**Summary**

Cancer patient Rebecca Costa-Brown gets a new lease on life—not through superpowers in a bottle, but dumb luck and the miracle of modern medicine. Naturally, she uses this opportunity to go to university, torment her roommate, get high, make friends, write papers, drink in moderation, and generally wreck everything in her path.

A no powers college AU set in modern day.

Updates when it updates.

**Notes**

The title of the fic is from the poem "It Was Like This: You Were Happy" by Jane Hirshfield.

Mucho love and thanks to the brilliant maroon_sweater for the invaluable betaing, idea-bouncing and overwhelming support.
They Fight Crime

She had more touches stolen from her than she'd ever freely given away.

She couldn't stand it—how her father would be gazing out the window at the traffic below, then wander over and stroke her scalp with his heavy callused hands. How her mother would be sitting there silent and rigid against the back of a chair and out of nowhere lurch forward to clutch her arm, like simple contact could contain the words no one would utter.

It wasn't just that it hurt. It was that they expected her to appreciate the gesture as something shared, imbued with meaning somehow, when really all it did was force her to stare down her own impotence writ large in hollows of bone and folds of skin that no longer held the shape of a human being. Her parents clung to her as though they thought the tubes weren't enough to tether her to this wasted life—as if she didn’t feel the gravity inside and on her at all times, dragging her bodily into cold starch and dull fear and away from even a stopgap promise of a future. Always.

All the same, she couldn't bring herself to deny them that comfort.

Imagining was impossible. She spent hours staring at caches of shadow, unable to coax them into movement or transformation, or her chest into sensation. There was no dread spectre residing in the curtain. The television was not a portal to distant realms. The doctors and nurses administered not adventure but anaesthesia.

Dreaming came as a surprise, then, white noise seeping into a space previously designated vacant, but never quite delivering her anywhere she'd want to be.

She dreamt that the ward would be her mausoleum.

Her hand fumbled under the pillow for the ballpoint she kept there, and she scrawled phrases on her palm. When the ink wouldn't take to her skin, she took to the bed sheets.

In the morning she could not decipher what she had written, but her parents noticed the scratchings on the linen. They started bringing her blank notebooks: soil-dark, multiplication tables on the covers. Every other page a grid. The brand she used to buy in bulk at back-to-school sales, though she had not gone back to school in months and might never. But that was just another thing she didn’t get to choose, and she accepted it like all the rest. At least they provided better pens.

The aches in her wrists stopped being merely a side-effect of cellular treason and started becoming the product of labour. She filled the lined pages with passages from her favourite books and half-remembered scripture. She wrote shaky letters to her family, her friends, her past self.

Mostly what she wrote was please.
“Please, the resolution isn’t even high enough for you to see them,” Rebecca said. She sat cross-legged on her bed, laptop propped up on two pillows. Several gel pens were wedged between the toes of her right foot. “Maybe if I’d just showered, but I haven’t and I’m wearing the baggiest shirt this side of Pasadena. They could air this live on network television.”

The door swung open. A girl strode in, making a beeline for her desk.

"Hey." Rebecca yanked out one earbud and flashed her a winning smile. “Can you tell if I’m wearing a bra?”

The girl ignored her in favour of sifting through the contents of a drawer.

“Is that Contessa? Let me talk to her.”

Rebecca made a face at the screen. “Mom, that’s really weird. You can’t just talk to people’s roommates.”

Objects knocked into each other, as Contessa searched with renewed urgency.

“Why not? We met when she moved in.”

Contessa’s hand landed on what she’d been looking for, the same instant Rebecca unplugged her audio jack.

“Hello, Contessa,” Rebecca’s mother said, as Rebecca rotated the laptop.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Costa-Brown.”

“Is Rebecca sleeping at regular hours? Is she drinking water? What about her laundry—is she doing
“I don’t spend much time in the dorm, myself,” said Contessa, “but she’s flapping her arms and mouthing ‘omertà’ at me, so if I were you I would assume the worst.”

Rebecca watched in dismay as Contessa cocked her hip against the desk and ran down a bulleted list of all her sordid habits, casually decimating any trust her mother had left in her ability to be a responsible and independent adult.

When the call ended, she straightened, seamlessly resuming her aloof demeanour.

Rebecca glared. “Thanks a lot. Friggin’ narc.”

“I’m not going to keep tabs on you for your mother.”

“I don’t want you to!” protested Rebecca. “If you just tell her what she wants to hear, we can be done much faster.”

"If I tell her what she doesn't want to hear, she won't ask me again,” Contessa countered.

She took a moment to tidy up some papers on her desk, black hair falling in waves over her shoulders. There was something different about her attire, though Rebecca couldn't pinpoint it. White button-down blouse. Bespoke black slacks with matching tie. Probably a blazer waiting in the wings somewhere.

But what was the—

Contessa toyed with her sleeve, and Rebecca caught a glint. *Cufflinks!*

"Ooh, why are you all dressed up?" she asked. "Model United Nations? Lawyer convention?"

"What would one even do at a lawyer convention?"

"I don't know, compare cards and drinking problems." Rebecca had pulled up the event calendar on the school website. She laughed at the first result. "Only you would watch a judo spar in business casual. When they go to nationals, will it call for a three-piece?"

"If you must know," Contessa said, "I'm attending the National Symposium on Environmental Issues in the auditorium."

Rebecca scrolled down. "This month’s topic: the Application of GMOs in Agriculture and Forestry," she read. "Sounds super interesting. Can I come?"

"Your funeral. And mine, I suppose."

Rebecca jumped out of bed, the gel pens clicking against the floor. She bent to slide them out. "Give me a sec. I'll just grab a few things..."

"Rebecca."

She stopped.

Contessa was motioning towards her chest. "Please."

Rebecca grumbled and reached for the bra draped over her chair.
The symposium was a bust.

Rebecca sagged into her seat. She didn’t know why she had been expecting to hear a real discussion about the benefits GMOs had to offer—maybe because when she started reading about the environment, she’d cut her teeth on op-eds about eutrophication, had seen photos of the sludge lying in lurid sheets over once-crystal lakes. She had gone on to research mitigation measures, which had given her a sound appreciation for the good that human-engineered bacteria could do.

Meanwhile the representatives onstage, with maybe two exceptions, were all opposed to the idea. Most of them waffled or fixated on the negatives, highlighting toxins and undesired herbicide resistance, and even the ones that agreed there was maybe something at stake refused to commit to one course or the other for their respective organisations. Some spoke only in company boilerplate, while others still exuded an unassailable skepticism.

This, she realised, had to do with the cameras.

The press crew and their tripods were parked in front of and beside the arcing tiers of retractable chairs. According to the program booklet, the speakers were high-profile in their fields and this was a Relatively Big Deal. With how packed the auditorium was, she didn't even know how Contessa had managed to get them optimal vantage points.

Speaking of Contessa—Rebecca suspected the students around her had credit-related incentives. Which begged the question: why was Contessa, an undeclared freshman, here taking notes on a Tuesday? Did she have some hitherto unrevealed zest for Golden Rice? Was she a believer in beta-carotene?

But throughout the talks, her face remained a stern mask of professionalism. Not one grain of rice-passion. Rebecca saw she was bored from various small tells (periodic foot-tapping, fiddling with her eraser, idly sketching the blueprints to some nerve gas-expelling device that possessed an effective radius coinciding with the dimensions of the auditorium), and she took it upon herself to alleviate this through lighthearted conversation.

“So,” said Rebecca, “you think in the future, we’ll start transplanting human brains into cats?”

Contessa gave her a sidelong glance.

“See, they look like cats, and are furry like cats, and snuggle like cats,” she said, “but they don’t shit in your shoes.”

“What makes you think they won’t shit in your shoes just because they have human brains?”

Rebecca paused, mulling it over. “Cyborg cats,” she decided.

“Why are you even bringing this up?”

She shrugged and gestured at the stage, where one of the representatives was spouting stats on the effects of genetic pollution on crop yield in sub-Saharan Africa. “They’re talking about ethics. It’s related.”

“No,” said Contessa, shortly.

"Really? I think—"
"You think they're talking about ethics?" Contessa asked, arching an eyebrow at her. "What they are talking about is hamstringing scientists. Did you know that certain fledgling research teams started cultivating varieties of bioflora capable of terraforming other planets, but they had to drop those projects because their sponsors deemed them—and I quote—'esoteric hobby-horses'? Yes, a potential long-term solution to overpopulation and scarcity is esoteric. Human lives are esoteric. Years of hard-fought data and development down the drain because the people with the power to change the world as we know it are incapable of seeing the forest for the trees."

"Um..." Rebecca's eyes darted to the panel.

"The public thinks they’re talking about ethics," she continued, "because that's the facade they're presenting to the media. What they are doing is making excuses to keep things the way they are, to keep famine and pestilence alive, to keep us locked on this planet until we kill it and ourselves. We are going extinct, but the government would rather divert funding to their short-sighted political masters, and corporations with annual revenue the size of some countries' GDPs would rather pay cowards with science degrees to churn out 'evidence' that tobacco doesn't cause cancer and that diesel is chicken soup for the ozone layer’s soul."

Her dark eyes tracked the progress of the camera crew as they weaved their way towards the stage. She spoke quietly, voice rising only for emphasis.

"Look at them. This is just a game. If they spew enough pompous bilge, they get to be smug and get paid. Then they go home to eat three times the number of calories some children see in a week, and they don't even have to think about the disproportionate harm they're doing to developing nations. The opportunity costs alone—"

She broke off. For a moment her gaze slid out of focus, blinded by some glacier-vast terror visible only within the confines of her head. Her hand gripped her pen till the knuckles drained white.

When she spoke again, it was venom that centred her: "They think they're talking about ethics? They're talking about stifling the greatest advances in agriculture since the Green Revolution, and they’re patting themselves on the back."

Rebecca felt like she’d just witnessed someone sleepwalk the length of a tightrope. The auditorium suddenly seemed to expand in her vision, lights and ambient chatter rushing up to fill it. Out of her depth, she swallowed. "You," she said, "feel pretty strongly about this."

"I'm merely familiar with the issues."

Privately, Rebecca resolved to pay more attention.

The Q&A session rolled around. Microphone stands were set up along the aisles of the auditorium. There were no takers until there was one, which precipitated a steady trickle of undergrads hoping to impress at least one other person in the room. They would give their own blustering mini-speeches affirming what had just been said, receive inevitable praise from the responding panellist, then strut back to their seats, confident they had contributed.

Rebecca glanced over to see if Contessa would bite. She wasn’t even listening.

She was texting, of all things. She’d look up, scan the room and stage, then fire off a string of short messages in rapid succession to unknown numbers. Individuals would stand up without delay, hand on pocket or clutching a folder, and walk up to the mic to ask a question.

When Rebecca noticed the pattern, she reclined as far as she could into the plush back of her seat,
and pretended not to be reading over Contessa’s shoulder with all the subtle intensity of a military drone. She tried to piece together the fragments but they made no sense. What was '05. Juice. Information desk person emoji.' supposed to mean?

It wasn't until a graduate student asked a question about the "nearly farcical collapse of the supply chain intended to provide relief for the 2011 famine in Chad" following an '11. Logs. Clown face emoji.' from Contessa that things clicked for her.

"Sorry, I know you came here to say that GMOs are evil and spooky," began a blonde girl who had received '95. Pumpkin emoji. Broken heart emoji.'

Affronted, the bespectacled man raised his eyebrows. "Miss, that's not quite an accurate representation of my position."

"I study conspiracy theories for my honors' thesis in sociology, and I wanted to interview you—"

"I'm willing to entertain relevant questions on the topic, perhaps after—"

"Sorry, could you please not interrupt? Thanks, I just need confirmation real quick. This article I found was posted on a GeoCities website in 1995, around... Halloween? I'm using it as one of my primary sources for my thesis on how easily pseudoscience can be used to persuade people of objectively false things."

The man stiffened, his cheeks glowing red under the stage lights.

She made a show of spreading out a stack of print-outs, angling it so the press could see the grainy security footage of a cordoned-off vegetable patch. "Yeah, so, you're the person who wrote that fifty thousand-word blogpost about how being stalked by genetically modified squashes destroyed your marriage."

He cried on camera.

It was like watching a spin doctor operate in real time, with a real scalpel. The initial questions had been softballs involving information that couldn't be quickly proven or disproven, meant to lull the panellists into false comfort. Then the bolder voices came roaring into play, dredging up everything from corporate scandals to personal indiscretions. One representative excused himself mid-session and never came back. The audience's murmuring had long boiled over into outrage.

Rebecca's heart raced her mind. She wasn't sure whether she was thrilled or horrified by the chaos being conducted by the calm staccato of fingers one seat over. She nudged Contessa's arm.

"You're a plant," she whispered at a volume that defeated the point of whispering.

"I'm concerned about plants." Contessa finally locked her phone, squaring it away. "There's a difference."

"Did you dig up dirt on everybody here?"

"What kind of plant would I be if I dug dirt up? You're mixing your metaphors."

In front of them, a young man stepped out into the aisle and walked across the empty stretch of carpet. He addressed the only female scientist on the panel, a black woman in a crisp white coat who Rebecca remembered making some incisive arguments about the merits of biotechnology earlier, smoothly occupying the gap left by her fellow panellist fleeing in humiliation.
"Doctor Sarr," the student said, "I guess—I guess you've convinced me. I don't think anyone has ever contemplated the sheer depth of potential that GMOs represent to the degree that you have. That's not even getting into all the thankless legwork your foundation has been doing for years. You're... honestly, you're a hero."

"That's kind of you to say so," Doctor Sarr said, smiling warmly. Her voice was velvet. "I hope I've earned enough goodwill for you to forgive my confusion. Was there a question in there?"

The audience laughed, releasing some of the tension the panel had built.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Yeah. Sorry. I mean, what do you think we can do today, to make sure research like this goes forward? Is there anything?"

"Absolutely. I would say there are two primary obstacles in my line of work. The first is, of course, funding—those of you who are science majors already understand that."

More laughter.

"The second is public indifference. The powers that be can keep the status quo intact because most people don't understand what we can do, which in turn means there's no interest in seeing it. We need to prove ourselves, and I think you can help us there. This city is considering whether to award a recycling contract to a run-of-the-mill garbage removal company, or to a small waste disposal business that would feed anything collected to a series of bacteria strains created to eat plastic."

She paused to take a sip of water from her glass. "If the program proved to be successful, it could be used as proof of concept. More and more cities could be persuaded to adopt the measure, with the result that less and less non-biodegradable plastic would be dumped into landfills and the oceans. I recommend you contact the city council and let them know your feelings on the subject. In the interest of full disclosure, I must say I've had a hand in the development of those species, and my research foundation would benefit financially if the deal went through."

"Good!" shouted someone, and a few other people clapped.

Another one of Contessa's textees, or a spontaneous expression of feeling? Rebecca couldn't tell anymore. Contessa looked just as cold as before, if not colder, and more tightly wound. Rebecca wanted to hold her hand, maybe offer some reassurance. But she wasn't sure she'd appreciate it.

She directed her attention back to the panel just as it concluded. Most students were leaving, though there were a few pressing forward, presumably to see if they could introduce themselves. Rebecca stood up and threw her hoodie back on, and was surprised to see Contessa hadn't already risen as well.

Instead she lingered, staring across the departing crowd at Doctor Sarr.

Their eyes met for a brief moment. The woman gave her a curt, barely perceptible nod.

Contessa turned away to begin packing up, but Rebecca saw the ghost of a smile flicker over her face.

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They loitered in a brightly lit junction between seminar rooms, snacking on the refreshments Contessa had liberated from the buffet table outside the auditorium. The catered tea had been VIP-only until Rebecca ran interference.
“I’m glad I was paying attention,” said Rebecca. Her voice was muffled by egg salad sandwich. “If only so I could flatter that guy using his anecdote about teaching underprivileged children how to weave baskets out of banana leaves.”

“The way he told it, you would never have guessed that his company mandates the orphanage tour for new employees. It’s more hazing than charity,” said Contessa. “That was good work, though. He was very taken with you.”

“The trick is to compliment the beard first,” Rebecca said, stroking her chin sagely. "Like my mom always says, facial hair is fifty percent of a man's self-esteem.”

Contessa nibbled at the chocolate icing on an éclair. "I find it more likely she always says you need to separate the light clothes from the darks, but that proverb just isn't as memorable."

“That reminds me, moisturise those kidneys,” Rebecca dangled the complimentary water bottle she’d picked up outside along with their goodie bags. “Since you care so much about hydration in front of my mom.”

“Are you still bitter about that?”

“Extremely.”

Contessa took the bottle from her but didn’t drink. She looked more relaxed than she had been, like her shoulders weren’t carrying so much.

“Rebecca,” she said, ”what’s your GPA?”

That came out of left field.

“3.7,” she replied. She examined Contessa’s expression for signs of disdain and, finding none, elaborated, “It’s gone down a bit since I picked up a couple of extracurriculars.”

“How many?”

“Five.”

“All right,” Contessa said. “I wish to enlist your aid.”

Rebecca's brow furrowed. “...tutoring?”

“No. Neither of us has time or energy for that, and if I did I would spend it studying.”

“What do you need, then?”

“I need you to look over my assignments and help me push them to an A. I'm not breaking B+ in a few of my courses.”

Rebecca was surprised Contessa struggled in academics, when she'd been so on the ball the past month. Wasn't she a scholarship student? Or was she only receiving financial aid? But there was no wounded pride there, just a frank admission that Rebecca wouldn't say was born of security or humility.

She wouldn't call that a bad thing either.

She chewed on the remains of her sandwich.
"They’re all Gen Ed, so you should be fairly familiar with the material, and at least a few of the professors’ grading styles. I’ll repay you in favours commensurate with the task.”

“Nah,” said Rebecca.

Contessa nodded like it was a foregone conclusion. “I understand. I’ll—”

“No, of course I’ll help you out. But you shouldn’t feel obligated to pay me back,” she said. "Why the formality? We’re friends.”

She didn’t expect the total bewilderment written on Contessa’s face in block letters.

When she eventually responded, her voice was reserved, uncomfortable. "I’d... really rather not owe you, Rebecca.”

"That’s not what I—" Rebecca started. Then she remembered and started bouncing on her heels instead. "If you insist."

Rebecca led her down the winding corridors, arriving at a bulletin board plastered over with posters and announcements. She extricated a flyer from the plastic outbox beside the board and handed it to Contessa, who frowned.

“At the park? The acoustics are going to be terrible.”

“It’s an amateur production. All of it is going to be terrible,” said Rebecca. “Which is why we absolutely need to watch it. I was going to go with a classmate, but she bailed. I still have a friend willing to drive...”

Contessa’s frown deepened as she turned the flyer over in her hands. Then she rolled it up and tucked it into the lining of her blazer. “Well, there are worse fates than being sloppy seconds,” she said.

Rebecca grinned, hearing nothing but yes.
Better Write This Down (I'm Gonna Test You Later)

Chapter Notes

Once again, mucho thanks to the wonderful maroon_sweater for A+ betaing and generally being the best.

Rebecca stood on the mossy stone steps leading down to a crescent cut of glade between the tennis courts and the school of mathematics. Though it was nowhere resembling large or luxuriant, she liked to think of it as a glade if only because she secretly fantasised about finding a sow’s head on a spit there one day and becoming enlightened about human nature.

The sound of balls being struck by rackets rang out frequently behind a high green fence, intermingled with grunts of exertion. To her back loomed the block of concrete that was the school of mathematics, and she could have gone in, but she preferred working outside in the sun to indoors. Besides, she didn’t like the library, with its sterile grey walls and metal shelves. Even if its selection was adequate, it smelt of ammonia instead of books.

In her hand was a stapled copy of Contessa’s first draft.

She’d just read it twice.

The economy of the arguments, all in Contessa’s clean, precise penmanship, raised goosebumps on her skin. Rebecca had never seen someone so capable of condensing complex concepts without losing anything crucial in the process. Maybe she didn’t have the best turn of phrase, or the most original ideas, but this was the kind of concision that Rebecca coveted. She was almost relieved when she came to the last two paragraphs and found grammatical errors in each. Overall, it deserved a B+.

Contessa had asked for an A.

Despite popular myth, Rebecca knew that no amount of point-shaving could convert a B to an A or vice versa. Letter grades represented classes of performance, not numerical milestones. So she read the essay once more, this time with an eye for shoring up weaknesses.

Rebecca jotted down how she would synthesise some of the ideas and expand on the relationships between others, interposing context where needed. Contessa clearly had no trouble scaffolding her lines of reasoning—she had a prodigious sense of structure—but there were parts that would benefit from more in-depth exploration.

She’d left her stash of rainbow gel pens and highlighters in the dorm, so she made do with a regular purple ballpoint. Hopefully Contessa didn’t mind manicules.

On the persuasion side of things, Rebecca kept in mind professorial quirks. She had never taken this course, but remembered the prof’s name from bylines in reputable journals. Sure enough, when she scoured her harddrive, she found her old notes on the man’s most recently published dissertations.

Her own comments weren’t useful in themselves—they had been written before she’d learnt to filter the noise. But from the quoted sections she could derive patterns, and from there disposition: the
professor waxed lyrical about societies on the brink of cultural transformation by new forces; he tended to attribute those forces to radical shifts in socioeconomic climate; he dedicated minimal wordage to citing other scholarly sources. Rebecca listed these characteristics on a psych assignment so she could ask Contessa later if they corresponded to his style of teaching and marking rubrics.

Now able to envision the shape an A-standard paper would take, Rebecca double-checked the dates and details of developments she deemed pertinent—wars, laws, inventions—and roughed out a watershed timeline on the back of her history homework. Then she compared that to the timeline of the novel and the biographical timeline of the author, narrowing down what to include while working out how to incorporate it organically.

As she absorbed herself in the zeitgeist of the era, she paced the overgrown lawn before her. White butterflies looped lazily around her ankles. Stray tennis balls lay abandoned among the weeds, fuzzy yellow islands submerged in a flaring sea of perennial green. To give her hands something to do, she picked up the balls whenever she encountered them and hurled them over the fence, back into the court.

"Hi there."

She turned and saw a guy with tousled brown hair approaching her. He was six feet of lean muscle in a monogrammed blue polo shirt and white shorts. One of the tennis players. Probably a senior, from the height and easy confidence of his gait.

“Hey! How’s it going?” she greeted, unsure if she knew him and compensating with exuberance.

He loped over, tote bag swinging low. “You’re the one who’s been throwing the balls down?”

“Yeah, I do it whenever I’m here. Figured it’d save you guys the chore.”

“Well, it does. Thank you,” he said, sincerely. He sat down on the steps and started retying his shoelaces. “It’s a bother coming up here from the court to retrieve them. Always have to walk the long way around.”

Rebecca joined him, moving her laptop and backpack to one side. “I was wondering about that. Is the gate jammed or something?”

“The locking mechanism is finicky. Was,” he amended. “You had to play roulette with a rusty tumbler, hope something clicked. Or you could body-slam the door shut. Guess what most people did.”

"Ouch."

"Now it doesn't even open anymore."

"That sucks. I'm Rebecca, by the way."

“Clarence,” he said. “Haven’t I seen you around? I think we share a class.”

“It’s likely.” She’d spent the add/drop period hurtling from one lecture to the next, attending every course she could cram between her cores.

“The intro philosophy seminar on Plato’s dialogues?” he offered, sparing her the awkwardness of admitting she didn’t recognise him. “Monday mornings with Professor Cammac?”

“Right, that’s the one!” Rebecca snapped her fingers. She remembered the class, at least—sitting
around a big maple Harkness table while the prof asked leading questions. Clarence must not have spoken up much, or maybe he had been on her right and her arm had obscured his face because she'd never put it down.

“I haven’t seen you in any other philosophy classes. Are you a freshman? Getting your prereqs out of the way?”

“Sophomore. Elective,” Rebecca said. “I couldn’t squeeze it in last sem, or I would have. I’ve been enamored with Plato since I read *The Charioteer* in—in high school.”

Clarence’s face broke out into a broad grin. “*The Charioteer* by Renault?”

“You’ve read it?” she asked, her own face following suit.

“Yes, I, er, read all of her novels except *The North Face*. It’s one of the main reasons I ended up double-majoring in classics and philosophy.”

Rebecca sat up straighter and flattened her palms on her lap. Her mouth hit the ground running of its own accord, praising Renault's iconic portrayal of Demosthenes while Clarence nodded and proffered his own opinions.

Inside she was thinking, *The North Face*. Of all her books, *The North Face* was the one he wasn't interested in. Gears spun.

“Oh and hey, listen, about that gate—I have a friend who might be able to fix it,” she said, and waggled her fingers. “Good with his hands and all.”

His blue eyes lit up. “If you could ask him, it would be much appreciated. I don't think the school’s going to get round to it while there's still one working gate.”

“Sure, I’ll just shoot him a text.” She took out her phone.

>**Rebecca**: yooo got a guy here
>**Rebecca**: wants you to fix his gate
>**Elliot**: In class atm. Cute y/n

“He needs a picture of the gate in order to assess the damage,” Rebecca told Clarence.

They walked the long way round, making small talk. The gate was draped over in the same green gauzy netting that shrouded the rest of the fence, and the exposed parts only showed off a flaking paint job. It wouldn't move when she and Clarence shoved it simultaneously either, although whether that was because it was a *pull* door was anybody's guess. In any case, Rebecca took many pictures.

“Yeah, just stand like that and indicate where the problem is. That would be the lock. No, don’t crouch or your shadow will get in the way.”

Drawing inspiration from classical Greek statuary, she posed him carefully. A jutting hip here, a flexed elbow there. She contemplated requesting a fun shot, where the fun would be in ‘not wearing a shirt’, then decided against pushing it.

She showed him the best photo. “This came out pretty well.”

“It looks nice,” agreed Clarence, “but maybe you should have zoomed in so your friend can see the issue.”
“I can crop it,” Rebecca assured him, opening up an editing app. She cropped out the gate, enhanced the contrast, and sent the picture to Elliot.

“Did you just add a pastel filter?”

“I hope you don’t mind.” She waved a hand while the other hastily swiped to the next screen before he could get a better glimpse. “I collect snapshots of the mundane. For there is much beauty in rust, in the soundless decay of the undisturbed, where the burden of time is etched in oxide. Hashtag nature. Hashtag mood. Do you do photography?”

He smiled at her in polite befuddlement, thankfully distracted. “I’ve dipped my toe into it.”

“Got an Instagram?”

He did, and she scrolled through his gallery. She started combing for couple selfies taken within the past six months—of which there were none—but he was actually a decent amateur photographer. Even if his subject matter was a little monotonous.

Dressage horses being groomed. Bermuda beach vacation highlights. Country club croquet with the lads.

“Is this your yacht?”

"My father's. It’s the first boat I ever sailed, so I have a soft spot for it. Of course, I did almost drive it into the jetty the first time—"

The phone dinged and a notification popped up on the screen.

> Elliot: Omfg

Clarence’s eyebrows knitted.

“He’s very enthusiastic about gates,” Rebecca explained.

∗∗∗

‘Can’t. Arrangements with J.’

‘Wednesday 6.30pm.’

‘Busy. J.’

Deep in the bowels of the Strickland Archives, at a chrome formica table between the stacks, Philip and Contessa passed notes.

Rather, they passed one note, a habit carried forward from their high school days: Philip would write on the corner of a torn-out legal pad page. Contessa would answer under it, Philip would reply, and so on until class was over. Sometimes when they were especially bored, they wrote in predesigned ciphers, challenging each other to deduce the key before the end of the period. Usually the messages turned out to be a barrage of devastating insults. They never held it against each other; it was a consequence of living under a dictatorship.

Although they no longer suffered the totalitarian regime of their study hall teacher, old habits died hard.

‘Thursday 9pm,’ Contessa wrote.
She rolled her eyes when he underlined his previous statement.

‘We were planning this job weeks ago.’

‘Some jobs take precedence.’

‘You know he’s not good for you.’

Philip made it a point to respond in pen: ‘His dick is.’

‘Unsurprising,’ Contessa’s pencil shot back, ‘considering he is composed entirely of it.’

“I wasn’t aware Professor Hoàng covered Shakespeare,” Philip said aloud, which was what he did when he didn’t want to continue the conversation on paper. “I would have switched to his tutorial group.”

Contessa arranged the stationery on the table and replaced the note with a fresh sheet. “He doesn’t. It’s postcolonialism all the way down.”

Philip looked at the pile of handwritten act summaries and companion texts splayed across the table. Contessa paged through a glossary of Early Modern English terms, her other hand feverishly annotating a thin paperbound that was decidedly not *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *The Crucible*.

“Reading for pleasure, then,” he said.

“Yes.”

He picked up one of the less intensely marked-up papers, a character-by-character thematic analysis entitled ‘Social Transgressions’, adjusted his glasses, and skimmed:

**Olivia** —Subverts societal norms of courtship by undertaking the role of wooer (typically male), making overt advances towards Cesario; line 79 – “Give me your hand”, line 122 – “Stay! I prithee tell me what thou think’st of me”, impassioned declaration of love from lines 132 - 141, and persists even after rejection, line 148 – “Yet come again…”

“Hm.” He set it down and leaned back into his chair.

“I’m attending a production this Sunday night, Pip,” Contessa said, flipping open a reference guide to Elizabethan dramatic conventions. “I like to go into these things somewhat informed.”

“An evening at the theatre,” said Philip. “How cultured. And here I thought you didn’t appreciate the performing arts.”

“I am returning a favour,” she explained with studied nonchalance. “Sh—they requested my company.”

He didn’t bother to hide the smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

She gave him an annoyed look from across the table, filing papers away into a two-ring. “It’s a group activity. There is at least one other person involved.”

“You’re brushing up so that you can charm them with your scintillating insight,” he said, placating. “‘Them’ being plural, of course.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Of course.”
“Well. I hope you glow in the dark.” Philip turned back to his calculus problem set, but he was already cycling through the possibilities in his mind. There were only a handful of people Contessa wouldn’t admit owing favours to, at least to him.

The table vibrated slightly. Contessa was moving her water bottle.

Either Foster Mother had arranged an evening out while she was in town, or Contessa thought the person she owed a favour to was embarrassing. Philip cross-referenced a list of people he knew Contessa looked down on with a list of women he knew Contessa knew, leaving—

“Out of curiosity, what did your roommate do to earn a favour?”

There was a mild choking sound. He glanced up to see Contessa pressing her lips to her sleeve, and reached into his bag for a tissue pack.

“She noticed something I didn’t think she would,” Contessa answered with great dignity, when she’d dried herself and her notes off. “In light of this revelation, I offered her a responsibility.”

“Still, isn’t this the girl you’ve complained about incessantly over the past month?” he asked, levelling his pen at her. “‘Walking pachinko parlour’ Rebecca Costa-Brown? ‘Has feelings about cats’ Rebecca Costa-Brown? ‘Never progressed past the glitter stage of elementary school’ Rebecca Costa-Brown?”

“I’m not saying her head isn’t still a novelty snow globe,” she said. She picked up her water bottle again and swished its contents. ”I’m saying something useful might come of shaking it. For that, I am willing to tolerate her utterly exasperating personality.”

He detected a trace of defensiveness there, which was interesting. “Just last week, you were telling me it was tinsel-town in there twenty-four seven. Admit it,” he said, "you misjudged her.”

Her expression frosted over. “Well, Pip, it’s hard to take someone seriously when they spend half an hour every night meowing into a web camera.”

The librarian walked past, and Contessa stopped her to ask about borrowing policies.

Philip watched her for a while before tackling his next assignment. This situation might bear further investigation, but he would wait.

After ten more minutes of sustained silent reading, Contessa closed the book and placed her head on the table, face-first.

“Apropos of nothing,” Philip said thoughtfully, “in tenth grade, when I was taking that language arts elective, I ran into the occasional stumbling block with King Lear.”

“Did you.”

He drummed his fingers lightly on his completed homework. “Fortunately, a few souls were kind enough to produce modern translations of Shakespeare’s most popular works, and they happened to come into my possession.”

She looked up.

“I may have a set of .pdfs. Seeing as I have no need for them anymore, I might move them into another folder. Perhaps a shared one.”
Later, when they were packing to leave, he found a scrap of paper under his pencil case. It was a note from Contessa, written in a cipher she knew he could decode fluently.

‘7pm Tuesday week after next. We cancel the 5pm (trivial). Solid hour of alone-time with J before + supper afterwards. Your place later?’

He ignored the tiny, surprisingly realistic firearms aiming at the ‘J’ and nodded his affirmation.

For research purposes, they spent that afternoon in his dorm torrenting She’s the Man.

✶✶✶

Rebecca had come back from class, showered, and gotten midway through a mystery novella when the tall slender figure of her roommate appeared in the doorway of their dorm.

She held out a white carton in a plastic bag.

Curiously, Rebecca accepted it.

“Dinner.”

From the logo, it was takeout from an upscale Thai restaurant near campus that Rebecca and her friends joked about ordering from but could never justify spending the money at. She opened the carton. Soft-shell crab in glass vermicelli, still fragrant and steaming—meaning Contessa had driven down to get it. “Contessa, this is—”

“My treat,” Contessa interrupted, in clipped tones. “I was with Philip, he implied that seeing one play was insufficient compensation for a recurring service, and I agreed.”

“I was going to say, this is super generous of you,” Rebecca said. “It smells delicious. Thank you.”

A sharp nod. Contessa turned to leave with her own carton of food, and as she did, Rebecca noticed the minute heaviness of her tread.

“Wanna eat in the lounge? We can go over your paper.”

Contessa looked for all the world as though she wanted to stay in the cramped, stuffy pantry and eat dinner by herself on a stool like an introverted saddo. As permitting this ran contrary to Rebecca’s moral code, she insisted on taking Contessa and the food down a flight to the much more spacious communal lounge, and flung open the bay windows to let the evening breeze sail in.

While they ate, Rebecca outlined her proposed revisions. Contessa seemed bemused that the notes were distributed among Rebecca’s various own course assignments, but if she had a better way of compartmentalising information, she didn’t disclose it.

“I didn’t think you had it in you to be so scathing,” Contessa remarked between bites of chicken stir-fry.

“What? Where?” Rebecca asked. She’d conscientiously followed the sandwich model of feedback.

“You denounced my second argument as a pathetic fallacy,” Contessa said, sliding the paper across the coffee table.

Rebecca burst out laughing when she saw the line. “Oh—no, that’s the name of the technique you were describing in that paragraph. You called it sympathetic background. Similar, but not really accurate in that case.”
Contessa reread what she’d written, disconcerted. “Could you clarify?”

“Sure, so, when the weather reflects—” Rebecca tapped her chin. “Know what, let me get my socks.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“Contessa, if we constrained ourselves to the necessary, we wouldn’t have any fun at all. Besides, puppet pageants are a form of recreation.”

“Recreation is one of the things I would categorise as unnecessary.”

“Your classification system needs an overhaul,” Rebecca informed her, trotting off to excavate her cardboard box of puppet paraphernalia. “I’ll file an official complaint in the morning.”

Forty minutes later, the lounge was littered with sheets of newspaper.

With Contessa’s begrudging help, Rebecca had moved most of the furniture to clear up a space. Then, because the pantry was lacking in coolers of dry ice, she’d taken a leaf from a Soviet animation about a hedgehog and tried to replicate fog with newsprint.

It hadn’t taken long for Rebecca to end up on her back, talking animatedly with socks on all four of her appendages—less a matter of drama and more a natural outcome of having too much energy for a single sock to encompass.

It was also a natural outcome of Contessa’s refusal to play more than one character.

Contessa kept pace, but she actually cared about whether the opening and closing of the sock’s mouth synced up with her speech, and she was trying to summarise at the same time so she wouldn’t have so much to read.

“The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone.” She paused for a few seconds, and her forehead creased as she stared down at the words. Then, breathing deeply to steel herself, she pushed ahead. “It seemed... unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard.’”

Rebecca frowned in concern.

“It did not shift or drive; it was just there,” Contessa continued, her voice clear but halting. “Standing all round you like something—”

“—not see-through enough,” Rebecca cut in, decisively. “Our fog is a flop. You can take that down.”

Contessa lowered the neon purple Narrator Sock, relieved to have been interrupted but giving Rebecca no hint as to why. She unclipped the translucent sheet of paper from its wireframe mount and tossed it onto the pile in the middle of the floor.

“If only we had rice paper, or like, a humidifier,” Rebecca said. She rubbed her forehead with the button-eye sewn to the red-and-green striped wool portraying protagonist Charles Marlow. “And a hedgehog. These are all essential.”

Contessa gathered up a few of the loose sheets, tucking them behind a sofa cushion to prevent them from blowing around. “A hedgehog would never survive in this environment, and we were crossing over into the realm of shadow puppetry anyway.”
“The scrim is *between* the light source and the puppet, though. Silhouette puppetry?” Rebecca tried.

A roll of paper bobbed against Contessa’s calf, and she gently punted it aside.

Before the roll could travel out of reach, Rebecca scooped it up with a besocked hand and jabbed it in Contessa’s direction, punctuating: “But yes! *Wayang! Kulit!* Contessa! We should do that sometime, or watch it.”

“I have seen performances,” said Contessa, back against the couch, parrying effortlessly with her own puppet.

Rebecca stopped fencing. “Oh?”

“Although where I—watched them, the puppets were not so polished.”

“...where you watched them?” Rebecca asked, then immediately regretted overstepping. Contessa was private in general, but downright cagey about her background. Maybe she was from Detroit.

It didn’t matter, because Contessa chose to disregard the question. “They were crude figures,” she said, “made of pebbles and twigs, bound with resin and raffia. The key was to create a distinct outline—yes, a silhouette, that was flexible enough to be reused in later shows.”

Rebecca tried to imagine this, the figures constructing themselves from detritus in her head. She imagined Contessa watching them dance.

“They were—” Contessa hesitated, drew her knees up to her chin. “Modular. A skilled puppeteer could tell a full-ensemble story using only two puppets that were altered, piece by piece, throughout the performance.”

A million questions bubbled to the forefront of her mind, but seeing the faint gleam in the other girl's eyes, Rebecca picked one. "What kind of stories did they tell?"

Contessa considered this. "Cautionary tales."

"Like parables?"

She shook her head. "Like fairy tales," she said.

There was a silence. Rebecca twisted over and crawled up to Contessa's side, mirroring her posture.

“I have a confession to make,” she said, solemn.

“What?”

“I haven’t read *Heart of Darkness* in four years. I improvised most of the lines just now.”

“Certainly fooled me,” said Contessa. “I had difficulty discerning if ‘oh my god, who dumped a leper camp into this ravine’ was a direct quotation or not.”

“I was trying to capture the essence of the scene. It was pretty *sic*, if you ask me.”

Contessa shrugged. “I haven’t finished it.”

“Here’s another secret,” said Rebecca. “From one lit major to a not-lit-major who is still gonna have to take a closed-book exam. You don’t have to do all of the assigned reading. You just need to know the important parts, and how to talk about them.”
“But you read everything,” Contessa pointed out.

Rebecca smiled, conspiratorial. She leaned in close to Contessa’s ear, shoulder warm against shoulder, and whispered, “They’re all important to me.”

“I have to go,” said Contessa. She stood abruptly.

Startled back, Rebecca blinked at her. “What, now?”

She didn't answer, instead turning on her heel and stalking out. The door swung closed behind her.

“It’s... ten p.m.,” Rebecca said to the empty room.

Even as she spoke she heard the words curl inward, robbed of momentum. It wasn’t even close to lights-out, and anyway Contessa didn't abide by normal sleeping hours.

Rebecca remained on the suddenly too-hard floor, feeling small and sweaty and guilty, wondering what she'd done or said to upset her. Was it the fog scene? Had she pried too much? Revealed too much of herself, inadvertently applying pressure on Contessa to do the same?

Above her the fan hummed, rhythmically keeping time. The wind stirred up the paper, and they drifted over the parquet like deflated poltergeists.

Peeling the socks off her hands and feet, she rose. She had an early class. Needed to do some studying of her own before it got too late. The bag containing the used takeout boxes was still in the corner. She walked over, knotted up the end and clutched the bulk of it to her chest as she made the solitary journey down three flights of stairs.

Navigating by lamplight, she reached the garden in the central outdoor area where the dorm entrance was. The bin squatted in front of the low wall bordering the garden, flanked on either side by potted bougainvilleas. She stamped on the pedal. The lid failed to budge.

Without thinking, she shifted more of her weight onto it.

*Ker-chunk.* The lid juddered out of place. Its lock, previously invisible to her, sprang out and pinged off her stomach, landing somewhere in the bushes.

Her eyes widened. She jumped the wall to look for the small square of plastic, but it had vanished.

“What,” she muttered.

She got rid of the bag and went back upstairs to clean up.
“How much coffee did you drink?”

Rebecca blinked at Contessa, momentarily confused until she remembered the disposable cup next to her. “Oh! No, this is some roasted acorn mix,” she said, as she got off the bench and threw it into a bin. “Tastes like chipmunk soup, but at least I’m already three days cold turkey. Too much caffeine makes me choleric. I don’t mean the temperament, as in irascible, but my newly coined adjectival form of cholera, of which diarrhoea is a symptom.”

“You’re taking roommate transparency too far,” Contessa said. Without waiting to see if Rebecca was following, she started down one of the wide flagstone paths.

Rebecca jogged to catch up. “Sorry. Anyway, coffee makes me feel like I’m moving too fast, even if it’s only my chemicals rushing around. I want my chemicals to mill about and smell the serotonin.”

She saw the messenger bag slung over Contessa’s shoulder. “You’re taking your books?”

“I emptied it before I left.”

Left where? Rebecca wondered. It was Sunday. Contessa hadn’t come back to the dorm since Wednesday night. Which wasn’t abnormal, not by a long shot, but her absence had weighed especially heavily on Rebecca. Part of it was that she couldn’t shake the worry that she’d done something to offend her the night of the puppet show. The other, more substantial part was that she hadn’t realised before how much of their limited interaction she had taken for granted. The number of times she’d looked up from her writing to ask a question (about llamas) or start a conversation (also about llamas, specifically concerning their affiliation with vicuñas, and the latter’s survival prospects following a nuclear cataclysm), only to remember the Contessa-shaped hole in the room? It was non-zero.

Another thing, as her eyes travelled down the length of Contessa’s back for clues: Whenever her roommate resurfaced after prolonged leave, Rebecca tended to perceive a slight dishevelment. Sometimes a fatigue that Contessa dismissed as jetlag, sometimes a localised injury she refused to expound on. Rebecca swore she’d seen a bullet hole in her jacket that one time before she swept it away into her To-Be-Incinerated Hamper.

But now she was here—composed and impeccably dressed, everything buttoned up and ironed down. She didn’t seem angry. In fact, there was a spring in her step, an extra sway to her hips as she walked ahead.

It was a relief. And more than a little… something.

“We’re going to be early,” Rebecca said, electing not to think too hard on it. “If you feel like reading, I brought a flashlight and…” She rooted around in her backpack, browsing spines. “…and Finnegans Wake, apparently. Fuck. Why? Oh well, I have Vance, of course. Stephenson. I don’t know if you actually like gonzo journalism or if you’re just reading Fear and Loathing for a class, but I saw it on your shelf so I borrowed a Thompson anthology from the library.”

“I doubt we’ll be more than ten minutes early,” Contessa said.

Rebecca nodded vigorously. “Exactly!”
Contessa followed the path, while Rebecca detoured onto the lawn to rustle the cupid’s shaving brushes that had sprouted somewhat unseasonably along it. By the time she rejoined Contessa, her socks were damp and flecked with shreds of grass.

She was hopping along and picking them off when Contessa asked, “Why did you do that?”

“Why not?” She set her foot down. “Didn’t you frolic as a kid?”

“I did not.”

“I guess it’s force of habit. My elementary school had this dandelion field,” Rebecca enthused. “I’d plough through it with my friends before the morning bell. Figuratively speaking.”

“I’m sure you did,” Contessa said. She gave the grass a long, considering look. “But I don’t share the need to assert my dominance over plants.”

“It’s not about asserting dominance. It’s about…” Rebecca spread her arms all-encompassingly as she cast about for a reason. “Actively participating in the propagation of flowers.”

“Being a dispersal vector for weeds.”

Rebecca frowned. “Being a dispersal vector for joy. Do you even know how dandelions are formed? An angel scrubs their back and sheds a bunch of feathers which then float to earth and coalesce into a fluffy ball of wonder. If we don’t spread them, what will? The wind? If the wind were doing its job at all, how come we never see any seedless dandelions?”

Contessa squinted up at the orange-red sky. “I’m sorry, but would you run this celestial loofah theory by me again?”

“My point is, you have to kick the stuff when you see it,” Rebecca said, and sent a pebble hiccupping across the ground with the toe of her sneaker to demonstrate. “Like soda cans, or bolonkas. Incidentally, dandelion roots are supposed to make a good coffee substitute when ground.”

“Rebecca, if you start eating the lawn, I’m not going to obstruct campus security when they cart you off.”

“I won’t. Those aren’t dandelions and I didn’t bring my mortar and pestle.” She perked up. “I need to stop by an apothecary soon. There’s one at the outlet mall, and you’d think it was some ripoff homeopathic bullcrap, but I checked it out and it could be legit. Vials and herbs and toadstools in baggies that give you weird dreams. Also, stop me if I’m talking too much. I’m just filling the silence so it doesn’t get awkward. What are you thinking about?”

“How good the weather has been lately,” Contessa replied. “Beyond that, I was wondering if someone spiked your ersetzkaffee with real kaffee, or possibly those toadstools. But I now suspect that this is just your default state.”

She didn’t stop her, though.

They reached the building of mechanical engineering. In its lee, Rebecca pointed out a fading chalk mural and explained how the cigarette butts strewn across it changed the message into its diametric opposite, at least in Braille. Contessa happened to know enough to debate the point. They were still arguing when their ride arrived.

A tall boy of twenty emerged from the side exit and stepped out onto the parking lot tarmac. Blonde hair flopped messily over his forehead; he brushed errant strands out of his brown eyes. He was
hollow-cheeked and gangly, his limbs defined by hard angles that he kept hidden beneath an oversize mesh jacket and heavy canvas trousers.

He was Rebecca’s favourite person in the world, and she ran up to envelop him in a crushing hug.

“Elliot!”

“Whoa there,” he said, dipping his head to kiss the part in her hair. “Don’t look now, but I’m sitting on a hell of a story. You remember that reactor I told you about? With the tungsten alloy casing?”

“If this story involves spontaneous sublimation, tell me all about it,” Rebecca said. She released him, maintaining a grip on his shoulder. “But first tell Contessa that the nose-bulb of the anglerfish represents capitalist incentives and that the cigarettes spell out ‘lose chains’, which we all know comes from a beloved slogan of the proletariat.”

He looked at Contessa, who raised her eyebrows in wordless challenge.

“You’re talking about the graffiti near the bike racks.” Elliot dug in his pocket for keys as he led them to his car.

Appearance-wise, Elliot’s red beater was fresh from the junkyard—scratched-up, missing a hubcap, stamped with the residual outlines of old bumper stickers. But he upgraded the engine constantly and in four years Rebecca had never heard it emit more than a satisfied purr, so there was nothing to complain about.

She opened the back door for Contessa to climb in before continuing. “Contessa thinks that the piscine symbols of private enterprise are a red herring and that the whole thing is ultimately the fevered product of some kid’s Oedipus complex.”

“That was also a ‘b’, not an ‘e’, and there was no second ‘s’,” Contessa said. “Thereby rendering the text gibberish.”

“You both make sound points,” Elliot said, once they were settled, “but sorry, Becks. Gonna have to side with her on this one. It is a female anglerfish. Plus I see it every day and your hypothesis rings less true every time. Especially since the cigarettes move.”

Rebecca huffed. “They don’t move that much. If Hana were here, she’d call it a political statement too.”

“She’d probably call it vandalism and littering,” he said. He stuck the key in the ignition, then peered behind his seat and offered Contessa a friendly grin. “Hey, so you’re Contessa. Rebecca’s told me a lot about you.”

At her name, Contessa raised her head. She’d been examining the cupholder where Elliot kept spare change and other odds and ends.

“Why did you have to say that in the most ominous way possible?” Rebecca asked. She leaned towards the other girl, dropping her voice. “I didn’t tell him anything.”

“She probably call it vandalism and littering,” he said. He stuck the key in the ignition, then peered behind his seat and offered Contessa a friendly grin. “Hey, so you’re Contessa. Rebecca’s told me a lot about you.”

“Suits seven days a week,” said Elliot, numbering off on one hand as he took the car out of campus. “Thermos under your pillow. Two to three spritzes of cologne before you leave.”

Contessa looked askance at Rebecca.

She felt her cheeks heat. It wasn’t as if she catalogued the information—it was just a smattering of
little things she couldn’t help but notice and also report to Elliot in painstaking detail over text. At least he’d only named the more innocuous features of rooming with Contessa, and not brought up the array of locked aluminum briefcases under her desk that diminished by one every Monday at dawn, or the fact that she sometimes exited through the window even though their dorm was on the fifth floor.

“Deductions grounded in recent observation,” she muttered, sinking into worn upholstery. "By Elliot. He can be very perceptive.”

“Yeah, put a pince-nez on me and I’m a regular Poirot. Speaking of, I have questions,” he said. “What high school are you from? What are you planning to major in? Tell us one unique fact about yourself.”

“She already went through orientation, geez. No need to drag her back.”

“Okay, okay.” Elliot tried to think of another question. “Uh—”

"Reed Academy. Undecided,” Contessa said, cutting him off. "As for the fact, I wouldn’t call it unique, but at least one person considers it remarkable.”

"Do tell,” he said.

"I sometimes keep a thermos of Dian Lake red tea under my pillow. In case I get thirsty at night.”

Elliot laughed. The corner of Contessa’s lips quirked, like she was laughing too.

Rebecca flushed harder and crossed her legs, sitting on her hands.

"I also have a preference for woody oriental fragrances,” Contessa continued. She turned, eyes fixing Rebecca’s, and lowered her voice the same way Rebecca had. "Though I use eau de toilette, not cologne. Lasts longer.”

Rebecca wrenched her eyes away. She kicked the base of the driver’s seat. “Soooooo, Elliot.”

“What?”

“Did you do it?”

“Did I do what?” he asked, in a tone that suggested he already knew what.

"Did you ask Clarence out?”

He said nothing, concentrating instead on making a left turn.

“You didn’t even text him.” Rebecca threw her hands up in the air. “Darn it, El, I already did the hard part of getting you his number. The least you can do is make use of it.”

He shifted in his seat, and glanced at Contessa through the rearview mirror.

The reason for his reluctance had to be something he wouldn’t elaborate on in front of a near-stranger. Rebecca could guess what that was. She was about to segue into a completely different topic when he did so himself.

“Not all of us can ask someone to prom by rigging the ivy trellis next to their bedroom window with explosives spelling out their name,” he said, archly.
“You helped me with that,” said Rebecca, “and it would have worked if the firecrackers had gone off like they were supposed to.”

“And if his parents hadn’t sicced their rottweiler on you?”

“It liked me!” she insisted. “Well, it liked the cherry bombs in my belt. Maybe it was one of those airport sniffer dogs.”

“That’s not a breed typically trained for bomb detection,” Contessa said. “German shepherds, labrador retrievers and vizslas are more high energy and have better work ethic.”

Rebecca tilted her head curiously. “How do you know?”

Contessa immediately developed a keen interest in the scenery outside the window. “Google.”

“I can’t ask Clarence out through domestic terrorism,” said Elliot. “At least not the first time. This has to be special.”

“Okay...” Rebecca clicked her tongue. “Later I’m gonna do a background check and compile a list of ways you can pop the question, but here are a few off the top of my head.

**Numéro un**, fix the gate while he’s around. Have him hold the bars still, pass you tools. Finger static in the handover, zap.”

“Zap,” Elliot said, automatically reaching behind the seat to bump Rebecca’s index finger with his. “I already took a look at the gate and it’s not that complicated a fix, but I guess this is the next best thing after couples IKEA assembly.”

She tapped her temple, scooting forward in her seat. “Now you’re thinking like an engineer. **Numéro dýo.** He’s a massive friggin’ prep and a Greek classics nerd. This means two things: your money is worthless here, and poetry is key.”

“Greek?” he asked uncertainly. “You know I didn’t finish that book you lent me. Or the other twenty-three.”

Contessa turned from the window and regarded him in the sudden naked light of kinship.

“I’m not saying you should recite Homer at him on the jungle gym after school in the hopes that he will draw parallels between you and Helen of Troy. Who would do that? Ha ha,” Rebecca said, scooting back an inch. “There are plenty of other romantic Greek poems to plumb. I will include them in the appendix of this list, along with relevant JSTOR articles.”

He nodded gratefully.

**Nömiri üş** is general advice.” Rebecca steepled her fingers. “Tell me, do you still have those canisters of nitroglycerin?”

It was dark when they arrived, and when they rolled to a stop by the curb, Elliot slapped the steering wheel. “Crap. I forgot to tell you the story.”

“Whoops,” Rebecca said apologetically, one leg out the door. “Tell it on the way back?”

“Sure. I don’t think there’s a place for me to legally park around here, so just text me when you guys are ready.”

“Elliot.”

“Yup?”
“Don’t wait too long. Carpe nates?” She extended a fist.

He rolled his eyes, but he wrapped his hand around it. “Carpe nates. Go enjoy your play.”

Contessa was right. The weather was beautiful. A cool breeze lapped at Rebecca’s cheeks as the two of them crossed over into the park. They walked the loop of jogging track, past the calisthenics stations and the fenced-in dog run. A waxing gibbous moon hung high in a cloudless sky, illuminating the performance space at the centre of a large grassy field where students and families had already claimed turf.

It was not so crowded that they couldn’t find a patch near the stage. Rebecca eased a picnic mat out of her backpack and unfolded it over the ground. When she sat, her backpack promptly toppled over onto its side, letting loose the collection of books she’d crammed in there.

Contessa ensconced herself on a corner of the mat. Her right hand fiddled with the grass along its hem.

“What are you doing?” Giving up on squeezing the books back into her bag, Rebecca craned her neck to see Contessa extract a blade of grass.

An upward swipe of fingernail, lightning precise, and a white seeded stalk was deposited onto Rebecca’s palm.

“Well, what do you know,” she said, smiling. “I can start my own farm now.”

Contessa propped herself up on the heels of her palms, surveying the throngs of people surrounding them. “In fifth grade,” she said, “a group of my peers handed me an envelope and asked me to collect as many grass seeds as I could. It was the ‘fad’ at the time, I believe.”

“Did you do it?” Rebecca asked.

“Initially I refused, but they were very persuasive.”

Rebecca played with the stalk, rolling it and tweaking the waxy little seed heads.

“I filled the envelope,” Contessa said. “But when I turned around, recess was over and everyone was gone.”

“That’s so sad.”

From the furrow of Contessa’s brow, this was not the expected response. "No, it wasn’t. I spent the rest of that day harvesting seeds. Months later, my classmates had since moved on to twine bracelets and autograph books, but I was still combing that field." She paused, as if recalling. “You could say it was how I met Philip. Before our meeting, the school was having to buy new topsoil regularly. After, they replaced everything with synthetic turf.”

"You systematically wiped out any chance the grass had of continuing the species, and I'm the botanical tyrant?” asked Rebecca. “And did you just never go back to class?”

Contessa shrugged.

“Contessa!” Rebecca said, scandalised.

“I doubt anyone noticed my absence.”

A thought occurred to her. “Did you make him a bracelet?”
“Philip?”

“Yeah. In between the genocide.”

“No.”

“Did you get his autograph?”

“Why would I need to? I can forge it myself.”

“Just a shame you missed out on all of that because of the Grass Seed Junior Mafia,” Rebecca said. Contessa stiffened. “We aren’t in the Mafia.”

“I didn’t mean you and Philip. I meant the people who strong-armed you into collecting them the first time.”

“Ah. Of course.”

“If music be the food of love, play on.” Orsino’s voice boomed into a concealed microphone as he strode out from behind the curtains.

The blocking didn’t square with her mental picture, but that was inevitable. Rebecca was aware she had an idiosyncratic view of where and how props should be set up in any given scene, and even that evolved over different performances. No, there was something conspicuously off about the acting.

A year ago, before the university theatrical society splintered into distinct camps, Rebecca had worked backstage for a production of Amadeus. She’d read the script between rigging sets with the other freshman crew member, and she’d watched the drama coach drill vocal exercises into the seniors and juniors lucky enough to secure roles. Finally, she’d sat in on the full rehearsals. There she had learnt the differences between words on a script and motions on a stage.

Onstage, Sir Toby Belch blustered at Maria from behind a box hedge made of compacted green crepe paper. It was their physiognomy, Rebecca concluded, and its exaggeration in the wrong directions. She could look at each actor and recognise the flaws in the construction of their character’s psychological profile, trace the subterranean root system of motivation that unfurled rhizomatically from there and informed every gesture and facial expression perceptible to the audience.

Rebecca was the audience. And yet there, sprawled out on a grimy checkered picnic mat, she felt as if she existed simultaneously inside and outside the illusion, witnessing both the facade and the machinery in motion. She imagined that this must be what Feste’s day-to-day life would be like if he were not a fictional character. He had always been her favourite.

Malvolio threw a ring at Cesario, but the impact of the dialogue was diluted at every turn by poor set design, lighting, and special effects. The part of her mind reserved for meta-commentary busied itself identifying these aspects, dissecting them, and filing them away so that they could be discussed later. Not with Elliot—the subject would bore him, though he’d feign interest for her sake. David and Hana might not understand. Or they would, but they would tell her to sit back and enjoy the show next time in spite of her protests that this was how she did. It frustrated her, sometimes, that there were these gaps between her and her friends that couldn’t be bridged, but this sentiment was nothing new (and, she was sure, mutual) and often went away after enough time.

For the rain, it raineth every day, she thought. Maybe if Contessa stayed in the dorm tonight, they
could talk about it. For now, Rebecca sat back and enjoyed the show.

As soon as the lights went out to signal intermission, she poked Contessa in the knee. “Hey, is it weird that I ship Cesario and Viola? Like, selfcest?”

Contessa didn’t take her eyes off the stage. “Yes.”

“Oh.” She sagged. “Well, I have to pee. If I sit here a minute longer, I’m gonna singlehandedly revive all the grass you just murdered. Save my seat.”

Contessa grumbled something to do with fellow theatre-goer transparency as Rebecca stood and wandered off to find a porta potty.

Ten minutes later, she came back complaining about queues and the lack of a functional sink. She reached for her bag to pull out a wet napkin, then stopped. Her backpack was upright, and the books within were flush and arranged alphabetically by author. Slowly, she turned her head. She sucked in a breath.

Contessa was reading.

Moonlight limned the pale curve of her cheek, lending her expression an otherworldly grace. Her hair spilled like black silk ribbon over one shoulder. Her lips were parted, not quite mouthing the words—but unmistakably probing their syllables, as one might a foreign candy.

Rebecca knew at a glance which book it was, from the creased cover and dog-eared pages. As a child, she’d read and reread that book under the covers every night for a week. *The Name of the Rose.*

Contessa looked up from the page, and Rebecca could see her dark eyes sharpening in thought. She closed the book.

Rebecca turned away.

She did so to spare Contessa the discomfort of being stared at, rather than to fend off any uncharacteristic attack of self-consciousness. Rebecca Costa-Brown did not flinch from pain, no matter how relentlessly it wore on her, and she did not avert her gaze from the distilled truth of the written word, no matter how deeply it pierced, and she did not shy away from spirals of feeling, no matter how thoroughly and hopelessly she could lose herself in them.

But if she leaned into this moment, if she pressed? Contessa might walk away the way she did after the puppet show.

Rebecca watched the sky. She was not looking at the girl beside her when she set the book down on the mat.

“I liked it,” said Contessa, in a low pensive voice that made Rebecca’s stomach take up yoga. She’d noticed her staring anyway.

“What do you think? It’s one of my favourite openings.” She forced herself to be calm, to not gush, to let her ideas effervesce unspoken in the back of her throat. Any time she spent speaking was time Contessa spent saying nothing. She needed to hear this.

“I think,” Contessa said, absently drumming on the cover, “that his ‘beloved’ staged the relationship to steal the book.”
Rebecca tore her eyes away from Contessa’s fingers to gape at her. She made sounds that didn’t quite resolve into words.

The lights came back on.

Feste chased Sebastian around the stage, but Rebecca was barely paying attention. Contessa actually, truly believed that seducing someone, travelling Europe and crushing their heart, all to steal a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript, was super romantic.

This perturbed Rebecca on many levels. She risked a peek at Contessa through her peripheral vision. The other girl seemed distracted as well—her hand drifted over the grass, twisting the stems.

The second half of the play passed without incident.

Rebecca got up hurriedly. “We have to get autographs.”

“Again with the autographs,” said Contessa. “Why?”

In the coming weeks, there would be online reviews of this performance and every performance after that. If the critics had any integrity at all, they would excoriate it. Rebecca wanted to support her local performing arts community, and having evidence of dedicated fans would go a long way in spurring young actors and actresses to continue dreaming in spite of criticism.

“I want a souvenir,” she said, because that was also true.

“Aren’t the memories sufficient?” Contessa asked.

“The memory of Malvolio cross-gartered in canary-yellow hose is insufficient. I need this man’s John Hancock tattooed on my thigh.”

Contessa grimaced and shook her head hard as if shooing away an unpleasant image. “Rebecca, must you?”

“Must I what?” asked Rebecca, genuinely baffled. Her eyes lit up. “Oh, you thought—”

“No, I know what you meant. But still, why?”

“Why not? But for real, I have a plan,” said Rebecca. “You be the refined and mysterious talent scout—you’re already dressed for it—and I’ll be the pedantic and irrational heckler. I’ll make patently absurd complaints, brandish my copy of *Twelfth Night* and hurl abuse at them for not hewing close enough to the story, that kind of thing. You interject, oppose my every comment with caustic yet penetrating wit. Don’t hold back. Like, totally crush my h—spirit. Just grind it to a fine powder beneath your heel like a dandelion root. Take my book from me if you have to. That way when they go out to the bar later, they’ll have a good memory to bond over.” She pursed her lips, reflecting on what she might have missed. “And uh, they’ll be so flattered by you, they’ll give you their autographs.”

Contessa frowned, standing as well. She dusted off her hands and looked at the group of cast members gathering near a set of light fixtures.

Seeing her discomfited expression, Rebecca began to lose faith in her scheme. This confidence-bolstering manoeuvre would be more effective with two people, harder to shrug off as the polite gesture of one Shakespeare fan with subjective tastes in theatre. But if Contessa was apprehensive talking to too many people...
“Actually, I bet I could pull this off alone. You can wait here if you like,” Rebecca told her, careful to keep any judgement out of her tone.

Leaving Contessa by the mat, Rebecca wended her way around the chattering clusters of people and approached the cast members side-on. To her disappointment, Malvolio wasn’t among them. The lead actors and actresses were easy. The rest were civil, if a little acerbic, but Rebecca had experience with that. It took her a few minutes of earnest conversation to determine the status hierarchy and how to encourage each of them without undercutting previous praise. She then capped off the affirmation session by requesting their autographs, whereupon she discovered she had no paper. The balance of egos was now too delicate for her to disrupt by leaving to get her copy of the play from her backpack, so she had them all sign the area around her navel.

She scampered back to their spot with a belly full of names. Contessa wasn’t there—maybe she’d gone to use the bathroom. Rebecca texted Elliot to let them know they were done. She was one third of the way through a draft of the list she’d promised him, when Contessa returned.

Pinched between the tips of her thumb and forefinger were the very same bands of black elastic that Malvolio had worn cross-braced over his yellow stockings.

“Oh my gosh.” Rebecca whooped delightedly, clapping her hands. “Oh my gosh! He actually gave you his garters! I can’t believe it!”

“What I want to know,” Contessa said, dangling the strips at arm’s length, “is how they can afford to be giving pieces of their costume to whatever rabid fan that fawns over them. Are there wardrobes of suspenders running spare? Do they drop trou for every patron who expresses the slightest appreciation for their set? Stop laughing. It’s not that funny.”

Rebecca doubled over in peals. She made no motion to take the garters from Contessa. “O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful! You’re a rabid fan!”

Contessa snorted. “Malvolio works fine as comic relief, but I wouldn’t say I’m a fan.”

“Who are you a fan of, then? Who gave you rabies?”

Ignoring Rebecca’s convulsions, Contessa replied, “Viola. Obviously. She’s quick-witted, resourceful and looks good in men’s clothing.”

“Sounds like someone we know.” Rebecca couldn’t keep the beam off her face, or her eyes off the garters. Everything was so perfect. “Okay, right, if you’re Viola, who am I? I prithee tell me what thou think’st of me.”

“Sir Toby Belch,” Contessa answered, without skipping a beat.

Rebecca opened her mouth to protest, but reconsidered. “You know what, I’m actually okay with this. Maria is a top catch.”

Contessa stared.

“What? You throw a strange regard upon me.”

“Let’s just go,” said Contessa. When she saw Rebecca’s waiting expression, she sighed. “I mean, um, nay, come, I prithee; would thou’dst be ruled by me.”

Rebecca positively shone. “Madam, I will.”
The tree-lined boulevard stretched ponderously before them as they made their way to the pick-up point. Neither bothered with the pavement, content to stroll beneath the ghostly yellow haze of the streetlights with a distance between them. Rebecca finally received input on the young adult speculative fiction novel she was writing; Contessa was astonishingly versed in FEMA emergency operations plans and the National Incident Management System, even if she didn’t seem to buy into the whole apocalyptic premise. When they wound right back to discussing the play, Rebecca was also impressed by how much she knew about *Twelfth Night*. She could quote chapter and verse, as well as cite her sources. Both of them agreed that that was important.

To stave off the night chill, Rebecca stuffed her fists into her hoodie pockets. Something narrow and feathery tickled her knuckles. She opened her hand, felt around, and realised.

It was the stalk of grass seeds.

On impulse, she closed the distance and hugged Contessa.

Contessa, caught in the middle of a thought, took a faltering half-step and froze in place. Her arms hovered, hands twitching at the wrists like she didn’t know where to position them.

Rebecca’s own arms rested on the small of Contessa’s back. Her fingers curled gently around her waist. Beneath the pressed white starch and toned muscle that Contessa wore like an armour was an unexpected softness. Not particularly warm—though that was changing—or particularly yielding, as she seemed to be actively fighting an instinct to relax, but pleasant all the same. Rebecca tucked in her chin, breathing in cypress and musk and an underlying note of fresh laundry fug. She focused on the pigeon-flutter of Contessa’s heart printing its shallow signature onto her own, and how it gradually, hesitantly, drew closer, keeping her right where she wanted to be.

An eternity later, Rebecca let her arms fall away. Several seconds later, Contessa backed into a lamppost.

“What was that for?” she demanded, embarrassment and indignation cast in dusty yellow.

“An amazing day,” Rebecca answered serenely. Warmth flooded her arms, her chest, buoying her, and she skipped ahead. Her eyes rode the sky. “We watched an awful play. You read the prologue to one of my all-time favourite stories. Don’t think I’m not going to bug you into reading it until you reach its glorious last line, by the way. And you got a present from the cast.”

“Rebecca, I—” Contessa started. The rest of the sentence plunged like a stone.

“Hmm?”

Rebecca spun around and started walking backwards just in time to see Contessa look up from the ground. Contessa instantly turned away, the pendulum swing of her hair obscuring her face. She didn’t manage to do it before Rebecca noticed the streak of colour across her cheeks.

“I—it was all right.”

Rebecca hummed in agreement. “Hmm. The only thing that would make it better is if we do some interior decorating tonight.”

A long pause. Contessa turned towards her again, narrowing her eyes, and Rebecca met them with cherubic innocence.

“I,” said Contessa, lifting the flap of her bag, “am going to toss these into the first receptacle I see.”
“Good luck with that,” Rebecca said cheerfully. “Never have I been so happy to live in a city with such lacklustre municipal anti-littering ordinances.”

“Oh,” Contessa said. She pointed to her right with casual interest. “Is that a bin?”

“No!”

Rebecca geared up to lunge in that direction, but the side of the street was empty. She was confronted only by Contessa's unamused glare.

“Rebecca, we are not hanging Malvolio’s sweaty discount garters in the dorm.”

“First you won’t let me string up fairy lights, now you won’t let me display a cherished memento.” Rebecca sighed, fluttering a hand over her chest. “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?”

“Enough,” Contessa said. “No more.”

Rebecca was still giggling when Elliot’s car pulled up to the curb.

Chapter End Notes

maroon_sweater is the best beta. <3
“You said I could hang them outside.”

Contessa didn’t glance up from the street map she had spread across the counter island. “I said not in the room.”

“Our door was fine, then!” Rebecca gestured at the hallway outside the pantry to punctuate her point. She looked at her roommate pleadingly. “You know I haven’t had coffee in ages, Contessa. They were the only things keeping me going every morning! Where are they? Where have all the garters gone?”

“The RA asked me to take them down,” said Contessa, making an amendment to the legend. “Rebecca, she thought I was exhibiting them as a trophy of lewd conquest. I had to convince her I wasn’t the one raiding the contraceptive basket on a daily basis.”

Rebecca paused on her way to the kitchenette. “That’s a leap. I’ll talk to her.”

“So I went to dispose of them,” Contessa continued, “and do you know what I found?”

“Anyone could have broken that bin,” Rebecca said immediately.

The only sound was the shuffling of papers as Contessa progressed through whatever urban planning project she was working on. She selected a red pen, uncapped it, and inscribed a single asterisk next to one phrase on a long list.

“I forgot to unlock it before stepping on the pedal,” Rebecca admitted, after a record four seconds. “Which wasn’t completely my fault. The lock is the exact same colour as the lid and it doesn’t even protrude.”

“The lock is there to deter vermin and hobos. You told me that. Pass me my tea, please.”

Rebecca picked up a half-full white enamel mug that Contessa was using as a paperweight. Or maybe she was using her stack of returned assignments as a coaster? Rebecca noted with satisfaction that she’d gotten a ninety-six on the *Heart of Darkness* essay. “Vermin and art majors,” she corrected, then realised it wasn’t necessary. “Did I also tell you that it is pointless now that there’s a fence?”

“You did, actually, when you almost broke it the first week. The word you used was ‘vestigial’.” Contessa accepted the mug from her. “Thank you.”

Rebecca slouched against the cabinet, arms folded as she considered how to go forward. “Well, today it met its selection pressure,” she pronounced. “I'm not fixing it. That lock has been a blight for too long. Our ancestors didn’t lock up their trash—they suspended it from trees in rawhide pouches and ate it as leftovers.”

“Doubtful,” Contessa replied, “but as long as we’re conjecturing about the waste disposal practices of our ancestors, they probably did report pouch breakages to their local bureaucratic caves. You know, to forestall infestations of sabre-toothed tigers?”
“Have you seen how quickly the admin office processes property damage reports?” Rebecca asked, crossing over to the sink. “Hint: the answer starts with ‘not’ and ends with ‘at all’. They’ll make me fill out three forms and then bounce it around departments for six months before making me fork out for a new bin with another lock only visible under an electron microscope.”

“So you’re washing your hands because you don’t want to fill out three forms and pay for a bin you broke.”

“No. I’m washing my hands because I had to touch the lid earlier to throw away my popsicle stick,” Rebecca said. She turned off the tap and dried her hands with a paper towel off the counter. Then she crushed it into a ball and held it high above her head. “But also because justice.”

Silently, Contessa raised the mug to her lips and sipped.

**Chapter 4: One with Nietzsche**

Of all the things Contessa expected Rebecca to be doing when she returned to their dorm building that evening, attacking the bushes with a 1:15 scale model Byzantine trebuchet hadn’t ranked particularly high. It had fallen somewhere between ‘tucking two live goats into bed’ and ‘stocking their shower stall with frozen packages of curly fries’. Then again, both had happened—the former as research for her novel and the latter in response to some practical joke involving ketchup. Contessa supposed a revision of her expectations was overdue.

“If your quarry goes to ground…” Rebecca growled as she loaded the sling with another stone.

Apparently the rest of the dorm residents found the lock as annoying as Rebecca did, because the issue had gone unreported for a fortnight. It had culminated in a raccoon problem so minor that Contessa wouldn’t have noticed if not for Rebecca’s outraged declaration of war.

As a bored and unaffected civilian, Contessa believed it her duty to provide aid for the sole enlisted troop. This entailed sitting on a nearby wall with a bag of fruit and lobbing Rebecca the occasional apple, if only for the amusement of seeing her bite into it and then absentmindedly load it like the rest of the stones.

“I thought you would like them. You like cats,” Contessa said, from her perch. She watched the rock sail through the air along an elegant parabola.

The girl had good aim, especially taking into account how much she was moving her machine around. She was consistently hitting the same spot in the shrubbery despite constantly switching up the distance for no obvious tactical reason. If Contessa didn’t know any better, she’d say Rebecca was calculating velocities and trajectories on the fly. But that was the sort of thing Philip did, and if the two were in any way similar, North America would have long since been reduced to a smoking crater.

Rebecca let out a snort and bit into her apple with derision. “Cats are different. They are soft and loving.”

“One nearly scratched me yesterday without any provocation.”

“Sometimes your presence is provocative enough,” Rebecca snapped. When she realised what she said, her eyes bulged and she almost choked on a chunk of apple. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that. Just... raccoons aren’t cats. They’re, like, garbage lemurs. Those grabby little hands...” She shuddered. “They contribute nothing to society and must be destroyed. Where do we keep the spare trash bags?”
“Custodial closet, third floor. Might be some quicklime in there too.” Contessa made a note to replenish it, along with the tarpaulin.

“I’m not going to kill it!” Rebecca sounded wounded. To her credit, she did glance at the giant boulder she was toting. “That was hyperbole. I'm going to replace the bag it shredded. It's the least I can do.”

“It is the least you can do,” agreed Contessa. “Where did you get a fully functional reproduction of a seventh century siege weapon?”

Rebecca loaded the boulder and rotated the axel until the throwing beam was at the right angle. “You won’t believe how much of this historical stuff you can find in thrift stores. At the time I didn’t have enough cash, though, so Elliot gave it to me as an early Christmas present…”

She continued nattering, her lips and chin glistening with juice in the sunlight. Determination sparked in her eyes, bright as a flame and just as vital against the dull green of the bushes around her. What did it feel like, to be possessed of that kind of energy? To move as if throttled by one’s meaningless goal? Rebecca didn’t walk; she skipped. She didn’t jump; she leapt. She grasped instead of holding, and she laughed instead of smiling. It should have been draining watching her, but for some reason it was not.

The rock smashed into a planter, shattering it. “Oops.”

Contessa turned away.

“Anyway, that’s where we got the tomahawk. My family uses it when we go camping.” Rebecca looked up from the clumps of soil and terracotta shards to see Contessa jumping off the wall. “Aw, are you leaving?”

“Mm. Much as I enjoy watching you commit yet more property damage and possibly instigate armed conflict with an earthworm colony,” Contessa said. She threw her own apple core into the battered bin on her way out the gate. “I’ll settle for reminding you that this would never have happened if you hadn’t selected against a functional lock.”

Behind her, Rebecca called, “Evolution makes mistakes!”

Contessa shook her head and headed off to fetch Philip.

* 

Like the other campus buildings clustered around it, Philip's dorm hall was a brutalist behemoth. Contessa only knew the architectural term because the school of mathematics adhered to the same style, and every time Rebecca brought it up she made the same joke (“The most brutal thing about that place is the damage it does to my individuality and sense of self-worth!”). Of course, she could have been biased by the stats module she’d taken and subsequently dropped.

The front door squatted between hulking columns, inconspicuous beneath the interconnected blocks that made up the building’s robust facade. This, Contessa realised, was what Rebecca so charitably referred to as concrete Jenga. She walked in.

Roommate commentary notwithstanding, Contessa held a great deal of respect for this building. She appreciated the sturdy practicality of its structure. She liked the predictable and easily navigable simplicity of its grey corridors, and how the rooms she passed were all identical negative cubes chiselled from concrete, free of the fripperies that adorned her own dorm hall. Case in point: the main
hub didn’t have an overgrown excuse for a garden.

It wasn’t a building that prided itself on being loud or flashy or even pretty. It just did its job.

She looked up at the flat expanse of ceiling, brushed her fingertips against the wall. Solid. **Uncompromising.** Idly, she wondered why Rebecca would compare this design to that of a game predicated on the risk of things crashing down.

She heard a pair of footsteps approaching. One was Philip’s. The other—

She ducked behind a vending machine and waited for them to pass before stealing into the lift lobby. She had no intention of availing herself—elevators were death traps—and instead flung open the door and dashed up the stairs, taking three at a time. In a burst of speed she cleared the second-floor hallway, using the momentum to launch herself out the far window and onto a textured-concrete platform on the other side.

She landed, somersaulted to the edge and flipped herself around to grip one of the piers supporting it. The treads of her shoes skidded over granite in her descent. Once on the ground, she flattened herself against a wall and listened. The footsteps and voices were closing in.

Phil and company were almost here.

She tore through breathing exercises, rolled her shoulders back and shook them loose on the exhale. She adjusted her jacket, smoothing the creases in her blouse. Finally, she schooled her expression into Breezy Insouciance #2—no mean feat, given the leagues of disparity between that and Post-Cardio Jaunty Nonchalance #1—and straightened her tie.

Thus composed, she rounded the corner so sharply she almost collided with Jacob.

The flash of surprise on his face was worth the effort, but he recovered too quickly for her to relish it.

Next to him, Philip took a step back. Neither Contessa nor Jacob budged. They stood inches away from each other, and she stared down into his stupid smirky goateed face.

“Jacob,” she said.

“Contessa,” Jacob said, infuriatingly unruffled.

Philip looked between them. “Philip,” he said.

Contessa turned to him, deciding she would now ignore Jacob’s presence as long as he was there. “Are you ready?”

Philip nodded and started walking with her towards the parking lot, but Jacob fell in step between them.

“Mind if I bounce some ideas off you?” he asked. “I’m prepping my substantives for next week’s tourney and I want to make sure I’ve covered all the bases.”

“Go ahead,” Philip said, condemning them all to slow torture.

Contessa called what Rebecca did nattering, but that was more like magnetic natter. This *thing* Jacob did, where he just dominated every space he occupied with his stupid smarmy voice? True natter. Even worse, he insisted on playing with his butterfly knife while he talked. Stainless steel, channel constructed, illegal to carry in California. Utterly unnecessary. He claimed it helped him focus, but its
true purpose was to drive Contessa up the wall.

“—citizenship tests, targeting undocumented aliens for deportation,” Jacob continued. He flicked the blade out and twirled it by the handle, pretending to ponder. “Particularly if they have a criminal history.”

“I think fixating on policy changes would be a misstep,” Philip said, trying to steer the conversation to neutral ground. “It’s a value judgement motion. Opposition is going to come down hard on you if you try to spin it into an issue the government has to address with a specific instrument.”

Jacob shrugged, folded his knife and made to put it into the pocket of his stupid smug vest. Then, just to set Contessa’s teeth on edge, he flicked it open again. “Fair. I just feel our stance should touch on the need to help them assimilate into American society. Make sure these outsiders contribute to the community in a productive way, within the bounds of the law.” He turned his cool blue eyes on her for the first time since he’d started talking. “You seem to have taken that personally, Contessa. Care to share? Anecdotes aren’t terribly compelling cases on their own, but a sob story always makes for a good opener.”

“I doubt the adjudicators would be interested in hearing an exhaustive account of your childhood,” Contessa said, ignoring Philip’s glance.

"I'm not going for the judges," he said with an exceptionally useless knife flourish. "I'm going to see about this year's crop of seniors. See how they measure up. Fresh meat, ready to be tested. I’ll cut through them like a scythe, leave only the strong standing. Survival of the fittest."

“She’s all aware that open tournaments are a pretence for college debaters to inflate their fragile, flaccid little egos.”

He hummed, undeterred. “You would know about pretences, wouldn’t you?”

*I'm not the one who carries around a fucking balisong,* she didn’t say. He’d interpret it as envy, and he’d bring the thing out twice as often to needle her. As it stood, he didn’t have enough ammunition to hit any nerves, so she gave him nothing.

At last they reached Philip’s car. Contessa sank into the passenger seat and slammed the door with finality.

“I saw your message,” Philip said, beside her. “The construction around the target might interfere with our leaving.”

“Accounted for. We take Chavez instead of Steinware, so the traffic won’t—”

There was a rap on the driver’s side window. She broke off. Jacob stood there, waving.

Contessa spoke urgently. “If you run him over now, we’ll have just enough time to switch license plates.”

Traitor that he was, Philip rolled down the window.

As soon as it was down, Jacob seized Philip’s face with both hands and kissed him. Slowly at first, then with more force. Philip seemed taken aback, but he melted into it, and his hand reached out to cradle Jacob’s jaw.

Contessa realised too late how petty and childish she would look if she turned away from the scene
right then. Fine. She’d seen much more and much worse without batting an eye. Seen things that had made her fantasise about taking a nail-studded baseball bat to her own eyes, even. She could handle a little kissing.

They just kept going.

All of Contessa’s being was focused on emanating perfect calm, while giving the impression that she was only coincidentally facing their direction as she meditated on the enduring questions of human existence, and definitely not processing whatever fresh contortionist hell Jacob was attempting with his tongue; this was not fine, this was grotesque, would it ever end, would she have to perform the Heimlich on Philip and did he even deserve to be saved—

Just as she was weighing the merits of a mercy killing, the two separated.

“See you tomorrow, Pip,” Jacob said, with a feral smirk. He ran a hand through Philip’s mussed hair and looked directly at Contessa. “We’re going to watch The Dark Knight.”

He pivoted on his heel and strutted away, still spinning his knife.

Contessa averted her stare to the dashboard. She could feel Philip breathing hard beside her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and extracting his keys from his pocket as quietly and unobtrusively as possible.

She turned and he fumbled. The keys dropped into the space between them, but she snatched them out of the air before he could.

He shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. “It’s a classic.”

✶✶✶

“As the ancient prophecy has foretold,” said Rebecca. “To appease those whose land they have encroached upon, transgressors must offer up their firstborn in the sacred branches of the bougainvillea bush by the next harvest moon.”

Across the table, Elliot munched on a double-glazed jelly doughnut. "And if they don’t?"

She stirred her strawberry milkshake, contemplating. “If they don’t... I shall descend like a swarm of locusts upon the damned."

"I'm not sure orchestrating a biblical plague is the solution here," Elliot said. "What if we ask Hana? She has some experience with hunting and trapping, I think. Mostly hunting."

“I told you, I don’t want their blood on my conscience.”

“We can specify nonlethal measures.” Elliot was already composing a text with his non-sticky fingers. Typing was slow.

“Give me that,” she said, and he handed her his phone. She appended additional criteria while he cleaned himself off with a napkin. A notification popped up and she gasped. “Clarence? You’re on texting terms?”

“Yeah,” he said, “I fixed the gate. Listened to your advice.”

Rebecca brightened. “So you did keep those canisters.”

“Not that advice.” He set the remnants of his doughnut on the napkin. “What you said afterwards.”
“Oh. That,” she said, sitting up tight against the back of her seat. He was referring to their text conversation later that night. “Well, I thought it was important for you to know you weren’t alone. It’s... not easy, dealing with that on your own. I don’t think I mentioned this, but I went through a phase where I just avoided showering—bathing at all, actually. Because I didn’t want to see the, um. Aftermath? I don’t know.”

“Residue,” he said softly.

“Right. That’s a good way to put it. But it’s something to carry, and you shouldn’t worry if other people…”

Elliot was retreating from her unconsciously, his breaths growing faster. She fidgeted, staring at him in desperate apology, but unable to shut up.

He leaned forward on folded arms. “You know what’s really important for me to know?”

She stopped, feeling a mixture of relief and worry. “What?”

He made eye contact and broke into a grin. “Who you like.”

The tension evaporated, and her own breathing steadied. She would have to apologise properly later, but for now they’d set it aside. “Whom,” she said.

“Whom indeed. From your history, I never thought you went for the dark, broody, mysterious type,” Elliot continued. “What was it? Byronic?”

Rebecca beamed, proud that he’d remembered the word. “Not broody. She doesn’t sit in a castle all day. She goes out and does stuff. The way she moves—it’s so purposeful. I don’t know how to describe it. Actually, let me describe it.” She produced a gel pen from her pocket, flipped his jam-smeared napkin around and started sketching a walk cycle. “Have you ever seen a pine marten? Like that, but bipedal. And that’s not even getting into how she speaks. So precise, like she thinks before she says anything. She has an accent, yeah, but what is it? It sounds kind of French. Do they speak French in Detroit?” She stopped to drink more of her milkshake. Then she waved her hands frantically. “Mmph! Oh, and she knows so many cool things! Like this morning, I was talking about the dry rot on our bathroom ceiling and whether the lizards would get mycetismus if they ate it, and she just rattled off the symptoms of exposure to all these different fungal pathogens without even looking it up.”

Elliot was grinning. “So when are you going to ask her on a date?”

“A date? We went on a date,” said Rebecca, cocking her head. “I was thinking of confessing to her tonight.”

Elliot winced, hard.

“Okay. What is it?” She batted at the worm she’d made out of her straw wrapper and Elliot clapped a hand over it before it could fall off the table.

“You can’t retroactively declare a platonic outing a date,” he said.

“Why not?” she demanded.

“Because it’s one-sided?” He pinched the ends of the crinkled wrapper and stretched the tube smooth. “I don’t think you should say anything until you know more about what she likes. What type of person she likes.”
“What type—” She caught the emphasis. That hadn’t occurred to her. Contessa didn’t read outside of school, so it wasn’t something she could determine the usual way.

And even if Elliot didn’t intend it that way, Rebecca was a type of person unto herself. Maybe a type of person Contessa didn’t, couldn’t like? Something cold knotted itself in her chest. She turned her head, stolen by the sight of the other students bustling around the cafe.

“Becks, you live in close proximity. If you corner her when she’s not ready for it, things could get messy real fast. Then she’s gone.” He continued, slowly, “And I think on some level you must have realised that too, or you would have said something at the play.”

Most patrons were dropping by for a pastry to snack on before their next afternoon class. The ones who had time to spare gossiped and dawdled over the display by the counter, leaving fingerprints on the heated glass as they chose between cherry cheesecake and cinnamon snails and almond bear claws. A mountain of sugar and butter molded into tantalising shapes, that she’d abstained from like coffee because she was making at least a token effort at cutting back on the things that weren’t good for her. Rather, she was making it so she could only have one good thing at a time: If she had a milkshake, she couldn’t have a cupcake. If she had a cupcake, she couldn’t have a doughnut.

Elliot touched her wrist and spoke, bringing her back to their table. She studied the veins and dimples of his narrow mottled hand, already nodding before she registered what he was saying, that it was him saying this to her. She wondered how they could have left the same place and still she was the one who always felt like a ball rolling downhill, or a stone loosed from a catapult.

The knot settled low in her gut. I can't wait. I can't.

“Thanks, El,” she said, smiling and meaning it.

He smiled back—a sad, resigned thing.

They both knew she was going to do it anyway.

Elliot’s phone glowed awake, and he peered at the screen. “Hana. Class just ended.”

✶

“I have to say I was confused by your requirements,” said Hana, when they rendezvoused.

They’d driven to a shed on the fringes of campus.

Elliot looked at Rebecca, who shrugged. “What’s up?” he asked.

Hana read off the text. “You asked for something ‘nonlethal, yet capable of vaporising a carbon-based lifeform into its phlogistonic particles, yet travel-sized and environmentally friendly.’” She put her phone away. “Regardless, I don’t keep guns in school. That is the kind of habit that gets people arrested.”

“But you have something,” said Rebecca.

She nodded. “I have something.”

She went into the shed and came out with a weapon.

It was the size of a supersoaker—Rebecca suspected from the neon coloration of the base and the plastic tank that it had in fact started out as one—and prominently featured a blowtorch."A
"Yes," Hana said briskly, "the fuel is antifreeze, which burns up rapidly. So long as you don't get it on anything, it should serve your purposes well enough."

Hana showed her how to turn the blowtorch on; the flame, in turn, would ignite the antifreeze as it was sprayed out of the nozzle. To Rebecca’s disappointment, she wouldn’t allow a live demonstration.

“If you want to avoid killing things other than the raccoons, you’re going to have to evacuate the area and keep an extinguisher on standby.”

“I’m not going to kill anything,” Rebecca said, hefting the flamethrower. She practised aiming it at a rock, a tree, the shed’s corrugated steel door.

Her friends looked at her skeptically. She frowned back.

“I’m just going to spook them a little, let them know what they’re messing with. They’re messing with fire,” she informed Hana, who folded her arms. “A show of force, guys. I’m not some procyonicidal maniac who doesn’t value the sanctity of life.”

“Let me hold it,” said Elliot.

Rebecca blinked at his outstretched hands and moved the flamethrower out of his reach. “What? No. This is mine now.”

“It is not,” Hana said, “unless the police ask. Then it’s yours, but I want it back as soon as you’re released.”

“Good.” Rebecca caressed the tank possessively. “Because I’d need it in prison.”

Hana furrowed her brow.

“She’d trade it for a shiv,” Elliot explained.

Rebecca shook her head. “Changed my mind about that. What if someone pricked themselves on it but hadn’t had their tetanus shot? I’d trade it for a can opener to perform the same function.”

Elliot was asking Hana a question.

“You could slit someone’s throat with a can opener,” said Hana, “but it would be harder to get into the right orientation if you didn’t already have the element of surprise.”

“I’m not slitting anyone’s throat!” Rebecca said, her voice rising in exasperation. She pointed the flamethrower nozzle at them. “Not even if they slit mine first! Stop assuming I would default to evil in dire circumstances when I just want to eat pinto beans and okra!”

“We don’t think you’re evil, just that you prioritise food preservation over self-preservation,” Elliot said, raising his palms in a conciliatory gesture as he stepped to the side and behind the tree. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“In the unlikely event that you succeed at smuggling my flamethrower into prison, I expect you to not exchange it for anything, and to keep it safe until your sentence ends,” Hana said sternly.

Elliot poked his head out and tutted. “Really, Han? You’d let her take the fall, but you wouldn’t help me break her out of there?”
“I’ve seen some of your contingency plans. I don’t think it’s possible to amass that much silverware in three weeks.”

“You have editing permissions on those docs,” Rebecca reminded her.

“And even if everything were viable and Elliot managed to build a jetpack in time for the getaway, I wouldn’t be on board. Do the crime,” said Hana, waving a hand, “serve the time.”

“We have a prison rescue operations folder for you too,” said Elliot.

“You do?” Hana stopped, looking from him to Rebecca and back again with thinly veiled curiosity. She pulled on the tip of her ponytail, almost shy, and stepped towards him. “You never shared it with me.”

Rebecca slipped behind her and made cutting motions across her own neck with a finger. Hana couldn’t find out that they had Amnesty International on speed-dial for this very reason.

“That’s—because it hinges on you not knowing what phase one is,” Elliot said hastily.

Hana’s face fell.

“People who live in tin houses shouldn’t throw can openers,” Rebecca said, swinging the flamethrower around with irrepressible glee. “Dinner? I’m buying.”

✶✶✶

“Pizza, fast food, Chinese, Vietnamese…” Philip flitted through restaurant listings on his phone. “There’s a two-for-one at this Thai place.”

Contessa looked past him, out the window at the darkened alleyway. Where they were parked, there wasn’t much of a view beyond a side-door and some worn brickwork. But that was all they needed for now.

“No,” she said, bringing her legs closer together. A marked-up street map lay folded on her lap, along with a sealed orange manila envelope.

“Why not?”

“Thai doesn’t agree with me.”

Philip frowned, but didn’t pursue it. “Chinese, then.”

“Why don’t we go shoot ourselves some burgers instead?” she asked. She tipped her fedora and mimed firing a shotgun. “I’m shocked that you would deign to consume anything so base and impure as un-American cuisine, being such an American yourself. I’m sure you and your American beau take great American pleasure in eating your civilised American dinners together.”

He rolled his eyes. “The animosity between you two is unwarranted.”

“The animosity between us is being deliberately provoked. Not by me,” she clarified, in case there was any confusion.

He handed her a set of floor plans and she scanned them briefly, her mind tracing potential routes through various levels of the building.

"He's just trying to get a reaction," he said mildly.
"I know that," she said, tapping on a dead-end corridor twice in query, "and that is why I don't react."

"As was observable from your clenched fists." He nudged her finger up and to the right so she would notice an exit point.

"That was incipient rigor mortis from my internal death. Thank you for that, by the way."

"And the fuming?" asked Philip. "Livor mortis?"

She shuffled the papers back into order. In truth, she didn’t understand why she’d been so fazed. The past few weeks had been frustrating, not least of all because of persistent unbidden mental images accompanied by debilitating lower abdominal aches. She’d spent more than a few days in Philip’s dorm just trying to regain her equilibrium, but Jacob’s presence disrupted that haven. Then there was Rebecca to return to, that bouncing conundrum of a girl for whom silence was impossible and propriety optional, who contrived to keep Contessa up all night long with inane rambling. It wasn’t quite nearly as bad, if she had to be honest.

While she was preoccupied, a pair of gloves joined the map and envelope on her lap. She looked up to meet Philip’s eyes, and was both perplexed and irritated by the tenderness in them.

"I can tell him you were adopted legally," he said, "bring it up in casual conversation. He’ll stop."

"He will not," she replied brusquely, tugging the gloves on. "You drop that factoid into fucking pillow talk and he'll stop calling me an illegal immigrant and then start digging at the adopted part. Who adopted me? Why? What is my—" She lowered her voice. "Tragic backstory? I'd never hear the end of it."

She glanced at her watch, then opened the car door and leaned out. The asphalt was deteriorating. She grabbed one of the slabs that had broken off, but it was the wrong shape and lacked heft. She dropped it in favour of dislodging a slightly larger, globular rock. After a cursory test, she drew back into the car and, without turning, pressed the rock into Philip’s open palm. He gave it a few languid tosses, getting used to the weight.

"He doesn’t care about anything other than getting under my skin," she continued. "It’s obvious from how he’s latched onto the vague sense I don't belong here like a fucking lamprey because it's the closest thing his model of me has to a sensitive point."

That, and you.

"Aside from your contempt for Batman," Philip said, smiling a little. "You did give him that."

"You realise he wants to watch that turgid, paternalistic pablum because he thinks the Joker is deep, right? He fancies himself an ‘agent of chaos’," she said, making air quotes. "As in, his go-to screenname is 'Agent0fChaos,' and the 'of' starts with a zero instead of an ‘O’ because he's that shallow and unoriginal."

She peeled open the manila envelope, inclined it. A nondescript black flash drive slid into her hand. When she’d pocketed it, Philip opened his door and stepped out onto the street.

"That’s his troll account," he said, walking towards the building.
“All his accounts are by definition troll accounts.”

Philip approached the wall-mounted security camera at an oblique angle, staying out of frame. He took a few seconds to gauge the distance. Then he wound up his arm and pitched the stone at its lens.

The glass fractured.

A guard emerged to investigate, but before he could discover anything of note, she had a hand on his mouth and a forearm on his carotid ushering him unceremoniously to the ground. Philip was inside the building before the guard stopped struggling, and once she’d bound the guard with his own belt she followed suit.

The lights went out the second she hit the stairwell. That was Philip’s signal that he was in place and would cause a distraction in four minutes; time was of the essence. She jogged the rest of the way, up steps and down corridors, evading patrolling guards through hairpin reversals into unoccupied rooms.

Before she left each one, she unsheathed her reliable old tactical knife, which was a Gerber fixed-blade and not a balisong because she wasn’t a pretentious fuck, and slashed every electrical wire and network cable present with its serrated edge. She didn’t need to check if Philip had disconnected the power, for the same reason he didn’t need to check if she’d disabled the guard: she knew he had. She trusted him to have her back when it counted, and she would have his.

She struck half of the rooms on the first three stories and smashed a window in the last one to make it look like she’d exited. Satisfied that she had put on a convincing display of vandalism, she bolted up the last two storeys to the executive suite.

The destruction she’d just visited on the building’s infrastructure was meant to divert scrutiny from this. She picked the lock of one of the corner offices and approached the desk, a hand reaching into her pocket for the flash drive.

Contessa felt around the ports at the back of the computer until she found the cable connecting it to the keyboard. She unplugged it, inserted the flash drive in its place, and plugged the keyboard USB into the unused end of the drive. Unless someone went poking around, it would appear as nothing more than an extra long keyboard cable.

She made sure the setup was working as intended, checked that the door was locked from the inside, then hightailed it out the open window.

On the ledge, she kept her back to the glass and shuffled along until she spotted another open window on the second floor—one that had been closed when they’d pulled up. She reached it through a series of precipitous drops and climbed through.

Philip was there. His right hand was on the door handle, and his left gave her the signal for all-clear.

…”

The raccoons mocked her.

Bandit was too playful a word, when they left fallen bins and trails of trash in their wake. They taunted her with glimpses of striped tail, the gentle susurrations of leaves each time they fled punishment.
They observed her now. She sensed their eyes on her, their wild animal intelligence sizing her up even as she loomed tall and undaunted before their home.

Rebecca squared her shoulders, trained the nozzle on them. She turned on the blowtorch.

The bush was swallowed in a gout of blue flame.

“Retribution!” she shouted, and charged.

✶✶✶

They were seven streets away from their target and eating beef hotplate off a trivet in a Chinese restaurant when Contessa decided to explain.

“I’m concerned,” she admitted, splitting the last spring roll and giving Philip the other half.

He gripped it between his chopsticks, waiting for elaboration.

“He wants his first speaker back,” she said. Technically Philip had alternated between first and second, but he’d disliked the former position more. “The fact that he hasn’t changed the name from the Deb9 is evidence enough.”

He sighed and dipped the morsel into the hotplate to soak up the remaining pepper sauce. “It’s a legacy thing. The name is well-established in the circuit—it makes strategic sense to keep the reputation.”

“Ah. So this is about strategy. Enlightening, to know how much you still care about the strategy of a club you’re no longer a part of.”

“Of course I care. My boyfriend is the captain.”

“Exactly my concern. What’s going to happen when the reserves can’t make it one round?” Contessa asked. “The next time your boyfriend decides he needs a swing team?”

He took too long to respond.

“It doesn’t even have to involve you being on the floor. One day you’ll receive a text begging you to sneak into the tab room and fudge a few scores, just like old times.” She prodded a small side plate of bean sprouts over to him.

“I’ll say no.” Philip picked up a sprout and crunched on it, matching her stare. “We had a good run in high school, but I’m not going back to that life. Why is that so difficult for you to believe?”

“Nobody who says they’ve quit debate has ever successfully quit debate,” Contessa said. She pushed the last of her egg noodles around the bowl with her chopsticks. “Pip, it’s just aggravating that he masquerades as a nicotine patch when he is the human form of a Pyramid Non-Filter.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’s the second figure of speech you’ve used unironically today. I think you’re spending too much time around your roommate.”

“My roommate doesn’t have the monopoly on metaphors. Besides, at times she’s actually more sensible than you.” She blinked, and shook her head. “Yes, I did just say that. And you’re deflecting. Do you remember how unhappy you were?”

Philip didn’t respond, his blank expression unchanging. It was a low blow, she knew, to make him relive those memories.
“I don’t want to see you sucked into that again,” she said, simply.

Philip fell quiet for a spell. Eventually, his eyes refocused and he asked, “Have you informed Simon of the installation?”

“Not yet,” she lied. She’d already sent the text in the car, but she wanted to offer Philip a moment of privacy to think. He knew this, of course. As a token gesture she turned on her University (Social) burner phone, and was surprised to see a slew of new messages and missed calls. She didn’t have that many friends. The surprise faded when she saw all of them were from her roommate. She scrolled past the copypastas, chain spam, and pictures of interesting leaves, to the most recent texts.

> RCB: Detroit’s kind of next to Quebec isn’t it
> RCB: Purely hypothetical but if you were in prison and could only obtain one thing what would it be? Assume also that you have already used a spoon to dig a cavity in the wall of your cell and have filled it with bunker rations
> RCB: contessa the garden is on fire
> RCB: contessa
> RCB: contessz

The texts continued in this vein for eight more messages.

Damn it, Rebecca. Contessa was glad she had already revised her expectations, or she might have said that out loud. She checked the timestamps again—it hadn’t been long—and turned to Philip. “We have to get back to my dorm building. It’s on fire.”

“Damn it, Rebecca?” he asked. He was already rising from his seat, tucking a roll of bills under the trivet.

“Still more sensible than you.”

They sprinted to his car.

***

As it transpired, having a fire extinguisher was very different from knowing how to use one.

There was an acronym. PASS. Point, assess, spray... scream? That didn’t sound right. Point, aim... Sovietise satellite states.

Too many ‘S’s. Rebecca clutched the heavy red cylinder to her chest, wishing she had paid more attention to that one basic fire safety talk in ninth grade than to the Cold War class before it. The handle just wouldn’t depress, no matter how hard she pumped. Some kind of chain restricted the movement. Her hands were starting to hurt from trying. She shook the cylinder in frustration, turning it over and—

There were instructions. In multiple languages. The words swam, but she picked out: Pull.

P was Pull!

Balancing the cylinder on her knee, she fumbled with the handle, searching for anything that could conceivably be pulled—a pin! That ring was a pin the whole time. She hooked a finger through it and yanked, feeling as though she was activating a grenade. The chain snapped. With newfound hope, she wrangled the extinguisher into a stable spraying position.

Before she could try the handle again, her muscles gave out.
She dropped the cylinder.

She made a frantic grab for it, only to lose her footing and fall forward onto the ground. She watched as it rolled inexorably away from her, into the flames.

*Well, she thought, blanching, I guess I just stop, drop and rolled myself into hell?*

Then she had a revelation: *Oh, the fence is vestigial now.*

She’d misjudged the situation. Clearly this was a Galápagos finch type scenario, where instead of having beaks adapted to cracking seeds and nuts, the survivors were adapted to withstand fire—through flame-retardant coats or some other natural defense.

Now because Rebecca had played God, she would perish for her hubris.

Smoke soured in her lungs, stung her eyes. She could feel the heat toasting her skin from all sides, but she couldn’t see a way out.

Around her, twigs and branches and stems curled into blackened stubs. Leaves twisted and crackled across burning blades of grass. They’d *expel* her for this.

She crawled to one surviving patch, fear gripping her at the thought. Her mind spun horror reels—she’d be barbecued alive, she’d be kicked out of school, she’d never get to tell Contessa how pretty she was, her corpse would be thrown into prison without so much as a can opener for company, her parents would never visit for the mortification. And then the raccoons would come, eyes aglow with malice, chittering over her expelled, imprisoned, charbroiled body, and they would poke at it with popsicle sticks as they laughed and laughed.

She looked around and spied an antifreeze bottle by the flamethrower. Maybe she should rub the last of the fluid onto her skin. Just to expedite matters.

Then somewhere from the blaze came a low hissing sound, stopping and starting, and the flames began to die in swathes. White clouds of something like dense smoke billowed out. She shut her eyes. When she opened them, there was no more fire.

In the midst of the clouds, she beheld a dark figure striding out towards her. It was wearing a suit and a fedora, and carried itself in a distinctly pine marten-like fashion—that of one in the process of stalking its prey.

Contessa looked down at her, holding the very fire extinguisher that had been sacrificed to the inferno. Her face was unreadable.

After a moment, she extended a gloved hand.

Seeing the black leather made Rebecca’s blood run hot. She didn’t feel up to standing. But the alternative was staying on the ground, so she grabbed the hand and found herself hoisted roughly to her feet. She stumbled into Contessa’s chest.

Contessa drew a breath like a dagger, sudden and sharp. She waited for Rebecca to steady herself, then let go of her hand and pushed the fire extinguisher into her arms. “Rebecca,” she said.

“Um, hi, Contessa.” Rebecca straightened, before attempting the herculean task of meeting Contessa’s eyes. She only managed half a second.

Contessa didn’t seem to care. Her voice was dangerously soft. “You like words, don’t you?”
Rebecca’s own voice was a squeak. She knew she had to be blushing; she raised the cylinder to hide it. “Um, yes.”

“If I were to look up the word ‘irresponsible’ in the dictionary, what would I see?”

“...a picture of me?” Rebecca hazarded meekly. The back of her shoe bumped up against the garden wall.

“No,” said Contessa, “I would see a definition for the word ‘irresponsible’, and it would aptly describe you. I would see synonyms, and they would also describe you. Do you want me to get a dictionary and show you?”

“I, um, I have one.”

“Then perhaps you should familiarise yourself with its antonym.” Contessa’s mouth twisted. There was no mirth to it, only simple pity—as if to drive home what a foolish little girl Rebecca was for believing she could end the raccoon threat in anything but an all-out conflagration. “I’d ask you what you were thinking, but I’m afraid you’ll illustrate with kerosene.”

Rebecca braced herself for an outburst, but Contessa only turned and walked off towards the gate to address someone. Blond hair and glasses… Philip.

Philip waited patiently to be let in. Once he was, he conducted a circuit of the ruined garden, practically strolling as he spoke into his phone.

Contessa walked back to Rebecca. “Everything will be replaced and papered over by the morning.”

No death, no expulsion, no humiliation, no posthumous conviction, no raccoons lording Roman triumphs over her. In one fell swoop, Contessa had snuffed out those futures like so much… fire, actually. There was nothing she could say or do to repay this debt.

Nothing she could say.

“Contessa,” Rebecca said, breathlessly, “thank you.”

“I’m not doing this for you,” said Contessa. Her eyes surveyed the rows of dorms above. “There are a few things I would rather not come to light, should there be an investigation into your little escapade. I consider this a favour. And Rebecca?”

Rebecca looked up at her, her insides stirring with a blend of fear and wonder.

“A lawyer,” Contessa said, tapping the brim of her fedora. “I would obtain a lawyer.”

Still hugging the fire extinguisher, Rebecca watched her go. Only later did it dawn on her that Contessa had answered her hypothetical prison question.

✶✶✶

Inside another dorm building across campus, Contessa knocked on a door.

She and Philip had just finished hunting down witnesses and talking them out of filing an incident report. If Rebecca’s estimates about the speed of pencil-pushing here were correct, she’d have six months to find out if they’d missed one. The emergency landscapers were already at work, furiously labouring to reconstruct the garden before sunrise.

That was what stumped her the most about this entire affair: If Rebecca wanted to burn down their
dorm, she should have just asked. It would have taken some effort to prepare alibis, stage an accident, minimise casualties and arrange substitute accommodations, but no more than it had to replace the shrubbery. Why she had decided to do everything backwards was beyond Contessa.

But a favour was a favour, and it was not Contessa’s to reason why.

In her arms was a handcrafted flamethrower concealed by a layer of canvas cloth. Rebecca had refused to divulge the name of its maker, because ‘snitches got third degree burns’, but she’d happily provided the address when Contessa offered to return it.

A girl in a white singlet and camo pyjama pants answered the door. She rubbed her face sleepily.

“Good morning,” said Contessa.

“Good… what—who are you?” Her eyes roved over Contessa’s face, her suit. They alighted on the bulky package she was carrying, and flickered with sudden understanding and panic. She lunged for the knob.

Contessa blocked the door with her foot, preventing the girl from slamming it shut. She extended the flamethrower to her. “It’s an impressive piece of work,” Contessa said. “In future I would prefer if you kept it out of the hands of inept and overeager arsonists, but perhaps we can do business.”

The girl eyed her warily and didn’t take it. “I don’t know how you got that but before you handcuff or extort me, I need to consult someone about a folder.”

“I’m not law enforcement, and if I were extorting you, you’d know.” Contessa removed the flamethrower from its canvas bag and propped the former up against the wall. Then she slipped a white card of quality stock out of her pocket. “If you need something, contact me.”

The girl looked nervously at the weapon now fully exposed outside her dorm. She took the card and examined it. Her eyes widened. “You’re Contessa.”

Contessa’s eyebrows rose. “You’re aware of me?”

"Rebecca talks about you a lot," she said.

Oh.

"Rebecca talks a lot about a lot of things," she responded evenly. "I hope she's at least professional about what she shares."

"No." The girl shook her head. She thought for a moment, then shook it again, more strenuously. "Not professional."

Contessa closed her eyes and privately wrestled the urge to sigh. By this point, a conversation about information security was in order.

The sun was peeking out from the horizon when she arrived back at the garden to dismiss the workers. The beginning signs of fatigue made themselves known in her legs and shoulders.

As she started up the steps, she heard rustling. She went to investigate, and found two raccoons cowering in the scorched branches of a bougainvillea bush.

Not so long ago she’d tried to get close to one of the stray cats roaming the campus, just to see what was so special about the creatures that entitled them to the undivided attention of their owner every
single evening. It hadn’t welcomed her advances, to say the least.

But these…

She looked down at the canvas bag she was holding, then regarded the raccoons speculatively. They nursed singed tails. Their eyes had seen war.

They would be more compliant.

She’d go to bed. But first, she would pay Jacob’s dorm a visit.

Chapter End Notes

Muchest of thanks to maroon_sweater for amazing betaing. You are inimitable. <3
At twelve-thirty on a Wednesday afternoon, Elliot wandered the cafeteria and thought about what he couldn’t have for lunch.

Between him and the serving stations stood a long white triptych that almost touched the ceiling. All three of its rectangular faces were covered in facts. Facts about meat. Facts about rice, printed in cereal-box format. Facts about dairy, bordered by colourful bovine vectors. No orderly diagrams, no Dante-esque circles of sustenance.

If the food pyramid hadn’t been a Big Ag racket, it would still be peddled on college campuses. Elliot’s elementary school cafeteria had had a food pyramid set into the wall and protected from grubby hands by a triangular pane of plexiglass. Models of ingredients had decorated the shelves behind it, grouped by their importance in a person’s diet. Generic soda cans and a cupcake had crowned supreme, while the layers below had featured T-bone steaks and turkey drumsticks, wedges of swiss cheese, courgettes and tomatoes. Those, however, hadn’t been the shiny preserved dishes arranged on the backlit displays of Korean restaurants. They had been the cheap molded plastic toys littered around the playrooms of polyclinics, congested with dust and mucus, waiting always for their next victims.

In retrospect, he should have known. Infographics lied. But they almost always told Elliot lies he wanted to hear or else was used to hearing. The food pyramid told him he could eat bread by the loaf and pasta by the pile. But Elliot hadn’t seen a pyramid since seventh grade, so he had concluded that it was a conspiracy concocted by the corn-people.

A shame. He’d liked corn.

At least this wall of nutritional information would, his friends had agreed, make the serving area a chokepoint in the event of a zombie invasion. Brains and cruciferous vegetables were a logical mix, when you had nowhere else to go.

Elliot turned from the wall to face the lunch-hour hustle. A spike of trepidation shot up his spine. He wasn’t in high school anymore—like the food pyramid, the old hierarchies had dissolved into an orrery. But he could still identify the cliques, and he still had to navigate them.

Passing the football team, he weaved his way between the rival bible study factions. The Old Testament and New Testament insisted on sitting at tables across from each other so they could glower into the divide, which was lined with goblets of holy water that neither was permitted to cross. Behind the boisterous improv table was the debate table, where the team was sullenly nursing bottles in brown paper bags. Bloodied cue cards and binders were strewn all over the table. One girl had her jaw wired shut, while the boy slumped beside her sported a black neck brace.

Elliot slid past another debate girl, who looked unscathed until she leered at him with a blank expanse of skin where her right eye should have been. A closer look revealed that it was a flesh-tone eyepatch.

_Huh, _he thought. _What’d they do, jump off the podium in a synchronised saving throw?_

He spotted his own group without much trouble. The benches belonging to the central tables were all anchored to the floor. This relegated his friends to the long table in front of the double doors; it had loose chairs they could push aside for David’s wheelchair.
David slouched against the contoured back of his chair, arms folded behind his head as he spoke. His heavy brows and pockmarked bulldog cheeks made him look like a police mugshot, but everywhere. He wore a summer-weight navy sweatshirt with the hood up and the sleeves rolled to the elbows. Even his too-cool-for-sensible-attire attitude buckled beneath urban heat island weather.

Hana sat next to him, sipping the water that had melted off the ice cubes of her empty drink. She’d paired a cream blouse with an olive drab skirt, and she sat stiffly.

“Blue,” David was saying, “or a glowing green.”

“Yes, David. That’s not at all disturbing and unnatural,” Hana replied.

She flipped through a thin stack of index cards bound by a metal ring—similar to the cards he’d seen on the debate table. Maybe she was studying. Elliot had never found flashcards particularly effective. But then, so few of his tests demanded memorisation. He took the seat across her and unzipped the pouch of his bag to get his packed lunch out.

“They said the same of onanism, but that never stopped the frottage in the locker rooms,” David said.

Hana scrunched up her nose. “Call me a prude, but I miss the days when I thought my JROTC officer was yelling at the boys for unsanctioned art projects.” She looked up. “Hi.”

“Hey.” Elliot returned her smile. He kept it up while surveying the contents of his lunchbox. Brussel sprouts were good. Vitamin K. He’d written it in his dietary plan. “What’s up?”

“Did you see the cultural appreciation club stand outside?” Hana asked, gesturing at the double doors behind them.

Elliot shook his head; he’d come in from the other side.

“They’re giving out these bowls of red porridge—”

“The porridge is red,” David stressed.

“It doesn’t look that bad,” Hana said.

David leaned forward. “It’s colitis congee. I was saying if you have to have coloured porridge, you should take your lead from household cleaner commercials, not abattoirs.”

“I dunno, no one finds detergent appetis—” Elliot said, and trailed off. He and Hana exchanged glances as they simultaneously remembered the first time Rebecca did laundry.

“Not the product,” David said, rolling his eyes. “The stains they vanish. They’re usually blue or some other colour that doesn’t resemble something… biological.”

“Please, sir, I want some more radioactive puke?” Hana asked, thrusting out her cupped hands.

David shrugged and continued carving into a slab of well done mystery meat. It, along with the plate and side of fries, was steeped in tar-thick pepper sauce.

Elliot couldn’t help but think that if David wanted to demonstrate the superiority of his own lunch, he should have picked something that didn’t have the texture and consistency of bitumen. “How would you make it glow green?”

“I don’t know, jellyfish? You’re the hotshot engineer,” David said. “Figure it out.”
He chewed the idea over. As with all his ideas, he wound up at the conclusion that he would never be able to obtain enough phosphorus or successfully market its inclusion in food. He sighed. “Not my specialty.”

“Pigment capsules built into the interior of the bowl,” Hana proposed.

She was going into heat-activated firing mechanisms when a cheerful voice cut in.

“You’re all missing the obvious.”

Elliot’s smile broadened in a grin, and he twisted around to bump fists with Rebecca. Her bright eyes and flushed cheeks made him think she’d been running, but she wasn’t dressed for it and he didn’t know why she would have.

“Two words: Mood. Lighting,” Rebecca said, setting her tray of food on the adjacent table so she could gesticulate unhindered. “Instant atmosphere, and you get a choice between fluorescent red, fluorescent green, fluorescent blue...”

“That’s a lot of trouble to go to,” Hana said, and Elliot privately concurred.

“I’ve been doing it to the pantry in my dorm,” Rebecca chatted on. “Yesterday was a fluorescent yellow day and Contessa said her turkey sandwich tasted citrusy, which is either some wicked synaesthetic thing or the new lemongrass air freshener. I’m gonna try it again soon and see if I can make her taste grapes. Can I put this here? Floor’s dirty.”

Without waiting for a response, she grabbed a chair from the table beside her, dropped her backpack onto it, and wedged the chair between Hana and David. They grumbled but made way.

She circled around to join Elliot on the other side of the table, taking her tray with her, and began digging into a bowl of red rice porridge with gusto.

“Do you even know what culture you’re appreciating right now?” Elliot teased.

“One that probably serves this in the skulls of its enemies,” David said.

Hana’s fingers flashed behind her head. She tied her hair up with a black elastic, undid it, and tied it up again.

Rebecca watched her finetune her ponytail. “Your interview’s this afternoon?”

“I was just leaving.” Hana tucked a lock behind her ear, unsatisfied but recognising the futility. She stood and slung her satchel over a shoulder.

“It’s at two, right?” David held up a hand. “Don’t go yet.”

“Not that I’m not flattered, but why?”

“Because,” he said, “if you’re there early, you’ll have to wait in the lobby. You’ll whip yourself into a nervous frenzy sitting still.”

“Yeah, he’s talked about this. You have to walk into the building seven minutes before it starts,” Elliot said. “Five minutes finding the room, two minutes getting ready outside the door.”

Hana frowned. “That doesn’t leave much buffer.”

“It’s so you don’t have time to panic. I’ve had a lot of job interviews,” David said. “I’m good at
“them, trust me.”

“She’s also really good at first dates,” Elliot added, earning an irritated look.

“I find your metrics for success at these endeavours extremely dubious,” Hana said. But she sat back down.

“This is actually pretty good. Anyone want some? No? Okay. Also, I hope you don’t mind if my classmate joins us,” Rebecca said, waving someone over. She glanced around her, then slapped her knee. “Oh, there are no seats. This is such a stroke of misfortune. Nobody could have foreseen this. Hana, my bag?”

Hana passed it to her over the table. Rebecca promptly dumped it on the floor.

Elliot looked at her, puzzled, and turned back to see Clarence settling down in front of him. He grinned, despite the minor panic eddying in his chest along with the usual pain. He channelled it all into an expression meant to convey, I can’t believe you’ve done this.

Rebecca squeezed his knee under the table—partly reassuring, partly I know you didn’t text him back. “Hey guys, this is Clarence.”

“Hi!” Elliot said.

“Hello,” Hana said, and David merely grunted.

The group sank back into awkward silence. Rebecca spooned more red porridge into her mouth.

“Like watching someone eat their own oesophageal lining,” David muttered.

“So, Clarence, what are your interests?” Rebecca asked, swallowing hurriedly. “I already told these folks about tennis and the yacht and Greek stuff.”

Clarence spoke tentatively. “I like… whittling.”

Hana perked up. “Wood?”

“Soap,” Elliot supplied, spearing a brussel sprout.

Hana, at least, kept her mask of interest in place while Clarence talked about his stint as a Boy Scout and the opportunities for decorative carving that entailed. David looked around the table, vexed.

“Well, what’s the point of that?” he asked. “You’re just making the bar smaller. What a waste.”

“It,” Clarence said. “Um.” He looked down, blinking at the tiny anchors on his polo shirt.

Before Elliot could respond angrily, Rebecca said, “Oh! Since Clarence has been nice enough to tell us about himself, we could all share about ourselves.”

She spread her palms. David shook his head and made various negatory signals with his hand to his throat.

“Not a good plan.”

“I don’t support this at all.”

“People in your life probably don’t tell you this enough, but you’re literally the worst.”
Elliot narrowed his eyes at David. “You can’t just say all of that and pretend we did.”

“I wasn’t speaking on your behalf,” David said. “I just left a pause for you all to fill in your own objections.”

Hana glanced at her watch. She shrugged and smiled. “I don’t have any.”

“Hana,” Rebecca said, “is interested in metallurgy and woodworking, the manufacture of weaponry, the hands-on preservation of endangered birds of prey, and fire.”

“You talking about the time she hugged an eagle?” Elliot asked.

Rebecca nodded, eyes sparkling.

“I shot it,” Hana said.

Rebecca’s eyes clouded over. David mouthed, what the fuck Hana, before whirling his wheelchair around and ramming the left wheel into a table leg, hard. Clarence crossed his fist over his chest. Elliot felt his own heart break.

“I’m sorry, I misspoke. I did not shoot it.” Hana said, her own eyes brimming. “I did not. Even if I did, bald eagles are immortal and invulnerable to random acts of euthanasia.” She looked to Elliot for reprieve from Rebecca’s increasingly porcelain smile, and found nothing but disappointment. She wilted and placed her face in her hands. “Maybe you should do my interview for me.”

Elliot rubbed Rebecca’s back consolingly, as she quivered with unshed tears. “Go on?”

“Okay,” Rebecca said, stacking up the pieces of her composure. “Okay. So. Elliot enjoys gaming, lasers, conspiracy theories, and subterranean medicinal horticulture.”

This had to be revenge for the roommate thermos thing. Elliot withdrew his hand from her back and pointedly buried it in his trouser pocket.

Clarence beamed. “I also enjoy lasers.”

“I don’t enjoy nerds,” David said, popping a cube of meat onto his tongue.

“David’s hobbies include recreational intoxication, nihilism, scaling snow-capped mountains, cocaine, scrapbooking, and wild oat cultivation.”

Dilettante, Elliot thought.

“Snow-capped mountains?” Clarence asked.

“Not safe for work,” Elliot said. “It involves snortable glue.” And cocaine.

Hana lifted her face from her hands. “All glue is snortable.”

“I think you mean sniffable,” Rebecca said.

“I don’t know what I mean. I don’t snort or sniff glue or make snuff films. I also don’t kill bald eagles, so please stop thinking that. It was a tranquiliser. It just—made it tranquil forever. I’m sorry.”

Rebecca looked away. “America is the one you should be apologising to.”

David abruptly shot up, as far as he could without standing, and thumped the table. “I don’t
scrapbook!’” he shouted.

The ice in Hana’s cup was still rattling from the impact when the sirens began. They blared from the loudspeakers in insistent waves.

Rebecca clamped her hands over her ears. “Drill!”

A collective sigh went round the table, as each of them slipped under it and pulled the chairs in after them. All around them, students did the same.

David remained where he was.

“Guess it’s just you and me,” he said, in a gravelly voice he presumably saved for flirting.

After a moment, Elliot realised he was speaking to the bowl of porridge.

“See, if I were the least popular girl at prom, you’re what I would be looking out for above the stage.”

Chapter 5: Disaster and Other Easy Recipes

A silhouette framed by whitewashed pillars, she lingered at the top of the stairs in a dress that swayed just above her knees. Her pale hands were folded in front of her, and her dark gaze swept languidly over the field.

Once upon a time Philip had been certain his closet door swung only one way, but then she’d come along and installed double-acting hinges. It wasn’t just that she was pretty, because she was, or that she held an unassuming, remote elegance far away from the time and place they inhabited, like a classical portrait, because she did. Anyone could have aesthetically pleasing body proportions and symmetrical facial structure. Parenthetically, about sixty-five million, one hundred and forty thousand people were in the top twentieth percentile of physical attractiveness in the United States.

But it took a special kind of talent to be able to wear a sundress and still look like the kind of person who kept a pair of custom brass knuckles in their glove compartment.

He stood at the base of the steps, one hand on a rail, one foot in the grass. His heart thudded, knowing it was done for.

They locked eyes. He spun around and started walking in the opposite direction.

Inwardly, he cursed. She was too good at forcing eye contact the moment he saw her. His only hope now was to walk at an even pace, slowly enough that she wouldn’t think he was fleeing, but not so slowly that she could catch up to him before he’d notice. He was glad he’d chosen this field to practise his pitching on instead of the baseball diamond across campus. Home field advantage, sort of.

Walk.

Walk.

Is she behind me?

Just walk.

On level terrain, he had the leg up. He ran faster, had a longer stride than she did, and knew the shortcuts to several hiding places in both the auditorium to his left and the cafeteria to his right. If
truly pressed, he could lose her in the latter—it was peak lunch hour, so there would be no deficit of obstacles and meat-shields to put between them.

And there was always the option of running ahead into traffic.

Philip slowed down to listen for footsteps and track the flow of air currents so he could triangulate her position. The vehicles roaring down the road made that harder.

Ludicrous. It was all ludicrous. He turned his head to assure himself that she wasn’t pursuing him, and of course she wasn’t. She was a mature adult who didn’t launch into DEFCON 1 over one missed coffee. Maybe two, but not one. So he hadn’t been able to make their meeting earlier. She wasn’t going to castrate him. He turned back.

She was in front of him.

His heart leapt into his throat. He planted one foot behind himself to keep from staggering.

“Hello, Pip,” Contessa said. “How nice of you to show.”

He hated when she did that. Hated it so much. The bleachers were over two hundred feet away and she didn’t even sound winded. How...

She was waiting for a greeting.

“Contessa,” he said, unable to muster one. “You look—you’re wearing something else. Special occasion?”

Contessa smoothed down her oleander-print dress. Philip noted with fermenting dread that she did so out of some learned coquettish impulse rather than any present need to unwrinkle her clothing. “No. I was bored.”

They walked back to the bleachers. On the way, Philip searched the area for ziplines.

“Did you come from Chemistry?” he asked, aware that she had ten minutes of lab left. She never skipped Chemistry, yet here she was. DEFCON 2.

“Let’s do lunch,” she said, producing a bottled energy drink from behind a stone bench.

Numbly, he reached for it, but with the wrong hand. Contessa’s eyes flickered to the white bandage encircling his wrist. Her jaw tensed.

“Allow me.”

“My hands are uninjured. I was going to practise pitch—”

Contessa twisted the cap off with a loud crack.

“—all right.”

She shook off the froth before it could bubble over and splash on either of them, and handed him the bottle.

“‘Isotonic’,” he read off the label. “She could save others from dehydration, but not herself.”

Contessa did not appreciate the attempt at levity. He drank.
“Have you eaten at all today?”

He shrugged, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his unbandaged hand. “I’ll get something from the vending machine.”

It was precisely the wrong answer. Contessa disappeared behind one of the pillars. She emerged with a container so immense that its claim to the Tupperware brand was only a technicality. At her behest, he levered open the lid.

The smell assaulted him first—the oppressive, raw scent of mung beans grown in damp cotton and left to decay. He rotated it, wary of what dwelt in its murky recesses. Glistening yellow chunks bobbed in and out of the oily film that had congealed on the surface.

Only repeated exposure to this brew over the years allowed Philip to recognise its true name: lentil and potato soup.

“Oh,” he said faintly. “You shouldn't have.”

“I did, because it was plain that you had no time for breakfast in the throes of all the important business you must have been attending to.” Contessa sat down on a stone bench, palms resting on either side of her. Her gaze lay fixed on the dining hall. “They were serving some sort of offal stew outside the cafeteria, but I’ve always thought that was more of a dinner food.”

What were lentils? He knew they were a legume, but he didn’t really know what that was or why. Contessa herself professed to dislike them. For a lark, he imagined himself telling her that the first time he’d said lentil and potato soup was his favourite, he had just been mocking her for being fussy. But then it would dawn on her that he’d been lying the subsequent times, and the effects of that would cascade.

“Is there something wrong?” Contessa asked.

He shook his head, mute. A bead of sweat trickled down his collarbone and soaked into his shirt.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I am very touched by the gesture,” he said diplomatically.

Contessa was still studying his expression. He resealed the container with deliberate care, and kept himself from forcing a smile he didn’t feel.

“You’ve already had a lot of lentil and potato soup,” she said.

I once consumed a tureen of lentil and potato soup, he thought. Absolutely overflowing. It was the day he’d gotten a 98 on a precalc test for ‘not showing his work’. He had been sad, but not unduly or excessively.

Later, Contessa had gone home and filled the largest bowl she could find with homemade lentil and potato soup. She’d invited him over and monitored as he downed spoonful after spoonful of the hateful stuff. Contessa could do many things, but she could not cook, and she could not measure proportionate serving sizes. The whole experience had been akin to eating the jellified remains of a pygmy hippopotamus, at gunpoint.

“No,” he said.

Contessa patted the spot beside her, once, twice, the flat of her palm like a judge’s gavel. He sat
Four kids had staked out the field and were tossing around a frisbee. Normally Philip would work out formations they should attempt for optimal catching and throwing, but his mind was elsewhere.

Maybe it was the way she’d opened the bottle, or the way she’d left only enough space for him to sit without falling off, but the air between them held a tension that portended imminent violence. An uneasiness roiled at the bottom of his stomach, dull and dense as pith. He was sure it would only mature and deepen over the course of this interaction.

“I spent the morning cooking,” Contessa said, “as I had nothing better to be doing from 0600 hours to 0630. The recipe called for two cups of water, which I determined to be roughly equivalent to one and a half ‘I Heart Unicorns’s. I tripled the volume so you could save some for dinner and breakfast tomorrow.”

Cups had nothing to do with her roommate’s industrial vat of a coffee mug, he wanted to say. Even if Rebecca wasn’t using it anymore—which, yes, was an odd thing for Contessa to have both taken note of and relayed to him.

Instead he said, “Oh?”

Contessa crossed her legs, shifted towards him till their elbows brushed. Philip’s entire world shrank, narrowing to that line of contact. She could probably feel the heat steaming off of his skin, if not see it mapped out like the predator from that one film.

“I didn’t have anything to do this morning,” she said again, the note of confusion wholly orchestrated. “Since I skipped Chemistry. I never skip Chemistry. I plan my truancy schedule around that class.”

“Cooking is a kind of chemistry,” he offered as a positive.

She turned to him, squinting. Then she stomped on his olive branch. “No. It’s not.”

“Okay.”

“Unlike cooking, you can do chemistry incorrectly.”

He nodded quickly.

She looked displeased, like she thought he was only agreeing to pacify her. “You can dress ingredients up however you want without any ill effects because they’re fundamentally carbs, proteins and fats. Nutrients are nutrients. Chicken is chicken. Calories in, calories out. It doesn’t make a whit of difference whether you poach or hard boil or microwave the chicken; you’re just making it hot to kill the bacteria.”

She punched her hand for emphasis. Philip commended himself on not flinching.

“Don’t need to go to culinary school to learn that,” he murmured.

“Culinary school.” Contessa scoffed, grinding her fist into her palm for needlessly protracted emphasis. “The only reason professional chefs have a job is that people get a thrill out of paying ‘experts’ to tell them their food is ‘frozen’. I rarely cook, and I can tell when food is frozen.”

“Is it when you bought it at the frozen foods section?”
“It’s when there is a layer of ice crystals on it,” Contessa said. “I simply rinse it off and half the work is already done.”

She hadn’t mentioned the missed meeting yet, aside from the crack about not having anything to do at six. She was angry enough to be indirect. DEFCON 1.75.

The frisbee wheeled into the air on a failed vertical toss, riding the breeze into a sunken patch of weeds. The kids laughed uproariously at the girl who had thrown it. The Tupperware container burned in his lap and he clutched it all the harder. Giant hydrogen clouds blew by overhead. Empires rose and were swept away in tsunamis of lava. Sirens wailed in the distance, their call like the guttural death-bleats of an animal ensnared.

It took him a while to realise the sirens were real, and that they were coming from outside his own head. He watched with detached concern as the kids scurried off the field and out of sight.

Contessa acknowledged neither the sound nor the fleeing students. She got up and walked around the bench, where she stood for an uncomfortably long time. After about two minutes of sirens and gritted teeth, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re tense,” she said.

Philip’s instincts screamed through megaphones for him to extricate her fingers from his body by whatever means necessary. “Tired,” he admitted.

“Did you have a bad night?” Contessa did her best impression of a person who could experience sympathy. “You weren’t in your dorm or your apartment, so I assumed you were working late.”

“I slept in my own bed,” he said truthfully.

“Then you should really throw your mattress out.” Her breath smoked over the nape of his neck. “You feel like you’ve been lying on strychnine needles.”

Independent of her suggestion, he decided to throw his mattress out at earliest convenience.

Contessa removed her hand, leaving a phantom impression of warmth. Before he could exhale, she planted her finger on the space between his shoulder blades. The finger traced figure eights in the thin cotton clinging to his back.

“Pip,” she said, in a tone that brooked no retort, “take off your shirt.”

“***

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Clarence said. “Why does the earth’s core care about the purity of the people that go into it?”

“That’s volcanoes,” Elliot said, hooking an arm around Rebecca’s shoulders. “Also, she’s kidding.”

He slapped her hand, which had been poised in an ‘O.K.’ signal, before she could complete the gesture by sticking her other hand’s pointer finger through it.

Rebecca furrowed her brow, but she didn’t correct him on either count. “Ha ha?”

Clarence looked more lost than ever. “Why do volcanoes—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hana said. Facing the door, she sat apart from the three of them. “David isn’t a virgin.”
David’s legs twitched and grazed the underside of the table. “I can hear you.”

“Your three kids can hear their next sibling’s mom,” Hana said.

Clarence’s eyes widened, and he looked to Elliot for confirmation. “Three kids?”

“Now you know why I’m okay with dying in an earthquake,” David said.

“Sorry,” Rebecca said, chastened. “It was just a last resort. I mean, since you’re already out there.”

“It’s fine. I’ve resigned myself to being the sole casualty of all natural disasters that might come to pass. Made my peace with it.”

Hana sniffed. “Stop martyring yourself. Obviously we wouldn’t really throw you into the fault. Who would replace the toner in the library copier?”

Rebecca jumped in. “Or rescue the cats that keep getting stuck in the elm in front of the humanities building?”

“Or seduce the barista for group discounts on frappés,” Elliot said.

“Sometimes I wonder,” David said, “if I have worthwhile qualities unrelated to being the campus factotum.”

Rebecca was the first to open her mouth. She shut it with a click and looked away, embarrassed. Elliot stared at a stray spaghetti strand on the floor. Clarence, exempt from any unspoken sense of obligation, grinned vacantly into space.

Hana poked her head out from between the table legs.

“Enforcers,” she muttered. “What do they need enforcers for? Do they think people are going to try to sneak out while the ground is collapsing beneath their feet? How long do these things last?”

“Um, you know, it kind of varies.” Rebecca elected not to mention that if there were students patrolling the area, the drill might last up to an hour. “We should play a game.”

“Under a table during an earthquake isn’t the most conducive for that,” David pointed out.

“Your face isn’t the most conducive for that,” Hana said, and Elliot proffered her a high-five she didn’t accept.

Rebecca frowned, looking at Hana in worry and consternation. It wasn't like her to be mean to David. Elliot, she could understand—well, not exactly. She didn’t know why he was mean to David. He’d told her it was normal among guys. But he had also told her David was less a guy and more a Russian nesting doll that you kept opening and opening and opening only to realise you had frittered away the best years of your life opening a doll that was hollow inside.

“It could be the last time we get to do this,” she argued. “We’re not near the epicentre, because we’re still alive, which means the real danger is getting hit by falling debris. If we end up trapped under wreckage, our sanity will be the first to go.”

“No, that would be the sensation in our extremities.” Hana tugged the hem of her skirt over her knees. “Followed by our kidneys.”

“Then we need to distract ourselves from nerve damage and renal failure,” Rebecca said, with jazz hands. “Any ideas?”
“I have a pencil. For tic-tac-toe?” Clarence said.

“It has to be verbal so David can play.”

David rolled his wheelchair back. “I really don’t have to.”

“Would You Rather?” Elliot suggested.

“Yes! I love that game!” Rebecca said. “Best icebreaker.”

“The best icebreaker is Burning Bridges,” David said.

“What? That’s a terrible icebreaker,” Elliot said, frowning. He went to three robotics camps a summer; he should know. “It’s not even an icebreaker. You only play that on the last night of camp when you know you’re never going to see these people again. It’s a refreezer.”

“Exactly.”

“You can’t refreeze when you and your best buds are dying six feet beneath post-earthquake rubble,” Elliot said.

“What if I’d rather be thrown into the fault than play a game with you people?”

“Yeah!” Rebecca cheered. “That’s the spirit!”

✶✶✶

Contessa took Philip’s lack of resistance as invitation to spread him out on his stomach. She would have also taken resistance as invitation, but fewer bones got broken this way. Releasing the nelson hold, but still crushing his torso against the hard stone bench, Contessa retrieved a vial from the belt strapped to her thigh.

“No pockets,” she explained, uncorking it and dribbling a healthy amount of clear oil onto her palm.

She’d just happened to have that with her. EDC: taser, utility knife, Faraday wallet, burner phones, little black book.

Massage oils? No.

This is premeditated, he thought, staring straight ahead. He recalled she had studied massage techniques in Japan, the same place she’d learnt to cleave a man in twain, and hoped there were no contact poisons that smelt like eucalyptus.

Contessa finally had enough of wringing the air from his diaphragm and shifted back to straddle his legs. The pressure on his quads was overwhelming. Then she shifted again, and the balls of her thumbs dug into his back, the full weight of her upper body behind them. Philip’s breaths became a long drawn-out wheeze. Doubtless she was frustrated she couldn’t breach the first layer of tissue.

He had to proceed with caution. Philip ordered his body to relax, to submit to her ministrations.

As a rule, Contessa didn’t get aggressive when she was angry. Nor did she become cold and withdrawn, as Philip himself tended to. Instead she became domestic. Nurturing. She didn’t understand her emotions, and so she sought to tame them—bludgeoning them into submission instead of managing them, until she became this smouldering caldera of neuroses that sometimes erupted into reckless flower arrangement and bouts of confused cross-stitch.
It saddened him a little, seeing her recognise feelings in herself and, fearing their intensity, claim some deep internal responsibility to prevent them from hurting the people she cared about.

Contessa kneaded. She was familiar with every inch of his anatomy, not perversely or abstractly, but thoroughly. Intimately. She knew where his nerve clusters were, and her fingers played across them, skimming and probing in a danse macabre of tease-and-release over slick skin, until he groaned from the sensation.

She reserved the greatest pressure for his muscles. She worked away industriously at the sinewy bands and thick cords around his back and shoulders, knowing from observation and experience how they were connected and how they flexed and snarled and hardened with salt. How they might hurt. How they might heal.

Contessa knew where his scars were, from the dark parallel streaks across his shoulder blades to the silvery raised crescent on his calf to the puckered trench on the inside of his lower right arm, near the pit. She knew how he had gotten most of them, and had patched a few up herself.

There was that element to it, he couldn’t forget. She had to have reminders that he was this fragile, wanted this portrait of naked need laid out before her. To have some assurance he wouldn’t abandon her.

But the last time he psychoanalysed her, she’d reflexively knitted him a sweater, while he was in it. Would an angry person crochet these pleasant sentiments? she’d communicated with each jab of blunted needle. Would an angry person clothe and feed you, destroy your enemies for you?

The sudden release of pressure on his legs and an abrupt gust of air on his backside jolted him back to the present.

She was lifting his waistband—both. He reached behind himself and pressed his pants flat.

“What are you doing?” he said, looking over his shoulder.

“I found a new technique,” Contessa said with an unconvincingly bright kick to her voice, “for relaxing your gluteal muscles.”

She flexed her fingers. At some point she’d snapped on a latex glove.

“My gluteal muscles are plenty relaxed,” he told her, and clenched like his life depended on it.

“I could double-check.”

“I have someone to do that for me.”

She scowled.

“Contessa, no.”

“No?”

“No.”

She let go of his pants and dismounted.

He got up from the bench without bothering to conceal his haste and pulled his shirt back on. The fabric felt abnormally dry and hot sliding over his tender skin, hotter still once it was on. His chest ached in a way that made him think she’d bruised it, but that dissipated once he finished stretching
his limbs.

He did feel better.

*I feel better,* he told himself, to ensure his mind agreed.

When he was ready, Contessa was staring at him with the same terrible intensity as before.

“*You said you were playing baseball?***

Games were not just games.

When Rebecca told Elliot that, he’d laughed. Of course they weren’t. They revealed who a person truly was.

*Not really,* Rebecca had said. Icebreakers were supposed to do that, but they couldn’t. You weren’t going to get a glimpse of lizard brain by shining a spotlight on a freshman in a gym. Favourite candy bars, ideal vacation destinations, what they’d bring to a desert island—people made their answers part of their identity, which was itself constructed, and filtered them through a web of social standards to turn them palatable. These so-called get-to-know-you games could only show you how a person viewed themselves, or how they wanted to be viewed. That didn't make them worthless. On the contrary, Rebecca loved icebreaker sessions because they were microcosms of society.

*I was talking about this guy,* he’d responded, motioning towards the match results screen with his controller. *This guy, he’s truly a fucking scrub.*

Rebecca regarded her friends, gathered as they were in a circle under the table. She chose her question carefully.

“Would you rather,” she said, “have an inflatable mermaid or an invisible pool noodle?”

Clarence tilted his head. “Inflatable, as in a float? Shaped like a mermaid?”

“No, inflatable as in a living, waterbreathing mermaid that you can blow up with air.”

“Oh, no contest,” Elliot said. “Invisible pool noodle, all the way.”

He didn’t justify the choice, but he didn’t need to. There were numerous self-evident uses for an invisible pool noodle. Sometimes Rebecca would fantasise that she was Pool Noodle Woman, unmasked vigilante of the natatorium, dispensing justice with a flexible but imperceptible foam rod.

“She died as she lived,” Rebecca said to herself, *sotto voce.*

Hearing her, Elliot leaned in and murmured, “Stupidly, and full of chlorine.”

She smiled beatifically at him.

“Why the hell would anyone want an invisible pool noodle?” David demanded. He had no imagination.

Rebecca sat up. “Sammy’s five now, right? You could take her to the pool, put her on top of the noodle and pretend she’s the Infant Jesus reincarnated.”

“Please, she hates baths,” he said. “I’d have an easier time getting Levi in there.”
“Oh, that would be so cute! A wee aqua-messiah.”

Hana looked at Rebecca, less enthused. “Really? Didn’t he waterboard you last Easter?”

“No, seriously,” Hana said, “didn’t he trap you in a gradually flooding shower stall and write your suicide note on the bathroom mirror with a red crayon? I found you when he was about to chuck in the hairdryer. Is anyone even listening to me?”

“I’d like an invisible pool noodle,” Clarence disclosed, raising his hand. “It sounds interesting.”

“Right?” Rebecca said. “There’s so much you can do. Like, you could hold one end, and your trusted lieutenant could hold the other, and you could trip pedestrians.” She lowered her voice. “The pedestrians may or may not be criminal scum. I for one relish the moral ambiguity.”

Hana looked at her watch. “Setting aside the lawsuits, this is just like the nano-beagle. How can you even keep track of it?”

“Same solution. Leash it, or keep it in a cabinet.”

“But you can’t put anything else in there or it might get lost. I’m not going to waste valuable cabinet space just to store one invisible pool noodle.”

Clarence nudged Elliot. “The nano-what?”

“Our friend Colin wanted to cram as much dog into the smallest space possible,” Elliot explained.

“But then why a beagle?”

“Beagles are the quintessential canine,” Rebecca said. “And the howling was supposed to help you pinpoint its location.”

“I’ll take the mermaid,” Hana said. “It can do my homework and take care of frivolous conversations while I work.”

Hana’s assumption that she’d get to control the mermaid—not to mention the fact that she didn’t allude to offering a living wage for its labour—galled Rebecca. “In creating a life you have a duty to not shackle that life to your own base ambitions,” she said firmly.

Clarence smiled, sad, and played with his hair. “Tell that to Mother.”

“Also,” Rebecca said, “it’s the Fiji mermaid.”

Elliot cringed. “That stuffed monkey-skull thing?”

“I change my answer,” Clarence said, looking up.

“Stop altering the conditions until you get the response you want,” Hana said crossly.

“I’m not altering anything!” Rebecca insisted. “It’s just a very specific scenario with predetermined characteristics. You should ask me questions about the options instead of answering immediately.”
“We do need to stick to one playstyle,” Elliot said, bumping Rebecca’s shoulder. “This isn’t D&D. You gotta lay everything out at once from the start.”

“Okay, but you cheating cheaters have to stop cheating by saying you’ll gargle hydrogen peroxide or whatever.” She cast a reproving glance at Hana. “It’s not in the spirit of the game. If you choose never brushing your teeth again over never showering again, that encompasses all methods of oral hygiene. If you choose to lose a limb, you cannot have a cybernetic prosthetic. Also, multi-track drifting is no longer an acceptable workaround.”

“Damn,” Elliot and David said in unison.

“That’s right. My playstyle was designed by the real world, buckos. Choices,” Rebecca said with a lofty air, “have consequences. The sooner you learn that, the happier you’ll be.”

“You win,” Hana said. “Invisible pool noodle, if only so I can reverse engineer the invisibility and sell the patent for billions. Then I’ll lose the noodle.”

Rebecca’s gaze hardened on her. “You are unfit to exploit the invisibility; you think about whether you could and not whether you should. Your callous disregard for other lifeforms, as demonstrated by the wanton slaughter of all that embodies freedom, culminates in the annihilation of humankind and its home.”

“I call for reroll.”

“The only thing that survives is the pool noodle itself, which ends up drifting through the ruins of the solar system like the Star Child.”

“You can’t reroll,” Elliot told Hana. “It’s Clarence’s turn.”

Rebecca and Hana glared at Clarence to impress on him the gravity of this next question. He looked around nervously, brushed off his shoulders, and settled on what he thought would be a safe topic.

“Would you rather date a bee or a wasp?”

Hana answered immediately. “Bee. They’re hardworking, committed, and they don’t sting on impulse. Hurting me would literally rip their guts out. Much like a prenup. Besides, honeybees live a month. Wasps live about two weeks.”

“Three,” Rebecca said.

“Wait, who evaluates their partner based on their projected lifespan?” Elliot asked, a little nettled.

“I would be on the rebound less,” Hana said.

“Wasps are so maligned,” said Elliot. “They’re only defending themselves from what they perceive to be a threat.”

“What do you care?” David asked. “You’re a bee. I should be the one offended.”

“I’m a bee?” Elliot repeated.

“You’re sure as hell not a wasp.”

“Just because I don’t plunge my stinger into everything that moves, doesn’t mean I’m a bee.”

“You know, I feel we’re not all on the same page here,” Rebecca said.
“That’s not what I meant,” David said. “Come on, do I have to spell it out?”

“Elliot, is it bad to be a bee?” Clarence asked gently.

Elliot shrugged. “I don’t think that’s a call we can really make. But I know bees don’t wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and wish they’ll see a wasp looking back.”

David’s voice floated down. “Because they’re bees and don’t have the capacity for crises of identity?”

“Pretty sure bees have a limbic system. Or something homologous. I’m not actually sure,” Elliot admitted. He fingered the aglets of his shoelaces, thinking. “It’s more that they don’t have higher aspirations than survival, so they don’t do shit. You’re a bee, you wake up in your little honeycomb cell. You go feed the grubs, mix up batches of honey, shack up with the queen, stand guard at the gates. I’m also unsure how specialisation works in hives. Maybe you only get to do one of those things. I think drones die after mating. But anyway, you do your job, you go to sleep in your little cell, and do the whole thing again tomorrow.”

“Foragers get to leave the hive,” Rebecca said. She rested her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers.

“Yeah. Maybe you get to go outside and get your fuzzy ass plastered with pollen. But the longer you spend out there…” He gestured expansively at the rest of the cafeteria. “…the harder it is to come back. You reoriented yourself with the outside world, and its landmarks, and now you don’t remember what it’s like to not be thirty-three degrees south of a beech tree, or fifty feet from a fountain, and what it’s like to not be able to see the sky. But you have to go back anyway.”

“You don’t want to be a bee,” Clarence said.

“No,” Elliot said decisively. “I don’t want to be trapped like that.”

“Hana didn’t say anything about wanting to be a bee,” David said. “Just about getting nasty with one.”

“I don’t want to get nasty with a bee,” Hana droned.

Rebecca shuddered. “I don’t like buggy creatures that sting or bite. But at least a bee would love me back.”

“You’re projecting,” David said. “Bees don’t feel love, just like wasps.”

“Yeah, Dave, you’re being very deep and profound,” Elliot said. “Your mother must be very proud to have raised such a deep and profound child. Rebecca knows they aren’t friendly or happy or capable of love. She knows these are her own feelings, attributed to them. What does that say about her?” He rubbed his chin. “What does it say about you?”

“Elliot, stop,” Rebecca said sharply.

“You know why you’re a bee, Elliot?” David asked. He stretched a leg, then the other. “It’s not just because you’re destined for a short, empty life of blue collar monotony, as you so lovingly described. It’s because you don’t know you’ve already spent your one sting, and now you’re just struggling fruitlessly to get your kicks in while your organs fail one by one.”

“David, stop.”
“And yeah, before I forget, don’t think I haven’t noticed you have a problem with me. You’d think I was communist, with how much you’ve been fucking sniping at me today.” David reached down and dragged Rebecca’s hand up by the pointer finger, wagging it back and forth. “Dick.”

“Everyone shut up!” Rebecca snatched her hand away mid-waggle, shooting David a glare he couldn’t see. She made a ‘T’ with her arms. “Stop being mean.”

She turned to Elliot, who had his eyes squeezed shut. He was concentrating on breathing, and she let him be. Oxygen was hard to come by when he got this angry. She reached for his hand, but pulled back when she noticed Clarence moving in closer to speak to him.

“Well, this has been,” Hana said, looking at her watch. She didn’t finish the sentence.

Rebecca watched in dismay as Hana climbed out from under the table and left. She crawled out halfway to see where she’d gone, but there were too many chairs and tables in the way.

Defeated, she sat in the aisle and spent the next few minutes listening to the murmurings of the other groups taking shelter. People were playing games of their own. She wished she’d brought a deck of cards too.

“Rebecca,” David said.

Behind her, possibly sensing the tension, Clarence had wrapped Elliot up in their own pocket of conversation. Rebecca inched closer, not interposing herself, but eager to listen in on whatever intellectual discussion they were engaging in.

“I mean… not saying I approve of the OSHA violations, or the way he treats his employees,” she heard Elliot say. He hesitated, scratching at a worn patch on his trousers, and finally gave a helpless little shrug. “But smash, I guess.”

“Really?” Clarence said, his shoulders heaving with suppressed laughter. “Willy Wonka?”

Elliot turned pink. “He has a great glass elevator! I, uh, I want to take it all the way.”

“Rebecca!” David hissed.

Rebecca sighed and came up to his side. “Yeah?”

He gestured towards his phone, which was plugged into a portable charger. She peered at the screen. There was a Skype call running, but she couldn’t see or hear much.


“What was that?”

“The babysitter,” David said grimly.

There was another thump. A young girl’s face entered the frame. Her face was chalky, almost luminous in the sepulchral gloom—the kind of face generally found roaming the deserted corridors of rundown motels, often in pairs, and dismissed by guests as mere electrical phenomena corresponding to the guilt weighing on them for having caused that car crash a decade ago.

“Sammy!” Rebecca cried in delight. “It’s Auntie Becky! You remember Auntie Becky, don’t you?”

The girl shifted towards a window, and a shaft of sunlight broke over her face. Her right eye and a clean third of her forehead was eclipsed by the pendulous shadow of a bean-stuffed felt coxcomb.
Rebecca recognised it as belonging to the chicken onesie David had acquired from storage at his last summer job.

“She remembers you,” David said, bored.

Rebecca’s smile widened. “Auntie Becky wants to play a game.”

Beneath the hood of her KFC mascot costume, Samantha’s one visible eye flicked upward.

David groaned. “I don’t get you people. Why do you always have to entertain yourselves with stupid passe-temps? Can you ever just sit quietly and wait for things to be over?”

This was why Rebecca was the cool aunt, and he was not.

“The game is called ‘sit down quietly and wait for Daddy to come home,’” she told Samantha. “Are you ready, Sammy? On the count of one, two… three.”

Samantha did not react. Her pale blue eye glinted.

“You do know your numbers, right? I said, one… two...”

“You’re not my aunt,” Samantha said, “and I don’t share your insipid desires, nor do I care to humour them.”

Startled, Rebecca turned to David. Her incredulity had no effect. She moved on to searching for ventriloquists in the vicinity.

Samantha continued, “You’re the worst at picking games. Your attempts at manipulation are transparent and amateurish.”

“Manipulation? But I—” Rebecca sputtered. “I—I’m not the worst!”

“You’re the worst,” Samantha, David, and the students under two nearby tables confirmed.

“I’m not the—!” She placed her hand over the screen. “David, when did she start talking?”

“Around the time I decided I was not to be condescended to any further, Rebecca,” Samantha said.

Rebecca lifted her hand, but David clapped it back down.

“You know those Parenting for Dummies books you gave me?” he asked.

“Yeah. Wait, you still haven’t returned them to the library? No wonder my fines are crazy.”

“They weren’t useful at all,” he said, ignoring her. “So I started going to hostage negotiation prep courses instead, and they give out these booklets. I think Samantha found them.”

Rebecca’s eyes prickled. She clasped both hands to her mouth, and her breath escaped in a squeal.

David propped his phone back up against the charger. “I know, it’s gotten pretty bad lately. I’ve lost three babysitters to ‘the subtle art of persuasion’. Admittedly the last one was a tweaker I knew from high school, but I’m desperate. Nobody from the agencies will return my calls.”

“No, David, don’t you get it?” Rebecca asked, with barely contained pride. “All those times I read her stories, I thought she didn’t understand. David, I taught Sammy how to read!”
“And now you all shall reap what she has sown,” Samantha said.

“Where are your brothers, Sammy?” Rebecca cooed. “Can I talk to them?”

“They are at that farce of an institution the authorities refer to as ‘school’.” A trace of petulance had crept into her voice. “I grow weary of your pleasantries. You know what I want.”

David shut his eyes, rubbing his forehead. “No, I don’t.”

“You lie.”

“I really don’t,” he said. “You haven’t stated your ransom. And Daddy’s kind of preoccupied at the moment, so if you could untie your sitter and wait till tonight…”

“Forever ‘preoccupied.’” Samantha spat the word. “Perhaps I shall find myself too ‘preoccupied’ to ‘recover her engagement ring’ from the ‘malfunctioning garbage disposal’. Or perhaps I will be too ‘preoccupied’ to ‘exhume her corpse’ from the sandbox when the ‘police are here’. Who knows what I could be ‘preoccupied’ with while you’re not around.”

David turned to Rebecca with a look of escalating exasperation.

With a frown, Rebecca held the phone up and inclined it, as if she could at the right angle see something beyond the confines of the cracked screen.

She gazed into the unblinking eye of the little girl, at the strand of platinum hair looping over it. The hood of the onesie was drawn tight to her face, to conceal the baby fat that padded it, and her cheeks were unblemished even by laugh lines. It was the kind of face that had forgotten how to smile, or had never learned.

Rebecca tapped the microphone icon to turn it off. “David, you need to promise her you’ll see her. As soon as the drill is over. Skip your lectures, take her out to the movies, or the zoo.”

“I don’t go to the zoo with terrorists,” David said. “Including Hana, because as far as I’m concerned that’s what she is for pulling that eagle stunt.”

Rebecca couldn’t bring herself to jump to Hana’s defense. “Sammy’s not a terrorist. She’s your daughter, and she’s alone all day. It’s no wonder she keeps her babysitters captive, if it means she gets to see you.”

She’d have stared him down as long as she had to, but then David pressed his lips together and turned the microphone back on.

“Stay on the line,” he said. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

“Better hurry. I will text one of her contacts personally and professionally compromising messages if you are not back by then. And one every five minutes thereafter, in order of increasing intimacy.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. If you end this call prematurely, I end her.”

Rebecca spoke in David’s ear. “Sweeten the deal.”

“Do you want frozen yoghurt?” David asked. “Pinkberry is on the way.”

There was a long pause. Samantha’s face moved out of frame again. Something was dragged across
the floor. When she reappeared, she pushed her eye up against the screen. It blinked, once.

“Peach,” she said. “Not original. I will know.”

“Of course.”

“And marshmallows,” Rebecca whispered.

“And marshmallows,” David added.

Samantha hummed her assent. “I will be waiting, Father.”

She faded into the darkness. David turned the microphone off once more, and set the phone down for good.

“I did read those parenting books, you know,” he said.

Rebecca stuffed her hands in her jean pockets and smiled, just to remind herself she could.

“I’m not sure what kind of reinforcement this is called, but it’s probably not positive.”

She sucked on her teeth. “Well, it’s not negative either, because you’re adding a reinforcing stimulus. And it’s not a punishment.”

They ruminated on this. Rebecca’s eyes crossed.

“She’s a handful.” David tugged his hood down and over his eyebrows. He flicked at a drawstring. “I don’t know where she gets it.”

Rebecca reached forward and pulled the hood off. After a thought, and to his indignation, she ruffled his hair. Then she left to check on Hana, who was addressing one of the roaming student enforcers across the cafeteria.

Hana was explaining to the short, muscular guy that the overall value of her education, and thus the value of the college, was predicated on whether or not she got this part-time job. She was also trying to guilt him by describing what drowning felt like, so Rebecca joined in with sound effects.

“Blblblblblbluh,” Rebecca said. She puffed out her cheeks and blew. “Bloop.”

“You’re not even wet,” the guy said.

“Side bar,” Hana murmured, pulling Rebecca away.

They huddled.

“Offer to kiss him,” Hana said, her voice low, “in exchange for letting me go.”

Rebecca stared at her, nonplussed. “Why me? This is David’s fault,” she protested. “He should do it. Remember that exchange student who said he was stupéfiant at kissing?”

“She didn’t mean on the lips, Rebecca!” Hana looked pained. “I need to leave now or I’ll miss it. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Take one for the team.”

Rebecca looked around and saw no one.

“The captain, then.”
“You’re the captain? How are you the captain?”

“Are you the captain?”

Rebecca thought so, but she didn’t want to say it aloud. “Elliot, maybe?”

“That would explain why we never win. Filthy casual.”

“Rude.”

The guy cleared his throat.

Rebecca drew a deep breath, summoning her courage. She thrust out her chest and walked right up to him like she’d seen girls on television do.

He backed away and made a bewildered face, followed by the sign of the cross. “Yeah, no can do, homeslice. Even if I did let you by, the security guards are under orders not to let students leave campus till this is over. Too many kids didn’t take the last drill seriously.”

“Why should they?” Rebecca asked, slightly affronted. “The doors are right there. They could get out before the tremors even start.”


“ Couldn’t you make an exception? Just her?”

His expression told her what he thought of that idea.

“Come on,” she wheedled. “We’re not that stupid.”

“That’s the thing. This—” He tapped his temple. “—isn’t gonna save you in those first few minutes. Your reflexes are. Drills make sure you do the safest thing on autopilot.”

“We’ve been under a table for half an hour. I think we’re past autopilot.”

Of all the enforcers they could have had, they’d gotten a scrupulous one. Rebecca argued in vain, while Hana made calculations on her phone.

“Cab comes in nine minutes,” Hana said, tonelessly. “The drive: twenty-three if I’m lucky with traffic. Finding the building—four. Leaving me...”

Rebecca checked the time. “Seven minutes.”

“Not much buffer,” the guy commented.

“God bless America,” Hana said, and crouched to address the group of students under the nearest table. “Anyone else have advice for the interview I’m not going to make? I’m a collector. I’ll even take duplicates.”

Rebecca put her hand on Hana's shoulder. “I’ll skip the rest of the day. We’ll find the place twice as fast together.”

“If we even make it out of here.”
“We’ll think of something.”

“Rebecca,” Hana said. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping. I’m sorry I was in such a bad mood.” She didn’t quite meet Rebecca’s eye. “Childish, really.”

“You’re just anxious,” said Rebecca. “Don’t apologise.”

“It’s my cousin,” she said, and Rebecca went on high alert. Hana so rarely talked about her family. She’d mentioned, in her guarded way, that the immigration process had been a source of stress for years. “His attorney fees have doubled. I’m going to have to pay for everything the ROTC scholarship and stipend don’t. Hearing Elliot and David go back and forth, sitting there knowing I might miss out on something I need—my family needs—because I listened to David’s nonsense, and then getting into an argument about an invisible pool noodle... Those aren’t excuses. I should have been more patient.”

Rebecca looked down at her shoes. “You don’t have to pretend to like it for me. I was being manipulative.”

“I know,” Hana said. Rebecca peeked up at her face and saw there was no malice in her expression. “Everyone knows it. I’m not saying we’re always going to be happy about it.”

Rebecca let her head droop lower.

“You’re not the captain. But you could be,” Hana said. “I like it when you take charge.”

“Why?”

“Because when you do...” Hana quirked a smile, shrugged one shoulder. “Somehow it feels like everything’s going to be okay.”

Rebecca’s eyes pricked again. She drew Hana into a hug. “I forgive you,” she whispered.

“Not for that.”

As they parted, Hana cast another glance at the enforcer, who had moved in front of the door and was trying to drive them away with the power of his stare. They slipped back under the table and Rebecca nudged Hana’s shoulder.

“I hope you get the job,” Rebecca said. “I can’t think of anyone more deserving than you.”

“It’s just diving into the ocean and dragging kids out.”

“You could train your inflatable mermaid to do that.”

“I would pay them, of course.”

“No, don’t. They’re probably not even sapient. Their brains can’t be more developed than a sponge; they’re full of air.” She jabbed a finger into the air. “Don’t pay inflatable mermaids.”

Hana looked as though she was going to say something else, then shook her head. “Okay, Rebecca.”
“One text,” Contessa said, calmly, as if remarking on the weather. “That’s all I ask.”

Then she flung the baseball with blistering force, as if the weather had insulted her back. Philip drew on reserves of adrenaline and his sense of self-preservation to knock it into left field.

“‘Yo Contessa, I can’t make it today.’ ‘Sup Contessa, I am unable to attend our urgent meeting to discuss the findings of our mission.”’ She struggled for a second. “...‘Holla Contessa, too busy YOLOing to do my job’. One text. I would even have accepted an emoji.”

A ball careened towards him. He swung his bat and struck it with a resounding crack.

“Yeet,” Contessa said. She lined up another barrage.

Contessa’s fastballs weren’t that fast, relative to some of the teams that his had been up against. Her secret was that she aimed for the face.

“I wasn’t… in the position… to text back!”

She let up for a moment. “And what position was that?”

Cuffed to Jack’s bed, he thought, but he wasn’t suicidal enough to joke. “A delicate one. My hands were indisposed.”

"I started at the coffee shop where we were supposed to meet."

Crack.

"Where we were scheduled to meet."

Crack.

"Where you agreed to meet me."

Crack.

“But you weren’t there,” Contessa said. “I went to your dorm.”

Philip swung. It was a testament to his fatigue that he almost missed.

“You weren’t there. I went to your apartment. Not there. Your usual baseball field. Pipless. The warehouse. All your classes for the day. Your parents’ place. And when I still couldn’t find you, I came back and fashioned my dorm into Guantanamo. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to extract information from three people at the same time, without waking Rebecca? It’s almost as difficult as mopping up five different fluids without waking Rebecca. Then, I cooked.”


“There might be some vitreous humour in your lentil and potato soup. You can’t tell from the colour. But that’s straying from the point, which is that I was very…” Contessa’s fist closed around another baseball. “I was very concerned. We have enemies.”

Crack.
She waved her hand. “And then I found you here, alive, with all your appendages and mental faculties, not to mention a working phone.”

“I apologise for not texting,” Philip said. “I turned off my phone—”

“Except for one small detail,” Contessa interrupted. She was breathing harder now, the exertion or the anger catching up to her and bleeding out in spurts. “No, two. Your arm is injured, and I couldn’t find Jacob this morning.”

He held the bat at the ready, backing away. She’d lost it. She’d finally lost it. In a way, this was less stressful than when she was trying not to be angry.


She rolled her pitching shoulder back. He had to twist to hit the ball she sent his way, and it flew at an oblique angle. It soared towards the dining hall, punched through one of the windows high along its side. Neither spared the broken window more than a glance.

“You’re not a fire hydrant,” Contessa said. “He doesn’t get to leave his mark on you.”

“Is that what you were doing earlier?” he asked, horrified. “Inspecting me?”

Her face remained implacable, but her shoe scuffed the grass. She tried to disguise it by stepping towards him.

“Of all the—What were you going to do? Perform a cavity search?”

Her brow creased, like it was an avenue she hadn’t fully considered. “Is that something I should be doing?”

“No! Well, I mean…” He shook his head vigorously to banish the prospect. “No.”

“I need,” she said, “to make sure you are safe. I need to make sure he’s not hurting you where I can’t see. I need to ensure you are operational.”

“I understand. You need to do a lot of things,” Philip said.

“Exactly. I—”

“What about what I need? What if I don’t need you giving me some… terrifyingly maternal prostate exam?” He picked a baseball up and presented it to her. “What if I don’t need you breaking my teeth in the next time you can’t control yourself? Are you listening, Contessa? Are your auditory organs operational?”

The earthquake sirens had stopped. At some point, a fire alarm had taken over.

Contessa stepped closer, arrested the hand that was holding the baseball bat. He let her take it.

“Where were you?” she asked quietly.

“When?”

“Last night. This morning.”

“The hospital.”
“I’ll kill him,” she said.

“Who?”

She spoke like it was obvious. “Jacob.”

Philip shook his head.

Contessa’s eyes narrowed in scrutiny, then widened. Another possibility appeared to flash through her mind. Philip had an inkling of what it was. She paused to marshal her thoughts, and her resolve.

“Well,” she said, her fingers tightening around the bat’s grip. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Not my father either,” he said. He’d aimed for blunt but landed on bitter. “Believe it or not, I don’t make a habit of visiting my parents, much less allow them to come near me.”

She looked relieved. “Who, then?”

“I wasn’t going to tell you, because I didn’t think you would believe me.”

“Try me,” she said.

He took a deep breath.

“Jacob called me at a quarter to four this morning.” Contessa’s grip on the bat tightened further, and he continued, “He was fairly incoherent. Said he hadn’t slept in a week and couldn’t take it anymore. He seemed to be under the impression that the art major on his floor had let in a hobo, and that the hobo was residing in the walls.”

The corner of Contessa’s lips curled suddenly, and she ducked her head to get it under control.

“He requested a shotgun. I suspected his heater was more likely to blame for the noises, so I collected my toolbox and drove over. When I unscrewed the vent cover, these... animals just burst out, hissing and spitting.” Philip grimaced, recalling their frenzied scrabbling, the reflexive arm to defend his face, the pain. “They must have been nesting in there, or something. One of them shredded my arm on the way out.”

To her credit, she didn’t call him ridiculous or accuse him of lying. But the gradual uncurling of the smirk, the falling away of the baseball bat... those were unsettling in themselves.

“So,” she said, without inflection.

“So,” he said. He gestured for her to continue.

She did, shuffling from foot to foot. “You were at the hospital...”

Philip extended his forearm and unravelled the bandage.

“Getting rabies shots,” he finished.

Contessa stared at the scratches so intently and for so long that he grew nervous. The smirk had all but vanished.

Expecting an infection, he checked them himself. But the cuts were already mending, and no longer swelling white around the edges like they had been. In any case, she’d seen worse, so there was no cause for concern.
Contessa lowered herself to the ground, where she sat for a long time, pressing her knuckles against her teeth. He was about to tell her off for the schadenfreude, when he realised she was just breathing especially heavily.

Long minutes passed before she deigned to speak.

“We should play more baseball,” she said. “That was fun. Let’s go back to doing that, and not talking.”

He looked at the wealth of baseballs strewn over the field. His eyes were momentarily drawn to the flashing lights of an ambulance driving past. Surprising number of emergencies today. “Not right away. Why?”

“Because. Fun.” She wouldn’t look at him. “I just think, to take your mind off the raccoons, we should avoid ever bringing them up again.”

Suddenly he understood. “I didn’t say they were raccoons.”

“You… didn’t say they weren’t.”

“Contessa,” he said slowly, folding his arms, “do you know how the raccoons got into Jacob’s vents?”

Contessa made a small noise that may have been a word, but it was muffled by her knees.

“Contessa?” he pressed.

“This campus, ‘dude,’” she muttered. “Just—raccoons all over the place. Different raccoons, everywhere.”

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The sound of shattering glass came from somewhere above them.

Something slammed into Elliot’s face, catching the left side of his nose and scraping across his cheek. His head snapped to the right. The pain arrived a millisecond later, blooming from bridge all the way to jaw. Through the haze of his vision he witnessed a baseball bounce erratically between the legs of a neighbouring table and its chairs. The girls underneath juked out of its path.

He saw a dark brown shoe stutter to a stop on the pedal of David’s wheelchair.

David, he thought, too stunned to be angry. David just kicked me in the face.

All around the cafeteria, voices began to murmur in fear and speculations about the spontaneously breaking window, until a shriek sliced through the cacophony.

“Oh my god!” someone screamed. “It’s real! It’s a real earthquake!”

At that, the cafeteria exploded into chaos. People clambered out from under the tables in a flurry of jostling and shoving, tore hell for leather towards the nearest exit. Sirens howled, shriller than the ones before.

“Did someone pull the fire alarm?” Hana had to repeat herself to be heard.

“People are just freaking out, I think!” Rebecca said.
“Yes,” Hana said, “and then they pulled the fire alarm. Definitely drizzling now.”

“I don’t feel anything. David, are the sprinklers on? David?” Rebecca poked her head out and pulled it back in before she was trampled. She started yanking on David’s trouser leg, to no response. “What happened to David?”

“Did you see the—the ball—” Elliot said, and cut himself off. The pain in his nose worsened, radiated.

“What ball?” Clarence asked.

Rebecca almost banged her head on the underside of the table crawling out. “Grand mal?”

“No, no, the ball—” Elliot stretched his mouth, winced at the pain that lanced through the oxbows of his skull, and resolved never to wince again.

“He could be haemorrhaging inside his brain!” Rebecca scrambled to her feet. She grabbed a passing student by the collar and barked into his ear, “Call 911!”

Moments like these were when people discovered who was born to lead and who was born to cower under a table trying not to get wet. Elliot scooched towards the middle of the table, towards Hana, and beckoned her closer, so she wouldn’t get splashed as students stampeded past.

“Why, though?” Hana wondered distantly, raising her eyes heavenward. “Why is it always like this.”

He made a noise of commiseration, deep in his throat.

Grimy water became grimy puddles, collecting along the grooves between the tiles. Elliot dammed them the best he could with the treads of his sneakers. Hana bunched up her skirt and tucked her legs beneath her. Together, they watched the rain flow in hollows on the floor.

Clarence joined Rebecca. He stood tall despite the people jockeying for space around him.

“Wait!” Rebecca said. “Where are you going?”

“To assemble the virgins,” Clarence said, his voice charged with purpose. He dropped to a crouch, and suddenly his blue eyes were flicking between them with that steely gleam, and Elliot bit his lip to keep from sighing wistfully at how little of a chance he had with this boy. “Elliot, Hana. How many sexual partners?”

Rebecca looked like she was going to answer for both of them, but then she waved him off. “This is no time for a census! We have to save David! Does anyone know the procedure?”

“I’m fine,” David slurred. “Really.”

“Um, um, um… cushion the head... get rid of dangerous objects.” Rebecca’s eyes darted around wildly. She spotted Hana peering out from under the table. “Hana, go away!”

Hana stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Stand by the door,” Rebecca instructed, shooing her. “When the paramedics arrive, lead them over here, and make sure you tell them he could be haemorrhaging inside his brain.”

Something significant passed between the two of them, that Elliot couldn’t decipher. Hana snapped off a salute and left. Rebecca began sweeping the used plates and bowls off the table.
A bowl landed on the floor next to Elliot, splattering him with cold porridge. He brushed at it, only managing to smear clumps across his shirt. “Ngh,” he said.

“Can you come up and help me? He might actually be dying.”

Elliot looked up at Rebecca. He touched his bruised face with his unencrusted hand. He tried not to cry.

“I know! I know, we’re all dying,” Rebecca said, misreading his choked silence as something other than the quiet misery of a guy who could feel his consciousness whistling out through his nostrils. “And I know you’ve had your differences. But the man has a family.”

“‘m fine,” David said.

“I read an article,” she continued, “about this girl who slipped on some ice and hit her head, but she felt fine, and her family thought she was fine, and later she went to bed.”

Elliot blinked.

“And then she didn’t wake up for twenty years!” Rebecca threw her arms wide.

From where Elliot sat, David looked the same as he always did. Eyes glazed, head bobbing like a defective Funko Pop!, hands twitching on the armrests of his wheelchair. His hood was down for once, exposing what could have been a stylish haircut if he spent as much time conditioning as he did being a disappointment to those around him. “What do you want me to do?” Elliot said finally, sounding pinched and adenoidal. “Kiss him?”

Rebecca turned her head towards the double doors, which was obscured by the clot of students bashing at them with lunch trays. No one had thought to hide behind the triptych.

She turned back to him.

“No,” she said, and swept her hair back with movie-star aplomb. “I will.”

To Elliot’s abject horror, Rebecca wetted her lips and leaned over David.

Whether it was more convenient than her roommate or not, she was too young to fling her future into that vortex. He grabbed her ankle before she could move in for the kill. “No! He’s not even sleeping!”

“Yeah, because he’s having a seizure!” She wrested her ankle from his grasp; he let go to avoid dislocating something. She clambered onto David, gripped him firmly by the shoulders. “Look at him! He’s thrashing!”

“Stop shaking him then!”

David’s eyes rolled like marbles as he was jerked back and forth. He put more effort into enunciating. “‘m fine, ‘becca, stop.”

“He’s capable of speech. Muscle control is intact. He’ll be fine.”

“I want a second opinion.”

“Okay, here it is,” Elliot said. “If you keep shaking him, you’re going to do permanent damage. Let the professionals handle this.”
Rebecca let go of David, fires banked.

“I could become a professional,” she said.

Rebecca started jabbing at her phone, apparently to look up further instructions. As he hovered, a cold little worry gnawed at Elliot. Did she have a thing for David? How had he missed that? It would explain why she kept him around. But when Elliot thought about it further, he found it explained nothing at all. If anything, it just conjured more questions, viz. why, though?

He still didn’t think they could do anything to help without a trained emergency medical responder, but he could indulge Rebecca until they arrived. He patted his pockets. Empty. He dropped to his knees to search the floor under the table. His phone was there, along with another phone a short distance away.

He nabbed both and stood, turning the unfamiliar one over. If the chrysoprase-green plastic case hadn’t convinced him it was David’s, the cracks spiderwebbing across the screen did—old damage, not caused by the fall.

“The WiFi here jaywalks,” Rebecca said, refreshing furiously, “because it doesn’t understand signals. The WiFi here pays for premium membership on dating sites because it can’t form a connection. The WiFi here sits alone at business functions because it thinks networks are for catching fish! Is that David’s phone?”

“Yeah, think so.” The Skype app was still on, but the video feed remained grainy darkness.

“Great.” Rebecca snapped her fingers. “David has a killer data plan. Four-five-zero-eight-zero-one.”

“It’s already unlocked.”

Elliot waited for a bit, hearing little more than rustling and laboured breathing. What was this? A hotline?

His thumb hovered over the red icon, as he marvelled at the pathos of a man so desperate for human contact that he would initiate phone sex while civilization, or at least California, came crashing down around him.

Elliot had to respect that. Pity, mostly, but also respect. Maybe it wasn’t all stinging and nectar, being a wasp.

He bent, and spoke next to David’s face. “For what it’s worth,” he said, “and in case you die before I can falsify your will, I’m sorry. I was a dick.”

“Dick,” David echoed.

“Dick,” Elliot agreed soberly.

“Dick.”

“Hey, man,” Elliot said. “You kicked me in the face. You’re kind of a dick yourself.”

“Dick.”

“Dick.”

Rebecca stared at the two of them in disbelief. She windmilled her arms. “Stop talking about dicks! I need you to look up epilepsy!”
“Oh, right.” Elliot ended the Skype call and minimised the window. In his haste, he accidentally opened a messaging app. “Shit, where’s the—”

“Are you on WikiHow? Can you scroll to—don’t read his messages,” Rebecca said, appalled.

“Sorry, sorry!” His thumb pecked at the home icon, but the app was unresponsive. “Yeah, I’m gonna fix this dumb screen for him.”

Rebecca huffed. Then, surreptitiously, she leaned in and asked, “What’s she saying, though?”

“Who? Oh, her.” Elliot scanned the text conversation between David and his latest one night stand. “Uh… ironic capitalised screaming. Something about Lake Michigan. Illegal stuff, though not half as illegal as Hana brutally and feloniously murdering a beloved, federally protected national mascot in cold blood without cause. A picture of a duck in a top hat. More capitalised screaming, not ironic. And, she’s pragernet.”

“She’s what?”

“That’s what it says,” he said, flashing her the row of messages.

“Oh. David…” Rebecca inhaled sharply. She let the breath rush out in a relieved sigh. “No seizure. He's just in shock.”

Was it even possible for something to come as a shock when it had already happened three times? Elliot didn’t voice this, but he did pat David on the shoulder. He owed him that much. “Them’s the breaks.”

“Told you,” David mumbled. “I’m fine.”

Elliot craned his neck, hoping to find Hana in the diminished crowd and update her on the situation. The few people left were parting to make way for a man and a woman in EMT uniforms. The woman noticed Elliot and strode over to him, coworker in tow.

“Your nose is swelling,” the man observed. “Are you the boy who’s haemorrhaging inside his brain?”

The woman directed his attention to Elliot’s shirt. “Doesn’t look so inside to me.”

Elliot looked down, suddenly aware of the stain spreading across his front and how violently red it was. David was right—it did belong in a grindhouse flick. “It’s porridge,” he explained lamely.

The woman nodded, humouring him. “Right. Are you in pain?”

“Always, but my friend…” Elliot indicated David, whose head was lolling to one side.

“He’s fine!” Rebecca called. “He’s just found out he’s going to be a father! Again!”

“‘m fine,” David said.

“Congratulations to your friend,” the man said, glancing over at David. “Let’s get you to the hospital.”

“I’m fi—” Elliot tried to ascertain whether saying that had worked for David or not. David had said he was fine, and he wasn't being carted away in a stretcher. “I’m fine? Uh, my nose feels like someone lit a grease fire in there, but I probably just need to put some ice on it.”
Both paramedics gave his spattered clothes another onceover and a very doubtful expression.

“If you’re sure,” the man said. “You should get checked just in case, but if—”

“Wait!”

They turned and saw Hana marching up to them. She was bedraggled—her hair plastered to the sides of her face by water, her blouse damp and untucked. Still she smiled with trance-like calm. “What hospital are you taking him to?” she asked.

“St. Vincent,” the woman said. “Is this another friend?”

Hana’s hand went to her skirt pocket, where her phone was. “Does your route take you past Wynn Street?”

“Yes. Why are you asking?”

“I’m accompanying him.”

The man’s face became severe. “We’re not a taxi service.”

“That wasn’t what I was suggesting at all. I’m his...” Hana straightened up, standing at parade rest. “Next-of-kin.”

“Oh, that’s all right then. So, you are going?”

Elliot met the man’s querulous gaze. Swallowing, he looked at Hana. She cocked her head to one side and hiked her eyebrows meaningfully at him. Please?

Elliot knew a few things for sure: The food pyramid was a scam, hierarchies were dumb, and human bodies weren’t built to digest this much corn. Hana was his friend, and she would make that interview on time.

His nose throbbed. This time, he remembered not to fucking touch it.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, intertwining his fingers with hers.

She squeezed his hand in thanks.

“Let’s go, Grandma.” If she wanted to hitch, she’d better have learnt how to tuck and roll out of a moving ambulance.

Elliot and Hana followed the paramedics out of the cafeteria. They’d just reached the doors when someone tall shouldered his way past and stepped in front of them, blocking the exit.

It was Clarence. He held hands with the leaders of the Old Testament and the New Testament, having somehow managed to repair the generations-spanning rift between them in a matter of minutes. The unified bible study group gathered in a halo around him, and as their voices lifted in hymnbook counterpoint, he pumped both fists into the air triumphantly.

“I have them!” he yelled. “Where’s the fault?”

✶✶✶

“And once you get past the stigma,” Rebecca said, sprawled out across the sofa, “you just have to remember to swaddle its abdomen in a towel when you get to second base.”
Out of politeness, Contessa paused her typing. It was difficult to pay attention to both her work and Rebecca’s rant about ovipositor sheathing etiquette, but for once Contessa was putting in a good faith effort. After the catastrophe that had been that afternoon, she desperately needed the distraction.

The communal lounge was shrouded in violet, courtesy of the coloured cellophane taped over the ceiling lights. It seemed more festive than the occasion warranted.

Rebecca's white nightgown shifted around her chest and hips as she adjusted her position on the couch cushion to get more comfortable. “Maybe wear a thimble instead, if you’re not into the age regression.”

“Why am I—” Contessa frowned deeply. “—snuggling this hornet, again?”

“You’re dating it,” Rebecca reminded her.

“I wouldn’t date a hornet.”

Rebecca rolled over, looking at her with interest. “Oh, so you’re a bee person?”

“I heard two of your friends were injured during the drill,” Contessa said, to pulp this topic before it could grow on her.

“Yeah, Elliot went to the hospital. He’s fine. Well, fractured nose, but he just needs to eat more brussel sprouts. Did you know they help with bone metabolism?” Rebecca pursed her lips and stared up at the ceiling. “No idea how David got a concussion, though. None of us saw him hit his head.”

Contessa shrugged. Sometimes things just happened.

Rebecca stole a throw pillow from behind Contessa, who let it pass. The room filled once more with the soft click-clacking of keys as Contessa resumed her anonymous email threatening a manager at the insurance firm she and Philip had raided. It had to land flawlessly; she checked again that she’d touched on all the bases: fear for his reputation and livelihood, fear for his wife and two daughters, fear of God.

“Contessa,” Rebecca said, “am I the worst?”

She finished attaching the photographs and hit send. “The worst what?”

“Friend? I don’t know. Never mind.” Rebecca sighed, twirling the braided tassel of the throw pillow on her lap. “I just worry I’m not there for my friends as much as I should be. Like maybe there are all these invisible fissures and phalli between us that I don’t know about and they’ll eventually split us apart.”

Contessa thought back to her day. “You can’t let a little phallus drive a wedge between you and your friends,” she said. “However…”

She glanced at Rebecca, who looked back expectantly.

“It’s... uncomfortable to hear sometimes,” Contessa said, “but you can hurt someone more than they’re willing to articulate to you, and it can be tempting to force a confrontation that neither of you are prepared to see through. But you have to accept that sometimes—not very often—practically never—they need space to work out their own issues.”

Rebecca pulled at her thumbs, becoming uncommonly solemn as she listened. A hazy purple hue imbued her features, teasing out the softness of her cheeks and the seeming inner glow of her eyes.
Contessa felt an unexplainable twinge in her chest, and a heat in her face that made her grateful for the violet light. She pushed on, with the weight of conviction behind her words: “Because if you don’t give them that much, they will get scratched up by a raccoon on behalf of someone who should have just taken it on the chin like a man. More importantly, they’ll blame you, and refuse to let you frisk them for their own safety.”

Rebecca nibbled her upper lip, absorbing this, and nodded. These days, she took matters of vermin very seriously.

“And,” Contessa said, indicating the cup of pale orange-pink soft-serve on the coffee table, “you did bring ice cream, so I suppose you can’t be all bad.”

“It’s not ice cream.”

“I take it all back. You are the worst.” Contessa lay back, and caught the throw pillow hurled in her direction.

Realising her mistake, Rebecca dove forward and snatched the pillow back. “Oh, just eat it before it melts,” she said testily, reclining once it was secured behind her.

Contessa picked up the cup and started eating.

“How is it?” Rebecca asked, far too casually to be casual.

She stopped, suspicion leaking into her tone. “It’s frozen yoghurt.”

“Yeah but…” Rebecca licked her lips, easing herself upright. “What does it taste like?”

Contessa relented. She chewed on one of the pink marshmallows along the lip of the cup first, but it was dry and crumbly from the freezer—like eating a foam peanut. She slipped the spoon back into her mouth and suckled on it contemplatively. Cold milky sweetness laved over her tongue, carrying sour, almost spicy hints of muscatel.

She raised her eyes. Rebecca was staring at her, with such investment that she was drawn forward and nearly off the couch altogether.

“It tastes like frozen yoghurt,” Contessa said.

Rebecca blinked, stalling mid-movement. She seemed to register that she was falling off the couch cushion. Then she shrank back and, hugging the throw pillow, curled up on her side like she was going to sleep.

Without her spectator, Contessa polished off the rest of the cup. She returned to her laptop, but her eyes didn’t leave the back of Rebecca’s head.

Grape, she decided, was a strange flavour for yoghurt.

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Mucho thanks to maroon_sweater for fantastic betaing and for pushing me to write this even when I wanted death. While it was enjoyable, I gotta say, never again. Next chapter won't be so long.
Contessa painstakingly pecked out the twenty characters of her password, entered her six-digit pin, and finally assured her phone of her identity with a press of her thumbprint to the screen.

The home page was blank but for one little envelope icon with a red border, smack dab in the centre of the screen. She had uninstalled all extraneous applications, including the ones that had come with the phone, to maximise storage space for incoming messages. Alexa had been replaced by a klaxon.

“Contessa.”

Contessa tapped the little icon again, in case she had received a missive one of the last fifty-three times she’d opened her inbox and it had erroneously been marked as ‘read’ and had therefore never triggered a notification.

The latest message in a grey speech bubble was still from Simon, sent the morning after she and Philip had broken into the insurance company’s office.

She slid the phone back into her pocket, keeping her finger squarely on the volume button to make sure it didn’t accidentally get turned down. Her laundering service had gone overboard on the starch once; it stood to reason that the fabric of her pocket might be stiff enough to exert the force needed to push a side-button if she sat at just the wrong angle.

“Contessa.”

After a moment’s thought, she took her phone out again to check that it was also on vibrate mode. She’d be banking on the sensitivity of human skin, but if tongues managed to sense the presence of tiny hairs—

“Contessa, it’s a matter of national importance. If you don’t ask about it, I'm going to disseminate the information early and cause mass panic and it’ll be all your fault.”

Contessa drew her tongue back into her mouth and looked up across the table. “Rebecca, if you get us thrown out again…”

“That was a different library,” Rebecca said, emerging from under the table. Sweat shone on her nose and forehead.

“Was it?” Contessa asked. “Was it really? Or was it the exact same library, and is that why we had to wear disguises?”

The handlebar mustache on Rebecca’s upper lip twitched askew, revealing a smaller, identical handlebar moustache. “It was a different library,” she insisted, as if Contessa wouldn’t remember the ignominious collapse of Nineteen Eighty-Fort. “You wanted to dress up. Don’t even pretend you didn’t.”

“And I suppose when we signed out a study room in runic script, it was for fun and not at all to bypass the librarian's handwriting analysis.” Contessa adjusted her own rather stylish grey bowler hat, which she had only agreed to wear because it went with her jacket.
In lieu of further grumbling, Rebecca planted her hands on the table. Contessa seized her forearm and gave it a warning squeeze to stop her from hoisting herself onto it.

“Ow! Contessa, the war was eight years ago!”

Contessa let go, feeling a pang. She hadn’t meant to hurt her; her fingers just instinctively sought out pressure points. “I’m sorry. What is your national emergency?”

“It’s…” Rebecca sat back down, rubbing her arm. “It’s too hot.”

The guilt evaporated. Contessa regarded her incredulously. “We are in an air conditioned room, you overprivileged brat. You’re hot because you’re wearing a trenchcoat in ninety-degree weather.”

“Point,” said Rebecca. “Counter point: it’s still too hot. We’re breathing recycled air. I’m melting.”

“Absolutely none of those things bothers me.”

“Come on, you’re totally suffering too—you just haven’t realised it.” She nudged Contessa’s shoe with her own. “You’ve been cranky.”

“For good reason. Midterms are in two weeks.”

Rebecca scrutinised her, brow furrowing, and cocked her head. “I don’t think that’s it. You keep checking your phone.”

“So do you.” Contessa nodded at the phone in Rebecca’s hand.

“Yeah, but that’s because if I don’t feed my elder dread god a foetal goblin every fifteen minutes, he dies.”

“He sounds like a very frail dread god.”

“He is an elder dread god. Cut your seniors some slack. Eating foetuses and procreation are the only things that give his life meaning anymore.”

“The microtransactions probably don’t hurt either.”

“Tithes,” Rebecca corrected. She thumbed the jagged shards of bone overlaying the subterranean hellscape on her screen, and a blood-red progress bar bubbled into action. “Anyway, if he dies before he sires an heir, I have to journey to the badlands and fuel the necromantic generator all over again.”

“You don’t seem to be having much fun,” Contessa said.

The progress bar continued to fill, inch by inch. “You don’t know what fun is.”

“Don’t you have an essay?”

“Oh yeah, I do.” Rebecca upped the wattage of her smile, sounding unconcerned. “I could speed this up if you accepted my boons.”

Contessa rolled her eyes and took her social phone out from her jacket. “I don’t understand how I can get notifications for an app I have never downloaded.”

“Yes! Thank you! The breeding process is complete.” Rebecca showed her the screen, which was exploding into stalactites. She rubbed her hands gleefully. “Now for the gestation.”
“How often do you have to press that button now?”

“Every thirty minutes until I unlock enough cervical dowsing rods,” Rebecca said. “Wait, what was I—oh yeah, you just seem kind of down today. You keep checking your phone! Are you waiting for a text or something?”

“Or something.” A sandalled foot grazed Contessa’s ankle. She raised her head to glare at Rebecca. “I’m just looking at my to-do list. Making sure I’m on task. Stop kicking me.”

Rebecca retracted her foot. “Philip does it all the time and you reciprocate.”

“He’s actually good at it. You’re just scuffing my shoe.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Rebecca said mournfully. “I can’t keep up with these footsie upstarts, stealing my footsie job. I apply for footsie skills training, but they say I’m too inexperienced. If only there were an entry-level—”

“Write your paper, Rebecca.”

“I can’t,” Rebecca said, “because it’s too hot!”

Contessa set her phone down with a sigh. She’d never get any work done if she had to indulge this girl’s restless complaining for the next two hours. “Are you actually hot, or do you just want to move somewhere specific?”

“Yes! You know what they say: can’t stand the heat, get out of Ecuador,” Rebecca said. “Let’s go to the mall! You can bring Philip. We’ll make a day of it.”

At those words, a sense of grim prescience seemed to blanket Contessa’s insides. She wondered if it was because she really hadn’t studied for midterms yet, or if it was just general foreboding left over from the last time she’d listened to one of Rebecca’s suggestions.

She gazed at her blank phone screen, looked up at Rebecca’s hopeful expression, and finally cast the implacable feeling aside. A day out could make the time go by faster, or else serve as a pleasant distraction. As long as it was just Rebecca and Philip, she could think of worse ways to spend a Friday afternoon.

Chapter 6: Confidence Games

Twenty minutes later, Contessa was sandwiched between Rebecca and Jacob in the backseat of Philip’s car.

She leaned forward, one hand gripping the front headrest. “Why is this person here?” she asked Philip.

His half-lidded eyes met hers through the rearview mirror. “You tell me.”

To her left, Rebecca alternated between sucking down lime slushie at a hard gurgle and comparing flavours of edible straw. She’d removed both handlebar moustaches, leaving only the pencil moustache she had spent three minutes drawing in front of a mirror before realising it was upside-down.

Jacob sat on Contessa’s right.

“Rebecca volunteered to be in the middle,” Philip pointed out. “You said no.”
A crate of the iguana specimens had claimed shotgun. Moving it could get dicey, given their augmentation and her present lack of protective gear. “I don’t suppose the trunk is empty,” Contessa said.

“It should be. We disposed of the parts from Wednesday night.” He frowned in disapproval when she tipped her head towards his boyfriend. “But I’m going to veto stashing anything live in there.”

“You guys make such creepy jokes,” Rebecca said.

“Oh, she’s not joking,” Jacob said. He turned from the window to simper at her with his stupid face. “Contessa truly does want to consign me to the trunk. She’s very inhumane. There are lizards in that box and they are all dying of exotic diseases that she introduced into their previously sterile habitat for giggles. Speaking of, I believe we haven’t been properly introduced.”

Rebecca peered over the headrest at the crate, shooting Contessa a quizzical, anxious look.

Contessa ignored it, unable to clarify without further compromising Coriolis side operations. She settled for glaring at the back of Philip’s head since he’d apparently leaked sensitive information to this vest-wearing goat curd. “They’re not dying,” she muttered.

“I’m—” Rebecca said, torn between replying to either of them. “Rebecca?”

Jacob smiled. “Jacob. But you can call me Jack.”

He thrust his hand into Contessa’s personal space, reaching over her lap to present his hand to Rebecca. They shook. Then, before she could withdraw her hand, he flipped it around and pressed his lips to the back.

“Oh,” Rebecca said, flustered.

As he lifted his head, he flicked his eyes up, and they flashed with the self-satisfaction of a child who had just licked a toy so that no one else would touch it. “Enchanté.”

Rebecca’s mouth formed an ‘O’ of surprise, then bloomed into a silly smile.

Something in Contessa’s mind snapped wide open, like the shutter around an aperture. Enemy, it hissed.

“I must compliment you on your excellent grooming,” Jacob said.

Rebecca, who had been looking at Contessa, nodded in agreement. Contessa waited for the other shoe to drop so she could shred it.

“No,” he said, “you, Rebecca.”

Rebecca blinked. “Me?”

“Yes. It’s not often you find someone in possession of such a magnificent moustache.”

The shutter strained to shatter point, and Contessa knew it had to be showing in her eyes and the way she was sitting. She didn’t care. It was a mistake betraying sentiment in front of him. But it would be a bigger mistake to let him think he could get away with disrespecting her roommate.

“Oh... thank you. I wouldn’t call it grooming,” Rebecca said. “I just grew it this morning.”

“Ah. I could barely tell,” Jacob said, every syllable oozing synthetic charm. “You know, many think
that size or intricacy is the key, but yours is discreet. Tasteful. I do believe you have a future in modelling.”

“Really?” Rebecca touched her upper lip with uncharacteristic diffidence.

Contessa stared at the wet patch on the back of her hand. Her breathing felt tight.

He rubbed his goatee, transparently mirroring Rebecca. “Certainly. I’d be happy to share some tips on contouring, perhaps loan you my favourite styling gels...”

As he went on, Rebecca preened, and Contessa tried to picture a more nightmarish scenario than her nemesis and her roommate bonding over the maintenance of fake facial hair. She could not. Unacceptable. She switched to thinking of ways to guillotine this line of conversation.

“Contessa, could you scoochoo over a bit?” Rebecca asked.

Contessa scooched.

“No, the other direction? You’re kind of, um, crushing me.”

Contessa looked down to her left. She removed her elbow from Rebecca’s sternum.

Rebecca wriggled in the tiny amount of room that had been freed up. “Whoof. Okay, then.”

“So, Rebecca,” Jacob said, “I noticed your Othello allusion just now, when we were walking here...”

“I didn’t know you were literate, Jacob,” Contessa said acidly, before Rebecca could reply. “I didn’t think your parents allowed you to read—”

“What I’m really interested in,” Philip interrupted, “is the verdict on the edible straws.”

—in the bunker. Contessa clenched her teeth at Philip’s uncanny ability to notice when her personal space had turned into a shark tank. He always insisted on intervening before she had a chance to end Jacob’s impertinence for good. She shifted back to the middle seat—gradually, so that it wouldn’t look like she was giving ground by taking ground.

It didn’t make a difference, she found. Jacob noticed. He rested his elbow on the cupholder and, when Rebecca wasn’t looking, suckled on the back of his hand. His eyes never left Contessa’s.

“Oh, um, if you have to, go with green apple or orange,” Rebecca said, glancing uncomfortably between the two of them. “They have the most intense flavours. Skip the cola and the red thing that isn’t really cherry. But it doesn’t matter anyway, because fruit-leather is a headache to chew through.”

She eased the cover off the cup and poured the syrup-soaked ice down her throat.

Jacob clapped his hands. “Slushies sound like a wonderful idea. With it being such a hot day and all. Mind if I have a sip?”

“Sure!” Rebecca said. Then she winced, pressing fingers to her temple. “Ow.”

As Rebecca reached over her lap to pass her cup to Jacob, Contessa’s knee spasmed and sent the slushie flying into the windshield.

Rebecca yelped in surprise.
“Oops,” Contessa said, staring at an equally surprised but less vocal Jacob. “An accident.”

Philip wiped the window in front of him with a handkerchief, sweeping the worst of the bright green slush onto the dashboard. He made no motion to clean his splattered glasses. His expression, though significantly more frosty, remained impassive. “Is that your full conclusion, Rebecca?”

Contessa refrained from directing another spasm at the back of his seat.

“No, actually,” said Rebecca. She was searching in vain for tissue paper to help mop up the sticky mess. “I mean besides that these half-measures to reduce plastic waste are kind of dumb.”

“There’s something to be said for small steps in the right direction,” said Contessa, privately seething. At the next red light, she caught Philip’s eye in the mirror again and expressed her displeasure through blinks.

_What_, he asked without speaking. _You slushie-throwing asshole._

*Why did you turn this political?*

He responded with the rapid elevation of his ice-dampened eyebrows. *How is this political!?*

Contessa pursed her lips. Then she performed a microscale nonverbal reenactment of every Thanksgiving at his house she’d ever had the dubious honour of attending, in the process inventing new ways to convey ‘WikiLeaks’ and ‘your grand-aunt laced the gravy with benzodiazepine again’ using head tilts and eye movements alone. All to communicate, _the personal is political._

_Now the fuck what_, he said, and her irritation mounted.

The light turned green. Rebecca was still going.

“—all I’m saying is those dire environmental warnings are misdirected. Like, in elementary school, they had us make these bookmarks with ‘Conservation Starts at Home’ on them and hand them out. But how much global warming is a bunch of titchy preteens actually causing? They don’t drive. They aren’t deciding oil policy. Compared to the military-industrial complex, they use a mouse-sized amount of water and electricity. I care about making the planet a better place for the next generation, but this is just fearmongering targeted at blameless, impressionable children who know nothing about the world!”

For the rest of the ride, Philip wouldn’t stop feeding Rebecca. If Contessa didn’t know any better, she’d think he was trying to get back at her for something. “Compared to a mouse, they use an industrial-sized amount of water and electricity.”

“Well, mice are socialist. They don’t have utility bills. If you give a mouse a cookie—”

On the bright side, Jacob appeared unable or unwilling to insert himself into the discussion. It wasn't that he didn’t have views—he was a debater—but that arguing would interfere with his agreeable facade. He contented himself with being smug.

“Anyway,” Rebecca said, “don’t even get me started on edible panties.”

“Nobody was going to,” Contessa said.

Philip pulled the car into reverse.

*
For the sake of everyone’s mood, they decided to split up when they reached the mall. Philip and Jacob took off for the higher floors, while Contessa and Rebecca started in the basement and worked their way up.

“These sewing details give the outfit structure,” Contessa said, and skimmed her fingers over the panels of pintucks coasting down the mannequin’s shirt. Passing a rack, she pointed out the ruffled collar on one of the blouses. “These break it up.”

She stopped to look behind her. Rebecca was stroking her cheek with a cable-knit cardigan from the clearance rack. “Rebecca, when is the last time you saw someone under eighty wearing a cardigan?”

“Literally three minutes ago.” Rebecca bundled up the cardigan as they moved aside to let a couple through the aisle. “It was me. Sure, you’re all about the structured outerwear, but you could pull this off with those shoulders. Have you even felt this? You could use it as a pillow.”

Contessa glanced at her own shoulders. “I already own a pillow.”

“Maybe outside?”

“I don’t find myself napping outdoors terribly often,” Contessa said. She pried the bundle of maroon wool from Rebecca and pushed it against the small of her back experimentally.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Rebecca said, smiling and rolling her eyes. “You’re a snob.”

“Or I’m not the urban homeless.” It was soft, but it wouldn’t provide sufficient lumbar support on a park bench.

Rebecca bumped her hip. “I mean about clothes. Label not designer enough for you, huh?”

“Designer labels can be useful if you want to present a respectable image in certain circles,” Contessa replied, her eyes dropping from her shoulder to her hip. What was that about? “But fundamentally, what matters is the fit and the finish.”

“What about whether it’s comfy?” Rebecca asked, splaying her hand out and running it through a collection of dresses.

Contessa nodded. “Weight, ventilation, freedom of movement. Practical considerations are important too. They aren’t mutually exclusive with professionalism or a put-together aesthetic.”

Rebecca frowned down at her own orange and black T-shirt, which was emblazoned with a purple tobacco pipe. Below it was the question ‘Maintenant où pourrait être ma pipe?’

She shrugged by way of response, then bounded off towards the formalwear section of the department store.

Contessa followed at a more sedate pace.

She soon found Rebecca gazing rapturously into the eyeless face of a mannequin bedecked in silk and taffeta.

“Love her, love her, love her!” Rebecca screeched from behind the mannequin, grasping it by the wrists and attempting to airlift it off its pedestal.

Contessa stood at the base, unmoved. “That isn’t even a bridal gown,” she said. “You’re going to break the mount.”
Rebecca twisted the joints, doing her level best to inflict an Indian burn on fibreglass. “If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces—and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper—love her, love her, love her!”

Then she whirled around, crossed her arms over her chest and teetered on the edge of the platform, before pitching back in a blatantly telegraphed trust fall.

Contessa stretched out the cardigan and caught her with the length of it. She held her securely in place. “Would that this were bubble wrap.”

Rather than escape, Rebecca backed into her chest and beamed up at her, cheeks glowing from the exertion of bouncing around. For a second Contessa felt her mouth twitch, time and thought suspended on the benign desire to simply not let go. There didn’t happen to be a fire extinguisher in the way, and she wasn’t hitting any pressure points this time.

But then she remembered she hadn’t checked her phone in nearly fifteen minutes. She couldn’t very well do that with her hands occupied. So she disentangled herself from a protesting Rebecca, folded the cardigan up properly and set it on the rack for a sales assistant to clear.

Still no messages. Not even a missed call. Contessa breathed in and out, her lungs suddenly a size too small. She put her phone away. “Did you want anything?” she asked Rebecca.

Rebecca stole one last longing look at the cardigan. “No,” she lied.

They returned to the blinding white and gold lights of the atrium. Beauty parlours shouted their services from billboards, the faces on them celluloid-perfect, poreless and glistening with milky pearls of product. Rebecca remarked on every advertisement they saw, even stopping to watch the videos. At a billboard outside a hair salon, she talked about the time a hairdresser told her her dandruff problem was caused by silicones in her shampoo, which was why for a week she’d quietly believed that she was transforming into a robot scalp-first, and had plotted her existential rampage until Elliot talked her down.

Then she noticed what the billboard was really advertising.

“What are semi-permanent eyebrows?” Rebecca wondered aloud. “Like, what is the average shelf-life of an eyebrow, and will it last longer if you pickle it?”

“I assume there is a spectrum of permanency and semi-permanent falls somewhere near the middle,” Contessa said.

“So semi-permanent eyebrows are to permanent eyebrows what henna is to tattoos.”

“It’s in the word. Semi. Permanent.”

“Why not ‘temporary’?”

“Marketing.”

A woman explained the procedure on the screen, but the volume was so low they couldn’t hear a word. To Contessa, it was a silent film about a woman obsessed with the slanting lines that lay beneath her natural eyebrows. In between the talking heads, blades sliced pellucid white skin, and dark, bluish ink flooded the wells that opened up. Each slit was the breadth of a hair.

“The lengths people go to for beauty,” Contessa said.
Rebecca didn’t respond at first. The woman on the screen combed her eyebrows with a thick-bristled brush, then parted them to expose the sleek, newly inked lines.

“That’s not very fair of you to say,” Rebecca said softly. “You don’t have to work for it.”

Contessa turned to her, a question on her lips, and stopped. She chose instead to study Rebecca’s face, as the glare of the lights threw her features into stark relief.

Rebecca didn’t trim her eyebrows, or pluck them, or stab them with tiny knives. They lacked defined arches, and stray hairs marred the skin above her eyelids. But they were expressive, more so than anyone Contessa had ever met—each degree of movement a dissertation about what she was thinking and feeling. Now they were furrowing in a way Rebecca’s past oversharing let Contessa know indicated nervousness, or constipation.

Below them, her eyes were brown like moss, but bright and liquid, and light flickered over them as they darted back and forth. They were harder to evaluate further because she was inexplicably dodging eye contact. Contessa was forced to move on.

The bridge of her nose was ever so slightly crooked. It had a little bone jutting out which she’d refused to correct with surgery. From the way Rebecca had spoken of it, Contessa suspected she was secretly proud that it made her look like a hardened street brawler, and not just a hopeless nerd who couldn’t keep her head out of a book long enough to avoid a rugby match when she was thirteen.

Her lips were full and shiny with tinted chapstick, because she was addicted to the cooling sensation post-application, and balked at the intensity of most rouges and glosses. Wild raspberry referred to either the colour or the scent. The most recent coat had been painted on inexactly, streaking the corners of her lips with a sheen of pinkish balm that she kept licking. Probably flavoured.

Contessa’s gaze trailed downward. Judging by the absence of twin peaks, Rebecca was wearing a bra for once. It wasn’t one of the purple ones with the distinctive fringes, or the raggedy white demi with the rusted clasp. The racerbacks were for exercise, the black balconettes were for darker clothing, and the lacy red bustier buried in her sock drawer was for special occasions. That left the pink and green bra with the thumb-sized ribbon on the front.

_The cup runneth over_, Contessa noticed, inclining her head. She considered adjusting the straps to alleviate the pressure of the underwire digging into Rebecca’s sides, except that would be inappropriate in public, and anyway Rebecca wasn’t Philip.

An endomorphic build and a baker’s diet had left Rebecca little in the way of obvious muscle, and much of her weight rested low on her waist in a soft lush ring that swelled just past her waistband. Contessa knew for a fact that Rebecca tossed on whatever was lying around the dorm—hoodies, ponchos, clown-noses—without regard for whatever flattered her figure or made her appear sane. Still, like most people, Rebecca preferred denim bottoms for mainstream appeal and easy matchability. A snug pair of jean capris clung to her rounded hips, creasing more heavily at the inner thighs. Embroidered below her left pocket was a vibrant blue morpho, silken wings outstretched, a contrail coursing its way down her thigh and dispersing into tendrils of silver thread.

Contessa circled around to see if the motif was repeated on the back.

“Um,” Rebecca said, hooking her thumbs through her belt loops.

She looked up briefly. Rebecca said something else, with the rising intonation that meant it was a question, so Contessa answered “no” and resumed her objective assessment. As expected, there were two smaller butterflies on the right rear pocket, filling out with the generous teardrop curve of her
buttocks.

Contessa stepped back and took in a broad sweep of the details, and how they all fit together: she observed the spatial arrangement of Rebecca’s features, the strong, organic lines of rhythm that flowed through her form as she squirmed and fidgeted for no discernible reason.

If she had to describe Rebecca in a single word, it would be *tumble*. Her appearance, her mannerisms, her personality. A walking calamity that didn’t even know what it was walking towards.

Contessa couldn’t imagine living like that. Were she to suffer a fit of honesty, she would admit she couldn't afford that level of spontaneity. There just wasn't enough inside her to invest in such gestures.

But Contessa saw things in terms of what they could be rather than what they were, and she could no longer ignore that there was a great deal of raw material to work with, here. If Rebecca wanted an authority to set the standards for her, to give her direction, Contessa could be that authority.

*I could—*

Contessa caught herself, uncertain. *Salvage her? Improve her?* It startled her, that she couldn’t label Rebecca as a fixer-upper so easily.

*Refine her.*

She lifted her eyes and fixed Rebecca with a cool stare. “Neither do you,” she said.

Rebecca emitted a strained, high-pitched noise.

Taking it to be the prelude to a retort, Contessa turned and walked away. Her stomach revolted again. She noticed a bench, but there was always something embarrassing about being the first person to sit down.

So she headed for the trinket kiosks around the atrium to scour their sock selection. She found it wanting.

Rebecca sidled up to her. “I didn’t know you wore socks.”

“Not for me. Philip has a peculiar fondness for uniquely hideous socks,” Contessa explained. “But these are just ordinarily hideous.”

“I think they're cute. Look, this one has seahorses on it.”

“He wouldn't wear it.” Her eyes fell on the outline of Rebecca’s phone in her pocket. “How popular is that game you play?”

“*Kitty Collector? Or Abyssal Forge IV: Gratuitous Birthing Horror?*”

Contessa took a shot in the dark. “The latter.”

“Millions!” Rebecca exclaimed. “Millions of players worldwide, except the countries where it's banned. You’re the only person I know who doesn’t play it. Even David’s level fifty-something on it already, and he hates resource management games. He says it feels more like a memory.”

“Popular enough to have merchandise, then.”
“Why yes, I did pre-order an Unabortable Jesus figurine,” Rebecca said, haughtily. “Seventy-second trimester, and no, you can’t see it. It’s for heathens’ eyes only.”

“Mm. Oh dear,” Contessa said. She unhooked a polka-dotted sock from the shelf hanger, tugged it over her hand. It was hard to find socks to Philip’s exacting standards, because Contessa found most socks that weren’t a solid neutral colour ugly.

“I mean, you will eventually. I’m gonna put it on my desk next to the Serenity maquette.” Rebecca saw Contessa’s besocked hand and did a double take. Her eyes lit up and she let out an audible squeak.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Rebecca said, smiling behind her hands. “Oh, and I know a shop that sells Abyssal Forge stuff. It’s on the fifth floor, I think, next to the cinema. We can look for socks there.”

“If it’s not too out of the way,” Contessa said.

It wasn’t out of the way, but first they had to wade through sales central. At every turn, they were targeted by solicitors hoping to reel them into demonstrations. Contessa had to rescue Rebecca from a lifetime of skin peels and anti-ageing moisture cream.

“There are two things in this world that love sea salt, Contessa. Sharks, and those hand wash salespeople. Coincidence? I think not,” Rebecca babbled as she was dragged away from the display sink. She waved her dripping hand perilously close to Contessa’s face. “Prune fingers! Have you noticed that ‘grift’ is one letter away from ‘graft’? What do you think they’re gonna do with all that skin they sloughed off? Make a fleshbeast?”

“It’s possible that making your skin dry and flaky from overwashing encourages you to buy their products,” Contessa allowed. “I don’t think they’re using the cells to construct unholy epidermal homunculi, however.”

“But you don’t know for sure, do you? Who even are the nine dermatologists that recommend these products? Better question, what did they do to the tenth one?” Rebecca peeked out from behind a fan of tropical fronds. “Are they still there?”

“The dermatologists?”

“The salespeople. The ones who keep accosting me! Call me Rebecca Costed-Brown.”

“Rebecca Costed-Brown, they will always be there. Just walk past, or tell them you aren’t interested.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Hiding behind a plant is easier?”

Rebecca stepped out to Contessa’s side and handed her a strip of thick paper with a picture of an improbably flexible hand that managed to show off both the pads of the first three fingers and the cuticles of the last two. “Part of it’s like, I’m depriving them of their livelihood.”

Contessa didn’t understand how that was supposed to make it harder. She also didn’t understand why she was now holding a complimentary ten-dollar voucher for skincare products.

“The other part of it is… I like meeting new people and making new friends,” Rebecca continued,
thoughtfully, “but I’m scared I might be running up against my ceiling. I only have so many Dunbar slots left. I already met Jack today…”

They neared the gleaming storefront of what looked like a cross between a gym and a health spa. When they walked up to to get a closer look at the sign, the automatic doors slid open.

“Perhaps you should learn how to say ‘no’ indirectly,” Contessa mused, tucking the voucher into her inside pocket. She strode over the threshold.

Rebecca hastened to follow. “Indirectly?”

Cold expensive light reflected off the marble tiles and the lead glass accenting the walls. A few customers lounged on low-slung papasans, and others sipped from paper cones by the watercooler. Contessa picked out an olive-skinned teenager with black hair to his shoulders and a nametag pinned to his breast. “There,” she said, under her breath.

Rebecca reflexively looked up, and set her foot into his snare by making eye contact with him.

At the same time, Contessa slouched, letting her eyes drift to the exit. Her body language radiated disinterest. “Don’t sign up for anything or spend any money,” she warned Rebecca, as the salesman approached.

She slipped away before the salesman could rope her into his pitch. With any luck, the boy would oust Jacob from Rebecca's friend circle. It annoyed her that he'd secured a spot so easily without even a trial period.

Scraping her hair back into a bun, she took the scenic route through the mini-labyrinth of lockers at the end of the lobby. She unfolded a pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles from her pocket and affixed them to her nose. Her other hand made minor adjustments to her suit.

Two doors on either side of the lockers. A gym was visible beyond the glass one, but what piqued her interest was the locked metal door with the concentric circle patterns on it. A sign to its left explained that these were sensory deprivation tanks for therapeutic use. She picked a key fob engraved with the same symbols off an unattended duffel bag, unlocked the door, and slinked into the room.

Once inside, she only had a moment to assess the situation. What was the greatest fear of people coming into a place like this?

The answer seemed obvious: being entombed and made to marinate in a pool of embalming fluid, with nothing but their thoughts for company.

For the life of her, Contessa couldn't understand why anyone would willingly subject themselves to such torture.

But this was a luxury people paid for. She cast her eyes over the rest of the room, zooming out. The tanks were clinical in their whiteness, while LED strips on the walls and ceiling burned an aggressive blue. A clean mineral tang permeated the air, sharpening when she inhaled. The scent gave her clarity.

She walked to one of the pods, found the groove on the edge of the lid and popped it open like a clam shell. A middle-aged lady floated within, on a reservoir of cool blue water.

“Good afternoon.”
The occupant’s eyelids fluttered open, and she blinked at Contessa as she roused from her trance.

Contessa raised her voice to help her along. “Ma’am,” she said. “I don’t mean to alarm you, but there are a few things you need to know about this establishment before you continue.”

When their conversation was over, Contessa politely turned her back as the lady yanked her clothes on over her wet bathing suit and hurried out the door.

Contessa was about to leave herself, when she was confronted by a gaunt woman storming in through the staff entrance. She had an ash-blonde bob and the taut, squinting mien of the permanently stressed. Save for the age, she looked more like a librarian than the hulking Trunchbull of a lady who had physically escorted Rebecca from the library three days prior.

“Pardon me,” the woman said, “but just what are you doing here?”

Contessa’s hand paused on the door handle. She offered the woman a genial smile. “I was just leaving.”

“No one is allowed in these chambers without an appointment,” the woman said, strident as a school-issue recorder. “If you wish to avail yourself of the private facilities, you must make a booking. They are in very high demand.”

“I’ve seen enough of the private facilities,” Contessa said lightly, and glanced at the woman’s nametag. Audrey Morgan, Manager. She raised her eyebrows. “Quite an operation you have here.”

“Excuse me?”

“No antiseptic sprays or hand sanitiser. Used towels and clothing on frequently touched surfaces.” She took a slim moleskine notebook out of her jacket, flipped to the back pages and pretended to be reading off records instead of the model answer key to her last civics quiz and numerical ratings for each and every one of her civics professor's ridiculous ties. “And, you allow patrons to wear their own bathing suits in the tank.”

The manager’s pale mouth puckered. “We require all our customers to take a disinfecting shower before they use the tanks.”

“I’m sure that does miracles for the complexion.”

“Once again. Who are you?”

“Nobody important,” Contessa said. She matched the manager’s curt tone consonant for consonant, empty amiability hardening into righteous contempt. “Just your friendly neighborhood health and safety inspector.”

The manager’s demeanour leapt from cold to icy. But there was a tinge of something else there now. Nerves. “I wasn't informed of a surprise health and safety inspection.”

“You must not have received the surprise memo. Did you check your surprise spam folder?”

“I’d like to check some ID, please.”

Tucked in the inner lining of Contessa’s jacket were five sets of business card—embossed serif lettering on baronial ivory stock—each bearing a different name and different ambiguous logo. Not one of them read ‘Health and Safety Inspector’. A neophytic oversight, in retrospect. She improvised, retrieving a card from her pants pocket with the flair of a seasoned card sharp.
Morgan took it and scanned both sides, her eyes narrowing. "This is blank."

"It has all my identifying details and clearance," Contessa replied. "The ink becomes visible when it comes into contact with certain fluids."

"That doesn’t seem... efficient."

"It isn’t meant to be. Sometimes efficiency is anathema to thoroughness. If you cut corners with security measures, you cut corners with health and safety."

Grudging acceptance. "Which fluids, exactly?"

Contessa gestured towards a water bottle on the counter. The manager reached for the cap, but Contessa shook her head and pantomimed drinking from it. It took a moment for her meaning to sink in.

"That's disgusting," Morgan said.


She still looked disbelieving, but not as much. "I don’t—"

"You have two options," Contessa said, steamrolling the manager before she could voice her doubts. "One, you urinate on this card now, and see that I’m telling the truth. I write you up for violating code, as well as report you to local authorities for public indecency. Two, you go to the washroom. Urinate on it there and, again, see that I'm telling the truth."

"I’m not letting you out of my sight."

Contessa feigned revulsion. "I’m sorry, are you requesting that I accompany you?"

"No, I’m just—"

"Perversion," she said, making a note with exaggerated strokes. "Deviant exhibitionism in the workplace."

Morgan bristled, beginning to sound in need of a float herself. "You could urinate on it."

"And allow you to cover up any lingering violations in my absence?" Contessa tapped the cover of her notebook without closing it. She opened the door and walked out into the main lobby. "I’d advise you to close shop, or start squatting."

"I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing at," said Morgan, "but you’re spreading slander about a very reputable business. We have five stars on Yelp, and we have never had a complaint concerning hygiene. Until you produce some practical verification, you’re not in the position to be issuing these frankly obscene ultimatums."

"Hi, excuse me?"

They turned to the girl who had appeared next to them.

"Hi, so, we were wondering about your prices?" the girl said, motioning towards her friend in the corner.

Morgan’s lips compressed into a smile. "Yes? They’re listed on the wall."
The girl examined her acrylic nails, shrugging, and an idea occurred to Contessa. “Yeah but, like, do you have special rates for MRSA outbreaks? Your website didn’t say anything about an MRSA outbreak, so can we get, like, a markdown?”

“There is no MR—” A few heads swivelled in the manager’s direction. “There is none of that, in here.”

Behind her own back, Contessa tugged her right sleeve up and methodically dragged her fingernails up and down her exposed forearm—hard enough to leave marks, but not enough to break skin. It would take a few seconds for the blood to rush in.

“There was a lady just now—she was talking about festering sores, and like, we don’t want that? We want the opposite?”

“She was mistaken,” Morgan said. “We sterilise all our equipment regularly.”

Standing in the manager’s blindspot, Contessa raised her red-streaked wrist and shook her head. The girl’s eyes widened.

“Whatever,” she said, backing away towards her friend, “abscesses are so not my aesthetic right now?”

Contessa pulled her sleeve down just as Morgan turned back to her. Her lips curved in an unapologetic smile. “We received an anonymous tip from someone working at this company regarding a potential MRSA hazard.”

Morgan opened her mouth, closed it. She started, “There is no evidence of any such—”

“The third option,” Contessa continued, her voice soft yet abiding no overspeak, “is you trust I am what I say I am, and you trust that I don’t want to draw this out any more than you do. But I take my job seriously, and I have the cachet and resources to do more damage than a Yelp review. Tell your customers to leave now. Be the one who erred on the side of caution. When the lawsuits roll in, I’ll ensure the record reflects your immediate compliance.”

Morgan looked at her with hateful eyes, her hand reaching for her phone.

Before leaving her to her doubtlessly urgent call, Contessa threw the rest of the bone. “In our exchanges, they went by the moniker ‘HispanicMaleSurferBoi16, with an ‘i’ in ‘boy’. As the teenagers do.”

Contessa found Rebecca in the gym, next to the stationary fitness bikes and step twisters. She was still chatting with the salesman even as the room emptied around them. There was another boy hanging off his arm, though he kept gently elbowing him away.

“Not here, I’m working,” the salesman told him, hiding a blush. “Go get a pretzel or something.”

“Hey, Contessa,” Rebecca said cheerily. “Carlos, Eric, this is Contessa. Why are you wearing glasses, Contessa?”

“Hi, Contessa.”

Contessa nodded at the pair to acknowledge their presence, then faced Rebecca. “We’re leaving now.”

“We just got here!”
“Yes, and now we’re leaving.”

“She’s not usually this much of a nerd,” Rebecca said to Carlos, an undercurrent of irony in her voice. She nudged Contessa in the side. “Just a while longer? Carlos was talking about this package deal that comes with the one-year membership. You get a trainer and the first session is free…”

Intransigent. Contessa weighed her options. Small talk for a minimum of six minutes, going by Rebecca’s average time. Or—small talk for two minutes to build a profile, one minute to turn that data into a resolution.

She glanced at the door. She was on a tight clock here.

“All right, Carlos,” Contessa said, letting her shoulders relax and her face slacken. “Tell me about yourself.”

He did—condensing the safe surface details of his high school, his family, miscellaneous tidbits of personal history when prompted. She nodded along, speaking only to cut Rebecca off at the pass before she could draw him into tangents.

He was a natural salesman. It wasn't just his clean-cut good looks and physique, or even the apple-pie sweetness of his disposition, the way he kept his big brown eyes free of guile and his voice perpetually earnest. Those only made it easier for people like Rebecca to forget what he was. Mostly it was that he understood why. Why he was opening up, why he was telling these strangers about why his family moved to Santa Monica, how he had a rough sophomore year but made it into the honours class by dint of hard work and extra credit. Building this narrative, so you would commit to a year of maybe seeing him again. The classic confidence game was all about giving the mark your confidence in order to earn theirs.

He was closing now, already had Rebecca in the crosshairs. She was complimenting him on something or other.

“Aw, shucks,” he said, being the type of person to say aw, shucks. “I’m just glad to have the opportunity to work in a place with this kind of atmosphere, you know? Some of our regulars, they say it’s a real culture shock to work out anywhere else, because the trainers don’t go the extra mile —”

"How many of these regulars did you get to sign up?” Contessa asked.

Abashed, he ran his fingers through his hair. “I can’t tell you exact numbers, but I try to steer lots of people towards a healthier lifestyle.”

“Well, Carlos,” Contessa said, “can you tell me how many people have you given this pitch to who, compelled by some Olympic pipe dream, happily sign up for the fantasy you're selling them, and yet never come in to work out past New Year’s Day?

He laughed awkwardly. “Uh… I think people generally want to improve themselves, but they sometimes need an extra push, which is why we encourage them to add their name to the mailing list —”

“You know very well this operation is a scam, Carlos, that the handful of 'regulars' couldn't enjoy such luxuries if not for the hundreds of gullible marks you prey on who are locked into a thousand dollar contract they can't break, courtesy of your organisation's predatory business model. What's really in the fine print of that contract you keep waving at my associate, Carlos? Pay a hundred dollars a month for MRSA-infested facilities you'll never use or else?”
Carlos unconsciously backed into a treadmill. Carlos’ friend, who had returned with a chocolate-covered pretzel, stared at him. Rebecca held Contessa’s sleeve at the elbow. Not pulling, just gripping the fabric as a reminder that she was there.

Contessa didn’t look at her. She filled a syringe with as much heartfelt sorrow as she could muster and injected it directly into her expression. “You claim you want to chaperone people to a deeper understanding of themselves, improve their self-perception, but you don’t even understand yourself anymore. You built your self-esteem on the feeling that you were innately better than the people you grew up around. And who could blame you? You were a rising star on the track team. You got every scholarship. You were the one who made it out. Now you’re surrounded by people who are more gifted than you, faster, smarter, and the work doesn’t come so easily. You struggle to hold onto the insular system of accountability you prided yourself on having, but it turns out you need external validation as much as the next person. What happened to you, Carlos? Do you think your grandfather would be proud to see you now, Carlos? Do you think he survived Vietnam and paid for your education so he could witness you squander your potential?”

She could see the manager coming into earshot behind him.

“Thank you for your assistance. I would shake your hand, but, well, you understand,” she said. She winked and palmed him the skincare voucher. “A gratuity for services rendered.”

Carlos blinked away tears, his face a picture of sheer black incomprehension, while his friend dropped his pretzel in his haste to put distance between them.

“Don’t eat that. You’ll get intestinal MRSA. We’ll be going now,” Contessa said, making a little rabbit-ear hand gesture she’d been informed was a symbol of peace. “Rebecca?”

Rebecca followed her out of the spa speechlessly.

Behind them, the manager told Carlos he was being let go.

✶

A gaggle of schoolgirls accosted them when they were halfway across the floor, shaking donation tins and chattering about the needs and goals of the American Red Cross.

“No thank you!” Rebecca cried. When they didn’t scatter fast enough, she jumped in front of them, her arms spread to shield them from Contessa with her body. They hurried off soon after.

“You're upset,” Contessa said.

“Yes!” Rebecca replied, oddly shrill. “Yes, I am very upset!”

Contessa nodded, her suspicions confirmed. Years of reading Philip had made her very perceptive when it came to these things. “Why?”

“Why? I should be asking you! Why would you do that to Carlos?”

Her thoughts missed a stair. She took off the spectacles and blinked. “...who is Carlos?”

“That nice boy we were just talking to?” Rebecca almost shouted. “You met him and then you destroyed his entire life!”

“Oh. Him.” She frowned a little. “I think my Dunbar's number is slightly smaller than yours.”
“Contessa, I wanted to learn to say no to salespeople, not _destroy their entire life._”

“I said no for everyone who would have been harassed by him,” Contessa said defensively. “It was a public service.”

“He’s just a kid,” Rebecca said, as if this fact would inspire sympathy. She rubbed her eyes. “This was his first part-time job. So he could buy a car.”

“Walking is healthy.”

“Is humiliation also healthy?”

Something in her tone told Contessa that ‘very’ was the wrong answer. “I fail to grasp the relevance.”

“You humiliated him in front of his crush!”

Contessa rifled through her memory of the scene. “The other boy? That was his friend.”

“No it _wasn’t_, Contessa,” Rebecca said plaintively. “Why didn’t you stuff him into a staph locker while you were at it?”

“Because biological warfare is notoriously inefficient,” she explained with utmost patience, even though Rebecca was being fickle and unreasonable. Pathogens took time. If Jacob had found out about the iguanas firsthand, he’d be experiencing the psychotropic effects of their lamina sheddings after three to five days of continuous exposure, not instantaneously. She’d have to inflict more time with him on herself at some point in the next seventy-two hours to observe the results.

Rebecca sighed, brushing the hair out of her eyes unhappily. She looked back in the direction of the shops and forced a smile. “I guess he would have lost his job anyway, if they’re shutting down because of the MRSA outbreak.”

“That wasn’t real.”

The brief ray of hope was doused. “What do you mean it wasn’t real?”

“I mean I made it up.”

Emotions warred on Rebecca’s face, disappointment triumphing over bewilderment and outrage. She squeezed her eyes shut. “Contessa, _why?_ If you didn’t feel comfortable there, we could have just left.”

“But it was the _indirect_ no,” Contessa felt her eyebrows knit. She wanted to explain that this was the teachable moment. Rebecca was supposed to have learnt a lesson about how to deal with bottomfeeders. She wasn’t supposed to get attached. “Rebecca, I gave him the voucher.”

Then Rebecca looked more angry than disappointed, and she stamped off towards the food courts.

She must have really wanted that discount.

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Chapter End Notes
Mucho thanks to my love maroon_sweater for betaing and her unconditional support and encouragement. ❤️
Side-Story: Parable of the Gerbil

Chapter Summary

If sensitive to gore/animal abuse, skip the first really long paragraph.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I was thinking,” Jacob said, “about how the mothers eat their young.”

The pet store had a grid of glass tanks against the wall. The spartan enclosures housed gerbils and hamsters, mostly, save a pair of shaggy guinea pigs in the far corner next to a white bunny.

Jacob pointed at a fat, ginger-coated gerbil—the only one awake at the moment—as it meandered out of a tunnel. “If you were a mother, would you rather eat part of your child, or a live gerbil?”

“Which part and how much?” Philip asked.

“Oh of the child? A chunk off the thigh. Substantial enough to be considered a meal.”

Philip squinted. The gerbil snuffled its way through the wood shavings, seeking out stray pellets instead of climbing into the full food bowl next to it.

“A woman gets hauled onto a stage in front of a crowd,” Jacob mused. “She’s told she has to choose between eating part of her child that’s already been cut, cooked and garnished, and eating a live gerbil. Or else the kid dies. Are you picturing it?”

He shrugged and made a non-committal noise. It was wiser to see where Jacob was going with something before commenting.

“She chooses the gerbil, of course. People are silly and predictable like that. Have to cling to these stubborn notions of propriety.” Jacob leaned in towards the display with parted lips, his breath briefly fogging the glass. “She suffers all the way through it—the fur, the crunching of tiny bones and sinew, blood squirting when she bites down. It’s still alive to kick up a fuss, scratching her tongue and gums, scraping the roof of her mouth. She doesn’t know how to kill it besides just chewing and chewing till it stops moving, and maybe she thinks if she swallows, it’ll all be over and digested quick. But she can’t swallow it. When she thinks it’s almost down her gullet, it twitches and comes back up. All over the stage. She drops to her knees to scoop up the gorge, but it’s too late. The kid gets their throat slit. Now she walks through the village alone and as she passes, people point and whisper, she couldn’t even eat a gerbil to save her child. It was just a gerbil, after all.”

“What,” Philip said, not taking his eyes off the gerbil, “is the purpose of this tale?”

It was Jacob’s turn to shrug. “You asked me what I was thinking about.”

“I didn’t think you were crafting an extended fantasy about a mother eating a gerbil.”

“She didn’t eat the gerbil. That was the point.”
The gerbil’s tiny claws found a pellet wedged in a crack in the plastic slide. It sniffed at it from every angle, whiskers twitching like it was some rodent food mix connoisseur. Eventually it gave in and began to gnaw on its prize.

“Was cannibalism the right answer?”

“Well, I’m not here to judge,” Jacob said.

“They are silly and predictable.”

“Glad you agree.”

Annoyed but amused, Philip cast him a sidelong glance. Jacob pretended not to notice and moved down the row of tanks, tapping as he went. He didn’t succeed in waking up the clump of baby hamsters snoozing in a corner, but a knock did rouse a solitary grey furball. It blinked and yawned wide with a full-bodied quiver, before curling around to face the inside of its resin cave.

Jacob smiled.

Philip felt this inexplicable, quiet fondness rising up in him. It made him want to take Jacob’s face in his hands and trace the sculpted edges of his cheeks with questing thumbs, brush the corners of his lips, travel tenderly to the pulse in his neck.

But it was an idle thought more than a true desire—ugly and inconvenient, like the urge to lick a drain or fling your phone off a bridge. Jacob might reciprocate, but only for a moment to seize control. Philip’s shoulder blades ached from the thought of being forced backwards into the tanks. Even worse, Jacob would file the incident away as a vulnerability, another thing to hold over him. Another thing that signified the hold he already had.

So Philip kept his schoolboy daydreams at arm’s length, where they could join the other lost possibilities of his life in dignified decay. He turned his attention back to the rodents.

“Boring,” Jacob said. “Why are they all asleep.”

“Hamsters are nocturnal,” he recited.

“Are gerbils?”

Philip had never owned a pet. “I’m not sure. But one can’t really begrudge them the occasional long nap, when they live in captivity.”

“They have that little exercise wheel. They should run on that and power our appliances. Have little stationary gerbil marathons with little gerbil sponsorships and little gerbil performance-enhancing drug scandals.”

“Better than eating them,” Philip agreed.

Jacob huffed softly in reply. He turned around and wandered past a chinchilla tank and a terrapin-studded rocky waterfall display, to the shelves of products. Philip followed closely behind.

Jacob stopped at the accessories section. It was wedged between a rack of grooming supplies and a narrow column of canned pet food that hadn’t made it to the big gourmet brand leagues on the shelves behind them, but he acted like he’d come primarily for this.

A variety of collars, harnesses, chains and leashes hung from a perforated metal stand. His long
elegant fingers skimmed over the leashes, and settled on a choke chain. Beside him, Philip furrowed his brow.

A pale freckled girl who had been hovering around them earlier hurried over. She cleared her throat. "That's very cruel, you know."

Jacob spared her a lazy glance, only to unhook the chain from the stand. "Hm."

Goaded, the girl put her hands on her hips and stepped up to him in a manner that would have been intimidating, had she been a little taller. Her white t-shirt had an anthropomorphised dog on it, from some cartoon he didn’t recognise.

"Mm-hm. It really is," she told Jacob. "You should treat your dog the same way you would treat your child."

In light of the discussion they’d just had, Philip expected Jacob to respond facetiously, or simply bestow one of his trademark smirks. He didn’t expect—

"But mine's disobedient," Jacob said, "and he's so big. He needs to be brought to heel."

Philip felt his neck bloom with heat, underneath the collar.

Jacob didn’t own a dog.

"That's—that's no excuse." The girl’s lips pulled into a grimace. "Are you trying to train him not to trust humans? You might as well put a shock collar on him."

"Oh," he said, and feigned browsing the shelf with more interest, “do they sell those here? I’ve been looking."

Philip wanted to intervene but found he couldn’t, as if all his muscles had tightened at once, rooting him in place. Jacob twisted the chain around his knuckles, and Philip imagined the cold links clinking and digging into his own skin. The flush of heat migrated steadily southward.

The girl tried again to reach Jacob. "I can’t believe this. How would you like it if someone jerked you around every time you resisted?"

"I wouldn't like that very much." He looked her in the eyes. "But it's not for me, is it?"

The girl opened and closed her mouth, her appeal falling apart. She floundered to construct another argument that didn't presume empathy, but by walking away Jacob wordlessly slammed the door shut on the conversation and bolted it.

Philip was very familiar with that sound.

The girl looked at him in exasperation, searching for commiseration. He offered her a polite nod so she could eke any meaning she wanted out of it, and walked stiffly out of the aisle.

Jacob was waiting at the counter with a plastic bag in hand. He turned at Philip’s approach. His eyes were dark and unsmiling. “Come,” he said.

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Philip buttoned his shirt, hands moving more roughly to mask the slight tremble. He glanced at Jacob, who was ensconced on the low cushioned seat in a corner of the dressing room. His right leg
was propped up over his left thigh, and Philip could see the exposed white edges of his sole. “You need new shoes. Again.”

Jacob sighed through his nose. The choke chain lay coiled in a pile on his lap. “They wear out so quickly.”

“Perhaps it’s your gait. Do you use the same shoes for exercising?” Philip turned around and took his time sliding the waistband of his jeans to his hips, allowing Jacob to better appreciate his award-winning ass.

He did just that. “Bold of you to assume I exercise.”

“The wear pattern on the tread suggests overpronation. Very common. Your ankles are rolling too far inward when you walk.”

In the mirror, Jacob shifted like he knew he was being watched and was contriving to provide as little to watch as possible—not uncomfortable false rigidity, but a deceptively unfocused lethargy, head half-turned and leaning against the glossy white wall. The seat of his black jeans squeaked across the cushion.

“Orthotic insoles should help,” Philip said. He smoothed down his shirt, then continued, “I could look around for motion control athletic shoes if you’re willing to get fitted.”

“Mm. After midterms.”

“You said you were a 9, but that might have exacerbated the issue. You could try going up half a size so your toes have more room.”

“Fine.”

A silence descended.

His breathing sounded loud to himself, a metronome suspended in the stale and brilliantly lit vacuum between them. Jacob didn’t care. Jacob also thought he was rambling, which he was. But there was a comfort, a certainty to witnessing the irritation manifest in harsh sighs at the ends of sentences and the occasional incredulous raise of an eyebrow. Are you still talking, Philip? Would you do one thing for me real quick? Just real quick—could you shut the fuck up? It was like prodding a bruise to produce that familiar twinge.

Or maybe it was more like tonguing a gap between teeth. He zipped and buckled his pants quickly, the shake having fled his fingers. Maybe Jacob really was just tired.

“Am I going to get a disease?”

The shrapnel of the question ricocheted and struck Philip in the face. Something must have bled into his expression when he swivelled around, because Jacob only rolled his eyes.

“From the lizards,” Jacob said. “I want to know if I stared death in the nictitating membranes.”

“Ah.” He allowed the residual hurt to trickle away before asking, “When did you look?”

“Last night.”

Philip hesitated. “It’s imperative that you answer as honestly and accurately as possible,” he said. “How long were you exposed to the iguanas?”
“Less than five minutes.” Jacob ran a hand through his dark hair, tugging his fingers free of the tangles. “Were they iguanas? Iguanas don’t look like that. I googled them. They don’t have nearly that many mushrooms sprouting from their backs. Or glow-in-the-dark eyes.”

“Did you inhale at any point during that time?”

“I don’t know, Philip. Maybe at one point during those five minutes.”

“Are you experiencing symptoms? Nausea, headaches, hallucinations involving plantains?”

“No.”

“You’ll live.” He rubbed his brow with the side of his hand. “Jack, don’t do that again. If not for my job security, then for your own safety.”

At that, Jacob did give him a smirk. “If you happen to leave open crates lying around where I can see them, can you blame me for getting curious?”

“I found a crowbar,” Philip said, unamused. “It’s not mine.”

“Maybe it’s Contessa’s.”

Of course he would bring her into this. “Hers is titanium and has a rather distinctive stain. Leaving aside the question of motive.”

“As usual, you leap to her defense,” Jacob said.

“You just confessed.”

“Did I.”

“Yes.”

He spoke lightly, because Jacob was patently being playful, and wouldn't Philip feel silly if he reacted so seriously?

It occurred to him, then, that Jacob wanted him to treat the matter lightly, so that the violation of boundaries and confidentiality could be deemed peccadilloes and therefore ignorable. “Jack. I’d like you to not touch my work-related materials. Please.”

“Okay,” Jacob said. “I won’t.”

Too easy. Philip gave him a skeptical look.

Jacob met his eyes, and raised his hands. “For you. I promise.”

Philip studied his face, saw the sincerity. He was aware Jacob could be faking it, but a promise would do for now.

He’d have to admit fault as well, for not taking more precautions in the first place. Abandoned warehouses weren’t impregnable, even locked, and neither were dorms and wall safes and the trunks of cars.

Contessa wouldn’t have admitted any fault at all.

Philip collected his wadded-up boxers off the floor and tucked them under an armpit. They’d have to
be discarded. He opened the door a crack, then paused, remembering.

Jacob’s eyes drifted to Philip’s face, but didn’t linger. “So eager to leave?”

“Aren’t you? It smells like covert anal sex in here,” Philip said, checking his neck for visible marks in the mirror. “We should find something else to occupy the time till the girls are ready. Like get you a new pair of shoes.”

“Every time I go to the mall, I rediscover my boundless hatred of the whole concept.” Jacob groaned and sat up slowly, stretching his limbs. “Shopping. Why?”

With a frown, Philip tugged his collar up and did the first button.

Chapter End Notes

LBD7 is actually almost done, but I lack the time and energy to devote to it right now because finals and other excuses. Also yesterday my beta Roon told me what Pip and Jack were really doing at the mall, so you get this snip.

Another note: I post additional material (art, writings) to the SB thread occasionally. Subscribe to it if you're interested.

The world was such a beautiful place. She was blessed to be the only one able to see it.

She stood and rested her hand on a balustrade of compacted teddy bears, gazing out over the hive of activity below. Here in the heart of the empire, or at least one of the ventricles, her loyal subjects were free to work, play, or surfeit themselves on the feast she had catered. Merchants hawked their wares on the sidelines, from spinning tops to canisters of magic metallic slime to packets of dyed brine shrimp eggs. Nearby, a group of kids were poised to tear down a school. Education was important, but so was constant revitalisation of the economy. Children ferried around rolls of plasticine the size of grapefruits to use as mortar for the subsequent reconstruction.

A blur of red caught her eye before she could get too absorbed in the joyous sights and sounds of her people. The centurion stationed at the border was waving a flag at her, signalling that a foreign element had crossed over into her kingdom without identifying themselves. Her initial impulse was to dismiss the alert as a false alarm. Her subject was not the best at remembering to request identification anyway.

But when she cast her eyes upon the trespasser, a frisson shot through her like a current.

Out of the shadows appeared a dark-haired traveller, fair and sylphlike, wearing a bowl-shaped hat and a grey suit that shimmered beneath the myriad white suns. The traveller clearly hailed from distant climes. She beheld the sovereign’s domain with eyes that spoke of a long, weary journey.

She dismounted from a vehicle very much like a horse, if a horse looked very much like an aluminum kick scooter. Holographic silver stars were splashed down the lustrous black neck. A spray of streamers fluttered from the handlebars, the proud vibrant mane of a thoroughbred.

She was, the sovereign realised with a start, no mere traveller.

The knight set down a basket laden with treasures from the far north and some of the midwest. From it, she extricated a sword of arcane origin radiating an anaemic green light that the sovereign suspected could be adjusted in intensity via a button on the hilt. A deft flick of her wrist sent the sword’s tubular blade telescoping outward.

*Why the gifts?* the sovereign had to wonder, eyeing the knight warily from her dais. *Why the weapon? Why the shoulders that just wouldn’t quit?* There was no conference on the docket that would necessitate tokens of goodwill, at least not with any single-member entities. Due to recent budget cuts, there was no dragon, hydra, three-headed canine or other prohibitively expensive mythological beast guarding the gates of her domain.

All these meant that this knight, in her suit of shining suit... had come to vanquish the supreme ruler herself.

“Rebecca, why,” the knight said.

The question itself appeared rhetorical, there being no variation in the knight’s tone or countenance.

Yet the sovereign shuddered at the words. It had been a long time, a lifetime, since she had heard that name unadorned.
The past could not be outrun. At the very most, it could be stalled. “I am not Rebecca.”

The knight swung the sword, triggering a startling riot of raucous chirps and buzzes on the primary swing. Her thumb stabbed at buttons to turn it off, but that only altered the flash-pattern of the light. She gave up and levelled the weapon at the sovereign’s chest.

“No,” the knight said, shaking her head. “No, Rebecca. Stop. Do not.”

The sovereign gazed upon her, spread her arms, and smiled with generosity and benevolence.

Between them, the lambent green blade pulsed, one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two.

“I,” she said, "am Rebecca Plush Invicta, Vicereine of the Velvet Empire.”

Chapter 7: Land of the Blind

They walked past a burger kiosk and an artisanal ramen restaurant. Rebecca didn’t pitch a sitcom where the punchline would always be an ironic Thoreau quote. They walked past a music school. Rebecca didn’t tell the story of the vengeful spirit that haunted her aunt’s boudoir grand piano, but only on weeknights and only for people who had no appreciation for early baroque. They walked past a sporting goods store. Rebecca didn’t say hi to Jacob and Philip when she spotted them in the badminton section playing hacky sack with a shuttlecock. They took the escalator up to find it didn’t lead anywhere, and had to backtrack to take a different escalator at an opposite arm of the mall, which left them stranded on the fourth storey as it had no escalator going down. They walked past a Daiso. Rebecca didn't make a comment about the soft power of the zaibatsu, or buy a basketload of two-dollar household trinkets to save money.

Finally, at a corner of an arcade, Rebecca broke her silence.

“Contessa, I’m still upset.”

“Frankly, so am I,” Contessa replied, without skipping a beat. “Most of these prizes are too bulky to be successfully lifted, much less transported. Even the smaller capsules are beyond the crane’s reach. This is why Philip brings his own claw.”

Rebecca jerked the joystick, and her other hand planted itself on the glass. “Not about the machine. Well, yeah, it’s kind of terrible. But what’s even more terrible is what you did! I know you’re grumpy. Maybe it’s my fault for dragging you out. But there was the slushie, and Jack, and the whole thing with the MRSA... it’s not all right for you to bully people like that, whatever your mood.”

Electronic noises and excited voices peppered the lull. Rebecca looked to see if she was being ignored, but Contessa stood squinting at her like she was the one whose motives were inscrutable.

“How exactly do you think I got Malvolio to give up his garters? Do you think I asked nicely?”

Rebecca’s hand stopped moving the joystick. She’d assumed Contessa had befriended the actor through friendly conversation, but now the possibility that she had left him in the throes of some gangrene scare seemed equally likely. “Didn’t you?”

“I did ask,” Contessa said. “With a roll of quarters.”

Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief and went back to guiding the laden claw towards the hatch. “So you paid him? That’s not so bad. See, you don’t have to resort to—” She paused. “Wait a second, how do you remember Malvolio’s name but not Carlos’?”
Her forehead creased. “Who is Carlos?”

Rebecca turned to snap at her, but the sudden skid of Contessa’s expression from vexation to blankness gave her pause. “Not funny,” she warned.

“It isn’t,” Contessa agreed. “Forgive me if I simply don’t retain irrelevant information.”

“People aren’t irrelevant! There’s nothing for them to be relevant to.”

“That is the definition of irrelevance, yes. What will it take for you to...” Contessa glanced at the plushies heaped in the claw machine, apparently reviewing her next few words.

Rebecca mentally completed the question—*drop this, forget it happened*—and prepared a tirade.

“...feel better about this?” Contessa finished.

In many ways, this was worse. It became transparent that Contessa genuinely thought the locus of the problem was Rebecca: she didn’t care about Carlos, only that Rebecca cared about Carlos. Maybe if she laid it out logically, Contessa would understand.

“It’s not about how I feel,” Rebecca began. “You can’t just toss me an ice-cream and get Carlos’ job back.”

Contessa listened, paying extra attention to the movement of Rebecca’s lips as she lectured her about the categorical imperative. Good.

Her voice rose over the din, picking up speed the way it did whenever she waited for some wiser subconscious part of her brain to spring awake and guide the flow of her reasoning. Results were mixed, but it was what she had. “You have caused material harm. Imagine a society where everyone acts as you just acted! You Kant just do that! You—”

Contessa interrupted, “What about that toy store we saw just now?”

They were at the entrance of the toy store inside of a minute. Calliope music streamed from the speakers in an unending merry loop.

“I suppose this is more age-appropriate than the cardigan.”

“There’s so much to see,” Rebecca said. She flicked at a fidget spinner hanging from a mobile with its brightly coloured brethren and giggled helplessly when they all rattled. “Eee! I love these things. Okay, so where should we start?”

Placid, Contessa gazed at the shelves of toys spreading out before them. “We should proceed alphabetically.”

“A. A... Amazing race,” Rebecca said. “Yes.”

Contessa failed to react.

"Amazing race." Rebecca dual-wielded a pair of fidget spinners to give her statement more gravitas. “Contessa, we need to do an amazing race!”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s a race that’s amazing. Look.” She returned the spinners so she could fish a toy catalogue from the counter rack and leaf through its glossy pages. “I’ll get someone to make a list of toys for us to
find and we'll see who gets all the toys on her list first.”

“Sounds dull,” Contessa said, “and we would have to return the toys to their respective shelves afterwards, making it dull and pointless.”

“Oh.” Rebecca shook her head in disappointment. “I think we both know why you don't want to.”

“I just explained why.”

“No, the real reason.”

Rebecca led Contessa to the bargain bins left of the entrance, taking her specifically to the bin brimming with yellow rubber chickens. She unfolded the catalogue, spread it out over the surface of the toys, and forced her weight down onto it.

Then she released, stumbling to her feet, and the chickens rose with her. The air whooshed back out of them in a high keening squall that turned the heads of the customers around them.

“Are you listening to this, Contessa?” Rebecca shouted, over the strains of at least thirty yellow chickens wailing in unison. “It's the call of your people.”

Contessa folded her arms, her face devoid of anything but killer instinct.

Rebecca flapped the catalogue at her hopefully.

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Contessa stared at the babies. The babies stared back.

They squatted there in rows, watching her with blue eyes afflicted by dropsy of the lids and framed by harvested spider legs. They would be taunting if they weren’t so soulless. That in itself was a taunt: I cannot be killed. She had no doubt that should their glistening berry-pink lips fully part, they would communicate just that. Their diapered torsos looked pliable—but she only had to see the hard pale valleys of their limbs as they bulged out of their invariably bibbed clothing, and how their wrists and ankles were restrained by manacles, to know they were not to be underestimated. Monstrous. If the warnings on the box were to be believed, they cried, ate and excreted just like any living being. Doubly monstrous. Rebecca needn’t have worried about salespeople molding sentient atrocities out of her discarded skin; they did well enough with plastic.

Who even purchased these horrors? Were they the same people who bought their daughters Easy-Bake Ovens to prepare them for unfulfilling lives of domesticity and foster in them a healthy subservience to the patriarchal paradigm? Or did they sincerely believe that their sprog could feel safe in their nursery with something that had, as the box implied, served three to eight years in solitary confinement? She wrinkled her nose. They even had latrines. As accessories.

A hamster or gerbil could provide a similar illusion of companionship, and the problems that came with its maintenance would remain at manageable levels throughout its short life. Babies, on the other hand, only increased in unmanageability, demanding care, demanding attention, demanding affection—always demanding, as if their incidental expulsion from an incubator entitled them to financial and emotional support, no strings attached.

Never, Contessa thought, would she bind herself to the whims of some clamorous brat.

She looked down at her basket. It was starting to get heavy. She had collected: a microscope kit, a build-it-yourself log cabin, a xylophone, a remote-controlled helicopter, a lightsaber, a strange
urchin-shaped ball that didn't bounce properly, a transforming robot, and sundry military-themed bric-a-brac. The catalogue lay on top, open to the interactive dolls section with that damned ‘Burping Baby Boo!’ circled in black marker.

It wasn't as though she cared about the outcome of the race. She cared more about pacifying Rebecca so that she wouldn’t have to suffer a litany of complaints on the car ride back. Furthermore, she wasn't a fowl; she was Contessa.

She needed that doll.

Closing her eyes, she extended a hand to take a box off the shelf.

“Ma-ma.”

She yanked the hand back, pivoted on her heel, and started striding down the aisle.

“Ma-ma,” the doll said behind her.

She walked until she couldn’t hear the voice. Then she requisitioned a scooter from a little girl, to lower the chances she would ever hear the voice again.

In the fullness of time, she reached the soft toy section—a fairly isolated outpost commanding a far corner of the store. A towheaded little boy of about eight blocked the aisle she was in with his red jeep. Instead of driving it, he was poking at a plastic laptop he’d set on the steering wheel. He looked up upon her approach, eyes immediately zeroing in on the lightsaber in her basket.

She hid it from view, and nudged him out of the way before getting back on the scooter and manoeuvring through the gap. Her plan was to nab the stuffed tiger nestled in the berg of toys rising up before her, without interrupting her loop.

When she looked up, she sighed. Her plan would not survive.

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The great Queen Anne dollhouse was still there, still stalwart in its beauty, though now shielded on all four sides by a glass case so that people like her wouldn’t finger the crisp sashes of the oriel windows or trace the finely enlaced blond strapwork.

But she could still peer into its open interior where all the furniture was, and the dolls. Miniature men and women, posed and petrified in states of ritualistic fervour. Cooking, sweeping, waking up, eating, reading, performing the mundane. An infant in his mother’s arms before she laid him down to sleep in his crib. A young girl in straw curls and a white negligee standing before her bedroom dresser, peering at her mirrored self. An elderly man stooped over in his wicker rocker by the window, contemplating the horizon. Rebecca was a voyeur into their household choreography, an unseen ghost tiptoeing through the shadowed spaces of a tableau vivant that someone else had sliced through walls just for her to witness.

She stepped away from the glass. She looked at the smaller boxes lined up on the shelves beside it. Then she dragged herself out of the aisle, and resumed wandering. Classics had been pushed aside. Whole sections of the store were now themed around the latest installments churned out by popular franchises. Had it always been like that? She couldn’t remember, but the changes angered and thrilled her.

Rebecca had no fear of losing. Contessa would be efficient, as she was in all things. But this was one of the largest toy stores in L.A., and it was Rebecca’s turf. She used to come here once or twice a
month to visit the orthodontist in the same building. She’d hated those visits. Her parents would hand
her twenty dollars to spend on anything she wanted to take the edge off the unavoidable toothache,
and set her loose among the well-stocked pews of this cartoon cathedral.

She gave way to girls and boys traversing the same hallowed aisles, trod carefully around the
toddlers being trundled around in perambulators. It wouldn’t do to interfere with their own religious
experience.

After all, it wasn’t quite the same for her anymore.

There were other parts she didn’t remember from her childhood forays. For instance, this immense
mountain of plush animals taking pride of place on a low white platform. It was taller than herself.
She circled it, wondering if the toys had been arranged that way for display purposes or if children
had pried them from shelves and discarded them in the same general area. Maybe they had
accumulated over time.

A pair of little girls—sisters, from how close they were standing—were already engrossed. One was
burying her face in a fluffy white Persian cat and the other was trying to get her attention or perhaps
scare her by clamping the jaws of an alligator around her arm.

Rebecca waited for them to leave, and when a boy arrived to pick out a wolf for himself, she waited
for him to leave too. When the coast was clear, she made her move. One hand plunged into the pile.

She dug around for a while, revelling in the feel of the toys closing around her arm. Her search
yielded a brown bat. Its fur was darker where it had been smoothed against the grain and it was limp
in the wing department, but that was no issue. Rebecca had always subscribed to the ‘better
underfilled than over’ school of stuffing. It made them easier to pose in front of a whiteboard for
lessons. She stroked the bat’s fur back in the right direction, and leaned it against a droopy giraffe
that looked like it needed a friend.

She smiled to herself. There were few pleasures that could compare to having something soft and
warm cuddling up by your side. The feeling that even if you didn’t belong anywhere, at least for the
moment this belonged to you.

With great difficulty, she turned away. The amazing race called.

Then she paused. There was an opening in the side of the pile, about the size of a sand dollar. The
pile of toys was hollow.

It seemed that the pile was actually some sort of igloo made of foam or thick cardboard, concealed by
layers upon layers of stuffed toys. She bent to examine the opening.

A pair of rheumy, cataracted eyes glinted back.

“Um, hi?” Rebecca said. She straightened up and brushed lint off her hand sheepishly, feeling like a
kindergartner caught closed-fisted in the cookie jar.

To her shock, the inhabitant responded. His voice was guttural, filtered through a layer of phlegm
and modulated by what looked to be a toy megaphone. “Hello.”

“Hi,” she said, in case he hadn’t heard her the first time. She managed a smile. “Didn’t see you
there.”

“False. You did see me, have seen me, and do see me, as you see much.”
She nodded once, slow. “I do wear contacts.”

“That is not what I mean and you know it,” the voice said. “I saw how you approached this place, my shrine. How it drew you, inspired your reverence.”

She returned a fallen stingray to the top of the pile, trying to ignore how fast her heart was beating all of a sudden. “I should be getting back. My friend is waiting for me.”

“Most important place is always right here,” said the voice. “Most important time is always right now.”

Easily parried. “There are places you don’t want to be forever.”

“Is this one of them?” The voice grew urgent. “Truly? Ask yourself.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

A rumble of amusement shook the pile, dislodging the stingray again. “You may call me the Maker,” he said. “For I am the secret weaver of dreams, the architect of civilisations. I cultivate kingdoms and the armies that decimate them. I build empires and raise the queens to rule them. I am also skilled at quilting, and I accept exposure as remuneration.”

“Link in bio?” she asked, but his eyes only narrowed. “I’m just Rebecca, I guess.”

“Well, Just Rebecca I Guess. I am offering you an opportunity to shape the world as you see fit. To shepherd it into a brighter future. The only limit is your imagination. Will you join me?”

A hand threaded its way out through the hole. It was a life-size felt doll’s mitt, fingerless but for the thumb, and it bobbed up and down twice in invitation.

Contessa was waiting for her. Waiting to be enlightened on an important matter. This was just a temptation, a diversion.

But knowing something was a temptation didn’t make it resistible.

After a moment, she grasped the hand. The stuffing gave when she squeezed, and its coarse single-ply parody of skin chafed.

This was not the casual, meaningless exchange she and Jack had shared in the car. This was a contract that had heft, had texture. It was an offer to be understood as who she was and what she could do. She shook.

“Come now, Fuzzy One,” the voice said. “Come, and take your place by my side. Or on top, as the case may be.”

She studied the mound for a minute or so, unsure where to anchor herself and afraid that it would collapse beneath her.

She climbed anyway.

It bore her weight, welcomed her into its bosom. She pored through the piles of plush, stroking the apricot fuzz dusting a velveteen monkey, cupping a kangaroo’s bloated belly and sliding her hand into the puffy inner folds of its satin-lined pouch. She burrowed through to the furthest depths, weaving between fur and floss, busy fingers seeking ever more intimate spaces, finding, caressing, sinking into anamnesis. Their warm bodies writhed and swelled into her palms, decadently soft and
dense with potential, blending together till she could no longer tell what animals they were, only the fabrics that girt them—cold slippery rayon, wool fibres tickling the sensitive grooves of her wrists and clinging in pastel dandelion puffs to the fine hairs on her arms. Meanwhile the downy wilderness rippled ceaselessly beyond her reach, its roots infinite and growing as she submerged herself, forgot herself, and became whole.

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The mounded eyrie in which Rebecca nested was flanked by broad half-walls of stuffed animals, and buttressed by other toy-based structures which were themselves kept upright by a complex pulley system composed of yo-yo strings attached to nearby shelves. An attempt had been made at building spires by stacking successively smaller animals on top of each other and tying them together, but this architectural project seemed to have been abandoned all over the surrounding floor.

While Rebecca held court above, children trafficked the area in a fashion that passed for orderly. They didn’t stay long, mostly taking established paths to and from the mound carrying various goods. The ones that did stay worked on constructing new edifices, or executing controlled demolitions on existing ones.

Contessa’s eyes followed a particular pair of little girls as they ushered a crane truck into position. Once it was in place, they lowered the My First Chemistry Kit safety goggles resting on their helmets and gave each other a thumbs-up before summarily wrecking a makeshift schoolhouse replete with screaming pupils. Contessa held up the lightsaber to fend off flying alphabet blocks. They were scooped up in gigantic butterfly nets by a separate crew of children. Renovation began immediately afterwards.

It’s been twenty-five minutes.

“I am not Rebecca,” Rebecca said, beaming down at her, her arms thrown wide. “I am Rebecca Plush Invicta, Vicereine of the Velvet Empire.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“You mean, ‘I heard you the first time, Your Excellency.’”

Contessa thought for a second. “No,” she said. “It’s time to go. I’m not in the mood to spend the next hour disabusing you of your fanciful delusions, much less entertaining sudden-onset megalomaniacal insanity.”

Rebecca looked injured. “I’m not insane.”

“Yes, you are.” She watched a boy collect a basket marked ‘Daily Allotment’ from another boy. The basket contained nothing but slinkies. “I remember the symptoms because we did this last week, Rebecca. In the library. How many times a month can a person succumb to their darkest impulses? How many iterations of Genesis do we really need?”

“Paradise Lost,” Rebecca corrected.

“They are the same,” Contessa said.

Rebecca’s injury turned to outrage and back again in a blink.

“She would see fit to usurp you.”

“And stop listening to diabolical disembodied voices.”
“Contessa’s my friend,” Rebecca told the diabolical disembodied voice. “She wouldn’t do that.”

“You still have a paper to write,” Contessa reminded her.

“I wrote it already,” Rebecca said, with a lazy wave. “While you were getting Philip and Jack.”

“You wrote an essay in twenty minutes?”

“It’s only the proposal and outline for the actual research paper. Not even due yet.” She shrugged. “Besides, one thousand words isn’t an essay. It's a sneeze.”

The cold comfort Contessa had gotten from believing Rebecca hadn’t finished her homework either melted away. “Then,” she said, “could we at least visit that store you mentioned? With the merchandise for that game you play?”

Rebecca laughed, and Contessa was not imagining the streak of world-domination in there. “Only children play games.”

“I haven’t done my homework and I need to get Philip his socks, and I only came in here to do the ‘amazing race’ you abandoned, so we should go now,” Contessa said, the words coming out faster than she’d have preferred, for some reason. Irritating.

Rebecca's laughter died away. But a smile continued to play about her lips as she steepled her hands and looked indulgently down at Contessa. “Oh, Contessa, Contessa, Contessa. What am I going to do with you?”

The urge to turn around and ride into the sunset was palpable, but Contessa held her gaze and her ground. This was just Rebecca being Rebecca. “I’ve made my suggestions,” she started.

“I abolished imprisonment and corporal punishment, remember?” Rebecca said, reaching over the edge to pat the claw soothingly, and nearly falling off in the process. “I’ve looked at the numbers, and all they’ve contributed in the last era is high recidivism and a steep increase in petty rebellions. We have less barbaric options now. Fines, probation, rehab, aversion therapy, community service, gladiatorial combat...”

“That last one sounds fitting, my liege,” the voice said.

“Contessa, fight to the death?” Rebecca asked, still wearing a smile that could dissolve tungsten.

Contessa shook her head clear of strange thoughts. She secured the lightsaber under an arm, cracked her knuckles, and stepped forward. *Rear naked choke, over the shoulder, exit on scooter. Straightforward enough.*

But Rebecca scuttled backwards into the wall, a palm raised. “Not here!”

“Where, then?”

“The Snuggledome!”

Contessa looked to where Rebecca was gesturing. It was a neighbouring plateau consisting of plush animals cannibalised from the mound of toys she was now sitting on. It wasn’t shaped like a dome at
“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“Tarry a little. She agrees too readily,” the voice said.

“Why don’t you go jump in the bargain bin?” Contessa asked.

“I already am jumping in the bargain bin all the time,” the voice replied, “and the name of this bargain bin is ‘democracy’. Your Excellency, she has clearly prepared for a physical altercation. I would advise you not to engage.”

“Aha. I knew you were being sneaky,” Rebecca said, pointing an accusatory finger. “You work out, don’t you? It’s how you get your shoulders like that.”

Contessa ignored the urge to check her shoulders. “State your challenge, set the terms. Let’s get this over with.”

“It shall be a contest of guile,” the voice said. “A battle between intellects, whereupon only the more cunning and knowledgeable may emerge victorious.”

This time she feigned thorough consideration. “I accept,” she said, after a while. “Do you have a Snuggle Boardroom or can we do this here?”

Rebecca conferred privately with whoever was in that hill. Upon concluding, she turned back to Contessa. “The Snuggledome accommodates a diverse range of activities up to and including contests of guile. We’re currently in talks with the LEGO® ambassadors, with the end goal of expanding office space. But we don’t have a designated space to conduct those talks in, so they just get postponed indefinitely.”

“That’s fine,” Contessa said. The madness ends now.

She would have to keep a close watch on that pair of eyes, which evidently belonged to the éminence grise masterminding this operation. She readied herself. Whatever happened, choking someone out would always be an option.

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“B. Feminine.”

“Ooh,” Rebecca said, wincing, and flipped the answer card over with a flourish. “I’m sorry, but you are incorrect! The correct answer is D, the group genitive!”

Brow furrowing, Contessa took the card from her. “But the king’s wife is female.”

“You conflate natural gender and grammatical gender! That means—”

“I know what that means,” Contessa said sharply. She pressed two fingers to her temple, looking more frustrated than Rebecca had ever seen her despite not having as much trouble as Rebecca did balancing on the Snuggledome. “Just, why is there even a question on genitives? I thought this game was rated G. And is this honestly your contest of guile? This is a contest of specialised academic trivia.”

She didn’t have to sound so incredulous. “I think,” Rebecca said, prim, “that you’ll find that it requires more thought than your average brawl.”

A pigtailed little girl poured them cups of tea with the good plastic and scaled the Snuggledome to
Rebecca accepted the proffered teacup, gave it a dainty sip, and set it back on its saucer. “Delightful as always, Alison.”

“Besides which,” Contessa continued, glowering down at her cup, “this is the absolute nerdiest activity I have ever participated in, and that is a list that includes Topology Tuesday.”

"You're such a jock." Rebecca snatched the card back. “Well, I was going to suggest that game from Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* where we each state what we are and then try to conquer, eliminate or otherwise one-up each other with hypothetical transformations, but I did that with my friends once to determine who got the last juice box and it ended super badly. Like, I was the Field of Medical Research and David decided he’d be Elliot’s Mom, so Elliot became the Unfeeling Vacuum of Space Itself, and he turned Hana’s hoover into some kind of doomsday device and it ate her curtain. I had to pour the juice on a ficus to keep it from wrecking our friendship. You could say I won.”

“I’m glad you realise that this conflict, like all your other conflicts, is completely manufactured and artificial.”

Rebecca frowned, and Contessa held up the underside of the teacup, showing her the ‘Made in China’ label stamped in relief on it.

“I just don’t understand,” Contessa said. “Do you have a problem? Should I be looking into a twelve-steps program? What do I have to do to get you to stop?”

“The Maker chose me,” Rebecca said. She disliked the sulky tone her voice had taken on. She slipped the *Story of English* card back into the Early Modern deck and shuffled it, more to give her hands something to do than anything else.

Contessa’s gaze became cold. “You think he chose you for your endearing smile and silk—silicone-infused hair? He didn’t, any more than that salesman did. He selected you because you represent the psychological type he was looking for.”

Rebecca’s eyes flicked away. To Contessa it probably looked like she’d become distracted, but she couldn’t help it. They were circling something she never wanted to acknowledge directly, out of fear that it would fester and make her angry at her roommate, her own friends, people on the street for an opinion they couldn’t control. Even so, she felt the slivers of it flex inside her, prodding, waiting to be granted form by articulation.

“You’re not stupid, Rebecca,” Contessa said. “You know what it is.”

All the roughness in her voice and stance had been filed off and sanded down. Rebecca heard *gullible* all the same. Was this how everybody saw her?

She stood up and walked to the edge of the Snuggledome.

She couldn’t help but resent Contessa a little bit, for treating her again like some tantruming child to be indulged and distantly pitied. Someone whose fleeting moods were to be tolerated when they arose, because they weren’t real, she wasn’t real, she was silly for wanting to make these excursions beyond the shell.

But the present wasn’t all that great, and neither was reality. There was a time when her mind, that withered and useless thing perched in her head like a broken aerial, had sought to breach the desolate grey static of the ordinary world and had failed over and over and over and over until she’d been forced to conclude that there might not be a world for her to inhabit at all. Those hours had been...
filled with incursions, by other people, other voices, into the interminable hush that had rendered her immobile on detergent sheets. And that was all she had been to them—the part of their lives that had intersected with hers, a part that had dwindled to almost nothing when visiting had become no more than a lonely pilgrimage to a terrible place and speaking to her had become the routine tightening of a wire around the teeth, only without the promise of an eventual reward.

“Rebecca?”

She blinked, the remembered darkness already fading from her mind as the bright lights of the store flooded in to equilibrate its absence.

Beside her was Contessa, regarding her with dispassionate eyes and a flatline mouth. The sword rested beneath her clasped hands, a long smooth femur still glowing its sickly green. She wielded it like a toy.

Because that was what it was.

With a tentative sandal, Rebecca tested the integrity of the verge. Plushies broke off from the mass and tumbled to the floor. She stepped back uneasily, and Contessa moved forward as if to catch her.

“I do,” Rebecca said. “But I don’t think it’s the same one you’re thinking.”

“What is it?”

Rebecca didn’t answer. Saying it out loud would make it real: in need of escape.

“Rebecca.”

“What, Contessa?” she asked brusquely, turning to face her.

Contessa gave no indication that she was bothered by Rebecca’s tone. She was watching the children milling below with a mildly troubled expression. “Why is it an amazing race? Why do you not call it a scavenger hunt?”

Rebecca rolled her eyes a little. “‘Scavenger hunt’ doesn’t start with an ‘a’. Look,” she said, not referring to the name of the game anymore. “You wouldn’t get it. It’s hard to explain to anyone. Even me.”

Contessa nodded.

She left and returned with the teacups, somehow sensing the need for Rebecca to nurse something in her hands. Neither of them spoke for a while, until—

“Tell me your long-term goals.”

Rebecca looked up from her cup, surprised. “Really? You want to hear about that?”

“Yes.”

Her reply was so simple it couldn’t not be the truth.

Rebecca ran her designs through her head once more, and took a deep breath. “I’ve established a method of determining succession to ensure both a peaceful transfer of power and continuity of values and institutions. I’ll nominate two potential successors and the lower house of representatives will nominate one. Five independent democratic councils will elect two via very different methods, and the winner will be the one with the best understanding of bureaucracy navigation. This way, my
Rebecca was about to expound on her five-hour plan, but the Maker’s hard voice abruptly broke in from the other pile. “No. I will not let that happen.”

She looked at Contessa, who was busy pretending to drink tea. She climbed down cautiously so she could hear him better and meet his eyes. “Huh? Why not?”

He needed a moment to rally. “You already took everything,” he said. His voice cracked. “Everything. You gave it all away.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“This once was ours. Mine. A kingdom where we alone would rule over the peons as we deserve. I listened to you. I trusted you would make the empire great again by making the right decisions. Propping up crumbling institutions and maintaining outdated and fundamentally flawed systems whatever the cost—that sort of hard choice. But then you started delegating. You had to shatter all the glass ceilings I installed. Universal secondary education. Formalised managerial training.” He snapped out the words like they were epithets. “Health insurance.”

“They needed coverage. I had to give it to them.”

“What has been given cannot be taken back. You couldn’t handle the power, so you had to distribute it amongst the unwashed masses like the craven bleeding-heart liberal you are. You turned the Velvet Empire into a welfare state, Rebecca Plush Invicta, and it may never recover.”

“I just wanted to end social stratification,” Rebecca said, getting upset. “I was making things better.”

“Not yours to end,” the Maker hissed. The mechanical claw arm gestured all-encompassingly, or as encompassingly as it could while restricted to the hole. “Not yours to tame. For the past hour I have weathered these indignities, hoping you would come to your senses. I see now how foolish that was. To think, you were once my protégé. No. No, you will not sweep the future of the empire out from under me as well. I have allowed much. I cannot allow this.”

The sick swoop of her stomach told her what was coming. She closed her eyes, bracing herself. “Are you betraying me?”

“...yes.” Then, as he warmed to the idea: “Yes, I am. My reign begins now.”

There was a pause. Rebecca opened her eyes and tapped the tips of her fingers together.

“What?”

“I mean,” she said, “if you wanted it to begin now, you should have sent in your application ten minutes in advance. I didn’t receive anything, so...”

“Application?” he asked.

The teapot Alison had left on the floor was actually empty, but she still tipped the spout over her teacup. “Yeah. As a courtesy, I won’t abuse the extra time to prepare my resistance. But there’s kind of a procedure to make you eligible for acts of treachery, like poisoning my tea or mobilising reinforcements.”

“Or we could dispense with the formalities.”
“It’s not just a formality,” Rebecca said with a small frown, and blew into her cup before raising it to her lips. “If you prematurely launch an assault on my person, direct or indirect, I will bring all my powers to bear and crush you like a fly.”

His response was curt. “Very well. I look forward to the attempt. How do I submit an application?”

“Harriet’s been a big help since I started awarding more research grants to women in STEM fields. We have a portal now.”

“Where is this portal?” the Maker asked eagerly. “What ancient artifact must I procure to access it?”

“It’s an e-portal,” she said, pulling out her phone. “Online. I can register the account for you if you —”

His eyes darkened as she spoke. “No!” he bellowed. “Technology is of the devil. Miss me with this ‘computer shit’. I will send it in the mail.”

Rebecca glanced at the mechanical claw he was jabbing into the air, the one that had replaced the hand of the doll he’d sacrificed during Barbie’s First Brush War. She recalled how instrumental that doll had been in brokering a peace between all those squabbling clans, even more so than the promised shipment of combs that she had yet to finalise. Why hadn’t she, again? Oh, right. Transport logistics. “That’s not a good idea,” she said. “Hard copies get lost in the mail.”

“Then don’t lose it. Even now, brought low, you condescend to me.”

“She hasn’t been brought low,” Contessa said. She’d been observing silently. “She’s likely taller than you, even.”

“I look forward to your demise as well, Usurper.”

Rebecca summoned Douglas from his leafy green spot by the shelves, and he scooted his jeep as close to the hill as possible. She explained the situation in the clearest terms she could, with a stuffed rabbit and a boa constrictor as visual aids.

Douglas’ face stretched out into a nubby gap-toothed smile as he watched the snake coil around the bunny. It was possible he didn’t quite grasp the implications.

“Is your betrayal in—invegetable,” he asked the hill, per instruction.

Rebecca helped him out. “Inevitable. In-ev-itable.”

“In-ev-itable,” he said. “Is the betrayal invettable?”

“What does this mean—inveitable?” The Maker’s voice dripped disdain.

“From a narrative standpoint,” Rebecca said. “Would you say an outsider could have reasonably suspected your duplicity?”

“Why does this matter?”

“Douglas needs to know whether to give you SV-415 or SV-415-E,” she explained. She slung the boa constrictor over her shoulders and smiled briefly at its warmth. “The latter form has an additional section. Also, there’s aesthetic tension if you were fated to clash with me from the beginning due to ideological disagreements.”

Contessa stood by the Snuggledome, checking her phone.
“You.” The Maker pointed at her with the claw. “—surper. Did you expect this to happen?”

“Yes,” she said, not looking up.

“Well, then,” he said grandly. “I suppose it was inevitable.”

Douglas still needed handholding, so Rebecca coached him on the colour-coded treasure hunt filing system for paper documents until he located SV-415-E, the Official Application for Deposition of Current Leadership (Anticipated). Douglas handed the claw the neon pink form, followed by a marker that it had trouble gripping.

The claw disappeared into the pile. Minutes later, it re-emerged, sagging with the weight of a stuffed carrier pigeon. The form was rolled up and attached to its leg.

“Coup, coup!” the Maker shouted through the megaphone, chucking the pigeon across the aisle.

Rebecca walked over to pick it up and deposit it on Douglas’ ‘desk’. She flipped through it. “Did you fill out the customer service feedback survey at the back?”

“I have checked all the ‘strongly disagree’ boxes regardless of my true experience.” The Maker directed the megaphone at Douglas, who had gone back to blasting space buccaneers on the laptop. “You are powerless to stop me.”

She clucked her tongue. “You’ll skew his end-of-hour evaluation.”

“It pleases me to bring you pain,” he said. “Just as you have brought me pain all these wretched minutes. Now that the paperwork has been set in motion, I shall enact my revenge.”

“It has to be approved and notarised first. I can do it for you if you want,” Rebecca said, “once it’s done processing.”

Contessa spoke up. “How long is processing?”

Douglas consulted the notes scrawled on his palm. “Three to five working minutes.”

Satisfied that his time would come, the Maker fell quiet. Douglas pedalled the jeep away, and Contessa kept pace beside him, speaking in low tones.

Rebecca returned to the base of the hill. She couldn’t muster the will to climb it again. The floor around her was littered with stuffed animals. Next to her, Alison was stuffing a patchwork sheep headfirst into the teapot.

Rebecca confiscated both. “I know you didn’t manage to get your recreational pillory permit,” she told the pouting girl, gently but firmly. “But rules-lawyering won’t help your case when you apply again.”

“It rubs the lotion on its skin,” Alison said.

“I wasn’t lying earlier,” a new voice said. “I don’t understand.”

Alison scuttled away. Rebecca turned, and saw Contessa advancing, without the sword.

Contessa punted toys aside as she strode, clearing a space for them both to meet in the middle. She held her hand close to her chest and twitched her fingers convulsively like she’d just touched something disgusting. Her voice, however, was calm. “But I’m willing to try.”
“I need things to mean something,” Rebecca blurted, and hated how clumsily she’d phrased it. But there was something she was building towards. “Everything has to matter, or nothing does, you know? Have you ever wanted things to make sense so badly that you rearranged it so that it did? And then you get so comfortable with it, like you give it reasons for it to be that way, and the reasons give intrigue and history to the nothing that was there before, and you stop feeling like you live in an egg carton all the time. And you share it with other people so they don’t have to feel that way too.”

She steeled herself against derision, but Contessa expressed no judgement on her face—only a thoughtful frown.

“Rebecca,” she said. “It’s all right to want power. It’s all right to need it.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I don’t think it’s about power. I need to invent insights and conjure meaning for actions so that I can understand them.” She paused. “Maybe that does come from lust for power.”

“Not necessarily, Rebecca the Unconquered Plush. It’s about—” Contessa hesitated. “I want to say control, because to give meaning is to exert control, but I’m beginning to see that isn’t quite right. Perhaps perspicacity, or the need to feel perspicacious...”

Rebecca looked at the dais, then at the fallen bodies of the toys surrounding her, subsurface anxieties starting to stir. “Maybe it's narcissism.”

“I’m not the best person to diagnose this kind of thing, but I understand that narcissism is incompatible with empathy.” Contessa shrugged a shoulder. “I’m becoming more aware that you illustrate a horizon of context behind events that is imperceptible and often incomprehensible to me. It’s likely the reason we don’t always see eye to eye.” She dipped her head in the most minuscule of bows. “But perhaps I could defer to you on certain matters and you could defer to me on others.”

Rebecca felt a corner of her mouth turn up. “Is this you trying to get me to abdicate the throne?”

“You don’t have to stop if you don’t want to,” Contessa said, even as she nodded at Rebecca vehemently. “Just make sure you recognise when you do.”

The rest of the smile came rushing to Rebecca's face, along with the warmth of an indescribable gratitude. She stepped closer to Contessa.

“It’s been five minutes,” the Maker cut in.

“Okay,” Rebecca said, slightly annoyed at the interruption. “Coming.”

“You have forsaken this land, I will destroy you, etcetera.”

She glanced over. “Okay. But I still haven’t received an application.”

The eyes narrowed to angry slits. “What! You watched the messenger pigeon go out. You held the papers in your hands!”

Rebecca spun around to question Douglas, but remembered he’d pedalled off. The bumper of the jeep peeked out two shelves down. She marched over, prepared to write him up for negligence.

But when she got there, no little boy sat at the wheel.

Just a baby doll in a cornflower blue bib, staring at her with glassy eyes as it suckled the teat of a tiny milk bottle.
“Ma-ma,” it said, and burped without moving its lips.

She searched the floor of the car, and the floor around the car, but the form was nowhere to be found. “It’s not here,” she called.

“I submitted it.” The Maker’s voice was low and disbelieving, unamplified by the megaphone.

“I think I might have seen it. Contessa, did you?”

Contessa dropped her arms to her sides, palms facing front, and raised her eyebrows. “It must have gotten lost in the mail,” she said.

“You could fill it out again,” Rebecca suggested apologetically. “Or do you have a soft copy?”

“I do not have a ‘soft copy’,” the Maker said. “However, I do have this soft fist of vengeance!”

His claw darted out and poked Rebecca in the belly.

She looked down at the spot.

It didn’t hurt. Not really.

She still called the National Guard.

He should have known better than to defy protocol. They came in waves and swarmed his shelter, stripping it of not only the stuffed toys but the safeguards and load-bearing structures Rebecca had briefed them on. Once it had been severed from the pulley system, they concentrated pressure on the foam keystone with a state-issued beginner’s palaeontology pick and soon the dome cracked under their combined weight. With a singular tribal scream, they fell in a heap, and seized the Maker’s treasonous flailing limbs before he could even think about evading community service.

Thus was the magic of following procedure. She had to look away when the biting began.

"Plush Invicta!" he howled from beneath the bombardment of child and toy.

“My name is Rebecca Costa-Brown,” she said. Too quietly for him to have heard, but it wasn't for his ears.

She turned and walked to the shelves. Contessa waited there on a scooter, beckoning her with her eyes and a nod. Rebecca hopped onto the deck behind her and held her waist. She felt Contessa tense up, and instantly regretted having presumed. She moved her hands to her shoulders.

Contessa didn’t say anything either way. The claw was surfacing from the pile. Before the Maker could surface with it, she kicked off and the scooter lurched forward.

Together, they made their exit.

✶

The escalator progressed downward. It turned out there was another escalator on the other side, but they had to cross a bridge to get there. The layout of the mall was extremely counterintuitive and difficult to navigate, Rebecca reflected, especially when Contessa point blank refused to set foot in an elevator. Only by luck had they managed to find the merch store in the end.

Now Contessa was frowning intently at her phone again, the one with the black case.
“What a millennial,” Rebecca commented, beside her. "Always scrolling through the digital world on her electronic device, unable to unplug and engage with her surroundings. This generation has the collective attention span of a gnat that is forever checking Facebook instead of respecting family time." She put the ribbing on hold to scratch her arms. “Ugh, I am so itchy.”

“I wonder what could have caused this unfortunate phenomenon.”

“I don’t. It’s because I didn’t have a cardigan to protect my skin which was made inordinately sensitive by the stupid hand wash people! I’m gonna get a rash now, and—” Rebecca shifted to the right of the escalator to let a teenager muscle past. The movement jostled her jeans pocket, and she reached for her phone to check it. Her eyes widened first at the low battery, then at the waterfall of black sludge surging down the dimming screen. “Ahhhh! My elder dread god died!”

Contessa said nothing, though she did look up. Her eyes roved over the kiosks below. She was probably still thinking about the scooter, which she’d only agreed to return after a brief but heated argument about the ethics of shoplifting. They had stealthily left it against the checkout counter. Some poor sales associate would have to reshelve the spoils of their amazing race.

“Now I have to do the funeral minigame,” Rebecca said, pressing a button to confirm the cremation of her deceased demon deity. She let out a dejected sigh, flopping bonelessly over the handrail. “I guess nothing really lasts forever.”

“I don’t know about that,” Contessa said. “Perhaps some lessons do.”

When they reached the bottom of the escalator, she removed a rolled-up set of papers from her jacket and tossed it into the trash.

Rebecca looked up at the flash of pink, her thumbs freezing on the screen. She stared at the bin. “Contessa, was that… did you…”

“Yes, I offered your fledgling civil servant the lightsaber in exchange for his resignation,” she said, clipped. “Another thing I could have kept, but didn’t for the greater good.”

Rebecca shook her head, and sourly slid her phone back into her pocket. “I can’t believe Douglas was corrupt,” she grumbled. “We had a seminar about this.”

“Corruption is systemic. You failed to implement effective checks and balances.” Contessa started walking towards the atrium.

“Where are we going anyway?” Rebecca asked, following her. “The car? I bet Jack and Philip are done now.”

“Not yet.”

When they neared the health spa, Rebecca understood. She smiled, linking arms with Contessa. “I don’t know if he’ll still be there.”

"Irrelevant," Contessa said, giving their entwined arms a narrow, though not altogether displeased glance. “Charles’ manager is the one who can rehire him. If that fails, I can at least obtain his contact details. I’ll—”

She stopped and pulled away from Rebecca.

Through the glass door of the storefront, Rebecca noticed a mall cop speaking to a severe-looking woman at the front counter. The woman answered him, and he nodded and started jotting something
down in a little book.

“What’s going on?” Rebecca asked, craning her neck.

“We should go,” Contessa said.

But the woman had already noticed them. Rebecca waved, but she didn’t wave back. Instead, she said something to the cop and pointed at them.

“She peed on the card,” Contessa muttered, unfazed by the guard now stepping towards the door. Her hand went to her phone. “If only we still had a getaway vehicle.”

Rebecca backed into a kiosk, breaking out into a nervous sweat. The mall cop was approaching at a steady pace. “What? Con—”

She cut her off. “You don’t know me. I don’t know you. Get to the men’s bathroom on the third floor. Pick a stall. Don’t run.”

“But—”

“Hey!” the mall cop barked.

Contessa stayed where she was. “Go now.”

Rebecca went.

✶✶✶

Roads away from that godforsaken mall, Contessa finally allowed her fingers to uncurl around the roll of quarters in her pocket. Traffic might be intense at this intersection, but waiting for it to clear was a mindless, non-physical activity. Just what she needed.

She turned. Rebecca was out like a light beside her, head on the interior sill and the rest of her slumped at an awkward angle that would probably leave her sore when she awoke. The day’s events must have caught up with her all at once. She’d pestered Contessa for an explanation on the way to the parking garage but ditched the subject when more mall cops showed up, mostly because Contessa had yanked her inside a moving car.

Contessa was glad Philip had received her message in time.

At least she could thank him now. She tossed a sealed egg into the driver’s seat and it landed in his lap.

Automatically, he lowered the window.

“No,” she said, placing a hand on his shoulder before he could fling it out.

“Not live?”

“Not a grenade.”

He met her eyes in the rearview mirror and she blinked back three times. Only then did he relax and open the egg.

The socks spilling from the halves were flesh-pink, patterned with veins and swollen red anemones of embryonic villi. An uneven slimy sheen gave the polyester the impression of being coated in
vernix.

"Abomination." Gingerly, he turned them over.

"Unique enough for you?" she asked.

"This might be my favourite pair yet," he replied, folding them, and she could hear the unfiltered honesty in his voice. "They are diseased. Repulsive. They even feel like they were squeezed from a birth canal."

She thought back to the metal tines raking the socks out of their amniotic capsule, and the fallopian tube that had spat the resulting egg into her palm. "You aren't wrong."

He tucked the socks in his breast pocket without sealing them back in the egg. He wore the beginnings of a smile.

She felt a warmth unfurl in her chest, content that whatever crack had formed between them during her earlier loss of composure had been caulked at least a little. It was hard to know how to respond to his moods when he seemed to have so very few and—she noted, watching him stare stoically at the stained windshield—had so little to distinguish them from simple fatigue. She supposed she could ask, but that wasn't something they did. She did know, now, that when Philip said 'hideous', he didn't mean 'ugly Christmas sweater'. He meant 'must disinfect feet after use'.

Before she sat back, she noticed his collar was buttoned and pulled to his jaw. He never wore it that way. She tapped his shoulder and twirled a finger at her neck, then at his, with a questioning tilt of her head.

"Turtling," he said in a voice too flat to be truly neutral. He hiked the collar further up. "It's all the rage."

_Since when do you care about fashion?_ Her impulse was to turn to Jacob, disembowel him, then find out exactly what he'd done.

But Jacob seemed too distracted by the scenery outside his window to be eavesdropping. He had been surprisingly quiet, not aggravating her, not even whining when the car peeled out of the garage at a speed that had slammed him into the door. His arm was draped over the shoebox on his lap. They’d actually gone shopping.

_Raccoons_, she reminded herself, sheathing her suspicion in its scarcely used scabbard. She drew back into her seat.

As soon as she did, Rebecca rested her head on her shoulder.

Contessa stiffened, blood creeping to her face. She didn’t look down.

Rebecca shifted position in her sleep in search of a more forgiving spot to nestle than the hard bulb. Eventually and completely on her own, she found the hollow and settled in.

Contessa moved the arm wedged between them. Just as a test. Just to see.

At that, Rebecca made a soft noise. _Mmmph_

Contessa’s breath hitched, and the warmth in her chest flared with a vengeance. She glanced again at Jacob, to verify that the feeling came from triumph over the adversary, but it didn’t go away even when she saw he wasn't watching.
Rebecca might still need refining, but that didn’t mean she had nothing to teach Contessa. Today, whether she’d intended to or not, she’d taught Contessa that fidget spinners were very persuasive in the right hands, that amazing races were functionally identical to scavenger hunts, and that entire governments could be undermined by judicious application of plastic atrocities.

On that note, the babies must have awakened some biological instinct in her. All she could think about now was how to not rouse this small sleeping creature so that it might make more noises. She just had to stay perfectly silent and still until they arrived.

Then a klaxon blared from inside her jacket. Rebecca’s legs kicked, and she jerked her head away from Contessa’s shoulder with a cry of alarm. Philip and Jacob were similarly jolted from their respective reveries. They both turned to her, irritated.

Contessa wrestled her phone out, her thumb already depressing the volume button.

The screen flickered on. A single phrase in a grey bubble stared up at her.

> **FM:** Wednesday, 1pm.

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**Chapter End Notes**

This was supposed to have been done 84 years ago. I don't know what happened. But at least finals are over?? Mostly?? Thank you to one beloved maroon_sweater for her tireless support and bentaing.
Society, Philip reflected, could be divided into two categories: people who got to attend their classes unmolested, and people who were dragooned into performing nonsense tasks by their colleagues on the way to their gen ed literature lectures. It was ever his ambition to achieve the glorious heights of the former, and ever his fate to fall into the execrable troughs of the latter.

And it was ever Contessa’s passion to push him in.

“Oh no,” said Rebecca, when he suggested they make use of one of his hall’s kitchens. “We are not cooking in Concrete Jenga. It’s completely soulless.”

From the threshold of the dorm room, Philip folded his arms and stared hard at the bifold bathroom door. Contessa’s gripes about Rebecca might have tapered off, but that didn’t mean he was willing to skip class and spend an entire afternoon playing nursemaid to her.

Rebecca went on, “We might as well drive down to the state penitentiary and commandeer one of their cells. We can’t sit ‘round the fire and ladle out hearty stew in those conditions.”

He looked at her. Conditions? The quality of their university’s dormitory halls ran from refugee shack to mid-range hotel. This place skewed more towards the first. He was fairly certain he’d seen a vagrant feeding his scabs to a wild animal in the garden downstairs. Either of them may have been an art major, but he hadn’t been able to tell which.

“When did hearty stew enter the picture?” he asked.

She sat up on the bed and opened her mouth.

“While you’re at it, explain to me exactly what you think hearty stew is.”

“Minestrone?” she tried. “Beef. Carrots…”

“We are baking cookies,” he said firmly, “and not in your kitchen. The lighting is always some bizarre colour, and I develop a grease patina just standing there. Does anyone ever clean the place? Why are there always noodles in the sink?”

“Because people use it for—for ladling hearty stew! Enough rhetorical questions,” she said, waving her arms. “I'm not crazy about it either, but the culinary science department started locking their kitchens.”

The bathroom door finally creaked open, and Contessa walked in briskly. Her tie had to be strangling her with how tight it was, but she held herself like she’d been training with a bearing rein.

“Contessa,” he began, “I don’t think—”

“All complaints in triplicate,” Contessa said, before he could make an itemised list of all the reasons this was a bad idea. She picked at the tie knot. “Find a compromise.”

He walked up to adjust it for her. “Why are you foisting this off on me again?” he murmured.

“It's not foisting when you enjoy cooking.”
“I wasn’t referring to the cooking.”

“I promised her this before the meeting came up. Just occupy her for a while.”

He tugged her failed double windsor knot loose. “How long is a while?”

“Two hours,” she said. She glanced at Rebecca. “Three at most.”

_Three hours? “Do you have a laser pointer?”_

“My desk. Second drawer.”

Once finished, he stepped away to check his handiwork.

She cut a sharp figure in a dark grey jacket over a white dress shirt with a nipped-in waist. Silver cufflinks monogrammed with the Coriolis whorl gleamed on her crisp double cuffs, and beneath those was a very expensive stainless steel wristwatch that he knew had that year engraved on the back.

She looked very nice.

Rebecca was staring at the seat of Contessa’s pencil skirt—a midi with pinstripes, dark grey to match her jacket. It was probable she’d never seen Contessa in a skirt, although in his opinion the spectacle hardly merited a slack jaw.

When Rebecca saw him looking, she reddened and pretended to be fixing her hair.

“Subtle,” he said.

“Pardon?” Contessa smoothed her now-perfect tie in front of the full-length mirror on the inside of her wardrobe door.

“Subtle attempt at hiding that phrasebook,” he said. Rebecca was lucky he was a smooth criminal. “Aren’t you fluent enough?

“_Je dois rafraîchir mon français,_” Contessa said. “She might want to speak it.”

_English isn’t even your second language and I don’t see you breaking out the Duolingo to talk to me._ He refrained from voicing this in front of Rebecca in case she wasn’t already aware of that fact.

Contessa handed him the booklet that had been poking out from her jacket pocket. As he took it, a cry erupted from beside him.

“Are those _suspenders_?”

Rebecca lunged for the exposed sliver of elastic band, but Contessa pulled her jacket over it before she could twang it.

“No one wears _suspenders_ with a skirt!” Rebecca said, her face radiant with delicious scandal. “No one wears suspenders, period. You usually wear a belt. Why are you wearing suspenders?”

“I too would like to hear the answer to that question,” Philip said, and was rewarded with a glare.

“Wait, what?” Rebecca said. “What happened?”

“Don’t take your jacket off,” he advised Contessa.
Rebecca poked him in the arm. "What's the story behind the suspenders!"

"Not mine to recount," he said. "Besides, I think it'll be that much more compelling if she tells it."

"Well, I like them. They kind of remind me of the—that guy."

"A stooge?" he suggested.

"No..." She snapped her fingers. "The kid from that old family show. The one who cloned himself and was always dubious about his own culpability."

"That does sound like Contessa."

"You should wear a bowtie," Rebecca told her.

"This is a work lunch," Contessa said. "A certain degree of formality is expected."

"Bowties are formal. Philip, agree with me."

"Yes," he said.

"See? Philip knows what I'm talking about. Him and me, formality experts. We co-wrote the book on formality."

He nodded. "I wrote the section on dress code, you doodled cats in the margins, and Contessa cheated us both of our royalties."

Rebecca beamed at Contessa triumphantly, and Contessa rolled her eyes.

"Out of curiosity, have you ever been employed before?" Philip asked Rebecca.

"Yeah, a bunch of times. I left due to creative differences," she added, when she realised what that implied.

Contessa sniffed.

"What!"

"Creative differences," she said, "like whether or not you should microwave ice cream containers."

"Beach kiosk," Rebecca explained to Philip. "The box wouldn’t open."

"Like whether or not you should microwave toy stethoscopes."

"Daycare centre. A kid said the resonator was too cold. You know, one of the girls said the same thing about the ultrasound wand, which kind of tells you a lot about Fisher-Price medical equipment."

Contessa sat down on the bed next to Rebecca. "Whether or not you should microwave your colleagues’ gloves."

"They were wet," Rebecca said crossly. "What was I supposed to do? Flap them?"

"There are many ways to dry wet clothing, Rebecca, not all of which involve flapping." She rested a palm on the bed and, leaning to the side, reached out with a finger to gently bump the tip of Rebecca’s nose.
Philip blinked.

Contessa realised what she’d done a moment later. The gesture seemed to have alarmed herself as much as it delighted Rebecca.

“Or microwaves,” Contessa said, springing back up off the bed and adjusting her jacket for the hundredth time. She took her hat off its hook. “Well. I’ll be off. Play nice.”

“You’re going to kill it, I know,” Rebecca said, patting her own nose. “Don’t even sweat!”

“I’m not going to... perspire.” Her face softened, just a touch. “But thank you, Rebecca.”

“Don’t kill anything either,” Philip said. She needed the reminder.

She tipped her hat at them both, and strode out the door.

Why she was this nervous when she’d been explicitly asked to fill the position she was gunning for was a mystery to Philip. He supposed it was good she wasn’t getting complacent.

He turned to Rebecca. “I rent an apartment off campus. It should be simple enough to pick up the ingredients en route.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Rebecca said. Her eyes lingered low on the door. “Philip…”

“Yes?”

“Is it just me or did she look, um, spiffier than usual?”

Philip opened the second drawer of Contessa’s desk. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Chapter 8: Wanting Sweet Things

Through windows overlooking the street, sunlight splashed like milk across the floors and dining table. The windows were large enough that the light reached the pale panelled walls, lending a glossy sheen to the impressionistic oil paintings of Parisian cafés that lined them.

“—which is why the miscarriage was indeed your fault, and all your friends and family blame you, even though they will never say it to your face.” Contessa spoke softly, in deference to the serenity of this clandestine space. “But you must have known all along. From how colleagues avoid you, and how your sister-in-law can’t bring herself to call you back anymore, much less run away with you to Bangkok like you’ve been planning in secret.”

There was a moment of pensive silence before she dropped her eyes and said, “Would you replace the napkins again, please? They need to be about twelve percent starchier.”

She retracted her hand from the waiter’s shoulder and watched him trudge to the cupboards. Hopefully he wouldn’t stain the new serviettes—tears would make them more limp, not less.

Everything had to be perfect. According to her watch, she only had thirty-three minutes left to complete preparations.

She turned her attention to the window, which continued to present a problem. Light shouldn’t splash; it was a careless manner of illumination, the product of too much diffusion and not enough focus. But the room would be dim if she drew the curtains, and natural light was superior to the alternative.
Thoughts of strategically placed screens and reflective surfaces flickered before her mind’s eye. She dismissed them. Turning the private room into some prismatic feng shui funhouse would give off the wrong impression.

Redecorating might help. She moved the table away from the window and rearranged some of the furniture, trying to orient the light so that it would cascade and pool on the table in a more seemly fashion.

But all the odds and ends on the window sill just looked like clutter. The light fell the way it wanted to fall.

She exhaled sharply through her nose, and started moving everything back.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes,” Contessa said.

She didn’t need to look; she could sense the presence of the waitress—this fair-haired, saucer-eyed young bedwetter constantly floundering in a soupy miasma of self-flagellating anxiety and eagerness to please. She was a node on the intelligence network Contessa had established ad hoc to provide status updates on the ongoing insurrection in the kitchen and receive further instructions. But the way she spent minutes struggling to scare up anything of use irritated Contessa immensely.

“The saucier says he can’t work in these conditions,” the waitress began. “He’s not getting the respect he deserves.”

Contessa nodded. She’d deal with that in a bit.

She made a trip across the room to another vase, plucked a few of the blossoms from one side, and rotated the vase towards the wall so that its sparseness wouldn’t be apparent. She returned to the plant on her table, some spongy red and white affair with too few flowers, and nestled the salvaged blossoms among the leaves.

Beside her, the waitress dithered. “Is anything else not to your satisfaction, ma’am?”

“The tablecloth,” Contessa said, finally turning to face her. “It needs to be white.”

“This... is white, ma’am.”

In reply, Contessa held a corner of the cloth to the light. Elaborate tendrils of vine shimmered along the border, infesting a full one-eighth of the length.

The waitress stared at the embroidered filigree, eyes glassy, red lips set in a false jovial rictus like she was dredging up the scraps of her professional cheer and hammering them into place.

Contessa waited patiently for the last nail to go in before repeating herself. “It needs to be plain white.”

“I’m very sorry,” the waitress said. “We don't have any others.”

“I saw plain white tablecloths outside.”

“Those are for the bigger tables, ma’am.”

What sort of sham restaurant uses two different varieties of tablecloth?
Contessa reminded herself she couldn't browbeat all the staff into compliance or they might turn on her at a critical juncture. She couldn’t show too much contempt for their substandard practices. She had to employ other methods.

“A plain white tablecloth,” she said, slipping the waitress a roll of hundred-dollar bills. “No patterns, no frills or other embellishments. Plain white. Keep the change.”

The waitress fingered the money without pocketing it.

“Will that be a problem,” Contessa said.

“Ma’am,” the waitress said nervously, “I’m not sure we can get a replacement tablecloth of this quality now. We have a bulk supplier.”

“I’m not asking for a matching set. You can get one tablecloth.” Contessa pinched the fabric. “Similar thread count. Four hundred is the standard, yes?”

“I can try…"

“What size is this?”

“The smaller…” The waitress took the tablecloth from her and squinted at it, clearly at a loss. “I’m—I’m not sure, ma’am.”

Contessa tamped down on her annoyance. “What size is the table, then?”

“For two, ma’am.”

“The dimensions.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the waitress squeaked, wringing the tablecloth probably in much the same way she did her sodden sheets every morning. “I don’t know.”

“Do you have a tape measure? A ruler?”

“No, ma’am. I’m really very sorry.”

She’d have to consult Philip, then, and adjust his estimate since the bevelling might affect the drop. But he would need a point of reference. “How tall are you? In inches,” she added. “Not in the number of people you can seat.”

“Five foot... four, ma’am.”

Contessa pointed at the spot next to the table. “Stand here, please.”

After sending the waitress off to procure a tablecloth with Pip-provided measurements, Contessa left to deliver a simmering pan of respect down the saucier’s throat. He decided he didn’t want any after all, and that his red wine reduction needed more seasoning.

When she came back, she discovered disaster.

Shrouding the table was a vastly oversized tablecloth ripped straight from one of the bigger tables outside. The table looked like a melting white ice cream cake.

Contessa’s eyes darted around the room in search of the waitress, but she’d fled the scene.
And she had taken the original, smaller tablecloth with her.

Motherf—

The door opened.

“Contessa,” Foster Mother said, sounding mildly surprised to see her. She stepped in. “Good afternoon.”

Contessa had a trick for when her schemes were thwarted by happenstance, when the real possibility of failure brewed overhead and she felt the blood freeze solid in her veins. It was to imagine herself balancing on a length of wire between two skyscrapers. The wire, no thicker than dental floss, could barely support her weight even when she was standing still. If she flinched or wavered, stayed in one place for too long, did anything but walk steadily along it, she would find herself plummeting to the asphalt below.

The asphalt was the black woman standing by the door, statuesque, immaculately attired in a blue and white chevron-print sheath dress teamed with a white blazer. Her hair was drawn up into a chignon fastened by lacquered chopsticks. She appraised the room, and Contessa, with wintry eyes. She was early.

At this point there was no way to go but forward, through the whipping crosswinds, towards the open window on the other side. Contessa eradicated all external evidence that she had a moment ago been on the precipice of total mental freefall over an incorrectly sized tablecloth. She gave the puddling skirt a discreet kick with her heel to push the folds under the table, and smoothly pulled out a chair for Foster Mother as she approached.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Sarr,” she said.

Rebecca stood on the doormat of Philip’s loft apartment for a good few minutes to admire the view.

Sheer curtains filtered sunlight through the window that took up almost the whole wall on one side of the room. Though fine dust drifted over the hardwood flooring, she noticed that the L-shaped sofa was completely free of the scuffs and scratches that leather so easily sustained.

A bar counter, furnished with highball glasses but no bottles, separated the living room and kitchen. His kitchen had a collection of newfangled appliances on the counters. It was also spotless—not at all like hers back home. She bet all his utensils matched, too.

What struck Rebecca was how small the place was, even with the open concept design and all the vertical space and lighting tricks. Unless someone camped out under the stairs, this wasn’t a place for a family.

It clicked. Bachelor pad.

“Whoa, you live all by yourself?” she asked, bounding further inside. She hadn’t pegged Philip as that old, but he was clearly old enough to legally drink.

“Shoes, please.”

“Oh, sorry.” She backed up and slipped off her sandals, leaving them just outside the threshold before reentering.
As soon as she passed him, Philip picked the shoes up and placed them on the rack.

She craned her neck. A spiral staircase that was all wooden steps and narrow banisters topped with globe finials wound its way up to a single room on a mezzanine floor. Philip’s bedroom?

“Do you have a roommate?” she asked.

“I live all by myself,” he said, setting his satchel down by the coffee table.

Rebecca cringed a little at the backs of his feet as he padded into the kitchen with the groceries. He’d kept on his thin flesh-tone toe socks, which were dappled with perfectly round Vantablack circles of uniform size. They made his feet look porous like a lotus seed pod. There were especially large semicircles where his nails should have been.

Who does this, Rebecca thought, but didn’t comment. Instead she pointed at the framed Dali print hanging above a mission table. “What’s that painting? It looks familiar.”

“Galatea of the Spheres,” he said. “I used to have Corpus Hypercubus, but there was water damage.”

“Oh. Well, I love the décor,” she said sincerely, flitting her hand over the broad leaves of a Chinese evergreen in the corner. “Super classy, very Champsaur meets Pinterest featured board. Your parents just let you live on your own?”

“No.” Behind the kitchen counter island, he glanced around the apartment himself. His face tightened slightly. “It wasn’t my intention to imitate Champsaur. I don’t like minimalism.”

Rebecca perked up. “Why?”

Philip looked at her with some suspicion, as if unaccustomed to being asked for his opinion. “It calls too much attention to itself.”

“Minimalism calls too much attention to itself?”

“Yes.”

She waited for him to continue, but that was all he was willing to say on the matter. An awkward silence descended.

Before it could become suffocating, Rebecca turned to his bookshelves. He had a lot of philosophy—Foucault, Russell, Machiavelli. With the shelves being as tidy as the rest of the apartment, she couldn’t know for sure if Philip had actually read them. She decided not to ask.

A library hardcover of Austerlitz by Sebald lay bookmarked on the coffee table, next to a bamboo wood puzzle and an empty mug on a coaster. Rebecca poked around in the satchel resting against the table leg and found a fitted blue cap emblazoned with the college crest, as well as two more books—Hofstadter’s An Eternal Golden Braid and Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress. She recognised the latter as one of the assigned texts for Survey of Seventeenth Century Western Lit, an introductory core she’d taken two semesters ago.

But from the book’s pristine condition, he hadn’t read it yet, so they couldn’t talk about it. Drat.

“That should be everything we need,” Philip said, from beyond the bar counter. “We can begin once you’ve finished rifling through my personal possessions.”
Rebecca dropped the bag guiltily. “Sorry,” she said.

“Hm?”

“That was rude. I wanted to see what you were reading, but I guess I should have just asked.”

He glanced up at her with a furrowed brow, more perturbed by the apology than by her invasion of his privacy.

She skipped to the counter island, where the ingredients were neatly arrayed.

“So, what are you reading?” Rebecca prodded. “I’m always looking for more recs.”

“Category theory,” he said, paying more attention to his phone.

“Oh. That’s…” She went with the most dependable descriptor. “Interesting! What else?”

“Linear algebra.”

“That is also extremely interesting. Anything else?”

“You should know that I have many defining character traits, but math is the only one.”

“Outside of class, I mean! Like _Austerlitz_? I’ve never heard of it, but I’m guessing it’s about the Napoleonic Wars.”

“The main character’s name is Austerlitz.”

“Oh.” She smiled and nodded harder. “I see! Are you enjoying it?”

“I haven’t gotten very far.”

He didn’t volunteer anything else. Rebecca snuck up behind him and peeked at his phone, which he didn’t bother to hide. He was looking at a photo of a uniformed waitress standing barefoot next to a table. After a few seconds, he swiped to the next picture. It was a zoomed-out aerial view of the same table, this time with the lady lying on the floor beside it.

She didn’t judge. Maybe the waitress was his girlfriend. Philip was pretty cute in that nerdy way, and as she watched him examine the label on the back of a caster sugar bag, she wondered why she’d doubted he had read the books in his living room. With the glasses and pocket protector, he was the kid who won the spelling bee every year—or, given his inclinations, the mathematical tripos.

_Like Vivie Warren_, she thought excitedly, and searched for more parallels.

He certainly looked well-built enough. His blue-grey oxford hinted at muscle tone underneath, suggesting that the baseball cap in his bag wasn’t just for keeping the sun off. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but for all the apparent dorkiness, he had this energy. Her eyes journeyed below the belt to ascertain where said energy was emanating from, then snapped back up.

The memory of him catching her being a lech who objectified her friends was still fresh. Philip was educated and modern, not a flower for her aesthetic consumption.

Did he and Contessa have the same workout routine, though? Because that was one sculpted—

“Put that apron on when you’re done leering at me,” Philip said.
Rebecca sputtered, her face prickling all over. “I wasn't!”

"Ah. Then by all means, continue.” He rested his elbows on the counter as he texted, and arched his back with an air of supreme indifference. “Just don't take all day.”

Pointedly not leering, Rebecca unhooked a white apron from a cupboard handle. She realised he was wearing one too. The peculiarity of the idea, that Philip could be both the New Woman and an Angel in the House, made her smile. "Have you read Mrs. Warren's Profession?"

"No," he said. He handed her the plastic bag of snacks she’d picked up for her dorm. “Yours.”

She opened up the bag, and what she found horrified her. She took the six-pack of mixed fruit juice cartons out of the bag and dropped it onto the counter with a thud.

“Someone,” she said grimly, “stole the straws.”

Philip looked down at his disrupted mise en place, then at the little brown bottle that had rolled onto the floor. “Do you think I stole them?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Did you?”

“Perhaps they just don’t come with straws,” he said.

“No, no, they totally come with straws,” Rebecca said. “Otherwise they wouldn’t have these tiny holes you can’t poke a regular straw through. And you see these globs of glue? The straws were removed.”

“Contessa told me you share a tin of assorted biscuits with her, and she can never find a single chocolate wafer.”

She bent to pick up the thankfully intact bottle. Vanilla extract. “That’s completely different. I don’t hoard them or deliberately purge the tin to deprive Contessa. I just eat them because the only worthwhile biscuits in there are those and the lemon sandwich crackers. The rest are sugared cardboard and Oreo knockoffs with Play-Doh instead of creme, and oatmeal raisin cookies.”

“I like oatmeal raisin cookies,” Philip said.

“And I’m sure they'll find a cure someday,” Rebecca said kindly. She tapped on a carton. “This takes malice. Like whoever empties the contraceptive basket. They’re playing with people’s lives here.”

At the mention of people’s lives, Philip immediately lost interest. He turned away to pour the granulated sugar into a measuring cup. Not to be outdone, Rebecca grabbed the bag of dark brown sugar and another cup.

Philip whisked it from her as soon as her sugar rose slightly above the three quarter mark, and combined it with the granulated sugar and the butter—when did he get the butter out?—in a large mixing bowl.

“You have a condom scalper in your building too?” he asked, probably to distract her from the fact that he was taking over all the important steps.

She didn’t take her eyes off the mixture. “Yeah, I guess. They sell them?”

“I presumed so. Otherwise we have someone of staggering libido and truly phenomenal refractory period on the loose. I'm not sure I want to get in the way of that, regardless of how conscientious
they are about their prophylactic measures.”

“I want to beat it,” Rebecca said, making grabby motions.

He gave her the bowl and gestured towards the electric mixer.

“No! We have perfectly good hands.” She hugged the bowl protectively. “And the dough can tell when you’ve outsourced your labour to the machines.”

“That’s why I do it,” he said. “The outrage motivates the dough to rise up, and the ever-looming threat of obsolescence keeps my hands on their toes. Or fingers, rather. In any case, I left my manual mixer in the 1800s. If you want to mangle your hand with some modified spoon contraption, be my guest.”

Rebecca had to admit her arm grew tired very quickly whenever she mixed dough. But she had no wish to participate in or witness the brazen marginalisation of the human hand and concomitant exploitation of machinery, so Philip observed the mixing by himself.

When he cracked an egg without so much telling her that it was cracking time, Rebecca put her foot down.

“Stop doing everything,” she complained. “Save an egg for me.”

Wordlessly, he stepped aside to let her crack an egg over the bowl.

He handed her a fork afterwards, to pick the shards of shell out of the yolk.

“You must feel very smug right now,” she said.

“A little bit.”

She grinned at him, hoping for a smile back, but he’d turned to start the mixer up again.

She’d never met anyone quite so insular, except maybe Contessa. But even Contessa reacted sometimes to disguise her expressions. Philip didn’t seem to have much to hide beyond the occasional perplexed frown, and even those were brief and subdued.

“I just realised what this is,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the whirring.

“Cookie dough?”

“It’s the anti-straw activists! They’re the ones putting pressure on companies to make those horrible edible straws lately. Making strawmen of their detractors.” She shook her fist. “Sorry for like, harping on it, but it keeps happening.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I agree it’s not very effective.”

“I warned you about straws, bro,” Rebecca said. “I told you, dog. If I wanted to have to open the carton, I’d just get a big one and pour my drinks into cups. But not using a straw when consuming sugary drinks erodes your enamel faster.” She bared her teeth and pointed at her incisors knowingly. “It’s not the inbreeding that gets you.”

Philip switched off the mixer.

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I court a cousin,” he said, and went to open the freezer.
He removed two large bars of chocolate and proceeded to break the dark bar into chunks over a bowl. Rebecca eagerly followed his lead with the milk bar, sneaking squares into her mouth.

“In you go!” Rebecca screamed when they poured the chunks into the thick, creamy mixture. “Into the Slough of Despond!”

He shook out the last few chunks. “You saw my assigned books, didn’t you.”

She whirled on him. “So you have read it!”

Her attempts at befriending him might be more successful than she’d first thought.

***

“I don’t think the mosquitoes are a success,” Foster Mother said. “They—”

She paused abruptly at a knock on the door. The waiter shambled into the room bearing two platters of entrées. His uniform was rumpled and his eyes were bloodshot, which made him look high.

If he really had been shooting up in a backroom, there would be hell to pay. But he’d probably just discovered that his wife had already seen the airfare receipts, and been inspired to fresh tears.

At least he left quickly after setting the platters down in front of them and shut the door behind him.

“What seems to be the issue?” Contessa asked, studying Foster Mother for signs that she was displeased by either the waiter’s appearance or the meal before her.

The food had better be flawless. She’d reignited hostilities between the head chef and the more competent sous chef, cleaving the kitchen in two. Then she’d ensured that all the better cooks were on the latter’s team. From there, it was trivial to get a new menu drafted and laminated. Foster Mother had picked the coincidentally all-vegetarian set with the sous chef’s signature dishes.

“Normal mosquitoes don’t transmit hepatitis.” Foster Mother picked up her fork and tucked into her mushroom risotto. “It appears the modifications we made can cause a mutation that means ours do.”

Contessa cut into her own food. Moist wisps of steam rose from the slab of—sea bass? She hadn’t been paying much attention to what she’d ordered for herself. When she tasted a morsel, she found she still couldn’t tell. Her palate was refined enough to detect the difference between flavours of a yoghurt. It was not refined enough to distinguish one species of fish from another.

She had to time her bites so that her mouth wouldn’t be full whenever she was asked a question. The portions of food had to be small enough to be swallowed rapidly, should she be caught unawares.

“It only affects one in a thousand offspring,” Foster Mother said, “but we did engineer them to be as prolific as possible, and we deployed them over a particularly rainy period.”

There were other factors to take into account. If she ate too slowly, Foster Mother would think she wasn’t enjoying the food. If she ate too quickly, Foster Mother would think her uncouth, or worse—that she had somewhere else to be. She did have a tutorial coming up, but the dilemma of whether to be late for class or to disrespect Foster Mother’s time was a no-brainer.

Contessa nodded attentively. “Should I neutralise them?”

“It’s been six days,” Foster Mother said. “They’ve reproduced tens of thousands of times.”

“I have a bug zapper,” Contessa offered.
“This is not a joking matter.” Foster Mother directed her flinty gaze to the window as she tapped the edge of her bowl. “The scare will assist our pro-vaccination efforts across the region, but it has exposed a crucial shortage. We need better microbiologists.”

Contessa straightened, her focus sharpening. An objective. “Do you have anybody in mind?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I’ve sent you what I could find of the current top contender upon a cursory search.” She waved to indicate that Contessa should check her phone.

Contessa opened up her inbox and found a message from her containing a series of shortened links. The first one led to a profile on a site with an orange teardrop logo. No doubt a favourite haunt for headhunters. She placed her phone on the table so that Foster Mother could see the screen.

**William Manton, 22**

*Actually 28 but I haven’t changed it yet, long story. 6’2. 7’’. Married but I don’t mind if you don’t. MAD SCIENTIST! Joke, I just unravel the building blocks of life and reassemble them according to my masterful whims for fun and profit :^) Love travelling in my VW van, reading quantum physics textbooks, antique stores, deep late night conversations about the meaning of existence. Looking for a lady who appreciates the finer things in life but I always seem to fall for the psychos haha. 100-135lb, below 5’7, B-cup and above, no smoking or tattoos please.*

*In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play. — Nietzsche*

“Make an account, then swipe right to be able to engage him in conversation,” Foster Mother said, eyeing the displayed photos from afar. “Of course, you have to make sure he ‘matches’ with you first.”

Contessa nodded, downloading the app as prompted by the window. She’d construct a profile and lie about all her particulars later.

“If you forget which direction, remember: ‘swipe right if their future seems bright, swipe left if their credentials lack professional heft.’” Foster Mother raised a spoonful of risotto to her lips. “I’ve weeded out many unsuitables with this mnemonic guideline.”

Once she’d taken down notes, Contessa put her phone away.

Foster Mother leaned back into her seat, getting comfortable as one could get while being Foster Mother in a subpar chair. She looked straight at Contessa and asked, “How are you doing?”

Contessa’s red-thread constellation of theories flashed through her head. Previous meetings had always taken place within a mile radius of CHQ. Contessa had marked out the venues of every meeting they’d ever had, and drawn lines connecting them before organising them into zones. This restaurant, reputable as it was, fell outside the zones she’d demarcated, and had no more than tenuous association with the functions Foster Mother had scheduled before and after this lunch.

She didn’t profess to understand the enigmatic workings of Foster Mother’s mind, but one thing was clear: Foster Mother had arranged a meeting near Contessa’s university in order to evaluate her for the coveted position of Lab Assistant—a position that she had asked her to fill but had not followed up on in the thirty-three days since, which led Contessa to very reasonably assume that her qualifications were still up in the air and that Foster Mother must need more convincing.

This lunch was therefore an interview, and how she responded moving forward was of dire
importance.

Fortunately, Contessa had anticipated obligatory niceties intended to lull her into a false sense of security. She yielded the right answer with ease. “I’m adjusting well to college life. My studies are progressing, and I’m networking.”

“That’s good,” Foster Mother said.

“I made a contact,” Contessa added, on the off chance Foster Mother wanted specifics. “She’s the top of her class in ROTC.”

Foster Mother slipped her phone from her blazer and typed something into it.

That was a signal. She needed a graceful way to leave. Contessa began lining up the steps to provide it, as she did whenever Foster Mother needed to escape a corporate luncheon or an audit.

She was pulled up short by the sight of Foster Mother putting her phone away.

“Reserve Officers' Training Corps,” she said.

“Yes,” Contessa said.

After that, the only sound was the clink of utensils on flatware accompanied by the low foggy drone of the ceiling air conditioner. Contessa couldn’t stand that drone.

*Why isn’t she asking more questions?*

She promptly seized that voice and gave it a hard cuff across the cheek.

*Grow up,* she commanded herself. Foster Mother didn't take time out of her schedule so that she could endure her banal prattle.

“I received a bill for six thousand dollars worth of emergency landscaping the other day.”

Contessa stopped slicing. "It was how I made a contact, and she's the top of her class in ROTC. I'll pay it back."

“No need,” Foster Mother said, dismissing the implicit apology with a gesture. “I was just confused. I thought you might have taken up gardening.”

“I don’t have hobbies,” Contessa said quickly.

“Indeed?”

What did that mean? Indeed what? What was the question? Was she supposed to have hobbies? She reached for the first recreational activity that came to mind. “I watched a play.”

“A film?”

“A live performance of Shakespeare.”

“I see,” Foster Mother said, not sounding like she saw.

“I may adopt it as a pastime, in fact,” Contessa said noncommittally, fishing for reactions. “Theatre-going. Along with visiting museums and—the opera.”
Foster Mother’s forehead crinkled. “The opera.”

Why? Of all the activities that could have made her appear a cultured, well-rounded individual, why had she picked that? She should have just swapped her silk out for tweed. Contessa searched her memory for Rebecca monologues and marshalled everything she’d ever said on the subject.

“‘Yes [1],’ she said, pronouncing the footnote as her roommate had. “Opera is after all to be understood in terms of the relationship between the narrative that frames them, and the ways in which music and words convey that narrative and its emotional content. The way a listener perceives that relationship varies from performance to performance, as they process not its faithful ideal as imagined by its composer but the specific incarnation they experience. [2] Opera is an organism, and organisms don’t merely exist in their environments, but because of them. Their development arises from interaction and the imposition of conditions that birth opportunities for perseverance and growth.”

As she pressed onward, Foster Mother looked increasingly flummoxed.

Not a good sign.


Foster Mother waited for her to finish—and then a few seconds more to make sure she was actually finished, like a schoolmarm accommodating her most remedial pupil. “I see,” she said at last. “And what operas are you particularly interested in watching?”

“Wagner,” Contessa said, after only a moment’s hesitation.

“Wagner? Which of his works?”

“The—” She paused. “—the one with the phantom.”

“Isn’t that a film?”

“The opera was based on the film, I believe.”

Foster Mother didn’t look impressed. “Are you still planning on majoring in biomedical engineering?”

“Yes. The study of opera is just one of my general education requirements.”

“If you truly wish to major in liberal arts, I won’t stop you,” she said, every word engorged with profound distaste. “There might even be unseen benefits to such an... education. But employment opportunities might be sparse in this economic climate. Or—well, any climate, historical or geographical.”

“I know,” Contessa said hastily. “I have no interest in liberal arts.”

"I can’t say I think much of the opera. It’s always struck me as being like golf.”

“Golf is disgusting.” Contessa was relieved to be off the subject of her prospective major. “It is a wasteful indulgence for profligate elitists. I would never golf or attend an opera for pleasure.”

“Quite,” Foster Mother said, her mouth turned down.
A few more queries into ‘the campus’, ‘classwork’, and ‘college administrative policy’ were volleyed at her. Contessa could sense Foster Mother’s interest in her—if she’d even had any to begin with—waning with every comprehensive, heavily cited response she provided.

Eventually it shrivelled altogether, and she busied herself with her risotto. Contessa matched her pace, ears pricked in case further chitchat was imminent.

Seconds ticked by in silence.

The more she replayed the conversation in her head, the more repulsed she was by herself. She saw every misstep projected on a wide screen, could tally every bodily transgression: weight shift, hair tuck, hand on napkin, fork nudge. She heard the raw edge to her voice betraying that adolescent desperation for approval she thought she’d outgrown.

All these converged into the inescapable crushing conviction that she’d been seen through to the child she was at her core, this needy, inconsiderate, ungrateful wretch incapable of something so basic as keeping her mouth shut when it came to irrelevant matters. No wonder Foster Mother didn’t want to speak to her more than was absolutely necessary—it would only spur Contessa to bleat on about the inconsequential details of her daily life, like an undertow snaking through surf and sand to drown this unsuspecting woman on the shore in minutiae.

_How was your day?_ Foster Mother might ask, one day.

_Oh, Contessa would respond blithely. I had to replace my toothpaste because I thought the scrub to foam ratio was off. Afterwards, I watched my roommate make balloon animals for twenty minutes. I then took an antacid and briefly attempted to recall the jingle for it, but nothing rhymes with ‘Bismol’ besides ‘dismal’ and ‘abysmal’, neither of which are positive descriptors. Yes, I did squander part of my morning on OTC medication and other inanities when I should have been reading up on the Mendoza case, or checking on the iguanas, or ordering the anthrax, or hurling myself down an elevator shaft, or preparing for yet another fucking civics quiz instead of copying the answers off the reflection in Pip’s glasses because my brain is self-evidently too clogged with informational muesli to store the structure of the U.S. federal government. I’m such an irresponsible and indolent person, you see, perhaps you shouldn’t have bothered saving me after all._

“Well,” Foster Mother said, dabbing at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “I need a dossier on Manton as soon as possible.”

“I’ll get it to you by Monday,” Contessa said. Having nothing more to add, she sipped her water.

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>Teresa: Idk... I just don’t think that’s a very charitable interpretation :V

>Elliot: it’s so charitable it could fund NASA for a year

>Hana: or the national asses’ convention for six years

>Elliot: Yeah that isn’t even a real apology

>Elliot: ‘I’m sorry if. You were offended I’m be, late’ wtf is this….. prevaricating bs

>Elliot: Don’t mind me I’m just gonna quote everything SO YOU CAN SEE

>Teresa: He’s not an ass
>Theresa: He’s just busy

>Theresa: stop vilifying him

>Hana: if you didn’t want us to vilify him, why did you show this to us

>Elliot: Is this speech to text?? he couldn't even stop for one minute to type a message smh

Rebecca had been tracking a suspicious red dot around the kitchen until it had vanished somewhere between the cabinet doors. She’d used this reprieve to herd Philip off into his bedroom—he had been taking a call anyway—in the hopes of protecting him from the phantom sniper that had apparently stalked her all the way from her dorm. It was her they wanted; she would never forgive herself if Philip became collateral damage.

Although, now that she thought about it, they’d have to be a pretty lousy assassin to hit a completely different person from their target.

The danger seemed to have passed, and she had gotten distracted by a carnival flier tacked to the fridge by a magnet. She’d sent a picture of it to the girls-only plus Elliot group chat, accidentally interrupting a chain of screenshots and rigorous discourse analysis of Colin’s texts to Theresa.

Everyone was typing at once. She considered entering the melee herself to discuss the missing commas in his messages, but Elliot had already covered punctuation and was wading into wider implications.

She propped herself up against the counter, waiting for the conversation to shift towards the question of how to respond to Colin. Then she jumped in with the message she’d drafted in her notes application.

>Rebecca: listen up you hoes

>Rebecca: you absolute trash women

>Rebecca: so

>Theresa: Hi Rebecca

>Rebecca: i’m about to spit the truth :lips: :sweat_drops:

>Rebecca: Colin is

Just as she began drumming out a tirade on her keyboard, her elbow bumped into the upright bag of flour. It toppled. She let her phone clatter onto the table, and dove to seize the bag—but didn’t manage to catch it before she heard the whumpf of impact and saw the ensuing white plume.

*Please don’t let it be a lot, please don’t let it be a lot...*

She dragged the worryingly light bag back up, pinching the opening, but it was too late. She looked at the sizeable pile of flour on the tiles in dismay.

Philip couldn’t know. He’d think she was a total clown. Her mind scrambled for solutions as she tried to scoop the flour up in her hands. What was the best way to hide flour? Spreading it out so thinly it was invisible? He’d notice eventually when the powder got on his cursed socks.

He wouldn’t notice if she camouflaged it.
Using the outer side of her foot, Rebecca swept a little flour into the niche between the cupboards.

The cupboards were white. Paint catalogues would label their particular shade ‘eggshell’, but it’d still be included among the white swatches. He’d see this jutting, similarly coloured imperfection and dismiss it as a furniture anomaly, or natural dust-like deposits that had resulted from chemical weathering in situ. Later, she’d find an opportune excuse and time to clean it up properly.

She swept more flour into the corner.

Philip came down the stairs and walked into the kitchen, phone still in hand. She shot up and smiled brightly at him, confident that at this angle the damage wasn't visible. Even he couldn’t see behind counters.

Her sudden movement attracted his attention. He stared at her for a moment, expressionless, and headed to the wall charger.

When she was sure he was preoccupied plugging his phone in, Rebecca resumed kicking flour.

“Rebecca,” Philip said, his back to her.

“Yes!” she said, stopping. “I mean, yes?”

“Reseal that bag when you’re done spilling the flour and attempting to conceal the evidence.”

“Oh, um, I—”

“There are rubber bands in the cabinet behind you.”

Sheepishly, she opened it and peeled a yellow rubber band from the clump inside. She struggled to twist it around the pursed opening of the bag, until it occurred to her to just roll the top part over a few times and wrap the band around the whole thing.

He crossed over to survey the streaks of flour. “You should have lined it up along the cupboard instead of using the corner.”

“Would it have worked?” she asked hopefully.

“No, but it would have been easier for me to clean up.”

“I’m cleaning it up,” she said, to his patent bewilderment. “Where’s your vacuum?”

“Later,” he said. He opened the fridge door and retrieved the large cling-wrapped steel bowl they’d put in half an hour ago. “I anticipate more mess.”

While the oven preheated, they set to work dropping the balls of chilled cookie dough on the tray in rows. They’d make two batches so there would be enough for all three of them and Rebecca’s parents.

“Hey. Philip,” Rebecca said, taking a fresh baking sheet from the box. “Let’s make cookies for Contessa.”

“She can have a few when she gets back. I texted her that we were here.”

“No, I mean a cookie of Contessa,” she said. “For Contessa.”

“How do you propose we do that? I left my suspender-shaped cookie cutter in my dorm.”
“The miracle of hands.” She wiggled her floured ones at him. “Pottery fingers! We can each make one. She’ll love them.”

“All right.” With a spoon, Philip started scraping out lumps of dough without chocolate chunks in them. That was a good call—the chunks would tarnish the portraits. “I do not believe this will turn out the way you imagine it will. But bonitatem doce me.”

Sculpting cookie dough into the shape of a Contessa was more difficult than it seemed. Her limbs were either noodles that kept getting detached from her hips, or enormous lumpy sausages protruding from her midriff. There was also the matter of her suit—Rebecca blamed the lack of a suspender-shaped cookie cutter.

She ended up having to copy Philip and only make a Contessa’s head, but in her expert opinion, hers was more inventive.

“There,” he said, shutting the oven door again and flipping the mitt onto the counter. “Now when she gets back, she’ll have something everyone aspires to consume in their lifetime. Their own disfigured visage, times two.”

“I got frosting for a reason,” Rebecca said. “If they look too bad, we can just, you know… fix them.”

“She’ll be pleased to see that too. All her imperfections frosting-shopped out.”

“If my flaws were made of buttercream, I’d eat them.”

They started tidying up. Philip gathered up the ingredients, while Rebecca wiped down the counters with a damp cloth.

“What was her profession?” he asked out of nowhere.

“Whose?”

“Mrs. Warren’s.”

She wanted to regale him with the plot, but thought better of it. Instead she took out a pen and wrote the two words on the back of the supermarket receipt. She slid it across the counter, face-down, reenacting how Vivie Warren had revealed the secret in the play.

He read them, his eyebrows lifting in exaggerated surprise. “How scandalous.”

“It really was,” Rebecca agreed.

Neither of them spoke for a while. Philip was kind enough to bag the ingredients for her to take home.

Rebecca deliberated over whether or not to share with him what had been weighing on her mind the past few days. It was easier for her to picture herself confiding in him, even if he didn’t get it, because he wasn’t so familiar. She had no expectations of him, and so she wouldn’t be disappointed or embarrassed by his reaction.

“Did Contessa tell you why I wanted to bake today?” she asked, casual and upbeat, revealing nothing.

“As you might recall, she dropped this on me without warning.”

Her pretense at nonchalance disintegrated. “Oh. Sorry about that. I thought she’d told you, and you
—"You didn't protest. She shifted her weight. “I would’ve rescheduled.”

“But you didn’t,” he said matter-of-factly. “Why did you want to bake today?”

“I mean, tomorrow would've worked too, but Contessa and I just agreed on today. I don't know what her schedule's like. The truth is… I'm nervous about Friday.”

“I understand.”

Rebecca looked at him, stunned. “You do?”

“It is Family Weekend, isn't it?”

“Well, yeah, but why would I be nervous about that?” she asked. “My parents are coming. We’re going to have a picnic.”

He said nothing.

“They’re taking me to the doctor after. That's what I'm nervous about. Like, stupidly, irrationally nervous. It's just a routine checkup. I go every six months. It’s just a routine checkup,” she repeated. “But they might find something, you know? Something they missed last time. Like a mole. Or a malignant tumour. Can I get two-more cookies? Ha ha ha!”

His eyes bored into her, and she fiddled with a strand of her hair.

“Or two-more T-cells than the norm!” She laughed more uproariously. “Ha ha ha!”

“You really should have double majored in duplicity.”

“I didn’t tell Contessa the details,” she confessed, sobering. “I mean, I told her I’d be giving my parents the cookies, but not why. I don’t want her to think I’m scared of the doctor. It’s pretty stupid, don’t you think?”

“I think,” Philip said, “Contessa would understand more than you think.”

Rebecca shook her head and laughed again, uncertainly. “It’s stupid.”

“At the very least, you should tell her you’re the one eating the wafers.”

“I thought she knew. She never said anything.”

“She has to me. She once compared the disappearance of her favourite kind of biscuit to Zerzetzung because she assumed it was part of a sustained enemy campaign to destabilise her mental health,” Philip said. “I swiftly assured her that this was impossible.”

***

“How are you and Philip?”

Contessa prepared her answer like the words were being dictated to her. She and Philip were doing well. They were in good shape. Both of their scholarships were secure.

Then Foster Mother smiled, and Contessa’s mind went blank.

Foster Mother did not give gratuitous smiles. She smiled for clients, to put them at ease. She smiled for public appearances, to meet social expectations of her as a woman in a male-dominated field. She
did not lavish wide-mouthed approval on her staff when a nod would suffice.

Contessa had never seen this particular smile from her before, but she could still isolate its components, compare it to other people’s expressions, and make an educated guess. A gentle upward spreading of the lips, an almost matronly glint in the eyes, just a modicum of discomfort—fondness. It was a fond smile.

Foster Mother had already asked Contessa about herself during the earlier small talk. This was essentially the same question, except it included concern for Philip’s welfare. The only explanation for this unaccounted-for fond smile was that she held Philip in greater regard than she did Contessa.

And why shouldn't she? He was competent. He was punctual. He was good at hitting things with a bat. He was reliable, and Contessa was hard-pressed to name any time he hadn’t been there for her when she needed him.

Contessa considered her response. She needed to recalibrate, switch focus.

*Philip is doing well.* Milquetoast and repetitive.

*A bit distracted lately.* She couldn’t throw him under the bus like that, however useful it might be in a later push for Jacob’s removal. She needed more details to create verisimilitude.

*I gave him a massage the other day.* No.

Foster Mother was looking at her. She was out of time.

“Philip is doing excellently,” Contessa said. “He was distracted but I massaged him.”

“Oh,” Foster Mother said, after a beat. The smile faltered, then regained its firmness. “I see. You’re close. Of course. I should have expected.”

Contessa nodded and relaxed her shoulders, attempting to make her reaction fit Foster Mother's expectations—whatever they were.

“I must admit I harboured misgivings about the two of you sharing an apartment, but they were unfounded.”

While Contessa's alias might have been on the lease, it was Philip’s apartment. She didn’t correct her, though.

“You’re adults now,” Foster Mother said, somewhat stilted. “Seventeen. Old enough to make your own decisions.”

They were eighteen, but again Contessa didn’t correct her. No one could be expected to remember these puerile anniversaries, much less ones that took place all the way in January. It wasn't as though Foster Mother never celebrated Contessa’s birthday or gave her presents.

Never mind that the gift money in their joint account hadn’t yet been wired to Contessa’s own account since she was legally allowed to open one, or that Contessa earned more than the cumulative ten-year sum in two weeks, or that Foster Mother hadn’t been able to attend the last birthday dinner and Contessa had eaten lobster bisque with her personal assistant over video conference call. Cassidy had put Foster Mother’s company portrait on the screen, and assured Contessa that minutes of the event would be taken and forwarded to her.

It was the thought that counted, after all, and Foster Mother’s thoughts were worth more than most.
Under the table, Contessa fiddled with the strap of her watch.

“Philip has proven himself to be a fitting companion. You’ve always worked well together. Just—” Foster Mother gestured vaguely with her fork. “—stay safe.”

“We take ample precaution during our missions,” Contessa said.

The briefest of pauses.

“I… see.” Foster Mother turned the fork over in her hand, suddenly captivated by patterns on the handle.

“We plan every operation with assiduous attention to detail and all the necessary equipment,” Contessa continued. “Allowing room for contingencies, of course.”

Foster Mother brushed a leaf of the plant with the fork.

“Where possible, we conduct thorough inspections of our target sites in advance.”

An expression that could only be described as agonised regret lurched across Foster Mother’s face before it was suppressed into a grimace and raised eyebrows.

Was she coming off as defensive? Or was Foster Mother seeing the holes in her performance, secretly thinking that they assumed too much risk?

“We also keep a team of highly qualified associates on standby in case we require more specialised methods of extraction. And we debrief when we finish—”

“Thank you, Contessa,” Foster Mother interrupted, her aspect ice-cold, and Contessa fell silent. “For reassuring me.”

As Foster Mother spoke, she prodded at the plant. One of the loose blossoms dropped into her water glass. She blinked down at it with bemusement, and used the fork to lift it out. Water soaked into the tablecloth.

Contessa’s overworked heart seized. She resisted the urge to grab the deficient plant and replace it with the one across the room; she couldn’t just get up from the table. She tapped the button to summon a server, but she knew they wouldn’t arrive before Foster Mother permanently associated her with this unmitigated catastrophe.

“The lab assistant position,” Contessa said, loath to be the one to bring it up but unable to see any other path to diversion.

Besides which, she had to know.

Foster Mother wiped her fork with the napkin. “What about it?”

“Are there any promising applicants?”

“Two or three fit the bill rather nicely. I’ve yet to confirm whether their goals align with ours, but the interviews should take care of that.”

The response vaulted out of her before she could think about it. “My goals align with our goals.”

Foster Mother made a small hum noise. “I did see your application. But when I asked you to help fill the position, I meant you should keep an eye out for potential candidates and direct them our way.
“Was I unclear?”

“I understood,” Contessa said, though she hadn’t. Her gut twisted. “I was only thinking that I might be a potential candidate.”

“No.”

There was no reservation in the dismissal. The air suddenly felt coiled and hot despite the air conditioning. “May I ask why?”

“You wouldn’t have enough time to excel in school and attend to your other duties.” Calmly, Foster Mother folded her napkin into a square and laid it over the fallen blossom.

“I’m getting A’s in all my classes,” Contessa said. She couldn’t help how defensive she sounded.

“So far,” Foster Mother said. “This is the first semester of your first year. The material is simple enough that straight A’s are to be expected. Frankly, I would be shocked if you achieved anything less. And very soon you’ll be participating in extracurriculars to bulk up your résumé, which will consume even more time and energy. I’d rather you not stretch yourself too thin and neglect your responsibilities as a result.”

This is the only extracurricular I want. “It won’t be an issue with proper time management.”

“There are only so many hours in a day.”

“I’ll draw up a schedule.”

“Contessa.” Foster Mother’s steady gaze flattened her like a physical touch. “I believe you’ll do much more for the organisation where you are now.”

Contessa spoke past the gathering tightness in her throat. “I understand.”

She did understand.

It was nice of Foster Mother to not sugarcoat it.

“Perhaps in the future we can discuss it, but for now you will concentrate on your education,” she said. “Be it... opera, or the biomedical sciences.”

It was also nice of her to not come right out and tell Contessa she was unqualified.

“Tell me how you will handle the insurance fraud investigator. You mentioned a carnival?”

My duties, Contessa thought. Where I am now.

So she continued down the highwire, hobbling her steps with information about key resources and agents and locations. Foster Mother made the odd comment, asked the odd question, and Contessa answered with all the composure that was expected of her.

The waiter arrived. He’d cleaned himself up, though no amount of face-washing and clothing changes could fully dispel the hollow-eyed despair and all-engulfing desire for escape that had perceptibly clamped their jaws around him.

“Why,” he said, not so much looking at them as swinging his body to face their direction.

Contessa didn’t have it in her to tell him off for tardiness when she herself was so flawed. There was
no need for an interrogation point either, because everyone knew ‘why’ was a question. She gave up on hunting down the last fragments of his self-esteem and just said, “Replace the water. Then replace the tablecloth and the plant. Bring a straightedge and a protractor to ensure they are exactly in the same position as before.”

Foster Mother’s eyebrows rose. “That won’t be necessary. It’s only a flower.”

“...of course. Yes. I was making a joke.” Contessa forced out several laughs to make a more convincing case. “I said all of that because it was incongruous with the situation at hand, and therefore amusing.”

Foster Mother stared at her blankly.

“Thank you for being audience to my joke,” Contessa told the waiter, quietly dying. “Absolutely nothing else is needed of you. Do not bring any rulers.”

The waiter gave a half-hearted bow and turned to leave.

Then the fringe of the too-long white tablecloth snagged the very tip of his dress shoe and he tumbled. His arms didn’t shoot out on reflex to break his fall, so he crashed heavily to the floor.

Contessa tried to restore her heart to its factory settings, or at least find one that was not murderous apoplexy or blind flailing panic.

Foster Mother cast the waiter’s prone body a glance, wearing the same expression she might upon encountering fresh roadkill.

“Good heavens,” she said, with a boredom bordering on apathy. “Are you all right?”

His shoulders heaved.

Foster Mother extended an elegantly shod foot and nudged him, eliciting an unintelligible moan from deep within his chest. Now she frowned like she had gotten animal viscera on her heel and it was wasting her time with aimless small talk. She addressed Contessa in an undertone. “Is he all right?”

Contessa stood from her seat. “I’ll take care of it.”

Foster Mother nodded her acknowledgement, and went back to inspecting her empty bowl for any rice or mushrooms that might remain.

“—wasn’t supposed to be this way,” the waiter said, to no one in particular. “I just wanted—”

Contessa hauled him to his feet, supporting him by the armpits, and slung him over her shoulders in a fireman’s carry. He didn’t resist. He was surprisingly heavy for such a compact man, but she kept her back ramrod straight as she carried him out the back exit and into the wide alleyway.

All throughout, he babbled. “My fault. All my fault.”

“Yes,” Contessa ground out. “Yes, it was.”

The waitress sat huddled in between two green dumpsters, bundled up in a tablecloth, with five lit cigarettes jammed into a customer service smile. When she saw Contessa and the waiter draped over her shoulders, she leapt up and made a break for the road.

Contessa’s eyes followed. Not so far from the escaping waitress, parked by the curb, was the black car that had transported Foster Mother. Cassidy was inside, even if Contessa couldn’t see her through
the tinted windows.

She'd have been the one to personally feed Contessa's application into the shredder.

Contessa waved away the tobacco smoke and set the waiter down on one of the dumpsters. Habit directed her fingers towards his vest, but upon undoing two buttons she remembered where she was. She didn't need a disguise. She went through the motions of opening the other dumpster and checking that there were bags to act as cushioning, before depositing the waiter inside for safekeeping.

She'd been incautious in her haste. Some of the blood streaming from his nose had managed to get on her sleeve. Even against the dark grey of her jacket, it was stark as ink.

Foster Mother always told her not to spill any blood. She'd tried, and it had spilt anyway.

She couldn't take her jacket off. Her hand went to her waist to unclip one of the suspenders.

No. The risk was too high.

She reopened the dumpster instead. She rooted around and found a bag bulging with what was likely bottles. The waiter inside shifted his legs to let her haul it out. Their eyes met—his wet and mournful, hers with a vibrating, pitless heat behind them. She saw her own helplessness reflected back at her.

She dropped the lid shut with a dull metallic clunk.

Plastic bottles shouldn't have been discarded alongside expired produce. A slash of her pocket knife opened up a hole in the bag. From the contents, she selected an Evian bottle with some cloudy water swirling around at the bottom. She uncapped the bottle and dribbled a little water on the stain, then scrubbed until it faded and her sleeve was damp and wrinkled and ruined.

She paced for a while in a numb fugue, rehearsing Unflappable Poise #3 and flicking her wrist occasionally to speed up evaporation. She transferred the bag of bottles to a recycling bin on the curb. Then she returned to the alley and slid to the ground next to the dumpster, letting her jacket grind against the coarse brick wall all the way down. She wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her face between them.

After exactly eight seconds, she rose and dusted herself off. There was still the rest of lunch to be had.

***

"It's the only way to do it," Rebecca insisted, thrusting her interlocked fingers in and out of the basin. "Tap first to wet the hands, soap, lather, then rinse."

"Why make two trips when you can just soap and rinse?"

"Because you waste time waiting for the suds to diffuse outward. Plus just having that dry blob of soap on your palm feels weird."

"That's why you lather while you rinse."

"Then the soap goes down the drain too fast!" she exclaimed. "Did you even learn the ten-step handwashing technique?"

"I did." Philip ran his soapy hands under the stream of water for a few seconds, then dried them off
with paper towels. "I also learnt the one-step guide to prioritising, and then I didn’t perform that step because it wasn’t a priority.”

“Health and sanitation should be the number one priority of today’s youths,” Rebecca said. She grasped at her throat, continuing in a rattling warble, “I can feel the salmonella swimming upstream. We’re all going to be taken by the typhoid, Philip!”

“Let’s hope.” He waved a hand over the tray of golden, chunk-studded cookies on the counter. “They’ve cooled. Have one.”

Rebecca needed no second invitation. She took one and bit into it, her teeth sinking easily into its forgiving centre. Hot melted chocolate scalded her tongue. She huffed and made a face at Philip.

“Satisfactory?”

“The best,” Rebecca said, muffled, and crammed the rest of the cookie into her mouth before starting on another. She savoured the smell wafting off it this time, then the crunch, the dusky-sweet pangs that bled from every bite.

Philip gingerly picked out a cookie for himself and examined it as if looking for a good place to start.

“This is different from the cookies my mom and I used to bake.” Crumbs fell from her mouth as she spoke. “We used chips, not chunks. And we never used dark chocolate. Dad’ll like it—he’s always talking about how milked-down commercial chocolate is. He needs that ninety percent cacao.”

“You know.” Philip chewed and swallowed, looking thoughtfully at the field of cookies on the tray. “This wasn’t such a bad idea, overall.”

“How could cookies be a bad idea?”

“The cookies are all right. I’ve had better,” he said, and nodded at her. “But I found the company rather enjoyable as well.”

“Aww! I had a fun time too.” She smiled, climbing a stool and plopping onto it. “For a while there, I thought you didn’t like me.”

“Take heart,” he said. “It’s rare for me to have opinions on people at all.”


The cookie he was holding crumbled, and he made to collect the bits before they could all fall down his front. “Jack?”

“I’ve been thinking about this.” She wagged the rest of her cookie. “I mean, you already know each other, and you hung out together at the mall. I foresee a great friendship between you two.”

“Friendship.”

“Yeah, he’s really nice.”

“He can be,” he said, distantly.

“He stopped by my dorm this weekend to trade book recs. You know he’s really into Austen?”

“I didn’t, no.”
“The last time someone really talked about books with me, I was sick and he was trying to get meds off me,” Rebecca said. David had some astonishing insights into the sci-fi genre, even if he did purloin her Percocet. “Jack didn’t even bring a baggie! We were kicking around the idea of starting a literature club. But then Contessa came in and...”

She trailed off to recollect. Contessa had stared at Jack like he’d just purchased the railroads. She’d knocked his top hat off, and had been about to do the same to his monocle when she saw Rebecca’s upset (also monocled) face.

Rebecca had been a little scared of her.

“And?” Philip said. He emptied the crumbs in his palm onto the table, watching Rebecca’s face with something approaching engagement.

“I don’t know exactly,” she admitted, adjusting an invisible lense. “She asked me to get us all snacks from the vending machine and when I came back, Jack was gone.”

Philip was quiet. His eyes flicked to the cabinets. “I could be friends with Jack,” he said, more to himself.

“Yeah,” Rebecca said. “Yeah! I know you might think you're not compatible, but chemistry doesn't always happen right away. I have this friend. She didn't like me at all freshman year of high school. Would you believe I used to be pretty obnoxious? I had a clique, sure. Do people still call them cliques or does that have bad connotations now because of all the high school movies? My circle of friends. Anyway, I had friends but I wasn't the best, socially. I sat next to her in science and she said I talked way too much.

“So we’re doing this practical. I’m like, waving the striker, getting ready to turn that sucker on. And she yanks it out of my hand! Except I’m still holding onto it, so there’s kind of a struggle and it falls on the table and knocks my burette on the floor. There’s glass everywhere, and I’m like, what the heck, Hana! Turns out someone from the previous class left the Bunsen burner at my bench on for some time and she saw that wavy gas stream coming out of it even though we hadn’t started yet. I didn’t have great eyesight, so I didn’t even realise. And then we both got docked points on the practical for breaking apparatus.”

“You’re saying I should attempt to... immolate Jack,” Philip said. “To earn his companionship.”

“Huh? No,” Rebecca said, puzzled. “She was really mad at me. I think she didn’t talk to me for a month.”

“Then?”

“Then she became friends with my best friend, so we ate lunch together most of the time. Now we’re all best friends forever.”

“Is she aware that you still set things on fire?”

“Yes,” she said, and hurried on. “Anyway, Jack likes to talk, and you’re a good listener. You’ll get along great, given time and propinquity.”

He glanced at his neglected cookie, but didn’t finish it. Apparently all this talk had stolen his appetite. “I’m not really the kind of person who makes friends easily. Or keeps them.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. You have Contessa,” Rebecca said. “And you have me.”
“Hm.”

“What do you look for in a friend?” she prompted, leaning forward on her elbows.

He didn’t respond straight away.

He regarded her, his eyes half-closed as usual, like the world bored him so much that he didn’t want it to occupy any more of his visual field. But he didn’t fidget or drift off as a bored person would. He only stared unblinkingly at her like he’d been raised by androids and had to learn facial cues from a mail-order handbook. She was transfixed and disconcerted in equal measure by the penetrative glacial blue of his irises.

Finally, he said, “Have you ever felt like you were missing something?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” he said. “The sense that you lack something essential to being a human being.”

She shrugged. “I think everyone feels like that sometimes.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew they were wrong—a glib and terrible statement to make to him so assuredly. The realisation must have coloured her face, but he only tilted his head at her.

“Do they?” he asked, a faint note of curiosity in his voice.

“Maybe not,” she hedged, and grabbed another cookie. “Not that specifically. I meant more like, feeling incomplete until they find their purpose in life.”

“It could be the same with me. I can’t say. It’s just something people have always told me. Peers.” He looked again at the half-eaten cookie in his hand. “Doctors. They say I don’t seem to them like a whole person, more an impression of one. And that’s consistent with my experience, so there has to be a kernel of truth there.”

“You seem like a whole person to me,” Rebecca said, frowning at the thought of a doctor telling him such a thing. “For what it’s worth.”

“Unimportant.”

She smiled. “Well, you’re welcome.”

“Unimportant to what I’m getting at,” he said. “Imagine living like this and knowing only this for the longest time. And then one day you meet someone who understands what it’s like, someone who can look into you and not look away. They become the world you live in.”

“Huh.”

He dusted some crumbs to one side of the tabletop. “It’s not static. You become moulded to each other, complementary. Even if you don’t think the same thoughts, you find yourself able to contain twice as many. If they left, you’d be the half of a person you were before, but different. Unrecognisable even to yourself.”

“Do you like them?” Rebecca asked, cutting to the heart.

He had the grace not to play coy with the definitions of ‘like’, but his face still slid into its inscrutable
mask. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“What you think doesn’t matter,” he said. “What you feel doesn’t matter. Because you’re not going to do anything about it.”

“Why not?”

“You’re going to feel that way until you don’t. They’re the one who still has a choice.” He opened the fridge. “Milk? Or rice horchata?”

“Milk,” Rebecca said. “Thanks.”

Philip went about pouring her a glass.

“They might want you back. Don’t you think the risk might be worth it?”

“It’s not,” he said.

It wasn’t the judgement that surprised her, but that it was levelled with such certainty. Rebecca crossed her legs. “So what do you do?”

“You content yourself with being there for them when they need it, as they are for you.” He passed her the glass of milk. “And eventually, that becomes enough.”

Rebecca dipped her cookie into the milk and chewed on the cold crumbly end, mired in thought. She didn’t know what he’d seen in her that made him tell her this, and that unnerved her as much as his stare did.

“You’re talking about waiting for the right moment,” she said.

People urged her to do that all the time, and she listened. A percentage of the time.

He shook his head. “Waiting means you believe there is a chance where there is none. What I mean is pushing all of that aside. You don’t nourish the part of you that wants them in the capacity you can’t have. Not with idle fantasies, not with hope. Society places such a premium on consummation, as if we have no choice but to be held hostage by our desires.” He shrugged, and brought his own glass to his lips. “As I said before. Priorities.”

“I’ve never had… I’ve never known anyone like that. The other half of me.”

“No?” He smiled a little. “Lucky.”

Rebecca felt frustration ripple through her. He hadn’t answered her initial question, or maybe he had in a roundabout way. But his answer only meant that he wanted this one specific friend he already had. It wasn’t a type. She rocked forward on her stool and tried again, “What do you—”

The sound of shoes being shuffled off, followed by the click of the door being unlocked. A moment later, it swung open.

Contessa!

“Contessa!” Rebecca put her glass down and jumped up. She rushed to Contessa as she stepped into the room, grabbing her hands and spinning her around the kitchen. “How was it!”
Contessa spun without protest, only steering them both away from sharp edges. She didn’t avoid looking at Rebecca, but it was like her eyes had picked one spot—Rebecca’s nose—to settle on for convenience’s sake. “Good.”

“Are you sure?” She slowed down to scan Contessa’s face. “You sound kind of tired.”

“I’m doing well. So is Philip.”

Across the room, Philip frowned.

Rebecca noticed a reddish smear on the cuff on her left shirt sleeve. “Is that blood? Are you hurt?”

Contessa looked down at it. Her eyes narrowed. She hadn’t noticed it, then.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Like heck,” Rebecca said. “You’re bleeding! Philip, do you have a bandaid?”

Before he answered, Contessa pried her hands free of Rebecca’s and grasped her wrists, halting her mid-spin.

“Rebecca,” Contessa said, her eyes hard and serious. “I said I was fine. I don’t need anything from anyone.”

Her tone was an electric hum at the base of Rebecca’s spine. “Okay,” she said, not knowing what else to say. “Sorry. Okay.”

Contessa released her.

“The cookies should cheer you up,” Rebecca said, having instantaneously thought of what else to say. “I hope you don’t mind, but the secret ingredient is E. coli.”

Contessa exchanged a glance with Philip, who shook his head.

“Because Philip doesn’t know how to wash his hands,” Rebecca said, annoyed that her punchline had been preempted. “Where’d you put the Contessa cookies?”

He gestured at the plate on the bar counter.

Rebecca snatched it and held it up to Contessa’s nose. “Here. Look at this. Look at this basic biscuit, zero stars, would not bake again. What is this, amateur hour?”

She presented the golden-brown one Philip had produced. He had modelled the dough meticulously before putting it into the oven, accounting for expansion and the other vagaries of baking. It had actually turned out the right shape, so he hadn’t had to chip off any of the edges. He’d applied minimal frosting for the features, only using very fine lines and scrupulous stippling to give the cookie a solemn expression.

“And here we have this gourmet good. So intricately carved, you could call it top-notch. Finally, some good flipping food!”

She pointed out the other cookie. It had come out amorphous, and blackened on one corner. But she’d chiselled at it to approximate a humanoid head wearing a hat, then squirted out the details in vanilla cream. Below a pair of eyes squeezed shut in joy, a big sloppy smile licked across the
cookie’s face.

“We agreed not to give her that one,” Philip said.

“I have no memory of such an agreement.” Rebecca handed the plate off to Contessa. “And you have no proof, so there.”

He did in fact have proof in writing, but Rebecca had used the contract to blot the cookies.

Contessa clutched the plate with both hands. “What are these?”

“Cookies!” Rebecca said.

“Why are they different from the others?”

“They’re you,” Philip said. “One of them is, at least.”

Rebecca waited for her to eat either of them, to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt who was the better pastry chef. But Contessa only stared at the two cookies with an intensity that could have baked them all over again.

Maybe she just wasn’t hungry. After a minute of silent staring, she dropped the cookie platter on the table, turned her back on Philip and Rebecca, and went upstairs without even trying one.

Chapter End Notes

All my love and thanks to maroon_sweater for her support, betaing and idea-bouncing. Thank you also to Harbin for some advice and inspiration.

Sorry for the wait; school has been burning me out and I've been finding it hard to write. Also I feel kinda guilty about posting a zillion words of fluff after a long period of nothing, but then again anyone still reading this is probably not turned off by that.

Thank you for sticking around! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed!
Philip awoke in the dead of night to someone straddling his hips.

He blinked hard, chasing the fog from his mind. It didn’t help; he couldn't see much. Sleep paralysis? Or Jacob?

The spectre kneaded at his pectorals with its palms. “Pip.”

Jacob never called him that, except to annoy—

“Contessa? What?” She was supposed to have gone back to her dorm hours ago.

“Pip,” Contessa said again, less urgently now that his eyes had found her face. “Why was the Fairness Doctrine established?”

He tried to sit up to grab his glasses off the bedside table, and failed. “You woke me up to ask that?”

“Why was it established?” she repeated, plucking them up and handing them to him.

He affixed them. “The notes are on the server. Wikipedia is on the Internet.”

“I—” She glanced away. “I don’t understand them. I learn kinesthetically. But there aren’t any suitable broadcasting stations nearby, so auditory will have to do.”

“The lecture recordings are also on the server.”

“Why would I listen to the recordings if I didn't listen to the original lecture?” she asked.

“So you can listen to them at twice the speed? And discover that the course outline is outdated and the Fairness Doctrine is only being tested next week? Why are you studying Civics at—” He glanced at the clock. “—three in the morning. The quiz is on Friday. As it always is.”

“It is also thirty percent of our grade.”

“Collectively they’re thirty percent of our grade.” Philip tipped his head back into the pillow. “Go to bed.”

“I need an A,” she said.

“Even if you don’t show up to this one, you can still get an A.”

“You could say that about any of the quizzes. But if I didn't show up to any of them, I would get a
“I didn’t say…” He sighed.

She waited.

“I’ve looked at the past-year questions in the database. You could get by just memorising those. They don’t even bother to reshuffle the choices.”

He saw her face. Too much like studying, he supposed.

He changed tack. “One or two of the options will be obvious throwaways. The professor will generally phrase the correct answer in the passive voice, and use numerals whenever numbers occur. If a number is written out, it’s not the answer. If a subject without an explicit gender is referred to by a pronoun other than the singular they, it’s not the answer. If one of the options is ‘all of the above’ and you’re not sure, it’s almost certainly the answer.”

She digested this information. “And the section where they ask us to match political parties to their affiliations?”

“I converted particularly onerous lists of facts to ternary and memorised the integers the strings represent. I’ll explain the system later,” he said, his eyes drifting shut.

“You could have told me all of this earlier.”

“I thought you had it figured out already. You get full marks on every test, like I do.” He opened his eyes. “Wait, you haven’t actually been wasting your time—”

She started kneading his shoulders more feverishly.

The picture resolved. This wasn't about Civics at all. It was about getting something else she needed. She’d done this once a month ago, extracting cuddles from him at ten at night in an agitated state. When Contessa took comfort in the heat and solidity of his body, she took it—pinned him down like an insect to a corkboard without having the decency to kill it first.

His train of thought derailed when her thighs clamped around his and the already concerning amount of pressure on his lower half increased.

“Contessa,” he said, strained, “Could you possibly not s-sit there?”

She looked down at where their bodies met, frowned, and looked up again. “Where should I sit?”

“Anywhere else.”

She acquiesced in a manner of speaking, shifting further up his abdomen till she was almost on his chest. “Rebecca informed me the cooking went well.”

His voice came out even more strangled. “It—it did.”

She slid back to his hips to accommodate his breathing again, with an expression that said, \textit{See, didn’t this make more sense?}

He found himself in no position to argue. As she got herself situated, he focused on the ceiling and tried not to let a grunt escape.

“How do you find her?” she asked, oblivious to his growing discomfort. “Rebecca.”
“She’s pleasant. Easy to be around.” He exhaled tightly and glanced at one of the hands tenderising his anterior deltoids. “An unusual experience, all told. How did the meeting with Foster Mother go?”

Contessa opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“So red light on the carnival.”

“No,” she said. “She approved it. We have until Sunday.”

“Later today, then,” he said, hoping that if they had work to do soon, she’d let him sleep. “We both have some time after four. Get it out of the way.”

She looked like she was about to disagree, but at the last moment didn’t. She went still and silent for a moment, mulling something over.

“I had an idea,” she said finally. “I should move in with you.”

The fall from his apartment window was unlikely to be fatal. He’d have to sneak the revolver from the toilet cistern and go out back.

“You’re aware that I spend most weekdays in my dorm,” he said.

“Even your dorm bed is large enough for the both of us. It would be like high school, Pip.”

As if to prove it, she settled next to him and rolled him onto his side. The bed sheets barely rustled as she closed ranks with his back and wrapped an arm around his waist, assuming big spoon in three seconds flat.

After another second of thought, she slipped her leg over his.

“I highly doubt Jack would be amenable to that arrangement,” Philip said, keeping very still despite his body having turned into a furnace. “Neither am I.”

“Why not?”

‘Because then I would have to kill myself, and I’m reserving that for when my family finds me’ didn’t seem like a wise thing to say when she already had an arm around him. “Where is this coming from?” he asked instead.

“I do not know what you mean.”

He felt something warm nudge at the crook between his neck and shoulder, bidding a line of goosebumps to rise along his nape.

Her nose. Her lips.

He fought back a shudder. “Contessa,” he said, more sternly.

“Fzz… break… ing… fzz… up…” She mumbled into his skin.

He rolled his eyes, even though she wouldn’t be able to see. “You can’t fake static in a face-to-face conversation, Contessa. Just tell me what the matter is.”

No response.

“If it’s not important enough for you to explain, it’s not worth moving in with me for.”
Contessa’s arm constricted around his ribs.

“Do you remember,” he said, undeterred, “the time your pants slipped, and Foster Mother saw the waistband of y—”

A hand clasped his mouth and turned his head up to the ceiling.

Foster Mother had to have bought her underwear at some point in her childhood. He didn’t know what there was to be embarrassed about.

Her hand eventually loosened and fell away from his mouth, and he took that to mean she was going to ask a question. He didn’t expect the one she did.

“Pip, do you ever wonder why Foster Mother didn’t attend our graduation?”

“No. She was in New Jersey,” he said. “She didn’t come to convocation either. She’s—”

“A busy woman.” Her knuckles traced his breastbone. “I know.”

He tried to ignore the warmth radiating from her touch. “She gave you a watch.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a nice watch.”

“I ordered it, Pip. Of course I know it's a nice watch.”

“You—” He trailed off. “Oh.”

“She told me to purchase something nice for myself,” Contessa said. “And she gave me the money to do it. It's the same thing.”

“All right.”

“It is. Stop pitying me.”

“I'm not,” he said honestly. “I just wish you'd told me it mattered.”

“It doesn’t.” She sounded angry, like she couldn't stand the thought of him believing that anything mattered to her at all. “Why? What would you have even done?”

He had to ponder this. Assuming she told him at the graduation ceremony, he could arrange for an express delivery via something appropriately exotic. A hot-air balloon. But what package? Contessa had likely chosen a watch for herself because it was a practical status symbol and could be worn as a reminder to herself that Foster Mother appreciated her services enough to pay for a gift. It wasn't perfect for her, though. Bags, jewellery and other apparel were all cliché and suspicious. She wasn't the type to browse catalogues or magazines, but he could probably find out what she really wanted and expected from Foster Mother in a roundabout way through careful questioning by proxies. It would be hard but not impossible. What about after receiving the gift? She’d thank Foster Mother, but through impersonal means that would only see a generated response from Cassidy. If that wasn't the case, he’d intercept—

“Elaborate scheme,” Contessa broke in flatly.

“No,” he said, after a delay. “Not that elaborate.”
“Don't play this game with me.” She buried her face into his shoulder, and he had to guess her next few muffled words. “You don't know how.”

Neither of them had any more to say to each other—a discomfiting but increasingly common occurrence.

Minutes passed. He stared ahead at the wall, feeling her drift off. Her breathing slowed. It never fell into the same rhythm as his, even as she moulded herself against his back.

Things were changing. She was changing. She was behaving more and more erratically—becoming sentimental, wanting contact and reassurance for reasons she refused to apprise him of.

If she was changing, what did that mean for him?

He could have attempted to shove her off, sent her to the couch. But he didn’t feel angry or upset or any other emotional call to action. He didn’t really feel anything but resignation, boiling up and settling like slag in the pit of his stomach, a molten bezoar of libido and tired fear that he knew would remain there until he left, or removed it by force.

And, of course, there was the massive erection. His body always felt the need to dignify these fleeting urges with physiological responses, as though there was anything in him worth that effort.

He disentangled himself from her and stepped out of bed. She stirred and grumbled a little, but he wedged his pillow between her arms, and her fitful tossing subsided. He folded the duvet on his side over her lower body.

Cast in these softer charcoal shades, crumpled in on herself, she looked almost vulnerable. Less the ruthless professional, and more the reticent but strong-willed little girl who would follow him around at recess, and had called him Philippe until he’d proposed an abbreviation she could pronounce.

It was a trap, whether she’d set it unconsciously or not, whether he accepted it or not. He would always define himself in relation to her. He would always be this alone.

But Philip didn’t dwell on what ifs or what could have been. He didn't have the imagination for it.

Too awake to stay still, he left the bedroom and entered the muggy darkness of the living room. A gust of air blew in through the open window, carrying with it the stale ash scent of nighttime smog. She’d climbed up, then, instead of using her key. He closed the window and latched it.

He padded over to the kitchen counter. A thin hardcover book had been left there. When his eyes adjusted, he saw the outline of an orchid bouquet on the cover. *Floral Arrangement for Dummies.*

Rebecca had probably left it behind. Contessa would remember to bring it back to her when she saw it in the morning.

No time to fret over it. There was work to be done, plans to finalise. He had a trapper keeper in his desk filled with the relevant details of tomorrow’s mission. He stood at the counter, waiting for his feet to move him to where he needed to be.

They didn’t move.

He still hadn’t turned on a single light.

His phone was across the room, plugged into a socket. He went to get that and opened up a messaging app. His thumb hovered over his list of ongoing conversations. There were two.
He bit the bullet.

> **Philip**: Are you awake?

Being a proponent of polyphasic sleep, Jacob slept at odd hours. That didn’t mean he would respond. It especially didn’t mean he would respond to Philip.

He waited. And waited. He spent ten minutes squinting at a glowing screen, wondering why he was even bothering.

Then:

> **Jack**: someone better be dying

> **Jack**: and it better be original

> **Jack**: send pics at a decent hour

> **Jack**: also send nudes

Philip’s thumb did not so much as navigate to the camera icon. It was too dark, and anyway Jacob possessed enough pictures of him unclothed in spinally unfriendly positions that he shouldn’t get bored anytime soon. The nuclear apocalypse could wipe out the fruits of civilisation and there would still be surviving photographs of Philip Jameson in the buff.

He had to admit that this prospect worried him somewhat but, all things considered, it wasn’t the worst outcome for humanity.

He shut his burning eyes. This had been a mistake. It would lead to the type of conversation he was ill-equipped to handle.

> **Jack**: well?

> **Philip**: Can we meet somewhere?

There was a long pause, but that was preordained. He pressed the button to turn off the screen—just as the ellipses popped up.

> **Jack**: the things I do for you

> **Jack**: obelisk in 10

All that was left was to go where he was told.

***

The Obelisk wasn't an obelisk as much as a vaguely humanoid abstract sculpture standing on the lawn outside a set of small derelict buildings. Philip knew of its reputation as a site for everything from paper sales to drug deals, but for him and Jacob it served as a convenient landmark in a secluded area.

Over the years the sculpture’s mottled black marble had become scratched and dirty from repeated pigeon bombardment. The inscription on its base was a quote from one of the buildings’ laconic namesake, a professor emeritus of aerospace engineering.
As Philip waited for Jacob to arrive, he read it again.

“Please, no statue. I hate statue.” — Irvin Lim, PhD, BSc (Hons), 1989.

After about five minutes, Jacob finally sidled up, his hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans.

“What did she do now?” he asked without preamble.

Philip put his own hands in his pockets. “It isn’t always about her.”

“Yes it is,” Jacob said. “Count yourself lucky I’m not the jealous type.”

They ambled through scrubby patches of browning grass towards a nearby hill that Jacob insisted on climbing. The night sky sagged low on its gentle slope, the air as smothering as it had been inside Philip’s apartment. By the time they crested the hill, they were both sweating—from the humidity rather than exertion.

Jacob settled down on the grass and stretched out his legs.

Philip kicked aside a few clods of earth before joining him. He wasn’t looking forward to muddying his pants, but he knew they’d be soiled by the end of the night anyway.

The chirping of crickets threaded through the quiet.

“I want to know what she did,” Jacob said, gazing out at the grey line of buildings instead of Philip’s face. “You can’t keep forgiving her like this.”

“She’s my partner.”

“She’s your warden.” He rested his palm on the hollow of Philip’s thigh, rubbing idly.

Philip didn’t look at it. He was, however, acutely conscious of its proximity to the swelling inseam of his pants. “Let’s not do this tonight,” he said.

“Do what?” Jacob sounded amused, and slightly surprised.

“You. Prodding, looking for weak spots. Trying to see inside my head.”

Jacob chuckled. “Your problem,” he said, “is you don’t think there’s anything in there worth seeing.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“It’s holding you back.” He ran his hand down Philip’s thigh and up again. “Is this really the way you want to live the rest of your life? Good little accountant obeying orders, crunching numbers, day in and day out?”

This was another trap. The kind that revealed itself early and lowered your guard, making you believe you could spring it unscathed.

He didn’t know yet if he would spring it.

“I rather enjoy crunching numbers,” he said neutrally. “Chewing on them, even.”

He squeezed his legs together, and Jacob’s fingers took that as a cue to wander over the ridges of his crotch.
“You’re a kid, Pip,” Jacob said, deliberately using the nickname. “You may know what you enjoy, but you don’t know what you want.”

“We’re the same age.”

“I never claimed it didn’t apply to me. But I’m not the one who acts like I know exactly how the future pans out.”

Jacob rubbed him with the heel of his palm. Philip rocked into the contact, but Jacob moved his hand back, denying him the resistance.

“If you want something, all you have to do is ask.”

“Take…” Philip began, and inhaled sharply at a sudden application of pressure. “Take it out.”

True to his word, Jacob unzipped Philip’s fly and hefted his semi-hard member out through the slit in his boxers. A few more strokes brought it to full stiffness.

“Have you ever played The Sims?” Jacob asked, watching Philip’s feet abruptly cant away from each other. His eyebrows rose, sly, as he rubbed his thumb over the tip of Philip’s cock.

Philip hissed out a breath, straining against his hand. “SimCity.”

“Classic,” Jacob said. “But also disgusting.”

“More of a—a—Universalis fan. I’ve played a bit of—of Sims 3.”

“Well, the way Contessa acts reminds me of how you’re supposed to play it,” Jacob said.

“Explain?”

“Maybe she thinks you’re pissed at her, or she’s feeling guilty about something she did. She buys you a pair of socks to earn some goodwill. Get that friendship bar back on track. Then she goes on her merry way, continues doing what she was doing until she inevitably breaks everything again and has to slap on a bandaid. She doesn’t care enough to even try to understand what happened.”

He stopped stroking, like the repetitive gesture now bored him. His hand drifted back to his own knee.

It would be a stretch to say that Philip had no objections to this unsanctioned absence of hand on his dick, but it did make it easier to think. He sat up, breathing evenly to distract himself from his throbbing groin.

“I don’t think the analogy is all that necessary,” he said, adjusting his shirt where it had bunched up around his waist, “considering that the gameplay mechanics are based on simplified facsimiles of real life relationships.”

“That’s my point. She gamifies interactions. Your relationship is a series of transactions to her.”

Philip shrugged and looked off towards the night sky. “Relationships are by nature transactional.”

“You really haven’t changed.”

He turned his head, making sure to cast a pointed glance at Jacob’s criminally stationary hand. “What do you mean?
“It’s just so you.” Jacob grinned. “All the champagne sophistry, everything you dream up to explain to yourself why you feel so empty.”

How did he know about that?

Philip hid the flare of disconcertion under a bushel of annoyance. He was about to remark how rich it was that Jacob was accusing him of sophistry, when the other boy lowered his mouth to the head of his cock and sucked.

A shot of liquid pleasure jolted through him. His hips bucked to push more of himself into Jacob’s mouth.

Anticipating the motion, Jacob drew up and back, but didn’t fully capitulate. His soft lips continued to caress the head in tantalising circles.

“But feeling and being…” Jacob licked, coaxing a ragged groan from Philip. “…are different. I’ve been trying to show you things about yourself, Philip, ever since we met. Things about people like you and me.”

“Like… your newfound love… for *Pride and Prejudice*? Nng…” Philip threw his head back in response to a particularly skilful little tongue manoeuvre, elbows slipping on the grass.

“Silly,” Jacob said. “I much preferred *Sense and Sensibility*. But as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted: I understand you, Philip, even if she doesn’t. Even if you don’t.”

“And just what do you understand about me?”

“You pride yourself on being able to see the workings of the world, the strings on which everyone dangles.” Jacob’s lips curled into a lopsided smile, and he swept an arm in front of him. “So many people think this makes them *better than*, puts them above the ignorant masses. Even more aspire to be puppeteers. But they forget they’re still part of the play. *I* never forget, and you shouldn’t either.”

Philip resisted shaking his head at Jacob’s typical lapse into grandiose metaphor. He didn’t agree, anyway, that that was how he was. “How is this related to what you were saying about Contessa?”

“It wasn’t. This was a tangent. Pay attention,” Jacob said, his tone mock-chiding. It turned serious: “I think you should spend some time away from her.”

“Is that an ultimatum?” Philip asked.

In response, Jacob deepthroated him.

He couldn’t really fit all of Philip without damming his oesophagus, but he didn’t need to. His technique made up for it.

Just as Philip felt he might come on the spot, Jacob withdrew.

“I told you,” Jacob said, as Philip writhed beneath him. He wore that bewitching cavalier smirk. “I’m not the jealous type.”

Philip took a moment to relearn how to breathe normally. “Forgive me if I mistake this for some kind of ploy to evict her from my life.”

“Not saying you should drop her in a pool and sell the ladder. But you need distance. You’re too close to be able to see what her issues are...”
He punctuated his statement with a long lick along the underside of Philip’s shaft, from base to head, so excruciatingly slow he could feel each individual taste bud as it passed.

Philip stifled a groan.

Jacob raised his head, keeping a hand wrapped around Philip’s cock. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?” he asked breathlessly.

“Holding back.” Jacob’s grip tightened.

“I’m n—nngh.”

“I don’t expect weeping and gnashing of teeth, but I will hear you,” Jacob said, squeezing, stroking. His hand suddenly stilled. “Or I’ll stop. Take your pick.”

What happened to why are you talking, Philip? What happened to Philip, I really don’t care? Philip wasn’t sure what he wanted to hear. He could try moaning. But if he wasn’t convincing enough, Jacob might get irritated and refuse to continue. He had to sound needy, yet masculine.

“Unhhhhhh,” he essayed, staring deeply into Jacob’s eyes. He drew from his chest till his voice approached a baritone rumble. “Hnnnngh. Hghhhhhh, more. Unhhhhhh.”

Jacob frowned. His hand didn’t move. “The hell was that? Are you reenacting Jurassic Park?”

“No,” Philip said, flushing. “Sorry.”

“Don’t you think I’m being very kind to you, Philip? I’m not telling you to beg. I don’t want you to plead for me to touch your aching cock.” Jacob’s expression shifted to one of compassion. “All I want is for you to ask. For anything. I may not be able to do it...”

A long, firm glide up and down his slick length. Philip released a shuddering gasp he didn’t have to fake.

“But you can ask.”

“Keep going.” He needed Jacob’s mouth. “Keep... sucking. Please.”

“Are you sure? You don’t sound sure.”

“Please, Jack.” He inclined his head, looking for a way to persuade him, and noticed the bulge in Jacob’s own jeans. He envisioned himself moving for it, taking the initiative, being rewarded.

But would he be rewarded? Jacob hated being at the mercy of others, hated having himself taken in someone else’s crude fist and wielded like a peppermill. The only person allowed to conquer him was himself. When Philip was permitted to use his mouth, he was usually restrained by rope or Jacob’s hand.

“Please,” he repeated, more desperately.

Jacob relented, impatient himself. He rolled his tongue back and forth over the head of Philip’s dick while massaging the sides with experienced fingers. Philip sighed and groaned as he felt heat pool in his groin.

Jacob’s hair fell over his forehead, and Philip reached out to brush the strands away.
Jacob raised his head, sliding his lips free of Philip’s cock. “Don’t touch me.”

Philip closed his hand into a fist and let it fall into the grass. In the moment, lost in the haze of sensation, he’d forgotten that rule.

He thought with some trepidation that he might be punished for it, but then Jacob leaned over to graze Philip’s jaw with the curve of his palm.

“My good little boy,” Jacob said.

At the words, Philip tensed.

Gabe used to say that. It would come after a winning speech.

Usually.

Jacob’s face betrayed neither satisfaction nor remorse. If anything, it took on a cold grim cast. He searched Philip’s expression, both seeking a specific reaction and trying to figure out what was there.

Philip held his breath.

Apparently not finding what he wanted, Jacob bowed again to resume his ministrations.

He tugged Philip’s pants further down. His fingers dug into the sides of his ass, groping, pinching in a painful, familiar way, and it was then that Philip began to understand that this was a reminder gift-wrapped and tagged for him: *There are worse things that could be happening to you. Count yourself lucky.*

He had to wonder if Jacob found this healing. Jacob must have heard those words more often than anyone on the team.

Jacob’s movements became rough and hard enough to leave bruises. His thumbs bit into flesh. He’d squeeze Philip’s balls, ignoring his grunts. All the while he lapped and nipped and sucked, cheeks hollowing, tongue coursing over sensitive skin.

In spite of or because of the pain, Philip found himself skidding closer and closer to climax. His fingers twisted clumps of grass.

Jacob stopped moments before he could tumble over the edge.

“What do you want?” Jacob asked softly. “Tell me.”

Philip blinked at him. What scorched through his mind was how much he wanted to be touched—but how he hated being touched, and what he really wanted was to be resisted, all the way. He wanted to be contoured by someone who knew already what they were. And that couldn't be Contessa, but if not her, then who?

“I want to come,” he said.

Jacob cupped his ear. “Didn’t catch that.”

“I want to come, Jack, please.”

With both hands, Jacob yanked the waistband of Philip’s pants down to his knees. He shifted so his weight rested on Philip’s thighs. Jacob’s mouth, so wet and aggressive and hungry, worked upwards from the base of his cock before enveloping it in tight velvet heat.
“Jack—” Philip gasped, arching his back. “Jack, fuck, please—”

Jacob sucked.

Philip came with a jerk, his cock twitching and spurting into Jacob’s mouth. The sight of his come dribbling down Jacob’s chin sent another wave of arousal surging through him, and he thrust his hips upwards until it passed.

Jacob prised his mouth off, coughing a little from the sheer brutality with which his throat been assaulted. He quickly abandoned Philip’s softening cock to loom over his face.

*Push me down,* Philip thought in a frantic rush. *Grind me into the dirt.*

Jack gripped Philip’s shoulder with one hand, hauling him upright, and held his jaw in place with the other. He crushed his mouth against Philip’s, forcing him to taste himself.

Jacob’s mouth was soft and hot, sticky, tinged with salt. Philip wrinkled his nose, but didn’t recoil. He closed his eyes and opened his own mouth wider, granting Jacob’s tongue the room to muscle in. His neck ached from having to sit at this angle with only his elbows for support, but he waited till Jacob had claimed every last corner of his mouth.

It was rare for Jacob to do this so readily without an audience. Philip had only been kissed by one other person in his life, and Jacob was aware of this—so much so that every kiss from him was designed to invite comparison. The artifice was there to kill Philip’s arousal, to make him understand that this was not meant to feel *good.* Had that been the intention, Jacob would have kissed him while he was still hard.

When Jacob finally peeled away, a glistening thread stretched between their lips before breaking.

Philip wiped his mouth, panting, trying not to dwell on the texture of his own come. Sweat trickled down his face and neck. His lower body was still churning with the aftershocks of his orgasm.

Jacob gazed at him like he knew this, his hooded eyes tender and heavy with something resembling but not quite desire. More solid than that—more secure. His voice was hoarse. “I’m not her. You get that, right?”

*Ownership.* “Yes.”

“I don’t pretend to be what you want,” Jacob said. “But I know I’m what you need. Say thank you.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Philip said.

Jacob smiled. He wiped his hand on Philip’s shirt, and pressed a warm, solitary kiss to his forehead. Then he stood and made his way back down the hill.

Philip didn’t follow. He sank into the grass.

Now that it was over, humiliation reared up in his chest and nested there, rising, falling, rising, falling in time with his heartbeats. The realisation of what else Jacob had been telling him earlier, with *those* words, burrowed into his brain.

*You will always feel this way. You will always want it.*

*You asked for it then, too, didn’t you?*

He couldn’t think about that. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t think about that, and he wouldn’t get up,
because if he did he would dry-heave his lungs out. Instead he would lie like this until the feeling seeped into the earth and steamed into the night and he was gradually purged of the immeasurable loathing he held for his body and all the needs that anchored it.

If he closed his eyes, he could return to the noiseless, nerveless dark inside. He could pretend that he was dreaming. That he hadn’t locked himself into the person he was and swallowed the key, that he hadn’t said yes and meant it every single time it mattered.

Around him, the black sky seemed to swirl and pulsate. The crickets’ clarion songs spiralled from hidden places. The breeze cooled his exposed skin, washed over the drying smears on his inner thighs.

He kept his eyes wide open.
Noncanon alternate timeline where Philip messaged Rebecca instead.

***

>Unknown Number: Hi, Rebecca. It's Philip.

>Rebecca: heyyyyyyyyy yo

>Rebecca: what's up in the truck

>Rebecca: speaking of trucks I was secretly looking at pics of my preschool bully to see if she was a loser now and you made me hit like on her new hybrid lmao hopefully she'll think it's ironic

>Rebecca: it's ok though she is a loser inside!!!!!

>Rebecca: or maybe she's turned over a new leaf and just started her degree in social work idk that's what her profile says. It's actually pretty inspiring

>Rebecca: you know, people always think social work is like, community service or something but it's not. Like why would you major in community service lol wtf imagine being graded on how much litter you picked up off the beach

>Rebecca: extra credit if it's made of metal

>Rebecca: did I scare you off? where'mst'd've did you go

>Rebecca: iphippppppppp

>Rebecca: hink honk

>Rebecca: :sob:

>Rebecca: do you know if contessa's coming back? she was doing homework and got kind of frustrated. She left saying she was going to enforce net neutrality WITH HER BARE HANDS

>Rebecca: idk what that means but she's been gone for hours and I'm getting worried

>Philip: She's with me.

>Rebecca: !!!!! ok good I thought I was gonna have to be pool noodle woman tonight and rescue her from the clutches of muggers and/or jehovah's witnesses

>Rebecca: there's a transformation ritual and everything

>Rebecca: what's up Philip why are you awake!
>Philip: Never mind. I'm sorry to have bothered you.

>Rebecca: whaaaaaaaaaat noo come back seriously what's up

2 missed voice calls at 04:12

>Rebecca: do you need someone to talk to?? sorry I'll shut up

1 missed voice call at 04:15
1 missed voice call at 04:16
1 missed voice call at 04:17

>Philip: I don't have anything to say.

>Rebecca: that's ok!

>Rebecca: I have some things to say

>Rebecca: I know we haven't spent much time together but I really liked hanging out today

>Rebecca: you're funny and smart and good at making cookies

>Rebecca: maybe don't read so much machiavelli though haha or at least keep in mind the political context

>Rebecca: it's sweet that you look out for Contessa. I know she gets moody and I'm glad she has a friend like you

>Rebecca: you said you felt strange and lonely sometimes. I'm sorry.

>Rebecca: it happens

>Rebecca: and I don't, well I didn't mean to be like, 'oh everyone feels the way you do sometimes, it's no big deal lol you're being melodramatic'

>Rebecca: sorry if I insinuated that earlier. I shouldn't have

>Rebecca: because you do matter, and you will always deserve better than what you have

>Rebecca: did you go to sleep?

>Rebecca: that's ok

>Rebecca: I hope you're ok

>Rebecca: I'll check on you in the morning set your alarm

>Rebecca: file your change of address, it's rebecca's-heart-ville from now on

>Rebecca: ok good night

*** *** ***
The rollercoaster was purely scaffolding, a gleaming, coiling assemblage of hot-rolled steel, like the mechanical skeleton of some prehistoric serpent whose spine smaller dinosaurs abused for their entertainment. It was by far the largest, most perilous amusement ride at the carnival. People could be seen riding the circuit all day long, making the agonising crawl up its mountainous peaks so they could hurtle into the valleys below.

Rebecca turned to her friends in a last-ditch attempt to persuade them. “Are you sure you don’t want to?”

“Of course I do,” Elliot said. He tapped his chest. “It’s just not good for the ticker. Supposed to be avoiding high-stress situations, like rollercoasters and paying for my girlfriend’s implants with my wife’s credit card. Hana’s tall enough to ride with that hat though, so…”

“I’m staying down here too, thanks,” Hana said, her ten-gallon hat firmly emplaced.

“But why?” Rebecca pouted. “Look at that monster, it goes upside-down!”

“Exactly. I’m not a fan of gravity rides. I’m always afraid something will break while I’m on them.”

Rebecca squinted up at the rollercoaster again, shading her eyes with a hand. As far as embellishment went, the ride was the architectural equivalent of a hit-and-run—hastily erected, without a facade to conceal the narrow steel supports, little decoration beyond a couple of flyers taped to the sides. Bracing the trestle-style base were fat yellowing sandbags, some leaking sand, some turgid enough to burst like grapes beneath the blazing sun.

“That’s just me being paranoid,” Hana added quickly. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“What if it’s not fine?” Rebecca entwined her thumbs and flapped her hands in imitation of a butterfly’s wings. “Worse, what if it was supposed to be not fine but is? How will we prevent a Final Destination situation from unfolding if you guys cheat Death?”

“Well, are you getting a premonition?” Hana asked.

Rebecca paused to check, pointing at her temples and striving for future sight. “I don’t think so. But it could happen.”

“You just gotta watch extra closely for ill omens,” Elliot told her. “That was the problem in those movies. People were all like, doing acupuncture and getting pool drain rimjobs instead of paying attention to their surroundings.”

“Yeah, but to be fair, we get foreshadowing and metafictional information that the characters aren’t privy to,” Rebecca replied, getting animated. “Diegetic and non-diegetic audiovisual cues, like changes in light, colour, temperature…”

Elliot slid between Rebecca and a passerby to keep her from swatting their paper cone of cotton candy. Her hand bounced harmlessly off his shoulder instead.

“Chances are I won’t even notice the auguries of my imminent demise,” she said, “because there
won’t be cinematic close-ups of banana peels and malfunctioning hydraulics before it happens.”

“Maybe there are,” Hana said. “But they’re for someone else’s viewing.”

“They should cancel their subscription already,” Elliot said. “We’re knee-deep in seasonal humus, nobody’s with anybody, and all we do every episode is talk about irrelevant crap.”

The queue moved up.

“Hummus?” Hana asked, frowning.

“Not hummus, humus. Like in soil. I was playing off rot, but I didn’t want it to sound bad.”

“I don’t think that worked.”

“Rollercoaster,” Rebecca said intensely, and they moved forward as a group.

Instead of hard cash, the carnival used a prepaid credit system. They’d had to buy a card at the front booth, filled with the minimum amount and periodically top it up at a machine when they ran low on funds. Elliot handed their FunCard over to the lady manning the booth. He squeezed Rebecca’s hand. They’d hashed out where they would meet up later, but he and Hana hung around as Rebecca walked up to the railing.

When the last train finished up, the lady opened the gate to let a pack of dizzy, laughing customers out and usher the new ones in. Rebecca clambered into the second row, managing to scald her palms on the parts of the safety bar that weren’t mummified in duct tape. Nobody joined her; two young couples settled into the seats immediately in front of and behind her, while a big party of rowdy teenagers lay claim to the rows further back.

The linked cars lumbered steadily along for a few seconds till they reached the first, intimidatingly steep hill. As her car climbed, her fingers tightened around the safety bar and the belts of metal that looped over her shoulders like the straps of a backpack. The car felt far heavier and the tracks far more rickety when she was almost vertical. She couldn’t focus on scenery. She was too conscious of the machinery—the rough purchase of wheels on track, the bulk of the undercarriage beneath her as it hummed its age into her bones, the rubber mats that scuffed the floor when she moved her shoes.

Only at the crest of the hill was she able to drag her awareness to the view outside her car. Her heart skipped at the enormity of all she could see.

From this vantage Rebecca could see the track swooping above, below and ahead of her, and the billboard in the middle of the fairground blinking out the words *Sponsored by Life Insurance Mutual*. If she looked to her right, she could see the rust-mottled tangle of girders and support struts, and—

“Contessa?” Rebecca said. She raised her voice. “Contessa?”

The girl was standing on a distant beam, one that didn’t look particularly sturdy. She didn’t look particularly concerned. Even with the shadows of the latticework crisscrossing over her face, that stern countenance was unmistakable—as were those shoulders.

She stepped towards Rebecca’s car. The late afternoon light embraced her, clung to her lithe suited figure like a jealous lover. It traced her contours, the gentle slope of her waist to her hips, that stout curve of her hips to her thighs.

She glanced up and to the side, then made the snap decision to keep going.
Other people’s bodies were what they’d been born with and had grown into. Contessa moved like hers had been made for her. She was smoke in human form, slipping fluidly from one moment to the next. She danced from girder to girder, her fingers only just grazing bars for balance.

Rebecca was so entranced by the surrealness of the moment, she almost didn’t register Contessa jumping into the unoccupied seat next to her.

The train lurched. Rebecca’s impulse was to grab Contessa to keep her from somehow falling. She held back, getting out of the way as Contessa seized the safety bar behind her, hauled it over her head, and jammed it against her own waist.

“What are you doing?” Rebecca shouted.

The train dove, and her question was lost to the wind. It whipped past as the train careened over the track, completing several corkscrews in rapid succession. The opening credits of her life flashed before her eyes. Her mind didn’t quite make it to the first act twist before the train banked left, slithered up a low hump, zipped down to a level stretch of track, and finally, achingly stopped.

Contessa straightened her lapels.

“I was rescuing a baby bird,” she said. “That fell from its nest.”

She reached into her pocket for her phone, so calm, subjugating fear and vertigo to an inner steel that exploitative dinosaurs could only dream of. Rebecca’s own nerves hardened in the face of such sangfroid.

“That’s so sweet,” Rebecca cooed. “Do you have pictures?”

“No.”

“Who’re you texting?”

“Philip. I am entrusting the baby bird to his care.” Contessa finished typing and put her phone away. “He isn’t happy.”

“Why isn’t he up here too?”

“He’s afraid of heights.” She leaned forward, temporarily blocking Rebecca's view. “Part of why he’s not happy.”

“Still, a bird in October? What kind was it?”

Contessa paused. “A woodpecker.”

“Huh? But— yeeep!”

Air rushed into Rebecca's lungs like ballast as the train whooshed back into motion. Suddenly she was upside-down, and instead of coasting back down the loop, the train clanked to a stop at the apex.

The people around her screamed and whooped while she sat frozen and trembling, the safety bar in her white-knuckled grip. Her heartbeat became a solid wall of percussive force, a Saturday night bassline pounding in her chest. The vibrations echoed out from there, conducted through catgut strings in her arms down to the impossibly thin wires branching out inside her wrists and hands.

Her hair dangled, falling like the rest of her felt. Gravity coaxed her downward, whispering around the taut skin of her face—\textit{down down down}— as she confronted the inverted world.
Grinning, she slowly turned her head to meet Contessa’s eyes.

Contessa held down the crown of her fedora with one hand. Her dark hair poured from the brim, swaying around her face. Her normally pale cheeks glowed a fierce pink. So much of the severity that Rebecca had come to associate with her face had melted away.

She was staring at Rebecca’s hand, and not the one clutching the safety bar.

The one clutching Contessa’s arm.

“Sorry,” Rebecca said, not sorry at all.

Chapter 9: Through a Funhouse Mirror, Darkly

Beneath the brim of her gargantuan brown Stetson, Hana furrowed her brow. “Sorry?”

“It makes total sense,” Rebecca said. “Wait, no, better than that—it’s art.”

“Yeah, you’re not seeing the subtext, Hana,” Elliot said, bringing up the rear.

Oil vapour mingled with the sugary air as they passed another cluster of concession stands selling the usual deep-fried suspects and powdered regret in all its tempting forms: apple fritters, beer-battered mushrooms drenched in cheese, bacon cinnamon rolls and, because it was October, chicken-fried pumpkin hand pies with crispy bubbles swelling from the golden crust.

Right beside Rebecca, a vendor was serving up paper plates of banana funnel cake drizzled all over with glistening lines of chocolate and caramel. She lingered at the stall, making up her mind to sample one later.

She turned back to Hana. “I took a single bite. Now I am recontextualising this irrevocably altered sausage by placing it inside the trash can. It’s classic détournement.”

“I think you’re only saying this,” Hana said, “because you put too much mayo on your corndog and now you don’t want it.”

Rebecca raised her eyes to the heavens, spreading her arms as though yielding to crucifixion. “I didn’t know it was mayo!”

“How could you not know it was mayo?”

“I thought it was like, white cheese or something,” she said, miserably twirling the stick. “They should have had cheese. Why did they have mayo?”

“You need to eat your corndogs with ketchup and mustard like an American.” Hypocritically, Hana waved her own plain corn dog.

“Cheese is a pretty American condiment,” Elliot said. “Hey Han, can you even see anything with that on? Because I can’t.”

“I can see perfectly. It’s not the size of the hat, it’s the shape of my skull,” Hana said wearily.

“Is mayo American?” Rebecca asked, before they could veer into another argument over the size of Hana’s head vis-à-vis universal hat sizes.

“Eh. French.” Elliot shrugged. “Just throw it away, Becks. You don’t have to turn it into a performance art thing.”
“But I don’t want you guys to think I have no sense of civic responsibility.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Hana said.

“Thanks for the peer pressure! Hold up, I think I can get most of it off...”

They stopped walking so Rebecca could rapidly discover the futility of trying to squeegee mayo off deep-fried batter onto a waxpaper wrapper using nothing but said wrapper.

"New million-dollar IP,” Elliot said, raising a finger as she gave up and glumly dropped the stick into a trash can. “A single sauce that is all the condiments in one.”

"A recipe for mud, you mean,” Hana said. “There are so many condiments, not to mention the maple syrup problem.”

"Three condiments in one, then.”

“Any three you wish, so you can call it djinn mustard,” Rebecca added. She made a face at the sticky white goop smeared over her fingers. “This is so gross. And there’s so much of it! It’s like the time David accidentally ate sushi with cough syrup instead of soy sauce. He finished the whole bottle before he realised.”

“Must’ve had just as much trouble as you scraping it off,” Elliot said.

Hana gave her a tissue. “I still can’t believe you thought a corndog stand would have white cheese. That isn’t a thing.”

“That was just contextually most likely,” Rebecca said defensively. “I thought of other possibilities.”

“Like what?”

“Cream, custard, béchamel sauce, semen...”

“Ha,” Elliot said, “how did I know your mind would go to that from David? Fakeout cheese dispenser isn’t his M.O, though. See, what he does is he keeps a cooler of frozen sperm in his backpack and rolls around with a spray bottle spritzing women he senses are fertile.”

Hana abruptly decided that she did not want her corndog anymore and handed the stick off to Rebecca, who fell upon it with a passion.

Just as she stuffed her face, though, Rebecca spotted Contessa up ahead. She was with someone who looked like Philip from the back.

“First of all, what in pollination. We agreed he wasn’t a bee,” Hana said, tilting her hat up to give him a withering look. It promptly slid back down over her eyebrows. “Second of all, why are you more okay with eating that than m—”

In front of them, Philip was speaking to Contessa. “—considering the fragility of the contents, we should—”

Rebecca’s mouth was too crammed with delicious mayonnaise-free corndog to issue either warning or greeting. Hana collided with him.

Philip himself didn’t even stumble, but his chest jarred the crate he was holding, causing the contents to scrape the insides. He sighed and surrendered it to Contessa. She took a few ginger steps to the side, a hand already unsealing the top flap.
“I’m so sorry.” Hana stepped in front of Philip, hat in hands. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“It’s fine,” he said.

“It’s not her fault. Her head size doesn’t coincide with universal hat sizes,” Elliot explained. He jerked a thumb at the crate. “Anything alive in there? Thought I heard something.”

"Nothing," Philip said, "that wasn't slated to die anyway."

"Oh, well, I really am sorry. I'm Hana.” Easing her hat back on, Hana gestured at her friends in turn. “Elliot, Rebecca.”

Rebecca waved excitedly. She was still chewing.

“Philip.” He didn't introduce Contessa, who was inspecting the contents of the crate.

Hana watched her out of the corner of her eye. "I've met your friend there."

“Yes,” he said. “She’s mentioned you. She also mentioned that if you still needed assistance, you have her number.”

“Assistance?” Elliot cut in. “For what?”

“Class,” Hana said, staring at Philip. “It’s a class thing.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Rebecca said, choking down the last hunk of corndog in her haste to interject. “I’ve literally been saying that for literal years. It’s always a class thing. You’re all just too bougie to understand. Or not bougie enough. Hi Philip!”

“Rebecca,” he said.

Though he was a stone-face at the best of times, Philip still managed to project an aura of profound human suffering. It was the discomfort in his eyes and shoulders; they laid bare a noble internal struggle to conjure invisibility and escape even the slightest chance of prolonged social interaction. He also looked like he hadn’t slept.

He glanced at Contessa.

“I need to make a call. Stay here,” Contessa said. She strode off with the crate, holding it much less delicately than before.

Philip opened his mouth, then closed it and turned fully to regard the group.

“Hi!” Rebecca said again.

“Hey,” Elliot said, with a little wave.

"You should hang with us today!" Rebecca said. More nonchalantly: "And maybe Contessa could also join us. If she wants."

“I'm sure she does,” Philip said, “but we couldn't possibly."

"Might as well, since you're already here," Elliot said.

"Not for long. We're quite busy."
Hana nodded in commiseration. She’d had to be dragged from her books too. "Midterms."

"Midterms," Philip agreed, a bit too readily. "Facts to memorise, ancient rituals to perform. These squirrels won't eviscerate themselves."

"What was in that crate?" Hana asked, eyes suddenly sharp.

Rebecca scoffed. "Midterms. We all have midterms. We're just not acknowledging them yet."

"Easy for you to say," Elliot said. "You wrote most of your papers already and you have like, two exams."

"One thousand words isn't a paper, it's a sneeze!"

"My hay fever isn't acting up," Philip said.

Sensing the awkwardness, Hana made the tactical decision that was best for everyone present: fleeing. "We should go refill the card. I think we have maybe five dollars left."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Philip said.

"Why?" Hana asked.

"I assume you're sharing a card?"

"Yeah," Elliot said.

"The way the price system works," Philip said, "you will usually have a few dollars in your card left if you bought the standard sixty-four dollar card. Since there are no food items, games, or rides that cost less than five dollars, you are forced to top up your card with the minimum amount if you want to use up the remainder."

Elliot frowned, obviously trying to add up prime numbers in his head. "That can’t be right. There should be many ways to get maximal value."

"Most people don’t ride the rollercoaster four times," Philip said. "The least wasteful course of action is for you to just let that five dollars go."

"You really have been here for a while," Hana said. "Do they have a price list on their website? I didn’t see one."

"I have a list. Among other things." Philip pulled his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen. It was black. "My apologies. I’m needed absolutely anywhere else."

He made his brisk retreat, and the three of them immediately ravaged him with their eyes.

"That's BDE if I ever saw it," Elliot noted.

Hana doffed her hat, placing a hand on her forehead to feel her temperature. "Someone’s been doing squats."

"Look at that subtle off-white colouring. The tasteful thickness of it." Elliot pointed at the brand on his rear pocket and groaned, making a grasping gesture. "My god. It even has a watermark."

"Yeah," Rebecca said, less keen to partake of the lustfest. She was thinking about Contessa, whom she hadn’t seen since the previous evening. "I didn’t expect to see him—” She snapped her fingers.
“Oh, right. I got the flyer from his place.”

“You were in his dorm?” Elliot asked.

“His apartment.”

“Oh. Did you two…”

“Yep! We baked cookies.”

They continued on their way. After refilling their card, they ambled in circles without any real purpose or direction. Their conversation mostly revolved around the sweltering heat, how they were walking simultaneously too fast and too slowly, and whose fault that was.

When Rebecca paused to catch her breath, her eyes and throat were scorching with smog. This unquenchable thirst called to mind other unquenchable thirsts. She bumped Elliot’s hip.

“What?”

“Why were you so interested?” she asked. “I thought you were off the market.”

Elliot’s gaze turned shifty. “I mean… maybe? Clarence and I have been hanging out more but it’s just been as friends. We never talked about exclusivity.”

“I didn’t think someone like Philip was your type,” Hana said.

“No, taxidermied tax attorney is not my type.”

“Hey,” Rebecca said, jostling him again. “Maybe you’re not his type!”

Elliot laughed. His head was down, so it came out as a huff. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “I’m not anybody’s type.”

“That’s not what I said, you goof.” She pointed at a little stand that was serving frozen virgin margaritas. “You guys want drinks?”

“No thanks,” Hana said, which wasn’t a surprise. She had committed to the ascetic regimen of the soldier, meaning that she scrutinised everything she put into her body for vitamin and caloric content and compared them to the tables in her head. Carnival mocktails were not to be trusted, and thus anathema to her long-term goal of peak fitness.

Corndogs were exempt from judgement.

“Uh… hmm.” Elliot stared at the menu, but Rebecca knew it wasn’t the choice of flavour he was pondering.

Like herself, Elliot was slightly less consistent when it came to monitoring his dietary intake, claiming that he strayed from his nutritional plan only as often as he imbibed.

Luckily, such indulgences only occurred when he could no longer find solace in the inspirational platitudes that his well-intentioned parents had pasted along the borders of his bathroom mirror, or in his doctor’s assurances that healthy eating and regular exercise were the key to happiness, or in his own shameful fantasies about someday ascending to a physical state that not only didn’t threaten to tear him apart from the inside out but might also be appealing to society at large, and he became certain that only the sweet instant dopamine relief provided by candy, fried food and alcohol could plausibly thwart despair’s inexorable advance, at least until he could sink no deeper into the churning
viper pit of dysmorphia and lethargy. This was about once every three weeks.

In the end, Rebecca ordered a raspberry margarita for him too. They were non-alcoholic, she reasoned, and raspberries were packed with antioxidants.

They waited under the clamshell awning, where they could watch the lone vendor shovel ice into a blender.

“Clarence made it pretty clear he didn’t want a hookup,” Elliot said, his eyes fixed on a stream of bright red syrup dribbling into a bed of ice.

“Do you?” Hana asked.

The owner switched on the blender. Elliot leaned against the counter, taking advantage of the loud whirring to stay quiet a while longer.

Hana wasn’t deterred. As soon as the noise ended, she repeated, “Do you?”

“I said I could roll with that.” His evasive manoeuvre didn’t go unnoticed. “I don't wanna be that guy, you know? I don’t wanna mess it up by pushing. If something happens, it happens.”

Hana nodded. Rebecca sipped her very refreshing margarita and nodded too, though she didn’t understand how something could happen if you didn’t make it happen.

“But it’s been weird,” Elliot said, “and I’m not sure we have all that much in common. We’re in this ambiguous friendship zone.” He drew a horizontal line with his hand.

“Describe exactly what it is that you do together,” Rebecca commanded.

He accepted his freshly made margarita. “Can we move? It’s getting kind of crowded.”

A queue had indeed formed. The vendor became increasingly harried, scooping and pouring and sometimes missing the mark. Chunks of ice skittered over the slick countertop.

The three of them shuffled to the furthest corner that still offered some shade.

“Like, we’ll grab tea if there’s time between class.” Elliot took a gulp of his drink. “I’ll wait around for tennis practice to end, but not if I know it’s gonna go on past six. We text a lot. Just normal stuff like what movie to see or where to eat, nothing serious. He took my virginity last weekend in his parents’ croquet shed. And yesterday, when we were showering, he—”

“What in revelation?” Rebecca shouted, almost knocking Hana’s hat off with a flailing arm. “He did what?”

“He told me I had the same silhouette as his mother.”

“No, no, what did he do in the croquet shed?”

“That,” Elliot said pointedly, “is between me and his mallet.”

Hana didn’t seem particularly shocked, rearranging her Stetson on her head. “I thought that ship had sailed. With, well—”

“Who?” Rebecca demanded.

“That didn’t count.” He paused to chew on the raspberry garnish. “And it wasn't… it didn’t feel like
that at all.”

“Like what?”

He talked over her. “Besides the part where neither of us came and we both cried after. That was practically a re-enactment.”

“I’m so confused,” Rebecca complained. “This is the first time I’m hearing any of this. How could you tell Hana and not me! Why am I the last ball going through the wicket?”

“I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” he said, in a tone that very much meant, drop it.

Rebecca frowned, but she dropped it.

They walked in silence through the fairground’s games corner, surrounded on all sides by the activity booths. Some of them had signs or flags, but hardly any were more than frames of metal and wood that looked unstable, as though adhering to the carnival’s theme of ‘civilised husk’. A faint breeze rippled the frayed pennants on the pole above a hoop toss stall, not quite strongly enough to wave them.

They reminded Rebecca of the first Nude in The Glass Essay, shreds of flesh flapping and peeling off a column of bone and muscle. She wondered too if these were the naked glimpses of her soul, but thought her soul could do better than ochre and primary blue. The colours of the flags were more reminiscent of a bank function than a carnival.

They arrived at a bumper car arena. All of them had been on bumper cars before and agreed they weren’t as exciting as they seemed from the outside, which made the arena a good place for sitting around and talking.

“Share?” Elliot asked Rebecca.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“Two, please,” Elliot said to the man at the booth. To Rebecca, he added, “You can drive.”

“Don’t let her drive,” Hana said, as the man went to unchain two cars for them. “She gets competitive.”

“How dare—” Rebecca planted her hands on her hips. “Just for that, I challenge you to a Battle Royale. Winner takes all.”

Hana claimed the green car for herself. “All of what?”

“All of the satisfaction.”

“On second thought, I’m driving,” Elliot said, slotting himself into the driver’s seat of the blue car in a hurry. “The last time you won all of the satisfaction, I lost all of my eyebrow hair.”

It was a little hard to talk to Hana when she was in a separate bumper car, especially with rock remixes blaring from the surrounding speakers. They tried to stay close to each other anyway.

With Elliot at the wheel, the experience felt more like a leisurely cruise through a smaller, more circular countryside—albeit one where other drivers intentionally T-boned your vehicle and cackled about it afterwards.

“Sorry,” Rebecca said, when another car glided away from an impact neither of them had seen
“It was my fault,” Elliot said. “Didn’t check my left.”

“Sorry for just now. I just… I just kind of thought I’d be the first person you’d tell.”

“That’s...” He flashed her a sidelong glance and half of a smile, without turning his head.

Rebecca mentally completed the thought for him. Self-centred. She chided herself for the lapse. “I know. I’m sorry. It was stupid.”

“It’s whatever. Not a big deal.”

“You said it wasn't great,” Rebecca said.

“I didn’t,” he said, his voice taking on an edge. “You said that, actually, about your first time. Those words. ‘It wasn't great’.”

“I mean...” she said. “It wasn't.”

“How great can it get? It’s just... you rub two bits of skin together, sparks fly, he calls his mom, then it’s over. It’s really whatever. Nothing to write home about.”

Rebecca didn’t disagree, but she felt like agreeing out loud would somehow dredge up the memory and all the feelings associated with it.

Elliot sighed and drummed his fingers on the wheel. “I wasn't going to tell anyone about the first time.”

“You told Hana.”

“Hana found out by accident.”

“I remember it, though,” Hana confided.

“Me too.”

“It just dwells at the back of my mind, always, like the time I almost stepped on a landmine. Nightmares sometimes.”

“Yeah.” Elliot smiled the way he did when he found something very funny or very painful. “Yeah, I think I’m just not very good.”

Hana found a change of subject before Rebecca could. “How are your projects going?”

"The usual. I have three running right now,” he said. “Two due on the same day, and my groupmates are being alternately useless and antagonistic. Look at this.” He showed her the group chat on his phone. "This fucko just asked me whether the presentation is next week or the week after. It's literally tomorrow morning. Did you not see the timeline I emailed you all weeks ago? Also, how did you even find a computer that still has Word Art in the fonts options, and why would you use it in a twenty-first century slide?”

“That sucks,” Rebecca agreed. “I guess you’ll be staying up tonight?”

“Have to. For some ungodly reason, they all picked me to be project leader. I’m not a leader, Becks. This is the face of someone who loses at Settlers of Catan. At this point I am capering in the flames
of my academic career.” He leaned back and took one hand off the wheel to scratch at a red weal on his other arm. “Anyone got bug repellant?”

Hana fished a little box of citronella-scented patches from her haversack and tossed him a pack.

He affixed two patches to his sleeves, and deftly dodged an incoming vehicle. “Never get how these are supposed to work. They’re so small, like do they only protect this tiny area?”

“You’re supposed to put them on your skin so the scent permeates it,” Hana said.

“Thanks,” he said, sticking another on the back of his neck. “I swear, these mosquitoes are killing my crops and pillaging my villages. You’d think the heat would discourage them but they’re freakin’ everywhere.”

“I know, right?” Rebecca said. “Last week Contessa started putting up screens in our windows and installed this huge insect electrocutor trap outside. I told her it was kind of alarmist because there weren’t even that many bugs around then. But yesterday, I saw a whole swarm of them. They were all buzzing around the first floor dorms. I was trying to sneak past them to get to the staircase, but I swear they looked directly at me.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran away! I could hear them right on my tail. So I ran around for a bit and then I jumped in the pond to escape, because people do that with bee attacks all the time, but the pond was full of their larvae. Some of the water got in my nose. It was so awful.”

“But you escaped, right?” Elliot asked, just as a teenage boy rammed into their side. “I mean, you must have. Can you flip that kid off? Hands kinda busy.”

Dutifully, Rebecca raised a middle finger in the howling little punk’s direction, but he wasn’t facing them. “I hid in a closet and texted Contessa to warn her. She was supposed to be in class.”

“But she wasn’t?”

“This was after the baking. I actually don’t know where she went,” Rebecca said. She hadn’t thought Contessa would come for her. She’d seemed so down yesterday. “But after I texted her, she walked in with a pesticide sprayer and just ripped through their ranks. I kept asking if it was DDT but she wouldn’t say. She just said not to let it get on my skin or mucous membranes, not that it mattered because I was watching through a crack in the door.”

“Then what happened?”

Rebecca shrugged. “Then we went to study.”

She left out that they’d studied for less than twenty minutes. Contessa had left in frustration and not returned.

“Well, she can't very well let that ass get bitten, can she?” He elbowed her.

“Huh? What’s my ass got to do with it?”

“You didn’t see Contessa checking out your butt?”

“What? Really?” She twisted around to examine her hindquarters, but couldn’t hoist it more than an inch or so in the cramped space without having to stand. “Oh no! What’s wrong with it?”
“Dunno. Too round, maybe.”

“She thinks I’m fat,” Rebecca said, her voice hollow as she sank back into her seat. “I know she does. She stared at me when we were at the mall and she was definitely thinking it.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Hana asked. “I don’t begrudge anyone their idle and sedentary lifestyles.”

“Contessa does! Contessa doesn’t want a Rubens! She wants someone who can play hide and seek behind a Giacometti.”

Hana darted forward to rear-end the car in front of them that had been stationary for almost a minute. “I see,” she said gravely, when Elliot pulled back up to her side. “Alas. She is so sickened by your disgusting voluptuous body, she just can’t bring herself to stop judging it.”

“Hana’s right. I was listening to Contessa’s podcast at the gym the other day,” Elliot said, tapping his ear. “You know, Heterossessments of Other Women’s Butts. And she said, ‘Let me give it to you straight, ladies: Rebecca Costa-Brown is a gluttonous ricecake. Total fuckin’ manatee in yoga pants. Her BMI is like, way over the national average. Waist-to-hip ratio 1.6. I eyeballed that number. I eyeballed it all day.’”

“Shut up!” Rebecca shoved at his shoulder, laughing, and he steered to the right. “She glanced at my butt, so what?”

“She didn’t glance at your butt. She was like one of those haunted mansion hallway optical illusion portraits. Her eyes just followed. Seriously. She doesn’t even try to hide it. Go bend over in front of her, you’ll see.”

“No.”

“Go do it!”

“Never!”

“Let me give it to you straight, ladies—see, she always starts off like that, it’s like her catchphrase—Rebecca Costa-Brown has a huge butt.” He batted away Rebecca’s attempts to wring his neck. “Can we all take a moment to appreciate how nauseatingly wide it is? The historians, they listed her birth as one of the top ten most significant events in Posteriors for Posterity. The scientists, they couldn’t use her butt as a case study in The Ass was Fact: Veracity of the Booty because they all agreed it was an outlier that couldn’t recur in nature. Fact is, it’s just beyond all measure. Jazz break.”

“Why do you hate me!”

“Becks. Leaving aside your obviously perfect proportions, you know you have a face for movie posters, right?”

“No I don’t.” Rebecca thought for a moment. “And Hana?”

“What about her?”

“What does she have a face for?”

“Military recruitment ads.”
“David?”

“Political cartoons. You gonna run down the list? Because I could do this all day.”

“Last one. Contessa.”

The ensuing pause was pregnant with triplets. Elliot put his foot on the accelerator and pushed past Hana’s car. He reared it back, and slammed into the side of the car belonging to the teenager who had gotten them earlier. “Sorry not sorry, you little bitch,” he said to the boy.

Rebecca prodded him. “What does Contessa have a face for?”

“Uh…” he said, finally. “Pass.”

"What? Elliot!"

"Wanted notices, okay?"

“Wanted—?” she said, and squinted at him. “Wait. Do you… not like Contessa?”

“I didn’t say that,” Elliot said, with uncharacteristic delicacy.

He crept up to the fence encircling the rink. Hana followed.

“You don’t think we’d be good together,” Rebecca said.

“Okay, I definitely didn’t say that.” He looked to Hana for backup. “Did I say that?”

“He didn’t say that.”

“You don’t think so either,” Rebecca accused her.

“I only met her the one time,” Hana said, diplomatically.

“And? What do you think?”

“She’s… sharp. A little cold.”

"What, like a needle that was left in the freezer?"

"Like a Mafiosa," Elliot said.

"She is not in the Mafia," Rebecca snapped. "She told me so on five separate occasions."

“Rebecca…” Hana hesitated, again choosing her words carefully. "Can you really picture a date that doesn’t start with her chloroforming you and end with your likeness on the back of a milk carton?”

“What the—that is not even something an organised crime syndicate would do.” Rebecca tossed her hair, irritated by her friends’ chronic and probably debilitating deficiency of faith. “And yes. We have been on several such dates, in fact, only two of which involved chloroform. We’re practically already together.”

"Does she know that?" Hana and Elliot asked at the same time.

“Worst,” Rebecca grumbled. “Worst friends. Fine. I’ll just have to seduce her at the earliest opportunity to prove it to you.”
Concern crossed both of their faces.

"I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna unleash my feminine wiles all over the feminine wilds and there’s nothing you can do to stop me."

"We weren’t about to," Elliot said.

“As soon as she walks in tonight,” Rebecca said, “I'll be like, 'what say we make it a little more romantic around here' and she’ll be all, 'oh Rebecca, nothing about us has ever been platonic, except your butt which is the Platonic ideal of butts.' Then she'll grab my hand and whisk me off on a magic carpet adventure. But instead of showing me a whole new world she’ll be climbing all over me and she’ll be so turned on, she’ll accidentally slash my trachea with her erect nipple!"

"Wait," Hana said. "You think she'd grab your hand after saying that?"

Rebecca took her sweet time letting go of Contessa’s arm. She hadn’t counted on seeing her again so soon, but she wasn’t complaining.

Contessa made a show of pulling up her sleeve and massaging the marks left in the wake of Rebecca’s fingers. “You have given me permanent grooves.”

“Sorry,” Rebecca said again, even less sorry than before. She leaned against Contessa’s shoulder and sighed theatrically. An opportunity was an opportunity. “I’m so lucky you’re here to protect me.”

“I doubt my presence affects the velocity of the ride.”

"Well, we’re pretty high up. It’s a good thing you’re here."  

"We’re both in the same position,” Contessa said. “Should there be an unexpected fatal accident, I wouldn't be able to prevent either of us from plunging to our deaths.”

The train swooped. Rebecca clasped the safety bar again.

“Well,” Contessa said, and Rebecca looked at her. “Perhaps me.”

The rollercoaster was not an ideal venue for seduction. Perhaps it was all the diving and inversions and previews of autobiographical films, but she felt a change of location was in order.

To the ferris wheel it was.

It counted as a date, because she had asked and Contessa had agreed, and now they were strapped in together on a revolving wheel high above the rest of the fairground.

What was a date, after all, but a request and an answer in the affirmative followed by a series of related events? The environmental symposium had been a date. The puppet pageant had been a date. The play had been a date. The mall visit had been a date. Through this lens, Rebecca couldn’t think of even one outing she’d had with Contessa that hadn’t been a date.

The giddy flutter in her chest became a twitch in her knees and then her elbows, before migrating to her left hand—thankfully out of Contessa’s sight. She needed to kick things into high gear, which meant she had to translate the nervous energy to élan.

You can do this, she told herself. You’ve done this before.
The safety bar was positioned further away from them than it had been on the rollercoaster. Rebecca smoothed her skirt over her leggings, inwardly lamenting the thickness of her thighs, the lack of tone, the cellulite she was sure had to be visible even through the fabric. Then there was the whole perspiration situation.

*I’m so sticky. I’m disgusting and she’s right next to me, she can see it all over me, she can feel it.*

She allowed the negative thoughts to saturate her head like so much raspberry concentrate, then dug deep to find her reliable old well of baseless confidence and flushed them all out.

*I am like, the second hottest girl in this car right now. When I’m done with her, she’ll be morally opposed to closing her legs.*

Rebecca crossed her own legs, and tugged at the hem of her surplice top to flaunt her décolletage.

Despite the extra room, Contessa sat with her tailbone up against the back of the seat. She glanced at Rebecca, her lips compressed into a thin line and her hands clasped firmly on her lap.

Rebecca found it weird and endearing that Contessa was more nervous on a ferris wheel than a rollercoaster. “Ever been on one of these before?”

“No,” Contessa said, her posture not relaxing an iota. “I’ve only been to a few county fairs. They were much smaller.”

“What do you think?”

“It’s very odd,” she said. “So many machines built to take you to the same place over and over. Transportation that transports you nowhere. I don’t see the point.”

Rebecca’s fingers curled around the bottom of her seat. The perforated metal was hot against the flat of her palm. “There’s a thrill. The constant danger of falling.”

“I’m aware some people enjoy an element of risk in their activities,” Contessa said. “But this? Cycling slowly through the air, seated, secure…”

“Intimate,” Rebecca said.

Contessa’s expression hesitated at the crossroads between bewildered and flustered, eventually setting up camp at unsettled. She turned her gaze to the approaching ground.

Too fast. She was moving too fast. Rebecca turned away for a brief moment to silently contort her face and mime punching herself in the nose.

Shoving the mistake out of her mind, she turned back and nudged Contessa’s ankle lightly. *Let’s see how she likes her incidental contact.*

At the third nudge, Contessa glanced down. "I distinctly recall that you were footsie retrenched just a few days ago.”

“Well, where’s my footsie severance package?”

"Something’s getting severed if you keep that up.”

But she nudged Rebecca's ankle back.

That was it. Contessa liked her playful.
Playful came more naturally to Rebecca than any other persona, for some reason. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. As she did, she teased a few strands loose over her collarbone.

So much of flirtation relied on appearance adjustment, but the act mattered more than the outcome. It was all about the coquetry of self-conscious gestures that didn’t tip over into fidgeting yet drew the eye, movements that said she was done censoring her intentions, especially if she batted her eyelashes like so, and slid against Contessa’s arm like so...

Contessa tensed. Her gaze travelled down Rebecca’s neck and beyond.

“It’s okay,” Rebecca said, her voice a throaty purr in Contessa’s ear. “You can look if you want to.”

“Look at what?”

“You know. This… general area.” Rebecca sketched out a rough oval over her chest, with a wedge down the middle.

“I’m already looking,” Contessa said, her eyebrows knitting together. “You wear your bras too tight to be comfortable.”

“Oh.” Rebecca flushed a little in spite of herself, and her hand shot up to touch her cleavage. She forced it back down again. “Are they? I didn’t, um, notice.”

"I notice. If you adjusted them properly you would spend less time—” Contessa’s eyes flicked down again. “—readjusting. And exposing your xiphoid process. I know I don’t have as large a… I mean yours is..."

“Yes?”

"Sports bras are better," she said at last. “Are you cold?”

Before Rebecca could question the non sequitur and answer that no, the weather was actually obscenely hot for fall, Contessa shed her jacket. She draped it over Rebecca’s shoulders.

Rebecca realised she was to wear it. Her thoughts stuttered, devolving into an incoherent jumble. She grasped the black silk with sweaty hands and tried to pull it on. “Um, the armholes—they—”

“It’s a jacket, Rebecca. You wear it like a hoodie.”

“I know, I’m just—”

Contessa reached over and took hold of the sleeves, determined to help Rebecca perform the intricate task of putting on a jacket she didn’t really need.

A little manoeuvring and sliding around later, it was on. They were left gazing at each other.

“Thanks,” Rebecca said. She bit her bottom lip, the corner of her mouth curling up in a half-smile she hoped would be construed as sultry. An expression she’d just invented. An expression she’d call ‘intent to be kissed’.

Contessa drew closer, oblivious to the space between them as it shifted in obligation, until Rebecca could feel the warmth radiating from her.

Their noses bumped. Contessa jolted back as if stung.

Rebecca’s smile widened.
"My apologies. I miscalculated the distance between our faces," Contessa said in a low voice. "I will endeavour not to do that again."

"Or, y’know," Rebecca said, "you could do that again."

Contessa arched an eyebrow. "You're behaving strangely today. More than usual."

"Mmm. Am I?"

"Very."

"Do you like it?"

"Rebecca," Contessa said, her voice tight. "Are you intoxicated?"

"What makes you think that?" Rebecca asked semi-innocently.

"Sluggish movement, dilated pupils, lowered..." Contessa clenched her jaw when Rebecca fingertips ‘accidentally’ came to rest on her knee. A moment passed before she managed to continue. "...inhibitions. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be on this ride if you’re not in full possession of your mental and emotional faculties."

"Your pupils are looking a little dilated there, too."

Contessa stared into Rebecca’s eyes with such smouldering menace that it became a glare.

Rebecca held the glare with her own hooded gaze. When she was satisfied she’d proven her mettle, she closed in on Contessa’s ear and murmured, “And you’re burning up.”

Contessa’s ear flushed red and she brought a hand up to shield it from the caress of Rebecca’s breath. “The weather. I haven’t been drinking.”

“Me neither. That would be illegal.”

“And even if I had, I don’t...”

“You don’t?” Rebecca let her lips just barely graze the back of Contessa’s hand.

Contessa jerked her hand away. “...get drunk. I just remembered. I need to meet Philip. For a work-related matter.”

“When?”

“Now.” Contessa leaned over the edge and looked down. “How much longer is this?”

“I dunno, maybe two more revolutions?” Rebecca grabbed her arm. “Contessa, wait, are you mad at me?”

“No,” Contessa said, disengaging the safety bar with brute force. “Fifteen minutes. I’ll find you.”

She stood up, extricating Rebecca’s hand from her arm. Then she slipped out and made her departure.

Had Rebecca not been wearing Contessa’s jacket, she might have been more unsure of whether her seduction had succeeded or not. She might have been worried that her date had just literally leapt over eight feet to the ground and sprinted away into the distance.
But she was wearing Contessa’s jacket.

She spent the remaining two revolutions basking in the memory of nose-to-nose contact and the feel of fine black silk.

* *

When the ride was over, Contessa still hadn’t texted her or otherwise come to find her, so Rebecca decided to look for her friends in the meantime. They were at a bottle-shooting stall.

“Where are the iron sights?” Hana was asking the vendor.

“If you’re not going to shoot the bottles,” he said, “then stop wasting my time and just shoot me.”

Rebecca swept her hair back and strutted over to Elliot. “Hey, friendo.”

”Hey, how was the ride? We're blowing our estate on rigged games.” His eyes landed on her newly acquired apparel. “Nice.”

“Shhh,” she said, doing her best to hold off on the preening.

“Did you seal the deal?”

“What deal?” Hana turned her head towards Rebecca, her rifle trained on the pyramid of bottles. “Why do you look like a Charades player whose word is ‘courtesan’?”

“Hana, shhh! Contessa will be back any second!”

“She’s not here now, so spill the tea,” Elliot said impatiently.

She buffed her nails on her chest, letting him simmer.


“We didn’t do anything,” she said, and paused for effect. “I mean... unless you count riding the rollercoaster together.”

“That’s so—” His grin faltered. “Wait, when did she get on the ride? We didn’t see—”

“I don’t know!” she said, hugging her Contessa’s jacket-clad self. “It doesn't matter. Because then I asked her to come with me on the ferris wheel, and we rode that too!”

“Oh shit.”

Unable to restrain herself any longer, she jumped up and down. “I think she might actually be into me! What do I do?”

“Shoot some bottles,” the vendor suggested.

“You know exactly what you should do,” Elliot said, releasing her forearms. “Ask her out to dinner.”

“You’re the one who told me to wait!”

“Well, aren’t you glad you did? Look where you are now.”
Rebecca spun to address Hana. “What do you think?”

Hana was staring morosely at the rifle in her hands. “I want a real gun.”

“Hana!”

“Oh.” Hana looked up and plastered on a smile, convincing no one of her attentiveness. “Congratulations, either of you.”

“Hana,” Rebecca said. She fixed Hana with an expression of utmost solemnity that was somewhat undermined by how much she was bouncing. “You’re super practical, and the only one of us who has been in a relationship that lasted more than like, two months. So do you think I should ask Contessa out on a date when she gets back? Yea or nay, circle one.”

“Yea? I don’t see why not,” Hana said.

Rebecca frowned at her.

Hana rolled her eyes, then drew a ‘y’ in the air and circled it. “The worst that can happen is you get rejected because there is an overwhelming volume of applicants this year and your skills aren’t a perfect fit for this position even though your resume clearly lists your prior lifeguarding experience.”

Rebecca stopped mid-bounce, instantly paralysed by indecision.

“Can I see that real quick?” Elliot asked Hana, and took the rifle from her. He fumbled with it for a few seconds. Then he threw it at the ground next to Rebecca, earning a dirty look from the vendor. “Wow, I’m clumsy. Help me out, Becks.”

Rebecca bent over to pick it up. As she did, she felt her behind brush against something solid.

She turned around.

Contessa stood there, staring.

In an instant, Rebecca was put in mind of the time she’d been on the ground and Contessa had loomed above her. The difference was that there was no pity in Contessa’s eyes now. There might have been, had there been room for anything but pure, unadulterated want.

She rose slowly but did not turn. She could feel Contessa’s gaze raking up and down her body, the hunger in it dark and palpable.

Elliot had been right.

“Hello, Contessa,” Rebecca said coyly, finally turning.

She stepped forward so there was only a sliver of space between them.

Contessa drew a sharp breath and parted her lips, on the verge of speaking. Then she exhaled and shifted to the side, her eyes going to the pyramid of bottles.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Rebecca stepped back, disappointment welling up. The moment was lost.

“Knock over many bottles as you can,” the vendor drawled, “and you just might get a prize of your choosing.”
The prizes, Rebecca noticed, were all plushies of dubious quality. Admittedly, Rebecca’s standards of plushie quality had risen since the toy store.

Contessa saw Rebecca looking at the prize shelf, and placed her FunCard on the counter of the stall. The vendor loaded an airsoft rifle and handed it to her.

She appraised it. “The sights have been removed.”

“It bothers me too,” Hana said.

“Hm.” Contessa’s attention turned to Hana for a second, before being drawn to Hana’s hat. “What in accuracy modification.”

Without pausing to aim or even stabilise the gun, Contessa fired once at the pyramid. It struck the top bottle just below the lip, but the bottle only wobbled.

“Oof,” Elliot said. “So close.”

“This game is rigged,” Contessa said, matter-of-fact.

“That’s what they all say,” the vendor said. The corner of his lips quirked. “Well, what the losers say. At least you use the thing for something other than fondling and flinging.”

“I said it was impossible to win with this weapon,” Hana told Contessa. “Don’t waste your money.”

“I already paid,” Contessa said, turning to the vendor, “and I have nine shots left. You loaded the bottles. I'm going to guess lead.”

"Don't blame the bottles, girl," he said.

"I blame you. But it doesn't matter." She took a step to her right. “A bottle is only as strong as its weakest point.”

She aimed and emptied the clip at the flimsy particleboard stand supporting the shelf, knocking it over so all the bottles toppled down.

The vendor looked at the bottles on the ground, then at Contessa. “That was unnecessary,” he said.

“I’d like my prize now,” Contessa said.

“You know how long I spent setting up that shelf?”

“Evidently not very, or it would still be up. My prize, please.” She scanned the shelf of prizes. “The pangolin.”

“Armadillo,” Rebecca corrected.

“The brown stuffed animal that resembles a rock.”

“No way,” he said.

“You said if I knocked over as many bottles as I could, I would get a prize.”

“I said you might. But you sure as hell aren’t getting anything from me.”

“Would you rather pick a bottle and share its contents with the rest of the class?”
The vendor laughed. “Ball bearings, magnetised so they don’t fall out.”

“And you’re fine with deceiving your customers,” Contessa said.

“With that gun? At this distance? These bottles are easy as shit to knock over if I don’t load them. Come on.”

“She did knock them all over,” Hana said.

“But you saw how she did it,” he said. “I can’t just give prizes out to every kid who finds a loophole. I gotta make an honest living.”

“You call this honest?”

“Relatively?” he said,shrugging. “‘S not like I’m in the Mafia.”

“Neither am I,” Contessa said.

Rebecca gave her friends a ‘told you so’ look.

Contessa mirrored his shrug, and raised the rifle again. “Have it your way.”

She hurled the gun itself at one of the poles holding up the tarp over the stall and it collapsed, burying the vendor in aluminum frame and canvas. Contessa lifted the corner of the tarp, reached past the vendor’s thrashing arm and collected the armadillo.

Elliot nudged Hana. "You know that when I say the Second Amendment scares me, it's because of things like this, right? What if that was somebody's house?"

“Like tears... in rain,” the vendor said, his arm growing feeble as Contessa dropped the tarp back on his face. “Time to—”

“Hang on, I’ll save you,” Hana said, walking up to the collapsed stall. “I have prior experience.”

Contessa presented the armadillo to Rebecca.

Rebecca lit up. She grabbed it and crushed it to her chest with a squeal. “I love it! I love it so much! Thank you Contessa!”

“It’s cute,” Hana said politely, kicking the poles aside.

“No, it’s not,” Contessa said.

Elliot stared at her, baffled. “Then why did you get it for Rebecca?”

"I didn't want to get the stuffed ebola virus. It looks like a duodenum."

Rebecca squeezed the armadillo harder. Whatever its stuffing was, it wasn't very pliant—ebola would have been snugglier. The shell was also covered in a field of metallic studs, preventing her from comfortably brushing her cheek against it. Even the unprotected parts of the armadillo were coarse. Its marble-eyed face was dour, like it disapproved of her holding it at all.

It wasn't cute.

But cuteness was an aestheticisation of powerlessness, a demand that a creature submit to affection against its will or knowledge, ignoring its rich interiority. By adopting this texture and resisting
compression in defiance of its primary function, the armadillo had been transformed into something unrecognisable—something indomitable.

“Classic détournement,” she whispered.

“What are you calling her?” Elliot asked. “Or him, I guess.”

Contessa shook her head minutely and mouthed, *not me.*

Rebecca could see the resemblance, and she could name it after her, but that would get confusing.

“Colin.” She raised the plushie to the sky, reverently, like a mandrill christening a lion cub before the exultant congregation of its future prey. “His name is Colin.”

Elliot snorted. “That’ll get confusing.”

“Two ‘l’s,” Rebecca decided, and texted Colin to inform him immediately.

> **Rebecca:** Contessa got me an armadillo and his name is collin.you have to meet him he’s just as grumpy as his namesake

"He says 'why would you message me now, I'm busy'. Typical. 'I don't know, Colin’," Rebecca said loudly, typing the words as she spoke. “‘Maybe I thought that, in this hustle-and-bustle world, amidst the tumult of, of—’”

“Globalisation,” Elliot supplied.

“—globalisation, a girl could share her triumphant spoils with those friends of hers who elected to be absent on such a momentous occasion. You armoured dildo!”

"He won't get it," Hana said. "He'll think you're actually angry at him."

"I know,” Rebecca said. “That's why we're going to send a picture. Contessa, over here. Huddle time.”

They had a passerby take the photo. Elliot put an arm around Hana, who held hands with Rebecca, who nuzzled up against the shoulder of a very bemused Contessa. Contessa carried the armadillo.

"He says 'you thought wrong'," Rebecca read, when she received Colin’s reply. Another message popped up. "'And I don't look like that.' Ha! Excelsior!"

"I'm relieved to find you here, on solid ground, playing games with company.”

It was Philip, sidling up to Contessa. He didn’t look happy.

"I was afraid that you might have chosen to while away your copious leisure time doing something less pleasant,” he said to her, “like dangling from an unstable metal structure without your harness or the belayer who was supposed to provide it. How thoughtful of you to assuage my concerns in a timely manner.”

“Sorry to steal her away,” Rebecca said. “But you kind of stole her from me.”

He turned to her, eyebrows raised. “...pardon?”

She broke out into a smirk, to show she was only teasing. “When she left me to go see you!”
“She—” Philip swallowed whatever he was going to say, looking at the jacket Rebecca was wearing and the armadillo in her arms. A strange expression flitted across his face, but it was gone before she could parse it. “So she did. Reality is after all flexible.”

Contessa stepped over to Rebecca, and slipped her hand into her jacket. Rebecca stood stock still as she removed an opaque plastic case, a phone, and a tube of Tums from the inside pockets.

“I could give it back now,” Rebecca said, without any intention of doing so. The heat was still oppressive and the jacket was too tight around the sleeves and armpits, so she felt like a potato being baked in silk instead of foil. But she would never take it off.

“But then you would resume being cold,” Contessa pointed out.

“I keep her auxiliary jackets in my car,” Philip assured Rebecca, “along with her auxiliary shirts, auxiliary trousers, auxiliary hosiery, and auxiliary millinery.”

“Why so much spare clothing?” Hana asked.

“In case she needs to loan her mains out to those unfortunate young dames who happen to be freezing in the dead of Los Angeles autumn.”

“Leave it on my bed,” Contessa said, returning to Philip’s side. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“What?” Rebecca snapped alert. “Where are you going?”

“Business.” Contessa reached into Philip’s hair, her fingers weaving in and out, and retrieved a wispy little covert feather.

“But you’ve only been here, like, five seconds!”

Philip looked slightly annoyed at either Contessa’s hand or the feather. Contessa let it float away.

“Tempting though it may be,” he said, “we can’t all abandon our responsibilities to cavort around on carnival rides with any pretty face that catches our eye. Speaking only for myself.”

“But,” Rebecca said, “but tonight...”

“Rebecca,” Contessa said, not even looking at her as she dusted off Philip’s shoulder. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Then, before Rebecca could protest any further, Contessa and Philip walked side by side into the crowd.

“Well, bye then,” Elliot said.

Hana picked up the rifle on the ground.

Everything came together. Rebecca understood then that she could not have moved too fast or waited too long because Contessa was already spoken for.

Hana fired the rifle. The bullet could have punched through Rebecca’s chest and she wouldn’t have noticed.

Contessa was not uncomfortable or awkward around Philip. She didn’t blush when he murmured in her ear, or stiffen when he closed the distance between them. Maybe they didn’t hold hands in public, but there were the meaningful glances, the placating gestures—a semiotic system of affection
and care that was born of a years-long mutual bond. There were other clues: the fact that Contessa didn’t come back to the dorm some nights, and the fact that Philip seemed irritated by Rebecca spending time with her. The fact that they had left together.

To go where?

To do what?

_Business_. The crate they’d been carrying had probably had ten vibrators in it. Ten prostate massagers? *Five vibrators and five prostate massagers,* she thought with a chill. *Or any other permutation of marital aids.* But then she remembered that Philip had said the contents were alive, which left… a road she didn't want to go down.

"Oh my god, Hana," Elliot said, crouching in the grass a few paces away. "You killed a woodpecker."

"I did _not._" Hana joined him in crouching. "Woodpeckers aren't even native to this area."

"Can you blame them, with you on the loose?"

"It's a warbler."

"Even worse. You ended his fledgeling singing career. Yeah, nope, that is a woodpecker. They're a protected species!" He stood, flicking the brim of her hat. "What in conservation."

"I wasn't aiming at it," Hana said. "It flew in front of _me._"

"The bird? Or your hat?"

"It has nothing to do with the hat! I'm sure I just clipped a wing—"

"And with it, his dreams of going pro."

"—with a _pellet._ Not a deadly projectile."

"Probably took its eye out." He tutted at her. "What are the rules of gun safety again? ‘Always be aware of your target and what lies beyond’?"

"You know…"

The traits that Philip had and Rebecca didn't unravelled in a steady vertical scroll. Of course Contessa would choose to be with someone like herself—more worldly, less trivial, more careful, less bumbling, more stoic, less emotional. It had been silly of her to believe she could compete on any level, as if the momentary hormone-fuelled lust that flared inside her could compare to what they had.

Yet she had forced herself on Contessa, thrusting her chest out and rubbing against her, clumsy, artless, like a dog in heat. Contessa had been so embarrassed on her behalf that she’d given Rebecca an out, and Rebecca hadn’t taken it.

A hand waved in front of her face. "Ground control to Major Rebecca."

Rebecca blinked at Elliot, keeping her smile wide and eyes bright, as though she had been lost in a daydream she’d just now snapped out of.

"So we should leave before the feds arrest Miss Sandpiper Sniper over here for a murder of crows,“
Elliot said. "I'm thinking we head back, grab our junk, camp out in the library till closing time, then move to the com labs."

Hana cast an uneasy glance at the grass. She folded her arms, a gesture both indignant and self-soothing. "The labs will be full of compsci people doing their hackathons and technomancy."

"Your dorm?" Elliot asked.

"It's a single. It might be a little cramped."

"There's mine, but both of you would have to sneak past the RA and I can never tell when my roomie's on a bender or if he's going to crawl in at 1am. What about yours, Rebecca?"

"Good idea," Hana said, "since it'll be empty."

They both turned to Rebecca expectantly.

"Yeah, sure." Her breathing quickened. "Actually, is there a restroom around here? I have to—well, corn dog, roller coaster. You know."

Elliot gave her a sympathetic look. "Saw one earlier at the food corner. Maybe you should've bummed a Tums off Contessa."

"We'll walk you there," Hana said.

"Nah, it's far," Rebecca said. "The line'll probably be long. You guys go on ahead."

"I can hold onto Collin for you." Elliot reached for the armadillo she was hugging.

She relinquished it with some reluctance, but no less brilliant a smile as she broke away. "Take care of the little guy. Where can I find you?"

"Card booth, probably. Not the machine, the one at the entrance."

"Sounds good!"

Rebecca skipped off towards the food corner, but did not go to the restroom in case her friends came looking for her and caught her leaving the tent.

With the mellowing heat came the evening crowd. The fairground was teeming with families, students and couples in full postprandial daze. Rather than work her way through the noise and bodies, Rebecca cut a path behind the concession stands. She made it as far as the bushes behind the funnel cake display before she tugged off Contessa's jacket and began to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to maroon_sweater for betaing and support, and thank you to babagaia for help with math.

Check out the side-story if you haven't already!
Works inspired by this one: Things Worth Saving by smolandfeisty, Guns and Hoses by CPericardium, smolandfeisty

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