventure,” said Barry solemnly, and Lup laughed. He grinned.

“Well listen, I’m down for it if you are,” she said.

“It’s pretty public,” he said cautiously.

“Yeah, well, this isn’t a secret anymore, so screw it.” She brandished her violin like a weapon. “This town better be prepared for us.”

Now Barry laughed. “If you’re sure.”

“Puh-lease,” she said, and decided to take a risk. “There’s no one I’d rather share a stage with.”

A look of surprise crossed Barry’s face. Shit, damage control, damage control-- “Except maybe Taako,” she added.

Barry’s surprise turned to a smile. “Hell, I can’t match that kind of glamor.”

Lup laughed again. “Oh, speaking of glamor, we should hit him up for something to wear.”

“For the concert?” said Barry.

“Yeah, might as well go all out, right?”

“Sure, I guess.” He was frowning a little. “I’m just…not usually very comfortable in fancy dress.”

“It doesn’t have to be fancy,” she said.

Barry nodded. “Then I’m willing. Hey, do you have somewhere to be? I want to try out this piece of Johann’s before we go.”

“I’m yours all afternoon,” she said, placing the music on her stand. “Just sight-read it?”

“Sure, give it a go. You want to count us off?”

“You better, I’ve got the first note.”

“All right…it’s adagio, so…one and two and three--”

They played it, with some fumbling, all the way through. It was a relatively short piece, only three or four minutes long, but as their last notes faded, they were both struck speechless.

“My god,” said Barry, staring at the music.
“Fuck,” breathed Lup. “And he thinks this isn’t perfect?”

“Oh my god,” said Barry again.

“We should… we should play this one for the concert, right?”

Barry nodded vehemently. “Absolutely. We’ll need a lot more practice, though.”

“Then let’s go, Barold, count us off!”

“Right--one and two and three--”

Lup pulled a steaming pan of perfect manicotti from Taako’s oven. “You’re gonna be nice, right?”

“I am a beacon of hospitality, sweet Lulu,” twittered Taako, spreading aromatic garlic butter on a split loaf.

“See now, that’s what I’m worried about,” she said, putting down the pan and jabbing his chest with an oven mitt. “I don’t want you to be cool. I want you to be nice.”

Taako paused in his buttering. “You’re acting like I’m meeting your boyfriend.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She snatched off the oven mitts and slapped them down onto the counter.

“Ah, yeah, you guys are just friends,” teased Taako, and resumed buttering. “Friends who tell each other everything and stuff.”

“Yeah, exactly,” said Lup. “Now where’s the parmesan?”

Taako pointed with his knife to the counter, where she’d got it out before. She snatched it up, dug around in a drawer for the grater, and proceeded to riddle the top of the manicotti with cheese. Taako watched her carefully.

“Ugh!” she said finally, tossing the grater into the sink with a clatter. “Cause like, he’s so nerdy, right? Like, stupid nerdy.”

“So you’ve said,” said Taako, scraping the last of the butter onto the bread.

“And like, he has absolutely no sense of style,” she said, crossing her arms and glaring at the pasta.

“You have so much in common,” Taako quipped.

“Don’t start,” she shot back.

Taako raised the bread in surrender. “Fine, fine.”

“You know I told him I was making my own pasta and he said he didn’t know you could do that?” Lup scoffed.

Taako snickered. “Oh boy, does he think the name-brand spaghetti sauce is fancy?”

“You know, you laugh, but I think he does,” Lup said earnestly.

“Good god,” Taako said. “Someone rescue this man from himself.”

“Right?” said Lup, throwing up her hands. “And you want to know something else?”
“Do I?” Taako murmured, stifling a laugh.

“He doesn’t know how to swim.” She paced the tiny kitchen. “What kind of grown-ass man can’t even swim?”

“Beats me, Munch,” he said, shaking his head. “He sounds like a loser.”

“I know!” She left off pacing to sit down at the table and glower into space.

Taako laid the bread on a baking sheet and set the oven to “broil.” Wait for it…

Lup buried her face in her hands and wailed, “Then why do I like him so much!?”

There it was. Taako grinned. “So the truth comes out.”

“Please, Taako, just kill me,” she groaned. “Ease my suffering. I’m begging you.”

“When’s the last time you had a good crush, Munch?”

“I don’t know! It’s been a while!” She threw her head back in despair. “It suuuuuucks.”

“C’mon, crushes are fun,” Taako goaded, sitting down with her at the table.

“No, they’re torture.” She scowled at him. “This is all your fault, you know.”

“Who, moi ?”

“You said I should open up to people, and I did, and a bunch of feelings got in,” she snapped.

“Sorry, I guess?” Taako grinned. “What are you going to do?”

She shot him a look that was equal parts dismay and terror.

“Well how does he feel? Strictly friends?”

She threw her hands out in an exaggerated “I don’t know” gesture.

Taako sighed. “All right, I take it back. Your crushes are no fun.”

Lup put her forehead on the table and groaned.

“Are you seriously just gonna let this eat you up?” said Taako, resting his hands on the table and his chin on his hands.

She turned her head just enough to look at him. “Maybe.”

“Are you really, though?”

“No.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’d explode. But I’m not gonna say anything now.”

“How come?”

She mirrored his pose, resting her head on her own hands. “Doesn’t feel right yet. I want to wait for the right moment.”

“What if there’s never a right moment?” Taako asked. “This isn’t a fairy tale.”
“I think I’m entitled to some fairy tale in my life, personally,” she said haughtily.

Taako snorted. “Still, though.”

“I’ll burn that bridge when I get to it,” she said, sitting up.

He smiled wickedly and leaned back in his chair. “You want me to be your wingman?”

“Oh my god, no.” She pointed to him. “I’ll kill you.”

Downstairs the door opened. “Taako? Is this the right pie?” Kravitz appeared, holding up a paper box.

Taako stood up and flipped open the box. “That’s the one! I made this one this morning, Lup. Threeberry.” He kissed Kravitz. “Thanks, babe. Put that on the counter for me?”

A knock rattled the door downstairs. Lup jumped to her feet. “I’ll get it.”

“Go ahead, I’ve got to get the salad,” Taako said, waving a hand.

She paused at the top of the stairs to jab a finger in his direction. “Be nice.”

“Uh-huh. Krav, would you get that vinaigrette from the fridge?”

Lup thumped down the stairs. Taako heard her say, “Hey. Uh, come on in.”

“Anything else I can do?” Kravitz slid the bowl of vinaigrette onto the counter, then wrapped an arm around Taako’s shoulders and kissed his cheek.

“Want to help me embarrass my sister?” Taako said.

Kravitz chuckled, gave him a squeeze, and let go. Lup and Barry’s footsteps came up the stairs.

“So, uh, this is Barry.”

Taako glanced over his shoulder to see his sister and some Tom Arnold-looking motherfucker in a sweater vest, holding a bottle of wine. He looked nervous. So did Lup.

“What’s up, my dude!” Taako said, expertly pouring on the vinaigrette and shuffling the salad. “Heard a lot about you.”

“Oh, uh, all good things, I hope?” said Barry, glancing at Lup.

“Of course, of course,” Taako shmoozed.

“And you said you’ve met Kravitz before?” Lup added.

“Yes, at the first derby bout, right?” said Kravitz, extending a hand.

“That’s right,” said Barry, shaking his hand. “Uh, how are you?”

“Good, thanks,” said Kravitz, and gestured to the wine bottle. “I can open that up, if you like.”

“Sure.” Barry handed it off.

Taako saw Lup tapping her hands against her thighs. Awkward small talk. Much more of this and she was going to do something stupid. Time to wingman.
“Let me tell you, Barold, you are in for a treat.” Taako put the salad bowl on the table. “This manicotti is the shit. Sausage, spinach, and cheese. Lup’s a master.”

Barry winced. “Cheese?”

“Three kinds,” Taako enthused.

Lup looked at Barry in alarm. “Oh, no, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t get along super great with lactose?”

Taako’s mouth snapped shut.

Lup covered her face with one hand. “Shit. Oh my god.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Barry assured her. He put a comforting hand on her arm, Taako noted. “It’s not so bad, I promise. Honestly, the food smells so good, I’m willing to brave a little indigestion.”

She shot him a grateful glance. “I’m sorry, Barry, really, I should have asked.”

“I should have said something,” he responded. “I’m sure it’ll be worth it.”

Wasn’t that just sweet as hell, Taako thought, moving back to the stove.

“That’s just a lot of fuckin’ pressure,” Lup said, laughing.

“It’ll absolutely be worth it,” said Taako, taking the pan of manicotti and putting that on the table too.

“How’s that wine coming, babe?”

Kravitz looked up from reading the label. “Hm? Oh, sorry, I was… this is a really nice merlot.”

Barry smiled sheepishly. “Well, thanks. Uh, I know jack shit about food, but wine I can do.”

Kravitz took a four glasses from a cupboard, looking impressed.

“So, we’ve got a few minutes before the bread is ready,” said Taako, opening the oven and sliding the baking sheet with the bread inside. “You guys want to start looking at outfits?”

“Sure,” said Barry, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Fabulous.” Taako sauntered over to the racks of clothes, followed closely by Lup. “Now what are we thinking? What is the look?”

“This!” Lup snatched the dress from The King and I off the rack and held it up to herself. “Shit, this is pretty.”

“So we’re going full-on costume dressy, are we?” Taako considered Barry’s honest, pudgy form. “I have a period-appropriate tux--”

“A tux?” said Barry, wincing. “I’m not much for dressy clothes.”

“You’ll make it look good, trust me,” said Taako, waving away his concerns with one hand. “Now where did I put it…”

“Isn’t it more important that he’s comfortable onstage?” asked Kravitz from the counter, where he was pouring the wine.
Lup laughed. “How dare you suggest to my brother that there is something more important than aesthetic.”

Taako tapped his foot impatiently. “Do you want to look good or not?”

“Well nobody said I have to wear this to do it,” said Lup, carefully hanging the dress back on its rack.

“You always look good,” said Barry sheepishly.

Lup smiled and curtsied. “Thank you, it’s a gift. What else you got, Flip?”

Taako huffed and reached into a rack, fishing out a velvet slip dress. “This is about right for concert wear. Black is traditional, so this is a nice twist.”

Lup’s eyes widened in awe. “Oh my god.” She reached out and touched the velvet. It looked black, but shimmered violet under her fingers.

“It’s good, right?” Taako grinned. “Got a nice drop back there, too, know you’re into that.”

She lifted the dress out of his hands with reverence. “I need this on my body now.”

“Done, Munch.” Taako rubbed his hands together. “Now what do we put Barold in?”

Barry shifted anxiously. “You know, I’m not sure what I could wear that’d match something like that.”

“Oh, no worries there, Barry, it’s nothing complicated on your end.” Taako rifled through the nearest rack. “A suit with a matching shirt—I’m sure I have a violet one in here somewhere.”

“Couldn’t I just wear a nice pair of jeans?” said Barry pleadingly.

Taako stopped. He felt… yes, yes, definitely, it was his soul leaving his body.

“Maybe with a suit jacket?” Barry suggested.

Taako turned slowly. “You… but you two have to look like you’re… together,” he sputtered. “Like you have to look like you came to the same event.”

“I won’t be able to focus on playing the piano if I’m uncomfortable,” said Barry, shrugging.

“Your audience won’t be able to focus on you playing the piano if your duet partner looks like a million bucks and you look like you shambled onstage from a Chamber of Commerce meeting!” said Taako, throwing his hands into the air.

“They also won’t be able to focus on the piano if it’s very bad because all I’m thinking of is how itchy I am,” Barry pointed out, looking mildly offended.

“You know Barold, I think I have to side with Taako on this one,” said Lup.

Both men looked to her.

She nodded solemnly. “You need something fancy. Like this.” She stuck her hand into a rack and yanked out a fluffy ruffled shirt from Pirates of Penzance.

Barry laughed. “Yeah of course. Sure.”
Lup’s deadpan broke into a smile. “Seriously, though, I’ll just steal this dress for later. I don’t have to wear it.”

“Stop stealing my costumes,” said Taako, snatching the dress out of her hands. “Did you want my help or not?”

“We want your collection, mostly.” Lup rehung the pirate shirt and flipped a few more hangers. “Here, Barry, what about this?”

Barry pulled out the shirt she was pointing to, a black bowling shirt with the classic vertical stripes in burgundy and cream. He considered it carefully. “I like it.”

“Yeah? ‘Cause I have a sundress that’s like, this exact red.”

Something in Taako’s gut died. “A bowling shirt.”

“You’re sure you’re all right with that, Lup?” asked Barry. “Either of those dresses would have been nice.”

Dazed, that’s what Taako was. He’d been blindsided by bad fashion. Mugged by it. In an alley.

“You’re already going to be nervous,” said Lup, shrugging. “No sense making things worse. We can go fancy for our next performance.”

Barry smiled a relieved smile. “Thanks, Lup, really.”

“But–but–” Taako attempted.

Kravitz’s hands appeared on his shoulders. “Let it go,” he murmured, steering Taako back towards the kitchen.

“What kind of casual Friday bullshit–” Taako began under his breath. He whipped the bread out of the oven and huffed it over to the table. But he paused as he looked at Barry and Lup again.

“You sure it’ll be okay?” Barry asked her, his eyebrows all scrunched together.

“It’s a community concert,” said Lup, smiling broadly at him. “We’ll be the best looking ones there.”

Barry chuckled and echoed her smile. The two of them looked at each other for a minute, grinning like idiots. Taako blinked a few times, his fashion storm dissipating in light of this new information. He looked over at Kravitz, who looked back at him eyebrows raised in a mildly surprised expression.

His sister was in love with the human equivalent of a pair of white tube socks.

And she was happy.
“I’m just not sure how well a grapevine will do out here,” Avi said, readjusting the blanket rolled up under his arm. He and Antonia were strolling hand in hand toward the bandshell at McElroy Memorial Park, where a crowd was already starting to gather.

“Well that’s the thing, it’s not just about climate, it’s also about soil and maintenance,” Antonia said. “I know I could get them to grow.”

“Where would you put them?” Avi asked, steering her through the crowd to a likely looking clear spot a little left of center. “There’s not a ton of space left in the garden.”

“I was thinking I could put a trellis in the middle of the vegetables,” she said.

“Wouldn’t that add a bunch of shade?”

Antonia considered this. “That doesn’t matter if we put it by the lettuces, they like a little shade.”

“Here, we’ll stop here,” Avi said, and let go of his wife’s hand to spread out the blanket. “Princess, if you think you can make it work, I’m game.”

“Yay.” She smiled. “There’s something so poetic about grapevines.”

“I like the bit where now we have the possibility to make our own wine,” Avi added, taking her hand again and guiding her to the blanket to sit.

“Oh, I’ll leave that project to you.” She grinned, and kissed him as soon as they’d settled onto the blanket.

“Hey, Avi!”

Avi broke off from his wife to look up. Magnus and Julia were headed their way, along with--

“Angus!” Avi said, jumping to his feet. “You’re back!”

“Hello, Mr. Avi!” said Angus, bounding up to their blanket.

“Get in here, kid,” Avi said, spreading his arms, and then paused and looked to Julia. “Hugs? That appropriate?”

“That’s up to Angus,” said Julia.

Angus grinned and threw his arms around Avi. Avi laughed and patted him on the back. “It’s good to have you back, kiddo.”

“I better receive any hugs being passed out,” said Antonia. Angus plopped down on the blanket beside her and hugged her too. She ruffled his hair when he let go. “How are you doing, buddy, okay?”

“Better all the time,” said Angus.

“Good.” Antonia clasped her hands under her chin. “Many a night I would gaze mournfully into the darkness, playing my gachapon kazoo and thinking of you.”
“It woke up all the neighbors,” said Avi, dead serious.

Angus burst out laughing. Antonia dropped the act and grinned.

“Hey, Taako and Kravitz,” Magnus observed as he spread out his blanket beside theirs. He shouted, “Hey guys!”

“Hello, sirs!” called Angus.

“Well looky here, it’s a party,” said Taako as they approached, carrying folding chairs. “Hey, Ango. I didn’t know all you guys were coming.”

“Johann and I go every year,” said Avi, sitting back down.

“Barry and Lup invited us,” said Magnus, as he and Julia settled in. “They said they were doing a song.”

“That’s why we’re here too,” said Kravitz, unfolding his chair. “Johann must be excited, huh?”

Avi was puzzled. “Why?”

“He’s the one who’s been teaching Lup and Barry, homie,” said Taako, plopping down in his own chair. “Didn’t you know?”

Avi frowned. “He said he had students in the concert, but I thought he meant like, other music alums. He’s not a teacher.”

“Sounds like he kind of is now,” Magnus offered.

“Well, well,” said Lucretia’s voice, as she and a solemn redheaded woman wandered by. “If there’s a group of friends like this, you can be sure Avi’s at the center of it.”

“Hey, Lucretia,” said Avi, grinning. “Won’t you join us?”

“That sounds lovely,” said the redhead, giving no indication that she actually believed it.

“Share a blanket?” asked Julia.

“Thank you,” said the redhead as she and Lucretia took a seat.

“You’ll remember Justice Troth?” said Lucretia.

“Justine, please,” said the redhead.

“Oh, yeah, of course!” Magnus shook her hand. “We actually should thank you--You’re part of the reason we finally got Angus.”

“Then I should thank you too!” Angus piped up.

“We’re his foster parents,” Julia explained.

Justine’s look softened, just a little. “I’m glad I could help.”

“*There’s* Johann,” said Taako, gesturing. “And Brad.”

Avi looked over his shoulder. Johann looked surprisingly calm, but maybe it was because he was holding Brad’s hand. Avi smiled to himself.
“What’s up, guys?” said Avi as his best friend approached, and a round of introductions took place, Angus to Brad and Justine to everyone and Brad to Julia, while Johann set out a blanket. Avi liked the look of the blankets and chairs all patched together, of Justine and Julia chatting, while Brad settled in next to Antonia and Angus, and Magnus and Lucretia bantered. Avi smiled contentedly. All his friends together. This was paradise.

He nudged Johann. “How are things?”


Avi grinned. “Both, man.”

Johann shot a glance toward Brad. “Things are…very good.”

“Nice.”

“Whatever,” Johann snorted, and nudged him back.

“I had a question for you, Antonia,” Brad was saying. “I plan to get started on a garden, and I hear you’re quite the gardener.”

Lucretia looked up from her conversation. “You’re starting a garden?”

“Yes,” said Brad enthusiastically. “There’s a spot in my yard that would look just wonderful with some roses. That’s my question, Antonia, I’m a bit worried that roses might be a little challenging for a beginner.”

“Actually, roses are a good place to start,” said Antonia. “They’re pretty low-maintenance as long as you’re consistent.”

“Ah, perfect, then.” Brad smiled. “Thank you.”

“See, this is a great idea,” said Johann, throwing an arm around his boyfriend. “It’s gonna be beautiful.”

“I’m glad you brought it up,” said Brad sincerely.

That reminded Avi of something. “Speaking of bringing things up--you didn’t tell me you were teaching music, Johann.”

“Didn’t I?” Johann looked thoughtful. “I am, yeah. I’m up to uh… six students now?”

“Six!” Avi was shocked.

“Yeah, four of them are playing today.” Johann counted off on his fingers. “Ariel, she’s on guitar, gonna play ‘Classical Gas,’ which I think she’s gonna kill… and then Rick, he’s got that clarinet solo, and uh, Lup and Barry. And they refused to tell me what they were gonna play, ‘cuz they’re a couple of drama queens sometimes.” Johann tapped his fingers on his knees. “They’re all gonna do fine, right?”

“Of course they are,” Brad assured him. “You’re good at this.”

“Thanks.” Johann shot Brad a fond look.

Brad paused. “Oh, shoot. I forgot my camcorder in the car.” He stood up.
“Oh, I’ll go with you,” said Johann, standing with him.

“All right.” Brad offered his hand, which Johann took, and they wandered off.

The moment they were out of earshot, Lucretia pronounced in disbelief, “Johann found Brad a hobby.”

Avi leaned forward. “Brad found Johann a job!”

“I can’t believe it,” said Lucretia, shaking her head.

“Is Brad as handsome as he sounds?” Antonia asked.

“Oh, definitely,” said Avi. “I’m still trying to—man, how did he convince Johann to sell out or whatever?”

“Is a hobby so surprising?” Justine asked Lucretia.

“It is for Brad,” said Lucretia.

“He acts like he was raised in a cubicle,” said Taako. “I’m pretty sure his favorite color is manila.”

Lucretia rolled her eyes. “That’s one way to put it, but yes.”

“So they’re good, right? Helping each other?” asked Angus.

Avi paused. He’d kind of forgotten Angus was here.

Lucretia stroked the divot above her lip. “It looks like it, yes. It’s just interesting.”

“It’s nice to see people who are so good for each other,” said Julia, smiling at Magnus.

The group made general affirmations of this, and then fell into a thoughtful silence. Avi leaned back on his hands, that sweet contentment creeping back into his chest. He was proud of his best friend, and he liked Brad. He took comfort in the fact that Johann had introduced them, instead of the other way around. For a long time it had seemed like Johann only had the friends Avi had, which was fine, but…still, this meant Johann was finally growing up.

“When’s the concert going to start?” said Magnus, interrupting the quiet.

“Any minute now,” said Kravitz, checking his watch.

“Miss Antonia, I just finished reading The Killing Joke,” Angus said.

“Oh, that’s a classic,” said Antonia, sitting up a little. “What did you think?”

“I thought it was interesting how they try to make you sympathize with a bad guy,” Angus said, “but the argument that one bad day makes you bad seems wrong. I think I’d be a supervillain already.”

“I think we all would,” said Antonia. “I think that’s the point.”

Angus’ face went awash with enlightenment. “Ohh.”

“This sounds like an interesting book,” said Justine. “I might like to read it.”
Avi suppressed a smile. *The Killing Joke* was definitely a Batman comic.

“Good evening, everyone,” said a voice from the speakers on the bandshell. A woman Avi recognized as a music professor from the university stood up there with a microphone. “Thank you for coming to this year’s community concert. We have a… stunning lineup for you this evening, featuring men and women, boys and girls from all over Faerun.”

Avi snickered at the lack of enthusiasm.

“Oh, good, we’re just in time,” said Brad, as he and Johann appeared and sat down.

“Lup and Barry are up first,” Johann mumbled.

Avi patted Johann on the back. “They’re gonna do great.”

“We’re proud to feature our community’s talent for the seventeenth year running,” said the announcer, and then her tone took on a little more sincerity. “I am pleased to introduce our first performers, Lup Peynirci on violin and Professor Barry Bluejeans on piano, who will be performing an extraordinary piece.”

“Extraordinary might be a little much,” said Johann. “It’s a fairly simple duet--”

“This piece was composed by local musician, one of my former students, Johann Larsen,” she said. “Please enjoy ‘Agapē.’”

The whole group turned to look at a speechless Johann. Brad hurriedly flipped open the camcorder. Johann burst into tears.

Standing backstage while Dr. Marlow opened the show, Lup clutched her violin, trying to will her hands to stop shaking. She never got nervous like this. Well not never--there was the last bout with the Rad Robes--still, this was fucking weird.

She looked over to Barry, who was staring straight ahead, eyes glazed over, constantly drying his palms on his khakis. He was in fine form today.

“Barry,” she said. He blinked a few times to look at her. She smiled a little. “I thought you said this was a low-stakes venue.”

He laughed nervously. “Yeah, uh, you know. Can’t seem to convince my brain of that.”

She nodded vaguely. Poor Barold.

“You’re probably not nervous, huh?” he said.

Lup held out a hand so he could see it shake.

“Oh god, not you too,” he said, reaching out and--

And taking hold of her hand. Lup froze.

Barry froze too. His mouth fell open, to justify or explain maybe, but he said nothing. Neither one moved, eye contact unbroken; the moment turned fragile and electric.

“Please enjoy ‘Agapē,’” said Dr. Marlow’s voice, followed by a little scattered applause, and the
moment was over.

Lup found she could breathe again. She murmured, “That’s our cue.”

Barry swallowed and let go, looking away. “Yeah. Uh, good luck.”

“Hey Barry?” she said, and when he looked up, she smiled like a cat. “Let’s do this.”

Barry managed a smile back, and they stepped onstage to their places.

People were talking in the audience, not really listening. Lup tucked her violin under her chin. They wouldn’t be talking for long. At the piano, Barry wiped his hands on his pants one more time and silently counted her off. One and two and three --

Because it was Johann’s song, Lup and Barry had spent time trying to figure out the story, the emotions the song was trying to convey. They’d decided it was an argument, between the violin, which was steady and strong and in some places quick and angry, and the piano, which played a scattered and complicated melody that danced around the violin’s. At first it almost sounded like the two of them took turns playing two different songs, one after another, sometimes stealing the last two or three notes from each other to add to their own tunes. Then the argument got more heated, and the tunes began to overlap, frustrating and discordant, until one climactic chord, where they were suddenly playing together. Then the piano started to play bits of the violin’s melody, and the vice versa, and suddenly they weren’t playing two different songs at all, but one beautiful harmony. It was an argument, but it was an argument between two people who, in the end, loved each other.

Lup poured every ounce of feeling she had into the song, and she could hear Barry doing the same, playing with the sort of—of love, yes, it was love, that she hadn’t dared hope he had for her, because it was the same love she felt for him. And today, she embraced it, and it felt like home.

The song ended with them playing one last note together, and as it faded, Lup noted that the audience had gone nearly silent. She enjoyed that last silent moment, keeping perfectly still…and then she exhaled, and so did Barry, and the crowd burst into applause.

She grinned at Barry, who jumped up to stand beside her, and they grabbed hands and took a flamboyant bow. Some of the audience was standing, god. Lup spotted Johann and a few other friends all on their feet, Johann’s face streaming tears. Lup laughed, and so did Barry, and they bowed again, and Barry looked at her like she was the only person in the world that mattered.

She gave his hand a squeeze and muttered as the applause faded, “Barry, do you want to go talk somewhere? For a while?”

A smile spread across his face. “Yeah,” he said.

And they left the stage so the next act could start, and neither one of them let go.
Lup sashayed down the hall, installed herself in the doorway of Barry’s office, and struck a careless pose. “Hey, handsome.”

Barry looked up and grinned. “Hi.” He gathered up an armful of paper and a shoebox from his desk. “Thanks for being cool about this.”

“Eh, here or the comic shop, doesn’t matter to me where we play.” Lup wandered into his office, looking deep into his skeleton’s skull. “Grab something for you?”

“Sure, here,” he said, passing off the shoebox and grabbing the pencil box full of dice and a keychain. “Uh, thanks, babe.”

Lup’s heart fluttered. Babe. She followed him across the hall to a room labeled “Conference.” Barry unlocked the door, flipped on the light, and held it open for her.

“Such a gentleman,” Lup said, alighting her free hand on Barry’s shoulder. “How shall I reward you?”

“Hmm.” Barry looked into her eyes, leaned forward, and kissed her on the nose. She scrunched up her nose and snickered. Barry grinned, and started to set up on a too-professional-for-D&D conference table.

“This works out pretty well, anyway,” Barry said. “Noelle said she needs all the time she can get in the lab.”

“Yeah, what did Lenny say he was doing this week?” Lup pulled her little witch figurine out of her purse and set her carefully on the table, and then hooked her purse’s strap over a chair. “Visiting family?”

“His grandkids, he said.” Barry set up the screen and spread out his notes behind it. “Can I see the box?”

Lup held the shoebox close to her chest. “You’ll have to pay the toll.”

“You’re trying very hard to get me to kiss you,” observed Barry.

“Well I can stop if you like,” she said, examining her nails.

“Oh, no, I’m not complaining.” He set down the rest of his notes and reached up, running his fingers through her hair. “It’s just not every day I’m given the privilege of kissing such a beautiful lady.”

Lup smiled, put her mouth a hair’s breadth from his, and whispered, “Get used to it, babe.” And she
kissed him like she meant it.

The moment of quick quiet breaths was interrupted by a pointed cough. Lup looked up to find Lucas standing in the doorway. He had the good grace to look a little embarrassed. “Uh, sorry, I--”

“It’s okay, nerdlord,” said Lup, shooting a smile at Barry. “C’mon in.”

“Cool, uh…” Lucas entered, looking sheepish. “I had a backstory question for you, Barry, if you’ve got a sec.”

Barry squeezed Lup’s arm before letting her go. “Yeah, sure, uh, Lup, would you go get Noelle? She’s in the engineering workshop—the building just across from this one?”

“You got it, Dungeon Master,” said Lup, strolling out the door and down the hall.

She floated along on a happy little cloud out one door and in another, following the sign in the half-lit engineering building that said “Workshop.”

“Gerald, what the hell?”

Lup paused just outside the oversized double doors. That was Noelle’s voice.

“Now listen, just listen for once. I’ll give it back, I promise. I just need one thing from you.”

Lup heard Noelle sigh. “What?”

“Just a kiss.”

Lup clenched her fists. Oh, hell no.

“You must be out of your mind if you think--”

“Listen, it’s just one kiss! Nothing else! You might even like it!”

Nope, not okay. Lup poked her head into the workshop.

The scene that greeted her was even worse than she anticipated. The workshop was empty except for Noelle and a leering kid in glasses. Noelle was sitting on a tall stool, backed up against a workbench. Her leg was missing; the kid, apparently Gerald, was holding it in one hand above her head, hovering over her like a vulture.

Noelle was glaring at him in utter defiance. “Why can’t you get it through your thick head that I’m not and never will be interested in you, Gerald?”

Good girl, Lup thought. Maybe she didn’t need help.

“If you give me a chance, you’ll see how nice I can be, huh?” said Gerald, leaning in close. Noelle attempted to squirm away, to no avail, as he got dangerously close.

Aaaaaand now. “Noelle?” Lup swept inside, adding just the slightest undertone of murder to her stride. “This guy bothering you?”

Noelle’s face was immediately awash with relief. Gerald straightened up, a little warily, but didn’t move away. “Hey, ma’am, this is none of your business.”

“Is it not?” She placed a splayed hand on his chest and gently pushed him backward. That’s the
ticket, a little distance between him and Noelle.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, swatting Lup’s hand away.

“Oh.” Lup softened her tone. “How interesting. So only you get to choose who touches whom, hmm?”

“Listen, lady, this is between me and my friend here,” he said, leaning in close to her. “Why don’t you go pound sand?”

“I can’t do that, Gerald,” Lup said. “Cause Noelle is my friend, see, not yours, and I’d hate, just hate to see anyone treating her with disrespect.”

“If we’re talking about disrespect, you’re being pretty damn disrespectful to me,” said Gerald, jabbing a finger in Lup’s face. “I bet you’re one of her dyke friends, huh? I bet you want her.”

Now he was talking about the team? Oh, he was a dead man. “Just batting a thousand today, aren’t you?” Lup spat. “How about this? I’m gonna give you one chance to give Noelle her leg back before I take it, huh?”

“You don’t scare me,” the kid said.

“Three…two…”

“Get out of my way,” snarled Gerald, and attempted to push her.

Attempted being the key word. Completely unmoved, she smiled, grabbed his ear, and twisted.

“Augh!” Gerald yelped. “God, fuck--”

“Drop the leg, Gerald,” Lup hissed.

“Fine!” He did, and it clattered to the floor.

“Are you gonna bother Noelle again?” Lup asked.

“She and I are--”

Lup twisted a little more.

“Yeah, yeah, no, I won’t! I won’t!”

“Right.” Lup tilted his head so he was looking at her. “And if I hear any different, you’ll get a lot worse than a scolding, capisce?”

“Yeah, okay! Whatever!”

“Good,” Lup purred, and released him. She patted him gently on the cheek. “Now get out.”

The kid rubbed his ear and scowled. “I still have work to do--”

“Did I fucking stutter?” Lup spat. “Get. Out.”

Gerald hesitated, for just an instant, and then took off running out the double doors. Lup watched him go with no little satisfaction.

“Thanks,” sighed Noelle. She was hunched over on the stool, head in her hands.
Lup paused. Despite playing derby and D&D together, despite finally feeling like part of the team, there was something that didn’t feel right about calling Noelle a friend. She knew why, of course, it was because of the tournament back in November--

“How could I be so stupid,” Noelle groaned.

Lup picked up the prosthetic carefully, gave it a quick once-over, and held it out to Noelle awkwardly. “This is the opposite of your fault.”

Noelle looked up and took her leg. “It kind of is, though. I thought it’d be a good idea to take off my leg for a bit. He wouldn’t’ve--”

“Guys like that always find a way to be jackasses,” said Lup. “Not your fault. Not even close.”

Noelle sighed again and started strapping on her leg. “I guess.”

Lup tried not to watch, looked at the workbench behind Noelle instead. It had three different prosthetics on it, in various states of working order from what she could tell, two arms and a leg. She felt like an intruder, and not just in the space, but she didn’t want to leave Noelle alone. That asshole kid might come back. “I’m uh…sorry about that. I know we’re not exactly… close.”

Noelle paused. “You’re sorry for saving me from Gerald?”

“No, no, sorry about--ugh.” Lup ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

“We’re not close…” Noelle frowned. “Like we’re not friends?”

“Something like that, sure,” said Lup briskly.

“Are we not?” asked Noelle.

Lup leaned against the workbench, careful not to touch anything. “You don’t want to be my friend, Noelle.”

Noelle shot her a look. “Why not?”

Oh, god dammit. Lup rubbed her forehead. This was not a conversation she wanted to have today. “You sure you want to know?”

Noelle was properly alarmed by this. “I do now.”

“Shit. Okay.” Lup braced herself for anger. “You remember the tournament? When the Robes snapped your leg?”

“Yeah?” Noelle looked lost by this line of reasoning.

“It was my idea.” Lup set her jaw. “I told them they should do it.”

“Oh.” Noelle leaned back down to finish putting on her leg. “Is that all?”

Lup was taken aback. “Wha--what do you mean, is that all?”

“I was expecting like, anti-Semitism. Something really bad,” she said.

“You’re not angry at all?” Lup felt almost indignant.
“No, it’s okay. I forgive you.”

“Y-you--” Lup blustered. “You can’t just go forgiving people!”

“Sure I can.” She finished attaching all the velcro that held her leg in place and slid off the stool. “Anyway, I understand why you did it.”

“Do you now?” Lup said, more acidically than she meant to.

Noelle paused. “I think so. I mean…we all saw the way the Robes treated you. You’re not the only one who did stuff you regret to fit in with people.” She tested her leg gingerly.

All the indignance drained out of Lup. She watched Noelle put her weight on her leg, then lean down to make an adjustment to the velcro.

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience, Cindy Lou Who.”

Noelle looked up, and then averted her gaze. “I don’t really…like to talk about it, but my first semester here…” She grimaced. “You wouldn’t believe the stuff i used to say to get the engineering guys to like me. Misogynistic stuff and…worse.” She swallowed. “I’m not proud of it, but I did.”

Lup felt an unexpected kinship. “Did it work?”

“No.” Noelle scooped a folder and some paper from the workbench and patted her pockets. “All I was doing was stroking their egos. And you saw how well that worked out.”

“I can relate,” muttered Lup.

“Yeah.” Noelle located a pencil in her back pocket and added it to the stack of paper in her hand. “But you know, that’s not really me anymore.”

Lup considered her carefully. “You think people can change?”

“God, I hope so,” Noelle sighed. “I kinda hate who I used to be.”

“Me too,” said Lup thoughtfully.

“So, uh, shall we?” Noelle held out a hand to the doors. Lup took the lead.

“What made you stop?” asked Lup as they left the engineering building.

“Stop what? Being that person?”

“Yeah.”

Noelle held open the door of the science building. “Same thing that made you stop, I think.”

Lup raised a skeptical eyebrow as she walked through the door. “Oh really?”

Noelle nodded. “It was the team. Who needs to be friends with idiots when you have family like that?”

Lup said nothing, but she nodded, very slowly.

“Well.” Noelle cleared her throat, and took on that terrible Cockney-adjacent accent she used to play Tilly. “Are you ready to fight a lich, Pam?”
Lup snorted and did her own character voice. “Please, Thief Tilly. Pam is always ready.”

Noelle laughed, and Lup found herself smiling too. Forgiveness, huh? It felt like a fist unclenching.

Carey and Magnus had arrived by the time they entered the conference room. Barry was saying, “I’m not gonna give you a plus two strength modifier just because you want one.”

“Okay, but consider this,” said Magnus, laying his hands flat on the table. “Ulysses is part bear.”

Carey cackled and Lucas joined laughing. Barry rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t even want to consider the biological implications of that.”

Lup and Noelle shared a glance and a good chuckle as they sat down.

“So besides that,” said Barry, settling in behind the DM screen, “any questions about levelling up?”

“I have a question,” said Lucas, pointing to Lup and Barry in turn. “How long have you two been together? Did I miss something?”

“You’re what!” yelped Carey. Lup grinned.

Barry blushed. “About a week.”

“I knew it!” said Magnus, throwing out a hand at Carey. “Ten bucks!”

“Dammit,” Carey said, digging her wallet out of her pocket. “You losers couldn’t have waited a month?”

“You didn’t see them at the concert,” Magnus said, accepting the bill from Carey. “Thank you. You guys were amazing, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Barry, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

To Lup’s surprise, she found herself enjoying the attention immensely. “You two bet on us getting together?”

“Yeah, we bet on everything,” said Carey.

“Do you?” said Lup, intrigued.

“Hell yeah,” she said, grinning. “You want in on the action on Lucretia?”

“Later, Carey, c’mon,” said Magnus. “I want to play.”

“Me too,” said Barry. “I uh. Didn’t mean to make this session all about us or anything.”

“I mean, I brought it up,” Lucas said, shrugging.

“It’s okay,” said Lup, patting Barry on the arm. “It would have come out anyway when you started playing favorites.”

Barry looked a little offended by this. “I’d never play favorites.”

“Never?” Lup goaded.

Barry hid a smile. “Never. No matter how hard you tried to distract me, or seduce me, or kiss me a lot--”
Lup half-stood. “You want to test that theory, Barold?”

“Ew, boo,” laughed Noelle.

“Ow ow!” Carey whooped.

“Get a room,” said Lucas, shielding his eyes.

Lup grinned at her boyfriend and sat back down. “All right, all right, I see. You all just hate love.”

“Now hold on,” Magnus said with mock indignance. “I love love.”

Barry chuckled. “Okay, then. Right. Ready?”

Her friends settled in. Lup did too, feeling...what was this feeling? Contentment, yeah, and something else too. She glanced at Barry. That’s what it was: possibility.

“All right,” said Barry. He steepled his fingers. “Our heroes were outside a cave, which you presume to be the lair of the the lich. When we left off, you had just heard a mysterious and constant clicking sound from inside.”

“Right, I was going to look inside sneakily,” said Noelle, taking a die from the open dice box and rolling it. She glanced at the die and then her character sheet. “Uhh, oo, not great. A seven.”

“Yep, awesome,” said Barry. “You stick your head around the corner, and you are immediately seen by thousands and thousands of eyes.” He grinned. “Eyes in multiples of eight.”

“Oh no,” groaned Lucas.

“That’s right, the cave is full of giant spiders,” said Barry gleefully, and chuckled as they all moaned in anguish. “Roll for initiative.”
Julia tapped her hand against her arm impatiently as Sloane unhitched her car from the tow truck.

“So?”

Sloane shook her head. “Julia, I don’t know how you managed this.”

“It was the stupid deer again!” said Julia, raking her hand into her curls. “At least I didn’t hit it this time.”

“Right, you just skidded off the road and bent your axle.” Sloane sighed. “Honestly, Jules, it would have been better for your car if you’d just hit it.”

“Ugh.” Julia massaged her forehead. “Whatever. You can fix it, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a spare axle on hand,” she said. “Maybe two days?”

“That’s fine, I guess,” said Julia, checking her watch. “Dammit. I have to pick up Angus from school in like, twenty minutes. I don’t suppose you have a loaner?”

“Both our loaners are out,” said Sloane. “What about Magnus?”

“He’s out in Iprè on a job,” groaned Julia.

“Listen, I would lend you someone else’s car, but Hurley’s interviewing for the police department today and made me promise not to do anything illegal for like, at least a month,” Sloane said.

“Sloane, I’m really not in the mood for jokes,” Julia said, rubbing her forehead.


Julia made her way through the loud garage as Sloane directed her mechanics. Damn and damn and damn. What kind of foster mom was she, anyway?

She shut herself in the office and sighed in the relative quiet. This wasn’t really her fault; she’d probably be late even if she had hit the deer, and blaming herself was not going to fix anything. Still, though, she couldn’t help but feel guilty.

Julia picked up the phone and dialed Rosemary and Rye, and tried to remind herself that this wasn’t something she was supposed to do alone.

“Yello, Rosemary and Rye?”

“Hey, Taako, it’s Julia. I need a favor—”

“Sorry, sweet cheeks, if it involves leaving the shop, I can’t do anything until Joaquin gets here.”

“Well, when is he gonna get there?” asked Julia.

“Another hour or so?”
“Dammit,” Julia grumbled. “I need somebody to pick up Angus. Do you think Kravitz--”

“No can do, Jules, he’s out in Goldcliff making a website for a podiatrist. What about Carey? Merle would probably let her off for an afternoon.”

Julia sighed again. “No, she and Killian went to Rockport to visit Killian’s family. Why is everyone out of town right now?”

“You could try Avi and Antonia.”

“No, Avi was just complaining about their weird shift schedule. They’re at work.” Julia gritted her teeth. “Maybe Johann?”

“He doesn’t have a car. Oop--sorry, Jules, gotta go. Afternoon, folks, what can I--”

Julia listened to him hang up and put down the phone. Lucretia couldn’t do it, not with Brian breathing down her neck. Maybe Noelle? She dialed Noelle’s number and got voicemail.

Sloane opened the door to the office just as she hung up. “Any luck?”

“Nope. Do you know if Hurley’s free?”

Sloane shook her head. “When I say she’s interviewing for the police department, I mean she’s interviewing like, right now. Sorry, Jules.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Who have you tried so far?”

Julia rattled off the list. Sloane rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“Well there is one more person you could call.”

Lup sat cross-legged on the floor of her new apartment, phone balanced between her ear and her shoulder as she alphabetized her books. “I ask you, babe, is there anything more satisfying than a well-organized library?”

“A well-organized lab,” said Barry promptly on the phone. She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Psh, what a nerd,” she said, sliding a Pournelle aside to fit another Pratchett.

“Oh, I’m the nerd. Who called who to brag about her library?”

Lup laughed. “I think you mean, who called whom.”

“Yeah, sure, whom is the real nerd here, anyway?”

“Hey now--” Lup prepared a stunning response, but was interrupted by a call-waiting beep. “Oh, uh. Someone else is calling me. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure thing. I lov--I--yep. See you then.”

Lup smiled, just a little, at the glow in her chest. “Bye.” She punched the button on her phone to switch lines. “Wassup?”
“Lup? It’s Julia.”

Lup furrowed her brow. Unusual. “Hey, Julia, what’s shaking?”

“I’m um…sorry to bother you but I need to ask a favor.”

“Well, you did help me carry roughly fourteen thousand boxes up three flights of stairs last week, so I suppose I can manage a favor,” said Lup, putting down the books in her arms. She hadn’t expected moving help, but Taako had insisted, and the whole team ended up coming. “What do you need?”

“Angus McDonald, please report to the front office,” said the voice on the intercom.

Angus looked up from his book in alarm. The entire class went, “Oooooooo…”

“Enough,” sighed Mr. Cho. “Angus, you’re all done with your quiz, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Angus, closing his book.

“Then you’re dismissed for the day. The bell’s going to ring in ten minutes anyway. I suggest the rest of you finish your work.”

Angus stuffed his book in his backpack as unobtrusively as he could and left class, trying to ignore the eyes on him. What could the office want with him? Maybe Miss Julia was early to pick him up? But she’d just wait until school was over, wouldn’t she?

He swallowed back the fears that something had gone wrong. No need to worry until there was something to worry about. He made his way through the quiet halls to the front office.

The lady at the desk looked up as he came through the door. “Angus McDonald?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, approaching the desk uneasily.

“I have a message for you from Julia, your…” The lady gave him a questioning glance. “Mom?”

Angus nodded. “Basically.”

“Right.” The lady adjusted her glasses and looked down at a notepad. “She wants you to know that she’s fine, but your car was in a wreck, so she’s sending a friend to pick you up, name of Lup.” The lady looked back up. “She also says she’ll meet you at home as soon as she can.”

“Oh,” said Angus, frowning. Very strange. Why would Miss Julia ask Lup? There were so many other…actually, maybe not, a lot of the team was out of town right now. “Thank you,” he added.

“You’re welcome,” said the lady. “That’s all, you can go back to class.”

Angus left the office and took his time going to his locker. No point in going back to class now. He stopped at his locker and carefully dialed in his combination.

Miss Lup was…he wasn’t sure how to feel about her. He knew she was on the team before he’d finally gotten out of the group home and seen her at a practice—Carey, Killian, and Taako had mentioned her in their letters—but he couldn’t quite shake the memory of her breaking Taako’s nose. She had been cruel, and now she was not, and being away from the team for so long meant that he missed the point when she changed. The team seemed to trust her, and maybe that should be enough, but even so…
Maybe then, it was time for an investigation. Angus smiled.

The bell rang, and kids started pouring into the hallway. Angus grabbed his math book, shut his locker, and headed for the front door.

June caught him just as he exited the school. “I heard them call your name. You okay?”

“Yeah, but maybe wish me luck?” he said.

“What for?”

“It’s an investigation. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

“Okay, good luck!” she said, and took off toward the line of buses.

Angus waved, then scanned the cars in the pickup line. What kind of car did Miss Lup have?

“Hey, Mick!” Brody’s voice invaded his focus.

Angus thought up a list of his favorite cuss words, but said nothing and started walking. Don’t look at Brody. Don’t even acknowledge him.

“Mick Mick Mickey Mick, what’s up.” Brody was walking beside him now. Angus continued to ignore him. “Heyyyy, can’t you even say hi?”

Nope. Don’t do it. He’ll just turn your words. Angus wasn’t even looking where he was going now, as long as he was moving.

“C’mon, Mick, aren’t we buddies?” Brody tousled his hair roughly.

“Please don’t,” Angus muttered.

“Don’t what? Do this?” Brody scrubbed his head again, knocking his glasses askew.

“Cut it out,” said Angus, trying to walk faster and adjust his glasses at the same time.

“You cut it out,” said Brody, grabbing onto his backpack and keeping pace. “Hey do you still carry your skates around everywhere? Can I have them?”

“Hey.”

The voice was sharp, decidedly Grown-up with just a hint of Teacher. Both Angus and Brody stopped dead. Lup loomed in front of them and glared down at Brody. “Let go of his backpack.”

Brody’s hands flew off in automatic obedience, but he sneered at Lup. “Mickey’s my friend.”

“He doesn’t look like your friend, little boy,” said Lup, with a tone that could have cut mahogany.

“I’m not a little boy!” Brody snapped.

Lup leaned down. She was tall enough that she was bent almost double at Brody’s eye level. Her eyes flashed. “You look pretty little to me.”

Brody walked away backwards, stumbling a little on his feet. Angus didn’t blame him.

She watched him go, expression unchanged, before softening it and looking to Angus. “Now I do have the right kid, right? Angus?”
Let the investigation begin. Angus nodded. “Yes.”

She looked back after Brody. “The fuck is Mickey?”

“Short for McDonald,” Angus sighed. “It’s not my name, though.”

“I know how that is,” said Lup, rolling her eyes. “Ready to go?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Angus, and followed Lup. So far she had stopped a bully from bullying him, despite having shown herself to be a bully. She was trusted by the team, so maybe she had become a bully only to other bullies? Interesting.

“Your chariot,” said Lup, waving her hand at a little silver car. She had parked, not waited in the pickup line.

Angus climbed into the backseat. “Thank you,” he said, on principle.

“You can sit in the front, you know,” said Lup, settling into the driver’s seat.

“I’m not five feet tall yet,” he said, buckling his seatbelt.

“Is that a rule?” Lup buckled her own seatbelt. “Well I won’t tell anybody if you won’t.”

“Thank you, but I’d rather sit in back.” Anyway, his seatbelt was already buckled.

“Whatever you want, little man.” She adjusted her mirrors, glanced back at him in the rear-view, double-checked her own seatbelt, and started the car.

So, then, she was willing to break rules if she didn’t think they were important, but unwilling to drive if she couldn’t see where she was going or if someone was unbuckled, which possibly meant that she thought safety was important, but not the most important.

“What’s wrong with people, anyway?” Lup muttered as she pulled out of the parking space. “You know that’s the second time in two weeks I’ve had to give a kid a talking-to.”

“What other kid?” Angus asked.

Lup drove slowly through the crowded parking lot, with more patience than Magnus usually did. “Some bozo was harassing Noelle.”

“Who?” Angus demanded, distressed.

“Classmate of hers. Real piece of work. But he hasn’t bothered her since.” She glanced back at him in the mirror. “Maybe I should just be a vigilante now, huh? Like Batman.”

Angus opted not to respond. She looked away after a few seconds. So, further evidence for hypothesis 1. And if hypothesis 2 was correct, then it meant that she thought that bullying was more important than safety, such as when Angus was being bothered by Brody and when Noelle was being harassed by a classmate. And now he was getting into his favorite part of the investigation, motive. Why was it that Lup had thought breaking Taako’s nose was more important than his safety?

“I saw that jump you did at the bout last week,” said Angus, keeping his tone casual. “Where three of the blockers were piled up against Miss Sloane and you leaped over all of them.” It had been an amazing jump, but dangerous.
Lup grinned into the rear-view mirror. “Pretty rad, right?”

Angus conceded the point with a nod. “It was cool, but you could have just gone around.”

“Aw, but that wouldn’t be any fun at all,” she said.

Fun? That was what was more important to her than safety? Had she broken Taako’s nose for fun?

Now hold on, there was something else to consider, and it was that (fact 1) caring about your personal safety was not the same as caring about the safety of others.

“But you could have hit Miss Sloane in the head with your skate,” said Angus.

“Nah, she was half-buried under one of the Phandolin blockers. I would have hit one of them first.”

Aha. Apparently Lup felt that (hypothesis 4) the safety of her team superseded the safety of the other team. And…well, she had been a Rad Robe when she’d hit Taako.

Angus frowned at his hands, folded in his lap. If hypothesis 4 was true, then the only reason Lup was trustworthy was because she was on their side now. But (item 3) the team trusted her, and they were (item 3b) not dumb or naive. They wouldn’t trust someone with such flexible loyalty. Unless hypothesis 4 was true in addition to something else.

Time to be straightforward then. “Miss Lup?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did you quit the Rad Robes?”

She glanced back at him questioningly. Angus waited.

“They were really mean,” she said finally. “I got tired of it. I decided to join a team where people were nicer.”

“If they were so mean, why did you join in the first place?”

“Pff. Didn’t realize this would be a backseat interrogation.”

Whoops. Backing off. “Sorry, I just--”

“Nah, it’s all right, kiddo.” She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts, maybe. “All I wanted was to play derby. I thought it’d be my only chance.”

She had been (Item 9) desperate. Angus knew that feeling.

He looked down again. This changed things. It meant that hypotheses 2–4 were correct, and that (conclusion 1) Lup was so desperate to keep derby, something she loved, that she was willing to hurt people.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered.

“Understand what?”

Angus paused. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but she had answered all of his questions so far. “I don’t understand why you fought so much when you were on the Rad Robes. Why you called people names and… hurt people.”
“Hmm. Well, all right.” Her steely gaze turned back to him in the rear-view. “Now it’s my turn for questions. Do you think fighting is wrong, Angus McDonald?”

Oh, dear, now she was investigating him. Maybe that was only fair. “Of course,” he said.

“So you’ve never fought anyone before.”

Angus hesitated. “I tried to fight Brody once.”

“That kid from before?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Angus looked down at the upholstery. “He tried to steal my skates.”

“Yeah, so it was important to you. And you still have your skates, right, I’ve seen them, so I can only assume it worked.”

“No, he just gave me a black eye. My friend Mavis had to take them back.”

“How?”

Again, Angus hesitated. “She… hit him.”

“So same question. Is fighting wrong?”

“Fighting isn’t right if you’re not doing it for the right reasons,” Angus insisted.

“I agree with you.” Lup’s voice went quiet. “And I wasn’t. So I quit, and I found something worth fighting for.”

Oh. Then hypothesis 1 was correct, sort of. Which meant that (conclusion 2) Lup had discovered that hurting people wasn’t worth it.

That would be why the team trusted her--she’d proved that her priorities had changed.

“Really, only one fight ever?” said Lup.

Angus raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Wow. I think my childhood was more messed up than I realized.”

“How many fights did you get in?” asked Angus.

“Oh, god, I don’t know. Too many to count. I kind of had to.” She glanced back at him again. “But I got good at it eventually.”

Angus resituated in his seat and remembered that (fact 2) you always got better at things you practiced at. “I don’t think I’ll ever be good at fighting.”

“With any luck, you won’t have to be.”

They were quiet for a while. Angus pondered his conclusions. Lup wasn’t a bully, then, just a fighter in the wrong direction. Or rather, fighting for the wrong things could turn you into a bully. A new fact. Angus filed it carefully away in his mental library and decided that this investigation was a
success.

“So. Angus. Word on the street is you like to read.”

Angus looked up. “Very much, Miss Lup.”

“What sort of books?”

“All sorts.” He thought of the book in his backpack, a disappointingly abridged Nancy Drew where they’d cut out the bit where she had a gun. “But mysteries are my favorites.”

“Ah, so you’ve probably met my friends the Boxcar Children.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ve read a few, although after forty or so you start to be able to guess the end pretty easily.”

Lup half turned in her seat. “There are forty Boxcar Children books? Since when?”

“I think there are more like seventy now.” Angus squinted, trying to remember. “They came out with six last year.”

“No fuckin’ way.” She turned back to the road. “And you’ve read forty of them?”

“Something like that. Mostly now I just read the ones about ghosts.”

“I think I’ve got some catching up to do.”

Angus smiled.

Julia waved a thank-you to Sloane’s car and checked the mailbox. Sloane had only just managed to get away for long enough to give her a ride home, a half hour after she was supposed to pick up Angus. No mail. She proceeded up the walk and unlocked the front door.

Julia admitted a little bit of nervousness on what state she’d find Angus in. She liked Lup—god, if she could hear herself thinking that a year ago—but Lup didn’t exactly seem like the kind of person who was good with kids, or even liked them. Or maybe that was just Julia being judgy. After all, if a year ago she’d been told that she’d have a kid—

She opened the door, and noted with relief that Angus’s backpack was slumped against the back of the couch. All right, so he’d made it home, good.

“I’m home!” she called, putting her keys in the bowl, and paused. There were voices coming from upstairs. Huh. She shut the door behind her and made her way up to Angus’s room, listening.

“So you’re telling me that in seventy books, Benny has had absolutely no character development, and Grandfather has had—how many birthdays?”

Julia paused outside the door. That was Lup.

“At least four, maybe more, but none of the kids grow up!” This was Angus talking now. “The one mystery they can’t solve is series continuity!”

“Yeah, I see why you stopped reading them.”
This was a surprise. Julia poked her head in the doorway. Lup and Angus were sitting on the floor, surrounded by half-open tomes and scattered bookmarks. Lup was examining a paperback as if it was in code. Angus held out another book.

“Caleb Cleveland, Kid Cop is much better,” he said. “You should try it.”

“Now I have to,” Lup said thoughtfully, accepting the book without taking her eyes off the page. “You know, maybe the Boxcar Children are stuck in some kind of eternal loop, doomed to solve mysteries until they can find the one that will free them from this time prison.”

Angus’s eyes went huge. “I would read that book.”

Julia cleared her throat. Lup and Angus looked up. Julia stifled a smile. “Having fun?”

“Uh. Hi. Sorry.” Lup snapped the book in her hand shut. “Angus just wanted to show me his library.”

“It’s fine,” Julia assured her. “Thanks for picking him up.”

“Yes, thank you,” Angus added.

“Yeah, of course.” Lup got to her feet, deftly avoiding the remnants of the book-splosion. “Uh. Anytime. Seriously.”

“Careful, we’ll totally take you up on that.” Julia grinned.

Lup smiled back. “Right. Um. I guess I’ll see you at practice--”

“Can Miss Lup stay for dinner?” Angus interrupted.

Julia’s eyebrows shot up.

Lup paused. “I don’t want to impose--”

“No, that’s a great idea,” said Julia, surprising herself by saying it. All the better to thank her for the favor today, and if Angus liked her… “There’s this zucchini pasta dish I’ve been wanting to try for ages, but Magnus hates zucchini and I’d end up making too much for just Angus and me anyway-- we’d love to have you.”

“Pfft, tempt me with cooking,” scoffed Lup, maybe to hide that brief flattered smile. “Yeah, sure, okay.”

“I’ll clean up the books and then come help!” Angus declared, gathering armfuls of them.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Lup said, crouching down to the floor again. “You ever think about alphabetizing your books?”

Angus dropped all of his books and looked at her in awe. “That is a great idea.”

Julia smiled and headed downstairs, leaving them to talk about libraries.
Julia sighed and twitched her mouth to the side. She turned side to side in the full-length mirror in the bedroom. She’d always liked this light blue sundress. Perfect for picnics or dates. She just never expected that she’d get married in it. Really she should be grateful, they’d been able to beg, borrow, and steal practically everything else for the wedding. It was going to a beautiful day, and on a shoestring budget too. But ...the dress. A quiet knock came from the door.

“Don’t come in!!” she shouted, quickly running to the door and holding it shut.

“Um, Magnus wanted me to tell you that we’re going to get started,” Angus said from the other side.

“Oh. Thanks, hun. I’ll be down in a sec.”

“Okay.” She listened to hear his feet walk down the stairs. She sighed and took off the dress, changing back into her shorts and t-shirt. She zipped it back up in the garment bag that Magnus was forbidden to open and put it in the back of the closet.

She joined Angus and Magnus downstairs. There was an episode of *Double Dare* playing on the TV. Angus was dutifully cutting squares of coral tulle. Magnus filled them with white colored bird seed and was trying to tie them one-handed with a small navy ribbon. She sat next to him on the couch, and helped him tie.

“Thanks.”

“Angus, did you finish your homework?” Julia asked, grabbing for a box to put the satchels in.

Angus nodded. “We just had to do reading, but I finished the book last week.”

“Reading, that’s it?” Julia shook her head. “Maybe we should see if there’s some sort of gifted and talented program at school.”

“I am in gifted and talented.”

“And you just had reading for homework?” Magnus asked, looking up from his bird seed pouch.

“...Yes?” Angus said, looking worried.

“Don’t worry. It’s not your fault, hun,” Julia assured him, tossing a satchel into the box. “Sad that the junior high still hasn’t been improved since I went.” She looked at Angus. “What would you think about going to Rockport and seeing if we couldn’t find some work books?”

“Is that like extra homework?”

“Yes. But you’re too smart to just have reading as homework. I know it might not seem like it, but you’re not that far off from high school and then college. You’ll want to be prepared.”

Angus mumbled something as he cut the next square.

“What was that?” Magnus asked gently.
“I said… I don’t know if I’ll go to college.”

Julia frowned. “And what makes you think that?”

Angus shrugged and didn’t look at them. “They say it’s really hard for foster kids to go after you… age out.”

Julia and Magnus looked at each other. They set down their supplies and went and sat on either side of him on the floor. Magnus quickly flipped off the TV and Julia put an arm over Angus’ shoulders. Angus kept cutting tulle squares.

“Who said this to you?” she asked.

Angus shrugged. “Some kids in the hall.”

Magnus heaved a sigh. Julia searched around, how to reassure him. She didn’t want to make any promises she couldn’t keep, so she chose a different tactic.

“Do you know why it’s hard for foster kids to do college?” she asked quietly. Angus shook his head.

“Because they lack a support system,” she answered.

Magnus nodded. “College is difficult for everyone, and if you don’t have people backing you up, it’s really really difficult.”

“But, Angus, do you know what you have?” Julia asked, tilting his chin up so he’d have to look at her. “You have a whole team of people who support you and love you like family. We all want the very best for you, and, just like we do in derby, we’ll see you through.”

Angus nodded.

“So if you want to go to college, all of us will help you get there,” Magnus said. “And if you don’t, that’s okay too. But for as smart as you are, and as loved as you are, where you came from will not stop you from achieving what you want to.”

Angus sniffled and smiled. “Okay.”

“Would you like to go to college?” Magnus asked.

Angus nodded. “I would.”

Magnus smiled. “Well, then. You’ll probably want to get those workbooks with Miss Julia.”

“Harvard doesn’t accept slackers,” Julia added, a teasing smile on her face. Angus laughed a little.

“I think Princeton does,” Magnus replied. Julia smacked his shoulder as he laughed, and she returned back to her spot over by the ribbons.

“Do you have any ideas for things you might like to study?” she asked.

“Sometimes I think it might be cool to be an engineer, like Miss Noelle. Or maybe a teacher. I’m not really sure,” Angus said, cutting the last of the tulle.

“You don’t have to know for sure, you have plenty of time. When I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be a horse trainer.”
“Wait, really?” Magnus looked at her. He gasped. “Were you the horse girl in your class?”
“I was,” she admitted.

“Oh my god, I married a horse girl.”

“Oh, please. Like what you wanted to be in sixth grade was so practical.”

“That’s fair. I wanted to be an astronaut who fought space crime.”

“Space crime doesn’t exist,” Angus said.


“Is someone on the back porch?”

At that exact moment, the door opened and Lucretia and Killian burst inside.

“Hello Magnus. Angus,” Lucretia said, very calmly for having just committed a B&E. “I’m stealing your fiancée and your van for the rest of the evening.”

“Found the keys!” Carey’s voice came from the kitchen.

“What are you—” Julia started. Killian quickly threw her over her shoulder fireman style and headed towards the back door. Lucretia nodded to the two left behind and turned to follow.

“Magnus!” Julia shouted at him.

“Have a good time!” he shouted back.

Killian carried Julia out the back and towards the garage.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Sloane asked, holding both of her hands behind her back.

“I don’t know, I can’t see,” Julia said, sounding a little exasperated.

“Perfect. Watch your step.” Julia still tripped and fell into the van, and she heard the door shut beside her.

“Seriously, guys. Where are we going?”

“Floor it, Taako!” Hurley said, and everyone rocked forward as he peeled out of the driveway and down the road.

“You guys, I’m not dressed to go anywhere.” she wriggled her toes. “I don’t even have on shoes.”

“You don’t need shoes where we’re going,” Killian said from the front seat.

“She doesn’t?” Noelle asked, before snapping another picture and winding to the next frame.
“Too late now,” Lucretia said, as Taako accelerated some more.

Julia was never very sure where they were headed, but they definitely left town. They bumped down the highway for about 30 minutes, and then slowed down when they reached some sort of town.

The chatter died down all of a sudden and they pulled, presumably, into a parking lot. The door slid open and Killian picked up Julia, and carried her bridal style.

“Thanks, Killian,” Julia said, resignedly.

“No prob, Jules.”

Someone else opened a door and a gentle chime sounded. Soft piano music was playing and it smelled like peonies. Where were they?

“Ah, is this the--” an unfamiliar voice asked.

“SHH!” several girls responded.

“Ah, yes. Well. Right over here.”

Killian carried Julia over to the left, and then set her down. There was plush carpet underfoot. Killian took her hand. “Just a little step up now.”

Julia stepped up onto what sounded like a hollow wooden box. Two hands grasped her shoulders and turned her a little bit.

“There. Okay,” Taako said, right behind her. “Are you ready?”

“Um, I guess?”

The blindfold was pulled off and it took Julia a few blinks for her eyes to adjust. And the first thing she saw was a white dress hanging on a large mirror. It was gorgeous satin with a lace overlay and a full skirt. Julia’s mouth dropped open when she saw it, and tears started to well in her eyes. After a minute, she noticed the entire team standing behind her, similar expressions on their own faces. Lucretia stepped forward, and, bless her, her eyes were teary too.

“We all chipped in so you could have a real wedding dress when you get married. It’s not fancy or anything--”

“No.” Julia turned to look at her and the rest of her team. “It’s perfect.” She pressed a hand to the base of her throat and tried to catch a breath. “I love you guys.”

“There’s plenty of time for crying later,” Taako said, the edges of his eyes red. “You have to go try it on!”

Julia nodded quickly, and took a breath to steady her nerves. The attendant guided her to a changing room, and a pair of satin heels were found for her as she was helped into the dress. She ran her hands over the skirt and turned side to side to watch the fabric sway back and forth. A smile spread across her face.

“Sometime this millenium, Jules!” Hurley shouted from back in the showroom. The bridal attendant looked rightfully shocked, but opened the door and let Julia walk out.

The team had all piled onto one of the small fancy couches in front of the mirror, much to the
exasperation of the rest of the staff, even though they were the only ones in the shop. Hurley was sitting on one of the arms. Taako was pouring champagne into flutes and he handed one to Sloane as Julia came into view. A loud chorus of ‘OOOOOOOO’s met her arrival.

“Damn, girl,” Carey whistled from her spot on Killian’s lap.

“Give us a twirl, baby,” Killian said. Julia smiled broadly and turned around, the skirt spinning out around her.

The attendant helped her stand back up on the riser. Julia looked at herself in the mirror, and tears sprang to her eyes again.

“Oh my god,” she said, looking at herself. The attendant added a veil attached to a hair comb.

“Now it may need some alterations,” the attendant started, pulling the veil smooth. “Which are an additional charge--”

Taako suddenly appeared at her side. He walked around the podium, carefully observing the dress. He, then, waved the attendant aside, who blinked rapidly at him but gave him room, and he stepped up on the podium.

“Clamp,” he said, holding his hand out to the attendant.

“I don’t think--” she began.

“Did I fuckin’ stutter?” he said, flapping his hand at her. “Ka-lamp.”

She slowly dropped one into his hand. He grabbed the shoulders of the dress and pulled one up, clamping it to the proper height. “Clamp.” The attendant pursed her lips, but handed another one off. He did the same to the other shoulder, and then added one to the back of the dress at the waist. He took a final look, then nodded. He stepped off the podium, and stood next to the attendant.

“Alter that,” he said to her, wiping off his shoulder.

Julia looked at the dress again.

“Whoa,” she said, her mouth falling open. “Taako, are you magic?”

“You know it, bubele.” He pointed a finger gun at her and winked. “I can do all of those alterations no sweat, baby.”

“W-w-well, you don’t want to trust your alterations to just anybody,” the attendant tried.

“Yes, yes. Go bother another bride with your overpriced seamstress, Martha Stewart,” Taako dismissed her.

Julia looked at herself. It was almost perfect… something wasn’t quite right. The dress was perfect, the veil was lovely, the borrowed shoes sure were uncomfortable though. Oh. She stepped out of the heels, back in her bare feet. She nodded.

“No heels,” she said.

“I’ll toast to that,” Sloane said, clinking her glass with Noelle.

Julia laughed, then looked back at herself in the mirror. Holy Moses, she was wearing her wedding dress.
Julia turned back around to look at her team, her family. She smiled at them.

“Is this the one?” Lucretia asked.

Julia nodded. “Yeah, this is the one.”

The team cheered loudly and clinked glasses together, accidentally spilled on the sofa. Carey wiped some of it off the arm of the couch.

“Guys,” Julia began. “How can I ever thank you for this?”

“You can let us borrow it when we get married.” Killian said, grinning widely.

“Of course,” Julia laughed. “Of course.”

“I think it’ll look great on you, Killian.” Hurley said, leaning back on the arm rest.

“Yeah, same to you,” Killian replied. They high-fived.
“Am I crazy for volunteering for this?” Julia asked as Magnus pulled up to the school. Angus unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned across the backseat for his backpack.

“Probably, yes,” Magnus said. He gave her a quick kiss. “Have a good time.”

Julia laughed nervously and got out of the car.

“Bye, Magnus!” Angus called.

“Bye, Ango.”

Angus ran over to a dark-skinned girl in a yellow dress. Julia joined the other parent chaperones near the school buses parked in the parking lot, one of them handed her a yellow hi-vis vest. Magnus, gratefully, put the chaos of the junior high field trip in his rearview mirror.

Work, however, was the exact opposite of 150 6th graders at a wildlife park. All of his current projects were completed, and any new ones were waiting on client input before he could start.

Magnus found himself whittling a small whistle in the early afternoon. Isaak walked into the workshop and looked around.

“I’m going home, Magnus. I suggest you do the same,” he said, plainly, before walking back out. Magnus did not have to be told twice.

Since he had to pick up Julia and Angus again at three, he figured he’d just go wait at the coffee shop downtown. If he went home, he’d get too involved in a project and forget.

He stirred the sugar and cream into his drip coffee and checked around for an empty table. The coffee shop was relatively empty. He saw just one person typing furiously on a laptop in the corner, and someone sitting in one of the booths made for two.

“Lucretia?” he asked. She looked up from the journal that she was writing in, and smiled broadly. Well, broadly by Lucretia-standards.

“Hello, Magnus. What brings you here today?” She shut the journal and set down her pen.

He walked over to her table. “I’m picking Julia and Ango up from school later, so I thought I’d kill some time here.”

“It’s a good place to do that.”

“What about you?”

“The directors are at a retreat, so the rest of the office was given the day.” She waved to the seat across from her. “Do you want to sit?”

“Oh, sure.” Magnus slid in. He took a sip of his coffee and looked down at the black leather book. “I
didn’t know you kept a journal.”

She nodded, and gave her tea a stir. “Well, outside of practice and post-game celebrations, we don’t spend a lot of time together.”

Magnus thought about it. “That’s true, I suppose.” He chuckled. “Remember when you showed up at my apartment at 3 am and gave me the lecture of a lifetime?”

She smiled and looked very pleased. “That one is definitely in my top ten life advice lectures I’ve given.”

“It’s crazy to think how much has changed in just a year,” Magnus said, thinking back to a just a year ago.

“For the better?” Lucretia asked.

Magnus looked back to her. “Oh, of course.” He smiled. “Better than I ever knew it could be.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said, nodding slightly.

“How about you?”

“How about me what?”

Magnus shrugged. “Are you better off now than a year ago? Have you changed?”

Lucretia appeared to think about it for a minute. “I’m… not really sure.” Her eyebrows furrowed. “I have the same job, same house… the only thing that’s really changed is I made a new friend.”

“That’s not nothing.”

“I suppose…” she frowned.

“What is it?” Magnus asked after a moment.

She looked up at him, and shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Now it was his turn to frown.

“You know,” he leaned forward on the table, “Now that I’m a foster dad, I am just filled with all sorts of wisdom and knowledge that I can share.”

Lucretia cracked a smile. “Oh, really?”

He nodded. “Yes, that’s what the course was about. Parental wisdom… and I took the optional seminar about dad jokes.”

“Alright, I’m listening.”

“Hi, Listening. I’m Dad.”

Lucretia groaned and rolled her head back as Magnus laughed at his own joke.

“That was awful and you should be ashamed.”

“That’s exactly what Julia said.”
Lucretia smiled and shook her head.

“But seriously,” Magnus continued. “If you want to talk about something, you know, I’m here, Julia’s here. Hell, I think Angus would be happy to listen too.”

“I don’t think this is the type of problem he could help with.”

“What kind of problem is it?”

“It’s… Justine.” Lucretia admitted after a moment. “Justice Troth,” she clarified after seeing Magnus’ confused face.

“Oh. Oh!” he nodded a few times. “...How is she?”

“She’s fine. She’s great. We spend time together every week practically, go ice skating, or to the theatre. We went to that John Williams concert in the park last night. Sometimes we just get a drink and talk.” She frowned again.

“That sounds… nice.” Magnus wasn’t sure what the problem was.

“It is. It’s wonderful… but ...I think she wants to be more than just friends.”

Magnus carefully searched Lucretia’s face, still looking for the problem. “And that’s… bad?”

“Well, not inherently.”

“But you’re not...”

“I thought I wasn’t, now I don’t even know.” Lucretia ran a hand over her short hair. “But that’s not even the problem.”

“That’s not the problem?”

“No. =,” she insisted.

“So what is the problem?”

“I just said it… I think she wants to be more than friends.”

“And you don’t want to be more than friends with her?”

“I don’t know!” Her hands clenched and unclenched several times. “My life has been very comfortably consistent for quite a while now. I-I’m happy with my life. I’m stable.”

“Are you stable, or are you stuck?”

“What?” she asked, blinking at him.

He shrugged. “There’s a difference between being stable, and just being stuck. And it’s easy to confuse the two. Which are you?”

She looked down at the table and furrowed her eyebrows again. Magnus let her think for a bit as he finished his coffee. Lucretia sighed.

“I think I’ve been stuck for years,” she said in a small voice.

“I get that,” Magnus said. Lucretia looked up at him. “After my parents were… died, I got pretty
stuck myself. Thought I was making a difference, fighting for good, but I was just stuck in my own grief and anger.”

Lucretia was quiet for a long time again, she was looking down at the table top. “After Cam...died, everything felt so unstable. I guess I just thought that this calm was how life’s supposed to feel if you weren’t hurting. How do you even... begin to unstick yourself? How’d you do it?”

“I threw a gangster in jail and moved 200 miles away,” he said dryly.

“...Okay.”

“Doing that forced me to change everything. I knew no one when I moved here, didn’t have a job, didn’t have a place to live. It was pretty drastic, but it got me unstuck. Not everyone has to do something like that. Just have to leave yourself open to new opportunities... new relationships.”

She sighed. “It’s been so long since I’ve even thought about that… And last time the end nearly destroyed me... I don’t know.” She frowned.

“You know, a very wise person once told me, ‘you need to figure out if you have what it takes to give her the chance she deserves.’” He smiled a little.

“And if I don’t have what it takes?” she replied bluntly.

Magnus shrugged. “Then you don’t, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing... But fear of getting hurt, fear of trying something new, shouldn’t be the reasons you stay still. That’s how you stay stuck.”

Lucretia didn’t reply.

“Do you like Justine?” he asked, a little afraid of how she’d respond. But she just nodded. “Do you love her?” She shook her head. “Could you love her one day?” She paused for a moment.

Then she slowly nodded.

“That’s my answer, isn’t it?” she asked. He nodded. She blew out a long breath. “Thanks, Magnus.”

He glanced at his watch. “Listen, I have to go--”

“Yeah, no. Go pick up your family.” she sat back and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Will you be okay?” he asked as he stood up. She nodded.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you at practice on Monday.”

He waved at her and left the shop, the bell jingling as the door swung shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys,

So I know that we’re not the only ones who've noticed how close we are getting to the end. (AHHHHHHHHH) We are planning to do something special when we get there. We’re still working out the details of what it’ll be exactly, BUT we need your help.
We need your questions, your queries about the fic (or about us, if you really want?). Any and all. “What happens next to this character? Where did that character go? How did you come up with this? Did Magnus ever pay his bill?” etc etc.

You can reply your questions in the comments below, or you can message them to us on the blog.

Thanks! <3, H+K
Good Morning

Chapter by miceenscene

Kravitz cracked open an eye and glaring at the sunlight beginning to pour in through the window. He could shut the blinds. But that would require getting up. Instead, he rolled over and groped across the sheets, but Taako wasn’t there. Kravitz opened both eyes this time and lifted his head slightly.

“Good morning, handsome.” Taako said from the kitchen, sounding far far too awake for Kravitz’ taste. He grunted a reply and let his head flop back down on the pillow. He heard the sound of Taako’s footsteps across the old wooden floor, and then the mattress dipped beneath his weight as he sat down.

“I made zucchini muffins.” Taako continued, sing-songly. Kravitz grunted again. “And coffee.” At that Kravitz finally opened his eyes again. Taako was smiling down at him.

“Coffee sounds good.” Kravitz croaked, rubbing a hand over his face. He breathed deeply and looked up at Taako. “Morning.” he smiled slightly.

Taako leaned down and gently brushed his lips over Kravitz’. Kravitz slipped a hand around the back of Taako’s neck and pulled him closer. He tasted like spearmint and coffee. His other hand slipped around behind him and pulled at the tie of his apron. Taako pulled away as it came undone.

“Hold on, hold on.” he said, standing back up and heading for the kitchen. “Let me get the second batch out of the oven first.”

Kravitz sat up and watched him deftly open the oven and pull out a batch of very tempting smelling muffins. Taako put a knife into one and pulled it back out, carefully checking the results. He shrugged and tossed the knife in the sink, whipping his apron off.

“They might be a little raw, but I don’t care right now.” he said, pulling his shirt off too and practically running back to Kravitz. Kravitz laughed and caught him as he leapt back into bed. He brushed the back of his fingers over Taako’s cheek and pulled him close for another kiss.

Sloane fished four dollars out of her Betty Boop coin purse and handed it to the farmer.

“Here you go, miss.” he said, bagging up the blueberries she had just bought.

“Thanks.” She smiled, turning back into the flow of traffic at the farmer’s market. She looked around for Hurley, it was always a little difficult to find her in crowds. Typically, Hurley found her first.

“Sloane!” she heard from behind her. Ah, there she was. Hurley bounded up to her, her arms full of brown paper bags. “Look, look, look.” she pulled out a round loaf of bread and held it up to Sloane. “Smell this.”

Sloane took it and inhaled deeply. Flour and something deliciously tangy met her nose.

“Oh my god, I love sourdough.” She inhaled again. Hurley smiled.

“I got a couple, I figured we could make some soup and use them as bread bowls.”
Sloane looked down at her girlfriend and slowly shook her head.

“You are so smart.” she said. Hurley grinned widely and put the bread back in the sack.

“Do you think your knives are done yet?”

“Maybe. Do you wanna drop this off at the car and I’ll go check?”

“Yeah.” Hurley took the blueberry bag from Sloane and headed for their car. They often went to the Rockport farmers market on Saturdays. Faerun didn’t have one, plus it was nice to get out of town even for just a couple hours. Hurley opened the trunk and carefully placed the bags inside, securing them so they wouldn’t fall over even with Sloane’s crazy driving. By the time she had done that, Sloane was walking up with a package wrapped in butcher’s paper.

“Here we go, all sharpened.” she said, tossing them in the trunk. Hurley took a moment to secure them as well before shutting it.

“Did you need to get anything else?” Hurley asked.

Sloane shook her head. “You wanna get breakfast before we head back? We could go to that waffle place you like.”

Hurley looked up at her girlfriend and smiled. “You are so smart.”

“Would you say that I’m pretty sharp?” Sloane grinned wickedly.

Julia woke up to very wet doggy kisses on her cheek. She scrunched her face, and tried to push the mass of black fur away.

“Go away, Fish.” she muttered, trying to pull the sheet up over her head. But Fish was not to be deterred. She snuffled along Julia, and then yipped at her. Julia sighed. “You know, if you’d let Magnus take you outside, we wouldn’t have this problem.” she said to the dog. Fish lolled her head to one side and yipped again. “Alright, I’m up, I’m up.”

Julia stretched a little as Fish did excited circles around the bedroom. When Julia opened the bedroom door, Fish zoomed down the small hallway to the stairs and waited for her. The voices of Magnus and Angus wafted towards her, along with the smell of bacon. Fish ran ahead of her down the stairs and she heard Magnus say,

“Oh, Jules must be up.”

“Morning.” Jules said as she reached the bottom of the stairs. Angus and Magnus were at the dining room table, empty plates in front of them.

“Good morning, Miss Julia.”

Magnus gave her a quick kiss. “Would you like some pancakes?” he asked. She nodded and sat down.

“Fish needs to go out.” she said.

“Come on, girl.” Magnus said, scooching the dog towards the kitchen and the back door. Fish very much did not want to leave Julia’s side.
“Well… big plans for today?” Julia asked Angus, resting her chin in her hand. Angus laughed a little.

“I was just asking Magnus if my friend Mavis and I could get a ride to the library today. I want to sign up for the summer reading program. If you read 10 books, you get a free personal pan pizza from Pizza Hut.”

“So at the rate you read, we’ll be ankle deep in pizzas by the 4th of July is what you’re telling me.” Julia grinned at him. “Yeah, we can do that. You wanna go this afternoon?”

“Yes, please.”

“I gotta drop off my last tuition check, and then mail the team’s insurance forms for next season. So we’ll run a couple errands and then go pick up Mavis. Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

“Here we go.” Magnus said, placing a plate of pancakes in front of Julia. He had drawn a smiley face on them in whipped cream.

“Thanks, babe.” Julia picked up a bit of the whipped cream and booped it on Angus’ nose.

Keys jangled in the lock to the front door as Carey drained the rest of her coffee. She rubbed at her forehead and yawned as Killian shut the door behind her.

“Oh, hey. Didn’t expect you to be awake.” Killian said, brightly. She walked into the kitchen, and her smile quickly melted into concern. “Oh, hun, are you sick?”

Carey was sitting on the counter, empty mug in hand and giant dark circles under her eyes. She yawned again. Killian quickly put a hand to her forehead.

“No, I just couldn’t sleep last night.” Carey said through the yawn. “My head feels like a rock.”

Killian took Carey’s hands in hers. “You’re shaking, how much coffee have you had?”

Carey’s shoulders bounced up and down. “I dunno… a pot? I was going to make some more.”

Killian chuckled and took the mug from her. She rinsed it out and filled it back up with water.

“How about you drink some of this instead?” she offered it to Carey, who flopped her arm weakly at the mug.

“I can’t reach it.” she said, frowning cartoonishly large. Killian smiled a little and walked back over to stand in front of her again. Carey leaned forward and rested her forehead on Killian’s chest. “I’m too weak, I can’t sit up anymore.” Killian laughed again, and set the mug down, wrapping her arms around Carey.

“You’re a weirdo.”

Carey lifted her head and pulled Killian in for a kiss. “Yeah, but I’m your weirdo.” she said, her lips still pressed to hers.

“That you are.” Killian shut her eyes and rested her forehead against Carey’s. But Carey was just looking at Killian, what an amazing woman she was.
“Hey.” Carey said, quietly.

“Hey yourself.” Killian replied, her eyes still shut.

“...Will you marry me?”

Killian’s eyes flew open and her mouth made a small ‘o’.

“Wh-what did you say?”

Carey smiled a little. “Will you marry me?”

“But-but, you know we can’t get… we’re not--”

“I didn’t ask that… I asked if you will marry me?”

“You’re asking me that right now?”

Carey nodded. “I could get down on one knee if you like.”

“You’ve had way too much coffee.”

Carey shrugged. “Maybe, but coffee doesn’t change how I feel about you, and what I want for my future.”

“You’re serious.”

Carey just nodded, that calm smile still on her face, dark circles under her eyes. And she was the most breathtaking woman Killian had ever seen.

The same smile spread across Killian’s face and a laugh escaped from her.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes! Of course.”

The two of them stood in silence for a minute, just looking at each other and marvelling at how lucky they both were.

“I love you.”

“And I love you.”
Angus’ face was frowned in concentration as he delicately painted the number 14 on the wing of the plane. Magnus couldn’t help but smile as he watched his extreme focus.

“There,” Angus said, putting down the brush and nodding at his careful work.

“Quite the craftsman, Ango,” Magnus replied, approving of the quite impressive job he’d just done. “Where do you want to display it?”

Angus looked around his room, a few more books on the shelves than when he’d moved in and a collection of dirty clothes growing next to the empty hamper.

“On the dresser.” He pointed to the spot beneath all the team photos.

“An excellent choice!”

“But we have to wait for the paint to dry first before we move it.”

Magnus nodded sagely. “Of course.”

Suddenly there was a plink as something small hit the window. Both Magnus and Angus turned to look at it. A pebble flew up and hit against the glass.

Angus leaped out of his chair, and together they opened the window. They had to duck out of the way as another pebble was tossed into the room.

“Ah! Look out! Sorry!” Julia yelled from the backyard. Magnus laughed.

“Isn’t it bad luck to see the groom before the wedding?” he called down.

“I thought you were with Mr. Taako till the ceremony.”

“I was, but I snuck out. I thought to myself that I’d like to get some ice cream with my two favorite guys.” Magnus and Angus looked at each other and smiled. Julia shrugged dramatically.

“But if you’re too busy for little old me, then maybe I should just go back to Taako’s--”

“As long as Mr. Taako won’t be mad.” Angus said. Julia laughed.

“You know, I think he’ll forgive me this once.”

“Can we skate to downtown?”

“Why else did we put outdoor wheels on your skates?”

It took a few minutes for all three to find and put on their skates. Angus tightened the double knot on his laces, and then looped the velcro strap over top.

“Ready to go?” Julia asked. She was sitting next to him on the front steps of the house. He nodded vigorously and hopped up. She had a split-second panic that he might fall over, but he just started down the front walk easy as can be.
“It’s amazing what a difference a year makes.” Magnus commented sitting next to her, the two of them watching him hop off the ledge of the front walk.

“Yeah.” Julia nodded. “Oh, it came.” She patted her purse on her hip. Magnus’s face lit up.

“It did?”

“Yep.” They grinned at each other for a moment.

“Are we still going?” Angus yelled back to them; he was already a house down the street.

“We’re coming, we’re coming,” Magnus said, taking off down the walk at breakneck speed. Julia took a moment to snap her helmet on and follow behind.

“Last one there’s a rotten egg!” Magnus yelled passing by Angus.

“Magnus, get out of the street!” Julia yelled back at him. She caught up to Angus and kept pace with him.

The sky was beginning to turn shades of soft pinks and purples, and cicadas screamed merrily in the trees. Julia watched Angus make a pretty good attempt of keeping up with Magnus, and she couldn’t help but smile. God, she loved these two so much.

They made it downtown with Magnus only having to throw himself out of danger’s way once. And the other people did give them odd looks when the trio rolled into the ice cream shop, but not a one of them minded. They ended up sharing a park bench that overlooked the small river that ran through downtown. Angus wheeled his skates back and forth on the grass as he finished his superman ice cream.

“And Mavis says that I’m a lot like Klaus, but I think I’m more like Violet,” Angus said, getting up to throw their cups in the trash.

“Thank you, hun,” Julia said. She and Magnus shared a look, both of them suddenly nervous.

“Are you guys okay?” Angus asked, looking between the two of them.


“Lots of people get nervous before they get married, that’s very normal,” Angus replied.

Julia had to suppress a chuckle. “No, we’re not nervous about that.” She patted the space on the bench in between her and Magnus, and Angus sat down. He looked suspiciously between the two of them. “Now, Angus, we have loved being your foster parents.”

“Absolutely,” Magnus chimed in.

“But some changes are coming down the pipe.”

Angus’ face fell.

“Angus, honey, what’s wrong?”

He wiped at his nose with the back of his hand and said in a shaky voice, “I’ve gotten this talk before, I-I-I understand.” He swallowed hard and looked up at Julia. “Is Mrs. Paloma coming after the wedding at least?”
“Mrs--?” Suddenly, it clicked for her. “Oh, no! No, Angus, she’s not. I promise. This isn’t what you’re thinking.”

“Miss Julia’s trying to say, that we really like this setup we have here, and we were wondering if you’d like to make it more permanent?” Magnus said, looking carefully at Angus.

Angus’ brows scrunched up. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Julia pulled a thick, opened envelope from her purse and gave it to Angus. He pulled the letter out and unfolded it. The seal of the state was at the top.

“We would like to adopt you, make you formally part of our family. And if that’s something you want too, we can take these papers to a judge and get it all signed and documented,” Julia said. Angus was reading the letter diligently. “You’re old enough that we thought you needed to have a say in this.”

“We understand if you don’t want to,” Magnus interjected. Julia nodded. “We have a good thing right here as it is…”

Angus stood up and turned around so he could look at both of them at the same time. He looked slowly from the letter to the two of them, and the back to the letter.

“You… you want to adopt me?” he asked, his voice getting very squeaky.

“We do,” Julia answered, nodding.

“We have for a while now.” Magnus chuckled a little.

“Yeah, around when we figured out that the two of us wanted to be a family, we figured out that we wanted you to be part of it too.” Julia smiled at him softly. “But if you don’t want it to, nothing has to change.”

“Yeah, you take all the time you need to make a decision, okay? There’s no rush.”

Angus nodded dumbly, looking down at the cream-colored pages. His thumb ran over the raised seal in the corner a few times.

“Would… would I change my last name?” he asked, looking back up to both of them.

“Like with Miss Julia, only if you wanted to.” Magnus answered.

He nodded again and was quiet for a minute. Julia and Magnus shared a look. Neither of them had known what to expect going into this. Finally Angus very quietly said,

“Angus Burnside is nice sounding.”

“It’s a good last name, that’s why I’m taking it.” Julia replied. Magnus smiled at her.

“Thanks, my dad picked it out for me.”

Angus chuckled a little, then he nodded. “Yes.”

Magnus and Julia snapped back to look at him. “What?”

“I want you to adopt me.” A smile spread across his face, echoed on Julia and Magnus’s too.
“Really?” Julia asked, her voice thick. Angus nodded quickly.

“You’ve been my family for a long time… It’d be nice to make it official.”

The three of them just sat there for a moment, smiling at each other with tears running down their cheeks.

“Come here, Burnsides!” Magnus cheered, hauling Julia and Angus in for a group hug.
In the heart of downtown, a few people wandered the streets enjoying the cool of dusk. Most of the businesses were closed for the night, though business was in full swing at Pour Joe’s. And just a few doors down, the light was still on in Rosemary and Rye. Curtains were half hung up, covering the large windows, and a banner across the windows read, ‘Coming Next Month!’ in bright purple text.

Taako took a step back and surveyed the cake he’d been working on for days now. He brushed a hair out of his face, smearing some icing on his cheek. He tilted his head to get a different angle on the concoction, and smiled a little. It was a three-tiered, buttercream decorated, chocolate ganache filled, fresh flower covered Triumph.

“Damn, son,” a voice said behind him. Taako about jumped out of his skin as he spun around. Lup was leaning on the counter, grinning wickedly at him.

“Don’t do that--how long have you been here?”

Lup shrugged. “A couple minutes. You were deep in Baker Mode, so I didn’t bother you right away.” She pulled a pizza box from under the counter. “I bring sustenance.”

“Blessed are you among women,” Taako said, practically tripping over himself in his rush for the box. He ripped the top off and grabbed a slice.

“You’re welcome.” Lup grabbed a piece and hopped up on the counter. She gestured to the cake. “It’s looking good, by the way.”

“Fanks,” Taako said around a large mouthful. He chewed for second, then continued, “It’s not finished yet. Still need to add a few more flowers.”

“On the second tier?”

Taako gave her a look. “Yeah.”

“What?”

“Nothing...just... well spotted.”

Lup shrugged. “I’m an editor, I’m trained to see gaps.”

Taako brushed his hands on his apron and pulled a coral rose out of the bunch he’d bought from Merle. He trimmed off the stem and gently placed it on the second tier.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in a while,” he said, carefully adjusting its position.

“Well, you’ve been busy with wedding prep and all.”

“Yeah, but even before that. Feel like I haven’t really gotten a chance to talk to you since--Oh!” Taako jerked up from delicately arranging the rose and grinned at his twin. “How’s Barry?”
Lup leaned back on the counter and shrugged just a little too nonchalantly. “He’s fine. Drowning under grading his finals, but otherwise good.”

Taako grabbed another rose and jabbed it at Lup’s stomach. “Okay, but how is he?”

Lup’s ears went pink and she batted away the flower. “You’re gross.”

Taako crowed with laughter. “Ha-HA! I knew it!!!”

“Whatever, you perv.” She crossed her arms and looked away as Taako continued to laugh.

“Oh, this is just too good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“This is better than when you made out with Jimmy Rickens in the supply shed after Homecoming.”

“I’m not listening,” she insisted, pretending to be very engrossed in the design on the top of the pizza box.

Taako stopped teasing and looked at his twin for a moment. “You really like Barry, huh?”

Lup looked up at Taako and nodded shyly. “Like a really stupid amount.” She smacked a hand to her forehead and fell backwards on the counter. “It’s so dumb how much I like him. Like he’s Barry! He wears SPF 30 to go to the park!”

Taako laughed and trimmed the stem of the rose.

“He thinks seasoned salt is spicy,” Lup continued, still lying on the counter. “He puts on nature documentaries on Sunday afternoons and naps through them...”

“And?” Taako leaned over to put the rose in place.

“And I think I love him, Taako.”

He quickly looked over at Lup, but she was still lying on the counter. Her hands folded across her stomach.

“Hatchi-matchi,” Taako said quietly. “Have you told him that?”

Lup leaned up on her elbows. “No. Haven’t found the right time to... and...”

“And what?”

“Well, what if it’s a one-way street?” Lup frowned.

“Not possible,” Taako said, turning back to his work.

“Yes it is.”

“No, it’s really not.” He stood up and gestured with a new flower. “You may have missed the way he looks at you, but I didn’t.”

“Really?”

Taako scoffed and stepped back to survey the cake again. “Please. It’d be sickening if it wasn’t so fuckin’ cute.”
Lup smiled a little.

“If you’re not ready to tell him, that’s chill. Believe me, I understand. But there’s not a snowball’s chance in Hell that he doesn’t feel the same way.”

“You’ve become very wise in your old age.”

“I’m glad you’ve finally acknowledged it,” Taako said primly. He stepped back and gestured grandly to the cake. “How about now?”

Lup stood up and walked around it a few times. She got up close, and then backed up, nodding her head the whole time.

“Still missing one thing,” she said after the rigorous inspection.

“What?”

“The topper.”

“Oh, I’m not gonna put it on till tomorrow. But, holy shit, you have to see it.” Taako spun around and nabbed a small box on the bottom shelf of the cart the cake was resting on. “Jules and I made them, aren’t they perfect?”

He held the box out so Lup could look inside. She laughed. “Oh my god, it’s perfect.”

Just then the door to the shop opened and in ran Kravitz.

“Hey babe,” Taako said.

“My mother—” was all he was able to get out before Raven walked in after him, impeccably styled as always.

Raven’s mouth dropped open and she clasped her hands in front. “Oh Taako, this place looks marvelous!” she said, looking around. “You did all of this in the past two months?”

Taako jogged out from behind the counter and kissed her cheek. “Well, I had a lot of help… and a decent contractor.”

“It’s night and day difference.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I’ll be honest. When you showed me what you had bought, I was worried. I shouldn’t have been though.”

“Well, let me give you the grand tour.” Taako swept an arm back towards the counter and Lup gave a little wave. “Oh, first, this is my sister, Lup. Lup, this is Kravitz’s mom. Raven Sinclair.”

Raven held out her hand. Lup reached over the counter to take it, obviously not used to shaking hands.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Sinclair.”

“You as well. I had no idea Taako had a sister.”

Lup shrugged. “I’m new.”

“...oh.” Raven blinked a few times and Lup hid a smile. She turned to her brother.

“I’m gonna go help Lucretia set up the party. What time is Julia supposed to be arriving?”
Taako spun around, looking for something.

“Shi--” he glanced at Raven and quickly snapped back to Lup. “--take mushrooms. I left my
schedule at my apartment. It’s on there. And Lucretia’s got the spare key.”

Lup finger-gunned him and nodded. “Right on. Later days, dudes.” She ducked under the counter
and sauntered out the front door.

“So, you still want that tour?” Taako asked. “The kitchen’s through that door, but it’s a mess. My
dishwasher couldn’t come in till tomorrow. And we haven’t started on the upstairs yet, so it’s still the
same since last time. But otherwise we’re on track for an early June official opening.”

“Are you hosting a party?” Raven asked, obviously not listening to Taako’s little spiel.

“That’s what I was trying to say, Mother.” Kravitz stepped around her. “Normally, we love
surprises. But this weekend is kinda rough. Some really good friends are getting married tomorrow
and we have things planned all weekend for that.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry--” Raven started but Taako interrupted her.

“Don’t be! This is actually great.” Taako walked back behind the counter. “This way you get to see
me in action.” He pointed a thumb to the cake behind him, “I made that fuckin’ confectionary
masterpiece. And I’m in charge of set up and the food, you should come to the reception!”

“Don’t you think Julia and Magnus will mind?” Kravitz asked, looking concernedly at Taako.

“They’ll be too busy to notice. Plus, I’ll just say this is my fee,” Taako said quickly to Kravitz. “It’ll
be great!”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to have to rearrange a seating chart.”

Taako laughed.

“Don’t worry, it’s not that kind of wedding,” Taako assured her.

“Well, if you don’t mind… It wouldn’t just be me. My friend, Pan, came with me too. He’s over in
Pour Joe’s getting some tea for his throat.”

“The more the merrier.” Taako grinned.

“Don’t you mean, marry-er?” Kravitz said, looking very proud of himself.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Sloane and Hurley.”

Fireflies drifted lazily across the front lawns in the Burnsides’ neighborhood. A minivan was pulled
up in front of the house. Julia hung a garment bag in the trunk as Angus ran down the front steps.

“Thanks again for doing this, Hekuba,” she said. Angus tossed his backpack into the front row as
Mavis and Mookie cheered.

“No problem. 4 o’clock, right?” she said over the din of excited chatter.

Julia nodded. “Or we’ll all be getting ready around 1, so if you need a break you can bring him by
earlier. Ceremony starts at 5.”
Hekuba nodded and laughed a little bit, shutting the trunk. “I’ll call you if it’s going to be earlier than four.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Angus,” Julia called into the car.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” Angus said. He hopped out of the van and gave Julia a hug. She kissed the top of his head. “See you tomorrow!”

Angus hopped back into the car and Julia shut the door. Hekuba honked twice as she pulled away from the curb. Julia waved to them as they drove down the street.

Then she looked around, as if to see if someone was watching. There was no one around. She smiled and snuck up the front walk and went around the corner of the house, heading for the backyard.

However, she was stopped when she ran into Magnus.

“Hey!” he pointed a finger at her. “You were trying to sneak a peek, weren’t you?”

“What? No! No. Of course not,” she lied. Magnus grunted and took her by the shoulders, turning her around and marching her back out to the front yard.

“I told you, no peeking. It’s not done yet.”

Julia sighed dramatically and went limp, making it more difficult for Magnus to guide her forward.

“But I wanna seeeeeeeeee it.”

“You can see tomorrow.” he picked her up and carried her fireman style to her car. “You have a party to get to.”

“Fine-uh.”

She pulled her keys out of her pocket, frowning dramatically, and stepped away.

“Wait a second.” Magnus grabbed her wrist and pulled her in for a long kiss. “I need something to tide me over till the wedding.”

Julia smiled and kissed him again. “Just one more. For good luck.”

Magnus chuckled. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be the one in white.”

Magnus watched her drive away and then headed back for the backyard. He set up a couple work lights and pulled the canvas off that was covering the gazebo he’d built. It had been a bitch to hide from Julia, but he’d managed to do it, somehow. It wasn’t stained yet, but that was okay. He wanted her input on that part anyway. Tonight all he had to do was affix the gingerbread finishings in the archways and it would be ready to go for tomorrow. Ready to get married in--ooh, he couldn’t think about that yet or he’d start crying. Again.

He had half of them up when Carey walked around the corner into the yard.

“‘Sup, my man?” she waved a hand.

Magnus smiled and waved back. “I thought you’d be at Taako’s?” Mags asked, pulling a nail out from between his teeth.
Carey shrugged. “I’ll put in an appearance later, but I wanted to be at your party too.”

Mags smiled at her and stepped down from his ladder to move it.

“So what’re we doing?” Carey asked, sitting on the bench opposite from him in the gazebo. “Everything I know about bachelor parties comes from comedy movies, so someone’s ending up in jail. Smart money’s on Kravitz.”

Magnus laughed and he nailed in the next accent piece. “Kravitz, Avi, and Johann are coming over later. Kravitz is making gourmet burgers, we’re drinking beer, and we’re watching the best Candlenights movie of all time.”

“... Home Alone 2: Lost in New Elfington?”

“What? No! Die Hard!”

Carey laughed. “Never thought of Die Hard as a Candlenights movie, but okay. Sounds good, I’m in.”

“Awesome!”

She watched him nail the last couple accents into the gazebo.

“Jesus, dude. This thing is ...amazing.” she ran a hand over the smooth railing. “How long have you been working on it?”

Magnus folded up the ladder and thought for a moment. “Pretty much since we moved in. Was working on pieces for a while. Once we picked a date, though, that’s when I really started working on it.”

“And Jules has no idea?”

Magnus grinned as he sat down on a bench across from her. “She knows I’m building something back here. I told her it was a Man Shed. ...She said that was stupid.”

Carey laughed. “‘Cause it is.”

“Yeah. So I think she’ll be surprised.”

Carey nodded. “You know, speaking of surprises,” she said, growing serious. “I got you a present.”

“Oh, Carey, you didn’t—”

She held a hand. “I don’t have a lot of money, so don’t get too excited. But your friendship means a lot to me, Magnus. And I wanted to get you something to commemorate it and your special day tomorrow.”

She pulled a white plastic bag out of her back pocket and tossed it to him. He opened it and a chain fell out. He held it up to the light and realized it was two chains. It was two necklaces with pizza shaped pendants that when put next to each other read, ‘Best Friends’. Magnus got a little choked up.

“Carey…” he said, smiling at the necklaces.

“You can pick which piece you want.”

He nodded quickly.
“Are you crying?” Carey asked.

“Yes,” Magnus said, wiping a tear.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I’m gonna cry a million times this weekend. What’s one more?”

Carey laughed, and Magnus tossed her a necklace. It was the Best one.

“Thanks, Carey. I love it. You’re my best friend too.” He tried to put it on, but the chain didn’t really fit. “Huh. Hmm… Is this what Lup means when she says chokers are in?”

“They came from Claire’s, so maybe they don’t make their necklaces big enough for grown men.”

“They should have thought that through.”

“Where in the god-forsaken world did you get a Pin the Junk on the Underwear model game?” Hurley asked.

Killian shrugged. “I know a guy.”

“So who bought the thong?” Sloane pointed to the banner of panties above the drink table. They’d all bought a pair to use both as decor and to mortify Julia. It was a win-win.

“Oh, that was me,” Lucretia said, lifting her glass. Everyone threw back their heads and howled.

“What’s so funn--oh. My. Fucking. God,” Julia said from the top of the stairs.

The entirety of Taako’s apartment was decked out for the party. There was a very prominent theme: Pink. And Penises.

“Julia!!” everyone yelled and rushed forward. She was pulled into the apartment, given a sash and two electric purple jello-shots.

The evening was a blur of pink and glitter. Taako had outdone himself in every way. There were homemade cream puffs and frozen pizzas, karaoke and Pin the Junk on the Underwear Model. They kept going into the early morning, fuelled by jello shots and Surge, but eventually they all ended up lazily draped across various bits of floor and any horizontal surface they could find.

“Okay, okay, okay. You ready Noelle?” Lup asked, struggling to sit up in the bean bag.

“Lay it on me.” Noelle turned over on the bed and reached for another Cheeto puff.

“You will live in a Mansion, marry Lance Bass, have 200 kids.”

“My condolences,” Carey patted her shoulder.

“Buuuuut! You’ll go to Space, live in Vienna, and drive a Ford Escort. So all in all, not too bad.”

Noelle gave Lup a thumbs-up and then she dropped her head face first on the mattress. There was a lull as everyone deeply regretted how much food they’d eaten.

Lucretia stood up and clicked off the lights, the penis string lights still giving a soft glow from the
kitchen. There was quiet for a few minutes.

“Penis,” Hurley said. Everyone giggled.

“Remember we got to be up early tomorrow,” Taako said from his pallette by the stairs.

“Thanks, Mom,” Lup replied, giving up fighting against the bean bag now.

“Shut up and go to sleep, Munch,” he replied, pulling the blanket over his head.

There was quiet again.

“Lucretia?” Julia asked quietly.

“Yes?”

“Are you awake?”

“...no.” Lucretia replied, deadpan. Julia heard Killian chuckle from over by the bed. “What is it, Julia?”

“I’m getting married tomorrow.” A rush of giggles fell out of her.

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that,” Lucretia said. Julia could hear the smile in her voice.

“Yes you did.”

“Ah, you got me.”

Julia turned over so she could see Lucretia’s face.

“Hey Lucretia?”

“Yes, Julia?”

“I’m really glad you’re my friend.” Lucretia craned her neck to look at her. She was smiling bemusedly at Julia. “I love you.”

“I love you too. You should really go to sleep.”

“Okay.” Julia curled around her pillow and closed her eyes. A car drove by on the street outside and Julia felt herself start to drift off.

“Butts,” Lup said.

Everyone burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

We couldn't bear to end on a Monday! Also...there's like a lot to tie up. So April 12th will be our finale. We'll have a special gift then and some announcements too! See you then! <3, H+K
Julia’s eyes cracked open in the sunshine pouring in through the window. She glanced around at the wreckage leftover from the night before. Sloane and Hurley were curled tightly together in the bean bag chair. Lup was splayed across three floor pillows like a skydiver. Killian, Carey, and Noelle formed a tangle of limbs that Julia couldn’t quite make out from her position on the air mattress. Julia smiled and chuckled a little, then it suddenly hit her.

She was getting married.

Today.

The smile grew four times as wide and she did a little dance, the air mattress squeaking beneath her.

“Good morning, starshine,” Taako said quietly. Julia looked up and finally noticed him and Lucretia in the kitchen. They were both already dressed and holding large steaming mugs. Julia hopped up and practically skipped the few feet over to the kitchen.

“Gooooood morning,” she replied, quietly, but that grin still on her face. Lucretia chuckled into her mug.

“How do you feel?” Taako asked, adding three large spoonfuls of sugar to his coffee.

Julia tried to reply, but it just came out as a rush of giggles.

“That sounds about right,” Lucretia said, dryly.

“Here.” Taako handed over a mug with a tea bag in it. “Drink this, it will help you rehydrate.” He then pulled out a clipboard, he pulled the pen out from under the clip and started clicking it rapidly. “So I have today all scheduled, everything will go to plan, and execute smoothly.”

“Oh it will, will it?” Lucretia asked.

“Yes. I am verbalizing my goals, and I will see them put into action. Oprah. Wise woman.” Taako pointed the pen at Lucretia and clicked it again for emphasis. He pointed at a duffle bag by the bathroom door. “In that duffle bag are a change of clothes and some bathroom stuff so you can get ready in time for your 9:30am brunch with Steven.”

“Thanks, Taako. You’re amazing,” Julia said.

“You need to leave the diner by 10:50 at the latest, so you can make it to your house by 11, which is when the high-maintenance types can start getting ready,” Taako continued, not looking up from his clipboard.

“High-maintenance types?” Julia objected.

“There’s no shame, bubule. You’ll just take longer than Carey over there who just has to comb her hair, put on her suit, and then she can march straight down the aisle.” He pointed the pen at the still sleeping Carey.

“Fair enough.”
“Now, go get ready! You kibitzing with my time-table has put us 42 seconds behind schedule.”

The bells on the door jingled as Julia entered the diner. Breakfast service was in full swing, several waitresses expertly navigated the gaps between tables with arms full of steaming plates. Julia walked past the people waiting and looked around for her dad. He waved to her from the corner booth by the window.

“Aw, you got the old table,” Julia said, dropping her purse and hopping deeper on to the seat.

“I had to stink-eye a whole Bible study to get it too,” Steven said, leaning forward conspiratorially. Julia laughed and glanced down at the menu.

“Now, Taako said that I am to have you back at your house by 11 on the dot.”

“On the dot?”

“Yes, he was very clear about that. He had a look in his eye that I’ve never seen before.”

Julia smiled and nodded. “Yeah, he’s taken over, but honestly, it’s such a relief. I let him take care of setup and I get to enjoy breakfast with you.”

“Expertly done.”

The waiter came by and they both put in the usual orders.

“Nice to know some things don’t change,” she said, looking over the rest of the restaurant. The decor was exactly the same as she remembered.

“It’s been a while, but, you know… I just thought it seemed right to come back here. Especially today.” Steven sipped at his coffee.

“Yeah,” Julia quietly agreed.

“So are you nervous?” Steven asked, clearing his throat. Julia shook her head.

“No, not really. I mean, we are already married.”

“That is true. Takes some of the pressure off, I suppose.”

“I’m still excited though. Like today’s the day, you know? I’ve thought and dreamt about this day for years. And it’s here. Like it’s crazy.”

Steven chuckled. “I remember once I found you in the middle of a ceremony. Pillowcase on your head, all your stuff animals lined up as the guests.”

“Oh my god, I forgot about that,” Julia laughed, covering part of her face with her hand. “Embarrassing.”

“No, I think you and Michael Jackson would have been very happy together.”

“Shut up!” Julia hid her face in both hands now.

“You and Ella practically wore out that Jackson 5 record.”
“Uh, point of order, it was the Donna Summer album that we wore out.”

“Was it?”

“Yes! She’d put it on every Saturday morning when we’d do chores. You’d be out mowing. And we’d dust and sing *I Feel Love* at the top of our lungs.”

Steven laughed. “I do remember that now.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The space next to Steven seeming more empty than it had in years.

He reached across the table and took Julia’s hands in his. “You know, when you were a newborn, we talked a lot about the things we were looking forward to seeing you do. Walking, talking, first day of school…riding a bike… Graduations… and today.” He straightened the ring on her finger.

“Is it stupid that I wish she could be here just for today?” Julia said, tearing her eyes from the empty seat back to her dad.

“She’d be awfully proud of you, chickadee. I know I am.”

“Dad, you’re not allowed to cry. Not yet.”

The bells on the door rang again and Steven sat up. “Josephine?” he asked, looking confused.

Julia looked over her shoulder and there was Auntie Josephine dressed head to toe in purple.

“She bustled quickly to the table and scooted in next to Steven. “Taako told me I could find y’all here. I told him that the Lord himself would have to call me home before I’d miss seeing my baby girl on her big day.” She scoffed for a second as she looked at the two of them. “What are you two getting all teary over?”

“Just ...missing Mom.” Julia said, wiping a little at her face.

“Oh, honey.” Josephine put an arm around Steven and held Julia’s hand. “You know she’s still here right? Not in the way any of us wanted, but she’s still here.”

They shared a smile for a moment.

“And you know what she’d say?” Josephine continued. Julia shook her head. “She’d say, ‘Quit crying and get back to celebrating!’”

Julia and Steven laughed.

“You’re right.” Steven said.

“Course I am.” Josephine smoothed her jacket. “Now, where’s the waiter? We’re going to need about four more tables.”

“Why?” Steven asked, warily.

“Well, where else will the rest of the family sit?”

Julia smiled.
“How are we doing, Lucretia?” Taako yelled as he skated into the rink, throwing open the doors with abandon. Setup was in full swing; tables were being rolled into place and streamers hung. Lucretia looked up from arranging a centerpiece of floating candles.

“Right on schedule,” she said with a salute. “Though Merle is having some trouble with the disco ball.”

They looked towards the booth that usually the announcer sat in above the office. Merle appeared in the window and gave a thumbs up. There was a screech of horrendous feedback and everyone covered their ears.

“I think I got it working now,” he said over the loudspeaker. “Let me give it a test.”

Merle leaned down and then all the lights in the rink went out with a loud hum. A muffled swear came from the booth. Taako pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Okay, take five, people. We do not have workman’s comp,” he announced. “Lucretia, please come with me.”

Taako and Lucretia raced off to the booth, dodging around Hurley who narrowly managed to keep from spilling something in a mug. She watched them jog off in the dim light coming from the front doors. Then she walked over and placed the mug down in front of Sloane, who was sitting at one of the tables.

“Here,” Hurley said, sitting down next to her.

“You remembered my tea?” Sloane smiled at her.

“Oh. ...Nothing.”

“Nothing? You’ve been kinda off all day.”

Sloane looked at Hurley for a moment then sighed. “I’m so happy for Magnus and Julia, I really am. They deserve every bit of this celebration.” she paused and looked over the tables. “But I just wonder if we’ll ever get to have this.”

“No. I mean, this.” She waved a hand at the half-decorated rink. “Part of me wants to just move to Sweden and get married there at some city hall. But then I see this,” Sloane righted the capsized candle, “and I want it too, Hurley. I want the stupid floating candles, and the monogrammed napkins,
and even the dress.” She shook her head. “I want to invite everyone I’ve ever met and tell the whole world how much you mean to me.”

Hurley leaned over and took Sloane’s hand in hers. Sloane shook her head and sighed again.

“I just— do you think we’ll live to see a day like that? A world where that could even be possible?”

Hurley thought about it seriously for a minute before speaking, “I...don’t know.” Her eyes met Sloane’s. “Things are better now than they were a decade ago. They’re even better than they were three years ago. But it’s slow… way too slow for my taste. Maybe it won’t be us, but maybe it’ll be Angus’s generation.” Hurley shook her head. “I won’t pretend it doesn’t suck and that it’s not scary at times. But we have a damn fine life anyway. And if you want the monogrammed napkins, and the Pachelbel canons, and the fucking disco ball, then I will move Heaven and Earth to get them for you.” Sloane smiled a little. “I’ll go in front of the governing body of our great nation myself. And I’ll tell those ladies on The View, ‘Hey! Get it together. I wanna marry my girlfriend.’”

Sloane laughed at that. She looked at Hurley for a long moment, running her thumb over her fingers.

“You’re right.” She nodded. “Barbara Walters really does run our country.”

“Right?” Hurley replied emphatically. Sloane smiled again. “...but seriously, we are gonna get married one day. And when that day comes, I’m going to marry you so hard you won’t know what hit you.”

Sloane laughed. “Not if I marry you first,” she said, cupping Hurley’s cheek and pulling her close for a long kiss. It was sweet and slow—and then the lights came back on.

“Hey you two,” Taako yelled from across the rink. “Quit smoochin’!”

Without opening their eyes or stopping the kiss, they both flipped him the bird.

Taako huffed and shook his head.

“I leave them in your capable hands. I have to go check on the house,” he said to Lucretia as he started to skate towards the front door.

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re my rock, Lucretia,” he called as he left the building.

Taako rolled up the driveway of the Burnside house. A sign at the end of it read, ‘Ceremony this way!’ He checked off the box on his master schedule. He leaned against the garage to take his skates off and peered into the backyard.

Killian was setting up white folding chairs and Johann followed behind her making them perfectly even.

“Has Carey been by with the flowers?” Taako asked, running up to Killian in his bare feet. She shook her head.

“ Haven’t seen her.”

“How about Julia? Is she back from brunch?”
“Haven’t seen her either.”

“Great.” Taako frowned and chewed on the end of his pencil. “These chairs are looking good.” Killian smiled a little. “Keep it up, Johann,” Taako said, walking away.

Killian’s smile dropped and she looked back at Johann, who was glowing.

Taako hopped the steps onto the deck and ran into the house. He pulled the phone off the hook and quickly dialed a number from his clipboard. It rang twice and then Carey picked up.

“Pan’s Blooms, this is Carey speaking.”

“Where are you?!” Taako asked.

“Taako, I’m so sorry. I’d already be there, but I can’t find the boutonnieres. I know Merle made them.”

“Forget those for now, bring the flowers for the ceremony decorations to the house now. I’ll call Merle and have him pick up the wedding party flowers. Just get here.”

“Okay!”

Taako hung up as Barry walked into the kitchen, holding a garment bag over his shoulder.

“Hello Taako.”

“Barold, wonderful. Is Lup—”

Lup was just a few steps behind him, carrying a large duffle bag.

“I got the goods,” she said in a tough accent. She eyed Barry over. “This guy with you? He a cop?”

“Normally I love your dramatics, but I cannot right now.” Taako paused and looked at Barry. “Of course he’s a cop, look at his shoes—anyway.”

Barry looked down at his feet and frowned. Taako snapped a few times.

“Barry Bagdalen, focus up. I need you to go down to the rink. See if you and Noelle can’t get the disco ball to work.”

Barry nodded and headed out the back door.

“Lup, I need you to go to that diner downtown and get—”

At that moment, the front door slammed open and Julia ran in.

“I’m here! I’m here!” she ran to the kitchen and collapsed against the door frame. “I know I’m late, but my entire family ambushed me at brunch.” She tried to catch her breath.

“I thought something like that might happen, so it’s okay. Go run upstairs and hop in the shower.” Julia nodded and dashed for the stairs. Lup turned back to Taako and jangled the duffle bag.

“So should I just leave this here and start setting up chairs?” she asked. Taako pulled a sheet off his clipboard and handed it to Lup.

“No, I need you to stick with Julia and keep her on schedule.”
Lup looked it over. “You made the schedule to the minute. Nerd.”

“Josephine couldn’t do her hair so that’s why I asked you to bring the arsenal.” he patted the duffle bag.

“So what’re we aiming for?”

“You know Julia Roberts’ hair in the red dress scene from *Pretty Woman*?”

Lup nodded. “Say no more.”

“Great.” Taako said as the phone began to ring again. “Yello?”

“Taako? Good,” Avi said on the line. “Listen, Magnus forgot underwear. Can someone run them over, or should I stop by?”

Lup turned away and headed up the stairs as Taako continued to put out fires.
“What do you mean you can’t come?” Taako asked, clutching the phone. The team’s cheerful chatter in the master bedroom came to a quick halt as everyone tuned into Taako’s conversation. He gave Julia a pained smile and then stepped out into the hall.

“That’s my brother. Ominous and dramatic,” Lup commented, looking up briefly from finger curling a bit of Julia’s hair. Noelle and Hurley snickered.

After a few moments Taako walked back into the room.

“Everything okay?” Julia asked, carefully trying not to move her head.

“Well... the reverend can’t make it.”

“What?!” she jerked her head around and Lup hissed.

“His daughter went into labor in Rockport and so he’s has to go.”

Lup spun Julia around so she could face Taako.

“Is it that big of a deal?” Killian asked cautiously. “You’re already married legally.”

“I guess not...” Julia frowned. “But like someone has to be up there to lead the ceremony. And basically everyone we know already has a part.”

Lucretia said something unintelligible. Her mouth was in a round O to apply her lipstick. When she noticed that no one had understood her, she stopped applying for a moment. “What about your dad?”

Julia started to shake her head, but Lup held her bodily in place. “He hates public speaking... plus he’d cry through the whole thing.”

“Maybe Magnus knows someone?” Sloane offered.

“Yeah, maybe. Or maybe I can just find a random hippie off the street,” Taako said, sighing.

Julia laughed a little. “I trust you, Taako. Whoever you find will be fine, I’m sure,” she said. Taako headed back into the hall, dialing a number on the phone. As he passed by the window at the top of the stairs he got a glimpse of the backyard. Carey and Merle were setting up the flowers along the aisle. He got an idea.

Magnus stepped out of Kravitz’ car just as Angus was hopping out of Hekuba’s minivan.

“Magnus!!” Angus shouted and waved. He was already dressed up in his suit.

“Hey Ango! Well don’t you look like a fancy business boy.” Magnus gave a low whistle and nodded, waiting for him on the front walk.

“I couldn’t get the bowtie to stay on properly. Can you help?”
“Sure thing.” There was a tapping sound and they both looked up. Carey was tapping on the window of the master bedroom. She waved at them, then blew a raspberry on the glass. It left a large smudge. “Well, it seems calm enough. Shall we brave the unknown?”

The outside of the house may have seemed pristine, but inside was loud and cacophonous. Loud laughter came from upstairs, along with Fish barking. Merle was pacing in the dining room and Carey and Taako were pounding down the stairs. Taako was faster.

“Where’s Kravitz?” he demanded.

“He’s parking the car—” Magnus didn’t get to finish his sentence as Taako pushed past him.

“My man!” Carey held out her hand for the long and complicated secret handshake they’d made up a few months ago. They had to restart three times because they both kept messing up, but eventually the fourteen-step process was completed. “You ready?”


“Hey, I’m not ready,” Merle said from the dining room, looking up from his notecards.

“I guess we’ll wait for you, Merle,” Carey said, sighing dramatically. She looked down at Angus. “Sweet look, dude.”

“Thank you, Miss Carey.” He straightened his lapels and smiled real big.

“Oh, here. Let’s fix your tie.” Magnus guided Angus over to the mirror in the coat closet door. “Okay, now this may take me a few tries, but I’ll get you there. So first you make the right one longer.” Magnus explained to Angus as he went along and at the end managed to tie a decent bow tie. “Oh, hey. Lookie there. Got it in one.”

There was a camera shutter and they both looked over as Kravitz lowered his camera.

“You didn’t expect me to not capture that moment, did you?” he asked with a smile. Kravitz turned to Taako. “Are they decent enough upstairs that I can get some photos?”

“As decent as they ever are,” Taako replied.

The next hour passed in a flurry of activity, with bridal party members rushing up and down stairs, sharing safety pins and q-tips. At one point, Hurley and Carey started a vicious game of Egyptian Rat Slap that ended with Avi needing an ice pack. Angus and Killian crowded at the windows to wave at the guests as they arrived and walked around to the backyard.

“Feels like practically everyone in town is here,” Noelle said to Sloane, looking out the back window at the gathering crowd. Lup and Barry were already out in the yard, playing the pre-ceremony music.

“At least everyone we know,” Sloane commented. “And that’s pretty much everyone who matters anyway.”

Taako clapped his hands. “Alright, line up! Line up! Like we practiced. Magnus, you and Carey can head out to the gazebo now.”

Magnus nodded, taking a steadying breath.

“Wish me luck, Ango.” He held his hand up for a high-five.

“Good luck!” he said, slapping Magnus’ hand as hard as he could.
Carey grabbed Magnus’ shoulder, “We better get going or Taako might burst a blood vessel.” She pushed him towards the back door. “Let’s go get you married,” she said.

“Steven,” Taako said, rearranging Noelle and Hurley, “She’s ready for you upstairs.”

Steven flattened his tie again and walked up to the master bedroom, leaving the loud group behind. He cleared his throat and knocked twice on the door.

“Jules?” he called.

“Come in,” she said. He pushed open the door. Lucretia was smoothing Julia’s veil. When she saw Steven, she stepped back.

Julia turned towards him and held out her arms to show off the dress. His smile was shaking and he put a hand up to cover his mouth. He nodded a few times.

“You look… absolutely beautiful, chickadee,” he choked out.

Julia smiled wider. “Thanks, Dad.” She kissed his cheek.

“They’re ready for us downstairs,” he said, pulling himself together.

Lucretia led the way down to where the bridal party had gathered. Oh, man. This was really happening now. It was crowded in the living room, but Taako had somehow made it work. Julia and Steven took their place at the back of the line behind Angus and Sloane.

“You know, Sloane,” Killian said, juggling her bouquet from hand to hand. “I never thought you would ask to be flower girl.”

“And why not?”

“Well, I don’t know. I just thought I’d never live to see the day of you wearing a dress.”

Sloane smiled smugly. “I have my reasons.” She made pointed eye contact with Killian then looked over at Hurley. Hurley was trying desperately to not look at Sloane, but kept sneaking glances; her face turned brighter and brighter red as she did.

Killian laughed. “I get it.”

“Alright people!” Taako called from the kitchen. “It’s time.”

Immediately everyone dropped into silence and the air stretched thin with tension. Taako opened the back door and the first couple exited the house into the bright sunshine beyond.

One after another, the pairs of her friends filed out the back door. Sloane gave Julia a wink and then followed after Angus. Through the open door Julia could hear faint strains of the music, she took a steadying breath.

Steven looked at her. “You ready, hun?” He held out his arm.

She nodded and took it. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

The familiar first chords of the bridal march started as they left the house. She was awed for a moment by the sunshine and the beautiful flowers, all of her friends standing and looking back at her.

But then she saw Magnus.
He was dressed and pressed in his suit, a wide smile on his face and tears running down his cheeks. Her breath caught in her throat and she echoed his smile. It was only thanks to her dad’s arm and steady pace that kept her from sprinting down the aisle straight for Magnus.

“You good?” Carey quietly asked Magnus as the processional started. He nodded and clenched his hands together. Could people see that he was shaking? It wasn’t that he was nervous; well, he was. But not for the reasons that people would think. This would be a day that he would look back on for the rest of his life. It was important, momentous, life-changing—he should probably focus.

He blinked a few times and realized that Lucretia was half-way down the aisle. He could see Angus and Sloane exiting the back door. Angus was concentrating very carefully on not dropping the box with the rings. Sloane tossed flower petals with a flourish, half of which blew immediately on to the bride’s side of the guests. But they made it to the front without issue.

“Good job, buddy,” Magnus whispered to Angus. He beamed up at him.

Lup and Barry started playing the bridal march and the guests stood, blocking his view. His heart fluttered in his chest; this was it.

But then he saw Julia.

He would remember everything about that moment for the rest of his life. The way the sunlight fell on her hair, the way she smiled at him, the way he immediately started crying. Big fat tears rolled down his cheeks; he slapped a hand over his mouth. He was the luckiest man in creation.

Carey handed him a hanky, which he gratefully took. He pulled himself together a little bit, though his joy threatened to break into tears again just under the surface. He steadied himself by looking at Julia. Oh, she was radiant.

Steven kissed Julia’s cheek and then shook Magnus’ hand with a smile. He went to sit down next to Josephine.

Magnus’ view was monopolized by Julia, who stood across from him at the opening of the gazebo. He studied her face, wanting to remember every little detail for the rest of time.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“H-hey,” he whispered back. They smiled at each other for a moment. Then they realized that Merle was smiling conspiratorially at both of them.

“Shall I get started?” Merle said with a grin. A laugh rippled through the crowd as Julia and Magnus nodded.

“Friends, Family, many of you know that Magnus and Julia are already married. They got officially married nearly 3 months ago so they could foster this smart kid to my left here.” Merle reached over and patted Angus’ shoulder. “So today is not a typical wedding. The contracts have already been signed; the binding vows have already been said. No, today is a celebration. Of where they have each come from, of the love that brought them together, and of where they’re going from here. So Magnus, do you want to start us off?”

Magnus nodded. He pulled out the folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket and took a deep breath. He looked at Julia and began.
“When I came to Faerun, I thought I was running from a lot of things. But I had no idea that in fact I was running to something much greater. I had no idea how much was missing in my old life, and how much better it was about to get. In the past eighteen months, I’ve been given friends, I’ve been given a home, I’ve been given a family. But most importantly, I’ve been given you, Jules.”

He had to pause and wipe a few more tears off his face before he could continue.

“So I see these vows not as a promise, but as a privilege, that I get to laugh with you and cry with you; care for you and share with you. I get to run with you, walk with you, and skate with you; I get to build with you and live with you. I can’t wait to spend the rest of our lives together.”

When he looked up, Julia had tears in her eyes too. She was blinking pretty fast, obviously trying to save her makeup. He held out the hanky to her and she took it with a chuckle.

“Julia? Do you have something for Magnus?” Merle asked. Julia handed off her bouquet to Lucretia, swapping it for a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it a couple times and looked back up at Magnus.

“Mags, you’re my best friend, my confidant, and my greatest challenger. But most importantly, you are the love of my life. You make me happier than I ever could have imagined and more loved than I ever thought possible. You’ve made me a better person. I’m truly blessed by our wonderful life together.

“I promise to love and care for you. I vow to be honest with you, kind, patient and forgiving. I promise to try to be on time at least once a year. But most of all, I promise to be a true and loyal friend to you. I love you.”

Merle smiled at the two of them.

“Angus, you still have the rings, right?” Merle asked. Angus nodded and stepped forward, opening the box that Magnus had so lovingly crafted. They each took the other’s ring. “Magnus, if you’ll repeat after me.”

Magnus took Julia’s left hand. He slipped her mother’s ring on and repeated after Merle.

“I, Magnus Burnsides, give you this ring as a reminder that I will love, honor, and cherish you. In all times, in all places, and in all ways, forever.”

Magnus squeezed Julia’s hand before he let go.

“Julia, if you’ll repeat after me.”

Julia took Magnus’ hand and looked up at him as she slipped the ring on.

“I, Julia Waxman, promise this day to love, honor and cherish you as my husband, companion, and partner. I place this ring upon your hand as a sign of my love and fidelity.”

Magnus took both her hands in his for a moment. Holy smokes, they both realized. They were really and actually married.

“Well, by the power vested in me by Taako about two hours ago, I pronounce you still husband and wife,” Merle said with a laugh. “You may now kiss--”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence before Julia had gripped Magnus’ lapels and pulled him down for a kiss. He wrapped his arms around her, spinning her over and dipping her as everyone else cheered.
Magnus smiled down at his wife and kissed her again before letting her stand back up.

“It is my great honor to introduce to everyone, again, Mr. and Mrs. Burnsides!”
The day was just beginning to turn to twilight as the guests walked down the sidewalk of the Burnsides’ neighborhood to the rink for the reception. For a photographer like Kravitz, the timing was perfect—it’s not called the Golden Hour for nothing—but not even the sun’s perfect positioning in the sky could get Magnus’ face to stop looking dumb.

Kravitz sighed a little and shook his head as he lowered the camera.

“Your face is doing it again, Magnus.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not intentional, I swear, Kravitz.”

“It’s okay, hon,” Julia said, patting Magnus’ cheek. “I still like your weird face.”

Kravitz pulled the checklist he’d made of the desired poses. He’d gotten everything, the group shots, the wide shots, he had a full roll of beautiful shots of Julia. Everything, except for anything focusing on Magnus. He ran a hand over his dreads and frowned.

“Maybe we could go grab Brad as a stand in,” Julia suggested sarcastically. Magnus gasped dramatically.

“I can’t believe you’d suggest such a thing. Kravitz, did you hear what she said?”

Kravitz glanced up from his list. “Give me a moment, guys.”

“Sorry. Take your time.” Magnus waved. Julia bent down and picked a few wildflowers. They were just starting to bloom in the field by the rink. She put the flowers behind Magnus’ ears.

“Beautiful,” she smiled up at him.

He took one and put it behind her ear. “Right back at you.” He leaned down and kissed her, soft and sweet.

Kravitz watched the scene play out and it gave him an idea. “Alright.” Kravitz began picking his way back to the couple. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Magnus, hold Julia.”

Magnus awkwardly reached out and sort of took hold of Julia’s elbows. Julia looked up at him. “You have never once held me like this.”

“...I kind of forgot what to do with my hands.”

Julia laughed and stepped closer to him in a much more natural arrangement.

“Much better,” Kravitz said, focusing on Magnus. “Now, look at Julia–do it now. And I just want you to think about her.”

Julia smiled up at him and crossed her eyes. Magnus snickered. Click.

“That’s it,” Kravitz said, adjusting his lens. “Think about her and how you feel about her.”

Julia uncrossed her eyes as Magnus began to take it seriously. He looked down at her and a soft
smile spread across his face. *Click.* He studied everything about her, the curl of her hair, the brush of her eyelashes on her cheek. Kravitz could hardly believe how well it was working. *Click, click.* His expression changed again, and it took Kravitz a moment to put a finger on what it was. It was wonder. *Click, click, click.* Kravitz got closer and focused again. *Click.*

Were those-- Kravitz paused as he looked at Magnus’ eyes. A tear broke loose and fell down Magnus’ cheek, another quickly followed. Kravitz lowered the camera. Maybe it worked a little too well.

“Oh, honey,” Julia said, putting a hand on her chest.

Magnus wiped at his face. “I just love you a lot,” he said through a thick voice.

Julia laughed; she was tearing up now too. “I love you too, you big sap.”

He leaned down and kissed her again. *Click.*

Mookie pushed on the door and Hekuba helped him, holding it open for Mavis behind. When she turned around Mookie had already disappeared into the crowd.

“Mook--?” she started looking around.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll keep an eye on him,” Mavis said, jogging off. Hekuba watched her make a beeline for her friend, Angus. Oh, good, Mookie was already there. The three started chatting animatedly, as if they hadn’t been doing that practically the entire night before. Hekuba chuckled a little as she remembered similar parties from her childhood. Sugar-fueled intense bonding, everyone left the next morning a different person in a way. Huh, sort of like derby.

Hekuba waved to Lucretia from across the room as she drifted towards the office to find Merle. They’d done a pretty good job of making the rink look presentable, but the beauty treatment hadn’t reached into the deepest corners of the rink. The office was a usual wreck, which was comforting in a way.

Merle looked up from the records he was flipping through. “Hey, do you remember which album *You Should Be Dancing* is on?”

Hekuba pulled on her purse strap. “*Children of the World*?” she guessed. Merle turned back to the records, he flipped through a few and pulled on out.

“Got it. Thanks, Hek.” He held the door for her as he left the office.

She nodded, flipping off the lights. “No problem. Just stopped by to say the kids are here. They’re over with Angus.” She gestured to the trio a ways over.

“Oh, good. It’ll be good that he has someone his age around for the party.”

Hekuba looked at Merle. She was still getting used to this Merle 2.0, a Merle who paid attention to others, shockingly enough.

“Well, I’m off,” she said.

“You’re not staying?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to intrude.”
“You wouldn’t be the only last-minute addition, trust me.”

Hekuba frowned “What does that mean?”

“I officiated the ceremony.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You? ...sorry.”

Merle chuckled. “No, believe me. I said the same thing.” He headed over towards the sound booth, Hekuba following behind. “But I think it went ...well, okay at the very least. I didn’t accidentally un-marry them.”

Merle opened up the sound booth and Hekuba hung the doorway. He queued up the next song on the turntable. He looked back at Hekuba and shrugged. “The groom’s a big disco fan.” he explained.

“Merle, I don’t mean to be rude, but what happened to you?” Hekuba finally came out and asked. “You’re… different. To put it mildly.”

Merle looked at her for a moment and then let out a breath. “Frankly, it was losing Boyland.”

“Boyland?”

“It was a big wake up call.” He paused and looked back to her. “I’ve been meaning to say this for a while… and I was honestly a little too scared too. But I just wanted to say, I’m sorry, Hekuba. I know there’s nothing I can do to change the past, but I want to try to make the future better. For the kids and for you.”

Hekuba blinked at him a few times. Never in her wildest dreams. She nodded slowly.

“Yeah. That sounds good.” she said, contemplatively. Damn, if even Merle could change like this… “I think I’m going to rejoin the team,” she heard herself say.

Merle’s eyebrows raised. “Really?”

She nodded. The idea taking shape in her head. “Yeah. I think it’d be good for me.”

“I know they’d be real happy to have you.”

“Merle, I honestly never thought I’d say this. But… thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled a little. “You sure you won’t stay?” he asked, standing up.

“No, I have some errands to run.” Hekuba headed out of the booth, Merle following behind. “Oh, please make sure that Mookie doesn’t eat only cake. At least some protein.”

“I can do tha--” Merle had glanced out of to the reception and was now frozen.

“Merle?” Hekuba asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

“Is that who I think it is?”

Hekuba scanned the crowd. “Who?”

Merle pointed to a table near the edge. Hekuba didn’t recognize anyone at the table. “I don’t know any of those people.”
“Pan Duin!” Merle shouted quietly.

Hekuba frowned. That name sounded familiar and now that he mentioned it, the large man seated next to the impeccably dressed older woman looked familiar too.

“Wait, we saw him in Neverwinter once, right?”

“Yes! When you were pregnant with Mavis. What is he doing here???”

“You should go say hi.”

“I couldn’t.”

Taako happened to be hurrying by, clipboard in hand. “Taako.” Merle flagged him down by grabbing his elbow. “What is the Pan Duin doing here?”

Taako looked a few times between Merle and Pan. “How do you know Pan?” he asked.

“How do you know Pan?” Merle replied.

“I met him at Kravitz’s mother’s house. He came with her, they’re good friends.”

“Kravitz the photo guy?”

“Yes.” Taako looked at Merle, who was still frozen, staring at the side of Pan’s head. “I could introduce you, homie. Hook you up with that good face-to-face time everyone wants.”

“Um…” Merle managed.

“I think that means yes,” Hekuba offered. Taako nodded and walked over to the table. Hekuba watched in amusement, Merle in horror, as Taako talked to Pan and then started walking back over towards them with the large man in tow.

“Taako here tells me that you’re a fan,” Pan said in a booming voice. Hekuba pushed Merle forward a little.

He started nodding quickly. “Yes, sir.” Pan took Merle’s hand in his. “You were a marvelous Siegfried, sir.”

“Der Ring?” Pan laughed. “My, that was quite a while ago now.”

Merle let out laugh and he quickly looked at Hekuba in a panic.

“Would you mind signing a poster, Mr. Duin?” she said. “You still have it up in the office, right?”

“I’d be delighted.”

“I’ll go get it,” Hekuba offered with a chuckle.

“Thanks, Hek,” he squeaked.

“No problem, Merle.”

Kravitz let out a breath and sat down next to Taako. Finally he could take a break; no one wanted pictures of people eating, no matter how delicious the food. He pulled the next roll of film out of his
bag and quickly swapped it for the one in his camera.

“My brave cameraman,” Taako said, pushing a plate of food over.

“Thank you, babe.”

“No rest for the weary?” Lucretia asked. Kravitz picked up a salt shaker. Taako made very deliberate eye contact with him, looking affronted. He slowly put it back down.

“This is why I don’t do weddings anymore, unless it’s for dear friends.”

“Not family?” Taako asked, carefully watching Lucretia take a bite.


Taako smiled broadly at him, looking more than a little smug.

“You and Ren really outdid yourselves,” Lucretia said.

“No kidding, best wedding food I’ve ever had,” added Kravitz.

“Thank you, though I should check how Ren is holding up at the line.”

Kravitz watched him walk away and picked up the salt shaker again. He glanced up guiltily at Lucretia who just raised her eyebrows.

“He always undersalts the Potatoes Au Gratin.”

“Your secret dies with me,” she said, smiling a little. They looked over the reception for a moment. The buffet line was chugging along merrily. Magnus’ specially selected playlist aired over the speakers.

“Where’s Justine?” Kravitz asked, snapping Lucretia out of her reverie.

“Hm? Oh. Neverwinter, visiting family.”

Kravitz seemed to think about the next question, but he asked it anyway. “How… are things going with you two?”

Lucretia smiled. “Well. Very well. Actually, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about…” She leaned over and started digging in her purse.

“About your relationship?”

“No. Well, in a way.” She pulled out a black leather book and placed it on the table next to Kravitz.

“What’s this?”

“You always said that you’d be interested in publishing my story if I would let you.” Kravitz looked up at her in shock. “It’s taken me a long time. Honestly, if I hadn’t met Justine, I don’t know if I would have ever…”

He picked up the journal and flipped through a few pages. Lucretia’s meticulous penmanship filled every line; in between a few pages were some photographs. There was one of her in competition, one of her and Mrs. Sinclair in practice, and in the back was one of Lucretia and Cam. Kravitz remembered taking the picture, so many years ago.
“I’m ready to close this chapter of my life, finally. ...I’m happy, I deserve to be happy. And I think Cam would be happy for me too.”

Kravitz nodded. “He would. He’d be very proud.”

She smiled at him. “I wrote down as much as I could remember, but I figured it could be a first draft. It definitely needs an editor.”

Kravitz looked up. “I think actually I know one who could help. Do you mind if Lup takes a look at it?”

“Oh of course not. She’d do marvelous.” Lucretia watched Kravitz looking through the book. “Is it alright?”

“This is…” Kravitz kept flipping through the pages. “This is incredible.” He thought for a moment. “I think I still have a few contacts that would be very interested in something like this. Sports stories are always popular.”

“I trust you to do it justice.”

Taako dropped back down at the table with a flourish. “Ren has everything under control. That woman is a godsend. What’d I miss here?”

Kravitz was deeply engrossed in Lucretia’s journal. Lucretia looked back to Taako with a smile. “I gave Kravitz a new story to tell.”
“Angus!” Magnus declared, holding up both of his hands like he just scored a touchdown. “Here you are! We’ve been looking all over for you, little man.”

Julia and Magnus fell into a few of the empty seats at the table with Angus. Merle looked up from the game of Hangman he was playing with Mookie, Mavis was deeply engrossed in a book.

“How’re you holding up?” Julia asked Angus, attempting to comb through his curly hair with her fingers.

“I’ve been great. Mavis and Mookie and Mr. Highchurch have been keeping me company.”

“Sorry we haven’t been by to see you yet.”

“It’s okay. I know you have a lot of people to talk to.” Angus reassured them.

“Yeah, we didn’t get a chance to eat any food. How was it?” Magnus asked.

“The potatoes were kind of bland.” Merle offered.

“Don’t let Taako hear you say that.” Julia said with conspiratory glance.

“You gotta put shoes on him ‘cause I haven’t guessed it yet.” Mookie whined to Merle, who complied.

“You’re about to run out of letters.” Merle tried to explain.

“I almost got it!” Mookie frowned down at the napkin.

“I could get you some food, if you’d like.” Angus offered.

“I’ll come with you.” Julia leaned in close and stage whispered to Angus. “I think Magnus would blow our cover. He’s very conspicuous.”

“Says the lady dressed in white.” Magnus replied. Julia put a finger to her lips.

“You ready, Agent Angus? You’re our only hope.” she asked Angus, turning back to look at him. He smiled at nodded.

“Let’s go.” they got up and dramatically tiptoed past a couple of tables like the Pink Panther. Magnus watched his family narrowly avoid a run in with a group of wandering cousins and he laughed.

“Thanks for keeping an eye on him, Merle.” Magnus said. Merle looked up from adding a hat to his hangman.

“Well, I was here with Mavis and Mookie anyway.”

“No, I mean… Angus told us about his time at the group home. He said that knowing you and Mavis were looking out for him made a big difference. And I just wanted to thank you for that.”

Merle looked surprised for a moment. He nodded and looked down.

“Don’t mention it.” he paused for a moment. “If he ever ends up in a similar situation like that again,
you can… I’ll do my best to help.”

Magnus smiled. “Actually, thankfully, I don’t think that’ll ever be the case again.”

Merle looked confused.

“We’re officially adopting him. We got the papers a couple days ago.”

Merle smiled. “Wow.”

“So thanks for the advice on being a dad too. …the Dad-vice.”

Merle chuckled. “Hope you don’t come looking for more, ‘cause I don’t have a lot.”

“That’s okay. I figure I’ll learn more at the Secret Society of Dads meetings.”

Merle laughed. “Yeah, sure. We get together and play poker once a week.”

Magnus grew serious as an idea dawned on him. “Actually...” he thought for a moment. “If you want, I’m part of a group that plays poker occasionally. You could come with me next time.”

“Is it a bunch of people from derby?”

“I can’t afford to bet against them. No, it’s my boss, Julia’s dad, and a couple other people from around town. I bet you’d like them. You might even make some new friends.”

“I’ll think about it.” Merle said as Julia and Angus returned with no plates.

“Were they completely out?” Magnus asked.

“Out of dinner plates, yes. But we did snag a bunch of dinner rolls.” Julia said.

Angus opened a napkin and the rolls tumbled out onto the table. The newlyweds both immediately grabbed several and devoured them.

“Angus, don’t learn from this. Entire meals should not be made out of bread.” Magnus said, around a mouthful of roll.

“Noted.” Angus said.

“Nice parenting save, honey.” Julia replied.

“Okay, 1, 2, 3!” Kravitz yelled. A flurry of camera flashes went off as Magnus and Julia cut the cake.

“I bet they both smash it in each other’s faces.” Hurley said, a few feet away and surrounded by the rest of the team.

“Ooh. I’ll take that bet.” Taako said, holding open his satchel. Hurley started fishing for money in her pockets.

“10 says that Magnus is a gentleman but Julia smashes it in his face.” Killian said, tossing in a bill.

“Wait! Are we doing *Price is Right* rules?” Sloane asked, very seriously.
“Noelle? You getting in on the action? Only a few moments left.” Taako eyed Magnus carefully plating the slice of cake. Noelle shook her head.

“I left my purse in the car.”

“Smart money would be with Killian.” Dr. Miller said, coming to stand next to Noelle. Killian bumped a fist on her chest.

“I’m glad you could make it, professor.” Noelle said. Dr. Miller lifted her champagne flute.

“Anything to get me out of grading for a few hours.”

“So teachers hate homework almost as much as students do?” Killian asked.

“Maybe even more so.” Dr. Miller finished off her champagne flute.

“Here we go! No more bets.” Taako said as Magnus and Julia picked up the cake pieces.

“Wait, hold it.” Kravitz held up a hand. “I’m out of film.”

The team let out an audible groan as Kravitz fiddled with his camera for a second.

“Oh, speaking of grading, Noelle.” Dr. Miller said. Noelle’s eyes widened.

“Yes?” she asked trepidatiously.

“You project—” Dr. Miller started, which sent Noelle’s heart rate speeding. She was interrupted when there was cheers from the surrounding group. Julia had a neat mouth full of cake and Magnus had icing all over the lower half of his face. He swiped off a bit of it and smeared it on Julia’s nose.

“W-what about my project?”

“The committee made an official decision yesterday. I was going to tell you Monday, but since you’re here now.”

“Dr. Miller, please tell me quickly. I am dying.”

“Oh, sorry. It’s a go.”

“What?” The crowd around her began to disperse as they went to go get their slice of cake too.

“You’ve got your funding.”

Noelle felt like she might float away. “Really?”

“And I got in contact with a few paralympians last week who are very interested in being part of your prototype testing.”

Certainly now she was dreaming. “Seriously?”

Dr. Miller nodded and patted her shoulder. “You’ve got a bright future ahead of you, Noelle.”

Noelle took a few deep breaths. “I just hope I’m ready for it.”

“You are.” Dr. Miller smiled.
“You were totally right about the Graham Yellow,” said Brad, wiping some ganache from the corner of his lip with a napkin. Johann smiled at his boyfriend fondly. The two of them sat with Avi and Antonia at a table off to one side.

Antonia grinned. “I knew you could grow those. My buddy Rowan was giving me a hard time for not giving you tea roses to start on.”

“I have nothing against a tea rose,” Brad assured her. “They’re just not as elegant. What do you suppose I should plant next? You said something about snowdrift roses?”

“Snowdrift are nice, but wouldn’t you like something with more of a pop of color?” Antonia gestured with her fork to his tie, which was a sedate maroon and blue geometric pattern. “Something more like that?”

Brad blushed. “Oh dear. I told you it was too much, Johann.”

“Nonsense,” said Johann, sipping his drink. “It’s a party, after all.”

Brad picked at the tie. “I don’t usually go in for crazy patterns.”

Avi snorted, and then disguised it as a cough.

“I didn’t mean to make you self-conscious, Brad,” said Antonia, squinting at the tie. “I just like the color. I’m sure it’s a perfectly fine tie.”

“You think so?” asked Brad pleadingly.

Johann reached around his boyfriend’s broad shoulders and patted them reassuringly. “She’s right, it’s fine.”

“You know, it’s a little late in the season to plant roses, if you want them to come back next year,” said Antonia. “What would you think of clearing out a flowerbed? There are lots of gorgeous wildflowers that grow great in this area, like echinacea.”

Brad raised an eyebrow, tie forgotten for now. “What’s that look like?”

“It’s a coneflower, sort of a fuschia color, and…” she trailed up, screwing up her face. “Okay, the finer details are kind of lost on me. But there’s a planter full of them out front if you’d like to see.”

“Certainly. Now, or…”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Antonia hopped to her feet and made her way around Avi’s chair. “If you’ll steer me through the tables.”

Brad stood and offered her his arm. “Of course.”

Johann watched them go, smiling to himself.

“Wow.”

Johann tore his eyes away from them to look at Avi. “Wow what?”

Avi was grinning broadly. “You are so in love.”

Johann considered this seriously. “Yes,” he agreed.
“Wow.” Avi looked a little taken aback. “I mean, I was teasing you.”

“It’s true.” Johann shrugged and glanced around the other tables, laying eyes on Julia and Magnus for a moment, eating their cake. “You know, I get why you got married now.”

Avi chuckled. “Did you not get it before, or what?”

“I think I understood it abstractly, but not intimately, you know?” said Johann earnestly. “Not really.”

“I’m happy for you guys,” said Avi. “Seriously.”

Johann smiled, and glanced back at Magnus and Julia, who were now deep in a raucous conversation with Carey and Killian. Carey had been a great best man.

He remembered, all in a flash, when he’d been best man, and the wave of feelings that went with that, a wave of feelings that had been suppressed for so long…

“Hey, Avi, I feel like--” Johann stopped.

Avi paused, drink halfway up to his mouth. “What?”

Johann hesitated. “This might be uncomfortable, but I think…I think I ought to be honest with you.”

“Oh no, are you gay?” said Avi in mock horror.

Johann frowned. “I’m being serious.”

“As usual,” said Avi, taking a swig of his drink. “Sorry, man, go on.”

“I was… For a really long time…” Johann rubbed the back of his neck. Screw it, just say it. “I was in love with you before. Like, those feelings are gone now, and you know, of course I still love you as my friend, and my brother and stuff. Of course, forever. And I’m with Brad now, and I mean to stay that way, but… I don’t know, I just thought you should know.”

Avi stared, struck silent, glass dangling from his hand. Johann felt despair well up in his gut. God dammit, he’d ruined it. He’d ruined everything. Johann put his head in his hand. “This must be weird for you, sorry. You’re straight and married and here I am--”

“Johann--”

“--like an idiot --”

“Johann, look at me.”

He did, met Avi’s eyes. Avi had set down his glass, met his gaze unblinkingly. “I’m not straight.”

Johann paused, dumbstruck. He glanced to the door where Antonia had disappeared, and then back to Avi. “But--”

“I swing both ways, dude,” said Avi, still dead serious.

Johann was taken aback. “Really?”

“Like a pair of goddamn saloon doors,” he said, and cracked a smile. “So let’s get one thing straight: I’m not.”
“Oh. Well… oh.” Johann loosed a slow breath. He was having trouble processing this. “I never knew.”

“I didn’t know you were gay ’til you went after Brad,” said Avi, hooking his thumb over one shoulder.

“But you always dated girls in college, and afterward,” Johann protested.

Avi shrugged. “It’s a bigger dating pool, man.”

Johann frowned. “You could have dated me.”

“And I would have, too,” said Avi, pointing at him. “Did you never once notice how much of a crush I had on you?”

“No, I just thought—I mean, shit, Avi, I didn’t realize I was gay either ’til like, last year.” Johann raked his hand through his hair. “Shit.”

“Shit,” Avi agreed, leaning back in his chair.

The two of them sat in contemplative silence for a moment or two.

“I’m… kind of… glad. That we didn’t end up together,” said Johann slowly.

Avi’s grin came back. “I think I’m offended.”

Johann smiled a little. “No, like… listen, no offense, because you are my best friend, but you’re kind of an enabler.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” laughed Avi. “I’m the enabler, sure. You know what’s in this cup?” He lifted his glass. “It’s fucking iced tea. And not even the Long Island kind. That’s all Tony, man, you and I used to get plastered all the time.”

“Yeah.” Johann nodded. “You did good with her.”

“So did you, with Brad.”

“We make much better friends than we would lovers,” said Johann solemnly.

“Eugh, lovers?” said Avi with a visceral shudder. “Never say that, ever.”

“Why not?” asked Johann.

“It’s a terrible word,” said Avi, barely suppressing his laughter. “What if I started calling you and Brad lovers?”

Johann was perplexed. “But we are lovers.”

Avi threw up his hands. “No, ew, no more.”

“What are you two up to?” said Antonia’s voice, arriving again with a hand on Brad’s arm.

“Brad,” said Johann seriously, “what do you think of ‘lover’ as a term of endearment?”

Brad considered as he sat down. “I rather like it.”

Antonia stared at them in horror. “What did I walk into?”
“Don’t listen to them, Princess,” said Avi, patting her hand. “They’re disgusting.”

“Oh, we’re disgusting,” scoffed Johann. “What about your outdated patriarchal pejoratives?”

“What, you mean ‘princess?’” asked Antonia.

“I think it’s sweet,” offered Brad.

“It reeks of the bourgeois,” Johann insisted.

Avi threw back his head and laughed.

Julia double knotted her laces and tightened the velcro strap on her skates.

“Ready?” she asked Magnus, who was sitting next to her on the bench. He nodded.

“Always.” He took her hand and they skated over to the entrance to the flat rink.

“We’d like to invite everyone to the flat rink for Magnus and Julia’s first couples skate.” Merle’s voice echoed over the loudspeaker. A cheer went up from the crowd as they skated onto the empty rink. The disco ball lowered from the ceiling as the song they’d picked started playing.

*Listen baby, ain’t no mountain high*

*Ain’t no valley low, ain’t no river wide enough baby*

At first they skated just hand in hand. Julia looked over when she heard Magnus start to sing along. She smiled and he pulled her in as if they were going to ballroom dance.

*If you need me call me no matter where you are*

*No matter how far don’t worry baby*

*Just call my name I’ll be there in a hurry*

*You don’t have to worry*

They circled around the furthest edge, spinning a few times. She sang the song back to him as he spun her around behind him.

*’Cause baby there ain’t no mountain high enough*

*Ain’t no valley low enough*

*Ain’t no river wide enough*
They stopped and did the planned hip thrust on “keep me”, which definitely got a few cat calls from the guests. Magnus laughed and grabbed Julia’s hand again, spinning her before switching her to the other hand and spinning her again. Her wedding dress spun out around her, the lace catching in the bubbled light.

Julia looked up at Magnus; she wondered if her face could crack from smiling so much. They’d come so far since that first meeting.

“What’re you thinking about?” Magnus asked, leaning close to be heard over the music.

“About practice last January. When we met.”

Magnus chuckled. “Who could have known how important that practice would be?”

“If I’d have known, I’d have been on time.” Julia said with a smile.

“And I would have washed my shirt.” Magnus replied making Julia almost double over with laughter. He caught her and turned it into a dip.

“Love you, babe.” she said, leaning up to kiss him as the song faded to a close.
The sound of a knife hitting a glass echoed through the noisy rink, causing everyone to slowly quiet down and search for the source of the noise. Carey waved and dropped the knife back onto the table. She picked up a mic and it made a loud feedback noise.

“Whoa, hey. Sorry about that. Um… Hey, everybody. I’m Carey, and I’m told that usually the best man gives a speech at the reception,” she said, twiddling the bottom of her suit jacket with her free hand.

Killian whooped from a few tables over; Carey looked over towards her and laughed a little.

“Thanks, baby. That’s my--anyway, um, I hate speeches. I’m not good at them. Don’t like hundreds of people looking at me when I’m …talking… But don’t worry, Magnus, I have found a very good substitute.” Carey set down her glass with an obvious look of relief. “So instead of listening to me blather on, give it up for Angus McDonald.”

Carey helped Angus stand on a chair and handed him the mic before quickly retreating to sit next to Killian. Angus pulled a small stack of notecards out of his jacket and smiled at Julia and Magnus.

“Hello, everyone. As Miss Carey said, I’m Angus McDonald. Miss Julia and Magnus are my foster parents. I’ve done some research on what makes a good wedding speech. And it said that I should start with how I met the couple. I met Magnus the same day he met Miss Julia. He was the new referee for the Bureau of Badass and he swore in front of me.”

A laugh rippled through the crowd and Magnus covered his face in his hands.

“I met Miss Julia several years before that, though I don’t remember the exact day. She shared an orange with me and taught me a new way to tie the laces on my shoes so the frayed ends wouldn’t show.”

Julia put a hand over her heart. “I can’t believe he remembered that,” she said to Magnus.

“I’m very lucky in my life that I have a lot of people who look out for me and want what’s best for me, and Magnus and Miss Julia are no exception. They’re both very kind to me, they really listen. They’re thoughtful and considerate, but they fiercely stand up for what they believe in. And while I’m very young, even I can see that they are very much in love.”

Angus blinked quickly and wiped at his eye with the back of his hand.

“They worked very hard over the past six months so they could become my foster parents and give me a nice home filled with love, and understanding, and a dog. And then just a couple days ago, I found out that--”

Angus stopped, taking a shuddering breath. He looked up from his notecards to Julia and Magnus, both of whom were crying too.

“That they’re going to adopt me. I’m so happy that they’re married and that they’ve included me in their wonderful new life together. I love you, Mom and Dad.”

Angus put down his notecards and picked up a glass from the table.
“To the new family.”

“To the new family,” the guests repeated as Magnus and Julia hopped up from their seats. They ran to Angus and grabbed him into a group hug.

“Did I do a good job?” Angus asked, his voice muffled from somewhere in the hug.

“Just the best,” Julia said, kneeling down and placing several kisses on his cheek.

All three of them stared at each other for a moment, then they went back into the group hug.

Carey approached slowly and snuck the mic out of Angus’ hand.

“Yeah, I couldn’t have done half as good a job,” she said, looking down at the huddle of Burnsides. She turned and looked out over the crowd. “Uh, Merle? You wanna take it from here?”

“Allllllright, alright, alright everyone, get your skates on! It’s time to get this party started,” Merle’s voice came over the loudspeakers. “Celebration” started playing and the black lights kicked on.

A line quickly formed at the skate rental booth, though many guests just pulled out their own.

Barry very carefully tied the laces so they wouldn’t untie and get caught in the wheels. He pulled on them a few times. Yeah, they weren’t going anywhere. A pair of skates came to a dramatic stop in front of him. He looked up and a smile spread across his face.

“You ready for your first lesson?” Lup asked, hand on her hip. She winked at him and Barry melted a little.

“I-I’m going to be very bad at this. I haven’t skated since I was a kid and even then I wasn’t very good.”

“That’s okay.” Lup held out her hand. “You can lean on me.”

Lup helped him slowly stand up and he slowly wobbled out towards the rink. One hand was holding Lup’s, the other gripping the half-wall.

“Alright, now you’re going to have to let go so we can join the group.”

Barry looked out at the rotation of people on the rink, he paled slightly. “They’re going so fast,” he gulped.

“I’ll be right here the whole time,” Lup said, slowly guiding him out onto the floor. Barry rolled along behind her, looking very stiff and absolutely petrified.

“Yeah, Barry!” Killian said, making a hang-loose with her hand as she whizzed by.

“Bend your knees a little bit,” Lup coached. “And push off with your right foot, yeah. There you go. You’re doing it.”

“I am?” Barry looked down at his skates. His knees were shaking, but lo and behold, he was rolling along. He smiled at Lup. “I am!”

She smiled. “Okay, the turn’s coming up. So push more with your right foot than your left.”

Barry’s elation quickly evaporated as he attempted to make the turn. But then he felt like he was
falling too far forward, so he jumped upright, which made him even more unbalanced. Reeling, he grabbed the only thing he had for support: Lup. And down they both went into a tangle of limbs and spinning wheels.

Barry felt his whole face go red as he attempted to sit up. He could already tell he was going to bruise. “Lup? I’m sorry. Are you okay?” He got on hands and knees so he could see her face. She was laughing, tears running out of the corners of her eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“You’d make a decent blocker if you ever got comfortable on skates,” she managed to say.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She got back up on her feet very gracefully. “Come on, you gotta keep plugging away.” She held out both hands. Barry took them and she pulled him back onto his feet, letting him find his balance again.

“H-hey, Lup?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” he said with as much sincerity as he could muster. Her mouth dropped open and she blinked a few times.

Then she smiled. “I love you too.”

Barry cupped her cheek and kissed her, deeply and fervently. When they parted, they were both smiling. He kissed her cheeks, her forehead. He had to stop when he almost lost his balance again, but Lup caught him this time and kept him from falling.

She smiled down at him as he had an awkward grip about her middle. She leaned down and kissed the top of his head.

“Get a room!” Hurley jeered with a smile as she sailed past, hand in hand with Sloane. Lup stuck her tongue out at her. Sloane and Hurley cackled.

So, so very slowly, Barry and Lup finished the circle of the rink.

Kravitz was sure to get a picture of the two of them when they came close enough. He was smiling as he changed the film to the next frame. Taako hip bumped him as he came up beside him.

“Hey there, sailor,” Taako said, turning away from the rink and resting his elbows on the half-wall. “You wanna pop on some skates and head out there?”

Kravitz laughed and swung the camera strap over a shoulder. “Taako, love of my life, light of days… no. I’ll stay here on dry land, thank you.”

“All work and no play made Kravitz a very dull boy.”

“I could say the same thing to you,” Kravitz said, intertwining his fingers with Taako.

“Tell me about it. Straight people weddings are so much work.” Taako dramatically drooped his head against Kravitz’ chest.

Kravitz chuckled, then slipped an arm around Taako’s waist. He took his hand in his and started swaying to the music. Taako lifted his head.
“People don’t usually slow dance to Kool and the Gang.”

“Maybe they should.” Kravitz replied with a low smile. They swayed to the music for a few bars.

“Sorry I’ve been so busy lately,” Taako said seriously.

“It’s fine.” Kravitz looked out over the wedding. “You did a fantastic job.”

Taako looked out over it and looked a little pleased with himself. “I did, didn’t I?”

Kravitz chuckled and spun Taako away from him. He pulled him back in closer. “Though you being so busy has gotten me thinking.”

“Ooh, do tell.”

“How about we take a trip? Just the two of us. Go somewhere romantic.”

“Like Cincinatti?”

Kravitz stopped and had to laugh for a moment. “N-no. Not like—” he huffed and found his rhythm again. “I was thinking Naples.”

“Ooh, that does sound romantic.”

“Horseback rides, candlelit dinners, I know a villa we can rent.”

Taako let out sigh. “Sounds fantastic. Do we have to come back?”

Kravitz chuckled. “Not if you don’t want to.” He gazed at Taako for a long moment. “I’m happy anywhere as long as I’m with you.”

Taako froze for a second, and leaned back. “Kravitz Leonard Sinclair, are you proposing to me?”

Kravitz smiled a little and shook his head. “No. When I do propose to you, you’ll know it.”

They looked at each other for a moment till Taako blushed and glanced away.

“Stop. You know what it does to me when you get all debonair.”

Kravitz smiled and tilted Taako’s chin back towards him for a kiss as the song ended and a new one began. They both smiled and had to laugh as they recognized the number.

“Of course Magnus would have this at his wedding,” Kravitz said with a smile.

“Nah, son. This is all Julia.” Taako pointed over to where she was standing, or rather, doing some very bad disco dancing. Magnus laughed and then proceeded to out-do her terribleness as they waited for Angus to finish.

Angus gave a final tug to his laces and he looked up at the dancing pair.

“Are we embarrassing you, Ango?” Julia asked, holding out her hand while she danced.

“Not even a little bit.” Angus took his parents’ hands and they skated to the rink.

Merle waved a hand from the edge where he was watching Mavis and Mookie skate. Sloane and Hurley looked deep in each other’s eyes as they skated along. Lucretia and Noelle danced to the music with large smiles on their faces. Killian winked at Angus as she and Carey passed by. The
Burnsides merged into the mass of circling friends and family as the lyrics began.

We are family

I got all my sisters with me

We are family

Get up everybody and sing...

Deep in the middle of nowhere there is a town called Faerun. It’s not on a lot of maps and most people drive right through it, never realizing that they missed it. It never got a Hardees, or even a second grocery store. The Adventure Zone Roller Rink and Arcade never really became a “successful” business. But there is one thing that makes Faerun special for a small group of people, turned friends, turned family. And that is roller derby.

~*~

May 18, 2004

Lucretia tapped a finger on her clipboard. She looked from the clock on the wall of the locker room, back to her own watch again.

“No one has heard from them?” she said.

Most of the team, minus Killian, Carey, Sloane, and Hurley, were sitting on the benches in their practice gear. They all shook their heads.

“Well… where could they be?” Lucretia sighed impatiently, flipping open her cell phone again.

Suddenly, the door burst open and the missing four stampeded into the room, all talking over each other. It was just an unintelligible wall of talking, something about Massachusetts and traffic.

“Wait, wait. Silence! One at a time.” The group finally quieted down. “Now where have you been?” Lucretia demanded.

“We had to take a quick road trip,” Hurley started.

“’CAUSE WE GOT MARRIED!!” Carey crowed. All four of them broke out in huge grins and held up their left hands. They each had a wedding band.

The locker room was quiet for a moment in disbelief, till Taako hopped to his feet and yelled,

“WITHOUT ME??”

The End...ish
(Be sure to check out our “podcast” Bureau of *Bureau of Badass* for bonus content and a special announcement from the authors. Find it on the tumblr.)
Appendix: Good Good Boy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September 2000

Rachel the barista bestowed a kiss and a baby on her husband when he wandered into their little kitchen. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” he yawned, taking the baby. “Morning, favorite boy.”

“Look at this little man, finally sleeping through the night,” Rachel said fondly, ruffling the baby fuzz on her son’s head.

“Our huge giant baby boy,” her husband replied. “You leaving?”

“Yep. Coffee’s on the counter.” She grabbed her keys from the hook on the wall and headed out the door. “Love you!”

“Love you too!” he called out behind her.

“Do you think the aviators are too much?” asked Hurley, checking in the passenger mirror.

Sloane glanced over at her uniformed girlfriend. “You look like MacGyver.”

“Hell yeah.” Hurley slipped the shades onto her face. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Sloane grinned and turned right. She was taking a shortcut on a near-abandoned industrial part of town. There was a car pulled to the side of the road.

“Hey, look,” said Hurley.

The car was on a jack and missing it’s back left wheel. There was a guy leaning into the backseat.

“Do we have time to stop?” asked Hurley.

Sloane shrugged. “No, but we probably should anyway.”

“Cool. I’ve always wanted to be in a pit crew.”

Sloane chuckled and pulled up behind the little Subaru. She and Hurley hopped out, and were immediately assailed by the sound of a wailing baby.

“Hey, you need a hand?” Sloane called.

The man poked his head out of the car, and an expression of relief washed over his face. “God, if you wouldn’t mind. My baby’s kind of having a meltdown here.”

“No problem,” said Sloane, crouching down beside the car. “Is this your spare?”
“Yeah, I almost had it on when Little Man here decided he was done,” said the man, who was now holding a tiny baby with more patience than Sloane would have if there were someone screaming at her face. “You ladies need a hand, or--”

“We’ll take care of it, sir,” said Hurley in what Sloane was now familiar with as her Cop Voice. “You just hang on to your kid there.”

“Thanks, Officer,” he said, and started making soothing baby noises.

It took the two of them no time at all to affix the tire, and once they’d cleaned up the tools and the jack, the man made a point to shake their hands. “Thank you. I’m not even going to be late for work. You saved my ass big time.”

“Not a problem,” said Sloane. “And hey, if you ever need a repair, feel free to visit me over at Kim’s Cars.”

“I definitely will,” he said. “Thank God for a world full of competent women.”

Sloane and Hurley exchanged an amused glance and bid him goodbye.

“Your textbooks will tell you that there are different racial classifications, like Mongoloid, African, Caucasian, and so on.”

Angus sat up straight. He was very much looking forward to Seventh Grade World History, and was glad he had the same teacher as in Civics last year. He’d already read the chapter, and spent a fair amount of time wondering which classification he fit into, or for that matter which classifications Magnus and Julia fit into. None of them seemed quite right.

“Well, guess what, everyone,” said the teacher. “I’m about to swear.”

Angus exchanged a glance with June. The class collectively leaned forward.

“That’s a bunch of bull honky,” he said.

The class burst into laughter. Angus’ hand shot up.

The teacher waited a second for the class to settle down. “Yes, Angus?”

“Are you saying the textbook is wrong, sir?” Angus asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Angus. It’s based on old ethnography that’s recently been proven inaccurate.” The teacher leaned against his desk. “Scientists now think that every single human shares about 99% the same DNA. So look around.”

Angus did, glancing at his classmates.

“You guys are way, way more the same than different. In fact, the part of our DNA that controls the color of our skin is so small that it barely even matters.”

June raised her hand.

“June?”

“Sir, if our textbook is wrong, how do we know every textbook isn’t wrong?” she said.
“That’s a good question,” the teacher said, nodding. “We’re finding new things out all the time about history and science and language. I guess the answer is, we’ve just got to keep learning, and being willing to learn.” He threw out a hand. “That’s why World History is important. In order to really understand the world, you have to pay attention to its context, where it came from.”

Angus nodded thoughtfully.

Beside him, June flinched. “Ow.”

“Brody?” said the teacher in a warning tone.

Angus glanced behind him. Brody was holding a straw with a guilty expression. He must’ve hit June with a spitball.

“Do you need another detention?” the teacher asked.

Brody shook his head and put down his straw.

“That’s better. Now.” The teacher grabbed some chalk. “Let’s talk about what makes a civilization.”

“Rach?” came the call from the front door.

“In here,” Rachel called. She gave her son another little bounce in his bouncy seat and stirred the chili in its pot. Almost done.

Her husband appeared and kissed her. “How was your day?”

“Very good,” she said. “And yours? How did the racism talk go?”

He grimaced. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I even get through to these kids.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said, adjusting his glasses, which had slid down his nose, and then kissing him. “Here, I have something that will cheer you up.”

“Mm, what?”

“Let me get it,” she said, pulling away and opening a cupboard.

He crouched down beside the baby. “How about Sweet Boy? Was he okay in daycare?”

“Buh buh buh,” said the baby.

“They said he was a little fussy,” said Rachel, pulling a plastic tray of cupcakes out of the cupboard. “He might be teething. Here, we go, voila!”

“Oh babe.” He stood up and took a cupcake. “From Rosemary and Rye?”

“Yep,” she said, smiling and taking one herself.

Her husband took a huge bite, getting frosting all over his face. “Mmm. Babe. Rachel. I have a good good idea.”

“What’s that?” she said, taking a bite herself.
“It’s very good. Here it is. Ready?”

She nodded.

“We live in Rosemary and Rye.”

She swallowed back a smile. “That is not a good idea.”

“What are you talking about, it’s pure brilliance,” he said, completely straight-faced. “We’ll make ourselves a bed under the oven. And a lil baby hammock near the cookies.”

“Pleh,” said the baby.

“See, he thinks it’s an awesome idea.” He grabbed Rachel’s shoulder. “Babe, c’mon, live in a bakery with me.”

Rachel finally managed to swallow. “All right, I’ll ask Taako if he needs a scullery family.”

His deadpan broke into delighted smile. “A scullery family!”

“You’d better eat something,” she said. “You’re going to be late for the bout.”

“I’ll just have these,” he said, snatching the tray of cupcakes out of her hand and making a break for the door.

“Hey, get back here!” she laughed.

“You’ll never take me alive!”

Merle unlocked the door to the DJ booth and glanced around. Where was… oh, there.

“Evening, Merle,” said the young man walking up to him through the crowd of derby fans.

“Evening,” said Merle. “Got it all set up for you. Er, you have…” Merle gestured to his own face.

“Oh.” The man dabbed at his face. “Sorry. Frosting. Did I get it?”

Merle nodded. “Yep. Are you sure you don’t want to meet the team? They’ve been asking about you.”

“About me?” said the man, puzzled.

Merle frowned. “You’re a pillar of the league. You know that, right?”

“I just do this for fun,” said the man, shrugging.

“So that’s a no?” said Merle.

“Yeah… I prefer to stay in the background, I think.”

“If you say so,” said Merle, shaking his head. “See you after the bout, Griffin.”

“Sure.” Griffin pulled open the door of the DJ booth and settled down in the chair. Let’s see. This week it was the B.o.B. versus Phandolin, gonna be a good bout.
He spotted Angus sitting in the stands, watched the team collect in the center of the track, listened to their chant. He knew a little bit about each team member--you had to, for this job--but he’d never met any of them until today. He was gratified to know that in addition to being amazing athletes, Battling Ram and Jenicide were good people.

The chant finished off. Griffin glanced at the clock. It was time.

“Llllladies and gentlemen!” he said into the microphone. “It’s a beautiful night for some derby!”

The crowd cheered. Griffin grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to The Appendix everybody! If you listened to our podfic (ficpod?) then you know what's up and didn't spend this past weekend in mourning. But for the rest of you, here's the scoop: WE AINT DONE YET! Well, we're done. But it's not over. We love this world just a little too much to contain our excitement to this one 18 month period in the character's lives. So thus The Appendix. We have a little bit everything, some fluff, some angst, some crack, prequel, sequel, and everything in between. This will be the permanent state for the fic going forward. We have a collection of about 10 or so chapters right now, which we'll post on Mondays. And then when we run out, we'll update when we write more. So, see you Monday! <3, H+K
January 2001

Magnus stretched and cracked an eye open. The ceiling of their bedroom seemed brighter than it usually did in the early mornings. He leaned up a little to see out the window over their bed. Snow covered the ground, and more was falling softly down. And according to the clock, they still had half an hour before the day needed to begin. Perfect. He pulled the extra quilt back up over his shoulder, and snuggled closer to Julia, wrapping an arm around her. She groaned and mumbled something.

“Go back to sleep,” he said, quietly, heading that way himself.

“What time--?” she managed, her eyes still closed.

“Not even 6 yet.”

She gave a little ‘mmph’ and appeared to go back to sleep.

Magnus relaxed back, his breath slowing, when suddenly Julia popped up and jumped out of the bed. She raced into the adjoining bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her. Fish hopped off the bed after her and sniffed along the door jam.

“Jules?” Magnus asked, sitting up in bed. Some truly horrifying, and immediately recognizable, sounds came from behind the door. It sounded like a velociraptor was trying to gargle lawn mowers. Magnus got up and knocked on the door. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t come in!” she said, coughing a little, followed by more retching noises.

“Come on, Jules, we said in sickness and in health. I’m coming in.”

Julia was crouched by the toilet, clutching to it for dear life. Magnus knelt down behind her and held back her hair as she went for another round.

“Go away. I’m gonna make you sick.” she whined after it subsided. She gagged a few more times, but remained steady otherwise. She leaned back against the tub. Magnus held a hand up to her forehead.

“Clammy, but no fever. That’s good.”

“I’ll be fine, just go back to bed,” she tried. Magnus filled a dixie cup with some water from the tap and handed it to her. Fish kept trying to force her way closer to Julia and eventually snuck by. She laid down next to her, putting her head on her thigh.

“Slow, small sips,” he reminded her gently. She frowned but took one, scratching Fish behind her ear.

A shout came from down the hall. Then the sound of running feet and their bedroom door burst
“No School! No School!” Angus leapt onto their bed. “Mom! Dad! IT’S A SNOW DAY!! NO SCHOOL—wait, where are you?” He stopped hopping up and down on the bed and looked around the room.

“Right here, Angus,” Magnus said, appearing in the bathroom doorway. Angus jumped off the bed.

“Dad! Dad! It’s a snow day!!” he said excitedly.

“That’s great, buddy. Mom’s not feeling well right now.”

Julia waved from where she was leaning against the tub, still cradling her dixie cup.

Angus frowned when he saw her. “Oh, no.”

“Yeah. Listen, I still have to go into work today. Would you be willing to help take care of your mom till I get back?”

Angus nodded quickly. “We still have the gatorade from when I was sick last week.”

“Excellent. Why don’t you get a glass for her?”

“Okay!”

He ran away and Julia chuckled a little. “What did we ever do to deserve him?”

Magnus smiled and nodded.

“Excuse me, Fish.” Magnus gently pushed her aside. He put an arm under Julia’s knees and another behind her back, scooping her up. “Back to bed with you.”

“I feel much better now.”

“Sure, honey,” he said, placing her back in her spot on the bed. He pulled the pillows back into place. “I have to go and install the Snyder order in Rockport, will you and Angus be okay till after practice?”

“No, I don’t want to miss practice. It’s the first one back.”

“People who throw up in the morning don’t go to a full-contact sport practice in the evening.”

“But I feel fine now.” He just looked at her. She huffed out a breath. “Fine.”

“Tell me you’ll call Taako if you need anything.”

“I’ll call Taako if I need anything,” she repeated, glumly. Magnus smiled.

“I love you,” he reminded her.

“I love you too,” she grumbled. He placed a kiss on her forehead as Angus returned with the gatorade, he’d even brought a coaster. He set both carefully down on the nightstand. He also set a wide mixing bowl on the floor in front of it.

“Just in case...you know.” He shrugged.
Julia smiled and took his hand. “My boys...you take such good care of me.”

They both smiled. Magnus put a hand on Angus’ shoulder.

“We’ll let you sleep,” he said, before guiding him and Fish out of the room and shutting the door behind them. “So, little man, how do snow day pancakes sound?”

“Yes, please!” Angus said, hopping down the stairs.

“What do we need?” Magnus asked, following him into the kitchen. The snow was really starting to accumulate in the backyard, drifts were blowing up onto the back porch.

“Flour, and sugar, and eggs, and buttermilk, and baking soda, and Mom adds vanilla even though the recipe doesn’t call for it.”

“Would you feed Fish?”

“Yes, sir.”

Magnus picked up the phone and punched in a familiar number, pinning it to his shoulder so he could pull the flour down from the cabinet. Angus poured some kibble into Fish’s bowl as she eagerly danced around it.

“Yello?”

“Hey, Taako, it’s Magnus.” Magnus also pulled down the sugar and baking soda. “Yep, yep. It’s snowing here too.”

“It’s almost up to the tire swing,” Angus added, looking out the back door.

“Listen, Jules is feeling under the weather. Would you do me a favor and stop in sometime today? I have to go to Rockport.”

Angus dutifully measured out the flour and sugar, putting them back in their places before getting the next ingredient.

“Of course, she’s being stubborn about it. She’s Jules,” Magnus said, laughing. He returned the buttermilk to the fridge. “No fever...not yet anyway. But she threw up this morning. Angus came down with something similar last week, so it’s probably just making the rounds. But you know, it wouldn’t be January without the flu...okay. Thanks so much. Say hi to Krav for me. Uh-huh, bye.”

Julia woke up a couple hours later, and thankfully the nausea had passed. If she hadn’t had the stomach episode that morning, she wouldn’t have thought herself sick at all. In fact it was almost lunchtime and she was starving. She groaned and got up. If she had to convalesce, at the very least she’d like to do it with some company.

She wrapped the extra quilt around her shoulders and shuffled down the stairs. Angus was zipping up his coat by the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked. He spun around.

“Fish and I are going to go build a snowman.” Fish barked, as if in agreement.

“And where are your snow pants?”
“I couldn’t find them.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, heading for the closet under the stairs.

“Yes.” Angus followed her. “I looked everywhere.”

Julia opened up the coat closet, and there were the snowpants, right in front.

“Oh,” he said. She chuckled.

“Like Grandpa always says, ‘if it was a snake, it would have bit ya.’” She pulled them off the hanger and handed them off to him. It took him a few minutes to take back off the hat, scarf, gloves, coat, and boots. She helped him step into the pants, so he wouldn’t slip and fall on the wooden floors with the slick fabric. They ended up being about an inch too short. “Didn’t we just buy these in October?” she asked, as he slipped his boots back on.

“Yeah.”

“You better stop this growing business,” she said, pulling the hat on over his hair. “Or you’ll be taller than me soon.”

He laughed as Fish suddenly took off for the front door, barking and pawing at the door. The doorbell then rang. Julia opened it to find Taako, holding a grocery bag and stomping the snow off of his boots.

“Well, hi Taako,” She opened the screen door to let him in.

“Evil white stuff,” he said, brushing some snow off the shoulders of his suede jacket as he came inside. Fish rushed past them, followed quickly by Angus.

“Hi Taako!” he said, running down the front porch stairs. Fish was happily leaping around in the snow drifts, a dark splash of black fur against the pure white landscape.

Julia closed the door behind Taako. He was taking off his boots, setting them on the mat next to Julia’s.

“I live in the South for one reason and one reason alone. It’s not supposed to snow here,” he said exasperatedly. He flung a hand out to the winter wonderland beyond the front windows. “So what the hell is this?”

Julia laughed. “Can I get you some cocoa?”

He huffed a breath and took off his coat. “Do you have tea, actually?”

“Yeah, we do.” She walked into the kitchen and Taako followed behind her.

“So besides the fact that you’re in your pajamas still at noon-thirty, you don’t seem sick,” Taako commented, sitting down at the small table against the back wall.

“How’d you--” she sighed quickly, “Did Magnus tell you stop by?” She set the tea kettle on the stove and turned it on.

“He did. So I brought some ginger ale and a few other supplies.” He pushed the bag across the table towards her.

“Thanks, but I’m really fine.” She set two mugs on the table. Taako selected a couple bags from
the tin that lived on the table and put one in each cup.

“It’s not a problem.”

She opened the bag. “Let’s see… ginger ale, saltines.” She pulled them both out and set them on the counter, “Pepto, very useful, and—” there was only one item left in the bag, a small-ish rectangular box. She did not pull it out, but gave Taako a look. “Ha. Ha. Very funny.”

“I’m not joking,” he replied.

She started to protest, but then started doing some calculations in her head. Oh, wait. She turned and looked at the dog calendar on the fridge. Wait, no. She actually walked over and counted the days back. Oh, no. She looked back at Taako as the tea kettle started to sing. He smiled slyly.

“You go take care of business, I’ll take care of the tea.”

By the time Magnus pulled back into the driveway that night, it was long past dark. A happy family of snow people now lived in the front yard, probably thanks to Angus. All the lights in the house were off upstairs, which was to be expected as it was well past Angus’ bedtime, and just one lamp was still on in the living room. Magnus knocked the snow off his boots before going inside the back door. He took off his boots in the kitchen and padded through to the living room. Julia was sitting in the chair by the lamp, her hands folded in her lap.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t think you’d still be up.”

She just looked at him. “How was practice?”

“Long,” he sighed, taking off his coat and scarf and hanging them in the closet under the stairs. “We got started late and Lucretia, I guess, really wanted to start off training with a bang.” He stood behind the couch, leaning against it. “Did Taako stop by?”

“He did, yeah.”

“Good, good. So how are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling… great.”

“I’m glad to hear.” He nodded. “Don’t feel too bad about missing. Carey was out sick too. I think she has the same bug you do.”

Julia smiled wryly. “If Carey has the same thing I do, then she’s in for even more of a shock than you are.”

Magnus frowned in confusion. “What?” he asked.

Julia unfolded her hands and tossed something at him. He didn’t even know what it was till after he caught it. It was a pregnancy test. With two pink lines on the read-out.

His mind couldn’t even take the next step to draw the conclusion of what he was seeing for a minute. Did this--was this-- He blinked at it a few times, before looking back up at Julia, who was smiling broadly now.

“Congrats, Dad,” she said.
“So you’re--” he started.

“Yep.”

“And this--”

“Uh-huh.” She stood up, and started walking over to him.

“And I’m--?”

She nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek. He slapped a hand across his face and looked down at the positive pregnancy test. He laughed as tears welled up in his eyes. He looked back up at Julia, she had two hands pressed to her stomach. “Oh, Julia.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed exuberant kisses all over her face and neck as she laughed before giving her a long, tender kiss, his thumb rubbing over her cheek. He rested his forehead against hers.

“I… I don’t even have words to describe,” he whispered shakily, “how… incandescently happy I am right now.”

Julia nodded. She took his hand and pressed it to just below her navel. Of course, neither of them could feel anything yet, but they both still alternated looking down at the spot and smiling tearful smiles at each other.

“I love you, Magnus Burnsides,” she whispered to him.

“And I love you, Julia Burnsides,” he whispered back.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: "If I have the same thing that [female friend name here] has, she's in for an even bigger shock than you are.” is exactly how my mom told my dad that my youngest brother was on the way. Steal inspiration from everywhere, kids. :P See you Monday! <3, K
Appendix: Don't Badmouth my Beautiful Mother

July 2001

Julia cradled baby Josephine in one arm and considered that this may have been a mistake. She’d insisted on going to the grocery store. She was so sick of being cooped up in the house.

Now, though, she was tired and her stitches hurt like hell and there was only limited support a shopping cart could offer. Maybe she should have stayed in the car or something. At least Jojo was sleeping, looking like an absolute angel. If they were very lucky, she would stay that way.

She pulled one of those plastic produce bags off the roll and picked her way back over to the shopping cart, by the tomatoes. A couple of women were in the way; Julia circumnavigated them with an “Excuse me.”

They were whispering something, ignoring her. Good, she didn’t have the energy for human contact right now anyway.

Angus was examining a tomato with interest. “Mom, how do you tell if a tomato is ripe?”

“Instinct, mostly,” said Julia, handing him the bag to hold. She selected three and put them in one by one. “Could you get me an onion?”

Angus put the bag of tomatoes in the cart and selected an onion from across the aisle. Behind him, the two women laughed. They were looking at her.

Julia tried not to react right away. She probably looked like a mess, after all, and she had two kids, one newborn and very brown and one twelve and much paler. It was probably a funny sight.

This didn’t make her feel much better. She took a deep breath.

One of them said to the other, just loud enough to be heard, “I tell you, Sandy, some women just don’t know how to keep their legs shut.”

Julia’s eye twitched. “Angus, honey? Would you hold your baby sister?”

“Yes.” He finished putting the onion in another bag and held out his arms like she’d shown him. Bless the boy, he was even careful to support her head.

She looked at the sight fondly, then turned an overbright smile to the women and marched forward.

Magnus was deep in the existential question of a lifetime—was it worth an extra thirty cents to buy a soup that had exactly four more carrot nibs in it, or should he just go with the off-brand again?—when he heard it.

His head snapped up. It was a sound that struck terror in the hearts of men, especially this man, especially when he knew from whom it came and she’d just given birth to a child not ten days ago.

“Ex cuse me??”
Magnus dropped both cans of soup and ran at top speed to the produce section.

He found her, index finger extended to some women whose expressions were changing from smug satisfaction to blind terror.

“...and if you think I’m going to stand here and take your insults that you can damn well fight me right here and now, you--”


She whirled on him. “Stay out of this!”

“Nope, you are healing, and you can’t fight anyone in your condition.” He gently moved her away from the woman. “Come on, they’re not worth it.”

“You didn’t hear what they said.” She was starting to tear up now. “A couple of grade-A assholes, Mags.”

“Then why waste time on them?” He shot them a look that he hoped was as angry as he felt. They were both stock still and wide-eyed. “No need to fight. I’m sure they’re sorry. Now here, let’s get Jojo...” Magnus scooped her up from Angus’ arms and gave her back to Julia. “There. Angus can get all our fruits and veggies for us, and you can help me pick out some soup.”

Julia was crying now, all exhaustion and hormones. She let Magnus steer her away. Magnus shot a questioning glance over his shoulder to Angus.

Angus nodded and gave a thumbs up. Poor Mom. He turned to the women, who were still frozen in shock.

“I think you should know,” he said, as soon as he was sure his parents were out of earshot, “that those people were my mom and dad. They adopted me when they were still barely married, even though they hadn’t planned on being parents yet, because they love me.”

“I--I’m sure they’re--” began the one addressed as Sandy, but Angus interrupted her.

“What I’m trying to say, ma’am, is that maybe you should think before you speak. And also, please don’t talk about my mother that way.”

He left them speechless, off on a quest to find a fresh melon.
“Wait, wait! Angus!” Julia yelled down the wide busy hallway. Angus turned around and jogged back to his parents.

“I don’t want to be late, Mom.” he said, his voice squeaking on the last word.

“You won’t be, we have plenty of time.” she said, trying to brush his hair over to form a part. The hotel conference center was thronged with parents and students, even a few members of the media. Honestly, when the teacher said that Angus had qualified for the National Spelling Bee, Magnus and Julia hadn’t realized what a big deal it was. This was like the Big Time for junior highers. “Now, remember what we talked about?”

Angus let out a breath and recited from memory, “You’re both very proud of me for just qualifying, and if I don’t win, you’ll be proud of me anyway and we’ll go get ice cream and go see the Lincoln Memorial.”

“Correct.” Julia said, smiling down at him.

“Pop quiz! Demarche, go.” Magnus said, looking up from the informational pamphlet they’d picked up at registration.


“Correct! High five!” He held up a hand way above Angus’s head, and Angus jumped for it. He actually managed to hit it, he had finally grown tall enough. “That was the winning word last year.”

“What does it mean?” Julia asked, hauling the tote bag up over her shoulder. Magnus shrugged.

“Hm. Well, anyway. We’ll be in the audience once the bee starts, okay?”

Angus nodded quickly, bouncing on his heels. “Okay. Love you, bye!” he said, running down the hallway for the room marked, ‘Contestants Only’.

“Alright, according to the schedule, the bee doesn’t actually start till 2. And there is a parent’s brunch in Ballroom C.” Magnus said, starting down the hall and still reading the pamphlet. A small family had to jump out of his way and Julia waved them a quick apology as she walked after him.

“I was kind of thinking we could skip the parent’s brunch?” Julia said when she finally caught up
to him. “Maybe get some coffee... or go back to the hotel.” she said looking at him significantly. He didn’t understand at first, so she made the face again, a little more exaggerated this time.

“Oh. Oh!”

“I’m just saying. It’s not a real weekend away, but Jojo’s back at home with my Dad. Angus is busy all morning.” she smiled up at him and put her arm through the crook of his elbow.

“As ... wonderful as that sounds, and it sounds... really... wonderful.” he stopped and cleared his throat. “I really think we should go to this brunch. We’re already a solid decade younger than all the other parents. I don’t want to stick out any more than we already do... for Ango’s sake.”

Julia sighed. “You’re right. Damn you.” They continued walking down the hall towards Ballroom C.

“Hey, how about this.” Magnus offered, “Kravitz volunteered him and Taako for babysitting. Maybe we could let the kids stay with them next month and then we’ll have a real weekend away. Go down to Bottlenose Cove? Rent a condo, build some sandcastles?”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s do that.” she said, showing her badge to the greeter at the door.

Magnus was right, most of the parents were several years older than either of them. As she picked up some mini-muffins and a few orange slices, Julia overheard conversations about property values, and 401(k)s. A few were talking about the PSAT’s.

Julia sat down at one of the empty tables and Magnus quickly joined her, holding two cups of coffee. He sipped it and grimaced, but Julia didn’t mind hers.

“Well, I think we stick out anyway,” she said under her breath.

“I just overheard someone talking about early college acceptance,” Magnus whispered back.

“The kids aren’t even 15 yet.” Julia said, her whisper voice rising several octaves.

“Right?” Magnus took another mini-muffin from the plate. “This is like--oh my god.”

He stopped talking and his mouth fell open. Julia tried to see what he was looking at, but she didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, pushing his chin up to close his mouth.

“Did-did you see her?”

“Who?”

“The woman! The- where’d she go?” he leaned side to side in his seat. “She looked like a human goldfish cracker.”

“Be nice.” Julia said, though she was also desperately scanning the crowd but not seeing anyone who fit the description.

“I’m not exaggerating, Jules. I swear.”

“ARE THESE SEATS TAKEN?” a loud, gruff voice suddenly asked in a thick Russian accent. Magnus and Julia both jumped.
A woman with greying black hair and a mint colored shirt stood next to the table, her hand on the back of one of the chairs. In roller derby, Julia had seen a lot of muscular women, but this one was on a whole new level. She was just full blown beefcake. She looked like a punch made human.

Julia shook her head dumbly and the woman sat down. Julia couldn’t stop staring at her face. It was impeccably made up, but something about just seemed powerful, like she had seen some shit.

“I AM PAM.” she said, smiling horrifyingly at them.

“Ju-Ju-Julia...and this is-is Magnus.” she managed.

“IT IS GOOD TO MEET YOU.”

“Yes...nice to meet you too.” Julia wrenched her eyes away and down at her cup of coffee.

“HUSBAND. I FOUND SEATS.” she said, waving at someone across the room.

Julia and Magnus immediately turned to look, both desperately curious who Pam’s husband could be. A man in an electric green turtleneck and a visor waved back at her from the muffin table. He was just as unsettlingly muscular as she was, but he as he approached the table they realized that he was very short. Not a little person, like Hurley, just very short. Very short and fuckin’ stacked.

“I’m Daz, good to meet ya.” he said, setting his plate down on the other side of Magnus and holding out his hand. Magnus slowly shook it.

“Magnus.” he said after a minute.

“This IS JULIA.” Pam chimed in, making Julia jump again.

“Nice to meet you too.” he said, scooching the chair up to the table with a couple of hops. “So where are you folks from?”

Daz was at least two more steps closer to normal than his wife was, but something about him was unsettling too. Maybe it was the coal black eyes behind the sports sunglasses or the golf shorts.

“We’re from Faerun, near Neverwinter.” Magnus said.

“We were in Neverwinter last December, remember honey?”

“YES. IT SNOWED WHOLE TIME.”

“They should rename it AlwaysWinter.” Magnus said, smiling a little. Daz chuckled; Pam stared forcefully at him for a full minute, then said,

“HAHA. HE TELL LITTLE JOKE.”

“Now, Magnus, do you play golf at all?” Daz asked, picking up a muffin.

“How MANY SONS YOU HAVE, JULIA?”

“ Jeez--” Julia flinched. “Uh...just the one. He’s competing today. Our daughter is at home with family.”

Pam nodded. “I HAVE MANY BEAUTIFUL SONS. I SHOW YOU PICTURES.” Pam pulled a wallet from the pocket of her high-waisted pants, it had one of those plastic picture corrals. Pam handed it to Julia. First photo was a school photo of a boy with a wide smile. “THAT MY
“SHAUNSTER. HE’S SPELLING TODAY.” Julia nodded slowly, and looked at the next photo. Maybe it was upside down...or wrong. It looked like maybe a dog...or like a very large bug. “THAT IS ROACHIE. AND THIS IS MY LITTLE BUNDLE OF JOY.” It was a picture of a can of coffee. Julia stared at it, bewildered and unsettled, then handed the photos slowly back.

“They seem...lovely.” she said. Pam nodded.

“Alright, Welcome parents to the Scripps National Spelling Bee.” a moderator stood on the small stage at one end of the room, holding a microphone. “We are thrilled to have you here.” And Julia was thrilled to not have to talk to the fifth horseman of the apocalypse anymore.

Over the course of the far too long presentation, it turned out that the brunch was just a way to remind parents to be courteous of each other and the competitors.

“What sort of pocket dimension have we fallen into where you have to spend 30 minutes telling people to not be assholes to children?” Julia asked Magnus once the presentation ended.

“Upper-middle class suburbia.” he replied. “Here there be monsters.” he nodded to Pam and Daz as they pushed aside a couple to be the first ones out of the room.

“So Daz plays golf?” Julia asked, picking up their trash to throw away.

“Well, when he found out I haven’t played golf he tried to give me some tips. He said that too many people take the backswing too fast. ‘You want to go slow. So slow that you just kiss that golf egg.’ ” he did a pretty good impression of Daz. “He then proceeded to talk about how Tiger Woods was ‘holding him back’. ...oh and he called it ‘ball chess’ the whole time.”

Julia threw her head back with laughter. “Oh my God!”

“Right? We gotta get Angus onto a derby team; at least there’s no weird people there.”

“Very true.” Julia said, taking his hand and walking out with him.

-Three years later-

“Wait, wait! Jojo!” Julia said, running after the bouncing bundle of energy and curls. She finally grabbed the hem of her dress. “Now you can’t run off like that. I know you’re excited, but we’re going together.”

“Sorry, Mommy.” Jojo said, not looking very sorry. Magnus, who was pushing little Lucy in the stroller, and Angus came up behind her.

“Mom, mom, can we go to Space Mountain first?” Angus said, looking up from the map. “I read online that if you start in Tomorrowland and work counter-clockwise through the park you avoid the longest lines.”

“I wanna see Minnie!!” Jojo cried, wiggling around in Julia’s arms.

“We will, I promise, munchkin.” Magnus said, taking Jojo from Julia.

“Let me see the map, Angus.” Julia stood to look over his shoulder, though she barely could these days. Suddenly there was a whoosh past their shoulders. They looked up to see a blur of yellow, blue, and black hair run past, yelling,
“GOOFY I COME FOR YOU.”

Magnus and Julia looked at each other in terror.

“Kids, get back in the mini-van. We’re leaving.”
Chapter Notes

Heads up, discussions of child abuse, terminal illness, and sexual abuse. Stay safe. <3, H+K

March 2006

Angus woke up reluctantly. He’d been up late finishing an essay for AP Lang. It shouldn’t have been such a big deal, but he was studying for a calculus test too, and there was all that chemistry homework, so he’d put it off.

He jabbed his alarm clock so it’d stop screaming at him and slid off his bed, automatically ducking under the model solar system that had been hanging just low enough to hit him in the head since he was fifteen. Someday he’d hang it somewhere else, he thought, like he had every day since he first hit his head on it when he was fifteen. He blinked a few times. Wake up, eyes. Focus on things. He felt around for his glasses on the bedside table and shoved them onto his face.

6:44. School started in an hour and sixteen minutes, and he couldn’t hear the shower, which meant there were sixteen blessed minutes in which his parents would be awake and available to talk before his sisters got up. Not that he resented his sisters. Jojo and Lucy were amazing and beautiful and adorable and smart. But they were also four and a half and two years old, and loud. The house used to be quiet and neat. At least he still had…

He looked blearily around his room. This place was a mess too. He needed to clean it. Maybe now that the dang essay was written he could fix the space up, help clear his head a little.

He thumped down the stairs, rubbing his eyes behind his glasses, and went to the kitchen. Mom and dad were leaning on the counter, speaking in hushed tones.

“You’re sure you’re not overreacting?” said Dad.

“I can’t afford to not be sure,” said Mom. “With Auntie Josephine’s history—”

Dad stopped her by looking up. “Oh, morning, Angus.”

“Morning,” he said, frowning. They both looked worried, and also like they were trying not to be worried. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Mom, approaching him. “Now get down here.”

He bent over so she could kiss his head. He was taller than either of them now, just passed up Dad last year. Mom ruffled his hair.

“You can’t say nothing is wrong and then look like you’re hiding something,” he said.

“We’re not hiding anything,” she said, and her voice had an edge to it. “It’s too early for an
interrogation.”

They were lying, and it rankled, but Angus dropped it for the sake of a peaceful morning. “Is there tea?”

“Mmhmm.” She took a teabag from the tin on the table and tossed it to Dad, who caught it and plopped it into a mug he’d just poured of hot water. Dad pulled a spoon from the drawer and handed the whole thing off to Angus.

“Thank you,” Angus said, smiling a little.

Dad shot Mom a cheesy look. “Teamwork.”

“You dork,” she said, and sat down at the table, where a stack of mail lay mid-peruse. “How’d that essay turn out? You were up awfully late.”

Angus opened a cupboard and pulled out the peanut butter, and then snagged a bagel out of the bag on the counter. “It’s good enough for an A. Not really a masterpiece though.”

“Good enough for an A is good enough for me,” said Dad. The toaster popped, and he snatched the toast out of the top. Angus added his bagel. Dad slid a plate out of the cupboard behind him, dropped his toast on it, and pulled out the butter. “How about your test, are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” said Angus, watching the toaster. They were worried. Something big, it seemed. What did Auntie Josephine have to do with it?

“Good,” said Dad absentmindedly, buttering his toast. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

He seemed far away. Mom, meanwhile, was absorbed in mail, or pretending to be. Angus sipped his tea. Auntie Josephine… had had cancer.

He took another sip. “Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you okay?”

“Of course, hun.” She didn’t look up.

The whole house seemed too still, despite the radio playing from somewhere upstairs. Angus gulped at his tea. He’d wanted quiet, sure, but not like this.

A shriek from upstairs brought him out of his reverie. Mom looked up. “Ah, there they are. Right on schedule.” She stood and turned to go upstairs. “Would you put in some more toast, Ango?”

“Sure,” he said, pulling out three more pieces of bread. Dad put his arm around Angus’ shoulder and gave him a squeeze, before stuffing a piece of toast in his mouth and following Mom upstairs.

The bagel appeared from the toaster. Angus pulled it out, burned his fingers, dropped it on a plate, and replaced it with some bread. Let’s see, peanut butter for him, Jojo would want peanut butter and sugar, Lucy would want butter and jam…

From upstairs he could hear Dad saying, “All right you monkeys! Time to shape up! Jojo’s gotta get to preschool!”

His sisters squealed and giggled. Angus smiled, but only for a moment.
Cancer. Cancer was a terrible word. Healthy people weren’t supposed to get cancer, and his mother was very healthy. But Auntie Josephine had been healthy too, right? Breast cancer didn’t come from smoking or anything.

He spread peanut butter on his bagel. Maybe he was wrong. He hoped he was wrong. He replayed the conversation in his mind. They hadn’t said cancer, they’d just implied something serious having to do with Auntie Josephine. Their tones had suggested cancer, or something equally serious, that was the problem. And they weren’t telling him.

Angus sighed. They did this sometimes. There was that time Fish got hit by a car, and he’d overheard the vet say she had a fifty/fifty chance, even though they assured him she’d be just fine. Fish had been fine, sure, but that wasn’t the point. He hated to say it, but they lied to him, to make him feel better. He was nearly an adult now. He just wanted the truth.

“Angus Angus Angus Angus Angus!” came a voice screaming down the stairs, and then a thumpthumpthump.

Angus dropped his bagel and rushed to the stairs. Jojo was at the bottom, her face scrunched up. “Ow.”

“Are you okay?” Angus said, crouching down beside her, holding out his hands to help her up.

She took them. “My socks slipped.”

Dad careened into the upstairs hallway. “We okay? We good?”

“Just got a little excited, I think,” said Angus, pulling Jojo to her feet. Jojo grinned and gave Dad a thumbs-up.

Dad exhaled and laughed. “You’re gonna be a derby girl like your mom someday, huh?”

“Yeah!” said Jojo. “Hey, can I have toast?”

Angus laughed. “Yeah, c’mon.”


Angus plopped down beside June, who was picking at a mysterious school lunch. “Do you think there’s any actual nutritional value in this?” she asked.

Angus didn’t answer, he just pulled two sandwiches and apple out of his sack lunch. He was so hungry these days.

“Earth to Angus?”

“Technically even rocks have nutritional value, so.”

June snickered. “How’s your weekend?”

“Pretty good. Saw you at the bout.”

She nodded. “I can’t wait to try out for the team. I keep trying to come up with a good derby name. Like…” She tapped her fork on the tray. “Like Juneslug.”
Angus took a thoughtful bite of his sandwich. “Like a garden slug?”

“No, like a slug to the face,” she said, swinging an arm. “Roswell says you’re a good ref.”

Angus smiled. “Tell them thanks. How’s everything going with that? Roswell being your foster...parent?”

June shifted in her chair, and looked to see if anyone was listening. “Um. Good. Like.” She lowered her voice. “Like really good. I’m kind of worried it’s too good, honestly.”

“Do you think they’ll adopt you?” asked Angus.

She shook her head. “Don’t get my hopes up. I’m just happy to be out of the home.”

“It happened to me,” he said.

“You’re kind of an exceptional case, Ango, let’s be real.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He stared sullenly at his lunch. It didn’t seem so appetizing at the moment.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“Hey nerds,” said a cracking voice. Mookie slid onto the bench across from them.

“Hey,” said Angus.

“Mookie, when are you going to shave that horrible thing on your lip?” asked June.

Mookie touched the fuzz under his nose gingerly. “I can’t shave the ‘stache. It’s still growing.”

“Been growing like that for about a year,” scoffed June.

“Whatever,” he said. “Look, I promised my dumb friend I’d tell you that he thought you were cute.”

June rolled her eyes. “You can tell all your band geeks that there’s no amount of money in the world that would make me date a freshman.”

“Look, I tried to tell him y’all were dating,” he said.

“We’re not dating,” Angus protested. “We went on one date one time.”

“How many times do we have to say this?” said June.

“Why not, though? You’re always together anyway.”

“Would you date Mavis?” asked June.

Mookie gagged. “Ew, no.”

“Yeah, like, I can’t date my sister,” said Angus.

“Right on,” said June, and offered a high five. Angus returned it.
“Well whatever, I just said I’d tell you,” said Mookie.

“How is Mavis, anyway?” asked Angus.

Mookie shrugged. “Last time she called home, I think she said something to Dad about a date, and she got an hour-long lecture on safe sex, and I had to listen to it.”

Angus blushed. “Oh god.”

“Right? Like, why is my family so weird?” Mookie shuddered. “Parents are the worst.”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Angus reproachfully. “You gotta value the family you have.”

“Easy for you to say, your parents love each other.”

Angus frowned. “It’s not like I don’t have family problems, Mookie.”

“Whatever, Mr. Perfect, everyone knows you lucked out in the parent department.”

Angus scowled. Every word rankled.

“You practically got to pick your own,” Mookie went on. “And you’ve got the entire derby team for moms.”

A tiny flicker of anger appeared in Angus’ gut. “Just shut up, Mookie.”

Mookie’s mouth snapped shut. June’s jaw dropped.

The sudden flicker disappeared again, back to wherever it came from. Angus was horrified. “Um. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean--”

“Holy cuss, I’m not even mad,” said Mookie. “I’ve never seen you angry ever.”

Angus shook his head. “Sorry. I’m...really tired.”

June studied his face. “Mookie, get lost.”

“Yes,” he said, jumping to his feet. “See you nerds later.”

Once June was sure he was gone, she leaned in toward Angus. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. “My parents are keeping secrets from me,” he muttered. “I think I know what’s wrong, but they won’t tell me.”

June thought about this. “I’m not an expert in the parent department, but maybe they’re just trying to protect you?”

“From what?” That flicker of anger was back. Angus gritted his teeth. “From being scared? I’m already scared.”

“You’ve been through a lot, is all,” said June. “Maybe they’re just trying to spare you from more.”

“I don’t want to be spared!” he said, his volume rising again. “I want the truth!”

June was unfazed by the shouting. “You do the same thing to them.”
Angus settled back down. “What are you talking about?”

“Like you must, right?” said June. “If you’d told them everything that happened back in the home, you’d probably be in therapy.”

“It was no worse than what you went through,” he said.

“Boy, I’m in therapy!” she said. “You keep the truth from them, right? So they don’t worry, or whatever? Guess what, when you lie to protect someone, it’s usually just to make you feel better.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he muttered.

“Beg to differ, it definitely was.”

“What you went through--what all the girls went through--was way worse.”

“We’re not gonna play that game, either. You want your parents to be honest with you? You’ve got to be honest with them.” She waved a hand. “They’ve only been parents for like, five years anyway. They’re still learning.”

Angus considered this carefully. June gave him silence, space to think.

Finally, he said, “How long have you been in therapy?”

“A couple of months,” she said.

“I didn’t know.”

“It’s not exactly something I want to spread around. But it helps.”

Angus nudged her. “Thanks, June.”

“You know I’m always here for you.”

“Are you gonna eat your fries?”

She slid the tray over to him.

Amazing, all this chemistry homework, finally done, only to be rewarded with more chemistry homework. Angus was settled at the table after dinner, after his sisters had gone to bed. Dad was out in the garage making something. Mom was at the table too, working on someone’s accounting, calculator in hand. She had a cotton ball taped to the inside of one elbow.

Angus stared at his chemistry book. Redox reactions made sense, but they were so tedious to balance. He kept glancing up at Mom.

Finally she caught him looking. He hurriedly turned back to his book, but it was too late.

“All right,” she said, putting down the calculator. “Go ahead. I know you want to ask.”

Angus swallowed. “Do you have cancer?”

Mom’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh. Um. Didn’t expect you to… make the connection there. No, Angus, I don’t.”
Angus felt weak with relief. “Oh god. I was so worried.”

Mom looked pained. “I thought… I thought I felt something this morning, so I went to the doctor. They took some blood just to be safe, but they didn’t find anything. I’m just fine.”

“I wish you would have told me,” he mumbled.

“It was nothing,” she said. “What good would telling you have done?”

Angus frowned. That little flicker of anger was back. Easy, don’t shout. “It would have kept me from having a terrible day.”

“There was nothing wrong, nothing to worry about in the first place,” she said, gratingly calm. “I didn’t see any reason to scare you.”

Angus clenched his fists. “Do you not trust me? ’Cause it feels like you don’t think I can handle bad news. I have handled bad news.”

“It’s not your job to handle bad news anymore,” said Mom. “It’s our responsibility as your parents.”

“It’s not my job to care about my mom?” Angus demanded.

The garage door opened. “Hey, Jules, have you seen the--” Dad paused in the doorway, looked between Mom and Angus. “What’s this?”

Angus crossed his arms and didn’t say anything. Mom said, maddeningly quiet, “Angus is upset we didn’t tell him what was going on this morning.”

Dad looked him over. “Is this one of those moody teens we’ve been told so much about?”

The anger flared. “Would you stop? I’m being serious!” He raked his hand through his hair. “I know you didn’t want me to worry, but not knowing anything is so much worse! Please. I’m sixteen, and I know I’m not grown up yet, but I’m not too young not to help.”

They were shocked, both of them. He’d never had an outburst like this. He felt a little guilty, but the charges needed to be answered.

“I didn’t realize you were so upset about this,” said Mom.

“Why wouldn’t I be upset?” he demanded. “I thought you might die! I didn’t stop thinking about it all day!”

“Oh my god.” Dad covered his eyes. “Like your grandpa. Dammit.”

“Or your parents!” shouted Angus. “Or your mom! Next time I lose someone I want to know about it first!”

Mom shook her head. “We’re not going anywhere, Angus.”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know what’ll happen!” Hot angry tears were pricking the corners of his eyes.

Mom pressed a hand to her mouth. “Are you still afraid of this? After all this time?”

Angus squeezed his eyes shut. June had been right, oh god. He hid his face in his hands.
He heard the chair move on the other side of the table, felt his mom’s arms around him. “Oh, Angus. I’m sorry. We didn’t know.”

“Come here, buddy,” said his dad’s voice. Mom let him stand up so they could both hug him. He felt like a little kid again, head resting on her shoulder, wrapped up in the warmth of their arms.

“As far as it is in our power,” said Dad, “we’re staying, okay? We’re never gonna leave you.”

“We can be more upfront about things, though, if it helps,” said Mom. “As long as you’re upfront with us about feelings like this.”

There were tears streaming down Angus’ face, but he laughed anyway, a soggy sort of laugh. “June said this would happen.”

“June’s a smart girl,” said Mom. “You should take her out on another date.”

“Jules, leave the boy alone, they’re just friends,” said Dad.

Angus squeezed them both as tightly as he could.

Julia tapped the table with a fingernail. She looked at her son, who was gawky and befreckled and possibly the tallest human being on the planet and still growing, and all she could see was the kid he’d been, tiny and vulnerable. She glanced at Magnus. The look in his eye told her he was seeing the same thing. She squeezed his hand under the table.

They’d been talking through things for hours. It was probably early morning now, but this felt important.

“Therapy,” Julia repeated.

“It was June’s idea,” said Angus. “That’s what she’s doing.”

Julia waved a hand. “If this… abandonment fear is that pervasive then maybe we should.”

“Not a bad idea,” Magnus murmured.

Angus stared at the tabletop. “Well,” he started, and then stopped.

“What?” said Julia.

He hesitated. “For her it’s not just abandonment, and I don’t think it would be for me either.”

Julia shot Magnus a horrified look. Magnus, for his part, looked properly alarmed, but he tried to keep his tone even. “We’re being upfront with each other. Honest, right?”

Angus nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“You know there’s nothing you can tell us that would make us stop loving you or feel any differently about you.”

Again, Angus nodded.

“So what else do you think this would be about?”
The boy opened his mouth and stopped himself again. He didn’t look traumatized, but Julia couldn’t stop her brain from playing a selection from her Worst Case Scenario Files.

“It just seems stupid,” he said finally. “The girls had it so much worse.”

“What girls?” said Magnus.

“Coyote Hill Group Home. Before I went to live with Grandpa. The house dad, he’d...um.” Angus stopped. She saw his fists clench again, for the second time that day. “He did some really fucked up shit.”

The words sounded wrong coming out of Angus’ mouth. Julia opted not to comment on the fact that usually he avoided it.

“He’d just beat up the boys,” Angus continued. “The girls got the worst of it. He’d pick them off when they were alone, so we tried to make sure they never were, but sometimes he’d just take one anyway and there wasn’t anything we could do about it. Except get thrashed again.”

The idea made a sob well up in Julia’s throat. She put her hand over her mouth. Beside her, Magnus was flexing his jaw.

“It was really bad. But you knew that.”

“I didn’t,” Julia whispered. She cleared her throat. “I didn’t know. I didn’t have any idea.”

“I’ll fucking kill him,” growled Magnus.

Angus shook his head. “He’s in jail. The home isn’t anywhere close to that bad anymore. It was really hard to go back, though.”

“I should think so, my god,” said Julia. “Angus, have you been carrying this around with you for all this time?”

“It’s not like it was a secret,” he said, ridiculously calm. How was he so calm about this? “Mrs. Paloma knew. June and the other kids know.”

“No, no, Paloma said there were allegations,” said Magnus. “She never said anything about this.”

Angus hesitated. “I might not have told her everything that happened to me. It seemed more important for her to know what happened to the others.”

“The others…” Julia didn’t want to ask. The question terrified her. She asked anyway. “What about June?”

Angus’ expression was unreadable. “He liked June.”

Magnus stood up abruptly and paced, murmuring, “Motherfucker…”

Julia felt sick. The poor girl. Her poor Angus. Why was the world like this?

She looked back at her son. He seemed… so detached from all this. It had been half his life ago, she supposed. But still.

“I think,” she began. “I think I’m starting to understand. Somehow… mind you, without sharing any genetics… you’ve managed to be just as protective as your dad.”
Angus gave her a quizzical look.

“That’s why you didn’t tell anyone, right?” Julia asked. “To protect her and the other girls?”

He nodded.

“You did it, you know,” said Julia, reaching out and taking his hands in hers. “You’ve protected them. Now you should let us protect you, okay? We won’t lie to you anymore, but maybe therapy is a good idea.”

“Okay,” he said. He still didn’t seem bothered.

Magnus stopped pacing, turned to Angus. “Is June okay? Like…” He seemed to be struggling to find the words. “You know, is she… okay?”

Angus shrugged. “I don’t know. Most of the time, yes. She’s doing better than she used to.”

“At least she’s with Roswell now,” said Julia.

Magnus ran a hand through his hair and sat back down, visibly distressed. “Can we do anything to help her?”

Angus considered this. “She wants to join the derby team. I bet she’d like some lessons.”

Julia loosed a mirthless laugh. “If it’s family she’s after, she’ll find it on the team. We can do lessons, I think.”

Magnus heaved a huge sigh. “No wonder you two are so close.”

“You’re so brave,” she said. “Both of you.”

“I don’t feel very brave,” Angus said.

Magnus covered their hands with his. “You are. Believe me. And I’ve… his voice cracked a little. “I’ve never been prouder—prouder of you—”

“Don’t you start crying, Dad,” said Angus, already tearing up. “I’ll cry too.”

Julia laughed, the kind of deep, weary laughter that was necessarily accompanied by tears. “You’re a couple of saps.”

And for a moment the whole world was in the kitchen, the three of them laughing, and crying, and settling into a close private silence, hands in a heap on the table.

“Mommy?”

Angus jumped. Julia looked; Jojo and Lucy were in the doorway, holding hands, Lucy trailing a blanket behind her. It was Jojo who spoke.

“Oh shiiiiiiiooooot, what time is it?” said Julia, looking at the clock on the stove, their small private moment broken. The clock said 6:02.

“You two are up early,” said Magnus, rubbing his eyes. “Jee-hosephat, did we stay up all night?”

“I didn’t hear the shower,” Jojo explained.
Lucy pointed, fist still full of blanket, at the three of them. “Sim shut.”

“What, sweetie?” said Magnus, standing, ruffling Angus’ hair.

“Sim shut,” she insisted.

“She said, same shirt,” said Jojo. “Same as yesterday, Lucy?”

Lucy nodded. “Sim shut. Wanna wear sim shut.”

“Oh, no, Lil Lu, we have to pick you new clothes for today.” Julia stood too and scooped up Lucy. “Mom and dad and Angus are just trying a new style.” She paused, looked to Angus. “It’s called honesty.”

Angus chuckled.

“Wanna try a new style,” said Lucy gravely.

Julia laughed. “You will soon, I’m sure.”

“We’re a whole hour early,” said Magnus. “I’m making bacon and eggs.”

“Yay!” said Jojo. “Can I crack the eggs?”

“Sure, I like to live dangerously,” said Magnus, pulling a spatula out of a drawer.

Angus stood up. “I guess I should get ready for school.”

“No, absolutely not,” said Julia, trying to comb Lucy’s curls into some kind of order with her fingers. “Not after the night we’ve had. Don’t you think, Mags?”

Magnus nodded thoughtfully. He pulled a bowl from a cupboard, put it on his head, and brandished the spatula. “I declare today the Burnsides National Day of Honesty!”


He crouched down and looked her dead in the eye. “Thank you for your honesty.”

Jojo grinned. “Can I have a bowl on my head?”

“Absolutely.”

Julia laughed. “You goofs. I guess I’d better call your schools.”

She made her way to the phone, watching Angus settle back in his chair, blinking owlishly. He’d be okay, she reminded herself.

She picked up the phone, glancing at the number of Faerun High tacked up on the wall for reference and typing it in. It was early enough that she’d have to leave a message, which suited her all right.

“Don’t chew on your blanket, baby girl,” she said to Lucy absentmindedly, and as the phone rang, she watched Jojo offer Angus a bowl and a potato masher. Angus took the bowl with an air of solemnity and placed it carefully on his head.

Yeah, he’d be okay. He was home.
April 1972

Steven looked up from his Spider-man comic at the sound of a knock at the door of his dorm room. He hopped down from his bunk bed and opened his door.

Ella was leaning in the doorway, chewing on a cuticle. She looked up and smiled faintly.

“Hey,” he said, giving her a grin. She was taller than him, long and gawky and wearing a pair of high-waisted shorts that made her legs look even longer.

“Hey.” She looked up and down the hall, hooking some wispy blonde hair behind her ear. “Can we talk?”

Steven felt his heart sink into his gut. He glanced over his shoulder at his napping roommate. “Yeah. Um. Let’s go for a walk?”

“Groovy.” She stepped back while he closed the door behind him.

They fell in step down the hall. Steven held open the door for her and they ducked into the spring sunlight. Steven could feel the worry tap dancing in his gut. That was not a good conversation starter ever in any way, and oh god, was she breaking up with him? What had he done wrong? They’d been together for three years now, they’d planned to get married once they graduated.

“So before you panic, I’m not going to break up with you,” she said.

Steven let out a breath, trying to make it sound like something other than a sigh of relief. “Okay. Good.”

She chuckled. “Worrywort.”

“You sounded so serious,” he said, looking at her.

Her smile fell. “It’s pretty serious.”

Oh, good, the tap dancing worry was back. “What’s wrong? Is it your mom?”

They turned away from the dorms to walk around the edge of the quad. It was really nice out, and a few folks were lounging in the grass. A guy was playing something on a guitar in the distance, faint enough that Steven couldn’t hear what.

“Steve, I’m pregnant.”

Steven nodded, very slowly. “I see.”

He attempted to breathe. There didn’t seem to be any air over here, how strange. He tried again. Nope, still nothing, very peculiar. His knees started to wobble.

“Steven? Are you okay?”

He tried to breathe again and managed a wheeze before his legs gave out. Ella caught him and
hauled him over to a bench.

“Just...just here, put your head between your legs.”

She sat next to him with a hand on his back while he tried to find oxygen. Good, yes, there it was. He took a few deep shuddering breaths before sitting up straight again.

“Are you okay?” she said, her face all over concern.

“Am I okay, are you okay?” He took hold of one of her hands.

Her calm demeanor cracked a little. “I’m scared.”

“Yeah, you know...” Steven ran a hand through his ‘fro. “Like, what do we--what do we do? What do we even do?”

“It’s good to hear you say ‘we,’” Ella said hopefully.

“What else would I say? I’m partially responsible for this, right?” A thought occurred. “I am, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Ella, a little reproachfully.

“It’s just, we’ve been so careful--”

“I think it was that day by the lake,” said Ella quietly.

“What? That was one time.”

She pressed her lips together. “It was one day.”

Steven winced. “Ohhhh.”

“Yeah.”

Steven swallowed. “I’m really sorry, Ella.”

She loosed the kind of chuckle that could easily turn to a sob. “You’re sorry?”

“Yeah, this...this is going to go way harder for you than it is for me, I think. Jeez, your parents--god, your parents. They already don’t like me.”

“Well what about you? They still--” She stopped herself, glancing around, and lowered her voice. “They still have lynch mobs sometimes. Not this town, maybe, but still...”

God, he hadn’t even thought of that. It had only been legal for them to get married for a few years now, and even so they were pretty private about their relationship, especially off-campus. He rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “How did we get ourselves into this mess?”

He heard her snort. He opened his eyes. She was shaking, pressing a fist to her mouth.

“What?”

“Well, you see, Steven, when a mommy and a daddy love each other very much--”

Steven laughed, the kind of laugh borne of exhaustion. “Oh my god. How do you do that?”
“Do what?” she said.

“Make me laugh when I don’t feel like it?”

She shrugged, her smile turning into a grimace. “I don’t know.”

Steven spread out his arms. “C-come here.”

Ella leaned into him, rested her head on his shoulder. “This is pretty bogue,” she said, her voice cracking.

“About as bogue as you could get,” Steven mumbled, holding her tight.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you just...you know, l-let me take care of this myself.”

“Baby, I’m not going anywhere.”

They stayed like that until her shuddering sobs quieted. She sat up, face pink from crying. Steven gently cupped her face under one ear, running a thumb along her cheek to wipe away a stray tear.

“Whatever we do, we’ll do it together, okay?” said Steven.

She nodded, placed her hand over top of his. “I love you, Steve.”

“I love you too,” he said, letting his hand fall away from her face. “You know, I’m...not the slightest bit ready to be a dad. But I’ve kind of always wanted to be one.”

Ella smiled, just a little. “I think I need to call my parents.”

“I should call mine, too,” he said, heart sinking. “My daddy’s gonna tan my hide.”

She stood up. “Let’s just get it over with. The dorm phone?”

And back for an encore performance, the tap dancing worry. “Yeah, we better.”

Steven was half hoping there would be someone on the phone talking so they could wait, maybe forever, but the phone sat in its little nook in the dorm lobby as if expecting them.

“Okay,” said Ella as they leaned into the nook, still holding hands. “Who first?”

Steven opened his mouth and shut it again. There was no good answer to this question. He reached into his pocket and dug out a half-dollar.

“Heads, you, tails, me?”

She nodded. He flipped the coin, caught it, and laid it on the back of his hand.

“Heads,” breathed Ella. “Here goes.” She picked up the phone and dialed. Steven offered his hand again, and she took it and squeezed.

Ella listened for a moment. Steven heard the faint echo of the ringing phone, and then a click.

“Hi, Mama, it’s Ella,” she said into the phone. “How are you feeling?” A pause, while she listened. “You getting enough rest?” And another pause. “That’s good.”
Steven couldn’t help but smile a little as her drawl became more pronounced. She always sounded more Southern around her family. It was cute.

“I’d love to socialize, Mama, but I have something pretty important to tell you. It um. It might be a little shocking. You sitting down?”

Steven squeezed her hand. She threw him a grateful glance.

“Okay. I’m pregnant.”

Ella winced as her mom’s voice came rattling out of the phone.

“No, I wasn’t--no it’s nothing bad, Mama, I swear.” She listened a minute longer. “No, I wasn’t coerced. I promise. I just made a mistake.”

Ella’s worried expression turned into exasperation. She turned the mouthpiece to her shoulder for a moment and muttered, “Weak heart my eye,” before listening again.

“It’s my boyfriend,” she told the phone. “You know. Steven.”

Steven tried to command his stomach to calm down.

“Mama, don’t call him that,” Ella said sharply.

Oh, good, now they were getting to the best part. Steven grimaced.

“No, don’t--don’t give the phone to--” Ella sighed and waited a moment. “Hi, Daddy.”

Steven had met Ella’s parents once over Labor Day weekend last year. He couldn’t decide which was more grating: Ella’s mom, who tried very hard not to show how racist she was, or Ella’s dad, whose disapproval had no shame and no filter. It had been a long three days.

“I’ll do no such thing,” Ella snapped. “No, this--this is not me being rebellious or trying to ruin you. I love him, Daddy, you know that.”

Whatever her father was saying, she was getting more and more angry about it. She gritted her teeth.

“You’re a goddamn hypocrite, Dad, do you know that?” she said.

Steven’s eyes went wide. Ella almost never swore, and especially not in front of her parents.

“What kind of a choice--do you hear what you’re saying?” Ella demanded. “Daddy, please--”

She listened a minute longer, flexing her jaw.

“Fine! I think you know what my answer is. Goodbye.” She slammed down the phone and buried her face in her hands.

“What’d they say?” asked Steven.

Ella groaned from behind her hands.

“Come on, baby,” he said.

When she looked up, she was crying again. “He said that I could come home without you and
he’d have someone ‘take care of it,’” she bawled.

Steven balked. “That’s--like an abortion? That’s illegal .”

Ella nodded damply. “That’s when I said he was a hypocrite, and he--he--Steve, he said my choice was that or to not come home at all!”

“Oh no,” he breathed. “Oh god.”

Ella dissolved into tears. Steven leaned back on the wall.

“I got you kicked out of your house,” he said, horrified.

“No, no, stop,” she blubbered.

“Ella, I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Not your fault,” she managed. “They kicked me out. Not you.”

This did not assuage his guilt, but he reached out to hold her anyway, letting her cry into his shoulder.

After a while she quieted and mumbled, “This shirt of yours is going to be ruined.”

He chuckled a little. “Oh no, whatever will I do.”

She stood up again so he could see her face. Her jaw had a particular set to it, a look of determination he’d come to both love and fear. “It’s going to work out. We’ll show ‘em.”

“I wish I was so sure,” he said.

She smiled at him. “You worry too much.”

“Not without reason,” he said. “Good grief.”

“Your turn to call home,” she said, and handed him the phone receiver.

He took a deep breath. “Right. Yep. I think we’ll need help, right?”

“Probably,” she said. “A kiss for courage?”

“That’s how we got into this mess,” he grumbled.

“That’s not how babies are made, Steven,” she teased, and leaned down. He accepted the kiss. He had to admit, it did help.

He disengaged and typed in the number before he lost the will to do it. The phone only rang once.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom,” he said. Ella offered him her hand, which he took.

“Oh, hi, Stevie. I was just thinking about you. What it is?”

It always threw him when his mom used slang. It sounded wrong. “Uhhh...I’ve, uh...I’ve got something to tell you. I’m in kind of a bind.”
“What’s wrong?”

“You know Ella?”

“Oh, yeah, is she all right?”

“She’s fine. Actually, she’s right here.”

“Oh! Hi, Sugar!” she shouted.

Steven winced and leaned away. “My mom says hi.” Ella smiled.

“Now what’s this about Ella?” asked his mom.

“She’s uh...she’s...”

“Stevie?”

“Uhhhhh....”

“Stevie, did you get this girl pregnant?”

“Yes?” Steven squeaked.

“Boy, your daddy’s gonna tan your hide.”

“I know,” Steven moaned. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, you said you wanted to marry her, I guess now’s the time.”

Steven blanched. “I can’t--Mom, I can’t just--I’m not ready! We’re not ready!”

“Oho, look at you, planting fields you don’t mean to harvest.”

“Mom!” said Steven, mortified.

“Don’t you ‘mom’ me. You knew what you were doing. Time to own up.”

“It’s not that simple. We just talked to her parents...they told her that if she’s with me she can’t go back home.”

The line went silent.

“Mom?” said Steven.

“Sorry, I had to ask forgiveness for the murderous thoughts in my heart. Leaving this poor girl to fend for herself! For shame.”

When she put it like that, Steven felt less guilty and more angry. He ran his thumb along the back of Ella’s hand.

“Now listen, Stevie, if you really love her, and I certainly hope you do, then make an honest woman of her, and fast.”

Steven gulped. “How fast?”

“Tomorrow, if you can. We can’t have unwed mothers flapping in the wind.”
“We can’t throw together a wedding tomorrow,” said Steven, the familiar worry rising up again in his stomach. Ella’s eyebrows shot up.

“You don’t have to. Just go to the courthouse. And here, how about this? Josie’s been frothing to plan your wedding. We’ll send her up to give you a reception or something.”

Steven capitulated. “I’ll have to talk to Ella about it.”

“I like to hear that. Give her my love, all right? Call again to tell me what you decided.”

“Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, now.”

Steven hung up the phone carefully. Ella watched him with concern. “That seemed like it went pretty well.”

“She says we should get married. Like, tomorrow.”

Ella nodded thoughtfully. “I guess we could.”

“But—but no, you—Ella, we can’t just up and get married,” Steven protested.

“Why not?” There was that set to her jaw again, that determination. “We’re going to anyway, right? And… and it’ll look better all around if we’re married when this one is born.” She put a hand carefully below her navel.

“But what about school?” said Steven. “We’re just one year from graduating, and-and I don’t have a job, I can’t support you and a baby.”

“So maybe we take a year off. Or even two. We can always go back later, college credits don’t go rotten.”

Steven had to admit, this wasn’t a bad idea. “Still, though… A shotgun wedding, Ella?” His thoughts floated to the slowly growing pile of money in a box in his closet, the box labeled “Ring Fund.” “I wanted more for you. You deserve more.”

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t care,” said Ella firmly. “I’m happy.”

Finally, some of the worry in Steven’s gut melted away. He wasn’t ready to get married or be a dad but… well here they were, right? And now they had a plan, and Ella was right, dammit, it was going to work out.

“If you’re happy, then I’m happy,” said Steven. “Worried, but happy.”

She smiled. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Steven frowned. “I guess we should do this properly, right?”

“Oh what?”

He backed out of the phone nook just enough to get down on one knee. Ella’s face lit up in a grin.

“So, I’ve uh… I’ve thought a lot about what I would say here,” he said, taking her hand. “I never came to any good conclusions, so I’ll just say that you’re my whole world.” He looked into her eyes.
“Ella, will you marry me tomorrow?”

She had the most radiant smile, Steven thought. She chuckled a little. “Actually tomorrow I have a literature test. Can we get married later this week?”

Steven stood up, threw his arms around her, and laughed.
Appendix: ACL, MCL, LCL

Chapter by miceenscene

Chapter Notes

Hey everybody! It's been a minute, huh? But we're back and we have a couple new chapters for you that we're really excited about. Happy End of Summer! <3, H+K

April 1992

“Destroy Her, I want you jamming,” Maureen said, looking up from her clipboard. Lucretia pulled the panty off Julia’s helmet and snapped it onto her own. “Jule, you’re on the bench, Beauty, you’re in for blocker.”

“I could go another jam,” Julia said, breathing heavily.

“There’s no need to push it, Beauty will do fine.” Maureen quickly checked her clipboard again. “Alright, now I know we’re down by 10, but we can make that up in the next two jams if we keep our heads. Keep the pack together. Got it?”

The team nodded.

“Hands in, on 3.”

“1, 2, 3, B.O.B.!” the team shouted. Julia gave Killian a double high-five before sitting down on the bench.

Maureen grabbed Lucretia’s shoulder as she rolled by. “Play smart. We don’t know what they’ll throw at you.”

Lucretia nodded and bit down on her mouth guard. She skated onto the track and took her spot next to the Rad Robe jammer.

“Looks like Coach Marie Fury is sending Destroy Her in as jammer this time,” the announcer said. A cheer went up from the crowd. “Destroyer of blockers and destroyer of hearts. Gentlemen, I hear she’s still singleeee.”

Lucretia flipped her middle finger up at the announcer booth and the crowd laughed. Boyland skated up to the inside of the track.

“Ready to lose?” the other jammer taunted.

“I don’t know. I’ll just ask you at the end of the game,” Lucretia replied with a smirk.

Lucretia and the other jammer bent low.

Gundren blew the whistle and the pack took off. Killian was doing a great job of holding off two blockers at once. Lucretia watched their movements, expertly scouring for her target. There was half of a gap opening up on the inside of the track. Perfect.
The whistle blew a second time and Lucretia took off. She squatted low and slipped into the gap, popping up and tossing two blockers off their skates as she sailed through.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” she heard the Rad Robe coach yell from the center of the track. Lucretia grinned and sped around turn two. The track rolled smoothly under her skates and she pushed herself to go even faster just because she could. The Rad Robe jammer had yet to break free of the pack as Lucretia rounded turn four and approached the pack again.

No obvious openings this time, so she slowed as she reached the back end. Oh, wait, there was one just behind Killian. Lucretia darted past one Rad Robe blocker, only four more to go. But wait, the track was clear ahead of her. Not questioning her good luck, Lucretia pushed ahead for the opening, quickly gaining speed.

A blocker knocked one of B.O.B. onto her back and into Lucretia’s path. She expertly jumped over her. She landed.

A Robe blocker slammed Lucretia towards the outside of the track. Lucretia wavered to keep upright, balancing on one skate.

Another blocker blasted Lucretia back the way she came. She tried to pull herself out of the spin and--

SNAP.

“Six months?” Lucretia repeated back to the doctor.

He looked up from the file he was noting in. “Six to nine, yes.”

Maureen let out a deep sigh and covered her face with her hand. The doctor pulled the x-rays off the display and put them back in the folder.

“Well… that’s doable. It’s another seven months till the season championship; we can still win it again,” Lucretia rationalized.

The doctor blinked at her a few times. “Six months to everyday use. You’re looking at closer to a year before you’re able to play any sort of contact sport,” he clarified. Lucretia’s face dropped. He pulled out a pamphlet and handed it to her. “In there you’ll find your new regimen of care. And you’ll need to make an appointment for a month from now so we can check in on your progress.”

Maureen was stonily silent as Lucretia paid for her appointment and made a new one. The elevator was deathly quiet as they rode it down. Lucretia glanced over the pamphlet as Maureen pulled the car around.

It took Lucretia a few minutes to figure out how to get into the car with the crutches. They sat quietly in the car for a few minutes, till Lucretia broke the silence.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Maureen looked over at her and shook her head. “No, don’t be. It’s not your fault, injuries happen. Just… disappointing to see the rest of our season go up in flames so early on. The rest of the team is good, don’t get me wrong. But seeing a teammate go down like this; it affects you.” Maureen chuckled. “Which may be a blessing in disguise, Julia plays like she has a personal vendetta. That girl is headed for trouble.”
Lucretia looked from her braced knee to the pamphlet. “Well... I can still be a captain from the sidelines. Even if I can’t play.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And just you watch.” Lucretia waved the pamphlet. “I’m gonna follow every last one of these steps and be a champion healer.”

“Make healing from a knee injury your bitch.”

“Hell yeah.”

“So what’d you think?” Lucretia asked. Her doctor looked up from the knee he was closely examining.

“I think you’ve made excellent progress these past few months. The fact that you have so little pain is an very good sign.”

He stood up and took a few notes on her chart.

“So...does this mean I can play?”

The doctor looked over at her in confusion. “Play?” he asked.

“Roller derby.”

“Ohhh.” He looked back down at the chart. “No.”

“But we have a really important game this weekend. And I’ve been feeling so much better and I’ve been following that pamphlet like it’s the word of God. I’ll still take it easy. I could just play a half.”

“No,” the doctor repeated, looking back down at the chart.

“What about just a jam or two?”

“I don’t know what those words mean. But no.”

Lucretia fumed and scooted forward on the table. “You don’t understand, this game is against the Rad Robes! I-- We really need to stick it to them; show them that they can’t push us around like this. My team needs to win this game.”

The doctor sighed and looked back up at her again. “I know you’re anxious; a lot of athletes are when we reach this stage. But your knee isn’t fully healed yet. And the stress of a full contact sport could damage it even further. So I’m sorry. But the answer is still no.”

The door to the room opened and a nurse stuck his head in.

“Sorry to interrupt, but the Willis mother is demanding to speak with you again. She won’t take no for an answer.”

The doctor sighed. “I’ll be right back.” And he left the room.

Lucretia tapped her fingertips on the tabletop and glowered. She was so sure her reasons would
be good enough for the doc. It was her stupid knee. Everything about this was stupid. This whole room was stupid. Stupid healing chart, stupid Highlights magazines, stupid pain scale, stupid doctor’s notepad--

Wait.

“The doctor said it’s okay for me to play!!” Lucretia declared to the locker room at The Adventure Zone, waving her forged prescription note like a victory flag. The whole team jumped to their feet and broke into cheers. Killian grabbed Lucretia in a big hug.

“Holy shit, this is amazing!!”

“I still have to take it easy, but I can play a couple of jams.”

“You feel ready to play? It’s been a bit since you’ve actually been at practice., Julia asked.

“Please. It’s you who’s going to struggle to keep up with me.”

Another cheer broke out and Maureen had to yell to be heard over it. “Alright, alright. Finished getting dressed and then get out on that track for warm ups. And I want no funny business with the Rad Robes, hear me?”

“Yes, Coach,” the team replied.

“Lucretia, can I speak to you outside?” Maureen led her just outside the door. The rest of the rink was noisy as it geared up for the match. “Did the doctor really say you could play?”

“Yes. Here.” Lucretia handed over the note. “I told him you’d want proof. So he gave me that.”

Maureen closely examined the note, then looked at Lucretia. The sound of whooping came from the track as the Rad Robes started their warm ups. Their coach gave the pair of them a very cool smile.

Maureen sighed. “Two jams.” Lucretia started to protest, but Maureen talked over her. “And I don’t want to hear any complaining. You still haven’t been on skates in a while.”

Lucretia bit her tongue and nodded. “Thanks, Coach,” she said, smiling.

“Go get ‘em, Destroy Her.”

By the time Lucretia got all her gear on, the rest of the team was already at warm ups. She skated out of the empty locker room for the track feeling very triumphant. In response, her knee gave a twinge and she shook it out, silently telling it to keep its shit together. She’d ice it when she got home. One of the Rad Robes noticed her approach and stopped.

“Well well well, I didn’t know they were letting cripples play in this league now;” she said, putting her hands on her hips and blowing a bubble with her gum. “How’s the knee?” She popped her bubble.

“Still good enough to beat you,” Lucretia replied as she skated past.

“We’ll see, won’t we?”

Shaking it off, Lucretia pushed her way through warm ups and felt pretty good. A little wobbly at
times and not as fast as she could be, but she was here. She was playing again. Even if it wasn’t her best, it still felt so much better than sitting on the sidelines.

Though the sidelines is exactly where she spent much of the game. She cheered and yelled from the bench, keeping up the team’s spirits and being the best captain she could. And as they neared the end of the second half, the Rad Robes were leading only by 6 points.

“Miss Fortune, you’re out. Jule-Be, you’re jamming,” Maureen said, looking down at her clipboard. Lucretia watched Julia skate away, again, and sighed. There weren’t that many jams left in the game and Maureen had made no mention of her playing soon. So Lucretia got up and skated over to her.

“Hey, when are you going to put me in?” she asked, turning away from the rest of the team. “I can make up those points if you let me play.”

Maureen hesitated. “Uh, soon.”

Lucretia’s eyes widened. “You’re not gonna let me play, are you?”

“Look.” Maureen grabbed her elbow and pulled her further from the team as the next jam started around them. “I know your doctor said it was okay, but I haven’t seen you skate yet. Besides, it’s good for team morale for you to just be here with them. You don’t have to play.”

“But I want to play; I need to play! You need me to play. If we don’t win this game, we don’t go to the championships.”

“But you’re not you right now. You’ve been benched for four months.”

Lucretia clenched her jaw and tried to come up with a counter argument. But she kept coming up empty. She dropped her head and felt any feeling of normalcy drain away.

“Just… please, Maureen.”

The crowd around them cheered as Julia scored four points and ended the jam. Maureen sighed.

“I’ll make you jammer, if you call it when you get us even. Two points and then you’re out of there, okay?”

Lucretia looked up and nodded vigorously. Maureen turned to face the bench. “Jule, you’re blocking. Elle Dritch, take a seat. Destroy Her is jamming.”

Julia tossed the panty to Lucretia and grinned. “Yeah, girl.”

Lucretia slipped it over her helmet, a similar grin on her own face. She skated over to the jammer line as the crowd around her let up a big cheer.

“Ladies and gents, it looks like Coach Marie Fury is FINALLY letting her play. Put your hands together for the valiant return of our beloved captain, Destroy Herrrrr!” the announcer’s voice boomed. “Not even a knee injury could keep a gal like her down. Let’s see if she can bring this game home for the Bureau.”

Lucretia bit down on her mouth guard and took the familiar spot on the jammer line. The Rad Robe jammer was saying something to her, but Lucretia missed it. All the sounds around her faded out as she focused on the pack ahead of her. She was here, she’d done it. Now.
Time to deliver.

The whistle blew once and the pack took off, fiercely jostling their way down the track. Lucretia searched for her opening and waited for her opportunity. A possibility was happening towards the outside of the track.

The second whistle blew. Suddenly, she was knocked off her feet by the Rad Robe jammer. She quickly got back up and skated after her, but that opening that had been there a moment ago was gone. It was just a tangle of skirts and helmets. Lucretia got caught up in the pack, unable to cut her way through.

“Destroy!” Beauty called from the inside of the track. Lucretia quickly ducked that way and Killian held off a few blockers, letting Lucretia through. She burst down the open track, following the Rad Robe jammer who was already a turn ahead.

Sweat poured down Lucretia’s back as she rounded the last turn and the Rad Robe jammer reached the pack. Damn, she was more out of shape than she thought. The jammer ducked around a Bureau blocker before Lucretia even got there. Three Robe blockers followed her side to side as she tried to cut around them. And one of them hip-checked her off her skates. Then she heard the whistle blow again, ending the jam.

Lucretia got to her hands and knees, trying to catch her breath. A bead of sweat fell off her face and hit the track. She glanced up at the scoreboard. They were now four points behind.

As she pushed herself to standing, her knee let out a seeming howl of pain. Lucretia grimaced.

“You okay?” Beauty asked her, offering a hand. Lucretia took it, carefully avoiding the pointed looks from a very suspicious Maureen in the center of the track. She took a few deep breaths and nodded.

“Yeah, I got this.” She skated towards the jammer line again.

“Well, not so much valiant as rocky and frankly not what we’ve come to expect from our dear captain. Better luck next time, Destroy Her,” the announcer said from the booth.

Lucretia shook out her knee, biting down hard on her mouth guard. She’d definitely be out the rest of the season, she thought as she leaned down for the start. Better make this jam worth it.

The first whistle blew again. Lucretia took slow steadying breaths as she waited. She glanced sideways at the Red Robe jammer. Yeah, she was planning on pulling the same stunt again.

The second whistle blew and Lucretia jumped backwards. The Rad Robe fell to the track in front of her and Lucretia darted around. She hit the pack and ducked low, swooping between legs. She came up at the end and knocked a blocker off her skates as she left the pack in her wake.

She rounded the track, the Rad Robe jammer just a turn behind, and approached the pack again. She passed through an opening behind Killian who was fiercely holding off two blockers. Two points. She side stepped around blocker number three. She glanced behind her, the Rab Robe jammer had yet to find an opening in the pack. Maureen was yelling something from the sidelines, but a path to a grand slam opened in front of her. Lucretia pushed ahead for the opening, quickly gaining speed.

Then, almost out of nowhere, two Rad Robe blockers flanked her.

One hip checked her towards in the inside of the track.
And then the other body slammed her to the floor.

Lucretia never remembered much of that moment beyond the unmistakable sound of her knee going Snap. Again.

The next few hours were just flashes of images. The skates of her teammates crowded around her on the track. The telephone wires cutting across the autumn sky as she laid in the backseat of Maureen’s car. How tightly her doctor pursed his lips as he came into the examination room.

The following days were just a blur. Merle very kindly gave her time off from her job at the concessions stand. She couldn’t bring herself to go to The Adventure Zone now, to have to tell her team what she had done, to see Maureen’s face. One word thudded over and over in the back of her mind: irreparable.

Dirty bowls and plates stacked up in her kitchen as she haunted her own apartment. Her mother called and Lucretia let it go to the answering machine. Maureen and several girls from the team reached out, but she didn’t answer. She found herself looking through old photo albums, letting her *The Karate Kid* vhs play on repeat in the background.

And then, one day almost two weeks after the game, Lucretia heard keys jangling in the lock on her front door. She sat up in her bed; a few food wrappers fell off of her and her hair stood up at an odd angle from lying on the pillow. The front door opened and shut and then someone started moving around in her living area.

She hobbled to standing and looked around desperately for some sort of weapon. The best she came up with was one of her old ice skates. She slipped the guard off and, with a crutch in the other hand, hobbled out into the main area. She could hear the person moving dishes in the kitchen, so Lucretia steeled her nerve and waited for them to come around the corner.

“HAH!” Lucretia shouted as Maureen rounded the corner, garbage bag in hand. She blinked at Lucretia, but otherwise did not react.

“You still have your skates?” she asked bemusedly, turning and throwing junk mail on the counter into the trash.

Lucretia glanced at the skate, then dropped it on the floor.

“What are you doing here?” Lucretia asked. Maureen looked up from sorting mail.

“No one had heard from you in two weeks. We were worried that you had died.” She pointedly looked around the trashed apartment. “I’m still not convinced one way or another.”

“But...what are you doing?” Lucretia asked as Maureen bent down and picked up a stack of pizza boxes. She took them to the front door and stacked them outside. Lucretia followed her out into the main area.

“Lucretia, I know you got bad news. But when your teammate falls down on the track, you help them up. That’s how we do things, you know that.”

“You don’t get it!” Lucretia’s voice grew thick and hot tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. “I’m not *part* of the team. The doc said my knee’s too busted to play *anything* anymore.”

Maureen stacked up a few bowls off the coffee table. “Don’t be ridiculous. Even if you can’t
play, you’re still part of the team.”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s have some-some washed up lame gimp sitting on the sidelines as a reminder to all the players that ‘Hey, you fuck up bad enough you could end up like her, but have fun!'”

“No one will think that,” Maureen said, infuriatingly calm as she stepped around her and headed for the kitchen. She started washing dishes as Lucretia followed her around the corner.

“Yes, they will. Hell, the Rad Robes would probably even say it to my face. I’m not going back--you can’t make me.”

Maureen flipped the water off and spun around to face her. “So what’s the plan then, Lucretia? Hm? Are you going to pack up all your stuff and move again like when Cam died?”

Lucretia stepped back like she’d been slapped.

“Or is the plan to lay down and die in this apartment?”

Lucretia sank down into one of the chairs at the recently cleared kitchen table, she rested her head against her crutch.

“I…”

“You’ve had time to mourn, time to mope. But now it’s time to decide, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know!!” the cry ripped from her chest and those tears broke loose. “What am I supposed to do?? I’ve only ever been good at one thing. I was a shit student, I wasn’t creative or smart, but I was good at skating. And now, I can’t. At all.” She dropped the crutch and folded over on herself, hiding her face in her knees. Loud sobs echoed off the linoleum floor.

Maureen knelt down next to her and rubbed a hand over her back. “Lucretia.” Maureen waited as she kept crying. “Lucretia, look at me.”

Lucretia lifted her head a little and met Maureen’s gaze.

“That’s a load of horse shit and you know it.”

Lucretia blinked a few times and sniffled.

“Now,” Maureen continued, “this is a tough situation. You made this bed. But you have to stop acting like this is the end, because it’s not. Not even a little bit.”

Lucretia swallowed and wiped away some snot on her sleeve, but she eventually nodded.

“I still don’t know what to do,” she said in a small voice. Maureen patted her shoulder and stood up.

“How about we start with the dishes?”

It took the two of them several hours, but they slowly put Lucretia’s apartment back in order. Albums put away, dishes washed, even The Karate Kid was put back on the shelf.

“Thanks, Maureen,” Lucretia said, handing her her purse. Maureen nodded and turned for the front door.
“Oh, one more thing. I quit as the Bureau’s coach this afternoon.”

“You what? But... you *founded* that team.”

“I know.”

“You love that team.”

“I know.”

“But...why?”

She pulled a sheet of paper out of her bag and handed it to her.

“The team needs a new coach within the week, or it will dissolve and lose its charter with the league.”

Lucretia looked at the paper. It was the coach application form.

“I know you’ll make the right decision,” Maureen said. She squeezed Lucretia’s shoulder and left the apartment.

“So is she okay?” Killian asked, lacing up her skate in the locker room before practice.

“Yeah, she said she was. She gave a really weird reason for quitting though.” Julia adjusted her elbow pad. “She said, ‘someone needed it more than her’? I dunno, weird, right?”

The door to the locker room opened and Lucretia walked in, still on her crutches.

“Hey Lucretia, welcome back,” Killian grabbed her in a hug.

“We thought you died!” one of the girls called from the back room.

“You weren’t too far off,” Lucretia said with a wry smile.

“Hey, Mr. Highchurch said that the league appointed our new coach. Do you know who it is?” Julia asked.

Lucretia nodded. “I do. It’s me.”

A stunned silence swept over the locker room.

“I know that my captainship has been a little...shaky this season. But I promise that together we can achieve great things with this team. And we’ll always pick up a teammate when she falls down.”

Killian and Julia met eyes and nodded.

“Sounds good.” Killian said. The other girls chimed in similarly.

Lucretia smiled. “Well, let’s get out there and start practice. We have a game to win next Saturday.”

“You got it, Coach.”
Hurley sat in her car at 11:30pm on a Friday, eating lo mein out of a paper box with plastic chopsticks, ruminating. Who even was she?

She jabbed at the noodles. Fuckin’ twenty-something nerdy redheaded lesbian midget with a shit job and exactly two talents: judo and watching too much TV. Useless. Really, she should just go back to Neverwinter. The bus line would probably take her back—she had the highest on-time rate in the city last year.

Hurley sighed and rested her forehead on the steering wheel. Sure, back to Neverwinter, where she had a different kind of shit job and was surrounded by her family, who expected better of her. Or worse, expected exactly this. She leaned back again and stabbed a strip of chicken with a chopstick. At least delivery driving came with food. And people were always happy to see her. Confused, maybe, that an Irish midget was delivering their Chinese food, but happy. And tips were good. Didn’t get tips on a public bus. Just got made fun of by children.

Eh. Usually the kids didn’t mean any harm. Teenagers could go jump off a dock though.

She slurped up the last few noodles and tossed the carton into the bag in the passenger seat. Swish. If only she was tall enough for basketball.

She leaned forward on the steering wheel. Faerun was nice, at least. She was parked under a streetlamp by the McElroy Memorial Park. It was springtime, and a few of the trees were in bloom. Like cherry blossoms from an anime, she thought, although she knew they were crabapple.

Home was waiting. She’d just found some old tapes of Matlock in the back of a Blockbuster, and she was pretty sure there were one or two episodes on there she’d never seen, but the idea of going back to her apartment to watch people be cops when she never could be seemed… she sighed again. Depressing. Better to stay here, watch nature. Wait for something interesting.

A gust of wind started up, and suddenly the street was whirling with crabapple petals. It was pretty. Like, poetic. At least this town was good like that. Neverwinter’s bus routes never looked like this. It was peaceful here. Quiet.

Four cars came tearing around a corner and burst through the cloud of petals.

The street racers. Hell yeah. Hurley started her car and swung a U-turn.

The street racers had been making trouble for months. Hurley had been reading the police blotter. Cops couldn’t catch them. No one could catch them, especially not the one who called himself The Raven.

Hurley shifted gears and grinned. Maybe they couldn’t, but she could.

Sloane whipped around the corner and checked her mirrors again. Perfect, she was well ahead. That would show those Team Cricket freaks.
Her subconscious registered something. Sloane looked back in the mirror. What was that? A fifth racer?

No, nope, that was a Ford Victoria, a cop car. Shit. Why wasn’t he turning on his siren, though?

Sloane flashed her brights to the signal a scatter and swung around a corner. A cop meant the race was off, every man for himself. Behind her the racers disappeared down side streets and alleys. Surely the cop would choose someone easier than her to follow, right?

They must have seen her, Hurley thought. No matter, she’d just go after the leader, some little Hyundai sports car. That was the most important car anyway, and the only black one. The Raven always drove something black, although reports of the type of car he drove varied wildly.

The Raven swerved a sharp turn up the wrong way on a one-way street. Hurley swerved after him. He turned left, and then tried to lose her in an alley, but Hurley wasn’t fooled. No amount of fakes and turns could throw her off, not now. She hadn’t spent two months driving delivery to get lost in a small town like this. Still, the Raven was making a serious effort. Hurley laughed. Good.

Sloane gritted her teeth. This cop wasn’t letting her go, and he wasn’t turning his siren on still, which meant he had a grudge. Not good. She pulled out of the alley, yanked the emergency brake—she drifted onto Front Street and shifted gears, accelerating. There was an alley ahead that was barely wide enough for the car, but Sloane could make it through, and she doubted the cop could no matter how fast he thought he was. And then she could lose him as he scraped his paint job across the walls.

Sloane eyed the alley, pulling ahead of the cop a little. Wait for it…

She yanked the wheel, downshifted, and disappeared into the alley—shit!

There was a six-foot chain link fence! Who’d put that there!

She screeched to a halt. Time to run for it. Without bothering to turn off the car, she opened the door—shit, it hit the wall of the alley with a crunch, shit—squeezed out into the alley—

Behind her she heard the cop car stop, was outlined in headlights, heard a door open—

“Don’t move!”

Sloane froze.

Hurley was living. This was the best moment of her life. She was standing on the driver’s seat, leaning on the top of the door of her car. The Raven was standing in the alley, silhouetted. He—or she, actually, she was wearing a baggy jumpsuit and a motorcycle helmet but was still decidedly girl-shaped—she carefully raised her hands.

“Take off your helmet,” said Hurley. “Slowly.”

The Raven placed a hand on each side and lifted it off. A sheet of black hair slid down her shoulders.

Oh god, she was hot. Hurley’s heart caught in her throat. “Uhh…”
The Raven shot a puzzled glance over her shoulder.

“D-don’t--don’t move!” said Hurley desperately. Shit, there went her credibility.

“What?” scoffed the Raven, turning around. “You--you’re not a cop.”

“Not another step, I am armed with a gun!” lied Hurley.

The Raven faced her and crossed her arms, helmet hanging from one hand. “Let’s see it then.”

“Uhhhh…” This was...this had been a bad idea.

“Fuck this,” said the Raven, turning toward the fence. She hauled herself up to the top, swung her legs over, and landed on the other side.

“Wait, I--”

But the Raven was gone.

“All right, new guy,” said Sloane, pulling a pen out from behind her ear and writing his name down on the clipboard. “I want you to get started on the Chevy in the corner today.”

“Sure, sure,” said Marvey, observing the garage’s goings-on. “Fixed plenty like it.”

“Good.” She pulled the work order off the clipboard and handed it to him. “Any questions?”

“Uh, when do I meet the boss?” he asked, reaching out to take the order.

She snatched the order out of his fingers and glared at him until he looked her in the eyes. “I am the boss. Do you understand, Marvey?”

He frowned a little. “But--”

“But what?” she said, in her best Dragon Lady voice. “Is this not Kim’s Cars? Am I not Sloane Kim?”

Marvey put up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I get it. You’re the boss.”

“Damn straight.” She gave him the order. “Now get to work.”

“Sure thing.” He turned toward the corner and froze. “Oh, shit.”

Sloane looked up--a couple of cops had just come in through the front door. Oh boy, she figured this was coming. Not that they were going to find anything, of course, but having the cops around made her antsy anyway. She hadn’t been arrested yet, and she didn’t mean to start now.

“Shit, shit,” Marvey was saying under his breath.

“Marvey, get ahold of yourself,” Sloane scoffed. “They’re here about the break-in.”

He exhaled. “Oh. Yeah. Right.”

She waved a hand to dismiss him, and he walked a little too casually toward the Chevy. The cops spotted her and moseyed on over.
“About time,” she said, crossing her arms. “The break-in was two days ago. Did you find the Tibaron or what?”

“Yes ma’am, we did,” said the cop with the beard slowly, in that smug way cops have when they think they know something. “And you know, it’s funny, but we found something else, didn’t we, Luca?”

“Sure did, Redmond,” said the other cop. “You mind explaining why your fingerprints were on the wheel, there, Miss Kim?”

Sloane raised her eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“If you have trouble understanding, we can always repeat the question down at the station,” added the one called Redmond.

“No, I--this is my garage,” she said, waving a hand. “My fingerprints are on the wheel because I drove it in here to fix it. I was repairing it.”

“Do you have any proof of that?” asked the one called Luca.

Sloane glared at them. She flipped a few pages on her clipboard and pulled out the order on the Tibaron. There was a line on there where they put the name of the mechanic. It said “Boss.” She pointed it out to the cops. “Here.”

“‘Boss’ could be anyone,” said the bearded cop.

Sloane gritted her teeth. She turned sharply to the right. “Hey Little Jerry!”

Little Jerry poked his head out of the sunroof of an ‘87 PU11 Maxima. “Yeah Boss?”

“Actually, never mind, you’re good, Jerry, thanks,” said Sloane, and turned a blank look on the cops. “Here.”

“Fair enough,” said Luca, holding up his hands. “It’s like the Captain thought, Redmond.”

“Yep, yep.” Redmond nodded. “All right, Boss, sorry to bother you.”

Sloane gave him a beleaguered shrug. “Any idea who broke in yet?”

A flicker of movement caught her eye, a customer walking in. A rather short customer. Kind of cute. Red curly hair, some seriously adorable freckles—

Oh damn. She was the--damn. Fuck.

“We’ll keep you apprised of any news, ma’am,” said Luca. “You have a good day now.”

“Oh, sure.” She glanced back at the cops. They were giving her a weird look. “Sorry, I have work to do.” Don’t look at the redheaded woman, don’t react to her coming in. Don’t let her talk to the cops.

“Of course,” said Redmond, and they turned to leave, passing by the woman.

Oh god. It was all over. The redhead was going to finger her and she was going to jail. Sloane looked down at her clipboard, feeling sweat break out on her forehead. Shit. She flipped a few papers up to look busy.
The redheaded woman smiled at the cops and watched them pass by.

What the…

She approached Sloane as they left. Sloane forced her lungs to function normally. The woman—god, she was like three and a half feet tall—looked up at her pleasantly. “Hello.”

“Hi.” Sloane let the papers fall back onto the clipboard. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for the Raven,” said the redhead, straight-faced.

Dammit. Sloane closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “All right.”

The redhead’s face broke into a grin. “I knew it.”

Sloane glared. “How did you find me?”

“Just some basic detective work.” The redhead glanced over her shoulder. “So they probably suspected you, right? ‘Cuz the car was stolen from here?”

Sloane said nothing, just glowered.

The redhead nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense. So like, you probably staged the break-in yourself afterward, right? And since you have a garage, you can change out cars for every race, which is why no one ever sees you in the same car.” She shook her head, impressed. “Wow. That’s kind of awesome. Devious.”

“What do you want?” Sloane said through gritted teeth.

“Hm?” She looked back up. “Oh. Um.”

“You must want something,” spat Sloane. “Otherwise I’d have been in cuffs two days ago. You saw my face. And there aren’t that many Asian chicks in this town.”

“Well, you know it’s funny you bring up your face,” said the redhead. Oh god, was she doing finger guns? “Because I looked at it, and I just had to—like—” She faltered. “You know you’re. Um.”

Sloane’s glare turned into a puzzled frown.

“Uhh…” the woman attempted. Oh, she was blushing. Oh! Oh. “You’ve uh… driven me to this, so…” The redhead grinned at her own pun, and then cringed. “Oh my god.”

Despite her best efforts, Sloane felt the corner of her lip twitch. “Driven you to what?”

“I just—here.” The redhead pulled a slip of paper out of her pocket and handed it over. “I won’t tell, as long as you let me give you this. And maybe consider not doing the whole street racing thing anymore. It’s illegal, and you could get into trouble.”

Sloane took the slip of paper and unfolded it. It said “Hurley O’Shaghennessy,” followed by a phone number. She refolded it and looked silently back to the redhead.

“Oh.” Wow, this Hurley woman was blushing to the tips of her ears. “You don’t have to call. Not if you don’t want. I just…wanted you to have it. Just in case.” She paused, looking at Sloane desperately for some sign. When none was forthcoming, she said, “So bye,” and turned on her heel.

Sloane watched her go, trying to figure out what she was feeling. She’d thought…
She’d thought she was the only lesbian in this town.

Then again, she’d also thought not a person alive could chase her down.

“Hey,” Sloane called after her, probably too quietly. Yep, Hurley didn’t hear. Sloane jogged up to her. “Hey!”

Hurley looked up in surprise.

Oh damn. Sloane had no idea what she was going to say. She swallowed. “I just wanted you to know you can expect a call from me.”

Hurley brightened. “Yeah?”

Sloane nodded slowly. Should she...yeah, she should. “Ignoring a meeting like this would be downright...criminal.”

A broad grin spread across Hurley’s face. She seemed at a loss for words. Sloane allowed herself a small, brief smile.

“Cool,” Hurley eked out, and when she couldn’t manage another word, wandered out into the parking lot.

Sloane turned back to her garage. She hoped her mechanics couldn’t see her stifling a grin.
Merle stirred his Old Fashioned, half-listening to the band on the stage. He and Davenport were at the jazz club, which was where they went these days on a weekly basis. The drinks weren’t nearly as good as what that Tom kid made, but Davenport wanted to avoid what he called a confidentiality chain disaster at Refuge, so this place was the go-to. And Merle liked it, too, enjoyed the music and the ambiance. He and Davenport were finally starting to get past the awkward catching-up phase. It wasn’t like it used to be, but Merle couldn’t help but think it was better this way.

“What if I joined a sailing club?” Davenport was saying, sipping a bourbon. “That could be an element of community. A good hobby.”

“Do you have a boat?” asked Merle.

“I have a canoe,” said Davenport, and Merle laughed. Davenport smiled. “Maybe I could just tell them it’s been taken in for repairs every week.”

“Run afloat of the storm, did you?” asked Merle.

“Aye,” said Davenport sadly. “My poor ship. The S.S…”

“Starblaster.”

Davenport shot him a look of disgust. “No one should ever let you name a ship.”

Merle laughed. “Maybe not a sailing club. What else do you like?”

“You know, I’m not even sure,” said Davenport, shrugging. “I’m still trying to break myself of work-is-my-life habits. Maybe I should try something new.”

Merle snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it. Roller derby.”

Davenport laughed. “Oh my god, that’s a great idea. I’d be a fantastic…” He waved a hand uncertainly. “Hitter.”

“No, not a position,” chuckled Merle.

“Striker?”

“Nope.”

“Swing…vote.”

Merle laughed. “Sure, yeah. Why don’t you come to a bout, see what it’s like? Everyone there’s young and stupid, but it’s a lot of fun.”

“Why not?” said Davenport. “In the spirit of trying new things.”

Merle nodded and took a drink.
“Now tell me what’s on your mind,” said Davenport.

“Ah, stop with the psychoanalysis,” scoffed Merle.

“Would that I could. I can’t turn it off.”

“There’s your real problem,” said Merle, pointing with his drink. “Your brain’s always at work.”

“Maybe so,” said Davenport. “But in the meantime, you want to talk about what’s going on with you?”

Merle sighed. He hadn’t wanted Davenport to find out like this. “Well...it’s my son.”

“What’s Mookie up to?”

“He’s got detention perpetually these days,” said Merle, setting his glass down. “Causing trouble, disrupting class, driving his teachers up the wall.”

“That’s not good,” said Davenport, all over concern.

“So Hekuba took him to a psychiatrist in Neverwinter.”

Davenport’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Not me? I’m offended.”

Ah, so he wasn’t going to take that personally. Good. “No, because she knows we’re friends, see. Thought you’d take my side.”

“Your side?”

Merle threw a hand in the air. “She’s convinced he’s got some kind of attention disorder or something, wants to drug him up.”

Davenport frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with taking medication for ADD, Merle.”

“I don’t like the idea of it,” grumbled Merle. “He’s so small still.”

“If he was blind, you’d get him a cane, right?” said Davenport. “Or if he couldn’t walk, he’d get a wheelchair?”

“God forbid,” said Merle. That idea was a little too much to handle after just one drink.

“But you see what I’m saying, right?”

“Your point’s taken,” said Merle, shrugging. “But it doesn’t matter anyway, because the psychiatrist said he doesn’t have any disorder. He’s acting out for other reasons. So Hekuba’s got him in therapy.”

“And that bothers you?” asked Davenport.

“No, I don’t have anything against therapy,” said Merle, shaking his head. “Kid probably needs it. But I want to help, right? I just don’t know how.”

“Hmm.” Davenport leaned back in his chair. “Any word on why Mookie’s acting out?”

“Hekuba said something about him being underchallenged. He’s smart, but he’s bored.”

“So he needs an outlet for all that energy,” said Davenport. “What’s he do when he’s staying with
“Mostly plays those damn video games,” Merle mumbled. “You think I should take them away?”

“No, that’d probably only make things worse.” Davenport finished off his bourbon. “But you might give him something more constructive to do.”

“Like what?”

Johann frowned. “Okay, well now at least I understand why you asked me to set this up at the middle school.”

Mookie was staring at his--what were those things called, gaming boys?--gaming boy, kicking his feet under the bench beside the middle school band room. A child, and not the kind of child who was seen and not heard, from what Johann could tell. Merle hadn’t specified who was going to be receiving the music lesson today, so Johann had assumed--

“Look, if you can’t do it, we’ll figure something else out,” said Merle, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“I just don’t usually give lessons to children,” said Johann. “Teenagers, sometimes.”

“I’m almost a teenager,” said Mookie to his game. “I’m a tween.”

“Just one lesson,” said Merle. “If you can find him an instrument he likes, then great, we can move forward from there. Or get another teacher, whatever.”

Johann shrugged. “I suppose. All right.”

“Okay.” Merle clapped his hands together. “You ready, Mookie?”

Mookie hopped up from the bench without looking up from the game. Merle took hold of a corner of the thing with two fingers. “Pause it.”

“Dad dad dad wait ,” whined Mookie.

“Pause your game,” Merle repeated.

“Okay, okay,” Mookie griped, and pushed a button, allowing Merle to take it out of his hands.

“I’ll be right out here,” said Merle, closing the game and sitting down on the bench.

Mookie considered Johann carefully. “So?”

Johann felt a little unnerved. “Uh...let’s get started.”

He led Mookie into the middle school orchestra room, which he’d set up with a selection of instruments on tables and stands. God, it was beautiful, seeing them all lined up and waiting. He surveyed them for a moment like a proud father before turning to Mookie. “All right, so...what do you want to try?”

Mookie’s look of utter disinterest was heartbreaking. “I don’t know.”

Johann frowned. What did children like? “Maybe something...loud?”
Mookie shrugged. Good enough. Johann picked up a trumpet from its little stand on the table. “So this has a tricky embouchure—”

“The cuss is a omer-shur?” said Mookie, holding out his hands for the trumpet.

Johann paused. “Uh. The way you hold your mouth. Like...can you make an elephant sound?”

Mookie put the heels of his hands over his mouth and eked out a tragic squeak. Johann snorted. Mookie took his hands away, smiling a little.

“What about with just your lips?” said Johann, and tightened his mouth into a line, honking out a fairly good elephant.

Mookie grinned and tried it, with more of a raspberry effect.

“Yeah, not bad. That’s how you want to blow into the trumpet.” He handed it over.

Mookie took it clumsily and gave it a pretty good honk.

“Right, and if you push down that middle valve, that’s a B,” added Johann.

Mookie took a deep breath and managed an F sharp.

“Well not quite a B,” admitted Johann.

“I don’t like this,” said Mookie, and put the trumpet down clumsily on the table. “I can try all of these?”

“Yes, sure,” said Johann, hastily putting the trumpet back on its stand.

“Cool.” Mookie grabbed a French horn by the valves. “This one’s weird.”

“Oh!” Johann hastily adjusted his hands. “You brace it against your fist. That goes in the bell.”

Mookie gave the horn a feeble blow, and then pulled his fist out of bell in disgust. “It’s wet!”

“That’s spit, I’m afraid,” said Johann.

The boy set the horn down on the edge of the table and turned toward a saxophone. Johann jumped forward and rescued it before it teetered onto the floor.

“Hey look,” said Mookie, picking up the sax. “Like Bill Clinton.”

Johann raised an eyebrow, gingerly putting the French horn up. “How do you know--?”

“From Animaniacs,” he said, and blew a hissing, strangled nothing. “Nope.”

“If you let the reed soak up some moisture--”

“All these have too much spit,” grumbled Mookie.

“Okay, no that’s fine,” said Johann, hastily taking the saxophone before Mookie could put it down. “Let’s try some strings. Here, take a seat.” He reached for a guitar.

“Guitars are boring,” said Mookie, going for the cello, which lay on its side. He propped it up and plucked a couple strings.
“Uh, hang on,” said Johann, putting the guitar and sax back. He picked up the cello’s bow from the table. “Now, this is how you hold a bow, okay? Fingers like this.” He demonstrated, and then handed the bow off to Mookie.

Mookie frowned in concentration and arranged his hand as shown. And then he sawed the bow across the cello hard enough to break some of the bow’s strings with an ungodly groan.

“Aw, cuss,” he said, holding up the bow to look at it. “Sorry.”

Johann sighed. “It’s okay, it’s an old bow anyway. If you just go a little gentler--”

“Nah, I don’t like it,” said Mookie, about to let the cello fall to the floor--

“Freeze!” Johann barked.

Mookie froze, wide-eyed.

“Sorry, just...put it down slowly.”

Johann did, very gently. “Like that?”

Johann breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, good.”

“Okay.” He dropped the bow unceremoniously and headed toward the piano.

“Mookie, you can’t--just--” Johann snatched up the ravaged bow and looked at it with despair. “You can’t just drop musical instruments.”

“Yeah,” said Mookie, pushing piano keys at random with his whole hand. “If you drop a piano on someone you crush them flat. Blam!” He hit the keys with a fist.

Johann winced, and then--yes, a flash of inspiration. “Why don’t we try the drums?”

“Okay.” Mookie wandered over to the drumset that Johann really hadn’t planned on using today and sat down in the seat. He raised a hand over one of the toms, ready slap it down.

“Use--Mookie, stop.” Johann hurried over and pulled a pair of drumsticks from the pouch hanging off the marimba. “Here, use these.”

“Cool.” Mookie took the sticks and gave the tom a good whack, and then the snare, and then the cymbal.

“Try that pedal there,” said Johann.

Mookie hit the bass drum a couple times in a row.

“And that one, try that one.”

The high hat jumped. Mookie smiled a little, and made it jump a couple more times.

“What do you think?” asked Johann.

“How do you play them all at once?” Mookie asked.

“You usually start with one at a time,” said Johann. “At least at first.”

Mookie poked at the snare. “That’s it?”
“Afraid so,” said Johann.

He hit the snare a couple more times and hopped up, taking the drumsticks with him. “I don’t like this one either.”

What now? Johann sighed. There had to be something. Maybe this kid’s attention span was too short for music. Music took discipline, focus.

He considered Mookie. Discipline and focus didn’t exactly come to mind.

Mookie dragged the drumstick along the keys of the marimba and froze.

Johann frowned, watching. Mookie didn’t move. He was being…still.

After a moment, carefully, Mookie dragged the drumstick across the keys again. He stopped and played four notes in a row, part of a chromatic scale, and then looked up with a grin.

“What’s that?” asked Johann.

“From Zelda,” Mookie explained. “When you find a chest.” He played the riff again.

“Hang on, hang on, here.” Johann snatched up two softer mallets from the pouch and held them out to Mookie. “The drumsticks are hard enough to dent the keys.”

“Oh.” Mookie traded them out and played the riff one more time. “It’s not as loud.”

Uh oh, this could be the death knell for this instrument. “No, it’s not, but it’s better for the instrument.”

Mookie looked at the mallet thoughtfully. “And it sounds better.”

Johann smiled in relief. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Mookie hit a few notes at random, and then stopped on a D. He hit it a couple times, and then tried an E. “Nope.” He hit the D again, and then an F. “Yeah.”

“Are you trying to play something by ear?” asked Johann in surprise.

“I’m just figuring out a song,” Mookie explained, jumping up to the C before starting over.

Johann felt a jolt of inspiration. He groped behind him, where his folio was laying on the table, snatched it up, and took out his music staff notebook and a pen. “How does it go?”

“Like, doo-doo doo, doo-doo doo, doo deedooede doodoot doo…”

Johann transcribed the notes as fast as he could and considered the page. “This is really quite pretty. What’s it from?”

“Zelda,” said Mookie, hitting the keys a few more times. “Ocarina of Time.”

Johann frowned, puzzled. “Is that a movie?” He knew what an ocarina was, but--

“It’s a video game.” Mookie tried an E, which was still the wrong note, and pulled a face. “Ugh.”

“Here, look,” said Johann, putting a notebook on the music stand in front of the marimba. “It looks like it’s D, F, D. See, this note here is a D--”
Mookie scowled. “I don’t need the paper, I can figure it out.”

“If you can read the music, you don’t have to figure it out,” said Johann patiently. “You can just know. Here, look.” He grabbed another mallet, circled to stand beside Mookie, and, pointedly looking at the music, played the first few measures.

Mookie narrowed his eyes. “You’ve heard this song before.”

Johann lifted a hand to pronounce an oath. “I swear I haven’t, not once in my life.”

This seemed to be enough for Mookie. He looked down at the keys, and then back at the notebook, and pointed at a note on the page. “Which one is this one? And why’s that one black and that one hollow? And why’s that one got a roof?”

Johann smiled. All right, now this was something. “Let’s start on the keys, okay? This one’s a C.”

Merle wandered in after about an hour and paused in the doorway. Johann was sitting beside an outsized xylophone, watching Mookie carefully and deliberately playing a scale. “That’s good, yeah,” Johann was saying. “So if I said to play C sharp—”

“It’s the same as D flat,” Mookie finished, and hit the note.

“Excellent,” said Johann, and looked up. “Oh, hey Merle. I think we found an instrument.”

Merle rubbed his chin. Unexpected. He’d thought maybe Mookie’d choose something like a tuba or a trombone. Or drums. “We’re going with a xylophone?”

“It’s a marimba, dad,” said Mookie, and played the scale again.

“I’d be willing to teach him, too, if you’d like,” added Johann.

Merle shrugged. “Well, hel--heck, that works for me. Once a week? The rate we discussed?”

“Certainly.”

“What do you think about that, Fireball?” asked Merle.

Mookie looked up from the marimba. “I want to.”

“Great.” Merle nodded, watching his son play the scales. He hadn’t asked for his video game back yet. “We’ll do that then. All right, kiddo, time to go.”

“Aww,” whined Mookie.

“It’s okay, we can do more next week,” said Johann. “So what did we promise?”

Mookie screwed his face up in concentration. “I promise to come in here three times a week and practice.”

“Right, and I promise to play Zelda, which I apparently need something called a sixty-four to do, right?” said Johann solemnly.

“Yep!” Mookie handed the sticks back to Johann and scurried over to Merle. Merle tousled his hair.
“You don’t have to buy a video game, Johann,” Merle muttered.

“But he promised!” Mookie protested.

“I actually want to anyway,” said Johann, and damn if the man wasn’t dead serious. “I’d like to transcribe as much of the music as I can. That way Mookie can practice on something he likes, right?”

“You can’t write down music and play at the same time,” said Mookie. “You need both hands.”

“I can write from memory,” said Johann. “Or Brad can play and I can watch and listen. One of the two.”

Merle was touched. He held out a hand. “Thank you, Johann. This is...this is really something.”

Johann shook it. “I’m glad to help. From what Mookie’s shown me, it could be a whole new genre for me to explore.” Johann looked him dead in the eyes. “That’s what’s really good about teaching. You learn, too.”

Merle stopped himself from laughing and let go of Johann’s hand. “We’ll see you next week.”

Johann nodded thoughtfully and began putting the various instruments away.

“Can I have my game back?” asked Mookie as they turned to leave.

Merle took it out of his pocket and handed it over. “Which one is Zelda?”

“I only play it at mom’s house,” said Mookie, as the reedy startup music on his game started. “That’s where my 64 is.” He paused. “I wonder what notes that is.”

“What?” asked Merle, glancing down at his son.

“The song,” said Mookie, pushing away at buttons as they walked, his game beeping and booping. “I bet I could play it.”

Merle looked at his son fondly. “I bet you could.”
Lup stopped and pulled off her acid-washed jean jacket. It was awfully warm for late September in New Elfington. She started walking again as she reorganized arrangement of the jacket, her violin case, and her backpack. Only a few other high schoolers were scattered across the wide front steps. Lup casually surveyed her surroundings as she headed towards the street. No one really worth talking to was left. Jenny Gibbons waved to Lup from across the way, Lup waved back and pressed the button for the crosswalk. Jenny’s jerk boyfriend sneered at Lup, who turned away and rolled her eyes. She’d only been looking at Jenny’s pleated skirt; it looked a lot more comfortable than jeans… and Lup would look better in it too.

As she walked the few blocks from the high school to her house, she went out of her way to crunch some leaves under foot. There was something just so damn satisfying about it. She glanced at her watch and picked up the pace. If she hurried, she could catch a few minutes of that new show, Club MTV, before Mom got home from the church.

But when she turned the corner, Lup stopped. Mom’s car and Dad’s truck were parked in the driveway. Dad was never home this early. Senses on high alert, Lup headed for the front walk. She patted the head of the scarecrow that leaned against the front bushes as she passed by and unlocked the door.

“I’m home,” she called into the house, kicking the front door shut behind her. She dropped her bags and jacket on a pile on the chair in the front room.

“Taako?” Mom asked. Lup walked into the living room. Mom was seated on the couch, her hands primly folded in her lap. Dad was leaning against the doorway into the dining room. “Oh, hi dear. How was school?”

Lup looked back and forth between her parents. “Good… is everything okay?”

“Is your brother with you?” she asked instead. Dad uncrossed and then re-crossed his arms.

“No, he had play practice, remember? He said he’d be home around 4:30. …what’s going on?”

Mom looked to Dad, who shook his head.

“I think you should go upstairs,” Mom said, looking back to Lup. “Work on some homework. We need to have a talk with Taako.”

Lup looked between her parents again, but the look on Dad’s face kept her from asking questions.
She picked up her pile of bags and the jacket and headed upstairs to the room she shared with Taako. Her brain was quickly calculating through the list of Things Mom and Dad Would Need to Have a Talk About. It wasn’t a very long list, but there was a particular item that made Lup’s stomach feel like it was bottoming out.

She shut the door behind her, gently this time, and dropped her things. She didn’t have a lot of time, as the clock already read 4:38. She opened the closet door and pulled out the display board for an old science fair project. She grabbed a marker and took a moment to think of what she wanted to say. Glancing out the window, she saw Taako round the corner; he seemed to be attempting a moonwalk. She quickly opened the window and yelled out in a whisper,

“Hey!”

They had a very quiet neighborhood, so Taako turned around when he heard it. He waved to her, and she held up her sign. ‘Parents Want To Talk To You’, it read.

Taako held out his arms and mouthed, ‘Why?’

Lup shrugged and shook her head. Taako frowned and shoved his hands in pockets for a moment. He was obviously mentally going through the same list that Lup had. He looked back up at her, a worried look in his eyes. He straightened up and then headed for the front door, patting the scarecrow as he passed by.

Lup didn’t open the door for another hour like a damn coward. At one point she tried to start on her History homework, but she couldn’t focus enough to read more than a sentence before she forgot what she’d read. She ended up pacing for most of it, hearing dulled voices rise through the carpet. Eventually she took a breath, and dared to open the bedroom door. Their voices sailed up the stairs, irate and vicious.

“Are you fucking kidding me, right now?” she heard Taako say.

“Watch your language, young man,” Dad replied. Lup could hear the frown in his voice.

“Taako, we’re worried about you.” Mom pleaded. “We want what’s best for you.”

“So you’re kicking me out???”

Oh shit.

“You have a choice to make.” Dad cut back in. “You can either go to the psychiatrist recommended--”

“Conversion therapy ,” Taako said, tersely. “Call it what it is, Dad . You want me to pray the gay away, or-or look at pictures of naked women and try to be interested in them!”

“OR you are no longer welcome in this house.”

Lup shut the door and leaned against it, her heart beating a million times a minute in her chest. Fuck, they’d found out. How?? When?? Did they know about her too???? She sat down on her bed and gripped her hands tightly together.

Suddenly, the door banged open and Taako slammed it shut behind him. Lup hopped up, and the two of them just looked at each other for a minute. Taako turned wordlessly for the closet, ripping it open and yanking a duffel bag down from the top shelf. He pulled a drawer open and started shoving his clothes into it.
“Taako—” Lup began.

“No,” he cut her off. His voice sounded thick. “Just no.”

She stood quietly, absent-mindedly worrying the lint inside her pocket as she watched her twin empty out his drawers in the bureau. He threw a pair of shoes and his deodorant into the bag.

“Maybe I can go talk to them,” she said slowly. He scoffed and didn’t stop packing. “They… don’t mean it. They’re our parents, they—they love you.”

“Well they sure have a hell of a way of showing it.”

Lup swallowed hard. Taako went to his desk and started dumping drawers out into his bag. Her chin began to wobble.

“Please!” the word ripped from her chest. She felt so stupid and out of control, like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum. “You can’t go!”

Taako finally turned to look at her, his eyes were rimmed with red.

“I can’t stay, Munch.” He shook his head and looked at the door. “They want me to be someone I’m not—I can’t do that.”

Lup blinked a few times, her tears drying up almost instantly. “Yes. You. Can.” she said with quiet fury. He snapped back to look at her.

“What?”

“You go back down there and you feed them whatever bullshit line they want to hear.” She shoved a finger against his chest. “Because we are 8 measly months from being able to walk away from all of this scot-free.”

Taako clenched his jaw. “I don’t want to lie about who I am.”

“What do you think I do every fucking day? You think I like using the boys bathroom or—or how no matter how many times I’ve asked them you are the only person who calls me Lup?? Do you think I want to lie about how I am?? NO! But I do every fucking day for us.”

“This isn’t about yo—No, I’m not doing this. I’m not fighting with you.” Taako knelt down and yanked the zipper closed on his bag.

Lup’s tears returned with a vengeance. She spun around and walked back towards the window.

“Fine! Then just go. See if I care.” She hated every word that came out of her mouth but she couldn’t stop them.

The silence between them seemed to yawn. But Taako didn’t leave.

“Lup,” he said quietly. “Come with me.”

She turned to look at him. He was gripping the strap on his bag with white knuckles.

“We... It’ll be easier together. We’re a good team.”

Lup blinked a few times, trying to process. “Where are you even going?”
Taako shrugged. “I can afford a bus ticket. I’m getting out of here--blowing this popsicle stand. I figure... I dunno. I’ll figure it out as I go. We can figure it out as we go.”

Slowly, Lup finally finished processing and she shook her head.

“Taako, I can’t…”

The reasons to stay stacked sky-high, but in the end it boiled down to the simple truth: she was scared.

“I...I can explain,” she started.

“No. I see how it is.” Taako’s jaw tightened and he straightened up. He swung the bag over his shoulder and left the room.

She watched him walk stiffly down the stairs. She ran to the window to watch him walk to the corner, a street lamp turning on above him. He stopped and looked back to the window and she pressed a hand against the glass.

‘Come back soon,’ she mouthed.

His frown grew deeper, then turned and walked into the darkness.
Merle watched Davenport step down from his front porch, navigating with that cane of his with the polished silver head. Davenport had been offered a hospital cane and had rejected it outright in favor of something classier. Merle chuckled to himself. Proud old motherfucker.

Davenport stepped out of his front gate and paused, heaving a sigh. “All right, I think that’s enough exercise for today.”

“Think again,” scoffed Merle, starting on their walk.

“Hardass.” Davenport fell in step beside him.

“The doctors said—”

“I know what the doctors said,” said Davenport, waving a hand. “And thank you, Merle, for looking after my heart. You bastard.”

Merle laughed, and they fell into a companionable silence as they headed downtown. Three times a week they took a walk together, and every time Davenport complained, some days with more sincerity than with others. Merle never let him win, though. The heart attack hadn’t been major, but it had been enough to put the fear of God into Merle. Yes, he had more friends these days, and yes, it had been almost twenty years since Boyland had died, but the thought of losing Davenport was too familiar and unconscionable. So he’d make sure Davenport followed doctor’s orders, dammit.

They made their way out of Davenport’s neighborhood, down past the Subway that used to be the Chi-chi’s, and then past the rink in the direction of Refuge. Ren was out front, hanging a rainbow flag on the pole by the door. She stepped back to look at it, and then noticed them coming toward her and waved. “Gentlemen!”

“Howdy, Ren,” said Merle, as they stopped. He squinted up at the flag. “Is that the gay one?”

“Well, June is Pride, you know,” she said, pulling at a corner of the flag to settle it. “Given my customer base it seemed appropriate.”

“Is that wise?” asked Merle. “In this town?”

“Oh, what harm could one flag do?” said Davenport.

The door of Refuge opened, and Tom appeared, holding a box. “Hey, Ren, I found the rest of the flags.”

Ren snickered. “Your timing, as always, is impeccable. Go ahead and stick them in the window box.”

Davenport looked a little chagrined. “A few flags, then.”
“Yeah, it just…” Ren paused and sighed. “In this political climate? It doesn’t seem right not to take a stand. I mean, this place—” she patted the bricks of the building— “This place is called Refuge for a reason. It’s supposed to feel like home. I hate the thought of someone not knowing they’re welcome here.”

Tom looked up from putting tiny multi-colored flags in amongst the pansies in the window box. “Except people who make other people feel unwelcome.”

“Except for that, yeah,” said Ren, nodding.

Merle shook his head. “It just doesn’t seem safe. Not after what happened in Orlando last year.”

“I have to do something,” she said. “Me and Tom talked it through—it’s not enough to sit on a fence.”

Behind her, sticking a flag with gray and purple stripes into the planter, Tom was nodding.

“Good for you,” said Davenport firmly.

Merle watched Tom pull out another flag he didn’t recognize, this one blue and pink and yellow. “What are all these?”

“Oh, no, wait, let me see if I can remember them.” Davenport frowned in concentration, pointing at each one as he went down the line. “Uh…trans, aromantic, lesbian, bisexual, genderqueer, polyamory, agender, nonbinary, asexual, and pansexual?”

“And we are ten for ten!” Ren clapped theatrically. “Well done, Davenport.”

“Thank you,” said Davenport, pleased. “Good luck, Ren.”

“Thanks, y’all.” She waved as they walked on.

“All those things have flags?” said Merle, as they turned a corner.

“Oh, there are even more than that,” said Davenport.

“How come you know them all?”

Davenport gave him a sideways glance. “There are…a few reasons. But foremost among them is that I’m the only psychiatrist for two hundred miles. In any direction, Merle, in the rural South. If I don’t give people the resources they need to understand themselves, who the hell else is going to?”

Merle shook his head. “It’s all so complicated now.”

“It seems complicated, but it’s not really,” said Davenport, moving a fallen stick out of the path with his cane. “You just have to keep listening.”

“Hmm.”

Merle considered this, and they spent the rest of their walk in silence.

“Dinner is served!” Merle placed the baking sheet of sizzling fish down on the table, fresh from the oven, and his kids took their seats, all grown up and come to visit dad. Merle had to remind himself that they were allowed to drink wine now, although Mookie was looking more like a beer
drinker these days. He lived close by now, but Mavis had driven in from Phandolin for the evening.

“Smells amazing, Dad,” said Mavis, digging into the rice and passing it along to Mookie. Mookie scooped himself some with one hand and served himself some fish with the other.

“Me and Davenport caught them ourselves,” Merle said, taking a responsible amount of broccoli and scooting the bowl toward his daughter. “All right now, kids, catch me up. What have you been up to?”

“Yeah, you came back to Faerun for some unthinkable reason,” said Mavis, pointing her fork at Mookie. “What gives?”

Mookie swallowed a mouthful of rice and wiped away a couple of stray grains stuck in his undergrown beard before answering. “Faerun High’s got the worst music program in the district. Somebody had to come fix it.”

“You’re going to single-handedly fix the entire music program?” teased Mavis, taking a sip of her wine.

Mookie was not having it. “I can reboot their marching band at least. Maybe get a drumline going. I’m not going to try to lead choir or anything, but cuss, when I was in school, band was the only thing I liked about it. The arts deserve a little attention.”

“Can’t argue with that,” said Merle.

“I just don’t believe you’d give up your cush gig at Ipré West,” said Mavis, shaking her head. “Faerun High is...kind of a bad school.”

“It’s not bad, it’s just poor,” Mookie insisted. “We did fine.”

“That’s cuz we had someone giving a flying fuck about our education,” Mavis said, gesturing to Merle.

“That’s all I’m trying to do, Mave,” said Mookie. “Let students know that someone cares about them as more than just...grade machines or whatever.”

Merle smiled to himself. Good kid. “Does the school even have the money to reboot the band?”

Mookie shrugged. “We have plenty of old instruments, and I’ve got some ideas for fundraisers. If I can get a summer band camp going, that’ll help a lot. And if we choose some good music for the fall. I was thinking video game music to start.”

Mavis looked up. “Okay, that’s actually kind of cool.”

“I thought you’d say that,” said Mookie, grinning. “I could use some recs from you.”

“Let’s talk video games after dinner, huh?” said Merle. “I’m too old to relate.”

His kids laughed and conceded.

“Anyway, I want to hear about this new boyfriend of yours,” he said to Mavis. “Mischa, right?”

Mavis paused, suddenly on guard. Strange… “Um. Yeah.”

“You said you met him through work? Or was it a friend from work?”
“Through a friend,” Mavis mumbled, picking at her fish.

“Tell me about him.”

Mavis paused for a long moment, and then took a deep breath, in and out. “Okay, so, I’ve been meaning to tell you this anyway but...I didn’t know how you’d...ugh.” She put her head in her hand. “Whatever. Mischa’s not my boyfriend, Dad, because they’re not a boy. Or a girl.”

Merle stopped, fork halfway to his mouth.

A tight silence hung over the table. Mookie glanced between the two them, wide-eyed.

Merle put down his fork, shaking his head as if it’d help. “Can you say that again?”

“They’re neither my boyfriend nor my girlfriend.” His daughter stared at him defiantly, waiting for him to pick a fight.

“He’s not a boy, or a girl…” Merle attempted.

“They,” said Mavis pointedly.

“They,” Merle repeated, searching for something to anchor this idea to. “...Like...Coach Roswell?”

Relief washed over Mavis’s face. “Yeah, yeah, kind of like that. Although I think Coach is more agender? But Mischa’s genderfluid.”

Merle didn’t know what that meant, but now didn’t seem like the time to ask, because a more important question sprang to mind. “So does that make you…?” “Gay” wasn’t the right word, because she’d be gay if she brought home a girl, right? Dammit, he didn’t have the vocabulary for this.

“No straight?” Mavis provided. She shrugged. “God, I don’t know, dad. I guess so. All I know is that...I like them.” She blushed a little, looked down. “A lot.”

“And he—they—” Merle corrected himself. “They like you too?”

Mavis nodded, smiling a very small smile.

All right...all right. This was a lot to consider. Merle frowned at his food, trying to figure out what to say. “H—they. They’re a good person? Good job and all that? Not a slacker?”

“Mischa’s very good,” Mavis said seriously. “They’re wonderful, dad, you’d like them.”

Merle nodded, very slowly. All right, that was what was important, after all. “Then they’re all right in my book.”

Mavis’s face lit up. “Okay. Yeah.”

“So wait, if they’re not your boyfriend, what are you calling them?” asked Mookie, who seemed completely unphased by this conversation now that the tension had dissipated. “Partner?”

Mavis blushed again. “We’re going with ‘datemate.’”

Mookie cackled, “Datemate! That’s adorable!”
“Shut up,” scoffed Mavis, hiding her delight.

“And you just had to go with another M name, didn’t you,” said Mookie in mock derision.

“Hey, the heart wants what it wants, you stupid cusser,” she shot back, through laughter.

Mookie laughed and finished off his wine. “You know...as long as we’re talking about this. I don’t think I’m straight either.”

His tone was casual, but Merle noticed him start to sweat.

“Really?” said Mavis, suddenly fascinated.

“Yep.”

Merle watched Mookie put down the wineglass carefully, trying to think of something to say to his son. Shit, this was a real live heart-to-heart they were having, wasn’t it? Merle finally settled for, “When did this happen?”

Mookie shrugged. “Recently? I mean, like, I realized it recently. Looking back I think I’ve always been this way. I don’t know.” He shrugged again. “I’m still working through this stuff.”

“Gay?” Merle managed. Mookie wasn’t exactly what one thought of when one thought of a gay man, but—

“At least,” said Mookie, very carefully not looking at any of them. “Maybe bi or pan or something. Like I said. Still thinking about it.”

Merle tried to think of something else to say, and settled on the obvious. “I accept you, son.”

Mookie laughed at this, but Merle saw his shoulders relax. “Thanks, I guess.”

“It’s just strange to me that it’s both of you,” said Merle thoughtfully. “What are the chances of that?”

“Haven’t you heard, Dad?” said Mookie. “All the millenials are gay.”

Mavis burst out laughing. Merle felt as though he was missing a joke, but smiled all the same.

“So, then, Fireball,” he said, once his children were done laughing. “Any...guys or gals, then? That you’re interested in?” He glanced at Mavis and added, “Or other, I suppose.”

Mavis smiled.

“Cuss no, Dad, I’m trying to build a marching band,” Mookie scoffed. “I don’t have time for dating.”

“You should let me set you up,” said Mavis, with a mischievous grin. “The people I could introduce you to—”

“Over my dead body,” Mookie said, pointing at her. She laughed, and Merle chuckled.

“Read ‘em and weep,” said Magnus, laying his hand on the table. A collective groan went up from the players.
“Every damn time,” said Cassidy, throwing down her hand.

“I told you, you should’ve folded,” said Davenport mildly. Merle chuckled.

“A fine game, everyone, well done!” Garfield scooped up the cards and started shuffling as Magnus collected his quarters. “But who will triumph this time ‘round?”

“Ah, deal me out,” said Davenport, standing and taking his cane from where it leaned on the wall. “The hour grows late, and I’ve got an early appointment tomorrow.”

“We should probably head out too, huh?” said Isaak to Cassidy.

“Ah, shit, probably,” she said, standing up as well.

“Yeah, me too,” Magnus yawned.

“Got to get home to the wife and kids?” asked Leon, collecting scattered glasses.

“Just the two kids at the moment,” said Magnus, passing off his own glass. “Jojo and Julia are out of town.”

“Give Diego and Lucy my love, would you?” said Steven.

Magnus leaned over to squeeze his father-in-law’s shoulders. “Will do.”

“Now hang on, how many am I dealing in?” asked Garfield. “Merle?”

Merle didn’t really want to stay if Davenport was leaving. “No, I’ll be going too, I think.”

“Then just the three of us,” said Garfield gleefully to Steven and Leon. “Let’s do this thing!”

“Deal ‘em,” said Leon. “Thanks for coming by, y’all.”

“Thanks for having us,” Davenport said as the early departers made their way out of Leon’s library.

A neighbor of Leon’s was having a party, so the whole group of them had a ways to walk to get to where their cars were parked.

“So where are Jojo and Julia off to?” asked Davenport, as they made their way down the sidewalk.

“Neverwinter, with everyone else,” said Magnus.

This rang a bell for Merle. “Carey said something about that.” Carey had been manager of The Adventure Zone for years now, and had asked for a long weekend off.

“What’s in Neverwinter?” asked Isaak.

“Pride,” said Magnus.

Cassidy raised an eyebrow. “Like, gay pride?”

“I think it’s just Pride, these days,” said Magnus, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Like, I know someone who’s trans who’s going. And two people who are bi, and one who’s asexual—”

“That’s a whole ass-ton o’ words right there,” said Cassidy.
“There’s a whole...ass-ton...of people in the world,” said Davenport. “Everyone wants to be understood.”

Cassidy frowned thoughtfully.

“Why are Jojo and Julia going, then?” asked Merle.

Magnus smiled. “Jojo takes after her aunts.”

The group chuckled, except for Isaak. “What’s uh...” Isaak cleared his throat and tried again. “What’s asexual mean?”

“It means you don’t feel sexual attraction at all,” said Davenport.

Cassidy looked at Isaak, and then back at Davenport. “You got one of them fancy words for when you’re only attracted to someone after you’ve known ‘em a spell?”

Isaak looked up at her sharply.

“There are a few different terms for that,” said Davenport. “I think the most common ones are gray asexual, or demisexual.”

Isaak’s gaze snapped to Davenport. “Really.”

“Yes,” said Davenport.

“You’re not bullshitting me?”

“I would never,” said Davenport solemnly.

“Huh.”

They walked in silence for a moment or two, Davenport’s cane tapping on the concrete alongside their footsteps, before Isaak and Cassidy stopped beside a rusted old Ford parked underneath a street lamp. “This is us, I guess,” Isaak said, his voice a little rougher than usual.

“’Night y’all,” said Cassidy, waving them all off.

“Night, Cassidy, night, Isaak,” said Magnus, and the three of them walked away.

“So I know there are parades and celebrations and such for Pride,” said Davenport. “Will Jojo be going to those? It all seemed more adult-oriented.”

“That’s why Julia’s going too, to keep an eye on her,” said Magnus. “You know, the whole team offered to watch her, but they ought to have their fun too.”

Isaak’s car hadn’t started yet. Merle glanced back over his shoulder.

In the pool of yellow light from the streetlamp, Isaak was leaning into Cassidy’s arms. She was bent close to his ear, saying something softly, and his shoulders were shaking like he was crying—

Merle’s head snapped back forward. “Shit,” he muttered.

“What?” Magnus looked back. “Oh my god. Is he—”

“Eyes front,” said Davenport. “Let him be.”
Magnus swiveled his gaze around. “Should we go talk to him?”

“We’d just embarrass him,” said Merle.

“So...wait, so he’s...Cass was asking about him?” Magnus said.

“Seems so. Ssh.” Davenport nodded his head ever so slightly in Isaak’s direction. “Regarding your question from the other day, Merle, that’s why I know all this stuff.”

Merle felt like an intruder. He resisted the urge to look back again.

“He’s like, in his sixties,” said Magnus, shaking his head. “To just find this out now, can you imagine?”

“It happens more often than you think,” said Davenport. “It’s never too late to figure something out about yourself. Oh, here’s me.”

Davenport stopped beside his Honda Accord, fiddling with his keys. Magnus waved and kept walking.

Merle paused and lingered, for just a second, before following Magnus.

Merle hopped out of his car and hurried to Davenport’s front gate, where Davenport was leaning and struggling with his phone.

“Oh, there you are,” said Davenport, looking up. “I was trying to send you a text message, but the damn words are so small—”

“I think you can fix that,” said Merle.

“Really?” Davenport held his phone out at arm’s length and squinted at the screen. “How?”

Merle shrugged. “Does it look like I know how phones work?”

Davenport chuckled, slipped his phone in his pocket, and took hold of his cane, which leaned on the fence beside him. “What’s made you late for today’s drudgery?”

“Got distracted looking some things up on the internet,” said Merle, as they settled into their normal pace.

“Sounds interesting,” said Davenport.

Merle nodded. “It was that, yeah. I was going to mention it, the other day at poker, but with everyone else there, it didn’t seem like the right time.”

“Mention what?”

“Both my kids came out to me last week.”

Davenport looked up in surprise. “Really?”


“And how are you feeling about that?” asked Davenport carefully.
Merle scowled at him. “Cut it out, shrink.”


Merle huffed. “I’m confused, mostly. I tried to...that’s what I was looking at, on the internet, all these labels you seem to know, but none of that’s helpful. My kids said they were, and I’m quoting here, ‘not straight, I guess.’ and ‘gay, at least, probably.’ The hell am I supposed to do with that? How do I...how do I help them?”

“Oh, I see,” said Davenport, chuckling a little. “Let’s see. You told them you love them, I presume? And that you support them?”

“Of course,” said Merle, a little offended.

“Then you’ve done what you can, for now,” said Davenport. “Unless they ask for your help, it’s best to let them figure it out on their own.”

Merle frowned at the sidewalk, still not satisfied.

“Sexuality can be very fluid, too,” added Davenport. “They may decide on a label and then grow out of that later. Or they may not. You might want to be prepared, either way.”

“Mm, fluid, speaking of fluid, genderfluid?” Merle threw out a hand. “I can’t figure that one out.”

“That one’s tricky,” Davenport agreed. “It can mean a lot of things to different people. Sometimes genderfluid people relate to one end or another of the binary, or both, or neither. Best to ask, if you’re well enough acquainted and they’re willing to tell you.”

Merle made a mental note to do that, if Mavis got serious about this Mischa person. “Fine then...what about bi and pan? What’s the difference there?”

“In practice, not much,” said Davenport. “Again, depends on what the person prefers.”

“And now there’s a difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction, too?” scoffed Merle.

“Yes, for some people.”

“And they don’t match all the time?” Merle demanded.

Davenport looked at him with concern. “Merle, what’s got you so annoyed about this? If you’re all right with your kids?”

Merle glowered at nothing. “It’s all so...complicated. There’s a whole lot going on that I never understood and it’s all changing so fast--”

“That’s not very fair to Mavis and Mookie,” said Davenport, with just a hint of scorn. “Expecting people to know exactly who they are at all times is a pretty big ask.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean, then?” asked Davenport.

Merle hesitated. It wasn’t Mavis and Mookie he was concerned about, it was all these other factors, factors that had led to some introspection, a practice he was neither fond of nor good at. And that introspection had...uncovered some things, things that had never seemed quite right. The sort of
things that’d up-end a man’s life, if he let them. Because he’d never loved Hekuba, not like she’d loved him, even if she was an attractive woman, a beautiful woman. He’d always preferred to share, really share his life with a friend, not with his wife, because that was what he thought friendship was, but he was friends with...with Carey, too, and Magnus, and all the folks he played poker with, wasn’t he? And those feelings weren’t the same, dammit, not like they were for--for--

“You know all the labels,” said Merle, stopping, facing Davenport head-on. “Right?”

Davenport leaned on his cane, searching Merle’s face. “Most of them. What’s this about?”

Merle’s opened his mouth, which was suddenly dry, and closed it again. It was about a label for him, but more than that…

Ah, what the hell.

“What do you call it if you fall in love with your friend?” Merle said.

Davenport froze, terrified for a split second, before he squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. “Jesus.”

Merle’s heart sank. God damn it, why had he said anything!

“Look,” said Davenport, eyes still shut, “I never meant for you to find out, all right? It’s not a problem for me if it’s not for you.”


“Nothing has to change,” Davenport insisted, clutching his cane white-knuckled. “You don’t have to act any differently on account of my feelings for you.”

What the hell… “Dav, are you—”

“Gay? Yeah, Merle.” He met Merle’s gaze again. “I always have been.”

“You never said anything,” said Merle, feeling strangely hurt and not half turned around.

“How could I?” Davenport demanded. “In this town? In this state? With the career I wanted? Good God, Merle, some people still think conversion therapy is an actual treatment instead of an abomination. How could I be gay psychiatrist?” He rested his head in one hand and sighed again. “I’m sorry. About all of it. I...what do you want me to do?”

The tone of defeat in his voice broke Merle’s heart.

“Davenport?” Merle waited until he looked up again. “I was...I was talking about me.”

Davenport’s face went from despair to blank incomprehension.

“I’m the one...” said Merle, haltingly. “Who’s fallen in love....with my friend. With you.”

“Buh—b-but.” Davenport shook his head, sputtering. “But you—you’re... What? ”

Merle shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the sidewalk, a little sheepishly. “Well, with everything that’s happened the last couple weeks...it’s like you said, right? Never too late to learn something about yourself.”

Davenport was still shaking his head. He didn’t believe Merle. “This is...this isn’t happening. You’re joking, or something. This isn’t funny, Merle.”
Merle threw a glance up and down the street. No one else was here at present. Good. He leaned in, put a hand on Davenport’s shoulder, and kissed him, quickly and decisively, and oh God. That was what kissing was supposed to be, wasn’t it? This felt right.

When he broke away, Davenport was short on breath. “Oh,” he managed.

Merle swallowed, suddenly embarrassed. “I see I’m not doing your heart any favors, acting like that.”

A laugh bubbled up from Davenport, a laugh that had him bent double. He staggered.

“Woah, now.” Merle caught him. “You okay there?”

“You,” Davenport wheezed, and tried to straighten up. He had laughed so hard there were tears in his eyes, Merle saw. “You are, you’re going to give me another heart attack.”

Merle laughed too, then, steadying him. “Not on my watch, you old fart.”

“Who’s old, you coot?” Davenport said, still shaking, still hanging onto Merle’s arm, not quite steady yet. He took a moment to catch his breath, wiped his eyes and then gave Merle a look of wonder. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Neither do I,” Merle admitted. “Haven’t done this in a while.”

“I’ll do you one better, I haven’t done this at all,” said Davenport. “Not properly.”

Merle considered. “Well, if you were a lady, I’d ask you out for drinks at Refuge. That could work.”

Davenport chuckled. “Might could. Though I am not a lady.”

“That would be defeating the purpose,” said Merle solemnly, and Davenport laughed again. They walked on, Davenport still holding onto Merle’s arm. Merle didn’t bother to shake him off.

“You know what’s really good about this?” asked Davenport, leaning more now on Merle than his cane.

“What’s that?” asked Merle through a smile.

“It means we get to cut this infernal exercise short.”

Merle laughed. “Oh, no, we’re still walking back.”

Davenport snorted. “I never get a break with you, do I?”

“Nope.”

The two old men made their way down the street, past the Subway that used to be Chi-chi’s, past the Adventure Zone, and to the dark brick building with the rainbow flag.

Chapter End Notes

Since the fic is coming up on its two-year anniversary, we’ve been itching to do some
improvements. Fix typos we missed, smooth out word choice, etc. The plot will stay as is, no worries there. So if you decide that you really like the fic as is, I guess save a copy now [01.30.2019]? Otherwise, a "remastered" version will start replacing the old chapters here in the next few weeks. As always, we love you and appreciate each and every one of you. <3, H+K
The white noise machine whistled soothingly in the corner of the dark bedroom as the door slowly opened. Kravitz snored lightly, sleeping peacefully on his back. Taako was starfished half across the bed and half across Kravitz. A figure crept through the room and Taako was awoken unceremoniously from his sleep as a hand covered his mouth and another pinched his nose. He gasped, but the hand remained across his mouth. Lup was kneeling by his side of the bed and she put a finger up to her mouth.

“What’re you--” Taako started to whisper, but she gestured more forcefully. He sighed and nodded. Lup motioned for him to follow her and she headed for the door. Taako rolled over and started to sit up, but then stopped. Lup motioned again as if to say,

‘Hurry up!’

Taako gestured back.

‘You go ahead, I’ll catch up.’

‘No, come on!’

“I’m not wearing any clothes, you heathen!” Taako whisper-yelled, holding the duvet up to his chest as if to protect his virtue. Lup rolled her eyes but headed out into the hall.

Taako picked up the outfit that had been discarded from the evening before, or at least what he could find of it in the bedroom. Kravitz still slept on as Taako shut the bedroom door quietly behind him.

Lup held out the shirt that had been left in the hall with a smug grin.

“Fun night?” she asked.

Taako buttoned up a few buttons, following Lup back out into his living room. “It was, till a nosy sister woke me--wait, how did you even get in here? There’s no way Krav left the door unlocked.”

Lup dropped onto the loveseat and rested her feet on the coffee table, examining her nails too casually. “You need a better lock. It was way too easy to pick.”

Now it was Taako’s turn to roll his eyes. He walked over to sit next to her, pushing her feet off the table at the same time. “Get your feet off my furniture, Munch. Krav waited for months for this table.”

He flopped down on the couch next to her, rubbing his eyes. They were too old to be getting up in the middle of the night like this. But looking at Lup, he wouldn’t have been able to guess. She was bouncing, like a current was running through her. Though she was definitely trying to hide it.

“So what’s this about?” he asked around a yawn.
“What’s what about?” she asked back. He glanced over at the VCR/DVD player and rolled his head back on the couch.

“Lup, it’s three fuckin’ thirty in the morning. Please just tell me, or let me sleep.”

“Okay. Okayokayokay.” She smacked her knees and sat up. “Okay. So… I… damn, how do I ask this…”


“Right, sorry. So I need a favor. A pretty big one.”

Taako lifted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes. “What kind of a pretty big favor?”

Lup bit her lips for a second, then took the plunge. “I need you to come with me, do what I say, and not ask questions. Oh, and also not tell anyone.”

Taako sat up and leaned close. “...you didn’t kill anyone, right?”

“No! No. Not this time.”

“Oh, good.” Taako looked at his sister for a moment. She definitely had something up her sleeve. But it didn’t seem to be her usual tricksy attitude. He shrugged. “Fine, I guess. When’s this Navy Seal operation going down?”

“Right fucking now. Get your coat.” Lup hopped up and jogged to the front door. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and flipped it open with a flick of her wrist. “Barry, bring the car around.”

Taako shut the coat closet door, having pulled out Kravitz’ favorite sweatshirt. “Barold’s coming?”

Lup scoffed. “I told him to go hide. He was getting nervous about the lock picking.”

“Gee, I wonder why.” Taako slipped on his flip-flops and shut the front door behind him, taking care to make sure it was locked.

Barry’s very sensible tan sedan of a car pulled up next to the curb and Lup literally jumped into the front seat.

“Drive!” she yelled as Taako got in. And Barry actually pulled away from the curb before the door was shut, much less Taako’s seat belt on.

“Hey!” Taako said, pulling the door shut.

“Sorry, Taako.” Barry glanced in the rearview mirror apologetically but kept driving. Faerun downtown turned into a more residential district.

“Where are we going?”

“Uh, I believe I said no questions,” Lup said, turning to look at Taako.

Taako sighed. “Fine.”

“We’re almost there,” Barry offered as he turned down another street. This street was very familiar, even in relative darkness. They passed by the Burnsides’ house, the front yard littered with tricycles and a half-finished home improvement project. And then Barry pulled into the parking lot of
The Adventure Zone. The lone light in the parking lot was surrounded by a small cloud of bugs.

He killed the engine and the trio sat in silence for a minute.

“Okay, I think we’re good. Go go go!” Lup whispered. She and Barry hopped out of the car. They pulled a few bags out of the trunk as Taako slowly got out.

The twack of his flip-flops seemed to echo through the quiet neighborhood with every step.

Lup turned to look back at him. “You couldn’t have picked quieter footwear?”

Taako shrugged. “I didn’t know this was a stealth op, homie.”

They got to the front door of the rink and Lup handed off her bag to Barry. She knelt down by the lock and wiggled a small pin in it. Taako looked in alarm to Barry, who was resolutely scopeing the street.

“So this is what we’re doing? Breaking into The Adventure Zone?” he asked, semi-quietly. Lup shushed him. “You know that Merle was in the army right? Or navy? I’m pretty sure he has a gun. Like 95% sure of gun.”

“It’s fine,” Lup said, still picking the lock. Taako turned to Barry.

“You’re good with this, Barry? You.” Barry half-smiled and shrugged. “The man won’t go swimming after he’s eaten, but sure, he’ll break into a place of business.”

“Got it.” Lup stood up triumphantly and held open the door. Taako glared at her as he walked inside the dark rink.

“Somehow the old nacho smell is even stronger at night,” he said, dryly. Lup took one of the bags from Barry and smiled at him.

“Okay, I’ll go get ready and you guys set up,” she said, sounding genuinely excited. Though his face was in shadow, Taako could see a similar expression on Barry’s face.

“Sounds good.”

Lup jogged off towards the locker rooms, leaving Barry and Taako. Barry started walking over towards the banked track. He dropped the duffle on the ground and unzipped it, pulling out a large extension cord.

“You think you can find an outlet?” he asked, holding out the neatly wrapped bundle. Taako looked between Barry and the cord a few times.

“Okay, Barold. Level with me. What is happening??”

Barry smiled sheepishly. “Don’t worry, you’ll see soon.”

Taako scoffed and took the cord from him. “Lup’s a bad influence on you.”

“Actually… this was my idea.”

Taako stared at him for a solid minute, sputtering. “Wha--but--you think ketchup is spicy! It was your idea to break in here???”

Barry shrugged. Taako eyed him warily but then went off to do as Barry asked. It took him
probably a solid ten minutes to find an outlet anywhere near the track. By the time he brought the end of the plugged-in cord to Barry, there was a whole lot of something arranged around the inner edge of the track.

“Let’s hope this works,” Barry muttered, taking the cord from Taako. “Oh, can you get the CD from Lup?”

Taako headed over to the locker room and poked a head in. “Lup? Barry said you had a CD?”

She was in the middle of some sort of hair-do. She gestured with her chin to the CD on the counter next to her. Taako grabbed it.

“Norah Jones? Really?”

“Track five, you butthead,” she said around a mouth full of bobby pins. Taako scoffed but headed back to the rink. His mouth dropped open as he walked closer. Whatever Barry had planned had obviously worked.

Every Candlenights light string they owned and then some were all strung together and arranged around the inner circle of the track, casting soft light in the large space. The benches had been moved away and Barry was in the process of lighting candles of all different sizes that formed a sort of makeshift aisle.

It clicked.

“Are you--” Taako sputtered a few times. Barry looked up, trying to feign innocence. Taako gasped and pointed an accusatory finger at him. “You’re wearing your best jeans! This is--holy--you’re getting MaRRied?? ”

Barry’s eyes went wide and he ran towards Taako, gesturing for him to be quiet. He looked over Taako’s shoulder at the locker room beyond and when no one came out Barry relaxed.

“Okay, you got us. Yes.” Barry put his hands in his pockets. “And I know we don’t have a lot of time before you were supposed to figure it out, but could you act surprised anyway? For Lup?”

“Act surprised? Barold, I AM surprised. And-and shocked! And appalled that you would have your wedding in this dirty old roller rink. If you had told me, I could have at least found you a nice park or something-- AND I’m wearing FLIP FLOPS to my sister’s wedding. Oh, this is a disaster.” Taako put his head in hands as Barry chuckled.

“She said you’d say something like that if you figured it out. If it makes you feel better, it’s not a legal wedding.” Barry put a hand on Taako’s shoulder. “We’d been talking about this for years now, whether we should wait till we could do the whole kit and caboodle. Was that even what we really wanted? And we finally realized that all we really wanted was each other.” Barry smiled softly.

Taako looked around at the decently romantic set up they’d managed to make. “But… you’re not going to invite the team? Are you going to even tell them?”

“We’ll tell them soon. Hell, we may even have a party eventually. But it was important to us, and to Lup, that this just be about us. And that you were here for it.”

Taako looked at Barry, his soon to be brother, and he understood. He nodded. “...thanks for inviting me.”

“Thanks for being here.” Barry squeezed Taako’s shoulder. “Lup, honey? He figured it out.”
“Damn, we were so close,” Lup’s voice came from the locker room. “Y’all almost ready?”

Taako looked to Barry who took a deep breath. But then he smiled and nodded.

“Ready when you are,” Taako yelled back. He put the CD in the boombox and queued up the track. Barry took his place at the top of the aisle, he kept fidgeting his hands like he didn’t know what to do with them. Taako started the languid song and the door to the locker room opened.

Taako took a moment to appreciate the look on Barry’s face. It was like he was seeing the sun for the first time. Then he looked over his shoulder to see Lup. She was even wearing the wedding dress the team had gotten for Julia, although how she’d gotten her hands on that Taako had no clue. She beamed at Barry as she walked into the flickering light of the track.

As she passed by Taako, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. She went and stood across from Barry; he immediately pulled her into a long hug as the song continued. Taako found himself holding back tears, and he was doing a poor job of it.

The pair of them smiled at each other for a while. Then Barry dropped her hands and pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket on his shirt. He cleared his throat.

“Lup. I’ll be the first to say that I’m not very good with words or speeches. And it took me a really long time to figure out how to tell you how much you mean to me. Because you mean the whole world, the moon, the stars, this whole plane of existence, to me. You have made my life amazing. And I never want to be apart from you. I promise to spend every day of the rest of my life making you as happy as you have made me, making you feel as loved as you have made me. I love you, Lup. Now and forever.”

He looked up from his piece of paper and Lup nodded quickly. He squeezed her hands in his and smiled at her.

There was a pause as Lup tried to figure out how to hold her bouquet and her own paper with her vows. Barry took the bouquet from her and she smiled. She took a shaky breath.

“Barry,” she started, her voice thick. A fat tear rolled down her cheek. “Dammit.” He chuckled a little and pulled out a hanky to dab away the tear. She watched him for a moment, then dropped her vows and put a hand over his on her cheek. “You’re the love of my life. I never thought that I’d be so lucky as to ever meet someone who’s half the man you are. You’re my fairytale come true. I love your mind, your voice first thing in the morning.” She smiled broadly. “I love your jeans and the way you blush when I kiss you. I love how you push me to be a better person.” She took another shaky breath. “You’re my home, Barry. And I’m so happy that I get to be yours.”

She wrapped her arms about his neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

The sleeve of Kravitz’ jacket ended up quite damp as Taako just kept thinking about how far they’d come. How there had been a time when he would have laughed if you’d told him he’d be at his sister’s wedding. How there was a time when he would have laughed if you’d told him that he’d know his sister ever again. Yet here they were.

Lup rested her forehead on Barry’s, a smile spreading across both of their faces. Taako tried to stifle a sniffle and failed. She looked over at her brother.

“Are you crying?” she asked, laughing a little with tears on her own cheeks.

“Shut up, you’re crying. It’s beautiful,” he said, wiping some snot on his sleeve. Barry chuckled.
“Come here, you sap,” Lup said, grabbing her brother and her husband into a group hug.

And they were happy.

End Notes

Hey everyone,

Thanks so much for reading. Be sure to leave us a comment or some kudos, we love hearing from you guys. If you have questions, concerns, or just want to chat, feel free to message us here or on tumblr. See you next chapter! <3, H+K

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